

ISABELLE EBERHARDT: *The Legion's Most Wanted Woman*



Her punishment was to be the same as any Legionnaire's; she would be dragged behind the horse for two hours.

A man by day, a woman by night, she learned the arts of love and murder from the Arabs she ruled.

By **BILL WHARTON**

ILLUSTRATED BY JULIAN PAUL

THE girl raised herself on one elbow and stared with bloodshot eyes across the undulating dunes of the Sahara Desert.

The dead camel, in whose shade she sheltered against the fierce noonday heat, stank to high heaven. But she leaned back against it and closed her burning eyes again

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The Legion's Most Wanted Woman continued

to the intense blue heat of the sky. Twenty-four hours ago she had slit into the camel's guts to get at its water supply. Even that was finished now as she waited in an almost vain hope that someone would find her.

It was towards sunset on her fourth day alone in the desert, after she had been without water for thirty hours, that eight Touareg tribesmen appeared on a sand dune and saw the vultures suspended in the still air over something half a mile away.

They turned their camels in that direction and a few minutes later stared down at the unconscious girl.

"Si Mahmoud!" one of them shouted and leaped down

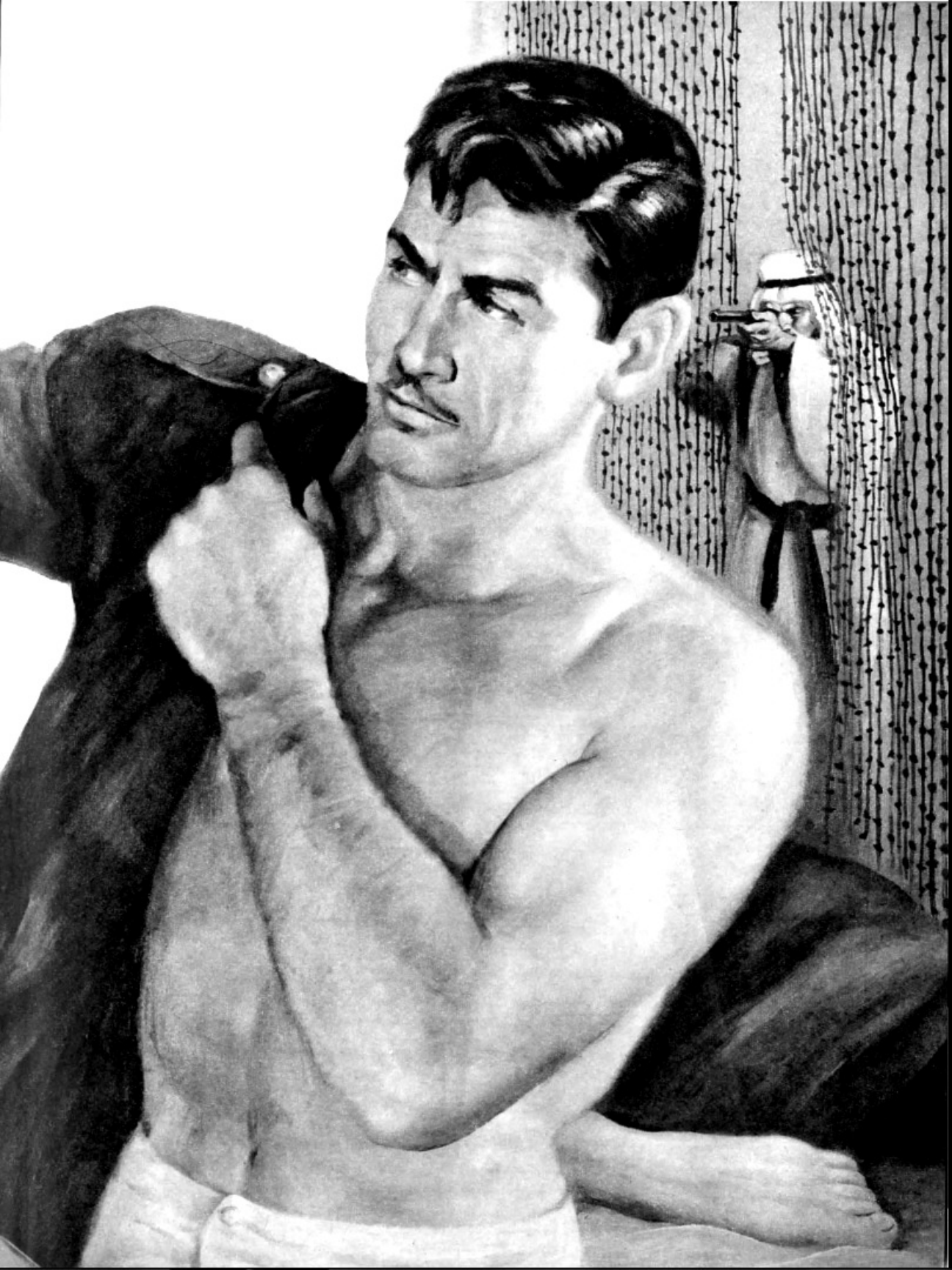
from his camel with a waterbag in his hands. Gently the men lifted the girl to the back of a camel. They took her to their camp in the shadow of the Riff Mountains. A few days later she was up and around again, singing ribald songs and drinking potent desert liquor with the men who had saved her life.

