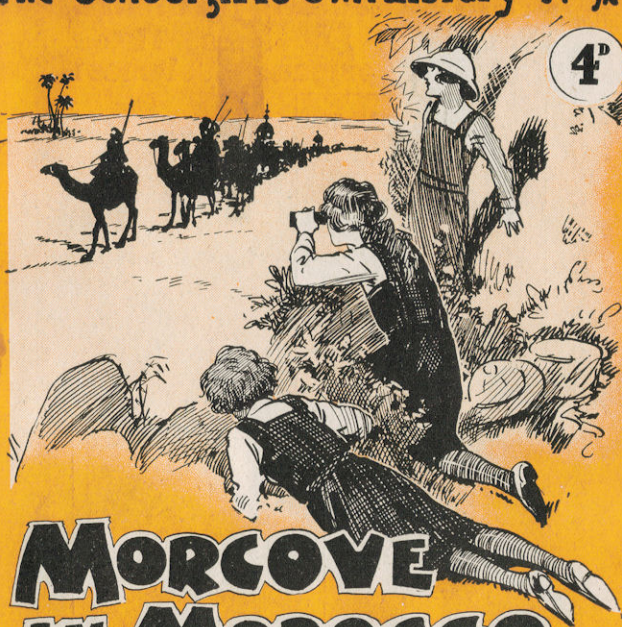


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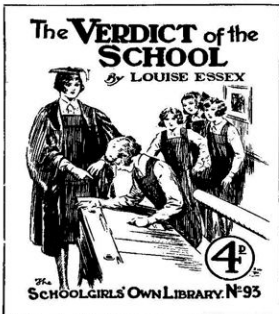


MORCOVE IN MOROCCO

BY MARJORIE STANTON

AN EARLY ADVENTURE OF BETTY BARTON & CO
INTRODUCING "ROSE OF THE DESERT"

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MORCOVE IN MOROCCO!



A Magnificent Tale of the Early Adventures of BETTY BARTON and the Girls of Morcove School, introducing "Rose of the Desert."

By

MARJORIE STANTON.

Author of "THE HIDDEN SCHOOLGIRLS," "THE DRUDGE OF MORCOVE," "THE TROUBLE-MAKER OF MORCOVE," etc., etc.

CHAPTER 1.

Off for the Holidays!

"HURRAH!"

"Hooray!"

"Yes, wathor, bai Jove! Hoo-way, geals!"

"Now we can feel we are off!"

It was the breaking-up day at Morcove School.

The morning had fled by in a whirl of excitement. The last muster in Big Hall had been held; studies were looking all upside-down after the packing up; dinner had been scrambled through amidst a frenzy of talk and delirious peals of laughter.

Now, in the corridors on to which study doors opened, mountains of luggage stood dumped about, and to and fro went porters and cabmen, making light of their enormous loads because of the tips they meant.

Tips—Christmas tips!

Everything was "Christmassy" to-day.

The scholars' mood, their talk and their jokes, their looks—all betokened the arrival of the great winter festival. And so, hurrah for Christmas! was the jovial cry, again and again. Hurrah for Yuletide and the holidays!

In the Fourth Form corridor, a certain number of the merry girls were, at this moment, on the very point of departure from the school they loved so dearly.

Betty Barton, the Form captain, was one. Her bosom chum, Polly Linton—mad-cap Polly, of the Fourth—was another.

Then there was Paula Creel, the swell girl of the Form; no "swanker," be it understood, but one of the nicest girls that had the luck to be born with a silver spoon in her mouth. Paula was dressed at last, although it was certain that she would want to dodge back to her study mirror at least once again, before going off.

Tess Trelawney and Trixie Hope were also hatted and gloved, and were saying good-byes to friends who would not be leaving until later.

And here was Dolly Delane—affectionately termed "Dolly the Doormat"—living up to her reputation by spending her last moments in seeing after everything and everybody.

It was said of Dolly that she would do anything to oblige; that you could even ask her to lie down and let you wipe your shoes on her, and she, the Doormat, would oblige! But was that a quality to make Dolly at all unpopular? Not likely!

"Pway wolieve my mind!" pleaded Paula Creel, coming into Study 12, where Betty and Polly were sitting on the table-edge. "Am I weally dwessed all wight, geals?"

"Your hat is the millionth part of an inch crooked, Paula dear!"

"Gwacious!" was Paula's cry of dismay,

and off she went to put the hat straight, passing Tess and Trixie on the way out.

"Your study!" chuckled Tess, gazing all round the den which Betty and Polly shared. "It looks just about as forlorn as mine!"

"And mine," said Trixie. "Cela ne fait rien—it doesn't matter!" she added, flavoured her talk, as usual, with a smattering of French. "We are done with the old dens for a few weeks, and so—"

"Yes, wather, goals!" beamed Paula Creel, reappearing. "And pway set my mind at rest, some of you. Do I look quite all wight now?"

"You never look quite right, Paula dear," Polly teased, swinging her legs as she perched on the table-edge. "But my people have met you before, and so I shan't have to apologise for you!"

"Weally!" protested Paula. "I can see I am going to have a most distwessing time at Linton Hall! Howevah! Betty dear, I wely upon you for pwtectioan!"

"Don't do anything of the sort, over Christmas," laughed Betty. "I shall be a guest at Linton Hall, the same as you and the rest, Paula. And Polly, being the daughter of the house—"

"Will be just fifty times more of a mad-cap than she is at the school!" struck in Tess. "My word, there'll be some fun!"

Betty said suddenly:

"But where is Madge Minden? There's the man taking the last of our luggage down to the cars! We were to start at two, and it is five past now!"

"Hark!" exclaimed Tess. "Who is that playing the piano?"

"Who could it be but Madge—Madge the musician?" cried Betty. "Queer girl! She has managed to slip back to the music room for a last five minutes' practice."

"Race you down to the music room!" challenged Polly, suddenly falling off the table and charging for the passage. "Come on!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The girls were pealing with merriment as they dashed after the madcap.

In the luggage strewn corridor, the race became a steepchase, one scholar after another jumping this hefty portmanteau and scrambling over that other, whilst sundry fragile hatboxes were scattered to right and left.

Polly, keeping the lead, got to the stairs end and went charging down them. Round a bend she whirled, and then—

Biff!

The madcap girl had tumbled upon the porter, carrying three bits of luggage all at once. He held on to a couple, but the third went rolling down—down, with a—

Bump, bump, bump!

And the third bit of luggage was one of Paula's many belongings!

"Heah, help!" yelled the dressy girl, as she saw her ill-fated possession thudding down the stairs. "My best fwocks! Gwacious, geals!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Then the porter missed his footing, and he and the two other bits of luggage all went shooting down the stairs together!

Bump, bump, bumpity—bump!

"Whoa!" roared the porter, in a dazed manner. "My hat—"

"Your hat! That is my hat you are sitting upon!" wailed poor Paula, as she saw him flattening out a cardboard box from Bond Street, London. "Weally, geals, this is most distwessing!"

It was—for Paula!

But for Betty and the others it seemed to be only a Christmas joke. On they stormed, and in a moment they were swarming in upon Madge Minden.

"Hi, hi, hi!" yelled Polly, above the crashing chords of a very wonderful rhapsody. "Come on, Madge! We're off!"

"Off your heads, I quite agree!" laughed Madge, jumping up. "Well, I'm ready!"

"Fall in the party for Linton Hall!" sang out Betty gaily. "And before we go, girls—altogether! Three cheers for the dear old school!"

"Hurrah! Hooray! Hip, hip, hip—"

"Quick march!" Betty cried. And there and then they all went tramping—stamping as far as the music room doorway.

There was, however, no keeping step after that.

Down the stairs came girls who had already said good-bye twice before, and from different parts of the house came now many other members of the school, eager to give the Linton Hall party a good send-off!

Louder and louder swelled all the hearty talk and laughter, as bigger and bigger grew the party escorting Betty and Co. to the front porch.

Miss Somerfield, the Headmistress, came along, with Miss Redgrave, the Fourth Form assistant mistress.

"So you're off at last!" smiled the Head-

mistress, shaking hands all round. "Well, a very happy Christmas, girls!"

"The same to you—the same to all!" Betty cried out.

"Oui—oui!" shrilled Trixie, in French. "Heureux Noel—happy Christmas!"

"Good-bye, all!" chimed in Ethel Courtway, the head girl of the school. "I suppose you mean to have a pretty crowded holiday!"

"Rather!" chuckled Polly.

"I twust," said Paula, taking out a pocket mirror to look at her hat—"I twust that I shall be able to west properly during the holidays. Yes, wather! What with hard work and stenuous games of hockey, I feel downhight pwostwate!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I shall be seeing all of you during Christmas, so this is hardly a real good-bye," said Miss Somerfield. "As you know, girls, Mr. and Mrs. Linton have insisted that I and my brother shall spend a few days at Linton Hall—"

"To keep us in order!" laughed Polly.

"Oh, no!" smiled the Headmistress. "To help swell the disorder, I expect! You may count upon my brother doing that, at any rate!"

"Yes, wather!" murmured Paula, whilst her chums, as they all drifted on to the couple of waiting cars, talked delightedly about what it meant to them, to know that Miss Somerfield and her brother Jack would be beneath the roof of Linton Hall over Christmas.

Even in her official capacity, as Headmistress of the school, Miss Somerfield was no spoil sport. Anything but!

As for Jack Somerfield, the girls had seen enough of him, during the last few days, to know that he was bound to be capital company.

He was quite a famous explorer, whose daring exploits would provide many a fine story round the fireside—if only they could get him to talk about them!

The two cars had been sent from Linton Hall to fetch the party of chums, so that all the bother of a cross-country journey by train could be avoided.

Betty, Polly, Paula, and Madge were in No. 1 car, with a good deal of luggage squashed about their feet. No. 2 car held Tess, Trixie, and Dolly, also with a whole load of luggage.

"All right behind?" Betty cried, from the

window of No. 1 to the window of No. 2, where Dolly was looking out.

"All serene!" was Dolly's cheery response; and so, at last, with a jolly blaring of the motor-horns, and amidst tremendous cheering, both cars set off.

Down the long carriage drive they purred slowly, with scores of friends and well-wishers running beside, to cry a last breathless adieu:

"Good-bye, Betty! Good-bye, all! Happy Christmas!"

"Good-bye—good-bye!" yelled back Betty and the others, their heads at all the windows. "We shall think about you all!"

"And if you think of me, goals," beamed Paula, "pway remember that I am westing! After the stenuous term I have had, I weally must wecupwate! Yes, wather!"

"Ha, ha, ha! Ta-ta!"

Out through the widebung gateway of the school sped the cars, and then, swinging round into the main road they leapt to thirty miles an hour.

And now, as they watched from the windows, Betty and Co. were silent—silent, and just a little grave, all at once.

There was the dear old school, its huge range of fine buildings standing out against the sullen, wintry sky. And was it a wonder that the girls were feeling, even at this joyous season of the year, a little of the sadness of farewell?

Good-bye! And what a good-bye it was to prove, indeed, for at least two of these girls, little though they know it!

For two of them, though they had no premonition of it, what strange and perilous experiences were in store!

What thrilling adventures were they to undergo, before ever they would see the walls of Morcove School again!

CHAPTER 2.

The Watcher on the Crags!

IN one of the very highest, loneliest, wildest parts of Exnoor, on this gloomy winter's afternoon, a man stood sentinel-like—watching.

The spot at which he had posted himself was a craggy one, commanding stretches of a road so walled-in by the giant hills that it had all the romantic grandeur of a mountain pass.

MORCOVE IN MOROCCO!

for the man himself, strangely garbed as he was, and keeping watch in such an eagle-like place as this, he might well have been likened to a fierce mountain brigand from a foreign clime.

A foreigner to England the man was; native of a country even wilder than the very wildest parts of Europe. Those eagle-like eyes had scanned, how often, the sands of the desert; and, although he was hardy enough not to feel the biting cold of the Exmoor heights on this half-dark winter's day, it was the burning heats of Africa to which he was better accustomed.

He was, in fact, one of a tribe of people whose own mysterious haunts are in the hinterland of Morocco; that strange, fierce tribe, the Susahlahs, whose ways to-day are the unchanged ways of a thousand years ago.

Now, just as the feeble daylight was giving out, and when a flurry of snow was falling from the darkening sky, the death-like stillness of this romantic spot was broken by the most unromantic of sounds—the blare of a motor-horn!

The droning note came like a prolonged moan from far off down the valley road, and, although the watcher on the crags gave a visible start, he knew there was ample time for him to guard against being seen.

In a leisurely manner that seemed to bring out the litheness of his whole imposing figure, he sought a more sheltered spot, and there he crouched.

With the snow falling ever faster about his mantled form, he waited, those black, piercing eyes looking down through the deepening gloom at the lonely road.

Now the drone of motor engines filled the silence, and suddenly a car became visible, grinding slowly, yet steadily, towards the summit of the hill.

Behind it came a second car, and from both motor vehicles there issued such a roaring of engines, and such billows of oil-fumes as told how heavily they were loaded, and how great a test of endurance was this almost mountainous road.

But that test both cars accomplished without a hitch. They drove out on to the level bit at the summit—only a hundred feet from where the lonely sentinel was watching, all unseen—and then they hummed on in easier fashion, to take the descent on the other side.

A few moments, and both cars were gone.

Even the noise of the engines died away almost immediately. The watcher stood up, laughing softly in a way that seemed to make him shake from head to foot.

Presently he was joined by another man of similar nationality. The second man however was evidently a sort of chieftain, for the other made gestures that were plainly a salute, before speaking.

Rapidly the two men of the desert conversed for a few minutes, and their foreign talk was all so passionate and fierce, one might have thought they were quarrelling. It, suddenly, the excitable talk died down to the mere purring of their two voices, and the chieftain parted from his sentinel, smiling and shrugging.

Out there in the falling snow and the deepening darkness remained the watcher of the pass, whilst his superior zig-zagged amongst the giant rocks and the wind-blown trees, coming at last to the mouth of a small, natural cavern in a great wall of rock.

How many holiday makers in the wilds of Devon, next summer, would be visiting this romantic spot, to poke about in the caverns which, so tradition said, had once been the lair of daring outlaws!

Always, during the summer-time, one could expect to find at least a few picnickers here. But now it was the depth of winter, and day after day would go by without anybody setting foot inside the caves.

Even the roadway hardly knew a pedestrian at such a season as this; but if anybody should, perchance, come this way and leave the roadway at the summit, thinking to take a look round—well, what was that watcher for, but to give timely warning to his companions?

Stepping into the cave, the Susahlah chief communed for a few minutes with another of his subordinates. Then he returned to the open, and worked round to the entrance to another cave.

Here he was met by a woman in the native dress of the tribe, and there passed between the chieftain and this woman a few words of hurried talk.

The woman passed farther into the cave, and whilst she was gone the man stood about in the falling snow, minding it as little as a wild bird minds the rain.

In a minute the woman was back again, murmuring to the effect, evidently, that he might pass on. He did so, and a few

yards along the cave he was suddenly met by a second woman carrying a lamp.

She was exceedingly beautiful. Although her native dress included a flimsy veil that passed across the lower half of her face, her large eyes and the fineness of her brows spoke for the queenly loveliness of her other features.

This woman set the lamp upon a convenient ledge in the cavern wall, and fell into earnest talk with the chieftain—talk which we must record, the reader bearing in mind that we are giving the English translation.

"Two cars, you say, El Valiante?" the woman murmured. "I and my companions heard the noise; but we were not uneasy."

"They were cars with English schoolgirls as passengers," El Valiante rejoined. "Girls from the very school from which we have sought to obtain that which we came to seek!"

"That is so?" his companion returned, with a look of quickened interest in her lovely eyes. "Then Hussuf reported truly when he told us that to-day all the girls at that school would be going to their homes."

El Valiante gave a satisfied nod.

"Yes," he muttered, and bared his white teeth in a smile. "Hussuf, thy brother, was right. From to-day the school is almost empty, and so we shall have a good chance when we go there, by night, to gain that which we came to seek! Rose of the Desert, you like this country no better than I; but patience for only a little while now, and then—"

"I am content," Rose of the Desert made haste to assure him. "Was it not an honour for all of us who are here—I and my fellow women; you and your men—an honour to be chosen for the adventure?"

"No greater honour could our master confer upon any of his subjects!" answered El Valiante proudly. "Even to die in the attempt to get what we seek, for the glory of our master, and of our country—it would be an honour all would envy us!"

"And we shall succeed!" Rose of the Desert said, with an earnest clasping of her small, shapely hands. "There is to be no returning, El Valiante, without the prize we seek. These English—"

El Valiante interrupted her with a scornful laugh.

"Bah! They are but girls, all of them!"

"And yet, not quite all," added Rose of

the Desert impressively. "Remember how it was reported to us by our spy. There is that Englishman, the man Somerfield—he is at the school! A man to reckon with!"

"Ay, I do not forget that man!" El Valiante scowled. "He has come to the school—and why, if not to be his own protector of the thing we seek! But—"

"Hark!" broke in Rose of the Desert, with uplifted hand. "One comes—it is Hussuf, our spy! How well I know my brother's voice from all others!"

Back at the cavern entrance some breathless newcomer was parleying with the woman there. He was evidently asking for El Valiante, and that imperious chief now called softly, yet eagerly.

"Approach then, Hussuf! I am here, and all you have to say to me it is well that your sister, Rose of the Desert, should hear!"

Then the new arrival into this strange camp came quickly forward, and the lamp-light showed him to be dressed in ordinary English garb.

Excepting, indeed, for the sallowness of his face, he might have passed unchallenged as a foreigner anywhere in the kingdom.

No one, certainly, would ever have set him down as being a man with African blood in his veins.

"El Valiante, most favoured of our master," this man said, speaking rapidly in the native tongue. "I come with all speed to report many things!"

"Speak, then," said the chief imperiously.

"First, I would tell you how, at the appointed time, each night, our boat has made the signal to show that she is there!"

"That is good," commented El Valiante. "To know that the boat is ready to take us away, the moment we have seized what we came to seek—it is much to make us content, O Hussuf!"

"But the rest!" exclaimed Rose of the Desert. "Hussuf, my brother, your cunning has always been wonderful. Say, then—"

"The rest is less pleasant to tell," Hussuf answered, with a moody shake of his fine head. "It is true that the scholars are going to their homes, and that the school will be almost like an empty camp after to-day. But my ears have picked up news which means that all our plans must be altered!"

"Is that so?" muttered El Valiante, frowning. "How then?"

"That which we came to seek will not be at the school," Hussuf answered, with slow impressiveness. "It is in the hands of the man Somerfield, and he also is going from the school."

"With what we have promised our master to recover!" interjected Rose of the Desert.

"Even so," nodded Hussuf. "My ears have heard this: That whither the man Somerfield goes, it goes with him—always! That is the word he has spoken to many, carelessly, never thinking how such talk might reach these ears!"

"How should that man think there was need to be on guard against any spy?" said Rose of the Desert. "Did not El Valiante here choose you, from those on the yacht, because your cunning is so great? Ay, and because, like me, you can speak the English tongue!"

Hussuf drew himself up and smiled with pleasure at his beautiful sister's flattering words.

"So, then," he went on, addressing El Valiante, who was looking grimly perplexed, "there must be a change of plans, is it not so? The man Somerfield goes on a visit to a certain house not twenty miles from here. It is a house where many English will be gathered, for this festival of theirs—"

"You know all this, of a certainty?" El Valiante questioned, his brow clearing a little. "Then the news is no great blow to us, O Hussuf. A house twenty miles from here—"

He paused to smile and to give one of his expressive shrugs.

"It can be reached," he said, "as easily as the school that stands upon the cliffs by the sea!"

"Only," rejoined Hussuf, "it will not be so easy to get away to the boat when our task is finished! For many miles must we make our way through the country, to get from here to the seashore which is near the school. And yet—"

"Hussuf, my brother," broke in Rose of the Desert, "it cannot be that El Valiante is to find you unwilling?"

"Unwilling—I!" answered Hussuf, proclaiming himself every inch a son of the desert by his haughty mien. "Let El Valiante propose a plan, and it shall be

carried out by me alone, if so he thinks fit!"

"I shall have a plan," was El Valiante's grim response. "And it is certain the risks will be great. Yes. But be assured, O Hussuf, others will share those risks with you. It may even be that Rose of the Desert, thy sister, must again play her part!"

"I am ready to risk all, even death itself," the beautiful girl murmured vehemently, "that the glory and honour of our people may be upheld!"

"There should be no part for you in any plan of mine, O fairest Rose of the Desert," El Valiante answered, regarding her with the same admiration which was in her brother's eyes; "but always there is the difficulty—the language. Alas! that I myself cannot speak the English. Of all of us who have come so far from our own land, on this great and glorious quest, only you, Rose of the Desert, and Hussuf, your brother, who was on the boat, can speak it."

"Use me, then!" Rose of the Desert entreated, her dark eyes flashing. "I may not carry myself as an English girl—that is forbidden to all daughters of the Susahlah race. I may not disguise myself, as Hussuf my brother is permitted to do, being a man; even so, I speak the English, and you shall find me neither a bungler nor a coward!"

"Thou and thy brother both—thou shalt be used to good purpose, never fear!" El Valiante answered, with a gesture of one arm betokening pride and confidence. "And it shall be remembered in thy favour, O Rose of the Desert—in thine also, O Hussuf!—when we are again beneath the blue skies of our own country."

"Day of glory and rejoicing," murmured Hussuf, "when it is known in our land that we have returned, and have brought back what we sought!"

"When what we sought is no longer in infidel hands," added Rose of the Desert, with passionate fervour, "but is restored once more to its home of a thousand years!"

El Valiante turned towards the east and bowed twice or thrice.

"Yes," he said. "And it shall be! Yonder, across the seas, in the land which is our own, in the great Mosque of Susahlah, it shall be seen again by all our people. That which we have come thus

secretly in quest of, it shall be seen again!

"The lamp—"

"The lamp!" echoed Hussuf, with all a fanatic's fervour, whilst Rose of the Desert murmured softly:

"The Lamp of the Susallah!"

CHAPTER 3.

Christmas Revels!

IN the drawing-room at Linton Hall, all the jollity of Christmas Day was in full swing.

For the last hour all the rich hangings had been drawn across the big windows, to shut out the wintry darkness and the biting cold. On the great hearth a fire of Yule logs was sending its cheery flames towards the cavernous chimney. Shaded lamps stood here and there, with many a pretty Chinese lantern to add extra brightness to the scene.

It was half-past six. The adult members of the Christmas house-party had all gone up to their rooms, to dress for dinner; and even Paula Creel had felt she must change into another frock for this evening.

But Betty Barton and the others had been content to run a comb through their hair, and fine fun were they now having amongst themselves, during the others' brief absence.

For Madge was at the grand piano, playing some dance music; and when Madge Minden started a piece like the "Destiny Waltz"—well, who could help making a partner of the person nearest to hand, and starting to float round the room?

"Faster, Madge!" cried Polly, eager for a proper whirl, like the madcap she was.

"Oh, help!" laughed Tess, who happened to be Polly's partner. "I'm just about done!"

"Done!" scoffed Polly. "Are you going to let Betty and Trixie beat us? Stick it, Tess!"

But now Tess came nearer than ever to collapsing, if only because of the fit of laughter that seized her. For Dolly Delane, left with nobody to dance with, grabbed up a bolster-like cushion with gold tassels, from the hearthrug, and made a partner of that!

"Ha, ha, ha!"

At this moment, Betty and Trixie became so helpless with laughter, they crashed into

Dolly and her "partner," and down went all three girls and the cushion, in a squirming, breathless, mirthful heap.

"Gwacious!" exclaimed Paula Creel, suddenly floating into the room, in a wonderful evening frock. "How fivulous you all are, weally!"

"Hallo, hallo! Dancing—eh?" chimed in handsome Jack Somerfield, coming in behind Paula, in his immaculate dress clothes. "Then, Paula, I must beg the pleasure!"

Paula looked dismayed.

"Are you proposing that I shall indulge in a widiculous womp?" she asked.

For answer, Jack Somerfield calmly took her by the hand and whirled her off.

Madge, entering into the joke, changed to a livelier measure; and then Polly and Dolly got going as partners, whilst Betty plumped down for a breather.

But now Polly's brother, Jack Linton—yes, another Jack; but he was full ten years Jack Somerfield's junior, being only eighteen—whirled into the room, also dressed for the evening.

He looked round for a partner, saw Betty resting, and had her waltzing round inside of two ticks!

"Bless my soul!" laughed Mr. Linton, following his wife—the sweetest of women, and the best mother in the world, if you asked Polly!—into the room. "Do you see what they are up to, mother?"

"Ah, to be young again!" Mrs. Linton sighed, in mock despair to Miss Somerfield, who had accompanied their entry.

"Still, my dear," said her husband, taking her hand, "I think we might try a round or two?"

"Yes, wather!" shrilled breathless Paula.

"Weally, don't you know, it's wipping!"

"Last time round—and a good 'un, Madge!" Jack urged the willing pianist.

"Off!"

How Madge's left fingers rattled the piano keys then!

There was a despairing shriek from Paula, as she felt herself fairly whirled off the floor.

Polly and Dolly fell over a settee, and sat screaming with laughter, whilst they rubbed their bumped heads. Jack Linton and Betty just steered clear of the human wreckage and whirled on; and after them came the host and hostess!

Then, with a final crash of notes, Madge jumped up from the piano.

Out in the raftered hall one of the maids was striking the gong for dinner—bong, bong, bong!

"I am an uttuh weck, Mr. Somerfield!" wailed Paula, in dismay. "How can I go in to dinner like this?"

Jack politely offered her the ribbon out of her hair.

"You have two minutes in which to straighten yourself out," he said gravely. "If you are not down by that time, you won't get any turkey! I'm sitting next to you, and I'll watch that you only get sausage!"

"Mr. Somerfield," said Paula, with mock dignity, "I think you are too uttably frivolous for words! Yes, wather!"

All the same, it seemed to please Paula, when she joined the party round the festive table, to find Jack Somerfield next to her.

They say that extremes meet, and Paula the indolent found it very nice to be taken notice of by Jack Somerfield, the hero of a hundred thrilling activities and adventures in foreign lands. And Jack, for his part, seemed to find in Paula just the right victim for Christmastide teasing and japing!

It was a proper Christmas feast—trust Mr. and Mrs. Linton to see to that! After the turkey and the pudding—such a pudding!—came the cracker-pulling, and what shrieks of laughter shook the ceiling then!

On the opposite side of the table, Madge Minden and Jack Linton had pulled crackers with each other, and now Jack Linton was proposing that they should "swap."

"That paper flower," he said to Madge, after she had fastened the pretty imitation carnation in her frock; "I'll swap with you for it—eh?"

"But what do I want with your lead monkey?" answered Madge, pretending great disdain for the tiny trinket that had come out of Jack's bon-bon.

"This lead monkey is wonderful," he assured her. "It's a charm! It'll protect you! I say—"

"But I don't know that I want any protecting!"

"You may, some day," said Jack. And ah, some day, how all the playful

talk of this never-to-be-forgotten Christmas party came back to both of them!

"How can a lead monkey, made in Japan, protect me?" argued Madge, just for the fun of teasing.

