

The Great Hiding Place



by Denzil C. Lees

I WAS reclining in a deck-chair on the first-class deck of the P. and O. liner *Orezarba* studying a little roughly sketched map. It had been put into my hand when I stepped aboard the boat in the London docks, as the only possible clue to the whereabouts of David Castle, who had fallen heir to an immense fortune. I turned the map over.

"This is a risky undertaking," was written on the back; "but one that will well repay you if you bring David Castle home to England."

I had been in worse places—so I thought—and had come out with scarcely a scratch. But in my wanderings about the world on investigations for the law arm of Bainbridge and Bainbridge, of Lincoln's Inn, London, I had never before been in the peninsular of Arabia—my destination on this trip.

I was glad that Bainbridge had given me this commission, as my financial affairs were getting dangerously into low water. I had been allowed ample money for expenses, and

was to receive twenty thousand pounds if successful.

My instructions from Bainbridge were to keep the real purport of my trip to myself if I expected to make good. He had tried for the past six months through the papers to find Castle, he had told me. You see, the man disappeared from England fifteen years ago while under suspicion of some crime. Circumstantial evidence was against him and he was unwisely advised to run. It was a welched affair. There was some talk that he had gone to save some one else. He was only nineteen and an undergraduate at Oxford University at the time.

The authorities had traced him to Aden and from there he was supposed to have gone northeast into the desert to Riyat. The British government had sent a man in after him, but the fellow never returned, so the matter was dropped. The Arab tribes in that locality had been making trouble then. The death of a man named Lakeman and his confession had lifted the cloud from David Castle. Lakeman in his penitence has left his entire fortune to Castle,

with instructions that half of it be spent, if necessary, to find him.

Bending from my deck-chair I reached for the white helmet at my feet, picked it up and tilted it at the back of my head, rising at the same time, and wiping the perspiration from my brow. I sauntered over to the ship's side, but even there the heat and glare of the breathless afternoon poured under the canvas awning.

Leaning over the ship's rail my eyes wandered to the treeless, sandy shore of the east side of the Gulf of Suez. Since morning there had been no change of scene. The eternal drab-colored water reaching to the dull coast line, which likewise reached to the cloudless horizon against a chain of desolate mountains from which the sun had suddenly burst hot and brazen, this was what met my eyes.

Now the ship turned slightly to starboard as it entered the blue waters of the Red Sea, and the shore took on the rich golden hue of the Arabian desert. The slight change in the ship's course brought a faint breeze, still warm, mingled with the unwelcome scent of camels, which betokened some Arab town hidden in a bend of the shore.

The *Orezarba* had put on more speed since she reached the deeper channel of the Red Sea and the sun began to set in a radiance of coppery red. My life had never been very quiet or depressed, but I suddenly felt a kind of thrill of adventure that I had never experienced before. Was it the sudden cool breeze that came just then from the desert as the purple twilight descended? Or was it the soft murmurings of the sunset prayers of the Arabs in the steerage taken on at Suez? I shall never know. Perhaps a sunset on the Red Sea affects every one that way.

The next morning when I awoke the screw had stopped its eternal throb. A deathlike stillness held the vessel, and the harsh aspirate tones of jabbering Arabs reached me from somewhere outside the ship.

We had arrived at Aden of Araby, the point at which I was to begin my journey into the desert.

I walked forth from the boat after breakfast with a letter of introduction to the British consul.

Aden is a port of call, the last on the way further East. The town looked hard and forbidding with its dull, gray, mud-and-stone houses intermingled with basalt rocks and greenstone. There was not much sign of vegetation, and beyond the city the desert glared beneath a blistering sun.

I passed a number of Europeans gathered on the jetty. The rippling murmur of laughter reached me. I looked at the group from whence the laughter came, and the sparkling eyes of a girl in white met my gaze. For a moment they held me in their spell. Then I passed on, and, strange to say, I was not so sorry I had come to Aden after all. I wondered who she was.

I found the British consul's residence, a large whitestone house west of the town. It appeared to be the only one with grounds surrounding it. On gaining admission I was shown into the consul's study. After glancing at the letter of introduction and my other credentials he greeted me heartily and began a string of questions about my voyage and my business in Aden.

