

UNDER TWO FLAGS

By "OUIDA"

As from before the open windows after dinner, listening to the hands and laughing low and softly, and at some distance from them, beneath the shade of a cedar, the figure of a corporal of chasseurs, calm, erect, motionless, as though he were the figure of a soldier cast in bronze.

"A true soldier!" she muttered where she lay among the rhododendrons, while her eyes grew very soft as she gave the highest word of praise that her whole range of language held. "A true soldier! How he keeps his promise! But it must be bitter."

She looked awhile very wistfully at the chasseur where he stood under the Lebanon boughs; then her glance swept bright as a hawk's over the terrace and lighted with a precient hatred on the general form of all a woman's. There were two other great ladies there, but she passed them and darted with unerring instinct on that proud, fair, patrician head with its haughty, staggish carriage and the crown of its golden hair.

Cigarette had seen grandes dames by the thousand, but now for the first time the sight of one of those aristocrats smote her with a keen, hot sting of heartburning jealousy, with a sudden perception, quick as thought, bitter as gall, wounding and swift and poignant, of what this womanhood that he had said she herself had lost might be in the highest and purest shape.

"Unsexed—she said I was unsexed," she mused, while her teeth clinched on the ruby fullness of her lips, and her heart swelled half with impotent rage, half with unconfessed pain. For the first time looking on this imperious foreign beauty, sweeping so slowly and so idly along there in the Algerian starlight, she understood all that she had missed, all that he had meant when he had used that single word for which she had vowed on him her vengeance and the vengeance of the army of Africa.

"If those are the women that he knew before he came here, I do not wonder that he never cared to watch even my dance," was the latent, unacknowledged thought that was so cruel to her; the consciousness—which forced itself in on her while her eyes jealously followed the perfect grace of the one in whom instinct had found her rival—that while she had been so proud of her recklessness and her devilry and her trooper's slang and her deadly skill as a shot, she had only been something very worthless, something very lightly held by those who liked her for a rhaud just, a dance and a "de" support of headlong riot and drunken mirth.

The mood did not last. She was too brave, too fiery, too dauntless, too untamed. "Bah! She would faint, I dare say, at the mere sight of these pistols," she thought, with her old disdain, "and would stand fire no more than a ga-



He bent over the hand she held out, smiling. They are only made for summer day weather, those dainty, gorgeous, silver pheasants.

Like many another, Cigarette underrated what she had no knowledge of and depreciated an antagonist the measure of whose fence she had no power to gauge.

Crouched there among the rhododendrons, she lay as still as a mouse, moving nearer and nearer until her ear, quick and unerring as an Indian's, could detect the sense of the words spoken. Chateauroux himself was bending his fine, dark head toward the patrician on whom her instinct of sex had fastened her hatred.

"You expressed your wish to see my corporal's little sculptures again, madame," he was murmuring now. "To hear was to obey with me. He waits your commands yonder."

"It was you, was it, brought him here?" muttered the Friend of the Flag, with the passion in her burning more hotly against that "silver pheasant," whose delicate train was sweeping the white marbles of Chateauroux's terraces and whose reply she lost, though she could guess what it had been, when a lackey crossed the lawn and summoned the chasseur.

Cecil obeyed, passed up the terrace stairs and stood before his co'onel, giving the salute. The shade of some acacias still fell across him, while the party he fronted were all in the glow

of a full Algerian moon and of the thousand lamps among the belt of flowers and trees. Chateauroux spoke with a carelessness as of a man to a dog, turning to his corporal:

"Victor, the princess honors you with the desire to see your toys again. Spread them out."

The savage authority of his general speech was softened for sake of his guests' presence; but there was a covert tone in the words that made Cigarette murmur to herself:

"If he forgets his promise, I will forgive him!"

Cecil had not forgotten it; neither had he forgotten the lesson that this fair aristocrat had read him in the morning. He saluted his chief again, set the chess box down upon the ledge of the marble balustrade and stood silent, without once glancing at the fair and haughty face that was more brilliant still in the African starlight than it had been in the noon sun of the chasseur's chambre. Courtesy was forbidden him as insult from a corporal to a nobly born beauty. The carvings were passed from hand to hand as the marquis' six or eight guests, listlessly willing to be amused in the warmth of the evening after their dinner, occupied themselves with the ivory chess armies, cut with a skill and a finish worthy a Roman studio. Praise enough was awarded to the art, but only one glanced at the artist with a touch of wondering pity, softening her pride—she who had rejected the gifts of these mimic squadrons.

"You were surely a sculptor once?" she asked him, with that graceful, distant kindness which she might have shown some Arab outcast.

"Never, madame."

"Indeed! Then who taught you such exquisite art?"

"It cannot claim to be called an art, madame."

She looked at him with an increased interest. The accent of his voice told her that this man, whatever he might be now, had once been a gentleman.

"Oh, yes; it is perfect of its kind. Who was your master in it?"

"A common teacher, madame—necessity!"

There was a very sweet gleam of compassion in the luster of her dark, dreaming eyes.

"Does necessity often teach so well?"

