

Halima and the Scorpions

By Robert Hichens

In travelling about the world one collects a number of those trifles of all sorts, usually named "curiosities," many of them worthless if it were not for the memories they recall. The other day I was clearing out a bureau before going abroad, and in one of the drawers I came across a hedgehog's foot, set in silver, and hung upon a tarnished silver chain. I picked it up in the Sahara, and here is its history.

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Mohammed El Aïd Ben Ali Tidjani, marabout of Tamacine, is a great man in the Sahara Desert. His reputation for piety reaches as far as Tunis and Algiers, to the north of Africa, and to the uttermost parts of the Southern Desert, even to the land of the Touaregs. He dwells in a sacred village of dried mud and brick, surrounded by a high wall, pierced with loopholes, and ornamented with gates made of palm wood, and covered with sheets of iron. In his mansion, above the entrance of which is written "L'Entrée de Sidi Laïd," are clocks innumerable, musical boxes, tables, chairs, sofas, and even framed photographs. Negro servants bow before him, wives, brothers, children, and obsequious hangers-on of various nationalities, black, bronze, and *café au lait* in colour, offer him perpetual incense. Rich worshippers of the Prophet and the Prophet's priests send him presents from afar; camels laden with barley, donkeys staggering beneath sacks of grain, ostrich plumes, silver ornaments, perfumes, red-eyed doves, gazelles whose tiny hoofs are decorated with gold-leaf or painted in bright colours. The tributes laid before the tomb of Cheikh Sidi El Hadj Au ben Sidi El Hadj Aïssa are, doubtless, his perquisites as guardian of the saint. He dresses in silks of the tints of the autumn leaf, and carries in his mighty hand a staff hung with apple-green ribbons. And his smile is as the smile of the rising sun in an oleograph.

This personage one day blessed the hedgehog's foot I at present possess, and endowed it solemnly with miraculous curative properties. It would cure, he declared, all the physical ills that can beset a woman. Then he gave it into the hands of a great Agha, who was about to take a wife, accepted a tribute of dates, a grandfather's clock from Paris, and a grinding organ of Barbary as a small acknowledgment of his generosity, and probably thought very little more about the matter.

Now, in the course of time, it happened that the hedgehog's foot came into the possession of a dancing-girl of Touggourt, called Halima. How Halima got hold of it I cannot say, nor does anyone in Touggourt exactly know, so far as I am aware. But, alas I even Aghas are sometimes human, and play pitch and toss with magical things. As Grand Dukes who go to disport themselves in Paris sometimes hide them incognito to the "Café de la Sorcière," so do Aghas flit occasionally to Touggourt, and appear upon the high benches of the great dancing-house of the Ouled Naïls in the outskirts of the city. And Halima was young and beautiful. Her eyes were large, and she wore a golden crown ornamented with very tall feathers. And she danced the dance of the hands and the dance of the fainting fit with great perfection. And the wives of Aghas have to put up with a good deal. However it was, one evening Halima danced with the hedgehog's foot that had been blessed dangling from her jewelled girdle. And there was a great scandal in the city.

For in the four quarters of Touggourt, the quarter of the Jews, of the foreigners, of the freed negroes, and of the citizens proper, it was known that the hedgehog's foot had been blessed and endowed with magical powers by the mighty marabout of Tamacine.

Halima herself affirmed it, standing at the front door of her terraced dwelling in the court, while the other dancers gathered round, looking like a troop of macaws in their feathers and their finery. With a brazen pride she boasted that she possessed something worth more than uncut rubies, carpets from Bagdad, and silken petticoats sewn with sequins. And the Ouled Naïls could not gainsay her. Indeed, they turned their huge, kohl-tinted eyes upon the relic with envy, and stretched their painted hands towards it as if to a god in prayer. But Halima would let no one touch it, and presently, taking from her bosom her immense door key, she retired to enshrine the foot in her box, studded with huge brass nails, such as stands by each dancer's bed.

And the scandal was very great in the city that such a precious thing should be between the hands of an Ouled Naïl, a girl of no repute, come thither in a palanquin on camel-back to earn her dowry, and who would depart into the sands of the south, laden with the gold wrung from the pockets of loose livers.

Only Ben-Abid smiled gently when he heard of the matter.

Ben-Abid belonged to the *Tribu des blancs*, and was the singer attached to the café of the smokers of the hashish. He it was who struck each evening a guitar made of goatskin backed by sand tortoise, and lifted up his voice in the song "Lalia":

Ladham Pacha who has left the heart of his enemies trembling—
O Lalia! O Lalia!

The love of women is no more sweet to me after thy love.

Thy hand is white, and thy bracelets are of the purest silver—

And I, Ladham Pacha, love thee, without thought of what will come.

