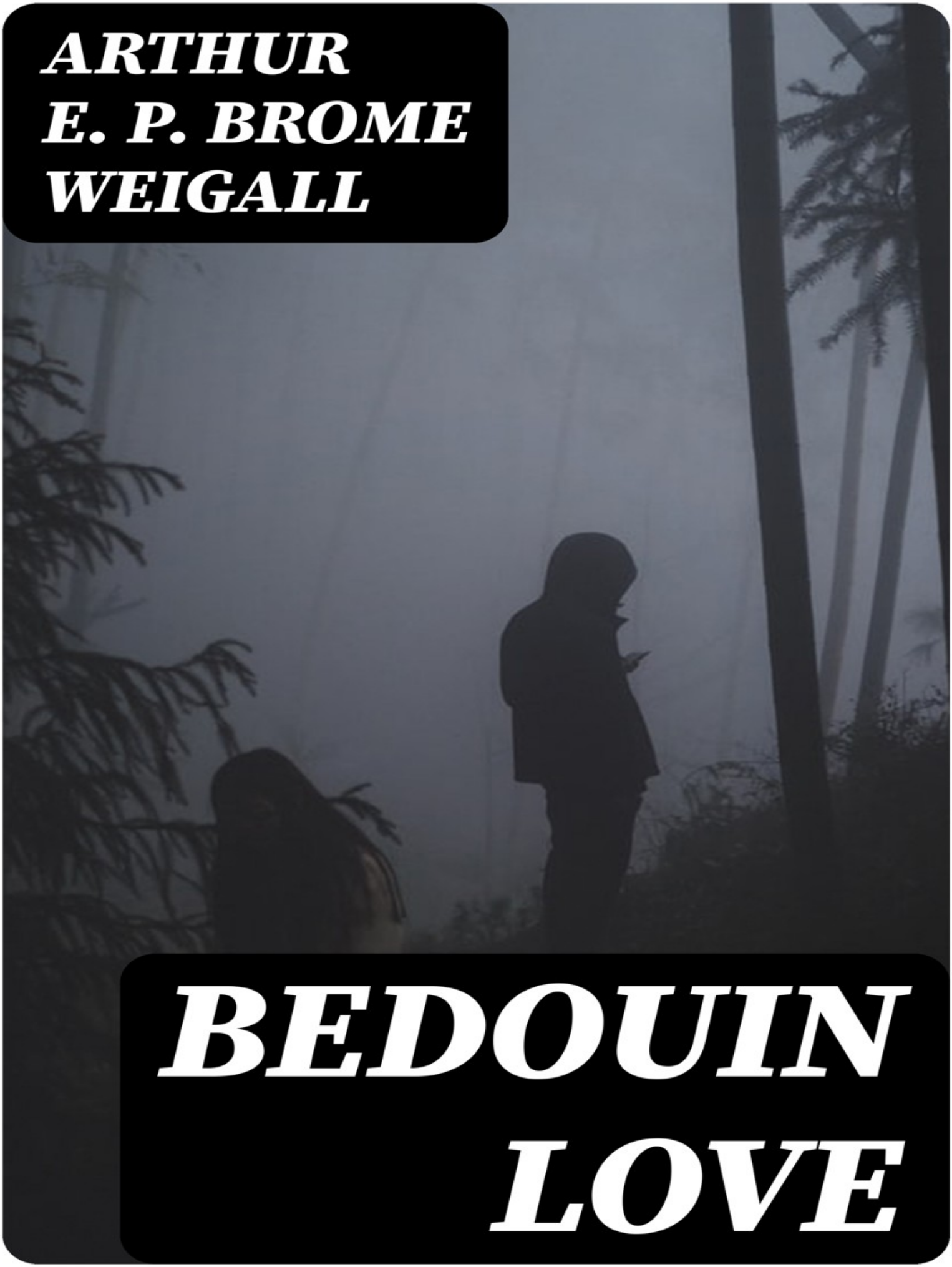
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Bedouin Love

EAN 8596547370147

DigiCat, 2022
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Chapter I: CHOLERA

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James Champernowne Tundering-West, or, as for the time being he preferred to be called, Jim Easton, sat himself down on the camp-bedstead in the middle of the one habitable room of a derelict rest-house, built on the edge of the desert some distance behind the houses of the native town of Kôm-es-Sultân. All day long he had been feeling an uneasiness of body; and now, when the incinerating June sun was sinking towards the glaring mirror of the Nile, this vague disquiet developed into a very tangible malady.

