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UNDER TWO FLAGS - By "OUIDA"

CHAPTER XI.

MEANWHILE the subject of their first discourse returned to the chamber. It was empty when he returned. The men were scattered over the town in one of their scant pauses of liberty. There was only the dog of the regiment, Flick-Flack, a snow white poodle, asleep in the heat on a sack, who, without waking, moved his tail in a sign of gratification as Cecil stroked him and sat down near, basking himself to the work he had in hand.

It was a stone for the grave of Leon Ramon. There was no other to remember the dead chasseur, no other besides himself save an old woman sitting spinning at her wheel under the low sloping shingle roof of a cottage by the western Moroccan sea.

Cecil's hand pressed the grave along the letters, but his thoughts wandered far from the place where he was. Alone there in the great sun scorched barrack room the news that he had read, the presence he had quitted, seemed like a dream. He had never known fully all that he had lost until he had stood before the beauty of this woman, in whose deep, imperial eyes the light of other years seemed to lie, the memories of other worlds seemed to slumber.

Those blue, proud, fathomless eyes! Why had they looked on him? She had come to pain, to weaken, to disturb, to influence him, to shadow his peace, to wring his pride, to unman his resolve, as women do mostly with men. Was life not hard enough here already that she must make it more bitter yet to bear?

"If I had my heritage," he thought, and the chisel fell from his hands as he looked down the length of the barrack room, with the blue glare of the African sky through the casement.

Then he smiled at his own folly, in dreaming of things that might have been.

"I will say no more," he said to himself. "If I do not take care, I shall end by thinking myself a martyr to the last refuge and consolation of impotent egotism."

At that instant Petit Piepon's keen, pale, Arabian face peered through the door, his great black eyes, that at times had so pathetic a melancholy.



"There's great news. Fighting has begun," and at others such a monkeyish mirth and malice, were sparkling excitedly and gleefully.

"You, Picpon? What is it?"

"My corporal, there is great news. Fighting has begun, the Arabs want a skirmish and Rake has run a spalis through the stomach, that is all. I don't think the man is so much as dead, even. He always does something when he thinks promotion is coming—something to get himself out of its way, do you see? And the reason is this: He's a good friend, and loves you, and he will not be put over your head. 'Me rise afore him?' said he to me once. 'He's a prince, and I'm a mongrel got in a gutter! I owe him more'n I'll ever pay, and I'll kill the general himself afore I'll insult him that way. So say little to him about the spalis.' He loves you well, does your Rake."

"Well, indeed! Good God! What nobility!"

Picpon glanced at him; then with the tact of his nation, glided away and busied himself teaching Flick-Flack to shoulder and present arms, the weapon being a long chibouque stick.

"Is this true, Rake—that you intentionally commit these freaks of misconduct to escape promotion?" Cecil asked of the man when he stood alone with him in his place of confinement.

Rake flushed a little. "Mischief's bred in me, sir; it must come out. It's just bottled up in me like ale. If I didn't take the cork out now and then, I should fly a-piece!"

"But many a time when you have been close on the reward of your splendid gallantry in the field you have frustrated your own fortune and the wishes of your superiors by wantonly proving yourself unfit for the higher grade they were going to raise you to. Why do you do that?"

Rake fidgeted restlessly and, to avoid the awkwardness of the question, replied like a parliamentary orator by a flow of rhetoric.

"They can't help nobly busting out when the fit takes 'em. 'Tain't reasonable to blame 'em for it. They're just made so, like a chestnut's made to bust its pod and a chicken to bust its shell."

"But you wander from my question," said Cecil gently. "Do you avoid promotion?"

"Yes, sir, I do," said Rake, something sulkily, for he felt he was being driven "up a corner." "I do. I ain't not one bit fitter for an officer than a rioting pup is fit to lead them crack packs at home. I should be in a straitwaist-coat if I was promoted. And as for the cross, Lord, sir, that would get me into a world of trouble! I should pawn it for a toos of wine the first day out or give it to the first girl that winked her black eye for it."

Cecil's eyes rested on him with a look that said far more than his answer. "Rake, I know you better than you would let me do if you had your way. My noble fellow, you reject advancement and earn yourself an unjust reputation for malicious conduct because you are too generous to be given a step above mine in the regiment."

"Who's been telling you that trash, sir?" retorted Rake, with ferocity.

