

The Red Mirage

A Story of the French Legion in Algiers

By L. A. R. WYLIE

CHAPTER XX—Continued.

The clear eyes darkened. Gabrielle Smith did not take the extended hands. Her own were clasped before her. "I have come to plead with you, Madame Arnaud—not to judge."

"And if I promise you—if I tell you that I will do all that lies in my power—"

"Then my errand is accomplished." Sylvia's hands dropped. It struck her that this woman had a mean soul, coarsened with rough contact with the world. She could not rise to the high altitudes of forgiveness and reconciliation. She could only grasp the material things of life. Sylvia caught a glance of her own reflection in the glass opposite, and she saw how ethereal her own beauty had become. After all, beauty is the outward and visible sign. Suddenly her name was called—roughly yet piteously—and her eyes sank.

"That's my husband," she said gravely. "Even in his delirium he is always calling for me. The dying are sacred, are they not? We must forgive them as we forgive the dead."

"Yes," Gabrielle assented.

"I must go to him. But I will do what I have promised. I—I will atone for him. Perhaps it may soothe him—comfort him to think that the wrong he has done has been righted—don't you think?"

"Perhaps." But Gabrielle Smith did not seem to see the extended hand. There was a hard line about the fine mouth, and without greeting—almost as though goaded by an impatient contempt—she went out of the open French windows into the brazen glare of the afternoon. Sylvia Arnaud watched the slight upright figure vanish into the archway beyond the courtyard. She was vaguely disconcerted—like an actress left suddenly without her cue—and beneath the tranquil consciousness of virtue there stirred the old hatred, the old mistrust.

In the sickroom all was still again. The blinds were drawn, and in the green-tinted shadows Desire's face showed like a white light. She went softly over to his bedside and sat down, looking at him. His eyes were closed and he appeared to sleep. A cold wonder crept over her. He had changed so completely in those few months of their married life that the change ceased to be terrible. This was not the man whose fleeting, unknown fascination had caught her restless fancy—not even the man she had grown weary of. He was nothing—a mere husk of something that had once been. Still, as she sat there and looked back on those months, many things became triumphantly clear to her. She understood why she had grown weary, and why weariness had changed to nausea. He was a bad man. He had sinned; he had let another suffer for him, and had pursued his victim with a relentless hatred. Her woman's instinct had recognized the evil and had passed judgment. Beside him Richard Farquhar's figure gleamed in the limelight of her imagination—a cavalier of the old school, quixotic and romantic. But she did not love him. Perhaps there was even somewhere in her a vague contempt—at least, a slightly patronizing pity strengthened by the knowledge that now his salvation was in her hands. Her thoughts passed on from him to the implacable, ruthless man who had come back to her out of the jaws of death, and to whom she was going with the surrender of her whole self. And as she thought of him invisible hands tore down the veil, and she saw the picture that he had painted of her—saw it and shrank from it even though she knew that it was the insignia of his power.

Desire's eyes opened. They rested full on her face, and in their recognition, their pathetic, helpless worship she regained herself and the heights of her virtue. She bent over him.

"Are you better, Desire?"

"Sylvia." His hand groped feebly for hers. She touched it kindly. She would not reproach him. She was forgiving him. He was going to die. And then she would be free. She did not think of her freedom. It was like a hidden pulse—beating persistently, feverishly.

"I heard you call," she said. "Is there anything want? The nurse will be back in a moment."

He caressed her hand with an infinite tenderness.

"They are going to shoot him at daybreak," he said very gently. "And then all will be well, will it not? You will forget him. You will learn to understand—everything. We shall be-

gin a new life together in a new world, my wife. There will be no shadow between us where we are going—"

She shrank from him, half in horror, half in vague fear. He was dying, and he seemed so sure. He did not ask for forgiveness; there was no remorse in his sunken eyes—rather a grave, serene pity. His hand still held hers. There was a power in its weakness which terrified her; she felt as though she would never be able to free herself.

"Sylvia—you will not leave me? I feel as though I could rest with you beside me. You will stay?"

"Yes—yes." "I have loved you so greatly, my wife. I have been down to hell for love of you, and now I am fighting my way back—to you—to the light. Love is stronger than sin—than death—than God himself—" His voice trailed off again, his eyelids dropped, hiding the pale light of ecstatic delirium.