He knew precisely what was the matter with him, and his dark, angry eyes rolled around the dirty pink-washed room, as would those of a criminal around the place of execution. Yesterday he had arrived in from the desert, tired out by a four-days' journey on camel-back across the furnace of rocks and sand which separated the gold-mines, where he had been working, from the nearest bend of the Nile. There had been an outbreak of cholera at the camp; and, being the only white man then remaining at the works, which were in process of being shut down for the summer, he had been obliged to stay at his post until, as he supposed, the epidemic had been stamped out. Then, with a handful of natives he had set out for the Nile Valley; but on the journey his personal servant had contracted the dreaded sickness, and the man had died pitifully in his arms, in the stifling shadow of a wayside rock.

The little town of Kôm-es-Sultân was a mere jumble of mud-brick houses surrounding a whitewashed mosque; and

so great was the summer heat that one might have expected the whole place suddenly to burst into flames and utterly to be consumed. No Europeans lived there, with the exception of a nondescript Greek, who kept a grocery store and lent money to the indigent natives at outrageous interest; but at the village of El Aish, on the other side of the Nile, there was a small sugar-factory, in charge of an amplitudinous and bearded Welshman named Morgan, who, presumably, was now at his post, since, but a few minutes ago, the siren announcing the end of the day's work had sounded across the water. Although six hundred miles above Cairo, Kôm-es-Sultân was not so isolated as its primitive appearance suggested; for it was no more than five miles distant from a railway-station, where, once a day, the roasting little narrow-gauge train halted in its long journey down to Luxor.

Jim cursed his suddenly active conscience that it had not permitted him to take this train as it passed in the morning, for already then he had realized the probability that calamity was upon him; but he had been constrained to remain where he was, alone in the ramshackle and parboiled rest-house outside the town, for fear of spreading the sickness, and he had determined to wait until an answer came from the Public Health official at Luxor, to whom he had sent a telegram stating that his party was infected, and that he was keeping the men together until instructions were received. He seldom did the correct thing; but on this occasion, when lives were at stake, he had felt that for once the freedom of the individual had to be subordinated to the

interests of the community, repugnant though such a thought was to his independent nature.

A dismal sort of place, he thought to himself, in which to fight for one's life! There were two doors in the room, one bolted and barred since the Lord knows when, the other creaking on its hinges as the scorching wind fluttered up against it through the outer hall. A window near the floor, with cracked, cobwebbed panes of glass, stood half open, and a towel hung loosely from a nail in the outside shutter to another in the inside woodwork. In the morning it had served to keep out the early sun; but now the last rays struck through the cracks of the opposite doorway in dusty shafts.

He had told his Egyptian overseer that he was tired, and that he did not wish to be disturbed again until the morning; and he bade him keep the men in the camp amongst the rocks a few hundred yards back in the desert, and prevent them from entering the town. But in thus desiring to be alone he had not been prompted merely by his regard for the safety of others: he had followed also that primitive instinct which his wandering, self-reliant manner of life had nurtured in him, that instinct which leads a man to hide himself from, rather than to seek, his fellows when illness is upon him. Like a sick animal he had slunk into this desolate place of shelter; and he now prepared himself for the battle with a sense almost of relief that he was unobserved.

He went across to the door and bolted it; then to the window, and pulled the shutters to: but the bolt was broken and the woodwork, eaten by white-ants, was falling to pieces. He took from his medicine-box a large flask of

brandy, a bottle of carbolic, a little phial of chlorodyne, and a thermometer. There was a tin jug in the corner of the room, full of water; and into this he emptied the carbolic, shaking it viciously thereafter. Then he saturated the towel with the liquid, and replaced it across the window.

As the first spasms attacked him and left him again, he gulped down a stiff dose of brandy, stripped off most of his clothes, and rolled them up in a bundle in the corner of the room; uncorked the chlorodyne, and lay down on his mattress. His heart was beating fast, and for a while he was shaken with fear. All his life he had smiled at death as at a friend, and, like Marcus Aurelius, had called it but “a resting from the vibrations of sensation and the swayings of desire, a stop upon the rambling of thought, and a release from all the drudgery of the body.” Yet now, when he was to do battle with it, he was afraid.

He endeavoured to laugh, and as it were mentally to snap his fingers; and presently, perhaps under the influence of the brandy, he got up from the bed and fetched from the outer room his guitar, which had been his solace on many a trying occasion. Some years ago, in South Africa, he had set to a lilting tune the lines of Procter in praise of Death; and now, sitting on the edge of the bed, a wild haggard figure with sallow face and black hair tumbling over his forehead, he twanged the strings and sang the crazy words with a sort of desperation.

King Death was a rare old fellow;
He sat where no sun could shine,
And he lifted his hand so yellow,
And poured out his coal-black wine

Hurrah, for the coal-black wine!

