Arabian Nightmare

A Society wife finds love in the Arabia of the early-20th century
…while her husband finds only servitude

Giles Rokeby

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"ARABIAN NIGHTMARE"

By
Giles Rokeby

Dedicated to the Memory of E.M Hull – 1880-1947

PREFACE

My name is Owen Middlemass. I'm English, unmarried and based in Rye on the South-Coast. One of the Cinque-Ports and, for any of our American cousins reading, once the home for Henry James, the writer of "Portrait of a Lady" and other gems of life at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. My tiny cottage, in fact, is on the opposite side of the church to his former – and far more impressive – dwelling to which tourists flock the whole year round.

As with my father and uncle before me, I'm also a writer – though the four political biographies I've had published to this point can't be said to have set the literary world afire either in terms of sales or critical satisfaction in the same way of Mr Miller's fiction.

Which, brief but necessary introduction made, brings me to the point of my making it:

Not a week ago – and barely three weeks on from my own father's death at the age of eighty-two, just one month on from Mr Churchill's victory in the 1951 election, in which the subject of my latest biography played a pivotal role in his narrow victory, I sorted through the contents of the family home to which my father had left my sister, along with her two children and a journalist husband (our mother had passed at the outbreak of the war with Germany) and came away with those possessions of his which had sentimental value for me, a cheque from his estate, and a curious manuscript from my uncle Arnold, wrapped securely in brown paper and tied across with blue twine – both of which been left for me by our trusted family solicitor, Hendricks.

I say *"curious"* because at no time had my father ever mentioned such an item; nor the fact that he had anything belonging to my late-Uncle Arnold Middlemass in his possession.

A simple note written in father's hand, again left for me by his solicitor, was more – a little, anyhow - forthcoming:

Dear Son,

We will have already said our goodbyes and you are as aware of my love for you as I have always been secure in that which you have always had for me. Neither you nor your sister have need of guilt nor recrimination at either the passing of your mother or myself. We were both as proud of you as parents can be and you may be sure I will be telling her of all your recent accomplishments when, as I hope to do, I join her once again.

And now to the manuscript you now have in your possession, which, I'm sure, is bound to have tweaked that natural curiosity you have displayed since that first time your eyes were strong enough to discern figures moving before them.

What you now have in your possession is the last thing I received from my brother Arnold; placed into my hands shortly after I had tried with my presence to support his departure to the next world – this after having been summoned to his home for the very first time since he returned a hero from that accursed country all those many years before in 1910.

It is something I have read just the once since it was passed to me and I could not bring myself to make a return - not even had the events within its pages been inflicted upon a stranger.

Nor, by the same token, could I even consider its publishing at either that or subsequent times.

Not when there were so many who knew your uncle before he withdrew from public life and, by doing so, I would be sure to run the risk of bringing his memory into ill and judgemental regard.

For you, however, and with the passing of so many years from the events described, the reservations ensuring my silence have no emotional or practical pull.

You met your uncle but once when you were a child, after all – before his marriage and the ill-fated trip described in the manuscript – and, though you often heard your mother and I speak of him, you did not meet or see him again.

I have no doubt that you will find a use for his writing and, obviously, neither my brother nor I are in a position to care in regard of its public reception. After all, in these lurid and prurient days, when sex is no longer a subject considered in the same light as blasphemy by publishers and newspaper barons alike, it may even turn out be something of hot-potato and you may find yourself with a nice nest egg to go along with my other bequests to you and enjoy your twilight years without being beset with the usual problems of finance writers can sometimes endure. It would, at least, give some small meaning to Arnold's privations and I feel he would not begrudge you any such boon accruing from his ability as a wordsmith.

I would, though, have asked you not to be too censorious of your late-uncle, but realised in time that such a request is not required and that your natural tolerance and sound sense make any appeal of the kind academic.

With all my love and fervent good wishes for your future,

Your father.

Bernard Middlemass.

You may imagine that it was in a condition of some intellectual and, I confess, sexual curiosity, that I settled myself in the sitting room of my Rye Cottage, poured myself a generous of Jameson's, and settled in with the manuscript.

My uncle Arnold's *"condition"* had long been a talking point among our family and, even after the original sensation the event itself had caused had given way to the next headline to thrill the fickle and fleeting public taste, my sister and I often heard our parents conjecturing on what could possibly have caused our *"Hero"* uncle's retreat from not just public life but the company of his family and friends.

And now, the full story of the adventure that led to the papers of the day proclaiming him a hero was in my hands.

And a mystery as to why my father felt he needed to pre-empt my reaction to what I was about to read.

Below, and with extractions and editorial tampering guaranteed to see it published rather than placed on the Vatican's list of forbidden books, is what I read…

Owen Middlemass
November 1951
Rye

FOR MY BELOVED BROTHER

Salutations from beyond, my dear Bernard!

That you are reading this, and if Burnside at Willis & Threlfall has administered my wishes in accordance with his instructions, you will now be in receipt of my worldly goods and the fervent hope that they bring you more pleasure and good fortune than they ever fetched your older brother.

You will also find a certain manuscript that is yours to do with as you wish – though, knowing you, I feel sure that whatever is done will not see fruition during your own lifetime.

I am sure you already suspect the contents of the manuscript and, in this, you are right. Since my return from… *that*… place in 1911 – a *"Hero"*, if you will! - you have made many attempts to have me confide the details of my ordeal to you. Not from any prurience or suspicion on your part (I know my younger brother too well to believe him capable of such base motives) but rather a way of sharing some of that mental and physical pain with which I suffered and could not shrug off upon my return. Believe me, if there is one person on this sometimes benighted planet of ours I could have shared such things with it is you.

That, as we both know, was a confidence beyond my ability to share during my lifetime. The prospect of watching your eyes regard me as the knowledge of your brother's ordeal became plain to you at last - along with a recognition of all the mental and physical weakness no loving brother should ever have to accept in an older sibling in whom he has invested his trust, love, and respect - ensured confession of such a kind was beyond my ability to make in your, or anybody else's, regard.

A lack of courage, and the fear of yet more emotional pain from direct confrontation, the cemetery has now made meaningless and allows me to supply you with the document that will answer all these many unanswered questions that have plagued you in the years since my return.

Along with the answer to my self-enforced reclusivity - with no human contact other than that of my housekeeper - that followed it.

For what must have seemed like a lack of trust in you on my part all these years, I apologise and state only that no such lack was ever present in my thoughts upon your regard.

The deficiency was mine and, even as you read the manuscript left you, the lack of moral courage in facing you with the truth that was also mine will become clear.

In common with the mode in which I have made my living down the years – and having no stomach to provide the details of my disgrace via the harsher and more prosaic form of a journal that will require a moral strength I no longer possess – I made the decision to recount my adventure in a fictional third-person form.

A form that would necessitate the usual effort on my part to make such a thing reasonable as well as readable and, in the process, divert my mind a little from the pain it was unavoidable I must undergo once the project was undertaken.

You may be assured, dear brother, that what you read is as devoid as it can be of any special pleading on my part for allowing the mental and sexual humiliations that were heaped upon my head at the time of my story, and that every event written is as true as my presentation of the facts in such a fictional form allows.

Apologies also for the recital and description of words and acts I feel obliged to warn may both shock and offend you.

I have entitled my manuscript of shame in the following way:

“Arabian Nightmare”

In the hope that you will still see something of the brother you knew and respected after your reading is complete, I leave you now with a most loving…

Adieu…

CHAPTER I

“Are you coming in to watch the dancing, Lady Benedict?”

The first part of the answer was an emphatic shaking of the head, while the second underpinned the distaste of the expression on the somewhat disdainful looking lady so questioned.

“I assuredly am not. More, I thoroughly disapprove of the expedition of which this dance is the inauguration. I consider that even by her contemplation of such a tour into the desert with only her husband and no attendant of her own sex, with only native camel drivers and servants, Helen Middlemass – nee: Templeton, is behaving with a recklessness and impropriety that is calculated to cast a slur not only on her own reputation, but also on the prestige of her country… And as for her husband permitting to such a proposition?... Well, I think my views on the subject of that love-struck fool, and the shocking way he allows her to ride roughshod over him, are plain.”

Lady Benedict’s cheeks were flushed with anger and her listener knew there was more to come.

“I blush to think of it,” she went on sure enough. “We English cannot be too careful of our behavior abroad. Examples must be set if our continental neighbours are not to cast their envious stones. And especially here, where we are the guests of the French in their own territory.”

She fanned herself rapidly, as if the mere action could blow away these affronts to her set-in-stone sensibilities.

“It is the maddest piece of unprincipled folly I have ever heard of from a woman in her position,” she finished.

“Oh, come, Lady Benedict!” the younger and less intolerant of the two ladies urged. “You exaggerate, surely. In a few months’ time the century will be two decades old. For what did those brave suffragettes sacrifice if not for women to be free to experience the thrill of adventure and discovery as well as men? I agree it is… unconventional… and, probably, not quite the safest of journeys she and her husband undertake. But I also feel we should applaud her boldness… I also take into account, Mrs Middlemass’s unusual upbringing.”

“And you believe I haven’t?” the more judgemental of the two asked. “It has been deplorable – and that is to understate its full horror. But nothing can excuse this scandalous escapade. I knew her mother years ago, and I took it upon myself to expostulate both with Helen and her brother, but Sir Aubrey is hedged around with an egotistical complacency that would defy a pickaxe to penetrate. According to him, a Templeton is beyond criticism, and his sister, though married, remains of the breed. He has his own life to live and her reputation is her own to deal with.”

The dowager allowed herself a derisive snort.

“The girl herself was, unsurprisingly given her breeding, flippant and not a little rude. Well, I washed my hands of the whole affair right there and then and will certainly not countenance

to-night's entertainment celebrating her departure by appearing at it. I have already warned the manager that if the noise is kept up beyond a reasonable hour I shall leave the hotel to-morrow."

Which was when, position stated and thrilling to her own sense of narrow and righteous indignation, Lady Benedict drew her wrap around her with a little shudder and stalked majestically across the wide verandah of the Dominion Hotel.

The two men left standing by the open French window that led into the hotel ballroom looked first upon her departure and then at each other.

Both were smiling, heads seeming to shake in unison at the ill-informed intolerance their unsuspected presence, courtesy of a rather large decorative fern, had allowed them to overhear.

"No prevarication there, what?" said one, with a marked American accent. "I guess that's how scandals are made with you English, eh?"

"Rubbish!" answered his companion, though not combatively so. "The presence of a runt shouldn't lead to a belief that rest of the litter is less than reasonable. Lady Benedict is, I admit, of a peculiarly English origin, but she is not indicative of all its islanders. Certainly, she does not speak for this one."

A sip of a particularly fine Dow's later, he went on:

"To my knowledge, there's never been a breath of scandal attached to Helen Templeton's name. And I've known the child since she was a baby."

His own statement brought a smile to is lips.

"And a rum little thing she was too… But scandal?"

The English half of the pairing shook his head.

"Confound that interfering old woman who has yet to know a moment's passion beyond her own social climbing prejudices! If the sainted Mary herself were to land at this party now she would insist she had come fresh from a Limehouse lamp-post."

The American laughed, knowing enough of the English and that *particular* area of London to find the joke amusing.

"She would wreck the reputation of the Archangel Gabriel if he came down to earth, let alone that of a mere human girl."

"Not a very human girl," said the American, still laughing at the earlier allusion. "Looks to me like she was meant for a boy and had a change of heart the wrong side of the womb."

It was the Englishman's turn to laugh now.

"Looks like a boy in petticoats," continued the colonial cousin. "A damned pretty boy too."

“And a damned haughty one,” the Englishman added with a chuckle. “I overheard her this morning, in the garden, making mincemeat of a French officer. Handled him as if he were a new-boy in front of his first governess.”

The American laughed again and his fellow guest went on:

“Tried making love to her, I expect – despite her husband being around. A thing she does not tolerate. Apart from with the man she allowed to place a ring on her finger, she's the coldest little fish in the world - and, from what I hear, she likes to rule the roost with him also.”

“If we’re not careful,” said the colonial with a chuckle, “we’ll soon be sounding like that disapproving social climber of yours who just left for her room with her fine sense of propriety in an outrage.”

The Englishman held up his hands in a gesture of *“God forbid!”* before finishing his train of thought:

“Perish the thought, my friend… I simply point out that our Mrs Middlemass is a woman who does not take kindly to… being led. What she wants she goes after, and what she wants mostly is the romance of travel and adventures that can go in hand with trips to exotic and, perhaps, dangerous locations. I don't think she knows the meaning of the word fear.”

“Not exactly conducive to a happy marriage, if you ask me. Why does the husband put up with it? Is he a bought man, or just a weak one?”

“Neither. I happen to know he’s from good stock and has his own money. A successful writer of fiction, or so I’m led to believe. His indulgence of her, I suspect, has its origins in love.”

“Ah,” the American latched onto the word, facial expression indicating he himself had being scorched by its fire himself upon more than one occasion. “The consolation provided to woman by nature for it having denied her equality in physical strength. The ability to inspire devotion and place a ring through the nose of a credulous man… No matter by how great a margin he be her superior.”

His expression became sour and it wasn’t difficult for the Englishman to suspect he was recalling more… *personal*… memories.

A suspicion soon borne out:

“At least, that is, until a better offer comes along and that same credulous man finds himself shorn of hair and chained to a Philistine pillar.”

Then, almost to himself, as if he had forgotten he was in company:

“Slut”

Expression unreadable now, he seemed to go off-world for a few seconds as his companion regarded his lapse into the vulgar with an almost… *forensic*… interest.

Then, coming back to the here and now with, neither acknowledgement of, nor apology for, his sudden intensity:

“There's a bad streak in the family, isn't there? I heard some fossil in his cups yammering about it the other night. Paterfamilias was mad and blew his brains out, or so the old coot said.”

The Englishman shrugged his shoulders.

“The *‘old* coot’, as you so aptly describe the Baronet in question, was right on this occasion. And you may call it *‘mad’*, if you like,” he said slowly.

Then, giving the American a long thoughtful look, as if gauging his mettle:

“I live near the Templeton’s' in England, and happen to know the story.”

He paused, noting the raised interest levels of his fellow guest.

“If you should like to hear it, that is,” he finished.

“The night is clement and our glasses are full,” observed the American, a light in his eyes indicating he’d like nothing more. “What better time to have one’s ears… *informed*.”

The Englishman indicated a bench on the empty terrace and waited until they were seated before taking a sip of his Port and beginning.

“Sir John Templeton was passionately devoted to his wife,” he began. “After twenty years of married life they were still lovers.

“Then… A girl was born, and the mother died. Two hours afterwards Sir John shot himself, leaving the baby in the sole care of her brother. A brother who was just nineteen, and as lazy and as selfish then as he is now. The description *‘wastrel’* one that might have been coined for him.

“The problem of bringing up a girl child was too much trouble to be solved for one so young himself and in receipt of his own massive character flaws, so he settled the difficulty by treating his baby sister as if she was a boy.

The result is what you see, together with the reactions to her which you hear.”

Gazing over their shoulders at the same time, they could see into the brilliantly lit ballroom, already filled with gaily chattering people.

On a slightly raised platform at one end of the room the host and hostess were receiving their guests.

Brother and sister, that is.

Not, husband and wife.

The brother and sister were singularly unalike. Sir Aubrey Templeton was very tall and thin, the pallor of his face accentuated by the blackness of his smoothly brushed hair and heavy black moustache. His attitude a mixture of well-bred courtesy and languid boredom. He seemed too tired even to keep his drink to hand, and made sure he was next to table that allowed him to relieve himself of such a burden between frequent sips that, as the evening wore on would become gulps.

By contrast the girl at his side appeared vividly alive.

She was only of medium height and though slender with the easy, vigorous carriage of an athletic boy, there was nothing whatsoever boyish about a chest suggestive enough to ensure she had need to take an admiring French officer to task that very day.

Her head was poised proudly and a somewhat scornful mouth and firm chin showed plainly an obstinate determination. Deep blue eyes that met all enquiries with frankness – almost as if in a dare - were unusually clear and steady. The long, curling black lashes shading them and the dark eyebrows above were a foil to the thick crop of loose, red-gold curls that she wore on this occasion piled above her head to reveal ears that were small and well-formed and gave off the misleading impression of a pixy.

“The result’s certainly worth seeing,” said the American admiringly, referring to his companion's last remark.

A third and younger man came through the French-Windows and joined them without a by-your-leave.

“Hallo, Wilson. You're late,” greeted the English half of the pairing. “The divinity is ten deep in admirers already.”

A dull red crept into the young man's face, and he jerked his head angrily.

“I got waylaid by Lady Benedict - poisonous old harridan!”

The older men shared looks of amusement for the immediacy of youth that bypassed their more considered… *diplomacy*… and simply went with the first description that sprang to mind.

The thoughts of both men describing that description as reserved, given the circumstances and its object.

“She had a great deal to say on the subject of Miss Temp… Mrs Middlemass and her trip. Harridan ought to be gagged. I thought she was going to be talking all night, so I fairly bolted in the end. All the same, I agree with her on one point. Why is her husband allowing her to make such a trip?”

Nobody seemed to be able to give an answer. The band had begun playing, and the floor was covered with laughing, talking couples.

Sir Aubrey Templeton had moved away to talk with the husband in question, and his sister was left standing with several men, who waited, programme in hand and wishing to dance, despite her marital status.

All of whom she waved away with a marked absence of smile and a resolute and impatient shake of her head.

“Things seem to be getting a hustle on,” said the American.

“Are you going to try your luck?” asked the elder of the two Englishmen.

The American bit off the end of a cigar with no small surprise – as well as a rueful little smile.

“I’m surely not. The haughty young lady turned me down as a dancer very early in our acquaintance. Even though I told her – and truly – that my intention was simply to dance with an interesting married lady and not, as her French Officer attempted earlier, with seduction in mind.”

His face grew solemn again and it was easy to see he was deathly serious as he added:

“I’ve had my share of so-called men who put the make on the wives of other men.”

The older and younger Englishmen shared a look at this reveal and the American soon shook himself from what was, no doubt an uncomfortable trip into his memories.

“I don't blame her,” he added, with a rueful laugh, “I’m a dud as a dancer. But her candour still rankles. She told me quite plainly that she had no use for an American who couldn’t ride or hunt – and wouldn’t have found one even if she wasn’t married.”

