

In the Capital of the Sahara.

ARNOLD BENNETT

Table of Contents

<u>In the Capital of the Sahara</u>	1
<u>ARNOLD BENNETT</u>	1
<u>I</u>	1
<u>II</u>	3
<u>III</u>	6
<u>IV</u>	9
<u>V</u>	10

In the Capital of the Sahara.

ARNOLD BENNETT

This page copyright © 2001 Blackmask Online.

<http://www.blackmask.com>

- I.
 - II.
 - III.
 - IV.
 - V.
-

I

MRS. MACALISTER turned with sudden eagerness and alarm towards Cecil Thorold the crowd on the lawn in front of the railings was so dense that only heads could be moved and she said excitedly

"I'm sure I can see my ghost across there!"

She indicated with her agreeable snub nose the opposite side of the course.

"Your ghost?" Cecil questioned, puzzled for a moment by this extraordinary remark.

Then the Arab horsemen swept by in a cloud of dust and of thunder, and monopolised the attention of the lawn and the grand stand, and the élite of Biskra crammed thereon and therein. They had one more lap to accomplish for the Prix de la Ville.

Biskra is an oasis in the desert, and the capital of the Algerian Sahara. Two days' journey by train from Algiers, over the Djujura Ranges, it is the last outpost of the Algerian State Railways. It has a hundred and sixty thousand palm trees; but the first symptom of Biskra to be observed from the approaching first-class carriage is the chimney of the electric light plant. Besides the hundred and sixty thousand palm trees, it possesses half a dozen large hotels, five native villages, a fort, a huge barracks, a very ornamental town hall, shops for photographic materials, a whole street of dancing-girls, the finest winter climate in all Africa, and a gambling Casino. It is a unique thing in oases. It completely upsets the conventional idea of an oasis as a pool of water bordered with a few date-palms, and the limitless desert all round! Nevertheless, though Biskra as much resembles Paris as it resembles the conventional idea of an oasis, it is genuine enough, and the limitless desert is, in fact, all around. You may walk out into the desert and meet a motor-car manœuvring in the sand; but the sand remains the sand, and the desert remains the desert, and the Sahara, more majestic than the sea itself, refuses to be cheapened by the pneumatic tyres of a Mercedes, or the blue rays of the electric light, or the feet of English, French, and Germans wandering in search of novelty it persists in being august.

Once a year, in February, Biskra becomes really and excessively excited, and the occasion is its annual two-day race-meeting. Then the tribes and their chieftains and their horses and their camels arrive magically out of the four corners of the desert and fill the oasis. And the English, French, and Germans arrive from the Mediterranean coast, with their trunks and their civilisation, and crowd the hotels till beds in Biskra are precious beyond rubies.

In the Capital of the Sahara.

And under the tropical sun, East and West meet magnificently in the afternoon on the racecourse to the north of the European reserve. And the tribesmen, their scraggy steeds trailing superb horsecloths, are arranged in hundreds behind the motor-cars and landaus, with the pari-mutuel in full swing twenty yards away. And the dancing-girls, the renowned Ouled-Nails, covered with gold coins and with muslin in high, crude, violent purples, greens, vermilion, shriek and whinny on their benches just opposite the grand stand, where the Western women, arrayed in the toilettes of Worth, Doucet, and Redfern, quiz them through their glasses. And, fringing all, is a crowd of the adventurers and rascals of two continents, the dark and the light. And in the background the palms wave eternally in the breeze. And to the east the Aurès mountains, snow-capped, rise in hues of saffron and pale rose, like stage mountains, against the sapphire sky. And to the south a line of telegraph poles lessens and disappears over the verge into the inmost heart of the mysterious and unchangeable Sahara.

It was amid this singular scene that Mrs. Macalister made to Cecil Thorold her bizarre remark about a ghost.

"What ghost?" the millionaire repeated, when the horsemen had passed.

