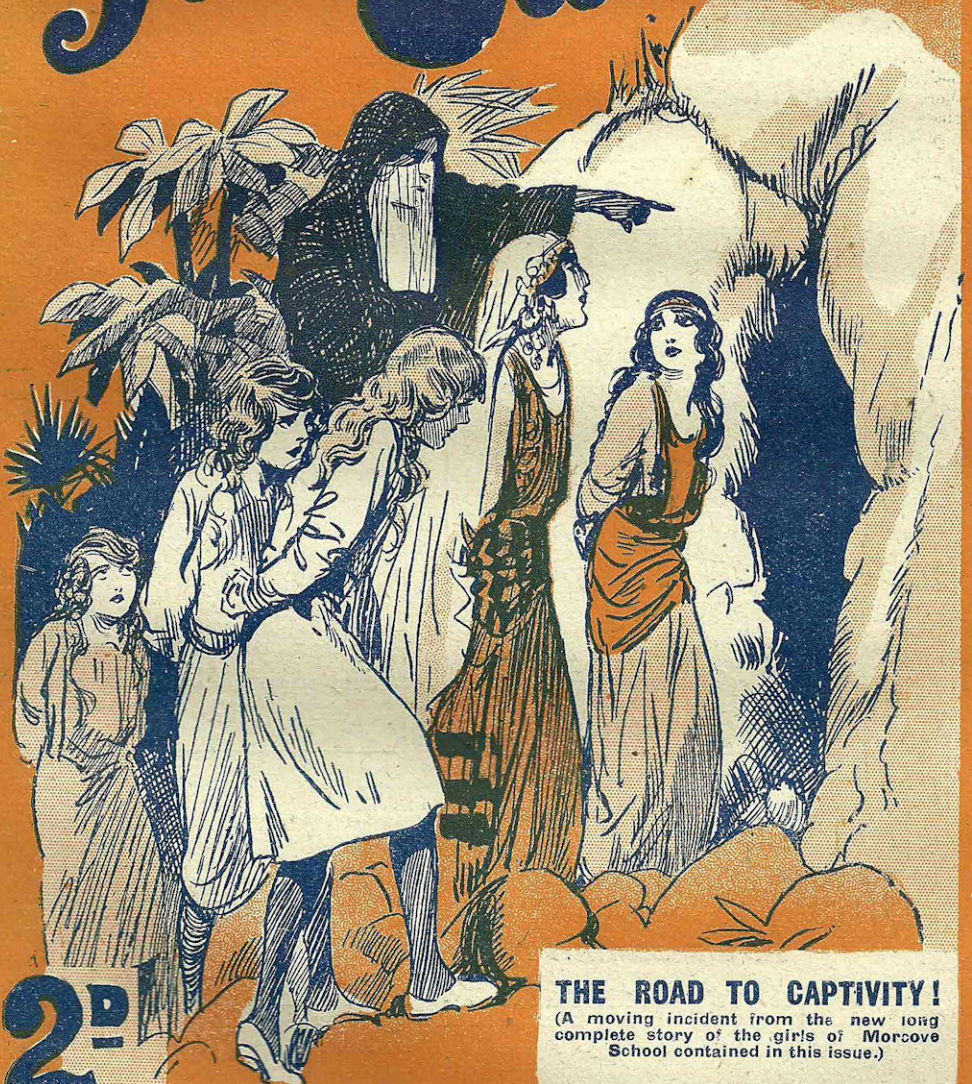


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“SCHOOLGIRLS IN CAPTIVITY!”

A SPLENDID STORY OF
BETTY & CO. IN MOROCCO.

The Schoolgirls' Own



2nd

THE ROAD TO CAPTIVITY!
(A moving incident from the new long complete story of the girls of Morocco School contained in this issue.)

Betty Barton and her chums have figured in many stirring adventures, but none so startling as those which overtake them in this great Morocco Story.



SCHOOLGIRLS IN CAPTIVITY!



A magnificent new long complete story of the girls of Morocco School in the land of mystery and adventure—Morocco!

BY MARJORIE STANTON.

The Spy of Susannah.

"HARK, Betty! What a strange sound!"
"Yes, Polly; I don't like to hear it. Is it someone singing some sad native song? What do you think, Madge?"
"I never heard anything quite so mournful in my life," was the answer that Madge Minden gave.

She, with Betty Barton and Polly Linton, kept silent for a few moments now, and to the keen hearing of all three schoolgirls came the weird wailing that had startled them.

Thrills of one sort and another the girls had been experiencing almost every hour of the day just lately. For they, whose ordinary life was set in the midst of a great public school for girls, had known the sudden strange transition from schoolroom and playing-field to—the heart of the African desert!

At this moment, when they were standing spell-bound by the weird chanting and wailing that seemed to have such a mysterious origin, the chums of Morocco School were in their own stately apartment of a Sultan's ancient palace.

Through the marbled corridors and the cloistered courts of that vast palace the mournful voice was sending its wailing note, with an effect upon Betty and Co. that was distinctly creepy!

"I suppose we shall find out that it has something to do with a custom of the country," Madge exclaimed at last. "We are always having the queerest things explained to us by Mr. and Mrs. Hamilton."

"I don't like it," said Polly Linton flatly. "What's more, I can't stand it!"

"Well, if you girls feel like investigating, I'm with you," Betty Barton agreed. "Shall we?"

"Yes, let's!" Polly suggested anxiously. "We know that the old Sultan of Nakara is a decent ruler, who abolished all tyranny and cruelty as soon as he came to the throne. There can't be anyone suffering from some injustice; but—Oh, hark! It's awful!"

Polly said this as she opened the door, and they all three passed out into the great corridor.

The distressing sound was indeed much louder now, and seemed to be charged with a deeper anguish, harrowing to the girls. They hurried along to trace it to its source, and so all at once they ranged up outside another apartment. From this room the wailing cries were emanating.

"Naomer's quarters!" Betty exclaimed. "Well—"

"Is it she, then?" Polly wondered, in amazement.

"Must be!" Madge declared. "But, poor little soul, whatever is her trouble?"

Polly, the headstrong, took immediate steps to find out the answer to that question. She gave the door a loud thump, then opened it.

"Naomer dear—Naomer!"

That girl, the beautiful grandchild of the aged Sultan, was alone in the magnificent apartment that was hers by day; but if she heard the British girls call her softly by her name, she did not answer.

Perhaps she really did not hear their voices, for her own was still lifted up in that loud wail of great anguish. She had her back to the door by which the girls had entered, and, kneeling upon one of the rugs with which the floor was strewn, was bowing her head and keeping her hands before her eyes—the very picture of overwhelming anguish.

"Well!" Betty gasped, in utter amazement.

The native girl's violent grief was all the more inexplicable because she was by nature such a bright, vivacious soul, with everything to make her as happy as the day was long.

"Naomer, darling! Oh—"

"Naomer dear! What is it? What's the trouble?"

Carried away by their own feelings of distress, the girls crossed over to where their dark-skinned friend was kneeling, and touched her shoulders.

Instantly Naomer checked her loud wailing, whilst she glanced up in a startled manner. Then, seeing who was here, she sprang lithely to her feet, and it gave Betty and Co. another surprise to see the sad face break into smiles.

"Allo! Good-morning!"

"Yes, Naomer; so you said when we met you an hour ago!" Polly replied, starting to grin. "One doesn't usually say good-morning more than once. Still—"

"I say good-morning all day if I like!" Naomer protested. "I say him five time, feefy time, million time, if I like!"