"Well, anyway," said Jack Linton desperately. "I want that flower! I'll give you the lead monkey, and—and I won't catch you when we play blind man's buff presently. There's a bargain, Madge!"

"But I don't know that I mind being caught—by you," said Madge. "You are nobody to be afraid of! Not a nasty savage, like those Susahlah people who — But I forgot; we don't want to talk about that. You really want the flower?"

"I do—awfully."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I just want it," said Jack.

And so, of course, he got it, and Madge got her lead monkey in exchange.

She slipped it into her pocket, and Jack quite thought he would never see it again, little dreaming under what strange and thrilling circumstances was that tiny trinket to meet his eyes one day!

Only a metal toy out of a Christmas bon-bon—a thing valueless in itself. And yet, what a vital purpose was it to serve, in the time to come!

What would the fate of Madge Minden have been if she and Polly Linton's brother had never made the playful bargain?

"I am going to keep this paper flower always," said Jack. "And you will keep that little charm, Madge?"

"Oh, yes," she laughed lightly.

And keep it she did.

Shortly after dinner Mr. Linton, cigarette in mouth, sauntered with the two Jacks into the drawing-room, where Polly was already being blindfolded, although it was only ten minutes since she got up from two helpings of turkey and a very fair share of Christmas pudding!

"Will I play blind man's buff?" smiled the genial host. "Why, of course. You, too, my dear—and you, Miss Somerfield," he added, to his wife and the headmistress. "We are all in this, you know!"

"Pway excuse me," pleaded Paula. "I weally am—"

"There is no excuse for anybody!" declared Jack Somerfield sternly. "Fall in, young lady!"

"Weal," sighed Paula, "is my hair quite wight, for a start?"

"Your hair is beautiful," said Jack. "I am going to have a lock of it. Hallo, they're off!"

And he only just evaded the groping Polly by jumping over a settee!

Fast and furious grew the fun in the next few moments.

Polly meant to make a catch somehow, and she dived this way and that with all the alacrity of her madcap nature, keeping the others flitting and dodging breathlessly.

Crash! went a palm-pot and stand, but nobody minded—least of all, Polly! She nearly caught Madge, and she nearly caught Betty—but not quite!

Deftly the groping arms were evaded, and down went a fire-screen and a coffee-table as Polly made fresh dashes.

Then, suddenly, she looked like cornering Jack Somerfield. But he adroitly skipped behind Paula, who promptly yelled:

"Bai Jove!"

"Got you!" shouted Polly; but she was a bit too previous.

A roar of laughter went up as Paula just saved herself by dashing away.

Polly gave chase, following up Paula by hearing that girl's agitated gasping. The drawing-room door was open, and the swell girl of Morcove School thought it was best to dash for the hall.

Worse things could happen than being caught by Polly, however, as Paula now found.

Just as she went darting out of the drawing-room, a maid came away from the dining-room, carrying the relics of the plum-pudding.

Paula tried to pull up sharply, but couldn't. And next moment she gave a helpless scream as she and the maid collided, with the plum-pudding in between them!

Crash!

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"My gwacious! Healp, healp!" yelled poor Paula, sitting up on the floor, with half a Christmas pudding in her lap.

"Heal, this is dweadful!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"My new fwock—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"How perfectly unkind you all are!" wailed the swell girl, shooting the Christ-

mas pudding off her lap and scrambling to her feet. "Howevah—"

"You have another frock to put on?" grinned Jack Somerfield.

"Yes, wather! I have my gwreen one," said Paula. "I have a bwown one, too."

"And a blue!" laughed Betty.

"And a pink!" chuckled Madge.

"Yes, wather!"

"Also," said Trixie, "a pale yellow?"

"Yes, wather!"

"Also," chimed in Dolly, "there's a carmine?"

"Yes, wather!"

"And," said Trixie, "there's even a mauve?"

"That is quite @wue," agreed Paula. "The twouble is to choose, don't you know!"

"Try a bit of each!" chuckled Jack Somerfield.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Whereupon the swell girl of Morcove School tried to look at Jack with haughty disapproval.

"How wiculous you are!" she said, and marched off upstairs to make another fresh toilette.

CHAPTER 4.

Told in the Firelight!

"HALF-TIME!" cried Polly, still cut of breath with the game. "I say, I vote we have chairs round, and get Mr. Somerfield to tell us—"

"Hear, hear!" burst in the other girls eagerly. "A story, Mr. Somerfield! Tell us about some of your adventures!"

"I'd rather play leap-frog," said the modest Jack. "Mr. Linton—"

"I am entirely in the girls' hands," said the genial host; and, indeed, he was literally in the hands of Polly, who was pushing him into a chair by the fire.

"Draw up—draw up, everybody!" ordered Polly. "We are going to have one story, anyhow!"

"The story of the Lamp of Susablah!" suggested Betty; and again there was a chorus of eager cries.

"Yes, yes! Oh, yes! Tell us the story of the lamp, Mr. Somerfield, and how you got it!"

With a dismal groan of resignation,

Jack Somerfield allowed himself to be pushed into a chair, and then all the rest of the company quickly settled down.

Mr. Linton turned over the logs on the hearth, and brighter than ever leapt the flames, shedding their dancing light upon the half-circle of listeners, whilst the first words of Jack's story fell slowly from his lips.

"The Lamp of Susahlah," he said, "was one that used to hang in the Mosque of Susahlah, which is rather a top-hole place of its sort, in the heart of the desert city, and close to the sultan's palace. No need to describe the lamp; you girls have seen it when it was in the school museum."

"But Mr. and Mrs. Linton have never seen it," put in Miss Somerfield gently.

"Well, I'll show it to 'em by-and-by," Jack said, in his happy-go-lucky way. "Because I've got it with me, you know."

"Here, at Linton Hall?" exclaimed the girls.

"Oh, yes!" His nonchalance was amusing. "I just take it everywhere with me now in case of any further trouble with the Susahlah folk, you know, although I rather fancy we shall never see any of their emissaries in this part of the world again."

He lit a cigarette, and continued.

"As to how I first got possession of the lamp. It was several years ago, at a time when I was prospecting around the hinterland of Morocco, disguised as a native. And, by the way, I had an experience there which makes a far more romantic story than the affair of the lamp. For, d'you know, one day I found a wee native girl, lost in the desert, and we got quite pally, she and I! The little minx found out my secret, too—that I was a 'foreigner' in disguise, and—"

"Did she betray you to her people?" asked Tess.

"After I had saved her life, as I suppose I had? Not likely!" he answered, smiling. "The little kid—Rose of the Desert was her pretty name—she held her tongue even when I was thrown into the sultan's dungeons, just because I had given offence to some sluekh chap or other."

"But surely," broke in Mr. Linton, "they found out that you were an Englishman, then? Your gaolers—"

"Not they," laughed Jack. "Even when I was in fetters, and being taken out now

and then to be mocked in the marketplace, no one ever spotted the Englishman beneath the filthy rags and the stained skin! If ever you want a good floor polish—"

"Now you are getting flippant!" Miss Somerfield admonished him. "And the girls want a serious story."

He ran a hand over his kinky hair.

"All right! Well, then, to cut a long story short—"

"But we don't want you to cut the story short!"

"Am I to tell this story the way I want to?" he demanded flatly. "As I was going to say, what I went through at the hands of the sultan, and the shiekh chap, and the gaolers, and everybody else out there—it made me simply thirst for revenge! So, when I had the miraculous chance, one night, to escape—"

"Yes, but how did you escape?" clamoured the girls.

"Oh, there was a mutiny amongst the gang of gaolers, and whilst they were slicing at each other, I and quite a lot of the other prisoners managed to escape. Nothing to brag about. I just—"

"Bunked!" suggested Jack Linton.

"That's the word!" said Somerfield. "And then, whilst I was living like a hunted rat in the heart of the city, I somehow got into the mosque. I knew all about the lamp, and so, naturally, I took it."

"To pay out the sultan for his cruelty?" said Betty.

"And the shiekh chap, and the whole boiling of 'em—yes! And as soon as I could do so, you bet I—"

"Vamoosed?" suggested Jack Linton again.

"Your vocabulary, young man, is A1," said the traveller. "I vamoosed, and got to England at last, and that's how the Lamp of Susahlah came to be in the school museum at Moreovo!"

Polly Linton pouted.

"You have made the story as bald as possible!" she protested. "It is really a hair-raising story, told properly. You haven't said anything about the Susahlah people—what a fierce, cruel lot they are!"

"And what about Rose of the Desert?" added Madge. "I like that name. It sounds so pretty!"

"She was a pretty girl, take my word

for it," said Jack, looking more musingly into the fire. "But what do you think ought to have happened in regard to that girl? Think I ought to have brought her home with me, and married her, and lived happy ever after?"

"I expect she fell in love with you, anyhow," said Betty roguishly. "When you had saved her life, and she discovered your secret—the risks you were running—"

"She was only a kid," he shrugged. "A smart kid, though, anyhow! The way she picked up the English talk—it was wonderful! But there, somehow I don't care to talk too much about Rose of the Desert. When I think of her—"

He paused, and every one of his listeners realised that, quite suddenly, all his flippancy had vanished.

He was staring into the leaping flame, as if the bright fire was showing him a picture of Rose of the Desert.

"She used to run all sorts of risks to get a secret talk with me," he said, musing aloud. "Even when I was first put in prison, she managed to see me now and then. And I remember how the tears used to come to her bright, dark eyes, because she wanted to arrange my escape, and couldn't. Ah, Rose of the Desert! For all you were only a dusky little maid, standing no higher than my hips, I missed you sadly when you came no more!"

"She came no more?" echoed Mrs. Linton softly. "Why?"

He gave another shrug.

"Who knows? She may have died, or perhaps it was only that she grew old enough to be taken into the sultan's palace. At any rate, I never saw her again. Kismet—it is Fate!" he wound up quietly. "Such ripping pals we were; and then—good-bye! How like life, always!"

A pause ensued.

"There was some Susahlah women in the gang that made the attempt to get the lamp, when it was in our school museum," Betty said at last. "How strange it would be if one of those women was really Rose of the Desert!"

"Pity Cora and Judith refused to talk about their captivity after their escape," murmured Madge. "But it was just like those two girls to be in mortal terror—afraid to speak, for fear the sultan himself should hear!"

Jack Somerfield laughed.

"Yes," he said; "I myself noticed that the sisters seemed to fall into a tremble if I asked the most simple questions, so I thought it best not to pester them. Come, though," he added, pushing back his chair to rise, "we have had enough of all this talk about the Lamp of Susahlah, and Rose of the Desert! Now for a—"

"Hark!" cut in several of the girls, starting up in wild alarm.

From the upper part of the great country house there had come a piercing scream.

"Paula!" burst out Betty, suddenly thinking of the girl who had gone up to change her dress.

"That is Paula Creel, surely!"

There followed a rush for the staircase. The two Jacks led, but only by a pace or two. Excitedly the whole party made their way to the first floor—and there, in a dimly-lit corridor, lay Paula Creel, in a deep swoon!

The girl's attack of faintness was no laughing matter.

It took her astonished friends at least a couple of minutes to bring her round; and even then poor Paula remained in such a shaky state, whilst she sniffed at Mrs. Linton's smelling salts, and sipped a glass of cold water, that nobody liked to pester her with questions.

At last, however, she steadied up, and then they soon found out the reason for her alarming swoon.

Paula had had a fright—a terrible fright.

She was just coming away from her bedroom, she said, when she saw a mysterious figure flit into view at the far end of the corridor.

"But, my dear girl," exclaimed Mrs. Linton soothingly, "it was only one of the maids!"

"Pwax excuse my contwadieting you," said Paula, who never forgot to be polite. "It was not a bit like one of the maids. I—I am twying to wecollect just who it was like, don't you know, but I can't!"

"Man or woman, anyhow?" questioned Jack Somerfield.

"Oh, a woman—yes, wather!" declared Paula. "It was all dwaped like a—like a ghost!"

"Hooray!" said Polly gaily. "Just the

thing for Christmas! Linton Hall has got its ghost at last!"

"How frivolous you are!" sighed Paula. She sniffed the salts again. "Only give me time, and I shall wocollect where I have seen just the same sort of dwaped figure before. At pwesent, howevah, I feel extcively distwessed. Yes, wather!"

So, to soothe her nerves, which really were in a shaky state, they all returned with her down to the drawing-room, and Mrs. Linton passed a whisper around that the subject had better not be discussed.

"Have you a ghost at Linton Hall? Betty and Madge could not help asking Polly, outside the room.

"No, worse luck!" grimaced Polly. "Not to my knowledge, anyhow. But what a lark if one is billeting here, just for the holidays! He, he, he!"

Then Mrs. Linton called to Madge to come in and oblige with some of her wonderful music—"something lively, my dear!"—and in a few minutes the Christmas gathering was as festive as ever.

Was it a wonder, however, if minds were running on the uncanny, when at last midnight had struck, and all the inmates of the house were going up to bed?

It was that season of the year when all of us are very susceptible to superstitious influences. Ideas we would laugh to scorn at other times seem very plausible on Christmas night!

But the girls came in for a lot of nonsense from the two Jacks, to help them fight against a certain feeling of "jumpiness."

To begin with, Jack Linton, after vanishing for a minute, suddenly appeared at the head of the stairs, pretending he was a burglar!

And then the other Jack—old enough to know better, as Miss Somerfield said—started playing the ventriloquist.

He made dogs howl mournfully all over the great house, and the placo also seemed to be full of parrots for a minute or two.

"How splendid!" laughed Madge, whilst her chums staggered about the hall, in fits of merriment. "We'll have a proper entertainment to-morrow night!"

"Yes, wather!" said Paula. "Howevah, for the pwesent, give me some sweet wese! Good-night, all!"

"Good-night—good-night, my dears!"

Mrs. Linton, the hostess, called out last of all, as the girls took their candles and trooped up the stairs together. "No first bell in the morning!"

"No jolly fear!" cried Polly. "Night, night, numsie!"

Their bed-rooms were all in the one corridor. Betty and Polly shared one, just as they shared a study at the school. Madge and Tess were together in the room adjoining; Trixie and Dolly had gone "co," in the next, whilst Paula wanted at least a whole room to herself, since her stock of "fwocks" was so enormous!

Fires were burning cheerily in each bedroom, and so there was no shuddery feeling of having left a cosy fireside for an ice chamber.

Then, when the beds had really begun to look more inviting than the fireplaces, doors were finally closed and silence fell upon the house.

"Bother! I left my bracelet on the piano downstairs!" Madge exclaimed with a laugh, breaking the quietude of her room and Tess'. "I'd better slip down for it, in case it gets lost. I hate losing things in other people's houses."

She had not yet started to undress, and she knew that the menfolk, at any rate, were still keeping each other company, smoking a last cigarette in the library. So it meant no trouble at all, her slipping down to retrieve the bracelet—no need to take a candle, since the house was not yet locked up and in darkness.

Quietly she went to the door and opened it, and passed out into the corridor. Tess, with a silent yawn, was just sitting down to shake off her shoes, when—

"Oh, Tess, I've had such a scare!" gasped a faint voice.

And there was Madge, back at the doorway, looking ready to drop.

Her handsome face was chalk white. She shook from head to foot.

CHAPTER 5.

"Help! Help!"

TESS sprang to her feet and made for her chum.

"Why—what—"

"Sh!" gesticured Madge, pulling herself together. "Tess, is there someone

prowl about the house? Or is there really a—a ghost?"

"But——"

"I saw a figure just as I went out of this room," Madge rushed on, in a tone of suppressed excitement. "It was right at the far end of the other corridor. It scared me so——"

"But why, dear? It was only one of the maids, surely?"

"No! But perhaps—perhaps it was only my imagination, after all," Madge said, sweeping a shaking hand across her eyes. "We have been talking about the Lamp of Susannah, and those Moorish people, and so——"

"You don't mean to say you saw a figure like—like——"

"Yes, like one of those women we saw in Barncombe High Street that day! You remember?" whispered Madge. "And perhaps they were the figures that Paula couldn't recollect to-night!"

Tess took a grip on herself.

"I'll come with you, Madge—to look round, yes! We don't want to raise an alarm——"

"No. Certainly not. It is so upsetting for everybody," Madge agreed. "Will you come, then? I'll show you where I saw the figure."

Tess gave a nod that meant "Right-ho!" and next moment both girls crept out into the corridor.

Beyond the staircase landing there was another corridor, in direct line with this one. Madge pointed towards it.

"Right at the end, there," she whispered.

"Isn't that the corridor where Jack Somerfield has his room?" questioned Tess.

"Yes; but he and the others are still downstairs. Hark! You can hear them talking!"

It was quite true. From below came the pleasant murmur of the men's voices.

Tess met Madge's eyes for a moment. Then, together, they tiptoed along the corridor, across the staircase landing, and soon came to the other passage.

Thick carpet was under their feet, and not a sound did they make, creeping cautiously past room doors that were all closed.

Suddenly, almost at the end of the passage, they reached a door which was

slightly ajar. Inside the room, although it was in darkness, someone was moving about.

And this, the girls felt sure, was Jack Somerfield's room!

Madge made a sign to her chum not to stir for a moment, and then she herself scouted forward to the end of the passage and turned round the corner. All this was done without a sound.

A few seconds later, however, Tess, still waiting breathlessly outside the half-open door, heard a faint scuffling sound, as if Madge, round the corner, had blundered in the dark.

Perhaps she had only just saved herself from falling headlong down some flight of stairs used by the servants.

The odd thing was, however, that Madge did not come back.

Tess would have prowled forward to investigate, but now those faint sounds came again from the bed-room, and she felt the impulse to tap at the door.

That impulse she yielded to, and directly she tapped at the door all the furtive noises ceased.

"Who is there?" she whispered uneasily. "Answer, please!"

But no answer came.

Then Tess stepped away from the door, feeling sure that something wrong was happening, and that an alarm must be raised.

She made a dart for the end of the passage, meaning to recall her chum from round the corner.

"Madge, dear—Madge!" she whispered, reaching the angle of the wall. "Come back! There is someone—a thief—in Mrs Somerfield's room, and we must——"

Her agitated whisper changed suddenly to a startled gasp.

Something had rushed upon her, silently, out of the deep gloom, and she was grappling with it.

A woman—yes, a woman in strange garb!

Lithe as a panther she had sprung upon Tess, clapping a hand across the girl's mouth to prevent her crying out.

And now—in vain, it seemed to the terrified girl, might she struggle with her mysterious adversary. She had been taken completely by surprise, just as Madge must have been a few moments previously.

Yet struggle she did—desperately.

Violently she tried to evade the hand that was pressed to her lips, whilst she fought to escape from the slim arm that imprisoned her. The woman was as strong as she was supple, and Tess was suddenly lifted clean off the floor.

Then, to Tess' increased bewilderment, this mysterious woman with whom she was tussling whispered fiercely in plain English:

"Be silent! Yield to me, and I will do you no harm!"

Almost in the same instant that this injunction was hissed, the whole situation changed.

Tess heard a quavering sigh come from Madge, who had been lying in a helpless heap upon the floor. Madge now struggled up, and flung herself upon the woman, who thus had two schoolgirls to combat with instead of one.

That she realised her desperate situation the woman showed by calling excitedly to whoever was in the room round the corner.

"Hussuf! Hussuf!"

There were other words, but they were mere gibberish to the schoolgirls.

"Mr. Somerfield! Mr. Linton! Help!" yelled Madge, and immediately Tess also, having got her lips free of the silencing hand, shouted wildly:

"Help! Help!"

That loud outcry brought the woman's confederate darting round the corner, after he had fled the room in panicky haste.

Something was in his hands—some bit of loot or other—and to the girls' amazement the woman urged him to make off with it.

All her excited talk, although it was in that foreign language, plainly told the girls that she was urging him to think only of getting away with what he held.

The man stopped dead, however, and there was the fraction of a second when Madge and Tess expected to be struck to the ground with ruthless blows. The woman cried out sharply, and her ally stayed his hand, strangely obedient to her command.

But he ejaculated a few words that were a warning to the woman to end the struggle, or he must end it for her.

"Help, help!" both girls shrilled again.

They had turned the tables by now, and she was their prisoner; but it was like

trying to retain one's grasp of an eel. Never had they encountered anybody so lithe and agile.

How it happened Tess never knew exactly, but suddenly her feet went from under her, and she sat down on the floor, only hanging on to the elusive woman by her raiment.

Then the same thing happened to Madge,

Down she fell, sprawling a'most a-top of Tess, but still clinging to the woman's outer mantle.

In a flash, that mantle was slipped off by its cunning wearer, and she was fleeing with her companion—fleeing down the side stairs of the house.

Madge and Tess scrambled up, breathless and shaky. They heard many feet sounding swiftly along the corridor, and in another moment a whole crowd came swarming round the corner.

Mr. Linton, Jack Somerfield, all the other girls, Jack Linton, his mother—here they were, within a few moments of Madge and Tess' first wild outcry, panting anxiously:

"What the matter? What has happened?"

"Down there—quick!" cried Madge, pointing wildly down the dark stairs. "A man and a woman—Moorish people, both of them! They are in full flight!"

"What?"

"The Lamp of Susahlah!" gasped both breathless girls, in the selfsame instant. "They have made off with it!"

Never would Betty & Co. forget the lightning effect that cry had upon the headmistress' brother.

Hardly had Madge and Tess voiced it before he was dashing down the dark staircase in pursuit of the fugitives.

Jack Linton followed, and Mr. Linton, too. Nor would the girls have hesitated about joining in the midnight chase, if they had been equipped for out of doors.

But all were without their shoes, and some had even begun to undress when the wild alarm went up. So—very ruefully, it must be said—they could only stand about at the top of the stairs, leaving the pursuit to the male members of the Christmas party.

Slam went an outer door, down there at the foot of the stairs, and then—click!

sounded the hasp of a lock, as a key was sharply turned.

A moment afterwards, all three men came charging back up the stairs, explaining breathlessly, as they dashed past the crowd in the passage, that the fugitives had got clear of the house and had locked the door on the outer side.

It was another proof of their great cunning, for they must have taken care to put the key in the outer keyhole when they first entered the house.

But neither Jack Somerfield nor his fellow pursuers meant to lose more than a few moments through this check.

Down by the main staircase they whirled through the great, old house, and a few seconds more found them dashing out from the front porch into snowy grounds.

There was no moon; no star shine even, for the sky was overcast. Only the unfailling luminosity of the snow saved the wintry night from being groping dark.

Followed by Mr. Linton and son, Jack Somerfield dashed on round to the rear of the house, hoping to pick up tracks in the snow made by the fugitives' feet.

Arrived at the back door by which the couple had quitted the house, however, there was a galling disappointment for the three men.

A swept path led away from the locked door, and so all tell-tale footprints were absent. The three could only race along the swept gravel in the hope of picking up tracks by-and-by.

Thus, in the next half-minute, they reached what was the high boundary wall of the kitchen garden. There was a green-painted door in the wall, completely fitting an arched opening; but the gate was locked—again on the outer side!

Then Jack Somerfield, with a grim laugh that showed he was on his mettle, made a spring for the top of the wall, the other Jack instantly following his example. Over the wall they both scrambled, alighting nimbly on a snow-covered bank of grass beside the main roadway.

Jack Linton darted to the green-painted door, meaning to turn the key and let his father through. But the key had been taken out and thrown away—another cunning action of the fugitives. Not that it was to prove much of a hindrance, however, for Mr. Linton, with at least some of his son's agility, was already starting to come over the top of the wall!

Jack Somerfield followed some tracks in the snow, but they only led him to the centre of the road, where they were lost amidst so many others.

"Well, we must scatter now," he muttered. "You each go one way, and I'll go another!"

"Right-ho!" assented Jack Linton. "You'll give a shout, of course, if——"
"Rather!"

And with that one word Jack Somerfield was off, racing alone along the nightbound road, whilst his friends each set off in other directions.

As Jack went dashing along he was listening keenly all the while for any sudden, faint "Hallo!" from either Jack Linton, or his father. Nothing of the sort became audible. What his straining ears did pick up, suddenly, was a sound ahead of him—a faint moaning sound!

On he bounded then, even faster than ever, and all at once he had to pull up sharply to avoid stumbling headlong over a fallen figure writhing in the roadway.

"Got-you!" he panted.

Suddenly he became aware it was a woman!

He bent over her, and, in the excitement of the moment, spoke to her in English, forgetting that he was a fluent speaker of the Susahlah tongue.

"The lamp! Come on now, where is it?"

"It shall never be yours—never!" the woman answered passionately; and then Jack suddenly realised how strange it was that she, a native, had understood his question.

Not only that, but she had answered him in English!

"Why, how do you come to speak English?" he gasped, in sheer amazement. "I only know one Susahlah native who could do that, and she was the one I taught—Rose of the Desert!"

"Rose of the Desert! I am Rose of the Desert!"

"What!"

He recoiled from her and stood staring blankly.

"You are pretending to be hurt so as to detain me like this! Rose of the Desert, I am going to catch that companion of yours!"

"He is my brother, Hussuf the brave!" she panted, still clinging to Jack's arm. "There must be no violence between my brother and you!"

"I must have the lamp! It was a vow I made, after my escape from that vile prison, after all the cruelty and torture I had undergone!" Jack said, with returning sternness. "I vowed that your people should rue their abominable treatment of me, and that lamp must remain mine!"

Gently but firmly he disengaged himself and ran on again, feeling pretty sure he could soon find Rose of the Desert again, after he had caught his man. He dashed on, and it was almost a miracle that he did not overshoot the mark.

For, suddenly, after rounding a bend in the lonely road, it was by a mere chance that he caught sight of a vague figure, shrinking between two dark holly-bushes, beside the highway.

It was Hussuf, and all in an instant Jack Somerfield turned and swooped upon the man.

Neither of the two was armed, but suddenly Hussuf, wrenching free his right hand, dived it into the pocket of the great-coat that he wore, as part of his English garb. Jack quite expected to see the man whip out some sort of weapon, but instead it was the lamp itself that Hussuf dragged forth, whilst the struggle still raged on.

With this heavy object Hussuf tried to deal Jack a blow on the head that would have stunned him.

He ducked, and the blow fell wide, and next instant he had hold of the thing by its chains, and was wrenching it desperately from Hussuf.

It was Jack's at last, and he sprang back with it, laughing triumphantly.

Taking a single instant for breath, Hussuf rushed at the Englishman again; and again there was a struggle. Then Jack, so as to have both hands free, sent the lamp flying through the air, and it fell upon the frosty roadway, smashing to fragments!

The splintering crash was not without a distressing effect upon Somerfield.

Even whilst he was still at grips with Hussuf, he was aware of a strange, sentimental regret that the lamp was no more. As for Hussuf, it must have been a fanatical grief which seized him.

Uttering a wild, inarticulate cry, the man from the desert tore himself free of his opponent with such violence that it threw Somerfield off his balance on the slippery roadway.

Then Hussuf's right hand dealt a lightning blow, and down went Jack Somerfield, so lie there, absolutely stunned,

When at last his swirling senses came back to him, Hussuf was gone. So, too, were the fragments of the lamp, except one little piece, which Hussuf must have overlooked in his search for them.

Jack picked this piece up and pocketed it, and then hurried back to the spot where he had left Rose of the Desert. But he could find no trace of her.

Gone—clean vanished, and he was all alone amidst the darkness and the snow.

