

*A Gripping Story of the
Algerian Sahara*

THE HAND OF FATMA

By HARRY ANABLE KNIFFIN

TO MAJOR DARROW, Patricia's father, it was a memory redolent of almond groves, sandalwood, and the soft night winds of Algeria; a memory of starlit trysts with a youthful Arab beauty, and the magic of a charm, an ivory Hand of Fatma.

Major Darrow often recalled the night Aimee had given it him. A servant, at her bidding, had sawed the ivory hand in two, down the middle finger. One tiny half she presented to her lover, and the other she kept—and so they both were protected.

The major had accepted the gift with good humored tolerance for her superstition. Needless to say he failed to believe in it—until after their illicit affair was discovered, and he barely escaped with his life. But that is a story he never told in detail, fearing it might reach the ears of Patricia.

She was only eight years old when he returned to England. And this dashing, widowered father of hers soon filled her head with dreams of haughty Arabs and the great Algerian desert.

But what of the Arab beauty?

Ah! she is the reverse of the picture! Her memories, while she lived, were of the wrath of an outraged father, of being given in marriage to a servant, and living in a mud hovel in the village of Sidi Okba. But her misery was not for long. She died in giving birth to a male child, a half-brother to Patricia.

And what of the child, whose very existence was unsuspected by the major?



His life was one of wretchedness. For Hamed, his step-father, remarried at once, and both he and his wife gave the infant no more care than was absolutely necessary. Reared on kicks and curses, not a day passed that the boy's infidel blood was not tauntingly alluded to. It was the same in the village as it was in the home.

Half-caste and outcast, Aomar grew to the age of sixteen, filled with anger against his father and his father's race. His hatred was intensified by a fanatical old shiek, who preached the extermination of all foreigners by means of the sword.

Hamed, the step-father, in the meantime prospered. Biskra, twenty kilometers to the north, had become the resort of tourists. Parties of these often ventured into the desert as far as Abouda, or even Temassisse, the holy city. Hamed conducted them at great profit to himself, and Aomar he impressed into his service as a camel driver.

And what of Patricia?

She was twenty-three, and a charming, beautiful young woman, when she married Lord Anstruther, fifteen years her senior. It was said to be a love match, although there were those who raised their eyebrows and knowingly smiled, and said "Wait!" and "Watch out!"

The major was dead. He had bequeathed to Patricia his blessing, the tiny ivory hand, and little else—unless it be a belief in the charm, and a romantic dream of Africa.

They had been married two years when Anstruther expressed a desire to travel and to hunt big game. And so nothing could be more natural than that Patricia should suggest Algeria. Nor was it strange, upon their arrival in Biskra, that they should employ Hamed to conduct them into the desert.

And now—what of the story?

PATRICIA, followed by her husband, came slowly down the steps of their hotel. She nodded pleasantly to Hamed, who stood bowing low before her, then her inquiring glance wandered to the camels and their drivers.

"What a sleek, beautiful animal! It is meant for me, is it not?" She confidently approached the camel at whose head stood the waiting Aomar.

Thus they came face to face. There was nothing dramatic in the meeting. Merely a gracious, beautiful young woman of the great world smiling down into the countenance of an ignorant Arab boy, who frowned and looked away.

Patricia was assisted to her seat in the *atitich*, a kind of palanquin; her

husband mounted behind Seid, a handsome young Arab; then the luggage and guns were secured to the pack-animals, and the caravan started on its journey into the interior.

The experience proved novel and delightful to Patricia. She attempted to engage her driver in conversation, asking him pleasantly in French if it never rained in the desert. Aomar, like most Algerian Arabs, possessed a smattering of that language, but he sullenly replied that he did not comprehend, and her friendly effort came to naught.

The heat increased with the day's advance. The creaking of leather and an occasional word or exclamation from the Arabs alone broke the stillness. A caravan carrying dates and other merchandise passed them going north, the dignified desert men gazing at them in silent curiosity.

In the early evening they stopped and struck camp near a small desert village hidden among the palms of an oasis. The tents were raised and a table laid for Patricia and her husband facing a western sky all saffron and rose.

