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CHAPTER XVII.

THE MARCH.

The details of the march need not be narrated at length. Our journey lay over scarred and blighted ground and across sandy plains and in and out among circular sand hills—loose, impermanent heaps, which the winds of the desert twist and curve and fling about in their wanton, lonely sport; desolate heaps that hide the bones of the perished traveler and are forever moving their formless lips with a silent, stealthy motion to suck in and overwhelm the living. No man knows the deep treachery of mother earth till he has wrestled with the noiseless forces of the desert.

The pace, however, was brisk, for man and beast were fresh and eager. Indeed it was a perpetual surprise to me how the animals made such progress over the elusive path. The camels, swinging at a steady trot, had much the best of it, for when the hard hoof of the horse sinks and slips the elastic spongy foot of the camel spreads like a web, and he passes as easily and safely over drifting sands as a snowshoer over smothering wreaths. It was then I first understood how truly the camel deserves its title of the ship of the desert, for as ships pass along their liquid way so the camel treads his unstable course over the sandy wastes. Yet the horses, too, had uncommon lightness and skill in making way where every step forward was a half step backward.

To the horsemen the first sensation of a desert ride is as if he were poised on springs of ineffable delicacy, which swayed gently on the slightest pressure. Much of this luxurious ease is due to the yielding track, but something also to the springy motion of the Arab horse. To the saddle nothing whatever is due, since it is merely pieces of the hardest wood roughly nailed and bound with thongs of rawhide. On an English horse and a macadamized road it would reduce a trooper to helplessness in an hour, and indeed with all the suppleness and softness of the true Kohlan Arab saddlery is apt to pain the inexperienced. The Arabs themselves are aware of no discomfort because they are as hard as the wood they bestride.

On the first night we marched steadily till set of moon, then halted for food and rest. I could not half admire the quickness with which the fires were lighted with withered grasses and shrubs, and the good humored alacrity of the cooks in preparing the meal. To be sure it did not call for any elaborate exercise of art, for the rations consisted of nothing daintier than coarse flour, salt and dried dates with some packages of coffee. The cooks took two or three handfuls of flour apiece, poured water on it from a skin and kneaded it into a dirty dough with dirty hands. It would be profane in an Arab cook to have clean hands, and so he keeps them religiously filthy, thus giving those who eat his preparations the benefit of many unsuspected ingredients.

The dough, which was wet perhaps half way to the center, was beaten out into thick cakes, which were laid on the glowing embers and covered with hot ashes. They were left thus till converted into a sodden, sooty paste, then taken out and eaten as hot as they could be swallowed. I nibbled the edge of one, but finding my teeth stick in it I ate a handful of dates, took a drink of water, and then wrapping my burnous close about me threw myself on the ground and slept the sweet sleep of the weary.

It seemed I had not lain five minutes when the kettledrums were beating the reveille. The gray dawn was only beginning to glimmer, but already the camelmen were quarreling with their grunting beasts and our bakers were busy with the glutinous compound they called bread. We hastily swallowed some mouthfuls of it straight off our burning coals, with a few dates and a drink of sooty water apiece, and were off again.

For an hour the air was deliciously cool and refreshing, and the glories of the opening day in the lone wilderness as the sun broke through his circlets of white mist were such as a man beholds with awe and remembers with reverence. But the blazing orb soon turned the dewy freshness to a sweltering, blistering heat that was trying to the strongest temper of men toiling through shifting sands and conical tumuli of volcanic slag. Yet no man complained, only we saw the muffled and streaming faces the oftener turned, and here and there a man gave a low involuntary moan. Save such intermittent moves and the dreary, monotonous sift, sift, sift, of animals' feet in the sand there was not a sound. When the sun mounts his night, desert travelers are apt to fall silent.

Toward noon, when we had almost reached the point of utter dissolution, we gained the crest of a low ridge, whence looking to the northwest we saw what evoked a cry of gladness from nearly every throat in the company. It was an oasis, a tiny spot of green with a clump of trees in the midst, shining like an emerald in a broad dull setting. We knew there was a well there, and Tabal, with the privilege of a guide, suggested we should halt and replenish our water skins. But Abou Kuram assured curtly that we were not yet in need of water; that the time for rest had not come, and that to forced marches men had to think more of speed than of comfort.

There was a general look of disappointment at this speech, which urged Tabal to appeal again and to advance reasons for stopping.

"Were I doing thy counsel, I will tell thee," returned Abou Kuram shortly. "Look thou to the way and leave the rest to me. And methinks thou hadst better mend thy pace."

After this no man durst speak, and keen as was the disappointment there was no murmuring—only the men sat a little more grimly and prodded a little more vicariously with their riding sticks. As we passed, many a man turned with yearning eyes to the verdurous spot, thinking perhaps he should be dead ere another came in sight.

