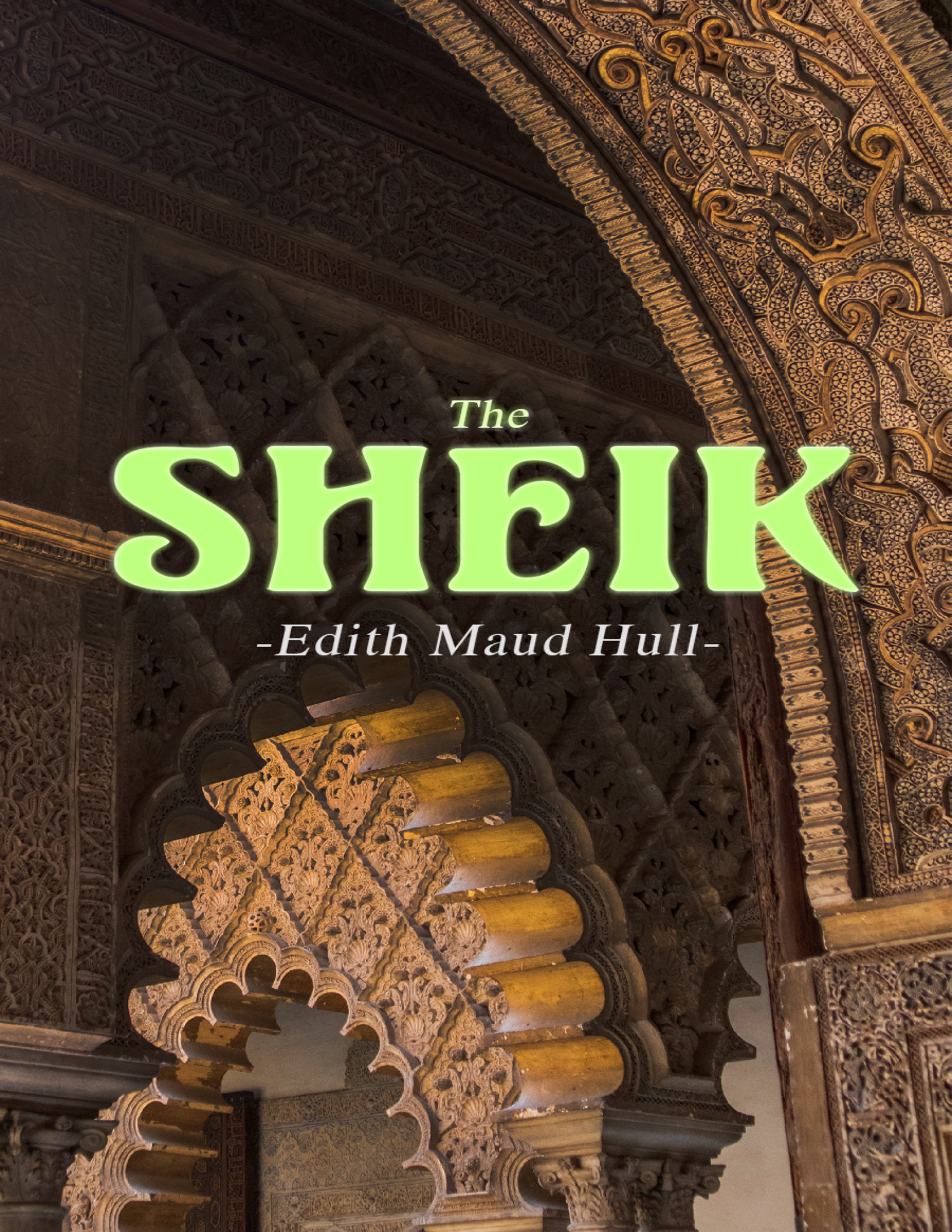

The SHEIK

-Edith Maud Hull-

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The Sheik

Desert Romance

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CHAPTER I

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"Are you coming in to watch the dancing, Lady Conway?"

"I most decidedly am not. I thoroughly disapprove of the expedition of which this dance is the inauguration. I consider that even by contemplating such a tour alone into the desert with no chaperon or attendant of her own sex, with only native camel drivers and servants, Diana Mayo is behaving with a recklessness and impropriety that is calculated to cast a slur not only on her own reputation, but also on the prestige of her country. I blush to think of it. We English cannot be too careful of our behavior abroad. No opportunity is slight enough for our continental neighbours to cast stones, and this opportunity is very far from being slight. It is the maddest piece of unprincipled folly I have ever heard of."

