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OF
SOLOMON

ALLAN
HAWKWOOD

XIV

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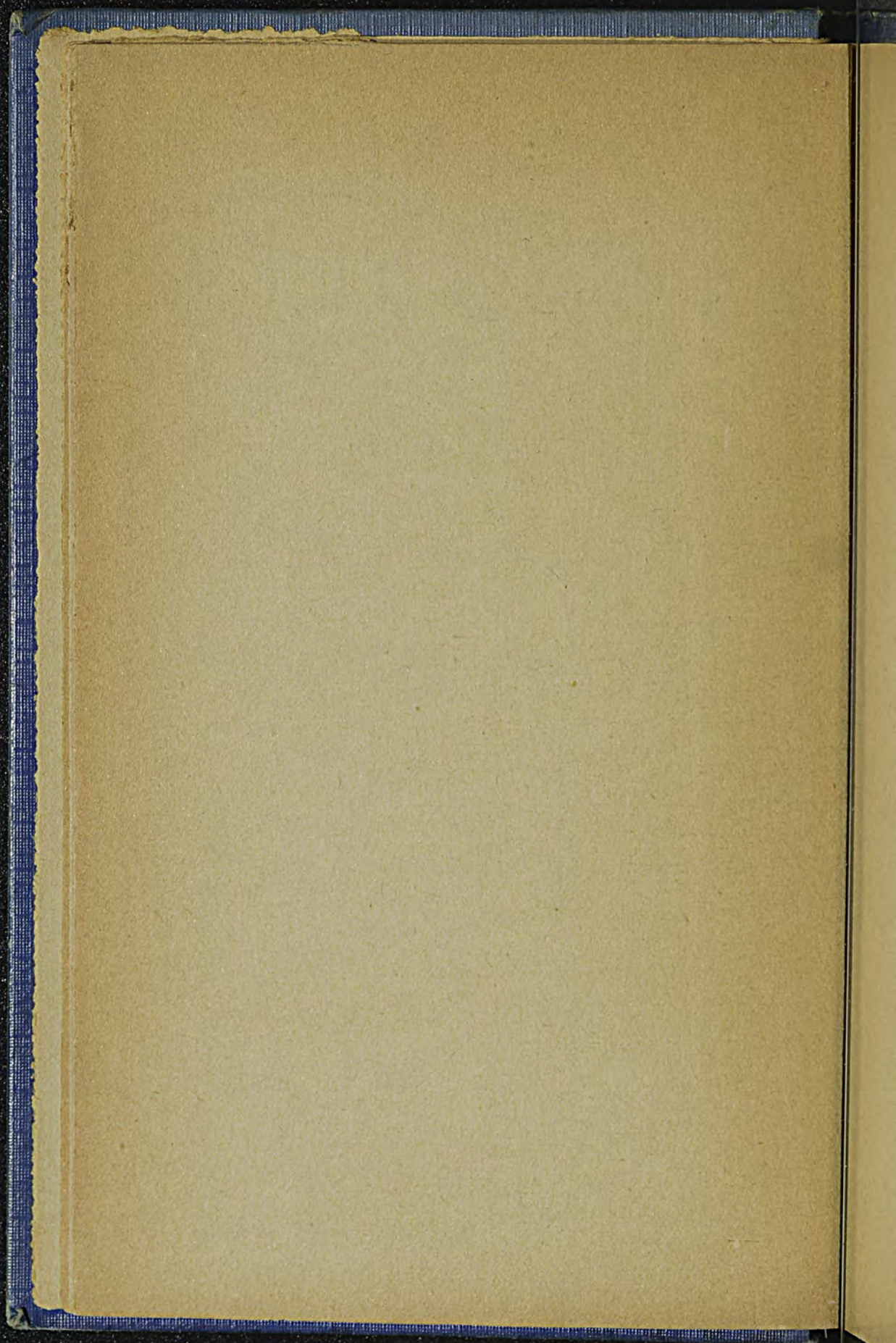
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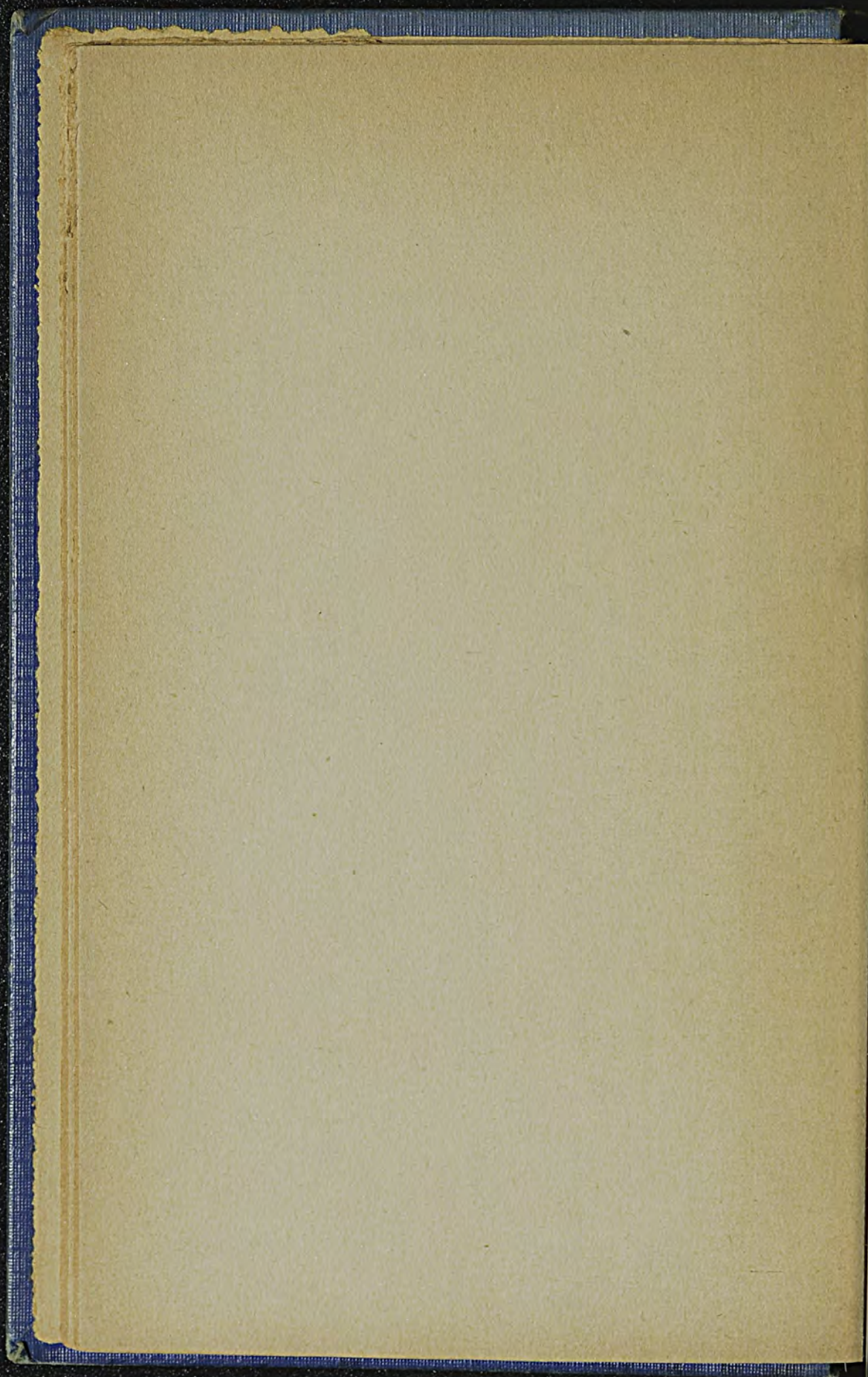
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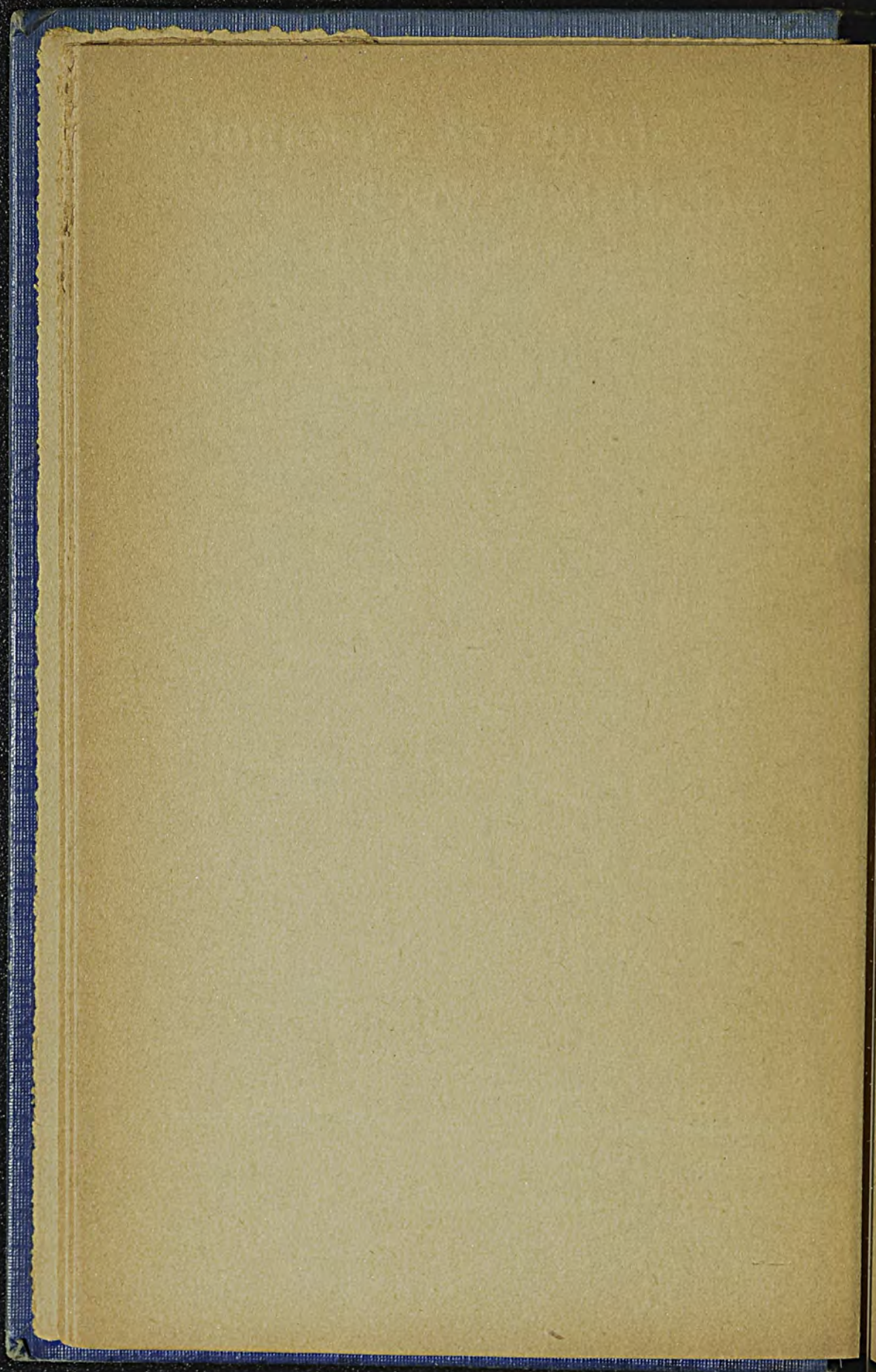
The Shawl of Solomon

By ALLAN HAWKWOOD - *Author of*

"Solomon's Quest," "Solomon's Carpet," etc., etc.



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THE SHAWL OF SOLOMON

CHAPTER I

THE TEAKWOOD BOX

Regan stared at the box which rested on the table before him, and his grey eyes were whimsical.

"If I look like I feel," he muttered, "I'm indescribable. Who shoved that box into my hand? And why?"

His was a lean merry face, with angular jaw and a mouth like a straight cleft, losing none of its strength when in merriment. One may ever judge a man by his smile. Regan smiled often; his keen grey eyes smiled seldom.

As he lounged on the consulate veranda and waited for the consul to answer his card, his slender figure looked very trim and boyish in its white flannels. Its only noteworthy feature was the balance from shoulders to hips, the splendidly poised ease of every movement. He reached out and lifted the box again with hands which, like his face, were deeply tanned.

"It's a box right enough, and with nothing much in it. H'm!"

"Hello!" cried a hearty voice. Regan dropped the box and turned. "Larry Regan! How the deuce did you get here in Tripoli? Shake!"

Higdale, acting United States consul in Tripoli, pumped Regan's hand and grinned delightedly in concert with his visitor.

"Why, man," he went on hastily, "I thought you were still in Alexandria, explaining that consuls were meant to write trade reports, not to protect home citizens! What on earth are you doing here in God-forsaken Tripoli?"

"Touring, Higdale. I'm a blessed tourist, aching to see my country's consul and

receive condolences on being eleven-umpty miles from Oshkosh."

"No!" Higdale stared at him in frank amazement. "You've not quit the service? You, the one decent Oriental linguist of the corps, the one fellow who can take a mess of hen tracks and translate 'em into sense? No! What pried you loose?"

Regan leaned forward mysteriously.

"Listen! One thousand round U.S. dollars in cash, with a salary of the same once a month—say! Wouldn't that pry you loose? You bet it would, Higdale!"

"Huh!" The consul affected an expression of scorn as he surveyed his visitor. "Who'd want to hire a twenty-six-year-old kid like you? A kid who doesn't know anything except this beastly Arabic, and how to use his feet and hands and tongue—say, have a drink, old man? On the new boss?"

"You've not taken to drink, Hig?"

"Nope. But I thought you had maybe. What's the lay, anyhow? Here, sit down and smoke a real home-made pill."

The two men dropped into chairs, Regan refused the proffered cigarette, drawing out

his brier instead. Then he nodded toward the table.

"That's my box yonder, Hig. Story connected with it—somebody shoved it into my hands two minutes after I'd landed this morning. I failed to see the giver in the crowd. Either someone mistook me for someone else, or some Arab damsel had a mash on me and sent her pet eunuch with a gift of pearls and diamonds. Open that box, and I'll split the jewels with you."

Regan leaned back in his chair, a humorous smile twisting his lips. Higdale took up the box and examined it, with an exclamation of surprise at its lightness, for it measured a foot in length, six inches in width, and was four inches deep—and appeared to be a solid block of black teakwood.

"Why, it's no box at all!" ejaculated the consul sharply. "You can't have a box without a lid and a bottom—and this has neither. There's no sign of a junction, my son! This is simply a chunk of wood——"

"Too light, by a long shot, Hig. It's teak, observe; there's only a shell of it,

and it's not veneer. I tried cutting it, and discovered it was genuine. Besides, you'll find a round keyhole near one corner, though I never saw a key to fit it."

"H'm!"

The consul worked over the box for three minutes, at the end of which time his curiosity had given place to an air of baffled irritation.

Close to one corner was a round hole lined with silver. Higdale produced a bunch of keys, sent his consulate kavass for a piece of wire, and settled down to solve the mystery. When keys and wire had alike proven fruitless of result, he set down the box and stared at it, wiping perspiration from his brow.

"Confound the thing, and you, too, Larry Regan! Is this one of your blasted jokes?"

Regan shook his head slightly. "No, it's exactly as I've stated."

With supreme disgust, and more than a trace of suspicion, Higdale consigned the teakwood box to regions warmer than Tripoli, and turned to his visitor.

"Unless you want to smash it up, I'm

through with the thing. Where are you putting up? No objections to this little outfit, have you?"

"None, thanks." Regan chuckled. "My suitcase is downstairs now. Can't say how long I'll stay, though, as it depends on my present employer. I want to see what you think of my new job, Hig. Maybe you know the chap."

"Fire away." The consul settled deeper in his chair, gazing out upon the sapphire-blue harbour, where the sponge fleet rocked around the Greek hospital ship, where the new quays and the giant cranes gave raucous testimony to the Italian efficiency that had invaded this old corner of Libya.

"Well," began Regan, stretching out comfortably, "last week I received a long cablegram from New York, to the effect that I had been weighed in the balance and found to have the goods; in other words, pretty thoroughly investigated. I was offered a job; duties not stated, but with a promise of excitement and probable danger. As remuneration, I was offered a bonus of a thousand, a salary of a thousand a month, and, in the event of my decease,

ten thousand would be paid to whomever I might name. The sender gave the Bank of Egypt and the Credit Lyonnais as references, and asked that I cable immediate answer. What would you have replied, Higdale?"

"H'm! That I'd sooner be a live dog than a dead lion," was the dry retort.

Regan grinned. "Well, I looked the chap up. Found he was guaranteed without reservations by both institutions—and that means a whole lot, as you can imagine. Since I'm alone in the world, I responded that I'd waive the ten thousand in case of death, but would expect it as additional bonus if I came through alive. And, by Jasper, the chap called my bluff—promised it! Said to come here to Tripoli on the jump and wait for his arrival. I took him up, and tried to find out something about him, but the Britishers couldn't give me any information, and the banks wouldn't. I don't suppose you have him on file anywhere?"

"Who?" drawled Higdale, cocking his feet on the balustrade. "You forgot to mention his name."

"Oh, it was Solomon. John Solomon.

No record of him in my books."

Higdale brought down his feet suddenly, and shot Regan a swift glance.

"Very sorry indeed, Mr. Regan," he returned stiffly. "We have no knowledge of the person in question. Consular duties are so absorbing, you know, especially in these war times, and the wires are so filled with——"

"Oh, shut up!" said Regan disgustedly. "Can the official, old chap! What do you know about my man?"

Higdale gazed out to sea. "Are you asking as an American citizen or as an employee of the consular service?"

Regan inspected his host thoughtfully. Much to his surprise, he began to think his friend in earnest.

"Well, you've received no official notice of my resignation. I'm asking then, as an employee, a fellow diplomat—anything you like to call it."

Higdale turned to him a serious face.

"In that case, Regan, I can tell you something. This Solomon is a Britisher, or was; I believe he became an American citizen recently. For years he operated between Egypt and India—everything from

gun running in the Red Sea to political intrigue. Immensely wealthy, they say, with a genius for secret service organization. Finally he crabbed some game the Senussiyeh was playing—that's the big secret monastic Order of Islam down south of here—and got them down on him; then he slammed the Osmanlis hard, and Constantinople put out a reward of a thousand pounds, Turkish, for his head.

"Between the Senussiyeh and the Turks, the upper and nether millstones of the Mohammedan world, Solomon had to travel away from here, and travel fast. He went to the States, where he's been doing some work for the government."

Regan heard this resume with frank astonishment, not unmingled with incredulity. He was soon forced into belief that his friend was right, however. Higdale knew enough facts to back up his words.

"H'm! Do you suppose he's coming back here?" queried Regan thoughtfully. "If he does—"

"He probably intended to do so, right enough, Larry. You collected that advance thousand, didn't you?"

"Sure. Why?"

"You were lucky, then. Hand me that copy of yesterday's *Nuovo Italia* on the table under that box, will you?"

Regan complied wonderingly, while his host searched the columns of the paper, which reached Tripoli thrice weekly. At length Higdale found that which he sought, and looked up at Regan with a fleeting smile.

"You put one over on me with that box, young man, so I've been putting one over on you in return. Your friend Solomon won't meet you here."

"Eh? Why not?"

"Because he's dead. Read this."

Stunned, Regan took the paper and found before him an account of the sinking of the Italian liner *Re Vittorio*, submarined a few days previously. No one had been rescued except a few of the crew. Among the passengers had been John Solomon, well known in business circles of the Levant and the Near East, who had been proceeding to Italy in order to consult with the Italian government regarding a new war loan.

Drawing a long breath, Regan set down the paper.

"I guess that lets me out, Hig," he said evenly. "Sure it's the same man?"

The consul shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm sorry, old chap, for your sake. Yes, I'm afraid it's the same one; John Solomons don't grow on every bush." The consulate kavass and general factotum appeared, saluting, and Higdale rose.

"Pardon me a moment, Larry. I have an appointment with the governor to get this month's figures on esparto grass—be back in twenty minutes. Make yourself at home, and if you want anything just lift your voice."

Regan nodded gloomily, and the consul disappeared.

Left alone to stare over the bay and curse his unlucky streak, Lawrence Regan followed both pursuits in full measure. He found himself out of a job in a land where no jobs were.

His bad luck was emphasized by the fact that he had resigned a consulate position which did not depend upon the whims of an administration. As a boy, Regan had spent four years in Beirut, where his father had been consul. With his own knowledge of Arabic and Arab customs, Regan had

become a permanent fixture in Alexandria, and promotion had loomed large on his horizon.

Now all this was gone. His sole consolation was what remained of his advance thousand dollars and the fact that he had been submarined out of excellent prospects. His gaze lighted upon the teakwood box, and with a sudden smile he leaned forward.

"Pearls and jewels, eh?" For the tenth time he examined the thing. Higdale's efforts had convinced him that the hole near a corner was a false keyhole, designed to baffle picklocks, and that if there were any means of opening the box, it lay elsewhere.

Why had that box been thrust into his hand amid the hurrying crowd the moment he stepped from the steamer? The customs had been passed—no wild stretch of imagination could explain the incident from that angle. He was unknown here in Tripoli, and he had been unknown aboard the steamer. Higdale was the only person between Gibraltar and Alexandria who knew him by sight. Thus it could not well have been a joke of any sort.

"By Jasper, I'm tempted to take an axe to the thing and see what's in it!" muttered Regan in perplexity. He glanced up to find the kavass scraping and bowing before him.

"Effendi!" exclaimed the Sudanese eagerly. "Higdale effendi left honourable me no orders. One lady down below, sar, to interview these United States consulars in big hell of haste to——"

"Oh, a lady?" chuckled Regan, springing up. "Right-o! I'll be the consul *pro tem.*, boy; take me down at once. Ho, cunning Higdale! I'll teach you to put over a joke on Larry Regan. Good-bye to your consular reputation now, my lad!"

And, still laughing to himself, he followed the kavass.

CHAPTER II

THE BLACK SCARF

Upon reaching the reception-room, Regan bowed to hide his astonishment.

Many times had he viséed passports upon which were the features of Mary Elizabeth Andres, who had been travelling through northern Africa for the past two years, and whose book on Morocco was already a standard work. From the passports Regan knew that she was twenty-four years old and was nominally interested in bettering the condition of Moslem women; also, that she was a woman of rare beauty.

Universally styled the most beautiful American girl in the Levant, newspapers had more than once credited Miss Andres with engagements to petty royalty or nobility of the Near East, but these reports had developed no further. Regan's attitude changed swiftly at sight of her. At the inquiry in her level brown eyes, he saw that she had expected to see Higdale.

"Mr. Higdale has been called away, Miss Andres," he said. "I am Lawrence Regan, his friend, and I'll be only too happy to take his place, if I may."

"Oh!" The doubt passed from her face, and she smilingly held out her hand. "I am very glad to meet you. Do you know if my papers are ready? They were sent up here yesterday as soon as I landed."

"I'll have Higdale send them back properly made out, Miss Andres. I only landed an hour ago myself. You may expect them immediately after luncheon." Regan decided mentally that her photographs had not done her justice—that curl of brown hair, for instance, that quiet, confident air of perfect poise——

"Well, please don't hurry," she was responding. "I came up this morning to make a report of theft and ask for assistance. I don't speak very good Italian, and these officials don't impress me as being first-class detectives. So I——"

"Good! Detective work is where I shine, Miss Andres!" Regan dropped into a chair and leaned forward, laughing. The girl's eyes twinkled response to his smile. "What's lost? Suitcase or trunk?"

"Neither, Mr. Regan. I don't suppose you're conversant with all the details of these Moslem countries, so perhaps I'd better explain in full."

"Of course." And Regan nodded gravely, although the faint twitching of his lips drew a suspicious glance of the brown eyes. "Pray do so."

"Some time ago I was in Morocco. When the Moors were expelled from Spain many of them went to Morocco, which was then, as now, the home of the most bigoted, fanatical, hair-splitting sects of Islam, and which at that time was the centre of Islam in Western Europe. This is in explanation of my story.

"A friend of mine, a French official, presented me with an odd piece of loot taken from one of the sultan's, or, rather, *sherif's* palaces. It was a shawl of very old Spanish lace, said to have been brought over from Andalusia by the expelled Moors, and it was said to have been preserved as a sacred relic. From the documents concerning it, I was led to believe that it had something to do with religious secret societies."

"And this has been stolen from you?"

Regan frowned slightly. "Where?"

"Some time since I landed here; probably last night. It was among my things, in a black box which I have never been able to open."

"Eh?"

Regan's grey eyes widened at thought of the black box which he had left upon the balcony. His quick wit, however, instantly shifted the reason for his evident surprise.

"I don't understand, Miss Andres. You say you've never been able to open this box. How, then, do you know what it contains?"

Mary Andres laughed.

"From the documents that came with it, and which said that it had been the miracle-working scarf or shawl of Iran Abiff, an ancient Arab saint. It was preserved in a box which no one could open. And, by the way, there's a minor secret society of Mohammedans here in north Africa which purports to worship the memory of that saint."

"Yes." Regan nodded abstractedly. "It's composed chiefly of the descendants of those Spanish Moors, and is rather strong between here and Tunis. Probably some of them

had learned about this gift to you, and got after it."

Amazement sprang into the girl's eyes.

"Why—how do you know so much about these Arabs?" she asked quickly. "I didn't think that five white people had ever heard of that society."

"Probably not," chuckled Regan. "I'm one of the five." Inwardly, he was wondering just what to do. If this Miss Andres were telling the truth, that black box upstairs must belong to her.

In such case, however, why had it been taken from her, only to be shoved into his hand as he landed in Tripoli, an utter stranger? That question was a stumbling-block. After all, his box might not be the same one.

"Frankly, the chances are slim for your recovering your shawl," he said slowly. Miss Andres made a little gesture of comprehension.

"Oh, I know! If it's been stolen, especially by any member of that secret order, I'll probably never find it. I came up to report the loss merely in the hope that some chance might give you a clue concerning it."

"And it's a good bet," mused Regan. "I tell you, Miss Andres! In case I were enabled to restore that shawl to you at the same time Higdale sends over your papers, would you mind if the box were smashed?"

Startled, she gazed at him for a few seconds.

"What do you mean? Gracious, you must be a wizard, Mr. Regan! No, of course I care nothing about the box—I had determined to break it open, anyway, to see if that shawl were really inside. Do you honestly think you can find it?"

"H'm! I dishonestly think so." Regan grinned cheerfully. He was very good to look upon when he smiled, and perhaps the girl's eyes dwelt over-long on the clean lines of his face, for suddenly she rose, a tinge of colour in her cheeks.

"Well, if you fulfil your promise, I'll certainly count you a miracle worker!" She held out her hand, laughing. "Good-bye, Mr. Regan. If you're going to be here some time, I trust that we may see you over at the governor's palace—I'm under official protection, you know."

"Thank you, Miss Andres. In that case, I'm sure to be here some time. Perhaps I

may bring Higdale around—er—to-morrow, to pay our respects?”

Their eyes met and held for a moment.

