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## **THE WEAVERS**

By Gilbert Parker

### **BOOK VI.**

#### **XL. HYLDA SEEKS NAHOUM XLI. IN THE LAND OF SHINAR XLII. THE LOOM OF DESTINY**

### **CHAPTER XL**

#### **HYLDA SEEKS NAHOUM**

It was as though she had gone to sleep the night before, and waked again upon this scene unchanged, brilliant, full of colour, a chaos of decoration—confluences of noisy, garish streams of life, eddies of petty labour. Craftsmen crowded one upon the other in dark bazaars; merchants chattered and haggled on their benches; hawkers clattered and cried their wares. It was a people that lived upon the streets, for all the houses seemed empty and forsaken. The sais ran before the Pasha's carriage, the donkey-boys shrieked for their right of way, a train of camels calmly forced its passage through the swirling crowds, supercilious and heavy-laden.

It seemed but yesterday since she had watched with amused eyes the sherbet-sellers clanking their brass saucers, the carriers streaming the water from the bulging goatskins into the earthen bottles,

crying, "Allah be praised, here is coolness for thy throat for ever!" the idle singer chanting to the soft kanoon, the chess-players in the shade of a high wall, lost to the world, the dancing-girls with unveiled, shameless faces, posturing for evil eyes. Nothing had changed these past six years. Yet everything had changed.

She saw it all as in a dream, for her mind had no time for reverie or retrospect; it was set on one thing only.

Yet behind the one idea possessing her there was a subconscious self taking note of all these sights and sounds, and bringing moisture to her eyes. Passing the house which David had occupied on that night when he and she and Nahoum and Mizraim had met, the mist of feeling almost blinded her; for there at the gate sat the bowab who had admitted her then, and with apathetic eyes had watched her go, in the hour when it seemed that she and David Claridge had bidden farewell for ever, two driftwood spars that touched and parted in the everlasting sea. Here again in the Palace square were Kaid's Nubians in their glittering armour as of silver and gold, drawn up as she had seen them drawn then, to be reviewed by their overlord.

She swept swiftly through the streets and bazaars on her mission to Nahoum. "Lady Eglington" had asked for an interview, and Nahoum had granted it without delay. He did not associate her with the girl for whom David Claridge had killed Foorgat Pey, and he sent his own carriage to bring her to the Palace. No time had been lost, for it was less than twenty-four hours since she had arrived in Cairo, and very soon she would know the worst or the best. She had put her past away for the moment, and the Duchess of Snowdon had found at Marseilles a silent, determined, yet gentle-tongued woman, who refused to look back, or to discuss anything vital to herself and Eglington, until what she had come to Egypt to do was accomplished. Nor would she speak of the future, until the present had been fully declared and she knew the fate of David Claridge. In Cairo there were only varying rumours: that he was still holding out; that he was lost; that he had broken through; that he was a prisoner—all without foundation upon which she could rely.

As she neared the Palace entrance, a female fortune-teller ran forward, thrusting towards her a gazelle's skin, filled with the instruments of her mystic craft, and crying out: "I divine-I reveal! What is present I manifest! What is absent I declare! What is future I show! Beautiful one, hear me. It is all written. To thee is greatness, and thy heart's desire. Hear all! See! Wait for the revealing. Thou comest from afar, but thy fortune is near. Hear and see. I divine—I reveal. Beautiful one, what is future I show."

Hylda's eyes looked at the poor creature eagerly, pathetically. If it could only be, if she could but see one step ahead! If the veil could but be lifted! She dropped some silver into the folds of the gazelle-skin and waved the Gypsy away. "There is darkness, it is all dark, beautiful one," cried the woman after her, "but it shall be light. I show—I reveal!"

Inside these Palace walls there was a revealer of more merit, as she so well and bitterly knew. He could raise the veil—a dark and dangerous necromancer, with a flinty heart and a hand that had waited long to strike. Had it struck its last blow?

Outside Nahoum's door she had a moment of utter weakness, when her knees smote together, and her throat became parched; but before the door had swung wide and her eyes swept the cool and shadowed room, she was as composed as on that night long ago when she had faced the man who knew.

Nahoum was standing in a waiting and respectful attitude as she entered. He advanced towards her and bowed low, but stopped dumfounded, as he saw who she was. Presently he recovered himself; but he offered no further greeting than to place a chair for her where her face was in the shadow and his in the light—time of crisis as it was, she noticed this and marvelled at him. His face was as she had seen it those years ago. It showed no change whatever. The eyes looked at her calmly, openly, with no ulterior thought behind, as it might seem. The high, smooth forehead, the full but firm lips, the brown, well-groomed beard, were all indicative of a nature benevolent and refined. Where did the duplicity lie? Her mind answered its own question on the instant; it lay in the brain and the tongue. Both were masterly weapons, an armament so complete that it controlled the face and eyes and outward man into a fair semblance of honesty. The tongue—she remembered its insinuating and adroit power, and how it had deceived the man she had come to try and save. She must not be misled by it. She felt it was to be a struggle between them, and she must be alert and persuasive, and match him word for word, move for move.

"I am happy to welcome you here, madame," he said in English. "It is years since we met; yet time has passed you by."

She flushed ever so slightly—compliment from Nahoum Pasha! Yet she must not resent anything to-day; she must get what she came for, if it was possible. What had Lacey said? "A few thousand men by parcel-post, and some red seals-British officers."

"We meet under different circumstances," she replied meaningly. "You were asking a great favour then."

"Ah, but of you, madame?"

"I think you appealed to me when you were doubtful of the result."

"Well, madame, it may be so—but, yes, you are right; I thought you were Claridge Pasha's kinswoman, I remember."

"Excellency, you said you thought I was Claridge Pasha's kinswoman."

"And you are not?" he asked reflectively.

He did not understand the slight change that passed over her face. His kinswoman—Claridge Pasha's kinswoman!

"I was not his kinswoman," she answered calmly. "You came to ask a favour then of Claridge Pasha; your life-work to do under him. I remember your words: 'I can aid thee in thy great task. Thou wouldst remake our Egypt, and my heart is with you. I would rescue, not destroy. . . . I would labour, but my master has taken away from me the anvil, the fire, and the hammer, and I sit without the door like an armless beggar.' Those were your words, and Claridge Pasha listened and believed, and saved your life and gave you work; and now again you have power greater than all others in Egypt."

"Madame, I congratulate you on a useful memory. May it serve you as the hill-fountain the garden in the city! Those indeed were my words. I hear myself from your lips, and yet recognise myself, if that be not vanity. But, madame, why have you sought me? What is it you wish to know—to hear?"

He looked at her innocently, as though he did not know her errand; as though beyond, in the desert, there was no tragedy approaching—or come.

"Excellency, you are aware that I have come to ask for news of Claridge Pasha." She leaned forward slightly, but, apart from her tightly interlaced fingers, it would not have been possible to know that she was under any strain.

"You come to me instead of to the Effendina. May I ask why, madame? Your husband's position—I did not know you were Lord Eglinton's wife— would entitle you to the highest consideration."

"I knew that Nahoum Pasha would have the whole knowledge, while the Effendina would have part only. Excellency, will you not tell me what news You have? Is Claridge Pasha alive?"

"Madame, I do not know. He is in the desert. He was surrounded. For over a month there has been no word—none. He is in danger. His way by the river was blocked. He stayed too long. He might have escaped, but he would insist on saving the loyal natives, on remaining with them, since he could not bring them across the desert; and the river and the desert are silent. Nothing comes out of that furnace yonder. Nothing comes."

He bent his eyes upon her complacently. Her own dropped. She could not bear that he should see the misery in them.

"You have come to try and save him, madame. What did you expect to do? Your Government did not strengthen my hands; your husband did nothing— nothing that could make it possible for me to act. There are many nations here, alas! Your husband does not take so great an interest in the fate of Claridge Pasha as yourself, madame."

She ignored the insult. She had determined to endure everything, if she might but induce this man to do the thing that could be done—if it was not too late. Before she could frame a reply, he said urbanely:

"But that is not to be expected. There was that between Claridge Pasha and yourself which would induce you to do all you might do for him, to be anxious for his welfare. Gratitude is a rare thing—as rare as the flower of the century—aloe; but you have it, madame."

There was no chance to misunderstand him. Foorgat Bey—he knew the truth, and had known it all these years.

"Excellency," she said, "if through me, Claridge Pasha—"

"One moment, madame," he interrupted, and, opening a drawer, took out a letter. "I think that what you would say may be found here, with much else that you will care to know. It is the last news of Claridge Pasha—a letter from him. I understand all you would say to me; but he who has most at stake has said it, and, if he failed, do you think, madame, that you could succeed?"

He handed her the letter with a respectful salutation.

"In the hour he left, madame, he came to know that the name of Foorgat Bey was not blotted from the book of Time, nor from Fate's reckoning."

After all these years! Her instinct had been true, then, that night so long ago. The hand that took the letter trembled slightly in spite of her will, but it was not the disclosure Nahoum had made which caused her agitation. This letter she held was in David Claridge's hand, the first she had ever seen, and, maybe, the last that he had ever written, or that any one would ever see, a document of tears. But no, there were no tears in this letter! As Hylde read it the trembling passed from her fingers, and a great thrilling pride possessed her. If tragedy had come, then it had fallen like a fire from heaven, not like a pestilence rising from the earth. Here indeed was that which justified all she had done, what she was doing now, what she meant to do when she had read the last word of it and the firm, clear signature beneath.

"Excellency [the letter began in English], I came into the desert and into the perils I find here, with your last words in my ear, 'There is the matter of Foorgat Bey.' The time you chose to speak was chosen well for your purpose, but ill for me. I could not turn back, I must go on. Had I returned, of what avail? What could I do but say what I say here, that my hand killed Foorgat Bey; that I had not meant to kill him, though at the moment I struck I took no heed whether he lived or died. Since you know of my sorrowful deed, you also know why Foorgat Bey was struck down. When, as I left the bank of the Nile, your words blinded my eyes, my mind said in its misery: 'Now, I see!' The curtains fell away from between you and me, and I saw all that you had done for vengeance and revenge. You knew all on that night when you sought your life of me and the way back to Kaid's forgiveness. I see all as though you spoke it in my ear. You had reason to hurt me, but you had no reason for hurting Egypt, as you have done. I did not value my life, as you know well, for it has been flung into the midst of dangers for Egypt's sake, how often! It was not cowardice which made me hide from you and all the world the killing of Foorgat Bey. I desired to face the penalty, for did not my act deny all that I had held fast from my youth up? But there was another concerned—a girl, but a child in years, as innocent and true a being as God has ever set among the dangers of this life, and, by her very innocence and unsuspecting nature, so much more in peril before such unscrupulous wiles as were used by Foorgat Bey.