Just as the dawn of another day was glimmering in the leaden sky, Rose of the Desert and her brother finished relating the story of their night's fruitless adventure to El Valiante, the chief.

Thus had they returned to that secret camp in the wild highlands of Exmoor—with only the tragic news of disaster at their lips, and only the incomplete relics of the lamp to set before El Valiante's eyes.

For a time the chieftain seemed too overcome for words. But at last he straightened his dejected figure and spoke grimly.

"Kismet—it is Fate!" he said. "But our master, what will he say to us if we go back with only this for the lamp—the lamp that can never burn again in the Mosque of Susahlah?"

"He will say," rejoined Hussuf, "why did we not bring back hostages—captives—who would only be released when every fragment of the lamp had been restored to us!"

"The English girls!" put in Rose of the Desert softly. "Remember, the lamp would have been ours last night—ours to take back to our master the sultan—but there were two English girls who gave an alarm!"

El Valiante gave one of his magnificent shrugs.

"Be it so," he answered, with grim finality. "They shall go with us, back to the land of Susahlah, two of those English girls, and they shall never see their friends again until the lost fragments of the lamp have been restored to us!"

CHAPTER 6. Danger Ahead!

A FEW evenings later, just before dinner, Mrs. Linton came to where the youngsters were gathered around the great fireplace in the lounge hall.

"Jack dear—all of you," the hostess of Linton Hall cried gaily, waving a letter that she had just opened. "Here is something that will provide some fun. Lady Elmsley is holding a sort of ice carnival to-morrow night. She wants us all to take part in it."

Lady Elmsley, as the girls knew, was an old friend of Mrs. Linton's. Sir Timothy Elmsley's big estate adjoined the Linton property.

"Carnival?" echoed some of the girls, jumping up at the word.

"On the ice! Oh—"

"Hooway! How wipping!" chimed in Paula.

"Lady Elmsley says," pursued the hostess, glancing at the letter, "that all their guests are going to have a fancy dress turn-out on the ice to-morrow evening, starting at eight o'clock. There will be torchlights and lanterns—"

"Hurrah!"

"And prizes for the best costumes!"

"Hooway! Bai Jove, geals—"

"How splendid!" declared all the girls clatedly.

"What-ho!" said Jack Linton. "We'll be there!"

"Then I'll send back a note at once, thanking Lady Elmsley for her kindness," said Mrs. Linton; and she hurried away to execute this pleasant task.

Amongst the half-circle of youngsters at the fireplace, all the talk was now of the glorious carnival.

That none of them had come provided with fancy dress clothes did not trouble them in the least.

"We can all tog up somehow!" declared Polly gleefully. "First thing in the morning, girls, I'll show you lots of cupboards we can turn out. Old lace curtains—"

"Wipping!" cried Paula. "I can go as a Spanish dancer!"

"On the ice? I can see you dancing on the ice!" teased Jack Somerfield, coming towards the girls, dressed for dinner.

"I think I'll be Charlie Chaplin," said Jack Linton. "The dad's bowler-hat, and a moustache—yes, that's my mark!"

"I know what I'd like to be," said Madge, when the other girls had talked themselves out of breath. "I'd like to dress up as a Moorish maid!"

"Rose of the Desert—eh?" said Jack

Somerfield. "No reason why not, young lady. I'm sure Polly can rout out a few things to make you look quite a daughter of the desert!"

"Do—do!" Jack Linton urged Madge then. "Think of the fun it will cause—Charlie Chaplin skating with a Moorish girl! Ha, ha, ha!"

"If I can get Mr. Linton, our host, to go as Mr. Pickwick," said Jack Somerfield, "I'll go as Sam Weller!"

There was a peal of laughter over this, and then the gong rang for dinner, putting an end to all the gleeful debate.

They all passed into the bright dining-room, and presently, when servants had ceased to go to and fro, the vast hall of the mansion was left entirely deserted.

The dining-room door was shut. Out here in the hall all was now perfect silence, whilst slowly the dancing flames of the log fire died down, shedding less and less light upon walls and ceiling.

The old hall was amply furnished with things in keeping with the stately architecture of the place. Here and there rich hangings served to dispel any impression of grim coldness which the stone walls might have created. And suddenly one such costly hanging might have been seen to move slightly, as if someone behind it were stirring.

Someone was there, behind that great curtain. Again it showed the least rippling movement, and then—

Round the edge of it there peered a face; not a man's face, but the small, half-veiled face of a woman.

For just a second the woman's bright, dark eyes sent their cautious glance all round the empty hall.

Then, without a sound, she slipped clear of the curtain that had screened her up to now, and flitted silently towards the stairs.

With a burst of laughter over some bit of merriment coming to her ears from the party at dinner, the furtive figure ran quickly, noiselessly, up the stairs.

Her dark raiment merged itself into the gloom of the staircase and landing, and thus she looked like some weird apparition floating through the house.

On and on she went, now darting swiftly along some dim passage, now pausing, with inheld breath, to listen keenly for signs of danger, before turning a corner.

So, at last, unseen by anybody belonging

to the house, she reached a remote part that would have been utterly deserted to-night, even if Linton Hall had been harbouring twice the number of Christmas guests.

Coming to the closed door of what was an upper room in this empty wing of the great house, she turned the knob and passed into the groping-dark chamber.

A moment and the door was shut behind her, and she went across the floor as dexterously as if her eyes were those of a cat, able to see in the dark.

Then, stopping before another door leading to a room beyond, she tapped very softly.

"Hussuf!" she whispered. "Hussuf, it is I, thy sister, and I have news—great news!"

The door was opened at once, and the encounter between that mysterious woman and her equally mysterious companion took place by the light of a lamp burning dimly in this farther room.

His gestures to the woman proclaimed great delight at her return. That dusky face of his, capable of looking so fierce and ruthless, was all smiles and tenderness. His low voice purred a welcome; and when she answered him in the same strange language that he had used, he again flashed a smile at her.

Then they closed the door behind them, and in this empty room, which was evidently only one of several lairs they had found within the great country mansion, the pair of them fell to conversing excitedly. We must record their talk, giving an English translation of the whispered dialogue.

"Great news—yes, my brother!" the woman said hastily. "You know how, when it was dark, I crept down to hide behind that curtain——"

"So that you should hear all the talk of those English girls, sitting before the fire," he broke in, nodding. "And you heard——"

"This, Hussuf my brother. A thing is to happen that will give us the chance for which we have been waiting!"

"A chance to avenge ourselves and our country for the loss of the lamp?" he exclaimed.

"Even so," she whispered back at him. "When it is dark to-morrow, there is to be a gathering of all these English out yonder where the ice lies thick upon the

fields. They go to a sort of festival there; I hear talk of torches, and many lanterns, and all will wear strange dresses!"

"These English girls——"

"Yea, Hussuf, even they will go to the gathering. Think, then, what it will mean to us! They will be away from this house, in the open country——"

"And it will be night!" muttered Hussuf.

"Rose of the Desert, my sister, it is indeed good news! If our chief, El Valiante, were here, then would he rejoice with us!"

"Dark night; even the moon will be down! We shall succeed!"

"Yea, surely!" he answered. "All is in our favour, my sister. Even their wearing of strange dresses will aid us. For, should you be seen, they will but think you are one of themselves, even an English girl, in disguise!"

"That is so, Hussuf!"

The woman looked ready to laugh with cunning delight; and then suddenly her eyes were agleam with fury.

"Hearken, also, to a thing I have not yet told you," she went on fiercely. "There is one English girl who will dare to dress even as I, Rose of the Desert, am dressed always! It is an insult, truly! But——"

"That insult shall be avenged, my sister," Hussuf took her up grimly; "just as all the rest shall be avenged. When we have done El Valiante's bidding; when there are two English hostages on the boat that is even now ready to take us back to the land of Sushlah—then shall all insults be well avenged!"

"Your plans, then?" questioned Rose of the Desert, in an eager whisper. "Since we know all this, what must we do to prepare ourselves? Hussuf, the time is short!"

He pondered a while, with a hand cupping his chin. Then:

"The hour shall find us ready!" he declared sternly. "Hearken, my sister; this is my plan. I go at once to the place where El Valiante is, to tell him that to-morrow night the boat must be ready for us all. You, my sister, will abide here——"

"I shall obey, Hussuf," she broke in, "even as I would obey our master, the sultan, for whom we are working!"

"I am thy brother, Rose of the Desert; and were it not so, still would I trust thee

to be wise and cunning in all you do," he continued, whilst his eyes dwelt admiringly upon this tall, beautiful, queen-like girl. "Since first we came to England, in quest of the Lamp of Susahlah—which, alas! is now no more—you have proved yourself, O Rose of the Desert, worthy of all praise!"

"No more so than thee, Hussuf," she returned softly. "But where is the man or woman amongst all of us, who has not striven to make the quest successful? It has failed—alas! as you say, the Lamp of Susahlah is smashed, and there is one fragment of it which we have failed to recover. That fragment, we believe, the man Somerfield must have found, and our master the sultau will know how to wrest it from him!"

"True," murmured Hussuf. "We return to our country to tell our master how, when the lamp was even in our hands, it was snatched from us by the man Somerfield and smashed! We return, and because the lamp is lost for ever, we shall return—with two hostages!"

"Yea," exclaimed Rose of the Desert, with extreme gratification. "Even two of the English schoolgirls—they shall go with us back to the desert, to the hidden city which is ours. And there, as El Valiante has said, they shall remain as hostages until that fragment of the lamp is restored to us!"

A pause followed the sinister words. Then Hussuf, after stepping to the door and listening, looked round and spoke.

"I go then," he whispered. "The time is short, and I must waste not a moment. Abide here, in hiding, Rose of the Desert, and to-morrow—"

"Whither those English girls go, I shall go," she suggested.

"Whither they go, you must follow—yes!" he answered. "We know not where their strange festival is to be, but it cannot be far from this house. So, then, you will easily follow. And, Rose of the Desert, hearken to my last words."

"Yes?" she breathed, bending towards him.

"I shall be there!" he told her grimly. "There, away from the light of the lanterns and the torches, to aid you. Trust me, my sister!"

"May I never behold the land of Susahlah again," she returned vehemently, "if I fail in the part that must be mine!"

Once again he stood regarding her with great pride.

Then, without speaking another word, he stole from the dimly-lit room.

The door closed behind him, and without a sound he made his way out into the dark corridor.

Unseen, as his sister had been, by any members of the household, he crept down through the house and gained the open air.

By midnight he was twenty miles away.

CHAPTER 7.

King Carnival!

NEXT day the girls spent a good deal of time getting ready for the evening's carnival on the ice.

Polly Linton showed her chums several odd cupboards which were stocked with just the right materials for "dressing up." So these cupboards were soon routed out, with the result that each girl "bagged" whatever seemed most suitable for the fancy dress she was favouring.

Polly Linton was going to the carnival as "Miss Polar Bear." An old sheepskin rug seemed just the thing for this purpose. Betty Barton was hoping to cause some fun by being an Indian squaw, with a face as brown as water-colour paints could make it.

Trixie Hope had got hold of an old red dressing-gown, and she was adapting this into a costume for Little Red Riding Hood.

Then there was Dolly's choice.

Dolly Delane's haul, during the raid on the cupboards, amounted to a skirt of very full dimensions, an old-fashioned poke-bonnet, and an out-of-date umbrella of huge proportions. So Dolly was going to be—Sairey Gamp!

Paula Creel, on the contrary, meant to be on the side of beauty—with a capital B.

It was Paula's good luck to rout out a real Spanish shawl, as well as several yards of snow-white lace curtain. Her ultimate toilette would greatly depend on a lot of pinning together, and so she made it known that she would "wetire" to her room to dress for the carnival directly after tea!

As for Tess Trelawney, she came off rather badly in the hunt for old garments that could be turned into an original costume.

In such a perplexed state of mind was this girl, Madge Minden thought it only kind to suggest that she—Tess—should also be a Moorish maid.

"Oh, but," demurred Tess, "I wouldn't like to be the same as you! People don't like to see two fancy dresses of the same sort."

"What on earth does it matter?" urged Madge. "The whole thing is only a bit of nonsense!"

"There are to be some prizes," said Tess. "My being the same character that you are taking may spoil your chance of a—"

"Both prizes!" exclaimed Madge. "Look here, dear; I have routed out ever so much too much stuff for my own requirements—enough for the two of us. So we'll each dress alike!"

The two girls were alone together in the bed-room they were sharing when this dialogue took place. The things routed out by Madge were all dumped on the floor, and they indeed made such a huge heap of suitable raiment that Tess abandoned her scruples, and so it was agreed that they should both dress up as Moorish girls.

As soon as tea was over that afternoon, with a rush the girls stormed upstairs to their various rooms.

Lots yet remained to be done to the fancy dresses, and how busily did fingers stitch away with needle and thread, and what yells of laughter attended the various tryings-on!

Nor were the menfolk of the house one whit less enthusiastic about the carnival.

They also were soon retiring to their rooms, there to "make up" for the evening. And, whilst the girls on one side of the house shrilled merrily over their amusing tasks, the men could be heard guffawing heartily as the good work went on.

Six o'clock was chimed by the stables clock, then half-past six. Still the mirthful Morcovians were putting finishing touches to their costumes!

Mrs. Linton had suggested that they should all sit down to some light refreshment before starting out, and then have supper when they got home after the carnival. But, when Mr. Pickwick started banging away at the hall gong, to summon everybody down to the light repast, the fearful clamour seemed to fall upon deaf ears.

Then suddenly Betty Barton came down, feeling almost afraid of herself when she saw her reflection in a landing mirror.

"Good-evening, Mr. Pickwick!" she greeted her host.

"Bravo—capital!" cried that gentleman jovially. "Betty, isn't it? 'Pon my soul, splendid! Little Minnehaha!"

"What price me, dad?" sang out Miss Polar Bear, now making her appearance on the stairs. "I suppose I ought to growl. Gurrurr! Gurrurr! Somebody give me a bun!"

"Excellent!" declared Mr. Pickwick. "And here is Little Red Riding Hood, and—why, if it isn't dear old Mrs. Gamp! How are you, Sairey? I think Mr. Pickwick must take Mrs. Gamp into the dining-room for a glass of lemonade!"

"Wot I say is," said Sairey Gamp, "drink fair, wotever you do!"

"So you know your Dickens, my dear?" Mr. Linton said to Dolly. "I think you are perfectly splendid!"

At this instant a very excellent imitation of Charlie Chaplin appeared, coming down-stairs with "East and West" feet, a bowler-hat, moustache, and all!

The hall filled with the others' shrieks of laughter, and this greeting "Charlie" acknowledge by taking off the bowler-hat and twirling it in the well-known fashion.

Then, from above, appeared Samuel Weller—another Dickens character. This was Jack Somerfield, made up so cleverly that he looked just like the famous "Samivel."

"But look, who is coming now?" cried Miss Polar Bear. "Grand flourish of trumpets! Enter the world-famous Spanish dancer—"

"Yes, wather, geals!" panted Paula Creel, pausing on the half-landing to admire herself in a mirror. "Pway welieve my mind, geals! Am I all wight, at a distance?"

They assured her that she looked superb, and there was a happy smile on Paula's face as she came tripping down the stairs.

And now a couple of figures appeared, at the sight of which there was a series of "Ohs!" like one hears at a gorgeous fireworks display.

Madge and Tess came rustling down the stairs, dressed in their Eastern raiment. The lower half of each girl's face was thinly veiled, and altogether they looked their part to the life,

"Bravo!" applauded Betty, Polly, and the rest. "First prize, Madge and Tess!"

"Do we really look all right?" Madge laughingly asked of Jack Somerfield, knowing that he, the traveller in Africa, was an expert critic.

"All right!" he echoed. "If I met you in the lantern-light on the ice I wouldn't know you from Rose of the Desert herself."

"I'd like Rose of the Desert to see Madge and Tess!" chuckled Polly, as they all went into the dining-room. "It would make her feel ratty, I know! Ha, ha, ha!"

Sandwiches were hastily swallowed, lemonade was quaffed, and then the whole party set forth on foot, forming as weird a procession of figures as one could ever expect to see.

The night was bitterly cold and dark, and the snow crunched—crunched under their feet as they marched along in the usual twos and threes. Some carried Chinese lanterns, and very pretty was the effect of their light upon the whitened ground.

As for the skating-ground, when the party got to it they found it looked like fairyland itself.

There must have been scores of Chinese lanterns hanging from the branches of trees on the margin of the ice, and more lanterns still were to be seen on the ice itself, suspended by means of tall poles. Lady Elmsley's guests were arriving in merry parties, and the frosty air rang with all the laughter and talk, whilst skates were being fitted on.

The Linton Hall party had no intention, of course, of keeping to itself. That would not have been in keeping with the spirit of carnival at all.

But whilst they were getting on their skates they remained a distinct batch, and all their talk consisted of comments on the other fancy dresses which the lantern light continually revealed.

Obviously a lot of these fine costumes had been hired from London. All the same, Lady Elmsley and her friends declared that the Linton Hall costumes were marvels of ingenuity, and that they did great credit to their wearers.

"Well, I'm off!" cried Polly the Polar Bear, as she fastened the last strap. "Ta-ta!"

"Half a sec.!" pleaded Betty, and next minute the little Indian squaw was on the ice with her chum.

Then Dolly and Trixie got started, and were soon mixed up in the gay throng which was whirling around in the lantern-light, to the music of the gramophone.

Paula, hugging her Spanish guitar, trod gingerly down to the edge of the ice, to find Mr. Samuel Weller chivalrously waiting to give her assistance.

What became of the guitar in the next minute or so Paula never knew. After sitting down on it twice rather heavily, she left it to its fate, and probably it remained kicking about amongst all the skaters.

And now Madge and Tess were ready.

They were the last of the Linton Hall party to take to the ice, for, after fitting on their skates, each had had to manipulate the veil covering the lower half of her face. And, as Tess chucklingly remarked, she was not exactly used to this sort of thing!

Very pretty both girls looked—no mistake about that—in their picturesque garb. Directly they were on the ice the attention they attracted was so great as to become an embarrassment.

"Shall I find you partners?" asked Lady Elmsley, who looked very sweet as a China shepherdess.

Shyly they intimated to Lady Elmsley that they would like to skate together for a little while, and next minute they were skimming hand in hand round the outer circle.

Four or five acres at least was the area of the ice, and even so large a number of revellers as was here to-night could not crowd the place.

"Look, Tess!" exclaimed Madge, suddenly pulling up at a quiet spot. "How pretty the whole scene is from here!"

Tess agreed. She and her chum had reached the far side of the sheet if ice, well away from the lanterns and clear of other skaters. Thus, with darkness all around them, they were in the right position for viewing the carnival as a whole.

"It would make a lovely picture; think I'll do it from memory when I get back to school," said Tess, who was quite a promising artist. "Those lovely lanterns dotting the scene, all the glow of torches and other lanterns amongst the people over there—"

"Beautiful!" Madge murmured, still gazing enraptured. "One only gets the real beauty of the scene by standing apart from it."

"It's lovely here!" repeated Tess, still

drinking in the glowing scene which was surrounded by the wintry night.

So they lingered there, watching the ever-changing group of fantastic figures, whilst their ears caught the pleasant medley of laughter and talk, and the ring and clash of skates.

Behind them, on this remote side of the ice-covered field, was a big larch wood, the straight-stemmed trees bordering the temporary lake. Utterly still was the winter's night—not a breath of wind stirring, or the girls would have heard the larch wood whispering in its own soft, sad way.

Suddenly, however, Madge and Tess heard a rustling footfall just inside the woodland, and they looked behind them sharply.

"Someone there?" muttered Madge, in surprise. "I should not have expected it."

"If it is someone," said Tess, "I suppose it is only one of Lady Elmsley's guests coming later to the carnival. But—"

"Hark!" broke in Madge. "Someone spoke!"

They listened eagerly, and now, from out the darkness of the larch wood came a low, pleasant voice—the voice of a woman—calling them.

"Come and help me, please!" was the plaintive cry. "I am in need of help!"

Madge and Tess looked at each other, feeling puzzled.

Then, of one accord, they got off the ice and advanced between the trees.

CHAPTER 8.

Prisoners!

"**W**HERE are you?" called Madge.

"Who is there?"

But that plaintive voice did not speak again. The only response to Madge's cry was a sharp rustling of the undergrowth in the woodland.

The two schoolgirls were groping in darkness, and their skates hampered their movements.

"This is rather strange," muttered Tess. "The person might at last answer. Hallo, hallo!" she called out. "Say what is the matter!"

And again there was no spoken response—only that continuous rustling noise, as if somebody was all entangled by brambles.

Suddenly Madge halted.

"Tess," she whispered, "I don't like it! I shan't go any farther!"

"And yet, supposing somebody is lying ill?" returned Tess uneasily. "That may account for our not getting an answer. There was certainly that one faint call for help!"

"I—I had not thought of that!" exclaimed Madge. "Then we must go on. But—"

"Better keep together, yes," broke in Tess, and they held hands after that, whilst they pressed along a brambly path between the dense trees.

All at once Madge Minden was greatly startled by the way in which her chum fell to the ground, as if she had had her feet pulled from under her.

There was a sharp cry from Tess, as she fell; but in the moment following she neither moved nor cried out again. It was just as if she had fainted!

"Tess! Why, Tess, what's the matter?" gasped Madge anxiously.

Close though she was to her fallen chum, she could not see her.

Pitch dark was the nightbound wood, and now, more than ever, Madge regretted that the pair of them had let themselves be lured away from the open ice-field.

She bent down to try and see what was the matter with Tess, and then—

"Oh!"
It was a sharp, bewildered cry from Madge as her own feet were suddenly pulled from under her.

Down she crashed to the ground heavily, and before she could voice another cry there was a hand clutching her.

"Silence, English girl!" spoke the same female voice that had sounded the alluring cry for help just now.

Then, whilst Madge and Tess began, both of them, to struggle desperately, their mysterious opponent called to someone who was evidently close at hand:

"Hussuf! Hussuf!"
Other words went with that name; but they were the words of a foreign tongue.

Even so, only too well the schoolgirls knew the fate that had suddenly befallen them.

They were in the hands of Rose of the Desert and her brother!

Here, within shouting distance of all the throng of skaters, they had been taken completely by surprise—made helpless prisoners almost before they could utter a sound or offer any resistance!

In a few moments the man Hussuf was at the spot, and what happened after that filled the still struggling schoolgirls with wilder dismay than ever.

Already part of their veil-like raiment had been wound about their heads, so that each girl felt as helpless as if she were in a sack. Now the enfolding wraps were drawn tighter, and the two girls were lifted by strong arms and borne swiftly through the larch wood.

For perhaps a hundred yards they were rushed along like this, with the springy branches of the trees lashing and scratching their swaddled forms. Then each girl realised that her captor had got clear of the wood with her. The hurrying feet crunched hard snow lying in the open, whilst all at once both captives heard the faint humming of a motor-engine.

Madge realised then what was going to happen next.

Frantically she struggled, but although it was Rose of the Desert who held her, that woman seemed to be just as strong as a man.

Into the waiting motor-car the hapless girl was bundled, to find herself sprawling beside her equally ill-fated chum.

The engine roared to life, and the car went bounding off over rough ground.

positively dwagged!" declared Paula. "But I have not seen those geals, no!"

The rather puzzled silence that followed this statement ended with a muttered "Um!" from Betty.

"I suppose they must have gone back to the Hall for some reason or other," she reflected aloud. "But I should have thought they would let us know before they went."

"Yes, wather!" agreed Paula. "I trust we have not offended them in any way, geals?"

"Absurd!" said Polly. "Madge and Tess are not like that; they don't take offence. Besides—an evening of this kind, when everything is a joke!"

"It is no joke, wondering what has become of those two," rejoined Dolly Delane. "I think something ought to be done about it."

"Yes, wather!"

Betty was of the same opinion, too, and the upshot of it all was that they found Mrs. Linton and Miss Somerfield, and explained their anxiety.

"What's that I hear you saying?" cried Jack Linton, suddenly joining the group on the ice. "Madge and Tess not here?"

"No. It's very peculiar, Jack, but—"

"Peculiar!" he cried. "Here, Mr. Somerfield, and you, dad! These girls are saying that Madge and Tess are missing!"

And so the news spread until the whole gay carnival had been brought to a complete stoppage by reason of this unlooked-for incident.

The more it was discussed the more uneasy did everybody feel.

Lady Elmsley's people tried to dispel the alarm by advancing various plausible theories, but none would hold water.

Jack Linton quitted the ice suddenly, and started to take off his skates. That done, he explained his intention with business-like crispness.

"Going back to the Hall," he said. "And I'd rather not wait for the rest of you."

Then he was off, his familiarity with every yard of the countryside enabling him to make good speed in spite of the darkness.

This business about Madge and Tess was worrying him.

Up to a minute or two ago he had been larking about as gaily as anybody; now, even as he ran on, he got rid of most of his absurd make-up, feeling that the time for fooling was over.

"Polly——"

"Hallo-ee, Betty! What's up?"

"Have you seen anything of Madge and Tess?"

Betty Barton asked the question fully an hour after the carnival had started.

"Queer you should ask me that!" exclaimed Polly. "I was just wondering myself what had become of those two girls!"

Trixie and Dolly came skating by, and Betty called to them:

"Seen Madge and Tess, you girls?"

"No," answered Trixie and Dolly breathlessly, as they pulled up on the ice for a bit of talk. "Not since we first got our skates on."

"Well, that is funny!" answered Polly.

"Where are they, then?"

"Perhaps Paula can tell us. Paula, dear," shouted Betty, "have you seen Madge and Tess?"

And again there was a disappointing answer.

"I have been dwagged wight and left—

He flung away the bowler hat, rubbed off the painted "moustache," and, one way and other, looked quite his normal self again by the time he reached the gates of Linton Hall.

Striking up the carriage-drive, he burst into the entrance-hall, crying eagerly:

"Madge—Tess! Madge!"

There was no answer. Two or three of the servants came from the kitchen, agape with surprise, and he panted a question at them:

"Have a couple of the girls been back since we started out?"

"No, sir! Oh, no!"

"Then where—what——"

He checked his bewildered cries, and made a rush for the stairs. Mounting them three at a time, he was soon in the corridor outside the bed-room occupied by the missing couple.

"Madge—Tess!"

For he thought they might have come back to the house, and come up here without being heard by the servants.

But again there was no answer.

Down the stairs he went, and as soon as he was out in the grounds he sent a ringing shout into the darkness:

"Madge—Tess! Hallo, hallo! Coo-eee! Coo-eee!"

Still no answer.

All he heard at last was the excited voices of Betty, Polly, and the rest, heralding the hasty return of all the Linton Hall party from the ice.

He ran to meet them, crying out excitedly:

"They are not at the house! No sign of them anywhere!"

"What!"

"The servants say nobody has been back!" he panted, facing the scared-looking throng on the snowy drive. "So what does it mean? That's what I want to know—what does it mean?"

Mr. Linton, after the moment's halt, resumed his hasty strides towards the house.

"The telephone!" he muttered. "I am going to 'phone the police!"

And by the time the rest of the party got indoors they could tell, from his exasperated cries, that he had already been ringing and calling at the instrument until his patience was lost.

