The Beggar at the Gate

A Gripping Story of Adventure in the Sahara

By

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and

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"In the name of Allah, a sou, O wealthy one!" whined the beggar boy, lifting a dirty brown hand supplicatingly.

The Arab merchant gave the boy a disdainful glance.

"May Allah satisfy all thy wants," he replied; and turned away.

Disconsolately, the beggar lad seated himself on a sack of millet. Behind him loomed the great south gate of El Mora, where the twisting street of the Tent-makers' Bazaar ends, and where the caravans outfit for their voyage across the Sahara.

A passing Frenchman, clad in the uniform of the Saharan Desert Patrol, sauntered by.

"In the name of Allah——"

The beggar boy began his chant, but the officer strolled unheeding on his way. Still reiterating his appeal for alms, the boy followed after. Apparently the Frenchman did not heed, but at the door of the coffee-house he suddenly stopped.

"See here, thou son of charity," he said, in Arabic. "Thou art an Arab of some learning. Twice have I heard thee sing in the market-place. Each time thou sang with understanding. Even thou sang an English song. Is that not true?"

The boy nodded.

"Canst thou, then, read Arabic?"

Again the lad bobbed his head.

"Then thou art the lad I need. Come inside, and there will be a sou for thee."

Curiously, the boy obeyed.

Inside the coffee-house, the Frenchman pointed to a large placard on the side-wall.

"My name is Lieutenant Gidel," he said. "I've caused that sign to be printed and posted here, but although I speak Arabic, I do not read with ease. Canst thou tell me exactly what it says, that I may see whether or not my commands have been carried out?"

The boy was silent a moment, then he began to read from the sign in a high, sing-song voice:

"REWARD.—For any information concerning the whereabouts of Major Jordan, noted

exporter of ivory and skins, wealthy landholder, reported missing from his caravan following an attack by marauding Tuareg tribes. Information will be held confidential. Apply to

"Lieutenant Raoul Gidel,
"Saharan Desert Patrol."

As the Frenchman did not reply, the boy ventured:

"Is the notice correct, monsieur!"

"Yes, it is correct." Then, as if musing to himself, he added: "I wonder if I should have put in that he has been gone three months? However, everyone knows that. Here, lad; thy learning is quite remarkable for a beggar boy!"

He tossed the boy a coin and motioned for him to go.

"Wait!" he called.

The boy turned.

"Thou art everywhere. Perhaps thou couldst help us. Hast thou seen anything of a white lad wandering about—a boy of perhaps your own age?" Then, as the beggar boy looked blank: "It's this Major Jordan's son, the son of the man you've been reading about. His name is Phil, and he has lived all his life in Algeria, until this term, when his father sent him to England to school. When the boy heard his father had disappeared, he ran away. The last thing heard of him was that he'd embarked for Africa. I have thought perhaps this would be his destination. If you should bring me news of him, there will be an extra sou for you. Run along now!"

The boy went out into the Market Place. Evening was near. Already deep shadows were invading the arcade square, and candles were being lighted behind grated windows. He stopped at one corner and began to sing. His first song was the "Lament of the Prisoner of Kairowan."

People collected in the square; a circle formed about the little singer. Street children pushed through the group to see who sang so well this melancholy love song. After the melody had died away, the boy collected a few coins. He turned to his listeners, saying:

"Wait, O kind ones, and I will sing for thee now a song of far-away England which I learned from a traveller! Not many beggar boys can sing a song of England."

"True, true!" echoed the little circle. "Surely this youth is doubly wise for a beggar, for they say that to get to this England one must travel across the great Mediterranean."

"What is thy name, O beggar boy?" shouted someone on the edge of the crowd.

The boy looked up, as though he had been momentarily startled.

"Ali!" he answered quickly; and began to sing his foreign song.

"Should auld acquaintance be forgot
In the days of auld lang syne?"

He began precisely.

"And never brought to mind——"

His clear tenor voice thrilled far out over the house-tops of the Market Place. The Arabs evidently thought the song interesting, although unusual, for they listened uncomprehendingly, with many a whispered word of praise or condemnation. Dark forms appeared behind grated windows. Women with veiled faces leaned over from the roofs of the mud-walled houses and gazed unseen at the singer below. Passing camel drivers stopped their beasts while they listened.

Abruptly the prayer call of Muezzin from a near-by mosque fell on the still evening air. Prayer rugs were brought forth and laid in the street where the Mohammedans prostrated themselves, faces toward Mecca. Ali reverently joined the throng of worshippers, repeating in soft tones:

"There is only one God, and Mohammed is His prophet."