He smiled.

“Though I did intimate to her, very gently, that there were a few little openings in the States for men beside cattle-punching and fur trapping.”

The older of the other two laughed at his use of irony:

“I shouldn’t imagine that met with her approval. She’s far too serious to laugh.”

The younger man appeared ready to leap to the defence of his heart’s desire, but a long-suffering look of warning cut him off at the pass.

“You have that right,” the American agreed, smile now a laugh. “She froze me with a look and, I have to say, I faded away under it, despite the difference in our years. No, Sir, the brother may be a *‘wastrel’*, as I’ve heard him described a good few times over the past few days, but he does seem to care for his sister. He also plays a companionable game of Bridge and I’ll be limiting my contact with his family to that pursuit for the rest of my stay. He's actually not so bad a chap underneath and he's a sportsman. Doesn't seem care a durn if he wins or loses.”

“It doesn't matter when you have a banking account the size of his,” said Wilson with a little sourness. “Personally, I find dancing more amusing and less expensive. In fact, I shall go and take my chance with our hostess. If a husband is fool enough to leave her alone the way hers does, then I’m afraid he can have no complaints if he loses her.”

Under the American's disapproving gaze, his eyes turned rather eagerly towards the end of the room where the girl was standing alone, straight and slim, the light from an electrolier gilding the thick red curls standing atop her haughty little face.

She was staring down at the dancers with an absent expression in her eyes, as if her thoughts were far away from the crowded ballroom.

The American pushed Wilson forward with a little laugh, though his disapproval, in the words the older Englishman felt sure he intended to be light, came through:

"Run along, foolish moth, and get your poor little wings singed. When the temple is about your ears," he said to the somewhat bemused Wilson, continuing with his earlier biblical metaphor I'll be along to mop up the remains. If, on the other hand, your temerity meets with the success you hope for it, I'll try to keep the husband away from any weaponry to be found in the near vicinity."

Then, linking his arm in that of the more mature of the Englishmen, he drew him away to the card-room.

Ignoring the strangely couched warning, Wilson went through the window and worked slowly round the room, hugging the wall, evading dancers, and threading his way through groups of chattering men and women of all nationalities. He came at last to the raised dais on which Helen Middlemass was still standing and climbed up the few steps to her side.

"This is luck, Mrs Middlemass," he said, with an assurance that he was far from feeling. "Am I really fortunate enough to find you without a partner?"

She turned to him slowly, with a little crease growing between her arched eyebrows, as if his coming were inopportune and she resented the interruption to her thoughts, and then, to his surprise, she smiled quite frankly.

"I said I would not dance until everybody was started," she said rather doubtfully, looking over the crowded floor.

"They are all dancing. You've done your duty nobly. And this is rather a nice tune," he urged persuasively.

She hesitated, tapping her programme-pencil against her teeth.

"I refused a lot of men," she said, with a grimace. Then she laughed suddenly, as if making up her mind. "Come along, then. I am noted for my bad manners. This will only be one extra sin and I'm sure my husband will forgive me."

At mention of this impediment, Wilson chanced a glance at the man himself and was relieved to see him still in an absorbed conversation with his wife's brother, before reiterating to himself the thought he had shared on the verandah with the older men along the lines of his having no complaints if his carelessness ensured she was lost to him.

He danced well, but with the girl in his arms he seemed suddenly tongue-tied. They swung round the room several times, then halted beside an open window and – again to his surprise –

she guided them out into the garden of the hotel to sit beside each other on a wicker seat under a gaudy Japanese hanging lantern. The band was still playing, and for the moment the garden was empty, lit faintly by coloured lanterns, festooned from the palm trees, and twinkling lights outlining the winding paths.

Wilson leaned forward, his hands clasped between his knees, feeling about as nervous as he had in his young life.

“I think you are the most perfect dancer I have ever met,” he said a little breathlessly.

Mrs Middlemass looked at him seriously, without a trace of self-consciousness; a young woman for whom compliments of such a nature had long lost the power to embarrass.

“It is very easy to dance if you have a musical ear, and if you have been in the habit of making your body do what you want. So few people seem to be trained to make their limbs obey them. Mine have had to do as they were told since I was a small child,” she answered calmly.

Then, with an intent whose meaning was lost upon his young and not fully formed soul; despite his being her senior by a couple of years:

“I like… *things*… that do as they are told.”

The unexpectedness of the reply - together the mystifying intensity suffixing it - acted as a silencer on young Wilson for a long period, and the girl beside him seemed in no hurry to break the silence.

Then dance was over and the empty garden was thronged for a little time before the dancers drifted back into the hotel as the band started again.

“It's rather pleasant here in the garden,” Wilson said tentatively, heart pounding with unusual rapidity, the eyes, he kept fixed on his own clasped hands looking… *hungry*.

“You mean that, you want to sit out this dance with me?” she said with a boyish directness that somewhat nonplussed him.

“Yes,” he stammered rather foolishly.

“Despite what my husband might think?” she asked.

“I… I think if your husband is foolish enough to leave so beautiful a wife alone then… Then he can hardly be surprised if… if company does not find her.”

With a small and teasing laugh, she held her programme up to the light of the lantern.

Then she sighed, as if at the imposition of an onerous duty:

“I promised this one to Arthur Benedict. Though heaven alone knows why he asked. We quarrel every time we meet and I cannot think why he would bother. He disapproves of my lifestyle even more than his mother.”

“She is an interfering old lady and her son a mummy’s boy without a mind of his own,” said Wilson in defence of her.

Her laughter sent chills of pleasure through him for having been its cause.

“Then he will be overjoyed to be let off. And, now I’ve danced with you I am done for the evening.”

Her hand lightly touched his knee before moving away again and he felt something stir below decks.

“I think I shall stay and talk to you, but you must do your best to keep me in a good temper.”

His pleasure knew no bounds at this boon she was bestowing upon him and his voice shook a little as he asked:

“Are you really determined to go through with this tour?”

She stared at him in surprise.

“Of course. Why not? My arrangements have been made some time. Why should I change my mind at the last moment?”

“Why does your brother let you go alone? Why doesn't he go with you? I know your husband will be with you but…”

“You don’t feel my husband capable of… *protecting*… me?” she asked, the mocking note in her voice intermingled with something more… *fierce*.

“I… I… it is just that he is so much older than you and… and…”

“And the desert is a dangerous place,” she finished for him.

He nodded, feeling he might have offended the goddess and worried by the fact.

“How about *me* being capable of protecting *him*? Or am I too young as he is too old?”

“I… I did not mean to offend,” he stammered, the effect of her eyes upon his unmanning him. “It is just that he is so many years your senior and…”

“Twenty-two,” she confirmed. “He is forty-seven. Aren’t you men supposed to be in your prime at such an age. The meeting of maturity’s wisdom with a more controlled… *physicality*.”

He found himself flushing red; the final word of her sentence having a most… *galvanising*… effect upon him coming from the full and sensuous lips in that almost boyish face.

“That may be so, Mrs Middlemass, but – and excuse me if I speak out of turn – but Mr Middlemass does not seem… does not seem…”

His voice trailed off, at a loss as to how he might phrase a thought in regard of her husband he felt sure she would find offensive.

His rescue came from the object of his desire herself.

“Does not seem a man of action but a man of words? Is that what you were about to say?”

He nodded gratefully, though he knew an exact phrasing of his thoughts would have been a sight less complimentary to the man.

“Arnold is a literary man, it is true,” she confirmed. “And, as is so often the way with men of that kind, tends to live life mostly within the confines of his skull. It is what first attracted him to me. That and the fact he is not so hidebound as most men I meet – you included – who tend to allow the form of their lives to be dictated by what certain men and women such as Lady Benedict, and the son who peeps fearfully and dutifully at the world from the folds of her petticoats, think to be… *seemly*.”

Wilson was stirred to defend himself.

“I hardly think I qualify for inclusion with a poisonous old bat and her wretch of a son,” he said, the heat of anger joining cheeks already stirred into vivid colour by the reaction of his senses to being so close to this woman for whom he felt such… *overpowering*… feelings.

She shrugged her shoulders with a little laugh, as if to say:

“Whatever you wish.”

“To return to your original concerns,” she began finally. “We fell out, Aubrey and I, over my decision not to accompany him to America. Arnold was not happy with my decision either, but that was neither here nor there. It’s what *I* wanted. A trip into the desert. America is known to me, and what is known does not involve adventure. The desert, however, is something quite… *different*.”

Wilson contented his thoughts to stay that way. Voicing them at this point, he was convinced, would only alienate her from him. *“My decision”*, indeed. What kind of a husband accepted such ultimatums from a woman? No matter how desirable!

What kind of a *man?*

Oblivious to his thoughts, though having some idea as to how they were running, given what she knew of the general opinion of men in regard of women with a sense of independence, she continued:

“We quarrelled for two whole days and half one night, and then we compromised. I should have my desert tour, and Aubrey should go to New York. But, though he remained displeased. and to mark his brotherly appreciation of my gracious promise to follow him, with my husband, to the States at the end of a month, he has consented to grace my caravan for the first stage of our trip into the desert.”

Her head turned and Wilson saw her eyes flicker back in the direction of the hotel and to her brother, whom they could see was still in conversation with Arnold Middlemass.

“Well, your sibling does not seem displeased with his brother-in-law, at least,” observed Wilson, finding the whole set-up more than a little… *odd*.

“Yes. Surprisingly enough, Aubrey and my husband find agreement on many things. My brother believes Arnold to be a sobering influence upon his reckless young sister. Of course, it annoyed him enormously that neither he nor my husband could order me not to go. But, and especially since I came of age a few months ago, I can do as I please.”

She turned back to give her admirer a smile that was a mix of the coquette and the determined young woman she was, as if inviting him to exception with her statement.

Adding:

“Not that I have ever done anything else.”

“Your brother thinks your husband a good influence,” Wilson began, not playing her game. “That is all very well. But shouldn’t be there more to a union?”

“Explain?” she ordered.

“I refer to love, Mrs Middlemass,” he answered instantly and earnestly. “I am sure there are any number of good people ready and able to be a *‘good influence’* upon you. But that hardly demands a requirement that you marry them. And especially when they are…”

“So much older than myself,” she finished for him. “Your insistence on the singing of this *‘old’* song begins to tire me, sir. Did I not explain my reasoning not a minute before?”

“I did not hear love mentioned?” he reminded her.

“Why, Mr Wilson,” she began, smiling but with serious eyes, “if I did not know better I would get the impression that you yourself are a little in love with me.”

“Not just a little,” he began, the admission opening the floodgates to his previously undeclared passion.

Or would have, had she not placed a finger across his lips to silence what she knew must follow.

“Calm down and do not make me return inside now, Edmund,” she warned using his first-name for the first time and knowing it would have quite the opposite effect to having him *‘calm down’*.

“But, Helen…?” he began, when her finger freed his lips, returning the favour with eyes full of devotion.

“I mean it, Edmund,” she said sternly. “Not one more word of such things.”

He fell to silence beneath her unblinking gaze, hating her brother, her husband, and anybody with more access to her heart, mind and body than he himself was permitted.

“They are both right, though,” he said finally as the silence between them grew awkward.

“On which score”

“The desert,” persisted Wilson. “It isn't safe. The stories one hears of young European women who…”

“Oh, not you too, Edmund,” she said with a sigh that spoke of great disappointment. “People like your *‘poisonous’* Lady Benedict regurgitate the contents of the latest potboiler to take their interest and, of a sudden, people are reciting it as if they have received verification from His Majesty’s Foreign Office itself… Oh, dear.”

“There have been stories in the newspapers concerning…” he began defensively.

“There are always stories in newspapers, Edmund. And normally of just that kind an editor or proprietor feels will increase circulation. Do try not to be so credulous.”

She flicked him a look of some disgust, as if he had truly let her down, before continuing:

“I don't agree with you, or your *‘newspapers’* at all,” she told him vehemently. And I don't know why everybody is making such a fuss about my decision. Plenty of other women have travelled in much wilder country than this desert and come to no harm.”

He looked at her curiously. She seemed to be totally unaware that it was her youth and her beauty that supplied all the danger of the expedition. A reason he sensed she would have no truck with and contented himself with an easier line of reasoning.

“From what I have read, and an Uncle who *is* with the Foreign Office tells me, there seems to be unrest amongst the tribes of the region you intend to visit.”

Then even more seriously:

“There have been a lot of rather disturbing rumours lately.”

She made a little movement of impatience. “Oh, that's what they always tell you when they want to put obstacles in your way. The authorities have already dangled that bogey in front of me. I asked for facts and they only gave me generalities. I also asked if they had any power to stop me. They said they had not, but strongly advised me not to make the attempt. I said I should go, unless the French Government arrested me… A part of my journey is in their territory, after all.”

“But, Helen…?”

“Why not go? I am not afraid. Moreover, I don't admit that there is anything to be afraid of. I don't believe a word about the tribes being restless. Arabs are always moving about, aren't they? Why else would they be called Nomads?”

Wilson sensed his cause was doomed.

“You don't know what this trip means to me,” she continued. I like wild places. The happiest times of my life have been spent camping in America and India, and I have always wanted the desert more than either of them. It is going to be a month of pure joy and I am going to be enormously happy.”

“Just the same, I…”

I have an excellent caravan leader, so good even the authorities vouch for him. And I shall be armed. I am perfectly able to take care of myself. I can shoot straight and I am used to camping. Besides, I have given my word to Aubrey to be in Oran to meet him that we might take this American trip. I can hardly get very far away in that time.”

There was an obstinate ring in her voice, and when she stopped speaking he sat silent, consumed with anxiety, obsessed with the loveliness of her, and tormented with the desire to tell her so.

Then he turned to her suddenly, resolve, face a most startling white.

“Mrs Middlemass… Helen… If you won’t put off this trip, then at least give me the right to go with you. I… I…

He faltered a second and then recovered himself.

“I love you, and…”

Now it was the turn of his finger to silence her lips that he might speak without interruption.

“Yes, I realise you are married and, no doubt, have feelings for your husband. But that fact does not alter the nature of my own. I want you for my wife more than anything on earth and know such a desire is impossible – at least at this time. But I shan't always be a penniless subaltern, just as you will not always be married. One of these days you will be free and I shall ask for your hand. I sense already that we are good friends but I’ll have you know that I'll give my whole life to make you happy. The world has been a different place to me since you came into it. I can't get away from you. You are in my thoughts night and day. I love you; I want you. My God, Helen! Beauty like yours drives a man mad!”

“Is beauty all that a man wants in his wife?” she asked, with a kind of cold wonder in her voice, unimpressed at a declaration she had heard many times before; if, perhaps, without the same intensity of feeling. “Brains and a sound body seem much more sensible requirements to me.”

“But when a woman has all three, as you have, Helen,” he whispered ardently, his hands closing over the slim ones lying in her lap. “What then for the man who desires them?”

With a strength that seemed impossible for their smallness she disengaged her hands from his grasp.

“Stop that! This instant! I gave you no permission to expect such… *intimacies*.”

A feeling of ice cold gripped his innards at her disapproval and he complied on the instant, removing his hands from hers to sit penitently and await his fate as his thoughts raced upon her choice of word:

"Permission?"

The words outlining that fate, when they came, were *not* what he had been expecting.

"I am interested to hear you say that you love me," she told him.

Then, as he waited in an agony of his own making:

"You are, though, not… *disinteresting*... to me."

The cold in him retreated and he looked back into her eyes with renewed hope, the knowledge he was trespassing on another man's territory, and despite his well-developed sense of honour, not troubling him in the slightest at that moment, so great was his sense of relief.

"But, despite my age," she warned, "you would do well to consider that – and before you commit yourself to me – that I'm not a woman like any other you have known."

"That is what makes you so…"

"Be silent when I am speaking," she snapped instantly, and Wilson, who was at least three years her senior, felt a shiver of fear blow over him at both her words and the harshness of tone accompanying them.

But he did fall silent as she had demanded.

"Any man who wishes to be in my life," she continued, "must accept that he will have no say in how I will live it. My brother has yet to come to terms with this simple truth and my *'older husband'*, as you describe him, is only now beginning to realise the full implications of that which I did not trouble to hide from him when he, like you, confessed the feelings he held for me."

She allowed him a few moments that her words might sink in more fully.

Then:

"Which does not mean that I do not expect to have a great deal of say in how he lives *his* life."

Wilson could only stare at her as words refused to form; though he was unsure at that moment of his capacity to voice them even if they had.

"I think it only just – given a certain man and the… *right*… woman," she went on, "that the woman be in absolute charge of the relationship. Be that man, brother, husband, or lover."

Her quiet, even voice stopped. The enchanting face and the intelligent eyes that held his so effortlessly seeming pleased that its point had been made. And made with a tone of cold sincerity in it that Wilson could not help but recognise.

As well as find… *chilling*.

She had meant everything that she said. The smitten young man was certain of it. It was no more than the truth and he now knew with certainty that her reputation for complete indifference to admiration and her unvarying attitude towards men was both factual and well-deserved – together with her wilfulness and obstinate determination. As it was said, so it was done.

He had heard of such women, of course.

Women who desired to be… *imperious*… to the men in their lives.

But, until now, he had only met them in the form of wives who domineered their husbands a mixture of tears, whining, and nagging. Of course, some of his fellow officers had a hankering over women of a certain type who would, for the exchange of currency, satisfy their strange prepubescent urge to be punished by Nanny or Maid; but neither that nor its more everyday variation could be described in the same breath as that which Helen Middlemass had just outlined to him. His friends and fellow Subalterns were, after all, simply indulging a childish need; not committing themselves to the command of a female in the implied way of the girl's husband.

An image of whom forced the question to his mind:

"Where would all this leave him?

And, more importantly, would he wish to remain wherever he was when she condescended to tell him of his destination?

Wilson sat in silence, unable to reconcile what he had just heard with what he felt for the girl he had only just heard it from.

And there was something else.

Something that was, perhaps, even more disturbing.

A wild sensation that traced his network of veins as if it were molten; taking senses and imagination with it into areas he had yet to allow himself to visit.

Even, perhaps *especially*, after hearing of the somewhat pathetic adventures of his self-congratulatory fellows, for whom the antics at their various and respective Public Schools - and even more elevated seats of learning - had made such episodes not only expected but some kind of badge of honour.

