

A Passion in the Desert.

FROM THE FRENCH OF BALZAC.

[THE greatest of French novelists hardly needs an introduction. Innumerable books of recent years have rendered him and his peculiarities familiar to the world—his ponderous figure and his face like Nero's, his early struggles as a Grub-street hack, his garret in the Rue Lesdiguières, his meals of bread and milk at twopence-halfpenny a day, his midnight draughts of coffee, his everlasting dressing-gown, his eighteen hours of work to five of sleep, his innumerable proof-sheets blackened with corrections, his debts, his duns, his quarrels with his publishers, his gradual rise to affluence and glory, his romantic passion for the Russian Countess, his marriage with her after sixteen years of waiting, and his death of heart disease just as the land of promise lay before him. Balzac, who took all human nature for his theme, and who portrayed above two thousand men and women, made but one study of an animal—a circumstance which gives "A Passion in the Desert" an interest all its own.]



"It is a terrible sight!" she exclaimed as we left the menagerie of Monsieur Martin.

She had just been witnessing this daring showman "performing" in the cage of his hyena.

"By what means," she went on, "can he have so tamed these animals as to be secure of their affection?"

"What seems to you a problem," I responded, interrupting her, "is in reality a fact of nature."

"Oh!" she exclaimed, with an incredulous smile.

"You think, then, that animals are devoid of passions?" I asked her. "You must know that we can teach them all the qualities of civilised existence."

She looked at me with an astonished air.

"But," I went on, "when I first saw Monsieur Martin, I confess that, like yourself, I uttered an exclamation of surprise. I happened to be standing by the side of an old soldier, whose right leg had been amputated, and who had come in with me. I was struck by his appearance.

His was one of those intrepid heads, stamped with the seal of war, upon whose brows are written the battles of Napoleon. About this old soldier was a certain air of frankness and of gaiety which always gains my favour.

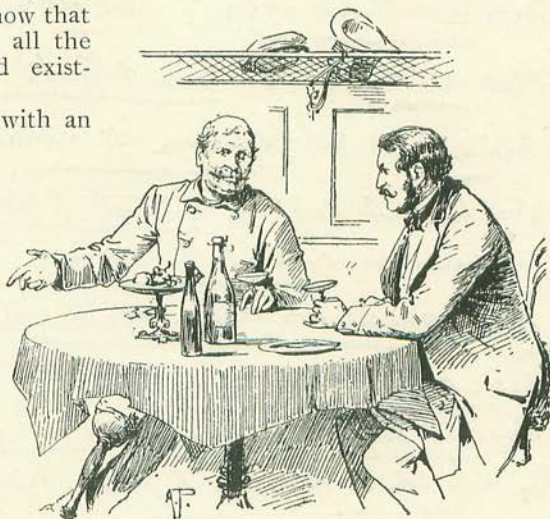
He was doubtless one of those old troopers whom nothing can surprise; who find food for laughter in the dying spasms of a comrade, who gaily bury and despoil him, who challenge bullets with indifference—though their arguments are short enough—and who would hob-nob with the devil. After keenly looking at the showman as he was coming from the cage, my neighbour pursed his lips with that significant expression of contempt which superior men assume to show their difference from the dupes. At my exclamation of surprise at Monsieur Martin's courage he smiled, and nodding with a knowing air, remarked, 'I understand all that.'

"How?" I answered. "If you can explain this mystery to me you will oblige me greatly."

"In a few moments we had struck up an acquaintance, and went to dine at the first restaurant at hand. At dessert a bottle of champagne completely cleared the memory of this strange old soldier. He told his story, and I saw he was right when he exclaimed, 'I understand all that.'

When we got home, she teased me so, and yet so prettily, that I consented to write out for her the soldier's reminiscences.

The next day she received this episode,



"HE TOLD HIS STORY."

