

# UNDER TWO FLAGS

By "QUIDA"

He carves in ivory. I suppose he has a good sale for those things with you?"

The Moor looked up in amazement.

"In ivory, madame? He? Allah! Allah! I never heard of it. It is strange."

"Very strange. Doubtless you would have given him a good price for them?"

"Surely I would; any price he should have wished. Do I not owe him my life?"

At that moment little Musjid let fall a valuable coffee tray inlaid with amber. The noise startled Cecil, and his eyes unclosed to all the dreamy fantastic colors of the place and met those bent on him in musing pity—saw that lustrous, haughty, delicate head bending slightly down through the many colored shadows.

He thought he was dreaming, yet on instinct he rose, staggering slightly, for sharp pain was still darting through his head and temples.

"Madame, pardon me. Was I sleeping?"

"You were—and rest again. You look ill," she said gently. And there was for a moment less of that accent in her voice which the night before had marked so distinctly, so pointedly, the line of demarcation between a princess of Spain and a soldier of Africa.

"I thank you, I am all right."

"I fear that is scarcely true," she answered him. "You look in pain, though as a soldier perhaps you will not own it."

"A headache from the sun, no more, madame."

"That is quite bad enough. Your service must be severe?"

"In Africa, miladi, one cannot expect indulgence."

"I suppose not. You have served long?"

"Twelve years, madame."

"And your name?"

"Louis Victor." She fancied there was a slight abruptness in the reply, as though he were about to add some other name, and checked herself. She entered it in the little book from which she had taken her bank notes.

"I may be able to serve you," she said as she wrote. "I will speak of you to the marshal, and when I return to Paris I may have an opportunity to bring your name before the emperor."

The color flushed his forehead.

"You do me much honor," he said rapidly, "but if you would grant me, madame, do not seek to do anything of the kind."

"And why? Do not you even desire the cross?"

"I desire nothing, except to be forgotten."

She regarded him with much surprise, with some slight sense of annoyance. She had bent far in tending her influence at the French court to a private soldier, and his rejection of it seemed as ungracious as it was inexplicable. At that moment the Moor joined them.

"Miladi has told me, M. Victor, that you are a first rate carver of ivories. How is it that you have never let me

benefit by your art?"

"My things are not worth a sou," muttered Cecil hurriedly.

"You do them great injustice and yourself also," said the grande dame more coldly than she had before spoken. "Your carvings are singularly perfect and should bring you considerable returns."

"Why have you never shown them to me at least?" pursued Ben Arsil. "Why not have given me my option?"

The blood flushed Cecil's face again. He turned to the princess.

"I withheld them, madame, not because he would have underpriced but overpriced them. He rates a trifling act of mine of long ago so unduly."

Ben Arsil stroked his great beard, more moved than his Moslem dignity would show.

"Always so," he muttered, "always so. My son, in some life before this was not generosity your ruin?"

"Miladi was about to purchase that lamp?" asked Cecil, avoiding the question. "Her highness will not find anything like it in all Algiers. May I bear it to your carriage, madame?" he asked as she moved to leave, having made it her own, while her footman carried out smaller articles. She bowed in silence. She was very exclusive; she was not wholly satisfied with herself for having conversed thus with a Chasseur d'Afrique in a Moor's bazaar. Still she vaguely felt pity for this man; she equally vaguely desired to serve him.

"Wait, M. Victor," she said as he closed the door of her carriage. "I accepted your chessmen last night, but it is impossible I can retain them on such terms."

A shadow darkened his face.

"Let your dogs break them, then, madame. They shall not come back to me."

"You mistake; I did not mean that I would send them back. I simply desire to offer you some equivalent for them. There must be something that you wish for—something which would be acceptable to you in the life you lead?"

"I have already named the only thing I desire."

"To be forgotten? A sad wish. Nay, surely life in a regiment of Africa cannot be so cloudless that it can create in you no other?"

"It is not. I have another."

"Then tell it to me; it shall be gratified."

"It is to enjoy a luxury long ago lost forever. It is to be allowed to give the slight courtesy of a gentleman without being tendered the wage of a servant."

She understood him. She was moved, too, by the infection of his voice. She was not so cold, not so negligent, as the world called her.

"I had passed my word to grant it. I cannot retract," she answered him after a pause. "I will press nothing more on you. But, as an obligation to me, can you find no way in which a rouleau of gold would benefit your men?"