The girls raced up to their rooms, there to change out of all their ridiculous attire

with lightning speed. Like Jack Linton, they felt that it was awful to be made-up in carnival attire now that matters had taken such a serious turn. They knew, too, that Jack Somerfield was also getting rid of a costume which had ceased to be amusing.

"What a time dad is getting on to the police!" Polly exclaimed, as she heard her father almost raving at the 'phone down in the library. "I've never known quite such a bad delay!"

"Would it be the weather?" asked Betty.

"But it was all right—no delay at all—this afternoon," answered Polly. "Dad was using it then, you remember."

They hurried away, meeting their chums in the corridor, and all five girls passed down the stairs together.

"Exchange! Hallo—hallo!" Mr. Linton was still shouting in the library. "Are you there, exchange?"

He gave another twirl at the instrument, still hoping to make himself heard by the exchange operator several miles away.

"Always the way!" he fumed, whilst the girls hovered at the threshold, watching and waiting. "Whenever there is an urgent call, I——"

"Hark, dad!" cried out Polly. "Someone is calling to you from upstairs—it is Mr. Somerfield, I fancy!"

In the selfsame instant, a hasty step sounded on the stairs, and the girls fell apart as they saw Jack Somerfield dash down into the hall and come whirling towards the library door.

"You can't get on, Mr. Linton?"

"No, bother them!" shouted the gentleman, still holding the instrument in readiness for the call. "There has not been the least answer!"

"No wonder!" was Jack Somerfield's grim reply. "You are cut off!"

"Cut off——"

"Yes, I have just discovered that the telephone wires have been cut, outside a landing window, upstairs."

"Then we are isolated!" gasped Mr. Linton. "A proof that there has been some villainy afoot!"

"And those two girls—oh, what has happened to them!" cried out Miss Somerfield, in great distress. "Mr. Linton, you know I am closely concerned in all this——"

"You are bound to be," he said hoarsely. "You are the girl's headmistress at Morcove School. Though they were here as

guests, and you were in no way responsible for them, any harm that may befall them is bound to grieve you terribly!"

"Poor Madge—poor Tess!" exclaimed Betty. "But what harm can possibly have befallen them? Unless—"

"Unless what? jerked out Jack Linton eagerly.

"Unless," said Betty slowly, "they have been captured by Rose of the Desert and her people!"

As those words were uttered, Jack Somerfield struck a clenched hand to his head in sudden horror.

"Betty is right!" he panted. "That is the explanation! Madge and Tess are in the hands of the Susahlahs! Those servants of the sultan have made captives of the girls!"

"For what reason?" quavered Miss Somerfield, looking as white as death.

"For what reason indeed!" was Jack Somerfield's groaning answer. "The Lamp of Susahlah has been destroyed for ever, and this, surely, is their method of revenge!"

"You mean that they will be taken out of England?" asked Mr. Linton huskily. "Taken to their far-off country?"

Jack Somerfield shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

"I am afraid that is what I do mean," he returned.

For a tense moment silence reigned.

"In that case," said Betty suddenly, "we must go after them."

"Hear, hear!" cried Polly excitedly.

"Of course I shall go after them," said Jack Somerfield. "Naturally—"

"I said 'we,'" put in Betty firmly.

"But, my dear young lady—"

"Moreover to the rescue!" cried Polly. "You can't leave us behind, Mr. Somerfield; can he, girls?"

"No, no, no!"

Jack gazed at their eager faces for a brief instant.

"By Jove," he said at length, "if by any possible chance it could be managed—if you could all accompany me—No, no, don't all speak at once! I must think this out; I won't promise. Still, there's an outside chance. To-morrow I'll give you a definite answer."

CHAPTER 9.

The Schoolgirl Hostages!

ALL through the hot African day not a living being had visited this tiny oasis in the heart of the desert.

The glassy surface of the shady pools had never once been rippled by the touch of man, beast, or bird.

Vividly green, amidst the surrounding waste of white sand, this cool, verdant spot had seemed as lifeless as they.

But now, towards sunset, the tall date-palms were canopying quite a fair-sized party of travellers.

They were natives, and they had come in, an hour since, upon the backs of their tireless camels.

Here, evidently, they would rest for the night, for already a few quaint-rigged tents of camel-cloth had been set up. The unladen beasts of the desert had been taken apart to be tended by their men, and were now all a-kneel, but with heads still nervously erect, after the manner of their kind.

Already, too, a camp fire had been lit, and to and fro between this fire and one of the still pools went a man, who was preparing an evening meal.

It seemed as if the tiny camp was to be kept in two sections—one for the men-folk and the other for the women. The choicest spot had been set apart for this latter section, and its tents were the first to be completed.

Down dropped the fiery sun to an horizon that was dead level, and swiftly the deep shadows of moving people and stately trees lengthened upon the grass. Then, suddenly the light seemed all gone. A wind stirred across the sun-baked sands, and the palms rustled.

Checking all the excitable yet quiet movements of the whole party, there now sounded the winding note of a horn. It was a call to prayer, and all in a moment these people had ceased their activities.

They turned to the east, where already a few stars were flashing forth in the velvet sky. Silence reigned, and then the faintest murmur of musical voices, murmuring some formula in unison, blended with the whispering of the palms.

Whilst all visible in the open air were still devoutly kneeling, the flap of one of the women's tents was drawn aside, and

two girlish figures in native dresses stepped forth together.

Not only were they taking no part in the sunset call to prayer, for all they were dressed as daughters of the desert, they stood and looked at the kneeling figures with all the awed expression of strangers in a strange land.

In a few moments one girl plucked the other gently by the sleeve, and they passed in silence to a part of the camping ground remote from the rest of the party.

Then one of these girls spoke.

"The mountains, Tess!" she said, in the English of any British schoolgirl. "How close they seem to us now!"

"Yes, Madge," sighed the other heavily.

"One more day on the back of that camel, and I suppose we shall be all amongst them. They look pretty black and terrible, don't they? And I had a sort of idea that there was no mountains at all in this part of the world, only hundreds upon hundreds of miles of smooth desert!"

"One lives and learns, Tess dear," murmured the other girl, with an air of being desperately cheerful in the face of great adversity. "What an interesting experience it would be, if only——"

"If only we were tourists!" struck in the girl Tess. "Cooks' tourists, seeing the tame part of North Africa as thousands of British tourists will see it during this winter holiday-time! But we are off the beaten track, Madge—we know it only too well!"

"Winter!" Madge mused aloud. "Yes, it is only January, and how many days is it since you and I were spending Christmas in Linton Hall, with Polly Linton and Betty Barton and Paula, and——"

"Oh, Madge darling, don't!" quavered Tess. "When we don't know for certain that we shall ever see the Homeland again, it gives one such a pang to think of old Morcove, the life that was ours before we were snatched away like this!"

Madge made no rejoinder, but slipped her hand into Tess's, as if to restore that girl's fortitude.

"Now it is quite dark—so suddenly the night falls!" Tess exclaimed, in a moment. "Yet I can still see those mountains over there in the east, Madge. The stars—oh, see what millions of stars! They come right down to the mountain crests. And

to-morrow! Madge darling, oh, Madge! Am I going to be a coward?"

"Hush, dear! No, you are very brave, Tess. How can either of us, mere school-girls from England, help feeling just a little afraid when the night shuts down? Even if we were with our own people, Tess; there is something in the vastness and silence of the desert that is terrible!"

"And we are not with friends! We are helpless captives who were snatched from the very midst of those we love, to be brought all this way, to this strange land, to be taken beyond those great mountains which hide the city of Susahlah!"

Tess Trelawney's voice was full of anguish as she said this, and her companion was going to murmur some further heartening words, when both girls were startled by a light footfall close behind them.

Against the firelit background of primitive tents and clustered palms, they saw a young woman advancing towards them.

Hers was a lithe, slender figure that had never known any other dress save that of her native country. For she was a woman of Northern Africa, and another day or two at most would see her within the white walls of her people's secret city.

Although this woman was the girls' chief custodian, they did not shrink from her with any shuddering sense of aversion. Maybe her breast harboured a spirit that could be stern and even cruel; but Madge and Tess would have been the first to give her credit for having treated them gently ever since that fateful hour when they were made captives.

She spoke to them in English of a quaint kind.

"Were you not tired, English girls, after the long day on the camel's back, that you had no desire for rest? And yet it was our first thought, to prepare a tent for you, before night should fall."

"Surely," protested Madge, "there was no harm in our taking a turn in the open? But perhaps you fear we were planning to escape!"

"If that is so," added Tess heavily, "you need not be uneasy, Rose of the Desert. Escape! Is it likely, now?"

The beautiful woman cast her dark eyes round about, and laughed musically.

"The English girls would be foolish indeed to flee when I and my people are not

looking!" she said. "For the stranger to this land only death in the trackless desert can be the end to any wanderings! So, then, you will never be so mad as to think there can be safety for you in flight. Besides, I trust you—"

"That is good of you, I am sure," said Madge Minden, with a touch of hauteur. "But you will remember that we have not given any promise not to escape!"

"Ah, you English girls!" Rose of the Desert exclaimed, laughing softly again. "How idle it is for you to tell me, again and again, that there is no promise not to escape! Yet it is a thing that pleases me, too. I am of a race that despises those who would give their word and then break it!"

The darkness fell a shade deeper around them, and now the desert wind came in a sudden cold blast against their faces.

"Come!" Rose of the Desert ordered them, not too sternly. "You would do better to rest, English girls. Night is upon us, and in the darkness the voice of the desert sometimes speaks sadly! I would not have you suffer more than is necessary."

"Rose of the Desert—oh, listen for a moment!" pleaded Tess. "You seem to pity us—"

"One may pity, and yet be firm," the woman answered quickly. "This night you are in sight of the mountains of Susahlah, and your own country and those you love must seem far from you indeed! I am young; my heart is not much more than the heart of a girl in many ways, and so I can sorrow for thee in thy captivity. Even so—"

Making another pause, she suddenly drew herself very erect, assuming all the pose of a very queen amongst women.

"I tell thee this, English girls!" she exclaimed, her dark eyes flashing like the stars overhead. "If it were to be done again, I would do it!"

"I can hardly believe it possible," murmured Madge. "Like my fellow captive, I feel that you look at us often, in our helplessness, and feel regret—"

"Never!" Rose of the Desert declared vehemently. "The thing that I and my companions did was for our country and our master, the sultan. So would we do it fifty times over, rather than prove ourselves to be only worthless cowards!"

Tess heaved a hard sigh

"Well, it is a cruel shame!" she exclaimed, with intense bitterness. "A shame that what you consider your duty to your country has led you to bring us away from England. Apart from the misery and suspense it means for us, think of what our people at home are suffering!"

"Yes," added Madge sadly. "They do not know—"

"They will know, ere long," Rose of the Desert broke in. Her soft tone showed that she was not untouched by the girl's dream.

"To-morrow, we reach the mountain pass that takes us to the city of Susahlah; that secret pass through the mountains which only one man of your race has ever found—the man Somerfield. Soon, O English girls, you will be inside the city walls—"

"And then?" questioned Madge breathlessly.

"Then—I tell it for thy peace of mind—there will go forth a message to your people in England, from the sultan himself. He will say, 'Deliver into my hands the missing fragment of the Lamp of Susahlah, and the two English girls shall be delivered up to you.'"

"The missing fragment of the lamp!" echoed Tess, in a dull, despairing tone.

"That is what our fate is to turn upon! If the missing fragment is not in anybody's possession—what then?"

"Night has cast its gloom upon your mind, English girl," returned the Rose of the Desert softly. "Take comfort from what I tell thee. That missing fragment is not lost for ever! I and those who wore with me in England—we say it cannot have been utterly lost. It was found—by whom, we cannot guess; but it was found! And so it will come into our master the sultan's hands at last, and then wilt thou be let to go in peace."

How remote, indeed, seemed all hope of their seeing England again!

CHAPTER 10.

From England, Perhaps!

WITH heavy hearts they followed Rose of the Desert beneath the palms to the low tent that had been set apart for them.

A queer little lantern was shedding its

bluish light upon the interior, and the girl raptives saw that blankets had been spread for them upon the dry sand, whilst on a metal tray some food and drink had been set for them.

"Is there anything you lack?" Rose of the Desert asked, standing just inside the tent. "Tell me, and I, Rose of the Desert, will bring it with my own hands."

"Our English clothes," Madge seized this opportunity to mention. "You have made us wear garments like yours, and we do not like them. We are not used to them."

"And yet," Rose of the Desert retorted, with a faintly mocking smile, "were you not dressed even as I am, on the night when we captured you?"

"That was only for fun," sighed Tess. "It was a festival on the ice—what the English call a carnival. Madge and I only dressed up like that—"

"For a mockery!" exclaimed Rose of the Desert, as if she felt it as an insult that her Eastern garb had been imitated. "But you have not been made to wear those things as punishment for the mockery. It was said to me by El Valiante, who is chief of all of us, that you must wear the dress of this country across the desert."

"We were wearing ordinary English clothes under our disguise, at the carnival," Madge said; "those clothes are with us now. Why cannot we be allowed to wear them, then?"

"When the desert is behind us," said Rose of the Desert, "when we have passed the mountains of Susahlah, and are in sight of the city then shall you dress as English girls again. But until then, it is not safe."

"Not safe? Why—"

"El Valiante himself has said it. Perchance, someone that is not of our tribe might pass us in the desert, and he would go his way, to talk to others of what he had seen."

As she finished this explanation, the woman turned with all her native grace to leave the tent. Holding the flap aside, she looked round yet once again to speak a final word.

A huge moon had risen above the jagged outline of the mountain range, and Rose of the Desert's queenly figure was silhouetted against the silvery light.

"May thy sleep to-night be without

dreams," she murmured, with the old hint of compassion in her tone. "Thou art prisoners for me to guard carefully, not to befriend. And yet I pity thee."

Then she was gone, letting the flap of the tent fall behind her.

Madge fastened it for the night, and then she and Tess ate a little of the food and drank some warm coffee.

It was a meal that occupied only a minute or so, and it was eaten in silence. Both girls were as weary as they were dejected.

The long day's ride on the pitching back of a camel had made them feel far more fatigued than ever the longest cross-country tramp had done, in the old days at Morcove School.

Ah, those happy schooldays!

Little had they dreamed, when they were saying good-bye to the dear old school, on break-up day, that hundreds of leagues would lie between them and Morcove before half the winter holidays were over!

When they had laid themselves down, close together, upon the spread blankets, and had drawn others about them for warmth—for the night was already bitterly cold—they could not sleep at once, although they were so weary.

The tired minds retained thoughts of England and those dear to the hearts of the girls; their parents, their school chums—all the happy company with whom they had been spending Christmas at Linton Hall, when this strange fate overtook them.

There came a moment for Madge Minden—and perhaps it was the same with Tess Trelawney—when, lying here in the desert tent, on the borderland of sleep, she fancied she was back in England.

It was the night of the ice carnival, and she was with all the Christmas revellers again, skimming around on her skates by the light of all the pretty Chinese lanterns.

And, in twos and threes, she saw all her dear friends again; was exchanging happy talk with Betty Barton and Polly Linton; could hear Paula Creels drawing voice; was having a laugh with Trixie Hope and Dolly Delane over some joke or other.

Then she seemed to be with Polly Linton's brother, Jack; handsome, manly Jack Linton, who had sat next to her at the Christmas dinner.

He and she had pulled bon-bons together, and had exchanged trinkets—just for fun. There was that other Jack, too—Jack

Somerfield, brother to the headmistress of Morecove School; again Madge, in her dreamy doze, could see the tall, impressive figure of the adventurous traveller, and she felt how wonderful it was that a man who had faced such dreadful perils out here in the wilds of North Africa had ever been able to remain so boyish and light-hearted.

Silent was the whole camp by now, and all around it lay the vast desert, just as silent, too. Yet even this deathlike stillness served to bring Madge back sharply, now and then, from her flights of fancy to a painful sense of her actual position.

For, in this intense hush of night in the desert, there was a reminder, more emphatic than any sound could have been, of the hundreds of miles that lay between these two girls, and the mere edge of civilisation.

Such silence—it was not merely the silence of a country different from England; it was like the silence of another world!

And yet, suddenly, out of the intense stillness of the sandy plains and the starry heavens, there came one sound inseparable from thought of civilised places.

Madge heard it, and she lifted her head to listen keenly.

The hum-hum-hum of motor engines, droning far-off in the darkness!

Hum-hum-hum!

The faint noise persisted, although it did not grow much louder.

"Tess!" whispered Madge.

There was no response, and Madge knew then that her equally hapless captive had fallen asleep at last.

It seemed a shame to wake her; and yet — That sound, of all sounds, breaking the solemn silence of these African wastes!

Was it a motor-car? How could it be a car, out here in the desert?

Hum—hum—hum! The noise went on, as constant as the droning of an aeroplane.

An aeroplane!

Madge caught her breath excitedly as this explanation flashed upon her mind.

Not a car, but an aeroplane!

Even now, however, she felt it was kindest not to wake her chum. Only, she must get up and go to the door of the tent, to look out and listen.

Gently she turned aside her coverings, and tried to rise without disturbing her chum. But that girl was only sleeping lightly.

All in a moment, Tess was starting up, fully awake.

"Why Madge—"

"Hush, dear! It is all right. But I heard a sound outside. Hark! Isn't that an aeroplane, Tess?"

For barely a moment did Tess give her ear to the droning sound before she exclaimed softly:

"Yes! You are right, Madge, that must be an aeroplane! But—oh, Madge, darling, doesn't it make you think of England again! That sound—out here!"

They rose to their feet very quietly, and went to the tent entrance.

Unfastening the blanket that was drawn across the opening, they stood close together, peering all over the marvellous sky with its myriad flashing stars.

Yes, it was an aeroplane.

They traced it by its sound to a certain part of the heavens, and, although they could not see it, even as a speck in the moonlight, they still gazed in that direction yearningly.

"The people in that machine are most likely Britishers," Tess said, in a whisper of intense anguish. "If they knew, Madge—oh, if only they could know that we are here, helpless captives in the hands of these Africans!"

"Look!" Madge exclaimed, in sudden great excitement. "I can see its light, Tess! Can you make it out—that light like a moving star?"

"Yes! Oh, Madge, how good it is to see and hear it! A bit of civilisation—a bit of England! Which way is it going, Madge? How strange for an aeroplane to be going right over the desert!"

Madge answered, trying to keep the note of despair out of her voice:

"I expect it is some long distance journey for a race or a test. Someone has probably got up another trans-African trip. You know there was one some time ago. We used to read about it in the papers."

"Yes," responded Tess heavily. "And they—they won't come down anywhere near here! Even if it were daytime they would have nothing to land for here. And they are going over us in the night. They'll be gone soon!"

Even as the poor girl said the words, it seemed as if the drone of the powerful engines became a little fainter.

And now, still standing at the opening in the tent, the hapless girls heard sounds which told them that the aeroplane had disturbed others.

Close at hand they heard the voices of

Rose of the Desert and her women companions.

The men's tents were a couple of hundred yards away, and yet the muttering of El Valiante and his inferiors was also audible.

Fainter and fainter the sound in the sky became, until it died away altogether. And then, with only the murmur of barbaric voices to listen to, the girls fastened up the flap of the tent and turned back to their pile of blankets, almost wishing that the tantalising hum of the plane had never reached their ears.

"You will think me silly, Madge dear," was Tess's rueful remark, when they were settling down again; "but I couldn't help thinking, perhaps it was a rescue-party from England!"

"I had just the same thought, darling," Madge answered consolingly. "So if you were silly, I was, too! The moment I first heard that sound and knew it for what it was, I thought to myself: 'Supposing—oh, supposing—friends have come by aeroplane, to try and find and save us!'"

CHAPTER 11.

Waiting!

IN the glare of high noon, on the following day, a young man in Arab-like dress stood searching the horizon of the desert with a pair of British field-glasses.

The spot on which he stood was a rocky one, at the foot of a mountain forming part of the giant range seen by Madge and Tess on the previous evening.

At first sight, it would have seemed as if this lonely figure was in a place more appallingly desolate than even the trackless desert. Yet he himself knew that within a stones throw of where he stood there was that which the desert did not hold—a definite track for such native travellers as ever came this way.

He was at the very beginning of the pass across the mountains into the land of mystery that lay beyond.

"Nothing!" he said to himself, in perfect English, lowering the glasses for a moment, after his fiftieth sweep of the horizon. "But they will come—they must come this way, and no other. Somerfield said so—and Somerfield knows!"

He had only just comforted himself with this muttered remark, when the rattle of a

pebble close behind him made this strange sentinel face about sharply.

The field-glasses fell from his grasp and hung by their strap, whilst he clapped a hand to some weapon that was ready for service.

Then came a sound that banished the ready-to-fight look from his handsome face. He heard a girl's voice whispering in English:

"Don't shoot, please! It's only me—Betty!"

"Betty!"

"And your own sister Polly!" added another girlish voice.

Next moment, the speakers emerged from cover; and here, in this barbaric wilderness at the foot of the Susahlah mountains, stood a couple of English schoolgirls—in English clothes, too!

"My word, if you don't clear out sharp!" the young man in native disguise said, half-seriously, shaking a brown fist at the couple.

"Get back to the others, I tell you!"

"But——"

"You never know who may see you!"

"Gracious, I didn't think you would be so huffy with us!" said Betty Barton. "I'm sorry," she added, with genuine regret; but her chum, the maceap of Morcove School, struck in scornfully:

"Look here, Jack darling, you and the pater and Mr. Somerfield are not going to have all the thrills! Betty and I didn't join the expedition simply to look on. Neither did mother, and Paula Creel, and Trixie and Dolly!"

Jack Linton came away from his look-out post to reason with the girls.

"You'll get your whack of peril and excitement before we are back in England, never fear," he said grimly. "We may yet see you having to disguise yourselves as Susahlah girls, to help in the rescue——"

"It is the reason why we were allowed to join the expedition," said Polly Linton, "so if you think such talk frightens us, Jack, you are mistaken!"

The brother eyed his cheeky sister with a certain degree of admiration.

"Jove, but you are a couple! In fact, the whole lot of you, including Paula the drawler, are the limit for nerve!"

"Yes, wather!" came in an eerie sort of murmur from amongst the giant rocks.

"What, you, too!" gasped Jack Linton, gazing at the dainty figure of Paula Creel,

as that girl suddenly appeared before his eyes.

"Yes, wather!" Paula answered—more by habit than by way of soothing the indignant Jack.

Soothed he certainly was not.

"Look here"—and he would have clutched his hair desperately, if it had not been for the risk of spoiling his skilful disguise—"have we come all the way from England, by aeroplane, for a picnic?"

"Anything but!" said Polly, with a grim smile.

"Then what the dickens—"

"Gwacious, how extremely cwoos you are!" protested Paula demurely. "Weally, goals, this life is vewy twying, don't you know! If I stay at the secret camp we have made for ourselves, I have to put up with Mr. Somerfield's fivofulous wemarks. If I take a bwief stwoll to see if Jack has any news to wewport, I get my head snapped off! Howevah—"

"Well," burst in Jack, with a resigned shrug, "it's your look-out!"

"Yes, wather!"

"Excuse me, Jack darling," said Polly, "it is your look-out, isn't it? You have been keeping a look-out ever since nine o'clock this morning, and we have got simply fed up with suspense!"

"Besides which, we felt anxious on your own account," said Betty.

"Oh, of course!" scoffed Jack. "There is not a living being anywhere round about this part," he added. "You know what Mr. Somerfield said—and he knows. Natives may come down the pass, or may come towards it from the desert; but all this wild, rocky ground round about us—it is lifeless from one year's end to the other."

"Just so!" his sister took him up triumphantly. "And so what nonsense it was to suggest that we were running into danger! Besides, we came along very cautiously."

"Yes, wather!" agreed Paula. "I find it extremely advisable to cweep vewy cautiously woumd the wocks! Betty deah—Polly! Have you seen the dwoadful lizards? They are as big as dwagons!"

"Ahem!" said Polly. "As big as that! Well, put it all down when you come to write your book about the expedition, Paula deah! Lizards as big as dragons! Ha, ha, ha!"

It was good to hear that merry laugh ringing out in such a spot as this—the same mirthful laughter which had so often greeted

Paula Creel's fatuous talk at Morcove School.

But now Jack Linton was again scanning the sandy plain with his glasses, and there came a startled exclamation which drew a panted question from the three girls.

"Yes, Jack, what is it? Do you see—"

"At last!" he burst out, still peering through the glasses.

They were levelled to the far-off horizon, where the hazy white of sun-baked sand merged into the azure sky.

Betty, Polly, and Paula gazed with unaided vision in the same direction, but could see nothing—nothing! Only the level plains, with the heat quivering above them.

"I tell you they are coming!" Jack exclaimed a moment later. "A party of travellers on camels—natives, of course. And it must be El Valiente and his people—"

"With Madge and Tess as their prisoners!" chimed in Betty tensely. "Oh, how this makes me tremble with excitement—the longing to do something—anything!—for those girls!"

"Yes," nodded Polly, who was grave enough now. "Even if it were only to let them know that we are out here, determined to rescue them! We have reached the Pass of Susahlah in advance of them all, thanks to that wonderful aeroplane. But Madge and Tess—how it would surprise them even to know that we have left England, let alone that we are here!"

Jack lowered the glasses for a moment.

"Now, girls, go back to the others, and you know that the time for all fun is over. I think you a lot of bricks to keep smiling, as you do. It was fine to hear you joking about things, a while back, as if it was all a spree within a mile of Morcove School! But now—"

"We will go back, yes," Betty assented gravely. "Only—oh, Jack, do let us each have one peep through the glasses!"

"Well, sharp about it!" he said. "That caravan is coming along at a pace, and they may have glassos, too!"

"Bai Jove!" Paula said, ducking low. "I nevah thought of that!"

Betty took her peep through the lenses, and wonderful it was to see what they made visible amidst the noontide haze—a small procession of camels, the beasts swinging along one behind the other, each with its burden of passenger or baggage.

"But I can't see Madge or Tess! Oh, I can't see them!" the girl fumed regretfully,

handing the glasses to Polly. "They are too far off, of course."

Polly took her good look at the advancing party, and Paula had her peep. Then they zig-zagged their way amongst the giant rocks and boulders, leaving Jack still on the lookout.

The rocky wilderness abounded in places where scores of people might surely be in wait and spy out upon the camel-riders when they went past making for the mountain pass. But the girls had resolved when they embarked upon this daring adventure, that the most trifling order from their elders was to be obeyed implicitly. And the order was, at present, no showing even a hair of one's head over the top of any sheltering rock while the caravan went by!

It was Jack Somerfield who had decreed this, and, as Polly's brother had said, Jack Somerfield knew!

He knew—no one better—the most uncanny powers of the people of the desert to know when they were being watched, even from afar. It was a saying of his, a man like El Valiante could see round a rock with that eagle eye of his.

"So they are in sight, Jack?"

That cool remark made Polly's brother jump with surprise, for, with the field-glasses again glued to his eyes, he had been quite unaware of a solitary figure, dressed as he was, coming up behind him.

It was Jack Somerfield; but it is safe to say that this bearded man might have walked through the very streets of the secret city of Susahlah yonder beyond this mountain range, and none would ever have scented the Britisher beneath the disguise he wore.

