



"The desert is calling, but you must not listen. Go! And the blessing of Allah go with you!"

HER WORD OF HONOUR

A British Woman's Pluck Amongst the Bedouins

By S. KIRKLAND VESEY

COLIN MACNAB sat on an old sack in the mud and bush but which had been hastily erected for him when the army was brought to a standstill by floods in front and a sand-storm behind. It was still daylight, and he was endeavouring to study a dirty map, but was continually interrupted by the sand which swept in at every nook and corner and whirled about in mad career. Some one fumbled at the canvas which had been stretched across the opening, and in a moment Colin was on his feet and his hand instinctively sought his revolver, but it was a Highland soldier who entered.

"What is it, Mac?" asked Colin. In times of peace the man had been a gamekeeper in the MacNab family and Colin knew him well.

"There's a wumman i' the camp, an' we canna mak oot what she's wantin'," replied the soldier.

"Bring her here," Colin commanded sharply. Mac turned to go, but family feeling overcame discipline and he came back a step or two.

"Maister Colin," he whispered, "tak oot yer revolver for A've niver seen sic a mighty big wumman among them Arab folk an' A'dout she's a mon." Colin smiled and nodded; he had not the heart to rebuke the man. Then he sighed.

Colin MacNab was a soldier to the core and came of old Highland fighting stock. He had lived among soldiers all his life; in his infancy, his father had been quartered in places where the child could remain with his parents, and later on, when they were abroad, he spent his holidays with some military uncle or cousin in a garrison town. He was over thirty now and had been some dozen years in the army, having seen service both in India and Africa, and when the Great War broke out, he had been among the "first for the Front." He had come through the terrible retreat and the Battle of the Marne without hurt, he had faced all the horrors of a winter campaign, and on more than one occasion he had proved himself an exceptionally efficient officer with a remarkable knowledge and talent for languages. In consequence of this, he had been appointed to an important post in the Expeditionary Force sent to Mesopotamia. And now that force was slowly pushing its way across the golden desert, enduring tortures of thirst under the blazing sun on the sandy waste, alternating with miseries of cold from rain and wind. Every variety of disease had thinned its ranks, while the horrible Bagdad boil had already marred more than one comely British face, but they struggled on, and things seemed going unusually well, for the Turks had been driven back and Bagdad—their goal—was almost in sight.

Then, apparently out of the earth, there had suddenly arisen a mighty host of desert Bedouins led by a chief who was famed for his courage, wisdom, and success. They were tall, lithe men, these Bedouins, swift of foot, and

matchless on horseback. They would suddenly appear, attack with appalling ferocity, and as suddenly vanish, leaving no trace; they knew their desert, and knew it in all its moods. Modern warfare or scientific tactics were powerless against such a foe; and this was just the sort of night which the Bedouins would choose for an attack. Perhaps the woman meant—

Colin sighed again and wondered if there had ever been a time when he had sat down in peace without death on one side and suspicion on the other.

His reflections were interrupted by the return of Mac with another soldier, leading the woman between them. She was dressed in the dark blue robes often worn by the Bedouin women and was closely veiled. Colin smiled as he thought of his subordinate's caution; she certainly was very much taller than the ordinary Arab woman.

"What do you want?" he asked in Arabic.

The woman started, but quickly recovered herself and replied in the same tongue, "To speak with you alone."

At a word from Colin the soldiers left them, Mac moving reluctantly, and making as many cautionary signs as he dared.

"I didn't know it was you," whispered the woman in English, uncovering her face.

"Heather!" Colin stood gazing at her, too amazed to move.

"Yes, it is I," she said. "But never mind that; there isn't a moment to spare. Go to your commanding officer, and tell him to advance the instant the sand-storm abates. He must march straight on Bagdad. There is a moon now. Go! Go!" She pushed him toward the entrance, but he held back.

"I don't understand," he said, turning round. "What are you doing here, and who gave you this message?"

"Never mind," she said again. "Tell him to do this and all will be well with you."

"But we can't march; there are floods in front of us, and we are surrounded by Bedouins."

"The straight road to Bagdad avoids the floods, and the Bedouins are going back to their pastoral life to-night."

"But, Heather, how do you know? You must tell me."

"I cannot tell you, but I swear to you that it is true, and if you will do as I ask, the army will be saved, and Bagdad taken almost without a struggle. Now, go! And let me go, too." She gathered her draperies around her, but Colin seized her wrist.

"Heather!" he said almost fiercely. "You must tell me how you know this and what you are doing here?" She was silent.

"I can't take this absurd yarn to Headquarters," he broke out. "You must come with me and tell the General yourself." Her draperies fell once more and a look of fear came into her face.

"I cannot do that; but if I tell you from whom I come,

will you go to your general?" she asked, and her voice was beseeching.

"Yes, if you come with me," Colin answered doggedly. The woman thought for a moment, and then said firmly:

"I come with this message from Ali Ibn Sud."