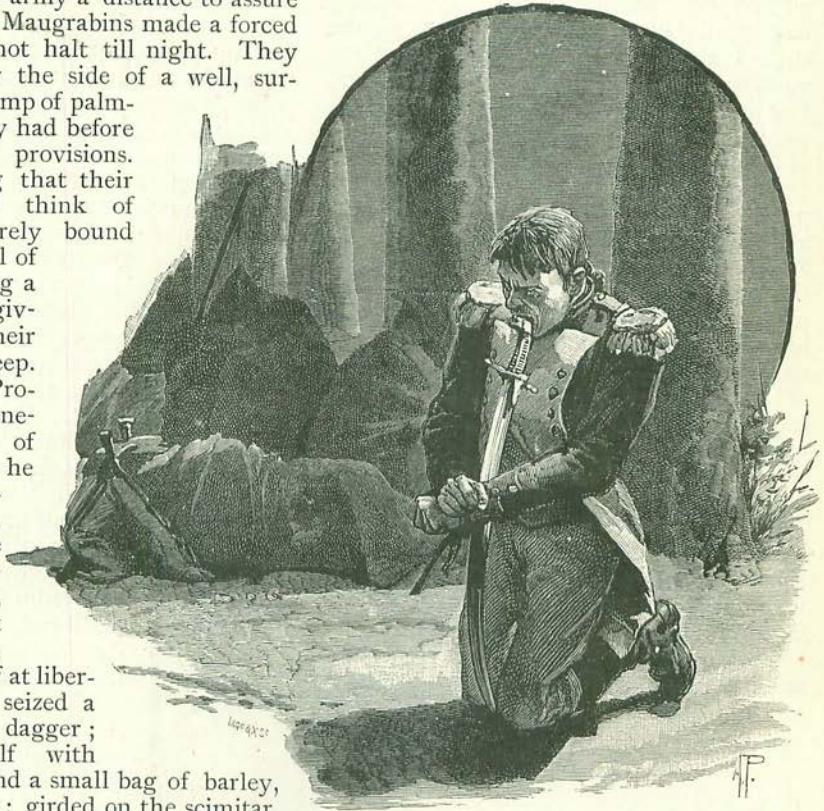
from an epic that might be called "The French in Egypt."

During the expedition undertaken in Upper Egypt by General Desaix, a Provençal soldier, who had fallen into the hands of the Maugrabins, was taken by these Arabs into the desert beyond the cataracts of the Nile. In order to put between them and the French army a distance to assure their safety, the Maugrabins made a forced march, and did not halt till night. They then camped by the side of a well, surrounded by a clump of palm-trees, where they had before buried some provisions. Never dreaming that their prisoner would think of flight, they merely bound his hands, and all of them, after eating a few dates, and giving barley to their horses, went to sleep. When the bold Provençal saw his enemies incapable of watching him, he picked up a scimitar with his teeth, and then with the blade fixed between his knees, cut the cords that lashed his wrists, and found himself at liberty. He at once seized a carbine and a dagger; provided himself with some dry dates and a small bag of barley, powder and balls; girded on the scimitar, sprang on a horse, and pressed forward in the direction where he fancied the French army must be found. Impatient to regain the bivouac, he so urged the weary horse, that the poor beast fell dead, its sides torn with the spurs, leaving the Frenchman alone in the midst of the desert.

After wandering for some time amidst the sand with the desperate courage of an escaping convict, the soldier was forced to stop. Night was closing in. Despite the beauty of the Eastern night he had not strength sufficient to go on. Fortunately he had reached a height on the top of which were palm trees, whose leaves, for some time visible far off, had awakened in his heart a hope of safety. He was so weary that he lay down on a granite stone, oddly shaped like

a camp bed, and went to sleep, without taking the precaution to protect himself in his slumber. He had sacrificed his life, and his last thought was a regret for having left the Maugrabins, whose wandering life began to please him, now that he was far from them and from all hope of succour.

