

The Camels of Iphi.

BY CHARLES CLAYTON DANA.



HE Arab stumbled, recovered himself, stumbled again, drew his burnoose over his face and fell forward on the hot sands.

“Water, Allah, water,” he gasped.

His companion, his own twin brother, laughed a horrible, choking laugh and stumbled on.

Suddenly he, too, fell. His legs jerked convulsively for a second or two, and he turned over on his back, exposing his blistered face to the fierce sun. His swollen, cracked lips parted, permitting his parched, dust-laden tongue to protrude horribly. A puff of scorching air blew some sand into his face. More sand drifted over him, some of it sifting into his mouth and nostrils.

The sun went down, a fiery disc in a copper sky. Darkness came on like the rapid fall of a black curtain. Away in the distance a jackal howled. A lion roared, the air quivering with the sound. His mate answered. A buzzard dropped out of the nothingness of the sky, settling some yards away from the prostrate figures. A few large drops of water fell, and both figures stirred uneasily, scaring away for a time the birds of prey. Presently, however, the moon rose, silvering the sands which had been golden only a few hours before. Two long, inky shadows seemed to come out of it, surging across the sands with the rocking dip of the masts of a ship. They were shadows of camels.

The camels came straight towards the motionless men and stopped beside them. They were riderless, and blacker than their shadows. No bridles or housings trammled them, only garlands and wreaths of snow-white flowers, like patches of virgin snow on volcanic rock. The camels approached fearlessly, each selecting a man. They bent their necks and licked the blistered, feverish faces, the moisture and coarseness of their tongues bringing back consciousness. He who had fallen first was the first to sit up.

He saw the camel, and, not knowing what he did, tried to mount the standing animal, but fell back exhausted. The animal seemed to comprehend the effort, and lay carefully down beside him. Presently the man partly regained his faculties, and, half dazed, got on the camel, burying his face in the sweet, waxen blossoms. Meantime the other man had mounted his camel, experiencing nearly the same difficulties as his brother.

When both were settled the camels set off slowly, going in the direction whence they came. The riders began mechanically to eat the flowers of the garlands, getting food and drink out of the sweet buds. All night the camels kept at their long, swinging trot, and when morning came the men saw they were approaching an oasis. Like an emerald dropped on a cloth of gold it was, and as the men drew nearer they caught the shimmer of falling water. Suddenly they made a simultaneous effort to stop the black beasts.

"Iphi! The Oasis of the Bubble," they cried, their voices quaking with terror.

Instead of stopping, the camels redoubled their speed, and their riders were carried resistlessly towards the place which they had learned to fear with the greatest of dreads.

The Oasis of the Bubble is the fairest spot in the desert. It is the Garden of Eden of the Sahara, yet it was more feared by the two Arabs than sacrilege. Their father had disappeared into it, and for many years the greatest of the family had vanished there. A long time ago one of the family had come back mortally wounded. Before he died he had talked of houris and of the Gates of Heaven, but he was delirious. It was certain, however, that there dwelt there two women, two enchantresses, perhaps. Then, too, these very same men had viewed the desert from afar and had come upon the bodies of men lately killed. The faces were peaceful, even happy, but this only terrified the beholders the more. The corpses were naked save for garlands of white flowers.

The Oasis itself is simply a freak of nature. The ground is covered with thick, soft verdure. Many-colored blossoms stud its surface. Tall, graceful trees cast queer light and dark patterns over it. The air is cooled by the presence of water and laden

with aromatic odors. Bees buzz among the flowers and gay-plumaged birds flit about overhead. But the wonder of the place is the great Bubble. A porous stone, taller than two camels and round as a bullet, rests in the center of the place. Out of a cuplike dent in its top bubbles a cool, sparkling spring, which overflows the side of the cup evenly and ripples down the sides of the stone, a crystal bubble on the grass. It was the presence of this bit of unnatural nature which helped to make the Arabs superstitious.