Then he remembered that on the famous night, now nearly a month ago, when the Hotel St. James at Algiers was literally sacked by an organised band of depredators, and valuables to the tune of forty thousand pounds disappeared, Mrs. Macalister had given the first alarm by crying out that there was a ghost in her room.

"Ah!" He smiled easily, condescendingly, to this pertinacious widow, who had been pursuing him, so fruitlessly, for four mortal weeks, from Algiers to Tunis, from Tunis back to Constantine, and from Constantine here to Biskra. "All Arabs look more or less alike, you know."

"But "

"Yes," he said again. "They all look alike, to us, like Chinamen."

Considering that he himself, from his own yacht, had witnessed the total loss in the Mediterranean of the vessel which contained the plunder and the fleeing band of thieves; considering that his own yacht had rescued the only three survivors of that shipwreck, and that these survivors had made a full confession, and had, only two days since, been duly sentenced by the criminal court at Algiers he did not feel inclined to minister to Mrs. Macalister's feminine fancies.

"Did you ever see an Arab with a mole on his chin?" asked Mrs. Macalister.

"No, I never did."

"Well, my Arab had a mole on his chin, and that is why I am sure it was he that I saw a minute ago over there. No, he's gone now!"

The competing horsemen appeared round the bend for the last time, the dancing-girls whinnied in their high treble, the crowd roared, and the Prix de la Ville was won and lost. It was the final race on the card, and in the mêlée which followed, Cecil became separated from his adorer. She was to depart on the morrow by the six a.m. train, "Urgent business," she said. She had given up the chase of the millionaire. "Perhaps she's out of funds, poor thing!" he reflected. "Anyhow, I hope I may never see her again." As a matter of fact he never did see her again. She passed out of his life as casually as she had come into it.

He strolled slowly towards the hotel through the perturbed crowd of Arabs, Europeans, carriages, camels, horses and motor-cars. The mounted tribesmen were in a state of intense excitement, and were continually burning powder in that mad fashion which seems to afford a peculiar joy to the Arab soul. From time to time a tribesman would break out of the ranks of his clan, and, spurring his horse and dropping the reins on the animal's neck,

In the Capital of the Sahara.

would fire revolvers from both hands as he flew over the rough ground. It was unrivalled horsemanship, and Cecil admired immensely the manner in which, at the end of the frenzied performance, these men, drunk with powder, would wheel their horses sharply while at full gallop, and stop dead.

And then, as one man, who had passed him like a hurricane, turned, paused, and jogged back to his tribe, Cecil saw that he had a mole on his chin. He stood still to watch the splendid fellow, and he noticed something far more important than the mole—he perceived that the revolver in the man's right hand had a chased butt.

"I can't swear to it," Cecil mused. "But if that isn't my revolver, stolen from under my pillow at the Hotel St. James, Algiers, on the tenth of January last, my name is Norval, and not Thorold."

And the whole edifice of his ideas concerning the robbery at the Hotel de Paris began to shake.

"That revolver ought to be at the bottom of the Mediterranean," he said to himself; "and so ought Mrs. Macalister's man with the mole, according to the accepted theory of the crime and the story of the survivors of the shipwreck of the Perroquet Vert."

He walked on, keeping the man in sight.

"Suppose," he murmured—"suppose all that stuff isn't at the bottom of the Mediterranean after all?"

A hundred yards further on, he happened to meet one of the white-clad native guides attached to the Royal Hotel, where he had lunched. The guide saluted and offered service, as all the Biskra guides do on all occasions. Cecil's reply was to point out the man with the mole.

"You see him, Mahomet," said Cecil. "Make no mistake. Find out what tribe he belongs to, where he comes from, and where he sleeps in Biskra, and I will give you a sovereign. Meet me at the Casino to-night at ten."

Mahomet grinned an honest grin and promised to earn the sovereign.

Cecil stopped an empty landau and drove hurriedly to the station to meet the afternoon train from civilisation. He had arrived in Biskra that morning by road from El Kantara, and Lecky was coming by the afternoon train with the luggage. On seeing him, he gave that invaluable factotum some surprising orders.

