A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

W. T.—1

The readers of this magazine express their opinions

"He drew a knife from under his burnoose and put a bowl under her feet."



Dancing Feet

By PAUL ERNST

A story of the Caid of Hamam Meknes in the Sahara desert, and the young white wife who displeased him—a grinn tale, through which blows a breath of horror

E KNEW her only as Mademoiselle d'Or. None of us knew where she came from. Some said Russia, for she spoke Russian like a na-

tive. Some said from the south of France, and that she had fled here to avoid a political scandal. Some said from the Saar. But none of us knew, and none of

us cared. You didn't care where Mademoiselle d'Or was from, so long as you could be with her.

She was small, beautifully formed. She had tawny hair, and topaz eyes with a deep mysticism in them. Her skin was tanned a light gold in spite of the fact that she kept out of the sun as every woman must in Hamam Meknes on the eastern fringe of the Sahara.

But it was her feet and legs that one remarked on most. She had the daintiest small feet and slender ankles, and the loveliest, lithe legs. Dainty, small feet. Dancing feet. Dancing their way into the hearts of all of us

She used to spend much of her time at the Café Penny, where the French officers in charge of the Hamam Meknes post came, and where I, as local manager of a farm machinery corporation, often went with Arab customers. Most afternoons at three-thirty or four she would come there, a cool and lovely golden figure in the blazing sun. And the reception was ever the same.

"Voilà! Mam'selle d'Or!"

"A dance, a dance!"

Sometimes she would smile and refuse. Oftener, she would oblige.

There was a phonograph in the rear of the café. Somebody would turn it on to the one record which was appropriate to dancing. "There are smiles . . ."

That one record! I can hear the song yet-outmoded even at that time, but the one she liked best to dance to. With the phonograph grinding out its tune, she would tap-dance for us, either on a cleared spot among the tables or perhaps on a table top. And we would watchand dream.

Mademoiselle d'Or, a slender golden vision on a table top, laughing, tawny eves glinting, skirts raised a little to allow her beautiful legs proper freedom, dainty feet tapping with the perfect rhythm of one born to dance. She would have been a sensation in Paris. In fact, I've sometimes suspected she had been a sensation there-before fate or whim drove her down here into North Africa to Hamam Meknes near the Isle of the Lotus Faters One lovely woman alone among men exiled here by business or the armydancing her way into all our hearts. . . .

After her tap-dance she would dance with those of us she knew would not try to take liberties. She played no favorites: indeed she scarcely knew whose arms she danced in.

It was the dancing itself that intoxicated her. That was all. Born to dance. loving it, almost seeming to live for it.

And then she went mad-or womanly -and married Lakhdar.

♠ CHMED LAKHDAR was the Caid of Hamam Meknes. His house didn't look like much from the outside, and he himself always dressed in plain burnooses. But Lakhdar was a rich man. He could probably have laid his hands on a quarter of a million in cash had he needed it

Lakhdar was up in Madrid when Mademoiselle d'Or first appeared among us. He was there for six months before coming back and meeting Mademoiselle d'Or.

The first day he met her he proposed marriage.

Lakhdar was handsome in his way. About forty, he was lean and supple, with a close-cropped black beard. He was suave and smooth-mannered, but even a woman should have seen the ruthlessness under the surface. His hawk nose and thin-lipped mouth indicated it. So did his eves, tawny eves much the color of Mademoiselle d'Or's, only cold as frozen amber where hers were warm and laughing.

We all tried to reason with her. But it seemed her money was running low, Caid Lakhdar was rich, he loved her, he was reasonably good-looking, it would be romantic. . . .

Lakhdar's Renault town car came back from Tunis one day with the shades pulled tightly over the windows. In the body was Mademoiselle d'Or, now Lakhdar's wife

Fourth wife of the Caid Lakhdar, immured in his house. . . .

These marriages of East and West! They can be made to look very romantic, but seldom do they work out that way. Sometimes an Arab petty potentate will have only the one wife, allow her a sort of half-freedom, may even permit her to retain her own religion. Even in these rare cases happiness seldom lasts long. And the Caid Lakhdar was far from being that sort of husband.

