

ALEE THE SIX-FINGERED.*

A TALE OF WESTERN BARRARY.

CHAPTER III.

"WILLST the Sultan was contriving Alee's destruction, the robber's famous horse, on which he had often escaped from justice, died from over exertion, after saving his master's life while hotly pursued by a troop of cavalry. Now there was an Arab sheikh who governed a camp in the neighbourhood of Aleassar, and who, amongst much rare and precious property, possessed a mare of marvellous powers. Her swiftness was that of the east wind, and by the most true God, I swear she was a thorough-bred defeater*. Her dam it is said, had surpassed in beauty and speed all the horses in the world. Her sire, it was firmly believed, was the famous stallion of the sea, called Moha al Bahr.† No sooner did Alee, now without a horse—hear of the famous mare, than he coveted this most precious of the rich sheikh's goods, and vowed that he would have her by fair means or by foul.

"It happened that in one of his marauding expeditions, a follower of this very sheikh fell into the hands of Alee. A free passage was promised to this man, on condition of his carrying faithfully a message to his master, touching the mare. This message was couched in extremely polite but rather decisive terms; to the effect that, at an appointed time and place, he, the sheikh, would be pleased to send the mare; adding that this was suggested to save both the sheikh and himself much trouble, and, it might be, some bloodshed; for were not the mare sent as directed, he should forthwith take her by force, and no power, if so it pleased God, should hinder him. He then dismissed the man unharmed, but with a dreadful threat of vengeance if he did not fulfil his mission faithfully.

"The poor envoy soon found cause to rue his having undertaken this office; for on presenting himself to the sheikh and delivering Alee's mes-

sage, he was ordered to receive instantly one hundred stripes of the dreadful staly* for his barefaced impudence. This was all the attention shown to the robber's demand and threat. Well indeed might the haughty sheikh regard it lightly for this mare of all mares was picketed every night in front of his own tent, and in the centre of the door, around which prowled packs of hungry dogs, watchful as the moon, and who, with little provocation would make a meal of any stranger who trespassed on their domain after dusk.

"It was on a dreary day in the month of January, while fierce wind and torrents of rain raged from the heavens, that a man in the dress of a courier, his hooded galeb tucked up and girded round his loins, his feet clothed in a pair of stout sandals, a small dagger stuck in his girdle, and a palmetto basket slung over his shoulder for a hudget, was seen making hasty way on the high road to Aleassar Kibeer, and not till between the *Mood Aloolee* and the *Sebbah*‡ did he deviate from the main track and take the direction of a camp of the *Odal Ensair*§ thence some half-hour's distance. The gloomy eve turned to a black night, while a sea of the heaviest rain fell pelting from above.

"The disguised courier, for it was no other than Alee himself, halted as he neared the camp, and finding all quiet except now and then the howl of a dog, he planned his approach; and now on hands and feet advanced cautiously towards the pen where the sheep were kept, in the eye of the wind, for fear the hungry hounds should snuff him. Snatching a 'father of wool'§ out of the pen he squeezed him in his grasp, and retraced his steps some fifty yards; then drawing his dagger sacrificed the mutton in the name of God, and making a prayer for his success, proceeded to cut up the mutton into some fifty bits.

"Taking these in the skirts of his galeb, he moved on some few yards and listened; all was

* The Moors' epithet for a horse that defeats the rider by the speed with which it rushes through the air.

† There is a Moorish legend telling of such an animal on the coast of Arabia, where it is supposed the finest Arabs are bred.

* The usual Moorish scourge, so called as being made of strips of Taislet leather.

‡ Between two and five o'clock in the evening.

§ The sons of eagles.

§ *Alee Souf*, or a sheep.