He had a pleasant way with him and at once made me feel at home. Yet this story could never have been told if I had confided in him, as I was tempted to do at that time. While we were talking a man entered the room unannounced. He was tall and powerfully built. He moved with a swing, his dark hair curled slightly, his skin had a sallow tinge—the invariable Oriental stamp. His steel-gray eyes had a piercing directness that seemed to look through me as he came into the study.

"I thought you were alone," he said addressing the consul, who had turned at the sound of his footstep. "Excuse me, but I came

for the book Miss Helen told me you had received from the boat's mail."

"Let me introduce you to Mr. Warton Hunter," the consul broke in, turning to me. "This is His Excellency Doud Gaer Bey, an intimate associate of mine. Mr. Hunter."

The man came forward with that easy swing and a smile on his face as he extended his hand.

"By the way, Gaer," went on the consul in his friendly way. "Hunter wants to go to Riyat. You will give him some tips, I'm sure. And why not go with him? He couldn't have a better guide."

Again the man's eyes looked through me. I thought a kind of reserve had taken hold of him, for his manner suddenly became cold and formal, as he bowed muttering that he would be glad to be of service. With that he left the room in an abrupt way, saying that he would see me again.

"Gaer is a queer kind of fellow, but he has a good heart," said the consul after the man had disappeared. "He has been a great help to me since I came to Aden, five years ago. You see he speaks perfect English. He owns hundreds of camels, and was given the title of Bey for his generosity to the Arabs during the cholera epidemic some years ago when he provided food and medical aid. He takes wandering spells and disappears into the desert for months on end."

He stopped talking, walked over to his desk and took up some papers.

"Make yourself at home, Mr. Hunter," he remarked, turning toward the door. "I have an engagement, but will be back shortly. By the way, I want you to stay with me until you can get your plans arranged. We seldom have a visitor in Aden."

I thanked him for his invitation, which I gladly accepted, and turned toward a window.

I looked out into a garden of roses with little winding paths between the beds. On one

path a man and a woman were walking. They turned, facing me. The man was His Excellency Doud Gaer Bey, and the woman was the girl with the sparkling eyes I had seen on the jetty! Just then the light ripple of her laugh reached me, doubly confirming the fact.

She seemed to be attracted to the man in some way. Her face showed a sort of admiration as she surveyed his great shoulders and head. Every now and then he gave her a hungry look. I remember at the time puzzling over the way the fellow looked at her. That was the only word to describe it—hungry! Then when he caught her eyes he would stiffen in the way he had done before me. They turned down a path and disappeared from view.

At lunch I met Helen Chamberlain, the daughter of the British consul. The faintest tinge of pink suffused her cheeks at our meeting, and her eyes sparkled as they had done on the jetty. Gaer was there. His eyes followed the girl's movements as they had done in the rose garden, but shifted when she looked his way. At the table his face was set, though he chatted and joked and ate with ease.

"You had better not make the trip to Riyat for at least a month," he remarked to me at the close of the meal. "Wait until the simoom season is over, then I will be free to go with you." That afternoon the consul took me out in his car to see the town. His daughter and Gaer rode in the back seat. Every now and then her rippling laugh came to me. It thrilled me in a way that set me thinking.

It never occurred to me how important a woman is in a man's life until that moment. It was vaguely impressed upon my mind that I had still more to learn on the subject. I had never been much of a lady's man. My travels had kept me from their society.

But now I was more than interested. Something had gripped me, causing an irresistible desire to glance around once in a while, as though at some object on the

roadside, but in reality to get a glimpse of the girl. There was a youthful freshness about her which contrasted with the gray, dirty town. It seemed as if she had brought the beauty and the fragrance of the rose garden with her. Once I met Gaer's eyes, but he showed no resentment at my curiosity.

That night she played and sang to us. The next day I walked in the rose garden with her.

Gaer went away for a few days, and the consul being a busy man, his daughter and I were left constantly alone together.

Three weeks passed—of sunlight and roses and the music of her laugh. Everyday she seemed sweeter and wiser and more perfect in my eyes, until, one day in the garden, the truth dawned on me. That which I had laughed at in other men had happened to me. I was in love with Helen Chamberlain.

The sudden revelation brought an anxiety about Gaer and his attentions toward her, and the next morning I found myself talking to her about the man. At first she answered in monosyllables.

"Yes, he is wonderful," she admitted at last. "He has such courage. The Arabs say that he shoots lions alone beyond the mountains in the north-eastern desert. It is said that once a lion came to an Arab camp and stole a child, and that he went out with his gun alone and brought the child back."