From the moment Mademoiselle d'Or disappeared into his home, she stayed in it as in a tomb. Now and then, rarely, we saw her. Always she was heavily chaperoned. We would never have known her, veiled and swathed in white, from other Arab women driven under surveillance to a secluded shop, had it not been for her feet. Those dainty, thistle-down feet, clad stubbornly in high-heeled shoes. The one feature of her individuality left. You couldn't mistake those

And so we knew, when infrequently a small, shrouded figure with forlomly drooping shoulders hastened from closed car to dimly lit shop on lovely little feet in high-heeled slippers, that this was our Mademoiselle d'Or. Or her shell, perhaps! And we sighed and looked at each other, and ordered another cognac, which was drunk in silence.

The Café Penny—indeed the whole town of Hamam Meknes—was a bleak, grim place without our dancing, small companion. Bur if Mademoiselle d'Or was absent in the flesh, she was much with us in the spirit. All we could talk about was her probable happiness in Lakhdar's white-walled home, and what she was doing now to busy herself—and how she could live without her dancing and her gay comradeship with men.

Well, I had the answer to that, long afterward, from one of Lakhdar's houseboys in a gossiping moment.

She had no happiness in Lakhdar's house, she had nothing with which to busy herself—and she could not live without the dancing and the comradeship.

It went well for a few weeks, the boy said. Lakhdar was no fool. He knew the yearning of those trim small feet in their high-heeled shoes. When they came back from Tunis that day, he had a phonograph and some records in the car with them. Among the records was the one to whose dancing he had farst seen Mademoiselle d'Or. "There are smiles."

She danced for him, to that record.

I can see her, tawny eyes laughing, tawny hair tossing a little as her feet tapped out the tune, dressed probably in the gauzy harem garments whose main function is coolness rather than embellishment of sex—though the sex is not ienored.

She danced and danced. And Lakhdar, who had no rhythm in his heart or music in his soul, of course quickly tired of it. More, he began to be annoyed by it, so that Mademoiselle d'Or danced alone when her feet urged her past enduring, or danced not at all.

In Lakhdar's house, under Lakhdar's frozen amber eyes, she could not dance and had no one to talk to but the servants, and Lakhdar's three other wives, who were fat and stupid and hated her with a consuming hatred.

A short distance away was the Café Penny, where she could dance to ecstatic bravos, and later dance with men who treated her almost reverently and whose adoration must have been like wine to her

gay, starved soul. A short distance from Lakhdar's home to the Café Penny. And even an idiot should have foretold the result. . . .

But I was utterly unprepared for it when it came. For I had not then talked to the house-boy, and even in my most pessimistic moments had not dreamed the girl was so wildly unhappy.

All I knew was that, as I sat under the awning on the baked sidewalk at a Café Penny table, I looked down the narrow street and saw an Arab woman walking alone over the cobbles.

STARED. Arab women, except of the lowest class, do not commonly walk, alone, along the streets. And this woman's haik was exceptionally fine, and she was small and daintily formed, as you could see in spite of the shapelessness of her garments.

And then I heard the French lieutenant sitting next to me gasp and sit very straight and incredulous in his chair. And I saw what he was looking at.

The woman's feet were very small, and were clad in high-heeled, European shoes.

We stared at those feet while the woman came up to the sidewalk tables. As we stared, so did the others-a dozen of them-seated there. And in unison, our eyes swept up her body and to the eyes showing over her veil.

Tawny, golden eyes. Laughing eyes, though now a certain desperation showed in them.

"My God!" I said.

The French lieutenant looked the other way, and spoke to her out of the corner of his mouth.

"Mon Dieu! You must not stand here, Mam'selle. Leaving the Caid Lakhdar's harem and coming to a café alone where a dozen men sit! Lakhdar will flay you alive!"

Mademoiselle d'Or just stood there.

The Frenchman had been in North Africa for a long time. He knew the place well. And his face was white to the lips at the thing she had done. But Mademoiselle d'Or was mad-or womanly.

She came among the tables, and she unloosed her veil!

"I came to dance," she said. "I came to live again one of the afternoons that were mine before I---" She faltered and stopped.

Well, with her unloosing of the veil, the damage was done. Had she simply gone out alone, and walked away from the café with her veil still in place. Lakhdar's rage, though bound to be terrific, might have stayed within bounds. But this! Lowering her veil before a café full of men! Wife of a Caid!

