Desert Air

By Robert Hichens

I

On an evening of last summer I was dining in London at the Carlton with two men. One of them was an excellent type of young England, strong, healthy, athletic, and straightforward. The other was a clever London doctor who was building up a great practice in the West End. At dessert the conversation turned upon a then recent tragedy in which a great reputation had gone down, and young England spoke rather contemptuously of the victim, with the superior surprise human beings generally express about the sin which does not happen to be theirs.

"I can't understand it!" was his conclusion. "It's beyond me."

"Climate," said the doctor quietly.

"What?"

"Climate. Air."

Young England looked inexpressively astonished.

"But hang it all!" he exclaimed, "you don't mean to say change of air means change of nature?"

"Not to everyone. Not to you, perhaps. Have you travelled much?"

"Well, I've been to Paris for the Grand Prix, and to Monte—"

"For the gambling. That's hardly travelling. Now, I've studied this subject a little, quietly in Harley Street. I'm no traveller myself, but I have dozens of patients who are. And I'm convinced that the modern facilities for travel, besides giving an infinity of pleasure, bring about innumerable tragedies."

He turned to me.

"You go abroad a great deal. What do you say?"

"That you're perfectly right. And I'm prepared to affirm that, in highly-strung, imaginative, or over-worked people change of climate does sometimes actually cause, or seem to cause, change of nature."

Young England, who was by no means highly-strung or imaginative, looked politely dubious, but the doctor was evidently pleased.

"An ally!" he cried.

He glanced at me for an instant, then added:

"You've got a case that proves it, at any rate to you, in your mind."

"Quite true."

"Can you give it us?"

"Jove! let's have it!" exclaimed young England.

"Certainly, if you like," I said. "I don't know whether you ever heard of the Marnier affair?"

Young England shook his head, but the doctor replied at once.

"Three years ago, wasn't it?"

"Four."

"And it happened in some remote place in the Sahara Desert?"

"In Beni-Kouidar. I was with Henry Marnier in Beni-Kouidar at the time."

"Go ahead!" said young England more eagerly.

"Poor Marnier was not an old friend of mine, but an acquaintance whom I had met casually at Beni-Mora, which is known as a health resort."

"I send patients there sometimes," said the doctor.

"The railway stops at Beni-Mora. To reach Beni-Kouidar one must go on horse or camel back over between three and four hundred kilometres of desert, sleeping on the way at Travellers' Houses—Bordjs as they are called there. Beni-Kouidar lies in the midst of immeasurable sands, and the air that blows through its palm gardens, and round its mosque towers, and down its alleys under the arcades, is startling: dry as the finest champagne, almost fiercely pure and fresh, exhilarating—well, too exhilarating for certain people."

The doctor nodded.

"Champagne goes very quickly to some heads," he interjected.

"Beni-Kouidar has nothing to say to modern civilisation. It is a wild and turbulent city, divided into quarters—the Arab quarter, the Jews' quarter, the freed negroes' quarter, and so on—and furthermore, is infested at certain seasons by the Sahara nomads, who camp in filthy tents on the huge sand dunes round about, and sell rugs, burnouses, and Touareg work to the inhabitants, buying in return the dates for which the palms of Beni-Kouidar are celebrated.

"I wanted to see a real Sahara city to which the Cook's tourist had not as yet penetrated, and I resolved to ride there from Beni-Mora. When Henry Marnier heard of it he asked if he might accompany me.

"Marnier was a young man who had recently left Oxford, and who had come out to Beni-Mora only a week before to see his mother, who was going through the sulphur cure. He was what is generally called a 'serious-minded young man'; intellectual, inclined to grave reading and high thinking, totally devoid of frivolity, a little cold in manner and temperament, one would have sworn; in fact, a type of a very well-known kind of Oxford undergraduate, the kind that takes a good tutorship for a year or so after leaving the University, and then becomes a schoolmaster or a clergyman. Marnier, by the way, intended to take orders.

"Now, this sort of young man is not precisely my sort, and especially not my sort in the Sahara Desert. But I did not want to be rude to Marnier, who was friendly and agreeable, and obviously anxious to increase his already considerable store of knowledge. So I put my inclinations in my pocket, and, with inward reluctance, I agreed.

"We set off with Safti, my faithful one-eyed Arab guide, and after three long days of riding and talking—as I had feared—Maeterlink and Tolstoy, Henley and Verlaine (this last being utterly condemned by Marnier as a man of weak character and degraded life) we saw the towers of Beni-Kouidar aspiring above the shifting sands, the tufted summits of the thousands of palm-trees, and heard the dull beating of drums and the cries of people borne to us over the spaces of which silence is the steady guardian.

