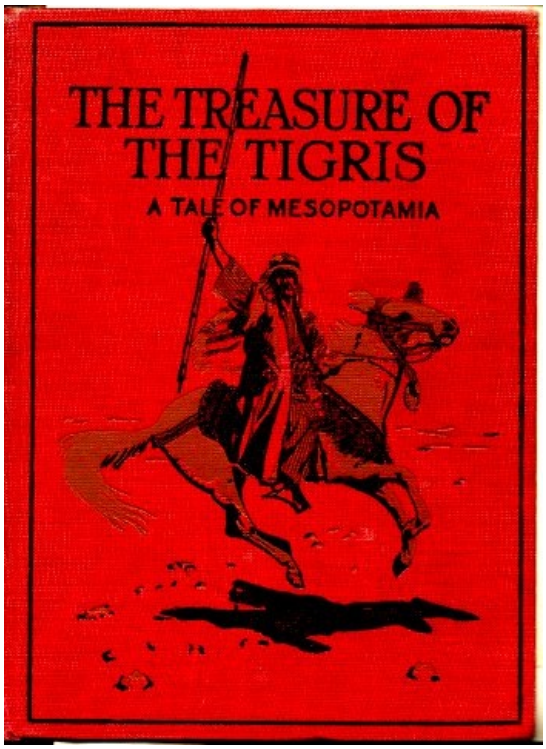
Title: The Treasure of the Tigris: A Tale of Mesopotamia

Author: A. F. Mockler-Ferryman

Release Date: March 20, 2011 [EBook #35615]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Delphine Lettau, Mary Meehan and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at http://www.pgdp.net



THE TREASURE OF THE TIGRIS

A TALE OF MESOPOTAMIA

BY LIEUT.-COLONEL A. F. MOCKLER-FERRYMAN

AUTHOR OF "LIFE STORY OF A TIGER"
"HEMMED IN" ETC.

WITH EIGHT FULL-PAGE ILLUSTRATIONS
IN COLOUR BY ALLAN STEWART

A. & C. BLACK LTD.
4, 5 & 6 SOHO SQUARE, LONDON, W.1

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN

First published in 1908

"I BALANCED IT EXACTLY, AND SLOWLY AND STEADILY DREW IT UP"

CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS IN COLOUR

By ALLAN STEWART

THE TREASURE OF THE TIGRIS

CHAPTER I.

INSTRUCTIONS.

First of all, I must explain how it happened that I, Walter Henderson, whom, I have every reason to believe, my masters regarded as a very ordinary kind of boy, should have blossomed within a couple of years of leaving school into a person of some importance. I say this with all modesty, though my enemies will doubtless cast it in my teeth that no modest man would write a book about himself.

On events which prevented my getting a commission in the Army, after nearly having completed my course at Sandhurst, I do not propose to dwell. At the time I considered the whole affair to be an error of judgment, though my father ascribed it to lack of brains and too much cricket. Be all that as it may, the fact remains that before I was twenty, all my military ambition had been nipped in the bud, and I was incarcerated in the back premises of that imposing but dreary-looking old building, the British Museum. My uncle, Professor Ambrose Wentworth, had taken compassion on me, and had appointed me his private secretary, at a nominal salary. It was not at all the sort of life that I had mapped out for myself, as I had fully made up my mind to be a soldier, as most of my ancestors had been; and, as a matter of fact, had it not been for my mother's entreaties, I should have enlisted directly I left Sandhurst.

My uncle's particular line was Babylonian history, and probably no living man knew more about history tablets, cylinder seals, and such like things, than did he. As was, perhaps, only natural in a man whose whole existence was wrapped up in deciphering cuneiform inscriptions and hieroglyphics, he wrote an almost illegible hand, and it was my duty to make fair copies of all his letters and documents—a task which I found not only most uncongenial but also decidedly difficult. However, I did my best, and my uncle was always kind and considerate; but I could see that he was disappointed that he had been unable, at the end of a year, to make me enthusiastic in the matter of his hobby. At last came the day when I really thought that I could stand the life no longer. It was towards the end of November; we had had a fortnight of dreary fogs and drizzling rain, during which time I had worked by artificial light continuously, and as I took my seat at my desk I made up my mind that this day should be my last at the British Museum. Whether my uncle observed my dejection, or whether his archæological researches had produced in him the faculty of seeing through a brick wall, I cannot say, but when he entered the room in which I was at work, he came up to me and laid his hand gently on my shoulder.

"Walter, my boy," he said, "you don't like this sedentary life, I can see."

"It is the weather, uncle," said I. "I think it has got on my nerves."

"Well," said my uncle, "I have been meaning to speak to you for some time. You have stuck to your uninteresting work for months without a murmur, and you have proved to me that you have plenty of grit. I can now offer you a change. Mr Jenkins and I have been talking matters over, and we want someone to go to Babylon for us. We have come to the end of our arm-chair researches, and we can do nothing more without a man on the spot. If you like to undertake to study hard for six months, we will send you out on a voyage of discovery for us. You will have to make up your mind to real hard work, but I promise you that you will have a thoroughly interesting trip, and will see a good deal of the world. I will tell you plainly what you will have to do. In the first place, you must be able to read cuneiform inscriptions and translate them readily; secondly, you will have to learn a certain amount of Arabic, so as to be able to converse with the natives; and lastly,

you will be required to go on an expedition to Babylon by yourself, and follow up the work that Layard and others commenced. You can think it over for twenty-four hours, and let me know whether you will undertake it, or whether we shall have to look out for someone else."