In addition to Lecky, the millionaire observed among the passengers descending from the train two other people who were known to him; but he carefully hid himself from these ladies. In three minutes he had disappeared into the nocturnal whirl and uproar of Biskra, solely bent on proving or disproving the truth of a brand-new theory concerning the historic sack of the Hotel St. James.

But that night he waited in vain for Mahomet at the packed Casino, where the Arab chieftains and the English gentlemen, alike in their tremendous calm, were losing money at petits chevaux with all the imperturbability of stone statues.

II.

Nor did Cecil see anything of Mahomet during the next day, and he had reasons for not making inquiries about him at the Royal Hotel. But at night, as he was crossing the deserted market, Mahomet came up to him suddenly out of nowhere, and, grinning the eternal, honest, foolish grin, said in his odd English

"I have found him."

In the Capital of the Sahara.

"Where?"

"Come," said Mahomet, mysteriously. The Eastern guide loves to be mysterious.

Cecil followed him far down the carnivalesque street of the Ouled–Nailg, where tom–toms and nameless instruments of music sounded from every other house, and the premières danseuses of the Sahara showed themselves gorgeously behind grilles, like beautiful animals in cages. Then Mahomet entered a crowded café, passed through it, and pushing aside a suspended mat at the other end, bade Cecil proceed further. Cecil touched his revolver (his new revolver), to make sure of its company, and proceeded further. He found himself in a low Oriental room, lighted by an odorous English lamp with a circular wick, and furnished with a fine carpet and two bedroom chairs certainly made in Curtain Road, Shoreditch—a room characteristic of Biskra. On one chair sat a man. But this person was not Mrs. Macalister's man with a mole. He was obviously a Frenchman, by his dress, gestures, and speech. He greeted the millionaire in French and then dropped into English—excellently grammatical and often idiomatic English, spoken with a strong French accent. He was rather a little man, thin, grey, and vivacious.

"Give yourself the pain of sitting down," said the Frenchman. "I am glad to see you. You may be able to help us."

"You have the advantage of me," Cecil replied, smiling.

"Perhaps," said the Frenchman. "You came to Biskra yesterday, Mr. Thorold, with the intention of staying at the Royal Hotel, where rooms were engaged for you. But yesterday afternoon you went to the station to meet your servant, and you ordered him to return to Constastine with your luggage and to await your instructions there. You then took a handbag and went to the Casino Hotel, and you managed, by means of diplomacy and of money, to get a bed in the salle à manger. It was all they could do for you. You gave the name of Collins. Biskra, therefore, is not officially aware of the presence of Mr. Cecil Thorold, the millionaire; while Mr. Collins is free to carry on his researches, to appear and to disappear as it pleases him."

"Yes," Cecil remarked. "You have got that fairly right. But may I ask—"

"Let us come to business at once," said the Frenchman, politely interrupting him. "Is this your watch?"

He dramatically pulled a watch and chain from his pocket.

"It is," said Cecil, quietly. He refrained from embroidering the affirmative with exclamations. "It was stolen from my bedroom at the Hotel St. James, with my revolver, some fur, and a quantity of money, on the tenth of January."

"You are surprised to find it is not sunk in the Mediterranean?"

"Thirty hours ago I should have been surprised," said Cecil. "Now I am not."

"And why not now?"

"Because I have formed a new theory. But have the goodness to give me the watch."

"I cannot," said the Frenchman, graciously. "Not at present."

There was a pause. The sound of music was heard from the café.

"But, my dear sir, I insist." Cecil spoke positively.

In the Capital of the Sahara.

The Frenchman laughed. "I will be perfectly frank with you, Mr. Thorold. Your cleverness in forming a new theory of the great robbery merits all my candour. My name is Sylvain, and I am head of the detective force of Algiers, chef de la Sureté. You will perceive that I cannot part with the watch without proper formalities. Mr. Thorold, the robbery at the Hotel St. James was a work of the highest criminal art. Possibly I had better tell you the nature of our recent discoveries."