We did what we could to cover the affair. We hustled her into the closed part of the café where we sat during the rare days when it rained, or the more frequent days when driving wind made of the narrow street outside an inferno of whirling dust.

"This is horrible," said the Frenchman. "It is a-nightmare! If Lakhdar ever dis-

In the back of the café, Mademoiselle d'Or laughed at us. Mad-or woman-

"Why do you look so terrified? Like frightened children instead of men. I know this is a very bad thing I am doing. But suppose I am caught? This is the Twentieth Century. Even an Arab husband can do no more than divorce me."

Her tawny eves laughed at us. And what could we say in the face of such wilfulness? She should have known better, after living for weeks in the harem of that thin-lipped man with the frozen amber eyes. But she didn't seem to.

"Anyway," she said gayly, "I shall not be caught. Today he is in Tunis. So I shall dance and dance."

She got to a table top, helped by hands that, I think, trembled. I know mine did. She shook her tawny hair free and, like a child delivered from a dark prison, laughed and danced. To the tinny record: "There are miles."

There was no gayety, aside from the almost hysterical gayety of Mademoiselle d'Or. We stood close to the table, as if to ring her around against possible evil.

I can see her yet, dancing there in her incongruous Arab costume, tawny hair flying, small feet tapping madly to the beat of the outmoded song.

"Laugh!" she cried. "Sing the song with me as I dance! This is a celebration. Lakhdar is in Tunis and so for a rare few minutes I am free!"

It was just at that moment that I heard a strangled curse rip from the lips of the French lieutenant. At the same time Mademoiselle d'Or's dancing feet broke their rhythm and stopped. She stared toward the doorway with eyes no longer laughing.

I turned to look, too, knowing what I was going to see but still hoping my knowledge was wrong.

In the doorway stood Achmed Lakhdar. He was dressed in a light blue burnose, with the hood hanging down his back. He stood easily in the doorway, with a little smile on his lips. There was no expression in the icy amber of his eyes. But I began to sweat as the full enormity of what those eyes saw swept over me. The wife of the Caid of Hamam Mcknes, dancing on a table top in a cafe before a dozen men, with her veil down and her face fully exposed to profaning gazes!

Instinctively we crowded between Lakhdar and the table. He ignored us, and smiled at the girl, whose white face appeared over our heads.

"Come. cherie." he said.

I felt the table tremble against me with W. T.-3

the trembling of Mademoiselle d'Or's slender body.

"Come," he repeated.

Ruin for me, or for any of the others there, to try to oppose the man. The French govern Tunisia politically, but they are meticulous in refraining from meddling in the Arabs' personal affairs. And nothing could be more personal than this scene between a petty tyrant and his wife.

Ruin for any of us to try to interfere, but we all did.

"Don't go," an Italian trader next to me said in a low tone.

The French lieutenant seconded it. "Nom de Dieu, no!" he said, "Stay,"

"I'll drive you to Tunis in my car," I said. "You can catch a Marseilles boat."

But she only shook her tawny head at us, while the Caid Lakhdar stood easily in the doorway, smiling.

She got off the table and started toward him. The group of us took a step after her.

"Gentlemen," said Lakhdar courteousty, "twenty of my men wait in the street. Any trouble would result in a small war, after which, I think you would be executed by the French if you were left alive by my men."

Mademoiselle d'Or faced us. "Please," she said. "This will be all right."

She was gone before we quite knew what had happened. We rushed to the sidewalk in time to see Lakhdar's closed Renault whirl up the narrow, crooked street.

A FAR as any of us could tell, that was all there was to it. Lakhdar took his wife from the café and kept her thereafter more closely in his harem. In a few months it was rumored that Mademoistelle d'Or had gone to Paris, and from then on one ever heard of her again. That was the rumor. We believed it mainly

because we wanted to believe it. But later, bit by bit, I got the whole grim story—a story that brings sweat to the palms of my hands even now as I write it, though many years and thousands of miles now separate me from Hamam Meknes.

Lakhdar took Mademoiselle d'Or home. He went with her to the big, secluded room where he met with his wives

He dismissed the three wives who were waiting there, hating Mademoiselle d'Or and pleased with the trap their lord had set for her. He went to the phonograph that looked so out of place among the other furnishings, and put on its feltcovered disk the record. Smiles.

