

The Turquoise Necklace

by Sax Rohmer, 1883-1959

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I

„He is the lord of the desert, Effendi,” declared Mohammed the dragoman. „From the Valley of Zered to Damascus he is known and loved, but feared. They say”—he lowered his voice—„that he is a great *welee*, and that he is often seen in the street of the attars, having the appearance of a simple old man; but in the desert he is like a bitter apple, a viper and a calamity! Overlord is he of the Bedouins, and all the sons of the desert bow to Ben Azreem, Sheikh of the Ibn-Rawallah.”

„What is a *welee*, exactly?” asked Graham.

„A man of God, Effendi, favoured beyond other men.”

„And this Arab Sheikh is a *welee*?”

„So it is said. He goes about secretly aiding the poor and afflicted, when he may be known by his white beard—”

„There are many white beards in Egypt,” said Graham.

But the other continued, ignoring the interruption:

„And in the desert, Ben Azreem, a horseman unrivalled, may be known by the snow-white horse which he rides, or if he is not so mounted, by his white camel, swifter than the glance of envy, more surefooted than the eager lover who climbs to his enslaver’s window.”

„Indeed!” said Graham dryly. „Well, I hope I may have the pleasure of meeting this mysterious notability before I leave the country.”

„Unless you journey across the sands for many days, it is unlikely. For when he comes into Egypt he reveals himself to none but the supremely good”—Graham stared—„and the supremely wicked!” added Mohammed.

The poetic dragoman having departed, Graham leaned over to his wife, who had sat spellbound, her big blue eyes turned to the face of Mohammed throughout his romantic narrative.

„These wild native legends appeal to you, don’t they?” he said, smiling and patting her hand affectionately. „You superstitious little colleen!”

Eileen Graham blushed, and the blush of a pretty Irish bride is a very beautiful thing.

„Don’t you believe it at all, then?” she asked softly.

„I believe there may be such a person as Ben Azreem, and possibly he’s a very imposing individual. He may even indulge in visits, incognito, to Cairo, in the manner of the late lamented Hārūn er-Rashīd of *Arabian Nights* memory, but I can’t say that I believe in welees as a class!”

His wife shrugged her pretty shoulders.

„There is something that I have to tell you, which I suppose you will also refuse to believe,” she said, with mock indignation. „You remember the Arabs whom we saw at the exhibition in London?”

Graham started.

„The gentlemen who were advertised as *chiefs from the Arabian Desert*? I remember one in particular.”

„That is the one I mean,” said Eileen.

Her husband looked at her curiously.

„Your explanation is delightfully lucid, dear!” he said jocularly. „My memories of the gentleman known as El-Suleym, I believe, are not pleasant; his memories of me must be equally unfavourable. He illustrated the fact that savages should never be introduced into civilised society, however fascinating they may be personally. Mrs. Marstham was silly enough to take the man up, and because of the way he looked at you, I was wise enough to knock him down! What then?”

„Only this—I saw him, to-day!”

„Eileen!” There was alarm in Graham’s voice. „Where? Here, or in Cairo?”

„As we were driving away from the mosque of the Whirling Dervishes. He was one of a group who stood by the bridge.”

„You are certain?”

„Quite certain.”

„Did he see you?”

„I couldn't say. He gave no sign to show that he had seen me.”

John Graham lighted a cigarette with much care.

„It doesn't matter, anyway,” he said, carelessly. „You are as safe here as at the Ritz.”

But there was unrest in the glance which he cast out across the prospect touched by moon-magic into supernatural beauty.

In the distance gleamed a fairy city of silvern minarets, born, it seemed, from the silvern stream. Beyond lay the night mystery of the desert, into whose vastness marched the ghostly acacias. The discordant chattering and chanting from the river-bank merged into a humming song, not unmusical. The howling of the dogs, even, found a place in the orchestral scheme.

Behind him, in the hotel, was European and American life—modernity; before him was that other life, endless and unchanging. There was something cold, sombre, and bleak in the wonderful prospect, something shocking in the presence of those sight-seeing, careless folk, the luxurious hotel, all that was Western and new, upon that threshold of the ancient, changeless desert.

A menace, too, substantial yet cloaked with the mystery of the motherland of mysteries, had arisen now. Although he had assured Eileen that Gizeh was as safe as Piccadilly, he had too much imagination to be unaware that from the Egypt of Cook's to the Egypt of secrets is but a step.

None but the very young or very sanguine traveller looks for adventure nowadays in the neighbourhood of Mena House. When the intrepid George Sandys visited and explored the Great Pyramid, it was at peril of his life, but Graham reflected humorously that the most nervous old ladies now performed the feat almost daily. Yet out here in the moonlight where the silence was, out beyond the radius of “sights,” lay a land unknown to Europe, as every desert is unknown.