Night descended. Anstruther, wearied by the journey, fell asleep in his chair. Even the sounds from the nearby village—the mournful note of a haut-boy and the throbbing beat of a drum—failed to waken him.

Patricia, alluring in short skirt and tan leather puttees, rose and strolled beyond the edge of the encampment. Pausing, she gazed up at the desert stars and at a new moon hanging low above the palms of the oasis.

A faint sound came from behind her. She turned and saw the figure of a man looming ten feet away.

"Who is it?" she called.

The figure moved forward. "Seid, Madame," and the dandified Arab bowed deferentially before her.

"Yes. What is it?" Her voice was kindly, her manner slightly detached.

"Madame had left the encampment. I merely watched to see that she came to no harm."

"You mean there is danger—from the village?" She approached and looked up into his handsome face, the starlight reflected in the blue depths of her eyes.

"Not from the village, but from the desert, Madame. It is a dangerous place to wander for those who do not know it. One can so easily become lost in the sandy wastes."

Patricia looked away toward the oasis, where a gleaming fire winked invitingly. The drum beat an insistent pulse, the haut-boy wailed its inexplicable longings.

"Tell me, Seid—what do they do there?" The question was soft spoken,

barely audible. Seid bent his head to catch her words.

"It is the *danse du Zibans*, Madame—a desert dance." His eyes never left the wistful face and the beautiful form before him.

Again the drum-beat, the insistent, hypnotic drum-beat! It far exceeded her dreams—the alluring mystery of an African night!

"Would it be safe to go there, Seid?"

"Perfectly, Madame—if M'aieur would not object."

Several long, silent moments, then:

"He is asleep; he will not kn—care." A sigh escaped her, prelude to a sudden willful determination. "Come, you shall be my knight and squire me to the dance." She smiled up at him faintly.

Together they started for the village. Patricia appeared singularly quiet, dreamily content. A dog barked. She paused and looked questioningly at her companion.

"It will not harm me, will it, Seid?"

"No, Madame. We Arabs have a proverb: 'The stars are not harmed by the bark of dogs.'"

"Thank you, Seid. You are very poetic."

"One can not live long in the desert, Madame, and fail to become so." He lightly touched her arm to guide her over an uneven space.

"I can understand that, Seid. It is the effect of the solitude." She sighed, a deep exhalation of content.

They arrived at the edge of the oasis. Several snarling dogs came forth to challenge them. Seid spoke to them in Arabic and drove them slinking away.

In the shadow of the palms they paused. Not far distant a group of hooded Arabs squatted in a semi-circle round a brightly burning fire. Before them, swirling and gyrating, an Alme performed the *danse de Zibans*.

The flames leaped and fell, the shadows advanced and receded, but a far more potent flame—of sensuous grace and barbaric allure—twinkled and flashed in the maze of the hypnotic dance. Modest flittings, coquettishly shy retreats, led to timid progressions followed by bold advances. Through a gossamer veil gleamed an ivory-hued body. Bizarre ornaments sparkled with each graceful swaying and startling abdominal contortion.

Elemental it assuredly was, but accompanied by the wail of the flute and the beat of the drum it held a singularly strange appeal. Patricia gazed at it as if fascinated, reminded of Babylon, of Nineveh, and the splendor of ancient days.

Oh, that drum! The rhythm of it was in her blood. She found herself swaying in time to it, her gaze held by the graceful creature now dancing before her with such shameless abandon. A feeling of languor overcame her. Her former identity seemed lost, swept away in the swirl of the dance. Here was where she belonged—in the vast starlit desert, with the haut-boy ever wailing and the drum continuously throbbing its *tum-tum-tum-tum*!

Presently, by a wrench, she freed herself from the spell and looked up at Seid. His dark, inscrutable eyes were bent upon her searchingly, questioningly.

"Take me back, Seid, take me back." Her words came barely above a whisper.

"Very well, Madame." He took her arm and led her out into the desert.

In silence they made their way along, Seid giving her opportunity to recover her poise. At last she spoke, her voice slightly tremulous with emotion.