It was, again, a house-boy of Lakhdar's who told me this, looking a little sick as he recounted it.

"There are smiles," the record ground

out, "that make you happy—there are smiles that make you blue . . ."

Lakhdar stared at the girl.

"Dance for me," he said softly.

She stared back at him, fear and be-

wilderment on her face.
"I-I don't feel like dancing."

"Dance for me."

There was something in his voice that belied the expressionlessness of his cold amber eyes.

She danced for him, alone in the harem room. Her lovely small feet in their ridiculously inadequate but entrancing high-heeled slippers tapped out the tune. Tawny hair tossing, body swaying like thistle-down, she danced to the music as she had danced so often before. But now her face was white as the sand under the moon, and her tongue kept moistening her dry lips as she stared at those icy, expressionless eyes.

"You love dancing, don't you?" murmured Lakhdar, as the record whirred to a close and she stopped. "Those little feet of yours won't let you be still. And they lead you into places where a Caid's wife should not go."

He began to smile again. And at that smile, the house-boy, watching in peril of his life from a high grating, says Mademoiselle d'Or screamed a little.

She screamed again as Lakhdar raised his voice and a man came into the room in answer. The fellow was a big, burly Arab with bloody hands. He was a butcher from the local coult.

Lakhdar tore the veil from the girl's face. And at the look in his eyes then, she fainted. While she lay unconscious, at Lakhdar's command the big Arab butcher gagged her and bound her arms. He placed her on a table, binding her legs separately to rings in the table top in such a way that her feet hung over the edge. He drew a knife from under his stinking burnoose, put a bowl under her feet. . . .

The house-boy heard someone coming, then. He dropped from the grating to the yard and ran and hid.

"It was about a month later that I heard there was a new grave in the cemetery by the sea-wall," the house-boy said.
"It was a nameless grave. A child of

"It was a nameless grave. A child of parents too poor to buy a headstone was buried there, I was told."

It was just at this time that Lakhdar gave out that rumor of Mademoiselle d'Or's going to Paris.

I' was two weeks after the Paris rumor that we saw Lakhdar again.

Usually he went to the Arab café down the tortuous street, but this time he came to the Café Penny, and sat down at a sidewalk table, arranging the folds of his burnoose.

To a man we turned in our chairs so that our backs would be presented to him. None addressed him or glanced at him. We knew nothing then of the hellish thing that had happened to the golden girl, like a golden butterfly, in his house. But we suspected that something to make a calloused Legionnaire shudder had gone on under Lakhdar's roof before he allowed her "to go to Paris," and we acted accordingly.

Lakhdar didn't even bother to smile. The opinions of Infidels were less than nothing to him. He simply sat indifferently at his table, sipping at the wine he had ordered.

Not looking at him, I was unprepared for the sound of his voice when it grated out:

"Allah!"

I turned in my chair to stare at him. He had risen to his feet. His face was

white with a maniac's rage. His eyes were blazing. He turned toward the service bar.

"What fool dares play that record and dance to it?"

The French café owner dropped the glass he was polishing. "Play what record?" he faltered. "And

"Play what record?" he faltered. "And who is dancing?"

"Pig!" rasped Lakhdar, his nostrils quivering with mad wrath. "The song she danced to! Who started that in the machine? And who is dancing to it as she danced to it?"

"But no one," gasped the proprietor.
"No one. I hear nothing----"

Lakhdar's curse crackled out. He strode to the rear of the café and looked around.

There was no one there. I could see that from where I was. Not a soul. But Lakhdar looked for a full minute, as though he doubted the evidence of his eyes.

Then he went to the phonograph. No sound was coming from it, of course. Had there been, we all could have heard. But there was a record lying on its disk,

collecting dust because none of us cared to play it any more.

Lakhdar grasped the record. He raised it high and dashed it to the floor, shattering it to pieces.

I knew what the record was. "There are smiles . . ."

Caid Lakhdar stalked out of the café. And we looked after him, and then turned to stare at one another.

The song she danced to? Dancing as she had danced to it?

We looked at one another quite a long time, there at the Penny Café, with the floor behind us littered with the pieces of the record to the tune of which those small flying feet had twinkled so often.