It was a thought that had often come to him, but it came to-night with a force and wearing a significance which changed the aspect of the sands, the aspect of all Egypt.

He glanced at the charming girl beside him. Eileen, too, was looking into the distance with far-away gaze. The pose of her head was delightful, and he sat watching her in silence. Within the hotel the orchestra had commenced softly to play; but Graham did not notice the fact. He was thinking how easily one could be lost out upon that grey ocean, with its islands of priestly ruins.

„It is growing rather chilly, dear,” he said suddenly; „even for fur wraps. Suppose we go in?”

II

The crowd in the bazaar was excessive, and the bent old figure which laboured beneath a nondescript burden, wrapped up in a blue cloth, passed from the noisiness out into the narrow street which ran at right-angles with the lane of many shops.

Perhaps the old Arab was deaf, perhaps wearied to the point of exhaustion; but, from whatever cause, he ignored, or was unaware of, the oncoming *arabeeyeh*,

whose driver had lost control of his horse. Even the shrill scream of the corpulent, white-veiled German lady, who was one of its passengers, failed to arouse him. Out into the narrow roadway he staggered, bent almost double.

Graham, accompanied by Mohammed, was some distance away, haggling with a Greek thief who held the view that a return of three hundred and fifty per cent. spelled black ruination.

Eileen, finding the air stifling, had walked on in the direction of the less crowded street above. Thus it happened that she, and the poor old porter, alone, were in the path of the onward-whirling carriage.

Many women so placed would have stood, frozen with horror, have been struck down by the frantic animal; some would have had sufficient presence of mind to gain the only shelter attainable in time—that of a deep-set doorway. Few would have acted as Eileen acted.

It was under the stimulus of that Celtic impetuosity—that generous madness which seems to proceed, not from the mind, but from the heart—that she leapt, not back, but forward.

She never knew exactly what took place, nor how she escaped destruction; but there was a roaring in her ears, above it rising the Teutonic screams of the lady in the arabeeyeh; there was a confused chorus of voices, a consciousness of effort; and she found herself, with wildly beating heart, crouching back into the recess which once had held a mastabah.

From some place invisible, around a bend in the tortuous street, came sounds of shouting and that of lashing hoofs. The runaway was stopped. At her feet lay a shapeless bundle wrapped in a blue cloth, and beside her, leaning back against the whitewashed wall, and breathing with short, sobbing breaths, was the old porter.

Now, her husband had his arms about her, and Mohammed, with frightened eyes, hovered in the background. Without undue haste, all the bazaar gradually was coming upon the scene.

„My darling, are you hurt?”

John Graham's voice shook. He was deathly pale.

Eileen smiled reassuringly.

„Not a bit, dear,” she said breathlessly. „But I am afraid the poor old man is.”

„You are quite sure you are not hurt?”

„I was not so much as touched, though honestly I don't know how either of us escaped. But do see if the old man is injured.”

Graham turned to the rescued porter, who now had recovered his composure.

„Mohammed, ask him if he is hurt,” he directed.

Mohammed put the question. A curious group surrounded the party. But the old man, ignoring all, knelt and bowed his bare head to the dust at Eileen's feet.

„Oh, John,” cried the girl, „ask him to stand up! I feel ashamed to see such a venerable old man kneeling before me!”

„Tell him it is—nothing,” said Graham hastily to Mohammed, “and—er——”—he fumbled in his pocket—“give him this.”

But Mohammed, looking ill at ease, thrust aside the proffered *bakshish*—a novel action which made Graham stare widely.

„He would not take it, Effendi,” he whispered. „See, his turban lies there; he is a *hadj*. He is praying for the eternal happiness of his preserver, and he is interceding with the Prophet (*Salla—'lláhu 'aleyhi wasellum*), that she may enjoy the delights of Paradise equally with all true Believers!”

„Very good of him,” said Graham, who, finding the danger passed and his wife safe, was beginning to feel embarrassed. „Thank him, and tell him that she is greatly indebted!”

He took Eileen’s arm, and turned to force a way through the strangely silent group about. But the aged porter seized the hem of the girl’s white skirt, gently detaining her. As he rose upon his knees, Mohammed, with marks of unusual deference, handed him his green turban. The old man, still clutching Eileen’s dress, signed that his dirty bundle should likewise be passed to him. This was done.

Graham was impatient to get away. But——

„Humour him for a moment, dear,” said Eileen softly. „We don’t want to hurt the poor old fellow’s feelings.”

Into the bundle the old man plunged his hand, and drew out a thin gold chain upon which hung a queerly cut turquoise. He stood upright, raised the piece of jewellery to his forehead and to his lips, and held it out, the chain stretched across his open palms, to Eileen.