I listened and watched for any sign of special interest or pride at what she was relating.

Her father called to her and she left me alone. The sunlight suddenly lost its beauty and the roses looked to be languishing. I felt that there was nothing real in the world, but her presence and the words that I could not utter until I had come back from the desert with David Castle.

Gaer returned. The days slipped by toward the time set for our trip. Helen Chamberlain and Gaer were often together in

the garden.

At last came the evening before our departure when Helen and Gaer sat and walked in the garden for over an hour. A sort of resentment took hold of me. I began to dread the trip with Gaer. I feared I might quarrel with him about the girl. I felt that she was between us. Several times, on going to the window overlooking the garden, I had seen them sitting on the seat where I had sat with her so often before his return.

When they came in her face was radiant. She smiled at me in a new way. I wondered if Gaer had won. Then she turned and said good night. Her father also retired and left Gaer and myself alone.

My eyes were still glued to the doorway through which she had passed when Gaer's voice broke the silence.

"Well, Hunter, this is our last evening on the edge of the world. To-morrow we shall disappear, and who knows if there will be a return? I always go into the desert feeling that way. One can never tell out there."

The man's words made me start and set me thinking. Did he mean there was a risk? Bainbridge had written that on the back of the little map in my pocket. But what sort of risk did Gaer refer to?

He went on talking again about the preparations he had made for our trip, which, at the consul's advice, I had placed entirely in his hands. Not once had Gaer asked why I was going to Riyat. But the man was every inch a gentleman and minded his own business. In some vague way I rather liked him, but I felt he was somewhat of an enigma. When he returned after the three weeks' absence from Aden he acted the first day like a boy fresh from boarding-school; then lapsed into his serious, silent way.

"I have never said anything before to you about this trip, Hunter," he said calmly "I don't know if you realize there is a risk."

After a moment's silence I said:

“In what way do you mean?”

“Well, I have known of two other white men going to Riyat. One returned with fever from which he did not recover; the other never came back. The desert of El Ahkaf is no playground. It’s a veritable furnace, where men are tried like clay vessels in a potter’s oven. Some of them crack and shrivel, and some come out hardened, but only those who have the temper and spirit of endurance.”

“I have been around a good bit,” I replied coldly. “I guess I can stand it. But I thank you all the same for the warning. I have made up my mind to go, and I am not tied in any way. Besides, Miss Chamberlain tells me that I shall not fail with *you!*”

I watched him closely when I uttered those last words, but the expression on his face never changed.

The next morning Helen Chamberlain and I were the first down to breakfast. She greeted me with her youthful smile, and we went for a stroll in the garden. The sun had just come up from behind the desert. The smell of the sea reached us. I watched her gather some roses.

“I’m going to put one of them in the pocket of your tunic.” she said. “It will die, of course, but I want you to bring it back so that I can treasure it—it will have been so far in the desert.”

I thought her lip quivered a little, but her words were slow and steady.

When she came near me with the rose and her hands touched me, her hair all filled with the sunlight and her eyes searching my face. I knew the moment had come to speak.

I seized her hands.

“I shall bring the rose back,” I heard myself saying. “And when I do—”

Suddenly she turned. I followed her gaze. Gaer was approaching us. I let go her hands and they fell limply at her side. A smile trembled on her lips as Gaer came up and she bid him good morning. He looked at her for a

moment before speaking—with that hungry look. I wondered if he had seen. Then the gong sounded for breakfast and we passed into the house.

After the meal we all four went in the car to the edge of the desert, where the camels and Arab servants were gathered for the journey. I had donned an Arab burnoose, and Gaer was clad in Arab costume. He bent with reverential awe and kissed the girl’s hand when he said good-by, but his face showed no sign of distress or pain at the parting.

My heart gave a wrench when I took her hand.

“You will be back sooner than you expect,” she said cheerfully.

I pulled myself together and laughed some inane reply. I remember how hollow and empty my laugh sounded.

“Good luck to you, Hunter’.” broke in the consul.

I turned from them and mounted my camel, and we started off into the desert. I looked back several times to see them wave to us, but not once did Gaer turn his head. He rode in front of me. I called to him to look back that they were waving to us.

He replied in cold, hard tones:

“I cannot do it, man!”

He was feeling the separation more than I had thought.

For hours we rode in silence. The town soon disappeared behind us, and now we were launched on the ocean of sand.