"Oh, certainly," Betty put in tactfully. "Only, Naomer, darling, don't, please don't keep on that awful sad singing!"

"What's it for? What's the trouble, dear?" Madge asked.

"Oh, I am sad!" Naomer said pathetically. "I think of the friend of yours who is my friend as well, how she is gone from us."

"Ah!" Betty exclaimed, in a "Now we understand!" tone. "It's all on account of Paula Creel's disappearance overnight—"

"Why do you not mourn for her, you English

girls?" Naomer wanted to know, almost reproachfully. "She is your friend—"

"One of the dearest friends we have, yes, Naomer," Madge put in gently. "And we are terribly anxious about her. We—"

"I think she is perhaps never coming back!" Naomer burst out excitedly. "And so I must mourn for her. Ohe, ohe, I am sad!" she wailed piteously; and Polly muttered in alarm:

"Gracious, she is going to start again!"

"Naomer—listen, darling," Betty entreated, with tactful gentleness. "You are going to England with us in a little while, aren't you, to be given an English schooling at Morooove?"

"And say, 'Allo, present' to the mistress, yes!" Naomer nodded, suddenly forgetting her grief. "And have plenty joke all ze days!"

"Weil, now," the Fourth Form captain of Morooove reasoned with this quaint daughter of a barbaric race, "we girls want to explain, dear. In our country, when troubles come upon us, we try not to make a song about them. That isn't to say we are not unhappy, if someone we love is in difficulty or a great danger. Only we—"

"We carry on, see?" Polly helped Betty out breezily. "That's a sort of motto, Naomer. You say it: 'Carry on!'"

"Carry on," Naomer repeated proudly. "'Allo, present, carry on! Yes, that is a good one! Carry on!"

"It means, don't sit down and howl, dear, but keep your pecker up," Polly explained. "So no more weeping and wailing, there's a darling! We girls—"

"You say, carry on; it is all right. Paula will come back to be, 'Allo, present at ze lessons!'"

"We hope and pray so, Naomer," Betty answered earnestly. "It is indeed a terrible business, her having suddenly vanished along with Rose of the Desert; but we are going to keep smiling."

"Then I not weep any more!" Naomer announced, with quite a violent change from utter heartbreak to intense levity. "Now you have taught me a good lesson, and I love you!"

Such was the quaint, artless girl—Nakara's future ruler—who was to go with Betty and Co. to England at the end of their sojourn in the Sultan of Nakara's desert kingdom.

An adorable little thing; and the chums of Morooove fairly loved her, whilst they found her a sure cure for the blues, so amusing were her efforts to speak their language and to adapt herself to their ways.

She now showed herself quite willing, all of a sudden, to be as gay as ever, in spite of the cloud of trouble that overhung the royal palace. She sauntered away with the schoolgirls, breathlessly reel off suggestions for the way the morning should be passed. Would they like to go into the city and see the bazaar again? Or should she have her fine Arab pony brought out from the royal stables, for them all to take turns at riding—*if ride that fleet animal they could!*

But Betty and Co.—no, they were not in the mood for pleasuring. It meant another tactful explanation to make Naomer understand that, whilst weeping and wailing was not "the thing" when one was anxious about a missing friend, neither was it considered quite seemly to go to the other extreme.

Just as it happened, the girls had not been more than a few minutes drifting aimlessly about the palace, when they fell in with Miss Redgrave and Mr. and Mrs. Hamilton.

The talk turned upon the grave business of Paula Creel's disappearance along with Rose of the Desert.

"No, not a scrap of news—not a clue to be found!" Mr. Hamilton informed the anxious girls. "My wife and I have just been telling your mistress; the whole city was searched from end to end during the night, and nothing was to be discovered that would throw light on the mystery."

"Strange!" Betty exclaimed, with a puzzled frown. "If they had vanished in the daytime, we might have wondered if they had strayed out into the desert. But—"

"Even then, could they possibly have got lost, when one of them is a native of this part of the world?" Mr. Hamilton broke in; and the girls were bound to agree that Rose of the Desert might have been carried blindfolded into the very heart of the Sahara, and she would yet have found her way back to safety!

"Doesn't it force you to believe, then, that they never even left the palace precincts?" Miss Redgrave exclaimed. "And yet—"

"Yes; goodness knows, the place was searched twice over!" Polly broke in. "From attic to cellar, as they would say in England!"

"In this case, from roof to dungeons," Mr. Hamilton rejoined. "Dungeons!" he repeated sharply, as if a startling thought had struck him. "But that reminds me—"

"Oh!" Betty almost shouted. "We did not search any dungeons! No!"

At that instant, whilst the anxious group was at a standstill in the corridor, their minds opened to all sorts of possibilities that a search in the dungeons held out, a shuffling figure in deep black came by.

It was the stooping figure of an aged widow-woman. As she shuffled past, she mumbled a few words at the girls without lifting her head. The almost inaudible utterances were in the native; all the same, Betty and Co. could have made a guess at what was meant.

This old crone, installed in the palace out of the aged Sultan's pure pity for her forlorn state, had been treated kindly by the British girls, and she could not forget it apparently.

For the moment, however, there was to be no giving a thought to the widow Obed as she drifted by. In an electrified manner, the schoolgirls were ready to dash off there and then to the dungeons!

"Where are they?" panted Polly. "Underground, of course but how do we get to them? Which way? Oh, Mr. Hamilton, do—do—"

"It is incredible that Paula and Rose of the Desert can have got themselves shut away underground, if there are such places down there," Miss Redgrave exclaimed. "Still, I am all for leaving no stone unturned."

Then Naomer broke out in the native dialect, addressing some excited remark to Mr. and Mrs. Hamilton, who could speak the language fluently.

None noticed that Naomer's excitable voice reached the receding figure of the old crone, and that what Naomer was saying in the native dialect seemed to arrest that shuffling step for an instant.

"This way, then," Mr. Hamilton said, starting forward along the corridor. "No need to get a guide; I've explored the dungeons many a time."

The schoolgirls, Naomer, Miss Redgrave, and Mrs. Hamilton—they all swarmed after him, and another minute found them going down the

dungeon steps, with an electric torch to light the way.

As for the widow Obed, she shuffled forth into the blazing sunshine of the African day, hobbling infirmly along until she had traversed the palace courtyard and emerged upon the city's streets.

But when she had reached a part of the desert town where scarce a soul was on hand to witness the dramatic change, she became suddenly erect and as agile as a young woman!

All in an instant this strange being seemed to shed fifty years or more. There was no longer any Widow Obed to excite the compassion of any chance passer-by, even as she had excited the compassion of the Sultan himself.

Instead, a tall, graceful woman went gliding along, with that part of her raiment that had proclaimed her a widow suddenly muffled out of sight.

Those Britishers at the palace—they had gone to search the dungeons! And so Obed Jehathra, otherwise Nassina, the spy of Susahlah, was making off whilst there was still time!

Hue and Cry!

DOWN, down into the black depths of the palace dungeons had the chums of Morocco School followed their trusty guide, with Mrs. Hamilton, Miss Redgrave, and Naomer treading just as warily the stone paving of these many winding passages.

"Awful place!" Polly had whispered; and so indeed it was.

The groping darkness and the sepulchral silence of the labyrinth were sufficient alone to fill the mind with shrinking dread; but, to add to the longing to get back to daylight, there were bound to be thoughts of the terrible uses to which the prison cells were put in days gone by.

"How many a hapless captive had languished to death within these living tombs in the bad old days before the present Sultan of Nakara began his reign?"