"Oh, come, Lady Conway! It's not quite so bad as all that. It is certainly unconventional and—er—probably not quite wise, but remember Miss Mayo's unusual upbringing——"

"I am not forgetting her unusual upbringing," interrupted Lady Conway. "It has been deplorable. But nothing can excuse this scandalous escapade. I knew her mother years ago, and I took it upon myself to expostulate both with Diana and her brother, but Sir Aubrey is hedged around with an egotistical complacency that would defy a pickaxe to penetrate. According to him a Mayo is beyond criticism, and his sister's reputation her own to deal with. The girl herself

seemed, frankly, not to understand the seriousness of her position, and was very flippant and not a little rude. I wash my hands of the whole affair, and will certainly not countenance to-night's entertainment by appearing at it. I have already warned the manager that if the noise is kept up beyond a reasonable hour I shall leave the hotel to-morrow." And, drawing her wrap around her with a little shudder, Lady Conway stalked majestically across the wide verandah of the Biskra Hotel.

The two men left standing by the open French window that led into the hotel ballroom looked at each other and smiled.

"Some peroration," said one with a marked American accent. "That's the way scandal's made, I guess."

"Scandal be hanged! There's never been a breath of scandal attached to Diana Mayo's name. I've known the child since she was a baby. Rum little cuss she was, too. Confound that old woman! She would wreck the reputation of the Archangel Gabriel if he came down to earth, let alone that of a mere human girl."

"Not a very human girl," laughed the American. "She was sure meant for a boy and changed at the last moment. She looks like a boy in petticoats, a damned pretty boy—and a damned haughty one," he added, chuckling. "I overheard her this morning, in the garden, making mincemeat of a French officer."

The Englishman laughed.

"Been making love to her, I expect. A thing she does not understand and won't tolerate. She's the coldest little fish in the world, without an idea in her head beyond sport and

travel. Clever, though, and plucky as they are made. I don't think she knows the meaning of the word fear."

"There's a queer streak in the family, isn't there? I heard somebody yapping about it the other night. Father was mad and blew his brains out, so I was told."

The Englishman shrugged his shoulders.

"You can call it mad, if you like," he said slowly. "I live near the Mayos' in England, and happen to know the story. Sir John Mayo was passionately devoted to his wife; after twenty years of married life they were still lovers. Then this girl was born, and the mother died. Two hours afterwards her husband shot himself, leaving the baby in the sole care of her brother, who was just nineteen, and as lazy and as selfish then as he is now. The problem of bringing up a girl child was too much trouble to be solved, so he settled the difficulty by treating her as if she was a boy. The result is what you see."

They moved nearer to the open window, looking into the brilliantly lit ballroom, already filled with gaily chattering people. On a slightly raised platform at one end of the room the host and hostess were receiving their guests. The brother and sister were singularly unlike. Sir Aubrey Mayo was very tall and thin, the pallor of his face accentuated by the blackness of his smoothly brushed hair and heavy black moustache. His attitude was a mixture of well-bred courtesy and languid boredom. He seemed too tired even to keep the single eye-glass that he wore in position, for it dropped continually. By contrast the girl at his side appeared vividly alive. She was only of medium height and very slender, standing erect with the easy, vigorous carriage of an athletic

boy, her small head poised proudly. Her scornful mouth and firm chin showed plainly an obstinate determination, and her deep blue eyes were unusually clear and steady. The long, curling black lashes that shaded her eyes and the dark eyebrows were a foil to the thick crop of loose, red-gold curls that she wore short, clubbed about her ears.

"The result is worth seeing," said the American admiringly, referring to his companion's last remark.

A third and younger man joined them.

"Hallo, Arbuthnot. You're late. The divinity is ten deep in would-be partners already."

A dull red crept into the young man's face, and he jerked his head angrily.

"I got waylaid by Lady Conway—poisonous old woman! She had a great deal to say on the subject of Miss Mayo and her trip. She ought to be gagged. I thought she was going on talking all night, so I fairly bolted in the end. All the same, I agree with her on one point. Why can't that lazy ass Mayo go with his sister?"

Nobody seemed to be able to give an answer. The band had begun playing, and the floor was covered with laughing, talking couples.

Sir Aubrey Mayo had moved away, and his sister was left standing with several men, who waited, programme in hand, but she waved them away with a little smile and a resolute shake of her head.

"Things seem to be getting a hustle on," said the American.

"Are you going to try your luck?" asked the elder of the two

Englishmen.

The American bit the end off a cigar with a little smile.

"I sure am not. The haughty young lady turned me down as a dancer very early in our acquaintance. I don't blame her," he added, with a rueful laugh, "but her extreme candour still rankles. She told me quite plainly that she had no use for an American who could neither ride nor dance. I did intimate to her, very gently, that there were a few little openings in the States for men beside cattle-punching and cabaret dancing, but she froze me with a look, and I faded away. No, Sir Egotistical Complacency will be having some bridge later on, which will suit me much better. He's not a bad chap underneath if you can swallow his peculiarities, and he's a sportsman. I like to play with him. He doesn't care a durn if he wins or loses."