If the foremen had been lost, the afternoon had an atmosphere of living fire. Yet we toiled on, dissolving and open mouthed, and wondering how long we could stand the burning lances of the sun.

I speak of the rank and file. As for Abou Kuram, he seemed to be oblivious of heat or thirst or fatigue. How I envied him! While my mouth was cracking he was evidently as cool and sweet as a ripe pear. Koor Ali, who rode beside me, must have noticed the painful twitching of my lips, for looking in my face with an expression of concern he asked if I was thirsty.

"As dry as a baked brick," I croaked.

Koor Ali's son, Ahmed, a lad about my own age, rode beside us, and on hearing my seven words burst into a fit of laughter.

"What art thou laughing at, Ahmed?" demanded Abou Kuram, turning slightly in his saddle. Ahmed pointed to me.

"The accursed cowback with whom I" he said, "are we are half way over the Gebel?"

I tried to explain but failed; my mouth was as a rusty machine that had not moved for a century.

"Give him thy water skin, Koor Ali," said Abou Kuram, "lest he faint. It were ill to die in the desert," he added, smiling at me.

The water was dingy and beginning to smell badly, but just then a stagnant pool would have been sweet, and I took a huge gulp. Taking another, I held it in my mouth for a minute, then squirted it out, sending it, as if by pure accident, over the sprightly Ahmed.

"By my faith, I like not to be spat on by an infidel," he cried, grasping his spear as if to have at me.

The laugh was now on my side, though I perceived the danger of indulging in it.

"'Twas but an accident," I said apologetically. "Yet it is good and will cool thee."

I tried to propitiate him by handing him his father's water skin to drink, but he disdainfully declined.

"Nay. I am not a babe like thee," he said. "Thou shouldst have brought thy mother with thee," and he tossed his head as if he were safe from the weakness of thirst in a desert land.

Three mortal hours of panting toil and dripping sweat had yet to pass ere Abou Kuram ordered a halt, and then it was but to dismount, swallow a mouthful of dry dates and feel lukewarm water and scramble into the saddle again. Through the broiling afternoon we stewed and gasped and pushed on, fainting, never drawing rein till sundown, when we stopped for prayers and the evening meal. I had scarcely eaten when I was asleep on the sand, and my eyes appeared to have just closed when those abominable drums were beating the order to mount and march again. Words cannot tell how sore and tired I was or how I longed to lie down and be at peace. The feeling was as if some one had pounded my limp and nature was slowly stiffening up again with the joints all out of place and every muscle and ligament stretched beyond endurance. But as the Arabs said nothing of fatigue I would have eat my tongue out rather than complain.

Five days we panted on through scorching sands under a flaming sky, and five nights the bright Arabian moon lighted us on our trackless, hurrying march. By the third day man and beast were showing decided signs of exhaustion. Camels fell and were left to die, sometimes with their burdens on them. The horses lagged with low heads and protruding tongues, and men dropped suddenly from their saddles with strange stertorous noises and lay as senseless as logs. Two went raving mad, one of them succeeding in killing another and himself ere his comrades could overpower him. Hollow graves, which the jackals and hyenas could reopen with a scratch of the paw, were scooped out for the dead and their camels given to others.

The young soldiers shook and looked anxious, for sudden death and unceremonious burial are disconcerting to juvenile nerves. The old sons clinched their teeth, growling that war and the desert were not for children, and Abou Kuram, self possessed, but a trifle grimmer than at starting, spoke roughly about the delays. So the cavalcade toiled wearily on, yearning so fervently for rest that it forgot glory, yet stolidly enduring the harshness of fate that indeed an Arab is a wildcat in vitality, and more than a wildcat in the capacity to bear pain uncomplainingly. We pressed silently ahead, counting the beads of sweat as they rolled down and wondering how many of us the desert would swallow ere we got a chance of taking it out of the enemy.

At last we left the sands for alkaline lands scantily clothed with hard, sour grass and sapless diminutive shrubs, and gradually ascending to a range of mountains that crossed our line of advance north and south. It was somewhere within those ramparts that we expected to find Amood Sinn and his discomfited army. Being now close upon the scene of the late battle, we had to exercise double vigilance, for Yumen Yusel would naturally be on the lookout to prevent aid from reaching the man whom he wished to destroy utterly. Nearly all the cooking was done by day, so that there might be no fires at night to indicate our presence and position, and when we lay down to rest the number of sentinels was increased. But we reached the foothills without molestation and far from sorry that we were likely to be able to pick our selves together before fighting.

