

UNDER TWO FLAGS By "OUIDA"

CHAPTER III.

IT WAS just sunset. Camped on one of the stretches above the Mustapha road was a circle of Arab tents. The circle was irregularly kept, and the Kumas were scattered at will. Here a low one of canvas, there one of goatskin; here a white towering canopy of teleze, there a low striped little nest of shelter, and, lofter than all, the stately tent of the sheik, with his standard stuck into the earth in front of it, with its heavy folds hanging listlessly in the sultry, breathless air. In the central tent, tall and crimson striped, with its opening free to the night, sat the khallifa, the head of the tribe, with a circle of Arabs about him. He was thrown on his cushions, rich enough for a seraglio, while the rest squatted on the morocco carpet that covered the bare ground, and that was strewn with round brass Moorish trays and little cups emptied of their coffee. Near him was a guest whom the khallifa delighted to honor, only a corporal of chasseurs and once a foe, yet one with whom the Arab found the brotherhood of brave men and on whom he lavished in all he could the hospitalities and honors of the desert.

The story of their friendship ran thus: The tribe was now allied with France or at least had accepted French sovereignty and pledged itself to neutrality in the hostilities still rife, but a few years before far in the interior and feigned with the Kabyles it had been one of the fiercest and most dangerous among the enemies of France. At that time the khallifa and the chasseur met in many a skirmish, hot, desperate struggles, when the desert sand and the smoke of musketry circled in clouds above the close locked struggle, and the leopard of France and the lion of Sahara wrestled in a death grip. In these, through four or five seasons of warfare, the sheik and the chasseur had encountered each other, till each had grown to look for the other's face as soon as the standard of the Bedouins flashed in the sunshine opposite the guldons of the imperial forces; till each had watched and noted the other's unmatched prowess and borne away the wounds of the other's home strokes with the admiration of a bold soldier for a bold rival's dauntlessness and skill.

At last it came to pass that the tribes were sorely pressed by the French troops and had to flee southward to the desert and, incumbered by their flocks and their women, were hardly driven and greatly decimated. Now, among those women was one whom the sheik held above all earthly things except his honor in war, a beautiful, antelope eyed creature, lithe and graceful as a palm and the daughter of a pure Arab race on whom he could not endure for any other sight than his own to look and whom he guarded in his tent as the chief pearl of all his treasures; all, save the honor of his tribe, he would have surrendered rather than surrender Djemla. It was a passion with him—a passion that not even the iron of his temper and the dignity of his austere calm could abate or conceal—and the rumor of it and of the beauty of its object reached the French camp till an impatient curiosity was roused about her, and a raid that should bear her off became the favorite speculation round the picket fires at night and the scorching noons. The heat was intense; the water was bad and very rare; dysentery came with the scorch and the toll of this endless charge. The chief in command, M. le Marquis de Chateauroux, swore heavily as he saw many of his best men dropping off like sheep in a murmur, and he offered 200 napoleons to whoever should bring either the dead sheik's head or the living beauty of Djemla.

One day the chassateurs had pitched their camp where a few barren, withered trees gave a semblance of shelter and a little thread of brackish water oozed through the yellow earth. Suddenly the noon lethargy of the camp was broken. A trumpet call rang through the stillness. Against the amber transparency of the horizon line the outlines of half a dozen horsemen were seen coming nearer and nearer with every moment. They were some spahis who had been out sweeping the country for food. The mighty frame of Chateauroux, almost as unclad as an athlete, started from his slumberous panting rest. His eyes lightened hungrily. "Hah, they have the woman!" he cried. They had the woman. She had been netted near a water spring, to which she had wandered too loosely guarded, and the colonel's face flushed darkly with an eager, lustful warmth as he looked upon his captive. Rumor had not outdone the Arab girl's beauty. Only Djemla was as innocent as the gazelle, whose grace she resembled, and loved her lord with a great love. Of her suffering her captor took no more heed than if she were a young and dying of shot wounds; but, with a triumphant admiring glance at her, wrote a message in Arabic to send the khallifa her loss was discovered, and a second whom he lay at the door of his tent whom he should

send with it. His men were almost all half dead with the sun blaze. His glance chanced to light in the distance on a soldier to whom he bore no love, causelessly, but bitterly all the same. He had him summoned and eyed him with a curious amusement. "Chateauroux treated his squadrons with much the same familiarity and brutality that a chief of filibusters uses to his.

"So, you heed the heat so little you give up your turn of water to a drummer, they say." The chasseur gave the salute with a calm defiance. A faint flush passed over the sun bronze of his forehead. He had thought the sacrifice had been unobserved.

"The drummer was but a child, colonel." "Be so good as to give us no more of those melodramatic acts," said the marquis contemptuously. "You are too fond of trafficking in those showy fooleries. You bribe your comrades for their favoritism too openly. I forbid it. Do you hear?" "I hear, colonel."