"It doesn't matter when you have a banking account the size of his," said Arbuthnot. "Personally, I find dancing more amusing and less expensive. I shall go and take my chance with our hostess."

His eyes turned rather eagerly towards the end of the room where the girl was standing alone, straight and slim, the light from an electrolier gilding the thick bright curls framing her beautiful, haughty little face. She was staring down at the dancers with an absent expression in her eyes, as if her thoughts were far away from the crowded ballroom.

The American pushed Arbuthnot forward with a little laugh.

"Run along, foolish moth, and get your poor little wings singed. When the cruel fair has done trampling on you I'll come right along and mop up the remains. If, on the other

hand, your temerity meets with the success it deserves, we can celebrate suitably later on." And, linking his arm in his friend's, he drew him away to the card-room.

Arbuthnot went through the window and worked slowly round the room, hugging the wall, evading dancers, and threading his way through groups of chattering men and women of all nationalities. He came at last to the raised dais on which Diana Mayo was still standing, and climbed up the few steps to her side.

"This is luck, Miss Mayo," he said, with an assurance that he was far from feeling. "Am I really fortunate enough to find you without a partner?"

She turned to him slowly, with a little crease growing between her arched eyebrows, as if his coming were inopportune and she resented the interruption to her thoughts, and then she smiled quite frankly.

"I said I would not dance until everybody was started," she said rather doubtfully, looking over the crowded floor.

"They are all dancing. You've done your duty nobly. Don't miss this ripping tune," he urged persuasively.

She hesitated, tapping her programme-pencil against her teeth.

"I refused a lot of men," she said, with a grimace. Then she laughed suddenly. "Come along, then. I am noted for my bad manners. This will only be one extra sin."

Arbuthnot danced well, but with the girl in his arms he seemed suddenly tongue-tied. They swung round the room several times, then halted simultaneously beside an open window and went out into the garden of the hotel, sitting down on a wicker seat under a gaudy Japanese hanging

lantern. The band was still playing, and for the moment the garden was empty, lit faintly by coloured lanterns, festooned from the palm trees, and twinkling lights outlining the winding paths.

Arbuthnot leaned forward, his hands clasped between his knees.

"I think you are the most perfect dancer I have ever met," he said a little breathlessly.

Miss Mayo looked at him seriously, without a trace of self-consciousness.

"It is very easy to dance if you have a musical ear, and if you have been in the habit of making your body do what you want. So few people seem to be trained to make their limbs obey them. Mine have had to do as they were told since I was a small child," she answered calmly.

The unexpectedness of the reply acted as a silencer on Arbuthnot for a few minutes, and the girl beside him seemed in no hurry to break the silence. The dance was over and the empty garden was thronged for a little time. Then the dancers drifted back into the hotel as the band started again.

"It's rather jolly here in the garden," Arbuthnot said tentatively. His heart was pounding with unusual rapidity, and his eyes, that he kept fixed on his own clasped hands, had a hungry look growing in them.

"You mean that, you want to sit out this dance with me?" she said with a boyish directness that somewhat nonplussed him.

"Yes," he stammered rather foolishly.

She held her programme up to the light of the lantern. "I promised this one to Arthur Conway. We quarrel every time we meet. I cannot think why he asked me; he disapproves of me even more than his mother does—such an interfering old lady. He will be overjoyed to be let off. And I don't want to dance to-night. I am looking forward so tremendously to to-morrow. I shall stay and talk to you, but you must give me a cigarette to keep me in a good temper."

His hand shook a little as he held the match for her. "Are you really determined to go through with this tour?"

She stared at him in surprise. "Why not? My arrangements have been made some time. Why should I change my mind at the last moment?"

"Why does your brother let you go alone? Why doesn't he go with you?
Oh, I haven't any right to ask, but I do ask," he broke out vehemently.

She shrugged her shoulders with a little laugh. "We fell out, Aubrey and I. He wanted to go to America. I wanted a trip into the desert. We quarrelled for two whole days and half one night, and then we compromised. I should have my desert tour, and Aubrey should go to New York; and to mark his brotherly appreciation of my gracious promise to follow him to the States without fail at the end of a month he has consented to grace my caravan for the first stage, and dismiss me on my way with his blessing. It annoyed him so enormously that he could not order me to go with him, this being the first time in our wanderings that our inclinations have not jumped in the same direction. I came of age a few months ago, and, in future, I can do as I please. Not that I

have ever done anything else," she conceded, with another laugh, "because Aubrey's ways have been my ways until now."

