

# A DESERT MEETING



L IKE all men who lead a solitary life, Robert Kingston had his bad times. Days when he remembered his family at home, days when he thought of his Oxford friends and wondered what they were doing; days, again, when he thought of neither of these things, but merely felt a dull aching void, a need of something he could not define. "It is the cry of the man for the womanfolk," his servant said gravely to him one of these days; and had been sorely beaten for his remark.

So to-day Abdullah rode at a discreet distance behind his lord and said nothing; but he had beaten his son, who had acted as cook-bottle-washer to the little party, and he only awaited the passing of his master's mood to cheer the way with one of his interminable day-long stories of devils and men and the magic of the desert.

Robert Kingston was returning from a year's solitude in the desert lands west of Khartoum, where he had been engaged on government survey, and he looked in a week's time to the mild dissipation of Khartoum.

He looked round with the languid gaze of the tired man. Before him stretching away to the hills on the horizon were soft waves of sand desert shimmering in the morning sun. Behind him the same landscape stretched back to the tiny black dots which proclaimed the oasis from which he had started that morning. To the left desert with hills some five miles away, and to the right again a drear waste of sand in the same soft rolling contours.

An exclamation from Abdullah made him turn sharply to see the man's arm stretched out towards the western hills.

"What is it, Abdullah?" he asked.

"A camel, master, and—by Allah—a woman!"

"Nonsense," laughed Robert. "What would a woman be doing here?" But he pulled nervously at the strap of his field-glasses. In another moment was revealed to him the astonishing sight of a woman urging a racing camel down the steep rock-strewn slope of the hills. It was too far away to see her face, but she sat her mount superbly, and her dress showed her to be unmistakably a European. "Shout, Abdullah," he ordered, and Abdullah's ear-splitting yell was seen to reach the woman, who waved a white handkerchief and fell to lashing her camel with fury.

A score of times the two riders were hidden from one another, but at last Kingston pulled up on the crest of a wave and the unknown rode up to his side. She was undeniably tired, he observed, and her face looked pinched, while her eyes blazed like glowing coals.

Kingston was a little at a loss. A solitary life does not quicken one's speech in dealing with social matters. He raised his hat conventionally. "Good morning! Very warm day, isn't it?" was the best he could manage as she came within bowing distance.

"Thank God! Oh, thank God! An Englishman," and with that she broke down, and covering her face with her hands, she sobbed as if her heart would break.

"Here, I say," he remonstrated, groping in his pockets.

She pulled herself together with marvellous rapidity. "We must be getting on," she said. "They will be on our heels in a minute."

"Who?" asked Kingston, mystified.

"Why—oh, of course, you don't know," she said with the ghost of a smile. "I am being followed by men on camels—Bedouins, I think. All night they have been behind me."

Kingston looked up sharply, and as he did so a solitary figure silhouetted sharp against the brilliant sky, topped the rise of the hills over which the girl had ridden, and seeing the little group, had halted and waved to his companions behind.

"My father is Colonel Baker, the Egyptologist," she explained. "We started from Khartoum a week ago to visit the site of some ruins. He arrived at the spot and camped about half a mile away. Father went off to his excavations with two of the men, and one was preparing supper. I strolled away to the top of a little hill near at hand to see the vine and to keep an eye on the cook from a distance. Suddenly I heard shouts and yells, and, to my horror, I saw a band of Arabs break out from behind them. My father fired at them as they came, but he was overpowered in a second. Said, the cook, with wonderful presence of mind, cut loose

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the camels and stampeded them as the men were rushing across from the ruins to the camp. They must have hidden their own camels some distance off. Said mounted one camel and yelled, 'I go for soldier, missis. You ride east, too,' but they shot him as he went. I managed to catch my camel, and as I rode I saw the Arabs dashing away for their own mounts. Since then—it is six hours ago—they have been following me. Oh, what shall we do?"

"We'll just have to go on together, that's all," said Kingston, cheerfully.

"I'm afraid my camel won't last much longer," she said, nervously. "See, he's beginning to fail, poor brute."

"No matter," he said in his quiet matter-of-fact way. "Jezebel is quite fresh, and she will carry two as easily as one. Camels are my one luxury here, and I fancy I've got the best in the Soudan."

They had now come to the crest of a rise, and he looked around. A cluster of little figures were riding fast down the distant hills, and as he closed his glasses he laughed grimly. "Fifteen, at least, and there may be more. Too long odds for us. We'll have to run for it. What about Abdullah? Ah, there he is."

Abdullah, the strategist, and his son had withdrawn to one of the hollows, and were lying watching with considerable interest the approach of his master and the strange girl.

"I come with you, master?" asked Abdullah.

"Yes," said Kingston sternly. Then to the son—a smart lad of sixteen—"Those men bad men. We ride north and they follow us. When they have gone out of sight you take camels and ride to the police post at Argeh. Give this to the officer there," and as he spoke he scribbled a note. "Pursued by twenty Bedouin Arabs. Send help.—KINGSTON."

"All right, master," said the lad, grinning. "I ride like hell. I have baggage camel. It too slow."

"Very good," said Kingston shortly. "Buck up when you do start."

The pursuing Bedouins on seeing this change of course also altered their direction and made as if to cut them off.

They rode side by side in silence for a time before the girl spoke. "What will become of my father?" she asked.

"Since they didn't kill him at once, they will probably hold him with the idea of ransom," he said to cheer her up, though in his heart he knew quite well that the object of the attack was not ransom but slavery.