"Ali Ibn Sud!" thundered Colin; then, recollecting himself, he lowered his voice.

"Do you mean the Bedouin chief?"

"Yes, I do. Now go, and let me go, also."

"Back to him?" Colin's face darkened, and his hand on her wrist tightened.

"Yes," she answered simply, "back to him." And breaking away, she started for the door. But the man caught and held her fast.

"Heather, my love, my darling! You sha'n't go back! You can't! You shall not go! You must stay with me! Now that I have found you again, I will not let you go. I love you more than ever. Can't you care for me, again?"

"Colin, leave me. I've stayed too long already."

"You shall not go! Have you quite ceased to love me? Look in my face and tell me so." No, you can't, you can't! You shall not go!" and he kissed her passionately. For an instant she lay quite still in his arms, then very gently freed herself and spoke quite calmly.

"No, Colin, it cannot be. All is over between us forever. I must go back, for I am Ali Ibn Sud's fiancée. We are to be married to-morrow."

"Married to-morrow!" he exclaimed vehemently. "To that heathen savage?"

"He is not a heathen savage," Heather said quietly. "He is nearly as civilized as we are. He spent six years in Europe, travelling about. He is quite educated, and he's been very, very good to me since I was—I mean since I have been here," she ended rather incoherently.

"You mean—" and Colin looked at her intently.

"I mean that since I have known him he has treated me as any English gentleman would, and much better than some." There was a bitter pride in her tone. Colin moved impetuously to her side and put his arm round her again.

"Then, Heather, my own, why can't you stay with me? We could be married at once, and then you could come with the army to Bagdad or—" He spoke quickly, but she moved away and said very gravely, "Colin, do you realize that the fate of the whole army lies in your hand, and that you are wasting time when every moment is precious? You used to be a soldier before all things. Now, farewell!" She covered her face and glided to the entrance, but he was too quick for her.

"I regret, Miss Melville, but if you are so obstinate, I must put you under arrest."

"For God's sake, let me go." She swayed as she spoke, but he paid no heed.

"Bring this woman to Headquarters in five minutes," he said sharply to the two soldiers who were standing outside in the shelter of a neighbouring hut, "and see that she does not escape." Then he struggled out against the storm and made his way to the General. The General listened to the story with ever growing wonderment.

"She is Sir Peter Melville's daughter, you say?" he enquired, when Colin ceased speaking. "And you know her well?"

"Yes, sir, I have known her for a good many years." Colin hesitated. "Indeed, sir," he went on, "we were engaged, but she broke it off before the War, and the last I heard of her was that she had gone to South America. She was always of a roving disposition and fond of travelling, and now that both her parents are dead, there is nothing to keep her at home."

"She must not be allowed to go back," said the General, sternly, then added indulgently, "Young women often take these wild fancies for Arab Sheiks and such things when they know nothing about them, but it will soon wear off." He looked rather keenly at the younger man. Colin coloured, and an angry light came into his eyes, but he restrained himself sufficiently to say:

"I don't think Heath—I mean Miss Melville—would have any delusions of that kind. She has been a great deal in the East with her father, and then she knows Arabic quite well. That's why I can't understand it."

"Oh!" said the General. After a pause he added, "However, the real question is, are we to believe her message or not?"

"I am sure she would not have come unless she believed it to be true," Colin answered.

"No doubt! But she is a tool. German intrigue, you know."

"Yes," muttered Colin, almost sorrowfully.

"Well, I'd better see her," said the General. "You will leave us alone. I may be able to gain her confidence." He straightened his coat and cocked his cap on one side. "Fetch her in."

Colin went out and nearly collided with Mac, who was hurrying toward the tent. "Losh, Maister Colin, yon wumman's awa. She's gien us a' the slip," he gasped.

"Damned fool!" ejaculated Colin.

And the General added something even stronger when he heard.

WHEN Colin had left the hut, Heather looked round for some means of escape, but escape seemed impossible, for the soldiers never took their eyes off her for a moment.

"Say, Mac, this heathen Chinese ain't no woman," said the soldier, looking expectantly at Mac, who paid not the slightest attention. "Somethink more 'ere nor meets the naked eye." But finding his conversational efforts a failure, he lapsed into silence.

"It's time tae gang," Mac spoke in sepulchral tones.

"Come on, then, my 'earty," said the other, and he would have chucked Heather under the chin if Mac had not prevented him.

"Dev ye no mind what the Colonel said tae ye aboot the weemen," said that worthy sternly.

"Come on, then, 'leetle meenister," and finish your sermon on the way," replied the other irrepressibly, and they started, with Heather between them.

"What's that?" The party paused.

"It's a caat," said Mac.

"No fear!" answered the soldier, and for an instant both men turned to peer through the sand-storm at the mysterious object. Then Heather felt an iron grasp on her arm, and she was hurried forward she knew not where. She dared not turn round, and if she had, she could not have distinguished anything, for the sand-storm was blowing with renewed fury. At last her captor paused in the shelter of a rock.

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