Days passed. At night the Arabs made camp and watched beside the little fires. During the days that followed Gaer seldom spoke, but in the evenings he was more congenial. I found that he was somewhat of a philosopher.

“You know, Hunter,” he began one evening after supper, “the desert is a great place for a man to examine himself. There is nothing to disturb him. He can pull himself to pieces, bit by bit. There is no hurry and no one

to look on. If he won't do it, the desert will—that is, if he stays long enough.

“A man's in a sort of crucible out here. We have been moving for days. We have seen practically nothing but sand; yet we have passed many places where only a little scratching beneath the surface will reveal things—skeletons and such like.

“The desert is something like the heart of a man. Things are hidden; evil deed, the bodies of men, visions, dreams, hates, loves, and things in mirage. The wind of the night sweeps and the sand hides. But in the day another wind comes, the simoom, sometimes called by the Arabs the wind of desolation, the covering of the sand is torn away and the skeletons of things long since dead are revealed.”

Night after night I listened to his ramblings. When he was not talking about the Arab and the desert he was asking questions about England.

Two days later we reached an encampment of Bedouin Arabs. I saw that they were extremely friendly toward Gaer, but looked at me with suspicion. We spent a night with them, Gaer talked around their camp-fire long into the night. They listened with rapt attention to all he said, but I could not understand a single word. He spoke in Arabic.

The following evening he came into my tent as I was about to retire.

“This must belong to you,” he said, handing me a piece of paper. “One of our men found it near the watch-fire.”

I saw what it was at once—the little map about David Castle.

“Yes,” I heard myself saying, “it must have dropped from my pocket.”

I wondered if he had studied it or seen what was written on the back. He left my tent without another word, and his face betrayed nothing.

Three days later we camped early in the afternoon to go out and shoot game. We

had reached a ridge of mountains. When we returned to the camp at dusk the camels and the Arabs had disappeared.

They had left food and water beside a little fire. Gaer looked at me hard and the muscles in his face twitched; then he muttered something in Arabic.

“What the devil's the meaning of this?” I blurted out.

“The fidelity of some Arabs is remarkable,” was all he said.

He walked off north, examining the surface of the sand. In a few minutes he returned.

“It's no use trying to catch them. Hunter.” He spoke in a slow, calm way. “The camels went off at the gallop. They are probably beyond the mountains by now. We can make Riyat in about ten days, walking all day, and we stand a chance of being picked up by a caravan.”

He bent down and examined the food and the water.

“There is only enough food and water for six days, Hunter, for the two of us. That means a gallon of water a day between us.”

“But what's the meaning of them leaving us like this?” I broke in. “We were paying them well, and I thought you said that the camels were yours?”

“It's one of those things that happen in the desert, Hunter,” he replied in a cold matter-of-fact way. “Arabs are men, after all, just like you and I; and you can never tell what is hidden inside.”

He was taking the whole affair much more calmly than I was. His calm set me thinking that perhaps it was not as serious as I anticipated.

After four days, however, I changed my mind. Gaer started each day with a joke and a laugh, and carried most of the food and the water. He was more cheerful during those four days and talked more than he had ever done since I met him. He would trudge on in

his easy, swinging way, telling me to keep in his shadow, laughing and joking like a big kid. He kept me constantly wondering and listening so that I forgot my sore feet, sore eyes, and blistered skin.

In the evenings he told me Arab fairytales till I dropped wearily to sleep.

Twice the sun came up and glared at us; that was all that marked two days.

I had thrown away my burnoose. My tunic was open at the throat. I staggered beside Gaer. I had to stop him talking because his voice hurt my head. At night I shivered and he wrapped his burnoose about me. He nursed me like a child. I was beginning to see the end. Against the brazen sky the warning had come. A vulture followed us in his weary flight.

In the next two days I began to understand something of Gaer's physique. Death stared at me all around, but from his massive frame—life! I was envious. We divided the bread and the water. Twice he had put his portion of bread inside his abeyah and left the water in the canteen.

Night was gathering. The sun had taken his blistering hand off us and gone down in a sullen fusion of gold. A peace came with the stars and my mind wandered. I smelt roses. Helen was in the garden. I saw her with Gaer. But he was there sitting across from me on the still warm sand.

I am sorry to say I suddenly felt a dislike for the man. He was going to win his life from the desert. I was sure of that. I was going to die. He was going to win Helen. I was half dead already. Perhaps I was looking at him wildly. I jumped when he spoke reminiscently.