He was awakened by the sun, whose pitiless rays falling vertically upon the



"HE CUT THE CORDS."

granite made it intolerably hot. For the Provençal had been so careless as to cast himself upon the ground in the direction opposite to that on which the green majestic palm-tops threw their shadow. He looked at these solitary trees and shuddered! They reminded him of the graceful shafts surmounted by long foils that distinguish the Saracenic columns of the Cathedral of Arles. He counted the few palms; and then looked about him. A terrible despair seized upon his soul. He saw a boundless ocean. The melancholy sands spread round him, glittering like a blade of steel in a bright light, as far as eye could see. He knew not whether he was gazing on an

ocean, or a chain of lakes as lustrous as a mirror. A fiery mist shimmered, in little ripples, above the tremulous landscape. The sky possessed an Oriental blaze, the brilliancy which brings despair, seeing that it leaves the imagination nothing to desire. Heaven and earth alike were all aflame. The silence was terrible in its wild and awful majesty. Infinity, immensity, oppressed the soul on all sides; not a cloud was in the sky, not a breath was in the air, not a movement on the bosom of the sand, which undulated into tiny waves. Far away, the horizon was marked off, as on a summer day at sea, by a line of light as bright and narrow as a sabre's edge.

The Provençal clasped his arms about a palm tree as if it had been the body of a friend; then, sheltered by the straight and meagre shadow, he sat down weeping on the granite, and looking with deep dread upon the lonely scene spread out before his eyes. He cried aloud as if to tempt the solitude. His voice, lost in the hollows of the height, gave forth far-off a feeble sound that woke no echo; the echo was within his heart!

The Provençal was twenty-two years old. He loaded his carbine.

"Time enough for that!" he muttered to himself, placing the weapon of deliverance on the ground.

Looking by turns at the melancholy

waste of sand and at the blue expanse of sky, the soldier dreamed of France. With delight he fancied that he smelt the Paris gutters, and recalled the towns through which he had passed, the faces of his comrades, and the slightest incidents of his life. Then, his Southern imagination made him fancy in the play of heat quivering above the plain, the pebbles of his own dear Provence. But fearing all the dangers of this cruel mirage, he went down in the direction opposite to that which he had taken when he had climbed the hill the night before. Great was his joy on discovering a kind of grotto, naturally cut out of the enormous fragments of granite that formed the bottom of the hill. The remnants of a mat showed that this retreat had once been inhabited. Then, a few steps further, he saw palm-trees with a load of dates. Again the instinct which attaches man to life awoke within his heart. He now hoped to live until the passing of some Maugrabin; or perhaps he would soon hear the boom of cannon, for at that time Buonaparte was overrunning Egypt. Revived by this reflection, the Frenchman cut down a few bunches of ripe fruit, beneath whose weight the date trees seemed to bend, and felt sure,

on tasting this un hoped-for manna, that the inhabitant of this grotto had cultivated the palm-trees. The fresh and luscious substance of the date bore witness to his predecessor's care.

The Provençal passed suddenly from dark despair to well-nigh insane delight. He climbed the hill again; and spent the remainder of the day in cutting down a barren palm-tree, which the night before had served him for shelter.

A vague remembrance made him think of the wild desert beasts; and, foreseeing that they might come to seek the spring which bubbled through the sand among the rocks, he resolved to secure himself against their visits



"THE POOR BEAST FELL DEAD."

