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Contents of Winter Issue, 1932

Cover Design	J. Allen St. John	
The Dragoman's Jest	E. Hoffman Price & Otis A. Kline	4
<i>Arabia—a jest that turned into deadly earnest</i>		
The Dancer of Djogyakarta	Warren Hastings Miller	31
<i>Java—A Moslem girl calls upon the Hindoo gods to save her from the lust of white men</i>		
The Mystic Rose	Hung Long Tom	40
<i>Verse</i>		
Tsang, Accessory	James W. Bennett	41
<i>Shanghai—kidnapping and murder—Chinese motion pictures—and a Chinese detective</i>		
Honor of a Horse-Thief	S. B. H. Hurst	66
<i>Afghanistan—the brilliant exploits of a Durani clansman—a fascinating action-adventure story</i>		
The Sowers of the Thunder	Robert E. Howard	80
<i>Palestine—a mighty tale of Balbars the Panther, most spectacular figure of the Crusades</i>		
Broken Honor	H. E. W. Gay	106
<i>Malay Archipelago—a white exile is put to a heart-breaking test</i>		
The Dance of Yesha	Grace Keon	116
<i>India—a coward sat on the throne of kings and prayed that he might never yawn</i>		
El Hamel, the Lost One	G. G. Pendarves	119
<i>North African desert—the tale of a Tonaregg woman's loyalty to her fallen shekk</i>		
The Snake Strikes	Lieutenant Edgar Gardiner	132
<i>India—a red-blooded tale of outlawry and border raids</i>		
The Souk		137
<i>A chat with the readers</i>		



"Efendi! Allah is merciful! He has sent thee!"

El Hamel, the Lost One

By G. G. PENDARVES

The tale of a Touaregg woman's loyalty to her fallen shekh—a story of the North African desert

"The fate of every man is about his neck."
—Arab proverb.

LIEUTENANT DESTINS was young, unreconciled to loneliness, passionately unwilling to support the burden of his consciousness without the distractions of friends, music, theaters, and the general effervescence of a gay city life—the life of Paris, in fact, now removed from him by the Mediterranean and many weary leagues of the vast Sa-

hara desert. He was undergoing the severest trial a man of his temperament could experience, and his vivacious Gallic soul rebelled and sickened under the ordeal.

It was two years now since he had first arrived at Fort Djebel Sfah, one of the most isolated outposts of the French occupation, northwest of the great range of the Hoggar mountains. It was a region sufficiently desolate and heart-breaking

without the added terror of being the stronghold and headquarters of the dreaded Touaregg tribe.

The "Forgotten of God" these people are justly named, robbers, murderers, raiders of the most savage character. In spite of French vigilance, they made themselves feared throughout the desert—a fighting untamable remnant of a white Berber race, over whose origin the learned still dispute. "Wearers of the Veil" is another popular name for this unique people, whose men from time immemorial have worn the *littram* jealously fastened across their aristocratic features both at home and abroad—sleeping, eating, fighting, dying in this mysterious veil that is so useful in their frequent raids, making identification and retribution equally impossible.

Lieutenant Destins stood on the western ramparts of Fort Djebel Sfah and gloomily watched the far-distant Hoggar peaks—fantastic brilliant pinnacles of rock—against the changing sky. The great vault overhead merged imperceptibly from azure to ultramarine; the far-flung carpet of pale yellow sand deepened to saffron from horizon to horizon. Gradually the whole firmament took fire, blazed in unbelievable reds, yellows, purples, greens, softened to a dusky amethyst, finally darkened in chromatic beauty until the brief desert darkness cloaked the wilderness.

Still Lieutenant Destins stood like a statue, immobile in his frozen bitter nostalgia, while the moon and brilliant stars revealed the desert once more in the magic of a Saharan night. The soldier's well-knit youthful figure, his military carriage, the poise of his dark head, the beautifully drawn lines of nose and jaw in the shadow of his sun-helmet, all gave a first impression of strength and elasticity, of the "dauntless stuff" which fiction loves to

associate with men who hold the frontiers of empire.

In Lieutenant Destins' case this first impression was misleading. The little muscle twitching at the angle of his smoothly-shaved jaw, the restless snapping of thumb and finger, the bitter despondency of the too flexible mouth, the clouded dull despair in the brown eyes did not reveal heroic endurance.

Le cafard was about to claim another victim! That was clear to all within the sun-baked walls of Djebel Sfah who remarked Destins' symptoms. *Le cafard*—the madness that overtakes so many in the awful loneliness of Saharan outposts, a mortal sickness which too often drives its victims to end the unbearable monotony of their days in suicide.