Unsurprising then, that the next words to leave his mouth surprised him as if they had fallen from the lips of a stranger:

"Am I the kind of man you would wish to… *command*… Miss Templeton?" he asked, only dimly aware that he had addressed her by her maiden name.

She looked at him a moment and, by the dim light of the hanging lanterns, saw that his eyes were almost cow-like before her own as he succumbed to her *"female authority"*. He was attractive and loyal, and ready, she knew, to take his place alongside her husband as another male willing to forego his own independence – even his pride – simply to remain in the orbit of her existence.

"You will have to know your place, Edmund," she said finally; magnificent eyes holding his. "I demand complete respect and perfect obedience from my husband and will expect no less from you. If you do not feel that male pride of yours can countenance the control and command of a woman – and especially a woman who is younger in years than yourself – then you must say so now and not either my time or your own."

She paused for a few moments and he marvelled at what he was hearing from the lips of this fascinating goddess for whom, not minutes before it seemed, had appeared as beyond the reach of his dreams and hopes as Saturn and Jupiter are beyond the wingspan of a domestic pigeon.

"But," she continued as he stared at her with eyes all the more entranced for the mind behind them being shocked, "I find you most attractive and, if you are ready to submit yourself to my authority, I will gladly consent to your request to travel to the desert with myself and my husband."

He was finding it difficult to breathe in her presence now and, with this last, almost stopped entirely.

She was offering him, this woman of his dreams, the opportunity to travel at her side!

"Well?" he heard her ask at last. "What is it to be? Are you unable to part with your male pride? Or will you commit to accompanying me to the desert as a part of my retinue?"

Edmund Wilson would later have no idea how long he sat beneath her unwavering gaze as he considered her words.

But he would remember for the rest of his existence the meaning of the ones he chose when he finally croaked out a response:

"M-Miss Templeton… I mean, Mrs Middlemass… Your offer to me is…"

*****

A few hours later Helen came into her bedroom, and, switching on the electric lights, tossed her gloves and programme into a chair.

Unseen as yet by her, Arnold Middlemass was waiting in a chair to the side of the door.

A handsome man, he had oft been told, approaching the exact middle point of his forties, he was still physically imposing and in receipt of a full head of only slightly greying hair.

As seemed usual for him these days, he was more than mildly annoyed with his wilful and erotic wife and wondered how she kept him in such a condition of pride destroying acceptance.

Even if he was voluble on the subject of her… *behaviour*.

"Did your lover please you?" he snapped, gratified to see her start at his voice but not so pleased as she collected herself almost instantly and trained fierce eyes upon him.

"He is not a lover, Arnold, but an admirer. A follower, if you will."

"But…"

"For your information, not that I feel required to tell you anything of my affairs other than what you need to know to be useful, young Mr Wilson will be accompanying us to the desert?"

"What?" he exploded, leaping to his feet. "You value me so lightly you would flaunt him in my face. And what of my reputation? Do you intend to make a laughing stock of me to my family? To my friends? To my readers?"

Her laughter was as maddening to him as his inability to prevent it.

"Really, Arnold," she began, "we have not been married long but you cannot say I didn't warn you that there would be absolutely no possibility of your having the slightest say in how I live my life.

"But…" he began to protest, before she cut him off with her usual ease, outraged at her double-standard when he considered the great pleasure she took in ruling his own affairs.

"Do not interrupt, Arnold," she snapped, craftily accompanying the rebuke by beginning to disrobe, knowing the sight and what it might mean would destroy his equilibrium and allow her to lead him in the usual way. "He is simply another male – an officer and a gentleman, for what that's worth – coming along for the ride to provide that *'extra security'* you and my brother, together with just about every other dyed-in-the-wool dowager in our circle, insist I must have to be safe."

Arnold Middlemass watched as her clothes fell away to reveal the perfectly sculpted body that so enslaved him and prevented his assuming the role a man could expect to have in respect of his wife.

He was hopelessly and irrevocably infatuated with her and she knew it.

"And as for your readers," she continued, "I would be surprised if anyone so lacking in grey cells they could be entertained by what you so risibly describe as *'literature'* were sentient enough to be aware of, let alone shocked by, your young wife's private arrangements."

Completely naked now and staring at him with her hands upon her hips expectantly, utterly confident in the ability of her body as well as her mind to conquer him, she allowed the man she had married to drink her in.

Then, when she considered him… *ripe*:

"There is no need for you to undress for now," she told him. "As usual, I have no need for that pathetic tid-bit you so over-generously describe as a cock."

His face fell but, beaten down as her mind and erotic firm body had him, he did not move; instead standing motionless to drink in her wondrous and pert young breasts as they rose above a waist that appeared truly hour glass and led down into the valley of her womanhood and the red bush she trimmed so assiduously.

A red-bush that rested between a pair of legs that were sheer and toned in their perfection.

“But, if you apologise nicely and most abjectly for your outburst,” she told him. “I might just be persuaded to allow your tongue upon my hungry little cunny that I may be lulled into blissful sleep that much more swiftly.”

He watched, stunned immobile still, as she placed herself upon the bed with her back to the mattress and her head propped upon some plentiful pillows that she might view his efforts for her from above and waited.

A pulse ticked at his temple and he knew inner rage such as he had yet to experience – even in *her* presence. She was his wife, for God’s sakes! His manhood was dying beneath her gaze and, more importantly, his own, and if he did not seize it from the young she-devil’s grasp soon, he knew he would never know the pride and the pleasure of it again.

Moved by an anger that made him both vengeful and unbalanced, he suddenly moved towards the infuriating and dominant goddess awaiting his tongue with spread legs and, staring into her eyes with an intensity he swore must terrify her…

Knelt!

CHAPTER II

As Helen Middleman – nee: Templeton – had said it would be, so it was.

The arrangements for the trip had been perfect and they – her retinue and the young wife herself – had left exactly upon time.

There had been no hitch anywhere and, her brother having departed, she was now, with husband, male follower, and aides, at the very start of a month's adventure she had dreamt of for many months now.

Longer, in fact.

Much, much, longer.

The guide recommended her, Mustafa Ali, appeared capable and efficient, effacing himself when not wanted and replying with courteous dignity when spoken to on that first day of their trip towards the interior.

A day that had been full of interest. The long, hot ride for Helen having been the height of physical enjoyment; though not, she knew, as much for her husband as it had been for herself and the younger Wilson who, surprisingly, Arnold had appeared to like. They had reached the oasis where the first night was to be passed and found the camp already established, tents pitched, and everything so ordered that nothing could be criticised to criticised.

Helen glanced about her little travelling tent with complete content. It was much smaller than the ones to which she had always been accustomed, ridiculously so compared with the large one she had had in India the previous year, - complete with separate bath and dressing-rooms. Servants, too, had swarmed in India, but here service promised to be inadequate. A fault she owned as her own. It had been her whim on this tour to dispense with the elaborate arrangements that Sir Aubrey cultivated whenever he travelled and to try a comparative roughing it.

The narrow camp cot, the tin bath, the little folding table and her two suit-cases seemed to take up all the available space. But she laughed at the inconvenience, though she had drenched her bed with splashing, and the soap had found its way into the toe of one of her long boots. She had changed from her riding clothes into a dress of clinging jade-green silk, swinging short above her slender ankles, the neck cut low, revealing the gleaming white of the generous but girlish bosom her husband loved so much and had done so much to ensnare him.

Exiting the tent, she stood a moment to take in her surroundings and the starry night that was swiftly turning cold – as nights in the desert were wont to do.

The vista above was simply breathtaking!

In a condition of some aww for the desert canopy above them, she took herself to the tables upon which had been set the evening meal

“Are you going to rig yourself out like that every evening for the benefit of Mustafa Ali and the camel-drivers?” asked a sour Arnold, looking for all the world in his khaki like a refugee from a Rider Haggard novel.

To his left, looking a little more at home in his own version of desert-wear, Edmund Wilson seemed to agree with him; though he was far too entranced with her entrance in such clothes to make his feelings known.

“I do not propose to invite the worthy Mustafa to meals, and I am not in the habit of *'rigging myself out,'* as you so charmingly put it, for any one's benefit but my own. So, if you think I should dress in camp to please you, my dear husband, you not only flatter yourself but show a certain flare for delusion. As with all things I do, I do it entirely to please myself.”

“My darling wife,” her husband began, obviously attempting to keep up appearances for the sake of young Wilson, “I simply point out that you are not attending a soiree in Kensington or an al fresco ball on the Bois. This is the desert and there is all the reason in the world for you *not* to make yourself more attractive than you are already.”

“Are you accusing me of something, husband?” she asked in a quietly menacing voice, the dark blue eyes fixed on his face growing darker as she looked at him.

“I've been doing some hard thinking to-day, Helen,” he told her. “This tour you propose is impossible.”

“Isn't it rather late in the day for such a revelation?” she told him with heavy sarcasm.

“Back in more… *civilised*… surroundings,” he began, “I can understand how such an adventure might look appealing. But you are here now and must see for yourself that, face to face with the thing, it is impossible. It's quite unthinkable that you can wander…” he referenced the armed Wilson, “even in the company of us two men - for the next month in a desert populated by savages. Yes, you are an independent woman, as you so enjoy telling any who will listen, but I am still your husband and that requires certain moral obligations towards you on my part. There are certain things a young woman cannot do – no matter how determined and… *wilful*… she might be.

If Helen was irritated before she was now incandescent with anger, despite the fact it surfaced in a hard laugh.

“If I had not lived with you long enough to know… *things*…” she began, throwing a deliberate look at young Wilson to unnerve her husband with the reminder of his presence and what she might say in front of him, I should really be cowed with your husbandly dominance, Arnold.”

His wince of discomfort was not lost upon her and, as usual, she realised he had been vanquished before combat had even begun.

“But,” she went on, “as we both know how this conversation will end if you persist with it, I suggest you talk of subjects less likely… *annoy*… me.”

“Please, Helen,” he implored, still not giving up. “Give up this insane trip and let us return home. We can wire Aubrey to tell him we have changed our minds and can join him earlier in…”

“My mind is not yours to change and I will not.”

Her voice softened towards him suddenly, as he took to a sulky silence that made him look even more unmanly and ensured an embarrassed Wilson – though the younger travelling companion remained as smitten with the wife as the husband himself – stared into his soup as if it were the most interesting and appetising entrée it had been his delight to experience on the civilian side of the army mess.

Her softening however, was not of a kind to increase her husband’s sense of masculinity:

“I am my own mistress, Arnold, as you have every cause to know. You have no right over me at all, save for some antiquarian vows I condescended to share with you and thought you realised were no more than symbolic exchanges of affection. Your only claim over me is that which I allow you – and I think we can both agree upon the extent of those.”

She let matters rest for a few moments as her husband looked disinterestedly at the soup which appeared to have Wilson so engrossed.

Then:

“Up to now,” she started, speaking directly to her husband’s lowered head, “I’ve told myself that your objections to my trip have been made because you feel protective of your young wife. But, seeing you here now, in situ, as the case has it, I’m coming to an entirely different view of your constant carping to me on the subject.”

“This soup really is…” began poor Wilson, hoping to save the man he had come to like somewhat since getting to know him up close any more embarrassment.

A well-meaning intervention that served only to fetch some of that same discomfiture down upon his own head.

“Be silent until you are spoken to, Edmund!” her voice snapped at him as if it were a whip or a coiled serpent.

Not the first time she had taken a dominant tone with her follower but certainly the first time before a witness – be that witness or husband or not.

“This is between my husband and I and, unless you prefer me to send you away, I suggest you keep an obedient and civil tongue in your head.”

Wilson’s soup again took on an almost obsessive interest for him.

“If you are afraid of being laughed at, my dear husband,” she said returning to the main focus of her ire, “for not sharing the same courage and spirit of adventure as your far younger wife…”

A most unseemly sneer marring those boyishly attractive features as her husband seethed impotently in his chair.

"Then," she finished, "you have my permission to return home to the comforts of London and continue writing those tales of heroic and masculine men your readers are so taken in by."

She laughed.

"Though I wonder if your characters will appear so believable to them when they learn that the man writing of them was so craven he would leave his wife to fend for herself in a desert he himself was trying to persuade her was too dangerous for her presence in it."

Now she shook her head with mock sadness:

"Oh, how they will laugh at you, my poor frightened husband."

"I am not afraid of being laughed at," he told her suddenly, finally looking up. "Only cowards are afraid of that, and I am not a coward."

Her expression asked:

"Really?"

"Nor am I afraid for my own safety in this… *purgatory*," he assured her. My only concern is for the woman I pledged to love and protect."

Suddenly, impulsively, he reached across the table to take her hand.

She allowed it.

"Please, Helen, listen to reason!"

For a few moments, she actually smiled at him and any stranger looking on would have been able to tell that there was fondness for the older man in that smile – love, even.

What they would not have discerned was that both love and fondness were not based upon the usual emotional sharing common to such matrimonial pairings.

At least of a kind that were successful.

For the former Helen Templeton's feelings for her handsome older husband were not prompted by his facility to love and protect her so much as they were based on his willingness to be… *obedient*… to her will.

And, at this moment, he was flagrantly defying her.

"Arnold, I have said my last word. Nothing will alter my determination to go on this trip and your arguments, far from convincing me, are having a far different effect."

She allowed a few moments to pass that her next words might take on a more ominous ring.

Then:

“I am beginning to think that the assurances you gave me as to your willingness to obey were no more than base promises simply to have me marry me.”

The face of Arnold Middlemass reddened to hear himself spoken of in such a way before another man – albeit truthfully – and the look he turned upon the young wife who had mastered him with growing power since they had married, was almost pleading.

“Do not worry, Arnold,” she told him, reading him expertly. “Edmund here will not divulge your shameful secret to the world.”

Young Wilson did not respond.

“Is that not right, Edmund,” she said, having felt the power her charms exerted over the young subaltern growing more unanswerable in the days from their first real conversation at the hotel until now.

“Y-Yes, of course,” he answered finally, unable to bring his head up from the soup he had barely tasted for all his attention to it. “It is none of my business what happens between a man and his wife and I… I certainly wouldn’t betray any confidence that might reach my ears.”

“There!” she exclaimed, giving her husband a look of triumph. “You see how well-behaved Mr Wilson is.”

They were facing each other across the little table and a look of the purest misery contorted her husband’s features as she watched him, once again, try to come to terms with the feelings of need for her that kept him at her side as if he were a flunkey rather than a husband.

“You're a damned evil little devil!” he observed.

But sadly.

Not furiously.

As if he were confessing his regret for having married such a girl and, at the same time, owning that his obsession with her was so great he found it impossible to leave her side.

He was not to know that, if the indomitable but socially and sexually… *abnormal*… girl he had married had her way, he *never* would.

Though he would have been appalled at the many and various ways in which her imagination suggested he should be kept there.

*****

She was almost aggressively cheerful next morning at breakfast and for the time that they lingered at the oasis after the baggage camels had started. Arnold was morose and silent, and she exchanged most of her badinage with a Wilson who seemed more smitten with her domineering ways by the second.

At that point, Wilson was superintending the packing of the tiffin basket that would accompany her in charge of the man who had been selected as her personal servant, and who was waiting, with Mustafa Ali and about ten men, to ride with her.

Not for the first time as the older man watched her, he wondered why he had fallen so deeply into her thrall he could allow himself to be disrespected with such callous disregard for his feelings.

And then he took in that lithe body and recalled the taste of her upon his tongue as she allowed him to make love to her in the only way she would allow – at least up to now – and he felt the backs of his knees weaken as he looked forward to a repeat of such treatment.

If not the contemptuous way her eyes held his after he asked for and received permission to pleasure himself in front of her.

Thankfully, the time for their starting came and spared him his thoughts temporarily.

He saw that Wilson was fussing about the horse that Helen was to ride.

“Everything all right, Edmund?” he asked, coming up to him as he cradled the sole of his wife’s boot and enabled her onto the horse.

The subaltern swung towards him suddenly and there was a light in his eyes Arnold Middlemass recognised only too well as… *obsession*.

And not the obsession for a young woman – or, in this instance, wife – understandable for a an almost equally young man feeling that full and empowering Spring of his early years.

It was a look of complete and utter devotion and the thrill of being able to serve its object.

“Perfectly, thank you,” said Wilson with an asperity and fierceness of expression the older man had not seen in him to then.

Ignoring the attitude towards him, as if Wilson resented him interrupting his hand’s contact with his wife’s boot, Middlemass swung towards her.

“Helen, it's still not too late to change your mind. For Heaven's sake give up this folly. It's tempting Providence.”

There must have been something different in his voice, a tone of foreboding that penetrated her self-confidence, an intimation that nothing would ever be the same if they took this trip – something. Because Helen wavered, only for a moment, but enough to give him hope.

Then she looked at him with a slow smile as she made herself comfortable upon the saddle – even sitting upon a horse in the male way instead of the more ladylike sideways on position.

“Arnold,” she began in a voice that was not unkind so much as patronising of the older man, this as the besotted Wilson looked on, “stop being such a goose. You know me well enough to realise I do not change my mind once it is made up – and especially not at the eleventh hour. It's perfectly safe. You will be with me and so will our good Edmund here. How much safer do

I need to be? Believe me, Mustafa Ali will take care that everything goes smoothly; at least if he values his reputation as a guide at all. You know the character reference the authorities gave him and he is not likely to throw that away carelessly."

He wasn't convinced and she went on with a long-suffering sigh:

"In any case I can take care of myself. Even you must admit that my shooting is the match of most men."

To give emphasis to her words, and to give air to the little devil that was always seeking release from her overheated head, she let laughed and whipped out he ivory-mounted revolver. Then, aiming at a low flat rock some distance away, fired.

She was, as she had said, an unusually good revolver shot, but this time she seemed to have missed.

There was no movement from the stone neither was there a mark.

Helen stared at it angrily, as if she could will it into recognition of the hit, a frown of perplexity creasing her forehead.

Then she looked at her husband and Wilson next to him, and then back to the revolver in her hand.

"I don't understand it. How could I miss? It's as big as a house," she murmured thoughtfully, and raised the revolver again.

But Arnold Middlemass caught her wrist. "Don't tempt fate a second time," he warned.

"Fate? What on earth has fate to do with…?"