Of all the adventurous women of this century, few can compare with Isabelle Eberhardt, known throughout the Sahara as Si Mahmoud.

Isabelle was born of Russian-German parents. An only child, she was thoroughly spoiled. Her mother's desire was that the girl should become a (*Continued on page 68*)



"Why did you try to kill me?" she whispered. Too late, the officer realized he'd walked into a trap.



and, if possible, becoming more and more lost.

That night we slept in the woods, afraid to risk being caught in another village. Dawn of the third day broke with no hope of reaching our lines. Sooner or later we were going to stumble into a large enemy force. Then we'd be too low on ammo and too weak to fight long or effectively. And then this madness would end.

Yet, we still weren't beaten. As long as we had clips for the M-1's and a few handfuls of rice, I was determined to keep the men moving.

At a little before noon, we spotted another enemy patrol. This time we had been moving along the crest of a hill so we saw them first. My men deployed behind rocks and trees and waited for them to get into range, then we opened up. I saw a couple of the enemy riflemen drop under our fire. The rest disappeared in quick time. This puzzled me, though. They easily outnumbered us, and ordinarily the Reds weren't inclined to break off an engagement so quickly, especially when they had numbers on their side.

A REASON for their action came to my mind, but I didn't dare get up any hope. This unit could have been the rear guard of the convoy we saw the day before. They probably wanted to keep up with the main body of their force for one reason: they were near enough to U. N. lines to draw fire!

Even this long shot gave us renewed energy. The men straightened up and moved forward with their heads up now. We headed along the hillside paralleling the road down which the enemy had just come.

We had gone about another mile or so when we heard the distant drone of an engine. This time it was no wheezing Russian truck but the sweet purr of an airplane. Seconds later we saw it, an Army artillery L-5 cutting low over the hilltops, looking around for likely targets.

The men broke out of cover and stood in the clear, waving their hands and shouting. I had often seen such things in the movies when guys shipwrecked on some desert island went through such antics to attract the attention of a passing ship. I never thought I'd be doing the same thing to a little ol' L-5.

The plane banked low and buzzed us. That put-putting engine made the sweetest music we ever heard, believe me. The pilot wagged the ship's wings. Then he turned and we got the idea: this was the direction in which we should be going.

We stepped off smartly now. An hour and a half later, we saw a patrol from Charley company. They had come out to bring us in. They had a couple of trucks waiting. We climbed aboard and rolled back to our own lines—and at last.

The Old Man was standing there in the company area when we pulled up. He flipped a cigarette from his mouth.

"Just where the hell you guys been?" he bellowed at us.

I dropped down over the tail-gate of the truck and threw him a high ball.

"Walkin', Captain," I said. "We've just been out for a walk." ***



lady-in-waiting to the German Empress. To qualify for this honor, Isabelle was educated in private schools in France and Switzerland. She became an accomplished linguist, speaking six languages, and with her natural beauty, a much sought after marriage partner.

But she was interested neither in a life of luxury in the German Imperial court nor in marriage. She wanted adventure.

When her education was completed her mother arranged for her to enter the Kaiser's household, but on the day when she was due to arrive in Berlin, she was waiting to see the editor of a now defunct Paris newspaper. In that year of 1897 women reporters were an unknown quantity and the editor showed her the door.

"I am equal to any man," Isabelle declared. "I can do any man's job."

