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UNDER TWO FLAGS

By "OUIDA"

CHAPTER XVII.

THUS burdened he made his way for over two leagues. The hurricane never abated, and the blinding dust rose around him in great waves. The horse fell lame. He had to dismount and move slowly and painfully over the loose, heavy soil on foot, raising the drooping head of the lifeless rider. It was bitter, weary, cruel travail, of an intolerable labor, of an intolerable pain. At last he drew near the caravansary where he had been directed to obtain a change of horses. It stood midway in the distance that he had to traverse. The groups in the court paused in their converse and in their occupations and looked in awe at the gray charger with its strange burden and the French chasseur who came so blindly forward like a man feeling his passage through the dark. Cecil moved slowly on into their midst, his hand on the horse's rein. Then a great darkness covered his sight. He swayed to and fro and fell senseless on the gray stone of the paved court. When consciousness returned to him, he was lying on a stone bench in the shadow of the wall, with the copiousness of the fountain water bubbling near and a throng of lean, bronzed, eager faces about him.

Instantly he remembered all. "Where is he?" he asked. They knew that he meant the dead man and answered him in a hushed murmur of many voices. They had placed the body gently down within a darkened chamber.

A shiver passed over him. He stretched his hand out for water that they held to him.

"Saddle me a fresh horse. I have my work to do."

He knew that for no friendship or grief or suffering or self pity might a soldier pause by the wayside while his errand was still undone, his duty unfilled.

He drank the water thirstily; then, reeling slightly from the weakness that was still upon him, he rose, rejecting their offers of aid. "Take me to him," he said simply. "They understood him."

He motioned them all back with his hand and went into the gloom of the chamber alone. Not one among them followed.

When he came forth again, the reckless and riotous soldiers of France turned silently and reverentially away, so that they should not look upon his face, for it was well known throughout the army that no common life had bound together the exiles of England, and the fealty of comrade to comrade was sacred in their sight.

The fresh animal, saddled, was held ready outside the gates. He crossed the court, moving still like a man without sense of what he did. The name that some of the hurrying grooms shouted loudly in their impatience broke through his stupor and reached him. It was that of the woman whom, however madly, he loved with all the

strength of a passion born out of utter hopelessness. He turned to the outrider nearest him.

"You are of the Princess Corona's, suit? What does she do here?"

"Madame travels to see the country and the war."

"The war? This is no place for her. The land is alive with danger, rife with death."

"Miladi travels with the duke, her brother. Miladi does not know what fear is."

"But?"

The remonstrance died on his lips. He stood gazing out from the gloom of the arch at a face close to him, on which the sun shone full, a face unseen for 12 long years and which a moment before laughing and careless in the light changed and grew set and rigid and pale with the pallor of an unutterable horror. Cecil brought his hand to his brow in military salute, passed with the impassiveness of a soldier who passed a gentleman, reached his charger and rode away upon his errand over the brown and level ground.

He had known his brother in that fleeting glance, but he hoped that his brother would see no more in him than a French trooper who bore resemblance by a strange hazard to one long believed to be dead and gone.

The instinct of generosity, the instinct of self sacrifice, moved him now as long ago one fatal night they had moved him to bear the sin of his mother's darling as his own.

Within six and thirty hours the instructions he bore were in the tent of the major whom they were to direct, and he himself returned to the caravansary to fulfill with his own hand the dead those last offices which he would delegate to none.

It was in the coolness and the hush of the night, with the great stars shivering clearly over the darkness of the plains, that they made the single grave under a leaning shelf of rock, with the somber fans of a pine spread above it and nothing near but the sleeping herds of goats. The sullen echo of the soldiers' muskets gave its only funeral requiem.