"No matter who. It is no trash. It is splendid loyalty of which I am utterly unworthy, and it shall be my care that it is known at the bureau, so that henceforth your great merits may be—"

"Stow that, sir!" cried Rake vehemently. "Stow that if you please! Promoted I won't be—no, not if the emperor himself was to order it and come across here to see it done! A pretty thing surely! Me a officer, and you never a one; me a-commanding of you, and you a-saluting of me! By the Lord, sir, we might as well see the camp scullions a-riding in state and the marshal a-scouring out the soup pots! If you don't let me have my own way and if you do the littlest thing to get me a step, why, sir, I swear as I'm a living being that I'll draw on Chateauray the first time I see him afterwards and slit his throat as I'd slit a jackal's! There, my oath's took!"

And Cecil knew that it was hopeless either to persuade him to his own advantage or to convince him of his disobedience in speaking thus of his supreme before his noncommissioned officer. He was himself, moreover, deeply moved by the man's fidelity.

He stretched his hand out.

"I wish there were more blackguards with hearts like yours. I cannot repay your love, Rake, but I can value it."

Rake put his own hands behind his back.

"God bless you, sir, you've repaid it ten dozen times over. But you shan't do that, sir. I told you long ago I'm too much of a scamp. Some day, perhaps, as I said, when I've settled scores with myself and wiped off all the bad uns with a clear sweep tolerably clean; not afore, sir."

And Rake was so sturdily obstinate not to always carry his point. Meanwhile Picpon's news was correct.

The regiment was ordered out on the march. There was fresh war in the interior, and wherever there was the hottest slaughter there the Black Hawk always flew down with his falcon flock. When Cecil left his incorrigible comrade, the trumpets were sounding an assembly. There were noise, tumult, eagerness, excitement, delighted zest, on every side. A general order was read to the enraptured squadrons. They were to leave the town at the first streak of dawn.

That evening at the Villa Aoussa there gathered a courtly assembly of much higher rank than Algiers can commonly afford, because many of station as lofty as her own had been drawn thither to follow her to what the Princess Corona called her banishment.

There was a variety of distractions to prevent ennui. There were half a dozen clever Paris actors playing that ariest of vaudevilles in the bijou theater beyond the drawing rooms; there were some celebrated Italian singers whom an imperial prince had brought over in his yacht; there was the best music; there was wit as well as homage whispered in her ear. Yet she was not altogether amused; she was a little touched with ennui.

"Those men are very stupid! They have not half the talent of that soldier!" she thought once, turning from a peer of France, an Austrian archduke and a Russian diplomatist.

"Chateauray and his chasseurs have an order to march," a voice was saying that moment behind her chair.

"There is always fighting here, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes. The losses in men are immense, only the journals would get in trouble if they ventured to say so in France. How delicious La Doche is! She comes in again with the next scene."

...a union of fairy and of fury, was flying with the news. Cigarette had seen the flame of war at its height and had danced in the midst of its whitest heat as young children dance to see the fires leap red in the black winter's night. Cigarette loved the battle, the charge, the wild music of bugles, the thunder tramp of battalions, the sirocco sweep of light squadrons.

CHAPTER XII.

THE African day was at its noon.

From the first break of dawn the battle had raged. Now, at midday, it was at its height. Far in the interior, almost at the edge of the great desert, in that terrible season when the air that is flame by day is ice by night and when the scorch of a blazing sun may be followed in an hour by the blinding fury of a snowstorm, the slaughter had gone on hour through hour under a shadowless sky, blue as steel, hard as a sheet of brass. The Arabs had surprised the French encampment where it lay in the center of an arid plain that was called Zaratia. Hovering like a cloud of hawks on the entrance of the Sahara, massed together for one mighty if futile effort, with all their ancient war lust and with a new despair, the tribes who refused the yoke of the alien empire were once again in arms, were once again combined in defense of those limitless kingdoms of drifting sand, of that beloved belt of bare and desolate land so useless to the conqueror, so dear to the nomad.

Circling, sweeping, silently, swiftly, with that rapid spring, that marvelous whirlwind of force, that is of Africa and of Africa alone, the tribes had rushed down in the darkness of night, lightly as a kite rushes through the gloom of the dawn. For once the vigilance of the invader served him naught; for once the Frankish camp was surprised of its guard. While the air was still chilly with the breath of the night, while the first gleam of morning had barely broken through the mists of the east, while the picket fires burned through the dusky gloom and the sentinels and vedettes paced slowly to and fro and circled round, hearing nothing worse than the stealthy tread of the jackal or the muffled flight of a night bird, afar in the south a great dark cloud had risen, darker than the brooding shadows of the earth and sky.