"In the ranks of our army, madame, I think it does; often, indeed, much better."

"Victor knows that neither he nor his men have any right to waste their time on such trash," Chateauroux said carelessly, "but the truth is they love the canteen so well that they will do anything to add enough to their pay to buy brandy."

She whom he had called the princess looked with a gobbling surprise at the sculptor of the white Arab king she held.

"That man does not carve for brandy," she thought.

"It must be a solace to many a weary hour in the barracks to be able to produce such beautiful trifles as these," she said aloud. "Surely you encourage such pursuits, colonel?"

"Not I," said Chateauroux, with a dash of his camp tone that he could not withhold. "There are but two arts of virtue for a trooper to my taste—fighting and obedience."

"You should be in the Russian service, M. de Chateauroux," said the lady, with a smile that, slight as it was, made the marquis' eyes flash fire.

"Almost I wish I had been," he answered her. "Men are made to keep their grades there, and privates who think themselves fine gentlemen receive the lash they merit."

"How he hates his corporal!" thought Cigarette, while she laid aside the white king once more.

"Nay," interposed Chateauroux, recovering his momentary self abandonment, "since you like the bagatelles do me honor enough to keep them."

"Oh, no; I offered your soldier his own price for them this morning, and he refused any."

Chateauroux swung round.

"Ah! You dared refuse your bits of ivory when you were honored by an offer for them?"

Cecil stood silent. His eye met his chief's steadily. Chateauroux had seen that look when his chasseur had bearded him in the solitude of his tent and demanded back the Pearl of the Desert.

The princess glanced at both. Then she stooped her elegant head slightly to the marquis.

of the Flag where she hid among her rhododendrons. Now, the dainty aristocrat was very proud, but she was not so proud but that justice was stronger than pride.

"Wait," she said, moving a little toward them, while she let her eyes rest on the career of the sculptures with a grave compassion, though she addressed his chief. "You wholly mistake me. I do not blame whatever on your corporal. Let him take the chessmen back with him. I would on no account rob him of them. I can well understand that he does not care to part with such masterpieces of his art, and that he would not appraise them by their worth in gold only shows that he is a true artist, as doubtless also he is a true soldier."

The words were spoken with a gracious courtesy, the clear, cold tone of her habitual manner just marking in them still the difference of caste between her and the man for whom she interceded, as she would not equally have interceded for a dog who should have been threatened with the lash because he had displeased her. That very tone struck a sharper blow to Cecil than the insolence of his commander had power to deal him. His face flushed a little. He lifted his cap to her with a grave reverence and moved away.

"I thank you, madame. Keep them, if you will so far honor me."

The words reached only her ear. In another instant he had passed away down the terrace steps, obedient to his chief's dismissal.

"Ah, have no kind scruples in keeping them, madame," Chateauroux laughed to her as she still held in her hand doubtfully the white sheik of the chess Arabs. "I will see that Bel-a-faire-preneur, as they call him, does not suffer by losing these trumperies, which, I believe, old Zist-et-Zest, a veteran of ours and a wonderful carver, had really far more to do with producing than he. You must not let your gracious pity be moved by such fellows as these troopers of mine. They are the most ingenious rascals in the world and know as well how to produce a dramatic effect in your presence as they do how to drink and to swear when they are out of it."

"Very possibly," she said, with an indolent indifference. "But that man was my vector, and I never saw a gentleman if he has not been one."

"Like enough," answered the marquis. "I believe many gentlemen come in our ranks who have fled their native countries and broken all laws from the Decalogue to the Code Napoleon. So long as they fight well we don't ask their past criminalities."

"Of what country is your corporal?"

"I have not an idea. I imagine his past must have been something very black indeed, for the slightest trace of it has never that I know of been allowed to slip from him. He encourages the men in every kind of indignation, buys their favor with every sort of stage trick, thinks himself the finest gentleman in the whole brigades of Africa and ought to have been shot long ago if he had had his real desert."

She let her glance dwell on him with a contemplation that was half contemptuous amusement, half unexpressed dissent.

"I wonder he has not been since you have the ruling of his fate," she said, with a slight smile lingering about the proud, rich softness of her lips.

"So do I."

There was a gaunt, grim, stern significance in the three monosyllables that escaped him unconsciously. It made her turn and look at him more closely.

"How has he offended you?" she asked.

Chateauroux laughed off the question.

"In a thousand ways, madame; chiefly because I received my regimental training under one who followed the traditions of the armies of Egypt and the Rhine and have, I confess, little tolerance in consequence of a rebel who plays the martyr and a soldier who is too effeminate an idler to do anything except attend to his interests in every kind of indignation, buys their favor with every sort of stage trick, thinks himself the finest gentleman in the whole brigades of Africa and ought to have been shot long ago if he had had his real desert."

"I am not much interested in military discussions," she said coldly, "but I imagine, if you will pardon me for saying so, that you do your corporal some little injustice here. I shall not keep the chessmen without making him fitting repayment for them. Since he declines money you will tell me what form that had better take to be of real and welcome service to a Chasseur d'Afrique."