"You will be in danger; your sex—"

Her eyes flashed, her small figure stiffened.

"So, you think, monsieur, that someone might assault your reporter? You are a big man, monsieur, why don't you try!"

With two of his reporters as witnesses, the editor rose, expecting it to be a simple matter to grasp the slimly-built girl of 20 and throw her to the ground.

His right hand was still reaching out for her when she stepped in under his upraised arm, slipped her right hand around his neck and flung him bodily over her shoulder against the wall.

"You get a job," he gasped out as he struggled painfully to his feet.

For six months Isabelle covered Paris for the paper, then she turned her attention to Morocco. Vague reports of brutality in the French Foreign Legion, the slaughter of Arab tribesmen by the Legionnaires filtered into the French capital almost every day. Isabelle was determined to go to Morocco and see for herself what the situation really was.

Her editor knew better than to argue with her, although he brought in a former Legion captain to warn her of the dangers.

"You will probably be dead within a month," Captain Henri Leroux told her, but Isabelle smiled wryly.

"You are alive after six years in Morocco, mon capitaine," she said. "I shall be, too."

In effect, Isabelle became the first foreign correspondent France ever had. Certainly she was the first woman foreign correspondent and a war correspondent at that, for France was at constant war with Arab tribes in North Africa.

In Sidi-bel-Abbès, the Foreign Legion's headquarters, she met Colonel Lyautey (later General Lyautey). In spite of his

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protestations that she could not go into the desert with the Legion she insisted and, as she carried a French Government press pass, there was little he could do about it. He held one trump card, however.

"The press pass says that you will be subject to Legion regulations, mademoiselle," he said. "I trust you realize what that means."

"It means that I must obey the commanding officer at all times," she replied. "This was explained to me."

"Good, then you know. You will become nothing more nor less than a Legionnaire while you are here, in so far as regulations are concerned. If you break the regulations or disobey a direct order, you will be subject to the same punishment as any Legionnaire, regardless of your sex. Do you accept these conditions?"

"I do," she said, smiling.

Lyautey turned her over to Captain Dufresne, then commanding officer of the Legion's headquarters at Ain Sefra. A week later she walked alone in the Arab city. The place seethed with discontent, overrun with fanatics who would slit a white man's throat with pleasure. It was not the safest place for a white woman to be.

BUT Isabelle had planned for the occasion. She went about dressed as an Arab, making friends among them and playing with their children. After a few weeks, she came to meet Habib Mogamet, chief of a nomadic tribe of Touareg, the sworn enemies not only of the Legion but of all whites.

Within 24 hours, Isabelle had charmed her way into his heart—and private chambers. All she really wanted was information, and for that she was ready to give anything. Already her despatches to Paris were causing a sensation in France. Her newspaper's sales soared; the French Cabinet was worried, but they had no justification for recalling the girl.

The Legion looked around for an opportunity to ban her from Morocco, for her despatches were discrediting the Legion. The rumors of brutalities which had reached Paris she discovered were all too true. Men were flogged and dragged behind horses for hours for minor breaches of the regulations. Few prisoners were taken in the desert warfare; those rounded up after skirmishes were immediately shot.

The Arabs, in the meantime, took the girl to their hearts. They saw that their leaders trusted her, so they did too.

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One afternoon she was out with a Touareg band on a peaceful trading mission to an oasis when they were attacked by a company of Legionnaires. The Touareg offered no resistance until they saw that the Legionnaires meant to kill every one of them. Then they began to fight.

Isabelle rode into the thick of the fighting and sought out the officer in charge. She found him watching the skirmish from a distance.

"These are peaceful people," she screamed. "Why do you kill them?"

"War is not a woman's business," the captain shouted. "Stay here, otherwise you will be shot as an agent for the Touareg."

Instead of obeying the order, she rode into the fight, endeavoring to stop the Legionnaires from killing the tribesmen. This was exactly what the Legion wanted. She had disobeyed a direct order.

Not one of the Touareg was left alive; the wounded were bayoneted to death and the company of soldiers rode off to their outpost with Isabelle as their prisoner.

THE next morning, she was brought before the company commander.

"The charge against you, Isabelle Eberhardt, is that you deliberately disobeyed a direct order. You are subject to Foreign Legion regulations and I can make no distinction between you and any other Legionnaire. You will be dragged behind a horse for two hours."