A running, stumbling figure in a red fez, and long white shirt that flapped about a pair of lean dark legs, was approaching the fort across the moonlit sands. There was a shout from a sentry, repeated and echoed from within the walls of the fort, where native servants squatted round their cooking-fires, eating, smoking, and sleeping in the welcome coolness of the freshening wind.

The hubbub of excited voices pierced Destins' apathy; the distant hurrying figure, like an ant in that immensity of sand, attracted his attention at last. With the rest of the garrison, who tumbled like eager schoolboys from their quarters, he joined the group at the gates as the heavy doors were unbolted and opened to receive the traveler.

The whole garrison was stung to instant life and normality at mere sight of the approaching man. The sluggish tide of existence at the fort became in a twinkling a purposeful swift-flowing river. Here was a link with the great outside world from which they were cut off. Here came tidings of good or evil, no

matter which: tidings—news—the breath of life once more!

"Bachir!" exclaimed one of the natives. "Ya salam! He comes with all the *sbaitans* of the wilderness at his heels!"

And "Bachir! Ha! Bachir! Melek Taos! Melek Taos!" echoed on every side, with bursts of ribald laughter.

To see the vain, stately Bachir in this disarray indicated quite unprecedented tidings. Three days ago he had left the fort in company with six others—two servants like himself, and three officers of the garrison. They had gone ostensibly gazelle-hunting, but rumors of a threatened raid on a *garsta* crossing from Timbuktu to Lake Chad had given purpose and direction to the hunters, apart from the chance of varying their restricted diet with gazelle steaks.

Three short days ago Bachir had departed puffed up with pride and importance. Long service, and conspicuous bravery in several hot sieges and sudden raids, had placed him considerably above the rank and file of other natives at the fort, and an overweening vanity in the matter of dress decked him out in such abandon of glorious hues that he was nicknamed "*Melek Taos*," or "*Lord Peacock*," by one officer, who had been reading up the strange history and beliefs of the Yezidees, or devil-worshippers.

Near the gates, the disheveled dusty figure collapsed suddenly. A dozen eager helpers ran out into the moonlight, carried him into the fort, and put him gently on the ground with his back to a wall. Water was brought. He took a mouthful, spat it out, his throat muscles working convulsively; then he drank deeply and raised a limp hand in salute as the commandant bent over him.

"A *rhazzia*!" he whispered, his stiff, blackened lips shaping the words with difficulty. "Near the Pass of Set-Set! Touareggs . . . big *rhazzia* . . . hun-

dreds! All killed except me . . . wounded here!" he raised a shaking hand to his head. "I escaped . . . they pursued to the Well of Daz . . . but I had time . . . to drink . . . and spoil the water . . . poison plant near. My pursuers died. Lost my camel . . . yesterday. Touareggs come . . . swiftly, swiftly, *Arfi!*"

He stretched, sighed deeply once, and fell back. The *Lord Peacock* would strut no more. His body was hastily carried to a convenient corner to await burial at a less distracting moment—a bundle of dirty rags and indifferent clay.

THE ancient fort hummed and buzzed. The pent-up energy of weeks of inaction turned officers and men alike into demons of effectiveness. Gunners stood at attention on the walls, ammunition was brought up by chattering, excited men, cartridge belts donned. In addition to the regulation government rifles, old flintlocks, wicked-looking knives, and swords in strangely-chased scabbards appeared amongst the Arabs, who moved like cats in spite of the weight of the miniature arsenals they disposed about their persons.

With the rest, Lieutenant Destins became a dynamo of energy. Taut, erect, with throbbing pulses he stood again on the western ramparts, his narrowed eyes glued to the binoculars he held up, his whole soul concentrated on a barricade of hills running north and south almost in a straight line across the western horizon. Sand dunes rose to heights of several hundred feet on the distant sky-line. In the foreground, stretching to the base of the fort itself, the dunes flattened out to mere sandy swellings on the plain, covered with bush and dried yellow grasses, and affording excellent cover to such enemies as the Touareggs. With a perfection learnt through centuries of guerilla warfare in the wilderness, these Touareggs had a magic faculty of identifying themselves

with bush and grass and shadow that no white man could hope to emulate.

"Something moves to the left of that tallest hill, *Arfi!*" one of the Arabs volunteered. "Under the big star."

Destins frowned, strained his sight in vain.

"Keep down, keep down!" he ordered. "If you can see them, they can see us. They mustn't guess we've been warned, and are ready for them. Next man who puts an inch of himself above the parapet will be taken down to the guardhouse."

This horrible threat of missing all the fun kept the excited natives huddled within the deep shadow of a heavy buttress, but they chattered like monkeys.