„He must be some kind of pedlar,” said Graham.

Eileen shook her head, smiling.

„Mohammed, tell him that I cannot possibly take his chain,” she directed. „But thank him all the same, of course.”

Mohammed, his face averted from the statuesque old figure, bent to her ear.

„Take it!” he whispered. „Take it! Do not refuse!”

There was a sort of frightened urgency in his tones, so that both Graham and his wife looked at him curiously.

„Take it, then, Eileen,” said Graham quickly. „And, Mohammed, you must find out who he is, and we will make it up to him in some way.”

„Yes, yes, Effendi,” agreed the man readily.

Eileen accordingly accepted the present, glancing aside at her husband to intimate that they must not fail to pay for it. As she took the chain in her hands, the donor said something in a low voice.

„Hang it round your neck,” translated Mohammed.

Eileen did so, whispering:

„You must not lose sight of him, Mohammed.”

Mohammed nodded; and the old man, replacing his turban and making a low obeisance, spoke rapidly a few words, took up his bundle, and departed. The silent bystanders made way for him.

„Come on,” said Graham; „I am anxious to get out of this. Find a carriage, Mohammed. We’ll lunch at Shepherd’s.”

A carriage was obtained, and they soon left far behind them the scene of this odd adventure. With Mohammed perched up on the box, Graham and his wife could discuss the episode without restraint. Graham, however, did most of the talking, for Eileen was strangely silent.

„It is quite a fine stone,” he said, examining the necklace so curiously acquired. „We must find some way of repaying the old chap which will not offend his susceptibilities.”

Eileen nodded absently; and her husband, with his eyes upon the dainty white figure, found gratitude for her safety welling up like a hot spring in his heart. The action had been characteristic; and he longed to reprove her for risking her life, yet burned to take her in his arms for the noble impulse that had prompted her to do so.

He wondered anxiously if her silence could be due to the after-effects of that moment of intense excitement.

„You don't feel unwell, darling?” he whispered.

She smiled at him radiantly, and gave his hand a quick little squeeze.

„Of course not,” she said.

But she remained silent to the end of the short drive. This was not due to that which her husband feared, however, but to the fact that she had caught a glimpse, amongst the throng at the corner of the bazaar, of the handsome, sinister face of El-Suleym, the Bedouin.

III

The moon poured radiance on the desert. At the entrance to a camel-hair tent stood a tall, handsome man, arrayed in the picturesque costume of the Bedouin. The tent behind him was upheld by six poles. The ends and one side were pegged to the ground, and the whole of that side before which he stood was quite open, with the exception of a portion before which hung a goat-hair curtain.

This was the “house of hair” of the Sheikh El-Suleym, of the Masr-Bishareen—El-Suleym, „the Regicide” outcast of the great tribe of the Bishareen. At some distance from the Sheikh's tent were some half a dozen other and smaller tents, housing the rascally following of this desert outcast.

Little did those who had engaged the picturesque El-Suleym, to display his marvellous horsemanship in London, know that he and those that came with him were a scorn among true sons of the desert, pariahs of that brotherhood which extends from Zered to the Nile, from Tanta to the Red Sea; little did those who had opened their doors in hospitality to the dashing horseman dream that they entertained a petty brigand, sought for by the Egyptian authorities, driven out into ostracism by his own people.

And now before his tent he stood statuesque in the Egyptian moonlight, and looked towards Gizeh, less than thirty miles to the north-east.

As El-Suleym looked towards Gizeh, Graham and his wife were seated before Mena House looking out across the desert. The adventure of the morning had left its impression upon both of them, and Eileen wore the gold chain with its turquoise pendant. Graham was smoking in silence, and thinking, not of the old porter and his odd Eastern gratitude, but of another figure, and one which often came between his mental eye and the beauties of that old, beautiful land. Eileen, too, was thinking of El-Suleym; for the Bedouin now was associated in her mind

with the old pedlar, since she had last seen the handsome, sinister face amid the throng at the entrance to the bazaar.

Telepathy is a curious fact. Were Graham's reflections *en rapport* with his wife's, or were they both influenced by the passionate thoughts of that other mind, that subtle, cunning mind of the man who at that moment was standing before his house of hair and seeking with his eagle glance to defy distance and the night?

„Have you seen—him, again?“ asked Graham abruptly. „Since the other day at the bridge?“

Eileen started. Although he had endeavoured to hide it from her, she was perfectly well aware of her husband's intense anxiety on her behalf. She knew, although he prided himself upon having masked his feelings, that the presence of the Bedouin in Egypt had cast a cloud upon his happiness. Therefore she had not wished to tell him of her second encounter with El-Suleym. But to this direct question there could be only one reply.