I need, perhaps, hardly say that, as I was only too keen to travel, I accepted the offer, and I began my six months' course of instruction forthwith. It was hard work, as my uncle had foretold, and nearly nine months passed before I was considered fit to start on my voyage of discovery. But, at the end of that time, my study had resulted in making quite an enthusiast of me, and I was most eager to get away to the land which had already given to the world so many historical treasures.

Then arrived the eventful evening when I was to receive my final instructions, and I was closeted with my uncle and Mr Jenkins for several hours, listening to the great scheme that I was intended to attempt to carry through. Up till then I had had no inkling that my trip was to be anything more than an ordinary digging undertaking, in the hope of finding something new; but when I entered my uncle's sanctum, I soon saw that he and his assistant had something important to discuss with me.

"Well, Walter," my uncle began, "the time has come at last; you are off to-morrow, and now we are going to tell you the great secret that is known only to Mr Jenkins and myself. If either of us were young enough to undertake the work, you may be sure that we should not have let you do it. But it wants a young and an energetic man to carry it through, and that is why we have gone to the trouble of training you. What we are going to disclose to you is absolutely in confidence; you must reveal it to no one; for, as you will see, on the keeping of the secret depends the whole success of your expedition."

My uncle now unlocked a safe, from which he took a tin despatch-box. Then, unfastening a bundle of papers, he began:—

"THE GIRDLE OF SOPHANA, THE GREAT QUEEN. That is what we want you to find. It exists, or it did a few years ago, beyond a doubt. If you can discover it and bring it to England, you will be a made man. If you fail, we shall not blame you. But I will tell you what we know about it. Mr Jenkins and I have devoted years to the matter, and, from what we have been able to gather from scraps of information, collected from history tablets and other sources, we know that Queen Sophana was possessed of a girdle of solid gold. Exactly what it was like we do not know, though several life-like snakes are said to have been embossed upon it, and it was supposed to have been possessed of certain magic properties. We have not much to go upon, but we will not keep anything from you, and you shall hear how we have put two and two together. In the first place, the ancient representations, on cylinder seals and such like things, of the queen, always show the girdle or belt round her waist; secondly, the old writers, in describing the queen, frequently refer to the magic belt; thirdly, on a fragment of a history tablet we have found clear evidence that, on the death of the queen, her favourite handmaiden dressed her mistress in pure white clothes and carefully fastened on the girdle before the corpse was laid in the coffin of baked clay.

"Then there are several other tablets on which mention is made of the girdle; and we have copies of all these things ready for you to take with you. But we should never have thought of trying to unearth this treasure, had it not been for information of a much more recent date that has come to us. Barely sixty years ago, some members of an Arab tribe ransacking the ruins of Babylon, found, bricked up in a solid wall many feet underground, a substantial tomb; inside the tomb were several coffins, and within one of these, encircling a shrivelled corpse, lay a belt of golden snakes—massive and of great weight. Now comes the difficulty; for, according to the story which the Arabs relate, the finders of the treasure, from the moment that they took possession of it, suffered every species of calamity. But of all this you must read in the manuscripts which we are handing over to you; it is too long a story to go into now, and I need only tell you the end. The golden girdle was eventually buried in the place where it had been found, by the sole survivor of a family of the Shammar tribe, in whose possession it had been for some years; and, in order that no one should notice that the ground had recently been turned over, the man obliterated all trace of his work by setting fire to the scrub jungle far and wide. Lastly, we have the climax; the Arab committed suicide on the bank of the Euphrates, by falling on the point of his broken spear.

"What you have to do is to endeavour to find out the spot where the man buried the girdle; dig it up, and bring it home. Mr Jenkins and I have written down our views as to how we think this can best be done; but you must consider what we have written as mere suggestions, and you must be guided by circumstances. We do not pretend to be anything more than students and theorists; and, unhappily, such men as Layard and Rawlinson, who could have helped us, have long since passed away. In reading through your papers, you will, of course, come across a deal of Eastern superstition; but I think that you are matter-of-fact enough to pay no attention to the supposed magical properties of the girdle, or any nonsense of that kind."

The remainder of the conversation it is unnecessary to give. I received lengthy instructions as to the voyage, as to secrecy, and as to more commonplace matters of business—how I was to draw money for my expenses, and so forth. No detail had been forgotten by my uncle and his assistant, who, I discovered, were staking their reputations on the success of my quest.

I was handed a despatch-box containing, as I was told, all papers bearing on the object of my journey; and then, like many another, I, Walter Henderson, buoyed up with hope and puffed up with pride, left the Museum under the impression that I was fairly on the road to fame.

