Title: A Soldier of the Legion

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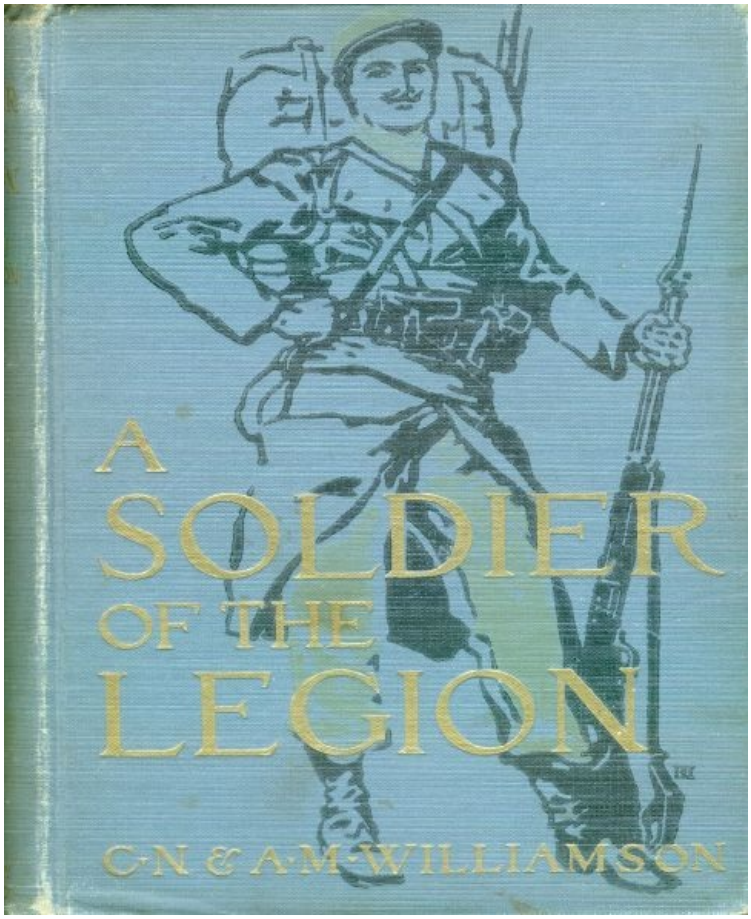
Release date: March 14, 2007 [eBook #20815]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Suzanne Shell, Graeme Mackreth and the Online
Distributed Proofreading Team at http://www.pgdp.net



A Soldier of the Legion

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A Soldier of the Legion

BY

C.N. & A.M. Williamson

GARDEN CITY NEW YORK
DOUBLEDAY, PAGE & CO.
1914

TO
THE LEGION

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A Soldier of the Legion

CHAPTER I

THE TELEGRAM

It was the great ball of the season at Fort Ellsworth. For a special reason it had begun unusually late; but, though the eighth dance was on, the great event of the evening had not happened yet. Until that should happen, the rest, charming though it might be, was a mere curtain-raiser to keep men amused before the first act of the play.

The band of the —th was playing the "Merry Widow" waltz, still a favourite at the fort, and only one of the officers was not dancing. All the others—young, middle-aged, and even elderly—were gliding more or less gracefully, more or less happily, over the waxed floor of the big, white-walled, flag-draped hall where Fort Ellsworth had its concerts, theatricals, small hops, and big balls. Encircled by their uniformed arms were the wives and sisters of brother officers, ladies whom they saw every day, or girls from the adjacent town of Omallaha, whom they could see nearly every day if they took the trouble. Some of the girls were pretty and pleasant. They all danced well, and wore their newest frocks from Chicago, New York, and even, in certain brilliant cases, from Paris. But—there was a heart-breaking "but". Each army woman, each visiting girl from Omallaha knew that at any minute her star might be eclipsed, put out, as the stars at dawn are extinguished by the rising sun. Each one knew, too, that the sun must be at the brink of the horizon, because it was half-past eleven, and it took more than twenty minutes to motor to Ellsworth from Omallaha. Besides, Max Doran, who used to love the "Merry Widow" waltz, was not dancing. He stood near the door pretending to talk to an old man who had chaperoned a daughter from town to the ball; but in reality he was lying in wait, ready to pounce.

It was a wonder that he hadn't gone to meet her; but perhaps she had refused his escort. A more effective entrance might be made by a dazzling vision alone (the "stage aunt" did not count) than with a man, even the show young man of the garrison.

The show young man talked jerkily about the weather, with his eyes on the door. They were laughing eyes of a brilliant blue, and accounted for a good deal where girls were concerned; but not all. There were other things—other advantages he had, which made it seem quite remarkable that a rather dull Western fort like Ellsworth should possess him. His family was high up in the "Four Hundred" in New York. He had as much money as, with all his boyish extravagances and wild generosity, he knew what to do with. He was exceedingly good to look at, in the dark, thin, curiously Latin style to which he seemed to have no right. He was a rather popular hero in the —th, for his polo, a sport which he had introduced and made possible at Fort Ellsworth, and for his boxing, his fencing, and his marksmanship. He had been graduated fourth in his class at West Point three years before, so that he might have chosen the engineers or artillery; but the cavalry was what he preferred; and here he was at old Fort Ellsworth, enjoying life hugely and so well helping others to enjoy life that every one liked him, no one was jealous or grudged him what he had.

There he stood, this "show young man," well-groomed and smart in his full-dress uniform of second lieutenant of cavalry, the stripes and splashes of yellow suiting his dark skin: a slim, erect figure, not very tall, but a soldier every inch of him, though the wide-apart blue eyes gave the square-chinned face a boyish air of wistfulness, even when he smiled his delightfully childlike, charming smile. Girls glanced at him as they swung past in their partners' arms, noticing how tense was the look on the brown face, and how the straight eyebrows—even blacker than the smooth dark hair—were drawn together in expectant concentration.

Suddenly the door opened. The curtain-raiser was over. The drama of the evening was about to begin.

It seemed wonderful that the band could keep presence of mind to go on playing the "Merry Widow," instead of stopping short with a gasp and crash of instruments, to start again with the "Tango Trance," *her* dance in "Girls' Love."

She flashed into the ballroom like a dazzling fairy thing, all white and gold and glitter. Because she knew that—so to speak—the curtain would ring up for her entrance, and not an instant before, in the fondness of her heart for young officers she had not even delayed long enough to change the dress she wore as the Contessa Gaëta in the third act of "Girls' Love." The musical comedy had been written for her. In it she had made her first almost startling success two years ago in London, where, according to the newspapers, all young men worth their salt, from dukes down to draymen, had fallen in love with her. She had captured New York, too, and now she and her company were rousing enthusiasm and coining money on their tour of the larger Western cities.

The Gaëta dress looked as if it were made of a million dewdrops turned to diamonds and sprinkled over a lacy spider-web; the web swathing the tall and wandlike figure of Miss Billie Brookton in a way to show that she had all the delicate perfections of a Tanagra statuette.

Despite the distraction of her entrance, followed by that of the little gray lady engaged as her aunt, the musicians had the self-control to go on with their "Merry Widowing," irrelevant as it now seemed. The dancers went on dancing, also, though the dreaded dimness of extinction had fallen upon even the brightest, prettiest girls, who tried to look particularly rapturous in order to prove that nothing had happened. They felt their partners' interest suddenly withdrawn from them and focussed upon the radiance at the door. No use ignoring that Radiance, even if one had in self-defence to pretend that it didn't matter much, and wasn't so marvellously dazzling after all!

"There goes Mr. Doran to welcome her—of course!" said an Omallaha girl lately back from New York. "I wonder if they really are engaged?"

"Why shouldn't they be?" her partner generously wanted to know. (He was married.)

"Well, for one thing, she doesn't seem the sort of woman who'd care to give up her career. She's so self-conscious that she must be selfish, and then—she's older than he is."

"Good heavens, no! She doesn't look nineteen!"

"On the stage."

"Or off, either."

"Anyhow, some people in New York who know her awfully well told me that she'd never see twenty-nine again. An actress of twenty-nine who can't look nineteen had better go into a convent! Though, when you notice, her mouth and eyes are hard, aren't they? What *would* Max Doran's wonderful mother say if her son married Billie Brookton?"

"Miss Brookton's father was a clergyman in Virginia. She told me so herself," said the married partner.

"She *would*—— Oh, I don't mean to be catty. But she must have a background that's a contrast—like that aunt of hers. I don't believe she'd want to marry for years yet—a man who'd make her leave the stage. She has the air of expecting the limelight to follow her everywhere through life, and I'm sure Max Doran's gorgeous mother wouldn't let her daughter-in-law go on acting, even if Max didn't mind."

"Max would mind. He'd never stand it," Max's brother officer informed the girl who had been to New York. "Though he's so simple in his manner, he's proud, I guess. But whether she's nineteen or twenty-nine, I don't see how Billie could do better than take Max Doran, unless she could snap up an English duke. And they say there aren't any unmarried ones going at present. She'd be an addition to this post as a bride, wouldn't she?"

"Ye-es," answered the girl, giving wonderful dramatic value to her pause.

Just then the reign of the "Merry Widow" came to an end, and as soon after as could be, the "Tango Trance" began. The band had practised it in Miss Brookton's honour; and it had been ordered as the first dance after her arrival. The aunt sat down, and Billie Brookton began "tangoing" with Max Doran. They were a beautiful couple to watch; but of course people had to keep up the farce of dancing, too. This was not, after all, a theatre. One was supposed to have come for something else than to stare at Billie Brookton without paying for a place.

"Your pearls," she whispered, as she and Doran danced the tango together, taking graceful steps which she had taught him during the fortnight they had known each other. "How do they look?"

"Glorious on *you*!" he answered. "And the ring has come. I telegraphed, you know. It's what you wanted. I was able to get it, I'm happy to say. Oh, Billie, can it be possible that I shall have you for mine—all mine? It seems too wonderful to be true."

"I've promised, haven't I?" She laughed half under her breath, a pretty, tinkling laugh. "Honour bright, Max dear, you're the first man I ever said 'yes' to. I hope I shan't be sorry!"

"I won't let you be sorry," whispered Max. "I'll do everything to make you so happy you'll forget the theatre."

"If anything or anybody could make me do that, it would be you," she answered, under cover of the music. "I believe you must be very fascinating, or else I—but never mind—— Now let's stop dancing and you'll show me the ring. I'm engaged for the next—and I can't wait till you and I have another together."

Max took her to sit down at an end of the room uninfested by chaperons. No one at all was there. He had the ring in some pocket, and, by dint of sitting with his "back to the audience," hoped to go through the sacred ceremony without being spied upon. The ring Billie had asked for was a famous blue diamond, of almost as deep a violet as a star-sapphire, and full of strange, rainbow gleams. It had belonged to a celebrated actress who had married an Englishman of title, and on her death it had been advertised for sale. Billie Brookton, who "adored" jewels, and whose birthstone conveniently was the diamond, had been "dying for it." "She was not superstitious," she said, "about dead people's things." Now the blue diamond, with a square emerald on either side, and set in a band of platinum, was hers. She took it between thumb and finger to watch the sparks that came and went, deep under the sea-like surface of blue. As she looked at the ring, Doran looked at her eyelashes.

Never, he thought, could any other woman since the world began have had such eyelashes. They were extraordinarily long and thick, golden brown, and black at the tips. The Omallaha girl who had been to New York thought that Billie Brookton herself had had more to do than heaven in the painting of those curled-up tips. But such a suggestion would have been received with contempt by Max Doran, who at the threshold of twenty-five considered himself a judge of eyelashes. (He was not; nor of a woman's complexion; but believing in himself and in Billie, he was happy.) Miss Brookton had a complexion nearly as white, and it seemed to him—more luminous, more ethereal, than the string of pearls he had given her a month in advance of her birthday. She said it would be her twenty-third, and Max had been incredulous in the nicest way. He would have supposed her to be nineteen at the most, if she had not been so frank.

"Now, if you've looked at the ring enough *off* your finger, will you let me put it on?" he begged. "I'll make a wish—a good wish: that you shall never grow tired of your bargain. For it *is* a bargain, isn't it? From the minute this ring is on your finger you're engaged to me."

"What will your beautiful mother say?" asked Billie, hanging back daintily, and doing charming things with her eyelashes.

"Oh, she'll be surprised at first," Max had to admit. "You see, she's so young herself and such a great beauty, it must be hard for her to realize she's got a son who has grown up to be a man. I used to think she was the most exquisite creature on earth, but now——"

His words broke off, and he looked up from the gleaming line of gold-and-black lashes. An orderly had come quickly and almost noiselessly to him. "For you, Lieutenant," the man announced with a salute, holding out a telegram.

"May I?" murmured Doran, and perfunctorily opened the envelope.

Billie went on gazing at the ring. She was faintly annoyed at the delay, for she was anxious to see how the blue diamond would look on her finger, and Max had asked to wish it on. The lights in the stone were so fascinating, however, that for an instant she forgot the interruption. Then, sensitive to all that was dramatic, something in the quality of Max Doran's silence struck her. She felt suddenly surrounded by a chilling atmosphere which seemed to shut her and Max away from the dancers, away from music and life, as if a thick glass case had been let down over them both. She glanced up quickly. No wonder she had felt so cold. Doran's face looked frozen. His eyes were still fixed on the telegram, though there had been time for him to read it over and over again. He was so lost in the news it had brought that he had forgotten even her—forgotten her in the moment when she had been consenting to a formal engagement, she, the illusive, the vainly desired one, run after just to the foot of her unclimbable mountain by the nimblest, the richest, everywhere!

Her small soul was stirred to resentment. She wanted to punish Max Doran for daring to neglect her at such a time, even for a few seconds; but a half-angry, half-frightened study of the dark, absorbed face changed her mood. No man could look like that unless something awful had happened.

What, that was awful, could happen to Max Doran? Why, he could lose all his money!

Billie's heart leaped, and then seemed to fall back heavily in the lovely bosom sheathed like a lily with a film of sparkling dew. Would he ever speak? She could not wait. Besides, it was right to be sympathetic. "Max, what is it—*dear* Max?" she whispered in the honey-sweet voice of Gaëta in "Girls' Love."

He started, and waked up. "It's my mother. She's been hurt," he said. "My God, I must go at once!"

Almost, Billie sighed out her intense relief in words; but she had just presence of mind and self-control enough to hold them back. Gently she took the telegram from him, and he let her do it. Meanwhile, however, she had slipped the ring on to her own finger—but not the engaged finger. Evidently this was no time for an announcement, or congratulations and sensations. But it was

just as well to have the blue diamond safe on one's hand, even if it were the right hand instead of the left.

"'Your mother dangerously injured in motor accident,'" she read. "'Asking to see you. Come without delay. Reeves.'"

"Oh, how very sad!" breathed Billie. "How awful if she should be *disfigured*! But I do hope not."

Doran did not remember to thank his love for her solicitude. He got up, not frozen now, but a little dazed. It occurred to Billie that he had never looked so handsome, so much a man. She felt that he was gathering himself together. "I'll telephone to Omallaha for a special train to connect with the limited at Chicago," he said. "By the time I can see the Colonel and get off it ought to be ready. Yes, I ought to catch the limited that way. It's awful to leave you like this, but I must. I'll take you to your aunt, and—who's got the next dance with you?"

"Major Naylor," she answered, slightly injured, for not ten minutes ago he had been looking at her card. He ought to have remembered every name on it and in the right order.

"Well, he'll come to you in a minute. Trust him not to lose a second! And—you'll write to me?"

"Of course; you'll wire as soon as you can, how your mother is—and everything? On Monday I shall be back in Chicago."

"I'll wire the moment I can," Max assured her. "You know the address in New York?"

"Oh, yes, everybody knows the beautiful Mrs. Doran's address. I'll write or telegraph *every* day. My heart will be with you."

He squeezed her hand so desperately that she could have screamed with pain from the pressure of the blue diamond. But with touching self-control she only smiled a strained, sympathetic little smile. And Max had forgotten all about the ring!

"Thank you, my beautiful one, my angel," he said. And Billie's large brown eyes (so effective with her delicate dark brows and rippling yellow hair) gave him a lovely look. She had been called many things by many adoring men, but perhaps never before an "angel." Max Doran was very young, in some ways even younger than his years. "Good-bye," she murmured. "But no—not 'good-bye.' That's a terrible word. *Au revoir.* You'll come to me when you can, I know. I shall be in Chicago a fortnight. But if you can't leave Mrs. Doran, why, in six weeks I shall be in New York."

"Don't speak of six weeks!" he exclaimed. "It's like six years. I *must* see you before that. But—my mother is before everything just now."

They bade each other farewell with their eyes. Then he took her to Mrs. Liddell, the small gray aunt, and hardly was Billie seated when Major Naylor dashed up to claim her for Gaëta's waltz in the first act of "Girls' Love."

After that, things happened quickly with Max Doran. He seemed to dream them, and was still in the dream, tearing toward Chicago in a special train whose wheels rushed through the night in tune with that first-act music from "Girls' Love."

CHAPTER II

THE BLOW

The name that signed the telegram was that of Mrs. Doran's lawyer and man of business. It was that also of Max Doran's old-time chum, Grant Reeves, Edwin Reeves' son. And when Max stepped out of the limited in the Grand Central Station of New York, among the first faces he saw were those of the two Reeveses, who had come to meet him. He shook hands with both, warmly and gratefully with Grant. He had never been able really to like his friend's father. But it was to him he turned with the question: "How is she?"

The elder, tall, thin, clean-shaven, with carrot-red hair turning gray, had prominent red eyebrows over pale, intelligent eyes that winked often, owing to some weakness of the lids, which had lost most of their lashes. This disfigurement he concealed as well as he could with rimless *pince-nez*, which some people said were not necessary as an aid to eyesight. They were an aid to vanity, however; and the care Edwin Reeves bestowed on his clothes suggested that he was a vain as well as a clever man.

The son was a young and notably good-looking copy of his father, whose partner in business he had lately become. They were singularly alike except in colouring, for Grant was brown-haired and brown-eyed, with plenty of curled-back lashes which gave him an alert look.

Both men started forward at the sight of Max, Grant striding ahead of Edwin and grasping Max's hand, "I *had* to come, old chap," he said, with a pleasant though slightly affected accent meant to be English. "I wanted just to shake hands and tell you how I felt."

"Thank you, Grant," said Max. "Is she—is there hope?"

"Oh, there's always hope, you know; isn't there, governor?"

Grant Reeves appealed to his father, who had joined them. "Who can tell? She's wonderful."

Edwin Reeves took the hand Max held out, and then did nothing with it, in the aloof, impersonal way that had always irritated Max, and made him want to fling away the unresponsive fingers. Now, however, for the first time in his life he did not notice. He was lost in his desire for and fear of the verdict.

"It would only be cruel to raise his hopes," the father answered the son. "The doctors (there are four) say it's a miracle she's kept alive till now. Sheer will-power. She's living to see you."

Max was dumb, his throat constricted. And then, there was nothing to say. Something deep down in him—something he could not bear to hear—was asking why she should suddenly *care* so much? She had never cared before, never really cared, though in his intense admiration of her, almost amounting to worship, he had fought to make himself believe that she did love him as other mothers loved their sons. Yet his heart knew the truth: that she had become more and more indifferent as he grew up from a small boy into a young man. Since he went to West Point they had spent very little time together, though they were always on affectionate terms. She had never spoken a disagreeable word to him, never given him a cross look. Only—there had been nothing of the mother about her. She had treated him like a nice visiting boy who must be entertained, even fascinated, and then gently got rid of when he began to be a bore. In his first term at West Point she had sailed for Europe, and stopped there for two years. When he was graduated she had gone again, and stayed another year. They had met only once since he had been stationed at Fort Ellsworth: last Christmas, when he had run on to New York and surprised her. She had been in great beauty, looking not a day over thirty. And now—Max could not make it seem true. But, at least, she wanted him. Max clutched at the thought with passion, and scarcely heard Grant saying that he must hurry on to the office; he had come only for a word and a handshake: it was better that the governor alone should go with dear old Max to the house.

Mrs. Doran's town automobile was waiting with a solemn chauffeur and footman who bent their eyes reverently, not to look the stricken young soldier in the face. Max had a sick thrill as he saw the smart blue monster, with its row of glittering glass eyes; it had been his Christmas present to his mother by request. When the telegram told him briefly that she had been hurt in a motor accident, he had thought with agony that it might have been in the car he had given. He was thankful that it had not been so. That would have seemed too horrible—as if he had killed her. Now he would hear how it had really happened. Every nerve was tense as if he were awaiting an operation without anesthetics.

There were not many blocks to go from the Grand Central to the Fifth Avenue home of the Dorans, an old house which had been remodelled and made magnificent by Max's father to receive his bride. In less than ten minutes the blue automobile had slipped through all the traffic and reached its destination; but many questions can be asked and answered in eight minutes. Between the moment of starting, and the moment when Max's one hastily packed suitcase was being carried up to the door, he had heard the whole story. The fated car had been a friend's car. There had been a collision. The two automobiles had turned over. For half an hour she had lain crushed under the weight of the motor before she could be got out. Her back was broken, and she had been horribly burnt. Even if she could have lived—which was impossible—she would have been shockingly disfigured. Edwin Reeves had been with her once, for a few minutes: she had wanted to speak to him about certain things, matters of business, and the doctors, who never left her, had stopped giving her opiates on purpose. From the first she had said that she must be kept alive till Max could come, and that no matter what she had to suffer her mind must be clear for a talk with him. After that, nothing mattered. She wanted to die and be out of her misery. When Mr. Reeves had been taken into her room her face had been covered with a white veil, and Max must prepare himself to be received in the same way. It was better that he should know this beforehand and be spared a shock.

Never to see that beautiful face again in this world! Max felt like one dead and galvanized as he walked into the house and was received by a doctor—some great specialist whose name he had heard, but whom he had never chanced to meet. Not once did his thoughts rush back to Billie Brookton, and the night when he had meant to put on her finger the blue diamond in the platinum ring. Billie was in another world, a world a million miles away, as following the doctor Max walked softly into his mother's room.

There he had once more that insistent feeling of unreality. The gay room with its shell-pink melting into yellow and orange looked so unsuited to any condition but joy that it was impossible to believe tragedy had stalked in uninvited. Even with the morning light shut out by the drawn yellow curtains, and the electricity turned on in the flower or gauze-shaded lamps, it looked a place dedicated to the joy of life and beauty. But when, with a physical effort, Max turned his eyes to the bed, copied from one where Marie Antoinette had slept, he saw that which seemed to throw a pall of crape over the fantastic golden harmonies. A figure lay there, very straight, very flat and long under the coverlet pulled high over the breast. Even the hands were hidden: and

over the face was spread a white veil of chiffon, folded double, so that no gleam of eye, no feature could even be guessed at.

Until that moment, Max had kept his self-control. But at sight of that piteous form, and remembering the radiant face framed with great bunches of red-gold hair, which he had kissed good-bye, in this very bed not three months ago, the dam which had held back the flood of anguish broke. It was as if his heart had turned to water. Tears sprang from his eyes, and the strength went out of his knees. It was all he could do not to fall at the side of the bed and to sob out his mother's name, telling her that he would give his life a hundred times for hers if that could be, or that he would go out of the world with her rather than she should go alone. But something came to his help and kept him outwardly calm save for a slight choking in the throat as he said softly, standing by the bedside, "Dearest, I am here."

"At last," came a faint murmur from under the double veil.

Max thought, with a sharp stab of pain, that he would not have recognized the voice if he had not known that it was his mother's. It sounded like the voice of a little, frail, very old woman; whereas Rose Doran had been a creature of glorious physique, looking and feeling at least fifteen years younger than her age.

"I started the minute I had the telegram," Max said, wanting to make sure that she realized his love, his frantic haste to reach her. "It has seemed a hundred years! Darling, if I could bear this for you. If——"

"Please, don't," the little whining voice under the veil fretfully cut him short. "I can't see very well. Has the doctor gone out?"

"Yes, dearest. We're alone."

"I'm glad. There isn't much time, and I've got a story to tell you. I ought to call it a confession."

That swept Max's forced calmness away. "A confession from you to me!" he cried out, horrified. "Never! Darling One, whatever it is I don't want to hear it—I don't need to hear it, I know—— Rest. Be at peace. Just let us love each other."

"You don't know what you are talking about." The veiled voice grew shrill. "You only do harm trying to stop me. You'll kill me if you do."

"Forgive me, dear." Max controlled himself again. "I'll not say another word. I——"

"Then don't—don't! I want to go on—to the end. I'd rather you sat down. I can see you standing there. It's like a black shadow between me and the light, accusing—no, don't speak! It needn't accuse. You wouldn't have had the life you've had, if—but I mustn't begin like that. Where are you now? Are you near enough to hear all I say? I can't raise my voice."

"I'm sitting down, close by the bed. I can hear the least whisper," Max assured her. He sat with his head bowed, his hands gripping the arms of the chair. This seemed unbearable, to spend the last minutes of her life hearing some confession! It was not right, from a mother to a son. But he must yield.

"I don't know how long I can stand it—the pain, I mean," she moaned. "So I can't try and break things gently to you, for fear—I have to stop in the midst. I'm not your mother, Max, and Jack wasn't your father. But he thought he was. He never knew. And he loved you. I didn't. I never could. You see—I *did* know. You must have wondered sometimes. I saw you wondered; I suppose you never guessed, even though I always told you to call me Rose, or anything you liked, except mother?"

She was waiting for him to answer; and he did answer, though it was as if she had thrown him over a precipice, and he were hanging by some branch which would let him crash down in an instant to the bottom of an unknown abyss.

"No, I never guessed." Queer how quiet, how utterly expressionless his voice was! He heard it in faraway surprise.

"I used to be afraid at first that Jack would guess, you were so unlike either of us, so dark, so—so *Latin*. But he said you were a throw-back to his Celtic ancestors. There were French and Irish ones hundreds of years ago, you know. He never suspected. Everything happened just as I hoped it would—just as I wanted it to. But I didn't realize how I should feel about it if I were going to die. The minute I came to myself after—the accident, it rushed over me. Not the very first thought. That was about myself. I wanted to know if my looks were gone. When they had to say yes, I was glad—thankful—I could die. I'd have poisoned or starved myself rather than live on. But no need of that. I think I could let myself slip away any minute now. I'm just—holding on. For something told me—I have a feeling that Jack himself came, and has been here ever since, knowing all I had done and willing me to tell the truth. I struggled a little against it, for why shouldn't you go on being happy? Nothing was *your* fault. But it was borne in on me that I must give you the chance to choose for yourself, and—*another*. That's why Jack has come, perhaps. She is his daughter."

"There was a girl, our child. But—you can't understand unless I tell you the story. I shall have strength. I feel I shall now—to get through with it. Perhaps Jack will help. He was the one human being I ever loved better than myself. That was real love! What I did was partly for his sake, I'm

honestly sure of that. He wouldn't have let me do it. But it made him happy, not knowing——

"You've been told over and over how you were born in France, when Jack and I had the Château de la Tour, on the Loire. That was true—the one true thing. But you weren't born in the château. It wasn't for nothing that you learned French almost as easily as you breathed—and Latin, too. I suppose things like that are in people's blood. You are French. If I had left you where you were, you would have grown up Maxime Delatour. Delatour was your real father's name; he came originally of the de la Tours, but his branch of the family had gone down, somehow. Even the name was spelled differently, in the common way. But they lived in the same neighbourhood—that is how it all came about."

She paused, and gave a sigh like a faint moan. But Max was silent. He could spare her nothing. She must go on to the end—if the end were death. For there was somebody else, somewhere, who had to be put in his place—the place he had thought was his.

"It was really because I loved Jack—too much," the veiled woman still fretfully excused herself. "I should have been nobody, except for my looks. He married me for my looks, because I was strong and tall and fine, as a girl should be. He thought I could give him a splendid heir. You know how things are arranged in this family. The property goes from father to son, or a daughter, if there's no son. But they all pray for sons. The Dorans want to carry on the name they're so proud of—just as you have been proud! The wife of a Doran's important only if she's beautiful, or if she has a son. I wanted to be important for both reasons. Oh, how I wanted it!

"Jack took me to England for our honeymoon, and then to France. We hadn't been in Paris long before I knew I was going to have a child. Jack was so happy! He was sure it would be a boy—the most gorgeous boy ever born. How I remember the day I told him, and he said that! But all the time I had the presentiment it would be a girl. I felt guilty, miserable, when Jack talked about the baby.... The doctors said it would be safer for me not to have a sea voyage, so we decided to stop in France till after the child came. We stayed in Paris at first, and Jack and I used to go to the Louvre to see beautiful pictures and statues—for the 'sake of the boy.'

"When the Salon opened we went there, and I saw a painting every one was talking about—by a new artist. It was called 'Bella Donna,' just a woman's head and shoulders. Max, *she was like me*! But she was horrible, wicked—somehow deformed, though you couldn't see how. You only felt it. And besides being like me, she was like a lynx. There was one in the Zoo in London, with just her expression. Jack and I saw it together, and he laughed, and said now he knew who my first ancestress was. He didn't say anything about my looking like 'Bella Donna,' but I knew he must have thought it. He got me away from the picture as soon as he could, but I couldn't forget. The lynx-face, with the yellow eyes and red hair like mine, haunted me. I began to dream of my child being born like that—a girl, deformed in the horrid, mysterious way that you could only feel. I could never go to sleep again on a night after the dream. I suppose I looked pale; and he worried, and the doctors advised the country. We had some friends who'd just come back from the Loire, and they told us about a wonderful château there that was to be rented furnished. It belonged to an old family named de la Tour, who had lost their money. They had a romantic, tragic sort of history that interested us, especially Jack, so we went to see the place. There were vineyards badly cultivated, and a forest, and some shooting, too; and we took it for a few months. But we hadn't been there many weeks when a telegram came to Jack from Edwin Reeves. Edwin acted for him even then. It was important, on account of some business, for Jack to go home. He would have answered that it was impossible, but I said, why not go? I was safe, and he could be back in a month or five weeks. I had old Anne Wickham with me, and she'd been my nurse when I was a little girl, you know, and my maid afterward, till she died. You can remember her."

Max could. As a very tiny boy he had been almost afraid of old Anne Wickham, because his nurse was afraid of her: also because she had glared at him critically, mercilessly, with her great eyes in dark hollows, never smiling kindly, as other people did, but seeming to search for some fault in him. Now, suddenly, he understood this gloomy riddle of his childhood.

Rose Doran, beneath her veil, did not wait for any answer, or wish for one. She hurried on, only stopping now and then to sigh out her restlessness and pain, making Max bite his lip and quiver as if under the lash.

"We had a Paris doctor engaged, and a trained nurse," she said. "They were to come weeks before I expected my baby. I don't know how much Jack was to pay for the doctor—thousands of dollars; and Jack thought to be back in a month before, at latest. But one day I caught my foot going downstairs, and fell. We had to send for the village doctor in a hurry, and Anne had to remember all she knew about nursing. The child was a seven months' baby—a girl. And she had a face like mine, and like 'Bella Donna,' and like a lynx. There was just that look of deformity I had dreamed—mysterious and dreadful. I hated the creature. I couldn't feel she was mine and Jack's. She was like some changeling in an old witch tale. I couldn't bear it! I knew that I'd rather die than have Jack see that wicked elf after all his hopes. I told the doctor so. I threatened to kill myself. I don't know if I meant it. But he thought I did. He was a young man. I frightened him. While he was trying to comfort me an idea flashed into my head. It seemed to shoot in, like an arrow. I begged the doctor to find me a boy baby whose mother would take the girl and a lot of money. I said I would give him ten thousand dollars for himself, too, if he could manage it secretly, so no one but he and Anne Wickham and I need ever know. At first he kept exclaiming, and wouldn't listen. But I cried, and partly by working on his feelings and partly with the bribe that was a fortune to such a man, I persuaded him. Anne helped. She would have done anything for me. And she knew the Dorans. She knew Jack could never feel the same to me, as the mother

of that impish girl.

"The doctor knew about a young woman who had just had a child—a boy. He'd helped bring it into the world a night or two before. She was the wife of a private soldier who'd been ordered off to Algeria somewhere. They'd been married secretly. If she had money she would have followed him. But they were very poor. The man was mixed up with the romance of the de la Tours; he belonged to the branch of the family that had gone down. They were called Delatour, but every one knew their history. The doctor thought the girl would do anything for the money I'd offer—and to get to Algeria. He managed the whole thing for me, and certified that my child was a boy. He even went to Paris and sold my pearls and a diamond tiara and necklace, and lots of other things, worth ever so many thousands more than I'd promised to pay him and Madame Delatour. You see, I hadn't any great sums of money by me, so I was forced to sell things. And afterward I had to pretend that my jewels were stolen from a train while we were in the dining-car; otherwise Jack would have wondered why I never wore them. I was thankful the night you were brought to me. I hadn't any remorse then, about sending the other baby away. I told you she didn't seem mine. She seemed hardly human. But I was frightened because you were so dark. You had quantities of black hair. I didn't even try to love you. Only I felt you were very valuable. So did Anne. And when Jack came hurrying back to me on the doctor's telegram, he was pleased with you. He called you in joke his 'little Frenchman.' He didn't dream it was all truth! And he didn't mind your being called Max. You'd already been baptized Maxime, after the soldier; and his wife made just that one condition: that the name should be kept.

"I told Jack I'd always loved the name of Max, so he loved it, too; and though you had other names given to you—the ones we planned beforehand—nothing fitted the 'little Frenchman' so well as Max. That's all the story. At first Anne and I used to be afraid of blackmail, either from the Delatour woman (who went off at once, before she was really strong enough to travel) or from the doctor, who hurried her away as much for his sake as for hers, lest it should be found out by some neighbour that her boy had been changed for a girl. Luckily for us, though, people avoided her. They didn't believe she was really married. But the doctor said she was. And he turned out to be honest. He never tried to get more money out of me. Neither did the woman. His name was Paul Lefebre, and the village was Latour. I've never heard anything from them or about them since Jack and I and you and Anne left the Château de la Tour, when you were six weeks old. I didn't wish to hear. I wanted to forget, as if it had all been a bad dream. Only Anne's eyes wouldn't let me. They seemed to know too much. I couldn't help being glad when she was dead, though she'd been so faithful. But when Jack died in that dreadful, sudden way, then for the first time I felt remorse—horrible remorse, for a while.... I thought he was taken from me by God as a punishment—the one human being I'd ever loved dearly! And I got insomnia, because his spirit seemed to be near, looking at me, knowing everything. But the feeling passed. I suppose I'm not deep enough to feel anything for long. I lived down the remorse. And it was fortunate for me I had a child; otherwise all but a little money would have gone to the Reynold Dorans. You've been good to me, Max, and I've liked you very well. I've tried not to think about the past. But when I did think, I said to myself that you had nothing to complain of. What a different life it would have been for you, with your own people. And even as it is, you needn't give up anything unless you choose. If Jack were alive I'd never have told, even dying. But he's gone, and I shall be—soon. So far as I'm concerned I don't care which way you choose: whether you write to Doctor Lefebre or not. Only for the sake of the name—Jack's name—don't let there be a scandal if you decide to try and find the girl. Maybe you can't find her. She may be dead. Then it needn't go against your conscience to let things stay as they are. The Reynold Dorans have heaps of money."

"That isn't the question exactly," said Max. "Whatever happens, I haven't the right—but never mind.... I don't want to trouble you, God knows. I can see partly how you must have felt about the baby, and about fath—I mean, about the whole thing. It isn't for me to blame—I—thank you for telling me. Somehow I must manage—to make things straight, without injuring fath—without injuring the name." His voice broke a little. John Doran had died under an operation when Max was ten, but he had adored his father, and still adored his memory. There had been great love between the big, quiet sportsman and the mercurial, hot-headed, enthusiastic little boy whom Jack Doran had spoiled and called "Frenchy" for a pet name. After more than fourteen years, he could hear the kind voice now, clearly as ever. "Hullo, Frenchy! how are things with you to-day?" used to be the morning greeting.

How were things with him to-day?...

Max had heard the story with a stolidity which seemed to himself extraordinary; for excepting the shiver of physical pain which shook him at each sigh of suffering from under the veil, he had felt nothing, absolutely nothing, until the voice of dead Jack Doran seemed to call to him out of darkness.

"He wasn't my father," came the stabbing reminder; but the love which had been could never be taken away. "I must do what you would want me to do," Max answered the call. In his heart he knew what that thing was. He must give everything up. He ought to look for the girl and for his own parents, if they lived. The daughter of John Doran must have what was hers.

As he thought this, Rose spoke again, more slowly now, since the story was told, and there was no longer any haste. "Remember, nobody knows yet but you and me, Max," she said. "Not even Edwin Reeves. All he knows is that I had something to say to you. If he tried to guess what it was, he must have guessed something very different from this. Why not find out where *she* is, if you can, and somehow contrive to give her money or send it anonymously—enough to make her rich;

and let the rest go as it is? I told you just now that I didn't care much either way, and I don't, for myself, because I shall be out of it all, and because I know you loved Jack too well not to be careful for his sake, what you do. But I care more for your sake than I thought I cared at first. You're so quiet, I know I've struck you hard. Almost—I wish I hadn't told."

"I don't," answered Max with an effort. "And you mustn't. It was the only thing."

And yet, even as he spoke, he was conscious of wishing that she had not told. Some women, having done what she had done for the love of a man and for their own vanity, would have gone out of the world in silence—still for the love of the man, and for their own vanity. Vanity had been the ruling passion of Rose Doran's life. Max had realized it before. Yet something in the end had been stronger than vanity, and had beaten it down. He wondered dimly what the thing was. Perhaps fear, lest soon, on the other side of the dark valley, she should have to meet reproach in the only eyes she had ever loved. And she needed help in crossing—Jack Doran's help. Maybe this was her way of reaching out for it. She had told the truth; and she seemed to think that was enough. She advised Max to leave things as they were, after all. And he was tempted to obey.

No longer was he stunned by the blow that had fallen. He felt the pain of it now, and faced the future consequences. He stood to lose everything: his career, for Max had his vanity, too; and without the Doran name and the Doran money he could not remain in the army.

If he resolved to hand over all that was his to the girl, he must go away, must leave the country.

He would have to think of some scheme by which the girl could get her rights, and the world could be left in ignorance of Rose Doran's fraud. To accomplish this, he must sacrifice himself utterly. He must disappear and be forgotten by his friends—a penniless man, without a country. And Billie Brookton would be lost to him.

Strange, this was his first conscious thought of her since he had stepped out of the train, almost his first since leaving her at Fort Ellsworth. He was half shocked at his forgetfulness of such a jewel, so nearly his, the jewel so many other men wanted. He wanted her, too, desperately, now that the clouds had parted for an instant to remind him of the bright world where she lived—the world of his past.

"You're so deadly still!" Rose murmured. "Are you thinking hard things of me?"

"No, never that," Max said.

"How are you going to decide? Shall you take my advice, keep your place in this world, and give her money, if you find her? And most likely you never can. It's such a long time ago." Rose's voice dragged. It was very small and weak, very tired.

"It's your advice for me to do that?" Max asked, almost incredulously. "And yet—she's your own child, *his* child."

"Not the child of our souls. You'll see what I mean, if you ever see her. Think it over—a few minutes, and then tell me. I feel—somehow I should like to know, before going. Wake me—in ten minutes. I think I could sleep—till then. Such a rest, since I told you! No pain."

"Oughtn't I to call the doctor?" Max half rose from his chair by the bedside.

"No, no. I want nothing—except to sleep—for ten minutes. Can you decide—in ten minutes?"

"Yes."

"You promise to wake me then?"

"Yes," Max said again.

For ten minutes there was silence in the room, save for a little sound of crackling wood in the open fire that Rose had always loved.

Max had decided, and the time had come to keep his promise. He must speak, to wake the sleeper. But he did not know what to call her. She said that she had never loved him as a son. She must always have felt irritated when he dared to address her as "Dearest"—he, the little French *bourgeois*. She would hate it now.

"Rose!" he whispered. Then a little louder, "Rose!"

She did not answer.

He would not have to tell her his decision. But perhaps she knew.

CHAPTER III

THE LAST ACT OF "GIRLS' LOVE"

The wail of grief that echoed through New York for Rose Doran, suddenly snatched from life in the prime of her beauty, sounded in the ears of Max a warning note. Her memory must not be smirched. And then again came the temptation. As she lay dying he had decided what to do. But

now that she was dead, now that letters and telegrams by the hundred, and visits of sympathy, and columns in the newspapers, were making him realize more and more her place in the world she had left, and the height of the pedestal on which the Doran family stood, the question repeated itself insistently: Why not reconsider?

Max had thought from time to time that he knew what temptation was; but now he saw that he had never known. His safeguard used to be in calling up his father's image to stand by him, in listening for the tones of a beloved voice which had the power to calm his hot temper, or hold him back from some impetuous act of which he would have been ashamed later. He had seemed to hear the voice as Rose slept her last sleep, under her white veil, but later it was silent. It left him to himself, and sometimes he was even persuaded that it joined with the voice of Rose, whispering that siren word, "Reconsider."

Jack Doran had loved Rose. Perhaps on the other side of the valley he had forgiven her, and wished above all other things that her memory should remain bright. If Max reconsidered, it would all be easy. No one would be surprised if he took long leave and went abroad. No one would think it strange or suspicious if a girl "Cousin" should later appear on the scene: a Miss Doran of whom no one had ever heard, who had been educated abroad, and who, because she had lost her parents, was to take up life in America. Or maybe it needn't even come to that, in case he found the girl. She might be married. She might prefer to remain where she was, with plenty of money from her distant relations, the Dorans, of whose existence she would be informed for the first time. There would be no difficulty in arranging this. The one real difficulty was that Max's soul would be in prison. The bars would be of gold, and he would have in his cell everything to make him and his friends think it a palace. But it would be a prison cell, all the same, for ever and ever; and at night when he and his soul were alone together, looking into each other's eyes, he would know that from behind the door he had locked upon himself there was no escape.

There were moments, and whole hours together, when he said with a kind of sudden rage against the responsibility thrown on him, "I'll take Rose's advice—the last words she ever spoke." But then, in some still depth far under the turmoil of his tempted spirit, he knew that his first decision was the only one possible for honour or even for happiness. And the day after the funeral he made it irrevocable by telling Edwin Reeves a wild story that had come to him in a strange moment of something like exaltation. It had come as he stood bareheaded by the grave where Rose had just been laid to sleep beside Jack Doran; and in that moment a lie for their sakes seemed nobler than the truth that would hurt them. More and more, as he thought of it on his way back to the house which had once been "home," and as the possibilities developed in his mind, with elaborations of the tale, this lie appealed to his chivalry. Everybody might hear it without fear that Jack or Rose would be blamed. That was the great advantage. There need be no whisperings and mysteries. And once the tale was told, there would be no going back from it.

The story which fixed his imagination and inspired him to martyrdom might have made a plot for some old-fashioned melodrama, but Max began to realize that there was nothing in fiction so incredible as the things which happen in life: things one reads about any day in newspapers, yet which in a novel would be laughed at by critics. He would say to Edwin Reeves that, shortly before her death, Rose had learned through the dying confession of a Frenchwoman who had nursed her in childbirth that her girl baby had been changed for a boy, born about the same time to a relative of the nurse; that hearing this story she had intended to write Max, and ask him to go to France to prove or disprove its truth, but that she had been struck down before summoning courage to break the news. Edwin Reeves would then understand Rose's anxiety to see Max; and he would keep the secret, at least until the girl was found. As for what ought to be done in the case of not finding her, or learning without doubt that she was dead, Max thought he might take the lawyer's advice as a friend of the Dorans, as a legal man, and as a man of the world. Perhaps, if in Edwin Reeves's judgment silence would in that event be justified, Max might accept this verdict.

There was that one grain of hope for the future—if it could be called hope. But there was another person besides Edwin Reeves and Edwin Reeves's son (Max's best friend of old days) who must be told at once how little claim he had to the Doran name and fortune. That person was Billie Brookton.

Max had dimly expected opposition from Edwin Reeves, whose advice might be what Rose Doran's had been: to give money, and let everything remain as it had been. It was somewhat to his surprise that the lawyer, after listening in silence, agreed that there was just one thing to do, if the girl still lived. Grant (who was with him in their private office by Max's wish), though more demonstrative, more openly sympathetic, held the same opinion.

Max ought to have been glad of this encouragement, but somehow, shaming himself for it, he felt a dull sense of injury, especially where Grant was concerned. Grant exclaimed that it was horribly hard lines, and that old Max was the splendid fellow everybody had always believed him to be. Lots of chaps would have been mean, and stuck to the name and money, though of course no honourable man could do that. Grant quite saw how Max felt, and would have to act in the same way himself, no matter what it cost. If the truth had to come out, every one would say he'd behaved like a hero—that was one comfort; but, as Edwin Reeves reminded them both, Max might be rewarded for his noble resolve by learning that there was no need to make the sensational story public. If the girl had died or could not be found, it would be—in Mr. Reeves's opinion—foolishly quixotic to rouse sleeping dogs, and ruin himself, to put money in the pockets

of the Reynold Dorans, who had more than they wanted already.

"You'll feel like getting leave to run over to France, I suppose," said the lawyer, "though of course the search might be made for you if you prefer."

"I prefer to go myself," Max decided quietly.

"Why not let me go with you?" Grant suggested, with a certain eagerness which it seemed to Max he tried to suppress, rather than to show as a proof of friendship. "The governor could spare me for a while, I expect, and it wouldn't be quite such a gloomy errand as if you were alone. I'd be glad to do it for you, dear old boy, honestly I would."

Yes, he would be glad. Max saw that. And instead of feeling drawn nearer to Grant Reeves, he felt suddenly miles away. They had drifted apart since Max had joined his regiment in the West and Grant had become a partner with his father. Now Max told himself that he had never known Grant: that as men they were so far from one another he could really never know him; and he wondered at the impulse which had made him wish Grant to hear the story with Edwin.

"But suppose it's all true and you find the girl over on the other side somewhere?" Grant went on, when Max had answered that the search might be long, and it would be better for him to make it alone. "What will you do? Hadn't my mother better fetch her? Mother's over in Paris now, you know, so it would be less trouble. You mightn't want to bring her back yourself, unless, of course ——"

"Unless—what?" Max wanted to know.

"Well, you're not related to the girl, and you're about the same age. She'll naturally look upon you as a hero, a deliverer, and all that, if she's a normal woman. If it were in a book instead of real life, the end would be——"

"Different from what it will be with us," Max cut him short. "Don't let's speak or think of anything like that."

"It only occurred to me," Grant excused himself mildly, "that if—nothing like that *did* happen, you mightn't want to come back to this country yourself, for a while. It's a queer sort of case. And you see you went through West Point and got your lieutenancy as Max Doran. If you weren't Max Doran, but somebody else, I wonder what they would do about——"

"I shouldn't give them the trouble of doing anything," said Max quietly. "I'd resign from the army. But there'll be other doors open, I hope. I don't mean to fade out of existence because I'm not a Doran or a fellow with money. I'll try and make something out of another name."

"And you'll succeed, of course," Edwin Reeves assured him. "I suppose it was in Grant's mind that if this extraordinary story proved to be true, and you should give up your name and your fortune to John and Rose Doran's daughter, why you would in a way be giving up your country, too. You say that the confession Mrs. Doran received was from a Frenchwoman: that this person took the child of a relative, and exchanged it for the Doran baby. If we are to believe that, it makes you of French blood as well as French birth. Grant supposed, perhaps, that this fact might change your point of view."

Max had not thought of it, and resented the suggestion which the two seemed to be making: that he would no longer have the right to consider himself an American. "But I don't feel French," he exclaimed. "I don't see how I ever can."

"Yet you speak French almost like a Frenchman," said Grant. "We used to tease you about it in school. Do you remember?"

Did he remember? And Jack Doran had called him "Frenchy." Always, it seemed, he had been marching blindly toward this moment.

Nothing was settled at the end of the talk, except that the secret was to be kept for the present. And Max learned that Rose had made an informal will, leaving him all her jewellery, with the request that it should be valued by experts and sold, he taking the money to "use as he thought fit." She had made this will years ago, it seemed, directly after Jack Doran's death, while her conscience was awake. Max guessed what had been in her mind. She had wanted him to have something of his own, in case he ever lost his supposed heritage. He was grateful to her because, not loving him, she had nevertheless thought of his welfare and tried to provide for it. Mr. Reeves knew something about the value of Rose's jewels. She had not had many, he reminded Max. Once, soon after her marriage, and while she was still abroad, all her wedding presents and gifts from her husband had been stolen in a train journey. Since then, she seemed to have picked up the idea that a beautiful woman ought not to let herself be outshone by her own jewels. She had cared for dress more than for jewellery, and, with the exception of a rope of pearls, her ornaments had not been worth a great deal. Still, they ought to sell for at least twelve or fifteen thousand dollars, counting everything, and two or three rather particularly fine rings which Jack had given her.

"I think she must have meant me to except those from the things to be sold," said Max. "She would have known I'd never let them go."

His first impulse after that interview with the Reeveses was to dash out West and see Billie, to tell her that something had happened which might make a great difference in his circumstances,

and to give her back her freedom. But when he had stopped to think, he said to himself that it wouldn't be fair to go. Face to face, it would be hard for Billie to take him at his word, and he did not want to make it hard. Instead, he wrote, telling her that he was getting leave to go abroad on important business—business on which the whole future would depend. Perhaps (owing to circumstances which couldn't be explained yet, till he learned more about them himself) he might be a poor man instead of a rich one. Meanwhile, she mustn't consider herself bound. Later, when he knew what awaited him, if things righted themselves he would come to her again, and ask what he had asked before. In any case, he would explain.

It was rather a good letter, the version which Max finally let stand, after having torn up half a dozen partly covered sheets of paper. His love was there for the girl to see, and he could not help feeling that, possibly—just possibly—she might write or even telegraph, saying, "I refuse to be set free."

While he waited, he engaged his passage to Cherbourg on a ship that was to sail at the end of the week. That would give Billie's answer time to come. Or—just madly supposing she cared enough to have an understudy play her part for a few days—it would allow time for a wonderful surprise, and the greatest proof of love a girl could give a man.

There was no telegram, but the day before he was to sail an envelope with Billie Brookton's pretty scrawl on it was put into his hand. He opened it carefully, because it seemed sacrilege to tear what she had touched, or break the purple seal, with the two bees on it, which she used instead of initials or a monogram. The perfume which came from the paper was her own special perfume, named in honour of her success and popularity—"Girls' Love." Max remembered Billie's telling him once that it cost "outsiders" five dollars an ounce, because there were amber and lots of wonderful, mysterious things in it; but *she* got it for nothing.

"How good, how noble you are!" were her first words; and Max's heart leaped. This divine creature, who could have her pick of men, was going to say ... but as his eyes travelled fast from line to line, the beating of his heart slowed down.

"Come back to me when this horrible business trouble is over, and ask me again, as you say you will. You'll find me waiting, oh, *so* impatiently! for I *do* love you. Whatever happens, Max—dear, handsome Max—you will be the one great romance of my life. I can never forget you, or those blue eyes of yours, the day you told me you cared. They will haunt me always. Oh, how I wish I were rich enough for both of us, so that we might be happy, even in case of the worst, and you lose your money! But I don't know how to keep the wretched stuff when I have it. And though I make a lot now, I'm not strong, and who knows how long my vogue may last? We poor actress girls, who depend on our health and the fickle public, have to think of these sordid things. It is, oh, *so* sad for us! No woman who hasn't known the struggle herself can realize. Do hurry back, with good news for both, and save me from a *dreadful* man who is persecuting me to marry him. I met him in such an odd way the last time I was here in Chicago, but I didn't tell you the story of the adventure, because it would only have worried you. Besides, you made me forget every one and everything—you did truly, Max! But he frightens me now, he is so fearfully rich, and so strong and insisting; and somehow he's got round auntie. She's so silly; she thinks you oughtn't to have left me as you did, though of course you had to. *I* understood, if she doesn't. She's only a foolish old lady, but she does fuss so about this man! If you don't rescue me, he may be my fate. I *feel* it. Dear Max, I wait for you. I want you.

BILLIE.

"P.S. *Please wire when you know*."

As he read the letter through for the second time, he could hear through the open window of his room a woman's voice singing one of Gaëta's songs, the one most popular: "Forever—never! Who knows?"

The words mingled themselves with the words of the letter: "Come back. Bring good news. Forever—never! Who knows?" And the song was from the last act of "Girls' Love."

CHAPTER IV

THE UPPER BERTH

When he had learned at the village of La Tour that Doctor Lefebre had left the place long ago, to practise in Paris, Max went there, and found Lefebre without difficulty. He was now, at fifty, a well-known man, still young looking, but with a somewhat melancholy face, and the long eyelids that mean Jewish ancestry. When he had listened to Max's story he said, with a thoughtful smile: "Do you see, it is to you I owe my success? I have never repented what I did for Madame. Still less do I repent now, having met you. I gained advantages for myself that I could not otherwise have had; and to-day proves that I gave them to one who Has known how to profit by every gift. The *other*—the girl—would not have known how. There was something strange about the child,

something not right, not normal. I have often wondered what she has become. But it is better for you not to think of her. Fate has shut a door between you two. Don't open it. That is the advice, Monsieur, of the man who brought you into this very extraordinary world."

Max thanked him, but answered that, for good or ill, he had made up his mind. Doctor Lefebre shrugged his shoulders with an air of resigned regret, and told what little he knew of the Delatours since he had sent the young woman off to Algeria with the baby. The first thing he had heard was four or five years after, when he paid a visit to La Tour, and was told that Maxime Delatour had left the army and settled permanently in Algeria. Then, no more news for several years, until one day a letter had been forwarded to him in Paris from his old address at La Tour. It was from Madame Delatour, dated "Hotel Pension Delatour, Alger," asking guardedly if he would tell her where she might write to the American lady whose child had been born at the château. "The lady who had been kind to her and her baby." She would like to send news of little Josephine, in whom the lady might still take an interest. Madame Delatour had added in a postscript that she and her husband were keeping a small hotel in Algiers, which they had taken with "some money that had come to them," but were not doing as well as they could wish. Doctor Lefebre, feeling sure that she meant to make trouble, had not answered the letter; but even had he answered, he could only have said that Mrs. Doran lived in New York. He knew no more himself, and had never tried to find out. Since then he had heard nothing of the Delatour family.

That same night Max left Paris for Marseilles, and the next morning he was on board the *General Morel* starting for Algiers. For the first time in his life he had to think of economy: for though Rose's legacy had amounted to something over fifteen thousand dollars, already it was nearly disposed of. He determined never again to touch a Doran dollar for his own personal use, unless he discovered that the rightful owner was dead. He had left Fort Ellsworth owing a good deal here and there; for tradesmen were slow about sending bills to such a valuable customer. Now, however, he felt that he must pay his debts with the money that was his own; and settling them would make an immense hole in his small inheritance. There, for instance, were the pearls and the ring he had bought for Billie Brookton. Their cost alone was nine thousand dollars, and even if Billie should offer to give them back, he meant to ask her to keep them for remembrance. But she would not offer. He would never have admitted to himself that he knew she would not; yet, since receiving her letter, he had known. If he had by and by to tell Billie that he was to be a poor man, she would make some charming excuse for not sending back his presents. Or else she would not refer to them at all. Whatever the future might bring, it seemed to Max that he had lost youth's bright vision of romance. There was no such girl in the world as the girl he had dreamed. The letter had shown him that—the one letter he had ever had from Billie Brookton.

After his talk with Doctor Lefebre the change in his life became for Max more intimately real than it had been before. The fact that he was travelling second-class, though an insignificant thing in itself, brought it home to him in a curious, irritating way. He felt that he must be a weak, spoiled creature, not worthy to call himself a soldier, because little, unfamiliar shabbinesses and inconveniences disgusted him. He remembered how he had revelled in his one trip abroad with Rose and some friends of theirs the year before he went to West Point. They had motored from Paris to the Riviera, and stayed in Nice. Then they had come back to Marseilles, and had taken the best cabins on board a great liner, for Egypt. What fun he and the other boy of the party had had! He felt now that, however things turned out, the fun of life was over.