As it would be at once extremely dangerous, extremely difficult and tedious to take the whole body of troops to the rendezvous appointed by Amood Sinn, Abou Kuram decided to send Koor Ali forward with an escort to ascertain whether it would not be possible to effect a junction of the two armies outside the mountains. It was near sunset when we arrived at our halting place, and as soon as the moon rose Koor Ali and his little band set forth, Tabal still leading.

According to the guide we might expect them back at the latest by noon next day. Noon came, however, without bringing them. The afternoon wore slowly on, darkness fell, prayers were said and supper was eaten, and still no Koor Ali. Abou Kuram was getting impatient. After a forced march across the desert, it was exasperating to be kept waiting at this stage. The camp lay down to sleep, moon and stars kept their vigil, morning broke and still no tidings of the absent ones. Abou Kuram strutted sullenly about the camp, recalling his stock of Arabian oaths. Noon came again, and again sunset, supper and prayers, yet there was no sign of Koor Ali and his escort.

I am afraid Abou Kuram went through his devotions with a preoccupied, inattentive mind that evening. At any rate the first thing he did after turning his face from Mecca was to pour a flood of objurgations on Amood Sinn, on Koor Ali, on Tabal and all concerned with them. But that did not bring them, and once more the camp lay down to rest. The commander, however, did not lie down. Long after his men were snoring at the sky I watched his dark and solitary figure moving to and fro in angry, uneasy expectancy.

"There shall be a reckoning for this," I heard him mutter once. "Woe betide the man who causeth this delay."

He was still walking about when I fell asleep.

I was enjoying a happy dream, when all at once in the black darkness I was roused by the crackle of firearms and the shrill voices of excited men.

"The enemy, the enemy," they shouted as I sprang up, rubbing my eyes. "The devil on the black horse with 10,000 demons at his back!" And then all along our front there was a momentary line of leaping fire which showed our scurrying men commendably trying to get into fighting order. To our great surprise there came no response to our volley, nor could we hear any movement outside our own lines, though we hearkened with ears that would have heard the stealthy tread of the panther.

"The enemy has run," said some one exultingly. "Our fire has given him fleet feet to make off." And just then, as if in answer to this boast, there was the vicious ping of flying lead in the air, and some of our men dropped screaming to the earth. We delivered another volley blindly into the darkness, then waited for the return fire, but it did not come.

Savage at the double disgrace of being fooled and taken unawares, Abou Kuram ordered a sortie, but the party had not gone 99 yards when a similar shower of bullets fell upon us from the opposite direction. The foe was running round us, peppering us at his will. A second sortie party was instantly sent out, but like the first it came back without making any discovery. Only some said they had seen a terrible apparition on a black horse of gigantic size, and that steed and rider breathed blue flame. So the army stood there, nervously handling its matchlocks and supplicating the protection of the prophet. The prophet was evidently gracious, for there were no more of those ugly surprises that night. The foe, content with a moderate amount of fun, had gone off to chuckle over his success and get up his courage for a big fight.

Abou Kuram knew it was coming. He knew, too, that the enemy, flushed with success, would be exceedingly tough to deal with, and the knowledge incensed him afresh against his ally for being so dilatory. "Thou art more afraid than thy man,' I said. 'They are but common soldiers,' he answered. 'The enemy seeketh not their life, but mine. Peradventure if we go down with thee he will fall upon us by the way and slay me.' Whereupon I, answering, said that forasmuch as no battle could be fought among rocks and gorges they must come down to the plain. If they did not, then would my lord return to Marabel, and Amood Sinn's possessions would go from him and his posterity for ever. And being again sore ashamed he consented to come down and now lieth yonder close by the foot of the mountain awaiting my lord's behest."

Koor Ali and his little band were at last spied emerging from a defile.

"Thou hast done the part of a brave man, Koor Ali," said Abou Kuram, when the recital was at an end. "I was wroth at the delay, and now my anger is kindled against Amood Sinn. Thou hast done right well in taking the cowardly dog by the ear and dragging him to the foot of the mountain. We have been surprised here, and a battle is at hand. Get thee things ready, Koor Ali. We will move to meet Amood Sinn. And now I must go to Mohammed ben Eldad Hassam. He lieth ill at ease in my tent, full of excuses for his brave master and peradventure for himself."

"Yes, it is likely," returned Koor Ali. "My opinion is that he cometh to spy my lord's strength. He will return if thou let him to report to Amood Sinn, and if my lord's army be not enough in their eyes they will betake themselves to the rocks again."

"Two can play at every game," said Abou Kuram significantly, pointing toward his tent.

The warning which Koor Ali had given was well timed, for sure enough, when Mohammed ben Eldad Hassam had washed and eaten and rested and paid Abou Kuram the regulation number of compliments, he proposed that he should get an escort and precede the troops in order that Amood Sinn might be prepared to receive their illustrious general in a fashion becoming his rank. But Abou Kuram had not studied diplomacy for nothing.