"I have known you many years, Nahoum, and dark and cruel as your acts have been against the work I gave my life to do, yet I think that there was ever in you, too, the root of goodness. Men would call your acts treacherous if they knew what you had done; and so indeed they were; but yet I have seen you do things to others—not to me—which could rise only from the fountain of pure waters. Was it partly because I killed Foorgat and partly because I came to place and influence and power, that you used me so, and all that I did? Or was it the East at war with the West, the immemorial feud and foray?

"This last I will believe; for then it will seem to be something beyond yourself—centuries of predisposition, the long stain of the indelible—that drove you to those acts of matricide. Ay, it is that! For, Armenian as you are, this land is your native land, and in pulling down what I have built up—with you, Nahoum, with you—you have plunged the knife into the bosom of your mother. Did it never seem to you that the work which you did with me was a good work—the reduction of the corvee, the decrease of conscription, the lessening of taxes of the fellah, the bridges built, the canals dug, the seed distributed, the plague stayed, the better dwellings for the poor in the Delta, the destruction of brigandage, the slow blotting-out of exaction and tyranny under the kourbash, the quiet growth of law and justice, the new industries started—did not all these seem good to you, as you served the land with me, your great genius for finance, ay, and your own purse, helping on the things that were dear to me, for Egypt's sake? Giving with one hand freely, did your soul not misgive you when you took away with the other?

"When you tore down my work, you were tearing down your own; for, more than the material help I thought you gave in planning and shaping reforms, ay, far more than all, was the feeling in me which helped me over many a dark place, that I had you with me, that I was not alone. I trusted you, Nahoum. A life for a life you might have had for the

asking; but a long torture and a daily weaving of the web of treachery—that has taken more than my life; it has taken your own, for you have killed the best part of yourself, that which you did with me; and here in an ever-narrowing circle of death I say to you that you will die with me. Power you have, but it will wither in your grasp. Kaid will turn against you; for with my failure will come a dark reaction in his mind, which feels the cloud of doom drawing over it. Without me, with my work falling about his ears, he will, as he did so short a time ago, turn to Sharif and Higli and the rest; and the only comfort you will have will be that you destroyed the life of him who killed your brother. Did you love your brother? Nay, not more than did I, for I sent his soul into the void, and I would gladly have gone after it to ask God for the pardon of all his sins—and mine. Think: I hid the truth, but why? Because a woman would suffer an unmerited scandal and shame. Nothing could recall Foorgat Bey; but for that silence I gave my life, for the land which was his land. Do you betray it, then?

"And now, Nahoum, the gulf in which you sought to plunge me when you had ruined all I did is here before me. The long deception has nearly done its work. I know from Ebn Ezra Bey what passed between you. They are out against me—the slave-dealers—from Senaar to where I am. The dominion of Egypt is over here. Yet I could restore it with a thousand men and a handful of European officers, had I but a show of authority from Cairo, which they think has deserted me.

"I am shut up here with a handful of men who can fight and thousands who cannot fight, and food grows scarcer, and my garrison is worn and famished; but each day I hearten them with the hope that you will send me a thousand men from Cairo. One steamer pounding here from the north with men who bring commands from the Effendina, and those thousands out yonder beyond my mines and moats and guns will begin to melt away. Nahoum, think not that you shall triumph over David Claridge. If it be God's will that I shall die here, my work undone, then, smiling, I shall go with step that does not falter, to live once more; and another day the work that I began will rise again in spite of you or any man.

"Nahoum, the killing of Foorgat Bey has been like a cloud upon all my past. You know me, and you know I do not lie. Yet I do not grieve that I hid the thing—it was not mine only; and if ever you knew a good woman, and in dark moments have turned to her, glad that she was yours, think what you would have done for her, how you would have sheltered her against aught that might injure her, against those things women are not made to bear. Then think that I hid the deed for one who was a stranger to me, whose life must ever lay far from mine, and see clearly that I did it for a woman's sake, and not for this woman's sake; for I had never seen her till the moment I struck Foorgat Bey into silence and the tomb. Will you not understand, Nahoum?

"Yonder, I see the tribes that harry me. The great guns firing make the day a burden, the nights are ever fretted by the dangers of surprise, and there is scarce time to bury the dead whom sickness and the sword destroy. From the midst of it all my eyes turn to you in Cairo, whose forgiveness I ask for the one injury I did you; while I pray that you will seek pardon for all that you have done to me and to those who will pass with me, if our circle is broken. Friend, Achmet the Ropemaker is here fighting for Egypt. Art thou less, then, than Achmet? So, God be with thee.

**"DAVID CLARIDGE."**

Without a pause Hylda had read the letter from the first word to the last. She was too proud to let this conspirator and traitor see what David's words could do to her. When she read the lines concerning herself, she became cold from head to foot, but she knew that Nahoum never took his eyes from her face, and she gave no outward sign of what was passing within. When she had finished it, she folded it up calmly, her eyes dwelt for a moment on the address upon the envelope, and then she handed it back to Nahoum without a word. She looked him in the eyes and spoke. "He saved your life, he gave you all you had lost. It was not his fault that Prince Kaid chose him for his chief counsellor. You would be lying where your brother lies, were it not for Claridge Pasha."

"It may be; but the luck was with me; and I have my way."

She drew herself together to say what was hard to say. "Excellency, the man who was killed deserved to die. Only by lies, only by subterfuge, only because I was curious to see the inside of the Palace, and because I had known him in London, did I, without a thought of indiscretion, give myself to his care to come here. I was so young; I did not know life, or men—or Egyptians." The last word was uttered with

low scorn.

He glanced up quickly, and for the first time she saw a gleam of malice in his eyes. She could not feel sorry she had said it, yet she must remove the impression if possible.

"What Claridge Pasha did, any man would have done, Excellency. He struck, and death was an accident. Foorgat's temple struck the corner of a pedestal.

"His death was instant. He would have killed Claridge Pasha if it had been possible—he tried to do so. But, Excellency, if you have a daughter, if you ever had a child, what would you have done if any man had—"

"In the East daughters are more discreet; they tempt men less," he answered quietly, and fingered the string of beads he carried.

"Yet you would have done as Claridge Pasha did. That it was your brother was an accident, and—"

"It was an accident that the penalty must fall on Claridge Pasha, and on you, madame. I did not choose the objects of penalty. Destiny chose them, as Destiny chose Claridge Pasha as the man who should supplant me, who should attempt to do these mad things for Egypt against the judgment of the world—against the judgment of your husband. Shall I have better judgment than the chancellories of Europe and England—and Lord Eglington?"

"Excellency, you know what moves other nations; but it is for Egypt to act for herself. You ask me why I did not go to the Effendina. I come to you because I know that you could circumvent the Effendina, even if he sent ten thousand men. It is the way in Egypt."

"Madame, you have insight—will you not look farther still, and see that, however good Claridge Pasha's work might be some day in the far future, it is not good to-day. It is too soon. At the beginning of the twentieth century, perhaps. Men pay the penalty of their mistakes. A man's life—he watched her closely with his wide, benevolent eyes—"is neither here nor there, nor a few thousands, in the destiny of a nation. A man who ventures into a lion's den must not be surprised if he goes as Harrik went—ah, perhaps you do not know how Harrik went! A man who tears at the foundations of a house must not be surprised if the timbers fall on him and on his workmen. It is Destiny that Claridge Pasha should be the slayer of my brother, and a danger to Egypt, and one whose life is so dear to you, madame. You would have it otherwise, and so would I, but we must take things as they are—and you see that letter. It is seven weeks since then, and it may be that the circle has been broken. Yet it may not be so. The circle may be smaller, but not broken."

She felt how he was tempting her from word to word with a merciless ingenuity; yet she kept to her purpose; and however hopeless it seemed, she would struggle on.

"Excellency," she said in a low, pleading tone, "has he not suffered enough? Has he not paid the price of that life which you would not bring back if you could? No, in those places of your mind where no one can see lies the thought that you would not bring back Foorgat Bey. It is not an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth that has moved you; it has not been love of Foorgat Bey; it has been the hatred of the East for the West. And yet you are a Christian! Has Claridge Pasha not suffered enough, Excellency? Have you not had your fill of revenge? Have you not done enough to hurt a man whose only crime was that he killed a man to save a woman, and had not meant to kill?"

"Yet he says in his letter that the thought of killing would not have stopped him."

"Does one think at such a moment? Did he think? There was no time. It was the work of an instant. Ah, Fate was not kind, Excellency! If it had been, I should have been permitted to kill Foorgat Bey with my own hands."

"I should have found it hard to exact the penalty from you, madame."

The words were uttered in so neutral a way that they were enigmatical, and she could not take offence or be sure of his meaning.

"Think, Excellency. Have you ever known one so selfless, so good, so true? For humanity's sake, would you not keep alive such a man? If there were a feud as old as Adam between your race and his, would you not before this life of sacrifice lay down the sword and the bitter challenge? He gave you his hand in faith and trust, because your God was his God, your prophet and lord his prophet and lord. Such faith should melt your heart. Can you not see that he tried to make compensation for Foorgat's death, by giving you your life and setting you where you are now, with power to save or kill him?"

"You call him great; yet I am here in safety, and he is—where he is."

Have you not heard of the strife of minds and wills? He represented the West, I the East. He was a Christian, so was I; the ground of our battle was a fair one, and—and I have won."

"The ground of battle fair!" she protested bitterly. "He did not know that there was strife between you. He did not fight you. I think that he always loved you, Excellency. He would have given his life for you, if it had been in danger. Is there in that letter one word that any man could wish unwritten when the world was all ended for all men? But no, there was no strife between you—there was only hatred on your part. He was so much greater than you that you should feel no rivalry, no strife. The sword he carries cuts as wide as Time. You are of a petty day in a petty land. Your mouth will soon be filled with dust, and you will be forgotten. He will live in the history of the world. Excellency, I plead for him because I owe him so much: he killed a man and brought upon himself a lifelong misery for me. It is all I can do, plead to you who know the truth about him—yes, you know the truth—to make an effort to save him. It may be too late; but yet God may be waiting for you to lift your hand. You said the circle may be smaller, but it may be unbroken still. Will you not do a great thing once, and win a woman's gratitude, and the thanks of the world, by trying to save one who makes us think better of humanity? Will you not have the name of Nahoum Pasha linked with his—with his who thought you were his friend? Will you not save him?"

He got slowly to his feet, a strange look in his eyes. "Your words are useless. I will not save him for your sake; I will not save him for the world's sake; I will not save him—"

A cry of pain and grief broke from her, and she buried her face in her hands.

"—I will not save him for any other sake than his own."

He paused. Slowly, as dazed as though she had received a blow, Hylda raised her face and her hands dropped in her lap.

"For any other sake than his own!" Her eyes gazed at him in a bewildered, piteous way. What did he mean? His voice seemed to come from afar off.

"Did you think that you could save him? That I would listen to you, if I did not listen to him? No, no, madame. Not even did he conquer me; but something greater than himself within himself, it conquered me."

She got to her feet gasping, her hands stretched out. "Oh, is it true— is it true?" she cried.