"It's an omen, Helen, don't you see that?" he interrupted. "We're being told that nothing good will come of this trip of yours and that we should return to where we're meant to be."

"Rubbish!" she cried, though she did jerk the little weapon back into its place reluctantly. "I'll have no truck with such ridiculous thoughts."

She mounted and wheeled her horse alongside both men:

"It's time we set off," she declared in a voice both husband and admirer knew would not be gainsaid and, with a nod to Mustafa Ali, she turned her horse's head southwards.

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For a long time, she rode in silence. She well knew that what she was doing was considered unconventional, that was a huge part of the trip's attraction after all. She had never even thought, and certainly not cared, about possible criticism for taking it and she had been both amazed and amused at the sensation just the proposing of it had caused. As usual, she had been scornful that people could not occupy themselves with their own affairs and leave her to deal with hers.

Arnold's presence in the chorus of disapproval was less surprising to her – he loved her and was entirely and bemusedly enslaved by a woman for the first time. In denying him herself in the way a man would normally expect himself accommodated by a wife, she had not only intrigued his writerly curiosity but made his need for her all the greater. For where there is need then power is concentrated in the hands of the person able to satisfy it. And power over men, as much as the pleasure of sex was what fuelled her; the one inextricable from the other in a soul that had started out… *warped*… and, by example and personal growth, became more and more marked.

That her husband truly loved her and was worried for her safety was in no doubt to Helen. But neither was there the slightest prospect that she would be weakened by that love. Quite the opposite. It would be, she had decided, he whose feelings made him dependent, not her, making any possibility of her being swayed by his not unreasonable fears for her security in the desert impossible. To give an inch was to give a yard, and to give a yard…

She would yield nothing!

Which explained her anger with him and the contempt for his… *timidity*… at least upon her part, which mingled with it.

This was the desert!

Her desert.

He knew all too well how long she had dreamed of such an adventure and how she had planned for its eventuality from before they had even met at Aubrey's ball.

And now he was expecting her to give it up?

And with no more thought than if it were no more to her than a simple snap of the fingers!

Looking about her with the fondness with which a person gazes upon a long-cherished dream in the process of being realised, the very idea of the danger that so obsessed her husband and others brought a little laugh to her lips.

How could anything in the desert hurt her, when it It had been calling to her always?

There was nothing strange about the scene that lay all around her, after all. In fact, her surroundings seemed oddly familiar. The burning sun overhead in the cloudless sky, the shimmering haze rising from the hot, dry ground and the feathery outline of some clustering palm trees in a tiny distant oasis were like remembrances of a former life almost. Just being a part of the landscape made her radiantly happy. Everything seemed magnified to her – her sense of youth and strength, her strong-will and perfect physical fitness, together with an appearance that won the attention of men that her other endowments might… *manage*… them.

Manage them, in fact, much as the nervous horse between her knees and powerful thighs was being managed at that moments. Useful beasts, made even more convenient for knowing the power of a woman's natural authority. Slaves to their natures as much as she was in bondage to her own; the only difference the difference that the one was owned while the other fully intended to remain an owner.

She gave out a great sigh at the head of *her* caravan and gave thanks that she had not allowed herself to be swayed by pressure of narrow-minded and timid opinion to abandon her plans.

This trip had been planned with much relish and the realisation was proving infinitely greater than the anticipation.

One whole month of perfect happiness was lay ahead of her.

Which was when she thought of her promise to her brother with impatience.

To give up the joyous freedom of the desert, simply to join him for the commonplace round of American social life, seemed preposterous. The thought of the weeks in New York were frankly tedious; Newport would be a little less bad, for there were alleviations. The only hope was that Aubrey would find the wife he was looking for quickly and release his sister from an obligation that was going to be very wearisome. Then again, he was counting on her, and it would be unsporting to let him down; she had given her word and her own nature ensured she would have to keep her promise.

But she would be glad when it was over.

A married Aubrey would settle the possibility of any further disagreements between them her own marriage – and the friendship between husband and brother - had failed to address.

She wondered vaguely what the future Lady Templeton would be like, but she did not expend much pity on her. American girls as a rule were well able to care for themselves; albeit in a shrewish kind of way. But that was Aubrey's lookout.

For now, though, she had her beloved, and much dreamed of, desert before her.

She stroked her horse with a little smile as Aubrey and his possible wife became singularly uninteresting beside the vivid interest of the moment.

In the near distance, a caravan that had been visible for a long time coming in their direction drew closer and Helen reined in to watch the long line of slow, lurching camels passing.

The great beasts, of this large caravan, with their disdainful tread and long, swaying necks, never failed to interest her. The bales on the camels' backs looked heavy, and beside the merchants on riding camels and a motley crowd of followers - some on lean little donkeys and others on foot - there was an armed guard of mounted men. Consequently, it took some time to pass.

One of two of the camels carried huddled figures, swathed and shapeless with a multitude of coverings, that Helen knew must be women.

The contrast between them and herself almost ridiculous.

It made her feel stifled even to look at them.

She wondered what their lives were like, if they ever rebelled against the drudgery and restrictions religion and unfettered masculinity imposed upon them. If they ever longed for the

freedom that she so revelled in, or if custom and usage were so strong that they had no thoughts beyond the narrow life they led. The mere thought of such a life filled her with aversion. The idea of a marriage along such lines was repugnant to her and felt a shiver of absolute repulsion simply from the considering of such an abomination.

It was a thing of horror and disgust.

That women could submit to the degrading intimacy and fettered existence of a married life that made chattels of them filled her with scornful wonder. To be bound irrevocably to the will and pleasure of a man who would have the right to demand obedience in everything, and the power of both the law and his greater strength with which to enforce his will, revolted her. The prospect of it, put simply, sickened her.

For a Western woman not blessed with her individuality and inherited riches, marriage was bad enough.

But for the women of the East?

Women who were mere slaves to the passions of the men who owned them, unconsidered, disregarded, reduced to the level of animals?

The mere idea of it all made her quiver and bring her hand down heavily on her horse's neck as if he were one of the brute males whose easy assumption of undeserved superiority she would love to correct.

The nervous creature started sharply and she let him go, calling to Mustafa Ali as she cantered past him. He had ridden to meet the caravan and was dismounted, deep in conversation with the chief of the armed guard. With the thoughts that it had provoked the caravan had lost all interest for Helen. She wanted to get away from it, to forget it, and she rode on unmindful of her escort, who, like her guide, had stopped to speak with the traders. Helen's horse was fleet, and it was some time before they caught her up. There was a look of annoyance on Mustafa Ali's face as she turned on hearing them behind her and signed to him to ride beside her.

“Mademoiselle is not interested in the caravan?” he asked curiously as her husband and Wilson also left the caravan to join her.

“No,” she replied shortly, and asked for some details connected with her own expedition. The man talked easily and well, in fluent French, and after giving the required information, volunteered anecdotes relating to various well-known people whom he had guided in the desert. Helen watched him interestedly. He seemed a man of about middle age, though it was difficult to guess more than approximately, for the thick, peaked beard that hid both mouth and chin made him look older than he really was. His beard had been his only drawback from Helen's point of view, for she judged men by their mouths. Eyes were untrustworthy evidences of good character in her consideration. And, without being too judgemental, she felt Mustafa Ali's were wavering now as she looked at him, making him look a sight shiftier than he had seemed upon first meeting.

Being the woman she was, however, she attached no importance to the thought and dismissed it as much less interesting than the great difference displayed in their respective modes of riding.

The Arab's exaggeratedly short stirrup would have given her agonies of cramp, she pointed out to him with a laugh of amusement and drew the man on to speak of his horses.

The one Helen was riding was an unusually fine beast, and had been one of the greatest points in the guide's favour when he had brought it for her inspection. He was enthusiastic in its praise, but vague as to its antecedents, which left Helen with the conviction that the animal had either been stolen or acquired in some irregular manner and that it would be tactless to pursue further inquiries. After all it was no business of hers. It was enough that her trip was to be conducted on the back of a horse that it was a pleasure to ride. For some of the horses she'd had presented to her were the most woeful donkeys in horse-like form.

She asked Mustafa Ali about the country through which they were passing, but he did not seem to have much information that was really of interest and what seemed important to him appeared trivial to her.

Unsurprising then, that the landscape soon began to exercise a greater hold upon her thoughts than the conversation of her guide. Her husband remained in a sulk and, for some reason, she felt the urge to ignore her young admirer. An aloof mood that soon had her guide dropping back to trail in her wake.

Their arrival at a little oasis, where the guide suggested that the midday halt might be made, was opportune.

Helen swung to the ground, and, tossing down her gloves, gave herself a shake.

She had a thoroughly healthy appetite, and superintended the laying out of her lunch with interest.

Finishing it quickly, she then propped her back against a palm tree and clasped her arms around her knees to settle down happily and overlooking the desert.

She found the whole thing enchanting!

The noontime hush seemed over everything. Not a breath of wind stirred the tops of the palms; a lizard on a rock near her was the only living thing she could see. Over her shoulder. She could see the men with their big cloaks drawn over their heads, lying asleep, or at any rate resting. Only Mustafa Ali was on foot, standing at the edge of the oasis, staring fixedly in the direction in which they would ride later.

Helen was happy to rest but had no desire to follow the example of her escort and sleep. She was much too happy to risk losing a minute of her enjoyment by wasting it in dozing. A that moment, she had not a care or a thought in the world. There was not a thing that she would have changed or altered. Her life, given she had always gone her own way, had always been happy and she made sure to extract the last ounce of pleasure out of every moment of it. That her happiness was due in massive part to the wealth that had enabled her to indulge herself never occurred to her.

She thought of her wealth no more than of her beauty.

The business connected with her coming of age, when the big fortune left to her by her father passed unreservedly into her own hands, was a wearisome necessity that had been got through as expeditiously as possible, with as little attention to detail as the old family lawyer had allowed, and an absence of interest that was evidenced in the careless scrawl she attached to each document that was given her to sign.

The mere money was nothing.

A means to an end and of no other interest.

She had hardly understood and had been a little irritated by the formal and pedantic congratulations with which the lawyer had concluded his statement of her financial affairs. It all seemed very stupid and decidedly uninteresting. Of real life, she knew nothing. And of the ordinary ties and attachments of family life, even *less* than nothing.

That she had awakened an emotion that she did not understand in certain men had at first been seen as an annoyance. An annoyance that had become more palatable when she realised how much she enjoyed wielding the power her command of their affections… of their *lusts*… bestowed upon her. She had married Arnold partly as a means of discouraging others but also because his handsome looks and maturity had moved her more than any other man prior to their meeting. That and the fact she found the wanton sensations going hand-in-hand with domineering a man old enough to be her father simply incredible.

Sensations that led her more and more to sexually humiliate him that she might know even greater sensations and, in the process, decimating any respect she might have had for the older and very handsome writer who was so infatuated with her.

As for Wilson?

Fond of him as she was, he was of much more use to her as a tool with which to tease her husband and a harmless toy to play with when she was bored.

And toys could be discarded the moment their owner grew tired of them.

Helen dug her heels into the soft ground with a little wriggle of content; here she would be free from anything that could mar her perfect enjoyment of life as it appeared to her.

At least for a month.

Here there was *nothing* to spoil her pleasure.

Her… *autonomy*.

The wilful young wife's head had drooped during her thoughts, and for the last few minutes her eyes had been fixed on the dusty tips of her riding-boots. But she raised them now and looked up with a great content in them, recalling the night before when she had asking Wilson if he minded putting a sheen on them for her. The watching him as, red of face, he performed the menial task at her feet.

It was the happiest day of her life.

A shadow beside her made her turn her head and Mustafa Ali salaamed obsequiously.

“It is time to start once again, Mademoiselle.”

Helen looked up in surprise and then back over her shoulder at the escort. Arnold, Wilson, and the men, were already mounted.

The smile faded from her eyes.

Mustafa Ali was guide, but she was head of this expedition.

If he had not realised this he would have to do so now.

She glanced at the watch on her wrist.

“There is plenty of time,” she said coolly.

Mustafa Ali salaamed again. “It is a long ride to reach the oasis where we must camp to-night,” he insisted hurriedly.

Helen crossed one brown boot over the other, and scooping up some sand in the palm of her hand trickled it through her fingers slowly.

“Then we can ride faster,” she replied quietly, looking at the shining particles glistening in the sun.

Mustafa Ali made a movement of impatience and persisted doggedly.

“Mademoiselle would do well to start.”

Helen looked up swiftly with angry eyes, for under the man's suave manner and simple words a peremptory tone had crept into his voice.

It irked her.

“We will start when I choose, Mustafa Ali,” she said brusquely. “You may give orders to your men, but you will take your orders from me. I will tell you when I am ready. You may go.”

Still he hesitated, swaying irresolutely backwards and forwards on his heels, the command of a woman not something he saw as… *natural*.

Helen snapped her fingers over her shoulder, a trick she had learned from a French officer who had tried to make love to her and been given short shrift back at the Dominion.

“I said go!” she repeated sharply, setting herself a time in her head when *she* would give the order to depart.

Though she had decided to wait nearly another hour to allow the fact of her authority to sink into Mustafa Ali's brain, she cut that time in half when she saw the guide in conversation with Arnold. Knowing he would be speaking to her on the guide’s behalf she decided to make the

decision to leave and keep her authority intact. Not because she would have taken direction from Arnold anyway, but simply because she didn't want him to lose face with the guide and him men when they realised he no influence whatsoever over his young wife.

That would not be good for any of them.

As it was, they really had to make haste afterwards to arrive at the camp before darkness set in. But she was sure one hour would not make much difference. The horses had more in them than had been taken out of them this morning; they could be pushed along a bit faster with no harm happening to them. She eyed her watch from time to time during the journey with a grin of amusement, but suppressed the temptation to look and see how Mustafa Ali was taking her having usurped what he saw as his manly authority.

They were in his land, after all, and it didn't make too much sense to antagonise him.

Not overly, anyway.

They had been riding for some hours when they came to the first oasis that had been sighted since leaving the one where the midday halt was made.

Helen, who always preferred to ride alone, pulled up her horse to look at it, for it was unusually beautiful in the luxuriousness and arrangement of its group of palms and leafy bushes. Some pigeons were cooing softly, hidden from sight amongst the trees, with a plaintive melancholy that somehow seemed in keeping with the deserted spot. Beside the well, forming a triangle, stood what had been three particularly fine palm trees, but the tops had been broken off about twenty feet up from the ground, and the mutilated trunks reared themselves bare and desolate-looking. Helen took off her heavy helmet, tossed it to the man behind her, and sat looking at the oasis. The faint breeze that had sprung up stirred her thick, red hair, and cooled her hot head. The place had an air of mystery that pleased her.

She turned eagerly to Mustafa Ali. "Why did you not arrange for the camp to be here? It would have been a long enough ride."

The man fidgeted in his saddle, fingering his beard uneasily, his eyes wandering past Helen's and looking at the broken trees.

"No man rests here, Mademoiselle. It is the place of devils. The curse of Allah is upon it," he muttered, touching his horse with his heel, and making it sidle restlessly - an obvious hint that Helen ignored.

"I like it," she persisted obstinately.

He made a quick gesture with his fingers. "It is accursed. Death lurks beside those broken palm trees," he said, looking at her curiously.

She jerked her head with a sudden smile. "For you, perhaps, but not for me. Allah's curse rests only upon those who fear it. But since you are afraid, Mustafa Ali, let us go on."

She gave a little light laugh, and Mustafa Ali kicked his horse savagely as he followed; her belittling of him neither missed nor likely to be forgotten.

The distance before her spread out cleanly with the sharp distinctness that precedes the setting sun. She rode on until she began to wonder if it would indeed be night-fall before she reached her destination. They had ridden longer and faster than had ever been intended. It seemed odd that they had not overtaken the baggage camels.

She looked at her watch with a frown. “Where is your caravan, Mustafa Ali?” she called. “I see no sign of an oasis, and the darkness will come.”

“If Mademoiselle had started earlier…” he offered sullenly.

“If I had started earlier it would still have been too far. To-morrow we will arrange it otherwise,” she said firmly.

“To-morrow…” he growled indistinctly.

Helen looked at him keenly.

“What did you say?” she asked haughtily.

His hand went to his forehead mechanically.

“To-morrow is with Allah!” he murmured with unctuous piety.

A retort trembled on Helen's lips, but her attention was distracted from her annoying guide to a collection of black specks far off across the desert.

They were too far away for her to see clearly, but she pointed to them, peering at them intently.

“See!” she cried. “Is that the caravan?”

“As Allah wills!” he replied more piously than before, and Helen wished, with a sudden feeling of irritation, that he would stop relegating his responsibilities to the Deity and take a little more of an active personal interest in his missing camel train.

The black specks were moving fast across the level plain. Very soon Helen saw that it was not the slow, leisurely camels of their own caravan that they were overtaking, but a band of mounted men who were moving swiftly towards them. They had seen nobody since the traders' caravan had passed them in the morning. For Helen, the Arabs that were approaching were even more interesting than the caravan’s she had seen previously. And she had seen plenty of caravans arriving and departing from The Dominion, but, though she had seen small parties of tribesmen constantly in the vicinity of the town, she had never seen so large a body of mounted men before.

Nor had she seen them as they were here, at one with the wild picturesqueness of their surroundings.

It was impossible to count how many there were, for they were riding in close formation, the wind filling their great white cloaks, making each man look gigantic.

Helen's interest flamed up excitedly, realising she was gazing upon the very stuff of her dreams. It was like passing another ship upon a hitherto empty sea. They seemed to add a desired touch to the grim loneliness of a panorama that had begun to be a little awe-inspiring.

Perhaps she was hungry, perhaps she was tired, or perhaps she was only annoyed by the bad arrangements of her guide, but before the advent of the mounted Arabs Helen had been conscious of a feeling of oppression, as if the silent desolation of the desert was weighing heavily upon her. But the body of swiftly moving men and horses had changed the aspect utterly. An atmosphere of life and purpose seemed to have taken the place of the quiet stagnation that had been before their coming.

The distance between the two parties decreased rapidly. Helen, intent on the quickly advancing horsemen, spurred ahead of her guide with sparkling eyes. They were near enough now to see that the horses were beautiful creatures and that each man rode magnificently. They were armed too, their rifles being held in front of them, not slung on their backs as she had seen before. They passed quite close to her, only a few yards away - a solid square, the orderly ranks suggesting training and discipline that she had not looked for.