"We were all pretty tired, but Marnier was especially done up. He had recently been working very hard for the 'first' with which he had left Oxford, and was not in good condition. We were, therefore, glad enough when we rode through the wide street thronged with natives, turned the corner into the great camel market, and finally dismounted before the door of the one inn, the 'Rendezvous des Amis,' a mean, dusty, one-storey building, on whose dirty white wall was a crude painting of a preposterous harridan in a purple empire gown, pouring wine for a Zouave who was evidently afflicted with elephantiasis. Yet, tired as I was, I stepped out into the camel market for a moment before going into the house, emptied my lungs, and slowly filled them.

" 'What air!' I said to Marnier, who had followed me.

“ ‘It is extraordinary,’ he answered in his rather dry tenor voice. ‘I should say like the best champagne, if I did not happen to be a teetotaller.’

“(The market, I must explain, was not at that moment in active operation.)

“After a *bain de siege*—we both longed for total immersion—and some weak tea, in which I mingled a spoonful of rum, we felt better, but we reposed till dinner, and once again Marnier, in his habitually restrained and critical manner, discussed contemporary literature, and what Plato and Aristotle, judging by their writings, would have been likely to think of it. And once again I felt as if I were in the ‘High’ at Oxford, and was almost inclined to wish that Marnier was the rowdy type of undergrad, who ducks people in water troughs and makes bonfires in quads.”

“H’m!” said the doctor gravely. “Better, perhaps, if he had been.”

“Much better,” I answered. “At seven o’clock we ate a rather tough dinner in the small, bare *salle-à-manger,* on the red brick floor of which sand grains were lying. Our only companion was a bearded priest in a dirty soutane, the aumônier of Beni-Kouidar, who sat at a little table apart, and greeted our entrance with a polite bow, but did not then speak to us.

“When the meal was ended, however, he joined us as we stood at the inn door looking out into the night. A moon was rising above the palms, and gilding the cupolas of the Bureau Arabe on the far side of the Market Square. A distant noise of tomtoms and African pipes was audible. And all down the hill to our left—for the land rose to where the inn stood—fires gleamed, and we could see half-naked figures passing and repassing them, and others squatting beside, looking like monks in their hooped burnouses.

“ ‘You are going out, messieurs?’ said the aumônier politely.

“I looked at Marnier.

“ ‘You’re too done up, I expect?’ I said to him.

“His face was pale, and he certainly had the demeanour of a tired man.

“ ‘No,’ he answered. ‘I should like to stroll in this wonderful air.’

“I turned to the priest.

“ ‘Yes, monsieur,’ I said.

“ ‘I come here to take my meals, but I live at the edge of the town. Perhaps you will permit me to accompany you for a little way.’

“ ‘We shall be delighted, and we know nothing of Beni-Kouidar.’

“As we stepped out into the market Marnier paused to light his pipe. But suddenly he threw away the match he had struck.

“ ‘No, it’s a sin to smoke in this air,’ he said.

“And he drew a deep breath, looking at the round moon.

“The priest smiled.

“ ‘I have lived here for four years,’ he said, and cannot resist my cigar. But you are right. The air of Beni-Kouidar is extraordinary. When first I came here it used to mount to my head like wine.

“ ‘Bad for you, Marnier!’ I said, laughing.

“Then I added, to the aumônier:

“ ‘My friend never drinks wine, and so ought to be peculiarly susceptible to such an influence.’

II

"Opposite to the aumônier's dwelling was the great dancing-house of the town, and when we had bade him good-night, and turned to go back to the inn, I rather tentatively suggested to Marnier that, perhaps, it would be interesting to look in there for a moment.

" 'All right,' he responded, with his most donnish manner. 'But I expect it will be rather an unwashed crowd.'

"A quantity of native soldiers—the sort that used to be called Turcos—were gathered round the door. We pushed our way through them, and entered. The café was large, with big white pillars and a double row of divans in the middle, and divans rising in tiers all round. On the left was a large doorway, in which gorgeously-dressed painted women, with gold crowns on their heads, were standing, smoking cigarettes, and laughing with the Arabs; and at the end farthest from the street entrance was a raised platform, on which sat three musicians—a wild-looking demon of a man blowing into an instrument with an immense funnel, and two men beating tomtoms. The noise they made was terrific. The piper wore a voluminous burnouse, and as the dancers came in in pairs from the big doorway, which led into the court where they all live together, each in her separate little room with her own front door, they threw their door keys into the hood that was attached to it. As soon as they had finished dancing they went to the hood, and rummaged violently for them again. And all the time the piper blew frantically into his instrument, and rocked himself about like a man in a convulsion.