"The West has conquered," he answered.

"You will help him—you will try to save him?" "When, a month ago, I read the letter you have read, I tried to save him. I sent secretly four thousand men who were at Wady Halfa to relieve him—if it could be done; five hundred to push forward on the quickest of the armed steamers, the rest to follow as fast as possible. I did my best. That was a month ago, and I am waiting—waiting and hoping, madame."

Suddenly she broke down. Tears streamed from her eyes. She sank into the chair, and sobs shook her from head to foot.

"Be patient, be composed, madame," Nahoum said gently. "I have tried you greatly—forgive me. Nay, do not weep. I have hope. We may hear from him at any moment now," he added softly, and there was a new look in his wide blue eyes as they were bent on her.

## CHAPTER XLI

### IN THE LAND OF SHINAR

"Then I said to the angel that talked with me, Whither do these bear the Ephah?"

"And he said unto me, To build it an house in the land of Shinar; and it shall be established, and set there upon her own base."

David raised his head from the paper he was studying. He looked at Lacey sharply. "And how many

rounds of ammunition?" he asked.

"Ten thousand, Saadat."

"How many shells?" he continued, making notes upon the paper before him.

"Three hundred, Saadat."

"How many hundredweight of dourha?" "Eighty—about."

"And how many mouths to feed?" "Five thousand."

"How many fighters go with the mouths?"

"Nine hundred and eighty-of a kind."

"And of the best?"

"Well, say, five hundred."

"Thee said six hundred three days ago, Lacey."

"Sixty were killed or wounded on Sunday, and forty I reckon in the others, Saadat."

The dark eyes flashed, the lips set. "The fire was sickening—they fell back?"

"Well, Saadat, they reflected—at the wrong time."

"They ran?"

"Not back—they were slow in getting on."

"But they fought it out?"

"They had to—root hog, or die. You see, Saadat, in that five hundred I'm only counting the invincibles, the up-and-at-'ems, the blind-goers that 'd open the lid of Hell and jump in after the enemy."

The pale face lighted. "So many! I would not have put the estimate half so high. Not bad for a dark race fighting for they know not what!"

"They know that all right; they are fighting for you, Saadat."

David seemed not to hear. "Five hundred—so many, and the enemy so near, the temptation so great."

"The deserters are all gone to Ali Wad Hei, Saadat. For a month there have been only the deserted."

A hardness crept into the dark eyes. "Only the deserted!" He looked out to where the Nile lost itself in the northern distance. "I asked Nahoum for one thousand men, I asked England for the word which would send them. I asked for a thousand, but even two hundred would turn the scale—the sign that the Inglesi had behind him Cairo and London. Twenty weeks, and nothing comes!"

He got to his feet slowly and walked up and down the room for a moment, glancing out occasionally towards the clump of palms which marked the disappearance of the Nile into the desert beyond his vision. At intervals a cannon-shot crashed upon the rarefied air, as scores of thousands had done for months past, torturing to ear and sense and nerve. The confused and dulled roar of voices came from the distance also; and, looking out to the landward side, David saw a series of movements of the besieging forces, under the Arab leader, Ali Wad Hei. Here a loosely formed body of lancers and light cavalry cantered away towards the south, converging upon the Nile; there a troop of heavy cavalry in glistening mail moved nearer to the northern defences; and between, battalions of infantry took up new positions, while batteries of guns moved nearer to the river, curving upon the palace north and south. Suddenly David's eyes flashed fire. He turned to Lacey eagerly. Lacey was watching with eyes screwed up shrewdly, his forehead shining with sweat.

"Saadat," he said suddenly, "this isn't the usual set of quadrilles. It's the real thing. They're watching the river—waiting."

"But south!" was David's laconic response. At the same moment he struck a gong. An orderly entered. Giving swift instructions, he turned to Lacey again. "Not Cairo—Darfur," he added.

"Ebn Ezra Bey coming! Ali Wad Hei's got word from up the Nile, I guess."

David nodded, and his face clouded. "We should have had word also," he said sharply.



There was a knock at the door, and Mahommed Hassan entered, supporting an Arab, down whose haggard face blood trickled from a wound in the head, while an arm hung limp at his side.

"Behold, Saadat—from Ebn Ezra Bey," Mahommed said. The man drooped beside him.

David caught a tin cup from a shelf, poured some liquor into it, and held it to the lips of the fainting man. "Drink," he said. The Arab drank greedily, and, when he had finished, gave a long sigh of satisfaction. "Let him sit," David added.

When the man was seated on a sheepskin, the huge Mahommed squatting behind like a sentinel, David questioned him. "What is thy name—thy news?" he asked in Arabic.

"I am called Feroog. I come from Ebn Ezra Bey, to whom be peace!" he answered. "Thy messenger, Saadat, behold he died of hunger and thirst, and his work became mine. Ebn Ezra Bey came by the river. . . ." "He is near?" asked David impatiently.

"He is twenty miles away."

"Thou camest by the desert?"

"By the desert, Saadat, as Ebn Ezra effendi comes."

"By the desert! But thou saidst he came by the river."

"Saadat, yonder, forty miles from where we are, the river makes a great curve. There the effendi landed in the night with four hundred men to march hither. But he commanded that the boats should come on slowly and receive the attack in the river, while he came in from the desert."

David's eye flashed. "A great device. They will be here by midnight, then, perhaps?"

"At midnight, Saadat, by the blessing of God."

"How wert thou wounded?"

"I came upon two of the enemy. They were mounted. I fought them. Upon the horse of one I came here."

"The other?"

"God is merciful, Saadat. He is in the bosom of God."

"How many men come by the river?"

"But fifty, Saadat," was the answer, "but they have sworn by the stone in the Kaabah not to surrender."

"And those who come with the effendi, with Ebn Ezra Bey, are they as those who will not surrender?"

"Half of them are so. They were with thee, as was I, Saadat, when the great sickness fell upon us, and were healed by thee, and afterwards fought with thee." David nodded abstractedly, and motioned to Mahommed to take the man away; then he said to Lacey: "How long do you think we can hold out?"

"We shall have more men, but also more rifles to fire, and more mouths to fill, if Ebn Ezra gets in, Saadat."

David raised his head. "But with more rifles to fire away your ten thousand rounds"—he tapped the paper on the table—"and eat the eighty hundredweight of dourha, how long can we last?"

"If they are to fight, and with full stomachs, and to stake everything on that one fight, then we can last two days. No more, I reckon."

"I make it one day," answered David. "In three days we shall have no food, and unless help comes from Cairo, we must die or surrender. It is not well to starve on the chance of help coming, and then die fighting with weak arms and broken spirit. Therefore, we must fight to-morrow, if Ebn Ezra gets in to-night. I think we shall fight well," he added. "You think so?"

"You are a born fighter, Saadat."

A shadow fell on David's face, and his lips tightened. "I was not born a fighter, Lacey. The day we met first no man had ever died by my hand or by my will."

"There are three who must die at sunset—an hour from now—by thy will, Saadat."

A startled look came into David's face. "Who?" he asked.

"The Three Pashas, Saadat. They have been recaptured."

"Recaptured!" rejoined David mechanically.

"Achmet Pasha got them from under the very noses of the sheikhs before sunrise this morning."

"Achmet—Achmet Pasha!" A light came into David's face again.

"You will keep faith with Achmet, Saadat. He risked his life to get them. They betrayed you, and betrayed three hundred good men to death. If they do not die, those who fight for you will say that it doesn't matter whether men fight for you or betray you, they get the same stuff off the same plate. If we are going to fight to-morrow, it ought to be with a clean bill of health."

"They served me well so long—ate at my table, fought with me. But—but traitors must die, even as Harrik died." A stern look came into his face. He looked round the great room slowly. "We have done our best," he said. "I need not have failed, if there had been no treachery. . . ."

"If it hadn't been for Nahoum!"

David raised his head. Supreme purpose came into his bearing. A grave smile played at his lips, as he gave that quick toss of the head which had been a characteristic of both Eglington and himself. His eyes shone— a steady, indomitable light. "I will not give in. I still have hope. We are few and they are many, but the end of a battle has never been sure. We may not fail even now. Help may come from Cairo even to-morrow."

"Say, somehow you've always pulled through before, Saadat. When I've been most frightened I've perked up and stiffened my backbone, remembering your luck. I've seen a blue funk evaporate by thinking of how things always come your way just when the worst seems at the worst."

David smiled as he caught up a small cane and prepared to go. Looking out of a window, he stroked his thin, clean-shaven face with a lean finger. Presently a movement in the desert arrested his attention. He put a field-glass to his eyes, and scanned the field of operations closely once more.

"Good-good!" he burst out cheerfully. "Achmet has done the one thing possible. The way to the north will be still open. He has flung his men between the Nile and the enemy, and now the batteries are at work." Opening the door, they passed out. "He has anticipated my orders," he added. "Come, Lacey, it will be an anxious night. The moon is full, and Ebn Ezra Bey has his work cut out—sharp work for all of us, and . . ."

Lacey could not hear the rest of his words in the roar of the artillery. David's steamers in the river were pouring shot into the desert where the enemy lay, and Achmet's "friendlies" and the Egyptians were making good their new position. As David and Lacey, fearlessly exposing themselves to rifle fire, and taking the shortest and most dangerous route to where Achmet fought, rode swiftly from the palace, Ebn Ezra's three steamers appeared up the river, and came slowly down to where David's gunboats lay. Their appearance was greeted by desperate discharges of artillery from the forces under Ali Wad Hei, who had received word of their coming two hours before, and had accordingly redispensed his attacking forces. But for Achmet's sharp initiative, the boldness of the attempt to cut off the way north and south would have succeeded, and the circle of fire and sword would have been complete. Achmet's new position had not been occupied before, for men were too few, and the position he had just left was now exposed to attack.

Never since the siege began had the foe shown such initiative and audacity. They had relied on the pressure of famine and decimation by sickness, the steady effects of sorties, with consequent fatalities and desertions, to bring the Liberator of the Slaves to his knees. Ebn Ezra Bey had sought to keep quiet the sheikhs far south, but he had been shut up in Darffur for months, and had been in as bad a plight as David. He had, however, broken through at last. His ruse in leaving the steamers in the night and marching across the desert was as courageous as it was perilous, for, if discovered before he reached the beleaguered place, nothing could save his little force from destruction. There was one way in from the desert to the walled town, and it was through that space which Achmet and his men had occupied, and on which Ali Wad Hei might now, at any moment, throw his troops.

David's heart sank as he saw the danger. From the palace he had sent an orderly with a command to an officer to move forward and secure the position, but still the gap was open, and the men he had

ordered to advance remained where they were. Every minute had its crisis.