CHAPTER II.

ACROSS MESOPOTAMIA.

About my voyage out I shall say little—for it was much like any ordinary voyage to the East—and of the passengers one only need be mentioned. That one joined the steamer at Marseilles, and became my cabin companion. He was a German, named Kellner, an amusing and pleasant individual, who talked English perfectly, and who, in spite of the fact that he seldom lined up for his morning bath, was tolerably clean. For some considerable time I could not make out what his business was, but at last I discovered that he was a "traveller in glass and china," and was going to Karachi. He interested me a good deal, as he appeared to be thoroughly well educated, and able to discuss almost any topic.

At Karachi I had to remain two days, waiting for the Persian Gulf steamer, and when I embarked again I found, to my astonishment and no little joy, that the only other passenger on board was my friend Kellner. He explained his unexpected reappearance by saying that he had had a telegram from his firm, telling him to go on up the Gulf, as there was a good opening for trade at Bushire and Baghdad. I was delighted at having his companionship, and during the next week our friendship increased considerably, so much so, that when we put in at Bushire, I persuaded him to come on with me to Baghdad, and first do his business there, taking Bushire on his way back. As was only natural, I had talked over my plans with him freely, though I had never divulged the secret of the Girdle, merely telling him that I was going to excavate at Babylon for the British Museum. He was politely interested in all I had to say, but he was not enthusiastic, giving it as his opinion that it would be much more practical to induce the people to take to European goods and forget all about their past history.

At last we got up to Bussorah, went on board the river steamer, and after four or five days on the Tigris, came alongside the wharf at Baghdad. I was duly accredited to the British consul-general, and was met by a kawas, who removed me, bag and baggage, to the Residency at once. Kellner went off with an Armenian gentleman, who, he told me, was agent for the firm for which he was travelling, and we parted with many expressions of regret that our long voyage was at an end.

The Consul-General had, I found, received a despatch from the Foreign Office about me, instructing him to assist me in every possible way, and he was kindness itself. I soon decided that there could be no possible harm in my telling him the object of my journey; in fact, I came to the conclusion that it was absolutely necessary. He said that I would have a most exciting hunt, and that he himself would have liked to have accompanied me, but unfortunately he could not leave Baghdad for some time. The Residency surgeon, who had only been in the country about eighteen months, wanted to visit Babylon, and it was soon settled that he should go with me—an arrangement that pleased me immensely, as George Edwards was a man of the world, with a delightful personality. It took a few days to get things in order: the *firman* from the Turkish Government examined and signed by the governor; servants and horses engaged, and an escort of mounted zaptiehs provided.

At length everything was ready, and, the evening before our departure, I overhauled all the papers in my despatch-box, in order to refresh my memory. I had studied them thoroughly on the voyage out, and knew their contents almost by heart. I had even gone to the length of making a *précis* of everything in a note-book. I thought it advisable, however, to have a final look through the papers, as I did not wish to encumber myself with the heavy despatch-box, which I had arranged to leave with the Consul-General. On opening the box I found, to my surprise, all the papers in a state of confusion—confusion which could not have arisen from the box having been turned upside down, because I always kept the papers, which were docketed and tied up in order, in their proper places, by filling up the box with two thick books. The books I now found nearly at the bottom of the box, and the bundles of papers were all untied and thoroughly mixed up. Someone had tampered with the box; there was not a doubt of it. I hastily checked off the papers with the inventory in my note-book, and, to my dismay, discovered that one was missing. I went over everything again—the missing document contained a carefully-drawn plan of the ruins of Babylon, with instructions as to the best method of attempting to locate the burial-place of the Girdle. It was, to my mind, the most important paper in the box; but its loss was not irreparable, as I had fortunately made copious notes from it, and possessed a duplicate plan. Nevertheless, it was most annoying to find that someone had been turning over my papers, and I mentioned the matter to my host at dinner that night.

"What sort of lock have you got on the box?" he asked.

"A Brahma," I replied, "and the key is on my watch-chain."

"Have you ever left your watch lying about?"

"Never; I have always been most particular about it."

Then I remembered that the day I went on shore at Muskat, I had left my watch in my cabin. I remembered the fact, because when I visited Jelali Fort, the governor showed me his watch, and I put my hand in my pocket to take out mine, wishing to explain the advantages of a repeater, but discovered that I had left it behind.

"Haven't you opened the box since then?" inquired the Consul-General.

"No, I don't think I have looked at it since I left Karachi."

"Well, probably the inquisitive steward went through your belongings while you were on shore at Muskat, in hopes of finding a stray bank-note, and I expect in his hurry he omitted to put all the papers back."

So we forgot all about the incident, and the following morning Edwards and I, with our cavalcade of pack-horses, and our soldierly-looking escort, left the Residency, and riding down the dirty, narrow lane to the bazaar, crossed the quaint old bridge of boats and got away into the desert beyond. As we looked back we saw the Consul-General in a *kufa* in mid-stream waving a last farewell to us, and then we put our little Arab horses into a canter, and soon settled down for the ride to the khan (or caravanserai) of Mahmoudieh. It was late when we reached the solid gate of the khan, and it was closed for the night, but we managed to find accommodation in the little coffee shanty just outside.

