

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

blown from the south, for sand attracts and holds sand; witness that beach of Las Palmas, built entirely by the wind from the African coast.

Jean, whose camel had ranged up beside the old man's at the turn they had made, pointed ahead.

The other nodded and pointed in a direction sou'sou'-west across the sand-hills to indicate the spot he was making for. Then followed a string of Arabic words, amongst which might have been the name of their destination; Jean could not tell. He let his camel fall back to its accustomed place in the line.

The wind shifted a bit, blowing more from the east and cooled so that the heat at noon was not insupportable.

They halted, but only long enough to drink and have some food. Their leader was evidently anxious to have done with the sand, and as they mounted again he pointed again to the sou'sou'-west, swept his arm round to the east and then pointed north. But what he said it was impossible to understand.

He was perhaps telling them where they were bound for, and how it lay as regarded the place they had come from. Who could tell?

Jean's camel had taken its accustomed place behind Karan's, and they had made perhaps half an hour's journey from the noon halting place when he saw her fall a bit to one side, throw out an arm as if to balance herself—next moment she was lying on the sand.

He cried out, forgetting that their leader was deaf, flung himself off and knelt down beside her whilst the camels plodded on.

She had fallen from heat dizziness perhaps, but she lay as if stunned. He raised her head, but her eyes did not open. She was breathing, his hand

felt the slight movement of her heart, only for that she might have seemed dead.

Then, at last, she moved. Her eyelids fluttered, they opened and her eyes, like the eyes of a person half-dazed, met his.

He kissed her hands and spoke to her. And now, moving and raising herself a bit on her elbow, she glanced around her. Then her eyes became fixed.

She was looking at the camels now far away ahead, still plodding on, indifferent to their dropped burdens.

Jean sprang to his feet shouting to the camel man to stop, forgetting and then remembering his deafness. He glanced at Karan who, fully conscious now, made a movement to him to follow. He ran, tearing off his robe so that he might run the quicker.

But the pad of the camel is made for the sand, and the foot of man for solid ground. There were hard patches where he gained speed only to lose it again when the sand was soft.

Whoever has followed the track of a caravan across the sands will know that camels, though moving in line ahead, shift and alter their position as regards one another, sometimes following on one another's steps, sometimes diverging a bit to left or right.

This made the path of the runner more difficult owing to the disturbance of the sand, but he was slowly gaining.

Running for life and for the life of Karan, he put forth an energy almost super-human.

To be left in this desolation without food or water would mean death.

But he was gaining, yard by yard, and now the race was almost won; he was labouring along by the hind-quarters of the last camel. A moment later he could have seized one of the bales, but that would

not have stopped the brute, he would only have been dragged along the sand. He dared not risk it, his strength was almost gone, he must reach the camel's head and try to stop or turn it by the leading rope.

Useless—waste of time—at his outstretched hand the camel swerved.

His breath was all but exhausted. There was only one chance more, to reach and get ahead and within sight of the camel man, that terrible deaf figure riding ahead like Fate beyond the reach of voice or touch.

But he had used up his strength in the race to overtake and get level. What he might have done with ease ten minutes ago, now seemed utterly beyond him.

Yet success was almost in his grasp, he was now level with the leader's flank, the profile of the rider was in sight—a minute more—but it was not to be.

A soft sand ridge prepared by the wind caught his foot and he fell.

The camels plodded on.

He lay for a moment gasping and spent, fighting for breath. He struggled up on one elbow, but a terrible vertigo and sickness made him fall back. It passed gradually and then, struggling to his feet, he looked around him. The caravan was a long way off, and Karan—he could see nothing of her. The rising of the sand into ridges here and there hid her from him, and completed the sense of disaster that, joined with his physical exhaustion, made him for the moment impotent and feeble as an old, old man or a child.

The caravan was as far beyond his reach or touch as the events of his own life that had led him here.

He turned from the sight of it and followed back

along the camel tracks—they, at least, gave him guidance—to Karan.

At last he saw her. Far away, standing up and waiting for him. She raised her arm, and the sight of her giving him new strength, he hurried his steps to meet her.

CHAPTER XLVI

PALM TOPS IN THE SKY

JUST as the sand swellings had hidden her from his sight, so now they hid the far away camels.

"He will come back," said Karan, "when he finds that we are gone. We must follow."

"Yes," said Jean.

There were only two ways for them. To return or to follow in the tracks of the caravan.

To return was impossible. It would mean, even when free of the sands, that arid and desolate country beyond. To go forward might be to find something better, and there was a possibility that the camel man might return for them; just a possibility.

As they went, Karan beside him, refusing all help, he turned over in his mind this possibility. Their whole fate lay in this man's keeping. When he found them gone—well, what would he think?"

The question came cold as ice because of the answer that instantly suggested itself. There was no certainty that he would think an accident had happened. He could not possibly imagine the reality. He would probably think that the two people he had picked up so strangely and at such a good price, had deserted him and dropped off to make their way on foot.