The assent was perfectly tranquil and respectful. He was too good a soldier not to render perfect obedience and keep perfect silence under any good of provocation to break both.

"Obey, then!" said Chateauroux savagely. "Well, since you love heat so well, you shall take a flag of truce and my sword to the Sid Ilderim. But tell me first, what do you think of this capture?"

"It is not my place to give opinions, colonel."

"Fare! It is your place when I bid you. Speak, or I will have the stick cut the words out of you!"

"I may speak frankly?"

"Ten thousand curses, yes!"

"Then I think that those who make war on women are no longer fit to fight with men."

For a moment the long, sinewy, massive form of Chateauroux started from the skins on which he lay at full length like a lion starting from its lair. His veins swelled like black cords. Under the mighty muscle of his bare chest his heart beat visibly in the fury of his wrath.

"By heaven, I have a mind to have you shot like a dog!"

The chasseur looked at him carelessly, composedly, but with a serene defiance still, as due from a soldier to his chief.

"You have threatened it before, colonel. It may be as well to do it, or the army may think you capricious."

Chateauroux crushed a blasphemous oath through his clinched teeth and laughed a certain short, stern, sardonic laugh, which his men dreaded more than his wrath.

"No; I will send you instead to the khallifa. He often saves me the trouble of killing my own curs. Take a flag of truce and this paper, and never draw rein till you reach him. Your beast drop dead at the end."

The chasseur saluted, took the paper, bowed with a certain languid, easy grace that camp life never cured him of and went. He knew that the man who should take the news of his treasure's loss to the Emir Ilderim would, a thousand to one, perish by every torture desert cruelty could frame, despite the cover of the white banner.

Chateauroux looked after him as he and his horse passed from the French camp in the full, burning tide of noon.

"If the Arabs kill him," he thought, "I will forgive Ilderim five seasons of rebellion."

The chasseur, as he had been bidden, never drew rein across the scorching plateau. At last, ere he reached the Bedouin tents, he saw the sheik and a party of horsemen returning from a foraging quest and in ignorance as yet of the abduction of Djemla. He galloped straight to them and halted across their line of march, with the folds of the little white flag fluttering in the sun. The Bedouins drew bridle, and Ilderim advanced alone. He was a magnificent man of middle age, with the noblest type of the eagle eyed, aquiline desert beauty.

A glance of recognition flashed from him on the soldier who had so often crossed swords with him, and he waved back the scroll with dignified courtesy.

"Read it me."

It was read. Bitterly, blackly, shameful, the few brutal words were. They netted him as an eagle is netted in a shepherd's trap.

The moment that he gave a sign of advancing the captive's life would pay the penalty; if he merely remained in arms, without direct attack, she would be made the marquis's mistress and abandoned later to the army. The only terms on which he could have her restored were instant submission to the imperial rule and personal homage of himself and all his Djouad to the marquis, as the representative of France—homage in which they should confess themselves dogs and the sons of dogs. So ran the message of peace.

The chasseur read on to the end calmly. Then he lifted his gaze and looked at the emir. He expected 50 swords to be buried in his heart.

With a wild, shrill yell the Bedouins whirled their naked sabres above their heads and rushed down on the bearer of this shame to their chief and their tribe. The chasseur did not seek to defend himself. He sat motionless.

He thought the vengeance just.

The sheik raised his sword and signed them back as he pointed to the white folds of the flag. Then his voice rolled out like thunder over the stillness of the plains:

"But that you trust yourself to my honor I would rend you limb from limb. Go back to the tiger who rales you and tell him that as Allah liveth I will fall on him and smite him as he hath never been smitten. Dead or living, I will have back my own. If he take her life, I will have 10,000 lives to answer it. If he deal her dishonor, I will light such a holy war through the length and breadth of the land that his nation shall be driven backward like choked dogs into the sea, and perish from the face of the earth for evermore. And this I swear by the law and the prophet!"

The menace rolled out, imperious as a monarch's, thrilling through the desert hush. The chasseur bent his head as the words closed. His own teeth were tightly clinched, and his face was dark.

"Emir, listen to one word," he said briefly. "Shame has been done to me as to you. Had I been told what words I bore they had never been brought by my hand. You know me. You have had the marks of my steel, as I have had the marks of yours. Trust me in this, sidi—I pledge you my honor that before the sun sets she shall be given back to you unharmed, or I will return here myself, and your tribe shall slay me in what fashion they will. So alone can she be saved unharmed. Answer, will you have faith in me?"

"You are a great warrior. Such men do not lie. Go, and if she be borne to me before the sun is half way sunk toward the west all the branches of the tribes of Ilderim shall be as your brethren and bend as steel to your bidding. If not—as God is mighty—not one man in your host shall live to tell the tale."