"No way that I can take it for them. But, if you care indeed to do them a charity, a little wine, a little fruit, a few flowers (for flowers are those among them who love flowers) sent to the hospital will bring many benedictions on your name, madame. They lie in infinite misery there."

"I will remember," she said simply. "Adieu, Mr. Corporal, and if you should think better of your choice and will allow your name to be mentioned by me to his majesty send me word through my people. There is my card."

The carriage whirled away down the crooked street. He stood under the lawn awning of the Moorish house with the thin, glazed card in his hand. On it was printed:

"Madame la Princesse Corona d'Amague, Hotel Corona, Paris."

In the corner was written "Villa Aïssa, Algiers." He thrust it in the folds of his sash and turned within.

"Do you know her?" he asked Ben Arsil.

The old man shook his head.

"She is the most beautiful of thy many fair Frankish women. I never saw her till today. She seemed to have an interest in thee, my son. But listen here. Touching these ivory toys, if thou dost not bring henceforth to me all the work in them that thou doest thou shalt never come here more to meet the light of her eyes."

Cecil smiled and pressed the Moslem's hand.

"I kept them away because you would have given me a hundred plasters for what had not been worth one. As for her eyes, they are stars that shine on another world than an African trooper's. So best?"

Yet they were the stars of which he thought more, as he wended his way back to the barracks, than of the splendid constellations of the Algerian evening.

Meantime the Princess Corona drove homeward—homeward to where a temporary home had been made by her in the most elegant of the many new white villas that stud the sides of the Sahel and face the bright bow of the small bay. She passed from her carriage to her own morning room and sank down on a couch a little listless and weary with her search among the treasures of the Algerian bazaars.

"Not one of those things do I want—no one shall I look at twice. The money would have been better at the soldiers' hospital," she thought, while her eyes dwelt on a chess table near her—a table on which the mimic hosts of chassours and Arabs were ranged in opposite squadrons. She took the white king in her hand and gazed at it with a certain interest.

"That man has been noble once," she thought. "What a fate! What a cruel fate! How bitter his life must be! When Philip comes, perhaps he will know some way to aid him. And yet—who can serve a man who only desires to be forgotten?"

Then, with a certain impatient sense of some absurd discrepancy, of some unseemly occupation, in her thus dwelling on the wishes and the burdens of a corporal of light cavalry, she laughed a little and put the white king back once more in his place. Yet even as she set the king among his mimic forces the very images themselves served to re-tell their artist in her memory.

There was about them an indescribable elegance, an exceeding grace and beauty, which spoke of a knowledge of art and of refinement of taste far beyond those of a mere military amateur in the one who produced them.

"What could bring a man of that talent, with that address, into the ranks?" she mused. "Persons of good family, of once fine position, come here, they say, and live and die unrecognized under the imperial flag. It is usually some dishonor that drives them out of their own worlds. It may be so with him. Yet he does not look like one whom shame has touched. He is proud still—prouder than he knows. More likely it is the old, old story—a high name and a narrow fortune, the ruin of thousands. Well, it is no matter of mine. Very possibly he is a mere adventurer with a good manner. This army here is a mixture, they say, of all the varied scoundrelisms of Europe."

The Moslem had said aright of her beauty. Many besides the old Moslem had thought her "the fairest that e'er the sun shined on" and held one grave, lustrous glance of the blue imperial eyes above ought else on earth. Many had loved her, all without return. Yet, although only 20 years had passed over her proud head, the Princess Corona d'Amague had been wedded and been widowed.

Wedded, with no other sentiment than that of a certain pity and a certain honor for the man whose noble Spanish name she took; widowed by a death that was the seal of her marriage sacrament and left her his wife only in name and law.

The marriage had left no chain upon her; it had only made her mistress of wide wealth, of that villa on the Sicilian sea, of that light, spacious palace dwelling in Paris that bore her name, of that majestic old castle throned on brown Estremaduran crags. The death had left no regret upon her; it only gave her for awhile a graver shadow over the brilliancy of her youth and of her beauty and gave her a plea for that indifference to men's worship of her which their sex called heartlessness, which her own sex thought an ultra refined coquetry and which was in real truth neither the one nor the other, but simply the negligence of a woman very difficult to charm. It was not ambition that had killed her on his deathbed with Beltram Corona d'Amague, but what it was the world could never tell precisely. The world would not have believed it if it had heard the truth—the truth that it had been, in a different fashion, a gleam of something of the same compassion that now made

her merciful to a common trooper of Africa which had wedded her to the dead Spanish prince. Corona d'Amague had been her brother's friend, the only one for whom he had ever sought to break her unvarying indifference to her lovers, but for whom even he had pleaded vainly until one autumn season when they had staid together at a great archducal castle in south Austria. In one of the forest glades she rejected for the third time the passionate supplication of the superb noble. He rode from her in great bitterness, in grief that no way moved her. An hour after he was brought past her, wounded and senseless. He had saved her brother from imminent death at his own cost, and the tusks of the mighty Styrian boar had plunged through and through his frame as they had met in the narrow woodland glade.