“Too soon altogether, sir,” declared Mary Andres, a dancing merriment in her face. “Anyway, I’m leaving for the interior to-morrow. We’ll be back in a week, I hope. Then, by all means, bring—Mr. Higdale.”

“Take care of yourself up-country,” warned Regan, following her to the door. “It’s pacified in name only, you know.”

“Thank you, I’m quite at home with the natives. Good day!”

“Au revoir,” returned Regan. And, when the door had closed, he lightly blew a kiss in the direction of the street. “By Jasper! There’s a young woman who’s—well, I’d better not say it. Now for that box!”

Turning, he brushed aside the astonished kavass, and in another moment darted out upon the rear balcony. Catching up the teakwood box, he examined it once again.

“Here—why didn’t I think of it before?”

Hastily he got out his penknife, and with swift deft strokes began paring down one of the corner edges from top to bottom of

the box. As he worked at it the voice of Higdale sounded behind him:

"Hello, there! Didn't I see Miss Andres leaving the consulate as I came up?"

"Maybe you did," returned Regan. "Say! Look at this, will you? What does it look like to you?"

He held up the box to the consul, who inspected his work carefully.

"You've laid bare the secret, Larry, This has a lid, after all, eh? Cunningly fitted, then joined with some kind of gum or paste of a black colour, and slowly worked over until it was invisible. Some job, son!"

"And some brainwork to find it, my consular friend. Now to open her."

He worked swiftly, and in five minutes had laid bare a thin line running around the box, where lid joined bottom. As he worked he told of his conversation with Mary Andres, and chuckled over the dismayed objections of Higdale to investigating the box.

As Regan promptly retorted, it was none of the consul's affair. Further, he was abiding strictly by his agreement with Miss Andres, and if the box proved to contain her property, would turn it over to Higdale

for delivery. Having so delivered himself, Regan laid down his knife, caught the two halves of the box in his strong hands, and with one effort wrenched the thing apart.

A sinuous black object fell out upon the marble-topped table.

"By Jasper, it's hers, all right!" cried Regan admiringly.

He held up a large black lace scarf of exquisite workmanship, and shook it free of folds. The teakwood box had an inside lining of cedar, which, with the gum filling of the crack, had kept the interior air-tight. The keyhole, as Higdale had previously thought, was a mere blind.

"Perfectly preserved, and a beauty!" exclaimed the consul, feeling the billowy softness of the black heap. "Know anything about lace? I don't."

"Nor I." And Regan shook his head. "Worth money, I suppose. Exquisite work, Hig! Hello—look at this!"

With a swift gesture he spread out a portion of the scarf. Against the white marble of the table-top every thread and line stood out distinctly clear-cut. With growing excitement in his face, Regan pointed to it.

“Arabic—and old Arabic at that—woven in the pattern! You know, Hig, Arabic is something like shorthand in the way vowels are marked, but they only invented that vowel marking in order to make the reading of the Koran more accurate. Early Arabic has no vowels—and this is darned early. Here, give me a pencil and paper!”

With something of Regan’s excited eagerness reflected in his own features, the consul produced a pencil and an old envelope. Regan drew up a chair and began work, copying the woven inscriptions and jotting in the vowel marks as he proceeded.

While he worked, he marvelled the more at the exquisite fabric before him, and at its perfect preservation. From the black folds there exuded a faint oppressive perfume—an odour unlike anything Regan had ever experienced, even in the wondrous *parfumeries* of the Arabs. He did not like it, and was thankful for the cool sea breeze that filled the balcony of the consulate with a tang of salty air from the harbour.

At last he had worked around the shawl to his starting point, and he pushed back from the table. Higdale leaned forward.

“What is it—verses from the Koran?”

"No. Remember what Miss Andres said about that Arab saint, Iran Abiff? Well, this seems to be a sort of poem, called the Words of Iran Abiff. I wouldn't be a bit surprised, Hig, if these Words had something to do with the workings of the secret Order of the Abiffs, Sons of Iran, as they are called. However, no matter. Listen:

"Give ear to three things!
The advice of an old man,
The murmur of thy slaves,
The silence of strangers.

"Give eye to three things!
The humps of thy camel,
The door of thy harem,
The edge of thy knife.

"Give tongue to three things!
The question of a child,
The sadness of thy friend,
The call to prayer.

"Give hand to three things!
The broken rein,
The word of insult,
The one who asketh thine aid."

Regan finished, and set down the scribbled envelope.

"Nothing very astonishing in all that," exclaimed the consul, palpably disappointed. "I thought it'd be a charm to work miracles, at least."

"Sometimes wonderful things have a very ordinary look," mused Regan, unwonted gravity in his eyes. "Why, for example, should this bit of ordinary Arab philosophy have been woven into so marvellous a fabric as this? H'm! Well, nothing to do but to send it over with the lady's passports."

"We might gum up the box again," suggested the other.

"No, it might look sneaky. I'll put my card in the box, and let it go at that." Regan suited actions to words, then wrapped up the whole affair in the *Nuovo Italia*, and set the package on the table. "Get your papers ready and send 'em all over."

It was nearly midday, and the perspiring consul departed hastily. Regan remained sitting on the balcony, staring gloomily at the bay and the towering castle of the pashas to one side.

Lawrence Regan set no great store by dollars and cents. The torpedoing of all his visions of wealth with the *Re Vittorio* did not trouble him so much as did the loss of a job which had promised keen interest and excitement.

Just at present his mind was chiefly

occupied with Mary Andres and the mysterious link which had arisen between them. The teakwood box had been stolen from her, and had been shoved into his hands—for what reason? And, after its theft, why had not the box been opened?

“The logical conclusion,” he argued with himself, “would be that the thief knew exactly what the box contained, and for reasons of his own placed it in my hands. That is the logical conclusion from the facts, but it’s damned illogical! And that’s about as far as the argument will carry, so let’s have luncheon.”

Higdale was a bachelor, and was delighted at the advent of a friend, for few Americans come to Tripoli—at least as tourists—and those who are tourists are apt to remain afar from the American consulate for reasons which are best understood of world wanderers.

Half an hour later the kavass was dispatched with Miss Andres’s papers and the teakwood box, and returned from the castle with word of their safe delivery. The two friends seated themselves at luncheon, which, for the sake of coolness, was served on the sea balcony.

"I suppose we'll get a note from Miss Andres, thanking us for this wonderful recovery of her treasure," chuckled Higdale.

"You mean I'll get it." And Regan grinned. "You're out of this game, old chap."

"Well, what's on your immediate programme, Larry? If you're out of a job, what will you go into? Reconsider your resignation?"

"Not by a long sight! I'll——"

The kavass appeared with a salaam.

"Effendi," he addressed the consul, "below doors there waits a man, who came, sar, in the automobile of the governor. An Englishman, sar, to interview these consulars——"

"In the governor's car, eh? Who is he?"

The kavass salaamed again, and produced a card. Higdale read it, and handed it over to Regan with an inquiring glance. The card was ornately engraved as follows:

**John Templeton Blackton-Friars,
Bart., M. P.**

**Armour Plate—Ship's Sundries
Blackton-on-Clyde.**

"What the devil!" ejaculated the amused Regan. "A war lord, Higdale—bet you

a dollar! Knighted for his contributions to the war fund, eh? Let's have him up here."

Higdale assented, and directed the kavass to bring the visitor to the balcony. Larry Regan leaned back and lighted his pipe, chuckling anew over that combination of business and visiting card.

Two minutes later the kavass returned and ushered upon the balcony a short pudgy man, whose mild blue eyes stared out from a spiky tangle of grey beard. Sir John Templeton Blackton-Friars wore loudly checked tweeds, a sun helmet wound with a green *pagri*, and carried a green sun umbrella. He made a most amazing figure.

CHAPTER III

BLACKTON-FRIARS

Clinging tightly to his green umbrella, the armour-plate baronet acknowledged his introduction to Regan with a grunt, dropped into a chair, sipped the lemonade set before him, and mopped a perspiring brow. Then in response to the consul's questions he stated his business—and with the first words Regan grinned anew.

"Yes, sir. I 'ave a commission from Parliament, so to speak, to ininvestigate some o' these 'ere pacified Libyan tribes along the Egyptian border. So I've come to you, Mr. Higdale, sir, thinkin' as 'ow you might give me a bit of 'elp."

The consul remained grave with some difficulty. Here was the typical comic character of the Near East—an earnest political investigator walking where angels might fear to tread. Added to this was the

extremely harmless, innocent, confiding appearance of Sir John Blackton-Friars, a pronounced Cockney accent, and garb which proclaimed the low-caste Englishman afar.

"I'm afraid you'd better go to your own consul, Sir John," returned Higdale. "I would hardly be in a position to further you, of course——"

"It ain't that, sir," interrupted the visitor earnestly. "I thought as 'ow you might know of someone as you could recommend, just like that. I don't fancy there 'ere Italians none whatever, sir; with them, sir, you never knows what lays just around the corner, as the old gent said when 'e kissed the 'ousemaid."

"Oh, you want to hire someone, then?"

"Yes, sir, just like that, and money no object." Sir John took from his pocket a clay pipe, blew through the stem, and proceeded to fill it with black tobacco, nor did he continue until he had touched a match to the bowl. Regan flung the consul a look that made Higdale cough violently.

"Yes, sir," repeated the visitor, "I'm a-looking for an honest man, like that 'ere chap Dodgeyerknees. I want 'im white,

and also 'e 'as to know the language o' the country and be able to 'old his own in a scrimmage, like. You see, it's me intention to take the trip in native costume."

Lost to all courtesy and decency in the gale of amusement which swept him, Regan exploded in a burst of laughter. Higdale bit his lips, and gazed at the harbour. Sir John Blackton-Friars glanced from one to the other with wondering eyes.

"I—I beg your pardon," gasped Regan helplessly. "But you—in native costume—with blue eyes——"

The baronet puffed placidly for a moment.

"Then you're werry much mistaken, if I may make so bold as to say so," he retorted calmly, a wheeze in his voice. "Young man, if so be as you never saw a blue-eyed Arab or Berber, nor yet a fair-haired one, I'm sorry for you, I am that! I've spent a good many years o' me life in the East, Mr. Regan, and if I goes on this 'ere trip, I goes as the Hajj Hanifa," and the speaker added, in the true Arab whine, "on whom be the protection and grace of Allah!"

The mirth died out of Regan's features. He leaned forward, his eyes narrowing swiftly. This surprising baronet not only

failed to drop the harsh Arab aspirates, but spoke the language like a native.

"Man, you know Arabic!" he ejaculated, and fell silent.

He was well aware that the other was correct. The Berbers, and even the Touaregs belong to the white race and, despite centuries of the African sun, have a tendency to display true Caucasian eyes and hair.

"I 'ave passed for a native a-fore this," said the visitor complacently. "And I 'ave knelt on the red carpet in the Mosque Kekkia, me young friend."

"I beg your pardon, Sir John," said Regan quietly.

He knew the Mosque Kekkia, in Cairo, and knew that few white men had seen what colour carpet lay within its doors. It came to him swiftly that this amazing Cockney might well belong to the British Secret Service in Africa; that this amusing exterior might well shelter a keen, alert brain. Something in the man's blank blue eyes conveyed to Regan a calm self-confidence which was embarrassing to the American.

"No 'arm done, sir," and the other

nodded acceptance of the apology. "A laugh is a werry good thing in its place, says I, but its place ain't always in public. Now, then, Mr. 'Igdale, do you 'appen to know of anyone as I could get for this 'ere trip?"

"Excuse me," returned the consul, with a glance at Regan. "May I speak to you a moment in private, Larry?"

Regan nodded, rose, and followed the consul to the end of the balcony. Here, out of earshot, Higdale turned.

"How about it? Remember, he said money was no object. If you can control your grins, Larry, this might be a good thing."

This very thought had already occurred to Regan.

"I'll take him on," he assented quietly. "My man Solomon has evidently gone down with the *Re Vittorio*, and there's no mail or message here for me. If anything does turn up, you can probably arrange the matter."

"All right."

Sir John Blackton-Friars heard the proposal of Regan to accompany him with his usual complacent air.

"I had made an engagement with an American," went on Regan, "but since he went down with the *Re Vittorio* and I have had no news, that engagement is automatically cancelled. If you care to accept my services at the same figure——"

"Werry good, werry good," broke in the baronet, with a wave of his pipe. "Wages ain't all to be 'ad in money, as the old gent said when 'e 'ired the new 'ousekeeper. 'Ow soon can you be ready to start, Mr. Regan, sir?"

"Now," said Regan. He was not at all sure, on second thought, that Blackton-Friars could be a Secret-Service man; the fellow was too obviously uneducated, too obviously a man advanced in years. Yet his few spoken words of Arabic had revealed a good deal to Regan's mind.

The baronet rose with a wheezy sigh, and held out his hand to the consul.

"I 'ave a bad peg as bothers me this 'ot weather—well, Mr. 'Igdale, werry 'appy I am to 'ave met you. You 'ad best leave your luggage 'ere, Mr. Regan, sir; 'cause why, you ain't a-going to 'ave much use for it. I'll provide the equipment, sir, or one o' me friends will do so."

"Your bluff is called, Larry," chuckled the consul. "I'll run up and see Miss Andres to-night—any message?"

"Sure—you might tell her to look out for a blue-eyed holy man and a chap named Regan, if she gets up-country. So long, old man! Hold any mail, will you?"

"You bet."

In this sudden but prosaic and unromantic fashion the door of Larry Regan's old life opened, and he walked out of it for ever.

Had he been able to foresee what path lay ahead of him, it is doubtful if he would have followed Blackton-Friars into the waiting automobile with so jaunty an air, or if he would have gazed at the passing Arabs and Italians and Persians and Japanese with such good-humoured boldness in his grey eyes. But no man may foretell his fate, for, as the Moslems say, this lies in the hand of God.

"This 'ere is a werry cosmopolitan place," observed the baronet, as the auto whirred away. "Ain't like the old days when the Turks was 'ere, Mr. Regan, sir! I saw, to-day, a couple o' Hindus what used to be in Suez, in the brass business, and an

old thief of a Persian silversmith as 'ad a stall in Cairo one year—lor'! This 'ere is a werry cosmopolitan place, it is that!"

"Are we going to the castle?" queried Regan.

"No, sir, we ain't. We're a-going to the 'ouse of a werry particular friend o' mine for a brief 'alt; then we're going on to another 'ouse. To-night we go south, and to-morrow we takes to the camels. 'Ave you ever been on a camel's back, Mr. Regan, sir?"

"Yes." Regan made a wry grimace. "If I have to ride a *jemal*, I'd sooner walk, by far."

"No, sir—they'll be *mehara*, the best racers to be 'ad, sir."

Regan received this information with acute relief. Even an Arab will usually walk rather than to ride a *jemal*, or ordinary baggage camel, which pitches like a ship in a gale; a very different motion, indeed, from the regular smooth undulations of a *mehari*.

In the Street of Four Columns the automobile halted before a line of shops. Blackton-Friars descended with some trouble,

owing to the fact that his right leg was an artificial limb, and took Regan's arm with a low word.

"Your best passport 'ere, sir, is me own face. Your next best is to speak Arabic from now on. Remember always that I am Hajj Hanifa, a 'oly man who 'as made the pilgrimage."

"Very well," assented Regan soberly. He began to realize that his guide was not altogether a person to be jested with.

They entered a shop. The Moor in charge silently pointed to a back doorway, through which Blackton-Friars led the way. Regan found himself in a tunnel-like passage, at the end of which was another door. The baronet knocked.

This door was opened by an Arab, whom Regan knew at once to be no Moor but a native of Arabia--and an Arab of consequence. This man, salaaming to Blackton-Friars, led them on into a room that gave upon a court. Here, bidding Regan await him, the baronet passed on into another room. As the door opened, Regan had a glimpse of a tall, venerable man, whose grey beard descended to his waist and who came

forward to greet his guest with surprising warmth. Then the door closed.

Regan found himself alone, with the Arab, who had admitted them, standing at the door. He remained alone for ten minutes, when Blackton-Friars returned, motioned to him to follow, and led the way back to the street.

"Whew!" wheezed the baronet, as they climbed into the car. "That 'ere gent. was a werry good friend o' mine some years ago. Last time I saw 'im was in Mecca."

"Eh? In Mecca!" Regan stared. "Then you've really made the pilgrimage?"

The other nodded assent, but proffered no furthered information.

Rapidly they whirled along the Street of Four Columns, the Arbar Arsat, the very pulse of Tripoli, where flowed a stream drawn from a dozen natives and a hundred tribes. At length, not far from the great arch of Marcus Aurelius at the end of the street, the automobile drew up before a plain, unpretentious house, in the front of which were two niche-like shops and a door.

As they descended, Blackton-Friars

handed the chauffeur a coin, and the car hummed away.

"Now, Mr. Regan, sir," said the baronet, knocking at the door, "you'll see a bit of the real Arab Tripoli!"

The door was opened to them by a Sudanese, who salaamed deeply and ushered them through a dark and narrow passage-way into a wide courtyard, partially shaded by awnings, where fountains played and fruit trees vied with exquisite flowers to shame the blue of the sky and the creamy whiteness of the walls.

From beneath the awning shade, at one side, a tall, hawk-nosed man advanced to greet them, a man of imperious eye, with gold-embroidered *burnous* instead of the usual Tripoline *baracan* of coarse wool. As he approached he raised long, nervously-strong fingers in the triple salute of breast, lips, and brow.

"*B'is salamah!* In the name of God, welcome. All is prepared, worthy friend, and I am to accompany you in person."

Blackton-Friars introduced Regan to the Sheikh Zanzour, and the American was not slow to guess that this Arab was no small personage, even had he not glimpsed the

splendid jewels flashing from the *khanijar*, or long dagger, half-showing at the breast of the white *burnous*.

"A courteous man, speaking our tongue well, and apt to prove a good man of thews," smiled the sheikh as he held the grey eyes of Regan for a moment. "Brother, we shall prove good company. Now, Hajj Hanifa, is it your pleasure to discard the robes of an infidel?"

Blackton-Friars nodded, and his blank blue eyes went to Regan. The latter smiled assent to the unspoken question.

"Yes, if there is to be desert travel, I will wear desert garb."

The baronet nodded in solemn confirmation, and Sheikh Zanzour motioned them to follow him. Five minutes later Regan found himself in a room fitted in European fashion, while a deft Nubian boy was aiding him to bathe, and don the garments of the desert.

Unlike the majority of visitors, who never cease wondering that the Arab wears such heavy clothes beneath a burning sun, Larry Regan knew by experience the method in this madness. As he donned the fine linen tunic and white trousers that reached to his

ankles, and noted the beautifully woven white *burnous* laid ready for him, he wondered a little at their fineness, and he wondered more as the Nubian bound on his feet, sandals of tooled and gilded leather. Yet for all their beauty of make, these loose, close-woven garments provided the best of wear and the best of protection against the sun and sand.

Regan's time of wondering was not yet over, however. When the Nubian re-conducted him to the garden, he started in amazement at the sight of Blackton-Friars, who was walking there with the sheikh. The pudgy figure of the baronet was garbed as an Arab of Arabia, in a *burnous* which must have cost a small fortune, to say nothing of jewelled dagger and pistols peeping from beneath its folds; and, wonder of wonders, was crowned by a turban of green!

That such a turban should be worn by an unbeliever was an unheard-of sacrilege, as Regan well knew; his own was of snowy white. Blackton-Friars, then, must have made the pilgrimage to Mecca, and Sheikh Zanzour must be well aware of the fact.

"By the Prophet, brother, here is a

fine-looking Arab!" exclaimed the sheikh merrily, as Regan joined them. "Come! There is yet one matter to be settled, O Hajj, before we start, and refreshments await us."

Slavery might well be abolished in the new Italian province, but as Regan followed to the interior of the house and passed the salaaming, snowy-clad black men at the doors, he noted the slashed-out strips of flesh from the cheeks, and knew that Sheikh Zanzour at least followed the customs of his fathers.

In a long high-ceiled room, where walls and floor were covered with rich rugs and rare hangings of Bagdad weave, the three reclined on couches, and slaves brought coffee, cigarettes, ices, and delicate cakes. Regan was more and more amazed at the utter complacency of the baronet, for even to Blackton-Friars this place must have seemed a veritable Arabian dream.

"My brother, you sent me a piece of work to do," said the sheikh gravely, "and I entrusted its performance to Halil, my sister's son." He clapped his hands, and in another moment the man Halil entered.

Regan gazed upon such a man as he had

rarely seen—a pure-bred Arab, handsome and regal beyond measure, little more than his equal in years. Had Halil ibn Zoura been clothed in rags instead of as a prince, he would have stood out as a man among thousands. Now, as he greeted them with the three-fold gesture, he appeared as one who awaited tolerantly the questions of his inferiors. His chiselled features were no darker than those of Regan, and if his thin lips betrayed some inner taint of cruelty, they could also laugh as heartily as those of the American.

“Sit, Halil ibn Zoura,” said the sheikh quietly. “Let us hear the result of the mission which was given thee from the Hajj Hanifa.”

Regan fancied he caught a brief glimmer of scorn in the brown eyes as Halil sipped his coffee and glanced at the baronet. It was gone instantly, but it was vaguely disturbing to the American, more especially as, from the very instant of his entrance, Halil’s was the dominant figure of the room.

“I was told to secure a certain thing,” said the younger Arab, his voice sonorous and rich, his brown eyes dwelling on the face of Regan. “I secured it, but at the

same time found myself in great danger. These things took place at the customs house, and there were many black men around me, whom I conjectured to be of the sons of Iran Abiff."

Regan started imperceptibly, but felt convinced that the steady gaze of Halil had not perceived the slight motion of surprise. That the Beni Iran, the Sons of Iran Abiff, referred to members of that secret Order was obvious.

"There was but one thing to do—get rid of the object," went on the Arab calmly. "I did so. I thrust the box into the hands of an infidel as he left the customs house. Let him now state what he did with it, for this is the man."

One slender finger rose and pointed to Regan, who sat as if stunned.

Upon what devilish game of Oriental intrigue had he entered? This Halil was the thief who had obtained the teakwood box, evidently from Miss Andres's trunk. In a flash Regan's brain comprehended all that the words of the Arab portended. And in the same instant he realized that he must step warily, must play the game, must at all costs maintain a cool poise, for it was

becoming increasingly clear that he had entered upon a hazard where the stakes were much greater than the mere lives of men.

With a great effort he held himself in hand, and with cold steadiness his grey eyes met the searching gaze of Halil. In that gaze he read subtle antagonism, the causeless antagonism which up-springs between men at meeting.

"Look 'ere," exclaimed the baronet in English, his blue eyes wide with surprise, "Mr. Regan, 'ave you got that 'ere teakwood box?"

CHAPTER IV

HALIL

"As I left the customs-house a box was shoved into my hand," said Regan quietly, speaking Arabic that the others might understand. "It was a teakwood box, so formed that it could not be opened. Is this the one to which you refer, Halil ibn Zoura? If so, why was the box placed in my hands—stolen property?"

Regan centred all his attention upon Halil, although aware that the baronet and Sheikh Zanzour were watching him in what seemed surprised dismay.

"Stolen property is not the question," and Halil waved his hand scornfully. "I would have been murdered in another five minutes had I kept it. Therefore I placed it in your keeping, having heard you say that you were going to the American consulate, and intended to reclaim the box later. By the will of Allah you were not

murdered, therefore you must have the box now."

Blackton-Friars cleared his throat loudly.

"That box, or its contents, is very important," he said, his wheezy voice somewhat agitated. Halil watched the American with imperious, questioning eyes. Sheikh Zanzour did likewise, his keen hawk face drawn tensely.

Regan smiled in derision. "You place high value on a shawl, my friends," he said, and at the words Halil started. "An American lady, the same from whom you stole the box, Halil ibn Zoura, came to the consulate an hour before luncheon. She reported the loss, describing the box so exactly that I knew it must be hers. Therefore I sent the box back to her at the castle, and it was safely delivered. She said that it held only a scarf."

A low imprecation broke from the sheikh, and Sir John drew forth and filled his clay pipe. Regan fancied that a flicker of satisfaction passed over the features of Halil, unseen by the others. That flicker gave him warning, and he repressed all mention of the Arabic words woven in the lace scarf.

Why had Halil been gratified by the return of the scarf to its owner, and why did he now assume a scowling disappointment? Regan guessed the answer swiftly enough—the man was playing traitor to his uncle. Knowing that Regan was going to the consulate, knowing that Miss Andres would report her loss there, Halil had taken a fairly certain method of doing the task set him, yet returning the scarf to its owner for his own purpose.

"We must set to work within the castle, then," broke out the sheikh. "By the Prophet's beard! To think that we so nearly had won it——"

"No," cut in Blackton-Friars, puffing calmly at his pipe. "No, my brother. We will abandon the whole affair of the scarf for the present. Time presses, and within an hour we must be off. Perhaps your sister's son may yet be able to gain possession of the box."

"Most gladly do I accept the commission," assented Halil—a little too eagerly, thought Regan. "Ere this hour to-morrow I will be bearing the box south, my uncle."

"It is well," said the sheikh curtly, and turned to Regan. "My brother, you are

not aware of our intent or of our purposes?"

Regan lighted one of the admirable cigarettes on the taboret beside him.

"I'm not curious," he returned coolly. "If it please Allah that I be informed, well and good. I am not hired to ask questions."

"And it is not well to hear the name of Allah profaned by the lips of infidels," said Halil, with an air of hauteur. Regan's grey eyes bit out at him.

"It is written, O son of Zoura, that courtesy toward a guest is a virtue," he retorted calmly.

The retort stung deeply—not Halil alone, to whose handsome face mounted a hot flush, but Sheikh Zanzour also. The latter rose.

"My brother," he said to Regan, anger stirring in his voice, "I pray you pardon this wretched kinsman of mine and accept, in token of sorrow for his words, this gift of friendship." He took from his girdle his jewelled *khanijar* and extended it. Regan, who knew the Arab nature thoroughly, took the gift and said nothing in the way of thanks—for to the Arab thanks from one man expresses surprise

that the other man has acted courteously, and courtesy should be accepted as a matter of course.

"As for you, unhappy one," the sheikh turned to his imperious nephew, "go hence and repent the shame thou hast brought upon my house! And see to it that ere to-morrow's evening prayer the teakwood box is upon its way to our hands."

Halil retired respectfully, but he sent Regan one glance which spelled murder.

"The consul has vouched for you," said the baronet calmly to Regan, "and we therefore shall trust you fully. Know, then, that we are engaged upon a mission of diplomacy—a mission which requires delicate handling."

Regan nodded in silence. He had already discovered that this amazing baronet was, as an Englishman, rather *déclassé*, but was, as an Arab-speaking person, a man to be heard with respect and attention. Regan began to think, in fact, that Sir John Templeton Blackton-Friars was a tremendously clever individual.

"As you know," went on the pudgy little man, "the padishah at Constantinople is titular caliph of Islam, but his claims to

be the head of the Moslem faith are absolutely contrary to the Koran, and the Turks are despised by all Arabs. The *Sherif* of Mecca is the only living person who has any rightful claim to the caliphate, and his claims are recognized by the tribes of Arabia and the religious schools of Africa."

