

UNDER TWO FLAGS By "OUIDA"

His thoughts drifted back over many varied scenes and changing memories



"I wish I had come straight to you, and"

of his service in Algeria as he lay there at the entrance of the shanty and reddened with the heat of the sun, he moved before him. Hours of reckless, headlong delight, when men grow drunk with bloodshed as with wine; hours of horrible, unaccounted suffering, when the desert thirst had burned in his throat and the jagged lances been broken off at the hilt in his flesh, while above head the carrion birds wheeled, waiting their meal; hours of severe discipline, of relentless routine, of bitter deprivation, of campaigns hard as steel in the endurance they needed, in the miseries they entailed; of military subjection, stern and unbending, a yoke of iron that a personal and pitiless tyranny weighted with persecution that was scarce less than hatred; of an implicit obedience that required every instinct of liberty, every impulse of pride and manhood and freedom to be choked down like crimes and buried as though they had never been; hours of all the chance-fortunes of a soldier's life in hill wars and desert raids passed in memory through his thoughts now where he was stretched, looking dreamily through the film of his ebullient smoke at the city of tents and the couchant forms of camels and the tall, white, slowly moving shapes of the lawless marauders of the sand plains. "Is my life worth more under the French flag than it was under the English?" thought the chasseur, with a certain careless, indifferent irony on himself natural to him. "There I killed time—here I kill men. Which is the better pursuit, I wonder?"

He was more silent and more meditative than seemed in keeping with a wild lion of the chasseur, whose daring outdared all the fire eaters and whose negligent devilry had become a passport all over Africa till "What special exploit has he done today?" became the question put after every skirmish or expedition. But he was much more of a soldier than a thinker at any time, and, instead of following out the problem of the world's uses of its two raw materials, time and men, he found a subject more congenial in the discussion of stable science with the Emir.

The night was some way spent when the talk of wild pigeon blue mares and sorrel stallions closed between the Djed and his guest, and the French soldier, who had been sent hither from the Bureau Arabe with another of his comrades, took his way to the black and white tent prepared for him.

As he opened the folds and entered, his fellow soldier, who was lying on his back with his heels much higher than his head and a short pipe in his teeth, tumbled himself up with a rapid somersault and stood bolt upright. "Beg pardon, sir! I was half asleep."

The chasseur laughed a little.

"Don't talk English. Somebody will hear you one day."

"What's the odds if they do, sir?" responded the other. "It relieves one's feelings a little. All of 'em know I'm English, but never a one of 'em knows what you are. The name you was enrolled by won't really tell 'em nothing. They guess it ain't yours. That cute little chap, Tata, he says to me yesterday, 'You're always a-treating of your corporal like as if he was a prince.' 'Hang me,' says I, 'I'd like to see the prince as would hold a candle to him.' 'There ain't his equal for taking off a beggar's head with a back sweep.'"

The corporal laughed a little again as he tossed himself down on the carpet.

"Well, it's something to have one virtue. But have a care what those chatterboxes get out of you."

"Lord, sir, ain't I been a-taking care those ten years? I've told 'em such a lot of amazing stories about where we been from that they've got half a million different styles to choose out of. Bless you, sir, you may let me alone for bamboozling of anybody!"

With which the speaker dropped on his knees and began to take off the trappings of his fellow soldier with as reverential service as though he were

a lord of the bedchamber serving a Louis Quatorze. The other motioned him gently away.

"No, no; I have told you a thousand times, sir, that we aren't and never will be and don't ought to be," replied the soldier doggedly, drawing off the spurred and dust-covered boots. "A gentleman's a gentleman, let alone what straits he falls into, but ceases to be one as he takes a service he cannot require or claims a superiority he does not possess. We have been fellow soldiers for 12 years."

"So we have, sir, but we are what we always was and always will be—one a gentleman, 'tother a scamp. If you think so be as I've done a good thing side by side with you now and then in the fighting, give me my own way and let me wait on you when I can. I can't do much on it when those other fellows' eyes is on us, but here I can and I will—begging your pardon—so there's an end of it. One may speak plain in this place, with nothing but them Arabs about, and all the army knows, well enough, sir, that if it weren't for that black devil, Chateauroux, you'd have had your officer's commission and your troop, too, long before now."

"Oh, no. There are scores of men in the ranks who merit promotion better far than I do. And—leave the colonel's name alone. He is our chief, whatever else he be."

The words were calm and careless, but they carried a weight with them that was not to be disputed. The other hung his head a little and went on, harnessing his corporal in silence, contenting himself with muttering in his throat that it was true for all that and the whole regiment knew it.

"You are happy enough in Algeria, eh?" asked the one he served as he stretched himself on the skins and carpets and drank down a sherbet that his self-attached attendant had made.

"I, sir? Never was so happy in my life, sir. I'd be discontented, indeed, if I wasn't. Always some spicy bit of fighting. If there aren't a fantasia, as they call it, in the field, there's always somebody to pot in a small way, and if you're lying by in the barracks there's always a scrimmage hot as pepper to be got up with fellows that love the row just as well as you do. It's life; that's what it is. It ain't rusting!"

"Then you prefer the French service?"

"Right and away, sir. But won't there never be no hope, sir?" he whispered, while his voice trembled a little under the long, fierce sweep of his yellow mustaches, "no hope of you ever being again?"

He stopped. He scarcely knew how to phrase the thoughts he was thinking. The other moved with a certain impatience.

"How often must I tell you to forget that I was ever anything except a soldier of France! Forget, as I have forgotten it!"

The audacious, irrepressible Rake, whom nothing could daunt and nothing could awe, looked penitent and ashamed as a chidden spaniel.