If the girl, Josephine Delatour, lived, he would have to leave the army; that was clear. Grant Reeves had shown him why. And it would be hard, for he loved soldiering. He could think willingly of no other profession or even business. Yet somewhere, somehow, he would have to begin at the bottom and work up. Besides, there were his real parents to be thought of, if they were still alive. Max felt that perhaps he was hard—or worse still, snobbish—not to feel any instinctive affection for them. His mother had sold him, in order that she might have money to go to her husband, whom she loved so much better than her child. Well, at least she had a heart! That was something. And if the pair still kept a little hotel, what of that? Was he such a mean wretch as to be ashamed because he was the son of a small hotel-keeper? Max began spying out in himself his faults and weaknesses, which, while he was happy and fortunate, he had never suspected. And now and then he caught the words running through his mind: "If only she is dead, the whole thing will be no more than a bad dream." What a cad he was! he thought. And even if she were dead, nothing could ever be as it had been. Jack Doran was not his father, and he would have no right to anything that had been Jack's, not even his love. If he kept the money it would not make him happy. He could never be happy again.

It was in this mood that he went on board the *General Morel*, the oldest and worst-built ship of her line. She was carrying a crowd of second-class passengers for Algiers, and the worried stewards had no time to attend to him. He found his own cabin, by the number on his ticket, groping through a long, dark corridor, which smelt of food and bilge water. The stateroom was as gloomy as the passage leading to it, and he congratulated himself that at least he had the lower berth.

His roommate, however, had been in before him, and either through ignorance or impudence had annexed Max's bunk for himself. On the roughly laundered coverlet was a miniature brown kitbag, conspicuously new looking. It had been carelessly left open, or had sprung open of itself, being too tightly packed, and as Max prepared to change its place, muttering, "Cheek of the fellow!" he could not help seeing two photographs in silver frames lying on top of the bag's other contents. Both portraits were of men. One was an officer in the uniform of the French army, with the typical soldier look which gives likeness and kin to fighting men in all races of the world. The

other photograph Max recognized at a glance as that of Richard Stanton, the explorer.

Queer, Max thought, as he lifted the bag, open as it was, to the upper berth. Queer, that some little *bourgeois* Frenchman, journeying second-class from Marseilles to Algiers, should have as a treasure in his hand-baggage the portrait of a celebrated and extremely pugnacious Englishman who had got the newspapers down on him two or three years ago for a wild interview he had given against the *entente cordiale*. Max remembered it and the talk about it in the officers' mess at Fort Ellsworth, just after he joined his regiment. However, the Frenchman's photographs were his own business; and Max relented not at all toward the cheeky brute because he had a portrait of the great Richard Stanton in his bag. This was the sort of thing one had to expect when one travelled second-class! A few weeks before he would have thought it impossible as well as disgusting to bunk with a stranger whom he had never seen; but as he said to himself, with a shrug of the shoulders which tried to be Spartan, "Misfortune makes strange bedfellows." Max was disciplining himself to put up with hardships of all sorts which would probably become a part of everyday life. His own hand-luggage, a suitcase with his name marked on it, had been dumped down by some steward in the corridor, and he carried it into the stateroom himself, pushing it far under the lower berth with a rather vicious kick. As rain was falling in torrents, and a bitter wind blowing, he kept on his heavy overcoat, and went out of the cabin leaving no trace of his ownership there except the hidden suitcase. Perhaps on that kick which had sent it out of sight the shaping of Max Doran's whole future life depended.

On the damp deck and in the dingy "salle" of the second-class Max wondered, with stifled repulsion, which among the fat Germans, hook-nosed Algerian Jews, dignified Arab merchants, and common-looking Frenchmen, was to share his ridiculously small cabin. Most of them appeared to be half sick already, in fearful anticipation of the rocking they were doomed to get in the ancient tub once she steamed out of the harbour and into the face of the gale. In the "gang," as he called it, there was visible but one person in what Max Doran had been accustomed to think of as his own "rank." That person was a girl, and despite the gloom which shut him into himself, he glanced at her now and then with curiosity. It seemed unaccountable that such a girl should be travelling apparently alone, and especially second-class.

The first thing that caught his attention was the colour of her hair as she stood with her back to him, on deck. She was wrapped in a long, dark blue coat, with well-cut lines which showed the youthfulness of her tall, slim figure, as tall and slim as Billie Brookton's, but more alertly erect, more boyish. On her head was a small, close-fitting toque of the same dark blue as her coat; and between this cap and the turned-up collar bunched out a thick roll of yellow hair. It was not as yellow as Billie's, yet at first glance it reminded him of hers, with a sick longing for lost beauty and romance. Seeing the delicate figure, cloaked in the same blue which Billie affected for travelling, he thought what it would be like to have the girl with the yellow hair turn, to show Billie's face radiant with love for him, to hear her flutey voice cry: "Max, I couldn't bear it without you! Forget what I said in that horrid letter. I didn't mean a word of it. I've given up everything to be your wife. Take me!"

Soon the girl did turn from the rain blowing into her face, and that face was of an entirely different type from Billie's. Seeing it, after that attack upon his imagination, was a sharp relief to Max. Still he did not lose interest. The girl's hair was not so yellow where it grew on her head and framed the rather thin oval of her face, as in the thick-rolled mass behind, golden still with childhood's gold. Except for her tall slenderness she was not in the least like Billie Brookton; and she would have no great pretension to beauty had it not been for a pair of long, gray, thick-lashed eyes which looked out softly and sweetly on the world. Her nose was too small and her mouth too large, but the delicate cutting of the nostrils and the bow of the coral-pink upper lip had fascination and a sensitiveness that was somehow pathetic. She held her head high, on a long and lovely throat, which gave her a look of courage, but a forced courage, not the christening gift of godmother nature. That sort of girl, Max reflected, was meant to be cherished and taken care of. And why was she not taken care of? He wondered if she had run away from home, in her dainty prettiness, to be jostled by this unappreciative, second-class crowd? She was brave enough, though, despite her look of flower-delicacy, to stop on deck long after the ship had steamed out from the comparatively quiet, rock-bound harbour, and plunged into the tossing sea. At last a big wave drove the girl away, and Max did not see her again until dinner time. He came late and reluctantly into the close-smelling dining-saloon, and found her already seated at the long table. Her place was nearly opposite his, and as he sat down she looked up with a quick, interested look which had girlish curiosity in it, and a complete lack of self-consciousness that was perhaps characteristic. Evidently, as he had separated her in his mind from the rabble, wondering about her, so she had separated him and wondered also. She was too far away for Max to speak, even if he had dared; but a moment later a big man who squeezed himself in between table and revolving chair, next to the girl, made an excuse to ask for the salt, and begin a conversation. He did this in a matter-of-fact, bourgeois way, however, which not even a prude or a snob could think offensive. And apparently the girl was far from being a prude or a snob. She answered with a soft, girlish charm of manner which gave the impression that she was generously kind of heart. Then something that the man said made her flush up and start with surprise.

From that moment on the two were absorbed in each other. Could it be, Max asked himself, that the big, rough fellow and the daintily bred girl had found an acquaintance in common? There seemed to be a gulf between them as wide as the world, yet evidently they had hit upon some subject which interested them both. Through the clatter of dishes Max caught words, or fragments of sentences, all spoken in French. The man had a common accent, but the girl's was

charming. She had a peculiarly sweet, soft voice, that somehow matched the sweetness and softness of the long, straight-lashed eyes under the low, level brows, so delicately yet clearly pencilled. Max guessed at first that she was English; then from some slight inflection of tone, wondered if she were Irish instead. It was a name which sounded like "Sidi-bel-Abbés" that made the girl start and blush, and turn to her neighbour with sudden interest. Again and again they mentioned "Sidi-bel-Abbés," which meant nothing for Max until he heard the girl say "La Legion Etrangére." Immediately the recollection of a book he had read flashed into Max's brain. Why, yes, of course, Sidi-bel-Abbés was a place in Algeria, the headquarters of the Foreign Legion, that mysterious band of men without a country, in whom men of all countries are interested. What was there in the subject of the Foreign Legion to attract such a girl? Could she be going alone to Sidi-bel-Abbés, hoping to find some lost relative—a brother, perhaps? She asked the man eager questions, which Max could not hear, but the big fellow shook his bullet-shaped head. Evidently he had little information to give on the subject which specially appealed to her; but there were others on which he held forth volubly; and though the girl's attention flagged sometimes, she could have been no more gracious in her manner to the common fellow if he had been an exiled king. "*La Boxe*" were the words which Max began to hear repeated, and a boxer was what the man looked like: a second or third rate professional. Max wished that he could catch what was being said, for boxing was one of his own accomplishments. He boxed so well that once, before he was twenty-one, he had knocked out his master, an ex-lightweight champion, in three rounds. Since then he had kept up his practice, and the sporting set among the officers at Fort Ellsworth had been proud of their Max Doran.

Every moment the weather grew worse, and one after another the few second-class passengers who had dared to risk dining faded away. At last, about halfway through the badly served meal, the girl got up with a wan little smile for her talkative neighbour, and went out, keeping her balance by catching at the back of a chair now and then. The bullet-headed man soon followed, charging at the open door like a bull, as a wave dropped the floor under his feet. But Max, priding himself on his qualities as a sailor, managed to sit through the meagre dessert.

The girl was not visible on the rain-swept deck, or in the gloomy reading-room, where Max glanced over old French papers until his optic nerves sent imperative messages of protest to his brain. Then he strayed on deck again, finding excuse after excuse to keep out of his cabin, where no doubt a seasick roommate was by this time wallowing and guzzling. At last, however, his swimming head begged for a pillow, no matter how hard, and in desperation he went below. He found the cabin door on the hook, and the faded curtain of cretonne drawn across. There was one comfort, at least: the wretch liked air. Max hoped the fellow had gone to sleep, in which case there might be some chance of rest. Gently he unhooked the door and fastened it again in the same manner. A little light flittered through the thin curtain, enabling Max to grope his way about the tiny stateroom, and he determined not to rouse his companion by switching on the electricity.

It had occurred to him, on his way to the cabin, that he might find his berth usurped by a prostrate form, as in the afternoon by a bag. But his first peering glance through the dimness reassured him on this point. The owner of the bag had taken the hint, and stowed himself in his own bunk. Max could just make out a huddled shape under bedclothes which had been drawn high for warmth. Then he knelt down to grope for the suitcase which he had pushed far under his own berth. Seeking it in the semi-darkness, a wave sent him sprawling. He heard from somewhere a shrill crash of glass, a sudden babble of excited voices, and decided it would not be worth while to undress unless the storm should abate. He scrambled up, and thankfully flung himself, just as he was, on to his bunk. In the wild confusion of squeaking, straining planks, the thump of waves against the porthole, the demon-shrieks of infuriated wind, and the shouts and running to and fro of sailors overhead, it seemed impossible that any human being could sleep. Yet the creature overhead was mercifully quiet; and suddenly slumber fell upon Max, shutting out thought and sound. For a while he slept heavily; but by and by dreams came and lifted the curtain of unconsciousness, stirring him to restlessness. It seemed that he had lived through years since New York, and that everything had long ago been decided for him, one way or the other, though his dulled brain kept the secret. He knew only that he was at Sidi-bel-Abbés—Sidi-bel-Abbés. How he had got there, and what he was doing, he could not tell. It ought to be a town, but it was not. There were no houses nor buildings of any kind in this strange Sidi-bel-Abbés. He could see only waves of yellow sand, billowing and moving all around him like sea waves; and it was sea as well as desert. Suddenly one of the waves rolled away, to show a small white tent, almost like a covered boat. A voice was calling to him from it, and he struggled to get near, falling and stumbling among the yellow waves. Then abruptly he started back. It was Billie Brookton's voice. Instead of being glad to hear it, he was bitterly, bleakly disappointed, and felt chilled to the heart with cold. Surprised at his own despair, he waked up, with a great start, just in time to brace his feet against the bottom of the berth and save himself from being thrown out by a shuddering bound of the ship. From overhead he heard a sigh of pain or weariness, and the top berth creaked with some movement of its occupant. "The beast's awake!" thought Max, resentfully. "Now for ructions! No more hope of sleep for me, I suppose."

But all was still again, except for a faint rustling as if the pillow were being turned over. At the same instant something long and supple, like a thick, silky rope, slid down from above. He could see it in the dim light as it fell and brushed his hand protruding, palm uppermost, over the edge of the bunk. Quite mechanically he shut his fingers on the thing, to prevent its dropping to the floor, and, to his amazement, it felt to the touch like a woman's hair. His hand was full of it—a great, satin-soft curl it seemed to be. Only, it *couldn't* be that, of course! Maybe he was half

dreaming still. He opened his fingers and let the stuff go. But instead of falling to the floor, the long rope swayed gently back and forth with the rocking of the ship. It *was* hair! A wonderful plait of hair, attached to a woman's head. A woman was lying there in the upper berth.

CHAPTER V

THE NIGHT OF STORMS

A Woman! But how was it possible that there should be a woman in his cabin? There must have been some unthinkable mistake, and he felt confident that it was not he who had made it. He had looked carefully at the number over the door, comparing it with the number on his ticket. But, after all, what did it matter? It was too late now to apportion blame. She was there. And what hair she had! When she stood up it must fall far below her knees.

"What shall I do?" thought Max. "Shall I lie still until she goes to sleep again, and then sneak out into the *salle*? If she doesn't see my suitcase she need never know I've been in the room."

And, after all, it came back to that, whether he had mistaken the cabin, or she. If he had left his suitcase in plain sight, marked "Lieutenant Max Doran, —th Cavalry, Fort Ellsworth," the woman would have rung for a steward, and the error would somehow have been adjusted.

Four or five minutes passed, and silence reigned in the berth overhead. Max sat up cautiously, lest his bunk should squeak, and had begun still more cautiously to emerge from it, when there came a sudden vicious lurch of the ship. He was flung out, but seized the berth-curtain, as the *General Morel* awkwardly wallowed, and staggered to his feet, just in time to save the occupant of the upper berth from flying across the room. With a cry, she fell on to his shoulder, and he held her up with one hand, still grasping the curtain with the other. The long plait of hair and a smooth bare arm were round his neck. A face was close to his, and he could feel warm, quick breaths on his cheek.

"Don't be frightened," he heard himself soothe her with deceitful calm. "It'll be all right in a minute. I won't let you fall."

Even as he spoke, it occurred to Max that possibly she didn't understand English. The thought had hardly time to pass through his mind, however, when she answered him in English in a shocked whisper, trying vainly to draw away:

"But—it's a man!—in my cabin!"

"I'm awfully sorry," said Max. "There's been some mistake. Better let me hold you a few seconds more, till the ship's steadier. Then I'll lift you down to the lower berth. You see, I thought it was my cabin."

"Oh," she exclaimed; and he felt a quiver run through the bare arm. Her hair, which showered over his face and twined intricately round his neck, had a faint, flowery perfume. "As soon as I get you down, and make you comfortable, I'll go," he hurried on. "There, now, I think things are quieting for the moment. We must have had two waves following one another quicker than the rest. Let go your hold on the berth, and I'll take you out."

He felt her relax obediently; and slipping one arm under her shoulder, the other under her knees, he lifted a burden which proved to be light, from the upper berth, to bestow it in safety, far back against the wall in the bunk underneath.

"Oh, thank you," was breathed out with a sigh of relief. "You're very kind—and so strong! But I feel dreadfully ill. I hope I'm not going to faint."

"I'll get you some brandy," said Max, bethinking himself of a certain silver flask in his suitcase, a prize as it happened, won as an amateur of *la boxe*.

To his horror she made no answer.

"Jove!" he muttered. "She's gone off—and no wonder. It's awful!"

He began to be flurried, for his own head was not too clear. "She may be flung to the floor while I'm groping around for that suitcase of mine, if she's fainted, and can't save herself when the next wave comes," he thought. "That won't do. I'll have to light up, and wall her in with the bedding from the top bunk, so she can't easily be pitched out."

Hesitating a little, not quite sure about the propriety of the necessary revelation, he nevertheless switched on the electricity. After the dusk which had turned everything shadow-gray, the little stateroom appeared to be brilliantly illuminated. In his berth lay the girl he had seen on deck and at dinner.

Max was not completely taken by surprise, as he would have been had he seen the vision before hearing her voice. As she clung round his neck, she had spoken only brokenly and in a whisper, but from the first words he had felt instinctively sure of his companion's identity.

If she had been delicately pale before, now she was deathly white, so white that Max, who had

never before seen a woman faint, felt a stab of fear. What if she had a weak heart? What if she were dead?

She wore a dressing-gown of a white woollen material, inexpensive perhaps, but classic in its soft foldings around the slender body; and the thought flitted through Max's head that she was like a slim Greek statue, come alive; or perhaps Galatea, disappointed with the world, turning back to marble.

All the while he, with unsteady hands, unlocked and opened his bag, fumbling among its contents for the flask, she lay still, without a quiver of the eyelids. She did not even seem to breathe. But perhaps girls were like that when they fainted! Max didn't know. He wanted to listen for the beating of her heart, but dared not. He would try the brandy, and if that did not bring her to herself, he would ring and ask for the ship's doctor. But—could he do that? How could he explain to any one their being together in this cabin?

Hastily he poured a little brandy from the flask into the tiny cup which screwed on like a cover. The pitching and tossing made it hard not to spill the fluid over the upturned face—that would have been sacrilege!—but with an adroitness born of desperation he contrived to pour a few drops between the parted lips. Apparently they produced no effect; but another cautious experiment was rewarded by a gasp and a slight quivering of the white throat. On one knee by the side of the berth, Max slipped an arm under the pillow, thus lifting the girl's head a little, that she might not choke. As he did this she swallowed convulsively, and opening her eyes wide, looked straight into his.

"Thank heaven!" exclaimed Max. "You frightened me."

She smiled at him, their faces not far apart, her wonderful hair trailing past his breast. Yet in his anxiety and relief Max had lost all sense of strangeness in the situation. Drawing long, slow breaths, she seemed purposefully to be gaining strength to speak. "It's nothing—to faint," she murmured. "I used to, often. And I feel so ill."

"Have you any one on board whom I could call?" Max asked.

"Nobody," she sighed. "I'm all alone. I—surely this cabin is 65?"

"I think it's 63. But no matter," Max answered hurriedly. "Don't bother about that now. I——"

"When I came in first this morning, I rang for a stewardess to ask if there was to be any one with me," the girl went on, a faint colour beginning to paint her white cheeks and lips with the palest rose. "But nobody answered the bell. There was no luggage here, and I thought I must be by myself. But afterward a stewardess or some one put my bag off this bed on to the upper one so I dared not take the lower berth. I put the door on the hook, to get air; but when I heard somebody come in, I never dreamed it might be a man."

"Of course not," Max agreed. "And I—when I saw a form in the dim light, lying up there—I never thought of its being a woman. I can't tell you how sorry I am to have seemed such a brute. But ——"

"After all, it's a fortunate thing for me you were here," the girl comforted him. "If you hadn't been, I should have fallen out of the top berth and perhaps killed myself. I should hate to die now. I want so much to see my father in Africa, and—and—somebody else. I think you must have saved my life."

"I should be so happy to think that," Max answered warmly. "I haven't as pleasant an errand in Africa as you have. But whatever happens, I shall be thankful that I came, and on this ship. I was wondering to-day if I were glad or sorry to have been born. But if I was born to save a girl from harm, it was worth while, of course, just for that and nothing else. Now, if you're feeling pretty well again, I'd better go." Gently he drew his arm out from under the pillow, thus laying down the head he had supported.

The girl turned, resting her cheek on her hand—a frail little hand, soft-looking as that of a child—and gazed at Max wistfully.

"I suppose you'll think it's dreadful of me," she faltered, "but—I wish you *needn't* go. I've never been on the real sea before since I was a baby: only getting from England to Ireland the shortest way, and on the Channel. This is the first storm I've seen. I never thought I was a coward. I don't like even women to be cowards. I adore bravery in men, and that's why I—but no matter! I don't know if I'm afraid exactly, but it's a dreadful feeling to be alone, without any one to care whether you drown or not, at night on a horrible old ship, in the raging waves. The sea's like some fierce, hungry animal, waiting its chance to eat us up."

"It won't get the chance," Max returned cheerfully. He was standing now, and she was looking up at him from the hard little pillow lately pressed by his own head. "I shouldn't wonder if the old tub has gone through lots of worse gales than this."

"It's comforting to hear you say so, and to have a human being to talk to, in the stormy night," sighed the girl. "I feel better. But if you go—and—where *will* you go?"

"There are plenty of places," Max answered her with vague optimism.

Just then the *General Morel* gave a leap, poised on the top of some wall of water, quivered,

hesitated, and jumped from the height into a gulf. Max held the girl firmly in the berth, or she would have been pitched on to the floor. Involuntarily she grasped his arm, and let it go only when the wallowing ship subsided.

"That was awful!" she whispered. "It makes one feel as if one were dying. I can't be alone! Don't leave me!"

"Not unless you wish me to go," Max said with great gentleness.

"Oh, I don't—I can't! Except that you must be so miserably uncomfortable."

"I'm not; and it's the finest compliment and the greatest honour I've ever had in my life," Max stammered, "that you should ask me to—that it should be a comfort to you, my staying."

"But you are the kind of man women know they can trust," the girl apologized for herself. "You see, one can *tell*. Besides, from the way you speak, I think you must be an American. I've heard they're always good to women. I saw you on deck, and afterward at dinner. I thought then there was something that rang *true* about you. I said 'That man is one of the few unselfish ones. He would sacrifice himself utterly for others.' A look you have about the eyes told me that."

"I'm not being unselfish now," Max broke out impulsively; then, fearing he had said an indiscreet thing, he hurried on to something less personal. "How would it be," he suggested in a studiously commonplace tone, "if I should make myself comfortable sitting on my suitcase, just near enough to your berth to keep you from falling out in case another of those monsters hit the ship? You could go to sleep, and know you were safe, because I'd be watching."

"How good you are!" said the girl. "But I don't want to sleep, thank you. I don't feel faint now. I believe you've given me some of your strength."

"That's the brandy," said Max, very matter of fact. "Have a few drops more? You can't have swallowed half a teaspoonful——"

"Do you think, if I took a little, it would make me warm? I'm so icy cold."

"Yes, it ought to send a glow through your body." He poured another teaspoonful into the miniature silver cup, and supported the pillow again, that she need not lift her head. Then he took the two blankets off the upper berth, and wrapped them round the girl, tucking them cozily in at the side of the bed and under her feet.

"If you were my brother," she said, "you couldn't be kinder to me. Have you ever had a woman to take care of—a mother, or a sister, perhaps?"

"I never had a sister," Max answered. "But when I was a boy I loved to look after my mother."

"And now, is she dead?"

"Now she's dead."

"My mother," the girl volunteered, "died when I was born. That made my father hate the thought of me, because he worshipped her, and it must have seemed my fault that she was lost to him. I haven't seen my father since I was a little girl. But I'm going to him now. I've practically run away from the aunts he put me to live with; and I'd hardly any money, so I was obliged to travel all the way second-class."

"That's exactly what I thought!" ejaculated Max.

"Did you think about *me*, too?" she asked, interest in their talk helping her to forget the rolling of the ship.

"Yes, I thought about you—of course."

"That I'd run away?"

"Well, you were so different from the rest, it was queer to see you in the second-class."

"But so are you—different from the rest. Yet you're in the second-class."

"I'm hard up," exclaimed Max, smiling.

"You, too! How strange that we, of all the others, should come together like this. It is as if it were somehow meant to be, isn't it? As if we were intended to do something for each other in future. I wish I *could* do something for you, to pay you for to-night."

"I don't need pay." Max smiled again, almost happily. "It's you who are being good to me. I was feeling horribly down on my luck."

"I'm sorry. But it's helped you to help me. I understand that. Do you know, I believe you are one whose greatest pleasure is in doing things for those not as strong as yourself."

"I never noticed that in my character," laughed Max.

"Yet there's something which tells me I'm right. I think you would, for that reason, make a good soldier. My father is a soldier. He's stationed at a place called Sidi-bel-Abbés."

"But that's where the Foreign Legion is, isn't it?" The words slipped out.

"He's colonel of the First Regiment. Oh, I believe it's half dread of what he'll say to me, that makes me so ill and nervous to-night. The only two men in the world I love are so strong, so—so almost terrible, that I'm like a little wreath of spray dashed against the rocks of their nature. They don't even know I'm there!"

Suddenly Max seemed to see the two framed photographs in the open bag: an officer in French uniform, and Richard Stanton, the explorer, the man of fire and steel said to be without mercy for himself or others. Max felt ashamed, as if inadvertently he had stumbled upon a secret. "Strong men should be the tenderest to women," he reminded her.

"Yes, on principle. But when they want to live their own lives, and women interfere? What then? Could one expect them to be kind and gentle?"

"A man worth his salt couldn't be harsh to a woman he loved."

"But if he didn't love her? I'm thinking of two men I know. And just now, more of my father than—than the other. I've got no one to advise me. I wonder if you would, a little? You're a man, and—and I can't help wondering if you're not a soldier. Don't think I ask from curiosity. And don't tell me if you'd rather not. But you see, if you *are* one, it would help, because you could understand better how a soldier would feel about things."

"I have been a soldier," Max said. There was no reason why he should keep back the truth from this little girl for whom he was playing watchdog: the little girl who thought him as kind as a brother! "But I'm afraid I don't know much about women."

"The soldier I'm thinking about—my father—doesn't want to have anything to do with women. My mother spoiled him for others. I believe their love story must be the saddest in the whole world. But tell me, if you were old, as *he* is, nearly fifty, and you had a daughter you didn't love—though you'd been kind about money and all that—what would you say if she suddenly appeared from another country, and said she'd come to live with you?"

"By Jove!" exclaimed Max. "Is that what you're going to do?"

"Yes. You think my father will have a right to be angry with me, and perhaps send me back?"

"I don't know about the right," said Max, "but soldiers get used to discipline, you see. And a colonel of a regiment is always obeyed. He might find it inconvenient if a girl suddenly turned up."

"But that's my only hope!" she pleaded. "Surprising my father. Anyhow, I simply *can't* go back to my aunts. I have some in Dublin—they were my mother's aunts, too: and some in Paris—aunts of my father. That makes them my great-aunts, doesn't it? Perhaps they're harder for young people to live with than *plain* aunts, who aren't great. I shall be twenty-one in a few weeks and free to choose my own life if my father won't have me. I'm not brave, but I'm always trying to be brave! I can engage as a governess or something, in Algeria, if the worst comes to the worst."

"I don't believe your father would let you do that. *I* wouldn't in his place."

"After all, you're very young to judge what he would do, even though you *are* a soldier!" exclaimed the girl, determined not to be thwarted. "I must take my chance with him. I shall go to Sidi-bel-Abbés. If there's a train, I'll start to-morrow night. And you, what are you going to do? Shall you stop long in Algiers?"

"That depends," answered Max, "on my finding a woman I've come to search for."

The girl was gazing at him with the deepest interest. "You have come to Algiers to find a woman," she murmured, "and I, to find a man. Do you—oh, don't think me impertinent—do you *love* the woman?"

"No," said Max. "I've never seen her." And then, the power of the storm and the night, and their strange, dreamlike intimacy, made him add: "I love a woman whom I may never see again."

"And I," said the girl, "love a man I haven't seen since I was a child. Let's wish each other happiness."

"I wish you happiness," echoed Max.

"And I you. I shall often think of you, even if we never meet after to-morrow. But I hope we shall! I believe we shall." She shut her eyes suddenly, and lay still for so long that Max was afraid she might have fainted again.

"Are you all right?" he asked anxiously, bending toward her from his low seat on the suitcase.

She opened her eyes with a slight start, as if she had waked, half dazed, from some unfinished dream.

"Oh, yes," she said. "I was making a picture, in a way I have. I was wondering what would happen to us, in our different paths, and trying to see. One of my aunts says it is 'Celtic' to do that. I saw you in a great waste-place, like a desert. And then—*I* was there, too. We were together—all alone. Perhaps, although I didn't know it, I'd really fallen asleep."

"Perhaps," agreed Max, and a vague thrill ran through him. He, too, had dreamed of desert as he lay in the lower berth, and she, overhead, had dreamed a desert dream, each unknown to the

other. "Try to go to sleep again."

She closed her eyes, and presently he thought that she slept. Once or twice she waked with the heave and jolt of a great wave, always to find her watchdog at hand.

But at last, when with the dawn the storm lulled, Max noiselessly switched off the light and went out.

CHAPTER VI

THE NEWS

It was after breakfast when they met once more, on a wet deck, in bleak sunshine.

"I waked up in broad daylight and found you and your suitcase gone," said the girl. "Oh, how guilty I felt! And then to discover that, just as you thought, the cabin *was* 63, not 65. What became of you?"

"I was all right," replied Max evasively. "I got a place to rest and wash."

"In 65?"

"No, not there."

"Why, was there a woman in that cabin, *too*?"

Max laughed. It was good to have some one to laugh with. "I didn't dare look," he confessed. "And I didn't care to wander about explaining myself and my belongings to suspicious stewards."

They walked up and down the deck, shoulder to shoulder, like old comrades. Last night there had been so many matters more pressing and more important, that they had forgotten such trifles as names. Now they introduced themselves to each other, though Max had an instant's hesitation before calling himself Doran. To-morrow, or even to-day, he might learn that which would part him forever from the name and all that had endeared and adorned it for him.

"Do you know what I've been calling you?" the girl asked, half ashamed, half shyly friendly, "'St. George.' Because you came and saved me from the dragon of the sea that I was afraid of. And that was appropriate, because St. George is my patron saint. I was born on his day, and one of my names is Georgette, in honour of him, and of my father, who is Georges: Colonel Georges DeLisle. My French aunts call me Georgette, for him. My Irish aunts call me 'Sanda,' for my mother, who was Corisande, and I like being 'Sanda' best."

She was frank about herself, as if to reward Max for his St. George-like vigil, telling him details of her life in Ireland and France, and how it had come about that Richard Stanton, her father's friend, had informally acted as her guardian when she was a child. Somehow, finding her so simple and outspoken, so kindly interested in him, Max could not bear, on his part, to build up a wall of reserve. He gave the name that had always been his: and though he did not tell her the whole story of his quest, he said that he was in search of a person to whom, if found, all that had been his would belong. "But you needn't pity me," he added quickly. "I'm used to the idea now. I shall lose some things by being poor, but I shall gain others."

She gave him a long look, seeing that he wanted no sympathy in words, and that it would jar on him if she tried to offer it. "Yes, you'll gain others," she echoed. "It must be splendid to be a man. I wonder—if things go as you think—will you stay and seek your fortune in Algeria?"

Seek his fortune in Algeria! Max could not answer for a second or two. Again he seemed to hear Grant Reeves's rather affected voice speaking far off as if in a gramophone: "Perhaps you won't want to come back to America."

When Grant had said that, Max had resolved almost fiercely that nothing on earth should keep him from going back as quickly as possible. If Grant or Edwin Reeves had calmly advised his seeking a new fortune in remote Algeria, he would have flung away the proposition with passion; but when Sanda DeLisle quietly made the suggestion, it was different. America lay behind him in the far distance, where the sun sets. His face was turned to the east, and Algeria was near. The girl whom he had been able to help and protect was near, also. And she would be in Algeria. If he hurried home to America he would never see her again. Not that that ought to matter much! They were ships passing each other in the night. Yet—they had exchanged signals. Max had a queer feeling that they belonged to each other, and that, if it were not for her, he would be hideously, desperately homesick at this moment, almost homesick enough to turn coward and go back with his errand not done. Curiously enough, he felt, too, that she had somewhat the same feeling about him. Silently they were helping each other through a crisis.

"I hadn't thought of staying in Algeria," he answered her at last. "I don't suppose I shall stay. But—I don't know. Just now my future's hidden behind a big cloud."

"Like mine!" cried Sanda DeLisle. "Does it comfort you at all to know there's some one here, close to your side, who's walking in the dark, exactly as you are?"

It was the thought that had hovered, dim and wordless, in his own mind. "Yes, it does comfort me," he said. "Though I ought to be sorry that things aren't clear for you. They will be, though, I hope, before long."

"And for you," she added. "I wish we could exchange experiences when we've found out what's going to become of us. I wish you were going on to Sidi-bel-Abbés."

"I wish I were," Max said, and he did actually wish it.

"Will you write and tell me what happens to you?" she rather timidly asked.

"I should like to. It's good of you to care."

"It's not good, but I *do* care. How could I help it, after all you've done for me?"

"You'll never know what it was to me to have the chance. And will you write what your father's verdict is? If you should be going back, perhaps I——"

"Oh, I shall not be going back!" the girl cried, with sharp decision. "But I'll write. And I shall never forget. If men disappoint me—though I hope, oh, *so* much, they will not—I shall remember one loyal friend I have made. After last night and to-day, we couldn't be *less* than friends, could we? even though we never hear from each other again."

"Thank you for saying that. I feel it, too, more than you can," Max assured her. "But since we're to be friends, will you let me help you all I can, and see you again on shore, before we go our separate ways? Let me find out about your train, and take you to it, and so on; and perhaps you'll dine with me, if there's time before you start."

"How good you are!" She gave him one of those soft, sweet glances, which, unlike Billie Brookton's lovely looks, were prompted by no conscious desire to charm. "But you will be so busy with your own affairs!"

"Not too busy for that. I don't suppose it will be very difficult to get at what I've come for. I shall soon know—one way or the other. I may have to go on somewhere else, but one day won't matter. I can give myself a little indulgence, if it's for the last time."

So they settled it. Max was to be "St. George" and keep off dragons for a few hours more.

The *General Morel* was supposed to do the distance between Marseilles and Algiers in twenty-four hours, but on this trip she had an unusually good excuse to be late. The storm had delayed her, and every one was thankful that it was only half-past three when the ship steamed into the old "pirate city's" splendid harbour.

Max Doran and Sanda DeLisle stood together watching the Atlas mountains turning from violet blue to golden green, and the clustered pearls on hill and shore transform themselves into white domes. The two landed together, also, and Sanda let Max go with her in a big motor omnibus to the Hotel Saint George, the hotel of her patron saint, whose name Max remembered well because of postcards picturing its beautiful terrace and garden, sent him long ago by Rose when he was a cadet at West Point. They discovered that the first train in which Sanda could leave for Sidi-bel-Abbés would start at nine o'clock that evening, so the proposed dinner became possible; and Sanda, by the advice of Max, took a room at the hotel for the rest of the day, inviting him to have tea with her on the terrace at five, if he were free to come back.

He waited until the girl had disappeared with a porter and her hand-luggage, and then inquired of the concierge whether the Hotel-Pension Delatour still existed. He put the question carelessly, as though it meant nothing to him, adding, as the man paused to think, that he had looked in vain for the name in the guide-book.

"Ah, I remember now, sir," said the concierge. "There used to be a hotel of that name, close to the old town—the Kasbah; quite a little place, for *commercants*, and people like that. Why, yes, to be sure! But the name has been changed, five or six years ago it must be. I think it is the Hotel-Pension Schreiber now."

"Oh, and what became of Delatour?" Max heard himself ask, still in that carefully careless tone which seemed to his ears almost too well done.

"I'm not sure, sir, but I rather think he died. Yes, now I recall reading something in *La Depeche Algerienne*, at the time. He'd been a brave soldier, and won several medals. There was a paragraph, yes, with a mention of his family. He came from the aristocracy, it said. Perhaps that's why he didn't turn out a good man of business. Or maybe he drank too much or took to drugs. These old retired soldiers who've seen hard fighting in the South often turn that way."

"Did he leave a widow and children?" Max went on, his throat rather dry.

"That I can't tell you, sir; but Delatour's successor might know. I could send there, if——"

"Thank you. I'll go myself," said Max.

The concierge advised a cab, although there was of course the tram which would take him close to the Hotel Schreiber, and then he could inquire his way. Max chose the tram. He had thought it not unfair to pay the expenses of his quest for the Doran heiress with Doran money, since he had little left that he could call his own. But he had not spent an extra dollar on luxuries; and after a

journey from New York to Paris, Paris to Algiers, second-class, a tram as a climax seemed more suitable than a cab.

Where the Arab town—old and secret, and glimmering pale as a whited sepulchre—huddled away from contact with Europe, a narrow street ran like a bridge connecting West with East, to-day with yesterday. Near the entrance to this street, where it started from a fine open *place* of great shops and cafés, the Hotel Schreiber stood humbly squeezed in between two dull buildings as shabby as itself.

"In a few minutes I shall know," Max said to himself, as he walked into a cheaply tiled, dingy hall, smelling of cabbage-soup and beer.

Commercial travellers' sample boxes and trunks were piled in the dim corners, and a fat, white little man behind a window labelled "Bureau" glanced up from some calculations, with keen interest in a traveller who for once looked uncommercial.

His eyes glazed again when he understood that Monsieur wished only to make inquiries, not to engage a room. He was civil, however, and glib in French with a South-German accent. Madame Delatour had sold her interest in the hotel to him, Anton Schreiber. Unfortunately there had been a mortgage. The widow was left badly off, and broken-hearted at her husband's death. With what little money she had, she had gone to Oran, and through official influence had obtained a concession for a small tobacconist business, selling also postcards and stamps. She ought to have done well, for there were many soldiers in Oran. They all wanted tobacco for themselves and postcards for their friends. But Madame lost interest in life when she lost Delatour—a fine fellow, well spoken of, though never strong since some fever he had contracted in the far South. A friend in Oran had written Schreiber the last news of poor Madame Delatour. That broken heart had failed. She had died suddenly about two years ago, and the girl (yes, there was a daughter, a strange young person) had been engaged through the influence of Schreiber's Oran friends, to assist the proprietor of the Hotel Splendide at Sidi-bel-Abbés. She was, Schreiber believed, still there, in the position of secretary; unless she'd lately married. It was some months since he'd heard.

Sidi-bel-Abbés.... Home of the Foreign Legion; home perhaps, of Sanda DeLisle!...

It was all over, then. The blow had fallen, and Max thought that he must be stunned by it, for he felt nothing, except a curious thrill which came with the news that he must go to Sidi-bel-Abbés. The Arab name rang in his ears like the sound of bells—fateful bells that chime at midnight for birth or death. It seemed to him that Something had always been waiting, hidden behind a corner of life, calling him to Sidi-bel-Abbés, calling for good or evil, for sorrow or happiness, who could tell? but calling. And his whole past, with its fun and popularity and gay adventure, its one unfinished love story, its one tragic episode, had been a long road leading him on toward this day —and Sidi-bel-Abbés.

The temptation to go back, to forget his mission, a temptation which had come to life many times after it had first been "scotched, not killed," did not now lift its head. Max had found out within less than an hour after landing that which would make him penniless and nameless; yet his most pressing wish seemed to be to get back in time for his appointment with Sanda DeLisle, and tell her that he, too, was going to Sidi-bel-Abbés.

CHAPTER VII

SIR KNIGHT

Max hurried back to the St. George, knowing that he would be late, and arrived somewhat breathless on the terrace, at a quarter-past five. Miss DeLisle would forgive him when he explained. And he would explain! He was half minded to tell everything to the one human being within four thousand miles who cared.

It was March, and the height of the season in Algiers. Many people were having tea on the flower-draped terrace framed by a garden of orange trees and palms, and cypresses rising like burnt-out torches against the blue fire of the African sky. Max's eyes searched eagerly among the groups of pretty women in white and pale colours for a slim figure in a dark blue travelling dress. Sanda had said that she would come out to take a table and wait for him; but he walked slowly along without seeing, even in the distance, a girl alone. Suddenly, however, he caught sight of a dark blue toque and a mass of hair under it, that glittered like molten gold in the afternoon sun. Yes, there she was, sitting with her back to him, and close to a gateway of rose-turned marble pillars taken from the fountain court of some old Arab palace. But—she was not alone. A man was with her. She was leaning toward him, and he toward her, their elbows on the little table that stood between them.

The man sat facing Max, who recognized him instantly from many newspaper portraits he had seen—and the photograph in Sanda's bag. It was Richard Stanton, *poseur* and adventurer, his

enemies said, follower and namesake of Richard Burton: first white man to enter Thibet; discoverer of a pigmy tribe in Central Africa, and—the one-time guardian of Sanda DeLisle.

Max had thought vaguely of the explorer as a man who must be growing old. But now he saw that Stanton was not old. His face had that look of eternal youth which a statue has; as if it could never have been younger, and ought never to be older. It was a square face, vividly vital, with a massive jaw and a high, square forehead. The large eyes were square, too; very wide open, and of that light yet burning blue which means the spirit of mad adventure or even fanaticism. The skin was tanned to a deep copper-red that made the eyes appear curiously pale in contrast; but the top of the forehead, just where the curling brown hair grew crisply up, was very white.

The man had thrown himself so completely into his conversation with the girl, that Max, drawing nearer, could stare if he chose without danger of attracting Stanton's attention. He did stare, taking in every detail of the virile, roughly cut features which Rodin might have modelled, and of the strong, heavy figure with its muscular throat and somewhat stooping shoulders. Richard Stanton was not handsome; he was rather ugly, Max thought, until a brief, flashing smile lit up the sunburnt face for a second. But it was in any case a personality of intense magnetic power. Even an enemy must say of Stanton: "Here is a man." He looked cut out to be a hero of adventure, a soldier of fortune, and in some sleeping depth of Max's nature a hitherto unknown emotion stirred. He did not analyse it, but it made him realize that he was lonely and unhappy, uninterestingly young; and that he was a person of no importance. He had come hurrying back to the hotel, anxious to explain why he was late; but now he saw—or imagined that he saw—even from Sanda's back, her complete forgetfulness of him. He might have been far later, and she would not have known or cared. Perhaps she would be glad if he had not come at all.

Max had until lately been subconsciously aware (though it was nothing to be proud of!) that he was rather an important personage in the eyes of the world. He had been a petted child, and flattered and flirted with as a cadet and a young officer, one of the richest and best looking at his post. Suddenly he stood face to face with the fact that he had no longer a world of his own. He was an outsider, a nobody, not wanted here nor anywhere. If he could have stolen away without danger of rudeness to Sanda, he would have gone and left her to Stanton, even though by so doing he lost his chance of seeing her again. But there was the danger that, after all, she had not quite forgotten him, and that she might be taking it for granted that he would keep his appointment. He decided not to interrupt the eager conversation at this moment, but to hover near, in case Miss DeLisle looked around as if thinking of him. He hardly expected her to do so, until the talk flagged, but perhaps some subtle thought-transference was like a reminding touch on her shoulder. She turned her head and saw Max Doran. For an instant she gazed at him half dazedly, as if wondering why he should be there. Her face was so transfigured that she was no longer the same girl; therefore it did not seem strange that she should have forgotten so small a thing as an invitation to tea given to a chance acquaintance. Instead of being pale and delicately pretty, she was a glowing, radiant beauty. Her dilated eyes were almost black, her cheeks carnation, her smiling lips not coral pink, but coral red. She made charming little gestures which turned her instantly into a French girl. "Oh, Mr. Doran!" she exclaimed. "Here is Mr. Stanton. Only think, he's staying in this hotel, and we found each other by accident! I came out here and he walked past. He didn't know me—it's such ages since I saw him—till I spoke."

Max had felt obliged to draw near, at her call, and to stand listening to her explanation; but it was clear that to Stanton he was irrelevant. The explorer had spread a folded map on the table. It was at that they had been looking, and as Sanda talked to the newcomer, Stanton's eyes returned to the map again. Max must have been dull of comprehension indeed if he had not realized that he was wanted by neither. The girl followed up her little preamble by introducing her new friend to her old one, and the explorer half rose from his chair, bowing pleasantly enough, though absent-mindedly; but there was nothing for Max to do save to excuse himself. He apologised by saying that his business would keep him occupied for the rest of the afternoon, and that he must forego the pleasure of having tea with Miss DeLisle. The expression of the girl's face as she said that she was very sorry contradicted her words. She was evidently enchanted to have Stanton to herself, and Max departed, smiling bitterly as he thought of his impatience to give her the news. This was what all her pretty professions of friendship amounted to in the end! He had been a fool to believe that they meant anything more than momentary politeness. She had not referred to his invitation for dinner, so had probably forgotten it in the flush of excitement at meeting her hero. It seemed cruel to recall it to her memory, as by this time no doubt Stanton and she were planning to spend the evening together, up to the last moment. Still, the situation was difficult, as she might remember and consider it an engagement. Max decided at last to send a card up to her room, where she would find it when her tête à tête with Stanton was over. He scribbled a few words in pencil, saying that his business would be over in an hour; that if Miss DeLisle cared to see him he would be delighted; but she must not consider herself in any way bound. He did not even mention the fact which a little while ago he had been eager to tell: that he was going to Sidi-bel-Abbés. Perhaps, as Stanton was a friend of Colonel DeLisle's, he, too, was on his way there, in which case Max would lurk in the background. The card, in an envelope, he gave to the concierge, and then went gloomily out to walk and think things over. Passing the terrace he could not resist glancing at the table nearest the marble pillars. The two still sat there, absorbed in each other, their heads bent over the map. Stanton looked up as if in surprise when a waiter appeared with a tray. They had apparently asked for tea, and then forgotten the order.

During that hour of absence Max Doran passed some of the worst moments of his life. He lived over again his anguish at Rose's death; heard again her confession which, like a sharp knife, with

one stroke had cut him loose from ties of love; and gazed ahead into a future swept bare of all old friendships, luxuries, and pleasures. His "business," of which he had made much to Miss DeLisle, consisted solely in walking down the Mustapha hill from the garden of the Hotel St. George to the small white-painted post-office, and there sending off two telegrams. One was to Edwin Reeves: the other was the message for which Billie Brookton had thriftily asked in her special postscript. "Have lost everything," he wrote firmly. "Will explain in letter following and ask you to treat it in confidence. Good-bye, I hope you may be happy always. Max."

As he paid for the telegrams he wondered that the framing of Billie's did not turn one more screw of the rack which tortured heart and brain, but he felt no new wrench in the act of giving up the girl whom all men wanted. She seemed strangely remote, as if there had never been any chance of her belonging to him. Max had something like a sensation of guilt because he could not call up a picture of her, traced with the sharp clarity of an etching. In thinking of Billie, he had merely an impressionist portrait: golden hair, wonderful lashes, and a sudden upward look from large, dark eyes, set in a face of pearly whiteness. Because Sanda DeLisle was somewhat of the same type, having yellow-brown hair, and a small, fair face, her image would push itself in front of that other far more beautiful image; far more beautiful at least, save in the one moment of glowing radiance which had illumined Sanda, as a rose—light within might illumine a pale lily. No woman on earth could have been more beautiful than she, at that instant; but the magic fire had been kindled by, and for, another man; and if Max had not already guessed, it would have revealed her whole secret.

The impression was so vivid that it clouded everything else, just as a white light focussed upon one figure on the stage dims all others there. He thought of himself, and what he should do with life after his mission was finished; whether he should take the name of Delatour, which was rightfully his, or choose a new one; yet suddenly, in the midst of some pressing question, he would forget to search for the answer, as Sanda DeLisle's transfigured face seemed to shine on him out of darkness.

He stayed away from the hotel for precisely an hour, and then, returning, asked at the desk of the concierge whether there were a message for him. Yes, there was a letter. Max took it, thinking that this was perhaps the last time he should ever see the name of Doran on an envelope addressed to him. The direction had been scrawled in haste, evidently, but even so, the handwriting had grace and character. Its delicacy, combined with a certain firmness and impulsive dash, expressed to Max the personality of the writer. The letter was of course from Miss DeLisle; a short note asking if he would look for her on the terrace at six-thirty. She would be alone then. Max glanced at the hall clock. It wanted only three minutes of the half hour, and he went out at once. The scene on the terrace was very different from what it had been an hour ago. It might have been "set" for another act, was the fancy that flashed through the young man's mind. The hyacinth-pink of the sunset-sky was now faintly silvered with moonlight. All the gay groups of tea-drinking people had disappeared. Many of the crowding chairs had been taken away from the little tables and pushed back against the irregular wall of the house. The floor was being slowly inlaid with strips of shadow-ebony and moon-silver. Even the perfume of the flowers seemed changed. Those which had some quality of mystery and sensuous sadness in their scent had prevailed over the others.

At first Max saw no one, and supposed that Miss DeLisle had not yet come to keep the appointment; but as he slowly paced the length of the terrace, he discerned, standing on the farther side of the pillar-gateway, a figure that paused close to the carved balustrade and looked out over the garden. There was a suggestion of weariness and discouragement in the pose, and though the form had Sanda's tall slimness he could hardly believe it to be hers, until passing through the gateway he had come quite close to her. She turned at the sound of footsteps; and in the rose-and-silver twilight he could see that her eyes were full of tears.

Somehow it struck him as characteristic of the girl that she should not try to pretend she had not been crying. He could scarcely imagine her being self-conscious enough to pretend anything.

"Is it half-past six already?" she asked, in a very little voice, almost like that of a child who had been punished. "I'm glad you've come. Will you forgive me?"

"Forgive you for what?" Max asked, though he guessed what she meant, and added hastily, "I'm sure there's nothing to forgive."

"Yes, there is," she insisted; "you know that as well as I do. But you will forgive me, because—because I think you must have *understood*. I was not myself at all."

Max hesitated and stammered. He did not dare admit how well he had understood, though it seemed a moment for speaking clear truths, here in this wonderful garden which they two had to themselves, with the magic light of sunset and moonrise shining into their souls.

"You needn't be afraid of shaming me," the girl went on. "I felt that you understood everything, so we can talk now, when I've come back a little to myself. I didn't mind your seeing, then, because everything seemed unimportant except—*just him*, and my being there with him. And I don't mind even now, because there's so much that's the same in my life and yours. I feel (as I felt before I was carried out of myself) that we've drifted together at a time when we can help each other. You can forgive me for being selfish and thoughtless to you, because I was at a great moment of my life, and you realized it. Didn't you?"

"Yes," said Max.

"I've always adored him. He was the one I meant, of course, when I told you about caring for somebody," Sanda confessed. "You see, my father has never let me love him, in a personal sort of way. He has held me off, though I hope it's going to be different when he sees me. Sir Knight (that's what I always called Richard, ever since I was small) was very kind whenever he had time. He didn't mind my worshipping him. He never wrote, because he was too busy; but when he came home from his wonderful expeditions and adventures, he generally had some present for me. I've always followed him as far as I could, through the newspapers, and—I *knew* he was somewhere in Algeria now. I'm afraid—that's partly what made my wish to come so—terribly, irresistibly strong. I didn't quite realize that, until I saw him. Honestly, I thought it was because I couldn't live with my aunts any longer, and because I wanted so much to win my father before it was too late. But meeting Richard here, unexpectedly, when I imagined him somewhere in the South, showed me—the truth about myself. I'd been so anxious for you to come back, and to hear all that had happened to you; but meeting him put everything else out of my head!"

"It was natural," said Max. "You wouldn't be human if it hadn't."

"I think it was *in*human. For when I remembered—other things, I didn't seem to care. I was—*glad* when you said you had business and couldn't stay to tea. I hoped you'd forget that you'd asked me to dinner, because I wanted so much to have it with Sir Knight—with Richard. I thought he'd be sure to invite me, and take me to the train afterward. I was going to apologize to you as well as I could; but even if you'd been hurt, I was ready to sacrifice you for him."

"Please don't punish yourself by confessing to me," Max broke in. "Indeed it's not necessary. I ——"

"I'm not doing it to punish myself," Sanda exclaimed. "I've *been* punished—oh, sickeningly punished!—already. I'm confessing to you because—I want our friendship to go on as if I hadn't done anything ungrateful and cruel to spoil it. I'm trying to atone."

"You've done that a thousand times over," Max comforted her, feeling that he ought to be comforted at the same time, yet aware that it was not so. He began to realize that he was boyishly jealous of the great man whose blaze of glory had made his poor rushlight of friendship flicker into nothingness.

"Then if I have atoned, tell me quickly your news," said the girl.

"The news is, that I haven't any past which belongs to me—and God knows whether I've a future." Max gave lightness to the sombre words with a laugh.

"Then the worst has happened to you?"

"One might call it that." Still he managed to laugh.

"Are you very miserable?"

"I don't know. I haven't had time to think."

"Don't take time—yet. Stay with me, as we planned before—before——"

"But Mr. Stanton? Aren't you——"

"No, I'm not. He left me fifteen minutes after you went. I shan't see him again."

"Not at the train?"

"No, not anywhere. You see, he has such important things to do, he hasn't time to bother much with—with a person he still thinks of as a little girl. Why, I told you, he would hardly have known me if I hadn't spoken to him! He's going away to-morrow, leaving for Touggourt. There are all sorts of exciting preparations to make for a tremendous expedition he means to undertake, though it will be months before he can be ready to start. He can think of nothing else just now. Oh, it was only 'How do you do?' and 'Good-bye' between us, I assure you, over there at the little tea-table I'd been keeping for you and me."

"It didn't look like anything so superficial," Max found himself trying once more to console her. "I'm sure it must really have meant a lot to him, meeting you. I could see even in the one glance I had, how absorbed he was——"

"Yes, in his map! He was pointing out his route to me, after Touggourt. He's chosen Touggourt for his starting-place, because the railway has just been brought as far as there. And there's a man in Touggourt—an old Arab explorer—he wants to persuade to go with him if he's strong enough. He—and some other Arab Richard came to Algiers to see, are the only two men alive, apparently, who firmly believe in the Lost Oasis that Sir Knight means to try to find, when he can get his caravan together, and start across the desert early next autumn after the hot weather."

"The Lost Oasis? I never heard of it," said Max. "Is there really such a place somewhere?"

"Richard doesn't know. He only believes in it; and says nearly every one thinks he's insane. But you must have heard—I thought every one had heard the old legend about a Lost Oasis—lost for thousands of years?"

"I'm afraid not. I haven't any desert lore." As Max made this answer, last night's dream came back, rising for an instant before his eyes like a shimmering picture, a monochrome of ochre-

yellow. Then it faded, and he saw again the silver sky behind darkening pines, plumed date-palms, the delicate fringe of pepper trees, and black columns of towering cypress.

"All mine has come from Sir Knight: stories he's told me and books he's given me. Long ago he talked about the Lost Oasis. I thought of it as a thrilling fairy story. But he believes it may exist, somewhere far, far east, beyond walls of mountains and shifting sand-dunes, between the Sahara and the Libyan deserts."

"Wouldn't other explorers have found it, if it were there?"

"Lots have tried, and been lost themselves: or else they've given up hope, after terrible privations, and have struggled back to their starting-place. But Richard says he has pledged himself to succeed where the rest have failed, or else to die. It was awful to hear him say that—and to see the look in his eyes."

"He's done some wonderful things," Max said, trying to speak with enthusiasm.

"Yes; but this seems different, and more terrifying than any of his other adventures, because in them he had men for his worst enemies. This time his enemy will be nature. And its venturing into the unknown—almost like trying to find the way to another world. Everybody knew there was a Thibet and a Central Africa, and what the dangers would be like there; but no one knows anything of this place—if it is a place."

"What's the story that makes Mr. Stanton feel the thing is worth risking?" Max asked.

"The story is, that there's a blank in Egyptian history which could be filled up and accounted for, if a great mass of people had moved away and begun a new civilization somewhere, safe from all the enemies who had disturbed them and stolen their treasure."

"Splendid story! But it sounds as much of a fable as any other myth, doesn't it?"

"It might, if there hadn't been other stories of lost oases which have proved to be true."

"I never heard of them," Max confessed his ignorance.

"Nor I, except from Sir Knight. He says that only lately people have found several oases south of Tripoli, which were talked about before in the same legendary way as this one he's going to search for. Only a few people know about them now: but they *are* known. And they're inhabited by Jews who fled by tribes from the Romans when Solomon's Temple was destroyed, in the reign of the Emperor Titus. They never trade, except with each other, but have everything they need in their hidden dwelling-places. They speak the ancient language that was spoken in Palestine all those centuries ago, and wear the same costume, and keep to the same laws. That's why Sir Knight thinks the greater Lost Oasis may exist, having been even better hidden than those. There was a famous explorer named Rholf who believed that he'd found traces of a way to it, but he lost them again. And there were Caillaud and Cat, and other names he spoke of to-day, that I've forgotten. I wish, though, that he were not going—or else that I could go with him, in the way I used to plan when I was small." The girl paused and sighed.

"What way?"