"I always thought well of the robbery," Cecil observed, "and my opinion of it is rising. Pray continue."

"According to your new theory, Mr. Thorold, how many persons were on board the Perroquet Vert when she began to sink?"

"Three," said Cecil promptly, as though answering a conundrum.

The Frenchman beamed. "You are admirable," he exclaimed. "Yes, instead of eighteen, there were three. The wreck of the Perroquet Vert was carefully pre-arranged; the visit of the boat to the Perroquet Vert off Mustapha Inférieure was what you call, I believe, a 'plant.' The stolen goods never left dry land. There were three Arabs only on the Perroquet Vert—one to steer her, and the other two in the engine-room. And these three were very careful to get themselves saved. They scuttled their ship in sight of your yacht and of another vessel. There is no doubt, Mr. Thorold," the Frenchman smiled with a hint of irony, "that the thieves were fully au courant of your doings on the Claribel. The shipwreck was done deliberately, with you and your yacht for an audience. It was a masterly stroke," he proceeded, almost enthusiastically, "for it had the effect, not merely of drawing away suspicion from the true direction, but of putting an end to all further inquiries. Were not the goods at the bottom of the sea, and the thieves drowned? What motive could the police have for further activity? In six months nay, three months all the notes and securities could be safely negotiated, because no measures would have to be taken to stop them. Why take measures to stop notes that are at the bottom of the sea?"

"But the three survivors who are now in prison," Cecil said. "Their behaviour, their lying, needs some accounting for."

"Quite simple," the Frenchman went on. "They are in prison for three years. What is that to an Arab? He will suffer it with stoicism. Say that ten thousand francs are deposited with each of their families. When they come out, they are rich for life. At a cost of thirty thousand francs and the price of the ship—say another thirty thousand—the thieves reasonably expected to obtain absolute security."

"It was a heroic idea!" said Cecil.

"It was," said the Frenchman. "But it has failed."

"Evidently. But why?"

"Can you ask? You know as well as I do! It has failed, partly because there were too many persons in the secret, partly because of the Arab love of display on great occasions, and partly because of a mole on a man's chin."

"By the way, that was the man I came here to see," Cecil remarked.

"He is arrested," said the Frenchman curtly, and then he sighed. "The booty was not guarded with sufficient restrictions. It was not kept in bulk. One thief probably said: 'I cannot do without this lovely watch.' And another said: 'What a revolver! I must have it.' Ah! The Arab, the Arab! The Europeans ought to have provided for that. That is where they were foolish—the idiots! The idiots!" he repeated angrily.

"You seem annoyed."

In the Capital of the Sahara.

"Mr. Thorold, I am a poet in these things. It annoys me to see a fine composition ruined by bad construction in the fifth act. . . . However, as chief of the surety, I rejoice."

"You have located the thieves and the plunder?"

"I think I have. Certainly I have captured two of the thieves and several articles. The bulk lies at " He stopped and looked round. "Mr. Thorold, may I rely on you? I know, perhaps more than you think of your powers. May I rely on you?"

"You may," said Cecil.

"You will hold yourself at my disposition during to-morrow, to assist me?"

"With pleasure."

"Then let us take coffee. In the morning, I shall have acquired certain precise information which at the moment I lack. Let us take coffee."

III.

On the following morning, somewhat early, while walking near Meced, one of the tiny outlying villages of the oasis, Cecil met Eve Fincastle and Kitty Sartorius, whom he had not spoken with since the affair of the bracelet at Bruges, though he had heard from them and had, indeed, seen them at the station two days before. Eve Fincastle had fallen rather seriously ill at Mentone, and the holiday of the two girls, which should have finished before the end of the year, was prolonged. Financially, the enforced leisure was a matter of trifling importance to Kitty Sartorius, who had insisted on remaining with her friend, much to the disgust of her London manager. But the journalist's resources were less royal, and Eve considered herself fortunate that she had obtained from her newspaper some special descriptive correspondence in Algeria. It was this commission which had brought her, and Kitty with her, in the natural course of an Algerian tour, to Biskra.

