VALIANT DUST

P.C.Wren

LONGMANS

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VALIANT DUST

NOVELS BY P. C. WREN

MYSTERIOUS WAYE
BEAU GESTE
BEAU SABREUR
BEAU IDEAL
GOOD GESTES
SOLDIERS OF MISFORTUNE
THE WAGES OF VIRTUE
STEPSONS OF FRANCE
THE SNAKE AND THE SWORD
FATHER GREGORY
DEW AND MILDEW
DRIFTWOOD SPARS
THE YOUNG STAGERS
THE MAMMON OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

EDITED BY P. C. WREN

SOWING GLORY

VALIANT DUST

BY

PERCIVAL CHRISTOPHER WREN

"...
All valiant dust that builds on dust
And guarding, calls not Thee to guard,
..."

Kipling.

"... Loyalty struggling, sometimes victoriously, sometimes vainly, either against the forces of Nature or the power of mean persons ..."

Desmond McCarthy.

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To
FAITH BALDWIN
INDOMITABLY
VALIANT

PROLOGUE

PROLOGUE

The news spread like wild-fire throughout Cantonments that big Lieutenant Le Sage, returning from furlough, had brought his notably beautiful, extremely fascinating, and provocatively charming and intelligent wife with him to Morocco.

The joy of the officers of the garrison of Mellerat was unconcealed; that of their wives, well concealed.

Within a month, the popular, brilliant, and successful Lieutenant Riccoli made no secret of the fact that he was head over ears in love with her.

Indeed, he boasted of it—loudly; and bade folk watch.

Folk did—and speculated in messes, clubs, and drawing-rooms, as to whether the gay spark Riccoli had taken the measure of the giant Lieutenant Le Sage as accurately as Lieutenant Le Sage had taken that of the accomplished Riccoli.

Most intriguing . . .

§ 2

The moon-drenched African night was very hot and very still, the air electric with presage of thunder; a brooding, bodeful night, disturbing and unsettling.

So, at any rate, Madame Le Sage appeared to find it, as she moved restlessly about the tiny pathetic drawing-room of her little bougainvillea-covered bungalow, set amongst its dusty palms.

“Do sit down, darling . . . Come and sit here,” begged Lieutenant Napoleon Riccoli, patting the cushions of the

divan on which he sprawled.

Madame Le Sage stepped out on to the verandah and looked forth into the night.

“Although the stars are so huge and near, and the moon so wonderful, I feel that we’re going to have a storm,” she said.

“I did not come here to-night . . . to discuss the weather,” replied Riccoli.

“No?” said Madame Le Sage, turning and eyeing her guest steadily.

How extraordinarily handsome he was, this Corsican, in spite of his high narrow forehead, too large and limpid eyes, and girlish mouth. And how, too, terribly charming, in spite of his amazing conceit and self-satisfaction.

“No,” repeated Riccoli, “I did not . . . Sit down here, and I’ll tell you why I came.”

Madame Le Sage, with a pretty and attractive grimace at her admirer, coquettishly disobeyed. Turning from the moonlit doorway, she came and stood erect before him, her hands behind her back.

“I think I’ll stand and hear it,” she laughed.

“Then I’ll stand—and tell it,” observed Riccoli, and rising to his feet, put his arms about her, and, as she threw back her head, whether in invitation or alarm, drew her to him and kissed her passionately on the lips.

“That’s what I came for,” he said unsteadily. “Now sit down by me, and I’ll give you further—reasons.”

Wiping her lips with a tiny lace handkerchief, Madame Le Sage obeyed.

“Before producing any more—er—reasons,” she said, “will you tell me why you think they should interest me?”

“Well,” drawled the ardent officer, placing his right arm about the waist of his hostess, “you are a clever woman as well as a lovely one, and I am the Lieutenant Napoleon Riccoli.”

“And therefore what else could I do but fall in love with you?” laughed Madame Le Sage.

“Precisely, *mon ange*. What else should happen? I fancy I am worthy of you . . . And you—are worthy of me . . .”

“ O f *Monsieur le Lieutenant* Napoleon Riccoli!” murmured the lady.

“Yes. Beautiful, witty, charming, clever . . . You and I, Marie, are a pair . . . Nay, we are one.”

“Have you given yourself the trouble to consider what might be my husband’s views on that?” asked Madame Le Sage.

“No, they do not interest me.”

“They might.”

“They don’t.”

“His views *might*, at some time, interest you, I think.”

“The views of Lieutenant Le Sage!” laughed Riccoli.

“Still, he is Lieutenant Le Sage, you know, and my husband.”

“But I am Lieutenant Napoleon Riccoli, and your lover.”

“You are?”

“I am. I declare it here and now. And I am going to be something even more than that.”

“*Really?* More than . . . ?”

“Yes. More than the good Le Sage ever even dreams of being. I am going to be a great soldier, a General, a Field-

Marshal, a Conqueror . . .”

Madame Le Sage opened wide eyes of admiring wonder —of wonder, at any rate.

“Yes, and more than a great soldier . . . A great leader of men . . . A great ruler . . . A Dictator . . . Is not this the day of such men? Look at Russia . . . Look at Turkey . . . Look at Spain . . . Look at Italy . . . Look at Poland . . . Were not those Dictators once Lieutenants, and less than Lieutenants? Was not Mustapha Kemal Pasha once a Lieutenant? Was not Primo de Rivera once a Lieutenant? Was not Marshal Pilsudski once a Lieutenant? Was not Mussolini a Corporal? And what were Lenin and Trotski? Gutter-snipes . . .”

“And you?” interrupted Madame Le Sage, at this, perhaps, unfortunate point.

“I? A Corsican,” was the portentous reply.

“Like the other Napoleon,” observed Madame.

“Like the other Napoleon,” agreed Riccoli.

“And, like him, a lieutenant . . . Poor, obscure ambitious, but with a brain . . . a brain . . .”

“And a heart,” he added, turning to more immediate matters and Madame Le Sage. “I lay it at your feet, and the day will come when I will lay a kingdom there.”

“And meanwhile?” smiled Marie Le Sage.

“More reasons,” replied Riccoli, and, drawing her closely to him, he again kissed her smiling lips.

And again.

Indeed, clasping Madame Le Sage with all the ardour of his recently declared love, Lieutenant Riccoli pressed his lips so firmly upon hers that the impassioned kisses became one long kiss, the while Madame, both hands against his breast, thrust with all her strength, in her endeavour to free

herself from his embrace.

“Why are you so cold? Why do you pretend that you wish to escape? Why do you struggle?” he asked with tender reproach, as he drew breath.

“Because my husband is standing staring at us,” replied Madame reasonably.

And indeed, Lieutenant Le Sage, tall, thick-set, powerful, hands on hips and arms akimbo, stood at the big unglazed window of the verandah and smiled pleasantly upon the pretty scene.

“Done?” he inquired conversationally.

Madame Le Sage did not scream, nor, rising dramatically to her feet, cast herself at those of her husband. Moving to the end of the divan she folded up her handkerchief neatly.

“I am at your service, Lieutenant Le Sage,” said Riccoli, as he rose and bowed with great dignity.

“You are,” agreed Le Sage.

“The choice of weapons shall be yours,” said Riccoli.

“Only one weapon,” replied his brother officer.

“Eh?”

“I’ll get my revolver.”

“Murder? You will kill your wife and me?”

“Oh, no.”

“Suicide? I am to commit . . .” stammered Riccoli.

“Oh, no.”

“You, perhaps? You will commit . . .” suggested the unhappy lover.

“Oh, no.”

Crossing to his bureau, Lieutenant Le Sage took his revolver and a packet of army cartridges from a drawer. Opening the paper packet, Le Sage took out a cartridge, broke open the breach of the revolver, and spun the chamber round.

"Empty," he said, and, exhibiting the cartridge between finger and thumb, thrust it into one of the six compartments of the chamber.

Again he spun the chamber round and round, and then shut the revolver with a snap.

"One cartridge," he observed, and with a courteous bow, presented the revolver, handle first, to Riccoli.

"*Suicide!*" cried that gentleman, and placed his hands behind his back. "No. A thousand times, no. I will not commit suicide for so little . . . so little reason . . ."

Madame coughed.

Lieutenant Le Sage placed the muzzle of the revolver against his own temple.

"*Ah!*" gasped Riccoli.

Madame covered her face.

Le Sage pulled the trigger.

A sharp click fell upon the silence of the room.

"Your turn," said Le Sage, and again offered the pistol to Riccoli.

White-faced, the Corsican glared at his friend.

"Take it, man," said the latter, with quiet patience.

"I will *not* commit suicide," cried the Corsican at length.

"A chance or a certainty?" replied Le Sage. "Take your chance, or I will give you a certainty."

Riccoli drew a deep breath through nostrils that quivered slightly, and extended his hand.

“I am protected,” he whispered, as he took the pistol. “I am a Man of Destiny.”

“Pull the trigger then, Man of Destiny,” said Le Sage quietly.

With a dramatic gesture, a flourish of the left hand, and eyes turned heavenward, Riccoli placed the muzzle of the pistol to his temple, closed his fine eyes, whispered:

“Nothing can hurt me!” clenched his teeth and, with visible effort, a shudder, and a grimace, pulled the trigger.

Again a sharp click broke the breathless silence.

Riccoli relaxed, sighed deeply, and, lowering the pistol, reversed it, and handed it to Le Sage.

“One each . . .” breathed Riccoli. “A fair duel . . . Honour is satisfied.”

And he smiled almost affectionately at his friend and brother-in-arms.

“Don’t you believe it, my son,” replied that gentleman, and promptly pointed the pistol at his own forehead.

Again Madame Le Sage buried her face in her hands as her husband pulled the trigger.

For the third time the hammer fell with a harmless click, and a look of mingled disappointment, wrath, and despair clouded the handsome countenance of Lieutenant Napoleon Riccoli.

With a cheerful smile, Le Sage offered him the pistol, while Madame sat erect and watched him with the deepest interest.

“No, no! Enough of this folly. This is sheer madness. I will not do it,” cried Riccoli, exhibiting the anger of fear. “I am not a dog . . .”

“No,” agreed Le Sage. “Dogs are nice beasts.”

“. . . and I will not die the death of a dog,” continued Riccoli. “This is murder, I say.”

“It will be, if you don’t obey,” agreed Le Sage. “Take your chance, like a man, since you’re not a dog.”

“I protest. I will not be hectored by a great blustering bully such as you. It is a trap. Your wife invited . . .”

“I’ll give you one minute,” interrupted Le Sage, glancing at his watch. “If at the end of that minute you have not taken your chance, I will shoot you—like a dog. Which will be an honour for you. Now . . .”

Looking more like a trapped jackal than any kind of dog, Riccoli extended a slightly trembling hand, took the pistol, and held it to his head.

His face cleared, and he smiled.

“Fate has great things in store for me,” he said. “Not for nothing was I born, not only in Corsica, but, mark you, in Ajaccio itself! Not for nothing was I named Napoleon. Not for nothing did I, from childhood, daily haunt the house of my great prototype, that Greatest of all Great Men. Not for nothing have I . . .”

“Speech!” interrupted Lieutenant Le Sage . . . and, with an angry glare at that imperturbable man, Riccoli pulled the trigger.

For the fourth time a sharp click sounded through the little room, startling, by its mighty smallness, the ears of the three protagonists of this drama.

“You see?” Riccoli smiled palely. “I am protected . . . I am a Man of Destiny.”

“So far, so good—or so bad,” observed Le Sage, and taking the pistol, turned it upon himself.

“Stop,” cried Riccoli. “I give you notice that, whether you pull that trigger or not, I myself will not do so again . . . This is uncivilized . . . This is barbarous . . . Are we gentlemen or . . .”

“Yes, are we gentlemen, Riccoli—both of us?” asked Le Sage.

“Of course we are. Let us behave as such. We have had the courage to fight two rounds of your terrible duel, and that is enough. As I said before, Honour is satisfied.”

“Yours, or mine?” inquired Le Sage.

“Honour is satisfied, I say, and if it is not, I will agree to fight yet a third duel with you. But it shall be the duel of civilized people . . . of gentlemen . . . of men of honour . . . of soldiers . . .”

“Swords, eh?”

“Yes, swords.”

“You are the champion swordsman of the Nineteenth Army Corps, one recollects,” observed Le Sage.

Riccoli bowed.

“Then I think we’ll go on with our present effort,” continued Le Sage. “In the circumstances, I think I’ll trust to chance rather than skill, eh?”

And putting the pistol to the side of his head, Le Sage pulled the trigger.

Again Madame Le Sage’s lovely face was hidden by her beautiful hands.

For the fifth time the hammer clicked harmlessly.

“*Now*, Man of Destiny,” said Le Sage, and offered the pistol, handle foremost, to Riccoli.

That gentleman again placed his hands behind his back

and violently shook his head.

"*I will not*," he shouted. "Before you pulled that trigger I gave you fair warning that I would not."

"You will," contradicted Le Sage, "or I will pull it for you."

"*Murder*," shouted Riccoli.

"As you please," replied Le Sage. "It's certainly suicide if it isn't murder, now that we've come down to number six."

"*Murder*, I say," cried Riccoli again, and clutched his throat.

"Or suicide," agreed Le Sage.

"*Neither*," cried Riccoli.

"But surely you couldn't walk away from here, and look yourself in the face again?" asked Le Sage. "What is life worth to a man who has lost self-respect, lost the respect of his brother officers, his Regiment, his Brigade, his Division, his Country, his Army, eh?"

"No one would . . ." began Riccoli.

"Oh, yes, they will," interrupted Le Sage. "Everyone will. I shall tell every man I know, and my wife will tell every woman she knows . . . You'll have to leave the Army, Riccoli, and change your name. You might enlist in the Foreign Legion, of course. A rotten Destiny."

He thrust the handle of the pistol against Riccoli's chest.

"Take it, man," he said, "and shoot yourself—like a man."

"I *won't*! . . . I will fight you with swords. I will not commit suicide . . . I, at my age . . . I, Napoleon Riccoli . . . I will *not*."

"You will. I pulled that trigger three times, and you're

going to pull it three times."

Riccoli's hands fell to his sides.

"Very well," he said resignedly. "So be it. Have your own way."

And taking the pistol he added:

"Since you insist, I will pull that trigger a third time."

And swiftly raising the pistol, he pointed it full in the face of Lieutenant Le Sage, and pulled the trigger.

For the sixth time the hammer clicked harmlessly.

"Now, aren't you a dirty dog!" observed Le Sage, shaking his head sadly.

"Trickery!" cried Riccoli.

"Yes," agreed Le Sage.

"I saw you put that cartridge in," faltered the puzzled Corsican.

"You did," agreed Le Sage. "But you didn't see me take it out again," he added.

With parted lips Riccoli stared at the face of the big man towering above him.

"Slink off, Man of Destiny," said Le Sage, at length, breaking the tense silence and pointing to the open door with one huge hand, while the other rose, open, clutching and ominous, in the direction of Riccoli's neck.

In silence Riccoli departed with what dignity he might, and Lieutenant Le Sage turned to his wife.

"Thank you, my dear," he said. "An unpleasant job, but useful and valuable. The Chief shall thank you himself."

"Well, that settles the question of Riccoli," observed

Madame, moving her hands together, with the action of one who dusts her fingers.

"Absolutely," agreed Le Sage. "I shall report that he failed utterly and completely; and that in spite of his perfect knowledge of Italian, Spanish, English and Arabic, his great histrionic ability, his splendid swordsmanship, and his extreme cleverness, he is wholly unfit for the Secret Service. No real nerve and far too—amorous."

PART I

On in the snow—on in the snow—
Blinded and numbed, the soldiers go.
With footfall silenter than theirs
Death dogs their steps: and, unawares,
Strikes down his victims one by one.
Pursuit is distanced; doom begun.
Frost-bitten fingers, stiff with cold,
Seem frozen to the gun they hold.
The icicles hang on beard and hair;
The breath like smoke goes out in the air;
Till reason and thought begin to wane.
And only the dull, blind sense of pain,
And the instinct of Duty till Death, remain.

On in the snow—on in the snow—
The cruel, drifting, deadly snow—
They march in silence, with muffled tread:
Till one of them stumbles,—and drops behind, dead!
And the others shudder, and glance around—
For they hear, growing nearer, an ominous sound
In the woods—the dismal howl
Of the wolves that after them stealthily prowl.
By open waste: by dreary wood:
By rivers black and frozen flood—
On in the snow—on in the snow—
Ever, with thinning ranks, they go.

Clifford Harrison.

CHAPTER I

"On in the snow—on in the snow—
Blinded and numbed, the soldiers go."

Major Napoleon Riccoli rode at their head, looking, according to his wont, as Napoleonic as possible. Thus, he reflected, must his great ancestor—well, no, perhaps not exactly ancestor—his great namesake, prototype, forerunner, exemplar, what you will, have looked on the Retreat from Moscow.

Not that this Napoleon was retreating, of course. *Au contraire*, advancing. Very much so. Advancing a good deal farther than some people proposed, expected or intended.

Ho, ho! Advancing indeed . . . And with an independent command. An independent command at last; the chance for which this Man of Destiny had waited so long; worked and waited, plotted and schemed.

And actually on the very borders of Mekazzen!

Now the world should hear something; hear of a newer—and a greater—Napoleon.

A new Napoleon.

New worlds to conquer . . .

A new Jerusalem.

Napoleon Buonaparte—a back number.

Napoleon Riccoli—a new Man of Destiny.

Emperor Napoleon Buonaparte—Emperor of France.

Emperor Napoleon Riccoli—Emperor of the Sahara. Emperor of Northern Africa.

Emperor of Africa. Emperor of Africa and France.

Emperor of Africa and Europe.
Emperor of the World!

And meanwhile it was extremely cold, and the future Emperor had no handkerchief.

At the heels of the weary and half-starved horse that had the honour to carry Major Napoleon Riccoli—a horse named Marengo after another famous charger—strode Major Napoleon Riccoli's humble relative, henchman, and fervent admirer, the excellent Sergeant-Major Vittorelli.

Excellent indeed from the point of view of his superior officers, though the soldiers of his Section used other, many other, adjectives when describing Sergeant-Major Vittorelli.

In justice it must be admitted that soldiers rarely apply the term "excellent" to their Sergeant-Major, and it is probable that one so described would be a man of unusual and peculiar traits, if not virtues.

What his men knew of Sergeant-Major Vittorelli was his harshness, brutality, love of fault-finding, merciless cruelty when provoked, his injustice; and, be it admitted, his ability, hardihood, and high courage.

What Major Napoleon Riccoli knew of Sergeant-Major Vittorelli was his absolute unswerving fidelity to, and burning faith in, Major Napoleon Riccoli. Where Riccoli led, Vittorelli would follow. What Riccoli ordered, Vittorelli would do.

"Thought you said this Africa was a 'ot country," grumbled *le Légionnaire* William Bossum to his comrade

Sailor Harris, marching on his right, near the head of the little column led by Major Napoleon Riccoli.

"So it is 'ot in the 'ot parts—and the 'ot times," was the cold reply. "You'll be grumblin' because it's too 'ot, soon."

"Roll on, the 'ot," observed *le Légionnaire* William Bossum, and, bent almost double against the bitter chill of the icy blast and beneath the weight of his snow-laden pack and sodden clothing, he breathed hard upon numbed fingers.

"*Cor!*" he said, in general comprehensive comment and condemnation.

"'Tain't no worse for you than what it isn't for nobody else, is it?" expostulated Sailor Harris.

"That don't make it no better for me, do it?"

"Not 'arf it don't. Course it do."

"'Ow?"

"Well, don't it make you feel no better to know 'ow bad I feel?"

"Ar," agreed *le Légionnaire* William Bossum. "There's somethink in that, as the monkey said when he sat on the bee-'ive."

"Besides," continued Sailor Harris, "ain't you never 'ad it worse than this? Reefin' sails in the middle of the night and a 'owlin' blizzard abaft the beam, fit to blow you off the yard-arm; with the sail froze 'ard as wood and the ropes and spars an inch thick in ice? Eh? Ain't you ever laid out along the bowsprit, twenty below zero, snowin' thicker than this, foot-ropes under the sea 'arf the time, with a jib-sail broke adrift, and flappin' over the knightheads—and you findin' yerself knocked off by a bloomin' great wave as the bowsprit dives down, and then 'angin' by one frozen 'and

to the jackstay as it shoots up to the sky? ’Aven’t you?”

“No. I ’aven’t,” replied William Bossum. “I bin in the Navy; a gentleman’s life.”

“*Ho!*” observed Sailor Harris and fell silent.

“Give us your *bundook*, William Bossum, you miserable flat-footed mouldy matlow,” said *le Légionnaire* Joe Mummery, marching on complainant’s left hand. “I haven’t got no smelling-salts to offer you.”

“I don’t want no smellin’-salts, Joe, and I don’t want no one to carry me gun. I could carry yours as well as mine, and yer pack too. I wasn’t grumblin’, was I? I only said it was cold, didn’t I? So it is, ain’t it? You don’t expect me to *sing*, do yer?”

“Gord, no!” ejaculated Sailor Harris.

“All I wants,” continued *le Légionnaire* William Bossum, “is a cosy, warm little pub, with red blinds and a blazin’ fire and a nice good-’earted gal ’andin’ you a drop o’ somethink ’ot acrost the bar, and you lightin’ up a pipe o’ real tobaccer . . . Down Gosport way! Ar!”

“Goin’ strong, boy?” said *le Légionnaire* Joe Mummery to his left-hand man.

“Eh? What? ’Pon my word, I believe I was asleep,” replied *le Légionnaire* Otho Bellême.

“Well, turn over and have another snooze, mate, and don’t pinch all the clothes,” said *le Légionnaire* Sailor Harris, and the four Englishmen laughed, causing a crapulous and liverish old *légionnaire*, known as Tant de Soif, to growl that, by the Name of a Name, the sacred dogs of Englishmen grew madder every day.

On in the snow . . .

Trudging on dead feet through snow and slush and mud and water; through little sudden mountain torrents; over boulders; up wet and slippery precipitous slopes; at times almost leaning against the howling biting wind; starving, ragged, with outworn, burst and sodden boots, the soldiers go . . .

Nor are their sufferings lessened, their courage stiffened, by the knowledge that they are approaching barracks, a fort, an outpost, nor even a native village, for they have left civilization far behind, and are daily penetrating farther and farther into the mountains.

They know that when they halt they will lie down as they are; lie down on the wet ground beneath the pitiless rain, the stinging sleet, or the driving snow; unfed, unwarmed, unsheltered. It will be impossible to light fires, to cook food, to boil water, and make coffee.

However, *que voulez-vous*? *C'est la Légion! À la guerre comme à la guerre* . . . They are soldiers, and take life—and death—as it comes. But a few days agone, men suffered sunstroke. To-night they suffer cold, exposure. Heat-stroke then; frost-bite now.

Some may die of . . .

Bang!

What is that?

Automatically the little column staggers to a standstill. Major Napoleon Riccoli halts, wheels about, and rides back.

There is confusion in the ragged straggling ranks.

What is it?

An attack? . . . When frozen, starving men can scarcely stand; when numbed, dead hands can scarcely feel the ice-

coated rifle; can scarcely open stiff, ice-coated cartridge-cases?

What dirty dogs to attack when . . .

No, only a single shot.

Only young Ramononez, it appears, has had enough.

Suddenly he has lurched from the ranks, placed the butt of his rifle upon the ground, its muzzle beneath his chin and, bending over, has pressed the trigger with his thumb.

The Legion shrugs its shoulders. *Chacun à son goût. Le Légionnaire* Ramononez will not suffer from the cold to-night.

"*Au contraire*, it may be of heat that he will complain," suggests old Tant de Soif, rubbing the end of his blue nose with the back of his shrivelled hand.

"It will be of heat that we shall all be complaining in a day or two, look you," observed old Tant de Soif's *copain*, another old man, veteran of Cochin-China, Madagascar, Senegal, and the Western Sahara in general.

". . . Those of us who do not die of cold up here . . . When we've crossed these mountains and get down into the valleys and the plains, we shall be in the hottest place in the world. I know, I who speak. I have soldiered there before. The Sultan of Mekazzen hunted us and hounded us and cut off stragglers, but it was the heat that killed us. Yes, had young Ramononez been a sensible Frenchman instead of an excitable Spaniard, he could have found plenty of warmth without going to Hell for it . . . Yes . . . He could have died like a soldier at his post on active service, beloved of his officers, cherished by his non-commissioned officers, and admired by his comrades . . . He could have had a military

funeral, and a nice grave with a wooden cross and his name on it, decipherable for at least a year, and everybody quite pleased about it, including himself . . .

"He should have consulted me before . . ."

"Hold your tongue, my grandchild," interrupted Tant de Soif. "You talk too much, like all young people."

As the beard of "Père Poussin" was not quite so long, nor quite so light a grey as that of Tant de Soif, nor his years of service probably quite as many, it was the custom of Tant de Soif to treat his fellow *ancien* as a boy, indiscreet, rash and voluble, a person whose ignorance, inexperience and immaturity should keep him silent and respectful in the presence of his elders and betters, or rather of that elder and better soldier, Tant de Soif.

A garrulous old gentleman, especially when under the influence of alcohol—his normal condition—he suffered sorely, though not in silence, from Tant de Soif's sense of duty, the duty of keeping his junior in his place, and in a sense of his unworthiness.

"Am I, then, a child that . . ."

"Yes. In intellect," interrupted Tant de Soif, "though your never still tongue runs in an unwise old head."

Père Poussin fell silent.

It was hard, very hard, that he who had soldiered all over the world, been in twenty-three engagements, wounded seven times and thrice decorated, should not be allowed to give, and give generously, of his garnered stores of wisdom, knowledge and experience . . . Well, one of these days old Tant de Soif would die. No, old soldiers never die. He would be killed in battle, and then Père Poussin would be Father of the Battalion. But as he would

indubitably himself die of grief within twenty-four hours of the death of his comrade, there was not much consolation in that.

There was, however, in neat rum—and once again he hitched his "water-bottle" forward.

"You drink too much, you know," observed Tant de Soif. "Far too much."

"What?" ejaculated Père Poussin.

"Too much. Too fast, and too often," continued Tant de Soif. "The next thing will be that I shall find that your water-bottle is empty when I want a drink."

"Oh, *pardon*. I understand," replied Père Poussin. "Might one suggest that you husband the rum in your own bottle?"

"I have no rum in my bottle," was the cold reply. "I have red wine. And when I have drunk that miserable pint or so of *pinard*, I shall be glad of some rum."

"I will save you some, *mon vieux*."

"Do so. Rum is bad for boys. It stunts their growth and fuddles their intellects."

"If any," he added.

"Christ! It's cold!" cried a voice with a ring of protesting, shivering agony.

"For God's sake let's march—or lie down and die," growled a big German.

A bigger Russian, bearded, bear-like, enormous, laughed.

"*Cold!*" he said. "I wish I had got you all back in Siberia with me, in the world-famous Preobrazhensky Regiment, of

which I was once Regimental Sergeant-Major . . .”

“*En avant! Marche!*”

And once more the little column staggers forward, Major Riccoli rides back to his place at its head, thrusts his right hand inside his *capôte* and broods Napoleonicly.

Napoleon the Fourth?

But why be Fourth to anybody? Why not Riccoli the First?

No, better keep to the name Napoleon; and many of the greatest Kings and Emperors had not been the First of their name.

Louis the Fourteenth . . . Charles the Fifth . . . Henry of Navarre, who became Henry the Fourth of France.

Or perhaps just Napoleon Riccoli, like Gustavus Adolphus, Ghengis Khan or Attila the Hun.

William the Conqueror. . . . What about Riccoli the Conqueror?

Alexander the Great. . . . What about Riccoli the Great?

But, after all, the world would choose for itself. These names are given, not chosen. Look at Pedro the Cruel; Philip the Beautiful; Louis the Good; Peter the Great. Obviously these men did not choose their names.

It would be for History to name him Napoleon the Fourth, Riccoli the Redeemer—or just plain simple Napoleon Riccoli like plain simple Julius Cæsar—greatness unadorned.

Meanwhile the first step. *C’est le premier pas qui coûte.*

The first step—the capture of the impregnable stronghold, perhaps in these days the last truly impregnable stronghold, the great citadel of Mekazzen.

If a barbarous uncivilized bandit like the Kaid of

Mekazzen could defy and defeat a Great Power—not only a Great Power but a combination of Great Powers—what could not a highly trained, widely experienced, and brilliantly clever modern soldier do? And not only soldier, but diplomat, statesman, and born leader of men.

Why, suppose he embraced Islam and became a leader in Islam—organized, co-ordinated, and united, the greatest force in the world to-day?

Kaid of Mekazzen . . . Sultan of Morocco . . . Algeria . . . Tunisia . . . Tripoli . . . Egypt . . . Arabia . . . Persia . . . Afghanistan . . . India . . . half the world, for a start.

Might and power and glory.

Power . . .

The things one could do to one's enemies!

That fellow Le Sage, rival and enemy, the only man who had ever made Napoleon Riccoli feel small and look ridiculous . . . Le Sage and his empty revolver! . . . A damned rascally trick to play on a gentleman.

What should Napoleon the Fourth do to Le Sage?

Something with a revolver—and show Le Sage that he was not the only one who could play tricks.

An idea! Offer a big reward and capture him, some time, when he was running about in one of his fool disguises playing at Secret Service mysteries. Capture him, put him in a cell, and go in with a revolver . . . Give him the revolver and say,

"Look here, le Sage—that bright and clever duel-idea of yours, in which you ran no danger, because it was a rascally trick! We're going to fight that duel now, and fight it properly, for there *is* a cartridge in the revolver, this time. I

give you my word of honour there is. And as the brilliant idea was yours, you shall have the first turn."

And, banking on his luck, the good Le Sage would grin and take the revolver, and put it to his thick head and pull the trigger.

And that would be the end of the good Le Sage, for there would be, as he told him, a cartridge in the revolver—and it would have five companions. In fact, the pistol would be fully loaded! Ha, ha, *ce bon* Le Sage. Such a clever man. Such a rising star in the Secret Service.

And his wife, the beautiful Madame Le Sage, also brilliantly clever, who helped him play his foul trick upon Napoleon Riccoli, the man who had honoured her by his notice. What of Madame Le Sage—after she had witnessed the beginning (and end!) of the second "duel" between her husband and Napoleon Riccoli?

One wondered if she were aware that there are still perfectly good slave-markets south of Morocco, where negroes and negresses are brought from the interior and bought and sold like other cattle—and where a white woman would be an interesting novelty.

Yes, that would do. That would dispose of the Le Sages.

And meanwhile how to dispose of oneself now for the night? The other Napoleon had a carriage in which to sleep. . . .

§ 2

A week later . . .

Blistering, blasting, devastating heat.

“Have you ever known anything like this before, Joe?” asked Otho Bellême, moistening dry lips with sticky tongue, as he turned to his right-hand man.

“No, mate, never,” replied Joe Mummery, shifting his rifle from one sore shoulder to the other. “Never. And I’ve bin up the Persian Gulf in a tin gun-boat all one summer, Muscat to Mohammerah, chasing dhows. Then ashore, chasing them Afghan gun-runners, from Karachi to Basra pretty well . . . No, nothing like this. Not even on the West Coast of Africa, in river-boats.”

“Wish I could die now and go straight to ’ell for a little coolness,” observed Sailor Harris, marching—or rather staggering—on Otho’s left hand.

“Well, you will soon, I should think, very probably,” comforted Joe Mummery.

What struck Otho Bellême as being entirely wrong, immoral, contrary to common sense, sound theory, and all that he had ever been taught on the subject, was the fact that old Tant de Soif, who appeared to live chiefly upon wine, beer, absinthe, and any other alcohol that he could get hold of, was undoubtedly the most cheerful, spry and active member of the whole Section. Apparently the long and terrible march in this appalling heat affected him not at all. From time to time he sang songs more remarkable than edifying; and again, from time to time, uttered words of cheer and encouragement to his younger comrades.

“Hot, my child?” he would reply to a grumbling observation of Père Poussin. “You drink too much. That is why you feel what you call the heat. It’ll be hot later on, I grant you, when we get nearer to the Mekazzen country . . . Nice deep stone defiles between nice high stone mountains

. . . No air . . . Stone hotter than the sun . . . Everything almost white."

"White lime-stone?" inquired Otho Bellême.

"No, white-hot," replied Tant de Soif succinctly.

And in the fullness of time and the emptiness of the great desert, the section of the Legion halted, piled its arms, threw down its knapsacks, and instantly set to work to erect the four walls of the square perimeter camp in which it would build a fortified *poste*, and there sojourn at the orders of Sergeant-Major Vittorelli.

Life in the *poste* was about as dull, monotonous, and wearisome as life could well be. The heat was terrific; food as monotonous as the work, and less plentiful, though not more attractive; water scanty and bad; and diversions non-existent.

"Might as well be in prison," grumbled Sailor Harris to William Bossum.

"You mean 'in prison again,' I s'pose," growled William.

"No, mate, not me. *I* ain't bin in prison."

"Ho! Some's lucky," observed William Bossum.

"And you wasn't, I s'pose?"

"Wot d'you mean?" asked William truculently, raising a large fist.

"That's enough," interposed Joe Mummery. "We're all in prison, aren't we? Eat up your cold chicken, and don't grouse. Sing instead, if you're unhappy. Ever heard this one?"

And lifting up a fine bass voice he trolled,

> "This oakum pickin'
> Gives me such a lickin'
> I'd rather 'ave
> A little bit o' chicken
> In me 'ands,
> In me dooks.
> In the flips o' me dirty maulers."

"All together, boys."

And as Joe Mummery raised a battered spoon as *bâton*, the Englishmen burst into the chorus of the song which, by now, certain of their comrades believed to be the British National Anthem:

> "We ain't ones to shirk
> Any kind of 'ard work
> But thank Gawd we can't get it to do-o-o-o."

"That's better," observed Joe. "Better than jackals singin', anyhow."

"Yes, we're prisoners all right. '*Prisoners of the Desert*,' he added, '*By Mr. Drury Lane of The Adelphi Theayter*.' Wonder how long we sits in this salubrious spot while the back-pay, travelling-allowance, and hard-lying money mounts up? Ha'penny a day! Why, it must be gettin' on towards half a crown every couple o' months or so."

"How long?" replied Otho Bellême. "Until Major Riccoli has got his Senegalese and *Tirailleurs Algeriens* up. From what I heard Sergeant-Major Vittorelli saying to Sergeant Tomaso, we took a short cut and a big chance across those mountains, in March . . . Good old Legion. The

other detachments are either marching a few hundred miles farther round or waiting for warmer weather up there. No good at winter sports."

"What's the idea when Ole Man Ricketty does get 'em 'ere, I wonder," speculated William Bossum.

"Chain of *postes* like this one, I suppose," replied Otho Bellême. "With Major Riccoli in command of the lot."

"Well, *then* wot's the idea?" pursued William. "No one won't come 'removin' the sand from the foreshore'—for the canary's cage or their garden paths, if we ain't 'ere, will they?"

"We're peacefully penetrating, my son," replied Otho. "Also, I believe, keeping an eye upon the Sultan of the Mountains, the Great Kaid, the Kaid of Mekazzen—biggest man in North-West Africa, bigger than the Sultan of Morocco."

"Ar! that's right," agreed Sailor Harris. "Ole friend o' mine, 'e is."

"Bloke I told *you* about, Bob," he added, turning to Otho, "that day at the Fair, when we was with the Circus, in ole Pug Pounder's Boxing Booth. You an' me, Bob, an' the Battersea Boy and the Sheffield Blacksmith . . ."

"Yes, and young Sturge and Tod Maclehose and Walter Jones," agreed Otho. "I'm not likely to forget it, nor your message about '*Save the little Jewels*,' as I thought you said."

" '*Save the little Jules*,' " murmured Otho again, with a short and bitter laugh.

"Wot was that, 'Arris?" asked William Bossum. "You bin 'ere before, d'you say? If you bin 'ere before, why couldn't you say so before?"

“Ho, yus, before and be’ind. I didn’t say before that I’d bin ’ere before becos we come some other way. But I been to Mekazzen before, all right,” replied Sailor Harris.

“Well, go on, get it up,” requested William Bossum, “and don’t be so bloomin’ ’aughty and mysterious. Anybody’d think you was a missin’ *h*eir or somethink.”

“You’ll be a missin’ Legion- *h*eir all right, in a moment,” replied Sailor Harris with unwonted brilliance. “If you could close your ’ead for half a second, I’d tell you. What I was tryin’ to say was . . . Before I ’ad the misfortune to meet you in Tonbury, I goes ashore from off my ship in Marseilles and gets drunk. So drunk I gets that I joins the Foreign Legion, or else the Foreign Legion joins me . . . *I* dunno . . . Any’ow, my Section was garrison of a fort, and my *escouade* was doin’ a patrol and got mopped up by some Beddoo blokes. Me an’ my chum, ole Peer Legrand, is what they calls the sole survivors of the bloomin’ shipwreck. Took the knock we ’ad—down for the count all right—but not killed, yer see.”

“No, I see you wasn’t killed,” agreed William Bossum.

“An’ these Beddoo blokes takes us along to Mekazzen an’ gives us to this Kite for a Christmas-box or a birthday-present or something. No joy-ride neither, it wasn’t. They fair walloped us along like costermongers’ donkeys, an’ dragged us along be’ind a camel when we couldn’t run no more. Nasty rough lot they was. But nothin’ to the Kite o’ Mekazzen . . .

“Cor lumme! Rough! ’E *was* an ole bastard. We soon wished we was back with the Beddoos. They only knocked us about; but ’e fair tortured us. Uster bring us out to be shot

fer breakfast, then put us back and bring us out again to be shot fer supper. Sometimes the firin' party would fire blanks . . . Sometimes they'd shoot all round us . . .

"Then one day he took my poor chum Peer Legrand, an' 'ad him chucked off a tower on to some sharp 'ooks, 'arf-way down the wall. An' there 'e 'ung till he died . . . 'Ooked through the leg . . . Upside-down . . . like a sheep in a butcher's shop . . . Pore ole Peer. 'E was a good chum, 'e was . . . Always called me 'Arry and thought he was sayin' 'Arris . . .

"'E's a dirty dog, that Kite; an' I told him so. Treating two soldiers like that becos they wouldn't join his bloomin' Fred Karno's army. Dirty dog. I'd serve him the same if I got a chance."

"Well, then you wouldn't be no better than what he is, if you done the same thing," expostulated William Bossum.

"Well, I'd shoot 'im, any'ow," was the reply.

"Kite Harem Abduller Kareem," he growled. "The dirty dog . . . I'd like to . . ."

"Well, how did you come to get away then?" asked Joe Mummery, as Sailor Harris paused to think of exactly what he'd like to do to the Kaid Haroun Abd'allah Karim of Mekazzen.

"It was his sister done it. Come down in the middle of the night to the dungeon place, she did, where I was chained up like a dog. Sez she can get me out and guided to a place called Tangier if I'd give a bloke there a message from 'er. Then the bloke would give me two 'undred and fifty francs for meself and see me on my way. Likewise she done it too. A dumb bloke, an' an ole 'ag, an' a black piccaninny. An' me in one o' their big cloaks like a great 'orse-blanket with a

hood to it.

"Well, the dumb bloke gets me out all right and guides us to Tangier. And all the way I keeps repeating the message to meself, not knowing but what me life depended on it, yer see. The message from this girl to the bloke in Tangier, Seenyor Peteroh Mulleeny."

"Yes," murmured Otho. "Señor Pedro Maligni."

"What was the message?" asked Joe Mummery.

"'*Save the little jewels*,' " replied Sailor Harris, "'*Gibraltar. England. Don't trust my brother any more. His wife has won. Give this man two hundred and fifty francs and send him over the sea. Peteroh's gazelle Elizabeth Ellen speaks. Save the little jewels.*'

"Yes, that was the message an' I'll remember it as long as I live . . . Elizabeth Ellen was the girl's name—the Kite's sister. Only she pernounced it like El Isa Beth El Ain. Like that . . . A lovely piece, she was, too. Cor lumme! . . . An' spoke some English with 'er French and Arabic."

"Her mother was an Englishwoman—Elizabeth Elaine Torson," said Otho, "captured with her husband Captain Torson, a gunner from Gibraltar. The tribesmen who captured them, killed him, and sold her in the market-place of Mekazzen as a slave. This Kaid's father bought her—and the woman of whom Harris is talking was their daughter. So she is the half-sister of the present Kaid. Also half-English . . . Poor soul . . ."

"How d'you know, Bob?" asked Joe Mummery as Otho fell silent.

"Because the 'black piccaninny' who went with Harris and the dumb man and the old hag was her son, disguised.

He was ‘the little jewels’ (as Harris thought she said)—his name is Jules—and it was to escort, and to save, the little Jules that she sent Harris to Tangier . . . *And* the little Jules Maligni, being safely handed over to his father, Pedro Maligni, by the dumb guide, was sent to England in charge of a Dr. Maykings and his wife, friends of Señor Pedro Maligni whom they were visiting in Tangier. Dr. Maykings, as you know, Joe, was my father’s friend and doctor . . . And ‘the little Jules’ married his daughter Margaret Maykings who, as you also know, was my—er—friend.”

Otho Bellême fell silent.

“Rum world,” soliloquized Sailor Harris. “Rum go. Fair ole pantermime . . . Fancy that piccaninny bein’ that girl’s kid!”

“Yes,” continued Otho. “It was Jules Maligni. And I have known him for nearly as long as I can remember . . . I met his cousin too—chap named Raisul—son of the Kaid Haroun Abd’allah Karim. He was educated in Paris and Madrid, and he used to come to see Jules Maligni at Oxford, when he visited England. The Señor Pedro Maligni was the Kaid’s agent—financial and political in general, and gun-running in particular, I believe. I expect Jules looked after the English end of it for Pedro—and Raisul looked after Jules . . .

“I used to hear a good deal about Mekazzen, at one time, when Jules lived with the Maykings family close to my house—but I never thought I’d see the beastly country.”

“You never know *wot* you won’t see, mate,” concluded Sailor Harris. “All *I* know is that . . .”

“You don’t know nothing—and you know that wrong,” interrupted William Bossum, and the ensuing scuffle ended

the conversation on the subject.

CHAPTER II

The Section had endured life at *Poste* One for but a brief space, when the personality of a hitherto unnoticed comrade began to impinge upon Otho's consciousness—a man whom the four Englishmen and their friends had noticed only as one of the party whom they generally termed "Vittorelli's pets." He had arrived, one day, with a mule-convoy, and had remained at the *poste*.

Undeniably, Sergeant-Major Vittorelli was guilty of gross favouritism, and undoubtedly this man was a prime favourite—ranking with the Corsicans themselves in Vittorelli's esteem, and, with them, basking in the warmth of his approval—an approval that had numerous significant and practical manifestations.

Very probably the fact that the fellow had lived in Corsica, knew Ajaccio and spoke Italian, had a great deal to do with his success with Sergeant-Major Vittorelli. And not only with Sergeant-Major Vittorelli, for that invaluable and powerful patron of a worthy and deserving *protégé* had introduced him to the favourable notice of Major Riccoli himself.

In this exalted quarter also, the fellow had found favour, and had so far ingratiated himself that Major Riccoli had appointed him his *ordonnance*, orderly for duty whenever Major Riccoli sojourned at *Poste* One.

Here again, doubtless, the man's knowledge of Corsica, Ajaccio, and the Italian tongue were of immense service to him in the attainment of his ambitions.

But why he, rather than the genuine Corsicans

themselves, Corsicans bred and born?

And then, with a smile at his growing tendency to cynicism, Otho remembered that the man had money—for a *légionnaire*, quite a lot of money.

And if, in the Kingdom of the Blind, the one-eyed is King, in the Legion's Purgatory of Poverty, the man with a private income is Crœsus.

Not, of course, that his having money had any bearing upon his finding favour in the sight of Major Riccoli; nor, indeed, is it ready that the Sergeant-Major commanding a *poste* is likely to accept gifts of money from a *légionnaire*. No, no. Nevertheless, the fact remains that a cash-endowed "creeper," tactful and discreet, can creep a very long way.

Lord! What petty and pitiful trifles loom large in such a life as that of a buried-alive forgotten desert-outpost.

§ 2

Otho yawned cavernously, stretched himself mightily, and sat up on his cot.

Siesta-time was all very well, and the rigidly enforced *siesta* very sound in theory, if not in practice. Doubtless it kept fools out of the sun at the very hottest time of the day, and so prevented a certain number of cases of sun-stroke and heat-apoplexy.

Also, the two hours' relaxation undoubtedly did something for frayed nerves and fatigue-poisoned muscles—if one could relax.

But the fact remained that *siesta*-time was a rotten time when the *siesta* was taken in a stuffy airless oven, and that,

a very crowded oven. A great many attacks of *cafard* seemed to occur during *siesta*-time. But, on the other hand, it was quite probable that there would be more *cafard* if there were less *siesta*.

Otho closed his eyes, the better to pursue thoughts and memories of Margaret.

"Lend us that rag, mate . . . Yes, yes, all right, I'll give it to you back. What's your name, by the way?"

"Bombelli."

Joe Mummery and that queer chap the "creeper," Major Riccoli's *ordonnance*, who had lately been cultivating the four Englishmen and their friends.

"What did you say?"

"Bombelli."

"Love us! Bit explosive, ain't it? You should take something for that."

"*Comment?*"

"Bombelli! . . . I think I'll call you Shell-back instead, mate."

"My name is not Shelbach, no. It is Bombelli, yes."

Otho laughed.

Good for Joe. "Shell-back" certainly was a rather subtle alternative. Also what one might term a delicate paraphrase.

Why was Bombelli now cultivating him, Otho, so assiduously and unmistakably? Also Joe, William Bossum, and Sailor Harris, as well as Tant de Soif, Père Poussin and Petrovitch, their friends?

What could he hope to get out of them? What was his game?

Otho considered him and his recent gradual emergence from the ruck of their comrades into the position of, not exactly membership of their set, but that of a candidate for membership.

An extremely amusing as well as interesting person, with an inexhaustible fund of humour. One gathered that he had had an amazing career, had used all the world as his stage, and in his time played many parts.

He still had a wonderful voice and had sung in all the chief Opera Houses of Europe. He was immensely agile, quick and supple, and had earnt his living as an acrobat and conjurer. Although not very big he was very strong, with muscles like wire hawsers. Also he was extremely handsome in the classic Roman style.

A real human puzzle.

Whenever life was extra hard, food extra short, and wine unprocurable, Bombelli loudly lamented the cowardice that brought him to the Legion.

"So you're a faint-hearted, lily-livered, cold-footed coward, eh?" Joe Mummery had smiled one day, the first time Bombelli bewailed the lack of courage that had made him a soldier in the Regiment that is always fighting.

"Sure, Bo," replied Bombelli in Italianate English-American.

"Goddam god-awful coward . . . I maka the runaway . . . I vamoosa. From a girl! She beata me . . . I skedadalla . . . I sure get-to-hell-outa-this, *pronto* . . ."

"Blimey," objected Sailor Harris, "I run away from lots o' girls in my time—but I don't say I'm a coward. If every

bloke that got-up-and-got because of a girl, was a coward—well—where's the brave man?"

"Ah—but she beata me with a whip . . . She knock me about . . . I say 'If you hit me, I hit you back' . . . Then she hit me again and I do not hit her back nor her front, because she knock me down and put her foot on my neck and beata me with my own whip . . . And when I rigolo away out, she chase me and beat me up some more . . ."

"Where was all this, Bombo?"

"U.S.A. I am acrobat with de Barnum and de Bailey . . . In other circuses I am acrobat, contortionist, juggler, tumbler, trapeza; do an act on de horse; lion-tamer; refined musical act . . . All things I do."

"And who was the girl, Shell-back?" asked Joe. "Couldn't you acrobite and contort and juggle her, or get up the trapeze or on the horse, or tame her, or charm her with refined music or . . ."

"Nope," replied Bombelli. "Nor couldn't nobodies. Not on your lifa."

"Couldn't you just plain smack 'er?" inquired Sailor Harris. "Knock 'er about a bit—for 'er own good?"

"Nope." Bombelli laughed. "I couldn't hurta her," he said simply.

"Was she your wife?" Joe jeered. "And did you let her make a doormat of you? Because you loved her so much."

"She *was* my vife . . . I did let her make a doormatta of me . . . Because I lof her so moch . . . And because she was da Strong Woman of Slocum's Sensational Circus. She was as strong as four men and as wicked as four women; and I would not like to be one of four men dat attacka her. She throw them at each other. Then she picka one up and beata

the others with him . . .

“In Slocum’s Circus I am lion-tamer, and Herculea is da Strong Woman . . . Oh, da wonderful fine woman to look at . . . Oh, da wonderful fine woman to—do a de bunk from . . . Such a vife to come home to—and, per Bacco, such a vife to not go home to no more, yes.

“In Slocum’s Circus I am lion-tamer and I have a uniform better as General Lyautey and more medals. One day dis Herculea say,

“ ‘I like you, little Wop. Or else I like your glad little breeches and boots. You gotta marry me and come live in my caravan. See?’

“ ‘I can’t,’ I says, ‘I gotta . . .’

“When I recover from de blow I find my jaw is broken and I cannot eata . . . So I drinka . . . And while I am drunka . . . Herculea marries me . . .

“Mother of Pity and All the Saints at Rest—I don’t get no Pity and no Rest . . . One day she throwa da plata da soupa all over my uniform, because I deny I blowa kiss to bare-backa rider girl . . . I rise in my wrath, and I sits down in my grief, in a puddle outside da caravan, because she knocks me t’rough da door which it was shut yes . . . Before I can get up she takes my lion-whip and belta da life outa me . . . I yell for mercy and then I run like hell—and jumpa into da lions’ cage along wit’ da big lion Cæsar an’ his vife Mrs. Chant—nasty vicious brutes dat killa da tamer before me.

“ ‘Sure! Dat’s where you belong,’ bawls my vife, ‘along wit’ da other dirty beasts’—and Cæsar’s vife gets up and shows da teeth like what she t’inks I don’t belong there at

all. Not outa working-hours.

“What wit’ my vife an’ Cæsar’s vife, I don’t allow I has any use for vives. No, Sir, yes.

“When I slams da cage door an’ feels pretty safe, I pokes outa my tongue at my vife.

“ ‘Yah!’ I says, feeling sore—especialla in da seat of da pants and all up da back and front and da head an’ face—‘Yah! I sooner be in here wit’ dese pore dumb animals in a cage than in your caravan . . . You ain’t a woman, you’re a she-gorillaro.’ And then one of da dumb animals lets a roar to shake da Big Top down. Mrs. Chant it was, and she growls like I was meat.

“ ‘That’s only a catta,’ I says, ‘but you’re a bitcha,’ and pokes out my tongue again at my vife.

“That was da bad tacticka. I do not know dat woman yet.

“Before I can get my tongue back into my mouth, she is insida da cage!

“I give one jump behind Cæsar and yells:

“ ‘Bite her, Cæsar! . . . Seize her, Cæsar! . . . Chew her up!’

“Does he? . . . Not on your lifa, da big coward; and in two ticks she’s hunting the three of us round an’ round da cage—me leading, and Cæsar and Mrs. Chant getting mosta da licks.

“ ‘Lion-tamer!’ bawls Herculea, ‘I’ll tame your goddam lions and their tamer too . . . I’ll make you three animals so dam’ tame you’ll sit up an’ darn holes in my tights for a livin’ . . .’

“And all of a sudden I gets back my wits and dives outa the trick door and shuts her in wit’ Cæsar an’ Mrs. Chant.