It was not that he was made up for the part better than Jack Linton. But Somerfield, the adventurer of old, in this barbaric land knew how to live the part as well as look it. That tongue of his so fond of boyish witticisms could speak the Susahlah language as it was spoken in the sultan's own palace.

Polly's brother handed the glasses to his friend who was his senior by ten years or more, and for a full minute not a word passed.

Then Somerfield returned the glasses with a quiet:

"Thanks, Yes, Jacky boy, 'the camels are coming,' if you don't object to my taking liberties with a certain phrase. And we are

going to stand in the very dust they kick up as they go by!"

"Yes," said Jack, with a thrust of the jaw, as if the lightly spoken words were really a rallying cry to one's fighting spirit. "Well, you know I'm ready. Ready for anything!"

"Huh!" said his friend, and that was all for the moment. Then he said, laying a hand upon the lad's shoulder:

"But it will be all right, my son; trust me! I shall pass the time of the day with El Valiante himself, as if I were an old pal of his, you see."

"I trust you right enough, sir. And, even if the thing were a hundred times riskier than it is, I'd still be game for the venture! If only we can catch the eye of Madge and Tess—"

"We shall have made a good start, that's a cert.," agreed the elder Jack. "Don't forget you are deaf and dumb, Jack boy. Quite a common complaint amongst these people, I assure you!"

So they talked on, with the cheerful fortitude of Britishers ready to come to grips with the foe.

Out of the shimmering haze came the camel-riders, drawing swiftly nearer. It was a long line of beasts, no two of them abreast of each other. Foremost rode the men of the party, and it was probably El Valiante himself who sat the first camel.

Baggage beasts came next, and last of all were the women and girls, with only one man riding at the very tail of the long procession, by way of guard.

Another hour brought the camels so close to the foot of the pass that the two Jacks could hear such minor noises as the procession was making.

"We shall be all right," Somerfield murmured steadily, "if only they do not halt here for a rest! If they do— Ycet El Valiante will surely push on as far as he can during the day. So we'll hope for the best, Jacky boy!"

Young Linton made no response.

With the foremost camel now only a quarter of a mile away, he had started to act as well as look the part he was to play.

A vacant look came into his intelligent face; his figure grew slack, giving him altogether a very half-witted appearance.

In a sort of childlike way, he shuffled around, stooping to pick up bits of stones, twigs—anything that seemed to catch his

becile fancy. And, after toying with these for a little while, he dropped them idly, only to pick up other foolish trifles.

And now both he and his trusty friend heard the voice of El Valiante, talking back over one shoulder to the man on the second camel.

"Steady does it, Jack boy!" was Somerfield's last murmur to young Linton. "You are splendid!"

Then the last chance for a final word had gone.

Steadily the camel-riders came on. A few more minutes, and then—what?

This daring encounter with the captors of Madge and Tess—how was it to end?

CHAPTER 12.

"Our hands have touched!"

EL VALIANTE checked his sulky-looking camel as he drew level with the lonely beings standing together beside the rough track.

Jack Linton, still picking about amongst the stones, was aware of the whole procession coming to a stop. Then El Valiante spoke—in his native language, of course.

"Peace be on you!" he said, his eagle eye looking down upon the disguised couple.

Quick as a flash, and with an accent that could have had no flaw in it, Somerfield answered in the usual formula:

"On you be peace, O my master!"

"Ho then," El Valiante continued, still taking stock of the couple with his dark, fierce eyes. "What do you, friends, thus far from any habitation, without aught to aid your travels?"

Somerfield spread out his brown hands in a gesture of sadness.

"Alas! my master. This my son is but an imbecile, grown almost to man's estate, and yet is he as the creatures of the wild in his habits. But he is my only son, and precious in mine eyes, O my master!"

"Thou and he are to be pitied, friend," murmured El Valiante. "Truly, life is sad for those who have no wits, and for those who have the care of such. Whence came ye, tell me?"

"From the city which is great, even the city of Susahlah," Somerfield answered, with all the dramatic expression which he knew so well how to act. "This, my son, wandered off, even as a witless sheep will

wander from the fold, and for days have I sought him. And also, this son of mine was born even deaf and dumb!"

"Better he had died when he was born!" El Valiante said, with a shrug. "Farewell, then, friend! For thy comfort, then, I will give thee this."

He detached a sort of pouch of food and drink that hung at his side, and flung it down to Somerfield, who caught it eagerly and with grateful cries.

"Now Allah attend thee on thy way, my master! And when I return to the city of our fathers, it shall be known to all what mercy thou dost show to those in distress! Farewell, my master—peace be on you!"

"And on thee, friend!" said El Valiante.

And he set his camel plodding forward towards the pass.

Then, as the long procession began to file past, Somerfield squatted upon the ground, and began eagerly to open the pouch.

He gave guttural cries of delight over what he found inside it. Jack Linton shambled up to him, and stood gaping foolishly, as if, in a sort of animal fashion, he realised that his fond "parent" had come in for a bit of luck.

The camels stalked by, one behind another, and the men who were riding cried down greetings, receiving excitable responses from Somerfield. Jack Linton had already taken a crust of bread from his father, and was gnawing it in a stupid way.

Then the baggage camels passed, and after them came the beasts upon which the women and girls were riding.

Somerfield got up off his haunches, and stood in an attitude of profound respect.

At the same time he murmured "Peace be on you!" and added words that told Rose of the Desert and her native companions that the "witless one" was not answerable for his actions.

As for Jack, he stared at them all vacantly, receiving in return compassionate glances. Then, just as the camels bearing Madge and Tess were almost level with him, he emitted a foolish cry of childish excitement.

He had dropped the crust of bread, and was holding a flower between his lips, as if sucking its stem gave him pleasure. Tess's camel took her close past the stupid fellow, and she cast him a pitying glance, as the native woman had done.

Then Madge Minden drew level with him, and, suddenly, he took the flower from his lips and ran towards her, offering it.

The whole thing was exactly the impulsive, childish action of a half-witted lad, and Madge, thinking he really was but a sort of harmless lunatic, took the flower quickly. Then, as her fingers closed about it, her heart gave a violent leap.

For the flower was a paper one.

It was the same flower that she remembered taking out of a bon-bon, pulled on Christmas Day!

All this happened in a single moment. In the next, Somerfield acted his part by rushing up to the "witless one" and dragging him back.

Behind Madge, who was the last of the girls, rode the one male guard—a very fine-looking fellow. He came charging forward with cries of resentment at what had happened; but wily Somerfield was in time with pleas for pardon.

"Hold then, O friend!" Somerfield shouted. "As I told thy master—peace be on him and all his house!—this my son is but a child in all his ways!"

"Ho, then! I see my master has given thee food and drink," muttered the other. "Take this from me, then; for if El Valiante has pity on thee in thy affliction, friend, so shall Hussuf his servant!"

Another pouch was flung at Somerfield, who caught it as deftly as before; and next moment he was calling blessing after its giver.

"Hussuf—Rose of the Desert's brother!" Somerfield murmured in plain English, when at last he and Jack were alone together. "Hussuf, who was the spy in England! Hussuf, who had that tussle with me, half a mile from Linton Hall, for the Lamp of Susahlah—and even he did not see through our disguise!"

It was the old, light-hearted Somerfield who was speaking now.

"I wonder," muttered Jack Linton—"I wonder how Madge and Tess are feeling, now that that carnation from the Christmas cracker is back in Madge's hand!"

"You did a daring thing, Jacky boy, in rushing up to offer it!" Somerfield said grimly. "Our plan was that you should merely hold it in your lips, for her to see it. Still, so much the better. Only, what a pity it wasn't a note you smuggled into her hand, like that!"

"All the notes in the world could not tell her more than that paper carnation told her," was Jack's decisive answer.

And he was right.

At this very moment, Madge Minden was almost swooning with the revelation that had taken place.

The little bon-bon flower—the very flower that she had given Jack Linton on Christmas Day, in exchange for his "find"; here it was, back in her own hand once more!

And now it had been returned to her by Jack himself!

Yes, she understood. If the paper flower had been a letter of many pages, it could not have made things clearer.

The lad in native dress was Jack himself; and it was Mr. Somerfield who had masqueraded as the bearded father of a witless son.

They were here—here, in Africa! They were here, at the very foot of the mountain range which shut off the City of Susahlah from all the rest of the world!

Wonderful—oh, it was more than wonderful! It was as if sheer magic had been brought into use.

The would-be rescuers had not merely left England in pursuit of El Valiante and his people. They had reached the Pass of Susahlah even in advance of the party they were pursuing!

How Madge longed to cry out the joyful news to her fellow captive!

But it would have been sheer madness to do this, for Rose of the Desert would hear and understand every word that passed.

Hour after hour the journey went on, with the camels still in single line. The path was not steep; but such a gradual ascent, continued for so great a distance, meant the attainment of a great altitude in the end.

And all the time both captives noted how much wilder grew their surroundings as higher and higher they were carried by the patient beasts. What vegetation there had been down below now ceased altogether. On both sides, the winding track was shut in by rugged walls of rock.

At last a halt was made, and Rose of the Desert herself helped to dismount the girls from their ungainly quadrupeds.

"Rest where you will, English girls," Rose of the Desert said to them, when she had taken them apart from the rest of the party. "We do not camp here, but at sunset we go on again, and to-night, when the moon is risen, you will see—the City of Susahlah!"

Her dark, lovely eyes scanned the face of each captive in turn, perhaps to see what effect those impressive words had made. And so it was that she noticed how pale and excited Madge looked.

"Does the thought of the journey's end terrify you?" she exclaimed. "You turn pale, English girl—you, who have borne the desert journey so well up to now!"

"I feel—shaken up," Madge faltered weakly. "I am not afraid!"

"Rest, then," Rose of the Desert enjoined them again; "and in a little while I myself will bring you food and drink."

She went with wonderful agility over the rough ground, and not for the first time did the girl captives watch that graceful, lithe figure, in its becoming Eastern raiment, with fascinated eyes.

Tess was even going to exclaim what a picture for any artist to paint this daughter of the desert would make, when she felt Madge pluck her by the sleeve in an urgent way.

"Tess darling—oh, Tess!" Madge whispered excitedly. "I have touched hands, to-day, with Polly Linton's brother!"

Tess Trelawney stared as if she felt that Madge must have lost her reason.

"You have done what, Madge?"

"Hush! We are at a safe distance for talking, dear," Madge whispered; "but we must keep a guard on our voices. Tess, you remember that bearded man and the foolish lad—"

"At the entrance to the pass?"

"Yes. You didn't recognise them, of course. I myself would never have done so, and they knew it, and that is why they did such a bold thing."

"Madge, dear, I—really, I don't understand what you—"

"The man in the board was Jack Somerfield! The lad was Jack Linton!"

"Somerfield—Jack Linton? Oh, what craziness is this, Madge? How—how is it possible?" gasped Tess.

"I asked myself that question again and again, Tess," answered Madge, "and suddenly I saw the explanation. Last night—"

"Oh, the aeroplane!"

"Yes! It must have been theirs, Tess—there is no other explanation of their getting all the way from England in advance of us.

When we were carried off, they must have guessed that it was El Valiante's doing, and so they have come, stage by stage, by air!"

"To rescue us!"

"To rescue us, Tess darling, or die in the attempt! Oh, you may be sure that that is their resolve! Others must be with them, too. I suppose Mr. Somerfield is the pilot; he was in the Air Service during the war. There are modern 'planes with big saloons, able to carry quite a number of passengers."

"But if you did not recognise them, Madge—that man and the lad—"

"They did a daring thing, I tell you. Look!" Madge exclaimed, showing the paper flower on the palm of her hand. "Jack ran at me and gave me this, behaving as if he were just a harmless idiot. But he knew what the flower would tell me!"

"A paper flower—"

"One that came out of the bon-bon I pulled with him on Christmas Day, at Linton Hall. His bon-bon had a trinket in it, and we swooped. I gave him this paper carnation; he gave me—see, I still have it about me!" Madge broke off.

Putting a hand into the neck-opening of her dress, she drew forth a little metal trinket, no bigger than the half of a walnut. It was the shape of a miniature monkey.

"He gave me that to keep. Oh, it was all a joke at the time," Madge went on excitedly. "He said it would be a charm to save me whenever I was in danger. And now—"

"Sh!" gestured Tess sharply.

Rose of the Desert was returning, bringing food and drink for the girls.

She remained with them for the rest of the halt, and so any further talk about hoped-for rescue was out of the question.

Very careful they had to be, too, not to display even the slightest excess of spirits, lest Rose of the Desert should wonder why they had suddenly gained heart.

But the joy of knowing that rescuers were not far off was there, in the girls' minds and hearts, and how it altered all their thoughts of what the next few days might have in store!

The journey was resumed at sunset, and Madge and Tess both felt that even their first sight of the dread city would cause no shiver of dread to seize them.

They pondered the cunning and daring

which their would-be rescuers had already shown; they realised how entirely successful the couple had been up to now; and so they were still buoyed up with hope.

What need to fear the journey's end, when all the time trusty friends were near—were following mile for mile, perhaps, with daring plans for the rescue!

They had passed the summit of the pass, and were now descending on the other side of the great mountain range. More wild and desolate than ever were their rocky surroundings in the blanching light of the moon.

On and on! taking one turn after another in the ill-defined track, until all at once it widened out into a mountain road, and they saw the moonlight flooding down upon a vast plain that was like another desert.

Both girls were almost nodding off to sleep whilst they rode their camels, when this wider road was reached. The whole line of beasts was checked for a moment, at some order from El Valiente, and Rose of the Desert brought her camel alongside the captives, who were now able to ride abreast.

"See!" murmured Rose of the Desert, with a thrill of exultation in her clear voice. "Yonder, on the plain—there in the moonlight, English girls, is your journey's end!"

She swept one arm forth to point to a part of the plain immediately below the mountains; and the two girls, their tired minds rousing to activity again, gazed excitedly in that direction.

Like a cardboard model was the secret city, as viewed from such a height. Bright moonlight and black shadow made all its features clearly visible.

They saw the ancient wall encircling the hundreds of square, flat-roofed houses; they saw larger buildings with only the tiniest windows in the great, white walls. There were tall towers, too, and minarets, and—most striking feature of all—there was one huge edifice with a dome that shimmered like silver in the moonlight.

"Now, see," went on Rose of the Desert, her own eyes gazing rapturously at this bird's-eye view of her native city. "To the left, as I am pointing, is the palace of the Sultan."

She pointed, next moment, to the domed building.

"Behold the Mosque of Susahlah!" she

cried. "There—there is the great mosque where, for a thousand years, the Lamp of Susahlah burned night and day alike, until the man Somerfield took it in his folly."

"You know why," Madge could not help saying, in defence of the explorer. "He was brutally treated by your sultan!"

"All that he suffered, I know—yes," Rose of the Desert broke in, in a softened voice. "There, with your own eyes, English girls, behold the very prison where he was kept!"

Madge and Tess had shuddered now, as the awful place which Somerfield had once described to them was actually pointed out.

Was some such prison to be theirs—some other prison, given over to female captives, and yet just as awful in the dungeon-like nature of its gloomy cells?

If so, then what hope had they, even with brave and desperate rescuers working for their release from the hands of these people?

Rose of the Desert said no more, and in a few moments the signal came that the last stage of the great journey was to be resumed.

On the jogging backs of the camels the hapless schoolgirls were borne forward once more, down the steep mountain roadway towards the dread city; and—such was the absence of all traffic between Susahlah and the outside world—not a living being came that way for the rest of that night or during all the succeeding day.

But, when another night had come, with the moon almost as large and luminous as ever in the clear heavens, another party of travellers, all in native dress, made a halt on foot at exactly the same spot where Madge and Tess had caught their first sight of the secret city.

They were in native dress, but all were British!

Mr. and Mrs. Linton; Jack Linton and Jack Somerfield; Betty, Polly, Trixie, and Dolly—yes, and even Paula, too!—they were all here, on the mountain road above the great plain of Susahlah.

For an hour they rested, looking down upon the ancient town that lay bathed in the moonlight.

Then they moved on again, always on foot; and, with young and old alike, the resolve was just the same.

No turning back, until Madge and Tess were safely in their midst!

CHAPTER 13.

The Sultan's Decree!

A CONFUSING babel of barbaric cries; the baa-ing of sheep in pens; the lowing of starved-looking cattle; the chanting cries of beggars asking for alms, as they squatted in the shade of white walls.

These were the sounds which fell upon the unaccustomed ears of Madge and Tess when, on their second day in the City of Susahlah, the two girls were led through what seemed the market-place of the strange African stronghold.

One at least of their greatest dreads had not been realised. Instead of being cast together into some dark, primitive sort of gaol, they had been housed with Rose of the Desert and a couple of other women, in a weird dwelling-place that seemed to be part of the ancient city wall.

It was the house of Hussuf Ben Nazar, Rose of the Desert's brother; and here, she told the girls, she had lived with him since their parents' death.

Now, at this late hour in the afternoon, the unhappy girls were on their way to the palace, to be taken before the sultan!

They had been given their ordinary English attire to wear, as Rose of the Desert had promised should be the case, when once they had passed beyond the mountains and come to their journey's end. So, if poor Madge and Tess stared in amazement at all the people who thronged the narrow streets and the cobbled market-place, it may be guessed how their stares were returned.

Men and women bargaining at the quaint stalls broke off their quarrelsome clack of tongues to gaze spellbound at two such girls as these, going by with Rose of the Desert and two other women companions.

It was an ordeal the girls were never to forget. Not a voice was raised in savage anger; but most of the haggling women were so old and ugly, and the men so fierce-looking, even a look from any of them was enough to make one shudder.

After going past hundreds of such terrifying native people, it was almost a relief to the girls to find themselves at the palace gates at last, and to see El Valiante and the men who had shared his journey to and from England standing there.

El Valiante was, in his way, a gentlemanly fellow, with a certain chivalry, for which

the girls had not failed to give him credit since they fell into captivity.

Ushered by Rose of the Desert and her companions through the massive gateway of the palace courtyard, the bemused girls had time to gaze around whilst the men and women talked together in the native tongue.

Presently Rose of the Desert turned to the schoolgirl captives.

"Come!" she ordered them, with one of her graceful gestures. "Into the very presence of our master, the sultan!"

Then they went forward in an orderly party, El Valiante leading. Rose of the Desert following next, with Madge and Tess side by side behind her, whilst the rest walked two by two in the rear.

Mounting some shallow marble steps, they passed into the palace through a porch that was as big as the stage of an English theatre. Like an English stage, too, it was hung with enormous curtains of rich material, and these had been drawn apart by attendants as the party approached.

Madge and Tess heard the curtains fall back into place behind them, and each girl looked at the other with desperate fortitude.

If prison doors had clanged shut behind them, the sound could hardly have been more appalling than was that soft rustle of the closing curtains! So, at any rate, it seemed to both the girls.

All that came before their eyes, in the next minute or so, they only remembered very vaguely afterwards. There was just the dim consciousness of being led through one magnificent marble court after another, each more beautiful than the one before it, until suddenly there came another halt, in front of curtains that were surely made of woven gold.

Not a whisper was audible whilst the two girls and their custodians waited there. In dead silence did they stand, until a hand-clap sounded on the inner side of the curtains, which at once rustled apart.

Then, with senses almost reeling, Madge and Tess were led on again; straight on, for perhaps twenty or thirty paces, until they found themselves at the very foot of the sultan's couch-like throne!

He was already there, to give audience to his returned emissaries from England; but his talk with El Valiante was to go on for a full minute or more before either of the schoolgirl hostages could venture to

raise their eyes from the marble floor and look at him.

He was not looking at them for the moment. El Valiante had launched forth into the full story of the journey to England in quest of the Lamp of Susahlah, and the sultan was hanging upon every word. So Madge and Tess were able to study him.

He was a middle-aged man, but had not lost his good looks. He had grown a trifle stout; his cheeks looking all the fatter because of the long, black beard that jutted from his chin.

His eyes were like El Valiante's—coal-black and always a-glitter. But they did not flash with the spirit that one saw in El Valiante at times. He was not half the man El Valiante was—so the girls decided in their minds.

El Valiante finished his dramatic story, which had been interrupted many times with questions and interjections. And now the sultan—this same barbaric despot at whose hands Jack Somerfield had suffered years ago—cast his flashing eyes upon the girls, then signed to Rose of the Desert to draw near.

With many an expressive gesture of his hands, he jabbered some orders to the girl, now on her knees before him.

The speech lasted but a minute or so, and then he lolled back, fixing his eyes upon Madge and Tess to see the effect his verdict would have upon them.

"Hear then, O English girls," Rose of the Desert said, after rising from her knees and facing the captives. "Hear the wishes of the most high, my master, the Sultan of Susahlah! It is as I and those who were with me in England knew would be the decree. The sultan is angry that the Lamp of Susahlah is broken, and that only its fragments have been brought back to this country. More angry still is he, because one fragment still remains to be recovered before the lamp can be made whole again."

She took a pause for breath, then resumed:

"It is the sultan's good pleasure to praise us for bringing back you English girls as hostages. It is his decree that here, in the City of Susahlah, you abide with me until that missing fragment of the lamp is brought to us!"

Madge and Tess gave a sigh of great relief.

Ever since they set foot inside the palace they had trembled with the fear that they would not go from it again, and that Rose of the Desert would be replaced by some less pleasant gaoleseress.

"Come, then!" said Rose of the Desert imperiously. "The audience is ended!"

But, even as Madge and Tess were taking the first tottering steps away from the foot of the throne, the sultan flung out a hand to check them.

He spoke excitedly, fiercely, his eyes agleam with a reddish light, and Rose of the Desert was on her knees at once listening in all humility.

"One thing more the sultan my master bids me tell you," she said, when at last he had finished and she was on her feet again. "It is his wish to see the man Somerfield in this city again—yea, in the very prison where he languished years ago! Therefore, English girls, when El Valiante goes to England to tell thy friends, he will take letters from you to them."

"Letters!" Madge and Tess whispered.

It was the only word that had come from the girls, throughout the audience.

"Letters, yes," said Rose of the Desert. "And in those letters you will say that when the man Somerfield has returned to this country with the fragment of the lamp—then, and then only, will you be set free!"

"And he—Somerfield?"

"He will never go free again," Rose of the Desert answered softly. "It is the sultan's own decree!"

When the sun was set, and when the city had been silent during its allotted time of evening prayer, tongues wagged continually with talk of the beautiful, pale-faced girls who were the sultan's helpless hostages.

The merchant in his cool courtyard; the poor man in his house of mud; the boggar still squatting on the filthy pavement—all were willing to talk of what they had seen and heard to-day. And happy were those who had the pride of telling the whole story to the new arrivals in the city—travellers who had come in at the gates round about suudown, after journeying from other parts of the great plain of Susahlah.

"Alms, then, good master—for the love of Allah, alms!" whined a poor, half-blind

boggar, as he finished telling the day's news to one such new arrival.

This was a white-bearded man who looked very old and sad, as if his years had been full of great trouble. But he was not poor; that was evident from the richness of his attire, and so the boggar had whined louder than ever as this stranger came his way.

"Of a truth, poor wretch, thou art to be pitied," the old man said, throwing coins to the beggar. "Besides which, thou tellest a thing that must please the ears of all the sultan's faithful ones!"

"I tell thee more, kind master," fawned the abject creature on the pavement. "Lo, where my hand is pointing now; I can tell thee what all in the city do not know about this thing. That is the house where the hostages abide!"

"Shrewd one," said the old man, casting more coins to the beggar. "What dost thou not see, with that one eye of thine? It is a goodly house—"

"It is the house of Hussuf Ben Nazar, who is brother to her they call Rose of the Desert, my master," purred the mendicant, jingling his handful of coins.

"Then should the sultan's hostages be in safe hands," answered the old man, going slowly on his way. "For Hussuf and his sister, Rose of the Desert, are of good repute!"

"Yea, so my master! Peace be on you!" whined the beggar.

"On you be peace, poor wretch!"

Then the old man, staff in hand, made his way to one of the city gates, and was suffered to pass out on explaining his business.

The night came down, and beneath the dark heavens, with their myriad stars, he suddenly changed his feeble gait to the sprightly step of a much younger man.

Mile after mile he hastened along, until, towards midnight, he was in the wild, rocky country at the foot of the mountain slopes.

"I have been into the city—yes," said Jack Somerfield, taking off the white beard that was part of his new disguise. "And things might be worse—I can tell you that much."

"Where are they—where are they being kept?" clamoured those who were grouped about him. "Can we rescue them?"

"They are at the house of Hussuf Ben Nazar—Rose of the Desert's brother. It is a house in the city wall—"

"And we can rescue them?" panted his hearers, again. "Oh, tell us, Mr. Somerfield, do you think there is a chance?"

"There is a chance," he said quietly. "And we are going to take it! But the risks are very great. It is only fair that I should tell you this. And if we are discovered, the consequences will be terrible."

"We know that," returned Mr. Linton. "Still, we're not going to turn back at the eleventh hour, are we, girls?"

"No fear!"

"Wather not!"

"And what are your plans, sir?" asked young Jack Linton.

Jack Somerfield shook his head.

"Ask me that to-morrow morning," he replied. "I am going to devote most of to-night to thinking. Several schemes are floating about my brain, but they are all too shadowy at the moment. At any rate, we can do nothing until sunrise. Thank goodness, Tess and Madge know we are near!"

"Poor girls—poor girls!" sighed Mrs. Linton. "It would be terrible if, after arriving here safely, we failed!"

"But we're not going to fail, mother!" cried Polly. "It's Morcové to the rescue, and Morcové always wins!"

"That's the spirit!" said Jack Somerfield approvingly. "And now, all of you get what rest you can and leave me to think."

CHAPTER 14.

Messages of Hope.

IT was the hour of sunset. Already, only the open spaces of the town, such as the market-place, were retaining a sort of half-light. In the byways of the city, the crooked alleyways running between the meaner homes, night was already obscuring scenes that had known no change for a thousand years and more.

Along one such deeply-shadowed, narrow street came a native woman, followed by two others, who, by their mode of keeping at a respectful distance behind her, seemed to be her personal attendants.

The woman herself was quite young, perhaps still in her teens. She wore the white robes of an unmarried girl, her face

being veiled after the fashion of her country.

Passing, with a gliding step, along the rough cobbles, she emerged into a more important-looking thoroughfare, on one side of which was a very imposing line of white-walled dwellings.

In this wider street a man, in the picturesque native dress, was striding to and fro, as if it were his duty just then to keep up a sentry-go in front of one of the flat-roofed, barrack-like buildings.

The girl, still attended by the two women, halted to exchange a word with the young man.

"All is well, Hussuf, my brother?" she murmured, in a very gentle voice.

"All is well, Rose of the Desert, my sister!" he answered, his fine figure seeming to stiffen with greater pride as he surveyed this queenly figure now poised before him.

"Thou and I, my brother," Rose of the Desert murmured, "we have a great trust to fulfil! We must not weary—"

"We shall not, my sister!" he made haste to declare, his dark eyes flashing. "Let it be the sultan's decree that the English girl hostages abide in our house for many years, still will my watch be an unwearied one!"

"And, mine, Hussuf," answered Rose of the Desert. "But now, since I am returned to the house, take thou thine ease. There are friends who would welcome thee in their midst, valiant one! Go then, for it is safe. As for me—"

She looked towards the stout house-door.