As the terrible punishment was ordered, Isabelle screamed defiantly, "You are murderers—callous, heartless murderers. I shall see that all France learns the truth!"

"Take her away and enforce the field punishment," the officer ordered.

Two non-commissioned officers led her out and one fetched an Arabian steed to whose saddle-horn he tied a 15-foot length of thin, strong cord.

Si Mahmoud's ankles and knees were tied together and the end of the cord was tied firmly around her wrists. Then one of the men leaped into the saddle and lashed the horse into action.

For two hours, the horse was raced around in a wide circle just outside the outpost, with Si Mahmoud bouncing along the ground, her eyes and nose, ears and mouth clogged with suffocating sand. She soon lost consciousness.

When the ordeal was over, her bleeding body—the Arab clothing ripped to shreds—was picked up and her bonds untied. She was carried into a bunkhouse. A bucket of brackish water was thrown over her, and she was left to recover as best she could.

She staggered up from the bunk and into the barrack square, her breasts and thighs bare, her back raw and bleeding, her face swollen.

"Where are you going?" a sergeant demanded. "Report to the medical orderly for attention."

"The Legion does not order *me*," she screamed.

They watched her drag herself from the outpost near Ain-Sefra and stagger towards the Arab city, but no one made a move to stop her. The company commander had seen her go and ordered her to be left alone, hoping she would die.

She had not gone far when she was seen by Touareg tribesmen. A runner dashed into the city while men hurried to Si Mahmoud's side and, reverently covering her with a cloak, picked her up and carried her to the home of a leader of the

Touareg, where her wounds were bathed and doctored.

The report she sent through to Paris from Ain-Sefra was damning, yet she did not mention the punishment that had been inflicted on her. She knew she had brought it on herself and she did not blame the Legion for treating her like any other Legionnaire. The omission, however, was unfortunate, because when her report of the slaughter of the Touareg tribesmen was published, the Legion countered with a report of her disobedience and punishment and claimed that her story was untrue, biased and written to get revenge. The public did not know whom to believe, and the matter died before it reached a public inquiry.

But in Si Mahmoud's heart it did not die. She was so firmly entrenched in the Riff and Touareg life that when she asked a chief to let her join the most secret of Arab legions—the one pledged to the death to kill all Legionnaires—she was accepted on condition that she become a Moslem.

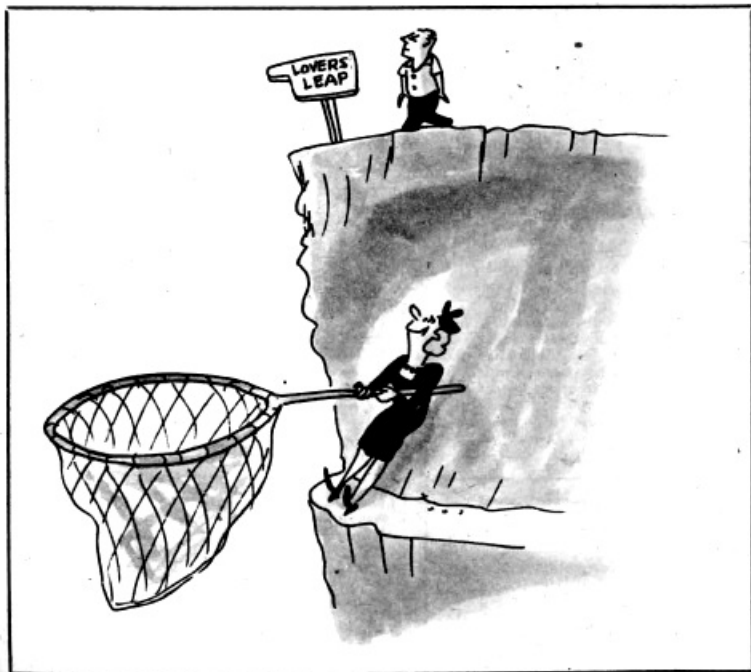
This she did, and forever renounced her European upbringing. Almost at once, she became a leader of this fanatical brotherhood whose main ambition then, as now, was to oust France from Morocco. The insignia of the brotherhood was tattooed on her right forearm and she became to all intents and purposes an Arab—a "male" Arab, because no women were admitted to the brotherhood.