Chateauroux, more incensed that he chose or dared to show, bowed courteously, but with a grim, ironic smile.

"If you really insist, give him a napoleon or two whenever you see him."

"I am not very happy to take it and spend it for drink, though he played the aristocrat today. But you are too good to him. He is one of the very worst of my insubordinates, and you are cruel to me in refusing to deign to accept my trooper's worthless bagatelles at my hands."

She bent her superb head silently, whether in acquiescence or rejection he could not well resolve, with himself, and turned to the staff officers, among them the heir of a princely semiroyal French house.

Crouched down among her rose buds covertly, Cigarette had watched and heard, her teeth set tightly, her breath coming and going swiftly, her hand clinched close on the butts of her pistols. She had never looked at a beautiful, high bred woman before, holding them in gay, satirical disdain. But now she studied one through all the fine, quickened, unerring instincts of jealousy, and there is no instinct in the world that gives such thorough appreciation of the very rival it reviles. She saw the courtly negligence, the regal grace, the fair, brilliant loveliness, the delicious, serene languor of a pure aristocrat for the very first time to note them, and they made her heart sick with a new and deadly sense. She dropped her head suddenly, like a

wounded bird, and the racy, vindictive camp oaths died off her lips. She thought of herself as she had danced that mad bacchic bamboula amid the crowd of shouting, stamping, drunken, half infuriated soldiery, and for the moment she hated herself more even than she hated that patrician yonder.

"I know what he meant now!" she pondered, and her spirited, sparkling, brunette face was dark and weary. She looked once, twice, thrice, more inquiringly, enviously, thirstingly; then she turned and wound herself back under the cover of the shrubs, not joyously and mischievously, as she had come, but almost as slowly, almost as sadly, as at a hare that the greyhounds have coursed drags itself through the grasses and ferns.

Once through the cactus hedge her old spirit returned. She shook herself angrily with petulant self scorn; she swore a little, and felt that the fierce, familiar words did her good, like brandy poured down her throat; she tossed her head like a colt that rebels against the gail of the curb; then fleet as a fawn she dashed down the moonlit road at topmost speed. "Ah, but she can't do what I do!" she thought.

And she ran the faster and sang a drinking song of the spahis all the louder, because still at her heart a dull pain was aching.

CHAPTER VII

SUDDENLY, as she went, Cigarette heard a shout on the still night air—very still now that the lights and the melodies and the laughter of Chateauroux's villa lay far behind, and the town of Algiers was yet distant, with its lamps glittering down by the sea.

"The shout was: 'Help, soldiers! For France!' And Cigarette knew the voice, ringing melodiously and calmly still, though it gave the sound of alarm.

"Cigarette is coming!" she cried in answer. She had cried it many a time over the heat of battlefields and when the wounded men in the dead of the sickly night writhed under the knife of the camp thieves. If she had gone like the wind before, she went like the lightning now, a few yards onward she saw a confused knot of horses and of riders struggling one with another in a cloud of white dust, silvery and hazy in the radiance of the moon.

The center figure was Cecil's; the four others were Arabs, armed to the teeth and mad with drink. They had knocked aside and trampled over a worn-out old colonel of age too feeble



A confused knot of horses and of riders, for him to totter in time from their path. Cecil had reined up and shouted to them to pause. They, inflamed with the perfidious drink and senseless with fury, were too blind to see and too furious to care that they were faced by a soldier of France, but rode down on him at once, with their curled sabers flashing round their heads. His horse stood the shock gallantly, and he sought at first only to parry their thrusts, but he soon saw that if he struck not, and struck not surely, a few moments more of that moonlight night were all that he would live. He wished to avoid bloodshed, but it was no longer a matter of choice with him, as his shoulder was grazed by a thrust which, but for a swerve of his horse, would have pierced his lungs, and the four riders, yelling like madmen, forced the animal back on his haunches and assaulted him with breathless violence. He swept his own arm back and brought his amber down straight through the sword arm of the foremost. The limb was cleft through as if the stroke of an ax had severed it, and, thrice infuriated, the Arabs closed in on him. The points of their weapons were piercing his harness when, sharp and swift, one on another, three shots blazed past him. The nearest of his assailants fell stone dead, and the others, wounded and startled, loosed their hold, shook their reins and toiled off down the lonely road, while the dead man's horse, shaking his burden from him out of the stirrups, followed them at a headlong gallop through a cloud of dust.

"That was a pretty cut through the arm. Better had it been through the throat. Never do things by halves, friend Victor," said Cigarette carelessly as she thrust her pistols back into her sash and looked with the tranquil appreciation of a connoisseur on the brown, brawny, naked limb where it lay severed on the sand, with the hilt of the weapon still hanging in the sinewy fingers. Cecil threw himself from his saddle and gazed at her in bewildered amazement. He had thought those sure, cool, death dealing shots had come from some spahis or chasseur.

"I owe you my life!" he said rapidly. "But, good heavens, you have shot the fellow dead!"

Cigarette shrugged her shoulders, with a contemptuous glance at the Bedouin's corpse. "To be sure, I am a bungler."

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