“ ‘Eat her, Pups,’ I begs. ‘Quit runnin’, and eat her quick! She’s yours . . .’ but those two Magnificent Forest-Bred Untameable Savage Lions and Lionesses keeps on runnin’.

“So I goes back to the caravan and finishes my dinner in peace. By an’ by the Boss comes along.

“ ‘Say, Bomb,’ he begins, ‘you’re fired—as lion-tamer to this show . . . Your wife’s in with Cæsar and Mrs. Chant an’ they’re sittin’ upright on their bohinds—beggin’!’

“ ‘Beggin’ for life, I guess,’ I says.

“ ‘Sure. Beggin’ for mercy,’ answers the Boss. ‘She’s right now and henceforth The World’s Most Renownded and Only Lady Lion-Tamer of Slocum’s Magnificent Forest-Bred Untameable Savage Lions and Lionesses. Yep. You’re fired, right now.’

“Well—I have my pride, me, Bombelli. They may know in da Circus that my vife beata me up, and that I am afraid of her; and they may say,

“ ‘He tama da lions but he don’t tama da vife’—but I have my pride, and I cannot stay in da Circus after my vife get my job from me and do it more better than what I done. Especialla when her job is lion-taming . . .

“So I make up da minda dat I go. I vamoosa. I cannot stay an’ clean cages for my vife where I been Signor Bombelli, da World’s Greatest an’ all dat . . . No, I go . . . But I have terrible revengeance . . . *Si, si!* My mother is Corsican, yes, and her father takes to da mountains and becomes da bandit because of vendetta yes . . . Revenge is in da blood, yes . . . I am insulted; I am in da soup—or da soup is all over me; I am beated; I am t’rown outa da

caravan inta da puddle; I am chased roun' an' roun' da lions' cage; and dere I am lose da job on me . . . *Revenge!* I say. I have blood-stain' revenge. I have bloody revenge. I have blood-awful revenge, yes. Likewise I done it."

"You didn't kill your wife?" asked Joe.

"Nosir, yes I didn't. But I have fearful vengeance."

"You didn't disfigure the features of 'er face?" inquired Sailor Harris.

"Nosir! I didn't that either, yes. But she remember all her lifa what I do."

"Did you torture her somehow—or maim her?" asked Joe.

"Torture her! Sure I did . . . They hear da screama t'ree mila distant, an' all da Circus performers and tent-men come runnin' . . . She scream and yell da blue murder."

"What did you do?" Otho was constrained to ask, though scarcely wishing to hear. "You didn't really injure the woman?"

"I tell you I have da vengeance which is fair and justa yes—justa leetle cruel too also. Did she not shame me an' ruin me and break my pride? Did she not injure da mind and da soul of Bombelli? And that is more worse than injure da body too.

"I look about for da t'ing I want, da weapon I need."

Bombelli's smiling face grew cruel, cunning and evil, for he talked with his features and his hands, almost as much as with his voice. Otho thought of glass daggers of which the point breaks off deep down in the incurable wound; of corrosive acids; of ground-up bamboo and powdered glass that, put in the victim's food, cause lingering, sure, and miserable death; of subtle poison, and other dreadful

weapons of offence.

"And very soon I find da weapon of my vengeance—da t'ing wit' which I punish da woman and save my pride, my respecka, save my face, my good name—and clean da stain from da soul of Bombelli. I find it, I say . . . I get it . . . I conceal it in da pocket . . . And late dat night I creep to the caravan of my vife, where rightly I should be sleeping in peace and in da bed.

"All is still. There is no sound in all da circus lot, except da rumblings of da elephant and da snoring of Herculea . . . two damn great she-elephants, yes.

"Softly I open da door—so softly, so slowly, wit' my left handa. So slowly, so gently, I turn up da wick of da lamp, fixed just inside da door, wit' my left handa.

"Da light wakes Herculea, and she blinka da eyes at me—and then she sit up in da bed.

"An' she don't like da look on my face, no . . . She see her time had come.

"Before she can move again, I pulls my right hand outa da pocket, holds it up to show her what I got and then—I *throw*."

"Knife?" growled Joe.

"Not vitriol!" ejaculated Otho aghast.

"Tar—and then feathers?" cried Sailor Harris.

"A snake?" Joe asked—remembering something of the sort that he had heard or read.

Bombelli grinned evilly, and made no answer to the questions.

"I throw!" he repeated, and licked his lips as they stared in silence.

“I throw a leetle frog at her. And then she throw a fit. And I run for da lifa—and hear her screama while I am still running t’ree miles away.”

When they had finished laughing, Joe remarked,

“But you didn’t run straight from Ohio to Sidi-bel-Abbès, Bombo?”

“Nope. I runs to the Yards and beata da Overland to N’Yorka. Soon I feels U.S.A. is too small leetle country for me while Herculea movin’ roun’ in it, so I beata da Overwater too—what-you-call a stow-it-away on ship—and comes to Yurrup . . . Then I come to Napoli and sing *Funiculi funicula* bunk to da tourista eatin’ spaghetti and drinkin’ *lachryma Christi* at da hotel by Pompeii . . . And there I sits in da sun an’ grow fat on good eats, wit’ da good oil an’ da good garlic, an’ praise da good God.

“And then lika dam-fool I must shake da loose foot again, and I go all over Yurrup some more, and sometime I sing *Pagliacci* in big Kursaal Concert and in Opera House; and sometime I juggle brass ball in Big Top tent . . . But I don’t tama da lion, any more . . . I don’t feel I can trust them after the way Cæsar let me down and hadn’t da courage to bite Herculea, no sir . . .

“An’ one day I am in Marseilles, to do turn at da Music Hall, an’ am walking up Cannabière feeling good—and run straight into Herculea . . .!

“Den I run straight into Mediterranean Ocean if I can get there before Herculea gets *me*.

“I’ll tell the worlda I can run some, yessir—when Herculea chase me. I’ll say I can. Sure. I can run faster than Herculea—when it’s Herculea what’s pacing me from behind. But I can’t find no ocean yet, so I bolts into da Fort.

“ ‘Fort’s strong enough,’ t’inks I. ‘Surely I’ll be safe in there.’

“Sentry bawls me out.

“ ‘Hi! Where in Hell you t’ink you goin’?’ he shouts.

“ ‘Anywhere there ain’t no women at *all*,’ I says—and the Sergeant comes out an’ says,

“ ‘That’s all right, Wop. Join right now . . . There ain’t no women here.

“ ‘Worse luck,’ he adds.

“ ‘Don’t you blaspheme, Bo,’ I begs, an’ joins da Foreign Legion *pronto* . . .

“For safety . . . Yep . . . Sure . . . No women here . . .”

Yes, an extremely amusing and extraordinarily interesting man.

But did he quite realize how interesting he was becoming—to Otho, at least?

Did he realize that once or twice when talking to Otho he had talked admirable English; talked English without a trace of Italian accent or the use of any expressions, figures of speech, idioms or words used more particularly by Americans?

Did he realize that occasionally he had spoken to Otho in absolutely perfect fluent French, and that it was quite evident that there was no Parisian or other *argot* that he did not understand?

Not entirely trusting his own judgment (and knowledge of French) in the matter, Otho had questioned Tant de Soif on the subject and, with some surprise, Tant de Soif had admitted that Otho was right. Bombelli’s knowledge and use of French were astounding, exact, perfect.

But then one had met Russians like that. Men who surprised Frenchmen when they informed them that they were not French.

§ 3

One moonlight night, as Otho sat leaning against the guard-room wall, thinking, as usual, of England, Home and Beauty—home at Yelverbury Castle and the beauty (mind, body and soul) of Margaret, a *légionnaire*, walking delicately, came and seated himself beside him.

"Hot," he said. "It maka da sweat. Pouf."

Bombelli again.

What now?

"You lika get outa dis?"

"Wouldn't you?"

"Sure t'ing. Yep. Me, I t'ink I get outa dis."

"What do you mean?"

"I go on pump. I maka da promenade. You deserta wit' me?"

"No, thank you."

"Why you not?"

"Not such a fool. Nor such a swine."

"By-an'-bye, perhaps, when good chance come? I gotta da dollars. We get clean away."

"Shut up."

Bombelli laughed, fell silent, and lit a cigarette.

"Say, Britisher, don't get high-hat. I only maka da joke. I play fool."

"You certainly do."

"I don't t'ink you desert wit' me. I tell you trick worth

better dan dat. You betcha lifa . . .”

Otho vouchsafed no reply.

“Lookit,” continued Bombelli. “You wanna make good? You wanna get in good wit’ Vittorelli? Wit’ Vittorelli and da Major?”

“Why?”

“Because I can show you how. I got Vittorelli in my pocket, see?”

“No.”

“Well, I have. And Vittorelli got Big Boy Riccoli in his pocket, see?”

“No.”

“Well, he has. Like you got your three English frien’s in your pocket . . . See? Lookit. Where you go, the other t’ree go too. What you do, the other t’ree do. You come in wit’ us, and bring them in, too. Then you get in good wit’ Vittorelli.”

“What are you driving at? What’s the game?”

“Big game. Riccoli’s game. You like to be a Rajah?”

“Why, going to India, are we?”

Bombelli glanced anxiously round, placed his lips close to Otho’s ear, and whispered,

“*India?* No, Morocco. See? You like to be a Kaid? Big man . . . officer . . . money . . . freedom . . . rank . . . wine . . . horses . . . women . . . ?”

“Call me Marguerite,” yawned Otho.

“What you mean?”

“Ever read *Faust*, my cheap Mephistopheles?”

“Talk sense.”

“Same to you.”

“Lookit, Bellême. Will you come in wit’ us and bring

Mummery, Bossum, Harris, and Tant de Soif, Poussin, Petrovitch, and the rest of your *escouade*? Bring them in wit' us and all happy together. Vittorelli smack you on back instead of on head; put you in his good books instead of punishment-cell. Big Boy Riccoli make you high officer, general, sheikh, kaid . . . Ever hear of Kaid Maclean—Sir Harry Maclean? Rose from drill-sergeant to be Commander-in-Chief, uh?"

"Oh yes, I've heard of him. An honourable gentleman . . . decent . . . true to his salt and faithful to his word . . . and all that."

"*Si, si.* Dat's him. Now, suppose you be honourable gentleman, true to salt, and faithful to word—to good paymaster, to employer that gives real career, fine life, glorious chances—like Sultan of Morocco gave Kaid Maclean."

Otho laughed.

"Apply again at end of present contract," he yawned. "I have an engagement with France; haven't you?"

"Huh! And what does France give you?"

"What France promised."

"You a fool, Bellême?"

"Yes. Like you. Not such a big one, though."

"Your *copains* fools?"

"Yes. Like me. Not knaves, though, like you."

"Lookit, Bellême. What about a spot of cash down? Suppose I could hand you da wad of jack, right a now. What you say?"

"Did you ever hear of Philo Vance, famous American detective—of fiction?"

"Nope."

"There's a little song about him.

'Philo Vance
Needs a kick in the pance.' "

"Say, what's bitin' you, Bellême? You gone bug-house? Why you not answer my question?"

Otho rose to his feet.

"Stand just in front of me, Bombo—about a yard away," he said.

"What you make?" asked Bombelli.

"Make you wish you'd never been born. Stand where I say, and I'll give you a lift in the seat of the 'pance' that will land you over that wall."

Le légionnaire Bombelli did not accept the invitation and Otho, turning suddenly to him, seized him by the collar.

"And listen," he continued. "You say one word of this sort of talk to any of my pals and I'll give you the damnedest hiding a man ever got. See? You may be a strong man and a juggler and an acrobat—as well as a damned rogue—but I happen to be a professional heavy-weight boxer. So let's hear no more out of you. Have a cigarette?"

Le légionnaire Bombelli, who had seen Otho beat M'Bongu, the Senegalese Champion, accepted the cigarette, patted Otho soothingly, laughed, and assured him he did but maka da joka.

"Rotten joke," growled Otho, as Bombelli rose and walked away.

CHAPTER III

Standing "properly at ease" on his sentry-post, and thinking how much more properly at ease he would feel if he could but crouch in the shadow of the low wall, or of one of those great rocks and boulders on the hill-side, *le Légionnaire* Otho Bellême was suddenly aware of a burly Arab who approached him.

Otho eyed him suspiciously and stood tensely ready.

One of the numerous scoundrels who daily brought small eggs, skinny chickens, parched grain, dirty honey, cakes of brown bread, full of the grit of the grind-stone—and opened a small market outside the gates of the little roughly constructed outpost which *les légionnaires* had hastily built for their protection—not so much a labour of bricks without straw as of walls without bricks; the whole post, perimeter walls and *caserne*-buildings consisting solely of piled, unhewn, unmortared stones.

Yes, scoundrels who were hucksters in the light of the sun and snipers by the light of the moon; peaceful pedlars one day and warlike warriors the next; their market but a cover and a chance for spying, for learning the strength—or the weakness—of the garrison, and studying its habits, dispositions and routine; its risings up and its lyings down.

It was not for *le Légionnaire* Otho Bellême to criticize the tactics, dispositions, or methods of his superior officer, Sergeant-Major Vittorelli, much less those of his infinitely more superior officer, Major Riccoli, who commanded the whole column, and rode over frequently from one of the other *postes*. He must know all about it, for, not only did he

occasionally spend the whole day at the *poste*, but sometimes stayed the night . . . Seemed very fond of Sergeant-Major Vittorelli—doubtless because the good Sergeant-Major was a brother Corsican.

The Corsican Brothers, in fact.

"Hi, you!" bawled Otho suddenly, to the burly Arab. "Bung off. Hop it. *Vamoose. Allez. Imshi*, in fact, you . . ."

Slightly changing direction, as the speaker threateningly raised his rifle and brought his bayonet to the charge, the Arab crossed the front of the sentry-post and, as he passed, glanced at Otho and uttered a single word.

"*Yelverbury*," said the big, bearded Arab.

Indubitably and unmistakably, the Arab had said "*Yelverbury*," although the pronunciation had not been that of a man of Kent.

Mechanically the astounded Otho resumed the position of attention, and then stood himself properly at ease.

"*Yelverbury!*"—with just that peculiar pronunciation and intonation.

By Jove! Of course! . . . The interview with the officer . . . The Parade-ground at Mellerat . . . The first day that he was able to go on duty again after his fight with M'Bongu, the fight that had left him with closed eyes, almost immovable jaw, and an almost unbearable ache that extended from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet . . . The messenger who had bidden him come with him forthwith, to where Monsieur le Colonel and a strange officer—another Colonel—demanded his immediate attendance.

He remembered every incident, every word of the interview that had followed.

Saluting and standing smartly at attention in that little room . . . speculating regarding the officer, a big powerful man, strong-faced and iron-jawed, who sat at the table and stared at him with hard appraising eyes . . .

"*Le Légionnaire* Otho Bellême?"

"*Oui, mon Commandant.*"

"Your real name?"

"*Oui, mon Commandant.*"

"You are English?"

"*Oui, mon Commandant.*"

"The name is French."

"Norman. A thousand years in England."

The officer smiled.

"Educated?"

"*Oui, mon Commandant.*"

"Where?"

"At home, at Yelverbury Grammar School, and at Oxford."

"Profession?"

"Pugilist."

The officer smiled. He had watched the defeat of M'Bongu the Invincible.

"Father's profession?"

"*Gentilhomme.*"

The officer raised his eyebrows.

"Sir Bellême, *en effet*?"

"Sir Otho Robert Mandeville-Bellême."

"Ah!"

The officer reflected, as he scrutinized Otho's strong and

handsome, if somewhat disfigured face. Yes, this was his man . . . a tool to his hand . . . Obviously—in view of that awful fight—as brave as a lion, strong as an ox, determined and tenacious as one of his own British bull-dogs . . . Well born, too; well educated; probably quite clever; and, by report, amenable to discipline and of excellent character.

Character? Then what should such a man be doing in the Foreign Legion? A woman, no doubt—*cherchez la femme*. Or perhaps merely one of those mad romantics who live for adventure, warming their brave hearts in the glow of glamorous dreams. Yes, this man would do.

"How would you like to leave the ranks and come with me?" asked the strange Colonel suddenly.

"Pardon, *mon Commandant*?" replied Otho, in some bewilderment.

"Do you speak Arabic as well as you do French and English?"

"As badly as I do French, but not as well as I do English, *mon Commandant*," smiled Otho.

"How would you like to be seconded and come with me . . . Study Arabic . . . dress as an Arab . . . live like an Arab . . . become an Arab, in fact; until I can use you as one. . . . How, in short, would you like to join the Secret Service, if you satisfied me during your apprenticeship, and passed my tests? . . . A hard and dangerous life—for a brave man; with a brave man's rewards, if he succeeded."

"I should love it, *mon Commandant*. Better than anything on earth . . . But I cannot leave my *escouade*."

"Why not?"

"My friends . . . They came with me . . . They joined the Legion because I did. I couldn't . . ."

“What type of men are these, your friends? Englishmen? Educated men? Gentlemen?”

“Two of them are pugilists like myself, *mon Commandant*. All three were sailors . . . Two, *matelots* in the British Navy; one, a Merchant Service sailor before the mast, a re-joined *légionnaire*.”

“Not educated?”

“No, *mon Commandant*.”

“Any of them naturally clever? Good at disguise . . . good linguists . . . good actors?”

Otho shook his head.

“No, *mon Commandant*. Splendid soldiers and fighting men, but no use to you in that way.”

“And you would not leave them?”

Again Otho shook his head.

“No, *mon Commandant*. Never. Absolutely not.”

“You are loyal and faithful, one perceives.”

Another useful trait! What a fool was this young man, to stand thus in his own light and, with his abilities and opportunity, to remain in the ranks of the Legion.

“But look you, *mon enfant*,” he continued, “there are three of them, you say, these friends of yours. It is not like your leaving one friend; leaving him forlorn. It is merely that your English party, instead of being four, will be three. Each will have the company and society of two other Englishmen. Surely it is enough. They would not grudge you your promotion—for that is what it would certainly amount to . . . See now—either they do not grudge it, and all is well; or they do grudge it, and they are no true friends.”

Otho smiled.

"They would urge me to accept your offer, *mon Commandant*."

"Then why not do so?"

"Partly because they would urge it. Do you not see, *mon Commandant*, they are my friends . . . How can I clear off and leave them? They followed me here. I am the cause and the reason of their being in the Foreign Legion. How could I desert them—to profit myself? Would you, sir, in my place?"

The officer smiled a little wryly.

The Secret Service is an exacting mistress and recks little of personal feelings and of such trifles as personal friendships.

The Colonel, head upon hand, reflectively regarding that foolish young man, aired his admirable English.

"You're their leader, eh? And don't intend to be their lost leader.

> " 'Just for a handful of silver he left us,
> Just for a riband to stick in his coat—
> Found the one gift of which fortune bereft us,
> Lost all the others she lets us devote.'

"Well, *mon enfant*, you are a fool."

"*Oui, mon Commandant.*"

"A silly fool."

"*Oui, mon Commandant.*"

"A damned silly fool."

"*Oui, mon Commandant.*"

"An Englishman, in fact."

"*Oui, mon Commandant.*"

“I’m very fond of the English,” said the officer, and rising to his feet, extended a huge hand, the grip of which caused poignant but agreeable pain to Otho’s damaged fist.

“Now listen, and pay close attention. Give me some word—we’ll have an English word, I think—that will instantly recall me to you, should I utter it in your hearing . . . A kind of pass-word, in effect, that will be private and peculiar to you and me.”

“Oh, I should never forget you, *mon Commandant*, especially after your kindness.”

“Perhaps not, *mon enfant*, but I trust that, although you may not forget me, you won’t know me the next time we meet . . . A little humiliating for me, you know, if I accosted you in the guise of a starving leper, and instead of giving me a *sou*, you saluted me and stood to attention . . . I sincerely hope a pass-word will be necessary before you recognize me.”

Otho smiled.

“I beg your pardon, *mon Commandant*. I did not understand . . . What about ‘*Yelverbury*’ where my home is?”

“Excellent. It is hardly likely that any Arab, Moor, Bedouin, Touareg or other Berber will introduce himself to you with that particular word,” smiled the officer as, with a friendly hand upon Otho’s shoulder, he bade him think well upon what he had heard, while remembering that a still tongue runs in a wise head.

And now, long after the curious little incident had faded from his mind, a typical hill Arab, bearded, brown and dirty,

with dingy *haik* and *burnous*, turban, sandals, and staff complete, had quietly, but distinctly and unmistakably, uttered the word "*Yelverbury*" as he passed.

That officer! . . . The strange Colonel, disguised as a Moor of the Southern Atlas, and so completely disguised that, but for the pass-word, Otho would never have dreamed that the Arab was other than he seemed.

Wheeling about, as though changing his mind and deciding to return to the little extra-mural market, the Arab approached the sentry, confident that the word which he had uttered guaranteed him against prohibitive challenge.

"Yelverbury!" he said again. "I must see Major Riccoli before he leaves this *poste*. Don't recognize me. Know nothing."

Yes, this was certainly the Secret Service Colonel, and Otho's superior officer. But what was going to happen to the sentry who allowed an Arab to hang about the gate of the *poste*?

Would the Colonel exculpate him when he was put under arrest for so grave a dereliction of duty, an action so flatly contravening his clear instructions? Any Arab, attempting to behave like this, would be regarded as a spy, and a complacent sentry as his bribed accomplice.

However, orders were orders and—luckily—any Colonel was certainly senior to Major Riccoli, and was it not French military law that, in any circumstances, any member of the French naval or military forces must obey the order of the senior officer on the spot, no matter to what branch of the Service he might belong?

As those thoughts flashed through Otho's mind, the Arab produced from beneath his *acnish*, the brown goat-hair cloak of the mountaineer, a folded piece of coarse paper, thumbed and filthy, on which was scrawled

"*Monsieur le Commandant le Major Riccoli.*"

"Get this to Major Riccoli somehow," he said. "If the Sergeant of the Guard refuses, speak to your Officer yourself . . . If nothing happens, come and look for me in the market there, selling almonds."

And the speaker, retiring a few paces, squatted beside the road or track that led from the gate of the *poste*.

Otho perpended.

Clearly he must let Major Riccoli know, as soon as possible, that a tribesman demanded speech with him. Would Sergeant-Major Vittorelli take the message and the scrap of paper, or curse him for a fool and punish him for allowing an Arab to approach so close that he might have stabbed the sentry, snatched his rifle and fled; or have dashed into the fort and died slaying—perhaps succeeding in killing the Commandant himself, or even Sergeant-Major Vittorelli?

Had he better march boldly into the stone hut that was the Commandant's quarters, trusting that the scrap of paper would be his passport to forgiveness for such presumption?

Sergeant-Major Vittorelli wouldn't forgive him, anyway, if he did—and on the whole the effects of the anger and enmity of a Sergeant-Major were apt to be more generally deplorable and distressful than those of a General.

Would it be better to report the incident, and produce the paper to the Corporal who relieved him or . . .

Suddenly, at a clank of hoofs, a jingle of steel, and a creak of leather, Otho sprang to attention, presented arms and returned to the position of attention, and then held out the paper to Major Riccoli as that officer, followed by his orderly, Bombelli, rode out of the gate and, glancing at the sentry, returned his salute by raising two fingers to his cap.

"What's this?" he asked, reining up.

"A letter for you, *mon Commandant.* That Arab just brought it. I told him to wait there until I was relieved."

"*Bien.*"

Taking the paper from the sentry, the officer scrutinized the hieroglyphics scrawled beneath his name, and then unfolding it, studied its contents. From time to time he glanced from the paper to the messenger who, squatting on his heels, his rigid arms resting on his knees, his hands dangling flaccid and inert, contemplated Infinity with closed eyes and open mouth, his mind apparently as vacant as his face . . .

Having frowned his way through the document, Major Riccoli, his handsome face otherwise devoid of expression, again read it, and again thoughtfully regarded the messenger.

"Hi, you, *rekass*!" he called, and beckoning to the Arab, wheeled about and rode back into the little fort.

Dismounting and giving his reins to the orderly, "See that I am not disturbed and that no one comes near here," he said.

Then, bidding the Arab follow him, he entered the little stone room that was at once his office and his quarters, and shut the door.

Having closed the door, Major Riccoli seated himself at

the rough wooden table, placed his revolver upon it and, with a wave of his hand, gave his visitor permission to be seated.

The Moor, respectfully touching his head and his chest, bowed and, squatting cross-legged on the floor of the hut, drew his feet beneath his cloak.

The French officer, head on hand, for some moments silently regarded the dusky, bearded and somewhat dirty face of the man who, from beneath over-hanging bushy eyebrows, watched him intently with unwinking gaze.

Yes, a typical Moor. A fat-faced, bushy-bearded hill-man who might be own cousin to Abd-el-Krim, Raisuli, or any other Moorish chieftain—robber, brigand, rebel, patriot or whatever one liked to call him.

Why didn't the fellow speak? One loses prestige and takes the lower ground if, in dealing with these people, one pays the first visit or makes the first remark.

In silence, Major Riccoli endeavoured to out-stare the Moor. To his great annoyance he found himself compelled, at length, to blink, and almost to withdraw his gaze from that of the visitor, as a fencer disengages his sword.

"Well?" he said sharply and received in reply another bow and salutation, respectful if not humble.

"Why have you come here?" he asked in his all but perfect Moorish Arabic.

"To bring that letter, Sidi."

"Do you know what's in it?"

"I do, Sidi."

"You know that it is an answer to my message to the Kaid?"

“I do, Sidi.”

“Why didn’t you go when you had given the letter to the sentry?”

“I have to take an answer, Sidi.”

“Why could not my messenger to the Kaid have brought this letter and taken back my answer?”

“My master, the Kaid, is the most trusting of men, but only in the Faithful has he any faith—and not much in them . . . He once trusted the word of the Sultan, publicly pledged on the K’ran.”

“So he sent you to find out whether the messenger and the message were genuine . . . and incidentally to find out anything else that you could, and generally to spy out the land, *hein*?”

The Moor smiled.

“The Kaid, my master, on whom be peace, sent me to find out whether the messenger and the message were genuine,” he replied. “. . . And also to be his ear into which your Excellency might whisper any further words that may now be said—provided your Excellency is convinced that I am what I appear to be, the secret messenger and ambassador of my master, the Kaid . . . And to discuss these proposals that give my master, the Kaid the greatest gratification—as well as to assure your Excellency of my master’s absolute good faith.”

“One thing at a time,” replied Major Riccoli, again endeavouring to out-stare the Moor. “First of all, as to your being what you pretend to be . . . If I said to you, ‘*Algo ó nada*’ . . . for example, what would you reply?”

“ ‘*Dádivas quebrantan peñas*’ . . . perchance,” replied the other instantly.

"And if I said '*Donde hay gana hay maña*,' to that?"

" '*Dios va abriends su mano*,' Sidi," was the immediate reply.

"So far so good," observed the French officer. "My messenger evidently reached your master. Now as to your being the ear of the Kaid . . . Hearken . . . for I am about to whisper . . . Hearken, I say . . . If your master, the Kaid, and I, can come face to face and talk, I can lay bare my mind to him and speak with single tongue . . . I can promise him such things as he has not dreamed of—such power, such wealth, such greatness, such munitions of war and . . . and . . ."

Words appeared to fail the speaker as he contemplated the picture that he drew.

"Promise!" he continued after a brief interval of silence in which the Moor continued to gaze at him with unwavering, unwinking, almost disconcerting stare. "I can promise him . . ."

"Promise . . ." he continued, "promise *and* perform—and give him proof and guarantee of my good faith."

"Ah! Proof and guarantee of good faith, Sidi. What proof? And what guarantee?"

"Of that I will talk with the Kaid, your master, as I said in my letter, and as I bade my messenger tell him."

"Doubtless, Sidi. You must meet the Kaid, my master, face to face, and talk with him. But I also have to face him and talk with him on my return. What can I say of proofs and guarantees that promises can, and will, be performed?"

"Say that I will bring him what most he needs—men and munitions. Every man worth a hundred as a fighting-

man; worth a thousand as a trainer of fighting-men . . . Proof and guarantee? Did I not offer in my letter to put myself completely in his power—to walk into the lion's den? What further proof of good faith could your master have or want? Is it not rather I, who need proof and guarantee of the Kaid's good faith?"

The Moor smiled with a flash of white teeth.

"You will not enter the lion's den unarmed, Sidi," he said.

"And has the lion neither teeth nor claws?" was the reply. "Let us speak plainly. I will visit the Kaid of Mekazzen accompanied by a handful of men, a mere escort, a bodyguard. How many men could the Kaid have in the Citadel of Mekazzen? How many in the City? How many encamped on the plains about it? Is the Kaid afraid? Who would be in danger from treachery, the Kaid or I?"

"And when you have spoken with the Kaid, my master, with single mind and simple speech, pure, clear and limpid as the waters of the rivers of Paradise, and you and the Kaid, my master, understand each the mind of the other, see eye to eye, and clasp hands of friendship—what then, Sidi?"

"Then I will bring more men, and yet more, until the whole of my command—men and munitions—foot, horse and guns are at the Kaid's disposal under my command . . . Then indeed may he raise his banner in the certainty that the tribesmen will flock to it. Then indeed may he hope for victory over the Sultan. Hope, do I say? Nay, be as certain of victory as the Faithful are certain of Paradise."

Again the Moor smiled.

"And you can answer for your men, Sidi . . . They will fight beneath that banner?"

“Are they not soldiers? Have they any duty—or desire—but to obey?” asked Riccoli, spreading eloquent hands, with a shrug of mobile shoulders. “Where I lead they will follow.”

“And your Government, Sidi? The *Franzawi maghzen*. Will they not also ‘follow’? Follow with a yet bigger army, and inquire what the Sidi and his troops are doing beneath the banner of the Kaid of Mekazzen?”

“Ah!” replied Riccoli. “It is concerning what will happen then, that I must talk with the Kaid, your master. Not another word will I say now . . . Not one.”

The Moor rose to his feet.

“I will carry your words to the Kaid, Sidi,” he said, touching his heart and head as he bowed. “Meanwhile, speak not of me and my visit to any other messenger, for no man knoweth the mind of the Kaid. His will is, that his right hand shall not know what his left hand doeth: and his spies spy upon all his spies.”

Sergeant-Major Vittorelli himself thereafter entertained the messenger, who seemed deeply interested in the men and ways of the *poste*, and, after sunset, lantern in hand, escorted him to the gate, and saw him out into the night.

As the Moor swung down the hill-side to where his camels were tethered, a mile or so from the fort, he frowned in deep thought.

“It might be a genuine *coup*,” he mused. “It might . . . And then again . . . If I know my Riccoli . . . my budding Napoleon . . .? *Nous verrons.*”

With a ragged tough-looking man, clad in a goat-hair

acnish cloak, whom he addressed as Pierrepont, but who appeared to be but a dirty Arab camel-driver, he discussed the matter at some length, and in the French tongue, as they drank coffee together.

"Wonder if Langeac will have any difficulty in joining us to-night?" mused the dirty camel-driver, changing the subject.

"Not he, my dear Pierrepont. Or if he has any difficulty, he'll overcome it."

Both men laughed.

"He saw you all right to-day?"

"He did."

"And you're sure he recognized you?"

"Quite. We fairly exchanged glances—after I'd made the sign. . . .

"Yes . . . Langeac will be with us by-and-bye," he continued, "and then we'll get off as soon as possible."

"*Mon Dieu*, but Langeac's the clever one," smiled the dirty camel-man.

"Clever as the Devil," agreed the other.

The two sipped their coffee in silence for a while.

"What are you laughing at?" inquired the camel-driver.

"Thinking of Riccoli's face when I confront him with Langeac."

"May I be there to see," breathed the camel-man fervently.

CHAPTER IV

Sensation . . .!

Nine days' wonder.

An interest in life at last—an absolute tonic and a marvellous cure of incipient *cafard*.

Le Légionnaire Bombelli had not lived in vain, for he had deserted in the night—and given *les légionnaires* something to talk about.

Deserted from his sentry-post . . .

At least, he was missing from his post, and he could hardly have vanished into thin air, been spirited away, kidnapped.

"What a fool!" said *les légionnaires* as one man. "*What* a fool!"

Where on earth did he think he could get to, from there? How long did he think he was going to live in that desert without water?

The silly lunatic knew what a terrible business it had been for the properly-equipped Section to reach the spot where they had built the *poste*.

And how long did he suppose he was going to escape the attention, and attentions, of the Arabs—Bedouin, Touareg, Hoggar raiders, Moorish mountaineers? What did he suppose they'd do to him when they caught him, as most assuredly they would?

The poor pitiable silly fool. What worse spot could he have chosen in all Africa, from which to attempt to desert.

And what a queer thing, too, that a man who obviously stood high in the favour of the Sergeant-Major should

desert! A man who was never "for it," never in cells, never in trouble of any sort—a man, moreover, with good pickings as an officer's servant.

Well, well—if they'd been told that one of the Section was going to desert, the very last man they would have expected to do so, would have been Major Riccoli's *ordonnance*.

Nor, it transpired, was that the queerest thing about this queer business, for it soon became known that *le Légionnaire* Bombelli had deserted unarmed.

Absolutely unarmed; for, before going over the wall, he had leant his rifle and fixed bayonet against it, and there they were when the Sergeant of the Guard came to relieve him. Actually, Bombelli's rifle and bayonet, and no Bombelli. Could you beat it?

Mad, of course—a clear case of *cafard*.

And yet, who in the whole *poste* had seemed a less likely subject for an attack of the desert-madness?

That there should have been any other sort of attack was unthinkable.

Bombelli would have given the alarm, fired his rifle, bawled "*Aux armes!*"

Besides, would rifle-thieves have left the rifle, even if they had taken the trouble to remove Bombelli's body?

"No, *mes enfants*," summed up old Tant de Soif. "Figure to yourselves, if you can, the species of sacred and infected camel that would call itself a rifle-thief and come and kill a sentry—only to carry away his corpse and leave his rifle behind! He would be as bad as this foolish child, Poussin, who, having had a glass of wine, put his uniform to bed and folded himself up, upon the shelf above.

“No, Bombelli has deserted, and by this time to-morrow he’ll be back, his tail between his legs, begging for a cup of water for the love of Christ . . . Or else he’ll be brought back by ‘friendlies,’ filleted like a sole, and with a few eyes, ears, lips and other spare-parts missing.”

“Such are not spare-parts,” objected Père Poussin.

Slowly turning a majestic gaze upon the foolish interrupter,

“Indeed?” replied Tant de Soif. “By the time poor Bombelli has been induced to spare them, I should have *thought* they’d have been remarkably spare parts. But then, of course, unlike yourself, I am not a thinker . . . Now, if anyone had said that a rum-bottle was a spare-part of *you* . . .

“Yes. Bombelli has deserted and will either come back alive or be brought back dead—some of him, anyhow.”

But Bombelli neither came back nor was brought back, and of all the puzzled men in Poste One, none was more puzzled than Sergeant-Major Vittorelli—unless it were Major Riccoli.

§ 2

“Wonder where old Bomb is now,” mused Sailor Harris. “Old Tant de Soif was wrong, anyhow. ’E ain’t come back and ’e ain’t bin brought back, neither. Reckon ’e got away, Joe?”

“Might,” hazarded Joe Mummery.

“Lucky ’im,” continued Sailor Harris. “Wish I’d got my ole bike. I’d go after ’im.”

“Didn’t know you was a trick-bicyciclist . . . I mean bicyclycist . . . I mean . . .” said William Bossum.

“You don’t mean nothing, and you mean that wrong.”

“What I mean is, you’d ’ave to be a trick one to ride it through that sand, wouldn’t you?”

“Ar.”

“And are you a trick-rider, Sailor ’Arris?”

“I thought I was once, Bill Bossum. I was, too. Bit of a trick, any’ow.”

“’Ow’s that?”

“Well. Ever seen a cyclin’-gent come out of a country pub wipin’ ’is mustosh and lookin’ up at the weather, all ’appy, just like a cat as ’as ’ad a saucer o’ cream, or a dog as ’as ’ad a bone, or a cyclin’-gent as ’as ’ad a pint o’ bitter.”

“Yus,” replied William Bossum. “I ’ave.”

“Well, that’s ’ow it ’appened.”

“’Ow what ’appened?”

“’Ow I became a trick-cyclist.”

“What yer talkin’ about?”

“This cyclist gent comin’ out o’ this nice wayside country inn, with his belly full o’ beer, and ’is ’eart full of ’appiness.”

“’Ow? ’Ow did *’e* make you a trick-cyclist?”

“Why, just as ’e comes out I was tryin’ to mount a bike I wasn’t used to. Seein’ me in difficulties, ’e offers a ’elpin’ ’and.

“ ‘Can’t you get on, my man?’ ’e says.

“ ‘Yus, guvnor,’ I says, ’oppin’ along like the Devil. ‘That’s right. I can’t.’

“ ‘’Arf a mo’, then,’ he says. ‘’Old ’ard. I’ll give you a leg-up.’

“Likewise ’e does it. ’E ’olds the bike while I climbs on. Then gives it a little run and a shove, and off I goes like a bird, pedalling down the ’ill like a six-day track-racer.

“Once I’m on that bike, it’s a fair bit of all right, and I goes on for howers.”

“Well, that ain’t trick-ridin’, is it?” expostulated William Bossum.

“Well, no, and again, yus. Yus, because I was in a manner o’ speakin’, a trick cyclist, and no, because it wasn’t really trick-ridin’ although I’d never bin on the bicycle before, as it weren’t mine.”

“Oo’s was it, then?”

“The cyclist gent’s. ’Im as started me off on it.”

William Bossum raised an outsize Navy fist.

“I often wonder what the ole geezer said when ’e found ’e’d give me ’is bicycle,” murmured Sailor Harris.

William Bossum made to rise to his feet, but was pushed back by Joe Mummery.

“Listen, you two,” he said. “An idea’s just come to me, and I want to talk it over with you now, while Bob’s on sentry.

“You two willing to do something for him, along o’ me?”

“Anythink on God’s earth,” asseverated Sailor Harris.

“Anything you says, Joe,” declared William Bossum.

“That’s the talk. Now you know who Bob is, as well as what he is—Sir Otho Robert Mandeville-Bellême, formerly of Yelverbury Castle and ought, by rights, to be in the ’Ouse of Lords instead of the French Foreign Legion, and would of been if the Old Lord hadn’t drunk it and gambled

it all away."

"What, the 'Ouse o' Lords?" inquired Sailor Harris.

"No, you fat-headed fool. Yelverbury Castle, I said, didn't I?

"And you know *what* he is," continued Joe. "One of the straightest fellows that ever lived, with no more frills than a hard-boiled egg, *and* the finest heavy-weight boxer in England, if not Europe and Africa."

"And you trained 'im, Joe," said William Bossum.

"Yes, till he beat me—points, thrashing, and knock-out—at the Albert Hall for Heavy-weight Champion of England. Besides which, and no harm in it," continued Joe, "he's got brains and learning, and went to Oxford College for his education like the Old Lord, though it wasn't him that sent him there."

"No, it was you, Joe," observed William Bossum.

"Well, then, what's a man like that doing on the lower deck? I mean, doing as a private soldier in this outfit? Isn't he as good a man as Major Riccoli, mind, body, and soul?"

"Ar, and a damn' sight better," agreed William Bossum.

"All three," added Sailor Harris, "'specially body. Beat him one hand, in one round, with one eye."

"Well, then, what's he doing in the ranks?"

"Why don't 'e go for permotion?" asked William Bossum. "Vittorelli'd get 'im made Corp'ral to-morrow—if 'e'd come in with 'im."

"Ho! Vittorelli been talking to you, too?"

"Not 'arf. An' I took me dyin' oath not to repeat nothin' 'e said. So I'll tell yer all about it."

"No need. He said it all to me, too."

"Me likewise," added Sailor Harris.

Joe Mummery laughed.

"What's he think we are?" he said.

"Dagoes—like 'imself," grinned Sailor Harris.

"Well," continued Joe. "It wasn't Vittorelli I was thinking about. Bob don't want Vittorelli's help for promotion. He could get it, all right—if he was free. Yes, any amount of it, on his own merits—Corporal, Sergeant, Sergeant-Major, *Adjudant*, and then sent to their Military College to be trained for a Commission. Course he could, if he was free."

"How d'you mean, Joe—'if 'e was free'?" asked William Bossum.

"I mean if he hadn't a bloomin' great millstone hangin' round his neck."

"Millstone?"

"Ar . . . Three of 'em."

"What . . ."

"Us three . . ."

"'Ow's that, Joe?"

"Because he wouldn't leave us. He reckons that because we came to the Legion with him, and we're his townies and pals, he can't leave us. If he was made Corporal and Sergeant, he couldn't only not kip with us any more but he couldn't drink with us, walk with us, nor talk with us. He might have to crime us and punish us . . . And, anyhow, he'd be transferred away from us. So we keep him down in this dog's life when he could rise to be a non-com as easy as winkin'—and rise to be an officer, too. Decorated; promoted on the field; rise to command the Regiment; be a General. Why, all the best Generals in the French Army

started in the Legion."

"Cor!" murmured Sailor Harris. "But 'ow could we 'elp 'im, Joe?"

"Ar, that's right. What could we do, Joe?" said William Bossum.

"What was you talking about just now, Harris?" asked Joe. "Trick-cyclin'," he added. "Wished you'd got your old bike, didn't you?"

"Ar!"

"What for?"

"Said I'd desert on it."

"That's it," cried Joe. "That's how we can help Bob. That's how we can start him goin' up the ladder."

"*Desertin'?*" gasped Sailor Harris.

"'Ow?" asked William Bossum, puzzlement writ large upon his countenance. "What *are* you talkin' about, Joe?"

"Why don't you listen, you fat fool? I'm talking about deserting—so as to get young Bob up on the quarter-deck, or started up the ladder, anyway. Look. Bob won't leave us. All right, we'll leave him."

"If you ses so, Joe."

"I'll go to Bob and say,

" 'Bob,' I'll say, 'unless you put in for promotion, and get it, Bill Bossum and Sailor Harris and me—we're all goin' to desert,' and I'll explain to him why."

"He won't believe it of yer, Joe," objected Sailor Harris.

"Then we'll do it, see? I'll go off first and stop away about four days; then come back dyin' of thirst and take what's comin' to me. Then you've got to go, Bill. You can come back in about three days. Then Sailor Harris goes. He can stay a couple of days.

"Then we'll say to young Bob,

" 'Next time, we don't come back, none of us.' "

"But won't they shoot us the first time?" asked William Bossum. "'Cos if so, we can't go the second time."

"How did you guess that? You got a brain all right, Bill. You're quite right; if they shoot us the first time, we can't desert a second time. Also, we shan't be keepin' young Bob back any more, shall we? But they won't shoot us. We'll plead *cafard*. Besides, you've got to be absent-without-leave for five days to be a deserter. And we won't desert off sentry-post, either."

"Suppose the Arabs gets us?" asked Sailor Harris.

"Well, you ought to know, mate. They got you once before, didn't they? Besides, if the Arabs get us, we're out of Bob's way, as I said, and without being shot either."

"Knifed instead, eh?" observed William Bossum.

"Tell you what, Joe," he continued. "Couldn't we all go together? I'm not raisin' any objections to our playin' at desertin'—takin' a day or two's leaf in the desert occasional-like—but it'd be more fun if we goes all together. Bloomin' lonely out there all alone for three or four days."

"Ar, that's right," agreed Sailor Harris. "Three's company and one's none."

"Well, we'll talk about that when the time comes," replied Joe. "The thing is, will you help me get it into young Bob's head that we really mean it, and that we're going to desert if he doesn't get promoted? Show him plain that if he don't leave us, we'll leave him?"

"Course we will," agreed William Bossum. "Whatever

you ses, Joe."

"Ar, that's right, Joe," said Sailor Harris.

"But you wouldn't really desert, Joe, would you?" asked William Bossum.

"No, Fat-head, course I wouldn't. I don't hold with desertin' and if I did, I wouldn't go off and leave young Bob here . . . But we've got to make him think we would. We've got to actually do it—at least once.

"Yes—perhaps we'll all go together," he added.

But . . . man proposes and Fate disposes.

Before Joe's foolish plans for such drastic action were completed, Fate intervened.

He and his henchmen left *Poste* One—but in company with the remainder of the Section.

For, a day or two later, a sentry gave notice that a dust-cloud approached. And from it emerged the relief, a company of Senegalese sharp-shooters, of Major Riccoli's column.

CHAPTER V

"We shall really burn our boats behind us by doing that, indeed, *mon Commandant*," mused Sergeant-Major Vittorelli, still perhaps a little doubtfully, as he stood before Major Riccoli, the same day, in the hut used by the latter when he visited the *poste*.

"We shall. Are you afraid, Vittorelli? You—a Corsican?"

"I am afraid of nothing, *mon Commandant*," replied Vittorelli, with more truth than modesty. "But it would break my heart if you failed."

"*Fail!* I? I am a Man of Destiny . . . And how should I fail? . . . Once inside the Citadel, everything will be easy. . . . Getting inside has been the difficulty—for the last thousand years. Nature has made the place impregnable, and Man has improved on Nature's handiwork . . . And we are going to march in unopposed. Not merely unopposed either—but actually invited."

"A spider's web, *mon Commandant*?"

"Well? Are we flies? Or are we wasps . . . hornets?"

"And the men, *mon Commandant*?" ventured Vittorelli, who though ignorant, rash, egotistical and impetuous, as well as being the fantastically devoted and admiring disciple of Riccoli, was sane and possessed of a shrewd peasant mother-wit and common sense. "Can we be certain that all the N.C.O.'s, corporals and *légionnaires* will be amenable . . . obedient . . ."

"It will be a bad day for anyone who is not, Vittorelli," smiled Riccoli.

“It would be a bad day for us, *mon Commandant*—the day on which some of them . . . even a minority of them . . . decided to remain—er—true to their—er . . .”

“Decided not to throw in their lot with mine and seize their glorious chance . . . the chance of rising from slavery to power, position, wealth? Only fools, clods, cowards, weaklings . . .”

“There are such people, *mon Commandant*.”

“Yes—as Captain Voulet discovered when he tried to found his Empire of the Sahara in 1897. But he was mad, of course. Hopelessly mad. A megalomaniac. And then he had a partner, too. Captain Chanoine, who failed him. That was where Voulet went wrong—one of his mistakes, anyhow . . . And we can learn something from the mistakes of *ce pauvre* Voulet. And then again he was dealing with stupid unambitious officers, and was compelled to show his hand too soon. Bad luck and bad management ruined his scheme; and part of his bad luck was that he had no inaccessible impregnable base from which to operate. He simply went out into the blue—out into the desert—and you cannot found an Empire on sand, and direct it from under a palm-tree.

“Here we shall have for our base and the heart of our Empire—a Citadel, a City, and a country that has never been conquered.

“Yes, Captain Voulet was both unlucky and a fool. I am a Man of Destiny and not a fool. Fate has led me here to the very spot, and created the very circumstances necessary for the fulfilment of that Destiny.”

“Without doubt, *mon Commandant*. But the men . . . ? It seems to me that success will depend upon one of two

things; on the one hand, whether the *légionnaires* are kept in ignorance long enough; or, on the other hand, whether they can be won over to—er—abandon their old allegiance and follow you."

"Of course, *mon enfant* . . . I know all about that. I intend, first of all, to get them inside the Citadel. They'll simply obey orders and carry on, in the ordinary course of duty, till the moment comes for seizing the place . . . The garrison of this *poste* will march as escort with me across the Mekazzen country to Mekazzen, and into the Citadel. All they will know or care—if they know or care anything at all—is that their Commandant is on a diplomatic mission to parley with the Kaid.

"When the time, and my plans, are ripe for the seizing of the Citadel, they will simply obey orders . . . When I am master of Mekazzen, and have garrisoned it with the rest of my command, will be the time to find out who is for me, and to make it clear that he who is not for me is against me. Also the exact fate of him who is against me."

"And the other detachments, *mon Commandant*? When will they arrive?"

"When I send for them. When I have completely won the confidence of the Kaid, so that he believes that they are marching to join his banner under my command."

"Why not assemble the whole column before marching from here, *mon Commandant*?" asked Vittorelli, eager, hopeful, but not yet wholly convinced.

"Ah, why not, indeed, *mon enfant*? Because the Kaid will not hear of it. If I cross the border with one man more than the garrison of this *poste*, it is war. We shall be

surrounded, cut off, ambushed, and annihilated in one of the defiles. My first proposal was to march in, bag and baggage, horse, foot, and guns—and that was the Kaid's answer through the mouth of his own son who visited me at *Poste 3*.

"That young man, Prince Raisul (a clever lad, by the way, who speaks English, French and Spanish as well as I do), made it clear that we should all be welcome—and the more the merrier—but we must come in small detachments and on different days."

"Treacherous swine, these Arabs," he added. "They trust nobody."

"So having marched into the place, we mark time until the other detachments arrive," mused Vittorelli. "H'm! What about treachery? We shall have to sleep with our eyes open."

"You are right, my friend. Until the Kaid sleeps with his eyes shut, once and for all . . . But don't you see the prettiness of my plan? If the Kaid intends treachery, and would capture the whole column—for its rifles, ammunition and kit, guns, horses, stores and cash—and such of the men as would join him to escape torture and death—he's got to wait until I send for the other detachments. And when I do send for the other detachments, I shall have in Mekazzen a force quite big enough to do our business, and settle his hash. Though what I hope and intend to do, is to seize the Citadel before I send for the other detachments. Then I can present a *fait accompli* to the *adjudants*, Sergeant-Majors and Sergeants, and to the N.C.O.'s of the native troops as well as to *les légionnaires*, when I have to show my hand."

Silence fell between the two men.

“Our rascals here can think they are seizing the Castle for France, of course,” observed Vittorelli at length.

“They can think what they like, as I said before,” replied Riccoli sharply. “Think what they like and do what they’re told. Though that is where you will be most useful, *mon enfant*. Sounding them: talking them over: showing them what they have to gain on the one hand and what to lose on the other—their lives: separating the sheep from the goats: forming an *escouade* of those upon whose personal loyalty I can absolutely rely.”

“H’m! . . . I can pretty well do that now, *mon Commandant*. Our good Corsicans, whom you so wisely selected, will be trustworthy; and I can answer for the Italians. I’ve no doubt the Germans will be all right, and more willing to fight against France than for her. I can get the Russians over, I expect; and, I think, the Spaniards and the Belgians . . . Where we shall have trouble will be with two French *grognards*, two silly old fools with about a hundred years’ service between them, and four Englishmen—stubborn mulish creatures, who can only entertain one idea at a time. Yes, we shall have trouble with them.”

“On the contrary, my dear Sergeant-Major,” replied Major Napoleon Riccoli, as he rose to his feet. “It is they who will have trouble with us.”

§ 2

Bugles! . . .

Rassemblement Général!

The stirring notes of the rousing call have such an effect upon the *poste*, as does the fall of a great rock into the quiet

tarn.

Curious, how strong in the human heart is the love of change for the sake of change. The bugle-call to hurry, to work and to march, is welcome as the call to eat. The heart of each soldier rejoices, though he knows that it is the signal for the commencement of a period of terrible effort, of hardship and suffering that may amount to torture.

To the *légionnaires* it is the signal for departure: and man, particularly the type of man who chooses the profession of soldiering, loves departure.

"Here we are, thank God," says he upon arrival.

"So for God's sake let's go somewhere else," he soon adds.

Having sounded their call in the centre of the *poste*, the *clique* marched to the gate and again sounded the "assembly," outside the *poste*. It then marched right round the walls sounding its strident urgent call to each of the other three points of the compass.

