Safti's Summer Day

By Robert Hichens

Safti is a respectable, one-eyed married man who lives in a brown earth house in the Sahara Desert. He has a wife and five children, and in winter he works for his living and theirs. When the morning dawns, and the great red sun rises above the rim of the wide and wonderful land which is the only land that Safti knows, he wraps his white burnous around him, pulls his hood up over his closely-shaven head, rolls and lights his cigarette, and sets forth to his equivalent of an office. This is the white arcade of a hotel where unbelieving dogs of travellers come in winter. I am an unbelieving dog of a traveller, and I come there in winter, and Safti comes there for me. I, in fact, am Safti's profession. By me, and others like me, he lives. For a consideration he shows me round the market, which I knew by heart six years ago, and takes me up the mosque tower, from which I gazed over the flying pigeons and the swaying palms when Safti was comparatively young and frisky. Together we visit the gazelles in their pretty garden, and the Caïd's Mill, from which one sees the pink and purple mountains of the Aures. We ride to the Sulphur Baths, we drive to Sidi-Okba. We take our *déjeuner* out to the yellow sand dunes, and we sip our coffee among the keef smokers in Hadj's painted café. We listen to the songs of the negro troubadour, and we smile at Algia's dancing when the silver moon comes up and the Kabyle dogs round the nomads' tents begin their serenades. And then I give Safti five francs and my blessing, and he bids me *"Bonne nuit!"* and his ghostly figure is lost in the black shadows of the palm-trees.

Oh, Safti works hard, very hard in winter. The other day I asked him: "Don't you get exhausted, Safti, with all this exertion to keep the Sahara home together? You are getting on in years now."

"Ah yes, Sidi; I am already thirty-two, alas!"

He was thirty-five when I first met him; but he is as clever at subtraction as a London beauty.

"Good heavens! So much! But, then, how can you keep up the wear and tear of this tumultuous life? You must have an iron strength. Such work as you do would break down an American millionaire."

Safti raised his one dark eye piously toward Allah's dwelling.

"Sidi, I must labour for my children. But in the summer, when you and all the travellers are gone from the Sahara to your fogs and the darkness of your days, I take my little holiday."

"Your holiday! But is it long enough?"

"It lasts for only five months, Sidi; but it is enough for me. I am strong as the lion."

I gazed at him with an admiration I could not repress. There was, indeed, something of the hero about this simple-minded Saharaman. We were at the edge of the oasis, in a remote place looking towards the quivering mirage which guards dead Okba's tomb. A tiny earthen house, with a flat terrace ending in the jagged bank of the Oued Biskra, was crouched here in the shade. From it emerged a pleasant scent of coffee. Suddenly Safti's bare legs began to "give." I felt it would be cruel to push on farther. We entered the house, seated ourselves luxuriously upon a baked divan of mud, set our slippers on a reed mat, rolled our cigarettes, and commanded our coffee. When a Kabyle boy with a rosebud stuck under his turban had brought it languidly, I said to Safti:

"And now, Safti, tell me how you pass your little holiday."

Safti smiled gently in his beard. He was glad to have this moment of repose.

“Each day is like its brother, Sidi,” he responded, gazing out through the low doorway to the shimmering Sahara.

“Then tell me how you pass a summer day.”

The coffee nerved him to this stubborn exertion, and he spoke.

“Sahah, Sidi.”

“Merci.”

We sipped.

“A day in summer, Sidi, when the great heats begin in June? Well, at five in the morning I get up—’

“And light the fire,” I murmured mechanically.

The one eye stared in blank amazement.

“Proceed, Safti. You get up at five. That is very early.”

“The sun rises at a quarter to five.”

“To call you. Well?”

“I eat three fresh figs, and sometimes four. I then mount upon my mule, and I ride very quietly into Biskra to take coffee with my friends.”

“That is half-an-hour’s exercise?”

“About half-an-hour. After taking coffee with my friends we play at dominoes. It is forbidden for the Arabs to play at cards in Biskra. I remain in the café at the corner—”

“I know—by the Garden of the Gazelles!”

“—till eleven o’clock, at which time I again mount upon my mule, and return quietly to my home. When I reach there I eat with my wife and children sour milk, bread, and dates from my palm-trees which I have kept from the autumn. At twelve, we all go to bed together in a black room.”

“A black room?”

“We fear the flies.”

“I see.”

“Till four in the afternoon I, my wife, and my children sleep in the black room. At that hour I rise once more, and go quietly to the Café Maure in old Biskra, near my house. I play cards there for five coffees till seven o’clock. At seven the mosquitoes arrive, and prevent us from playing any more.”

“How intrusive! Always at seven?”

“Always at seven. I then walk very quietly with my friends to the end of the oasis.”

“To the Tombuctou road?”

“Yes, Sidi; to get the air. We come back by the same road quietly, and I go to my house, and eat a cold kous-kous with my wife and children. After this I return to the café and play ronda till one o’clock.”

“One o’clock at night?”

“Yes. At one o’clock I go with my friends very quietly to bathe in the stream beneath the wall near the mosque. We stay in the water for, perhaps, an hour, and when we come out we drink lagmi.”

“What’s lagmi?”

“Palm wine. Then at three o’clock I go to my home, mount upon the roof quietly with my wife and children, and sleep till dawn.”

“And you do this for five months?”

“For five months, Sidi.”

“And—and your wife, Safti?”

I felt that I was very indiscreet; but Safti is good-natured, and has bought quite a number of palm-trees out of his savings when with me.

“My wife, Sidi?”

“What does she do all the time?”

“She remains quietly in my house.”

“She never goes out?”

“Never, except upon the roof to take a little air.”

“Doesn’t she get rather bor—”

The one eye began to look remarkably vague.

“And you find five months of this life a sufficient rest in the course of the year?”

Safti smiled at me with resignation. “I cannot take more, Sidi; I am not a rich Englishman.”

“Well, Safti, you must make the best of your fate. It is the will of Allah that you should toil.”

“*Shal-làh!* I will take another coffee, Sidi.”

“Larbi!”

I called the Kabyle boy.