The Queen of Atlantis

Pierre Benoit

Table of Contents

The Queen of Atlantis.....1
Pierre Benoit.....2
INTRODUCTORY LETTER 1.....3
CHAPTER I. A SOUTHERN STATION.....5
CHAPTER II. CAPTAIN DE SAINT–AVIT.....10
CHAPTER III. THE MORHANGE–SAINT–AVIT EXPEDITION.....16
CHAPTER IV. TOWARDS THE TWENTY–FIFTH DEGREE.....19
CHAPTER V. THE INSCRIPTION.....24
CHAPTER VI. THE INCONVENIENT RESULTS OF EATING LETTUCE.....29
CHAPTER VII. THE LAND OF FEAR.....34
CHAPTER VIII. THE AWAKENING IN THE HOGGAR.....39
CHAPTER IX. THE QUEEN OF ATLANTIS.....44
CHAPTER X. THE HALL OF RED MARBLE.....49
CHAPTER XI. ANTINEA.....54
CHAPTER XII. MORHANGE GETS UP AND DISAPPEARS.....59
CHAPTER XIII. THE HETMAN OF JITOMIR'S STORY.....64
CHAPTER XIV. HOURS OF WAITING.....70
CHAPTER XV. THE LAMENT OF TANIT–ZERGA.....74
CHAPTER XVI. THE SILVER HAMMER.....78
CHAPTER XVII. THE VIRGINS OF THE ROCKS.....83
CHAPTER XVIII. THE GLOW–WORMS.....88
CHAPTER XIX. THE TANEZROUFT.....93
CHAPTER XX. THE COMPLETION OF THE CIRCLE.....98

The Queen of Atlantis

Pierre Benoit

This page copyright © 2002 Blackmask Online.
http://www.blackmask.com

- INTRODUCTORY LETTER
- CHAPTER I. A SOUTHERN STATION
- CHAPTER II. CAPTAIN DE SAINT–AVIT
- CHAPTER III. THE MORHANGE–SAINT–AVIT EXPEDITION
- CHAPTER IV. TOWARDS THE TWENTY–FIFTH DEGREE
- CHAPTER V. THE INSCRIPTION
- CHAPTER VI. THE INCONVENIENT RESULTS OF EATING LETTUCE
- CHAPTER VII. THE LAND OF FEAR
- CHAPTER VIII. THE AWAKENING IN THE HOGGAR
- CHAPTER IX. THE QUEEN OF ATLANTIS
- CHAPTER X. THE HALL OF RED MARBLE
- CHAPTER XI. ANTINEA
- CHAPTER XII. MORHANGE GETS UP AND DISAPPEARS
- CHAPTER XIII. THE HETMAN OF JITOMIR'S STORY
- CHAPTER XIV. HOURS OF WAITING
- CHAPTER XV. THE LAMENT OF TANIT–ZERGA
- CHAPTER XVI. THE SILVER HAMMER
- CHAPTER XVII. THE VIRGINS OF THE ROCKS
- CHAPTER XVIII. THE GLOW–WORMS
- CHAPTER XIX. THE TANEZROUFT
- CHAPTER XX. THE COMPLETION OF THE CIRCLE

[Translated by Arthur Chambers.]

"I must warn you at the outset not to be surprised if I call the barbarians by Greek names."——Plato *(Critias)*.

INTRODUCTORY LETTER [1]

Hassi–Inifel. *November 8th,* 1908.

IF THE FOLLOWING PAGES ever see the light of the sun it will be because I myself have ceased to do so. The interval I fix before their publication is quite enough guarantee of that.

There need be no mystification about my object in preparing, and even insisting on that publication. No one need doubt that no author's vanity binds me to these tumultuous pages. Already I have left all such trivialities a long way behind me! But it is no use for others to follow me on the path from which I shall not have returned.

4 a.m. In a few moments the scarlet flames of

dawn will be sweeping over the *hamada.* The *bordj* is asleep around me. Through the open door of his room I can hear Andre de Saint–Avit breathing peacefully——oh, so peacefully!

[1] This letter, and the document which it covers——the latter in a package specially sealed——were handed to Sergeant–Major Chatelain, of the 3rd Spahis, by Lieutenant Ferrieres on November 10th, 1903, the day on which this officer set out for Tasili of the Azdjer Tuaregs (Central Sahara). The sergeant had orders to deliver them, on his first leave, to Monsieur Leroux, ex–officio member of the *Cow d'appel* of Riom, the nearest relative of Lieutenant Ferrieres. That official died suddenly before the interim of ten years fixed for the publication of the manuscript in question had expired, and the result was certain complications which have postponed publication until the present moment.

In two days' time he and I will be off. We are leaving the *bordj.* We are pushing south. The official order arrived yesterday morning.

And now it would be too late to draw back even if I wanted to. Andre and I have suggested this expedition. The permission we have jointly requested has now become an order. The idea of being afraid and hanging back after squaring the whole hierarchy of authorities and mobilising all our influence at the Ministry!

“Afraid,” did I say? I know I'm not afraid. I was afraid one night in the Gourara when I found two of my sentries killed with the ignominious Beraber cross cut in their stomachs. I know what fear is. But at this moment, when I concentrate my gaze on the great black depths from which the scarlet ball of the sun will shortly and suddenly emerge, I know that if I tremble it is not with fear. I can feel the tragic horror of mystery and its attraction struggling together within me.

Illusions, perhaps. The diseased imaginings of an over–excited brain and an eye bewildered by mirages. No doubt a day will come when I shall go through these pages with an embarrassed smile of pity, the smile of a man of fifty reading old letters. Illusions. Visions. But I cherish these illusions and visions. “Captain de Saint–Avit and Lieutenant Ferrieres,” runs the official decree, “will explore the Tassili and endeavour to establish the statigraphical relation of the argillaceous sandstone and the carboniferous limestone. . . . They will avail themselves of the opportunities that may be offered to ascertain if there has been any change in the attitude of the Azdjer towards our influence,” etc. If this expedition were really concerned only with futilities of that kind I do not think I should be going. . . .

So I am longing for what I most fear. I shall be disappointed if I do not find myself face to face with something which now makes me shudder strangely.

A jackal is howling at the bottom of the Wady Mia. From time to time a dove coos plaintively among the palms when a ray of moonlight, piercing the heat–laden clouds with its silver shaft, brings to mind the rising sun.

I hear a footfall outside. A shadow, swathed in shiny black robes, glides along, passes across the wall of the fort. A wisp of flame in the inky darkness. The man has just lit a cigarette. He is squatting and gazing south. He smokes.

It is Cegheir–ben–Sheikh, our Tarki guide, who three days hence is to lead us to the unexplored plateaus of the mysterious Imoschaoch through the *hamadas* of black stones, the great dried–up watercourses, past silvery salt–mashes, and the dunes of unburnished gold crested when the trade winds blow with trembling plumes of pale sand.

Cegheir–ben–Sheikh! This is he. Duveyrier's tragic words come to my mind: “The colonel was just putting his foot in the stirrup when he was cut down. . . .”

"Cegheir–ben–Sheikh! There he is. Tranquilly smoking a cigarette, a cigarette from the packet I have just given him. . . . May God forgive me this crime!

The lamp throws a yellow light upon the paper. It was a strange stroke of fortune which decreed one day, when I was sixteen, that without any particular reason I should go to Saint–Cyr and become the comrade of Andre de Saint–Avit. I might have gone in for law or medicine. I should now be a thoroughly contented soul in some town with a church and a fountain or two, and not this cotton–clad phantom gazing in unutterable apprehension into the desert which is about to engulf him.

A large insect has just come in through the window. It buzzes round, darts from the plaster walls to the globe of the lamp. It succumbs at length, its wings burnt by the flame of the candle, and falls inert on the white sheet——there.

It is a cockchafer, the huge black African cock–chafer with splashes of livid grey.

I think of those others, its French brothers, the copper–coloured cockchafers I used to watch of thundery summer evenings, bouncing like tiny balls from the soil of my old home. It was there that I spent my holidays when I was a boy; later on, my leaves. When I walked in those meadows during my last leave I had a slender white form at

[1] H. Duveyrier, *The Disaster to the Flatters Expedition.* (Bull Soc. Geo., 1881.)

my side, a form which was draped in a muslin scarf, for the night air is cold in those parts. And now, spurred by those memories, just for a second, I glance up at a dark corner of my room where the glass of a half–seen portrait on the bare wall catches the light. I realise how something which might have seemed my whole life has lost its significance. That pathetic mystery has ceased to interest me. Why, if Holla's strolling singers suddenly appeared beneath this window and sang their famous lays of home, I know I should not listen. If they became too importunate I should tell them to move on.

What is responsible for this change? A story, perhaps a mere fable, but in any case a story told by one on whom rests the most monstrous of suspicions.

Cegheir–ben–Sheikh has finished his cigarette. I hear him returning slowly to his mat in Block B, near the sentry–box on the left.

As we are to start on November 10th, the manuscript to which this letter is attached was begun on Sunday, November 1st, and finished on Thursday the 5th, 1903.

Olivier Ferrieres, *Lieutenant.*

3rd Spahis.

CHAPTER I. A SOUTHERN STATION

ON SATURDAY, JUNE 6th, 1903, the monotony of my life at the Hassi−Inifel station was broken by two events of unequal importance: the arrival of a letter from Mile. Cecile de C——, and the latest numbers of the *Journal Officiel* of the French Republic.

“May I, sir?” said Sergeant−Major Chatelain, settling himself to glance through the papers from which he had just torn off the wrappers.

I nodded consent, being already absorbed in reading Mile, de C——'s letter.

“When this reaches you,” was the substance of this charming young lady's letter, “mamma and I will probably have left Paris for the country. If at your *bled* the thought that I am as bored as you are can be any consolation, you may rest satisfied. The *Grand Prix* is over. I backed the horse you spotted for me and, of course, lost. The day before yesterday we dined with the Martial de la Touches. Elias Chatrian was there, looking astonishingly young. I am sending you his latest book, which is causing a mild sensation. It appears that the Martial de la Touches are drawn to the life in it. I am also sending the latest books of Bourget, Loti, and France, as well as two or three songs which are the rage at the cafes concerts. In politics they say there are going to be considerable difficulties about enforcing the law for the suppression of the religious orders. Nothing very new at the theatre.

“I have taken out a summer subscription for *l'Illustration.* That will please you! . . . There's nothing to do in the country. Always the same fatuous crowd to be met at tennis. I shan't deserve any credit for writing to you often. You can spare me your reflections about little Combemale. I haven't a spark of feminism in me. I can trust anyone who thinks me good−looking, and you especially. But it does make me wild to think that if I allowed myself one quarter of the intimacies with one of the farm hands that you know you have with your Ouled−Nails . .. Enough of that. Some things are too distressing to be imagined.”

I had got to this point in the letter of this emancipated young lady when an exclamation of horror from the sergeant−major made me look up.

“Sir!”

“What's the matter?”

“Well! They're a bright lot at the Ministry. But just read this.”

He handed me the *Officiel.* I read:

“To date from May 1st, 1903, Andre de Saint−Avit, Captain, from unattached list for service with 3rd Spahis and to command the Hassi−Inifel station.”

Chatelain's indignation exploded.

“Captain de Saint−Avit to command the station! This station that's always had a good record! Do they take us for a cess−pool?”

I was quite as astonished as the N.C.O. But just at that moment I caught sight of the evil, pole−cat face of Gourrut, the fellow we employed as clerk; he had stopped scribbling and was listening with sneaking interest.

“Sergeant−Major, Captain de Saint−Avit was at Saint−Cyr with me,” I said shortly.

Chatelain saluted and went out; I followed.

“Come, old man,” I said, slapping him on the shoulder, “don't take offence. Remember that we're starting for the oasis in an hour. Get the cartridges ready. We really must make some addition to the menu.”

Coming back into the office, I dismissed Gourrut with a nod. Left alone, I quickly finished Mile, de C——'s letter, then, picking up the *Officiel,* I read again the ministerial decree appointing a new chief to the station.

For five months I had been acting chief, and I must admit the responsibility suited me and I was enjoying the independence immensely. I can even claim, without nattering myself, that under my direction the station had been run very differently from what had been the case under Captain Dieulivol, de Saint−Avit's predecessor. A good fellow, this Captain Dieulivol, a colonial officer of the old school who had served under the Dodds and Duchesnes, but afflicted with a terrible weakness for strong liquors and too much inclined, when he had been drinking, to confuse dialects and to interrogate a Hausa in Sakalava. No one was ever more sparing of the station's water−supply. One morning, when he was mixing his absinthe in company with the sergeant−major, Chatelain, watching the captain's glass, was astonished to see the green fluid pale under an unusually heavy dose of water.

He looked up, feeling that something abnormal had happened.

Captain Dieulivol sat rigid, the tilted carafe in his hand, gazing fixedly at the water which was dripping on the sugar. He was dead.

For five months after the disappearance of this genial toper the authorities seemed to take no interest in his replacement. I had even had a moment of hope that they might decide to appoint me officially to the duties I was temporarily performing. . . . And to–day, this sudden announcement. . . .

Captain de Saint–Avit. ... At Saint–Cyr he was my contemporary.

I had lost sight of him. Then my attention had been drawn to him again by his rapid promotion, his decoration, which was the well–deserved reward of three particularly daring exploring expeditions to Tibesti and the Air; and suddenly the mysterious drama of his fourth journey, the notorious expedition with Captain Morhange from which only one of the explorers had returned. Things are soon forgotten in France. This was six years ago. Since then I had never heard of de Saint–Avit. Indeed, I thought he'd left the Service, And now he was to be my chief.

"Come," I thought, "why not he as well as another? At Saint–Cyr he was charming, and we always got on well together. Besides, I haven't enough private means to take my captaincy."

And I left the office whistling.

Now Chatelain and I, our guns lying on the already cooler earth, were hidden behind a sort of trellis of alfalfa, near the pool that forms the centre of the sparse oasis. The setting sun tinged with rose the little stagnant canals which irrigate the miserable crops of the natives.

Not a word on the way out. Not a word while we waited. Chatelain was obviously sulking.

In silence we brought down in turn a few of the miserable turtle–doves which came, dragging their wings in the oppressive heat of the day, to quench their thirst in the thick green water. When half a dozen of the skinny, bleeding bodies were stretched in a row at our feet I put my hand on the N.C.O.'s shoulder.

"Chatelain!"

He started.

"I was rude to you just now, Chatelain. You mustn't take it to heart. Bad temper before the siesta. The midday feeling."

"You are my chief, sir," he answered in a voice which he intended to be brusque, but which showed that he was touched.

"Chatelain, don't take it to heart. . . . You have something to tell me. You know what I
mean."

"Indeed I don't. No, I don't."

"Chatelain, Chatelain, let's be serious. Tell me about Captain de Saint–Avit."

"1 know nothing," he said shortly.

"Nothing? Then what you said just now . ..?"

"Captain de Saint–Avit is a brave man," he muttered, his head lowered obstinately. "He set out alone for Bilma, for Air, all alone in places where no one has ever been. He's a brave man."

"Of course he's brave," I said, as gently as possible. "But he murdered his companion, Captain Morhange, didn't he?"

The old sergeant–major shuddered.

"He's a brave man," he persisted.

"Chatelain, you're childish. Are you afraid I shall report what you say to your new chief?"

I had nicked him on the raw. He jerked up his head.

"Sergeant–Major Chatelain fears no one, sir. He has been in Abomey fighting the Amazones, a country where a black arm shoots out from every bush and seizes your leg while another lops it off with a cutlass."

"Then what they say, what you yourself . . ."

"All that's only talk."

"Talk which *is* repeated, Chatelain, in France, everywhere."

He lowered his head again without replying.

"You stubborn mule!" I broke out. "Will you speak?"

"Sir, sir," he pleaded, "I swear to you that what I know, or anything . . ."

"You are going to tell me what you know, and at once. Otherwise I give you my word I shall not speak a single

word to you outside the official routine.”

Hassi−lnifel, thirty native soldiers, four Europeans——myself, the sergeant−major, a corporal and Gourrut. The threat was a terrible one. It had the desired effect.

“All right, sir, here goes,” he said, with a heavy sigh. “But the least you can do is not to blame me for telling you things about my chief that oughtn't to be talked about, especially when they're only mess gossip.”

“Go on.”

“It was in 1899. I was then a lance−corporal at Sfax, with the 4th Spahis. I had a good record, and, as I didn't drink, the adjutant made me officers' messman. A very good billet. The market, the accounts, entering the books taken out of the library——there weren't many——and the key of the liqueur cupboard; because you can't rely on the orderlies for that. The colonel was a bachelor, and took his meals in the mess. One evening he came in late, looking a little worried, sat down and called for silence.

“'Gentlemen,' he said, 'I want to tell you something and ask your advice. This is the trouble. To−morrow morning the *Ville−de−Naples* arrives at Sfax. She has on board Captain de Saint−Avit, who has just been appointed to Feriana and is joining his station.”

“The colonel stopped. 'Good,' I thought, 'this means to−morrow's menu to be seen to.' For you know the custom that has always been followed wherever there are officers' clubs in Africa. When an officer passes through, his brother−officers go to meet him in a boat and make him free of the club while his ship is in the port. He pays for his entertainment with news from home. On these occasions a lot of trouble is taken even for a subaltern. At Sfax it meant an extra course, choice wine and the best brandy. “But this time I saw, from the way the officers looked at one another, that the old brandy would not leave the cupboard.

“'You've all heard, gentlemen, I think, of Captain de Saint−Avit and certain rumours that are current about him. These rumours don't concern us and his promotion and decoration even justify us in supposing that they are unfounded. But, between suspecting an officer of a crime and receiving him as a guest at our table there's a wide gap which we're not necessarily called upon to bridge. This is the point on which I should be glad to hear your opinion.'

“There was a silence. The officers looked at one another. They had all suddenly become serious, even the most lively of the young subalterns. In the corner, where I saw they had forgotten me, I did my best to avoid making any noise that might remind them I was still there.

“'We are grateful to you, sir,' said a major, 'for having had the kindness to consult us. All of us, I think, know to what painful rumours you allude. If I may be allowed to say so, in Paris, in the Army Geographical Department, where I was before coming here, many officers, and those most competent to judge, held views on this melancholy story which they avoided expressing but which one felt were unfavourable to Captain de Saint−Avit.'

“'I was at Bammako at the time of the Morhange−Saint−Avit mission,' said a captain. 'The view of the officers there differed little, I am sorry to say, from what the major has just told us. However, I must admit that they were recognised to be merely suspicions. And suspicions are certainly inadequate when one thinks of the atrocious nature of the affair.'

“'In any case, gentlemen, they are sufficient,' replied the colonel, 'to justify us in not receiving him. It is not a question of passing judgment, but a place at our table is not a right. It is a mark of brotherly esteem. All I want is to know whether you think you ought to extend this hospitality to Captain de Saint−Avit.'

“As he said this he looked at the officers in turn. In turn they shook their heads.

“'I see we are unanimous,' he went on. 'Unfortunately our task is not yet over. The *Ville de Naples* will be in the harbour to−morrow morning. The launch, which goes to take off passengers, leaves the quay at eight. One of you, gentlemen, must undertake the unpleasant task of going to the ship. Captain de Saint−Avit might think of coming to the club. We have no wish to insult him by refusing to receive him if he were to come, counting on the traditional custom of hospitality. His arrival must be prevented. It will have to be made clear to him that he will do better to remain on board.'

“The colonel looked at his officers again. They couldn't help agreeing; but I could see they were all feeling uncomfortable.

“'I can't hope to find a volunteer for an errand of this sort. I shall be forced to name someone. Captain Grandjean, de Saint−Avit is a captain. It is right that our message should be delivered by an officer of the same

rank. Besides, you're the least senior. I am therefore compelled to select you for this unpleasant duty. I needn't ask you to carry it out as tactfully as possible.'

"Captain Grandjean bowed, while all the rest gave a sigh of relief. As long as the colonel was there he kept apart without saying a word, but when the chief had left he said:

"'There are some jobs that jolly well ought to count for promotion.'

"Next day, at lunch, all waited impatiently for his return.

"'Well?' the colonel asked shortly.

"Captain Grandjean didn't answer at once. He sat down at the table where the other officers were mixing their aperatives, and he, who was generally chaffed about his abstemious ways, tossed down a large glass of absinthe almost at one gulp and without waiting for the sugar to melt.

"'Well, Grandjean?' repeated the colonel.

"'Well, sir, I've done it. You needn't worry any more about it. He won't land. But, my God, what a job! '

"The officers didn't venture a word. Only their eyes showed how curious they were.

"Captain Grandjean poured himself out a drink of water.

"'Well, I had thought out what I was going to say in the launch. As I went up the companion–ladder I felt it had all gone out of my head. Saint–Avit was in the smoke–room with the captain of the ship. I thought I should never have the courage to tell him, especially as I could see he was ready to land. He was in uniform, his sword on the sofa, and was wearing spurs. One doesn't wear spurs on board ship. I introduced myself and we exchanged a few words, but I must have looked embarrassed, for after the first minute I knew he had guessed. On some pretext or other he left the captain and took me towards the stern near the wheel. There I plucked up courage to speak. What on earth I blurted out I can't tell you. He didn't look at me. Leaning on the taffrail he looked into the distance with a smile. Then, all at once, when I had got thoroughly tied up in my explanations, he fixed his eyes on me coldly and said:

"'Thank you very much, my dear fellow, for all the trouble you have taken. But really it was unnecessary. I'm tired and have no intention of landing. At least I've had the pleasure of making your acquaintance. Since I can't take advantage of your hospitality I hope you'll do me the honour of accepting mine while the launch is alongside."

"'Then we went back to the smoke–room. He mixed the cocktails himself. He talked to me. We found we had friends in common. I shall never forget that face, that ironical, detached look, that sad, modulated voice. I say, you fellows, they can say what they like in the Geographical Service, or in the Sudan stations . . . but there must be some horrible mistake. A man like that guilty of such a crime? Believe me, it's impossible.'

"That's all, sir," concluded Chatelain, after a silence. "I never saw a more dreary meal than that. The officers hurried through their lunch without a word, in an atmosphere of restraint which no one made any attempt to shake off. And, in this dead silence, their eyes could be seen stealing furtively towards the *Ville–de–Naples* as she rode in the breeze about a league from the shore.

"She was still there when they mustered for dinner, and it was not until a blast from her siren, followed by spirals of smoke from the red–and–black funnels, had announced the liner's departure for Gabes that conversation became general, but still less cheerful than usual.

"Since then, sir, the Sfax mess shunned like the plague any subject which might lead the conversation to Captain de Saint–Avit."

Chatelain had been speaking almost in a whisper and the little denizens of the oasis had not heard his strange story. It was almost an hour since our last shot was fired– Round the pool the doves, reassured, were preening their wings. Large, mysterious birds were flying about under the darkening palms. A cooler wind swayed their mournful, trembling eaves. We had laid aside our helmets so that our temples might enjoy the caresses of this faint breeze.

"Chatelain," I said, "it's time to go back to the station."

Slowly we gathered up the doves we had shot. I felt the N.C.O.'s eyes linger upon me and in his look a reproach, as though he regretted having spoken. But on the way back I couldn't bring myself to break our melancholy silence by a single word.

When we arrived night had nearly fallen. The station flag could still be seen hanging limp against the pole, but it was too dark to distinguish the colours. The sun had gone down in the west, behind the ragged dunes silhouetted

against the dark violet of the sky.

When we had passed through the gate of the fort, Chatelain left me.

“I'm going to the stables,” he said.

Left alone, I made my way to that part of the fort where the European cantonments and the magazines are. An unutterable sadness weighed

upon me.

I thought of my brother−officers in barracks at home: at this time they would be returning to their quarters to find their mess uniform laid out for them on the bed, the gold−laced tunic and glittering epaulettes.

“To−morrow,” I said to myself, “I shall apply for a transfer.”

The staircase of beaten earth was already in darkness, but a few last rays of light still lingered in the office when I went in.

Leaning over the order−book sat a man, his elbows on my table. He had his back to me. He had not heard me come in.

“Hello, Gourrut, my lad, make yourself at home.”

The man had risen. I saw he was fairly tall, lithe and pale.

“Lieutenant Ferrieres, I think?”

He came towards me and held out his hand.

“Captain de Saint−Avit. Delighted, my dear fellow!”

At the same moment Chatelain appeared in the doorway of the office.

“Sergeant−Major,” said the new arrival sharply, “I can't congratulate you on the little I've seen.

There's not a single camel−saddle without some buckles missing and the heel−plates of the rifles look as though it rained three hundred days in the year at Hassi−Inifel. Another thing, where were you this afternoon? Out of the five Frenchmen attached to the station the only one I found when I arrived was a private sitting in front of a dram of brandy. We must change all that, eh? Carry on.”

“Captain de Saint−Avit,” I said stiffly, while Chatelain stood at attention petrified, “I must inform you that the sergeant−major was with me and that I am responsible for his absence from the station; he is an exemplary non−commissioned officer in every way, and if we had been informed beforehand of your arrival ...”

“Of course,” he said, with a cold, ironical smile. “Moreover, Lieutenant Ferrieres, I have no intention of holding him responsible for negligence which must be placed to your account. He is not expected to know that an officer who abandons a station like Hassi−Inifel, even for a couple of hours, runs the risk of finding very little left when he comes back. The Chaamba looters have a great weakness for fire−arms and, for the sake of the sixty rifles in your racks, I'm sure they'd have no scruples, even at the risk of landing you in for a court−martial, about taking advantage of the absence of an officer of whose excellent record, incidentally, I am aware. But come with me, will you? We'll finish the little inspection I was only able to carry out very superficially just now.” He was already on the stairs. I followed without saying a word. Chatelain brought up the rear. I heard him muttering to himself in a tone I will leave to the imagination:

“We're going to have some fun here, I can see.'“

CHAPTER II. CAPTAIN DE SAINT–AVIT

IT ONLY TOOK A few days to convince us that Chatelain's fears for our official relations with our new chief were unfounded. I have since thought that by the abruptness he showed us when we first met he intended to establish his authority, to show us that he could keep his head erect under the heavy burden of his past. . . . The fact remains that on the day after his arrival we saw him in a very different light; he complimented the sergeant–major on the condition of the station and the training of the men. To me he was charming.

"We were at Saint–Cyr together, weren't we? I need hardly authorise you to drop formality with me. It's your right."

Vain marks of confidences, alas! Elusive signs of mutual frankness. What more accessible, apparently, then the vast Sahara, open to anyone who cares to penetrate its depths? What could be more impenetrable than he? After six months of life in common, of intimate relationship such as a southern station affords, I ask myself whether the most extraordinary feature of my adventure is not to be starting to–morrow for the unplumbed solitudes with a man whose real thoughts are as strange to me as these solitudes for which he has inspired me with longing.

The first surprise my singular companion gave me was the baggage that followed him.

When he came upon us from Wargla so unexpectedly and alone he had loaded his thoroughbred camel only with what such a sensitive animal can carry without strain: his arms, sword, ordnance revolver, and a strong carbine, and a few necessaries reduced to a minimum. The remainder did not arrive until a fortnight later, by the convoy that brought the station supplies.

Three cases of considerable size were brought up one after the other to the captain's quarters, and the grimaces of the porters were sufficient testimony to their weight.

I thought it discreet to leave Saint–Avit to his moving in and began to examine the mail which the convoy had brought me.

Soon afterwards he came into the office and glanced at the reviews I had just received.

"Hello!" he said; "you take this?"

He was glancing through the current number of the *Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft fiir Erdkunde in Berlin.*

"Yes," I replied. "These gentlemen are good enough to take an interest in my geological work at Wady Mia and the Upper Igharghar."

"This may be useful to me," he muttered, still turning over the pages of the review.

"'You're welcome to it."

"Thank you. I'm afraid I've nothing to offer you in exchange, except perhaps Pliny. And besides . . . You know as well as I do what he says about Igharghar. He follows King Juba. At any rate, come and help me to arrange my gear and you'll see if there's anything to suit you."

I accepted without waiting to be asked twice.

We began by bringing to light various meteorological and astronomical instruments: thermometers by Baudin, Salleron, Fastre, an aneroid, a Fortin barometer, some chronometers, a sextant, an astronomical telescope, a prismatic compass ——in short, what Duveyrier calls the simplest and most easily portable outfit for camel transport, As Saint–Avit handed them to me I arranged them on the only table the room boasted.

"Now," he announced, "there's only the books left. I'll pass them to you. Heap them in the corner until I have some shelves made."

For two hours I helped him to pile up a regular library. And what a library! Never was its like seen in a southern station.

All the documents devoted by antiquity in any connection whatever to the regions of the Sahara were collected between the four plaster walls of this *bordj* room. Herodotus and Pliny, of course, and also Strabo and Ptolemy,

Pomponius Mela and Ammianus Marcellinus. But, side by side with these names, which reassured my sense of ignorance a little, I saw those of Corippus, Paulus Crosius, Eratosthenes, Photius, Diodorus of Sicily, Solis, Dion Cassius, Isidore of Seville, Martin of Tyre, Ethicus, Athenseus. . . . The *Scriptores Historic Augusta,* the *Itinerarium Antonini Augusti,* the *Geographi latini minores* of Riese, the *Geographi graeci minores* of Karl Muller. ... I have since had the opportunity of making myself familiar with the works of Agatarchides of Cos and Artemidorus of Ephesus, but I confess that at this time the presence of their dissertations in the quarters of a cavalry captain did not fail to cause me some amazement.

1 will mention further the *Descrittione dell Africa* of Leon the African; the Arabic histories of Ibn−Khaldoun, Al−Iaqoub, El−Bekri, Ibri−Batoutah, Mohammed El−Tounsi. . . . Amid this Babel I can only recall two volumes bearing the names of contemporary French scholars. These were the Latin theses of Berlioux I and Schirmer.[2]

While stacking up all these works as well as I could, I said to myself:

"And I thought that on his mission with Morhange, Saint−Avit was mainly responsible for the scientific observation. Either my memory is strangely at fault or he's changed his habits. One thing certain is that there's nothing of any use to me among all this jumble."

[1] *Doctrina Ptolemaei ab injuria reentiorum vindicata, sive* mow *Superior et Nilus vents, hodiernus Eghiren, ab antiquis wptoraft.* Paris in—8Â°, 1874, with two maps.——Note by M.

2 *De nomine et genere populorum* out *berberi vulgo dicuntur.* Pans—8Â°, 1892.——Note by M. Leroux.

He must have read the only too obvious signs of astonishment in my face, for he said in a tone which I thought betrayed a note of suspicion:——

"My choice of books surprises you, perhaps?"

"I've no right to say I'm surprised," I replied "since I'm not aware of the work for which you've collected them. In any case, I think I may say, without fear of contradiction, that no officer in the Arab stations ever possessed a library in which the humanities were so well represented."

He smiled evasively, and we didn't pursue the topic any further that day.

Among Saint−Avit's books I had noticed a voluminous manuscript book furnished with a stout lock. Several times I came upon him writing notes in it. When for any reason he was called out of the room he would carefully lock this album in a little cupboard of white wood provided by the generosity of the Government. When he was not writing, and duty did not require his presence, he would have the camel saddled on which he had arrived, and a few minutes later, from the terrace of the fort, I could see the double silhouette disappearing with great strides from the horizon behind a red fold in the desert.

Each of these excursions was longer than the last. Always he brought back a kind of exaltation, which made me look at him at meal−times, the only time we were really together, with an uneasiness which increased daily.

"This is bad!" I said to myself one day when his conversation had been more daringly disconnnected even than usual. "It is not pleasant to be on board a submarine when the captain drugs himself with opium. What drug can this fellow take ? "

The following day I made a rapid inspection of my friend's drawers. This inspection, which seemed to me a duty, reassured me for the moment. "Unless, of course, he carries his Pravaz syringe and tubes about with him."

At that time I still thought that Andre's imagination might require artificial stimulants.

A meticulous observation disillusioned me. Nothing suspicious in this respect. Moreover, he drank very little and smoked hardly at all.

And yet there was no denying the progress of this disquieting fever. He always returned from his wanderings with shining eyes; he was paler, more expansive, more irritable.

One evening he left the station about six o'clock, the hour when the great heat abates. We waited for him the whole night. My anxiety was heightened by the fact that for some time past the caravans had reported bands of marauders in the neighbourhood of the station.

At dawn he was still away. He did not return until midday. His camel collapsed rather than knelt down.

His first glance was at the squad of mounted men I had at length collected to go to meet him, and which was already mustered on the parade−ground between the bastions.

He saw that he ought to apologise. But he waited until we were alone at lunch.

"I'm distressed to have caused you anxiety. But the dunes were so splendid in the moonlight . ... I let myself be drawn too far."

"My dear fellow, I've no reproaches to make. You are free to do as you like and are in command here. Allow me, however, to recall to your mind certain words about the Chaamba looters, and the inconvenience that may be caused by the too prolonged absence of the commanding officer from the station."

He smiled.

"I don't dislike a good memory," he answered simply.

He was in good spirits——too good.

"You mustn't be angry with me. I went for a little ride, as usual. Then the moon rose. Then I recognised where I was. It was that way that Flatters went out to meet his fate twenty–three years ago next November, in a state of exaltation that the certainty of never returning only made sharper, more intense."

"A strange state of mind for the head of an expedition," I muttered.

"Don't run down Flatters. No other man loved the desert as he did ... to the death."

"Palat and Douls, among others, loved it in that way," I replied. "But they exposed themselves alone. Being only responsible for their own lives, they were free. Flatters bore the responsibility of sixty lives. And you can't deny that he was responsible for the murder of his expedition."

Scarcely had I uttered this last sentence when I regretted it. I thought of Chatelain's story of how at the officers' mess at Sfax, all conversation which might veer towards a certain Morhange–Saint–Avit expedition was avoided like the plague. Happily, I saw that my companion had not been listening. His glistening eyes were elsewhere.

"What was your first garrison?" he asked abruptly.

"Auxonne."

He laughed jerkily.

"Auxonne. *Cote–d'Or. Arrondissement de Dijon:* six thousand inhabitants. Platoon drill and detail inspections. The colonel's wife at home on Thursdays, the adjutant's on Saturdays. Sunday leave: Paris on the first of the month; Dijon the other three. That accounts for your judgment of Flatters.

"*My* first garrison, my dear friend, was at Boghar. That's where I landed one October morning, a twenty–year–old subaltern in the 1st Bataillon d'Afrique, with one white stripe on my black sleeve. . . . '*Les tripes au soleil,'* as the convicts call the stripes of their guards. Boghar! . . . Two days before, from the ship's deck, I'd caught my first glimpse of Africa. I'm sorry for anyone who sees her pale rocks for the first time without feeling a great blow at his heart when he thinks that this land stretches for thousands and thousands of miles. ... I was little more than a boy; I had money. I was before my time. I could have spent three or four days in Algiers amusing my. self. Well, the same evening I took the train for Berrouaghia.

"There, scarcely a hundred miles from Algiers the railway ends. Going on in a straight line the first you would find is at the Cape. The coach travels by night because of the heat. On the gradients I got down and walked beside the coach, forcing myself to feel, in this new atmosphere, the desert's kiss of welcome.

"About midnight we changed horses at Camp des Zouaves, a humble station on the raised road, dominating the parched valley from which the heady perfume of oleander rises. There we found a gang of convicts with their warders, escorted by infantry and sailors to the stone–heaps of the south. They were the dregs of the Algiers and Douera gaols, in uniform and, of course, unarmed; the others in civilian clothes——what clothes!——the year's recruits, young rakes of the *Chapelle* and the *Goutte–d'Or.*

"They were the first to leave. Then the coach overtook them. In the distance in a pool of moonlight I saw the black convoy strung out on the tawny road. Then I heard a muffled tune. The poor devils were singing. One in a melancholy, throaty voice would sing the verse, which lingered, sinister, among the depths of the blue ravines:

' *Mainlenard qu'elle est grande,*
Elle fait le trottoir
Avec ceux de la bande
A Richard–Lenoir."

"And the others took up the horrible refrain in chorus:

"*A la Bastille, a la Bastille,*

On aime bien, on aime
Une Nini Peau d'Chien;
Elle est si belle et si gentille
A la Bastille.'

“I saw them quite close when the coach passed them They were terrible. Their eyes like smoul–derintf fires in their pallid, clean–shaven faces. The burning dust choked the raucous voices in their throats. A ghastly melancholy took possession of me.

“When the coach had left this nightmare behind I regained control of myself.

“'On, on!' I cried, 'further south out of reach of this 'degrading stream of the sweepings of civilisation.'

“When I'm tired, when I've had enough of it and feel tempted to sit down by the side of the road I've chosen, I think of the convicts of Berrouaghia, and my only anxiety is to go on.

“But what a reward, when I am in one of those places where the poor animals have no thought of flight, because they've never seen a man, when the desert stretches all around, when the old world might crumble into dust and not a crack in the desert, not a single cloud in the silver sky, warn me!”

“That's true,” I murmured. “I felt that myself once, in the heart of the desert, at Tidi–Kelt.”

Up to this point I had allowed him to get carried away without interruption. Later I saw the mistake I'd made in making this unhappy remark.

His nasty nervous laugh came again.

“Oh, really! At Tidi–Kelt? My dear man, I beg you, in your own interests avoid this kind of reminiscence if you don't want to make yourself ridiculous. Really, you remind me of Fromentin, or poor Maupassant, who talked about the desert because he'd been as far as Djelfa, two days from the Rue Bab–Azoun and the Government Square, four from the Avenue de l'Opera. Because he'd seen a miserable camel in its last throes near Bou–Saada he thought he was in the middle of the Sahara, on the old caravan route . . . Tidi–Kelt, the desert!”

“It seems to me, however, that In–Salah . . .” I said, a little nettled.

“In–Salah? Tidi–Kelt! But, my poor friend, the last time I was there, there were as many old newspapers and empty sardine boxes lying about as in the Bois de Vincennes on Sunday!”

His persistence, his evident desire to annoy, made me forget my reserve.

“Of course,” I replied acidly, “*I* have never been as far as . . .”

I had stopped. But it was too late.

He looked me full in the face.

“As far as where?” he said quietly.

I didn't answer.

“As far as where?” he repeated.

And as I persisted in my silence:

“As far as the Wady Tarhit, you mean?”

According to the official report it was on the east bank of the Wady Tarhit, a hundred and twenty kilometres from Timissao, lat. 23Â° 5' N., that Captain Morhange was buried.