"Cor lumme! Do put on a noo record. That one's gettin' wore out," observed Sailor Harris as he stuffed small kit into his *sac*.

"Wore out!" grunted *le légionnaire* William Bossum, rolling spare boots in blanket and tent-canvas that he proceeded to strap to his knapsack. "I reckon it's broke. They broke it. Yus . . . they broke the record," he chuckled. "Playin' it five times round five square yards to five men and a boy."

"Bli'me! A joke!" observed Sailor Harris in an annoying manner.

“You break the record for speed, my lad, or you’ll be for it,” urged Joe Mummery, as he spun round and round winding twelve feet of broad woollen belt about his middle . . .

In the cook-house *soupe* is being hastily prepared and loaves of bread laid out for distribution.

The tightly packed *sacs*, and the rifles are brought out and, by each man, laid in the place where he will fall in.

Once again the bugles sound, and almost immediately everybody is in his place, and the *légionnaires’* roll is called.

Cartridges are distributed, the quarter-master and his orderlies issue reserve rations to each man, two tins, a pound of corned beef and a pound of biscuits. Each man also receives a little bag of coffee, one of salt and one of sugar.

Major Riccoli mounts his horse.

Garde à vous!

The *légionnaires* stand silent and steady as a rock, buglers ten paces to the right.

The Senegalese come to attention. Their guard present arms.

En avant! Marche!

The buglers strike up the March of the Legion and once more the Legion marches.

§ 3

Always the Legion marches . . .

“March or die, *mes enfants*! *Marchez ou crevez!*”

Some, at any rate, of *les enfants* feel that Major Napoleon Riccoli is being a little excessive. They have every intention of marching and none of dying—when *en*

route for billets in a real town, and all the joys thereof.

If all his men would not follow him to the Gates of Hell and through them, as he is fond of boasting, they will certainly follow him to the Gates of Mekazzen and through them.

But it is a weary march across the burning waterless desert that is one of the chief factors in the impregnability of Mekazzen: most powerful of the defences that had kept the country inviolate since the days when the great Shereefian warrior ancestor of the Kaid conquered and colonized it, centuries before his descendants conquered and colonized Spain.

A weary march, needing no human enemies (in alliance with those of heat, thirst and sand-storms) to render it almost impossible.

How long ago it seemed to the over-strained, heat-stricken men, since the detachment of Senegalese infantry arrived at the *poste* and took over charge; how long since their own bugles blew the *Rassemblement Général*.

As usual, it was the aged and alcoholic Tant de Soif who could find breath for song and conversation.

"Do you know what we are, *mes enfants*?" he asked, as the column halted and flung itself down for its ten minutes' rest, at the sound of Major Riccoli's whistle.

Sailor Harris's reply is better unrecorded.

"Speak for yourself," rebuked Tant de Soif. "I will tell you what we are—as distinguished from yourself. We are sheep . . . Sheep, I say—and I don't like it."

"Oh, make it 'lambs,' " suggested Otho Bellême.

"Why sheep—rather than goats?" inquired Joe Mummery.

“Because we are shepherded. We are being absolutely shepherded along. There are at least four *harkas* whose scouts are in touch with us . . . I don’t like it, I say. I have lived for France and desire to go on living for France. I have no wish to die for her. And when I have to do so, I prefer to die discreetly—and in the newspapers, if you know what I mean—like the heroes of Camarron.”

“Die in the newspapers?” grumbled Père Poussin. “Personally I’d prefer to die in the canteen.”

“Live there, you mean.”

“What’s this about being shepherded along?” asked Joe Mummery.

“Have you seen no cloud of dust on the horizon, every now and then, and from almost every direction?” asked Tant de Soif. “Haven’t you seen suspicious-looking riders, in twos and threes, suddenly appear above a sand-dune and quickly disappear? . . . Haven’t you seen a solitary scout, sitting like a graven image, on a racing camel, at dawn of every day since we left the *poste*? . . .”

“No, I haven’t,” stated Père Poussin.

“No? . . . Well, you should march with your eyes open, instead of staggering along half-asleep, bent double and with your eyes on the ground—as though you were looking for your lost innocence.”

“Oh, shut up, you old wind-bag.”

“You leaky wine-skin, be quiet . . .”

“All the same—I don’t like it,” persisted Tant de Soif.

“Go and tell the Major you don’t—and let us sleep . . .”

A sudden cry from a sentry, who extends a pointing

arm.

A blast from the whistle . . . A shouted order . . .

In less than a minute the straggling, sprawling, recumbent column is in position, prepared to receive cavalry or anything else.

A whirlwind, consisting of buff, white, brown and grey camels ridden by yelling, rifle-brandishing men in flowing and fluttering white clothing, sweeps down upon the bayonet-bristling double-rank, on the flank of which Major Riccoli sits, cool and steady, on his horse.

"Wait for it," he cries, as a few rifles are raised from the "ready" to the "present."

"Cor lumme!" murmurs Sailor Harris. " '*Wait!*' Chrissmas comin' on, too . . ."

"*Allahu Akbar! . . . Allahu Akbar! . . .*"

It is a wild fierce charge, and if the tribesmen come on, the *légionnaires* must be swept away, stamped flat.

The strain is terrible . . . The instinct of self-preservation strong.

A man throws his rifle up to his shoulder—and a Sergeant kicks him so violently from behind that he almost falls.

"Steady—you wretched recruit," he growls. "Wait for it."

"This is madness," observes Tant de Soif as the avalanche surges down upon the thin khaki line.

But there is method in Major Riccoli's madness.

Suddenly, a man who has throughout kept ahead of the charging horde, throws up his hand, and instantly the *harka* divides and wheels, one half to the left, the other to the right, and instead of overwhelming the soldiers and trampling

them into the sand, out-flanks them on either wing, surrounds and envelops them.

The leader rides up to Major Riccoli, laughs, and salutes in semi-military fashion.

"Good morning, Major," says he, in excellent French. "You were expecting us?"

"I was, Prince Raisul," he replies. "My men were not . . . You have thus already seen something of their steadiness and discipline."

"Quite good, *Monsieur le Commandant*."

"Yes. I am glad that neither you nor any man of yours was shot. One may observe that you took a risk, Prince Raisul."

"Oh, I like taking risks, don't you? . . . I too am glad for all your—our—sakes that no one was shot . . ."

From that hour the "Military Mission" was undoubtedly shepherded, as Tant de Soif had said, or escorted as Raisul said, on the remainder of its roundabout and terrible journey—roundabout because no one whomsoever was allowed to approach France-defying, Spain-defying, Europe-defying Mekazzen, by the direct and secret route through oasis and mountain pass; terrible because of the incredible heat, lack of water and looseness of the soft and shifting sand . . .

And one morning, a day or two later, the red, tired eyes of the weary *légionnaires* were gladdened by the sight, upon the far horizon, of the minarets and domes of the city of Mekazzen, rising from a sea of palms that appeared in the shimmering light to flow about the base of the mighty cliff of rock, on the summit of which was perched the great citadel Castle of Mekazzen, impregnable, inviolate, virgin

even to that day.

PART II

CHAPTER I

Rarely has a more varied, incongruous and cosmopolitan circle—and a family circle at that—sat in stranger surroundings and circumstances.

Margaret looked long and thoughtfully at her husband, Jules Maligni; at Raisul, his cousin; at Raisul's father, her uncle by marriage, the Kaid Haroun Abd'allah Karim; at the Lady Zainub, his wife, the mother of Raisul; at the Lady El Isa Beth el Ain, sister of the Kaid, and her own mother-in-law; at Señor Pedro Maligni, her father-in-law; and, finally, at Sara, her cousin by marriage, the daughter of the Lady Zainub's famous brother, Kaid Mahommed Hassan, slain by the French.

Again Margaret looked round the family circle, and felt very, very far from her home at Yelverbury, Kent, England. England was a thousand miles from the vast impregnable and ancient castle of the Kaid Haroun Abd'allah Karim, and was also a thousand years from it.

The Kaid Haroun Abd'allah Karim lived and dressed and acted and thought much as did his ancestor of a thousand years ago; and surely this castle, or castellated rock, had not changed in a thousand years?

Marvellous to think that the Union Jack floated over Gibraltar only a couple of hundred miles away, and that so near were a British garrison, battleships, churches, clubs, messes, shops, and British law and order.

Whether the thousand-year idea were extravagant or not, one certainly travelled back more than two hundred years in travelling that two hundred miles.

This castle, this life, these people, that town down there, below the castle, were all far more mediæval than Tudor England, in outlook, in mode of life, in act and word and thought and deed.

The things her husband's mother, Lady El Isa Beth el Ain had told her! . . . Unbelievable things . . . Perfectly incredible and perfectly true . . .

Of how that fat woman Zainub, once so beautiful—with whom, apparently, she now dwelt in perfect amity—had done her best to murder Jules, the Kaid's nephew, now Margaret's husband.

Strange to reflect how, but for that savage villainy, Jules would never have been sent to England, and Margaret herself would not now be Mrs. Jules Maligni, seated there in that lovely artificial Moorish garden, beneath the African moon, contemplating this strange assembly of her relatives.

No, she would not have been Mrs. Jules Maligni.

Would she have been Lady Bellême, had Zainub always been as fat and placid as she was to-day?

Once more Margaret's eye travelled round that amazing circle.

Jules, her husband, graduate of Oxford University, yet bred and born in that terrible castle, the son of Señor Pedro Maligni and the Lady El Isa Beth el Ain, the Kaid's half-sister.

And, undoubtedly, Jules, lolling there on his cushioned rug, was well in the picture—Jules, with his black hair, pale face and great dark eyes. But then, of course, he belonged. This was his home, his birthplace. His mother was half-

Moorish . . . (oh, her terrible tale of her English mother, sold in the market-place of Mekazzen) . . . his father a Spaniard, bred and born in Morocco.

No wonder he had seemed to change so rapidly and so soon, after their arrival in this disturbing place. It was literally the return of the native.

Native? Her husband a "native"? What an unpleasant word in this particular connection.

But how absurd to take that view. Anybody is a native of the place in which he is born and bred. She was herself a native—of England.

And Margaret once again firmly put out of her mind an expression that she had somewhere heard or read—a phrase that had been doing its best to intrude upon her consciousness for some time.

"Gone native."

It was perfectly absurd. If, as she kept telling herself, everybody is a native, and the natives of one country are as good, or as bad, as the natives of another—in their own particular way and sphere—how could anyone "go" native?

If the phrase meant anything at all, it meant departing from the ways and customs and standards of your own country, and adopting the ways and customs and standards of the foreign country in which you were sojourning.

But this was Jules' own country, she kept telling herself. He couldn't go native, for the excellent reason that he was a native.

Had she, then, married a Moor?

And thereupon a horrible little voice from somewhere at the back of her mind, coolly remarked that she hadn't married a Moor so much as a mongrel in whose veins ran

Moorish, English and Spanish blood—Spanish blood dilute, for Señor Pedro Maligni's mother had been of African extraction unspecified—Berber, Kabyle, Ouled-Naïl, or, perhaps, Negress, again unspecified.

Angrily Margaret replied to the horrible little voice, telling it to cease its beastly remarks, for she was married to an English gentleman whom she had known from childhood, who had almost grown up in her father's house, and who had there spent his holidays from Prep school, from Eton and from Oxford, at all of which seats of learning he had been with her brother Jack.

Of course it was only natural and—er—right that, back in Morocco, the land of his birth, he should wear native dress . . .

That word *native* again . . .

It had begun with their all "dressing-up" for fun, and very good fun it had been. Margaret had thoroughly enjoyed putting on a complete set of Sara's lovely scented silken clothing and barbaric jewellery, and wished she could keep them to take home to wear at fancy-dress dances.

But to wear them regularly, to live in an *aabaia*, *roba* and *melh'afa* just because they were Moorish clothes and she was in Morocco, was quite a different thing. She was an English girl, and she would wear English clothes wherever she might be, and retain English manners and morals and customs and standards.

Of course it was different with Jules, and one must make allowances.

Nevertheless, since he was obeying the call of the blood, and returning so quickly and thoroughly to the ways of his

ancestors, it was rather a pity he omitted their custom of avoiding alcohol. Jules certainly had developed a thirst in the heat of dry and dusty Morocco; and it seemed that only strong drink would satisfy it.

No, Morocco had not done Jules any good at all, and the sooner they went away again, the better.

She had never been under any delusion as to Jules, and had always seen him with merciless clearness; the calm lucidity of her soul unclouded by love's feverish and blest illusion.

She had never loved him, but she had married him, and was going to make the very best of it; make the marriage a success in every way, and, being denied the delirium of happiness, seek placid peace and ensue it.

If Jules were weak she would be strong: and if, in Morocco, he would "go native," she must take him back to England as soon as possible, and see that he went native there—English native, in the rôle of country gentleman . . . fishing . . . shooting . . . hunting . . . with a seat on the Bench, and on many a useful Council and Committee.

But what a Moor he looked squatting there, cross-legged, on his cushioned rug, in that Arab kit and with that turban on his head. And those beastly yellow heelless slippers on his bare feet.

Was it sunburn or that white *gandoura* and *bidi*, if that was what they called them, that made him look so much darker than he had done at home? A regular Moor.

Maligni the Moor . . .

Othello, the Moor of Venice . . .

As she so frequently found herself doing nowadays, Margaret pulled herself up sharply, and resolved to treat

Jules with extra gentleness and loving-kindness.

Why on earth must the man stare up at the stars, with his mouth open in that idiotic way, and twitch his feet as though he had St. Vitus's dance?

Sighing angrily—the anger at herself—Margaret glanced at the man who sat beside her husband.

Raisul.

First introduced to her at Oxford as "Mr. Russell." Introduced to her that day at Jack's luncheon-party in Jack's rooms at St. Just's; that day when Otho was so silly and stand-offish and unlike himself—as though for the first time in his life he wished her to remember that he was Sir Otho Mandeville-Bellême and not her childhood's darling and hero, 'Tho of Big Attic . . .

When she had greeted him as "dear old 'Tho," he had called her Miss Maykings, instead of Muggie or some other pet-name of the days when he approved her as a congenial playmate and comrade, a good chap.

Yes, that was the day on which "Mr. Russell" had first met her. It was also the day before that on which he had declared his undying passion for her . . . the amazing creature. He had never taken his eyes from her face throughout that lunch; had inquired at which hotel she and her father were staying; had immediately transferred himself from his own hotel to theirs; stared at her unwaveringly at tea-time, at dinner-time, at the boxing-match which followed; at breakfast-time next morning, and then, catching her alone in the lounge, had laid his heart and fortune at her feet and demanded her hand in return.

How she and Dad had laughed, and how Jack and Jules

and Mother had laughed, about it.

"Mr. Russell" . . . otherwise the Kaid Raisul Abd'allah Karim, son and heir to the great Kaid Haroun Abd'allah Karim, the most powerful man in Morocco, greater far than the Sultan himself, and able to defy more than two or three European powers when he could not play them off one against the other.

"Mr. Russell" . . . late distinguished alumnus of the Paris Sorbonne, full-blooded Moor who spoke English, French and Spanish as perfectly as he did his native Arabic.

Strange that the true pure-bred Moor, a princely descendant of a hundred princes, warriors, corsairs, leaders and rulers of armies and of fleets, should be the one who sat there in a chair of European origin, and dressed precisely as he would have been at a bachelor dinner-party in Mayfair—strange that it should be he rather than Jules Maligni of Eton and Oxford.

Did he, with his subtle cleverness, wear that dinner-jacket, black tie, those black silk socks and patent shoes because he guessed, or intuitively knew, that she must hate to see her husband with his bare feet stuck into Arab slippers, squatting there in native dress? Strange that the Etonian Oxonian Englishman should dress and squat like a native while the real Moor should dress, look, and behave like an English gentleman.

Yes, almost certainly it was calculated, for Raisul did nothing without a reason and a motive.

For how long would he "behave like an English gentleman" here in Morocco? Had she been fancying things or was he going to make himself a nuisance; and if so, would he be very difficult to manage?

Suddenly Raisul, who had been industriously picking a flower to pieces, looked up, opened wide his great dark eyes, gazed into hers and, as though reading her thought, smiled with a flash of brilliant teeth. Not a friendly pleasant smile of kindness and affection, but a twisted smile, sardonic, sarcastic, enigmatic.

Ignoring him, Margaret's glance travelled on, and rested for a moment upon the fat, jolly, evil and cruel face of his father, the Kaid Haroun Abd'allah Karim. Watching him as he sat chuckling and whispering with Zainub his wife, whose lively sallies evidently pleased him much, Margaret found it almost impossible to believe the tales of his appalling cruelty, tales that her husband's mother, the Kaid's own half-sister, had told her—as interesting anecdotes and family gossip.

Amazing to think that that middle-aged gentleman sitting there, enjoying his Turkish cigarette and coffee, was a human monster, a brute who had always delighted not merely in savage war, but in its aftermath of slaughter and actual torture.

And yet why wonder at this if, as one was taught, heredity and environment make the man? What else should this descendant of pirates, bandits, brigands and raiders be, living as he did in this robbers' stronghold, dominating a wild land known as "The Country of the Gun" because it produced nothing else but the gun, and its people lived and died by the gun?

Was there as much difference between this cruel blood-stained mediæval baron and his twentieth-century son, as there was between their respective dress? Was there as

untamed and unchanged a savage Moor in Raisul's Savile-Row dinner-kit as there was in Haroun's silken *aba* and fine *burnous*?

Why on earth had she been such a fool as to come into this horrible country, among these incredible people, into this fantastically impossible, fantastically real Moorish life that they led to-day as they led it two hundred and three hundred and, for all she knew, five hundred and a thousand years ago?

But then, on the other hand, why should she have done anything but jump at so obviously delightful a suggestion as Jules had made when he had suddenly said, one day, there in the garden of her father's house at Yelverbury,

"I say, Margaret. Here's an idea for our honeymoon. Let's go to Mekazzen, Abd'allah Karim's place, and see the real Morocco . . . My mother, who is really English, you know, is a connection of Abd'allah Karim's by marriage. We should be absolutely safe, travelling through Morocco as kinsmen of the great Abd'allah Karim, on their way to visit him."

Margaret had thought it a simply splendid idea and a unique opportunity of seeing—not as the tripper sees it—a uniquely interesting country.

And there, awaiting her arrival, had been Raisul, a little too insistent on the fact that they were now cousins and he endowed with cousinly privileges.

Had the Kaid any influence and power over his son, or did he love him with too besotted a devotion to thwart or cross him in anything whatsoever?

According to Jules' mother, El Isa Beth el Ain, the child had ruled the man from babyhood and, far from ever

denying him anything, the Kaid had turned his murderous wrath upon any man, woman, child, or beast that had ever refused, thwarted, hindered, or angered the boy.

Had he not stabbed with his own hand, the favourite horse from which Raisul, as a child, had fallen? Had he not consented to the death of his own nephew Jules, because of Raisul's mother's bare suggestion that Jules might grow up to be an enemy and a usurper? No, probably the Kaid's influence over Raisul was nil while that of Raisul over the Kaid was paramount.

From the Kaid, Margaret glanced at his wife, the once lovely Zainub who, according to El Isa Beth el Ain, had been reputed the loveliest woman in Morocco, the desired of the Sultan himself—the autocratic all-powerful Sultan whom the Kaid had first defied and then defeated.

Evidently a woman of character, forcefulness, and determination, as proved by the one fact alone that she had retained her power and influence over her ferocious, autocratic, and untrammelled husband. Evidently, too, a woman of fascination and charm, in that the Kaid apparently enjoyed her society to-day as he had done twenty years ago. What was the secret of her power, that she should retain and, according to El Isa Beth el Ain, augment and strengthen it, even as she changed from lovely *houri* to fat old woman. For a Moorish woman in her forties is old.

Probably she and the Kaid were "two minds with but a single thought" on most subjects, and he admired her ruthlessness and strength as much as he had once admired her beauty.

What a pity one could not talk to her, get her point of

view, attitude, and outlook on life and current events—if talk she would, to a hated and despised *Nasrani*.

Watching her as she sat with uncovered face, Margaret thought of an ageing Lucretia Borgia, a Cleopatra in middle-life, of Catherine de Medici, and Catherine of Russia. Of such was the Lady Zainub, wife of Abd'allah Karim and mother of Raisul.

And that equally, if differently, amazing woman who sat next to her, the Lady El Isa Beth el Ain, Jules' mother, half-sister of the Kaid. How could she have found life bearable, and contrived to live it beneath the same roof, however vast, as the woman who had tried to kill her baby, the little Jules, and who had put the child's life in such danger that she, the child's mother, had sent it away, with little hope of seeing it again.

How could she have borne to do this and to remain behind, in loyalty to her husband's trust? How she must have loved this Pedro Maligni, that she could remain at the post of duty, to watch over his interests, and keep his name sweet and fragrant in the mind of her half-brother, a mind steadily poisoned by his wife.

If Pedro Maligni were the Kaid's agent, El Isa Beth el Ain was assuredly her husband Pedro's agent, faithful not only unto death, but to the losing of her child.

What a thrilling tale she had told Margaret, in her curious English interspersed with French phrases and Spanish and Arab words, about the faithful slave-woman and her brother Hassan el Miskeen, who had taken the child Jules from Mekazzen to Tangier, and handed him over to his father, Pedro Maligni.

Had they been less faithful or less fortunate in their

journey, she, Margaret, would not be sitting there in the castle of Mekazzen at that moment. For Señor Pedro Maligni would not have been able to hand the boy over to his friends, Doctor and Mrs. Maykings, her parents, to take home to England with them.

What ghastly lives these native women led, even those of the ruling classes. Something of a heroine this poor Lady El Isa Beth el Ain. Fancy seeing one's adored husband two or three times a year, and one's adored child once in two or three years—and that, after a separation in which he had changed from a child to a youth.

How had she refrained from killing this Zainub who had killed her happiness? Doubtless her English descent would have something to do with it. That and fear of the terrible Abd'allah Karim.

And how could she have allowed her husband to make such a tool and convenience and agent of her? Doubtless her Moorish descent would account for that.

Does not the Koran say that women, camels, and cattle are Allah's gifts to men?

And there were those two women sitting side by side, in apparent amity and peace, with all that behind them; sitting like two European sisters-in-law at a garden-party on the Rectory lawn.

But, after all, their mutual attitude was but an exaggeration of that of Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Jones when the former says of the latter, "Here comes that appalling cat. How I do loathe the woman," and, rising, kisses her fondly upon the cheek . . .

Poor El Isa Beth el Ain, tragic daughter of a tragic

mother, with her thin lined face a record of a lifetime of suffering and sorrow. How pathetically happy she was in this brief interlude, this rare experience, of having both her husband and her son.

Her greeting of Jules had been positively painful in its wild abandonment of joy—a hysteria of tear-drenched happiness.

What did she really think of Jules now? And what did she see in the excellent Señor Pedro Maligni that she should lay her life and happiness at his feet—for him to walk upon towards success? Perhaps, five-and-twenty years ago, he had been more of a Romeo to this girl who must undoubtedly have been something of a Juliet.

Margaret glanced at Señor Pedro Maligni, fat, sallow and—no, she must be strictly just if she couldn't be generous—not greasy. He didn't look greasy at all, but he most certainly looked what he was, distinctly cosmopolitan, not to say cross-bred.

Why did he make one think of organ-grinders and ice-cream merchants? What a horrid mind she had. And what a horrid man he . . . Nonsense . . . He probably was not horrid at all—but since he was one's father-in-law, one could wish he looked and sounded and seemed a little more—well—English. But how absurd—the English aren't the only people in the world, nor endowed with a monopoly of the virtues. Still, one was English oneself and it was natural to prefer English tastes, ideas and standards—English prejudices, if you like.

But then, if one were going to be prejudiced to that extent, one should have married an Englishman.

Well, Jules was an Englishman in everything but birth

and blood and—oh dear, this would not do.

Anyhow, she must conquer this unreasoning distrust of Señor Pedro Maligni, and accept his paternal kisses with . . . With . . . ? Well, endeavour to “suffer them gladly,” or pretend to.

At the moment he was obviously more interested in the girl Sara than in herself or his wife who watched him so hungrily, much as Sara watched Jules.

What a family circle! Did ever an English girl drop straight into a stranger one or, indeed, into a stranger place?

CHAPTER II

The Lady El Isa Beth el Ain paced the grim stone cell that was her boudoir like a caged tigress, as she had done almost daily for more years than she could count, more years than she wished to remember.

In that gaunt room which, voluntarily, she had made her prison, she had grown from girlhood to middle age and, for a quarter of a century, had wrestled with devils and fought with beasts; the devils of murder, treachery and vice; the beasts of cruelty, savagery and hate.

With amazing courage she had fought her half-brother for himself, fought to save him from himself; had fought for the life of her baby against Zainub, his wife; had fought against intrigue unceasing, for the success of her husband.

For years, during the period of Zainub's insane jealousy, she had tasted no food that a faithful slave-woman had not cooked there in that room.

Life had been hard after the brief delirium of her marriage with Pedro, and the golden joy of motherhood—those glorious days before the coming of the Lady Zainub—when her baby had filled her life, and she had been mistress of Mekazzen and the Kaid's good angel; her baby, his plaything and his heir. Pedro had come more often then, before business in Europe and Tangier had become so ever-increasing and important.

Even now she hated to recall those dreadful days between the time of her sending the child Jules to him—sending her baby, the light of her life, out into the cruel desert of the Country of the Gun, away over those endless

awful mountains, alone with a slave-woman, dumb Hassan el Miskeen and the English soldier—and that God-sent hour when dumb Hassan el Miskeen returned and acted the story which told of the journey, the killing of the slave-woman, his sister; the fight of the English soldier with the robbers; and the final handing over of the boy to his father in Tangier.

How the grim face of dumb Hassan el Miskeen had softened and beamed as he enacted the part of Pedro, her husband, his master, taking the child in his arms, kissing and fondling him, and afterwards patting Hassan el Miskeen upon the head with one hand as, with the other, he shook the hand of the soldier, who gave him her message in English, and with whom Pedro conversed in English.

Yes, those had been hard days, before Zainub had aged and mellowed, and before she had come to realize that neither she nor her son Raisul had anything to fear from the Lady El Isa Beth el Ain, or from her child.

The woman had been an incarnate Jealousy in those days, and it was a marvel that she had not succeeded in one of her many attempts to kill both her and the child Jules.

And here was Jules returned, child grown into a man, and bringing, to see his mother, the English girl, his wife.

Her husband, her son, and herself, together under the same roof—the roof beneath which she and Pedro had spent their honeymoon, and Jules had been born.

Why had Jules brought this English girl?

As she had done so many thousand times before, the

Lady El Isa Beth el Ain stood still as a statue, looking, with unseeing eyes, across the desert plain which—three hundred feet below the little stone balcony that clung like a swallow's nest to the wall of this great castle built upon the edge of a great rock—stretched shimmering to the far horizon.

Why had he brought this pink-and-white, beautiful English girl, who so reminded her of her own mother, Elizabeth Elaine Torson?

Could not Jules have come to see his mother—the mother who had cut her very life in halves to save him, and who had so yearned for him all these years—without bringing another woman with him?

Why bring her here at all, in any case?

But doubtless young headstrong love would account for that.

But had he told the girl everything?

Did she know why he was here?

How much had Jules told the girl of Pedro's business? And was she to be trusted? Was she such a one as would deny herself; suffer; give up everything; run every risk; intrigue and plot and lie and kill; in the interests of her lord and master, as she herself had done for Pedro?

Women who marry such men as the Malignis, must be such women as the Malignis need.

How much did the girl know, and in any case what did the pink-and-white chit know of war, of politics, policy, negotiation, secret service, espionage and affairs?

And suppose the girl knew nothing at all, and were merely Jules' doll? What would she do, as realization dawned upon her . . . realization, for example, that the date

of her return to England—indeed, her return to England at all—was vague and problematical.

A thousand pities that the boy should complicate matters and add to his difficulties, not only by marrying this girl, but by bringing her with him.

And did he quite—or Pedro either for that matter—understand young Raisul?

She thought not. She feared not.

That young Raisul, if her opinion were worth anything—and it certainly ought to be worth something on that subject—was a young devil, if indeed, he were not the Devil himself, incarnate. She might be an old woman (of forty!) who had practically lived her life in the castle of Mekazzen, but she knew what she knew, and if her knowledge were not wide, it was deep; and one of the things she knew was the character, intelligence, mode of thought, and future line of conduct, of these people among whom she had lived and in whose hands her life had precariously been.

. . . This Raisul she had watched from babyhood until he had gone away to France, and she knew him for what he was, the cleverest, wickedest and cruellest Moor of them all, utterly unscrupulous, utterly conscienceless, and utterly without fear of God or man or beast or devil.

He was his father's son in courage and cruelty and strength; his mother's son in force and subtlety; and with a cleverness all his own, polished and sharpened and enhanced by education, travel, and experience.

Let Jules beware of Raisul, and when the time came for the Kaid to be gathered to his fathers, let Pedro beware of

Raisul.

From babyhood his mother, Zainub, had poisoned his mind against Jules and Pedro, and though Raisul had far outgrown his mother's narrow teaching, and was outwardly and apparently the good friend of his cousin Jules, what is engraved upon the mind of the child remains upon the mind of the man.

Raisul would remain the good friend of Jules and of Pedro, just as long as they were useful to him.

So let Pedro and Jules beware.

And most certainly let this pink-and-white girl, Margaret, beware.

§ 2

The Kaid Abd'allah Karim, seated upon his cushions in the Lady Zainub's chamber in the *hareem*, laughed merrily his famous laugh, that hearty, deep-chested, full-throated laugh which shook him from head to foot, and which so rarely inspired a sense of amusement and inclination to laughter, in the hearer.

"Ha, ha, thou Desired of Emperors, thou Moon of my Delight that knows't no wane, what saith the Prophet Himself (on whom be peace)—and he, Allah witness, knew something of women—what saith he?"

"Well, what does he say?" inquired the Lady Zainub, humouring her lord with smiles, and wondering whether, in the end, he would stick a knife in her, or have her thrown from the battlements in a sack. Better that, perhaps, than grow old, and wither in neglect.

And it was the sort of thing he would do, if he felt like

it, for this lord of hers was, thank Allah, a man.

"What saith he on that interesting subject, my love?" chuckled the Kaid. "Listen and hear. He said:

" '*Oh ye assembly of women, give alms, yea, though it be of your ornaments of gold and silver, for verily ye are mostly for Hell on the Day of Judgment*,' " and the jolly Kaid again roared with laughter.

The Lady Zainub sniffed.

"Well, meantime, you listen to what *I* say, and so the further postpone your own day of judgment . . . Beware of this Jules Maligni, son of your servant and of your sister. Why has the *Nasrani* Pedro Maligni brought him here?"

"To learn to follow in his father's footsteps," replied the Kaid.

"To learn to be, in his turn, my trusted agent and servant and friend, and those of Raisul, my son. As Pedro Maligni's father was to my father—on whom be peace—and as Pedro Maligni has been to me, so shall Pedro Maligni's son be to my son, a devoted and faithful . . ."

"Faithful *perhaps*," sneered the Lady Zainub.

"And when has Pedro Maligni been less than faithful; given me anything but good advice; true and full information; the best rifles that . . ."

"At a price," again sneered the Lady Zainub.

"At a price, woman? And who, in the Name of Allah the Merciful, the Compassionate, does anything save at a price? Should he risk death or imprisonment for nothing? Did not Pedro's father bring Pedro here, that he might know and serve me, even as Pedro has brought his son that I . . ."

"Beware of that son, I say," repeated the woman doggedly.

“I heard you—twice and thrice I heard you—oh Delight of Mine Eyes. Do not become the Abhorrence of Mine Ears. A little you weary me.”

And the Kaid rose to his feet.

“It is not well to weary me,” he added mildly, and the Lady Zainub shivered slightly at her husband’s kindly tone.

Casting herself at his feet, she begged her lord to be seated, promising him amendment, obedience, and great entertainment.

But remarking that, although he had intended to remain in the *hareem* for the remainder of the day, he was constrained by her distressing wearisomeness to leave it, the Kaid strode away, for he had an important engagement.

Thus it was at a moment not more than an hour later than the time appointed, that he entered his Council Chamber, attended by his son, Raisul; his friend and agent, the Señor Pedro Maligni; his agent’s son, Mr. Jules Maligni; his confidential scribe and secretary, Abu Talib Zerhoun; mighty Ibrahim the Lion, his gigantic bodyguard; and the stern and stalwart Commander-in-Chief of his fighting men, Mahommed Ali el Amin, Mahommed the Trustworthy, Mahommed the Reliable.

Seating himself on a handsome, if somewhat dirty, divan, the Kaid courteously signified his pleasure that the others should be seated also, and bade Abu Talib, the scribe, go and inform the Visitor who had arrived yesterday (on Señor Pedro Maligni’s recommendation and personal guarantee), that the Kaid sat in audience, and would receive him.

“ ‘*To strangers and wayfarers be kind*,’ saith the Koran,” observed the Kaid, and laughed meaningly.

“He is undoubtedly a stranger—and something of a wayfarer by now,” smiled Pedro Maligni, “as he has come deviously hither from Germany by way of Egypt, Tunis and Algeria.”

“And I shall undoubtedly be kind,” laughed the Kaid again.

A few minutes later the scribe returned, accompanied by a tall, thick-set, broad-shouldered man, dressed as an Arab, his bearded face sunburnt and weather-beaten.

In Arab fashion and speech, he saluted and greeted the Kaid and the assembled company.

The Kaid clapped his hands loudly; servants entered at the signal, and were bidden to bring coffee, mint-tea and cigarettes.

“Perhaps, being a *Roumi*, our guest would prefer strong drink of the *Roumis*?” inquired the Kaid courteously.

The stranger signified that he would be loth to offend his host’s eyes and delicate nostrils with the sight and scent of the forbidden and abhorrent drink.

The Kaid laughed merrily, and the stranger eyed him thoughtfully the while.

“Well,” said the Kaid, “as to that, I can bear it, I can bear it. In fact, to speak the truth—which is ever pleasant and natural to my lips—I have tasted it. Yea, sometimes I drink it . . . And yet, on the other hand, I do not drink it, I never drink it.”

“A hard saying, Lord Kaid,” mused the stranger. “A riddle, in fact.”

“Yes,” agreed the Kaid. “The solution of the riddle

being that my Holy Mullah, most pious and learned man in Mekazzen—yea, in all the Country of the Gun—yea, in all Mogreb—blesses it, and straightway it turns to milk in my mouth!"

"Let us drink milk," he added; and the visitor, observing that milk was indeed a valuable, in fact an almost perfect, food, agreed.

Again the Kaid clapped his hands, gave orders to his Chief Butler and Cupbearer—and the company drank "milk."

In the ensuing conversation and negotiation, the Kaid showed himself the keen man of business—the business of war—that heredity, training, and environment had made him.

The visitor or emissary, on the other hand, proved less competent and, on the few points upon which they differed, was, without great difficulty, out-manœuvred, overborne and defeated by the superior cunning, skill, and forcefulness of his host.

Indeed, at one moment, there was a certain constraint and awkwardness, a slight tension, an atmosphere of strain and faint discomfort, when the Kaid took occasion to observe that he appreciated and indeed enjoyed the privilege of being the Roumi's host . . . So much so, in fact, that he began to feel that he must be his host in perpetuity, and never suffer the beloved guest to wander from his side any more—never allow the stranger within his gates to pass those gates again, in short.

The stranger remarked that this was true hospitality and would be the height of bliss, but nevertheless abandoned the

point completely and in some haste.

But, on the whole, the interview was amicable, and, in the end, satisfactory to both parties.

"Very well," observed the Kaid, at the conclusion of the interview. "All is now clear as the limpid waters of the rivers of Paradise, and we understand each other, as a pious, learned, and true believer understandeth the words of the Book . . . Two hundred and fifty thousand marks in gold; four mountain guns, such as take to pieces to be carried on the backs of mules; ammunition; and a good and faithful man to instruct my gunners in the use and care of such guns . . ."

"And you yourself to remain in my country until full and complete delivery of all things agreed upon," added the Kaid.

Sitting cross-legged upon his cushion, the big stranger bowed low from the waist, his head almost touching his feet.

"It is agreed," he said, and on that happy note the interview concluded.

"What think you of him, oh Raisul, my son?" inquired the Kaid, when the stranger had been conducted from the Council-chamber to the dungeon-like guest-room which had been allotted to him, "and what said you to him in his own tongue?"

"I spoke to him in English," replied Raisul. "Spoke suddenly, as you observed, and bade him reply instantly in that tongue. He did so, and with a marked German accent.

Personally, I never trust any man, oh my father, but I believe he is a German and what he professes to be. I say keep him in this country and let him send what messages and messengers he will. Messengers chosen by you, of course."

"And you, my friend? Speak your mind fully and frankly," said the Kaid, turning to the Señor Pedro Maligni seated next to and slightly below him.

"Undoubtedly he is our German, and undoubtedly the genuine agent," was the prompt reply. "Invaluable. I feel it has been my good fortune to serve you, in this matter, perhaps more usefully than ever before in the long years of our felicitous association. My friend the German Consul at Tangier sent me a photograph of the fellow, and said, in the covering letter, that his information from the Friedrichstrasse was that he had started . . . That would about tally with his arriving now.

"And then, of course, he has the pass-word," he continued, "and that was known to no other living person but you, the Consul and myself. Oh yes, he's genuine all right, and you can have complete confidence in him."

"Let me see the picture again," said the Kaid Abd'allah Karim.

"Yes, that is undoubtedly the same man," he continued, after a careful study of a portrait, bearing the name and address of the German photographer, which Señor Pedro Maligni produced from the leather case which he always carried about his person.

"He asked for nothing for himself—which is a little suspicious," observed the Kaid, whose natural habit it was to judge others by himself.

"No need to do so," the Señor assured him. "He'll get

something for himself, all right."

"Bribes, commission, pickings, do you mean?"

"Well, well," smiled Maligni, "perhaps. But I was not thinking of that. What I meant was that he'll get his reward in his own country, from his own employers. Honour, promotion, payment, if he is successful here—if he foments trouble among the tribes, and helps you to wage successful war against the French."

"I am to be the wasp that stings the hand of Germany's enemy as he is about to strike, eh?" smiled the Kaid.

"Or as he is about to defend himself," agreed Maligni.

"So," murmured the Kaid, and sat awhile in thought. "Have you any words to utter, Mahommed Ali el Amin, the Trustworthy, the Reliable? What is in your mind—or is it vacant, as usual?"

The fine soldierly Moor smiled, bowed, and salaamed to his master. "I am no thinker, nor clever schemer, oh Kaid," he replied in a deep, sonorous voice. "The man seemed to me to be a good man, solid and quiet, and a man of his hands. I know nothing of policies and plots, nor of the use of words that have two meanings, and my opinion is of no worth; but I tell you this, oh my master—that *Roumi* is a soldier, a fighting man. If he deny it, he is a liar."

"There is no denial nor pretence, oh Mahommed Ali el Amin," the Señor Pedro Maligni assured him. "The man is no mere messenger. He is an officer of the army of the Germanis, and has fought in this country of Africa where he learned Arabic and the ways of the people."

"It is well," said Mahommed Ali el Amin, and fell silent.

"And shall we hear your voice, oh son of my old and

faithful friend?" inquired the Kaid courteously of Jules Maligni. "For I am told that, though young, you are a man of learning, wisdom, and understanding."

"How should I speak words worthy the attention of such a one as the Kaid Abd'allah Karim and in the presence of my father and these wise men?" was the modest reply. "But, even as Mahommed Ali el Amin the Trustworthy, the Reliable, knows that this man is a soldier, so I know that he is a German. Speaking to him in French, as one who knew no German, I received a reply in French, and it was the French of a German. In meaning to say '*bon confrère*,' he said, '*pong congvrère*,' or something like that. He is, without doubt, a German, though I can say nothing else about him.

"But what need?" he added, "since my father can—and has his photograph, his pass-word, and the statement of the German Consul that such a man was being sent from Berlin. Surely his description and the photograph prove it, and obviously he could not have obtained the chosen pass-word by guile."

"Surely," agreed the Kaid, stroking his beard. "Very well. Relying on the plighted word of my friend and adviser, the Sidi Pedro Maligni, and on the wisdom of my counsellors here present, I will trust this man and accept him for what he appears to be. But he shall remain with us until we have the money and arms . . . And, indeed, until the fighting is over, since he is a soldier."

"Doubtless he would fight for us?" he continued, turning to Maligni.

"Doubtless," agreed that gentleman. "Of a certainty. He would willingly take command of your artillery, or of your

cavalry, or of such portion of your infantry forces as you choose to put in his charge. They are great soldiers, these Germanis, and this man knows all three branches, and could command and manœuvre a brigade of all arms."

"You know much of him," observed the Kaid.

"I talked long with him last night," replied Maligni. "Almost till the dawn, we talked."

"And he convinced you that he could do all this?"

"Completely. He can drill and manœuvre your cavalry, and lead a cavalry charge that will sweep away your enemies. He knows the ranging and loading and firing of the guns that will come; also the care of them; and will train your gunners to handle them so as to blow your enemies to Hell. He can drill and train your foot-men and form them in regiments so that, in addition to being the marvellous marksmen that they are, they will have the discipline and steadiness of the French themselves, yea, of the French Foreign Legion."

"Would that we could get a few of those fine warriors, those desert lions," mused the Kaid. "They would be worth their weight in minted silver, both as drill-sergeants and as a stiffening for my soldiers when fighting in the *Roumi* fashion. One or two of them have come to me, have served me well, risen to rank and honour, and died in battle. One or two have deserted and left me, to escape to their own country—even though they came to me voluntarily. Two or three I have captured in battle, and one or two have been brought to me by nomads. But none of these prisoners would fight for me against the French, and since as slaves they are not worth their keep, we had a little merry sport

with them."

"Dropping them from the walls on to the hooks, eh, my father?" laughed Raisul.

"After bringing them face to face with a dozen deaths," chuckled the Kaid . . . "Would that I had a regiment of them, willing to fight for me against their former masters."

"Yea, or even but as many as I have fingers on my hands . . ." he added.

"So many and very many more, you shall have, oh my father," promised Raisul. "Willing volunteers. That I swear to you by the Beard of the Prophet. A gift from me to you."

"A princely gift, oh Raisul my beloved son," smiled the Kaid. "But how shall that come to pass?"

"Have patience and give me a little time, and it shall come to pass, oh my father," assured Raisul in a tone of firm conviction. "Soon you will receive a strange letter from one who is Commander of a Column among them—a letter offering to bring a *harka* of them to you."

"Allah grant it, my son," replied the Kaid. "They would be as leaven is to bread, as the forbidden *sherab* is to the water in which it is mixed . . . Among the mountains, behind rocks, my men are wolves, yea, our tribesmen are the best soldiers in the world. When charging they are swooping eagles, yea, the foot-men are as cavalry . . . Could we but get them to stand in line, to obey words of command, each group faithfully obeying a little leader and the little leaders faithfully obeying a bigger leader, and the bigger leaders faithfully obeying the Commander of that line—so that, in advance or retreat, some shoot by order while others move by order, who could then withstand them? What foreign foot could tread the Country of the Gun? We

could clear this land of them, and I would soon be Sultan of Morocco."

"You shall, oh Kaid," murmured Maligni.

"*Insh'allah*," whispered the Kaid, and rising to his feet, signified that the Council was ended.

"Stay a moment, Raisul, my son," he added, resuming his seat, and, waiting till the Hall of Audience was empty, continued,

"What is this talk of bringing me *Roumi* soldiers, willing volunteers from the great Regiment of Strangers that fights for the French? Do you mock me, my son?"

"By Allah, I do not, oh my father," replied Raisul. "Hearken to plain facts—a tale I had not intended to tell you until it had proved its own truth.

"In Algiers, as was my business, I met an officer of the Nineteenth Army Corps—from the Island of Corsica—where once our ancestors ruled and had their watch-towers and forts . . . I became his friend, lent him money and having helped him to spend it, lent him more . . . Women were his weakness . . . Women and overwhelming ambition . . . '*There is a madness in his blood*,' I thought . . . I made myself necessary to him, and just when things were . . . getting interesting . . . he was sent to the Sahara. Soon I went to the Sahara—and soon he owed me more money. As we grew ever more friendly and intimate, I learnt more and more of his ambitions, his hopes—yea, his intentions.

"The madness in his blood was increasing—and his weakness for women (of whom he had known too many) and his insane ambition. Sometimes he talked as one smitten of Allah. But only to me . . . He knew that at any moment I

could ruin him, by prosecution for debt; knew that he was already absolutely in my power; so he cared not what he said, cared not what I knew—and he opened his mind to me . . .

"A curious mind for a European, and one brought up in strict discipline, restraint and the European officer's code of honour. Always he spoke of Soldiers of Fortune who have carved out Kingdoms and Empires in India, Africa, Arabia, China, for themselves—and especially of his ancestor Napoleon, an obscure officer who became Emperor of the French and conquered Europe . . .

"Then he got himself sent to Ain Broudja—and thence with a little desert column to where the borders of the French Sahara meet those of Mekazzen . . ."

"And had you a hand in this, oh Raisul my son?" smiled the Kaid.

Raisul's smile matched that of his father.

"A hand, my father? Nay, nay . . . But, perchance, a voice. A voice that was but a whisper—in his ear. Just a suggestion . . . or the hint of a suggestion—of a suggestion. Just a tiny seed in wondrous fertile, fruitful soil.

"An independent command—far, far away from superior authority, from observation—indeed, from any thought or care or interest in his doings or his fate.

"Who so keen and zealous an officer—who so devoted to his profession, his career and his country—as he who would volunteer, nay, beg, to be sent on such duty, establishing a chain of outposts at the very back of beyond, in the depths of the God-and-man forsaken desert, in that roasting hell of loneliness, thirst, hardship and deprivation?

"This to his superiors . . . A zeal that would ask for a

station in Hell.

"This to himself . . . A small, compact, self-contained and self-sacrificing army, at his absolute disposal . . . A nucleus—a *cadre*—for a greater army, an ever-growing army, a mighty army, such as that with which the Mahdi of the East swept down upon Africa, or Abd-el-Kader fought the French."

The Kaid stroked his beard as he closely watched Raisul's animated face.

"A moment, my son . . . You go too fast . . . This man is a *Roumi*, an officer of France in command of French troops . . ."

"And he would throw off his allegiance to France. He would use those troops for his own ends. He would lead them into this country, lead them here to Mekazzen city—and place them at your disposal, my father."

"By Allah!" cried the Kaid. "He would? He would? And you have brought this about, my son? *Bismillah!* I cannot believe it . . .

"No," he continued, "and if he did—what would be his true and hidden intention? What would he hope to gain? . . . No. It is a trick, I say.

"On his part! . . . On *his* part, I mean, my son," he added hastily.

"What would he hope to gain, oh my father? Power. Wealth. Freedom. Relief from the bonds of irksome discipline and the restraints of the slow promotion that will not make him a great and powerful man until he is an old and feeble one.

"As I showed him—by careless remark and casual hint

—he could rise in a day from the rank of Major to that of General, Field-Marshal, Commander-in-Chief, if he joined you, bringing a well-armed, well-equipped force with him—and found favour in your sight.

"And in truth he could be to you what Kaid Sir Harry Maclean was to the Sultan—and much more . . . In one brief campaign he could make you Sultan of Morocco. In another he could sweep the French and Spaniards into the sea. In another re-conquer Algeria—with the help of the countless hordes of the Bedouin of the Sahara. Then Tunisia. And how long would the Italians resist in Tripoli—with the Senussi helping in their overthrow? The English in Egypt—that once great English people that now lets its Empire fall to pieces—how long? Then Africa for the Africans . . . Islam united . . . The Pan-Islamic *jehad* against the usurping Infidel at last . . ."

"Led by this *Roumi* officer, my son?" interrupted the Kaid.

"Led by you, oh my father—at the head of an army trained and taught and disciplined by this *Roumi* officer, and drilled by the soldiers he will bring with him."

"And who will control him—even when he is but Commander-in-Chief of my present army, and has defeated the Sultan and conquered Morocco in my name?"

"I will, oh my father," was the prompt reply. "I will control him. And when he has outlived his usefulness, or his gratitude, his humble allegiance . . ."

Raisul drew his hand suggestively across his throat.

The Kaid nodded, smiled again, and stroked his beard.

"A great and battle-scarred Boar of the Mountain Forests once invited a Lion of the Desert to enter into his

secret grove and into a hunting partnership with him," observed the Kaid. "The Lion of the Desert agreed, and was led to the secret grove of the Boar of the Mountains . . . They entered into a partnership that day—and that night when the Lion felt hungry, the Boar entered into the Lion."

"You have spoken, oh my father," smiled Raisul. "For you are the Lion. This officer shall enter into your den and into a hunting-partnership with you, and when the time is ripe, you shall eat him up."

The Kaid sat silent for a few minutes, while Raisul watched him.

Suddenly he laughed his famous hearty laugh.

"Let him come, my son," he said. "And let him bring all that he can bring . . . but let him bring his *harka* piece-meal, detachment by detachment, and not as a conquering army . . . Yea, let him come, and let him go again—when Allah wills."

"I do not think Allah will decree that he go again, oh my father," smiled Raisul, and, rising, respectfully took his leave.

CHAPTER III

"Jules!"

"Is that you, Jules?" said Margaret, confused, suddenly awakened from sleep by a slight sound in the pitch-dark room—for nowadays she slept as lightly as a mouse or a bird.

"Who's there? Is that you, Jules?" repeated Margaret, wondering whether she had been mistaken.

She had retired to rest in the great stone turret-room, leaving Jules smoking with his father, Raisul, the Kaid and the curious man whom the Señor Pedro Maligni addressed as Herr Schlacht—although Jules had told her that he was a German officer, Ober-Leutnant Carl von Mittengen.

There had been cognac, Algerian claret, and assorted French liqueurs on the low tables in the tiled garden, and Jules had flatly refused to leave the party when she had suggested retiring.

It seemed, nowadays, that he was carrying his principle of "When in Rome, do as the Romans do" altogether too far, and enlarging it to "When in Rome, make your wife do as the Romans' wives do." But there she had drawn a very firm line. Because she was in Morocco, she was not going to behave as a Moorish woman, whether in the matter of slavish obedience to her husband, or of becoming a more-or-less banished inmate of a more-or-less *hareem*.

By all means let Zainub and Sara and El Isa Beth el Ain and the rest of them withdraw and retire at a nod from their respective masters, and follow all the customs of their country. For herself, she would follow the customs of her

own country, and where Jules went she would go, and what Jules did she would do.

So when, after the banquet, the women had, at a nod, disappeared to loll and munch and chew—sweets, nuts, pink cakes, Turkish delight, *hulwa* and other muck, she had, in spite of Jules' frown, accompanied him to the garden, sat down, and lighted a cigarette.

It was not as though it were one of their eternal Councils. She was a guest. They were all more or less European, except the Kaid, and supposed to be living in European fashion.

Very well then, she was not going to be ordered off to a beastly *hareem* with those fat women who, with the exception of El Isa Beth el Ain, could do nothing but stare at her, handle her clothes and jewellery, talk about her, and giggle. The novelty of the *hareem* had very soon worn off, as indeed had that of Moorish ways of life in general . . .

How she was beginning to hate the beastly food that, at first, she had thought so interesting.

Banquets!