As Lacey and himself left the town the misery of the place smote him in the eyes. Filth, refuse, debris filled the streets. Sick and dying men called to him from dark doorways, children and women begged for bread, carcasses lay unburied, vultures hovering above them—his tireless efforts had not been sufficient to cope with the daily horrors of the siege. But there was no sign of hostility to him. Voices called blessings on him from dark doorways, lips blanching in death commended him to Allah, and now and then a shrill call told of a fighter who had been laid low, but who had a spirit still unbeaten. Old men and women stood over their cooking-pots waiting for the moment of sunset; for it was Ramadan, and the faithful fasted during the day—as though every day was not a fast.

Sunset was almost come, as David left the city and galloped away to send forces to stop the gap of danger before it was filled by the foe. Sunset—the Three Pashas were to die at sunset! They were with Achmet, and in a few moments they would be dead. As David and Lacey rode hard, they suddenly saw a movement of men on foot at a distant point of the field, and then a small mounted troop, fifty at most, detach themselves from the larger force and, in close formation, gallop fiercely down on the position which Achmet had left. David felt a shiver of anxiety and apprehension as he saw this sharp, sweeping advance. Even fifty men, well intrenched, could hold the position until the main body of Ali Wad Hei's infantry came on.

They rode hard, but harder still rode Ali Wad Hei's troop of daring Arabs. Nearer and nearer they came. Suddenly from the trenches, which they had thought deserted, David saw jets of smoke rise, and a half-dozen of the advancing troop fell from their saddles, their riderless horses galloping on.

David's heart leaped: Achmet had, then, left men behind, hidden from view; and these were now defending the position. Again came the jets of smoke, and again more Arabs dropped from their saddles. But the others still came on. A thousand feet away others fell. Twenty-two of the fifty had already gone. The rest fired their rifles as they galloped. But now, to David's relief, his own forces, which should have moved half an hour before, were coming swiftly down to cut off the approach of Ali Wad Hei's infantry, and he turned his horse upon the position where a handful of men were still emptying the saddles of the impetuous enemy. But now all that were left of the fifty were upon the trenches. Then came the flash of swords, puffs of smoke, the thrust of lances, and figures falling from the screaming, rearing horses.

Lacey's pistol was in his hand, David's sword was gripped tight, as they rushed upon the melee. Lacey's pistol snapped, and an Arab fell; again, and another swayed in his saddle. David's sword swept down, and a turbaned head was gashed by a mortal stroke. As he swung towards another horseman, who had struck down a defender of the trenches, an Arab raised himself in his saddle and flung a lance with a cry of terrible malice; but, even as he did so, a bullet from Lacey's pistol pierced his shoulder. The shot had been too late to stop the lance, but sufficient to divert its course. It caught David in the flesh of the body under the arm—a slight wound only. A few inches to the right, however, and his day would have been done.

The remaining Arabs turned and fled. The fight was over. As David, dismounting, stood with dripping sword in his hand, in imagination, he heard the voice of Kaid say to him, as it said that night when he killed Foorgat Bey: "Hast thou never killed a man?"

For an instant it blinded him, then he was conscious that, on the ground at his feet, lay one of the Three Pashas who were to die at sunset. It was sunset now, and the man was dead. Another of the Three sat upon the ground winding his thigh with the folds of a dead Arab's turban, blood streaming from his gashed face. The last of the trio stood before David, stoical and attentive. For a moment David looked at the Three, the dead man and the two living men, and then suddenly turned to where the opposing forces were advancing. His own men were now between the position and Ali Wad Hei's shouting fanatics. They would be able to reach and defend the post in time. He turned and gave orders. There were only twenty men besides the two pashas, whom his commands also comprised. Two small guns were in place. He had them trained on that portion of the advancing infantry of Ali Wad Hei not yet covered by his own forces. Years of work and responsibility had made him master of many things, and long ago he had learned the work of an artilleryman. In a moment a shot, well directed, made a gap in the ranks of the advancing foe. An instant afterwards a shot from the other gun fired by the unwounded pasha, who, in his youth, had been an officer of artillery, added to the confusion in the swerving ranks, and the force hesitated; and now from Ebn Ezra Bey's river steamers, which had just arrived, there came a flank fire. The force wavered. From David's gun another shot made havoc. They turned and fell back quickly. The situation was saved.

As if by magic the attack of the enemy all over the field ceased. By sunset they had meant to finish this enterprise, which was to put the besieged wholly in their hands, and then to feast after the day's fasting. Sunset had come, and they had been foiled; but hunger demanded the feast. The order to cease

firing and retreat sounded, and three thousand men hurried back to the cooking-pot, the sack of dourha, and the prayer mat. Malaish, if the infidel Inglesi was not conquered to-day, he should be beaten and captured and should die to-morrow! And yet there were those among them who had a well-grounded apprehension that the "Inglesi" would win in the end.

By the trenches, where five men had died so bravely, and a traitorous pasha had paid the full penalty of a crime and won a soldier's death, David spoke to his living comrades. As he prepared to return to the city, he said to the unwounded pasha: "Thou wert to die at sunset; it was thy sentence."

And the pasha answered: "Saadat, as for death—I am ready to die, but have I not fought for thee?" David turned to the wounded pasha.

"Why did Achmet Pasha spare thee?"

"He did not spare us, Saadat. Those who fought with us but now were to shoot us at sunset, and remain here till other troops came. Before sunset we saw the danger, since no help came. Therefore we fought to save this place for thee."

David looked them in the eyes. "Ye were traitors," he said, "and for an example it was meet that ye should die. But this that ye have done shall be told to all who fight to-morrow, and men will know why it is I pardon treachery. Ye shall fight again, if need be, betwixt this hour and morning, and ye shall die, if need be. Ye are willing?"

Both men touched their foreheads, their lips, and their breasts. "Whether it be death or it be life, Inshallah, we are true to thee, Saadat!" one said, and the other repeated the words after him. As they salaamed David left them, and rode forward to the advancing forces.

Upon the roof of the palace Mahommed Hassan watched and waited, his eyes scanning sharply the desert to the south, his ears strained to catch that stir of life which his accustomed ears had so often detected in the desert, when no footsteps, marching, or noises could be heard. Below, now in the palace, now in the defences, his master, the Saadat, planned for the last day's effort on the morrow, gave directions to the officers, sent commands to Achmet Pasha, arranged for the disposition of his forces, with as strange a band of adherents and subordinates as ever men had—adventurers, to whom adventure in their own land had brought no profit; members of that legion of the non-reputable, to whom Cairo offered no home; Levantines, who had fled from that underground world where every coin of reputation is falsely minted, refugees from the storm of the world's disapproval. There were Greeks with Austrian names; Armenians, speaking Italian as their native tongue; Italians of astonishing military skill, whose services were no longer required by their offended country; French Pizarros with a romantic outlook, even in misery, intent to find new El Dorados; Englishmen, who had cheated at cards and had left the Horse Guards for ever behind; Egyptian intriguers, who had been banished for being less successful than greater intriguers; but also a band of good gallant men of every nation.

Upon all these, during the siege, Mahommed Hassan had been a self-appointed spy, and had indirectly added to that knowledge which made David's decisive actions to circumvent intrigue and its consequences seem almost supernatural. In his way Mahommed was a great man. He knew that David would endure no spying, and it was creditable to his subtlety and skill that he was able to warn his master, without being himself suspected of getting information by dark means. On the palace roof Mahommed was happy to-night. Tomorrow would be a great day, and, since the Saadat was to control its destiny, what other end could there be but happiness? Had not the Saadat always ridden over all that had been in his way? Had not he, Mahommed, ever had plenty to eat and drink, and money to send to Manfaloot to his father there, and to bribe when bribing was needed? Truly, life was a boon! With a neboot of dom-wood across his knees he sat in the still, moonlit night, peering into that distance whence Ebn Ezra Bey and his men must come, the moon above tranquil and pleasant and alluring, and the desert beneath, covered as it was with the outrages and terrors of war, breathing softly its ancient music, that delicate vibrant humming of the latent activities. In his uncivilised soul Mahommed Hassan felt this murmur, and even as he sat waiting to know whether a little army would steal out of the south like phantoms into this circle the Saadat had drawn round him, he kept humming to himself— had he not been, was he not now, an Apollo to numberless houris who had looked down at him from behind mooshrabieh screens, or waited for him in the palm-grove or the cane-field? The words of his song were not uttered aloud, but yet he sang them silently—

"Every night long and all night my spirit is moaning and crying  
O dear gazelle, that has taken away my peace!  
Ah! if my beloved come not, my eyes will be blinded with weeping  
Moon of my joy, come to me, hark to the call of my soul!"

Over and over he kept chanting the song. Suddenly, however, he leaned farther forward and strained his ears. Yes, at last, away to the south-east, there was life stirring, men moving—moving quickly. He got to his feet slowly, still listening, stood for a moment motionless, then, with a cry of satisfaction, dimly saw a moving mass in the white moonlight far over by the river. Ebn Ezra Bey and his men were coming. He started below, and met David on the way up. He waited till David had mounted the roof, then he pointed. "Now, Saadat!" he said.

"They have stolen in?" David peered into the misty whiteness.

They are almost in, Saadat. Nothing can stop them now."

"It is well done. Go and ask Ebn Ezra effendi to come hither," he said.

Suddenly a shot was fired, then a hoarse shout came over the desert, then there was silence again.

"They are in, Saadat," said Mahommed Hassan.

.....

Day broke over a hazy plain. On both sides of the Nile the river mist spread wide, and the army of Ali Wad Hei and the defending forces were alike veiled from each other and from the desert world beyond. Down the river for scores of miles the mist was heavy, and those who moved within it and on the waters of the Nile could not see fifty feet ahead. Yet through this heavy veil there broke gently a little fleet of phantom vessels, the noise of the paddle-wheels and their propellers muffled as they moved slowly on. Never had vessels taken such risks on the Nile before, never had pilots trusted so to instinct, for there were sand-banks and ugly drifts of rock here and there. A safe journey for phantom ships; but these armed vessels, filled by men with white, eager faces and others with dark Egyptian features, were no phantoms. They bristled with weapons, and armed men crowded every corner of space. For full two hours from the first streak of light they had travelled swiftly, taking chances not to be taken save in some desperate moment. The moment was desperate enough, if not for them. They were going to the relief of besieged men, with a message from Nahoum Pasha to Claridge Pasha, and with succour. They had looked for a struggle up this river as they neared the beleaguered city; but, as they came nearer and nearer, not a gun fired at them from the forts on the banks out of the mists. If they were heard they still were safe from the guns, for they could not be seen, and those on shore could not know whether they were friend or foe. Like ghostly vessels they passed on, until at last they could hear the stir and murmur of life along the banks of the stream.

Boom! boom! boom! Through the mist the guns of the city were pouring shot and shell out into Ali Wad Hei's camp, and Ali Wad Hei laughed contemptuously. Surely now the Inglesi was altogether mad, and to-day, this day after prayers at noon, he should be shot like a mad dog, for yesterday's defeat had turned some of his own adherent sheikhs into angry critics. He would not wait for starvation to compel the infidel to surrender. He would win freedom to deal in human flesh and blood, and make slave-markets where he willed, and win glory for the Lord Mahomet, by putting this place to the sword; and, when it was over, he would have the Inglesi's head carried on a pole through the city for the faithful to mock at, a target for the filth of the streets. So, by the will of Allah, it should be done!