A couple of Bedouin chiefs were in possession of the only room, so the verandah was handed over to us, and, the night being warm, it was far pleasanter than being inside, though the corporal of our escort did not at all like the arrangement, and tried to persuade us that it was most unsafe to sleep as it were in the open, in a country which was known to be swarming with robbers and cutthroats. Being Englishmen, we laughed at the corporal's fears, and after supper and a smoke we turned in on the frail wicker-work, crate-like beds that had been provided for us, taking the precaution, however, to have our revolvers handy, and to put everything of value either under the beds or under our bodies. How long we had slept I cannot say; I had been dreaming hard, and I had dreamt that I had found the Golden Girdle—I held it in my hand and gazed at it in wonder—I found the clasp—with great difficulty I unfastened it—I put it round my waist—I felt for the clasp to fasten it—nothing would induce it to close. I pulled with all my might—the Girdle was too small for my waist. I seized both ends in my hands, held my breath, and pulled again. My waist was growing smaller and smaller—my body seemed to be breaking in half. I gave a wild yell, and the clasp snapped with a report like that of a pistol shot. And it was indeed a pistol shot.

As I awoke with a start, I found that the whole place was in a wild state of commotion; the zaptiehs were all around us with lanterns, and Edwards was standing by the side of his bed, with revolver in hand.

"What on earth is the matter?" I asked.

"Had a shot at a blackguard trying to loot our kit, but failed to score, I am afraid," was the reply.

Then Edwards told us all about it; how he had been aroused by my restlessness, how he saw, in the moonlight, two men kneeling close to my bed, and how he quietly took his revolver from under his pillow, and sprang up, only, however, in time to get a flying shot at the men as they made off. Their horses were just outside the verandah, and the thieves were on them and away before he could get another shot in. Our troopers wanted to go in pursuit, but it would have been perfectly useless their going out into the desert, as they had not the remotest idea which road to follow; so we contented ourselves with the examination of our belongings, to see what we had lost. My heart absolutely stopped beating when I discovered that my money-belt had gone from my waist. It was a chamois-leather belt that I had had specially made in England, with neat little pockets all round it, in which I carried the whole of my money—about £50 in sovereigns, and a certain number of silver kerans and rupees.

We were not long in finding out who the thieves were, as the owner of the house came running out to tell us that the two Bedouin chiefs had disappeared without paying for their supper or lodgings. Then I remembered that one of them had passed through the verandah to the inner room while I was fastening the belt over my sleeping-suit, and he must have noticed what I was doing, and guessed that the belt was worth having. My dream all came back to me, and of course my long struggle with the Golden Girdle was probably caused by the Bedouins taking off my belt; but I cannot imagine how they got it off without awakening me. It was gone; there was no doubt about that; and, turning to the coffee-house man, I demanded what he knew of his two runaway guests.

"Lord!" he replied, "I never set eyes on them before this night. They arrived after the gates of the khan were shut, and, saying that they had ridden from the Euphrates, they begged a night's lodging before going on to Baghdad. What manner of men they were I knew not. I swear it."

I believed him, for he was a Jew, and therefore not likely to give board and lodging to two strangers unless he thought that they were respectable and likely to pay their bill. Still, I was not quite certain that the old gentleman was not a confederate of the Bedouins, so I called the corporal and told him that I thought he had better take the owner of the place into Baghdad as a prisoner, and report what had happened. The consternation of the Jew when he heard the order is indescribable. He grovelled on the ground at my feet; flung the dust over his head, and swore to me that he was innocent of participating in any plot. To be sent in to the Turkish governor of Baghdad would mean his ruin. He would not be heard. He was a Jew, and there was no justice for Jews. He begged and implored me to have mercy and to believe his word. As a matter of fact, I had not the slightest intention of losing the services of our escort by sending them back to Baghdad, and I was quite confident that the Jew knew nothing of the robbery. The loss of the money, however, was rather a serious thing, though, fortunately, Edwards was carrying enough to supply our probable wants for some time; and before making a start I sent a letter to the Consul-General, telling him what had occurred, and asking him to send me some more money to

Babylon. As can be imagined, we were not too well pleased with the result of our first night in Mesopotamia, and for the next night or two we took the precaution to keep a sentry on duty while we slept.

Getting away as early as possible in the morning, we rode hard all day, and, after passing Khan Haswa and Khan Mahawill, at sunset we crossed the remains of the ancient Parthian earthworks, and entered the ruins of the Great City, taking up our quarters at dusk on a roof-top of the little modern village of Babil, lying close by the Euphrates. Every house in the village was built of bricks dug out of the ruins of famous Babylon; on every brick was the superscription of Nebuchadnezzar; and it was with almost sacrilegious feelings that we lay down to rest among such romantic and old-world surroundings.

CHAPTER III.

INTO THE DESERT.