Suddenly he started and raised his head in surprise. Above the murmur of prayer in the hushed market-place, he heard a faint voice singing:

"Should auld acquaintance be forgot
In the days of auld lang syne?"

Yes, he had not been mistaken. A distant baritone voice was singing his song. Seemingly the voice came from across the Market Place, somewhere near the shop and home of Hadji Ahmed, wealthy Arab trader.

The prisoner who sang

There was a final murmur, and the prayer was over. Chatter broke out in the Market Place as the Arabs folded their prayer rugs and wended their way to their homes. Ali strolled across the almost deserted street when the crowd had well dispersed. He took up his stand in front of the great shop of Hadji Ahmed and began singing his "Lament of Kairowan." After that he repeated the words which introduced his favourite song, and began once more to sing the foreign words. He sang it proudly, as if it were a wonderful thing. Into it he put all the fervour of which his voice was capable: carefully he pronounced the strange words. He raised the tones so that they floated out over the market-place, reaching all the Arab homes hidden behind their blank walls and narrow windows.

Again, above the shuffle of passing footsteps, the tinkle of a goat's bell, and the murmur of Arab voices, the answering melody floated back to him. A sign! A sign! Someone who spoke English was singing from Hadji Ahmed's home! His pulses beat wildly as he collected a sou or two, his eyes ever searching the roof of the great house before him.

As the crowd dwindled, he spied a large black Sudanese standing in the merchant's doorway. The black was probably the merchant's servant, who had come to the street attracted by the singing of the beggar boy. At the door Ali lifted his hands supplicatingly.

"Food! Food, O Lucky One!" he whined. "Merely a bite to satisfy my hunger, O Friend from the South!"

The big black grinned sympathetically.

"Willingly would I feed thee, Little Singer," he replied, "but my master would learn of it and have me beaten."

"Not for two days have I eaten," pleaded the boy. "Allow me to return after candle-lighting time. None shall know that you befriended a beggar."

The black looked cautiously about.

"Return soon, Little Singer," he whispered, "and knock twice on this door."

Raising his voice so that the near-by loiterers should hear, he cried:

"Begone, beggar! Hadji Ahmed likes not beggars at his doorway!"

So saying the Sudanese withdrew and slammed the door shut. Ali slipped away, turning the corner into a narrow, dark street. A few candles gleamed behind jalousied windows; above shone the blue-green of the luminous African night. A burnoused figure scuffled softly past; while from over the housetops came the distant throb of a native tomtom, beating rhythmically its wild strange dance. Night had descended upon the oasis town of El Mora.

When the crescent moon came stealing into the shadowy street of the Milk-Sellers' Market, the boy crept back to the Market Place, and crossed quietly to the house of Hadji Ahmed. He knocked softly twice upon the merchant's door, and eagerly waited. A shuffling came from behind the door, a bolt was drawn, and a deep voice whispered:

"Enter, Little Singer! To-night thou shalt have a feast such as will always make thee remember Salam the Sudanese."

A large hand grasped his, and he was drawn within the house. The door was carefully closed, and the bolt shot into place. He followed the black through a dark passage to an open court, where a candle sputtered fitfully. Noiselessly crossing this they passed under an arcaded veranda to a lighted doorway. Salam drew the boy within the room and closed the door.

"Now for the feast, Little Singer!" cried the black, showing his white teeth in a wide grin. "All is ready!"

On the floor of the bare, whitewashed room Salam had placed a few dishes from which tempting odours emanated.

"This is a couscous such as the master loves," said the Sudanese, pointing to a steaming pot.

Ali proceeded to help himself, for truly he

was hungry. As he squatted on the floor, he chatted with the friendly black.

"Hadji Ahmed is a good master!" he questioned, sticking his fingers into the steaming mixture.

"Lah! A good master!" cried the black, his face taking on a fierce expression of hate. "He is like a Kaffir! Always does he beat his servants and slaves!"

"Slaves!" exclaimed the boy, looking up quickly.

"Hush, Little Singer! Not so loud! Thou knowest that the French have forbidden the Arabs to hold slaves from the Sudan; but here in the desert towns live many slaves and the French know it not. Some are contented; but me—by Allah! Some day I shall attain my freedom—when my chance comes!"

"Ah, Salam," said Ali quietly, putting his hand on the big black. "You are not the only prisoner in this house!"

The big black's eyes rolled grotesquely.

"Thou art wise, Little Singer," he replied. "If that lazy mud-fish of a master of mine could but hear thee—hush!"

Warningly he raised his hand. The two listened. Approaching footfalls came from the courtyard.

"'Tis my master!" cried Salam. "He is returning from a visit to a great sheik who is encamped without the town walls. Come, Little Singer! Thou must hide!"