"I know, sir. I have tried many a year, but I thought perhaps as how his lordship's death—"

"No life and no death can make any difference to me except the death some day an Arab's lunge will give me, and that is a long time coming."

"Ah, for God's sake, Mr. Cecil, don't talk like this!"

The chasseur gave a short, sharp quiver and started at the name as if a bullet had struck him.

"Never say that again!"

Rake stammered a contrite apology.

"I never have done, sir—not for never a year, but I wrung it out of me like you talking of wanting death in that way."

"Oh, I don't want death," laughed the other, with a low, indifferent laughter that had in it a singular tone of sadness all the while. "I am not sure that I am not better amused in the chasseur than I was in the Household, specially when we are at war. I suppose we must be wild animals at the core, or we should never find such an infinite zest in the death grapple. Good night."

Now, long after his comrade had slept soundly, the Chasseur d'Afrique lay wakeful, letting his memory drift backward to a time that had grown to be to him as a dream, a time when another world than the world of Africa had known him as Bertie Cecil.

CHAPTER IV.

"O—H—H! We are a queer lot, a very queer lot—sweepings of Europe," said Claude de Chanrelon, dashing some vermuth off his golden mustaches where he lay full length on three chairs outside the cafe in the Place du Gouvernement, where the lamps were just lighted.

guardism is burned into daredevilry and turned out as heroism. A fine manufacture that, and one at which France has no equal."

"We have a right to praise the blackguards," growled the general. "Without them our conscripts would be very poor trash. The conscript fights because he has to fight; the blackguard fights because he loves to fight—a great difference that."

The colonel of tirailleurs lifted his eyes—a slight, pale, effeminate, dark-eyed Parisian, who looked scarcely stronger than a hothouse flower, yet who, as many an African chronicler could tell, was as swift as fire, keen as steel, unerring as a leopard's leap, unflinching as an Indian on trail once in the field with his indigènes.

"In proportion as one loves powder one has been a scoundrel, my general," he murmured. "What the catalogue of your crimes must be!"

The tough old campaigner laughed grimly. He took it as a high compliment.

"The cardinal virtues don't send anybody, I guess, into African service. And yet I don't know. What fellows I have known! I have had men among my Zephyrs—and they were the wildest scoundrels, too—that would have ruled the world. I have had more wit, more address, more genius, more devotion, in some headlong scamp of a private soldier than all the courtiers and cabinetiers could furnish. Such lives, such lives too!"

"Faith," laughed Chanrelon, "if we all published our memoirs the world would have a droll book. The real recollections of sergeants that send us to the ranks would be soon found to be—"

"Women," growled the general. "Cards," sighed the colonel. "Absinth," muttered another. "A comedy that was hissed."

"The spleen."

"The dice."

"The roulette."

"The natural desire of humanity to kill and get killed."

"Mordieu!" cried Chanrelon as the voices closed. "All those mischiefs beat the drum and send volunteers to the ranks, sure enough, but the general named the worst. Look at little Cora. The minister of war should give her the cross. She sends us ten times more fire than the conscription does. Five fine fellows joined today because she has stripped them of everything, and they have nothing for it but the service. She is invaluable, Cora. It was Cora d'Acier who was the rage in my time. She ate me up, that woman, in three months. I had not a hundred francs left. She stripped me as bare as a pigeon. Her passion was emeralds—uncut just then. Well, emeralds made an end of me and sent me out here. Cora d'Acier was a wonderful woman, and the chief wonder of her was that she was as ugly as sin. Hello! There is the handsome corporal listening. Ah, Bel-a-faire-pot, you fall too, among the Comra d'Acier ones, I will warrant!"

The chasseur, who was passing, paused and smiled a little as he sat down. "Cecile is the name, monsieur, I fancy."

"Bahi. You beg the question. Did not a woman send you out here, eh?"

"No, monsieur—only chance."

"A fig for your chance! Women are the mischief that casts us adrift to chance."

"Monsieur, we cast ourselves sometimes."

"I doubt that. We should go straight enough if it were not for them."

The chasseur smiled again.

"Monsieur le Vicomte thinks we are sure to be right, then, if for the key to every black story we ask, 'Who was she?'"

"Of course I do. Well, who was she? We are all quoting our tempers to-night. Give me your story, mon brave."

"Monsieur, you have it in the military records as well as my sword could write it."

"Good, good," muttered the listening general. The soldierlike answer pleased him, and he looked attentively at the giver of it.

Chanrelon's brown eyes flashed a bright response.

"And your sword writes in a brave man's fashion—writes what France loves to read. But before you wore your sword here? Tell us of that. It was a romance, wasn't it?"

"If it were, I have folded down the page, monsieur."

"Open it then. Come, what brought you out among us? Out with it!"

"Monsieur, direct obedience is a soldier's duty, but I never heard that inquisitive annoyance was an officer's privilege."

The words were calm, cold, a little languid and a little haughty. The manner of old habit, the instinct of buried pride, spoke in them and disregarded the barrier between a private of chassours and a colonel commandant who was also a noble of France.

Chanrelon flushed scarlet over his frank brow, and an instant's passion gleamed out of his eyes. The next he threw his three chairs down with a crash as he shook his mighty frame like an Alpine bog and bowed with a French grace, with a campaigner's frankness.

"A right rebuke, fairly given and well deserved. I thank you for the lesson." The chasseur looked surprised and moved. In truth he was more touched than he showed. Under the rule of Chateauroux consideration or courtesy had been a thing long unshown to him. Involuntarily, forgetful of rank, he stretched his hand out on the impulse of soldier to soldier, of gentleman to gentleman. Then, as the bitter remembrance of the difference of rank and station between them flashed on his memory, he was raising it proudly, but deferentially, in the salute of a subordinate to his superior, when Chanrelon's grasp closed on it readily.

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