Riding over the ruins on the following day, I realised for the first time the immense task that I had undertaken. In all directions there stretched miles and miles of barren land, with here and there low mounds, ditches, and heaps of rubbish, overgrown with scrub and coarse grass. Actual ruins, such as walls and the remains of buildings above ground, there were none, though an occasional long deep trench, dug by modern excavators, disclosed the presence of a wall at a considerable depth below the surface. For centuries the place had been ransacked for bricks to build the towns and villages in the neighbourhood, and even now I found natives with donkeys loading up the panniers with masses of broken brickwork.

With the scanty information that I possessed, to attempt to commence digging for the Golden Girdle was, of course, hopeless—far more hopeless than looking for a needle in fifty bundles of hay. I, however, made a thorough exploration of the ruins, and corrected and added to my maps, deciding that the next step to be taken was to get away among the Bedouin tribes, and to try to discover some sort of clue as to the burial-place of the Girdle. Why I thought of the Bedouins as likely to be of assistance was this; I had among my papers a full-sized drawing of an Arab horse-shoe, and my uncle had shown me the actual shoe, the peculiar shape of which at the time interested me a good deal, though I now found that similar ones were worn by all the Arab horses. It was a thin disc of metal with a hole in the centre, but it differed from most shoes in that it had eight nail-holes instead of the usual six. With the drawing was the translation of a document, and a note to the effect that the horse-shoe and its description were obtained from the Munshi Abdul Aziz of Kerbela, and brought to England in 1899 by a certain Captain Johnson, who was subsequently killed in South Africa. The document itself ran as follows:-

> "*In the name of God, the Merciful and Compassionate, and, Said Mohammed, Agent of the High God, and of the Companions of Mohammed. Praised be the Lord, the Omnipotent Creator.*
>
> "This is the Na'l Talisman of the Muntafik, which at one time adorned the hoof of the beautiful mare Shahzadi, by a Kuhailan Haifi sire, out of the dam Labadah. The famous mare, known to all the tribes, was captured by Feyzul, sheik of the Jelas Aeniza, from the Sheik Jedaan-ibn-Mirshid, who was killed in battle, when a portion of the Salama tribe of the Shammar was utterly defeated on the 17th of the month Saphar, A.H. 1281. Of the ill-omened Salama there escaped but one man, who was riding a brown horse, with four white feet and a white mark on the forehead, said by some to have been of the true breed of Saklawi, by others of Ubaiyan. The man bore away the serpent belt of pure gold, coveted by the desert tribes."

On the back of the original paper was scribbled in pencil:-

> "The shoe and its history were given to me by my old friend, Munshi Abdul Aziz, on his deathbed, in return for some slight services which I had rendered him in connection with the annual payment of pilgrim money. He told me that it had been carried, for many years, as a talisman, on the neck of the mare ridden by a former sheik of the Muntafik. How it came into his possession he preferred not to disclose; but he said that it was well known that the mare Shahzadi was shod on the off hind foot with an eight nailed shoe (the near hind, of course, having no shoe). H. J., 8.4.98."

I had already regarded this document as of very great importance, and I now decided that my first object should be to discover Feyzul, and learn what he had to say about the golden belt. It was true that Feyzul might not be alive, and his tribe, in its turn, might have been wiped off the face of the earth; but still it was the only clue, and it seemed to me to be worth while following up. So we left Babil and went off to the town of Hillah, where we imagined we might be able to get the desired information from the Turkish police officer, whose duty it was to keep an eye on the Bedouin tribes of the neighbourhood. The officer was most polite, and, after inspecting my passport and *firman*, sent for his sergeant, and asked him what was the latest information that he had of the Jelas sheik.

The sergeant, with much pomp and ceremony, produced a note-book from his pocket, and rapidly turning over the leaves, at length came to the page he wanted, when he read out deliberately and in a low voice:—

"Faris-ibn-Feyzul, tribe of Jelas, otherwise Ruwalla, of the Aeniza; 742 men; 428 women; many children; valuable mares and stallions; also camels and sheep. Blood feud with the Salama of the Shammar; constantly fighting. The tribe was driven from the Ndjef marshes by the Turkish troops two months ago, and was reported to have moved about four days south."

"Is that all?"

"It is all that I know, captain, for, as you are aware, I have been out in the northern district for the past month."

"What age do you suppose this Faris to be?" I asked.

"Oh, anything over fifty-five, might be seventy, but rides and fights like a man of thirty."

Then the officer suddenly appeared to become inquisitive, and asked me why I was so anxious to find this particular Arab chief, who had not the best of reputations. For the moment I was rather nonplussed, but I satisfied him by saying that I had been told that he and his tribe knew the ruins of Babylon better than most people, and that they would be sure to know what parts had been explored by previous excavators. In the end the sergeant was told to try and find out where the chief had his headquarters, and during the next few days I and my party were entertained by the police officer, who showed us all the sights of the neighborhood—including the so-called Tower of Babel, or Birs Nimroud.

Before the end of the week Faris-ibn-Feyzul had been discovered, and the sergeant proudly related how one of his men had seen him in the bazaar at Kerbela, and had tracked him for three days and nights out into the desert, and had found his tribe encamped barely two days' ride from Hillah.