Regan nodded again. All this was a matter of common knowledge. He knew, also, that the great secret monastic Order of the Senussiye, which ruled a great portion of central Africa physically, and the whole of Africa spiritually, was unalterably opposed to the Turks as representing the rulers of Islam.

"We have, then, the entire Arab race opposed to the Turks, and the *Sherif* of Mecca as the one lineal descendant of the Prophet," continued Blackton-Friars, puffing calmly at his pipe. "My brother, what is the answer?"

"Eh? You mean——" Regan paused, leaning forward, a swift flame of excitement in his grey eyes. The thing was incredible, impossible—and yet——

"Exactly," assented the Englishman. "The *Sherif* of Mecca set up as caliph of

the holy cities, his sovereignty guaranteed by France and England against foreign interference. What could alone render such a thing impossible?"

"It could not be done," returned Regan slowly, "without the consent of the Senussi-yeh, for this order has practical control of all Moslems in Africa. Were the Senussiyeh to consent, and the tribes of Arabia to consent, why—why," excitedly he lapsed into English, "it would be the biggest political stroke ever pulled off! By Jasper, an independent Arabia would pretty near solve the problem of the Near East!"

There was a moment of tense silence. Then Sheikh Zanzour leaned forward, a flame in his hawk face.

"Only one man could effect this master-stroke, my brother! This man is one who in past times has been a blood brother with the emirs of Arabia, who, better than any other infidel, knows the heart of the Arab, who is on terms of close friendship with the great Moslem universities of Egypt, who has the ability and the talent to effect such a master-stroke, who himself belongs to many of the secret societies of Islam. This man is an Englishman——"

Blackton-Friars waved his pipe and leaned forward swiftly.

"Was an Englishman, you mean, sheikh. He went down with the *Re Vittorio*, and his name was John Solomon." The pudgy little man turned to Regan apologetically. "I must ask your pardon for saying nothing of this at the consulate, but I have taken up this mission in the place of the departed Solomon."

Regan's brows drew down in a frown.

"I was given to understand," he made answer, "that this man Solomon was in very bad repute with the Senussiyeh. How, then, could he deal with them?"

"For the good of Islam," exclaimed the sheikh sonorously, "the Senussiyeh have agreed to waive past differences and to meet him in conference. My brother, the Hajj Hanifa, has taken his place in the endeavour to gain the consent of the Senussiyeh to this political stroke. But one thing stands in the way—the Sons of Iran Abiff. This secret society is composed of fanatical, infidel-hating men who are opposed to any political dealing with unbelievers. Needless to say, they are decried by all good Moslems, for our religion teaches us that Christians

are our brethren. However, this secret society is very strong, and has many adherents among the Touareg tribes of the Sahara. That is all."

The American leaned back on his couch, and lighted another cigarette. He needed the hashish-tainted tobacco to quiet his nerves.

His first thought was that, incredible though it seemed, he and two other men were embarking on a mission which would settle the fate of empires, the fate of half the world perhaps. It was staggering to conceive of.

But as he gazed at the grey-bearded, blue-eyed little man who faced him, the realization grew upon him that this pudgy Cockney baronet was an amazing rather than an amusing man. Sir John had doubtless known all along that Regan was to have met Solomon at the American consulate in Tripoli, and had, without mentioning that he was carrying out the original undertaking, very cleverly managed to enlist the American's services. Thus had the Beni Iran suspected Solomon's mission, they would consider it to have died with Solomon.

"Thank you for the information, my friends," said Regan gravely. "You may count upon me, of course, to the limit. I presume the Italians favour this scheme?"

Sheikh Zanzour rose. "The Italians," he said dryly, "are placing every facility at our disposal. I will go now and assure myself that our automobile is waiting. We shall meet my camels at a place appointed to-night."

The tall sheikh left the room. No sooner had he done so than Blackton-Friars leaned forward and touched Regan's knee swiftly.

"Mr. Regan, sir! What was in that 'ere teakwood box?"

Regan gazed quizzically into the mild blue eyes.

"I didn't say anything about opening it," he evaded.

"And a werry good job as you didn't, sir. Not with that danged Halil around—I 'ave me eye on that beggar! But you opened it?"

Regan nodded.

"Yes. Tell me, first, about this Halil. You don't trust him?"

"No, sir. The sheikh don't know it, but

I'm werry much afraid as 'ow Halil is one o' them 'ere Beni Iran. Was there a scarf in that 'ere box, sir?"

"Yes, a scarf with ancient Arabic characters woven in it. Here is a copy of the thing." Regan had transferred his personal effects to his new garments, and now held out the envelope on which he had jotted down the Words of Iran Abiff.

He was past being surprised at anything this pudgy little man did, consequently he made no comment when Sir John ran his eye over the pothooks as though they had been English characters, and handed back the paper with a nod.

"You'd best learn that 'ere thing by 'eart, sir, and destroy it. Whew! There ain't no telling what lies ahead of us, but I'm werry sorry as that 'ere scarf 'as got away from us."

"Perhaps our friend Halil wanted it to get away," suggested Regan softly. The blank blue eyes met his, and widened a trifle.

"Perhaps 'e did, sir, and a werry promising young man 'e is. You learn them Words of Iran Abiff, Mr. Regan,

sir. If so be as you 'as to pass for a Son of Iran, they'll be mortal 'andy to know."

Five minutes later, in a large car fitted for desert travel, and with a *burnoused* Nubian at the wheel, the three whirled out of Tripoli by the great south road that leads to the Sudan. Regan glanced back at the white walls, the rounded domes, the minarets that speared upward into the blue sky—then it all vanished. Through a forest of palms, imperiously scattering Arab, and Jew, and Berber, passing ancient ruins and verdant orange trees, the car plunged headlong toward the great desert.

With his luxury behind him, the sheikh became once more a desert dweller, silent, hawk-eyed, content. Blackton-Friars eased his artificial limb—he had lost a leg several years previously, it appeared—and smoked his cutty pipe in placid peace.

Regan, with the eager virility that spurred his soul, enjoyed every moment, every scene, every red-fezzed Arab or swart Italian passer-by. The long lanes of trees fled away behind, the sandy palm groves faded into the distance, a winding monster caravan of a

hundred-odd camels died out in the background—and ahead lay the billowy sandwastes of the Sahara, red-gold in the sunset, beautiful, terrible, limitless.

Here the car halted, and the Nubian chauffeur deflated the tyres against the loose sandy road ahead. Over an alcohol lamp the sheikh brewed tea, with a touch of mint and sugar; this, with dates and bread of guinea corn, made the desert meal. As the red sun ball glowered on the horizon rim, the sheikh and the Nubian set robes from the car on the clean sand to one side, washed in the sand as is prescribed by the Prophet, and bowed themselves toward the east in the prayer of evening.

“By Jasper!” muttered Regan to the baronet, as they sat apart, smoking. “It makes a fellow realize things, this desert. There’s a great deal of good in Islam and its faith, Sir John.”

The other nodded slowly.

“Yes, Mr. Regan, sir; werry true. A good Moslem, a good Jew, a good Christian—they’re all werry much alike, says I. This ’ere religion of Islam springs right out o’ the ground, so to speak; indigenous it is, just like that, and it ’as its good

points. But, Mr. Regan, if I may make so bold, keep your eye peeled for that 'ere Halil. If there's any man what's apt to do werry surprising things, it's 'im, as the old gent said when 'e caught the second butler a-kissin' of the 'ousemaid."

Regan grinned.

CHAPTER V

THE AISSAOUA

The *fonduk*, or caravanserai, of Bu Sef was no more than a walled square, with an arched corridor around the inside. The automobile reached it at midnight, and drew up under the rustling palms. Over the place hung a cloud of dust, a faint taint of incense, a rhythm of men's voices chanting. As the auto drew up before the high barred gates an exclamation of annoyance broke from the sheikh:

"By the beard of Mohammed! Instead of peace and silence and a quiet departure, we find those accursed Aissaouas! May they and their ancestors and their descendants alike be triply chained in Jehannum!"

Regan could understand this imprecation fully. The Aissaouas formed a guild of magicians, with headquarters at Meknez in Morocco. Born nomads, they could be

found everywhere, at all times, holding wild orgies. Claiming immunity from the ills of humanity, their feats were, in truth, wonderful things.

"Will you come in with me?" Sheikh Zanzour turned as the heavy gates were swung open. "O Hajj, I may need thy influence to get my men and camels away from this magic-working horde!"

Regan followed them just inside the gates, and waited there as they passed on into the throng. The automobile turned instantly, and hummed away into the night, back to Tripoli.

The green turban of the baronet and the gold-threaded *haik* of the sheikh were speedily lost in the tumult. In the centre of the square courtyard burned a fire, over which was a large vessel pouring forth the fumes of incense. Near this sat the band of musicians, playing fifes, cymbals, and drums, in a wild ecstasy. Around these danced weird figures, the Aissaouas themselves. Thronging the edges, forming a packed mass of humanity and camels and sheep, the guests of the *fonduk* watched the night-long revelry.

Revelry it was, in very truth. As he

stood there, waiting, Regan saw man after man of the dancers approach the fire, inhale deeply of the incense fumes, then pass on in the dance. They did strange things—chewed and swallowed thorns and glass, played with snakes, tossed off rank poisons, stabbed themselves relentlessly with daggers.

One of these men, not far from the gates, particularly drew the attention of Larry Regan. He was a large, splendidly formed man, half-naked, and seemed less under the general intoxication than the rest of the wild mob. In one hand he held a brass bowl, into which he gazed from time to time for some purpose unknown to the American; in the other hand he held a keen, glittering knife, which at intervals he ran clean through the flesh of his cheeks, shoulders, and thighs until the blood pooled at his feet.

Suddenly this man whirled and walked toward the gates. At sight of the American he stopped short, stared for a long moment; then, with a wild laugh, tossed his knife into air. Instinctively Regan followed the knife with his gaze, but it was gone. Nor did it descend again.

“Look well, O infidel!” The Aissaoua

strode closer, gazing steadily at Regan, and spoke in a soft piercing tone. He drew the edge of his hand over cheeks and shoulder and thigh, wiping away the blood. Where had been raw gapings of wounds the firelight now disclosed firm flesh. "Ho, infidel! Can thy god perform such wonders?"

"Neither my god nor thine is the servant of tricksters," said Regan calmly. A flash of anger filled the dark features of the Aissaoua.

"Tricksters? In the name of Allah! Look you here, infidel, and believe!"

He held up the brass bowl, turning so that the firelight fell into it.

Now, whether this were desert magic or the gropings of his own imagination inspired by vagrant fumes from that incense pot, Regan looked into the brass bowl and saw there a picture.

The wizardry of the Eastern lands is a subtle thing, which many men decry with scorn yet cannot duplicate, and which many more men acknowledge, even as they acknowledge the sky and the sea and the blade of wheat—a thing to be accepted, not to be explained.

The picture upon which Regan gazed was a scene in miniature.

In a room, through the open windows of which could be seen the glittering lights of Tripoli harbour, and upon whose wall hung a large picture of Italy's king, two people sat talking across a table. Facing Regan was Mary Elizabeth Andres; he could not suppress the word of surprise which rose to his lips at recognition of her.

The man, wearing evening dress, who sat with his face half-hidden, was at first glance unknown to the American. Upon the table, between the two, however, was an open box, and as Regan gazed he saw Miss Andres lift from the box and shake gently over the table-top a black lace scarf—the miracle-working scarf of Iran Abiff! There could be no mistake. Then the man leaned forward, and Regan caught sight of the regal handsome profile of Halil ibn Zoura. Amazing as it seemed, incredible though this Arab's vesture might be—none the less Regan was gazing at Halil in conventional garb. Abruptly the picture faded away. Regan opened his mouth to speak, but was checked by the sight of another picture

suddenly staring at him from the brass bowl.

A desert scene this—the desert night, with Orion uprising magnificently in the east. Regan saw two figures dimly lighted by the flicker of a camel-dung fire. Both men, these, in loose desert robes, their faces hidden by swathing cloths; men such as Regan had never seen, but had often heard described.

By the masks, the glitter of chain-mail, the ancient two-edged Crusaders' swords that hung across their shoulders, the daggers that hung by bands from their wrists, the heavy jade fighting stones upon their left arms—by these things Regan knew the two men for Touaregs, most dreaded of desert warriors. The picture faded.

"In the name of Allah, infidel! Is this a trick?" exclaimed the Aissaoua triumphantly, staring fixedly at Regan.

The latter was astounded, wordless.

"What it was I know not," he returned slowly. "Yet it was wonderful. Who were those Touaregs whom you showed me?"

The Aissaoua tossed the bowl into the air—and the bowl disappeared.

"That question is one which I expected,"

he answered calmly. "Their names I could not tell unless you had the knowledge which no infidel may have."

"And what knowledge is this?" queried Regan. For all his intentness upon the play of magic he watched the man narrowly, and did not fail to note that the brown hand was creeping under the girdle, and that the Aissaoua was taking slow steps forward.

"The knowledge of the Words of Iran Abiff," and the nomad smiled grimly, a sudden baleful fire in his steady eyes.

Regan started. The fire in the courtyard flared up, and by the flicker he caught a glint of steel in the nomad's hand. Too late he realized that for some reason this wizard meant mischief.

"The Words of Iran Abiff?" he repeated, striving hard to recall the phrases he had deciphered. Sir John's words recurred to him—that he had best destroy the paper. Also, that those sayings were doubtless a form of password among the Beni Iran. And Regan did not doubt that this wizard facing him was one of the Sons of Iran.

"There are four of those Words, O

Aissaoua," he said quietly, "and have a care lest I need the fourth, and last Word, and lay my hand upon thy names of insult! I think the touch of a heavy hand would speedily make thee forgetful of that dagger."

With a low exclamation of amazement, the Aissaoua thrust back his dagger and stood staring anew at Regan.

"There is some mistake here!" he cried out. "How is this? I was ordered to slay thee as an infidel and a foe, yet—of a truth, brother, knowest thou the Words?"

Regan, who was unarmed, was quick to comprehend. For some mysterious reason, fanatic or otherwise, this wizard had meant to kill him, yet the fact of knowing those proverbs had struck the man with amazement.

"Of a truth I know them," he said, smiling. "How runs the first?"

"Give ear unto three things!
The advice of an old man,
The murmur of thy slaves,
The silence of strangers!

You, O Aissaoua, should have heeded the silence of the stranger, for by imposing

speech and magic upon me, an error was nearly made that would have cost thee dearly. Go back to your fellows, you dog among dogs, unless you want to feel the whip!"

As Regan snapped forth the last words, he saw the wizard shrink from him. Then, cringing, the man held out both palms imploringly.

"O brother, pardon me in the name of Allah the compassionate, the merciful! Nay, here there is some mistake! Brother, place your palms in mine in the grip of forgiveness, in the name of Allah!"

The American thought that he caught a shuffle of feet on the sand behind him, but a backward glance showed him that the gateway was deserted. On the far side of the courtyard he could make out a tumult amid the shadowy crowd, and guessed that Sir John and the sheikh were rousing their men and camels.

Turning again to the Aissaoua, Regan held out his hands, setting his palms in those of the Arab—and watching the man narrowly the while. It was in his mind to detain this would-be assassin in talk until Sheikh Zanzour could come up and question

the man. That remark about having been hired to slay Regan was ominous.

This intention of Regan bore no fruit, however, for excellent reasons. As the palms of the two men touched, the swarthy fingers of the wizard clutched down upon those of the American. At the same instant Regan again caught the sound of feet at his back—and was trapped.

Before he could wrest free from that grip, before he could even cry out, a cruel cord slipped about his wrists and drew them together with fearful force, cutting into the flesh. A cloth was flung over his head, and a pungent, sweetish odour assailed his nostrils. Another cord encircled his ankles.

Helpless though he was, Regan twisted his body to one side, struck out with both arms together, and then went down under the weight of bodies. As he lay on the sand that sweetish odour crept to his brain, and his senses reeled into sleep. His last thought was that he had been deftly trapped and drugged.

Twenty minutes later Sheikh Zanzour and Sir John Blackton-Friars reached the gates of the *fonduk* with half a dozen men and a

string of black *mehara*, or racing camels, following them. There was no trace of Larry Regan to be found.

It was something like ten hours before the American recovered from the effects of the soporific drug which had stupefied him. He wakened groggily, as wakens a man drunk. It was a long while before his brain could obtain any grip on things.

Slowly, gradually, comprehension and remembrance came to him. He was upon the surging back of a *mehari*, and the morning was half-spent. Around was the desert, vast and limitless sand dunes against the horizon. Ahead of his beast moved another, topped by a bundled figure, and behind him was a third. The three were moving rapidly along a caravan trail stamped ten feet deep in the sand by countless hoofs.

Glancing at the rider behind him, Regan met a wave of the hand and recognized the Aissaoua magician. This aided him to remembrance. A goatskin water bottle hung at his knee, and he drank thirstily.

In half an hour Regan was himself again; the effects of that strange drug vanished

almost as quickly as they had come. He found that he was unbound, unrobbed; nothing in his pockets had been touched. His first move was to tear up the paper bearing the Words of Iran Abiff, and to swallow the fragments. Throw them away he dared not, for behind him was a pair of keen eyes.

He rode onward in a kind of blind helplessness. Why he had thus been kidnapped, why the wizard had tried to kill him, whether he had witnessed real magic or had been in a hypnotic state on the evening previous—these things existed in his mind merely as questions whose answers would come in time. It did not matter particularly. He gathered all his energy to fight off the nausea induced by the swinging regular motion of the racer, and succeeded. The three camels plunged onward along that deeply trodden lane in the sand which seemed to lead nowhere, to have neither end nor beginning save in the sun-smitten wastes around—the wastes of nothingness and of eternity.

Presently, Regan released the cords which held him in the saddle, and, the feeling of nausea gone, ate of the dates which hung in their own bag beside the goatskin. The

motion of the racer was less tiring than that of a horse, and Regan rather enjoyed it. After a time he noticed that the guide was heading for a thin grey smoke tracery that rose against the eastern horizon.

What of the baronet and Sheikh Zanzour? That question did not trouble Regan greatly. By an accident of fate, or rather of design, he was now thrown entirely upon his own resources. The other two were quite capable of taking care of themselves, and Regan considered that it would require all his ability to perform the same function for himself without wasting thought upon the others. He did wonder, however, if Halil had been at the castle the preceding evening, as had been suggested by the magic-bowl scene.

Presently, as they topped a high sand dune, Regan descried a little clump of figures ahead—whence that trickle of smoke had arisen. A rendezvous, then! Where he was Regan had no idea, except that since his awakening they had been heading eastward. But, a little later, new wonder and amazement came upon him.

The clump of figures on the sand disclosed itself as two camels, hobbled, and two

men, who watched the approach of the three *mehara* as though in expectation. Both wore the *litham* or cloth mask of Touaregs; that of one was white, tokening that he was a slave. Both men bore long two-handed swords over their shoulders, and, upon closer approach, Regan recognized the two Touaregs whom he had seen in the brass bowl—saturnine men, fierce-eyed, lithe of motion, true primitive warriors both.

The Aissaoua surged up alongside Regan, hissed sharply, let loose his rein as did Regan, and the guide and the three *mehara* came to a halt.

"*Kh! Kh! Kneel!*"

The three beasts knelt. With a sigh of relief Regan slipped to the sand, amid an exchange of "*B'is salamahs!*" from the Touaregs and Aissaouas. Here had four men met, as it were, in limitless space by appointment, yet they gravely exchanged the *temenah*, the three-fold greeting, and stood silently for a moment. The fierce eyes of the Touareg freeman, who, to judge from his garb and weapons, was of high caste, flitted from Regan to the Aissaoua.

"O wizard," he said, "was it ordered thee to bring this infidel hither?"

"Nay, brother," returned the magician, shrinking slightly from the stern warrior. "When I was about to slay him this man repeated to me the first Words of Iran Abiff. As time pressed I drugged him and brought him hither to await your commands."

The tall Touareg gestured with his hand. His slave stepped out of earshot, as did the Aissaoua's guide. Regan found himself facing the swathed figure of the Touareg, and caught the glitter of chain-mail beneath the warrior's *burnous*. He saw the right hand of the Touareg flip back a fold of the garment, and the heavy jade fighting stone leaped into sight.

In that instant the American knew that the crisis was upon him. One course only would avail him—that of boldness. He must lie boldly, he must seize at every thread which offered to his hand, he must use those words of the Moslem holy man to their uttermost if he were to save his life from that fighting stone. Reading all this in the intent gaze of the Touareg, he waited for no questions, but attacked swiftly, a smile curving his lips.

"Truly this Aissaoua is a wizard, O sheikh! Instead of slaying me, he read my thoughts, and knew that I bore a message to you. Shall I deliver this message or no?"

Confidently Regan gazed into the Touareg's eyes, and awaited the result of this cool bit of bluff. The chance, he knew well, was slim.

"In the name of the Compassionate!" exclaimed the Touareg sharply in that mingling of Arabic and Berber which is spoken by the nomads. "You are not of the Beni Iran, infidel!"

"I am not," Regan returned promptly, confidently.

Could he succeed in carrying off this lie before the Touareg could ask any embarrassing questions—could he amaze the other man sufficiently to drive suspicion away, the result might justify the means. The present situation presented no great hopes. Regan knew that his only chance lay in using wit enough to twist that situation to his own ends.

And in this luck served him. He made a shrewd guess that Halil was the arch foe, and that Halil had made counter plans against the mission of John Solomon,

which was now being carried out by Blackton-Friars.

"My message is from one named Halil ibn Zoura," he continued, assuming an air of arrogance which he was far from feeling. "I am not of the Beni Iran, but I was given the Words of Iran in order that I might reach you safely with the message."

At the name of Halil the scowling eye cleared.

"Then you are welcome, infidel," said the Touareg. "Are not Halil and Sheikh Mansour of the Asgars blood brethren? Speak now your message, and fear not."

"I have not yet feared, O sheikh," and Regan smiled a little scornfully, so that the eyes of the "God-forsaken", as the Arabs term the Touaregs, gleamed approval. "This is my message: The man Solomon is dead, and his mission is dead with him. Sheikh Zanzour rides to the south to announce this to the Senussiyeh. Halil says that he himself follows his uncle, bearing the scarf of Iran Abiff; may he rest in paradise!"

Sheikh Mansour turned, eyeing the horizon reflectively.

Regan did not doubt that before him stood the head chief of the Asgar tribe of

the Touareg confederation—that relentless race who rule the Sahara as their own and each year take tribute of millions from the caravaneers. Divided into rigid feudal castes of nobles, half-bloods, serfs, and black slaves, these Touaregs are neither Arab nor Berber; they are chiefly Berber, and stern men. It is they who wear to this day the arms and armour of St. Louis and his Crusaders, and whose masks, made necessary by the terrible sand storms of the inner Sahara, add to their name of terror.

“Did Halil confirm the meeting place which he appointed?” asked Mansour slowly.

“Yes,” returned Regan, not knowing what else to say.

“Good!” From beneath the sheikh’s mask rippled a laugh that was grim and mirthless. “Then you shall ride with me to the meeting, brother. Come!”

CHAPTER VI

THE HIDDEN WELL

Regan could only play for time and await developments. These were swift in coming.

After Sheikh Mansour had uttered a few words to the Aissaoua, the latter called his guide and rode away without further word to Regan. The two were headed east. While they rode off the Touareg stood gazing after them. When they had vanished he turned to the American.

"What said Halil of the woman he was to bring?"

"Of this he said naught," returned Regan, on dangerous ground now.

"Saw you anything of a Feringi woman with eyes like brown jewels and grown hair that is half-reddened with gold? The same, saith rumour, who bore the sacred shawl.

Halil swore by the three-fold oath that more beautiful woman had never lived, though she might refuse to enter my harem at the first."

The heart of Regan went cold within him at thought of Mary Andres. So Halil was to bring her—where? To the rendezvous with this Touareg as a bride?

"There are many such women among the Feringi, O sheikh," answered Regan. "This one I saw not. Halil spoke naught of her, for that is the Arab way. Yet how he could bring her through the Italian guards I know not!"

"Halil can defeat the infidels, for he has lived among them," returned the sheikh, and signed his man to approach. "Let us go."

Like the countryman, the *paysan* the world over, was this Sheikh Mansour. Though a fierce man, a Touareg chieftain, the things of the outside world awed him, and he spoke of this Feringi woman as a child speaks of some greatly desired wonder.

None the less, Regan knew only too well that Mary Andres stood in acute peril. Many are the white women who have been lured or forced into the desert, never to

return. That Halil ibn Zoura could bring this high-spirited, fearless girl beyond the safety zone of Italian protection, through guile or treachery, was but too likely.

"By Jasper!" thought Regan to himself. "I'm not so sure things have turned out badly, after all, since I'm going to this unknown rendezvous. H'm! I was a fool not to have a revolver in my pocket."

That day Sheikh Mansour rode by a zigzag course over untracked desert, whether to throw Regan astray as to direction, or whether following some trail known only to himself, there was no saying. By mid-afternoon Regan had lost all sense of their route, and knew only that they had come east and south.

The sand desert was giving place to the rock desert also. Instead of the long endless billows of yellow sand, clay and rock now predominated, and on the southern horizon were jutting long rock masses into the sky. On every hand were thorn plants, rank stretches of grass, and the slender desert lily intermingled with the poisonous milk shrubs. Imperceptibly this change was coming about, but by sunset the sand was

gone. The Great Desert is only composed, in part, of sand.

Halting only for a meal and a smoke, they travelled on into the night, Regan dozing at times as he rode. During that long ride he gained more information from Mansour, who seemed puzzled, and with good reason, over the supposed introduction of an infidel into this plot by Halil. Being puzzled, Mansour was willing to talk, striving to get some hint of explanation from Regan; but the American was wary enough to make his lies hold water.

In this fashion Regan learned that Sheikh Zanzour, who represented the town Arabs, or Moors, as they are usually called, and who was held in high religious respect from Morocco to Egypt, was interested with the Senussiye in placing Arabia under the rule of the *Sherif* of Mecca. Halil had betrayed the scheme to the Beni Iran, and this powerful secret society was doing its best to defeat it. Opportunely the scarf of Iran Abiff had turned up, and the Beni Iran wanted this scarf; it was a holy relic of their founder, and if it would perform an iota of the miracles attributed to it, their power would be vastly increased. In

short, the Beni Iran were throwing down the gauntlet to the Senussiye.

It was this combination of world politics, petty intrigue, and religious jealousy which had drawn Mary Andres into the net. Whether he could cut that net Regan did not know, but he meant to try.

Shortly after midnight they reached the rendezvous. This proved to be a deep and narrow valley under the north side of a long rock mountain, and Mansour halted beside an up-curving pinnacle of rock shaped not unlike a sabre. Five minutes later all three travellers were asleep near the weary beasts.

Regan awakened with the dawn. He sat up, and at the slight motion saw the desert-bred Touaregs roll over and spring erect, grasping at their weapons. Regan grinned.

"Allah be good to thee, sheikh! And may thy conscience be eased."

Mansour, masked even in sleep, grunted.

"In the desert there is no disease save the sword, infidel."

