



Azaläi

JOHN SKOLLE

A classic account of adventure and discovery among

EXCERPTS FROM “AZALAI”

INQUISITION

There are two “roads” south across the Sahara. One leads through the central desert via the oases of Ghardaïa, El-Goléa and In-Salah into the Hoggar Mountains, the heart of the Tuareg country; the other, to the west, connects the Alegrian military post Colomb-Béchar with the town of Gao on the Niger River.

On my first trip into the desert I travelled with a friend, a British colonel, who was driving back to his post as district officer in Kenya in his Bedford lorry. I had met him in Ghardaïa, about five hundred miles inland from the Algerian coast, where I was waiting for transportation to Tamanrasset in the Hoggar. The hotel in Ghardaïa was pleasant enough, if expensive. There were a few elderly couples on a conducted tour, a few officers who came and went, and a baby ostrich. The mad confusion of the market place was a mile away.

Among others I had casually met a Frenchman who identified himself as an engineer. He was supervising extensive electrical installations, he said. He was a stocky, square-headed man with steady, unsmiling eyes who spoke fluent Arabic. Considering the importance of his job, he did remarkably little work. His chief occupation consisted of hanging about the bar and strolling into the patio, listening to conversations and asking questions. He was greatly interested in my plans, much more so than I was in his. He never bought a drink but, slyly, persistently, he managed to become part of a group that would sooner or later count him in.

One morning, when my door was ajar, he briskly entered my room without knocking and hung up his hat, saying, “I want you to write a letter for me in English. My sister’s husband is English and I want to write him personally in regard to some legal documents.”

“All right,” I said. “This is rather sudden, but I’ll do the best I can.”

He hadn’t thought of bringing his own stationery, so I got out my writing paper while he looked around the room.

“Is this all the luggage you have?” he asked out of a clear sky.

“Yes,” I said, “what about it?”

This made no dent.

“Well, let’s get to work,” he said as if he had hired me as his secretary. “Start the letter: ‘Dear Tom, I received your message a week ago. I wanted to write you sooner but, as you know, I am very busy here. I trust that Nicole and the children are in good health...’ ”

“Yes, go on.”

My visitor was hypnotizing a fly.

“Are you married?”

“No, not at the moment.”

“A trip like yours must cost a pretty penny.”

“Oh, you know, nowadays everything is expensive. Do you wish to say something more in your letter?”

“Yes. Continue: ‘I expect to see Grandmother in another month or so. Please give my regards to your brother and send me the papers at your earliest convenience.’ Now read it back to me.”

I carried on the comedy for a few more minutes. Naturally, I could see right through him. It was almost amusing to watch him try to fool me when I knew his game all along. After a while I asked him point-blank: “I suppose what you really want is to see my passport? Is that your business?”

“Yes,” he said severely, “I want to see your passport. That is my business.”

It occurred to me that he might have demanded it without all this mystery.

He carefully studied every page. He even held the paper against the light, presumably to check watermarks. At one point his wooden face attempted a dreamy expression, as if all the shady characters of his career were passing in review before his penetrating mind.

“How much money do you have?”

I told him, approximately.

“What is that over there?”

“My sleeping bag.”

“Are you planning to get married again?”

“It’s just a single sleeping bag... I mean, yes, possibly.”

“How long have you had this passport?”

I told him. “The date is in it, you know.”

His face had become hardwood again.

“How long do you intend to stay here?”

“A few days. I had hoped to relax in peace for a while before going farther south.”

“You are an artist? What do you paint? Landscapes? Portraits?”

“No,” I said, “I prefer to do abstractions; that way I don’t have to look at people.”

“Abstractions? You mean that cubist stuff? Why don’t you paint pretty pictures?”

I let that pass. My inquisitor showed strong disapproval.

“Well,” he said, “it doesn’t make sense to me. See you later. I’ll have to make a report.”

A report? What was wrong? Suddenly the whole thing burned me up. I went to see the manager of the hotel.