“Andre", I blurted out, “I swear . . .”

“What do you swear?”

“That I never had any intention . . .”

“Of mentioning the Wady Tarhit? Why not? Why shouldn't you mention the Wady Tarhit before me?”

1 pleaded in silence and he shrugged his shoulders.

“Idiot!” he said simply.

And he left me before I could say another word.

But all my humility had not melted him. This was proved to me on the following day, and the way in which his temper displayed itself was in the worst taste.

I'd hardly got up when he came into my room.

“Can you explain what this means?” he asked.

He was carrying in his hand one of the regimental books. In his fits of irritability he used to turn them over in the hope of finding some excuse for making himself officially unbearable.

This time he was in luck.

He opened the book. I blushed violently when I saw a proof of *a* photograph I knew well.

"What's this?" he repeated scornfully.

I had surprised him in the act of examining Mile. de C——'s photograph in my room, and unfavourably, too often to mistake his determination to pick a quarrel with me.

I kept myself under control, however, and locked the poor little photograph in a drawer.

But my affected indifference didn't suit his book

"In future," he said, "kindly take care not to leave the souvenirs of your love affairs lying about among the official papers."

He added, with a most insulting smile:

"It won't do to excite Gourrut."

"Andre," I said, pale as death, "I order you . . ."

He drew himself up to his full height:

"Well, what? It's quite all right. I've given you permission to mention the Wady Tarhit, haven't I? I take it I have the right . . ."

"Andre!"

He was now looking sneeringly at the portrait on the wall, the proof of which I had just removed from this painful scene.

"Well, well, please don't get angry. But really, between you and me, confess she's rather on the thin side."

And before I had time to reply he vanished, humming the shameful refrain of the night before:

"*A la Bastille,*

On aime bien, on dime bien

Nini Peau d'Chien. . . ."

For three days not a word passed between us. My exasperation was inexpressible. Was I, then, responsible for his avatars? Was it my fault that out of every two remarks I made one always seemed to contain an innuendo? . . .

"This position is intolerable," I said to myself.

"It can't go on."

It was soon to come to an end.

A week after the photograph scene the mail arrived. I had scarcely glanced at the table of contents of the *Zeitschrift,* the German review I have already mentioned, when I started with astonishment. I had read: *Reise und Entdeckungen zwei franzosischer Offizieren, Rittmeisters Morhange und Oberleutnanis de Saint−Avit, im westlichen Sahara.*[1] At the same moment I heard my companion's voice:

"Is there anything interesting in that number?"

"No," I said casually.

"Let's have a look."

I obeyed. What else could I do?

I thought he turned pale as he read the table of contents. And yet it was in the most natural voice in the world that he said:

"You'll lend me this, won't you?"

And he went out with a glance of defiance at me.

The day passed slowly. I didn't see him again until the evening. He was in good spirits —— very good —— and this made me uneasy.

When we had finished dinner we went out to lean over the balustrade of the terrace. There, facing east, we had an extensive view of the desert, into which the darkness was already eating its way.

".discoveries of two French officers, Captain Lieutenant de Saint−Avit in the Western Sahara.

Andre broke the silence.

"Oh, by the way, I took back your review You were right; nothing interesting."

He seemed to be vastly amused at something.

"What's the matter with you? What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I replied, choking.

"Nothing? Would you like me to tell you what's the matter with you?"

I looked at him with pleading eyes.

He shrugged his shoulders. “Idiot!” he repeated.

Night was falling rapidly. Only the southern bank of the Wady Mia retained its yellow tinge. A little jackal darted down the rocks with a plaintive cry.

“The *dib* is howling for no reason——a bad sign,” said Saint–Avit. He went on pitilessly: “Then you won't speak?” I made a great effort which ended in this futile sentence:

“What an overpowering day! What an oppressive night! . . . One loses hold of existence; one no longer knows . . .”

“Yes,” said the strangely remote voice of Saint–Avit, “an oppressive night. Just such a night as that on which I killed Captain Morhange.”

CHAPTER III. THE MORHANGE–SAINT–AVIT EXPEDITION

"SO YOU SEE IT'S TRUE that I killed Captain Morhange," said Andre de Saint–Avit next day, at the same place and hour, in a calm voice which knew nothing of the awful night I had passed. "Why did I tell you? I haven't the remotest idea. Perhaps it was the desert. Are you the man to carry the burden of such a confidence, and, moreover, accept all it may involve? I don't know that either. The future will show. For the moment there is only one definite fact. I repeat that I killed Captain Morhange."

I killed him. As you want me to tell you exactly when, you'll realise that I've no intention of taxing my brain to set out a story for your benefit. Nor do I mean to follow the naturalist tradition, and describe my first breeches; or oblige the Neo–Catholics by telling you how often I went to confession when I was a boy, and how much I liked it. I have no use for irrelevancies. You must be satisfied if my story begins at the point where I first met Morhange.

To begin with, I shall tell you that I don't regret having known him in spite of all he has cost me in the way of peace of mind and reputation. Apart from all question of an ill–requited friendship, my killing him was an act of black ingratitude, for it is to him, and all his knowledge of rock inscriptions, that I owe the one thing which will have made my life more absorbing than the petty existences dragged out by my contemporaries——at Auxonne and elsewhere.

So much for that. Now for the facts. It was in the Arab Section at Wargla, where I was a lieutenant, that I first heard the name of Morhange. I don't mind admitting that at the moment it put me in a pretty bad temper. We were living in rather lively times just then. The hostility of the Sultan of Morocco was latent. That gentleman was covertly assisting the machinations of our enemies at Tuat, where the murders of Flatters and Frescaly had already been plotted. Tuat was the great centre for all the schemes of revolt, *razzias* and defections, as well as the supply depot of these elusive nomads. The Governors of Algeria, Tirman, Cambon and Laferriere demanded its occupation. The War Ministers agreed with them——privately. But there was Parliament which refused to do anything, for fear of England and Germany, and more particularly of a certain *Declaration of the Rights of Man,* which lays down that revolt is the most sacred of duties, even when the rebels are savages who are doing their best to murder you. In short, all the military could do was to strengthen the southern garrisons discreetly——and establish fresh posts——Berresof, Hassi–el–Mia, Fort MacMahon, Fort Lallemand, Fort Miribel. But "Nomads are not caught by forts, but by their stomachs" as Castries said. In this case the stomach was the oasis of Tuat. The best course was to present them with a faithful record of the plots which were being hatched against us. The principal authors of the plots were——and still are——the Senussi, whose spiritual head has been compelled by our military measures to transfer the headquarters of the brotherhood from there to Schimmedru in the Tibesti, a mighty long way. The authorities——I say "authorities" from modesty——took it into their heads to follow up the tracks of these agitators in their favourite haunts, Rhat, Irmassinin, the plain of Adjermor and In–Salah. From Irmassinin, at any rate, you will observe it was practically the same route that Gerard Rohlfs had taken in 1864.

I had already made a certain name for myself through two expeditions of mine, one to Agades, the other to Bilma; and the officers in the Arab Section regarded me as one of the authorities on the Senussi question. I was therefore asked to take on this new job.

So I suggested that it would be a good idea if I killed two birds with one stone and had a peep at the western Hoggar, just to see if the relations between the Abitarhen Tuaregs and the Senussi were as friendly as at the time when they had put their heads together to massacre the Flatters expedition. My proposal was at once approved. My original itinerary was changed as follows: when I reached Tghelaschem, three hundred and seventy–five miles south of Temassinin, instead of taking a direct line for Tuat by the Rfrat–In–Salah route, I was to cut south–west between the Mouydir and Hoggar ranges and make for Shikh–Salah. From there I should turn north to In–Salah by the Sudan–Agades route. It meant the addition of a bare five hundred leagues and the certainty of a pretty careful examination *of* the favourite routes of our enemies the Senussi of Tibesti and the Tuaregs of the Hoggar, when they visited Tuat. Every explorer has his side–show, and it was pleasant to think that on my way I could devote a little time to the examination of the geological formation of the Plateau of Eguere, about which Duveyrier and the others have so little to say.

Everything was ready for my departure from Wargla. “Everything” meant very little: three camels. There were my own, that of my companion Bou−Djema——a faithful Chaamba whom I had taken with me on my expedition to the Air, less as guide in a region I knew well than as a machine for saddling and unsaddling the camels—— and a third which carried our food and water−skins, the latter very small, as we had pretty well located the wells, thanks to my efforts.

Some individuals have started on expeditions of this kind with an escort of a hundred regulars, and even guns. I myself prefer the precedent of such men as Douls and Rene” Caillie”: I go alone.

I was at that delightful moment when a mere thread was my only link with civilisation when an official order arrived at Wargla. “Lieutenant de Saint−Avit,” it curtly announced, “will postpone his departure until the Arrival of Captain Morhange, who will accompany him on his expedition.”

I was more than disappointed. The idea of this expedition had been mine alone. You can imagine all the difficulties I had had to get the approval of the authorities. And now, at the very moment when I could revel in the prospects of hours of *tete−a−tete* with myself in the very heart of the desert, I had a stranger foisted on to me, and worse——a superior!

The sympathy of my brother−officers intensified my rage.

They turned up the Army List and obtained the following information:

“Morhange (Jean−Marie Francois), promoted 1881. Brevet rank. Captain on General List (Army Geographical Section).”

“That explains everything,” said one.

“He's somebody's darling who's being sent to bag all the credit in some show where you get all the knocks. Brevet rank! Rotten swindle!”

“I don't altogether agree with you,” said our C.O. “The Parliamentary crowd——things always get out somehow, unfortunately——have found out the real object of Saint−Avit's mission: to force their hands into occupying the Tuat. This Morhange must be the slave of the Army Committee. All that crowd, deputies, ministers and governors, are always spying on each other. Some day there'll be a frightfully amusing story, regular paradox, about French colonial expansion which has always been carried on without the knowledge of the authorities except where it has been in spite of them.”

“Whatever the reason, the result's the same,” I said bitterly. “We shall be two Frenchmen spying on each other night and day away in the south. It's a pleasant prospect considering that we shall need all our wits to keep even with the niggers. When will the fellow be here?”

“The day after to−morrow, for certain. There's a convoy coming up from Ghardaia. It's likely that he'll come with it. Everything seems to show that he's not the sort of chap that knows much about travelling alone.

Captain Morhange did, in fact, turn up two days later with the Ghardaia convoy. I was the first person he asked to see.

I had beaten a dignified retreat to my room as soon as the convoy came in sight, and when he came in I was disagreeably surprised to realise that it would be difficult to give him the cold shoulder for long.

He was tall, had a round face, high complexion, mocking blue eyes, a small black moustache and his hair was already nearly white.

“I can't apologise enough, my dear chap,” he burst out at once, with a frankness of manner which I have never known in any other roan.

You must hate the interloper who has upset all your plans and delayed your departure.”

“Oh dear no, sir!” I said coldly.

“It's your own fault partly. It was your knowledge of the routes in the south (they know all about it in Paris) which made me want to have you as my sponsor when the Ministries of Education and Commerce and the Societe de Geographic combined to entrust me with the mission which has brought me here. The exact job those highly honourable and moral dignitaries have given me is to find the track of the ancient caravan route which, from the ninth century onwards, carried the traffic between Tunis and the Sudan, passing through Tozeur, Wargla, Es Suk and the Burrum bend. In so doing I am to consider the possibility of restoring the ancient splendour of that route. While getting these instructions I heard in the Geographical Section about the expedition on which you are starting. We follow the same route from Wargla to Shikh−Salah. I have to admit that this is the first expedition of this kind I've attempted. I wouldn't funk lecturing on Arab literature for an hour to the School of Oriental

Languages, but I realise that in the desert it would be awkward to have to ask whether to turn right or left. I was presented with a unique opportunity of getting up–to–date and at the same time owing my initiation to a delightful companion. You must forgive me if I seized it and used all my influence to postpone your departure from Wargla until I had time to join you. Apart from this I have only one thing to say. I am entrusted with a corn mission the origin of which makes it essentially civil. You, on the other hand, are working for the Ministry of War. As is only right, until we reach Shikh–Salah and separate, you for the Tuat and I for the Niger, your advice and orders will be followed implicitly by a subordinate. By a friend, too, I hope."

While he was speaking in his frank and charming way I was enjoying the agreeable sensation of seeing all my worst fears dispelled. But I could not resist the ill–mannered temptation of treating him with a certain distance for disposing of my company from afar without consulting me.

"You are very flattering, sir, and I am most grateful. When do you want us to leave Wargla?" His gestures indicated the most utter indifference.

"Just when you like. To–morrow. To–night. I have kept you back. Your preparations must have been complete long ago."

My little scheme had turned against myself, as I had had no idea of starting before the following week.

"To–morrow, sir? But , . . what about your kit?"

He laughed heartily.

"I understood it was a case of taking as little as possible. A few personal things; some paper. My good old camel had little difficulty in carrying that. The rest I'll leave to your advice and the resources of Wargla."

I was beaten. There were no more objections to offer and, besides, such frankness of mind and manner was already attracting me strangely.

"Well," said my brother–officers, when we met over our aperitives, "your captain looks a splendid fellow."

"Quite."

"You certainly won't quarrel with *him.* But you'll have to see he doesn't bag all the bedclothes."

"We're not working on the same job," I replied evasively.

I was lost in thought——simply lost in thought. I'll swear it. From that moment all my ill–feeling against Morhange was gone. And yet my silence convinced them that I was still nursing bad feeling against him. When, later, suspicions began to go round about the business, all of them——every jack man of them——said, "He's certainly guilty. We saw them together and can swear it."

Guilty I am . . . but for the low motive of jealousy . . . Loathsome idea!

After that there was only one course open to me. To get away, to fly to places where men who think and reason are no longer to be found.

Morhange came in, arm in arm with the C.O., who seemed delighted with his new acquaintance.

He introduced him noisily. "Gentlemen, Captain Morhange. If spirits are the test he's an officer of the old school, I can assure you. He wants to start to–morrow but it's our business to give him such a reception that he'll give up that idea in an hour or two. You can give us at least a week, Morhange?"

"I'm at Lieutenant Saint–Avit's disposal replied Morhange with a gentle smile.

The conversation then become general. Glasses clinked and the laughter became hilarious. I heard my brother–officers going into convulsions over the stories which the newcomer poured out with imperturbable good humour. But for myself . . . I had never felt so sad.

The time came to pass to the dining–room. "Here, on my right," said the C.O., looking more radiant every minute. "And I hope you've .still got something good from Paris. You see, we *get* behind the times here."

"As you wish, sir," said Morhange. "Sit down, gentlemen."

The officers obeyed amid a merry clatter of chairs. I could not take my eyes from Morhange, who was still standing.

"Excuse me, sir. Excuse me, gentlemen," he said. And before taking his place at that table, where he showed himself throughout the gayest of .guests, Captain Morhange closed his eyes and muttered the *Benedicite.*

CHAPTER IV. TOWARDS THE TWENTY−FIFTH DEGREE

"YOU SEE," SAID Captain Morhange a fortnight later, "that you know far more about the ancient tracks of the Sahara than you let me suppose, as you are familiar with the existence of the two Tadekka. But the Tadekka which you have just mentioned is the Tadekka of Ibn−Batoutah, which that historian places seventy days' journey from Tuat, and Schirmer is right in citing it in the unexplored regions of the Awellimiden. In the nineteenth century it was through that Tadekka that the Songhoi caravans passed on their annual visit to Egypt.

"*My* Tadekka is the other one, the capital of the *Veiled Race* fixed by Ibn−Khaldoun at twenty days south of Wargla. El−Bekri puts it at thirty and calls it Tadmekka. It is for this Tadmekka that I am making, and it must be sought for in the ruins of Es−Suk. Through Es−Suk passed the commercial route which in the ninth century connected the Djerid of Tunis with the bend made by the Niger at Burrum. It is with a view to studying the possibility of restoring the importance of that ancient track that the Ministries have sent me on the mission which has given me the pleasure of your company."

"You'll be disillusioned, no doubt," I murmured "Everything seems to me to show that the traffic on that route to−day is insignificant."

"We shall see," he replied calmly. All this was while we were passing the drab edge of a *sebkha.* The broad salty expanse was a sheet of pale blue in the light dawn. The strides of our five camels cast flickering shadows of a deeper blue. Every now and then a bird, a kind of heron and the sole inhabitant of these solitudes, rose and hovered above us as if suspended by a thread, to drop down again the moment we had passed.

I was in front, looking after our direction. Morhange followed. Wrapped in his great white cloak, wearing the straight fez of the Spahis and with a long chaplet of large black and white beads terminating in a cross of the same round his neck, he realised the perfect type of the White Fathers of Cardinal Lavigerie.

After a halt of two days at Temassinin we had just left the route taken by Flatters and turned south−west. I have the honour of preceding Foureau in revealing the importance of Temassinin, a point of intersection of caravan routes, and selecting the site at which Captain Pein has just constructed a fort. Situated at the crossing−point of the routes from Fezzan and the Tibesti to Tuat, Temassinin will one day be a wonderful intelligence centre. The information I gathered about the proceedings of our Senussi foes was distinctly important. I observed the complete lack of interest with which Morhange watched me going about this business.

He spent these two days talking to the old negro guardian who watches over the remains of the fevered Sidi−Moussa under his plaster cupola. I'm sorry I've forgotten what he and the official talked about, but, judging by the astonished admiration of the negro, I realised how ignorant I was of the mysteries of the immense Sahara and how little they were mysteries to my companion.

When all's said and done, you are not without a certain familiarity with the ways of the south, and I'll tell you something which will give you some idea of the amazing originality of the element Morhange represented in a show like ours. It was exactly one hundred and twenty−five miles from here, quite close to the Great Dune, and after we had been travelling six horrible days without water. We only had enough left for two days before reaching the first well, and you know that in the words of Flatters to his wife, "You have to work for hours to open these wells before your men and animals can get anything to drink." We met a caravan going east towards Rhadames but had come a little too far north. The empty, sagging humps of the camels were eloquent of the sufferings of the convoy. Bringing up the rear was a small grey donkey, a wretched little beast which stumbled at every step. The merchants had taken off its pack as they knew quite well it was bound to die It was following instinctively, putting forth its last efforts as it realised that the minute it stopped would be the end, followed by the busy bustle of the bald−pated vultures. I am fond of animals and I have good reason to prefer them to men. But it would never have occurred to me to do what Morhange did. I should explain that our water−carriers were practically empty and that our own camels without which we should have been absolutely helpless in the desert, had not been watered for several hours. Morhange made his camel kneel got down a skin and gave the poor donkey a drink. It was a real pleasure to see the wretched beast's bare flanks throbbing with relief. But I was responsible for the party. I also caught sight of the amazed expression on Bou−Djema's face and the disapproving looks of the thirsty members of the party. I made some sort of protest. What a reception it got!

"1 have only given what was mine by right," replied Morhange. "About six to−morrow evening we shall be at the wells of El−Biodh. I know I shan't be thirsty between now and then."

All this said in a tone in which for the first time I detected the captain. "It's easy to see what he's up to," I said to myself, feeling pretty peevish. "He knows that my own and Bou−Djema's water supply will be at his service whenever he wants. But I did not yet really know my Morhange, and the fact remains that until the evening of the next day when we reached El−Biodh he resisted all our offers with a smile and did not drink at all.

Shades of Saint Francis of Assisi! O hills of Umbria in all the purity of dawn! It was in such dawn that Morhange stopped by the brink of a silvery stream pouring out in cascades from a cleft in the grey rocks of Eguere. The water, a thing of wonder, spread over the sand, and we could see little black fishes, each reflected in the light. Fish in the very heart of the Sahara! All three of us were struck dumb at this freak of Nature. One of the fishes had gone astray in a little creek in the sand and lay there, vainly flopping about and showing its silvery−white belly. . . . Morhange picked it out, looked at it thoughtfully for a moment, and then put it back in the little flowing stream. . . . Shades of Saint Francis of Assisi! Oh, hills of Umbria! . . . But I have promised not to break the unity of my story by untimely digressions.

"I was right, you see," Captain Morhange said to me a week later, "when I advised you to veer south a bit before making for your Shikh−Salah. Something told me that this Eguere range had no interest from your point of view. You have only to stoop and pick up the stones here to prove the volcanic origin of this region with greater force than Bou−Derba, the Cloiseaux, and Doctor Marres ever did."

We were then passing along the western slopes of the Tifedest mountains towards the twenty−fifth degree of latitude.

"It would *be* churlish of me not to be grateful," I said.

I shall never forget that moment. We had dismounted from our camels and were engaged in collecting typical fragments of rock. Morhange was working in a way which was eloquent of his knowledge of geology, knowledge the possession of which he had often denied.

It was at this point that I put the following question:

"May I show my gratitude to you by making a confession?"

He looked up and gave me a glance. "Please do."

"I don't see the practical importance of the mission you are on."

He smiled.

"How's that? Exploring the ancient caravan route. Proving that from the earliest antiquity there has been a link between the Mediterranean world and the countries of the blacks. Does *that* convey nothing to you? The hope of settling once for all the age−old controversy which has exercised so many able minds——d'Anville, Heeren, Berlioux and Quatremere on one side, and Gos−selin, Walckenaer, Tissot, Vivien de Saint−Martin on the other. Do you call that of no interest? You're hard to please, old chap."

"I mean practical interest," I said. "You will not deny that that controversy can only interest library geographers and armchair explorers."

Morhange was still smiling.

"Don't annihilate me, my dear fellow. Try and remember that your job's been given you by Ministry of War, while I hold my commission from the Ministry of Education. The different origin explains our divergent goals. I'll grant you that it explains why my own is not really of a practical nature."

"You were sent out by the Ministry of Commerce as well," I replied, rather nettled. "Under that head you have undertaken to examine the possibility of restoring the ancient commercial route of the ninth century. You needn't try to pull my leg about that. With your knowledge of history and the geography of the Sahara you were quite clear in your mind before you left Paris. The route from Djerid to the Niger is dead —— dead as doornails. You knew that there would never be any traffic worth talking about on that route although you have undertaken to examine the possibility of restoring it."

Morhange looked me square in the face. "If that's so," he said, with an air of friendly detachment, "and if I had the conviction you credit me with before I left, do you know what inference must be drawn?"

"I should like to hear you tell me."

"Simply this, dear boy: that I was not as clever as you in finding a pretext for my journey, and have found reasons less sound than yours to conceal the true motives which have brought me here."

"A pretext? I don't see ... "Please be sincere. It's your turn. I am quite convinced that you are extremely anxious to give the Arab Section information about the machinations of the Senussi. But admit that supplying such information is not the sole and private motive of your journey. You are a geologist, my friend. This expedition has provided you with an opportunity of indulging your hobby. No one could dream of blaming you, as you have been able to reconcile what is of value to your country with what is of interest to yourself. But for heaven's sake don't start denying. I need no other proof than the fact of your presence here, at the foot of the Tifedest, a spot which is no doubt very curious from the point of view of mineralogy. But to explore it you have come a hundred miles south of your official route."

It would have been impossible to take the wind out of my sails more neatly. I parried with an attack.

"Must I infer from all this that I don't know the real objects of your journey and that they have nothing to do with its official purpose?"

I had gone a bit too far this time. I realised it from the serious note in Morhange's answer.

"No, dear boy, you must not. I should have no use for a lie which was aggravated by a piece of fraud towards the worthy bodies which have judged me worthy of their confidence and subsidies. I shall do my level best to reach the goals which have been assigned to me. But there is no reason to conceal from you that there is another, a private and personal one, which concerns me much more closely. If you like, and employing phraseology for which I don't care, let my put it that the first are the means while the last is the *end."*

"Would it be indiscreet to enquire . . .?"

"Certainly not," my companion replied. "We are now within a few days of Shikh–Salah. Before long we shall have separated. The man whose foot steps in the Sahara you have guided so devotedly should have no secrets from you."

We had stopped in the valley of a little dried–up *wady* where a few miserable plants were sprouting. Close by a spring had a grey–green fringe about it The camels had been unloaded for the night and were bounding round and browsing on the thorny tufts of the *had.* The black, smooth walls of the Tifedest mountains rose almost sheer above our heads. In the still air blue wreaths of smoke were already rising from the fire at which Bou–Djema was cooking our dinner.

Not a sound, not a breath. The smoke slowly climbed straight into the sky.

"Have you ever heard of the *Atlas du Christianisme?"* asked Morhange.

"I think so. Isn't it a geographical treatise published by the Benedictines under the direction of a certain Dom Granger?"

"Good shot," said Morhange. "But let me give you some details on a matter which you have had less reason to be interested in than I. The *Atlas du Christianisme* is a work designed to establish the limits of the great flood of Christianity in every part of the globe down the ages. It is a work worthy of the learning of the Bendictines and so marvellous a scholar as D Granger."

"So you are here to determine those limits in this region?" I murmured.

"That's it," said my companion.

He stopped, and I respected his silence. I was quite determined to be surprised at nothing.

"It's merely ridiculous to start confidences and then stop half–way," he went on after a few minutes' reflection, and his voice was suddenly serious and had lost all but a shade of that airy banter which had so delighted the young officers at Wargla a month earlier. "I have begun mine, and you shall hear all. But you must trust in my discretion and not press me on certain events of my private life. You are not interested in the reasons which impelled me four years ago to enter the cloister as a result of those events. I myself can only be amazed that the entry into my life of a certain being of no conceivable interest was enough to change the course of my career. I can only feel astonished that a being, whose sole worth was her beauty, was appointed by the Creator to influence my destiny in so unexpected a direction. The monastery at the doors of which I knocked had excellent reasons for doubting the permanence of such a vocation. In short, I could only agree with the Abbe when he forbade me to send in my resignation then and there. I was a captain and had got my brevet the previous year. At his orders I asked for, and obtained, my transfer to the reserves for three years. At the end of the three years we should see if the world was really dead to your humble servant.

"The very day of my arrival at the monastery I was put at the disposal of Dom Granger and posted by him to the body engaged on the famous *Atlas du Christianisme.* After a short examination he was able to judge of what

kind of service I could be to him. In this way I entered the section devoted to the cartography of Northern Africa. I did not know a word of Arabic, but it happened that when I was stationed at Lyon I had attended Berlioux's lectures in the *Faculte des Lettres.* There's no doubt he was a brilliant geographer, but obsessed by one idea: the influence of Greek and Roman civilisation on Africa. This was enough for Dom Granger. He immediately provided me with the Berber dictionaries of venture, Delaporte and Brosselard, the *Grammatical Sketch of the Temdhaq,* by Stanhope Fleeman, and Major Hanoteau's *Essai de Grammaire de la Langue Temdchek.* After three months I was able to decipher any *Tifinar* inscription that came to hand. You know that *Tifinar* is the national script of the Tuaregs, a form of the Temachek language which seems to us a curious protest of the Tarki race in face of its Mohammedan enemies.

' Dom Granger, indeed, was convinced that the Tuaregs were Christians from a date which remains to be determined, but doubtless coincides with the splendour of the Church of Hippone. You know, better than I do, that with them the cross is a fatalistic symbol. Duveyrier has discovered that it figures in their alphabet, on their weapons, and in the pattern of their clothing. The only tattooing on the forehead and on the back of the hands is a cross with limbs of equal length; the pommels of their saddles, the hilts of their swords and daggers are in the form of a cross. And it is hardly necessary to remind you that in spite of the fact that bells are proscribed by Mohammedanism as Christian symbols, the trappings of Tuareg camels are ornamented with little bells.

“Neither Dom Granger nor I attached any exaggerated importance to such proofs, which were too much like those which bristle in *Le Genie du Christianisme.* But, after all, it's impossible to reject certain theological arguments entirely. Ammon, the god of the Tuaregs, and irrefutably the Adon of the Bible, is unique. They have a hell, *timsi−tan−eldkhart,* 'the last fire,' where Iblis, our Lucifer, reigns. Their paradise, where their good deeds are rewarded, is inhabited by the *andjelousen,* our angels; and you must admit the resemblance between their theology and the Koran, or I shall bring forward historical arguments and remind you that through the ages the Tuaregs have struggled, to practical extermination, to maintain their beliefs against the encroachments of Mohammedan fanaticism.

“I often studied with Dom Granger this tremendous epic in which one sees the natives holding out against their Arab conquerors. With him I watched the army of Sidi−Okba, one of the Prophet's companions plunge into the desert to subdue the great Tuareg tribes and force upon them the Mussulman code. These tribes were then rich and orosperous. There were the *Ihoggaren,* the *Imededren,* the *Ouadelen,* the *Kel−Gueress,* the *Kel−Air.* But internicene strife weakened their resistance. They showed themselves formidable enemies, however, and it was only after a long and terrible war that the Arabs succeeded in capturing the Berber capital. They destroyed it, after massacring the inhabitants. On its ruins Okba built a new city. This city is Es−Suk. The one destroyed by Sidi−Okba is the Berber Tadmekka. What Dom Granger wanted me to do was to try to exhume the traces of Berber, and perhaps Christian Tadmekka, from the ruins of Mussulman Es−Suk.” “I understand,” I murmured.

“Good,” said Morhange. “But what I want you to understand now is the practical common sense of these monks, my masters. Remember that even after three years of monastic life they still had doubts as to the genuineness of my vocation. This suggestion gave them an opportunity of testing it once for all, while at the same time making use of official facilities for their own ends. One morning I was summoned before the Father Abbot, and this is what he said, in the presence of Dom Granger, who acquiesced in silence.

Your period of probation expires in a fortnight. You will return to Paris and ask for re−admission to the Ministry. After what you have learnt here and the relations we have had from time to time with the General Staff you won't have any difficulty in getting seconded to the Army Geographical Service. When you arrive at Rue de Grenelle you will receive our instructions.'

“I was astonished at their confidence in me Once I found myself a captain in the Geographical Service again I understood. At the monastery daily intercourse with Dom Granger and his disciples had kept me continually conscious of the limitations of my scholarship. But with contact with my brother−officers I began to understand the superiority of the education I had received at the monastery. There was no need for me to trouble my head about the details of the expedition. The Ministries approached me on their own account and urged me to accept. I had only to use my own initiative on one occasion: having heard that you were about to leave Wargla for this journey, and having some reason to doubt my own capacity as a practical explorer, I did what I could to delay your departure so as to join you. I hope you've got over your annoyance.”

The light was fading westward where the sun had sunk in an unimagined wealth of violet robes. We were

alone in this immensity at the foot of the black immovable rocks. Nothing but ourselves. Nothing. Nothing but ourselves.

I held out my hand to Morhange and he gripped it; then he said:

"Even if they seem infinitely long, those thousands of miles that separate me from the moment when, my task accomplished, I can at last find in the cloister forgetfulness of things for which I was never meant, let me say this: at the moment the hundred miles or so which remain to be travelled in your company before we get to Shikh–Salah seem infinitely short."

In the pale water of the little spring a new–born star was reflected, motionless and fixed like a silver nail.

“Shikh–Salah,” I murmured, my heart filled with an indefinable melancholy; “patience! We're not there yet.” As it turned out, we were never to get there.

CHAPTER V. THE INSCRIPTION

MORHANGE knocked a piece of rock from the black side of the mountain with a blow of his iron–shod stick.

“What's that?” he asked, handing it to me.

“Peridotite basalt,” I said.

“Isn't it interesting? You've only glanced at it.”

“On the contrary, it's very interesting. But, for the moment. I confess I've other things to think about.”

“What?”

“Have a look over there,” I said, pointing west to a dark spot on the horizon beyond the white plain.

It was six in the morning. The sun had risen, but it could not be seen behind the film which covered the sky. And not a breath of air, not a breath.

Suddenly one of our camels uttered a cry. An enormous antelope leapt up from the ground and dashed its head madly against the wall of rock.

It stood there, a few yards away from us, panic–stricken, its slender legs trembling.

Bou–Djema had rejoined us.

“When the *mohor's* legs tremble the pillars of the firmament will soon shake,” he whispered.

Morhange looked at me, then back towards the horizon at the black spot which had now doubled in size.

“A storm, isn't it?”

“Yes, a storm.”

“And you're worried about it?”

1 didn't answer at once. I was exchanging a few words with Bou–Djema, now busy controlling the camels, which were getting nervous.

Morhange repeated his question. I shrugged my

shoulders.

“Worried? I don't know. I've never seen a storm in the Hoggar. But I have my doubts. And it really looks as though this is going to be something out of the ordinary. Besides, look at this.”

Over the level rock a light dust had risen. In the perfectly still air a few grains of sand began to twist in a circle with a speed which increased until it made one giddy, giving us on a microscopic scale a foretaste of what was about to break loose upon us.

A flight of wild birds passed, uttering shrill cries. They came from the west, flying very low.

“They're making for the Amandghor Sebkha,” said Bou–Djema.

“That settles it,” I thought.

Morhange looked at me enquiringly.

“What are we to do?” he asked.

“Mount our camels at once, and be quick and find shelter on a higher level before they're out of control. Think how we stand. It's all very well to travel along a dry river–bed, but in less than quarter of an hour, perhaps, the storm will have burst. In less than quarter of an hour there'll be a regular torrent rushing down here. On this hard ground the rain will roll along like a bucket of water thrown on an asphalt pavement. No depth, all height. Besides, look over there!”

I pointed to where, ten yards up, the side of the rocky corridor was scored with the long parallel marks of former erosions.

“In an hour the water will be rushing along at that level. Those are the marks of the last flood. Come, let's make a start. There's not a moment to lose.”

“Come on!” said Morhange, unmoved.

We had the greatest difficulty in getting the camels to kneel. As each of us climbed into the saddle they dashed off at a pace made more and more frantic by terror.

Suddenly a formidable wind got up, and almost at the same moment the light seemed to vanish from the ravine. In the twinkling of an eye the sky overhead had become darker than the black walls of the corridor down which we were tearing at break–neck speed.

"An outlet up the rocks!" I shouted through the wind to my companions. "If we don't come across one in the next minute it's all up."

They didn't hear me, but, turning round, I saw they were keeping their distances, Morhange immediately behind me, Bou−Djema last, driving the two baggage camels before him with splendid horsemanship.

A blinding flash of lightning rent the darkness. A peal of thunder crashed down and re−echoed along the rocky walls until it was lost in infinity and immediately great tepid drops began to fall. Our burnouses, floating out behind us as we sped along, in an instant were glued to our dripping bodies.

"Saved!" I cried suddenly.

Without warning, a cleft had opened up in the wall on our right. It was the bed of a *wady,* a tributary of the one in which we had unluckily involved ourselves that morning, and almost perpendicular. Already a veritable torrent was roaring down it.

I have never so well appreciated the incomparable surefootedness of camels in climbing precipitous places. Stiffening themselves, stretching their enormous legs, heaving themselves up over the rocks which the water was beginning to loosen, our beasts performed in this minute feats which would probably have beaten a Pyrenees mule.

After some seconds of superhuman effort we at last found ourselves out of danger, on a kind of basalt terrace overlooking from a height of about fifty yards the corridor of the *wady* where we had all but lost our lives.

We were in luck's way. A little grotto opened behind us. Bou−Djema managed to get the camels under shelter there. From its opening we had time to observe in silence the prodigious spectacle before us.

I expect you have seen artillery practice at Chalons. You have seen the chalky ground near the Marne seethe under the bursting explosives like the inkpots at school when we put in a bit of calcium carbide. It swells, rises, bubbles in the din of bursting shells. Well, it was something like that, but in the heart of the desert and in darkness. The water, white with foam, hurled itself to the bottom of the black gulf and rose towards the rock on which we stood. All this amid the ceaseless crash of the thunder, and, louder still, the roar of whole walls of rock which, undermined by the flood, fell in one mass, broke in pieces, and were swept away in a few seconds by the swirling current.

All the time this deluge lasted, an hour or two perhaps, Morhange and I stood without a word, leaning over this fantastic bowl of darkness anxious to see, to go on seeing, to see in spite of everything; feeling with a kind of ineffable horror, yet with fierce enjoyment, the trembling of the basalt crest, where we had taken refuge, as the water struck it with the force of a battering−ram. I don't think we hoped for a single instant for the end of this titanic nightmare, it was so splendid.

At last a ray of sunlight shone through. Then, and not till then, we looked at one another.

Morhange gave me his hand.

"Thanks," he said simply.

And he added with a smile:

"To have lost our lives by drowning in the middle of the Sahara would have been theatrical and ridiculous. We owe our escape from this paradoxical death to your presence of mind."

Oh, why didn't his camel stumble and send him rolling into this torrent! Then what happened since would never have happened: that is the thought that comes to me in moments of weakness. But, as I've told you, I soon get myself in hand again. No, no, I *don't,* I *can't,* regret that what happened later did happen.

Morhange left me, to go into the little grotto where we could hear the contented gruntings of Bou−Djema's camels. I was left alone, watching the water rising ceaselessly, rising, under the impetuous inrush of its frenzied tributaries. It had stopped raining. The sun was shining in a sky which was once more blue. I could feel my clothes, which a minute before had been drenched through, drying upon me with incredible rapidity.

I felt a hand on my shoulder. Morhange was again at my side. A strange smile of satisfaction lit up his face.

"Come!" he said.

Somewhat puzzled, I followed him. We went into the grotto.

The opening, which was large enough for the camels to enter, let in the daylight. Morhange led me up to a smooth wall of rock opposite.

"Look!" he said, with ill−concealed delight

“Well?”

“Well! don't you see?”

“I see there are some Tuareg inscriptions,” J replied, rather disappointed, “but I thought I told you I'm not good at reading Tifinar characters. Are these inscriptions any more interesting than those we've already come across several times?”

“Look at that one,” said Morhange.

There was such an accent of triumph in his voice that this time he held my attention.

I looked.

I was an inscription with its letters arranged in the form of a cross. It plays such an important part in the story that I must sketch it for you.

Here it is:

[Illustration]

It was drawn with great regularity, the characters cut fairly deep in the rock. Although at that time I didn't know much about these inscriptions I had no difficulty in seeing that this one was very old.

Morhange examined it with increasing satisfaction.

I looked at him questioningly.

“Well! What do you say to that?” he said.

“ What do you expect me to say? I repeat, I can hardly decipher Tifinar.”

"Shall I help you?” my companion suggested. After what we had just gone through such a lecture in epigraphy seemed, to say the least of it, ill−timed. But Morhange's delight was so obvious that I couldn't bring myself to spoil it.