A BRILLIANT young Arab physician, graduate of the Sorbonne, who had come to Hamam Meknes only a little before Mademoiselle d'Or's disappearance, and who knew nothing of the tale and cared less, supplied me with the next bit in the mossic.

I went to his house with an infected hand, and while he bound the puffy, discolored cut, he talked. He talked of the Caid, which was unwise; but he wanted to impress me with the fact that he attended Lakhdar.

"I have attended him daily in the last week," he said. "Or, I should say, nightly. There is a curious case."

He frowned a little.

"The Caid seems unable to sleep. And I seem unable to make him—unless I give him morphine enough to kill a camel."

"Unable to sleep?" I repeated. "That is odd."

"Very," said the doctor. "But not so odd as the cause. He keeps thinking he hears somebody dancing. Tap-dancing, as they call it in English. He swears someone is dancing, and the sound keeps him from sleeping. He remains unconvinced even when I show him there is no one in the room—or any of the rooms near by."

I felt a little chill touch my spine, and I did not look at the doctor. I didn't feel that I could trust my eyes.

"The first time I went to see him, to try to cure his sleeplessness, I thought he was right. I thought someone really was dancing. His fingers were tapping to a sort of tune, and his head was a little sideways as he listened. There was no expression on his face, but in his eyes I thought I could see that he did not like the dancing."

The doctor finished dressing my hand.
"It was the devil's own job getting him
to sleep. Always he insisted someone was
dancing near him. And once I even
thought I heard faint music, so strong

was his conviction."
"Music?" I said. "Could you recognize

He smiled.

"When there was actually no music to be heard? No, my friend. Yet I thought I heard it. When I was a student and we wanted music late at night without noise, I would sharpen a splinter of soft wood and put it in my phonograph for a needle. This music that I thought I heard was like that. Like the ghost of a phonograph record;

"You must have heard it pretty plainlv."

He shrugged. "No. I would not have thought of that phonograph trick at all if my patient had not seemed to think of it first. He got up, as I listened, and went to his own phonograph. There was a record on it. He took the record off and broke it over his knee. It was this that suggested the thought to me, you see? Mental suggestion can be a powerful thing," he added importantly, "as any good doctor knows."

... I took out my wallet to pay him, but

delayed counting the bills. I wanted to hear more.

"Has the Caid continued to hear this

—this dancine?" I asked.

"He has said nothing more," the young doctor said, suddenly realizing that he was talking pretty freely about the man who could make or break him in Hamam Meknes

THAT was all I could get out of him. But I talked one evening to a French olive buyer. . . .

"What," said the Frenchman, "has happened to the Caid Lakhdar?"

I shook my head. "I haven't seen him for weeks. Nor has anyone else. It seems he is keeping closely to his own house." The French buyer nodded slowly.

"It was there I saw him, instead of at the Arab café where we often talk over the coming season's business. He looked bad."

I said nothing, and abruptly the Frenchman became more voluble.

"Looked bad? Mon Dieu! He looked like a very sick man. He acts like a man of seventy, and his hair is graying, and his hands and head shake constantly, as though he had palsy. But always as his head shakes, it keeps to one side and his cyes are far off and intent as if he listened to something."

"Did he tell you what he was listening to?" I asked, with a carelessness I was far from feeling.

The buyer scowled.

"He mumbled something about dancing feet, several times. Dancing feet. . . . And his fingers tapped as if he was keeping time to these dancing feet. And once he hummed part of one of your American tunes. Or English, I don't know which."

"What tune was that?"

He pursed his bearded lips and whistled a few bars. "There are smiles . . ." "But the man is mad, I think," he went on, still soowling bewilderedly. "He asked me constantly to repeat what I had been saying. . . . Yet he seemed to hear things my ears could not hear. I suppose someone was dancing in a near room, and he heard—but I could not."

 His eyes narrowed shrewdly, and he chuckled.

"In fact, mon ami, I know he is mad! I contracted for all his olive oil for the season at a price so low that I could hardly believe he understood—a price that will ruin him, for this year at least. I was astonished when he signed at that figure. Had it been anyone else, I would have raised my own price—I only used it as a basis for bargaining. But Lakhdar is a hard man, and it is a stroke of business my house will appreciate. He has his own olive presses, you know, and ships a very fair grade of oil. . . . "

I let him talk on, but I wasn't listening. I was remembering Lakhdar's rage in the café awhile before:

"What fool dares play that record . . . the song she danced to . . . dancing as she danced? . . ."