Betty and her two chums noticed that they were continually passing partition doors in the tortuous passages, all of which had had to be opened for them by Mr. Hamilton, as he led the way. And was there any do but that the purpose of those doors had been chiefly to shut off the sounds of prisoners' cries from the outer world?

They could imagine the moaning and the pitiful calling out that must have been audible, night and day alike, to the brutal gaolers who used to keep watch and ward down here in the dungeon corridors. But now all was dead silence, except for such sounds as the searchers themselves made, prowling on and on out of one cavernous passage-way into another.

"Oh, I cannot believe that the missing two have got themselves shut away down here," Miss Redgrave exclaimed tremulously. "I only wish I could think it possible for then the next few minutes would surely find us setting them free. But—"

"I know," put in Mrs. Hamilton, nodding gravely. "The question is, for what possible reason could they have been induced to venture down here?"

"Paula, too, of all girls in the world!" Polly chimed in. "Dear old Paula! There's no one loves her more than I do, but she was such a duffer always! As for starting to explore a place like this, out of sheer curiosity—it's a thing I might do in one of my mad moments—"

"Would you even do a thing like that?" Betty broke in dubiously. "With all your harum-scarum ways, Polly dear, would you ever get caught prowling about in an awful chamber of horrors of this sort?"

"No, I don't think I would," Polly owned, with a queer laugh. "Burr, it gives me the creeps! I say, I wonder how much further before—"

And there the chatterbox broke off abruptly, whilst she laid a clutching hold on Betty's arm.

In the self-same instant, every other member of the search-party stopped dead.



FOUND! Flinging open the heavy door, Betty swept the dungeon with her electric torch. Immediately the rays focussed upon the dear, familiar face of Paula Creel. And behind her Betty saw the dim outline of Rose of the Desert!

That sound—a noise like muffled blows—could it have its origin in one of the passages or chambers as yet unexplored? Or was it merely the thud, thud of a workman's hammer, transmitted to this underground place from some spot overhead where he was at work in the palace? "Listen!" they exclaimed to one another needlessly.

For a few long moments they even suppressed their breathing, whilst they reared their heads to catch any repetition of the sound.

And suddenly it came—a few more dull thuds, and from where?

They could not tell, and it was for them to find out at once!

Not a word passed. With the electric torch to light the way, Mr. Hamilton hurried on, and

hard, after him teemed his companions. The noise grew louder as they turned into another passage, and all at once he broke into a run. So did the others, whilst Polly for one started to voice the general excitement.

"We've found them! It is they who are hammering away—Paula and Rose of the Desert! Oh, they are locked in somewhere! Shout to them—shout!"

"Hilloa—Hilloa!" Betty and Madge joined with Polly in calling loudly. "Pau—la! Hilloa!" "Ello—yes! 'Ello—ello!" Naomer cried out shrilly.

Mr. Hamilton, still leading, glanced round upon the others before turning into yet another passage.

"Are you all coming—keeping up?"

"Yes, yes! Oh, hurry—do let's hurry!" the schoolgirls clamoured. "Hark! Now you can hear them quite plainly!"

Nor was that surprising.

Only a few paces did the excited searchers have to traverse this remote passage before they came to the very dungeon door against which feeble blows were being rained by the hapless prisoners.

Mr. Hamilton flashed the light all over the door, and he shouted just as joyfully as his companions when the bright beam revealed a massive iron key, still in the lock.

Giving the torch to Betty to hold—for she was closest to him—the Britisher seized the key and twisted it back, the rusty wards creaking loudly in the lock.

Then open swung the ponderous door, and Betty found herself shining the light upon the dear, familiar face of Paula Creel!

Behind that girl stood her fellow-captive, Rose of the Desert, calming down in this very first moment of the release, and even amidst all the excitement of the thrilling reunion Betty and Co. had time to think how like Rose of the Desert that was.

But it would be wrong to say that Paula was calm.

"Geals—geals!" she fairly shrieked. "Oh, my gwacious—oh! Oh, Miss Wedgwave—Betty deah—Polly deah—Madge deah!"

"Paula darling, you poor unlucky girl! To think that you—"

"Ello, present!" put in Naomer, in a hysterical manner. "Good-morning, Paula! You say to me, 'I pleased to see you!'"

"Yes, wather! Bai Jove—pleased! Oh, my gwacious, geals!" Paula palpitated, whilst one rescuer after another embraced her. "The inexplicable relief! Oh, if you only realised what I and Wose of the Desert have been through!"

And when Paula said that, her chums hardly knew whether to laugh or cry!

The whole thing had come so near to being a dreadful tragedy, and yet it was impossible not to be tickled by the aristocrat's gasping utterances.

"As for my hair, bai Jove," she exclaimed, starting to fiddle with her glossy tresses, "it must be dweadfully wuffed! Yes, wather! Geals, am I a frightful fright—tell me?"

"You are our dear old Paula!" Polly said, giving her another hug. "Oh, you duck! Here we've been worried to death, wondering what had happened to you, and all the time—"

"How did you get imprisoned in this place, Paula?" Mr. Hamilton now interposed. "I am astounded!"

"Bai Jove, how did I get impwisoned, you

ask?" returned the agitated girl. "Ask Wose of the Desert. Geals, it's a most dweadful thing! Tweachewy!"

"What!"

"Tweachewy in the palace—yes, wather!" was the cry with which Paula left her hearers agape with horror. "Weally, though, I am too pwostwate after my dweadful experiewce! Pway let Wose of the Desert welieve your cwivosity!"

So they all turned to that grave-featured, beautiful girl, who now advanced a step, her dark eyes suddenly kindling.

"Yea, I will tell thee," she said, with a dramatic gesture. "It was last night that this girl was set upon and overpowered by one whom she had suddenly recognised as a spy. That cunning creature brought the girl hither, and it fell out that I traced them both to this dungeon. Alas," the speaker went on, with sudden mournfulness, "I myself was tricked and overpowered! I, who would give my life at any moment in thy service—"

"Who was the spy?" Mr. Hamilton broke in anxiously.

"O great one, whose servant I am," Rose of the Desert answered, "ye know of a woman who calls herself Obed Jehathra, a widow of great age? She—yea, she is the spy!"

"Great Scott!" Mr. Hamilton gasped out. He flashed round upon his wife. "Norah, do you hear this? That old crone—"

"Yea, master! She is no other than Nassina, the spy of Susahlah," Rose of the Desert spoke on passionately. "It was my suspicion, three days since, but I desired proof. Alas that I delayed the warning!"

"You had your reason, no doubt, girl," Mr. Hamilton consoled her, touched by her bitter regret. "In any case, you and this English schoolgirl have come to no harm, and we have the spy nicely caught, after all."

"Yes, hurrah!" Polly burst out gleefully. "We have only to go back into the palace, and we shall catch her there."

"Then come along!" Mr. Hamilton promptly suggested. "A spy in the palace! Great Scott, what a thing to have happened! If things had gone differently, the woman would have got hold of all the plans for sending Naomer to England, and then—"

He said no more, but preceded his companions out of the awful dungeon. Paula, still in palpitations over the terrible ordeal she had shared with Rose of the Desert, was torn between the desire to dawdle along in talk with her chums and the longing to be present when Obed, the impostor, should be pounced upon and placed under arrest.

Altogether, the stone corridors and stairways fairly rang with a jabber of talk as the girls swarmed after Mr. Hamilton.

Then suddenly all other exclamations were overwhelmed by a sort of yelp of delight from Paula.

She saw daylight ahead of her, and the "welfare" she felt could only be "expressed" in an incoherent manner.