Not a head turned in her direction as they went by and the pace was not slackened. Fretted by the proximity of the galloping horses, her own horse reared impatiently, but Helen pulled him in, turning in her saddle to watch the Arabs pass, her breath coming quick with excitement.

“What are they?” she called out to Mustafa Ali, who had dropped some way behind her. But he, too, was looking back at the horsemen, and did not seem to hear her question. Her escort, Arnold and Edmund Wilson with them, had lagged still further behind her guide and were some distance away.

Helen watched the rapidly moving, compact square eagerly with appreciatory eyes - it was a beautiful sight.

Then she gave a little gasp. The galloping horses had drawn level with the last stragglers of her own party, and just beyond they stopped suddenly. Helen would not have believed it possible that they could have stopped so suddenly and in such close formation while travelling at such a pace. The tremendous strain on the bridles flung the horses far back on their haunches. But there was no time to dwell on the wonderful horsemanship or training of the men.

Events moved too rapidly.

The solid square split up and lengthened out into a long line of two men riding abreast. Wheeling behind the last of Mustafa's men they came back even faster than they had passed, and circled widely round Helen and her attendants.

Bewildered by this manoeuvre she watched them with a puzzled frown, striving to soothe her horse, who was nearly frantic with excitement.

Twice they galloped round her little band, their long cloaks fluttering, their rifles tossing in their hands, but now Helen was growing impatient. It was very fine to watch, but time and the light were both going. She would have been glad if the demonstration had occurred earlier in the day, when there would have been more time to enjoy it. She turned again to Mustafa Ali to

suggest that they had better try to move on, but he had gone further from her, back towards his own.

She wrestled with her nervous mount, trying to turn him to join her guide, when a sudden burst of rifle shots made her start and her horse bound violently.

Then she laughed.

That would be the end of the demonstration, a parting salute, the decharge de mousqueterie beloved of the Arab.

She turned her head from her refractory horse to look at them ride off, and the laugh died away on her lips.

It was not a farewell salute.

The rifles that the Arabs were firing were not pointing up into the heavens, but aiming straight at her and her escort. And as she stared with suddenly startled eyes, unable to do anything with her plunging horse, Mustafa Ali's men were blotted out from her sight, cut off by a band of Arabs who rode between her and them – though she could see. Mustafa Ali himself was lying forward on the neck of his horse, who was standing quiet amidst the general confusion. Then there came another volley, and the guide slid slowly out of his saddle on to the ground, and at the same time Helen's horse went off with a wild leap that nearly unseated her.

Until they started shooting the thought that the Arabs could be hostile had not crossed her mind. She imagined that they were merely showing off with the childish love of display which she knew was characteristic. The French authorities had been right after all.

Helen's first feeling, however, was one of contempt for an administration that made possible such an attempt so near civilisation.

Her second a fleeting amusement at the thought of how Aubrey would jeer. But her amusement passed as the real seriousness of the attack came home to her.

For the first time, though, it occurred to her that her guide's descent from his saddle was due to a wound, and not to the fear that she had at first disgustedly attributed to him.

It also occurred to her that nobody had seemed to put up any kind of a fight.

Wrathfully, she tugged angrily at her horse's mouth, but the bit was between his teeth and he tore on frantically. Her own position made her furious. Her guide was wounded, his men surrounded, and she was ignominiously being run away with by a bolting horse. If she could only turn the wretched animal. It would only be a question of ransom, of that she was positive. She must get back somehow to the others and arrange terms.

It was an annoyance, of course, but after all it added a certain piquancy to her trip.

It was only a *"hold-up,"* and it would be an experience.

She did not suppose the Arabs had even really meant to hurt anyone. Probably, they were excited and someone's shot, aimed wide, had found an unexpected billet. It could only be that.

It was too near the French territory for any real danger, she argued with herself, still straining on the reins, loath to admit that there was any danger - though her heart was beating in a way that it had never done before.

Then as she hauled ineffectually at the bridle with all her strength there came from behind her the sound of a long, shrill whistle.

Her horse pricked up his ears and she was conscious that his pace sensibly lessened.

Instinctively she looked behind.

A solitary Arab was riding after her and as she looked she realised that his horse was gaining on hers. The thought drove every idea of stopping from her and made her dig her spurs into her already flying mount instead. There was though, she noted, a sinister air of deliberation in the way in which the Arab was following her.

He was, she realised with a thrill of both fear and exhilaration, riding her down.
Helen's mouth closed firmly and a new keenness came into her steady eyes. It was one thing to go back voluntarily to make terms with the men who had attacked her party; it was quite another thing to be deliberately chased across the desert by an Arab freebooter.

Her obstinate chin was almost square by now. Then the shadow of a laugh flickered in her eyes and curved her mouth. New experiences were crowding in upon her to-day. She had often wondered what the feelings of a hunted creature were. And now she seemed a fair way towards finding out.

It was not long for the humour of the situation to lose its appeal and Helen began to get angry. In the level country that surrounded her there were no natural features that could afford cover or aid in any way. There seemed nothing for it but to own herself defeated and pull up.

If she could.

An idea of trying to dodge him and of returning of her own free will was dismissed at once as hopeless. She had seen enough in her short glimpse of the Arabs' tactics when they had passed her to know that she was dealing with a finished horseman on a perfectly trained horse, and that her idea could never succeed. But, perversely, she felt that to that particular Arab following her she would never give in.

She would ride till she dropped, or the horse did, before that.

The whistle came again, and, in spite of her relentless spurring, her horse checked his pace.

Which was when an explanation for her troubles came to her.

Her guide's reluctance to give any particulars of his acquisition of the horse came back to her. There could not be much doubt about it. The animal had unquestionably been stolen, and either belonged to or was known to the party of Arabs who had met them.

But that stupidity was the guide’s affair, not hers. In the meantime, she had paid for the horse to ride it through the desert in good faith. Not to be waylaid by Arab bandits.

Her temper was going fast.

She urged the horse on with all her power, but perceptibly he was slowing up.

The Arab was closer behind her than she had been aware.

She had a momentary glimpse of a big white figure with dark piercing eyes and white gleaming teeth before passionate rage filled her. With no thought of what the consequences or retaliation might be, with no thought at all beyond a wild desire to rid herself of her pursuer, driven by a sudden madness which seemed to rise up in her and which she could not control, she clutched her revolver and fired twice, full in the face of the man who was following her.

He did not even flinch and a low laugh of amusement came from him – at the sound of which Helen's mouth parched suddenly and a cold shiver rippled across her spine.

A strange feeling that she had never experienced before went through her.
She had missed with a shot again as she had missed this morning.

Once, for a marksman of her ability, yes.

Twice?

That, to her, was inexplicable.

She dropped the useless revolver, trying vainly to force her horse's pace, but inch by inch the fiery chestnut that the Arab was riding crept up nearer alongside.

She would not turn to look again, but glancing sideways she could see its small, wicked-looking head, with flat laid ears and vicious, bloodshot eyes, level with her elbow.

For a moment or two it remained there, then with a sudden spurt the chestnut forged ahead, and as it shot past it swerved close in beside her the man, rising in his stirrups and leaning towards her, flung a pair of powerful arms around her. Then, with a jerk, he swung her clear of the saddle and on to his own horse in front of him.

His movement had been so quick she was unprepared and unable to resist – until her senses came back to her and she struggled wildly.

A struggle that was futile.

Stifled in the thick folds of the Arab's robes, against which her face was crushed, and held in a grip that seemed to be slowly suffocating her, her struggles were for nought. The hard, muscular arm round her hurt her acutely and her ribs seemed to be almost breaking under its weight and strength. It was nearly impossible for her to breathe with the close contact of his body – despite the unusual strength she possessed for a girl she was helpless against this steely power that held her.

For a time, the sense of her helplessness and the pain that any resistance to the arm wrapped round her produced made her lie quiet.

She felt the Arab check his horse, felt the chestnut wheel, spinning high on his hind legs, and then bound forward again.

Her feelings were indescribable. She did not know what to think. Her mind felt jarred. She was unable to frame any thoughts coherently. What had happened was so unexpected, so preposterous, that no conclusion seemed adequate. Only rage filled her - blind, passionate rage against the man who had dared to touch her, who had dared to lay his hands on her, and those hands the hands of a native.

A shiver of revulsion ran through her.

She was choking with fury, with anger and with disgust.

The ignominy of her plight hurt her pride badly.

She had been outridden, swept from her saddle as if she were a puppet, and compelled to bear the proximity of the man's own hateful body and the restraint of his arms.

No one had ever dared to touch her or to handle her as she was being handled now.

How was it going to end?

And *where* were they going?

For the first time – tellingly – her thoughts went to her husband and his fate. Was he too slumped across the back of his horse with an Arab bullet between either eyes or shoulder-blades?

And what of young Wilson?

He was an army man and armed, but, if he managed to retaliate then the sound of the gunshots giving evidence of it had not been heard by her.

With her face hidden she had lost all sense of direction and could have no idea to what point the horse had turned when its rider had wheeled it so suddenly.

He was galloping swiftly with continual disconcerting bounds that indicated either temper or nerves, but the man riding him seemed in no way disturbed by his horse's behavior. She could feel him swaying easily in the saddle, and even the wildest leaps did not cause any slackening of the arm around her.

By degrees she was able to turn her head a little towards the air for which she was almost fainting, but not enough to enable her to see what was passing around her.

She drank in the cool air eagerly.

Though she could not see she knew that the night had come, the night that she had hoped would fall before she reached her destination, but which now seemed horrible. The fresh strength that the air gave her, though, fanned the courage that still remained with her. Collecting all her force she made a sudden desperate spring, trying to leap clear of the arm that now lay almost loosely about her, her spurred heels tearing the chestnut's flank until he reared perpendicularly, snorting and trembling.

Again, her rebellion was answered by futility.

With a quick sweep of his long arm the Arab gathered her back into his hold while controlling the maddened horse only with the pressure of his knees.

“Doucement, doucement.” She heard the slow, soft voice indistinctly, for he was pressing her head again closely to him, and she did not know if the words were applied to herself or to the horse. She fought to lift her head, to escape the grip that held her, straining, striving until he spoke again.

“Lie still, you little fool!” he snarled with sudden vehemence, and with brutal hands he forced her to obey him, until she wondered if he would leave a single bone unbroken in her body till further resistance was impossible.

Gasping for breath she yielded to the strength that overpowered her, and ceased to struggle.

The man seemed to know intuitively that she was beaten, and turned his undivided attention to his horse with the same low laugh of amusement that had sent the strange feeling through her when her shots had missed him. It had puzzled her then, but it grew now with a horrible intensity, until she knew that it was fear that had come to her for the first time in her life. A strange fear that she fought against desperately, but which was gaining on her with a force that was sapping her strength from her and making her head reel. She did not faint, but her whole body seemed to grow nerveless with the sudden realisation of the horror of her position.

For the first time in her life she swooned.

When she came back to her senses, she realised he had set her down and unwound the covering from her face.

She narrowed her eyes.

The light that shone around her seemed dazzling by contrast with the darkness that had gone before.

Confused, she clasped her hands over her eyes for a moment and then looked up slowly.

She was in a big, lofty tent, brightly lit by two hanging lamps.

But it was the man regarding her, not her surroundings, upon whom she focused.

He had flung aside the heavy cloak that enveloped him from head to foot and was standing before her, tall and broad-shouldered, dressed in white flowing robes, a waistcloth embroidered

in black and silver wound several times about him, and from the top of which showed a revolver that was thrust into the folds.

Helen's eyes passed over him slowly till they rested on his brown, clean-shaven face, surmounted by crisp, close-cut brown hair. It was the handsomest and cruellest face that she had ever seen. Her gaze was drawn instinctively to his. He was looking at her with fierce burning eyes that swept her until she felt that the boyish clothes that covered her slender limbs were stripped from her, leaving the beautiful white body bare under his passionate stare.

She shrank back, quivering, dragging the lapels of her riding jacket together over her breast with clutching hands, obeying an impulse that she hardly understood.

“Who are you?” she gasped hoarsely.

“I am the Sheik Ahmed Ben Hassan.”

The name conveyed nothing. She had never heard it before. She had spoken without thinking in French, and in French he replied to her.

“Why have you brought me here?” she asked, fighting down the fear that was growing more terrible every moment.

He repeated her words with a slow smile.

“Why have I brought you here? Bon Dieu! Are you not woman enough to know?”

She shrank back further, a wave of colour rushing into her face that receded immediately, leaving her whiter than she had been before. Her eyes fell under the kindling flame in his.

“I don't know what you mean,” she whispered faintly, with shaking lips.

“I think you do.” He laughed softly, and his laugh frightened her more than anything he had said. He came towards her, and although she was swaying on her feet, desperately she tried to evade him, but with a quick movement he caught her in his arms.

“I am married and my husband is with me,” she added, immediately realising how ludicrous was even the prospect of *this* man being intimidated by her Arnold.

“And he, along with your young travelling companion is with my women now,” came the reply in perfect French. “I am sure they will find ways to keep both…. *Amused*.”

Terror, agonising, soul-shaking terror such as she had never imagined, took hold of her. The flaming light of desire burning in his eyes turned her sick and faint. Her body throbbed with the consciousness of a knowledge that appalled her. As he pulled her to her feet and into him, she understood his purpose with a horror that made each separate nerve in her system shrink under the consuming fire of his ardent gaze and in the fierce embrace that was drawing her shaking limbs closer and closer against the man's own pulsating body.

This was *not* what she wanted.

It would *never* be what she wanted.

Control was what *she* demanded of others.

Not what they took *from* her!

She writhed in his arms as he crushed her to him in a sudden access of possessive passion. His head bent slowly down to her, his eyes burned deeper, and, held immovable, she endured the first kiss she had ever received without either having instigated it or having given her express permission.

About to sink her teeth into the lips probing at her own, she was made of a new, and perhaps even more terrifying sensation.

Her own desire to be taken.

The touch of his scorching lips, the clasp of his arms, the close union with his warm, strong body, seemed to rob her of all strength.

And, with it, for the moment, all power of resistance; the intensity of her fiercely held principles on the subject of the two sexes as nothing before the brute appeal he made to her womanhood.

With a great sob, her eyes had closed wearily, the hot mouth pressed on hers was like a narcotic, drugging her almost into insensibility.

Numbly she had felt him gather her high up into his arms, his lips still clinging closely, and carry her across the tent through curtains into an adjoining room.

He laid her down on soft cushions.

“Do not make me wait too long,” he whispered, and left her.

Those whispered words sent a shock through her that seemed to wrench her deadened nerves apart, galvanising her into sudden strength.

She sprang up with wild, despairing eyes, and ran from side-to-side frantically.

It was not true! It was not true! It could not be”

These things did not happen.

Not to her.

Helen Middlemass!

It was a dream, a ghastly dream that would pass and free her from this agony, she told herself as she tried to find a way to reassert the former principles that had held her in such good stead in a world ruled by men.

But this man, she told herself, was nothing like the domesticated Europeans such as her husband and Wilson with whom she amused herself.

A man, she sensed, who would never be… *de-fanged!*

Again, she screwed her eyes shut and prayed she was experiencing a dream.

And, when she opened them again, as if in answer, the strange room seemed to swim before her eyes.

Before, to her great disappointment, it re-focused itself once more.

It was not a dream.

It was real!

An actual fact from which there was no escape.

She was trapped, powerless and defenceless.

Her eyes fixed upon the heavy curtains concealing her with dread.

There, behind them, was the man who taken her so effortlessly.

A savage man, waiting to claim what he had taken.

Any moment she knew he might come and the thought set her to shivering, limbs trembling uncontrollably as she realised for the first time that her fate did not reside in her own hands. Birth, position, and wealth, were as nothing to her captor and habitual courage broke down before the horror that awaited her. She could, she knew, expect no help and would be shown no mercy.

It was inevitable.

She had felt the crushing strength of the man and knew herself helpless against it.

Struggle would be useless.

Fight would make no difference.

All power of self-determination was gone. She could only wait and suffer in the complete moral collapse that overwhelmed her and that was multiplied so much more devastatingly by her own peculiar temperament. Her body was still aching from the grip of his powerful arms and her mouth bruised by his savage kisses.

She clenched her hands in anguish and cursed all and sundry for her plight.

All except that one person who had brought the whole episode down upon herself and had known better than those who were both older and wiser.

“Oh, God!” she sobbed, with scalding tears that scorched her cheeks. “Curse him! Curse him!”

And with the words on her lips he came, silent, noiseless, to her side.
With his hands on her shoulders he forced her to her feet.

His eyes were fierce, his stern mouth parted in a cruel smile, his deep, slow voice half angry, half impatiently amused.

“Must I be valet, as well as lover?”

CHAPTER III

The warm sunshine was flooding the tent when Helen awoke from the deep sleep of exhaustion that had been almost insensibility.

She awoke to immediate and complete remembrance.

One quick, glance around the big room assured her that she was alone and she sat up slowly, her eyes growing wider as memory became more… *real*.

Her behaviour of the previous night, when viewed in the day's cold light, seemed unbelievable to her.

She recalled him beginning to gently undress her as she stood in shock at his presumption; this despite her expectation of his doing just that. Of course, she had fought him and, with a restraint and similar gentleness, he had simply allowed her to beat at him until she had exhausted herself. Then, when she was too tired to lift her arms, let alone use them to defend herself, he had laid her upon the pelts and other furs that made up the bed and removed the rest of her clothing until she was displayed before him in a way only her husband had seen her until then.

When he began to lick the soul of her foot and work his way up her glorious leg to the oasis of her womanhood waiting for his arrival at the apex where it met its counterpart, she could feel her mental resolve crumbling with the already physical resistance.

"Coward! Coward!" she whispered fiercely, verbal insult all that was left to her at this point.

His compelling eyes stared up at her from the moistness of her cunny that betrayed the arousal he had instilled in her.

"You think so?" he replied with a laugh, using her own French. "To give you what you so obviously want makes me a coward?"

She had bitten her lip, asking herself why had she not simply suffered all that he had done to her in silence. Knowing it have pleased the animal less than the frenzied entreaties that had only provoked that soft laugh guaranteed to made her shiver each time she heard it.

Just as she shivered now.