“Very well, then,” my companion began, as much at his ease as if he had been in front of a blackboard; “the first thing you'll notice about this inscription is the way it is repeated in cross−form. That is to say, it consists of one word written once vertically and downwards, and once from right to left. As the word consists of seven letters, the fourth letter, I, of course forms the centre. This arrangement, unique in Tifinar epigraphy, is quite remarkable in itself. But there's better to come. Let's decipher it now.”

Blundering three times out of the seven, I at last succeeded, with Morhange's patient help, in spelling the word.

Got it?” said Morhange, with a wink, when I had finished my task.

“I'm further off than ever,” I replied, a little irritated. “I've spelt the word: a, n, t, i, n, h, a——

Antinha. Antinha, I don't know any word like it or even approaching it, in any of the Sahara dialects I know.”

Morhange rubbed his hands. His jubilation was becoming unreasonable.

“You've hit it! That's precisely what makes this inscription unique.”

“How?”

“There is indeed nothing analogous to this word in Arabic or Berber.”

“Well, then?”

“Then, my dear friend, we must be faced with a foreign word transcribed into Tifinar characters.”

“And to what language do you suppose this word belongs?”

“To begin with, you must remember that the letter 'E' doesn't figure in the Tifinar alphabet. Here it has been replaced by the nearest phonetic sign, H. Replace it where it belongs in this word and you get——?”

“Antinea.”

“Antinea, precisely. We have here a Greek word reproduced in Tifinar. And now I think you'll agree with me that my discovery is of some interest.”

We did not get any further in our study that day. A terrible cry of anguish rang out.

We immediately rushed outside, where a strange sight awaited us.

Although the sky was now quite clear, the yellow, foaming torrent was still roaring down the *wady* and showed no sign of abating. In midstream a curious object, greyish and soft bobbing on the surface was driving desperately down the current. But what put the finishing−touch to our astonishment was to see Bou−Djema running along the

debris of the fallen rocks as if in pursuit of the floating object. Bou–Djema, usually so calm, now seemed to have gone completely mad.

Suddenly I seized Morhange's arm. The grey object was coming to life. A long neck was stretched out appealingly, followed by the heartrending cry of a frenzied, maddened animal.

"The clumsy fool!" I cried. "He's let one of the camels escape and the stream is carrying it away."

"You're wrong," said Morhange. "All our camels are in the cave. The one Bou–Djema is running after is not ours. And the cry of anguish we heard was not Bou–Djema's. Bou–Djema is a brave Chaamba with only one idea in his head at the moment: to salvage this floating camel for his own profit."

"Who was it, then?"

"Let's go and see," said my companion. "Come along upstream and let's leave our guide to dash away in the opposite direction."

And, without waiting for my reply, he had already started up the rocky bank which the recent disturbances had made more difficult than ever.

At this moment, it may be said, Morhange went out to meet his destiny."

I followed him. We had the greatest difficulty in making two or three hundred yards. At last we saw at our feet a little splashing creek, where the stream was beginning to ebb.

"Look!" said Morhange.

A black bundle was floating on the waters of the creek.

When we reached the edge we saw it was the body of a man dressed in the long dark–blue robe of the Tuaregs.

"Give me a hand," said Morhange; "and get a grip of the rock with the other."

He was strong——very strong. In an instant he had got the body on the bank as if it had been a toy.

"He's still alive," he said with satisfaction. "Now we must get him to the grotto. This is no place for applying artificial respiration."

He lifted the body in his powerful arms.

"It's astonishing how light he is for a man of his height."

By the time we had made our way back to the grotto the Tarki's clothes were practically dry. But the colours had run out of them, and it was an indigo man that Morhange was bringing back to life.

When I had given him a dram of rum he opened his eyes, started in astonishment at seeing us, then, closing them again, murmured in Arabic and in a scarcely intelligible voice this sentence, which we were to understand some days later:

"*Can I have reached the end of my mission?"*

"What mission can he mean?" I said.

"Let him finish coming round," Morhange replied. "See, open a tin of meat. With fellows of this type one needn't take the precautions necessary for drowned Europeans."

It was indeed a veritable giant we had saved. His face, though very thin, was regular, almost handsome. His complexion was clear, his beard thin. His white hair showed a man of about sixty..

When I had put a box' of corned beef in front of him a flash of voracious joy passed across his eyes. This box contained a generous meal for four hearty appetites. He emptied it in the twinkling of an eye. "There," said Morhange, "that's a useful appetite! Now we can ask our questions with an easy conscience."

The Tarki had already adjusted on his head and face the blue ritual veil. He must indeed have been famished not to have seen to this essential formality earlier. Now we could only see his eyes watching us with a glow which grew more and more sinister.

"French officers," he muttered at last.

And, taking Morhange's hand, he placed it against his chest and then put it to his lips.

Suddenly a look of anxiety came into his eyes.

"Where's my camel?" he asked.

I explained to him that our guide was trying to save the animal. He, in his turn, told us how it had stumbled and rolled down into the torrent. He had been pulled in after it in trying to hold it back. He had dashed his head against a rock. He had shouted. Then he could remember nothing more.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Eg−Anteouen."

"What tribe do you belong to?"

"The Kel−Tahats."

"Kel——

"The Kel−Tahats are the serfs of the Rhelas, the great nobles of the Hoggar?"

"Yes," he replied, looking at me askance. It looked as though he didn't like these close questions about the Hoggar.

"The Kel−Tahats, if I'm not mistaken, live on the south−west side of the Atakor."[1]

"I was going through Tit to In−Salah," he said.

"What were you going to do at In−Salah?"

He was on the point of answering. But suddenly we saw him tremble. His eyes were fixed on something in the cave. We followed his look. It was the inscription which an hour before had so pleased Morhange.

"You know that?" Morhange asked with sudden curiosity.

The Tarki did not utter a word, but there was a strange light in his eyes.

"You know that?" Morhange insisted.

And he added:

"Antinea?"

"Antinea," the man repeated after him.

And he was silent.

"Answer the captain, will you!" I cried, feeling a strange anger coming over me.

The Tarki looked at me. I thought he was going to speak But his eyes suddenly hardened. I felt that his features were stiffening under the shining veil.

Morhange and I turned round.

At the door of the cave, panting, discomfited, distressed by an hour of fruitless running, Bou−Djema had just appeared.

[1] Another name, in the *Temahaq* language, for the Note by M. Leroux.

CHAPTER VI. THE INCONVENIENT RESULTS OF EATING LETTUCE

WHEN Eg−Anteouen and Bou−Djema found themselves face to face I thought I saw both the Tarki and the Chaamba tremble, though both at once controlled themselves. It was, I repeat, simply a fleeting impression. Nevertheless it made me decide to question both my guide and our new companion a little more closely when we were alone.

This beginning of the day had tired us considerably. We therefore decided to end it there, and spend the night in the grotto so as to get a complete rest.

Next morning, while I was looking up our route on the map, Morhange came up. I noticed he looked embarrassed.

“We shall be at Shikh−Salah in three days,” I told him. “Perhaps even to−morrow night, provided the camels go well.”

“We shall perhaps separate before then,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“Yes, I have modified my route slightly. I've given up the idea of going direct to Timissao. *I* should like first to push a little way into the Hoggar group.”

I frowned.

“What is this new idea?”

At the same time I looked at Eg−Anteouen, whom I had seen talking with Morhange the previous night and a few minutes before. He was placidly mending one of his sandals with the waxed thread Bou−Djema had given him. He didn't look up.

“It's this way,” Morhange explained, more and more ill at ease. “This man tells me there are more inscriptions like these in some caves in the western Hoggar. These caves are quite near his road home. He has to go *via* Tit. Now from Tit to Timissao, *via* Silet, is scarcely two hundred miles. It's a quasi−classical journey,[1] only half as far as I should have had to go alone from Shikh−Salah to Timissao, after we had separated. You see, that's also partly the reason which urges me to . . .”

“Partly? Very much partly,” I answered. “But have you quite decided?”

“Yes,” he answered.

“When do you think of leaving me?”

“It will be better to do so to−day. The road by which Eg−Anteouen intends to enter the Hoggar crosses this one about four leagues from here.

The route and halting−places between Tit and Timissao were, in fact, traced in 1888 by Captain Bissuel. *The Western Tuaregs,* routes I and 10.—— Note by M. Leroux.

And, by the way, I have a small favour to ask you.”

“By all means.”

“As my Tarki companion has lost his camel I should like to ask you to let me have one of the two baggage camels.”

“Your baggage camel belongs to you just as much as your saddle camel,” I answered coldly.

For a few moments we didn't speak. Morhange maintained an embarrassed silence. I was examining the map.

More or less everywhere, but especially to the south, the unexplored regions of the Hoggar left numerous, too numerous, blank spaces in the dark colouring of the explored mountains.

At last I said:

“You give me your word that you'll go back to Timissao *via* Tit and Silet after you've seen these famous grottoes?”

He looked at me, perplexed.

“Why do you ask me this?”

“Because if you give me your word, and provided, of course, that my company is not disagreeable to you, I'll come with you. I am now only a hundred and fifty miles away. I shall reach Shikh−Salah from the south instead of the west, that's all.”

Morhange looked at me, obviously touched.

“Why should you do that?” he murmured. “My dear fellow ”——it was the first time I had addressed Morhange in these words——” my dear fellow, I possess a sense which becomes strangely acute in the desert——the sense of danger. I gave you a slight example of it yesterday morning just before the storm. With all your knowledge, you don't appear to me to realise exactly what the Hoggar is, nor what you may meet with there. In view of this I had just as soon not let you run certain risks alone.”

"I have a guide,” he said, with charming *naivete.*

Still squatting on his heels, Eg−Anteouen went on mending his sandal.

I went towards him.

“You heard what I've just told the captain?”

“Yes,” answered the Tarki calmly. “I'm going with him. We shall part company with you at Tit, where you will see to it that we arrive without trouble. Where's the place to which you propose to take the captain?”

“I didn't propose it, he asked me to,” the Tarki said coldly. “The grottoes where these inscriptions are, are three days' march south into the mountain. The first part of the road is pretty rough, but afterwards it makes a bend and you get to Timissao without any difficulty. There are good wells at which the Taitoq Tuaregs, who are friendly to the French, water their camels.”

“And you know the road well?” He shrugged his shoulders. His eyes smiled scornfully.

“I have done the journey twenty times,” he said. “Well, then, let's make a start.”

For two hours we marched forward. I didn't exchange a word with Morhange. I had a clear intuition of the folly of rashly risking our lives like this in the least known and most dangerous region of the Sahara. All the blows of the last twenty years aimed at stemming the French advance have come from this formidable Hoggar But what was to be done? It was entirely of my own free will that I had supported this mad enterprise. It was too late to turn back. What was the good of spoiling my generous suggestion by keeping up an appearance of bad−temper? And besides, I had to admit to my self that this new turn our journey had taken was by no means displeasing to me. From that moment I felt that we were travelling towards something unheard of, some tremendous adventure. Not for nothing is one for months and years the guest of the desert. Sooner or later it gets hold of you, overwhelms the good officer, the timorous official —— overthrows his sense of responsibility. What is there behind these mysterious rocks, beyond these sandy solitudes which have baffled the greatest probers of mystery? . . . We're off, I tell you, we're off!

“Are you really quite sure that this inscription is of sufficient interest to justify what we're about to attempt?” I asked Morhange.

My companion started with pleasure. I understood the fear he had felt since our departure that I didn't really want to go with him. From the moment I gave him the opportunity of convincing himself his scruples vanished and his triumph seemed certain.

"Never!” he replied, in a voice he intended to be deliberate but through which his enthusiasm penetrated. “A Greek inscription has never been discovered in so low a latitude. The extreme points here they have been mentioned are the southern parts of Algeria and Cyrenaica. But in the Hog−ear! Just think of it! It's true that it is in Tifinar characters. But this peculiarity doesn't lessen the interest of the thing: it increases it.”

"What, in your opinion, does the word mean?”

"Antinea cannot be anything but a proper name,” said Morhange. “To whom does it apply? I confess I don't know, and my reason for going south at the present moment, and dragging you with me, is that I am counting on supplementing my information. Its etymology? There is not one, there are thirty possible derivations. Remember that the Tifinar alphabet by no means coincides with the Greek, which multiplies the possibilities. Would you like

me to suggest a few?"

"I was going to ask you to."

"Very well, there is, first, *(Greek)* and *(Greek)* ' *The woman placed before the vessel,'* an explanation which would have pleased Gaffarel and my revered friend Berlioux. That would apply well enough to the carved figure in the bows of a ship. (There's a technical term I couldn't remember now if I was threatened with the bastinado.[1])

[1] It may be recalled here that *Figure−heads* is the title of a *very* remarkable collection of verse by Mme. Delarue−Mardrua.—— Note by M. Leroux.

"Then comes *(Greek),* which would have to be derived from *(Greek)* and *(Greek)*, '*She who stands before* the *(Greek),* the *(Greek)* of the temple, '*The woman before the sanctuary,'* the priestess, therefore. An interpretation that would delight Girard and Kenan from every point of view.

"Then we have *(Greek),* from *(Greek)* and *(Greek),* new, which may have two meanings: either '*She who is the contrary of young,'* that is to say, *old;* or, '*She who is opposed to newness,'* or *the enemy of youth.*

"There's still another meaning of *(Greek)*, *in exchange for,* which complicates the other possibilities; there are also four meanings of the verb *(Greek),* which may mean *to go, to thread or weave, to heap up.* There are others besides. . . . And remember that, on this otherwise convenient camel's hump, I'm not in a position to consult either Estienne's large dictionary or the lexicons of Passow, Pape or Liddel and Scott. This, my dear friend, is simply to show you how much the science of epigraphy is continually subject to the discovery of a new text contradicting the earlier one, when it is not at the mercy of epigraphists' whims and their particular conception of the universe."[1]

"I'm rather inclined to agree," I said. "But you will sympathise with my astonishment that, being so sceptical of the object you have in view,

[1] In this enumeration, in places imaginative, Captain Morhange seems to have forgotten the etymology *(Greek),* a Doric form of *(Greek)* from *(Greek),* flower, which would mean *in flower.* ——Note by M. Leroux.

You should not hesitate to run what may be considerable risks.

Morhange smiled feebly.

"I don't interpret, my friend, *I* connect. From what I bring him Dom Granger has the necessary scholarship to reach conclusions that are beyond my shallow learning. I've been amusing myself a little I'm sorry."

At this moment the girth of one of the baggage camels, doubtless not pulled tight enough, slipped round.' Part of the load toppled over and fell on the ground.

Eg−Anteouen had already got down from his camel and was helping Bou−Djema to repair the damage .

When they had finished I brought my camel alongside Bou−Djema's.

"We shall have to tighten up all the camel−girths at the next halt. They have to go through mountainous country."

The guide looked at me in astonishment. Up to now I had not thought it necessary to inform him of our new plans. But I imagined that Eg−Anteouen would have told him.

"The road to Shikh−Salah across the white plain is not mountainous, sir,' said the Chaamba.

"We've finished with the road across the white plain. We're going to turn south, through the he stammered.

"Through the Hoggar!"

"But——"

"But what?"

"I don't know the way."

"Eg−Anteouen will guide us."

"Eg−Anteouen!"

I looked at Bou−Djema from whom this muffled cry had come. His eyes turned upon the Tarki a look of mingled stupor and fear.

Eg−Anteouen's camel was marching some ten yards in front side by side with Morhange. The two men were

talking. I imagined Morhange would be talking to Eg−Anteouen about the famous inscriptions. But we were not too far behind for them to hear what we were saying.

Once more I looked at my guide. I saw the colour had gone from his face.

“What is it, Bou−Djema, what's the matter?” I asked in a whisper.

“Not here, sir, not here,” he muttered.

His teeth were chattering. He added, as though in one breath:

“Not here. This evening at sunset at the halting−place, when he is turning towards the east to pray. Then call me to you. I will tell you. . . . But not here. He is talking, but he is listening at the same time. Go on. Catch up the captain.”

“Here's another mystery,” I muttered, pressing my foot on the camel's neck to overtake Morhange.

It was about five o'clock in the afternoon when Eg−Anteouen, who was in front, halted.

“It is here,” he said, dismounting.

The place was sinister and beautiful. To our left a fantastic wall of granite traced its grey outline against the crimson sky. This wall was lit from top to bottom by a winding corridor about a thousand feet high, but scarcely wide enough for three camels to enter abreast.

“Here it is,” the Tarki repeated.

To the west, straight before us, the track we had just left lay unrolled like a pale ribbon in the light of the setting sun. The white plain, the Shikh−Salah road, the sure halts, the known wells . . . And, in the opposite direction, this black wall against the mauve sky, this dark corridor.

I looked at Morhange.

“Let's pull up,” he said simply. “Eg−Anteouen advises us to renew our water supply.”

With one accord we decided to spend the night there before entering the mountain.

There was a well in a dark basin of rocks into which a beautiful little cascade fell; a few bushes and plants.

The hobbled camels had already begun to graze.

Bou−Djema was laying our camp table with tin cups and plates on a large slab of rock. A tin of meat he had opened was placed beside a dish of lettuce which he had gathered on the moist banks of the spring. The jerky movements with which he placed these various objects on the rock showed me how greatly he was upset.

Once, when he leant towards me to pass me a plate, he indicated with a gesture the dark, uncanny corridor into which we were to plunge.

“Blad−el−Khouf!” he murmured.

“What's he say?” asked Morhange, who had noticed the gesture.

“Blad−el−Khouf. That's the *Land of Fear*. That's what the Arabs call the Hoggar.”

Bou−Djema had sat down apart, leaving us to our dinner. Squatting on his haunches, he began to eat some lettuce which he had kept for himself.

Eg−Anteouen never moved.

Suddenly the Tarki got up. In the west the sun was now no more than a glowing ember. We saw Eg−Anteouen go towards the spring, stretch his blue burnous on the ground, kneel down.

“I didn't think the Tuaregs were so devout towards the Mussulman tradition,” Morhange said.

“Nor I,” I said thoughtfully.

But I had no time for astonishment. I had other things to do.

“Bou−Djema!” I called.

At the same time I watched Eg−Anteouen. Absorbed in his prayers, turned to the east, he did not appear to pay any attention to me. He was prostrating himself when I called again, louder:

“Bou−Djema, come with me to my camel; there's something I want out of the saddle−bag.”

Still kneeling, Eg−Anteouen murmured his prayer, slowly and deliberately.

Bou−Djema hadn't budged.

Suddenly I was answered by a stifled groan.

Morhange and I immediately jumped to our feet and ran to the guide. Eg−Anteouen reached him at the same time.

The Chaamba was moaning in Morhange's arms, his eyes closed, his feet and hands already cold. I had caught hold of one of his hands. Each of us was doing his best to guess, to understand.

Suddenly Eg−Anteouen leapt up. He had caught sight of the dented tin plate which the Arab had been holding a minute before between his knees and which was now lying on the ground upside down.

He seized hold of it, picked up and examined quickly one by one the few lettuce−leaves that remained and uttered a hoarse ejaculation.

"That's right," murmured Morhange; "now I suppose it's his turn to go mad."

Watching Eg−Anteouen, I saw him dart, without a word, to the stone on which our table was laid; a second later he was back beside us, holding the dish of lettuce we had not yet touched.

Then he took a green, luscious leaf, broad and pale, from Bou−Djema's plate and brought it to us with the other leaf he had just taken from our dish.

"*Afahlehle,*" he said simply.

A shudder passed through me and through Morhange—— this, then, was the Afahlehle, the *falestez* of the Sahara Arabs, the terrible plant which had killed part of the Flatters mission more quickly and more surely than the Tuareg weapons.

Eg−Anteouen was now standing upright. His tall figure showed a black silhouette against the sky, which had suddenly turned the palest lilac. He was watching us.

And, as we crowded round the wretched guide the Tarki repeated, shaking his head:

"*Afahlehle.*"

Bou−Djema died in the middle of the night without regaining consciousness.

CHAPTER VII. THE LAND OF FEAR

"IT'S STRANGE," SAID Morhange, "how our expedition, so uneventful since leaving Wargla, now tends to become full of incident."

He said this as he rose from kneeling a moment to pray by the grave which had cost us such effort to dig and where we had placed the body of the guide.

I don't believe in God. But if ever anything could make me believe in His power for good or evil, in light or darkness, it was the muttered prayer of this man.

For two days we made our way across an immense chaos of black rocks, in a country as desolate as the moon. Nothing but the sound of stones rolling from under the camels' feet and falling to the bottom of the precipices with the noise of bursting shells.

A strange march indeed. For the first few hours I tried to trace the road we were following with the help of the plane–table. But I soon lost the track, doubtless owing to an unevenness in the stride of the camels. Then I replaced the compass m the holster. Henceforward Eg–Anteouen was our master uncontrolled. We could only place ourselves in his hands.

He went first, followed by Morhange. I brought up the rear. The strangest specimens of eruptive rocks were constantly passing before my eyes, but *I* took no notice. I was no longer interested in these things. A new curiosity had taken possession of me. Morhange's madness had infected me. if my companion had come and said to me: "What we are doing is madness; let's go back to the beaten track; come," I should from now onwards have replied: "You are free to do as you like. I'm going on."

Towards evening on the second day we found ourselves at the foot of a black mountain, the rugged foothills of which stood out five thousand feet above our heads. It was an enormous dark bastion, battlemented like a feudal castle and silhouetted against the orange sky.

There was a well with a few trees, the first we had met since plunging into the Hoggar.

A group of men surrounded it. Their camels, hobbled, were searching out the scanty vegetation.

On seeing us the men closed up, uneasy and on the defensive.

Eg–Anteouen, turning to us, said:

"Eggali Tuaregs."

And he went towards them.

They were fine men, these Eggali. The tallest Tuaregs I have ever met. With unexpected readiness they went away from the well, leaving it to our use. Eg–Anteouen spoke a few words to them They looked at us with a curiosity in which there was no fear; even with respect.

Astonished at such discretion, I saw their chief refuse the few presents I had drawn from my saddle–bag. He seemed to suspect even my

look.

When they had gone I expressed to Eg–Anteouen my astonishment at this reserve, for which my previous experience of the inhabitants of the Sahara had by no means prepared me.

"They spoke to you with respect, with fear even," I said. "And yet the Eggalis are a noble tribe. And the Kel–Tahats, to whom you tell me you belong, are a serf tribe."

A smile passed across Eg–Anteouen's dark eyes.

"It is true," he said.

"Well, then?"

"Then it is because I told them that you and the captain are going to the *Mountain of the Genii."*

He pointed to the black mountain.

"They were afraid. All the Tuaregs of the Hoggar are afraid of the *Mountain of the Genii.* You saw how they made off at the mere sound of the name?"

"So you're taking us to the *Mountain of the Genii?"* asked Morhange.

"Yes," the Tarki replied. "That is where the inscriptions I told you of are to be found."

"You didn't mention this detail."

"Why should I?" The Tuaregs are afraid of the Ilhinen, the genii with the horned foreheads and a tail, who are clothed in hair and kill the cattle and make men die of catalepsy."

But I know that the Roumis are not afraid of them; they even make fun of the Tuaregs' fears on this subject.

"And you," I said, "you're a Tarki and you don't fear the *Ilhinen?"*

Eg–Anteouen showed me a small red leather bag hanging by a white chaplet from his neck.

"I have my amulet, blessed by the venerable Sidi–Moussa," he answered gravely. "And then I am with you. You who saved my life. You wished to see the inscriptions. Allah's will be done."

"All this is beginning to get very strange," muttered Morhange, who had come up to me.

"We must exaggerate nothing," I replied. "You remember as well as I do the passage where Barth relates his excursion to *Idinen,* which is the *Mountain of the Genii* of the Azdjer Tuaregs. The place had such a bad reputation that no Tarki would go with him. He came back, however."

"He came back, without a doubt," my friend replied, "but he began by losing his way. Without water or food, he almost died of hunger and thirst, and had to open a vein and drink his own blood. Such a prospect is not exactly attractive."

I shrugged my shoulders; after all, it wasn't my fault that we were there.

Morhange understood my gesture and felt called upon to apologise.

"Besides," he began again, with rather forced gaiety. "it would be interesting to make the acquaintance of these *genii* and confirm the statements of Pomponius Mela, who knew them and, as a matter of fact, locates them in the Tuareg mountains. He called them Aegipans, Blemyans, Gamphasantes, Satyrs. . . . 'The Gamphasantes,' he says, 'are naked; the Blemyens have no head, their face being situated in their chest; the Satyrs have nothing human about them except the face; the Aegipans are part fish, part goat.' Satyrs, Aegipans . . . really, isn't it strange to hear these names applied to barbarian *genii* in this place? Believe me, we're on a strange trail; I'm sure that Antinea will prove to be the key to some very original discoveries."

"Hush," I said, my finger to my lips; "listen."

In the evening, which was coming on with great strides, strange noises began to be audible all round us. A sort of crashing sound, followed by long–drawn, rending shrieks, which were re–echoed in the neighbouring ravines until lost in the distance. It seemed as though the whole black mountain had suddenly begun to wail.

We looked at Eg–Anteouen. He went on smoking, without taking the least notice.

"The *Ilhinen* are awaking." he said simply.

Morhange was listening and did not say a word. Like me, he understood: the overheated rocks, the cracking of the stone, a whole series of physical phenomena, recollections of the singing statue of Memnon. ... But this unexpected concert reacted none the less on our strained nerves.

Poor Bou–Djema's last sentence comes back to my mind:

"The Land of Fear."

And Morhange repeated, too:

"The Land of Fear."

The strange concert came to an end when the first stars appeared in the sky. With infinite emotion we watched the tiny faintly azure flames light up one after another. At this tragic moment they were in touch with us——isolated, condemned, lost, they formed a bond between us and our brothers in more northern latitudes, who at that hour would be rushing in delirious frenzy to their pleasures in the towns, where the white glare of the electric lamps would suddenly banish the darkness.

"*Chet–Ahadh essa hetisenet:*

Mateseredjre d–Erredjeaot,

Mateseksek d–Essekaot,

Matelahrlahr d' Ellerhaot,

Ettas djenen, barad tit–ennit abatet."

It was the slow and guttural voice of Eg–Anteouen. It rang out with a sad and solemn majesty in the silence, now complete.

I touched the Tarki's arm. With a nod he showed me a constellation twinkling in the firmament.

"The Pleiades," I muttered to Morhange, pointing to the seven pale stars, while Eg–Anteouen, in the same monotonous voice, took up again his dismal song:

"The daughters of the night are seven:
Mateseredjre and Erredjeaot,
Mateseksek and Essekaot,
Matelahrlahr and Ellerhaot,
The seventh is a boy whose eye has flown away."

A sudden uneasiness had come over me. I seized the Tarki's arm when, for the third time, he began to sing his refrain.

"When shall we get to the grotto with the inscriptions?" I asked him brutally.

He looked at me and answered with his habitual calm:

"We are there."

"We are there? Why don't you show them to us? What are you waiting for?"

"For you to ask me," he replied, not without a touch of impertinence.

Morhange had jumped to his feet.

"The grotto, the grotto is there?"

"It is there," Eg−Anteouen repeated deliberately, rising to his feet.

"Take us to the grotto."

"Morhange," I said, suddenly uneasy, "the night is falling. We shall see nothing. And it may be a long way from here."

"It is scarcely a hundred yards," replied Eg−Anteouen; "the grotto is full of dried grass. We will set fire to it and the captain will see as clear as in daylight."

"Come!" my companion repeated.

"What about the camels?" I ventured once more.

"They're hobbled," said Eg−Anteouen, "and we shan't be away long."

He was already making his way toward the black mountain. Morhange followed, trembling with excitement; I followed too, seized from this moment, with deep uneasiness. My temples throbbed. "I'm not afraid," I repeated to myself; "I swear I'm not afraid."

No, it was certainly not fear. And yet, what a strange giddiness! A mist swam before my eyes My ears buzzed. I could hear Eg−Anteouen's voice again, but this time multiplied, immense and yet muffled, muffled:

"*The daughters of the night are seven . . .*"

And it seemed to me that the voices of the mountain took up the echo, repeating into the infinite distance the sinister refrain:

"*The seventh is a boy whose eye has flown away."*

"It is here," said the Tarki.

A black hole opened into the wall. Eg−Anteouen had struck his tinder. He set fire to a heap of grass near the opening. At first we could see nothing. The smoke blinded us.

Eg−Anteouen had remained at the side of the opening. He sat down, and, calmer than ever, began to draw his pipe from the folds of his long, baggy, grey trousers.

A flickering light now came from the glowing embers of the grass. I caught a glimpse of Morhange. He looked extraordinarily pale. Leaning with both hands against the wall, he was at work deciphering a conglomeration of signs which I could scarcely see.

Nevertheless I thought his hands were trembling.

"The devil! Could he be as far gone as I?"

I asked myself, finding it increasingly difficult to co−ordinate two ideas.

I heard him shout violently, as I thought, to Eg−Anteouen:

"Stand on one side! Let's have some air! What a smoke!"

He was deciphering, still deciphering.

Suddenly I heard him again, but indistinctly. It seemed as though the very sounds were clogged by the smoke.

"Antinea. . . . At last. . . . Antinea. . . . But not cut in the rock . . . traced in ochre . . . and not ten years ago, perhaps five. . . . Ah!"

He had leant his head in his hands. He uttered a great cry.

"It's a mystery, a tragic mystery!"

I laughed mischievously:

“Come, come, don't get angry!”

He had seized my arm and was shaking me. I saw his eyes, dilated with fear and astonishment.

“Are you mad?” he yelled, full in my face.

“Don't shout so loud,” I answered, with a short laugh.

He looked at me again, sat down exhausted on a stone in front of me. At the mouth of the grotto Eg−Anteouen was still smoking placidly. We could see the red lid of his pipe glowing in the darkness.

“Mad! Mad!” repeated Morhange, whose voice appeared to be choking.

Suddenly he leant over the brazier from which the last flames flickered higher and clearer. He seized some grass not yet consumed. I saw him

examine it attentively, then throw it in the fire with a loud, harsh laugh.

“Ah, ah! She's very kind!”

He reeled towards Eg−Anteouen and pointed to the fire.

“Hemp, eh! *Hashish, hashish!* Ha, ha! She's very kind.”

“She's very kind,” he repeated, bursting into laughter.

“Eg−Anteouen approved with a discreet smile. The dying fire lit up his veiled face and shone in his dark, terrible eyes.

He hesitated a second, then, all at once, Morhange seized the Tarki's arm.

“I want to smoke too,” he said; “give me a pipe.”

The imperturbable phantom offered my companion what he asked for.

“Ha, ha! A European pipe! . . . “

“A European pipe,” I repeated, more and more hilarious. “With an initial, 'M.' ... It might have been made for you: 'M'——Morhange.”

“Captain Masson,” Eg−Anteouen corrected me calmly.

“Captain Masson!” Morhange and I repeated.

We began to laugh again.

“Ha! ha! ha! Captain Masson. . . . Colonel Flatters ... the Grama well. They killed him for the sake of his pipe, this pipe. It was Cegheir−ben−Sheikh who killed Captain Masson.”

“It was indeed Cegheir−ben−Sheikh,” replied the Tarki with the same unshakable placidity.

“Captain Masson had left the convoy with Colonel Flatters to reconnoitre the wells,” said Morhange, shaking with laughter.

“Then the Tuaregs attacked them,” I went on, roaring louder than ever.

“A Hoggar Tarki seized Captain Masson's bridle,” said Morhange.

“Cegheir−ben−Sheikh held Colonel Flatter's horse,” said Eg−Anteouen.

“The colonel puts his foot in the stirrup and is struck down by Cegheir−ben−Sheikh's sword,” I said.

“Captain Masson draws his revolver and fires at Cegheir−ben−Sheikh, cutting off three fingers of his left hand,” said Morhange.

“But,” added Eg−Anteouen, unmoved, “Cegheir−ben−Sheikh splits Captain Masson's skull with his sword. ...”

As he says this he utters a silent little laugh of satisfaction. The dying flame lights him up. We see the black shining stem of his pipe. He's holding it in his left hand. This hand has only one, two fingers. Strange I have never noticed this detail.

Morhange has noticed it too, for he goes on, shrieking with laughter:

“Then, after splitting his skull, you robbed him, took his pipe. Bravo, Cegheir−ben−Sheikh!”

Cegheir−ben−Sheikh makes no reply. But his secret satisfaction can be felt. He is still smoking. I can only make out his features indistinctly. The flames grow pale, the fire is dead. I have never laughed as I did that night. Nor, I'm sure, has Morhange. It will perhaps make him forget the cloister. And all because Cegheir−ben−Sheikh stole Captain Masson's pipe. . . . Beware of religious vocations.

And still this cursed song: *The seventh is a boy whose eye has flown away.* You can't imagine any words more idiotic. Ah! very funny, certainly. Now there are four of us in this cave. Four, did I say? I mean five, six, seven, eight. . . . Come on, don't mind us, my friends. Stop! there are no more. ... At last I shall know what the spirits here are like, the Gamphasantes, the Blemyens. . . . Morhange says the Blenyens' faces are in the middle of their

chests. This one who is seizing me in his arms is certainly not a Blemyen. Now he's taking me outside. And Morhange. I hope they won't forget Morhange. . . .

They haven't forgotten him: I see him, hoisted on a camel ahead of the one to which I am tied. They did well to tie me, for otherwise I should fall off, that's certain. These genii are not bad devils. But what a long way! I want to lie down. To sleep! Just now we were certainly going through a long passage, then we got into the open air. Now we are back in an interminable passage, stifling. Here are the stars again. . . . How much longer is this absurd ride going to last?

Hello, lights. . . . Stars, perhaps? No, I'm right, lights. On my word it's a staircase, cut out of the rock, if you like, but nevertheless a staircase. How can the camels ... But it isn't a camel carrying me now, it's a man. A man dressed all in white not a Gamphasante, not a Blemyen. That's one for Morhange, with his historical induction all wrong, I say, all wrong. Good old Morhange! We'll hope his Gamphasante doesn't drop him on this endless staircase. Something shines on the ceiling. Yes, it's a lamp——a copper lamp like those in Barbouchry's at Tunis. Good, now we can see nothing again. But what do I care? I'm lying down; now I can get some sleep. What an idiotic day! ... Ah, gentlemen, I assure you you needn't, tie me up, I've no wish to get down on the boulevards.

Darkness once more. Footsteps vanishing into the distance. Silence.

Only for a moment. Someone is talking at our side. What are they saying? . . . No, impossible! This metallic sound, this voice. Do you know what this voice is shouting, shouting as though it always shouts like this? Well, it is shouting:

“Put down your stakes, gentlemen, put down your stakes! There's ten thousand louis in the bank. Your stakes, gentlemen!”

Good God! Am I or am I not in the Hoggar?

CHAPTER VIII. THE AWAKENING IN THE HOGGAR

WHEN I OPENED my eyes it was broad daylight. My first thought was for Morhange. I didn't see him, but I heard him, beside me, uttering little exclamations of astonishment.

I called him. He ran to me.

“They haven't bound you?” I asked him.

“Oh yes, they did. But badly; I managed to get free.”

“You might have loosed me too,” I said angrily.

“What was the good? I should only have woken you up. And I thought you would call me as soon as you did wake. There! Now you're all right.”

I reeled as I stood up.

Morhange smiled.

“We couldn't have been in a more pitiable state if we'd spent the whole night smoking and drinking,” he said. “Never mind, this Eg–Anteouen's a first–class scoundrel with his hashish.”

“Cegheir–ben–Sheikh,” I corrected him. I passed my hand over my forehead.

“Where are we?”

“*My* dear fellow,” Morhange replied, “since I woke up from this amazing nightmare that leads from the smoke–laden grotto to the lamp–lit staircase of the Arabian Nights, I pass from one surprise to another, mystery follows on mystery. But just have a look round.”

I rubbed my eyes and looked. I caught hold of my companion's hand.

“Morhange,” I pleaded, “tell me we are still dreaming.”

We were in a circular hall, some fifty feet in diameter, of almost equal height all over, lit by an immense bay window opening on to a sky of vivid blue.

Swallows were flitting to and fro with sharp little cries of joy.

The floor, the concave walls and the ceiling were of a kind of veneered marble like porphyry, covered with plates of some strange metal, paler than gold, richer than silver, now dimmed by the morning mist which poured in through the window I have mentioned.

I tottered towards this window, attracted by the freshness of the breeze, by the light which scatters dreams, and I leant my elbows on the balustrade. I couldn't repress a cry of admiration.

I found myself on *a* kind of balcony, overhanging space and cut in the very flank of the mountain. Overhead, the azure; beneath, completely girded by a continuous and inviolate circle of mountain peaks, a veritable paradise appeared before my eyes some fifty yards below. There stretched a garden.

The palms gently swayed their great fronds. At their feet lay the tangle *of* little shrubs which they shelter in the oases——almonds lemons, oranges, and others——many others. I could not yet distinguish their perfume. ... a broad, blue stream, fed by a cascade, ended in a delightful lake which my height made wonderfully transparent. Great birds were circling in this well of verdure; on the lake I saw a splash of scarlet, a flamingo.

As for the mountains which raised their lofty peaks on every side, they were completely covered with snow.

The blue stream, the green palms, the golden fruit, and up above this miraculous snow——–all this made up something so pure, so beautiful in the unsubstantial fluidity of the air, that my poor human strength could no longer bear the sight. I leant my forehead on the balustrade itself wadded with this divine snow and began to cry like a child.

Morhange, too, behaved like a child. But as he had awakened before me he had doubtless had time to familiarise himself with all these details making up the fantastic whole that overwhelmed me.

Placing his hand on my shoulder, he drew me gently back into the room.

“You've seen nothing yet,” he said. “Look, look!”

“Morhange! Morhange!”

"What is it, my dear fellow, what do you want me to do? Look!"

I Had just noticed that the strange hall was furnished in European style. It is true there were here and there round Tuareg cushions of leather with violently contrasting stripes, Gafsa rugs, Kafrouan carets, Caramani door−curtains which at that moment, I should have shuddered to raise. But a half−open panel in the wall showed me a library crowded with books. A whole series of photographs, representing the *chefs−d'oeuvre* of ancient art hung from the walls. Finally there was a table hidden under an unimaginable heap of papers, pamphlets, books. I nearly collapsed when I saw a copy—— a recent copy—— of *La Revue Archeologique.*

I looked at Morhange. He returned my look, and all at once we were convulsed with laughter, mad laughter which lasted a full minute.