Boom! boom! boom! The Inglesi was certainly mad, for never had there been so much firing in any long day in all the siege as in this brief hour this morning. It was the act of a fool, to fire his shot and shell into the mist without aim, without a clear target. Ali Wad Hei scorned to make any reply with his guns, but sat in desultory counsel with his sheikhs, planning what should be done when the mists had cleared away. But yesterday evening the Arab chief had offered to give the Inglesi life if he would surrender and become a Muslim, and swear by the Lord Mahomet; but late in the night he had received a reply which left only one choice, and that was to disembowel the infidel, and carry his head aloft on a spear. The letter he had received ran thus in Arabic:

"To Ali Wad Hei and All with Him:

"We are here to live or to die as God wills, and not as ye will. I have set my feet on the rock, and not by threats of any man shall I be moved. But I say that for all the blood that ye have shed here there will be punishment, and for the slaves which ye have slain or sold there will be high price paid. Ye have threatened the city and me—take us if ye can. Ye are seven to one. Why falter all these months? If ye will not come to us, we shall come to you, rebellious ones, who have drawn the sword against your lawful ruler, the Effendina.

"CLARIDGE PASHA"

It was a rhetorical document couched in the phraseology they best understood; and if it begat derision, it also begat anger; and the challenge David had delivered would be met when the mists had lifted from the river and the plain. But when the first thinning of the mists began, when the sun began to dissipate the rolling haze, Ali Wad Hei and his rebel sheikhs were suddenly startled by rifle-fire at close quarters, by confused noises, and the jar and roar of battle. Now the reason for the firing of the great guns was plain. The noise was meant to cover the advance of David's men. The little garrison, which had done no more than issue in sorties, was now throwing its full force on the enemy in a last desperate endeavour. It was either success or absolute destruction. David was staking all, with the last of his food, the last of his ammunition, the last of his hopes. All round the field the movement was forward, till the circle had widened to the enemy's lines; while at the old defences were only handfuls of men. With scarce a cry David's men fell on the unprepared foe; and he himself, on a grey Arab, a mark for any lance or spear and rifle, rode upon that point where Ali Wad Hei's tent was set.

But after the first onset, in which hundreds were killed, there began the real noise of battle—fierce shouting, the shrill cries of wounded and maddened horses as they struck with their feet, and bit as fiercely at the fighting foe as did their masters. The mist cleared slowly, and, when it had wholly lifted, the fight was spread over every part of the field of siege. Ali Wad Hei's men had gathered themselves together after the first deadly onslaught, and were fighting fiercely, shouting the Muslim battle-cry, "Allah hu achbar!" Able to bring up reinforcements, the great losses at first sustained were soon made up, and the sheer weight of numbers gave them courage and advantage. By rushes with lance and sword and rifle they were able, at last, to drive David's men back upon their old defences with loss. Then charge upon charge ensued, and each charge, if it cost them much, cost the besieged more, by reason of their fewer numbers. At one point, however, the besieged became again the attacking party. This was where Achmet Pasha had command. His men on one side of the circle, as Ebn Ezra Bey's men on the other, fought with a valour as desperate as the desert ever saw. But David, galloping here and there to order, to encourage, to prevent retreat at one point, or to urge attack at another, saw that the doom of his gallant force was certain; for the enemy were still four to one, in spite of the carnage of the first attack. Bullets hissed past him. One carried away a button, one caught the tip of his ear, one pierced the fez he wore; but he felt nothing of this, saw nothing. He was buried in the storm of battle preparing for the end, for the final grim defence, when his men would retreat upon the one last strong fort, and there await their fate. From this absorption he was roused by Lacey, who came galloping towards him.

"They've come, Saadat, they've come at last! We're saved—oh, my God, you bet we're all right now! See! See, Saadat!"

David saw. Five steamers carrying the Egyptian flag were bearing around the point where the river curved below the town, and converging upon David's small fleet. Presently the steamers opened fire, to encourage the besieged, who replied with frenzied shouts of joy, and soon there poured upon the sands hundreds of men in the uniform of the Effendina. These came forward at the double, and, with a courage which nothing could withstand, the whole circle spread out again upon the discomfited tribes of Ali Wad Hei. Dismay, confusion, possessed the Arabs. Their river-watchers had failed them, God had hidden His face from them; and when Ali Wad Hei and three of his emirs turned and rode into the desert, their forces broke and ran also, pursued by the relentless men who had suffered the tortures of siege so long. The chase was short, however, for they were desert folk, and they returned to loot the camp which had menaced them so long.

Only the new-comers, Nahoum's men, carried the hunt far; and they brought back with them a body which their leader commanded to be brought to a great room of the palace. Towards sunset David and Ebn Ezra Bey and Lacey came together to this room. The folds of loose linen were lifted from the face, and all three looked at it long in silence. At last Lacey spoke:

"He got what he wanted; the luck was with him. It's better than Leperland."

"In the bosom of Allah there is peace," said Ebn Ezra. "It is well with Achmet."

With misty eyes David stooped and took the dead man's hand in his for a moment. Then he rose to his feet and turned away.

"And Nahoum also—and Nahoum," he said presently. "Read this," he added, and put a letter from Nahoum into Ebn Ezra's hand.

Lacey reverently covered Achmet's face. "Say, he got what he wanted," he said again.

## CHAPTER XLII

### THE LOOM OF DESTINY

It was many a day since the Duchess of Snowdon had seen a sunrise, and the one on which she now gazed from the deck of the dahabieh Nefert, filled her with a strange new sense of discovery and revelation. Her perceptions were arrested and a little confused, and yet the undercurrent of feeling was one of delight and rejuvenation. Why did this sunrise bring back, all at once, the day when her one lost child was born, and she looked out of the windows of Snowdon Hall, as she lay still and nerveless, and thought how wonderful and sweet and green was the world she saw and the sky that walled it round? Sunrise over the Greek Temple of Philae and the splendid ruins of a farther time towering beside it! In her sight were the wide, islanded Nile, where Cleopatra loitered with Antony, the foaming, crashing cataracts above, the great quarries from which ancient temples had been hewed, unfinished obelisks and vast blocks of stone left where bygone workmen had forsaken them, when the invader came and another dynasty disappeared into that partial oblivion from which the Egyptian still emerges triumphant over all his conquerors, unchanged in form and feature. Something of its meaning got into her mind.

"I wonder what Windlehurst would think of it. He always had an eye for things like that," she murmured; and then caught her breath, as she added: "He always liked beauty." She looked at her wrinkled, childish hands. "But sunsets never grow old," she continued, with no apparent relevance. "La, la, we were young once!"

Her eyes were lost again in the pinkish glow spreading over the grey- brown sand of the desert, over the palm-covered island near. "And now it's others' turn, or ought to be," she murmured.

She looked to where, not far away, Hylda stood leaning over the railing of the dahabieh, her eyes fixed in reverie on the farthest horizon line of the unpeopled, untravelled plain of sand.

"No, poor thing, it's not her turn," she added, as Hylda, with a long sigh, turned and went below. Tears gathered in her pale blue eyes. "Not yet—with Eglington alive. And perhaps it would be best if the other never came back. I could have made the world better worth living in if I had had the chance—and I wouldn't have been a duchess! La! La!"

She relapsed into reverie, an uncommon experience for her; and her mind floated indefinitely from one thing to another, while she was half conscious of the smell of coffee permeating the air, and of the low resonant notes of the Nubian boys, as, with locked shoulders, they scrubbed the decks of a dahabieh near by with hemphod feet.

Presently, however, she was conscious of another sound—the soft clip of oars, joined to the guttural, explosive song of native rowers; and, leaning over the rail, she saw a boat draw alongside the Nefert. From it came the figure of Nahoum Pasha, who stepped briskly on deck, in his handsome face a light which flashed an instant meaning to her.

"I know—I know! Claridge Pasha—you have heard?" she said excitedly, as he came to her.

He smiled and nodded. "A messenger has arrived. Within a few hours he should be here."

"Then it was all false that he was wounded—ah, that horrible story of his death!"

"Bismillah, it was not all false! The night before the great battle he was slightly wounded in the side. He neglected it, and fever came on; but he survived. His first messengers to us were killed, and that is why the news of the relief came so late. But all is well at last. I have come to say so to Lady Eglington—even before I went to the Effendina." He made a gesture towards a huge and gaily-caparisoned dahabieh not far away. "Kaid was right about coming here. His health is better. He never doubted Claridge Pasha's return; it was une idee fixe. He believes a magic hand protects the Saadat, and that, adhering to him, he himself will carry high the flower of good fortune and live for ever. Kismet! I will not wait to see Lady Eglington. I beg to offer to her my congratulations on the triumph of her countryman."

His words had no ulterior note; but there was a shadow in his eyes which in one not an Oriental would have seemed sympathy.

"Pasha, Pasha!" the Duchess called after him, as he turned to leave; "tell me, is there any news from England—from the Government?"

"From Lord Eglington? No," Nahoum answered meaningly. "I wrote to him. Did the English

Government desire to send a message to Claridge Pasha, if the relief was accomplished? That is what I asked. But there is no word. Malaish, Egypt will welcome him!"

She followed his eyes. Two score of dahabiehs lay along the banks of the Nile, and on the shore were encampments of soldiers, while flags were flying everywhere. Egypt had followed the lead of the Effendina. Claridge Pasha's star was in its zenith.

As Nahoum's boat was rowed away, Hylda came on deck again, and the Duchess hastened to her. Hylda caught the look in her face. "What has happened? Is there news? Who has been here?" she asked.

The Duchess took her hands. "Nahoum has gone to tell Prince Kaid. He came to you with the good news first," she said with a flutter.

She felt Hylda's hands turn cold. A kind of mist filled the dark eyes, and the slim, beautiful figure swayed slightly. An instant only, and then the lips smiled, and Hylda said in a quavering voice: "They will be so glad in England."

"Yes, yes, my darling, that is what Nahoum said." She gave Nahoum's message to her. "Now they'll make him a peer, I suppose, after having deserted him. So English!"

She did not understand why Hylda's hands trembled so, why so strange a look came into her face, but, in an instant, the rare and appealing eyes shone again with a light of agitated joy, and suddenly Hylda leaned over and kissed her cheek.

"Smell the coffee," she said with assumed gaiety. "Doesn't fair-and- sixty want her breakfast? Sunrise is a splendid tonic." She laughed feverishly.

"My darling, I hadn't seen the sun rise in thirty years, not since the night I first met Windlehurst at a Foreign Office ball."

"You have always been great friends?" Hylda stole a look at her.