ISABELLE knew what her decision meant. If she took an active part in the brotherhood's raids, and was subsequently captured by the Legion, she would either be shot at once for high treason, or sent to France to be tried and probably guillotined. But she would first have to take an active part, and planning operations for the fanatics did not constitute an overt act against France in the eyes of the Legion.

This Isabelle knew, and while she accompanied the brotherhood on forays against the Legion, she did not actually take part in the fighting; she never touched or carried any weapon other than the short bone-handled dagger she had always carried for self-protection.

The dagger saved her life one night while she was drinking wine in a wine-shop in Ain-Sefra. A disgruntled member of the brotherhood, whom she had had expelled because of fraternization with Legionnaires, walked into the café with a sword in his hand and looked the customers over. Spotting Si Mahmoud, he leaped toward her brandishing the sword, shouting, "Die, Infidel! Allah commands you die!"

Isabelle ducked and moved in under the sword which caught her a glancing blow across the shoulder. Her knee jerked up into the man's groin, and from her belt she plucked the dagger and ripped it upwards through the Arab's robes. When she withdrew the weapon, blood spilled out over her hand. Then a dozen Touareg and Riff tribesmen leaped on the man with daggers and sliced him to ribbons.



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flabby you are. I'll make you
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of the strong. Why can't I do for you
what I did for MANY THOU-
SANDS of skinny fellows
like YOU?

DEVELOP YOUR 520
MUSCLES - GAIN POUNDS,
INCHES FAST!
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broadened. From head to
heels, you'll gain SIZE,
POWER, SPEED.
You'll be a
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Si Mahmoud was carried out to have her slightly injured shoulder treated. The Arab herbal practitioner was still with her when Legionnaires arrived and arrested her for murder. She laughed at the accusation because she had acted only in self-defense, but she was given an ultimatum: either get out of Morocco and stay out, or face trial by court martial for murder—and no Arab witnesses would be allowed to testify in her defense. This meant certain conviction—the trial would be a mere formality—with the execution to follow the next day.

She left Ain-Sefra with a caravan bound for Oran, where the Legion escorted her aboard a ship bound for Marseille. In Marseille, she was advised to leave France immediately, or be charged as a prohibited immigrant for inciting the Arabs against France.

She crossed over to Switzerland where she found that, after a short rest, she was as beautiful as ever, with men as eager for her favors as they had been five and a half years before. One suitor courted her for eight months, lavishing thousands of francs on her, hoping she would marry him.

"Arrange for me to get to Algiers or Tangier," she said, "and I shall marry you."

He made all the necessary arrangements for her to go, via Spain, but it never crossed his mind that by so doing he was sending her away from him.

She disappeared from her usual haunts one day, and when next she was heard of, it was through a Legion informer in Ain-Sefra. Si Mahmoud was back among the brotherhood.

Si Mahmoud was the moving factor behind many Riff and Touareg attacks on the Legion. She knew the Legion's methods and her charms, plus the lack of attractive women in Ain-Sefra, sent Legion officers to her like flies to a lump of sugar.

Although every officer knew that Si Mahmoud was forbidden territory, that it might mean a court martial to be found in her company, they nonetheless crowded to her, to relax in her arms while she served them lightly drugged wine and pried Legion secrets out of them.

THE Legion command knew what was going on, but General Lyautey gave an order that Isabelle was not to be arrested. He feared a mass uprising among the Arabs.

"She will come to her own end soon enough," he said.

In the meantime, the fanatical brotherhood continued successful forays against the Legion, forays planned for them with meticulous care by Si Mahmoud.

One evening a Legion officer arrived at Si Mahmoud's. She was dressed in a light gown, loosely tied, so that when she moved about it swung open revealingly. The Legionnaire drank her wine and made love to her. At one point, as he kissed her, she smelt something on his breath. And she knew immediately that this was no ordinary officer in search of an interlude of love.

She led him on and questioned him

carefully about Legion movements. When he left her, she went to the brotherhood.

"An officer tells me that the Legion is moving out of Figuig tomorrow and that the city will be unguarded," she told them.

At once there was an excited murmur. This could be the chance for a full scale Arab attack on the trading city, and much booty for the attackers.

"Wait!" Si Mahmoud admonished. "It is a trap. The Legion wants you to attack Figuig, so that they can kill you and get me afterwards for being a spy."