Couscousoo—which Pedro Maligni called *pilaff*—would not be so bad were it not that one of the ingredients was apparently either cheap scent, hair oil, or scented soap. How disgusting, making what might be a delightful dish, of rice or wheat and chicken or lamb, into something that smelt as though it had come straight from a hairdresser's rather than from a kitchen.

And how sick she was of the eternal *smead*, as they called the bread made with barley-flour in flat loaves the size of a soup-plate. And the horrible *kiftah*, balls of force-meat into which the cooks seemed to put all the things

which were unfit to appear before the human eye or nose, in any other form.

And why must the cakes that appeared at every meal be masses of greasy dough, tasting of nothing but cinnamon? Thank Heaven, at any rate, for the tangerines, figs, pomegranates and loquats.

And, oh for a cup of tea instead of the foul stuff poured out from a kind of kettle in which stewed that filthy concoction of mint, sugar, tea, tinned milk and water . . .

There was someone in the room . . .

Margaret felt for the box of matches which should be on the stool beside her low uncomfortable bed.

"Would you mind answering, Jules?" she said, with some asperity.

"'Fraid he can't answer," said a voice, "he's—er—speechless."

Raisul.

"D'you mean he's ill? Have you come for me? What's happened?" cried Margaret, sitting up. "Where are the matches?"

"No, I wouldn't say he's ill," replied Raisul, "but I think he will be, to-morrow. At the moment he's very drunk indeed. Speechless, as I said . . . As to whether I've come for you . . . Well . . . I've certainly come for a talk with you, my dear. A conclusive one—with no interruptions. I'm going to finish what I began saying in England, and what you've contrived to prevent my saying, on numerous occasions, here. And finally, as to the matches, I've got them."

"Go out of my room, instantly. I'll . . . I'll . . ."

"In fact, '*Unhand me, monster, said the village maiden to the villain*,' " continued the cool and mocking voice. "Or you'll do—what? . . . Just what will you do?"

"My husband will . . ."

"He won't. Don't you think it, my dear. In point of fact, your husband will do exactly as I tell him, for our good Jules knows on which side his bread is buttered. He also knows that some quite funny and amusing things happen in this place. He knows, too, that he is not really *persona grata* with the Lady Zainub, and that if both she and I became two minds with but a single thought—well . . . you'd soon be a single woman again. Wouldn't that be nice? For you know you don't love him, Margaret. And surely you must be deadly bored with him by now?"

Springing from the bed, Margaret seized her dressing-gown which lay upon the foot of it, threw it round her, and slipped her feet into the mules which lay beside the bed.

"Have you gone completely mad?" she asked, facing about, to where, between her and the balcony, the figure of Raisul loomed dark against the starlit sky.

"Completely mad," replied Raisul . . . "Mad for love of you . . . Love at first sight . . . I saw you at noon on a day in May, and I loved you at a minute past noon on that day . . . Desperately . . . Devotedly . . . Madly, as you say . . . I loved you then . . . I have loved you every hour of the day and the night since then . . . I love you now, and I shall love you every hour of the day and the night until I die . . . And then in Paradise or Heaven—or Hell—I shall still love you for the whole of that Eternal Day or Night. I tell you . . ."

"Would you kindly tell me, instead, where my husband is?" interrupted Margaret icily. "And I'll tell him something.

I'll tell him to give you the finest horse-whipping that ever a gentleman gave a cad."

Raisul laughed lightly.

"My dear, the poor Jules couldn't understand you, for he's far too drunk. And if he were sober he wouldn't understand you, for he's far too wise. He realizes, as you're going to do, that there's no law here—except mine; there are no police—except mine; no friends—except mine; no servants—except mine; no transport—except mine; no weapons—except mine; no food or water—except mine; no hope—except in me.

"For the Kaid, my father, rules in Mekazzen as Allah rules in Paradise—and I rule the Kaid."

"And you call yourself a gentleman and you . . ."

Raisul laughed again.

"Not a bit of it, my darling. I call myself a *man*," he interrupted, "and I pay you the compliment of calling you a woman fit to be the mate, and, if you like, the wife, of such a man."

Margaret gasped.

"I can only suppose that you've been drinking, too," she said, endeavouring to control her voice.

"*Been* drinking! No, I'm drinking now . . . the sound of your voice . . . the fragrance of your presence," and Raisul strode toward the spot where Margaret stood.

"That's what I am drinking, Margaret . . . a million times more intoxicating than alcohol . . . Alcohol! We Moors invented *al kohl*, but not to drink it. We leave that to Christian swine. No, I won't call them that, for you are a Christian . . . for the present. But you are going to be a

Moorish princess, Margaret—Sultana of Morocco . . . I will make you a Queen . . . I will lay a kingdom at your feet, and . . .”

“Meantime will you kindly get out of my room. You boast that you are a man—though admittedly not a gentleman . . . Do you call this behaving like a man?”

“Like a man in love,” said Raisul. “Like a man who knows exactly what he wants, and intends to get it. If you had fifty husbands and each one had an army, I would get you—and keep you.”

Margaret yawned audibly, tapping her open mouth with her hand awhile. A brave effort.

“Very interesting, Raisul,” she said. “Getting quite a big, boastful boy, aren’t you? But won’t you tell me the rest of the story some other time? I want to go to sleep again, and little as I like boastful boys, I should hate to see my husband come and throw you over the balcony . . . Three hundred feet, isn’t it? You’d be a nastier mess than you are now.”

Again Raisul laughed and drew a step nearer. Margaret turned to the bed behind her, and a faint sound was audible as she moved the pillow.

“Don’t move again,” she said, “except in the direction of the door, or this pistol will go off—and I hate the noise they make in a room.”

“Oho! Little Spit-fire has got a pistol, has she? What a liar Jules is . . .”

“As it happens, Jules doesn’t know I’ve got it,” replied Margaret—with perfect truth, for she had no pistol, and had never touched a pistol in her life.

“So we don’t tell our husband everything, don’t we?”

“I shall have something to tell him as soon as he comes,”

answered Margaret bravely, “if he doesn’t come while you’re here and break every bone in your body.”

Again the amused laugh.

“Well, you tell him, darling—and then tell me what he says, will you?” said Raisul.

“I think I can tell you that, now,” he added. “He’ll say, ‘Oh, you mustn’t mind young Raisul. The boy will have his joke.’ He will . . .”

“Look here,” Margaret interrupted him abruptly, making her voice sound as hard and harsh as she could. “Get out—or I’ll shoot you. Go on. Get out, you cur.”

That maddening mocking laugh again.

“You wouldn’t shoot me just for standing here—and telling you that you’re the loveliest woman on this earth, or in Paradise; and that I worship you, would you?” he asked softly.

“Unless you go instantly, I will shoot you for coming into my room in the middle of the night, and making love to me. Now go.”

And this time it was Margaret who took a step forward.

Laughing, Raisul drew back.

“Oh, splendid! I love you more than ever, darling . . . And I shall love you still better without the pistol . . . Ever so much. I don’t want to die for you, darling . . . not a little bit. I want to live for you—and with you.”

“I’ll count ten,” said Margaret. “One . . . two . . .”

“ ‘Buckle my shoe,’ ” said Raisul.

“Three . . . four . . .”

“ ‘I’ll shut the door,’ ” said Raisul, “. . . after me,” and Margaret saw him pass between her and the balcony

archway.

"Good night, darling," he said from the door. "We've got all life before us, and there is no hurry. We'll have another jolly talk when there are no nasty pistols about . . ."

The door shut, Margaret rushed across the room, thrust home the huge clumsy bolts, tottered back to her bed and collapsed upon it.

Margaret awoke to find herself lying across the over-cushioned, faintly unpleasant, dubious, slightly musty, fusty, frowsy bed, in her dressing-gown.

She sat up.

Had she had a horrible nightmare?

No. It was not a dream.

She must get out of Morocco—at once.

How? How could she get away from this awful place?

Where was Jules?

She had bolted the door.

Had he come up and found it fastened?

Why hadn't he hammered and wakened her?

What time had it been when that vile beast had come to her room?

She must get a pistol and learn to fire it.

But how utterly absurd in the Twentieth Century. Such things don't happen. But this wasn't the Twentieth Century here in Mekazzen; it was about the Fifteenth, and such things did happen.

What would Jules do to Raisul?

And what would they do to Jules if he killed him? Something terrible, something unthinkable, for Raisul was

the apple of the Kaid's eye. He positively worshipped him and, according to El Isa Beth el Ain, the Kaid was a monster of cruelty and savagery when his anger was aroused . . . and very often when it wasn't.

He'd torture Jules to death if Jules injured Raisul . . .

Perhaps she had better not tell Jules, after all?

But she must, for several reasons. If she didn't tell him, she could produce no sufficient reason for insisting that they should leave Mekazzen instantly.

If she didn't tell him—it might happen again.

If she didn't tell him, Raisul would not get the horse-whipping that he deserved if ever a man did.

If she didn't tell him, Jules wouldn't understand her wish for a pistol, and her demand that he should never leave her unprotected.

Of course she must tell him . . .

But she must insist on his keeping his temper and controlling the indignant rage that would lead him to thrash Raisul within an inch of his life.

She must point out to him that Raisul was all-powerful here, and that, by coming here, they had put themselves completely outside the pale of civilization and all that civilization stands for.

She must remind Jules of the terrible dungeons and torture-chamber here, and of the Kaid's besotted worship of his son, and of his unbridled savagery and ferocious cruelty to those who offended him.

And if Jules turned a deaf ear to her prayers, advice, and warning, she would use his love for her as a conclusive argument, and point out that if anything happened to him, her plight would be terrible indeed.

Margaret rose from the bed and, thinking that she would give anything to be able to walk into her bathroom at home, performed her uncomfortable ablutions in a curtained alcove, as best she might, with the aid of a kind of glorified brass coffee-pot, a big earthenware jar of water, and a large brass basin.

Yes, she told herself, as, with her hand-mirror in one hand and brush in the other, she looked out across the shimmering rocky, dusty plain, she must tell Jules, after breakfast and, while minimizing the outrageous offence sufficiently to keep Jules from "seeing red" and losing control, still make it sound serious enough to ensure his taking her away at once.

But after her breakfast of coffee, fruit and *smead*, Margaret did not tell Jules—nor at any other time that day—for she did not see him.

He was, according to Raisul—who came upon her in the garden, and, with unblushing effrontery, ignored her cutting and contemptuous refusal to speak to him or notice his presence—unwell . . . suffering from a bad headache . . . and quite unable to get up.

Finding that Margaret completely refused to speak to him, look at him, or in any way realize his presence, even to the extent of asking where her husband was, Raisul laughed and observed,

"*Villain-avaunt-said-she . . . But-my-hour-will-come-said-he-for-once-aboard-the-lugger-and-the-girl-is-mine . . . And-with-a-hissing-scowl-he-gnashed-both-his-teeth-flung-cloak-about-his-shoulder-and-strode-away*," and strode away.

Margaret did not look up from the book which she was not reading, but as soon as Raisul was out of sight, went in search of El Isa Beth el Ain.

She was Jules' mother and, to that extent, perhaps Margaret's friend. Presumably she would be able to get to the bottom of the matter, and find out where Jules was and what had happened.

Probably Raisul had put *hasheesh* or some such filthy drug in his coffee or wine . . .

CHAPTER IV

As Margaret approached the heavy iron-studded garden-door at the foot of the staircase that led up to the apartments of the Lady El Isa Beth el Ain, who was also the Señora Maligni, an old man, clad in a dirty hooded *burnous*, rose from the great squared stone that was at once a mounting-block and a doorstep.

"I want to see . . ." began Margaret, and, as the man shook his head, realized that it was useless to speak to him in English.

"*Je desire* . . ." and again the man shook his head, and, with uplifted out-spread hand, signed to her to stay where she was, while with the other he pointed first to himself and then to the stairs.

In the shadow of the vast wall of the court-yard, Margaret waited until Hassan el Miskeen, reappearing, beckoned to her to come with him.

Followed by Margaret, the door-keeper climbed three steep flights of stairs and traversed several dark and airless stone corridors.

At another heavy iron-studded door he halted, unfastened it, pushed it open and held aside a heavy curtain for Margaret to enter.

The conversation that ensued was difficult and unsatisfactory, both by reason of the ladies' lack of proficiency in one of their mutual languages—which were English and French—and by reason of what Margaret considered the other's unreasonable attitude.

“Yes, my son Jules is here,” Margaret understood her to say in her curious English and still more faulty French. “He is ill—very ill. It is your fault . . . If he could have stayed with me, he would never have learnt these nasty habits of the *Roumis* . . . And why are you so cold? And why are you not obedient to Jules, as a good wife should always be to her husband?”

In English where she could, and in French where she must, Margaret endeavoured to point out that it was only when he had returned to his own country that Jules had developed bad habits, and that in England he had been as abstemious as the average English gentleman and had never, on any occasion, so far as she knew, drunk more than was good for him.

Whereat the mother shrugged and looked sceptical.

Nor should El Isa Beth el Ain forget that she too had English blood in her veins, and that an English wife held a position very different from that of an Arab wife. They were not slaves, and it was not expected of them that they should be unquestioningly obedient to their husbands. They were their husbands’ partners, friends and equals—not their chattels.

Here the Lady El Isa Beth el Ain laughed derisively.

“Partners!” quoth she. “Have I not been my husband’s partner? Have I not given my life and happiness—the very light of my eyes and joy of my days—to help him and further his interests? Did I not stay here and send my child away, when I could have gone with it myself, had I been as selfish as—as some people? . . . You say you want to go away from here? Do you think I wanted to go away from here when I sent my child away—when I cut my heart out

of my body and sent it from me? Do you think I wanted to go away to Tangier when my husband, my beloved, my desired, my lord, was there—and here there was nothing but danger and death, nothing but lies and plots and intrigues? If I could stay here and show my love of my master, and of my duty, when he was far away for months at a time, cannot you show your love, and do your duty when your master is here with you?"

"Jules is not my master."

"Isn't he your husband? Aren't you married?"

"Yes, he is my husband."

"Very well, then . . . ?"

"In any case," Margaret pointed out, "there is no question of my leaving my husband. I'm not talking of leaving here alone. Jules will accompany me, of course. We only came here on a visit."

"A visit," smiled El Isa Beth el Ain. "Apparently Jules doesn't tell you as much as he tells his mother. It will be a long visit."

"Why?"

"Why? Because this is his home, or, at any rate, Morocco is his home. He has got to come into his father's business and that is here in Mekazzen and Tangier, and sometimes in Gibraltar where my mother came from, and in Marseilles. Pedro has never lived in England, although he has visited the country; and now that Jules is a man, and educated, knowing the ways of Europeans, he must live in Morocco and Mekazzen, and learn the ways of the Moors and the business of his father with the Moors—especially with the Kaid, my half-brother."

“I am certainly not going to live in Morocco,” said Margaret.

“Then it’s a pity you married a man who is.”

“Yes.”

El Isa Beth el Ain shrugged eloquent shoulders.

“Anyhow,” said Margaret, “I will see Jules now.”

“He is sleeping. He is very ill.”

“All the more reason why I should be with him. If he is ill, I am the proper person to nurse him.”

“Mothers sometimes make good nurses. I will nurse him.”

“I’ll help you then,” smiled Margaret diplomatically.

“Sara is helping me,” was the reply.

“Look here,” said Margaret angrily, rising from the divan. “This is all nonsense. Where’s my husband? I’m going to him now. I insist.”

The Lady El Isa Beth el Ain smiled tolerantly.

“People don’t ‘insist’ here, my child,” she said. “No one does that except the Kaid—or Zainub and Raisul through the Kaid . . . Insist!” repeated El Isa Beth el Ain, and laughed gently. “My poor girl . . .”

“Where is Jules?” asked Margaret, fighting back a slowly rising tide of fear, cold and horrible.

“Up here, in my husband’s bedroom.”

“Where’s that?”

“Through there,” replied El Isa Beth el Ain, pointing to a small door in a Moorish horse-shoe setting, opposite to the one by which she had entered.

Without further remark, Margaret ran to the door, only to find it entirely devoid of any kind of handle, latch, bolt or keyhole—and entirely immovable.

Having pushed with all her strength, and thrown herself against the door as heavily as she could, Margaret rushed across to the other one, determined to find a way round. Pulling back the curtain that hung on the inner side of the thick wall, she tried to open the door. This also was immovable, presumably locked from without.

Hammering upon the heavy mass of wood, endeavouring to shake it, Margaret realized that she was panic-stricken; that the cold tide of fear was rising higher and higher.

This would not do. She must not lose control. Panic was never any good to anybody. She must be cool . . . and wary . . . and brave.

She turned back into the room.

"Is this a trap?" she said.

"A trap?" smiled El Isa Beth el Ain. "Of course it's not. Don't be so absurd. You came here of your own free will, and you can go whenever you like."

"Jump over that balcony, do you mean?" asked Margaret.

"If you wish . . . But it would be pleasanter to give the signal to Hassan el Miskeen that we want the door open . . . You knock twice quickly and three times slowly . . . and hard, for Hassan is getting a little deaf and might not hear knuckles. Use the handle of that dagger."

And El Isa Beth el Ain pointed to where, on a table, lay a large dagger with hilt and sheath of heavy cut steel, the top of the handle flattened out into the shape of an open fan, and the end of the sheath curved sharply round in a small semicircle.

Margaret picked up the dagger.

"Thank you," she said. "Could you give me this? Might I take it with me?"

"Certainly . . . *Souvenir de voyage* to take home—when you go?"

Margaret hung in doubt for a moment, and then came to a decision.

"I'll tell you something," she said, "and then perhaps you'll understand—if you didn't before—why I insist on being with my husband.

"Last night, knowing that my husband was not there, Raisul came to my bedroom and insulted me . . . Insulted me unbelievably . . . unspeakably . . . made love to me . . ."

"*Raisul* did?"

"Yes, Raisul."

"He . . . made love to you? Attacked you? Assaulted you?"

"Insulted me, I said. Told me that he loved me, and that he . . ."

"Only told you?"

"*Only?* . . . Yes."

"How did you get rid of him, then?"

"It was quite dark in the room, and I told him I would shoot him if he did not go. I pretended I had a pistol. Could I get one?"

"No, you couldn't. And you'd better not take that knife if you're thinking of stabbing Raisul."

"Thinking of stabbing him? Of course I'd stab him, or anybody else who came into my room in the night and . . ."

"Well, you'd better stab anyone else, then . . . Don't stab Raisul, unless you want to suffer a more terrible death than

you can imagine. The Kaid would . . .”

“I’d rather suffer the terrible death.”

“And Jules? And his father, my husband? And I, his mother? Are we all to die, because you’re a silly English Miss, cold and flat and skinny? Can’t you take a joke?”

“A joke?” cried the scandalized Margaret.

“Well . . . well, suppose it wasn’t a joke then—and I can’t understand Raisul really wanting to make love to anyone like you, with Sara and the other beautiful Moorish girls about—suppose it wasn’t a joke. Can’t you manage a man, or rather a boy, without talking about shooting and stabbing? It’s ridiculous, disgusting . . .”

“And what would you have done?” asked Margaret in angry bewilderment.

“Well, what do you suppose I’ve done a thousand times in this Castle, with my husband hundreds of miles away, and Zainub devoting the whole of her time to plotting my ruin?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t seem to know anything. And Jules was a fool to bring you here.”

“I was a fool to come, but I’m going back at the very earliest possible moment, and I’ll take good care I don’t return.”

“You won’t take my Jules away ‘at the earliest possible moment,’ ” replied El Isa Beth el Ain quickly, “and if you are going to live in England—if ever you get there—you will live as a widow, for this is Jules’ country and his home. His work is here, and henceforth he will live here.”

“I’ll discuss that with Jules, thank you,” replied

Margaret coldly. “And while we are here, he must stay with me . . . After last night, I will not be left alone again.”

“And I intend to see him now,” added Margaret.

“He is ill—he is sleeping.”

“Then I’ll wait until he wakes.”

“Yes? Where will you wait? Shall Hassan take you back to your room?”

“I’ll wait here,” replied Margaret. “I’m sorry to intrude, but I won’t leave this room until I see Jules.”

“I used to talk like that when I was a girl,” smiled El Isa Beth el Ain.

“I tell you I insist,” cried Margaret angrily, and encouraging hot anger that it might fight chill fear. “I insist on . . .”

“I used to insist, at first,” said El Isa Beth el Ain conversationally, as she rose from her cushions and crossed to the door that had first foiled Margaret. “You were going to say you insist on remaining in this room? . . . Well, I’ll leave it.”

And, almost without pausing, she opened the door and went out. With a heavy clang and a click, the door closed behind her.

Rushing across the room and throwing herself against it, Margaret again found it immovable.

Obviously there was some secret device by which it could be opened or—disturbing thought—someone waited, watched and listened on the other side. Someone not as deaf as Hassan el Miskeen who kept the outer door.

§ 2

Traversing a tunnel-like corridor, the Lady El Isa Beth el Ain entered a lofty whitewashed room, bare and unfurnished save for rugs, cushions, and a broad bed, or divan, upon which the place of mattress was taken by a mass of coloured pillows, partly covered, uncomfortably and untidily, by a stained sheet of purple silk.

Upon this unattractive bed reclined Jules Maligni, and beside it, on a cushion, sat the girl Sara, wielding in one hand an incongruous painted fan edged with dirty swansdown, and holding in the other a brass vessel containing a dubious-looking mixture of fruit-juice, sherbet and water, with which she ministered to her patient's thirst.

Smiling fondly upon her son, and approvingly upon the ministering angel whose attentions presumably alleviated the pain and anguish that wrung his brow, El Isa Beth el Ain advanced to the bedside, bestowed a warm lingering loving kiss upon the patient, and bade his nurse clear out.

"And how do you feel now, Light of my Eyes?" she asked solicitously.

"Well, Ornament of Courts and Desire of Emperors, and all that, I'll tell you. I feel—exactly as though I was very drunk last night. Gloriously drunk. And so I was. That Algerian wine is a bit sweet and heavy and sticky, but believe me, it's great stuff . . . D'you know, Light of the Hareem, there were three 'dead men' under my chair before I was vanquished?"

"*Dead men?*" interrupted the Lady El Isa Beth el Ain.

"Yes, and a half-dead one, of Cognac, on the table, and three or four badly wounded ones, of assorted liqueurs."

"My son, my son, why do you drink that horrible *sherab* that makes you ill, and takes away your sense and your

beauty, and leaves you at the mercy of your enemies? . . . One wants all his wits about him in this place, my Jules. Oh, take my advice, and . . .”

“And you take some advice from me, thou Pearl of Asia—or is this Africa—advice given freely by an old, old man . . . and I feel very old this morning, Mother mine . . . And that is this—or do I mean that this is that? Anyhow, my advice to you, Ma’am, is, drink all you want, and then drink a lot more; drink all you can, and then some you can’t; but, darling, don’t mix ’em. Better a Nile of Wine than a lot of little brooklets of drinks—you know, any old drinks that come handy. See, darling? You remember that, and try and be a better girl. And now run off and send Sara back, and if you *have* got an iced lager . . .”

And here the speaker paused to emit a deep heart-rending groan . . .

“An iced lager!” he whispered . . . “A bottle off the ice . . . instead of this appalling bilge—sherbet and warm water. Oh Allah, I ask You! Sherbet and warm water, with a squeeze of rotten orange in it . . . and Paradise were wilderness enow.”

“Peace my son,” interrupted the Lady El Isa Beth el Ain, laying a hand upon her son’s hot forehead. “Peace; and listen. I know you are a great grown man now, and that men must be men, and enjoy themselves, with wine and women and music and banquetings. All that is well enough in its way, and right and proper in due season, but it is the mark of the wise man to know the season. And I say that it is not now.

“Not only are there great things toward,” she continued,

“matters of policy and Peace and War, involving European nations, the Senussi, the Touareg, the Bedouin, and the Sultan and our Kaid himself—but there are also small things which, to you, as well as to your father and to me, are great, far greater than those of the Nations and of Peace and War. Matters of our own peace, Jules, our own safety, your welfare, my son, your future, your position, your wealth. I foresee great changes here . . .”

“You don’t see any chance of changing this foul drink for some cold black beer, darling, I suppose?”

“Listen to your old mother, Heart of my Heart, and heed her advice . . . I foresee great changes here, and at an early day . . . This young Raisul who . . .”

“Good boy, young Raisul,” yawned Jules. “Drank me under the table.”

“Sat by—and led you on. Filled your glass as fast as you emptied it, and saw you drink yourself into a sleep like the sleep of Death, while he drank nothing. And when he had made you drunk as a *kif*-sodden servant, he went off as sober as a *Kazi* on the judgment-seat—and got into mischief.”

Jules laughed.

“Did he really? He’s a great lad.”

“That Raisul!” continued El Isa Beth el Ain. “I tell you, Jules, his coming will make a difference to the lives of all of us, and may shorten the lives of some of us.

“He has come to stay. He has learned all he needs of the ways of Europe; speaks English like an Englishman, French like a Frenchman, and Spanish like a Spaniard; has sojourned in England and lived in that London from which my mother came; has lived among the Germans and spoken

face to face with their great men of Foreign Policy and of War.

"He has studied not only their languages," she went on, "but their policies, their needs and fears and jealousies, their diplomacy and their weapons and their ways of war.

"And now he has come back for good . . . and for what? . . ."

"For a thirst, I should think. Grand country for a thirst," yawned Jules Maligni.

"He has come back to rule, to govern, and to fight. He has come to rule Mekazzen and all the Country of the Gun, through his father, the Kaid, that he may the more strongly rule it with his own hand after the Kaid's death. And when will that be? . . ."

"Don't know, Mother," murmured Jules. "I'm not a prophet."

"No, you don't know. No one knows. But I could tell them. I could tell them when the Kaid will die. He'll die just as soon as Raisul has done with him. He will die when it's convenient to Raisul.

"So long as the Kaid's name is one to conjure with in Morocco; so long as the English and the French and the Spaniards and the Germans intrigue for his help, favour and support; so long as he is a terror to the Tribesmen and to the Nomads, the Bedouin and the Touareg; so long as he is a tower of strength unto Mekazzen, the Country of the Gun—just so long will Raisul use him, shelter behind him, and remain content to be the Power behind the Throne.

"But let the Kaid falter and weaken; let him refuse to take Raisul's advice; let him choose the safe middle road

instead of the mountain-scaling path of Ambition—and where will he be? Facing Mecca in his tomb, I say.

"Let him thwart any scheme or plan or plot that is dear to Raisul's heart, and what becomes of the Great Kaid, the earth-shaker, the mighty man of war, the killer, the cruel devil whose nod has been the death of thousands? What becomes of him?"

"No good at riddles," Jules protested wearily.

"Then tell me what becomes of the scorpion that sits where he would set his foot; the bug upon his pillow . . ."

"Oh, indelicate . . . !"

". . . the mosquito that settles on his hand . . . I tell you the Great Kaid would be no more to him than these, and I tell you he loves the Great Kaid, his father, no more than he loves such insects as these.

"That Raisul! He is without conscience, heart, soul or bowels of compassion. Raisul fears neither man, nor beast, nor fiend, nor Allah himself. Raisul is a Devil incarnate, and would spit upon the Beard of the Prophet."

"Hey, Lady Mother," yawned Jules. "Let's talk about Raisul, shall we?"

"I *am* talking about Raisul."

"No!"

"And I say, beware of Raisul. Placate him, consider him, and please him in everything. For, before long, he will rule this Castle and this town of Mekazzen and this Country of the Gun—and, some day, he will rule Morocco.

"Even now, when orders are given, the voice is the voice of the Kaid but the words are the words of Raisul . . . And Zainub, his mother, has influence with him—much influence. If the Kaid ceased to indulge Raisul, to obey

Raisul; if the Kaid thwarted him in any matter upon which he had set his heart, and Raisul decided that his father had lived long enough, Zainub would help Raisul.

"If Raisul brought poison, saying, with that smile of his, '*This will give the Kaid, my father, wonderful dreams—long, long dreams*,' Zainub would put it in his *couscousoo*, or his coffee, or his wine."

"Scheherazade, my soul, you're getting morbid. These things positively are not done nowadays. You're old-fashioned, absolutely Victorian."

"I have dwelt in the dark rooms of this Castle for a quarter of a century, my son, and I . . ."

"Want a change, darling. You want a week-end at Brighton."

". . . and I know what I know. Listen to me, Jules, my son, that your days may be long upon the earth, and those of your dear father, my husband and lord, also. I say to you now, and I say to you daily, even though you come to hate the sound of my voice,

"Raisul rules; beware of Raisul; offend him not; obey him, please him and placate him."

"And why all this fuss, just now, oh my mother?"

"Because of what happened last night, my son."

"What, my making a merry night of it with Papa and the Kaid and old Herr Schlosshenboschenheimer, and Raisul himself: and the wading in the wassail? You're not going to sit there and tell me Raisul was shocked, are you?"

"My son, never be a knave, but oh, ten thousand times, I say, never be a fool. Listen. This Raisul, your cousin, the son of my brother, is not only the greatest of knaves, but so

clever that he thinks all other men are fools. He thinks you are a fool. He made a fool of you last night. He made you drunk."

"Well, that amused me more than it did him," smiled Jules Maligni.

"Did it?" inquired his mother dryly. "Well, he made you drunk, for your father, watching, saw . . . And in that, my son, you were a fool."

"I certainly gathered in a head and a mouth, my love, and that was a foolish thing to do."

"That is nothing . . ."

"Oh, is it?"

"Nothing, and less than nothing. You were a fool in that you let Raisul make a fool of you. You let Raisul get the upper hand and take the higher ground. It is not for Sultans to make Viziers drunk, and mock them and despise them, and get the better of them. It is for Viziers to make Sultans drunk and bend them to their will; obtain mastery and influence and power over them; make Sultans sign what Viziers have written; make Sultans say what Viziers think; it is for Viziers to guide them and lead them and drive them and ride them, as the weakest man can ride the strongest stallion, or the swiftest camel.

"Let not this Raisul make you drunk again, or ill will come of it—great ill in great matters, as well as little ill in little things."

Lady El Isa Beth el Ain paused in the torrent of her speech and in her fanning of her son.

"A little ill hath already befallen," she said quietly.

"If you call this head 'a little ill' . . ."

"I don't call it even that, my son. A far, far worse ill than

that befell; for that pale English girl, your wife, insulted and angered Raisul, our master; Raisul, in the hollow of whose hand lie the fortunes of your father and yourself and me."

"*What?*" cried Jules, suddenly sitting upright on the divan.

"Yes, you may well ask. Now you are taking some notice of what I say. Through your drinking this vile *al kohl* and *sherab*, and becoming insensible, this befell. Had you been with your wife, as you should have been, it would never have happened. Not only did she insult and anger and thwart Raisul, she actually threatened him.

"What, think you, is the fate of those, and of the family of those, who thus offend great powerful Sheikhs and Kaids and Sultans?"

"What happened?" asked Jules Maligni.

"Oh, you know what Raisul is. Can't leave any girl alone . . . Not that they want him to leave them alone. . . . That Sara! You keep her out of Raisul's way."

Jules Maligni laughed.

"He's a great lad," he said again.

"Yes, and he'll be a great Sultan some day—and you can be a great Prime Minister, Vizier, Chief Councillor . . ."

"Keeper of the King's Conscience—and Treasury—what?" laughed Jules. "The latter would be more worth keeping."

". . . yea, Governor of a great Province, a fat province, yielding twice the taxes that the Governor has to send to the Treasury," continued El Isa Beth el Ain. . . . "All dependent on the countenance and favour of this Raisul—some day. And meanwhile, your wife must quarrel with him, insult

him, threaten him. Would you believe that she came and asked me to lend her a knife to stick in him . . . ? Think of it!"

"But what happened, Woman?"

"Why, a certain fool got drunk in front of the man whose respect he should keep . . . Got so drunk and incapable that his own father said it would be wrong to take him to his wife's apartments and let her behold his shame. Thus was his wife left alone with none to protect her . . . or to give her good counsel . . . or to keep her out of mischief. So she got into mischief. She insulted and angered and threatened her husband's patron and employer, the source of his wealth, his honour and his future greatness."

"*Will* you tell me what happened, before I . . . ?"

"I *am* telling you. The fool's wife—a far bigger fool—unmindful of her husband's happiness and welfare, behaved according to her folly."

"I suppose you mean young Raisul went to give her a cousinly good-night kiss, and overdid it, and got his face smacked?"

"It is all very well to put it like that. It's all very well to make little of it, but it's a very serious matter—as you'll find out, my son. All very well to say, with a laugh, that Raisul got his face smacked; but people of Raisul's sort don't like having their faces smacked, and they are apt to return a smack with a thrust—of a knife; or with a blow—of a bullet; or with a jerk—of a noose."

"Morbid! Old-fashioned! Victorian!" laughed Jules.

"So don't get drunk again, my son," continued his mother, "or if you must, see that your wife is in a safe place—where she cannot cause mischief and danger."

“It’s news to me, my mother, that Margaret is much of a mischief-maker, or given to pursuing young men and leading them on, for the fun of turning them down—at the psychological moment.”

“I did not say that your wife pursued Raisul. Do not put false accusations against your wife into my mouth, my son. I did not say that she led him on. I said that she insulted and enraged him. I said that she threatened him.”

“Threatened to do what?”

“She threatened to shoot him.”

“To *shoot* him? What for?”

“What for? To get her husband, and her husband’s father and mother put to death, I should think. What do you suppose would be the result of Zainub’s hearing of the mere threat—the threat to kill her son? Shall I ever forget what happened when she got it into her head that you might grow up to be a danger to her Raisul? . . . And here, when you are back again, and Zainub’s fears and suspicions dead, your own wife threatens to kill Raisul. To kill her son Raisul, whose heir you are!”

“Oh, for some ice,” groaned Jules, “or even a bucket of really cold water to stick my head in, oh Morbid Mother of Moans and Misery. But look here, Dangerous Daughter of Delight, joking apart and slaughter aside, Raisul must have annoyed Margaret quite noticeably, if she talked about shooting him. She never shoots people. How do you know she threatened to shoot him?”

“She told me so, herself.”

“Well then, presumably she told you why.”

“Why? You know Raisul; you know what this Raisul is.

Finding her alone, and knowing the state you were in, he thought he'd have some fun."

"Fun?"

"What he calls fun."

"Yes, but surely that's a case for the swift smack, the slap that brings the blush of shame to the cheek of naughtiness. Margaret's an English girl, and they don't go about shooting wayward young men very much. What did happen?"

"Oh, she'll tell you, no doubt, and make a mighty story of it . . . Probably try to give you the impression that she had a desperate struggle with Raisul the Ravisher, and that the only possible thing now is for you to kill him, to avenge your honour, or some hysterical rubbish of that sort."

"That's absurd, of course, but . . . well . . . it's a bit difficult. Raisul mustn't annoy her, and if she really threatened to shoot him, he must have annoyed her badly . . . It's a bit awkward."

"Very awkward . . . Oh, my son, why did you bring the woman here? Why on earth did you marry an Englishwoman when you knew that you would come and join your father in Morocco, when the time was ripe? . . . So unsuitable . . . Only an additional expense and responsibility and anxiety . . . Now a girl like this Sara, a girl of the country, with knowledge and understanding . . ."

Jules Maligni laughed.

"You may laugh at me, my son, but I implore you to heed what I say."

"Well, what do you say, Lady Macbeth?"

"I say this: your wife must not offend Raisul with her airs and graces."

“But suppose Raisul offends Margaret?”

“Then one of two things; she must not take offence—or she must go.”

“Go where? You don’t mean go to Heaven, do you?”

“It’s said to be a good place for saints . . .” replied El Isa Beth el Ain dryly. “But I did not mean Heaven . . . She could go back to England.”

“I can’t go back to England now. Father and I are . . .”

“I did not say *you*, my son. I said your wife. Since she finds Raisul’s nonsense so shocking, she has a simple remedy—she can go away; she can go back to England—in theory until you rejoin her. If she gets tired of waiting there for you, she can come back again, and see how Raisul behaves then.

“Why can’t women help their husbands instead of hindering them?” she added angrily. “Help them as I’ve helped mine—at any cost.”

“You’re different, my dear. You . . .”

“Yes, very different. I put my husband’s interests and welfare—let alone his life—before a silly trifle like a kiss.”

“Yes, I said you’re different from Margaret.”

“Very well, let this different woman go back to her own country.”

“How can she?” expostulated Jules. “Even if she wished to go, and I agreed, how could she go without me?”

“How? How did you go when you were a child? You went with Hassan el Miskeen and his sister, my slave, and an English soldier, a captive of the Kaid. She could go in safety with a caravan, and this same Hassan el Miskeen as a guide. He could take her to Tangier—and, once there, I

suppose she's big enough to look after herself."

"And what about me?"

"Yes, and what about you—and your father, not to mention your mother—if the girl refuses to go, and also refuses to be friendly . . . to Raisul?"

"Oh Lord," groaned Jules. "Perfect little head-ache-cure, aren't you? Better than three aspirins and a cup of coffee, any day . . .

"I'll have both, I think," he added. "So you beetle off, and make me a cup, strong and black, and about a pint of it. Beetle off, Mother, and let Sara bring it."

And having forestalled her daughter-in-law, and sown certain seeds in her son's mind, the Lady El Isa Beth el Ain "beetled" off.

CHAPTER V

Meanwhile Margaret, sick with indignation, fear, anger, resentment, and a terrible sense of helpless loneliness, passed a bad hour.

Had her intuition been right when she first became engaged to Jules, and was there a yellow streak in his character? She had told him, at the time, that she did not love him, and had talked about a twelve-months' engagement.

She had always liked him well enough, but had she trusted him? She had always known that he was a mongrel, poor Jules, but she had, if such a thing were possible, known it without realizing it. Or perhaps she should say, had realized the fact without considering its implications.

Yes, she had been doubly foolish in letting Jules persuade her to marry him . . . The folly of marrying a man one did not love . . . The folly of marrying a foreigner, a man of alien and Oriental blood, whom one did not love . . . A native . . .

Here Margaret pulled herself up sharply, once again.

Whoever he was, and whatever he was, she had married him of her own free will, and with her eyes open—and she would make the best of it. He was her husband, and she would make the best of him.

If he were weak, she must try and strengthen him; and if Morocco had a bad effect upon him, she must get him out of the country, and never let him come back to it.

And, in any case, they must get out of this horrible place. It was like living in the Tower of London . . . and in

the days of Richard the Third, or Henry the Eighth.

And meanwhile what to do? How to find Jules?

How long had she been in this beastly room? And what would happen if she merely sat tight? El Isa Beth el Ain—her mother-in-law!—had simply said, "If you insist on remaining in this room, I'll leave it" . . .

Another hour passed, and a gnawing hunger was added to Margaret's other troubles.

If she grew tired of waiting, and went away, would she be re-admitted if she returned.

On the other hand, she would look rather foolish if she merely sat there suffering a self-inflicted imprisonment. She was being absurd. Everybody had treated her perfectly kindly, and she had had nothing whatever of which to complain—save for Raisul's incredible madness of last night.

Of course this woman El Isa Beth el Ain was bitterly jealous of her, but surely she would do her own son's wife no harm, nor permit anybody else to injure her?

Anyhow, this was no good.

Springing up, Margaret went to the outer door and hammered upon it, as El Isa Beth el Ain had told her to do. Almost at once the heavy lock was turned, a big bolt withdrawn, and the door opened by Hassan el Miskeen.

"I want to find my husband, the Sidi Jules Maligni," she said; repeated the statement in French, and attempted it in a shocking jargon of Spanish and Arabic, as she realized that it was a waste of time to address this dirty old man in English or French.

Hassan el Miskeen, smiling pleasantly, shook his head and then, opening widely a cavernous mouth, made patent

the fact that he had no tongue.

Margaret shuddered, pushed past him, and rushed down the corridor, turned to the right at the end of it, and tried to remember whether the turning that she should take out of this passage was the third or fourth on the left . . . or the second or third on the right.

She could try both sides, and if one passage did not lead her to the stairs, another would.

The second on the right seemed familiar, and yes, there were the steep, worn stone steps that led down to the inner court-yard which was the garden and place of recreation of the people of the *hareem*.

But no, this was wrong. There should be three flights of stairs, and she had only come down two flights. Should she go back, or follow this gloomy tunnel-like passage in search of another descending flight of steps, and if so, should she turn to the left or to the right?

Well, she could explore in both directions, and return to these steps, if she did not find the other flight that she must descend to get down to the court-yard.

She must not get lost, and she must not panic. She must remember that she was an English girl, staying with her husband in the house where his parents dwelt. She must fight against this foolish fear, this idiotic feeling that she was caught, trapped, and in some hideous danger.

Turning the corner at the end of the passage, Margaret stopped. What was that sound?

Had somebody coughed or spoken, or dropped something?

Or had it been the sound of a footstep?

Silence . . .

What a heavenly sound!

Someone was positively whistling, quite near; someone was softly whistling an air that she recognized. Where had she heard it? Paris, Marseilles, the ship, Gibraltar, Tangier? A band had been playing it in one of those places.

Yes, the band of a marching regiment.

Where?

And whoever was whistling must be a European. Moors don't whistle.

Jules?

Or, of course, it might be the Señor Pedro Maligni.

Raisul? . . . He was a Moor, but having been educated in France, and lived so long in Europe, he might whistle. She had never heard him do so—nor Jules either, for that matter.

What would happen if Raisul caught her there?

Anger mingled with the fear that clutched at Margaret's heart. Who was she, that she should dread this wretch; this beastly native?

And who was he, that Margaret Maykings should quail at the thought that he might be near?

Margaret's mouth set in a straight line; her hands clenched; and she realized that she was carrying the heavy dagger with which she had hammered on the door of El Isa Beth el Ain's room.

Drawing it from its cut-steel sheath, Margaret saw that the blade was bright, keen-edged and sharp-pointed.

"This is ridiculous," she said, and crept forward in the direction of the sound.

A few yards farther on, yet another corridor of this

warren branched from the passage in which she was.

Standing at an unglazed Moorish window that was little more than an arrow-slit with a horseshoe top, was a man, wearing a hooded *burnous*, and yellow heelless slippers; a very much bigger man than Raisul, bigger than Jules or his father.

Motionless, in the dark shadow of the wall, he watched intently someone or something that interested him below.

Suddenly, hearing her footsteps, with a swift movement he turned toward Margaret, at the same time drawing farther back from the light, but not before she had recognized the bearded face of Ober-Leutnant Carl Von Mittengen *alias* Herr Schlacht.

"Oh, good morning," said Margaret. "I've rather lost myself, I'm afraid. Could you tell me how to get to the court-yard—the inner court-yard, from which three flights of stairs lead up to the *hareem* part of the Castle where my husband's mother's apartments are?"

The man bowed courteously, swiftly studying her face with a steady gaze which, though keen and penetrating, was yet not offensive.

In the moment of her sudden appearance, it seemed that something wary, watchful, anxious, peeped out from behind the hooded, bearded mask that was his face. As he did not immediately reply Margaret began all over again in French.

"*Bon jour, Monsieur. Je suis . . .*"

"I spik Anglisch," interrupted the man. "Please to spik it to me if you haf prefair it. I understand it quite pairfect, though I do not spik it so quite pairfect."

"Oh, good," replied Margaret. "My French is very far

from perfect, and so is my understanding of it, especially if it is spoken quickly . . . Will you kindly show me the way out?"

"Yes, I know the way out," replied the man, and added, with a slow smile, "Sometimes the way out is easier than the way in, doesn't it?"

"Sometimes," agreed Margaret, "and sometimes it is a great deal harder."

Herr Schlacht nodded his assent.

"Ah," he observed, "do you, perhabs, t'ink you find it more difficult to leave Mekazzen than to come into it? . . . I, me myself, find it more difficult to come into Mekazzen than to go out."

"Well, at the moment," replied Margaret, "I want to get out of this wing of the Castle. Once I'm in the court-yard, I can find my own way to my husband's quarters."

"Yes," agreed Herr Schlacht, "I will do so with goot bleasure," but did not move from where he stood. "How is he . . . your husband?"

"What do you mean . . . 'How is he?' "

"I t'ink he have sore head and dry mouth this morning. But you haf not see him to-day, no?"

Margaret's manner and expression became less friendly.

"I help Herr Pedro put him to bed," smiled Schlacht deprecatingly, "he was so ver' drunk. I am sorry to know it, because it make you angry that I know it."

To this Margaret made no reply.

"I know ver' great deal about t'ings that happen in Mekazzen."

This also she accepted in silence.

"Perhaps you know one or two that I know not . . . and

can tell me. Perhaps I know one or two you know not—ver' useful to you—and can tell you."

"Thank you," said Margaret. "Is that the way out?" and pointed down the passage.

"Yes. No. May I spik to you?" replied Herr Schlacht.

"Well, you are speaking to me, aren't you?"

"I haf the bleasure of liddle converzation, but I mean, could I spik to you about some matters . . . Like friends . . . Like business friends, I mean. I t'ink you and I could be ver' goot friends, and help each other . . . Play with each other hands . . ."

Margaret stared.

With as angry and haughty a look as she could assume, she stared.

What was the man driving at?

Was she Margaret Maykings in Mekazzen, or Alice in Wonderland?

Herr Schlacht smiled disarmingly.

"Play . . . yes . . . *into* each other's hands, isn't it?"

"What do you mean?"

"I t'ink I can help you in your affaires, and I t'ink you can help me in my affaires . . . my affaires different from yours."

"I don't see how I could be of service to you," replied Margaret coldly, "and I certainly don't see how you could help me in any way . . . Not that I require any help from anybody. Of course not. Why should I?"

"You do need help," replied Herr Schlacht, shaking his head and smiling upon her in a kindly, almost fatherly manner.

“When I need help I will appeal to my husband, thank you, and he . . .”

“Pray forgif me if I offend, but I know . . . Suppose you want help last night when Raisul come to your room, *hein*?”

“*What?* How do you know that he . . . ?”

“Ah!”

And Herr Schlacht wagged a stout forefinger at Margaret. “You appeal to your husband for help then?”

“How do you know he . . . ?”

“Ah! . . . I watch our friend Raisul like mouse watches cat; I see his liddle game to make the young Herr ver’ drunk, and when Papa Maligni say,

‘I am liddle tipsish, but this naughty boy *ver’* tipsy, help me put him in my room so as not to shock nize liddle Anglisch wife,’ I say

‘*Ja, ja.* Ver’ goot . . .’ and then I come back and watch Raisul. And my servant, who looks like ver’ stupid Moor and is ver’ clever Arab, watch too . . . So I know.”

Margaret felt a strong inclination to sit down.

“I t’ink you ver’ brave girl, and I admire, respectfully much. Ver’ brave, ver’ clever. Look see, I am not what you call in your peautiful language dam-flirt, isn’t it? . . . Lady-kisser . . . no, lady-killer, isn’t it? I haf dearly-beloved wife whom I dearly belove, God bless, waiting for me at my home. So I only admire most ver’ respectful, and wish to help. And you help me. You tell me all t’ings you know, and I be your friend. No? Isn’t it?”

“What sort of things?”

“Joost anyt’ing that habbens in this Castle; anyt’ing you hear that the Kaid is going to do, or anyt’ing you hear Pedro Maligni is going to do, or the good Raisul.”

“They are hardly likely to consult me, or inform me beforehand, are they?”

“*Nein. Non.* No, no. But they may consult the young Herr Jules, your husband, or inform him beforehand, and he might tell you.”

“Do you think it likely I should repeat to you anything that my husband told me of other people’s affairs?”

“Yes; if it were more better so for your husband and for you, and if, in return for what you have told me, I have told you t’ings useful . . . perhaps to save yourself . . . perhaps to save the life of the young Herr Jules.”

“And pray how should his life be in danger?”

“Everyone’s life here is in danger. The Kaid and Raisul from the French and Spaniards, whom they will defy and fight; Herr Pedro and Herr Jules from Raisul and the Lady Zainub, if they offend—especially Herr Jules, if the Lady Zainub t’ink perhabs he kill Raisul or the Kaid himself . . . *Ja*.

“My life is in danger, if all I promise does not habben, or if other Government send other emissary, and he t’ink I am in the way; or perhabs Moorish officers get jealous if Kaid put me over them, and listen to me in council . . . *Ja*.

“Even ladies’ lifes in danger; Lady El Isa Beth el Ain, if Zainub get jealous about all Maligni family; Lady Zainub herself, if Kaid say,

‘Time I get new wife, this pattern old-fashioned. Sara latest model.’

Sara’s life in danger, if Lady Zainub say,

‘I must keep her a good girl; the only good girls are dead girls.’ *Ja*.”

In spite of herself, Margaret smiled, and against reason and circumstance, she instinctively and intuitively liked and trusted this amazing person, whose knowledge was phenomenal, uncanny, and whose observations were as disturbing as they were convincing.

"And I t'ink," continued Herr Schlacht, "that, apart from wickedness of the *verdamnt schweinhund* Raisul, the life of yourself may be in danger . . ."

"Oh, what nonsense!" expostulated Margaret. "I never heard such a lot of absurd rubbish and . . ."

"Look you, my dear young lady, you are not now in London, or green peaceful English country. You are in place uncivilized, and among people barbarous, where might is right, and there is no law but will and desire. Joost that much law. And all man's motto is ' *What a man dares, he may do.*'

"So I t'ink . . . I fear . . . you yourself's life is in danger, from jealousy."

"And who on earth should be jealous of me?" asked Margaret. "You *are* a Dismal Jimmy, Herr Schlacht."

"*Nein, nein! Non.* Never am I a Jimmy Dismal, Fräulein. Always I laugh, out loud or in myself. I am joost foony fat German. And laugh behind what you call in your peautiful language, 'poker-face.' But I do not laugh when I t'ink your life in danger from jealousy . . . Jealousy of girl Sara."

"*What?*"

"Jealousy of girl Sara who perhabs much lof Herr Jules . . . Jealousy of Lady El Isa Beth el Ain who do not like Anglisch girl coming here and perhabs taking her Jules back again to England . . . Jealousy of Lady Zainub . . ."

"Now that is absurd, if all the rest wasn't."

“Jealousy of Lady Zainub,” repeated Herr Schlacht imperturbably, “who is ver’ jealous of influence of Herr Pedro over the Kaid, and perhaps ver’ jealous of influence of Herr Jules over Raisul. And perhabs ver’ jealous if she see Raisul going in lof with peautiful Anglisch girl.”

Margaret forced a laugh.

“So, look you, my dear young lady, do you not t’ink that it will be goot to have a friend—a friend who can warn and help—an ally . . . who never would be drunk when most need was for help, and . . .”

“Don’t talk to me like that, please,” interrupted Margaret, with asperity, and colouring hotly. “It was the first time that my husband ever . . . Mind your own business, please. I don’t believe that my husband was . . . I believe that cur Raisul put some beastly filthy drug . . . *hasheesh*, or something, in his coffee, or wine, or . . .”

“The first time?” replied Herr Schlacht, with raised eyebrows. “And suppose Raisul did do this? What about the next time and the next?”

The colour drained away from Margaret’s face as she realized that the events of last night—whatever their cause—might happen any night . . . every night . . .

Suppose they occurred again and again. Suppose anything happened to Jules—and she were alone in this terrible place.

“Look you, young lady,” continued Herr Schlacht. “What are the peautiful t’ings of life? . . . Love, health, peace, friendship . . . *Ja*, I would put friendship among the best peautiful t’ings of life. Let you yourself and I myself be friends, and help each other. As I tell you already, never will

I offend or be presumish and familiar, like kiss-lizard and flirt-hound and lounge-pig, because I am trustable shentleman, and lof my wife too. All I want is to help, and be your true friend.