"Oh, it was only nonsense—silly, romantic nonsense, that I'd got out of books. I used to make up stories about myself joining Sir Knight on some expedition, dressed as a boy, and he not recognizing me." She laughed a little. "I constantly saved his life, of course! But now we won't talk of him any more. You and I will make up a story about *ourselves*. We're alone on a desert island, and we have to find food and shelter, and be as comfortable and as happy as we can. In the story, you have cause to hate me, but you don't, because you're generous. So you forage for game and fruit, and help me to escape. Which means, if you've really forgiven my horridness, that you'll take pity on me and ask me to dine with you before you put me into my train as you promised."

"I will do all that," said Max, almost eagerly. "And if you'll let me I'll go with you in the train to Sidi-bel-Abbés."

"Oh, no!" she exclaimed. "I couldn't consent to such a sacrifice."

"I must go either by your train or another."

"Why—why?"

"I've found out that the woman I came to search for is not only alive, but living at Sidi-bel-Abbés."

"It's Fate!" the girl half whispered. "But *what* Fate? What does it all mean?"

"I've been asking myself that question," Max said, "and I can't find an answer—yet."

CHAPTER VIII

ON THE STATION PLATFORM

They dined together in a glass-fronted restaurant opening out on to the terrace, and Sanda was sweet, but absent-minded. Max could guess where her thoughts were, and almost hated Stanton. How could the man let some wretched engagement, with a few French officers, keep him from this poor little girl who adored him? How could Stanton let her go alone to meet her unnatural father (it was thus that Max thought of Colonel DeLisle) when as her one-time guardian he might have taken her to Sidi-bel-Abbés himself, and persuaded his old friend, DeLisle, to be lenient. All that Max had heard against the explorer came back to him, and he was ready to believe Stanton the cruel and selfish egoist that gossip sketched him. Poor Sanda!

Miss DeLisle had meant to finish her long journey as she had begun it, second-class; but Max persuaded the girl to let him take for her a first-class ticket, with *coupé lit*, in a compartment for women, as far as the station where at dawn they must change for Sidi-bel-Abbés. She was surprised at the smallness of the price, but did not suspect that she owed her new friend anything more substantial than gratitude for all the trouble he had taken for her comfort.

Max himself went second-class, packed in with seven men who would have thought opening the window a symptom of insanity.

One of the seven was the man with whom Sanda DeLisle had chatted on board the *General Morel* at dinner. He was the hero of the compartment, for he was going to Sidi-bel-Abbés to fight a boxing match with the champion of the Legion, a soldier named Pelle. Four of the travellers (three men of Algiers and a youth of Sidi-bel-Abbés) were accompanying the French boxer, having met him at the ship.

Dozing and waking, Max heard excited talk of *la boxe* and the coming event. He was vaguely interested, for he had been the champion boxer of his regiment—a hundred years ago!—but he was too weary in body and mind to care much about a match at Sidi-bel-Abbés. When he was not trying to sleep, he was mentally composing a letter to his colonel, with discreet explanations, and a justification of his forthcoming immediate resignation from the army: or else a written explanation of his farewell to Billie, following up the telegram; or thinking out business directions to Edwin Reeves. Suddenly, however, as he was dully wondering how best to send the heiress to New York without going back himself, a name spoken almost in his ear had the blinding effect of a searchlight upon his brain.

"La petite Josephine Delatour," said the young man who lived at Bel-Abbés. He was evidently answering some question which Max had not caught.

"The handsomest, would you call her?" disputed a commercial traveller, who also knew the town. "Ah, *that*, no! she is too strange, too bizarre."

"But her strangeness is her charm, *mon ami*! She has eyes of topaz, like those of a young panther. If she were not bizarre, would she—a little nobody at all—be strong enough to draw the smart young officers after her? There are girls in Bel-Abbés, daughters of rich merchants, who are jealous of the secretary at the Hotel Splendide. Before she came, it was only the officers of high rank who messed there. Now it is also the lieutenants. It is not the food, but Mademoiselle Josephine who attracts!"

"Once upon a time she thought me and my comrades good enough for a flirtation," said the commercial traveller. "But she looks higher in these days, especially since her namesake in the Spahis joined his regiment at Bel-Abbés. She told me they had found out that they were cousins."

"The lieutenant doesn't go about boasting of the relationship," laughed the youth from Bel-Abbés. "He comes to my father's café, which is the best in the town, as you well know. If any one speaks to him of *la petite*, he laughs: and it is a laugh she would not like."

Max's ears tingled. He felt as if he were eavesdropping. He wished to hear more, though at the same time it seemed that he had no right to listen. Luckily or unluckily, the boxer broke in and changed the subject.

Early in the morning, passengers for Sidi-bel-Abbés had to descend from the train going on to Oran, and take a slow one, on a branch line. It was a very slow one, indeed, and it was also late, so that it would be nearly midday and the hour for *dejeuner* when they reached their destination. Max saw himself inquiring for Mademoiselle Delatour just at the moment when the admirers of her topaz eyes were assembling for their meal. He did not like the prospect; but said nothing of his own worries to Sanda, whom he joined on changing trains. Now the meeting with her father was so near, she had to hold her courage with both hands. She had realized for the first time that she would not know where to look for Colonel DeLisle. He might be in barracks. She could hardly go to him there. He would perhaps be angry, should a girl arrive, announcing herself as his daughter, at the house where he had rooms. The third alternative was the Hotel Splendide, where he took his meals. He might already be there when she reached Sidi-bel-Abbés. What a place for a first meeting! Max agreed, sympathetically. It seemed that everything at Sidi-bel-Abbés must happen at the Hotel Splendide!

"If you could only be with me and help, as you have helped me all along!" she sighed. "Though of course you can't. If Sir Knight had come—— But I couldn't easily explain *you* to my father. At least, not just at present."

Max saw this, even more clearly than she saw it. It would indeed be difficult for a strange new daughter to explain in a few brief words a still more strange young man to such a person as

Colonel DeLisle. If he were to be introduced or even mentioned at all, Max felt that it would have to be later, and must depend on the word of the redoubtable colonel. He suggested to Sanda as discreetly as he could that he would keep out of her way at the hotel, unless she summoned him. But, he added, he would have to be there for a short time at all events, because his business was taking him precisely to the Hotel Splendide.

"The person you're looking for is staying there?" asked Sanda.

"She's the secretary of the hotel." Max hesitated an instant, then, realizing from the words he had overheard how conspicuous a character Josephine Delatour evidently was, he thought best to tell Sanda something more of his story than he had told her yet. He sketched the version, vindicating his foster-mother, which he had given to Billie Brookton and the Reeveses—a version which all the world at home would, he believed, soon hear.

"So that is it?" said Sanda. "You're giving up everything to this girl. Do you think she will take it?"

"I wish I were as sure of what I shall do next as I am sure of that," laughed Max. If there had ever been any doubt in his mind as to Josephine's attitude, it had vanished while listening to the talk of her in the train.

"I know what you ought to do next," Sanda said. "You ought to be what you have been—a soldier."

"I shall always be, at heart, I think," Max confessed. "But soldier life is over for me, so far as I can see ahead."

"I wonder——" she began eagerly, then stopped abruptly.

"You wonder—what?"

"I daren't say it."

"Please dare."

"I mustn't. It would be wrong. I might be horribly sorry afterward. And yet——"

She silenced herself with a little gasp. He urged her no more, but stared almost unseeingly out of the window at the roofed farmhouses, and the yellow hills, like reclaimed desert, with bright patches of cultivation, and a far, floating background of the blue Thesala mountains.

Sidi-bel-Abbés at last! and the train slowing down along the platform of an insignificant station, which might have been in the South of France, save for a few burnoused Arabs. There was a green glimpse of olives and palms, and taller plane trees, under a serene sky; and in the distance the high fortified walls of yellow and dark gray stone, which ringed in the northernmost stronghold of the Foreign Legion.

"Sidi-bel-Abbés!" a deep voice shouted musically from one end of the platform to the other, as the train came in; and the name thrilled through Max Doran's veins as it had not ceased to thrill since yesterday. More strongly than ever he had the impression that some great things would happen to him here, or begin to happen, and carry him on elsewhere, beyond those yellow hills. Deep down in him excitement stirred in the dark, like a dazed traveller up before the dawn, groping for the door through which he must pass to begin his journey. All the more quietly, however, because of what he secretly felt, Max took Sanda's bag and his own, and gave her a hand for the high step from the train to platform. There they became units in a crowd strange to see at a little provincial station; a crowd to be met at few other places in the world.

The French boxer was not the only guest of importance this train brought to Sidi-bel-Abbés. At the far end of the platform, where the first-class carriages had stopped, a group of officers in full dress were collected round a man who wore civilian clothes awkwardly, as an old soldier wears them. There was the sensationally splendid costume of the Spahis; scarlet cloak and full trousers; the beautiful pale blue of the Chasseurs d'Afrique, and a plainer uniform which Max guessed to be that of the Foreign Legion. The boxer had his committee *de réception* also; a dozen or more dark, fat, loud-talking proprietors of cafés, or tradefolk keen on "*le sport*." These, and the lounging Arabs, might have interested strangers to Sidi-bel-Abbés, if there had been nothing better worth attention. But owing to the lateness of the train, it had come in almost simultaneously with another made up of windowless wagons for men, horses or freight, which had not yet discharged its load. Out from the wide doorway of the long car labelled "*32 hommes, 6 chevaux*," was streaming an extraordinary procession; tall, bearded men with the high cheek-bones and sad, wide-apart eyes of the Slav: a blond, round-cheeked boy whose shy yet stolid face could only have been bred in Germany, or Alsace; sharp-featured, rat-eyed fellows who might have been collected at Montmartre or in a Marseilles slum; others who were nondescripts of no complexion and no expression; waifs from anywhere; a brown-skinned Spaniard and an Italian or two; a Negro with the sophisticated look of a New York "darkee"; a melancholy, hooded Arab, and a fierce-faced Moor; types utterly at variance, yet with one likeness which bound them together like a convict's chain: weariness and stains of long, hard travelling, which thrust the few well-dressed men down to the level of the shabbiest. Some were almost middle aged; some were youths hardly yet at the regulation enlistment age of eighteen; a few one might take for broken-down gentlemen; more who looked like workmen out of a job, and one or two unmistakably old

soldiers, eager-eyed as lost dogs who had found their way home: a strange gathering of individuals to find stumbling out of a freight train at a country station of a French colony; but this was Sidi-bel-Abbés, headquarters of *La Legion Etrangére*: and as the tired, dirty men tumbled out on to the platform, everybody stared openly as a corporal with a high képi, a buttoned-back blue overcoat, and loose, red trousers tucked into military boots, formed the crew into lines of four.

Even the officers at the end of the platform gazed at the soiled scarecrows who had to be made into soldiers: for this being Sidi-bel-Abbés, there was no difficulty in guessing that the twenty-eight or thirty men of six or seven nations were recruits of the Legion of Foreigners. The draggled throng was quietly indicated to the visitor in civilian clothes, who nodded appreciatively and then turned away. But the boxer's brigade explained the unfortunate wretches so loudly and unflatteringly to their guest that haggard faces flushed and quivering lips stiffened; while at the gateway of exit, a motionless row of non-commissioned officers, watching for deserters, regarded "*les bleus*" critically, yet indifferently.

Max, whose quick imagination made him almost painfully sensitive for others, felt hot and sorry for the men herded together by misfortune. He had read sensational stories of the Foreign Legion, and found himself hypnotized into looking for brutal jowls of escaped murderers, or faces of pallid aristocrats in torn evening clothes, splashed with blood. Among these men of mystery or sorrow there were, however, few startling types which caught the eye. But one man—young, tall, straight as an arrow—running the gauntlet of jokes and stares with fierce, repressed defiance, turned suddenly to look at Max and Sanda.

Where to place him in life, Max could not tell. He might be prince or peasant by birth, since prince and peasant are akin at heart, and ever remote from the middle-classes as from Martians. He wore a soft, gray felt hat, smeared with coal-dust from the engine. The collar of his dusty black overcoat was turned up; it actually looked like an evening coat. His trousers were black too, and Max had an impression of patent leather shoes glittering through dust. But these details were only accessories to the picture, and interesting because of the wearer's face. It was dark as that of a Spaniard from Andalusia, with the high, proud features of an Indian. It had been clean-shaven a few days ago; and from two haggard hollows a pair of wild black eyes flashed one glance at Max—the only man who had not seemed to stare. Face and look were unforgettable. It seemed to Max that some appeal had been flung to him. He could hardly keep himself from striding after the tall figure, to ask: "What is it you want me to do?" And Sanda also had been impressed. He heard her murmur under her breath, "Poor man! What wonderful eyes!"

Nobody moved from the platform until the corporal had called the roll of names—German, French, Spanish, Italian, Russian, Arab—and had marched his batch of recruits briskly through the guarded gate. Max would have hurried Sanda out directly behind them, before the crowd could secure all the queer, old-fashioned cabs which were waiting, but at that moment the smart group of officers moved forward. Having shown their guest one of the sights of Sidi-bel-Abbés, they evidently expected to take precedence of the townspeople, who gave no sign of disputing their right. Max, following the example of others and resisting an impulse to salute, stood back with his companion to let the uniforms pass. Sanda, pink with excitement, was as usual all unconscious of self, and vividly interested both in recruits and officers. The latter, especially the young ones, were equally interested in the pretty, well-dressed girl, a stranger in Sidi-bel-Abbés and the one woman on the platform.

Max saw the polite but admiring glances, and would have liked to draw her further away. He bent down to whisper a suggestion, but Sanda did not hear. Her face, her whole personality, had undergone one of those swift changes characteristic of her.

With a fluttering cry, she started forward, then stepped nervously back, and, stumbling against Max's foot, would have fallen if he had not caught her.

All his attention was for her, yet, with his eyes on the girl, he suddenly became conscious that something had happened among the officers. One man had stopped abruptly just in front of Sanda, while others were going through the gate, hurrying on as if tactfully desirous to get themselves out of the way. A voice murmured "Mon Dieu!" and having steadied Sanda, Max saw standing close to them a small, rather dapper man with a lined brown face, a very square, smooth-shaven jaw, long gray eyes, short gray hair, and the neat slimness of a West Point cadet. He had on his sleeve the five gold stripes signifying a colonel's rank, and was decorated with several medals.

Instantly Max understood the situation. The one thing that ought *not* to have happened, had happened.

CHAPTER IX

THE COLONEL OF THE LEGION

All Sanda's anxiously laid plans were swept away in the wind of emotion. She and the father she had meant to win with loving diplomacy had stumbled upon each other crudely in a railway station. The dear resemblance upon which she had founded her best hope had struck Colonel DeLisle like a blow over the heart.

The dapper little officer, with the figure of a boy and the face of a tragic mask, stared straight at the girl, with the look of one who meets a ghost in daylight. "My God! who are you?" he faltered, in French. The words seemed to speak themselves against his will.

Sanda was deathly pale. But she caught at her courage as a soldier grasps his flag: "I am—Corisande, your daughter," she answered in that small, sweet voice of a child with which she had begged Max to pardon her, yesterday. And she too spoke in French. "My father, forgive me if I've done wrong to come to you like this. But I was so unhappy. I wanted so much to see you. And I've travelled such a long way!"

For an instant the man still stared at her in silence. He had the air of listening for a voice within a voice, as one listens through the sound of running water for its tune. Max, who must now unfortunately be explained and accounted for in spite of every difficulty, found a strange likeness between the middle-aged soldier and the young girl. It was in the eyes: long, gray, haunted with thoughts and dreams. If Sanda DeLisle ever had to become acquainted with sorrow her eyes would be like her father's.

The pause was but for a second or two, though it was full of suspense for the girl, and even for Max, who forgot himself in anxiety for her. The hardness of straining after self-control melted to sudden beauty, as Max had seen Sanda's face transfigured. Never again, it seemed to him—no matter what Colonel DeLisle's actions might be—could he believe him to be cruel or cold.

"Ma petite," DeLisle said, with a quiver in his voice that echoed up from heartstrings swept by some spirit hand. "Can it be true? You have come—across half the world, to me?"

"Oh, father, yes, it is true. And always I've wanted to come." Sanda's voice caressed him. No man could have resisted her then. "You're not angry?"

"Mon Dieu, no, I'm not angry, though my life is not the life for a girl. I only—for a moment I thought I saw——"

"I know, I guessed," Sanda gently filled up his pause. "Since I began growing into a woman every one told me I was like—her. But I wouldn't send you a photograph. For years I've planned to surprise you—and make you *care* a little, if I could."

"Care!" he echoed, a look as of anguish passing over his face like the shadow of a cloud; then leaving it clear, though sad with the habitual sadness which had scored its many lines. "You have surprised me, indeed. But——" He stopped abruptly, and apparently for the first time noticed the young man standing near. Stiffening slightly, Colonel DeLisle looked keenly at Max, his eyes trying to solve the new puzzle. "But—my daughter, you have come to me with——"

"Only a friend," Sanda broke in desperately, blushing up to her bright hair. "A kind friend, Mr. Doran, an American who had to travel to Sidi-bel-Abbés on business of his own, and who's been more good to me than I can describe. I want him to let me tell you all about him, and then you will understand."

"I thank you in advance, Monsieur," said Colonel DeLisle, unbending again, and a faint—a very faint—twinkle brightening his eyes, at the thought of the error he had nearly made, and because of Doran's blush at being mistaken for an unwelcome son-in-law.

"I've done nothing, Monsieur le Colonel," stammered Max. "I had to come. I have business with a person at the Hotel Splendide. It is Mademoiselle who is kind to me in saying——"

"Could he not take me to the hotel to wait for you?" Sanda cut in. "I shouldn't have interrupted you in such a place as this, and at such a time, my father, if I could have helped doing so, even though I recognized your face from the old photograph that is my treasure. But acting on impulse is my greatest fault, the aunts all say. And when I saw you I cried out before I stopped to think. Then I drew back, but it was too late. I have taken you from some duty."

"I came officially with my comrades to meet General Sauvanne, who is visiting our Algerian garrisons," said DeLisle. He glanced again at Max, giving him one of those soldier looks which long experience has taught to penetrate flesh and bone and brain down to a man's hidden self. "It is true that I have no right to excuse myself for my own private affairs." He hesitated, almost imperceptibly, then turned to Max. "Add to your past kindness by taking my daughter to the hotel, Monsieur, where in my name she will engage a room for herself—since, unfortunately, I have no home to offer her. I will go with you both to a cab, and then return to duty. My child, I will see you again before *dejeuner*."

Max's quick mind promptly comprehended the full meaning of Colonel DeLisle's seemingly unconventional decision. Not only was he being made friendly use of, in a complicated situation, but Sanda's father wished all who had seen the girl arrive with a man to know once for all that the man had his official approval. Soon Sanda's relationship to the Colonel of the First Regiment of the Foreign Legion would be known, and there must be no stupid gossip regarding the scene at the station. As they passed the other officers and their guests (who for these few dramatic moments had discreetly awaited developments, outside the platform gate), Colonel DeLisle lingered an instant to murmur; "It is my daughter, who has come unexpectedly. A young friend whom I can trust to see her to the hotel will take her there, and I am at your service when I have put them into a cab."

"What do you think?" cried Sanda, as the rickety vehicle rattled them toward the nearest gate of

the walled town. "Have I failed with him—or have I succeeded?"

"Succeeded," Max answered. "Don't you feel it?"

"I hoped it. Oh, Mr. Doran, I am going to love him!"

"I don't wonder," Max said. "I'm sure he's worth it."

"Yet I saw by your look when I spoke of him before, that you were thinking him heartless."

"I had no right to think anything."

"I gave you the right, by confiding in you. But I didn't confide enough, to do my father justice. I knew he wasn't heartless, though he couldn't bear the sight of me when I was a baby, and put me out of his life. He has always said that a soldier's life was not for a young girl to share. I knew he had a heart, *because* of that, not in spite of it. It was that he loved my mother so desperately, and I'd robbed him of her. Now you've seen him, you must let me tell you a little——"

"Would he wish it?"

"Yes, if he knew why, and if he knew you, and what you are going through at this time. He fell in love with my mother at first sight in Paris, and she with him. He was on leave, and she was there with her parents from Ireland. He'd never meant to marry, but he was swept off his feet. Mother's people wouldn't hear of it. They took her home in a hurry, and tried to make her marry some one else. She nearly did—because they were stronger than she. She wrote father a letter of good-bye, to his post in the southern desert, where he was stationed then. He supposed, when he read the letter, that she was already married when he got it. But suddenly she appeared—as unexpectedly as I appeared to-day. She'd run away from home, because she couldn't live without him. Oh, how well I understand her! Think of the joy! It was like waking from a dreadful dream for both of them. They were going to be married at once, though mother was half dead with fatigue and excitement after her long, hurried journey; but on their wedding eve she was taken ill, and became delirious. It was typhoid fever. She had got it somehow on the journey. She had come without stopping to rest, from Dublin to Touggourt, where father was stationed. They say it's wild there even now. It was far wilder then, more than twenty-one years ago. He nursed mother himself, scarcely eating or sleeping: not taking off his clothes for weeks. One of his aunts —my great-aunt—told me the story. It came to her from a friend of father's. He never spoke of it. For three months mother wasn't out of danger. Father was her nurse, her doctor, not her husband. But at last she was well again. They had their honeymoon in a tent in the desert. She loved the desert, then—or thought she did. Afterward, though, she changed, for I was coming, and she was ill again. By that time they were stationed still farther south. She grew so homesick for the north that my father got leave. They started to travel by easy stages through the desert, with a small caravan. Their hope was to reach Algiers, and to get to France long before the baby should come; but the heat grew suddenly terrible, and one day they were caught in a fearful sandstorm. My mother was terrified. I was born two months before the time. That same night she died, while the storm was still raging; and before she went, she begged my father to promise, whatever happened, not to leave her body buried in the desert. He did promise. And then began his martyrdom. The caravan could not march fast because of me. A negro woman who'd come as mother's maid took care of me as well as she could, and fed me on condensed milk. Strange I should have lived.... My father had his men make for my mother's body a case of many tins, which they spread open and soldered together, with lead from bullets they melted. In the next oasis they cut down a palm tree and hollowed out the trunk for a coffin. They sealed up the tin case in it, and the coffin travelled on the camel mother had ridden when she was alive, in one of those beautiful hooded bassourahs you must have seen in pictures. At night the coffin rested in my father's tent, and he lay beside it as he had lain beside my mother when she lived, and they were happy. Because she'd been a Catholic, and because she'd always hated the dark, father burned candles on the coffin always till dawn; and the men who loved him looked for wild flowers in the desert to lay upon it. He had forty days, and forty nights, marching through the desert with the dead body of his love, before they came to the railway. Then he took mother to France, and left me with his two aunts there. Now do you wonder he never loved me, or wanted to have me with him?"

"No, perhaps not," said Max. Deep sadness had fallen upon him. He was in the desert with the man beside whose agony his own trial was as nothing. All the world seemed to be full of sorrow and pain sharper than his own personal pain. And as the girl asked her question and he answered it, their cab passed the procession of recruits for the Foreign Legion, tramping along between tall plane trees toward the town gate.

Once again a pair of tortured black eyes looked at Max, who winced as the thick yellow dust from the wheels enveloped the marching men.

"Will you let me tell my father your story, as I have told you his?" Sanda asked.

"Do as you think best," he said.

In another moment the cab had rolled past a few gardens and villas, a green plateau and a moat, and passed through a great gateway. Overhead, carved in the stone, were the words "Porte d'Oran," and the date, 1855. Once, when the town was young, the gates had been kept tightly closed, and through the loopholes in the stout, stone wall (the old part yellow, the newer part gray) guns had been fired at besieging Arabs, the tribe of the Beni Amer, who had worshipped at

the shrine of the dead Saint, Sidi-bel-Abbés. But all that was past long ago. No hope of fighting for the Legionnaires, save over the frontier in Morocco, or far away in the South! The shrine of Sidi-bel-Abbés stood neglected in the Arab graveyard. Even the meaning of the name, once sacred to his followers, was well-nigh forgotten; and all that was Arab in Sidi-bel-Abbés had been relegated to the *Village Négre*, strictly forbidden as Blue Beard's Room of Secrets, to the Soldiers of the Legion.

Inside the wall everything was modern and French, except for a few trudging or labouring Arabs in white, or in gray burnouses of camel's hair made in Morocco. As the daughter of the Legion's colonel drove humbly in her shabby cab to the Hotel Splendide, she felt vaguely depressed and disappointed in the town which she expected to be her home. She had fancied that it would be very eastern, with mosques and bazaars, and perhaps surrounded with desert; but there was no desert within many miles; and there was only one minaret rising in the distance, like a long white finger to mark the beginning of the *Village Négre*. Instead of bazaars, there were new French shops and a sinister predominance of drinking places of all sorts: a few "smart" cafés, with marble-topped tables on the pavement, but mostly dull dens, appealing to the poorest and most desperate. The town was like a Maltese cross in shape, the arms of the cross being wide streets, each leading to a gate in the fortifications; Porte d'Oran, Porte de Tlemcen, Porte de Mascarra, and Porte de Daya; and the one great charm of the place seemed to be in its trees; giant planes which made arbours across the streets, giving a look of dreaming peace, despite the rattle of wheels on roughly set paving-stones.

There were middle-aged buildings, low and small and dun-coloured, exactly like those of every other French-Algerian settlement, but big new blocks of glittering white gave an air of almost ostentatious prosperity to the place. There was even an attempt at gayety in the ornamentation, yet there appeared to be nothing attractive to tourists, save the Foreign Legion, which gave mystery and romance to all that would otherwise have been banal. Noise was everywhere, loud, shrill, insistent; rumbling, shrieking, rattling, roaring. Huge wagons, loaded with purple-stained cases of Algerian wine, bumping over the stones; strings of bells wound round the great horns of horses' collars jingling like sleigh-bells in winter; whips in the hands of fierce-eyed carters cracking round the heads of large, sad mules; hooters of automobiles and immense motor diligences blaring; men shouting at animals; animals barking or braying, snorting or clucking at men; unseen soldiers marching to music; a town clock sweetly chiming the hour, and, above all, rising like spray from the ocean of din, high voices of Arabs chaffering, disputing, arguing. This was the "Arabian Night's Paradise" that Sanda had dreamed of!

Presently the cab passed a great town clock with four faces (one for each of the four diverging streets) and drew up before a flat-faced building with the name "Hotel Splendide" stretching across its dim, yellow front. Inside a big, open doorway, stairs went steeply up, past piles of commercial travellers' show trunks, and an Arab bootblack who clamoured for custom. At the top Max Doran and his charge came into a hall, whence a bare-looking restaurant and several other rooms opened out. On a gigantic hatrack like a withered tree hung coats and hats in dark bunches, brightened with a few military coats and gold-braided caps. As Max and Sanda appeared, an officer—youngish, dark, sharp-featured, with a small waxed moustache and near-sighted black eyes—turned hastily away from a window, and with a stride added his cap and cloak to the hatrack's burden. He had an almost childishly guilty air of not wishing to be caught at something. And what that something was, Max Doran guessed with a queer constriction of the throat as he looked through the window. This opened into a dim room, which was labelled "Bureau," and framed the head and bust of a young woman.

Such light as there was in the hall fell full upon her short, white face, into her slanting yellow eyes and on to the elaborately dressed red hair. She had been smiling at the officer, but on the interruption of the strangers' entrance she frowned with annoyance. It was the frank, animal annoyance of a beautiful young lynx, teased by having a piece of meat snatched away. The eyes were clear in colour as a dark topaz, and full of topaz light. This was remarkable; but their real strangeness lay in expression. They seemed not unintelligent, but devoid of all human experience. They gazed at the newcomers from the little window of the bureau, as an animal gazes from the bars of its cage, looking at the eyes which regard it, not into them; near yet remote; a creature of another species.

The girl appeared to be well-shaped enough, though her strong white throat was short, and the hands which lay on the wide window ledge were as small as a child's. Yet like a shadow thrown on the wall behind her was a lurking impression of deformity of body and mind, a spirit cast out of her, to point at something veiled. If there could have lingered in the mind of Max a grain of doubt concerning Rose Doran's confession, it was burnt up in a moment; for the girl was an Aubrey Beardsley caricature of Rose. No need to ask if this were Mademoiselle Delatour. He knew. And this lieutenant in the uniform of the Spahis was the "namesake" of whom the men had talked in the train.

CHAPTER X

THE VOICE OF THE LEGION

It was all far worse even than Max had expected; and the next few days were a nightmare. The

resemblance between the girl and her mother—once his mother, whom he had as a boy adored—made the effect more gruesome.

Josephine Delatour was coarse minded and sly, inordinately vain, caring for nothing in life except the admiration of such men as she had met and mistaken for gentlemen. Her way of receiving the news of her change of fortune disgusted Max, sickened him so utterly that he could not bear to think of her reigning in Jack Doran's house. She was torn between pleasure in the prospect of being rich, and suspicious that there was a plot to kidnap her, like the heroine of a sensational novel. She did not want to go to America. She wanted to stay in Sidi-bel-Abbés and triumph over all the women who had snubbed her. She boasted of her admirers, and hinted that even without money she could marry any one of a dozen young officers. But the one for whom she seemed really to care—if it were in her to care for any one except herself—was the namesake of whom Max had heard laughing hints.

At the time it had not occurred to him that the name of the alleged "cousin" must be Delatour; but so it was though the dark young man with the waxed moustache spelled his name differently, in the more aristocratic way, with three syllables. When Josephine boasted that, though he was from a great family, with a castle on the River Loire, he called himself her cousin, Max realized that the Lieutenant of Spahis must be a son or nephew of the de la Tour from whom Rose and Jack had taken the château. So far, however, was Max Doran from being elated by this tie of blood, that he mentally dubbed his relative a cad. It was all he could do to persuade Josephine not to tell Raoul de la Tour that she had come into money, and a name as aristocratic as his own—in fact, that she was qualifying as a heroine of romance. Only by appealing to the crude sense of drama the girl had in her could she be prevented from stupidly throwing out bait to fortune-hunters. But having wired again to Edwin Reeves, and hearing that Mrs. Reeves, already in Paris, had started for Algiers, a plan occurred to Max. He advised Josephine, if she thought that de la Tour cared for her, to tell him that she was giving up work in the Hotel Splendide; also that she was leaving Sidi-bel-Abbés forever; and then see what he would say. What he did say was such a blow to the girl's vanity that, when she was sure he had no intention of marrying a poor secretary, she flung the dazzling truth at his face. Repentant, he tried to turn his late insults into honest lovemaking; but the temper of the lynx was roused. Never having deeply loved the man, she took pleasure in using her claws on him. In taunting him with what he might have had, however, she let the identity of the newsbringer leak out.

De la Tour then warned her passionately against *le jeune aventurier Americain*, and almost frightened the girl into disbelieving the whole story. But proofs were forthcoming, and with the landlord's wife, who enjoyed sharing a borrowed halo, Josephine Delatour—or Josephine Doran—went to Algiers to await Mrs. Reeves's arrival. Meanwhile, with the money she procured from Max, the girl planned to buy herself a trousseau, and eventually departed, rejoicing in her lover's discomfiture. Whether or no this attitude were safe with such a man remained to be seen. As for Max—the messenger who had brought the tidings—since he showed no desire to flirt with her, Josephine saw no reason to be interested in him. Besides, she could hardly believe that he was not somehow to blame for having kept what ought to have been hers for his own all these years. She had not loved her supposed father and mother, who had interfered with her pleasure, disapproving of what they called her extravagance and frivolity.... There was no grief to the girl in learning that the Delatours were not her parents.

Nor did it seem to Josephine that gratitude was due Max for resigning in her favour. She was greedily ready to grab everything, without thanks, just as her lynx-prototype would snatch a piece of meat, if it could get it, from another lynx. She grudged the years of luxury and pleasure which she ought to have had; and could she have realized that she had made of Lieutenant de la Tour an enemy for Max Doran, she would have been glad. It was right that two men should quarrel over a woman.

While he was arranging Josephine's affairs, Max saw nothing of Sanda and Colonel DeLisle. He had thought it best to take up his quarters at another hotel, and his only communication with them was by letter. He wrote Sanda that when his business was finished he would make up his mind what to do; but in any case he hoped that he might be allowed to bid her and Colonel DeLisle farewell. In answer, came an invitation from the Colonel to see the Salle d'Honneur of the Legion, the famous gallery where records of its heroes were kept. "That is," (Sanda said, writing for her father) "if you are interested in the Legion."

"If he were interested in the Legion!" Already he was obsessed by thoughts of it. Sidi-bel-Abbés, which at first had struck him as being a dull provincial town, now seemed the only place where he could have lived through his dark hours. Elsewhere he would have felt surrounded by a gay and happy world in which a man with his back to the wall had no place. Here at Sidi-bel-Abbés was the home of men with their backs to the wall. The very town itself had been created by such men, and for them. For generations desperate men, sad men, starving men, of all countries—men who had lost everything but life and strength—had been turning their faces toward Sidi-bel-Abbés, their sole luggage the secret sorrow which, once the *Legion* had taken them, was no one's business but their own.

Max Doran could not go into the street without meeting at least a dozen men in the Legion's uniform, who seemed akin to him because of the look in their eyes; the look of those cut off from what had once meant life and love. What they were enduring was unknown to him, but he was somehow at home among them. And the day Josephine went away, before he had yet made up his mind to the next step, for the first time he heard the music of the Legion's band.

It was in the afternoon, and he had strolled outside the Porte de Tlemcen into the public gardens for the music, only because he had an hour to pass before his appointment in the Salle d'Honneur. In winter the band played in the Place Carnot, but on this soft day of early spring the concert was announced for the gardens beloved by the people of Sidi-bel-Abbés. They were beautiful, but to Max it seemed the beauty of sadness; and even there, outside the wall which dead Legionnaires had built, everything spoke of the Legion. Men of the Legion had planted many of the tall trees of the cloistral avenue, whose columnar trunks were darkly draped with ivy. Men of the Legion swept dead leaves from the paths, as they swept away old memories. Men of the Legion walked in the gray shadow of the planes, as they walked in the shadows of life. Men of the Legion rested on the rough wooden benches, staring absently at mourning plumes of cypresses, or white waterfalls that fleeted by like lost opportunities. Yes, despite the flowers in the myrtle borders it was a place of sadness, and of a mournful silence until the musicians brought their instruments into the curious bandstand formed of growing trees. Then it seemed to Max that he heard the Legion speak in a great and wonderful voice.

As by studying a hive one feels the mysterious governing spirit, so he felt the spirit of the Legion in its music, its restlessness, its longings, its passions, and its ambitions, uttered and cried to heaven in prayers and curses. As individuals the men were dumb, guarding their secrets, striving to forget; and it was as if this smothered fire, seeking outlet, had sprung from heart to heart, kindling and massing all together in a vast, white-hot furnace. The music opened the doors of this furnace, and the flames roared upward to the sky. In the dazzling light of that strange fire, secrets could be read, if the eyes that saw were not blinded. Bitterness and joy were there to see, and the blending of all passions through which men ruin their lives, and need to remake their souls. Yes, that was the Legion's call. Men came to it, in the hope of remaking their souls. With his own drowned in the music of pain and regeneration, Max went to the Salle d'Honneur to meet Colonel DeLisle.

He knew where to find it, next to the barracks; a small, low building of the same dull yellow, set back in a little garden with a few palms and flowerbeds. Inside the gate was a red, blue, and white sentry box. But Max entered unchallenged, because at the door of the house stood the colonel, who came down a step to meet him. "Monsieur Doran!" he exclaimed cordially, holding out his hand.

"Will you still offer me your hand, sir," Max asked wistfully, though he smiled, "even if I've no name any more, and no country that I can claim? Mademoiselle DeLisle has told you?"

"She has told me," echoed the elder man, shaking the younger's hand with extra warmth. "I congratulate you on the chance of making a name for yourself. I think from what I hear, and can judge, that you will do so, in whatever path you choose. Have you chosen yet?"

"Not yet," Max confessed. "Neither a name nor the way to make it. Nor the country most likely to make it in."

"As for that"—and Colonel DeLisle smiled—"we of the Legion are more used to men without names and without countries than to those who have them. Not that your case is allied to theirs. Shall we go in? I want to thank you, as I've not been able to do yet, for your chivalrous behaviour to my daughter. She has told me all about that, too—*all*. And I had a feeling that this room, in which our Legion commemorates honourable deeds, would be a place where you and I might talk."

As he spoke he led Max into a short corridor, at the end of which hung a large frame containing portraits and many names of men and battles with the crest of *la Legion Etrangére* at the top. Pushing open a door at the right, DeLisle made way for his guest. "Here are all the relics that are to us men of the First Regiment most sacred," he said. And as he passed in, he saluted a flag preciously guarded in a long glass case: the flag of the regiment decorated with the Cross of the Legion of Honour on an historic occasion of great bravery. An answering thrill shot through Max's veins, for in them ran soldier blood. Involuntarily he, too, saluted the flag and its cross. Colonel DeLisle gave him a quick look, but made no comment.

Two out of the four walls were covered with portraits of men in uniforms ancient and modern; paintings, engravings, photographs; and the decorations were strange weapons, and torn, faded banners which had helped the Legion to make history. There were drums and weird idols, too, and monstrous masks and great fans from Tonkin and Madagascar, and relics of fighting in Mexico. On the long table lay albums of photographs, and upon either side were ranged chairs as if for officers to sit in council.

"Whenever we wish to do a guest honour, we bring him here," said the colonel. "We are not rich, and have nothing better to offer; except, perhaps, our music."

"I have already heard the music," answered Max. "I shall never forget it. And I shall never forget this room."

"Such music wakes the hearts of men, and helps inspire them to heroic acts like these." Colonel DeLisle waved his hand toward some of the pictures which showed soldiers fighting the Legion's most historic battles. "I am rather proud of our music and our men. This room, too, and the things in it—most of all the flag. My daughter has spent hours in the Salle d'Honneur looking over our records. Presently she will join us. But I wanted to thank you before she came. Corisande is a child, knowing little of the world and its ways. Some men in your place would have misunderstood her—in the unusual circumstances. But you did not. You proved yourself a friend

in need for my little girl, on her strange journey to me. I wish in return there might be some way in which I could show myself a friend to you. Can you think of any such way?"

The voice was earnest and very kind. A great reaction from his first prejudice against the speaker swept over Max. Beneath this one voice which questioned him and waited for an answer, he heard as a deep, thrilling undertone the voice of the Legion which had called to him through the music to come and share its bath of fire. A sudden purpose awoke in Max Doran, and he knew then that it had been in the background of his mind for days, waiting for some word to wake it. Now the word had come. All his blood seemed to rush from heart to head, and he grew giddy: yet he spoke steadily enough.

"I have thought of a way, Colonel DeLisle!"

"I am glad. You have only to tell me."

"Accept me as one of your men. Let me join the Legion."

"Mon Dieu!" The Legion's colonel was taken completely by surprise. Max had thought he might perhaps have expected the request, but evidently it was not so. The dapper little figure straightened itself. And from his place beside his adored flag, Colonel DeLisle gazed across to the other side where, close also to the flag, stood the young man he had wished to serve. Max met his eyes, flushed and eager and, it seemed, pathetically young. There was dead silence for an instant. Then DeLisle spoke in a changed tone: "Do you mean this? Have you thought of what you are saying?"

"I do mean it," Max replied. "I believe I have thought of it ever since I saw those men of all countries getting out of the train to join the Legion. I felt the call they had felt. But it is stronger to-day. I know now what I want. In the Salle D'Honneur of the Legion I decide on my career."

"Decide!" the other repeated. "No, not that, yet! You have got this idea into your head because you are romantic. You think you are ruined and that the future doesn't matter. You will find it does. This is no place for poetry and romance—my God, no! It's a fiery furnace. In barracks we should burn the romance out of you in twenty-four hours."

"If I've got more in me than any man who loves adventure ought to have, then I want it burned out," said Max.

"Adventures will cost you less elsewhere," almost sneered DeLisle.

"I don't ask to get them cheap," Max still insisted. "Though I've got nothing to pay with, except myself, my blood, and flesh, and muscles."

"That's good coin," exclaimed the elder, warming again. "Yet we can't take it. You may think you know what you mean. But you don't know what the Legion means. I do. I've had nearly twenty years of it."

"You love it?"

"Yes, it is my life. But—I have to remind you, I entered it as an officer. There is all the difference."

"At least I should be a soldier. I know what a soldier's hardships are."

"Ah, not in the Legion!"

"It can't kill me."

"It might."

"Let it, then. I'll die learning to be a man."

DeLisle looked at his companion intently. "I think," he said, "you are a man."

"No, sir, I'm not," Max contradicted him abruptly. "I used to hope I might pass muster as men go. But these last days I've been finding myself out. I've been down in hell, and I shouldn't have got there if I were a man. I'm a self-indulgent, pining, and whining boy, thinking of nothing but myself, and not knowing whether I've done right or wrong. If the Legion can't teach me what's white and what's black, nothing can."

The colonel of the Legion laughed a queer, short laugh. "That is true," he said. "I take back those words of mine about poetry and romance. You've got the right point of view, after all. And you are the kind of man the Legion wants, the born soldier, lover of adventure for adventure's sake. You would come to us not because you have anything to hide, or because you prefer barracks in France to prison at home, or because some woman has thrown you over," (just there his keen eyes saw the young man wince, and he hurried on without a pause) "but because we've made some history, we of the Legion, and you would like a chance to make some for yourself, under this"—and he pointed to the flag whose folds hung between them—"*Valeur et Discipline!* That's the Legion's motto, for the Legion itself must be *Dieu et Patrie* for most of its sons. I've done my duty as a friend in warning you to go where life is easier. As colonel of the First Regiment, I welcome you, if you sincerely wish to come into the Legion. Only——"

"Only what, sir?"

"My daughter! She wanted me to help you. She'll think I've hindered, instead."

"No, Colonel. She hoped I'd join the Legion."

DeLisle looked surprised. "What reason have you for supposing that?"

"Interpreting a thing she said, or, rather, a thing she wanted to say, but was afraid to say for fear I might blame her some day in the future."

"She, knowing nothing of the Legion, recommended you to join? That is strange."

"She knew a little of me and my circumstances. I'd been a soldier, and there seemed only one convenient way for a man without a name or country to start and become a soldier again. Miss DeLisle saw that."

"You're talking of me?" inquired Sanda's voice at the half-open door. Both men sprang to open it for her. As she came into the Salle d'Honneur, she seemed to bring with her into this room, sacred to dead heroes of all lands, the sweetness of spring flowers to lay on distant graves. And as she stepped over the threshold, like a young soldier she saluted the flag.

"I have just said to Colonel DeLisle that you would approve of my joining the Legion," Max explained. "Have I told him the truth?"

The girl looked anxiously from one man to the other. She was rather pale and subdued, as if life pressed hardly even upon her. "You guessed what I wouldn't let myself say in the train the other day!" she exclaimed. "But—you *haven't* joined, have you?"

"Not yet, or I shouldn't be here. The Salle d'Honneur is for common soldiers only when they're dead, I presume."

"But you could become an officer some day, couldn't he, father?"

"Yes," replied Colonel DeLisle. "Every soldier of the Legion has his chance. And our friend is French, I think, from what you've told me of his confidences to you. That gives an extra chance to rise. France—rightly or wrongly, but like all mothers—favours her own sons. Besides, he has been a soldier, which puts him at once ahead of the others."

"I shouldn't trade on that! I'd rather begin on a level with other men, not ahead of them," Max said hastily. "My object would be not to teach, but to learn—to cure myself of my faults——"

The colonel drew a deep breath, like a sigh. "We do cure men sometimes, men far more desperate, men with souls far more sick than yours. There's that to be said for us."

"His soul isn't sick at all!" Sanda cried out, in defence of her friend.

"Perhaps he thinks it is." Colonel DeLisle looked at Max as he had looked after those chance words of his about a woman.

"*Do* you think that, Mr. Doran?" the girl questioned incredulously. "I shall be disappointed if you do."

"Don't be disappointed. I do not think my soul is sick. I want to see how strong it can be, and my body, too. But you mustn't call me 'Mr. Doran' now, please. It isn't my name any more. Colonel DeLisle, may I ask your daughter to choose a name for a new soldier of the Legion? It will be the last favour, for I understand perfectly that after I've joined the regiment, as a private soldier, you can be my friends only at heart. Socially, all intercourse must end."

"Oh, no, it wouldn't be so," Sanda cried out impulsively, though the old officer was silent. "It wouldn't, if I were not going away."

"You are going away?" Max was conscious of a faint chill. He would have found some comfort in the thought that his brave little travelling companion was near, even though he seldom saw and never spoke to her.

"Not home to the aunts! I told you I'd never go back to live with them, and my father wouldn't send me. But there's to be a long march—— Oh, have I said what I oughtn't? Why? Since he *must* know if he joins? Anyhow, I can't stay here many days longer—I mean, for the present. I'm to be sent to a wonderful place. It will be a great romance."

"Sanda, it is irrelevant to talk of that now," Colonel DeLisle reminded his daughter.

"Forgive me! I forgot, father. May I—name the new soldier, and wish him joy?"

DeLisle laughed rather bitterly. "'Joy' isn't precisely the word. If he hoped for it, he would soon be disillusioned. You may give him a name, if he wishes it. But let me also give him a few words of advice. Monsieur Doran——"

"St. George!" broke in Sanda. "That is to be his name. I christen him, close to the flag. Soldier, saint, slayer of dragons." She did not add "my patron saint," but Max remembered, and was grateful.

"Soldier Saint George, then," DeLisle began again, smiling, "this is my advice as your friend and well-wisher: again, I say, why should you not take advantages you have fairly earned? My men are wonderful soldiers. I suppose in the world there can be none braver, few so brave; for they nearly all come to heal or hide some secret wound that makes them desperate or careless of life.

They are glorious soldiers, these foreigners of ours! But at the beginning you will see them at their worst in the dulness of barrack life. There are all sorts and conditions, from the lowest to the highest. You may happen to be among some of the lowest. Why not start where you are entitled to start? When, in being recruited, you are asked to state your profession, you're at liberty to say what you choose. No statement as to name, age, country, or occupation is disputed in the Legion. But once more, let me advise you, if you write yourself down "Soldier," things can be made comparatively easy for you."

"I thank you, sir, and I will take your advice in everything else. But I don't want things made easy."

"You may regret your obstinacy."

"Oh, father," pleaded Sanda, "wouldn't you be the very one to do the same thing?"

"In his place," said Colonel DeLisle, shrugging his shoulders, "I suppose I should do what he does. What *I* might do, isn't the question, however. But I've said enough.... Now I have to get back to barracks. For you, Sanda, this must be 'good-bye,' I fear, to the friend of your journey."

"My friend for always," the girl amended, holding out her hand to Max. "And I'd rather say 'Au revoir' than 'Good-bye'; we shall meet again—away in the desert, perhaps."

She caught her father's warning eye and stopped. "Good-bye, then—Soldier of the Legion."

"If he doesn't change his mind," muttered DeLisle. "There's still time."

Max looked from the girl to the flag in its glass case.

"I shall not change my mind," he said.

CHAPTER XI

FOUR EYES

Beyond the barracks of the Legion, going toward the Porte de Tlemcen, and opposite the drill-ground and cavalry barracks of the Spahis, there is a sign: *Bureau de Recrutement*.

Early in the morning after taking his resolution, Max walked down the narrow, lane-like way which led off from the Rue de Tlemcen and the long front wall of the Legion's barracks, and found the door indicated by the sign.

In a bare office room, furnished with a table and a few benches, sat a corporal, busily writing. He looked up, surprised to see such a visitor as Max, and was at some trouble to hide his amazement on hearing that this well-dressed young man, evidently a gentleman, wished to enlist in the Legion. Opening off the outer room, with its white-washed walls and display of posters tempting to recruits, was another office, the *Bureau du Commandant de Recrutement*, and there Max was received by a lieutenant, older than most of the men of that rank in the English or American armies. Something in his manner made Max wonder if the officer had been told of him and his intention by Colonel DeLisle. At first he put only the perfunctory questions which a man entering the wide-open gate of the Legion may answer as he chooses. But when in its turn came an inquiry as to the recruit's profession, the officer looked at Max sharply yet with sympathy.

"No profession," was the answer; a true one, for Max's resignation had already taken effect.

"At present, but—in the past?" the lieutenant encouraged him kindly. "If you have military experience, you can rise quickly in the Legion."

For good or ill, Max stuck to yesterday's resolve, knowing that he might be weak enough to regret it, and anxious therefore to make it irrevocable. "I have done some military service," he explained, "enough to help me learn my duties as a soldier quickly."

"Ah, well, no more on that subject, then!" and the lieutenant sighed audibly. "Yet it is a pity, especially as you are of French birth and parentage, though brought up in America. Your chance of promotion would—but let us hope that by good luck something may happen to give you the chance in any case. Who knows but both your countries may be proud of you some day? Is there—nothing you would care to tell me about yourself that might enable me to advise you later?"

"Nothing with which it is necessary to trouble you, my Lieutenant."

"*Bien!* It remains then only for you to be examined by the *medecin major*. You have nothing to fear from his report. *Au contraire!*"

In an adjoining room two men were already waiting the arrival of the doctor, who was due in a few minutes. One, evidently a Frenchman, with a dark, dissipated face, volunteered the information that he was a chauffeur, whose master had discharged him without notice on account of an "unavoidable accident" at a small town within walking distance of Sidi-bel Abbés. The other, a blond boy who looked not a day over sixteen, announced that he was an Alsatian who had come to Algeria as a waiter in a restaurant car, on purpose to join the Legion, and escape military service as a German. "I shall serve my five years, and become a French subject," he said joyously.

"Take hold of my arm. Not bad, is it, for biceps? For what age would you take me?"

"Seventeen," replied Max, adding a year to his real guess.

But it was not enough. The girlish face blushed up to the lint-coloured hair, cut *en brosse*. "I call myself eighteen," said the child. "Don't you think the doctor will believe me when he feels my muscle?"

"I think he'll give you the benefit of the doubt," Max assured him, smiling.

"No trouble about *my* age!" exulted the chauffeur. "I am twenty-seven."

He looked ten years older. But a recruit for the Legion may take the age as well as the name he likes best, provided the *medecin major* be not too critical.

Both his companions were keenly curious concerning Max, and considered themselves aggrieved that, after their frankness, he should choose to be reserved. They put this down to pride. But the Legion would take it out of him! All men were equal there. They had heard that among other things.

Before the stream of questions had run dry through lack of encouragement, the door was thrown open, and in walked the doctor, a big, jovial man, accompanied by the middle-aged lieutenant who had shown interest in Max, and a weary-faced clerk plunged in gloom by a bad cold in the head. As they entered, the two officers looked at Max, and glanced quickly at each other. They had evidently been speaking of him. But his examination was left till the last. The chauffeur of "twenty-seven" and the waiter of "eighteen" were passed as physically fit—*bon pour le service*: and then came the turn of the third recruit, whose pale blue silk underclothing brought a slight twinkle to the eye of the jolly *medecin major*. Max wished that it had occurred to him to buy something cheaper and less noticeable. But it was too late to think of that now. At all events, he was grateful for the tact and consideration which had given him the last turn.

"Magnifique!" exclaimed the doctor, when he had pinched and pounded Max, sounded heart and lungs, and squeezed his biceps. "Here we have an athlete." And he exchanged another glance with the lieutenant.

The clerk scribbled industriously and sadly in his book, as Max dressed himself again; and the ordeal was over. When the third recruit of the day had been given a paper, first to read, and then to sign with his new name, his contract for five years to serve the Republic of France was made and completed. Maxime St. George was a soldier of the Legion.

He, with the ex-chauffeur and the ex-waiter, was marched by a corporal through a small side gate into the barrack square; and the guard, sitting on a bench by the guardhouse, honoured the newcomers with a stare. The chauffeur and the waiter got no more than a passing glance, but all eyes, especially those of the sergeant of the guard, focussed on Max. Apparently it was not every day that the little gate beside the great gate opened for a gentleman recruit. Max realized again that he was conspicuous, and resigned himself to the inevitable. This was the last time he need suffer. In a few minutes the uniform of the Legion would make him a unit among other units, and there would be nothing to single him out from the rest. He would no longer have even a name that mattered. In losing his individuality he would become a number. But for a moment he felt like a new arrival in a Zoo: an animal of some rare species which drew the interest of spectators away from luckier beasts of commoner sorts.

The trio of recruits stood together in an unhappy group, awaiting orders from the regimental offices; and the news of their advent must have run ahead of them with magic speed, swiftly as news travels in the desert, for everywhere along the front of the yellow buildings surrounding the square, windows flew open, heads of soldiers peered out, and voices shouted eagerly: "*Voilà les bleus!*" There were only three newcomers, and the arrival of recruits in the barrack square was an everyday spectacle; but something to gaze at was better than nothing at all. Men in fatigue uniform of spotless white, their waists wound round with wide blue sashes, came running up to see the sight, before *les bleus* should be marched away and lose their value as objects of interest by donning soldier clothes. Max recalled the day of his début at West Point, a humble, modest "Pleb." This huge, gravelled courtyard, surrounded on three sides by tall, many-windowed barracks, and shut away from the Rue de Tlemcen by high iron railings, had no resemblance to the cadets' barracks of gray stone; but the emotions of the "Pleb" and of the recruit to the Legion were curiously alike. The same thought presented itself to the soldier that had wisely counselled the new cadet. "I must take it all as it comes, and keep my temper unless some one insults me. Then—well, I'll have to make myself respected now or never."

"*Les bleus! Voilà les bleus!*" was the cry from every quarter: and discipline not being the order of the moment for Legionnaires off duty, young soldiers and old soldiers gathered round, making such remarks as occurred to them, witty or ribald. *Les bleus* were fair game.

As a schoolboy, Max had read in some book that, in the time of Napoleon First, French recruits had been nicknamed "les bleus" because of the asphyxiating high collars which had empurpled their faces with a suffusion of blood. Little had he dreamed in committing that fact to memory that one day the name would be applied to him! Thinking thus, he smiled between amusement and bitterness; but the smile died as a voice whispered in his ear: "For God's sake don't sell your clothes to the Jews. Keep them for me. I'll get hold of them somehow."

The voice spoke in French. Max turned quickly, and could not resist a slight start at seeing close

to his, the face which had seized his attention days ago in the railway station.

The man who had then been dressed in dusty black was now a soldier of the Legion, in white fatigue uniform, like all the rest: but the dark face and night-black eyes had the same arresting, tragic appeal. After this whisper, the Legionnaire drew back, his look asking for an answer by nod or shake of the head. Max caught the idea instantly. "By jove! the fellow has made up his mind to desert already!" he thought. "Why? He hasn't the air of a slacker."

There was no language he could choose in this group made up from a dozen countries, which might not be understood by one or all. The only thing was to trust to the other's quickness of comprehension, as the speaker had trusted to his. He held out his hand, exclaiming: "*C'est vous, mon ami! Quel chance!*"

The ruse was understood. His handclasp was returned with meaning. Every one supposed that *le bleu* of four days ago and *le bleu* of to-day were old acquaintances who had found each other unexpectedly.

There was no chance for private speech. A quick fire of interrogation volleyed at the three recruits, especially at Max. "Are you French? Are you German? Are you from Switzerland—Alsace—Belgium—Italy—England?" Questions spattered round the newcomers like a rain of bullets, in as many languages as the countries named, and Max amused himself by answering in the same, whenever he was able.

"How many tongues have you stowed in that fly-trap of yours, my child?" inquired a thin, elderly Legionnaire with a long nose and clever, twinkling eyes. No nation but Holland could have produced that face, and it was unnecessary that the speaker should introduce himself as a Dutchman. "Fourteen years have I served France in the Legion. I have been to Madagascar and Tonkin. Everywhere I have found myself the champion of languages, which is only natural, for I was translator in the State Department at home—a long while ago. But if you can speak eleven you will get the championship over me. I have only as many tongues as I have fingers."

"You beat me by six," laughed Max, and the jealous frown faded.

"Encore un champion!" gayly announced the round-faced youth who had jocosely asked Max if he were a Belgian. "Voilà notre joli heros, Pelle."

"Quatro oyos" ("Four Eyes") added a Spaniard. "Papa van Loo can beat you with his tongue; Four Eyes beats with his fists."