The nurse entered on tiptoe. "There is a man—a soldier—in the drawing room, madame," she whispered. "He brings a message for madame—it must be delivered at once. I will keep watch while madame is gone."

She nodded. He had sent for her. She was going to him. Nothing mattered now. She had waited long enough. The little fragile chain of self-control had snapped. She was going to him—now, cost what it would. Yet outwardly she was quite calm as she



"Who is This, Madame?"

pushed aside the curtains. Only the uneven color of her cheeks might have betrayed her.

"Yes?" she said interrogatively. The legionary standing against the light turned and clapped his heels together.

"A letter, madame, to be delivered in your hands."

"I thank you." Her voice sounded gentle, graciously courteous. She tore open the letter with steady fingers. "Will you take back a message from me?" she asked.

"Such are my orders, madame."

"Will you tell Colonel Destin?"

"Yes?"

"Is that all, madame?"

"That is all."

Yet he remained motionless, watching her.

"Madame, I have another message. It is for another lady—a Mademoiselle Gabrielle, who is Madame's companion."

"From whom?"

"From a comrade who dies at daybreak."

She caught her breath inaudibly. The pulse stopped for a moment. In the full course of her reckless purpose something gripped and held her—a poignant suspicion, an emotion that was like jealousy.

"Mademoiselle Gabrielle is not here," she said slowly. "If you give me the message I will deliver it."

"It is verbal."

"I will deliver it exactly."

He looked at her. She did not like his face. There was an imperturbable arrogance in his eyes which offended her.

"The message is a simple one. My

comrade said to me: 'Tell her that her faith in me made many things possible. Tell her that the reality was more beautiful than the mirage.'"

"A strange message." She tried to laugh, but the laugh shook and broke off. "I shall endeavor to remember."

"My comrade will thank you, madame."

He saluted and turned to go. But on the threshold of the wide-open windows he halted. He seemed to be looking at something, and suddenly, to her angry amazement, he stopped and picked up a silver frame from the bric-a-brac on the low table.

"What are you doing?" she demanded imperatively.

He faced her with an ease and decision that startled her.

"Who is this, madame?"

"Are you mad? Shall I have to report you to your colonel?"

She glanced at the photograph which he held toward her. Against her will, forced by an indescribable fascination, her eyes rose again to his face. And suddenly the pulse stood still, drowned in a rushing flood of incoherent terrors.

"That was my brother."

She used the past tense for the first time with that deadly sense of conviction. The legionary unfastened his tunic and drew out something, which he laid quietly on the table beside her.

"Then this belongs to you," he said simply.

Mechanically she took up the little locket and opened it. Inside was the thing she knew that she would find, her own miniature—a valueless, amateurish effort done in her schoolgirl years for her adored comrade.

"I knew him as Philip Grey, madame. He gave it to me nearly two years ago—when he was dying."

"Then—he is dead?"

He made a grave pitying movement of assent.

"He was my friend, madame. He belonged to my company. He was not strong, and one day out in the desert he gave way. He went mad, I think—mad with exhaustion and thirst. He disobeyed orders, and they gave him a double burden. He broke down, and they left him out there—in the desert."

"How long ago?"

"As I have said—nearly two years. It was Colonel Destin's great forced march south—one hundred and fifty kilometers in three days. Many of us died on the road."

She laughed suddenly. She had the odd feeling that there was a third person in the room—a black faceless shadow that had laughed with her. She had to make a great effort to regain her composure.

"Yes—and then?"

"Afterward they allowed me to go back and fetch his body. I did not know his real name, but he had given me the locket, and it occurred to me that if ever his people knew they would be glad that he had not been left out there—alone. He lies in the

Legion's cemetery—Philip Grey, No. 3112."

"Yes—I remember—thank you." She did not see him go. She closed quickly and went out into the courtyard. A voice called her by name with monotonous persistency, but she didn't hear it. There was a woman with flowers to sell standing hesitantly in the passage, but she did not see her. She had grown deaf and blind to the present. She was looking back along the road she had come, and she saw the fate she had invoked stalking invisible beside her.

"Sylvia! Sylvia!"

The flower-girl still stood in the shadowy passage. Imperturbably, with inscrutable eyes, she watched Sylvia Arnaud's figure stand out for a moment against the sunlit avenue and disappear.

"Sylvia!"

"Philip Grey, No. 3112, Legion Etrangere."