The American nodded. More than once during that ride he had considered what might be done by a weaponless man, for

he had only the jewelled *khanijar* given him by Sheikh Zanzour; but he had eaten and drunk with these Touaregs, and it went against the grain to make an attempt upon them—unless necessity spurred him.

"I have eaten your salt, Sheikh Mansour," he said quietly, and no more words passed.

Now Regan had heard it said that a Touareg can find water anywhere within a day's ride, for on the desert water means life and a well may win a battle. In this narrow valley where there was seemingly no water, he saw the two Touaregs cross to a tangle of rocks, heave aside several of the smaller blocks, pull away a covering of brush and hides, and disclose a small well.

"Here we await Halil," exclaimed the sheikh.

The nomad has no use for tents. With the *mehara* hobbled, the Touareg serf went climbing to the rocks above and remained there on watch. Regan and the sheikh stretched their *burnouses* on spears taken from the saddles of the Touaregs, and then rested in the shade. And as they lay,

talking and smoking, Regan made a fresh discovery.

A most unpleasant one it was, to the effect that Sheikh Zanzour and his men, including the fat infidel with the grey beard, were also to be fetched here. A cloud of the Asgar Touaregs had been stretched out to catch Solomon, and since the Aissaouas had borne out Regan's statement that Solomon was dead, and that an unknown infidel rode with Sheikh Zanzour, Mansour had determined to round up everyone within reach.

Regretfully, Regan felt himself compelled to take the initiative against this Sheikh Mansour. The Asgar chieftain was a terribly dangerous potentiality, for around him revolved the Asgar tribe, and Halil, with bribes of white brides and with infernal cleverness, was pulling the strings of these puppets. Mansour might represent the Beni Iran, but Regan had a shrewd idea that Sheikh Zanzour's nephew was no puppet himself.

From Mansour, Regan learned that John Solomon had been well known to all of the principal Moslems, either personally or at second-hand. He was described as a

moon-faced man with an exceedingly sharp tongue.

"Well," decided the American, as his one chance took shape in his mind, "there is no way out save in action. Thank Heaven I'm as dark as a Touareg with this bronze!"

A half-hour before sunset Regan knew that the gods favoured him, for the slave on the hillside uttered a shout and began to descend. The moment had come.

Sheikh Mansour rose and stood before his *burnous* tent, peering up the valley. Regan joined him. For an instant he hesitated; then, stepping beside the sheikh, calmly swung his fist to the Touareg's concealed jaw, all his weight in the blow. It was a cold and cruel thing, but it was Regan's one chance.

They were in full view of the Touareg slave, who gave vent to an angry shout and hastened his descent. Regan knelt above the senseless sheikh, searching for weapons.

The search produced only two old flint-lock pistols, unprimed, two razor-edged knives, another up the sheikh's right arm, and the jade fighting-stone on the left wrist. Disdaining all these, Regan caught

up the two-handed sword that supported one corner of the sheikh's *burnous*, and waited.

The slave came in on the run, swinging his own sword, and Regan smiled at the absurdity of such a combat. It was absurd, yet tragic. If he failed to stop the mouth of this slave, his plan would fall to pieces and he would be lost. And as yet his plan was a hazy one, dependent largely upon the arrival of Halil.

With a rush, the slave leaped in, his sword flashing. The conflict was wordless, brief. Regan felt as though attacked by a wild beast, so deadly and ferocious was the Touareg's effort. Knowing that he would be bested at sword-play, Regan whirled the heavy blade about his head, and loosed it, point first, as the slave threw up both arms to strike. The sword-point caught the Touareg full in the throat.

An hour after these things the sun was under the horizon of rock waste, but the afterglow lingered ruddily upon two figures sitting in the valley near the well.

One was that of a bound and gagged man, nearly naked, who stared with terrible

dumb hatred at his captor. The latter wore the garments of Sheikh Mansour of the Asgar Touaregs, but over the cloth face-mask peered steady grey eyes; a minor detail this which the night would hide. The Touareg slave's body was covered with a *burnous*.

Down the rock valley to this scene, then, came a file of *mehara*—pure black ones, the finest racing breed in Africa. At sight of them, Regan stirred the helpless sheikh with his foot, and laughed.

“O Mansour, is not a black camel the sign of death! This scheme of thine is like to have an ill ending, for but one man has died, yet here are ten black camels!”

Having primed the two flint-lock pistols, Regan awaited his visitors. The swift desert darkness came down while they drew near, and as the pale stars deepened in the sky, the string of racers halted and knelt, fifty feet away. The leader of the party dismounted and strode toward Regan, and the voice of Halil ibn Zoura sounded vibrantly:

“In the name of Allah! Is it thou, Mansour?”

"Nay, O Halil, if such be thy name. Sheikh Mansour is ill of a dagger thrust, and I, Omar, the son of Abdul, am sent in his place. I found a desert thief nearby, who slew my servant and sought to slay me, but he lies bound at my feet."

There was a momentary silence. Even should fires be lighted, Regan relied on the fact that Halil had probably never seen the face of Mansour lacking its mask.

"How shall I know if thy words hold truth?" queried Halil.

"Even as I may judge of thine," answered Regan at a venture, "if thou are of the Sons of Iran."

Without hesitation the Arab repeated the first of the Words of Iran Abiff, and Regan followed suit with the second verse. Halil promptly ordered his men to water the camels and make camp, then advanced and squatted in the sand a yard from Regan.

"This captive dog must die," and he pointed to the sheikh. "He will hear our talk."

"Have no fear," returned Regan. "He dies in Allah's good time, but first I will torture him a little. Speak! You have

the Feringi woman? She with the flame-gold hair?"

"Aye, she is safe and unharmed. What news from the *fonduk* of Bu Sef?"

"All has gone as ordered. In another day the prisoners will be here."

A savage exclamation broke from the Arab.

"Prisoners? Did not the sheikh agree to slay them all?"

Regan was somewhat taken aback by this display of affection toward Sheikh Zanzour, until he realized that Halil's plotting knew no scruples. Zanzour was to have been slain, then!

"Aye, Halil. But two of thy uncle's men were sons of Iran, whom we could not slay."

"True," agreed the other sullenly, and Regan breathed freely again. "Is Sheikh Mansour close at hand? My camels are weary."

"A day's journey from here, brother. To-morrow night, when the Asgar men come with the captives, we will leave."

Regan gathered that the new arrivals had already said their evening prayer, for now fires of thorn shrub and camel-dung

began to glow, and one of Halil's men brought dates, bread, and couscous. The American munched a handful of dates reflectively.

He knew that by daylight he could not possibly maintain his pose of Touareg before these men. While he had thorough acquaintance with the language, he knew little of the customs, especially those of religion. To attempt the inevitable prayers, with their prescribed ritual, would betray him before the next day was an hour old. Therefore, if he were to carry out the plan which had come to him, he must do it swiftly.

When, a few moments later, one of the men fetched them a skin of water, he knew that once more fate was furthering his plans.

"One of you on guard!" commanded Halil. "And disturb me not until dawn."

"Hold!" exclaimed Regan, seizing the opportunity at once. "I have been resting most of this day—one of you keep watch until midnight, brother, when I will guard until the dawn, by Allah's will."

"May the Compassionate requite you, Omar ibn Abdul!" murmured the grateful

Arab, as he withdrew to join his comrades, dim shadows in the starlit darkness.

Regan took no chances. With one of the long flint-lock pistols reversed in his hand, he leaned forward and struck Halil a single blow behind the ear. The regal plotter fell forward without a sound, and in five minutes was fast bound and gagged beside Sheikh Mansour beneath a *burnous*. From Halil's pocket Regan took an excellent automatic, with a spare clip of cartridges. Then for a little he sat smoking.

Knocking out his pipe and replacing his mask, Regan rose and sauntered toward the encamped Arabs. Most of these were already asleep, for they had travelled hard and fast. Regan approached the one who stood on guard, and was saluted ceremoniously. The Arab fears the Touareg.

"Allah be good to thee, brother," he said quietly. "Thy leader has sent a word by my mouth to this Feringi woman. Show her to me."

"She lies beneath the white *burnous*, brother," was the reply.

Regan stepped over to the group of propped-up *burnouses*, efficient shelters against the heavy dew of the desert. Just beyond these

were hobbled the *mehara*, but the three racers which had brought Regan and the Touaregs were on the other side of Regan's little camp.

"Miss Andres!" Leaning over beside the white *burnous*, Regan formed the English words with cautious lips: "Is that you?"

The white *burnous* stirred. From beneath its folds Regan caught a glimpse of the girl's white face staring at him in the dim starlight.

"Be quiet!" he continued swiftly. "This is Larry Regan. At midnight I will be on guard. When you see a match flash steal quietly out and join me. Understand?"

The girl gasped. Then her whispered "Yes, God bless you!" reached him, and he turned away and strode back to his own camp.

There was work to do—the water-bottles to be filled, two of the Touareg's racers to be prepared for the escape, the little bags of dates and meal made ready: but Regan accomplished it in silence. He laughed to himself as he concluded.

"*Splendide audax!* By Jasper, who'd have thought it possible? Here an American

walks into the Sahara, kills a Touareg with his own weapon, captures a Touareg chief, runs a bluff at being a Touareg, and gets away with it long enough to knock out that Arab leader, takes the heroine, and walks away! Whew! Wonder what old Higdale would say if he could see me now? It ought to be in a story—only in a story it wouldn't happen so easily. To make a good clean-up I ought to get that lace shawl, but I guess I'll stand pat."

Fortune had aided him, of course; so had the utter audacity of his emprise. Without reckoning consequences he had played heavily the cards that fell into his hand, but he was now at a point where he could do no more. The morrow would find him in the trackless desert, ignorant even of directions. His best chance lay in killing Mansour and Halil as they lay, but this, Regan could not so much as consider.

A little while before midnight he relieved the Arab on guard. The weary man invoked the blessings of Allah upon his head, and reeled off to slumber. After a few minutes Regan lighted a match and held it to his pipe.

The cards were played out; the die was cast. The morrow, as he well knew, would be a new day, and was more than like to bring disaster in its train. But——

“*Mektub!* It is written!” he muttered, and turned with a smile to meet Miss Andres.

CHAPTER VII

FLIGHT

At sunrise, and not until then, Regan bellowed "Hot! Hot! S-sh!" at the two *mehara* until they came to a halt, and the headlong flight was stayed.

He had removed his swathing mask, and now, as he helped Mary Andres from her perch, his fine-lined keen features smiled up at her, and his grey eyes rejoiced to find answering smile in her travel-worn face. She was quite self-possessed, he noted gladly.

"Well, now we've a chance to talk," exclaimed the American, with a sigh of relief, as he began stretching the white *burnous*, which the girl had carried for a shelter from the sun. "An hour's rest, and then on again! Say, that sun is some warm to be new-risen, isn't it?"

She pushed back her red-gold hair, gazing at him with admiring wonder in the depths

of her brown eyes. She was very beautiful, and her beauty struck to Regan's heart with a pang.

"Mr. Regan, I—I can't realize it! It seems so unreal, so fantastic——"

"Our friend, Halil, is probably thinking the same thing," chuckled Regan. "Here, get under the shade and have breakfast. Tell me, first, how Halil got you out here?"

She took one of the dates with a laugh, and her white teeth bit into it.

"In primitive fashion, sir—by taking me. You see, I had met him in Tripoli——"

"Eh?" exclaimed Regan, startled. "Was he calling on you at the castle the same evening of the day I returned that teakwood box, and shawl?"

"Yes, and I let him see the shawl."

"Oh, go ahead, please," said Regan helplessly. The Aissaoua's magic had been true magic, he began to think.

Miss Andres told her tale briefly enough between bites of dates and sups at a water-bottle.

She had gone south with an Italian escort, and at the edge of the Tripolitan oasis Halil and a dozen men had fallen upon her party without warning. Surprised and

bewildered by the entirely unsuspected attack, the Italians had been shot or cut down, and Halil had coolly put the girl on a *mehari* and struck off to meet Sheikh Mansour.

"It was very direct, very brutal, and very brief," concluded the girl, her face white. "Halil wanted that shawl, and he wanted me. He got us both, for I had the shawl with me. Last night I was thinking of suicide as my only resource when—when you came."

Regan told her his story without reserve, knowing that she could be trusted. Indeed, the project of uniting Islam under the *Sherif* of Mecca seemed to be a very open secret in any case.

She heard him out without comment. Then, "I think you are a very wonderful young man, Mr. Regan," she said simply. "Think of what you've accomplished——"

Regan held up a protesting hand.

"I've accomplished nothing, Miss Andres. My companions have by this time fallen into the hands of the Asgar men. Temporarily, at least, I've managed to get you away from Halil and Sheikh Mansour, but it were folly to cherish hopes of ultimate

escape. You see, I am ignorant of this desert; I know not even where we are, or whither my companions were bound, and anyone we meet is undoubtedly an enemy. We have a little food, a little water, and when it is gone we shall die."

She gazed at him, puzzled.

"Why, then, are you laughing, Mr. Regan?"

"Why? Because we must all die eventually, and therefore I am very happy to die with you or serving you."

"A very pretty speech, sir—considering that we have only met once before this!"

Regan shrugged his shoulders. "Once? Not at all, Miss Andres. I've met you half a dozen times, and each time I wanted to know you better."

"How do you mean?" Her brown eyes narrowed slightly.

"I have been stationed in Alexandria, and your passports have gone through my hands on several occasions. So, you see, I know you very well."

"Oh!" As she met his merry grey eyes her cheeks flooded with colour. Then, glancing out at the horizon, she reverted to the original topic. "If we are to die,

Mr. Regan, we had better do it sensibly. You are, frankly, lost. I am quite certain, however, that after we left the caravan road we struck to the east. Therefore, we have only to continue east in order to make one of the other caravan routes, any of which will take us north to Tripoli, or at least to Italian patrols. At least, we'll not give up."

"No, we'll not give up," Regan rose. "Half an hour for sleep, Miss Andres!"

For half an hour the American kept watch, the horizon remaining unbroken by any figures of pursuers. He had dozed in the saddle since leaving the hidden well, and could ill afford to sleep during this day, when the desert behind them must be covered by quartering hounds of the Asgar tribe seeking their trail.

Once more they took up the flight into the east. Perched in his carved leather saddle on the racer's hump, Regan pushed the pace hard. Unless they could reach some caravan track and find a well or oasis, their water would soon be gone—and after that the sun would give them short shrift.

They were now out of the sand entirely. At midday they faced a wild panorama of rock—low eroded masses which offered

little hope of a decent road, with the exception of a single valley mouth that opened ahead and seemed to run on to the east through a shoulder of the low hills. The heat was terrific. The spring rains were long since over, and the tender mass of green which carpets the Sahara after the rains was vanished. There were only rocks, refracting the sunlight and sending up heat waves which set the whole landscape a-quiver.

Regan glanced at his companion. Miss Andres was very white, and he knew that to attempt to stand this midday heat were folly.

"We may as well take that ravine and follow it eastward," he said, pointing to the valley that opened ahead of them. "If we can find no shade, we'll stop and rig up the *burnouses* for an hour or two, eh?"

"Whatever you say," she returned, in a listless tone which all too well showed how the heat was telling upon her. Without hesitation Regan plunged ahead for the ravine.

To his surprise and dismay, the winding valley did not hold eastward. Instead of cutting out across the hill shoulder, it

twisted southward and into the heart of the long spur of hills.

Twenty minutes later Regan found the ravine gradually narrowing, until he was riding along a winding track between two sheer rock walls that rose two hundred feet above him. Pulling at the rein of his racer's nose ring, he halted perplexedly.

"By Jasper, Miss Andres, I'm grateful for the shade; it's God-given! But there's no use going on; this track is taking us away off our course."

In great degree revived by the grateful shade of the high scarp, Mary Andres laughed excitedly, and pointed to the sandy bed of the ravine.

"Turn back? Not a bit of it! Isn't that a camel track there in the angle of the rock?"

Regan glanced down. There in a twist of the high wall, where the breeze that swept perpetually through the ravine had left the sand undisturbed, he saw the deep swirl caused by the down-thrust of a camel's pad.

"You're right!" he exclaimed eagerly; keen hope kindled within him by sight of the spoor. "This trail leads somewhere;

at least, someone else has passed this way, and not very long ago, either. Come along, then!"

With the other garments of Sheikh Mansour, Regan donned the mail coat of thin steel rings cunningly woven in ancient days, though he had discarded the heavy sword as too cumbersome to carry. Now, with the prospect of meeting other travellers, he replaced the Touareg mask, and drew up his *burnous* to cover the mail shirt from sight, and urged his racer on anew.

That imprint in the sand was puzzling. As they proceeded, and he could find no other spoor, he began to think that it might not have been made by a camel, after all. This place must be far from any caravan route. On the other hand, such a ravine as this was a physical peculiarity, a freak of Nature, which would make it a place known to the desert dwellers.

At this precise moment, and for no reason at all except the deterioration of age and the effects of much hard usage, the long girth which fastened Miss Andres's saddle to the hump of her camel gave way.

Regan heard the girl's quick cry of alarm, and turned to see her toppling on her perch,

grasping frantically at the *mehari*'s elongated neck. To save her from the impending fall Regan shot from his own saddle to the soft sand, braced himself, and held out his arms as the girl slid gently downward.

It might have been quite possible for Regan to have caught the leathern saddle with impunity, but Mary Andres was a very healthy and healthily built young lady. They plunged together into the sand beneath the nose of the girl's camel. That startled beast did the most natural thing in the world—he turned him about and departed as he had come, at a fast pace. Regan's *mehari*, finding himself relieved of his burden, and having no order to halt, and furthermore finding his master's muffled voice lifted into roaring echoes by the rock walls, broke into a shambling run and continued his journey.

Thus, by exasperatingly logical sequence of cause and effect, Regan sat up and clawed the sand from his eyes, to find Mary Andres and one broken saddle beside him, and nothing else in sight. He leaped up and ran to the twist in the ravine, ten yards ahead. There his *burnous* tripped and sent him down, with a last glimpse of his *mehari* speeding through the shadows like some

unholy thing, head and tail outstretched.

"By Jasper!" exclaimed Regan, gaining his feet as the girl joined him, and gazing around. "Now I've done it, sure enough!"

Miss Andres laughed, then her face sobered.

"There are possibilities in the situation, sir. Our beasts of burden being gone, what is there left to do?"

"Walk!" returned Regan ruefully. "Walk, my dear Lady Mary, until we come to the end of this cursed place."

"Agreed, then." She inspected him with a little smile. "It comes hard to call a person of your appearance Sir Larry, but I like you——"

"Well enough to die with me?" cut in Regan, his grey eyes twinkling. "Or to live with me?"

"Well enough to carry the water, if you'll carry the food," she retorted, turning to the fallen saddle. "Mercy! Doesn't this place remind you of the old pictures in the 'Pilgrim's Progress'?"

"Yes," chuckled Regan, unfastening the bag of dates from the saddle. "Only I used to fit in those pictures with the text of the Arabian Nights, never dreaming that I'd be

living the part some day—even to the chain-mail and the *burnous*! All fixed? Then forward into the valley of shadow!”

So, with a jest at the certain death facing them, they set forth afoot.

The ravine narrowed, and drove ever deeper between the sheer rocks. Overhead, was merely a thin line of blazing blue sky and golden sunlight, and the breeze that swept through the gorge was grateful to the desert travellers.

To Regan this refuge seemed like a preposterous, incredible thing. Half an hour had taken them from the terrific heat of the desert into this cool abode of shades—even though they might prove the shades of death. This, indeed, was wellnigh certain. They had a scant half-gallon of water and a bag of corn and dates, no more. Regan could find no other camel tracks, since the eternal wind kept the loose sand ever in motion.

Twisting and turning ran the ravine, cut by some ancient stream through ages of ages when the centre of the Great Desert was a sea. For half an hour more they followed its windings, seeing nothing save the foot-prints of Regan's *mehari*, already nearly

obliterated. Of the racer itself, they found nothing.

"Whew! Let's rest, Lady Mary, and smoke up!" Regan sank down in the sand and got out his brier. "Hard work pulling through this looses and, eh? Getting tired?"

"No. I wish I could smoke, too; you seem to enjoy it so thoroughly."

"I do. How far is this cañon going to take us? See here, doesn't it strike you that such a place as this must be rather well known in this part of the world, whether inhabited or not?"

She nodded, glancing up the winding defile. Now, as ever, the clear beauty of her face smote Regan with wonder at her. Very far from the world they seemed, very distant seemed peril and thirst and hunger in that moment.

"I was thinking the same thing," she returned, her face grave, her eyes searching Regan once more with a curious intentness. "Yes, I think that probably it is well known, Sir Larry. Please take off that mask. It's a horrible thing."

Regan laughed and obeyed. For a little space they sat in silence.

"It's commonplace, after all," said the

American suddenly, watching a slow upwreath of smoke from his pipe. "This situation, I mean. We're just two people sitting in the sand beside a rock; that's about the gist of it. Just around the corner of the rock we may find death or rescue or friends——"

"You certainly talk about death in a horribly commonplace way," she broke in, with a grimace. "Why? You're not an Arab, and I hope you're not anxious to die. You puzzle me, Sir Larry. Come, knight of the merry countenance, and explain the inward gaiety mingled with cynicism which shines through your words!"

Regan stretched himself out more comfortably.

"Very well," he said soberly. "I'd held down a stiff, serious job so long that when I came on this trip it made a boy of me again; it was a lark. Then I met you, and did not want to come at all, but I came. Then I met you again, and that finished it. Since we've been alone in the desert, Lady Mary, and more especially since we've been placed in our present situation, I've come to know that two things lie ahead of me. They are death and—love."

"We're quite convincingly removed from the insincerities and conventionalities of things here," he went on, steadily gazing away from her. "And because another chance may not come I'm quite willing to answer your question frankly. It is quite certain that death lies ahead of us, and the only question is the shape it will take."

He paused, puffing his pipe alight once more. Then, looking at her suddenly, he found her brown eyes fastened upon him, a strange, happy glow in their depths. Smiling, he laid his pipe in the sand, and his hand closed over hers.

"There is the cynical part of it, Lady Mary—that these two things should have come into my life together. Yet not quite together, either. From the first time I ever saw your passports, eight months ago, I knew that you were the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. Since then I have heard of you and read of you, and—well, isn't that enough? Don't you think I have cause to be happy because I love you, and because I shall die with or for you, Lady Mary?"

"You are the most wonderful man I ever

knew," she said quietly, gazing into his eyes, and her fingers tightened upon his. Regan raised her hand to his lips.

Then, quickly and as if with an effort, she drew away from him.

"Listen!" He wondered at the composed steadiness, the forced level, of her tone. "You know that all camels are branded, of course? Well, one of our *mehara* went ahead, the other went back; therefore, if there's anyone behind or ahead of us, our presence here will be inevitably made known."

"*Ca va sans dire.*" Regan shrugged his shoulders. "Would you prefer to go on, or shall we wait here?"

A gesture answered him. He rose and held out his hand to her. For a moment they stood looking into each other's eyes, reading there the words that neither dared utter.

"I have often dreamed of meeting you, my knight," she said very softly at last, "but I never thought to meet you—like this. We cannot escape, of course. I—I—" Her voice failed for a moment, then she turned. "Come, let us go—quickly."

They walked down the ravine hand in hand, like children, upon their souls a burning exaltation too great for utterance.

The sinuous gorge narrowed until they could no more than walk abreast. Then, with an abrupt twist, it ended altogether.

"By Jasper!" breathed Regan. "What a place!"

Facing them was a semi-circular cliff, across an open space a hundred feet wide, upon which the gorge gave entrance by a narrow passage. Although the Touareg *mehari* must have come hither, there was nothing to be seen in this natural amphitheatre except rock and sand. The place seemed deserted, empty of all life.

"Where did our racer go?" exclaimed Regan to his companion. They stood in the narrow entrance, examining that which lay ahead. "The beast must be here——"

"There are caves, I think," and the girl pointed across toward the high cliff. "Or else we may find a continuation of the ravine——"

She checked herself abruptly, gripping Regan's hand.

From somewhere, some unseen point, a

voice floated to them and was magnified a thousandfold by the eddying echoes of the high rock walls. That voice drew a start of amazement from the American, as he recognized its accents.

"Dang it! Stand werry still, sir and miss. 'Cause why? You're in a werry ticklish place. I wasn't a-lookin' to be meeting of you 'ere, as the old gent. said when 'e kissed the butler by mistake in the dark 'all——"

The girl's fingers, clenched on those of Regan, trembled. There was something eerie and uncanny about that voice, apparently proceeding from nowhere. But, an instant later, a rattle of stones drew their attention to the rocky scarp above. Glancing up, they saw a figure descending from a dozen feet overhead.

"By Jasper, it's Blackton-Friars!" cried Regan astounded. That voice, that green turban and white *burnous*, were all too readily recognized. The figure scrambled and slipped down to the sand, then faced them. An amazed word broke from Regan. Instead of the baronet's grey hedge of beard, he saw a round, pink, expressionless face that——

"Beggin' your pardon, sir, it ain't Blackton-Friars at all," said the other, with a wheezy chuckle. "It's plain John Solomon, sir, and werry 'appy I am to say it. 'Cause why? There ain't no fun in being dead."

CHAPTER VIII

THE BRANDED CAMEL

"The question is," observed Solomon sagely, "who are we a-fightin' of? The Sons of Iran, or that 'ere danged Halil, or the Touaregs, or all three? And what are them Senussi a-doin' all this time?"

To this question there was no immediate answer.

The bowl-like end of the ravine had been inhabited by a prehistoric race of cave men, who had occupied huge hollows in the cliffs. The place was known as the Valley of Jehannum, and had been appointed for the meeting between Solomon and Sheikh Zanzour and the Senussiyeh princes.

Upon this place Regan and Mary Andres had stumbled largely through accident. Regan's *mehari*, which had run ahead, had apprised Solomon of their coming, but by

the beast's brand the Cockney had thought that Touaregs were at hand, and had made ready to repel the visitors, for he was here practically alone.

In one of the vast caves lay Sheikh Zanzour, wounded. After the disappearance of Regan at the *fonduk* of Bu Sef, Solomon and the sheikh had pushed on cautiously. They had encountered a band of the Asgar Touaregs; the result had been that Solomon and the sheikh had broken through, alone of their little force. Zanzour's Arabs had gone down, but had managed to hold the Touaregs before they did so.

"Well, we're not so badly off," declared Regan, when a general understanding had been attained. "This place can be defended indefinitely, should the Touaregs find the trail of Miss Andres's racer, which went back toward the desert. You say there's plenty of water here; besides, the Senussiye'h will arrive any time now. How many of them will come?"

"Not more than six, sir; that was the contract, and they'll 'old to it. But why ain't they 'ere, says I?"

"Perhaps the Asgar Touaregs have prevented them," suggested the girl.

"No, miss," averred Solomon, with decision. "Most o' them 'ere Touaregs belong to the Senussiyeh, and them as don't wouldn't dare, just like that."

Regan gazed at the man with a growing amazement and wonder.

That John Solomon had taken passage from New York on the *Re Vittorio*, and at the last minute had changed to a faster ship was credible enough, and explained why his name had appeared among those lost. Seizing upon this accident of fate with fine perception of its value, Solomon had promptly become Blackton-Friars, with the connivance of the Italian authorities at Rome. No one in Tripoli save Sheikh Ahmed knew his secret, and his beard had been a sufficient disguise to anyone who might have met him in earlier years.