"But for the sake of one month! What difference could it make to him?" he asked in astonishment.

"That's Aubrey," replied Miss Mayo drily.

"It isn't safe," persisted Arbuthnot.

She flicked the ash from her cigarette carelessly. "I don't agree with you. I don't know why everybody is making such a fuss about it. Plenty of other women have travelled in much wilder country than this desert."

He looked at her curiously. She seemed to be totally unaware that it was her youth and her beauty that made all the danger of the expedition. He fell back on the easier excuse.

"There seems to be unrest amongst some of the tribes. There have been a lot of rumours lately," he said seriously.

She made a little movement of impatience. "Oh, that's what they always tell you when they want to put obstacles in your way. The authorities have already dangled that bogey in front of me. I asked for facts and they only gave me generalities. I asked definitely if they had any power to stop me. They said they had not, but strongly advised me not to make the attempt. I said I should go, unless the French Government arrested me…. Why not? I am not afraid. I don't admit that there is anything to be afraid of. I don't believe a word about the tribes being restless. Arabs are always moving about, aren't they? I have an excellent caravan leader, whom even the authorities vouch for, and I shall be armed. I am perfectly able to take care of myself. I

can shoot straight and I am used to camping. Besides, I have given my word to Aubrey to be in Oran in a month, and I can't get very far away in that time."

There was an obstinate ring in her voice, and when she stopped speaking he sat silent, consumed with anxiety, obsessed with the loveliness of her, and tormented with the desire to tell her so. Then he turned to her suddenly, and his face was very white. "Miss Mayo—Diana—put off this trip only for a little, and give me the right to go with you. I love you. I want you for my wife more than anything on earth. I shan't always be a penniless subaltern. One of these days I shall be able to give you a position that is worthy of you; no, nothing could be that, but one at least that I am not ashamed to offer to you. We've been very good friends; you know all about me. I'll give my whole life to make you happy. The world has been a different place to me since you came into it. I can't get away from you. You are in my thoughts night and day. I love you; I want you. My God, Diana! Beauty like yours drives a man mad!"

"Is beauty all that a man wants in his wife?" she asked, with a kind of cold wonder in her voice. "Brains and a sound body seem much more sensible requirements to me."

"But when a woman has all three, as you have, Diana," he whispered ardently, his hands closing over the slim ones lying in her lap.

But with a strength that seemed impossible for their smallness she disengaged them from his grasp. "Please stop. I am sorry. We have been good friends, and it has never occurred to me that there could be anything beyond that. I never thought that you might love me. I never

thought of you in that way at all, I don't understand it. When God made me He omitted to give me a heart. I have never loved any one in my life. My brother and I have tolerated each other, but there has never been any affection between us. Would it be likely? Put yourself in Aubrey's place. Imagine a young man of nineteen, with a cold, reserved nature, being burdened with the care of a baby sister, thrust into his hands unwanted and unexpected. Was it likely that he would have any affection for me? I never wanted it. I was born with the same cold nature as his. I was brought up as a boy, my training was hard. Emotion and affection have been barred out of my life. I simply don't know what they mean. I don't want to know. I am very content with my life as it is. Marriage for a woman means the end of independence, that is, marriage with a man who is a man, in spite of all that the most modern woman may say. I have never obeyed any one in my life; I do not wish to try the experiment. I am very sorry to have hurt you. You've been a splendid pal, but that side of life does not exist for me. If I had thought for one moment that my friendship was going to hurt you I need not have let you become so intimate, but I did not think, because it is a subject that I never think of. A man to me is just a companion with whom I ride or shoot or fish; a pal, a comrade, and that's just all there is to it. God made me a woman. Why, only He knows."

Her quiet, even voice stopped. There had been a tone of cold sincerity in it that Arbuthnot could not help but recognise. She meant everything that she said. She said no more than the truth. Her reputation for complete indifference to admiration and her unvarying attitude

towards men were as well known as her dauntless courage and obstinate determination. With Sir Aubrey Mayo she behaved like a younger brother, and as such entertained his friends. She was popular with everybody, even with the mothers of marriageable daughters, for, in spite of her wealth and beauty, her notorious peculiarities made her negligible as a rival to plainer and less well-dowered girls.

Arbuthnot sat in silence. It was hardly likely, he thought bitterly, that he should succeed where other and better men had failed. He had been a fool to succumb to the temptation that had been too hard for him to resist. He knew her well enough to know beforehand what her answer would be. The very real fear for her safety that the thought of the coming expedition gave him, her nearness in the mystery of the Eastern night, the lights, the music, had all combined to rush to his lips words that in a saner moment would never have passed them. He loved her, he would love her always, but he knew that his love was as hopeless as it was undying. But it was men who were men whom she wanted for her friends, so he must take his medicine like a man.