"That's the queer part of it; I was so stupid, and he so clever. But Windlehurst has a way of letting himself down to your level. He always called me Betty after my boy died, just as if I was his equal. La, la, but I was proud when he first called me that—the Prime Minister of England. I'm going to watch the sun rise again to-morrow, my darling. I didn't know it was so beautiful, and gave one such an appetite." She broke a piece of bread, and, not waiting to butter it, almost stuffed it into her mouth.

Hylda leaned over and pressed her arm. "What a good mother Betty it is!" she said tenderly.

Presently they were startled by the shrill screaming of a steamer whistle, followed by the churning of the paddles, as she drove past and drew to the bank near them.

"It is a steamer from Cairo, with letters, no doubt," said Hylda; and the Duchess nodded assent, and covertly noted her look, for she knew that no letters had arrived from Eglington since Hylda had left England.

A half-hour later, as the Duchess sat on deck, a great straw hat tied under her chin with pale-blue ribbons, like a child of twelve, she was startled by seeing the figure of a farmer-looking person with a shock of grey-red hair, a red face, and with great blue eyes, appear before her in the charge of Hylda's dragoman.

"This has come to speak with my lady," the dragoman said, "but my lady is riding into the desert there." He pointed to the sands.

The Duchess motioned the dragoman away, and scanned the face of the new-comer shrewdly. Where had she seen this strange-looking English peasant, with the rolling walk of a sailor?

"What is your name, and where do you come from?" she asked, not without anxiety, for there was something ominous and suggestive in the old man's face.

"I come from Hamley, in England, and my name is Soolsby, your grace. I come to see my Lady Eglington."

Now she remembered him. She had seen him in Hamley more than once.

"You have come far; have you important news for her ladyship? Is there anything wrong?" she asked with apparent composure, but with heavy premonition.



"Ay, news that counts, I bring," answered Soolsby, "or I hadn't come this long way. 'Tis a long way at sixty-five."

"Well, yes, at our age it is a long way," rejoined the Duchess in a friendly voice, suddenly waving away the intervening air of class, for she was half a peasant at heart.

"Ay, and we both come for the same end, I suppose," Soolsby added; "and a costly business it is. But what matters, so be that you help her ladyship and I help Our Man."

"And who is 'Our Man'?" was the rejoinder. "Him that's coming safe here from the South—David Claridge," he answered. "Ay, 'twas the first thing I heard when I landed here, me that be come all these thousand miles to see him, if so be he was alive." Just then he caught sight of Kate Heaver climbing the stair to the deck where they were. His face flushed; he hurried forward and gripped her by the arm, as her feet touched the upper deck. "Kate-ay, 'tis Kate!" he cried. Then he let go her arm and caught a hand in both of his and fondled it. "Ay, ay, 'tis Kate!" "What is it brings you, Soolsby?" Kate asked anxiously.

"'Tis not Jasper, and 'tis not the drink-ay, I've been sober since, ever since, Kate, lass," he answered stoutly. "Quick, quick, tell me what it is!" she said, frowning. "You've not come here for naught, Soolsby."

Still holding her hand, he leaned over and whispered in her ear. For an instant she stood as though transfixed, and then, with a curious muffled cry, broke away from him and turned to go below.

"Keep your mouth shut, lass, till proper time," he called after her, as she descended the steps hastily again. Then he came slowly back to the Duchess.

He looked her in the face—he was so little like a peasant, so much more like a sailor here with his feet on the deck of a floating thing. "Your grace is a good friend to her ladyship," he said at last deliberately, "and 'tis well that you tell her ladyship. As good a friend to her you've been, I doubt not, as that I've been to him that's coming from beyond and away."

"Go on, man, go on. I want to know what startled Heaver yonder, what you have come to say."

"I beg pardon, your grace. One doesn't keep good news waiting, and 'tis not good news for her ladyship I bring, even if it be for Claridge Pasha, for there was no love lost 'twixt him and second-best lordship that's gone."

"Speak, man, speak it out, and no more riddles," she interrupted sharply.

"Then, he that was my Lord Eglington is gone foreign—he is dead," he said slowly.

The Duchess fell back in her chair. For an instant the desert, the temples, the palms, the Nile waters faded, and she was in some middle world, in which Soolsby's voice seemed coming muffled and deep across a dark flood; then she recovered herself, and gave a little cry, not unlike that which Kate gave a few moments before, partly of pain, partly of relief.

"Ay, he's dead and buried, too, and in the Quaker churchyard. Miss Claridge would have it so. And none in Hamley said nay, not one."

The Duchess murmured to herself. Eglington was dead—Eglington was dead —Eglington was dead! And David Claridge was coming out of the desert, was coming to-day-now!

"How did it happen?" she asked, faintly, at last.

"Things went wrong wi' him—bad wrong in Parliament and everywhere, and he didn't take it well. He stood the world off like-ay, he had no temper for black days. He shut himself up at Hamley in his chemical place, like his father, like his father before him. When the week-end came, there he was all day and night among his bottles and jars and wires. He was after summat big in experiment for explosives, so the papers said, and so he said himself before he died, to Miss Claridge—ay, 'twas her he deceived and treated cruel, that come to him when he was shattered by his experimenting. No patience, he had at last—and reckless in his chemical place, and didn't realise what his hands was doing. 'Twas so he told her, that forgave him all his deceit, and held him in her arms when he died. Not many words he had to speak; but he did say that he had never done any good to any one—ay, I was standing near behind his bed and heard all, for I was thinking of her alone with him, and so I would be with her, and she would have it so. Ay, and he said that he had misused cruel her that had loved him, her ladyship, that's here. He said he had misused her because he had never loved her truly, only pride and vainglory being in his heart. Then he spoke summat to her that was there to forgive him and help him over the stile 'twixt this field and it that's Beyond and Away, which made her cry out in pain and

say that he must fix his thoughts on other things. And she prayed out loud for him, for he would have no parson there. She prayed and prayed as never priest or parson prayed, and at last he got quiet and still, and, when she stopped praying, he did not speak or open his eyes for a longish while. But when the old clock on the stable was striking twelve, he opened his eyes wide, and when it had stopped, he said: 'It is always twelve by the clock that stops at noon. I've done no good. I've earned my end.' He looked as though he was waiting for the clock to go on striking, half raising himself up in bed, with Miss Faith's arm under his head. He whispered to her then—he couldn't speak by this time. 'It's twelve o'clock,' he said. Then there came some words I've heard the priest say at Mass, 'Vanitas, Vanitatum,'—that was what he said. And her he'd lied to, there with him, laying his head down on the pillow, as if he was her child going to sleep. So, too, she had him buried by her father, in the Quaker burying-ground—ay, she is a saint on earth, I warrant."

For a moment after he had stopped the Duchess did not speak, but kept untying and tying the blue ribbons under her chin, her faded eyes still fastened on him, burning with the flame of an emotion which made them dark and young again.

"So, it's all over," she said, as though to herself. "They were all alike, from old Broadbrim, the grandfather, down to this one, and back to William the Conqueror."

"Like as peas in a pod," exclaimed Soolsby—"all but one, all but one, and never satisfied with what was in their own garden, but peeking, peeking beyond the hedge, and climbing and getting a fall. That's what they've always been evermore."

His words aroused the Duchess, and the air became a little colder about her—after all, the division between the classes and the masses must be kept, and the Eglington's were no upstarts. "You will say nothing about this till I give you leave to speak," she commanded. "I must tell her ladyship."

Soolsby drew himself up a little, nettled at her tone. "It is your grace's place to tell her ladyship," he responded; "but I've taken ten years' savings to come to Egypt, and not to do any one harm, but good, if so be I might."

The Duchess relented at once. She got to her feet as quickly as she could, and held out her hand to him. "You are a good man, and a friend worth having, I know, and I shall like you to be my friend, Mr. Soolsby," she said impulsively.

He took her hand and shook it awkwardly, his lips working. "Your grace, I understand. I've got naught to live for except my friends. Money's naught, naught's naught, if there isn't a friend to feel a crunch at his heart when summat bad happens to you. I'd take my affydavy that there's no better friend in the world than your grace."

She smiled at him. "And so we are friends, aren't we? And I am to tell her ladyship, and you are to say 'naught.'

"But to the Egyptian, to him, your grace, it is my place to speak—to Claridge Pasha, when he comes." The Duchess looked at him quizzically. "How does Lord Eglington's death concern Claridge Pasha?" she asked rather anxiously. Had there been gossip about Hylda? Had the public got a hint of the true story of her flight, in spite of all Windlehurst had done? Was Hylda's name smirched, now, when all would be set right? Had everything come too late, as it were?

"There's two ways that his lordship's death concerns Claridge Pasha," answered Soolsby shrewdly, for though he guessed the truth concerning Hylda and David, his was not a leaking tongue. "There's two ways it touches him. There'll be a new man in the Foreign Office—Lord Eglington was always against Claridge Pasha; and there's matters of land betwixt the two estates—matters of land that's got to be settled now," he continued, with determined and successful evasion.

The Duchess was deceived. "But you will not tell Claridge Pasha until I have told her ladyship and I give you leave? Promise that," she urged.

"I will not tell him until then," he answered. "Look, look, your grace," he added, suddenly pointing towards the southern horizon, "there he comes! Ay, 'tis Our Man, I doubt not—Our Man evermore!"

Miles away there appeared on the horizon a dozen camels being ridden towards Assouan.

"Our Man evermore," repeated the Duchess, with a trembling smile. "Yes, it is surely he. See, the soldiers are moving. They're going to ride out to meet him." She made a gesture towards the far shore where Kaid's men were saddling their horses, and to Nahoum's and Kaid's dahabieh's, where there was a great stir.

"There's one from Hamley will meet them first," Soolsby said, and pointed to where Hylda, in the desert, was riding towards the camels coming out of the south.

The Duchess threw up her hands. "Dear me, dear me," she said in distress, "if she only knew!"

"There's thousands of women that'd ride out mad to meet him," said Soolsby carefully; "women that likes to see an Englishman that's done his duty—ay, women and men, that'd ride hard to welcome him back from the grave. Her ladyship's as good a patriot as any," he added, watching the Duchess out of the corners of his eyes, his face turned to the desert.

The Duchess looked at him quizzically, and was satisfied with her scrutiny. "You're a man of sense," she replied brusquely, and gathered up her skirts. "Find me a horse or a donkey, and I'll go too," she added whimsically. "Patriotism is such a nice sentiment."

For David and Lacey the morning had broken upon a new earth. Whatever of toil and tribulation the future held in store, this day marked a step forward in the work to which David had set his life. A way had been cloven through the bloody palisades of barbarism, and though the dark races might seek to hold back the forces which drain the fens, and build the bridges, and make the desert blossom as the rose, which give liberty and preserve life, the good end was sure and near, whatever of rebellion and disorder and treachery intervened. This was the larger, graver issue; but they felt a spring in the blood, and their hearts were leaping, because of the thought that soon they would clasp hands again with all from which they had been exiled.