"I'm inclined to think," said Regan slowly, "that news of your demise may have reached the Senussiyeh, Solomon. They have agents everywhere, you know."

"I knows it werry well, sir," returned the little Cockney dryly. "Miss Andres, if I may make so bold, where is that 'ere black lace shawl of yours?"

"In the hands of Halil, Solomon."

The little man pulled at his pipe.

"Make it plain John, sir and miss," he protested. "I'm John to me friends, just like that. Puttin' on airs is all werry well in their place, but their place is mortal 'ard to find, I says. About that 'ere shawl, I'm werry much afraid as 'ow it'll make trouble."

"Eh?" Regan gave him a sharp glance. "In what way?"

The blank blue eyes widened.

"Why, sir, it's said to 'ave worked miracles, that shawl is. And why was it shut in that 'ere solid teakwood box? Because miracles like that is werry uncommon things."

"Why, what kind of miracles did it work?" queried the girl wonderingly. "I thought that was mere superstition——"

"Superstition is a mortal queer thing in Africa, miss. I don't rightly know about that 'ere shawl, but I've 'eard things said. Well, Mr. Regan, if so be as you'll come along wi' me and then come back 'ere to stand guard, we'll visit the sheikh."

Thus abruptly closing the discussion, Solomon got to his feet and aided Mary Andres to rise. They had been sitting in

the sand at the end of the gorge, where Solomon had appeared to them.

As they walked across the sandy surface of the amphitheatre, it occurred to Regan that if the Senussiyeh thought Solomon dead and did not keep their appointment, matters were apt to go hard with the four people in the Valley of Jehannum.

In one of the great vaulted caves that opened directly off the crater-like bowl, they found Sheikh Ahmed lying, three *mehari* contentedly perched on their knee pads beyond him. The sheikh merely had a bullet scrape across his ribs, but from the fact that he also had a touch of fever Regan gathered that Solomon had told his tale very sketchily. Arabs do not easily yield to fever.

"All things are in the hands of Allah!" was the grave Arab's only comment on learning the situation. "If the Senussiyeh come, it is well."

"And if they do not come?" queried Regan.

"*Mektub*—it is written!" The sheikh turned his face to the wall.

Upon examination, Regan found a spring, tiny but sufficient for their needs, which arose in the rear of the cave and trickled

away through a small channel in the rock. This cavern, like all the others in the base of the cliff, was huge—a hundred feet in height and of like width; in depth, however, it was only some thirty feet, and had no other outlet. It was a great concave blister in the rock, no more.

After a long drink, Regan came back to the entrance and took the rifle which Solomon handed him. The little Cockney, he now saw, appeared to be worn out.

"I'll act as nurse," exclaimed Mary Andres, adjusting the *burnous* that lay under the head of Sheikh Zanzour. "You get to sleep, John."

"Werry good, miss," wheezed Solomon. "Mr. Regan, sir, you'll find steps cut in them 'ere rocks, leadin' up to where I was perched when I seen you a-coming. If so be as you'll call me at sunset, why, I'll relieve you."

Regan nodded, and strode from the cave mouth.

He was still amaze with dull wonder at John Solomon redivivus. Even though he was fully aware of how the trick had been played, it was something of a stunning blow, and he quite naturally resented what

seemed to have been a lack of trust. Why had not Solomon revealed this to him in Tripoli.

Gradually the answer to that question up-turned in his mind. During his own sharp encounter with Sheikh Mansour and Halil, he had repeated the story of Solomon's presumed death with an emphasis which he could not have given to a lie. The enemy would now be positively assured that Solomon was dead; their whole game would now be based upon that assumption. Had this been part of the Cockney's plan?

It seemed incredible; it was incredible. As Regan sat in the niche of the rocks above the end of the gorge and watched the shadowy defile, he frowned perplexedly. Could it be at all possible that Solomon had foreseen the kidnapping of Regan or perhaps of the sheikh?

"Perhaps he did," muttered the American. "Confound the man! He's playing a desperate game, of course, for if Higdale told the truth he's venturing into a land where his life isn't worth a continental. Well, I suppose one can't blame him for his confounded secrecy, and, after all, we've reached our objective safely. If I hadn't been

carried off, Mary Andres would be in a bad fix right now, so I suppose we might as well let bygones be bygones and thank God that everything has come out right."

The long hours dragged without incident. Nothing fell within Regan's line of vision save the sinuous windings of the defile ahead and the high jagged cliff behind. When the sun dipped into the west, Solomon's voice arose, and Regan descended from his perch and returned to the cave.

Sleep had inspired the pudgy Cockney. Instead of watching further at the head of the ravine, he was saddling a *mehari* in order to ride out to the mouth of the long winding gorge.

"If so be as you 'ears any shots, sir," he told Regan, "mount one o' them 'ere other beasts an' come. We 'ave two rifles and three revolvers, which is well enough to defend that 'ere gorge."

Scarce pausing for his frugal repast of dates and water, Regan flung himself down in the sand, and was asleep instantly.

He wakened at voices, and found morning upon them. Solomon had returned, and was making a tiny blaze of camel-dung over which to cook some cakes of guinea corn.

The Cockney reported all clear. Sheikh Zanzour's fever was gone, and the Arab sitting up.

"Good morning!" Mary Andres, who had slept in the adjoining cave, appeared with the radiant smile of a very beautiful young woman who has rested well. She had discarded her *burnous*, and all three men glanced approvingly at the trim khaki dress, whose divided skirt and loose folds concealed the lender lines of her figure without hiding its fine proportion and graceful strength.

"How is the patient this morning?" Miss Andres smiled at the sheikh, who made answer, with his habitual grave courtesy:

"With Allah's help, able to slay men this day! Solomon effendi, I will watch——"

"You sit where you are!" commanded Regan. "I'll take the trick to-day, sheikh. Don't you want to take a morning ride down the ravine, Lady Mary?"

As he met her gaze, Regan felt sharply disappointed. Instead of the tender intimacy which for a brief while had shone from her eyes on the preceding day, which he had carried in his heart ever since their hands had clasped in the ravine, which he had looked forward to seeing, he now met

only a frank friendliness, a level-eyed comradeship. And it was not the same.

"No," she said, and smiled: "I am afraid—afraid of that ravine! We were very close to madness yesterday, my friend."

Regan merely assented with a nod, turning away to hide the swiftly bitter lines of his face. Five minutes later he mounted his *mehari* and departed.

"My friend," indeed! The words hurt. In those few moments with Mary Andres, on the morning previous, he had been in what was, for him, a rare mood, indeed; he had laid bare his soul before her, he had thrown off all reserve, he had proffered his love and himself, yet without thought of self. It had been a sacred moment to him.

"Madness, she calls it!" he muttered, his face dark as he rode. "Did it mean no more than that to her? She has been courted by princes and soldiers and great men—perhaps it was madness to look for a moment into the heart of a simple American, and to let him see into hers!"

So brooding upon bitterness, he rode through the shadow.

Presently a saner realization came to him. Perhaps Mary Andres, too, had known that

for a sacred moment, as had he. Perhaps she, too, had bared her soul for a fleeting instant before his eyes. Regan bowed his head in shame of his own doubtings.

"She was right," he thought. "We were close to madness, for we were close to death, too. And now it is different. We're not going to die—at least not yet, and she is afraid, just as she said. That girl's level-headed, by Jasper! After all, perhaps it was a compliment to me that she would not come down here this morning."

Although rather hazy as to his involved reasoning, Regan rode on more cheerfully, confident that his conclusion was correct.

He passed through the deep shadows into the glaring sunlight once more, and at last drew rein in the valley mouth, gazing out over the calcined-rock desert. The horizon was bare, empty of life, utterly desolate.

After a time he returned down the gorge to the first patch of shadow, hobbled his beast, and rested. He could see the entrance of the ravine, each rock and bush sharp-cut in the glaring light.

The hours dragged by, and the sun mounted

overhead, a great brazen bowl in the blue sky. Regan stretched out comfortably, and smoked and dreamed of taking Mary Andres home to Boston town, and wondered anew at the intricate brain machinery that lay behind the placid brow of John Solomon.

For whom was that pudgy little Cockney, declared by Higdale to be an American citizen, acting? Who was behind the great project of re-establishing the Arabian caliphate? Not Italy, although Italy might well be acquiescent to the scheme. Probably it was England, abetted by France. A subtle blow at Turkey this! Beyond a doubt it was the first blow at the sultan's tottering throne, thought Regan, and thrilled to the bare idea of it. When the great war was over would the fate of Turkey have been settled here on the sands of Tripoli—perhaps here in the very Valley of Jehannum itself? And what part would he, Lawrence Regan, hold in this off-stage drama?

He was awakened from these wonderings by a sudden pad-pad of feet thudding on the sands. Glancing up, he seized his rifle and sprang to his feet; bearing down upon him, full speed from the mouth of the defile, was a camel!

Regan's rifle dropped, and a curt smile at his own alarm came to his lips. The beast was no *mehari*, but a *jemal*, a common camel; the long tail, large ears, rough coat, and general ungainly appearance testified to this. Further, he was innocent of load or saddle, and was quite alone. Having ascertained this much, Regan jumped into the saddle of his kneeling *mehari* and urged the beast forth, keeping a wary eye on the swinging head of the *jemal* as they passed the incoming beast. The latter did not try to bite, however.

Gaining the entrance to the defile, Regan drew rein and gazed out upon the desert shimmering with refracted heat in the glare of high noon. There was nothing to be seen. The tracks of the *jemal* led in straight from the north, as though the beast had headed on a well-known trail, but otherwise the desert was empty as ever.

Frowning in perplexity, the American turned back into the ravine, and found that the camel had halted, facing after him, and was standing with feet wide apart and neck outstretched. There was something wistful about the great ungainly beast; like all his kind, he was evidently in search of

company and had come hither to find man or brute, for a camel alone on the desert is the loneliest of God's creatures, and the most disconsolate.

Regan lifted his rifle and fired in the air to summon Solomon. There was some mystery about this beast's arrival, which he could not fathom. A moment later, as he approached the *jemal*, he was glad of his action.

The beast stood motionless, a bubbling, gurgling wheeze coming from his thick lips. Only then did the American note what he had overlooked in his haste; the *jemal* showed a flank black with clotted blood, and across the left shoulder ran a jagged cut as of sword or spear. Evidently here was a survivor of some dark desert episode.

Regan was still puzzling over the secret when Solomon appeared, his *mehari* sweeping along like a whirlwind. The Cockney drew rein, and stopped the racer near Regan.

"What's this 'ere, sir? Wisitors?"

"One visitor," returned the American. "He drifted in all by himself, John. No one else in sight outside, and this chap is badly wounded."

Solomon urged his mount closer to the *jemal*. A sudden cry broke from him:

"Dang it! Look 'ere! Look 'ere, Mr. Regan!"

"What is it?"

Regan came closer. The pudgy little Cockney leaned forward, and his blue eyes were very wide indeed as he pointed to the left side of the camel's neck, where appeared a series of triangular marks burned into the hide.

"Look at that 'ere brand! Dang it, sir! Now we're gone for fair, we are!"

"Well, what does it mean?" queried the wondering Regan. "What on earth——"

"That 'ere, sir," said Solomon impressively, "is the brand o' the Senussiyeh, just like that! This *jemal* is wounded and 'is load is gone—baggage camel 'e is. Now, sir, who'd dare to rob from the Senussiyeh? Nobody, not in this 'ere country. Then what's the answer, sir?"

"I'll bite, John. What *is* the answer?"

"It's a werry bad one, sir," Solomon pulled out his clay pipe, and began to fill it. "Yes, it's a werry bad answer. It means, Mr. Regan, sir, that them 'ere danged Touaregs or Beni Iran 'ave gone and attacked

our Senussiyeh men. What's more, they've whipped 'em, and this 'ere *jemal* is all that got away. Just like that, sir. It looks mortal bad for us, sir, 'cause why, in about three hours more we'll 'ave the 'ole bloody pack o' wolves on us—we will that!"

CHAPTER IX

SIEGE !

It was quickly borne in upon Regan that John Solomon knew whereof he spake.

The brand on that camel's back was an augury which changed the whole aspect of affairs, and changed them for the worse.

The Senussiyeh princes, or magnates, or sheikhs, or whatever they were, had plainly come to the meeting place, only to be met by the Beni Iran and driven off or cut to pieces. And just here was one thing that puzzled Regan.

"Tell me, John," he said frowningly. "I always heard that most of the Touaregs belonged to the Senussiyeh. Yet that doesn't hitch with this situation. Aren't the Asgar Touaregs in on the federation controlled by the Senussiyeh?"

Solomon nodded, staring the while at

the wounded camel. The two men had dismounted.

"Yes, sir, most on 'em is. But this 'ere Beni Iran is some'ow different, a werry puzzling thing it is, Mr. Regan, sir. A secret society, just like that, as 'as a 'atred for all Christians; a rival of the Senussiyeh maybe, but a werry secret rival, 'oping in the course o' time to——"

"To what?" prodded Regan, as the little Cockney paused.

For answer Solomon stooped and drew a straight line on the sand. Then he drew another line which met it at an angle of ninety degrees. Where the two lines met he drew an X.

"This 'ere X, Mr. Regan, is a man in Tripoli—a werry ambitious man as 'olds a werry 'igh place. Out 'ere," and he followed one of the lines to its end, drawing in the sand a Y, "is another man; we'll call 'im Y. This 'ere Mr. Y 'e's by way o' bein' werry ambitious also. Mr. X 'e comes down this line, just like that, and 'e meets that 'ere Mr. Y. Did you ever see raindrops a-rolling down a pane o' glass, Mr. Regan—one meeting another and a-gobbling of it up? That 'ere is Mr. X's game. 'E comes

along and gobbles up Mr. Y and stands out twice as big as 'e was afore, just like that. Then——”

Again Solomon paused. Regan regarded him with narrowed eyes, wondering just what the man was driving at, wondering if these deductions meant anything or were getting anywhere. He soon found out that they did and were.

“Out 'ere where Mr. Y stood,” and Solomon returned to his diagram in the sand, “we now 'ave Mr. X standing, and a werry big man 'e is, 'aving all that 'e 'ad in the first place and Mr. Y's strength to boot. This 'ere X, 'e plans like this.” Leaning over, Solomon drew a line connecting the two points of the angle, forming a triangle. With his foot he wiped out the letter Y and drew an X in its place—a very large X.

“Mr. X sir, 'e moves down this 'ere line to the third point o' the triangle. And what's there? Why, just this!” At the third point Solomon drew an S in the sand. Suddenly Regan perceived that the triangle represented the actual points of the compass. Tripoli was at the top, the former Y at the left represented the Asgar Touaregs to the

west and far south of Tripoli, and the point S stood for the Senussiyeh, far south-east of Tripoli.

"The Senussiyeh!" exclaimed Regan. The Cockney bobbed his grey head in assent.

"Yes, sir, werry good. Mr. X, 'e plans to move along this 'ere third line, and when 'e gets to that 'ere S 'e gobbles it, too. Now, sir, let's see. That Mr. Y, who was 'e?"

"Sheikh Mansour, John? But your Mr. X could not possibly supplant him——"

"Don't you make no mistake, sir! That Mr. X is a werry wersatile man, powerful among the coast Arabs and Moors, trained in Europe, knowing exactly what 'e's about. If 'e 'as the chance to supplant Mansour, 'e'll do it, just like that, joining the Asgar men to 'is own forces."

"But would the Asgars obey him, unless he's a Touareg?"

"Them as belonged to the Sons of Iran will obey 'im, sir, and them 'ere Beni Iran form a werry large organization. You know who this 'ere Mr. X is, sir?"

Regan shook his head, his eyes on the Cockney.

"It's that 'ere Halil ibn Zoura, and in

about three hours 'e'll be 'ere with 'is men, Mr. Regan."

"Impossible! Halil—by Jasper, you may be right!" exclaimed Regan. "But what makes you think he's coming here?"

"'Is men will follow that camel's track, sir."

"But the track will be obliterated, and on this rock desert——"

Solomon chuckled wheezily.

"Mr. Regan, sir, beggin' your pardon, sir, there's a mortal lot you don't know about them 'ere Touaregs and Arabs. They can follow a trail where there ain't none, just like them 'ere red Indians in America; only them Arabs 'as got it all over them Indians, sir, at trailin'. They can follow a track a month old what's been wiped out long ago."

"Then why," cried Regan, feeling exasperated by the inexorable logic of the pudgy little man, "why haven't Sheikh Zanzour's men trailed you here and come to your aid?"

"Maybe they 'ave, sir, and that 'ere danged Halil 'as thrown 'em off the scent. Let's be getting 'ome, Mr. Regan, sir. We'll 'ave to stand siege, just like that, and that

'ere camel is a'going to come in mortal 'andy, I says. A camel is all werry well in 'is place, says I, and also 'e's werry well in other places. Just you look at 'is 'ump, sir!"

Regan understood clearly. The wounded *jemal* had evidently enjoyed a long rest just previous to the present expedition on which he had come, for his hump was very large and full. Oftentimes pieces of these humps are sliced from living beasts by the Arabs, who esteem the meat a great delicacy, and the skin being sewn in place the hump quickly heals. This poor beast would provide meat against a long siege.

Mounting to their saddles, Regan and Solomon urged their beasts down the ravine. The wounded camel gurgled plaintively after them, then gathered himself up and followed.

Half-way back to the caves, they encountered Mary Andres, mounted on the third *mehari*, for to those of Solomon and Sheikh Zanzour had been added that of Regan.

"Sheikh Zanzour insisted on coming to repel boarders," she cried laughingly, "so I got ahead of him and came myself, in order to keep him quiet. What's happened? And to whom does that camel behind you belong?"

"To us," responded Regan. "Can you turn your beast around? We may as well join the sheikh and thrash out the situation while we eat, for it looks as though time were valuable. At least John thinks so."

The three returned together, Regan in the lead, Solomon explaining to Mary Andres the nature of his deductions. Arriving at the great bowl in the rock-cliff, Regan set to work on their meagre luncheon. He found Sheikh Zanzour able to be up and at work and keen for action.

Fortunately, Miss Andres had an excellent working knowledge of Arabic, though she was no such linguist as Regan. The latter in fact, assumed command of the situation, and quickly settled the council of war which was held.

"I'll go on back down the ravine," he announced, "and will stay there for the afternoon. John, are you quite sure we'll be attacked before very long?"

"Before three hours," said the Cockney, and the sheikh nodded grave assent.

"All right. You three stay here, kill that *jemal*, and make ready for a siege—if you want to stand one. But why couldn't we make a break for refuge? Sheikh

Zanzour, you know the desert—why can't we go for one of the Senussiye^h oases, or go back to Tripoli?"

"Because," said the stately Arab, "our friend, Solomon effendi, was given safe-conduct to this place alone for the purpose of meeting certain Senussiye^h princes only, and under no other conditions. He is known to them, and were he to appear elsewhere in Senussiye^h territory—and whatever the Italians claim, most of the desert is Senussiye^h territory—his life would not be worth a medjidie. If Solomon effendi wishes to give up his purpose and return to Tripoli, it might be done."

"No," said Solomon emphatically, his round face looking a trifle aged and worn. "No! I'll stay here till the Senussiye^h come, and I'll not give up my purpose."

Regan's glance went to Mary Andres. The girl read his meaning, and spoke before his words found utterance.

"You are not to consider me, any of you!" She leaned forward earnestly, her flushed and beautiful features alight with purpose. "I'm able to take care of myself, and I do not propose to run away from anything, like a silly schoolgirl would do. Accidents of

fate have thrown me in with you as a comrade, and as a comrade I intent to remain."

"And werry well said, miss," added Solomon in English, then reverted to Arabic. "That *jemal* must be killed in any event, for he has lost too much blood to be of any good to us. We'll take care of it in one of the adjacent caverns."

"Very well," nodded Regan. "I can hold off anyone who appears until sunset without assistance. You have cartridges for these rifles of yours? Then give me a supply. In case there is any parley——"

"There will be none," said the sheikh gloomily. "Those who come will doubtless be fore-riders, a mere vanguard, scouts searching far from the main body. Halil ibn Zoura—may Allah curse him for his black treachery to me!—is the one to parley with. Sheikh Mansour, unless dead, will be with him."

Regan found that the sheikh fully shared Solomon's idea regarding Halil's plans, at least as to the fate of the Touareg chieftain. Just how Halil would rid himself of the latter, however, was a point undetermined.

As the American fastened the bag holding

food and cartridges to his saddle, and tied on an extra water-bottle, Mary Andres came to him across the sand.

"You're not going without a word, Sir Larry?" She smiled into his grey eyes, a wistful touch in her look. They were outside the cave, in the great bowl

"I thought perhaps you wished me to, Lady Mary." He took her hand, and, under the impulse of her look, brought it to his lips. "My words have been said, dear girl, and they were not words of madness. Whatever may lie before us, be sure of one thing; whatever I do is done for you alone."

The deep tenderness which shone in her eyes startled him.

"Thank you, my very perfect gentle knight!" was all she said, and turned about to the cave. But Regan had looked into her eyes and had seen.

Three hours, Solomon had said. Thinking back over the words of the pudgy little man, over that strange prediction with the triangle, Regan wondered, as he rode along, how much of it might prove to be based on fact.

No matter how keen the Senussiye'h might be to collect the scalp of Solomon, their compact and safe conduct were proof that

they placed the good of Islam before their private hatred. A powerful Order of Moslems this; a secret monastic society whose aim was to restore Islam to its ancient purity and fervour—the fervour of the faith which had swept the Crescent far into Europe.

Regan knew much about the Senussiyeh, the ever-present fear of officialdom in Egypt. Yet there was little to fear from them, since their ambitions were rather religious than political. True, they had a vast organization, with agents everywhere; their might had fought back the Italians for years; the Grand Senussi, the grand master of the order, had more power in Islam than the sultan; their missionaries were to be found from Timbucktu to the Cape.

That the Beni Iran should undertake to cope with such an order was startling. It was a pitting of the fanatic Moslem, the Moslem of perverted religion and distorted Koran, against the Moslem who held to the old, simple, strong faith of Mohammed. Yet as Regan considered this point it appeared less surprising. The Sons of Iran formed an organization that dated back to the expulsion of the Moors from Spain, a brotherhood little heard of, but ancient,

hating Christians most thoroughly, and probably much more powerful below the surface than at first appeared.

Reaching the mouth of the long ravine, Regan cautiously rode forth. The same bare monotonous expanse of rocky desert met his view; no moving object anywhere broke the horizon line.

Sudden doubt swept in upon him. After all, why should he look so fiercely to see riders swing over that horizon? Merely because a pudgy Cockney had predicted their coming? It was absurd.

"In three hours, he said," thought Regan, frowning; then drew out his pipe, and a smile curved his lips. "Well, I'll settle down and—and—and——"

His voice died. His eyes widened, and the hand reaching for his tobacco halted half-way to his belt. He sat motionless, staring; and as he sat, the long neck of his *mehari* curved up and a bubbling gurgle wheezed from the nostrils of the desert beast. For the racer, too, saw.

What was it? A blur on the horizon, no more. A tiny blur that broke the great unbroken line of sky to the north, away from the hills that stretched east. A dot

against the skyline—a dot that represented a dozen men high-mounted on camels afar off.

“By Jasper!” swore Regan in soft amazement. A little laugh broke from him, and he drew out his tobacco mechanically. “Three hours, he said? That was a good two hours and more ago when he first saw the camel. Those chaps on the horizon are a good hour away—if they’re coming here. By Jasper, that man Solomon is a wizard! He can stack up against my Aissaoua friend any day!”

Quietly, confidently, with a smile on his lips, Larry Regan made ready.

Leading his *mehari* back to where the defile narrowed, he hobbled the racer there against future need. Then, with his pipe alight, for he was careless of discovery, he made his way toward the entrance again and picked his ground of battle.

At a twist of the ravine he piled a few boulders against the western side wall, where after another hour he would be shaded for the remainder of the day, and where he commanded a clear view of the valley mouth and approach. Then he settled down to await the riders.

Regan stood in plain sight, clad in the

Touareg regalia he had stripped from Sheikh Mansour, his rifle ready to hand. As the approaching riders drew nearer, evidently heading for the Valley of Jehannum, the American saw that they numbered an even dozen.

A mile away they halted and clustered together, having descried his figure. That the garments would deceive them was, of course, impossible, since by this time all the Asgar tribe would be searching for the infidel who had fooled their sheikh.

Now ten of them came forward, while two wheeled their camels and started on the back trail at full speed, beyond doubt to summon the main body, with whom would be Mansour and Halil—if Mansour still lived. Regan smiled again at remembrance of how Solomon had foretold the precise situation.

"I'll wait and make sure," he muttered. "Let 'em fire the first shot——"

He had not long to wait.

The Touaregs—for such Regan knew them to be by the black *litham* or mask that hid each swarthy face to the eyes—opened out, prodded their camels into a run, and swept down, with the evident intention of

finishing this solitary fugitive then and there. A rifle cracked, and another, the bullets smashing against the rock wall behind Regan and spanging off into the air with a whistling whir.

The American stood motionless until the desert warriors bore down to two hundred yards—a hundred and fifty—a hundred. Then, lifting his rifle, he began to fire.

As the echoes from his first shot thundered along the gorge one of the raiders pitched from his camel. The second bullet missed. The third brought down another man. The fourth sent camel and rider plunging forward, and the fifth picked off the dismounted Touareg. The sixth missed—and there was no need of the seventh.

Under this deadly fire the attackers turned their beasts, leaped from their saddles, and took cover among the rocks. The charge was broken.

Laughing to himself, Regan sank down behind his boulders. Rifles were cracking and bullets spattering all around him, but none came dangerously close. He concluded that the Touaregs must have taken those rifles from the Senussiye, since such weapons were almost unknown to the desert dwellers.

The American bided his time; then, locating his enemies, dropped one and winged another. Those who were left lost no time in retreating from such close quarters.

Disdaining to expend further ammunition, Regan laid aside his weapon. The Touaregs contented themselves with long-range sniping, which effected nothing. An hour later, finding them creeping up on him, Regan again went into action, put one man out of action, wounded another, and drove them all back out of range, where they recovered their camels and made camp. Plainly they decided that it was useless to cope with this infidel marksman for the present. The siege had begun.

The situation began to look a good deal more cheerful to Regan. With the defenders of the blind valley in possession of the only available water supply, it was hard to see how any siege of duration could occur.

Further, while Halil had apparently overcome the small party of Senussiye^h who had come to confer with Solomon, it was unlikely that he would yet be in shape to attack the full strength of that Order. And once the Senussiye^h learned of the disaster which had overtaken their ambassadors,

they were most apt to send a strong force to eat up the audacious Halil and the Beni Iran.

"All of which," thought Regan, "is in the hand of Allah."

The afternoon wore on. When the wide valley entrance was at last bathed in the reddening light of sunset, Regan saw the Touaregs scramble to their saddles with a great shouting and firing of rifles. They rode out toward the desert, and there, coming over the horizon, Regan descried a large body of riders. The Beni Iran had come.