"Now that night is here, I go no more abroad in the streets. I go to speak with the English girls, Hussuf; then to my repose."

He murmured approvingly, making a dignified gesture of loving respect for his sister as she turned away, gliding towards the closed door.

With a huge iron key, which she took from the folds of her white garment, she opened the stout old door, and passed inside, her attendants following, mute as ever.

With the hollow thud of a prison door was this house door forced shut. Going forward, with her gliding step, Rose of the Desert emerged from a short archway, into a small courtyard.

Here she dismissed her companions, who

passed swiftly into one of the buildings whose small windows looked out on to the paved yard.

The air in this tiny quadrangle was sweeter than the atmosphere of the city streets. Rose of the Desert removed part of the veil from her face, and seemed to spend a moment enjoying the peace and loveliness of this retreat.

She looked up at the African sky, of which a vast square section was visible, crammed with flashing stars. In some remote corner of the house-buildings, nesting doves cooed in the darkness.

Then, suddenly, the murmur of women's voices in one part of the ancient habitation, gave place to the thrumming of some musical instrument like a lute.

Rose of the Desert sighed—why, perhaps she would have found it hard to say, except that she was still young, and the stars and the music stirred up some youthful emotion. Crossing to a corner of the tiny quadrangle, she passed through an arched doorway, and then stopped, in groping darkness now, to knock twice upon a door on the left.

"Come in!" called a voice that surely no one would never have expected to hear in such a place as this—the calm, sweet voice of an English girl!

Then Rose of the Desert turned back a big key that was already in the lock, and swung the studded door wide open.

The room she entered was large and lofty, yet, if only because its walls were of a stone, and its one slot-like window heavily barred, the place suggested a prison.

Nor was it anything else but a prison to these hapless English schoolgirls—two in number—who stood up when Rose of the Desert appeared before them.

A quaint, globular lamp hung from the lofty ceiling, and, in the bluish light diffused by this feeble luminant, the face of each girl captive looked deathly pale.

But, if Rose of the Desert scanned those pale faces for signs of fear, she was not to detect any.

Suspense and anguish the two girls would own to suffering, but fear—never!

The native girl had not spoken a word before she took her dark eyes off the girls and looked at the clumsy table set in the middle of the room.

A bottle of ink, a quill pen, and some

small sheets like parchment were there set out, but never a word had either of the captives sat down to write.

"How, then!" exclaimed Rose of the Desert, letting a slight frown draw her finely-arched brows together. "You have not written those letters?"

"No!" both girls said together.

There was no insolent defiance in their tones, only a certain stoicism, which, perhaps, Rose of the Desert secretly admired. For she came of a race of people brave and spirited, even if they were utterly barbaric.

"So, then," Rose of the Desert exclaimed softly, "you Engleesh girls would put the future safety of the man Somerfield before your own?"

"If you were in our position, Rose of the Desert—" Madge Minden began.

But the imperious girl checked her with a gesture.

"Talk not of what I myself might do for the man Somerfield," she said, with a sudden passionate ring in her voice. "I, Rose of the Desert, am the girl whose life he saved, when, years ago, he was a traveller in this country, in disguise. I owe my life to that man, and I would give it for him at any time, if my life were my own to dispose of. But—"

She drew a deep breath.

"He is the man who took away from the Mosque of Susahlah the lamp that had burned there for a thousand years and more! And in England the lamp was smashed, and now are ye held hostages here until one lost fragment is restored to the sultan."

She took a step closer to the girls, and brought her small hand to rest upon the blank sheets of parchment.

"Oh, foolish ones," she rebuked them gravely, "heed my warning! It shall not be reported to the sultan this night that you refuse to write the letters for El Valiante to take to England. But if by the time another sun has set you still refuse to write, then must I go to the palace and report it."

The two girls now lifted their shoulders, with sighs that seemed to suggest an inclination to think better of their obstinate refusal.

"We are helpless!" Madge Minden exclaimed despairingly. "We know it is no

use hoping that the sultan will make lighter terms for our release. And so—"

"You will write those letters even now?" Rose of the Desert struck in eagerly. "It is weakness if I plead with thee, and I must not be weak. Yet do I feel that in this heart of mine, because I am but young myself, which urges me to entreat thee. English girls, be not stubborn!"

"But—"

"Be warned in time! If those letters are not written, then will it go ill with thee!"

Again the two girls sighed heavily, as if resigning themselves to the hopeless situation.

"Very well, Rose of the Desert," Madge said despairingly, whilst Tess murmured to the same effect. "Give us until to-morrow evening, and we will try to bring ourselves to writing the letters."

The beautiful African girl flashed her captives a look of satisfaction.

"Until to-morrow, then," she said, and turned back to the door.

Halting there, she spoke a last gentle word to the girls, over her shoulder.

"Night is upon the city, yet will I come again to you before your eyes are full of sleep. Do I tend thee well, Engleesh girls? Is there anything ye lack?"

"You have given us everything for our comfort. We give you credit for that," Madge Minden answered.

"It is as much my duty to tend thee well as to guard thee closely," she returned, and then was gone, shutting and locking the heavy door behind her.

Madge Minden at once tiptoed across the floor to the inner side of the door, and listened eagerly.

Perhaps her equally hapless chum could only hear the weird music of the African lute, as its strings were still plucked by some distant player. But the listener at the door heard the faintest sounds of Rose of the Desert's receding step, and at last she came away, sighing with relief.

"Yes, she has really gone, Tess," Madge whispered. "And so we can talk. But, oh, keep a guard upon your voice!"

"Trust me," whispered back Tess. "How can we ever know but what she has some means of listening? This strange house in the city wall, as they say it is, it may have its secret means of enabling

her to spy upon us when we little know it!"

Madge nodded, then whispered very cautiously again:

"I think we managed it all right, don't you, Tess—that bit of bluff, as I suppose people would call it?"

"Splendidly, I felt," answered Tess, just as cautiously. "She thinks we are slowly resigning ourselves to the writing of those letters—"

"And, in the meantime, we have gained a day or two!" Madge rejoined, with suppressed excitement. "Supposing we are compelled to write the letters to-morrow evening, Tess. That will mean El Valiante cannot start away from this city with them until the next day. And so—"

"We shall have done all we could, anyway, to delay his departure," broke in Tess. "And, oh, how I do hope that when he does start upon his journey he does not come by chance upon—you know whom!—in the mountain pass!"

"Hush!"

Finger on lip, Madge seemed to feel they must both listen again, to try and make certain that Rose of the Desert was not playing eavesdropper outside the door.

They could hear nothing, at any rate, and at last the whispered talk was resumed.

"That would have been the fatal thing—yes," Madge agreed, below her breath, "for El Valiante to have started to-day, perhaps, and to have reached the mountain pass just as—we know whom—were coming through it, making for this town!"

Tess turned towards the barred window in the wall opposite the door.

It was a window that looked out neither into the courtyard of the house nor into the city's streets. Instead, it faced towards the barren plains that lay all round the city's wall, of which this house of Rose of the Desert was an integral part.

The moon had risen. Its silvery light was flooding down upon the stretch of barren land at which Tess gazed out as she stood peering between the iron bars.

She could even see, far off in the distance, the great range of mountains, through which there was a pass—to the desert and the sea.

Madge came and stood beside her fellow captive, and for fully five minutes both

girls remained mute and still, gazing towards those moonlit mountains.

"It is all guesswork!" Tess exclaimed at last, still guardedly. "We can only guess that Mr. Somerfield and his companions have been coming through the pass in the last forty-eight hours."

"So much is guesswork—yes," answered Madge, her wistful gaze still directed towards the mountains. "But this much we know for certain, Tess, darling—and, oh, what comfort it gives us! There are those who have come all the way from England, by aeroplane, to rescue us! Mr. Somerfield is one—"

"And Jack Linton—"

"He is another. That we know, because we saw him and Mr. Somerfield, in disguise, when we were brought across the desert. They mean to rescue us, somehow. But I wonder—"

Madge broke off abruptly, startled by something that made her jump away from the window.

Tess also fell back sharply, equally startled by what had happened.

A fluttering object had hit one of the thick iron bars of the window.

Was it a bat, flying about in the moonlight, or a bird that had been frightened from its roosting-place?

It was neither.

After a moment, the two girls stepped close to the window again, expecting to see some poor maimed creature lying helpless upon the stone embrasure. What they saw, instead, was a folded sheet of stiff paper.

Madge snatched at it with a leaping heart.

Exchanging a wild-eyed glance with her fellow captive, she unfolded the piece of paper, and took it to the light.

Written in a bold hand, in pencil, were these words:

"Be brave still. Deliverance is coming!"

CHAPTER 15.

Will Their Dreams Come True?

SIDE by side on their prison couch that night, the schoolgirl hostages lay awake for hour after hour, excitedly pondering the thrilling thing that had happened.

Here, whilst under lock and key in this house of Rose of the Desert, a message had come to them through the barred window!

A message in their own English tongue—a message of hope from their would-be rescuers!

"Be brave still. Deliverance is coming!"

Midnight came and went, and still the excited captives felt their minds all in a whirl with this amazing development, whilst their hearts pounded with joyous hope.

Sleep fell upon them at last, yet even in their sleep the girls' minds seemed to carry on the train of thought started by the receipt of that startling message.

"I dreamed," said Madge, in a guarded tone, to Tess, when they both woke up, a little after daylight, "I dreamed that half Morocco School had come to Africa to rescue us!"

"Why, so did I!" answered Tess, with a queer sort of smile. "At any rate, in my sleep I saw some of our best friends again. There was Betty Barton and Polly Linton and Trixie and Dolly—"

"Sh!"

The door had been rapped on its outer side, and now Rose of the Desert unlocked it and entered, bringing food and coffee to the girls.

"See how I, though I have many at my command, attend upon thy comfort," she said, setting down the brass tray.

"You are treating us kindly," Madge hastened to say gratefully. "But are we to remain all through another day in this dingy cell? We are used to the fresh air, and without it we shall perhaps fall ill."

The idea had flashed upon her—perhaps they could be granted the privilege of taking the fresh air on the flat roof of the house, in which case they could hope to make themselves seen to any would-be rescuers who were close at hand in disguise.

To communicate with any such rescuers would be absolutely out of the question. But it would be a great thing achieved if they—Madge and Tess—could show themselves to be still safe and well.

Rose of the Desert contemplated her two charges for a few moments without speaking.

The girls had made a very careful

toilette, and their appearance seemed to be pleasing in the eyes of this native girl, with whom personal cleanliness and care in dressing was a strong point.

"Hearken, then," she murmured, in her silken voice, "when another hour has gone you shall go to the housetop for a while."

She added, whilst the two girls were showing their delight:

"From the housetop, Engleesh girls, may ye look out upon a city that is fairer than all others in my eyes: A city that was great when your cities were yet unthought of! A city that only one other English being has ever gazed upon, and that was the man Somerfield!"

Then she withdrew, leaving the girls to make their meal.

The food was good, and the coffee delicious. So it had been from the very first, but not until now had they felt any zest for their meals.

This morning, however, with that wonderful message of hope ever repeating itself in their minds, they had the appetite of breakfast-time at Morocco School!

Then, until Rose of the Desert reappeared, the two girls stood at the barred window, feeling the hot air from the sun-baked desert fanning their faces.

They were exchanging subdued remarks when Rose of the Desert came in.

"Come, then!" she said, beckoning to the girls. "You shall see the city that I, with my own ears, have heard the man Somerfield say is wonderful."

Madge and Tess followed eagerly as she led the way to a tiny rectangular tower, the thick walls of which enclosed nothing but flights of shallow stone steps.

Ascending these, the schoolgirls emerged, behind Rose of the Desert, upon the flat roof of the ancient house. Only the lowest parapet ran round the edge, although the roof was fully thirty feet from the ground.

At first the girls were completely dazzled—blinded—by the fierce glare of the African sun. Its heat seemed to them enough to shrivel up any living thing.

Then, by screening their eyes with their hands, they were able to gaze around, viewing a scene of which they had been able to see nothing from their chamber window.

With their backs to the open country and the distant mountains, they looked out across the teeming city.

It was all a-quiver with the heat, and Tess' whole artistic nature could appreciate the vivid contrast between blinding white walls and the patches of cool shadow.

As for Madge, in whom music was ever the ruling passion, she reared her head, to listen enraptured to fragments of barbaric music, which her keen hearing detected amidst the hum of the city's life.

Then both girls, by shifting their position on the flat roof, were able to see an open space some distance off, where several native minstrels were providing the music for all who chose to dance.

It was a glimpse of the happier life of the strange city, amidst so much whining for alms and cry of wares and quarrelsome bargaining, such as made a chaos of the town from sunrise to sunset.

Madge and Tess were still spellbound with what they could see and hear, when one of Rose of the Desert's attendants appeared upon the housetop, and spoke to her rather excitedly.

The girls saw Rose of the Desert raise her brows in surprise, and then she hastened below with her attendant, leaving the schoolgirl hostages alone on the flat roof.

"She doesn't seem to fear we shall take our chance, and try to escape!" grimaced Madge, looking over the parapet into the street below. "And, no wonder, either! It is a bigger jump than even we Morcove girls would ever like to—"

She broke off with a startled gasp. "Tess—Tess, darling! Quick! Look down!" she burst out, in an excited whisper, next moment. "Look!"

Tess quickly did so, and there, on the pavement below, outside the house door, which had not yet been opened, stood a very old man and a younger one.

The latter was looking straight up to the roof parapet, and his eyes met those of Madge and Tess.

"Jack Linton!" Madge panted, below her breath. "It's Polly's brother, in a new disguise!"

This was an even greater shock to Madge and Tess than the message on paper had given them.

All of a tremble, they clutched each other steadily, whilst they still stared down at the upturned face, which, despite its stained skin and other features of the disguise, they knew to be Jack Linton's.

Then, becoming instantly on guard, they

heard the stout door being unbolted and unlocked. They drew away from the parapet, to stand mute and still, wondering what was going to happen next.

Were the two disguised Britishers actually daring to seek admission to this house? And, if so, on what pretext?

"Oh, Madge, darling Madge!" exclaimed that girl's fellow captive, in great agitation. "I feel it is more than I can bear! For those two friends of ours to be as near to us as this—so near, and yet so far!"

"Hush, dear! Hush!" entreated Madge. She was fumbling in her dress pocket, and next moment she drew forth a quaint little object, no bigger than the half of a walnut.

"The little leaden monkey that Jack Linton gave me, out of his Christmas bon-bon," Madge murmured to Tess. "If I get the chance, Tess, darling, I shall slip it into his hands. Somehow, I feel sure it will tell him that we got the message safely, that we are full of hope."

"Hark!" Tess exclaimed, with upraised finger.

The incredible had happened. Jack Somerfield, disguised as a very old native, with stout staff and a flowing white beard, and his companion, Jack Linton, they had gained admission to the house!

At this very moment they were with Rose of the Desert in the inner courtyard.

The two girls on the housetop tiptoed to the parapet that ran round the walls forming the well of the yard. Ever so cautiously they peered over, and suddenly Rose of the Desert glanced up and saw them.

She evidently felt it was only natural curiosity on their part. At any rate, she did not motion them to stand away.

Neither Jack Somerfield nor Jack junior glanced up. They knew their part too well to make such a blunder as that.

Rapidly the white-bearded old man jabbered away to Rose of the Desert, accompanying all his talk with many a gesture of sad entreaty.

"Oh, I do wonder what it is all about!" Madge whispered to Tess. "If only we knew a few words of this language!"

As it was, they could only watch the interview in this bird's-eye fashion.

When the old man had ceased his entreaties, Rose of the Desert seemed to voice some reluctant refusal, and then he renewed his supplications.

Nor were they renewed in vain.

Utterly unintelligible as was all the talk to Madge and Tess, they could tell that Rose of the Desert was at last assenting to the old man's request.

Finally, she murmured some definite phrases that seemed to overwhelm both her visitors.

Down on their knees they went, bringing their white-draped heads to the very pavement. And, whilst the pair of them were still at the girl's feet, the old man poured forth the most extravagant thanks.

Rose of the Desert was evidently flattered. When the two at last stood up, she motioned to them to wait, and went indoors—quite "the lady of the house"—as if to see about refreshment.

It was Madge Minden's chance, and she seized it.

Deftly, she tossed the little lead monkey down into the courtyard.

It fell, with scarce a sound, right at Jack Linton's feet. He did not look up even then, nor did he immediately pick up the tiny trinket.

Only when Rose of the Desert had come out to them again, followed by a veiled attendant, bearing a tray of refreshment, did he pick up the lead monkey whilst fiddling with the strap of a sandal.

Rose of the Desert was clearly unaware of what had passed. She talked with the old man whilst he and his companion gratefully accepted the refreshments, and, finally, she escorted them, under the archway, back to the house door.

Madge and Tess thought it wisest not to run to the front parapet and look down into the open street.

Trying to appear unconcerned, they were studiously gazing towards the dome of the mosque when Rose of the Desert rejoined them on the roof.

CHAPTER 16.

What Pluck Can Do!

"ENJOY the sunshine while ye may," said the Rose of the Desert quietly. "At noon I receive a party of travellers in this house, and then must ye abide in your chamber below."

"Travellers?" echoed the girls, with not too much curiosity.

"From afar, yes," answered Rose of the Desert. "They are a family who go a long

pilgrimage because of great troubles that have befallen upon their house."

"Poor things!" exclaimed Madge.

"Pity them ye may, indeed," Rose of the Desert rejoined, growing more and more confidential. "So great is the loss they have suffered that all, save the old man, whom ye saw—him of the white beard—have taken a vow of silence."

"That is a common custom in this country, I suppose?" said Tess quietly.

Rose of the Desert inclined her head.

"It is a custom, yes. And these travellers, when they arrive, ye shall see, will neither speak nor show their faces, nor will they heed a word that is spoken them. So do they keep their vow, until the pilgrimage is ended!"

"How many are there?" Madge asked, still trying to suggest mere idle curiosity.

"Of those for whom the shelter of this house has been craved, one woman and five girls," was the answer. "The two men whom ye saw a while ago, and another who is of the party, they will abide outside the city, even nigh to this house."

"They will camp, do you mean?" asked Tess.

"Nay," answered Rose of the Desert. "No camp will they make, for there is no need. They do but stay the night long, with the camels which will be theirs."

"Oh!" said Madge, with affected lightness, although her heart was fluttering excitedly. "They will have camels?"

"To pursue their pilgrimage, even so," returned Rose of the Desert. "Last night they were resting on the plains, these pilgrims we speak of, and, lo, their camels took fright, and are gone beyond recall! So, he who is the venerable one of the house, he entreats me to give shelter to the females of the party, whilst he, alas, must search the city for those who can perhaps sell him fresh camels."

"Well," exclaimed Tess, glancing out across the teeming town "let us hope he gets them, and gets them cheap! Poor old chap! I do pity him—don't you, Madge?"

That girl nodded. Like Tess, however, her real pity would be for the "old man," otherwise Jack Somerfield, if he was unmasked whilst bargaining in the town for those camels!

Never in their lives had the two girls felt such thrills as were running through them now.

From the tongue of Rose of the Desert herself they had learned the whole daring plan for rescuing them! And an amazing plan it was—one to take one's very breath away.

But, above and beyond all the secret excitement raging in the hostages' hearts, over the thought of possible freedom ere another day was here, there was the thrilling anxiety as to what was happening to Jack Somerfield and his companion now—now, at this very moment!

They were abroad in the streets of the city, in the full blaze of the morning sun.

Their task was to mingle with all the native population, without making one slip that would be their undoing.

The search for camel-owners, and the subsequent bargaining, might occupy several hours, and from moment to moment there would be the dreadful peril of self-betrayal!

What audacity these two Britishers were showing indeed—audacity only equalled by their splendid courage!

And their disguised female companions—what wonderful courage was theirs, too! Who were they? The schoolgirl captives were wondering excitedly. A woman and five girls! Did it mean that—

Oh, wonder of wonders! Was it possible that the one woman was Mrs. Linton, and that the five girls were no other than the very five who had shared Christmas with Madge and Tess at Linton Hall?

Betty Barton and Polly Linton, Trixie Hope and Dolly Delane, and, then, making up the total to five, actually Paula Creel!

Were these the girls, veiled from head to foot, all of them deaf and dumb in the eyes of Rose of the Desert, on account of a vow, beneath the shroud-like disguises—one brave British woman, and five brave British girls!

"Well, Tess, darling," Madge whispered very cautiously, when she and her fellow captive were back in their shadowy prison chamber, an hour later, "one thing is clear. We must make no attempt of any kind to communicate with them."

"But, Madge—"

"Hark!" broke in Madge, starting violently. "A knock at the house door!"

"They are here!" breathed Tess, trembling from head to foot. "They have come!"

Strange, indeed, was the variety of human beings gathered that evening in the spacious old house of Hussuf Ben Nazar!

In one section of the fortress-like habita-

tion there were Rose of the Desert and her women-folk.

In that prison chamber on the ground floor with its one barred window looking out across the vast plains were the schoolgirl hostages.

And there, in the upper rooms that had been set apart for them, were the captives' disguised rescuers!

Mrs. Linton was arrayed in black raiment, according to the custom of married women in that country. Her youthful companions were all in spotless white, and neither the one woman nor any of the five girls had suffered the native occupants of the house to see behind that muslin veil which concealed, in every instance, an English face!

Rose of the Desert was totally unsuspecting. Of that the whole party was convinced.

In posing as an afflicted family making a long pilgrimage through the country, they had adopted a ruse as safe as it was ingenious.

That supposed vow of silence was a thing Rose of the Desert and her household were quite accustomed to meeting with, as Jack Somerfield's previous experience of the country had told him.

So, since the party's arrival, at midday, all had gone well. Food and drink had been brought to them by attendants who refrained from addressing a single remark to the strangely silent group. And when Rose of the Desert herself conducted them over the house, and even took them to view the city from the housetop, it was all done without a word from her lips.

She was respecting the conditions of silence which that old man, the patriarch of the family, had told her his people had placed upon themselves.

Nor did she eye the silent ones with pitying contempt for their self-imposed disabilities. In certain circumstances, she and her brother, Hussuf, might have acted just the same.

And now—now that night was here again, and a million stars flashed and burned above the silent city of Susallah, the shrouded occupants of these upper rooms had been left to enjoy their repose.

Only one outer door served the apartments, which consisted of a large chamber and a smaller one, with a curtained archway in between. That outer door was now closed and made fast on the inside, and at

last the disguised rescuers felt they could venture to whisper in one another's ears.

"Betty!" whispered Polly Linton, bringing her lips close to one of Betty Barton's shell-like ears, "this is rather quieter than after 'lights out' at Morcove School!"

Betty only nodded, feeling she had better not encourage such a chatterbox as her chum, Polly!

What Polly must have suffered during the last few hours, as the result of having to keep a still tongue, Betty could hardly imagine.

Then another pair of lips tickled Betty's other ear in the darkness.

"Betty dear, how do you like it—what?" came, in the very faintest of whispers, from Paula Creel. "Weally thwilling—what?"

Betty turned to whisper back in Paula's ear, and so the two girls bumped their foreheads together!

"Gwacious!"

"Sh!"

At this instant a firm hand was suddenly pressed upon Betty's shoulders, and she guessed that it was Mrs. Linton who had crept close to her in the groping darkness.

"Betty!"

Sure enough, it was Mrs. Linton who was now whispering.

"Pass the word round, Betty, but quietly. You girls must all lie quite still, as if you were sound asleep."

Betty put her lips to Mrs. Linton's ear:

"Right-ho!"

Then she listened to the whisper that came in reply:

"Do not stir if you hear me going to the door. It will not be time for you to act. Another hour yet!"

"Right-ho!" was again the whispered response from the captain of the Fourth Form at Morcove School.

Then from one to another of the girls, the word was passed around, always by means of lip to ear.

Anyone standing in the darkness of the main apartment would not have heard even the merest breath of a whisper.

The same silence was here as brooded over the whole house of Hussaf Ben Nazdr and the whole city. All a listener would have heard was the hooting of an owl from the open country outside the city wall.

And that sound from the outer darkness—what joy it brought to the hearts of Betty & Co.!

It was a signal from Jack Somerfield that all had gone well with him and his two companions, Jack Linton and Mr. Linton.

Three hooting notes in the darkness, the agreed signal that the camels had been obtained, and were even now on the open ground, close to the outer wall of the house!

Several minutes crept by. Then, suddenly, each of the girls was aware of Mrs. Linton rising to her feet.

In her black raiment, her figure was absolutely lost in the darkness; yet, somehow, the girls knew when she had got to the door and was silently opening it.

Then she was gone!

Without a sound, she went down the stone stairs and emerged into the cloisters on one side of the inner courtyard of the house.

A few seconds later she was at the door of Madge and Tess' prison chamber.

Mrs. Linton did not enter it, although the temptation to do so must have been almost overpowering.

She felt about until her sweeping hand touched the key in the lock. Satisfied that it was there, she now bent down and slipped a folded note under the door.

No faint rap could she bestow upon the stout timbers, to call attention to the note.

Madge Minden had thrown the toy monkey to Jack in the courtyard, at midday, thus telling him that she and Tess were alive to the whole daring plan. Mrs. Linton knew about this, and so she could hope and trust that no tap at the door was necessary.

Nor was it.

Barely had that slip of paper been pushed under the door before Madge and Tess saw it. They had been lying down, ready to sham sleep, but not for a moment had they closed their eyes.

Madge crept across to the door and snatched up the note. The lamp was still burning dimly, as on other nights. Trembling fingers unfolded the paper, and, with dilating eyes, the two girls read these words:

"When you hear four hootings of an owl, be ready!"

They stifled gasps of excitement. Refolding the note, without any crinkling of the paper, Madge at once made a sign to Tess that they must both lie down again. And this they did, without the interchange of a single whisper.

Things were all so critical, they felt they durst not voice even a whisper in each other's ears.

After that, what seemed an eternity of suspense dragged by. Silence, dead silence, both inside the house and everywhere out of doors.

How the two girls longed to rise from their couch and stand by the thickly-barred window! For they knew that, only fifty yards from that window, a number of camels were tethered, with three Britishers—disguised Britishers—keeping watch upon the beasts!

The schoolgirl hostages had seen the camels brought to that bit of open ground just before sundown. Watching, then, from their barred window, they had seen the disguised Britishers set about making the camels secure for the night, and then rig up some bit of shelter for themselves. And now—

Hark! What was that?

On the dead silence of the night there was sounding the hooting of that large, horned owl, which is so common in Africa. "Haw-oot, haw-oot, haw-oot, haw-oot!"

That was the sound, as near as one can describe it, repeated four times.

It was the signal to be ready!

CHAPTER 17.

The Moment Comes!

BETTY BARTON and her four disguised chums heard that hooting of the nightbird, and for them it was a signal—not so much to be ready, but to act!

They had had their instructions. Not one of these five intrepid girls was to be without her part in the actual carrying out of the plan.

Directly that last mournful "haw-oot" had died away, the girls silently got upon their feet. Then they stood as motionless as well-trained soldiers standing at attention.

In the next few moments, Mrs. Linton went to the door, as she had done an hour or so before, and opened it stealthily.

This time she did not at once creep on down the stone steps.

