

A Scene in the Desert

By Unknown

I

The Arabian disposition, sweet and tractable, has, nevertheless, at its bottom an amount of energy and of firmness which, when those qualities are called for, renders the Arab capable of enduring the most terrible physical toil, the most harsh treatment. He is endowed with an obstinacy which renders him capable of enduring with stoical calm what would be to others unendurable. The people of those regions are, so to speak, kneaded of sand and sun, but, enervated by the continual heat, they adapt themselves readily to every occasion, and quickly receive every impression. Careless respecting his life, having few wants to satisfy, the Arab gives himself up to an idle and wandering existence without troubling himself concerning the future. His desires are satisfied if the spring of water to which he has strayed does not fail him.

Awake, however, the lion asleep in his den, arouse in this heart of fire a desire, a passion to be satisfied, and you will discover a man full of savage instinct, a man who will astound you by his endurance, a man who will make you tremble by the depth of his passion, which often, however, degenerates into ferocity.

The duel which has come down to our time, a bequest from barbarous ages when all was settled by the point of the sword, although very rare among the people of Africa, is not, however, unknown. The sharing the spoil of some caravan, or the fruits of a contest with the enemy, the dispute concerning a newly-discovered spring of water to which two different tribes lay claim, such matters sometimes give rise to a duel between rival chiefs. But a passion which, in these hot regions, burns within man's heart with still intensified fire, love, is the most common cause of such combats.

The young men of Ben-Ouassel, who five days since had left the oasis where they had pitched their tents, were returning worn out with fatigue, and many of them wounded, from an expedition they had made, the event of which had not been so happy as to make them forget their laborious march across the desert. The sun, spoiled of his rays, floated in the midst of a heavy, stifling air, and sank slowly to the horizon. No breath of wind refreshed the faces of the men—no sound, no song of war, could be heard among them. The Arab mare, alone still fresh amidst this general weariness, neighed softly now and again, rejoicing in its easy pace and pleased at its instinctive assurance that the end of the long journey was near. Its eyes glancing fire, its mane scattered, it now and then lifted its graceful delicately-chiselled head, and seemed to fix its look upon some object which, vague and ill defined, was hardly perceptible in the distance. Night began to fall over the desert, but in the quarter where the sun had set the sky was filled with a thousand dancing tints of rose, of blue, of opal, with here and there a great band of gold. A light breeze sprang up, chasing before it the suffocating vapours with which the air was filled, and falling gratefully upon the fainting band. This breeze, although it was itself hot, at least permitted the lungs to breathe more at ease. Men and horses at once felt its vivifying influence, and began to awaken from the stupor which had fallen upon them.

'Il allah,' cried the eldest of the band. 'On, men.'

They raised their war-cry, followed their chief, and plunging into the space which spread before them, hastened on to reach the palm-tree where they were to make their last halt.

The men ranged themselves around the foot of the tree, at which trickled a little stream of water, according to their age. Breathless as they were with their long journey, it was with a sense of delirious joy that they felt the water at their lips; and when the first longing had been allayed, when the great need was satisfied, when the horses were refreshed, as they sat under the kind shade of the tree, in the fresh air which dwelt around it, they would return to the spring, and taking up the water in the hollow of their hands, drink the drops with a delicious sense of voluptuous enjoyment.

Among the band were two young men, robust, tall, muscular. They were about the same height and apparently of the same age, their foreheads high, their eyes lively and piercing. More than once they had during the halt cast fierce glances the one at the other, and it was easy to see that an ill-restrained hatred burnt with violence within their hearts. They sought to avoid one another, and they came together in spite of themselves. Some magnetic attraction seemed to draw them together, and whenever they so met, the expression of their features, the play of the muscles, betrayed the passion which filled them.

After a frugal meal, which occupied but a few minutes, came the time for sheep. They cast themselves carelessly down upon the sands, the wounded men being tended by their comrades, the horses wandering at liberty. The spot was the last place at which the band would halt before reaching the oasis where the tribe dwelt. This was still eight hours' march away, and the Arabs proposed to sleep for a short while, and then push on so as to avoid having to make the journey during the heat of the day.

All around the palm was complete quiet. The breeze playing among the leaves of the tree, seemed to murmur sadly in mysterious harmony.

As soon as all was still a dark figure quietly lifted itself up, bent its ear to be assured that all around were sleeping, and then took its way to the side of the camp where the horses had collected. It seized one by the bridle, passed a caressing hand over its back and through its long flowing mane, and putting its mouth to the animal's ear seemed to command it to be silent. The figure led the horse away from its companions, jumped upon its back, and sped away at a gallop.