Averting her gaze from the head between her legs, she attempted to stifle her desire for the man by taking in her surroundings more fully.

They were a curious mixture of Oriental luxury and European comfort. The lavish sumptuousness of the furnishings suggested a subtle and unrestrained indulgence and the whole atmosphere was so voluptuous, Helen shrank from the impression it conveyed without exactly understanding the reason. The rich hangings all harmonised and there were no glaring incongruities such as she had seen in native palaces in India. And she could take no pleasure from any of it.

Everything upon which her eyes rested drove home relentlessly the hideous fact of her position.

His things were everywhere.

His!

And now, on the morning after her… *fall*… she recalled the words he had spoken to her, shortly before his tongue had taken her to a heaven her handsome older husband had never achieved with his and all her defences and self-beliefs crumbled onto the soft pelts upon which they made love, as if they had been nothing more than childish sandcastles she had constructed in the path of an incoming tide.

"I am not a beast, and I refuse to take what is not freely given," she recalled him telling her as she fought with herself that she might not beg him to replace the tongue he had removed from her sopping and overheating cunny in order to speak.

"You must tell me what you want," he had continued as she made vain attempts to quell her… *need*.

Then:

"And, once you have told me," he had gone on, a finger gently teasing her engorged clitoris as he spoke, *"you must show your respect and ask for what you want… politely."*

Turning, she saw the pillow beside her still bore the impress of his head and she could smell his scent as an uncontrollable shuddering seized her and she cowered down, smothering the cry that burst from her in the soft pillows and dragging the silken coverings up around her as if their thin shelter were a protection. - living again the most shameful and exciting night of her young life but, especially, that moment when she could resist no more and asked – no, begged – him to take her.

In a condition of high shame and constant arousal, she fell back asleep.

*****

It was midday when she awoke again.

And she was not alone.

A young Arab girl was sitting on the rug beside her looking at her with soft brown eyes of absorbed interest.

As Helen sat up she rose to her feet, salaaming, with a timid smile.

"I am Zilah, to wait on Madame," she said shyly in stumbling French, holding out a wrap that Helen recognised with wonder as her own.

Looking behind her, she saw her suit-cases were lying open, partially unpacked.

She nodded to herself,

The missing baggage camels had been captured first, then.

So, she was at least to be allowed the use of her own belongings during her…

What?

Abduction? Captivity?... Kidnapping?

A gleam of anger shot into her tired eyes and she swung round with a sharp question; but the Arab girl shook her head uncomprehendingly, drawing back with frightened eyes; and to all further questions she remained silent, mouth drooping like a scared child.

She was little more, in point of fact, and evidently only half understood what was said to her and could give no answer to what she did understand.

The girl turned away with obvious relief when Helen stopped speaking and went across the tent to pulled aside a curtain leading into a bathroom that was as big and far better equipped than the one housed in Helen's own and which, up to now, had seemed the last word in comfort and luxury.

Though the girl's knowledge of French was limited her hands were deft enough, but her ignorance of the intricacies of a European woman's toilette was very apparent, and constantly provoked in her a girlish giggle that changed hurriedly to a startled gravity when Helen looked at her.

For, and understandably so, laughter was very far from Helen – even if she could not help smiling now and again at young Zilah's funny mistakes. The girl, with her big, wondering eyes, her shy, hesitating French and childish curiosity, in some indefinable way. gave back to Helen the self-control that had slipped from her. Her pride reasserted itself, rigidly suppressing any sign of feeling or emotion that could be noticed by the gentle, inquisitive eyes fixed on her.

Even if she doubted her ability to remain so self-possessed in the presence of the girl's Master.

Though she did take advantage of her regained self-control to ponder the question of her husband and young Wilson.

What had this, so-called, *"Sheik"* told her:

"…he, along with your young travelling companion, is with my women now. I am sure they will find ways to keep both…. Amused."

She pondered this for a few moments, then, with that supreme sense of entitlement only the extremely wealthy, the beautiful, or the irredeemably narcissistic, seem to feel is their right, turned her thoughts to her own situation.

They were men, after all, and she was but a woman alone.

Husband and admirer or not, her only duty now was to herself.

The hot bath that took the soreness out of her limbs brought back the colour to her face and lips. She even tubbed her head, rubbing the glistening curls dry with fierce vigour, striving to rid herself of the contamination that seemed to have saturated her. Yet the robes against which

they had been pressed were spotless, and the hands that had held her were fastidiously clean, even to the well-kept nails.

She came back into the bedroom to find Zilah on her knees poring over her scanty but diverse wardrobe with bewilderment, fingering the evening dresses with shy hands, and finally submitting tentatively to Helen the tweed skirt that had been packed with her other things for the journey when Oran should be reached.

But Helen put it aside, and pointed to the riding clothes she had worn the previous day.

In them she felt more able to face what might be before her and the associations connected with them seemed to give her moral strength.

In them she would feel herself again.

Helen the boy.

Not the shivering piece of womanhood that had succumbed with barely a whimper of fight only last night.

She bit her lip as she stamped her foot down into the long boot.

Sending the girl away at last, and noticing that she avoided passing into the adjoining room, but vanished instead through the curtains leading into the bathroom, she wondered if that meant the Sheik was in the outer room waiting?

The thought banished the self-control she had regained and sent her weakly on to the side of the bed with her face hidden in her hands.

Was he there?

Her questions to the little waiting-girl had only been concerned with the whereabouts of the camp to which she had been brought and also of the fate of the caravan in general. Of the man himself, she had not been able to bring herself to speak. The strange fear that he had inspired in her filled her with a rage and humiliation almost the equal of the desire she now felt whenever her thoughts lingered upon him.

The thought of seeing him again after last night brought with it a shame that was unspeakable.

But she conquered her agitation by assuring herself that it was better to face the inevitable of her own free will, rather than be fetched whether she would or not.

For she knew now the strength of the man who had abducted her and confessed herself helpless against him.

She raised her head and listened.

It was very silent in the next room.

Perhaps she was to be allowed a further respite.

She jerked her head impatiently at her own hesitation, then, contemptuously, strode across the room. But at the curtains she halted for a moment, then with set face drew them aside and went through.

The respite had been granted and the room appeared to be empty. But as she crossed the thick rugs her heart leapt suddenly into her throat, for she became aware of a man standing in the open doorway. His back was turned to her, but in a moment she saw that the short, slim figure in white linen European clothes bore no resemblance to the tall Arab she had expected to see.

She had thought her footsteps noiseless, but he turned with a little quick bow.

A typical Frenchman with narrow, alert, clean-shaven face, sleek black hair and dark restless eyes. His legs were slightly bowed and he stooped a little; his appearance was that of a jockey with the manners of a well-trained servant. Helen coloured hotly under his glance, but his eyes were lowered instantly.

“Madame is doubtless ready for lunch.” He spoke rapidly, but his voice was low and pleasant. His movements were as quick and as quiet as his voice, and in a dream Helen found herself in a few moments before a lunch that was perfectly cooked and daintily served. The man hovered about her solicitously, attending to her wants with dexterous hands and watchful eyes that anticipated every need.

She was bewildered, faint from want of food, and everything seemed unreal, so the opportunity to simply sit still and be waited on by the soft-footed, soft-spoken manservant - who seemed such a curious adjunct to the household of an Arab chief – was a welcome one.

“Monseigneur begs that you will excuse him until this evening. He will return in time for dinner,” he murmured as he handed her a couscous.

Helen looked up blankly. “Monseigneur?”

“My master. The Sheik,” he informed her before retiring.

The Frenchman came back with coffee and served her.

“Monseigneur dines at eight. At what hour will Madame have tea?” he asked as he cleared away and folded up the table.

Helen choked back the sarcastic retort that sprang to her lips and supplied him with her preference. Seeing in the man's quiet and deferential manner nothing more than the tool of his Arab Master that he was. Relieved when he made himself scarce and she was alone with her thoughts.

Breathing more freely now that he was gone, she flung up her head and jerked her shoulders back with an angry determination to conquer the fear that made her ashamed and the capitulation it had led to.

Natural curiosity had been struggling with her other emotions, and she gave way to it now to try and turn the channel of her thoughts from the fixed direction in which they tended, and wandered round the big room.

The night before she had taken in very little of her surroundings – and what she had seen had scarcely registered - her eyes had been held only by the man who had dominated everything; her included.

Now she looked and took note.

Here, also, were the same luxurious appointments as in the sleeping-room. She had knowledge enough to appreciate that the rugs and hangings were exquisite, the former were Persian and the latter of a thick black material, heavily embroidered in silver. The main feature of the room was a big black divan heaped with huge cushions covered with dull black silk. Beside the divan, spread over the Persian rugs, were two unusually large black bearskins, the mounted heads converging. At one end of the tent was a small doorway, a little portable writing-table. There were one or two Moorish stools heaped with a motley collection of ivories and gold and silver cigarette cases and knick-knacks, and against the partition that separated the two rooms stood a quaintly carved old wooden chest.

Though the furniture was scanty and made the tent seem even more spacious than it really was, the whole room had an air of barbaric splendour.

The sombre hangings gleaming with thick silver threads seemed to Helen like a studied theatrical effect, a setting against which the Arab's own white robes should contrast more vividly.

She remembered the black and silver waistcloth she had seen swathed round him and her lip curled scornfully. There was, she generalised contemptuously, a strain of vanity in all natives. Doubtless it pleased this native's conceit to carry out the colour scheme of his tent even in his clothes, and pose among the sable cushions of the luxurious divan to the admiration of his retainers.

Helen made a little exclamation of disgust, and turned from the soft seductiveness of the big couch with disdain.

She crossed the tent to the little bookcase and knelt beside it curiously.

What did a Francophile-Arab read?

Novels, probably.

Of a type that would harmonise with the atmosphere that she dimly sensed in her surroundings.

A smile crossed her lips as she pondered the irony she might discover some titles of her husband’s there.

Wouldn’t that be a thing!

But no, it was not novels that filled the bookcase.

They were books of sport and travel with several volumes on veterinary surgery.

All in French, and obviously frequently handled.

Many of them had pencilled notes in the margins written in Arabic.

One shelf was filled entirely with the works of one man, a certain Vicomte Raoul de Saint Hubert. With the exception of one novel, which Helen only glanced at hastily; they were all books of travel. From the few scribbled words in the front of each Helen could see that they had all been sent to the Arab by the author himself - one even was dedicated to *"My friend, Ahmed Ben Hassan, Sheik of the Desert."*

She put the books back with a puzzled frown. She wished, with a feeling that she could not fathom, that they had been rather what she had imagined. The evidence of education and unlooked-for tastes in the man they belonged to troubled her. It was an unexpected glimpse into the personality of the Arab that had captured her and was vaguely disquieting. For it suggested possibilities that would not have existed in a raw native, or one only superficially coated with a veneer of civilisation.

With this knowledge of him, he seemed to become infinitely more sinister and infinitely more horrible.

She looked at her watch with sudden apprehension. The day was wearing away quickly and soon he would come. Her breath came quick and short and the tears welled up in her eyes.

She fought them by recalling how often she had chided others for such signs of weakness.

Dropping down suddenly on to the big black divan that she had scorned before she fell instantly to sleep.

She was still asleep when the servant brought tea, but she started up as he put the tray on a stool beside her.

"It is Madame's own tea. If she will be good enough to say if it is made to her taste," he said anxiously, as if his whole happiness was contained in the tiny teapot at which he was frowning deprecatingly.

His assiduity jarred on Helen's new-found jangling nerves, but she recognised that he was sincere in his efforts to please her.

After tea, the longing for fresh air and the desire to see what place she had been brought to grew irresistible as the evening came nearer.

She went to the open doorway.

A big awning stretched before it, supported on lances.

Stepping out from under its shade, she looked about her wonderingly.

It was a big oasis - bigger than any she had seen.

In front of the tent there was an open space with a thick belt of palm trees beyond. The rest of the camp lay behind the Chief's tent. The place was alive with men and horses.

There were some camels in the distance, but it was the horses that struck Helen principally.

They were everywhere, some tethered; some wandering loose, some exercising in the hands of grooms. Mounted Arabs on the outskirts of the oasis crossed her view occasionally. There were groups of men engaged on various duties all around her. Those who went by near her salaamed as they passed, but took no further notice of her.

A strange look came into Helen's eyes.

This was the desert indeed.

The desert as she had never expected to see it - as few *could* expect to see it.

But the cost!

She shuddered, then turned at a sudden noise near her. A biting, screaming chestnut fury was coming past close to the tent, taking complete charge of the two men who clung, yelling, to his head. He was stripped, but Helen recognised him at once. The one brief view she had had of his small, vicious head as he shot past her elbow the evening before was written on her brain for all time.

He came to a halt opposite Helen, refusing to move, his ears laid close to his head, quivering all over, snatching continually at his grooms, who seemed unable to cope with him. Once he swung up on his hind legs and his cruel teeth flashed almost into the face of one of the men, who was taken off his guard, and who dropped on to the ground, rolling out of the way with a howl that provoked a shout of laughter from a knot of Arabs who had gathered to watch the usual evening eccentricities of the chestnut.

The French servant, coming from behind the tent, stopped to speak to the man as he picked himself up and made a grab at the horse's head, and then turned to Helen with his pleasant smile.

“He is rightly named Shaitan, Madame, for he is assuredly possessed of a devil,” he said, indicating the chestnut, who, at that moment, with a violent plunge, broke away from the men who were holding him and headed for the edge of the oasis with the Arabs streaming after him.

“The mounted men will catch him,” he added with a little laugh, in response to Helen's exclamation.

“Is he amusing himself, or is it really vice?” she asked.

“Pure vice, Madame. He has killed three men.”

Helen looked at him incredulously, for his tone was casual and his manner did not indicate any undue feeling.

“He ought to be shot,” she said indignantly.

The man shrugged. “Monseigneur is fond of him,” he said quietly.

And so, because Monseigneur was fond of him, the vicious animal was surrounded with every care that his master's pleasure might not be interfered with. Evidently the lives of his wretched people were of less value to him than that of a favourite horse. It sounded compatible with the mercilessness she had herself experienced.

“The horses are magnificent, but they are bigger than any Arabians I have seen before.”

“They are a special breed, Madame,” replied the Frenchman. “The tribe has been famous for them for generations. Monseigneur's horses are known through all the Barbary States, and as far as France,” he added, with a little accent of pride creeping into his voice.

Helen looked at him speculatively. There was an inflection in his voice each time he mentioned his master that indicated a devotion that she was unable to accredit to the brute for whose treatment she was still suffering.

But her thoughts were broken into abruptly as she saw a naked man led from a tent at the periphery of the encampment.

A naked man with his hands bound behind him and being led as if he were a common dog by an Arab woman in flowing silk robes.

A naked man she recognised as her husband!

“That…” she gasped. “That is my husband.”

“I am afraid that is so, Madame,” answered the Frenchman.

“But…?” she began, fighting back a thrill at seeing Arnold being led in such a fashion – and by a woman! Knowing such thoughts to be as unfair as they were unworthy.

“But why is he naked?... And being led?”

“The Master has given me permission to answer your questions, Madame,” the servant told her with what seemed to her an expression of regret. “But please be sure you wish to hear my answers to them before you ask.”

The look she turned upon him made a reply superfluous.

“The Master has decided that… that your husband and the younger gentleman are not fit males to be allowed integration into the life of the camp itself.”

Her gaze was quizzical now.

“Master will explain to you in greater detail, I am sure,” he went on. “All I know is that, after the events of last night, when both men were placed under the supervision of Master’s wives and their attendants, something occurred to ensure they could no longer be allowed to live the life *real* men could expect to lead.”

“Do you mean to say that they will be…?” she began, horrified.

“No, no, Madame!” he answered her before she could finish. “I know what you are thinking and that was not my meaning at all.”

“What then?” she asked with relief, glad to have appalled and racing thoughts calmed.

“When I say, they are no longer to be allowed to live here as real men, I mean that, for the duration of their time here, they will become the attendants of the Master’s women.”

She was about to question the valet on this revelation but had no further time to linger on the subject before the Frenchman drew her attention to an approaching rider.

“There is Monseigneur,” said the servant suddenly; speaking as if she too, must be glad of his coming, despite all that he must know had occurred between them.

Did the valet imagine for one moment that she was here of her own free will?

Or was it all a part of the hypocrisy in which she was enveloped and seemed designed simply to break her spirit as a free and independent woman?

She flashed one glance at the horseman riding through the belt of trees that fringed the oasis and an icy perspiration chilled her from head to foot.

Helen shrank back under the awning and into the coolness of the tent, raging against the mastering fear that she could not overcome and… *something else*.

But just inside the open doorway she stood firm and even her fear could make her go no further.

She would meet him here, not cowering in the inner room like a trembling creature skulking in the furthest corner of its cage.

That much pride at least was left to her.

From the shelter of the tent she watched him cross towards her and enter with a long noiseless stride.

“I hope that Gaston took care of you properly and gave you everything that you wanted?” he said easily.

The coolness of his words and manner hit her like a dash of cold water.

She had been prepared for anything but this calm nonchalance in a situation that was intolerable.

His tone conveyed the perfunctory regret of a host for an unavoidable absence and her fear gave way to rage.

Her body stiffened and her hands clenched.

“Is it not time that this ended? Haven't you done enough?” she burst out passionately. “Why have you committed this outrage? What crime have I committed against you that I should be dishonoured in such a way?”

He shrugged.

“And my husband and our young companion? What have these *strangers* done to you that you could humiliate them so thoroughly?”

Unperturbed, his hand moved in her direction in one of the gestures that she had noticed outside.

But of an answer there was none.

His silence infuriated her and she grew utterly reckless.

“Do you think that you can keep me here, you fool? That I can vanish into the desert and no notice be taken of my disappearance - that no inquiries will be made?”

“There will be no inquiries,” he answered calmly.

Then, adding:

“And, as I recall, this outrage you speak of was one you expressly asked me to perform for you.”

Her face coloured as she was reminded of her entreaties of the previous night and she ground the heel of her boot into the soft carpet.

“There will be inquiries,” she choked furiously. “I am not such a nonentity that nothing will be done when I am missed. The English authorities will make the French Government find out who is responsible, and you will have to pay for what you have done.”

He laughed - the little amused laugh that sent the same cold feeling of dread through her that she had felt the day before.