There came to him many a maiden
Whose eyes had forgot to shine,
And widows with grief o’erladen,
For draught of his coal-black wine.
Hurrah, for the coal-black wine!

The heat of the room was abominable, and he mopped his forehead with his handkerchief, and groaned aloud. Then, returning to his song, he skipped a verse and proceeded.

All came to the rare old fellow,
Who laughed till his eyes dropped brine,
And he gave them his hand so yellow,
And pledged them in Death’s black wine.
Hurrah, for the coal-black wine!

The sun set and the stars came out. At length, overcome with sickness, he thrust the guitar aside, and staggered across the room; and presently, when he was somewhat recovered, he groped for a candle, lit it, stuck it in an empty bottle, and lay down again with a gasp of pain.

Now the battle began in earnest, and he made no further attempt to laugh. Taut and racked, he stared up at the dim, cobwebbed ceiling, and swore that no man should come near him so long as there was danger of infection. He was, perhaps, a little pig-headed on this point; but such was his nature. “Live, and let live” had ever been his motto; and now he was putting into practice the second half of that maxim.

The thought occurred to him that he ought to write a will, or some general instructions, in case the “rare old fellow” were triumphant; but, on consideration, he abandoned the idea for the good reason that he had neither property worth mentioning to leave, nor relations to whom he would care to address his last message. Moreover, in his momentary relief from pain, he felt extraordinarily disinclined to bother himself.

He had an uncle—Stephen—who was in possession of a little estate at Eversfield, a small English village in the neighbourhood of Oxford, where the Tundering-Wests had lived for many generations; but he had not seen much of this correct and conventional personage during his childhood, and nothing at all for the last ten years, since he had been a grown man and a wanderer. This uncle had two sons, his cousins: one of them, Mark by name, was, he believed, in India; the other, called James like himself, lived at home. They were his sole relations, he being an only child, and his father and mother having died two or three years ago, leaving him a few hundred pounds, which he had quickly lost.

There was nobody who would care very much if he pegged out, and in this thought there was a sort of gloomy comfort. Moreover, he was known by his few friends in Egypt and elsewhere as Jim Easton; for, many years ago, at a time when he was reduced to utter penury, he had thought it best to hide his identity, lest interfering persons should communicate with his relations. In the name of Jim Easton he had wandered from place to place, and in that name he had obtained this job at the gold mines; and if now

he were to die, the fate of James Tundering-West would remain a matter of speculation. That was as it should be: ever since he left England he had been a bird of passage, and is it not a rarity to see a dead bird? Nobody knows where they all die, or how: with few exceptions, they seem, as it were, to fade away; and thus he, too, would disappear.

He rolled his eyes around his prison, and clapped his hand with pathetic drama to his burning forehead. “Wretched bird!” he muttered, addressing himself. “It was in you to soar to the heights, to go rushing up to the sun and the planets, with strong, driving wings. But the winds were always contrary, or the attractions of the lower air were too alluring; and now you are sunk to the earth, and may be you will never make that great assault upon the stars of which you had always dreamed.”

He dismissed these useless ruminations. He was not going to die: life and the lure of the unattained were still before him.

Another and another spasm smote him, tore him asunder, and left him shaking upon the bed. With a trembling hand he mixed the brandy and chlorodyne, making little attempts to measure the dose. The candle spluttered on the floor near by, and strange insects buzzed around it, singed themselves, and fell kicking on their backs.

He opened his eyes and watched them as he lay on his side, his knees drawn up, and his hands gripping the edge of the bed. Their agonies, no doubt, were as great as his, but, being small, they did not matter. He, too, as Englishmen go, was not large; and it was very apparent that he did not much matter. He was of the lean and medium-

sized variety of the race, and was of the swarthy type which is often to be found in the far south-west of England, where his family had had its origin. Some people might have termed him picturesque: others might have said, and most certainly just now would have said, that he looked a bit mad.

At length he slept for a few minutes; but his dreams were hideous, and full of faces, which came close to him, growing bigger and bigger, until, with strange and melancholy grimaces, they receded once more into infinite distance. Somebody grey, ponderous, and very fearful, counted endless numbers, now slowly and portentously, now with such increasing rapidity that his brain reeled.

In this manner the seemingly endless night passed on: a few moments of sleep, a disjointed procession of horrible fantasies, convulsions of pain, staggerings across the room, fallings back on the bed, brandy, and exhausted sleep again. But all the while he knew that he was growing weaker.

Presently the candle went out, and the darkness closed over his agony. The thought came to him that soon he would no longer have the power to dose himself, and with it came that human desire for aid which no animal instinct of segregation can wholly stifle in a heart weary with pain. It was now long past midnight, and from this time till sunrise he fought a terrible double battle, on the one hand with Death, on the other with Self. It would not be impossible, he knew, to crawl from the room into the silent desert outside, and a cry for help would possibly be heard by his men.