"I don't know," Morhange managed at last to say, "whether we shall one day regret our little expedition into the Hoggar. Meanwhile confess that it seems pregnant with surprises. This inimitable guide who sends us to sleep with the sole object of removing us from the inconveniences of caravan life and gives me the opportunity of tasting the much−vaunted ecstasies of hashish; this phantom night−ride; and, to finish up with, this Noureddin's Grotto which would have been assigned by the Ecole Normale to the Athenian Bersot. Upon my word, it's enough to unhinge the most serious mind."

"But, seriously, what do you think of it all?" "What do I think of it, my poor friend? Exactly what you must think of it yourself, I understand nothing, nothing, nothing. What you politely call my erudition is all adrift. And what else can you expect? This troglodytism frightens me. Pliny certainly speaks of natives living in caves seven days' march south−west of the country of the Amantes, twelve days west of the great Syrte. Herodotus, too, says that the Garamantes hunted in their chariots the Ethiopian troglodytes. But after all, we are in the Hoggar, in the heart of the Tarki country, and we are told by the best authors that the Tuaregs never live in a cave. Duveyrier is definite on this point. And what, I ask you, is this cavern, furnished like a study with reproductions of Venus de Medici and the Laurocton Apollo on the walls? Mad! I tell you it's enough to drive one mad."

And, dropping on a divan, Morhange began to laugh louder than ever.

"Look," I said; "Latin."

I had picked up some of the scattered pages on the work−table in the centre of the room. Morhange took them from me and scanned them eagerly. His face expressed unbounded astonishment.

"Worse and worse, my dear fellow! Someone here is writing a dissertation on the Islands of the Gorgons: *De Gorgonum insulis,* with the help of texts. According to him, Medusa was a Libyan savage inhabiting the neighbourhood of Lake Triton, our present Chott Melhrir, where Perseus . . . ah!"

Morhange's voice was strangled in his throat.

At the same moment a sharp shrill voice echoed through the vast hall.

"Kindly leave my papers alone, sir, I beg of you." I turned towards the newcomer.

One of the Caramani curtains had been thrust aside to make way for a most unexpected person. Resigned as we were to grotesque happenings, this apparition surpassed in unexpectedness anything that can possibly be conceived.

In the doorway stood a small, bald−headed man, with a yellow, pointed face, half hidden by an enormous pair of green spectacles and a little pepper−and−salt beard. Little linen could be seen, but an impressive cherry−coloured cravat covered his chest. White trousers of the kind known as *fiottard.* The only Oriental detail about his costume was a pair of red leather slippers.

He wore, not without ostentation, the rosette of an *Officier de l'instruction Publique.*

He picked up the papers, which in his astonishment Morhange had dropped, counted them, rearranged them, and with an angry glance at us, rang a copper bell.

The curtain was raised again. A gigantic White Tarki came in. I thought I recognised in him one of the genii of the cave.[1]

l The negro slaves of the Tuaregs are generally called White Tuaregs. While the nobles are dressed in blue cottons, they are dressed in white: hence the name White Tuaregs. *Vide Duv*eyrier, *Les Touaregs du Nord,* p. 292.——Note by M. Leroux.

"Ferradji," said the little Officer of Instruction angrily, "why have these gentlemen been shown into the library?"

The Tarki bowed respectfully.

“Cegheir–ben–Sheikh returned sooner than was expected, Sidi,” he replied, “and the embalmers had not finished their work last night. They were brought here to wait,” he went on, pointing to us.

“Very well, you can go,” said the little man fiercely.

Ferradji walked backwards to the door. There he stopped and said:

“I am to remind you, Sidi, that lunch is ready.”

“Very well, go.”

And the little man with the green spectacles, sitting down at the desk, began to scribble feverishly.

At this moment I was seized, I don't know why, with a frenzy of exasperation. I strode up to him.

“Sir,” I said, “my companion and I know neither where we are nor who you are. We only see that you're a Frenchman, since you wear one of the esteemed honorary distinctions of our country. Doubtless you have already observed the same thing on your side,” I added, pointing to the narrow red ribbon I wore on my white tunic.

He looked at me with scornful surprise:

“Well, sir?”

“Well, sir, the negro who has just gone out mentioned a name. Cegheir–ben–Sheikh, the name of a brigand,. a bandit, one of the assassins of Colonel Flatters Do you know this, sir?”

The little man stared at me coldly and shrugged

“Certainly. But how do you think that concerns me?

“What?" I cried, beside myself. “But who, then are you?”

“Sir,” said the little old man, turning to Morhange with comic dignity, “I take you as witness to the extraordinary behaviour of your companion. This is my room, and I do not allow ...”

“You must excuse my friend, sir,” said Morhange, coming forward. “He's not a student like you. These young subalterns, you know, are hotheaded, and besides, you must know that we have both some reason for not being as calm as we might be.”

In my anger I was on the point of dissociating myself with Morhange's strangely humble remarks. But a glance was enough to convince me that his face now expressed at least as much irony as surprise.

“I am well aware that most officers are stupid,” grumbled the old man, “but that's no reason ...”

“I am only an officer myself, sir,” retorted Morhange, with increasing humility, “and, if I have ever suffered from the intellectual inferiority of this profession I swear it was just now, while looking through——an indiscretion for which I ask pardon—— the scholarly pages you are devoting to the fascinating story of the Gorgons, according to Procles of Carthage, quoted by Pausanias.”

The features of the little old man were extended in comic astonishment. He wiped his spectacle hastily.

“What?” he cried at last.

“It is to be regretted in this connection” continued Morhange imperturbably, “that you are not in possession of the interesting treatise devoted to this burning question by Statius Sebosus which we only know through Pliny, and that...”

“You know Statius Sebosus?”

“And that my master Berlioux, the geographer ...”

“You know Berlioux! You were his pupil!” stammered the little old man with the ribbon, amazed.

“I have had that honour,” replied Morhange, this time very coolly.

“But then, sir, then you have heard, you are acquainted with the question, the problem of Atlantis?”

“As a matter of fact I have some acquaintance with the works of Lagneau, Ploix, and Arbois de Jubainville,” said Morhange, cool as ice.

“Oh, my God!” And the little man was quite shaken with emotion. “Sir, how glad I am. what excuses ...”

At the same moment the curtain was raised again. Ferradji reappeared.

“Sidi, they wish me to say that if you don't come, they are going to begin without you.”

"I'm coming, I'm coming, Ferradji, tell them we're coming. Oh, sir, if I could have foreseen . . . . But what an extraordinary thing, an officer who knows Procles of Carthage and Arbois de Jubainville. I repeat . . But allow me to introduce myself——Monsieur Etielle le Mesge, graduate of the University.”

"Captain Morhange," said my companion. I came forward in my turn. "Lieutenant de Saint–Avit. It is true that I am quite capable of confusing Arbois of Carthage and Procles de Jubainville. I shall try later to fill in these lucanae. For the moment I should like to know where we are——my companion and I—— whether we are free, or what occult power is detaining us. You seem, sir, to be sufficiently at home in this house to inform me on this point, which I am weak enough to consider of first importance."

M. Le Mesge looked at me. A rather ugly smile hovered about his lips. He opened his mouth . . . At the same moment a gong rang impatiently. "All in good time I will tell you, I will explain . . . but for the moment, look, we shall have to hurry. It is time for lunch and our friends are tired of waiting."

"Our friends?"

"There are two of them," explained M. Le Mesge. "We three form the European staff of the household——the permanent staff," he thought fit to add, with his disquieting smile. "Two original characters, gentlemen, whom you will probably prefer to have as little as possible to do with. One is a cleric, narrow–minded, though a Protestant——the other a man of the world who has got off the beaten track, an old lunatic."

"Excuse me," I said, "this must be the man I heard last night. He was making a bank; doubtless with you and the parson? . . . "

M. Le Mesge made a gesture of injured dignity

"With me, sir, what an idea! He plays with the Tuaregs. He has taught them every conceivable game. Listen. It's he hammering the gong for us to hurry. It is half–past nine and the *trente–et–quarante* room opens at ten o'clock. Let's hurry up. I expect you won't be sorry to get something to eat either."

"We shan't refuse," replied Morhange.

We followed M. Le Mesge down a winding corridor with steps every yard. We were walking in the dark, but at intervals rose–coloured lamps and perfume–burners shone from little niches cut into the rock. The disturbing eastern perfumes hung in the darkness and formed a pleasant contrast to the cold air from the snow–clad peaks.

Every now and again a White Tarki passed us, a mute, impassive phantom, and we heard the shuffling of his slippers die away behind us.

M. Le Mesge stopped before a heavy door, embossed with the same pale metal I had noticed on the library walls, and, opening it, stood aside to let us pass.

Although the room we had entered was nothing like a European dining–room, I have known many inferior to it in comfort. Like the library, it was lit by a large bay window. But I noticed that this faced outwards, while the library looked on to the garden inside the mountain circle.

No central table, nor any of that barbarian furniture known as chairs. But countless small Venetian tables in gilt wood, piles of rugs in vague, subdued colours, Tuareg or Tunisian cushions. In the centre an enormous mat on which acollation, the very sight of which filled us with childish delight, was spread in baskets of delicate wicker–work amid silver flagons and copper bowls of scented water.

M. Le Mesge, coming forward, presented us to the two men who had already taken their places on the mat.

"Mr. Spardeck," he said——and this simple phrase told me how far Le Mesge was above empty mundain titles.

The Reverend Mr. Spardeck of Manchester bowed stiffly and asked our permission to keep his broad–brimmed top–hat on his head. He was a dry, frigid man, tall and thin. He ate with melancholy unction, enormously.

"Monsieur Bielowsky," said M. le Mesge, introducing us to the second guest.

"Count Casimir Bielowsky, Hetman of Jitomir," this gentleman corrected him with a perfect manner, while he rose to shake hands.

I at once felt a certain sympathy with the Hetman of Jitomir, who realised the perfect type of the old beau. A parting divided his chocolate–coloured hair (I found out later that the Hetman dyed it with a decoction of khol). He had splendid side–whiskers, *a la* Francis–Joseph, also chocolate coloured. His nose was slightly red indeed, but so fine, so aristocratic. His hands were wonderful. I spent some time calculating the date of the fashion to which the Count's coat belonged, n was bottle–green with yellow lapels adorned with a huge buckle in silver and blue enamel. Recollections of a portrait of the Duke de Morny led me to select 1860 or 1862. The rest of this story will show that I was not far wrong.

The Count made me sit down beside him. One of his first questions was whether I drew to a five at baccarat.

“That depends on inspiration,” I replied.

“Bravo! I've given it up since 1866. A vow. A peccadillo. One day at Walewski's, a deuce of a game I played. I lost, of course. The other fellow had four. 'Idiot!' little Baron de Chaux−Giseux shouted, piling enormous sums on my number. Presto! I threw a bottle of champagne at his head. He ducked, the bottle hit Marshal Vaillant. Tableau! The matter was settled because we were both Freemasons. The Emperor made me swear not to do it any more. I've kept my word, but at times it's hard, very hard.”

He added, in a voice which was strangled by chagrin:

“A little of this Hoggar 1880. An excellent vintage. It was I, sir, who taught the people here to use the juice of the grape. Palm wine, excellent when properly fermented, would become insipid.

It was heady, this 1880 Hoggar. We sipped it in wide silver goblets. It was as fresh as Rhine wine, dry as a wine of L'Ermitage. And then, suddenly recalling the burnt wines of Portugal, it grewsweet, fruity; an admirable wine, I tell you.

This wine washed down the most delicate of luncheons. Little meat, it is true, but all strangely spiced; lots of cakes, pancakes with honey, spiced fritters, rolls of curdled milk and dates. And, above all, fruits, masses of fruits in great vermilion dishes or wickered jars —— figs, dates, pistachios, jujubes, pomegranates, apricots, enormous bunches of grapes longer than those which bowed the shoulders of the Hebrew soldiers in the land of Canaan, heavy melons cut in two, with pink moist flesh and rows of black seeds.

I had scarcely finished eating one of these splendid iced fruits when M. Le Mesge got up.

“Gentlemen, if you are ready,” he said, addressing Morhange and me.

“Leave this old humbug as soon as you can,” whispered the Hetman of Jitomir to me. “The game of *trente−et−quarante* is about to begin. You'll see, you'll see. Much more thrilling than at Cora Pearl's.”

“Gentlemen,” repeated M. Le Mesge formally.

We followed him. When we were all three back in the library:

Sir,” he said to me, “you asked me just now what occult power detains you here. As your manner was threatening I should have refused to reply, had it not been for your friend whose scholarship puts him in a better position than you *to* appreciate the full value of the revelations I am about to make.”

So saying, he touched a spring in the wall. A cupboard appeared crammed with books. He took one down.

“You are both,” M. Le Mesge continued, “in the power of a woman. This woman, the Queen the Sultana, the absolute sovereign of the Hoggar is called Antinea. Don't start, M. Morhange, you'll understand in the end.”

He opened the book and read this sentence:

“I *must warn you at the outset not to be surprised if I call the Barbarians by Greek names.”*

“What is this book?” stammered Morhange, whose pallor at this moment appalled me.

“This book,” M. Le Mesge replied slowly, weighing his words with a strange appearance of triumph, “is the greatest, the finest, the most hermetic of Plato's dialogues: it is the *Critias,* or the *Atlantis.”*

“The *Critias?* But that is unfinished,” murmured Morhange.

“It is unfinished in France, in Europe, everywhere,” said M. Le Mesge. “Here it is finished. Look at this copy.”

“But what connection, what connection,” repeated Morhange, eagerly glancing through the manuscript, “what connection is there between this dialogue, complete, I think——yes, complete—— what connection can it have with this woman Antinea? Why is it in her possession?”

"Because,” the little man replied imperturbably, “because this book is this woman's *Peerage,* a of *Gotha* you understand? Because it establishes her prodigious genealogy; because she is. . .

"Because she is?” repeated Morhange.

"Because she is the grand−daughter of Neptune, the last descendant of the Atlantes.”

CHAPTER IX. THE QUEEN OF ATLANTIS

M. LE MESGE looked at Morhange in triumph. It was obvious that he was only addressing him, that he alone was thought worthy of his confidences.

“Many are the French or foreign officers,” he said, “who have been brought here by the caprice of our Sovereign Antinea. You are the first one to be honoured with my relations. But you have been a pupil of Berliou, and I owe so much to this great man's memory that I seem to render homage to him by sharing with one of his disciples the results, unique, I venture to say, of my private research.”

He rang the bell. Ferradji appeared.

“Coffee for these gentlemen,” M. Le Mesge ordered.

He offered us a casket enamelled in brilliant colours and filled with Egyptian cigarettes.

“I never smoke,” he explained, “but Antinea comes here sometimes. These are her cigarettes. Take one, gentlemen.”

I have always had a horror of this pale tobacco which allows a barber's boy from the Rue de la Michodiere to imagine that he is enjoying the voluptuousness of the East. But, of their kind, these perfumed cigarettes were not unattractive, and my supply of *caporal* had long since given out.

"Here's a collection of *La Vie Parisienne*, sir,” M. Le Mesge said to me. “Look at them, if they interest you, while I talk to your friend.”

“Sir,” I replied somewhat heatedly, “it's true that I have not been Berlioux's pupil. You'll allow me, however, to listen to your conversation; it is not impossible that it may interest me.”

“As you like,” said the little old man.

We settled ourselves comfortably. M. Le Mesge sat down at the desk, pulled down his cuffs and began:

“Though I favour complete objectivity, sir, in matters of erudition, I cannot keep my own story altogether apart from that of the last descendant of Clito and Neptune. This is at once a source of regret and an honour.

“I am the child of my work. From childhood I was struck by the prodigious momentum given to historical science by the nineteenth century. I saw what my line was. I have followed it in spite of every one.

“I may well say, 'In spite of everyone.' Without any other resources than my work and my merit, I was made *agrege d'histoire et de geographie* at the examination of 1880. A great competition. Out of the thirteen who passed were several names that have since become illustrious: Jullian, Bourgeois, Auerbach. ... I don't begrudge colleagues the high official honours they have won; I read their works with commiseration and the pitiable errors into which their inadequate documentation has led them would amply repay me for my academic disappointments and would fill me with ironic joy if I were not above such vain satisfactions.

“As a master at the Lycee du Pare at Lyons I got to know Berlioux and followed passionately his work on African history. From that time I conceived the idea of a very original doctor's thesis It was *a* question of establishing a parallel between La Kaherra, the Berber heroine of the seventh century who struggled against the Arab invader, and the French heroine Joan of Arc, who fought the English. I therefore suggested to the Paris Faculty! of Letters this subject: *Joan of Arc and the Tuaregs.* This simple announcement raised a general hullabaloo in the world of learning, a stupid outburst of derision. Friends warned me discreetly. I refused to believe them. I had to give way, however, when I was summoned before the Rector, who, after showing a surprising interest in the state of my health, at last asked me if I would care to take two years' holiday on half−pay. I indignantly refused. The Rector didn't insist, but a fortnight later, without any warning, a ministerial decree came nominating me to one of the most insignificant and out−of−the−way *Lycees* in France, at Mont−de−Marsan.

“If you can understand how embittered I was, you will excuse the extravagances in which I indulged in this obscure department. And after all, what is there to do in Landes but eat and drink? I did both freely. My pay went in *foie−gras,* woodcock and wine. The result soon came about: in less than a year my joints began to crack like the rusty axles of a bicycle which has been ridden a long distance on a dusty track. I was pinned to my bed by a bad attack of gout. Fortunately in this blessed country the remedy goes with the disease. So I left to spend my holidays at Dax to try to dissolve these painful little crystals.

"I hired a room on the banks of the Adour, on the Promenade des Baignots. A worthy woman came to keep house for me. She did the same for an old gentleman, a retired *juge d'instruction* and president of the *Societe Roger−Ducos,* a vague scientific society in which the scholars of the *arrondissement* devoted themselves, with extraordinary incompetence, to the study of the most heteroclite questions. One afternoon I was in my room, owing to the heavy rain. The good woman was frantically polishing the brass handle of my door. She was using a paste called *tripoli,* which she spread on a piece of paper and rubbed and rubbed. . . . The curious appearance of the paper puzzled me. I glanced at it. 'Great Heavens! where did you get this piece of paper?' She looked anxious: 'In my master's room; there are heaps of them like it. I tore this one out of a note−book.' 'Here are ten francs; go and fetch me the note−book.'

Quarter of an hour later she came back, bringing it. Splendid! There was only one page missing, the one she had been using. Do know what this manuscript, this note−book was? Nothing more nor less than the *Journey to Atlantis* of the mythographer Denys de Milet, quoted by Diodorus and the loss of which I had often heard Berlioux deplore.[1]

1 How did the *Journey to Atlantis* get to Dax? I have so far only found one satisfactory explanation. It might have been discovered in Africa by the" traveller de Behagle, member of the *Societe* in *Boger−Ducos.*

"This invaluable document contained numerous quotations from the *Critias.* It quoted the substance of the celebrated dialogue, of which you have just had in your hand the only example that exists in the world. It established beyond dispute the position of the stronghold of the Atlantes and proved that this site, denied by present−day science was not submerged under the waves as is imagined by the few timid partisans of the Atlantis hypothesis. It was called 'the Central Mazy clan mountain group.' You know there is no longer any doubt that the Mazyces of Herodotus are to be identified with the peoples of Imoschaoch, the Tuaregs. Now, Denys' manuscript definitely identifies the Mazyces of history with the Atlantes of the legend.

"Denys taught me, then, that the central part of Atlantis, the cradle and home of the Neptune dynasty, not only had not sunk in the catastrophe related by Plato, which engulfed the rest of the island of Atlantis, but that this part corresponded with the Tarki Hoggar, and in this Hoggar, in his time at least the noble Neptune dynasty was reputed to be still extant.

"The historians of Atlantis calculate the date of cataclysm which destroyed the whole or part of this famous country at 9000 b.c. If Denys de Milet, who wrote scarcely two thousand years ago, considers that the descendants of Neptune were still ruling in his time, you will see that I quickly conceived the following idea: what has subsisted nine thousand years can subsist eleven thousand. From that moment I had only one object in life: to get into touch with the possible descendants of the Atlantes, and if, as I had good reason to believe, they had degenerated and were ignorant of their former splendour, reveal to them their illustrious descent.

"As is equally natural, I did not inform my academical superiors at the University of my intentions. In view of what I had gathered of their attitude towards me in the past, my solicitation of their assistance, or even sanction, would certainly have involved the risk of my being shut up as a lunatic. So I realised my small savings and embarked unostentatiously for Oran. I arrived at In−Salah on October 1st. Comfortably stretched under a palm−tree in the oasis, it gave me infinite satisfaction to think that on that same day the frenzied headmaster of Mont−de−Marsan, with difficulty restraining twenty nasty little brats shrieking at the door of an empty class−room, would be sending out telegrams in all directions to find his history master."

M. Le Mesge stopped with a look of satisfaction.

I confess that at that moment my dignity forsook me, and I forgot his pose of confining his attention to Morhange.

"You will excuse me sir, if your story interests me more than I expected. But you know that I am ignorant of many details necessary for understanding you. You have mentioned the Neptune dynasty. What is this dynasty from which, *I* believe, you trace Antinea's descent? What part did it play in the story of Atlantis?"

M. Le Mesge smiled condescendingly while winking at Morhange. The latter, without moving a muscle, without uttering a word, listened, chin in hand, elbow on knee.

"Plato will answer for me, sir," said the professor.

And he added in a tone of inexpressible pity:

"Is it possible, then, that you have never made the acquaintance of the beginning of the *Critias?"*

He had picked up from the table the manuscript which had so excited Morhange. Adjusting his spectacles, he

began to read. It was as though the magic of Plato thrilled, transfigured this ridiculous little old man:

"*The gods, having drawn lots for the different parts of the earth, some obtained a large country, others small. . . . Thus Neptune, to whose share fell the island of Atlantis, placed the children he had had by a mortal in one part of this island. There was, not far from the sea, a plain, situated in the middle of the island——the most beautiful, we are assured, and the most fertile of plains. About fifty stadia from this plain, in the middle of the island, was a mountain. There lived one of those men who, at the beginning of things, were born on the earth, Evenor, with his wife Leucippa. They had one daughter, Clito. She was a woman when her father and mother died, and Neptune, falling in love with her, took her to wife. The mountain where she lived Neptune fortified by cutting it off from the earth on every side. He encircled it with concentric and ever−widening belts of land and water alternately, two of land and three of water. ...*"

M. Le Mesge stopped reading.

"Does this arrangement remind you of anything?" he asked.

I looked at Morhange, plunged in the increasing depths of his thoughts.

"Does it remind you of nothing?" insisted the professor's incisive voice.

"Morhange, Morhange," I stammered, "remember our ride yesterday, our capture, the two corridors we had to pass before entering this mountain . . . *belts of land and water* . . . two corridors, two belts of earth. ..."

"Ha, ha!" said M. Le Mesge.

He was looking at me, smiling. I took his smile to mean: "Can he be less dense than I thought?"

As with a great effort, Morhange broke silence.

"I understand, I understand. . . . The three belts of water . . . But in that case, sir, your explanation, the ingenuity of which I do not deny, presupposes that the hypothesis of the Sahara Sea is correct!"

"That is so, and I can prove it," replied the irascible little old man, striking his desk. "I am aware of the objections raised by Schirmer and the others, better than you. I know everything sir. I will place all the proof at your disposal. Meanwhile, this evening at dinner, you will doubtless enjoy some succulent fish. And you will tell me whether you think that those fish, caught in the lake you can see from this window, are freshwater fish.

"Just consider," he continued, more calmly, "the mistake made by those believers in Atlantis in explaining the cataclysm in which they thought the wonderful island had sunk completely beneath the waves. They all believed it had been engulfed. As a matter of fact there was no immersion, there was an *emersion.* New lands have emerged from the waves of the Atlantic. The desert has replaced the sea. The sebkhas, the salt−marshes, the Triton lakes, the sandy Syrtes are the solitary vestiges of moving waves over which the fleets once sailed to conquer Attica. Sand swallows up civilisation better than water. To−day these calcined mountains are all that is left of the beautiful island that once the sea and winds made proud and verdant. In this rocky basin, cut off for ever from the living world, the wonderful oasis at your feet, these red fruits, this cascade, this blue lake alone bear witness to the vanished golden age. When you arrived here last night you crossed the five belts: three belts of sea, dried up forever; two belts of land split by a corridor through which you rode your camels and in which once sailed the tiremes. In this tremendous catastrophe, the one thing left in all its ancient splendour was this mountain, the mountain where Neptune imprisoned his beloved Clito, daughter of Evenor and Leucippa, Mother of Atlas, ancestress thousands of years ago of Antinea, the sovereign under whose sway you have come for ever.'

"Sir," said Morhange, with exquisite politeness, "it is not unnatural that we should wish to enquire the reasons and the object of this servitude. But see to what extent your revelations interest me: I postpone this private question. A few days ago I discovered this name Antinea inscribed in Tifinar in two caves. My friend is witness that I took it for a Greek name. Now, thanks to you and the divine Plato, I understand that I must not be surprised to hear a barbarian called by a Greek name. But I am none the less perplexed about the etymology of this word. Can you enlighten me on this subject?"

"Sir," M. Le Mesge answered, "I shall certainly do so. Let me tell you, by the way, that you are not the first to ask me this question. Of the explorers I have seen come here during the last ten years the majority were drawn here in the same way, intrigued by this Greek word written in Tifinar. I have even prepared a fairly exact catalogue of these inscriptions and the caves in which they are to be found. All, or nearly all, are accompanied by this formula: *Antinea. Here begins her domain.* Here and there I have myself had them repainted in ochre where they were beginning to fade. But to return to what I was saying at first, not one of the Europeans led here by this epigraphic mystery has asked to be enlightened as to this etymology, once he was in Antinea's palace. They all

immediately had another bee in their bonnet. In this connection one might say a good deal on the subject of the real importance of purely scientific preoccupations even among scholars, and in the ease with which they give way before more material cares: for instance, anxiety for their own lives."

"If you prefer it, sir, we will return to this another time," said Morhange, still with admirable courtesy.

"There is only one object for this digression, sir: to show you that I do not include you among these unworthy scholars. You indeed, are anxious to know the derivation of this name, Antinea, even before knowing what sort of woman she is who bears it or the reasons for which you and this gentleman are her prisoners."

I looked at the old man closely. But he was talking with the deepest sincerity.

"So much the better for you," I thought, "otherwise I should soon have sent you through that window to be as ironical as you liked. The law of gravity probably holds, even in the Hoggar."

"You have doubtless, sir," continued M. Le Mesge to Morhange, without paying any attention to my searching look, "formulated some etymological hypotheses when you first found yourself face to face with this name, Antinea. Would you have any objection to informing me of them?"

"None, sir," said Morhange.

And, very deliberately, he enumerated the derivations I have mentioned already.

The little man with the cherry cravat rubbed his hands.

"Very good," he said appreciatively, in tones of intense delight. "Splendid, considering the probable mediocrity of your Hellenic scholarship. All this is none the less wrong, quite wrong."

"It's precisely because I suspected as much that I am questioning you," said Morhange gently.

"I won't leave you in ignorance any longer," said M. Le Mesge. "The word Antinea is derived in this way: *ti* is nothing but a barbaric addition to this essentially Greek name. *Ti* is the feminine of the Berber definite article. There are many examples of this mixture. Take that of Tipasa, the town in North Africa. Its name signifies *the whole* from *ti* and (Greek). Similarly, *tinea* signifies *the new,* from *ti* and (Greek)."

"And the prefix *an?*" asked Morhange.

"Is it possible, sir," answered M. Le Mesge, "that I have exhausted myself for an hour in talking to you about the *Critias* to arrive at such a pitiable result? It is certain that the prefix *an,* in itself, has no meaning. You will understand that it has one here when I tell you that this is a curious case of apocope. It mustn't be read as *an,* but as *Atlan. Atl* has been dropped by apocope; *an* has remained. In short, Antinea is composed as follows: (Greek) And its meaning, *the new Atlantis,* stands out clearly."

I looked at Morhange His astonishment knew no bounds. The barbarian prefix *ti* had literally confounded him.

"Have you had an opportunity of verifying this ingenious derivation?" he managed to say at last.

"You have only to glance at these few volumes" said M. Le Mesge disdainfully.

One after the other he opened five, ten, twenty cupboards. A vast library was heaped up before our eyes.

"It's all here, all," Morhange muttered, in a strange tone of terror and admiration.

"All that is worth consulting, at any rate," said M. Le Mesge. "All the great works the loss of which the so–called world of leaning now deplores."

"And how did they get here?"

"My dear sir, how you distress me; and I thought you at least knew something about it! So you forget the passage in which Pliny speaks of the library of Carthage and the vast treasures it contained? In 146, when this town succumbed to that battering–ram Scipio, that inconceivable collection of illiterate men known as the Roman senate showed the deepest contempt for these riches. They presented them to the native kings. It was thus that this wonderful heritage came into the hands of Mastanabal; it was passed on to his sons and grandsons, Hiempsal, Juba I, Juba II, husband of Cleopatra Selena the splendid, daughter of the great Cleopatra and Mark Antony. Cleopatra Selena gave birth to a daughter who married a king of Atlantis. In this way Antinea, daughter of Neptune, counts among her ancestors the immortal Queen of Egypt. In this way she has inherited what is left of the library of Carthage, enriched by the remains of the Alexandria library, which you now see before you.

"Knowledge eludes man. When those monstrous pseudo–scientific Babels —— Berlin, London, Paris—— were established, knowledge took refuge in this deserted corner of the Hoggar. There they can fake hypotheses based on the lost mysteries of ancient works as they please: these works are not lost. They are here. Here are the books —— Hebrew, Chaldean, Assyrian. Here are the great Egyptian traditions that inspired Solon, Herodotus, and Plato. Here are the Greek mythographers, the magicians of Roman Africa, the Indian dreamers; all the

treasures, in short, without which contemporary dissertations are mere mockery Believe me, the humble little graduate they took for a lunatic and jeered at is well avenged. I have lived, I live, I shall live in a perpetual roar of laughter at their false, truncated erudition; and when I am dead, thanks to the jealous precautions taken by Neptune to cut off his beloved Clito from the rest of the world, error will continue to reign, sovereign mistress of their miserable scribblings.

"'Sir," said Morhange gravely, "you have just affirmed the influence of Egypt on the civilisation of the people here. For reasons which some day perhaps I may have an opportunity of explaining to you, I should like to have the proof of this connection."

"There is no difficulty about that, sir," replied M. Le Mesge.

Then I came forward in my turn.

"A word sir, if you please," I said brutally "I shall not conceal from you my opinion that these historical discussions are quite out of place. It's not my fault that you have had academical disillusions at the University and are not at the College de France or elsewhere. At the present moment one thing alone matters to me; to know what we are doing, what I am doing here. It is of far more importance to me than the Greek or Berber etymology of her name to know exactly what this lady, Antinea, wants with me. My friend is anxious about her relations with ancient Egypt: that's all very well. For my part, what I want to know before anything else is in what relation she stands with the General Government of Algeria and the Arab Sections."

M. Le Mesge burst into a shriek of laughter.

"I will give you an answer which will satisfy you both," he replied.

And he added:

"Follow me. It is time you learnt."

CHAPTER X. THE HALL OF RED MARBLE

ONCE MORE WE negotiated an interminable succession of stairs and corridors behind M. Le Mesge.

“One loses all sense of direction in this labyrinth,” I whispered to Morhange.

“It's enough to send one mad,” my companion answered in a low voice. “This old lunatic is certainly a great scholar. But God knows what he's driving at. At any rate, he promised we should know soon.”

M. Le Mesge had stopped before a dark, heavy door covered with grotesque signs. Turning the handle, he opened it.

“Please enter, gentlemen,” he said.

A gust of fresh air struck our faces. In the new hall we had just entered the temperature was that of a cave.

The darkness at first prevented me from getting an exact idea of its size. The lighting, purposely restricted, consisted of twelve enormous copper lamps, in the form of pillars resting on the ground, on top of which blazed broad red flames. When we entered, the draught from the corridor blew on these flames and for a minute our shadows lengthened and, curiously distorted, danced around us. Then the draught ceased, and the flames, once more steady, pierced the darkness with their rigid red tongues.

These twelve gigantic lamps (each about three yards high) were arranged so as to form a kind of crown, with a diameter of at least fifty feet. In the middle of this crown a dark mass appeared shot with trembling red reflections. Going nearer I made out a fountain. It was this fresh water that maintained the cave–like temperature. Great couches were cut out of the central rock from which the murmuring and shadowy fountain spurted. They were heaped with silken cushions. Within the crown of red torches was a second crown of half the diameter, formed by twelve perfume–burners. In the darkness one could not see their smoke rising to the vaulted ceiling, but their languor, combined with the coolness and rippling of the water, banished from the soul any other desire than to remain there for ever.

M. Le Mesge had made us sit down on the cyclopean couches in the centre of the hall. He sat between us.

“In a few moments,” he said, “your eyes will grow accustomed to the darkness.”

I noticed that he lowered his voice as if in a temple.

Gradually our eyes grew accustomed to this red light. Little more than the lower part of the vast hall was lit up.

The roof was plunged in darkness and it was impossible to tell its height. Vaguely, I noticed a great lustre above our heads, its goldwork, like everything else, licked by the sombre red flames. But there was no means of judging the length of the chain by which it hung from the bidden roof.

The marble pavement was so highly polished that it reflected the great torches.

This hall, as I say, was round, forming a perfect circle, of which the fountain at our back was the centre.

We were thus facing the rounded walls. Soon we could not remove our eyes from them. This is what made these walls so remarkable: they were divided into a series of dark niches, the line of which was interrupted, in front of us, by the door through which we had just entered; behind us, by a second door, forming a darker gap which I could barely distinguish in the darkness when I turned round. Between one door and the other I counted sixty of these niches, making a total of a hundred and twenty. Each was three metres high and one metre broad. Each contained a sort of case, broader above than below, of which the lower part alone was closed. In each case, except the two facing me, I thought I could distinguish a shining form, a human form without a doubt, something like a statue of very pale bronze. In the arc of the circle in front of me I counted exactly thirty of these strange statues.

What—were these statues? I wanted to see; I got up.

I felt M. Le Mesge's hand on my arm.

“All in good time,” he murmured, still speaking very low; “all in good time.”

The professor's eyes were fixed on the door through which we had entered the hall, and behind which a sound of footsteps could be heard, growing more and more distinct.

It opened silently and three White Tuaregs entered. Two of them were carrying on their shoulders a long bundle; the third appeared to be the chief.

On a sign from him, they placed the bundle on the ground and took out from one of the niches the oblong case

which each contained.

"You may approach, gentlemen," M. Le Mesge then told us.

In reply to his sign, the three Tuaregs drew back several paces.

"You asked me just now," said M. Le Mesge, addressing Morhange "to give you a proof of the influence of Egypt in this country. What do you think, first of all, of this case?"

With these words he pointed to the case which the servants had just laid on the ground after taking it from its niche.

Morhange uttered a stifled cry.

We had before us one of those cases used for preserving mummies. The same polished wood, the same brilliantly coloured painting, with the sole difference that hieroglyphics were here replaced by Tifinar characters. The shape alone, narrow below and broad above, would have told us this.

I have already said that the lower half of this case was closed, giving to the whole the appearance of a rectangular wooden shoe.

M Le Mesge knelt down and fixed on the front of the case an oblong piece of white cardboard, a large label which he had taken from his desk a few minutes before as we left the library.

"You may read," he said simply, but still speaking low.

I knelt down too, for the light from the great candelabra made it difficult to decipher the label, on which however, I recognised the professor's handwriting.

It bore these simple words, in a large round hand:

"No. 53. *Major Sir Archibald Russell. Born at Richmond, July 5th,* 1860. *Died at Hoggar, December 3rd,* 1896."

With one bound I was on my feet.

"Major Russell!" I cried.

"Softly, softly," said M. Le Mesge. "No one has the right to raise his voice here."

"Major Russell," I repeated, obeying his injunctions in spite of myself, "who left Khartum last year to explore the Sokoto?"

"Himself," replied the professor.

"And . . . where is Major Russell?"

"He is here," replied M. Le Mesge.

The professor made a sign. The White Tuaregs approached.

A tense silence reigned in the mysterious hall, broken only by the cool gurgling of the fountain.

The three negroes had begun to undo the bundle they had put down near the painted case. Bowed under the weight of an inexpressible horror Morhange and I looked at one another.

Soon a stiff form, a human form appeared. A red light shone on it. We had before us, stretched on the ground, enveloped in a sort of veil of white muslin, a statue of pale bronze, a statue like those which, upright in the niches around us, seemed to fix us with an impenetrable gaze.

"Sir Archibald Russell," murmured M. Le Mesge slowly.

Morhange approached in silence; he had the strength to raise the muslin veil. For a long time he stared into the solemn face of the bronze statue.

"A mummy, a mummy," he said at last. "You're wrong, sir; this is not a mummy."

"Strictly speaking, no," replied M. Le Mesge. "It is not a mummy. This thing before you is, however, certainly the mortal remains of Sir Archibald Russell. Indeed, I ought to point out to you, my dear sir, that the embalming process used by Antinea differs from those in use in Ancient Egypt. Here they use no natron, no bandages, no aromatics. Hoggar industry has immediately arrived at a result only obtained by European science after a long period of experiment. When I first came here, what was my surprise to find that they used a method which I thought was only known to the civilised world."

With the knuckle of his forefinger M. Le Mesge gently struck the smooth forehead of Sir Archibald Russell. It gave a metallic sound.

"It's bronze," I murmured. "That's not a human forehead. It's bronze."

M. Le Mesge shrugged his shoulders.

"It is a human forehead," he stated decisively, "and it is not bronze. Bronze, sir, is darker. This metal is the

great unknown metal of which Plato speaks in the *Critias* and which is halfway between gold and silver; it is a metal peculiar to the mountain of Atlantis; it is orchilacrum."

Stooping still lower, I saw that this metal was the same as that with which the library walls were covered.