O Lalia! O Lalia!"

The assembled smokers breathed out under the black ceiling their deep refrain of "Wurra-Wurra!" and Larbi, in his Zouave jacket and his tight, pleated skirt, threw back his small head, exposing his long brown throat, and danced like a tired phantom in a dream.

Ben-Abid smiled, showing two rows of lustrous teeth.

"Should Halima fall ill, the foot will not avail to cure her," he murmured. "Ben Ali Tidjani's blessing could never rest on an Ouled Naïl, who, like a little viper of the sand, has stolen into the Agha's bosom, and filled his veins with subtle poison. She deems she has a treasure; but let her beware: that which would protect a woman who wears the veil will do naught for a creature who shows her face to the stranger, and dances by night for the Zouaves and for the Spahis who patrol the dunes."

And he struck his long fingers upon the goatskin of his instrument, while Kouïdah, the boy who played upon the little glasses and shook the tambourine of reeds, slipped forth to tell in the city what Ben-Abid had spoken.

Halima was enraged when she heard of it, more especially as there were found many to believe Ben-Abid's words. She stood before her room upon the terrace, where Zouaves were playing cards with the dancers in the sun, and she cursed him in a shrill voice, calling him son of a scorpion, and requesting that Allah would send great troubles upon his relations, even upon his aged grandmother. That the miraculous reputation of her treasure should be thus scouted, and herself insulted, vexed her to the soul.

“Let the son of a camel with a swollen tongue dare to come to me and repeat what he has said!” she cried. “Let him come out from his lair in the café of the hashish smokers, and, as Allah is great, I will spit in his face. The reviler of women! The son of a scorpion! Cursed be his—”

And then once more she desired evil to the grandmother of Ben-Abid, and to all his family. And the Zouaves and the dancers laughed over their card games. Indeed, the other dancers were merry, and not ill-pleased with Ben-Abid’s words. For even in the Sahara the women do not care that one of them should be exalted above the rest.

Now, in Touggourt gossip is carried from house to house, as the sand grains are carried on the wind. Within an hour Ben-Abid heard that his grandmother had been cursed, and himself called son of a scorpion, by Halima. Kouïdah, the boy, ran on naked feet to tell him in the café of the hashish smokers. When he heard he smiled.

“To-night I will go to the dancing-house, and speak with Halima,” he murmured. And then he plucked the guitar of goatskin that was ever in his hands, and sang softly of the joys of Ladhham Pacha, half closing his eyes, and swaying his head from side to side.

And Kouïdah, the boy, ran back across the camel market to tell in the court of the dancers the words of Ben-Abid.

That night, when the nomads lit their brush-wood fires in the market; when the Kabyle bakers, in their striped turbans and their closefitting jerseys of yellow and of red, ran to and fro bearing the trays of flat, new-made loaves; when the dwarfs beat on the ground with their staffs to summon the mob to watch their antics; and the story-tellers put on their glasses, and sat them down at their boards between the candles; Ben-Abid went forth secretly from the hashish café wrapped in his burnous. He sought out in the quarter of the freed negroes a certain man called Sadok, who dwelt alone.

This Sadok was lean as a spectre, and had a skin like parchment. He was a renowned plunger in desert wells, and could remain beneath the water, men said, for a space of four minutes. But he could also do another thing. He could eat scorpions. And this he would do for a small sum of money. Only, during the fast of Ramadan, between the rising and the going down of the sun, so long as a white thread could be distinguished from a black, he would not eat even a scorpion, because the tasting of food by day in that time is forbidden by the Prophet.

When Ben-Abid struck on his door Sadok came forth, gibbering in his tangled beard, and half naked.

“Oh, brother!” said Ben-Abid. “Here is money if thou canst find me three scorpions. One of them must be a black scorpion.”

Sadok shot out his filthy claw, and there was fire in his eyes. But Ben-Abid’s fingers closed round the money paper.

“First thou must find the scorpions, and then thou must carry them with thee to the court of the dancers, walking at my side. For, as Allah lives, I will not touch them. Afterwards thou shalt have the money.”

Sadok’s soul drew the shutters across his eyes. Then he led the way by tortuous alleys to an old and ruined wall of a *zgag*, in which there were as many holes as there are in a honeycomb. Here, as he knew, the scorpions loved to sleep. Thrusting his fingers here and there he presently drew forth three writhing reptiles. And one of them was black. He held them out, with a cry, to Ben-Abid.

“The money! The money!” he shrieked.

But Ben-Abid shrank back, shuddering.

“Thou must bring them to the dancers court. Hide them well in thy garments that none may see them. Then thou shalt have the money.”

