

# “Fin Tireur”

By Robert Hichens

Two years ago I was travelling by diligence in the Sahara Desert on the great caravan route, which starts from Beni-Mora and ends, they say, at Tombouctou. For fourteen hours each day we were on the road, and each evening about nine o'clock we stopped at a Bordj, or Travellers' House, ate a hasty meal, threw ourselves down on our gaudy Arab rugs, and slept heavily till the hour before dawn, drugged by fatigue and by the strong air of the desert. In the late afternoon of the third day of our journeying we drove into a sandstorm. A great wind arose, carrying with it innumerable multitudes of sand grains, which whirled about the diligence and the struggling horses, blotting out the desert as completely as a London fog blots out the street on a November day. The cold became intense, and very soon I began to long for the next halting-place.

“Where do we stop to-night?” I shouted to the French driver, who, with his yellow toque pulled down over his ears, was chirping encouragement to his horses.

“Sidi-Hamdane,” he answered, without turning his head. “At the inn of ‘Fin Tireur.’”

Three hours later we drew up before a low building, from which a light shone kindly, and I scrambled down stiffly, and lurched into the longed-for shelter.

There was a man in the doorway, a short, sturdy, middle-aged Frenchman, with strong features, a tuft of grey beard, heavy eyebrows, and dark, prominent eyes, with a hot, shining look in them.

“*Bon soir, m'sieu,*” he said.

“*Bon soir,*” I answered.

This was my host, the innkeeper whom the driver had called “Fin Tireur.”

I found out afterwards that he was not only landlord of the desolate inn, but cook, garcon; in fact, the whole personnel. He lived there absolutely alone, and was the only European in this Arab village lost in the great spaces of the Sahara. This information I drew from him while he waited upon me at dinner, which I ate in solitude. My companions of the diligence were Arabs, who had melted away like ghosts into the desolation so soon as the diligence had rolled into the paved courtyard round which the one-storied house was built.

When I had finished dinner I lit a cigar. I was now quite alone in the bare *salle-à-manger*. The storm was at its height; the sand was driven like hail against the wooden shutters of the windows, and I felt dreary enough. The French driver was no doubt supping in the kitchen with the landlord, perhaps beside a fire. I began to long for company, for warmth, and I resolved to join them. I opened the door, therefore, and peered out into the passage. There was no sound of voices; but I saw a light at a little distance, went towards it, and found myself in a small kitchen, where the landlord was sitting alone by a red wood fire in the midst of his pots and pans, smoking a thin black cigar, and reading a dirty number of the *Journal Anti-Juif* of Algiers. He put it down politely as I came in.

“You're alone, monsieur,” I said.

“Yes, m'sieu. The driver has gone to see to the horses.”

I offered him one of my Havanas, which he accepted with alacrity, and drew up with him before the fire.

“You have been living here long, monsieur?”

“Twenty years, m'sieu.”

“Twenty years alone in this desert place!”

“Nineteen years alone, m’sieu. Before that I had my little Marie.”

“Marie?”

“My child, m’sieu. She is buried in the sand behind the inn.

I looked at him in silence. His brown, wrinkled face was calm, but in his prominent eyes there was still the hot shining look I had observed in them when I arrived.

“The palms begin there,” he added. “Year by year I have saved what I could, and now I have bought all the palm-trees near where she lies.”

He puffed away at his Havana. “You come from France?” I asked presently.

“From the Midi—I was born at Cassis, near Marseille.”

“Don’t you ever intend to go back there?”

“Never, m’sieu. Would you have me desert my child?”

“But,” I said gently, “she is dead.”

“Yes; but I have promised her that her *bon papa* will lie with her presently for company. Leave her alone with the Arabs!”

A sudden look of horror came into his face.

“You don’t like the Arabs?”

“Like the dirty dogs! You haven’t been told about me, m’sieu?”

“Only that your name was ‘Fin Tireur.’ ”

“ ‘Fin Tireur.’ Yes; that’s what they call me in the desert.”

“You’re a sportsman? A ‘capital shot’?”

He laughed suddenly, and his laugh made me feel cold.

“Oh! they don’t call me ‘Fin Tireur’ because I can hit gazelle, and bring them home for supper. No, no! Shall I tell you why?”

He looked at me half defiantly, half wistfully, I thought.

“But if I do, perhaps your stomach will turn against the food I cooked with these hands,” he added suddenly, stretching out his hands towards me. “You are English, m’sieu?”

“Yes.”

“Then I daresay you won’t understand.”