"It is orchilacrum," continued M. Le Mesge. "You don't seem to understand how a human body can assume the form of an orchilacrum statue. Come, Captain Morhange, you whom I credited with a certain amount of knowledge, have you never heard of Dr. Variot's process for preserving bodies without embalming? Have you never read his book? [1] There he explains the so–called galvanoplastic method. The cutaneous tissues are coated very lightly with salt of silver to render them conductors. The body is then dipped into a bath of copper sulphate and polarisation does its work. The process by which the body of this gallant English major has been metallised is the same. The same except that the bath of copper

[1] Variot. *L'Anthropologie Galvanique.* Paris, 1890.——Note by M. Leroux.

sulphate has been replaced by a bath of sulphate of orchilacrum, usually a rare substance. Thus instead of a statue of copper, you have before you J statue made of a metal more precious than gold and silver——a statue, in short, worthy of the granddaughter of Neptune."

M. Le Mesge made a sign. The negro slaves seized the body. In a few seconds they had slipped the orchilacrum phantom into its sheath of painted wood. This, reared upright, was placed in its niche, next to the niche in which an exactly similar sheath bore the label, No. 52.

Then, their task accomplished, they withdrew without a word. The cold draught from the door once more swayed the flames of the copper torches and made our great shadows dance around us.

Morhange and I stood as motionless as the pale metal spectres that surrounded us. Suddenly, pulling myself together, I tottered up to the niche next to that in which the remains of the English major now stood. My eyes sought the label, label No. 52.

Leaning against the red marble wall, I read:

"*No. 52. Capitaine Laurent Deligne. Born in Paris, July 22nd,* 1861. *Died at Hoggar, October 20th,* 1896."

"Captain Deligne," murmured Morhange, "started from Colomb–Bechar for Timmimoun in 1895 and was never heard of again."

"Precisely," said M. Le Mesge, with a little nod of approval.

"'*No.* 51,'" Morhange read, his teeth chattering, "' *Colonel von Wittmann. Born at Jena in* 1855. *Died at Hoggar, May 1st,* 1896.' Colonel Wittmann, the explorer of Kanem, disappeared in the direction of Agades!"

"Precisely," said M. Le Mesge again.

"'*No.* 50,'" I read in my turn, holding on to the wall to prevent myself from falling. "'*Marquis Alonze d'Oliveira. Born at Cadiz, February 21st,* 1868. *Died at Hoggar, February 1st,* 1896.' . . . Oliveira, who set out for Araouan!"

"Precisely," repeated M. Le Mesge. "This Spaniard was very well informed. I had some interesting discussions with him about the exact geographical position of the kingdom of Antee."

"'*No.* 49,'" said Morhange, whose voice had sunk to a whisper. "' *Lieutenant Woodhouse. Born at Liverpool, September 16th,* 1870. *Died at Hoggar, October Uh,* 1895.' "

"Little more than a boy," said M. Le Mesge.

"'*No.* 48,'" I said. "'*Sub–Lieutenant Louis de Maillefeu. Born at Provins* . . .'"

I broke off. My voice was strangled with emotion. Louis de Maillefeu, my best friend, my old playmate, at Saint–Cyr, everywhere. ... I looked at him, I recognised him under the metallic crust. Louis de Maillefeu! . . . and, my forehead pressed against the cold wall, my shoulders heaving, I began to sob.

I heard Morhange's muffled voice speaking to the professor.

"Sir, this scene has lasted long enough. Let us end it."

"He wanted to know," answered M. Le Mesge. "What could I do?"

I strode up to him. I seized him by the shoulders.

"How did he get here? What did he die of?"

"The same as the rest," replied the professor. "The same as Lieutenant Woodhouse, Captain Deligne, Major Russell, Colonel von Wittmann, the same as the forty–seven of yesterday, the same as those of to–morrow."

"What did they die of?" said Morhange. imperatively.

The professor looked at Morhange. I saw my companion blanch.

"What did they die of, sir? *They died of love."*

And he added, very low and very gravely:

"Now you know."

Gently, and with a thoughtfulness which we should scarcely have suspected in him M. Le Mesge drew us away from the metal statues. A moment later Morhange and I found ourselves once more seated, or rather collapsed, among the cushions in the centre of the hall. At our feet the invisible fountain murmured its lament.

M. Le Mesge was between us.

"Now you know," he repeated. "You know, but you do not yet understand."

Then he said, letting his words fall very slowly:

"You, like these, are Antinea's prisoners . . . and Antinea must have vengeance."

"Vengeance!" said Morhange, who had regained possession of. himself, "and tell me for what? What have my friend and I done to the Queen of Atlantis? How have we deserved her hatred?"

"It is an old quarrel, a very old quarrel," replied the professor gravely. "A quarrel which is beyond you, M. Morhange."

"Explain yourself, I beg, M. le professeur."

"You are men. She is a woman," said M. Le Mesge meditatively. "That's the whole point."

"Really, sir, I don't see ... we don't understand."

"You will understand. Have you really forgotten what the beautiful barbarian queens of Antiquity suffered at the hands of the strangers that fortune drove to their shores? The poet Victor Hugo has given an adequate description of their detestable behaviour in his colonial poem entitled *La Fille d'O−Taiti.* As far back as can be remembered it is always the same story of robbery and ingratitude. These gentlemen exploited the beauty and riches of these ladies. Then one morning, they would disappear. The woman was lucky if, having carefully taken his bearings, the man did not return with ships and an army of occupation.'!" Your erudition is delightful, sir," said Morhange. "Pray go on."

"Do you want examples? Alas, there is no lack of them. Think of how cavalierly Ulysses behaved towards Calypso, Diogenes towards Callirrhoe. What about Theseus and Ariadne? Jason was incredibly callous in his behaviour towards Medea. The Romans carried on the tradition with increased brutality. AEneas, who has much in common with the Rev. Mr. Spardeck, treated Dido in most ignoble fashion. Caesar's behaviour towards Cleopatra was that of a be−laurelled bully. Finally, that hypocrite, Titus, after living for a whole year in Idumea on poor Berenice, only dragged her to Rome to complete her ruin. It was time for the sons of Japhet to pay off the enormous score of injury done to the daughters of Sem.

"At last a woman arose to re−establish Hegel's great law of oscillations in her sex's favour. Separated from the Aryan world by Neptune's tremendous precautions, she attracts the youngest and bravest of men. Her body is accommodating but her soul is inexorable. From these young braves she takes what they have to give. She lends her body to them but dominates them with her soul. She is the first sovereign that passion has never for an instant enslaved. She has never had to regain control of herself for she has never given herself. She is the only woman who has succeeded in dissociating those two closely−knit things, love and passion."

M. Le Mesge was silent a moment, then went on: "Once a day she comes to this hall. She stands before the niches. She meditates on these rigid statues. She touches their cold breasts which she has known burning with passion. Then, after musing before the empty niche where he will soon sleep for ever in his cold orchilacrum sheath, she returns nonchalantly to him who awaits her."

The professor stopped speaking. The fountain made itself heard once more in the shadows. My pulses were beating, my brain was on fire. *I* burned with a great fever.

"And all, all," I cried, heedless of where I was, "all acquiesced! They all bowed to her wishes!

Ah! Let her try——she'll soon see−"

Morhange was silent.

"My dear sir," M. Le Mesge said very gently, "you are talking like a child. You cannot know. You haven't seen Antinea. Remember that among these "——and with one gesture he included the whole dumb circle of statues——" there were men as brave as you. and perhaps less sensitive. One, the one labelled No. 32, I remember was a phlegmatic Englishman. When he appeared before Antinea he was smoking a cigar. Like the others, my dear sir, he was subjugated by the eyes of his sovereign.

“Don't speak until you have seen her. An academical career does not qualify a man to discourse on passion, and I feel at a loss to describe Antinea for you. I can only assure you of one thing: that from the moment you see her you will forget everything else. Family, country, honour—— everything you will renounce for her, everything.”

“Everything, sir?” asked Morhange, very self–possessed.

“Everything,” M. Le Mesge asserted emphatically. “You will forget everything, you will renounce everything.”

Once more a faint sound was heard. M. Le Mesge looked at his watch.

“Now you will see.”

The door opened. A White Tarki, the tallest we had yet seen in this awe–inspiring habitation entered and came towards us.

He bowed, and then touched me lightly on the arm.

“Follow me, sir,” said M. Le Mesge. I obeyed without a word.

CHAPTER XI. ANTINEA

I FOLLOWED MY guide along a new corridor. My excitement was increasing. I was impatient for one thing only——to face this woman, to tell her ... As for the rest, my life was already sacrificed.

I was wrong in hoping that this adventure would immediately take an heroic turn. In life there is no definite line dividing comedy and tragedy. Countless details of the past ought to have made me remember that in this adventure of mine tragedy was regularly intermingled with farce.

When we reached a little door through which a light shone my guide stood aside to let me pass.

I then found myself in the most comfortable and convenient dressing–room imaginable. From the ground–glass ceiling a cheerful, rose–tinted light poured down on the marble floor. The first thing I saw was a clock hanging from the wall, the usual figures being replaced by the signs of the Zodiac. The small hand had not quite reached the sign of the Ram.

Three o'clock; only three o'clock!

This day had already seemed a century . . . And I was only a little more than halfway through.

Then a new idea occurred to me and I shook with convulsive laughter.

“Antinea certainly intends that I should be presented to her to the best advantage.”

A great orchilacrum mirror occupied the whole of one side of the room. When I looked into it I saw that there was good reason for these precautions. My unkempt beard, a dreadful coating of dirt round my eyes and running in lines over my cheeks, my clothing grimy with all the different soils of the Sahara and torn by the thorny undergrowth of the Hoggar all combined to make me look a pretty woebegone suitor.

I was not long in undressing and plunging into the porphyry bath which occupied the centre of the dressing–room. A delicious languor came over me in the warm, perfumed water. In front of me a thousand little jars twinkled on a dressing–table of delicately carved wood. They were of every size and hue and cut out of a kind of very transparent jade. The soft humidity of the room soothed my excited nerves.

“To the devil with Antinea, her marble hall and M. Le Mesge,” I had just enough energy to think.

And then I went to sleep in my bath.

When I opened my eyes again the small hand of the clock had almost reached the sign of the Ox. In front of me stood a tall negro, leaning his hands against the edge of the bath. His face was unveiled, his arms bare, his forehead bound with a great orange turban. He was looking at me, Sailing silently and showing all his white teeth.

“And what on earth is this?”

The negro grinned more broadly than ever. Without a word he seized hold of me and lifted me as if I had been a feather out of my scented bath, the present colour of which I would rather not describe.

In no time I found myself stretched on a sloping slab of marble.

The negro began to massage me with extraordinary vigour.

“Steady on! Gently, you fool!”

My masseur did not reply but began to laugh and rubbed harder than ever.

“Where do you come from? Kanem? Borkou? You laugh too much for a Tarki.”

The same silence. This negro was as dumb as he was hilarious.

“After all, what's it matter?” I thought. “Whatever he is, I prefer him to M. Le Mesge with his nightmare erudition. But, by heaven, what a recruit he would be for Hammam of the Rue des Mathurins!”

“Cigarette, Sidi?”

Without waiting for a reply the negro placed a cigarette between my lips, lit it and at once began again to rub me all over.

“He doesn't talk much, but he's obliging,” I thought. And I puffed a cloud of smoke into his face.

This jest seemed to appeal to him enormously. He showed his pleasure by giving me great slaps.

When he had finished rubbing me down he took a small jar from the dressing–table and began to anoint my body with a pink paste. All trace of fatigue seemed to disappear from my rejuvenated muscles.

A stroke from a gong. My masseur vanished A wizened old negress entered dressed in the gaudiest of colours. She was as garrulous as a magpie, but I couldn't understand one blessed word of the interminable flow of

conversation she poured out, while, seizing my hands and then my feet, she polished my nails.

Again the gong sounded. The old woman gave place to a second negro, solemn this time, dressed entirely in white with a knitted cotton cap on his oblong skull. He was a barber and had a wonderfully skilful hand. He soon had my hair cut, and well cut too. Then, without asking how I wore my beard, he shaved me clean.

I looked with pleasure at my beardless face.

Antinea must favour the American fashion, I thought. What an insult to the memory of her worthy grandfather Neptune!

Just then the cheerful negro entered and put a bundle on the divan. The barber vanished. I was surprised to find that the bundle, carefully unfolded by *my* new valet, contained a complete white−flannel suit, exactly like those worn in summer by French officers in Algeria.

The full, soft trousers might have been made to measure. The tunic fitted perfectly and, to put the finishing−touch to my amazement, on each sleeve were the two gold stripes of my rank. For feet a pair of high slippers of red morocco leather embroidered with gold. The silk underclothing might have come straight from the Rue de la Paix.

“The dinner was superb,” I murmured, with a look of satisfaction at my reflection in the mirror; “the accommodation is perfectly appointed. Yes, but what about *the rest?”*

I could not repress a shudder when the thought of the Hall of Red Marble recurred to me for the first time.

Just then the clock struck half−past four.

There came a discreet knock at the door. The tall Tarki who had brought me appeared on the threshold.

Coming forward, he once more touched my arm and beckoned me.

Once more I followed him.

We threaded our way again through long corridors. I was excited but the warm water had soothed me to some extent. And then, above all, more, much more than I cared to admit even to myself, I felt myself pressed by an overwhelming curiosity. From that moment, if someone had offered to lead me back to the road of the White Plain, near Shikh−Salah, should I have accepted? I think not.

I tried to feel ashamed of this curiosity. I thought of Maillefeu.

“He, too, must, have gone along this corridor; and now he is down there, in the Hall of Red Marble.”

I had no time to continue my reminiscence Suddenly I was flung to the ground as though struck by a thunderbolt. The corridor was dark. I could see nothing. I only heard a mocking howl.

The White Tarki had stood aside, his back against the wall.

“Good,” I muttered, as I got up, “the fun's beginning.”

We went on again. Soon a light other than that from the rose lamps began to illuminate the corridor.

Then we reached a high bronze door through which the light penetrated in a strange lace pattern. The clear sound of a gong rang out, the double−door half opened. The Tarki, who had remained in the corridor, closed it behind me.

Mechanically I stepped a few paces into the room I had entered alone; then I stopped, rooted to the ground, and raised my hand to my eyes.

I was dazzled by the azure light in which I found myself.

Several hours of shaded lights had made me unaccustomed to the light of day. It flooded in through one entire side of the vast hall.

The hall was situated in the lower part of this mountain, more closely riddled with corridors and galleries than an Egyptian pyramid. On a level with the garden I had seen that morning from the balcony of the library, it appeared to form a continuation of this. You could not see where one began and the other ended; rugs lay under the great palms and birds flew about among the forest of pillars in the hall.

All that part not directly bathed in the light of the oasis seemed dark by contrast. The sun, sinking behind the mountain, tinged the gravel of the paths with rose and lit up the scarlet hieratic flamingo, poised, one foot in the air, on the edge of the little lake of deep sapphire.

Suddenly I was knocked down again. A weight had fallen heavily on my shoulders. I felt something warm and silky against my neck, a hot breath on the back of my head. At the same time the mocking howl which had shaken my nerves in the corridor rang out again.

I freed myself with a sudden twist and struck out at random with my fist at my assailant. The howl was

repeated, this time a howl of pain and anger.

It was echoed by a long peal of laughter. Furious, I sprang to my feet and glared round to see from whom this insolence came and ready to give rein to my anger. And then my look grew fixed.

Antinea was before me.

In the darker part of the hall, under a kind of vaulting made artificially luminous by the mauve light of a dozen tinted panes, four women lay stretched on a heap of striped cushions and the rarest white Persian rugs.

The first three I recognised as Tuareg women of splendid and regular beauty, dressed in magnificent robes of white silk embroidered with gold. The fourth, very dark−skinned, was the youngest, and her blouse of red silk heightened the dusky shade of her face, arms and bare feet. All four surrounded a kind of tower of white rugs surmounted by the skin of a gigantic lion, on which Antinea lay, her head supported by her elbows.

Antinea! Whenever I saw her again I asked myself if in my excitement I had really seen her on this first occasion, so much more beautiful did I she appear each time. More beautiful! Poor word, poor language! But is it really the fault of the language or of those who debase the word?

It was impossible to be in the presence of this woman without calling up the magic of her for whom Ephractceus subdued Atlas, for whom Sapor usurped the sceptre of Osimandias, for whom Mamylos subjugated Suze and Tentyris, for whom Antony deserted his country. . . .

“Oh, trembling human heart, if ever you beat,

It is in the imperious ardour of her embrace.”

The Egyptian *klaft* came down over her abundant curls, blue in the intensity of their blackness. The two extremities of the heavy gold−embroidered stuff reached her slender hips. Her arched and self−willed forehead was encircled by a gold *uraeus* with emerald eyes darting its double tongue of rubies above the young woman's head.

She wore a tunic of black veiling spangled with gold, very light and very full, and only loosely gathered by a scarf of white muslin embroidered with irises of black pearl.

Such was Antinea's costume. But what of herself beneath this ravishing film? A slight girlish figure, wide green eyes and a profile delicate and hawk−like. An Adonis more sensitive than Adonis. A child Queen of Sheba, but with a glance and smile never seen in Orientals. A miracle of irony and alertness.

Antinea's body I could not see. Indeed, I should not have thought of looking at this body, of which I had heard so much, even if I had had the strength. And this was perhaps the most extraordinary thing about my first impression. To think of the tortured men in the Hall of Red Marble, the fifty young men who had held this slight body in their arms: in this unforgettable moment the mere thought of these things would have seemed the most horrible sacrilege. In spite of her tunic daringly slit down the side, her splendid, uncovered throat, the bare arms, the shaded mysteries beneath the veiling, in spite of the monstrous legend surrounding her, this woman contrived to give the appearance of something very pure: indeed, something virginal.

For a moment she abandoned herself completely to the peal of laughter caused by my fall when I came before her.

“Hiram−Roi!” she called.

I turned round. I saw my assailant.

Clinging to the capital of one of the columns, twenty feet from the ground, hung a splendid cheetah. His eyes still blazed with anger at the blow from my fist.

“Hiram−Roi,” Antinea repeated, “here!”

The beast relaxed like a spring. Now he crouching at the feet of his mistress. I saw his red tongue licking the delicate bare ankles.

“Beg the gentleman's pardon,” said the young woman.

The cheetah looked at me with hatred in his eyes The tawny skin of his muzzle wrinkled up behind his black whiskers.

“Ffft!” he spat out, like a great cat.

“Come,” said Antinea imperatively.

Reluctantly the animal slunk towards me. He placed his head humbly between his paws and waited.

I stroked the fine spotted head.

“Thou must not bear him any ill−will,” said Antinea. “He is always like this at first with strangers.”

"He must be in a bad temper pretty frequently then," I said simply.

These were the first words I had spoken. They brought a smile to Antinea's lips.

She looked at me long and quietly, then:

"Aguida," she said, addressing one of the Tuareg women, "see that twenty–four pounds of gold are paid to Cegheir–ben–Sheikh."

"Thou art a lieutenant?" she asked, after a pause.

"Yes."

"Where art thou from?"

"From France."

"I suspected as much," she said ironically. "But from what part of France?"

"A part called Lot–et–Garonne."

"What place?"

"Duras."

She thought for a moment.

"Duras! There's a little river there, the Dropt. There's a big old castle."

"You know Duras?" I stammered, flabbergasted.

"You get there by a little railway from Bordeaux," she went on. "The line is cut through the hills, which are covered with vineyards and surmounted by ancient feudal ruins. The villages have beautiful names: Monsegur, Sauveterre–de–Guyenne, la Tresne, Creon . . . Creon, as in *Antigone."*

"You have been there?"

She looked at me.

"Say *thou,"* she said, with a kind of languor. "Thou wilt have to sooner or later. Begin at once."

This threatening promise at once thrilled me with an immense joy. I thought of M. Le Mesge's words: "Don't speak until you have seen her. From the moment you see her you will renounce everything for her."

"Have I been to Duras?" she went on, with a ripple of laughter. "Thou art amusing. Can'st thou imagine the grand–daughter of Neptune in a first–class carriage on a local railway?"

Stretching out her hand, she pointed to the great white rock dominating the palms in the garden.

"That is my horizon," she said gravely.

From several books which lay scattered about her on the lion–skin she selected one and opened it at random.

"This is the time–table of the Chemin de fer de l'Ouest," she said. "What excellent reading for one who never travels! It is now 5.30 p.m. Three minutes ago a stopping train arrived at Sugere in the department of Charante–Inferieure. It will leave again in six minutes' time. In two hours from now it will reach La Rochelle. How strange it is to think of such things in these surroundings! Such distances! ... So much movement! So much peace! . . . "

"You speak French well," I said.

She gave a nervous little laugh.

"I have to. And German, Italian, English and Spanish too. My way of living has made me a splendid polyglot. But I like French best, better than Tuareg or even Arabic. I feel I have always known it. And I do not say this to please thee."

There was a silence. I thought of her ancestress, of whom Plutarch says: "There were few nationalities for which she needed an interpreter; Cleopatra talked in their own language with Ethiopians, Troglodytes, Hebrews, Arabs, Syrians, Medes and Parthians."

"Don't stand planted in the middle of the room like that. It makes me feel uncomfortable. Come and sit here beside me. Move up, Monsieur Hiram–Roi."

The cheetah obeyed with bad grace.

"Give me thy hand," she ordered.

At her side there was a large onyx goblet. She took from it an orchilacrum ring, very simply made. She slid it on the third finger of my left hand. I then noticed that she was wearing one like it on the same finger.

"Tanit–Zerga, offer Monsieur de Saint–Avit a *sorbet a la rose."*

The negress in red silk hurried to obey.

"My private secretary," said Antinea, "Mademoiselle Tanit–Zerga of Gao on the Niger. Her family is almost

as old as mine."

As she said this she looked at me. Her green eyes fixed themselves on mine.

"And thy comrade, the captain?" she asked me in a far–away voice. "I haven't yet made his acquaintance. What is he like? Is he anything like thee?"

Then, for the first time since I found myself in her presence, I thought of Morhange. I did not reply.

Antinea smiled.

She stretched herself full–length on the lion–skin. Her right leg was uncovered.

"It is time to go back to him," she said languidly. "I will send my orders before long. Tanit–Zerga, show him the way back. First show him his room. He won't have seen it yet."

I got up and took her hand to kiss it. She pressed it against my lips so forcibly that they bled under this sign of possession.

I was now in the dark corridor. The little maid in the red silk tunic was walking in front.

"Here's your room," she said.

Then she went on:

"Now, if you like, I'll take you to the dining–room. The others will soon be coming to dinner "

She spoke a delightful broken French.

"No, Tanit–Zerga, no, I'd rather stay here this evening. I'm not hungry. I'm tired."

"You remember my name," she said.

She seemed proud of this. I felt that in case of need I should have an ally in her.

"I remember your name, little Tanit–Zerga, because it is beautiful."

I added:

"Now leave me, little one, I want to be alone."

She lingered interminably in the room. I was both touched and exasperated. A great longing to be left to my own thoughts had come over me..

"My room is above yours," she said. "On this table there is a copper gong. If you want anything you have only to strike it. A White Tarki will come."

This idea amused me for a second. I was in an hotel in the middle of the Sahara. I had only to ring for attendance.

I looked at my room. My room! How long would it be mine?

It was fairly large. Cushions, a divan, an alcove cut out of the rocks, the whole lighted by a huge bay window shaded by a straw blind.

T went towards the window and raised the blind, I let in the light of the setting sun.

My heart filled with thoughts I could not express. I leant my elbows on the sill of rock. The window faced south. It was at least two hundred feet from the ground. Below stretched the wall of volcanic rock, dizzily sheer and black.

In front of me, some two miles away, rose another wall, the first belt of land of the *Critias.* Then, far beyond, I saw the vast red desert.

[1] In Berber *titnit* means *stream; zerga* is the feminine of the adjective *azreg, blue.*——Note by M. Leroux.

CHAPTER XII. MORHANGE GETS UP AND DISAPPEARS

I WAS SO TIRED that I slept right through to the following day. I woke about three o'clock in the afternoon.

At once I recalled the events of the day before and found good reason for astonishment.

"Let's see," I said. "We must take things in order. First I must consult Morhange."

The gong pointed out to me by Tanit–Zerga was within reach of my hand. I struck it. A White Tarki appeared.

"Take me to the library," I ordered.

He obeyed. Once more as we threaded our way through the labyrinth of stairs and corridors I realised that I should never be able to find the way unaided.

Morhange was in the library. He was deep in a manuscript.

"A lost treatise of Saint–Optat," he said. "Oh, if only Dom Granger were here! Look: semi–uncial writing."

I made no reply. On the table, by the side of the manuscript, something had attracted my attention. It was an orchilacrum ring, identical with that given me the day before by Antinea and with the one she wore herself.

Morhange smiled.

"Well?" I said.

"Well?"

"You've seen her?"

"I have indeed seen her," replied Morhange.

"She's very beautiful, isn't she?"

"I think it would be difficult to dispute that," my companion replied. "I think I may even say she is as intelligent as she is beautiful."

There was a silence. Morhange, very self–possessed, was turning over the orchilacrum ring with his fingers.

"You know what our fate here is to be?" I asked.

"I know. M. Le Mesge explained it to us yesterday in discreet, mythological language. It's certainly a very extraordinary adventure."

He was silent, then, looking me in the face:

"I am tremendously sorry to have dragged you here. The one relief is the ready way in which you have resigned yourself to your share in it all since yesterday evening."

Where had Morhange acquired his knowledge of the human heart? I didn't answer, and so gave him the best proof that he was right.

"What do you think of doing?" I muttered at last.

He closed his manuscript, settled himself comfortably in his chair, lit a cigar and answered:

"I have thought it all out. Helped by a little casuistry I have decided on my line of action. It is simple and won't bear discussion.

"The position is not quite the same for me as it is for you, owing to my quasi–religious character which, I must admit, has got into a strange galley. I have made no vows, of course, but, apart from the fact that I still retain respect for the prohibitions of the Ninth Commandment as to relations with women other than one's wife, I must confess I have no taste for the sort of service for which this worthy Cegheir–ben–Sheikh has recruited us.

"Apart from all this, however, it remains to be considered that my life is not entirely my own to dispose of as a private explorer might do, travelling for his own ends and at his own expense. *I* have a mission to accomplish, results to obtain. So if I could regain my liberty by paying the strange toll which is in vogue here, I should consent to yield to Antinea's wishes to the best of my ability. I am well acquainted with the broad–mindedness of the Church and particularly of the Order to which I belong: this line of action would be immediately ratified and——who knows?——perhaps approved. Saint Mary, the Egyptian, surrendered herself to the boatmen in similar circumstances. It only led to her glorification. But, in doing so, she was certain of attaining her end, a holy one. The end justified the means.

"Now, as far as I am concerned, the case is in no way similar. Even if I submit to the extravagant caprices of this woman it will not prevent me from being catalogued in the Hall of Red Marble as No 54, or 55 if she prefers to begin with you. Under these circumstances ..."

“Under these circumstances?”

“Under these circumstances it would be unpardonable on my part to acquiesce.”

“What are you going to do, then?”

“What am I going to do! ...”

Morhange leant his head back on the armchair, puffed a cloud of smoke towards the ceiling and smiled.

“Nothing,” he said, “and that's enough. You see man has an incontestable advantage over woman in this matter. Naturally he has it in his power to offer complete resistance. This is not the case with woman.”

And he added with an ironical look: “No one can be compelled who does not submit willingly.”

I lowered my head.

“I have tried,” he began again, “all the subtleties of dialectics on Antinea. Waste of time.”

“'But after all,' I said, my arguments exhausted, 'why not M. Le Mesge?' She burst out laughing. 'Why not the Reverend Mr. Spardeck?' she replied. 'Messieurs Le Mesge and Spardeck are scholars for whom I have great respect. But

“*Maudit sirit a jamais le riveur inutile*

Qui voulut, le premier, dans sa stupidite,

S'eprenant d'un probleme insoluble et sterile,

Aux chases de l'amour meler l'honnetete.”

'Besides' she added, with her smile, which is really charming, 'hast thou never seen them?”

Then followed a few compliments on my appearance to which I could think of no reply, so disconcerted was I by those four lines of Baudelaire.

“She condescended to explain further: 'M. Le Mesge's scholarship is useful to me. He knows Spanish and Italian, keeps my papers in order, and is engaged on establishing my divine genealogy The Rev. Mr. Spardeck knows English and German. Count Bielowsky has a thorough knowledge of Slav languages; besides, I love him like a father. He knew me when I was little, when I had not yet begun to think of this foolishness——thou knowest what I mean. They are indispensable to me for my relations with foreign visitors of different nationalities, although I am beginning to get a good hold of the necessary dialects.. . . But I'm talking a great deal, and this is the first time I have ever explained my conduct. Thy friend is not so curious.' With this she dismissed me. A funny woman indeed. I think she is inclined to be a disciple of Renan, but more of a voluptuary than her master.”

“Gentlemen,” said M. Le Mesge suddenly, “you are late. We are waiting dinner for you.”

The little professor was in unusually good spirits this evening. He was wearing a new violet rosette.

“So you've seen her?” he asked waggishly.

Neither Morhange nor I replied.

The Rev. Mr. Spardeck and the Hetman of Jitomir had already begun dinner when we arrived. The setting sun shed its red rays on the cream–coloured mats.

"Be seated, gentlemen,” said M. Le Mesge noisily. “Lieutenant de Saint–Avit, you were not with us last night. You are tasting tonight for the first time the cooking of Koukou, our Bambara chef. You must tell me what you think of it.”

A negro servant placed before me a splendid gurnard swimming in pimento sauce, red like tomato.

I have already said that I was famished. The dish was exquisite. The sauce at once produced a thirst.

“White Hoggar 1879,” whispered the Hetman of Jitomir, filling my goblet with a fine topaz wine. “I have the care of it; it leaves the head clear but attacks the legs.”

I drained my goblet at a draught. I began to think the company charming.

“Well, Captain Morhange,” cried M. Le Mesge to my companion, who was discussing his gurnard with deliberation, “what do you say to this acanthopterygian? It was caught to−day in the oasis lake. Are you beginning to admit, the hypothesis of the Sahara Sea?”

“This fish is an argument,” said my companion−And, suddenly, he was silent. The door had opened. The White Tarki entered. The guests did not speak.

Slowly the veiled man approached Morhange. He−touched his right arm.

“Very well,” said Morhange.

And, getting up, he followed the messenger.

The flagon of Hoggar 1879 was between me and Count Bielowsky. I filled my goblet——− about half a litre——and drained it feverishly.

The Hetman gave me a look of sympathy.

“Ha, ha!” said M. Le Mesge, nudging my elbow. “Antinea respects military rank, you see.”

The Rev. Mr. Spardeck smiled prudishly.

“Ha, ha!” repeated M. Le Mesge.

My goblet was empty. For one second I was tempted to throw it at his head. But in a twinkling I filled and emptied it again.

“M. Morhange will only taste this delicious roast mutton in spirit,” said the professor, becoming more and more boisterous and helping himself to a large slice of meat.

“He won't miss much,” said the Hetman angrily. “It isn't roast mutton: it's more like wild sheep's horn. Really, Koukou's beginning to make fun of us.”

“You must blame our reverend friend,” continued the grating voice of M. Le Mesge. “I've warned him often enough to spare our cook his ecclesiastical attentions.”

“Professor!” said Mr. Spardeck with dignity.

“I stand by my protest,” cried M. Le Mesge, who now seemed to me slightly intoxicated. “This gentleman shall judge,” he continued, turning towards me. “You are a newcomer. You are unbiassed. Well, I ask you. Has anyone the right to addle the brain of a Bambara cook by stuffing it all day long with theological discussion to which it is in no way adapted?”

“Alas!” replied the pastor regretfully, “how greatly you are mistaken! He is only too predisposed to controversy.”

“Koukou's an idle scoundrel who takes advantage of it to stop work and burn the meat,” said the Hetman. “Long live the Pope!” he shouted, filling up all the glasses.

“I assure you that this Bambara is causing me anxiety,” went on Mr. Spardeck with much dignity. “Do you know the latest? He denies the Real Presence. There he is on the brink of falling into the errors of Zwingle and Oecolampadius. Koukou denies the Real Presence.”

“Sir,” said M. Le Mesge, who was getting very excited, “those who are in charge of the kitchen ought to be left in peace. This was the view of Jesus, Who, I take it, was as good a theologian as you, and yet never thought of drawing Martha away from her ovens in order to talk nonsense to her.”

“Prescisely,” said the Hetman approvingly.

He was holding between his knees a jar which he was trying to open.

“*Cotes roties,”* he whispered to me when he had succeeded. “Your glasses, gentlemen!”

“Koukou denies the Real Presence,” continued the pastor, emptying his glass sadly.

“What!” whispered the Hetman of Jitomir in my ear, “let them talk. Don't you see they're dead drunk?”

He himself was slurring his speech. He had the greatest difficulty in filling my goblet almost to the brim.

I felt inclined to push away the jar. Then a thought came into my mind.

“At this very moment, Morhange . . . Whatever he may say . . . She is so beautiful!”

Then, taking up my goblet, I drained it once more.

M. Le Mesge and the pastor were now involved in a most extraordinary religious controversy hurling at each other's heads the Book of Common Prayer, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the *Unigenitus* Bull. Gradually the Hetman was beginning to gain over them all the ascendency of the man of the world, however drunk, which education gives over mere instruction.

Count Bielowsky had drunk quite five times as much as the professor and the pastor. But he carried his wine

ten times as well.
“Let's leave these tipplers to it,” he said disgustedly. “Come, my dear friend. Our partners are waiting for us in the card–room.”
“Ladies and gentlemen,” said the Hetman as we entered, “allow me to present to you a new player, my friend Lieutenant de Saint–Avit.”
“Don't say anything,” he whispered in my ear. “These are really the servants of the household. . . . But, I pretend, you see.”
I saw indeed he was drunk.
The card–room was narrow and long. A huge table on the level with the floor, and surrounded by cushions on which a dozen natives were wallowing, formed the principle furniture. On the wall were pictures representing the most happy eclecticism: *Saint John the Baptist,* by Da Vinci, and Neuvelle's *La Maison des Demises Cartouches.*
On the table were goblets of terra–cotta and a heavy jar full of palm spirit.
I found some acquaintances among the company: my masseur, the manicurist, the barber, two or three White Tuaregs who had lowered their veils and were gravely smoking their long, copper–lidded pipes. While waiting for something better all were absorbed in the excitement of a game of cards I took to be *rams.* Two of Antinea's beautiful attendants, Aguida and Sydia, were there. Their smooth dusky skin shone under their silver–spangled veils. I was sorry not to see the red silk tunic of Tanit–Zerga. Again I thought of Morhange, but only for the space of a second.
“The counters, Koukou,” ordered the Hetman. “We're not here for fun.”
The Zwinglistic cook placed before him a box of multi–coloured counters. Count Bielowsky set himself to count them, arranging them in little heaps with infinite seriousness.
“The white are worth a louis,” he explained to me. “The red, a hundred francs. The yellow five hundred. The green a thousand. Oh! we play a devil of a game here, you know. But you'll see.
"I take the bank at ten thousand,” said the Zwinglistic cook.
“Twelve thousand,” said the Hetman.
“Thirteen,” said Sydia, who, seated on one of the Count's knees, was arranging her counters in little piles with a moist smile.
“Fourteen,” I said.
“Fifteen,” came the shrill voice of Rosita, the old negro manicurist.
“Seventeen!” proclaimed the Hetman.
“Twenty thousand!” snapped the cook.
And he knocked down the hammer with a look of defiance at the rest.
“Twenty. I take the bank at twenty thousand.”
The Hetman made an angry movement.
“Curse this Koukou! There's nothing to be done against the brute. You'll have to play carefully, sir.”
Koukou had taken up his position at the end of the table. He was now shuffling the cards with a dexterity which left me gasping.
“What did I tell you? It's like being at Anna Deslions',” murmured the Hetman proudly.
“Gentlemen, put down your stakes,” snapped the negro; “your stakes, gentlemen.”
“Wait, idiot,” said Bielowsky. “Can't you see the glasses are empty? Here, Cacambo!”
The glasses were at once filled by the grinning masseur.
“Cut,” said Koukou to Sydia, the beautiful Tarki, who was on his right.
The young woman, evidently superstitious, cut with her left hand. But it must be admitted that right was busy with her goblet, which she was raising to her lips. I saw the beautiful smooth throat swell.
“Deal,” said Koukou.
We were placed as follows: on the left the Hetman, Aguida (whose waist his arm encircled—with the most aristocratic nonchalance), Cacambo, a Tarki woman, and two veiled negroes, solemn and absorbed in the game. On the right Sydia, myself, the old manicurist Rosita, Barouf the barber, another woman, two White Tarki, solemn and attentive like those opposite.
“I'll have one,” said the Hetman.
Sydia shook her head.

Koukou drew the cards, giving the Hetman a four and himself a five.

"Eight," Bielowsky announced.

"Six," said the pretty Sydia.

"Seven," snapped Koukou. "One *tableau* pays the other," he added coolly.

"I double," said the Hetman.

Cacambo and Aguida followed his example. On our side we were more cautious. The manicurist especially never risked more than twenty francs at a time.

"I demand equal *tableaux"* said the imperturbable Koukou.

"This is insufferable," growled the Count. "There. Are you satisfied?"

Koukou dealt and put down a nine.

"Damnation!" roared Bielowsky. "I had eight."

I, who had two kings, didn't express my annoyance. Rosita took my cards from me.

I looked at Sydia on my right. Her mass of black hair covered her shoulders. She was really very beautiful, a little intoxicated like all the rest of this phantasmagorical assembly. She was looking at me, too, but from under her eyelids like a timid animal.

"Ah!" I thought, "she's afraid. I am branded as *preserved game."*

I touched her foot. She drew back, afraid.

"Who wants cards?" asked Koukou.

"I don't," said the Hetman.

"I have mine," said Sydia.

The cook drew a four.

"Nine," he said.

"The card that should have been mine," swore the Count. "And I had five——five! Oh, if only I had not once promised His Majesty the Emperor Napoleon III. never to draw to a five any more! It's hard at times, very hard. . . . And there's that brute of a nigger quitting."

It was true. Koukou, having scooped in three−quarters of the counters, was getting up with dignity and bowing to the company: "We meet to−morrow, gentlemen."

"Get out, all of you!" bellowed the Hetman of Jitomir. "Stay with me, Monsieur de Saint− Avit."

When we were alone he poured himself out another large goblet of spirit. The ceiling of the room was lost in grey smoke.

"What time is it?" I asked.