Sadok hid the scorpions upon his shaven head beneath his turban, and they went by the dunes and the lonely ways to the café of the dancers.

Already the pipers were playing, and many were assembled to see the women dance; but Ben-Abid and Sadok pushed through the throng, and passed across the café to the inner court, which is open to the air, and surrounded with earthen terraces on which, in tiers, open the rooms of the dancers, each with its own front door. This court is as a mighty rabbit warren, peopled with women instead of rabbits. Pale lights gleamed in many doorways, for the dancers were dressing and painting themselves for the dances of the body, of the hands, of the poignard, and of the handkerchief. Their shrill voices cried one to another, their heavy bracelets and necklets jingled, and the monstrous shadows of their crowned and feathered heads leaped and wavered on the yellow patches of light that lay before their doors.

“Where is Halima?” cried Ben-Abid in a loud voice. “Let Halima come forth and spit in my face!”

At the sound of his call many women ran to their doors, some half dressed, some fully attired, like Jezebels of the great desert.

“It is Ben-Abid!” went up the cry of many voices. “It is Ben-Abid, who laughs to scorn the power of the hedgehog’s foot. It is the son of the camel with the swollen tongue. Halima, Halima, the child of the scorpion calls thee!”

Kouïdah, the boy, who was ever about, ran barefoot from the court into the café to tell of the doings of Ben-Abid, and in a moment the people crowded in, Zouaves and Spahis, Arabs and negroes, nomads from the south, gipsies, jugglers, and Jews. There were, too, some from Tamacine, and these were of all the most intent.

“Where is Halima?” went up the cry. “Where is Halima?”

“Who calls me?” exclaimed the voice of a girl.

And Halima came out of her door on the first terrace at the left, splendidly dressed for the dance in scarlet and gold, carrying two scarlet handkerchiefs in her hands, and with the hedgehog’s foot dangling from her girdle of thin gold, studded with turquoises.

Ben-Abid stood below in the court with Sadok by his side. The crowd pressed about him from behind.

“Thou hast called me the son of a scorpion, Halima,” he said, in a loud voice. “Is it not true?”

“It is true,” she answered, with a venomous smile of hatred. “And thou hast said that the hedgehog’s foot, blessed by the great marabout of Tamacine, would avail naught against the deadly sickness of a dancing-girl. Is it not true?”

“It is true,” answered Ben-Abid.

“Thou art a liar!” cried Halima.

“And so art thou!” said Ben-Abid slowly. A deep murmur rose from the crowd, which pressed more closely beneath the terrace, staring up at the scarlet figure upon it.

“If I am a liar thou canst not prove it!” cried Halima furiously. “I spit upon thee! I spit upon thee!”

And she bent down her feathered head from the terrace and spat passionately in his face.

Ben-Abid only laughed aloud.

“I can prove that I have spoken the truth,” he said. “But if I am indeed the son of a scorpion, as thou sayest, let my brothers speak for me. Let my brothers declare to all the Sahara that the truth is in my mouth. Sadok, remove thy turban!”

The plunger of the wells, with a frantic gesture, lifted his turban and discovered the three scorpions writhing upon his shaven head. Another, and longer, murmur went up from the crowd. But some shrank back and trembled, for the desert Arabs are much afraid of scorpions, which cause many deaths in the Sahara.

“What is this?” cried Halima. “How can the scorpions speak for thee?”

“They shall speak well,” said Ben-Abid. “Their voices cannot lie. Sleep to-night in thy room with these my brothers. Irena and Boria, the Golden Date and the Lotus Flower, shall watch beside thee. Guard in thy hand, or in thy breast, the hedgehog’s foot that thou sayest can preserve from every ill. If, in the evening of to-morrow, thou dancest before the soldiers, I will give thee fifty golden coins. But, if thou dancest not, the city shall know whether Ben-Abid is a truth-teller, and whether the blessings of the great marabout can rest upon such a woman as thou art. If thou refusest thou art afraid, and thy fear proveth that thou hast no faith in the magic treasure that dangles at thy girdle.”

There was a moment of deep silence. Then, from the crowd burst forth the cry of many voices:

“Put it to the proof! Ben-Abid speaks well. Put it to the proof, and may Allah judge between them.”

Beneath the caked pigments on her face Halima had gone pale.

“I will not,” she began.

But the cries rose up again, and with them the shrill, twittering laughter of her envious rivals.

“She has no faith in the marabout!” squawked one, who had a nose like an eagle’s beak.

“She is a liar!” piped another, shaking out her silken petticoats as a bird shakes out its plumes.

And then the twitter of fierce laughter rose, shriek on shriek, and was echoed more deeply by the crowd of watching men.

“Give me the scorpions!” cried Halima passionately. “I am not afraid!”