The chasseur bowed his head to his horse's mane, then without a word wheeled round and sped back across the plain. When he reached his own cavalry camp, he went straightway to his chief. What passed between them none ever knew. The interview was brief; it was possibly as stormy. Pregnant and decisive it assuredly was, and the squadrons of Africa marveled that the man who dared beard Chateauroux in his lair came forth with his life. Whatever the spell he used the result was a marvel.

At the very moment that the sun touched the lower half of the western heavens the sheik Ilderim, where he sat in his sidesaddle, with all his tribe stretching behind him, full armed, to sweep down like falcons on the spoilers if the hour passed with the pledge unredemmed, saw the form of the chasseur reappear between his sight and the glare of the skies; nor did he ride alone. That night the Pearl of the Desert lay once more in the mighty, sinuous arms of the great emir.

But, with the dawn, his vengeance fell in terrible fashion on the sleeping camp of the Franks, and from that hour dated the passionate, savage, unconcealed hate of Chateauroux to the most daring soldier of all his fiery horse, known in his troop as *Bel-a-faire-pour*.

It was in the tent of Ilderim now that he reclined, looking outward at the night where flames were leaping ruddily under a large caldron, and far beyond was the dark immensity of the star studded sky. From the hour of the restoration of his treasure the sheik had been true to his oath; his tribe in all its branches had held the French soldier in closest brotherhood. Wherever they were he was honored and welcomed; was he in war, their swords were drawn for him; was he in need, their houses of hair were spread for him; had he want of flight, the swiftest and most precious of their horses was at his service; had he thirst, they would have died themselves, wringing out the last drop from the water skin for him. Through him their alliance, or, more justly to speak, their neutrality, was secured to France, and the Bedouin chief loved him with a great, silent, noble love that was fast rooted in the granite of his nature.

"I wish I had come straight to you, sidi, when I first set foot in Africa," the chasseur said at last, while the fragrant smoke uncurled from under the droop of his long, pendent mustaches.

"Truly it had been well," answered the khallifa, who would have given the best stallions in his stud to have had this Frank with him in warfare and in peace. "There is no life like our life."

"Faith, I think not," murmured the chasseur rather to himself than to the Bedouin. "The desert keeps you and your horse, and you can let all the rest of the world go."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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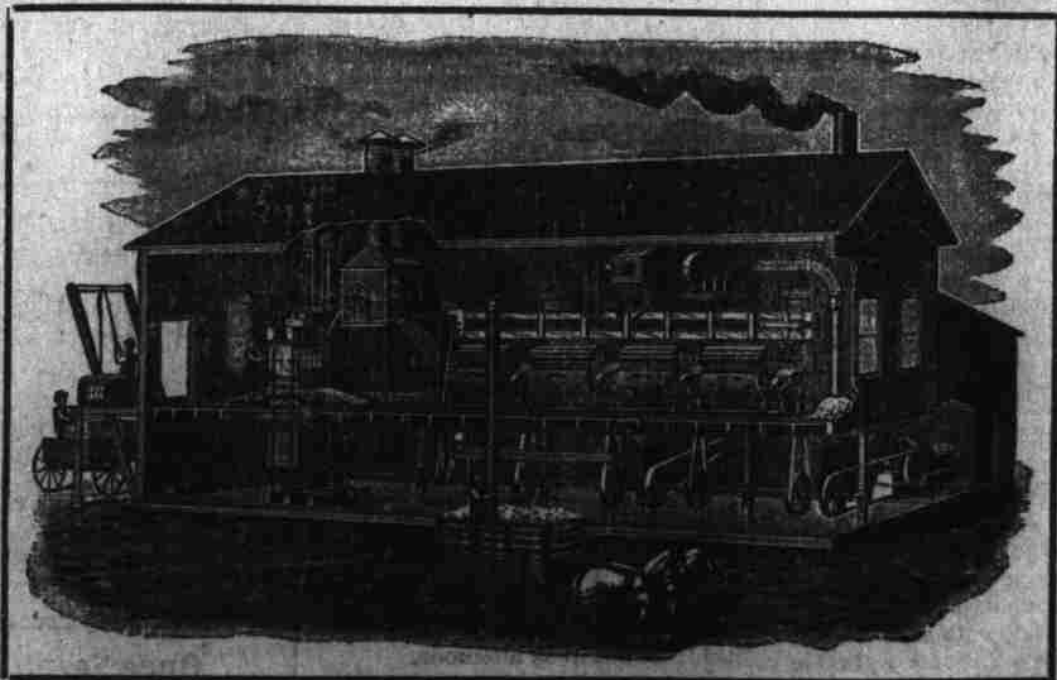
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