

ROMEO AND JULIET IN THE DESERT

A HALF-MOON high in the heavens, veiled in diaphanous mist, shed a ghostly spell over the Libyan desert. The yellow sands turned white, as if coated with snow. In the distance I saw the tombs of the Mameluke Sultans who had ruled Egypt for three hundred years. Distorted by the moonlight into fantastic shapes, they seemed to huddle together like crouching, white-robed giants, broken reminders of past glory in a chaos of white sand.

It was impossible to drive closer. The chauffeur who had brought me out from Cairo stopped the car. Bidding him wait, I started across the sands to inspect the tombs. Presently, as I stumbled along, I heard the sound of low voices. Some wandering Bedouins, I thought. Would they be friendly? Hesitantly I moved nearer.

And then I saw two figures close together. A young man in the caftan and burnous of the Arab. The girl in his arms was robed in black. A colored band bound her hair and in her ears

were two gold rings, proclaiming her a Jewess. An Arab and a Jewess! Two lovers, divided by religion, defying tradition for the ecstasy of a secret embrace! Here, in this ancient royal cemetery in the Libyan desert, they believed themselves out of reach of the age-old religious hatreds of their ancestors, safe from the undying enmity of their families, to share the confidences and caresses for which their hearts hungered. I heard her speak:

"Hassan . . . I know, now, the meaning of Paradise! Then she sighed. "Beloved, I am so afraid! If thy people should learn, they would surely slay us! Yet—I would welcome death, if I could lie eternally in thine arms."

He held her closer, his lips murmuring inaudibly against hers. Then, with a stifled cry, she drew away. There was a sound among the tombs. The sands echoed swift, secret movement.

"Hassan! *It is they!*" she cried.

Immediately a confusion of angry voices mingled with the sound of running feet. Then a choked

cry. Then silence—ghastly silence. After a time I crept fearfully to the spot from which that last cry had come. There they lay. A moment past, so full of life and love, now strangely still. A moment past, two of this world's eager lovers. Now dwellers in another universe.

I thought of the racial differences, the opposing creeds and religious hatreds which made the Arab and the Jew sworn, bitter enemies. Each with a code that bade the father slay his child rather than permit his blood to mingle with that of a dishonored infidel. Now it was done. Finished. All I could do was return and notify the police.

But I knew, as I made my way back across the desert to where I had left the car, that in all probability the police never would find the murderers. The chauffeur would not have seen them. And this type of crime is condoned by the natives, whose secrecy makes discovery most impossible.

To my amazement, when I came back in a police car to the fatal spot, I saw that the bodies had vanished! The smooth sand showed no trace of telltale bloodstains. The police looked incredulous. As they argued, I saw something glisten in the moonlight. I bent and picked it up. It was a gold earring—one of those which the Jewish girl had worn.

Some of the murderers, their knives still dripping with the blood of their victims, must have been hiding in the shadows of the tombs while I bent above the slain lovers! Why had they not killed me? They knew, no doubt, that their crime would never be discovered, but to murder a white man would be dangerous.

A police officer took me back to Cairo, while the others remained to make a search of the spot where the crime had been committed. They never found the murderers. They never will find them. The ancient laws of the East will see to that.—*Adapted from the "Letters from Abroad" program, National Broadcasting Company.*

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