Cecil was charmed to see his acquaintances; for Eve interested him, and Kitty's beauty (it goes without saying) dazzled him. Nevertheless, he had been, as it were, hiding himself, and, in his character as an amateur of the loot of cities, he would have preferred to have met them on some morning other than that particular morning.

"You will go with us to Sidi Okba, won't you, to-day?" said Kitty, after they had talked a while. "We've secured a carriage, and I'm dying for a drive in the real, true desert."

"Sorry I can't," said Cecil.

"Oh, but " Eve Fincastle began, and stopped.

"Of course you can," said Kitty imperiously. "You must. We leave to-morrow we're only here for two days for Algiers and France. Another two days in Paris, and then London, my darling London, and work! So it's understood?"

"It desolates me," said Cecil. "But I can't go with you to Sidi Okba to-day."

They both saw that he meant to refuse them.

"That settles it, then," Eve agreed quietly.

In the Capital of the Sahara.

"You're horrid, Mr. Thorold," said the bewitching actress. "And if you imagine for a single moment we haven't seen that you've been keeping out of our way, you're mistaken. You must have noticed us at the station. Eve thinks you've got another of your "

"No, I don't, Kitty," said Eve quickly.

"If Miss Fincastle suspects that I've got another of my " he paused humorously, "Miss Fincastle is right. I have got another of my . I throw myself on your magnanimity. I am staying in Biskra under the name of Collins, and my time, like my name, is not my own."

"In that case," Eve remarked, "we will pass on."

And they shook hands, with a certain frigidity on the part of the two girls.

During the morning, M. Sylvain made no sign, and Cecil lunched in solitude at the Dar Eef, adjoining the Casino. The races being over, streams of natives, with their tents and their quadrupeds, were leaving Biskra for the desert; they made an interminable procession which could be seen from the window of the Dar Eef coffee room. Cecil was idly watching this procession, when a hand touched his shoulder. He turned and saw a gendarme.

"Monsieur Collang?" questioned the gendarme.

Cecil assented.

"Voulez-vous avoir l'obligeance de me suivre, monsieur?"

Cecil obediently followed, and found in the street M. Sylvain, well wrapped up, and seated in an open carriage.

"I have need of you," said M. Sylvain. "Can you come at once?"

"Certainly."

In two minutes they were driving away together into the desert.

"Our destination is Sidi Okba," said M. Sylvain. "A curious place."

The road (so called) led across the Biskra River (so called), and then in a straight line eastwards. The river had about the depth of a dinner plate. As for the road, in some parts it not only merely failed to be a road it was nothing but virgin desert, intact: at its best it was a heaving and treacherous mixture of sand and pebbles, through which, and not over which, the two unhappy horses had to drag Sylvain's unfortunate open carriage.

M. Sylvain himself drove.

"I am well acquainted with this part of the desert," he said. "We have strange cases sometimes. And when I am on important business, I never trust an Arab. By the way, you have a revolver? I do not anticipate danger, but "

"I have one," said Cecil.

"And it is loaded?"

Cecil took the weapon from his hip pocket and examined it.

In the Capital of the Sahara.

"It is loaded," he said.

"Good!" exclaimed the Frenchman, and then he turned to the gendarme, who was sitting as impassively as the leaps and bounds of the carriage would allow, on a small seat immediately behind the other two, and demanded of him in French whether his revolver also was loaded. The man gave a respectful affirmative. "Good!" exclaimed M. Sylvain again, and launched into a description of the wondrous gardens of the Comte Landon, whose walls, on the confines of the oasis, they were just passing.

Straight in front could be seen a short line of palm trees, waving in the desert breeze under the desert sun, and Cecil asked what they were.