"Thousands—thousands were Bachir's very words!" they assured one another. "They come as the sands of the desert for multitude! The great Shekh Ben Zaban leads them—who byt he? *Billah*, the dogs! Scum of the Hoggar! Our guns will scatter them as eagles put wild birds to flight!"

Hours slipped by. The moon rose to her zenith and sank once more. The dark cold hour before dawn was upon them, and the excitement in the fort was intense despite the long hours of waiting. This was ever the Touareggs' chosen hour for attack—that chill discouraging hour when friend and foe are almost indistinguishable in the murk—the hour when blood runs slow and sleep lies heavy on the eyelids.

Lieutenant Destins drank scalding coffee from his pannikin, swore absent-mindedly as the hot metal burned his lips, and stamped his cold feet on the stones, his face turned constantly to the dunes.

Veil after veil of night imperceptibly lifted, and on the eastern horizon a cold white-gray patch increased. The wind that had nipped the garrison so cruelly through the night watches dropped suddenly. Even the Arab tongues were

stilled. A moment of silence as intense as the peculiar quiet of a forsaken churchyard held the fort and its watchers in a spell.

Then, like a burst bubble, the quiet and hush broke into a thousand flying shreds.

A soft thunder of hooves on sand increasing to a roar. Shrill yells of fury. *Ullah—Ullab—Ullab—lah—lah lab!* rose in a crescendo as, from the indistinct barrier of dunes, a cloud of horsemen surged forward like a great wave breaking.

An answering roar from the fort scattered them. Taken completely by surprise, they wheeled and circled in momentary confusion. But one figure, darting like a hornet amongst his men, rallied them. On they came once more, the hornet-like leader in the van brandishing his long gun over his head, while his gayly striped burnous stretched like a taut sail behind him.

Another flash of red leaped from the western walls of Fort Djebel Sfah, followed by a roar, and through the acrid smoke the garrison saw the Touareggs mowed down, whirl, and mill about in confusion. The hornet-one did not halt—standing in his stirrups of wide native design he harangued his men, and the Touareggs once more rallied.

On came Striped Burnous, lead peeping about him briskly as he got within rifle range, but although men fell on all sides, he seemed bullet-proof and rode straight for the gates of the fort. Some fifty of the Veiled Ones reached the safety of the buttressed walls with him, and reined in so close that it was impossible for the defenders to shoot them down without exposing their own bodies as easy targets.

A clattering of horses' hooves on the stones of the great courtyard arose. The commandant's orders rapped out like a machine-gun in action. From under the

gates wisps and curls of smoke rose ominously. The Touareggs were attempting to fire the massive wooden entrance.

"—but not until we have engaged them thoroughly," the commandant went on addressing Destins. "They've surrounded the fort, but as soon as we open the gates every last Touaregg will rush in on us. Then leave by the postern gate and circle round to cut them off from retreat to the hills. I can only spare you fifteen men. If he escapes us, concentrate on the leader—Ben Zaban! Get him . . . bring him back alive or dead! We must make an example of him."

THE gates were opened so abruptly that the raiders were again taken by surprize and the French thrust out in a grim determined wedge, meeting the yelling Berbers with the irresistible force of perfectly co-ordinated machinery. Pushing out through the swarming enemy, the defenders stood solid, taking aim deliberately, bringing down man after man until the riderless horses making toward the hills looked as if they were engaged in some sort of steeple-chase.

The Touareggs wavered, their morale breaking down rapidly under the steady strain. Their leader urged them in vain. Long distance sniping, guerilla warfare, the quick shock of hand-to-hand tussles in the hills with men as excitable and impassioned as themselves—that sort of fighting they understood. But this steady resolute opposition was not according to their code.

They broke and scattered, riding off in all directions. Those that made for the hills were cut off by Destins and his men strung out in a long line across the sand. Caught between these on one hand and the garrison on the other, few Touareggs escaped. But Ben Zaban's luck held, and he spurred determinedly for the hills, a flying streak of red and yellow.

Destins was after him, as closely attached as a tail to a flying comet. If Ben Zaban once reached his objective, the Frenchman realized that all the advantage would be with the desert fighter. It was now or never. He reined in his horse, took steady aim, and fired.

For a moment nothing happened, and he thought he had missed completely. Then the Touaregg reeled in his saddle, toppled, and slipped sideways to the ground. He was dragged in the dust until his body was caught and wedged by a mass of protruding rock. The horse broke free and dashed on, snorting with fear, and in a moment more had vanished among the winding defiles of the hills beyond.

Destins slowed his own horse to a footpace, for stone and stubble made the going precarious, and approached the bright huddle of Ben Zaban's body. He dismounted and looked down at the face which the torn veil revealed.