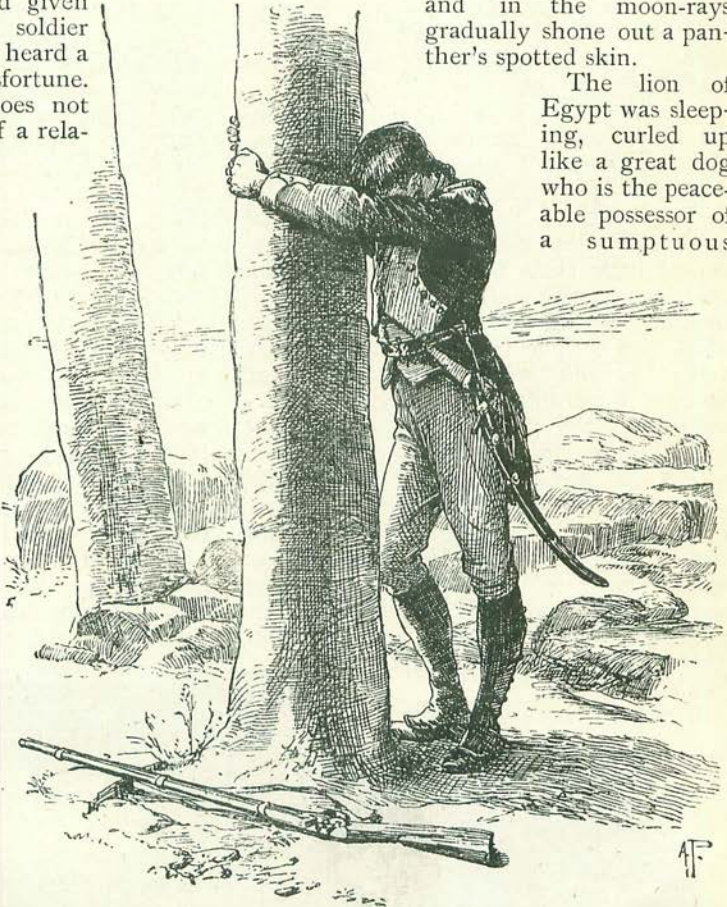
by placing a barrier at the door of his hermitage. In spite of his exertions, in spite of the strength with which the fear of being eaten during sleep endued him, it was impossible for him to cut the palm to pieces in one day; but he contrived to bring it down. When, towards evening, the monarch of the desert fell, the thunder of its crash resounded far, as if the mighty Solitude had given forth a moan. The soldier shuddered as if he had heard a voice that prophesied misfortune. But like an heir who does not long bewail the death of a relation, he stripped the tree of the broad, long, green leaves, and used them to repair the mat on which he was about to lie. At length, wearied by the heat and by his labours, he fell asleep beneath the red roof of his murky grotto.

In the middle of the night he was disturbed by a strange noise. He sat up; in the profound silence he could hear a creature breathing—a savage respiration which resembled nothing human. Terror, intensified by darkness, silence, and the fancies of one suddenly awakened, froze his blood. He felt the sharp contraction of his scalp, when, as the pupils of his eyes dilated, he saw in the shadow two faint and yellow lights. At first he thought these lights were some reflection of his eyeballs, but soon, the clear brightness of the night helping him to distinguish objects in the grotto, he saw lying at two paces from him an enormous beast!

Was it a lion?—a tiger?—a crocodile? The Provençal was not sufficiently educated to know the species of his enemy, but his terror was all the greater; since his ignorance assisted his imagination. He bore the cruel torture of listening, of marking the caprices of this awful breathing, without losing a sound of

it, or venturing to make the slightest movement. A smell as pungent as a fox's, but more penetrating, filled the grotto; and when it entered his nostrils his terror passed all bounds; he could no longer doubt the presence of the terrible companion whose royal den was serving him for bivouac. Presently the moon, now sinking, lighted up the den, and in the moon-rays gradually shone out a panther's spotted skin.

The lion of Egypt was sleeping, curled up like a great dog who is the peaceable possessor of a sumptuous



“HE CLASPED HIS ARMS ABOUT A PALM TREE.”

kennel at a mansion door; its eyes, which had been opened for one moment, were now closed again. Its face was turned towards the Frenchman.

A thousand troubled thoughts passed through the mind of the panther's prisoner. At first he thought of shooting it; but there was not enough room between them to adjust his gun; the barrel would have reached beyond the animal. And what if he awoke it! This supposition made him motionless. Listening in the silence to the beating of his heart, he cursed the loud

pulsations, fearing to disturb the sleep that gave him time to seek some means of safety. Twice he placed his hand upon his scimitar, with the intention of cutting off the head of his enemy; but the difficulty of cutting through the short, strong fur compelled him to abandon the idea. To fail was certain death. He preferred the odds of conflict, and determined to await the day-break. And daylight was not long in coming. The Frenchman was able to examine the panther. Its muzzle was stained with blood.

"It has eaten plenty," he reflected, without conjecturing that the feast might have been composed of human flesh; "it will not be hungry when it wakes."

