

ZOE.

A ROMANCE OF EGYPT.

How long I had been lying in agony on the hard earth I know not—minutes and hours were alike to me since that cruel shot had struck me down. I had seen in a mist of pain the shadows of the men of our regiment rush past in a rapid charge within a yard of my prostrate form, making my escape from being crushed to death almost miraculous.

I could keep no account of time, when each minute seemed to me an hour of intense suffering. The burning sun, as it rose high in the heavens, set my whole being on fire, and the thirst that followed made me wish that my comrades had been less careful to avoid my outstretched form, for death, swift and sudden, from the hoofs of the horses, would have been preferable to that hideous pain and mad craving for water.

I had given up all hope of succor when a light suddenly flashed before my eyes, and a voice sounded in my ears, saying, "Lend a hand, Tom, the captain's alive—gently!" and they lifted me on an ambulance stretcher, causing me intense agony—agony that made me, strong man as I was, shriek aloud.

I carried me across the battlefield; groans and cries resounded on every side as we passed by the wounded, writhing in their pain, while the dead lay still and white, with their faces ghastly in the moonlight. My heart sank within me till I lost all further feeling in a merciful unconsciousness.

I opened my eyes to find myself in a luxurious bed, with silk curtains round me, downy pillows under my head, and strange, sweet odors filling the apartment, which was but half visible by the dim light given by several hanging lamps.

I believed myself in a dream, and turned round again, too weary to arouse myself, when the curtains over the door moved, and a woman in Eastern dress entered and came up to me. She laid her slender hand on my forehead, and then her great black eyes met mine, and I said faintly, "Who are you?"

"Your nurse," she answered, gently, in broken English.

"And you are real?"—for I still fancied myself in a dream.

"Very real," she laughed, disclosing a row of pearly teeth, "as you will learn by and by."

"Die quiet still and I will tell you. You must be kept very quiet and must not worry about anything. My father is an Englishman and married an Egyptian—my mother. He was sorry for this war, and gave me leave to put aside this room for some wounded man. I was driving with my father early one morning and we saw some men bringing in a wounded officer. I passed you quite close, and when I saw you I reminded my father of his promise, so he told the men to bring you here. And now you will soon get better."

"Yes, I hope so," I murmured. "I was too ill to attempt to display interest in anything. I used to dream away the whole day. My past life seemed as if it belonged to some one else. My home, my friends, my regiment, the war itself—all were present in my brain, but in a confused, unformed sort of way, like the ever-moving colors of a kaleidoscope."

It was impossible for me to make an effort to realize anything. All I cared for was to see that heavy curtain over my door withdrawn and to watch that gliding, graceful figure enter—to see the rich color mount to her cheeks as her velvety eyes met mine, to feel her cool hands brush my hair as she rearranged the luxurious pillows on my couch, or to hear her musical voice pressing me to take some food drink, sparkling in an Eastern goblet.

Sometimes of an evening, when the shutters would be open and cool breezes wafted through the room, my beautiful nurse would take her little musical instrument on her knee, and, sitting at my side, would sing me a wild Oriental song in her rich, full voice, while the sun sank below the casement and deep shadows fell across the floor. Then her great, dark eyes would fall beneath my gaze, and in the hush of evening I could almost hear my own heart beat with returning life and vigor.

Then often I would close my eyes, and, turning on my side, fall into a deep sleep, unbroken as a child's.

So the days went by slowly and pleasantly enough. My nurse scarcely ever left me, devoting all her time to amusing me and nursing me back to health, assisted only by an old native.

At length I began to feel strong and well; my wounds, so skillfully treated, were healing fast, and I longed to rejoin my regiment and be again among my brother officers.

One day, when I was dressed, and feeling quite myself, I broached the subject of leaving to my lovely companion.

"Zoe," I said, "I have brightened as she laid her white hand on my head. It was very pleasant to feel it there, and to see her great eyes droop and melt beneath my gaze."

"I am very happy here, little one; but everything must have an end, and I must return to my regiment."

"It is useless," she cried, clapping her hands with joy. "The war is over, your soldiers are making ready to embark, and to-morrow they all return to their own country."

"I must be off at once!" I cried, starting to my feet.

"Stay here! Stay here, my beloved—be my husband!"

And she flung herself upon me—her soft arms clung round my neck, her sweet breath swept my cheek; I could feel her heart beating violently against my own. Was it to be wondered at that I kissed her passionately before I

gently released myself? Oh, ye gods! what should I not suffer if the blue eyes of a fair woman at home could rest upon this scene!

"Zoe," I said, "I don't think you understand. I must go back with my regiment, and though I would gladly marry you if I could I cannot—I have a wife already waiting for me at home."

She was silent for a moment, and then she said, "What does that matter? You love me! I can see it in your eyes a hundred times a day! What do I care about your wife? I will go home with you and be your slave—your servant."

I could hardly restrain a smile at this unconventional idea, but of the situation was an embarrassing one, and I was at my wit's end to find a way out, when a bright idea occurred to me.

"Zoe," I said, "I must tell you my plans. You say you love me, then you would not like me to be disgraced among my comrades, so you must let me go. I must see my commanding officer, who I no doubt believes me dead; but I will come back to-night, and then we will arrange about your journey with me."