"A real warrior!" Destins looked regretfully down at the Touaregg shekh. "Modern civilization can never breed men like this again. A marvelous savage!"

He hoisted the limp body on the back of his horse, and began to make his way back to the fort.

From the bush-covered spur of a hill about twenty yards away there was a faint tinkle of armlets; slender henna-tipped fingers held aside a twig; two dark brilliant eyes peered through the opening thus made.

Zamathar the Beautiful! Zamathar, whose songs of love and battle were sung at myriad campfires, echoing all the fiery passion and romance of her most ancient race. Zamathar, whose wit and beauty made her a queen amongst the fierce Touaregg warriors. Zamathar, the star of Ben Zaban's tumultuous life—whose firstborn kicked and crowed in Ben Za-

ban's tent in the far-off Hoggar mountains, not knowing that his father lay still and silent in the dust before Fort Djebel Sfah.

Her eyes watched the limp body of her lover unblinking, her mouth steady, her whole body still as a marvelous statue, her breath deep and quiet, scarcely stirring the silken folds across her breast.

Despair . . . death . . . that might come later. The present was no time for private grief. The last act was yet to be played, and the deep tragic gaze that followed Destins, as he led his horse with its burden across the stones and sand, missed no detail that might help her to play her part later.

A long time she lay hidden among the bushes, until the lizards, emboldened by her perfect stillness, began to whisk about her. The sun climbed steadily, the sky changed from blue to grayish white, intolerably hot and glaring. From the scant shelter of a rock Zamathar watched and waited with the endless deadly patience of the East.

At last the gates of the fort were opened. A group of men emerged carrying something amongst them; they moved in her direction until they were quite near to her hiding-place, then threw down their burden on the sand, returned to the fort and vanished within. In a few minutes they reappeared with a ladder, which one of them mounted, and fastened something dark and round to a spike set in the archway over the gates. He got down and surveyed his handiwork from below, and the others joined him, gesticulating furiously. They were town Arabs from Algeria, Zamathar knew, and she despised them as only the true Berber can despise the town-dwelling Arabs. They went back through the gates at last, and the latter closed behind them.

Zamathar's eyes, keen as a young hawk's, knew instantly what that small

round object was over the gates. It was the head of Shekh Ben Zaban.

Her heart stood still with fear and horror and a bitter anger. No more awful punishment could have been devised for a true believer. Not only death of the body, but death of the soul! A dishonor which would blacken the name of Ben Zaban and his heirs forever.

Such punishment as this would deprive her beloved of all chance of peace and happiness in Paradise. He was lost—body and soul he was lost, unless that dear and sacred head could be recovered and buried with his body in one grave.

Long and agonized were Zamathar's thoughts as she lay there. She crept at last across the burning sand to the burden which the men had flung down so carelessly, and beside Ben Zaban's headless trunk she made her vow. Stooping her proud little head to the breast that had pillowed it so often, her lips moved soundlessly. Then she vanished into the hills beyond, while the circling vultures dropped one by one from the brassy skies.

TWENTY-FOUR hours later, Lieutenant Destins rode out through the gates of the fort. The old deadly nostalgia was stealing back—the old irritation and despair beginning to tug at him, distorting every one and everything in sight.

A stiff gallop would shake him out of his mood for an hour at least, brace him up before the horrible tedium of mess-dinner with the same old faces, the same old jokes, the inevitable menu, and the choice between a game of cards, a quarrel, or the farce of studying a few dull books to fit himself for promotion.

"Promotion! *Mon Dieu*—promotion!" Destins said between his teeth as he passed under the archway. "And what does that mean in this cursed desert? Moving on to some other corner of hell! More flies . . . more sun . . . more

fools to hate . . . more beastliness . . . and no recognition until one is skewered on some filthy Bedouin's lance! Then—a nice little hole in the sand and a label—'Died for his country.' Bah!"

He looked up at the grim object suspended from an iron spike above the gates. The bitter lines about his mouth deepened.

"And that's the end of you, *mon brave!*" he apostrophized it. "That's the finish of your glory and renown! Your handsome head hangs out for the sun to dry—and your body flung to the vultures! Well, I envy you. At least you died with the blood singing in your veins; you never knew the paralysis of inaction . . . of years of stupid monotony. You lived a man's life and died fighting. You were never cooped up like a wasp in a bottle until you were a soggy dreary beast . . . until you didn't care . . . didn't——"

With a curse he spurred his mount to a wild gallop, on to the far horizon, where the flaming disk that had made the fort an inferno from dawn to sunset now withdrew in a last defiant flare of crimson and gold.