The Sudanese quickly scraped the dishes to one side and rose, leading the boy down a short passage to a darkened room.

"Remain in this store-room until I come for thee," whispered the black. "Thou art safe here."

From behind bales of goods Ali gazed out into the lighted room. He saw the door to the courtyard open and a tall, richly-garbed Arab enter. Ali could hardly repress a shudder as he beheld the merchant's cruel, hawk-like face, out of which his dark eyes gleamed evilly.

"What! Thou piece of a dog's flesh!" cried the merchant angrily to Salam. "Eating at this hour!"

"Only a bite, Arfi-Master," answered the slave meekly.

"Begone then, or, by the Prophet, I shall have thee whipped! To-night I have bigger business on hand!"

Ali heard the big Sudanese shuffle off.

Suddenly the boy started and raised his head. Above the shuffle of passing footsteps came the answering melody. Someone who spoke English was singing from Hadji Ahmed's home! (See page 222)

Next he heard a key grate in a lock and, turning, beheld a flickering candlelight shining behind a grated window in the wall above his head. From the room came Hadji Ahmed's voice, raised in triumph and contempt.

"Thou white-faced horse with eyes," Hadji said scornfully, "hast thou at last decided to tell me where in El Golea thou hast hidden the ivory?"

Breathlessly Ali waited for the answer.

"Never!" came the reply in Arabic, in the unmistakable tones of a foreigner. "I shall never tell thee, thou Kaffir!"

Ali's heart was pounding excitedly as he jumped upon a sack of grain and raised his head cautiously to the small barred window. As he took in the scene before him, he could barely suppress a cry. A middle-aged Englishman stood near a dirty couch, his foot tied by a heavy chain to a huge ring in the wall. His face was thin and pale as if from weeks of confinement in an unlighted room; yet he faced his captor bravely, defiantly. Surely a man of strength and daring, this trader—Major Jordan!

"Thou shalt die, O White Man!" hissed the merchant. "Thinkest thou that Hadji Ahmed will allow taunts to be thrown at him as if he were a pariah dog?"

"Thou lump of camel's flesh," cried the prisoner bitingly, "thou dost not dare kill me; for already thou knowest that the Desert Patrol suspect thee and are on thy trail!"

"Thou liest!" Hadji screamed the words in his anger; but his eyes gleamed furtively, frightened.

Ali dropped to the floor and crept down the passage to the room where he had eaten. He was not surprised to see Salam listening at the door of the prisoner's room. The slave was evidently taking a great delight in the duel of words coming from the other side of the door. He lifted a warning to Ali; but the boy drew back to the passageway.

"Salam," he whispered excitedly, "thou hast been waiting for a chance to escape to thy home in the south. Now is thy opportunity at hand! The prisoner in that room is Major Jordan, a wealthy English trader of Algiers. Help me to get him free and I promise thee the protection of the Desert Patrol and a gift of the swiftest riding-camel in El Mora to take thee across the desert."

The black's face was contorted in amazement.

"I thought him a petty trader," he gasped. "Is he truly the great exporter of Algiers?"

"By the Prophet, I swear it is true!" said Ali earnestly. "A swift mehara shall be thine."

"I believe thee, Little Singer," cried the startled black. "To resist destiny is sacrilege. Allah, thou hast spoken!"

The big Sudanese crept back to the room, to the doorway of the prisoner's abode. Angry voices still came from the other room, but the black did not pause. Cautiously, slowly, he swung back the unbolted door.

"Enter, Little Singer!" A large hand grasped Ali's, and he was drawn within the house
(See Page 222)

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Ali saw that the merchant's back was towards them as he hurled a torrent of epithets at his captive. Major Jordan was facing the door, and he evidently saw them enter, for his face took a mask-like expression as he strove to hide his astonishment. The merchant sensed the danger, for he turned—too late!

Like a tiger that springs upon his unsuspecting prey, the Sudanese slave leaped upon the back of the Arab. A cry, a muffled groan, and the two fell to the floor, writhing in the agony of mortal combat.

The black's hands dug into the Arab's throat until Hadji fell back limp and unconscious.

Slowly Salam arose, and gazed triumphantly down at the huddled form of his master. Already Ali was beside the unconscious Arab, searching. Madly he tore at the cord which bound the waist of the burnous. His fingers trembled so in his excitement that they refused to do his bidding.

"Under him! At his side!" cried the black. Feverishly Ali sought to follow his bidding. He tore aside the burnous and triumphantly held aloft a great bunch of keys.

Turning to the chain that held Major Jordan's leg, Ali hurriedly tried the large key. It would not fit. He seized another. Again failure.