"Half−past twelve. But you mustn't desert me like this, my boy, my dear fellow. My heart is heavy, very heavy."

Hot tears were falling from his eyes. The tails of his coat spread out on the divan behind him like great apple−green wings.

"Don't you think Aguida beautiful?" he said, still weeping. "Do you know, she reminds me, though slightly darker perhaps, of the Countess of Teruel, the beautiful Countess of Teruel who was bathing naked by the Rocher la Vierge at Biarritz one day when Bismarck was on the bridge. You don't remember? Meriedes de Teruel?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Of course, I was forgetting, you were too−young. Two or three years old. A child. Yes, a child. Oh, my boy, to have known those times, and to be reduced to playing banker with savages . . . I must tell you about it. ... "

I got up and pushed him aside.

"Do stay! Please stay!" he implored. "I'll tell you anything you like, anything——how I came here, things I've never told another soul. Please stay; I feel the need of opening my heart to a real friend. I'll tell you all, I say. I have confidence in you. You're a Frenchman, a gentleman. I know you won't repeat anything."

"I won't repeat anything? To whom?"

"To ..."

His voice was strangled. I thought I detects a shudder of fear. "To whom?"

"To ... to her, Antinea," he muttered. I sat down again.

CHAPTER XIII. THE HETMAN OF JITOMIR'S STORY

COUNT CASIMIR had reached the stage where intoxication assumes a sort of solemn compunction. He collected himself for a second and began this story, the archaic flavour of which I am afraid I can only produce imperfectly:

"When the new muscatels begin to ripen again in Antinea's garden I shall be sixty−eight. It's a sad thing, my dear boy, to have eaten one's corn green. It is untrue that life is a perpetual beginning again. What bitterness to have known the Tuileries in 1860 and then to be reduced to my present condition!

"One evening, very shortly before the war (I remember Victor Noir was still alive), some charming women whose names I will suppress (I come across the names of their sons from time to time in the society columns of the *Gaulois)* expressed to me a wish to rub shoulders with the real Bohemian world. I took them to a ball at the Grande Chaumiere. It was a company of young artists, demi−mondaines, and students. Our attention was attracted in particular by a small dark young man, dressed in an ill−fitting frock−coat and a pair of check trousers obviously unsupported by braces. He danced in an extravagant fashion. These ladies enquired his name: Leon Gambetta.

"How exasperating it is to think that it only required a shot from my pistol that night to account for this rascally lawyer and ensure for ever my own happiness and that of the country of my adoption, for, my dear friend, I am a Frenchman at heart, if not by birth.

"I was born in 1829, at Warsaw, of a Polish father and a Russian, or rather Volhynian mother. It is from her I get my title of Hetman of Jitomir. It was restored to me by the Czar Alexander II. at the request of my august master the Emperor Napoleon III. on the occasion of the Czar's visit to Paris.

"For political reasons into which I cannot go without relating the history of unhappy Poland, my father, Count Bielowsky, left Warsaw in 1880 and went to live in London. On the death of my mother he began to dissipate his enormous fortune——– from grief, they say. When he died in his turn, at the time of the Pritchard affair, he left me scarcely a thousand pounds a year and a few card−debts which I have since found valueless.

"I shall never be able to think without emotion of my nineteenth and twentieth years, during which I ran completely through this little legacy. London was indeed a delightful city. I had fitted out very jolly little bachelor's quarters in Piccadilly.

Piccadilly! Shops, palaces, bustle and breeze
The whirling of wheels, and the murmur of trees.'

"Fox−hunting, driving a buggy in Hyde Park, bachelor−parties which did not prejudice select little parties with the facile Venuses of Drury Lane took up all my time. But no, not all. There was card−playing, and a feeling of filial piety urged me to follow in the footsteps of the late Count, my father. Cards led to the events I am about to relate which were to have such a disturbing effect on the rest of my life.

"My friend Lord Malmesbury had said to me a hundred times: 'I must take you to see an exquisite woman who lives at 277, Oxford Street——–Miss Howard.' One evening I let him take me. It was February 22nd, 1848. The mistress of the house was indeed of perfect beauty and the company charming. Besides Malmesbury I found several friends, Lord Clebden, Lord Chesterfield, Sir Francis Mountjoye, a major in the 2nd Life Guards, and Count D'Orsay. We played cards and then began to talk politics. The conversation turned on events in France, and a long discussion followed on the consequences of the disorders which had broken out in Paris that same morning as a result of the prohibition of the twelfth *arrondissement* banquet, news of which had just been telegraphed through. Until then I had never taken any interest in public affairs. I don't now what put it into my head to declare, with all the vehemence of my nineteen years, that the news from France meant first the Republic and after that the Empire.

"The company greeted my outburst with discreet laughter and their eyes turned towards a guest who made the fifth at a *bouillotte* table where the game had just come to an end.

"The guest smiled too. He rose and came up to me. I saw he was rather below middle height wore a tightly−fitting frock−coat and had a vague distant look in his eyes.

"The whole company watched this scene with delighted amusement.

“'Whom have I the honour . . .?' he asked in a well−modulated voice.

“'Count Casimir Bielowsky,' I replied tartly, to show him that the difference between our ages did not warrant his question.

“'Well, my dear Count, may your prophecy be fulfilled, and I hope you won't neglect the Tuileries,' said the guest in the blue frock−coat, smiling.

“And he added, at last consenting to introduce himself:

“'Prince Louis−Napoleon Bonaparte.'

“I took no active part in the Coup d'Etat and I am not sorry. My feeling is that a foreigner has no right to interfere in a country's domestic troubles. The Prince appreciated my discretion and did not forget the young man who had proved such a happy augury for him.

“I was one of the first he called to the Elysee. My fortune was definitely founded by a decree of *Napoleon le Petit−* The following year, when Mgr. Sibour passed through, I was made Gentleman of the Bedchamber, and the Emperor extended his kindness so far as to marry me to the daughter of Marshal Repeto, Duke of Mondovi.

“I have no scruples in stating that this union was not what it might have been. The Countess, ten years older than I, was disagreeable and not particularly good−looking. Moreover, her family had insisted on the usual marriage settlement. Now, at this time I had nothing left but my twenty−five thousand pounds as Gentleman of the Bedchamber. A poor position for a friend of Count d'Orsay and the Duke of Gramont−Caderousse. Had it not been for the kindness of the Emperor I don't know what I should have done.

“One morning, in the spring of 1862, I was in my study reading my mail. There was a letter from His Majesty, summoning me for four o'clock at the Tuileries; a letter from Clementine informing me that she was expecting me at her house at five o'clock. Clementine was the beauty with whom I was then making a fool of myself. I was all the more proud of her because one evening at the Maison Doree I had snatched her from under the nose of Prince Metternich, who was very much taken with her. The whole Court envied me this conquest; I was morally obliged to take on its expenses. And then Clementine was so pretty! The Emperor himself . . . The other letters——great heavens!——the other letters were just bills from this child's tradesmen, for, in spite of my discreet remonstrances, she insisted on having them sent to my conjugal address.

“They ran up to rather more than forty thousand francs. Gowns and opera−cloaks from Gagelin−Origez, 23, Rue Richelieu; hats and coiffures from Madame Alexandrine, 14, Rue d'Antin; countless petticoats and lingerie from Madame Pauline, 100 Rue de Clery; jewellery and gloves from Josephine of the *Ville de Lyon,* 6, Rue de la Chaunee−d'Antin; taffetas from the *Malle des Indes;* handkerchiefs from the *Compagnie Irlandaise;* lace from the *Maison Ferguson; lait antephelique* from Candes. This last item especially astounded me. The bill showed fifty−one bottles. Six hundred and thirty francs fifty centimes for *lait antephelique!* Enough to soften the epidermis of a squadron of guards.

“'We can't go on like this,' I said, putting the bills in my pocket.

“At ten to four I was pouring through the door of the Carrousel.

“In the aides−de−camp's ante−room I ran into Bacciochi.

“'The Emperor is ill,' he said. 'He is confined to his room. He has given orders for you to be shown in as soon as you came. Come along.'

“His Majesty, dressed in a frogged tunic with Cossack trousers, was dreaming by the window. You could see the pale waving foliage of the Tuileries glistening in the fine warm rain.

“'Oh, there you are!' said Napoleon. 'Well, take a cigarette. You seem to have made things hum at the Chateau des Fleurs last night——you and Gramont−Caderousse.'

“I smiled with satisfaction.

“'Really, your Majesty has heard already . . .'

“'I have heard, vaguely.'

“'Has your Majesty heard Gramont−Caderousse's latest? '

“'No, but you must tell me.'

“'Well, here it is. There were five or six of us ——myself, Viel−Castel, Gramont, Persigny. . . .'

“'Persigny?' said the Emperor. 'He shouldn't go about in public with Gramont after the stories going about Paris with regard to his wife.'

“'Exactly, sire. Well, Persigny was certainly upset. He began to talk to us about the distress the Duchess's

conduct was causing him.'

“'This Fialin is somewhat wanting in tact,' murmured the Emperor.

“'Exactly, sire. Well, does your Majesty know what Gramont said to him? '

“'What? '

“'He said: “Monsieur le due, I forbid you to speak ill of my mistress in my presence.” '

“'Gramont goes too far,' said Napoleon, with a dreamy smile.

“'That's what we all thought, sire, including Viel–Castel, who, however, was tremendously tickled.'

"'By the way,' said the Emperor after a silence, 'I forgot to ask after Countess Bielowsky.'

"'She's very well, sire. I thank your Majesty.'

“'And Clementine? Still kind? '

“'Yes, sire. But . . .'

“'It seems M. Baroche is head over ears in love with her.'

“'I am deeply honoured, sire. But this honour is becoming very burdensome.'

“I pulled out of my pocket the morning's bills and showed them to the Emperor.

“He looked at me with a far–away smile.

“'Tut, tut! Is that all? I'll see to that, especially as I want to ask a service of you.'

“'I am entirely at your Majesty's service.'

“He rang a bell.

“'Tell M. Mocquard to come.'

“'I am not well,' he added. 'Mocquard will explain what I want.'

“The Emperor's private secretary entered.

“'Here's Bielowsky, Mocquard,' said Napoleon. 'You know what I want him to do. Tell him.'

“And he began to drum his fingers on the window–panes, against which the rain was now dashing angrily.

“'My dear Count,' said Mocquard, sitting down, 'it's very simple. You must have heard of a clever young explorer, M. Henry Duveyrier.'

“I shook my head, very surprised at this opening.

“'M. Duveyrier,' continued Mocquard, 'has returned to Paris after a particularly daring expedition into Southern Algeria and the Sahara. M. Vivien de Saint–Martin, whom I saw a few days ago, assured me that the Societe de Geographic intended to award him its gold medal on the strength of it. During his expedition M. Duveyrier got into touch with the chiefs of the tribe which hitherto has resisted his Majesty's armies, the Tuaregs.'

“I looked at the Emperor; my amazement was so great that he began to laugh.

“'Listen,' he said.

“'M. Duveyrier,' Mocquard continued, 'succeeded in arranging for a delegation of these chiefs to come to Paris to present their respects to his Majesty. Very important results may come of this visit, and his Excellency the Colonel Minister has hopes of obtaining their signature to a commercial treaty giving particular advantages to our country men. These chiefs, of whom there are five, including Sheikh Othman, Amenokal or Sultan of the Adzger Confederation, arrive to–morrow morning at the Gare de Lyon. M. Duveyrier will be there to meet them. But the Emperor thought that as well——'

“'I thought,' said Napoleon III., thoroughly enjoying my discomfiture, 'that it was correct that one of the Gentlemen of my Bedchamber should be at the station to meet these Mussulman dignitaries. That's why I sent for you, my poor Bielowsky. Don't be frightened,' he added, laughing louder than ever. 'You will have M. Duveyrier to support you. You are only responsible for the ceremonial part of the reception; you will accompany these *imams* to the luncheon I am giving in their honour to–morrow at the Tuileries; then, in the evening, using the necessary discretion in view of their religious scruples, which are very sensitive you will arrange to give them a good insight into Parisian life, without going too far; don't forget that in the Sahara they are high religious dignitaries. In this respect I rely on your tact and give you *carte blanche*. . . . Mocquard! '

“'Sire? '

“'You will arrange for the funds required by Count Bielowsky for the reception of the Tarki delegation. They will be drawn half on the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, half on the Colonial Office. I should think, to begin with, a hundred thousand francs. ... If the Count finds this insufficient he has only to inform you.'

“Clementine lived in a little Moorish apartment I had bought for her from M. de Lesseps in the Rue Boccador. I found her in bed. On seeing me she burst into tears.

“'What fools we are!' she sobbed. 'What have we done!'

“'Come, Clementine.'

“'What have we done, what have we done!' she repeated, and I felt pressed against me her heavy black hair, her warm flesh fragrant with *Eau de Nanou.*

“'What's the matter? What is it?'

“'This,' and she whispered in my ear.

“'No!' I said, aghast. 'Are you sure?'

“'Sure! I should think I am.'

“I was completely knocked over.

“'You don't look pleased,' she said bitterly.

“'I won't say that, Clementine, but after all ... Oh, I'm very glad, I assure you.'

“'Prove it then: let's spend to−morrow together.'

“'To−morrow!' I ejaculated. 'Impossible!'

“'Why?' she asked suspiciously.

“'Because to−morrow I have to pilot the Tarki mission round Paris. . . . The Emperor's orders.'

“'What sort of tale is this?' said Clementine.

“I admit that nothing so much resembles a lie as the truth.

“I recounted Mocquard's story to Clementine as best I could. She listened with an expression which meant, 'You can't get round me like that!'

“At last, furious, I burst out:

“'You've only to come and see. I'm dining with them to−morrow; you can come too.'

“'Of course I shall come,' said Clementine haughtily.

“I confess that at this moment I lost my presence of mind. But, after all, what a day I had had I Forty thousand francs in bills in the morning. Orders to conduct a convoy of savages round Paris on the following day. And now, as the last straw, the announcement of my prospective fatherhood. . . .

“After all, I thought, as I went home, these are the Emperor's orders. He told me to give these Tuaregs a glimpse of Parisian life. Clementine knows how to behave, and it won't do to exasperate her just now. I'll order a private room for to−morrow evening at the Cafe de Paris and I'll tell Gramont−Caderousse and Viel−Castel to bring their mistresses. It will be very amusing to see how the children of the desert get on at this little party.

“The train from Marseilles arrived at 10.20. On the platform I found M. Duveyrier, a pleasant young man of twenty−three, with blue eyes and a little fair goatee beard. The Tuaregs fell into his arms as they got out of the train. He had lived among them for two years, in tents. He presented me to the chief, Sheikh Othman, and the four ethers, splendid figures of men with their blue cotton robes and red leather amulets. Fortunately they all talked a sort of *sabir* which made things easier. “I needn't dwell on the luncheon at the Tuileries, the visits in the evening to the Museum, the Hotel de Ville, the Imprimerie Imperiale. Each time the Tuaregs wrote their names in the visitors' book of the place. It was an endless process. To give you an idea of what it meant, this is the full name of Sheikh Othman alone: Othman−ben−el−Hadj−el—Bekri—ben—el—Hadj—el—Faqqui—ben−Mohammed−Boja−ben−si−Ahmed−es−Souki−ben−Mahmoud.[1] “ And there were five like that!” I kept in good spirits, however, for on the boulevards our success was enormous. At the Cafe de Paris, at 6.30, it became delirious. The delegation, slightly intoxicated, embraced me, *bono* Napoleon; *bono* Eugenie; *bono* Casimir;

[1] I have found the names of the Tuareg chiefs and those who were in attendance. M. Henry Duveyrier and Count Bielowsky, in the visitors' book of the Imprimerie Nationale.——Note by M. Leroux.

bono roumis. Gramont−Caderousse and Viel−Castel were already in No. 8 with Anna Grimaldi of the Folies−Dramatiques and Hortense Schnieder, both alarmingly beautiful. But the palm went, when she entered, to my beloved Clementine.

“You must know how she was dressed: a gown of white tulle over a skirt of china−blue tarlatan.

“The tulle skirt was gathered up at each side with garlands of green leaves entwined with climbing roses. In this way it formed a panier which showed the tarlatan skirt in front and at the sides. The garlands rose to the waist, and between the two branches were large bows of pink satin. The lace corsage was draped with tulle, with a berthe of tulle fringed with lace. Her black hair was encircled with a wreath of the same flowers. Two long strands of leaves were entwined in her hair and fell over her neck. As an opera–cloak she wore a sort of hood of blue cashmir embroidered in gold and lined with white satin.

“So much splendour and beauty at once excited the Tuaregs, and especially the one on Clementine's right, El–Hadj–ben–Guernama, brother of Sheikh Othman and Amenokal of the Hoggar. With the *potage essence de gibier* washed down with Tokay they were already smitten. When they reached the *compote de fruits Martinique a la liqueur de Mme. Amphoux* they showed the most extravagant signs of unbounded passion. The *vin de Chypre de la Commanderie* left no doubt at all as to their feelings. Hortense was kicking me under the table. Gramont, trying to do the same to Anna, made a mistake and aroused indignant protests from one of the Tuaregs. I can assure you that when the time came to leave for Mabille we had a good idea of the way in which our visitors respected the Prophet's commandment with regard to the prohibition of wine.

“At Mabille, while Clementine, Hortense, Anna Ludovic and the three Tuaregs were indulging in a frenzied gallop, the Sheikh Othman took me aside and confided to me with visible emotion a certain commission with which he had just been charged by his brother the Sheikh Ahmed.

“Early next day I arrived at Clementine's.

“' My dear girl,' I began, after managing, not without some difficulty, to wake her up, 'listen to me; I want to talk to you seriously. “She rubbed her eyes irritably. “' How do you like this young Arab nobleman who was holding you so close last night?”

“'Oh . . . not bad,' she said, blushing.

“'Do you know that in his own country he is a ruling prince and reigns over territory five or six times as large as the dominions of our august master the Emperor Napoleon III.?'

“'He mumbled something of the sort to me,' she said, interested.

“'Well, how would you like to share a throne like our august sovereign the Empress Eugenie?'“ Clementine stared at me in astonishment.

“' I have been charged, in his name, with this message through the Sheikh Othman.'

“Clementine didn't answer. She was both dazzled and taken aback.

“'I an empress!' she said at last.

“'You have only to decide. He wants your answer before midday. If it's “yes” we are to lunch together at Voisin's to fix it up.'

“I saw that Clementine's mind was already made up, but she thought herself called upon to indulge in a little sentiment first.

“'And you —— you!' she moaned. 'Abandon you like this for ever! '

“'My dear child, no nonsense,' I said gently. 'Perhaps you don't know that I'm ruined. Oh yes, absolutely. I don't even know how I'm going to pay for your *lait antephelique.'*

“'Ah!' she said.

“But she added:

“'And ... the child? '

“'What child? '

“'The . . . ours.'

“'Oh, that's true. Er . . . but you can put it down among the profits and losses. I am sure that the Sheikh Ahmed will even think it is like him.'

“'You make fun of everything,' she said, half smiling, half crying.

“The next day at the same hour the Marseilles express carried off the five Tuaregs and Clementine, leaning on the arm of Sheikh Ahmed and beside himself with joy.

“'Are there many shops in our capital?' she asked her *fiance* languishingly.

“And he, grinning broadly under his veil replied:

“'*Besef, besef. Bono, roumis, bono.'*” When the time came for the train to leave Clementine broke down.

“'Casimir, listen, you've always been good to me. I'm going to be a queen. If you have any trouble here,

promise me, swear to me . . .”

“The Sheikh had understood. He took a ring from his finger and slipped it on to mine.

"'Sidi Casimir. my friend,' he said emphatically, 'come to us. Take Sidi Ahmed's ring and show it.

Everyone at Hoggar friend. *Bono,* Hoggar, *bono.'*

"When I left the Gare de Lyon I had a feeling of success, of having brought off an excellent jest.”

The Hetman of Jitomir was completely drunk. I had the greatest difficulty in understanding the end of his story, especially as he intermingled it all the time with lines from the best repertoire of Jacques Offenbach.

“'*Dans un bois passail un jeune homme,*

Un jeune homme frais et beau,

Sa main tenait une pomme,

Vous voyez d'ici *le tableau.'*

“Who got a nasty shock at the time of Sedan? Casimir, little Casimir! Five thousand louis to pay by September 5th, and not the first sou——no, not a sou. Picking up my hat and my courage I start for the Tuileries. The Emperor gone——yes, gone. But the Empress was so kind. I found her alone ——oh, the rats soon leave in these circumstances–alone with a senator, M. Merimee, the only literary man I knew who was at the same time a man of the world. 'Madame,' he was saying, 'you must give up all hope. M. Thiers, whom I have just met on the Pont Royal, is obdurate.'

“'Madame,' I said in my turn, 'your Majesty will always know where her true friends are.'

“And I kissed her hand.

“'*Evoke, que les deesses*

Ont de drotes de facons

Pour enjoler, pour enjoler, pour enjoler les garcons.'

“I go home, Rue de Lille. On the way I come across the rabble making for the Corps Legislatif at the Hotel de Ville. I had made up my mind.

“'Madame,' I said to my wife, 'my pistols.'

“'What's the matter?' she said, frightened.

“'All is lost. It remains to save honour. I am going to get killed at the barricades.'

“'Oh, Casimir,' she sobbed, flinging herself into my arms. 'I have been mistaken in you. Forgive me!'

“'I forgive you, Aurelie,' I said, with dignified emotion. 'I have myself often been in the wrong.'

“I tore myself away from this sad scene. It was six o'clock. In the Rue du Bac I hailed a passing cab.

“'Twenty francs tip,' I said to the cabman, 'if you get to the Gare de Lyon in time for the six thirty–seven train for Marseilles.' “

The Hetman of Jitomir could say no more. He rolled on to the cushions and slept, his fists clenched.

I reeled to the great window.

The sun was rising, pale yellow, behind the hard blue of the mountains.

CHAPTER XIV. HOURS OF WAITING

IT WAS AT NIGHT that Saint–Avit liked to tell me the details of his amazing story. He divided it into short instalments, strictly chronological, anticipating nothing in the episodes of this drama of which I knew the tragic end. Not merely to husband his effects —— I knew him to be far removed from any calculation of that sort! —— but simply as a result of the strange exaltation into which these memories plunged him.

That night the convoy had just arrived with the French mail. The letters brought in by Chatelain were lying on the little table unopened. The photosphere, a pale halo in the midst of the boundless black desert, made it possible to recognise the handwriting of the addresses. What a smile of triumph came over Saint–Avit's face when, pushing back these letters, I said to him breathlessly:

"Go on."

He acquiesced without waiting to be asked twice.

I cannot convey to you any idea of the fever which consumed me from the day when the Hetman of Jitomir told me his story to the day I found myself once more in Antinea's presence.

The strangest part about it is that the thought that I was in some sort condemned to death had nothing to do with this fever. On the contrary, it was chiefly caused by my anxiety to receive what would probably be the signal of my doom—— Antinea's summons. But it was in no hurry to come. And this delay was the cause of my morbid exasperation.

Did I ever have moments of lucidity during this period? I don't think I did. I can never remember saying to myself: "Well, aren't you ashamed of yourself? Trapped in this anomalous situation, not only do you do nothing to free yourself, but you even bless your captivity and long for your ruin." I did not even qualify my contentment to remain where I was with the plausible excuse that I could not try to escape without Morhange. If sometimes I felt a gnawing anxiety at not seeing him again, it was caused by quite other reasons than the desire to see him safe and sound.

Besides, I knew he was safe and sound. The White Tuaregs of Antinea's private service were not very communicative, it is true. Even the women were scarcely more talkative. I did indeed hear through Sydia and Aguida that my friend was fond of pomegranates or that he couldn't stand banana kouskous. But as soon as I tried to get any information of another kind, they ran away down the long corridors, terrified. With Tanit–Zerga it was different. This little maid seemed to have a sort of natural antipathy to telling me the smallest detail connected with Antinea. She was, however I knew, as devoted to her mistress as a dog. But if I so much as mentioned her name, or even Morhange's, she relapsed into obstinate silence.

As for the Europeans, I hardly liked to question these sinister puppets. Besides, all three were quite useless from this point of view. The Hetman of Jitomir drenched himself more and more with alcohol. What reason he had left he seemed to have exhausted on the evening he had told me the story of his youth. I met him from time to time in the corridors, which had suddenly become too narrow for him, humming in a thick voice a verse of La Reine Hortense:

"*De ma fille Isabelle*
Sois l'epoux a l'instant,
Car elle est la plus belle
Et toi Il plus vaillant."

As for Pastor Spardeck, I should dearly have liked to punch this scribbler's head. Then there was the hideous little man with the decorations, the placid editor of the labels for the Hall of Red Marble. I found it difficult to meet him without shouting in his face: "Well, Monsieur le Professeur, a very curious case of apocope: (Greek) Suppression of the *alpha, tau,* and *lambda!* I've got just as curious an example for you: (Greek)——Clementine. Apocope of the *kappa, lambda, epsilon,* and *mu.* If Morhange were here he'd tell you some pretty erudite things on this subject. But alas! Morhange doesn't deign to mix with us now. Morhange is no longer to be seen."

My thirst for information met with less reserve in Rosita, the old negro manicurist; never have I had my nails polished so often as during those days of uncertainty. Now——six years later——she is probably dead. I shall not be maligning her memory by saying that she was very fond of the bottle. The poor woman couldn't resist those I

brought her and I helped her to empty them out of politeness.

Unlike the other slaves who come from the south to Turkey through the agency of the Rhat slave–dealers, she was born at Constantinople and was brought to Africa by her master, who was the Kaimakam of Rhadames. . . . But don't expect me to complicate this story, already pretty full of digressions, by a recital of the avatars of this manicurist.

“Antinea,” she told me, “is a daughter of El–Hadj– Ahmed–ben–Guemana, Amenokal of the Hoggar and Chief of the great noble tribe of the Kel–Rhelas. She was born in the year 1281 of the Mohammedan era. She would never marry. Her wishes were respected because in the Hoggar, over which she now reigns, a woman's will is law. She is a second cousin of Sidi–El–Senussi, and she has only to speak the word for the *roumi* blood to flow from Djerid to Tuat and from the Chad to Senegal. If she had wished she could have lived, beautiful and respected, in the country of the *roumis.* But she prefers that they should come to her.”

“Cegheir–ben–Sheikh,” I said, “you know him? He is devoted to her?”

“No one here knows Cegheir–ben–Sheikh very well, because he is always travelling. It is true he's very devoted to Antinea. Cegheir–ben–Sheikh is a Senussi and Antinea is the cousin of the Senussi chief. Besides, he owes her his life. He is one of those who assassinated the great Kebir Flatters. For this, Ikhenoukhen, Amenokal of the Adzger Tuaregs, fearing French reprisals wanted to hand over Cegheir–ben–Sheikh. When the whole Sahara rejected him he found refuge with Antinea. Cegheir–ben–Sheikh will never forget, for he is a man of honour and carries out the law of the Prophet. Out of gratitude he brought to Antinea, then twenty years of age and a virgin, three French officers of the 1st Corps of Occupation in Tunisia. They are those numbered, 1, 2, and 3 in the Hall of Red Marble.”

“And has Cegheir–ben–Sheikh always been successful on his missions?”

“Cegheir–ben–Sheikh has been well trained and he knows the great Sahara as I know my little room in the summit of the mountain. At first he made mistakes. It was in this way that on his first journeys he brought back old Le Mesge and the marabout Spardeck.”

“What did Antinea say when she saw them?”

“Antinea? She laughed so much that she let them off. Cegheir–ben–Sheikh was vexed at seeing her laugh so much. Since then he has never made a mistake.”

“He has never made a mistake?”

“No. I have manicured the hands and feet of all who have come here. They were all young and handsome. But I must say that your friend, who was brought to me the other day, was perhaps the most handsome of them all.”

“Why,” I asked, to turn the conversation, “why, since she granted the pastor and M. Le Mesge pardon, has she not set them at liberty?”

“She found employment for them, it appears,” said the old women. “And besides, no one who comes here can ever go away again. Otherwise the French would soon be here, and when they saw the Hall of Red Marble they would massacre everybody. Besides, none of the men brought here by Cegheir–ben–Sheikh, except one, has ever tried to escape, once he has seen Antinea.”

“Does she keep them long?”

“That depends on them and how they please her. Two or three months on an average. It all depends. One big Belgian officer, built like a Colossus, only lasted a week. On the other hand, everyone here remembers the little English officer, Douglas Kaine: she kept him nearly a year.”

“And then?”

“And then, he died,” said the old woman, as though my question astonished her. “What did he die of?” She used the same words as M. Le Mesge: “The same as all the others: of love. “Of love,” she went on. “They all die of love, when they see their time finished and Cegheir–ben–Sheikh setting out to find others. Some died quietly with great tears in their eyes. They would neither eat nor sleep. One French naval officer went mad. He sang, at night, a mournful song of his native country which echoed through the whole mountain. Another, a Spaniard, was like a mad dog——he tried to bite. He had to be cut down. Many have died of *kif,* a *kif* stronger than opium. When they are sent away from Antinea they smoke and smoke. Most of them have died like this . . . the happiest, Little Kaine, died in another way.”

“How did little Kaine die?”

“In a way that distressed us all. I have told you he was the longest with us. We got used to him. In Antinea's

chamber, on a little kairouan table, painted blue and gold, there is a gong, and a long silver hammer with an ebony handle, very heavy. It was Aguida who told me about it. When Antinea, smiling her ceaseless smile, dismissed little Kaine, he stood before her mute and deadly pale. She struck the gong for him to be taken away. A White Tarki entered. But little Kaine had jumped for the hammer, and the Tarki lay on the floor with a broken skull. Antinea went on smiling. Little Kaine was taken to his room. The same night, eluding his guards, he jumped through the window, a height of two hundred feet. The embalmers told me they had the greatest difficulty with his body. But they made a good job of it. You have only to go and look. He is in niche No. 26 in the Hall of Red Marble."

The old woman drowned her emotion in her glass.

"Two days before," she went on, "I had come here to do his nails, for this was his room. On the wall near the window he had scratched something on the stone with his penknife. Look, it's still there."

"*Was it not Fate that, on this July midnight* ..."

At any other moment this verse, cut in the window–stone through which the little English officer had thrown himself, would have filled me with deep emotion. But as it was, another thought was in my heart.

"Tell me," I said as calmly as I could, "when Antinea holds one of us in her power she shuts him up near her, doesn't she? He is seen no more?"

The old woman shook her head.

"She has no fear that he will escape. The mountain is well shut in. Antinea has only to strike her silver gong; he would be at her side at once."

"But my companion! . . . I haven't seen him since she summoned him ..."

The negress smiled knowingly.

"The reason you don't see him is that he prefers to remain with her. Antinea doesn't compel him. Neither does she prevent him."

I banged my fist on the table.

"Get out, you old fool I And as quick as you like."

Rosita ran away frightened, scarcely taking the time to collect her little instruments.

"*Was it not Fate, that, on this July midnight*..." I obeyed the negress's suggestion. Following the corridors, losing my way, set right again by Pastor Spardeck, I pushed open the door of the Hall of Red Marble. I entered.

The coolness of this scented crypt did me good There is no place too sinister to be brightened by the sound of running water. The cascade rippling in the middle of the hall comforted me. Once, before an action, I was lying with my platoon in the long grass waiting for the whistle, the signal to get up and face a hail of bullets. At my feet ran a stream. I listened to its cool gurgle. I watched the play of light and shade in the transparent water, the little insects, the little black fish, the green grass, the yellow, wrinkled sand. . . . The mystery of water has always affected me.

Here, in this tragic hall, my thought was polarised in the shadowy cascade. I felt it was my friend. It kept me from fainting in the middle of the rigid witnesses of such monstrous sacrifices.

"No. 26." It was indeed he. "*Lieutenant Douglas Kaine. Born in Edinburgh, September 21st,* 1862. *Died at Hoggar July 16th,* 1890." Twenty–eight. Only twenty–eight! An emaciated face under it orchilacrum coating. A sad, passionate mouth. It was he indeed. Poor boy. Edinburgh——–I know Edinburgh though I have never been there. From the castle walls you see the Pentland Hills.

"*Follow a little lower with your eye,"* said Stevenson's gentle Miss Flora to Anne in Saint Ives. "*Follow a little lower with your eye and you will see a fold of the hill, the tops of some trees and a tail of smoke out of the midst of them. That is Swanston Cottage, where my brother and I are living with my aunt– If it gives you pleasure to see it I am glad."*

When he left for Darfur, Douglas Kaine must surely have left a Flora in Edinburgh, as fair as the one in Saint–Ives. But what are these slips of girls besides Antinea! Kaine, so reasonable, however, so much made for a love of this sort, loved the other. He is dead. And here is No. 27, because of whom he smashed himself on the rocks of the Sahara, and he too is dead.

Death——love. How naturally these words ring in the Hall of Red Marble! How the greatness of Antinea is enhanced in this circle of pallid statues! Does love, then, need all this death to be multiplied in this way! Other women in the world are doubtless as beautiful as Antinea——more beautiful, perhaps. I take you to witness that I

have said little of her beauty. Why, then, this yearning, this fever, this holocaust of all my being? Why, in order to press this elusive phantom for a moment in my arms, am I ready to do things I hardly dare imagine lest I should be afraid?

Here is No. 53, the last. No. 54 will be Morhange, 55, myself. In six months, eight perhaps ——other things being equal——I shall be set upright in this niche, an eyeless effigy, my soul dead, my body metallised.

I reached the apotheosis of happiness, self–analysing exaltation. How childish I was just now! I gave way to recriminations before a negro manicurist. Upon my soul, I was jealous of Morhange!

"Why not, while I was at it, be jealous of these, the present, then the others, the absent, who will come one by one to fill the black circle of these still empty niches? . . . Morhange, I know, is with Antinea at this moment, and it fills me with bitter, splendid joy merely to think of his. But one evening in three months, four perhaps, the embalmers will come to this place. Niche No. 54 will receive its prey. Then a White Tarki will come to me. I shall tremble with a wonderful ecstasy. He will touch my arm. And it will be my turn to plunge into eternity through the blood–stained gates of love.

When, roused from my meditations, I found myself back in the library, the falling night blurred the shadows of the company.

I recognised M. le Mesge, the pastor, Aguida, two White Tuaregs, and still others, all with their heads together in animated discussion.

Astonished, uneasy even at seeing together so many people who, as a rule, had little in common, I drew closer.

An unheard–of occurrence had just become known, an occurrence which was now setting the whole population of the mountain agog.

Two Spanish explorers from Rio de Oro had just been signalled in the west, in the Adrar Ahnet.

Cegheir–ben–Sheikh, on being informed, had at once prepared to go out to meet them.

Then he had received orders to do nothing.

There was no longer the least possible doubt.

For the first time, Antinea loved.

CHAPTER XV. THE LAMENT OF TANIT–ZERGA

"ARRAAOO, ARRAAOO!"

Vaguely I emerged from the doze to which I had finally succumbed. I half–opened my eyes. I started back hastily.

"Arraaoo!"——

Two feet from my face was the yellow, black–speckled muzzle of Hiram–Roi. The cheetah was watching my awakening, and without great interest, it appeared, for he was yawning; his dark carmine throat against which shone the splendid white fangs opened and shut lazily.

At the same moment I heard a burst of laughter. It was little Tanit–Zerga. She was squatting on a cushion near the divan on which I was stretched, and was eagerly watching me faced with the cheetah.

"Hiram–Roi was bored," she thought fit to explain. "I brought him with me."

"Oh, was he?" I grumbled. "But I say, couldn't he go and be bored somewhere else?"

"He's all alone now," said the little maid. "He's been turned out. He made too much noise playing."

These words brought back the events of the day before.——

"If you like I'll send him away," said Tanit–Zerga

"No, leave him alone."

I looked at the cheetah sympathetically. Our common misfortune brought us together.

I stroked the domed forehead. Hiram–Roi showed his satisfaction by stretching himself to his full length and showing his great amber claws The mat suffered severely for a second.

"There is Gale, too," said the girl.

"Gale! And who the deuce is Gale?"

At the same time I noticed on Tanit–Zerga's lap a quaint animal, the size of a cat, with flat ears and a long nose. Its pale grey fur was ruffled.

It was staring at me with funny little pink eyes.

"It's my mongoose," Tanit–Zerga explained.

"Look here," I said irritably, "are there any more?"

I must have looked very sulky and ridiculous, for Tanit–Zerga burst out laughing. I laughed too.

"Gale is a friend of mine," she said, when she was serious again. "I saved his life. He was quite little then. I'll tell you about it some other day. Look how friendly he is."

"It's kind of you to come and see me, Tanit–Zerga," I said slowly, stroking the little animal's back. "What time is it?"

"A little after nine. Look, the sun is high already. Let me pull down the blind."

The room was filled with shade. Gale's eyes turned pinker, Hiram–Roi's green.

"Very kind," I repeated, following my train of thought. "I see you're free to–day. You've never come so early."

A shadow passed over the girl's face.

"Yes, I am certainly free," she said, almost harshly.

Then I looked at Tanit–Zerga more closely. I noticed, for the first time, that she was beautiful. Her hair, falling over her shoulders, waved rather than curled. Her features were of remarkable purity: very straight nose, small mouth with delicate lips, firm chin. Her complexion was copper, not black. The slight, supple body had nothing in common with the shapeless bundles of fat of pampered negresses.

A broad copper band encircled her forehead and hair. She wore four bracelets, broader still, on her wrists and ankles, and for clothing a tunic of green silk, embroidered with gold. Green, bronze, gold.

"You are a Songhoi, Tanit–Zerga?" I said gently.

She answered, with a sort of stern pride:

"I am a Songhoi."

"Strange little person," I mused.

Obviously there was one point towards which Tanit–Zerga refused to let the conversation drift. I recalled the tone, almost of pain, with which she pronounced the word *they* when she told me they had turned out Hiram–Roi.

"I am a Songhoi," she repeated. "I was born at Gao, on the Niger, the ancient Songhoi capital. My fathers reigned over the great Mandingo empire. Though I am a slave here I am not to be despised." In a shaft of sunlight, Gale, sitting on his little hindquarters, was polishing his glossy moustaches with his front paws; Hiram–Roi, stretched out on the mat, was asleep, uttering now and then a plaintive whine.

"He's dreaming," said Tanit–Zerga, one finger to her lips.