It was a female. The fur upon her breast and thighs shone with whiteness. A number of little spots like velvet looked like charming bracelets around her paws. The muscular tail was also white, but tipped with black rings. The upper part of her coat, yellow as old gold, but very soft and smooth, bore those characteristic marks, shaded into the form of roses, which serve to distinguish the panther from the other species of the genus *Felis*. This fearful visitor was snoring tranquilly in an attitude as graceful as that of a kitten lying on the cushions of an ottoman. Her sinewy, blood-stained paws, with powerful claws, were spread beyond her head, which rested on them, and from which stood out the thin, straight whiskers with a gleam like silver wires.

If she had been imprisoned

in a cage, the Provençal would assuredly have admired the creature's grace, and the vivid contrasts of colour that gave her garment an imperial lustre; but at this moment he felt his sight grow dim at her sinister aspect. The presence of the panther, even sleeping, made him experience the effect which the magnetic eyes of the serpent are said to exercise upon the nightingale.

In the presence of this danger the courage of the soldier faltered, although without doubt it would have risen at the cannon's mouth. A desperate thought, however, filled his mind, and dried up at its source the chilly moisture which was rolling down his forehead. Acting as men do who, driven to extremities, at last defy their fate, and nerve themselves to meet their doom, he saw a tragedy in this adventure, and resolved to play his part in it with honour to the last.

"Two days ago," he argued with himself, "the Arabs might have killed me."

Considering himself as good as dead, he waited bravely, yet with restless curiosity, for the awaking of his enemy.

When the sun shone out, the panther opened her eyes suddenly; then she spread out her paws forcibly, as if to stretch them and get rid of cramp. Then she yawned, showing an alarming set of teeth and an indented, rasp-like tongue. "She is like a dainty lady!" thought the Frenchman,



"THE BEAST BEGAN TO MOVE TOWARDS HIM."

as he saw her rolling over with a gentle and coquettish movement. She licked off the blood that stained her paws and mouth, and rubbed her head with movements full of charm. "That's it! Just beautify yourself a little!" the Frenchman said, his gaiety returning with his courage. "Then we must say good-morning." And he took up the short dagger of which he had relieved the Maugrabins.

At this moment the panther turned her head towards the Frenchman, and looked at him fixedly, without advancing. The rigidity of those metallic eyes, and their insupportable brightness, made the Provençal shudder. The beast began to move towards him. He looked at her caressingly, and fixing her eyes as if to magnetise her, he let her come close up to him; then, with a soft and gentle gesture, he passed his hand along her body, from head to tail, scratching with his nails the flexible vertebræ that divide a panther's yellow back. The beast put up her tail with pleasure; her eyes grew softer; and when for the third time the Frenchman accomplished this self-interested piece of flattery, she broke into a purring like a cat. But this purr proceeded from a throat so deep and powerful that it re-echoed through the grotto like the peals of a cathedral organ. The Provençal, realising the success of his caresses, redoubled them, until the imperious beauty was completely soothed and lulled.

When he felt sure that he had perfectly subdued the ferocity of his capricious companion, whose hunger had been satisfied so cruelly the night before, he got up to leave the grotto. The panther let him go; but when he had climbed the hill, she came bounding after him with the lightness of a sparrow hopping from branch to branch, and rubbed herself against the soldier's leg, arching her back after the fashion of a cat. Then looking at her guest with eyes whose brightness had grown less inflexible, she uttered that savage cry which naturalists have compared to the sound of a saw.

"What an exacting beauty!" cried the Frenchman, smiling. He set himself to play with her ears, to caress her body, and to scratch her head hard with his nails. Then, growing bolder with success, he tickled her skull with the point of his dagger, watching for the spot to strike her. But the hardness of the bones made him afraid of failing.

The sultana of the desert approved the

action of her slave by raising her head, stretching her neck, and showing her delight by the quietness of her attitude. The Frenchman suddenly reflected that in order to assassinate this fierce princess with one blow he need only stab her in the neck. He had just raised his knife for the attempt, when the panther, with a graceful action, threw herself upon the ground before his feet, casting him from time to time a look in which, in spite of its ferocity of nature, there was a gleam of tenderness.