As the mass slowly drew nearer, it was joined by the scouts. Regan made out that horsemen were in the majority, and he estimated the whole number of riders at a hundred. Even as he watched, two horsemen spurred ahead of the mass, one upholding his rifle upon which a white flag waved. The others halted.

"By Jasper—Solomon was right again!" thought Regan. "Mansour and Halil coming in to parley."

A moment later he turned to meet John Solomon himself, who seemed to have timed his own arrival exactly to coincide with

that of the enemy. The pudgy little man seemed uncanny to Regan.

"Miss Andres and the sheikh are waitin' 'alf-way down the walley, sir," exclaimed the Cockney as he dismounted and joined Regan. "If so be as there's a fight, we can retire on our supports, just like that. Well, and now for a werry interestin' bit o' talk, says I! All well, sir?"

Regan nodded silently, his eyes on the two approaching horsemen.

CHAPTER X

SOLOMON'S TRAP

A half-hour of daylight was left as the two horsemen spurred on to where Solomon and Regan awaited them. The main body of riders had halted at the camp formed by the scouts.

Solomon, however, was seemingly not disposed to abide the coming of the two ambassadors. No sooner did he recognize the figures of Mansour and Halil than he gave Regan a low word.

"Them 'ere plotters must think as 'ow I'm Blackton-Friars," he said swiftly. "If they get a good look at me face, why it's all off, Mr. Regan. You bear this in mind, sir, and do the talkin'."

Solomon retired to the shadowed screen of rocks. His attire and figure would, of course, be recognized by Halil as that of the false baronet. Regan wondered idly

if that imposture were still undetected, if Solomon were still supposed to be dead. Yet, why not?

Ten feet away from the motionless Regan, Mansour and Halil drew rein and dismounted with a silent businesslike air that was menacing in the extreme. The lithe Touareg was now wearing, in place of his mask, the black lace shawl which had belonged to Mary Andres. Regan recognized it immediately, and laughed into the fierce hawk eyes that glowered at him over its folds. It typified, doubtless, that Sheikh Mansour was the head of the Beni Iran.

Then, as Regan's gaze met the eyes of Halil, he found the Arab's haughty face filled with a different enmity. The same veiled hatred which he had noted at their first meeting now blazed forth openly. Halil wore a simple white *burnous*, and from the snowy folds his thin-lipped, chiselled features stood out in sharp contrast. The eyes of Mansour were implacable, fierce, forthright; those of Halil held a more subtle, cunning hatred, and Regan knew that the Arab was the more to be feared.

But no fear sat in Regan's gaze as he met the two.

"*B'is salamah!*" he greeted them mockingly. "Peace upon you, my brethren! I am glad to see the sons of Iran in such goodly numbers. Feeling better than when we last met, Sheikh Mansour?"

The Touareg gave vent to a snarling "Gurr-r-r!" that was like the deep-throated growl of a wolf. Halil ibn Zoura proved to be the spokesman, however.

"Things have gone well with you, infidel," he said, his handsome eyes shifting slightly to where the figure of Solomon stood among the rocks, "and with yonder infidel Englishman, who dares to assume the garb of a holy *hajj*. Now, however, it has pleased Allah to pocket you here for our good. Surrender, and you shall have your lives."

Regan pulled out his pipe and filled it.

"We have meat, corn, dates, and water," he responded coolly, and lighted the brier. "Also rifles and ammunition. Also Sheikh Zanzour, whom you, Halil, may know, and a dozen of his men are with us. Why, then, should we surrender? And to whom?"

Cold scorn flitted across the Arab's face.

"Zanzour is with you, perchance, but not the dozen men," answered Halil, then darted at Mansour a quick inquiring glance which Regan could not interpret. "Craft and lies will avail you no further against us; you have Sheikh Zanzour and also the woman of your own nation. We wish them both."

Regan laughed softly.

"To what purpose? Do they get freedom with us?"

"We need not parry words, for you understand fully," returned Halil, his voice cold, his gaze now fastened upon the American.

"Yes, I understand," nodded Regan, staring out at the cavalcade beyond, his face serious now. "What assurance have I that you will keep your promise to free me? You plot the death of your uncle—will you keep faith, then, with me?"

"I will keep faith with those who stand not in my path," was the cynical, proud response. Halil hesitated, and half-turned at a sudden movement of the Touareg.

Sheikh Mansour, one hand at his throat, walked unsteadily toward the two horses, grasped his saddlebow, and stood with bowed

head. Suspicious of this attitude, Regan slipped one hand to his automatic. Halil, however, was still gazing at the Touareg, and then turned to the American with a thin cruel smile.

"That man stands in my path," and the Arab, speaking very softly, motioned toward the sheikh. "In five minutes he will be dead, stricken by Allah. Consider well, infidel! I will keep faith with you and with this fool of an Englishman, so yield."

There was something horrible in the kingly bearing, in the inhuman pride and cruelty of this regal Arab who so coldly announced the immediate death of his blood brother and the unscrupulous code which held death for his father's brother. Halil smiled anew at the flicker of horror in Regan's eyes.

"The fool thought I would turn over to his harem the woman with the flaming hair!" he said, in the same soft tone that Mansour could not catch. "You love her, too, American, and you have dared much for her sake, so perhaps I should also kill you. But I will not, unless you force me to the deed. You will yield?"

It came to Regan that here was his

chance to empty his automatic to excellent advantage, and his fingers clenched on the weapon in his belt.

This Halil, he saw at last, had been playing a lone hand from the start—had deliberately played for the power that would be his on the death of Mansour and his uncle, and to win Mary Andres.

"You might kill me indeed, yet I trusted in your faith," said Halil suddenly.

The American flushed, and his fingers unclenched. This Arab had read the intent in his eyes, and it shamed him.

"You are right." Regan's voice was hoarse. "Allah preserve me from being even as the traitor, Halil ibn Zoura! Go back to your curs, dog that you are! Murderer of your kinsmen, betrayer of your friends—go, dog!"

Under the sudden biting rage of the American, Halil turned livid. Perhaps he had thought Regan to be like putty in his hand, yet now, without a word more, he whirled on his heel and strode to the horses.

Sheikh Mansour was still clinging to the saddlebow. Halil clapped him on the shoulder. Soundlessly the Touareg's hands loosed

the leather, and Mansour fell in a crumpled heap on the sand.

In a flash, Halil stooped, tore away the sacred black lace shawl of Iran Abiff, leaped to his own saddle, and spurred out toward his men, shouting something as he went. The horse of Mansour followed.

Wondering, Regan leaped forward to the Touareg's body, Solomon puffing out to join him. Sheikh Mansour was quite dead.

"What killed him?" exclaimed Regan, bewildered. "I can swear that Halil did not stab him, yet the devil said that Mansour would be dead in five minutes——"

"Poison," broke out Solomon, mopping his streaming brow. "Dang it, Mr. Regan! We should ha' put a bullet into that 'ere murderin' rogue——"

The pudgy little man broke off and seemed to be listening to the excited yells that were greeting Halil's return to his men.

"Sure," nodded the American. "I know it, and I was tempted to do it. But, hang it all, we have to play the game, John!"

"Yes, sir; werry right you are, sir," and

Solomon clutched at his arm swiftly. "Give me a 'and up to me camel, sir; move sharp! That 'ere wagabond is a-telling 'em as we've gone an' killed Sheikh Mansour. Dang it, sir, move sharp!"

There was no time in which to force Solomon's *mehari* to kneel. One glance showed Regan the whole body of Touaregs and Beni Iran sweeping into a gallop towards them, and a wild fierce roar of execration told that the wily Halil had twisted the death of Mansour to swift advantage.

Regan took Solomon's foot in his cupped hands and fairly hove the pudgy little man up to the saddle; then, gripping his rifle, turned and ran down the ravine toward his own *mehari*. He could find no strategy in this headlong flight, nor, it seemed, was there any time to think of strategy. Two men, or three, or a dozen, could not hold that narrow defile against a mob of blood-crazed men on camels and horses. Bullets would not halt the raiders, especially in the gathering darkness of the ravine ahead.

Therefore, when he gained his own beast, Regan slipped off the hobbles, scrambled

somehow to the saddle, and fled after Solomon, who had gone like a spectre into the gloom ahead. The sun was down, and in the darkness there could be no aiming, no fighting. Regan saw nothing ahead except a wild flight to the amphitheatre, a desperate attempt to hold the narrow defile against the flood of man and beasts—and then the end of it all.

It did not occur to him that John Solomon might have been a very busy man himself during that long afternoon.

On fled Regan. Behind him the pursuit ceased momentarily at the body of Sheikh Mansour, then redoubled in vigour, as the increasing clamour of yells and gunshots testified. Closest behind Regan were the racing *mehara* of the Touaregs. The horses were doubtless jaded with long marching, while the racing camels were capable of tremendous speed, and bore their riders well ahead of the rout of horseman. Regan knew that he was well in the lead of them all, however.

"Confound that Halil!" muttered the American, regretting his own scruples over shooting the Arab. "How did he manage to kill Mansour just at the right

time to shove the blame on us? If it was poison——”

“’Old up there, Mr. Regan!” shrilled out the wheezy voice of Solomon, somewhere in the darkness ahead. “’Old up, an’ do it werry sharplike——”

Cursing, Regan strove to pull up his maddened racer, but without avail. In the gloom ahead, where from far above a very dim starlight was beginning to filter down between the high rock walls, he made out dim figures. Then the *mehari* heaved up in an awkward, amazed jump, went down in a sprawl, and shot Regan twenty feet ahead on the sand.

“What the devil!”

Rolling head over heels, Regan scrambled to his feet and groped for his rifle. Solomon bent over him and helped him erect. Then the American saw that his *mehari* had gone down over a ragged line of boulders rolled into the centre of the ravine. A shot flashed and echoed, and the red flash disclosed the figure of Sheikh Zanzour putting the broken racer out of its misery.

“Quick, sir!” cried Solomon, unwonted excitement in his tone. “Get to one side with your rifle—you ain’t gone and lost it?”

"No."

Perceiving something of the strategy of the pudgy Cockney, and blessing the inspiration which had led the man to lay that slender barricade in place during the afternoon, Regan leaped to one of the side walls, a hundred feet from the boulders. He caught the raised voice of Solomon again:

"Watch sharp, miss!"

"All ready, John," returned the clear voice of Mary Andres from somewhere up above. Regan gasped amazedly, then had no further time to wonder.

Around the bend in the ravine, fifty yards back, swept the rout of camels and horses, the camels perhaps a hundred feet in the lead. Half a dozen of the riders had lighted torches or flares, and as they came into sight Sheikh Zanzour's revolver began to crack, the rifle of Solomon spoke, and Regan flung up his weapon and pulled trigger.

The flares went down under the hoofs, and so did some of their bearers. An instant later came a wild shrill yell as the camel riders struck the barricade and piled up under the leaden hail that tore through them. Regan found what share Mary Andres played in this matter when a match twinkled on

the cliff-side above and a glare of light shot down from a pile of dried bushes and debris.

That light came too late for the horsemen who thundered on the heels of the racing camels. These first had halted at the barricade—had halted, and had become a screaming, writhing mass of men and beasts. Regan fired his last rifle cartridge, pulled out his automatic, emptied it, and began to reload his rifle again. But there was no haste.

Unable to check their headlong rush, the rolling tide of horsemen came driving down upon the doom that awaited them. Like an avalanche they came, those before pressed by those behind—an avalanche of fluttering robes, glinting weapons, eyes that glared horridly upon death in the red light of the bane fire above.

They struck with a smashing impact that shook the solid ground.

Then, through the wildly echoing screams of men and beasts, pierced the sharp rifle cracks. Regan found himself firing avidly into the crowded tangle that choked all the ravine from wall to wall. Two or three dismounted Touaregs plunged forward from

the inchoate mass, only to meet flying death, and over all rose the awful smitten shout of men massed in the death-grip: "Allah! Allah!"

His rifle emptied again, Regan found Solomon tugging at his arm, and the light above dying down into a red glow.

"This way, sir! Come along! Come out o' this 'ell!"

The Cockney's voice was a choking gasp. Regan turned and blindly stumbled after. A moment later he was helping Mary Andres into the saddle of a *mehari*. Solomon climbed to that of their remaining beast, and Regan, confusedly handing over his rifle at the request of Sheikh Zanzour, who was remaining to stand guard, followed the two camels down the Valley of Jehannum.

The uproar behind died away. Ahead, Regan could hear the sobs of Mary Andres; he felt tears on his own cheeks, he scarce knew why. That had been a terrible scene, a thing to grip the soul.

"It's war," thought Regan, "but it's hell!"

"I feel mortal bad," he heard Solomon's voice, "for them poor 'osses. I do that!"

"Oh, I never dreamed it would be like

that!" cried out the voice of Mary Andres. "I never dreamed——"

With an effort, Regan collected himself, gathered himself together from the threat of hysteria induced by that tremendous horror.

It was war, of course; it had been a master-stroke of strategy, and with a dozen men to complete the enemy's disaster it would have been a smashing victory, a certain destruction of the entire Beni Iran force. Regan was no pacifist, and he was schooled to stern things, yet this affair had shaken him more than he cared to admit. Its success had been a little too perfect almost.

When they reached the amphitheatre, Mary Andres retired at once to her own private cave. Regan and Solomon sat over a tiny fire, roasting a fat steak from the hump of the *jemal*, and smoking together. An hour later Sheikh Zanzour rejoined them.

"They have retired, leaving a guard at the barricade," and the stately Arab chuckled. "We bagged between thirty and forty of them, my brothers—Allah speeded the blow! The men and animals are being buried in the sand, and there will be no further attack

to-night. Do you sleep, and I will return and keep watch."

"It was werry 'ard on the 'osses," said Solomon in English. "But it 'ad to be done, as the old gent said when 'e married 'is third."

Regan slept beneath the stars, dreaming of that hell trap.

CHAPTER XI

THE SCRAP OF PAPER

"Prowidence," remarked Solomon sagely, "is a werry curious thing, it is that! I 'ad 'oped that 'ere Halil was in 'is blessed Moslem paradise, but 'e ain't. 'Cause why, 'e wants to 'ave another bit o' talk with us. Shall we 'ave 'im up, or shall we go and speak with 'im?"

It was the morning after the enemy's debacle.

Solomon had gone forth to relieve Sheikh Zanzour, but had instead come back with word that Halil was asking a second conference and showed no signs of desiring immediate renewal of hostilities.

Mary Andres was herself again. On hearing Solomon's errand, she turned to Regan with a frown of interrogation.

"Can we trust him in here, Sir Larry?"

Regan glanced around at the frowning

cliffs which inclosed the bowl, and laughed.

"If he can trust *us*—yes. How about it, John? Shall we throw aside scruples this time and finish him?"

At the startled look which these words drew from the girl, Solomon chuckled.

"No, sir; I'm werry sorry to say as that 'ere course would be wise, but it ain't exactly the thing for us to do, 'cause why, we're Christians, just like that. Now, sir, this 'er Halil wants to talk. Well, says I, let 'im talk! The more a man talks the more fool 'e, as the Good Book says. Also, 'e wants to bring two of them 'ere Touaregs with 'im."

It appeared that Halil, upon the demise of Sheikh Mansour, had become head of the Beni Iran—so far a fulfilment of Solomon's triangle prophecy. At the proposal to admit Halil and two of the chief Touaregs, who were coming to guard him against the supposed treachery of the infidels, through the defiles to the great bowl, Regan protested immediately. Solomon, however, had a method in his madness.

"I 'ave a notion, sir, as 'ow the Senus-siyeh 'as their spies among them Beni Iran,

and it might be as one o' them two Touaregs would be a friend. So, says I, let 'em come. I'll sit back in the shadow of one o' them 'ere caves, with me rifle ready against any tricks, and Halil won't be able to see me face. But if either one o' them Touaregs 'appens to 'old out 'is 'ands like this, with the palms down, then you'll know as 'e's a friend, and you can give 'im this paper, sir."

Solomon extended a scrap of paper on which were a few lines of Arabic characters. Without reading them, Regan took the paper.

"All right, John, but you keep your rifle cocked, mind! Lady Mary, you'd best go into the cave with John, in case those chaps try any crooked work. Why do they want to come here anyhow, John? Why not parley down the ravine where the sheikh is waiting?"

Solomon chuckled wheezily.

"They wants to 'ave a look at this 'ere place, I suppose, sir."

"Why? For purposes of attack?"

"Werry likely, sir," assented the Cockney, with irritating placidity.

"And you propose to let them do it?"

"Yes, sir."

Before the mild blue eyes of Solomon, Regan ceased further protest. The pudgy Cockney had arranged to fire one shot as a signal to Sheikh Zanzour to allow Halil and his friends free passage. Accordingly Regan fired his automatic in the air.

Solomon and Miss Andres retired to the shallow cavern that sheltered their two remaining *mehara*. In the entrance crouched the pudgy Cockney, pulling the folds of his *burnous* hood up around his face and holding his rifle in readiness. Out in the open waited Regan, hand on revolver, grey eyes steady and alert. He felt convinced that it were folly to allow the three foes to enter here. Halil would be ready, he argued, to attempt any desperate stroke to win, and treachery was his most apt weapon.

"Look here," Regan flung swiftly at Solomon, "you want no reference made to your being alive, John? And how about the death of Sheikh Mansour? Hadn't we better set those Touaregs aright about it? It might be a good stroke——"

"No, sir," replied Solomon hastily from his shadowed nook. "Let sleepin' dogs lie, sir, just like that. Them 'ere Touaregs

ain't a-goin' to believe you, nohow. And keep me out of it, sir, or the 'ole blessed game will be up."

The American laughed harshly. So far as he could see, the game was about up in any event. Halil could starve out or fight out the little party of four, and there could be no repetition of such disaster as had stricken the Touaregs on the preceding night. That would now be guarded against.

Also, Regan remembered that he was under the orders of Solomon.

"All right, John; you're the boss," he returned cheerfully. "Here they come now, I think."

As when he had faced death beside Mary Andres, it suddenly occurred to him that the scene was commonplace. Except for the odd formation of the defile and great bowl amid the rocks, it might have been taking place in the Arizona desert back at home. In the aspect of the three natives who rode slowly from the mouth of the ravine across the sand basin was nothing romantic or heroic. Their horses were jaded, their fluttering robes were dirtied and blood-smeared, and the Touareg who

rode next to Halil carried one arm in a sling.

Ragan moved forward to meet them in the centre of the open space. Halil did not dismount at once, but sat his horse for a moment, gazing down at the American with bitter eyes. Then abruptly he swung from the saddle, as did the two Touaregs.

But Regan noted that the third man, the unwounded Touareg, swiftly made him the sign given by Solomon. Strangely, this proof of the pudgy Cockney's acuteness did not seem odd to Regan; it merely brought a smile to his lips. He began to think Solomon a magician in good sooth, a worthy kinsman of the Aissaouas.

"I want water!" snarled Halil, striding up to Regan, an imperious frown stamped upon his handsome features; not so handsome now, for a long cut across his brow showed that he had not escaped unharmed from that rout of the horseman.

"Give us water, and we go, infidel! Wounded men and beasts have drunk up our water, and in the name of Allah give us water from these caves that we may go and leave you in peace."

Regan laughed. In his reckless dancing eyes there abode something of the Arab's haughtiness as he made answer:

"If you need water, O Halil, go and find it—or come and get it! Although you saw nothing of our plans, I think you will find another trap awaiting you if you try to fight us further. Seek no water here without fighting for it, traitor and murderer!"

"Listen!" With an obvious effort Halil forced himself to disregard the taunts. "I am the head of the Beni Iran, and you know not the meaning of that position. I have but to send forth messengers, and men will flock to me—by the score and the hundred. I can camp here and await them, if need be. But give me of your water and I go, and you shall be no more troubled."

"O compassionate one!" Regan chuckled. It might be true that Halil needed water, but he knew the man for one who gave up not so easily that upon which he had once gripped. Besides, Halil was a proven liar.

"And you will leave Sheikh Zanzour alive, eh? O Halil, that were a sorry ending to your plots and battles!" Regan mocked

him softly, so that the proud features of the Arab were red with the sting. "Try another tale, change your plea, worshipful grand master of the Sons of Iran, and perchance I will believe you. Was this all that you came hither to say?"

Just how to deliver that scrap of paper to the unwounded Touareg Regan could not see. The eyes of the two other men were watchful, alert, suspicious.

"Where got you the knowledge of the Words of Iran Abiff?" demanded Halil suddenly. "The knowledge that tricked us all so readily?"

"From the shawl that works miracles," responded Regan promptly, seeing no great virtue to be gained by lying. "By the way, where is that shawl? It belongs to Miss Andres, and if you want to return it to the lawful owner, I'll buy it back from you for a couple of lire."

As he spoke, Regan took from a corner of his girdle two or three Italian coins, which had remained with him since leaving Tripoli, and jingled them in his left hand, together with the scrap of paper.

The wounded Touareg broke into a storm of curses at the mockery of the American's

words and action. Halil took a step back, with so black a scowl that Regan's right hand slipped to his automatic, but the unwounded Touareg, darting forward with a wild snarl of apparent hatred, dashed the coins from Regan's hand to the earth.

In the movement, however, his brown claws retained the scrap of paper. It was cleverly done.

"Dog!" The Touareg shook his clenched fist under Regan's nose with a fine simulation of rising anger. "Dog of an infidel! For those jeers you shall die the death, aye and the Sons of Iran shall follow you to the ends of the earth——"

Halil took his follower by the shoulder, and swung him aside.

"Peace! This is no time for brawling." Suddenly, to the surprise of Regan, the Arab broke into perfect English; he had been European trained, in truth. "Is this your final word, Mr. Regan? Think well! Give us water, and you all go free from here. Refuse, and by the sword of Mohammed I swear not one of you shall reach Tripoli alive—and Mary Andres shall be mine! That is no light oath, I warn you, for I go

from here to call to arms every Son of Iran between Egypt and Morocco, and your cursed friends, the Senussiyeh, shall be swept away within a month."

Regan looked into the venomous terrible eyes of the Arab, and laughed, although his fingers were itching to close on the man's throat.

"Get our of here, you damned dog!" he said quietly, ominously. "Try to start anything with me, and my friend, the baronet, over there will plug you in a jiffy. Clear out of here before I forget myself and smash your teeth into your palate!"

Whether or not Halil quite understood this outbreak was a question, but there was no mistaking Regan's tenor. The Arab's hand went to his girdle, and he found himself staring into Regan's automatic.

"Clear out!" snapped the American grimly.

Livid to the lips. Halil turned to his horse, and his companions did likewise. As they departed Regan fired one shot in the air as a signal to Sheikh Zanzour to be on his guard, and strode back to join Solomon, who had heard most of the conversation.

"Well, John? What's his game?"

Before the Cockney could reply, Mary Andres stepped out beside him, her eyes shining, a smile on her lips.

"Sir Larry, who was your friend, the actor? Why, it was magnificent the way he palmed that bit of paper right under Halil's eyes!"

"He was some kid, all right," grinned Regan. "Who was he, John?"

"I'm blessed if I know," and Solomon shook his head blankly. "The 'ole affair is werry queer, to me mind, sir and miss. That 'ere Halil wasn't a-telling no lies, Mr. Regan, though you thought as 'e was. About the water, I mean."

"Eh?" Regan stared at the pudgy little man, whose moonlike features peered out so absurdly from beneath the green turban. "Not lying? You didn't swallow that yarn, did you?"

Solomon had swallowed it, and for good reason. Halil must have had plenteous water for the immediate needs of his company. The vanishing of that water supply in some unnamed and mysterious manner was due, in Solomon's judgement, to the activity of the man to whom Regan had passed that scrap of paper—the spy of the Senussiyeh, whose presence was very plainly unsuspected

by the Beni Iran. It were no hard matter for such a one to empty a few skins of water.

The more Regan reflected on the subject the more convinced he became that Solomon was correct in his theory; but, had Halil secured water, his promises to let the four go free would certainly have been broken.

"Still," argued the American, as he saddled the two kneeling *mehara*, preparing to go after Sheikh Zanzour and see what was happening up the ravine, "I can't quite believe that Halil means to loosen his grip on us, John. "It doesn't stand to reason, as Tom Sawyer says. How can he make good his threat that none of us will reach Tropoli?"

"I don't know as 'e can, sir, but 'e'll try mortal 'ard."

"Will it take a month for him to summon all the Beni Iran and open war upon the Senussiyeh?"

"It's 'ard to say, Mr. Regan, sir," returned Solomon reflectively. "That 'ere man is all puffed up wi' pride, just like that. But I'll venture to say, sir, as 'ow there won't be no war between 'im and the Senussiyeh."

"Why not, John?" asked Mary Andres, as the little man paused.

"I don't know, miss. I knows nothing

and I says nothing, just like that."

"You stubborn old plotter!" The girl laughed, and before her merry eyes Solomon's face relaxed a trifle. "What was in that paper?"

"Just a word to say as I was 'ere, miss. And 'ere we're a-going to stay."

Regan mounted and urged the two racers off. He frankly gave up trying to fathom John Solomon's mental attitude. He could well realize how the little Cockney, by virtue of that very attitude, had attained so commanding a position in the Eastern world, whose people are born to subtle intrigue and concealment of the obvious.

There was sense in the determination of Solomon to remain here in the Valley of Jehannum. Also, there was imperative necessity. They had but two *mehara*, consequently only two of them could go forth. Whoever ventured to do so would doubtless find the Beni Iran on guard all round. It would be saner and safer for the four to remain here where they could hope to defend themselves until either the Senussiyeh or the retainers of Sheikh Zanzour might come with rescue. Also, the Italians were no doubt searching for Miss Andres.

Regan found the sheikh perched high on one of the rock walls overlooking the place of ambushade. Here there remained no signs of the disaster; the animals and men had alike been buried in the sand.

Climbing down and mounting the extra *mehari*, Sheikh Zanzour heard Regan's report of the conference, then waved his hand toward the desert, and urged his mount forward. It was nearly midday now, and before returning they must see what Halil's force was about. As they rode, the sheikh spoke more freely than hitherto, albeit with some moroseness.

"This is the curse of Islam, Monsieur Regan," he said in French, "this eternal sectarianism, this internecine fighting. Beni Iran against Senussiyeh, Senussiyeh against Mevlevi—and all of them secret Orders, no man knowing whether his neighbour be friend or enemy. The Senussiyeh has been forced into political intrigues, and now this ambitious nephew of mine is leading the Beni Iran into the same paths. The great hope of the Moslem world is in this unification of our peoples under the *Sherif* of Mecca, but——"

"But the Moslem world seems to be doing

its best to prevent that union," said Regan as the other paused.

"Yes—the caliphate of Mecca is only a dream, an ideal, as yet. The Beni Iran fight it from motives of fanaticism, the Senussiye may block the scheme through vague suspicion. Well, it lies in the hand of Allah—we shall see!"

Ten minutes later they drew rein in the valley mouth, gazing together across the stony desert. Off to the north were filing the Beni Iran, bag and baggage—a great, slow-moving clump of riders heading over the horizon.

Their camp was deserted. They had gone.

"Look!" cried the sheikh vibrantly, and pointed to the eastern hills.