"Hurry!" implored the black

Trying to calm his mind, Ali set to work more carefully to force the first key he had tried into the ancient lock. There was a moment's suspense, then the lock slowly opened. The chain rattled to the floor. Major Jordan was free.

"Come. Run!" After a last glance at the silent but breathing man on the floor, they hurried from the room. Major Jordan closed and securely locked the heavy door behind them. The captor had now become the captive.

In safety they made their way to the courtyard. Ali glanced at his half-eaten meal. How long a time ago that seemed! And yet it was only half an hour! He stopped.

"Hush!" The others came to a stop behind him. "Voices!"

"Servants! Speak, Salam!" whispered Ali. "They know thy voice and will not suspect anything amiss."

The black was chattering in terror, but after several unsuccessful efforts to speak, he managed:

"This way, O visitors! My—my master bids me light thy way with a candle!"

Unmolested, hardly noticed, they crossed the courtyard and entered the passage. At the immense doorway, the black threw the bolts, and slightly opened the door. They were in the dark Market Place. Beneath the arcade they stood breathless.

"Well——" began Major Jordan.

"Thieves! Thieves!" came the cry from the courtyard behind them. "They have robbed the master. After them!"

"Run for your lives!" cried Ali. He led the way, as they sped as noiselessly as possible across the deserted Market Place. Behind them there was a great commotion. At the entrance to the street of the Tentmakers' Bazaar Ali gave a quick glance over his shoulder. The pursuers were approaching rapidly. He doubled back into a narrow dark alley, closely followed by Salam and Major Jordan. Behind them came the hue and cry.

On they sped. Their pursuers steadily gained upon them. They left the street and came out into the Place de la Republique, where the Saharan Desert Patrol's headquarters were. As they rushed across the square toward the gateway of the compound Ali saw with a flash of despair that the Arabs were almost upon them.

With a crash they hurtled at the gate. It was locked! Then it was that the beggar boy did that which made Major Jordan turn in amazement.

"Open the gate," the boy cried in English. "Major Jordan is outside."

The pursuers were upon them. With their backs to the gate the three fought for their lives. Sticks were out, and knives. The assailants, an even half a dozen, lunged at them again and again.

"The gate," screamed the boy once more. "Open the gate!" After that he was too busy dodging blows to call. The Arabs wielded their clubs with skill. Suddenly when the three had despaired of help and resigned themselves to their fate, the gate gave way behind them and they fell into the compound of the Desert Patrol.

A pistol spat fire, once, again. Silence. The quick sounding of Arab feet. The gate swung shut. The three were face to face with a man in the uniform of the Saharan Desert Patrol, who stood amazedly blinking at them.

"Why, it's Lieutenant Gidel!" cried Ali in English.

"Mon Dieu!" gasped the Frenchman. "Major Jordan! Who, O Beggar Boy, are

With a crash they hurtled at the gate. It was locked! "Open the gate!" the boy cried in English. "Major Jordan is outside! Open the gate!" (See this page)

you to bring back this man whom all of us had mourned as lost? Who are you?"

Ali smiled at the little circle. Abruptly he tore the tattered garments from his chest.

The lieutenant started in amazement.

"Mon Dieu! You are white!" he gasped. Clearly discernible in the flickering candlelight was the boy's white body, a dark line separating it where the face and chest had been stained brown.

"Don't you know me?" he cried, turning to Major Jordan.

The major drew a shaking hand across his dripping brow.

"Know you, you little beggar! Do you suppose I don't know my own son—Phil!"

Later that night as Phil and his father sat with the men in the patrol rest room, Lieutenant Gidel turned to the boy.

"How did it come to your mind to go into the street as a beggar boy?" he asked. The others listened for the boy's answer.

Phil looked around smiling—looked at his father, at Lieutenant Gidel, at Salam, who sat worshipping him from a corner.

"I got the idea in the Hotel du Sahara in Biskra," the boy replied. "The commandant in Algiers had told me there was no trace of my father. I tell you I was feeling mighty blue! I picked up a book in the hotel library—a book called the 'Life and Death of Richard Cœur de Lion.' He's always been a hero of mine. When I turned the pages one chapter seemed to leap at me. It was all about the imprisonment of Richard in Austria, and the adventures of the troubadour Blondel as he went through the countryside singing the king's favourite song, searching for his hidden prison. One day, underneath the tall grey towers of Gratz, the troubadour heard an answering melody, and a ring dropped at his feet. He had found Richard's prison. I thought that surely if a troubadour could find his king's hidden prison, I could find my father's. Only troubadours are not common in Algeria; so I chose to be a beggar!"

"That lad of yours has brains," said Lieutenant Gidel. "He's carried an idea down through the ages, from a troubadour to a beggar at the gate."

THE END