But what would happen? They would go into the town, doubtless carrying the infection with them, and would engage a boat in which they would row across the Nile to fetch Morgan, who had the reputation of being somewhat of a doctor. But Morgan had a wife and child in Wales, who were dependent on him: only last autumn that hairy giant had told him all about them as they sat drinking warm lager in the dusty garden by the river, one hot night, just before the mining party had set out for the distant works.

Thus, when at long last the sun rose and glared into the room, above and below the fluttering towel, he was still alone.

At nine o'clock, as the day's heat and the onslaught of the flies began again to be intolerable, he gave up hope. Until that hour he had fought his fight with decency; but now convulsion on convulsion had dragged the strength out of him, and he was no longer able to crawl back on to the bedstead. The last drops of brandy in a tumbler by his side, he lay limply on the floor; and where he lay, there the spasms racked him, and there he fainted. With the hope for life went also the desire, and each time that he came to himself he prayed to God for the mercy of unconsciousness. The dying words of Anne Boleyn, which he had read years ago, recurred again and again to his mind: "O Death, rocke me aslepe; bringe me on quiet rest." He kept saying them over to himself, not with his lips, for they were parched, but somewhere deep down in the nightmare of his wandering brain.

Presently a gust of blistering wind flicked the towel from its nail in the window, and with that the creaking shutter

slammed back on its hinges, and the sun streamed full on to the white figure on the floor. Jim opened his eyes, bloodshot and wild, and stared out on to the rocks and sandy drifts. A few sparrows were hopping about languidly in the shade of a ruinous wall, their beaks open as though they were panting for breath. The sky was leaden, for the glare of the sun seemed to have sucked out the colour from all things, even from the yellow sand, which now had the neutral hue of Egyptian dust.

This, then, was the end!—and he could shut up his life as a book that has been read. At the age of nineteen he had abandoned the humdrum but respectable City career towards which he was being headed by his father, and, having nigh broken the parental heart, had gone out to Korea as handyman to a gold-mining company. He had dreamed of riches; his mind had been full of the thought of gold and its power. He had imagined himself buying a kingdom for his own, as it were.

Two years later, utterly disillusioned, he had taken ship to California, and had earned his living in many capacities, until chance had carried him to the Aroe Islands in the pearl trade, and later to the diamond mines of South Africa. Incidentally, he had become, after three or four years, something of an expert in estimating the value of diamonds, and had made a few hundred pounds by barter; but with this sum in the bank he had failed to resist the vagrancy of his nature and the enticement of his dreams, and had returned to Europe to wander through Italy, France, and Spain: not altogether in idleness, for being addicted to scribbling his thoughts in rhyme, and twisting and turning

his speculations into the various shapes of recognized verse, he had filled many notebooks with jottings and impressions which he believed to be more or less worthless.

Then he had inherited his father’s small savings, and had been induced by a persuasive friend to invest them in an expedition to Ceylon in search of a mythical field of moonstones. Returning in absolute poverty, owning nothing but his guitar and the threadbare clothes in which he stood, he had landed at Port Said, and so had taken reluctant service in this somewhat precarious gold-mining company at a salary which had now placed a small sum to his credit on the company’s books.

A roaming, dreaming, sun-baked, Bedouin life!—and this ending of it in a stifling, tumbledown rest-house seemed to be the most natural wind-up of the whole business. Often he had enjoyed himself; he had played with romance; he had had his great moments; but at times he had suffered under a sense of utter loneliness, and these last months at the mines in the desert had been a miserable exile, only relieved by those silent hours in his tent at night, when he had endeavoured to put into written words the tremendous thoughts of his teeming brain. And now death and oblivion appeared to him as something very eagerly to be desired—a great sleep, where the horrible sun and the flies could not reach him, and an eternal relief from all this agony, all this messiness.

He fumbled for the last of the brandy, knocked the glass over and smashed it. The liquid ran along the floor to his face, and he put out his dry tongue and licked up a little.

Then, as though remembering his manners, he rolled away from it, and shut his eyes.

When consciousness came again to him somebody was knocking at the outer door in the hall beyond. A few minutes later there was a shuffling step, and a rap upon the inner door.

“Sir, are you awake?” It was the voice of his Egyptian overseer.

Jim raised himself on his elbows, thereby disturbing the crowd of crawling flies which had settled upon his face and body, and slowly turned his head in the direction of the speaker. “Go away, you idiot!” he husked. “I’ve got cholera. I’m dying.”