"Sidi Okba," replied M. Sylvain. "The hundred and eighty thousand palms of the desert city of Sidi Okba. They seem near to you, no doubt, but we shall travel twenty kilometers before we reach them. The effect of nearness is due to the singular quality of the atmosphere. It is a two hours' journey."

"Then do we return in the dark?" Cecil inquired.

"If we are lucky, we may return at once, and arrive in Biskra at dusk. If not well, we shall spend the night in Sidi Okba. You object?"

"Not at all."

"A curious place," observed M. Sylvain.

Soon they had left behind all trace of the oasis, and were in the "real, true desert." They met and passed native equipages and strings of camels, and from time to time on either hand at short distances from the road could be seen the encampments of wandering tribes. And after interminable joltings, in which M. Sylvain, his guest, and his gendarme were frequently hurled at each other's heads with excessive violence, the short line of palm trees began to seem a little nearer and to occupy a little more of the horizon. And then they could descry the wall of the city. And at last they reached its gate and the beggars squatting within its gate.

"Descend!" M. Sylvain ordered his subordinate.

The man disappeared, and M. Sylvain and Cecil drove into the city; they met several carriages of Biskra visitors just setting forth on the return journey.

In insisting that Sidi Okba was a curious place, M. Sylvain did not exaggerate. It is an Eastern town of the most antique sort, built solely of mud, with the simplicity, the foulness, the smells, and the avowed and the secret horrors which might be expected in a community which has not altered its habits in any particular for a thousand years. During several months of each year it is visited daily by Europeans (its mosque is the oldest Mohammedan building in Africa, therefore no respectable tourist dares to miss it), and yet it remains absolutely uninfluenced by European notions. The European person must take his food with him; he is allowed to eat it in the garden of a café which is European as far as its sign and its counter, but no further; he could not eat it in the café itself. This café is the mark which civilisation has succeeded in making on Sidi Okba in ten centuries.

As Cecil drove with M. Sylvain through the narrow, winding street, he acutely felt the East closing in upon him; and, since the sun was getting low over the palm trees, he was glad to have the detective by his side.

They arrived at the wretched café. A pair-horse vehicle, with the horses' heads towards Biskra, was waiting at the door. Unspeakable lanes, fetid, winding, sinister, and strangely peopled, led away in several directions.

In the Capital of the Sahara.

M. Sylvain glanced about him.

"We shall succeed," he murmured cheerfully. "Follow me."

And they went into the mark of civilisation, and saw the counter, and a female creature behind the bar, and, through another door, a glimpse of the garden beyond.

"Follow me," murmured M. Sylvain again, opening another door to the left into a dark passage. "Straight on. There is a room at the other end."

They vanished.

In a few seconds M. Sylvain returned into the café.

IV.

Now, in the garden were Eve Fincastle and Kitty Sartorius, tying up some wraps preparatory to their departure for Biskra. They caught sight of Cecil Thorold and his companion entering the café, and they were surprised to find the millionaire in Sidi Okba after his refusal to accompany them.

Through the back door of the café they saw Cecil's companion reappear out of the passage. They saw the creature behind the counter stoop and produce a revolver and then offer it to the Frenchman with a furtive movement. They saw that the Frenchman declined it, and drew another revolver from his own pocket and winked. And the character of the wink given by the Frenchman to the woman made them turn pale under the sudden, knife-like thrust of an awful suspicion.

The Frenchman looked up and perceived the girls in the garden, and one glance at Kitty's beauty was not enough for him.

"Can you keep him here a minute while I warn Mr. Thorold?" said Eve quickly.

Kitty Sartorius nodded and began to smile on the Frenchman; she then lifted her finger beckoningly. If millions had depended on his refusal, it is doubtful whether he would have resisted that charming gesture. (Not for nothing did Kitty Sartorius receive a hundred a week at the Regency Theatre.) In a moment the Frenchman was talking to her, and she had enveloped him in a golden mist of enchantment.

