

"I thought thou knewest the way," said Selif, "and would not bring us into the desert to perish.

"Alas," returned Hhareth, "I thought only of following thy master and mine. But now I think the fountains of Hira lie yonder a little to the south. If we can reach them we find water and rest, and we will still be on the way to Saba. Moreover, would not Zohair go thither, too?"

The troop was now spread out across the country, the men riding abreast, about a hundred paces apart, each instructed to watch for the first appearance of palm trees, and, on seeing them to signal his neighbors, who were to repeat the signal, when the troop would close in upon the man who should give the welcome intelligence. For an hour and more the horses galloped on, the foam flying from their necks. The dim copper-colored sun gleamed a baleful light upon the white and glittering sand; the heat shimmered and trembled over the shadeless landscape, and beat upon weary man and fainting steed; even the scant shade of a mimosa bush would have been welcome in that dreadful hour, but not so much was to be seen within all the wide horizon; false, fleeting mirages, like lovely lakes, gleamed before the eyes of the fainting men, but still no longed-for palm tree came in sight. Despair began to settle down upon the scattered company; the horses, over-tasked, began to stagger and reel, and the best of them could not be urged to continue the trying speed. It seemed that the little band would certainly leave their bones in the desert, when a faint but joyous shout was heard on the right of the line. It came like a pardon to a condemned criminal, and the despairing men roused themselves to a renewed effort. Even the horses seemed to understand the cry, and gathered themselves for still another exertion. It was true, the palm trees were there, and all knew that bright, clear, cool and sparkling water flowed at their roots. Up, up, above the arid waste of sand the trees rose. Nearer and nearer they came, though slowly. Another half hour, would bring the thirsty riders to their welcome shade and the welcomer water, when suddenly Selif reined in his horse, silently pointing toward the cluster of trees. The nearest men looked more intently, and turned to each other with a look of dismay.

The little green spot in the desert swarmed with armed men.

Few words were spoken. "If we turn back to the desert," said Selif, "we die. If we go on we can but die. It is better to die on the spears of our foes than to sink down like dogs and be devoured by vultures or beasts of prey."

They rode on then more slowly and in silence. As they approached the oasis, they saw that the throng was an immense one. Men with spears were there in thousands; horses, camels, and elephants were there, chariots stood in ranks out in the sun; tents of rich stuffs and gaudy hues were pitched beneath the trees, and busy throngs of men were hurrying to and fro. When our little band reached the busy scene an officer approached Selif, demanding, "Whom art thou?"

"We are men dying of thirst," said the Captain. "Let us drink, then will we tell thee the whom we are and whence we come."

It would indeed have been a difficult matter to keep the party back, for the horses scenting the water, pushed on madly to the little stream, and plunged into it, while the riders throwing themselves upon the ground alongside their animals shared with them the grateful draught.