

CHAPTER XLIII

THE CARAVAN

THE Legion, whose rest camp had been located by the spies that had followed its line of march for days, and whose information had formed the basis for the plan of this attack, the Legion was no longer there. Like a chess piece in the hand of a master player it had moved two hours ago, swift as a hawk, towards the south, leaving the Beni Hassan in the air with nothing to fight but smouldering fires. And now, as the dawn lit the desert from the south came news—the crash of rifle fire. Crash on crash. The fight was on.

The southern Arab army advancing to take up a position for the spring had all but run into the moving colossus, had wheeled and retreated full speed, then halted and re-formed. It all seemed a toss-up whether the fight was on or off, but the Commandant-General of Algeria knew his children of the desert, they were keyed up, they were in great strength. The southern army was the main force, the lust for fight would beat the cold consideration of strategy. They would attack—and they did. With the Legion over six miles out of position as regarded the movements of the eastern and western attackers.

At the sound of the firing Jean turned and ran back towards the donga, where he found Karan awake and listening. He helped her up.

The dawn was now lighting the world, and the Beni Hassan could be clearly seen sweeping south in

the direction of the fight like a swiftly vanishing cloud.

The rifle fire ceased, the wind blew the sand in the sandy places, and from the sky, now starless and blue, above them, came the cry of a bird—a great black bird that circled and span, volplaning downwards towards the dead mules, then rising again, a living picture of hunger held by suspicion.

Karan pointed to the cart.

"Yes," said Jean, "they have killed the mules. They passed us in the night without seeing us, they have taken everything and killed the mules." The girl drew in her breath with a little shudder.

"And Mansour?"

"I don't know," said Jean; "he has not come back. Listen!"

The far-off massed rifle fire had broken out again. Crash, crash, crash!

The first attack of the southern hordes having been repulsed, this was the second; the bright morning lighting the oncoming hordes, the spears, the fluttering banners, the useless valour.

Hurry as they would the Beni Hassan were too late to engage in this, the most critical moment of the fight.

The great bird swooped nearer to the dead mules. And now in the sky a few more birds showed high and far, and circling in the full sun blaze that would not cover the desert for some moments yet.

Jean led Karan towards the cart. It had been flung on its side as if by a tempest and completely gutted of its contents. Mansour's personal belongings, food, the last few cigarettes and articles of trade, even the water-cask, all were gone. But there was one thing left tossed about on the ground by

the wind and lying against the tilt of the cart—Karan's little drum.

She picked it up and slung it on her arm by the cord attached to it.

The firing that had raged and died and raged again had ceased, and now in the full sunshine the southern mountains stood like the desolate guardians of a desolate country that showed no trace of living thing.

The phantom Legion that they had followed from Sidi had fought a phantom battle. And in the silence now, who could tell whether it had met with victory or defeat?

Jean stood looking north, south, east and west. What should they do? They had no water, no food.

No water, no food. The thoughts pursued themselves in his mind, destroying for the moment all power of reflection till Karan, plucking at his arm, pointed west.

In the west something was moving in the far distance.

Three camels, strung out one behind the other, now looking like one, now as they got for a moment out of line showing as three; they were heading directly towards the cart.

No war camels these, but evidently one of those small caravans that Jean had often seen coming into Sidi laden with bales of dates and what not, from El Telagh or Mascara.

"They are coming this way," said Jean. "They have nothing to do with those others. We have nothing to fear from them, and I have money."

Karan was shading her eyes and looking at the oncoming camels.

"There is only one man," she said. "Look, he

is on the first camel. From where have they come? Oh! look at the birds!"

The birds, brave now as though knowing that they had nothing to fear from the two watchers, were round the mules and on them. There were only six. There would have been more but for the feast that lay spread for them away down south. It is only the birds of prey that profit from war, and they are quick to seize their profit.

Karan, taking her companion by the arm, moved away leading him towards the advancing caravan which now, owing to the undulating movements of the air above the sun-warmed ground, seemed wading through shallows of crystal-clear waving water.

Yes, there was only one man who showed now, when close up, as an Arab, white-bearded, yet sitting erect as a young man. And now, as he brought his beast to a halt, as a man of noble countenance, but incredibly wrinkled and dried by the sun and wind of the desert.

He was deaf. At the first words spoken to him by Jean he shook his head, pointed to his ear and seemed on the point of moving on, when Jean, thrusting his hand in his breast, drew out his bundle of notes.

He held the bundle up, one of them fluttering loose in the wind like a little flag. He pointed to Karan, to himself, to the camels, and then ahead to the east.

The camel man bent down and took the free, fluttering note between finger and thumb, read its denomination and then looked at Jean.

His eyes were cold and hard as the stones of the desert—the hardness of old age and of a life spent facing the blazing sun and the wind of the Hautes Plateaux, and the waste places.

But he understood. Jean and the girl wished to go with him. The thrown-down cart and the mules now being devoured by the birds were no doubt part of the story of these two people, but he could not inquire into that; it was all of no matter to him. He had not heard the rifle firing to southward that had now died down; if he had all that would have been of no interest to him. He was a trader in a small way. He had been a trader for sixty years and he had seen many wars between his people and the infidels, and between themselves. He had never taken part in them and he had never been seriously molested, though once or twice his goods had been commandeered.

His home was at Seb dou which lies south of Tlemcen, at least that was his resting place between journeys. The camels were his and the merchandise on them, though there was not much of that on this journey, just some bales of dates and some bags of rye flour, and some water-skins.

Yes, he understood. Here was an amount equal to the profit of three months trading put into his hand as if from nowhere, the only return asked being a lift and some food on the way for these two people. He marked the other notes which Jean had put back, and making his camel kneel, descended.

Then for the first time he spoke, in Arabic, and not to Jean but to the camels. He seemed explaining things to them as he rearranged the loads, so that his passengers might be seated. He produced some rye bread and dates, and a horn cup which he filled from one of the water-skins, and ten minutes later with Karan on the foremost led camel and Jean following, they started.