The poor Provençal, with his back against a palm tree, ate his dates, while he cast inquiring glances, now towards the desert for deliverers, now upon his terrible companion, to keep an eye upon her dubious clemency. Every time he threw away a date-stone, the panther fixed her eyes upon the spot with inconceivable mistrust. She scrutinised the Frenchman with a business-like attention; but the examination seemed favourable, for when he finished his poor meal, she licked his boots, and with her rough, strong tongue removed the dust incrustated in their creases.

"But when she becomes hungry?" thought the Provençal.

Despite the shudder this idea caused him, the soldier began examining with curiosity the proportions of the panther, certainly one of the most beautiful specimens of her kind. She was three feet high and four feet long, without the tail. This powerful weapon, as round as a club, was nearly three feet long. The head—large as that of a lioness—was distinguished by an expression of rare delicacy; true, the cold cruelty of the tiger dominated, but there was also a resemblance to the features of a wily woman. In a word, the countenance of the solitary queen wore at this moment an expression of fierce gaiety, like that of Nero flushed with wine; she had quenched her thirst in blood, and now desired to play.

The soldier tried to come and go, and the panther let him, content to follow him with her eyes, but less after the manner of a faithful dog than of a great Angora cat, suspicious even of the movements of its master. When he turned round he saw beside the fountain the carcass of his horse; the panther had dragged the body all that distance. About two-thirds had been devoured. This sight reassured the Frenchman. He was thus easily able to explain the absence of the panther, and the respect

which she had shown for him while he was sleeping.

This first piece of luck emboldened him about the future. He conceived the mad idea of setting up a pleasant household life, together with the panther, neglecting no means of pacifying her and of conciliating her good graces. He returned to her, and saw, to his delight, that she moved her tail with an almost imperceptible motion. Then he sat down beside her without fear, and began to play with her; he grasped her paws, her muzzle, pulled her ears, threw her over on her back, and vigorously scratched her warm and silky sides. She let him have his way, and when the soldier tried to smooth the fur upon her paws she carefully drew in her claws, which had the curve of a Damascus blade. The Frenchman, who kept one hand upon his dagger, was still thinking of plunging it into the body of the too-confiding panther; but he feared lest she should strangle him in her last convulsions. And besides, within his heart there was a movement of remorse that warned him to respect an inoffensive creature. It seemed to him that he had found a friend in this vast desert. Involuntarily he called to mind a woman whom he once had loved, whom he sarcastically had nicknamed "Mignonne," from her jealousy, which was so fierce that during the whole time of their acquaintance he went in fear that she would stab him. This memory of his youth suggested the idea of calling the young panther by this name, whose lithe agility and grace he now admired with less terror.

Towards evening he had become so far accustomed to his perilous position, that he almost liked the hazard of it. At last his companion had got into the habit of looking at him when he called in a falsetto voice "Mignonne."

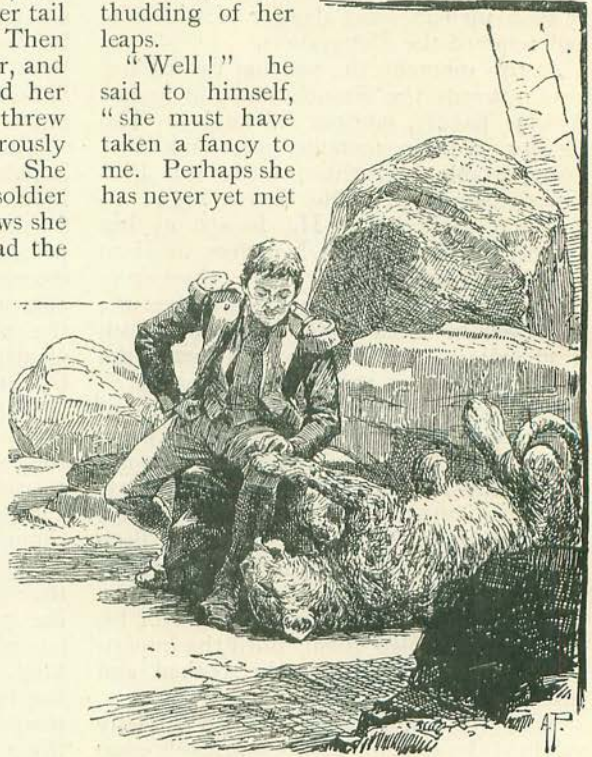
At sun-down Mignonne uttered several times a deep and melancholy cry.