„I saw him again—this morning,“ she said, toying nervously with the pendant at her neck.

Graham clasped her hand tensely.

„Where?“

„Outside the bazaar, in the crowd.“

„You did not—tell me.“

„I did not want to worry you.“

He laughed dryly.

„It doesn't worry me, Eileen,“ he said carelessly. „If I were in Damascus or Aleppo, it certainly might worry me to know that a man, no doubt actively malignant towards us, was near, perhaps watching; but Cairo is really a prosaically safe and law-abiding spot. We are as secure here as we should be at—Shepherd's Bush, say!“

He laughed shortly. Voices floated out to them, nasal, guttural, strident; voices American, Teutonic, Gallic, and Anglo-Saxon. The orchestra played a Viennese waltz. Confused chattering, creaking, and bumping sounded from the river. Out upon the mud walls dogs bayed the moon.

But beyond the native village, beyond the howling dogs, beyond the acacia ranks out in the silver-grey mystery of the sands hard by, an outpost of the Pharaohs, where a ruined shrine of Horus bared its secret places to the peeping moon, the Sheikh of the Masr-Bishareen smiled.

Graham felt strangely uneasy, and sought by light conversation to shake off the gloom which threatened to claim him.

„That thief, Mohammed,“ he said tersely, „has no more idea than Adam, I believe, who your old porter friend really is.“

„Why do you think so?“ asked Eileen.

„Because he's up in Cairo to-night, searching for him!“

„How do you know?“

„I cornered him about it this afternoon, and although I couldn't force an admission from him—I don't think anybody short of an accomplished K.C. could—he was suspiciously evasive! I gave him four hours to procure the name and address of the old gentleman to whom we owe the price of a turquoise necklace. He has not turned up yet!“

Eileen made no reply. Her Celtic imagination had invested the morning's incident with a mystic significance which she could not hope to impart to her hard-headed husband.

A dirty and ragged Egyptian boy made his way on to the verandah, furtively glancing about him, as if anticipating the cuff of an unseen hand. He sidled up to Graham, thrusting a scrap of paper on to the little table beside him.

„For me?“ said Graham.

The boy nodded; and whilst Eileen watched him interestedly, Graham, tilting the communication so as to catch the light from the hotel windows, read the following:

He is come to here but cannot any farther. I have him waiting the boy will bring you.

Your obedient Effendi,
Mohammed.

Graham laughed grimly, glancing at his watch.

„Only half an hour late,“ he said, standing up. „Wait here, Eileen; I shall not be many minutes.“

„But I should like to see him, too. He might accept the price from me where you would fail to induce him to take it.“

„Never fear,“ said her husband; „he wouldn't have come if he meant to refuse. What shall I offer him?“

„Whatever you think,“ said Eileen, smiling; „be generous with the poor old man.“

Graham nodded and signed to the boy that he was ready to start.

The night swallowed them up; and Eileen sat waiting, whilst the band played softly and voices chatted incessantly around her.

Some five minutes elapsed; ten; fifteen. It grew to half an hour, and she became uneasy. She stood up and began to pace up and down the verandah. Then the slinking figure of the Egyptian youth reappeared.

„Graham Effendi,“ he said, showing his gleaming teeth, „says you come too.“

Eileen drew her wrap more closely about her and smiled to the boy to lead the way.

They passed out from the hotel, turned sharply to the left, made in the direction of the river, then bore off to the right in the direction of the sand-dunes. The murmuring life of Mena House died into remoteness; the discordance of the Arab village momentarily took precedence; then this, in turn, was lost, and they were making out desert-ward to the hollow which harbours the Sphinx. Great events in our lives rarely leave a clear-cut impression; often the turning-point in one's career is a confused memory, a mere clash of conflicting ideas. Trivial episodes are sharp silhouettes; unforgettable; great happenings but grey, vague things in life's panorama. Thus, Eileen never afterwards could quite recall what happened that night. The thing that was like to have wrecked her life had no sharp outlines to etch themselves upon the plate of memory. Vaguely she wondered to what meeting-place the boy was leading her. Faintly she was conscious of a fear of the growing silence, of a warning instinct whispering her to beware of the loneliness of the desert.

Then the boy was gone; the silence was gone; harsh voices were in her ears—a cloth was whipped about her face and strong arms lifted her. She was not of a stock that swoon or passively accept violence. She strove to cry out, but the band was too cunningly fastened to allow of it; she struck out with clenched fists and not unshrewdly, for twice her knuckles encountered a bearded face and a suppressed exclamation told that the blows were not those of a weakling. She kicked furiously and drew forth a howl of pain from her captor. Her hands flew up to the bandage, but were roughly seized, thrust down and behind her, and tied securely.