When all was over, Cecil still remained there alone. Thrown down upon the grave, he never moved an hour after hour went by. To others that lonely and unnoticed tomb would be as nothing—only one among the thousand marks left on the bosom of the violated earth by the ravenous and savage gusts of war—but to him it held all that had bound him to his lost youth, his lost country, his lost peace. Suddenly he started with a thrill of almost superstitious fear as through the silence he heard a name whispered—the name of his childhood, of his past. He sprang to his feet, and as he turned in the moonlight he saw once more his brother's face, pale as the face of the dead and strained with an agonizing dread. Concealment was no longer possible.

Cecil was the first to break the silence. He moved nearer with a rapid

movement, and his hand fell heavily on the other's shoulder.

"Have you lived stainlessly since?"

"God is my witness—just. But you—you—they said that you were dead!"

Cecil's hand fell from his shoulder. There was that in the words which smote him more cruelly than any Arab steel could have done. There was the accent of regret.

"I am dead," he said simply—"dead to the world and you."

He who bore the title of Royalist covered his face.

"How have you lived?" he whispered hoarsely.

"Honorably. Let that suffice. And you?"

"In honor, too, I swear! That was my first disgrace and my last. You bore the weight of my shame! Good God, what can I say? Such nobility, such sacrifice! We believed you were dead. They said so; there seemed every proof, but when I saw you yesterday I knew you—I knew you, though you passed me as a stranger. I staid on here. They told me you would return. God, what agony this day and night have been!"

Cecil was silent still. He knew that this agony had been the dread lest he should be living.

There were many emotions at war in him—scorn, pity and wounded love and pride too proud to sue for a gratitude denied. Long ago he had accepted the weight of an alien crime and borne it as his own. To undo now all that he had done in the past, to fling out to ruin now the one whom he had saved at such a cost, to turn, after 12 years, and forsake the man, all coward though he was, whom he had shielded for so long—this was not possible to him. Though it would be but his own birthright that he would demand, his



"Have you lived stainlessly since?"

own justification that he would establish, it would seem to him like a treacherous and craven thing.

All seemed uttered, without words, by their gaze at each other. He could not speak with tenderness to this craven who had been false to the fair repute of his name, and he would not speak with harshness. The younger man stood half stupefied, half mad—dead.

"Bertie, Bertie!" he stammered. "On my soul I never doubted that the story of your death was true. No one did. If I had known you lived, I would have said that you were innocent. I would. I would have told them how I forged your friend's name and your own when I was so desperate that I hardly knew what I did. But they said that you were killed, and I thought then—then—it was not worth while. It would have broken my father's heart. God help me! I was a coward! I am in your power—utterly in your power," he moaned in his fear. "I stand in your place. I bear your title. You know that our father and our brother are dead? All that I have inherited is yours. Do you know that, since you have never claimed it?"

"I know it."

"And you have never come forward to take your rights?"

"What I did not do to clear my own honor I was not likely to do merely to hold a title."

"But, great heaven, this life of yours? It must be wretchedness."

"Perhaps. It has at least no disgrace in it."

The reply had the only sternness of contempt that he had suffered himself to show. It stung down to his listener's soul.

"No, no!" he murmured. "You are happier than I. You have no remorse to bear. And yet—to tell the world that I am guilty!"

"You need never tell it. I shall not."

He spoke quite quietly, quite patiently. Yet he well knew and had well weighed all the surrender in that promise—the promise to condemn himself to a barren and hopeless fate forever.

"Let us part now and forever. Leave Algeria at once. That is all I ask."

Then, without another word that could add reproach or seek for gratitude, he turned and went away over the great, dim level of the African waste, while the man whom he had saved sat as in stupor, gazing at the brown shadows, and the sleeping herds, and the falling stars that ran across the sky, and doubting whether the voice he had heard and the face upon which he had looked were not the victims of a waking dream.

CHAPTER XVIII.

HOW that night was spent Cecil could never recall in full. Vague memories remained with him of wandering over the shadowy country, of seeking by bodily fatigue to kill the thoughts rising in him. The full consciousness of all that he had surrendered in yielding up afresh his heritage rolled in on his memory like the wave of some heavy

(To be continued)

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