"She has been properly brought up," thought the light-hearted soldier; "she says her prayers!" But it was, no doubt, her peaceful attitude which brought the jest into his mind.

"All right, my little pet; I will let you get to sleep first," he said, relying on his legs to get away as soon as she was sleeping, and to seek some other shelter for the night.

The soldier waited with patience for the hour of flight, and when it came, set out full speed in the direction of the Nile. But he had only gone a quarter of a league across the sand when he heard the panther bounding after him, uttering at intervals that saw-like cry, more terrible even than the thudding of her leaps.

"Well!" he said to himself, "she must have taken a fancy to me. Perhaps she has never yet met



"HE BEGAN TO PLAY WITH HER."

anyone. It is flattering to be her first love!" At this moment the Frenchman fell into a shifting quicksand, so dangerous to the traveller in the desert, escape from which is hopeless. He felt that he was sinking; he gave a cry of terror. The panther seized him by the collar with her teeth, and springing backwards with stupendous vigour drew him from the gulf as if by magic.

"Ah! Mignonne!" cried the soldier, enthusiastically caressing her, "we are friends now for life and death. But no tricks, eh?" and he retraced his steps.

Henceforth the desert was as though it had been peopled. It contained a being with whom he could converse, and whose ferocity had been softened for him, without his being able to explain so strange a friendship.



"HE GAVE A CRY OF TERROR."

However great was his desire to keep awake and on his guard, he fell asleep. On awakening, Mignonne was no longer to be seen. He climbed the hill, and then perceived her afar off, coming along by leaps and bounds, according to the nature of these creatures, the extreme flexibility of whose vertebræ prevents their running.

Mignonne came up, her jaws besmeared with blood. She received the caresses of her companion with deep purrs of satisfaction. Her eyes, now full of softness, were turned, with even greater tenderness than the night before, to the Provençal, who spoke to her as to a pet.

"Ah! Beauty! you are a respectable young woman, are you not? You like petting, don't you? Are you not ashamed of yourself? You have been eating a Maugrabin! Well! they're animals, as you are. But don't you go and gobble up a Frenchman. If you do, I shall not love you!"

She played as a young pup plays with its master, letting him roll her over, beat and pet her; and sometimes she would coax him to caress her with a movement of entreaty.

A few days passed thus. This companionship revealed to the Provençal the sublime beauties of the desert. From the moment when he found within it hours of fear and yet of calm, a sufficiency of food, and a living creature who absorbed his thoughts, his soul was stirred by new emotions. It was a life of contrasts. Solitude revealed to him her secrets, and involved him in her charm. He discovered in the rising and the setting of the sun a splendour hidden from the world of men. His frame quivered

when he heard above his head the soft whirr of a bird's wings—rare wayfarer; or when he saw the clouds—those changeful, many-coloured voyagers—mingle in the depth of heaven. In the dead of night he studied the effects of the moon upon the sea of sand, which the simoon drove in ever-changing undulations. He lived with the Oriental day; he marvelled at its pomp and glory; and often, after having watched the grandeur of a tempest in the plain, in which the sands were whirled in dry red mists of deadly vapour, he beheld with ecstasy the coming on of night, for then there fell upon him the benignant coolness of the stars. He heard imaginary music in the sky. Solitude taught him all the bliss of reverie. He spent whole hours in calling trifles to remembrance, in comparing his past life with his strange present. To his panther he grew passionately attached, for he required an object of affection. Whether by a strong effort of his will he had really changed the character of his companion, or whether, thanks to the constant warfare of the deserts, she found sufficient food, she showed no disposition to attack him, and at last, in her perfect tameness, he no longer felt the slightest fear.