An answering exclamation broke from Regan. There, debouching from one of the passes, he could make out a slender string of camels, a dozen in all. They were two miles distant from the valley mouth, and the same distance from the Beni Iran, who must have plainly descried their approach. But the Beni Iran continued on their way north.

"What does it mean?" demanded Regan,

frowning. "Are they some of Halil's men——"

"No," cried the sheikh excitedly. "They are Senussiyeh—and Halil is not interfering with them! By the Prophet's beard, that dog must have given up the fight!"

CHAPTER XII

THE SHEIKH EL MAHDI

To Regan, watching, it seemed a strange thing that Halil should permit this band of a dozen Senussiyeh to thus approach the Valley of Jehannum. But stranger things than this were upon the way.

Here was one event, at least, which Solomon had not foreseen.

Steadily, slowly, the dozen Senussiyeh drew in to the valley entrance, while the party of Touaregs filed over the horizon and were gone. As the dozen approached, Regan saw that they were mounted upon very fine black *mehara*—animals whose quality could be told at a glance. The riders were bearded men all, and from the long white beards of the majority Regan was astonished to see that nearly all were old men or elderly. One alone, seemingly of middle age, was riding in the centre, the chieftain of the party.

In the closer view of these men, in their

undeviating, steady approach, Regan found something mysterious and awe-inspiring. He felt sombre eyes resting upon him; he looked into the faces of ascetics, faces not those of ordinary men. Instinctively he realized that in all this was something strange, wonderful. And then he saw that the hindmost of these riders was staring fixedly at him. With a shock, Regan met the man's gaze and recognized the features of the Aissaoua—the wizard of the *fonduk* at Bu Sef! Yet the man was not bound, nor did he appear to be in any way constrained, though beneath its hood his face expressed indubitable hatred and sullenness.

Why was this Aissaoua riding with the Senussiye, who must know him for a foe—why was he riding with them, when he could so easily have joined Halil's party? The American was still pondering this stunning revelation when Sheikh Zanzour leaned over in the saddle and caught his arm. The dozen riders were now fifty feet distant.

"For the love of Allah, keep silent!" breathed the sheikh hoarsely. "Know you who that man is, riding in the centre—the youngest of them?"

"No," responded Regan, grimly. "But

I know the hindmost man, and he is that magician of the Aissaouas who tricked me at the *fonduk* of Bu Sef! Now it seems to me that we shall settle the score——”

“Peace!” exclaimed the sheikh, staring at the riders. “Keep silent, if you value your life, for that Aissaoua is a captive, and that man in the centre—by the Prophet, it is wellnigh incredible!”

“Who is he, then?” growled Regan. That the Aissaoua was a prisoner might be true, but was unlikely, since he was unguarded and had made no move to escape to Halil’s party. “And why did the Touaregs ride off——”

“Be silent—ask no questions, I tell you!” He gave Regan one look, and in his hawk face there was such amazement, fear, bewildered surmise, that the American was astounded. “There is more in all this than we can guess. If you value life, conduct yourself as though you knew not these men, any of them! That Aissaoua is a captive; those white-bearded men hold him by stronger bonds than chains, although invisible ones. He who rides in the centre is no other than the Sheik el Mahdi, the Grand Master of the Senussiye——”

Regan stiffened in his saddle, staring.

Was this thing possible? Was he even then under the eyes of the Grand Senussi, as the Italians termed him—the Grand Master of the greatest religious Order in the Eastern world—the man who was, above all others, the most powerful personage, the most mysterious, the most feared and revered in all Islam?

The dozen riders halted, and one of the white-bearded men rode slowly out toward Regan and the sheikh. They seemed unarmed, all of these men, and Regan's wonder grew into something deeper. Under their sombre brooding eyes he felt again that sense of awe, that compellent mystery.

"There is but one God!" proclaimed the old man, drawing rein before Sheikh Zanzour and making the *temenah*, the three-fold sign of greeting. "There is but one God, my brother!"

"And Mohammed is the prophet of God," responded the sheikh.

"We seek one named Suleiman," said the elder. "Know you him?"

"He is in my company," answered Zanzour. "Know you that the Beni Iran have destroyed some of the Senussiyeh——"

"Trouble not my master with such things," broke in the old man gravely. "We seek Suleiman, and God will protect those who serve him."

Zanzour, evidently accepting this as a rebuke, silently motioned Regan to turn, and led the way into the winding ravine.

There Regan saw a strange thing. As the cavalcade started forward, he glanced around, to see the Aissaoua striving frantically to jerk the head of his *mehari* toward the desert. The beast obeyed, but one of the old men turned and made a slight motion in the air. Instantly the arms of the Aissaoua fell as though the power had left them, and his mount again turned and followed the party. Regan remembered what Sheikh Zanzour had just said about invisible chains, and something like fear fell upon him. What manner of men were these desert rulers?

In silence they rode down the winding ravine, Regan and the sheikh in the lead.

As they rode, however, Regan shook off his feeling of oppression. After all, these chiefs of the Senussiye were mere men; powerful perhaps, adepts in trickery and wizardry of all kinds, the actual spiritual

heads of a great world religion, yet still men.

The Touareg scouts must have seen these riders in the hills. Halil must have known of their approach even before he had asked a conference that morning. Was this the reason, then, for the withdrawal of the Beni Iran? Did Halil fear these dozen silent men who rode unaccompanied through the hills—

“Ah, that explains it!” exclaimed the American quickly to his companion. “Halil drew off because his scouts had seen the approach of a large force——”

“A large force?” Zanzour glanced at him with lifted brows. “Where, my brother?”

Regan jerked his head toward those who followed.

“This crowd. They’re probably convoyed by a small army of fighting men. Did you see any signs of their guard?”

The Arab smiled, as though Regan had uttered a good joke, and replied in French:

“Ho! Such as these, Monsieur Regan, need no guard. No, they came alone, under the protection of Allah. Are they not holy men?”

Regan grunted, and held his peace. He

was soon to learn, however, that Africa holds mysterious things—whether her holy men be wizards or mere men.

At last they came to the final cleft in the rocks, and Regan rode on ahead across the sand of the great amphitheatre. Solomon and Mary Andres were standing, talking, before the caves. At sight of him and of the cavalcade following, they stood staring.

“A friend of yours has dropped in to see you, John,” said Regan, dismounting. “The sheikh says he’s the Grand Master of the Senussiyeh himself. Will you receive him?”

The pudgy little Cockney stared across the sand, his blue eyes widening. Then he made a swift gesture toward the caves behind him.

“Will you be so good as to take Miss Andres in ’ere, sir? Dang it! Them ’ere Senussiyeh don’t ’old with ’aving women-folk at their councils, beggin’ your pardon, ma’am, and werry sorry I am to say it.”

For once his wheezy voice was stirred with excitement.

“Very well,” assented the girl quietly. “The Beni Iran have gone, Sir Larry?”

“Yes.”

Together they crossed to the great cliff,

and, from the shadowy recesses of a vast shallow cavern, watched the scene before them.

"Which one?" demanded the girl, in a whisper, and, when Regan had indicated the central figure, a sigh broke from her. "Oh, if I only had my camera unpacked! Why didn't you let me know?"

Regan chuckled, but made no reply.

In the centre of the open space, the *mehara* were halted, and all the riders except the Aissaoua dismounted. Then, while the elders began to make camp in methodical fashion, ignoring the cave openings, the Sheikh el Mahdi strode toward the waiting figure of Solomon.

Now the Arab touched breast, lips, and brow, as did Solomon, and for a moment the two stood gazing into each other's eyes. A strange contrast they made—the tall stately Arab, who lacked the splendid hauteur of Halil, yet whose features displayed twice the depth and power, and over against him the pudgy, grey-haired little Cockney, blue-eyed and expressionless.

"So this is Suleiman, the marvellous!" exclaimed the grand master, smiling a little. His voice was unexpectedly sonorous, like

a great bell. "This is that Suleiman of whom tales are told from the bazaars of Damascus to the *suk* of Mogador—the Suleiman who has worsted the Senussiyeh and lived to tell of it! Peace unto you!"

"And to you," Solomon made answer after the usual formula. Oddly Regan saw that the pudgy little man had lost all his awkwardness, and seemed to be very sure of himself. His Arabic was as flawless as that of the other man. "Yes, you are right, Sheikh el Mahdi. I have worsted the Senussiyeh, but I have not harmed the religion which you call Moslem, or Enlightened, Nor have I fought you; merely your agents, who were not good men."

The grand master nodded.

"Well said, Suleiman. What has passed here? Who were those Touaregs who left as we drew near?"

Solomon lowered his voice, evidently relating the events which had taken place. Regan chuckled. This evidence of humanity was quite in contrast to the proud superiority to mere news items displayed by the white-bearded elder.

"Very well," returned the grand master, turning. "Join us after the noon prayer."

He rejoined his followers. Sheikh Zanzour crossed to the caves, and, displaying no further interest in the proceedings, rolled up in his *burnous*. He was worn out, and curtly refused Regan's proffer of food and drink.

"Leave 'im alone, sir," said Solomon, wiping his brow excitedly. "It was 'is business to bring me 'ere, that's all. Now, miss, let's 'ave a bite to eat, 'cause why, me and Mr. Regan is a-goin' to be werry busy men."

"Am I to be in on the conference, then?" queried the American in surprise.

"Yes, sir."

They made a hurried meal. The Senus-siyeh, who seemed to have plenty of water for their wants, were engaged likewise; but the Aissaoua sat still upon his saddle, as though forgotten. Nor did he move until one of the white-bearded men motioned to him to join them in the noonday prayer, when, for the first time, he came to the ground.

To Regan there was something indescribably inspiring in the spectacle of those *burnous*-clad men kneeling in the sunlight and chanting aloud their prayers, heedless

of watchers or danger. There is always a fervour in the aspect of the Moslem at prayer—a quick, living faith, a deep sincerity, a realization of the scripture that man's first duty is toward his god.

Then, suddenly, the prayer was over; the kneeling figures rose. Solomon touched Regan's arm, and with a quick handclasp and a smile from Mary Andres the American followed to the conference.

The Grand Master sat in the centre of an irregular circle; one of the old men was making coffee upon a charcoal brazier, and the Aissaoua stood looking on—a sullen, scowling figure. Solomon and Regan seated themselves upon a camel rug opposite the Sheikh el Mahdi, and coffee was handed around.

"There is a matter to be settled, my brethren," said the Grand Master, and bent his finger toward the Aissaoua. Then, addressing the latter: "O magician, did not Allah reveal to the prophets of the Jews that wizards were to be slain?"

"I am not a Jew," responded the Aissaoua, his bronzed face paling slightly.

Regan found the hand of Solomon clenched suddenly upon his wrist—clenched with

amazing force. A moment later he discovered the reason for this repression.

"Since you are not a Jew," returned the Grand Master dryly, "you should give heed to the sacred writings of the Jews, for Mohammed made them sacred also unto us, the enlightened ones. O teacher, stand up!"

One of the old men arose, and the speaker turned again to the Aissaoua.

"Magician, you have troubled the Senussiye^h this long while. Now, therefore, let us see whether Allah favours the Beni Iran or the Senussiye^h—to thy magic, O wizard of the Aissaouas!"

Solomon's handgrip tightened, and under it Regan checked himself.

For the white-bearded man had stretched out one hand toward the Aissaoua, and with the other hand cast down a bit of brush. As it touched the sand the twig lengthened and twined up into a crested cobra, darted forward, poised before the wizard, and coiled for the death-spring.

One terrible instant the Aissaoua stared down at the viper, then a choking cry broke from him; he took a step backward and cast down a small object.

Whatever that object had been, as it touched the sands it became a second cobra, which leaped upon the first, fastened long fangs in its neck, and there upon the sand there lay but two bits of brush. The cobras were vanished.

"Does an Aissaoua fear the bite of a snake or the bite of steel?" said the Grand Master mockingly. "Defend thyself, O wizard!"

Now, whether this were trickery or hypnotic spell or sheer magic, Regan had no time to guess, but perhaps the scene held a title of all three. No sooner had the Grand Master spoken than the greybeard stooped, picked up another twig, and threw it into the air.

As though caught by some invisible hand, the twig flew up for a hundred feet, almost out of sight. The Aissaoua stared at it, sweat rolling from his face. At the apex of its flight, the twig paused. Regan saw it glitter, change shape, and, instead of a twig, there fell a dagger, shimmering in the sunlight, speeding down with inconceivable swiftness at the Aissaoua, who put forth his palm as if to meet it. And he did so. Regan saw the dagger go through the man's hand, saw the steel before and behind

the palm, and then there fell to the sand a twig, and the Aissaoua held up an unmarked hand.

"Defend thyself, magician!" cried the Grand Master again.

Now Regan realized that this Aissaoua was a man condemned to death, and that before his eyes was being played a great contest such as few white men had ever seen—a terrible game of that magic half-hypnotism, half-unexplained mystery, which renders the lands of the Eastern sun so inexplicable to Caucasians.

At other times Regan had seen exhibitions, and he had seen the tricks of Hindus and Africans and Aissaouas, but he had never thought to see one man fighting with magic weapons for his life and another fighting with the same weapons to destroy him.

The greybeard plucked a coal from the brazier and cast it toward the Aissaoua, who retreated until he stood at the edge of the circle of men and even went a step beyond them. The coal leaped into a flame and the flame leaped toward the Aissaoua, but the latter whipped off his *burnous* and threw it at the flame.

Like a sentient thing, the *burnous* spread

out, caught the flame, smothered it, and the Aissaoua leaned forward and slipped the garment over his shoulders—unsinged. But Regan saw that he now realized how death lay waiting for him, since his face was awful to look upon. He made no plea, however, gave no prayer for mercy.

“Defend thyself!” cried the Grand Master swiftly.

The greybeard caught up some loose sand in his hand and cast it at the Aissaoua, whose figure disappeared in a great whirl of sandy dust.

“In the name of Allah!” cried the greybeard, and flung a twig into the vortex.

From the whirlwind of sand came a wild cry. What passed therein was impossible for Regan to see or know, but the whirlwind swept away, and the staggering figure of the Aissaoua stood forth, stripped naked to the waist and bleeding from a dozen slight cuts.

Instantly the greybeard tossed into the air another handful of sand. The Aissaoua cried out incoherently and reeled away, but in the air, around his head, appeared a whirring, whistling flock of cruel-beaked hawks. Regan gasped at the sight.

Staggering, the Aissaoua sank to earth, the hawks tearing at him with beaks and talons. He, too, flung up a weak handful of sand, and then among the hawks appeared great vultures, tearing at the lesser birds and driving them off. In a flash all vanished, and there remained but the figure of the wizard, prostrate, trying feebly to rise on one elbow.

"Die, apostle of Sheitan!" thundered the Grand Master, rising and holding out one hand. "Die, trickster!"

And then happened a thing so incredible that Larry Regan knew not then or later if he had seen aright, or if it had been some product of his imagination. For in the air, over the head of the Aissaoua, appeared a black object, and he recognized it as the shawl of Iran Abiff. It spread out like a net, and so plain was it that Regan could even see the shadow of the lacework upon the sand as it descended and closed over the head and shoulders of the Aissaoua.

For a full quarter-minute the spell was unbroken. Then the Grand Master reseated himself; the shawl vanished; there was but the dead body of the wizard stretched out in the sand a dozen feet away.

"Bury him, two of you!" The Sheikh el Mahdi waved his hand toward the body, and even in that moment Regan wondered rather hysterically why the corpse was not disposed of by magic also. Then the Arab turned to Solomon, his swarthy face composed.

"Now, Suleiman, let us talk of your errand here. What is the word that was brought to me about a caliphate being established in Mecca?"

CHAPTER XIII

HALIL STRIKES

While two of the elders buried the dead Aissaoua, Solomon told of the great project which was destined to shake the Eastern world—if fulfilled.

The telling resolved itself into a duel between the Cockney and the Sheikh el Mahdi; a duel wherein the one questioned and the other answered in words which Regan would have deemed utter madness had they been uttered in other places by anyone else than John Solomon. Those around listened most attentively.

"It is all very well," said the Grand Master moodily, "to say that the Caliph of Mecca will include the holy cities in a temporal power, but who will sustain him in that power against the greed of Russia and Germany and others?"

"England will do so, and France," answered Solomon.

"Have you documents to prove this?"

"You have my word."

"The word of Suleiman is better than many oaths," mused the Arab. "Our lodges along the Egyptian border are being raided by the British. How shall this matter be adjusted?"

"There have been mistakes on both sides," said Solomon promptly. "Turks have masqueraded as Senussiye and have murdered and robbed; the British have retaliated on the Senussiye. Denounce these false members of your Order, and I will see to it that justice is done by the British troops."

The Grand Master eyed his elders, and Regan caught a faint nod of approval that passed around the circle of hearers.

"That is just," and the leader nodded assent. "As you have said, the sultan has no legal claim to pose as the caliph; the one person who may claim this honour is Hussein the Holy, *Sherif* of Mecca. What forces has he behind him? We have been able to hear but vaguely of the work, since the Italians and British have cut us off from our agents."

Solomon explained at length, and Regan was himself startled to discover that this was to be a solid outbreak of all the tribes of Arabia banded into a confederacy against the Turks, under the leadership of Hussein, and that Arabia was to become absolutely independent of foreign powers.

This thing was more than a dream, a vision; it was a conspiracy, that seemed only too likely to become fact. As they listened, the sombre eyes of the Arabs began to glisten with growing excitement, for Solomon painted the thing adroitly. Regan himself could grasp the fact that should this plan be undertaken successfully it would put a new nation upon the earth map.

He found it much harder to comprehend that the entire scheme hinged upon the conference at which he now sat as a listener; that upon this underground channel of diplomacy the fate of a whole race was swinging.

For in this hour the career of John Solomon had attained its apogee. In other days this pudgy Cockney had juggled the plots and ambitions of men and races; he had pulled wires which reached to princes

and potentates and thrones, but now there reposed in his hands a greater trust than all these combined.

He was the one man whose word was better security than any seal of any chancellery in Eastern lands. To him had been given unlimited authority, even though unwritten, to use the names of two world powers. He sat facing the holy man of mystery on whose face no white man had ever looked before, and upon the result of Solomon's errand would depend the religious hopes of hundreds of millions of Moslems.

"If you refuse to sanction the scheme, it will die," said Solomon gravely. "For Hussein will not assume the caliphate, even though he is entitled to it by Koranic law, unless the Senussiyeh consent. You, Sheikh el Mahdi, hold between your hands the choice, so think well upon it. The world has charged the Senussiyeh with having political ambition, worldly schemes. If this be true, then such ambitions must needs perish when the ancient caliphate is restored. If you have no such ambitions, it is well."

While this discussion was proceeding

Regan's thoughts fled back to the weird death of the Aissaoua. By what rank magic had the man died, as though strangled by that black lace scarf of Iran Abiff?

Sheikh Mansour had worn that scarf as a *litham* when he had died. That the Aissaoua had really been strangled by it was quite impossible; Regan knew very well that the scarf was in possession of Halil at this very moment. Could it be that the shawl was in truth a worker of miracles, as the Beni Iran believed? And could there have been any reason for its having been inclosed for centuries in an air-tight box of teak-wood?

From these ponderings Regan was summoned by the voice of one of the elders, and in the words of the speaker he found a new light upon the faith of Islam.

"The sons of Iran are bitterly opposed to this thing, and their organization is a strong one," said the old Arab slowly and weightily. "O sheikh, they hate all unbelievers, even as many of our faith hate them, especially in Morocco. But we of the Order know better than this, O sheikh! In the early days of Islam the Nazarenes were our friends and brethren, as were the Jews,

and this is the command of the Prophet himself. Their holy places are our holy places; their scriptures are sacred also to us; their God is our God, the one God who rules creation, Allah the Compassionate. To many of them these things are unknown; to many of us they are forgotten. Do I speak the truth?"

There was a mutter of approval. Then one of the other elders arose.

"Aye, that is the truth," he cried out swiftly, "but we must face conditions. For centuries the Christian and the Moslem have been bitter enemies. For centuries the Christian has mocked and scorned us, even as we mock and scorn him. What is the result? Hatred! Is it unnatural that we bar Christians from our mosques, lest they deride our faith and the Prophet whom we revere? Speak, Suleiman! Answer me!"

Solomon nodded placidly.

"That is true," he wheezed. "But consider this, my brethren! You of the Senussiyeh are missionaries, preaching the faith of Islam in the dark places of Africa. Here, then, is your greatest missionary work. You endeavour to restore the faith

of Islam to its ancient purity and sincerity and simplicity. Is not this your greatest chance to do so?

“Consider well! Two empires, with the greatest Moslem populations of the world, hold out the hand of brotherhood unto you. Is it to be lightly rejected?”

Now man after man spoke out, and by degrees the discussion drifted into the thousand and one theological arguments of the Moslem faith, in which Regan was hopelessly lost and which he gave up trying to follow.

But, amazingly, Solomon threw himself into each rebuttal, answered point after point, argued question after question with unruffled calm. It seemed as though all the years which the pudgy Cockney had spent in Eastern lands had but been expended upon the preparation for this, his greatest hour.

He quoted the Koran by book and chapter. He quoted the traditional sayings of Mohammed, which so fully govern the Moslem life, and he quoted their interpreters through the ages. To these doctors of the Moslem law he recited authorities and rulings, and confounded them with

their own texts. And ever he managed to swing back the argument to its original channels, though it proved a herculean task.

While he listened, only half-comprehending, Regan regarded the pudgy Cockney with new wonder and awe. Well did he know that there were few, if any, other white men in the world a tenth so learned in the tenets and the intricate details of Mohammedanism as John Solomon proved himself to be in this hour. Here was the oral testimony as to why this little man had made himself a tower of strength in Eastern lands. No other explanation was necessary.

Time passed unnoted. Man after man of the elders went down beneath the fire of Solomon's argument, scorn, or persuasion. Through it all the Sheikh el Mahdi sat silent, while Regan, watching him, saw the storm-cloud gathering in his eyes, and knew that trouble was brooding. It came at last, sharp and curt.

"A truce to this talk!" exclaimed the Grand Master suddenly, and rose. "There is one thing which I wish to discuss in private with my elders, Suleiman, and this is the question of the Beni Iran."

"I did not know there was a question," said Solomon dryly, "since the Beni Iran have declared open war upon you, and have attacked and scattered one of your caravans. Until you arrived, indeed, we thought they had destroyed the ambassadors who were to meet me here."

"None the less, it remains a question," returned the other. "It is now the time of afternoon prayer. To-night, we will discuss this question, and after the sunrise prayer in the morning come to us for your answer."

Solomon accepted the dismissal without further protest. Regan strode away with him, and as they crossed to the caverns the drone of voices in the afternoon prayer arose from the Senussiyeh. With a wheezy sigh Solomon drew out his clay pipe.

"Dang it! I wanted mortal bad to 'ave a smoke."

"Have we won or lost?" queried Regan.

"I don't rightly know, sir. It ain't a thing as you can explain off'and, as the old gent said when 'e was caught a-kissin' the 'ousemaid. Werry queer people they are, sir, just like that."

And more than this John Solomon would say nothing. Regan was surprised to find that the afternoon was nearly gone. Sheikh Zanzour still lay asleep, and his attitude in thus holding aloof apprised Regan more strongly than anything else could have done that he himself had been unduly privileged in having a seat at that council.

"What news? Is it all settled?"

Mary Andres greeted them with star-bright eyes, though her quiet words told how truly she felt the earnestness of the situation. Regan sketched what had passed, while Solomon sat in the sand under the cliff and smoked. And there the pudgy Cockney stayed, his mild blue eyes staring out at the camped Senussiyeh, his blank placid features devoid of any expression whatever.

The afternoon waned and died in sunset. At the girl's request Regan went to the Senussiyeh and procured a little coffee from one of the elders. By the time darkness fell and they wakened Sheikh Zanzour, they had a very respectable little repast laid in readiness.

"Looks as if you wasted some strategy in

giving that paper to Halil's man," said Regan, after vainly endeavouring to drag Solomon into talk. "The spy must have seen the arrival of our visitors, eh? So did Halil."

"That 'ere paper wasn't wasted, sir," answered Solomon slowly.

"Why not?"

Solomon refused to give any information whatever. When Regan proposed to go to the mouth of the ravine on guard, lest Halil return, the Cockney wheezily negatived the idea. Sheikh Zanzour brooded in silence.

An hour later, Regan and Miss Andres stood on the sand outside the cave, watching the flicker of firelight from the Senussiyeh camp and listening to the murmur of voices that came to them.

"I can't understand the apathy that has struck Solomon," exclaimed the American half-angrily. "First he let Halil come in here and spy out our whole situation and position. Next he knows that Halil saw the arrival of these chiefs of the Senussiyeh, a dozen unaccompanied men who would easily fall prey to the Touaregs. Solomon knows that Halil has fifty or sixty effective

fighting men left, yet he refuses to take the least precaution against an attack——”

“Perhaps he has his own reasons, Sir Larry.” The girl’s hand touched his arm, and Regan glanced around to see the figure of Solomon approaching. “For that matter, why are you so certain that Halil did see the Senussiyeh coming? Perhaps they were hidden by invisible cloaks or carry some kind of a Tarnkappe——”

“So you saw those magical proceedings this afternoon!” Regan chuckled. “What did it look like to you?”

“Well, I don’t know.” The girl turned to Solomon. “How about it, John? Was it real magic that went on out there, or was it just trickery?”

Solomon reflectively sliced some tobacco from a black plug, and stuffed it into his clay pipe.

“Well, miss I knows nothing and I says nothing, just like that,” he returned wheezily. “But I’ll ask you this ’ere question, if I may make so bold, ma’am. If you was a real storybook magician, wouldn’t you be a blessed fool not to ’ave your meals cooked an’ your dishes washed

an' your work all done up by magic, just like that? But you don't see these 'ere magicians use magic except for to show off with. And when magic can't be made to serve no good purpose, it ain't real magic says I! 'Cause why, I noticed as 'ow them 'ere Senussiyeh didn't use magic when they made that 'ere coffee. They used a charcoal brazier, just like that!"

Regan grinned.

"There's a Solomonesque bit of wisdom for you, Lady Mary—and pretty good at that! Well, John, when do we get back to Tripoli, and how? We have only two *mehara* left, and I observed that these Senussiyeh had no spare mounts."

Solomon puffed at his pipe, then made placid answer:

"We'll trust all that to Prowidence, sir."

There was a momentary silence; then Mary Andres laughed softly.

"To Providence, John, or to that little note of yours which wasn't wasted?"

The Cockney merely chuckled to himself, and walked away without response.

"It seems hard to believe, Lady Mary," said Regan, looking up at the starry circle formed by the rim of cliffs far overhead, "that we should be assisting at the birth of this Pan-Arab movement—this founding of an empire!"

"It is not yet founded," she reminded him soberly enough. "And for that matter, we are not yet out of the woods, Sir Larry."

"No. But when we do get out, if we do, what then? Are you going back to writing books about Africa—after this?"

"I don't know." The girl's voice was low. "How about you? Are you going back to—to looking at passports in a consulate?"

Regan laughed suddenly, a joyous ring in his voice.

"No! I'm going to start life all over again, Lady Mary—if you will start it with me. Will you?"

For a moment she was silent. Then——

"Why should I, Sir Larry?"