"It is only jaguars that dream," I said. "Cheetahs dream too," she replied gravely. There was a moment's silence. Then she said: "You must be hungry. And I don't think you'll have the pleasure of eating with the others." I did not answer.

"One must eat," she continued. "If you will let me I'll go and fetch something to eat for us both. I'll bring Hiram–Roi's and Gale's dinner too. When one is sad it is not good to be alone."

And the little green and gold sprite went out, without waiting for my reply.

This is how my relations with Tanit–Zerga became more intimate. She would come every morning to my room with the two animals. She rarely spoke to me of Antinea and always indirectly. The question she saw ceaselessly on my lips seemed intolerable to her, and I felt her shun all the subjects to which I did not myself dare to turn the conversation.

The better to avoid them, she talked and talked like a small parrot. I was ill and nursed, as no one ever was before, by this sister of charity in green and bronze silk. The two wild animals, big and small, were there, one on each side of my couch, and, in my delirium, I could see their sad mysterious eyes fixed upon me. In her musical voice Tanit–Zerga told me her beautiful stories, and among them the one she thought most beautiful of all, the story of her life. It was not until later that I suddenly realised how closely the life of this little savage had become bound up with mine. Wherever you may be at the present moment, my dear child, from whatever peaceful shore you watch the tragedy of my life, spare a look for your friend; pardon him for not having at first given you the attention you so richly deserved. "Of the years of my childhood," she said, "I have the memory of a young, rose–tinted sun rising amid the morning mists, over a great river flowing in a broad, full stream, *the full river,* the Niger. It was . . . but you're not listening."

"I am, I swear, little Tanit–Zerga."

"You're sure I'm not tiring you? You want me to talk?"

"Go on, Tanit–Zerga, go on."

"Very well. With my little playmates, to whom I was very kind, I used to play on the banks of the *full river,* under the jujube trees, brothers of the *zeg–zeg,* the thorns of which tore your prophet's head, and which we call the tree of paradise, because it is under such a tree, our prophet tells us, that the elect of paradise will rest.[1] It sometimes

[1] Koran, chap. lxvi., v. 17.——Note by M. Leroux.

grows so big that it would take a horseman more than a century to ride across the shadow it casts. "There we wove beautiful wreaths with mimosa! the pink blossoms of the caper and white nigellas. They were thrown at once on to the green water to propitiate the evil spirit, and we laughed like little mad things when a snorting hippopotamus pushed his great bloated snout out of the water, and bombarded him merrily until he dived again in a swirl of foam.

"So much for the morning. Then Gao lay dead under the grilling scarlet glare of the siesta hours. When that was over we returned to the river bank, to watch the huge armoured crocodiles crawl slowly up the banks amid clouds of mosquito and May–fly, and embed themselves treacherously in the yellow mud of the middle swamps.

"These we bombarded too, as we had done the hippopotamus in the morning, and in praise of the sun sinking behind the black bough of the doul–douls, stamping feet and clapping hands, we performed the ritual dance and sang the Songhoi hymn.

"Such were our usual occupations when we were free children. But you would be mistaken if you thought us merely frivolous, and I'll tell you, if you like, how I, who am talking to you, saved the life of a French chief, who must have been greater than you, judging by the number of gold stripes he wore on his white sleeves."

"Tell me, little Tanit–Zerga," I said, my eyes wandering.

"You shouldn't smile," she went on, a little miffed "and you ought to pay more attention. But what does it matter? It is for myself I tell these things, for memory's sake. Well, above Gao the Niger makes a bend. A little cape covered with great gum–trees juts out into the stream. It was one evening in August, and the sun was dying, for in the forest round about there was not a bird but was perched motionless to await the morning. Suddenly, to westward, we heard a strange noise, *boom–boom, boom–baraboom, boom–boom,* growing louder, *boom–boom, boom–baraboom,* and all at once there came a strange flight of aquatic birds——egrets, pelicans, ducks and widgeon——scattering above the gum–trees and followed through the air by a column of black smoke bent back ever so little by the awakening breeze.

"It was a gunboat rounding the cape, raising on each side of the river a wash which made the hanging undergrowth dance. Behind we could see the red, white and blue ensign trailing in the water, so close was the evening.

"She came alongside the little wooden mole. A launch was lowered, with two *laptots* rowing, and three chiefs who soon jumped ashore.

"The oldest, a French marabout, with a great white burnous, who spoke our language marvellously, asked to speak with Sheikh Sonni–Azkia. When my father came forward and told them it was he, the marabout said that the commander–in–chief of the Timbuctoo district was very angry, because a mile from where they were the gunboat had fouled a dyke of submerged piles, damaging her hull and making it impossible for him to continue his journey to Asango.

"My father replied that the Frenchmen, protectors of the poor home–loving tribes against the Tuaregs, were welcome; that it was not from malice, but because of the fishing, that the dyke had been constructed, and that he placed at the disposal of the French chief all the resources of Gao including a forge, for the repairs to the gunboat.

"While they were talking, the French chief looked at me, and I looked at him. He was a tall man of middle age, with strong, slightly stooping shoulders, and blue eyes as clear as the stream whose name I bear."

"'Come here little one,' he said in his gentle voice.

"'I am the daughter of Sheikh Sonni–Azkia, and I do as I please,' I replied, vexed at so much assurance.

"'You're right,' he answered, smiling, 'for you are pretty. Will you give me the flowers you are wearing on your breast? '

"It was a big necklace of purple hibiscus. I offered it to him. He kissed me. We had made peace.

"Meanwhile, under my father's direction, the *laptots* and the stronger men of the tribe had hauled the gunboat into a little inlet in the river bank.

"'This will take us all day to–morrow, sir,' said the chief engineer, when he had inspected the damage. 'We shan't be able to leave until the day after. And even then these lazy *laptots* will have to buckle to.'

"'What a bore!' grumbled my new friend.

"But his bad temper did not last long, so hard did my little friends and I try to amuse him. He listened to our most beautiful songs, and, to thank us, gave us a taste of the good things they had landed from the boat for his dinner. He slept in the great hut my father had given up to him, and for a long time, before going to sleep, through the branches that formed the walls of the hut where I slept with my mother, I watched the funnel of the gunboat, trembling in red circles on the surface of the dark stream.

"That night I had a terrible dream. I saw my friend, the French officer, sleeping peacefully while above his head a large crow hovered, cawing "*Craah, craah,* to–morrow night the shelter of the gum–trees of Gao——*craah, craah*——will be of little avail—— *craah, craah*——to the white chief and his escort.'

"Dawn was hardly breaking when I went *to* find the *laptots.* They were lying on the deck of the gunboat, taking advantage of the white men's, sleep to idle.

"I went up to the oldest, and spoke to him with authority:

Listen, last night I saw the black crow in a dream. He told me that the shelter of the Gao trees would be ill–fated for your chief to–night.'

"And, as they didn't move, but lay staring at the sky without even appearing to have heard, I added:

"'And for his escort.'

"It was the hour when the sun is highest the colonel was dining in the hut, with the other Frenchmen, when the engineer entered.

"'I don't know what has come over the *laptots* They are working like demons. If they keep it up, sir, we shall

be able to leave this evening.'

“'So much the better,' said the colonel, 'but don't let them scamp the job by hurrying it too much. There's no need to get to Asango before the end of the week. It will be better to start in daylight.'

“I trembled. I went up to him and, pleading, told him the story of my dream. He listened with a smile of surprise, then, at the end, he said seriously:

“'Well, that's settled, little Tanit−Zerga; we'll start this evening, since you wish it.'

“And he kissed me.

“Darkness had already fallen when the gunboat, her repairs finished, left the little creek. The Frenchmen, in the middle of whom I could see my friend, waved their caps to us for a long time, until we could see them no longer; and I stayed alone on the little shaking jetty, watching the flow of the river, until the noise of the smoke−ship, *boom−baraboom,* vanished into the night.”[1]

1 *Cf.* the reports and the *Bulletin de la Societe de Geographic de Paris* (1897) on cruises on the Niger of the Commander−in−Chief of the Timbuctoo district, Colonel Joffre, Lieutenants Baudry and Bluset, and Father Hacquart of the Society of the White Fathers.——−Note by M. Leroux.

Tanit−Zerga paused.

“That was the last night at Gao. While I slept and the moon was still high over the forest a dog harked, but not for long. Then came the shouts of men, the shrieks of women——cries, you know, never to be forgotten, once you have heard them. When the sun rose it found me, quite naked, running and stumbling northwards beside my little companions, to keep up with the speed of the camels ridden by the Tuaregs who escorted us. Behind, yoked together two by two, followed the women of our tribe, among whom was my mother. There were only a few men. They nearly all lay beside my father, the brave Sonni−Azkia, with their throats cut, under the ruins of the huts of Gao——Gao razed to the ground once again by a band of Awellimiden come to massacre the Frenchmen in the gunboat. “Now the Tuaregs were driving us on, on, for they were afraid of being pursued. We went on in this way for about ten days, and, as the millet and hemp was left behind, the march grew more and more terrible. At last, near Isakeryen, in the Kidal country, the Tuaregs sold us to a caravan of Trarza Moors, going from Mabrouk to Rhat. At first I thought all was well, because we were marching less quickly. But suddenly the desert became covered with hard stones and the women began to fall. The last of the men had long ago been beaten to death for refusing to go on.

“I had enough strength left to go on running, and even to keep as far in front as possible, trying not to hear the cries of my little friends. When one fell by the roadside and it was plain she could not get up one of our guards would get down from his camel and drag her to the side of the caravan to cut her throat. One day I heard a cry which forced me to turn round. It was my mother. She was on her knees, stretching out her poor arms towards me. In a moment I was at her side. But a tall Moor, dressed in white, separated us. Hanging from his neck by a black cord was a sheath of red morocco, from which he drew his cutlass. I can still see the blue blade against the brown skin. Another dreadful cry. An instant later, driven along with a stick, I was running again, swallowing my tears, to pick up my place in the caravan.

“Near the wells of Asiou the Moorish merchants were attacked by a band of Kel−Tazholet Tuaregs, serfs of the great Kel−Rhela tribe which rules over the Hoggar, and massacred in their turn to the last man. This is how I came to be brought here and offered in homage to Antinea, who took a fancy to me, and who has always been kind to me since. This is how to−day you come to have to soothe your fever with stories you don't even listen to not some slave, but the last descendant of the great Songhoi emperors, of Sonni−Ali, the scourge of men and nations, of Mohammed Azkia, who made the pilgrimage to Mecca, taking with him fifteen hundred horsemen and three hundred thousand *mithkal* of gold, at a time when our power ranged undisputed from the Tchad to Tuat and the western sea, and when Gao raised above all other towns her cupola, sister of the stars, higher than other cupolas, her rivals, as the tamarisk is higher than the lowly sorghum shoots.”

CHAPTER XVI. THE SILVER HAMMER

IT WAS ON A NIGHT like this that the story I am about to tell took place. About five o'clock the sky became overcast and the signs of an approaching storm made themselves felt in the stifling air.

I shall always remember it. It was January 5th, 1897.

Overcome by the heat, Hiram−Roi and Gate were stretched on the mat in my room. Leaning with Tanit−Zerga on the rock window−bay I was watching the heralds of the storm.

One after another they flashed up, striping the darkness, now complete, with their bluish lines. But no sound of thunder followed. The storm was unable to gain a hold on the summits of the Hoggar. It passed without bursting, leaving us to our dismal bath of perspiration.

"I am going to bed," said Tanit−Zerga.

I have already said that her room was over mine. The bay window which lighted it was some ten yards higher than that upon which I was still leaning.

She took Gate in her arms. But Hiram−Roi was obdurate. Fastened by his four paws to the mat, he mewed with anger and distress.

"Leave him," I said at last to Tanit−Zerga. "For once he may sleep here."

This is how the little wild creature came to bear so large a share of responsibility in the events which are to follow.

Left alone, I lost myself in my thoughts. The night was black. The whole mountain was entombed in silence. The growls of the cheetah, louder and fiercer, dragged me from my meditation.

Standing erect against the door, Hiram−Roi was tearing at it with his claws. He, who just before had refused to follow Tanit−Zerga, now wanted to go out.

"Quiet!" I said. "That will do. Lie down!"

And I tried to drag him from the door.

The only result was a blow from his paw which sent me staggering.

Then I sat down on the divan.

My rest was short−lived. "I must be honest with myself," I thought. "Since Morhange deserted me, since I saw Antinea, I have been obsessed by one thought. What is the good of deceiving myself with Tanit−Zerga's stories, however charming! This cheetah is an excuse, perhaps a guide. Oh, I feel strange things will happen to−night! How have I managed to remain inactive?"

At once my mind was made up. "If I open the door," I thought, "Hiram−Roi will bound along the corridors and I shall have great difficulty in following the trail behind him. I must set about it some other way."

The blind of the bay window was worked by a cord. I pulled it down. I twisted it into a strong leash which I attached to the cheetah's metal collar.

I opened the door a little.

"There! Now get along. Gently there; gently!"

I had indeed the greatest difficulty in restraining the ardour of Hiram−Roi, who was dragging me along the dark maze of corridors.

It was not quite nine o'clock, and the rose night−lamps had almost burned themselves out in their niches. Now and then we passed one sputtering out its last flickers of light. What a labyrinth! Already I knew that I should never be able to find my way back to the room. I could only follow the cheetah.

Furious at first at having to drag me along, he had gradually become accustomed to it. He drove forward, almost full−length along the ground, with sniffs of joy.

Nothing is so much like one dark corridor *as* another dark corridor. I was seized with doubt. Supposing I were to find myself suddenly in the baccarat room! But this was unjust to Hiram−Roi. Like myself, long deprived of a beloved presence, the noble animal led me well to the place where I wanted to go.

Suddenly the darkness in front of us became suffused with light. A rose−window, green and red, appeared, faintly luminous.

At the same time the cheetah, mewing softly stopped before a door pierced by this glowing window.

I recognised it as the door through which the White Tarki had admitted me the morning after my arrival, when I had been attacked by Hiram–Roi, when I had found myself in the presence of Antinea.

“We are better friends to–day,” I whispered, stroking him lest he should emit an incautious cry.

At the same time I tried the door. The light from the window was reflected on the ground, green and red.

A simple latch which I turned. At the same time I shortened the leash the better to control Hiram–Roi, who was growing excited.

The great hall where I had first seen Antinea was quite dark. But the garden on to which it opened shone under a troubled moon in a sky heavy with the storm which would not burst. Not a breath of air. The lake gleamed like a sheet of pewter.

I sat down on a cushion, the cheetah, growling with impatience, now gripped firmly between my knees. I reflected. Not on what I intended to do. My mind had long been made up. But how it was to be done.

Then I seemed to become aware of a distant murmur, a muffled sound of voices. Hiram–Roi growled louder, struggled to get away. I let out the leash a little. He began to creep along the dark walls in the direction of the sound. I followed him, stumbling as quietly as possible among the cushions which were scattered about the floor.

Now my eyes, accustomed to the darkness, distinguished the pyramid of rugs on which I had first seen Antinea.

Suddenly I stumbled over something. The leopard had stopped. I felt myself tread on his tail. The splendid animal did not cry out.

Feeling my way along the wall, I came upon another door. Softly, softly, as with the first, I opened it. The leopard gave a little cry.

“Hiram–Roi,” I muttered, “quiet!”

And I put my arms round his powerful neck.

I felt his warm, wet tongue on my hands. His sides were throbbing. A great happiness was shaking them.

In front of us, its central part lit up, another room appeared. In the middle, squatting on a mat, six men were playing dice and drinking coffee from tiny copper cups with long stems.

They were the White Tuaregs.

A lamp hanging from the ceiling cast a circle of light around them. Beyond its circumference the densest darkness reigned.

The black faces, the copper cups, the white burnouses, the moving light and shade made up a strange etching.

They were playing with restrained gravity, calling the score brusquely.

Then, still very softly, I slipped the leash from the collar of the restive beast.

He leapt forward with a rasping snarl.

What I had foreseen happened. Hiram–Roi's first spring had landed him into the middle of the White Tuaregs, throwing the bodyguard into disorder. With another bound he had regained the shadow. I caught a vague glimpse of the shadowy entrance of a second corridor on the other side of the room, facing that near which I had stopped.

“That is the way,” I thought. In the hall the confusion was indescribable but. noiseless, and it was apparent that the proximity of some great presence imposed this silence on the exasperated guards. The dice and dice–boxes had rolled in one direction, the cups in another.

Two of the Tuaregs, severely shaken, were rubbing their sides with muttered curses.

I need not say that I had taken advantage of this silent *melee* to slip across the room. I was now flattened against the wall of the second corridor down which Hiram–Roi had just disappeared.

At the same moment the clear sound of a gong rang through the silence. From the start that shook the Tuaregs I knew that the way I had taken was the right one.

One of the men got up. He passed me; I followed him. I was perfectly self–possessed. My slightest movement was under perfect control.

"Now I have got so far,” I repeated to myself, what do I risk?——to be led back politely to my room.”

The Tarki raised a curtain. Following him I entered Antinea's chamber.

This immense apartment was at once illuminated and very dark. While the right side, where Antinea was, shone with lights exactly circumscribed by shades, the left remained in darkness.

Those who have been inside a Mussulman house know what is meant by a *guignol,* a kind of square niche in the wall, four feet from the ground, the entrance concealed by tapestry. It is reached by wooden steps. I had sensed a *guignol* on my left. I got into it. My arteries were throbbing in the darkness. But I was still calm, very calm.

From this position I could see and hear everything.

I was in Antinea's chamber. Nothing unusual about this room except the wealth of rugs. The ceiling was in shadow, but several multicoloured lamps shed over the lustrous stuffs a soft, far–off light.

Stretched on a lion–skin, Antinea was smoking. A small silver tray and a flagon were at her side. Hiram–Roi, crouched at her feet, was licking them frenziedly.

The White Tarki stood rigid, one hand on his heart, the other on his forehead, at the salute.

In a very hard voice, and without looking at him, Antinea spoke.

“Why have you allowed the cheetah to pass? I said I wished to be alone.”

“He knocked us over, mistress,” said the White Tarki humbly.

“Were not the doors closed?”

The Tarki did not answer.

“Must I remove the cheetah?” he asked.

And his eyes, looking at Hiram–Roi, who stared at him vindictively, showed plainly that he hoped for a negative reply.

“Leave him, since he is here,” said Antinea.

She tapped the tray nervously with her little silver pipe.

“What is the captain doing?” she asked.

“He has just dined, and with good appetite,” answered the Tarki.

“Did he say nothing?”

“Yes, he asked to see his friend, the other officer.”

Antinea hammered the little tray more sharply.

“Did he say nothing else?”

“No, mistress,” said the man.

A wave of pallor crossed the little forehead of the Queen of Atlantis.

“Go and fetch him,” she said shortly.

Bowing, the Tarki left the room.

I listened to this dialogue with unutterable anxiety. So Morhange, Morhange . . . Was it true, then? Were my doubts of Morhange unjustified? He had asked to see me again and could not!

My eyes never left Antinea.

This was no longer the haughty, scornful princess of our first interview. The golden uraeus no longer surmounted her brow. Not a bracelet, not a ring. Only a full gold–embroidered tunic clothed her.

Her black hair, free from all restraint, poured in waves of ebony over her frail shoulders and bare arms.

A blue tinge covered the full width of her beautiful eyelids. Her divine mouth was drawn down by a line of fatigue. Was it with joy or pain that I saw this new Cleopatra troubled thus? I did not know.

Crouched at her feet, Hiram–Roi fixed upon her a long gaze of submission.

An immense mirror of orchilacrum, flashing gold, was encrusted in the wall to the right. Suddenly Antinea rose before it. I beheld her naked.

Bitter and splendid vision! Posed before her glass, a woman believing herself alone, and awaiting the man she would subdue.

From six perfume–burners scattered about the room rose invisible columns of scented vapour. Balsam essences of Arabia Petrea rose in an undulating woof which caught up my reeling senses. . . . And, with her back towards me, still upright like a lily before her glass, Antinea smiled.

Muffled steps sounded in the corridor. Instantly Antinea resumed the pose of nonchalance with which she had received me the first time. Such a transformation must have been seen to be believed.

Preceded by the White Tarki, Morhange entered the room.

He, too, was slightly pale. But what struck me most was the expression of serene peace which suffused this face I used to think I knew. I felt I had never understood what manner of man Morhange was——never.

He held himself erect before Antinea without appearing to notice the gesture with which she invited him to be seated.

She looked at him, smiling.

"Thou art, perhaps, astonished," she said at last, "that I should summon thee at so late an hour."

Morhange did not move an eyelid.

"Hast thou reflected well?" she asked.

Morhange smiled gravely and made no reply.

I saw in Antinea's face the effort she was making to maintain her smile; I admired the self–mastery of these two beings.

"I have summoned thee," she continued. "Dost thou not guess why? Well, it is to tell thee something thou dost not expect to hear. I reveal nothing when I tell thee I have never met a man such as thou art. During thy captivity with me thou hast expressed but one desire. Dost thou remember what that was?"

"I asked you," said Morhange simply, "permission to see my friend again, before I die."

I cannot say which of two feelings was uppermost in my heart when I heard these words, delight or emotion: delight at realising that Morhange said *you* to Antinea; emotion at learning what had been his one desire.

But already Antinea was saying very steadily:

"That is the very reason for which I have summoned thee, to tell thee thou shalt see him again. I will do more. Thou wilt perhaps despise me more on hearing that thou hadst only to resist me to bring me into subjection to thy will——I, who, until now, have bent all others to mine. Whatever may come of it, it is decided: I set you both at liberty. To–morrow Cegheir–ben–Sheikh will lead you back outside the quintuple circle. Art thou content?"

"I am," said Morhange with a scornful smile.

Antinea watched him.

"That will enable me," he continued, "to organise the next expedition I intend to make this way a little better. For you cannot doubt that I shall insist on returning to show my gratitude. But next time, to render to so great a queen the honours due to her, I shall ask my government to entrust to me two or three hundred European soldiers and a few guns."

Antinea had risen to her feet, very pale.

"What dost thou say?"

"I say," continued Morhange coldly, "that this was obvious. After threats come promises."

Antinea swept up to him. He had folded his arms. He was watching her with a kind of grave pity.

"I will have thee put to death with the most atrocious tortures," she said at last.

"I am your prisoner," said Morhange.

"Thou shalt suffer things beyond thy imagination."

And Morhange repeated with the same sad calm: "I am your prisoner."

Antinea was pacing the room like a caged animal. She went up to my friend, and, losing control of herself, struck him in the face.

He smiled and mastered her, bringing together her slender wrists, which he held tight with a strange mingling of force and gentleness.

A roar broke from Hiram–Roi. I thought he was about to spring. But the cold stare of Morhange held him back, fascinated.

"I will have thee killed before thy companion's eyes," stammered Antinea.

It seemed to me that Morhange's pallor had increased, but it was only for a second. He retorted with a sentence, the nobility and clear–sightedness of which held me spellbound.

"My friend is a brave man. He does not fear death. Moreover, I am sure he will prefer death to a life such as I should buy back at the price of what you suggest."

So saying he released Antinea's wrists. Her pallor was terrifying. I felt that her lips were about to pronounce the fateful words.

"Listen," she said.

How beautiful she was then in her scorned majesty, her beauty powerless for the first time!

“Listen,” she went on, “listen. For the last time, remember that I hold the gates of this palace. Remember that I hold supreme sway over thy life. Remember that thou canst breathe only so long as I love thee; think . . .”

“I have thought of all that,” said Morhange.

“For the last time,” repeated Antinea.

The wonderful serenity of Morhange's face at this moment was such that I no longer saw her with whom he spoke. Nothing earthly remained in this transfigured face.

“For the last time,” spoke Antinea's voice, almost breaking.

Morhange was no longer looking at her.

“Very well! Have it thy own way,” she said.

A clear sound rang out. She had struck the silver gong. The White Tarki appeared.

“Go.”

And Morhange, head erect, went.

Now Antinea is in my arms. It is no longer the haughty, scornful voluptuary that I press to my heart. She is now simply a little child miserable and humiliated.

Such is her prostration, she is not surprised to see me rise up beside her. I have her head on my shoulder. Like the crescent moon among black clouds I see the little hawk–like profile appear and vanish among her hair. Her warm arms strain me to her convulsively. . . . *Oh, trembling human heart!* . . .

Who could resist such embraces among these manifold perfumes, the languor of the night! I feel that I have renounced existence. Is this my voice murmuring:

“What thou willst, what thou askest I will do, I will do it ”?

My senses are quickened tenfold. My head, thrown back, rests on a little knee nervous and yielding. The clouds of perfume roll up. Then I seem to see the golden lamps from the ceiling begin to sway like giant thuribles. Is this my voice repeating:

“What thou willst, I will do ”?

Almost touching my face I see the face of Antinea; a strange light has passed over the great pupils.

A little beyond I see the glowing eyes of Hiram–Roi. Beside him stands a little kairouan table, blue and gold. On this table I see the gong with which Antinea summons her attendants. I see the hammer with which she struck it just now ——a hammer with a very long ebony handle and a heavy silver head . . . the hammer with which little Kaine killed . . .

Now I see no more. . . .

CHAPTER XVII. THE VIRGINS OF THE ROCKS

I AWOKE IN my room. The sun, already at the zenith, was filling it with intolerable light and heat.

The first thing I saw on opening my eyes was the blind, torn down and lying in the middle of the room. Then the events of the night began to come back to me confusedly.

My heavy head gave me pain. My intelligence was wandering. My memory seemed clogged. I went out with the cheetah, that is certain. The red mark on my forefinger shows how fiercely he tugged at the leash. My knees are still marked with dust. It is true that I crept along the wall, into the room where the Tuaregs were playing dice, at the moment when Hiram–Roi sprang. And then, after? Oh yes, Morhange and Antinea. . . . And then, after? . . .

I knew no more. And yet, something must have happened, something I could not remember.

I was worried. I wanted to remember, and yet I seemed afraid of succeeding; never have I felt anything so painful as this paradox.

“It is a long way from here to Antinea's apartments. I must have been sleeping soundly when I was carried back——for, after all, I must have been carried——not to have been aware of what was going on!”

There I stopped my investigations, my head ached too much.

“Let's get some air,” I muttered. “It is stifling in here. It will drive me mad.”

I felt I must see somebody, no matter whom. Mechanically I made my way to the library.

I found M. Le Mesge in a transport of delirious joy. The professor was just disembowelling an enormous package carefully sewn up in brown cloth.

“You've come in the nick of time, my dear sir,” he cried, on seeing me come in. “The reviews have just arrived.”

He was fussing about with fevered haste. From the sides of the package there now poured a stream of pamphlets——blue, green, yellow, salmon.

“Come now, this is splendid,” he went on, dancing with delight. “They are not so late, for here are the numbers of October 15th. Our good 'Ameur deserves a vote of thanks.”

His briskness was infectious.

“He is the worthy Turkish merchant at Tripoli who is good enough to subscribe to all the interesting reviews of both continents. He sends them on *via* Rhadames to a destination he cares little about. But here are the French reviews.”

M. Le Mesge was feverishly glancing through the tables of contents.——I

“Home politics: articles by: MM. Francis Charmes, Anatole Leroy–Beaulieu, and d'Haussonville on the Tsar's visit to Paris. Hello! a study of mediaeval wages, by M. d'Avenel. Here's some poetry, verses by young poets, Fernand Gregh, Edmond Haraucourt. Ah! a review of Henry de Castries' book on Islam. That may be more interesting. . . . But I beg of you, my dear sir, take what you like.”

Joy makes people friendly, and M. Le Mesge was really delirious.

A little breeze was now coming through the window. I went to the balustrade and, leaning on my elbows, began to turn over a number of the *Revue des deux Mondes.*

I was not reading, merely turning over the pages, my eyes sometimes on the paper where the little black letters crawled, sometimes on the roseate glow of the rocky basin grilling under the sinking sun.

Suddenly my attention began to fix itself. A strange connection began to be established between the text and the landscape.

“*Above our heads the sky retained only a few faint traces of cloud, like the white ash left by dying wood–embers. The sun kindled with fire the crests of the rocky circle, the majestic lines of which stood out against the azure. A great sadness, a great solitude fell from above into the deserted belt of hills like a magic potion into a deep cup.”* [1]

1 Gabriel d'Annunzio, *Les Vierges aux Rochers. Cf. La Revue des deux Mondes,* October 15th, 1896, p. 867 *et passim.*

I turned over a few pages feverishly. It seemed that my thoughts were beginning to clear.

Behind me, the grunts of M. Le Mesge, deep in a review, showed the indignation his reading was causing him.

I went on with mine.

"*On all sides a superb spectacle was unrolled at our feet in the crude light. The chain of rocks, completely exposed in their desolate sterility that reached to the topmost crests, stretched like an immense heap of gigantic, shapeless things left to astonish mankind from some primordial titanomachy. ...*"

"It's a shame, an absolute scandal," repeated the professor.

"*... Crumbled towers, razed citadels, fallen cupolas, broken colonnades, mutilated statues, prows of ships, bodies of monsters, bones of Titans, this tremendous mass, in its reliefs and depressions, assumed the form of everything that is vast, everything that is tragic. So limpid was the distance . . .*"

"Nothing less than a scandal," M. Le Mesge, exasperated, was still saying, banging the table with his fist.

"*. . . So limpid was the distance that I could distinguish every contour as if I had had before my eyes, infinitely magnified, the rock which Violante had shown me through the window with the gesture of a creator. . .. .*"

I closed the review, trembling. At my feet was the white rock Antinea had shown me on the day of our first interview, but now red, enormous, abrupt, dominating the bronze−coloured garden.

"It is my whole horizon," she had said.

Now M. Le Mesge's indignation knew no bounds.

"It's worse than a shame, it's an infamy!"

I should have liked to strangle him to silence him. He had seized my arm and was appealing to me.

"You will read this, sir, and without knowing very much about it you will see that this article on Roman Africa is a prodigy of unconscientiousness, a monument of ignorance. And it is signed; do you know by whom it is signed?"

"Let me alone," I said brutally.

"Well, it is signed by Gaston Boissier. It is indeed, sir! Gaston Boissier, Grand Officier of the Legion of Honour, senior lecturer at the *Ecole Normale Superieure,* permanent secretary of the *academie Francaise,* member of the *Academic des Inscriptions et Belles−Lettres,* one of those who once refused my thesis, one of those . . . Poor university, poor France!"

I was no longer listening to him. I had resumed my reading. My forehead was bathed in perspiration. But in my head, bright like a room in which one by one the windows are opened, I felt memories returning as pigeons home with beating wings.

"*... At that moment her whole body shook with an uncontrollable trembling, and her eyes dilated as if some ghastly vision had filled them with horror.*

"'*Antonello . . .' she stammered.*

"*And for several seconds she could not utter a word.*

"*I looked at her with unutterable anguish, and in my soul I suffered every contraction of her dear lips. And the vision that was in her eyes passed into mine, and I saw again the pale, emaciated face of Antonello and the rapid beating of his eyelids, and. the waves of anguish which possessed his long slender body and shook it like a fragile reed."*

Without reading any more I threw the review on to the table.

"That's it," I said.

To cut the pages I had been using the knife with which M. Le Mesge had cut the cord of the package, a short dagger with an ebony handle——one of those daggers which the Tuaregs carry in a sheath strapped to their left biceps.

I put it in the ample pocket of my flannel tunic and walked towards the door.

I was about to go out when I heard M. Le Mesge calling me.

"Monsieur de Saint−Avit! Monsieur de Saint—Avit!"

I turned round.

"One little detail, if you please."

"What is it?"

"Oh, nothing much. You know that I am responsible for the inscriptions in the Hall of Red Marble? . . ."

I went up to the table.

"Well, I omitted to enquire of Monsieur Morhange when he first came the date and place of his birth. Since then I have had no further opportunity. I haven't seen him again. So now I am obliged to have recourse to you.

Can you give me the information?"

"I can," I said quietly.

He had taken a broad label of white cardboard from a box in which there were several; he dipped his pen in the ink.

"Then we'll say: *Number* 54 ... *Captain?"*

"*Captain Jean–Marie–Francois Morhange."*

And, while I dictated, one hand on the edge of the table, I saw a stain on my white sleeve, a little brownish–red stain.

"*Morhange,"* repeated M. Le Mesge, finishing off my companion's name. "*Born at* . . .?"

"*Villefranche."*

"*Villefranche, Rhone.* What date?"

"October 14th, 1859."

"October I4th, 1859. Good. *Died at Hoggar, January 5th,* 1897. There, that's done. And my best thanks, my dear sir, for your kindness."

"You're welcome, sir."

With that I left M. Le Mesge.

Henceforward my mind was made up, and, as I say, I was perfectly calm. Nevertheless, on taking leave of M. Le Mesge, I felt the need of setting a few minutes' interval between the conception of the plan and its execution.

At first I wandered about in the corridors. Then, finding myself in the neighbourhood of my room, I made my way thither. I entered. It was still unbearably hot. I sat down on my divan and began to reflect.

The dagger in my pocket got in my way. I took it out and placed it on the ground.

It was a strong dagger with a lozenge–shaped blade. Between the hilt and the blade was a band of red leather.

The sight of this weapon recalled to my mind the silver hammer. I remembered the ease with which I had handled it when I struck ...

All the details of the scene came back to me with complete precision. But I did not feel so much as a shudder. It seemed as though my determination to kill instantly the instigator of the murder allowed me to call up its ghastly details unmoved.

I reflected on my deed, from astonishment, not for self–condemnation.

"What!" I said to myself, "this Morhange, once a child, who, like all the rest, cost his mother so much anxiety as a baby——*I* have killed him. It was I who cut off this life, destroyed this monument of love, tears and snares escaped that constitutes a human life!"

That was all. No fear, no remorse, none of that Shakespearean horror following murder which to–day, sceptical, *blase* and disillusioned as I may be, makes me tremble when I am alone at night in a dark room.

"Come," I thought; "it is time. I must get it over."

I picked up the dagger, and, before returning it to my pocket, I went through the movement of striking. All was well. The hilt was firm in my hand.

I had never been to Antinea's apartments without a guide——the first time the White Tarki, the second the cheetah. I found it, however, without any difficulty. Just before I came to the door with the luminous rose–window I met a Tarki.

"Let me pass," I commanded. "Your mistress has summoned me."

The man obeyed, shrinking aside.

Soon a muffled melody reached my ears. I recognised the strains of a *rebaza,* the one–stringed violin of the Tuareg women. It was Aguida playing, crouched as usual at her mistress's feet. The three other women, too, surrounded her. Tanit–Zerga was not there.

Oh! since this is the last time I saw her, let me talk to you of Antinea; tell you how she appeared to me in this supreme moment.

Did she feel the menace which hovered over her head, and had she wished to brave it by recourse, to her most invincible arts? In my mind I held a memory of her unadorned body, without rings without jewels, which I had pressed against my heart the night before. And now I almost recoiled to see before me, bejewelled like an idol, not a woman but a queen.

The overpowering extravagance of the Pharaohs weighed down this slender body. On her head she bore the

pskent, the crown of gods and kings, enormous and of gold, on which emeralds, the national stone of the Tuaregs, traced and retraced her name in *Tifinar* characters. She was robed in the *schenti* of red satin, embroidered with golden lotus. At her feet was a sceptre of ebony, terminating in a trident. Her bare arms were encircled by two golden cobras, whose open mouths rose to her armpits, as though to bury themselves there. *Pskent* ear–rings poured over a collar of emeralds the first row of which passed under the firm chin like the chin–strap of a helmet, while others circled downwards over her naked throat.

When she entered she smiled.

“I was waiting for thee,” she said simply.

I stepped forward, and, when I was four paces from the throne, I stopped, right in front of her.

She looked at me ironically.

“What is this?” she said, with the greatest calm.

I followed the direction of her gesture. I saw the hilt of the dagger protruding from my pocket.

I drew it out completely, and held it firmly in one hand, ready to strike.

“The first woman who moves I will have thrown out and left, naked, in the red desert, six miles away,” Antinea said coldly to her women, among whom my movement had caused a murmur of fear.

She went on, addressing me:

“This dagger is really very ugly, and thou seemest to me to hold it clumsily. Shall I send Sydia to my chamber to fetch thee the silver hammer? Thou handlest it better than that dagger.”

“Antinea,” I said hoarsely, “I am going to kill you.”

“Call me *thou,* call me *thou.* Thou didst so last night. Dost thou not dare before these women?” she said, pointing to the women, whose eyes were starting from their heads with terror.

She went on:

“Kill me? Thou art hardly consistent. Kill me at the moment when thou canst gather the prize of the other's murder. . . .”

“Did ... did he suffer?” I said suddenly, trembling.

“Little. I have already told thee, thou didst use the hammer as though thou hadst done nothing else all thy life.”

“Like little Kaine,” I murmured.

She gave a smile of surprise.

“Ah! thou knowest that story. . . . Yes, like little Kaine. But at least little Kaine was logical. Whilst thou ... I don't understand.”

“I don't understand very well either.”

She regarded me with an amused smile.

“Antinea,” I said.

“What is it?”

“I have done what thou didst ask of me. May I, in my turn, make a request——ask thee a question?”

“Say on.”

“It was dark, was it not, in the room where *he* was?”

“Very dark. I was obliged to lead thee to the divan where he slept.”

“*He* was sleeping——thou art sure?”

“I have told thee.”

“*He* . . . did not die at once, did he?”

“No. I know exactly when *he* died: two minutes after, having struck, thou didst run away with a cry.”

“Then there is no doubt, *he* cannot have known ...”

“What?”

“That it was I who held the hammer.”

“*He* might not have known, certainly,” said Antinea, “and yet, *he* knew.”

“How?”

“He knew because *I* told him,” she said, fixing her eyes on mine with magnificent courage.

“And,” I murmured, “*he* believed it?”

“With the help of my explanation, *he* recognised thee by thy cry. If *he* was not to know it was thou, the affair would have had no interest for me,” she added with a scornful little laugh.

Four paces, as I have said, separated me from Antinea. With one bound I cleared them, but, before I could strike, I rolled to the ground.

Hiram–Roi had sprung at my throat.

At the same time I heard the calm, imperious voice of Antinea.

"Call the men," she commanded.

A second later I was freed from the grasp of the cheetah. The six White Tuaregs were on me, trying to strangle me.