“The French Government has no jurisdiction over me. I am not subject to it. I am an independent chief, my own master. I recognise no government. My tribe obey me and only me.”

Her shaking fingers found the handkerchief for which they were groping, and she wiped the moisture that had gathered on the palms of her hands.

“When I am missed…” she began desperately, trying to keep a bold front, but her assurance was leaving her.

“You will not be missed for so long that it will be too late,” he replied drily.

“Too late! What do you mean?” she gasped.

“Your own plans will stop any possibility of inquiry for some time to come.”

He paused, then assured of her attention:

“You engaged a caravan in charge of Mustafa Ali,” he went on evenly, “to travel in the desert for a month. You set out from the French Dominion, but your intention at the end of the time was to travel northward to Oran and there dismiss the caravan. From there you were to cross to Marseilles, then to Cherbourg, where you would embark for America to follow your brother, who has already started.”

She listened breathlessly with an ever-increasing fear growing in her eyes. The slow, casual voice detailing her itinerary with the quiet certainty of perfect knowledge filled her with a terror that made her want to scream. She swayed a little as she stood, her eyes fixed on the endless strip of desert and gold-flecked sky visible through the opening of the tent, but she saw nothing of the undulating sand, nor the red glory of the setting sun.

“How do you know all this?” she whispered with dry lips that trembled as that recent image of her husband at the end of a leash controlled by a woman – an Arab woman – seemed to answer her own question.

Had Arnold been tortured?

Had Wilson?

“Let us say,” he began with a smile, “that my women can be most persuasive on my part.”

He shrugged.

“And, though they find the man you call husband to be most handsome, it is also obvious to them that he is not much of a man in the truest Arab meaning of the word. So, in answer to your earlier question, it is not their Master who has humiliated your husband and the young army man so thoroughly, but his wives and the women who attend them.”

“By that you mean they have tortured them?”

Her voice became sarcastic.

“Which means, I suppose, you are made a man by definition.?”

Her look to him was contemptuous as she added:

“In the truest Arab meaning of the word, of course.”

His laugh maddened her – as did his reply:

“There was no intent to torture him, as you put it,” he told her.

She sniffed.

“Why torture him,” the Sheik continued, “when a simple threat to do so delivered what we desired?”

Her stare was disbelieving; she had known Arnold was weak – he was man of words, not action – but…

“I am afraid it is true, Mrs Middlemass – or may I call you Helen, now that we are so… *intimate*… with each other?”

“Mrs Middlemass suits me perfectly, thank you,” she said with some asperity.

“As you please,” he conceded. “But surely you must know that, for all his other, no doubt, wonderful qualities, your husband is hardly a man in any sense of the word as it is intended to be understood?”

“If by that you mean he is not a savage with a gentleman’s airs who forces his unwanted attentions upon a woman, then…”

“Unwanted, Mrs Middlemass?” he asked, allowing an eyebrow to rise ironically.

Again, her cheeks coloured.

“No,” he went on. “There are many descriptions for a creature of your husband’s type, but *‘man’* does not number among them… Though my women assure me there are many uses to be made of him in his new environment.”

He smiled.

“At least until we decide whether he is too pathetic to serve even a woman and allow him to return home.”

Her anger flamed up again, leading her to entirely the wrong conclusion:

“So, it is money that you want? I’m to be held to ransom?”

But her scornful voice faltered and died away on the last word, and it did not need his silence to convince her that it was no question of ransom.

This was not a man who need go to such lengths for money.

Lust, however, was a different matter entirely.

Then in her despair a faint ray of hope came:

“Mustafa Ali, or one of the caravan men may have given the alarm already to the French,” she reminded him. “If, that is, you have not murdered them already.”

“I have not murdered them all,” he rejoined shortly, “but Mustafa Ali will not give any alarm to the French or anyone else.”

“Why?”

She tried to keep silent, but the question was forced from her, and she waited tense for his answer. Tales of ruthless Arab cruelty surged through her mind. What had been the fate of the unfortunate caravan leader?

Her eyes closed and her throat grew dry.

“There was no need for any murder,” he continued sarcastically. “When you come to know me better you will realise that I do not leave too much to chance. *'All things are with Allah, blessed be his name.*' But it is well to remember that Allah does not always concern himself with the affairs of men, and arrange accordingly. If I had left this affair to chance there might very easily have been, as you suggest, murder done - though we do not call it murder in the desert.

“It was very simple. Voyons! You paid Mustafa Ali well to guide you in the desert. I paid him better to lead you to me. I paid him well enough to make him content to remove himself from French Dominion, where awkward questions might be asked, to another sphere of usefulness where he is not known, and where he can build up for himself a new reputation as a caravan leader.”

It was the truth, she knew, and nothing less. She ground her teeth with rage. Her suave, subservient guide had been leading her the whole time, not in the direction that had been mapped out for her, but towards the man who had bought him to betray her trust. Mustafa Ali's shifting eyes, his desire to hurry her from the oasis where they had rested at mid-day, his tone was all explained. He had acted well. The last touch - the imaginary wound that had toppled him slowly out of his saddle had been a masterpiece, she reflected bitterly. Nothing had been omitted to make the attempt a success.

Even the horse that had been given her to ride was the Sheik's and trained to his whistle; while her revolver had been tampered with.

She had not missed, as she had thought.

The net that she had felt closing round her earlier in the afternoon seemed wrapped round her now inextricably, drawing tighter and tighter, smothering her. She gasped for breath. The sinking sun seemed suddenly to leap up wildly into the heavens; then she pulled herself together with a tremendous effort.

“Why have you done this?” she murmured faintly.

Then for a moment her heart stood still, her eyes dilating, sensing what was about to happen.

He had come close behind her, and she waited in an agony, until he caught her to him, crushing her against him, forcing her head back on his arm.

“Because I wanted you. Because one day in French Dominion, four weeks ago, I saw you for a few moments. A few moments that were long enough to know that I wanted you. And what I want I take. You played into my hands. You arranged a tour in the desert. The rest was easy.”

Her eyes were shut, the long dark lashes quivering on her pale cheeks so that she could not see his face, but she felt him draw her closer to him and then his fierce kisses on her mouth.

She wanted to struggle but, instead, found herself helpless to anything other than… *respond*.

He laughed softly as he kissed her lips, her hair, and her eyes.

Passionately.

Though he stood quite still, she felt the heavy beating of his heart under her cheek, and understood dimly the passion that she had aroused in him and the tremendous strength that went with it. She realised from what he had told her that he recognised no law beyond his own wishes, and was prepared to go to any lengths to fulfil them. Her life was in his hands. He could break her with his lean brown fingers like a toy is broken and no more would be said than if she were just such a plaything.

All at once she felt pitifully weak and frightened.

She was utterly in his power and at his mercy.

The mercy of an Arab who was merciless.

Helen gave in suddenly and lay quiet in his arms. She had touched the lowest depths of degradation; he could do nothing more to her than he had done. For the moment, she could fight no further, so worn out and utterly weary was she.

A numb feeling of despair came over her and with it a sense of unreality, as if it were a hideous nightmare from which she would wake, for the truth seemed too impossible, the setting too theatrical, and the man himself a mystery.

A dozen incongruities that she had noticed during the day crowded into her recollection until her head reeled and she turned from them wearily.

She was simply too tired to think, too spent in mind and body.

The strong arms around her tightened slowly.

“Look at me,” he said in the soft slow voice that seemed habitual to him, and which contrasted oddly with the neat, clipping French that he spoke.

She shivered and her dark lashes flickered for a moment.

“Look at me,” he repeated, voice just as slow, just as soft, but into it had crept an inflection that was unmistakable.

Command!

Twenty-four hours ago, Helen Middlemass had not known the meaning of the word fear, and had never in all her life obeyed any one against her inclination, but in the twenty-four hours since she had lived through years of emotions.

For the first time, she had pitted her will against a will that was stronger than her own.

For the first time, she had met an arrogance that was greater and a determination that was firmer than hers.

For the first time, she had met a man who had failed to bow to her wishes and she had been powerless to transform into a willing slave with no more than a look.

He smiled down at her suddenly.

“Bon Dieu! Do you know how beautiful you are?” he murmured. But the sound of his voice seemed to break a spell that had kept her dumb. She struggled again to free herself.

“Let me go!” she cried piteously, and it was her complete immunity from him that she prayed for, but he chose wilfully to misunderstand her.

The passion faded from his eyes, giving place to a gleam of mockery.

“There is plenty of time. Gaston is the most discreet servant. We shall hear him when he comes,” he said with a low laugh.

But she persisted with the courage of desperation.

“When will you let me go?”

With an exclamation of impatience, he put her from him roughly, and going to the divan flung himself down on the cushions and picked up a magazine that was lying on an inlaid stool beside him.

She bit her lips to keep back the hysterical sobs that rose in her throat, nerving herself with clenched hands, and followed him.

“You must tell me. I must know. When will you let me go?”

He turned a page with deliberation, before looking up. A heavy scowl gathered on his face, and his eyes swept her from head to foot with a slow scrutiny that made her shrink. “When I am tired of you,” he said coldly.

She shuddered violently and turned away with a little moan, stumbling blindly towards the inner room, but as she reached the curtains his voice arrested her. He had thrown aside the magazine and was lying back on the divan, his long limbs stretched out indolently, his hands clasped behind his head.

“You make a very charming boy,” he said lightly, with a faint smile, “but it was not a boy that I saw in French Dominion… You understand?”

Beyond the curtains, she stood a moment, shaking all over, her face hidden in her hands.

She *understood* all too well.

CHAPTER IV

"Do not let them hear you, for god's sakes!" Arnold Middlemass warned young Wilson in a strained and fearful whisper.

It had been over four weeks – four painful, humiliating, and negatively illuminating weeks – since their taking, and life for both men, young as well as old, had become the stuff of dreams.

Bad dreams.

Both, at least, had been spared some clothing now, but it was not their own. Though even the shapeless tunic reaching almost to the ground was preferable to being kept naked and vulnerable to the ridicule of both the wives of the man who had captured them and those that served him and his men. Strangely, the men who comprised his fighting force pretty much ignored them, as if to acknowledge their presence was to somehow be tainted by an inferior strain encompassed within their own gender.

A shunning that was not adopted by the wives and lovers of these fighting men who giggled and ridiculed the new white slaves of the Sheik's women whenever they came across them.

Though, as yet, they had not been used sexually by these wives and lovers of the soldiers as they had by the wives of the Sheik himself on a daily and, it seemed, shared basis.

A shared basis that seemed to leave no depravity unexplored, so long as debased, demeaned, and degraded, the two white men given over to their clutches.

"How are you?" Wilson asked, his voice too, hushed and strained, eyes darting about him frantically as if expecting discovery at any turn. Speaking between them had been expressly forbidden by the fierce woman of Middlemass's age who appeared to be the overseer of the accommodations in which the Sheik's wives lived, and of their… *needs*… also. It had taken but one punishment at her hands for both men to think twice before even thinking of disobeying her.

Another blow to the manly pride of each.

"Not… Not so good," was the older man's reply. "I don't see how I can… can…"

His voice caught in his throat and Wilson caught his wrist and gave it a supportive squeeze.

"Yes, you can," he told him forcefully – or at least as forcefully as one can be when whispering. "It is only a matter of time before the French authorities at Dominion discover our whereabouts and send a force. Miss Templeton's…" he caught himself. "Your wife's presence here ensures our Foreign Office will not rest until she is back where she belongs and this outrage paid for in full."

"She is *not* my wife!" Middlemass uttered, in a voice entirely too loud for the young man's sense of preservation.

"Please, Arnold! Lower your voice. I know you are upset but…"

“Upset?” snorted the aggrieved husband, voice thankfully back to a whisper. “At this moment, as her husband and her… *friend*… draw water from this foul oasis as if they were flunkeys, she takes her leisure in the tent of a savage who… who…”

Again his voice broke up and again his younger companion took his arm to provide moral support.

“She has no choice in the matter as we have no choice in the matter,” Wilson told him. “All we can do is…”

“You are wrong,” a suddenly calm Middlemass told him. “She at least had the choice to resist. As we resisted until…”

His eyes seemed to focus somewhere in the distance as he recalled his own resistance.

And the pain it had cost him before he had so shamefully and unmanfully been broken.

And by women.

Arab women!

“I saw no resistance when that infernal Arab dog had me taken to his quarters only yesterday,” Middlemass continued.

Wilson was suddenly alive with interest beyond that of their being discovered in conversation, desperate to hear of Helen, who until then they had only seen at a distance.

“You…? You saw Helen?... Spoke to her?... My god, man! Is she alright?”

“Oh, she is more than alright,” confirmed an outraged husband. “But then why wouldn’t she be?”

The young subaltern was looking at him with a puzzled expression for a question, given their circumstances, that made no sense.

“After all,” Middlemass continued, apoplectic now even as he his voice remained lowered, “it is not often a wife gets to experience the cock of her Arab lover in the presence of her husband.”

The words hit Wilson with the impact of spear between the shoulder blades.

Not just their boldness and vulgarity.

But their import.

“You… You make fun of me, Sir…”

Middlemass shook his head and the young man knew he had spoken nothing but the truth. The girl of his dreams had given herself to… to an Arab. The same girl who ruled the men around her with a rod of feminine iron.

“But…” he began. “If she were forced to…”

“I saw no evidence of *any* force used upon her,” Middlemass interrupted, eyes misty with the pain of his recollection. And, if the looks she bestowed upon her husband from over her shoulder as she rode upon her lover were my guide then she actively welcomed the animal’s attentions.”

“She…? She looked at you as…?”

“With a smile,” Middlemass nodded. “This as I knelt by the entrance and was forced to watch.”

Wilson made a sudden gagging sound and the older man thought he must lose the contents of his stomach; but he scooped some water into his mouth and recovered himself.

“You mean…? You were forced to kneel in their presence and watch as…”

“As my wife rode the cock of damned Arab tribesman and looked into my eyes as if to dare me to try and stop her.”

The young subaltern, despite the tanned cheeks bestowed upon him from his time in the region, looked positively green to the gills.

Then, half-observing, half-accusing:

“And you…? You just knelt there in the corner and…”

“No, damn you to blazes!”

The older man placed a hand upon his forehead as it to calm himself.

“As my wife threw back her head in utter abandon and screamed her joy to the heavens, in a way I had never been capable of…”

He censored the description of his own shortcomings and went on:

“I could take no more. I rose to my feet and, despite our so-called Sheik warning me of dire consequences were I to move before being given permission, grabbed up some object or other as a weapon, advanced upon the bed and…”

Wilson waited.

Then, just as it seemed the older man was unable to force more words past his lips, so shamed and horrified had his expression become:

“He spotted my approach and… and, throwing her from him, leapt to the bed and disarmed me.”

There was disappointment and anti-climax written across the younger man’s features, having expected his countryman to have at least put up a fight of some sorts.

Then:

“And that is when…” continued Arnold Middlemass, in a voice that seemed even less than a whisper, “…that is when, with my wife looking on and smiling, that he took me by the ear as if I were a naughty schoolboy and told me that he was going to punish me…”

*****

“Thirty-one days!” she marvelled to herself.

Thirty-one days that may just as well have been a lifetime for changes that had been wrought in her philosophy, her emotions, and her life.

The humiliation of it all should have seared her proud heart.

And yet, the opposite effect had been wrought upon that same organ.

He was pitiless in his arrogance and pitiless in his Oriental disregard to the preferences of the young woman he had subjugated. He was an Arab, to whom the feelings of a woman were non-existent. He had taken her to please himself and he kept her to please himself, to amuse him in his moments of relaxation.

So why did she have feelings for him she had come to conclude, having yet to feel such a way in her life before, were love?

She had not been prepared for either the strength-of-will or the ceaseless activity of the man whose prisoner she was. His life was hard, strenuous and occupied – yet he wore the burden lightly. His days were full, partly with the magnificent horses that he bred, and partly with tribal affairs that took him from the camp for hours at a time. Upon one or two occasions, he had been away for the whole night and had come back at daybreak with all the evidences of hard riding.

And had still been capable of making love to her with a power that left a breathless and thoroughly subdued young woman upon the divan, where once had been a proud and independent spirit its owner had vowed no man or no circumstance would ever tame.

Some days she rode with him, but when he had not the time or the inclination, the French valet went with her. He demanded implicit obedience to his lightest whim with the unconscious tyranny of one who had always been accustomed to command and governed his unruly followers despotically – for which, it seemed, they loved him; even as they feared him in equal measure.

Even she cringed from the heavy scowl that her wilfulness drew from him at times.

“You treat them like dogs,” she had said to him once. “Are you not afraid that one day they will rise against you and murder you?”

And he had only shrugged his shoulders and laughed, the same low laugh of amusement that never failed to make her shiver.

“Dogs, like slaves, of whom they are only slightly above,” he had told her, “must be punished immediately for their sins. And in ways most injurious to their pride and self-esteem

A few days after those words she had witnessed a practical demonstration of his *modus operandi.*

She had actually seen him chastise a servant – or *“slave”*, as he preferred to describe those who served.

She did not know what the man's fault had been, but the punishment seemed out of all proportion to anything that could be imagined, and she had watched, more fascinated and aroused than she knew any civilised person should feel, until he had tossed away the murderous whip, and without a second glance at the limp, blood-stained heap that huddled on the ground, back unconcerned to the tent.

The sight had haunted her.

And been the cause of much feverish activity with her own fingers on the few occasions he had spent the night from her.

She was unsure which was stronger in him: his callousness, or his cruelty; both of which seemed so incongruous when counterpointed with his handsome face and graceful, muscular body that seemed to come with a complete absence of personal vanity.

And then there was *that* night.

The night she had seen her husband up close for the first time since they had been taken.

A *“husband”* whose manner bore no resemblance to the man she knew and dominated.

For, though she led the older man by dint of his obsession with her and compelled him to *private* acts she could see shamed his pride even as he performed them, let alone in harsh light of day when he had no sexual excitement to dilute his own abject behaviour for him, with other men he was conscious of his own dignity and vigilant for even the slightest hint of disrespect to either himself or his wife.

And, literary man or not, he did not flinch from physical combat.

But *this* Arnold Middlemass had been nothing like the man she had married.

