

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.

But knowing as he did the country they were going through and finding as he would find, that the water-skins and bales had not been tampered with, might he not suspect something of the truth? Perhaps.

But there was no use in thinking: to follow the camel tracks, to follow swiftly and for as long as possible was their only hope.

As they went the dunes flattened out, and the sands, still ridged and tossed, but fairly level gave them a view miles in extent. But the shaking of the heat-laden air made a horizon of dubious and waving crystal that swallowed all trace of those they sought.

Next day, two hours after sunrise, Karan, unable to continue the journey, was lying on the sand, Jean kneeling beside her.

They had travelled all night, sometimes pausing to rest, but always continuing. After the setting of the young moon in the indeterminate light of the stars Jean could not see the tracks, but Karan was being led.

It was broad day for her. Her mind was wandering. She talked strangely at times as though she were speaking to Cavani, and Jean feeling her hands at one of the halting places, found them burning. She was evidently stricken with a fever whose first warning had been the dizziness that made her fall; something caught, perhaps, at that vile Spanish house where they had stopped at noon yesterday. But the fever instead of diminishing, seemed to lend her strength.

On, on, on, she would not stop, but for the momentary rests. And when the day broke clear and bright across the desolation of the sands Jean

saw far away ahead of them, against the brightening east, a trace of palm tops.

East! That had been her leading instead of south.

He had not noticed the stars, he had hoped that she could see the track that was hidden from him, yet she had left it following some instinct or guidance unknown.

And there lay the oasis. It lies there still on the track from El Abiod, just a well and some date palms, the promise, if not the fulfilment of the promise, of food and water.

But Karan, who had led him so far and so strangely, could lead him no more. She had sunk, falling as though gradually crushed down, and as he knelt beside her, her eyes that had closed, opened as he laid his hand on her forehead.

She was no longer burning.

The cold of the night just before dawn had done its work. She was collapsed and her forehead as chill as marble.

He spoke to her. She heard him, and the light of love and recognition came into her eyes, as her lips moved and her hand sought his. He put his arm beneath her head, and she tried to raise herself towards him, but the effort was useless.

He knelt beside her, his body sheltering her face from the sun. She lay in his shadow whilst the sun scorched and burned him. He had not drunk since noon yesterday, he was parched, and the palm trees far away over there spoke of water, but all that was nothing. If Karan died all else would die.

She had seemed to lead him always towards disaster, but to what heights could she have led him greater than this negation of self, to what prize greater than his own soul, made equal in simplicity and fidelity with hers?

He watched her now as she lay with eyes closed in a sleep that might return her to him, so that he might carry her to those trees and the well that was surely beneath them. Those trees that you still may see lifting their fronds to the wind of the desert on the old caravan track leading from far away El Abiod.

### ENVOI

ONE spring day in the second year of the Great War, with a world gone grey from hatred, two officers, Spahis, were riding from Brexina along the track that leads to Géryville, when one of them reined in his horse, dismounted and picked up something that had drawn his attention.

It was a little drum.

Old and battered and blown from far across the sands, it still showed its brass work scarcely tarnished by the dry air of the desert. And on the brass a name roughly cut, perhaps by some old soldier—the magic name, "Napoleon."

They took it with them—it is still preserved in the Spahi barracks—and for a long way on the road it formed an object for conversation and conjecture. It was an omen of good fortune to them. The good fortune that we call victory, and which rises out of the destruction of men and souls. But the little drum would have said nothing of all that if it could have told its story of the road it had travelled. Nothing of victory, or only of that strange victory whose other name is defeat.