"Say, Saadat, think of it: a bed with four feet, and linen sheets, and sleeping till any time in the morning, and, If you please, sir, breakfast's on the table.' Say, it's great, and we're in it!"

David smiled. "Thee did very well, friend, without such luxuries. Thee is not skin and bone."

Lacey mopped his forehead. "Well, I've put on a layer or two since the relief. It's being scared that takes the flesh off me. I never was intended for the 'stricken field.' Poetry and the hearth-stone was my real vocation—and a bit of silver mining to blow off steam with," he added with a chuckle.

David laughed and tapped his arm. "That is an old story now, thy cowardice. Thee should be more original.

"It's worth not being original, Saadat, to hear you thee and thou me as you used to do. It's like old times—the oldest, first times. You've changed a lot, Saadat."

"Not in anything that matters, I hope."

"Not in anything that matters to any one that matters. To me it's the same as it ever was, only more so. It isn't that, for you are you. But you've had disappointment, trouble, hard nuts to crack, and all you could do to escape the rocks being rolled down the Egyptian hill onto you; and it's left its mark."

"Am I grown so different?"

Lacey's face shone under the look that was turned towards him. "Say, Saadat, you're the same old red sandstone; but I missed the thee and thou. I sort of hankered after it; it gets me where I'm at home with myself."

David laughed drily. "Well, perhaps I've missed something in you. Thee never says now—not since thee went south a year ago, 'Well, give my love to the girls.' Something has left its mark, friend," he added teasingly; for his spirits were boyish to-day; he was living in the present. There had gone from his eyes and from the lines of his figure the melancholy which Hylda had remarked when he was in England.

"Well, now, I never noticed," rejoined Lacey. "That's got me. Looks as if I wasn't as friendly as I used to be, doesn't it? But I am—I am, Saadat."

"I thought that the widow in Cairo, perhaps—" Lacey chuckled. "Say, perhaps it was—cute as she can be, maybe, wouldn't like it, might be prejudiced."

Suddenly David turned sharply to Lacey. "Thee spoke of silver mining just now. I owe thee something like two hundred thousand pounds, I think—Egypt and I."

Lacey winked whimsically at himself under the rim of his helmet. "Are you drawing back from those concessions, Saadat?" he asked with apparent ruefulness.

"Drawing back? No! But does thee think they are worth—"

Lacey assumed an injured air. "If a man that's made as much money as me can't be trusted to look after a business proposition—"

"Oh, well, then!"

"Say, Saadat, I don't want you to think I've taken a mean advantage of you; and if—"

David hastened to put the matter right. "No, no; thee must be the judge!" He smiled sceptically. "In any case, thee has done a good deed in a great way, and it will do thee no harm in the end. In one way the investment will pay a long interest, as long as the history of Egypt runs. Ah, see, the houses of Assouan, the palms, the river, the masts of the dahabiehs!"

Lacey quickened his camel's steps, and stretched out a hand to the inviting distance. "My, it's great," he said, and his eyes were blinking with tears. Presently he pointed. "There's a woman riding to meet us, Saa dat. Golly, can't she ride! She means to be in it—to salute the returning brave."

He did not glance at David. If he had done so, he would have seen that David's face had taken on a strange look, just such a look as it wore that night in the monastery when he saw Hylda in a vision and heard her say: "Speak, speak to me!"

There had shot into David's mind the conviction that the woman riding towards them was Hylda. Hylda, the first to welcome him back, Hylda— Lady Eglington! Suddenly his face appeared to tighten and grow thin. It was all joy and torture at once. He had fought this fight out with himself—had he not done so? Had he not closed his heart to all but duty and Egypt? Yet there she was riding out of the old life, out of Hamley, and England, and all that had happened in Cairo, to meet him. Nearer and nearer she came. He could not see the face, but yet he knew. He quickened his camel and drew ahead of Lacey. Lacey did not understand, he did not recognise Hylda as yet; but he knew by instinct the Saadat's wishes, and he motioned the others to ride more slowly, while he and they watched horsemen coming out from Assouan towards them.

David urged his camel on. Presently he could distinguish the features of the woman riding towards him. It was Hylda. His presentiment, his instinct had been right. His heart beat tumultuously, his hand trembled, he grew suddenly weak; but he summoned up his will, and ruled himself to something like composure. This, then, was his home-coming from the far miseries and trials and battle-fields—to see her face before all others, to hear her voice first. What miracle had brought this thing to pass, this beautiful, bitter, forbidden thing? Forbidden! Whatever the cause of her coming, she must not see what he felt for her. He must deal fairly by her and by Eglington; he must be true to that real self which had emerged from the fiery trial in the monastery. Bronzed as he was, his face showed no paleness; but, as he drew near her, it grew pinched and wan from the effort at self-control. He set his lips and rode on, until he could see her eyes looking into his—eyes full of that which he had never seen in any eyes in all the world.

What had been her feelings during that ride in the desert? She had not meant to go out to meet him. After she heard that he was coming, her desire was to get away from all the rest of the world, and be alone with her thoughts. He was coming, he was safe, and her work was done. What she had set out to do was accomplished—to bring him back, if it was God's will, out of the jaws of death, for England's sake, for the world's sake, for his sake, for her own sake. For her own sake? Yes, yes, in spite of all, for her own sake. Whatever lay before, now, for this one hour, for this moment of meeting he should be hers. But meet him, where? Before all the world, with a smile of conventional welcome on her lips, with the same hand-clasp that any friend and lover of humanity would give him?

The desert air blew on her face, keen, sweet, vibrant, thrilling. What he had heard that night at the monastery, the humming life of the land of white fire—the desert, the million looms of all the weavers of the world weaving, this she heard in the sunlight, with the sand rising like surf behind her horse's heels. The misery and the tyranny and the unrequited love were all behind her, the disillusion and the loss and the undeserved insult to her womanhood—all, all were sunk away into the unredeemable past. Here, in Egypt, where she had first felt the stir of life's passion and pain and penalty, here, now, she lost herself in a beautiful, buoyant dream. She was riding out to meet the one man of all men, hero, crusader, rescuer—ah, that dreadful night in the Palace, and Foorgat's face! But he was coming, who had made her live, to whom she had called, to whom her soul had spoken in its grief and misery. Had she ever done aught to shame the best that was in herself—and had she not been sorely tempted? Had she not striven to love Eglington even when the worst was come, not alone at her own soul's command, but because she knew that this man would have it so? Broken by her own sorrow, she had left England, Eglington—all, to keep her pledge to help him in his hour of need, to try and save him to the world, if that might be. So she had come to Nahoum, who was binding him down on the bed of torture and of death. And yet, alas! not herself had conquered Nahoum, but David, as Nahoum had said. She herself had not done this one thing which would have compensated for all that she had suffered. This had not

been permitted; but it remained that she had come here to do it, and perhaps he would understand when he saw her.

Yes, she knew he would understand! She flung up her head to the sun and the pulse-stirring air, and, as she did so, she saw his cavalcade approaching. She was sure it was he, even when he was far off, by the same sure instinct that convinced him. For an instant she hesitated. She would turn back, and meet him with the crowd. Then she looked around. The desert was deserted by all save herself and himself and those who were with him. No. Her mind was made up. She would ride forward. She would be the first to welcome him back to life and the world. He and she would meet alone in the desert. For one minute they would be alone, they two, with the world afar, they two, to meet, to greet—and to part. Out of all that Fate had to give of sorrow and loss, this one delectable moment, no matter what came after.

"David!" she cried with beating heart, and rode on, harder and harder.

Now she saw him ride ahead of the others. Ah, he knew that it was she, though he could not see her face! Nearer and nearer. Now they looked into each other's eyes.

She saw him stop his camel and make it kneel for the dismounting. She stopped her horse also, and slid to the ground, and stood waiting, one hand upon the horse's neck. He hastened forward, then stood still, a few feet away, his eyes on hers, his helmet off, his brown hair, brown as when she first saw it—peril and hardship had not thinned or greyed it. For a moment they stood so, for a moment of revealing and understanding, but speechless; and then, suddenly, and with a smile infinitely touching, she said, as he had heard her say in the monastery—the very words:

"Speak—speak to me!"

He took her hand in his. "There is no need—I have said all," he answered, happiness and trouble at once in his eyes. Then his face grew calmer. "Thee has made it worth while living on," he added.

She was gaining control of herself also. "I said that I would come when I was needed," she answered less, tremblingly.

"Thee came alone?" he asked gently.

"From Assouan, yes," she said in a voice still unsteady. "I was riding out to be by myself, and then I saw you coming, and I rode on. I thought I should like to be the first to say: 'Well done,' and 'God bless you!'"

He drew in a long breath, then looked at her keenly. "Lord Eglington is in Egypt also?" he asked.

Her face did not change. She looked him in the eyes.

"No, Eglington would not come to help you. I came to Nahoum, as I said I would."

"Thee has a good memory," he rejoined simply. "I am a good friend," she answered, then suddenly her face flushed up, her breast panted, her eyes shone with a brightness almost intolerable to him, and he said in a low, shaking voice:

"It is all fighting, all fighting. We have done our best; and thee has made all possible."

"David!" she said in a voice scarce above a whisper.

"Thee and me have far to go," he said in a voice not louder than her own, "but our ways may not be the same."

She understood, and a newer life leaped up in her. She knew that he loved her—that was sufficient; the rest would be easier now. Sacrifice, all, would be easier. To part, yes, and for evermore; but to know that she had been truly loved—who could rob her of that?

"See," she said lightly, "your people are waiting—and there, why, there is my cousin Lacey. Tom, oh, Cousin Tom!" she called eagerly.

Lacey rode down on them. "I swan, but I'm glad," he said, as he dropped from his horse. "Cousin Hylda, I'm blest if I don't feel as if I could sing like Aunt Melissa."

"You may kiss me, Cousin Tom," she said, as she took his hands in hers.

He flushed, was embarrassed, then snatched a kiss from her cheek. "Say, I'm in it, ain't I? And you were in it first, eh, Cousin Hylda? The

rest are nowhere—there they come from Assouan, Kaid, Nahoum, and the Nubians. Look at 'em glisten!"

A hundred of Kaid's Nubians in their glittering armour made three sides of a quickly moving square, in the centre of which, and a little ahead, rode Kaid and Nahoum, while behind the square-in parade and gala dress-trooped hundreds of soldiers and Egyptians and natives.

Swiftly the two cavalcades approached each other, the desert ringing with the cries of the Bedouins, the Nubians, and the fellaheen. They met on an upland of sand, from which the wide valley of the Nile and its wild cataracts could be seen. As men meet who parted yesterday, Kaid, Nahoum, and David met, but Kaid's first quiet words to David had behind them a world of meaning:

"I also have come back, Saadat, to whom be the bread that never moulds and the water that never stales!" he said, with a look in his face which had not been there for many a day. Superstition had set its mark on him—on Claridge Pasha's safety depended his own, that was his belief; and the look of this thin, bronzed face, with its living fire, gave him vital assurance of length of days.