Sauntering toward *les bleus*, with the manner of a big dog who deigns to visit a little one, came a man of average height but immense girth. His great beardless face was so hideous, so startling, that Max gaped at him rudely, lost in horror. Nose and lips had been partly cut away. The teeth and gums showed in a ghastly, perpetual grin. But as if this were not enough to single him out among a thousand, a pair of black, red-rimmed eyes had been tattooed on the large forehead, just above a bushy, auburn line overhanging the eyes which nature had pushed deeply in between protruding cheek and frontal bones.

"Good heavens!" Max blurted out aloud; and the Dutchman cackled with laughter. "You're no Frenchman, boy!" he loudly asserted in English. "Now we've got at your own jargon. Go away, Mister Pelle, you're frightening our British baby. Or is it Yankee?"

An angry answer jumped to the tip of Max's tongue, but he bit it back. So this living corpse was Pelle, the champion boxer of the Legion, who would fight the Frenchman!

The new recruit was ashamed of the sick spasm of disgust that closed his throat. He felt that it was a sign of raw youth and amateurishness, as when a medical student faints at first sight of the dissecting table. He feared that his face had betrayed him to these soldiers, many of whom had hardened their nerves on battlefields. Somehow he must justify himself, and force respect from the men who greeted Van Loo's cheap wit with an appreciative roar.

Pelle was the only one who did not laugh. He came lumbering along in silence as if he had not heard; but Max saw that the boxer was aiming straight for him. The newly christened St. George stood still, waiting to see what the dragon would do. Within three feet of the recruit the hero of the Legion came to a stop and looked the slim figure in civilian clothes slowly over from head to foot, as Goliath may sarcastically have studied the points of David. The whole group was hypnotized, enchanted, each man in white praying that it might be five minutes yet before the corporal returned to shepherd his three lambs. Much can happen in five minutes. Battles can be won or lost! and at anything Pelle might do, under provocation, the powers that were would wink. Not an officer below the colonel but had money on the match which was to come off in the barrack square to-morrow.

All four eyes of Quatro Oyos seemed to stare at the insignificant shrimp of a recruit. Max had but two eyes with which to return the compliment, but he made the most of them. Pelle was not only hideous: he was formidable. The big square head and ravaged face were set on a strong throat. Chest and shoulders were immense, the arms too long, the slightly bowed legs too short. Up went a sledgehammer hand, coated with red hair, to scratch the heavy jowl contemplatively, and Max thought of a gorilla.

"So you don't think I'm pretty, eh?" the boxer challenged him, and Max started with surprise at sound of the Cockney accent, which came with a hissing sound from the defaced mouth. Pelle

was an Englishman!

The start was misunderstood, not only by the champion of the Legion, but by the surrounding Legionnaires, who tittered.

"Sorry if I was rude," remarked Max, with an air of nonchalance, to show that he was ready for anything.

"That's no way to apologize," said Pelle. "Don't look at me like that. You'll have to learn better manners in the Legion."

"A cat may look at a king," retorted the recruit. "And as for manners, I won't ask you to teach them to me."

"Why, you damned little Yankee spy, do you want to be pinched between my thumb and finger as if you was a flea?" bellowed the boxer.

"Try it, and you'll find the flea can bite before he's pinched," said Max. His heart was thumping, for despite his knowledge of *la boxe* he knew that he might be pounded into a jelly in another minute. This man was a heavyweight. He was a lightweight. But whatever happened he would show himself game; and at that instant nothing else seemed much to matter.

Somewhat to his surprise, Pelle burst out laughing. "Hark to the bantam!" he exclaimed in French—execrable French, but a proof that he was no newcomer in the Legion. "If you weren't a newspaper spy, my chicken, I'd let you off for your cheek. But we have heard all about you. Lieutenant de la Tour of the Spahis knows. He's told every one. It doesn't take long for news to get to the Legion. I'm going to teach you not to write lies about us for your damned papers. We get enough from Germany. So I shall make chicken jelly of you. See!"

"All right. Come on!" said Max, more cheerfully than he felt. For his one chance was in his youth and the method he had learned from the lightweight champion of the world.

A ring formed on the instant, to screen as well as to see the spectacle. Here would be no rounds timed by an official, no seconds to encourage or revive their men. The encounter, such as it was, would be primitive and savage, asking no quarter and giving none. But Max felt that his whole future in the Legion depended on its issue.

CHAPTER XII

NO. 1033

For a second the contestants eyed each other.

A strange hush seemed to fall upon all, a situation always present in affairs of this kind. It was noticeable to Max. "It might well be said that a calm always preceded a storm," Max reflected, and then he heard a voice speak close to his ear.

He dared not turn his head for fear of a sudden onslaught by his antagonist, but even as low as the tone was, he recognized the voice—it was the same voice that had begged him stealthily for his civilian clothes!

"Beware of his foot," said the voice. "He's English, but he fights French fashion with la savate."

Max had not expected the savate from an Englishman, and he was very glad of the warning.

It flashed through his brain just what the terrible savate could accomplish—a lightning-like kick landing on the jaw of an adversary, being much more crushing and damaging than the hardest punch.

The warning came just in time, for he had only a brief chance to steady himself when Four Eyes rushed at him like a maddened bull.

As he neared Max he let go two terrific swings, first with his left and then with his right hand, but his smaller opponent side-stepped with the nimbleness of a cat, and Pelle rushed by two or three steps before he could stop.

At once he turned with a lithe movement, surprisingly graceful for a body so big, and made ready as though to once more swing his two flail-like fists.

Again did Max set himself to dodge Pelle's punches, but instead of letting his two hands fly, one after the other, he bent his huge body back from the waist, and at the same time shot his right foot upward toward the other's face.

It was a fearful kick, and had it landed on Max's jaw it would have ended the fight then and there, indeed, if it did not break his neck. But that whispered warning about the savate was Max's salvation.

With a quick backward jerk of his head he saved himself—just barely saved himself—and the big foot shot harmlessly up into the air, Pelle almost losing his balance in the unsuccessful effort.

Before the latter could really regain his footing Max stepped in and, with left and right, landed full on his opponent's face, the last of the two punches coming flush on the nose with smashing force. It rocked the amazed Pelle back on his heels.

Moreover, the surprise at the force of the blow was not greater than the surprise at the sudden knowledge of the fact that the "Yankee Spy" was no bungling amateur, but that he had all the ear-marks of a skilled professional.

Well, he could not be fooled again, and on top of this thought came a heavy grunt as Max again stepped in and swung a swift right hook to his stomach and then jumped out of harm's way.

This blow took Pelle's wind and he began to dance around on his toes with the lightness of thistledown, despite his discomfiture, while all the time he watched the clever Max between half-closed eyes, waiting for another chance to deliver that awful kick where it would surely put the other out of business.

Now and then the big man would try an occasional swing at his elusive opponent, but it was more of an attempt to cover up his real intention rather than to land effectively. Well he knew that his best and quickest chance to end the fight lay in his ability to kick the other man insensible, and so he tried to fool and disarm Max by a bluff attack.

In this manner they danced about each other for a short space; the American, apparently whenever he chose, stepped in and landed left and right on the other's jaw with a sound like the crack of a whip.

There was a snap to Max's punches, a snap that stung and made an impression, and so while the big man almost exploded with fury at the gruelling he had to go through as his graceful adversary jumped in and out and banged him, he still nursed his best blow—the murderous kick! —holding it in reserve until the right moment.

Finally, in the course of Max's punishing onslaught, in which he was leaping in and out with unceasing agility, he—stumbled! This was just what Pelle was waiting for, and then, like the fillip of a spring-board, the heavy boot went toward Max's head!

Though he saw it start, and though he swung his head back, Max could not escape it altogether, and it grazed his chin. For an instant the barrack yard and the white-clad ring of men swam before his eyes. It seemed as though an iron bolt had entered his chin and gone through the top of his head, but he did not quite lose all presence of mind, though he did bend away from the other until he almost fell on his own back.

Pelle saw his advantage and, with a yelp of joy, jumped forward and swung his other foot. As he did so reason returned to Max and with it came a blind rage at the other's unfairness.

With the quickness of a panther, and with the strength of ten men, he swung his slim body sideways and then bent forward to let go a vicious right-hand swing—flush to the other's jaw!

The kick missed Max—missed him by a hair—but the punch landed, landed with every ounce of bone and muscle behind it that Max had in his body.

Down crashed the champion on the back of his skull, with a thud amid a spatter of gravel!

For an instant the huge form lay still, while the ring of Legionnaires remained petrified. Suddenly the group realized that the fighting cock had been beaten by the bantam.

Then, with visions of "cellule" for every one concerned, four or five men sprang to pick up the champion. As they got him to his feet, blood poured from his swollen and disfigured nose. Coming slowly to himself, Pelle wiped it away dazedly with the back of a hairy hand, anxious, even in semi-consciousness, to preserve the purity of his uniform, sacred in the Legion.

Max stood his ground, rather expecting to be attacked in revenge by some of Pelle's angry allies; and the man who had warned him to beware of "la savate" took a step nearer him. But both were new to the Legion Etrangére, and did not yet know the true spirit of the regiment.

Only admiring looks were turned upon the astonished young conqueror, who was rather surprised at his own easy victory. As Pelle came to himself in his friends' arms, the big fellow staggered forward, holding out a bloodstained paw.

CHAPTER XIII

THE AGHA'S ROSE

Sanda did not know, and would not know for many days, the news of Sidi-bel-Abbés, for she had started on a long journey, to the "wonderful place" of which she would have spoken to Max had she not been warned by her father's word and look that the story was "irrelevant."

If Sanda had tried to tell the tale of that "romance" at which she had hinted in the Salle d'Honneur, she would have had to begin far back in time when, after his wife's death, Georges DeLisle had by his own request been transferred to the Legion. His first big fight had been in

helping the Agha of Djazerta against a raid of Touaregs, the veiled men of the South, brigands then and always. Since those days, DeLisle and Ben Râana, the great desert chief, had been friends. More than once they had given each other aid and counsel. When Ben Râana came north with other Caids, bidden to the Governor's ball in Algiers, he paid DeLisle a visit. Each year at the season of date-gathering he sent the colonel of the Legion a present of the honey-sweet, amber-clear fruit for which the oasis of Djazerta was famous; and the officer sent to the Agha a parcel of French books, or some new invention in the shape of a clock, such as Arabs love. Now he was sending his daughter.

The way of it was this: just before Sanda's surprise arrival, the Agha of Djazerta, chief of the Ouled-Mendil, had written a confidential letter to Colonel DeLisle. He had a young daughter whom he adored. Foolishly (he began to think) he had let her learn French, and allowed her to read French novels. These books had made the girl discontented with her cloistered life. Being the only child, and always rather delicate, perhaps she had been too much spoiled. Greater freedom than she had could not be granted; but seeing her sad Ben Râana had asked himself what he could do for her happiness. Before long she would marry, of course; but it had occurred to him that meanwhile it might be well if a companion could be found who would be a safe friend for a girl of Ourïeda's position and religion. Did Colonel DeLisle know of any young gentlewoman, English or French, who would be willing to come to Djazerta? She must be educated and accomplished, but above all trustworthy; one who would not try to make Ourïeda wish for a life that could never be hers: one who would not attempt to unsettle the child's religious beliefs. In writing this letter Ben Râana had shown a naïf sort of conceit in his own broad-mindedness, which would have been rather comic if it had not been pathetic. But to DeLisle it was only pathetic, because, European though he was, he knew the hidden romance of the Agha's life: his worship of a beautiful Spanish wife who had died years ago, and for love of whom he had vowed never to take into his harem any other woman, although he had no son. His nearest male relative was a nephew, to whom DeLisle imagined that some day Ourïeda would be married, though the young man was at least a dozen years older than she.

When the letter came, Colonel DeLisle knew of no such person as Ben Râana asked for; but he had not answered yet when Sanda unexpectedly appeared. Hardly had he recovered from the first shock of his surprise when he remembered the great march soon to be undertaken—a march ostensibly for maneuvers, but in reality to punish a band of desert raiders, and later, men of the Legion were to begin the laying of a new road in the far south, even beyond Djazerta. There would be no long rest for the colonel of the First Regiment for many months, consequently he would be unable to keep Sanda with him. She did not want to go back to France or Ireland, so she was told about the Agha of Djazerta and the sixteen-year-old girl, Ourïeda, whose Arab name meant "Little Rose."

Next to staying at the headquarters of the Foreign Legion with its colonel, Sanda liked the idea of going into the desert and living for a while the life of an Arab woman with the daughter of a great chief of the south. The more she thought of it, the more it appealed to her. Besides, when her father pointed out Djazerta on the map, and not more than twenty kilometres away the *douar*, or tribal encampment under the rule of Ben Râana, she noticed that they seemed to be scarcely a hundred kilometres distant from Touggourt. Probably Richard Stanton would be spending many days or even weeks at Touggourt before he set off across vast desert spaces searching for the Lost Oasis. So the girl said to Colonel DeLisle that, since she could not at present stay with him, she would like beyond everything else such a romantic adventure as a visit to the Agha's house.

The one objection was that, if she went at all, she must start at once, because there was at the moment a great chance for her to travel well chaperoned. A captain of the Chasseurs d'Afrique had just been ordered from Sidi-bel-Abbés to Touggourt, and was leaving at once with his wife. They could take Sanda with them: and at Touggourt Ben Râana would have his friend's daughter met by an escort and several women servants. It was an opportunity not to miss; though otherwise Colonel DeLisle might have kept the girl with him for a fortnight longer.

Sanda would have liked to bid Max good-bye, or if that were not possible, to write him a letter. But DeLisle said it "would not do." Not that the newly enlisted soldier would misunderstand: but—he would realize why he heard nothing more from his colonel's daughter. She need not fear that he would be hurt. So Sanda could send only a thought message to her friend, and perhaps it reached him in a dream, for the night of her departure—knowing nothing of it—he was back again in the dim cabin of the *General Morel* gazing through the dusk at a long, swinging plait of gold-brown hair.

Sanda, with Captain Amaranthe and his wife, travelled to Oran, thence to Biskra, and from Biskra on the newly finished railway line to Touggourt. It was there that, twenty-two years ago, the beautiful Irish girl who had run away from home to her soldier lover, joined Georges DeLisle and married him. Sanda thought of that, and thought again also that in a few months more Richard Stanton would come to Touggourt for the getting together of his caravan. These two thoughts transformed the wild desert town with its palms, and tombs of murdered sultans, and its frame of golden dunes into a magical city of romance. She felt that some great thing ought to happen to her there. It was not enough that Touggourt should give her a first glimpse of the true Sahara. She wanted it to give her more. Nor was it enough that she should be met there by an escort of Bedouins with a chief's nephew at their head, and negro women to be her servants, and a white camel of purest breed for her to ride, she being hidden like an Arab princess in a red-curtained bassourah. All this was wonderful, and thrilling as an Eastern story of the Middle Ages; but it meant nothing to her heart. And something deep down in her expected more of Touggourt even

than this. She told herself that a place with such associations owed more to a child of Georges DeLisle and Sanda De Lisle; and even when she and her cavalcade started away from the great oasis city, winding southward among the dunes, she still had the conviction that some day, before very long, Touggourt would pay its debt.

Ben Râana had done what he could to honour Colonel DeLisle through his daughter. He had sent a fine caravan to fetch the girl to Djazerta, and according to the ideas of desert travellers, no luxury was lacking for her comfort. His half-sister's son, Sidi Tahar Ben Hadj, had under him some of the best men of the Agha's *goum*, and there were a pair of giant, ink-black eunuchs to guard the guest and her two negresses. Silky-soft rugs from Persia lined her bassourah on the side where she would sit, the balance being kept on the other by her luggage wrapped in bundles; and the whole was curtained with sumptuous *djerbi*, striped in rainbow tints. Over the *djerbi*, to protect her from the sun, or wind and blowing sand, were hung heavy rugs made by the women of the Djebel Amour mountains, the red and blue folds ornamented by long strands and woollen tassels of kaleidoscopic colours. Sanda's camel (like that of Ben Hadj and the one which carried the two negresses) was a *mehari*, an animal of race, as superior to ordinary beasts of burden as an eagle is nobler than a domestic fowl. There was a musician among the camel-drivers, chosen especially—so said Ben Hadj—because he knew and could sing a hundred famous songs of love and war. Also he was master of the Arab flute, and the räita, "Muezzin of Satan," strange instrument of the wicked voice that can cry down all other voices.

Lest the men should misunderstand and think lightly of the Agha's guest, his nephew did not look upon Sanda's face after the hour of meeting her at Touggourt, in the presence of her friends, until he had brought the girl to his uncle's house, three days later. She was waited upon only by the women and the two black giants who rode behind the white camels: and altogether Sidi Tahar Ben Hadj was in his actions an example of that Arab chivalry about which Sanda had read. Nevertheless she was not able to like him.

For one thing, though he had a fine bearing and a good enough figure (so far as she could tell in his flowing robes and burnous), in looks he was no hero of romance, but a disappointingly ugly man. Ourïeda, the Agha's daughter, was only sixteen, and Tahar was supposed to be no more than a dozen years her elder, but he appeared nearer forty than twenty-eight. He had suffered from smallpox, which had marred his large features and destroyed the sight of one eye. It had turned white and looked, thought Sanda, like the eye of a boiled fish. He wore a short black beard that, although thick, showed the shape of a heavy jaw; and his wide-open, quivering nostrils gave him the look of a bad-tempered horse. Although he could speak French, he seemed to the girl singularly alien and remote. Sanda wondered if he had a wife, or wives, and pitied any Arab woman unfortunate enough to be shut up in his harem.

On the third morning the great dunes were left behind, and the bassourahs no longer swayed like towers in a rotary earthquake with the movements of the camels. Far away across a flat expanse of golden sand, silvered by saltpetre, a long, low cloud—blue-green as a peacock's tail—trailed on the horizon. It was the oasis of Djazerta, with its thousands of date palms.

At first the vision seemed to float behind a veil of sparkling gauze, unreal as a mirage; but toward noon it brightened and sharpened in outline, until at last the tall trees took individual form, bunches of unripe dates beneath their spread fan of plumes hanging down like immense yellow fists at the end of limp, thin arms cased in orange-coloured gloves.

There was a *chott*, or dried desert lake, glistening white and livid blue, full of ghostly reflections, to cross; but once on the other side all the poetic romance of fairy gardens and magic mirrors vanished. The vast oasis rose out of earthy sand and cracked mud; and the houses piled together beyond it were no longer cubes of molten gold, but squalid, primitive buildings of sun-dried brick crowding each other for shade and protection, their only beauty in general effect and bizarre outline.

"Am I to live in one of those mud hovels?" Sanda wondered. She was not disheartened even by this thought, for the novelty of the whole experience had keyed her up to enjoy any adventure; still it was a relief to go swaying past the huddled town, and to stop before a high, white-washed wall with a small tower on each side of a great gate. Over the top of the wall Sanda could see the flat roof of a large, low house, not yellow like the others, but pearly white as the two or three minarets that gleamed above the fringe of palms.

Somebody must have been watching from one of the squat towers by the gate—each of which had a loophole-window looking out over the caravan way—for even before the head man of the cavalcade could reach the shut portals of faded gray palm-wood, both gates were thrown open, and a dozen men in white rushed out. They uttered shouts of joy at sight of Sidi Tahar Ben Hadj, as though he had been absent for months instead of a few days, and some of the oldest brown faces bent to kiss his shoulders or elbows.

Sanda saw a bare courtyard paved only with hard-packed, yellow sand; and the long front of the house with its few small windows looked unsympathetic and unattractive. The girl felt disappointed. She had imagined a picturesque house, a sort of "Kubla Khan" palace in the desert; and she had expected that perhaps Ourïeda and her father, the Agha, would come ceremoniously out through a vast arched doorway to welcome her. But here there was not even the arched entrance of her fancy, only two small doors set as far as possible from one another in the blank façade. Sanda's *mehari* was led in front of the eastern door, which was pulled ajar in a secretive way. One of the big negroes helped her out of the bassourah as usual, when he had forced the

white camel to its knees; and to her surprise the other black man made of his long white burnous a kind of screen behind which she might pass without being seen. The women servants—already out of their bassourah—came hurrying along to join her, silver bracelets a-jingle, chattering encouragement in Arab, scarcely a word of which could Sanda understand.

Inside the house was a queer kind of vestibule, evidently intended for defence, with a jutting screen of wall behind the door, and then a passage with a sharp turn in it, and seats along the sides. A very old, withered negro let them in; and still it seemed to the girl an unfriendly greeting for her father's daughter, one who had come so far. But in a minute more she gave a little cry of pleasure, and suddenly understood the mystery. This part of the house was the harem, secret and sacred to the women, since the very meaning of the word "harem" is "hidden."

She had been ushered through a long, dim corridor, with a sheen of pink and purple tiles halfway up the white wall to the dark wood of a roughly carved ceiling, and instead of coming into a room at the end, she walked unexpectedly into a large fountain court, bright with the crystal brightness of spraying water and the colour of flowers, shaded with orange trees whose blossoms poured out perfume.

Perhaps it was not such a wonderful place really, for the house walls were only of sun-dried sand-brick, white-washed till they gleamed like snow in sunlight; and the wooden balustrades of the narrow balcony that jutted out from the upper story were but roughly carved in stars and crescents, and painted brown to represent cedarwood. Yet it was a picture. The stem of the octagonal tiled fountain was of time-worn, creamy marble; the white house was draped with cascades of wistaria, and pale pink bougainvillea; underneath the shadow of the overhanging balcony ran wall-seats covered and backed with charming old tiles of blue and white "ribbon" design; on them were spread white woollen, black-striped rugs delicately woven by Kabyle women; Tuareg cushions of stamped leather, and pillows of brilliant purple and gold brocade silk. Though no grass carpeted the earthy sand, there were beds of gorgeous flowers under the orange and magnolia trees that patterned the yellow sand with lacy shadow, and a girl like an Arabian Nights' princess stopped feeding a tame gazelle and a troop of doves, to come forward shyly at sight of Sanda. She was the soul of the picture for the moment. Sanda did not even see that there were other women in it. Nothing counted except the girl. Everything else was a mere background or a frame.

There was but a second of silence before words came to either, yet that instant impressed upon Sanda so sharply, so clearly, every detail of Ourïeda's fantastic beauty, that if she had never seen the girl again, she could by closing her eyes have called up the vision.

The oval face was so fair and purely chiselled that it seemed Greek rather than Arab. The golden-brown eyes were large and full of dazzling light as the sun streamed into them under the curve of their heavy black lashes. But though they were bright they were very sad, keeping their infinite melancholy while the red lips smiled—the sad, far-off gaze of a desert creature caged. So long were the lashes that they curled up almost to the low-drawn brows which drooped toward the temples; and that droop of the eyebrows, with the peculiar fineness of the aquiline nose and the downward curve of the very short upper lip, gave a fatal and tragic look to the ivory face framed in dark hair. On either side its delicate oval fell a thick brown braid, not black, but with a glint of red where the light struck; and though Ourïeda's hair was not so long as Sanda's, the two plaits lying over the shoulders and following the line of the young bust fell below the waist. The girl wore a loose robe of coral-red silk, low in the neck, and belted in with a soft, violet-coloured sash. Over this dress was a gandourah of golden gauze with rose and purple glints in its woof; and a stiff, gold scarf was wound loosely round the dark head. The colours blazed like flaming jewels in the African sunshine. As the Agha's daughter moved forward smiling her sad little smile, there came with her a waft of perfume like the fragrance of lilies; and the tinkling of bracelets on slender wrists, the clash of anklets on silk-clad ankles, was like a musical accompaniment, a faintly played *leit motif*. Perhaps Ourïeda had dressed herself in all she had that was most beautiful in honour of her guest.

As usual, Sanda forgot herself with the first thrill of excitement. In her admiration she did not realize that the other girl was self-conscious, a little frightened, a little anxious, and even distrustful. It would have seemed incredible to Sanda DeLisle that any one on earth, even an inmate of a harem, could possibly be afraid of her.

She held out both hands impulsively, exclaiming in French: "Oh, are you Ourïeda? But you are beautiful as a princess in a fairy story. You are worth coming all this long way to see!"

Then the Arab girl's smile changed, and for an instant was radiant, unclouded by any thought of sadness. She took Sanda's little gloved hands, and, pressing them affectionately, bent forward to kiss her guest on both cheeks. Her lips were soft and cool as flower petals, though the day was hot, and the scent of lilies swept over Sanda in a fragrant wave. As she kissed the stranger, Ourïeda made little birdlike sucking sounds, in the fashion of Arab women when they would show honour to a favoured friend. First she kissed Sanda's right cheek, the right side of the body being nobler because the White Angel walks always on the right, jotting down in his book every good deed done; then she kissed the left cheek, since it is at the left side of man or woman that the wicked Black Angel stalks, tempting to evil acts, and hastily recording them before they can be repented.

"Why, you are as young as I am, and white and gold as the little young moon, and very, very sweet, like honey!" cried the girl, in French as good as Sanda's, though with the throaty,

thrushlike notes that Spaniards and Arabs put into every language. "I am glad, oh, *really* glad, that you have come to be with me! Now I see you I know I was foolish to be afraid."

Sanda laughed as they stood holding each other's hands and looking into each other's eyes. "Afraid of me?" she echoed. "Oh, you couldn't have been afraid of *me*!"

"But I was," said Ourïeda. "I was afraid until this minute."

"Why?" asked Sanda. "Did you fancy I might be big and old and cross, perhaps with stick-out teeth and spectacles, like Englishwomen in French caricatures?"

Ourïeda shook her head, still gazing at her guest as if she would read the soul whose experiences had been so different from her own. "No, I have never seen any French caricatures," she answered. "I hardly know what they are. And I did not think you would be old, because the Agha, my father, told me you were but a baby when he first knew your father, the Colonel DeLisle. Still, I did not understand that you would look as young as I do, or that you would have a face like a white flower, and eyes with truth shining in them, as our wise women say it shines up like a star out of darkness from the bottom of a well."

"In my country they say the very same thing about truth and a well," returned Sanda, blushing faintly under the oddly compelling gaze of the sad young eyes. "But do tell me why you felt afraid, if you didn't think I should be old and disagreeable?"

Suddenly the other's face changed. A queer look of extraordinary eagerness, almost of slyness, transformed it, chasing away something of its soft beauty. "Hush!" she said, "we can't talk of such things now. Some time soon, perhaps! I forgot we were not alone. I must introduce you to my Aunt Mabrouka, my father's widowed half-sister, who"—and her voice hardened—"is like a second mother to me."

She stepped back, and an elderly woman, who had stood in the background awaiting her turn (though far from humbly, to judge by the flashing of her eyes), moved forward to welcome the Roumia—the foreigner.

Then for the first time Sanda realized that Ourïeda, the soul of the picture, was not the only human figure in it besides herself. Lella[1] Mabrouka was a personality, too, and if she had been a woman of some progressive country, marching with the times, most probably she would have been among the Suffragists. She would have made a handsome man, and indeed looked rather like a stout, short man of middle age, disguised as an inmate of his own harem. She was dressed in white, Arab mourning, considered unlucky for women who have not lost some relative by death, and her square, wrinkled face, the colour of bronze, was dark and harsh in contrast. If she had not been partly screened by a great flowering pomegranate bush as she sat in her white dress against the white house wall, Sanda would have seen her on entering the court; but it was hopeless to try and appease the lady's scarcely stifled vexation with apologies or explanations. Lella Mabrouka, being of an older generation, had not troubled to learn French, and could understand only a few words which her naturally quick mind had assorted in hearing the Agha talk with his daughter. Ourïeda acted as interpreter for the politeness of her aunt and guest, but Sanda could not help realizing that all was not well between the two. A tall old negress (introduced by the girl as a beloved nurse), a woman of haggard yet noble face, stood dutifully behind Lella Mabrouka, but stabbed the broad white back with keen, suspicious glances that softened into love as her great eyes turned to the "Little Rose."

[1] Lella, *lady*.

Honey could be no sweeter than the words of welcome translated by Ourïeda, and when Sanda's answers had been put into Arabic, Lella Mabrouka received them graciously. Soon aunt and niece and servant were all chattering and smiling, offering coffee and fruit, and assuring the Roumia that her host was eagerly awaiting permission to meet her. Yet Sanda could not rid herself of the impression that some hidden drama was being secretly played in this fountain court of sunshine and flowers.

CHAPTER XIV

TWO ON THE ROOF

"Come up on the roof with me, and I will tell you that thing I have been waiting to tell you," said Ourïeda. "Aunt Mabrouka will not follow us there, because she hates going up the narrow stairs with the high steps. Besides, she will perhaps think I really want to show you the sunset."

Sanda had been in the Agha's house for three days, and always since the first evening a fierce simoon had been hurling the hot sand against the shut windows like spray from a wild golden sea. It had not been possible to sit in the fountain court of the harem, the hidden garden of the women, protected though it was by four high walls. Sanda and Ourïeda had scarcely been alone together for more than a few minutes at a time, and even if they had been, Ourïeda would not have spoken. As she said, she had been waiting. Sanda had felt, during the three days, that she was being watched and studied, not only by Lella Mabrouka, but by the girl. Their eyes were always on her; and though Sanda DeLisle was very young, and had never tried consciously to

become a student of human character, it seemed to her, in these new and strange conditions of life which sharpened her powers of discernment, that she could dimly read what the brains behind the eyes were thinking.

Lella Mabrouka's eyes, though old (as age is counted with Arab women) were beady-bright and keen as a hawk's, yet she was clever enough to veil thought by wearing the expressionless mask of an idol in the presence of the girls. Sanda had to pierce that veil; and she felt as if from behind it a hostile thing peered out, spying for treachery in the new inmate of the house, hoping rather than fearing to find it, and ready to pounce if a chance came. The stealthy watcher seemed to be saying, "What are you here for, daughter of Christian dogs? You must have some scheme in your head to defeat our hopes and wishes; but if you have, I'll find out what it is, and break it—break you, too, if need be."

No sinister thing looked out from the eyes of Ourïeda, but something infinitely sad and wistful kept repeating: "Can I trust you? Oh, I think so, I believe so, more and more. But it is so desperately important to be certain. I must wait a little while yet."

Always, through the countless inquiries of Lella Mabrouka and the girl about France and England (Ireland meant nothing to them) and Sanda's bringing up, and the life of women in Europe, the visitor was conscious of the real questions in their souls. But on the third day the feverish anxiety had burnt itself out behind Ourïeda's topaz-brown eyes. They were eager still, but clear, and her wistful smile was no longer strained. Whatever the burden was that she hid, she had decided to beg Sanda's help in carrying or getting rid of it. And instinctively realizing this, Sanda ceased to feel that the Arab girl was of an entirely different world from hers, remote as a creature of another planet. The Agha's daughter was transformed in the eyes of her guest. From a mere picturesque figure in a vivid fairy tale, she became pathetically, poignantly human. Sanda began to hear the call of another soul yearning to have her soul as its friend, and all that was warm and impulsive in her responded. A thrill of expectation stirred in her veins when, on the evening of the third day, after the wind had died a sudden, swift death, Ourïeda whispered the real reason for going up to the roof.

Sanda had been looking forward to mounting those narrow stairs (with the steep steps which Lella Mabrouka hated), because Ourïeda had several times spoken of the view far away to the dunes, and the wonderful colours of sunrise and sunset, when the sky flowered like a hanging garden. Perhaps the Arab girl had been cleverly "working up" to this moment, so that the suggestion, made instantly after the death of the simoon, might seem natural to her aunt. In any case it was as Ourïeda had hoped. Lella Mabrouka did not follow the girls.

When they came out on the flat white expanse of roof, Sanda gave a cry of surprised admiration. She had known it would be beautiful up there, to see so far over the desert, but the real picture was more wonderful than her imagination could have painted. The sun had just dropped behind the waving line of dunes and dragged the fierce wind with him like a tiger in leash. All the world was magically still after the constant purring and roaring of the new-conquered beast. The voice of the Muezzin chanting the sunset call to prayer—the prayer of *Moghreb*—seemed only to emphasize the vast silence. Up from the shimmering gold of the western sky, behind the gold of the dunes, slowly moved along separate spears of flame-bright rose, like the fingers of a gigantic Hand of Fatma spread across the sapphire heaven to bless her father's people. From this flaming sign in the west poured a pink radiance as of falling rubies. The wonderful light rained over the marble whiteness of the distant mosque—the great mosque of Djazerta—and fired the whole mass of the piled oasis-town behind its dark line of palms. The light showered roses over the girls' heads and dresses, stained the snow of the roof, with its low, bubbling domes, and streaming eastward turned flat plain and far billowing dune into a sea of flame.

Sanda's spirit worshipped the incredible beauty of the scene, and then flew northward to the two men whom she loved. She thought of her father, and wondered where Richard Stanton was at that moment. Then Max Doran's face came between her and the man she had named "Sir Knight." She remembered her dream of herself and Max in the desert, and was vexed because she had not dreamed the same dream about Stanton instead.

"How wonderful it is here!" she half whispered, and Ourïeda answered impatiently:

"Yes, it is wonderful; but don't let us talk of it, or even think of it any more, because I have so much to say to you, and Aunt Mabrouka will send to call us if my father comes. Besides, we can see this on any night when the wind does not blow."

She had in her hand a large silk handkerchief tied in the form of a bag; and sitting down on the low, queerly battlemented wall which protected the flat roof, she untied and opened the bundle on her lap. It was full of yellow grain, and she gave Sanda a handful. "That's for the doves," she said. "They will know somehow that we are here, and presently they will come. If Aunt Mabrouka sends her own woman, Taous, up to listen and spy on us she will find us feeding the doves."

"But why should Lella Mabrouka do such a thing?" Sanda ventured to ask, taking the grain, and seating herself beside Ourïeda.

"You will understand that, and a great many other things, when I have told you what I am going to tell," answered the "Little Rose." "From books my father has let me read, and from things you have said, I have seen that Roumia girls are not like us, even in their thoughts. Perhaps you are thinking now that I am very sly; and so I am, but not because I love slyness. It is only because I have to be subtle in self-defence against those who are older and wiser than I am. Everything in

our lives makes us women stealthy as cats. It is not our fault. At least, it is not mine. Some women—some girls—may enjoy the excitement, but not I. Perhaps I am different from others, because I have the blood of Europe in my veins. My father's mother was Sicilian. My own mother was Spanish. And he, my father, is an enlightened man, with broader views and more knowledge of the world than most Caids of the south. They all pride themselves on knowing a little French in these days, he tells me, and some have even made visits to Paris once in their lives. But you know already what he is."

"Yes, he is a magnificent man," Sanda agreed, "even greater than I expected from what my father said of him."

She had met the Agha only once, for a ceremonious half-hour on the evening of her arrival at his house, when he had begged permission as of a visiting princess to see and welcome her; yet this punctiliousness was not neglect, but Arab courtesy; and Ben Râana had talked to her of the world in general and Paris in particular, in French, which, though somewhat stilted and guttural, was curiously Parisian in wording and expression. He was one of the handsomest men she had ever seen, scarcely darker in colour than many Frenchmen of the Midi, and marvellously dignified, with his long black beard, his great, sad eyes whose overhanging line of brow almost met above the eagle nose, and the magnificent gray, silver embroidered burnous worn in the guest's honour. He had appeared to Sanda years younger than the widowed Mabrouka; and though she was a dark, withered likeness of him, it was not surprising to learn that Lella Mabrouka was only a half-sister of the Agha, born of an Arab mother.

"You know he has had but one wife, my own mother," Ourïeda said proudly. "That is considered almost a sin in our religion, yet he could never bring himself to look with love on any woman, after her, nor to give her a rival, even for the sake of having a son. I adore him for that—how could I help it, since he says I am her image?—and for letting me learn things Arab girls of the south are seldom taught, in order that I may have something of her cleverness that held his love, as her beauty won it. Yet, if he had married a second wife when my mother died, and she had given him a son, my life would be happier now."

"How can that be?" asked Sanda. "I couldn't love my father in the way I do if he had put somebody else in my mother's place, and spoiled all the beautiful romance."

"My father's romance with my mother was like a strange poem, for she was the daughter of Catholic Spanish people, who had an orange plantation near Blida, and wished her to enter a convent. But my father rode by with some French officers and saw her on her way to church. That one look decided their whole lives. Yes, it would have been a pity to spoil their romance; yet, keeping its poetry is spoiling mine."

"You mean your Aunt Mabrouka. But a stepmother might be worse."

"No, it isn't only Aunt Mabrouka I am thinking of. It is her son, who is my father's heir because he has no son of his own. My father is very enlightened in many ways, but in others he is as narrow and hard as the rest of our people, who hold to their old customs more firmly than they hold to life. My father intends me for the wife of Si Tahar, who met and brought you to our house."

Sanda could not keep back a little gasp of dismay. "Oh, no! it's not possible!" she cried. "You're so beautiful, and so fair. He's so—so——"

"Hideous. Don't be afraid to say the word to me. I love you for it. But because Tahar's not deformed from birth, and the strength and beauty of the line isn't threatened, his looks make no difference to my father. To him it seems far more important that I should be the wife of the heir, so that money and land need not be divided after his death, than that I should love my husband before my marriage. You see, that can hardly ever happen to a girl of our race and religion. If Tahar were not my cousin I should never even have seen him, nor he me. And if I had not seen him, it would perhaps be a little better, for there would be the excitement and mystery of the unknown. We are brought up to expect that; and if already I hadn't learned to dislike Tahar for his own sake and his mother's, I should be no worse off than other girls—except for one thing: *the great thing of my life*."

Her voice fell lower than before, and her companion on the wall had to bend close to catch the whisper. "What is that thing?" Sanda dropped the words into a frightened pause, while Ourïeda's glance went quickly to the well of the staircase.

"It is what I came here to tell you about," the Arab girl answered. "I forced myself to wait, but now I am sure of you as if you were my own sister. We are going to open our hearts to each other. Do you know what it is to have a man in your life—a man who is not father or brother, and yet is of great importance to you; so great that you think of him by day and dream of him by night?"

"Yes, there are two such men in my life," Sanda replied; and was surprised at herself that she should have said two. More truly there was only one man, not counting her father, who had a place in her thoughts.

"Two men!" Ourïeda echoed, looking shocked. "But how can there be two?"

Sanda felt herself blushing and ashamed before the woman of another race. She tried to explain, though it was difficult, because she had given the answer without stopping to think: indeed, it had almost spoken itself. "I fancy I said that because you asked me about dreams," she

apologized. "The man who has been my hero all my life—and always will be, I suppose, though he doesn't care for me and thinks of me as a child—I can't dream of, for some strange reason. He's seldom out of my thoughts by day for very long, I believe; but the other—I hardly know why I mentioned him!—is only a friend, and quite a new friend. He's nothing to me at all, really, though I'm interested in him because of the strange way we met and were thrown together. But the odd thing is, I dream of him—often."

"The women of my people say it is the man you dream of who has touched your soul," Ourïeda said thoughtfully.

"That's a very poetical idea, but I'm sure it isn't true!" Sanda exclaimed. "Now tell me about yourself, because if Lella Mabrouka should send——"

"Yes, I am, oh, so anxious to tell you! But what you said about the man of your thoughts and the man of your dreams was very queer, and made me forget for an instant. I am glad you love some one, for that will help you to understand me, and by and by you will tell me more. Already I can see that you must be almost as unhappy as I am, because you say the one you care for doesn't care for you. That must be terrible, but you are free, and perhaps some day you can make him care. As for me, if I am not saved soon, I shall be married to Tahar and lost forever."

"But surely your father, who loves you so dearly, won't actually force you to marry against your will?"

"He will expect me to obey, and I shall have to obey or—kill myself. Rather that, only—oh, Sanda, I am a coward! At the last minute my courage might fail. The one thing my father would promise was that I should be left as I am till my seventeenth birthday. That very day is fixed for the beginning of the marriage feast. We shall have a whole week of rejoicing. Think of the horror of it for me! I had a year of hope when he made the promise. Now I have less than six months. And in all that time nothing has happened."

Sanda saw by the girl's look and guessed by the quiver of her voice that she was not speaking vaguely. There was something in particular which she had been praying for, counting upon from day to day. And that thing had not happened.

CHAPTER XV

THE SECRET LINK

The Hand of Fatma was gone from the sky. Ruby had turned to amethyst, amethyst to the gray-blue of star sapphire, and the red fire of the dunes had burned out to an ashen pallor. The change had come suddenly while the girls talked; and when Sanda realized it, she shivered a little, with a touch of superstition she had learned from her two Irish aunts. All this cold whiteness after the jewelled blaze of colour was like the death of youth and hope. She pushed the thought away hastily, telling herself it had come only because Ourïeda had threatened to put an end to her own life rather than marry Tahar; yet it would not go far away. Like a vaguely visible, ghostly shape it seemed to stand behind the Arab girl as she talked on, telling the story of her childhood and a love that had grown with her growth.

There was another cousin, it appeared, the son of her mother's sister. He was all Spanish. There was not a drop of Arab blood in his veins, unless it came through Saracen ancestors in the days when Moorish kings reigned over Andalusia.

"You know, now you've been with us even these few days," Ourïeda said, "that the harem of an Arab Caïd isn't a nest of wives, as people in Europe who have never seen one suppose! My father has laughed when he told me Christians believed that. Now, Aunt Mabrouka and I and our servants are the only women in my father's harem; but when I was a little girl, before my mother died—I can just remember her—besides my mother herself there was her sister, whose Spanish husband had been drowned at sea. An Arab man thinks it a disgrace if any women related even distantly to him or his wife are thrown on the world to make their own living. It could never happen with an Arab woman if she were respectable. And even though my mother's sister was Spanish and a Christian, my father offered her and her boy a home. Already his own sister, Aunt Mabrouka, had come to stay with us, and had brought her son Tahar. Neither of the boys lived in the harem of course, for they were old enough to be in the men's part of the house, and have men for their servants; but they came every day to see their mothers. Even then, though I was a tiny child, I hated Tahar—and loved Manöel Valdez. Tahar had had smallpox, and looked just as he looks now, only worse, because he has a bad chin that his beard hides; and Manöel was handsome. Oh, you can't imagine how handsome Manöel was! He was like the ideal all girls, even Arab girls, must dream of, I think. I can see him now—as plainly as I see you in this sad, pale light that comes up from the desert at night."

"Is it long since you parted?" Sanda asked quickly, to put away that persistent thought of trouble.

"We parted more than once, because when our two mothers died, one after another, of the same sickness—typhoid fever—Manöel was sent away to school. He's nine years older than I am—twenty-five now; a little more than three years younger than Tahar. My father sent him to the university in Algiers, because, you see, he was Christian—or, rather, he was nothing at all then;

he had not settled to any belief. Tahar was like Aunt Mabrouka, very religious, and did not care much to study, except the Koran and a little French. He went once to Paris, but he didn't stay long. He said he was homesick. Oh, he is clever in his way! He has known how to make himself necessary to my father."

"And Manöel Valdez?" asked Sanda.

"My father loved him when he was a boy, because he was of the same blood as my mother. Although Aunt Mabrouka was jealous even then—for she ruled in the house after my mother's death—she couldn't prejudice my father's mind against Manöel, hard as she tried. Manöel was free to come here when he liked, for his holidays, or to the *douar* if we were there; and he loved life under the great tent. He had a wonderful voice, and he could sing our Arab songs as no one else ever could. Father wished him to be a lawyer, and gave money for his education, because we Arabs often need lawyers who understand us. But Manöel cared more for music than anything else—except for me. When I was eight and he was seventeen I told him I meant to marry him when I grew up, and he said he would wait for me. I suppose he was only joking then; but the thought of him and the love of him in my heart made me begin to grow into a woman sooner than if I had had only the thoughts of a child. It was like the sun opening a flower bud. When he was away I felt hardly alive. When he came back from Spain to our house or to our tent in the *douar* I lived—lived every minute! It was three years ago, when I was thirteen, that he began to love me as a woman. I shall never forget the day he told me! I was not *hadjaba* yet. Do you know what that means? I was considered to be a child still, and I could go out with my aunt to the baths, or with one of our servants, unveiled. I was not shut up in the house as I am now. But in my heart I was a woman, because of Manöel. And when he came home after nearly a year in Seville and other parts of Spain he felt and saw the difference in me. We were in the *douar*, and life was free and beautiful. For three months Manöel and I kept our secret. He said he would do anything to have me for his wife. He would even become Mohammedan, since religion meant little to him, and love everything. He had no money of his own, but he had been told that he could make a fortune with his voice, singing in opera, and he had been taking lessons without telling my father. A Frenchman—is "impresario" the right word?—was having his voice trained, and by and by Manöel would pay him back out of his earnings. We used to call ourselves "engaged," as girls and men in Europe are engaged to each other in secret. But one day, soon after my thirteenth birthday, Aunt Mabrouka, who must have begun to suspect and spy on us, overheard us talking. She told my father. At first he wouldn't believe her, but he surprised me into confessing. I should never have been so stupid, only, from what he said, I thought he already knew everything. After all, it was so little! Just words of love, and some dear kisses! He suspected there was more; and if I hadn't made him understand, he might have killed Manöel, and me, too. But even as it was, my father and Aunt Mabrouka hurried me from the *douar* in the night, before Manöel knew that anything had happened. I was brought here; and never since have I been outside this garden without a veil. It was months before I went out at all. And Manöel was sent away, cursed by my father for ingratitude and treachery, warned never to come again near Djazerta or the *douar* as long as he lived, unless he wished for my death as well as his."

"Have you never seen him since?" Sanda asked, her heart beating fast with the rush of the story as Ourïeda had told it.

"Yes, he has seen me, and I have seen him. But we have not spoken, except in letters. For a whole year I heard nothing. Yet I never lost faith. I seemed to feel Manöel thinking of me, calling me, far away across the desert. I knew that we should meet in life or death. At last, one Friday two years ago—Friday, you know, is the women's day for visiting the graves of loved ones—I saw Manöel. He was dressed like a beggar. His face was stained dark brown, and nearly hidden by the hood of a ragged burnous. But I recognized the eyes. They looked into mine. I realized that he must have been waiting for me to pass with Aunt Mabrouka. He knew of course that whenever possible we went on Friday to the cemetery. I almost fainted with joy; but Allah gave me presence of mind, and strength to hide my feelings. You have noticed how sharp Aunt Mabrouka is. It's the great ambition of her life to see the daughter of the Agha married to her son. Never for one moment has she trusted me since she spied out the truth about Manöel. That Friday, though, I thwarted her. Oh, it was good to know that Manöel was near! I hardly dared to hope for more than just seeing him; but he remembered that my old nurse had a grandson in my father's *goum*, a fine rider, who first taught him—Manöel—to sit on a horse. Through my nurse and Ali ben Sliman I got letters from Manöel. He told me he had begun to sing in opera, and that if I would wait for him two—or at most three—years, he would have enough money saved to give me a life in Europe worthy of a prince's daughter, such as I am. He would organize some plan to steal me from home, if there were no chance of winning my father's consent, and he was sure it could be done with great bribes for many people, and relays of *Maharis* and horses to get us through the dune-country. I sent word that I would wait for him three years, all the years of my life! But that was before I knew my father meant me to marry Tahar.

"Not long after Manöel came to stay in Djazerta, disguised as a wandering beggar of Touggourt, my father told me what was in his mind. I feel sure Aunt Mabrouka suspected from my happier looks that I was hearing from Manöel, for she persuaded my father that I was ill. She shut me up and gave me medicine; and I was so afraid Manöel might be discovered and murdered, that I sent him word to go away at once, not even to write me again. He obeyed for my sake, not knowing what might happen to me if he refused, but by word of mouth came the message that he would always be working for our happiness. Well I guessed what he meant! Yet when my father told me about Tahar, all my faith in Manöel could not keep me brave. My father is splendid, but he will

stop at nothing with those who go against him. At first he said I must be married when I was sixteen, but I reminded him that seventeen was my mother's age when he took her; and I begged him, "for luck," to let me wait. I dared not warn Manöel, lest they should have laid a trap, expecting me to write him about my marriage. I waited for months, and then it was too late, for Ali ben Sliman was away. I dared trust no one else; and so it is not yet a year ago that I sent a letter to an old address Manöel had left with Ali. I told him all that had happened, and I said, if I were to be saved it must be before my seventeenth birthday, the end of September. After that I should be dead—or else Tahar's wife. Since then, not hearing, I have sent two more letters to the same address, for I have no other. But no answer has come. Now Ali has died of fever, and I can never write to Manöel again unless—unless——"

"Unless what?" breathed Sanda.

"Unless you can manage to help me. *Would* you, if you could?"

"Yes," answered the other girl, without hesitating. "I'm a guest in the Agha's house, and I've eaten his salt, so it's hateful to work against him. But, some day, surely he'll be thankful to a friend who saves you from Si Tahar. I'll do anything I can. Yet I'm only a girl like yourself. What is there I *can* do? Have you thought?"

"*If* I have thought!" echoed Ourïeda. "I have thought of nothing else, for weeks and weeks, long before you came. I begged my father to find me a companion of my own age, not an Arab girl, but a European, to teach me things and make me clever like my mother. He believed I was pining with ennui; and because he had put real happiness out of my life, he was willing to console me as well as he could in some easy way. In spite of Aunt Mabrouka, who may have guessed what was in my mind, he trusts you completely, because you are your father's daughter."

"Ah, that's the dreadful part! To betray such a trust!" exclaimed Sanda.

"But after all, I am going to ask so little of you, not a hard thing at all," Ourïeda pleaded, frightened at the effect of her own words. "It is a thing only a trusted guest, a woman of the Roumia, could possibly do, yet it's very simple. And when the time comes to do it, you need only shut your eyes."

"Tell me what you mean," said Sanda anxiously.

"Every letter you write—not to your father, because he might ask questions, but to a friend—leave the envelope open, and turn your back, or go out of the room. Then don't look into the letter again, or notice if it seems thicker than before, but fasten it up tightly and seal the envelope with wax. Will you do that?"

"Yes," said Sanda, rather miserably. "To save you I will do that."

"You have friends in France who would post a letter if they found it enclosed in one of yours, without explanations?"

"I have friends who would do that, perhaps, but to make it more sure I will explain. It would not save my conscience to let you slip a letter into an open envelope, and pretend to myself that I knew nothing about it; because I *would* know, and I think I'd almost rather be hypocritical with other people than with myself."

"I told you," exclaimed Ourïeda, "that Roumia girls were different from us even in their secret thoughts! But you will love me, won't you, although you think I am stealthy and sly? I need your love and help!"

"I love you, or I shouldn't have promised what I have just promised now," Sanda assured her.

"But if there were still more—something harder and more dangerous—would you love me enough to do that thing too?"

"Do you mean something in particular that you have in your mind, or——"

"Yes, oh, yes! I mean something in particular."

"Will you tell me what it is?"

"I am half afraid."

"Don't be afraid. Tell me!"

"Hush!" whispered Ourïeda. "Don't you hear some one on the stairs—coming up softly? I must tell you another time. Laugh! Laugh out aloud! Call to the doves!"

The two girls began to chatter together like children. And their young voices tinkling out in laughter sounded pitifully small in the immensity of the night-bleached desert.

Far away in the north where colonist farmers had long ago conquered the desert there was music that evening at Sidi-bel-Abbés, headquarters of the Foreign Legion. The soul of the Legion was speaking in its tragic-sweet voice, and the Place Carnot was full of soldiers sauntering singly or in pairs, mostly silent, as if to hear their own heart-secrets cried aloud by telltale 'cellos and

flutes and violins.

The townsfolk were there, too; and when the band played some selection especially to their liking they buzzed approval. It was only the Legionnaires who talked little, and in tones almost humbly suppressed. Once, years ago, they had violently asserted their right to promenade the Place Carnot, and enjoy the music of their own famous band, when local authority would insolently have banished them; but now the boon was won, they were subdued in manner, as if they had never smashed chairs and wrecked bandstand in fierce protest against *bourgeois* tyranny. Immaculate in every detail of their uniform as though each man had his own servant, these soldiers who spent half their so-called leisure in scrubbing clothes, polishing steel and brass, and varnishing leather, had nevertheless a piteously dejected bearing whenever they passed pretty, well-dressed young women. They knew that, whatever they might once have been, as Foreign Legion men on pay of five centimes a day they were in the eyes of Bel-Abbés girls hopeless ineligibles, poverty-stricken social outcasts, the black sheep of the world. It was to vie with each other and to make the Legion far outshine Chasseurs and Spahis that they sacrificed two thirds of their spare time in the cause of smartness, not because even the handsomest and youngest cherished any hope of catching a woman's approving eye.

Just at the moment, however, there was an exception to the depressing rule. The prettiest girls, French, Spanish, and Algerian-born, all condescended to glance at the *bleu* who had "knocked out" the former champion of the Legion, and, taking his place in the match with the Marseillais, had kept the championship for the First *Regiment Etrangére*. Since the day more than a week ago when the barrack-yard of the Legion had been the scene of the great fight—officers looking on in the front ranks of the invited crowd, and soldiers hanging out of dormitory windows—every one in Sidi-bel-Abbés had learned to know the hero by sight; and a blackened eye, a bruised cheek-bone, and a swelled lip (the unbecoming badges of his triumph) made recognition easy. But the Legion was proud of St. George. Not a man, least of all Four Eyes, grudged him his success, such "luck" as had never fallen to any mere recruit within the memory of the oldest Legionnaires, unless in the battlefield, where all are equal.

Max realized fully what this "luck" had done for him, and was aware that eyes turned his way; but, far from being proud, he was half-ashamed of his conspicuousness, fearing that Colonel DeLisle might disapprove. Also, he knew that the small, brief blaze of his notoriety would die out like the flame of a candle. A week or two more and the "little tin god" would go down off his wheels. If he meant to be somebody in the Legion he would have to work as he had never worked in all his life.

With him in the Place Carnot was the Spaniard who had begged for his civilian clothes. They were in the same company and of the same age. From the first glance (given and taken when one man was a recruit and the other did not yet dream of becoming one) something had drawn the two together. Then had come the incident of the clothing; and Max had felt himself an unwilling partner in the other's secret. Later, without exchanging confidences (since "ask no questions, I'll tell you no lies," is a good general rule in the Legion), they drifted into a tacit kind of comradeship, Max admiring the Spaniard, the Spaniard trusting Max.

To-night they walked together in silence, or speaking seldom, like the other Legionnaires, and listening to the music. Suddenly the Spaniard stopped, muttering some word under his breath, and Max saw through the dusk that the olive face had gone ashy pale. "What's the matter, Garcia? Are you ill?" he asked.

The other did not answer. He stood stock still, staring almost stupidly straight before him.

Max linked an arm in his. "What's wrong? Garcia! What's wrong with you?" he repeated.

The Spaniard started. "I beg your pardon," he stammered, dazed. "I didn't realize you were—speaking—to me."

Instantly Max guessed that "Juan Garcia," the name appearing with the "*numero matricule*" over the bed of *le bleu*, was as new as his place in the Legion, and as fictitious as the alleged profession of *garcon d'hôtel* which accounted cleverly for the recruit's stained evening clothes.

"I only asked you what was wrong, what made you stop so suddenly?" Max explained.

"It was that thing the band is playing now," said the Spaniard. "Strange they should have it here already! It is out of the new African opera by Saltenet, "La Naïlia," produced for the first time ten days ago—a trial performance at Marseilles, and on now at the Opera Comique in Paris. Good heavens! Another world, and yet these extraordinary men are playing that song here already—*my* song!"

"Your song?" involuntarily Max echoed the words.

"My song. If a certain letter hadn't come to me on the night of the last rehearsal but one, and if we hadn't been in Marseilles, rehearsing, I shouldn't be here to-night. I should be in Paris, perhaps coming on to the stage at this moment, where I suppose my understudy is grimacing like the conceited monkey he is."

"By jove!" was all that Max could find to say. But he put several emotions into the two words: astonishment, warm sympathy, and some sort of friendly understanding.

"You wonder why I tell you this?" Garcia challenged him.

Max answered quietly: "No, I don't wonder. Perhaps you feel it does you good to speak. It's strange music!—stirs one up, somehow—makes one think of things. And I suppose you trust me? You can. But don't go any farther unless you're sure you want to."

"I do want to!" burst out the Spaniard. "I've wanted to from the first—since you helped me about the clothes. Only you're a reserved fellow yourself. I didn't care to have you think me a gusher. You guessed why I begged for the clothes?"

"I didn't let myself dwell on it too much."

"You must have guessed. Of course I mean to desert the first chance I get."