In his hysterical uncontrolled condition, the unhappy Destins rode farther and faster than he had intended. Outraged by the constant application of her master's spurred heels, his spirited mare flew on with a recklessness that matched her rider's mood. Darkness fell round him like a black curtain before Destins woke to a realization of his folly, but it was too late to prevent catastrophe.

The mare stumbled over a patch of rough ground, fell to her knees, and when Destins dismounted and got her up again, the beautiful creature stood shivering and trembling with pain. She rubbed her velvet muzzle against his arm as, full of contrition for his carelessness, he soothed her with hand and voice.

She was very lame, and it was doubt-

ful if she could hobble home even without Destins on her back. The fort was entirely out of sight, but when the moon rose and showed the straight black interminable ridge of hills on the western horizon, it was not difficult to steer in the right direction, and man and beast began their tedious journey.

Destins was in no mood to appreciate the austere desolate beauty of his surroundings. The vast solemn grandeur of the wilderness appalled him. Space . . . solitude . . . silence . . . and overhead the fathomless depths of night-blue sky.

His eager blood was chilled in his veins. He felt like a pale ghost divorced from his body. The desert was to him a bitter hell of sand and heat where a man lost all he had . . . all he was . . . all he ever hoped to be.

THE moon rose higher; the desert, sketched in sharpest black and silver, became more remote, more mysterious. A man of far coarser imagination than Destins might well have been awed to the point of fear.

The mare hobbled along more easily; fifteen miles away the dark squat outline of the fort loomed up, while on the left the hills ran down in long ridges and valleys not more than a hundred yards distant. Suddenly the animal halted, one forefoot suspended, intelligent dark eyes turned inquiringly to those same hills, her delicate ears pricked.

A long soft call came clearly, low and sweet as a bird note.

As Destins hesitated, his fingers around the butt of his revolver, a figure emerged from the shadows in the hills, and moved swiftly toward him—a woman's figure, unveiled, desperate in its movements, bare arms outflung in appeal, the eager slender body wrapped in crimson silk that reflected the light as some crystal goblet of rare wine.

The young soldier stood still in the greatest surprise. Half aware of the morbid hysterical state to which he was succumbing by degrees, he felt a pang of horror.

"Am I mad, then?" he asked himself. "Is this a delusion—a trick of the senses?"

He shut his eyes to gain control of himself. Perhaps when he opened them there would be no woman . . . he would know then that his mind was really going! He squeezed his lids tightly together—heard a faint high note singing in his ears—a quick snuffling breath from the mare—then a faint musical tinkle of metal against metal.

His eyes flashed open in time to see a woman collapse at his feet, a sobbing, murmuring heap of brilliant silk; two clinging hands took one of his between their soft palms and held it to a tear-wet cheek.

"But . . . but——" stammered Destins, scarcely knowing even yet if he were a victim to a delusion or not, charming though it might be. He was silenced by a sight of the face raised imploringly to his.

"*Effendi!* Allah is merciful! He has sent thee . . . thou wilt not refuse thine aid!"

Destins looked long at her. Her face, like a dark glorious flower, was lovely beyond any he had ever seen. Amazed, speechless, he stared with the conviction that he had not known what beauty was until this moment.

And Zamathar did not spare him. She recognized him at once, and her whole soul put forth its strength to lure and bind him to her; every nerve of her exquisite body responded to her demand.

She did not see a young French officer . . . she saw only Ben Zaban standing proud and splendid before her. She was not speaking to Destins, but to

him whose ears would never delight in her low voice again. With all the strength and passion in her she clothed Destins in the body and blood of her beloved dead.

The man before her heard little and understood less of the tragic story she poured out kneeling there at his feet, her eyes outshining the stars in splendor, her perfumed hair a dark mist about her face and slender body. Some dim idea did penetrate his consciousness that her caravan had been attacked by men of the Tublu tribe, blood enemies of her people, that she had escaped and needed sanctuary. Some one she loved was killed; she was defenseless and far from her home. If he would hide her for a few days . . . a very few days . . . until it was safe for her to return over the hills again.

"*Effendi*, thou wilt not refuse me this?" Her hands—the small-boned exquisite hands of the Touaregg aristocrat—held his gently as a child's soft fingers. Destins shivered under their touch.

He was so enchanted that for long moments he could only stand there stiff and stupid as a waxwork, watching the play of her features, her fathomless eyes under tear-wet lashes, her skin smooth and creamy as a deep tea-rose, and her mouth—crimson as her rich robe—pleading, lovely, irresistible.

He stooped to her, lifted her from her knees, holding her as if he feared his touch might break the spell, that she might melt and vanish in his clasp.