Sylvia knelt, with clasped hands, and gazed at the roughly-cut letters. Around her and above her a sea of crosses lifted up their gaunt black arms—hundreds upon hundreds, in the voiceless identical supplication of forgotten things. She prayed softly. She did not cry. She felt herself surrounded with a peace that was above tears. Little by little the flood was flowing back on its old course. She was thinking what she should say to Destin when he came to claim her. She would rise up and point to this piteous untended mound. "This lies between us," she would say to him. She would not curse him. In explanation she would claim Richard Farquhar's life. She would go back to her husband; she would take up the broken threads and weave them to the perfect pattern. She would carry with her the memory of that brief glimpse of her own soul, of her own love. The dead are not in vain—it was a beautiful thought—

Steps sounded on the gravel pathway. She looked up, but it was not Destin who came toward her. It was the flower-seller, her basket crowded with fresh blossoms.

"Roses, madame? Roses to offer to the dear dead?"

"Ah, yes, I thank you. Give me all that you have."

She covered the low mound with gorgeous red and gold. The beauty of it—of this chance—lifted her grief on soft wings to a gentle, almost happy resignation. She said, smilingly, "I shall come every day, and every day you must bring me all your flowers."

She wondered what it was—that had come over her. Something had happened. There had been a sharp, insignificant little pain between her shoulders—a mere nothing. She caught her breath; it hurt her, and she turned slowly, her eyes wide open with a childish amazement.

"What has happened?"

The woman opposite her said nothing. Her face, through the rising mist, was blank, unreadable. Sylvia put her fingers to her lips—she did not know why she had done so; she saw now that there was blood on her fingers. She remembered that she had kissed one of the roses. Perhaps it had bled. She tried to turn back again. Her limbs were curiously heavy—almost leaden. Then she dropped, face downward, amid the scattered roses.

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(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Meet Conditions as They Rise.

No man knows what is ahead of today, or what is just around the corner. The only thing for us to do is to step where we can see clearly today, and be prepared to meet with confidence and courage the obstacles which may arise tomorrow.

Our Increasing Population.

Census bureau experts estimate that the population of the United States on January 1 was 101,208,315, and that by July 1 next it will be 102,017,302. On July 1 last year they figured the population at 100,399,318.

On the basis of the rate of increase between the 1900 and the 1910 censuses the bureau estimates that there is an increase of \$08,997 in the population of the United States every six months, or an annual increase of 1,617,994. The census estimate is that the population of the country is increasing at the rate of 4,433 a day—184 every hour and 3 1-15 persons every minute.

Western states have led in growth, Washington heading the list, with Oklahoma, Nevada, North Dakota and New Mexico following in the order named.—New York Independent.

Women Urged to Raise Chickens.

Householders throughout England are being urged to keep a few chickens to increase the home production of eggs. Each year in normal times England imports 258,000,000 eggs. The women's section of the National Poultry society, which is behind the movement, declares that much waste could be avoided if householders had a few chickens to which to throw scraps from the table.

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DAISY FLY KILLER. Harold Somers, 150 DeKalb Ave., Brooklyn, N. Y.

Only a Lady in the Making. Five-year-old Freddy often showed pugilistic tendencies. One day he had been using his fists on 3-year-old sister Helen. His visiting auntie said, "Freddy, don't you know that a gentleman never strikes a lady?" Instantly Helen stopped crying and exclaimed, "They do, too."

Bringing it Home to Her. "I'm glad to know," said the village matron, "that there's such a thing as a conscience found in the country and people are secretly turning to the government the moment they embezzled from it. How nice!"

The Way it. "There was a great wreck of schoolers lately."

Stopped Most Terrible Suffering by Getting Her Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound.

Denison, Texas. "After my little girl was born two years ago I began suffering with female trouble and could hardly do my work. I was very nervous but just kept dragging on until last summer when I got where I could not do my work. I would have a chill every day and hot flashes and dizzy spells and my head would burst. I got where I was almost a walking skeleton and life was a burden to me until one day my husband's sister told him to get your medicine. So he got Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound for me, and after taking the first three doses I began to improve. I continued its use, and I have never had any female trouble since. I feel that I owe my life to you and your medicine. They did for me what doctors could not do and I will always praise it wherever I go."—Mrs. G. O. LOWERY, 419 W. Main Street, Denison, Texas.

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