The camels stopped near the Bubble under a bush flowering with the same blossoms as those on the animals' necks. The men fell rather than jumped from the camels, throwing themselves on their faces, and calling upon Allah to protect them. Suddenly there rose from the depths of the Bubble the sound of women singing,—or angels. The song was distinct but low, yet it stirred the Arabs like the deep tones of a bell or the chant of a battle song. They shivered and lay still. The water parted where it was whitest with bubbles and a woman appeared. The Arabs were the chiefs of their tribe, and had seen many beautiful women, but none like this one. They were in the presence of an houri. They thought of all the tales about the place and prepared stolidly to meet their fate. Again the waters parted and another woman stood before them. She was dark, the first was fair. Yet the Dark One was fairer than any of the daughters of the desert. The spray from the water through which she had just passed rested like jewels upon her hair. Her eyes fell tenderly and pityingly on the cowering Arabs. The Fair One was queenly and cold. Her face had no compassion, only the joy of triumph rested there.

"Sister," she said, and her voice was as the tinkling of a silver bell, "our black servants have returned at the appointed time, but one of their burdens must perish."

The Dark One bowed as to the inevitable.

"Sweet one," she answered, and her voice was full and deep and told of a soul that had love for the whole world, "I grieve that either of these glorious beings should perish. It is written, however, there can be but one slave, and the duel must be fought."

Both women turned as with a single thought and passed through

the watery curtain. They both came out again carrying harnesses of silver and ivory for the camels, but the Dark One brought food for the men also. She ministered to them, bathing their sand-grimed faces and giving them cooling draughts. The Fair One paid no attention to the sufferers, but set to work harnessing the camels, with a certain exultation as of anticipated pleasure.

Strength came with the wine, but with strength came overpowering fear, and the men would have fallen down and worshiped these strange, fair women, who dwelt alone in the desert.

"My poor sons," whispered the Dark One, trying to soothe them.

Both camels were ready, each equipped with a silver bridle and a carved ivory houdah. In the houdahs were silken cushions for two. Each woman mounted a beast.

"Sister," said the Dark One, and her voice rang with compassion, "can we not forego the ordeal?"

The Fair One made no direct reply. Instead, she turned to the quaking Arabs.

"Strangers," she commanded, "be men and listen."

The men clutched the grass as a frightened child grasps the dress of its mother, but they rose slowly.

"We have never seen you," the Fair One continued, "but we know you. You are twins, and wear the purple of the chieftains of the tribes of Kôn. Your father served us, aye, your grandfather and his father also. One of you must also serve. You are equals as drivers. Choose you, each, one of us and mount beside us. We are the Daughters of the Bubble, and it shelters us. One of you must enter also, but as a slave. The other dies. The camels are equal in speed, but I am lighter than my sister. Choose and mount."

The men glared at one another. They were brothers, but the desire for life had made them enemies. Each hurried to the animal nearest him and scrambled up. Their muscles and faculties were strained to the utmost. They never considered that they were men dealing with women. The superstitions of the place were upon them. Each was determined to save himself by the life of the other. Better to be a slave than dead.

"Dear one, courage," whispered the Dark One, kissing the burning cheek of her driver.

The Fair One drew a slender jeweled dagger. She pressed it lightly to her finger. A drop of blood, a red flower on snow, followed its withdrawal. "My sister," she said, her voice tinkling musically, "has a start of half a league. If her driver can keep ahead of mine for six leagues, I shall kill mine with this," and she held up the slender weapon with a drop of red blood clinging to its shining point. "If, however, I pass her, she must kill her driver. Sister, have you your toy?"

The Dark One showed a long, needle-like knife with a carved ivory handle. It was not jeweled like her sister's.

The camels began to move. At the edge of the Oasis the Fair One stopped hers. It grumbled and protested, but its driver held it with a firm hand. The coldness of the fate-like maiden at his side seemed to have entered his soul. His face wore the resolute air of anticipated victory. The other man drove his camel poorly. His hand trembled and a mist obscured his eyes. He had a premonition of his fate. The maiden looked at him pityingly. "Take heart, poor love," she said, laying a cool hand gently on his hot forehead, "we will win together."

He turned, and a sudden resolve showed in his eyes. "Sweet Lady," he said, reining in the camel and speaking rapidly, "we are not at the starting point yet. Kill me now. Think not that I fear the agony of delay, for I am certain I shall lose. Even if my brother should be unable to pass me, yet I should permit him. A minute ago I was forgetful of that, and would have killed him gladly to save myself; but now, thanks be to Allah, I am myself again. My mother gave him to me to protect, and I must."