"We sat on one of the raised divans, with coffee before us on a wooden stool, and Marnier observed it all with a slightly supercilious coldness. The women, who were dressed in different shades of red, and were the most amazing trollops I ever set eyes on, came and went in pairs, fluttered their painted fingers, twittered like startled birds, jumped and twirled, wriggled and revolved, and inclined their greasy foreheads to the impenetrable spectators, who stuck silver coins on to the perspiring flesh. And Marnier sat and gazed at them with the aloofness of one who watches the creatures in puddle water through a microscope. I could scarcely help laughing at him, but I wished him away. For to me there was excitement, there was even a sort of ecstasy, in the utter barbarity of this spectacle, in the moving scarlet figures with their golden crowns and tufts of ostrich plumes, in the serried masses of turbaned and hooded spectators, in the rocking forms of the musicians, in the strident and ceaseless uproar that, they made.

"And through the doorway where the Turcos—I like the old name—crowded I saw the sand filtering in from the desert, and against the black leaves of a solitary palm-trees with leaves like giant Fatma hands, I saw the silver disc of the moon.

" 'I vote we go,' said Marnier's light tenor voice in my ear. 'The atmosphere's awful in here.'

" 'Very well,' I said.

"I got up; but just then a girl, dressed in midnight purple embroidered with silver, came in from the doorway, and began to dance alone. She was very young—fourteen, I found out afterward—and, in contrast to the other women, extremely beautiful. There were grace, seduction, mystery, and coquetry in her face and in all her movements. Her long black eyes held fire and dreams. Her fluttering hands seemed beckoning us to the realms of the thousand and one nights. I stood where I had got up, and watched her.

" 'I say, aren't we going?' said Marnier's voice in my ear.

"I cursed the day when I had agreed to take him with me, leaped down to the earth, and struggled towards the door. As we neared it the girl sidled down the room till she was exactly in front of Marnier. Then she danced before him, smiling with her immense eyes, which she fixed

steadily upon him, and bending forward her pretty head, covered with a cloth of silver handkerchief.

" 'Give her something,' I said to him, laughing, as he stared back at her grimly.

"He thrust his hand into his pocket, found a franc, stuck it awkwardly against her oval forehead, and followed me out.

"When we were in the sandy street he walked a few steps in silence, then stood still, and, to my surprise, stared back at the dancing-house. Then he put his hand to his head.

" 'Is the air having its alcoholic effect?' I asked in joke.

"As I spoke a handsome Arab, splendidly dressed in a pale blue robe, red gaiters and boots, and a turban of fine muslin, spangled with gold, passed us slowly, going towards the dancing-house. He cast a glance full of suspicion and malice at Marnier.

" 'What's up with that fellow?' I said, startled.

"The Arab went on, and at that moment the faithful Safti joined us. He never left me long out of his sight in these outlandish places.

" 'That is the Batouch Sidi, the brother of the Caïd of Beni -Kouidar,' he said. 'Algia, the dancer to whom Monsieur Henri has just given money, is his *chère amie*. But as the government has just made him a sheik, he dares not have her in his house for fear of the scandal. So he has put her with the dancers. That is why she dances, to deceive everyone, not to make money. She is not as the other dancers. But everyone knows, for Batouch is mad with jealousy. He cannot bear that Algia should dance before strangers, but what can he do? A sheik must not have a scandal in his dwelling.'

"We walked on slowly. When we got to the door of the 'Rendezvous des Amis' Marnier stood still again, and looked down the deserted, moonlit camel market.

" 'I never knew air like this,' he said in a low voice.

"And once more he expelled the air from his lungs, and drew in a long, slow breath, as a man does when he has finished his dumbbell exercise in the morning.

" 'Don't drink too much of it,' I said. 'Remember what the aumônier told us!'

"Marnier looked at me. I thought there was something apprehensive in his eyes. But he said nothing, and we turned in.

"The next day I rode out with Safti into the desert to visit a sacred personage of great note in the Sahara, Sidi El Ahmed Ben Daoud Abderahmann. To my relief Marnier declined to come. He said he was tired, and would stroll about the city. When we got back at sundown the innkeeper handed me a note. I opened it, and found it was from the aumônier, saying that he would be greatly obliged if I would call and see him on my return, as he had various little curiosities which he would be glad to show me. Marnier was not in the inn, and, as I had nothing particular to do, I walked at once to the aumônier's house. As I have said, it was the last in the town. The dancing-house was on the opposite side of the way; but the aumônier's dwelling jutted out a little farther into the desert, and looked full on a deep depression of soft sand bounded by a big dune, which loomed up like a couchant beast in the fading yellow light.

