



THE GUN RUNNERS

By J. D. NEWSOM

Author of "Fried Chicken," "One Quiet Day," etc.

THIS STORY IS SOMEWHAT "OFF THE BEATEN TRACK" SO FAR AS SHORT STORIES IS CONCERNED, BUT IT'S A WHOLE OF AN ACTION STORY, NEVERTHELESS. FOR, AS ITS LEADING CHARACTER CONCLUDES, "AFRICA MAY BE ALL RIGHT, BUT DON'T LET 'EM GET YOU INLAND. YOU CAN'T TELL WHAT'S GOING TO HAPPEN, WHAT WITH ONE THING AND ANOTHER."

I WENT ashore at Sidi Manaf to call on old man Klotz, who runs a combination hotel, general store, and trading post in that God-forsaken, glaring, dusty town, which lies south of Mogador on a strip of barren land caught between the Atlantic Ocean and the gray-blue masses of the Atlas foothills.

Sidi Manaf's chief peculiarity is that it is Spanish territory. It is a pocket handkerchief colony; a small wart on the huge body of France's African domain. The average small-scale map omits it completely, for it is not quite twenty-five miles in depth, and no more than fifty miles long.

How its people make a living is shrouded in mystery. Some say they fish fish out of the deep blue sea, and quite likely some of them do; but a great many of them fish principally in troubled waters. It is rumored that rifles can be sold across the border for their weight in silver, and a cheap Belgian automatic, worth no more than four dollars on the home market, will fetch ten times that price in the *ksars* beyond Tizert.

I finished my business with old man Klotz, and he brought out the inevitable bottle of *schnapps* to celebrate the occasion. We had a couple of thimblefuls before the hoot of the *Santa Catarina's* siren warned me that it was time to be getting back on board again.

"And dot's true, too!" remarked Klotz. "I was

forgetting. I have a couple of passengers to send out to the ship. A man and his wife—*fery* nice peoples."

Strangers are few and far between at Sidi Manaf, and women—white women—are unheard of.

"Dey say," Klotz went on in answer to my question, "dot dey are dourists. Maybe so." He winked first one eye and then the other. "I know nodinks. Dey come in yesterday from Foum-el-Ticint." He chuckled, a deep, happy chuckle which made his ungirt belly shake like a mound of jelly. "Dey ain't left deir room ever since. Scared, *mein Gott!* He sits by the door mit a gun in his hand, and all the French agents in Sidi Manaf is cruising around outside. But—dey say dey are dourists, and dot's good enough for me."

"Who brought 'em in from Foum-el-Ticint?" I inquired.

"Ben Sliman's people."

That made me sit up, for ben Sliman is one of the Tafilet chieftains, who are in a state of chronic rebellion against the French. I was about to ask half a dozen questions when the *Santa Catarina's* siren gave another hoot.

"It's too gomblicated to exblain now," sighed Klotz as we shook hands. "You see dem on de boat. Maybe you can get him to talk; he's quite a nice fellow. And when you onderstand you will laugh,

too, you see.”

I went on down to the beach, and pretty soon these tourists came along and climbed into the ship’s cutter. They were a queer pair to meet in that part of the world. The woman must have been about thirty-five, but she was darned attractive. The man was middle-aged, staid and respectable. Their clothes were travel-stained and worn, they had no baggage of any sort, and to add a finishing touch to their misery they were sunburned the color of boiled lobster. Even so they retained an air of decency and good breeding. The woman was evidently suffering from an acute case of repressed indignation. It showed in her tightly drawn lips, and the stiff way in which she held herself. She looked straight ahead, never once turning her head to right or left. The man, her husband I gathered, was more at ease, but there was a worried look in his eyes which did not vanish even when the *Santa Catarina* weighed anchor and put out to sea.

They went straight to their cabin and stayed there for the rest of the day, but the next morning the man came up and settled himself in the captain’s deck chair on the poop deck.

When first I spoke to him his hand slid down into his coat pocket and I saw the hard outline of an automatic distend the cloth. There was no mistaking that gesture. But he thawed considerably when he found that we both spoke the same brand of English, and that I was neither going to kill him nor place him under arrest. After that we got along quite nicely, and he seemed glad to have somebody to talk to. His name was Seaton, George Seaton, of the Seaton Shoe Machinery Company with headquarters on lower Broadway, New York. He became pathetically friendly when he found out that an acquaintance of mine had offices in the same building.

So I offered him a cigar. There were tears in his eyes when he saw the brand.

“Yessir!” he declared. “I’ll be mighty glad to get home! And I’m going to stay home. I’m through traveling, ab-so-lutely through. America’s good enough for me. It’s safe and civilized.”

His last doubts vanished when he found out that I was engaged in the perfectly respectable business of selling kerosene to the coast traders.

“Well, don’t let ‘em get you inland,” he warned me soberly. “Don’t go gadding about through those oases, those doggoned, fly-ridden oases you read about. Suffering land of sheiks!” He pounded his

fist on his knee and glared at me through the smoke of his cigar. “If you’d so much as whispered the word ‘gun’ to me I was going to plunk you full of lead and risk the consequences. I don’t mind telling you I’m a bit rattled.”