The cloud swept onward, like a mass of cirri, in those shadows shrouded. Fleet as though wind driven, dense as though thunder charged, it moved over the planes. As it grew nearer and nearer it grew grayer, a changing mass of white and black that fused, in the obscurity, into a shadow color, a dense array of men and horses flitting noiselessly like spirits and as though guided alone by one rein and moved alone by one breath and one will; not a bit clamped, not a linen fold loosened, not a shiver of steel was heard. As silently as the winds of the desert sweep up northward over the plains, so they rode now, host upon host of the warriors of the soil.

The outlying vedettes, the advanced sentinels, had scrutinized so long through the night every wavering shade of cloud and moving form of buffalo in the dim distance that their sleepless eyes, strained and aching, failed to distinguish this moving mass that was so like the brown plains and starless sky that it could scarce be told from them.

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Awake while his comrades slept around him, Cecil was stretched half unharnessed. Do what he would, force himself into the fullness of this fierce and hard existence as he might, he could not burn out or banish a thing that had many a time haunted him, but never as it did now—the remembrance of a woman. He almost laughed as he lay there on a pile of rotting straw and wrung the truth out of his own heart that he, a soldier of these exiled squadrons, was mad enough to love that woman whose deep, round eyes had dwelt with such serene pity upon him. Well, it was but one thing more that was added to all that he had of his own will given up. He was dead. He must be content, as the dead must be, to leave the warmth of kisses, the glow of delight, the possession of a woman's loveliness, the homage of men's honor, the gladness of successful desires, to those who still lived in the light he had quitted.

Flick-Flack, coiled asleep in his bosom, thrilled, stirred and growled. He rose and, with the little dog under his arm, looked out from the canvas. He knew that the most vigilant sentry in the service had not the instinct for a foe afar off that Flick-Flack possessed. He gazed keenly southward, the poodle growling on. That cloud so dim, so distant, caught his sight. Was it a moving herd a shifting mist, a shadow play between the night and dawn?

For a moment longer he watched it; then what it was he knew or felt by such strong instinct as makes knowledge, and like the blast of a clarion, his alarm rang over the unarmed and slumbering camp.

An instant, and the live of man, so still, so motionless, broke into violent movement, and from the tents half clothed sleepers poured, awakened and fresh in wakening as hounds. Perfect discipline did the rest. With marvelous, with matchless, swiftness and precision they harnessed and got under arms. They were but 1,500 or so in all—a single squadron of chasseurs, two battalions of zouaves, half a corps of tirailleurs and some Turcos, only a branch of the main body and without artillery. But they were some of the flower of the army of Algiers, and they roused in a second, with the vivacious ferocity of the bounding tiger, with the glad, eager impatience for the slaughter of the unloosed hawk. Yet, rapid in its wondrous celerity as their united action was, it was not so rapid as the downward sweep of the war-cloud that came so near, with the tossing of white draperies and the shine of countless sabers, now growing clearer and clearer out of the darkness till, with the whirl like the noise of an es-



He gazed keenly southward.

gie's wings and a swoop like an eagle's seizure, the Arabs whirled down upon them, met a few yards in advance by the answering charge of the light cavalry.

There was a crash as if rock were hurled upon rock as the chasseurs, scarce seated in the saddle, rushed forward to save the pickets, to encounter the first blind force of the attack and to give the infantry, farther in, more time for harness and defense. Out of the caverns of the night an armed multitude seemed to have suddenly poured. A moment ago they had slept in security; now thousands on thousands, whom they could not number, whom they could but dimly even perceive, were thrown on them in immeasurable hosts, which the encircling cloud of dust served but to render vaster, ghastlier and more majestic. The Arab line stretched out with wings that seemed to extend on and on without end. The line of the chasseurs was not one-half its length; they were but a single squadron flung in their stirrups, scarcely clothed, knowing only that the foe was upon them, caring only that their sword hands were hard on their weapons.

With all the elan of France they launched themselves forward to break the rush of the desert horses. They met with terrible sound, like falling trees, like clashing metal.

The hoofs of the rearing chargers struck each other's breasts, and these bit and tore at each other's manes while their riders reeled down dead. Frank and Arab were blended in one inextricable mass as the charging squadrons encountered. The outer wings of the tribes were spared the shock and swept on to meet the bayonets of zouaves and Turcos. The cavalry was enveloped in the overwhelming numbers of the center, and the ranks seemed to cover the zouaves and tirailleurs as some great settling mist may cover the cattle who move beneath it.