Her night-dark eyes were on a level with his own, and he saw that they were blue, not black as he first believed. He drew her closer to him . . . closer, his eyes on hers. A flame danced down deep in those blue depths of hers, a flame of triumph . . . and contempt. Her tragic mouth twisted to a smile as he caught her to him.

"No! No!" she whispered breathlessly. "Not now—not yet! We must go

swiftly—swiftly, *effendi!* Take me away from this place! Hide me!"

Destins woke from his trance, astonished at the sudden change in her. He felt like an awkward schoolboy beside this regal woman, who pointed an imperious hand toward the distant fort.

"Take me there!" she commanded. "Hide me for a week—one week!"

She spoke a local dialect familiar to Destins with a liquid slurring of the vowels which pleased the young Frenchman's critical ear.

"It is as you please," he responded slowly. "I was thinking it will be easy to hide you for as long as you wish. I know of a place—if you are not afraid of *shaitans* [devils]!"

"I am afraid of nothing . . . nothing save the Tublu shekh who is pursuing me," she answered. "There are no devils more dreadful than those I find in human shape."

DESTINS flushed, remembering uneasily his share, and his fierce joy in the fight of yesterday. This woman would hardly have appealed to him if she had seen him shooting and hacking at her own tribesmen! He must be careful not to let slip anything about that.

Then a faint premonition of peril and disaster urged him to say:

"There is always the fort. Perhaps it would be wise for you to let me present you to the commandant. He will have you safely guarded, and you can send a message to your tribe."

"Never—never!" she cried. "A woman alone with all those rough soldiers and contemptible Arabs who are the servants of your army! My name would be blackened forever . . . my own father would shoot me like a dog if I dared return after such disgrace. It would be a shameful thing for a Touaregg woman such as I!

No, *effendi*, if you can not hide me, then I die here in the desert."

She snatched at his revolver before he could move a finger, and turned the muzzle to her breast.

"Wait—wait!" Destins was seized with a quite incredible terror. "It shall be as you desire. I will find a secret place for you . . . no one, no one shall ever discover you there."

She lowered the weapon, and Destins seized it roughly, his hands suddenly cold and wet with the sudden fear that he had lost her.

"It was only for your sake I suggested the fort. I thought you might feel safer. I am no better than my brother officers," he added roughly, impelled to sheer honesty by the lovely look of confidence and hope that again dawned in her eyes. "Why do you single me out . . . why do you trust me? I am a man . . . and you . . . you are the loveliest thing I have seen in all my life!"

Once more that flame danced in her eyes—that little flame of triumph . . . and contempt.

"I know men," she said briefly. "I know those whom I can trust. I have known them in peace and in war. Men have loved me, hated me, desired me since I first learned to smile or frown on them! Beauty such as mine brings great wisdom, *effendi!*"

She spoke with a calm detachment that no one could mistake for vanity. Destins realized afresh that here was no lovely plaything to amuse a man's idle hours.

He knew the matriarchal system of the Touareggs, the unlimited power and freedom of the mothers and wives of this ancient white race, the independence of their women-folk from childhood up. This was one of the *grandes dames* of that mysterious tribe—a woman whose word was law among her people, whom warriors sought out for counsel and advice,

who had no doubt ridden out to battle as other celebrated women of her tribe had done.

A brief doubt as to the meaning of her tears, her rôle of clinging despondent womanhood, assailed him. Even in his infatuation he realized dimly that such a rôle was alien to the stately creature before him.

Then she smiled at him, put a gentle, imploring hand on his arm. He was lost. What matter if she had been pretending? What matter the secret she concealed behind those dark blue eyes? What did he care? She had come to him out of the solitary wilderness—the first good gift it had given him, this loveliest of women had come to him. Why ask more of the Fates?

"They'll have sentinels posted," he said suddenly. "We shall be within their range soon. Better to wait here until the moon sets. That will give us a chance to get to your hiding-place without being seen. It is an old ruin about ten miles from the fort—the remains of an ancient castle. It is dry and there are no snakes about, and its reputation for being haunted acts like a charm for keeping it deserted."

She smiled at him again.

"It will be perfect," she assured him. "It is well for me that I have met you. Allah is good!"

Destins privately thought that Allah had been good to him also, and blessed his lucky star that had led him to ride out so fast and far that night.

THEY turned aside to a ridge of dunes, and in a deep hollow Destins built a fire from dried sticks scattered about, and by its cheering warmth he watched the stars fade out, giving himself up completely to the magic of the hour. The play of light and shadow on the face and figure of the woman fascinated him. At

times her head, in its cloud of hair, looked fateful, almost threatening—the eyes under their long lashes somber and tragic—the curved mouth austere to cruelty.