The air was now fresh. The sky, sparkling with stars, offered a magnificent contrast to the fierce dull fire which had prevailed during the day. The star Venus took its way through the heavens, following the sun in his track, and the extreme star of the constellation, Sagittarius, showed itself spark-hug and calm in the opposite quarter of the sky. The young man, whom this star served as a guide, was amused by a thousand pleasant thoughts. To such as he everything around him on such a night seemed full of joy. He took his course across the sea of sand, now silent, now talking to himself, now addressing a few words of encouragement and of gratitude to his horse. As his speed grew less, the man would hum some love strain, and in clear musical tones he sang,—

'The star of night is not more beautiful than she who has charmed me. Happy is he who is able to fix upon his glances the eyes of her whom he loves, and to drink in the sound of her beloved voice.'

The horseman had finished half his course before his comrades awoke, and it did not take long for the jealous eye of the young man who had remained behind to discover that he whom he hated was not with them. By the marks left by the horse in the sand, he perceived that he had gone towards the tribal place. Full of fury, he leaped upon his horse, and rushed away at its utmost speed.

Four hours had meanwhile passed. In the overarching sky many changes had taken place. Constellation had succeeded constellation in admirable succession. The thoughts of the lover

changed; they were not solely occupied by that single, gracious object. His heart beat quick, and the sense of distracting hate oppressed him. The words he had spoken to his steed had hitherto been caressing, but now they were hoarse and sharp, and the animal, in response to the mood of its rider, put forth its best efforts, as if endeavouring to satisfy by its exertions the fierce spirit of its master.

II

Fresh as a morning rose, young Nehdy stood by the side of the path which led to the spring, and her heart beat with joy as she listened to the words of the young horseman, as he told her of the incidents of the perilous expedition from which he had returned safe to her. The sun had not yet risen, but it was already colouring the east with faint rosy tints. The face of the young girl was bright with innocent childlike joy, with love, and anon would become grave and thoughtful. The brave horseman beside her, who had for a while been animated by the memory of the expedition, found welling up from his heart words of tenderness and of love. And Nehdy, as she listened, found within her heart a sweet responsive echo to the melody of his voice.

The lovers were about to part when all of a sudden the second horseman appeared. The two men looked at one another for a moment with concentrated rage, and the passions of jealousy and hatred agitated all their features. It was impossible to witness without a shudder in that look the fearful desire for vengeance, the thirst for blood, which raged within them. All the worst instincts of the desert struggled in their breasts, and the African nature revealed itself—implacable, savage, without mercy, inexorable.

There was no need for words. They had exchanged a defiance to the death. Going a short space aside in the desert, the one opposite to the other, their countenances calm, they drew from their girdles their curved poniards, and each fixed his eye on the other. Seizing an opportunity, the one darted his knife in the other's thigh, and inflicted a wound almost extending to the knee. The blood gushed out—not a muscle of the wounded man shrank, not a quiver showed that he had received a hurt.

'*Tahib*, it is well,' he said, aiming a blow at his adversary.

'*Tahib*,' his opponent answered him, as he in his turn received his foe's steel.

The breeze which came from the oasis ruffled the leaves of the palm-tree, and then went on losing itself in the desert. The two foes heeded it not, excited by the sight of the blood with which the sand about them was now stained. Following strictly the exact rules of a duel to the death, they restrained themselves from at first endeavouring to inflict serious wounds, and each thrust as it took effect was followed by the favourite exclamation and by a malevolent sneer.

In such combats it is rare that either combatant escapes with life. Victims of their vindictive disposition, they bear pain with a fearful carelessness—with a stoicism more than human. They recognise the highest rules of honour in the combat. Neither seeks to take his adversary unawares. They render hate for hate, wound for wound, but with honour. The Arab ever preserves, in the very midst of his passion, an impassibility which distinguishes him, and makes him as it were another being. Possessed by one desire which entirely masters him, whose voice he alone hears in the midst of his struggle, he is indifferent to wounds, and the blood of his foe refreshes him and gives him strength to endure.

The two opponents had already received many wounds. Exhausted by the loss of blood, wearied by the exertions of the preceding day, they commenced to strike more feeble blows—more dangerous, however, in their aim. The love of life awakening in them, each recognised that

his own preservation depended on the death of his adversary. Hardly did their hands seem equal to the blow. At length to each of them appeared the image of his loved one, clothed in all her beauty, her innocence of youth. At that instant his strength returned, his dagger glittered in the air and sank in the heart of his foe—not, however, so quick that vengeance had not overtaken the blow in the same instant as it was dealt.

The band of warriors as they came to the encampment of the tribe found two bodies lying on the borders of the desert.

No one knew what had been the occasion of the combat. Nehdy alone mourned the death of her lover.