And David answered: "May thy life be the nursling of Time, Effendina. I bring the tribute of the rebel lions once more to thy hand. What was thine, and was lost, is thine once more. Peace and salaam!" Between Nahoum and David there were no words at first at all. They shook hands like Englishmen, looking into each other's eyes, and with pride of what Nahoum, once, in his duplicity, had called "perfect friendship."

Lacey thought of this now as he looked on; and not without a sense of irony, he said under his breath, "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian!"

But in Hylda's look, as it met Nahoum's, there was no doubt—what woman doubts the convert whom she thinks she has helped to make? Meanwhile, the Nubians smote their mailed breasts with their swords in honour of David and Kaid.

Under the gleaming moon, the exquisite temple of Philae perched on its high rock above the river, the fires on the shore, the masts of the dahabiehs twinkling with lights, and the barbarous songs floating across the water, gave the feeling of past centuries to the scene. From the splendid boat which Kaid had placed at his disposal David looked out upon it all, with emotions not yet wholly mastered by the true estimate of what this day had brought to him. With a mind unsettled he listened to the natives in the forepart of the boat and on the shore, beating the darabukkeh and playing the kemengeh. Yet it was moving in a mist and on a flood of greater happiness than he had ever known.

He did not know as yet that Eglington was gone for ever. He did not know that the winds of time had already swept away all traces of the house of ambition which Eglington had sought to build; and that his nimble tongue and untrustworthy mind would never more delude and charm, and wanton with truth. He did not know, but within the past hour Hylda knew; and now out of the night Soolsby came to tell him.

He was roused from his reverie by Soolsby's voice saying: "Hast nowt to say to me, Egyptian?"

It startled him, sounded ghostly in the moonlight; for why should he hear Soolsby's voice on the confines of Egypt? But Soolsby came nearer, and stood where the moonlight fell upon him, hat in hand, a rustic modern figure in this Oriental world.

David sprang to his feet and grasped the old man by the shoulders. "Soolsby, Soolsby," he said, with a strange plaintive-note in his voice, yet gladly, too. "Soolsby, thee is come here to welcome me! But has she not come—Miss Claridge, Soolsby?"

He longed for that true heart which had never failed him, the simple soul whose life had been filled by thought and care of him, and whose every act had for its background the love of sister for brother—for that was their relation in every usual meaning—who, too frail and broken to come to him now, waited for him by the old hearthstone. And so Soolsby, in his own way, made him understand; for who knew them both better than this old man, who had shared in David's destiny since the fatal day when Lord Eglington had married Mercy Claridge in secret, had set in motion a long line of tragic happenings?

"Ay, she would have come, she would have come," Soolsby answered, "but she was not fit for the journey, and there was little time, my lord."

"Why did thee come, Soolsby? Only to welcome me back?"

"I come to bring you back to England, to your duty there, my lord."

The first time Soolsby had used the words "my lord," David had scarcely noticed it, but its repetition struck him strangely.

"Here, sometimes they call me Pasha and Saadat, but I am not 'my lord,'" he said.

"Ay, but you are my lord, Egyptian, as sure as I've kept my word to you that I'd drink no more, ay, on my sacred honour. So you are my lord; you are Lord Eglington, my lord."

David stood rigid and almost unblinking as Soolsby told his tale, beginning with the story of Eglington's death, and going back all the years to the day of Mercy Claridge's marriage.

"And him that never was Lord Eglington, your own father's son, is dead and gone, my lord; and you are come into your rights at last." This was the end of the tale.

For a long time David stood looking into the sparkling night before him, speechless and unmoving, his hands clasped behind him, his head bent forward, as though in a dream.

How, all in an instant, had life changed for him! How had Soolsby's tale of Eglington's death filled him with a pity deeper than he had ever felt— the futile, bitter, unaccomplished life, the audacious, brilliant genius quenched, a genius got from the same source as his own resistless energy and imagination, from the same wild spring. Gone—all gone, with only pity to cover him, unloved, unloving, unbemoaned, save by the Quaker girl whose true spirit he had hurt, save by the wife whom he had cruelly wronged and tortured; and pity was the thing that moved them both, unfathomable and almost maternal, in that sense of motherhood which, in spite of love or passion, is behind both, behind all, in every true woman's life.

At last David spoke.

"Who knows of all this—of who I am, Soolsby?"

"Lady Eglington and myself, my lord."

"Only she and you?"

"Only us two, Egyptian."

"Then let it be so—for ever."

Soolsby was startled, dumfounded.

"But you will take your title and estates, my lord; you will take the place which is your own."

"And prove my grandfather wrong? Had he not enough sorrow? And change my life, all to please thee, Soolsby?"

He took the old man's shoulders in his hands again. "Thee has done thy duty as few in this world, Soolsby, and given friendship such as few give. But thee must be content. I am David Claridge, and so shall remain ever."

"Then, since he has no male kin, the title dies, and all that's his will go to her ladyship," Soolsby rejoined sourly.

"Does thee grudge her ladyship what was his?"

"I grudge her what is yours, my lord—"

Suddenly Soolsby paused, as though a new thought had come to him, and he nodded to himself in satisfaction. "Well, since you will have it so, it will be so, Egyptian; but it is a queer fuddle, all of it; and where's the way out, tell me that, my lord?"

David spoke impatiently. "Call me 'my lord' no more. . . . But I will go back to England to her that's waiting at the Red Mansion, and you will remember, Soolsby—"

Slowly the great flotilla of dahabiehs floated with the strong current down towards Cairo, the great sails swelling to the breeze that blew from the Libyan Hills. Along the bank of the Nile thousands of Arabs and fellaheen crowded to welcome "the Saadat," bringing gifts of dates and eggs and fowls and dourha and sweetmeats, and linen cloth; and even in the darkness and in the trouble that was on her, and the harrowing regret that she had not been with Eglington in his last hour—she little knew what Eglington had said to Faith in that last hour—Hylda's heart was soothed by the long, loud tribute paid to David.

As she sat in the evening light, David and Lacey came, and were received by the Duchess of Snowdon, who could only say to David, as she held his hand, "Windlehurst sent his regards to you, his loving regards. He was sure you would come home—come home. He wished he were in power for your sake."

So, for a few moments she talked vaguely, and said at last: "But Lady Eglington, she will be glad to see you, such old friends as you are, though not so old as Windlehurst and me—thirty years, over thirty la, la!"

They turned to go to Hylda, and came face to face with Kate Heaver.

Kate looked at David as one would look who saw a lost friend return from the dead. His eyes lighted, he held out his hand to her.

"It is good to see thee here," he said gently. "And 'tis the cross-roads once again, sir," she rejoined.

"Thee means thee will marry Jasper?"

"Ay, I will marry Jasper now," she answered. "It has been a long waiting."

"It could not be till now," she responded.

David looked at her reflectively, and said: "By devious ways the human heart comes home. One can only stand in the door and wait. He has been patient."

"I have been patient, too," she answered.

As the Duchess disappeared with David, a swift change came over Lacey. He spun round on one toe, and, like a boy of ten, careered around the deck to the tune of a negro song.

"Say, things are all right in there with them two, and it's my turn now," he said. "Cute as she can be, and knows the game! Twice a widow, and knows the game! Waiting, she is down in Cairo, where the orange blossom blows. I'm in it; we're all in it—every one of us. Cousin Hylda's free now, and I've got no past worth speaking of; and, anyhow, she'll understand, down there in Cairo. Cute as she can be—"

Suddenly he swung himself down to the deck below. "The desert's the place for me to-night," he said. Stepping ashore, he turned to where the Duchess stood on the deck, gazing out into the night. "Well, give my love to the girls," he called, waving a hand upwards, as it were to the wide world, and disappeared into the alluring whiteness.

"I've got to get a key-thought," he muttered to himself, as he walked swiftly on, till only faint sounds came to him from the riverside. In the letter he had written to Hylda, which was the turning-point of all for her, he had spoken of these "key-thoughts." With all the childishness he showed at times, he had wisely felt his way into spheres where life had depth and meaning. The desert had justified him to himself and before the spirits of departed peoples, who wandered over the sands, until at last they became sand also, and were blown hither and thither, to make beds for thousands of desert wayfarers, or paths for camels' feet, or a blinding storm to overwhelm the traveller and the caravan; life giving and taking, and absorbing and destroying, and destroying and absorbing, till the circle of human existence wheel to the full, and the task of Time be accomplished.

On the gorse-grown common above Hamley, David and Faith, and David's mother Mercy, had felt the same soul of things stirring—in the green things of green England, in the arid wastes of the Libyan desert, on the bosom of the Nile, where Mahommed Hassan now lay in a nigger singing a song of passion, Nature, with burning voice, murmuring down the unquiet world its message of the Final Peace through the innumerable years.

## GLOSSARY

Aiwa—Yes.

Allah hu Achbar—God is most Great.

Al'mah—Female professional singers, signifying "a learned female."

Ardab—A measure equivalent to five English bushels.

Backsheesh—Tip, douceur.



Balass—Earthen vessel for carrying water.

Bdsha—Pasha.

Bersim—Clover.

Bismillah—In the name of God.

Bowdb—A doorkeeper.

Dahabieh—A Nile houseboat with large lateen sails.

Darabukkeh—A drum made of a skin stretched over an earthenware funnel.

Dourha—Maize.

Effendina—Most noble.

El Azhar—The Arab University at Cairo.

Fedddn—A measure of land representing about an acre.

Fellah—The Egyptian peasant.

Ghiassa—Small boat.

Hakim—Doctor.

Hasheesh—Leaves of hemp.

Inshallah—God willing.

Kdnoon—A musical instrument like a dulcimer.

Kavass—An orderly.

Kemengeh—A cocoanut fiddle.

Khamsin—A hot wind of Egypt and the Soudan.

Kourbash—A whip, often made of rhinoceros hide.

La ilaha illa-llah—There is no deity but God.

Malaish—No matter.

Malboos—Demented.

Mastaba—A bench.

Medjidie—A Turkish Order.

Mooshrabieh—Lattice window.

Moufettish—High Steward.

Mudir—The Governor of a

Mudirieh, or province.

Muezzin—The sheikh of the mosque who calls to prayer.

Narghileh—A Persian pipe.

Nebool—A quarter-staff.

Ramadan—The Mahommedan season of fasting.

Saadat-el-bdsha—Excellency Pasha.

Sdis—Groom.

Sakkia—The Persian water-wheel.

Salaam—Eastern salutation.

Sheikh-el-beled—Head of a village.

Tarboosh—A Turkish turban.

Ulema—Learned men.

Wakf—Mahommedan Court dealing with succession, etc.

Welee—A holy man or saint.

Yashmak—A veil for the lower part of the face.

Yelek—A long vest or smock.

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OF FIFTY YEARS AGO - VOLUME 6 \*\*\*

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