“What you say?” came the voice from the other side. “I cannot hear you.”

“I’ve got cholera,” he repeated, with an effort which seemed to be bursting his heart. Then, with another purpose: “I’m nearly well now ... all right in an hour ... keep away!”

The footsteps shuffled off hurriedly, then stopped. “I go fetch Meester Morgan: he is here this mornin’. I seen him comin’ ’cross the river,” the man called out; and the footsteps passed out of hearing.

Another convulsion: but this time there was no power of resistance remaining, and long before the spasm ceased he had fainted. The next thing of which he was aware was that the heavy footstep of Morgan was coming towards the house. That frightened rat of an overseer had fetched him, then, and the gigantic fool was going to take the risk! What use was he now? There was easy Death already almost in

possession: not the laughing, rare old fellow of his song, but beautiful desirable Rest.

He was powerless to stop the man. His voice failed to rise above a whisper when he attempted to call out a warning. Suddenly his eye lighted on the jug of carbolic a yard away. At least he could lessen the danger. Slowly, and with infinite pain, he wormed himself over the floor, until his limp arm touched the jug, and his fingers closed over the mouth. A feeble pull, and the jug tottered; another, and it fell over with a clatter, and the strong disinfectant ran in a stream around him, under him, through his hair, through his scanty clothes, and away across the room.

The handle of the door rattled. “Are you there, Easton? Let me in!—I know how to doctor you.” Another rattle. “Let me in, or I’ll come round by the window.”

But Jim did not answer. He lay still and deathlike as the hulking figure of Morgan scrambled into the room through the window, and knelt down by his side on the wet floor. The place reeked of carbolic: everything was saturated with it. Morgan stepped through it to the door, and pulled back the bolts. Then, slipping and sliding, he dragged the half-naked, dishevelled body by the armpits into the outer room, and, propping it up against his knees, felt for the pulse in the nerveless wrist.

The morning sun poured in through the broken-down verandah, glistening on the damp hair of the exhausted sufferer, and gleaming upon the bearded, sweating face of the good Samaritan.

Jim opened his eyes, and his cracked lips moved. “Don’t be a damned fool,” he whispered. “Don’t take such a risk ...

every man for himself....” His head fell forward once more, and his eyes closed.

“Oh, rot!” said Morgan. “You brave little chap!—I think you’ve got a chance, please God.”

Chapter II: THE CONVALESCENT

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A native doctor belonging to the Ministry of Public Health arrived at Kôm-es-Sultân during the afternoon, having travelled up from Luxor in response to the telegram reporting the infection; and to his care the patient was handed over by Morgan, who had refused to budge until proper arrangements could be made. When, a few days later, the sick man was able to be moved, he was conveyed down to Luxor in a small river-steamer belonging to the sugar factory; and, after ten days in the local hospital, where, in spite of the great heat, he was very tolerably comfortable, he was able to go north in the sleeping-car which, on certain nights during the summer weeks, was attached to the Cairo express, for the benefit of perspiring English officers coming down from the Sudan, and weary officials whose work had called them out into these sun-scorched districts of Upper Egypt.

The doctor in Cairo advised him to move down to the sea as soon as possible; and thus, one early evening at the end of June, as the glare of the day was giving place to the long shadows of sunset, Jim found himself driving through the streets of Alexandria towards the little Hotel des Beaux-Esprits which stands at the edge of the Mediterranean, not far outside the city, and which had been recommended to him as the inexpensive resort of artists and men of letters.

He leant back in the carriage luxuriously, and drank the cool air into his lungs with a satisfaction which those alone may understand who have known what it is to make this

journey out of the inferno of an Upper Egyptian summer into the comparatively temperate climate of the sea coast. The streets of Alexandria are much like those of an Italian or southern French city; and as he looked about him at the pleasant shops and the crowds of pedestrians, for the most part European or Levantine, he felt as though he had recovered from some sort of tortured madness, and had suddenly come back to the comprehension and the relish of intelligent life.

For the present there was nothing to mar his happiness. The greater part of a year's salary lay awaiting him in the bank, for in the desert there had been no means of spending money, and his losses had equalled his winnings at those daily games of cards which had at length become so tedious. The mines would remain idle in any event until the temperature began to fall, in September; and thus for the two months of his summer leave he could take his ease, and could postpone for some weeks yet his decision as to whether he would return to that fiery exile, or would fare forth again upon his nomadic travels.

His recent experiences had been a severe shock to him, and for the time being, at any rate, he felt that he never wished to see the desert again. But perhaps when a few weeks of this cool sea air had set him on his feet once more, the thought of his return to the mines would have lost its terror.