She was thrown across a saddle, and with a thrill of horror knew herself a captive. Out into the desert she was borne, into that unknown land which borders so closely upon the sight-seeing track of Cook's. And her helplessness, her inability to fight, broke her spirit, born fighter that she was; and the jarring of the saddle of the galloping horse, the dull thud of the hoofs on the sand, the iron grip which held her, fear, anger, all melted into a blank.

IV

Mohammed the dragoman, with two hotel servants, came upon Graham some time later, gagged and bound behind a sand hillock less than five hundred yards from Mena House. They had him on his feet in an instant, unbound; and his face was ghastly—for he knew too well what the outrage portended.

„Quick!” he said hoarsely. „How long is she gone?”

Mohammed was trembling wildly.

„Nearly an hour, Effendi—nearly an hour. Allah preserve us, what shall we do? I heard it in Cairo to-night—it is all over the bazaars—the Sheikh El-Suleym with the Masr-Bishareen is out. They travel like the wind, Effendi. It is not four days since they stopped a caravan ten miles beyond Bir-Amber, now they are in Lower Egypt. Allah preserve her!” he ran on volubly—„who can overtake the horsemen of the Bishareen?”

So he ran on, wildly, panting as they raced back to the hotel. The place was in an uproar. It was an event which furnished the guests with such a piece of local colour as none but the most inexperienced tourist could have anticipated.

An Arab raid in these days of electric tramways! A captive snatched from the very doors of Mena House! One would as little expect an Arab raid upon the *Ritz!*

The authorities at headquarters, advised of the occurrence, found themselves at a loss how to cope with this stupendous actuality. The desert had extended its lean arm and snatched a captive to its bosom. Cairo had never before entirely realised the potentialities of that all-embracing desert. There are a thousand ways, ten thousand routes, across that ruin-dotted wilderness. Justly did the ancient people worship in the moon the queenly Isis; for when the silver emblem of the goddess claims the sands for her own, to all save the desert-born they become a place of secrets. Here is a theatre for great dramas, wanting only the tragedian. The outlawed Sheikh of the Bishareen knew this full well, but, unlike others who know it, he had acted upon his convictions and revealed to wondering Egypt what

Bedouin craft and a band of intrepid horsemen can do, aided by a belt of sand, and cloaked by night.

Graham was distracted. For he was helpless, and realised it. Already the news was in Cairo, and the machinery of the Government at work. But what machinery, save that of the Omniscient, could avail him now?

A crowd of visitors flocked around him, offering frightened consolation. He broke away from them violently—swearing—a primitive man who wanted to be alone with his grief. The idea uppermost in his mind was that of leaping upon a horse and setting out in pursuit. But in which direction should he pursue? One declared that the Arabs must have rode this way, another that, and yet another a third.

Some one shouted—the words came to him as if through a thick curtain—that the soldiers were coming.

„What the hell's the good of it!” he said, and turned away, biting his lips.

When a spruce young officer came racing up the steps to gather particulars, Graham stared at him dully, said, „The Arabs have got her—my wife,” and walked away.

The hoof-clatter and accompanying martial disturbance were faint in the distance when Mohammed ran in to where Graham was pacing up and down in an agony of indecision—veritably on the verge of insanity. The dragoman held a broken gold chain in his hand, from which depended a big turquoise that seemed to blink in the shaded light.

„Effendi,” he whispered, and held it out upon trembling fingers, „it is her necklet! I found it yonder”—pointing eastward. „*Sallee 'a-nebee!* it is her necklet!”

Graham turned, gave one wild glance at the thing, and grasped the man by the throat, glaring madly upon him.

„You dog!” he shouted. „You were in the conspiracy! It was you who sent the false messages!”

A moment he held him so, then dropped his hands. Mohammed fell back, choking; but no malice was in the velvet eyes. The Eastern understands and respects a great passion.

„Effendi,” he gasped—„I am your faithful servant, and—I cannot write! Wa-llah! and by His mercy, this will save her if anything can!”

He turned and ran fleetly out, Graham staring after him.

It may seem singular that John Graham remained thus inert—inactive. But upon further consideration his attitude becomes explainable. He knew the futility of a blind search, and dreaded being absent if any definite clue should reach the hotel. Meanwhile, he felt that madness was not far off.

„They say that they have struck out across the Arabian Desert, Mr. Graham—probably in the direction of the old caravan route.”

Graham did not turn; did not know nor care who spoke.

„It's four hundred miles across to the caravan route,” he said slowly; „four hundred miles of sand—of sand.”