Then the leaping flame would set alight the fire in the blue eyes, her flashing glance would make his heart beat hard and fast, the proudly set lips would lose their tautness and relax to smile at him . . . to murmur gratitude and hope.

"What do they call you?" he asked abruptly.

She leaned toward him, holding out her hands, the jewelled fingers outspread.

"My names are many as the jewels I wear," she answered lightly. "As many as those who hold me dear."

"I hold you dear," replied Destins, his voice hardly audible above the crackle of the blazing twigs.

She looked at him in silence, her eyes holding his deep gaze with composure, her brows puckered a little as if he were a page of some new book she sought to understand.

"You shall call me Nakhla!" she said at last. "Often that name is in my ears. Nakhla—which means a palm-tree!"

"Palm-tree! The crown and glory of the desert," was Destins' quick response. "It's a good name for you. And my name——"

"I will name you El Hamel," she interrupted, with a strange twisted little smile. "El Hamel—the Lost One! When I first saw you trudging with your head down, and your shoulders bowed, that is how you appeared—El Hamel!"

Destins cheerfully agreed, laughing now at the dismal picture she sketched with an indescribable gesture of her supple wrist.

"That's what they will be calling me at the fort by this time, too," he remarked.

"Ah, yes! We must go!" She sprang to her feet. She was suddenly remote and withdrawn again, and Destins followed

her, leading the mare. In the gray dawn they reached the ruined castle that was to be Zamathar's shelter.

What had been the ramp leading to the main entrance of the place was now a hardly visible path, and Destins led his companion carefully over the stones and rock half concealed by the straggling camel-thorn. He looked round at the gray ruinous pile in doubt.

"It will be light before I get back to the fort. What will you do all day without food or drink? What a fool I am! You can't stay here and die of thirst!"

She took his hand in hers.

"That is nothing for me, a Touaregg woman! I can endure as much as a man. Often I have not drunk for many days together. Do not fear for me. I shall wait for your return tonight."

Destins took her in his arms—her hands crushed against his breast. . . .

"At the earliest moment," he said, his cheek against hers, the perfume of her hair in his nostrils. "You will wait . . . you will think of me, Nakhla, my beloved!"

"I will think of you during all the hours of the day," she assured him gravely, and stood quietly in his arms as he kissed her. He grew desperate at the moment of parting, afraid that the cruel desert would steal this new great treasure from him with all the rest.

"I can't leave you . . . I can't!"

"You *must* go," she answered very gravely. "In the Name of Allah I swear that you will find me here when you return tonight. Go now, El Hamel, if there is truly any love for me in your heart."

The last long miles across the sand might have been a stroll through the streets of his beloved Paris, as far as Destins was concerned. He looked up at the solid walls of the fort, and at the sentry's grinning face with astonishment on his arrival. As the day wore on, his brother

officers watched him at first with amusement, and then with pity.

"Poor fellow! Done for, I'm afraid! This cursed desert gets most of us one way or another!"

Destins, utterly unconscious of their looks and their interpretation of his dazed condition, lived the hours of the past night over and over again, counting the minutes until sunset and the friendly dark.

"IT AMOUNTS to this, then," said the commandant next morning. "No one has seen Destins since dinner last night. You, Boursoie, lent him your horse, and the sentry on duty then noticed that he took a southerly direction toward the Dazar oases. Take two Arabs and ride out there. If he has not been seen in that locality, round up a band of tribesmen for a search party. They're Tublus and at war with the Touareggs as usual, so that if any stragglers from those that attacked us are about, the Tublus will make short work of them. Keep a sharp lookout for snipers as you go, and report immediately on your return."

Boursoie saluted and went off. He drew a blank at Dazar, and spent the rest of the grilling hours of that day rounding up Tublu helpers and scouring the surrounding country. It was hopeless. At sunset he returned to make his report.

"Instruct the gunners to send up rockets every five minutes," ordered the commandant. "Double the sentries and tell them to keep awake for once."

But in spite of vigilance, nothing unusual occurred to disturb the serenity of the African night. From the distant hills came the occasional shrill yelp of a jackal—from the walls of the fort the voices of the sentries echoed—and that was all!

The surrounding country was full of small hummocks and hollows, patches of bush and long grass, many places where

the shadows lay densely black on the silvered face of the desert. More than once the sentries called to one another, thinking they spied something that skulked behind a bush, or crawled in the hollows behind the dunes. The rest would rally round, and, after a few minutes of concentrated vigilance, would jeer at the scaremonger unmercifully, for the sandy dunes were as empty of life and movement as the Dead Sea.