"May I still be the pal, Diana?" he said quietly.

She looked at him a moment, but in the dim light of the hanging lanterns his eyes were steady under hers, and she held out her hand frankly. "Gladly," she said candidly. "I have hosts of acquaintances, but very few friends. We are always travelling, Aubrey and I, and we never seem to have time to make friends. We rarely stay as long in one place as we have stayed in Biskra. In England they call us very bad neighbours, we are so seldom there. We generally go home

for three months in the winter for the hunting, but the rest of the year we wander on the face of the globe."

He held her slender fingers gripped in his for a moment, smothering an insane desire to press them to his lips, which he knew would be fatal to the newly accorded friendship, and then let them go. Miss Mayo continued sitting quietly beside him. She was in no way disturbed by what had happened. She had taken him literally at his word, and was treating him as the pal he had asked to be. It no more occurred to her that she might relieve him of her society than it occurred to her that her continued presence might be distressing to him. She was totally unembarrassed and completely un-self-conscious. And as they sat silent, her thoughts far away in the desert, and his full of vain longings and regrets, a man's low voice rose in the stillness of the night. "*Pale hands I loved beside the Shalimar. Where are you now? Who lies beneath your spell*?" he sang in a passionate, vibrating baritone. He was singing in English, and yet the almost indefinite slurring from note to note was strangely un-English. Diana Mayo leaned forward, her head raised, listening intently, with shining eyes. The voice seemed to come from the dark shadows at the end of the garden, or it might have been further away out in the road beyond the cactus hedge. The singer sang slowly, his voice lingering caressingly on the words; the last verse dying away softly and clearly, almost imperceptibly fading into silence.

For a moment there was utter stillness, then Diana lay back with a little sigh. "The Kashmiri Song. It makes me think of India. I heard a man sing it in Kashmere last year,

but not like that. What a wonderful voice! I wonder who it is?"

Arbuthnot looked at her curiously, surprised at the sudden ring of interest in her tone, and the sudden animation of her face.

"You say you have no emotion in your nature, and yet that unknown man's singing has stirred you deeply. How do you reconcile the two?" he asked, almost angrily.

"Is an appreciation of the beautiful emotion?" she challenged, with uplifted eyes. "Surely not. Music, art, nature, everything beautiful appeals to me. But there is nothing emotional in that. It is only that I prefer beautiful things to ugly ones. For that reason even pretty clothes appeal to me," she added, laughing.

"You are the best-dressed woman in Biskra," he acceded. "But is not that a concession to the womanly feelings that you despise?"

"Not at all. To take an interest in one's clothes is not an exclusively feminine vice. I like pretty dresses. I admit to spending some time in thinking of colour schemes to go with my horrible hair, but I assure you that my dressmaker has an easier life than Aubrey's tailor."

She sat silent, hoping that the singer might not have gone, but there was no sound except a cicada chirping near her. She swung round in her chair, looking in the direction from which it came. "Listen to him. Jolly little chap! They are the first things I listen for when I get to Port Said. They mean the East to me."

"Maddening little beasts!" said Arbuthnot irritably.

"They are going to be very friendly little beasts to me during the next four weeks…. You don't know what this trip means to me. I like wild places. The happiest times of my life have been spent camping in America and India, and I have always wanted the desert more than either of them. It is going to be a month of pure joy. I am going to be enormously happy."

She stood up with a little laugh of intense pleasure, and half turned, waiting for Arbuthnot. He got up reluctantly and stood silent beside her for a few moments. "Diana, I wish you'd let me kiss you, just once," he broke out miserably.

She looked up swiftly with a glint of anger in her eyes, and shook her head. "No. That's not in the compact. I have never been kissed in my life. It is one of the things that I do not understand." Her voice was almost fierce.

She moved leisurely towards the hotel, and he paced beside her wondering if he had forfeited her friendship by his outburst, but on the verandah she halted and spoke in the frank tone of camaraderie in which she had always addressed him. "Shall I see you in the morning?"

He understood. There was to be no more reference to what had passed between them. The offer of friendship held, but only on her own terms. He pulled himself together.

"Yes. We have arranged an escort of about a dozen of us to ride the first few miles with you, to give you a proper send-off."

She made a laughing gesture of protest. "It will certainly need four weeks of solitude to counteract the conceit I shall acquire," she said lightly, as she passed into the ballroom.

A few hours later Diana came into her bedroom, and, switching on the electric lights, tossed her gloves and programme into a chair. The room was empty, for her maid had had a *vertige* at the suggestion that she should accompany her mistress into the desert, and had been sent back to Paris to await Diana's return. She had left during the day, to take most of the heavy luggage with her.