I ventured the hope that Mrs. Seaton had not suffered unduly from the effects of the sight-seeing tour. He looked at me thoughtfully, as if he were debating in his mind whether I was trying to be funny or merely sinned through ignorance.

“Women,” he began, “are darn’ funny creatures, if you want to know.” He let this generalization soak in while he rolled the cigar around in his mouth and squirmed in the captain’s deck chair. At last he went on: “Anyway, I guess Mrs. Seaton’s cured of this—this wanderlust, she calls it. Itching foot’s nearer the mark, I should say. Still, that’s neither here nor there. Personally, I’m a plain man, with plain tastes, and Tampa’s always been good enough for me in the winter, when I can get away from the works. We’ve got a little place down there, you know, and the fishing’s just great. But women aren’t built that way; they want to gad about. Not that I’m saying a word against Mrs. Seaton. Nossir! She’s a mighty fine woman. A mighty fine woman—but they get funny ideas into their heads.”

He paused for a time, then said gruffly, “Say, just sit down for a few minutes and I’ll tell you how this thing happened. It’s a darn’ funny business, if you want to know, and it all started because Mrs. Seaton got this crazy notion into her head.”

WELL, sir, Mrs. Seaton goes to Europe pretty regularly every year. Mostly she goes to Paris—for the dresses, you know. Sometimes I go with her, and sometimes I don’t. I’m mighty fond of fishing, and Paris—well, there’s no tarpon in Paris, and if you’ve ever had one of those fighting fish on the end of your line, you’ll know what I mean when I tell you I wouldn’t swap all the Louvres in the world for one of those eighty-pounders.

So this year I went with her, because I had a deal to put through with some Germans. Those people are wizards when it comes to fine steel alloys. Mrs. Seaton stayed in Paris while I went on to Remscheid and bought up those patents. If you’re not interested in steel I’ll spare you the details. You’re not interested? That’s a shame.

Well, anyway, after that I went back to Paris, and hung around that woman's Paradise for a while, getting pretty darn' sick of the whole business, I don't mind telling you.

My wife's been over there so much and so often she almost thinks she's a native of the place, and d'you know what she springs on me about two days after I rejoined her? She said Paris was so full of cheap tourists she was ashamed to be seen on the streets! That sounded good to me, so I said, "If that's the case, Hon', let's go on home. Maybe we can locate a few friends who haven't gone Europe-crazy."

But that wasn't the idea at all. Nossir! Mrs. Seaton had it all worked out. We were due to go to Africa until the rush season for tourists was over. She knew darn' well the business was running smoothly and that my doctor'd told me to take a good long rest.

Rest! Suffering cats! Africa didn't mean anything much to me, and I was ready to try anything once just to please Mrs. Seaton. So we went south; Algiers, Constantine, Touggourt, Timgad, Tunis, Tlemcen—we did 'em all, but it seemed we couldn't get away from tourists. The hotels were full of 'em, and the little Arab boys have learned enough English to shout, "Penny, mister, give us a penny!" Yep, that's a fact. I'll bet half the United States adult population is cruising about in Europe and North Africa. Not that I minded—gosh, it's good to find somebody to talk to occasionally—but Mrs. Seaton's different. She's got this queer notion in her head, or she had at the time. She was dead set on getting off the beaten track, where there wouldn't be any tourists and see something all the folks back home hadn't seen or heard of before.



That's how we came to find out about Beni-Ounif. A fellow at the travel bureau told us about it. It's supposed to be an oasis on the edge of the desert, but the fellow told us there was a good, quiet hotel down there and lots of interesting scenery. He said it was too far out of the way for

most tourists, and that settled it. Off we went.

But we never did reach Beni-Ounif. We started off all right in a sleeping car, and the accommodation wasn't so bad while it lasted. And then at four in the morning that damn' car went out of commission; hotbox or something. We had to get out at a place called Le Kreider, right on top of the Tel Plateau, and I'll tell the world it's a cold place at four A.M. Whee! We stood about on that doggone' platform for a couple of hours while the sleeper was being uncoupled and shunted off onto a sidetrack.

After that we had to stand up in the corridor of a day coach nearly all morning, until we reached Ain Seffra. By that time it was hotter'n Hades. Well, at this place Ain Seffra most of the people piled out of the train and we had a compartment to ourselves. We were running through what I thought was desert all right enough; flat as a pancake with just a tuft of grayish blue grass here and there, and a row of hills away off on the skyline. And you get mighty tired looking at that kind of scenery after the first couple of hours. So we both fell asleep and, by gosh, we didn't wake up until Beni-Ounif was a hundred miles behind us.

That's what the conductor told us when he woke us up. He seemed to think we'd done it on purpose. So I pulled out a wad of notes and said "*Combien?*" which is the best way of smoothing out difficulties in that part of the world.

And I said, "We'll get off at the next station and go on back."

He laughed a good deal at that and waggled his hands.