At the hotel he was received by the fat and motherly proprietress, who, having diffidently asked for and enthusiastically received a week's payment in advance, led him to an airy room overlooking the sea, and left him with

many assurances that he would here speedily recover from the indefinite stomachic disturbances which he told her had recently laid him low.

On his way through Cairo he had purchased quite a respectable suit of white linen, and so soon as he was alone he set about the happy business of arraying himself as a civilized personage. Although much exhausted by his journey he was eager to go down and sit at one of the little tables overlooking the sea, there to drink his *bouillon*, and to make himself acquainted with his fellow guests; and he paid very little regard to the shaking of his knees and the apparent swaying of the floor when a struggle with his unruly hair had taxed his strength. Prudence suggested that he should remain in his room and rest; but, having been in exile so long, he could not resist the desire to be downstairs, enjoying the coolness of the evening, looking at people and talking to them, or listening to the music provided by the mandolines and guitars of a company of Italians who, presumably, earned their living by going the round of the smaller hotels, and the strains of whose romantic songs now came to him, mingled with the gentle surge of the waves.

Presently, therefore, he issued from his room, and, making for the stairs, found himself walking behind a young woman similarly purposed. He had not spoken to a female of any kind for nearly a year, and this fact may have accounted for the quite surprising impression her back view made upon him. It seemed to him that she had a wonderful pair of shoulders, startling black hair, and an excellent figure excellently garbed. He hoped devoutly that she was pretty; but, as she turned to glance at him, he saw that her

face was perhaps more interesting than actually beautiful. It was like an ancient Egyptian bas-relief—an Isis or a Hathor. It was sufficiently strange, indeed, with the high cheek-bones, the raven-black hair, and the wise, smiling mouth, to arouse his curiosity, and her dark-fringed grey eyes seemed frankly to invite his admiration.

At the foot of the stairs, when he was close behind her, he suddenly felt giddy again, and swayed towards her; at which she stared at him in cold surprise.

“I beg your pardon,” he said, clutching at the banister, and wondering why the light had become so dim.

A moment later he pitched forward, grabbed at the hand she instantly held out to him, and knew no more.

When he recovered consciousness he was lying upon the bed in his own room, and this black-haired woman whom he had seen upon the stairs was leaning over him—like a mother, he thought—dabbing his forehead with water.

“That’s better,” he heard her say. “You’ll be all right now.”

He sat up, at once fully aware of his situation. “I’m awfully sorry,” he exclaimed. “Did I faint?”

“Yes,” was the answer. “I caught you as you fell.”

Jim swore under his breath. “I’ve been ill,” he said. “I didn’t realize I was so weak. Did I make an awful ass of myself?”

“No,” she smiled, “you did it quite gracefully; and there was nobody about; they were all at dinner.”

“Who brought me up here?” he asked.

“I and the two native servants,” she laughed, and her laughter was pleasant to hear. “Are you in the habit of

fainting?”

“I’ve never fainted before in my life,” said Jim, warmly, “until I had this go of cholera.”

“Cholera?” she ejaculated. “You’ve had *cholera*? How long ago?”

“Oh, I’m not infectious,” he smiled. “It was quite a while ago.” He gave her the facts with weary brevity: it was a picture that he wished to banish from the gallery of his memory.

“But, my dear friend,” she said, “when you’ve just come out of the jaws of death like that, you must take things easy. You ought to be in bed, toying with a spoonful of jelly and a grape. What’s your name?”

“Jim,” he answered. “What’s yours?”

“That is of no consequence,” she replied, smiling at him, as he thought to himself, like a heathen idol.

He was silent for a few moments. He was not quite sure whether it would not now be as well to kill Mr. Easton and resuscitate Mr. Tundering-West, for at the moment he was anxious to forget entirely his Bedouin life and his exile at the mines, and he was no longer a disreputable beggar.

“I’ll call you ‘Sister,’” he said at length. “That’s what the patients at the hospital call the nurse, isn’t it?”

“I’m afraid I’m not much of a nurse,” she replied. “I’ve torn your collar in getting it open, and I’ve dripped water all down your coat.”

“I bumped into you when I fell, didn’t I?” he asked, trying to recollect what had happened.

“Yes,” she answered. “I thought you were drunk.”

“Thanks awfully,” he said.

“Have you any friends to look after you?” she enquired presently.

“No, nobody, Sister,” he replied. “Have you?”

She shook her head. “I hardly know anybody, either. I’m a painter. I’ve just come over from Italy to do some work.” She fetched a towel from the washing-stand. “Now, hold your head up, and let me dry your neck.”

“I suppose you don’t happen to have a brandy and soda about you?” he asked, when she had tidied him up. He was feeling very fairly well again, but sorely in need of a stimulant.