The most simple Oriental character is full of complexity. Mohammed the dragoman, by birth and education a thief, by nature a sluggard, spared no effort to reach Cairo in the shortest space of time humanly possible. The source of his devotion is obscure. Perhaps it was due to a humble admiration which John Graham's attempt to strangle him could not alter, or perhaps to a motive wholly unconnected with mundane matters. Certain it is that a sort of religious fervour latterly had possessed the man. From being something of a scoffer (for Islam, like other creeds, daily loses adherents), he was become a most devout Believer. To what this should be ascribed I shall leave you to judge.

Exhausted, tottering with his giant exertions, he made his way through the tortuous streets of Old Cairo—streets where ancient palaces and mansions of wealthy Turks displayed their latticed windows, and, at that hour, barred doors to the solitary, panting wayfarer.

Upon one of these barred doors he beat. It was that of an old palace which seemed to be partially in ruins. After some delay, the door was opened and Mohammed admitted. The door was reclosed. And, following upon the brief clamour, silence claimed the street again.

Much precious time had elapsed since Eileen Graham's disappearance from the hotel by the Pyramids, when a belated and not too sober Greek, walking in the direction of Cairo, encountered what his muddled senses proclaimed to be an apparition—that of a white-robed figure upon a snow-white camel, which sped, silent, and with arrow-like swiftness, past him towards Gizeh. About this vision of the racing camel (a more beautiful creature than any he had seen since the last to carry the Mahmal), about the rider, spectral in the moonlight, white-bearded, there was that which suggested a vision of the Moslem Prophet. Ere the frightened Greek could gather courage to turn and look after the phantom rider, man and camel were lost across the sands.

Mena House was in an uproar. No one beneath its roof had thought of sleep that night. Futile searches were being conducted in every direction, north, south, east, and west. Graham, feeling that another hour of inactivity would spell madness, had succumbed to the fever to be up and doing, and had outdistanced all, had left the boy far behind and was mercilessly urging his poor little mount out into the desert, well knowing that in all probability he was riding further and further away from the one he sought, yet madly pressing on. He felt that to stop was to court certain insanity; he must press on and on; he must search—search.

His mood had changed, and from cursing fate, heaven, everything and every one, he was come to prayer.

He, then, was the next to see the man on the white camel, and, like the Greek, he scarcely doubted that it was a wraith of his tortured imagination. Indeed, he took it for an omen. The Prophet had appeared to him to proclaim that the desert, the home of Islam, had taken Eileen from him. The white-robed figure gave no sign, looked neither to the right nor to the left, but straight ahead, with eagle eyes.

Graham pulled up his donkey, and sat like a shape of stone, until the silver-grey distance swallowed up the phantom.

Out towards the oasis called the Well of Seven Palms, the straggling military company proceeded in growing weariness. The officer in charge had secured fairly reliable evidence to show that the Arabs had struck out straight for the Red Sea.

Since he was not omniscient, he could not know that they had performed a wide detour which would lead them back an hour before dawn to the camp by the Nile beside the Temple of Horus, where El-Suleym waited for his captive.

It was at the point in their march when, to have intercepted the raiders, they should have turned due south instead of proceeding toward the oasis, that one of them pulled up, rubbed his eyes, looked again and gave the alarm.

In another moment they all saw it—a white camel; not such a camel as tourists are familiar with, the poor hacks of the species, but a swan-like creature, white as milk, bearing a white-robed rider who ignored utterly the presence of the soldiers, who answered by no word or sign to their challenge, but who passed them like a cloud borne along by a breeze and melted vaporously into the steely distances of the desert. The captain was hopelessly puzzled.

„Too late to bring him down,” he muttered, „and no horse that was ever born could run down a racing camel. Most mysterious.”

Twenty miles south of their position, and exactly at right-angles to their route, rode the Bishareen horsemen, the foremost with Eileen Graham across his saddle. And now, eighteen miles behind the Bishareen, a white camel, of the pure breed which yearly furnishes the stately bearer of the Mahmal, spurned the sand and like a creature of air gained upon the Arabs, wild riders though they were, mile upon mile, league upon league.

Within rifle-shot of the camp, and with the desert dawn but an hour ahead, only a long sand-ridge concealed from the eyes of the Bishareen troupe that fleet shape which had struck wonder to the hearts of all beholders. Despite their start of close upon two hours, despite the fact that the soldiers were now miles, and hopeless miles, in their rear, the racer of the desert had passed them!

Eileen Graham had returned to full and agonizing consciousness. For hours, it seemed, her captives had rode and rode in silence. Now a certain coolness borne upon the breeze told her that they were nearing the river again. Clamour sounded ahead. They were come to the Arab camp. But ere they reached it they entered some lofty building which echoed hollowly to the horses' tread. She was lifted from her painful position, tied fast against a stone pillar, and the bandage was unfastened from about her head.

