

A STRANGE TALE OF CANNIBALISM

Lafcadio Hearn

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The narrative of the last days of the Flatters mission, published in another column according to the text of the Paris Figaro, contains in its terribly dry detail suggestion of horror almost unprecedented. Most of the victims, as their names show, were spahis belonging to the race of the desert's children; but they had long been accustomed to the comparatively civilized life of Algeria or the Senegal colonies, and their last struggle took place in a region known only to the wildest and fiercest of all nomad Arabs, who sweep through it on their way to carry off a sable booty of slaves from the black cities of the Niger, leaving behind them on their return a track marked with skeletons. In these latitudes time has stood still for uncounted thousands of years,—naught has been changed since the primeval sea dried up. It is all a dead and ruined world like the Moon.

Occasionally a caravan passes, with traders armed to the teeth, prepared to fight every yard of the way against the Touareg. To be robbed in the desert is death; for without camels traveling is impossible. Vast distances separate the green islands in this yellow ocean of sand,—where the mouths of the wells are still guarded against the drift with great stones, as in the days when Jacob served seven years for Rachel. Between these halting places the sand is burning enough to blister the skin of the feet; the thermometer registers an incredible temperature; the least portion of the features exposed is scorched as by fire; and traveling is possible only with veiled face. Then there are sandstorms, sandpillars, reaching from earth to sky, and the wrecks of camel—skeletons bleaching to the whiteness of chalk.

In this ghastly desolation the last fragment of the exploring mission finds itself reduced to such misery, that even with the certainty of water a few miles off, the men cannot summon strength to advance. There is only one camel; it is their ship, their engine, their forlorn hope,—the riches of a thousand kingdoms would be as nothing in their eyes at such a juncture in exchange for one day, one hour, of that camel's life. There is a single native French officer alive,—the quartermaster. He is trusted by the Moslem spahis to go forward with the camel to the well, procure water and send back the animal with a supply of well-filled skins. But within a few hundred yards of the well his strength fails him. The Arab soldier accompanying him volunteers to obtain water, but rewards himself for his pains by stealing the camel! The frightful despair of the survivors may be imagined. Without their camel, to carry water with them is impossible.

For days subsequently that little band of human skeletons struggle vainly to leave the well—compelled by infernal thirst and heat to return after having marched a few miles under the sun;—lizards and sand insects are eaten alive; reason weakens and loses its grasp upon the reins of passion. An Arab sent out for assistance is shot and eaten by his comrades. Two more are subsequently murdered. The survivors devour the bodies; and a new phase of horror commences. Those who had marched on in advance return upon hearing the shots; they partake of the repast; they even kill another of the weaker ones and eat his flesh. After this the wreck of the expedition supports itself by cannibalism—as a pack of wolves devour each other in the madness of hunger. There is little flesh on those starving bodies—the bones are crushed and devoured.

Discipline is of course forgotten;—the French officer is killed and eaten. Then appears the most horrible phase of the long tragedy;—the sufferers conceive a hideous dread of each other. They separate; they fear at night to sleep; the man who yields to slumber in spite of himself may never awake. Carrying with them a provision of human flesh, they continue to struggle backward and forward between two oases,—dreading each other more than death;—fearing the sunset, the flesh-colored sunset of the desert,—fearing the tepidness of night tempting the weary to close their eyes,—fearing the furnace-glow of dawn heralding another day of horrors. In the glare of his comrade's eyes, in the fleshlessness of his comrade's face, each sees a menace and mockery of death,—each keeps his finger upon the trigger of his revolver. Only when nearly one-half of the survivors have been devoured by the rest, does the remnant of the expedition succeed in reaching a nomad camp, whose friendly sheik affords them true Arab hospitality.

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Strangely enough, these wretched survivors still feel the most intense hatred to one of their number who had been left behind at Hassi Hadjadj—"The Pilgrim's Well"; and who had repeatedly fled from those who sought to kill and devour him. They design to return and kill him, and beg that camels be lent to them. But the Arab host suspects something;—he insists upon accompanying them, and beholds sights that would have sickened the fiercest even of Touareug. By his coming, the life of the spahi is saved; but his fear of his old comrades is such that he refuses to accept aid until they have themselves departed another way. At last a troop of friendly horsemen escort the victims to Ouargla,—"The Tunis of the desert,"—whence it is generally possible to obtain an escort to the last of the French military outposts,—Tuggarth. But even Ouargla is remote from the civilized world proper; and the French flag could never be maintained there except under the protection of an expeditionary column.

When the reader pictures to his mind the unutterable misery of that march through a waste fantastically desolate as a lunar landscape,—under a sky whose very clouds are flying sand,—under a perpendicular sun, whose beams scorch like molten iron,—against a wind whose heat flays the face, excoriates the hands, shrivels even the water-skins upon the backs of the dromedaries;—and when he imagines that silent struggle about the oasis,—the murder of sleepers at the well,—the frenzy of mutual hatred inspired by cannibalism,—the emaciation that rendered it almost impossible to obtain three days' food from nearly twelve adult bodies,—the crunching of bones when starvation had consumed the muscles of the victim,—the thirst that blackens the lips and makes the tongue crack open and stifles speech in the throat,—it is indeed difficult to conceive how men can pass through such experience and remain sane! The most pitiful case of all seems that of the poor spahi left alone for nearly a week at the well, who took to flight whenever his ghoulish companions came back for water, and returned by stealth in the night to gnaw the bones of the dead.