"It was fascinating, Seid—thrilling; but I would not da—care to go again. Thank you for taking me. You have been very kind."

Seid shrugged. "It was Madame's wish; I merely obeyed."

They paused at the edge of the encampment. Anstruther still slept in his chair.

"Good-night, Seid." Patricia's smile was dreamily friendly. "And thank you."

Seid bowed gracefully. "Good-night, Madame."

He left her, her rapt gaze still lingering on the oasis. Presently he returned with a bottle and glasses.

"Your night water, Madame."

Again the wail of the haut-boy and the throbbing beat of the drum. Patricia turned, her eyes still wistful.

"Oh, Seid! Tomorrow I intend to change camels, and henceforth you shall be my driver."

"Thank you, Madame. Pleasant dreams."

PATRICIA effected a change of mounts the following morning. As she told Anstruther, the boy, Aomar, appeared sullen and dumb, and she desired a driver who could answer her questions.

Strangely enough, Aomar seemed to resent the act as a personal affront. Patricia often caught his frowning glance turned upon her. To avoid the unpleasantness of his gaze, she directed Seid to allow his camel to lag behind the others.

In the unbroken solitude Patricia found a soothing appeal. She never tired of the wide wastes and the far-

flung horizon, where an occasional caravan passed in silent silhouette. Seid told her much concerning Arab life and customs. From him she learned about Aomar—that he was the half-caste son of an English father and, in consequence, felt no love for her race. Indeed, by her act, she seemed to have become the focusing point of his hatred.

No longer were there drums to disturb her emotions. Once in her sleep she heard the rhythmic beat and caught the gleam of a half-naked body in the fire-light. She awoke, her heart thumping wildly, but soon fell asleep again, her hand clasping the ivory charm suspended about her neck.

On several occasions Anstruther questioned Hamed concerning the game to be found in those parts. The latter assured him that gazelle and mouflon abounded further in the desert.

Late in the afternoon of the fourth day, they approached the gleaming white domes and minarets of Abouda. At a word from Patricia, Seid gave his camel the signal with his foot and the animal increased his pace, the other camels following his lead.

In single file they passed through the massive gates to the walled Oriental city, stopping in a broad open square from which debouched narrow cobbled streets. Aomar, boylike, showed a keen interest in the bazars.

After a cursory view of the town, they returned to the desert and set up their camp. Before the work was completed the sun had set and the gates of the city were closed. Aomar grunted his dissatisfaction. He complained to Hamed that he had not had his fill of the bazars.

Hamed upbraided him for his impudence. Cursed son of an infidel, would he never be satisfied? Were they not to stay over the following day and part of the next? He then grudgingly admitted that on the morrow the Ingleese lord was to take the men on a hunting trip of twenty-four hours duration, the lady being left with Seid and Aomar.

These plans were put into effect the following morning. After the hunting party had left, Seid moved silently about the camp, directing Aomar in his tasks. Occasionally he waited on Patricia, who sat reading before her tent under the shade of an awning. Toward four in the afternoon he told the boy he might go visit the town if he so desired. He also assured him he need be in no hurry to return.

PATRICIA read her book in calm content. She felt vaguely conscious of Seid's presence at times, but the novel

held her attention and she gave little heed to his comings and goings.

At last the failing light forced her to set the book aside. Seid came and laid the table for the evening meal, then lit the lantern suspended above the tent entrance. She rose and strolled a short distance away. The sun was setting, edging the domes and minarets of Abouda with rims of gold.

She watched the western sky change to pale green, turquoise, then to the purple of night. The stars came out, their needle-rays faintly illuminating the desert. Africa! The thrill of it seemed never to pall!

"Dinner awaits, Madame!"

Seid, handsome and slenderly erect, was at her elbow. Her eyes continued to linger on the desert.

"Is it not wonderful, Seid?"

His soft spoken answer came charged with feeling: "Wonderful indeed, because Madame herself is a part of the picture."

The new note in his voice struck unpleasantly upon her ear. She turned and walked silently to her seat at the table.