She saw that she was lashed to one of the ruined pillars which once had upheld the great hall of a temple. About her were the crumbling evidences of the sacerdotal splendour that was Ancient Egypt. The moon painted massive shadows upon the debris, and carpeted the outer place with the black image of a towering propylæum. Upon the mound which once had been the stone avenue of approach was the Bedouin camp. It was filled with a vague disturbance. She was quite alone; for those who had brought her there were leading their spent horses out to the camp.

Eileen could not know what the hushed sounds portended; but actually they were due to the fact that the outlaw chief, wearied with that most exhausting passion—the passion of anticipation—had sought his tent, issuing orders that none should disturb him. Many hours before he knew they could return, he had stood looking out across the sands, but at last had decided to fit himself, by repose, for the reception of his beautiful captive.

A sheikh's tent has two apartments—one sacred to the lord and master, the other sheltering his harem. To the former El-Suleym had withdrawn; and now his emissaries stood at the entrance, where the symbolic spear was stuck, blade upward, in the sand. Those who had thrown in their lot with El-Suleym, called the Regicide, had learnt that a robber chief whose ambitions have been whetted by a sojourn in Europe is a hard master, though one profitable to serve. They hesitated to arouse him, even though their delicate task was well accomplished.

And whilst they debated before the tent, which stood alone, as is usual, at some little distance from the others, amid which moved busy figures engaged in striking camp, Eileen, within the temple, heard a movement behind the pillar to which she was bound.

She was in no doubt respecting the identity of her captor, and the author of the ruse by which she had been lured from the hotel, and now, unable to turn, it came to her that this was *he*, creeping to her through the moon-patched shadows. With eyes closed, and her teeth clenched convulsively, she pictured the sinister, approaching figure. Then, from close beside her, came a voice:

„Only I can save you from him. Do not hesitate, do not speak. Do as I tell you.”

Eileen opened her eyes. She could not see the speaker, but the voice was oddly familiar. Her fevered brain told her that she had heard it before, but speaking Arabic. It was the voice of an old man, but a strong, vibrant voice.

„It is the will of Allah, whose name be exalted, that I repay!”

A lean hand held before her eyes a broken gold chain, upon which depended a turquoise. She knew the voice, now: it was that of the old pedlar! But his English, except for the hoarse Eastern accent, was flawless, and this was the tone of no broken old man, but of one to be feared and respected.

Her reason, she thought, must be tricking her. How could the old pedlar, however strong in his queer gratitude, save her now? Then the hand came again before her eyes, and it held a tiny green phial.

„Be brave. Drink, quickly. They are coming to take you to him. It is the only escape!”

„Oh, God!” she whispered, and turned icily cold.

This was the boon he brought her. This was the road of escape, escape from El-Suleym—the road of death! It was cruel, unspeakably horrible, with a bright world just opening out to her, with youth, beauty, and— She could not think of her husband.

„God be merciful to him!” she murmured. „But he would prefer me dead to——”

„Quick! They are here!”

She placed her lips to the phial, and drank.

It seemed that fire ran through every vein in her body. Then came chill. It grew, creeping from her hands and her feet inward and upward to her heart.

„Good-bye... dear...” she whispered, and sobbed once, dryly.

The ropes held her rigidly upright.

VI

„Wa-llah! she is dead, and we have slain her!”

El-Suleym's Bedouins stood before the pillar in the temple, and fear was in their eyes. They unbound the girl, beautiful yet in her marble pallor, and lowered her rigid body to the ground. They looked one at another, and many a glance was turned toward the Nile.

Then the leader of the party extended a brown hand, pointing to the tethered horses. They passed from the temple, muttering. No one among them dared to brave the wrath of the terrible sheikh. As they came out into the paling moonlight, the camp seemed to have melted magically; for ere dawn they began their long march to the lonely oasis in the Arabian Desert which was the secret base of the Masr-Bishareen's depredatory operations.

Stealthily circling the camp, which buzzed with subdued activity—even the dogs seemed to be silent when the sheikh slept—they came to the horses. Solitary, a square silhouette against the paling blue, stood the sheikh's tent, on top of the mound, which alone was still untouched.

The first horseman had actually leapt into the saddle, and the others, with furtive glances at the ominous hillock, were about to do likewise, when a low wail, weird, eerie, rose above the muffled stirring of the camp.

„Allah el-'Azeen!” groaned one of the party—„what is that?”

Again the wail sounded—and again. Other woman voices took it up. It electrified the whole camp. Escape, undetected, was no longer possible. Men, women, and children were abandoning their tasks and standing, petrified with the awe of it, and looking towards the sheikh's tent.

