

Then he gave his information about the coming advance from the south.

"And the west?" asked the colonel.

"There is no danger to the west," said Mansour.

The colonel laughed. He was a hard man. He was also used to Arabs. Though he had used the dealer as a gatherer of information that always turned out right, he had not the slightest doubt that Mansour was also a gatherer of information for the other side. Indeed, he had once laughingly taxed him with it. What did it matter.

The stuff Mansour had to give away was valueless, whereas he had more than once, both at Sidi and on service, given worthwhile information about the other side.

Here, however, was a serious blunder, or was it a blunder?

"You are wrong," said the colonel; "or perhaps our information just come in is wrong. However, you must wait and see."

He ordered Mansour to be detained.

CHAPTER XLII

"DO YOU HEAR ANYTHING?"

WHEN the dealer went off leaving Jean and Karan alone the girl, who had been lying on her side, raised herself on her elbow. She seemed listening.

"Do you hear anything?" asked Jean.

"Nothing," said Karan; "and yet—no—it is only, perhaps, the wind."

She rose up, and he rose also and stood beside her.

The new moon was getting down into the west,

and its light and the light of the stars showed the desert vaguely stretching, marked by the outcrops of rock, like the bones of giants, cast there and left at the beginning of time. But the mules seemed disturbed.

Mansour had tethered them to the cart, without hobbling them, and they were straining at their ropes, tossing their heads and pawing the ground. Then they fell quiet and stood with heads hung down, listless, as though whatever had disturbed them had passed away.

All was quiet now. There was nothing to fear, and throwing his arm round her shoulders they moved away, aimlessly at first, walking just for the pleasure of moving together side by side under the stars, absolutely alone.

They reached a depression running north and south for a hundred yards or so, as though cut out by a great shovel, a donga, where to be free of the wind and to be even more absolutely alone, they lay down, instantly embracing with a passion and fervour that had been denied to them for days. An hour passed—a lifetime—and then came sleep. The sleep of the desert, profound as the slumber of the dwellers in the tombs, a sleep unbroken by the clink of bridle and the pad of camels, as the silent moving hordes of the Beni Hassan passed the donga to north and south of it, joining again and flowing on to halt half a mile away before the great attack which would open at dawn, if things were propitious.

Before that, at the first glimmer of the false dawn, Jean awoke suddenly, and with a sense of uneasiness as though Danger had placed a hand upon his shoulder.

Karan still slept, and not disturbing her, he rose. The wall of the donga was only breast high.

He saw the cart lying on the sands overturned, the mules were gone and ahead beneath the last of the stars, vaguely white and far-reaching the hosts of the Beni Hassan showed moveless as the lion crouching to spring.

The army of the desert had passed and now lay between him and the Legion—passed without seeing him and Karan—passed, sweeping to left and right—passed, destroying the cart in its terrible silent grasp, flinging the poor remains away.

Leaving Karan still asleep, he crawled out of the trench. Nothing was visible but the motionless host to the east. South, west and north there was no sign of life.

He drew near the cart. He could see now, lying on the sand a few yards away from it, the two mules, dead. The cart had been looted of its contents and the mules killed by a couple of sword strokes, as he and Karan would undoubtedly have been killed but for the donga.

And now as he stood looking at the remains on the sand a sound came from the hosts ahead—a sound like the sound of a quarrelling beach after a storm.

The army of the desert had been tricked.