“I think I shall,” I answered, looking full at him.

The way he had spoken of his child had drawn me to him. Whatever he had done, I felt that chivalry and tenderness were in this man.

“*Why* do they call you ‘Fin Tireur’?”

“The men of the Midi, m’sieu, are not like the men of the rest of France,” said Fin Tireur—“at least so they say. We are boasters, perhaps; but we’ve got more love of adventure, more wish to see the world, and do something big in it. They’re talkers, you know, in the Midi, and they tell of what they’ve done. I heard them at Cassis when I was a boy, and one day I saw a Zouave in front of the inn balcony, where folks come on fête days to eat the bouillabaisse. The talk I had heard made me wish to rove; but when I saw the Zouave, in his big red trousers and blue and red jacket, I said to myself: ‘As soon as my three years’ service is over I’ll go to Africa, and make my fortune.’ I did my three years at Grenoble, m’sieu, and when it was done I carried out my resolve. I came to Africa; but I didn’t conic alone.”

He puffed at his cigar for a minute or two, and the hot look in his eyes became more definite, like a fanned flame.

“You took a comrade?”

“I took a wife, a girl of Cassis. A good girl she was then.”

He paused again, then continued, in rather a loud voice: "She was good, m'sieu, because she had seen nothing. That's often the way. It was I who put it into her head that there were things to be seen better than rocks, and dead white dusty roads, and fishing boats against the quay. I've thought of that since I—since I got my name of Fin Tireur. Her name was Marie, and she was eighteen when we stood before the priest. Next day we went to Marseille, and took the boat for Algiers. Our heads were full of I don't know what. We thought we were clever ones, and should do well in a country like Africa. And so we did at first. We got into a hotel at Algiers. She was housemaid, and I was porter in the hall, and what with the goings and comings—strangers giving us a little when we'd done our best for them—we made some money, and we saved it. And I wish to God we'd spent it, every sou!"

His voice became fierce for a moment. Then he continued, with an obvious effort to be calm: "You see, m'sieu, at Algiers we had nothing to say to the Arabs. With the money we'd saved we left Algiers, and came into the desert to take a café which was to let near the station at Beni-Mora."

"I've just come from there."

"They call it 'Au Retour du Sahara.' "

"I've had coffee there."

"That was ours, and there little Marie was born. In those days there weren't many strangers in Beni-Mora. The railway had only just come there, and it was wild enough. Very few, except the Arabs. Well, they were often our customers. We learned to talk a bit of their language, and they a bit of ours; and, having no friends out there, I might say we made sort of friends with some of them. The dirty dogs! The camels!"

He struck his clenched hand down on the table. As he talked he had lost his former consciousness of my close observation.

"But they know how to please women, m'sieu."

"They are often very handsome," I said.

"It isn't only that. They can stare a woman down as a wild beast can, and that's what women like. I never so much as looked on them as men—not in that way, for a Cassis woman, m'sieu. But Marie—"

He choked, ground his teeth on his cigar stump, let it drop, and stamped out the glowing end on the brick floor with his heel.

"She served them, m'sieu," he resumed, after clearing his throat. "But I was mostly there, and I don't see how—but women can always find the way. Well, one day she went to what they call a sand-diviner. She didn't pretend anything. She told me she wanted to go, and I was ready. I was always ready that she should have any little pleasure. I couldn't leave the café, so she went off alone to a room he had by the Garden of the Gazelles, at the end of the dancing-street."

"I know—over the place where they smoke the kief."

"She didn't answer, but went and sat down under the arbour, opposite to where they wash the clothes. I followed her, for she looked ill.

" 'Did he read in the sand for you?' I said.

" 'Yes,' she said; 'he did.'

" 'What things did he read?'

"She turned, and looked right at me. 'That my fate lies in the sand,' she said—'and yours, and hers.'

"And she pointed at little Marie, who was playing with a yellow kid we had then just by the door.

“ ‘What’s that to be afraid of?’ I asked her. ‘Haven’t we come to the desert to make our fortune, and isn’t there sand in the desert?’

“ ‘Not much by here,’ she said.

“And that’s true, m’sieu. It’s hard ground, you know, at Beni-Mora.”

“Yes,” I said, offering him another cigar.

He refused it with a quick gesture.

“She never would say another word as to what the sand-diviner had told her; but she was never the same from that day. She was as uneasy as a lost bitch, m’sieu; and she made me uneasy too. Sometimes she wouldn’t speak to our little one when the child ran to her, and sometimes she’d catch her up, and kiss her till the little one’s cheek was as red as if you’d been striking it. And then one day, after dark, she went.”