“I’ll go and get you one,” she replied; and before he could make any polite protest she had left the room.

He got up at once from the bed, went with shaking legs to the dressing-table and stared at himself in the glass. “Good Lord!” he muttered. “I look like an organ-grinder after a night out.” He combed his damp hair back from his forehead, and sat himself down on the sofa near the open window, a shaded candle by his side. The night was soothingly windless and quiet, and a wonderful full moon was rising clear of the haze above the sea; and so extraordinary was it to him to feel the air about him temperate and kind that presently a mood of great content descended upon him, and, after his startling experience, he was no longer restless to join the company downstairs.

In a short time his nurse returned, bringing him the brandy-and-soda; and when this had been swallowed he began to think the world a very pleasant place.

She fetched two pillows from the bed, and in motherly fashion placed them behind his head; then, sitting down on

a small armchair which stood near the sofa, she asked him whether he intended to stay long in Alexandria.

“I have no plans,” he told her. “As long as I’ve got any money in the bank I never do have any. When the money’s spent, then I shall begin to think what to do next. I’m just one of the Bedouin of life.”

“I am a wanderer, too,” she said. And therewith they began to talk to one another as only wanderers can talk. There were many places in France and Italy known to them both, and it appeared that they had been in Ceylon at the same time, she in Colombo, and he up-country in search of his moonstones.

He felt very much at ease with her, coming soon, indeed, to regard her as a potential confidant of his dreams. Her enigmatic face was curiously attractive to him, particularly so, in fact, just now, with the screen of the candle casting a soft shadow upon it, so that the grey eyes seemed to be looking at him through a veil. He began to wonder, indeed, why it was that at first sight he had not regarded her as beautiful.

For half an hour or more they talked quietly but eagerly together, while the moon rose over the sea until its pale light penetrated into the room, and blanched the heavy shadows.

“Well, I’m very glad I fainted,” he said, lightly, observing that she was about to take her departure.

“So am I,” she answered, smiling at him as though all the secrets of all the world were in her wise keeping.

“Tell me, Sister,” he asked. “Are you all alone in the world?”

“Yes.”

“Do you think it’s quite correct to be sitting in a strange man’s room?”

“Perfectly.”

“Tramp!” he said.

“Vagrant!” she replied.

She rose, and stood awhile gazing out of the open window—a mysterious figure, looking like old gold in the light of the reading-lamp, set against the sheen of the moon.

“It’s a wonderful night,” he remarked. “You have no idea what it means to me to feel cool and comfortable. The desert up-country is the very devil in summer.”

“Yes,” she replied, turning to him, “one can understand why Cleopatra and her Ptolemy ancestors left the old cities of the south, and built their palaces here beside the sea.”

He smiled, knowingly. “If she had lived up there in Thebes where the old Pharaohs sweated, there wouldn’t have been any affair with Antony. She would have been too busy taking cold baths and whisking the flies away. But down here—why, the sound of the sea in the night would have been enough by itself to do the trick.”

She looked at him curiously. “To me,” she said, “the sound of the sea on a summer night is the most tragic and the most beautiful thing in the world. If I ever gave up wandering and came to rest, it would be in a little white villa somewhere on the shores of the Mediterranean.”

“No, for my part, I want to go north just now,” he rejoined. “I’m tired of the east and the south: I’ve got a longing for England.”

“It won’t last,” she smiled. “You don’t fit in with England, somehow.”

“Oh, I’m a typical Devon man,” he declared, recalling, with a sudden feeling of pride, the original home of his family, previous to their migration into Oxfordshire.

She looked at him with a smile. “That accounts for it,” she said. “The men of Devon so often have the wandering spirit.” She held out her hand. “I must go now. Good night!—I’ll come and see how you are in the morning. My room is next to yours, if you want anything.”

“Good night, Sister!” he answered. “I’m most awfully obliged to you. You’ve done me a power of good.”

She smiled at him with the calm, mysterious expression of the old gods and goddesses carved upon the temple walls, and went out of the room; and thereafter he lay back on his pillows, musing on her attractive personality, and wondering who she was. He was still wondering when, some minutes later, the native servant entered with a tray upon which there was a cup of soup, some jelly, and a bunch of grapes.

“Madam she say you to drink it *all* the soup,” said the man, “but only eat three grapes, only *three*, she say, sir, please.”

“Very well,” Jim answered, feeling rather pleased thus to receive orders from her.

That night he slept soundly, and awoke refreshed and almost vigorous. After breakfast in bed he got up, and he had been dressed for some time when his self-constituted nurse came to him.