So far so good. I knew that the Jelas tribe still existed, and though Sheik Feyzul was dead, his son Faris reigned in his stead. The next point was how to open up communications with him.

"It would be perfectly useless my sending for him," said the Turkish officer, "for he would not come. They are most independent devils, all these Bedouins, and you cannot even bribe them. You might send a dozen messages to this Faris, and tell him that you would pay him a thousand kerans a day for his services, but that would not be an inducement to him. He would imagine that we had designs on him."

"I must get hold of him somehow," I said; "what do you think I had better do?"

"There is only one way that I can see," was the reply. "Leave your zaptiehs here, and ride off with your friend to Faris's camp without an escort. I will give you a guide to show you the way, but he must leave you as soon as you are within sight of the camp. It will be somewhat risky, as, of course, the Jelas people may take you for Turks and make short work of you, but if you pretend to be simple English travellers having lost the way, I daresay it will be all right. I shall, however, have to get you to give me a paper saying that you left Hillah against my wish, in case you come to grief, as otherwise I might get into trouble."

Edwards and I agreed that we had better make the plunge into the desert, and leaving our belongings in charge of the zaptiehs, with strict injunction that if nothing was heard of us within a week, they were to follow us up, we gave the Turk his clearance certificate, and rode off with our guide at daybreak next morning.

After a somewhat uninteresting ride of a long day, with always in front of us a mirage rising out of the sandy desert, and enticing us to put spurs to our horses and gallop to the shade of the palm-groves, which appeared to grow on the edge of a lake surrounding a great city and its thousand minarets; after halting for the night in a real date garden, we arrived late in the afternoon of the second day on a low ridge from which the country around was visible for many miles. Here the guide stopped, telling us that we would now have to proceed alone. He then pointed out the line which we were to take—roughly south-west—showing us, in the far distance, a tiny speck, which he pronounced to be the encampment of the Jelas sheik. Looking through our field-glasses, we could just discern the resemblance to an encampment, but the prospect of reaching it before dark seemed small. The guide, however, assured us that it was not as far off as we imagined; the country was deceptive; and we should probably reach our destination before sundown. With hearts none too light, we parted from the guide, and started in a bee-line for our goal.

Before going any great distance, we got hung up by a morass, which had to be circumvented; then the horses showed signs of being fatigued, and we were obliged to get off and lead them.

"A jolly wild goose chase this seems to be," said Edwards, somewhat sulkily.

"Not very cheerful, is it?" I replied.

Neither of us spoke again for about half an hour. The sun was gradually nearing the horizon. It would be pitch dark in less than an hour. Edwards stopped.

"What are we going to do?" he asked. "We can't possibly reach the beastly place before dark, and

we are not likely to find it when we can't see where we are going. I vote we chuck it, have some food, and bivouac here till the morning."

"Don't you believe it," said I, "what sort of a person do you take me for? Do you suppose I have been looking at this compass of mine ever since we left the guide simply to amuse myself? I have got the bearing of old Faris's centre wigwam to a nicety. The compass is a luminous one. Look at it. Do you see the luminous paint? Well, as soon as it gets properly dark and the stars are nice and bright, I'll take you along quite gaily."

Edwards was interested. He had never seen a luminous compass before, and confessed that he had no idea that anyone could wander about in a desert at night and discover where he was going. Now, as a matter of fact, I was not at all confident of my ability to use a compass at night; for, since leaving Sandhurst, I had never troubled about these matters. Still, I could see that my companion did not much like the look of the situation, so I thought it best to reassure him.

The compass worked far better than I expected—indeed so accurately as to almost result in our coming to an untimely end. The darkness that had settled in very shortly after sunset was of the blackest, the stars standing out with remarkable brilliancy. Whether it was that my nerves were strained to the utmost, or that it was the first night that I had spent in the absolute solitude of the vast desert, I cannot say, but I can never remember in all my subsequent travels any night that approached this one for inky blackness. On we trudged over the hard, baked sand, still warm to the feet, and making the air warm as high as one's chest; above that, a cool invigorating breeze blew about our heads. Under other circumstances, we should have delighted in the night march; as it was, we were both too jumpy to appreciate it.

Suddenly, at a little distance to our right, a dog barked, and almost instantaneously half a dozen shots were fired. Fortunately, they were evidently fired haphazard, for none of them came in our direction, but our reception was far too warm to be pleasant, so I shouted in the best Arabic that I could command:—

"Salaam Aleikum! We are two English travellers who have lost our way. We seek hospitality for the night, and to be put on our road in the morning."

There was no reply, though we could hear voices quite close, and could now distinguish the form of the tents of the encampment. My compass had landed us within a hundred yards of the right spot, but I had no thought for the moment of congratulating myself on its accuracy, or on my skill in handling it. It was a question whether we should have a volley fired into us, or whether our account of ourselves would be accepted. All doubt, however, was soon swept away, when a stentorian voice came out of the darkness:—

"If you are, as you say, Ingleezee who have lost your way, let one man advance and the other remain a while behind."