The last time she had seen him before this had been at a distance as he was led – *by a lead* – naked and collared by a stylishly dressed woman she learned later was *another* of the Sheik’s wives. Since then she had seen nor heard nothing of either her husband or young Wilson. The one time she had brought up their subject, he had told her to put them from her mind as they would no longer play a part in her life going forward – or at least, so he said, in the roles she had allowed them to this point.

He also told her that his wives and their female helpers were ensuring that both white men knew their place and would eventually make admirable and very tame body-servants in his camp-bound seraglio.

She recalled her, *partly*, horrified response:

“You…? You mean to have them…? To have them…?”

“Neutered?” he had answered with a laugh. “Castrated?... Nullified?”

She had nodded.

“Do not concern yourself, my wilful English beauty. Even I would not be so cruel to my guests.”

He burst out laughing.

Then:

“And even if I were of a mind to do so, my dislike of eunuchs and the nasty and viciously petty intriguers they become in the absence of a former manhood would make me think again.”

He had read her thoughts easily at that point:

“And you need not trouble yourself that my wives’ new slaves may be tempted to defile their Master’s property. Of that there is not the slightest danger.”

“You are sure of that?” she had asked teasingly.

“Utterly. Your husband and your young admirer, the moment they were considered trained and servile enough to commence their duties, found themselves gifted certain… *jewelry*… that ensured they remained very well behaved boys.”

The sensuous and fiery thrill of unholy pleasure that made molten passage through her veins at the images the man’s words inspired, told her how far she had travelled from the free-spirited but fair-minded girl she had been at the start of her adventure, to the perverse and sensation hungry woman awaiting the attentions of her *“Master”*.

The Arnold Middlemass who had been presented to her in the Sheik’s quarters that evening – this as she and her Arab lover stood awaiting his arrival; her lover’s strong brown arms contrasted excitingly with her creamy Home-Counties skin as she nestled into his chest; bore no resemblance to the man of a few weeks before.

He was clothed in a shapeless dull grey djellaba and, where before he strode the confident stride of a proud man, now he shuffled, eyes fixed upon the floor below him as if to raise them would invite the torments of hell.

Helen Middlemass had been amazed at her own feelings.

This was her husband, after all.

A man who, after her own fashion, she still felt feelings of fondness; even if the easy way he allowed her to rule him had stopped those feelings from including respect within their compass.

So why, seeing him so abject and servile as she stood naked in the arms of the Arab who had stolen her from him, was her every nerve-end tingling with the joy of sexual excitement and personal supremacy?

When her masterful lover told him to kneel where he stood and not to move, she felt her womanhood enter a state of flood that became even more of a deluge when her husband complied without raising his eyes to theirs.

The words her lover had used next were not likely to ease her feelings any time soon either.

“I am going to ride your delightful young wife the way she was intended to be ridden by a superior and true man,” he had begun, his words robbing her of breath as she watched her husband’s shoulders shudder with emotion.

Her Master and lover was not finished yet though:

“Then, when she has placed my superior cock in her mouth and teased it back to life, I am going to lay upon my back and allow her to ride me exactly as a superior woman who has pleased her man deserves to ride him.”

He had led her to the bed then, but not before extending a dire warning to the abject and kneeling husband he was about to further emasculate.

“You will raise your lowly eyes and watch your Master and the woman who was once your wife as they make love,” he had ordered. “And, should you disobey me by either moving or lowering your eyes from the sight, I will take you across my knee and spank you in front of your wife like the disobedient child you will have become.”

Some thirty or forty minutes later, after she had ridden her own senses into mindless euphoria upon the cock of the Arab who had mastered her, Arnold Middlemass had been unable to take anymore and risen to his feet with murder in his eyes.

At which time, to her amazement and a renewal of the desire she had only just finished sating, her Master rose from the bed also and disarmed her husband before taking his ear-lobe between two fingers and dragging him to a chair.

When her whining and squealing husband went across the powerful thighs of the Arab whose cock had just taken her to heaven and beyond, she suspected she was seeing the most erotic sight of her life.

As a hand, no less powerful than the thighs trapping and supporting her husband, reduced Arnold Middlemass to piteous and ever more supplicatory screams, cries, and croaks, Helen Middlemass had no need any more to be suspicious on the subject.

She hadn’t seen anything of either Arnold or Edmund Wilson since that night and, given how humiliated her husband had to feel for not only having been forced to watch another man – an Arab man – make love to his wife, but to then be taken across that man’s lap like a recalcitrant prepubescent and spanked until his voice was too hoarse and broken to either scream, cry, or beg, she felt sure Arnold would not be missing contact with her. In truth, after her senses had

stabilised from the sexual euphoria of that night, she herself had felt much pain from her own guilt.

Certainly, she could not prevent the man who was as much her Master as he was Arnold's from insisting she ride his magnificent cock in front of her husband, and then punish him for having the temerity to try and reclaim some of his own manhood.

But her own powerlessness on that score could neither explain nor condone the feeling of utter exhilaration she felt at witnessing such an emasculation.

Guilt she had tried to explain to the Sheik and been told:

"It is a new world for you – even if it is older than the one from which you came. I saw enough during my stay in Toulouse and its University to have nothing but contempt for those European men who allow their manhood to be insulted and marginalised by women, simply that they may be offered some pitiful crumb of affection from Aphrodite's dining-table. No proud Arab man worthy of the term would countenance such an affront to his dignity."

Her thoughts went to Edmund Wilson, and all the others to whom she had offered such crumbs. Just reflecting on her past action led her to confess he was right. Poor Arnold was no more than the whipping-boy she had decided to marry that she might have an outlet for her need to dominate.

"He and your young friend, as much as you," he had continued, "have found the only role that living in my world – the real and untainted world of antiquity; free of unnatural restraint upon the strong – will countenance for the excuses of masculinity they have allowed themselves to become.

"I am neither cruel and nor am I vengeful in their regard – though such responses are not beyond me if I am tested. But they will not be treated any differently to my other subjects simply because of their land of birth. Their substance as men has dictated the roles they will either accept here or die. A substance, or lack of it in their cases, that allows no other usage of them other as slaves. And *not* to men."

His next words had surprised her just when she thought nothing could ever do so again:

"Though I am not averse to the charms of certain men and I must confess that your husband is among their number."

"You…? You find Arnold… appealing?"

"Subservience excites me, in either a beautiful woman or a weak but handsome man," he confirmed.

She stared at him, wondering how many layers of mystery and revelation she would need to peel from him before she could even begin to know this man who considered himself her owner.

And Arnold"

“And your husband as a most attractive mouth.”

Still lost in her thoughts, an image of the Sheik as he thrust his incredible cock between her husband’s lips as if his mouth were no more than a male cunny exciting her more than she thought it should, she felt a hand on her shoulder and let out a startled cry.

Usually her nerves were in better control. But the thick rugs deadened every sound, and she had not expected him so soon. He had been out since dawn and had come in much past his usual time, and had been having a belated siesta in the adjoining room.

“There was a scorpion in the bathroom to-day,” he said lazily, flopping down and stretching out his long legs upon the divan.

Then, as if it were symbolic of all his relationships:

“I crushed it beneath the heel of my riding boots.”

Desire for him took her instantly and she felt the warm blood pouring over her face, up to the roots of her bright hair and suffusing her slender neck.

Still not accustomed to revealing herself before a man in such a way, she put her hands up to her head and thrust her fingers through her loose curls to shield her face from his eyes.

She gave a sigh of relief when Gaston came in bringing a little tray with two filigree-cased cups of coffee.

When the valet had gone, she looked around the tent with a hunted expression, thinking how righteous and vindicated the Benedict’s, and others like them, would feel if they could see her right then.

There seemed no escape possible from the fate that had brought her closer than she had been at any time to her *true* nature.

Worse.

Had such an escape been available to her she was not at all sure she would accept it.

She sprang to her feet as he relaxed upon the divan and walked restlessly round the tent, her hands clasped behind her back, her head thrown up, and her lips pressed close together. She panted as if she had been running, and her eyes had a far-away, unseeing look until she gradually regained command of herself again and the nervous excitement borne of lust for the Sheik died down. A return to the more prosaic considerations of earth that left her weary and very desolate.

A sudden noise outside attracted her, and she wandered to the doorway and out under the awning.

Not thirty yards from her, she looked upon an incredible sight.

This time it was young Wilson being led by a leather lead attached to his neck collar.

But it was the sight behind and to the young subaltern's side that won her incredulity.

Her husband was also upon a lead, but the woman handling him was allowing him to go in front.

But only that she might find it easier to beat him across the back of his legs.

And the woman doing the beating?

Why, no other than young Zilah, the sweet young woman yet to reach twenty who had helped her with her breakfast and her clothing upon that first morning of her captivity.

"Mauvais chien!" the girl screeched, in between belabouring the back of his legs with a thin and whippy reed, only the folds of his djellaba preventing angry welts from decorating the backs of his thighs.

Though the pain was only diminished slightly if his cries of pain were a guide.

It was stunning to Helen.

Her husband, a man who, not a short time before was a respected author and a man much-admired for having landed the prize of a young woman's hand that so many had sought and failed to gain; a man in his middle-years much sought after himself by many of the women with whom he made contact; was being herded across and Arab encampment as if he were no more than a piece of domestic livestock.

And by a young woman who was not only his inferior in terms of looks, intelligence and social standing, but numbered less than half his years.

Regarding the vows joining them and the certificate confirming it as nothing more than archaic symbolism from a world she had left - or was at least in the process of leaving – behind, Helen Middlemass realised she no longer considered the man being beaten and led by a young serving girl to be her husband.

She had, she told herself, become a Templeton once more.

And soon, she suspected, she would not consider herself even that.

Such were her thoughts as her husband was beaten and an equally docile young Wilson was led to the seraglio where they now served.

The men lolling around, or either cleaning their rifles or placing a sheen upon the saddles of their horses, she noted, looked on at the sight of a middle-aged white man being taken to task by a young Arab girl with different degrees of interest.

Some were moved to laughter.

Some felt nothing but contempt.

But, upon none of those warrior's faces, did she see anything resembling pity.

"You see?" asked the Sheik as he came up behind her, making her start as he used a proprietorial hand to cup one of the voluptuous buttocks he had more than once made appreciative remarks in regard of. "It is entirely natural and is accepted as such."

Her anger rose at his casual assumption of ownership over her body but the desire his merest touch could trigger pre-empted any attempt on her part to move from his reach.

"Why, if it were not natural, would a man allow himself to be insulted and beaten in such a fashion by a young girl?"

Despite her earlier expression of contempt for the man she no longer considered a husband, Helen felt compelled – call it childhood conditioning, loyalty to country, or what you will – to defend what she herself now described in her thoughts as indefensible; even as a part of her heart declared it was not convinced of her words.

"Perhaps those rifles your men are cleaning and the daggers holstered in their belts have more to do with it than this… *rightness*… of nature you trumpet so loudly," she responded with an anger more dramatic than factual, finding his certitude playing upon her nerves with its usual ability to madden as she attempted to disguise her own excitement at the sight she had just witnessed.

His laughter at her rejoinder not pacifying her irritation either.

"That is nothing but nonsense," he told her as the girl continued to beat and verbally abuse the abject Middlemass and shepherd him to the wives' seraglio on the opposite side of the encampment next to the oasis itself.

From behind her, still cupping her buttock as a mark of ownership, he used his free arm to indicate the warriors who had sworn allegiance to him.

"I know," he began, "and know it because I have seen it, that any one of those men you see before you, if offered death, or a chance to live as a half-man in the service of women – as your English husband and your friend have accepted to live – that each, and without hesitation, would choose to keep their name unsullied and go to Allah with their respect and their manhood intact."

Unable to help herself, having already accepted the rightness of his observation and the weakness of her own country's men, Helen found herself leaning back into him.

An image of a frantic colt about to be broken came unbidden to the forefront of her thoughts and she allowed the scene to play out against the back of her eyes; feeling the colt's resistance giving way before the determination of the man atop it and finally going motionless as it declared itself beaten.

The symbolism was not likely to be lost upon her.

For that colt was neither of the two Englishman who had shared her original fate.

They, as the man she was increasingly coming to think of as her *"Master"* had so rightly pointed out, had already been saddled.

The groundwork and energy required to break them had already been expended and their necks were all but ready for a collar to be slipped about them.

And it was she – and European women like her everywhere – who had stripped them of their manly… *resolve*.

Suddenly, her own resolve remaining intact, albeit in a changed way, she stepped away from his arms and turned to smile into his handsome and knowing eyes.

The smile waiting to greet her, and what he said and did to her a few minutes later, told the *former* Mrs Helen Middlemass that, though she would be his, *he* would most certainly be hers and any appeal the wives in the seraglio opposite might once have held for him no longer counted for anything.

Just as the lives of the two Englishmen serving within it, no longer meant anything whatsoever to her.

CHAPTER V

The London Times – September 17th. 1911

A joint Anglo/French force yesterday took the Arabian stronghold of the feudal lord, Sheik Ahmed Ben Hassan as part of the ongoing search for Mrs Arnold Middlemass (formerly: Lady Helen Templeton) and her husband, who were part of a caravan that left French Dominion for the purpose of a month's exploration of the desert.

Having been provided information from a rival Sheik that Mr and Mrs Middlemass, along with Mr Edmund Wilson, a Subaltern with the Royal Garrison Artillery, were being held in Sheik Hassan's encampment, the Anglo/French force duly surrounded it after a night's forced ride and were in place by the early hours of September 14th.

At first light, the allied force moved into the encampment and, though the element of surprise aided their cause immeasurably, there was some ferocious fighting during which the Sheik's personal bodyguard suffered both injury and fatalities. Mr Middlemass and Mr Wilson were subsequently found within the camp, but concern persists over the whereabouts and well-being of Mrs Helen Middlemass herself. No trace was found of either the Sheik or the twenty-two-year-old wife herself and it is believed Sheik Hassan must have been warned somehow of the approach of the allied force and spirited her from the camp earlier the previous day.

Informed sources say the likelihood is that the Sheik will have taken shelter with another feudal leader in the region sympathetic to his cause and will shortly present a demand for the ransom of Mrs Middlemass...

…Arnold Middlemass studied the crumpled newspaper cutting for what must have been the thousandth time since his return to England before returning it to his pocket and continuing with his perusal of the river at the bottom of his garden.

So much time had passed, and still that one cutting exerted an inexorable power to make him relive events he would far rather forget.

As he watched the brackenish water make its journey towards Windsor, to pass the Royal dwelling itself and continue its journey towards London and the sea beyond, he asked himself - and with a frequency that was at least the equal of his perusal of the cutting - why it was he seemed unable to move past *that* experience of seven years before. Knowing that, until he did, he would never know the pleasure – if not the peace of mind – he had taken from both his working and social life prior to that point.

The birds were singing and it was the tranquil time of early morning that was his favourite part of the day.

Some rays of sunshine were even showing enough in the way of resolve to break through the seemingly habitual black clouds above.

But not *his*.

As was usual for him, he had once again allowed his enjoyment of both time and scene to be diminished by what had come to be a customary and almost obsessive return to that clipping and the events it triggered.

A trip down a lane of memory from which he would far rather abstain and, if such a thing were possible, obliterate it from the road-map of his recollection entirely.

Unbidden images of himself horrified his inner vision as the waterway at the garden was forgotten. Replaced by a succession of heathen women only to delighted to sexually torment a white man whose wife had replaced them in the affections of their lord and master.

Along with Wilson, his penis and scrotum had been pierced and secured with a tiny locking mechanism that effectively prevented either of them enjoying a full erection.

A denial that made the pleasure of the women all the more… *exquisite*.

When they were not being worked or schooled in the chores required of two male body-servants in the service of a Sheik's seraglio, it seemed one or other of them, many times both, were required between the legs of one or other of the Arab brides who, in fairness to the Sheik's sense of good taste, were each one of them comely and desirable.

Though *"fairness"* towards him was the very last thing Arnold Middlemass would have offered the man he in possession of a knife and the man below him now with a bared neck.

And woe betide white English flesh, already criss-crossed from the lash of either whippy reed or supple cane, if the tongue in its head was less than… servile, doglike, and pleasing.

And pleasing to *every* toe, orifice, and underarm, their female masters decided they wished to have served.

None of the above coming anywhere close to the *true* source of his lasting shame; images of which refused to be quelled and were the main reason his life seemed stalled and unable to move forward.

Images that were washing over him now with their usual polluting and emasculating doggedness as he tried to vanquish them from his mind.

It was the past now, he would mutter to himself. An experience that was horrific but now gone. The woman she had been then – had been forced to be – no longer existed now. He felt sure of it.

Which did not prevent a single tear from making a slow progress down his cheek. This as an unbidden memory of her beautiful face, as it had been then, formed before his eyes and he saw her smiling at him, lip curled mockingly and knowingly as she dragged back his head by the hair to look into his eyes. And, all the while, the cock of her Arab lover and Master sawed in and out of his mouth; intent upon conquering the husband as it had conquered the wife.

And without *any* of the accompanying niceties that had allowed her to, at least, save some face for her uncharacteristic capitulation.

Swiftly running the tap that he might splash his face and distract such thoughts that provided him with so much pain, he dried his face upon a tea-towel and checked the breakfast tray one last time.

Everything was in order and just as she expected it.

Toast, honey, and strong coffee.

A breakfast fit for his lady, she often told him.

Straightening the tie she insisted he wear during the day; despite the fact their only visitors – and that infrequently – were either tradesmen or builders; he made his way upstairs to the master-bedroom he was sometimes allowed to share with her.

She was still sleeping when he entered. The bedding had slipped down to her naked waist and he took the opportunity to drink in the lithe body that had so enslaved him.

And for so long.

Placing the tray on the floor at her side, he took himself to the end of the mattress and slid the bedding to one side that he may perform his usual and *demanded* morning ritual of respect.

The kisses he placed upon a smooth and wholly delectable instep were soon trained upon the red-nails of long and shapely toes; but it was not until he took one of the toes into his mouth, to suck upon it as if it were capable of sustaining life itself, that the object of his complete and utter obedience and devotion came awake.

Removing her toe from his mouth and kneeling before with hands clasped behind his back, adopting the position of respect she demanded and which had become second-nature to him, he lowered his eyes to the carpet and greeted her.

“Good morning, Miss Lilah…”

Adieu, my brother.

THE END