Diana stood in the middle of the room and looked at the preparations for the early start next morning with a little smile of satisfaction. Everything was *en train*; the final arrangements had all been concluded some days before. The camel caravan with the camp equipment was due to leave Biskra a few hours before the time fixed for the Mayos to start with Mustafa Ali, the reputable guide whom the French authorities had reluctantly recommended. The two big suit-cases that Diana was taking with her stood open, ready packed, waiting only for the last few necessaries, and by them the steamer trunk that Sir Aubrey would take charge of and leave in Paris as he passed through. On a chaise-longue was laid out her riding kit ready for the morning. Her smile broadened as she looked at the smart-cut breeches and high brown boots. They were the clothes in which most of her life had been spent, and in which she was far more at home than in the pretty dresses over which she had laughed with Arbuthnot.

She was glad the dance was over; it was not a form of exercise that appealed to her particularly. She was thinking only of the coming tour. She stretched her arms out with a little happy laugh.

"It's the life of lives, and it's going to begin all over again to-morrow morning." She crossed over to the dressing-table, and, propping her elbows on it, looked at herself in the glass, with a little friendly smile at the reflection. In default of any other confidant she had always talked to herself, with no thought for the beauty of the face staring back at her from the glass. The only comment she ever made to herself on her own appearance was sometimes to wish that her hair was not such a tiresome shade. She looked at herself now with a tinge of curiosity. "I wonder why I'm so especially happy to-night. It must be because we have been so long in Biskra. It's been very jolly, but I was beginning to get very bored." She laughed again and picked up her watch to wind. It was one of her peculiarities that she would wear no jewellery of any kind. Even the gold repeater in her hand was on a plain leather strap. She undressed slowly and each moment felt more wide-awake. Slipping a thin wrap over her pyjamas and lighting a cigarette she went out on to the broad balcony on to which her bedroom gave. The room was on the first floor, and opposite her window rose one of the ornately carved and bracketed pillars that supported the balcony, stretching up to the second story above her head. She looked down into the gardens below. It was an easy climb, she thought, with a boyish grin—far easier than many she had achieved successfully when the need of a solitary ramble became imperative. But the East was inconvenient for solitary ramble; native servants had a disconcerting habit of lying down to sleep wherever drowsiness overcame them, and it was not very long since she had slid down from her balcony and landed plumb on a slumbering bundle of

humanity who had roused half the hotel with his howls. She leant far over the rail, trying to see into the verandah below, and she thought she caught a glimpse of white drapery. She looked again, and this time there was nothing, but she shook her head with a little grimace, and swung herself up on to the broad ledge of the railing. Settling herself comfortably with her back against the column she looked out over the hotel gardens into the night, humming softly the Kashmiri song she had heard earlier in the evening.

The risen moon was full, and its cold, brilliant light filled the garden with strong black shadows. She watched some that seemed even to move, as if the garden were alive with creeping, hurrying figures, and amused herself tracking them until she traced them to the palm tree or cactus bush that caused them. One in particular gave her a long hunt till she finally ran it to its lair, and it proved to be the shadow of a grotesque lead statue half hidden by a flowering shrub. Forgetting the hour and the open windows all around her, she burst into a rippling peal of laughter, which was interrupted by the appearance of a figure, imperfectly seen through the lattice-work which divided her balcony from the next one, and the sound of an irritable voice.

"For Heaven's sake, Diana, let other people sleep if you can't."

"Which, being interpreted, is let Sir Aubrey Mayo sleep," she retorted, with a chuckle. "My dear boy, sleep if you want to, but I don't know how you can on a night like this. Did you ever see such a gorgeous moon?"

"Oh, damn the moon!"

"Oh, very well. Don't get cross about it. Go back to bed and put your head under the clothes, and then you won't see it. But I'm going to sit here."

"Diana, don't be an idiot! You'll go to sleep and fall into the garden and break your neck."

"*Tant pis pour moi. Tant mieux pour toi,*" she said flippantly. "I have left you all that I have in the world, dear brother. Could devotion go further?"

She paid no heed to his exclamation of annoyance, and looked back into the garden. It was a wonderful night, silent except for the cicadas' monotonous chirping, mysterious with the inexplicable mystery that hangs always in the Oriental night. The smells of the East rose up all around her; here, as at home, they seemed more perceptible by night than by day. Often at home she had stood on the little stone balcony outside her room, drinking in the smells of the night—the pungent, earthy smell after rain, the aromatic smell of pine trees near the house. It was the intoxicating smells of the night that had first driven her, as a very small child, to clamber down from her balcony, clinging to the thick ivy roots, to wander with the delightful sense of wrong-doing through the moonlit park and even into the adjoining gloomy woods. She had always been utterly fearless.