I immediately advanced, while Edwards stood his ground. At the doorway of a large tent I was received by a handsome young Arab, around whom clustered a number of wild-looking men and women. Oil wick lamps were raised to my face, and after a few searching questions, the men appeared to be satisfied, and told me that my companion could come in. As soon as Edwards appeared, the young Arab, who was evidently the chief of the party, looked intently into his face, then, flinging himself on the ground at his feet, became almost convulsed with emotion.

"It is the great *Hakim* (doctor)," he exclaimed, "*Alhamdu l'Illah*—Praise be to Allah—I have met him again. The blessed Hakim who saved my life when I was left for dead by the accursed Shammar. Oh, God is great to let me see him again, and befriend him in the desert."

We were soon surrounded by as many of the tribe as were able to crowd into the tent, and the doorway was blocked with the remainder. Edwards was the centre of attraction, and his Arab friend regaled his fellow-tribesmen with countless personal experiences of the Hakim's skill. But, in the excitement, our wants were not forgotten; our horses were taken away and cared for; women brought in vessels of sour *leben*, and dishes of meat and unleavened bread, of which we ate with an appetite whetted by a hard day's march and by the keen, crisp air of the desert night. Neither was this all, for the floor of the tent was rapidly piled up with carpets and rugs, conveyed by numerous eager hands, and after taking the most affectionate farewell for the night, Sedjur, our host prepared to leave us to ourselves.

"But, Sedjur," said Edwards, holding the young chief's hand, "you have not told me why you are here, six days' journey to the west of Baghdad; when in the hospital, you always said you came from the north, from near Mosul."

"True, O Hakim," was the reply, "but we of the desert have no fixed home. We wander hither and thither. Yet I confess that I lied to you when I said that I came from the north. To have disclosed my identity would have imperilled the safety of my tribe for the son of Faris would have been a rare prize for the Turki Spahis (a curse on them!), and they would have tortured me until they had discovered the movements of my father and his people."

"Are you, then, Faris's son?" inquired Edwards.

"Even so."

"Where then is the sheik, your father?"

"He left, two days since, with ten picked men, to effect the capture of the horses of some Shammar robbers who were reported to be at Babil. He will return before sundown to-morrow, and he will then offer you the full hospitality of the tribe."

"Well, peace be with you, Sedjur, at any rate for this night, and plenty of hard fighting before long. That is the greatest joy I can wish you, I know."

Sedjur's face brightened, and his keen eyes glistened as he turned and left us. When we were alone, I asked my companion to explain how, in the middle of the night and in the middle of the desert, he had suddenly found fame. It was not a long story, because George Edwards was the sort of person who made a story about himself as short as possible. The Consul-General, it appeared, was riding out, with a small escort, near Zobeidé's Tomb, one evening about a year before, and came across a man lying in an exhausted condition under a bush. The man was unable to give an account of himself, but he was evidently in desperate straits, with several sword cuts on his body and one or two ugly spear gashes. The Englishman made his escort carry the wretched Arab into Baghdad and hand him over to the Residency surgeon, and, as Edwards concluded, "I looked after him, tinkered up his wounds, and was just going to discharge him from hospital, when he discharged himself—made a bolt of it one fine night."

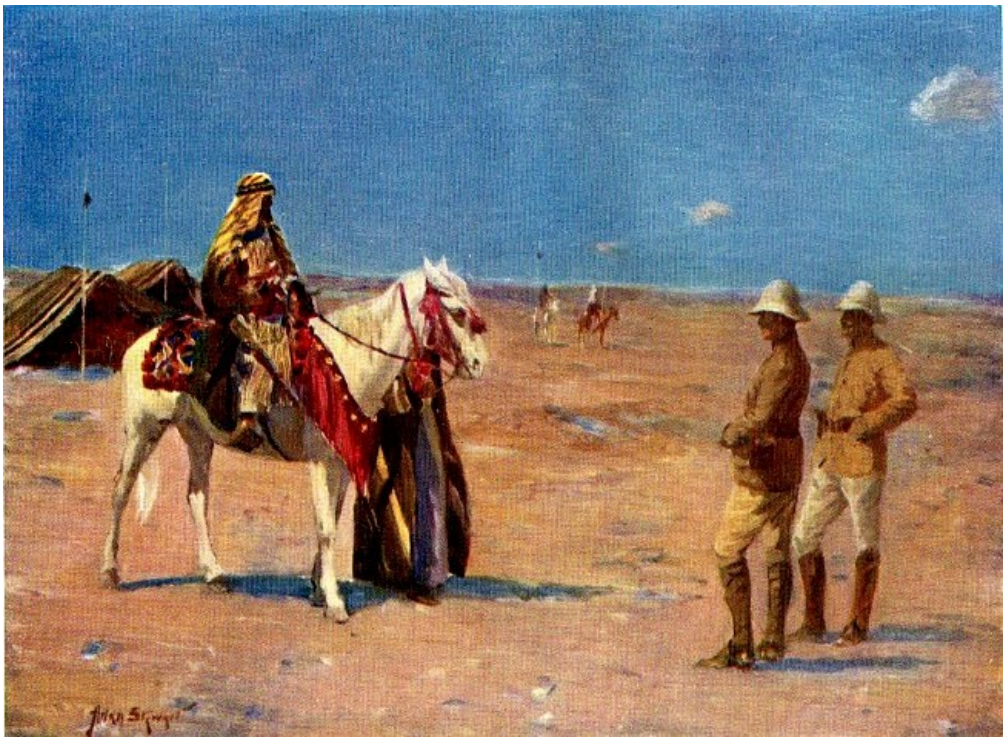
"Edwards," I said, when he had finished, "you are a marvel. There never was such a stroke of luck. If all accounts of these people be true, you have secured the everlasting friendship of Faris and all his tribe. We are made men—that is to say if Faris really knows anything of the Golden Girdle."