"Geals—geals! Hooway! Oh, how good it is, bai Jove, to be fwee—fwee!"

"Yes, here you are, young lady!" Mr. Hamilton turned about to remark gaily, at the top of the last flight of steps. "And as you must be jolly hungry, you had better sourry away and get some sort of brekker!"

"Hungry! I'm wedy to dwop!" declared the amiable aristocrat. "Howevah, pway let me be pwesent when that cwuel wetch is awwrested!"

"Just as you wish," assented the Britisher; and so he set forward again, his handsome face assuming a look that showed the sternest intentions on his part in regard to the woman spy.

Familiar with every corner of the place and with the room that the sham old crone had been given, he was outside her door less than ten seconds later. He knocked, but received no answer, and without further ado he sent the door swinging open.

"Ah! Not here!" he exclaimed, gazing into a deserted apartment. "Then she was going out into the city when she passed us in the passage, before we went down to the dungeons!"

"Will she come back?" Mrs. Hamilton suddenly wondered, uneasily. "Or has she taken flight, and got away whilst she was still free to do so?"

"Surely not!" Mr. Hamilton muttered, starting to frown. "She was not to know that we had decided to explore the dungeons! All the same—Yes," he decided quickly; "we'll have the city searched for her, just in case she doesn't mean to come back!"

Then Rose of the Desert stepped forward with something to say. She believed that the woman spy might be found taking a saunter on the city wall, for she had gone in that direction other days.

"Yea, master, and this I tell thee also," the girl said hastily; "yonder on the city wall there squats one who craves alms as a blind beggar. Is he truly blind? Ye may find him to be so; but I, thy servant, have a fear that he is Fuan Ben Jezel, the woman's own husband, in disguise!"

It was another startling surprise for the Britishers. Mr. Hamilton was off and away, whilst others were still spellbound with amazement; he was off to pick up some of the palace attendants and take them with him on an urgent hunt for that blind beggar.

But it was all too late. Back to the palace came the dejected Britisher and his helpers, three hours later, with no capture of which to boast.

In vain had they searched the city from end to end, in quest of both husband and wife. Gone from his place on the city wall was the "blind" beggar who had whined for alms so pitifully during the last few days. Gone, too, without leaving a trace behind her, was Nassina, his wife!

Gone, whilst there was yet time for them to act on some warning which Fate had given them; gone from the city and its palace, their work of spying baffled, perhaps and again, perhaps not!

There was the doubt; and for that reason a solemn council was held in the palace before the day was out.

Mr. Hamilton was present—the only Britisher to take part in a conclave made up of all the aged Sultan's most trusted advisers. Absolute secrecy was preserved, and neither Betty and Co. nor pretty Naomer gained the least inkling as to the plan that had been hit upon to ensure their safety.

They little dreamed in what dramatic fashion their stay at the Palace of Nakara was to be cut short, all for the sake of getting them well on the way to England before any spy of the enemy Sultan's could know that they had even started.

To the Mountains.

"WHY, it will be like one of our good old picnics!" said Polly.

Yes, wather! Bai Jove, galls—"

"With this bit of difference," put in Betty,

gaily; "we don't have to be back for call-over!"

Madge Minden did not fail to show how she also was full of delight over a certain outing that had been planned for the Sultan's schoolgirl guests. Madge was standing at one of the palace windows, where cool shadow made a pleasant contrast to the scorched up wilderness which lay beyond the city walls—miles and miles of arid desert, shimmering in the wilting heat, with a blur upon the horizon that was really a great mountain range.

"I've been wanting to spend a day amongst those mountains," Madge exclaimed, "ever since we got here!"

It was a couple of days since the inmates of the palace had been agitated by the discovery that an enemy spy had been existing in their midst, for the purpose of gleaming information as to when, and under what conditions, the Sultan's grand-daughter would be started upon her journey to England.

The sensation had now died down completely, there having been no disquieting sequel. Mr. Hamilton wore that serene expression by which a British informs the world that he has the situation well in hand. And, indeed, was it to be supposed that an excursion into the mountains would have been projected for Morcove's chums and Naomer, if further treachery were feared?

Although it was such a scene of wilting heat at which Madge had been gazing when she made that remark just now, the hour was still an early one. If all went well, the girls would be disporting themselves in some cool glade on the mountain slopes by the time midday was here, with its really frizzling sunshine. For the camels were now in the palace courtyard, ready to start, and it would only take three hours to traverse the belt of desert sands.

Miss Redgrave came in, looking very charming in the same light, cool garments which her school-girls had donned for the outing.

"Ready?" she asked; and was answered with great heartiness.

"Yes, yes! Yes, wather! Hallo, Naomer darling!" the chums added in another chorus, as that little imp suddenly showed herself in the doorway. Yes, we are coming now!"

"Ello, present!" Naomer cried saucily.

"Keep smiling—yes?"

"Yes, wather! Naomer deah, it is most gwatifying to me to see the smile—the pewpetuwal smile you have worn since I was wescued from that dweadful pwedicament," Paula beamed. "I weward it is a pwoof of your warm weward for me, Naomer, and pway accept my thanks!"

"Dear duffer, I love you!" said Naomer, throwing an arm about Paula's waist, as the whole party of them drifted out of the room.

"Deah what-did-you-call-me?" Paula asked, in a rather scandalised tone.

"Dear duffer, yes. It is how I hear Polly call you!"

"Theah you are, Polly!" sighed Paula. "Naow you see the weseult of being fwivolous! Duffer, bai Jove! That name is going to stick, don't you know?"

And it did. When the aristocrat of the Fourth Form came an undignified cropper from the camel she was riding half an hour later, Naomer sent a pealing laugh across the desert, while she remarked derisively:

"Oho, you dear duffer!"

"Bothah this wetched mode of twavel!" was poor Paula's rueful comment on her failure to



THE CAMEL RACE! With her hair streaming in the wind and her hands clasped round the camel's neck to prevent her falling off, Polly shot past Mr. Hamilton, who was acting as the winning-post. She had won—but only just!

feel any more at home on the back of a camel than she had in past time. "I was not brought up to this sort of thing, you know. I call it extremely tiring—yes, wather!"

"I run you a race," proposed Naomer, bringing her own camel padding alongside Paula's. "I say one, two, three—"

"No! Whoa! Healp! Stop!" yelled Paula. "Naomer deah, pway wealise!"

But Naomer was the very spirit of mischief this morning; a Moroccan edition of madcap Polly. She said something very quietly to Paula's camel that had alarming results for the hapless aristocrat.

Away went Paula's camel, covering the sandy waste at a lumbering, jolting trot, so that the air fairly rang with Paula's squeals for help. She simply clung on for dear life, squealing and yelling like that, whilst Naomer gave her own sort of circus entertainment with the beast she was riding.

When at last the roguish girl had mercy on the discomfited aristocrat, that young lady was not comforted by finding that all the other members of the camel party were in fits of laughter.

"I shall remember my African travels as being remarkable for disagreeable experiences, that's all!" Paula remarked sadly. "I'm in a wuffed, bedwaggled state from morning to night, I decleah!"

"Ah, now see me race Naomer!" madcap Polly cried teasingly. "I'm the one to take on a challenge! Up, Morcove! Hurroosh, get on there!" she urged the camel.

And promptly the sulky beast stood still.

"Get on! Hi, hi! Go on, you!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Betty and the rest fairly shouted as they saw Polly trying in vain to make the camel budge.

"Theah you are, you see!" Paula remarked. "I tell you, Polly, they are most impossible oweatures! You have done something to upset the bwute's susceptibilities now!"