Her desert blood was up. Her fatalism—even in the women of the Sahara it lurks—was awake. In that moment she was ready to die, to silence the bitter laughter of her rivals. It sank away as Sadok grasped the scorpions in his filthy claw, and leaped, gibbering in his beard, upon the terrace.

“Wait!” cried Halima, as he came upon her, holding forth his handful of writhing poison.

Her bosom heaved. Her lustrous eyes, heavy with kohl, shone like those of a beast at bay.

Sadok stood still, with his naked arm outstretched.

“How shall I know that the son of a scorpion will pay me the fifty golden coins? He is poor, though he speaks bravely. He is but a singer in the café of the smokers of the hashish, and cannot buy even a new garment for the close of the feast of Ramadan. How, then, shall I know that the gold will hang from my breasts when to-morrow, at the falling of the sun, I dance before the men of Touggourt?”

Ben-Abid put his hand beneath his burnous, and brought forth a bag tied at the mouth with cord.

“They are here!” he said.

“The Jews! He has been to the Jews!” cried the desert men.

“Bring a lamp!” said Ben-Abid.

And while Irena and Boria, the Golden Date and the Lotus Flower, held the lights, and the desert men crowded about him with the eyes of wolves that are near to starving, he counted forth the money on the terrace at Halima’s feet. And she gazed down at the glittering pieces as one that gazes upon a black fate.

“And now set my brothers upon the maiden,” Ben-Abid said to Sadok, gathering up the money, and casting it again into the bag, which he tied once more with the cord.

Halima did not move, but she looked upon the scorpion that was black, and her red lips trembled. Then she closed her hand upon the hedgehog’s foot that hung from her golden girdle, and shut her eyes beneath her ebon eyebrows.

“Set my brothers upon her!” said Ben-Abid.

The plunger of the wells sprang upon Halima, opened her scarlet bodice roughly, plunged his claw into her swelling bosom, and withdrew it—empty.

“Kiss her close, my brothers!” whispered Ben-Abid.

A long murmur, like the growl of the tide upon a shingly beach, arose once more from the crowd. Halima turned about, and went slowly in at her lighted doorway, followed by Irena and Boria. The heavy door of palm was shut behind them. The light was hidden. There was a great silence. It was broken by Sadok’s voice screaming in his beard to Ben-Abid, “My money! Give me my money!”

He snatched it with a howl, and went capering forth into the darkness.

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When the next night fell upon the desert there was a great crowd assembled in the café of the dancers. The pipers blew into their pipes, and swayed upon their haunches, turning their glittering eyes to and fro to see what man had a mind to press a piece of money upon their well greased foreheads. The dancers came and went, promenading arm in arm upon the earthen floor, or leaping with hands outstretched and fingers fluttering. The Kabyle attendant slipped here and there with the coffee cups, and the wreaths of smoke curled lightly upward towards the wooden roof.

But Halima came not through the open doorway holding the scarlet handkerchiefs above her head.

And presently, late in the night, they laid her body in a palanquin, and set the palanquin upon a running camel, and, while the dancers shrilled their lament amid the sands, they bore her away into the darkness of the dunes towards the south and the tents of her own people.

The jackals laughed as she went by.

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But the hedgehog’s foot was left lying upon the floor of her chamber. Not one of the dancers would touch it.

That night I was in the café, and, hearing of all these things from Kouïdah, the boy, I went into the court, and gathered up the trinket which had brought a woman to the great silence. Next day I rode on horseback to Tamacine, asked to see the marabout and told him all the story.

He listened, smiling like the rising sun in an oleograph, and twisting in his huge hands, that were tinted with the henna, the staff with the apple-green ribbons.

When I came to the end I said:

“O, holy marabout, tell me one thing.”

“Allah is just. I listen.”

“If the scorpions had slept with a veiled woman who held the hedgehog’s foot, how would it have been? Would the woman have died or lived?”

The marabout did not answer. He looked at me calmly, as at a child who asks questions about the mysteries of life which only the old can understand.

“These things,” he said at length, “are hidden from the unbeliever. You are a Rumi. How, then, should you learn such matters?”

“But even the Rumi—”

“In the desert there are mysteries,” continued the marabout, “which even the faithful must not seek to penetrate.”

Then it is useless to—”

“It is very useless. It is as useless as to try to count the grains of the sand.”

I said no more.

Mohammed El Aïd Ben Ali Tidjani smiled once more, and beckoned to a negro attendant, who ran with a musical box, one of the gifts of the faithful.

“This comes from Paris,” he said, with a spreading complacence.

Then there was within the box a sounding click, and there stole forth a tinkling of Auber’s music to *Masaniello*, “Come o’er the moonlit sea!”