A proud, happy light shone in the Dark One's eyes. "Speak not so, dear love," she said; "if you should die, the world would no longer be beautiful for me. Many men have come, and some have ridden the Race of Death, but none have won my heart as you have done. You must win."

"Dear Lady," answered the Arab, "I know not who you are, but I know you are a good woman. Treat the winner of this race gently, for I see your sister is different from you."

The light of the new resolve was still in his eyes. The Dark Maiden saw it and tears welled to her eyes, but she smiled a glorious smile. She knew how it would end. The Arab felt

that she read his secret thoughts. He bent and kissed the hem of her garment. "Sweet Lady," he said, "whatever good you can get from my poor love, that you have. The clouds would love the moon, and they pass beneath her feet. I am the lowliest of those clouds."

And now they came to the starting point. Only the white dress of the Fair One sharply outlined against the dark green of the Oasis marked the place of the other Arab.

The Dark Maiden stood up in the houdah. "My driver," she said, "I will flash my dagger in the sun. The instant you see the flash of my sister's dagger, start. Are you ready?"

The Arab leaned down and patted the neck of his camel. Against his will, a desire to win was rising in his heart. "Yes," he answered.

A flash of light moved across the green of the distant Oasis, and almost immediately the Arab was partly blinded by the answering flash. The camel seemed to have caught the flash and understood it, for he started off swiftly. The Arab looked around. His eye rested a second on the Dark Maiden, then it traveled to the distant moving speck. "My poor brother, dear love," he whispered softly.

He bent his head and drove the camel straight and swiftly, yet taking care to husband the animal's strength. "My poor brother, my sweet Lady," he murmured again.

He looked around. The other animal was approaching rapidly. Evidently it was going at the top of its speed. It had the long, resistless heave of a wave in deep water. He smiled. His camel had not begun to draw on its reserve force, and yet the other was having a hard time to overtake him. The Dark One looked behind, then she looked ahead. She was trembling with excitement.

"Yonder rock," she said, pointing to a speck on the horizon, "is the goal."

The Arab only bowed his head.

"My poor brother, forgive me," he thought. "I cannot die!"

And now the other camel was only a few feet behind. The Fair One rose exultant. She carried a whip. Great drops of perspiration stood on the brow of her driver. His face was drawn and anxious. The Fair One said something to him. He applied

the goad. The camel made an effort, and his neck came opposite to the houdah of the Dark One's camel.

"We win," cried the Fair One triumphantly, "On, on!"

The Dark One's driver bent and shook loose the bridle.

His camel shot ahead like a stone from a catapult, increasing the distance between the Dark Maiden, his Fate, and the Fair One, another Fate.

The driver of the Fair applied the goad and the whip, but vainly. The Fair One sat down quietly, and drew out her jeweled dagger. The driver of the Dark One looked back.

"My poor brother," he cried; "we win, dear love, we win."

"Yes," answered the Dark One sadly, "the rock is very near."

Her driver turned swiftly and caught the look in her eye. The muscles in his back grew tense. The camel's mouth opened. His driver was pulling very hard on the bridle. The camel shook his head. There was a snap. The bridle had parted.

"Allah wills me to win," began the Arab. Then he said suddenly, "Lady, give me your knife."

He took the weapon quickly, and, leaning far down, slashed at the camel's leg. The beast went lame. The Arab took the knife, and at that instant the other camel passed them. The Dark Maiden waved her hand at her sister.

"Wait for me at the Gates of Paradise," she whispered, kissing the Arab again, "I shall not be long."

With a cool, sure hand she drove the dagger into her driver's heart. He pitched forward on the sands, dyeing them with his blood. The camel stopped. The Dark One stood up and blew a kiss lovingly after her sister. Then she, too, fell on the sands with the same dagger in her heart, mingling her blood with the blood of her driver. The camel licked their faces wonderingly. The White Maiden turned and drove by proud and cold, never looking at the two on the sands. In her hands she held a whip, and across the face of the driver was a large welt.