Her childhood had been a strange one. There had been no near relatives to interest themselves in the motherless girl left to the tender mercies of a brother nearly twenty years her senior, who was frankly and undisguisedly horrified at the charge that had been thrust upon him. Wrapped up in himself, and free to indulge in the wander hunger that gripped him, the baby sister was an intolerable

burden, and he had shifted responsibility in the easiest way possible. For the first few years of her life she was left undisturbed to nurses and servants who spoiled her indiscriminately. Then, when she was still quite a tiny child, Sir Aubrey Mayo came home from a long tour, and, settling down for a couple of years, fixed on his sister's future training, modelled rigidly on his own upbringing. Dressed as a boy, treated as a boy, she learned to ride and to shoot and to fish—not as amusements, but seriously, to enable her to take her place later on as a companion to the man whose only interests they were. His air of weariness was a mannerism. In reality he was as hard as nails, and it was his intention that Diana should grow up as hard. With that end in view her upbringing had been Spartan, no allowances were made for sex or temperament and nothing was spared to gain the desired result. And from the first Diana had responded gallantly, throwing herself heart and soul into the arduous, strenuous life mapped out for her. The only drawback to a perfect enjoyment of life were the necessary lessons that had to be gone through, though even these might have been worse. Every morning she rode across the park to the rectory for a couple of hours' tuition with the rector, whose heart was more in his stable than in his parish, and whose reputation was greater across country than it was in the pulpit. His methods were rough and ready, but she had brains, and acquired an astonishing amount of diverse knowledge. But her education was stopped with abrupt suddenness when she was fifteen by the arrival at the rectory of an overgrown young cub who had been sent by a despairing parent, as a last resource, to the muscular

rector, and who quickly discovered what those amongst whom she had grown up had hardly realised, that Diana Mayo, with the clothes and manners of a boy, was really an uncommonly beautiful young woman. With the assurance belonging to his type, he had taken the earliest opportunity of telling her so, following it with an attempt to secure the kiss that up to now his own good looks had always secured for him. But in this case he had to deal with a girl who was a girl by accident of birth only, who was quicker with her hands and far finer trained than he was, and whose natural strength was increased by furious rage. She had blacked his eyes before he properly understood what was happening, and was dancing around him like an infuriated young gamecock when the rector had burst in upon them, attracted by the noise.

What she left he had finished, and then, breathless and angry, had ridden back across the park with her and had briefly announced to Sir Aubrey, who happened to be at home upon one of his rare visits, that his pupil was both too old and too pretty to continue her studies at the rectory, and had taken himself off as hurriedly as he had come, leaving Sir Aubrey to settle for himself the new problem of Diana. And, as before, it was settled in the easiest possible way. Physically she was perfectly able to take up the role for which he had always intended her; mentally he presumed that she knew as much as it was necessary for her to know, and, in any case, travelling itself was an education, and a far finer one than could be learned from books. So Diana grew up in a day, and in a fortnight the old life was behind her and she had started out on the ceaseless travels with

her brother that had continued for the last six years—years of perpetual change, of excitements and dangers.

She thought of it all, sitting on the broad rail of the balcony, her head slanted against the column on which she leaned. "It's been a splendid life," she murmured, "and to-morrow—to-day begins the most perfect part of it." She yawned and realised suddenly that she was desperately sleepy. She turned back into her room, leaving the windows wide, and, flinging off her wrap, tumbled into bed and slept almost before her head was on the pillow.

It must have been about an hour later when she awoke, suddenly wide awake. She lay quite still, looking cautiously under her thick lashes. The room was flooded with moonlight, there was nothing to be seen, but she had the positive feeling that there was another presence in the room beside her own; she had had a half-conscious vision in the moment of waking of a shadowy something that had seemed to fade away by the window. As the actual reality of this thought pierced through the sleep that dulled her brain and became a concrete suggestion, she sprang out of the bed and ran on to the balcony. It was empty. She leaned over the railing, listening intently, but she could see nothing and hear nothing. Puzzled, she went back into her room and turned on the lights. Nothing seemed to be missing: her watch lay where she had left it on the dressing table; and the suit-cases had apparently not been tampered with. By the bedside the ivory-mounted revolver that she always carried was lying as she had placed it. She looked around the room again, frowning. "It must have been a dream," she said doubtfully, "but it seemed very real. It looked tall and

white and solid, and I *felt* it there." She waited a moment or two, then shrugged her shoulders, turned out the lights, and got into bed. Her nerves were admirable, and in five minutes she was asleep again.