Doubt, the forerunner of fear, was beginning to trouble her. Was it entirely safe for a personable young woman to be left alone with Arabs? Pshaw! there were two of them—unfriendly at that. One would act as a restraint upon the other. She glanced about in search of Aomar. He was nowhere in sight.

Slowly and with an appearance of calmness she ate her dinner. Occasionally she addressed a pleasant word to Seid, as he deftly waited upon her. Under lowered lashes she watched him, studied him.

A subtle difference was noticeable in his manner. Polite and deferential, there yet was about him a subdued air of expectancy, of carefully repressed elation. It revealed itself in the timbre of his voice, in the gleam of his dark eyes.

Time passed. Dinner was over, and Seid was clearing away the remains. She spoke with an air of careless indifference.

"The boy, Aomar, Seid—I don't see him about. Is he in his tent?"

Seid paused and looked at her significantly. "No, Madame; he went to visit the town."

Her fingers, toying with a bread crumb, exerted a sudden flattening pressure.

"But I thought they closed the gates at sundown?"

"They do, Madame. Doubtless he became interested in the bazars and lost track of time. It must be that he is locked in."

Patricia drew in her breath slowly. "Poor boy," she said evenly. "And will they detain him long?"

Seid placed his hands upon the table and bent slightly toward her.

"Until sunrise, Madame."

She looked up at him searchingly. On all sides stretched the Sahara, silent save for the distant muffled noises of the walled-in city. How utterly, how hopelessly alone she was!

"Madame loves the desert," Seid was saying tenderly. "Her soul is attuned to the poetry, the mystery of it. She revealed the depth of her feelings on the night of the dance, which Allah forbid I should ever forget."

"Seid!" Startled, dismayed, she raised her hand in an arresting gesture.

Unheeding, Seid swept on:

"It is indeed a wonderful experience for a man and a woman to be alone in this great solitude, with none to interrupt their love-making, none to spy upon them but the far-away stars. It is so with us. No one will ever know what transpires tonight, for I shall be dumb as the sands about us."

Silence, tense, palpable, and the Arab's ardent glances; then—the faintest possible stir behind her, heartening her, giving her courage. Had Aomar returned? Even the presence of one who regarded her with hatred, brought her a feeling of reassurance. At least she was not alone with this amorous Arab.

Her next words were spoken with simulated weariness: "That will do, Seid. I have had a surfeit of melodrama."

She picked up her vanity case and began powdering her nose. Her eyes darted a swift, anxious glance into the mirror. It reflected the dark shadows behind her where something crouched, moved slightly among the tufts of camel-grass.

"Now tell me," she said quietly, "why you assumed I would entertain your villainous proposition."

Seid's glance wavered, shifted uneasily, his *savoir faire* dissipated by her unexplainable behavior.

"Madame convinced me by her interest that she cared," he answered sullenly.

Patricia replaced the mirror upon the table and regarded him questioningly.

"It may be partly my fault," she said. "But let this be a lesson to you not hastily to judge women whose habits and customs you do not understand. I am sure you mean to be a gentleman and will behave as such. I shall not mention this to my husband, for he would deal with you harshly. That is all."

Seid hesitated, considering.

Had she won? Would he go peaceably? Or must there be a struggle, a terrifying physical conflict in which his superior strength would assure him the victory. She waited, outwardly calm, inwardly tense.

Presently he turned, and, without word or glance, stalked off into the shadows.

She relaxed. Gradually her manner became calmer. After all, Seid was instinctively chivalrous. He had always been courteous, showing a nice regard for delicate little attentions. Unwittingly she had led him on, and the poor fellow had fallen in love with her. She sighed pensively. What woman, in her heart, could blame a man for that!

In a few moments Seid approached and placed before her the accustomed glass and bottle.

"Your night water, Madame."

"Thank you, Seid." Her voice was kindly. "Remember I trust you. Put out the light, please, before you retire."

In no way could she have shown greater confidence in his honor. Seid bowed and turned his attention to the lantern. The light glimmered out, leaving them in semi-darkness.

He lingered a moment, a shadowy form against the starlight. Then, with a "Bonne nuit, Madame," he left her and made his way to where the camels were tethered.