"The aumônier met me at his door, and escorted me into a pleasant room, where his collection of Arab weapons, coins, and old vases, cups, and various utensils, dug up, he told me, at Tlemeen, was arranged. But to my surprise he scarcely took time to show it to me before he said:

" 'Though a stranger, may I venture to speak rather intimately to you, monsieur?'

" 'Certainly,' I replied, in some astonishment.

" 'Your friend is young.'

" 'Marnier?'

" 'Is that his name? Well, I would not leave him to stroll about too much alone, if I were you.'

" 'Why, monsieur?'

" 'He is likely to get into trouble. The people here are a wild and violent race. He would do well to bear in mind the saying of a traveller who knew the desert men better than most people: "If you want to be friendly with them, and safe among them, give cigarettes to the men, and leave the women alone." I see a good deal, monsieur, owing to the situation of my little house.'

"I looked at him in silence. Then I said:

" 'What have you seen?

"He led me to the door, and pointed towards the great dune beyond the dancing-house.

"I saw your friend this afternoon talking there with one whom it is especially unsafe to be seen with in Beni-Kouidar.'

" 'With whom?'

" 'A dancer called Algia.'

" 'Talking, monsieur! Marnier knows no Arabic.'

"The aumônier pursed his lips in his black beard.

" 'The conversation appeared to be carried on by signs,' he responded. 'That did not make it less but more dangerous.'

"I'm afraid I was rude, and whistled softly.

" 'Monsieur l'Aumônier,' I said, 'you must forgive me, but this air is certainly the very devil.'

"He smiled, not without irony.

" 'I became aware of that myself, monsieur, when first I came to live in Beni-Kouidar. But I am a priest, and—well, monsieur, I was given the strength to say: "Get thee behind me, Satan." '

"A softer look came into his sunburnt, wrinkled face.

" 'Better take your friend away as soon as possible,' he added, 'or there will be trouble.'

III

"That night I found myself confronted by a Marnier whom I had never seen before. The desert wine had gone to the lad's brain. That was certain. No intonations of the Oxford don lurked in the voice. No reminiscences of the Oxford 'High' clung about the manner. A man sober and the same man drunk are scarcely more different than the Marnier who had ridden with me up the sandy street of Beni-Kouidar the previous day and the man who sat opposite to me at dinner in the 'Rendezvous des Amis' that night. I knew in a moment that the aumônier was right, and that I must get the lad away at once from the intoxicant which nature poured out over this far-away city. His eyes were shining feverishly, and when I mentioned Mr. Ruskin in a casual way he looked unutterably bored.

" 'Ruskin and all those fellows seem awfully slow and out of place here,' he exclaimed. 'One doesn't want to bother about them in the Sahara.'

"I changed the subject.

" 'There doesn't seem very much to see here,' I said carelessly. 'We might get away the day after to-morrow, don't you think?'

"He drew his brows down.

" 'The horses won't be sufficiently rested,' he said curtly.

" 'Oh yes; I fancy they will.'

" 'Well, I don't fancy I shall. The long ride took it out of me.'

" 'Turn in to-night, then, directly after dinner.'

“He looked at me with sharp suspicion. I met his gaze blandly.

“ ‘I mean to,’ he said after a short pause. “I knew he was telling me a lie, but I only said: ‘That’s right!’ and resolved to keep an eye on him.

“Directly dinner was over he sprang up from the table.

‘Good-night,’ he said.

“And before I could reply he was out of the *salle-à -manger,* and I heard him tramp along the brick floor of the passage, go into his room, and bang the door.

“The aumônier was getting up from his little table, and shaking the crumbs from his soutane.

“ ‘You are quite right, monsieur,’ I said to him. ‘I must get my friend away.’

“ ‘I shall be sorry to lose you,’ replied the good priest. ‘But—desert air, desert air!’

“He shook his head, half wistfully, half laughingly, bowed, put on his broad-brimmed black hat, and went out.

“After a moment I followed him. I stood in the doorway of the inn, and lit a cigar. I knew Marnier was not going to bed, and meant to catch him when he came out, and join him. In common politeness he could scarcely refuse my company, since he had asked me as a favour to let him come with me to Beni-Kouidar. I waited, watching the moon rise, till my cigar was smoked out. Then I lit another. Still he did not come. I heard the distant throb of tomtoms beyond the Bureau Arabe in the quarter of the freed negroes. They were having a fantasia. I began to think that I must have been mistaken, and that Marnier had really turned in. So much the better. The ash dropped from the stump of my second cigar, and the deserted camel market was flooded with silver from the moon-rays. I knew there was only one door to the inn. Slowly I lit a third cigar.