"Oh, no, you won't," he said. "You'll have to go on to Bechar and report to the military authorities. You're in military territory now and you're traveling on a strategic line. What's more there are only two trains a week between Bechar and Beni-Ounif and there isn't a place where you could get off even if you wanted to."

Mrs. Seaton translated that for me, and I said, "What's the odds? We'll go on to this Bechar and look it over while we're about it. It seems to be even farther off the good old beaten track than Beni-Ounif. Maybe there won't be any tourists there at all!"

The guard gave me a funny look and said he was sure he'd never heard of any tourists visiting Bechar, but he wished us luck and pocketed his money.

I saw what he meant when he said we couldn't get off even if we wanted to. All the stations we came to were just so many small forts set down in the middle of a howling wilderness. Yessir! Forts. Barbed wire and loopholed walls and armor-plated turrets. Believe me, it looked quite businesslike, and I felt as if at any minute an Arab was going to pop up behind one of the boulders by the track and start shooting us up.

I said to Mrs. Seaton, "How about this, Hon'? Maybe we'll run into an ambush or something. That'll give us something to write home about!"

"Don't be childish," she snapped. "They say it's safer to travel in the desert than it is to cross the Grands Boulevards. The natives are quite reconciled to French rule; but what's worrying me is what we're going to do for hotel accommodation. The guide-book doesn't say anything about Bechar."

I'll say it doesn't. But we'll come to that later.

Well, along around three in the afternoon we sighted some palm trees and after a bit we reached a station. It was Bechar right enough. We piled out. Say, you've never seen anything like it in your life. Nothing but soldiers. I never saw so many uniforms—all kinds. Arab cavalry wearing long red cloaks, and Senegalese Tirailleurs, and Moroccan Tirailleurs, and Light Infantry, and a hardboiled gang called the Foreign Legion. The platform was full of 'em.

We hunted around for a porter or somebody to carry our bags, but there wasn't a porter, nor a taxi, nor a carriage—not a darn' thing. But at last we hooked a small Arab boy and Mrs. Seaton talked to him, and he agreed to carry our bags to the hotel. Yep, there was a hotel, so it seemed.

Say, it was hot! I didn't realize how hot it was until we started off for the hotel. Outside the station there was a parade ground big enough to hold an army corps, and then barracks! Rows of barracks, dwindling away in the distance. Gosh, that place is just one huge concentration camp.

Well, we crossed this parade ground with the sun beating down on our heads and at last we came to the one street which is where the civilian population lives. The hotel was full of soldiers, too—a whole bunch of 'em standing around the counter drinking a sticky stuff called *anis*.

To cut a long story short, the boss of the place gave us one look and shook his head. Nothing doing. He didn't have any rooms and anyway he

couldn't put us up unless we received permission from the military authorities to stay in Bechar overnight. That was a blow, I don't mind telling you. It was the only hotel in the place, we were dog-tired, both of us—tired, and damn' hot, and damn' dirty. I waved money in his face but he wouldn't look at it. Just went right on pouring out *anis* to the thirsty troops.

"But listen here," said Mrs. Seaton in her best French, "if we secure the necessary permission can you give us a room?"

"Alas!" said he, shrugging his fat shoulders. "All my rooms are taken by the officers of a camel company who have just returned from a seven months' patrol in the desert. All my rooms have been commandeered."

"How about the billiard table?" I put in.

That was taken, too. The best he could do for us was a corner of the dining-room floor. But he couldn't even let us have that until we'd called on the officer in charge of local affairs.

So we crossed that damn' parade ground again, plodding along through the ankle-deep dust, with the Arab kid heading the procession with our bags piled on top of his head. The sun was going down, and its glare hit us full in the face. I don't mind telling you I was shedding my fat by the pint. And Mrs. Seaton was so mad she couldn't speak. I tried to say something about us being off the beaten track and she shut me up so quick I felt like a kid of two. But it's no good arguing with a woman, so I said nothing and let it go at that.

We found the right party after cruising around for about half an hour, and by that time it was pitch dark. Black as your hat. We were kept waiting for about another twenty minutes in a whitewashed corridor which was crowded with a bunch of Arabs, who didn't smell any too sweet. And all the time Mrs. Seaton was saying beneath her breath that this was an outrage and that she'd make a complaint to our ambassador or to the French Government, I forget which.

At last we were led into an office where there was a big fellow in a white uniform who asked us for our passports. I must say he didn't seem very pleased to see us. Those Frenchmen can be mighty cool and distant when they feel that way. That bird was an iceberg. Mrs. Seaton lit into him in fine style, but he never blinked. He came right back at us without turning a hair.

What were we doing in Bechar? We had

overslept and missed Beni-Ounif? His eyebrows went up at that as if to say, "You're a sweet pair of liars," but he kept his thoughts to himself. He was polite all right! Gosh, it takes a Frenchman to be polite like that!

"Look here," I said, "just be honest with yourself for two minutes and let's get this straight. Is there any reason why we shouldn't be here?"

But there was no cornering that smart lad. Nossir! He merely pointed out that Bechar was not a center of "tourism" as he called it, and he said it was his duty to interview all newcomers. He had to be careful, he explained, because Bechar was a big concentration camp, and they had to keep out agitators.