Patricia missed the significance of his action, failed to grasp the fact that he was preparing for flight. She sat gazing fixedly at the starlit desert. Somewhere in that vast solitude was her husband and protector. Sighing, she poured out a glass of water. There being no one to warn her, she raised it to her lips and drank half its contents.

Presently she rose and glanced behind her. Aomar was not in sight. Doubtless he had retired. She wondered whether or no he would have raised his hand to save her. In all probability his hatred would have stayed his hand. Well, the moral influence of his presence had turned the trick in her favor. She entered the tent and let down the flap.

Slowly she undressed. Her movements became more and more retarded by a feeling of inertia, an incipient form of muscular paralysis. It rapidly increased. By the time she had thrown herself upon her couch, she felt powerless to move, unable even to draw up the covers. Her mind was still clear. By all means in her power she must retain her senscs!

Alarmed, she reviewed the situation. Seid, of course, had drugged the water, but she failed to take enough to over-

come her mentally. Evidently he had preferred the subtlety of this method to brute force. And now at any moment she might expect a visit from him.

She lay there in an agony of dread until a slight sound came at the entrance. Unable to move, she listened, tense with fear. On hands and knees some one was approaching, quietly, stealthily. Through the ventilating hole in the tent-top the starlight shone faintly. Her eyes were slightly open, her head thrown back in a position to see—only when the intruder should reach the couch.

He had arrived. Slowly there rose into her line of vision the head and shoulders of Aomar. His face was set in grim determination; his right hand clasped a knife.

She tried agonizedly to fathom his motive. It must be revenge for the slight she had put upon him, for all the insults, all the misery he had endured because of her race. Doubtless to his ignorant, fanatical mind a blood sacrifice was demanded. An Englishman had wronged his mother, ultimately causing her death in childbirth. And now she, Patricia, was to pay the price!

If such a dreadful thing had to be, why did he wait? Through the fringe of her lashes she viewed his triumphant, gloating expression. The suspense was terrifying; she nearly swooned with fear. Blarily gazing at the face above her, she saw the look of hatred slowly fade, change, give place to startled amazement. His hand reached out uncertainly and touched the charm on her breast. He fingered it stupidly for a moment, then bent and examined it closely. Presently he reached into his burnouse and brought forth its counterpart.

He fitted the two halves of the ivory hand together, then his eyes regarded her wonderingly. She, too, wondered, her mind awakened to a startling possibility. The boy's father—her father—

The light in the tent grew brighter; surrounding objects lost their vagueness and became suddenly distinct. Aomar quickly turned and looked over his shoulder. It must be the tent flap was raised, letting in the starlight. Noiseless as a shadow, the boy vanished behind her upended steamer trunk.

This must be Seid, feeling his way to the side of the couch. Two Arabs in her tent, each on his own sinister errand! How would Aomar react to the situation? Just what did the charm mean to him? Would he passively stand by and allow Seid to accomplish his purpose?

It was Seid. He was kneeling now, and she could see his face, lighted by bestial passion. He leaned forward to

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There he was to become educated, and live in a great house, with no one to revile him. She owed it to him, she said, and to the diminutive ivory hand that had so strangely brought them together.

THE HAND OF FATMA

(Continued from page 24)

kiss her and his hot breath fanned her cheek. Where was Aomar? Oh, why—

There came a sudden noise behind the kneeling Arab—the flash of steel, a gasping grunt—and Seid, who had come to defile her, slid sideways to the floor!

Silence, tangible, heavy, burdened with tragedy. At last a low, boyish whimper; then uncertain, shuffling footsteps as Aomar staggered from the tent.

THEY found him the following morning, hiding in the bazars of Abouda. Like a dumb animal, accustomed to contempt and harshness, he had slunk away in terror from the encampment.

His eyes held a bewildered expression when Patricia rested a friendly hand upon his shoulder and asked him concerning his father. He told her he was an Englishman named d'Arro, and that the little ivory charm had been a cherished possession of his mother's.

And then Patricia informed him that he was to return with her to England.

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