"He will be a cripple—a paralyzed cripple for life!" said the one whose life had been saved by his devotion to her that night, and his lips shook a little under his golden beard as he spoke. "My God, what a death in life! And all for my sake, in my stead!"

She was silent several moments; then she raised her face, a little paler than it had been, but with a passionless resolve set on it.

"Phillip, we do not leave our debts unpaid. Go; tell him I will be his wife."

"His wife! Now? Venetia?"

"Go!" she said briefly. "Tell him what I say."

"But what a sacrifice! In your beauty, your youth!"

"He did not count cost. Are we less generous? Go; tell him."

He was told and was repaid. Such a light of unutterable joy burned through the misty agony of his eyes as never, it seemed to those who saw, had beamed before in mortal eyes. At midnight, in the great, dim magnificence of the state chamber where he lay and with the low, soft chanting of the chapel choir from afar echoing through the incensed air, she bent her haughty head down over his couch, and the marriage benediction was spoken over them.

"You are my own! Death is sweeter than life!" he said.

And before sunrise he died.

Some shadow from that fatal and tragic midnight marriage rested on her still. Men thought her only colder, only prouder, but they erred. She was one of those women who, beneath the courtly negligence of a chill manner, are capable of infinite tenderness, infinite nobility and infinite self-reproach. A great French painter once in Rome, looking at her from a distance, shuddered his eyes with his hand, as if her beauty, like the sun, dazzled him. "Exquisite! Superb!" he muttered. "She is nearly perfect, your Princess Corona!"

"Nearly!" cried a Roman sculptor. "What in heaven's name can she want?"

"Only one thing!"

"And that is?"

"To have loved."

He had found the one law—and it was still there. What he missed in her was still wanting.

## CHAPTER IX.

CIGARETTE was as caustic as a Voltare this morning. Coming through the entrance of the hospital, she had casually heard that Mme. la Princesse Corona d'Amague had made a gift of singular munificence and mercy to the invalid soldiers—a gift of wine, of fruit, of flowers, that would brighten their long, dreary hours for many weeks. Who Mme. la Princesse might be she knew not; but the title was enough; she was a silver pheasant—lamb! And with a word here and a touch there, tender, soft and bright, since, however ironic her mood, she never brought anything except sunshine to those who lay in such sore need of it, beholding the sun in the heavens only through the narrow chink of a hospital window. At last she reached the bed she came most specially to visit—a bed on which was stretched the emaciated form of a man once beautiful as a Greek dream of a god. The dew of a great agony stood on his forehead; his teeth were tight clinched on lips white and parched. She bent over him softly.

"Good day, M. Leon. I have brought you some ice."

His weary eyes turned on her gratefully. He sought to speak, but the effort brought the spasm on his lungs afresh. It shook him with horrible violence from head to foot, and the foam on his shaven beard was red with blood.

"There was no one by to watch him. He was sure to die; a week sooner or later—what mattered it? He was useless as a soldier—good only to be thrown into a pit, with some quicklime to hasten destruction and do the work of the slower earthworms."

Cigarette said not a word, but she took out of some vine leaves a cold, hard lump of ice and held it to him. The delicious coolness and freshness in that parching noontide heat stilled the convulsion. His eyes thanked her, though his lips could not. He lay panting, exhausted, but relieved, and she, thoughtfully for her, slid herself down on the floor and began singing low and sweetly as a fairy might sing on the raft of a water lily leaf.

"Ah, that is sweet," murmured the dying man. "It is like the brooks—like the birds—like the winds in the leaves."

He was but half-conscious, but the lulling of that gliding voice brought him peace. And Cigarette sang on, only moving to reach him some fresh touch of ice, while time traveled on and the first afternoon shadows crept across the bare floor. It was a Yete day in Algiers. There were flags and banners fluttering from the houses; there were Arab races and Arab maneuvers; there was a review of troops for some foreign general; there were all the mirth and the mischief that she loved and that never went on without her. But still she never moved, though

(Continued next week)

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