

CHAPTER XXXIII

MADAME HERDJIMAN

HE stayed three days at Bordighera, absorbing the sunshine, the perfume of violets, the sound of the sea. Lying on the shingly beach watching the waves break on the yellow rocks of the point beyond which lies the blue bay that washes Ospedaletti, wandering on the roads that lead to Sasso or Apricale, and during those three days he scarcely thought of the future or the thing that he desired most in the world—Karan.

He was safe, she was there, he only had to put out his hand to take her. Meanwhile, let him rest.

Had you told him a week ago the story of his flight and of how, once safe, he would collapse like this and give up effort for the moment, he would not have believed you. But in truth the strain had been terrific, lasting for days, and finishing on such a note of intensity that he might have collapsed more seriously than this. Exhaustion has only three words in its vocabulary, "I don't care."

He didn't care for anything but the sense of security now wrapping him like cotton wool. The longing for peace and beauty now being fed by the soothing sound of the sea, and the light, and the palms, and the blueness that stretched from Cap Ampeglio to the Esterelles.

Then one day he took the train for Turin, and from there to Venice. He had to wait at Venice for two days, pending the starting of a boat that would take him to the seaport of Ragusa by way of Trieste.

It was here, in Venice, whilst waiting and trying to kill time that Karan began to come back to him, no longer a figure half-faded out by tiredness.

It was here that Art came in clash with the vision of this girl, whose hold upon his life was uncanny.

They had clashed at Sidi, and Art had conquered seemingly, but here the living vision of Karan trod Art to splinters and dust for the moment.

Oh, those picture galleries, those churches, those palaces housing rags and the ghosts of dead men ; things he had to look at and examine while waiting for the ship that would take him home. To her.

The Adriatic, as the steamer left Venice, lay unruffled by the wind, delicately tinted as an aquarelle, and stretching towards a haze of smoky blue that hid the line of the horizon.

They made at first in the direction of the Istrian coast, and then south-eastward through the Dalmatian Islands, calling at Spalato and lying there for a whole day whilst cargo was being handled.

It is only a day's run from Spalato to Ragusa, and next day at five o'clock saw Jean on foot making his way along the pleasant road that leads from the port to the little town.

He had left his luggage at the shipping company's office, where he would send for it after he had seen Herdjiman. He had no idea of where he would stay, nothing mattered . . .

He passed the road that led up to the villa of Baron Stein ; he scarcely glanced in that direction. And now he was entering the little town so cosily tucked round with walls, and where the pigeons were fighting in the evening light above the great square.

He found the street of the Winds, and knocked at Herdjiman's door. It was opened by the

fisherman's wife, who, when she saw Jean, threw up her hands in surprise.

"Why, 'tis you, monsieur," she cried, "and only this morning we were talking about you and la Legion. But come in, monsieur, come in."

She led the way into the sitting-room, where the ship models stood, just as they had stood on the tragic night when Jean was here last.

The woman dusted a seat, and was explaining how that Herdjiman had been called away that morning about a new boat which he intended purchasing, but would be back soon, when the door opened and Herdjiman himself appeared.

He was in his best clothes.

When he saw Jean he started back. Then with a mighty oath he struck his right fist into the palm of his left hand, and then out shot the right hand grasping Jean's.

"And Karan?" asked Jean. "Where is she?"

Herdjiman's manner altered in a flash. One could see that he had forgotten Karan in the first moment of pleasure at seeing the other.

"The girl," he cried. "Why, she's gone!"

"Gone!"

Madame Herdjiman slipped out of the room.

"Gone. You must know that the old man died; he is buried in the cemetery over there, and the girl she stayed on in Beljazi."

"Yes! Yes!"

"Then when monsieur's letter came telling us he was in the Legion, the girl said she would go to meet you there at that confounded place whose name——"

"Sidi-Bel-Abbès."

"Yes. That is the name. But I told her that was no good as you would be in barracks there,

and she could not meet you. However, there is no use in telling young people things they won't believe, and the upshot is that she went. Two days ago. I told her you would not be able to leave there for five years, but she would not listen, she went."

"To Sidi?"

"To Sidi. She has money. The old man had his coat lined with money. Oh, she has money enough, and she said she would not be long in finding you, and that you would come back here. And sure enough here you are, but not with her."

"Good God," said Jean.

He sat down on a chair. It would seem that this horrible little parlour was a fatal place for him. Here, that terrible night he had reviewed his position with Herdjiman, and here now he had received this thrust from the hand of Fate.

Karan was gone, flown like a pigeon to find him. Gone to Sidi-Bel-Abbès. Was there ever such a fatality?

"Why, *mon Dieu!*" cried Herdjiman, seeing him collapse in his chair, "what is the matter? The girl is gone, but we can find her."

"Herdjiman," said Jean, "you know nothing—Sidi-Bel-Abbès is Hell. She has gone to find me and I am not there. Why, look you, I have run away from there, if I was caught I would be sent to prison. I cannot go there to meet her—well, what am I to do—what am I to do?"

He rose up and paced the floor of the little room. The ship models sailing imaginary seas could not tell him what he could do—nor the horny-handed Herdjiman, now seated, elbows on knees and with dropped head.