

## CHAPTER XLIV

## THE HOUSE IN THE DESERT

THE sound of firing from the south had ceased.

The far mountains seemed to have folded their hands and to be seated in the garment of their old unalterable silence, that had been disturbed and lifted for a moment by the fretting of men.

Before man had come to make war, or the birds born that feasted on the dead, the mountains had sat and watched the stony desert, the sand spaces that spoke of the vast seas of sand far south beyond Figuig and Moglar, and the grey-green cactus plants that knew this desolation before the Esparto grass or the oasis palms.

They drew near the great camping place of last night. There was nothing to show but the ashes of the cooking fires, some empty cardboard ammunition boxes blown about by the wind, empty cans that had held bully beef.

The camels passed, sublimely indifferent as the old man, but Jean, casting his eyes far and wide over the broken ground, felt disturbed at the thought of Mansour. Up to this he had not had time to think of the dealer or his fate.

At noon they reached what had once been a farm, but which had long been deserted; just a square house like a hollowed-out dice cube fronting the remains of a wall, and the remains of a well dried up. There was about the place a foul, evil smell, so vague as scarcely to be noticeable, but afterwards called to mind by Jean. What had been cultivated,

here, who could tell? But there was nothing now. It was as though the sunlit desolation of rocks, parched ground, sand patches and occasional cactus reaching far as eye could see, had stolen upon the place like a fire, destroying the wall, gutting the house, drying the well and driving all life away.

They rested here till evening, pursuing their way by the light of the stars and crossing a railway track—an astonishing thing to find in that wilderness, and no doubt the track that runs from Mechuria to Ain Sefara and the oasis of Figuig.

Where were they going? Impossible to say.

At noon Jean had tried to question the camel man with signs. He had replied in Arabic pointing ahead. It was impossible to understand him.

He was going somewhere with some definite purpose, but where, the desert only knew, and there was nothing to be done but go with him.

The position was curious.

With Mansour everything had been possible. They would have returned to Sidi, and then he would have devised some means of getting them away—but now! Now everything seemed impossible; unable to talk the tongue, dressed as they were, without knowledge of the country.

Still they had been saved miraculously, saved from the Beni Hassan, saved again by this camel man who, at least, gave them food and water. Then there was the money remaining, and with it much might be done.

It came to Jean as he turned these things over in his mind that they had been led, that they had nothing at all to do with their own fate, that it was quite useless to project plans, or think of what they would do—useless as for a chessman to have a mind other than the mind of the player.

And his mind, accepting this, had come, as it were, at last in perfect tune with the mind of Karan, who seemed perfectly indifferent to everything but the fact that he was with her.

Karan, who in her wandering life had learnt not to think of the morrow ; who never had known ties of home, or family, or any wish other than to live and move, and breathe the air away from cities ; who had absolutely no knowledge of life or need for expression except in the love she had given Cavani ; the passion, burning and mute as the burning sunlight, with which she had enveloped her lover—the burning sunlight that can create and yet can wither.

Why should she care ? The camels plodded on.

## CHAPTER XLV

### LOST !

BEYOND here is a stretch of sand projecting from the south, like the dry tongue of a man who has died of thirst.

They did not cross it. The camel man changing his direction turned south.

As they went the tongue broadened, and the rocks and occasional bushes fell away to east and west, till before them lay a country of sand levels and sand dunes, across which the wind came hot as from an oven.

This little Sahara has nothing to do with the great sand dune region that lies farther south. All the same, it is many miles in extent, possibly the bed of a vast lake long dried up and added to by sand