"It's a beastly risk. Did you see that awful photograph the colonel told the non-coms to pass around for us to look at, as a warning against desertion?"

"The poor wretch they found in the desert, across the Moroccan border, the man who ran away from Bel Abbés before we came? Yes, I saw the picture. Ghastly! And to think it's the women who mutilate men like that! But I shan't try to escape by way of Morocco. The danger I'll run is only from being caught and sent to the penal battalion—the awful 'Batt d'Aff.' It's a bad enough danger, for I might as well be dead as in prison—better, for I'd be out of misery. But I must run the risk. I enlisted in the Legion for its protection in getting to Africa, because I was in danger of arrest. And you know the Legion, once it's got a man, won't give him up to the police unless he's a murderer. I'm not that, though I came near it. Even while I signed for five years' service, I knew I should have to desert the minute I could hope to get away. I shall wait now till the big march begins, and get as far south as the rest of you go, in my direction—the direction I want. Then I shall cut away."

"God help you!" said Max.

"Maybe He will, though I'm a man of no religion. Is love the next best thing? Everything I've done so far, and what I have to do, is for love. Does that make you think me a fool?"

"No."

"I have to save a girl from being given to a man who isn't fit to kiss her little embroidered shoes—bless them! To save her from him—or from suicide. The letter told me she would rather die than marry him. That's why I'm not in Paris to-night. There'd been other letters before; she said in the one which reached me at the theatre—reached me in the midst of rehearsal—thank God—if there is a God—I still have till the end of September. The crisis won't come till then, on her seventeenth birthday. But what is five months and a half to a man handicapped as I am? Caught in a trap, and with hardly any money, just when I had a fortune almost in my grasp!"

"I can lend you a little," said Max. "I've a few hundred dollars left." He laughed. "It seems a lot here! These poor chaps look on me as a millionaire, a sort of prince, because I've got something behind the daily five centimes—some dollars to buy decent tobacco for my friends and myself, and pay fellows to do my washing and so on—fellows wild with joy to do it! Jove! It makes me feel a brute to think what a few sous mean to them, gentlemen, some of 'em, who've lived a more luxurious life than I have—and——"

"Maybe that's why they're here: because they lived too luxuriously—on other people's money. Tell me, St. George, did you ever hear the name of Manöel Valdez?"

Max thought for an instant. "Valdez? Let me see ... how ... I know, a singer! He sang last winter in New York, in something or other, a small part, and I wasn't there, but I saw great notices. I remember now. Why, you're——"

"Yes. You're right. Don't be afraid to speak. I asked for it."

"Then you *are*——"

"Manöel Valdez. Saltenet, the man who wrote 'La Naïlia,' wrote the man's part for me, because he thought I could sing it, and because I understand Arab music as maybe no other European does. I was brought up in the desert. The girl I love is a daughter of the desert. God! How that music they're playing makes me hear her call me, far away from behind her ocean of dunes! There's a secret link binding our souls together. Nothing can keep them apart. Saltenet was my benefactor. He has done everything for me. He would have made my fortune—after I'd made his; but that's human nature! And twelve nights ago I nearly killed him because he wouldn't let me go when that girl called—my desert princess! He vowed he'd have me arrested—anything to stop me. And he tried to hold me by force. I knocked him down in his own private room at the theatre where we were rehearsing, and then I had to make sure he wasn't dead, for his blood was on my hands, my sleeves, my shirt front. It was only concussion of the brain, but I hoped it would keep him still, until I'd got well away. That afternoon an officer I knew had happened to mention before me that a lot of men were being shipped off to Oran for the Foreign Legion. I remembered. It was as if some voice reminded me. Africa was my goal, but I'd next to no money. I thought, why shouldn't France pay? Well, here I am! Now you know why I must desert. Wouldn't you do the same in my place? Have you got it in you, I wonder, to sacrifice everything in life for a woman?"

Max thought for a moment before risking a reply. Then he answered slowly: "I—almost believe I have. But who knows?"

"Some day you will know," said Manöel Valdez, looking away toward the desert.

CHAPTER XVI

THE BEETLE

When Max had served four months in the Foreign Legion he felt older by four years. He looked older, too. There were faintly sketched lines round his mouth and eyes, and that indefinable expression which lies deep down in eyes which have seen life and death at grip: a Legion look.

In some ways he had been a boy when he took his sudden resolve in the Salle d'Honneur to prove what the Legion could do for a nature he himself doubted. Now he was no longer a boy. He realized that, though he had never found time to study the success of his experiment, and had no idea that it was being studied day after day by his colonel. Had he guessed, some dark hours might have been brightened by gleams of hope, for in spite of his luck in the Legion there were times when Max felt himself abandoned, a creature of as small consequence to any heart on earth as a half-drowned fly. A more conceited man would have been happier, but Max had not joined the Legion with the object of finding happiness, and one who was watching believed that it would be good for him to wait.

Max and Manöel Valdez (alias Garcia) had looked forward to the great march, already vaguely talked of when they joined. But it had not been a march for marching's sake: its real purpose was more grave. A band of Arab thieves and murderers on the border of the M'zab country had to be caught and punished. No recruits were taken: disappointment for Max and despair for Valdez. He had hoped everything from that chance, and, in his rage at losing it, made a dash for liberty from Sidi-bel-Abbés. He got no farther than the outskirts, the forbidden *Village Négre*, where he risked a night visit in search of the man bribed to hide a certain precious bundle. Fortunately he was arrested before securing it, for had he been trapped with civilian clothes not even his marvellous voice (the talk of the garrison since it had been heard in the soldier's theatre) could have saved him from the fate of caught deserters: the penal battalion for months, if not a year; death, perhaps, from fever or hardship. As it was, he escaped with the penalty for a night visit to the Arab quarter: eight days *cellule*. But the clothes were safe. He would try again. Nothing on earth, he said, should keep him from trying again; because he might as well be a "Zephir" in the dreaded "Batt d'Aff," if he could not answer the cry for help he seemed always to hear from across the desert.

Since his first failure and imprisonment nearly four months had passed, and he had tried again and failed in the same way. The second time his sentence was twice as long; but before it was over the *medecin major* sent him into hospital. He came out emaciated, sullen, dangerous, caring for nothing, not even to sing. Max yearned over him, but could do nothing except say, "It isn't too late yet. Maybe, if we brace up, we'll be taken on the big march that they talk of for the first of September. Even then there'll be time."

He said "we," because it was more comforting to Valdez that their names should be bracketed together as friends; but as Legionnaires they were already far apart. Max had never been censured, had never seen the inside of the prison building (that low-roofed, sinister building that runs along the walls of the barrack-yard). He was in the school of corporals. Soon he would wear on his blue sleeve the coveted red woollen stripe. Garcia, on the contrary, was constantly falling into trouble. He had even drunk too much, once or twice, in the hope of drowning trouble, as Legionnaires do. The September march to the south was ostensibly for road-laying; but there was again a rumour of other important work to be done. The great secret society of the Senussi threatened trouble through a new leader who had arisen, a young man of the far south called the "Deliverer." And when there was prospect of fighting in the desert or elsewhere for the Legion, recruits—even those who had served for six months—were seldom taken if a long list of black marks stood against their names. Max feared that there was little hope for Valdez, though he meant to do what he could to help. And he found it strange that he, a born soldier as he knew himself to be, should think of tacitly aiding another to desert, no matter on what pretext. At home in the same position it could not have been so; but in the Foreign Legion recruits talked freely, even before old Legionnaires to whom the Legion was mother and father and country. There was no fear of betrayal. The whole point of view seemed different. If a man felt that he had borne all he could, and was desperate enough to risk death by starvation or worse, why let him go with his comrades' blessing—and his blood on his own head! If he had money he might get through. If not, he was lost; but that, too, was his own business.

March was bitterly cold in wind-swept Sidi-bel-Abbés. April was mild; May warm; June hot; July and August a furnace, but Legionnaires drank no less of the heavy, red Algerian wine than before the summer heat engulfed them. Max had heard men say jokingly or solemnly of each other, "He has the *cafard*." Vaguely he knew that *cafard* was French for beetle, or cockroach; that soldiers who habitually mixed absinthe and other strong drinks with their cheap but beloved *litre* were often affected with a strange madness which betrayed itself in weird ways, and that this special madness was familiarly named *le cafard*. When the hot wave arrived he saw for himself what the terrible insect could do in a man's brain.

In the canteen it was bad enough on pay nights—so called "the Legion's holidays"—but there

reigned Madame la Cantiniere, young, good looking, a respected queen, who would go on march with the Legion in her cart, and who must at all times to a certain extent be obeyed. But in dim side-streets of the town, far from the lights of the smart, out-of-doors cafés, were *casse croutes* kept by Spaniards who cared nothing for the fate of Legionnaires when they had spent their last sou. The *cafard* grew and prospered there. He tickled men's gray matter and kneaded it in his microscopic claws. There his victims fought each other, for no reason which they could explain afterward, or mutilated themselves, tearing off an ear, or tattooing a face with some design to rival Four Eyes; or they sold parts of their uniforms to buy a little more drink, or tried to blow out their brains, or the brains of some one else. Afterward, if they survived, they went to prison; but if it could be proved that they were indeed suffering from *cafard*, they got off with light sentences.

Officers of the Legion old enough to have won a few medals seemed to respect the *cafard* and make allowances for his deadly work. If the men did not survive, they—what was left of them—went to the cemetery to rest under small black crosses marked with name and number, their only mourners the great cypresses which sighed with every breath of wind from the mountains.

One August night of blazing heat and moonlight Max could not sleep. There had been a scene in the dormitory which had got every man out of bed, but an hour after the tired soldiers were dead to the world again—all save Max, who felt as if a white fire like the moonlight was raging in his brain.

He lay still, as though he were gagged and bound, lest a sigh, or a rustle in turning over—as he longed to turn—might waken a neighbour. The hours set apart for the Legion's repose were sacred, so profoundly sacred that any man who made the least noise at night or during the afternoon siesta was given good cause to regret his awkwardness. The most inveterate snorers were cured, or half killed; and to-night, in this great room with its double row of beds, the trained silence of the sleepers seemed unnatural, almost terrible, especially after the horror that had broken it. Max had never before felt the oppression of this deathlike stillness. Usually he slept as the rest slept; but now, weary as he was, he resigned himself to lie staring through the slow hours, till the orderly's call, "*Au jus!*" should rouse the men to swallow their coffee before reveille.

The dormitory, white with moonlight streaming through curtainless open windows, seemed to Max like a mausoleum. He could see the still, flat forms, uncovered and prone on their narrow beds, like carven figures of soldiers on tombs. He alone was alive among a company of statues. The men could not be human to sleep so soon and so soundly after the thing that had happened!

In his hot brain the scene repeated itself constantly in bright, moving pictures. He had been rather miserable before going to bed, and had longed for forgetfulness. Sleep had brought its balm, but suddenly he had started awake to see a man bending over him, a dark shape with lifted arms that fumbled along the shelf above the bed. On that shelf was the famous *paquetage* of the Legionnaire; all his belongings, underclothes, and uniforms, built into the wonderful, artistic structure which Four Eyes had shown his pet how to make. A thief was searching among the neat layers of the *paquetage* for money: every one knew that St. George had money, for he was continually lending or giving it away. This one meant to save him the trouble by taking it. Max felt suddenly sick. He had thought all his comrades true to him. It was a blow to find that some one wished to steal the little he had left, though he had grudged no gift.

Just as Max waked the thief satisfied himself that the well-known wallet was not hidden in the *paquetage*, and stooped lower to peer at the sleeper's face before feeling under the pillow. His eyes and Max's wide-open eyes met. In a flash Max recognized the man. He was of another company, and had risked much to steal into the dormitory of the Tenth. The fellow must be desperate! A wave of mingled pity and loathing rushed over Max. Fearing consequences for the wretch, should any one wake, he would mercifully have motioned him off in silence; but the warning gesture was misunderstood. The thief started back, expecting a blow, stumbled against the nearest bed, roused Four Eyes, and in a second the whole room was in an uproar.

The full moon lit the intruder's face as if with a white ray from a police lantern. Pelle and a dozen others recognized the man from the Eleventh, who could have but one midnight errand in the sleeping-room of the Tenth: the errand of a thief. Like wolves they leaped on him, snapping and growling, swearing the strange oaths of the Legion. Bayonets flashed in the moonlight; blood spouted red, for a soldier of the Legion may "decorate" himself with a comrade's belt, or bit of equipment, if another has annexed his: that is legitimate, even *chic*; but money or food he must not steal if he would live. It is the Legion's law.

All was over inside two minutes. The guard, hearing shouts, rushed in and stoically bore away a limp, bloodstained bundle to the hospital. Nobody blamed the men. Nobody pitied the bundle—except Max, whose first experience it was of the Legion's swift justice. But nothing, not even exciting prospects of a march, can be allowed to spoil the Legion's rest; and so it was that in half an hour the raging avengers had become once more stone figures carved on narrow tombs in a moonlit mausoleum.

For the first and only time since he had joined Max thoroughly hated the Legion and wished wildly that he had never come near Sidi-bel-Abbés. Yet did he wish that? If he had not come he would not have met Colonel DeLisle, his beau ideal of a man and a soldier. He would be a boy again, it seemed, with his eyes shut in the face of life. And he would miss his sweetest memory of Sanda: that hour in the Salle d'Honneur of the Legion, when she had christened him St. George

and called him "her soldier." But after all, of what use to him could be his acquaintance with the Legion's colonel? There was a gulf between them now. And would it not be as well or better to forget that little episode of friendship with the colonel's daughter? She had probably forgotten it by this time. And a Legionnaire has no business with women, even as friends. Besides, Max was in a mood to doubt all friendship. He had had a letter that day—his first letter from any one in four months—telling him that Grant Reeves had married Josephine Doran.

Of course, Grant had a right to marry Josephine; but not to write until the wedding day was safely over—as if he had been afraid Max would try to stop it—and then to confess how he had come with his mother to meet Josephine at Algiers! That was secret and unfriendly, even treacherous. Max remembered very well how Grant had proposed accompanying Mrs. Reeves, and he—Max—had rather impetuously vetoed the arrangement, saying it was unnecessary, and guessing instinctively the budding idea in Grant's mind. It was clear now that Grant had never abandoned it, that he had from the first planned a campaign to win the heiress before any other man had a chance with her, and that he had carried out the scheme with never a hitch. The letter, written on the eve of the wedding, had been three weeks on the way. Grant (the only person except Edwin Reeves to whom Max had revealed himself as Maxime St. George, Number 1033, in the Tenth Company, First Regiment of the Foreign Legion) wrote that he was telling nobody where his friend was, or what he had done. "The day will surely come, dear boy," Grant said—and Max could almost hear his voice speaking—"when you will wish to blot out these pages from your book of life. I want to make it easy for you to do so; and I advise you to keep your present resolve: confide in none of your pals. They might not be as discreet as the governor and I."

"He's glad I'm out of the way," thought Max. "He wants me to be forgotten by every one, and he wants to forget me himself. If I were on the spot, poor, and hustling to get on somehow or other in business, it might worry him a little to be seen spending money that used to be mine."

Perhaps it was morbid to attribute these motives to Grant Reeves, who had once been his friend, but he did attribute them; and conscious that he was actually encouraging morbid thoughts, Max wondered if he, too, were getting the *cafard*, the madness of the Legion? Lying there, the only waking one among the sleepers, fear of unseen, mysterious things, the fear that sometimes attacks a brave man in the night, leaped at him out of the shadows. He could almost feel the sharp little claws of the dreaded beetle scratching in his brain. Yes, he'd been a fool to join the Legion, and to hand over Jack Doran's house and fortune to Grant Reeves! It was impossible that Grant had married Josephine for love. He had simply taken her with the money, and he meant to have the spending of it.

In the letter, Grant said that they planned to alter the old Doran house and "bring it up to date." It was he, Grant, who had all the ideas, apparently. Josephine was letting him do as he pleased. What should she know about such matters? If she could have all the dresses and jewels and fur she wanted, Grant would be allowed to go his own way with other things. He was clever enough to understand that, and to manage Josephine.

With the letter Grant had posted a bundle of Sunday newspapers and illustrated magazines, such a bundle of old news as one sends to an invalid in hospital. Max had glanced through some of the papers before going to bed, looking with a sad, far-off sort of interest at portraits of people whose names he knew. There had been a page of "America's most beautiful actresses" in one Sunday supplement, and among them, of course, was Billie Brookton. No such page would be complete without her! It was a new photograph that Max had never seen. The smiling face, head drooped slightly in order to give Billie's celebrated upward look from under level brows, had the place of honour in the middle of the page. And a paragraph beneath announced that Billie would leave the stage on her marriage with "Millionaire Jeff Houston, of Chicago."

No doubt Houston was the man she had mentioned in her last letter. Round her neck, in the picture, Max thought he recognized his pearls, and on the pretty hand, raised to play with a rope of bigger pearls—"Millionaire Houston's" perhaps—was the ring Max had given her the night when the telegram came. The photograph, which was large and clearly reproduced, showed the curiously shaped stone on the middle finger of Billie's left hand. A large round pearl adorned the finger on which Max had once hoped she might wear the blue diamond, a pearl so conspicuous that the original of the picture appeared to display it purposely. "Millionaire Houston" would be flattered; and that was what Billie Brookton wanted. As for what Max Doran might think if he saw the portrait, why should she care? For her, he was numbered with the dead.

Max was no longer in love with Billie. The shock of Rose Doran's terrible accident, the story she had to tell, and her death, had chilled the fire of what he thought was love. The letter of farewell had put it out. But the scar of the burn sometimes hurts. To-night was one of those times; and Max believed that his disappointment in Billie had had its influence in driving him to the Legion. She stood now as a type of what was mercenary, calculating, and false in womankind, just as (almost unknown to himself) Sanda DeLisle stood for what was gentle, yet brave and true. He felt that Billie Brookton had made him hard, with a hardness that was not good; and that not only she, but all those he had cared for most in his old life, had deceived and tricked or at best forgotten him. Lying in his narrow bunk, Max lifted his head and let his eyes wander over the faces of his comrades, turned to gray stone by the moonlight. Not one which was not sad, except that of the Alsatian who had joined on the day of his own recruitment. The boy was smiling in some dream and looked like a child, but a sickly child, for the heat and the severe marching drill for *les bleus* were telling upon him. Faces of twenty different types, faces which by day masked their secrets with sullenness, defiance, or stolidity, could hide nothing in sleep, but fell into lines

of sadness that gave a strange family resemblance to the stone soldiers on the tombs. Saddest of all, after Manöel Valdez, perhaps, was the wrecked visage of Pelle, whose own particular *cafard* had been leading him a merry dance the last few days.

To Sidi-bel-Abbés, with a letter of introduction to the colonel, had come an old officer of the British army, a man of distinction. Pelle, as an Englishman and an ex-soldier, had been honoured by being appointed his guide. The two had recognized one another. Pelle had served under the officer years ago. The encounter had been too much for Quatro Oyos: that, and the money the general gave him at parting. Remembrance of past days was the enemy in the Legion. Four Eyes had been half drunk ever since, and had escaped prison only by a miracle. That, however, was nothing new for him. He had been corporal twice and sergeant once; each time he had been "broke" because of drink. In spite of all, he had stuck to the Legion. There was no other place for him on earth. The Legion was his country now—his only country and his only home. His medals he had asked Max to keep till he "settled down again." They mustn't go to the places where the *cafard* would take him. They mustn't risk disgrace through things which the *cafard* might make him do. He looked like the ruin of a man in the revealing moonshine. But to-morrow he would be a soldier again till night came, and sooner or later he would pull himself together—more or less. The medals he had won and his love of sport were his incentives. Yet there were other men who had no medals and no special incentives, and to-night Max felt himself down on a level with those.

"What incentive have I?" he asked, in a flash of furious rebellion against fate, conscious yet not caring that such thoughts spawned the beetle in the brain. Five years of this life to look forward to!—the life he had pledged himself to live. The officers did their best. It was *vieux style* nowadays for an officer of the Legion to be cruel. But try as they might to break the sameness of barrack life by changing the order of drill and exercise—fencing one day, boxing the next, then gymnastics, target-practice, marching, skirmishing, learning first aid to the wounded, giving all the variety possible, the monotony was heart-breaking, as Colonel DeLisle had warned him it would be. And a great march, when a march meant the chance of a fight, didn't always come in the way of a young soldier, even one whose conduct was unsmirched by any stain. Max did not know yet whether he would be taken on the march that all the garrison was talking of. To-night the beetle in his brain tried to make him think he would not be taken. There was no luck any more for him! And as for his corporal's stripe, if he got it soon, what a pathetic prize for a man who had been a lieutenant in the —th Cavalry, the crack cavalry regiment of the United States Army!

Oh, better not to think of future or past! Better not to think at all, perhaps, but do as some of the other men did when they wanted to forget even as they had been forgotten: take the few pleasures in their reach, do the very things he had been prig enough to warn Valdez not to do! Let the beetle burrow, as a counter-irritant!

"Soldier St. George—my soldier!" a girl's voice seemed to encourage him.

Max heard it through the scratching of the beetle in his brain.

Sanda! Yes, Sanda might care a little, a very little, when she had time to think of him—Sanda, who loved another man, but had promised to be his friend. He thought of her eyes as they had looked at him that day in the Salle d'Honneur. He thought of her hair, her long, soft hair....

"She'd be sorry if I let go," he said to himself. "Jove! I *won't*! I'll fight this down. And if I'm taken on the march——"

He fell suddenly asleep, thinking of Sanda's hair, her long, soft hair.

And the moonlight turned him also into a stone soldier on a tomb.

CHAPTER XVII

THE MISSION

It is the darkest hour that comes before the dawn. Next day Soldier St. George became Corporal St. George, and felt more pleasure in the bit of red wool on his sleeve than Lieutenant Max Doran would have thought possible.

It was Four Eyes who brought him the news, a week later, that his name was among those who would go on "the great march." Four Eyes was somehow invariably the first one to hear everything, good news or bad. Life was not so black after all. There need be no past for a Legionnaire, but there might be a future. None of the men knew for certain when the start was to be made, but it would be soon, and the barracks of the Legion seethed with excitement. Even those who were not going could talk of nothing else. They swore that there was no doubt of the business to be done. The newly risen leader of the Senussi had summoned large bands of the sect to the village, El Gadhari, of which he was sheikh, calling upon them ostensibly to celebrate a certain feast. Close to this village was one of the most important Senussi monasteries. Tribes were moving all through the south, apparently with no warlike intention; but the Deliverer was dangerous. Just such a leader as he—even to the gray eyes and the horseshoe on his forehead—had been prophesied for this time of the world. The Legion would march. And it would maneuver

in the desert, in the neighbourhood of El Gadhari. If the warning were enough—there would be no fighting; but the Legion hoped it might not be enough. To be the regiment ordered to give this warning was in itself an honour, for wherever work is hardest there the Legion goes. The Legion must sustain its reputation, such as it is! Desperate men, bad men, let them be called by civilians in times of peace, but give them fighting and they are the glorious soldiers who never turn back, who, even when they fall in death, fall forward as they rush upon the enemy. All the world knew that of them, and they knew it of themselves. They knew, also, that when the moment of starting came men of Sidi-bel-Abbés who drew away from them in the streets and the Place Carnot would take off their hats as the Legion went by. It would be "Vive la Legion!" then.

With each day of burning heat the excitement grew more feverish. Surely this morning, or this night, the order would come! The soldiers whistled as they polished their accoutrements, whistled half beneath their breath the "March of the Legion" which the band is forbidden to play in garrison. Quarrels were forgotten. Men who had not spoken to each other for weeks grinned in each other's faces and offered one another their cheap but treasured cigarettes.

Almost every one seemed to be happy except Garcia. He was among those who would not be taken on the march—he, who craved and needed to go, as did no other man in the Legion! Max feared Garcia meant to kill himself the night when he lost hope, and would not let him go out alone to walk in the darkness. "I don't want to ask if you have any plans," he said. "But there's one thing I do ask: share with me the money I've got left. You may need it. I shan't. And if you'll take it, that'll be proof that you think as much of me as I do of you."

Garcia took it, from the wallet which a man now lying in the hospital had tried to empty the other night. Then Max knew for certain what the queer light in Manöel's eyes meant. He could not help a rejoicing thrill in the other's desperate courage which no obstacle had crushed.

That same night, when the two had separated (St. George reassured, and believing that Garcia had use for his life after all), Max met Colonel DeLisle face to face, for the first time alone and unofficially since they had parted in the Salle d'Honneur. The colonel was walking unaccompanied, in the street not far from the little garden of the officers' club, where the band was to give a concert, and returning Max's quick salute he turned to call him back.

"Good evening, Corporal! I should like to speak with you a minute!" DeLisle cried out cheerfully in English. Max's heart gave a bound. Surely never could the word "Corporal" have sounded so like fine music in a poor, non-commissioned officer's ears!

He wheeled, pale with pleasure that his beau ideal should wish to speak with him, and in English, the language they had used when they were still social equals. "My Colonel!" he stammered.

"I want to congratulate you on your quick promotion," said DeLisle. "It has come to you in spite of your resolution to take no advantage in the beginning over your comrades. I congratulate you on that, too, and on keeping it, now it has turned out so well. I hoped and believed it would be so, though I advised you for your good."

"I know that, my Colonel," answered Max, determined not to presume in speech or act upon his superior officer's kindness. "I knew it then."

"It may seem a pitifully small step up," DeLisle went on, "but it's the first reward the Legion can give a soldier. There will be others. I shall have to congratulate you again before long, I'm sure. Meanwhile, I have a message for you." He paused for an instant, slightly hesitating, perhaps. "It is from my daughter. She is in the south, visiting the daughter of an Agha who is very loyal to France as a servant, very loyal to me as a friend. Because of the march last spring, and again this one, now coming (which I expected for this time, and on which I must go myself), I could not have a young girl like Sanda living in Sidi-bel-Abbés. She is happy and interested where she is, and she has not forgotten you. In more than one letter she has wished to be remembered to you, if possible. To-night, Corporal, it *is* possible, and I'm glad to give the message."

"I thank you for it, my Colonel," Max said, half ashamed of the deep feeling which his voice betrayed. "I—wish I might be able to thank Miss DeLisle. It is a great deal to me that she should remember me—my——"

"Your chivalry? It would be impossible to forget," DeLisle took him up crisply. Then he dismissed the subject, as Max felt. "Tell me," he went on in the same cheerful tone in which he had called out "Corporal!" "Are you happy to escape the caserne, and get away to the desert?"

Suddenly a wild idea sprang into Max's head. Desperately, not daring to let himself stop and think, he spoke. "I should be happy, my Colonel, but for one thing. Have I your permission to tell you what it is?"

"Yes," said DeLisle. "If I can help you in the matter, I will."

"My Colonel, it's in your power to do me a favour I would repay you for with my life if necessary, though"—and Max began to stammer again—"that would be at your service in any case. The best friend I have made in the regiment would give his soul to go on this march. I know he hasn't always behaved as a soldier ought, but he's as brave as he is hot tempered and reckless. If it could be reconsidered——"

"You mean Garcia?" broke in Colonel DeLisle sharply.

Max was astonished. Instantly he saw that the colonel must have been watching his career. He might have guessed as much from the reward of merit just given him—friendly congratulations and Sanda's message, a thousand times more valued for the delay; and he had begun to realize that he had never been abandoned, never forgotten. But the colonel's knowledge of his friendship with Garcia brought the thrilling truth home, almost with a shock.

"Yes, my Colonel—Garcia," he replied.

"Well, I can make no promise," said DeLisle, speaking now more in the tone of an officer with a subordinate, yet showing that he was not vexed. "But—I should like you to go away happy, Corporal. I'll look into the affair of your friend, and after that—we shall see. Good-night."

Again the salute was exchanged, and the colonel was gone, turning in at the garden gate of the *Cercle Militaire*. The meeting, and all that had passed, seemed like a waking dream. Max could hardly believe it had happened, that Sanda had sent him a message, that her father had given it, and that he, scarcely more than a *bleu*, had dared to speak for Manöel Valdez.

That day it proved not to be a dream, for Garcia learned officially that he was to go with his comrades. Max hardly knew whether or not it would be wise to explain how the miracle had come to pass, but there was a reason why he wished to tell. When the truth was out, and Valdez ready to worship his friend, Max said: "I did it before I stopped to think; if I *had* stopped, I don't know—for you see, in a way, this makes me a traitor to the colonel. I begged him for a favour and he granted it. *Yet you and I understand what your going means.* I've been asking him for your chance to—well, we won't put it in words! Only, for God's sake, try to think of some other way to do what you've got to do!"

"Even you admit that I *have* got to do it!" Valdez argued. "To save a woman—it's to save her life, you know."

"I know," said Max. "But there may be some other way than this one in your mind."

"If there is, I'll take it. And now I can give you back your money."

"No! You'll need every *sou* if——"

"You're the best friend a man ever had!" cried the Spaniard.

At midnight the alarm they were all waiting for sounded, and though it was expected at any hour, it came as a surprise.

"*Aux armes!*" rang out the call of the bugle from the barrack-yard and waked the stone soldiers to instant life. The flat, carved figures sat up on their narrow tombs in the moonlight, then sprang to their feet. There was no need or thought of discipline with that glorious alarm sounding in their ears! The men yelled with joy and roared from dormitory to dormitory in the wonderful Legion language made up of chosen bits from every other language of the world.

"Faites les sacs. En tenue de campagne d'Afrique!" bawled excited corporals. Everything had to be done in about ten minutes; and though all soldiers knew the programme thoroughly, and young soldiers had gone through it in drill a hundred times, the real thing was somehow different. Men stumbled over each other and forgot what to do first. Corporals swore and threatened; but to an onlooker the work of packing would have seemed to go by magic. At the end of the ten minutes the barrack-yard was full of men lined up, ready for marching, and soldiers of all nations thanked their gods for finding that the cartridges served out to them from the magazine were not blank ones. They had all protested their certainty that this march was for business; and when they had heard that their colonel was going with them they had been doubly sure; yet in their hearts they had anxiously admitted that it was guesswork. Now these blessed cartridges packed full of the right stuff put an end to furtive doubts.

As the companies formed up, the "Legion's March" was played, and the young soldiers who had never heard it, unless whistled *sotto voce* by old Legionnaires, felt the thrill of its tempestuous strains in the marrow of their bones.

Nowadays the great marches of the Foreign Legion are not what they once were, unless for government maneuvers. When there is need of haste the Legion goes by the railway the Legion has helped to lay; and only at the end of the line begins the real business for which the Legion lives. For the Legion is meant for the hardest marching (with the heaviest kits in the world) as well as the fiercest fighting; and when the Legion marches through the desert, it is "*marcher ou mourir*."

The cry of the bugles reached the ears of the heaviest sleepers in town; for those who knew the Legion and the Legion's music knew that the soldiers were off for a great march, or that wild air would not be played. Windows flew up and heads looked down as the soldiers tramping the bright moonlit street went to the railway station. So the "lucky ones" of the Legion passed out of Sidi-bel-Abbés, some of them never to return. And perhaps that was lucky, too, for it's as well for a Legionnaire to rest in the desert as under one of the little black crosses behind the wall of cypresses in the Legion's burial ground.

They had to go by the new railway line to Touggourt, as Sanda DeLisle had gone, but instead of

travelling by passenger train, the soldiers went as Max had seen the batch of recruits from Oran arrive at Bel-Abbés: in wagons which could be used for freight or France's human merchandise: "*32 hommes*, *6 cheveaux*." After Touggourt their way would diverge from Sanda's. There was no chance for Colonel DeLisle to go and see his daughter, but in a letter he had told her the date of his arrival in the oasis town and the hope he had—a hope almost a certainty—of hearing from his girl there, or having a message of love to take with him on the long march, warmed his heart. It was very strange, almost horrible, to remember how he had felt toward his daughter until the day she came to him, in the image of his dead love, at Sidi-bel-Abbés. He had not wanted to see her. He had even felt that he could not bear to see her. Unjust and brutal as it was, he had never been able to banish the thought that, if it had not been for her, his wife might have been with him through the years. Sanda had cost him the happiness of his life.

He had easily persuaded himself that in any case, even if he had wanted her with him, for her sake it was far better not. Such an existence as his was not for a young woman to share, even after she had passed the schoolgirl age. It had seemed to DeLisle that the only place for Sanda was with her aunts, and passing half her time in France, half in Ireland, gave the girl a chance to see something of the world. She was not poor, for she had her mother's money; and because he wished to contribute something toward his daughter's keep, rather than because she needed it, he always paid for her education and her board. What she had of her own, from her mother, must be saved for her *dot* when she married; and half unconsciously he had hoped that she would marry early.

After he saw her—the lovely young thing who had run away to him, as her mother had—all that had been changed in an instant. His heart was at her little feet, as it had been at the feet of the first Sanda, whose copy she was.

His time for the next few months was so mapped out that he could not have the girl with him for more than the first few days of joy, for she could not be left in Sidi-bel-Abbés while he was away on duty. He had done the best he could for his daughter by giving her a romantic taste of desert life in the house of a tried friend whom he believed he might trust; but he thought tenderly and constantly of *la petite*, and of future days when they might be together—if he came back alive from those "maneuvers" near El Gadhari. Approaching Touggourt, the first scene of his life's great love tragedy, he could hardly wait for the letter he hoped for from Sanda. He expected another event, also the pleasure of meeting Richard Stanton, whom he had not seen for years, and who would be, he knew, at Touggourt, getting together a caravan for that "mad expedition" (as every one called it) in search of the Lost Oasis. But if Stanton had cared as much for his old friend as in past days, he had protested, he would have given a day or two to go out of his way and visit the Colonel of the Foreign Legion at its headquarters. He had not done that, and though DeLisle told himself that he was not hurt, his enthusiasm at the thought of the meeting was slightly dampened. He looked forward more keenly to Sanda's letter than to an encounter with his erratic friend. It was good to have something heart-warming to hope for in a place so poignantly associated with the past.

There was plenty for the Legionnaires to do in Touggourt. Having come by rail, their first camp was made in the flat space of desert between the big oasis town and the dunes. They were to stay only a few hours, for the first stage of their march would begin long before sun-up, and most of their leisure was to be spent in sleep. Yet somehow there was time for a look at the sights of the place. One of these was a large Arab café on the outskirts of the town where the trampled sand of the streets became a vast, flowing wave of gold. Four Eyes had been in Touggourt more than once, having marched all the way from Bel-Abbés, long before the railway was begun or thought of. He urged Max to come into the low white building where at dusk the räita and the tomtom had begun to scream and throb.

"Prettiest dancing girls of the Sahara," he said, "and a fellow there I used to know in Bel-Abbés—in the Chasseurs—has just told me there's a great show for to-night."

There were several cafés in Sidi-bel-Abbés, where the proprietors engaged Arab girls to dance, but Max, who had paid one visit, in curiosity, thought the women disgusting and the dancing dull. He said that he had no faith in the Touggourt attractions, and would rather take a stroll.

"You don't know what you're talking about!" Four Eyes scouted his objections. "Haven't you heard the scandal about this Stanton, the exploring man, who's here—our colonel's old pal?"

"No, I've heard that Stanton's at Touggourt. But I've heard no scandal," answered Max. "What has he got to do with the dancing girls?"

As he spoke, it was as if he saw Stanton sitting with Sanda DeLisle at one of the little tea-tables on the terrace of the Hotel St. George at Algiers; the square, resolute, red-tanned face, and the big, square blue eyes, burning with aggressive vitality.

"Everything to do with one of them," said Four Eyes. "That's the scandal. Seems Stanton's been playing the fool. They say he's half mad, anyhow, about a lot of things—always was, but it is a bit worse since a touch o' the sun he had a year or two ago. He's off his head about an Ouled Nail—don't know whether she came here because of him, or whether he picked her up at Touggourt, but the story is, he could o' got away before now, with his bloomin' caravan, on that d——d fool expedition of his you read of in the papers, only he couldn't bring himself to leave this Ahmara, or whatever her crack-jaw name is. The chap that was talkin' to me says she's the handsomest creature you'd see in a lifetime, an' she's going to dance to-night to spite Stanton."

"To spite him?" Max repeated, not understanding.

"Yes, you d——d young greenhorn! Anybody'd know *you* was new to Africa! These girls, when they get to be celebrated for their looks or any other reason, won't dance in public as a general thing. They leave that to the common ones, who need to do something to attract. Anyhow, Stanton wouldn't have let this Ahmara dance in a café before a crowd of nomads from the desert. She lives with the dancing lot, because there's some law or other about that for these girls, but that's all, till to-night. There's been a row, my old pal told me, because Stanton gives my lady the tip not to come near or pretend to know him while his friend the colonel is here. She's in such a beast of a rage she's announced to the owner of the café that she'll dance to-night; and I bet every man in Touggourt except Stanton and DeLisle'll be there. You'll come, won't you?"

"Yes, I'll come," said Max. He was ashamed of himself for so readily believing the scandal about Stanton, yet he did believe it. Stanton had struck him as the type of man who would stop at nothing he wanted to do. And Max was ashamed, also, because he felt an involuntary rush of pleasure in thinking evil of Stanton. He knew what that meant. He had been jealous of Stanton at Algiers, and he supposed he was mean enough to be jealous of him still. If Sanda knew the truth, would she be disgusted and cease to care for her hero, her "Sir Knight?" Max wondered. But perhaps she would only be sad, and forgive him in her heart. Girls were often very strange about such things. Max, however, could not forgive Stanton for ignoring the exquisite blossom of love that might be his, and grasping instead some wild scarlet flower of the desert not fit to be touched by a hand that had pressed Sanda's little fingers. He did not know whether or not to be equally ashamed of the curiosity which made him say to Pelle that he would see the dancer; but he yielded to it.

Already the great bare café was filling up. In the dim yellow light of lamps that hung from the ceiling, or branched out from the smoky, white-washed walls, the throng of dark men in white burnouses, crowding the long benches or sitting on the floor, was like a company of ghosts. Their shadows waved fantastically along the walls as they strode noiselessly in, wild as spirits dancing to the voice of their master Satan, the seductive räita. At one end of the room sat the musicians, all giant negroes, the scars and tattoo marks on their sweating black faces giving them a villainous look in the wavering light. They were playing the bendir, the tomtom, the Arab flute, as well as the räita; but the räita laughed the other music down.

This café was celebrated for the youth and beauty of its dancers, and one after another delicate little sad-faced girls, almost children, danced and waved gracefully their thin arms tinkling with silver bracelets, but the ever-increasing crowd of Arabs and French officers and soldiers (tourists there were none at that time of year) scarcely troubled to look at the dainty figures. They were waiting, eager-eyed. If Max had not known beforehand that something was expected, he would have guessed it. At last she came, the great desert dancer said to be the most beautiful Ouled Nail of her generation.

Max did not see how or whence she arrived, but he heard the rustling and indrawing of breaths that heralded her coming. And then she was there, in the square left open for the dancing. All the light in the room seemed to focus upon her, so did she scintillate from head to foot with spangles. Even he felt a throb of excitement as the tall, erect figure stood in the space between the benches, eying the audience from under a long veil of green tissue almost covered with sparkling bits of gold and silver. On her head she wore a high golden crown, and under the green veil fell a long square shawl of some material which seemed woven entirely of gold. Her dress was scarlet as poppy petals, and she appeared to be draped in many layers of thin stuff that flashed out metallic gleams. For a long moment she stood motionless. Then, when she had made her effect, suddenly she threw up her veil. Winding it around her arm, she snatched it off her head, and paused again, unsmiling, statue-still, except for her immense dark eyes, encircled with kohl, which darted glances of pride and defiance round the silent room. Perhaps she was looking for some one whom she half expected might be there. Max felt the long-lashed eyes fix themselves on him. Then, receiving no response, they passed on and shot a fiery challenge into the eyes of a young caid in a gold-embroidered black cloak, who bent forward from his carpeted bench in a dream of admiration.

She was perfect in her way, a living statue of pale bronze, with the eyes of a young tigress and the mouth of a passionate child. The gold crown, secured with a scarf of glittering gauze, the rows of golden coins that hung from her looped black braids over her bosom and down to the huge golden buckle at her loosely belted waist, gave her the look of an idol come to life and escaped from some shrine of an eastern temple. As she moved, to begin the promised dance, she exhaled from her body and hair and floating draperies strange, intoxicating perfumes which seemed to change with her motions—perfumes of sandalwood and ambergris and attar-of-rose.

For the first time Max understood the meaning of the Ouled Nail dance. This child-woman of the desert, with her wicked eyes and sweet mouth, made it a pantomime of love in its first timid beginnings, its fears and hesitations, its final self-abandon and rapture. Ahmara was a dangerous rival for a daughter of Europe with such a man as Richard Stanton.

When she had danced once, she refused to indulge the audience again, but staring scorn at the company, accepted a cup of coffee from the handsome young caid in the black mantle. She sat beside him with a fierce air of bravado, and ignored every one else, as though the dimly lit room in which her spangles flamed was empty save for their two selves. So she would have sat by Max if he had given back glance for glance; but he pushed his way out quickly when Ahmara's dance was over, and drew in long, deep breaths of desert air, sweet with wild thyme, before he dared

let himself even think of Sanda. Sanda, who loved Stanton—with this recompense!

As he walked back to camp, to take what rest he could before the early start, he met a sergeant of his company, a tall Russian, supposed to be a Nihilist, who had saved himself from Siberia by finding sanctuary in the Legion.

"I have sent two men to look for you," he said. "The colonel wants you. Go to his tent at once."

Max went, and at the tent door met Richard Stanton coming out. Max recognized his figure rather than his features, for the light was at his back. It shone into the Legionnaire's face as he stepped aside to let the explorer pass, but Stanton's eyes rested on the corporal of the Legion without interest or recognition. The colonel had just bidden him good-bye, and he strode away with long, nervous strides. "Will he go to the café and see Ahmara with the caid?" The thought flashed through Max's mind, but he had no time to finish it. Colonel DeLisle was calling him into the tent.

The only light was a lantern with a candle in it; yet saluting, Max saw at once that the colonel's face was troubled.

"Have I done anything I oughtn't to have done?" he questioned himself anxiously, but the first words reassured as much as they surprised him.

"Corporal St. George, I sent for you because you are the only one among my men of whom I can ask the favour I'm going to ask."

"A favour—from me to you, my Colonel?" Max echoed, astonished.

"Yes. You asked me for one the other night, and I granted it because it was easy, but this is different. This is very hard. If you do the thing, you will lose the march and the fight which we may come in for at the end. Is there anything that could make up to you for such a sacrifice?"

"But, my Colonel," answered Max, "you have only to give me your orders, and whatever they may be I shall be happy to carry them out." He spoke firmly, yet he could not hide the fact that this was a blow. He had looked forward to the march, hard as it might be, and to the excitement at the end as a thirsty man looks forward to a draught of water.

"But I am not going to give you any orders," said DeLisle. "It would not be fair or right. This is a private matter. I have just received a letter from my daughter with rather bad news. I told you she was staying in the house of one of the great chiefs of the south, a friend of years' standing, who has a daughter of her age. I needn't give you details, but Sanda has unfortunately offended this man in perhaps the one way an Arab, no matter how enlightened, cannot forgive. From what she tells me I can't wholly blame him for his anger, but—it's impossible for her to stop longer in his house. Not that she's in danger—no! that's incredible, Ben Râana being the man he is. An Arab's ideas of hospitality would prevent his offering to send a guest away, no matter how much he might want to be rid of her. Yet I can't endure the thought of asking him for a caravan and guard after what seems to have happened. You realize that it is impossible for me to go myself. My duty is with my regiment. Once before, you watched over my daughter on a journey—watched over her as a brother might watch over a sister. That is why I ask, as a favour from one man to another, whether you would be willing to go to the Agha's house and escort my daughter here to Touggourt. I know how much I am exacting of a born soldier like yourself."

"My Colonel, you are conferring on me the Cross of the Legion of Honour!" Max cried out impulsively.

"Then you accept?"

"I implore you to accept *me* for the service."

"But do you thoroughly understand what it means? We go on without you. It will be hopeless for you to follow us. I give you eight days' leave, which will be ample time for the engaging of a small caravan—three or four good men and the wife of one to act as servant to my daughter—going to Ben Râana's place at Djazerta, arriving again at Touggourt, and returning to Bel-Abbés. I shall have to send you back there, you see. There's nothing else to do."

"I understand, my Colonel. But though I'm sorry to lose the experience, I'd rather be able to do this for you and for Mademoiselle DeLisle than anything else."

"Thank you. That's settled then, except details. We'll arrange them at once, for you must get off to-morrow as soon as possible after our start. Another man must be appointed in your place, Corporal. At Sidi-bel-Abbés you shall have special work while we are gone. There hasn't been much time for thinking since I got the news, but I have thought that out. At first, I may as well tell you, my idea was to ask Stanton to put off his expedition and go to Ben Râana's. But—something I heard to-night turned me against that plan. I should like to have another man with you out of the regiment in case of trouble. Not that there can be trouble! But I shouldn't feel justified in asking for a second volunteer. All the men are so keen! It's bad enough to send one away on a private matter of my own, and——"

In his flush of excitement the soldier interrupted his colonel.

"Sir, I know of one! My friend would be glad to go with me!"

"You speak of Garcia again?"

"Yes, my Colonel."

"Are you sure of him?"

"I am sure."

"Very well. Talk to him then. Come back to me afterward, and I'll give you all instructions."

The name of the Agha and the name of the place where he lived were ringing through Max's head. Ben Râana—Djazerta!

The father of the girl Manöel Valdez loved and must save was the Agha of Djazerta. Now Valdez need not desert!

CHAPTER XVIII

GONE

There was keen curiosity and even jealousy concerning the errand which suddenly separated Corporal St. George and his chum Juan Garcia from the march of the Legion. None of their late comrades knew why they had gone or where, unless it were Four Eyes, who swaggered about looking secretively wise.

"I told St. George," said he to such young men of the Tenth as were admitted to the honour of speech with the ex-champion, "I told St. George to fire first at an Arab's face if he got any fighting. That's the way! The Arab ain't prepared, and he's scared blue for fear of his head bein' busted off his body. If that happens only his head goes to Paradise and can't have any fun. Nobody but old Legionnaires who've seen a lot of service have got that tip."

Because of Four Eyes' hints the story went round that St. George and Garcia had been sent off on special reconnaissance duty. And the Legion marched as only the Legion can, with its heavy kit, its wonderful tricks to cure footsore feet, its fierce individual desire to bear more fatigue than is human to endure, its wild gayety, its moods of sullen brooding. For a while it expected to see St. George and Garcia appear as suddenly and mysteriously as they had disappeared. But they did not come back. And days and nights passed by; so at last, as the Legion drew nearer to El Gadhari, the absent pair were talked of no more. There was much to think of and to suffer, and it was not strange if they were half-forgotten except by two men: one who knew the secret and one who pretended to know: Colonel DeLisle and Four Eyes.

When Corporal St. George arrived at the oasis town of Djazerta he had with him in his small caravan no other man in the uniform of the Legion. He had only camel-drivers in white or brown burnouses, nomads who live in tents, and whose womenfolk go unveiled without losing the respect of men. They had come from the black tents outside Touggourt, all but one, who joined the party after it had started, following on a fast camel. He was a dark-faced man like the rest, and wore such garments as the others wore, only less shabby than theirs, and none but the leader knew him or why he had come. The Arab fashion of covering the body heavily, and especially of protecting the mouth in days of heat as well as cold, was observed religiously by this tall, grave person. The one woman of the band, Khadra, wife of the chief camel-driver, wondered if the stranger had any disfigurement; but her husband smiled a superior smile, remarking that women have room in their minds only for curiosity about what can never concern them. As for the newcomer, he was as other men, though not as pleasant a companion as some. According to his own account, he had been born in Djazerta, though he had lived in many places and learned French and Spanish in order to make money as an interpreter.

When the caravan reached Djazerta they found the oasis town indulging in festivities because of the marriage of the Agha's daughter. The customary week of feasting and rejoicing was at its height, but, to the disappointment of every one, the bride and all the Agha's family had in the midst of the celebrations suddenly gone out to the *douar*, the desert encampment of the tribe over which Ben Râana ruled as chief. This was unprecedented for the wedding of great personages that the end of the entertainment should take place in the *douar*; but it was said that the bride was ill with over-excitement, and rather than put off the marriage, her father had decided to try the effect of desert air.

This was the news which was told to Max at the Agha's gates after his forced march from Touggourt. It was translated for him into French by his interpreter, the dark-faced man who covered his mouth even more closely than did the dwellers in the black tents near Touggourt; for Max, though he had studied Arabic of nights in the Legion's library, and taken lessons from Garcia, could not yet understand the desert dialects when spoken quickly. An interpreter was a real necessity for him on a desert journey with Arabs to command, and as the two talked together outside the open gate in the high white wall, discussing the situation, neither the Agha's men nor any man of the caravan could understand a word. The language they used was a mystery. French, English, Spanish—all were jargons to these people of the southern desert.

"At the *douar*!" Max repeated. "Where is it?"

"Not twenty miles away," answered Manöel, keeping all feeling out of his voice, as an interpreter should. "But it's between here and Touggourt. Not exactly on the way, still we could have reached it by taking a détour of a few kilometres off the caravan track and saved hours, precious hours."

"Never mind," said Max, worried though he was because of the delay that meant something to him, if not as much as to Manöel. "Never mind. We shall be in time yet. They say the festivities are only half over. That means she isn't married. Buck up! I know this is a shock; but it isn't a surprise that the wedding feast should be on. You've been expecting that. You've even been afraid it might be all over."

"But something has happened, or they wouldn't have taken her away," Manöel said.

"Perhaps she tried to escape," Max suggested. "Would it be harder for her to do that at the *douar* than here?"

"In a way, yes. Here she might be hidden for a while in some house of the village: it's a rabbit warren, as you can see. Whereas, round the *douar* lies the desert open to all eyes. Still, it's easier to get out of a tent than a house."

"Well, let's be off and see for ourselves, instead of guessing," proposed his friend with an air of cheerfulness. Manöel knew the errand which had brought Corporal St. George (and incidentally himself) to Djazerta at this eleventh hour, but Max and he had never spoken together of Colonel DeLisle's daughter Sanda except casually, as Ourïeda's guest. Manöel, his thoughts centred upon his own affairs, had no idea that Mademoiselle DeLisle was personally of importance in St. George's life. If he had seen that Max was anxious, he would have taken the anxiety for sympathy with him, or else the nervousness of a keen soldier who had only eight days' leave and small provision for delays.

Having finished their discussion, they politely refused an invitation, in the absent Agha's name, to spend the night in his guest house, and started out to retrace some kilometres of the track they had just travelled. This, thought the Agha's head gatekeeper, was a foolish decision, no matter how pressing might be the soldier's business with Ben Râana, for already it was past sunset, and there was no moon. These men were strangers, and could not know their way to the *douar* except as it was described to them. But what could one expect? Their leader was a Roumi, a Christian dog, and all such were fools in the eyes of God's children who knew that the lesson of life was patience.

CHAPTER XIX

WHAT HAPPENED AT DAWN

Sanda DeLisle's short life had not been brilliantly happy. She had known the ache of feeling herself unwanted by the only two human beings of paramount importance in her world: her almost unknown father, and her adored "Sir Knight" and hero Richard Stanton. But never for more than a few hours of concentrated pain, like those at Algiers, had she suffered for herself as she suffered for Ourïeda.

The "Little Rose," defenceless against the men who had power over her fate (as all Arab women are defenceless, unless they choose death instead of life), appealed to the latent motherhood that slept in the heart of Sanda, as in the heart of every normal girl: appealed to the romance in her: appealed to the sympathy born of her own love for Stanton, which seemed as hopeless as Ourïeda's love for Manöel Valdez. Would Manöel come in answer to one of those secretly sent letters? Would anything happen to save Ourïeda from Tahar? The girl brought up to be a Roman Catholic prayed to the Blessed Virgin. The girl brought up to be a Mohammedan prayed to Allah. And the prayers of both, ascending from different altars, like smoke of incense in a Christian church and in a mosque, rose toward the same heaven. Yet no help came; and the summer days slipped by, until at last it was September, the month fixed for the wedding.

With the subtlety and soft cowardice of Mussulman women, young or old, Ourïeda said no word to her father of her loathing for Tahar. When Sanda begged her to tell him at least so much of the truth and trust to his love, the girl replied always dully and hopelessly in the same way: it would be useless. He was very fond of her, for her dead mother's sake and her own. But the fire of youth had died down in his heart. He had forgotten how he felt when love was the greatest thing on earth. Besides, his own wife had been the exception to all womanhood, in his eyes. The child she had left had been his dear plaything, his consolation. Now he counted upon her to fulfil the ambitions of his life, thwarted so far, because she had been a daughter. To have his nephew, his heir by law, become the father of his grandsons, was his best hope now, and nothing except Ourïeda's death or Tahar's death would make him give it up.

"My dear nurse Embarka would kill Tahar for me if she could get at him," the "Little Rose" said one day, calmly. "That would end my trouble, but she cannot reach him, and there is no one she can trust among those who cook or serve food in the men's part of our house."

Sanda was struck with horror, but Ourïeda could not at first even understand why she was shocked. "If a viper were ready to strike you or one you loved, would you think harm of killing it?" she asked. "Tahar is venomous as a viper. I should give thanks to Allah if he were dead, no matter how he died. But since Allah does not will his death, I must pray for courage to die myself rather than be false to Manöel, who has perhaps himself gone to Paradise, since he does not answer when I call; and if a woman can have a soul, I may belong to him there."

Sanda had forgiven her, realizing if not understanding fully the difference between a heart of the East and a heart of the West, and loving the Arab girl with unabated love. Up to the hour when Ben Râana came into the garden of the harem and bade his daughter praise Allah because her wedding day was at hand, Sanda hoped, and begged Ourïeda to hope, that "something might happen." But even to her that seemed the end, for the girl listened with meekness and offered no objection except that the hot weather had stolen her strength: she was not well.

"Let the excitement of being a bride bring back thy health, like wine in thy veins, Little Rose," said the Agha, speaking in French out of compliment to the guest, and to show her that there was no family secret under discussion which she might not share.

"It is not exciting to marry my cousin Tahar," Ourïeda sighed rather than protested. "He is an ugly man, dreadful for a girl to look upon as her husband."

"Thou makest me feel that thine aunt is right when she tells me I was wrong ever to let thee look upon him or any man except thy father," the Agha answered quickly, with a sudden light behind the darkness of his eyes like the flash of a sword in the night. Sanda, knowing what she knew, guessed at a hidden meaning in the words. He was remembering Manöel, and wishing his daughter to see that he had never for a moment forgotten the thing that had passed. The Agha, despite his eagle face, had been invariably so gentle when with the women of his household, and had seemed so cultured, so instructed in all the tenets of the twentieth century, that Sanda had sometimes wondered if his daughter were not needlessly afraid of him. But the unsheathing of that sword of light convinced her of Ourïeda's wisdom. The girl knew her father. If she dared to urge any further her dislike of Tahar he would believe it was because of Manöel, and hurry rather than delay the wedding. Illness was the only possible plea, and even to that Ben Râana seemed to attach little importance. Marriage meant change and new interests. It should be a tonic for a Rose drooping in the garden of her father's harem.

"Thou seest for thyself that it is no use to plead," whispered Ourïeda when her father had gone, and Leila Mabrouka and her woman, Taous, on the overhanging balcony, were loudly discussing details of the feast. "Now, at last, is the time to tell the thing I waited to tell, till the worst should come: the thing thou couldst do for me, which would be even harder to do, and take more courage—oh! far more courage!—than leaving the letters open."

The look in Ourïeda's eyes of topaz brown was more tragic, more strangely fatal than Sanda had ever seen it yet, even on the roof in the sunset when the story of Manöel had been told. The heart of her friend felt like a clock that is running down. She was afraid to know the thing which Ourïeda wanted her to do; yet she must know—and make up her mind. It seemed as if there were nothing she could refuse, still——

"What is it you mean?" she whispered back, the two heads leaning together over a frame of bright embroidery in Ourïeda's lap, and the tinkle of the fountain drowning the soft voices, even if the chatter at the door of Leila Mabrouka's room above had not covered the secret words.