"My lord troubleth himself too much," he replied, with an insinuating grace that was wonderful to behold. "We are soldiers and will be satisfied with a soldier's welcome. We are not come hither for feasting and ceremonies, but to destroy Yumen Yusel and his evil ally on the black horse, of whom we have heard so much."

Mohammed ben Eldad turned his eyes to heaven at this, mentally invoking its protection. "Thinkest thou steel or lead will avail upon him?" he asked. "'Tis hard to kill satan."

"If he come in our way, we can but try our weapons upon him," answered Abou Kuram.

"Thou speakest like the valiant man thou art," said the envoy sweetly. "Wherefore I would again crave my lord's permission to return in advance of the troops. My royal master will be sore displeased if he be denied the opportunity of preparing for my lord's reception."

"The good Amood Sinn knoweth we are coming," said Abou Kuram suavely, "and thou needst not fear for his princely beneficence. We do not look for ceremonies with the foe in sight. Besides, see the troops are even now ready to march. It were folly for thee, therefore, to hurry away."

After this Mohammed ben Eldad could not further persist, but his disappointment and chagrin were evident to all. He and his master were committed to the chances of another battle.

(To be Continued.)

FATE'S VICTIM.

The Strange Case of Conductor Sullivan.

"I hardly like to say that I believe in fatalism," said a railroad man, "but from the way fate seems to rule things in the lives of different persons who follow railroading I hardly like to say that I don't believe in it. Take poor Ed Sullivan, for instance. A good many people of this town remember Ed Sullivan, so long the conductor of the swell Tuxedo express on the Erie railway.

"There are conductors who have run on this or that railroad for forty years or more, and who, although they have run hundreds of thousands of miles in all kinds of weather and under many adverse circumstances, and been in scores of bad smash-ups, have never as much as received a scratch in all those years. I know half a dozen such men myself. Then there are others who have railroaded not half so long and have been hoist by half as many perils, and yet to whom a run without a smash-up of some kind might be said to be a memorable exception.

"Now take Ed Sullivan. A better, more careful or thorough railroad man never lived than he was. He had been a good many years in the employ of the Erie before he was put in charge of the Tuxedo express. He hadn't charge of the road long before he was knocked down by a switch engine in the Port Jervis yard. His right leg was broken at the knee, and in such a way that he never recovered the proper use of the leg. He was a freight conductor then, and some time after he was able to resume work his train ran into another train that had stopped ahead of him, the rear end of which hadn't been guarded. A bad smash-up resulted. Ed Sullivan was buried in the wreck, and taken out with another broken leg and a side all smashed in. They thought sure he would never get over those bad hurts, but he did, although he was many weeks doing it.

"When he was well enough he went to work again. One night he discovered that his flagman was missing from his train. He stopped the train and went back to look for the lost man. He hadn't gone a great way in his search when he fell through a bridge to a rocky creek, a distance of twenty feet. This time he was badly hurt about the head and back, and he had two or three ribs broken, but he managed to make his way back to his train. I don't know what the fate of the missing flagman was, but Ed was laid up again for a long time.

"For a year or so after that he slid along without anything out of the common happening to him, and then he was put on the Tuxedo express. Two years ago at Garfield, where the train stopped, Ed was struck by a passing engine and knocked into the ditch. One of his legs was broken, his right shoulder was dislocated, and he was badly cut and bruised about the body. It was a good while before he was in shape to report for duty, and some months ago he was appointed yardmaster at Middletown. His first mishap there was to have several of his fingers taken off while he was helping making up a train. A week or so ago he was run over by a yard engine. This time he did not escape with a few broken bones and cuts and bruises.

"'This is the last one,' he said as he was being carried away.

"And it was. He died a few hours later. A strange fact in connection with his career on the railroad was that he was the only one who was ever hurt when there was an accident on or to his train. Now, why should he, careful and experienced man that he was, have been so persistently a victim to the perils of his calling, while others, twice as long in service as he was and many more times in greater peril, never had as much as a broken skin as a result of their experience on the rail?"—New York Sun.

WHEN I AM DEAD.

When I am dead, my dearest,
Sing no sad songs for me;
Plant thou no roses at my head
Nor shady cypress tree;
Be the green grass above me
With showers and dewdrops wet;
And if thou wilt, remember,
And if thou wilt, forget.

I shall not feel the shadows,
I shall not hear the rain;
I shall not hear the nightingale
Sing on as if in pain;
Dreaming through the twilight
That doth not rise nor set,
Haply I may remember,
And haply may forget.

—Christina Rossetti.

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