"As long as he doesn't upset me, I'll get him to go," Polly said. "Gee up, then! Goo on! Hi!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yes, wather! Haw, haw, haw!" Paula was getting her laugh now. Only it was not a laugh that lasted long.

Next moment indeed Paula's camel became just as frisky as Polly's had become mule-like. And once again a dismal wail was heard, mingling with all the merriment.

"Oh, healp! He's off again, bothah him! Goals—Mr. Hamilton, pway wealise!"

Most of the others sent their camels trotting quicker, to keep up with Paula, and so Polly got left behind, her sullen beast still refusing to budge. Presently her companions looked round for her, and beheld her all alone, still urging on the camel with ineffectual appeals.

"Goo on! Hi! Get up, do!"

Then Naomer went back, and spoke to the camel in a fashion that it could understand. Polly was off then, streaking across the desert levels, with her hair flying in the wind, and with Naomer giving her a fine spirited race.

There was a sort of understanding that Mr. Hamilton was the winning-post. Polly got there with her arms clasped about the camel's neck to save her from falling off, but she won. And Naomer promptly went into sulks, feeling the defeat as a very deep disgrace.

It was a thing that Morcove School had yet to teach this beautiful Eastern girl—that one sometimes gets beaten at one's own best game, and that even then one must "keep smiling."

However, she had forgiven Polly by the time they had all got to the foot of the mountain slopes. The sudden change of scene from barren desert to the grandeur of the mountain world delighted Naomer just as much as it enchanted the schoolgirls.

Betty and Co. missed all the verdure that clad the slopes of great hills which could be easily reached from Morcove School; but this desert range of mountains was more than merely pretty; it was inspiring.

Enormous cacti flourished amongst the sun-scorched rocks, and in gullies so deep that each one was like a valley. It was when the girls gazed upwards, however, to heights that looked almost inaccessible that they felt quite spell-bound.

"And on the other side of this range lies the land of Susahlah?" Madge said suddenly to Mrs. Hamilton. "A big enough wall, one would say, to keep out the Sultan of Nakara's enemies!"

Mrs. Hamilton nodded.

"We should not be here to-day, Madge," she said, looking round at the animated scene which had followed a general dismounting, "if there was any danger from our savage neighbours on the other side of that wall. But this mountain range—it really does serve as an almost impassable frontier between the two kingdoms."

"The Sultan of Susahlah has never invaded you by way of the mountains?"

"Never!" Mrs. Hamilton answered. "No attacking force dare come over the range; the

risk of not being able to get back speedily in the event of a defeat is too great."

Mr. Hamilton came up, with his briar pipe in full blast. He had given what orders were necessary to the few men who had charge of the camels, and was now free. He looked, too, in the real picnic mood.

"You know my idea," he said breezily to his wife, in the hearing of Miss Redgrave and the chums; "the camels must stay here, but we can very well make our camp a little higher up the slopes."

"Hurrah, yes!" Polly promptly applauded. "Just fancy snuggling down to-night in a tent high up amongst the rocks! How I shall snore when I get down to it!"

Mr. Hamilton was smiling as he turned away—not at Polly's breezy way of expressing herself, either.

He was smiling, because he knew that Polly, to-night, along with all her friends, would be on a camel's back once more, padding over the desert beneath the wide and starry sky—homeward bound.

For this was the well-kept secret. They had left the palace of Nakara this morning, little dreaming that they were not to return to it. After sundown this evening more camels with armed guards were to muster suddenly at this lonely spot. Miss Redgrave and the girls would find that all their luggage had been brought along from the palace, and that then and there a start was to be made for the journey to the coast.

Thus, if spies still lurked around the palace of Nakara, they had been completely hoodwinked. To-day's jaunt for Naomer and the British school-girls was but a pleasure outing. So any such unsuspected spy must have been led to believe. And before he or she was one whit the wiser, those who were marked down for victims of the Sultan of Susahlah's savage hatred would be well on their way to safety.

Mr. Hamilton loaded his pipe again, and lit up with every sign of having nothing to worry him now.

Only when it was too late—too late—was he to know that amongst the fastnesses of these stark mountains lurked the very spies who had fled from Nakara two days since, and that Naomer and her schoolgirl chums were fated, after all, to become helpless captives in the hands of the tyrant of Susahlah.

This Woman Again.

"PHOOF! I must stop for a breather, Betty!" "And to look at the view, too!" rejoined madcap Polly's chum, turning about as the pair of them halted at a lofty vantage point on the mountainside. "Oh, see! There's the city of Nakara—"

"Melting in the sun, or so it appears to be doing," said Polly. "I say, we came a tidy distance on those camels!"

"Melting—that's just what the whole world seems to be doing, in this shimmering heat!" Madge chimed in, as she came to a standstill beside the two other girls. "What a view! I could sit here for hours—if only there was a bit of shade!"

"Come on! Excelsior!" cried the madcap. "There's a better place than this higher up. Where's Paula? Paula?" she sang out gaily.

They would have known where Paula was next moment, even if Polly had not hailed her. A squeal of fright that could only have been voiced by the easily-scared aristocrat suddenly rent the

air, and then Paula was seen to be scrambling towards her friends with a most horrified expression on her pretty face.

"My gwacious—"

"Now what's the matter?"

"Matfah, bai Jove! Gwreat goodness, gvals, there are dwagons heah! Howwid gwreat snakes, anyhow!" Paula palpitated. "I nearly twod on one, and the dweadful cweature weared up to swike at me!"

"Oh!" The girls laughed, making allowances for Paula's proneness to exaggerate.

"How fwivolous you are!" sighed the hapless aristocrat of the Fourth Form. "I tell you fwankly it was a monstwous gwreat boa-constwictor—yes, wather!"

"Twenty feet long?" suggested Polly.

"Wather more," said Paula. "Yes, wather! Howevah, if you don't believe me, pway go and look!"

"I'm game!" Polly said at once, much to the aristocrat's dismay. "Down there, is it? A flying dragon, ninety feet long—"

"Polly deah, pway be careful! Pway wealise the wisk, Polly!"

"Where is Naomer?" Polly asked blithely, starting to clamber down into the rocky hollow along with Betty and Madge. "Gobbled up by the boa-constrictor, perhaps!"

"Yes, wather; and you'll be the next!" Paula said solemnly. "Howevah, if you will be so fwivolous!"

And, leaving the girls to their fate, she found



IN THE HANDS OF THE ENEMY!

The girls stood together watching anxiously to see if Mrs. Hamilton, Miss Redgrave, and Mr. Hamilton were brought along. Whatever their fate, let them meet it together.

a seat for herself and started to put her ruffled hair to rights.

Meantime, Betty, Polly, and Madge all went down into the gully to investigate, and there they found Naomer, sitting perfectly still with her gaze intent upon a cranny between two lumps of rock.

At sound of the girls' approach, Naomer made a sign without looking round that meant: "Hush, keep still!" So the girls stopped dead, and waited, guessing that Paula's boa-constrictor was just there, if it were anywhere at all.

Then, suddenly, Naomer made a lightning pounce, with her right hand flashing out to grab at something. Another instant, and she was standing up, proudly displaying her capture.

It was a brown lizard. Naomer held it captive while the schoolgirls drew close to admire it.

"Jolly amusing, I call it!" chuckled Polly. "I wonder what Paul would say to it?"

The same artful idea had evidently occurred to Naomer. She flashed her pearly teeth in delight, and nodded:

"Wait a bit?"

They they all made their way back to Paula, whom they found sitting very elegantly on a slab of rock, admiring the view.