“Went!”

“I’d been ill with fever, and gone to spend the night at the sulphur baths; you know, m’sieu, Hammam-Salahkin, under the mountains. I came back just at dawn to open the café. When I got off my mule at the door I heard”—his face twitched convulsively—“the most horrible crying of a child. It was so horrible that I just stood there, holding on to the bridle of the mule, and listening, and didn’t dare go in. I’d heard children cry often enough before; but—mon Dieu!—never like that. At last I dropped the bridle, and went in, with my legs shaking under me. I found the little one alone in the house, and like a mad thing. She’d been alone all night.”

His face set rigidly.

“And her mother knew I should be all night at the Hammam,” he said. “Fin Tireur—yes, it was coming back, and finding my little one left like that in such a place, made me earn the name.”

He fell suddenly into a moody silence. I broke it by saying: “It was the sand-diviner?”

He looked at me sharply. “I don’t know.”

“You never found out?”

“At Beni-Mora the women go veiled,” he said harshly.

Suddenly I realised the horror of the situation: the deserted husband living on with his child in the midst of the ordained and close secrecy of Beni-Mora, where many of the women never set foot out of doors, and those who do, unless they are the public dancers, are so heavily veiled that their features cannot be recognised.

“What did you do?” I asked.

“I searched, as far as one can search in an Arab town, and found out nothing. I wanted to tear the veil from every woman in the place; and then I was sent away from Beni-Mora.”

“By whom?”

“The French authorities, my own countrymen,” he laughed bitterly. “To save me from getting myself murdered, m’sieu.”

“You would have been.”

“Why not? Then I came here to keep the inn for the diligence that carries the mails to the south, for I wouldn’t leave the country till—”

He paused.

“And the sand-diviner?”

“I left him at Beni-Mora. He smiled, and said he knew no more than I; and perhaps he didn’t. How was I to tell?”

“But your name of Fin Tireur?”

“Ah!”—the thing in his eyes glowed like a thing red-hot—“I’d been here eleven months when, one afternoon of summer, just near sunset, I heard a noise of drums beating and African pipes

screaming, and the snarl of camels on the road you came to-night. I was in the house, in this room where we are sitting now, and little Marie was playing just outside by the well, so that I could see her through the window. By the sounds, I knew a great caravan was coming up, and passing towards the south. They always water at the well, and I stood by the window to see them. Little Marie stood too, shading her eyes with her bit of a hand. The drums and pipes got louder, and round the corner of the inn came as big a caravan as I've ever seen; near a hundred camels, horsemen, and led mules and donkeys, Kabyle dogs and goats, the music playing all the time, and a Caïd's flag flying in the front. They made for the well, as I knew they would, and little Marie stood all the while watching them. M'sieu, there were square packs on some of the camels, and veiled women on the packs."

He looked across at me hard.

"Veiled women?" I repeated.

"When they got to the well they made the camels kneel for the women to get down; and one of the women, when she was down, caught sight of Marie standing there, with her little hand shading her eyes. That woman gave a great cry behind her veil. I heard it, m'sieu, as I stood by the window there, and I saw the woman run at the little one."

He got up from his seat slowly, and stood by the wooden shutter, against which the sand was driven by the wind.

"In a place like this, m'sieu, one keeps a revolver here."

He put his hand to a pocket at the back of his breeches, brought out a revolver, and pointed it at the shutter.

"When I heard the woman cry I took my revolver out. When I saw the woman run I fired, and the bullet struck the veil."

He put the revolver back into his pocket, and sat down again quietly.

"And that's why they call me Fin Tireur."

I said nothing, and sat staring at him.

"When the camels had been watered the caravan went on."

"But—but the Arabs—"

"The Caïd had the body tied across a don key—they told me."

"You didn't see?"

"No. I took the little one in. She was screaming, and I had to see to her. It was two days afterwards, when I was at the market, that a scorpion stung her. She was dead when I came back. Well, m'sieu, are you sorry you ate your supper?"

Before I could reply, the door opening into the courtyard gaped, and the driver entered, followed by a cloud of whirling sand grains.

"*Nom d'un chien!*" he exclaimed. "Get me a tumbler of wine, for the love of God, Fin Tireur. My throat's full of the sand. *Sacré nom d'un nom d'un nom!*"

He pulled off his coat, turned it upside down, and shook the sand out of the pockets, while Fin Tireur went over to the corner of the kitchen where the bottles stood in a row against the earthen wall.