"When I said there was a thing I would ask, if the worst came," Ourïeda repeated, "I meant one of two things. If thou wilt do either, they are for thee to choose between. But thou wilt think them both terrible, and my only hope is that thou lovest me."

"You know I do," Sanda breathed.

"Enough to do what I am too poor a coward to do for myself, and Embarka has refused to do?"

"Not—oh, no, no, you can't mean——"

"Yes, thou hast guessed. No one need ever suspect. I would think of a way. I've thought of one already. There'd be no pain for me. And yet—I suppose because I am young and my blood runs hot in my veins, I fear—I am sure—I couldn't, when the moment came, do it myself."

"Even for you, I can't be a murderess," Sanda said miserably, almost apologetically.

"It is thy strange Christian superstition which makes thee call it that. It would be our fate; and thou couldst go away and be happy, feeling thou hadst saved me from life which is worse than death sometimes. Still, if thou wilt not, there is the other thing. Will thou help me to escape?"

"Oh, yes!" cried Sanda.

"Wait till thou hast heard my plan. Maybe thou wilt change thy mind."

"I feel sure I shan't change it."

"But the plan may make thee hate me, and think I am cruel and selfish, caring for no one except myself. Besides, there will be lies to tell; and I know thou dost not like lies, though to me they seem no harm if they are to do good in the end."

"Tell me the plan."

Ourïeda told it, while overhead on the balcony her Aunt Mabrouka—Tahar's mother—chatted of the merchants in Djazerta who sold silks from Tunis and perfumes from Algiers.

The plan was very hateful, very dangerous and treacherous. But—it was to save Ourïeda. The Arab girl proposed to Sanda that she should pretend to have a letter from Colonel DeLisle calling her back at once to Sidi-bel-Abbés, not giving her even time to wait for the wedding. Ben Râana would reluctantly consent to her going: he would give her an escort—not Tahar, because Tahar must stay for his marriage—but some trustworthy men of his *goum*, and good camels. On the camel prepared for her would be of course a bassourah with heavy curtains: probably the one in which she had already travelled. It went also without saying that Sanda would make the journey in Arab dress, such as she had worn during her visit. Ourïeda would pretend to be ill with grief because her friend must leave her at such a time; already she had prepared the Agha's mind by complaining of weakness. She would take to her bed and refuse to see any one but her nurse, Embarka. Lella Mabrouka, glad to be rid of the Roumia girl (of whom, beneath her politeness, she had always disapproved), and hating illness, would gladly keep out of the way for two or three days, while the wedding preparations went on. It would be easy, or almost easy, if no accident happened, Ourïeda argued, for her to go away veiled and swathed in the bassourah, while Sanda lay in bed in a darkened room. At Touggourt the veiled lady would be met by that Captain Amaranthe and his wife of whom Sanda had spoken: they must be written to immediately and told to expect Mademoiselle DeLisle. Then trouble might come, if they suspected, but perhaps they would not, if Sanda wrote that she had been ill with influenza and had nearly lost her voice. They might send her off by train, guessing nothing, or, if they did guess, she must throw herself on Madame Amaranthe's mercy. No woman with a heart would give her up! And if the plan succeeded, instead of going to Sidi-bel-Abbés she would go to Oran where she could find a ship that would take her to Marseilles. Her jewels (some which had been her mother's, and many new ones given by her father) would pay the expenses and keep her in France, hidden from Ben Râana and beyond his power, until perhaps Manöel found her through advertisements she would put into all the French papers.

As for Sanda, the result for her when the trick was discovered (as it ought not to be until Ourïeda had got out of Algeria) would be simple. She was the daughter of Ben Râana's friend, a soldier of importance in the eyes of France. Colonel DeLisle had entrusted her to the Agha's care, and she could not be punished as though she were an Arab woman. If Embarka or any member of Ben Râana's household so betrayed him and his dearest hopes the right revenge would be death, and no one outside would ever hear what had been done, for tragedies of the harem are sacred. To Mademoiselle DeLisle, however, her host could do nothing, except send her with a safe escort out of his home. And that would be her one desire.

At first it seemed to Sanda that she could not do what Ourïeda asked. With tears she said no, they must think of some other way. And the Little Rose did not argue or plead. She answered only that she had thought, and there was no other way but the one which Sanda had refused. Then she was silent, and the light died out of her eyes, leaving them dull, almost glazed, as if her soul, that had been gazing through the windows, had gone to some dark sepulchre of hope.

It was because of this silence and this look that Sanda changed her mind, after one day and night, all of which she spent—vainly—in trying to find another plan. A letter did come from her father, as she and Ourïeda had hoped it might (Colonel DeLisle, while still at Sidi-bel-Abbés, found time to scribble off a few lines to his girl for each camel post that travelled through the dunes from Touggourt to Djazerta), and in sickness of heart Sanda pretended that she was wanted "at home." The Agha was grieved and astonished, but, great Arab gentleman that he was, would have cut out his tongue rather than question his guest when no information was volunteered. He asked only if she had been in all ways kindly treated in his house; and when with swimming eyes she answered "yes," it was enough. The caravan was prepared to take her to Touggourt, where she would be met by her former travelling companions, Captain Amaranthe and his wife; and the Agha assured her that only the marriage—an event unlucky to postpone—prevented him from sending his nephew as before, or going himself as her escort.

The start was to be made very early in the morning, before dawn, in order that the caravan might rest during the two hours of greatest heat without shortening the day's march; and this was in the girl's favour. Sanda had said farewell to Lella Mabrouka the night before, that the lady need not wake before her usual hour: but not only did she wake; she rose, very quietly, and saw Embarka tiptoeing along the balcony from Sanda's room to Ourïeda's with the new gandourah and extra thick veil she herself had given the guest to travel in. When Embarka was out of the way Lella Mabrouka, in her night robe, pattered softly to Sanda's closed door and knocked. No answer. She peeped in and saw the room empty.

Sanda might have gone to bid Ourïeda good-bye at the last minute: that would be natural; and it was the last minute, because the sky was changing its night purple for the gray of dawn, and from the distant courtyard Lella Mabrouka had heard some time ago the grunting of the camels. (She was a light sleeper always: and afterward she told Ben Râana and Tahar that Allah had doubtless sent some messenger to touch her shoulder at this hour of fate.) She had had no definite suspicions until that moment, except that she was always vaguely suspicious of the girls' confidences; but suddenly an idea leaped into her mind, the suggestion of just such a trick as she herself would have been subtle enough to play. If the Roumia went to the room of her friend to disturb her (though Ourïeda had been ailing for days), why did she not go already dressed, by Embarka's help, for the start, since it was time to set out, and the Agha must be waiting in the courtyard to bid Allah speed his guest? There might be a simple and innocent reason for what

struck Lella Mabrouka as mysterious, but she determined to find out. With suddenness she flung open the door of Ourïeda's room (which Embarka, believing Lella Mabrouka safely asleep, had not locked), and by the light of a French lamp she saw the old nurse draping Ourïeda in the Roumia's veil. In Ourïeda's green and gold bed from Tunis lay Sanda in a nightdress of Ourïeda's with her head wrapped up as Ourïeda's was often wrapped by Embarka as a cure for headache.

Instantly the whole plot was clear to the mother of Tahar. She saw how Ourïeda had meant to go, and how Sanda would have kept her place, guarded from intrusion by the old nurse, until the fugitive was safely out of reach.

Ourïeda, quick of mind as the older and more experienced woman, explained without waiting to be asked that she and her dearest Sanda had exchanged clothing, just for a moment, according to the old Arab superstition that garments changed between those who love have the power of giving some quality of the owner to the friend. Sanda said nothing at all, knowing that she would but make matters worse by speaking. When she understood what the story was to be (she had given hours of each day during the past months to learning Arabic) she sat up in bed and begun unwrapping her head as if to prepare for the journey, now that time pressed, and she must again put on her own things. But if she had had the slightest hope that Lella Mabrouka might be deceived by Ourïeda's plausible excuse, the cold glint of black eyes staring at her in the lamplight would have stabbed it to death.

A woman of Europe, burning with rage like Mabrouka's, might have blurted out fierce reproaches or insults; but the woman of the harem did not even put her discovery into words. She looked at Ourïeda and the Roumia, and said quietly: "It was a charming idea to wear each other's clothes so that each might have something of the other in her heart forever. Already I can see a likeness. But do not hurry to change now. I came to say that for a reason, to be explained later, the caravan cannot start to-day. Our Little White Moon will light our sky for a time longer. Come with me, Embarka, I have work for thee. These dear children may have the pleasure of dressing each other."

Ashy pale under her bronze skin, Embarka obeyed without protest, throwing one look at her beloved mistress as she followed Lella Mabrouka to her fate. Her great, dilated eyes said: "Good-bye forever, oh, thou whom I love, and for whom I have given myself without regret."

When they were left alone the girls fell into each other's arms as if for protection against some terrible fate coming swiftly to destroy them. Though the September dawn had in it the warmth of summer, they shivered as they clung together.

"It is all over!" Ourïeda said. "Allah is against me."

"What will happen?" asked Sanda, a horror of the unknown upon her.

"Nothing to thee. Do not be afraid."

"I'm not afraid for myself. I am thinking of you."

"For me this is the end."

"You don't mean—surely your father will not——"

"He will not take my life. He will take from me his love. And I shall be watched every instant till I have been given to Tahar. I shall not even have a chance to kill myself—unless I do it now."

"Ourïeda! No—there's hope still. Who can tell——"

But Ourïeda did not hear. Suddenly she tore herself free from Sanda's arms, and running to one of the carved cedarwood doors in the white wall of the bedroom, opened a little cupboard. There, fumbling among perfumed parcels, rolled as Arab women roll their garments, she snatched from a bundle of silk a small stiletto with a jewelled handle. Sanda had seen it before, and had been bidden to admire its rough, square emeralds and queerly shaped pearls. The thing had belonged to Ourïeda's mother, and had been given to the daughter by the Agha on her sixteenth birthday, nearly a year ago. Ben Râana's Spanish wife had worn it in her dark hair; but Ben Râana's daughter, even from the first, had thought of it for another purpose. Last night, when Embarka had packed the jewels among Sanda's things for the secret journey, Ourïeda had kept out the stiletto in case of failure. Now it was ready to her hand, and before Sanda could reach her the point of its thin blade pressed the flesh over the heart. But the pin prick of pain as the skin broke was too sharp a prophecy of anguish for the petted child who knew herself physically a coward. She gave a cry, dropped the stiletto as if the handle had burnt her, and, stumbling against the girl who tried to hold her up, fell in a limp heap on the floor.

There was no time to hide the stiletto, even if Sanda had thought to do so, before Taous, Lella Mabrouka's woman, came quietly into the room. No doubt Mabrouka had meant to send her, but had not told the girls, because she wished her servant to surprise them. Gathering up Ourïeda, who had fainted, or seemed to faint, the negress's bright eyes spied the dagger. Freeing one hand as easily as if Ourïeda's weight had been that of a baby, she took the weapon and slipped it into her dress. Whether she meant to show the dagger to her mistress, or to keep it for herself, who could say?

Sanda would not leave Ourïeda when the girl had been laid on the bed by Taous, but presently, after half an hour's absence, Lella Mabrouka returned. "Thou mayest go now," said the

formidable woman. "We who love and understand her will restore our Rose with her name's perfume, which has the power of bringing back lost senses. Have no fear for her health, Little Moon. All will be well with our sweet bride. Dress thyself, not for a journey, but for a visit from my brother, the Agha, who will do himself the honour of calling upon thee when thou art ready to descend to our reception-room. Thou being a Roumia, with customs different to ours, may receive him alone, otherwise I would leave our Little Rose to Taous, and go with thee."

Despite the unbroken courtesy of Mabrouka's manner, or all the more because of its frozen calm, Sanda was sick with a deadly fear. She was not afraid that the Agha would do her bodily harm, but the whole world seemed to have come to an end because of her treachery. She did not know how she could meet his eyes, those eyes of an eagle, after what she had tried to do. She was afraid he would question her about what she knew of Ourïeda's secrets, and though she resolved that nothing should make her speak, her heart seemed turning to water.

CHAPTER XX

THE BEAUTY DOCTOR

"If my father were only here!" Sanda said as she went down to the great room of state where the ladies of the Agha's harem received their few visitors. And then she thought of Maxime St. George, her soldier. She recalled the night when she had been afraid of the storm, and he had sat by her through the long hours. Somehow, she did not know why, it helped a little to remember that.

Ben Râana, graver and sterner than she had seen him, was waiting in the early dawn which struck out bleak lights from the dangling prisms of the big French chandeliers—the ugly chandeliers of which Lella Mabrouka was proud. He asked no questions; and somehow that seemed worse than the ordeal for which Sanda had braced herself. The Agha's voice, politely speaking French, was studiously gentle, but icy contempt was in his dark eyes when they were not deliberately turned from the trusted guest who had betrayed him. He said he had summoned her to announce, with regret, that, owing to the illness of the man appointed as conductor of the caravan, it would not be able to start for some time. At present there was no other person equally trustworthy who could be spared. "I am responsible to thy father for thy safety," he added. "And though we poor Arabs are behind these modern times in many ways, we would die rather than betray a trust."

That was a stroke well aimed under the roses of courtesy, and Sanda could but receive it in silence. She had supposed when Lella Mabrouka spoke of the caravan not going that it was only a threat. Her expectation was to be sent out of the house at once, in disgrace, and though her soul yearned over Ourïeda, all that was timid in her pined to go. It was surprising—if anything could surprise her then—to hear that she must remain.

"Almost surely I shan't be allowed to see Ourïeda again, and if I can't help her any more I might as well beg father to send for me at once," she told herself, when Ben Râana, formally taking leave of her, with hand on forehead and heart, had gone. She went slowly and miserably to her own room to await developments, and while she waited, hastily wrote the message to Colonel DeLisle which three days later found him at Touggourt.

In writing, she feared that her letter might never be allowed to reach her father; but she wronged Ben Râana. He had spoken no more than the truth (though he spoke to hurt) in saying he would rather die than betray a trust. At that time he still kept his calmness, because the plot arranged by the two girls had not succeeded. His daughter was still safe under his own roof, and it was not an unexpected blow to him that she should have wished to escape from Tahar. He knew in his heart that Ourïeda was more to blame than Sanda, and seeing shame on the young, pale face of the Roumia he had no fear of anything George DeLisle's daughter might report to her father. Her letter went by the courier, as all her other letters had gone. Mabrouka's advice to keep it back, or at least to steam the envelope open and see what was inside, was scorned by Ben Râana; and to Sanda's astonishment she was actually sent for to visit Ourïeda.

This was in the afternoon of the day whose dawn had seen the girls' defeat. Ourïeda was in bed, and Taous sat by the open door with an embroidery frame. But Taous understood neither French nor English. In exchange for the lessons Ourïeda gave Sanda in Arabic, Sanda had given lessons in English; therefore, lest Aunt Mabrouka might be listening, and lest she might have picked up more French than she cared to confess, the two girls chose the language of which Ourïeda had learned to understand more than she could speak.

"How thankful I am to see you, dearest!" cried Sanda. "Didn't you think, after what your aunt said, that I should be sent away this morning? Would you have dreamed, even if I stayed, that we should be allowed to meet and talk like this?"

Ourïeda answered, slowly and brokenly, that she had not believed Sanda would be permitted to go. Aunt Mabrouka had not stopped to reflect when she had made that threat, or else she had hoped to part them, and to make Ourïeda believe Sanda had gone. "You see," the girl explained in her halting English, "they—my father and my aunt—shall have too much of the fear to let you go till after all is finished."

"Finished?"

"When the marrying has been over thou canst go. Then it too late. My father shall be sure, thee and me, we know where M—— is, that our plan was for him. I say no, but he not believe. That is for why they keep thee here, so thou not tell M—— things about me. But my father, he shall not be mean and little in his mind like my aunt. He not listen to the words she speak when she say not let us meet together. My father know very well now we shall be finded out, it is the end for us. He not have fear for what we do if some person shall watch to see I not kill myself."

"What has become of poor Embarka?" Sanda asked.

Ourïeda shook her head, unutterable sadness in her eyes. "I think never shall I know that in this world."

Ill, without feigning, as the girl was, the wedding was to be hurried on. The original idea had been for the week of wedding festivities to begin on the girl's seventeenth birthday; but now Ben Râana said that, in promising his daughter the delay she asked for, he had always intended to begin the week before and give the bride to the bridegroom on the anniversary of her birth.

Ourïeda no longer pleaded. She had given up hope, and resigned herself with the deadly calmness of resignation which only women of the Mussulman faith can feel. It was clear that her will was not as Allah's will. And women came not on earth for happiness. It was not sure that they even had souls.

"Allah has appointed that I marry my cousin Tahar," she said to Sanda, "and I shall marry him, because I have not another stiletto nor any poison, and I am always watched so that, even if I had the courage, I could not throw myself down from the roof. But afterward—I am not sure yet what I shall do. All I know is that I shall never be a wife to Tahar. Something will happen to one of us. It may be to me, or it may be to him. But something *must* happen."

The Agha himself had caused to be built at Djazerta a *hammam* copied in miniature after a fine Moorish bath in Algiers, at which he bathed when he went north to attend the governor's yearly ball. All Arab brides of high rank or low must go through great ceremonies of the bath in the week of the wedding feast, and no exception could be made in Ourïeda's case. The privacy of the *hammam* was secured for the Agha's daughter by hiring it for a day, and no one was to be admitted to the women's part of the bath except the few ladies who had enough social importance to expect invitations. That Lella Mabrouka and Sanda would be there was a matter of course; and, besides them, there were the wives and daughters of two or three sheikhs and caids, all of whom Sanda already knew by sight, as they had paid ceremonious visits to the great man's harem since her arrival at Djazerta.

The Agha had a carriage, large, old-fashioned, and musty-smelling, but lined with gold-stamped crimson silk from Tunis. It could be used only between his house and the town, or to reach the oasis just beyond, for there was nowhere else to go; but, drawn by stalwart mules in Spanish harness, for years it had taken the ladies of his household to the baths and back. Lella Mabrouka and Taous (both veiled, though they had passed the age of attractiveness when hiding the face is obligatory) chaperoned the bride and her friend, the coachman and his assistant being fat and elderly eunuchs.

At the doorway of the domed building, the only new one in Djazerta, there was much stately fuss of screening the ladies as they left the seclusion of the carriage. Then came a long, tiled corridor, which opened into a room under the dome of the *hammam*, and there the party was met not only by bowing female attendants, but by the guests, who had arrived early to welcome them. Ourïeda was received with pretty cries and childlike, excited chattering, not only by her girl friends, but the older women. All were undressed, ready for the bath, or they could not have followed the bride to the hot rooms; and that was the object and pleasure of the visit. Every one shrieked compliments as the clothing of the Agha's daughter was delicately removed by the beaming negresses; and gifts of gold-spangled bonbons, wonderfully iced cakes, crystallized fruit, flowers, gilded bottles of concentrated perfume, mother-o'-pearl and tortoise boxes, gaudy silk handkerchiefs made in Paris for Algerian markets, and little silver fetiches were presented to the bride. She thanked the givers charmingly, though in a manner so subdued and with a face so grave that the visitors would have been astonished had not Lella Mabrouka explained that she had been ill with an attack of fever.

From hot room to hotter room the women trooped, resting, when they felt inclined, upon mattings spread on marble, while the bride, the queen of the occasion, was given a divan. They ate sweets and drank pink sherbet or syrup-sweet coffee, and, instead of being bathed by one of the attendants, Ourïeda was waited upon by a great personage who came to Djazerta only for the weddings of the highest. Originally she was from Tunis, where her profession is a fine art; but having been superseded there she had moved to Algiers, then to Touggourt; and thence the Agha had summoned her for his daughter. She was Zakia, *la hennena*, a skilled beautifier of women; and she had been sent for, some days in advance of the great occasion, in order (being past her youth) to recover from the fatigue of the journey. None of the young girls had ever seen her, and exclaiming with joy they fingered her scented pastes and powders.

This bridal bath ceremony, being more intricate than any ordinary bath, took a long time, and when it was over, and Ourïeda a perfumed statue of ivory, the cooling-room was entered for the dyeing of the bride's hair. The girl's face showed how she disliked the process; but it being an unwritten law that the hair of an Arab bride must be coloured with *sabgha*, she submitted. After

the first shudder she sat with downcast eyes, looking indifferent, for nothing mattered to her now. Since Manöel would never see it again, and perhaps it would soon lie deep under earth in a coffin, she cared very little after all that the long hair he had thought beautiful must lose its lovely sheen for fashion's sake.

Now and then, as she worked, Zakia stooped over her victim, bringing her old, peering face close to the bowed face of the girl to make sure the dye did not touch it. Sanda, who had been grudgingly granted a thin muslin robe for the bath because of her strange Roumia ideas of baring the face and covering the body, noticed these bendings of *la hennena*, but thought nothing of them until she happened to catch a new expression in Ourïeda's eyes. Suddenly the gloom of hopelessness had gone out of them: and it could not be that this was the effect of the compliments rained upon her in chorus by the guests, for until that instant the most fantastic praise of hair, features, and figure had not extorted a smile. What could the woman have said to give back in an instant the girl's lost bloom and sparkle? Sanda wondered. It was like a miracle. But it lasted only for a moment. Then it seemed that by an effort Ourïeda masked herself once more with tragedy. She turned one of her slow, sad glances toward her aunt; and Sanda was sure she looked relieved on seeing Lella Mabrouka absorbed in talk with the plump wife of a caid.

According to custom in great houses of the south, *la hennena* was escorted, after the women's fête at the *hammam*, to the home of the bride, where she was to spend the remainder of the festive week in heightening the girl's beauty. She was given the guest-room of the harem, second in importance to that occupied by Colonel DeLisle's daughter. This, as it happened, was nearer to Ourïeda's room than Sanda's or even Lella Mabrouka's; and as, during the two days that followed, Zakia was almost constantly occupied in blanching the bride's ivory skin with almond paste, staining her fingers red as coral with a decoction of henna and cochineal, and saturating her hair and body with a famous permanent perfume, sometimes Lella Mabrouka and Taous ventured to leave the two girls chaperoned only by *la hennena*. That was because neither had seen the sudden light in Ourïeda's eyes after the face of Zakia had approached hers at the *hammam*.

For the first day there was no solution of the mystery for Sanda, who had waited to hear she knew not what. But at last, in a room littered with pastes and perfume bottles, and lighted by the traditional long candles wound with coloured ribbon, Ourïeda spoke, in Arabic, that the *hennena* might not be hurt.

"Zakia says I may tell thee our secret," she said. "At first she was afraid, but now she sees that she may trust thee as I do. Didst thou guess there was a secret?"

"Yes," answered Sanda.

"I thought so! Well, it is this: At the *hammam* is employed a cousin of Embarka's. I feared never to hear of Embarka again; but my father is more enlightened than I thought. He might have ordered her death, and the eunuchs would have obeyed, and no one would ever have known. Yet he did no more than send her away, giving her no time even to pack that which was hers. He did not care what became of her, being sure that she could never again enter our house. But he did not know of the cousin in the *hammam*. And perhaps he did not stop to think that I might have given Embarka jewels for helping me. She would have helped without payment, because she loved me. But I wished to reward her. She hid the things in her clothing; and when she was turned out she still thought of me, not of herself. She knew I would go to the *hammam* before my marriage, and that Zakia had been sent for to bathe me and make me beautiful. So she gave her cousin there a present, and all the rest of the jewels she gave to Zakia, for a promise Zakia made. Nothing has Embarka kept of all my gifts. It was like her! The rest is easy now. I shall never again know happiness, but neither shall I know the shame of giving myself to a man I hate when heart and soul belong to one I love."

"Can *la hennena* help you to escape?" Sanda wanted to know.

"From Tahar, yes. Here is the way," Ourïeda answered. And she held out for Sanda to see a tiny pearl-studded gold box, one of many quaint ornaments on a chain the girl always wore round her neck. She had explained the meaning or contents of each fetich long ago, and Sanda knew all about the sacred eye from Egypt, the white coral horn to ward off evil, the silver and emerald case with a text from the Koran blessed by a great saint or marabout, and the pearl-crusted gold box containing a lock of hair certified to be that of Fatma Zora, the Prophet's favourite daughter.

"I have put the hair with the text," said Ourïeda. "Look, in its place this tiny bottle of white powder. Canst thou guess what it is for?"

The blood rushed to Sanda's face, then back to her heart. But she did not answer. She only looked at Ourïeda: a wide-eyed, fascinated look.

"Thou hast guessed," the Agha's daughter said in a very little voice like a child's. "But I shall not use it if, when I have told him how I hate him, he consents to let me alone. If he is a fool, why, he brings his fate on himself. This is for his lips, if they try to touch mine."

"But," Sanda gasped; "you would be a——"

"I know the word in thy mind. It is 'murderess.' Yet my conscience would be clear. It would be for the sake of my love—to keep true to my promise at any cost. And the cost might be my life. They would find out; they would know how he died. This is no coward's act like smiling at a man and

giving him each day powdered glass or chopped hair of a leopard in his food, which many of our women do, to kill and leave no trace. If I break, I pay."

As she spoke the door opened and Lella Mabrouka came swiftly into the room, fierce-eyed as a tigress whose cub is threatened. She was tight-lipped and silent, but her eyes spoke, and all three knew that she had listened. Such words as she had missed her quick wit had caught and patched together. Ourïeda's wish to propitiate Zakia by not seeming to talk secrets before her had undone them both. But it was too late for regrets, and even for lies.

Lella Mabrouka clapped her hands, and Taous came, to be told in a tense voice that the Agha must be summoned. Then Mabrouka turned to the Roumia.

"Go, thou! This has nothing to do with thee," was all she said.

Sanda glanced at her friend, and an answering glance bade her obey. She rose and went out, along the balcony to the door of her own room. This she left open, thinking with a fast-beating heart that if there were any cry she would run back, no matter what they might do to her. But there was no cry, no sound of any kind, only the cooing of doves which had flown down into the fountain court, hoping Ourïeda might throw them corn.

The custom of the house was for the three ladies to take their meals together in a room where occasionally, as a great honour, the Agha dined with them. That evening a tray of food was brought to Sanda with polite regrets from Lella Mabrouka because she and her niece were too indisposed by the hot weather to forsake the shelter of their rooms. Politeness, always politeness, with these Arabs of high birth and manners! thought the Irish-French girl in a passionate revolt against the curtain of silk velvet softly let down between her and the secrets of Ben Râana's harem. This time it might be, she said to herself, that politeness covered tragedy. But the same night she received another message from Mabrouka. It was merely to say that, the air of Djazerta not being healthful at this time of year, the Agha had decided, for his daughter's sake, to finish the week of the wedding feast out in the desert, at the *douar*.

CHAPTER XXI

THE ELEVENTH HOUR

When Max, at the head of his small caravan, came in sight of the Agha's *douar*, it was almost noon, and the desert, shimmering with heat, was motionless, as if under enchantment. They had travelled through the night, after learning that Ben Râana and his family had gone from Djazerta, with intervals of rest no longer than those allowed to the Legion on march. What they saw was a giant tent as large as a circus tent in a village of America or Europe surrounded at a distance by an army of little tents, black and dirty brown, so flat and low that they were like huge bats with outstretched wings resting on the sand. The great tent of the chief with its high roof, its vast spread of white, red, and amber striped cloth of close-woven camel's hair, rose nobly above all the others, as a mosque rises above a crowd of prostrate worshippers at prayer. For background, there was a clump of trees; for here, in the far southern desert, just outside a waving welter of dunes, lay a region of *dayas*, where a wilderness of sand and tumbled stones was brightened by green hollows half full of gurgling water.

Never before had Max seen a *douar* of importance, the desert dwelling of a desert chief. But Manöel had been here before; and the camel-drivers, if they had not visited this *douar*, were familiar with others. Max alone wondered at the great tent, whose many different compartments sheltered the Agha, his whole family, and servants brought from Djazerta. As the caravan wound nearer to watching eyes, another tent, not so big, but new and brilliant of colour, separated itself from the vast bulk of the *tente sultane*.

"What is that?" Max asked Manöel, who rode beside him as interpreter, his dark-stained face almost covered by the white folds of his woollen hood, the fire of his young eyes dimmed and aged by a pair of cheap, silver-rimmed spectacles such as elderly Arabs wear.

"The Agha must have ordered that new tent to be set up for Tahar," Manöel answered gruffly; and Max guessed from the sharpening of his tone and the brevity of his explanation that this was the desert dwelling appointed for the bridegroom when he should take his bride.

In the boldness of their plan lay its hope of success; for though Ben Râana's suspicions were on the alert he would not expect the banished lover to ride brazenly up to his tent, side by side with a soldier messenger from Colonel DeLisle. There was an instant of suspense after the corporal on leave and his Arab interpreter were received by the Agha in a reception-room whose walls were red woollen draperies; but it was scarcely longer than a heartbeat. Ben Râana had just come out from another room beyond, where, the curtains falling apart, several guests in the high turbans of desert dignitaries could be seen seated on cushions and waited upon by Soudanese men who were serving a meal.

The Agha scarcely glanced at Max's companion, the dark, spectacled Arab, but announcing in French that no interpreter would be needed, he clapped his hands to summon a servant. One of the black men lifted the red curtains higher and came in, received instructions as to the interpreter's entertainment, and led him away. Max could hardly keep back a sigh of relief, for

that had been a bad moment. Now it was over, and with it his personal responsibility in his friend's adventure. It had been agreed between them that Colonel DeLisle's messenger to Ben Râana should have no further hand in the plot against the Agha. The rest was for Manöel alone, unless at the end help should be necessary (and possible) for Ourïeda's rescue.

Max delivered a letter from DeLisle, and the Agha read it slowly through. Then he raised his eyes and fixed them upon the Legionnaire as if wondering how far he might be in his colonel's confidence.

"My friend has sent thee to escort his daughter to Sidi-bel-Abbés," Ben Râana said thoughtfully. "Although he cannot be there himself, he believes the northern climate will be better for her health at this time of year. Perhaps he is right; though my daughter, whom she has visited, would have been delighted as a married woman to keep Mademoiselle DeLisle with her. However, my friend's will is as Allah's will. It must be done. The day after to-morrow my daughter's wedding feast will be over and she will go to her husband's tent. Remain here quietly till then as my guest. Thy interpreter and the persons of thy caravan shall be well cared for, I promise thee, by my household. When my daughter leaves me the daughter of my friend shall go in peace at the same hour, in thy charge."

As he spoke his eyes remained on the messenger's face, watching for any change of expression, and noting the flush that mounted through the soldier-tan.

"I am very sorry," said Max, "but Colonel DeLisle has given me only short leave. There was just enough time to get me to Djazerta, from Touggourt, and to do the journey comfortably to Sidi-bel-Abbés. He is a prompt man, as you know. He thinks and acts quickly. It didn't occur to him that there need be any great delay. Already there has been a day lost returning from Djazerta, where I heard that you were at your *douar*. A day and a half here, much as I should like to be your guest, would mean overstaying my leave. That, you will see, is impossible."

"If it is impossible, I fear that thou must go from here with thy mission unfulfilled and without Mademoiselle," replied the Agha, irritatingly calm. "For on my side it is impossible to let her go before my daughter is—*safely* married."

He smiled as he spoke, but the pause and the emphasis on a certain word were deliberate. Max was meant to understand it, in case DeLisle had confided in him. If not, it did not matter; he would realize that he had had his ultimatum. Max did realize this, and, after a stunned second, accepted the inevitable.

"I'll write to Sidi-bel-Abbés and explain. It's all I can do," was the thought which ran through his head as he politely informed the Agha that he would, at any cost, wait for Mademoiselle DeLisle.

"May I see her and deliver in person a letter I have from her father?" he asked.

But Ben Râana regretted that this might not be until all was ready for the start, which must be made in the evening after the end of the marriage feast, unless Corporal St. George preferred to wait till the morning after. The customs of a country must be respected by those sojourning in that country; and the Arab ladies visiting the *douar* would be scandalized if a young girl were allowed to speak with a strange man. There was nothing for it but submission, and Max submitted, inwardly raging. He wrote explanations to the officer left in charge at Sidi-bel-Abbés, the man to whom he must report; but no letter could reach DeLisle for many weeks.

He was entertained as the Agha's guest, being introduced to Tahar Ben Hadj and several caids invited for the bridegroom's part of the festivities. There was much feasting, with music and strange dances in Tahar's tent at night, and outside, fantasia for the *douar* in honour of the wedding; sheep roasted whole, and "powder play." What was going on in the bride's half of her father's great tent Max did not know, but he fancied that, above the beating of Tahar's tomtoms and the wild singing of an imported Arab tenor, he could hear soft, distant wailings of the ghesbah and the shrill "You—you—you!" of excited women. He wondered if Sanda knew that he had come to take her away, and whether Manöel had contrived to send a message to the bride.

That same night Khadra Bent Djellab, the woman who had travelled from Touggourt to return as Sanda's attendant, came from the camp of the caravan asking if she might see her new mistress. All was hurry and confusion in the women's part of the *tente sultane*, for a great feast was going on which would last through most of the night. The excited servants told Khadra that she must go, and come again to the tent in the morning; but just then the music for a dance of love began, and Khadra begged so hard to stay that she was allowed to stand with the servants. She had never seen Sanda DeLisle, but she had been told by the interpreter ("an order from the master," said he, slipping a five-franc piece into her hand) that there would be no other Roumia in the company. When Khadra caught sight of a golden-brown head, uncovered among the heads wrapped in coloured silks or gauze, she cautiously edged nearer it, behind the double rank of serving-women. All were absorbed in staring at the dancing-girl, a celebrity who had been brought from an oasis town farther south. She had arrived at Djazerta and had travelled to the *douar* when the family hastily flitted; but this was the night of her best dance. Nobody remembered Khadra. When she was close behind Sanda she pretended to drop a big silk handkerchief, such as Arab women love. Squatting down to pick it up, she contrived to thrust into a small white hand hanging over an edge of the divan a ball of crumpled paper, and gently shut

the fingers over it. A few months, or even weeks, ago Sanda would have started at the touch and looked round. But her long stay among Arab women, and the drama of the last eight days, had schooled her to self-control. Instantly she realized that some new plot was on, and that she was to be mixed up in it. She was deadly sick of plotting, but she loved Ourïeda, and had advised her not to give up hope until the last minute. Perhaps something unexpected might come to pass. With that soft, secret touch on her hand, and the feel of the paper in her palm, she knew that her prophecy was being fulfilled.

Not far away sat the bride, raised high above the rest of the company on a kind of throne made of carved wood, painted red and thickly gilded. It had served generations of brides in the Agha's family, and had been brought out from Djazerta. Sanda glanced up from the divan of cushions on which she and the other women guests reclined to see if Ourïeda was looking her way. But the girl's great eyes were fixed and introspective.

When Sanda was sure that Lella Mabrouka and Taous, her spy, were both intent on the figure posturing in the cleared space in the centre of the room, she cautiously unfolded the ball of paper. Holding it on her lap, half hidden by the frame of her hands, she saw a fine, clear black writing, a writing new to her. The words—French words—seemed to spring to her eyes:

> "Tell Ourïeda that I am here. She will know who. Perhaps you know also. There is only one thing to do. She must go, when the time comes, to Tahar's tent, but let her have no fear. At night, when her bridegroom should come to her, I will come instead and take her away. No one will know till the morning after, so we shall have a long start. For a while I will hide her in a house at Djazerta, where I have friends who will keep us safe until the search is over. No one will think of the town. All will believe that we have joined you and the caravan which your father has sent in charge of Corporal St. George. It is with him I have come, for I, too, am a Legionnaire. I hope to see St. George and explain my latest plans, but already he knows that I shall try and reach Spain or Italy. There I can make myself known without fear of capture and imprisonment. I can get engagements and money. If anything prevents my seeing St. George again, after I have started, show him this, or let him know what I have said.
>
> M.V."

Sanda's cheeks, which had been pale, brightened to carnation as she read; but the dancer held all eyes. The girl crumpled up the letter and palmed it again, wondering how to show it to Ourïeda, for they had not once been allowed a moment alone in each other's company since the scene with *la hennena*. Not that Sanda was suspected of a hand in that affair, but she might have a hand in another plot. The thing was, politely and kindly, to keep her a prisoner until after Ourïeda had gone to her husband. Then Tahar could protect his property; and once an Arab girl is married, she is seldom asked to elope, even by the bravest and most enterprising of lovers. Some pretext must be thought of for the giving of Manöel's letter. But what—what?

The answer was not long in coming. After the dance all the women, with the exception of the throned, bejewelled bride, sprang or scrambled up from their cushions to congratulate the celebrity. Some of them testified their admiration by offering her rings, anklets, or little gilded bottles of attar-of-rose which they had been holding in their handkerchiefs; and even Aunt Mabrouka's sharp eyes did not see Sanda slip the ball of paper into Ourïeda's hand when passing the throne to give a gold brooch to the favourite.

The bride herself was forgotten for a few minutes. Every one was caressing the dancer, patting her much-ringed hands, or touching her bracelets and counting the almost countless gold coins of her head ornaments and necklace. When Sanda dared glance across the crowd toward Ourïeda she saw by the look in her eyes that the girl had read the letter.

CHAPTER XXII

THE HEART OF MAX

Max had resigned himself days ago to Juan Garcia's desertion from the Legion, since the girl must be saved. But he was far from happy about his own position. The danger was that the day when he was due to report himself at Sidi-bel-Abbés would come and he would be absent. His letter of explanation ought to have arrived by that time, but it might be considered the trick of a deserter. And even when he appeared, the news of Garcia's desertion from his caravan must be told. The loss of a man would be a black mark against him, and he would probably forfeit the stripe on which he had been congratulated by the colonel.

There was consolation in the thought of seeing Sanda again, and the certainty that she would "stand up" for him; but he did not realize just how much that consolation would mean, until, after the delay of a day and a half, word came that Mademoiselle DeLisle was ready to leave her friend. The caravan had been assembled and waiting for the last hour, and Max knew that the bride must have gone to her husband's tent. The music had been wilder than before, the women's cries of joy louder and more triumphant; and while he had been examining the trappings of Sanda's camel a procession had gone by carrying aloft several big boxes draped with brocade and

cloth-of-gold: the bride's luggage on its way to her new home. The feasting in the *tente sultane* would continue all that night, as on other nights; but Ourïeda and Tahar would be left quietly in the tent of the bridegroom, alone until after dawn, when Tahar would steal away and the girl's women friends would rush in to wish her joy. That would be the hour, Max told himself, when all would be found out, and the chase would begin. He had seen Manöel once since the last details of the plot to rescue Ourïeda had been settled. He knew that Manöel had sent a letter to her through Sanda, to whom it had been given; but he was not sure if Sanda had been warned of the part she would have to play.

It was of this, more than the personality of Sanda herself, that he thought, as he waited, expecting her to come out from the Agha's tent. But instead, she came from another direction, and he did not recognize the slim figure in Arab dress until the well-remembered voice spoke through the white veil:

"It is—my Soldier St. George!" Sanda cried in English, and a thrill ran through the young man's blood. He forgot all about himself, his risks and his perplexities, and nothing seemed to matter except that Sanda DeLisle had come back into his life—the girl whose long, soft hair brushed his face in dreams, the girl who had saved his belief in womanhood and raised up for him, in his black need, a new ideal.

A tall negro woman, whose forehead was a strip of ebony, whose eyes were beads of jet above her snowy veil, accompanied Mademoiselle DeLisle, and the two had arrived from the bridegroom's tent, where doubtless Sanda had been bidding the bride good-bye. Max realized that her attendant would be shocked if he should offer to shake hands with the girl, so he only bowed, and answered hastily in English that he was glad—glad to see her again—glad to have the honour of being her guide. Khadra was brought forward, and Sanda spoke a few words to her in Arabic. Then the girl was helped into her bassourah, luggage being brought out by eunuchs from the Agha's tent and packed in to balance the other side. Only when the Roumia had retired behind the blue and red and purple curtains did Ben Râana appear to wish his friend's daughter and messenger the blessing of Allah on their journey. The caravan started, and it was not until after the *douar*, with its green *daya* and background of trees, was dim in the distance that Sanda's curtains parted. Max, riding the only horse in the party, saw the trembling of the rainbow-coloured stuff, and glanced up, expectant. He found that his heart and all his pulses were hammering, and as the girl's gold-brown head appeared, her veil thrown off, something seemed to leap in his breast, something that gave a bound like that of a great fish on a hook. She looked down and smiled at him rather sadly, yet more sweetly it seemed to Max than any other woman had ever smiled. He had not realized or remembered how beautiful she was. Why, it was the most exquisite face in the world! An angel's face, yet the face of a human girl. He adored it as a man may adore an angel, and he loved it as a man loves a woman. A great and irresistible tide of love rushed over him. What a fool, what a young, simple fool he had been to think that he had ever loved Billie Brookton! That seemed hundreds of years ago, in another incarnation, when he had been undeveloped, when his soul had been asleep. His soul was awake now! Something had awakened it; life in the Legion, perhaps, for that had begun to show him his own capabilities; or else love itself, which had been waiting to say: "I am here, now and forever."

Max was almost afraid to look at Sanda lest she should read through his eyes the words written on his heart. But then he remembered in a flash her love for Stanton, which would blind her to such feelings in other men. He felt sick for an instant in his hopelessness. Wherever he turned, whatever he did, happiness seemed never to be for him.

"You don't know how glad I am to see you!" the girl explained. "I've thought of you so often and —" she was going to add impulsively—"and dreamed about you, too!" but she remembered the Arab saying which Ourïeda had told her: that when a woman dreams of a man, that is the man she loves. It was a silly saying, and untrue; yet she kept back the words in a queer sort of loyalty to Stanton—Stanton, who neither thought nor dreamed of her.

"I was so thankful when I heard my father had sent for me," she quickly went on. "I heard about it only through *that letter*—you know the one I mean."

"Yes, I know," said Max. "I felt they didn't mean to tell you till the last minute, though I could see no reason why. I—I was more than glad and proud to be the one to come."

He was not hoping unselfishly that Colonel DeLisle mightn't have told in his letter how the great march and the expected fight had been sacrificed for her sake. He was not hoping this, because in his sudden awakening to love he had forgotten the march. He was thinking of Sanda and the wild happiness that would turn to pain in memory of being with her for days in the desert. If, when he reached Sidi-bel-Abbés, he were blamed for the delay, and punished by losing his stripe, or even by prison, it would be nothing, or almost a joy, because he would be suffering for her.

"It was only to-day they gave me father's letter, which you brought," Sanda was saying. "It was short, written in a hurry, in answer to one I sent begging him to take me away. Yet he mentioned one thing: that he didn't order you, but only asked if you were willing, to come. And he told me what you answered. I can never thank you, but I do appreciate it—*all*!"

"It was my selfishness," answered Max. "I said that the colonel was giving me the Cross of the Legion of Honour. I felt that, then. I feel it a lot more now." There was more truth in this than he wished her to guess.

"You are the *realest* friend!" cried Sanda. "Why, do you know, now I come to think of it, unless I

count my father, you are the only real friend I have in the world?"

"You forget Mr. Stanton!" Max reminded her, without intending to be cruel.

She blushed, and Max hated himself as if he had brought the colour to her face with a blow.

"No," she answered quietly. "I never forget him. But you understand, because I told you everything, that in my heart I can't call him my friend. *He* doesn't care enough, and *I*—care too much."

"Forgive me!" Max begged. "All the same I know he must care. He wouldn't be human not to."

"He isn't human! He's superhuman!" She laughed, to cover her pain of humiliation. "I suppose—long ago—he has started out on his wonderful mission. I keep thinking of him travelling on and on through the desert, and I pray he may be safe, and succeed in finding the Lost Oasis he believes in. He told me in Algiers that to find it would crown his life."

"He hadn't started when I left Touggourt," Max said rather dryly.

"What—he was still there? Then my father must have seen him. How strange! He didn't refer to him at all."

"You mentioned that the colonel wrote in a hurry." Max hinted at this explanation to comfort her, but he guessed why DeLisle had not been in a mood to speak of Stanton to his daughter. "There is a reason," he had said, "why I don't want to ask Stanton to put off starting and go to Djazerta." And Max, having seen the dancer, Ahmara, had known without telling what the reason was.

"Do you think Richard may be there when we get to Touggourt?" she asked, shamefaced, yet not able to resist putting the question.

"I think it's very likely." Max tried to keep his tone at reassuring level, though he hoped devoutly that Stanton might be gone. He could not bear to think of his seeing Sanda again after the Ahmara episode. With a man of Stanton's strange, erratic nature and wild impulses, who could be sure whether—but Max would not let the thought finish in his mind.

Sanda suddenly dropped the subject. Whether this was because she saw that Max disliked it, or whether she had no more to say, he could not guess.

"Tell me about yourself, now," she said. "My father has told me some things in letters, but I long to know from you if I made a mistake in wanting you to try the Legion."

"You made no mistake. It's one of the things I have to thank you for—one of several very great things," said Max.

"What *other* things? I can't think of one unless you thank me for having a splendid father."

"That's one thing."

"Are there more?"

"Yes."

"Tell me, please. Anyway, the greatest, or I shan't believe in any."

Max was silent for an instant. Then he said in a voice so low she could hardly hear it, bending down from her bassourah, "For giving me back my faith in women."

"I? But you hadn't lost it."

"I was in danger of losing it, with most of my mental and moral baggage. Through you—I've kept the lot."

"That's the most beautiful thing ever said to me. And it does me so much good after all I've gone through and been blamed for!"

"Who's dared to blame you for anything?"

"I asked you to tell me about yourself. When you have done that I'll tell you things that have happened here, things concerning Manöel Valdez and Ourïeda—poor darling Ourïeda, whom I ought to be thinking of every instant! And so I am, only I can't help being happy to get away—with you."

There was sweet pain in hearing those last words, and the emphasis the caressing girl-voice gave. Max hurried through a vague list of such events as seemed fit for Sanda's ears. They were not many, since he did not count his fights among the mentionable ones. He told her, with more detail, about his acquaintance with Valdez, whose face she had remarked at the railway station at Sidi-bel-Abbés; and then claimed her promise. She must tell him, if she would (with a sudden drop from the happy way of Max Doran with women to the humbler way of Max St. George, Legionnaire), what she had gone through in the Agha's house.

She began by asking a question. "Didn't you think it queer that no one but a servant came out to see me off?"

"I did a little, but I put it down to Arab manners."

"It was because I left in disgrace. Oh! no one was ever rude! They were polite always. It was like being stuffed with too much honey. And I don't mean Ourïeda, of course. Ourïeda's a darling. I'd do anything for her. I've proved that! Did my father give you any idea why he had to send for me in a hurry, though he has to leave me alone—or rather in charge of people I don't know—at Bel-Abbés? He must have told you something, as he asked such a sacrifice."

"He needn't have told me anything at all. But he took me into his confidence—it was like him—far enough to say the Agha was offended somehow, and you were anxious to leave."

"I should think the Agha *was* offended! I tried to help Ourïeda to escape, even though she hadn't heard from her Manöel. She had lots of jewels, and thought she might get to France. We failed in our attempt, and after that we were never alone together, though they—her father and aunt—didn't want me to go till she was married. The idea at first was—when I arrived, I mean—that my visit shouldn't end till father came back. They meant me to stop on with Ourïeda, as she and her husband would live at her old home at Djazerta. The last plot wasn't mine. It was got up by an old nurse they'd sent away, and a weird woman, a kind of Arab beauty-doctor. But all the same they were afraid of me. They longed to have me gone, yet, for their own superstitious, secretive reasons, they were afraid to let me go. As I *had* to stay so long, I'd rather have stopped a little longer, so as to know what becomes of Ourïeda. They made me say good-bye to her in Tahar's tent, where she is waiting, all dressed up like a doll, till the hour at night when her husband chooses to come to her. Instead, we hope—— But I can hardly bear it, not to know! Shall we *ever* know?"

"It may be a long time before Manöel can send us any word," said Max. "But we shall hear, I suppose, about Tahar."

"Oh, Manöel doesn't mean to *kill* him, does he? Ourïeda said he wouldn't do that! But Arab women are so strange, so different from us, I don't believe she'd care much if he did; except that if he were a murderer they could seize him, even in another country—Spain, where they both hope to go when they can get out of Djazerta."

"Manöel wouldn't care much, either, except for that same reason," Max admitted. "But he does care for that. He intends only to surprise and stun Tahar. He doesn't want his life with Ourïeda spoiled, for he'll be a public character, you know, if he succeeds in escaping from Algeria. He'll be a great singer. He can take back his own name."

"Why not France?" Sanda wanted to know. "Surely France would be better for a singer than Spain, or even Italy?"

"Perhaps, but, you see, he has had to desert from the Legion. In France he could be brought back to Algeria to the penal battalion."

"Oh, I hadn't thought of that!"

"It was—a hateful necessity, his deserting."

Sanda looked at him anxiously. "Will it make trouble for you?"

"Possibly. I hoped it needn't happen. But it had to. There was no other way in the end."

"How he must love Ourïeda, to risk all that for her sake!"

"He risked a great deal more."

"What—but, oh, yes, you told me! The way he came into the Legion, and all that. I wonder—I wonder if there are many men in the world who would do as much for a woman?"

"I think so," said Max quietly. "You don't count the cost very much when you are in love."

He was to remember that speech before many days.

"They're wonderful, men like that!" Sanda murmured. "And there's more risk to come, for Ourïeda and himself. A little for us, too, isn't there?"

"Not for you, please God! And very little for any of us. But I see you know what Manöel expects to happen."

"Oh, yes, that they'll run after us, thinking that he has followed with Ourïeda, to join our caravan. I do hope the Agha will send his men after us, for that will make us sure those two have got away. If we hear sounds of pursuit we'll hurry on quickly. Then the chase will have farther to go back, and Manöel and Ourïeda will gain time. The more ground we can cover before we're come up with by the Agha's camels, who'll be superior to ours, the better it will be, won't it?"

"Yes, for if the Agha lets Djazerta alone, Manöel may contrive to slip out of the town sooner than he dared hope, well disguised, in a caravan of strangers not of Ben Râana's tribe. In that case the Agha of Djazerta would have no right to search among the women. And Manöel's splendid at disguise. His actor's training has taught him that."

"I feel now that he *will* get Ourïeda out of the country. They've suffered too much and dared too much to fail in the end."

"I hope so; I think so," Max answered. But he knew that in real life stories did sometimes end badly. His own, for instance. He could see no happy ending for that.

They pushed on as fast as the animals could go when a long march and not a mere spurt of speed was before them. Through the mysterious sapphire darkness of the desert night the padding feet of the camels strode noiselessly over the hard sand. Sanda asked Max to offer extra pay to the men if they would put up with an abbreviated rest. Only three hours they paused to sleep; and then, in the dusk before dawn, when all living things are as shadows, the camels were wakened to snarl with rage while their burdens were ruthlessly strapped on again. As Max gave Sanda a cup of hot coffee (which he had made for her, as Legionnaires make it, strong and black) she said, shivering a little, "Do you think they'll have found Tahar yet if—if——"

"Hardly yet! Not till daylight," answered Max. "Are you cold? These desert nights can be bitter, even in summer. Won't you let me put something more around you?"

"No, thanks. It's only excitement that makes me shiver. I'm thinking of Ourïeda and Manöel. I've been thinking of them instead of sleeping. But I'm not tired. I feel all keyed up; as if something wonderful were going to happen to me, too."

Something wonderful was happening to Max. But she had no idea of that. She would never know, he thought.

All day they journeyed on, save for a short halt at noon, and Max was happy. He tried to recall and quote to himself a verse of Tennyson's "Maud"—"Let come what come may; What matter if I go mad, I shall have had my day!" He was having his day—just that one day more, because on the next they would come to Touggourt, and if Stanton were there he would spoil everything.

At night they went on till late, as before; but the camel-men said that the animals must have a longer rest. Luckily it did not matter now if they were caught. If Manöel and Ourïeda had escaped they had had a long start. A little after midnight the vast silence of the sand-ocean was broken with cries and shoutings of men. The Arabs, not knowing of the expected raid, stumbled up from their beds of bagging and ran to protect the camels; but Max, who had not undressed, walked out from the little camp to meet a cavalcade of men.

Ben Râana himself rode in advance, mounted on a swift-running camel. In the blue gloom where the stars were night lights Max recognized the long black beard of the Agha flowing over his white cloak. None rode near him. Tahar was not there. Max took that as a good sign.

"Who are you?" demanded the uniformed Legionnaire in his halting Arabic. "In the name of France, I demand your business."

Ben Râana, recognizing him also, impatiently answered in French, "And I demand my daughter!"

"Your daughter? Ah, I see! It is the Agha of Djazerta. But what can we know of your daughter? We left her being married."

"I think thou knowest well," Ben Râana cut him short furiously, "that her marriage was not consummated. I cherished a viper in my bosom when I entertained in my house the child of George DeLisle. She has deceived me, and helped my daughter to deceive."

"I cannot hear Mademoiselle DeLisle spoken of in that way, even by my colonel's friend, sir," said Max. "If your daughter has run away——"

"If! Thou knowest well that she has run away with her lover, who has half murdered the man who should by now be her husband. Thou knowest and Mademoiselle knows!"

"You are mistaken," broke in Max, not troubling to hide his anger. "If you think your daughter ——"

"I think she is here! But thou canst not protect her from me. Try, and thou and every man with thee shall perish."

"Search our camp," said Max.

As he spoke, Sanda appeared at the door of the mean little tent hired for her at Touggourt. From the shelter of the bassourah, close by on the sand, Khadra peeped out. The search was made quickly and almost without words. If the power of France had not been behind the soldier and the girl whom Ben Râana now hated, he would have reverted—"enlightened" man as he was—to primitive methods. He would have killed the pair with his own hand, while the men of his *goum* put the Arabs to death, and all could have been buried under the sand save the camels, which would have been led back to Djazerta. But France was mighty and far reaching, and he and his tribe would have to pay too high for such indulgence.

When he was sure that Ourïeda and Manöel Valdez were not concealed in the camp, with cold apologies and farewells he turned with his men and rode off toward the south—a band of shadows in the night. The visit had been like a dream, the desert dream that Sanda had had of Max, Max of Sanda. Yet dimly it seemed to both that these dreams had meant more than this. The girl let her "Soldier St. George" warm her small, icy hands, and comfort her with soothing words.

"You were *not* treacherous," he said. "You did exactly right. You deserve happiness for helping to make that girl happy. And you'll have it! You must! You shall! I couldn't stand your not being happy."

"Already it's to-day," she half whispered, "to-day that we come to Touggourt. The greatest thing in my father's life happened there. I thought of that when I passed through before, and wondered

what would happen to me. Nothing happened. But—*what about to-day*?"

"May it be something very good," Max said steadily. But his heart was heavy, as in his hands her own grew warm.

CHAPTER XXIII

"WHERE THE STRANGE ROADS GO DOWN"

Shadows of evening flowed over the desert like blue water out of whose depths rose the golden crowns of the dunes. The caravan had still some miles of sand billows between them and Touggourt, when suddenly a faint thrill of sound, which might have been the waking dream of a tired brain, or a trick of wind, a sound scarcely louder than heart-throbs, grew definite and distinct: the distant beating of African drums, the shriek of räitas, and the sighing of ghesbahs. The Arabs on their camels came crowding round Max, who led the caravan, riding beside Sanda's mehari.

"Sidi," said their leader, "this music is not of earth, for Touggourt is too distant for us to hear aught from there. It is the devil. It comes from under the dunes. Such music we have heard in the haunted desert where the great caravan was buried beneath the sands, but here it is the first time, and it is a warning of evil. Something terrible is about to happen. What shall we do—stop here and pray, though the sunset prayer is past, or go on?"

"Go on, of course," ordered Max. "As for the music, it must be that the wind brings it from Touggourt."

"It is not possible, Sidi," the camel-man, husband of Khadra, persisted. "Besides, there is no great feastday at this time, not even a wedding or a circumcision, or we should have heard before we started away that it was to be. Such playing, if from the hands of man, would mean some great event."

Even as he spoke the music grew louder and wilder. Max hurried the caravan on as fast as it could go among the sand billows, fearing that the Arabs' superstition might cause a stampede. With every stride of the camels' long, four-jointed legs, the music swelled; and at the crest of a higher dune than any they had climbed, Sanda, leaning out of her bassourah, gave a cry.