"And," added Herr Schlacht, "for you to help and be my true friend."

"Of course I should like a helpful friend," said Margaret, "but I'm certainly not going to repeat to you anything that my husband tells me in confidence, nor am I going to repeat other people's conversation . . . I'm not a spy."

"No, you are not a spy," agreed Herr Schlacht, "but women have done some wonderful—er—what shall I call it—some wonderful Secret Service work. It is ver' fine service, ver' interesting. Fine, interesting work for brave clever girl: what you call romantic, thrilling, full of adventure and experience."

"If one were working for one's own country, in time of war," agreed Margaret. "In the official Secret Service . . . Not as a spy, though."

"Some girls have done wonderful work for their country, as spies," observed Herr Schlacht. "As valuable as the work of great Generals.

"But your country is not much interested here now," he continued, "since it made agreement with France that England would leave Morocco alone, if France left Egypt alone . . . So you could not do anyt'ing for your own country here."

"I shall have enough to do to look after myself here, apparently," said Margaret.

Herr Schlacht ignored this.

"But you might for another country," he said. "That

country might be ver' glad to have you in its Secret Service, and be glad to offer you rewards and honours, if you served it well."

"What country?" asked Margaret.

"My country," was the reply. "The country whom I serve here."

"What exactly are you doing here?" asked Margaret. "Since we are being so personal," she added.

"What we call watching the situation, my dear young lady. There are going to be—er—developments. This waste, uncultivated country; these savage barbarous people who are two hundred, two thousand, years behind the times, have got to—er—adjust themselves, or be adjusted to the advance of civilization, the march of progress.

"Europe must expand; the colonizing nations of Europe, save your own great country which has already colonized half the world, have their eyes on Northern Africa—Germany, Spain, Italy, France. Morocco, a potential granary, a mine of wealth, is too near to hungry Europe to be allowed to lie fallow."

"Is the motto of civilized and enlightened Europe also 'Might is Right' then?" asked Margaret. "It seems a little hard on the Moors, doesn't it, that a European nation should invade their country simply because it covets it, and is strong enough to take it?"

"And what about when the Moors coveted European countries and were strong enough to take them? Didn't they invade Italy, France and Spain, time after time? Weren't they the curse of the whole Mediterranean? Didn't they conquer Spain and rule most of it with a rod of iron for five

hundred years? But do not let us talk politics now. Let us agree to be friends, and to help each other, shall we?"

"I shall be grateful for your help, Herr Schlacht, if you will give it, should I need it," replied Margaret. "And I shall be glad to help you in any way that I can . . . But I can't help you by betraying confidences, or repeating things I hear, or anything of that sort . . . And now I must, and will, go. So please show me the way out, or I'll try and return by the way I came."

Herr Schlacht bowed.

"Come with me, Fräulein," he said. "You and I will talk some more, isn't it? You and I are going to be ver' goot friends and help each other ver' much."

A few minutes later, suddenly weary in mind and body —weary as never before had she been in all her life— frightened, unhappy and puzzled, Margaret reached her room.

She would have been yet more puzzled could she have overheard the conversation then being carried on between Herr Schlacht and his squint-eyed "servant" in the room allotted to the former, particularly as the two men sat down together and talked, drank coffee, and smoked cigarettes, in the style of friends and equals rather than that of master and servant.

"Oh no. Utterly and absolutely incorruptible. You couldn't buy a word from her with a diamond tiara, a rope of pearls and a million francs."

"I was afraid so. In fact, I felt perfectly certain that it was

a case of nothing doing—on those lines. But she might be extremely useful if you worked on her fears, or rather used her very legitimate fears to make an offensive and defensive alliance," mused the "ver' clever Arab" who was playing the part of servant to Herr Schlacht.

"Yes, that was my idea," agreed Herr Schlacht. "She'd be absolutely staunch to her husband so long as he played the game by her, but I fancy she'd be on the merciless side if he let her down badly . . . that is to say, if she found out that he was unfaithful to her, as of course he is . . ."

"Still more so," observed the other man, "if he even seems to take the line of *mari complaisant* when Raisul pesters her."

"Yes, if we can step in just when and where her husband fails her, and the breach between them is sufficiently irreparable, we might get her—through her gratitude and sense of self-preservation . . . She's the type who'd sell you nothing, but give you everything—if you deserved it."

"How far do you think she's in the know?"

"Do you mean with regard to the general situation, the treachery of the Malignis, or our identity?"

"Well, everything."

"I'm perfectly certain she knows absolutely nothing—except what I told her—that war might come this way. I'd stake my life on it that she hasn't the vaguest idea that Papa Judas Iscariot Pedro Maligni and his precious son think they are in with us, and would betray the Kaid to Germany—or the highest bidder. Also I'm equally sure that she takes us at our face value."

"And yours, my lad, is a face of great value when you

take your teeth out, and put that squint on," added Herr Schlacht.

"What makes you so certain that the girl knows nothing?"

"Psychology, my boy, psychology. And my great and priceless gift of character-reading. Do you think that girl would have come here . . . do you think she'd stay here for one day . . . if she knew what the Maligni game is? Do you think a girl like that would be a party to such villainy, or any villainy at all? Look at her face, man. She's a transparently honest, honourable, typical Anglo-Saxon girl of her class. If I'm mistaken in her, I'll resign from the Secret Service on the day I discover the fact."

"I agree. But what'll she do if she does discover anything? Or suppose she finds her husband can't, or, for his own good reasons, won't, protect her from Raisul?"

"Try to bolt. Go back home, if she could. Which, of course, she couldn't."

"We don't want to lose her while there's a chance of her joining forces with us."

"No. It's a difficult situation. She'd be absolutely invaluable if she'd come in with us completely. We could tell her everything, and she could show the Malignis that she knew—pretending that she'd guessed it, or overheard something. She could also pretend to stand in with them, and demand to be admitted to all their councils and plans and secrets. But the devil of it is, the moment we told her the facts, she'd be sick with horror and disgust at their treachery, and would simply go—and die in the desert."

"You don't think she'd be out for punishing them,

having revenge on her husband for bringing her here and keeping her in the dark."

"No, the Anglo-Saxon of her class and type doesn't react in that way. They don't go in for vengeance. Her one wish would be to clear out and have no more to do with him."

The two men smoked awhile in silence.

"A pity . . . a thousand pities," mused Herr Schlacht's 'servant.' "It's absolutely the ideal situation for a woman spy . . . If only this girl were of the right sort . . . I should sleep more soundly o' nights. Lovely position to have your chief suspects' wife and daughter-in-law in your pocket."

"Much too lovely," replied Herr Schlacht. "It doesn't often happen like that in real life. But she may be useful to us yet . . . very useful . . . if things so develop that, on the one hand, she's thoroughly angry with her husband about Raisul, and on the other, thoroughly frightened for her own safety. She won't spy for us, but she may tell me far more than she thinks she does."

"As you say, we'd feel a lot safer if she would spy for us, for I trust the good Pedro just about as far as I could throw him with my left hand."

"And not as far as I could kick him with my right foot," agreed the other. "The probabilities are, that they are trustworthy . . . No, I won't say 'trustworthy' . . . but 'to be trusted' in this particular matter, because the stakes are so big. But if there were another purchaser in the market, with a longer purse . . ."

"The longer his purse the shorter our shrift."

"Yes," agreed Herr Schlacht, "or if the wily old Kaid got on to their game, we should join them in some really

choice novelty in the not-too-sudden death line."

"All of which makes for the probability of honest conduct on the part of those honourable Maligni gentlemen."

"Quite so, as long as they are in Mekazzen—or anywhere else within reach of the long arm of the Kaid."

Silence again fell in the dingy stone-built room.

"By the way, what about the girl Sara?" observed Herr Schlacht's "servant."

"What about her?"

"I mean, both from our point of view and from theirs. Would it be possible for us to get hold of her, and, on the other hand, is it possible that she is cultivating Jules Maligni 'by order'? Is she the Kaid's, or Raisul's, spy on them, do you think?"

"As far as we are concerned," said Herr Schlacht, "I should say it would be better to let her alone. Even if I were able to come to some sort of an understanding with her, I should trust her, if possible, less than I trust the Malignis. These palace women love intrigue, for its own sake, so much, that they couldn't run straight if they wanted to . . . Except when they're in love . . . And I'm afraid I can't compete with the young bucks like Raisul and Jules Maligni in that line nowadays."

"As for her being the Kaid's or Raisul's spy on Jules," he continued, "that's possible, of course. Anything's possible in this mediæval nest of villainy. Anyhow, I don't see Sara being any good to us at all. Our only hope is in the English girl."

"Yes," agreed the other. "She may give you a glimpse

of a straw which shows which way the wind is blowing—if it's only knowing before we do, that the Kaid, or Raisul, or the Malignis are contemplating a journey, or expecting visitors."

"I'll send you to her room with notes from time to time, making appointments so that I can talk with her as often as possible . . . It won't be long before she'll be remembering my offer of help and friendship . . . You may be able to get hold of some interesting letters and things, while she's with me, and young Maligni's on the razzle."

"Yes, it wouldn't do to be caught talking with her. You might get her to come here later on, when you've fully won her confidence. She could easily get a Moorish woman's kit and veil."

"Yes, she might come to regard this room as the one place where she was safe," agreed Herr Schlacht, "and we certainly might get something out of her if we are very clever, what with her terror on the one hand and her indignation and resentment on the other.

"Poor little girl," he added kindly. "The Secret Service isn't always a gentleman's job, my friend."

"No, but it's a man's job, old chap," replied the other, "and you're the man for it . . . Best man we've got, bar none."

CHAPTER VI

Frightened, unhappy and puzzled as Margaret was when she reached her room, her mental condition did not improve as she sat and waited for her husband and tried to come to a decision as to what it would be best to tell him . . . And should she say anything at all about her meeting with the German officer?

Perhaps it would be as well to make no reference to him, inasmuch as she had tacitly agreed to regard what he had said as confidential. It would be rather foolish and pointless to say to Jules,

"I met Herr Schlacht and had a chat with him, but cannot repeat our conversation to you."

Besides, the whole incident was utterly insignificant in comparison with the other matter of which she must speak.

At the end of one of the longest and unhappiest days of her life, Margaret's husband knocked at the bolted door of Margaret's room, and, protesting surprise at finding the door bolted and barred against him, was admitted after satisfying her as to his identity.

Jocular, facetious, flamboyant, endeavouring to hide lack of ease by false and noisy easiness, and to conceal consciousness of wrong-doing by exaggerated demonstrativeness, Jules Maligni found his wife in no mood for the reception of forced humour or forced affection.

As he advanced to put his arms about her, he found himself coolly, firmly, and very definitely, checked and repulsed. Expecting fierce anger, accusation, and a torrent of

reproach, he found an attitude of calm, cool seriousness and determination, that was more disturbing.

Rightly or wrongly he firmly believed, in the light of a not exiguous experience, that the best way to argue with an angry woman was with a closed mouth—pressed firmly against hers; and that any offended girl can be quickly kissed from bad temper into good temper.

But this was not an angry and bad-tempered woman.

It was a woman cruelly hurt, badly frightened, and quite determined upon her line of conduct.

"I say, I'm terribly sorry about last night," he began, as Margaret's extended hand repulsed his embrace. "I don't know what they gave me, but one minute I was sitting there chatting with Dad and the Kaid and old Schlacht and Raisul—and the next minute I woke up in Dad's room . . . Hours later . . . Absolutely blotto . . ."

"Tell me, Jules . . . Did you get drunk? Just be serious and tell me the truth, because it's most terribly important. I won't say a word of reproach."

"Drunk, my dear . . . on a glass or two of claret? You don't think my head's as weak as all that, do you? Have you ever seen me drunk, or in the slightest degree the worse for drink, in all the years that you've known me?"

"No, I haven't, Jules . . . until we came to Morocco. You've been drinking far more than is good for you, for the last six months . . . it seems like six years . . . But I have not seen you drunk, or what you call the worse for drink—unless being rather 'different,' rather excited, and . . . and a little noisy . . . laughing too much at too little, and talking rather wildly—is being the worse for drink."

Gently shaking his head, Jules smiled reproachfully.

“And you really did not get drunk last night, Jules?”

Jules again smiled reproachfully, and treated the question as unworthy of further answer.

“Very well then,” continued Margaret. “You must have been drugged deliberately—as I hoped . . . and knew.”

“You *hoped* and *knew* I should be drugged?”

“I didn’t say that . . . On hearing that you were insensible, speechless, apparently dead drunk, I hoped that you had been drugged . . . I knew you had been drugged. I was certain you had not merely made a beast of yourself . . .”

“Thank you,” interrupted Jules Maligni with a hint of sarcasm. “Very kind of you.

“Well, kindness, like patience, is a virtue,” he continued, as Margaret, white-faced and big-eyed, watched him with intent anxiety, “and virtue is its own reward . . . You have it —for I exercised exactly the same virtue of kindness toward you. Both of us kind, and both of us, rewarded.”

“I was going to say you show your kindness in a curious manner, Jules, in leaving me alone here all night, but of course it wasn’t your fault. It was my misfortune. But it mustn’t happen again, Jules. You mustn’t leave me alone again, while we’re here. And we mustn’t be here a day longer than is absolutely necessary for making preparations for the journey.”

“Why this sudden fear of being alone, and this—unrest?”

“I’ll tell you, Jules.”

(How much should she tell him? And how little? She must tell him enough to show reason for the urgency and

not enough to cause . . . bloodshed . . . and irreparable quarrel and breach between Jules and Raisul, which might have the deadliest consequences for Jules and herself.)

"I should be afraid to be left alone again as I was last night—because of Raisul."

"Ah!" observed Jules non-committally.

"Look here, Jules, you know that Raisul proposed to me at Oxford the day after he first met me."

"Yes."

"And you know that he then professed to be desperately and madly in love with me."

"Yes."

"Well . . ."

"Well?"

"He hasn't got over it; or he thinks he hasn't."

"I'm sure he hasn't, my dear. Who would? And he and I are not the only ones, either, are we?"

"Then since he hasn't, Jules—and you admit that he hasn't—you must surely understand . . ."

"Understand what?"

"Understand why I won't be left alone again, and why I want to leave here at the earliest possible moment. Understand why I hoped you were drugged, and not drunk, last night."

"Oh come, you exaggerate, my dear. Young Raisul's calf-love . . ."

"Can be a great nuisance," interrupted Margaret.

"Life is full of nuisances," shrugged Jules Maligni.

"Well, my life was rather over-full of this particular nuisance last night."

"How do you mean?"

“Raisul came up here . . . and pestered me.”

“When?”

“When you were . . . when he had drugged you.”

Jules Maligni struck an attitude, and “registered” shock.

He recoiled in horror and amazement.

Incredulity conquered these emotions.

Ferocious indignation and savage wrath succeeded incredulity.

“I’ll kill him . . . I’ll shoot him . . . I’ll break his neck . . .”

“Hush; don’t be silly. It’s you who are exaggerating now,” insisted Margaret. “Perhaps he’d had more wine than was good for him, too. Listen, Jules . . .” and Margaret laid a hand upon her husband’s dramatically outstretched arm.

“I’m not making a complaint against Raisul. I mean I’m not bringing an accusation against him and asking you to punish him. I don’t want vengeance, or any nonsense of that sort. I simply can’t and won’t be left alone, while we are here. I don’t want you to quarrel with Raisul, but I do want you to grasp the situation, and understand it without exaggerating it.”

“The scoundrel! I’ll kill him,” repeated Jules, clenching his fists and scowling ferociously. “I’ll break every bone in his body.”

Did it ring quite true?

Margaret searched her husband’s face in poignant anxiety.

Was he acting?

Certainly his last threat had been uttered with less violence and vigour.

But no, why should she think such a thing?

Doubtless he had realized, even while he spoke, that his hands were tied by her very presence there in Mekazzen, and that he could not treat Raisul as he longed to do, or give him the thrashing that he would certainly have given him, had they not been in his power.

Of course Jules was thinking of her safety rather than of his desire for vengeance.

That was why one got the impression that he did not quite mean what he said, and that he was playing a part. Even in the midst of his righteous indignation, he had remembered that, for his wife's sake, he dare not punish Raisul.

"You'd like to, I know . . ."

"*Like* to!" cried Jules.

"I mean, you are burning to horsewhip him, Jules; but your hands are tied—while we are in the Mekazzen country. We are absolutely in his power. So don't talk about punishing him—don't even think about it . . ."

"Perhaps you are right," acquiesced Jules. "Of course you're right. We are in his power."

"Don't think about punishing him," repeated Margaret. "Think about getting away, and about preventing anything of the sort happening again. You mustn't give him the chance of drugging you again, and you mustn't leave me alone, Jules."

"I don't see how I can prevent his . . ." began Jules.

"But of course you can," interrupted Margaret, "if you don't sit drinking with him, or eat with him in his own apartments."

"And I'm afraid you'll have to be left alone sometimes,

my dear. Be reasonable. I can't be inside the Castle always."

"It's night-time I'm thinking about, more."

"I may have—I certainly shall have—to be away for days at a time, perhaps weeks at a time, before very long."

"Jules!"

"Margaret!" mocked Jules.

"Look here, Jules, if you've really got to go out of this place before we can leave it for good, I'm coming with you. I'm quite as strong as you are."

"You are? Then you can manage Raisul all right, I should think, without all this fuss."

"What I meant was, I have as much endurance as you, and can ride as far, and rough it as well. Did I make any complaint on the journey down here? And we roughed it pretty well then; riding in all weathers and sleeping in those foul *fondaks*, when the tents couldn't be pitched."

"That was different. We were travelling at leisure then—like tourists—with a young caravan, and in reasonable safety. This would be different—without the Kaid's *mezrag* protection and an escort and guides. We should be in enemy country, among all sorts of trouble; raiders, robbers, hostile tribesmen, Bedowi, Touareg. If you fell into the hands of some of those birds, you'd wish fifty Raisuls had got you."

"If you leave this Castle, Jules, I'm coming with you—unless Raisul goes with you, that is."

"D'you suppose Raisul's going where I tell him?"

"No, I suppose you're going where Raisul tells you to go. If he goes on some expedition and you go with him, I don't mind staying here, provided a definite date is fixed for our return to England, and that it is the earliest possible date.

“But one thing is absolutely certain—I don’t stay another night alone in this room, if Raisul is in the Castle . . . You wouldn’t ask me to, would you, Jules?”

“Oh Lord, don’t make all the Atlas Mountains out of a mole-hill . . . Raisul won’t do it again. And anyhow, you can bolt your door, in future, if I’m not here.”

“But you’re going to be here, Jules—if *I* am . . . I can’t sit here night and day with the door locked.”

Jules gave a snort of impatience.

“Look, dear,” urged Margaret, “suppose you went away from the Castle, and Raisul suddenly came upon me . . . somewhere . . . in the daytime.”

“Oh, try your pistol trick on him again,” snapped Jules irritably.

“*What! What* did you say?”

Jules looked confused . . . Confused, guilty, and angry.

“How did you know that I pretended to have a pistol? How did you know that Raisul . . . ? Oh, Jules . . . You *knew*! You knew about Raisul all the time! You *were* acting. You knew when you came into this room. You weren’t really indignant at all, and you hadn’t the faintest intention of punishing Raisul.

“Of course, your mother told you. She . . .”

“Don’t you say anything against my mother,” blustered Jules loudly. “She’s one of those women who help their men-folk, not hinder them.”

“And am I hindering you, my gentle Jules,” asked Margaret, her voice low, bitter and cutting, “by mentioning that your cousin so behaved to me last night, here in my bedroom, that I had to threaten to shoot him? . . . Will you just tell me in plain English what you’d like me to do next

time? . . . I should be sorry to do anything that hindered you! Does your mother . . . ?”

“Will you leave my mother alone? She didn’t . . .”

“Ah! Perhaps she did *not* tell you. Perhaps Raisul himself boasted, or confided, to you, that while you were drugged—or drunk . . .”

“Hold your tongue! How dare you insinuate things like that against a gentleman . . . against your husband? Drunk indeed!”

“My husband! That honourable, truthful, reliable gentleman, my husband. Do you consider my suggestion—that you were drunk—as being on a par with my suggestion that Raisul himself told you that he had come to your wife’s room in the middle of the night, and . . .”

“Look here, my girl, just now you said you knew that I’d been drugged. I thanked you for your kindness and said it was a virtue. I further remarked that virtue got its reward, and your reward was that I exercised equal kindness in judging you.”

“Judging *me*? What are you talking about? Do you know, I think I must be going silly here.”

“ ‘Going’?”

“Gone, then. Gone quite mad. What d’you mean, ‘*judging* me’?”

“What I say. You heard I was blind drunk, and very charitably and very rightly, concluded I’d been drugged.”

“Yes.”

“Well, *I* heard that you’d had Raisul up here while I was—er—insensible . . .”

“*What?*” Margaret flinched, paled, and blindly extended

a hand, as if for support.

"I say that, like you, I was charitable. When I heard that Raisul had been up here, I said,

'What about it? Harmless flirtation. We all know young Raisul. I trust my wife' . . . As I said before, we were *both* kind, both charitable."

Margaret, feeling as though her knees would give way, sat down rather heavily, and with some suddenness, upon her bed. The cold tide of fear was rising again, so fast, so high, that she felt she must drown. She was going to faint. No, that she would not do. Die she might—and willingly—but she would not faint.

In her need and dire extremity, her husband helped her.

"So we'll cry quits," he said, "and understand each other. Any time that I'm—ah—'defeated,' shall we say, 'o'ertook,' 'under the influence'—I have been drugged . . . Any time that Raisul makes himself, shall we say, 'a nuisance'—it's a harmless flirtation, and no harm done. As you say, we're absolutely in his power . . . Absolutely . . . And what's got to be done may as well be done cheerfully and with a good grace . . . *Kismet*. . . . *Che sara sara.*

"I don't allude to our little friend Sara," he added, with a giggle, hateful and incredible.

Margaret's blood boiled, and her fighting spirit raised its head.

Not for nothing had she grown up with Otho Bellême, shared all his games and sports and pastimes, followed him, fought with him, loved him, and imbibed his ideas, adopted his beliefs, accepted his standards. *I Saye and I Doe* was Otho's motto.

She raised her head from her hands, looked at her

husband in wonder, and rose to her feet.

"I'm going home," she said quietly.

She had said it and she would do it.

"Some day, perhaps," assented her husband. "When Raisul agrees—and provides the camels, mules, water, provisions, fodder, camel-men, muleteers and escort.

"Meanwhile," he continued, "suppose—just for a bit of fun, suppose—you don't offend and antagonize and infuriate our best friend and worst possible enemy. No more idiotic school-girl heroics . . . What are you staring at?"

For Margaret was regarding this man, her husband, with a cool, impersonal but searching scrutiny.

What was it—this thing? An eel that slipped through your hand as you grasped it, leaving nothing behind but a slimy emptiness? A quicksand, a morass which, looking like firm ground, gave way beneath your feet, leaving you floundering—nay, foundering—in mortal danger? A haystack of feathers or soft wool, at which you struck in vain; a thing invulnerable in its softness, a thing against which one could beat oneself to death as one who beats the air until exhausted?

"I am going home," repeated Margaret. "Will you take me?"

"I won't and I can't."

"Will you come with me?"

"No, I can't. My business . . ."

"I'm going home."

"I think you mentioned it."

"I'm going home. If you take me, we'll forget this nightmare, and start again in England . . . If you won't help

me, but will come with me, we'll talk things over when we get to England, and if you'll promise not to come back to Morocco, I'll do my best to continue as your wife. If you leave me to go alone, I will never speak to you, nor see you again."

"I fully agree. You certainly won't!" replied Jules Maligni. "It's a pity Otho Bellême rushed off to the French Foreign Legion, isn't it?"

"I also fully agree. It certainly is," replied Margaret quietly, gently.

And nothing more that her husband could say had any power to provoke her to recrimination, contradiction, or any show of anger.

CHAPTER VII

The days and weeks that followed were such that occasionally Margaret looked in her little hand-mirror to reassure herself that her hair had not turned white.

More than once she had spent the night alone in her room, unable to sleep, in spite of the fact that she had doubly barred and bolted the door.

More than once she had encountered Raisul, in courtyard, garden and corridor, and had frankly fled with more speed than dignity, pursued by his mocking laughter.

A specially hideous fear and a growing belief against which she fought, and of which she was ashamed, augmented her general state of terror, anxiety and apprehension, and almost brought her to despair and defeat—the fear and belief that her husband's presence in the Castle was no safeguard; that, far from being a tower of strength, he was a source of weakness and danger.

Indeed—though she shrank in every fibre of her soul from admitting the thought—she began to feel that he was a traitor in her camp . . . that the watchdog was a treacherous wolf, a jackal, a hyena.

With him she held such conversation and communication as was politic and necessary, the while there hardened in her heart the determination never again to see his changed, deteriorated, loathsome face, once she had escaped from this terrible place and country.

For neither would he take her away nor so much as suggest, nor discuss, a date or time when they should depart; neither in any way help her to go away by herself, nor admit

the possibility of her doing so.

Nor would her father-in-law, to whom she appealed.

In fact, the Señor Pedro Maligni was—or affected to be—a little shocked, and more than a little disappointed in her, when she spoke of leaving Mekazzen. He evidently held the excellent view that a wife's place is by her husband's side, though in his own case, precept had been superior to practice.

When Margaret so far forgot tact and good manners as to allude to the fact that the Señor's wife was but rarely at his side, he enlarged the precept by the addition of the words,

"Unless she can better serve his interests elsewhere."

And since Margaret was incapable of serving her husband's interests anywhere, she might, at least, be content, if not thankful, that she could comfort, solace and delight him . . .

Indeed, her father-in-law's attitude was scarcely distinguishable from that of her husband; and such annoyance as he felt, appeared to be caused rather by her own conduct than by that of Raisul.

Definitely fearing, by now, the Kaid and the Lady Zainub only less than she feared Raisul himself; definitely distrusting her husband and her father-in-law, as well as the girl Sara who treated her with a faintly contemptuous and thinly veiled hostility, Margaret's one hope was in her husband's mother, the Lady El Isa Beth el Ain, and that only because she felt that she, Margaret, was a pawn to be removed from the chess-board of El Isa Beth el Ain's own game.

As often as she could, she visited El Isa Beth el Ain's

room, and remained there as long as possible. There she was safe, and there she could discuss possibilities and plans for her escape.

Sometimes her husband's mother would be keen and interested and almost enthusiastic; at other times, apathetic, bored and unhelpful . . .

On some days she was the plotting, scheming conspirator and helper.

. . . Of course it could be done by a strong determined and plucky girl. She had made the journey from Tangier and she could make the journey back again. Hassan el Miskeen could guide her, and doubtless she could get Mahommed Ali el Amin to lend two or three good fighting-men as escort. He'd be quite willing to facilitate the departure of a *N'zrani*. He feared them and their innovating ways, the infidel dogs, and hated to see them in the country, even Pedro and Jules, friends and helpers as they were. He didn't trust them; he trusted no Christians, or Jews either.

And Abu Talib Zerhoun el Munshi, the scribe, the Kaid's confidential secretary; Sara could get at him and he could do some very useful writings—and put the Kaid's seal on them—writings to be produced by Hassan el Miskeen when passing through the countries or towns of certain Governors, Kaids, and Tribal Chieftains who would at once become helpful.

Oh yes, it was feasible enough—easy almost. Margaret could travel either as a humble Moorish woman, her face stained with walnut oil; or even as a youth, the son of Hassan el Miskeen. No, better as a girl, since she could not speak Arabic, and need only veil her face in modest silence,

if addressed by a stranger.

Of course Hassan el Miskeen could carry it through, for he was both competent and absolutely trustworthy. Had he not actually done that very thing once already, and taken Jules himself when a child, from Mekazzen to Tangier, and delivered him over in safety to his father?

What a queer and interesting thing, that the same man should take them both, husband and wife, at an interval of so many years, on the same journey, their lives dependent on his fidelity and skill.

Most interesting.

On other days she was the helpless, hopeless pessimist and prophet of woe:

. . . A nice thing! What would her son, Jules, say, if he found out that his mother had been helping his wife to run away from him?

What would her husband, Pedro, say, if he found out that his wife had helped to bring this dishonour and disgrace upon the family?

What would Raisul do to her if he found out? What would he do to everybody who was concerned in the escape, or whom he chose to suspect of being concerned in it? Would age or sex or anything else save them from a dreadful death?

And the Kaid, and the Lady Zainub? What about them? What would happen to her, El Isa Beth el Ain, if she were such a fool as to put a real weapon into Zainub's hand?

Yes, couldn't you just hear Zainub inflaming the Kaid against those who had had the unimaginable audacity to tamper with the fidelity of the Kaid's Commander-in-Chief, and of the Kaid's own confidential scribe . . . those who had

the insolence and impudence to help people to escape from his Castle; to assist at such a scandal as the flight of the wife of his nephew, from her husband's bed and board!

No, it was unthinkable; it couldn't be done.

But Margaret was determined that it should be done, or at least attempted.

She would go if she had to go alone; and she spent dreadful hours visualizing herself trying to cross Morocco on foot, and in disguise, pretending to be a village idiot, or a nun; a female dervish, a wandering mendicant, dumb, diseased and half-witted.

Also visualizing herself dying of thirst in the desert . . . falling into the hands of tribesmen; ill, without medicine, food or attention, in one of those horrible stinking, filthy, flea-ridden *fondaks*.

Margaret sat down and wrote a three-word note.

And one day, a dirty ragged and squint-eyed Moor unobtrusively handed a letter to Margaret as she crossed the court-yard on her way from El Isa Beth el Ain's apartments to her own.

It was written in a somewhat spidery foreign handwriting and was apparently from Herr Schlacht who, after an absence of some days, had returned to the Castle.

> "*Will you walk in the tiled garden at moonrise to-night? Neither Raisul nor your husband will be in the Castle. When nobody is about, go to the doorway that leads up to the corridor in which we*

talked. I shall be waiting and watching. Trust me and come—do not be afraid. Your good freund."

Once again a feeble ray of hope shone in Margaret's heart. Evidently her own note, with its unsigned appeal, "*Please help me*"—which she had entrusted to this same dirty little Moor, had reached his master.

Of course she would trust him and go; and would not be afraid.

And straightway she was afraid.

Whom could one trust in this dreadful place?

Intuitively she felt that this man Schlacht or Carl von Mittengen, was trustworthy, but what about the squint-eyed Moor? How was she to know that he had not first taken this note straight to Raisul himself, in hope and expectation of reward?

Who was it had told her to beware of squint-eyed people? Why of course, it was Otho, one day in Big Attic, when they had been making grimaces at each other, and he had told her not to squint or the wind might change and she'd be "struck like it." Laughingly he had then remarked that, if that happened, he wouldn't trust her any more. When she had asked if dishonesty made people squint, he had replied that it was the other way about, and implied that visual obliquity eventually caused a corresponding moral obliquity.

Oh, Otho, Otho! . . .

Should she risk it, and go?

Yes, the note was genuine enough. How should Raisul know where she and Herr Schlacht had met and talked?

Unless, of course, Herr Schlacht was as bad as the rest

of them, and, for his own ends, was assisting Raisul.

But no. Somehow she felt sure that Schlacht was trustworthy. He might have his own game to play—undoubtedly he had, of course—but he was not a traitor, a swindler, a treacherous brute who would do a thing like that. She would trust him, and go.

And yet again . . .

No. When she had made a decision she must stick to it—and in any case, she couldn't be much worse off than she was. Something she must do, and here was something she could do.

She had asked him to help her, and here was the reply. Of course she would go.

But what was the Spanish proverb that she had heard the Señor Pedro Maligni laughingly quote once or twice to Jules, when a squint-eyed serving-man had waited on them at the *al fresco* evening meals?

"Hope that fellow isn't going to poison us," he jested. " '*No hay tuerto bueno.*' "

That meant that no good can come from one who squints. Well, that was rubbish; and certainly there were plenty of people from whom no good could ever come and who did not squint. Raisul for one.

Yes. She would risk it. Better a bad end, than no end at all, to this hideous uncertainty and suspense.

§ 2

Herr Schlacht *alias* Carl von Mittengen was waiting in the black darkness of the corridor or tunnel that led from the doorway. As Margaret entered from the moon-lit garden a

hand seized hers and a voice whispered,

"*Habe keine Angst, Frau Maligni* . . . Do not have fear . . . All right, yes? . . . *Das ist ja fein.* It is very goot jolly fine splendid . . . I will lead . . . *Habe keine Angst* . . ."

Easy enough to tell her not to be afraid . . . But afraid she certainly was. What girl wouldn't be afraid in such circumstances—the darkness, the sinister silence, this stranger who, although always dressed in *selham*, *haik*, turban and Moorish slippers, spoke German and broken English.

Of course she was afraid. Frightened nearly to death. But what was it that Otho used to say?

"Courage is not being without fear, young Muggie. It is conquering the fear you have got. Where there is no fear there is no courage—and no need for it."

Otho was always saying interesting, sensible, pithy things like that.

So she must conquer "the fear that she had got."

"Here we are," said Herr Schlacht, who could apparently see in the dark, halting at length and knocking a double knock, followed by a single knock and then another double knock, on what was presumably a door. Margaret wondered whether he was knocking with a pistol-butt, and whether he could be persuaded to give or lend her a revolver or automatic—if he proved to be what he professed to be, a friend.

The door was opened by the little squinting Arab—as Margaret saw by the light of an *argan* lamp, merely a brass bowl of oil and wicks—clad as usual in ragged and dirty *djellaba*, and a head-dress that was more sweat-rag than turban.

To him, Herr Schlacht spoke in Arabic, and the man departed, after lighting a cheap and ugly tin lantern, the four sides of which were panes of glass of different colours. A useful lamp for signalling, thought the acutely observant Margaret, whose mind was working quickly.

"Please to sit down on the cushions, Fräulein—or I should say Frau Maligni. But you look so young and beautiful and . . . er . . . will you have to drink? *Windrisi* tea—and perhaps some *quarmat* cakes?"

"No, thank you . . . You sent me a note . . . I . . ."

"Yes. And you sent me one—of three words. '*Please help me.*' I wish to help you, and I wish you to help me."

"I want to get away from here—to escape, in fact," said Margaret. "I have lost hope and faith in my husband's mother, the Lady El Isa Beth el Ain . . . Could I possibly get away from here alone . . . I mean without . . ."

"*Du lieber allmachtiger Gott!* No!" exclaimed Herr Schlacht. "A woman—alone. No man, however brave and hardy, could get away from here alone—unless he knew the only safe way—and knew the country . . . the people . . . the language . . ."

"I came here . . ." began Margaret.

"*Herr Je!* Yes," interrupted Herr Schlacht, "and how? With a caravan; with camels laden with water; with guides; with escorts from the borders of one Kaid, to those of another; with all the help and protection due to visitors and kinsmen of the Great Kaid, *de facto* Monarch of the Mountains and real Lord of Southern Morocco and of this part of the Western Sahara. You went in comfort from *fondak* to *fondak* in the civilized North, and had a camp

pitched for you each night in the desert South . . . You were passed on—from hand to hand as it were—under 'the Protection of the Lance,' the ancient Arab system, *El Mzareg*—and in whatever tribal territory, in whatever *cabila*, your caravan was, somebody was responsible for you and watching over you, whether you knew it or not."

Herr Schlacht was waxing quite eloquent, thought Margaret, and speaking remarkably good English.

"But going back! A fugitive from the Kaid's 'justice' . . . Even if you succeeded in getting out of the citadel and out of the city . . . Abandon the idea, I implore you, Frau Maligni. There are better deaths than that . . .

"And no need for death at all," he added.

"There are worse things than death," replied Margaret, and felt that the remark sounded silly and melodramatic. "I mean, I think I'd sooner die than go on living in this state of fear . . . this danger . . . helplessness."

"Raisul?" asked Herr Schlacht.

"Yes. And the place . . . It is getting on my nerves . . . Everything . . . Everybody . . . I cannot sleep now . . . Oh, I . . . Whom can I trust?"

"Mineself," replied Herr Schlacht quickly. "Me. You can trust me, as your own Herr Papa."

"Well—for a start—can you give me a pistol? . . . It would make all the difference, I think . . . I should be mortally afraid of the thing—but it would drive out a worse fear . . . Can you—Herr Papa?" and Margaret managed to smile.

"Er—yes, perhaps. Perhaps, yes. And a *hareem*-woman's cover-all with eye-holes—a complete disguise, so that you can visit me—or run to me for safety. Yes. But if I

do this for you, and part with my precious pistol—upon which my life also may depend—will you do likewise something for me?"

"Anything," replied Margaret. "Anything almost . . . anything—decent."

"Goot! Now listen. Will you watch where I tell you to watch, and report to me what you see?"

"Yes," replied Margaret.

Why shouldn't she? Self-preservation; self-defence. No one here would help her or befriend her, except this man. Not even her own husband. Least of all her own husband, she felt. He would betray her to . . . It would not bear thinking of.

Yes. She was among enemies. She would clutch at this chance of making a friend—and of getting a weapon worth a dozen knives.

"It is goot. And will you tell me anything you hear, *anything* you hear about what is going to happen? Gossip of the *hareem*, information volunteered by your husband; anything Raisul may tell you; any interesting remarks, statements, speculations made by the Lady El Isa Beth el Ain? . . . Everything; anything. I can sift the information, true from false, myself. Will you do that?"

"Yes," replied Margaret. "Yes—except in the case of confidences . . . I mean—if my husband, for example, said, 'Promise not to tell anyone if I tell you something' and then told me of . . ."

"But you need not agree," interrupted Herr Schlacht. "You need not gif der promise."

"True," agreed Margaret. "I will refuse."

“So! It is goot . . . Now something other. A little thing—but important. I do not ask you to play decoy. Not to be what you call the vamp, isn’t it? You are not of such a kind . . . But I do ask this. And I will gif you the pistol when you haf promise.

“Now listen. A Military Mission comes here soon. Very soon. A French officer and escort of European soldiers. I know the officer—and I want you to know him. Your husband shall arrange. I want you to talk to this man. He will be very friendly; and soon he will talk moch. Encourage him . . .”

“Encourage him—to what?” asked Margaret.

“To talk. And then tell me what he says; the sort of things he talks about; any suggestions or proposals he makes to you.”

“Suggestions? . . . Proposals? . . . Why should this officer . . . ?”

“Because he is of that sort. He will make love to you . . .”

Margaret sprang to her feet.

“Good Heavens above us! What on earth do you . . . ? Am I . . . ?”

“No, no, Fräulein. Listen. All will be well. It is a goot thing for you—goot in every way—that he comes. It will lead to your freedom, your escape from here, your return to England . . . See, you have no one else to trust. Trust in me absolutely—like the Herr Papa. I promise you truly and faithfully that, if you trust in me and do as I say . . .”

“All right. I will trust you—and obey you. But give me the pistol, now, at once—as a proof and a token.”

“So. It is here,” and Herr Schlacht, thrusting his hand

behind his back beneath his *burnous*, produced a small automatic pistol and handed it to Margaret.

"Can you use it?" he asked.

"No. I have never had one in my hand before. But I suppose I can hold it, and point it, and pull the trigger."

"Later I will unload it—and show you. It fires six times, quick. Or just once only, if you wish. There you are—now trust me and listen.

"When this officer is introduced to you, and you sit on a seat in der garden and make conversation, ask him if ever he has heard of *Aureille de Tounens* . . . Learn der name by heart, and do not forget it. Introduce it as naturally as you can. Say that you haf recently been hearing about him (which is true) if this officer, his name is Riccoli—Major Napoleon Riccoli—asks why you mention him. Or say you have been reading about Aureille de Tounens—and that you heard that Major Riccoli comes from Bordeaux, which was the home of Aureille de Tounens . . . Riccoli does not come from Bordeaux, but it does not matter."

"Well—I'd better know something about this Aureille de Tounens, if I am supposed to have been reading or hearing about him, hadn't I?" asked Margaret.

"Yes—but Riccoli will do the talking about him, I fancy. The name will be enough, I think. It will set him going and you will hear wonderful things—and you must tell me what he says. If the name is not as a spark to gunpowder, I am wrong in my thinks.

"Aureille de Tounens.

"Who was he? He was a private gentleman, a worthy, if obscure citizen of Bordeaux, who in 1876 made himself a

king. . . . In South America. . . . A proper real king, 1876 model, with whiskers, and with a capital, a court, a palace, an army, an' all der rest of it. He really was King Aurelio I of Arauco, South America, and he had his own Royal Standard and a national flag of Arauco. He had a Royal Mint, and struck his own coinage, and he issued his own stamps. He created an Araucan nobility, each member of which was either an ancestor, or a descendant, of a noble line, and he appointed Consuls to foreign countries—if not Ambassadors to foreign courts.

"But Major Riccoli can, I expect, tell you far more about him than I can, and that is what I want you to find out. All you haf to do is to remember the name, mention it to him, and see what happens."

"What is likely to happen?" asked the bewildered, frightened and unhappy Margaret.

"You may hear that Aureille de Tounens was mad and a megalomaniac, and that was why he failed. You may then hear that another and infinitely greater kingdom is about to be created—and at a spot not far from where we are sitting . . . And another thing that may happen is that you will receive the offer of a crown—the chance to become Queen Consort of the new Kingdom . . . joost to be going on with—until it grows into an Empire."

Margaret contrived to laugh.

"Is the man mad?" she asked.

Herr Schlacht patted her hand, and continued.

"I do not promise these great things," he smiled. "I only think perhabs this happen. Do not be disappointed if . . ."

"Oh no," replied Margaret. "I shall be getting *blasée* soon. This will be the second . . ."

“Raisul, eh?”

“Yes. I shall have to tell this gentleman what I told Raisul—that I already have one husband.”

“That would not trouble the good Raisul. Nor the good Riccoli. To these great men obstacles exist but to be—removed.”

“Is the man mad?” asked Margaret again.

“That is exactly what we want to be certain about,” replied Herr Schlacht. “Whether he is really mad—or ambitious to the point of mania . . . of madness.

“What does ‘mad’ mean, exactly,” he continued, “and who is not ‘mad’ on something or other . . . Was Napoleon Buonaparte mad, as well as epileptic? Was not Julius Cæsar as mad as Nero—in a different direction—as well as epileptic? . . . Anyhow, this officer, Major Riccoli, may be mad enough to do terrible mischief and cause endless bloodshed—or he may be sane enough to make a fine and clever *coup* for his country, France. So talk to him—of Aureille de Tounens—and of power and conquest and love—and form your own opinion . . . And tell me . . . Will you?”

“Yes. But I won’t betray confidences—and cheat and lie . . . I *hate* trickery and . . .”

“*Ja! Ja!* Of course. I know. You only make him talk and then tell me if he is going to be a king . . . *Hein?* Ha! Ha! The Man Who Would Be King . . .

“Now let me show you how to use the pistol. First we take out this—charger, holder, magazine, clip, is it?—from the handle, and then the ugly leetle thing will not go bang . . . I never did like fire-irons—nasty dangerous things, isn’t

it?”

In a few minutes, Margaret was able without much trepidation to load and unload the automatic, and having unloaded it, to hold it still and steady while she sighted it and pulled the trigger.

“It is a pity your pretty hands are not bigger also,” observed Herr Schlacht. “You could then lay the first finger along the barrel—so—and pull with the second finger. Then the first finger can push to the left while the second finger pulls to the right—and thus keeps the pistol still also. And you could squeeze with the whole hand instead of pulling suddenly on the trigger.

“Now unload—and suddenly I will jump up and spring towards you and you shoot me . . .

“Vair’ goot! That would have cooked my bacon as you say.

“Also it would have cooked the bacon for . . . eh? . . . Raisul . . . eh? . . . if he came. Yes. I think you pluck his goose if he try tricks.

“*Ja*—that Raisul! . . . you *kill* him if he attack you.”

CHAPTER VIII

The Bugles . . .

The crisp, clear, rousing notes of the silver-voiced if brazen-tongued bugles . . . The very sound of them did one good, thought Margaret. Bracing, like a cold bath, after the native noises of the shrill *ghaita*, the Moorish flute; the three-stringed *gimbri*, the native guitar; the eternal palm-struck *bendir*, tom-tom; the *derboukha*; the *raita*. The breath of the bugles, albeit foreign bugles, was as a breath from Home.

They spoke of the West; of discipline; of law and order; of established routine and solid sanity . . . although foreign bugles.

Foreign bugles. Bugles of the Foreign Legion. Otho's Regiment.

It was entirely possible that there might be a man in that detachment, marching far below, through the Mekazzen city, marching up to this very Citadel, who had known Otho. All of them would know of *le Légionnaire* Otho Bellême, anyhow—the man who had defeated the Senegalese boxer (who had fought and beaten the Champion of Europe) in what must have been one of the finest and stubbornest fights ever seen. That was what the *Echo d'Oran* had called it, anyhow.

Would it be possible to get to know some of the *légionnaires*, and to find out if any of them had known him? If the detachment left Mekazzen before she did, it might be the quickest way of getting a letter to him.

But why should the detachment leave Mekazzen before

she did? Why should she not leave with them—or at least more or less under their convoy and protection?

This officer . . . Major Riccoli . . . whose acquaintance Herr Schlacht was anxious for her to make . . . might he not prove most useful?

If he would help her to escape, could she not follow the detachment wherever it went, until it reached civilization again—or within a camel-journey of civilization? . . . Anything to get away from this sinister terrifying prison . . .

After all, this Riccoli was an "officer and a gentleman" of sorts, presumably; and he and his men were Europeans—with whom a white woman would be safe. Yes, surely, she could manage Major Riccoli, if only he could, and would, procure her a camel and what little else was necessary . . .

Swiftly completing her toilet, she locked her incongruous-looking dressing-case, unbarred her door, and ran down the steep and narrow flight of steps to the point of vantage whence she could see the soldiers march into the citadel . . .

Yes—there they came, an officer riding ahead—he must be the peculiar Major Riccoli—then the buglers blowing their March, then the little column with a tall non-commissioned officer in front.

How swaggeringly smart, self-confident, up-standing and alert, "steady and strong, marching along, like the boys of the Old Brigade"—like the Guards themselves for style, bearing and discipline.

Great *panache* . . .

But oh, how dusty and dirty, weary and worn and hollow-eyed they looked, in spite of their brave swagger.

Margaret felt a rush and glow of emotion. . . . A feeling

in the throat, and a tear. . . . Very foolish . . .

Otho's Regiment.

§ 2

Later that day, a tall, broad-shouldered young *légionnaire* stood on sentry outside the guard-room by the quarters allotted to the detachment.

Washed, shaven, brushed and cleaned, his accoutrements as bright and smart as "spit-and-polish" could make them, he looked the picture of a soldier, a tough, hard fighting-man, an old campaigner, though a young man.

Blue-eyed, handsome, fair though sunburnt, with aristocratic features, he looked a very forceful person, a man of great strength of character as well as of body.

A woman, bearing a jar of water on her right shoulder, crossed the vast court-yard, passed near the sentry, drew a portion of her *haik* across her face and one eye, and had a good look at him with the other.

Husnar besaf, she decided . . . Handsome! "White and beautiful as Sueira," as they say in Mogador. Would he be of the *Frances*, the *el Brus*, *el Bortokez*, the *Ingles*, *el Nimperial* or what? What did it matter to her whether he were French, Spanish, English or German . . . ? *She* was not the Lady El Isa Beth el Ain . . . Anyhow, the soldier was one of the *el Baida*, the white kind; *el Bikouros*, the Christians . . . What was it they said about them in Mogador? "*El N'zrani kulshi flus*"—the Christian cares for nothing but money . . . Not interested in a pretty girl, even? . . . Well, her mistress, the Lady El Isa Beth el Ain would be interested to know there were *N'zrani*, perhaps *Inglesi*,

soldiers in the *ksar* . . .

A man, a young Moor, in a beautiful hooded blue-cloth *djellaba* over a white silk *haik*, like a Roman toga; big turban, and *temag* riding-boots, emerged from a near-by entry and also passed the sentry.

As dark as the latter was fair, the Moor was, in his own style, equally handsome, clean-cut and stamped with the seal of breeding. Smaller and lighter though he was, his walk and upright graceful bearing spoke of agility, speed and strength.

In passing, he too glanced at the fine soldierly figure and handsome face of the sentry who, now pacing his beat, passed close to him. No feature of the Moor's impassive face changed in the slightest, but as he quickly looked away, his large bright eyes blazed.

"*Allah Kerim!*" he whispered, and as he turned in at the entry through which the girl had disappeared, he stood still, stared before him at nothing, and then laughed softly to himself.

"*El Ham du lillah!* Praise be to Allah! . . . Oho! . . . Oho! I must find our excellent and obliging friend, Jules . . . But I can't be mistaken," and he hurried along the passage and up a winding stair of stone.

A few minutes later another man passed the sentry, a slower, fatter person, in khaki jacket and riding-breeches beneath a white *burnous*. A small white turban, hanging *kufiyeh* neck-cloth, and a hood, effectually concealed his face.

He too looked at the sentry, as he marched past him, looked quickly from beneath his hood and glanced away again.

A minute later this man joined the other who had bidden him go and take stock of the sentry by the new-comers' quarters.

Bursting into the room and flinging himself down on a divan covered with a fine Sus blanket, striped black and white and fringed like a Spanish shawl, he roared with laughter—not drunken laughter nor the laughter of a quite sober man.

"By God, Raisul, you're right," he said. "It is he. Otho Bellême—by all that's wonderful!"

"Not so wonderful, either, my good Jules," replied Raisul. "We knew he joined the French Foreign Legion. And we knew a detachment of the French Foreign Legion was coming here . . . Well, it's come—and he's in it. *Voilà tout* . . ."

"But—*by* Allah!" Raisul added, and licked his lips while his hands moved in a curiously suggestive and unpleasant gesture.

"Absolutely amazing!" continued Jules Maligni. "Otho Bellême *here*. Here—and in our hands . . ."

"Yes. *Here*—and in our hands," said Raisul, playing with the long dagger that, in token of his rank, he wore stuck perpendicularly in the centre of the sash wound about his waist.

"What next?" asked Jules, eyeing his cousin speculatively.

"Oh, something quite interesting next, my good Jules . . . Quite funny . . . Now that, by the grace and goodness of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate, we have got *ce bon* Otho Bellême just where he will be most useful, just where

we want him, something quite amusing is going to happen. To him—and to me . . . and to your lady wife, the proud Margaret."

"Eh? You mean . . . twist his tail a bit? What about Margaret?"

"You aren't *very* fond of Otho Bellême, my good Jules, are you? . . . Your wife's lover . . . The man for love of whom she married *you*—out of pique, because he stole a purse of money, and, much worse, took unto himself a concubine . . . The man she still loves—and with whom she'd go off, any day, if he whistled to her . . . as you yourself have tearfully told me in your cups . . . Not very fond of him, are you?"

"No, damn him," replied Jules Maligni. "He was always first favourite—from the time we all played together as kids at Yelverbury. Used to think he was God Almighty because he was going to be Sir Otho Robert Mandeville-Bellême of Yelverbury Castle . . . Just as cocky when he was Bob Blame the bruiser, and boxed for a living in a booth at fair-grounds. Haughty as Hell. No, I've no use for him—and don't care what happens to him."

"I'm sure you don't, my excellent Jules. Well, something will happen to him before long, you'll see . . . Meantime—not a word to Margaret. Not a word. I'm going to spring a little surprise on her. A nice little surprise . . ."

"She's not likely to see him, herself," observed Jules. "Damn the swine."