“Look,” I said, “you are trying to run a respectable hotel. Who is the man who constantly sneaks around in the patio? Just now he walked into my room and proceeded to dictate a stupid letter which he wanted me to write for him in English. Then he asked all kinds of impertinent questions. He even examined my passport and didn’t seem to be satisfied with it. I assure you, this is the first time in my life that anyone has doubted my credentials. What is the meaning of all this?”

“Wait a minute,” he said. “I believe the police commissioner happens to be in the bar. I’ll call him.”

The police commissioner was a very agreeable and good-natured gentleman. He listened to my story, though a moment, then said: “Hum, strange, he is not a police agent. Wanted to see your papers, did he? I shall speak to him. I am very sorry this

happened to you. Will you come to my office tomorrow morning?”

A few hours after this interview the impostor came crawling to me. He had changed his tune. I had misunderstood the whole thing, he said. He had only asked me to do him a favour, after all. Wasn't I ashamed to make such a fuss?

“No,” I said, “I am not a bit ashamed. No friend of mine has ever posed as a detective and examined my papers. There is no misunderstanding as far as I am concerned, and the less I see of you the better I'll like it.”

The fellow was deeply hurt by my harsh attitude.

When I called on the police commissioner, he asked me if the self-styled secret agent had apologized.

“Yes,” I said, “I suppose he has in his fashion.”

“Well, poor devil, I am sure he really didn't mean any harm. I suspect that he is a little crazy. Why don't you forget the whole thing and send us a lot of tourists from America? Good-bye and good luck!”

The next morning, at breakfast, the hotel manager asked me if, by chance, I had any idea of the man's address.

“No,” I said, “he didn't give me any information about himself. Why?”

“Frankly, I just noticed that he failed to register. He has left without paying his bill.”

A TOUCH OF FEVER

Now the caravan was under way again; a long, dark thread twisting over the deeply corrugated pattern of the dunes along the proverbial trail of bleached bones. (...) The quality of the light, the disproportion of things, made this world a doubtful reality in which no one could move freely without grave danger. All, except those of superior knowledge, had to be led, and sometimes even a guide strayed into the Land of No Return which was full of bottomless pits. The trail we followed was like a tightrope suspended in space, without a net beneath us. (...)

By the following day the long sandy ridges alterned with depressions of black volcanic residue, again and again and again. In contrast to the carefree Tuareg journey, there was no singing and no music on this trail of hardship. The camels had become much weaker in their protests and followed one behind the other like so many wound-up automatons, each one of their sores a little worse than the day before. (...)

There was no use in asking: "How late are we going to continue tonight?" No one knew, not even Salah. To ask him would have been nearly as out of place as to address a personal request to Allah. The thing to do was to steal oneself for another three hours in the last extremity of weariness. Several times I managed to get myself into a trance which eliminated all consciousness of time and discomfort. (...)

The landscape had become an endless vista of hillocks with tufts of ragged weeds. The sand was too soft for walking, and riding the stumbling animals meant perpetual jolts. We had come so much farther south that the nights were no longer as cold as before, but the sun was fierce during the day and the insects had increased in numbers and variety. The ropes between the camels' tails and jaws were nearly all stretched out full length; even the wildest ones were docile now, too tired to put up a fight when they were being loaded. Salah still strode along in the loose sand as if he were just starting out, oblivious of the raging wind. Najim crouched on his camel holding the guiding rope between his toes. His face was uniformly dark; the white of his eyeballs never showed, so that the only noticeable contrast were his teeth when he opened his mouth, which made him look rather fiendish, especially at this moment when my head was swimming from fatigue and everything was a little blurred. I couldn't remember when or where we stopped, but I had the sensation that I was falling, deeper and deeper down, for a very long time, with Najim grinning high up above me. When I finally regained my footing, I found that I was walking on suction cups – or so I imagined, because it really was deep sand that held me back, a steep slope of sand which kept crumbling away under me. I had to get to the top, I thought, even if it was the last thing I did, and the effort was worth it, for when I

reached the crest of the dune, I saw tents spread before me and gay streamers drifting in the wind. There was music and laughter in the air, and at the foot of the tablelands in the far distance a city of blue domes and arches rose from the ashen rock. The tents were open except for a thin netting, and the only voices I heard were those of women, beautiful and more than friendly, judging by the ones I saw. One, in particular, caught my fancy: a slim, seductive girl with olive skin, exquisitely delicate and sensitive, whose name, Ghazal, I knew without asking. Had no hunter spied her? It seemed odd to find her unattended. She was dressed in the most persuasive scent, and her dark eyes said: "Come to me."