Naomer approached very quietly, and said: "Elo, present!" at the same time dropping the lizard in Paula's lap.

"Pwesent—for me?" Paula beamed. "Oh, thanks, thanks! What is it, howvah? Wemarkably like a pwetty bwooch, bai Jove! I—Ow, gwreat snakes! Healp!" she yelled, jumping up as the "brooch" came to life in her hands.

"You silly duffer, you!"

"This was to Naomer."

"You call me duffer?" Naomer said, suddenly changing from gay to grave. "You say I am duffer, yes?"

"I have a pwofound respect for your numerous good qualities, Naomer. I—I—Yes, wather!" floundered the aristocrat in dismay at seeing Naomer's eyes still a-glitter with anger. "Don't I, geals?"

Thus appealed to, Betty, Polly, and Madge did their very best to soothe Naomer's wounded spirit, and that did the trick. The cloud passed from Naomer's face as quickly as it had come.

The girls now became aware that they were being called to the spot where it had been decided to "picnic." Mr. and Mrs. Hamilton were there, with Miss Redgrave and Rose of the Desert, and eagerly the girls made a scrambling rush amongst the mountain boulders to rejoin those good friends.

Then, where the chams of Morcove and Naomer had been frolicking together, a sinister thing happened.

All had been dead silence at that spot for only a minute or so, when a pebble suddenly rattled as someone's foot touched it. It was the one sound made. Moving with greater stealthiness than ever, after that, a woman in native garb snaked away from the hiding-place where she had been seeing and yet unseen, and passed without the least sound round the mountainside.

It was Nassina, the spy; and ten minutes later she was in whispered debate with her husband in a rocky lair of their own!

The Plot Thickens.

"**Y**EA, Fuan; in the book of fate is it surely written! They are to be our captives yet—those whose capture we are sent to accomplish for our royal master!"

Fuan Ben Jezrel was pulling thoughtfully at his pointed black beard as he listened to that exultant whisper which his wife had voiced.

"If ye had seen them, as I saw them!" she murmured on. "Naomer, the most desired of all captives; the fair ones, too, who have journeyed hither from the country of Britain; yea, and that other—"

"Rose of the Desert, Nassina mine?"

"Even so, O Fuan! I tell thee, they are all, all nigh to us as we sit here!" the woman exclaimed passionately. "And we were in despair; we were in hiding in this cave, fearing to go over the mountains to Susahlah! Truly, we are favoured of Fate, after all!"

The man nodded gravely.

"Yea, Nassina," he agreed. "How could we dare go back to our royal master at his court of Susahlah only to tell him of our failure? But now—"

"Thou art full of courage, Fuan; thou hast even more cunning than I," the woman took him up excitedly. "So then, ponder it, and surely ye will turn this to our great advantage."

Again he nodded, and then stood up, his tall head almost touching the roof of the dim cavern which was the mountain lair the couple had found for themselves. After a turn or two in deep thought, he asked a question:

"No guards, ye said, Nassina?"

"None," she exulted. "Such men as came with the camels are to remain below on the plain. True, I have seen some of those men bring up tents, but they talked as they went by where I lay hidden, and I heard. It is to be a camp on the mountainside for this coming night. Far below, the men will guard their camels; but up here, Fuan—who will guard the damsels?" And she laughed softly.

"Even so, O Nassina, we are only two," Fuan Ben Jezrel exclaimed ruefully. "Nay, how could we surprise and overpower the camp? If there were time, that I could hasten on foot over the mountain and bring back those who would be sufficient—"

"Men of our own country and serving our royal master—yes, then would we soon have the damsels on their way to Susahlah," Nassina rejoined. "Well, say thou, is there not time?"

He considered a moment, then shook his head and sighed.

"Thou knowest, Nassina, beyond these mountains is the desert again, and the city of Susahlah many a league away."

"Are there no good men of the Sultan's to be fallen in with, perchance, there in the desert?"

Before he could answer, his wife suddenly laid hold of him excitedly.

"Nay, listen!" she rushed on. "Even were there men to be seen from afar, ye could never reach them in time? But, Fuan, how if ye were to give them a signal from the mountains?"

"The smoke of a fire?" he exclaimed, brightening up at the idea. "Yea, perchance—"

"Thou hast slower wits than mine, O Fuan, after all," she struck in, with a mirthless laugh. "See this bauble?" She snatched some sort of article like a brooch from her bosom, and held it out. "In the sunshine this will flash even as a mirror," she assured him. "From many a league away will it be seen, Fuan, and ye know what those who behold it will think! Who has not heard how the white men make use of a mirror in this country to flash messages from horizon to horizon?"

"Nassini!" Her husband was looking altogether delighted as he took the tow-dry broom from her. "Yea, thou hast the wits, truly! If there are men passing below in the desert of Susahlah when I have gained the other side of the mountains, they will come in answer to the signal."

"They will come all the quicker," she rejoined, with her crafty smile, "because it will seem to them that white men are in the mountains."

Hardly another word passed between the cunning pair. If he had lingered in talk, she would soon have been urging him to change words for action. But he did not linger.

In a minute he was off, parting company with her at the mouth of the cavern. The midday heat was upon the mountains, and before him lay such a toilsome climb that he might well have deemed out of the question until a cooler hour. But it was now or never, and away he went, his strong-knit frame summoned to meet all demands made upon it.

Eight hours from now to sunset. That meant five hours yet of strong sunshine, by the end of which period he must be at some point on the other side of the range, flashing the bit of crystal on the chance of its scintillations being picked up by hawk-eyed men in the desert below.

Could he do it in the time? He must, he was saying to himself. And the woman he had left behind him—she felt sure that he would!

Hour by hour, after that, she lurked about on the rugged mountain-slope. The cavern was invitingly cool, but she dared not remain there, for fear of being suddenly surprised and thus caught in a trap.

So, as subtle and elusive as one of the very reptiles that darted hither and thither amongst the hot rocks, she kept on the prowl. She knew the spot at which the party from Nakara had encamped, and she was careful to give it a wide berth.

All the same, in that high altitude, with wild Nature herself all so silent, many a light laugh from the girls, and some cry from one to another, reached the ears of this lurking foe. They were always English words that floated to her keen hearing, and therefore unintelligible to her. Yet they interested her—amused her, too, more than once.

"Poor fools!" was her hissed comment on one burst of laughter from a distance. "Well ye may make merry to-day, for the night is coming, when woe enough will fill your hearts! Yea, there is that in my breast that tells me Fuan will succeed, and to-morrow's sun will find thee all on the way to the dungeons of Susahlah!"

Taken by Surprise.

AND now the night had shut down upon mountain range and sandy plain, and for Mr. Hamilton the moment had come when he must spring his great surprise upon his companions.

An hour since they had finished their hearty meal, and at present there was that circle of faces which campers like to make round their fire of sticks before dispersing to their tents.

Mr. Hamilton had been smoking placidly whilst his wife and Miss Redgrave and all the girls chattered amongst themselves, saying what a wonderful thing it was to have had this "spiffing" outing. Now somebody yawned softly—it was Paula Crœl, pleasantly tired after the whole day in the open air—and that was the signal for Mrs. Hamilton to draw her husband into the talk.

"Time for bed, I suppose?" she suggested lightly, smiling upon him in the firelight.

Before the Britisher could out with his startling reply, Paula said drowsily:

"Yes, wather, bai Jove! And no twirlyity, pway!"

"Don't worry, Paula dear," laughed Polly. "I shall be asleep in five minutes from now."