"Of course not," replied Raisul. "Private soldiers won't do much wandering about in our part of the Citadel, nor is she likely to go prowling in the outer court-yards. Of course she won't see him. And mind you don't say anything . . . In

fact, make it certain you don't go and let it out—when you've been thirst-quenching—by keeping away from Margaret. You know she hates the sight of you, and she would go straight to him if she knew he were here.

"Don't be alone with her at all, d'you understand?" continued Raisul. "Your mother will give you a home from home for a few nights—and if you should get a fever, or anything, Sara will look after you . . . Have a drink? . . . Yes? . . . Right . . . And you leave *ce bon* Otho Bellême to me . . . *And* Margaret . . . *And* Margaret, I said, my excellent Jules. D'you understand . . . ?"

Raisul clapped his hands and his body-servant materialized like a djinn from behind the silken curtain that hid a door.

"Ho, Achmet," he smiled, "bring brandy-*shrab* and cigarettes for the Sidi. He would Drink the Shameful . . ."

§ 3

Meanwhile the young gentleman's father, the Kaid Abd'allah Karim, attended by his *hajib*, his *kaid el mesouar* or chamberlain, his confidential scribe Abu Talib Zerhoun, and his Strong Man bodyguard Ibrahim the Lion, gave audience to his distinguished visitor from Franguestan the Major Napoleon Riccoli.

Graciously the Great Kaid poured a libation of milk in sign of welcome, protection and hospitality. Gravely they drank ceremonial mint-tea and talked of—horses.

"You must see my private stables, Sidi Officer," said the Kaid, beaming graciously upon the man whom he was summing up with the shrewd cleverness, the deep and wide

experience, that so seldom led him astray.

"By Allah! Wait till you see my war-horse, *Schrab-er-reh*, the Wind Drinker," said the Kaid and laughed heartily. "Now that is a great chestnut horse. Swift as all chestnut horses are swift, ever since the Prophet Himself said they should be so. Always, the Prophet, on whom be peace, rode a chestnut horse. . . .

"What colour of horse does Your Excellency ride?"

"Black," replied Riccoli. "I like a black horse. Black as Death. That or pure white . . .

" 'Death on a Pale Horse . . .' " he added beneath his breath.

"Black!" replied the Kaid. "Black for show and display I grant you. But not for speed. Not for sure-footedness on a mountain track. Nor have I ever known a black horse with a great heart and a good temper. No, nor with the stamina of a sheep . . .

"Now a white horse, ah! By the Beard of the Prophet that is the horse for a Sultan . . . A Sultan, eh, Your Excellency? A royal horse, white without a single hair of other colour. I wonder how that would suit you, Sidi? . . . A worthy horse for such a rider, eh? . . . But a good mark, a clear target—for an enemy! A conspicuous horse in battle, eh? . . . Not that the Sidi would think of that—but we must think of such things for him . . ."

The eyes of the Secretary met those of the Chamberlain, and neither smiled.

"Now what colour are the horses of the troop of Arab Spahis who, later on, will join the Sidi here?" asked the Kaid suddenly.

"Bay," replied Riccoli. "At least it was a bay troop

when it left the Regiment."

"Ah, bay horses are good," smiled the Kaid. "I am not sure that they are not the best of all horses—very hardy, quiet, steady horses . . . Not like certain men who ride bay horses and fight against their own brethren. Evil flouters of El Koran rightly called Sons of the *Ouled el Haram*, People of Shame. But let us not judge them too harshly—for sometimes they see the error of their ways and repent, and re-join their brethren and fight for them against their former allies . . . Is it not so, Sidi?"

Riccoli smiled.

"On bay horses. Good . . . I am glad they are not roan, for roan horses are never swift. Nor yellow, for yellow horses are fit only for the *Ouled el Jahud* . . .

"I must give the Sidi a bay horse from my own stables, that he may match the troop. But it will not be the one that the Sultan sent to me, for it has not only a white face and white stockings, but actually a white patch on the withers. What could be more unlucky? . . . Oh yes, His Shereefian Holiness and Imperial Highness meant it to be unlucky . . . It will be . . . when I conquer and capture him . . . when we capture him . . . when you capture him . . . very unlucky—for him; for I will shave off the Shereefian and Imperial Holiness's beard . . . and nail his feet to the floor while I do it . . .

"But drink another glass of tea, Sidi; for a man should drink three times, and a horse four . . .

"Now we will talk awhile—and open our hearts to each other."

And at this signal the Kaid's attendants departed from

the Hall of Audience, leaving Major Napoleon Riccoli alone with the Kaid Abd'allah Karim.

§ 4

In the quarters allotted to the *légionnaires*, speculation was rife, mystification universal, and rumour busy.

Meanwhile, life was definitely good, for food was varied and plentiful, wine excellent and sufficient, duties light, fatigues negligible, punishments non-existent, and superiors kindly and complaisant.

Great—and glorious—was the change from short rations of dried mutton, bad dates, hard bread and the rice that sometimes had to be eaten uncooked, to unlimited luscious and succulent *tajin* mutton-stew, *cous-cous*, or *quaimi* and *burghal*, an excellent and filling mess of porridge and gravy, fresh bread and good fruit. Glorious the rest, after the long and terrible desert march.

"I wonder what's in the wind, Bob," speculated Joe Mummery as they sat on a bench outside the long low barrack-room in which they were not uncomfortably housed. "What's the game, I wonder?"

"Being fattened for the slaughter, I should say," replied Otho.

"Yes. Whose slaughter, I wonder? Vittorelli and his toadies are very full of some big idea or other . . . Do you get a sort of idea that there's something on, and we're being kept out of it?"

"Yes, I do. We four, and old Tant de Soif and Poussin, seem as if we are being sent to Coventry . . . And yet it's not as bad as that . . . a sort of feeling that they know something

we don't, and don't intend us to know it. Seen old Harris this morning?"

"Yes. He's queer. Due for a go of *cafard*, I should say. Full of hints of what he's going to do to someone, and the something he's going to show somebody. He'll want watching, Bob."

"I don't wonder he's a bit strange," observed Otho. "Enough to upset anybody. According to what he says, he had the most appalling experience here, when he fell into the Kaid's hands before. Absolutely tortured—mentally if not physically—and saw his *copain* tortured to death before his eyes. They threw the poor devil over the wall on to some hooks."

"By God! That explains it. That's why he's always been standing staring up at the tower there, and mumbling to himself about 'pore ol' Peer,' and what he's going to do about it."

"Yes. Pierre Legrand was the name he said, I remember . . . Yes, we must watch Sailor Harris . . . Got a cigarette? Good man! . . . I suppose you haven't noticed anything queer about me, Joe?" smiled Otho, having lit his cigarette.

"No, mate. You aren't going to throw a fit of *cafard*, are you? Not now we're out of that hell of a *poste*, and safe across that devilish desert. You don't want to go an' do it now everything's merry and bright and we're in clover . . .

"Besides, you aren't the sort, Bob," he added, scanning his beloved comrade's face anxiously. "It's the weak 'uns and the drinkers that do that."

"No, I'm not going dotty, Joe," was the quiet reply, "but Mekazzen gives me, as well as Sailor Harris, a lot to think about . . . I have been thinking about a young man named

Raisul . . . I used to know him as Russell.”

An orderly approached, bearing a slip of paper.

“Sergeant-Major wants Bellême, Mummery, Harris and Bossum, Soif, Poussin and Petrovitch.”

“Very interesting,” murmured Otho, as they rose to obey. “A very interesting collection of names—in the circumstances. We’re going to hear something, Joe.”

They were.

What they heard from Sergeant-Major Vittorelli was almost unbelievably thrilling and surprising—though had they but known it, not nearly as thrilling and surprising as what the remainder of the Section had heard from that zealous officer.

“Well! What d’you think of that, Bob?” asked Joe, as they made their way to a shady corner of the court-yard that they had made their own.

“Don’t much like it,” replied Otho Bellême, “but I suppose we’ve got to obey orders . . . Hint of treachery about it, isn’t there?”

“*À la guerre comme à la guerre, mon enfant*,” observed Tant de Soif. “There has been a state of war between this country and France for years. It is notorious that this Kaid has raided French territory, besieged if not captured French *postes*, captured French convoys, cut off and annihilated relief columns.”

“H’m. All’s fair in love and war, eh?”

“And suppose it doesn’t come off?” observed Joe Mummery. “According to Vittorelli, the Major has wangled us in here to seize the Citadel for France. But what price us,

if they do the seizing—and seize us for the Kaid?"

"Us fer the 'ooks," observed Sailor Harris tersely.

"Ar, that's right," agreed William Bossum. "If the Kite lets us come 'ere, 'e knows enough to look after himself, don't he? What's the odds against us in this Castle alone? Not to mention that lot we marched through, comin' in. Armies of 'em."

"I suppose the Major'll wait until he gets re-inforcements," commented Père Poussin.

"I doubt it, *mon enfant*," replied Tant de Soif. "He'll seize the Castle, and then send for the re-inforcements in case there's trouble in the city—as there will be."

"Why not get the re-inforcements first and make a sure job of it?" objected the old soldier.

"Because the Kaid wouldn't let them come, my good camel. He's not going to let a French *army* march in here, is he?"

"No," agreed Otho. "He's not . . . And the mystery to me is that he let us come."

"Mystery's right," agreed Joe Mummery. "It's a rum go."

"Well . . . Duty's duty," said Tant de Soif decisively, "and orders are orders. If we can seize this robbers' nest for France, they'll give the Section *le fougeron*."

"What's that?" asked William Bossum.

"The collective decoration given to a unit for valour," was the reply. "And every man of us will wear a shoulder-cord plaited in two colours . . . And you take it with you, too, if you go to another Company . . . Yes, we shall capture the Castle, cover ourselves with glory and get the Cord of Honour."

“Get a cord of *some* sort, I’ve no doubt,” growled Sailor Harris.

CHAPTER IX

That evening a ceremonial banquet, an *al fresco festino*, half Moorish, half European, was given in honour of the distinguished visitor—the French officer understood to be the representative of his great country, and the head of the Military Mission sent by France to the Kaid.

At this Feast of Welcome, which Margaret forced herself to attend, the effect of the sour looks that she received from her mother-in-law, El Isa Beth el Ain, from Zainub and the girl Sara, should have been entirely counteracted by the definitely sweet ones of the guest of honour.

Him she found a little overwhelming, as he sat beside her and informed her that it was months since he had seen a white woman, years since he had seen one of his own class, and a lifetime since he had seen one so beautiful.

Apart from the fact that his was a type that she did not admire, Margaret found him interesting when he would cease from fulsome florid compliment, and talk on the matters, or rather matter, that apparently obsessed him—the subject of himself and his career.

As all roads lead to Rome, so all topics, however apparently unpromising and alien to the theme, led to the career of Major Riccoli, past, present and adumbrated future.

When at length, the banquet finished, the other ladies retired to the *hareem* quarters of the Castle, Margaret rose, and remarking that she was going for her evening stroll on the battlements, left the lamp-lit garden, soon to discover

that she had been followed by Major Riccoli.

"May I walk with you, Mademoiselle?" he asked as he overtook her. "Such an oasis in the desert of my life. It is hard to be a soldier and to love beauty . . . To know the love of beauty and the beauty of love . . ."

Margaret, untruthfully stating that the pleasure would be entirely hers, led the gallant and ardent officer to her favourite and private spot upon the battlements, and to the subject of France, Bordeaux and the remarkable son of that city, Monsieur Aureille de Tounens who became King of Arauco.

Then indeed were the flood-gates opened, and what had been a babbling brook—that had reminded Margaret of "Men may come and men may go but I go on for ever"—became a torrent in full spate. After the uttering of that name, Margaret had no need of further speech, nor any slight anxiety as to Major Riccoli's attitude and conduct.

While that subject occupied his mind, no room was left for thoughts of love or love-making.

"Ah, that was a man indeed," he mused. "But mad, you know, mad. A megalomaniac. Through his own ambitious schemes he fell like . . . like Vauroi again—if he did fall—and is not at this very moment a great Ruler in his own Right, a King, an Emperor, in the great and unexplored interior of this mighty and marvellous continent."

"And who was Monsieur Vauroi?" asked Margaret, anxious to keep the mind of this amorously enterprising officer to the one subject that she judged to be more powerful in interest than even *l'amour*.

"Vauroi? You know not of the brave Captain Vauroi, and his bid for power and wealth and fame? No, being

English, I suppose you would not have heard of him. The military authorities, whom he defied, defeated and outwitted, did not exactly advertise his name to the world.

"Ah! that was a man—such another as Aureille de Tounens of whom you have just spoken; such another as Voulet and Chanoine, but not so mad.

"Vauroi! A simple Captain of Artillery, and now perhaps an Emperor. But as to the truth of that, no man knows. No European, that is to say, although the military authorities and the French Government pretend to know. No European knows for certain, but it is my opinion—and believe me, Mademoiselle, my opinion is worth having—that millions upon millions of Africans know; Arabs, Negroes, Touareg, and possibly races of whom we have heard nothing.

"Otherwise, tell me this. Why is there to this day throughout the Southern Sahara, a persistent and widely prevalent . . . rumour, story, belief, talk . . . of *a White Sheikh*? Yes, of a Great White Sheikh whose orders all men obey, and whom they fear and reverence as the Senussi fear and reverence their great religious and political leader, the Sheikh el Senussi himself.

"What did Vauroi do? I'll tell you, Mademoiselle.

"Finding himself stuck in the desert, buried alive, forgotten, neglected, lost in a wretched hole called Mescheria, he determined to carve out a career for himself. Why should he, a man of courage, ability, brains and ambition, be doomed to rot in Mescheria, while in Paris, guttersnipe politicians made themselves figures of international importance, masters of Europe—and made

Generals of their worthless military *protégés*, panders and toadies?

"Why should he? A man mentally as great as they, and indeed far greater. Why should he consent to grow grey in obscurity, poverty and misery while these *canaille* carved out careers for themselves?

"He would not consent to it.

"Since no brilliant career to fame and power lay open to him, he would carve out one for himself.

"Skilfully and cunningly he opened negotiations with a great Arab Sheikh, paramount ruler of the Beni-Amama and allied tribes—and when his plans were made and the time was ripe, he deserted . . . er . . . he departed . . . from Mescheria with the whole of his battery complete and entire, guns, limbers, ammunition-column, men, horses, mules and camels. He was, of course, received with open arms by the Arabs, who led him deep into the desert where perhaps no white man had ever been before.

"Deep and ever deeper into the desert, until they came to the capital of the Beni-Amama, a native city which—as the French Military Authorities afterwards discovered to their cost—he turned into a great fortress, a real citadel.

"Yes, he made it into a real citadel, almost such another as this, and on its walls he mounted his guns. Not only that, but he so organized, inspired, taught and drilled the Beni-Amama and their allies that before long they became so dangerous and painful a thorn in the side of the French, that an Expeditionary Force was collected and despatched against him.

"Yes, the Artillery Captain, Jean Jacques Vauroi waged war on the French Republic.

“Think of it, Mademoiselle. That alone shows what a man he was and to what power he rose.

“They might call the State, the Kingdom, that he founded, a ‘robber-republic’ of which he was the worst and wickedest robber, but the fact remains, they had first to make war upon him, and then, having failed to defeat him, they sent a Mission to negotiate with him.

“When that Mission returned, they reported that where they had expected to find a big village, or a little town, they had found not only a walled city with a well-nigh impregnable Citadel, but also a ring of forts surrounding it.

“An engineer officer attached to the Mission declared that the fortifications were not only worthy of Vauban, but extremely reminiscent of his plans, method and work.

“What became of him? Nobody knows, or rather, as I said, no European knows. But one thing is certain, neither he, nor any man of his Battery was ever seen by a white man again.

“Where is he—and what is he—to-day, this Jean Jacques Vauroi? We do not know. But we know that he was of those who are the architects of their own fortunes, of those who make their own Fate, of those who mould their own Destiny. Yes, a Man of Destiny. From simple Captain, to white Sheikh of many Tribes, Ruler of Men, King, Emperor . . .

“Think of it, Mademoiselle . . .”

And while he, too, thought of it, Major Riccoli, with apparent absence of mind, put his right arm about Margaret’s waist; and then, with obvious presence of mind, put his left hand beneath her chin, tipped up her face and

drew her closely to him.

With equal presence of mind, Margaret wriggled free.

"Madame Maligni," he said reproachfully, "Margaret, I have fallen in love with you. I love you. My first love and love at first sight. Margot . . . Do you love me?"

"Not yet, Major Riccoli."

"Margaret, *could* you love me?"

"I don't know, Major Riccoli."

"Ah, but you do not know. You call me Major Riccoli, but that I shall not be for long. Do you know my other name?"

"I'm afraid not, Major Riccoli."

"Napoleon."

"How terribly interesting."

"Yes, it is, as you say . . . interesting, and as you say, it shall be terrible. Not for nothing am I a Napoleon, a Corsican, a soldier . . . My namesake and prototype made a humble colonial wench an Empress; the obscure gentleman of Bordeaux, whom you mentioned to-night, made a notary's daughter a Queen; Voulet, a mere captain, would have made Tamarné an Empress, had he lived; doubtless Vauroi has raised some dusky desert-girl to be as a second Queen of Sheba."

Again the eloquent speaker placed his arm about Margaret's waist.

"Margot," he whispered, "would you be a Queen?"

"I don't think so, Major Riccoli."

"Margot! There was a Queen Margot, as you know. Will you be my Queen?"

"I'm afraid I'm not eligible, Major Riccoli."

"Eligible? You? Margaret . . . You?

“I, I fancy, am worthy of you . . . And you—are worthy of me . . . So beautiful, so witty, so charming, so clever—for you are a clever woman as well as a lovely one—why, you and I, Marg’ret, are a pair. Nay, we are one. Soon I shall be Riccoli the Great . . . You are Margaret the Beautiful. Be my Queen.”

Margaret rose to her feet, turned round once and sat down again, free from the urgent, encircling arm.

“But however beautiful I may be, and however great you are, Major Riccoli,” she protested, “I really am not eligible. I think you met my husband at dinner.”

“*Husband?* Pah! What are husbands?”

“Well—er——” began Margaret. “Husbands are rather . . .”

“To the Devil with husbands . . . The man I saw at dinner may be a perfectly good Monsieur Maligni, and your husband, but *I* am Major Napoleon Riccoli, and your lover.”

Margaret coughed slightly.

“That, and more . . . far more . . .” And Major Riccoli spoke of Generals, Field-Marshals, Conquerors, Dictators, and of successful Men Who Would Be Kings.

“Husbands . . .” he concluded. “What are they to me—and to you?”

Margaret thought of what her husband was to her.

“Husbands? . . . Had not Napoleon’s Josephine a husband? And did that trouble Napoleon? Would it trouble me?”

“It might trouble you, Major Riccoli . . . I don’t know, but it might.”

Major Riccoli laughed and flicked an imaginary

husband into the air.

Looking up as he did so, he discovered that a very large man, Arab or Moor, was standing before him, a man whose face was hidden in the shadow of the hood of his *burnous*, but whose voice seemed familiar when he begged permission to interrupt him, and to announce that his Excellency the Kaid, would speak with his guest upon matters of the utmost importance.

"*Peste!*" said Major Riccoli.

And,

"Good night, Major Riccoli," said Margaret.

§ 2

As the dapper Major Riccoli, on his way to the Hall of Audience, descended the steps that led down from Margaret's Walk, to the formal, artificial and somewhat pathetic garden, sacred to the use of the household, the big "Moor" turned to Margaret, threw back the hood of his *burnous*, and smiled his friendly beam of greeting.

"Well, Mademoiselle?" he said in French. "This is a good spot for a quiet talk. We shan't be disturbed or seen here. Clever Mademoiselle."

"Not Fräulein, or Frau, Herr Schlacht?" answered Margaret, desirous of discovering, if she could, why this man whom she instinctively trusted, talked sometimes in German, sometimes broken German-English, sometimes German-French, sometimes perfect French, and sometimes excellent English.

"No, Mrs. Maligni. No more Fräulein, nor Frau. And no more Herr Schlacht between us. We're friends, and we're

going to be partners . . . and . . . we'll talk in English. We're going to help each other. Now, you tell me exactly what Riccoli said to you—and then I am going to tell you the truth about myself . . . Cards on the table, eh?"

"Yes," agreed Margaret. "Major Riccoli said nothing about respecting confidences, or indeed that he was being confidential. In fact, he rather gave me the impression that he'd said it all before, and perhaps many times."

'Herr Schlacht' laughed.

"Clever girl. He has said some of it before, we may be quite sure . . . Did he rise to the bait of the Man Who Made Himself a King?"

"You should have heard him! And he was equally eloquent on the subject of a Captain Vauroi."

"Oho! This is really helpful, Margaret . . . May I call you that? . . ."

"Of course."

"Really helpful, interesting and valuable. Tell me all about it."

"I'll do my best to remember every word," replied Margaret, and did so.

"Oh, splendid!" commented 'Herr Schlacht' when she had finished her story. "I think that quite settles it. Now I really do know where I am."

"And where are you?" asked Margaret.

"Just exactly where I thought I was," smiled 'Herr Schlacht.' "And now I'll tell you something in return . . . And something that I hope will help you as much as you've helped me."

"God knows I want help," said Margaret. "Someone to whom I can turn . . . and whom I can trust."

The man put his big hand over hers.

"You can trust me," he said, "as I trust you. Listen . . . I am a French officer, Colonel Le Sage . . . Intelligence . . . Military Information . . . Secret Service, in fact; and I'm here on a very special job.

"I'm telling you this because I know that wild horses wouldn't drag it out of you, and because I want to win your complete trust by giving you mine. I have lived in England, and I know your type, Margaret, both intuitively and from observation. As I have said, I want your help. And as I have promised, you can count on mine—absolutely. The position's this . . .

"The Kaid, like his father, has been a nuisance, an embarrassment, and a danger, to France, ever since she began to extend her sphere of influence and civilization in this direction. Like his father, he has been a thorn in the side of the Military Authorities, a constant menace, and an ever-present cloud on their horizon . . .

"And you can believe me when I say that from the first, he has been the aggressor. We have never wanted war with Mekazzen, if only for the reason that it would be one of incalculable cost in men and money, even if we had anything to gain . . .

"No, it is not France, greedy, insatiable, imperialistic, land-grabbing, snatching at Naboth's vineyard; it is the Kaid of Mekazzen, by heredity a robber-chief and bandit, who is rendering ever more difficult France's world-important work of spreading civilization.

"Had he left us alone, we should have left him alone; and had he accepted our invitation and become our ally, it

would have been infinitely to his benefit. As it is, he prefers war for war's sake; war with his own over-lord, the Sultan; war with Spain; war with France.

"He is the opposite of the 'Angel who troubled the waters.' He's the Devil who troubles the waters—that he may fish in them. He has fished in troubled waters all his life, like his father and grandfather who were Barbary corsairs, and like all his ancestors since the days when they conquered Spain, defied Europe, and owned the Mediterranean.

"And now it's going to end. It's going to end because he has become an anachronism; because he presumes to hinder France's great work in Africa; because he is trying to bring Germany and Italy into this part of the world, and turn the march of progress into a dog-fight; and because his son bids fair to be a far bigger, and far more dangerous, enemy.

"And *that* young man is neither mad nor a megalomaniac, but he intends to be Sultan of Morocco, and that merely for a start.

"Well . . . I hope and intend to be the humble means of putting a spoke in the Kaid of Mekazzen's wheel, be he Kaid Abd'allah, or Kaid Raisul—a job that I've been working on for many a long day.

"And Fate will have her little joke, won't she?" he added.

"I haven't seen many jokes lately," murmured Margaret.

"You're seeing one now, my dear, and by-and-bye you'll be able to laugh. The biggest job, and the best work of my life, is putting the spoke in their wheel, and the joke is, that the spoke is none other than Major Napoleon Riccoli, traitor to France, and, incidentally, my life-long

enemy.

"Naturally it's a bigger joke to me than to you, but I'm sure you'll see a humorous side to it.

"Out of a welter of treachery, the treachery of the Kaid and Raisul to Riccoli, and of him to them; the treachery of the Malignis to the Kaid, and the treachery of Riccoli to France, comes the downfall of the lot of them, and the removal of the obstacle to France's civilizing march.

"From their efforts at War, comes Peace—final Peace, in this desert that shall blossom like a rose."

"*The treachery of the Malignis?* Why, what do . . ." asked Margaret.

"Yes, my dear, black base treachery. Shall I tell you?"

"Tell me everything, please . . . The more I know, the more I can perhaps help, and the freer I shall be to do so."

"Well, the organization of which I am the head, in this part of the world, discovered that the Kaid was dallying with Germany. Or put it the other way about, if you like. Anyhow, there were overtures, a *rapprochement*, proposals and an understanding.

"It was arranged that one of Germany's best men should come and see the Kaid, come to a definite agreement—make a treaty with him, in fact.

"The Kaid was to get money, men, and munitions, on the understanding that he used the men and munitions, and at any rate part of the money, to make war—any old war that should 'trouble the waters,' and especially war that would make him Sultan of Morocco, worry and embarrass France, and generally, as I said—'trouble the waters.'

"Then, of course, Germany was going to fish in the

troubled waters—fish for vast mineral concessions, among other things, as soon as the Kaid was Sultan of Morocco, or indeed, as soon as he was strong, and France and Spain were weak, in Morocco.

"In fact, there were to be mineral concessions in Mekazzen, and in the surrounding mountainous districts, wherever the Kaid could guarantee their safety and immunity from interference.

"And so Germany was sending this good man, one of their best, a real stormy petrel, with the highest courage, the greatest ability and the widest experience. Secret Service, of course, with no overt backing, countenance, or support from home. If he succeeded, so much the better for Germany and himself. If he failed and were caught, that was that—and the end of 'Herr Schlacht,' known to his brother officers as Carl von Mittengen.

"Well, as soon as we knew all this, it became my business to put a spoke in *his* wheel—and I conceived the bright idea of doing not only that, but being the new wheel myself, if you understand me. One fine day it would be a case of 'Herr Schlacht is dead, long live Herr Schlacht!'

"I got in touch—very gentle touch, just like velvet—with the Señor Pedro Maligni—who was acting for the Kaid in Tangier—and we had a talk that led to a talk that led to some doings that led to some undoings—of good solid German work and of a good solid German agent in Morocco, as well as of poor 'Herr Schlacht.'

"In short, the Señor Pedro Maligni sold the Kaid and the German agent and the whole German connection, to me, for a good round sum and a good square promise. Yes, he found francs better than marks. He also agreed with me that

the Kaid had had his day, and that it was time for so wise a man as Señor Pedro Maligni to . . . er . . . change his investments . . . put his money on another horse . . . rat from the sinking ship . . .

"For I was able to prove to him that France was going to sink the ship, one way or another, at any cost, some day. So he betrayed his employer and his German—er—clients and paymasters . . . and . . ."

"Did my husband know anything of this?" interrupted Margaret.

"You want the truth, my dear?"

"Of course, the absolute truth . . . the whole truth."

"He was present at my final interview with his father. Jules Maligni was introduced to me by Pedro Maligni as his partner and agent. He was witness to our agreement and he helped me in my plans for intercepting poor von Mittengen."

"He knows, then," said Margaret, "that you are a French officer, and in the French Secret Service? He knows you are not a German, not Carl von Mittengen *alias* Herr Schlacht?"

"He knows I am a French agent," replied Colonel Le Sage. "He knows that von Mittengen *alias* Herr Schlacht is dead and buried. It was he who was able to procure for me a mounted German photograph—from the mount of which I was able to remove the photograph and substitute my own above the name and address of the German photographer.

"This was to enable the Malignis to hoodwink the Kaid and lead him to suppose that I was the genuine German agent."

"What happened to him, the real Herr Schlacht, I

mean?" asked Margaret.

"I killed him."

Margaret involuntarily drew away.

"Oh, I didn't murder him in cold blood, my dear. Curiously enough, I killed him in self-defence. As my little caravan approached his camp one evening, beside a water-hole in the Oued el Draa, he simply turned his men out and opened fire on us. I don't know whether he took us for Touareg from the Tanezruft, or whether he had his suspicions of the Señor Pedro Maligni. I know I had my suspicions of Maligni as soon as von Mittengen opened fire on us at sight, and wondered whether he were double double-crossing, and had warned von Mittengen to look out for me.

"Anyhow, it was, as I say, a case of self-defence—for we'd got to get to the water—though I don't say I wasn't glad of the excuse to go for him. So 'Herr Schlacht' died that day—and rose again that night, in the person of myself.

"And when I reached Mekazzen, the Malignis were there all ready to vouch for me—pass-word, photograph, and all."

"Filthy treachery," exclaimed Margaret in deep disgust and indignation.

"Yes, pretty bad . . . It might be argued, of course," continued Colonel Le Sage, "that I'm as bad as they are . . . the receiver as bad as the thief."

"Oh no," expostulated Margaret. "You are working for France, working for good—not for your own personal profit, not making money by betraying the person who employs you, and trusts you."

"No: though in the Secret Service one frequently has to

fortify oneself by remembering that one is working selflessly for one's country . . ."

"And with your life in your hand," said Margaret. "Your life to lose, and nothing to gain, for yourself."

Colonel Le Sage raised his huge hand and patted Margaret's shoulder.

"Thank you, my dear . . . Then the other half of the circle that Fate is amusing itself by drawing—Riccoli's half. Yes, I think Fate is drawing a ring around the Kaid of Mekazzen, as the natives amuse themselves by making a ring of fire around the scorpion.

"While I, in one direction, am working for his downfall, Raisul is working for it in another—although he doesn't know it.

"*Kismet! Kismet!* Fate plays some funny tricks . . . Surely one of the funniest, was to bring Raisul, looking for just such a tool, across the path of Riccoli . . . to bring the ambitious Riccoli, looking for just such a tool, across the path of Raisul.

"Raisul, who can pass as a Spaniard in Spain, an Englishman in England, and almost as a Frenchman in France, is really clever, really subtle, and therefore infinitely more dangerous than his father, who is merely a first-class Robber Baron of the old pattern.

"And there again, strangely enough, it was Riccoli who brought Raisul under our more particular notice, for he was watching and cultivating Riccoli when I was doing the same thing. I have kept my eye on him ever since the year he became a Captain; for even then he was a very remarkable man. And even then had amazing boundless ambitions, and

made no secret of them.

"You won't be too deeply chagrined and hurt, I am sure, if I disclose to you the fact that he offered my own wife the same high destiny which he laid at your feet to-night. Yes, even before he was a Captain, he offered to make her not only Queen of his Heart, but Queen of his future Kingdom, Empress of the Empire he was going to found, or find."

Margaret smiled.

"I am a little disappointed, Colonel Le Sage," she said. "It takes a little of the gilt off the gingerbread for me."

"Yes, but I am going to take the gingerbread from under the gilt, for him," answered Le Sage, "and quite soon, I hope.

"Yes," he continued. "A Corsican officer of Chasseurs d'Afrique, who thinks in Kingdoms and Empires, is worth watching. Especially later, when his *âne damné* is the interesting Raisul, son and heir of the Kaid of Mekazzen; and most particularly so, when later still, he intrigues hard, moves heaven and earth, we may say, to get posted to the least desirable spot in the French African Empire, and that spot happens to be on the borders of the *cabila* of Mekazzen."

"I wonder the French authorities didn't arrest Raisul," said Margaret.

"Oh no, my child, that would never have done. In the first place, there were no grounds for doing so, for it is not a criminal offence to be the son of one's papa; and in the second place, once I was on his track and had a pretty clear idea of what was on, I should have been very sorry if the game had been stopped at that stage.

"Well, Raisul fooled Riccoli, and Riccoli fooled Raisul,

or each thought he was fooling the other. Raisul saw his way to giving France a hideous shock—another Dreyfus scandal—as well as gathering in some very solid material advantages in the shape of the latest guns—very difficult to get hold of—rifles, and a large number of European-trained soldiers. Also officers and specialists, engineers, signallers, gunners and so on.

"Doubtless Raisul hopes that Riccoli will be a perfectly invaluable tool and weapon until the time comes to break it—and that will be the time when the tool begins to turn in its master's hand, the weapon to be two-edged. It may happen at once. Riccoli may show his hand *now*.

"And then . . . exit Riccoli."

"And where did Riccoli fool Raisul?" asked Margaret.

"By pretending to be the tool, while intending to be the master. He hasn't the very faintest intention of really serving the Kaid of Mekazzen. *Au contraire*, it's the Kaid of Mekazzen who is to serve him and his ambition.

"Do you know what he has come here to do? Nothing more nor less than to seize this Citadel."

"*What?*" asked Margaret. "Capture the Castle?"

"Yes. And whoever holds the Citadel holds the town. And, of course, the country. It is the only base. Now had it been anybody else but Riccoli, or had I known my Riccoli less well (which certainly would have been the case had he kept away from my wife), I should have supposed that this was the extremely bold bid of a somewhat over-zealous officer to strike a great blow for his Motherland . . . a great capture . . . the *coup* of a lifetime—for France.

"But Riccoli . . . This Man Who Would Be King . . . It

is not for France that he is doing this . . . It is for himself."

"How do you know? How could you prove it?" asked Margaret.

"Know and prove? Well, I know because I have known Riccoli and the workings of his mind for a very long time; and because, thanks partly to you, Margaret, I know that his mind is working to-day as it worked when first he brought himself to my notice, through his proposal to my wife . . . but working now far more violently . . . the poison growing ever stronger in his veins . . . That is how I know.

"And as for proof, the fool has convicted himself not only in speech and in writing, but in act.

"When he left his base and came to the borders of Mekazzen, he was able to pick certain subordinates to go with his column . . . So was I . . . And one or two of the people whom he has approached and corrupted were planted there—to be approached and corrupted."

"It seems hardly believable," said Margaret.

"Yes, it would be unbelievable, if it hadn't been done before," replied Le Sage. "And I suppose you get at least one of that type in every generation of soldiers."

"Incredible," murmured Margaret.

"I suppose it is incredible . . . to you, an Englishwoman."

"Isn't it just *possible*," said Margaret, "that he is loyal; that his colossal ambition is working along the legitimate channel? . . . Rash and unorthodox, vain and self-sufficient, if you like, but not a traitor? . . . Might it not be that he sees himself the hero of France, and the idol of the army?"

"A successful Marchand of Fashoda, *en effet*?" smiled Le Sage. "No. Alas, no . . . But I am going to give him one

last chance at the last second of the eleventh hour . . .

"Though *le bon Dieu* alone knows when that hour will strike," he added. "All I pray is that I may know it in time . . . You see, the position is rather this . . . It is as though some foolish and wicked little boys are standing near a great heap of gunpowder, striking matches and throwing them at it, while I am standing by with a pail of water to throw at any match which falls near to it. Only I haven't eyes in the back of my head."

"Well, I've heard of sitting on a volcano!" began Margaret. "What would happen if one of the boys did throw the match on to the powder—behind your back? After the explosion, I mean."

"Depends on the boy . . . If Riccoli acts first, and is successful, the explosion will be heard all over Europe. Incidentally, I shall probably be blown out of the Castle, bucket and all, and I shall take you with me, Margaret, if you'd like to come. Not but what I should think you'd be safe enough here, for I don't for a moment think that Raisul and one or two of the other little boys will survive the explosion. In plain English . . . Riccoli will certainly shoot him and the Kaid for a start."

"Even so," replied Margaret, "I am not sure that I should be so very much safer in Major Riccoli's complete power than in Raisul's—and anyhow I want to get out of this terrible place at the earliest possible moment. Yes, if that happens, I'll go with you, please, Colonel Le Sage, if it can be managed."

"Yes, we'll get you away, all right, in disguise . . . Make a dirty little Arab youth of you. Oh, we'll manage it, don't

you be afraid. I've got quite a nice little caravan down in the town."

"And if Raisul strikes first?" asked Margaret.

"That would be hell, wouldn't it? . . . But I'll look after you. Trust me . . . I'll come for you. We'll disguise you in your room and hide you in my quarters till we can get you down into the town and hand you over to my caravan-leader. You'll be safe enough then, provided you do what he tells you."

"I don't understand any Arabic, you know," said Margaret.

"He's a French officer, Captain Pierrepont of the Intelligence Department," smiled Le Sage. "An officer *and* a gentleman . . . You'll be safe enough with him. Incidentally so is the dirty ruffian with the awful squint—the man who carried our notes. He is Major Langeac—a very handsome man when he takes off his squint and his dirt, and puts his false teeth in . . . He had all his beautiful teeth drawn—to facilitate his disguising himself. There's zeal for you! . . ."

"There'll be fighting, in any case, won't there?" asked Margaret.

"Heaven knows what there'll be, my dear. There's bound to be a certain amount of shooting, I expect. It's impossible to say what will happen, whoever begins the *émeute*—Riccoli, Raisul, the Kaid—or Jules Maligni and Pedro Maligni with some game of their own—or I, myself."

"You?" asked Margaret.

"Yes. Depends on how things go, and what re-inforcements arrive from Riccoli's column. And how soon. In certain eventualities, the only thing might be for me to

anticipate both Riccoli and Raisul . . . Depends to some extent on *les légionnaires*, and on what I find out, as to how far they have been corrupted."

"Haven't you got to anticipate them in any case?" asked Margaret.

"No, not necessarily. Not so much anticipate them as act simultaneously but contrarily. If Riccoli is able to act in time and seizes the Castle, I act too—and say, '*Thank you—my Castle, I think*,' having laid my plans to be in a position to do so . . . plans depending on the conduct of *les légionnaires* to a great extent, as I said.

"If Raisul chooses to act before he's got all the Column here and, deciding that Riccoli is not going to be his tool and weapon, cuts his throat, I must try to do my best with the Section of *légionnaires* that is here. If they have been utterly corrupted, we must go—and see what I can do with the advancing re-inforcements. I think I could manage them all right—and perhaps play Riccoli's part—play his game . . . but play it for France."

"You mean let Raisul decoy them into the Castle with a view to corrupting them, but you keep them loyal and seize the Castle, after all?"

"Yes, that's the idea. And I'll take you out of the Castle when I go to meet the first re-inforcements from Riccoli's column."

"Couldn't I—er—couldn't I . . . No, of course not . . ." said Margaret.

"Couldn't you what?"

"Oh, nothing . . . a purely selfish thought . . . I wondered for a second if I couldn't ask you to send me

away now with that caravan you mentioned . . . But of course you can't."

"No . . . I only wish I could, Margaret. But it's impossible. I should be lost without it . . . crippled. As I said, I may have to cross the desert and that would be impossible without my caravan. But when it goes, you shall go with it. Don't be afraid, and don't worry, my dear. You shall get home all right."

"*Home!*" breathed Margaret. "*Home!*"

"Where is it?" asked Le Sage.

"Yelverbury," replied Margaret.

Not by so much as the flicker of an eyelid, the movement of a muscle of his face, did Colonel Le Sage betray the fact that he had received one of the surprises of a lifetime.

He did not start, nor exclaim, nor repeat the word. He was neither by nature nor by training of those who, when startled, betray the fact.

Nor did Margaret observe any gleam of suspicion, distrust, or wonder in his eyes, as turning to examine her moonlit face, he said quietly and conversationally,

"What did you say, Margaret?"

"Yelverbury."

"Ah . . . Yes . . . I seem to have heard of it—somewhere."

CHAPTER X

"And not too hard, my excellent King of Beasts," cautioned Raisul, "or I'll have your tongue torn out by the roots. Also you shall have a hundred *bastinado* strokes, very much too hard . . .

"And not too light, either," he continued, "or your stomach shall be so light, for a month or two, that you'll never get over it. You'll be Ibrahim the Skeleton, instead of Ibrahim the Lion, by the time I've done with you.

"So just hard enough. Just hard enough to lay him out while we truss him up . . . Understand? . . . You are to knock the accursed dog of an Unbeliever senseless, without doing him any real harm."

Ibrahim the Lion grinned and shook his heavy *matrak*, the hard-wood stick which the Moroccan Arab uses with such skill, whether as a cudgel or a missile.

"*Ya Sidi*," he laughed, showing a huge mouthful of great shining teeth. "Watch me."

"I shall watch you, all right," Raisul assured him. "Get behind that curtain. The Infidel swine will sit just there, right in front of it . . .

"When I yawn loudly and say '*In'shallah*—' strike—and don't bungle your job . . . if you want to raise a family . . ."

A few minutes later, Raisul's personal bodyguard entered the room, followed by a soldier of the Legion.

"This is the man, Sidi," said the servant in Arabic, and retiring, closed the door.

Raisul, rising from his divan advanced with extended hand.

"Sir Otho Robert Mandeville-Bellême, I think," he said, with a pleasant welcoming smile.

"*Le Légionnaire* Otho Bellême," smiled Otho in reply.

"I wonder if you remember me?" continued Raisul, "or whether this Moorish dress . . ."

"Aren't you the 'Mr. Russell' who used to visit Jules Maligni at Oxford?" asked Otho. "Yes. I remember you . . . Now the Sidi Kaid Raisul ben Abd'allah Karim of Mekazzen."

"Ah—we have both changed our names slightly—as well as our clothes," observed Raisul. "Won't you sit down?" and he indicated the low-cushioned divan that stood before the heavy silken curtain.

"Will you have coffee—or something a little more interesting? What about some . . . ?"

"Oh, coffee, thanks," replied Otho quickly, with scarcely formulated, and instantly rejected, suspicion.

"Cigarette? . . . If you can smoke Turks."

"Thanks . . . A real treat."

Raisul seated himself comfortably among his cushions, lighted a cigarette and blew a smoke-ring.

"Yes . . ." he said, musingly. "Oxford . . . I remember a certain luncheon-party. It was there I first saw Jules' future wife."

"Yes, I remember. A Yelverbury lunch-party," replied Otho quietly. "It was in Margaret's brother's rooms, as a matter of fact. Margaret and her father were there, Jules Maligni, and you and I and a fellow named Henry Hoalne, I remember—also from Yelverbury."

“I don’t remember him,” said Raisul, “but I do remember that I sat opposite Margaret . . . Yes . . . Queer little small world, isn’t it, with its changes and chances . . . And *how* we’ve all changed! . . .

“Margaret Maykings is Margaret Maligni . . . Sir Otho Robert Mandeville-Bellême is *le Légionnaire* Otho Bellême . . . Maligni the Magnificent, as you used to call him at Oxford, is not quite so magnificent as he was—and ‘Mr. Russell,’ now on his native heath, is, as you observed, the Sidi Kaid Raisul ben Abd’allah Karim of Mekazzen.”

“Yes. Interesting,” agreed Otho.

“Oh, very. Very interesting—and amusing . . . ‘Mr. Russell’ wasn’t of very much importance at that party, and neither Margaret nor anybody else had a word to throw at him . . . And now he holds you all in the hollow of his hand.”

And extending a delicate but powerful hand, palm upward, the speaker suddenly clenched it till the knuckles stood out white through the olive-tinted skin.

“Really?” observed Otho, flicking ash from his cigarette.

“Oh, very really,” asserted Raisul, holding Otho’s eyes with his own piercing and hawk-like gaze.

And then suddenly smiling, he clapped his hands.

“The pleasure of seeing you almost rendered me inhospitable,” he said, as the servant entered. “Sure you prefer coffee?”

“Yes, thank you.”

Raisul addressed the servant in a dialect unfamiliar to Otho, who wondered if it were the *Tamashec* language.

“Yes,” continued Raisul. “In the hollow of my hand.”

“Oh, how’s that?” inquired Otho.

“Why—the lunch-party is now a country-house party—as regards four of its members, anyhow. You and I, my dear Bellême, and Maligni the Magnificent and Margaret, his wife . . . All together again . . . In my nice country-house in Mekazzen.”

“*What!*” ejaculated Otho, suddenly sitting bolt upright. “Margaret here? Here, in Mekazzen.”

“Yes . . . Mr. and Mrs. Maligni are honeymooning here—in Mekazzen.”

“Here, in the Castle?”

“Here, in the Castle.”

Otho’s heart beat fast.

Was he actually within a few yards of Margaret . . . Margaret. . . .

A vision of past years flashed across his mind, and instead of the over-furnished, over-cushioned, over-curtained Moorish room, with its pseudo-Persian decoration, he saw Big Attic, in Yelverbury Castle, the armies of lead soldiers marching across the vast bare floor, the River Nile flowing glassily past Khartoum (once a Swiss Chalet and the joy of his mother’s heart)—and Margaret and himself.

Was it possible that he was at this very moment close to her? Was it possible that he was about to see her again? What should he say to her? What would she say to him? The letter which she had written him from Gibraltar and he had received at Mellerat, and which he knew by heart, had ended with the words, as a sort of postscript,

“*Oh, Otho, you are the dearest friend I ever had.*”

Yes, the last paragraph had been,

“*We are crossing to Tangier next week for a holiday in*

Morocco, ending up with a visit to a real live Kaid whom Jules knows well. I can't tell you how thrilled I am.

"*I say, 'Tho, we shall both be in North Africa. Wouldn't it be lovely if we could all meet?*

"*Anyhow, do write to me, c/o The Secretary, Cosmopolitan Club, Tangier.*

"*With lots of love, 'Tho dear,*

"*Margaret.*"

And then the heart-warming, treasured postscript,

"*Oh, Otho, you are the dearest friend I ever had.*"

Margaret . . . Margaret here . . .

"By Jove," he said, with something of the *naïf* impetuosity of which Life had, even yet, not wholly cured him. "I should love to see her again."

"You shall," replied Raisul.

And yawning loudly he added,

"*In'shallah!* Which means, as you know, 'If God wills' . . ."

And Ibrahim the Lion struck.

When Otho recovered consciousness, and tried to move, he found that he could move nothing but his eyes. Nor did he keep his eyes open for more than a few seconds, as the pain that he suffered was intolerable and the vision that he beheld, unendurable.

Was he again sun-smitten in the desert, and beholding a maddening mirage? For he had seemed to see Margaret herself, standing between her husband, Jules Maligni, and that fellow "Mr. Russell," or Raisul, who he seemed to remember . . . Yes, each was holding one of her arms and

she was struggling violently . . .

Margaret struggling violently?

Then she needed help. He must help her. He must spring up and rescue her. He'd break their damned necks . . . But he could not move . . . Nightmare . . . "*Up Bellême! . . .*" The old war-cry . . . "*Up Bellême . . . I Saye and I Doe.*"

But Bellême could not get up . . .

And Bellême could not "*Saye*," for he was gagged . . .

And Bellême could not "*Doe*," for he was bound . . .

What the devil had happened?

It wasn't a nightmare. He could hear plainly enough now, although he could still hardly see . . . It must be blood that had trickled into his eyes.

Margaret was fighting like a wild-cat and calling . . . calling.

Damn the blood. It had glued his eyelids together while he had kept them shut. Or had he been unconscious again, since he saw the vision? His feet must be bound together; his knees; his thighs; his thumbs; his wrists; his arms; and there must be a cord also binding his arms to his sides. And he was gagged. And now he was blind—temporarily blinded.

With a great and painful effort Otho turned his head, crushed his face against a cushion, moved his head again, and contrived to rub congealed blood from the side of one eye; contrived to open the eye and again turn his face to the room.

Three men. Raisul, the servant who had brought the

coffee, and a great grinning giant, Hercules himself.

But hadn't he just seen Margaret and Jules Maligni?

Was it a nightmare after all?

Yes, and now it was a nightmare of drowning . . . he was drowning . . .

When Otho again recovered complete consciousness, he realized that he was lying on the floor of a small bare room. Soon he recognized it as being, in fact, the punishment cell, thoughtfully provided as an adjunct to the barrack-quarters allotted to the Section.

He sat up, thereby causing an acute pain to shoot through his head, and a wave of nausea to engulf him.

Carefully, and with some giddiness, he rose to his feet.

What exactly had happened?

The nightmare . . . Had he not been bound, hand and foot? Had he not thought, or dreamed, that he had seen Margaret?

Why on earth was he doing *cellule* punishment?

Slowly his mind cleared, and memory began to work accurately.

Some filthy Moroccan drug in his coffee? *Hashish*, or something?

If so, it must have been remarkably potent, for at one moment he had been sitting and talking with Raisul, and the next moment, he had been lying, trussed like a fowl, and feeling as though his skull had been smashed in.

Yes, and blood had trickled down and congealed in his eyes.

Gingerly, he felt his head.

Yes, by Jove! A lump and a cut . . .

But he could have sworn that Raisul had sat there in front of him, and never moved. Obviously then, he had been attacked from behind.

Nice lad, Raisul.

Have another chat with Raisul, another day, perhaps.

And had he really seen Margaret? In a brief moment between waxing and waning consciousness?

Of course he had.

He could remember how she was dressed—a plain white silk frock . . . bare arms . . . a scarlet belt . . . Yes, definitely a scarlet belt . . . And Raisul and Jules Maligni were each holding one of her arms . . . Curse and damn and blast them.

Yes. All that was fact . . . reality . . . no concussion-caused illusion, or drug-induced nightmare, about it.

Now then, what was the meaning of all this? What was the game?

Obviously he had been decoyed to Raisul's quarters by the messenger who had brought him the note—there to be knocked out and trussed up, with a view to exhibiting him, in that condition, to Margaret . . .

Why? . . .

After Margaret had seen him, she had been taken away again, presumably by force. There had been four men there for the job—and one of them her precious husband, who was obviously in the game, whatever it was.

Then, apparently, the gang had turned their attention to himself, and while he was still unconscious had carried him, or made Hercules carry him, down here. A deuce of a long journey too, if they'd come the way by which he had been

led up from the court-yard by the messenger.

Probably Hercules had given him that crack on the head . . . Been behind that curtain the whole time . . . He'd like to have Mr. Hercules in a twenty-four foot ring, with four-ounce gloves, or none at all.

But if they'd brought him to this cell, Vittorelli must be in it, or the Sergeant of the Guard, anyway.

Or perhaps they had just dumped him somewhere, apparently dead drunk, where he would be found and chucked into cells to sleep it off.

But what was the game?

And why, in spite of everything, was his heart singing a lark's song, a pæan of praise and joy . . . ?

Because he had seen Margaret again . . . Margaret was near . . . Margaret was here . . .

Here! In Mekazzen! And Otho's heart sank . . . down, down into the depths, as a sick feeling of anxiety overwhelmed and enfeebled him, mentally and physically.

Margaret in Mekazzen Citadel . . . Margaret whom he, himself, had seen violently struggling with the two men in whose absolute power she must be—her husband, and his cousin.

But, once again, why decoy him to that room for her to see him?

Perhaps when his brain ceased to ache and to swim, and this giddiness passed, he'd be able to think sufficiently clearly to reason it out. When this infernal cloud lifted, he might see daylight . . .

And then a hideous thought . . .

No, no . . . Fellows weren't as bad as that. Why, Jules

Maligni had grown up with them. From the time they'd all played together in Yelverbury Castle, to when Jules, and Margaret's brother Jack, and he, had been at Oxford together.

No; white men didn't do things like that.

But then this Raisul was in no sense a white man. And if it came to that, Jules himself was only—white-ish.

But no, he couldn't think *that* of Margaret's husband . . .

A clash of heavy keys and bolts against the iron door of the cell; and a blinding burst of sunshine as it was thrown open.

Sergeant-Major Vittorelli.

With the wall behind him for support, Otho stood to attention.

"Well, you drunken dog! Sobered up, have you?"

"*Oui, Chef.*"

"Fit for duty?"

"*Oui, Chef.*"

"Lucky for you, you slacking, shirking, boozing, worthless imitation of a soldier . . . You get drunk again, and I'll string you up by your wrists on the tips of your toes, against that wall in the sun, for a day . . . Yes, and with your mouth full of salt . . . I'll give you a thirst, if it's drink you're after . . . Got a smash on the head, too, didn't you?"