He spent a great part of his time in sleeping, but ever, like a spider in its web, with mind alert, that he might not let deliverance escape him, should any chance to pass within the sphere described by the horizon. He had sacrificed his shirt to make a flag, which he had hoisted to the summit of a palm-tree stripped of leaves. Taught by necessity, he had found the means to keep it spread by stretching it with sticks,

lest the wind should fail to wave it at the moment when the hoped-for traveller might be travelling the waste of sand.

It was during the long hours when hope abandoned him that he amused himself with his companion. He had learnt to understand the different inflexions of her voice, and the expression of her glances; he had studied the varying changes of the spots that starred her robe of gold. Mignonnette no longer growled, even when he seized her by the tuft with which her terrible tail ended, to count the black and white rings which adorned it, and which glittered in the sun like precious gems. It delighted him to watch the delicate soft lines of her snowy breast and graceful head. But above all when she was gambolling in her play he watched her with delight, for the agility, the youthfulness of all her movements filled him with an ever-fresh surprise. He admired her suppleness in leaping, climbing, gliding, pressing close against him, swaying, rolling over, crouching for a bound. But however swift her spring, however slippery the block of granite, she would stop short, without motion, at the sound of the word "Mignonnette!"

One day, in the most dazzling sunshine, an enormous bird was hovering in the air. The Provençal left his panther to examine

this new visitor; but after waiting for a moment the deserted sultana uttered a hoarse growl.

"Blessed if I don't believe that she is jealous!" he exclaimed, perceiving that her eyes were once more hard and rigid. "A woman's soul has passed into her body, that is certain!"

The eagle disappeared in air, while he admired afresh the rounded back and graceful outlines of the panther. She was as pretty as a woman. The blonde fur blended in its delicate gradations into the dull white colour of the thighs. The brilliant sunshine made this vivid gold, with spots of brown, take on a lustre indescribable. The Provençal and the panther looked at one another understandingly; the beauty of the desert quivered when she felt the nails of her admirer on her skull. Her eyes gave forth a flash like lightning, and then she closed them hard.

"She *has* a soul," he cried, as he beheld the desert queen in her repose, golden as the sands, white as their blinding lustre, and, like them, fiery and alone.

"Well?" she said to me, "I have read your pleading on behalf of animals. But what was the end of these two persons so well made to understand each other?"



"I PLUNGED MY DAGGER INTO HER NECK."

"Ah! They ended as all great passions end—through a misunderstanding. Each thinks the other guilty of a falsity, each is too proud for explanation, and obstinacy brings about a rupture."

"And sometimes in the happiest moments," she said, "a look, an exclamation, is enough! Well, what was the end of the story?"

"That is difficult to tell, but you will understand what the old fellow had confided to me, when, finishing his bottle of champagne, he exclaimed, 'I don't know how I hurt her, but she turned on me like mad, and with her sharp teeth seized my thigh. The action was not savage; but fancying that she meant to kill me I plunged my dagger into her neck. She rolled over with a cry that froze my blood; she looked at me in her last struggles without anger. I would have given everything on earth, even my cross—which then I had not won—to

bring her back to life. It was as if I had slain a human being. And the soldiers who had seen my flag, and who were hastening to my succour, found me bathed in tears.

"Well, sir,' he went on, after a moment's silence, 'since then I have been through the wars in Germany, Spain, Russia, France; I have dragged my carcass round the world; but there is nothing like the desert in my eyes! Ah! it is beautiful—superb.'

"What did you feel there?' I inquired of him.

"Oh! that I cannot tell you. Besides, I do not always regret my panther, and my clump of palm-trees. I must be sad at heart for that. But mark my words. In the desert, there is everything and there is nothing.'

"Explain yourself.'

"Well!' he continued, with a gesture of impatience, 'it is God without man.'