"Do we look like agitators?" Mrs. Seaton asked him, but he merely smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

Then he went on to say how sorry he was we had been obliged to come and see him, and he told us the next train for Beni-Ounif was due to leave in three days' time. He stressed that point—and he felt sure we'd enjoy the scenery because it was much more interesting and picturesque than at Bechar.

"In the meantime," I said to him, "we haven't any place to sleep. You don't know of anything, do you?"

He didn't. He was very sorry for us—so damn' sorry I could have kicked him—but he couldn't help us.

So we started back toward the hotel. It was so black you couldn't see two inches in front of your nose. And no lights anywhere except a couple of lanterns hanging over the barrack gates. The stars were out all right, but don't let anybody kid you about the star-sheen in the desert. It sounds romantic and all that, but as a lighting system it's a flivver. We just stumbled about behind the Arab boy who was toting our bags, and Mrs. Seaton said there were some things about the French she didn't like. I tried to whistle "Home, Sweet Home," which didn't improve matters.

Well, about halfway across that doggone' parade ground we were joined by a very gentlemanly old Arab, who spoke French just as good as Mrs. Seaton does. He apologized for walking up on us like that in the middle of the night, but he said he'd heard we were stranded in Bechar, and he offered us the hospitality of his own home, if we would care to spend the night in the

ksar. A *ksar's* a native village, by the way.

"Can you see in the dark?" I asked him. "If you can't how did you find us out here? It's beyond me!"

"Ah," he said, "I heard you whistle—a man does not whistle in the dark for no good cause."

That didn't make good sense, but I was too tired to argue. He seemed genuine enough and anyway I had a gun in my pocket so I thought we'd be fairly safe all things considered.

"How about it, Hon'?" I asked Mrs. Seaton. "Does it suit you?"

Did it! It was just what she wanted. You should have seen her perk up. She fell over herself being pleasant to this Arab whose face she couldn't see.

But I was feeling sort of doubtful about this fellow. It didn't seem natural for him to be inviting us to his house like that.

"Where is this house of yours, if you don't mind my asking?" I said.

"Not far," he told me. "And what is more a hot meal awaits my guests." Then he lowered his voice and added, "It is I, Mustapha ben Zacca!"

"Say, it looks to me as if there might be some mistake here," I said to Mrs. Seaton. "He seems to think we ought to know him. We'd better steer for that hotel and sleep on the floor for one night."

But Mrs. Seaton was feeling all pepped up. She wouldn't hear of it. Nossir!

"Why, this is a chance in a lifetime," she declared. "You don't think I'm going to miss this do you? *I'm* going to accept this man's hospitality. It's the *least* we can do to be nice to him. The very least. And we wanted to do something everybody else hasn't done—here's our chance."

Then she started talking high-pressure French to this Arab and that was the end of that.

Well, we walked and kept right on walking until I thought, "My gosh, do we hoof it all the way across the goldarned Sahara Desert?" We steered clear of the street where the hotel was, and went floundering around in the dark, tripping over stones and bumping into palm trees, all the time getting farther and farther away from the town.

After tramping along for about half an hour we came to the native village. And let me tell you they build queer villages out there. Compact's the only word for 'em. There's just one high mud wall built around all the houses, and all the houses are squashed up one against the other, and the streets are covered over with houses built on top of 'em.

Regular rabbit warrens. We went in through a low doorway and groped about through a tunnel until this bird Zacca located his particular hen-roost.

Inside it wasn't so bad. There was a big room with a couple of candles stuck on the floor and some mats to squat down on, and that's about all. Those desert Arabs aren't strong on luxury.

Zacca was a big, handsome fellow with a gray beard, cut square, and a pair of eyes which seemed to drill right through to your backbone. He invited us to be seated on his mats, just as if he'd said, "This is the most comfortable place in the world. Stretch out and make yourselves at home." But you can take it from me, those mats weren't so very comfortable. Hard! The floor was full of lumps and stones and bits of things.

"Do we sleep here?" I asked Mrs. Seaton while Zacca was out of the room. "I ain't kicking, but I don't mind telling you the floor of the restaurant would have been just as soft and we needn't have walked ten miles to get here."

"I think it's wonderful," she came back at me. "And I wish you wouldn't say 'ain't.' It's vulgar."

Just then friend Zacca came back with a great brass platter in his hands, heaped up with food. They do those things well down there. Simple and nice. He waited on us without batting an eyelash, after having explained that, of course, his women couldn't come in because I was on the premises. First he poured water over our hands to clean 'em and dried 'em off with a clean rag. After that we tackled the food. There was one big bowl of *couscous*, which is boiled maize with dates and raisins and green peppers and bits of goat's meat thrown in. It tastes mighty good, once you get used to eating it with your hands.

Well, Zacca didn't seem happy until we'd finished the whole dish. He'd keep pulling off tender bits of meat with his fingers and passing 'em around, and the only thing we could do was to eat and go on eating till the bowl was empty. Then there was tea with mint leaves stewed up in it, and that was good, too. I felt a darn' sight better by the time that meal was over.