"*Oui, Chef.*"

"Serve you right. Perhaps that'll teach you to keep where you belong. You go chasing their women here, and it won't be a split skull you'll get. It'll be a slit throat. Do you hear me, you son of a sow?"

"*Oui, Chef.*"

"D'you think you're here to booze and chase women . . . ? Or d'you suppose there might be a job of work and a spot of fighting—any day—yes—and at any moment? If it weren't for that, I'd give you ten days' solitary on quarter-rations and no water . . . If I let you out of here now, can you keep sober? Keep to your place—and keep your mouth shut?"

"*Oui, Chef.*"

"Get out of it then, you scrofulous scum . . ."

"*Oui, Chef* . . . May I speak?"

"Well?"

"A Moor brought me a note, written in English, saying that if I cared to accompany the bearer, the writer would be very glad to see me and have a chat. It was signed by the Kaid's son, Raisul, whom I met in England. Being off duty, and free, I went.

"I drank nothing but a cup of coffee, and then found myself lying bound, hand and foot, and with blood running down my face from a wound on the head. I then . . ."

"*Get out*—you lying swine! Get out of here, before I . . ."

Words failed the Sergeant-Major.

"*Oui, Chef.*"

And saluting, Otho, albeit a little unsteadily, marched out into the sunshine, in search of Joe Mummery.

CHAPTER XI

Margaret felt that she was going mad, and told herself repeatedly, and aloud, that she must not go mad. She must keep sane and be strong, for far more was now at stake than her own life, honour and safety.

Otho!

Otho was in the hands, in the limitless power, at the savage uncontrolled "mercy", of Raisul.

Oh Jules Maligni, wait. Just wait . . . Vile . . . treacherous . . . evil . . .

How could he . . . *how could he* come up to her in the garden with smiling debonair assurance, that air of the true *faux bonhomme*—and when she eyed him in cold and hostile silence, say,

"Oh, come, make it up, Margaret. Let's kiss and be friends . . . No, don't go away . . . Listen, Margaret . . . Oh, all right, go if you like . . . But won't you speak to Otho Bellême first?"

As she now stood tearing her handkerchief to rags, she saw the scene again.

How suddenly she had wheeled about.

"*What? Otho here?*"

And the hateful,

"Ah-h-h . . . Thought that'd fetch you, young woman. Yes, our old pal, Otho, is actually here . . . Want to see him?"

"Of course I do. Where is he? Can he come here?"

"No, he can't. D'you suppose soldiers of the guard at Buckingham Palace wander about the gardens, and stroll up

into the palace to have a chat with ladies of the household? Of course Otho can't come up here . . . Don't forget he's a private soldier now, in pursuit of his usual low tastes. A private in the Legion of the Doubly Damned . . . The Regiment of Ruffians . . . The Cohort of Criminals . . ."

"Where is Otho, please?"

"Over on the other side. He sent his kind regards, and since he can't call on you, would you, for old times' sake, come and see him, if you're not too proud to talk to a *légionnaire*."

"I doubt if he said that . . . Of course I'll go and see him . . . I'd walk miles to see Otho . . . Will it be all right for me to go over to the barracks, if you come with me?"

"Oh, I've managed better than that. Raisul's very kindly entertaining him in his quarters. He knew him at once . . . They met at Oxford in Jack's rooms, you remember.

"We were all having a drink together and Otho asked after you, and with my usual desire to please you, I brought his message . . . Coming?"

"Of course I am."

And like the fool she was, she'd walked into the trap . . .

Simpleton . . . Idiot . . . Damned fool to have trusted Jules Maligni for one moment . . . Why hadn't she seen danger the moment Raisul's name was spoken? Why hadn't she remembered what she knew—that the name Maligni was synonymous with Treachery . . . Villainy . . . Lies . . .

But what could it mean? What could it mean? *Why* should Raisul and Jules have Otho there, bound hand and foot, lying wounded and bleeding on a divan in that hateful room?

Why should they have fetched her there to see him?

And what had Raisul meant when he had stroked her face and neck, while Jules and that giant negro held her? What had he meant by saying, with his hateful, hateful grin,

"Never mind, darling . . . Never mind . . . He's alive—and he'll soon be kicking. Oh, I assure you he'll soon be kicking . . .

"*Unless you rescue him, that is* . . . Oh, ce bon Otho Bellême . . . ce cher Otho Bellême . . . He's safe enough, I'm sure . . . His Margaret'll rescue him all right—*when the opportunity is offered to her* . . ."

What had he meant? And why had they gagged her with that stinking silk handkerchief? . . . Thrown that suffocating great shawl over her head and carried her back here? . . . Anyhow, it had taken three of them to do it—and if she hadn't been able to bite anybody, she had struggled and kicked and fought like a wild-cat . . .

Oh, Jules Maligni . . . Her *husband* . . . How dared he, how could he, let them treat her so? Carried like a bundle by that huge black beast.

It had seemed like hours . . . They must have brought her by some devious subterranean way . . . Carried like a kicking child, flung on her bed and locked in her room.

Oh Jules Maligni . . . Wait . . .

And how long was she to be kept locked in like this? Until they had disposed of Otho?

Disposed of . . .

What should she do? What could she do?

Well, anyhow, sooner or later, the door must be unlocked for someone to bring her food. Presumably there was no intention of starving her to death.

No, Raisul wouldn't allow . . . Oh, God.

And meanwhile, Otho . . . Her Otho . . . How could she rescue him? What did that cur mean? Rescue Otho? She could '*rescue him when the opportunity was offered*?' What did Raisul mean?

What should she do? How could . . . ?

Colonel Le Sage!

But how to get to him.

Whoever opened that door should not shut it again.

Heaven help her! What should she do?

Like a creature distraught, Margaret paced her room, flung herself down upon her bed, and in a storm of weeping, found some relief.

Anon she sat up. This would not do. This would not help Otho.

What was that?

There was someone at her door.

Raisul?

She could "rescue Otho, when the opportunity was offered?"

Springing up, Margaret snatched her pistol from its hiding-place, crept to the door and stood waiting.

If it were Raisul . . . ?

Might it not be she who offered the opportunity? She who gave him the opportunity to save his own life by "rescuing" Otho?

But how could she trust him? Of course she couldn't trust him. He'd promise to go and fetch Otho, and simply walk off to safety.

Couldn't she march him, at the pistol's point, to where Otho was?

Idiot . . . As if Raisul would march in front of anybody's pistol! He'd trick her in a moment.

Why didn't the door open? She was certain she'd heard somebody at it. She'd heard the key turn. Why didn't the door open?

The door did open.

With a supreme effort of self-control, Margaret refrained from hysteria.

The aged Hassan el Miskeen, the dumb slave, stood grinning and salaaming on the threshold.

§ 2

Rising from the cushioned mattress that served him indifferently as arm-chair, couch and bed, Colonel Le Sage strode to the heavy iron-plated door of his room.

That wasn't Major Langeac's knock, but it was *the* knock all right.

Warily opening the door, Le Sage saw a Moorish woman, or rather a *bourka* and cloak which presumably concealed a Moorish woman, for no face was visible.

"Yelverbury?" he inquired in a whisper.

"It's I, Margaret . . ." she whispered in reply, as she slipped into the room, and Le Sage locked the door.

"Oh, I am in such trouble, Colonel Le Sage. I've come to you for help . . . You will help me, won't you?"

"What is it?" asked Colonel Le Sage. A little coldly, Margaret thought.

Could it be that he was another of those people who promise everything and perform nothing? Had he cultivated her solely for his own ends, and for her possible usefulness

to him.

"You *will* help me?" she asked again urgently, seizing his arm.

"What is it?" again asked Colonel Le Sage.

Yes. Definitely unenthusiastic.

He had been very different from this when it had been a question of her being useful to him.

"I did my best to help you, Colonel Le Sage. And I'll help you all I can. I'll do anything you ask, if only you'll help me now, just this once . . .

"I've not come to trouble you for myself . . . I've not come to ask you to get me out of here now, but to . . ."

"Sit down, Mrs. Maligni, won't you?"

Why was he calling her that, instead of "Margaret"? Why was he so different?

Margaret fought back her tears—tears of pain, misery and disappointment. Was there no one in the world she could trust—except Otho?

And yet she had felt such confidence in this man. An instinctive liking and trust . . .

What was he saying about Yelverbury? Why talk about that now?

"Oh, Colonel Le Sage, do listen to me and help me. My oldest and dearest friend is . . .

"One moment, Mrs. Maligni. You must answer my question before we go any further. I must know where I am."

"Oh, Colonel Le Sage, I trusted . . ."

"Yes, Mrs. Maligni . . . And I trusted you absolutely, although it's not my custom . . . Now, tell me why didn't you give me the pass-word when you came to my door?

And when you've told me that, just tell me where you got it . . ."

"I *don't* understand, Colonel Le Sage."

"You don't? At the end of our last talk together, you suddenly shot it at me, and I admit you made me feel something of a fool. What was the idea exactly, Mrs. Maligni, in concealing the fact that you knew all the time who I was?"

"But I *didn't* . . . I . . ."

"And I wonder how the devil your husband got hold of it . . . And I'd have sworn that that *légionnaire* lad was too honest, too straight, too fine . . . I suppose he gave me and the pass-word away to Riccoli, and Riccoli told it to the Malignis, and Jules Maligni told you."

"Told me *what*?" cried the bewildered Margaret.

"Look here, Mrs. Maligni . . . There's the small matter of my life at stake, and you can believe me when I say that it is a very small matter in comparison with my success. That is an enormous matter, and I stick at absolutely nothing when I am working for my country. . . .

"Now, before you go out of this—shall we say dungeon, death-trap, what you will—you are going to tell me one or two things. And you are going to tell me the truth . . .

"How long have you known who I am? Who else beside your husband and his father know who I am? And who was it told you a pass-word that I'd have sworn only I and one other man ever knew . . . It's important.

"Was it your noble husband, or was it Riccoli himself?"

"Colonel Le Sage, what *are* you talking about? What

has happened since I saw you last? My husband told me you were a German Secret Service officer, Carl von Mittengen, masquerading as Herr Schlacht, and hoping to get something out of the Kaid. I never dreamt you were anything else until you told me so, the last time I saw you . . .

"I hate and loathe and despise and detest my husband . . . and I would not lift a finger to help him . . . I'd sooner kill him . . .

"As for the pass-word you are talking about—nobody has ever told me any pass-word, neither my husband nor Major Riccoli, and I know nothing whatever about it."

Colonel Le Sage stared hard into Margaret's eyes, which met his unwaveringly, unflinchingly.

A good actress this. Yes, quite a neat piece of work. Very good acting indeed.

A pity he couldn't have got hold of her before the Malignis did. She'd have been very useful . . . Very useful indeed . . . And gone far in the Secret Service.

Suddenly he spoke.

"Tell me this, then," he snapped. "Where did you get this word 'Yelverbury'? Why did you say it to me?"

"Where did I get it? I was *born* there . . . *born* there . . . *born* there . . . Why did I *say* it to you? Because you asked me where my home was. Yelverbury's my home. What *are* you talking about? What *are* you driving at? . . ."

It was too much. Margaret burst into tears.

Was this acting? If so, she was beyond rubies. She was a pearl beyond all price. A woman who could turn on a flood of tears like that, to order . . . !

No, it couldn't be done.

Colonel Le Sage put his arm about the trembling, shaking, sobbing figure.

"Margaret," he said kindly, "tell me just one thing, and I'll never doubt you again. Not for a moment. Tell me someone else who lives, or lived, at your Yelverbury."

"My father, Dr. Maykings," sobbed Margaret. "My mother, my brother Jack, my husband was at school there . . ."

"Yes? Anyone else?"

"The Reverend Henry Hoalne was the Vicar. His son used to play with us."

"Yes? . . . Yes? . . . And who was your *grand seigneur* there? Your big man?"

"Sir Robert Mandeville-Bellême."

"*Ah!* And his son?"

"Oh, Colonel Le Sage . . . *Otho* . . . It is about Otho I have come to you . . . He joined the Foreign Legion . . . He is here . . . He . . . He . . ."

"Good God," whispered Le Sage, and in his relief put the other arm also about Margaret and hugged her.

She had been telling the truth. All was well.

"I beg your pardon . . . My dear child . . . Forgive me," he said. "Now tell me what the trouble is."

CHAPTER XII

"Cor!" ejaculated Sailor Harris. "Ain't 'e got a nerve neither. Not half 'e 'asn't. Knocking a *légionnaire* about. We'll twist his neck round three times and catch 'oo he may."

"We'll lay for 'im, mate," growled William Bossum. "We'll do 'im in proper."

"Close your heads, both of you," ordered Joe Mummery. "I want to think . . . It's a puzzler, Bob. If we got the young lady, where could we put her? What about Major Riccoli? Would he look after her?"

"Not 'arf 'e wouldn't," opined Sailor Harris. "Cor lumme!"

"Didn't Joe tell you to be quiet," expostulated William Bossum. "I don't want to 'it you."

"No, mate, I lay you don't. You bin an' spoke the truth."

"You see, her husband's here, Joe," replied Otho to his friend. "Suppose we did take her to Major Riccoli, and asked him to look after her, her husband has only got to go to him and say, 'What the devil is my wife doing here?' "

"Let me kill 'im for you, Bob," suggested Sailor Harris. "You point the bloke out to me, and *I'll* give 'im Little Jools."

"Thanks, old chap, but . . ."

"Don't mention it, mate. No trouble at all. Point 'im out, and me and Bill Bossum'll soon put him where the birds won't trouble 'im."

"Ar—that's right. Then 'e *couldn't* go to Major Riccoli

an’ say, ‘’Ere, where’s my bloomin’ wife,’ ” pointed out William Bossum.

“Talking plain sense, Bob. Suppose we could do this Raisul in, and this Jules . . .”

“And be court-martialled and shot for murder, or handed over to the Kaid . . .”

“Us fer the ’ooks,” growled Sailor Harris, looking up at a high tower which shadowed the court-yard.

“Well, we’ve got to do something, Bob . . . at any rate to the swine that had you decoyed and coshed. We’ve simply got to show the hound that he . . .”

An Arab, who had sauntered toward the group of *légionnaires*, stood eyeing them in vacant, open-mouthed wonder.

“Oi . . . bung off, *Budoo*. I ain’t got no coppers, an’ you ain’t got no monkey,” advised Sailor Harris.

But the big Arab, instead of obeying the advice of Sailor Harris, appeared to be galvanized into sudden life, activity and intelligence, as Otho, removing his face from his hands, looked up to see who might be the object of Sailor Harris’s admonition.

Striding forward, the Arab seized the astonished Otho by the arm.

“Yelverbury!” said he.

“Listen,” he continued, speaking English. “Tell these men on no account to go away until you return. They’ll get no orders meanwhile from their officer . . . They’ll do what you ask, eh? . . . Good . . .

“Now, follow me without appearing to do so. Don’t keep too close, I mean.”

Otho obeyed.

Joe Mummery, William Bossum and Sailor Harris, staring open-mouthed, scratched their respective heads.

As Otho followed the "Arab," whom he knew to be the strange officer of the Secret Service, hope raised its head once again. This Colonel was no Major Riccoli . . .

"Now then, Otho Bellême," said Colonel Le Sage, as he locked the door of his room. "Here's a chance for you. Listen. You know me. I am Colonel Le Sage of the 'Second Bureau'—the Secret Service . . . And you know that any orders I may give you, take precedence of those of Major Riccoli . . . Good . . .

"Now tell me. Are those three English friends of yours staunch and loyal to France, and to the motto on their Flag, *Honneur et Fidélité*?"

"Absolutely, *mon Colonel*."

"And if I told them to obey you, and to follow you, in any undertaking, would they do so?"

"Absolutely, *mon Colonel*."

"Good. Now for how many others can you answer in your Section? I mean, as being staunch and loyal, and entirely uncorrupted by—er—Sergeant-Major Vittorelli."

"Three, for certain. Two old soldiers of France, and a very fine Russian who was Regimental Sergeant-Major of a Guard Regiment."

"Good. Now listen. I want you and your three compatriots to come to this room after roll-call to-night. Parade dress, rifles, bayonets."

"Sergeant-Major Vittorelli would . . ." began Otho.

"Sergeant-Major Vittorelli will—er—be elsewhere,"

replied Le Sage. “There will be absolutely no difficulty or hindrance whatsoever . . . The only difficulty is finding a few men upon whom I can completely and entirely rely—and I’ve found them.

“Now we’ll leave the two Frenchmen and the Russian—give me their names, by the way—with the rest of the Section to leaven the lump, if it wants any leavening, when the time comes . . . Meanwhile, not a word to a soul, about me. Simply bring your three men here, telling them that now they really can do something helpful and useful in the matter of—er—shall we say . . . ? Yes . . . shall we say, ‘*Margaret*’? Eh? Margaret of Yelverbury?”

And Colonel Le Sage laughed.

“Sir?” ejaculated the startled Otho.

“Oh yes, *mon enfant*. Mrs. Maligni and I are old friends. Entirely *en rapport*. She is helping me, and I, her. If all goes well to-night, she’ll be safely out of this place quite soon.”

Rising, Colonel Le Sage strode to the door, and after suddenly opening it, glanced to right and left along the dim-lit stone tunnel-like passage.

“*Bien*,” said he, placing a kindly hand on Otho’s shoulder. “*Rompez, Légionnaire* . . . Your chance—and mine—comes to-night . . . *Bon chance*, Bellême.”

§ 2

Major Riccoli, at ease with dignity, leaned back among his cushions, sipped his coffee and lazily blew smoke-rings in the air.

Smoke-rings in the air. Castles in the air. *Dolce far niente.* But smoke-rings, however beautiful, are very

evanescent.

Castles in the air. Castles in Spain.

An unpleasant expression, that. Most inappropriate. To the devil with Castles in Spain—when one has a Castle in Mekazzen—or rather, will have one in a few hours' time.

A knock at the door. Major Riccoli glanced at his wrist-watch. That would be the excellent Vittorelli, come to report.

"*Ça va bien? Ça marche, mon enfant?*"

Saluting with tremendous smartness and punctilious respect, the Sergeant-Major intimated that everything marched, and all went well. Also that, as so frequently happens in the military sphere, All were Present and Correct.

Having concluded his report, Vittorelli accepted his superior officer's offer of a cigarette, and gracious permission to be seated, while they once again discussed the subject of the hour of arrival, and probable mental attitude, of the officer, non-commissioned officers and men of the first detachment of the re-inforcements.

"But after all, my dear Vittorelli, it is the *fait accompli* that is the best argument, the world over. When they arrive to find me King of the Castle, the thing is done. And should there be among them any fool who is so damned a fool as to hesitate between a happy life and an unhappy death—why, let him face the firing-party, by all means.

"I suppose," mused Major Riccoli, "it is the better plan to act first as though for France, and afterwards to see if we have any such fool among us."

"Respectfully, I am certain, *mon officier*. *Les légionnaires* will fight like tigers, every man of them, when

you give the word. They'll seize the Castle all right. It will be time enough then, to find out whether the Section contains any fools."

"Use the fools, and then shoot 'em, eh?" smiled Riccoli.

"Well—I think that's all," he added, yawning. "Turn the men out at 2 a.m. . . . Absolute silence, of course . . . And no one leaves the barrack-room until I come. I shall be there at ten minutes past two. . . ."

"I doubt it," said a deep voice, in French, as the door opened, and a big man in a hooded *burnous* stood on the threshold.

"Name of a Name!" roared Riccoli. "What the devil . . ."

The man in the *burnous* stepped forward, threw back the hood and dropped the *burnous* from his shoulders, revealing to the astounded Riccoli and Vittorelli, a French Colonel in full uniform.

"*Le Sage!*" whispered Riccoli.

Sergeant-Major Vittorelli instinctively sprang to attention.

"You are under arrest, Sergeant-Major," said Colonel Le Sage. "Remove your belt and revolver."

"Don't! *Shoot him!*" cried Riccoli, with a glance of positive agony at the table whereon lay his own revolver.

"Guard!" cried Colonel Le Sage, and four soldiers tramped into the room.

"Arrest that man!" ordered Le Sage, pointing to Vittorelli whose right hand tore at the flap of the holster of his revolver.

As the weapon flashed from its case, the nearest

légionnaire seized Vittorelli's arm, while the second presented his fixed bayonet at the pit of his stomach.

The expression on the face of Sailor Harris as he did so, was one of hope. Hope unfulfilled, for with a swift wrench, Joe Mummery seized the revolver, and almost broke his Sergeant-Major's wrist.

"Sit still, Riccoli," snapped Le Sage, his own hand on his revolver-butt.

"Good!" he added, turning to Vittorelli. "Three of you march him to the guard-room, and hand him over to Major Langeac with my orders that he is to be confined to the punishment-cell, to await court-martial. Use any necessary force."

The light of hope again illuminated the honest countenance of Sailor Harris.

"You may find that you have met Major Langeac before," added Le Sage, with a short laugh.

"*Légionnaire* Bellême! On guard outside this door, until your comrades return. Then report to me."

"Well, Major Riccoli! So we meet again . . . I wonder if you remember when we met last?"

"At El Brudja," replied Riccoli, eyeing, as though it hypnotized him, the revolver on the table.

"Ah ha! A little sop to my vanity," laughed Le Sage. "My good Riccoli, you've seen me daily, since you came to Mekazzen. You talked with me for an hour at the *poste* from which you marched here, and I've spoken to you upon exactly seven other occasions, since we met in El Brudja . . . So much for your contempt for my 'Secret Service tricks'

and inability to deceive and hoodwink Major Riccoli with my 'childish attempts at disguise.' "

"You're not the Moor who came to the *poste* with a message from the Kaid. He had a fat face, and a great beard," expostulated Riccoli.

"He had. So had I, an hour ago. And I have a fat face when I . . . think I will."

"And you came to the *poste* from the Kaid?"

"I certainly came from Mekazzen."

"Then you came from the Kaid. No one could go to and fro from here without his knowledge and consent."

"Or that of his trusted and all-powerful adviser and Vizier, the Señor Pedro Maligni. *Hein?*"

"Oh, ho! You got at him that way, did you?"

"I did. As you got at him through Raisul."

"Then the Kaid is fooling you, Le Sage."

"No. The other way about, I'm afraid, Major Riccoli . . . Now if you had said that Raisul and the Kaid are fooling *you* . . ."

"Nonsense, Le Sage. It is *I* who am fooling *them*. Talk sense. I hold the Kaid in the hollow of my hand. He thinks I am here to join him, to support him, to fight for him. I and my men are to serve his ends . . . the fool. He and his men are to serve mine . . . *Mine.*"

"And France?" inquired Le Sage softly.

"*France?* France? She will be glad and proud to make terms with me before long—when I am the invincible Sultan of Morocco, head of the vast Pan-Islamic . . ."

"Yes . . . yes . . . I know it all, Major Riccoli. You're still riding that horse, are you?"

"To victory . . . to power . . . to Empire."

“I doubt it,” observed Le Sage, glancing at his wrist-watch.

“Do you think because you’ve corrupted a handful of my men . . .” began Riccoli.

Le Sage laughed with genuine amusement.

“You find me amusing, *hein*?”

“Yes, I find you really funny . . . Corrupted your men! . . . Yes, very amusing—at the moment . . . and always interesting . . . You have intrigued me for years, Major Riccoli, and when I say I have followed your career with the closest interest, I speak literally . . . ‘Followed’ is the *mot juste*. Also closely . . . and you’ve led me here, Major Riccoli, although I anticipated you—followed in front, if you follow me—with the help of the late, and really lamented Carl von Mittengen, although he didn’t know it.”

“Carl von Mittengen?”

“Yes, Major Riccoli . . . a fine man, a really clever man, and a patriot. A true patriot, Major Riccoli. He died, working for his country as I work for France.

“I killed that honourable and patriotic soldier because he was working against France, Major Riccoli. If I killed him, what should I do to you?”

Riccoli smiled.

“Join me,” said he. “Join me, and have a career worth having. Have a destiny . . . Something finer than retiring as a fat Colonel, to grow cabbages in a French village . . . Join me, and I will make you a General, a Field-Marshal, a King . . . What did Napoleon make of his Murats and Bernadottes? If he could make waiters, ostlers, private soldiers, *canaille*, into Kings, what could not I make of you,

an educated, intelligent . . .”

“Why, a damned traitor. A scoundrelly, treacherous, thieving, lying dog . . . dishonourable and dishonoured . . . a foul cheat, whose base name would stink for ever in the nostrils of all decent men . . .

“That is what you could make of me, Major Riccoli, if I put myself unreservedly in your clean and honest hands.”

“Still riding that horse, are you?” sneered Riccoli.

“Yes, to victory, to power, and to Empire—for France.”

“And what will France give you, Le Sage? A cabbage-patch . . . Well, well, you’ve had your chance.”

“I’ve got it, Major Riccoli, and I’m taking it, quite soon,” and again Colonel Le Sage consulted his watch. “Meanwhile, as I am to suffer the pleasure of your society a little longer, tell me . . . Do you really think you would be happy, satisfied, content, if you realized your ambitions? Could you ever look any honest man in the face again? Could you ever bear to see a Frenchman again, hear the French language, see the French flag or hear the word ‘France’? Wouldn’t you feel dirty—mind, body and soul? Wouldn’t you feel rotten, diseased—a foul, filthy, and stinking mass of corruption? Damn it, man, I’d sooner be a faceless leper, falling to pieces on my feet.”

“I can quite believe it, Le Sage . . . A very limited person. Narrow, ignorant, stupid, hide-bound by ancient convention.”

“Thank God,” murmured Le Sage, studying the face of the speaker.

“Limited . . . limited . . .”

“Le Sage Limited *versus* Riccoli Unlimited, eh? But you haven’t answered my question. Tell me, do you really think

you'd ever have a moment's peace, content or happiness?"

"Man, what do I know or care of your puling peace, your childish content, your sheep-like, nay, maggot-like, happiness? That's what you are, you common men in your little world—just a writhing mass of maggots, blindly crawling in corruption."

"Well, you should be an authority on corruption, Major Riccoli," replied Le Sage. "But still you haven't answered my question. I am a boring fellow whose narrow mind holds but one idea at a time, I fear. But once again, do you really think you would ever again know happiness, contentment, peace of mind?"

"Pah! Peace among the cabbages, contentment among the carrots, happiness in the village wine-shop, love among the roses. Who am I to pursue peace, happiness and contentment? Power is what I want. Power, position, conquest, greatness. D'you suppose Napoleon made the greatest career ever made by mortal man—by pursuing peace, happiness and contentment? I have no patience, you weary me."

"Well, it won't be for long, Major Riccoli. I shall be going in a minute."

"Might one ask where?"

"To interview the Kaid. By the kindness and courtesy of the helpful Señor Pedro Maligni, I have an interview with the Kaid in his own private audience chamber. Private and personal, secret and confidential."

"For France?" sneered Riccoli.

"Well, in point of fact, I go in my Teutonic manifestation or incarnation, in the name and rôle of 'Herr

Schlacht.' "

"But for France . . . you are quite sure it is for France?" asked Riccoli with a suggestive half-sneer.

"Oh, quite. The Kaid thinks he is going to talk to me—it is curious you should have mentioned 'cabbages' once or twice, Riccoli," and Le Sage broke into English.

" 'The time has come,'
The Kaid has said,
'To talk of many things;
Of shoes and ships and sealing-wax
And cabbages and Kings,'

and more particularly as to whether the time hasn't also come for the German equivalent of a quarter of a million francs to turn up, together with certain guns, rifles, ammunition and men. I hope that's how it goes, anyway."

"My men?" asked Riccoli.

"No, nobody's men. Mythical men. The army of a dream. German army of a Kaid's *kif* dream."

"And may one ask what you are going to tell him?"

"Oh, very little. Only that I've come to arrest him and send him over the border for trial, on a charge of murder of French soldiers; the destruction of French convoys, *postes* and property; and of waging unprovoked war upon France."

"And then—might one ask?" smiled Riccoli, kindly indulgent.

"Then your young friend Raisul."

"Oh, you will seize him, too, will you?"

"I will."

"On what charge?"

"Aiding and abetting. Also murder of French soldiers

and subjects."

"Really? And with what force do you propose to do these wonderful things?"

"Ample, admirable and efficient—a half-hundred of *légionnaires*. And who could want anything better?"

"You think they'll obey you . . . follow you . . . do you?"

"Certain of it. I'll tell you why. Do you remember an excellent orderly you had at *Poste* One—a man named Bombelli, who, alas, deserted and was never heard of again? Yes. Well—he's being heard of now—and, in correct uniform and rank-badges, is putting the Fear of God and Sudden Death into some of the poor rascals you corrupted and suborned, Major Riccoli . . . Bombelli, your *ordonnance*, to whom you and Vittorelli told so much, both intentionally and unintentionally. Your Bombelli, my good Major Riccoli, is the famous Langeac himself. Yes, that's a nasty shock for you, isn't it? . . . Oh, your *légionnaires* will obey me and follow me, all-right . . . Major Langeac is talking to them at this moment, and he has a way with him, as you may know. An old Legion officer, and a real tough bird. His men used to worship him, and there isn't a *légionnaire* in the barrack-room down below who doesn't know him by repute, apart from remembering him as the 'Bombelli' to whom they revealed themselves so bountifully! . . . Langeac! He's a living legend in the Legion. I shouldn't be surprised if there are not still some *anciens* who have served under him . . . Oh yes, the men will follow him, and me, all right, Major Riccoli. Have no anxiety on that score."

"Ah! Those who live longest will see most, Le Sage."

“You are absolutely right there, Major Riccoli. They will.”

“Yes, and it is you and Major Langeac who should feel anxiety. How did the fellow get here, by the way?”

“On a camel! . . . And in the rôle of my servant. He takes his teeth out and turns his eyes in, you know. And his own Mama wouldn’t know him. At least, I hope not, for Mama’s sake.”

“Well, I’ll take his eyes out and put his teeth in—in the eye-sockets,” promised Riccoli.

“I doubt it,” smiled Le Sage. “In fact, Major Riccoli, I should advise you to give up all ideas and thoughts of that kind. I would think of your latter end, if I were you. It’s going to be an end of a wholly different kind from that which you have so long promised yourself . . . and it draws near.”

Major Riccoli smiled and brushed this aside with a wave of his hand.

“Uninteresting, Le Sage. Boring. But there’s one point that does interest me, I confess.”

The door opened and Otho Bellême, saluting, announced that Sergeant-Major Vittorelli was in the hands of Major Langeac, also in the punishment cell.

“Good. And your three compatriots?”

“Present, *mon Colonel*.”

“Good. You four will await me outside this door.”

“Well, Major Riccoli—the point of interest you mentioned?”

“Yes. It’s this. Why exactly did you choose to-night for this—er—exhibition?”

“I’ll tell you. I am worried, anxious and nervous. Really frightened. For I don’t quite know where I stand. I paid a visit, to-day, to the apartment of your—shall we say, competitor and exemplar in loyalty, honour and fidelity—the Kaid’s Vizier, Señor Pedro Maligni who, besides being the Kaid’s confidential adviser, is also my scoundrelly paid hireling.

“Now whether he was not only double-crossing, but treble-crossing, me, I don’t know. But after I had had his assurance that we were secure in the most perfect privacy, and that I could safely say what I’d got to say, I suddenly became aware that I wasn’t so sure of this. I’ve developed a sixth sense, you know, Major Riccoli . . .”

Riccoli smiled.

“. . . And I felt a . . . what the Americans call ‘le *hunch*,’ yes, a hunch, a suspicion, a *je-ne-sait-quoi*, a feeling, that we were not alone; and the devil of it was that I’d said all sorts of dangerous things, given away all sorts of deadly secrets.

“Not only dangerous and deadly for me, but also for the noble Señor Pedro Maligni. We’d said enough between us, to send us both to the torture chamber,” added Le Sage.

“Then obviously, my good Le Sage, Pedro Maligni was fooling you. He was giving you away to somebody who already knew Maligni’s game, but didn’t know yours.”

“Well, I know I’m a simpleton, Major Riccoli, and easily tricked—but I don’t think you are right on this occasion, because there’s nobody in the Citadel or in the town or, for the matter of that, in all Mekazzen, who knows that Maligni is a bought spy and traitor, except his worthy son, Jules. And, granted that, why on earth do you suppose

Pedro Maligni should sit there and show his hand, betray himself, and label himself for what he is, simply in order to betray me?

"Anyhow, there it was. Someone was listening, and the game was up. If Pedro Maligni knew—then I was trapped. If he didn't know—then we were both trapped, and my one idea was to get out of the trap as quickly as possible. So I politely bade the noble Pedro to hold his tongue for a moment, because I wanted to think.

"I did. I also wanted to hear . . . And to smell . . . And perhaps to see . . .

"For, among the few qualifications which I possess for this sort of work, are abnormally acute hearing, and sense of smell. And, come to think of it, it was through this last sense, that the feeling of danger had communicated itself to me. In fact, I 'snuffed the tainted breeze,' Major Riccoli. Quite unconsciously at first . . ."

Major Riccoli yawned.

"You seem to have several attributes in common with the brute creation, Le Sage," he observed.

". . . but now, quite consciously. I inhaled deeply, though silently, through my nose. Again and again; savouring the scent—as you say, like an animal scenting danger. And it was a scent, literally. Scent used on the person, or possibly a scented hair-wash or hair-oil, and it was a scent that I knew. In my stupid way, I take note of these things, you see, Major Riccoli. And in a very few seconds I knew where I'd smelt that particular perfume before.

"I knew who used it. I knew who was listening. But

strain my ears as I might, I could not hear a sound. Not the faintest sound of breathing; not the slightest creak of boot, or *hezaam*; not the slightest suggestion of the rustle of a silken *djellabia* against a *kaftan*, *jubba* or *jerd*."

"But why bother about a sound, since you'd smelt your man out, my good Le Sage?" asked Riccoli patiently. "Like a damned witch-doctor," he added.

"Because in my childish way, I'd got hold of the idea that it might be quite a good thing to know just where he was, or just where he was not—behind my back, *par exemple* . . .

"But no . . . And I tried hard to see . . ."

"See?" inquired Riccoli languidly. "Were you in darkness then?"

"Oh no, plenty of light . . . But there again—my incurable childishness—I have made something of a study of the natural hang of curtains, *arras*, hangings. And I have noticed that these things move when people move them."

"No!" breathed Riccoli.

"Yes," replied Le Sage.

"They do.

"These did.

"As I looked, I softly whispered to Maligni something quite ordinary and harmless and non-committal—and at about five and a half feet from the ground, a little bulge appeared in the curtain, the sort of little bulge that a man's head might make, as he leant forward the better to hear what was being whispered so confidentially. So, in my stupid way, Major Riccoli, I'd stumbled on the truth. I was right.

"*Mon Dieu*, I was frightened. Wouldn't you have been, Major Riccoli?"

“I do not know what fear is,” replied Riccoli, with a wave of the hand.

“No? I envy you . . . I envy you, Major Riccoli. Now what would you have done in those circumstances?”

“I? I would have drawn my pistol and fired straight into the middle of the bulge. And then I should have fired again, a foot lower.”

“But suppose I had done that, and it had proved to be you, Major Riccoli? What a catastrophe!”

“Well, it was not I,” objected Riccoli.

“No, it was not. As a matter of fact, I knew quite well who it was. But what I didn’t know, was whether the person behind the *arras* also had a pistol, drawn, cocked, and pointing at me. And not having your ignorance of fear, I was not brave enough to risk it.

“So I just sat tight, gave away no more secrets, if there were any left to give, and, as soon as I reasonably could, took my departure in as natural a manner as I could contrive. But I don’t mind confessing, I had a *mauvais quart d’heure*, from the time I’d seen that bulge.

“For the man who stood behind that curtain was —*Raisul*.”

“If so, why didn’t he kill you then and there?”

“I wonder. Probably because he hadn’t a pistol after all. More probably, because (as with my poor efforts at psychological study, I read Raisul) he far prefers the game of cat and mouse. It would be beyond Raisul, if I read him aright, to refrain from playing with his mouse, once he had caught him. His mice, in this case. The noble Señor Pedro Maligni and his worthy son, Jules; and I.

“Oh yes,” continued Le Sage. “That is Raisul’s way. He’s hugging himself with joy at having caught out the Malignis in their vile treachery, and at having nabbed me as an inimical French agent, who completely hoodwinked him in the rôle of a friendly German one.

“Yes! Friend Raisul is fairly licking his chops, and there’s ‘a smile on the face of the tiger,’ if you know the little English rhyme . . . It would be rather interesting to know what he has decided to do with us, and whether he has yet told the Kaid about me—*and* the Malignis.”

“They still go in for the wall-hooks here, you know,” observed Major Riccoli. “But you may be lucky . . . get it near a vital spot, and die in a few hours.”

“Oh, that’s only to finish up with,” laughed Le Sage. “Do you know what they did to a poor devil of a *sous-officier* and his men whom they cut off from Joffre’s column and captured alive? No?”

“No.”

“Well, I do. Langeac, in the rôle of my servant, has made lots of friends among the underlings here. Ibrahim the Lion is a great pal of his, and he’s by way of being Lord High Executioner and First Torturer.

“They blinded them with hot irons, cut off their hands and feet, and then put them one by one into a stone pit, sunk in the floor of the big dungeon . . . A deep place with inward-curving sides, that no one can climb out of. And the bottom of that pit was alive with ‘tame’ scorpions . . .

“It still is, Major Riccoli,” added Le Sage, as he eyed Riccoli steadfastly.

Riccoli sat up suddenly.

“Le Sage!” he said sharply, “did you talk of me to Pedro

Maligni? Did you tell him that I . . . ?”

“Well?” asked Le Sage, as Riccoli stopped. “Did I tell him that you . . . ?”

“Did you tell him anything about me?”

“Oh, quite a lot. Oh yes.”

“Le Sage, you’d never hand me, a fellow white man, a compatriot, a brother officer . . . you’d never hand me over to this devil, Raisul, to be tortured . . .”

“But you do not know what fear is, Riccoli.”

“True enough, true enough . . . I have never known fear. But to be blinded with a red-hot meat-skewer . . . to have one’s hands hacked off . . . one’s feet . . .”

Riccoli shuddered.

“There’s one thing . . . One would bleed to death very quickly,” he said.

“No . . . no . . . Not according to Ibrahim the Lion. You see they instantly plunge the mutilated stump into boiling pitch, thus stopping hemorrhage at once . . .

“You’re looking quite pale, Riccoli,” he added.

“Look here, Le Sage, for God’s sake tell me plainly, and let me know the worst.”

“The *worst*, Major Riccoli, is that you, a French officer, are, for your own private gain, a traitor to France.”

“Answer my question, Le Sage. Have you betrayed me to Raisul? And are you going to let him torture me?”

“*Betrayed* you to Raisul! Betrayed *you* to Raisul! No, Major Riccoli, not intentionally. Nor do I propose to hand you over to him. I am going to deal with you myself.”

Silence fell between the two men, while hungrily Riccoli eyed his pistol on the table beside Le Sage.

“Yes,” observed that officer at length. “I’ll take that pistol with me . . .

“So now you know why I am acting to-night, Riccoli. Anticipating you, Raisul, the Kaid, and for all I know, the honourable Malignis themselves.”

A look of cunning came into the eyes of Riccoli.

“The Kaid,” he said. “Raisul may have told him? Warned him?” and obviously he speculated upon the turn that this fact might give to events, especially to the affairs of the accursed Colonel Le Sage.

“Possibly,” agreed Le Sage. “Almost probably, in fact. But Raisul takes his own line—and it may cross that of the Kaid.”

“And you have an appointment with the Kaid . . .”

“To-night,” agreed Le Sage. “Now, in fact.”

Riccoli said nothing, but his face spoke volumes.

“Oh no,” laughed Le Sage in answer to Riccoli’s unuttered thought. “He won’t get me, Riccoli—though I’m banking on my belief that he thinks he will . . . In my stupid blundering way, I figure it out that my arrest—and its unpleasant *sequelæ*—are billed for to-night, and that is why I chose to-night for ‘staging this exhibition’ as you called it.

“My hand was forced, you see . . . Now I really must go . . .”

Picking up Riccoli’s pistol from the table, Le Sage went to the door.

“Bellême!” he called.

Otho entered and saluted.

“Which of your three is the staunchest, steadiest man?” he asked. “The man with the best head as well as the coolest courage.”

"*Légionnaire* Mummery, *mon Colonel*," replied Otho.

"Fetch him in."

"You see this officer," said Le Sage to Mummery, as Joe halted, saluted and stood rigidly at attention before him. "He is not to leave this room—alive . . . Lock the door after me, and do not open it until I knock—three times, then twice, then once, like this. If anyone else knocks in the ordinary way, take no notice whatever. If force is used, and the door is burst open—shoot this officer instantly—and then defend yourself. Understand?"

"*Oui, mon Colonel*."

"Good. Load your rifle fully. And do not hesitate to use it."

Le Sage turned to Riccoli.

"You'll find this man incorruptible, Major Riccoli," he said. "Also prompt in executing—orders. So let's hope none of your friends or followers knocks the door down, in search of you . . . If all goes well with me, I shall see you again later. If not—I am afraid the door will be burst open by someone or other . . . eventually."

CHAPTER XIII

"Follow me, and move quietly," ordered Le Sage, and led the way to the barrack-room of the *légionnaires*. . . .

"*Garde à vous! Fixe!*" ordered the senior Sergeant, as Le Sage entered, followed by Major Langeac, who had joined him at the door.

"Absolutely all right. Loyal, to a man," was the report of the latter. "I don't say that a few of them wouldn't have thrown in their lot with Riccoli, if he had brought it off and then declared himself. Anyhow, they're spoiling for a fight —as always.

"They're a fine lot, aren't they? I gained a very good impression of them, when I was watching them at *Poste* One, and from what I have seen of them here.

"First class. Picked men, of course. Not a more dependable gang in the French army, or any other."

"Well, I want three more, for my job," said Le Sage . . . "You, Bellême, pick me the three best men here—men you'd like to command for a forlorn hope, or have with you in a tight corner."

Otho called three names. Petrovitch. Poussin. Soif.

"Good. Fall in outside—the six of you."

"Carry on, Langeac, and good luck to you. Parade outside: a last word to the men: and then march off as though you owned the place.

"The Kaid and Raisul think Riccoli is not going to double-cross them until the rest of his column arrives. And as they don't connect me with Riccoli's show at all—I think we shall bring it off without firing a shot.

“Got it all clear? I go and collar the Kaid and Raisul—before they collar me; and you seize all strategic points meanwhile . . . main gate, magazine, store-houses, water-tank, barracks, and all exits and entrances—gently relieving all sentries and substituting our own . . . Unless Maligni is playing a game of his own, the pass-word is ‘*Sheshuan*,’ and I doubt if, in the absence of the Kaid and Raisul, you’ll meet with any opposition. Everybody will be too flabbergasted—especially as you have the pass-word.

“Good-bye, old chap. Good luck . . . One of us is bound to succeed—and therefore both. The one who has the Castle has the Kaid—and he who has the Kaid, as hostage, can get the Castle . . .”

The two officers shook hands.

“Good-bye, Sir,” smiled Langeac, “but I shall meet you again within the hour, at the flag-staff on the Sultan Tower . . .”

Le Sage joined his chosen six.

“Now follow me, in single file,” he ordered, “and step like—er—ballet-girls.”

§ 2

A few minutes later, at the foot of a flight of winding stairs, Le Sage signalled his men to halt and gather round him.

“Listen,” he said, “and make no mistake. There may be some fighting. If so, let no man fire a shot until I do. If I use my revolver, then shoot. Or, if we’re fired at, fire back. But if possible, I want there to be no noise. Understand, Bellême?

“We’re going to capture the Kaid, and unless we have been betrayed, it will be an easy job. If we have been betrayed, it will be our last job. Come on.”

At the top of the winding stair, the party was met by a short, stout, Moorish-looking man in hooded *burnous* and *djellabia*, who held a whispered conference with Le Sage.

“It’s all right,” whispered the Señor Pedro Maligni. “I sent Mahommed Ali el Amin off to his quarters, with a false order from the Kaid. Also, the Officer of the Guard. Langeac will find that they’ll sleep pretty heavily to-night.

“There will be nobody in the private audience-chamber when I admit you. And no one will come with the Kaid except myself, Abu Talib Zerhoun, and Ibrahim the Lion. Your men can deal with them? Good! . . .”

“And Raisul?” asked Le Sage.

“Raisul’s with Jules. Raisul, too, is going to sleep soundly to-night!”

The hands of the Señor Pedro Maligni trembled as he plucked at his lips.

“I say, Colonel,” he whispered. “D’you think it’s . . . safe?”

“Of course not,” replied Le Sage. “Not in the least. I should say it is most extremely dangerous! The Kaid is quite as clever as you, and a little more, shall we say, warlike. If he knows about you—and about me—it’s a matter of minutes . . .

“Dangerous, *ma foi*! But then you’ve played a very dangerous game, *mon cher* Maligni.”

“And I get my reward, *hein*? The other half?” reminded Maligni.

“If I get the Castle, you get your reward; rest assured of

that. . . . It is about time we got into the audience-room."

"Yes. And for the love of God, make no noise . . ."

"Lead on," said Le Sage.

Having climbed another stair, and traversed several passages, the party, guided by the Señor Pedro Maligni, halted at a small and heavy door, set in a thick stone wall. This, the latter unlocked, and with a warning gesture that commanded caution and silence, led the way into a small octagonal room, furnished, as to the walls, with deep cushioned divans and silken hangings.

Opposite a kind of throne, was a semicircle of settees of European origin, arranged so that people having private audience of the Kaid might be seated face to face with him, and facing him from a lower level.

"Stand here," whispered Maligni to Le Sage, indicating the settee, "as though you were going to take your place on the divan as soon as the Kaid is seated on the throne . . . Now then, the men must hide."

"Bellême," ordered Le Sage, "lie on the ground behind the settee, close to where I'm going to sit. You next to him," he added, pointing to the *Légionnaire* William Bossum.

"No, your feet to his feet . . . Close up against the settee . . . That's right. You, the other side of Bellême," he added, addressing Sailor Harris. "Feet to his head . . . That's right.

"You other three get behind curtains. Quick. That all right from where you're standing, Maligni?"

Señor Pedro Maligni, waiting by another small door opposite to the one by which they had entered, took stock of the room.

"That's all right," he said. "I can see no one but you. I'll

go for the Kaid, locking the door behind me. The Kaid himself has the only other key. He'll unlock the door, and probably lead the way into the room, followed by Ibrahim the Lion and Abu Talib Zerhoun.

"It will be supposed that I am following—and that the four of us, headed by Ibrahim the Lion, will deal with you when the moment comes . . . But instead of following, I shall stand aside, and when the three have entered the room, I shall quietly close the door, lock it from without, and leave the key in the lock.

"When you hammer on the door, four double knocks, I shall know that all is well, and will open it."

"And suppose I never do. What then?" smiled Le Sage maliciously.

"God knows," shuddered Pedro Maligni. "My fate will be worse than yours," he added as he went out, locking the door behind him.

"Now, my lads," said Le Sage quietly, "when I shout '*À moi*,' jump to it. No shooting. Rifle-butts will do our business . . . bayonets, if necessary. Get comfortable and keep still, for God's sake. Our lives hang on a thread . . ."

Five minutes that seemed like five hours.

Ten minutes that seemed like ten days.

A quarter of an hour that seemed like a quarter of a century.

Appalling silence.

A sound. The turning of a key in the lock.

The door opened, and the Great Kaid, Haroun Abd'allah Karim, stood in the doorway.

He gazed at Le Sage, smiled the peculiar smile that his son Raisul had inherited—and never with more sinister

meaning.

He entered the room, and like a following shadow, the giant negro, Ibrahim the Lion, stooping through the six-foot doorway, followed his master. Behind him came the Kaid's confidential scribe.

Softly the door closed behind him, and Le Sage suppressed a sigh of relief.

So far, so good.

Intent upon his victim, the Kaid noticed not the absence of his trusted Vizier, and, in the noise of his booming speech, the faint, almost inaudible sound of a turning, well-oiled key was lost.

Seating himself on the throne, his bodyguard and secretary behind him, the Kaid smiled again.

"*Aselamu, aleikum!*" he boomed. "*Baraka lowfik*, . . . The blessing of God upon you . . . *Keif halak Sidi Roumi* . . . How is your health? Well? That is well . . . Bitter as oleander would it be to my heart if the *Sidi Roumi* were not . . . well. We would have him in the completest possession of the highest health and strength, that he may get the fullest enjoyment from life . . . such life as may remain to him, by the Grace of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate."

Le Sage bowed, and seated himself.

Was that door locked?

Was Maligni being honest in his dishonour, faithful in his falsity?

"I trust that Allah the Merciful, the Compassionate, will not only give the Great Kaid many long years of health, but to me at least an equal number in which I may know that he is—er—safe . . . Safe, where no enemy can reach him, and

. . .”

Leaning back upon his throne, his great jewelled sword across his knees, the Kaid gave vent to his humour in the great roaring laugh, so merry and so hearty, for which he was not only famous, but feared. In Mekazzen and beyond, it was known as the Laugh of Death, for the Great Kaid laughed thus when he killed or tortured men.

And scarcely had that leonine roar of dreadful laughter begun, and while its deep diapason yet shook its maker, there was another roar, a shout, a cry in Cockney English.

“My Gawd! *It’s ’im! It’s ’im!*” as Sailor Harris sprang to his feet. “That’s the ole bastard! ’E ’ung my chum on the ’ooks!”

And, leaping the settee as he shouted, Sailor Harris, his fixed bayonet at the charge, rushed upon the Kaid.

Even as Le Sage sprang to his feet, the madman lunged and drove the long lean bayonet through the heart of the Kaid.

“Take that, you bloody torturer . . . you bastard . . .” shouted the *cafard*-stricken Harris, as he drew forth his bayonet and stabbed again.

“*À moi!*” shouted Le Sage, striking Ibrahim the Lion on the side of the head with all his strength, as the latter stooped to seize the Kaid’s sabre.

As Ibrahim staggered and almost fell, Otho leapt upon him, bringing him to the ground, while William Bossum, with excess of zeal, gave the unfortunate scribe so heavy a right-hander on the point of his jaw, that he crashed to the ground, and lay as one dead.

In a moment, four *légionnaires* hung upon the arms and legs of Ibrahim the Lion, while another tickled his throat

with the point of his bayonet.

Ibrahim the Lion sighed, relaxed, closed his eyes and lay still.

A strange silence fell upon the room, after that fierce and tragic activity. A brief calm after a brief storm.

"Well, my man," said Le Sage, turning to the panting Sailor Harris, "you've solved a problem—with the bayonet. What were your orders?"

"I forgot meself, Sir," panted Sailor Harris. "'E laughed like that when 'e killed my chum an' tortured me. 'E'd have 'ad you on the 'ooks, Sir."

"What were your orders?"

"To keep still an' quiet, an' 'op up when you said '*À moi*.' "

"Why did you disobey them?"

"I see red, Sir. I went mad when I 'eard 'im laugh."

"We'll call it that, then . . . *cafard*. All right, now?"

"Yes, Sir."

Suddenly there was a swift, tremendous swirl of struggling humanity.

Ibrahim the Lion had suddenly drawn up his legs, flexed his mighty arms, shot out his feet, sent flying the man whose bayonet was at his throat, crashed together the heads of the men who held his arms, and struggled free.