But the phonograph in the rear of the café had not been playing, and no one had been dancing.

How was it that he—and he alone heard the dancing feet of the golden girl who was said to have gone to Paris? . . .

"—Caid must indeed be a very sick man," I heard the voice of the buyer again.

He left the café then, leaving me to wonder . . . with that small chill stealing along my spine. . . .

THE scandal of Caid Lakhdar's death raised a very small tempest in a teapot composed of a very small bit of North Africa, when you contrast it with the great world happenings. But it certainly turned things upside down around

The young doctor fled at night. If he hadn't he would have risked being sent to Devil's Island. For there was a charge that he had deliberately made a dope addict out of the Caid, perhaps to drain him of money.

"But I didn't!" he cried again and again. "I didn't! I gave him morphine. Much morphine. But it was to make him sleep. He could not sleep, I tell you, unless he had a huge dose. He said he heard dancing feet constantly, and that they kept him awake. What could I do?"

His accusers grimly pointed out the circumstances of the Caid's suicide.

"But it was madness that made him do it," pleaded the doctor. "It was not the drug. It was madness. Who but a madman constantly cries out that he hears feet dancing—when there are none around to dance?"

He could never have prevailed in court, so it was just as well that he fled to Somaliland. The ending of the Caid Lakhdar was too monstrous.

Le Temps, in Paris, gave an account of it as accurate as any; a fairly long account, considering the item was but local colonial news:

Achmed Lakhdar, Caid of Hamam Meknes, Tunisia, committed suicide this morning, a raving

For some weeks he had been ill, suffering from insomnia, according to the Arab physician who attended him, though it seems unlikely that insomnia alone could have been the cause of his illness and the ensuing madness.

This morning, after a sleepless night, the Cail one from his bed, suddenly, screaming. He has had a defusion for some time that he could heat adming feet, according to the Arab servant who was the could heat a state of the could have a state of the cou

Screaming and raving about the dancing feet that would not let him rest, the Caid wrenched a surgical knife from the kit of the Arab doctor, and ran into the next room. He barred the door against the attacks of the doctor, the servants, and an American business man who represents a farm machinery corporation in Hamam Meknes. It took many minutes before the door could be broken down. And by that time the Caid had killed himself with the knife.

It is alleged that the doctor in attendance will be charged with injudicious use of narcotics, and that the Caid's momentary insanity sprang from the use of morphine, to which the Caid had recently become addicted.

Yes, I was the American business man. I'd gone into the house to see about a machinery order the Caid had placed months before and refused to confirm since. I arrived just in time to see him run, screaming and biting his frothing lips, into the next room—not having been stopped by any servants at the door as I should have been, and not knowing.

Le Temps didn't print quite all the details of his death-because the reporter from Tunis didn't get them all. But those of us trying to break down that barred door and reach him got the details, all right! First audibly, and then visually.

the real extent of the man's illness.

"For the love of Allah!" we heard him shriek again and again behind the barred door. "I can't bear any more! Not any more! In Allah's name!"

Then his screams took a turn that made our blood run cold, and we heard him shriek: "Stop that dancing! Stop it!" Stop it!"

He sang crazily, with a harsh Arabic accent, the only English words he knew:
"There are smiles that make you habby ..."

We got the door down then, and saw him standing in the center of the room. The surgical knife he had snatched from the doctor's emergency kit was pressed to his chest. Blood was dripping from it, and the point was sinking deeper and deeper into his flesh under the pressure of his mad hand.

He gave it a final thrust as we leaped toward him. . . .

We of the Café Penny have never said anything about the manner of the Caid's death. Not even after we'd learned and pieced together the scattered facts I have related here. Of what use to say anything now that Lakhdar is dead and beyond reach of punishment? . . .

But it he beyond reach of punishment? I, for one, sometimes wonder. I sometimes think that the Caid Lakhdar, who could only sleep when he took enough morphine to "kill a cannel", cannot sleep even now—that on the lid of his coffin in his grave by the sea-wall the dainty feet of Mademoiselle d'Or, the golden girl, will for ever be dancing.