I pulled out my cigar case and offered one to friend Zacca, but he didn't smoke. Funny people, those desert Arabs; they don't smoke, they don't drink any kind of hard stuff, and they don't even drink coffee! That wasn't my idea of a real Arab.

"We've been touring this country quite a good deal," I said to him, just to make a bit of

conversation before curling up and going to sleep. "Algiers and Tunis, you know, and up there, why they drink nothing but coffee and they smoke their heads off. But down here you seem to be quite different."

"We are," he said slowly. "The North is degraded and rotten. We are the true Arabs."

"Unaffected and quite charming," added Mrs. Seaton. "You, at least, have retained your own culture without trying to ape the manners of the Europeans."

"Yes," said Zacca, and I didn't like the look in his eyes worth a cent. "At present the fires of Islam are burning low, but the day will come when the cleansing flames will spring up heavenward, and when that day comes—" He made a sweeping movement with his hand.

"How wonderful!" cried Mrs. Seaton, who was having one grand and glorious time. "And you belong to the movement, too! Just to think of it! The cleansing flames will spring heavenward!"

Well, she raved on for a while, reminding Zacca what fine people the Arabs really were, and he nodded his head in agreement.

Then he said, yes, the Arabs were a great civilizing force in the world, but they had been corrupted by wealth and indolence.

"All our conquests date back to the days when the True Believers lived frugal lives," he pointed out, "and the fires are kept alive today by those who live according to the law of the Book."

By that time I was beginning to nod over the butt end of my cigar. There was a short pause while Mrs. Seaton, I guess, made mental notes for the next paper of her Literary Society, and friend Zacca smoothed his beard with his fingertips.

My eyes were beginning to bat when he straightened up and said quietly, "And now, it is time for us to talk business. When will the guns be dispatched?"

"What guns?" I asked.

"I am Mustapha ben Zacca," he shot back. "There is no need now for half words. The last convoy was captured at Timigourt, and my master needs the rifles urgently. The route must be changed. Can you arrange to land five hundred at



Oualidia by the end of the month? If so, I have a third of the money here for you.”

“You’ve hooked the wrong party,” I told him, feeling quite wide awake once more. “I don’t know a darn thing about your rifles. You see we’re just a pair of tourists—”

“You’re not Dalkeith’s agent?” inquired Zacca, running his fingers thorough his beard.

“Not a chance. My name’s Seaton.”

“Of course, we sympathize with you wholeheartedly,” Mrs. Seaton soothed him. “But, you understand, the French are very dear friends of ours, and we couldn’t countenance anything but constitutional methods.”

“A rebellion is always constitutional when it succeeds,” answered Zacca. “If the French revolution had failed Mirabeau would have been a traitor; if the American revolution had failed your Washington would have been shot. Success is its own justification.”

But I could see he was thinking about something quite different.

“Alem el Blaghi should have been here to meet you,” he went on, “but he could not come. The road is blocked at present. That name means nothing to you: Alem el Blaghi? Think, foreigner, think!”

“I’m thinking,” I told him, “but it doesn’t help much.”

“If there’s been a misunderstanding,” put in Mrs. Seaton, “why, I’m sure you can trust our discretion. We sha’n’t breathe a word of this to anyone.”

“No,” agreed Zacca, “you won’t.”

That didn’t sound so good. It was a bit too emphatic to suit me. It was a sweet mix-up all right! Apparently, Zacca was expecting a pair of gun runners to breeze in on that train; a man and a women who were going to play at being tourists. And the password was “Home, Sweet Home,” or some tune that must have sounded darn’ like it, although I can’t whistle even that correctly.

Even Mrs. Seaton began to understand that we weren’t sitting any too pretty and she said, “Well, we will thank you for your delightful hospitality and go back to the hotel.”

Old Zacca sort of smiled and showed his teeth.

“Oh, no, you will not go back to the hotel,” he assured her. “How do I know you are not French spies, trying to ferret out the links in the chain which leads back to my master? Also, it is possible that you are not willing to deal with me because

you do not know who I am—did you not say your sympathies were with us? Yes! So I will send you on into the Tafiilet, and he can deal with you himself.”

“But see here,” I pointed out, “if we don’t turn up at that hotel the French are going to be suspicious and first thing you know there’ll be trouble all around. We’ve got to get out of this country sometime, and how are we going to get out if the French think we’re a pair of gun runners?”

That didn’t worry this cool bird.

“You will go on tonight,” he told us. “I cannot afford to have you here, for I am too close to the French.”

Mrs. Seaton tried to be nice to Zacca, but he was case hardened. Nothing doing. And what could we do, I ask you, cooped up in that rabbit warren? They could have slit our throats open and buried us in there without any fuss whatsoever. So I calmed Mrs. Seaton down a bit and told her we’d have to make the best of it.

“We’re getting off the beaten track more and more, Hon’,” I told her. “Maybe we’ll see something that’s not advertised by the travel bureaus before we’re through with it.”

Gosh! She lit into me and she lit into the Arab, right and left. She was tired, you know, and worried, too, so you can’t blame her if she did carry on, but there was no sense in arguing with friend Zacca—he had too much at stake to worry about our feelings, I could see that.