Guided by a profound instinct, Eve ran up the passage and into the room where Cecil was awaiting the return of his M. Sylvain.

"Come out," she whispered passionately, as if between violent anger and dreadful alarm. "You are trapped you, with your schemes!"

"Trapped!" he exclaimed, smiling. "Not at all. I have my revolver!" His hand touched his pocket. "By Jove! I haven't! It's gone!"

The miraculous change in his face was of the highest interest.

"Come out!" she cried. "Our carriage is waiting!"

In the café, Kitty Sartorius was talking to the Frenchman. She stroked his sleeve with her gloved hand, and he, the

In the Capital of the Sahara.

Frenchman, still held the revolver which he had displayed to the woman of the counter.

Inspired by the consummate and swiftly aroused emotion of that moment, Cecil snatched at the revolver. The three friends walked hastily to the street, jumped into the carriage, and drove away. Already as they approached the city gate, they could see the white tower of the Royal Hotel at Biskra shining across the desert like a promise of security. . . .

The whole episode had lasted perhaps two minutes, but they were minutes of such intense and blinding revelation as Cecil had never before experienced. He sighed with relief as he lay back in the carriage.

"And that's the man," he meditated, astounded, "who must have planned the robbery of the Hotel St. James! And I never suspected it! I never suspected that his gendarme was a sham! I wonder whether his murder of me would have been as leisurely and artistic as his method of trapping me! I wonder! . . . Well, this time I have certainly enjoyed myself."

Then he gazed at Eve Fincastle.

The women said nothing for a long time, and even then the talk was of trifles.

V.

Eve Fincastle had gone up on to the vast, flat roof of the Royal Hotel, and Cecil, knowing that she was there, followed. The sun had just set, and Biskra lay spread out below them in the rich evening light which already, eastwards, had turned to sapphire. They could still see the line of the palm trees of Sidi Okba, and in another direction, the long, lonely road to Figuig, stretching across the desert like a rope which had been flung from heaven on the waste of sand. The Aurès mountains were black and jagged. Nearer, immediately under them, was the various life of the great oasis, and the sounds of that life—human speech, the rattle of carriages, the grunts of camels in the camel enclosure, the whistling of an engine at the station, the melancholy wails of hawkers ascended softly in the twilight of the Sahara.

Cecil approached her, but she did not turn towards him.

"I want to thank you," he started.

She made no movement, and then suddenly she burst out. "Why do you continue with these shameful plots and schemes?" she demanded, looking always steadily away from him. "Why do you disgrace yourself? Was this another theft, another blackmailing, another affair like that at Ostend? Why—" She stopped, deeply disturbed, unable to control herself.

"My dear journalist," he said quietly, "you don't understand. Let me tell you."

He gave her his history from the night summons by Mrs. Macalister to that same afternoon.

She faced him.

"I'm so glad," she murmured. "You can't imagine—"

"I want to thank you for saving my life," he said again.

She began to cry; her body shook; she hid her face.

In the Capital of the Sahara.

"But " he stammered awkwardly.

"It wasn't I who saved your life," she said, sobbing passionately. "I wasn't beautiful enough. Only Kitty could have done it. Only a beautiful woman could have kept that man "

"I know all about it, my dear girl," Cecil silenced her disavowal. Something moved him to take her hand. She smiled sadly, not resisting. "You must excuse me," she murmured. "I'm not myself to-night . . . It's because of the excitement Anyhow, I'm glad you haven't taken any 'loot' this time."

"But I have," he protested. (He was surprised to find his voice trembling.)

"What?"

"This." He pressed her hand tenderly.

"That?" She looked at her hand, lying in his, as though she had never seen it before.

"Eve," he whispered.

* * * * *

About two-thirds of the loot of the Hotel St. James was ultimately recovered; not at Sidi Okba, but in the cellars of the Hotel St. James itself. From first to last that robbery was a masterpiece of audacity. Its originator, the soi-disant M. Sylvain, head of the Algiers detective force, is still at large.