"A caravan—oh! but a huge caravan like an army," she exclaimed, "or like a troop of ghosts. What if—what if it should be Sir Knight just starting away?"

"I think it is he," Max answered heavily. "I think it must be Stanton getting off."

"We shall meet him. I can wish him good-bye and Godspeed! Soldier" (this was the name she had given Max), "it does seem as if heaven must have timed our coming and his going for this moment."

"Or the devil," Max amended bitterly in his heart. But aloud he said nothing. He knew that if he had spoken Sanda would not have heard him then.

"Let's hurry on," she begged, "and meet him—and surprise him. He can't be angry. He must be glad for father's sake, if not for mine. Oh! come, Soldier, come, or I will go alone!"

The man whose duty it was to guide her camel had dropped behind, as had often happened before at her wish and Max's order, for the mehari was a well-trained and gentle beast, knowing by instinct the right thing to do. Now Sanda leaned far out and touched him on the neck. Squatting in the way of camels brought up among dunes, he slid down the side of a big golden billow, sending up a spray of sand as he descended. Below lay a valley, where the blue dusk poured in its tide; and marching through the azure flood a train of dark forms advanced rhythmically, as if moving to the music which they had outstripped. It was a long procession of men and camels bearing heavy loads, so long that the end of it had not yet come into sight behind the next sand billow; but at its head a man rode on a horse, alone, with no one at his side. Already it was too dark to see his face, but Max knew who it was. He *felt* the man's identity with an instinct as unerring as Sanda's.

Also he longed to hasten after her and catch up with the running camel, as he could easily do, for his horse, though more delicate and not as enduring, could go faster. But, though Sanda had cried "Come!" he held back. She had hardly known what she said. She did not want him to be with her when she met Stanton; and if he—Max—wished to be there, it was a morbid wish. Whether Stanton were kind or unkind to the girl, he, the outsider, would suffer more than he need let himself suffer, since he was not needed and would only be in the way. Riding slowly and keeping back the men of his own little caravan, who wished to dash forward now their superstitious fears were put to flight, Max saw Stanton rein up his horse as the mehari, bearing a woman's bassourah, loped toward him; saw him stop in surprise, and then, no doubt recognizing the face framed by the curtains, jump off his horse and stride forward through the silky mesh of sand holding out his arms. The next instant he had the girl in them, was lifting her down without waiting for the camel to kneel, for she had sprung to him as if from the crest of a breaking wave; and Max bit back an oath as he had to see Ahmara's lover crush Sanda DeLisle against his breast.

It was only for an instant, perhaps, but for Max it was a red-hot eternity. He forgot his resolution to efface himself, and whipped his horse forward. By the time he had reached the two figures in the sand, however, the big, square-shouldered man in khaki and the slim girl in white had a little space between them. Stanton had released Sanda from his arms and set her on her feet; but he held both the little white hands in his brown ones; and now that Max was near he could see a look on the square sunburnt face which might have won any woman, even if she had not been his in heart already. Max himself was thrilled by it. He realized as he had realized in Algiers, but a thousand times more keenly, the vital, compelling magnetism of the man.

No need for Sanda to wonder whether "Sir Knight" would be glad to see her! He was glad, brutally glad it seemed to Max, as the lion might be glad after long, lonely ways to chance upon his young and willing mate.

"Curse him! How dare he look at her like that, after Ahmara!" thought Max. His blood sang in his ears like the wicked voice of the räita following the caravan. All that was in him of primitive man yearned to dash between the two and snatch Sanda from Stanton. But the soldier in him, which discipline and modern conventions had made, held him back. Sanda was Mademoiselle DeLisle, the daughter of his colonel. He who had been Max Doran was now nobody save Maxime St. George, a little corporal in the Foreign Legion, with hardly enough money left to buy cigarettes. Ahmara had been an episode. Now the episode was over, and in all probability Sanda, like most women, would have forgiven it if she knew. She was happy in Stanton's overmastering look. She did not feel it an insult, or dream that the devouring flame in the blue eyes was only a spurt of new fire in the ashes of a burnt-out passion.

She must be mistaking it for love, and her heart must be shaken to ecstasy by the surprise and joy of the miracle. Max knew that if he rudely rode up to them in this, Sanda's great moment, nothing he could say or do would really part them, even if he were cad enough to speak of Ahmara, the dancer. Sanda would not believe, or else she would not care; and always, for the rest of her life, she would hate him. He pulled up his horse as he thought, and sat as though he were in chains. He was, according to his reckoning, out of earshot, but Stanton's deep baritone had the carrying power of a 'cello. Max heard it say in a tone to reach a woman's heart: "Child! You come to me like a white dove. God bless you! I needed you. I don't know whether I can let you go."

Slowly Max turned his horse's head, and still more slowly rode back to the caravan which he had halted fifty feet away. For an instant he hoped against hope that Sanda would hear the sound of his going, that she would look after him and call. But deep down in himself he knew that no girl in her place, feeling as she felt, would have heard a cannon-shot. He explained to the astonished men that this was the great explorer, the Sidi who found new countries where no other white men had ever been, and the young Roumia lady had known him ever since she was a child. The Sidi was starting out on a dangerous expedition, and it was well that chance had brought them together, for now the daughter of the explorer's oldest friend could bid him good-bye. They must wait until the farewell had been given, then they would go on again.

The camel-men assented politely, without comment. But Max heard Khadra say to her husband, "It is the Sidi who loved Ahmara. One would think he had forgotten her now. Or is it that he tries this way to forget?"

Max wished angrily that his ears were less quick, and that he had not such a useless facility for picking up words out of every *patois*.

Half an hour passed, and the blue shadows deepened to purple. It was night, and Touggourt miles away. Still the two were talking, and the darkness had closed around them like the curtains of a tent. They had halted not only the little caravan returning from the south, but the great caravan starting for the far southeast. Nothing was of importance to Stanton and Sanda except each other and themselves. Max hated Stanton, yet was fascinated by the thought of him: virile, magnetic, compelling; a man among men; greater than his fellows, as the great stars above, flaming into life, were brighter than their dim brothers.

The music, which still throbbed and screamed its notes of passion in the desert, seemed to be beating in Max's brain. A horrible irritation possessed him like a devil. He could have yelled as a man might yell in the extremity of physical torture. If only that music would stop!

When he had almost reached the limit of endurance there came a soft padding of feet in the sand and a murmur of voices. Then he saw Stanton walking toward him with the girl. Sanda called to him timidly, yet with a quiver of excitement in her voice:

"Monsieur St. George, mon ami!"

Not "Soldier" now! That phase was over. Max got off his horse and walked to meet the pair.

"You know each other," Sanda said. "I introduced you last March in Algiers. And perhaps you met again here in Touggourt with my father, not many days ago. I've told Mr. Stanton all about you now, mon ami; he knows how good you have been. He knows how I—confided things to you I never told to anybody else. Do you remember, Monsieur St. George, my saying how, when I was small, I used to long to run away dressed like a boy, and go on a desert journey with Richard Stanton? Well, my wish has come true! Not about the boy's clothes, but—*I am going with him*! He has asked me to be his wife, and I have said 'yes.'"

CHAPTER XXIV

THE MAD MUSIC

Max was struck dumb by the shock. He had expected nothing so devastating as this. What to do he knew not, yet something he must do. If he had not loved the girl, it would have been easier. There would have been no fear then that he might think of himself and not of her. Yet she had been put under his charge by Colonel DeLisle. He was responsible for her welfare and her safety. Ought he to constitute himself her guardian and stand between her and this man? On the other hand, could he attempt playing out a farce of guardianship—he, almost a stranger, and a boy compared to Stanton, who had been, according to Sanda, informally her guardian when she was a little girl? Max stammered a few words, not knowing what he said, or whether he were speaking sense, but Stanton paid him the compliment of treating him like a reasonable man. Suddenly Max became conscious that the explorer was deliberately focussing upon him all the intense magnetism which had won adherents to the wildest schemes.

"I understand exactly what you are thinking about me," Stanton said. "You must feel I am mad or a brute to want this child to go with me across the desert, to share the fate all Europe is prophesying."

"It's glory to share it," broke in Sanda, in a voice like a harp. "Do I care what happens to me if I can be with you?"

Stanton laughed a delightful laugh.

"She *is* a child—an infatuated child! But shouldn't I be more—or less—than a man, if I could let such a stroke of luck pass by me? You see, she wants to go."

"*He* knows I love you, and have loved you all my life," said Sanda. "I told him in Algiers when I was so miserable, thinking that I should never see you again, and that you didn't care."

"Of course I cared," Stanton contradicted her warmly; yet there was a difference in his tone. To Max's ears, it did not ring true. "Seeing a grown-up Sanda, when I'd always kept in my mind's eye a little girl, bowled me over. I made excuses to get away in a hurry, didn't I? It was the bravest thing I ever did. I knew I wasn't a marble statue. But it was another thing keeping my head in broad daylight on the terrace of a hotel, with a lot of dressed-up creatures coming and going, from what it is here in the desert at night, with that mad music playing me away into the unknown, and a girl like Sanda flashing down like a falling star."

"The star fell into your arms, and you saved it from extinction," she finished for him, laughing a little gurgling laugh of ecstasy.

"I caught it on its way somewhere else! But how can I let it go when it wants to shine for me? How can I be *expected* to let it go? I ask you that, St. George!"

Racked with an anguish of jealousy, Max felt, nevertheless, a queer stirring of sympathy for the man; and struggling against it, he knew Stanton's conquering fascination. He knew, also, that nothing he could do or say would prevent Sanda from going with her hero. However, he stammered a protest.

"But—but I don't see what's to be done," he said, "Mademoiselle DeLisle's father, my colonel, ordered me to take her to Sidi-bel-Abbés."

"Not ordered; asked!" the girl cut in with an unfairness that hurt.

"All the blame is mine," Stanton assured him with a warm friendliness of manner. "My shoulders are broad enough to bear it. And you know, St. George, your colonel and I are old friends. If he were here he'd give his consent, I think, after he'd got over his first surprise. I believe as his proxy you'll do the same, when you've taken a little time to reflect."

"Why, of course he will!" cried Sanda, sweet and repentant. "He knows that this is my one chance of happiness in life. Everything looked so gray in the future. I was going to Sidi-bel-Abbés to be with strangers till my father came. And even at best, though he loves me, I am a burden and a worry to him. Then, suddenly, comes this glorious joy! My Knight, my one Sir Knight, wants me, and cares! If I knew I were going straight to death, I'd go just the same, and just as joyously."

"We both realized what was in our hearts, and what must happen, when she looked out between her curtains like the Blessed Damozel, and I took her out of her bassourah and held her in my arms. That settled our fate," said Stanton, attractively boyish and eager in the warmth of his passion. It was genuine passion. There was no doubting that, but lit in an instant, like a burnt wick still warm from a flame blown out. How long would it last? How clear and true a light would it give? Max did not know how much of his doubt of Stanton was jealousy, how much regard for Sanda's happiness.

"To think this should come to me at Touggourt, where my father's happiness came to him!" Sanda murmured rapturously, as Max stood silent. "It is Fate, indeed!"

"Listen to the music of Africa," said Stanton. "The players followed us for 'luck.' What luck they've brought! Child, I was feeling lonely and sad. I almost had a presentiment that my luck was out. What a fool! All the strength and courage I've ever had you've given back to me with yourself!"

"I could die of happiness to hear you say that!" Sanda answered. "You see how it is, my friend, my dear, kind soldier? God has timed my coming here to give me this wonderful gift! You wouldn't rob me of it if you could, would you?"

"Not if it's for your happiness," Max heard something that was only half himself answer. "But"—and he turned on Stanton—"how do you propose to marry her—here?"

The other hesitated for an instant, then replied briskly, as if he had calculated everything in detail. This was characteristic of him, to map out a plan of campaign as he went along, as fast as he drew breath for the rushing words. Often he had made his greatest impressions, his greatest successes, in this wild way.

"Why, *you* will pitch your camp here for the night, instead of marching on to Touggourt," he said. "I camp here, too. My expedition is delayed for one day more, but what does that matter after a hundred delays? Heavens! I've had to wait for tents a beast of a Jew contracted to give me and didn't. I've waited to test water-skins. I've waited for new camel-men when old ones failed me. Haven't I a right to wait a few hours for a companion—a wife? The first thing in the morning we'll have the priest out from Touggourt. Sanda's Catholic. He'll marry us and we'll start on together."

"Couldn't we," the girl rather timidly ventured the suggestion, "couldn't we go to Touggourt? There must be a church there if there's a priest, and I—I'd like to be married in a church."

"My darling child! The priest shall consecrate a tent, or a bit of the desert," Stanton answered with decision, which, she must have realized, would be useless to combat. "He'll do it all right! Marriage ceremonies are performed by Catholic priests in houses, you know, if the man or the woman is ill; deathbed marriages, and—but don't let us talk of such things! I know I can make him do this when I show him how impossible it would be for us to go back to Touggourt. Why, the men I've got together, mostly blacks, would take it for a bad omen if I left the escort stranded here in the desert the first day out! Half of them would bolt. I'd have the whole work to do over again. You see that, don't you?"

Sanda did see; and even Max admitted to himself that the excuse was plausible. Yet he suspected another reason behind the one alleged. Stanton was afraid of things Sanda might hear in Touggourt; perhaps he feared some more active peril.

"I thought," Max dared to argue, "that it took days arranging the legal part of a marriage? You're an Englishman, Mr. Stanton, and Colonel DeLisle's daughter's a French subject, though she is half British. You may find difficulties."

"Damn difficulties!" exclaimed Stanton, all his savage impatience of opposition breaking out at last. "Don't you say so, Sanda? When a man and woman need each other's companionship in lonely places outside the world, is the world's red tape going to make a barrier between them? My God, no! Sanda, if your church will give you to me, and send us into the desert with its blessing, is it, or is it not, enough for you? If not, you're not the girl I want. You're not my woman."

"If you love me, I *am* 'your woman,'" said Sanda.

"You hear her?" Stanton asked. "If it's enough for her, I suppose it's enough for you, St. George?"

Through the blue dusk two blue eyes stared into Max's face. They put a question without words. "Have you any reason of your own for wanting to keep her from me?"

"Will it be enough for Colonel DeLisle?" Max persisted.

"I promised to shoulder all responsibility with him," repeated Stanton.

"And father would be the last man in the world to spoil two lives for a convention," Sanda added. "Do you remember his love story that I told you?"

Did Max remember? It was not a story to forget, that tragic tale of love and death in the desert. Must the story of the daughter be tragic, too? A great fear for the girl was in his heart. He believed that he could think of her alone, now, apart from selfishness. Realizing her worship of Stanton, had her fate lain in his hands he would have placed it in those of the other man could he have been half sure they would be tender. But her fate was in her own keeping. He could do no more than beg, for DeLisle's sake, that they would wait for the wedding until Stanton came back from his expedition. Even as he spoke, it seemed strange and almost absurd that he should be urging legal formalities upon any one, especially a man like Stanton, almost old enough to be his father. What, after all, did law matter in the desert if two people loved each other? And as Stanton said—patient and pleasant again after his outburst—they could have all the legal business, to make things straight in the silly eyes of the silly world, when they won through to Egypt, under English law.

The matter settled itself exactly as it would have settled itself had Max stormed protests for an hour. Sanda was to be married by the Catholic priest from Touggourt, as early in the morning as he could be fetched. The great caravan and the little caravan halted for the night. Stanton harangued his escort in their own various dialects, for there was no obscure lingo of Africa which he did not know, and this knowledge gave him much of his power over the black or brown men. The news he told, explaining the delay, was received with wild shouts of amused approval. Stanton was allowing some of his head men to travel with their wives, it being their concern, not

his, if the women died and rotted in the desert. It was his concern only to be popular as a leader on this expedition for which it had been hard to get recruits. It was fair that he, too, should have a wife if he wanted one, and the men cared as little what became of the white girl they had not seen as Stanton cared about the fate of their strapping females.

The mad music of the tomtoms and räitas played as Max, with his own hands, set up Sanda's little tent. "For the last time," he said to himself. "To-morrow night her tent will be Stanton's."

He felt physically sick as he thought of leaving her in the desert with that man, whom they called mad, and going on alone to report at Sidi-bel-Abbés, days after his leave had expired. Now that Sanda was staying behind, his best excuse was taken from him. He could hear himself making futile-sounding explanations, but keeping Mademoiselle DeLisle's name in the background. None save a man present at the scene he had gone through could possibly pardon him for abandoning his charge. After all, however, what did it matter? He did not care what became of him, even if his punishment were to be years in the African penal battalion, the awful *Bat d'Aff*, a sentence of death in life. "Perhaps I deserve it," he said. "I don't know!" All he did know was that he would give his life for Sanda. Yet it seemed that he could do nothing.

When all was quiet he went to his tent and threw himself down just inside the entrance with the flap up. Lying thus, he could see Sanda's tent not far away, dim in the starlit night. He could not see her, nor did he wish to. But he knew she was sitting in the doorway with Stanton at her feet. Max did not mean to spy; but he was afraid for her, of Stanton, while that music played. At last he heard her lover in going call out "good night," then it was no longer necessary to play sentinel, but though Sanda had slipped inside her tent, perhaps to dream of to-morrow, it seemed to Max that there were no drugs in the world strong enough to give him sleep. He supposed, vaguely, that if a priest consented to marry the girl to Stanton, after the wedding and the start of the explorer's caravan, he, Max, would board the first train he could catch on the new railway, and go to "take his medicine" at Sidi-bel-Abbés.

Before dawn, when Stanton came to tell Sanda that he was off for Touggourt to fetch the priest, no alternative had yet presented itself to Max's mind, and he was still indifferent to his own future. But when Stanton had been gone for half an hour, and a faint primrose coloured flame had begun to quiver along the billowy horizon in the east, he heard a soft voice call his name, almost in a whisper.

"Soldier St. George!" it said.

Max sprang up, fully dressed as he was, and went out of his tent. Sanda was standing near, a vague shape of glimmering white.

CHAPTER XXV

CORPORAL ST. GEORGE, DESERTER

"Is anything the matter?" he asked. A wild hope was in his heart that she might wish to tell him she had changed her mind. The joy of that hope snatched his breath away. But her first words put it to flight.

"No, nothing is the matter, except that I've been thinking about you. I could hardly wait to ask you some things. But I *had* to wait till morning. It is morning now that Richard is up and has gone, even though it isn't quite light. And it's better to talk before he comes back. There'll be—so much happening then—— You're all dressed! You didn't go to bed."

"No, I didn't want to sleep," said Max.

"I haven't slept, either. I didn't try to sleep! I'm so happy for myself, but I'm not *all* happy. I'm anxious about you. I see that I've been horribly, hatefully selfish—a beast!"

"Don't! I won't hear you say such things."

"You mustn't try and put me off. Will you promise by—by your love for my father—and your friendship for me, to answer truly the questions I ask?"

"All I can answer."

"If you don't answer, I shall know what your silence means. *Mon ami*, you made a great sacrifice for me. You gave up your march to take me safely to Bel-Abbés. You had only eight days' leave to do it in. I know, because my father said so in his letter. But I, thinking always of myself, gave no thought to that. You lost time coming back from Djazerta to the *douar*. Now I've kept you another night. Is there a train to-morrow going out of Touggourt?"

"I think so," said Max warily, beginning to guess the trend of her questions.

"What time does it start?"

"I don't know precisely."

"In the morning or at night?"

"I really can't tell."

"You mean you won't. But that *does* tell me, all the same. It goes in the morning. Soldier, I've made you late. I see now you've been very anxious all the time about overstaying your leave, but you wouldn't speak because it was for my sake."

"I've written to the officer in command at Sidi-bel-Abbés, explaining. It will be all right."

"It won't! You're keeping the truth from me. I see by your face. You've overstayed your leave already. I calculated it out last night. Even as it is, you are a day late."

"What of it? There's nothing to worry about."

"Do you suppose I can be a soldier's daughter and not have learned anything about army life? Soldier, much as I'd want you to stand by me if it could be right for you, it isn't right, and you must go! Go now, and be in time for that train this morning. One day late won't be so bad. But there won't be another train till Monday. By *diligence*, it's two days to Biskra. That means—oh! go, my friend! Go, and forgive me! Let us say good-bye now!"

"Not for the world," Max answered. "Not if they'd have me shot at Bel-Abbés, instead of putting me into *cellule* for a few days at worst. Nothing would induce me to leave you until"—he choked a little on the words—"until you're married."

"*Cellule*" she echoed. "You, in *cellule*! And your corporal's stripe? You'll lose it!"

"What if I do? I value it more for—for something Colonel DeLisle said than for itself."

"I know you were an officer in your American army at home. To be a corporal must seem laughable to you. And yet, the stripe is more than just a mere stripe. It's an emblem."

"I didn't mean you to think that I don't value it! I do! But I value other things more."

Day was quickening to life; Sanda's wedding day. In the wan light that bleached the desert they looked at each other, their faces pale. Max could not take his eyes from hers. She held them, and he felt her drawing from them the truth his lips refused to speak.

"You are like a man going to his death," she sobbed. "Oh, what have I done? It will be something worse, a thousand times worse, than *cellule*. *Mon Dieu!* I know what they do to men of the Legion when they've deserted—even if they come back. I implore you to go away now. Do you want me to beg you on my knees?"

"For God's sake, Mademoiselle DeLisle!"

"Then will you go?"

"No! I told you nothing could make me leave you till—after it's over. What would be the use anyhow, even if I would go? If they're going to call me a deserter, I'm that already."

"Ah!" she hid her face in her hands, shivering with sobs. "*I've* made you a deserter. I've ruined you! Your career my father hoped for! If he were at Bel-Abbés he'd save you. But he's far away in the desert." The girl lifted her face and brushed away the tears. "Soldier, *if you don't go now, don't go at all*! Don't offer yourself up to punishment for what is not your fault, but mine, the fault of your colonel's daughter. Stay with me—stay with us! Keep the trust my father gave you, watching over me. Will you do that? *Will* you, instead of going back straight to prison and spoiling your life? Join us and help us to find the Lost Oasis."

The young man's blood rushed to his head. He could not speak. He could only look at her.

"You say that already you've made yourself a deserter," she went on. "Then desert to us, I wanted you to join the Legion, and you did join; so I've called you '*my soldier*.' Now I want you not to go back to the Legion. It would be a horrible injustice for you to be punished as you would be. I couldn't be happy even with Richard, thinking of you in prison."

"The world is a prison, if it comes to that!" laughed Max.

"For some people. Not for a man like you! Besides, some of the cells in the world's prison are so much more terrible than others. Come with us, and by and by, if we live, we shall reach Egypt. There you'll be free, as Manöel Valdez will be free outside Algeria and France."

"My colonel's daughter asks me to do this?" Max muttered, half under his breath.

"Yes, *because* I am his daughter as well as your friend. Do you think he'd like you to go back to Sidi-bel-Abbés under a cloud, with him far away, not able to speak for you? I know as well as if you'd told me that, if they tried you by court-martial at Oran, you wouldn't defend yourself as you would if my father had *ordered* you to give up the march, instead of *asking* you to go on a private errand for him with your friend. Because he did an irregular thing and trouble has come of it, don't I know you'd suffer rather than let details be dragged from you which might injure my father's record as an officer?"

"His record is far above being injured."

"Is any officer's? From things I've heard, I'm afraid not! Once I told you that you were one of those men who think too little of themselves and sacrifice themselves for others. I only felt it

then. I know it now. I'm so much better acquainted with you, my Soldier! You promised, if you answered my questions, to answer them truly. Would you explain in a court-martial that my father took you off duty, and told you, whatever happened, to look after me?"

"I have already explained in a letter to the deputy commanding officer. Probably the colonel has explained, too—more or less, as much as necessary."

"I don't believe father would have thought it necessary to say much about me. He's old fashioned in his ideas of women and girls. And, you see, he had no reason to dream that anything could go wrong. He supposed that you would arrive on time. How much did you explain in your letter?"

"I said I had been unavoidably delayed in finishing my official errand."

"What would you say if you were court-martialled for losing Manöel and being five days late yourself?"

"I don't know. It would depend on the questions."

"Would you answer in any way that might do harm to my father, or would you sacrifice yourself again for him and for me?"

"It wouldn't be a sacrifice."

"Do you think you could save yourself from prison?"

"Perhaps not, but I shouldn't care."

"*I'd* care. It would break my happiness. Father couldn't tell you, as I do, to join us, but I know enough about his interest in you to be sure that in his heart he would wish it, rather than come back to Sidi-bel-Abbés and find you in the *Bat d'Aff*. I've heard all about that, you see."

Max was silent for a moment, thinking, and Sanda watched his face in the growing light. It was haggard and set for a face so young, but there was still in the eyes, which stared unseeingly across the desert, the warm, generous light that had once convinced her of the man's heroic capacity for self-sacrifice. "He is one who always gives," she thought. And something within her said that Stanton was not of those. He was one born not to give, but to take. Yet how glad every one must be, as she was, to give to him!

Max was greatly surprised and deeply touched by Sanda's care for him at such a time. And he was almost bewildered by the strange answer that had come to his self-questioning. He had felt a passionate reluctance to leave her with Stanton, not only because he himself loved and wanted her, but because her marriage was to be only half a marriage, and because Stanton was what he was. If the man tired of her, if he found her too delicate for the trials she would have to endure, the girl's life in the desert would be terribly hard. Max dared not think what it might be. He had felt that it would tear his heart out to see her going unprotected except by that fanatic, to be swallowed up by the merciless mystery of the desert. But because she had decided to go, and because she thought she had need of no one in the world except Stanton, Max had made up his mind that he must stand by and let her go. Now, suddenly, it was different. She wanted him as well as Stanton. True, it was only because she wished to save him, but she would be grieved if he refused. What if he should accept—that is, if Stanton were of the same mind as Sanda—and let them both suppose that his motive in joining them was to keep out of prison? He knew that his true reason would be other than that if he went. But searching his soul, he saw there no wrong to Stanton's wife. He would not go with that pair of lovers for his own pleasure, and no suffering he could endure, even in the *Bat d'Aff*, would be equal to seeing Sanda day after day, night after night, when she had given herself to Stanton. All he wanted was to be near her if he were needed. He could never justify himself to Colonel DeLisle or to any one else in the world by telling the truth; but because it was the truth, in his own eyes perhaps he might be justified.

"Have you thought long enough?" Sanda asked. "Can't you decide, and save my happiness?"

Save her happiness!...

"I have decided," Max said. "If Mr. Stanton will let a deserter join his caravan I will go."

CHAPTER XXVI

SANDA'S WEDDING NIGHT

What arguments the explorer used none save himself and the priest from Touggourt would ever know. But the priest came and married Sanda to Stanton according to the rites of the Catholic Church. In his eyes, as in the eyes of the girl, it was enough; for was she not, in the sight of heaven, a wife?

Stanton professed himself not only glad, but thankful, to have Max as a recruit for his expedition. He agreed with Sanda that it would be Quixotic, in the circumstances, to go back to Sidi-bel-Abbés.

"You'd be a damn fool, my boy," he said emphatically, "to go and offer yourself a lamb for the

sacrifice!" It did not occur to him that Max was offering himself on the altar of another temple of sacrifice. He thought the young man was "jolly lucky" to escape from the mess he had tumbled into and get the chance of a glorious adventure with Richard Stanton. It had been a blow and even a humiliation to the explorer that all the Europeans he had asked to accompany him had refused, either on the spot, or after deliberation. He believed in himself and his vision so completely, and had snatched so many successes out of the jaws of disaster, that it was galling not to be believed in by others, in this, the crowning venture of his life. If he could find the Lost Oasis he would be the most famous man in the world, or so he put it to himself; and any European with him would share the glory. It had been almost maddening to combat vainly, for once in his career, the objections and sneers of skeptics.

People had said that if no European, not even a doctor, would join him in his "mad mission," he would be forced to give it up. But he had found a fierce satisfaction in disappointing them and in showing the world that he, unaided, could carry through a project which daunted all who heard of it. He had triumphed over immense obstacles in getting together his caravan, for Arabs and Soudanese had been superstitiously depressed by the fact that the mighty Stanton could persuade no man of his own race to believe in the Lost Oasis. It was only his unique force of character that had made the expedition possible at last; that and his knowledge of medicine, even of "white and black" magic, his mastery of desert dialects, his eloquence in the language of those who hesitated, working them up to his own pitch of enthusiasm by descriptions of what he believed the Lost Oasis to be: a land of milk and honey, with wives and treasure enough for all, even the humblest. Napoleon, the greatest general of the French, had wished to search for the Lost Oasis, marching from Tripolitania to Egypt, but had abandoned the undertaking because of other duties, not because he ceased to believe. The golden flower of the desert had been left for Stanton and his band to pluck. Threats, persuasion, bribes, had collected for him a formidable force. If he had lingered at Touggourt, after getting the necessary men together, no one had dared to suggest in his hearing that it was because a desert dancing-woman was beautiful. He had always had weighty reasons to allege, even to himself: the stores were not satisfactory; the oil provided was not good; camels fell ill and substitutes had to be got; he was obliged to wait for corn to be ground into the African substitute for macaroni; Winchester rifles and ammunition promised for his fighting men did not turn up till long after the date specified in his contract. But now he was off on the great adventure; and, gloriously sure that all credit would be his, he was sincerely glad to have Max as a follower, humble yet congenial.

His meeting with Sanda seemed to Stanton a good omen. Since Ahmara had deserted him in a fury, because of the humiliation put upon her during DeLisle's visit, he had been in a black rage. Days had been lost in searching for her, because she had disappeared. He had dreamed at night of choking the dancer's life out, and shooting the man who had stolen her from him, for he had no doubt of the form her revenge had taken. In the end, he had decided to put her from his mind, persuading himself that he was sick to death of the tigress-woman whom he had thought of carrying with him on the long desert march. Still, he had been sad and thwarted, and the music of the tomtoms and räitas, instead of tributes to his triumph, had been like voices mocking at his failure. Then Sanda had magically appeared in the desert: fair and sweet as the moon in contrast with the parching sun. He had held out his arms on the impulse and she had fallen into them. Her youth, her white beauty in the blue night, lit a flame in him, and he fanned it greedily. It was good to know that he was young enough still to light another fire so soon on half-cold ashes. He revelled in making himself believe that he loved the girl. He respected and admired himself for it, and he drank in eagerly the story she told him in whispers, at the door of her tent in the night: the story of childish, hopeless hero-worship for her "Sir Knight." He was so confident of her adoring love that jealousy of Max would have seemed absurd, though Max was twenty-six and Stanton twenty years older. If it had occurred to him that Max might be romantically in love with Sanda, the idea would not have displeased him or made him hesitate to take the younger man as a member of his escort. There was a cruel streak running through Stanton's nature which even Sanda dimly realized, though it did not diminish her love. There were moods when he enjoyed seeing pain and inflicting it; and there were stories told of things he had done in such moods: stories told in whispers; tales of whipping black men to death when they had been caught deserting from his caravans; tales of striking down insubordinates and leaving them unconscious to die in the desert. It would have amused Stanton, if the idea had presented itself, to think of a love-sick young man helplessly watching him teach an uninstructed young girl the art of becoming a woman. But the idea did not present itself. He was too deeply absorbed in himself, and in trying to think how infinitely superior was a white dove like Sanda to a creature of the Ahmara type. He wished savagely that Ahmara might hear—when it was too late—of his marriage within a few days after their parting.

When the wedding ceremony was over the caravan started on at once, in order to reach, not too late, a certain small oasis on the route where Stanton wished to camp on his marriage night. He described the place glowingly to Max. There was no town there, he said, only a few tents belonging to the chief of a neighbour tribe to Ben Râana's. The men there guarded an artesian well whose water spouted up like a fountain. Though the oasis was small, its palms were unusually beautiful, and the group of tall trees with their spreading branches was like a green temple set in the midst of the desert. Altogether, Stanton remarked, it was an ideal spot for the beginning of a honeymoon. His eyes were more brilliant than ever as he spoke, and Max turned his head away not to see the other man's face, because the look on it made him want to kill Stanton. The martyrdom he knew awaited him had already begun.

Before starting into the unknown Max bought from the leader of his own camel-men some

garments which Khadra had washed for her husband at Ben Râana's *douar*. They were to be ready for his return to Touggourt, and were still as clean as the brackish water of the desert could make them. Dressed as an Arab, Max made a parcel of his uniform with its treasured red stripes of a corporal; and having addressed it for the post, paid the camel-driver to send it off for him from Touggourt to Sidi-bel-Abbés. The unpardonable sin of a deserting Legionnaire is to rob France of the uniform lent him for his soldiering. But returning her property to the Republic, Max sent no letter of regret or apology. He was a deserter, and to excuse himself for deserting would be an insult to the Legion. Nobody except DeLisle could possibly understand, and Max did not mean to offer explanations, even to his colonel. If in his heart Sanda's father could ever secretly pardon a deserter, it must be of his own accord, not because of what that deserter had to say on his own behalf.

Out of the little caravan Max had to discharge, Stanton kept the mehari with the bassourah which Sanda had ridden during the journey from Ben Râana's *douar*. It was, he said, laughing, a present direct from Providence to his bride, since not without delay could he have provided her with anything so comfortable for travelling. The finely bred camel and many other animals of the escort might fail or die en route, but there were places on the way where others could be got, as well as men to replenish vacancies made by deaths. Stanton was too old an explorer not to have calculated each step of the way, as far as any white man's story or black man's rumour described it. And he talked stoically of the depletion of his ranks. It was only his own failure or death which appeared to be for him incredible.

Stanton rode all day at the head of the caravan, with Sanda, on her mehari, looking down at him, "like the Blessed Damozel" as he had said, between her curtains. Max, on a strong pony which Stanton had bought as an "understudy" for his own horse, kept far in the rear. The desert had been beautiful for him yesterday. It was hideous to-day. He thought it must always be hideous after this. They saw the new moon for the first time that afternoon. Sanda, lost in a dream of happiness, pointed it out to Stanton, but he was vexed because they caught a glimpse of it over the left shoulder. It was a bad sign, he said, and Sanda laughed at him for being superstitious. As if anything could be a bad sign for them on *that day*!

"Little White Moon," Ourïeda and the other Arab women had called her at Djazerta. Stanton said it was just the name for her, when she told him. The girl was perfectly happy now that Max was rescued. She had no regrets, no cares; for, though she dearly loved her father, it would have been long before she saw him again even if she had gone to Sidi-bel-Abbés; and she knew he had hated the necessity for leaving her there without him. She believed it would be a great relief to such a keen soldier as he was not to be burdened with a girl. Often she felt it had been wrong and selfish of her to run away from the aunts and throw herself upon his mercy. Their few weeks together, learning to know and love each other, had been delicious, but the future might have been difficult if she had stayed.

Surely her father would be glad to have her married to his friend, and, even if there were dangers to be feared in the unknown desert, why, Colonel DeLisle was a soldier, and she was a soldier's daughter.

She wrote a letter to her father and gave it to the priest who had married her. Some day it must reach its destination, and there were things in it which would make Colonel DeLisle happy. Sanda believed there would be tender romance for him, as for her, in the thought of the marriage near Touggourt, where his love had come to him from half across the world.

Not a rap did the girl care for the hardships in front of her. She laughed and thought it a great adventure that she had no "trousseau," but only the few clothes which were wearable after her long visit to Djazerta. And if they were never to find the Lost Oasis, or if they themselves were to be lost, she would go forth with the same untroubled heart.

The crescent moon had dropped behind the horizon, like a bracelet in the sea, before they came in sight of the oasis where they were to spend the wedding night; but the sky glittered with encrusting stars that spread a silver background for the tall, dark palms. As the caravan descended into a wide valley between dunes, Max heard Stanton's voice shouting to him. He rode forward to the side of the "Chief," as the explorer was called by his men.

"Like a good chap, gallop ahead with my fellows and see that our tent is set up in the best place," said Stanton in his deep, pleasant voice. "I should like Sanda to find it all ready when she gets there. Have it put where my wife would think it prettiest; you'll know the right place; place you'd choose yourself if it was *your* honeymoon!"

There was no conscious malice in the words, but they cut like a lash in a raw wound. Max had the impulse to strike his horse with the whip, but he was ashamed of it and stroked the animal's neck instead, as with a word he urged it on.

"I must watch myself if this isn't to turn me into a beast," he thought. "It shan't, or I'll be worse than useless to her. She shan't fall between two brutes."

Stanton had already selected the men who were to pitch his bridal tent, and Max rode ahead with them and their loaded camels. He chose a spot between a miniature palm grove separated from the main oasis and the artesian well, far enough from the gushing water for its bubbling to be heard through canvas walls soothingly, like the music of a fountain.

Fortunately for the comfort of the unprepared-for bride, Stanton was a man who "did himself

well" when he could, though he had always been ready to face hardship if necessary. He had not considered it necessary to stint himself when starting on this expedition, although, later on, he would be quite ready to throw luxuries away as encumbrances. There were cushions and thick rugs and fine linen and soft blankets. There was also some folding furniture; and one object which revealed itself among the rugs at first surprised, then unpleasantly enlightened, Max. It was a rather large mirror with a gilded French frame, such as Arab women admire. For himself, Stanton would have had a shaving-glass a foot square, and the gaudy ornament made Max's blood boil. Stanton had certainly brought it for a woman: Ahmara. Before the quarrel, then, he had intended to take her with him! It was only by a chance that he had gathered a fair white lily instead of a desert poppy.

Max would have liked to break the mirror, but, instead, he saw that it was safely hung on one of the tent-hooks and supported by a brightly painted Moorish chest.

As he stepped out of the tent when all was finished and ready for the bride—even to a vase of orange blossoms brought by the priest from Touggourt—the caravan, which had been moving slowly at the last, had not yet arrived. Two elderly Arabs hovered near, however, the men who lived in the oasis to guard the well and the date palms in season. As Max spoke to them in his laboured Arabic he saw in the distance the form of a woman. Standing as she did, in the open ground with no trees between her and the far silver horizon, she was a noble and commanding figure, slender and tall like a daughter of the palms. She was for Max no more than a graceful silhouette, majestically poised, for he could not see her face, or even be sure that the effect of crown and plumes on her high-held head was not a trick of shadow. Indeed it seemed probable that it was a mere illusion, for crowns and waving plumes were worn by desert dancers, and it did not appear likely that a wife or daughter of the well-guardians should be so adorned.

As he exchanged elaborate compliments with the Arabs the woman's figure vanished and he thought no more of it, for Sanda and Stanton were arriving. Max turned away his eyes as Stanton took the bride out of her bassourah and half carried her toward their tent without waiting to thank the man who had placed it. Max busied himself feverishly in superintending the arrangements of the camp, which Stanton had asked him as his "lieutenant" to undertake that night.

The kneeling camels were tethered in long lines. No zareba would be raised, for there would be many a long march before the caravan reached perilous country. Here a fire could be built, for there was no danger in showing smoke and raising a rose-red glow against the silver. The unveiled women, whom Stanton had diplomatically allowed to accompany their husbands, began to cook supper for the men; couscous and coffee and thin, ash-baked bread. It was a long time since Stanton had taken Sanda to the tent under the little grove of palms, but he had given no orders yet for food to be prepared. Max thought it unlikely that he should be asked to eat with them, but if he were invited he intended to refuse. In spite of himself, he could not help glancing now and then toward the tent. The door-flaps had not been let down, but there was no light inside. Turning involuntarily that way, as iron turns to a magnet, at last he saw a man and woman come out of the tent. But the woman was not Sanda!

Max realized this with a shock. He saw both figures for an instant painted in blue-black against the light, khaki-coloured canvas. The woman was very tall, as tall as Stanton, and on her head was something high, like a crown set with plumes. Stanton led her away, walking quickly. They went toward the low, black tents of the guardians of the oasis.

Max stood still with a curious sensation of being dazed after a stunning blow half forgotten. How long he remained without moving he could not have told. His eyes had not followed the two figures very far. They returned to the tent and focussed there in anguish. Some scene there must have been between those three. He was not surprised when, after a short time—or a long time, he did not know which—Sanda appeared. He wondered if his soul had called her, and she was coming in answer to the call.

She hesitated at first, as if not sure where to go. Then catching sight of him at a distance, with the light of the fire ruddy on his face, she began to run. Almost instantly, however, she stopped, paused for a second or two, and it seemed to Max that she swayed a little as if she might fall. He started toward her with great strides; but he had not taken more than three or four when he saw that she was walking slowly but steadily straight toward him. He felt then, with a mysterious but complete certainty, that she wished him to go no farther, but to wait. He stopped, and in a moment she was by his side. She did not speak, but stood with her head drooping. Max could not see her face. After the first eagerly questioning glance he turned his eyes away. She did not wish him to look at her or break the silence. He held his tongue, but he was afraid she might hear the pounding of his heart and his breath coming and going. If she did she would guess that he knew something which, perhaps, she did not mean to let him know. At last, however, he could bear the strain no longer; besides, Stanton might come back. If there were anything he could do for her, if she wanted him to take her away—God! how his blood sang at the thought of it!—there was no more time to waste.

His tone sounded flat and ineffectual in his own ears as he spoke. The effort to keep it down to calmness made it almost absurd, as it would have been to mention the weather in that tingling instant. He asked simply: "Is there something—something I can do?"

"No," she said. "Nothing, thank you. Nothing any one can do."

The voice was not like the voice of Sanda, which Max had once compared in his mind to the ripple of a brook steeped in sunshine. It was thin and weak, almost like the voice of a little, broken old woman. But, praise heaven, she was young, so very young that she would live this down, and, some day, almost forget. If she would let him take her back to Sidi-bel-Abbés after all! This marriage by a priest without sanction of the law need not stand. She was not a wife yet, but a girl, oh! thank God for that! It was not too late. If only he could say these things to her. But it seemed that he must stand like a block of wood and wait for her to point the way.

"Are you—perhaps you're homesick?" he dared to give her a cue.

"Homesick?" Her voice broke and, instead of being like an old woman's, it was like a little child's. "Yes, that's it, I'm homesick! And—and I think I'm not very well. I want my father, I want him so much!"

The heart of the man who was not her father yearned toward the girl.

"Shall I take you back?" he panted. "We're not far past Touggourt. To-morrow it will be too late, but now—now——"

"Now it's already too late. Oh, Soldier! to have yesterday again!"

He did not ask her what she meant. He did not need to ask.

"It can be yesterday for you," he urged.

"No. Yesterday I was Sanda DeLisle. To-day I'm Sanda Stanton. Nothing can change that."

"If you're unhappy your father can change it. You see, it's only the church that——"

"*Only* the church!"

"Forgive me. But the law would say——"

"It doesn't matter to me what the law would say. It's the thing what you don't think matters that matters entirely to me. And even if it were so—even if I were—unhappy instead of only homesick, and somehow ill, I wouldn't go back if I could. I've written to my father. And that priest from Touggourt will have told the Amaranthes. Every one knows. It would be a disgrace to——"

"No! Not to you."

"I think it would. And to Richard. I have taken him by storm and almost forced him to marry me. I would die and be left alone in the desert rather than disgrace him in the world's eyes just when he's starting out on the crowning expedition of his life."

"Who put such an idea into your head that you'd taken him by storm, that——"

"Never mind. It is in my head, and it's true. I know it. Soldier, I'm glad, oh, *so* glad, that you're here! Will you help me?"

"You know I will," Max said, his heart bursting. If he had needed payment for what he had done, he had it in full measure. She was glad he was with her!

"Well, I've told you that I'm ill. It's my head—it aches horribly. I hardly know what I'm doing or saying. I *can't* be—in that tent to-night!"

"You shall have mine," Max assured her quickly. "It's a good little tent, got for the French doctor Stanton was telling us about, who decided at the last minute not to come."

"Oh, thank you a thousand times. But you?"

"I shall rig up something splendid. They've got more tents than they know what to do with. Several men fell out after Stanton had bought his supplies."

"You *are* good. Could I go to your tent now?"

"Of course. I'll take you there, and fetch your luggage myself. But you're sure you won't go back while there's time?"

"Sure."

"If you're ill you can't ride on with the caravan."

"I shall be better to-morrow. God will help me, and you will help me, too. I shall be able to go on for a while. Maybe it need not be for long. People die in the desert. I've always thought it a beautiful death. When you promise to marry a person it's for better or worse. And I've never said I was not *happy*, Soldier! Only a little homesick and tired."

"Come with me to my tent," Max said, realizing that all his persuasions would be in vain. "Come quietly now, and I'll explain to—to Stanton."

"He knows I feel ill," she answered. "I told him. He will understand."

CHAPTER XXVII

THE ONLY FRIEND

When Stanton returned to his tent and found it empty he went out quickly again and called for St. George.

This was one of the few possibilities of which Max had not thought. He had imagined Stanton remaining sullenly in his tent as if nothing had happened, or searching for Sanda and ordering, perhaps even forcing, her to go back with him. In that eventuality, and that only, Max intended to interfere. One side of his nature, the violent and uncontrolled side, which every real man has in him, wanted to "smash" Stanton; yearned for an excuse perhaps even to kill him and rid Sanda forever of a brute, no matter what the consequences to himself. But the side of him where common sense had taken refuge wished to keep neutral for Sanda's sake, in order to watch over her and protect her through everything. When he heard Stanton's call he was not far from the tent he had lent Sanda. She, and everything of hers which she could need for the night, was already there, but she had not lighted the candle he had given her. The little khaki-coloured tent was an inconspicuous object in sand of the same colour. Making an excuse of settling a dispute between two camels which disturbed the peace, Max had kept near the tent, and intended, unobtrusively, to play sentinel all night.

He answered the "Chief's" call on the instant, braced for any emergency.

"St. George, do you know where my wife is?" Stanton asked.

"She told me she felt ill, and that you wouldn't object to my lending her my tent," answered Max promptly.

"I felt sure she'd go to *you*," said Stanton, without the signs of anger Max expected. Then still greater was the younger man's surprise when the elder laughed. It was a slightly embarrassed laugh, but not ill-natured. "What else did she tell you?" Stanton wanted to know.

"She *told* me—nothing else." To save his life, Max could not resist that telltale emphasis which flung a challenge.

Stanton laughed again and thrust his hands deep into his pockets.

"I see you've drawn your own conclusions. Fact is, St. George, I'm in a deuce of a damned scrape, and the only bit of luck is having a sensible chap of my own colour, a friend of both sides, a gentleman and a soldier like you, to talk it out with. You'd like to help, wouldn't you, for the father's sake if not the daughter's?"

"Yes," said Max, after a hair's breadth of hesitation. He was so taken aback by Stanton's attitude that he feared the other man might be drawing him out in some subtle way detrimental to Sanda.

"I was sure you would. Well! I'm going to tell you the facts.

"You're a man of the world, I expect, or you wouldn't have found your way into the Legion. Before I had any idea of marriage I thought of carrying along a—companion, only an Arab dancing-girl, but I'd take my oath there hasn't been a more fascinating creature since Cleopatra. A gorgeous woman! No man on earth—not if he were an emperor or king—but would lose his head over her, if she tried to make him. No treachery to Sanda in the plan. The child didn't enter into my calculations then. It struck me, after I'd asked you to see to my tent, you might spot something—from that mirror."

"I did," Max admitted.

"Oh, well, anyhow, to make a long story short, the girl flew into one of those black rages of the petted dancer men have made a damned fuss over, and she disappeared. Lucky for Sanda! If Ahmara'd been with me I'd have had to see Mademoiselle wend her way to Touggourt with you. But as it was, in all good faith, I let myself go—one of my impulses that carry me along. I attribute most of my success in life to impulses; inspirations I call them. I honestly thought this was one, and that it would make for my happiness. But by jove, St. George, when I took Sanda into my tent an hour ago if there wasn't Ahmara waiting for me!"

He stopped an instant, as if expecting Max to speak, but when only dull silence answered he hurried on.

"She hadn't got the news of my marriage. She wanted to give me a pleasant surprise by forgiving me, and coming out here secretly, ahead of the caravan, to hide in my tent. Her arms were round my neck before I knew what was up—and the smell of '*ambre*' that's always in that long hair of hers—God, what hair!—was in my nose. Unfortunately Sanda had been picking up Arabic; so she understood some things Ahmara blurted out before I could stop her. She got on to the fact that there'd been a row—a sort of lover's quarrel—and if it hadn't been for a misunderstanding, Ahmara would have started out with me in her place—*practically* in her place. No need to tell you more except that Sanda and I had a few words, after she'd refused to see the situation in the right light. I was sure she'd appeal to you. I am glad you thought of offering her your tent. I shall leave her to stew in her own juice to-night, and come slowly to her senses. She's too fond of me not to do that before long."

"When you've sent that woman away to-morrow——" Max began. But Stanton cut him short.

"I shan't send her away to-morrow."

"What? You——"

"Sanda had the childish impudence to tell me to-night that nothing could ever make any difference between us after what had passed. Perhaps it was partly my fault, for I lost my head for a minute when she accused me of tricking her into marrying me, or words to that effect. I'm afraid I said she had forced *me* into it—thrown herself at me—taken me unawares—something of that sort. In a way it's true. Heart caught in the rebound! But I wouldn't have been cad enough to throw it up to her if she hadn't said things so silly that a saint would have been wild. The girl vows she won't live with me as my wife. Well, I shall hold Ahmara as a threat over her head till she sees the error of her ways. It's the one thing to do, as I look at it. Besides, if I try to pack Ahmara back to Touggourt she'll screech like a hen with her head cut off. I won't be made a laughing stock before my men, at the start, before I've shown them what sort of a leader they've got. Ahmara comes from the south. If Sanda decides to behave herself I'll drop the dancer at her own place, *en route*. Meanwhile, I'll have time for bargaining over her with my wife, and Ahmara can travel with the other women. Several men with their wives have agreed to go only part of the way and get new fellows to join when they leave. That's the only way to shed Ahmara without trouble, as she's landed herself on me. And that's the way I'll take—as I said, if Sanda behaves herself."

"And if—not? I suppose you'll send—Mrs. Stanton back?"

"Damnation, I can't do that, St. George, and you know it. It would mean a duel with her father, and all the world would be down on me just at the time I'm bidding highest for its applause. If Sanda travels with me, whether she lives with me or not, she'll keep her mouth shut. She's that kind of girl. Don't you, as her friend—or anyhow, her father's friend—know her well enough to understand that?"

"I may think I'd know what *she'd* do," Max flung back at the other. "But God knows what *I'd* do if you insulted Mademoiselle DeLisle—Mrs. Stanton, I mean—by keeping that woman in the caravan. I believe I'd kill you!"

Stanton stared. "Good Lord!" he exclaimed, in a change of mood, looking suddenly like a great helpless schoolboy arraigned, "I thought I was talking to a friend. I was asking your advice, and you turn on me like a tiger. See here, St. George, if you're going to bite the hand I offer, *you'd* better be the one to go."

Max was staggered. He had made a false move. He could not go. Now, more than ever, a thousand times more, Sanda needed a friend, and he was the only one within reach. Perhaps he could not always help, but he could at least keep near. Only these unexpected confidences from Stanton could have made him so lose grip upon himself; and it must not happen again.

"I've just given you my advice," Max reminded the other more quietly.

"I can't take it."

"Then don't. We'll leave it at that."

"I ask no better. Do you want to go or stay?"

"I want to stay."

"Very well, then. I need a man like you, and I want you to stay, if you'll mind your own business."

"I will," Max promised fervently.

But as to what his business was, there might be different opinions.

As the long days passed and the caravan toiled on through dunes and alkali deserts and strange, hidden mountainlands, it was hard to keep before his eyes the best way of "minding his own business"—the best way for Sanda. That which was highest in him prayed for peace between her and Stanton. That which was lowest wished for war. And it was war. Not loud, open warfare, but a silent battle never ceasing; and the one hope left in Sanda's heart for her own future was death in the desert. She had determined to go on, and she would go on; but blinding, blessed suns of noon might strike her dead; she might take some malarial fever in the swampy, saltpetre deserts through which the caravan must travel. There were also scorpions and vipers. These things she had heard of as among the minor perils of Stanton's expedition, and there were many more formidable, of course, such as Touaregs and Tibbu brigands. She made Max swear that, if they were attacked, and there were danger for the women, he would shoot her with his own hand. That would not be a bad solution. And there were others. Her father had said that nearly all experts prophesied annihilation for Stanton and his men.

Sanda did not "behave herself." Nothing less than force could have dragged her to Stanton's tent, and the man openly found consolation with Ahmara; at first, perhaps, partly in defiance, but, as time went on, because such love as he had to give was for the "most fascinating creature since

Cleopatra." For the men of the caravan there was nothing very startling in this arrangement. The law of their religion and country gave each of them four wives, if he could afford to keep them. Ahmara, darkly beautiful and bejewelled, condescended to travel with the other women of her race, but when the camp was made she moved about proudly, like an eastern queen, and went wherever it was her will to go. Sometimes she passed nearer than was necessary to Sanda's tent, and turning her crowned head on its full round throat let her long eyes dwell on the rival who ignored her existence.

The life she had undertaken would have been impossible for Sanda without Max. If he had not been there, a self-appointed watchdog, Ahmara would certainly have insulted Stanton's white bride, or might even have attempted to kill her. But Ahmara was afraid of Max St. George. She had caught a murderous glint in his eye more than once, and knew that if she crossed a certain dead line which that look defined he would not hesitate to deal with her as with a wildcat.

As for Sanda, if she ever thought that Ahmara might stab her some night when Max was off guard, she told herself that she did not care. She longed for death as the one way out of the cage into which she had foolishly flown, and would have prayed for it, if such a prayer were not to her mind sacrilegious. She was too young to realize that to wish is to pray. Sanda was always hoping that something might happen to put an end to everything for her. She disregarded precautions which others took against sunstroke. If there came up a sandstorm she stole away and faced it while the rest sheltered, longing to be overwhelmed and blotted out of existence. But it seemed extraordinarily difficult to die. And then, there was always Max. Unfailingly he was on the spot to ward off danger, or to save her from the effects of what he called her "carelessness," though he must have guessed the meaning underneath alleged imprudences.

Sanda never confided in Max, yet she was aware that he could not help knowing why she refused to live with Stanton. She could not bear to speak of her humiliation, and Max would have cut his tongue out rather than let slip a word concerning it after his first vain appeal.

As time went on and the caravan advanced on its march across the desert, Stanton ignored the presence of Sanda as she ignored Ahmara's. She ate and slept in her own tent, which had been Max's. He it was who saw that she had good food and filtered water. Wherever fruit could be got, by fair means or foul, there was some for her, whether others had it or not. Max made coffee and tea for Sanda. He tended the camel she rode in order that it might be strong and in good health. When the caravan came into the country of the Touaregs he rode near her day by day, and at night lay as close to her tent as he dared. Sometimes he noticed that Stanton eyed him cynically when he performed unostentatious services for Sanda, but outwardly the only two white men were on civil terms. Stanton even seemed glad of Max's companionship, and discussed routes and prospects with him, asking his advice sometimes; and once, when the explorer was attacked by a Soudanese maddened by the sun and Stanton's brutality, Max struck up the black man's weapon; almost before he knew what he was doing he had saved the life of Sanda's husband.

"Why did I do it?" he asked himself afterward. Yet he knew some strange "kink" in his nature would compel him to do the same thing again under like circumstances.

Stanton, at his best, was an ideal leader of men. Many a forlorn hope he had led and brought to success through sheer self-confidence and belief in his star. But whether the failure of his mad marriage had disturbed his faith in his own persistent luck, or whether Ahmara's influence made for degeneration, in any case, a blight seemed to have fallen on the once great man's mentality. It had been a boast of his that, though he drank freely when "resting on his laurels" in Europe, he was strong enough to "swear off" at any moment. He had accustomed himself to taking tea and water only in blazing African heat; and since the serious illness that followed his sunstroke he had been forbidden to touch alcohol anywhere, in any circumstances. For a time he had been frightened into obedience to doctors' orders; but gradually he had drifted back into old habits; and after his quarrel with Ahmara at Touggourt he found oblivion in much Scotch whisky, his favourite drink.

Perhaps if all had gone well with Stanton, if Ahmara had not come again into his life and lost him Sanda's childlike worship, he might have pulled himself together after the starting of the caravan. But, as it was, there were black thoughts to be chased away, and the simplest receipt for replacing them with bright ones was to fill his head with fumes of whisky.