CHAPTER II

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The promised send-off had been enthusiastic. The arrangements for the trip had been perfect; there had been no hitch anywhere. The guide, Mustafa Ali, appeared capable and efficient, effacing himself when not wanted and replying with courteous dignity when spoken to. The day had been full of interest, and the long, hot ride had for Diana been the height of physical enjoyment. They had reached the oasis where the first night was to be passed an hour before, and found the camp already established, tents pitched, and everything so ordered that Sir Aubrey could find nothing to criticise; even Stephens, his servant, who had travelled with him since Diana was a baby, and who was as critical as his master on the subject of camps, had no fault to find.

Diana glanced about her little travelling tent with complete content. It was much smaller than the ones to which she had always been accustomed, ridiculously so compared with the large one she had had in India the previous year, with its separate bath—and dressing-rooms. Servants, too, had swarmed in India. Here service promised to be inadequate, but it had been her whim on this tour to dispense with the elaborate arrangements that Sir Aubrey cultivated and to try comparative roughing it. The narrow camp cot, the tin bath, the little folding table and her two suit-cases seemed to take up all the available space. But

she laughed at the inconvenience, though she had drenched her bed with splashing, and the soap had found its way into the toe of one of her long boots. She had changed from her riding clothes into a dress of clinging jade-green silk, swinging short above her slender ankles, the neck cut low, revealing the gleaming white of her soft, girlish bosom. She came out of the tent and stood a moment exchanging an amused smile with Stephens, who was hovering near dubiously, one eye on her and the other on his master. She was late, and Sir Aubrey liked his meals punctually. The baronet was lounging in one deck-chair with his feet on another.

Diana wagged an admonishing forefinger. "Fly, Stephens, and fetch the soup! If it is cold there will be a riot." She walked to the edge of the canvas cloth that had been thrown down in front of the tents and stood revelling in the scene around her, her eyes dancing with excitement as they glanced slowly around the camp spread out over the oasis—the clustering palm trees, the desert itself stretching away before her in undulating sweeps, but seemingly level in the evening light, far off to the distant hills lying like a dark smudge against the horizon. She drew a long breath. It was the desert at last, the desert that she felt she had been longing for all her life. She had never known until this moment how intense the longing had been. She felt strangely at home, as if the great, silent emptiness had been waiting for her as she had been waiting for it, and now that she had come it was welcoming her softly with the faint rustle of the whispering sand, the mysterious charm of its

billowy, shifting surface that seemed beckoning to her to penetrate further and further into its unknown obscurities.

Her brother's voice behind her brought her down to earth suddenly.

"You've been a confounded long time."

She turned to the table with a faint smile. "Don't be a bear, Aubrey. It's all very well for you. You have Stephens to lather your chin and to wash your hands, but thanks to that idiot Marie, I have to look after myself."

Sir Aubrey took his heels down leisurely from the second chair, pitched away his cigar, and, screwing his eyeglass into his eye with more than usual truculence, looked at her with disapproval. "Are you going to rig yourself out like that every evening for the benefit of Mustafa Ali and the camel-drivers?"

"I do not propose to invite the worthy Mustafa to meals, and I am not in the habit of 'rigging myself out,' as you so charmingly put it, for any one's benefit. If you think I dress in camp to please you, my dear Aubrey, you flatter yourself. I do it entirely to please myself. That explorer woman we met in London that first year I began travelling with you explained to me the real moral and physical value of changing into comfortable, pretty clothes after a hard day in breeches and boots. You change yourself. What's the difference?"

"All the difference," he snapped. "There is no need for you to make yourself more attractive than you are already."

"Since when has it occurred to you that I am attractive? You must have a touch of the sun, Aubrey," she replied, with

uplifted eyebrows, drumming impatiently with her fingers on the table.

"Don't quibble. You know perfectly well that you are good-looking—too good-looking to carry through this preposterous affair."

"Will you please tell me what you are driving at?" she asked quietly. But the dark blue eyes fixed on her brother's face were growing darker as she looked at him.

"I've been doing some hard thinking to-day, Diana. This tour you propose is impossible."

"Isn't it rather late in the day to find that out?" she interrupted sarcastically; but he ignored the interruption.

"You must see for yourself, now that you are face to face with the thing, that it is impossible. It's quite unthinkable that you can wander for the next month all alone in the desert with those damned niggers. Though my legal guardianship over you terminated last September I still have some moral obligations towards you. Though it has been convenient to me to bring you up as a boy and to regard you in the light of a younger brother instead of a sister, we cannot get away from the fact that you are a woman, and a very young woman. There are certain things a young woman cannot do. If you had been the boy I always wished you were it would have been a different matter, but you are not a boy, and the whole thing is impossible—utterly impossible." There was a fretful impatience in his voice.

Diana lit a cigarette slowly, and swung round on her chair with a hard laugh. "If I had not lived with you all my life, Aubrey, I should really be impressed with your brotherly solicitude; I should think you really meant it. But knowing