“Oh, I’m glad you’re up,” she said, giving his hand an honest shake. “I’m going to take you out on the verandah downstairs. It’s beautifully cool there.”

Jim was delighted. She looked so very nice this morning, he thought, in her pretty summer dress and wide-brimmed hat; and her smile was radiant. He held an impression from the night before that she was a creature of mystery, a woman out of a legend; and it was quite a relief to him to find that now in the daylight she was a normal being.

As they descended the stairs she put her hand under his elbow to aid him, and, though the assistance was quite unnecessary, it pleased him so much that he was conscious of an inclination to play the invalid with closer similitude than actuality warranted. Nobody had ever looked after him since he was a child, and, as in the case of all men who believe they detest feminine aid, the experience was surprisingly gratifying.

On the verandah they sat together in two basket chairs, and presently she so directed their conversation that he found himself talking to her as though she were his oldest friend. He told her tales of the desert, described his life at the mines, and tried to explain the dread he felt at the thought of returning to them. There was no complaint in his words: he was something of a fatalist, and, being obliged to earn his bread and butter, he supposed his lot to be no worse than that of hosts of other men. After all, anything was better than sitting on an office stool.

She listened to him, encouraging him to talk; and the morning was gone before he suddenly became conscious that she and not he had played the part of listener.

“Good lord!” he exclaimed. “How I must be boring you! There goes the bell for *déjeuner*. Why didn’t you stop me?”

“I was interested,” she replied, turning her head aside. “You have shown me a part of life I knew nothing about. My own wanderings have been so much more sophisticated, so much more ordinary.” She looked round at him quickly. “By the way, I am leaving you to-morrow. I have to go to Cairo for a week or so.”

Jim’s face fell. “Oh damn!” he said. His disappointment was intense. “Why should you go to Cairo?” he asked gloomily. “It’s a beastly, hot, unhealthy place at this time of year.”

“I shan’t be gone long,” she answered. “I just have to paint one picture. And when I come back I shall expect to find you strong and well once more. Then we can do all sorts of wonderful things together.” She paused, looking at him intently. “That is something for us to look forward to,” she added, as though she were talking to herself.

Chapter III: MONIMÉ

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Jim felt the absence of his new friend keenly. She had left for Cairo quietly and unobtrusively, just driving away from the little hotel with a wave of her hand to him, following a few words of good advice as to his diet and behaviour. He had asked her where she was going to stay, hinting that he would like to write to her; but she had evaded a definite reply, saying merely that she was going to the house of some friends. A woman is a figure behind a veil. It is her nature to elude, it is her happiness to have something to conceal; and man, more direct, often finds in her reticence upon some unimportant matter a cause of deep mystification.

“I don’t even know your name,” he had almost wailed, and she had answered, gravely, “Jemima Smith,” as though she expected him to believe it. The hotel register, which he thereupon consulted, contained but three pertinent words: “Mdlle. Smith, Londres,” written in the hand of the French proprietress, and that fat personage laughed good-naturedly and shrugged her shoulders when he questioned the accuracy of the entry.

The first days seemed dull without her; but soon the brilliance of the Alexandrian summer took hold of his mind, and dressed his thoughts in bright colours. His strength returned to him rapidly, and within the week he was once more a normal being, able to sprawl upon the beach in the mornings in the shade of the rocks, staring out over the azure seas, and able, in the cool of the late afternoons, to

go to the Casino to listen to the orchestra and watch the cosmopolitan crowd taking its twilight promenade.

And then, one evening, just before dinner, as he sat himself down in a basket chair outside the long windows of his bedroom, high above the surge of the breakers, he glanced into the room next door, which led out on to the same balcony, and there stood his friend, unpacking a dressing-case upon a table before her.

She saw him at the same moment, and at once came forward, but Jim in his enthusiasm was half-way into her room when their hands met.

“Oh, I *am* glad to see you!” he exclaimed, working her arm up and down as though it were a pump-handle. “It’s just like seeing an old friend again.”

She smiled serenely. “Well, we’ve had a week to think each other over,” she said. She turned to her dressing-case and produced a small parcel. “Here, I’ve brought you something from Cairo.”

It was only a box of cigarettes of a brand he had happened to mention in commendation; but the gift, and her words, set his brain in a whirl, and for some minutes he talked the wildest nonsense to her. He was flattered that she had turned her thoughts to him while she was in Cairo; and now, standing in her bedroom, he was possessed by a feeling of intimacy with her. He wanted to put his arm round her, or place his hand upon her shoulder, or kiss her fingers, or pull her hat off, or lift her from the ground, or something of that kind. Yet he felt at the same time a kind of dread lest he should offend her. He was perhaps a little bewildered in her presence, for, in some indefinable way, she represented