As they looked, as the frightened fugitives hesitated, looking also, from the tent issued forth a melancholy procession. It was composed of the women of El-Suleym's household. They beat their bared breasts and cast dust upon their heads.

For within his own sacred apartment lay the sheikh in his blood—a headless corpse.

And now those who had trembled before him were hot to avenge him. Riders plunged out in directions as diverse as the spokes of a wheel. Four of them rode madly through the temple where they had left the body of their captive, leaping the debris, and circling about the towering pillars, as only Arab horsemen can. Out into the sands they swept; and before them, from out of a hollow, rose an apparition that brought all four up short, their steeds upreared upon their haunches.

It was the figure of a white-bearded man, white-robed and wearing the green turban, mounted upon a camel which, to the eyes of the four, looked in its spotless whiteness a creature of another world. Before the eagle-eyed stranger lay the still form of Eileen Graham, and as the camel rose to its feet, its rider turned, swung something high above him, and hurled it back at the panic-stricken pursuers. Right amongst their horses' feet it rolled, and up at them in the moonlight from out a mass of blood-clotted beard, stared the glassy eyes of El-Suleym!

The sun was high in the heavens when the grey-faced and haggard-eyed searchers came straggling back to Mena House. Two of them, who had come upon Graham ten miles to the east, brought him in. He was quite passive, and offered

no protest, spoke no word, but stared straight in front of him with a set smile that was dreadful to see.

No news had come from the company of soldiers; no news had come from anywhere. It was ghastly, inconceivable; people looked at one another and asked if it could really be possible that one of their number had been snatched out from their midst in such fashion.

Officials, military and civil, literally in crowds, besieged the hotel. Amid that scene of confusion no one missed Mohammed; but when all the rest had given up in despair, he, a solitary, patient figure, stood out upon a distant mound watching the desert road to the east. He alone saw the return of the white camel with its double burden, from a distance of a hundred yards or more; for he dared approach no closer, but stood with bowed head pronouncing the *fáthah* over and over again. He saw it kneel, saw its rider descend and lift a girl from its back. He saw him force something between her lips, saw him turn and make a deep obeisance toward Mecca. At that he, too, knelt and did likewise. When he arose, camel and rider were gone.

He raced across the sands as Eileen Graham opened her eyes, and supported her as she struggled to her feet, pale and trembling.

* * * * *

„I don't understand it at all," said Graham.

Eileen smiled up at him from the long cane chair. She was not yet recovered from her dreadful experience. „Perhaps," she said softly, „you will not laugh in future at my Irish stories of the *good people!*"

Graham shook his head and turned to Mohammed.

„What does it all mean, Mohammed?" he said. „Thank God it means that I have got her back, but how was it done? She returned wearing the turquoise necklace, which I last saw in your hand."

Mohammed looked aside.

„I took it to him, Effendi. It was the token by which he knew her need."

„The pedlar?"

„The pedlar, Effendi."

„You knew where to find him, then?"

„I knew where to find him, but I feared to tell you; feared that you might ridicule him."

He ceased. He was become oddly reticent. Graham shrugged his shoulders, helplessly.

„I only hope the authorities will succeed in capturing the Bishareen brigands," he said grimly.

„The authorities will never capture them," replied the dragoman with conviction. „For five years they have lived by plunder, and laughed at the Government. But before another moon is risen"—he was warming to his usual eloquence now—„no Masr-Bishareen will remain in the land, they will be exterminated—purged from the desert!"

„Indeed," said Graham; „by whom?"

„By the Rawallah, Effendi."

„Are they a Bedouin tribe?"

„The greatest of them all.”

„Then why should they undertake the duty?”

„Because it is the will of the one who saved her for you, Effendi! I am blessed that I have set eyes upon him, spoken with him. Paradise is assured to me because my hand returned to him his turban when it lay in the dust!”

Graham stared, looking from his wife, who lay back smiling dreamily, to Mohammed, whose dark eyes burnt with a strange fervour—the fervour of one mysteriously converted to an almost fanatic faith.

„Are you speaking of our old friend, the pedlar?”

„I am almost afraid to speak of him, Effendi, for he is the chosen of heaven, a cleanser of uncleanness; the scourge of God, who holds His flail in his hand—the broom of the desert!”

Graham, who had been pacing up and down the room, paused in front of Mohammed.

„Who is he, then?” he asked quietly. „I owe him a debt I can never hope to repay, so I should at least like to know his real name.”

„I almost fear to speak it, Effendi.” Mohammed’s voice sank to a whisper, and he raised the turquoise hanging by the thin chain about Eileen’s throat, and reverently touched it with his lips. „He is the *welee*—Ben Azreem, Sheikh of the Ibn-Rawallah!”