I have considerable muscular and great nervous strength. For a moment I succeeded in rising to my feet. One of my enemies lay before me, knocked down by a blow on the chin delivered according to the best rules of the art. Another was groaning under my knee. At that moment I caught a last glimpse of Antinea. She was upright, leaning with both hands on her ebony sceptre and watching the fight with a smile of ironical interest.

At the same moment I uttered a loud cry and loosed my victim. A cracking of my left arm: one of the Tuaregs, seizing this arm from behind and twisting it backwards, had dislocated my shoulder.

When I fainted completely, it was in the corridors, through which two white phantoms were carrying me, so tightly bound that I could make no further movement.

CHAPTER XVIII. THE GLOW–WORMS

THE PALE MOONLIGHT was flooding my room through the wide–open window.

Beside the divan on which I was stretched stood a slender white form.

“It is you, you——Tanit–Zerga!” I murmured.

She placed her finger on my lips.

“Hush! It is I.”

I tried to get up from my couch, but a sickening pain shot through my shoulder. The events of the afternoon came back to my poor aching brain.

“Oh, my dear child, if you only knew!”

“I do know,” she said.

I was weaker than a child. The over–excitement of the day had been followed by deep depression when night came. A lump rose in my throat and was choking me.

“If only you knew, if only you knew! . . . Take me away, my child, take me away.”

“Speak lower,” she said. “There's a White Tarki sentry behind your door.”

“Take me away; save me!” I repeated.

“That's what I'm here for,” she said simply.

I looked at her. She was no longer wearing her red silk tunic; she was wrapped in a simple *halk;* she had thrown one corner over her head.

“I, too,” she said wearily, “I, too, want to go away; I've been wanting to a long time. I want to see Gao again, the village on the river bank, the blue gum–trees, the green water.”

She went on:

“Ever since I first came here I've wanted to go away; but I'm too small to wander alone in the great Sahara. I never dared tell any of the men who came here, before you. They all thought only of *Her.* . . . But you, you tried to kill her.”

I gave a dull groan.

“You're in pain,” she said; “they've broken your arm.”

“Dislocated it, at any rate.”

“Show me.”

With infinite gentleness she passed her little open hands over my shoulder.

“You say there's a Tarki sentry behind my door, Tanit–Zerga,” I said. “How did you get here then?”

“Through there,” she said.

She pointed to the window. The azure square was bisected by a black vertical line.

Tanit–Zerga went to the window. I saw her stand on the sill; a knife flashed in her hand; she cut the rope above, on a level with the top of the window; it fell to the floor with a dull noise.

She came back to me,

“Escape, escape!” I said. “Which way?”

“Through here,” she repeated.

And again she pointed to the window.

I leaned out. My fevered eye searched the well of darkness for the invisible rocks on which little Kaine had been dashed to pieces.

“Through there!” I said, shuddering. “We're two hundred feet from the ground.”

“The rope is two hundred and fifty,” she replied. “It's a good rope, very strong. I stole it just now in the oasis; it was used for felling trees. It's quite new.”

“Through there, Tanit–Zerga? And what about my shoulder?”

“*I* will lower you,” she said decidedly. “Feel how strong my arms are. Of course, I shan't lower you direct. But look: there's a marble column at each side of the window. By passing the rope round one of these and giving it one turn I shall be able to slip you down and hardly feel your weight.”

She continued:——

"And then, look: I've made a big knot every ten feet: they will help me to stop your fall from time to time if I want a rest."

"And you?" I said.——

"When you're at the bottom I shall tie the rope to the column and follow you. I shall have the knots to rest on if the rope tears my hands. But you needn't be afraid: I'm very agile. At Gao, when I was quite a little child, I used to climb gum–trees almost as high as this for toucans' eggs. Going down is easier."

"But when we're down how are we to get out? Do you know the way through the belts?"

"No one knows the belts," she said, "except Cegheir–ben–Sheikh, and perhaps Antinea."

"Well then?"

"Well . . . There are Cegheir–ben–Sheikh's camels which he uses for his journeys. I have loosed one, the strongest. I've brought him under the window and given him a lot of grass so that he won't make a noise and will have had a good feed before we start."

"But ..." I went on.

She stamped her foot.

"But what? . . . *You* stay here, if you like, if you're afraid; *I'm* going. I want to see Gao again, the blue gum–trees, the green water."

I felt myself blushing.

"I'll come, Tanit–Zerga. I would rather die of thirst in the sands of the desert than stay here. Come. . . ."

"Hush!" she said. "Not yet."

She pointed to the towering mountain crest lit brightly by the moon.

"Not yet; we must wait. We shall be seen. In an hour the moon will have sunk behind the mountain; then it will be time."

She sat down and remained silent, her *halk* completely covering her dusky little face. Was she praying? Perhaps.

All at once I lost sight of her. The light from the window was cut off. The moon had set.

Tanit–Zerga's hand rested on my arm. She drew me to the window; I forced myself not to tremble.

Below there was now nothing but absolute darkness. Very softly, but firmly, Tanit–Zerga said:

"Everything is ready. I've twisted the rope round the column. Here's the noose. Pass it under your arms. Stop! Take this cushion. Keep it pressed tight against your wounded shoulder. . . . It's well padded. Keep facing the wall. It will protect you from bumps and scraping."

I was very self–possessed now, very calm; I sat down on the edge of the window–sill, my feet hanging over the abyss. A puff of cool air from the mountain–crests braced me.

I felt Tanit–Zerga's hand in my pocket.

"It's a box. I shall want to know when you reach the bottom, so that I can come down too. You will open this box. There are glow–worms inside. I shall see them and then I'll come."

She clasped my hand lingeringly.

"Now go," she whispered.

I went.

I can only remember one thing about this two–hundred–foot drop; I was irritated whenever the rope stopped and I felt myself dangling against the side of the smooth rock. "What's the little fool waiting for?" I said to myself. "I've been hanging here quite quarter of an hour. . . . Ah! at last! That's it, now another stop!" Once or twice I thought I was touching the ground. But it was only a protrusion of the rock. I had to kick myself away quickly. . . . And then, all at once, I found myself sitting on the ground. I put out my hand. Undergrowth ... a thorn pricked my finger. I was there.

Immediately my former nervousness came back.

I got rid of the cushion and pulled oft the noose. With my unwounded hand I pulled the rope taut five or six feet from the mountain side and put my foot on it.

At the same time I took the little cardboard box from my pocket and opened it.

One after another three living halos rose into the inky night; I saw the glow–worms rise up the side of the rock. Their pale pink phosphorescence glided gently upwards. One by one the rings vanished. . . .

"You're tired, Sidi. Let me hold the rope."

Cegheir−ben−Sheikh had risen from the darkness at my side.

I looked at his tall, black silhouette. A shudder passed through my whole frame, but I didn't let go the rope, which I could already feel jerking faintly.

“Let go,” he repeated imperatively.

And he pulled it out of my hand.

I don't know what came over me at that moment. I was standing beside the tall, black phantom. And what, I ask you, could I do, with my dislocated shoulder, against this strong, agile man? And, after all, what was the good? I saw him, every muscle tense, holding on to the rope with both hands, both feet, his whole body, much better than I could have done it myself.

A rustle above our heads. A little dark figure.

"There,” said Cegheir−ben−Sheikh, seizing the little shadow in his powerful arms and placing it on the ground, while the freed rope swung back against the rock.

On recognising the Tarki, Tanit−Zerga groaned. He pressed his hand brutally against her mouth. “Will you be quiet, camel thief, little worm?” I had seized her arm. He turned to me. “Now follow me,” he said in a tone of command. I obeyed; during the short walk I heard Tanit−Zerga's teeth chattering with terror. We reached a little grotto. “Come in,” said the Tarki.

He lit a torch. By its red light I could see a splendid camel, peacefully munching.

“The little one is no fool,” said Cegheir−ben−Sheikh, pointing to the animal; “she had the sense to choose the finest and strongest; but she didn't use her brains.”

He took his torch up to the camel. “She hasn't much foresight,” he went on. “She's put on nothing but the saddle. No water, no provisions. In exactly three days from now you would all three be dead on the road . . . and what a road!”

Tanit−Zerga's teeth had stopped chattering. She looked at the Tarki, half in fear, half in hope. “*Sidi* Lieutenant,” said Cegheir−ben−Sheikh, “come here, beside the camel, while I explain.” When I was beside him he said: “At each side there is a skin filled with water.

Use this water as carefully as possible, for you have a terrible country to go through. It is possible you may not find a well for five hundred kilometres.

“There,” he continued, “in the saddle−bags, there are some tins of meat. Not much, because the water is more important; there's a carbine, too——your carbine, *Sidi.* Try to keep it for the antelopes. Then there's this.”

He unfolded a roll of paper; I saw his veiled face leaning over it, his eyes were smiling; he looked at me.

“Which way did you think of going when you are outside the belts?” he asked.

“To Ideles, to join the road where you met me with the captain,” I said.

Cegheir−ben−Sheikh shook his head.

“I thought as much,” he muttered.

And he added coldly:

“Before the sunset to−morrow you and the little one would be caught and murdered.”

He went on:

“To the north is the Hoggar, and the Hoggar is subject to Antinea. You must go south.”

“Then we'll go south,” I said.

“Which way will you go south?”

“Through Silet and Timissao.”

The Tarki shook his head again.

“They will look for you that way to,” he said; “it's the best route, the route with wells. They know you are acquainted with it. The Tuaregs will be sure to wait for you at the wells.”

“Then?”

“Then,” said Cegheir−ben−Sheikh, “you must not join the Timassao−Timbuctoo road until you are seven hundred kilometres from here, at Iferouane or, better still, at the Telemsi Wady. There the beat of the Hoggar

Tuaregs ends and that of the Awellimiden Tuaregs begins."

The wilful little voice of Tanit–Zerga broke in:

"It was the Awellimiden Tuaregs who massacred my people and made me a slave; I don't want to go into the country of the Awellimiden."

"Be quiet, little worm," Cegheir–ben–Sheikh said brutally.

He went on, still addressing me:

"What I have said is said. The little one is right. The Awellimiden are a fierce tribe. But they fear the French. Many of them are in touch with the northern stations of the Niger. Besides, they are at war with the people of the Hoggar, who won't follow you into their country. What I have said is said; you must join the Timbuctoo road where it enters the Awellimiden territory. Their country is wooded and well watered. If you reach the Telemsi Wady you will finish your journey under an avenue of flowering mimosa. Besides, the road from here to the Telemsi Wady is shorter than the one through Timassao. It is quite straight."

"It is quite straight, that's true," I said. "But you know that to follow it you must cross the Tanezrouft."

Cegheir–ben–Sheikh made an impatient movement.

"Cegheir–ben–Sheikh knows," he said. "He knows what the Tanezrouft is. He, who has travelled through the whole Sahara, would tremble to cross the Tanezrouft and the south Tasili. He knows that the camels that lose themselves there either die or run wild, for no one will risk his life to go and find them. ... It is this very fear haunting this region that may save you. And then, you must choose: either the risk of dying of thirst on the tracks of the Tanezrouft or the certainty of having your throats cut on any of the other routes."

He added:

"Of course you can remain here."

"My choice is made, Cegheir–ben–Sheikh," I said.

"Good," he said, unfolding again the roll of paper. "This line begins at the opening of the second belt of land, to which I will take you. It ends at Iferouane. I have marked the wells, but don't trust too much to them, for many are dry. See that you don't leave this line. If you do, it means death. . . . Now, get up on the camel with the little one. Two make less noise than four."

We marched for a long time in silence. Cegheir–ben–Sheikh was in front, his camel following obediently. We passed successively through a dark corridor, an enclosed gorge, another corridor . . . the entrance to each hidden by an inextricable tangle of rocks and undergrowth.

Suddenly we felt a burning wind on our temples. A dull reddish glow showed the end of the corridor. It was the desert.

Cegheir–ben–Sheikh halted.

"Get down," he said.

A spring was gurgling from the rock. The Tarki went up to it. He filled a leather drinking, cup.

"Drink!" he said, offering it to us in turn.

We obeyed.

"Drink again," he ordered. "It is so much saved from the skins. Now try not to be thirsty again before sunset."

He tested the girths of the camel.

"All is well," he whispered. "Come; in two hours it will be dawn: you must be out of sight."

In this tense moment I was seized with emotion; I went up to the Tarki and took his hand.

"Cegheir–ben–Sheikh," I said softly, "why are you doing this?"

He started back. I saw his black eyes light up.

"Why?" he said.

"Yes, why?"

"The Prophet," he answered gravely, "allows the just man, once in his life, to place pity before duty. Cegheir–ben–Sheikh is using this dispensation in favour of the man who saved his life."

"And," I said, "are you not afraid that, if I get back among the French, I may disclose Antinea's secret?"

He shook his head.

"I am not afraid of that," he said ironically. "It is not to your interest, *Sidi* Lieutenant, that your people at home should know how the *Sidi* Captain died."

I shuddered at this logical retort.

"I may be making a mistake in not killing the little one," the Tarki added. "But she loves you. She will say nothing. Go, the day will soon break."

I tried to grasp the hand of this strange deliverer, but he drew back again.

"Don't thank me. What I am doing, I am doing for myself, to acquire merit before God. Remember that I shall never do it again, either for you or another."

And as I made a movement to reassure him on this point:

"Don't protest," he said in a tone of mockery I can still hear. "Don't protest. What I am doing is for myself, not for you."

I looked at him, perplexed.

"Not for *you, Sidi* Lieutenant, not for you," he said solemnly, "for *you* will come back, and then don't count on the favour of Cegheir–ben–Sheikh."

"I——come back?" I muttered, shuddering.

"You will come back, you will come back," said the Tarki.

He was standing upright, a black shadow against a grey rock.

"You will come back," he repeated emphatically. "You are escaping now, but you are wrong if you think you will see your own world again in the same light as when you left it. Henceforward one thought, and only one, will haunt you everywhere, and one day, in a year's time, five, or perhaps ten, you will go down this same corridor through which you have just come."

"Be silent, Cegheir–ben–Sheikh!" said the trembling voice of Tanit–Zerga.

"Be silent yourself, little worm," said Cegheir–ben–Sheikh.

He grinned.

"The little one is afraid, you see, because she knows what I say is true, because she knows the story——the story of Lieutenant Ghiberti."

"Lieutenant Ghiberti?" I said, the perspiration breaking out on my temples.

"He was an Italian officer. I met him eight years ago between Rhat and Rhadames. He found that his love for Antinea did not make him forget his love of life. He tried to escape and succeeded; I don't know how, for I did not help him. He went back to his own country. Well, listen: two years later, to the day, I went out on my mission and found a miserable wreck of a man half dead with hunger and fatigue outside the northern belt, looking in vain for the entrance. It was Lieutenant Ghiberti come back. He's in niche No. 39 in the Hall of Red Marble."

The Tarki gave a little laugh.

"That is the story of Lieutenant Ghiberti. . . . But that's enough. Mount your camel again."

I obeyed without a word. Tanit–Zerga, on the croup, put her little arms round me.

Cegheir–ben–Sheikh was still holding the bridle.

"One word more," he said, pointing to the south, where, far away, a black mark showed against the violet sky. You see that *gour* over there: that's your way. It is thirty kilometres from here. You must be at the top of that at sunrise. Then consult your map. The next halting–place is marked. If you don't lose the track you will be at the Telemsi Wady in eight days."

The camel stretched its great neck to the stifling breeze that came from the south.

The Tarki released the bridle with a sweep of his arm:

"Now go."

"Thank you," I said, turning round in the saddle, "thank you, Cegheir–ben–Sheikh, and good–bye."

I heard his voice, already far away, answer:

"*Au revoir,* Lieutenant de Saint–Avit."

CHAPTER XIX. THE TANEZROUFT

FOR THE FIRST HOUR of our flight Cegheir−ben−Sheikh's big camel carried us along at headlong speed. We made at least five leagues. My eyes fixed on our goal, I steered the animal for the *gour* which the Tarki had pointed out and the crest of which was growing larger against the paling sky.

Our speed sent a light breeze whistling past our ears. The great tufts of *retem* shot past to right and left, sinister, withered skeletons.

I heard Tanit−Zerga's voice:

"Stop the camel."

I did not understand at first.

"Stop him," she repeated.

And her hand grasped my right arm tightly.

I obeyed. Very unwillingly the camel slackened speed.

"Listen," said the girl.

At first I heard nothing. Then a very slight noise behind us, a faint padding sound.

"Stop the camel," Tanit−Zerga ordered. "You needn't bother to make him kneel."

At the same moment a tiny grey form leapt on to the camel, which started off again, faster than ever.

"Let him go," said Tanit−Zerga. "Gale has jumped."

As she said this I felt a little ball of bristling fur under my hand. The mongoose had followed our trail and caught us up. I could hear the brave little animal panting and then gradually settle down.

"I am happy," murmured Tanit−Zerga. Cegheir−ben−Sheikh was right. We passed over the *gour* as the sun rose. I looked behind: the Atakor was now merely a vast chaos amid the night clouds scattering before the new day. Already it was impossible to discern among the unnamed peaks that in which Antinea was still weaving her plots of passion.

You know what the Tanezrouft is, the "*plateau par excellence,"* the deserted, uninhabitable country, the land of thirst and hunger. We were then in the part of this desert which Duveyrier calls South Tasili and which is mentioned in the map of the Ministry of Public Works with this attractive note: "Rocky plateau, no water, no vegetation, unsuitable for man or animals."

Nothing, except perhaps some parts of the Kalahari, is more terrible than this rock−strewn wilderness. Cegheir−ben−Sheikh was right when he said that no one would think of following us there.

Great patches of darkness still resisted the light of day. Memories teemed through my brain with complete incoherence. A sentence came to my mind, word for word.

"It seemed to Dick that he had never since the beginning of original darkness done anything at all save jolt through the air."

I gave a little laugh. "For several hours," I thought, "I have been calling up literary situations. Just now, a hundred feet in the air, I was Fabrice in the *Chartreuse de Parme,* hanging from her Italian prison. Now, on my camel, I am Dick in *The Light that Failed,* cleaving the desert to meet his comrades." I laughed again and then shuddered. I thought of the night before, of Orestes in *Andromaqtie* consenting to the sacrifice of Pyrrhus .... That, too, was a very literary situation. . . .

Cegheir−ben−Sheikh had reckoned eight days for our arrival in the wooded country of the Awellimiden, the outposts of the grassy steppes of the Sudan. He knew his camel's powers well. At the very beginning Tanit−Zerga had named the camel *El−Mellen, the white one,* for this magnificent animal had an almost spotless coat. He once went two days without any other food than an occasional branch torn from some gum−tree, with hideous white thorns nearly eight inches long which made me tremble for our friend's throat. The wells marked by Cegheir−ben−Sheikh we found where they were indicated on the map, but they contained nothing but scalding yellow mud. This sufficed for the camel, so that after five days, thanks to prodigies of temperance, we had only used one of the two skins of water. We thought we were saved.

Near one of these muddy pools that day I managed to bring down with my carbine a desert gazelle, with short straight horns. Tanit−Zerga skinned it and we enjoyed a fine roast, cooked to a turn. Meanwhile, Gale, who never

ceased to ferret about the hollows in the rocks during our halts in the heat of the day, found an *ourane,* a sand crocodile, about four feet long, and soon had its neck broken. He gorged until he couldn't move. It cost us a pint of water to help his digestion. We gave it gladly, for we were happy. Tanit–Zerga said nothing, but I could see how happy she was in her belief that I had given up thinking of the woman with the *pskent* of gold and emeralds. And indeed I scarcely gave her a thought during those days. I thought of nothing but the torrid heat we had to avoid; the goatskin water–bag we had to hide in the hollow of a rock to cool; the intense pleasure of putting to the lips a leather drinking–cup filled to the brim with this healing water. ... I can speak from the bitterest experience: the great passions of the brain or of the senses are for people who have food, drink and rest.

It was five o'clock in the afternoon. The fearful heat was abating. We had left the rocky shelter where we had taken our brief siesta. Seated on a large stone we were watching the western sky redden.

I unfolded the map on which Cegheir–ben–Sheikh had marked our halting–places as far as the Sudan road. I saw with delight that his itinerary was accurate and that I had followed it meticulously.

"The evening of the day after to–morrow," I said, "we shall be setting out for the halting–place which will take us, the following day, at dawn, to the Talemsi Wady. Once there, we needn't worry any more about water.

Tanit–Zerga's eyes sparkled in her drawn face.

"And Gao?" she asked.

"We shall only be a week's journey from the Niger. And Cegheir–ben–Sheikh said that from the Telemsi Wady the rest of the way is under an avenue of mimosa."

"I know the mimosa," she said. "It has little yellow balls that melt in your hand. But I like the caper–flowers best. You must come to Gao with me. I told you my father, Sonni–Azkia, was killed by the Awellimiden. But my people will have built up the village again by now. They're used to it. You will see how they will welcome you."

"'I will come, Tanit–Zerga, I will come, I promise you. But you must promise me something too."

"What? Oh, I think I can guess. You must take me for a little fool if you think I'm capable of talking about things which might harm my friend."

As she said this she looked at me. Hunger and privations had etherealised her brown face in which her big eyes shone. . . . Since then I have had time to collect my maps and compasses and fix once and for all the spot where I realised for the first time the beauty of Tanit–Zerga's eyes.

A great silence fell between us. It was she who broke it.

"It will soon be dark. We must eat so that we can get away as quickly as possible."

She got up and walked towards the rock.

Almost immediately I heard her voice calling me in a tone of anguish that made my blood run cold.

"Come! Oh, come and look!"

With one bound I was at her side.

"The camel!" she gasped; "the camel!"

I looked, and a mortal shudder ran through me.

Stretched at full length behind the rock, his white sides heaving convulsively, El–Mellen lay in the last throes.

I need not dwell on the fever with which we worked to relieve him. I never knew what was the cause of El–Mellen's death. All camels are like that. They are at once the strongest and the most delicate of animals. They will travel for six months through the most ghastly solitudes, with little food and no water, and thrive on it. Then, one day, when they have all they need, they will lie down on their side and die in a most disconcerting way.

When we saw there was nothing more to be done we got up and watched the animal's struggles grow weaker. When he gave out his last breath we felt as if it was our own life that had gone. Tanit–Zerga was the first to speak. "How far are we from the Sudan road?" she asked.

"We are two hundred kilometres from the Telemsi Wady," I replied. "We can gain thirty kilometres by taking the Iferouane route, but the wells are not marked that way."

"Then we must make for the Telemsi Wady," she said. "Two hundred kilometres, that means seven days?"

"Seven at least, Tanit–Zerga."

"And how far is the first well?"

"Sixty kilometres."——'

The girl's face twitched a little. But she soon controlled herself.——I

"We must start at once."

"Start, Tanit–Zerga, on foot!"

She stamped her foot. I admired her force of will.

"We must start," she repeated. "We will eat and drink, and Gale" too, for we can't carry all the tins of meat, and the water–skin is so heavy that we shouldn't do ten kilometres if we carried it. We will empty one of the meat–tins through a small hole and fill it with water. That will last for to–night's stage, which will mean thirty kilometres without water. Then, to–morrow evening, we shall reach the well marked on Cegheir–ben–Sheikh's map."

"Oh," I murmured, heart–broken, "if only my shoulder had been all right I could have carried the water–skin."

"That can't be helped," said Tanit–Zerga. "You will take the carbine and two tins of meat. I will carry two more and the tin of water. Now come. We must start in an hour if we are to do the thirty kilometres. You know when the sun rises the stones get too hot to walk on."

In what mournful silence we passed the rest of this hour, which had found us so confident, I leave to your imagination. Without Tanit–Zerga I believe I should have sat down on the rock and waited. Only Gale was happy.

"We mustn't let him eat too much," said Tanit–Zerga. "He might not be able to keep up with us. And to–morrow he'll have to work. If he catches another *ourane* it will be for us."

You have marched in the desert. You know how terrible the first hours of night are. When the huge yellow moon appears a bitter, stifling dust seems to rise in clouds. The jaws begin to work mechanically as though to masticate this dust, which finds its way into your burning throat. Then, as a rule, a kind of restful sleepiness comes over you. You go on without thinking. You forget you are marching. You don't notice it unless you stumble. It's true you stumble pretty often. But after a bit it becomes tolerable. "The night will come to an end, and with it the march. After all, I feel less tired than when I started." The night comes to an end, but then comes the most terrible time of all. You're dying of thirst and shivering with cold. All your old weariness comes back and weighs you down. The horrible little wind that heralds the dawn is no relief; rather the contrary. Every time you stumble you repeat: "The next will be the last."

This, moreover, is the experience of people who know that in a few hours they will have a good rest with food and drink. . . .

I suffered abominably. I felt every bump in my injured shoulder. Once I felt tempted to stop and sit down. Then I saw Tanit–Zerga. She was going forward with her eyes nearly closed. On her face was an expression of mingled pain and determination. I closed my eyes too and went on.

Such was the first stage. At dawn we halted in a hollow in the rocks. The heat soon forced us to get up and find a deeper one. Tanit–Zerga ate nothing. But she swallowed her half of the tin of water at one draught. The whole day she lay dozing. Gale ran about the rock uttering plaintive little cries.

I won't describe the second stage. It surpassed in horror anything that can be imagined. I suffered all it is humanly possible to suffer in the desert. But already I noticed with a feeling of infinite pity that my man's strength of muscle was beginning to outlast the nervous strength of my little companion. The poor child walked without a word, her *hatk,* one end of which she chewed, pulled down over her face. Gale followed.

The well towards which we were dragging ourselves was marked on Cegheir–ben–Sheikh's map under the name *Tissaririn*[1].

[1] Tissaririn is the dual of *Tessarirt,* and means *two isolated trees.*

The sun was rising when, at last, we caught sight of the two trees, two gum–trees. They were scarcely a league away and I gave a shout of joy.

"Cheer up, Tanit–Zerga, there's the well!"

She pulled aside her veil and I saw her poor face drawn with pain.

"That's good," she murmured. "Because, otherwise ..."

She could say no more.

We almost ran the last kilometre. Already we could see the hole, the mouth of the well.

At last, we reached it.

It was dry.

Dying of thirst is a strange sensation. At first the suffering is terrible, then it abates. Insensibility gradually comes over you. Absurd little details of your life come up before you and flit about like mosquitoes. I remember calling to mind my history essay on the Marengo Campaign in the entrance examination for Saint–Cyr. I kept on

repeating: "I said that the battery unmasked by Marmont at the time of Kellermann's charge had eighteen guns. . . . Now I remember there were only twelve. Twelve, I'm sure."

I repeated again:

"Twelve guns."

And I relapsed into a sort of coma.

From this I was dragged by a feeling as of red–hot iron on my forehead. Tanit–Zerga was leaning over me. It was her hand that burned like this.

"Get up," she said. "Let us go on."

"Go on, Tanit–Zerga! The desert is on fire, the sun is at its zenith. It is noon."

"Let us go on," she repeated.

Then I saw she was delirious.

She was standing up; her *haik* had slipped to the ground. Little Gale" was curled up, asleep.

Her head bare, heedless of the terrible sun, she repeated:

"Let us go on."

A flash of reason came back to me.

"Cover your head, Tanit–Zerga. Cover your head."

"Let us go on," she repeated, "let us go on. Gao is quite near, I can feel it. I want to see Gao again."

I forced her to sit down beside me in the shade of the rock. I felt that all her strength had deserted her. The great pity I felt brought back my common sense.

"Gao is quite near, isn't it?" she said.

And her glistening eyes looked at me pleadingly.

"Yes, little one, my dear little child. Gao is near. But, for God's sake, He down. The sun is terrible."

"Ah! Gao, Gao! I knew it," she repeated. "I was sure I should see Gao again."

She was sitting up again. Her little burning hands pressed mine.

"Listen. I must tell you, so that you can understand why I knew I should see Gao again."

"Tanit–Zerga, calm yourself; little girl, calm yourself."

"No, I must tell you. It was long ago on the banks of the full river, at Gao, where my father was a prince. . . . Well, one day, a festival, an old magician came from the interior, dressed in skins and feathers, with a mask and pointed hat, castanettes and two cobras in a bag. He danced the *boussadilla* in the village square where all our people were gathered. I was in the front row, and because I was wearing a necklace of tourmaline he saw I was the daughter of a Songhoi chief. Then he talked to me about the past, the great Mandingo empire over which my fathers had reigned, the fierce Kountas, our enemies——everything, in fact. Then he said ..."

"Do try and keep calm, little girl."

"Then he said: 'Don't be afraid. There may be evil days before you, but what does it matter when one day you will see Gao shining on the horizon, no longer the subject Gao reduced to a miserable native village; but Gao in all its ancient splendour, the great capital of the negro tribes; Gao regenerated, with the mosque of the seven towers and fourteen turquoise cupolas, newly–built houses, fountains, watered gardens, full of great red and white flowers. . . . That will be your hour of deliverance and you will be a queen.' "

Tanit–Zerga was now standing upright. Overhead and all round us, everywhere, the sun was blazing on the white–hot *hamada.*

Suddenly the girl stretched out her arm. She uttered a terrible cry.

"Gao! There's Gao!"

I looked.

"Gao!" she repeated. "Ah! I knew. There are the trees and fountains, the cupolas and towers, the palms and the great red and white flowers. Gao! . . ."

Indeed, on the blazing horizon a fantastic town rose, piling one on another its prodigious rainbow buildings. Before our dilated eyes the ghastly mirage conjured up and multiplied its fevered pictures.

"Gao!" I cried. "Gao!"

And almost at once I gave another cry, this time of pain and horror. I felt Tanit–Zerga's little hand relax in mine. I had just time to catch the girl in my arms and to hear her breathe:

"That will be my hour of deliverance and I shall be a queen."

Some hours later, with the help of the knife she had used two days before to skin the gazelle, I dug in the sand the grave in which Tanit–Zerga was to sleep at the foot of the rock where she had died.

When all was ready I wanted to look once more at the dear little face. For a moment I nearly fainted. ... I hastily covered the brown face again with the white *haik* and laid the girl's body in the grave.

I had reckoned without Gale.

The eyes of the mongoose never left me all the time I was busy with my task. When he heard the first handfuls of sand fall on the *haik* he uttered a shrill cry. I looked and saw him, his eyes blazing, ready to spring.

“Gale!” I pleaded.

And I tried to stroke him.

He bit my hand, then jumping into the grave, began to scratch away the sand furiously.

Three times I tried to get him away. I felt I should never finish, and that, even if I succeeded, Gale would stay behind and unearth the body.

My carbine was at my feet. A shot woke the echoes of the empty desert. The next moment Gale too was sleeping his last sleep, curled on his mistress's neck, where I had seen him so often.

When nothing showed on the surface of the ground but a little mound of trampled sand I tottered to my feet and started off into the desert, at random, towards the south.

CHAPTER XX. THE COMPLETION OF THE CIRCLE

FROM THE BOTTOM of the Mia Wady, where a jackal had howled that night when Saint−Avit told me he had killed Morhange, another jackal howled, or perhaps the same one.

At once I felt that something irrevocable was going to happen that night.

We were sitting, as before, under the little verandah built outside our dining−room. A plaster floor, a trellised balustrade and four beams supporting a roof of alfa grass.

I have said that this verandah commanded an extensive view of the desert. When he had finished speaking, Saint−Avit got up and leant over the balustrade. I followed him.

“And then?” I said.

He looked at me.

“And then——what? You know, I think, what was reported in the newspapers: how I was found, by a *harka* under Captain Aymard, dying of hunger and thirst in the Awellimiden country and brought to Timbuctoo. For a month I was delirious. I have never known what I said during this time of raging fever. Of course, the officers of the Timbuctoo mess didn't feel called upon to tell me. When I gave them the story of my adventures as it appears in the report of the Morhange−Saint−Avit mission it was easy to see from the polite coldness with which they listened to my explanations that the official version I had given them differed in certain details from what I had let out in my delirium.

“They didn't insist. The story was allowed to pass that Captain Morhange had died of sunstroke and had been buried by me on the bank of the Tarhit Wady, three stages from Timissao. Everyone felt there were many lacunae in my story. They doubtless scented some dramatic mystery. But to prove it was another matter. In face of the impossibility of obtaining proof they thought it better to hush up what could only have been a pointless scandal. But you know all these details as well as I do.”

“And ... she?” I asked timidly.

A smile of triumph passed over his face. Triumph at having drawn my thoughts from Morhange and his crime, at having succeeded in infecting me with his own madness.

“She,” he said, “she. . . . For six years I have heard nothing. But I see her, I speak to her. I think of the moment when I shall be with her again. ... I shall throw myself at her feet and simply say: 'Forgive me. I rebelled against your law. I did not understand. Now I know, and you see, like Lieutenant Ghiberti, I have come back.'

“'Family, honour, country,' said old Le Mesge, 'you will renounce everything for her.' Old Le Mesge is a fool, but he spoke from experience. He knew what had crushed the will of the fifty spectres in the Hall of Red Marble, in the presence of Antinea.

“'And now,' you too will ask, 'what exactly is this woman?' I do not know myself. And, after all, what do I care! What matters her past or the mystery of her origin: whether she is the genuine descendant of the Sea God and the divine Lagides or the bastard of a drunken Pole and a harlot of the *Quartier Marceau?*

“When I was weak enough to be jealous of Morhange these details may have interested the ridiculous self−conceit that civilised people always confuse with passion. But I have held Antinea in my arms. I don't want to know anything more. ... It doesn't matter to me what becomes of my mortal body. . . .

“I don't want to know. Or, rather, it is because I have too exact a vision of this future that I choose to seek oblivion in the only fate that is worth while: an unplumbed and virgin nature, a mysterious love.

“*An unplumbed and virgin nature.*——I must explain. One winter's day I followed a funeral in a populous town blackened with the soot from the factory chimneys and those horrible caravansaries, suburban houses.

“We followed the procession through the mud. The church was modern, damp, and poor. But for two or three people, relatives numbed by dismal grief, the whole procession had only one idea: to find an excuse for escaping. Those who reached the cemetery were the ones who had failed to find this excuse. I can still see the grey walls with the blighted yews, trees of sun and shade which look so beautiful against an azure background in the south. I can see the hideous mourners in greasy jackets and waxed top−hats. . . . No, it's too horrible.

“Near the wall, in an obscure corner of the cemetery, a hole had been dug in the ghastly yellow clay and gravel. That is where they left the body. I can't remember its name.

"While they were lowering the coffin I looked at my hands, those hands which had pressed Antinea's in a country of unrivalled light. I felt a great pity for my body, a great fear of the fate awaiting it in these muddy towns. 'Is it possible,' I repeated, that this body, this precious body, this body perhaps unique, might end there? No, no, body, precious beyond all treasure, I swear I will spare you this ignominy; you shall not rot under a registrar's number in the filth of a suburban cemetery. Your brothers in love, the fifty orchilacrum knights, await you, silent and solemn, in the Hall of Red Marble. I'll find a way to bring you back to them.'

"*A mysterious love.*——Shame to the man who reveals the secrets of his loves. The Sahara jealously guards Antinea with its impenetrable barrier. That is why the complicated exactions of this woman are in reality purer and more chaste than your marriage would be with its obscene riot of publicity, the banns, the press−notices, the invitations informing a vile, sneering public that on such and such a day, at such and such a time, you'll have the privilege of consummating your union with a wretched little virgin.

"I think that's all I have to tell you. No, there's something else. Just now I mentioned the Hall of Red Marble. South of Cherchell, ancient Caesarea, west of the little river Mazafran, on a hill that rises above the rose−hued morning mists, a mysterious stone pyramid stands. The natives call it *The Tomb of the Christian Woman.* There lies the body of Antinea's ancestress, Cleopatra Selena, daughter of Cleopatra and Mark Anthony. Situated right on the track of the invaders this monument has guarded its treasure well. No one has ever discovered the painted chamber in which the splendid body sleeps in its glass coffin. What her ancestress has done the grand−daughter will succeed in surpassing in sombre magnificence. In the centre of the Hall of Red Marble a platform is' fashioned on the rock from which the lament of the invisible fountain trembles. There, on the day when the hundred and twenty niches that surround her throne have all received their willing prey, this wonderful woman will take her place on the orchilacrum chair, with the golden *pskent* and uraeus on her head and in her hand the trident of Neptune.

"When I left the Hoggar, you will remember that niche 55 was to be mine. Since then I have never ceased to calculate, and I have concluded that it is in No. 80 or 85 that I shall sleep. But calculations based on such a frail thing as a woman's caprice may be false. That is why I grow daily more impatient. There's no time to be lost, I tell you, there's no time to be lost."

"There's no time to be lost," I echoed, as though in a dream. He raised his head with an indescribable look of joy. His hands trembled with happiness as they gripped mine.

"You shall see her," he repeated, drunk with ecstasy; "you shall see her."

Losing his self−control, he took me in his arms in a long embrace. An extraordinary happiness swept us both away while, laughing and weeping in turn, like children we went on repeating:

"There's no time to be lost, there's no time to be lost."

Suddenly a light breeze rose and rustled the tufts of alfa in the roof. The pale lilac of the sky grew paler still, and suddenly a great yellow rent split the east. The sun rose over the empty desert. From below the bastions came muffled sounds, the lowing of cattle, the clanking of chains. The station was awaking.

For several seconds we stood without a word gazing towards the southern track, the track that leads to Temassinin, the Eguerre, the Hoggar.

A knock behind us on the dining−room door made us start.

"Come in," said Andr6 de Saint−Avit, whose voice had hardened again.

Sergeant−major Chatelain stood before us.

"What do you want with me at this time?" asked Andre de Saint−Avit irritably.

The N.C.O. stood at attention.

"Excuse me, sir. The patrol have found a native prowling near the station. He made no effort to conceal himself. As soon as they brought him here he asked to be brought before the commandant. It was midnight and I didn't want to disturb you."

"What is this native?"

"A Tarki, sir."

"A Tarki? Go and fetch him."

Chatelain stood aside. The man was behind him escorted by one of our native soldiers.

They went on to the terrace.

The newcomer was six feet high and certainly a Tarki. The rising sun shone on his cotton robes of dark blue. I

could see his great black eyes sparkle.

When he came face to face with my friend I saw both men start back, but they at once controlled themselves.

They looked at one another for a moment in silence.

Then, in a very steady voice, the Tarki said, bowing:

“Peace be with you, Lieutenant de Saint−Avit.”

In the same steady voice Andre answered him:

“Peace be with you, Cegheir−ben−Sheikh.”

THE END