If the commandant had posted his men on the summits of the hills opposite the fort—those hills which had spewed out a Touaregg horde a few days previously—possibly an extra sharp-eyed watcher might have seen Zamathar. Just as possibly not! For she moved supple and quick as a panther, and in the neutral-tinted cloth she wound about her so closely, she was utterly inconspicuous. The brilliant royally clad Nakhla who had beguiled Destins was wiped out completely—only a phantom-like woman remained.

Her scarlet silken robe, torn and stained and dusty, was slung across her shoulders, looped so as to contain some burden about the size of a water-skin, with the corners knotted firmly about her neck. The bundle appeared damp, dripping every now and then upon the hot sands.

Keeping to the hollows, taking the shortest cuts, going always with untiring strength and determination, Zamathar at last reached a position almost opposite the fort, where she lay and took stock of her surroundings.

In the brilliant moonlight she could see distinctly every detail of the massive building which faced her. The white walls glistened as if they were cut from hard-frozen snow. On the battlements the sentries drowsily propped themselves on their guns and chatted in groups. It was almost three a. m. and they were thinking happily of hot coffee and their pipes

For any one skilled in guerilla warfare as was this warrior-queen, it was not a task of superhuman difficulty to approach within a hundred yards of the fort in comparative safety. True, that damp sticky bundle on her back was not a convenient accessory to her strategies. However, she let it slip from her shoulders and dragged it along in the sand, making a long furrow behind her—the sand caked and stuck to it until it resembled a huge ball of sand.

Behind a large patch of bush, Zamathar waited for endless minutes. The voices of the sentries came clearly across the clear night air to the watcher, whose brilliant eyes glittered as she prayed that Allah would speedily bring these dogs to a very evil end.

Not a sound, not a movement on the walls of the fort escaped her. But chiefly her attention was riveted on that small dried object hanging from the spike over the gate. Zamathar's face altered incredibly as she gazed at this.

She glanced around. Ah! There it was, still lying in the dust. A mere skeleton now, picked clean by desert scavengers—that strong splendid body that had been Ben Zaban's only three short nights since. Dead and dishonored! Her lover . . . dishonored!

Her small white teeth ground savagely together.

From sea to sea, in all the wide Sahara, none had borne a name more famous than that of the great warrior, Shekh Ben Zaban. And now this shameful curse was put upon him by the vile unbelievers . . . a curse to keep his noble soul from the Paradise it had earned.

The sentries were dispersing. It was a change of guard. She knew the ways of the white man—his strange foolish ways. There were two or three minutes when the walls were absolutely deserted, the careless sentries going off duty exchanging

badinage with equally careless sentries coming on.

"Now . . . now Zamathar!" she adjured herself.

Catching up her bundle under her arm, she sped like a cloud shadow across the last intervening space to the fort—gained the shelter of the walls—dropped beneath them.

With her bundle again slung on her back she once more looked up at the grim trophy over the gate. Then, clinging to the rough uneven surface of the old walls like a bat, taking advantage of every crack and cranny, she fought and struggled upward inch by inch. Her delicate feet and hands were torn, her nails broken, her muscles strained agonizingly, but she managed at last to reach a wide shelf of stone which ran along on either side of the gates. It was easy, once she stood there, to undo her bundle and exchange its contents with that shrivelled head impaled on the spike.

With the precious head clasped to her, she dropped in a soft boneless heap to the ground, and crouched there waiting. Not a tear, not a sigh escaped her, as she huddled there with that dreadful thing upon her knee. Not even yet was she free to dwell on her private grief. Vengeance was accomplished, but her duty to the dead was still incomplete.

An hour dragged by — two — three hours. At last she ventured to creep forward a few yards and peer up at the

walls. Only one sentry in sight, and he nodded as he stood with folded arms, leaning against a gun.

"Allah guard me!" she breathed, as she darted back to the shelter of the rocks and bush that fringed the hills opposite the fort, back to the hollow where the bones of Ben Zaban lay. She held the withered head to her soft breast.

"Remember me, where thou art gone, Ben Zaban!"

Digging a shallow grave in the soft sand, she laid within it both head and bones, covering all at last with a cairn of stones.

In the gray mists of dawn she vanished—back to the shelter of the enveloping dunes—back to her own tribe—back, to drink the cup of grief to its dregs.

SHORTLY after dawn, the commandant stared in purple apoplectic silence at that which replaced the head of the infamous Touaregg shekh, Ben Zaban.

True, a head still hung there from the iron spike over the gate of the fort—the head of a man as young, as handsome, as aristocratic as that of Ben Zaban's had been.

But this head was that of a Frenchman, not an Arab. Nor was it withered and dried by the sun. The face was still beautiful — more beautiful in death than in life, for peace and deep content were written on it.

It was the head of Lieutenant Destins.