"I am afraid you won't, Polly," Mr. Hamilton said quietly, tapping out his pipe. "I am very sorry, everybody, but those who want sleep to-night must get it—on the back of a camel."

Paula yelped:

"What! A camel! Good gwacious—"

"Mr. Hamilton is joking!" exclaimed Betty and Madge.

"Never more serious in all my life!" he answered, getting up. "In a few minutes, girls, we must all make tracks down the mountain to where we left the camels this morning."

"To go back to Nakara!" was the amazed cry.

"No, to start for England!"

Naomer was the only one who was not held mute and still by that astounding announcement. She sprang to her feet, full of sudden wild delight.

"England! Oh, yes, yes! I am ready—see! That great and good country which I see in my dreams—oh, I will go this minute, yes!"

And then came one of those lightning changes in her mood.

"But my grandfather!" she exclaimed with sudden wistfulness. "How do I say good-bye to him when he is not here?"

"Ah, Naomer," Mr. Hamilton answered, "that is a thing I feel very sorry about; but I want you to see, dear, that it is all for your good. His royal highness himself felt how hard it was to let you go without a formal good-bye, but he puts your safety before all else."

"Mr. Hamilton, do you really mean that we are going straight off to the coast from here?" Betty exclaimed incredulously. "What about our luggage?"

"Gweat goodness, yes! My fwocks—"

"Don't fret," smiled the Britisher. "When we get down to the foot of the mountain, we shall find all the luggage there. In a word, girls, we are dodging the spies. We start at once, under a big escort, and by travelling all night we get miles across the desert, whilst we are still supposed to be picnicking out this way. We—"

He broke off abruptly, to dart a glance at Rose of the Desert. She had stepped away from the firelight, and was peering in a certain direction, as if her curiosity had been aroused.

"What is it, Rose of the Desert?"

In the sudden deep silence she came stealing back to the group around the fire, then spoke in a whisper:

"O master, whose servant I am, is all well with us at this moment? Hast thou men coming with stealth to join us, or is it an enemy whom I heard!"

"You heard—what?" Mr. Hamilton exclaimed, with ill-disguised alarm.

Before the native girl could answer a wild cry that was clearly an order to attack rang out upon the night air, and the leaping firelight showed the campers a score of savage figures closing in upon them from all sides.

Naomer and Paula screamed with terror, whilst the other girls, for all they had stronger nerves, could hardly confine their alarm to gasps of dismay.

It was indeed a moment for the stoutest heart

to fail. Under cover of darkness the campers had been caught in the open, entirely surrounded! And of all forms of surprise attack none can be harder than that to resist.

"Get together!" roared Mr. Hamilton, above the harsh yelling of the swooping bandits. "Norah—Miss Redgrave—to me, all of you!"

Taken Away to What a Fate.

THE girls had done the only thing they could—got close together, with Mrs. Hamilton and Miss Redgrave in their midst, whilst they knew that their one possible defender, Mr. Hamilton, would put up the best fight that British pluck could show.

Defend themselves against such strong, fierce opponents as these that had made the surprise attack, the girls simply could not do. There were a score of the ruthless foes at least—there might be half a hundred, for all the Britishers could tell.

In other words, at the very instant when the fiendish mob rushed in upon them, the campers knew that it was all up with them. They were surrounded, overwhelmed—a defenceless party utterly at the mercy of the enemy.

What impressed itself, indeed, upon the half-dazed minds of the girls was the way in which the scene of turmoil was protracted, when they had felt sure that all would be over in a moment or so.

But perhaps the attack and defence did not really last as long as the hapless girls imagined. Perhaps the anguish of it all made each swift moment seem to them like so many agonising minutes. To Mr. Hamilton, at any rate, such fight as he was able to put up in desperate defence of those defenceless girls and women, seemed as short as it was sharp.

But the odds were too great for any man to cope with. He began a wild tussle with two, and then others rushed up, and next second it was the Britisher himself who was felled to the ground.

Mercifully he was oblivious of the fate that now came upon the women and girls. They, in the confusing darkness, were made captives with lightning swiftness, the swarthy fellows laughing at the ease with which this task was accomplished.

If violence, indeed, had been the only thing to distress the girls, they would soon have been relieved in their minds. Not one of them was roughly handled; the men seemed to despise them for their weakness, and so made a sort of grim joke of securing them.

But this was captivity for all of them, and even the gentlest treatment could not allay their terror.

How their hearts sank with despair as, with hands bound behind them, one by one the girls were hustled away from the spot where poor Hamilton lay bound and senseless upon the ground, close to the dead fire!

Was he to be taken along with them? Apparently not. It became an awful doubt, indeed, as to whether even his wife and Miss Redgrave were to be removed in captivity at the same time as the girls themselves.

For all at once the chums of Morcove School and poor Naomer found that they had been parcelled off, as it were, into a separate bunch of helpless captives.

Anxiously they stood grouped together, peering excitedly to see Mrs. Hamilton, Miss Redgrave, and the Britisher brought along. Whatever their fate, let them meet it together, was the girls' tragic thought. But no! That was an act of mercy they were not to be shown.

Only Rose of the Desert was brought along at last, helpless as any, with her hands tied behind her. As for the Britisher and his wife and Miss Redgrave, the girls saw no more of them, and would not see them again until what days and nights of peril and anguish had passed!

Even now when the light, such as it had been, was over, the girls' captors did not kindle any light. The starshine was sufficient for these sons of a desert kingdom.

In the unrelieved darkness, Betty and Co. heard the Moroccans making their exultant comments on the night's work, and the first the girls knew of any woman being a member of the hostile crew was when they heard a woman's light laugh.

Then this woman came across to where the girl captives had been set apart, and at sight of her dusky face in the starlight they knew her.

Nassina, the spy!

She could not speak a word of English, and so had to content herself by laughing in the girls' white, tense faces. But Rose of the Desert was here, and for her Nassina was ready with many a taunting word.

"Ye, thou and thy fair friends," Nassina hissed gloatingly, meeting Rose of the Desert's flashing eyes, "thou wert merry enough all day, for I heard thee! But now—now it is my turn to make merry!"

She bent towards this one captive with whom it was possible for her to converse.

"Ye know your fate, or shall I tell thee?" Nassina went on mockingly. "To Susahlah do ye go—to the dungeons in my royal master's palace! Thou, and thy English friends, and Naomer—yea, Naomer above all is to feel the might of him who was her father's sworn enemy."

"Monster of treachery and cunning is the Sultan of Susahlah. Ye may tell him I said it!" Rose of the Desert burst out fiercely. "Ah, Nassina, ye pride yourself on having accomplished a great work for one who will reward thee well! But how many have served the Sultan of Susahlah, only to meet with death at his hands in the end?"

"Silence, thou!" Nassina hissed, and struck the fearless girl across the mouth. "Truly, I will report what thou hast said, and so thy fate will be a harder one. O fool, to keep no curb upon thy tongue, when thou knowest that in any case thy life was forfeit!"

At this instant Fuan, her husband, came up, and it was obvious to the girls that he was the other's leader. His object now was not to stand gloating over the captives—he had no time for that—but to keep his wife in rapid talk for a few moments.

His remarks drew excited murmurs of approval from the woman, who suddenly flashed round upon Rose of the Desert again with a fierce order.

"Alas, ye unfortunate ones!" Rose of the Desert said to the girls. "Ye are to march with me—whither, ye may guess. Yet let one thing give thee comfort. We go in advance of the others, with only Nassina and her husband."

"And our friends—what of them?" panted Betty. "Mr. and Mrs. Hamilton and Miss Redgrave—"

Rose of the Desert's answer was a mournful droop of the head.