“A large cloud went over the face of the moon. A gust of wind struck my face. Suddenly the night had changed. The moon looked forth again, and was again obscured. A second gust struck me like a blow, and my face was stung by a multitude of sand grains. I heard steps behind me in the brick passage, turned swiftly, and saw the landlord.

“ ‘I must shut the door, m’sieu,’ he said. ‘There’s a bad sandstorm coming up.’

“As he spoke the wind roared, and over the camel market a thick fog seemed to fall abruptly. It was a sheet of sand from the surrounding dunes. I threw away my cigar, stepped into the passage, and the landlord banged the door, and drove home the heavy bolts.

“Then I went to Marnier’s room, and knocked. I felt sure, but I thought I would make sure before going to my room.

“No answer.

“I knocked again loudly.

“Again no answer.

“Then I turned the handle, and entered. “The room was empty. I glanced round quickly. The small window was open. All the windows of the inn were barred, but, as I learned later, a bar in Marnier’s had been broken, and was not yet replaced when we arrived at Beni-Kouidar. In consequence of this it was possible to squeeze through into the arcade outside. This was what Marnier had done. My precise, gentlemanly, reserved, and methodical acquaintance had deliberately given me the slip by sneaking out of a window like a schoolboy, and creeping round the edge of the inn to the *fosse* that lay in the shadow of the sand dunes. As I realised this I realised his danger.

“I ran to my room, fetched my revolver, slipped it into my pocket, and hurried to the front door. The landlord heard me trying to undo the bolts, and came out protesting.

“ ‘M’sieu cannot go out into the storm.’

“ ‘I must.’

“ ‘But m’sieu does not know what Beni-Kouidar is like when the sand is blown on the wind. It is *enfer.* Besides, it is not safe. In the darkness m’sieu may receive a *mauvais coup.’*

“ ‘Make haste, please, and open the door. I am going to fetch my friend.’

“He pulled the bolts, grumbling and swearing, and I went out into *enfer.* For he was right. A sandstorm at night in Beni-Kouidar is hell.

“Luckily, Safti joined me mysteriously from the deuce knows where, and we staggered to the dancing-house somehow, and struggled in, blinded, our faces scored, our clothes heavy with sand, our pockets, our very boots, weighed down with it.

“The tomtoms were roaring, the pipe was yelling, blown by the frantic demon with his hood full of latch keys, the impassible, bearded faces were watching the painted women who, in their red garments and their golden crowns, promenaded down the earthen floor, between the divans, fluttering their dyed fingers, smiling grotesquely like idols, bending forward their greasy foreheads to receive the tribute of their admirers.

“I ran my eyes swiftly over the mob. Marnier was not in it. I pushed my way towards the doorway on the left which gave on to the court of the dancers.

“Safti caught hold of my arm.

“ ‘It is not safe to go in there on such a night, Sidi. There are no lamps. It is black as a tomb. And no one can tell who may be there. Nomads, perhaps, men of evil from the south. Many murders have been done in the court on black nights, and no one can say who has done them. For all the time men go in and out to the rooms of the dancers.’

“ ‘Nevertheless, Safti, I must—’

“I stopped speaking, for at this moment Batouch, the brother of the Caïd of Beni -Kouidar, came slowly in through the doorway from the blackness of the sand-swept court. There was a strange smile on his handsome face, and he was caressing his black beard gently with one delicate hand. He saw me, smiled more till I caught the gleam of his white teeth, passed on into the dancing-house, sat down on a divan, and called for coffee. I could not take my eyes from him. Every movement he made fascinated me. He drew from his pale blue robe a silver box, opened it, lifted out a pinch of tobacco, and began carefully to roll a cigarette. And all the time he smiled.

“A glacial cold crept over my body. As he lit his cigarette I caught hold of Safti, and hurried through the doorway into the blackness of the whirling sand.”

* * *

Here I stopped.

“Well?” said young England. “Well?”

The doctor did not speak.

“Well,” I answered. “Algia danced that night. While she was dancing we found a dead body in the court. It was Marnier’s. A knife had been thrust into him from behind!”

“Ah!” said the doctor.

“But—” exclaimed young England, “it was that fellow? It was Batouch?”

I shrugged my shoulders.

“Nobody ever found out who did it.”

“Well, but of course—”

He checked himself, and an expression of admiration dawned slowly over his healthy, handsome face.

"I say," he said, "to be able to roll a cigarette directly afterwards! What infernal cheek!"

"Desert air!" I replied. "My dear chap—desert air!"

The doctor nodded.