It was not a battle; it was a frightful tangling of men and brutes; no contest of modern warfare, such as commences and conquers by a duel of artillery and sometimes gives the victory to whosoever has the superiority of ordnance, but a conflict, hand to hand, breast to breast, life for life, a Homeric combat of spear and of sword even while the first volleys of the an-

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swearing musketry pealed over the plain.

For once the desert avenged in like that terrible inexhaustibility of supply wherewith the empire so long had crushed it beneath the overwhelming difference of numbers. It was the day of Mazagan once more as the light of the morning broke, gray, silvered, beautiful, in the far, dim distance beyond the tawny seas of reeds. Smoke and sand soon densely rose above the struggle, white, hot, blinding, but out from it the lean, dark Bedouin faces, the snowy haicks, the red burnoose, the gleam of the Tunisian muskets, the dash of silver tilted yataghans, were seen fused in a mass with the brawny naked necks of the zouaves, with the shine of the French bayonets, with the tossing manes and glowing nostrils of the chasseurs' horses, with the torn, stained silk of the raised tricolor, through which the storm of balls flew thick and fast as hail, yet whose folds were never suffered to fall, though again and again the hand that held its staff was cut away or was unloosened in death, yet ever found another to take its charge before the flag could once have trembled in the enemy's sight.

The chasseurs could not charge. They were hemmed in, packed between bodies of horsemen that pressed them together as between iron plates. Now and then they could cut their way through clear enough to reach their comrades of the infantry, but as often as they did so often the overwhelming numbers of the Arabs surged in on them afresh like a flood and closed upon them and drove them back.

Every soldier in the squadron that lived kept his life by sheer breathless, ceaseless, hand to hand sword play, hewing right and left, front and rear, without pause, as in the great tangled forests of the west men hew a side branch and brushwood ere they can force one step forward.

The gleam of dawn spread in one golden glow of morning, and the day rose radiant over the world. They staid not for its beauty or its peace. The carnage went on hour upon hour. Men began to grow drunk with slaughter as with raki.

It was bitter, stifling, cruel work, with their mouths choked with sand, with their throats caked with thirst, with their eyes blind with smoke, cramped as in a vise, scorched with the blaze of powder, covered with blood and with dust, while the steel was thrust through nerve and sinew or the shot plowed through bone and flesh. The answering fire of the zouaves and tirailleurs kept the Arabs farther at bay and moved them faster down, but in the chasseurs' quarter of the field, parted from the rest of their comrades as they had been by the rush of that broken charge with which they had sought to save the camp and arrest the foe, the worst pressure of the attack was felt and the fiercest of the slaughter fell.

The commander of the chasseurs had been shot dead as they had first swept out to encounter the advance of the desert horsemen. One by one the officers had been cut down, singled out by the keen eyes of their enemies and throwing themselves into the deadliest of the carnage with the impetuous self devotion characteristic of their service. At the last there remained but a mere handful out of all the brilliant squadron that had galloped down in the gray of the dawn to meet the whirlwind of Arab fury. At their head was Cecil.

Two horses had been killed under him, and he had thrown himself afresh across un wounded charges whose riders had fallen in the melee and at whose bridle he had caught as he shook himself free of the dead animal's stirrups. His head was uncovered; his uniform, hurriedly thrown on, had been torn aside, and his chest was bare to the red folds of his sash. He was drenched with blood, not his own, that had rained on him as he fought, and his face and his hands were black with smoke and with powder. He could not see a yard in front of him. He could not tell how the day went anywhere save in that corner where his own troop was hemmed in. As fast as they beat the Arabs back and forced themselves some clearer space, so fast the tribes closed in afresh. No orders reached him from the general of brigade in command; except for the well known war shouts of the zouaves that ever and again rang above the din he could not tell whether the French battalions were not cut utterly to pieces under the immense numerical superiority of their foes. All he could see was that every officer of chasseurs was down and that unless he took the vacant place and rallied them together the few score troopers that were still left would scatter, confused and demoralized, as the best soldiers will at times when they can see no chief to follow.

He spurred the horse he had just mounted against the dense crowd opposing him, against the hard, black wall of dust and smoke and steel and savage faces and lean, swartly arched which were all that his eyes could see and that seemed impenetrable as a life, moving and charging at him, while he thrust his sword and his head.