So after a while we were taken out into the open again—and it certainly smelled clean after the variegated stinks of the *ksar*—and there were a couple of horses for us and two men to guide us.

“What if I should scream *now*?” inquired Mrs. Seaton, glaring at Zacca. “A French patrol might hear me. And—”

“And then, Madame,” answered Zacca, cool as a cucumber, “you would have this knife in your heart and you would be dead.”

“You better let me hoist you on that horse, Hon’,” I put in quickly. “This fellow means business.”

“I thought I was married to a man,” she snapped. “You don’t mind what these people do to me or to you.”

“That’s just the point. I mind a heck of a lot,” I assured her. “There’s a meeting of the board of directors on the fifteenth of March and I aim to be sitting in the presidential chair.”

That was the last we ever saw of Zacca. For all I know he's still hobnobbing with the French.

We traveled all that night and most of the next morning, until around noon. Most of the way there was nothing to look at but that sandy desert I was telling you about; stones and dust and tufts of grass—and the sun! Hot? We roasted. The backs of my hands where I was holding on to the reins puffed up into great water blisters, and the skin peeled off the back of my neck in strips.

The two Arabs who were guarding us couldn't talk French so we slept a bit as we rode along, but



it wasn't any too comfortable, for every time my head drooped down the sun caught the nape of my neck and I thought my brain was going to boil over any minute.

Mrs. Seaton stood it ten times as well as I did. She sat bolt upright and kept telling me what she was going to do about it first chance she got. And

she was pretty well pleased with herself, too, all things considered, even if she was hot and dusty. She's down in the cabin right this minute, writing a paper on "Habits and Customs of the Chleuh Tribesmen."

After a time we left the plain and plodded along through some low hills until we reached a group of tents pitched by the side of a well. About a hundred dogs came out to snap at our horses' legs and we drew up in true wild west style. I almost came off because I ain't used to those wiry little horses which sort of sneak out from under you when you least expect it.

There were some camels hobbled by the tents and a flock of small black goats. A real Bible picture; the sort of thing we used to get at Sunday school. All the women ducked into the tents as soon as they saw us coming, but the men came out and stared at us. Big fellows wearing gray burnouses with the hoods pulled on over their heads because of the sun.

Our guides had a long talk with an old fellow with a yellowish beard, who seemed to be worried about something. He didn't speak very good French, but Mrs. Seaton understood some of the

things he said.

There was a French *gendarme* cruising around somewhere nearby, and he might turn up at any minute.

"What of it?" said Mrs. Seaton. "All our papers are in order and he can do nothing to us."

"You are going on to see the *kaid*," grumbled the old man, "and it is my business to see you reach him safely. I am the servant of my master's guests."

He took us into one of those low tents and he fed us another *couscous* and more mint tea. That diet gets to be monotonous after a time. Still, we didn't refuse for the old boy was very polite and hospitable. From what he said I gathered that Zacca hadn't let on to him that we weren't gun runners; he was going to let his higher-ups find it out for themselves.

"Better not argue with the old fellow," I told Mrs. Seaton. "The less we say the better, seems to me. If that French cop comes along we can get him to take us back. If he doesn't come, well, we'll find some way out of this right enough."

Mrs. Seaton's a sensible woman. She caught the drift of my remarks right off the bat and, for once, she agreed with me.

"I suppose we are in a tight corner," she said between bites, "but I'm not worrying about it. Elizabeth Tomlinson will be green with envy!"

That's women for you! The Tomlinson girl has been talking about her experiences with an Albanian *comitadji* for the past two years. I guess that's why so many women like to travel; on the off chance they'll get kidnapped or see somebody killed and have something to talk about afterward.

Well, we'd been squatting in the tent drinking tea for about an hour when there's a shout. The old man rushed out and tried to have our horses saddled up, but before he could get rid of us along comes this French *gendarme*, all alone, mind you—a mighty brave man. I could see with half an eye that the Arabs didn't like him, and he didn't seem to think much of them. Nor, for that matter, did he like us.

He was suspicious from the first, and you can't blame him much. He took one look at our passports and then he blew up. He wouldn't listen to anything we had to say.

"You can explain all that when you reach Bechar," he told us. "Foreigners aren't allowed out here without special permits. You're under arrest."

That suited us. There was nothing we wanted so much as to be placed under arrest and taken back to Bechar.

The Arabs stood around without saying anything while we climbed on board our horses. But they didn't look any too pleased, and the *gendarme* loosened the flap of his holster.

"First man moves," he announced, "I shoot. There's a patrol five kilometers away. You know what'll happen to you if you try any tricks with me."

And then blooie! An Arab just inside the doorway of a tent killed the *gendarme* stone dead; shot him between the eyes.

I don't mind telling you that was the first time in my life I ever saw a man snuffed out like that, and it gave me a jolt. He went down as if he'd been pole-axed, and he lay there, hugging the ground so flat against it that he seemed to be sinking into the sand. It's queer how a dead man seems to deflate—

Well, anyway, Mrs. Seaton started to scream, and I don't blame her a bit. It's not the sort of thing that happens every day. But the Arabs didn't let on. They were in a hurry to strike their tents and get away before the patrol turned up. So we were hoisted onto our horses and off we went hell bent for leather over those hills.