Two days later, in the company of a small caravan ostensibly made up of traders, Si Mahmoud, disguised as an Arab, rode down the sandy highway to Figuig. Six miles from the city her sharp eyes spotted the Legionnaires waiting in ambush hundreds of yards ahead. Her suspicions had been correct.

She said to the chief riding next to her, "They won't bother us. They are waiting for the attackers they expect to fall on Figuig."

She was right. The caravan rode on, unhindered, into the city.

BACK in Ain-Sefra the following week, the same officer called on Si Mahmoud. She went through the motions of love and at the height of his passion she whispered, "Why did you endeavor to kill me the other night, mon capitaine?"

The officer jerked back to reality. "What do you mean?" he demanded.

"You deliberately gave me false information."

"So, you are a spy, otherwise you could not have known about the trap," he said slowly, starting to rise. Behind him, a curtain moved slightly.

"You ate many sardines coated with olive oil, and you drank much olive oil before you came to me," Si Mahmoud said quietly. "That means you oiled your stomach so the wine would not affect you."

Suddenly, she clapped her hands.

The officer whirled, reaching for his revolver. There was one shot. The Legionnaire stood poised uncertainly for a moment, then slumped down on the floor, a bullet in his head.

That night a caravan of four camels moved from Ain-Sefra, but so many went every day and night that the Legionnaires ignored it. No one guessed that the body of the dead captain was wrapped in a bag slung over one of the camels.

But Si Mahmoud's own death was near. She was a few days short of her 27th birthday; she had spent almost seven years in the desert, and her power among the fanatical tribes was growing daily.

In Sidi-bel-Abbès, General Lyautey and his senior officers were planning a course of action to get rid of Si Mahmoud without letting the fanatical Arabs know the Legion was responsible. Once before a popular leader had been executed by the Legion, and the result had been a war that lasted 18 months and cost the Legion over 3,000 men. A repetition of this could not be risked. Somehow, Si Mahmoud must be lured from Ain-Sefra and quietly sent out of Morocco to be dealt with by the French Govern-

ment or, alternatively, taken away to be shot and buried without the knowledge of the Arabs.

That night, for the first time in a century, a thunderstorm burst over Ain-Sefra. Rain lashed the low lying city. The little dried up creek running through it swelled. Towards midnight, the intensity of the rain increased until it became a cloudburst. Panic gripped the people as the creek became a raging torrent, overflowing its bank and sweeping the mud houses away like sandcastles. About two A.M. the heavens literally opened up and dropped tons of water on the stricken city.

By dawn it was all over. The city lay in a shambles, with thousands drowned, their bodies littering streets and the desert for miles around.

The Legion took emergency measures: troops were rushed from Sidi-bel-Abbès; immense graves were dug and the dead scooped into them. Inflammable liquid was then poured over the bodies and they were set on fire.

Towards noon, Legionnaires were busy digging corpses out of one of the shattered houses. They saw a foot protruding from under the mud. They dug out the body and were about to toss it into a wagon already laden with corpses, when one of the men recognized the victim and shouted excitedly. "It's Si Mahmoud!"

In Sidi-bel-Abbès, General Lyautey received the news with a sigh of relief. He had been saved a great deal of trouble.

"We will make propaganda out of this and force the Arabs to forget about her," he said to his second-in-command, Major de Ramezay.

"How?" the major asked.
Lyautey smiled. "The Arabs hate us. If we give Si Mahmoud a full military burial, just as if she were one of us instead of one of them, she will become an infidel to them again. They will force themselves to forget about her because her grave will belong to the Legion."

The next afternoon the burial was held. The Legion gave it the full treatment, including a rifle salute fired over the grave. There wasn't an Arab anywhere in sight.

"That settles her once and for all," Lyautey remarked.

He was wrong. A few days later a beautifully carved granite block was observed on Si Mahmoud's grave. When Major de Ramezay went to examine it, he found that it bore a simple Arabic inscription: SI MAHMOUD.

SABELLE Eberhardt—Si Mahmoud— was not dead to the Arabs. They began to make pilgrimages to her grave. Instead of ridding themselves of her, the Legion had made her an immortal figure in the desert.

Although her death occurred in the spring of 1904, Si Mahmoud's grave is today as carefully protected by the Arabs as it was then. Her name lives today as it did then, and there is no Arab—man, woman or child—in the Middle East who does not know the story of the white woman who became a leader of the Arab Brotherhood and who drowned in the heart of the Sahara Desert. ***

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