

## CHAPTER XXXIX

### FORT EZA

ARABS do not entrench. They sometimes build "zaribas" with the great prickly thorn of the desert and cactus set like sword-blades. But even so, the thing is chiefly useful as a protection for the animals of the caravan, and to keep the camels from breaking. But the Sidi of the Beni Abbas was no common sheik. He had seen campaigning almost to the Lake itself—which is Lake Tchad. He had some notion of what two Englishmen might want for defence purposes, and though he had not the least idea of staying within himself with his horsemen, he fully intended to render as faithful service as he could without endangering his tribal authority. Also, and especially, he meant if possible to get the promised reward.

He had always found that Grant and Amisfield faithfully performed their word. He had eaten salt with them. He had heard of the power of the Sheik el Islam, a kind of Moslem Peter-of-the-Keys. So, for these varied spiritual, secular and financial reasons he was resolved to play as fair as he could—which is, all things considered, a good deal from an Arab of Southern Algeria.

The "place of strength" he led them to was on the first spur of one of the outworks of the Atlas. Behind it the cliffs rose clear. The little flat-topped clump of rock lay out like a shut hand laid back upwards on a table, and the sands of the desert lashed about it like a sea. A couple of hundred feet high with only one practicable path for camels, the place had been used as a fort more than once by the French, when they were engaged in flanking