"Look here, Hon', this thing ain't no joke," I said to Mrs. Seaton when she calmed down a little. "We've run into a peck of trouble. We're so far off that beaten track the chances are we'll never get back onto it again unless we're mighty careful."

She agreed with me, for once, in a way, which shows that she's an intelligent woman when all's said and done.

"But," she said, "what can we do? When these people find out we're not gun runners they're going to treat us just as they treated that poor *gendarme*."

"They're not going to find out if I can help it," I told her. "Just sit tight and don't let 'em rattle you. Maybe we can bluff our way out of this. We'll try to anyway."

Well, sir, we rode all the rest of that day, heading right bang across country—hills getting higher and higher all the time. I've never seen anything like that country; nothing but naked rock. No grass, no weeds, not a bush, just rock and then more rock, and some small snakes hiding under the boulders.

Late in the afternoon we heard some shots away

off on our left, but we kept straight on going until it was dark.

Next morning we went on, and that afternoon we fell over the side of a hill into a valley full of tents and camels and sheep and men. Must have been a thousand of those Arabs down there. Their tents were spread out all over the valley, and they had sentries posted all along the crest of the hills.

We were taken to a big tent where we were met by an Arab in a white burnoose. Quite a young fellow, a bit stout perhaps, with a round, smiling face and a reddish beard—but there was no mistaking him. He was a big chief all right!

Gosh, he didn't only speak French, but Spanish and quite some English. Sure! He'd been to London University and his hobby was water-colors. A mighty fine fellow, even if he was a rebel by the name of Ras ben Sliman!

He fed us himself, just like Zacca had done, pulling off little strips of goat's meat and handing them to us, in his fingers, and he apologized for all the inconvenience we had been put to.

"Of course," he said, "the whole business could have been conducted by private messenger, but there's been a good deal of leakage, as Dalkeith told you. The last convoy was caught by the French at Timigourt. But that won't happen again—I've seen to *that*."



From the expression on his face I gathered that several perfectly good Arabs had been seen to, too.

"Well," said I, "I hear you want five hundred rifles landed at Oualidia. Do you think you can get 'em through safely?"

That didn't seem to bother him.

"But look here," he said, "Dalkeith told me he was sending a young man down here—a young fellow by the name of Moldan. If you don't mind my saying so you don't look particularly young, and you say your name's Seaton."

"Well, it's this way," I explained. "Young what's-his-name Moldan broke his leg about ten days ago, and Dalkeith asked me if I could run down instead."

"That's very funny," ben Sliman remarked, "but it's just what Dalkeith would do. You can tell him for me he's too erratic. Did he recover?"

"Oh, so-so," I answered, wondering what the devil this Dalkeith was supposed to be recovering from. "The doctors told him to be careful."

"Why, has he been sick, too?" exclaimed the Arab.

Well, sir, we went on getting more and more balled up until I didn't know who was what nor why. It seemed Dalkeith was trying to recover some money from an insurance company. So I had to make up another yarn about that, also, but somehow or other we floundered on without tripping up too badly.

But there was one thing which worried ben Sliman considerably, and that was why that other fellow Zacca had sent us on up the line.

"It's not like him to do a fool thing like that," he grumbled. "I can't make it out. I can't let you go back that way or the French will jump on you. And if I send you to the west coast you're almost sure to run into the French column which is trying to head me off."

He was playing a game of hide-and-go-seek with the French, so it appeared. They were trying to corner him, and he was dodging all over the hills keeping out of their way.

"I can't do anything without those guns," he went on. "I'm short of ammunition and short of rifles. If I don't have those rifles inside the next six weeks the Ouled-Gourma are going to make peace with the French, and that'll leave me wide open to the north."

He chewed his mustache for a while, and we just sat there wondering what would happen next.

It happened all right.

He said, "I don't like the looks of this business at all. Either Zacca's gone crazy and Dalkeith's mad, or both. Zacca was told to pay you and see you went north again by the first train. Instead, he sends you on to me. It's queer. Much as I want those guns I can't afford to take any chances. I'm going to keep you here until I can get in touch with Zacca and I'll send a message on to Dalkeith at the same time."

That's when Mrs. Seaton came into action. I never admired her so much in my life as I did right then. Blarney! How she did handle that man. She told him it was our fault—or rather, her fault, because she just couldn't resist meeting the great Ras ben Sliman. She was to blame for the whole thing. She laid it on thick, and the poor fish swallowed it all, hook, line and sinker. He sort of

smiled and bobbed his head and assured her it was an honor to entertain such a fine lady in his humble tent.

Before long she'd invited this rebel Arab to come to our home in New York and he'd accepted with thanks. Inside an hour he was so tame that he had forced me to accept sixty thousand francs to buy repeating rifles for him.

"Dalkeith's much too erratic for me," he said. "He's English and unreliable; he doesn't understand business methods. I'm glad to be dealing with Americans. Very glad, indeed."