All was now very quiet, the men subduing their jabber of talk to mere whispering. So when Nassina came close to the girl captives again and flashed a fierce command that Rose of the Desert

was bound to understand, her voice seemed loud and savage.

"March!" must have been the English equivalent of that merciless command, for Rose of the Desert made a sign to her hapless friends and then set forward, with Nassina pointing the way.

Up the rugged mountain-side Nassina pointed them, though how they were to keep going with darkness all about them and with their hands tied at their backs the girls did not know. More than once during the day had they experienced nasty tumbles as they scrambled amongst the rocks.

No sooner were they all started, however, than Nassina darted on to put herself at the head of the captive band. She and her husband, who was remaining behind for a space—evidently to advise the other men—exchanged a last cry, and then she led on in silence.

On and upwards, after that, dragged the doomed captives, going in Indian file over the rising ground; on, and on, making, no doubt, for some narrow pass over the mountain summit and down to the other side. Down to the desert again, and the city of Susahlah!

stumbling on and on up the rough ascent for so long that the dawn should have come by now.

No rest for their weary limbs! Not a moment's halt to recover breath! Nassina herself was tireless, and she demanded unflagging efforts from those who followed.

The first who followed that merciless guide was Rose of the Desert. Behind her came Betty, then Polly, then Naomer—poor Naomer, with the tears ever trickling down her cheeks! She was aware of the brave spirit her British chums were preserving, and who knows what fine efforts she made to copy their example? But the tears came, nevertheless.

Paula and Madge were at the tail end of the line, and so they could have talked in whispers inaudible to Nassina, only they needed every scrap of breath for the exertion of stumbling on—on, with how much farther to go before the summit would be reached was more than they could guess.

Then at last a sudden halt! The last girls in the line could only suppose that Nassina had granted them a rest, but those close behind the



NAOMER REBELS! With a rush Nassina swooped down upon Naomer, and, seizing hold of her, dragged the girl roughly to her feet. There was a fierce command from the woman, delivered in the native tongue, to which Naomer answered by trying to fling herself down again.

With the eyes of a cat in the dark night, Nassina was never at a loss which way to keep the captives upon the hard, exhausting ascent. In and out amongst the giant masses of rock she led them and sometimes it was the dry bed of a mountain torrent which became their steep and stony path.

And every yard was taking them farther from the hope of future freedom; every toilsome step was one step nearer to that cruel doom which a tyrant had decreed!

In the Cave.

WAS it two hours—three—four hours even, since the girls were marched off like that, with Nassina for a guide and wardress? They could not tell. In that moonless night the sky offered nothing to the hapless captives by which they could check the passing time. They only knew that the mountain world around them was still as dark as ever, although they had been

woman were instantly aware of her being at a loss which way to go.

They were in an open place, and a rough track could be seen by the starlight, still leading straight uphill; but Nassina had some reason for not going any higher. In a baffled manner she even scouted off by herself to get her bearings, although she was never quite out of sight. Just far enough off for Betty to be able to snatch a whispered talk with Polly.

"How do you feel, dear? Cheer up, darling!"
 "Oh, Betty, it's good to hear you say that! Do your wrists ache with being tied together? Mine do—awful!"

"If I could only get free!" Betty said fiercely, giving a desperate wriggle of her tied arms; but she had to desist with a wince of acute pain as the throngs only cut deeper into her wrists.

Then Nassina came back, throwing a sullen word to Rose of the Desert that meant "On again!"

For on again they went, climbing at least a few hundred feet higher up the great mountain slope, until suddenly they came upon another open place, very similar to the other.

Nassina emitted a little murmur of relief, and those who heard it knew that she had mistaken the other open place for this one. She knew her way about now, and all at once the captives were being led to the left over the rocky ground.

There was no path, but not to be going uphill was a relief to the worn-out girls. Even as it was, the time had come when one of them felt herself unable to go a yard farther, although it was a level course now.

That girl was Naomer. All at once she simply cast herself to the ground, crying out in her quaint English:

"I not go on—no, no! I not care if I die here, I, Naomer Nakara, refuse to go!"

With a rush, Nassina swooped back upon the rebellious girl and seized hold of her, dragging her to her feet.

There was a fierce command from the woman in the native dialect, which Naomer answered by trying to cast herself down again. But Nassina only laughed harshly, whilst she got a better hold of the poor girl and lifted her clean off her feet.

The chums of Morcove felt their blood boiling. They saw their dusky friend carried off in the arms of that implacable woman, and oh, how they longed to do something—anything to turn the tables on the ruthless creature! But what did that longing produce, except the sharpened pain of bound wrists, as the desperate effort was made to free them?

Helpless!

Although for the time being there was only this one woman in charge of them all, they could do nothing—nothing!

So they were forced to go on again submissively, with Nassina still leading. The frail form of Naomer seemed a trifling burden for her to be saddled with. When at last the woman halted again, she let Naomer fall smash to the ground; but that was only out of sheer cruelty, not the result of exhaustion.

Now the girls found themselves grouped on a wide ledge of rock, with a sheer precipice, as they guessed—for there was nothing but black darkness that side—on the left of them. To the right rose a great wall of rock, with a narrow cleft in it.

Nassina, as she spoke harshly to Rose of the Desert, waved one hand imperiously towards that gap in the rock.

"We are to enter there. It is a cave," Rose of the Desert turned to say passively to her fellow-captives; then stepped forward obediently, whilst the girls followed.

As they filed past Nassina, that woman had a gloating smile for each, and they could guess the jeering remarks they would have come in for if only she had been able to speak their language.

Beyond the entrance gap there was a cavern whose proportions the girls could not even conjecture. Around them there was a darkness that could be felt, and they huddled together, all helpless as they were, until Nassina called some command for Rose of the Desert to translate.

"We are to abide here for the present, so must we rest," that girl told the others softly. "Down, then, O friends, and have courage still."

"Are our hands to remain tied like this?" Polly asked, in a desperate whisper. "I can't get them free! Oh, I have tried and tried!"

"Hush! Patience, ye have not the knack!" Rose of the Desert checked the headstrong girl. "But I— Yea, perchance I may succeed."

That hopeful whisper drew the chums closer about her in the groping darkness.

"Rose—oh, Rose!" they exclaimed together breathlessly. "You really think there is a chance? You have the knack—a trick of the wrist? If only one of us could get free before Fuan comes!"

Rose of the Desert answered only:

"Hush! Rest ye, and be silent, or the woman will suspect!"

Then they understood, and acted on that whisper of caution.

Down upon the cavern floor huddled the girls, with Nassina standing sentinel-like at the one exit, whilst Rose of the Desert—

What was she doing in this pitch-black darkness? Moment by moment the whole minutes of terrible suspense dragged by, and still there was no sign from her. She seemed to be sitting as still as any of them, and yet they knew that she must be trying desperately, in her own expert way, to set her bound hands free.

If only she could get the use of them whilst there was still the one foe to reckon with!

But Fuan Ben Jezrel had never been far behind during the march, that was certain, and at any moment now he might rejoin his wife at this appointed rendezvous.

Strive then, Rose of the Desert—strive with all your strength and skill whilst there is still time! For, indeed, it is now or never if you and your fellow-captives are ever to know another hour's freedom!

(END OF THIS WEEK'S STORY.)

(Can Rose of the Desert loosen her bonds and rescue her unfortunate companions from the hands of the cruel followers of the Sultan of Susahlah? Read next week's stirring Morcove Story entitled "Rose of the Desert's Message!")

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