Leaping like a man of indiarubber to his feet, he snatched his master's sword and sprang at Le Sage, with a high wild cry in some unknown tongue, the tongue of his childhood in the buried jungle village, whence the slave-raiders had dragged him.

Ere the great shining blade could descend, and cleave

Le Sage's skull, Otho struck.

With his bare fist he drove a tremendous well-timed smashing blow between the giant's eyes, driving him staggering back.

Springing in, Otho crashed in a left and right, drove a tremendous right at the negro's mark, and, with his left, seized the wrist of his sword-hand—and fell as his foot slipped in the pool of blood on the marble floor.

Ibrahim the Lion wrenched free his sword-hand, and whirled up the sabre, once more to decapitate a man.

Otho flung up his arm to guard his head, and Sailor Harris again sprang.

"You too . . . you black bastard . . ." he roared, as he lunged.

Ibrahim the Lion, a lion to the last, died beside the master for whom he had lived, and from whom he had received nothing but—permission to live.

"Thanks, Harris," whispered Otho, as he rose.

"Joe'd 'it me on the nose, mate, if anything 'ad 'appened to you," was the adequate reply.

Le Sage gave directions for the scribe, who still appeared to be unconscious, to be bound and gagged.

"We'll come back here afterwards," said he, and then struck four double knocks upon the door, with the butt of the pistol he had taken from Riccoli.

The key was immediately turned in the lock and the door opened.

"All's well," said Le Sage, as Maligni stood in the doorway.

§ 3

But with the Señor Pedro Maligni, obviously all was not well.

Trembling from head to foot, with tears streaming down his cheeks, with shaking, clutching hands and broken voice, he implored Le Sage's instant help.

"What's wrong, man? Pull yourself together," urged Le Sage. "What is it? Has Langeac . . . ?"

"My son, my son," wept Maligni. "Come quickly, Colonel. Something terrible has happened . . . Raisul . . ."

"Yes? Raisul . . . ? It's Raisul I want now. I thought your son was going to—ensure that he slept well to-night."

"Come quickly, Colonel," begged Maligni again, seizing Le Sage's wrist in his urgency. "This man is dumb," and he indicated Hassan el Miskeen who stood behind him, mopping and mowing, gibbering and gesticulating, and apparently in even worse case than Maligni himself.

"He's dumb. The Kaid tore his tongue out, but he's trying to tell me something about Jules and Raisul. One of them has killed the other, and I fear it is my son . . . my son . . . my only son . . . who is dead."

And so great was the grief and horror of Hassan el Miskeen that he, too, even dared to pluck at Le Sage's sleeve.

"Raisul, the Kaid's son? This way?" asked Le Sage, in Arabic.

And the dumb slave, darting forward, turned and beckoned . . . beckoned . . . dumbly calling Le Sage on, as does a dog that would lead its master to some tragic spot.

Le Sage hung in doubt for but a second.

Were these Malignis in league with Raisul? A case of,

"The Kaid is dead, long live the Kaid"?

Had Pedro Maligni known that Raisul was hiding in Maligni's room, that day, during their quiet little private talk? A plot, a plant to show Raisul, the Rising Star, how the clever and faithful Maligni had fooled and caught the French officer who pretended to be a German friend and ally?

"Lead on in front of me, Maligni," he said, and gave the Señor Pedro Maligni a gentle push—with the muzzle of his cocked revolver.

A nod is as good as a wink to a man with perfect eyesight.

"Come along, men—no noise," ordered Le Sage.

"Yes, yes, come on," cried Maligni, and Le Sage decided that the man's state was genuine, and that he was in the grip of a most powerful emotion—sweating, weeping, trembling with horror, fear and grief.

His very colour had changed.

Running forward like a hound, waiting at corners, dashing forward again and doubling back to see that he was being followed, Hassan el Miskeen at length brought the party to a low horse-shoe doorway, from which a stone stair wound up in the thickness of the wall, and ended in another low doorway which gave upon a lofty battlement, bathed in brilliant moonlight.

Rushing forward, Hassan el Miskeen dashed, pointing and gibbering, to where a rope, looped round an embrasure-upright, dangled down the wall.

Craning through an embrasure, Le Sage saw that the rope just reached to a small balcony that jutted out from the wall, a dozen feet below.

“El Sidi Raisul?” he asked of Hassan who, with violent noddings of the head, stabbed downward with his pointing finger.

“Down there, is he? You saw him go down the rope?”

More violent gesticulations and noddings of the head.

“And my son . . . my son Jules . . . my only son . . . ?” cried the distraught Maligni in a voice of anguish.

“Bellême,” said Le Sage. “You know Raisul by sight. Here’s your chance. Down you go, man, and *get* him for me. *Get* him, alive or dead, and I’ll . . .”

“*Oui, mon Colonel* . . . Alive or dead,” and whipping his bayonet from his rifle, Otho sheathed it, stood his rifle against the wall, and, gripping the rope tightly with hands and legs, slid down it to the balcony below.

CHAPTER XIV

Meanwhile, after dinner that same evening, Jules Maligni having arisen from the cushion on which he was seated cross-legged, bare-footed and comfortable, yawned, stretched himself, and eyed his cousin Raisul.

"Come and have coffee with me, Raisul, since you won't have anything better. I've got something good to show you. Something really good, I'll give you my word."

Raisul raised his long-lashed, long-lidded eyes and regarded Jules Maligni with a considering look. He then smiled—not at his cousin, but at some secret thought; a smile that was a warning and a danger-signal to any wise beholder.

"Yes, my dear Jules," he said at length. "Do you know, I think I will. Yes. I have a sort of feeling, *mon vieux*, that now's the hour—for a cup of coffee with you in your nice room. And I'm quite sure you'll show me something good . . . something really good."

And rising to his feet, he linked his arm through that of his cousin, smote the girl Sara more or less playfully on the cheek, and accompanied Jules from the garden, softly singing a light love-song.

Outside the door of Jules' bachelor quarters sat Hassan el Miskeen. To him, Jules Maligni made a sign, closing his fist, save for the index and little fingers which pointed straight at Hassan's face, unseen by Raisul.

"Coffee, Hassan, quickly," said he.

Swiftly Hassan departed, and, a few moments later, was seated in his near-by stone cell, before a small brazier

wherein a fire perpetually smouldered, and water was ready for the making of coffee or mint-tea at any time.

In his left hand, he held over the fire a huge shallow spoon of copper, and slowly dropped into it the coffee berries which he was going to roast. Convenient to his right hand was an iron rod for keeping the roasting berries moving, the mortar in which he would grind them when sufficiently roasted, and the big straight-spouted coffee-pot in which he would make his brew.

Having accomplished all things to his satisfaction, Hassan el Miskeen now departed from his accustomed unchanging ritual.

Pulling a stone from the wall, he put his hand into the aperture thus disclosed, and brought forth a tiny amulet-box.

From this he shook a quantity of dirty white powder into the coffee-pot.

This was a thing he had not done for many many long years. Not since El Isa Beth El Ain had entertained, at tea, the lady whom Miriam, Hassan el Miskeen's sister, had overheard in most unguarded and undesirable conversation —with the Kaid himself—on the subject of El Isa Beth el Ain.

Allah had afflicted the lady with a violent illness after tea, and she had died that night. Very sad.

And now this hell-doomed fiend, Raisul, son of the thrice-accursed devil, the Kaid (who had torn out Hassan's tongue and tried to kill Hassan's adored master, Jules, whose life when a baby Hassan had saved), this evil Raisul was to drink of the Draught That Causes Death.

In'shallah!

Hassan's young master had given the order, and the

order should be obeyed. Obeyed with alacrity; obeyed with joy.

Let him who so loved torture, feel that burning torture in his own belly. Let that slayer die, and let the father of that slayer, who had deprived so many others of their sons, himself learn what it is to lose a son.

They would put Hassan's master the Sidi Jules in danger, would they? Cause him to go, as he had told Hassan, in fear of his life . . . ? *Ha!*

And smacking his lips, Hassan el Miskeen stirred the brew once more, and then hurried with laden tray to his master's room.

When Hassan el Miskeen entered that room, he found his master seated cross-legged upon a divan, a bottle of brandy and a glass upon a low table by his side.

Seated opposite to him, lolling in comfort, smoking a cigarette, Raisul smiled enigmatically.

"Put the coffee beside the Sidi," ordered Jules.

And having obeyed, Hassan el Miskeen departed from the room, and sat himself down within sight of the door, to watch and to wait.

Would that human devil be taken ill there in the room?

Would he actually die there in the room? Might Hassan be called, to go quickly for help, and looking into the room, might he actually see him contorted and writhing in the throes of death; with his own eyes see him dying there in dreadful agony, even as he had caused so many others to die in agony? . . .

“Coffee, Raisul?” said Jules Maligni casually.

“Thanks, Jules. I think I will . . . Any idea as to what became of Bellême when Ibrahim handed him over, drunk and incapable?”

“Doing time, I suppose,” smiled Jules. “Do you want him again?”

“May do. Shall do, in fact, by-and-bye, unless Margaret . . .”

“Yes?”

“Ah!”

“Don’t let the coffee get cold. Shall I pour you out a cup?”

“Oh, thanks. I will.”

And smiling, almost chuckling, at his thoughts, Raisul poured himself a cup of coffee.

“Aren’t you going to have a *demi-tasse*, Jules?” he asked, nodding towards the brandy bottle.

“Rather. I was only waiting until you . . .”

“Oh, don’t wait for me, my dear chap,” and Raisul stirred his coffee.

Jules poured himself a generous measure of brandy, observed,

“ ‘Here’s to us, for there’s none like us’—let’s hope,” and drank.

“God,” he said, “that tastes—funny,” and smacked his lips and clicked his tongue doubtfully.

“Brandy wrong, or your liver?” smiled Raisul, still stirring the untasted coffee. “Rub your tongue with a lemon and take a dose of salts to-night.”

“My liver’s all ri’,” protested Jules, who suddenly seemed a little drunk.

“So’s the brandy,” replied Raisul. “Try it again.”

Jules Maligni tried it again.

“’Snasty,” he said. “Bin in boll too long . . .”

Raisul laughed.

“Look here, aren’t you going to drink your—hic-coffee?”

Raisul again laughed merrily.

“No, I don’t think I’ll drink any coffee to-night, Jules, you half-baked Borgia.”

“Whassyou say?”

“I said, ‘Come along to my room now.’ I’m going to show *you* something. Something really good, I’ll give you my word. Come on with you.”

§ 2

“Rope!” observed Raisul to Jules Maligni as they sat in the former’s room a few minutes later. “Nice strong rope that. Strong without being thick. None of your esparto-grass or palm-fibre rubbish. That would bear a man’s weight, wouldn’t it, my good Jules?”

“Rather.” And Jules Maligni laughed inanely, vacantly.

“Bear your weight, wouldn’t it, Jules, if it were round your neck.”

“I should shay sho,” laughed the other, less vacantly.

“Even with a six-foot drop, eh?”

“Sh-shurely,” laughed Maligni uncomfortably.

“Yes, a very nice rope,” continued Raisul, “and it gives me a very nice idea . . . Strong enough and, I think, long enough.”

“For what?” asked Jules Maligni.

“I’ll show you, as I promised. Great idea. Come along,” and going to the door, Raisul bade Jules Maligni bring the rope.

“Is thy servant a—hic—dog?” asked Maligni.

“No, I don’t want it for a lead,” was the reply. “But I want you and the rope, and I don’t want a servant with us: so bring it along.”

“I say, you know, old chappie, you don’t think you’re going to—hic—hang me, do you?”

“No, I am not going to—hic—hang you. Come along, will you?”

And followed obediently by his companion with the rope, and soon by Hassan el Miskeen, Raisul proceeded, by devious ways, to a distant part of the Citadel.

Emerging from a stairway that led up through the thickness of the wall, the two came out into the stillness and silence of the moonlit night, upon a stretch of high deserted battlement.

Hassan el Miskeen, secretly following, as usual, his young master Jules Maligni, remained watching in the shadow of the stairway door.

“This is the place,” said Raisul at length. “At least, I think it is. I want you to lean through that embrasure and hang over, and tell me what you can see straight below. Be very careful, and don’t lean out too far.”

Jules Maligni obeyed his cousin, as always.

“Only a lill bal-balandah.”

“Do you mean a veralcony?”

“Yesh. Tha’s ri’. No, tha’s wrong. You’re drunk, Raisul. It’s a balcally. An’ I’ll tell you another thing,” he added, with owlish gravity. “It’s my balcally. I mean it was

my lill balcally when I had a lill balcally."

"Ah, I thought it would be about there," said Raisul. "How d'you know it's yours?"

"I know that *barada* thing, with that cup sitting beside it. Thass my rug, too."

"Good. Now come to the next embrasure. See anything below that? Don't lean out too far."

Again Jules obeyed.

"No. Nothing there. Can't see any—hic—thing. Only the rocks.

"And they're too far to see," he giggled.

"Ah!" observed Raisul. "All clear, eh? Right. Now stand up like a man, straight and steady, and look at the horizon. What can you see?"

"Nothing. Can't see any—hic—thing."

"Well, you will in a moment," replied Raisul and, standing behind Maligni, he swiftly bent over backward and raised his foot as does the *savate* fighter, with back-drawn knee.

Suddenly, with tremendous force and swiftness, the foot shot out, the sole taking Maligni squarely between the shoulder-blades, and hurling him forward.

His legs struck the edge of the low embrasure, and with a gasping cry he threw out his arms and clutched wildly at the embrasure sides, as, head foremost, he fell—and disappeared over the Castle wall . . .

Down . . . down . . . down . . . turning and turning in mid-air, to strike the jackal-haunted rocks in the deep ravine, three hundred feet below.

Leaning out through the wide embrasure Raisul stared down into the depths.

"Can you see anything *now*, you damned dog?" he whispered. "Do you see the way to the Seventh Hell reserved for traitors to their salt . . . the Hell especially kept for pariah curs that bite the hand that feeds them? You'd sell me to your 'Herr Schlacht' Le Sage, and the French, would you? . . . And thus shall my father deal with yours."

And having spat, Raisul turned away.

"And now for the little rope-trick," quoth he, and smiled his own especial smile.

CHAPTER XV

What was to be the end of it all—the end of her—Margaret wondered as she again assured herself that the huge key of her door was turned as far as it would go, and that both the great heavy bolts were shot home.

Thank God for bolts. Evil-disposed persons can tamper with locks, and keys can be turned from the outside by those who have the tools; but bolts are bolts and can only be manipulated from the inside.

Having undressed, she went to the little stone verandah-balcony built out from the wall of the room, that vast wall, ten feet thick even at this great height, which was part of the outer wall of the Castle itself.

Thank God again for this same great height—full three hundred feet of wall and of stone precipice—from which she looked down toward the ravine, the jagged rocks, and the desert plain below.

There was safety in such height, for no ladder could scale it, no human being, by any possible means, climb that smooth rock face which imperceptibly merged into the scarcely smoother wall.

One had heard of wonderful feats of escalade, of course—shooting arrows with string attached to them, string by means of which a strong cord could be hauled up, a cord by which a rope ladder could be hauled up . . . But that pre-supposed a traitor within the citadel, one who would do the hauling . . . And there was no traitor here . . . No husband—reliance upon whom would be worse than foolish.

Thank God, once more, that the room had but the one

door; and the one "window," three hundred feet above danger: and that she was young and strong and active: and that she had the pistol, as well as the keen-edged, needle-pointed dagger . . .

Courage! . . . Courage and Faith! . . .

Yawning heavily, for sleep of late had been light, scanty and broken, Margaret turned down the wick of the kerosene lamp, flung herself down upon the over-cushioned bed, and once again tried all the sleep-wooing devices of which she had ever heard.

But what folly! What hopeless idiocy to think that she could sleep. Sleep, while Otho was lying bound and gagged, perhaps maimed for life, perhaps blinded . . . Oh . . . Oh . . .

Margaret bit her knuckles and almost screamed with pain.

Pain? What did she know of pain?

Sleep? What did she know of sleep? Would she ever sleep again?

"Duncan has murdered sleep . . ." Raisul has murdered sleep. Was she going mad?

Oh, Otho. Her own Otho . . .

Otho Bellême—and her husband Jules Maligni! How *could* she have misjudged them so . . . Fool! . . . "No fool like an old fool"? There's no fool like a young girl.

God! What was that? . . . A cry? . . .

Margaret sprang up in bed.

There had been a sound . . . movement . . .

Was that someone at the door?

Could the door be less impregnable than she had thought? Surely the bolts could not be withdrawn. But

might not a hole be cut through the heavy door itself?

Silence.

No. She was getting nervy and fanciful.

After all, she had got a husband of sorts, and was in the bosom of her family—her husband's family, anyhow—and this was the Twentieth Century—and there was a limit to even Raisul's devilish audacity and wickedness.

Or was there?

Margaret realized that she was trembling, and promptly denied the fact . . . Just shaking a little. Perhaps she was a trifle cold . . . But she had also broken into a gentle perspiration . . . Not so gentle either.

Rising from the bed, she turned up the cheap and ugly kerosene lamp, that, together with a bottle of oil, she had begged from her mother-in-law.

That was better . . . No—of course the door was all right. Solid as a rock. She must have been dozing and imagined the noise . . .

All was well . . .

And then another wave of panic, overwhelming and terrible; with swift-beating heart, a feeling of physical sickness, a pain in the pit of the stomach, a bath of perspiration, and a horrible dryness of the mouth . . .

This would not do . . .

Courage! Courage and Faith!

She must take a firm hold upon herself.

Meanwhile, a drink of water.

Rising, Margaret went to where a *barada*—a shapely vessel of porous earthenware—stood on the broad coping of the low balcony wall, a big tin cup with a large handle,

inverted over its long neck.

Having drunk, Margaret put the tin cup down beside her, and stood gazing out across the moonlit desert.

Glorious moon, and glorious African sky of dark blue velvet densely studded with great gleaming diamonds.

"On such a night" . . . had she and Otho . . . Margaret shivered, and returned to her detested bed, turned down the light and fell asleep.

God! What was that? . . .

Again Margaret sprang up.

No doubt of it, this time! A noise. A crash. No, a clatter. Still sounding in her ears.

The cup! Someone had sent it rolling, bumping and clattering across the stone floor.

Merciful Heaven, help . . . ! There was a man—standing on the coping of the balcony—clearly silhouetted against the moonlight and the luminous star-spangled sky.

A man *had* climbed up . . . Impossible . . . Three hundred feet of sheer flat cliff, smooth as the side of a house.

No. He was hanging on a rope—or holding to it, as he stood on the balcony ledge—and he had kicked the tin cup into the room as he sought foot-hold.

Had she not gone and drunk water, and left the cup there in the middle of the coping—he would have got into the room in perfect silence, and found her there . . . asleep.

Well—now he had found her awake; awake, ready and determined. Full of fight . . . Now that the hour had struck, almost glad. Thank God for the pistol . . . "More things are

wrought by prayer . . .” and pray God she did not tremble, her hand did not shake, she did not collapse.

Should she fire at once? She had a perfect right to shoot, on sight, any man who entered her room in that manner, at this hour of the night, in this country . . . And while he presented some sort of a target silhouetted against the sky. Once he was in the room, it would be more difficult, by the light of the miserable floating-wick lamp.

Margaret raised the pistol . . .

No, she couldn’t shoot the man in cold blood, without a word. But if she waited much longer, her hand certainly would begin to shake . . . Dare she turn up the light of the big kerosene lamp, or was she safer in this comparatively dark corner of the room, whence she could see better than she could be seen . . . ?

Could he see her now? Why didn’t he move? Of course, he was listening, peering. *Should* she fire . . . or speak?

She would fire.

Heavens, no! It might not be Raisul . . . And if it were Raisul—and she killed him—what would happen to them all, as soon as the Kaid knew? Things unthinkable.

Her husband and his father and mother would die by hideous torture. Her own fate would be infinitely worse if she shot him, than if . . .

The man stooped and stepped down into the balcony.

“Well?” said Margaret quietly, and turned up the lamp.

“Good evening, my dear. Wide awake, sitting up, and taking notice,” laughed the hateful voice that made her flesh creep and her blood run cold.

“One would almost have thought that you were expecting me . . . Well, well . . . You will be expecting me

. . . after to-night, though I shan't have to come down a rope."

"Stop! Stand still," cried Margaret.

"Good Heavens! A real pistol! What a desperate young woman! Now I wonder where on earth you got that thing. And I wonder whether it's loaded. And I wonder whether you can use it."

"Stop!" cried Margaret again. "Stand still. If you cross that *hazira*, I'll shoot you."

Raisul laughed.

"Well, well," he grinned. "Do you know what our poet El Faredi says? . . ."

God, her hand was beginning to ache, and to shake, and to tremble.

"He says,

" '*Be sure always to take counsel of your wife—and then do the exact opposite.*' And you're going to be my wife, darling Margaret . . . lovely Margaret . . . of whom the very *houris* of Paradise are jealous . . . But not as jealous as I, Margaret . . . I'm *mad* with jealousy. Suffering, tortured, dying . . .

"Love me, Margaret . . . have me . . . I will make you happy. I swear it by the Ninety and Nine Sacred Names of Allah . . . Love? What do these Christian dogs know of love . . . Margaret . . ."

And Raisul deliberately stepped into the middle of the *hazira* mat, just as Margaret perforce lowered her aching arm.

"Listen," she said. "I have been patient and—er—merciful. I said I would shoot you if you stepped on to the

hazira. Now I swear I'll shoot you dead if you come any nearer. Listen, Raisul, for I mean it. Step on to that *libdah*, and it will be the last step you'll ever take."

Promptly Raisul stepped on to the *libdah*.

"A praying carpet, Margaret," he smiled. "When we Mussulmans have lost the battle and wish to die, we spread out praying-mats and die on them . . .

"Shoot, Margaret!" he said, and spread his arms wide, exposing his breast.

Margaret raised the pistol.

"Shoot, Margaret!" he repeated, standing steady as a rock, smiling unflinchingly, and completely spoiling the picture with a mocking,

"You might almost get a bull's-eye, at six feet.

"No?" smiled Raisul, bowing.

Oh God, what should she do? He was edging nearer. Why didn't she shoot him as he stood there smiling at her? . . . But how could she kill him—when only too well she knew the terrible consequences.

"Shoot, Margaret!" invited Raisul for the third time. "Let me die here at your feet . . . 'For how can man die better?' "

And Raisul took another step towards the bed.

Again Margaret raised the pistol.

"Please don't make me kill you, Raisul," she said. "Have you no decency at all? You shan't die on the praying-carpet. But I swear to God you shall die if you step off it. If you move another inch I shall be justified in firing in self-defence . . .

"And look here," she added, "I'm angry . . . And you're in danger . . . You go while the going's good."

"I love danger," smiled Raisul. "Nearly as much as I

love you. Margaret first, and danger next . . . But think of the ecstasy when I've got them together in the same room . . . ! The hour, the place, and both the loved ones."

"Will you go?" cried Margaret.

"You won't be kind?"

"*Go*, will you?"

"Very well . . . Have it your own way, Margaret. You can put that pistol down. I came on an errand of mercy. I really did come to be kind . . . Are you sure you won't be?"

"For the last time, *go*."

"All right, Margaret, all right . . . I'll go . . . We'll neither of us be kind . . . Not to-night . . . I really did come to try and save his life . . . But I'll go, I'll go . . . And when I come back, it will be with his blood on my hands . . . on my hands and on your head, Margaret . . ."

"What do you mean?" whispered Margaret, and again, perforce, she lowered the pistol, that he might not see how she trembled.

"Ah! What do I mean? Do you know, I hardly like to tell you exactly what I mean. Anyhow it will be 'something with boiling oil in it.' But I tell you this—either I'll have his lips or yours . . . Do you get the point? Either I have your lips with mine, or I'll have his lips with a knife . . . That'll spoil his beauty, won't it, Margaret? That's what I tell you, Margaret, and I think you know whether I am a man who keeps all his promises—when they are threats. '*I Saye and I Doe*' is his family motto, isn't it? Well, I say—and I do twice as much . . . to an enemy, and four times as much to a rival."

Neither of them had yet mentioned a name. Margaret

had shrunk back in horror.

"You . . ." she tried to speak. "You . . ."

"Yes, I know. All very horrid. Look here, Margaret, love me, and he can go. I'll see him safe out of the country, out of the Legion, and back to England . . .

"Mind you, I've got you, and I'm going to keep you, and things will be so much pleasanter—especially for you—if you'll be sensible as well as kind . . . and surely life would be better for you, Margaret, as my wife than as my . . ."

"I have one husband already."

"That's where you're wrong, Margaret. That was another part of my errand of mercy—to tell you that Jules has met with a little accident."

"Jules? . . . An accident? . . ."

"Yes . . . and to offer the appropriate sentiments . . . er . . . condolences or congratulations. In fact, I might have shouted in the window, 'Is the Widow Maligni at home?' "

Suddenly Margaret sat down.

Her trembling knees would support her no longer.

What was this creature saying? This heartless inhuman devil . . . this deadly, dangerous, poisonous snake.

Jules dead? Even such little protection taken from her? How? . . . Dead? Raisul was lying.

"You lie. I don't believe a word of it . . . No. Keep back . . . Back, I say . . . Quick. I'll shoot."

"Yes . . . *ce pauvre* Jules is no longer with us, and *ce bon* Otho Bellême will be with us no longer—if I go now, Margaret . . . I'm going, Margaret . . . going . . . going . . ."

But Raisul did not move.

Was Jules dead?

Would this devil mutilate, torture and murder Otho?

He would . . . for he had often done such deeds and worse. The things that El Isa Beth el Ain had told her! Things that had made her shudder, though they were then but tales. True tales, but abstract, so to speak, impersonal. Just the terrible doings of terrible men, this Raisul and the Kaid, his father.

He would torture and mutilate and kill Otho. Her Otho, whom she had loved for as long as she could remember. Her hero and friend . . . whose life she had spoilt by her girlish folly.

Whose fault was it that he was now in the French Foreign Legion?

Whose fault was it that he now lay bound, hand and foot, in a dungeon of this awful castle, awaiting—not only death.

She could not visualize it. And yet she could see it with crystal clearness. His dear lips that so often had kissed hers. His eyes that had looked at her so kindly.

Oh . . . Oh . . .

"Raisul," she said. "Is there any oath that you would keep?"

"Oh yes . . . yes . . . especially to you, Margaret. Yes . . . there's an oath I'd keep . . . I'm not exactly a pious young man, but I have my little superstitions."

"Then listen. Will you swear that oath to me? That if I do not . . . give myself to you . . . you intend to torture and to kill Otho Bellême?"

"With the greatest pleasure, and absolute sincerity.

"I swear, by the Beard of the Prophet; by the Ninety and Nine Most Sacred Names of Allah; by the Head and the

Life of my father, and by my own Head and my own Life; by the Head and the Life of my son, when Allah sends him to me; by the Holy Kaaba of Mecca; by my hopes of a Paradise hereafter; and the Head and the Beard and the Bones of my sacred ancestor the great saint and *marabout*, the Sheerif Sidi Mahommed Ali el Fasi; and by your Life and your Health, I swear, that I will torture him, to the utmost of my ingenuity, until he dies.

"*El Ham du Lillah. As hadu Illaha ill Allah wa as hadu inna Mahommed an rasul Allah. I swear it.*"

"You do. And you will keep that oath?"

"I will."

"I believe you."

That settled it. If Jules were dead, he could not suffer punishment. Pedro Maligni and his wife must look out for themselves, as they had done all these years. For herself—well, never mind herself. She could, and she would, save Otho. She had spoilt his life with her folly, she'd save it now with her poor courage.

Margaret raised the pistol . . . Straight at Raisul's face.

For Otho . . .

Bang! . . .

"*Y'Allah!* . . . That was close. You pulled to the right . . . jerked . . . But you've blinded me, Margaret . . .

"Blind for life," groaned Raisul.

Raisul raised both arms, drew his silken *haik* across his face—and then suddenly, sprang like a panther.

Bang!

Too late.

Bang!

What was the use? He was breaking her wrist. But the noise might bring help.

Bang! . . . Bang!

Oh . . . Oh . . .

The pistol . . . ! He had it.

She was flung violently upon the bed, and the pistol fell clattering in the most distant corner of the room.

The knife.

Fool that she had been . . . Why had she not kept the dagger in her left hand . . . Under the pillow . . . If she could only . . .

The man was as strong as a lion . . .

Both her wrists . . .

His whole weight . . .

She could not move . . .

His foul lips . . .

Oh God, she must not faint.

What was he saying? . . .

"Do you hear, Margaret . . . do you hear? Listen to that oath again . . . the oath that I have never broken . . . the oath that I will never break. Did you hear it?

"Come to me . . . come to me willingly . . . be my queen . . . my love . . . my own . . . and Otho Bellême goes free. I swear it. See . . . I'll release you . . . There . . . Now . . . Now choose.

"And he can thank his God that your first shot missed me, for nothing on earth could have saved your damned Otho Bellême—or you—if I had died here. *No one, and nothing, can save him but me.*"

And suddenly Margaret realized that it was so.

Otho . . . !

She herself had all but caused his death—for Raisul's death meant Otho's death. . . . For once Raisul was speaking the truth.

"Raisul," she said. "You swore that if I did not give myself to you, Otho should die. Do you swear by that same oath that he shall live and go free, if I . . ."

Raisul threw himself on his knees before her, seized her hands and covered them with his burning kisses, dropped them, and flung his arms about her waist, pressing his face against her body.

"Margaret, I swear it," he cried. "I swear it now, and tomorrow I will swear it before the Mullah in the Mosque upon the world's most sacred copy of the Koran . . . the actual manuscript that belonged to the Prophet himself. I could not, and would not, and dare not break that oath—the one thing, the one and only thing, Margaret, I dare not do . . .

"Margaret, I swear . . ."

Otho . . . Otho's life . . . Unspeakable tortures . . .

And, thank God, Otho would never know.

CHAPTER XVI

No . . . Thank God, Otho would never know.

And once he was safely away from this unspeakable place, and out of this accursed country—she need not go on living.

Quite probably she wouldn't have the option.

No, she need not live a day longer than she chose, and certainly she was not going to be another Elizabeth Elaine Torson . . .

To think of the possibility of leaving behind one, another El Isa Beth el Ain to marry a Moor or a—mongrel.

Neither should it be a vain and fruitless sacrifice, losing her own life and soul without saving Otho . . . Could she trust this—this—*Moor* to keep his word?

No, not to keep his word, but somehow to keep that oath.

There was sincerity in his voice as he uttered it—a ring of sincerity and truth in place of the eternal mockery, flippancy and falsity . . .

If he cheated her she would kill him . . . Without hesitation, regret, remorse, or twinge of concience, she would kill him.

Since he believed in "getting down to elementals" as he called it, he should see what an elemental Englishwoman could do when driven to desperation by unprovoked and wanton cruelty and wickedness.

She became conscious that she was wrestling physically as well as mentally . . . thrusting with both hands against his throat.

He laughed . . . lightly . . . merrily. He was amused.

"No, no, no . . . This won't do at all . . . You've got to kiss me . . . I'm not going to do all the kissing . . . maddeningly, thrillingly wonderful as it is . . .

"Come now . . . lips on mine, and a long, long warm kiss . . . a lingering kiss . . . You show me your idea of a kiss . . . And then I'll show you mine . . . Come to life, statue . . . Stone statue . . . Ice . . . Frozen hard . . . and staring . . . What the devil *are* you staring at?"

Turning about, Raisul followed Margaret's incredulous hypnotized gaze, and lithe and swift as a springing panther, leapt to his feet.

Margaret made no sound. Her contracted throat and parched lips refused.

A man stood where Raisul had stood, when she was awakened from sleep.

Leaving his hold upon the rope, he jumped down into the room.

Otho!

"*Ah!*" said Otho Bellême, with a sound of unfathomable satisfaction. "*Raisul ben Abd'allah Karim*."

Without taking his eyes from those of his adversary, Raisul bent sideways to the low table on which he had laid his long dagger, drew it from its sheath, and advanced, poised and crouching.

With a laugh that belied the look upon his face,

"Another visitor, Margaret!" he said. "Very much 'at home' to-night, aren't you? I'm afraid I've overstayed my . . ."

"Steel or bare hands?" interrupted Otho Bellême as he drew his bayonet.

“W-e-l-l,” replied Raisul, circling sideways and yet advancing as he spoke. “I think we’ll give the lady a dagger-*versus*-bayonet exhibition, eh? Bit fairer perhaps, what? Personally I’m not a professional bruiser.”

“Right,” replied Otho Bellême, holding the long thin bayonet before him, like a foil.

This ought to be a good fight, and with Margaret looking on . . . But he must go warily, for he must win—for Margaret’s sake, as well as for his own.

And he must not get angry, and he must keep cool—in spite of the fact that this was the man who had decoyed and trapped him and laid him out . . . and had made his way into Margaret’s bedroom.

Absolutely incredible.

Amazing.

Here was he, Otho Bellême, in Margaret’s room . . .

In a state of absolute funk and horror he had slid down a few feet of rope that dangled over hundreds of feet of sheer drop—in pursuit of that devil . . . And he was in Margaret’s room . . .

It was really and actually Margaret herself who, was crouching there on that bed, behind him, as he faced the circling Raisul.

Raisul sprang, and stabbed: Otho lunged and thrust, and his left hand seized Raisul’s wrist, as Raisul skilfully evaded the swift blade, and in turn, seized Otho’s right wrist.

Breast to breast. Stale-mate.

By Jove, this fellow Raisul was strong—wire, whipcord, and whalebone—but not as strong as the Champion Heavyweight of the Nineteenth Army Corps, nor

as heavy. Use weight in a moment. Strength first. A little arm-bending practice.

Yes . . . yes . . . the dagger-hand was slowly going back, back, while the hand that held the bayonet moved not at all.

Suddenly Raisul threw the whole of his weight violently forward and, mightily twisting his arm, sprang backward, releasing Otho's wrist as he did so.

Free . . .

Round one . . . And honours easy . . . This lad could fight . . . Most unsatisfactory form of fighting, though. If they'd only both had bayonets and used them as swords . . . or a good fixed-bayonet scrap . . . But this . . .

Otho sprang and drove a lightning thrust at Raisul's throat.

With equal swiftness, Raisul ducked beneath the lean sharp blade, and simultaneously slashed upward with the terrible disembowelling stroke, which will lay a man open from thigh to breast-bone.

Well for Otho Bellême that, albeit a heavy-weight, he was one of the quickest boxers of the day.

Striking swiftly downwards and sideways with lightning speed and all his strength, his left fist encountered Raisul's wrist with such force, that, as he whirled sideways, the knife fell from his hand, and clattered on the stone floor.

Disarmed, Raisul backed away from the gleaming bayonet . . . the long, lean, terrible, gleaming bayonet . . . that in an instant would be through his throat or his heart.

Setting his foot upon the knife, Otho spoke.

"There was a time when I should have told you to pick that up," he said. "I'm not quite the fool I was, but . . ."

And Otho sheathed his bayonet.

“Put up your fists,” he said, “and fight any way you can. I can’t stab you in cold blood—but, by God! . . .”

Raisul backed . . . backed . . .

“Defend yourself, man. Put your fists up, or kick, or something!”

. . . backed . . . backed . . . into the corner, stooped and rose in one swift movement—Margaret’s pistol in his hand, and levelled.

At Margaret.

Bang! . . .

At Otho.

Click.

Margaret screamed.

Otho turned his head. Her hand was pressed to her breast.

A crashing blow in the face, as the flung pistol struck him . . . and his hands closed about Raisul’s throat.

Jove! . . . but the fellow was strong . . . Strong—and agile as a cat; slippery as an eel; but, by God . . .

Free again.

Otho sprang, and Raisul kicked. Not for nothing had he been a *rabat* pupil of Ibrahim the Lion.

Otho drove a straight left.

Raisul ducked beneath it, and flung his arms about Otho’s waist.

Strong . . . Strong and tough . . . Strong as a young tiger—and a real wrestler.

This was some kind of *ju-jitsu*, or *rabat*, hold and throw—but they’d fall together . . . and when they rose, Otho would hit him, smash him, kill him.

Crash.

Down together.

A cry from Margaret.

"The knife, Otho! The knife!"

By Jove, he'd got it.

Raisul leapt to his feet, and stabbed.

Otho, rising, struck with his right, while parrying with his left—arm against arm, and no blood shed; fist against face, and no knock-out.

Margaret couldn't be mortally wounded.

Raisul feinted—feinted, dodged, feinted and struck—the fraction of a second too late.

Otho's blow sent him staggering backward.

Otho's spring and second blow sent him reeling across the room.

As he brought up against the wall beside the balcony, his arm shot forward as he flung his knife—too hurriedly.

Again Otho struck, and as Raisul side-stepped to his left, Otho smashed home a crashing right that drove Raisul heavily against the low balcony wall. With a loud cry he threw out his arms, clutched wildly at the rope, and ere Otho could seize him, fell backward across the coping . . .

Down . . . down . . . down . . . turning and turning in mid-air, to strike the jackal-haunted rocks beside the shattered body of his victim, Jules Maligni.

§ 2

After a hasty instinctive glance over the balcony at the still falling body, Otho whirled about, to find Margaret running to him . . . running to him with outstretched arms.

“’Tho darling. Oh, ’Tho . . .”

“Are you hit? Are you hurt?” cried Otho.

“No, no,” laughed Margaret shakily. “Oh, darling, I thought I was, and I’m not. I thought I was dead, and I did want to live long enough to see you kill him.”

Her arms were round his neck.

He was holding her tightly to him and stroking her hair.

“Kiss me, ’Tho . . . Kiss me, ’Tho . . . Kiss me again . . . and again . . . and again . . .

“Darling . . . darling . . .”

Neither ever knew how the next minutes passed.

At length,

“Otho, it’s incredible . . . It’s *too* wonderful. Oh, ’Tho, why *did* you go and leave me? Why *did* you join this awful Foreign Legion?”

“Didn’t you *know*? Why, so as to come down that rope at the psychological moment. Obvious, isn’t it?”

“Oh, ’Tho . . . ’Tho . . . my darling.”

Margaret could only stroke his face.

“And a few minutes ago, I was lying there thinking of you blinded and tortured and killed. ’Tho, you’ll never leave me again . . . you’ll never leave me again, will you? I couldn’t bear it.”

“Dear, I must leave you—now.”

“Yes, yes . . . but . . . ’Tho . . . Shall I tell you something? I love you, dear . . . I love you . . . love you . . . love you. I’ve loved you since I—stole bread and jam for you when you were locked in your room for being a

naughty boy . . . Do you love me, ’Tho?”

“You *know* I do. You know I’ve always loved you . . . from the day you let old Punch, my white rat, run up your clothes and out at the top, without squawking . . .”

Again they kissed.

“Oh Margaret, I love you so . . . I love you utterly . . . Do you know I have never lain down to sleep without thinking of you—since I was a boy.”

“’Tho, I worship you.”

“You might have told me that before.”

“Do you worship me, ’Tho?”

“Margaret, I adore you.”

“You might have told me that before.”

They clung together . . . and sprang apart as heavy blows sounded on the door.

Drawing the bolts, turning the key, and throwing the door open, Otho saw the aged slave who had guided them to the battlements. Seizing Otho’s arm, Hassan el Miskeen dragged him across the room, and out on to the balcony. Looking upwards, Otho saw several heads silhouetted against the sky, as their owners craned through the embrasures.

“Ohé, Bellême, was that Raisul?” called Le Sage.

“*Oui, mon Commandant.* He’s—er—on the rocks.”

Le Sage laughed grimly.

“Come up,” he called. “I’ve sent the guide for you.”

Motioning to Hassan to lead on, Otho kissed Margaret once again.

“Dear,” she said, clinging to him, “he’s dead, he’s dead. And I’m *glad* . . . *glad* . . .”

“I should say so,” smiled Otho. “Seeing that it was I

who knocked him over, and he's fallen a few hundred feet."

"Raisul! My dear, I mean *Jules*."

"It is true then?" asked Otho.

"Yes," said Margaret. "Raisul killed him."

"Thank God!" said Otho.

"Wait for me, Margaret," he added. "Wait for me."

Yes, she would wait for him. She would wait a lifetime for him.

§ 3

"Good," said Colonel Le Sage on hearing Otho's report. "Couldn't be better. You've taken your chance, Bellême."

"Now, *mes enfants*, let's get to work. The no-shooting order is cancelled. Fall in. Right dress. Number . . . Form fours. Right. You're a guard now, mind—not a sacred band of brigands.

"*En avant. Marche.*"

But of shooting there was none.

In the absence of the Kaid, Raisul, Mahommed Ali el Amin, and every other leader or executive authority, the organization of the Citadel of Mekazzen went to pieces; what should have been the garrison of Moorish soldiers became an armed rabble (quickly disarmed); and the Castle fell of itself. The loosely knit co-ordinated native life of the Citadel swiftly disintegrated, and the work begun by the betrayal of the pass-word, was completed by the issue of orders and instructions in the Kaid's name, by the Kaid's Vizier, the Señor Pedro Maligni.

Until the tricolour flew at the mast-head on the Sultan Tower, and Colonel Le Sage was *de facto* Governor of the

Castle, the orders of the Vizier were accepted and obeyed *faute de mieux*.

§ 4

"I trust that your wife is recovering, Señor Maligni," said Colonel Le Sage, as the Vizier entered his room for the daily transaction of business.

"Alas! no, Colonel. I think the poor woman is going mad, or has gone mad. She refuses to believe that our son is dead. She seems certain that there is some misunderstanding between us and Hassan el Miskeen, who, as you know, is dumb and unable to read or write. She believes, or professes to believe, that he is also getting very deaf, and is less than half-witted."

"And you, Señor Maligni?"

"How can I doubt, Colonel? My son is missing. He was last seen with Raisul, whom your *légionnaire* flung over the walls—and Hassan el Miskeen not only enacts, in pantomime, a murder that he witnessed, but nods or shakes his head, in a perfectly intelligent manner, in answer to my questions."

"No discoveries down there in the ravine?"

"No, Colonel. Jackals, hyenas, vultures, ants . . . The dense jungle of cactus and thorn-bushes is really impenetrable, although the searchers pretend they have combed them through and through."

"Well, sorry as I am for you and the Lady El Isa Beth el Ain, I am glad that the body of Raisul has not been recovered—and would be—er—unidentifiable if it were. The longer we can conceal the fact of the deaths of the Kaid

and Raisul, the longer we can use your authority as Vizier.

"Not that we shall need that for long, Señor Maligni.

"It is perhaps fortunate for all concerned," continued Le Sage, "that there is no heir."

"My son was Raisul's cousin," mused Pedro Maligni, "my wife being the late Kaid's half-sister."

"And you are your late son's next-of-kin, eh?" smiled Le Sage. "You may put that right out of your mind, forthwith, my friend. I should never give it another thought, if I were you—for when your period of usefulness here is over, you are going to take the Lady El Isa Beth el Ain for a change of air and scene—to Tangier. And you are never coming south of Tangier again, unless specially requested to do so—by the competent authority. The French authority."

"And the other half of the reward, promised me after the consummation of your work here?"

"It will be paid, Señor Maligni. *After*, as promised."

"Colonel, you would not trick me? I am now an aged and broken man. *After?* How long after?"

"It shall be paid to you personally, at Tangier, as soon as possible after I receive a letter from your daughter-in-law—in her own handwriting—from Yelverbury."

"A letter from Margaret? Yelverbury?"

"Yes, Señor Maligni. So see she gets there safely. And the sooner she does so, the sooner you will get the other fifteen pieces."

"Fifteen pieces, Colonel?"

"Oh, I beg your pardon, Señor Maligni. I was, for some reason, thinking of 'thirty pieces of silver.' "

"Surely, Colonel, you do not think that my daughter-in-law could come to any harm while in my charge?"

“Of course not, Señor Maligni. Nor while travelling in the company of her . . . mother-in-law. Still—I’ve heard things . . . And the reward will be paid as, and when, I have said.

“All still quiet down in the bazaars?”

“Absolutely, Colonel. Quiet as in the Castle, where it is supposed that the Kaid and Raisul have ridden out secretly in the night, as so often they have done before.

“Not a single Moor saw the Kaid die, except Abu Talib Zerhoun whom I have under lock and key; and not one saw Raisul die. In fact, Abu Talib Zerhoun, the scribe, is the only one who knows anything.”

Nor later, when rumours spread and legend grew, did it appear that, in the bazaars of Mekazzen, the absent Kaid and his son had been truly popular.

It was to be observed that those who mentioned their names, spat as they did so, albeit they seemed relieved as well as aghast that they had the temerity to do it.

Nor indeed was a single shot fired from any housetop as French re-inforcements, headed by a Squadron of the Fifth *Spahis Morrocains*, and guided by an accredited emissary of the Vizier, rode through the streets of the Citadel that, mighty, impressive, and impregnable, frowned down upon the town.

§ 5

“Orderly!” called Colonel Le Sage.

Otho stepped into the room, smartly saluting.

“I have been talking with—er—Margaret of Yelverbury,

and making arrangements for her safe arrival at that famous place.

"She tells me she would like to have a word with you, before the caravan and escort start off."

"*Merci, mon Commandant.*"

"Well, *mon enfant*, I should be giving the young lady tea in this room, in a few minutes . . . I am very busy . . . You shall deputize . . ."

"*Merci, mon Commandant.*"

"Oh, you English! . . ." ejaculated Colonel Le Sage as he strode from the room. "Face of stone—if heart of fire . . ."

. . .

"Otho!"

"Margaret!"

. . .

"I'm not crying, Otho . . ."

"Margaret, this is absolutely the happiest day in all our lives—so far. Of course you're not crying."

"Otho, you will take care of yourself?"

"Cotton-wool . . . Margaret . . ."

"Otho . . . The time will soon pass. And look, I am coming out to Africa again. Dear, I can . . . I must . . . I shall . . ."

Otho shook his head.

"To some perfectly good town, Otho. Sidi bel Abbès . . . Algiers . . . Oran . . . Whatever garrison-town or depôt is nearest to where you are."

Otho smiled.

"Too good to be true, Margaret. I may be in some desert outpost, or some hole like this, for the rest of my service."

“Also, you may not. Did you know that Colonel Le Sage is married?”

“No. What about it?”

“Well, he is . . . And I’m coming out to visit his wife. Dear Otho! . . . I’m going to stay with her. And Colonel Le Sage is going to stay with her, too. *And* he’s going to bring his orderly. See?”

“*Margaret* . . . Margaret, there’s so much to say, one can say nothing. What *can* one say?”

“Oh yes,” continued Margaret. “I have got something to say, darling. And that’s about Colonel Le Sage, too. From Colonel Le Sage, in fact . . . Darling, he wants you to leave the ranks.”

“Leave Joe Mummery and the other two?”

“Yes, darling. Yes, Otho . . . Look. It might shorten the time for us.”

“How?”

“Do you know, Otho, that you have made a very deep impression upon Colonel Le Sage. Do you know what he actually hinted at? . . . A commission! As he said, you are a gentleman (a ‘*milord*,’ in fact!), clever, a linguist, a great fighter, as brave as a lion, and, as he put it, ‘inexorably faithful unto death.’

“Also you have distinguished yourself again, here. He says, without you and ‘your men’ he might have failed against Riccoli and in the taking of the Castle.”

“Oh rot! Stop it, darling, do. Don’t let’s talk about me . . . let’s . . .”

“Let’s what?”

“This . . . and this . . . and this . . . and this . . .”

“Otho, you will take your chance, won’t you?”

“Well, aren’t I?”

“You know what I mean, darling. You will take your chance, Otho, for my sake?”

“Desert Joe and the others who came with me? No.”

“But think what you’d be able to do for them.”

“Yes, dear. Do for them altogether, I should think, if I left them in the lurch.”

“But *darling*, we can’t marry on a halfpenny a day! We could marry at once, when you’d got your commission . . . Look, darling—*I* know. You talk it over with Joe Mummery and the other two, after you’ve seen Colonel Le Sage again . . . You will, won’t you? Promise me that. I shall go away so much happier . . . Almost happy, Otho, if you’ll promise me that.”

Otho smiled, as he took Margaret in his arms again.

“I promise that,” he said.

“I Saye and I Doe.”

EPILOGUE

EPILOGUE

Colonel Le Sage knocked, in the appointed manner, upon the door of the room that had been Riccoli's quarters, and was now his prison.

"Guard the door outside," said he to the *légionnaire* who opened the door, and sprang to attention.

Removing the key from the lock, and pocketing it, Le Sage turned to Riccoli, who sat at his table, nervously drumming upon it with his fingers, and who eyed him with a feverish pale anxiety.

"You've come for my help, Le Sage?" he began. "But it will be on terms . . . on terms . . . I shall refuse to . . ."

"Listen, Major Riccoli," interrupted Le Sage. "The Citadel, town, and country, of Mekazzen, are now in my hands—for France.

"The whole of what was your Column is here, garrisoning the Castle, picketing the town, and patrolling the secret route by the oases and hidden water-holes.

"I have now a quorum of officers for a *conseil de guerre*, and I could try you this very day, by court martial. If I did so, you would be found guilty: you would be sentenced to death: and I would myself superintend the carrying out of the sentence, at dawn to-morrow. The firing-party, under Major Langeac, would consist of those *légionnaires* whom I know to be faithful, loyal, and obedient soldiers of France.

"But I shall not have you tried by court martial."

Riccoli smiled.

"I will take it upon me to spare France that scandal.

There shall be no great *affaire Riccoli*, eclipsing in shamefulness and European popularity, *l'affaire Dreyfus*: eclipsing, because poor Dreyfus was an innocent man, whereas you, Major Riccoli, are a guilty one—a traitor to your country, your army, and your oath.

"No. There will be no court martial."

Riccoli laughed.

"I'm sure there won't, my good Le Sage," he said.

"No. No court martial, and no scandal . . . Do you see this revolver, Major Riccoli? And do you remember a little episode of many years ago, in which a revolver figured prominently? Do you remember my telling you that it contained one cartridge? And do you remember my spinning the chamber—thus?

"And after all, it proved to be empty . . .

"Once again I offer you a revolver, Major Riccoli."

Riccoli extended an eager hand, seized the revolver and —presenting it at Le Sage's face, pulled the trigger . . . And again . . . And again . . .

"No, no, Major Riccoli," smiled Le Sage. "I had not forgotten what you did on the occasion to which I allude. You fired at me then, with what you thought was the sixth and certain shot . . . Didn't you?

"Now go and stand in the corner of the room—there."

"*Murder?*" gasped Riccoli.

"Oh no," replied Le Sage. "Stand there. So. Now—as I go out of this room, I shall, just before I close the door, give you a cartridge."

Riccoli stared wide-eyed, aghast.

"Now, Major Riccoli, listen. And if ever you believed anything in the whole of your life, believe this now.

“You have your choice . . . And it is the only choice, of any sort or kind, that is left to you. You can die by your own hand—or by mine. For I swear by the Name of God, and the name of France, if you do not take your own life, I will myself, with my own hand, kill you in this room.

“In your life you have done much harm to France. In your death you shall do none.

“In an hour’s time I shall send a . . . burying party . . . to this cell.”

As he closed the door, Colonel Le Sage contemptuously tossed a cartridge to Major Napoleon Riccoli, that Man of Destiny.

THE END

NOTE.—The story of the early life and adventures of Otho Bellême and Margaret Maligni (*née* Maykings) was told in the book *Soldiers of Misfortune*.

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Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

Inconsistency in accents has been fixed.

One occurance of Maclean was mis-spelt McLean and has been corrected.

[The end of *Valiant Dust* by Percival Christopher Wren]