Instead, after listening for a space, she came back to the girls, now grouped together in the pitch darkness, and whispered a word in the leader's ear.

"Carry on!"

That thrilling order Betty Barton somehow transmitted to her chums, whilst Mrs. Linton now passed back to the door and out of the room.

She could not have been half-way down the flight of steps before Betty was creeping forth from the upper room, followed by the other girls.

They did not creep down in the wake of Mrs. Linton. Trixie and Dolly stood sentinel-like on the stone landing, their part being to listen, and give warning of any sound betokening danger.

The three remaining girls, Betty leading, climbed the few stone steps that were all they had to ascend to gain the flat roof.

And now Paula, faithful to her instructions, halted at the top of the stairs, there to keep watch, leaving only Betty and Polly to creep forward across the open roof.

These two girls went swiftly and silently to the parapet above the western, or outer, wall of the house, that wall which fronted towards the open plains and the vast mountain range in the distance.

The night sky was as clear as the sky seems always to be in these latitudes. The moon had come up later, but it was all too much in evidence, flooding the whole world of Susahlah in its blanching light.

Peering over, the two girls plainly saw, in the bright moonlight, a number of camels close to the house wall. They were no longer tethered, but were being held by Jack Somerfield, Mr. Linton, and Jack Linton, two beasts to each man.

Betty Barton took something from beneath the folds of her white raiment.

It was a rope-ladder.

Uncoiling it, she paid it over the stone parapet, whilst Polly made all haste to fasten its upper end to the wall.

The end Polly was dealing with had sharp grappling-hooks, and it was her task to make these grip into joints in the masonry, with no possibility of the prongs slipping free at a critical moment.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Linton had stolen down to the door of the captives' prison chamber.

Even whilst her hand was feeling for the key in the lock, she could hear someone coughing softly outside the house door.

That was Hussuf, Rose, of the Deseri's brother, keeping formal watch in the street, as he had perhaps been commanded to do by his master, the sultan.

That no sentinels had been posted on the other side of the house did not argue stupidity on the part of those responsible for the custody of the captives.

The city ended at the town walls, and on

that side of this house there was, in the opinion of Hussuf and his sister, absolutely no need to post a guard.

To-night, it was true, those three men, with their camels, were resting there; but the bona fides of the "pilgrims" had been established.

What more natural than that the men should bring their camels close to the house where their women-folk were sleeping, so as to be ready for an early start on the morrow?

"They little know!" Mrs. Linton was saying to herself, as she realised that, whilst Rose of the Desert was sleeping peacefully, Hussuf was keeping this useless watch at the front of the house.

Cautiously she turned back the big iron key, and swung the door open.

Next moment her loving arms were embracing both girl captives, as Madge and Tess pressed about her in silent demonstration of their joy.

With the dim lantern-light upon her uncovered face, Mrs. Linton made the motion with her lips:

"Hush!"

Then she whispered in the ear of each girl:

"Follow me!"

Back to the open door she turned, and how her heart was beating with the fear lest, at this vital moment, some alarm should go up!

But, no! The whole house still remained as quiet as ever.

So, with the utmost stealth, she led the trembling girls along the cloistered pavement and up the flights of stone steps.

Madge and Tess almost screamed out when, suddenly, they saw two ghostly figures in the moonlight. They thought Rose of the Desert and one of her attendants must have been aroused, and were standing here, ready to raise a wild alarm.

And then—oh, joy! All in a moment Madge and Tess saw that they were two of their own chums of Morcove School standing there. Trixie and Dolly!

Not a word dared any utter. All Madge and Tess could do, all Trixie and Dolly could do in return, was to let their eyes proclaim the delight over this reunion.

Making a gesture imploring the greatest caution still, Mrs. Linton moved on, and now Madge and Tess suddenly beheld Paula—dear old Paula, the Drawer—

standing, sentinel-like, at her appointed spot.

Again there was an interchange of rapturous glances, and then the party, now grown to five girls and one woman, stole out across the flat roof, to where Betty and Polly had made fast the rope-ladder.

Mrs. Linton tapped Madge upon the shoulder, and pointed over the parapet, meaning:

"You first!"

In a twinkling, Madge obeyed.

Down she went, as if her very life depended upon her agility, as perhaps it did!

Betty and Polly kept their hands to the grappling-hooks, to make sure that there would be no disaster if a prong should slip free. But Polly had done her work well, and the hooks held splendidly.

Tess went next, for it had been agreed among the rescuers that the captives should be the first to get clear of their prison house.

Then Trixie and Dolly went down the ladder, to be followed by Paula. And if ever Paula was inclined to yell out "Gwacious!" it was now! But she kept her nerve, reaching the ground without having voiced the faintest exclamation, a thing that was to be for ever afterwards remembered in Paula's favour!

Over the parapet Polly swarmed, and it was just like her, the madcap of Morcove School, to let a few comic antics accompany her skilful descent of the ladder.

There remained Betty Barton and Mrs. Linton. Betty got the gestured order, "Go!" And she silently clambered over the parapet, and got her bare feet on to the rope-ladder.

The girl did not expect Mrs. Linton to follow until she—Betty—had reached the ground, for, so far, no two of them had been on the ladder at the same time.

What was Betty's surprise, then, to realise suddenly that Mrs. Linton was already climbing over the parapet!

Next moment that surprise of Betty's gave place to wild dismay.

"Quick—quick! Down!" urged Mrs. Linton, in a frantic whisper. "I believe the escape has been discovered!"

"Oh!"

"Hush! Down, Betty! Faster—faster!"

Then—deafening sounds, as compared with the excited whispers that Mrs. Linton had voiced—Betty heard the hollow boom

of a door being slammed somewhere in the great old house!

Almost in the same instant the voice of Rose of the Desert was audible, crying loudly:

"Hussuf! Hussuf!"

Words in the native language followed this first outcry, and Betty, of course, could not know their literal meaning.

But she knew what form they would be taking if they were being spoken in English.

"Hussuf! Hussuf! Quick, quick! The Engloese prisoners have escaped!"

In that moment of wild alarm Betty felt that the ladder was more of a hindrance than an aid in getting to the ground.

Its rungs of rope seemed like the meshes of a huge web, designed to entangle her feet!

With the whole contrivance pitching and twisting violently, she clambered down as fast as she could, knowing all the time that Mrs. Linton was following, rung for rung.

Ten feet from the ground, the girl thought she had better jump the rest, and she did so.

Taking both feet from the dangling ladder, she hung for the fraction of a second by both hands, and then let herself drop.

Crash! She came to earth, tumbling backwards helplessly. Before she could scramble up unaided, someone had hold of her by a firm grasp.

It was Jack Linton.

"All right. Keep calm! The others are mounted. It is only you and the mater. Mater!"

"Yes, Jack; here I am," his mother answered, as she scrambled down the last rungs.

"Come on, then!" Jack urged them both, and, taking each by an arm, he ran them towards the camels.

Jack Somerfield was upon his feet still, doing things with lightning speed. The rest were all mounted.

"Up with you!" he panted, with more cheery composure than agitation. "This one, Betty, girl!"

And in the next brief instant Betty found herself hoisted on to a lumpy back that was already seating Madge.

"Madge, darling—oh, Madge!" gasped out the captain of the Fourth Form at

Morcove School. "The joy it is, to—" "Yes, Betty. But what is the matter? Aren't we all making a lot of noise now?" exclaimed Madge.

"We are discovered," Betty had to answer, as calmly as she could. "But—"

"My gwacious, we'll nevah do it, aifah all!" burst out Paula, in extreme dismay. "This is dweadful—dweadful!"

"Steady does it!" Jack Somerfield said quietly.

The camel of his own he got astride whilst it was still patiently kneeling. At a word of command in the native language the brute stumbled on to its broad feet, and further cries sent it striding to the forefront.

How, as a united party, they would ever get started, was a matter already causing terrible anxiety to Betty Barton and the rest of the girls.

The whole moonlit scene seemed to them one of the utmost confusion.

And now, suddenly, a wild outcry drew the girls' scared gaze back to the housetop.

There, with one or two dangling lanterns among them, were Rose of the Desert, her brother Hussuf, and all the rest of the household.

"My gwacious!" palpitated Paula. "What are we waiting for, goals? Heah, got on!" she yelled at the camel. "Pway pwoceed, you widiculous cweature!"

Such strange injunctions, however, had no effect upon the camel.

He stood sulkily motionless, like all the rest, except the one which Jack Somerfield was riding alone.

"I say, look!" Polly could not help crying out, in frank dismay. "Hussuf is coming down the ladder!"

But now that Jack Somerfield sang out a sharp cry that acted like magic upon the trained beasts. Away they all trotted, getting into their lolling stride at once.

"Now, on—on!" the explorer shouted, whilst he brought his beast round, and charged back to the head of the party. "Hang on, all of you! Keep together, if you can!"

He followed the words with some weird cries to the excited beasts, and next moment—

"Hurrah!"

"Hooway!"

It was not a loud cheer. It was nothing

more than a gasping murmur from all the girls, in fact; but it meant all the relief and joy that they had ever expressed, in times gone by, when their united voices made the walls of Morcove School shake with a proper Fourth Form cheer.

Off at last—yes!

Away, across the moonlit plains, away from the walls of that barbaric city, the stronghold of the sultan, from which the schoolgirl captives had been snatched!

Pitching and jogging, jogging and jolting—away they were going—and keeping together, too!

"Are you all there?" shouted back Somerfield.

"Yes, yes!"

"Yes, wather!"

With that reassuring cry coming back to him, the leader set his own camel going faster than ever. And faster still followed the other ungainly beasts!

As often as they could venture to do so, whilst clinging for dear life to the speeding animals, the girls looked back at the city.

The brilliant moonlight showed them all the domed buildings and the tall minarets, and how the fugitives fervently hoped that these might be their very last glimpses of the sultan's city!

But was safety assured even now?

Far from it!

Already there was an uproar in the town which told of excited preparations for a pursuit.

As the girls continued to dart backward glances over their shoulders, they could even see that the city's gate on this side of the town had been thrown wide, and a whole mob of natives was pouring through it.

Happily, all were only on foot; but every one of the fugitives could imagine with what haste the sultan's men would get mounted for a chase in the moonlight.

Oh, on! Faster, faster!

Farther and farther the town was left behind, and fainter and fainter became the burly-burly of the populace in the fugitives' ears.

Yet faster still, if that were possible, the fleet-footed beasts were being urged.

There came a sudden shout from that leader on whose skill and judgment surely the whole success or failure of the flight must turn.

"We must get on faster!" was Jack Somerfield's ringing cry. "There is a mounted party—"

"Coming after us? Oh!"

"Steady, steady!" he cried back to the girls. "Only let us reach the mountain pass ahead of them, and we'll beat them yet!"

And so they raced on—on, across the moonlit plains; faster still, and ever faster! And, all the time, knowing that behind them were the sultan's men, making their mounted pursuit with the promise of no telling how great a reward for a capture, one anxious thought was filling the minds of all.

Would they—could they—do it?

When these million stars above them had given place to the blaze of another African day, would they be safely flying a mile high above the limitless desert? Or would they be captives together, with no hope of ever seeing the homeland again?

With whom was the final triumph to rest—pursuers or pursued?

The plan of rescue had succeeded; but whether this subsequent flight would be successful, too—who could say?

For the fugitives knew, as they forged on across the moonlit plains, making for the one pass that would take them over the mountains of Susahlah, that the sultan's men were already in pursuit.

No doubt the pursuit was coming on as fast as ever; but just at present the fugitives seemed to have the whole barren wilderness to themselves.

"Hillo—hillo! Pull up a moment, all!"

Such was the loud cry which at last came from the rider of the foremost camel.

Having checked his own camel skilfully, he pulled it round and brought it trotting back past his companions' beasts.

"Which of you are the most tired—the camels or yourselves?" he asked, with the cheery humour of a Britisher in a tight corner.

There was no answer for the moment. Perhaps the unskilled riders were too breathless to be able to voice even a single syllable! But, presently, one of the girls did manage to give a feeble sort of wail.

"Weally, it is cwuel!" she complained, in a drawing voice. "Talk about being pwestwate, geals! This is worse than fifty hockey matches wolloed into one!"

Then her chums laughed, being of the same spirit which enabled the intrepid

Somerfield to laugh in the face of danger.

"It does make one a bit stiff, sticking to a camel going like the wind!" chuckled Polly Linton.

"Stiff!" cried the drawler. "I am bruised all over! Weally, geals—"

"Half a sec. with the talk," Somerfield now cried out, in his genial tone.

He had dismounted. Now he dropped to his knees and placed his ear to the ground.

So he remained for at least half a minute, whilst one of his men friends—it was Mr. Linton, Polly's father—guessed what the knowing explorer was up to.

"Listening for sounds of our pursuers," he explained, in a low voice, to the girls. "Unless they are miles and miles behind, Mr. Somerfield will hear them, trust him!"

"Gwacious!" commented the drawler "How wemarkable!"

"How very satisfactory, that is what I say!" rejoined the listener, starting up and beating the dust from his hands. "Not a sound!"

"What!" came in a positive shout of wild relief from his companions.

"But we are going to push on still!" Jack Somerfield said, and he remounted in a jiffy. "We must be well up the mountain pass before sunrise."

It was only too true.

Though the pursuit had, apparently, been abandoned for the present, the fugitives' knowledge of the sultan's methods convinced him that his men would never dare turn back at this stage.

His wrath over the daring, desperate escape must be terrible, and it was easy to imagine the fabulous reward which he would offer for the capture of one or all of the Britishers.

So, for another hour and more, on and on sped the girls and their older companions, whilst at intervals they still cast anxious glances behind them.

The moon traversed the star-bejewelled heavens, and sank towards the mountain range. Yet another hour of breathless riding, and then, as the fugitives looked back, it was to see the east brightening with the dawn.

Then, with a rush, the dawnlight flooded the whole wilderness with rosy light.

By that time the untiring camels were crossing the last mile of the open plains.

A few minutes more, and then they would be at the foot of the mountain pass.

But what if, after all, the pursuers were even now overhauling them?

There could be no feeling certain that the chase had been abandoned. Supposing, just at that moment when Somerfield had laid his ear to the ground to listen, the pursuing party had been halting?

That would account for Somerfield hearing nothing—nothing whatever, with that trained ear of his. When they, the fugitives, had pressed on again, it might be that the pursuers had also started off once more!

No sign of alarm was Somerfield betraying; yet there was that about his actions which showed that he was fully alive to the gravity of the situation.

He would allow no slowing up, even though the commencement of the pass was now but a few hundred yards off.

Faster still, if that were possible, he led the whole party on, and the dust rolled in clouds behind the great, padded feet of the racing beasts.

The pass at last! Here it was, the beginning of a track which was amply wide at the start, although they all knew that in a little while they would find it narrowing to a rough defile, more like the dried up bed of a mountain torrent than a proper pass. But they had gained the mountains, and that seemed everything!

Impossible to proceed with any speed now. The camels were just as unsuited to the rough ascent as they were made for the sandy wastes of the desert.

Paula Croel's frantic holding-on was no longer a joke with the rest of the party. They really pitied her, as they saw her bumping and jolting about more than ever, whilst her pretty-mouth gaped wide open, emitting one cry of alarm after another!

The road up the slopes was a winding one. But, although there were intervals in the ascent when the fugitives were so shut in by walls of rock that they were totally safe from observation by any party coming after them across the plains, there were other times when they reached an exposed position. And then—

With what dilating eyes did they peer behind them, looking down now at a sea of desert spread out before them like a featureless map!

Nothing down there, save the vast, arid wilderness!

Stay, though! Was there indeed nothing? It was at a moment when Somerfield, still leading, looked round to see that all were following safely. He sent his keen eye travelling out and down to the great plains which had been the scene of the midnight ride, and suddenly his brows drew together in a heavy frown.

He had seen something to cause him uneasiness, and next second every one of his companions was gazing in the same direction.

And there—down there, in the full blaze of the morning sunshine—they all saw a party of camel-riders, coming along amidst such a cloud of dust as told what speed was being made!

Somerfield at once decided what to do.

"Now, listen," he said tersely. "We shall all push on for a bit, but as soon as we have reached the summit of the pass, I must trouble you to dismount."

"Dismount?" echoed the girls in dismay.

"If we are to elude them, we can only do so by a ruse," Somerfield went on. "Mr. Linton—and you, Jacky boy—I can trust you to escort Mrs. Linton and the girls through that by-track down the other side of the mountains?"

"To where the plane is hidden?" returned Mr. Linton briskly. "Yes. Trust my boy and me."

"We have compasses," Jack Linton said, with fine composure. "We'll not get far astray, anyhow."

Somerfield nodded.

"Good! Then I shall take all the camels and rush them down the main pass, to draw the pursuers after me on a wrong trail."

"How splendid!" cried the girls admiringly. "But, Mr. Somerfield—"

"On again, friends!" he interrupted, no doubt guessing that delight had quickly given place to anxiety as to whether the ruse might not involve him in fearful peril—peril which he would have to face alone.

Giving his companions not another moment for speech, he uttered one of his strange native cries to the camels, and the whole party of fugitives jogged on again.

Up and up they went, the beasts' broad feet padding heavily upon a steep path that was all too rough and stony.

Again and again one of the awkward

animals stumbled and almost went down with a crash. But the disaster never quite happened, and in another hour the fugitives were at a high altitude—at the very head of the mountain pass.

"Dismount!" came Somerfield's cheery order to his companions; and, all shaken to bits as they felt, the girls and Mrs. Linton, and the father and son, simply dropped anyhow from the beasts' backs.

Somerfield kept the camels together by clucking words at them which they clearly understood.

He was still mounted, and Mr. Linton and Jack spent a few moments at the explorer's saddle-side, exchanging final remarks, whilst pocket compasses were brought into play.

Then, with a promptness that left the girls almost bewildered, Somerfield pushed on alone with all the camels.

"I ought to be with you by sundown!" he cried gaily. "If not—until we meet again!" And he waved a hand.

"Good-bye, Mr. Somerfield! Good luck!" they all cried, as cheerily as possible. "At sundown!"

But, even as they voiced the words, how their hearts fell heavily with the dread of what might be!

This ruse of the false trail was the only thing, it was certain, that could save the entire party from being captured and dragged back to the sultan's city. Yet how loath the girls were to see it being put into operation!

Only schoolgirls though they were, all that was British in them made them far more inclined for a last stand together.

Somerfield rode on quickly, and after him and his own camel followed the now bare-backed beasts. None gave the least trouble, and once again the explorer's friends murmured their admiration of his skill and knowledge.

For a few moments he was still visible, going along the level of the track's highest point. Then he and all his beasts dipped out of sight, as a ship passes below the sea's horizon.

The last they saw of him—when only his head and shoulders were visible—he was flinging away the half-finished cigarette which he had lit only a minute ago.

"Did you see that?" exclaimed Mr. Linton, turning to the girls. "Done on pur-

pose, you may be sure—that business with the cigarette!"

"You mean——"

"The sultan's men will see it. Nothing is too small to escape their eye. They will see the half-used cigarette, and will feel sure they are on the right track!"

"Instead of which," said Jack Linton significantly, "we shall be picking our way on foot down the mountain slopes, far away from the track!"

"But what about Mr. Somerfield?" exclaimed Betty Barton, still gazing at the point where the intrepid explorer and his beasts had vanished out of sight.

"Don't worry, girls," Mr. Linton said confidently. "That trusty friend of ours knows his job, if ever a man did!"

Then, with a look that collected the whole party, he set off at the head of them without another moment's delay.

He and his son marched together, in front, with the pocket compasses ready to hand. And behind these leaders followed Mrs. Linton and the girls, divided into various couples.

It was terribly rough going. Even if they had been covering level ground, the roughness of the way would have been trying enough. But it was all steeply downhill, and to keep on and on with the descent seemed even more exhausting than stiff uphill work would have been.

More than once, during the next half-hour, Mr. Linton looked round upon his wife and the girls with eyes that told of his yearning to give them the longed-for halt. But, mingling with that compassionate look, was one of intense anxiety.

"Just a little longer!" he encouraged them all presently.

"All serene!" said Polly. "Don't you worry, dad!"

"Even Paula can manage another mile, can't you, Paula dear?" Betty said, giving a helping hand to the girl who had found even hockey an exertion in term-time.

"Yes, wather!" was the faint but resolute answer.

Fiercer and ever fiercer blazed down the sun upon that rocky wilderness, where hardly a stunted tree or bush was able to find an existence. Constantly the girls saw large lizards streaking out of sight amongst the boulders, whilst overhead they saw, now and then, birds of prey winging this way

and that. These were the only living creatures, unless one counted the flies. But the flies were countless!

At last, after he and his son had consulted their compasses again, and had made certain reckonings in their heads, Mr. Linton called a halt.

The very instant he did so, down flopped the whole party, to crawl here and there for any bit of shade the great rocks afforded.

"Bai Jovo!" panted Paula, creeping along to the bit of shade which Betty and Tess asked her to share with them. "What a weliof, geals!"

"Bravo, Paula!" Madge called across, from her bit of shade. "You have done famously!"

"I have twiced to be a bwick, like the west of you," said Paula, with a modest shrug. "I am, as you are aweah, wather a fwail eweature! Howevah, neyah say die is my motto, after this!"

Mr. Linton came and sat down by his weary wife.

"So far, so good," he announced. "We are six miles or more from the point where we parted from Somerfield."

"And the mountain pass?"

"As the crow flies," Mr. Linton answered. "Jack and I reckon we must be at least four miles from any part of the mountain pass!"

And then, to the amazement and delight of all, he and Jack both produced from the folds of the white garments, which were part of their disguise, enough food and drink to afford a snack and a wetting of the lips all round.

"Weally, geals," said Paula, after she had had her "rations," "I feel I could ewy!"

"Whatever for?" exclaimed her friends, laughing.

"Because ewevybody is such a bwick, don't you know! Howevah, pway forgive the wemark if you think me at all widiculous!"

"I shan't say what I think of you, Paula dear, until we are all back at Morcove School!" said Betty Barton.

"Dear old Morcove!" murmured Polly Linton. "When the summer comes again, and we get a roasting day on the beach——"

"We'll think of Africa," struck in Madge Minden, nodding.

"Oui, oui!" agreed Trixie Hope.

"Yes, wather! Howevah, geals, pway do not weter to Morocove at pwsent," pleaded Paula. "To be reminded of the cid school—our jolly times wound about pwep., don't you know—it is too distwessing!"

"When Tess and I were prisoners in Rose of the Desert's house—" Madge began quietly, and then broke off at a sudden, silencing gesture from Mr. Linton.

He and Jack both sprang to their feet and stood listening intently.

Mrs. Linton and the girls, still sitting wearily upon the ground, also listened, wondering why they had been induced to do so.

Then suddenly they understood.

From afar—from what must have been a great way off indeed—came the faint hallooing of a human voice.

The voice of a Susablah native!

That faint sound died away, and was heard no more. But it was enough!

Silently Mrs. Linton and the girls rose to their feet.

All weariness was forgotten now.

Mr. Linton and his son took the lead again, and on—on went the whole party once more, refraining from the merest whispered remarks, as if they felt the very rocks around them might be hiding some of the sultan's men! *

CHAPTER 18.

At Dead of Night!

SHORTLY after midday, the silent fugitives were following a zigzag path so extremely narrow that they had to walk in single file.

It was just as if they were hurrying along a trench designed for warfare.

But human hands had never fashioned this sheltered track along the foot of the mountain range.

It was a jagged fissure in the rocky earth, stretching for how great a distance the girls could only wonder.

Wearier than ever though they were, their spirits had just received a big lift-up.

The moment Mr. Linton and his son came upon the walled-in track, they had made known the glorious news that the end of the exhausting tramp was at hand! Sure enough, Mrs. Linton and the girls

soon saw the father and son halt at a spot where it would be easy for all of them to clamber out on to the open ground.

Cautiously, Mr. Linton made his way to the top of the trench and peered over, as a Tommy often enough had to peer over into No Man's Land during the Great War.

And if ever there was a No Man's Land, it was here!

So the girls thought to themselves, when their turn came to climb out of the trench and they could look around them.

The ground in front fell away gradually into a sort of barren glade, with mountainous land engirdling it.

"The valley of rocks!" Madge at once exclaimed softly, thinking of the name given to that impressive spot so famous in her beloved Devon.

Rocks there were, in plenty, bestrewing the sun-scorched glade—rocks and nothing else. Not one sign of life! And here, in this pent-up valley, the desolation seemed a hundred times greater than that of the open mountain slopes.

"Hurrah!" Polly Linton breathed softly. "Now we know where we are, don't we, girls?"

"Yes, wather!" Paula found a particle of breath to exclaim. "Bai Jove, we are weally theah!"

"There?" echoed Madge, and Tess, with raised brows.

Then their chums explained.

This was the glade where the aeroplane had made its safe descent, after being piloted all the way from England by Jack Somerfield. He had been an air pilot during the war—what hadn't he been, indeed, at different periods of his adventure-cramped career!

Betty Barton pointed across the great glade to a sort of gully in between two of the surrounding hills.

"It is there—hidden there!" she said to Madge and Tess, who were trembling with eagerness for their first glimpse of the aeroplane.

"We came down in the middle of the glade, where there were no rocks," Polly chimed in graphically. "Out we bundled, and helped to wheel it to a hiding-place!"

Madge and Tess exchanged glances.

"That was the moonlit night when we were camping in the desert, with Rose of the Desert and the rest, who brought us

away from England," said Tess. "How well I remember hearing the sound of a British aeroplane!"

"And I!" rejoined Madge. "We thought it was making a trans-African trip. We would have felt it was madness to hope that those who loved us could be in the 'plane—could have come all the way from England, by air, to rescue us!"

"Oh, well!" said Betty lightly. "You are rescued, and now—hurrah, for the journey home!"

"Yes, wather!"

Paula had taken on a new lease of life. She hobbled nimbly across the glade, in company with her chums, who were following close behind Mr. Linton and Jack.

Five minutes later, Madge and Tess were giving a great "Oh!" of wonderment as they stood close to the 'plane.

Even if they had been quite familiar with the ordinary type of flier, this marvellous aircraft would still have held them spellbound.

Its size was enormous. The body was one long, torpedo-shaped saloon, divided, as the girls afterwards discovered, into three compartments.

In addition, in the front section there was a sort of tiny conning-tower, reserved for the pilot.

To raise such a commodious air vessel from the ground, and to keep it stable in the air, its planes, of course, had to be of huge proportions. There were three propellers—one main one and two auxiliaries. Through a glass inspection window Madge and Tess had a peep at the engines.

"You should just hear the noise when Mr. Somerfield starts her up!" Polly said, with a grin. "A thousand motor-buses all rolled into one!"

"With a few taxi-cabs and machine-guns thrown in!" added Dolly Delane.

"Yes, wather!" agreed Paula. "How-eh-eh—"

And the weary one made signs suggesting that she just wanted to flop down somewhere and go off to sleep!

They found her, presently, curled up in the bit of shade cast by an overhanging rock, with a brown lizard putting out its harmless forked tongue to sample one of the sleeping beauty's shoes!

"Dreaming of tea-time at Morcove, I know!" grinned Polly. "It would be a shame to wake her, even though we are

ready for the first proper meals for ages!"