"My father has always taken me about with him on his expeditions this year, and I am quite an expert camel rider," she said brightly.

"How long can you last?" he said bluntly.

"Longer than my poor beast," she said, and even as she spoke the camel crossed its legs and pitched forward, to lie kicking feebly with a broken leg. As it fell, Kingston reached out, caught her by the waist and dragged her with a tremendous effort on to the peak of his saddle.

"No good wasting time," he said grimly, as she gazed at the fallen beast.

"But we can't leave it here to die," she said with a sob in her voice.

"Abdullah has a rifle. He will put the poor brute out of its pain," he said gently, and once more he urged his mount into its long loping gallop.

Once more silence fell upon them. Sybil apparently was content to rest with his strong arm round her and to trust herself to the care of this brown lean-faced man who had so suddenly come into her life. Kingston, too, was at rest. Curiously, the immediate danger troubled him but little. A queer satisfaction was spreading over his soul like a shower over thirsty land. The touch of this girl's hand on his shoulder as she steadied herself gave him a sense of happiness such as he had never felt in all these long lonely years. The boy in him, so long dormant, awoke and he laughed gaily.

For an hour they rode in silence, each immersed in thought; but his thoughts outstripped his judgment, and when he was dreaming of an English cottage with honeysuckle and roses and a wife—he pulled himself together and dashed into conversation for a tonic.

"My idea is to get those hills ahead of us a few miles. On the other side there is an oasis, where my escort should be waiting for me to-night."

She cried out in delight. "Then we are saved in another hour's time!"

"An hour," laughed Kingston. "How far do you suppose those hills are away?"

"Ten miles at the outside," she answered.

"Nearer thirty," he laughed. "Desert distances are deceptive."

"But won't they cut us off before then?"

"Depends on their camels. Jezebel is fresh, and so is Abdullah's camel, but theirs may be as tired as yours was. If we can't get there before them we'll just have to edge away to the west and make the best of it until young Said can get help from the police post. At the west we have rifles, and we can put up a very pretty fight for it."

"But why risk our lives if their object is merely ransom? My father is a rich man and can pay."

"I'm afraid I misled you at first," said Kingston, gravely. "It is more probable that they are a band of slave raiders from the interior who have been carrying off natives for sale in Moorish territory. I was warned of them, but I thought they had been headed off by the Camel Corps who are out after them."

"Slaves?" she asked, with distended pupils. "Oh, thank God, I met you. If I had been taken!" and she shuddered piteously. "Swear that they shan't take me alive."

"You shall not be taken alive," he said gravely.

After a pause. "Jezebel could do it alone quite easily," she remarked. "It's I who am keeping her back. Let me get down."

"Don't talk like a fool," was his gruff reply.

"Let me get down and hide till they have passed," she persisted, stirring in his arm. "Both of us need not be sacrificed. I will get down," and she made a resolute effort to free herself.

He was obliged to drop his chain to restrain her. She fought unavailingly for a short time, but his arms closed round her like a vice.

"Do you think I'll lose you now I have found you?" he said, and she looked into a pair of fierce eyes in which she saw that which caused all her resolution to melt in a flush of colour which dyed her face and even the tips of her ears to a glorious rose.

Kingston himself was surprised. What was this stray girl to him whom he had found but an hour ago?

The hills were perfectly clear ahead now, and they could see the countless holes in the upper faces where the workers for thousands of years ago had delved for gold. But Jezebel was no longer the camel she had been. The four hours' gallop with a double load had tired her, and Kingston could feel that little sinking between the strides which tells the experienced rider that the end of endurance is beginning.

"I know cave," said Abdullah eagerly. "We camp there long time ago. I lead."

"Good man, Abdullah," said Kingston, as the fellow forged ahead. "He knows these hills like a book, and he will fight like a lion for me."

As they reached the foot of the hills, Kingston pulled up abruptly and took his carbine and cartridges from the sling. She looked at him questioningly.

"All right," he laughed. "I'm going to try a little rifle practice from here until you are safe in the cave. Then Abdullah will cover my retreat."

The pursuers were quite clearly visible now, lashing their tired camels furiously as they saw they had brought their quarry to bay.

Kingston ran up his sights to seven hundred yards and fired a careful shot.

A long puff of dust and the whistle of a ricochet rewarded his efforts. "Refraction," he muttered.

Another shot into the bunch of the pursuers brought down a camel with a run and sent its rider flying a fluttering mass of white twenty yards ahead of his beast. A third shot, as the bunch was scattering, sent a man toppling from his mount, and the band halted. Once more the carbine barked, bringing yet another man to earth, and at a wave from their leader the Bedouins galloped into a little hollow when they were free of his fire, and evidently consulted as to what should be done with this Englishman who shot so well. Kingston glanced upwards to see the flutter of a handkerchief as the girl and Abdullah reached the ledge on which was the cave; and he smiled as Abdullah lay down in the calm style of an old campaigner to cover his retreat.

As he turned to climb, a head showed itself above the saucer in which their pursuers lay, and a moment later a bullet sang through the air and powdered the sandstone face of the cliff above his head. Evidently there were two sides to the question, he thought, he ran up the slope.

Abdullah's rifle spoke, but without effect, and soon he was climbing amid a perfect storm of bullets, one of which struck him as he was about to throw himself panting at the cave's mouth.

He staggered and would have fallen backwards