"Oh, no, no!" If you go you will never come back!"

I silenced her remonstrances with kisses, and very reluctantly she allowed me to leave her.

Once again in the open air, I hurried to headquarters, where I was welcomed as one risen from the dead.

After various matters had been discussed I went apart and wrote to Zoe, saying good-bye to her and telling her I had made up my mind never to see her again, as I loved her so dearly that I felt the only way was to use, like Lancelot, a little "rough discourtesy," and leave her without an adieu.

Then I went out and bought her a handsome diamond ornament, inclosing it with my letter, and sent it to her house.

The next day I was on the point of embarking, when a native servant presented me with a letter.

"Cruel!—cruel! You have broken my heart! But grant me, at least, this request. My servant, Assim, longs to see England—take him with you—you are not strong yet, and he will look after you. Surely you will not refuse me?"

"Zoe," I was surprised at the tone of the letter, for I had expected to be overwhelmed with reproaches for having broken my promise to return. I supposed that, woman-like, she was beginning to forget me; but I felt I could not refuse her last request, so, after some difficulty, I obtained leave to take the native with me.

I gave him my keys and told him to go to my cabin and unpack my things. I was fortunate enough to have had allotted to me a small hole to myself—a great boon to a wounded man.

I had so much to talk over with the other fellows that it was more than two hours before I went below. I opened my cabin door, and weak as I still was from my wounds, I nearly fell back with horror, for there on my berth sat Zoe, her eyes shining with delight, and a false beard and mustache lying by her side.

I shut the door hurriedly and came up to her. She sprang into my arms, laughing and crying and telling me how she loved me.

"Have I not managed it all well? Are you not surprised? You cannot refuse to take me now? I shall never be parted any more, my darling, for I will go everywhere with you. And see I am rich! Look what I have brought you!" And she took out of her pocket several rows of magnificent pearls and some unset diamonds of large size. "They are mine and I give them to you. Are you not happy?"

"Happy! I was the most miserable man on earth! What was I to do with her? Here, alone with only one man on board!"

"Alas!" she cried, "you are not glad! I see it in your face. Wretch! wretch! Why did you make me love you? Why did you write me that dear letter saying you loved me and were miserable at leaving me?"

Her eyes flashed ominously and she suddenly drew a dagger from her belt and made as if she would strike me.

I started back, but her eyes melted and she cried: "No, I cannot hurt you. Kiss me once more, oh, my love! and I will go away. I will never see you again—I will do all you wish!"

She drew me to her, and our lips clung together again and again. Then she pushed me from her. The steel glittered for one second before my eyes, and then was buried in her breast.

I shouted for help and raised her gently in my arms.

"My own dear love," she panted, "there was no way but this, for you do not love me, and I could not live without your love. Ah! don't touch the dagger, it hurts! Kiss me once again!"

And her head fell back. Zoe was dead.

My cry for help was drowned by the noise of the engines, for no one came.

Like one distraught I rushed on deck and staggered toward the Colonel.

"Great heavens, man!" he exclaimed, "what have you been doing to yourself? You are all over blood!"

I could not speak. I seized his arm and took him to my cabin.

"Great heavens!" he exclaimed, "the awful sight met his eyes, 'what is this?'"

"Is she dead—quite dead?" I gasped.

"Quite dead," he answered, gravely. "But what a lovely creature! How did she come here?"

I told him all, and then I fainted. It was some days before I recovered consciousness. The terrible shock, coming immediately after my severe illness, had been too much for me, and at one time they feared I would lose my reason.

This trial was mercifully averted, for I woke in my night mind. I found myself in my Colonel's cabin, which he had given up to me.

"And Zoe?" I asked him.

"I had her buried the next morning and have kept the whole matter as quiet as possible; and, do you know, as good fortune would have it, one of the sailors was about to close your skylight at the very moment the poor girl stabbed herself and was an eye witness to the whole proceeding, which is a good thing for you, my boy, for otherwise I am afraid this might have proved an awkward business. I should have believed you, of course; but it might have been difficult to avoid a trial on your return."

I pressed his hand; it was the only answer I could give.

Beautiful, laughing Zoe, dead with the green water rushing over her sweet face! Never do I close my eyes at night but I seem to hear those green waves sounding in my ears, and remember that far below their treacherous surface lies the heart that preferred a violent death to a life without my love.

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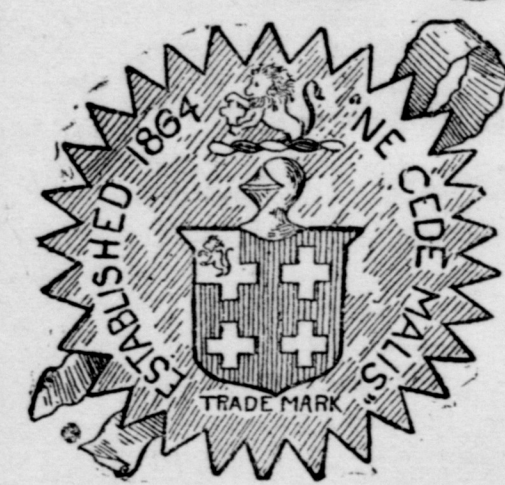
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