I entered her tent and all fatigue and anxiety vanished as desire surged within me and all my senses filled with rapture at the fervor of her passion and the touch of her accomplished caresses. All my being yielded to this revelation of delight. I had never known such amorous perfection, such sweet and sensuous abandon, such artful flights to the very brink of consummation, and, after moments of voluptuous restraint, fulfillment so joyous and harmonious. There was an interlude of languorous tenderness while I held her breasts with the painted nipples and lovingly retraced the intricate triangular design which graced her beauty. She smiled behind her long lashes, when a gruff voice commanded me to rise.

Outside the tent, black men were waiting for me with a string of camels.

"*Ach tehabb?*" I asked the one who had spoken. "What do you want?"

He sneered, and said: "We come to promise you a grievous punishment."

Their camels had fancy trappings and the men carried spears. I knew that I could not argue with them, so I mounted the animal which was pointed out to me before the caravan moved off in the direction of the distant city. Slowly, silently, we rode over the scorched earth. Once we descended into a deep cleft which had not been visible in looking over the dazzling plain from the tents. It was deadly still between the walls of rock, and the heat lay like a heavy carpet at the

bottom. As we emerged from the canyon on the other side, the wind ripped into us again. Half-empty goat-skins, horrible, perspiring carcasses suspended from the saddle, wobbled at my knees, and I was very tired. It vaguely occurred to me that I would lodge a formal complaint with the authorities of the region when and if I got out of this jam, but I had no idea what region we were in.

Our destination was a huge square, teeming with glistening blacks and other natives in gaudy attire. They all jeered, and it was very discouraging to think that there was no way of reaching them with a kind word. They were effulgently hostile. I was trapped.

At the far end of the square, under a canopy, sat the Caid and, by his side, to my amazement, I recognized my friend, the British colonel, who was chained to a post and fuming with indignation. He gave me a shaky “cheerio” and said to the Caid: “I say, old boy, aren’t you rather doing us down?”

Somehow, the court interpreter must have conveyed the gist of the remark in Arabic, for the Caid replied: “We only laugh at weakness.”

I was shaking uncontrollably, partly from fear, partly because of the sudden chill in the air as the sun plunged behind the mountains. The flickering light of the torches, which now illuminated the square, and the crash of wild drumming, added to the sinister atmosphere.

Then there was silence, the ominous silence of the desert, and the voice of the Caid, the black libertine, saying: “Speak unto the believing women, that they restrain their eyes, and preserve their modesty, and discover not their ornaments, except what necessarily appeareth thereof; and let them throw their veils over their bosoms, and not show their ornaments, unless to their husbands, or their fathers, or their sons, or their captives, or unto such men as have no need of women, or unto children, who distinguish not the nakedness of women.”

The multitude assented with a pious murmur.

Then the drumming resumed, pandemonium broke loose, black hands were raised against me. There were shouts of “Dweller of the Fire!... Cut off his head!... Cut off his head!”

"Hamdullah," said the Caid, as a slave grabbed my arms and another started to swing his scimitar.

The last thing I heard was the voice of the colonel.

"Ruthless, these chaps..."

A red flood engulfed me... I was shaken by a prodigious spasm...

It took me all of next day to get over it.

A sunstroke, perhaps? Or a touch of fever?

(...)

By the time the caravan started up again, I had pulled myself together sufficiently to stagger south beside the melancholy camels. My ears were ringing and I was shivering from intermittent chills. The day dragged on in glare, in heat, and in interminable hours.