When Sanda, riding behind her curtains, or shrinking in her tent, heard Stanton cursing the negro porters, and roaring profane abuse at the camels and camel-drivers, she did not know that he was drunk; but the men knew, and, being sober by religion, ceased to respect him. Among themselves, they began to question the wisdom of his orders, and suspect him of treachery toward themselves. Losing faith in the leader, they lost faith in the wonderful hidden oasis he sought, the oasis peopled by rich Egyptians who had vanished into the desert to escape persecution after the Sixth Dynasty. Arabs and negroes said it must be true after all that the "Chief" was mad, and they had been mad to trust themselves to him, or to believe in the mysterious city lost beyond unexplored mountains and shifting dunes which were but shrouds for dead men. He was either deliberately leading them all to death, for the insane pleasure of it, or else he had some plan for making his own fortune by selling his escort as slaves. Men began to desert whenever they came to an attractive stopping-place where there was food and water. They feigned illness, or fled in the night with their camels into the vastness of the desert, their faces turned once more to the west. For soon, if they stayed, they would pass beyond the zone of known oases, into the terrible land of mystery, charted by no man, a land where it was said the sun had dried up all the springs of water. So the caravan dwindled as slowly, painfully it moved

toward the east; and even while he hated him, Max was sometimes moved to pity for the harassed leader. Stanton grew haggard as the desert closed in round him and his disaffected followers; but there were days when, instead of sympathizing reluctantly, Max cursed the explorer for a brute, and cursed himself for saving the brute's life. There were days when Stanton shot or whipped a Soudanese for an impudent word, or ordered a forced march because Sanda had sent to beg respite for some wretch struck down with fever whom she was nursing.

As the men lost faith in Stanton and his vision of the Lost Oasis they attached themselves fanatically to the wife of their Chief, the "Little White Moon," who seldom spoke to her husband save to defend one of their number from his fits of anger, and who, with her golden hair and her skin of snow that the fierce sun could not darken, was like the shining angel who walks at the right hand of a good Mohammedan. They saw no wrong in Ahmara's presence; but she was haughty and high-tempered, and took part against them with Stanton. The whisper ran that the dancing-woman had brought bad luck to the expedition for so long as she was with the caravan; whereas, if fortune were to come, it would come through the white girl who nursed the sick and had a smile or a kind word for the humblest porter. This whisper reached Ahmara's ears through the wives of the camel-drivers, and at first she was anxious to keep it from Stanton lest it should prejudice him and put into his head the idea of leaving her at one of the far apart oasis towns where the caravan took supplies. But the more she turned over the thought in her unenlightened mind, the more impossible it seemed to her that Stanton would give her up. Besides, he was very brave, even braver than the great chiefs of her own race, for they feared unseen things and omens, whereas he laughed at their superstition. She used every art of the professional charmer upon Stanton for the next few days, while she asked herself whether to tell what she had learnt, or not to tell, were wiser.

When she was convinced that she had made herself more indispensable than ever, Ahmara put the story into the form that seemed to her very good. She said that nothing which passed in the caravan could escape her, because the life of the leader was her life. She wished to be for him like a lighted candle set at the door of his tent, the flame her spirit, which felt each breath of evil threatening his safety. The men who hated the Chief for his power or because he had punished them hated her also because she was true to him as the blood that beat in his heart.

"Those who are cowards and find the greatness of thy adventures too great for them, now they have tasted hardship, mutter in secret against thee," Ahmara said. "There are some who mean to band together and refuse to follow thee past the last-known oasis which is marked on thy maps. They say, that from what they have heard, thou art indeed mad to think that a caravan can live in unknown deserts where there is no water. Once they believed in thee so firmly if thou hadst told them thou couldst cause water to spout from dry sand they would have taken thy word for truth. But now the white girl, who is too proud to be thy wife because thy faithful one followed thee into the desert, has bewitched the men. They think she is a *marabouta*, a saint endowed with magic power, and that her spirit is stronger than thine. They will offer themselves to *her* man, when we come to the place where the known way ends, if he will promise to lead them straight to Egypt, without wandering across the open desert to seek thy Lost Oasis."

"Her man!" echoed Stanton, the blood suffusing his already bloodshot eyes as in an instant it reddens those of an angry St. Bernard. "What do you mean?"

"Thou knowest without my telling, my Chief. The man whose idol she is. There is but one man—the man who watches over her by day and night, and makes himself her slave."

"You're a fool, Ahmara," Stanton said roughly. "Don't you suppose I've got sense enough to see why you want to put such ideas into my head? You're jealous of my wife. St. George and she are nothing to each other. As for the men, like as not they growl in your hearing because they hope you'll repeat their nonsense to me and give me a fright. That's all there is in it."

"I know thou art a lion and fearest nothing," Ahmara meekly answered. But next day she saw that Stanton watched Max.

On the following night they came to the oasis of which she had spoken. It was called Dardaï, and lay between two danger-zones. The first of these—danger from man—was practically passed at Dardaï, Stanton calculated, and knew that he had been lucky to bring his caravan through the land of the Touaregs (which he had risked rather than face almost certain death along the shorter, more northern way of Tripolitania) with only a few thefts from marauders and no loss of life by violence. Perhaps the formidable size of the caravan and the arms it carried had been its protection, rather than the repute of its leader; but Stanton took the credit to himself. He told himself that, after all, he had triumphed over difficulties as no other man in his place could have done. It was monstrous and incredible that the spirit of the caravan should have turned against him. He said this over and over, but in his heart he knew that he had lost prestige through faults in his own nature, and because of mistakes he had made ever since the bad beginning. He knew that, although he had brought his followers through the first danger-zone without too many accidents, the second zone, the uncharted zone of Libyan desert which stretched before them now, had ten times more of danger in it than the zone of danger from men. Whisky could not chase away his gloom that night when he had come to camp from the house of the sheikh who had entertained him at dinner in the village, and to whom he had given valuable presents in exchange for help expected. But if the liquor could not cheer him, it made him conscious of his own bulldog tenacity.

"I'll show the ungrateful devils who is master," he thought as he looked out from his tent door to

the glow of the fire round which his men had been watching some naked male dancers of Dardaï. The dancers had gone, but the watchers had not yet moved. They were talking together more quietly than usual, in groups. Stanton wondered what they were saying; and he stared, frowning, over their heads toward the east, where lay the Libyan desert. They were practically out of the Sahara now.

As he gazed, Ahmara came flitting across a moonlit space of sand that lay like a silver lake between the tent and the rest of the camp.

"Thou art back, O master of my heart, from thy visit to the sheikh," she said. "Did it pass off well?"

"Well enough," Stanton answered mechanically. For the moment he was indifferent to Ahmara, though her strange face was tragically beautiful. In the pale light the figure of Max St. George became suddenly visible to him. It moved out from behind the tents and walked over to the fire. Stanton, on a quick impulse, called out to Max harshly:

"Come here, St. George! I want you; hurry up!"

Ahmara slipped behind Stanton, who took a step forward, and, as he forgot her, she darted into his tent.

CHAPTER XXVIII

SANDA SPEAKS

It was Max's policy, for Sanda's sake, never to give Stanton a pretext to send him away. He kept his temper under provocations almost intolerable; and now he obeyed the truculent summons.

"What do you want?" he asked stiffly when he had come near enough to speak in an ordinary tone.

"I'll tell you inside my tent," the explorer answered, stalking in first and leaving his guest to follow. Stanton was somewhat surprised to see Ahmara sitting on her feet, her ringed hands on her knees, her crowned head thrown back against the canvas wall; but on the whole, he was not sorry that she was there. She might be useful. He only smiled sarcastically when, at sight of her, Max stopped on the threshold.

"Don't be afraid to come in," Stanton laughed; "the lady won't mind."

"But *I* do," Max returned, with the curt politeness of tone which irritated Stanton. "I'll stand here if you please."

"All right. My orders won't take long to give. I want you to go to your friend's tent with a message from me."

"My friend's tent?" Max's eyes sent out a spark in the dull yellow light.

"My wife's tent, then, if you think the name's more appropriate. I believe she's likely to favour you as a messenger, and she hasn't gone to bed, for her tent's lit up. Tell her from me, I find it subversive of discipline in this caravan for a woman to set her will up against the leader and live apart from her husband. Entirely for that reason and not because I want anything to do with her, after the way I've been treated, I've made up my mind that she and I must live together like other married people. I wish the change to be made with the knowledge of the whole caravan. Go and tell her to come here; and then give my orders to Mahmoud and Zaid to bring anything over she may need."

If eyes could kill, Stanton would have dropped like a felled ox. But Max would not give him the satisfaction of a blow or even of a word. With a look of disgust such as he might have thrown at a wallowing drunkard in a gutter, St. George turned his back on the explorer and walked away. Before he could escape out of earshot, however, the Chief was bawling instructions to Ahmara.

"Since that fellow is above taking a message, go you, and deliver it," roared Stanton, repeating in Arabic the orders flung at Max. "Her ladyship knows enough of your language to understand. Say to her, if she isn't at my tent door in ten minutes I'll fetch her. She won't like that."

Max had not meant to go near Sanda, but fearing insult for her from the Arab woman, he changed his mind, and put himself between Ahmara and Sanda's tent. As the tall figure in its full white robes came floating toward him in the moonlight, he blocked the way. But the dancer did not try to pass. She paused and whispered sharply: "Thinkest thou I want the girl to go to him? No, I'd kill her sooner. But he is watching. Let me only tell her to beware of him. If she is out of her tent when he searches, what can he do? And by to-morrow night I shall have had time to make him change his mind."

"You shan't speak to Mrs. Stanton if I can help it," said Max. "Besides, I won't trust you near her. You're a she-devil and capable of anything."

"Speak to her at the door thyself, if thou art afraid my breath will wither thy frail flower," Ahmara

sneered. "Tell her to escape quickly into the shadows of the oasis, for the master will not care to lose his dignity in hunting her. As for thee, thou canst run to guard her from harm, as thou hast done before when she wandered, and I will carry word to the Chief that the White Moon refuses to shine for him. In ten minutes he will set out to fetch her, according to his word; but when he finds her tent empty he will return to his own with Ahmara, I promise thee, to plan some way of punishment. Shelter thy flower from that also if thou canst, for it may not be to my interest to counsel thee then, as it is now."

Max turned from the dancer without replying, and she hovered near while he spoke at the door of Sanda's tent, within which the light had now gone out.

"Mrs. Stanton!" he called in a low voice. "Mrs. Stanton!"

Sanda did not answer; and he called for the third time, raising his voice slightly, yet not enough for Stanton to hear at his distance.

Still all was silence inside the tent, though it was not five minutes since the light had been extinguished, and Sanda could hardly have fallen asleep. Could she have heard what he and Ahmara were saying? He wondered. It was just possible, for he had stepped close to the tent in barring the dancer away from it. If Sanda had heard hurrying footsteps and voices she might have peeped through the canvas flaps; and having made an aperture, it would have been easy to catch a few words of Ahmara's excited whispers.

"Perhaps she took the hint and has gone," Max thought; and an instant later assured himself that she had done so, for the pegs at the back of the tent had been pulled out of the sand. The bird had flown, but Max feared that it might only be from one danger to another. In spite of the friendly reception given to the caravan at Dardaï, a young woman straying from camp into the oasis would not be safe for an instant if seen; and in the desert beyond Sanda might be terrified by jackals or hyenas. Bending down Max saw, among the larger tracks made by himself and the men who had helped him pitch the tent, small footprints in the sand: marks of little shoes which could have been worn by nobody but Sanda. The toes had pressed in deeply, while the heelprints were invisible after the first three or four. As soon as she was out of the tent, Sanda had started to run. She had gone away from the direction of the dying fire, in front of which the men of the caravan still squatted, and had taken the track that led toward the oasis. There was a narrow strip of desert to be crossed, and then a sudden descent over rocks, down to an *oued* or river-bed, which gave water to the mud village high up on the other side. This was the way the oasis dwellers had taken after a visit of curiosity to the camp; and as the night was bright and not cold, some might still be lingering in the *oued*, bathing their feet in the little stream of running water among the smooth, round stones. Max followed the footprints, but lost them on the rocks, and would have passed Sanda if a voice had not called him softly.

The girl had found a seat for herself in deep shadow on a small plateau between two jutting masses of sandstone.

"I saw you," she said as he stopped. "I wondered if you would come and look for me."

"Weren't you sure?" he asked. "When I found the tent-pegs up, I knew you'd gone; and I followed the footprints, because it's not safe for you to be out in the night alone."

"Safer than in my tent, if he——" she began breathlessly, then checked herself in haste. She was silent for a minute, looking up at Max, who had come to a stand on the edge of her little platform. Then, for the first time since she had begged him to join the caravan instead of going back to Bel-Abbés, she broke down and cried bitterly.

"What am I to do, Soldier?" she sobbed. "You know—I never told you anything, but—you *know* how it is with me?"

"I know," said Max.

"I've been always hoping I should die somehow, and—and that would make an end," the girl wept. "Other people have died since we have started: three strong men and a woman, one from a viper's bite and the others with fever. But I can't die! Soldier, you never *let* me die!"

"I don't mean to!" Max tried to force a ring of cheerfulness into his voice, though black despair filled his heart. "You've got to live for—your father."

"I hope I shall never see him again!" she cried sharply. "He'd know the instant he looked into my eyes that I was unhappy. I couldn't bear it. Oh, Soldier, if only I had let you take me back when you begged to, even as late as that morning—before Father Dupré came out from Touggourt. But it makes things worse to think of that now—of what might have been!"

"Let's think of what will be, when we get through to Egypt," Max encouraged her.

"I don't want to get through. The rest of you, yes, but not I! Soldier, what am I to do if he tries to make—if he won't let me go on living alone?"

"He *shall* let you," said Max between his teeth.

"You mean that you—but that would be the worst thing of all, if you quarrelled with him about me. You've been so wonderful. Don't you think I've seen?"

Max's heart leaped. What had she seen? His love, or only the acts it prompted?

"Don't be afraid, that's all," he said. His voice shook a little. As her face leaned out of the shadow looking up to him, lily-pale under the moon, he feared her sweetness in the night, feared that it might break down such strength as he had and make him betray his secret. How he would hate himself afterward, if in a mad moment he blurted out his love for this poor child who so needed a faithful friend! In terror of himself he hurried on. "Better let me take you back now," he suggested almost harshly. "You can't stay here all night."

"Why can't I?"

"Because—it's best not. I'll walk with you as far as the camels, and then drop behind—not too far off to be at hand if—anything disturbs you. Did you hear all that woman said to me?"

"About his looking into my tent and then going back to his own—that she'd promise he *should* go back? Yes, I listened before I ran away. Those were the last words I waited for."

Max was glad she had not overheard the threat of future punishment.

"Well, then, your tent will be safe."

"Safe?" she echoed. "Safe from him—from my *hero*! What fools girls can be! But perhaps there was never one so foolish as I. It seems æons since I was that person—that happy, silly person. Well! It doesn't bear thinking of, much less talking about; and I never did talk before, did I? We'll go back, since you say we must. But not to my tent. I'd rather sit by the fire all night, if the men have gone when we get there. After dawn I can rest, as we're not to travel to-morrow."

She held out both hands to be helped up from her low seat, and Max fought down the impulse to crush the slender white creature against his breast. Slowly they walked back over the rocks and through the moon-white sand, until they could see not only the glow of the fire, but the smouldering remnants of palm-trunks. Dark, squatting figures were still silhouetted against the ruddy light, and Sanda paused to consider what she should do. She stopped Max also, with a hand on his arm.

"It's a wonderful picture, or would be if one were happy!" she muttered; and then Max could feel some sudden new emotion thrill through her body. She started, or shivered, and the fingers lying lightly on his coat-sleeve tightened.

"What is it?" he asked, but got no answer. The girl was standing with slightly lifted face, her eyes closed, as if behind the shut lids she saw some vision.

"Sanda!" he breathed. It was the first time he had called her by that name, though always in his thoughts she was Sanda. "You're frightening me!"

"Hush!" she said. "I'm remembering a dream; you and I in the desert together, and you saving me from some danger, I never found out what, because I woke up too soon. Just now it was as if a voice told me this was the place of the dream."

What caused Max to tear his eyes from the rapt, white face of the girl at that instant, and look at the sand, he did not know. But he seemed compelled to look. Something moved, close to Sanda's feet; something thin and long and very flat, like a piece of rope pulled quickly toward her by an unseen hand. Max did not stop to wonder what it was. He swooped on it and seized the viper's neck between his thumb and finger and snapped its spine before it had time to strike Sanda's ankle with its poisoned fang. But not before it had time to strike him.

The keen pin-prick caught him in the ball of the thumb. It did not hurt much, but Max knew it meant death if the poison found a vein; and he did not want to die and leave Sanda alone with Stanton. Flinging the dead viper off, he whipped the knife in his belt from its sheath, and with its sharp blade slit through the skin deep into the flesh. A slight giddiness mounted like the fumes from a stale wine-vat to his head as he cut down to the bone and hacked off a bleeding slice of his right hand, then cauterized the wound with the flame of a match; but he was hardly conscious of the pain in the desperate desire to save a life necessary to Sanda. It was of her he thought then, not of himself at all as an entity wishing to live for its own pleasure or profit; and he was dimly conscious, as the blood spurted from his hand, of hoping that Sanda did not see. He would have told her not to look, but the need to act was too pressing to give time for words. Neither he nor she had uttered a sound since his dash for the viper had shaken her clinging fingers from his arm; and it was only when the poisoned flesh and the burnt match had been flung after the dead snake that Max could glance at the girl.

When he did turn his eyes to her, it was with scared apology. He was afraid he had made her faint if she had seen that sight; luckily, though, blood wasn't quite so horrid by moonlight as by day.

"I'm sorry!" he stammered. But the words died on his lips. She was looking straight at him with a wonderful, transfiguring look. Many fleeting expressions he had seen on that face of his adoration, but never anything like this. He did not dare to think he could read it, and yet—yet——

"Have you given your life for me this time?" she asked, in a strange, deadly quiet tone.

"No, no. I shall be all right now I've got rid of the poison," he answered. "I'll bind my hand up with this handkerchief——"

"I'll bind it," she cut him short; and taking the handkerchief from him she tore it quickly into

strips. Then with practised skill she bandaged the wound. "That must do till we get to my tent," she told him. "There I've lint and real bandages that I use for the men when they hurt themselves, and I'll sponge your hand with disinfectant. But, my Soldier, my poor Soldier, how can I bear it if you leave me? You won't, will you?"

"Not if I can possibly help it," said Max.

"How soon can we be sure that you've cut all the poison out?"

"In a few minutes, I think."

"And if you haven't, it's—death?"

"I can't let myself die," Max exclaimed.

"It's for my sake you care like that, I know!" Sanda said. "And *I* can't let you die—anyhow, without telling you something first. Does the poison, if you've got it in you, kill very quickly?"

"It does, rather," Max admitted, still apologetically, because he could not bear to have Sanda suffer for him. "But it's a painless sort of an end, not a bad one, if it wasn't for—for——"

"For leaving me alone. I understand. And because you may have to—very soon, though I pray not—I shall tell you what I never would have told you except for this. Only, if you get well, you must promise not to speak of it to me—nor even to seem to remember; and truly to forget, if you can."

"I promise," Max said.

"It's this: I know you care for me, Max, and I care for you, too, dearly, dearly. All the love I had ready for Richard flowed away from him, like a river whose course had been changed in a night by a tremendous shock of earthquake. Gradually it turned toward you. You won it. You deserve it. I should be a wretch—I shouldn't be natural if I didn't love you! That's all I had to tell. I couldn't let you go without knowing. And if you do go, I shall follow you soon, because I couldn't live through a day more of my awful life without you."

"Now I *know* that I can't die!" Max's voice rang out. "If there was poison in my blood, it's killed with the joy of what you've said to me."

"Joy!" Sanda echoed. "There can be no joy for us in loving each other, only sorrow."

"There's joy in love itself," said Max. "Just in knowing."

"Though we're never to speak of it again?"

"Even though we're never to speak of it again."

So they came to Sanda's tent; and Stanton, sitting in his open doorway, saw them arrive together. With great strides he crossed the strip of desert between the two tents, and thrust his red face close to the blanched face of Max. His eyes spoke the ugly thing that was in his mind before his lips could utter it. But Sanda gave him no time for words that would be unforgivable.

"I had gone to the river," she said, with a hint of pride and command in her voice that Max had never heard from her. It forbade doubt and rang clear with courage. "Monsieur St. George was afraid for me, and came to bring me back. On the way he killed a viper that would have bitten me, and was bitten himself. He has cut out the flesh round the wound and cauterized it; and he will live, please God, with care and rest."

Taken aback by the challenging air of one who usually shrank from him, Stanton was silenced. Sanda's words and manner carried conviction; and even before she spoke he had failed in goading himself to believe evil. Drunk, he had for the moment lost all instincts of a gentleman; but, though somehow the impulse to insult Sanda was beaten down, the wish to punish her survived. Max's wound and the fever sure to follow, if he lived, gave Stanton a chance for revenge on both together, which appealed to the cruelty in him. Besides, it offered the brutal opening he wanted to show his authority over the sullenly mutinous men.

"Sorry, but St. George will have to do the best he can without rest," Stanton announced harshly. "We start at four-thirty. It is to be a surprise call."

"But we were to stop till to-morrow and refit!" Sanda protested in horror.

"I've changed my mind. We don't need to refit. In five hours we shall be on the march."

"No!" cried Sanda. "You want to kill my only friend, but you shall not. You know that rest is his one chance, and you'd take it away. I won't have it so. He stays here, and I stay with him."

"Stay and be damned," Stanton bawled.

The men sitting by the distant fire heard the angry roar, and some jumped to their feet, expecting an alarm.

"Stay and be damned, and may the vultures pick the flesh off your lover's bones, while the sheikh takes you to his harem. He's welcome to you," Stanton finished.

Before the words were out Max leaped at the Chief's throat. All the advantage of youth was his, against the other's bulk; but as he sprang Ahmara bounded on him from behind, winding her

arms around his body and throwing on him all her weight. It made him stagger, and, snatching up the heavy campstool on which he had been sitting, Stanton struck Max with it on the head. Weakened already by the anguish in the torn nerves of his hand (most painful centre for a wound in all the body), Max fell like a log, and lay unconscious while Ahmara wriggled herself free.

"He asked for that, and now he's got it," said Stanton, panting. "Serve him right, and nobody will blame me if he's dead. But he isn't, no fear! Fellows like him belong to the leopard tribe, and have as many lives as a cat. Good girl, Ahmara, many thanks."

And without another glance toward Max, beside whom Sanda was on her knees, Stanton threw the campstool into the tent and yelled to the men by the fire. He called the names of two who were his special servants, but most of the band followed, knowing from the roar of rage and the one sharp cry in a woman's voice that something important had happened.

Stanton was glad when he saw the dark crowd troop toward him, though in his first flush of excitement he had not thought to summon every one.

"Come on, all of you!" he shouted. "Now halt! You see the man lying there—at my feet, where he belongs. He was my trusted lieutenant, but he took too much upon himself. I knocked him down for insubordination. He doesn't go farther with the caravan. And we start in five hours. Zaid and Mahmoud, put this carrion out of my sight. I've shown you all what happens when black or white men disobey my orders."

No one came forward. From her knees beside Max Sanda rose up slim and straight and stood facing the Arabs and negroes.

"Men," she cried to them, "I've done my best for you. I've defended you, when I could, from injustice. When you have been sick with fevers or with wounds I have nursed you. Now my father's friend, and my friend, who to-night has saved my life, lies wounded. If you leave him, you leave me, too, for I stay as his nurse. What do you decide?"

Stanton was on her in two strides. Seizing her arm he twisted it with a savage wrench and flung her tottering behind him. The pain forced a cry from the girl, and Ahmara laughed. That was more than the men could stand, for to them Sanda was always the White Angel, Ahmara the Black; and over there by the fire they had discussed a deputation to Stanton, announcing that, since starting, they had heard too much evil of the haunted Libyan desert to dare venture across its waterless wastes. The spirit of mutiny was in them, having smouldered and flashed up, smouldered and flamed again at Stanton's cruelty. This was too much! The spark was fired. A Senegalese whom Sanda had cured of a scorpion bite—a black giant to whom Max had lent his camel when Stanton would have left him in the desert—leaped like a tiger on the Chief. Steel flashed under the moon, and Stanton fell back without a groan, striking the hard sand and staining it red.

For an instant there was silence. Then burst forth a wild shout of hate and joy....

CHAPTER XXIX

OUT OF THE DREAM, A PLAN

Stanton was dead, hacked in pieces by the men he had cursed and beaten. Ahmara had fled to Dardaï to live as she could by her beauty; and the murderers, taking with them, in a rage of haste and terror, camels, water, and provisions, had disappeared. The caravan of the great explorer had vanished like a mirage; and the Lost Oasis lay hidden forever from despoiling eyes and hands in the uncharted Libyan desert.

At dawn Sanda sat beside Max in his tent, where two of the few men who remained had carried him. Through the hideous hours he had lain as one dead. But light, touching his eyelids, waked him with a shuddering start.

"You!" he whispered. "Safe! I've had horrible dreams."

"Only dreams," she soothed him.

"How pale you are!" He stared at her, still half dazed.

"Perhaps it's the light."

"No, it's not the light. I remember now.... What happened after he—I——"

"I'll tell you when you're stronger."

"I'm strong enough for anything. Only a little odd in my head."

"And your poor wounded hand? I bathed it and bandaged it again, and you never knew."

"Queer! I thought if I were dead I should have known if you touched me!" He spoke more to himself than to Sanda, and she did not answer. His eyelids drooped, and presently he slept again. Hours later, when he woke, she was still there. It seemed to the girl that the world had fallen to pieces, leaving only her and this man in the ruins. All around them lay the vast desert. To go back

whence they had come was impossible. To go on seemed equally impossible. There was nowhere to go. But they were together. She knew that nothing could part them now, not life, and even less death, yet she could see no future. Everything had come to a standstill, and their souls might as well be out of their bodies. It would be so much simpler!

She gave Max tea that she had made; and when she had looked at his hand and bandaged it again, she told him all that had happened. How the Senegalese, whose brother Stanton had shot for pilfering, a month ago, had stabbed Stanton in the breast, and fifty others in blood-madness had rushed to finish his work. How Ahmara had run shrieking to the village, and the men, still in madness, had stolen the camels and gone off into the desert; not the murderers only, but their friends who saw that it was well to disappear, that it might never be known who were the men that saw Richard Stanton die.

Two months and more ago, when the caravan left Touggourt, there were over a hundred men who marched with it. Between that time and reaching Dardaï thirty had deserted, and a few had died. Now all had flown except a dozen of the oldest and most responsible who refused to be carried away by their comrades' vague fear of reprisals. Just these twelve were left with fifteen camels and a small store of arms and provisions. There was money also, untouched in Stanton's tent, and some bales of European rugs, clocks, and musical boxes, which the explorer had brought as gifts for native rulers. The question pressed: what was to be done? Sanda could find no answer; but Max had two. They might turn back and go the way they had come. Or they might go on, not trying to cross the Libyan desert in the direction of Assouan, as Stanton had hoped to do, but skirting southward by a longer route where the desert was charted and oases existed. After a journey of seventy or eighty days they might hope to find their way through Kordofan to Omdurman, and then across the Nile to civilized Khartoum. It was this idea that the leading mutineers, frightened by tales of the terrible Libyan desert, had meant to suggest to Stanton; and if he refused their intention had been to desert. The murder, Max felt sure, had not been premeditated; but he did not believe that it was regretted.

"I will not go back to Touggourt," Sanda said, when he had described to her the two plans.

"Why? Because you are thinking of me?" he asked.

"Partly that. But it would be as bad for me as for you, now, if you were to be arrested as a deserter. And besides," Sanda went on hurriedly, determined to show him it was for her sake more than his that she objected, "I've suffered so much I couldn't go again along that Via Dolorosa. I want to get away from the very thought of it. New scenes will be better. How many miles must we journey to Omdurman and Khartoum?"

"Nearly a thousand," Max confessed.

"More than we've come with our great caravan! It's not possible."

"It must be possible!" said Max. "We'll make it possible."

"Surely such a thing has never been done!"

"Maybe not, but we'll do it. I feel now that I have the strength of a hundred men in myself."

"You haven't even the strength of one. We must stay here till you are stronger." Yet she shivered and grew cold at the thought of staying on, even with Max, close to the grave the men had dug for Stanton in the sand.

"I shall be better travelling," Max urged. He would not tell Sanda, but he felt it unsafe to stay long near Dardaï with so few men. The sheikh had been hospitable to Stanton, but things were different now. Ahmara would tell about the money and the boxes and bales full of presents. The temptation virtuously to punish those who were left, for the fate of the explorer, would be too great, and the excuse too good.

"We shall have to get off after the heat of the day," Max insisted. "I've lain here long enough, for, you see, I must be leader now for you. I must talk to the men and tell them what we've decided."

"How *little* we are in this great desert, to talk of 'deciding,'" the girl exclaimed. "It is the desert that will decide. But—you will be with me always ... as in my dream!"

"And mine," Max added.

Then followed day upon day of the desert dream. Some days were evil and some were good, but none could ever be forgotten. The man and the girl whose dreams had come true never spoke of the future, though waking or sleeping the thought was seldom out of their minds.

"I *can't* give her up now, whatever happens," Max said to himself sometimes. Yet he did not see how he should be able, in justice to the girl, to keep her. In British territory he would be safe from arrest as a deserter from the Legion. But the very thought of himself as a deserter was torture from which he could never escape. He regretted nothing. What he had done he would do again if he had it to do, even in ignorance of the reward—her love. But he remembered how he had tried to puzzle out some other way for Valdez, and how impossible it would have seemed then, that he should ever follow Manöel's example. He loved Colonel DeLisle and he had loved the Legion with all its tragedies, and been proud of his place in it. He looked upon himself as a man disgraced, and did not see how he should ever be able to make a position in the world worthy to be shared by Sanda. Besides, it would be disastrous for Colonel DeLisle, as an official,

if his daughter should marry a deserter. That was one of the things that "would not do." Yet Sanda loved the deserter, and fate had bound them together. The spirit of the desert was making them one. Max did not know that out of Sanda's dreams had been born a plan.

CHAPTER XXX

THE PLAY OF CROSS PURPOSES

When Max St. George, with seven emaciated Arabs and five dilapidated camels, crawled into Omdurman, bringing Richard Stanton's young widow, their arrival made a sensation for all Egypt. Later, in Khartoum, when the history of the murder and the subsequent march of nine hundred miles came out, it became a sensation for Europe and America.

Rumours had run ahead of the little party, from Kordofan, birthland of the terrible Mahdi; but the whole story was patched together from disjointed bits only, when the caravan arrived in civilization. Very little was got out of the fever-stricken, haggard young man who (according to Mrs. Stanton) was the hero of the great adventure, impossible to have been carried through for a single day without him. It was Sanda who told the tale, told it voluntarily, even eagerly, to every one who questioned her. She could not give Max St. George—that mysterious young man who apparently had no country and no past—enough praise to satisfy her gratitude. There had been terrible sandstorms in which they would have given themselves up for lost if it had not been for his energy and courage. Once they had strayed a long way off their track and nearly starved and died of thirst before they could find an oasis they had aimed for and renew exhausted supplies. But Max St. George's spirit had never flagged even after the mosquito-ridden swamp where he had caught a touch of malarial fever. Through his presence of mind and military skill the party had been saved from extinction in a surprise attack by a band of desert marauders twice their number. Every night he had protected the little camp by forming round it a hollow square of camels and baggage, and keeping a sentinel posted, generally himself. It was through these precautions they had been able to withstand the surprise and drive the robbers off with the loss only of a few men and some of the camels. They had fought and conquered the enemy under a flag of the Legion, a miniature copy given by Colonel DeLisle to his daughter. There had not been one desertion from their ranks, except by death, and all was owing—Sanda said—to the spirit Max St. George had infused into his followers. He insisted that the latter were the only heroes, if any, and the Arabs from far-off Touggourt enjoyed such fame as they had associated with the delights of a paradise reserved for warriors. But of himself Max St. George would not talk; and people said to each other, "Who is this young fellow who was the only white man with Stanton? He seems at home in every language. Where did he come from?"

Nobody could tell. Not a soul knew what his past had been. But as for his future, it seemed not unlikely that it might be limited on this earth; for having finished his mission, and taken Mrs. Stanton as far as Cairo on her way back to Algeria, he succumbed to the fever he had resisted ferociously while his services were needed. When there was nothing to do he relaxed a little and the flame in his blood burned unchecked.

Mrs. Stanton's exhibition of gratitude, however, was admirable in the eyes of the world focussed upon her. If Richard Stanton had not been a magnificent man, celebrated for his successes with women, and having the added attraction of fame as an explorer, people might have suggested that the widow's remaining in Cairo to nurse St. George was not entirely disinterested. But as it was, nobody said disagreeable things about the beautiful, pale young creature, and the haggard skeleton of a man who had pioneered her safely through the Sahara and Libyan deserts.

It was as much because of her beauty, which gave a glamour of almost classic romance to the wild business, as because of Stanton's reputation and the amazing madness of his last venture, that newspapers all over the civilized world gave columns to the story. Somehow, snapshots of Max St. George, as well as several of Sanda, had been snatched by enterprising journalists before St. George fell ill in Cairo. These were telegraphed for and bought by newspapers of England, Spain, Italy, France, America, Algeria, and even Germany, which had not loved Stanton. The next thing that happened was the report in Algerian papers that Max St. George, "*le jeune homme de mystère*," was a missing soldier of the Legion, who had deserted from an important mission to join Stanton's caravan. Sensation everywhere! Paragraphs reminding the public of a curious fact: that young Mrs. Stanton was the daughter of the colonel of the Legion. Strange if she had not known from the first that the recruit to her husband's expedition was a deserter from her father's regiment. And what a situation for the colonel himself! His daughter protected during a long desert journey of incalculable peril by a man whom it would be her father's duty to have arrested and court-martialled if he were on French soil.

Journalists argued the delicate question, whether, in the circumstances, it would be possible for Colonel DeLisle to do anything officially toward obtaining a pardon for St. George—whose name probably was not St. George, since no man wore anything so obvious as his own name in the Foreign Legion. Retired officers wrote letters to the papers and pointed out that for DeLisle to work in St. George's favour, simply because accident had enabled the deserter to aid a member of his colonel's family, would be inadmissible. If St. George were the right sort of man and soldier he would not expect or wish it. As a matter of fact, he did neither; but then, at the time, he was in a physical state which precluded conscious wishes and expectations. He did not know or care

what happened; though sometimes, in intervals of seeing marvellous mirages of the Lost Oasis, and fighting robbers, or prescribing for sick camels, he appeared vaguely to recognize the face of his nurse; not the professional, but the amateur. "Sanda, Sanda!" he would mutter, or cry out aloud; but as fortunately no one knew that Mrs. Stanton, *née* Corisande DeLisle, was called "Sanda" by those who loved her, the doctor and the professional nurse supposed he was babbling about the sand of the desert. He had certainly had a distressing amount of it!

Max would have been immensely interested if he could have known at this time of three persons in different parts of the world who were working for him in different ways. There was Manöel Valdez in Rome, where he had arrived with Ourïeda by way of Tunis and Sicily, instead of getting to Spain according to his earlier plan. Manöel, singing with magnificent success in grand opera, proclaimed himself Juan Garcia, a fellow-deserter with St. George, in order to gild St. George's escapade with glory. Not only did he talk to every one, and permit his fascinating Spanish-Arab bride to talk, but he let himself be interviewed by newspapers. Perhaps all this was a good advertisement in a way; but he was making a *succes fou*, and did not need advertisement. Genuinely and sincerely he was baring his heart and bringing his wife into the garish limelight because of his passionate gratitude to Max St. George.

The interview was copied everywhere, and Sanda read it in Cairo, learning for the first time not only many generous acts of St. George of which she had never heard, but gathering details of Ourïeda's escape with Valdez, at which till then she had merely been able to guess. The entire plot of Manöel's love drama, from the first grim scene of stunning the prospective bridegroom on the way to his unwilling bride, to the escape from the *douar* in the quiet hours when Tahar was supposed to be left alone with the "Agha's Rose," on to the hiding at Djazerta, and stealing away in disguise with a caravan while the hunt took another direction, all had played itself out according to his plan. Valdez attributed the whole success to St. George's help, advice, and gifts of money, down to the last franc in his possession. And now Manöel began to pay the debt he owed, by calling on the world's sympathy for the deserter, who might not set foot on French soil without being arrested. Thus the singer's golden voice was raised for Max in Italy. In Algeria old "Four Eyes" was working for him like the demon that he looked; having returned with his colonel and comrades to Sidi-bel-Abbés after the long march and a satisfactory fight with the "Deliverer," he soon received news of the lost one. With roars of derision he refused to believe in the little "corporal's" voluntary desertion, and from the first moment began to agitate. What! punish a hero for his heroism? That, in Four Eyes' vilely profane opinion, expressed with elaborate expletives in the Legion's own choicest vernacular, was what it would amount to if St. George were branded "deserter." Precisely why Max had joined Stanton's caravan instead of returning to Sidi-bel-Abbés, perhaps a few days late, Four Eyes was not certain; but there was no one better instructed than he in pretending to know things he merely conjectured. He had seen Ahmara, the dancer, and had told Max the scandal connecting her with the explorer. "What more natural than that a soldier of the Legion should, for his colonel's sake, sacrifice his whole career to protect the daughter from such a husband as Stanton? No doubt the boy knew that Stanton meant to take Ahmara with him, and had left everything to stand between the girl and such a pair."

In his own picturesque and lurid language Four Eyes presented these conjectures of his as if they were facts; and to do him justice he believed in them. Also, he took pains to rake up every old tale of cruelty, vanity, or lust that had been told in the past about Richard Stanton, and embroider them. Beside the satyr figure which he flaunted like a dummy Guy Fawkes, Max St. George shone a pure young martyr. Never had old Four Eyes enjoyed such popularity among the townfolk of Sidi-bel-Abbés as in these days, and he had the satisfaction of seeing veiled allusions to his anecdotes in newspapers when he could afford to buy or was able to steal them. On the strength of his triumph he got up among his fellow Legionnaires a petition for the pardon and reinstatement of Corporal St. George. Not a man refused to sign, for even those who might have hesitated would not have done so long under the basilisk stare of the ex-champion of boxing.

"Sign, or I'll smash you to a jelly," was his remark to one recruit who had not heard enough of St. George or Four Eyes to dash his name on paper the instant he saw a pen.

While the petition was growing Colonel DeLisle (who gave no sign that he had heard of it) obtained ten days' leave, the first he had asked for in many years, and took ship for Algiers to Alexandria to see his daughter. But that did not discourage Four Eyes; on the contrary, "The Old Man doesn't want to be in it, see?" said Pelle. "It ain't for him, in the circus, to do the trick; it's for us, *ses enfants!* And damn all four of my eyes, we'll *do* it, if we have to mutiny as our comrades once did before us, when they made big history in the Legion."

The third person who, unasked, took an active interest in Max St. George's affairs was, of all people on earth, the last whom he or any one else would have expected to meddle with them. This was Billie Brookton, married to her Chicago millionaire, and trying, tooth and nail, with the aid of his money, to break into the inner fastnesses of New York and Newport's Four Hundred. It was all because of a certain resistance to her efforts that suddenly, out of revenge and not through love, she took up Max's cause. The powder train was—unwittingly—laid months before by Josephine Doran-Reeves, as she preferred to call herself after her marriage with the son of the Dorans' lawyer. Neither she nor Grant—who had taken the name of Doran-Reeves also—liked to think or talk of the man who had disappeared. On consideration, the Reeveses, father and son, had decided not to make public the story of Josephine's birth which Max had given to them. They feared that his great sacrifice would create too much sympathy for Max and rouse indignation against Josephine and her husband for accepting it, allowing the martyr to disappear, penniless, into space. At first they said nothing at all about him, merely giving out that Josephine Doran was

a distant relative who had been brought to the Doran house on Rose's death; but all sorts of inconvenient questions began to be asked about Max Doran, into whose house and fortune the strange-looking, half-beautiful, half-terrible, red-haired girl had suddenly, inexplicably stepped.

Max's friends in society and the army did not let him pass into oblivion without a word; therefore some sort of story had to eventually be told to silence tongues, and, still worse, newspapers. Grant was singularly good at making up stories, and always had been since, as a boy, he had unobtrusively contrived to throw blame off his own shoulders on to those of Max if they were in a scrape together.

Half a lie, nicely mixed with a few truths, makes a concoction that the public swallows readily. Max was too young, and had been too much away from New York, to be greatly missed there, despite Rose Doran's popularity; and when such an interesting and handsome couple as Grant and Josephine Doran-Reeves began entertaining gorgeously in the renovated Doran house, the ex-lieutenant of cavalry was forgotten comparatively soon. It seemed, according to reluctant admissions made at last by Grant and Josephine to their acquaintances, that Max had had secret reasons for resigning his commission in the army and vanishing into space. It was his own wish to give up the old house to Josephine, his "distant cousin from France," and in saying this they carefully gave the impression that he had been well paid. Nobody dreamed that the money Mr. and Mrs. Grant Doran-Reeves spent in such charming ways had once belonged to Max. He was supposed to have "come a cropper" somehow, as so many young men did, and to have disappeared with everything he had, out of the country, for his country's good. When people realized that there was a secret, perhaps a disgraceful one, many were sorry for poor Grant and Josephine, mixed up in it through no fault of their own; and the name of Max Doran was dropped from conversation whenever his innocent relatives were within hearing distance. Then, by and by, it was practically dropped altogether, because it had passed out of recollection.

This was the state of affairs when the beautiful Billie (Mrs. Jeff Houston) arrived, covered with diamonds and pearls (the best of the latter were Max's), to storm social New York. She had already won its heart as an actress, but as a respectable married woman who had left the stage and connected herself by marriage with a sausage-maker she was a different "proposition."

"You ought to know some woman in the smart set," advised a friend in the half-smart set who had received favours from Billie, and had not been able to give the right sort of return. "Oh, of course, you do know a lot of the men, but they're worse than no use to you now. It must be a woman, 'way high up at the top.'"

Billie racked her brains, and thought of Josephine Doran-Reeves. Josephine was "way up at the top," because she was a Doran and very rich, and so queer that she amused the most bored people, whether she meant to or not. Unfortunately, Billie did not know her, but the next best thing, surely, was to have known Max Doran.

Billie had made capital out of Max in the shape of a famous blue diamond and a string of uniquely fine pearls, and her idea had been that she had got all there was to be got from him. In fact, she had not mentioned this little love-idyll even to her husband. Suddenly, however, she remembered that they two had been dear, dear friends—perfectly platonic friends, of course—and she felt justified in writing a sweet letter to Josephine asking tactfully for news of Max. She put her point charmingly, and begged that she might be allowed to call on dear Mrs. Doran-Reeves, to chat cozily about "that darling boy," or would Mrs. Doran-Reeves rather come and have tea with her one day, any day, at the Plaza Hotel? She was staying there until the house her husband had bought for her (quite near the Doran house) should be out of the decorator's hands.

But the last thing that appealed to Josephine was the thought of a cozy chat about "that darling boy" Max. Besides, the moment was a bad one with her. Captain de la Tour had got long leave and come to America, she did not know why at first, and had been inclined to feel rather flattered, if slightly frightened. But soon she found out. He had come to blackmail her. There were some silly letters she had written when they were in the thick of their flirtation at Sidi-bel-Abbés, and the height of her ambition had been to marry a French officer, no matter how poor. Captain de la Tour had kept those letters.

He did not threaten to show them to Grant Doran-Reeves. He judged the other man by himself and realized that, having married a girl for her money, Grant would not throw her over, or even hurt her feelings, while she still had it.

What Captain de la Tour proposed was to sell the letters and tell the romantic story of Mrs. Doran-Reeves's life in a little Algerian hotel if she did not buy up the whole secret and his estates in France at the same time. For the two together he asked only the ridiculously small price of three hundred thousand francs—sixty thousand dollars.

Josephine had raged, for Grant, even more than she, hated to spend money where a show could not be made with it. But Captain de la Tour was rather insistent and got on her nerves. In an hysterical fit, therefore, she made a clean breast of the story to her husband. When she had described to him as well as she could what was in the letters, and what a Bohemian sort of life she had led in Bel-Abbés, Grant decided that it would be romantic as well as sensible to buy the Château de la Tour. Josephine had actually been born there; and they could either keep the place or sell it when it had been improved a bit and made famous by a few choice house-parties.

So the Doran-Reeveses bought the château and got back the letters, and hoped that Captain de la Tour would take himself and his ill-gotten gains out of the United States. But he lingered, looking

out for an American heiress, while Josephine existed in a state of constant irritation, fearing some new demand or an indiscretion. And it was just at this time that she received Mrs. Jeff Houston's letter. Naturally it gave her great pleasure to snub some one, especially a woman prettier than herself. She took no notice of Billie's appeal, and when Mrs. Houston, hoping somehow that it had not reached its destination, spoke to her sweetly one night at the opera, Josephine was rude before some of the "best people" in New York.

After that, Billie said to every one that Mrs. Doran-Reeves was insane as well as deformed; but that "cut no ice," as Jeff Houston remarked, and when the snapshot of Max St. George, deserter from the Foreign Legion, appeared with the newspaper story of Sanda Stanton, Billie did what Jeff described as "falling over herself" to get to the office of *Town Tales*.

She told nothing damaging to the late Miss Brookton in mentioning Max Doran, and of him she spoke with friendly enthusiasm. He had been *so* good, so kind to her, and so different from many young men who were good to actresses. It broke her heart to think of his fate, for there was no doubt that Max St. George, the Legionnaire, and Max Doran were one. Billie told how, to her certain knowledge, Max had sacrificed himself for Josephine Doran, who (for some reason he was too noble to reveal, but it had to do with a secret of ancestry) seemed to him the rightful heiress.

Penniless, Max had been forced to resign from an expensive regiment, where he lived expensively. He had done this for Josephine's sake, though he had loved his career better than anything else in the world. And then, last of all, he had effaced himself rather than accept pity or favours. He had enlisted in the Foreign Legion, and now he had further shown the nobility of his nature by the very way in which he had fallen into disgrace. But what did the Doran-Reeveses do, though they owed everything to him? They told lies and ignored his existence. Mrs. Jeff Houston said that she felt it her duty as Max Doran's only faithful friend to bring this injustice to public notice.

Town Tales was delighted to help her do this, because she was Billie Brookton, a celebrity, and because it was "good copy." Other papers—many other papers—took up the hue and cry which *Town Tales* started; and the Doran-Reeveses' life became not as agreeable as it had been.

They defended themselves to friends and enemies and newspaper men, and thought of suing *Town Tales* for libel, but were dissuaded from doing so by old Mr. Reeves. Then it occurred to Josephine to let every one know that, though she was being cruelly maligned, she wished, as a proof of her admiration for Max's desert exploits, to present him with all her French property, the magnificent old vineyard-surrounded Château de la Tour, where he could cultivate grapes and make his fortune.

The papers pointed out that this was something like sending coals to Newcastle, as St. George, alias Doran, was debarred from entering France unless he wanted to go to prison. But Josephine and Grant quickly retorted that the recipient of their bounty need not live in France in order to benefit. He could sell or let the Château de la Tour through some agent.

Not an echo of all this play of cross purposes reached Max at the nursing home in Cairo, where he had been carried by Sanda's orders after breaking down. But Sanda, who took in a dozen papers to see what they had to say about the "deserter," read what was going on at New York as well as in Rome and at Sidi-bel-Abbés. She saw that Max had been presented with estates in France by the woman who had taken everything and given nothing; and because of queer things Max had let drop in his delirium she understood more of the past than he would have revealed of his own free will. For one thing, she learnt that a certain Jack and Rose Doran had had a child born to them at the Château de la Tour. This enabled her to put other things together in her mind, and loving Max as she did, she saw no harm in thus using her wits, while she respected him with all her heart for not telling the secret. Besides, she had met Captain de la Tour in Sidi-bel-Abbés, and she had guessed that it was partly because of him and one or two others like him that her father had sent her to the Agha's rather than leave her at Bel-Abbés alone.

"It would be the most wonderful sort of poetic justice," she reflected, sitting at Max's bedside one day while he slept, "if the old place of his ancestors should come back to him at last."

This thought reminded her of her plan. Not that she ever forgot it; but she had to put it into the background of her mind until she was sure that Max was going to get well. Until then, she could not and would not leave him. But at last she was sure; and she was waiting only to find out if her father could help; or if not, till his leave was over and she was left to act for herself without compromising the Legion's colonel.

If Sanda had loved her father in their days together at Bel-Abbés, she loved him a thousand times more in those few days of his visit at Cairo. He forgave her without being asked for leaving him "in the lurch," as she repentantly called it, and letting herself be carried away by Stanton. "You thought you loved him, my darling," DeLisle said. "And I could forgive anything to love."

It was in his arms, with her face buried on his breast, that she told what her marriage had been, and then came the confession (for it seemed to her a confession, though she was not ashamed of it, but proud) about Max.

"He didn't speak one word of love to me," the girl said. "He tried not even to let his eyes speak. But they did, sometimes, in spite of him. And no man could possibly endure or do for a woman the things he endured and did for me, every one of those terrible days, if he didn't love her. So when I was afraid he might die from the viper's bite, I wanted him to have one happy moment in this

world to remember in the next. I told him that I cared, and he kissed my hand and looked at me. That's all, except just a word or two that I keep too sacredly to tell even you. And afterward when Richard was dead, and Max and I were alone in the desert, save for a few Arabs, he never again referred to that night, or spoke of our love. I was sure it was only because we were alone and I depended on him. But after those weeks and months of facing death together, it seems that we belong to each other, he and I. Nothing must part us—nothing."

She was half afraid her father might remind her of the situation which had arisen between Max as a deserter and himself as colonel of the regiment from which Max had deserted.

But Colonel DeLisle did not say this or anything like it. He knew that love was the greatest thing in the world for his daughter, as it had been for him, and he could not cheat her out of it. He was sad because it seemed to him that in honour he could do nothing for this deserter who had done everything for him—nothing, that is, save give him his daughter, and abandon what remained of his own career by resigning his commission. As colonel of the Legion, his child could not be allowed to marry a deserter, a fugitive who dare not enter France. As for him, DeLisle, though the Legion was much to him, Sanda was more. But she said she and Max would not take happiness at that price. They must think of some other way. And the other way was the plan.

When the colonel returned to Algeria and his regiment Max had not yet gained enough strength to be seen and thanked for what he had done, even if DeLisle had found it compatible with his official duty to say to a deserter what was in his heart to say to Sanda's hero. And perhaps, Sanda thought, it was as well that they did not meet just then. Irrevocable things might have been spoken between them.

The day after her father's ship sailed for Algiers she took another that went from Port Said to Marseilles. From Marseilles she travelled to Paris, which was familiar ground to her. What she did there gave a new fillip to the Stanton-DeLisle-St. George sensation, though at the same time it put an extinguisher on all discussions: a blow to those retired officers who liked writing to the papers.

Lest what the papers said should be prematurely seen by the convalescent's eyes, however, Sanda hurried back to Egypt.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE GIFT

Max was sitting up in a reclining chair, for the first time, on the day of Sanda's return to Cairo.

He knew that she had gone to France on business of some sort, but he had no idea what it was. It did not occur to him that it might have to do with his affairs. Probably (he thought) it was connected with Stanton, who had left money, and who had "geographical investments," as he called them, all over the world, in France, perhaps, among other places. But somehow Max could not imagine Sanda accepting money for herself that came from Stanton, even if it were legally hers.

Although Max was still weak, he had begun to think urgently, insistently, about the future. All the objections that Colonel DeLisle could see to the marriage of Sanda Stanton with the deserter St. George, the deserter St. George saw, and many more. It was caddish to think of marrying her, and monstrous to think of giving her up. His anxious thoughts toiled round and round in a vicious circle whence there seemed no way out.

In the morning the doctor came in and laid down on the table, with his hat, gloves, and stick, a newspaper. As he examined his patient, the nurse picked up the journal and began to glance quickly from column to column in order to have absorbed the news by the time the doctor wanted her services—or his paper. Suddenly, not being possessed of great self-control except in professional emergencies, she gave vent to a shrill little squeak of excitement.

Max and the doctor both turned their heads; and when the latter saw his newspaper open in the young woman's hand, he guessed instantly what had excited her. He anathematized himself for putting the paper where she could get at it; for without doubt Mrs. Stanton would want to tell the great news herself. She must not be defrauded of the pleasure, for she would certainly make a point of getting back for a "look at the patient" to-day or to-morrow. If to-day, she might appear at any minute, for a P. & O. boat-train had arrived at Cairo late the night before, Doctor Taylor had heard, and it was now nine-thirty in the morning—not too early to expect her.

Nurse Yorke must not blurt out the tidings in her common way! But how to stop her without arousing St. George's curiosity?

"Oh, I suppose you've got hold of the advertisement of that sale I told you of," he said, glaring over the top of Max's head.

"Why! I've found——" the nurse began briskly, but withered under Doctor Taylor's forbidding gaze.

"I knew nothing else could have excited you so much," he went on masterfully, still hypnotizing

her with his eyes, until even a duller woman would have grasped his meaning. But maybe he wanted to read out the news himself? Nurse Yorke handed him the paper.

"Perhaps Mr. St. George will be interested in the advertisement of this sale," she suggested, with a coy emphasis which made Doctor Taylor want to smother the well-meaning creature with a pillow.

"We'll let Mrs. Stanton read it to him when she comes," he said waspishly; and at that moment Mrs. Stanton came.

They both knew her knock, and Nurse Yorke flew to open the door.

She had a smile and a word for them, and then went straight to Max. "How splendid! You're sitting up," she said. "This is worth travelling fast for, if there were nothing else. But there is. There's something next best to your getting well." Then she caught sight of the open paper in the nurse's hand. "Have you—has any one been telling you—or reading you to-day's news?" she asked, breathless.

"Nurse Yorke was just beginning to read something about a sale, I think," Max answered, hardly knowing what he said because his eyes were upon her—this girl of girls, this pearl of pearls, whom honour was forcing him to give up, and at the same time bidding him to keep. He thought that he had never seen her so lovely as to-day, in the simple travelling dress and hat all of black, yet not mourning. There was a look of heaven in her eyes, and they seemed to say that this heaven was for him. Could he refuse it? He gave her back look for look; and neither he nor she knew what they said when Doctor Taylor invited Nurse Yorke to go with him into the next room and examine the chart.

"Are you glad I'm back?" Sanda asked, drawing a chair close up to the *chaise longue*.

"Glad? You're worth all the doctor's medicines and tonics. I'm well now!"

"Aren't you dying to hear my news?"

"It's such wonderful news that you've come, I can't think of anything else," Max assured her, gazing at her hair, her eyes, her mouth—her sweet, sweet mouth.

"All the same I'm going to tell you," Sanda insisted, panting a little over her heartbeats. "My news is not about a 'sale,' it's about a *gift*. Yet I think it's the very same news Nurse Yorke almost read you. Oh, I should have been thwarted, cheated, if she had! This is for *me* to tell you, my Soldier, me, and no one else, for the gift is to me, for you. The President of the French Republic has given it to me for Max St. George of the Tenth Company, First Regiment of the Legion; Max St. George, owner of the Château de la Tour, home of his far-off ancestors—where he and his Sanda will go some day together when he's tired of soldiering—and Sanda's father, Max's grateful colonel, will visit them. And that wonderful old Four Eyes, who has almost worked the Legion into a mutiny for the Soldier's sake, will live with them, if he can ever bear to leave the Legion. Now, can't you guess what the President's gift is?"

"Not—not pardon?" Max's lips formed the words which he could not speak aloud. But it was as if Sanda heard.

"Pardon, and a lieutenant's commission in the Legion."

"Sanda!"

All the worship of a man's heart and soul were in that name as it broke from him with a sob.

"My Soldier!" she answered, in his arms. And then they spoke no more; for again they were living through in that minute all the long months of agony and bliss in the desert, when their dream had been coming true.

Four months later Max left his bride to go with a French, English, and Russian contingent of the Legion to fight with the Allies in France, in the War of the World.

Sanda waits, and prays—and hopes.

THE END

THE COUNTRY LIFE PRESS GARDEN CITY, N.Y.

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