So Paula slumbered on. When she awoke, it was to find the African sun much lower, in a sky that had changed from brilliant blue to a coppery hue, suggesting a change in the weather.

Betty was the first to notice that Paula had woken up, and in a moment the captain of the Fourth Form was stepping across the rough ground with a cup of tea and ample eatables.

"Bai Jove, how extwomely wewfeshing!" was Paula's gratified comment, as she took the refreshments. "You geals, you have been bustling about—ch, what?"

"Quite enjoying the job, too!" laughed Betty. "However, your assistance will be required when the storm bursts, and we have to hang on to the aeroplane to keep it from blowing away!"

"Eh, what?" Paula looked aghast. "Storm, bai Jove!"

Paula looked at the aeroplane. She could imagine the amount of "hanging on" there would have to be if the wind got up and the vast planes caught the force of the gale. However— And she sipped her tea.

But she came strolling up, presently, when her chums were all bustling through the hundred and one jobs that make up camp life, and sunset found her just as busy as any.

Up to now, Madge and Tess' rescuers had not troubled to change out of the flowing raiment which had made up the disguise adopted for entering the sultan's city. Mrs. Linton now set the example, however, by retiring to one of the tiny saloons, and getting into ordinary English garb, and as soon as she had come forth, the girls took turns at using the saloon for the same purpose.

The short-lived twilight had now given place to night—a pitch-black night, too, for the moon would not be up until late.

Not a lantern dared they set match to, for fear its dim rays should be seen, from afar by some unsuspected wanderer. As for switching on any of the electric lights, in the aeroplane's saloons—that would have been sheer folly!

Most of the girls lay down to get a little sleep, and never in all their lives had deep slumber followed so swiftly upon the closing of their eyes.

Last night's loss of sleep, all the thrilling

suspense that had ended in the dramatic flight across the plains; and then the hours of weary tramping down the rugged mountain slopes—it had meant four-and-twenty hours of wear and tear.

Worn out though they were, however, at least two or three of the girls awoke before long.

The moon had not yet risen, and the valley was still in pitch darkness, so these girls who had now woken up knew that the night could not be far advanced.

Madge Minden was one of them. She raised herself on one elbow and peered around, unaware that others had also opened their eyes.

She saw, ever so dimly in the darkness, the manly figure of Jack Linton, keeping watch alone. He and his father had agreed to take spools, and this was Jack's turn, at present.

Then Madge heard a whisper at her side.

"That you, Madge?" asked the voice of Betty Barton. "I say! Mr. Somerfield isn't back, then?"

"I'm afraid not, Betty, dear."

Silence for a few moments. Then a third voice took up the hushed talk.

"I say!" exclaimed Polly Linton. "We'll be in a nice fix if Mr. Somerfield can't get to us!"

"Ay!" murmured Betty. "He is the only one who can drive the aeroplane!"

It was a thought that had troubled their minds during the day; but now, in the darkness of night, and with Somerfield not yet back from the laying of that false trail, they felt more than troubled.

It was hard, indeed, not to feel almost panic-stricken.

Here they were, still in the heart of an uncivilised land. They had no camels now—only the aeroplane. And how if the aeroplane's pilot never returned to take his place in that little conning-tower! What would become of them all then?

What else could be the end of such a disaster, but captivity from which there could be no hope of escaping—no hope whatever!

There ensued a few moments of gloomy silence amongst the girls who had wakened. Then Madge was about to dispel the horrid feeling of dismay which had crept upon them all, by making some

courageous remark, when she heard a sinister sound close at hand in the darkness.

The others heard it, too!

They grew rigid with suspense, uttering no comments, but keeping their dilating eyes upon that part of the night-bound rocks from which the sound had been audible.

And then, suddenly, their hearts thumped violently.

Out of the inky darkness of the night the shape of a white figure evolved itself—a figure exactly like all one's notions of an apparition.

A white-robed figure—and the appalling thought that seized the three girls was that here was one of the sultan's own men, who had tracked them to their lair!

CHAPTER 19.

The Hoot of an Owl!

THUMP, thump! went the hearts of all three girls, as they crouched there, with chums sleeping peacefully beside them in the open air. Their peering eyes were glued to the ghostly figure.

Haw-oot! Haw-oot! sounded a hooting cry, just like that made by the common African owl.

And then the girls understood. Their beating hearts fluttered with sudden wild joy. They sprang to their feet, and their unloosed tongues uttered cries of unbounded relief.

"Mr. Somerfield! Oh, it is Mr. Somerfield—back at last!"

Next moment, with the white-robed explorer sauntering quite coolly before them, Madge, Betty, and Polly burst out laughing at their own expense.

They had forgotten that the Britisher had been disguised as a Susahlah native when he parted with them, taking the camels down the mountain pass.

Jack Linton came nipping across the night-bound camp, to join in the laughter when he heard about the recent bad scare.

"Serve you jolly well right!" he said, chuckling. "If you girls had remained fast asleep, as you ought to have done, trusting to me and dad to guard the camp—"

"Oh, we did trust you!" they protested, in chorus. "But, confess now, Jack! You didn't see that white figure, and if it really had been one of the sultan's men—"

"I saw the white figure, and if it had come much nearer without giving the signal—well," said Jack grimly, "something was going to happen!"

By now the whole camp was awake, and the joyful excitement was unbounded. The girls understood that Somerfield had already vanished, to change into ordinary British garb, and that as soon as he had done this he was for giving the signal:

"All aboard for England!"

He came away from his rough and ready dressing-room whilst he was still putting on his last garments. Betty and Dolly had got him something to eat and drink, and they brought it to him as he stood with a cigarette dangling from his lips.

"Thanks! Yes, I can do with this," he said gaily, sipping the cup of hot coffee. "I had a snack or two with me, you know; but—"

"You must have had a terrible time, altogether," Madge exclaimed. "Do tell us how you managed!"

"Yes, wather!" Paula joined in eagerly.

"And keep you all here, like a lot of modest violets, wasting your beauty on the desert air!" he laughed. "Oh, no! You must have the full story some other time."

"But just while you are drinking the coffee, Mr. Somerfield!"

He gave a mock groan of resignation.

"Bother me if I ever personally conduct another party of schoolgirls from England to Africa!" he sighed, but his lips curved in a smile. "Never knew such obstinate monkeys! Well, I just rushed those camels down the mountain pass—"

"Yes?"

"Taking care to leave all the tracks I could—cigarette-ends and what not. At the foot of the pass I turned off to the left—and I left no tracks then, I can assure you! I found a place where I could leave the camels with no fear of their wandering for a day or two; quite a nice spot, with a bit of feed and a water-hole. They'll be happy there."

"And then—"

"Why, then, don't you know," he said, handing back the empty cup. "I just

scuttled across country for this rendezvous of ours!"

"Did you see any of the sultan's men?" questioned Polly.

He shrugged.

"That is going into details, which I can't be bothered with now. All aboard, young ladies!"

These last words threw Betty & Co. into a joyful fluster.

The signal had been given: "All aboard for England!"

It was enough to make one swoon with excitement.

After their hunted life of the last four-and-twenty hours; after all the thrilling adventures which had preceded the flight from the city of Susahlah, it seemed too much for the human mind to take in, that in the next ten minutes they would be sailing right away from this strange land.

Straight for the resting aeroplane rushed the excited girls. Mrs. Linton and her husband were there, and—still dispensing with even the dim light of a lantern—one by one the passengers took their places.

It was going to be a bit of a squeeze, of course. But who would mind that, when the pace would be a hundred miles an hour, and they could make a halt at the end of two hours, knowing they were two hundred miles beyond the sultan's reach.

Jack Linton remained outside to give what help he could to Somerfield, who was already "starting up." The rest of the party had all fitted into the tiny saloons, the low basket chairs winning high praise from the girls—especially from the luxury-loving Paula!

"Bai Jove, geals!" said Paula Creel. "I must invest in one of these comfy chairs for my study! They are weally wipping!"

Next moment, the girl who was so "comfy" gave a faint scream of alarm, whilst she gripped the arm-rests of the wicker seat for all she was worth.

Somerfield had "started up." With a deafening roar the engines had leapt to life—and now, woe betide the fugitives if there was any delay in getting off and away!

This hurtling roar of the mighty engines must have been audible, in a few seconds, miles upon miles away!

Amidst such deathlike stillness as brooded over the mountains and the plains, day and night alike, the noise of the mammoth plane

might be very possibly be heard even as far as the distant city of Susahlah!

So, in the grip of fresh suspense, the passengers waited for the start.

Jack Linton came running round to the tiny entrance to the forward saloon. This cabin was the smaller of the two, and was to be occupied by himself and his parents. He scrambled to his seat, gesturing amidst so much noise to indicate that Somerfield would do all the rest.

Roar—roar—roar-r-r-r! went the engines, whilst the pilot now climbed into his seat in the little conning-tower. And then—

Ten times louder than ever sounded the shriek and roar of the engines, as he set the propellers going at such speed as would start them "pulling."

The trembling 'plane began to move forward over the ground, running upon its wheels.

"Hurrah—hurrah!" yelled the girls, with good reason for their wild relief. "We are off!"

"Yes, wather! Hooway! Hip, hip, hip—"

"Hurrah!"

For a few seconds they felt a slight jolting, and they knew that the wheels were still skimming the rough ground. Then, suddenly, all sense of motion ceased, and they knew that the vast 'plane was actually off the ground!

"Hurrah! Hooway!"

They had taken to the air.

On and on—up and still upwards they must be going, climbing towards the stars.

Wonderful—marvellous! Only a few moments since, the perils of the strange country were still around them; and now—

Bang, bang, bang!

What was that?

Violent explosions had interrupted all the rhythmic hum of the engines. Something had happened—something must have gone wrong!

Heart in mouth, the girls sat mute and still, whilst the mammoth 'plane simply rushed on, with hardly a sound, through the empty air.

The propellers were revolving lifelessly now. The whole 'plane rocked gently, still floating on—on. Some of the most anxious moments the girls had ever known went by, perhaps mounting up to a full minute; and then—

Bump!

It was only the very gentlest jolting of the whole construction, and not one of the girls was bounced out of her seat.—But—it was a bump, all the same, and a bump meant a bump to earth!

They had come down!

Whether a mile from their starting point—two miles—ten miles, even—they had come to earth again. And, wherever they had alighted, they were certainly still in danger of being captured!

The 'plane rocked and jolted to a standstill. For several minutes the girls remained in their seats, trying to conquer their wild dismay. Mr. Somerfield had clambered out, and was inspecting the engines—doing something to them. Perhaps he would overcome the fault in a second or two. Perhaps—

No!

All at once he appeared at the door of the forward saloon and called into it:

"All change, please!"

It was the same old jesting voice; but full well everybody on board knew the tragedy that might be wrapped up in the cheery words.

This was a serious breakdown—it must be, or the pilot would not be asking them to get out. And so, that sharp fear of a few moments ago was being fully justified.

The 'plane was unable to fly! Here it lay, a wounded bird, still in the land of Susahlah, leaving all the helpless fugitives face to face with even greater perils than ever!

A gloomy dawn found them still at the spot where they had come down, several hours ago.

All they had been able to do, in the desperate hope of evading their enemies, was to wheel the mammoth 'plane to a sheltered bit of ground surrounded by rugged rocks.

They were still at the foot of the mountain range, and there is no need to say what thought caused them the greatest amount of anxiety. The thought that all the noise of their false start, in the night, had perhaps been heard!

Somerfield had taken his coat off to the job of tackling the engines' faults, and Jack Linton and his father were doing their utmost to help him.

Luckily, father and son were familiar with motor engines, so they were able to render really useful service.

Mrs. Linton and the girls, whilst they

busied themselves with all the routine work of camp-life, were hoping at any moment to hear the welcome sound of the engines leaping to life once more. But they listened in vain!

Now, too, there came another grave cause for alarm by the sight of the overcast sky.

For the first time since rescuers and rescued alike had come into this land of blue skies, the day had come without bringing its brilliant glare of sunshine.

A murky haze was all they saw when they glanced overhead, whilst every now and then a hot wind came in a sudden blast from down the mountains.

The wind, at such times, blew along the desert land, stirring the sands with its hot breath.

Altogether, daylight had found the fugitives in a sorry plight indeed.

Still within reach of their enemies, the mammoth aeroplane helpless to carry them a mile farther upon their journey—and, as the crowning misfortune, bad weather at hand!

A time for hearts to give way to utter despair—that is what it was.

Mrs. Linton could not help exclaiming earnestly:

"We must hope that the danger will pass, girls! Trust Mr. Somerfield. He is so clever, he will surely be able to—"

And there the speaker broke off abruptly, whilst Betty & Co. saw her face turn deathly white.

She was staring, wild-eyed, towards the rough ground behind the girls, and round they spun, fully expecting to see the alarming spectacle of a Susahlah native.

A figure in native dress there was, standing only fifty yards away—but it was a girlish figure.

"Rose of the Desert!" gasped Madge and Tess.

For, in a flash, those two had recognised the beautiful native girl in whose custody they had been, at the time of the escape.

CHAPTER 20.

Farewell—farewell!

WHILST they were still agape with stupefaction, she advanced with a step which, weary as it was, still retained some of its old queenly grace.

Meanwhile, the three who had just finished tinkering at the aeroplane, looked up, hearing the cry of alarm, and now they came rushing towards their fellow fugitives.

"Rose of the Desert!" jerked out Somerfield, looking as astounded as any. "Rose of the Desert here!"

"Kismet—it is fate!" she answered dully. "I have not sought you—no, no!"

"But—"

"All yesterday—all through the night—and now to-day," she went on, with tragic calmness, "I wander away from the city of Susahlah, resting but a little while now and then. I am sad—tired—"

"The poor girl must be ready to drop!" Mrs. Linton exclaimed compassionately. "What can we do for you, Rose of the Desert? Food—water—"

The girl made a gesture of indifference; but when Dolly Delano came rushing up with a small jug of cold coffee and a metal cup, the weary wanderer drank eagerly.

"Thank you, Engleish girl," she murmured, returning the cup. "Such kindness shall I not forget!"

"You were kind to us, Rose of the Desert," Madge Minden said, "when Tess and I were captives in your house. Let us all repay you as much as we can—please! You must be hungry—and here is some food."

"Not now," the wanderer answered, in the same tone of deep dejection. "Oh, I care not if I never taste bread again, for I am in deep disgrace over my captives escaping!"

She wrung her hands in a most tragic fashion, and then resumed her faltering speech.

"The moment I knew that my prisoners had gone, despair fell upon me. And so I have wandered away from the city of my fathers, even the great City of Susahlah, to hide from my people and the wrath of our rulers."

Madge Minden made a sudden start forward, and would have plucked the native girl by the hand; but Rose of the Desert recoiled sharply, drawing herself up.

It was a reminder to the whole party that a touch from any of them was, in her eyes, a sort of defilement.

In spite of this, Madge was not to be checked in her desire to display compassion.

"Mrs. Linton—all of you!" she appealed to her friends. "Oh, can't we do something

for Rose of the Desert? Let her come with us—"

"Yes, yes!" burst out Betty and the rest excitedly. "Yes—"

"Wather, bai Jove! Wose of the Desert—pway wegard me as a sympathiser—oh, what?" said Paula. "We all feel sowwy for you—yes, wather!"

"Jolly sorry!" agreed Jack Linton emphatically.

"It cannot be!" was the sorrowful response. "Engleesh people, I am grateful. I am the daughter of a race that is strange and wild in its ways; even so, we of the land of Susahlah have hearts that can overflow with gratitude! All the blood in my veins, all my loyalty to my people, bids me regard you as enemies. And yet—and yet—"

Her voice broke, and it was a moment before she could continue.

"And yet do I see much in all of thee to admire. But when you offer to take me to England with you, in the machine that is as the eagle in its flight, then must I answer no!"

A hard sigh came from Somerfield.

"Perhaps I can understand your reasons for refusing, better than my friends," he said sadly. "I have spent years in this country of yours, Rose of the Desert. I know that East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet!"

"Yea," she responded, turning her half-veiled face to him, so that her lovely eyes might dwell upon his handsome features. "Well do you know the ways of my country, O Engleeshman with the heart that never quakes!"

She lifted a draped arm to hide her face for a few moments, half turning away, and the girls could guess what deep emotions were flooding through her soul.

"Farewell, then!" she exclaimed, when she had controlled herself. "Farewell, Engleesh people! I go my way, and never more will your eyes behold me! Never more will the eyes of mortal being, it may be, behold Rose of the Desert! In the great desert will I lose myself, and this time no brave Engleeshman will be there to find and save me!"

Betty Barton turned away, crying. She couldn't help herself. Nor was she the only girl to feel suddenly broken down by Rose of the Desert's tragic despair.

"Think not, Engleesh people," the native girl went on, as she stepped a little apart from them—"think not that I will betray thy presence in this spot if the sultan's men come upon me. I would not have thee made captives."

"Rose of the Desert—"

"I would have my last thoughts be of all my Engleesh friends safe back in the land from which they came! Farewell, farewell, and all good speed take you to the land of your fathers! Only, when thou art come to thy journey's end—"

She faltered again, her dark eyes scanning the great desert.

"When thou art safely home," she murmured faintly, "give a thought now and then to poor Rose of the Desert!"

Her draped arm made a queenly gesture of farewell, and she was going from the hushed group, when Somerfield made a sudden start after her.

"Wait—wait, Rose of the Desert!" he cried excitedly. "Listen, and perhaps I can yet do something to send you back to the city of your fathers with a lighter heart."

She faced him with dilating eyes.

"How, then?"

"The two English girls were brought from England as hostages," he answered quickly. "They have told us that they were to be set free when the sultan had regained the lost fragment of the Lamp of Susahlah."

"Even so—"

"Then look!" cried Somerfield, whipping a short length of fine chain from his jacket pocket. "Here it is—you recognise it, Rose of the Desert! Here is the missing fragment on which the sultan's heart was set!"

"Yes!" she panted, gazing enraptured at the bit of chain. "That is the one fragment that was left behind in England! With that one-fragment, the lamp can be restored; it will burn again in the Mosque of Susahlah!"

"Take it then—take it!" Somerfield exclaimed, and placed it in her eager hands. "And with that in your possession, Rose of the Desert, surely you can return to the city and face the sultan! Angry he may be, at this moment; but when he sees that fragment of the lamp—"

"He will forgive all, yes!" she cried

out joyfully. "With this—oh, Rose of the Desert need fear nothing! And so, once again, I owe my life to thee, brave Englishman! Once again you have saved me—me, your little friend of the former days—from death in the desert!"

"Ah, Rose of the Desert," he said, looking greatly distressed as she suddenly knelt to him, "how I wish I could do more than this for you! How sorry I am that we must part, to-day, never to meet again!"

"Kismet—it is fate!" she said resignedly, as she arose from her servile attitude. "It is a true word, O brave Englishman, for whom this heart of mine is full of love. East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet!"

Then, with an abrupt gesture of final farewell, she went swiftly from the spot with her gliding step.

At the same instant a strong wind suddenly howled across the wilderness, and Somerfield tore his wistful gaze from that receding figure to look anxiously at the aeroplane.

It was rocking all too violently in the sudden squall, and he ran towards the mammoth machine, followed by Mr. Linton and Jack.

"Poor Rose of the Desert!" murmured Madge Minden, still gazing after that picturesque, pathetic figure, as it zig-zagged amongst the boulders strewn the ground. "Mr. Somerfield is right. There's a heart of gold in her breast!"

"If I were Mr. Somerfield," said Tess, "I think I should be in love with Rose of the Desert!"

"Isn't it pretty clear that he loves her just as much as she loves him!" said Betty Barton softly. "But——"

"Hallo! Oh, look—look!" burst in Trixie Hope excitedly. "Bonheur—bonheur! Joy. They've got the engines to work!"

It was true.

Above the fitful howling of the rising storm, the mighty engines had suddenly shrieked to life. And now Mr. Linton and his son were turning round to gesture eagerly:

"Quick, quick! All aboard!"

With a rush the girls started towards the aeroplane; at the same time, how-

ever, they felt they must give a last glance to Rose of the Desert.

She was still in sight, and what was their amazement and dismay to see her standing still on a bit of elevated ground, pointing out across the desert.

They followed the direction of that pointing arm, and there—only a mile away—was a party of camel-riders charging towards the aeroplane!

One dismayed glance the girls gave to that hostile party of men, riding their fleet beasts and with spears brandished above their heads. Then Betty and Co. dashed on again, and simply swarmed into the 'plane's saloons.

Mrs. Linton followed, whilst her husband and son also scrambled to their places.

The small doors were slammed shut, and now the engines shrieked louder than ever as the pilot settled himself in the conning-tower and handled the controls.

But, even as the mammoth machine was gliding away, there came once more the bang—snap—bang! of engines that seemed to be still at fault.

The aeroplane was not rising from the ground! It was not yet even moving on its wheels.

And all the time, whilst the excited fugitives were still helpless like this, they could see the hostile camel-riders drawing nearer—nearer!

During those thrilling moments of terrible suspense, the calm courage of Betty and Co. was a thing their companions in the aeroplane noticed more than all else.

Mrs. Linton, her husband and son—they themselves were calm enough; but then they felt calmness was to be expected of them. Two of them grown-ups, and the other a sturdy British lad—what else should they be but calm in the face of this climax to the whole series of perilous adventures?

But to think that Betty and the other girls—mere schoolgirls!—should be just as calm, too; it was wonderful!

White to the lips, but betraying only that one sign of agitation, there they sat, mute and still, whilst the engines of the aircraft snapped and banged fitfully, trying to get properly started.

On came the camel-riders—nearer, nearer! Half a mile away—only a few hundred yards now—and yet nearer they came!

Then, suddenly, the passengers felt the aeroplane shiver and stagger as if it were moving along in a clumsy fashion.

Eagerly the girls gazed out through the tiny portholes, only to find that there was no forward movement at all, only a violent pitching about. And now they understood.

The desert storm had burst with all its savage fury, and the craft was feeling the force of the shrieking gale.

Was this to be the end then—the end of everything? The aeroplane, lying overturned and wrecked by the time the camel-riders circled round it, and all its passengers utterly at their mercy?

For just a few seconds that seemed to be the inevitable finish to all their efforts to escape. And then—

"Look, look! Oh, look!" the girls fairly screamed out to one another.

For they saw that the very storm was going to be their salvation.

Black and thick rose enormous clouds of sand, swept up into the air by the furious wind. As waterspouts pass across a tornado-ridden ocean, so the clouds and columns of sand were sweeping across the desert.

Blotted out were the camel-riders, as they might have been blotted out by a raging snowstorm. Not a speck of sand was falling upon the aeroplane, for it was on the rocky ground at the very foot of the mountains.

And now—hurrah! There rang in Betty & Co.'s ears the sudden rhythmic roar of the engines, and in a moment the machine was bounding forward in the very teeth of the gale.

The opposing wind gave its own lifting power to the planes. Up rose the giant craft—roar, roar, roar! No misfiring now; not a break in the engine's smooth running!

"Off! We are really off at last!" yelled

the thankful girls. "Just in the nick of time!"

"Yes, wather! Howevah—"

"We are saved—saved!"

Whilst their chums were still repeating that joyful cry, Madge and Tess and Betty returned their eager gaze to the portholes.

Peering down, they saw men and camels alike enveloped in the terrific sandstorm, whilst clear of all the drifting clouds of black dust, one lonely figure in white raiment was visible, amongst the mountain rocks.

It was Rose of the Desert.

They saw her, as she stood there, waving again and again—waving her last farewell.

Four days later Madge Minden, Tess Tre-lawney, and all their rescuers landed in England.

Cablegrams to friends and loved ones preceded the whole party's safe arrival—and what joyful scenes were witnessed at that spot where Betty Barton & Co. first set foot on English soil again!

The January holidays had still a fortnight or more to run, and each of the chums of the Fourth Form was thus able to enjoy a happy time in her own family circle.

Perhaps life seemed just a wee bit tame to the girls after their days and nights of constant peril in the land of the Susahlah. But that is not to say that any of them regretted being home again!

More than once the girls were to be troubled in their sleep, at nights, by dreams of the strange city in far-off Africa; of Rose of the Desert and El Valiante; the sultan's emissary; of the thrilling rescue and flight into the mountains.

And how deep were the sighs of relief which the dreamers gave when they awoke in their own beds at home, and could tell themselves that never again would they be involved in such strange adventures!

THE END.

Three more splendid numbers of "The Schoolgirl's Own" Library will be on sale on Friday, July 2nd. See page iii of cover for further particulars.

GIRL TENNIS CHAMPIONS.

On the twenty-first of this month the eyes of the whole tennis world will be fixed upon Wimbledon, for that day will see the opening of the championship tournaments.

How important an institution Wimbledon has become can be judged by the facts that all available seats have been booked months in advance, and for such seats as remain unreserved it is safe to say there will be bigger queues of people than can ever be accommodated.

If you cannot go with the hope of getting a seat amongst the lucky ones, you would almost find it worth while to pay a visit in order to see the immense interest that the girls of this country show in the tournaments. One is struck by the fact that they easily form the bigger portion of the queues.

Unless anything unforeseen happens, the matches that will provoke the keenest interest will be those in which Susanne Lenglen, the girl champion of the world, takes part.

Except for some sensational surprise, such as none of the tennis experts are prepared for, we shall once again see the famous French girl defending her title in the final of the ladies' singles.

Who will be her opponent? Much as we in this country should like to see an English girl in competition with the wonderful Suzanne, the probability is that the honour will go to Helen Wills, the American girl champion, who fought such an exciting match with the champion at Cannes last February, and lost only by 3-6, 6-8.

This is the hardest fight the French girl has ever had, not forgetting even the occasion when, at the hands of Mrs. Mallory, she encountered her one and only defeat. But ill-health played the biggest part in Susanne's downfall in this game.

Without a doubt, Susanne is a player without an equal. The year after the war she won the ladies' singles championship of the world, and for four years after that she successfully defended her title, and won so frequently without losing a game to her

opponents, that she gained the title "Six-Love Susanne."

The following year, in 1924, ill-health prevented her competing in the finals, but last year, at Wimbledon, she again played for and won the title, adding to her honours by assisting Jean Borotra to win the mixed doubles.

The wonderful French-girl champion herself started collecting honours at a very early age. She was only fourteen when she won the championship of Picardy; which meant, of course, that she had been playing tennis seriously for years before that.

She was only nineteen years of age when she first won the world's championship. And Helen Wills, who at the moment seems to be her most dangerous rival, is only twenty.

It is not the ambition of every girl to win fame on the tennis courts, but most of you have a keen interest in the sport, and have a natural desire to do well amongst more average players. Whether you wish to become champion, or just useful with the racket, you cannot start taking your tennis seriously too soon.

As any champion would tell you, the first essentials are good tuition and heaps of practice. Susanne obtained her early tuition from her father, who himself was far from being a novice, and in his eagerness to see his daughter gain big honours, he gave her a racket to handle as soon as she could conveniently hold one, and then kept her regularly at work on the court, making her master each stroke by painstaking practice. Susanne did not find the task imposed upon her at all irksome. She revelled in the game; indeed, and was fired by the enthusiasm of her tutor.

If an English girl is ever to wrest the championship from her, or another holder of the title, it is certain she will have to pursue similar methods. So, if you have any hopes—well, start now!

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