Under the quiet calm of her voice, Regan's confidence fled in panic. He looked at her, and in the dim starlight saw that her eyes were fastened questioningly upon him. He

suddenly sensed her poise, her coolness, her beauty.

"Why—why—I thought you might want——" he faltered to a stop.

"When you find the answer to that question, tell me," and with a laugh that floated back to him she was gone.

"Damn it!" said Regan under his breath. "I wonder if—why, of course she meant it! Larry Regan, you're a fool."

Since Miss Andres had vanished into her own cave, Regan joined Solomon in that which they occupied jointly, and found the pudgy Cockney making ready to retire. As the American removed his *burnous* and prepared to strip off the shirt of mail, Solomon checked him with a swift word:

"Don't do that, Mr. Regan! Sleep in it, sir. It ain't comfortable, but I 'ave a notion it may come in 'andy right where it is."

Regan stared at the dim figure of the little man. Then, with a grunt of disgust, he assented. After all, his thoughts were with Mary Andres rather than upon present discomfort. Nothing mattered now, he reflected; he had found the answer to

her question, and with the morning he would tell her—tell her why she should start——

With a smile on his lips, Regan fell asleep, dreaming of the morn.

And with the morn he wakened, in that darkness which comes just before the true dawn, after the false dawn has lightened and died again in the east. Regan thought that his name was being called softly, insistently.

He rolled over, and felt for Solomon, but the Cockney was gone. Then, hearing an unmistakable mutter of voices and shuffle of feet, Regan rose, yawning. Sheikh Zanzour was with the two *mehara* in the adjoining cavern, and perhaps Solomon had called him.

At the entrance to the cave, Regan paused, astonished to find something dangling against him. He reached out and grasped it, to find a rope swinging in his hand. A rope here, dangling from the high cliffs!

His senses still benumbed with sleep, for a moment the American frowned in blank bewilderment. Then awakening was swift. From the camp of the Senussiyeh

leaped out a high shout, a clamour of voices, a shot; from the beetling cliffs above rang other voices; from somewhere close at hand arose a commanding shout, and Regan knew the voice of Halil ibn Zoura.

The Beni Iran had struck! Stealing back in the night, they had come over the highlands, they had let down ropes from the high cliffs, or they had scaled the stern rock walls—and to Halil was the victory. Regan groaned as he realized it all.

Then, while he stood there gripping at the rope, a figure took shape in the darkness beside him; there came a panting breath, and Regan staggered as a keen *khanijar* slithered on his mail shirt.

His fist shot out—there was no time to draw his automatic—and the assassin went reeling. But into his place sprang a dozen others, leaping bodily upon the American, and foremost among them was Halil.

Once, twice, Regan drove his fist into the imperious features of the Arab, and then he went down under a weight of bodies, still struggling, still fighting madly. As he

did so, through the confusion and uproar pierced the voice of John Solomon:

"Give in, Mr. Regan! Give in, sir—they've got us! Dang it, they've gone and got us, sir!"

Regan gave in.

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CHAPTER XIV

SOLOMON PLAYS TRUMPS

In the light of the dawning day John Solomon appeared to have become quite mad. From some recess of his garments he had produced a small red-bound note-book and a fountain pen. Seated by himself under guard, he was busily writing, quite oblivious to all that passed around him. In that final moment of wreck and ruin, Regan pitied the little man.

Halil had performed his task in a very thorough fashion. Under cover of night his force of Beni Iran had swept back to the Valley of Jehannum. A score of the Touaregs had advanced through the ravines; the others had swarmed over the hills to the great rock amphitheatre. Just before the dawn the blow had fallen.

Its success had been an almost bloodless one. The little band of Senussiye^h had been unarmed, and had made no resistance. Sheikh Zanzour had shot one of the Touaregs before going down under the rush. A guard had been stationed at the entrance to Miss Andres's cave, and so far she had been undisturbed. Solomon had put up no fight at all.

Regan was turned loose, stripped of his weapons, among the Senussiye^h. Under the care of two armed Touaregs, they were ranged along the cliff wall near Solomon, in front of the caverns. The Sheikh el Mahdi eyed his captors with supreme scorn, but neither he nor his elders broke silence.

In the midst of his triumphant followers stood Halil, a very king in aspect and manner, and disposed his men. Twenty of them were sent off down the ravine to watch against any possible descent of Senussiye^h warriors; the others, after the morning prayer was said, prepared the meagre breakfast of the desert and fed the prisoners, then gathered behind their master to await his orders.

"Why did you come unattended?" asked Regan of the Grand master, who stood

beside him. The Arab glanced at him in surprise.

"Are we not ever attended by Allah, O infidel?" was the grave response.

Regan accepted the rebuke, and said no more. It was plain that the Sheikh el Mahdi meant his words literally, and Regan could not but admire the simple faith of the man and his followers, misplaced though it might seem. This Grand Master was indeed typical of the Arab and the Arab faith, in his strange commingling of humility, fierce pride, and democratic manners. For the Moslem, if he be a good Moslem, never forgets that master and slave stand on one footing before Allah.

Now, his dispositions made, Halil strode over to the group of captives, pausing before the Grand Master. Something in the latter's proud silence and obvious contempt must have stung the Arab, for suddenly Halil reached out and tugged the other's beard, then stepped back, laughing. The Sheikh el Mahdi went livid, but stood quietly under the insult.

"Where is now the boasted strength of the Senussiye?" mocked Halil, supremely arrogant. "O sheikh, this day the Sons of

Iran Abiff are thy captors! So you holy men of Islam have covenanted to further the schemes of Christian infidels?"

"We have not yet so decided," returned the Grand Master, stonily.

A sneer darkened the face of Halil.

"Listen, my holy man! Perchance you have wondered at the clashes between the British in Egypt and outlying bands of your Senussiyeh warriors? It is time to throw off the mask. Men of the Beni Iran have fomented those troubles, aided by certain Turks sent by the sultan. Within a month, I, Halil ibn Zoura, will lead an army into Egypt that shall sweep the British into the sea.

"And what then? The power will be mine, and the *Sherif* of Mecca will sanction it. How do you, or any of us, know that the *sherif*, Hussein the Holy, descendant of the Prophet, desires to become caliph? How do you, or any of us, know that it is not some lie told us by the infidel in order to split the Moslem world asunder?"

From the Beni Iran swelled up a deep growling murmur of assent. The elders of the Senussiyeh glanced at each other with

meaning looks; the Grand Master himself frowned in swift hesitation.

"I know," he made answer, "because Suleiman, who sits yonder, has told me; and Suleiman is even as myself in honour."

"Suleiman!"

The word broke from Halil like an oath, and was echoed by his followers. Halil stared at the little Cockney, who blinked calmly at him and then went on writing.

"Suleiman is dead!" broke out the Arab fiercely. "This is some impostor, O sheikh! By Allah, this is the English baronet——"

He broke off abruptly at the smile which his words brought to the faces of his captives. The voice of Sheikh Zanzour bit out suddenly in mockery:

"Thou jackal who wearest the lion's robe! It is the English baronet of a truth, and it is also John Solomon himself. When first he saw thee he warned me against thy ambition. Methinks I had done better to heed his warning ere it had been too late."

Livid with fury, Halil flung his uncle one glance which left no doubt of his hatred, then strode to Solomon, who stood up to meet him.

The mild blue eyes of Solomon were very

wide and innocent, yet Halil seemed to find them very disconcerting. For a moment he studied the Cockney, then his hand went to his belt, and he whipped out a revolver, half-turning to his men.

"O sons of Iran!" he cried out hoarsely. "This infidel has confounded the true believers with his lies. Even these elders of the Senussiye have believed his deceitful tongue. That Hussein the Holy should desire the caliphate is a thing incredible, and it is but a lie of the Nazarenes to bring schism into our ranks. Shall not this man die?"

"Let him die, O Halil!" The growl of assent swelled up, deep and terrible.

Halil levelled his weapon, but Solomon placidly raised a hand in protest.

"One moment! I have a paper here which the Sheikh el Mahdi must see."

Frowning, Halil hesitated. Solomon untwined his green turban, standing grey-headed in the sun. From the folds of the turban he took a paper, which he passed to the nearest of the Senussiye. It went from hand to hand, until it came to the Grand Master, and every eye followed it in frowning wonder.

As the Grand Master unfolded the paper a startled exclamation broke from him; then, after scrutinizing the few lines of Arabic characters which Regan could glimpse on the white surface, the Sheikh el Mahdi reverently kissed the paper and touched it to his forehead.

"This is the signature of the holy Hussein himself," he exclaimed, "and it proclaims that Suleiman is upon his business."

Ensued a moment of startled amazement. Regan glanced admiringly at Solomon, who was unconcernedly filling his old pipe. It was a master-stroke, thought the American, to reserve this document against some such need, instead of to have laid it before the Senussiye on the previous day.

Even Larry Regan, however, was startled to observe how the very signature of the Prophet's lineal descendant was honoured and revered. The elders crowded around the Sheikh el Mahdi, kissing and reverencing the paper. With a babel of voices the Beni Iran came shoving forward also, demanding loudly to see and touch the paper which that signature had rendered a sacred thing. When the Grand Master handed it to them they

poured over it with muttered ejaculations of awe and wonder.

A black frown creasing his brows, Halil watched this demonstration silently, and evidently was in some perplexity over Solomon's neat stroke. Then, shoving away his revolver, he strode among his followers and seized the paper. Blacker grew his frown, until, as with a sudden thought, he held up the paper to the sun and gazed at it.

"Hah! By Allah, this is too great presumption!" Halil's voice rang out in harsh triumph, and he whirled toward his captives in furious exultation. "Listen, Sheikh el Mahdi! This forged letter is written on paper which bears an Italian watermark—paper which is sold only in Tripoli by the Italian government——"

"Dang it!" exclaimed Solomon softly.

His voice was drowned in the roar of execration which arose. Regan himself was staggered by the audacity of that forgery and the folly which had chosen such paper; there was no need to explain the matter further, since it was evident to all that the *Sherif* of Mecca could not well have written that note upon Tripolitan paper without having been in Tripoli.

The Grand Master raised his arms, and stilled the clamour with fierce insistence.

"O Süleiman," he cried bitterly, his eyes flashing rage, "I trusted you, and your honour is as naught! Halil, do with the dog as thou wilt."

Halil fingered his revolver, and smiled cruelly at the shrinking figure of Solomon.

"Have you anything to say before you die?" he asked in English. Solomon raised a haggard face.

"Yes, sir. Let me finish this 'ere pipe and get me accounts in shape—a matter o' ten minutes, sir."

A flicker of admiration in his arrogant eyes, the Arab laughed, nodded, and to the others explained the delay in slaying the sacrilegious infidel. Solomon held a match to his pipe, sat down, and began to write anew in his red notebook.

At this juncture, when it looked very much as though the Beni Iran would sweep past Halil and take vengeance into their own hands, a sudden shout from the ravine halted proceedings, and across the sandy bowl rode one of the masked Touaregs who had been sent to guard against surprise. He drew rein without dismounting, and delivered

his message to Halil in guttural tones:

"O sheikh of the Beni Iran! Our brother, Telek, who wandered from our company last night, has come leading a dozen men to this place. Ten of these men are strangers and appear to be Arabs of wealth. Guiding them are two Tripolines, and Telek informs us that they are coming hither to meet the sheikh of the Senussiyeh."

The Grand Master met the looks of his elders with a shrug that expressed complete ignorance of these arrivals. But Regan, glancing at Solomon, saw the little Cockney look up suddenly, wild-eyed, and, at the look, the American remembered the Senussiyeh spy, who must be this same Telek, and the scrap of paper which bore a message from Solomon.

"By Jasper, there's something behind all this!" thought Regan excitedly. "Yet—what can Solomon do now? He's lost his whole game beyond redemption."

"Who are these men?" Halil turned to the Sheikh el Mahdi.

"I know not," responded the Grand Master composedly.

"These dozen men have come alone?" demanded Halil of the messenger.

"Alone."

"Then slay the two Tripolines, and bid Telek bring on the strangers hither."

The Touareg wheeled his horse, and galloped away again into the ravine. Halil ordered his men to hold their weapons in readiness, then turned to his prisoners.

"O Senussiye, ye shall remain hostages in our hands until the Sons of Iran have taken over your power. Suleiman dies presently, and with him this grey-eyed infidel who has learned the secrets of the Beni Iran. Sheikh Zanzour, my worthy uncle, I shall presently confer a great honour upon you, but first bring forth that woman of the Feringi and give her all honour!"

It was well for Halil that he added those last words. Regan, almost beside the lordly Arab, had gathered his muscles to leap at the man's throat.

Checking himself, the American caught one imploring look and a swift gesture from Solomon. Grim-faced, Regan nodded slightly in response. Before he died, he resolved, he would feel Halil's brown throat under his fingers, but he was not yet dead.

From her cave shelter stepped Mary Andres, and Regan knew that she must have heard and seen most of what had taken place. Very pale she was. For a moment she stood looking around; then, disdaining Halil entirely, she crossed swiftly to Regan and put out her hands to him, her eyes meeting his. Regan drew her close.

"So? Very pretty!" Halil faced them with a sneering smile, and spoke in his precise English. "Miss Andres, say farewell quickly to this man, for he will soon be dead, and you in my arms."

"If you die, Sir Larry, then I die also," said the girl quietly.

Regan smiled, and bent his lips to hers. With a snarl of anger, Halil strode forward, and his hand went to the girl's shoulder.

Then, and not until then, Regan swung Mary Andres behind him and struck out. His fist took Halil in the mouth, driving the man back. Regan followed with another swift blow, and threw himself forward, striking fairly on the Arab as the latter fell. His fingers wound into the brown throat and sank deeply.

Not daring to fire lest they hit their

master, the Beni Iran leaped forward with wild yells. Regan clung grimly to his prey, but their sheer strength dragged him loose. A knife flashed, and another; but Halil, staggering up, cried out hoarsely to bind Regan.

The next moment the American, wrists bound behind him, went white under an open-handed blow from the furious Halil, whose mouth dripped blood.

"Dog!" shouted the Arab, and spat into Regan's face. "For this you shall die a worse death than you ever dreamed. Take him, men! Bind him between four horses, and let him be torn——"

"One moment, sir!" broke in the voice of Solomon. Halil turned as the little Cockney limped forward, the Arabs pausing in perplexity before his English words. "If you'd be so good as to cast your eye over this 'ere account, sir, I'd be werry glad. I expect as 'ow you'll find it all shipshape, sir—Mr. John Solomon, in account wi' Sheikh Halil ibn Zoura——"

Solomon, wide-eyed, held out his red notebook. Halil, repressing his fury against Regan, took the book and began to read.

A sudden cold smile crept to his lips,

and he looked up at Solomon with a cruel deadliness that was more intense with fury than his wild anger.

"O gutter cur," he said, with a slow volley of choice Arabic curses, "tell me one thing before I have you slain. What means this final item—this mention of my indebtedness to Allah?"

In response Solomon pointed to the ravine entrance.

Led by a Touareg, whom Regan guessed to be the Senussiyeh spy, a little group of men filed into the amphitheatre, mounted upon racing camels. There were ten in all.

As they approached, Halil motioned to his men to spread out, and then, throwing aside in contempt the red notebook, strode forward a few steps to meet the strangers. Solomon quietly picked up the notebook and stood waiting.

To Regan, standing, bound, between two of the Touaregs, came Mary Andres, her arms creeping around his neck, her face against his shoulder; nor did the Touaregs touch her to prevent.

"Oh, my Lady Mary," said Regan softly, looking down into her eyes, "I have the

answer to that question of yours—because you love me you must be mine for ever—and because I love you——”

She smiled. But before she could speak a murmur of amazement from the Arabs brought Regan's gaze up to the strange arrivals, and his grey eyes widened in incredulous wonder.

For the camels had knelt, and the riders had descended, unarmed. From their number strode forth one man to meet Halil, and at sight of his commanding figure, his venerable grey beard, his deep-set eyes, Regan recognized that Arab whom he had seen in Tripoli after leaving the consulate with Solomon.

“I seek the Sheikh el Mahdi, the Grand Master of the Senussiyeh,” said the stranger, glancing from Halil to the others. “Which of you is he?”

“Who are you who seek him?” demanded Halil bluntly.

For answer the venerable Arab slipped off his *burnous*. He appeared clad in the sacred green of Islam—green from turban to sandals, with gold broided into the green. At sight of his revealed figure it seemed that one great groan arose from

the Arabs. One and all fell prostrate, save Halil alone, and upon the silence struck the wheezy voice of Solomon:

“Hussein the Holy, descendant of the Prophet, *Sherif* of Mecca—and if Allah wills it, Caliph of Islam!”

CHAPTER XVI

HUSSEIN THE HOLY

At a gesture from the stranger, his companions closed around the paralysed figure of Halil. Telek, the spy, deftly bound the Arab's wrists without a struggle.

Leaping up, the Beni Iran grasped their weapons, and then halted. The Sheikh el Mahdi, advancing, knelt before the green-clad stranger.

"O holy Hussein," he cried in awe, "is this some vision sent us by Allah, or do we see you in the flesh indeed?"

The venerable Arab smiled, and stretched out a hand as in benediction.

"In the flesh truly," he responded. "In order that there might be no error in our plans for the great future of Islam, I have visited the holy men of our faith in Egypt. Unknown to any man save Suleiman, I came to Tripoli. There I and my friends

met Suleiman, and, in view of the danger threatening from the Beni Iran, he came to the meeting with you, preceding me, that I might have safe passage. Last night your Touareg spy met my party, halted the warriors of Sheikh Zanzour, and, in obedience to the advice of Suleiman, brought me on with my few friends here. That is all."

"Up!" The voice of Halil rose like a trumpet peal to his men. "Up, Sons of Iran, capture this impostor——"

The Beni Iran came leaping forward; but, instead of obeying, they cast their arms at the feet of Hussein, and knelt, with loud prayers for forgiveness. Well they knew that these elders of the Senussiyeh, who had known the *Sherif* of Mecca in his own city, were not deceived, and more than one of them had also made the holy pilgrimage, and had seen this venerable man, the guardian of Mecca, and they recognized him.

Smiling, Hussein greeted Solomon, and at his order Regan's bonds were loosened. Then Hussein, the Grand Master, and Solomon conferred together. From the scraps of talk which he overheard, Regan

gathered that Hussein's companions were emissaries of the chief rulers and emirs of Arabia, and that this secret mission had been undertaken with the connivance of the British to swing the Egyptian and Senussiyeh leaders over to the plan of the caliphate.

Halil was now in evil case. The note borne by Solomon had been no forgery at all, while the mere presence of Hussein, the literal pope of the Moslem world, had numbed the Beni Iran into forgetting their leader utterly. Hussein's prompt binding of Halil was ominous.

Sheikh Zanzour, by no means slow to perceive what was forward, had quietly possessed himself of his weapons, which were surrendered without question by the Touareg who had taken them. Then, grimly intent, he strode toward Halil, knife in hand.

Regan was the first to observe him, and his quick cry reached Solomon, who turned, and, with amazing agility, placed himself between the two affectionate relatives. Halil smiled scornfully.

"Let him alone, Suleiman!" said the captive, with a proud composure. "I have

failed, and the end matters not. Still, I would have honoured him."

"Yea, with a keen bullet," grunted Zanzour, his hawk face bitter.

"Not so," and the eyes of Halil glittered strangely. "I had in mind to present you with the sacred scarf of Iran Abiff, my uncle. It is even now wound about my waist, but according to story it possesses great virtues when twisted about the neck and mouth."

Solomon cocked his head on one side and surveyed Halil. Then he chuckled wheezily, laid his hand on the arm of Zanzour, and turned to the *Sherif* of Mecca.

"O Hussein," he said, his blue eyes twinkling, "will you give me this captive of yours that I may do him honour?"

"Surely, Suleiman," was the grave response. "All that I have is yours."

Solomon motioned to the men who held Halil.

"Remove the black shawl that is about his waist, and wrap it around his throat and mouth that we may do him honour."

The men tore open Halil's *burnous*. Halil drew himself up, and seemed about to speak, his face livid; but the black

lace shawl choked his words and gagged him. Solomon left Sheikh Zanzour, and walked to Regan and Miss Andres.

"Well," he observed, taking out his red notebook, "this 'ere scarf squares me account with Halil ibn Zoura." He proceeded to write a few words.

"What's all this mummary, John?" demanded Regan, frowning. Mary Andres checked him, and held out her hand to the little Cockney.

"John, I think you're a wonderful, wonderful man! And I want to thank you for—for bringing this knight of mine to me——"

"Lor', ma'am," and Solomon nearly blushed as he awkwardly took her hand for a moment, "it wasn't me at all. It was just Providence! Now, miss, if I may make so bold, them 'ere Moslems is werry nerwous about 'aving a lady around, and, if I was you, I'd go into one o' them there caves and rest, so to speak."

The girl glanced at the grave figure of Hussein; then, with a nod of assent, looked once into Regan's eyes and turned to the caves. Regan glanced after her, and his gaze came back frowningly to Solomon.

"What's behind this, John?" he asked again. "This business about the shawl and sending Miss Andres away——"

Solomon brought out knife and plug, and began to whittle tobacco into his palm. His placid gaze went to the tall figure of Halil.

"Well, sir, them 'ere Moslems is werry anxious to take wengeance on that 'ere Halil, and 'uman nature it is, says I. But I don't 'old with no torture, sir. So I'm a-workin' a blessed miracle, just like that."

"A miracle?"

"Yes, sir. Don't that 'ere shawl work miracles? That danged Halil knowed as it did, and 'e worked a bloomin' miracle on Sheikh Mansour, and 'e was just trying to work another on 'is uncle. Werry sweet-dispositioned gentleman 'e is!"

"A miracle—Sheikh Mansour——" At the words Regan started. Slow comprehension forced itself upon him as he remembered how Sheikh Mansour had died, with that lace shawl in place of a mask. He glanced at Halil and saw the Arab writhing in the hands of the men who held him.

"John! You can't mean——"

"Yes, sir, I do!" Solomon's blue eyes

met his with firm blankness. "You'd best go along o' Miss Andres in them 'ere caves, sir. That bloody shawl, it's fair impregnated wi' some poison, Mr. Regan—that's 'ow it come to work miracles, like the one it's a-workin' at right now. A blessed Arab miracle it is, sir, and in Arab countries a miracle is a werry peculiar thing, says I."

Regan looked again at Halil, who was held up only by his guards, and shifted his eyes quickly. A little shiver seized him, and he turned from Solomon, almost with repulsion. The uncanny, deliberate "kismet" of the mysterious East seemed in that moment embodied in the little Cockney.

Suddenly Regan found himself hating this Eastern world—all of it; the *burnoused* figures around him, the gravely gorgeous figure of the *sherif*, the darkly terrible masked Touaregs. He strode slowly over to the caves, and found there Mary Andres awaiting him.

Silently Regan held out his hands, and she came to him unfaltering, a little cry of gladness trembling on her lips. Regan pressed his lips to her hair, and spoke huskily:

"It's over, dear one—over for me, at least, thank God!"

"What?" She looked up at him in sudden fear.

"All this—this damnable Eastern world. Will you go home with me, Lady Mary? Will you go home to our own people once more?"

Her arms crept up around his neck, and her starry eyes smiled at him.

"Oh—I'm so glad! I was afraid—you'd want to stay——"

"Not by a—er—I mean, not a bit of it——"

Regan never completed his speech, for the most excellent of reasons.

THE END

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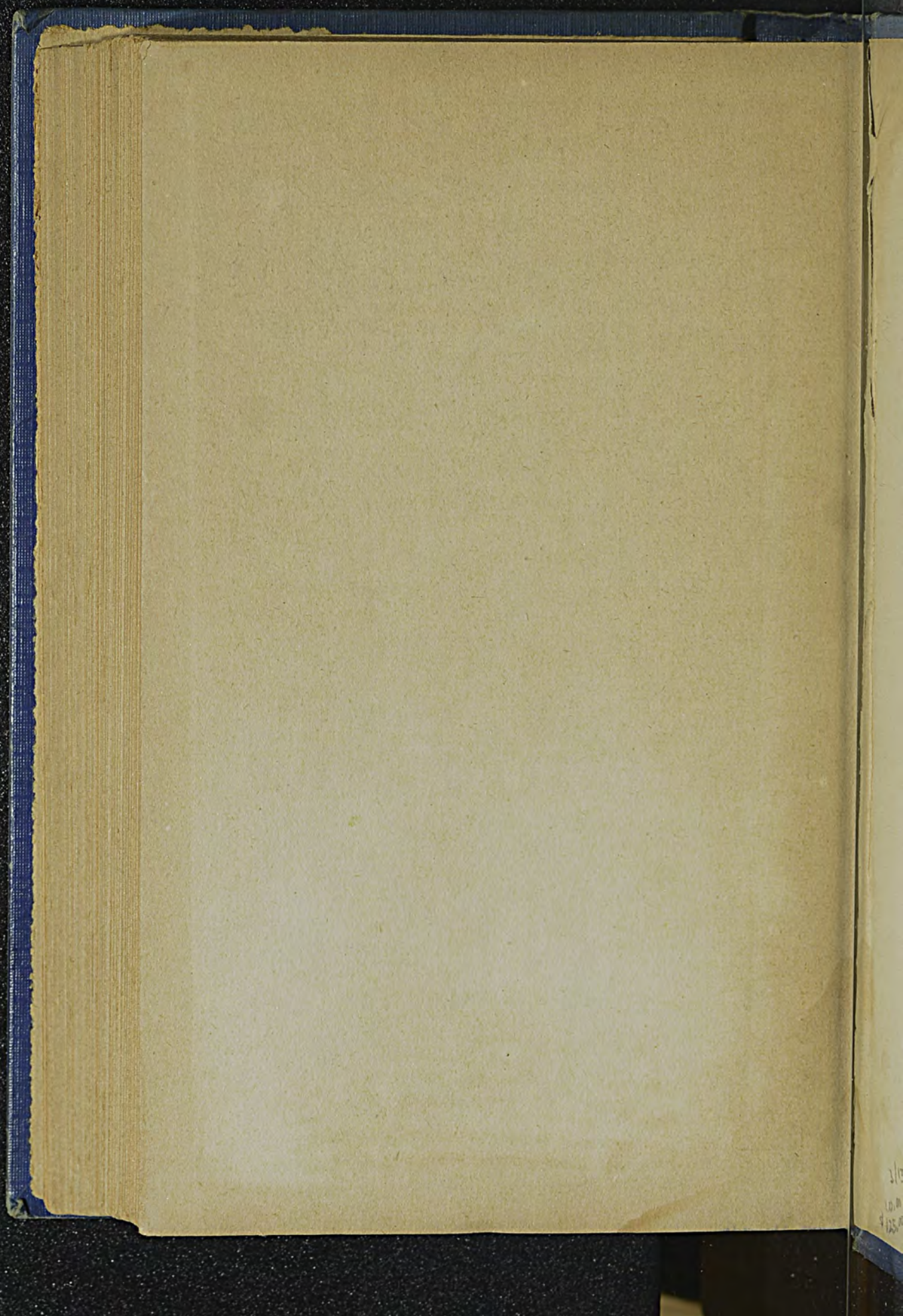
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