Mrs. Seaton said something about his glorious cause and what an honor it was to help a small nation fight for independence.

"Independence," said ben Sliman. "That's too much to hope for, but if I can hang on long enough, instead of being shot as a rebel I can make good terms with the French and maybe they'll give me the Legion of Honor to keep me quiet."

"That will be splendid," Mrs. Seaton told him. "I want you to meet so many of my friends in New York. I do hope you'll be able to come soon!"

"But what about Dalkeith," I put in. "Aren't we sort of double-crossing him?"

They both jumped on me for that. Mrs. Seaton said I was being disloyal to our friend ben Sliman, and he said Dalkeith was a bungler, who had made a fortune supplying the rebels with second-rate rifles and bum ammunition. It struck me this Dalkeith was no more than right because, after all, the sooner these Arabs had to surrender, the sooner the killing would stop. And I couldn't forget that doggone' *gendarme* with a bullet between his eyes. But I didn't say anything then. I pocketed the sixty thousand and sat back while Mrs. Seaton and the Arab talked independence and art and what-not.

That night we had a tent to ourselves with camel-skin rugs to sleep on, and I *slept*. Mrs. Seaton wanted to talk it over with me, but I couldn't keep my eyes open.

I said, "Hon", you're a wonder. You're a born diplomat, and I take my hat off to you, but as God is my witness I can't keep awake another minute."

I heard her say, "Isn't he wonderful!" Then I passed right out.

But along around dawn we were awakened by Sliman himself, and as soon as I sat up I heard a noise like a hundred carpets being beaten at the same time. A darn' disquieting sort of noise, it was. And all at once something went *zipp!* right through

the tent cloth.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“The French have hemmed us in, that’s what’s up,” ben Sliman explained. “We’ve got to move quick.”

So we moved. I’m not likely to forget that morning in a hurry. The tents were coming down in a hurry and being loaded on camels, and all the while the noise kept growing louder and louder. Stray bullets whined down from the hilltops, and one poor devil of an Arab curled up, hit in the stomach, just as he was helping Mrs. Seaton to get on her horse. It was a nasty business whichever way you look at it.

Then a detachment of French troops were reported coming up the valley, and ben Sliman sent a big bunch of mounted men to stop them while we cleared out. They went charging down that valley in fine style, and the noise became terrific. You could see those fellows dropping in clusters, just as if holes had been punched in their ranks, but they kept right on going. Mighty brave men.

“It’s touch and go,” laughed ben Sliman. “I’m sorry, but I can’t promise you’ll be alive in half an



hour’s time. We’re going to rush the French—and if we get through, we’ll get through. If not we’ll—”

He waved his hand and let it go at that. I didn’t say a darn’ thing, because the back of my throat had closed up tight, but Mrs. Seaton leaned over close to me and shouted, “Isn’t he wonderful!” Maybe he was, but a lot of people were getting themselves killed because he was so goldarned wonderful, and my stomach was tied up in knots.

Well, anyway—we were herded in with the baggage camels and the goats, and we rode forward, eating dust by the peck. I don’t know what happened. The only thing I tried to do was to keep close to Mrs. Seaton and see she came to no harm.

The noise became terrific. Everybody was shouting and yelling, guns were banging all around. First thing I knew the horse I was riding shied at a

string of dead men half buried in the sand. Still, we went through—men dropping and camels going down, and bullets whipping by over our heads.

After a while the noise died away, but we kept right on going at the same breakneck pace. Ben Sliman rode up behind us and shouted that we’d broken through the French lines, but that they were coming hot-foot behind us.

“They can’t get us,” he said, “but I’m forced to head due south for the present. I’m going to give you an escort and let you try to get through to Sidi Manaf because I need those guns in the worst way.”

“You wonderful man!” cried Mrs. Seaton. “We’ll do anything to help you.”

Yessir! That’s exactly what she said.

So he told us where he wanted the guns sent and then we parted company.

It took us three days to reach Sidi Manaf, and the French *spahis* were on our trail the whole way. Believe me, I didn’t get more than two hours’ sleep from first to last. And when we reached that rat-run of a hotel, I’m blowed if a half-dozen spies didn’t try to break in on us, so that I had to sit up with a gun in my hand while we waited for this boat to come in.

Yessir! I’ve still got that sixty thousand francs—and that’s what is causing all the hard feeling between Mrs. Seaton and me this very minute. You see, she thinks ben Sliman is a hero and all that sort of thing, and she says the only honorable thing for me to do is to buy him a carload of rifles and help him in his fight for independence.

But that’s not the way I look at it. I’m going to mail that money to the French Government or drop it overboard or something, because ben Sliman’s nothing but a scheming Arab, and a bloodthirsty one, too. And I’m doggoned if I’ll help him kill off any more people than he’s already accounted for.

Well, sir, I’ll trouble you for another one of those cigars of yours, if you don’t mind, and I’ll just repeat my warning so you won’t forget: Africa may be all right, but don’t let ‘em get you inland. You can’t tell what’s going to happen, what with one thing and another.