"It was the same when they sent a man to look for David Castle before. He was told that the Arabs called the desert the great hiding place. He was given a chance to get out, but he wouldn't go; said something about disgrace if he returned without Castle; and he

went on looking for him until the Arabs heard of it. Some of them loved David Castle."

He paused, shifted his position and went on again.

"Did you hear me, Hunter?—the great hiding place of deeds and of the bodies of men. You came to look for David Castle. You might have told me in the beginning. You have wasted my time. I might have known that no one would want to go to Riyat except to look for David Castle. I may as well tell you right now, Hunter, that David Castle will never be found. He disappeared fifteen years ago into the great hiding place—only the Arabs know where, and it would be dangerous to ask them. Even I would not dare to do that."

I glared at the man. He had known for days the quest of this journey, ever since he had brought me the little map that had fallen from my pocket. He had known that I would fail and now gloated over it. Of what interest was David Castle to him? I was sure now that I disliked the man, and yet why had he treated me so well since we had been left to walk. That very evening at supper he had said that he would eat no more bread and only drink once a day. I am ashamed of myself when I think of his sacrifices and my evil thoughts toward him.

The next day Gaer dragged on through the ghastly fire and I tried to keep in his shadow. He was carrying the last of the bread and water.

Once more the sun toppled over the edge of the desert with a splash of amber and red. I went down with a jerk.

Gaer sat down opposite me. He looked at me in a wondering way. His face was yellow, worn, and wasted.

"Hunter," he said hoarsely, "you must get back to Helen. She is waiting for you. She told me to take care of you."

"But didn't you—" I broke in, amazed.

"No, not in that way," he replied slowly, "only in a general way. You see I

made up my mind some years ago about women. I'm undependable. Sometimes I have to go into the desert. It's a great place to hide, Hunter, from the world. And sometimes I hate the world, then again I want to go back and take another look."

He stopped, noticed my intent gaze at the canteen, and handed it to me.

"Yes, you had better get your supper," he muttered. "I'm not hungry, nor even thirsty."

He passed over the last piece of bread. I took a greedy mouthful of water and handed the canteen back. He screwed on the cap without even wetting his lips. I broke the bread and handed him half. He put it inside his abayah.

"The bread and water will do for tomorrow morning," he said in a jerky way. "To-morrow evening we shall reach Riyat."

I stared at him in horror. Was the poor beggar delirious with sunstroke or desert fever? How yellow he looked!

"What's that?" I jerked out.

"I said that we should reach Riyat to-morrow evening," he replied slowly and deliberately. "And to revert again to David Castle, you won't find him, Hunter. Take my advice and don't ask for him at Riyat. Arabs stop at nothing where a friend is concerned. Besides, you had better get back before the fever gets you. There will be a caravan going to Aden, and I can get you through that way."

"And you?"

"I shall stay behind for a while."

The moon came up and laughed at us. The last four nights it had been the same. Gaer looked at it. His face shone like phosphorus. All at once he lay down, but his eyes still stared at the moon. He had done this the last

two nights.

I lay down beside him. He did not seem to notice. I got to thinking about him. He had pulled me through. He had put new spirit into me. The last few days he had given up his bread and his water to me. He had taught me many things. I was going to take his advice and get back.

I was going back to Helen. Gaer was making that possible. I suddenly wanted to shake his hand. I sat up and touched him. His eyes were still open but he did not move. I bent close and peered into his face blotting out his vision of the moon, but his eyelids never so much as flickered. His body slept but his eyes still stared.

I shook him. He awoke.

"What is it, man?" he mumbled, sitting up and staring around.

"You were sleeping with your eyes open."

He looked at me queerly.

"You are seeing things, Hunter. Take another pull at the canteen. Don't give way now. Only another day—then Riyat."

"But Gaer," I broke in, "I wanted to tell you--it's about David Castle. You're mistaken about me. I came to tell David Castle that a fellow called Lakeman had confessed—that this Lakeman had left him a fortune!"

"What's that you're saying, Hunter? Lakeman—has—confessed?"

The words came in short husky gasps. The man's face took on a strange look of apathy. Then a faint smile flickered on his lips. A sudden light came into his eyes and his whole frame shook with an uncanny laugh.

"My God! Hunter, if you had understood Arabic you would have known that Doud Gaer stood for David Castle!"