Edwards's reply was a long, loud snore, and it was not many minutes before I myself sank into that blissful state of oblivion which is begotten of sheer exhaustion.

CHAPTER IV.

GUESTS OF THE AENIZA.

How long we should have slept if left undisturbed I cannot imagine. The sun must have been up an hour or more before we were suddenly awakened by shouting in the camp almost amounting to an uproar. On jumping up and looking out, we found that the small black tents were being hastily struck, and the whole place was in confusion. We saw, at a little distance, Sedjur talking excitedly to a couple of dozen horsemen armed to the teeth. Presently he moved towards our tent, the mounted men following him. As they drew near we stepped outside to receive them, and were greeted by a shout from Sedjur, who was walking by the side of the horse ridden by a great gaunt Arab. That this was the sheik himself we instantly realised—so much alike were father and son—and any doubt that we had was soon dispelled by the introduction that followed.



"THAT THIS WAS THE SHEIK HIMSELF WE INSTANTLY REALISED"

The sheik welcomed us cordially, and thanked Edwards for all the kindness that he had shown to his son in Baghdad. Unfortunately, he said, he could not now ask us to partake of his hospitality, as it was absolutely necessary that he and his people should get away at once, to avoid capture at the hands of the Turkish authorities. Sedjur then related to us what had occurred. His father had, the night before, had a brush with a strong party of Shammar, some of whom had been left either dead or wounded on the field, and the fight only ended when it did because of the sudden appearance of a Turkish patrol.

"We must get away immediately," concluded Sedjur, "but my father and I hope that some day, when things are quieter, we shall be able to show you and your friend true desert hospitality. You will easily find your way back to Hillah, and so to Baghdad, by keeping straight for the high mound yonder, from which you will see the river and the roof-tops of Hillah at no great distance."

"But," replied I, not at all wishing to lose Faris just as we had found him, "my friend the Hakim does not desire to return until he has seen more of the desert. Besides, we might ourselves be captured by the Turkish soldiers, and be forced to betray your whereabouts."

"That would be difficult," laughed Sedjur, "for, look, our women and children are already out of sight, and safe; and, ere the sun has crept up another spear-head in the heavens, our horses will have carried us out of harm's way."

I looked round. The camp had vanished, the tent in which we had slept included. Our horses, with their saddles on, stood hobbled close by. The sheik, standing by his horse, was shading his eyes with one hand, and scanning the horizon.

Suddenly there arose a cry of "Tourki," and with one accord the sheik and his men swung into the saddle, and commenced to move off. Sedjur quickly mounted his mare, and calling to us that he regretted having to leave us thus discourteously, soon caught up the rest of the party, now settling down to a fast canter.

"Well," exclaimed Edwards, turning to me, "they are in a desperate hurry to clear out. I cannot even see the soldiers, can you?"

I looked for some time, and at last, when my eyes had become accustomed to the glare, I thought I could detect some small black objects, like flies, in the far, far distance.

"I think I have spotted them," I answered. "There, miles away to the north-east. Look along my finger."

"Oh, I see them," said Edwards.

"Well," said I, "I suppose we had better wait here till they come up, tell them that it is useless for them to try and catch the wily Arabs, and ride back with them to Hillah, or wherever they come from."

"Not a bit of it," said Edwards excitedly. "We must not meet them. I know the gentlemen; and if they find us here and their quarry gone, they are quite capable of shooting us off-hand as conspirators, and quietly putting us into a hole in the sand. Come on; there's plenty of time."

"Where to?" I asked, as we ran to our horses and mounted.

"After our Arab friends," was the reply. "They are not going any pace as yet."

So we dug our spurs into the flanks of our little beasts, and made them gallop over the baked desert. But gallop as we would, we did not appear to be gaining on our friends, and it seemed to us, on glancing back, that the Turkish troopers were overhauling us. Then, as we looked ahead, we saw the Arab horsemen suddenly disappear.

"Where on earth have they gone?" asked Edwards, turning to me.

"Heaven only knows," I replied, "unless they have got into a watercourse. We shall probably see them come out again in a minute."

We kept our eyes fixed ahead of us as we rode on, but no sign did we see of the reappearance of the party, and before long we discovered the cause. The track brought us to a deep dry watercourse, running almost at right angles to the route that we were following, and there, in the loose sand which formed the bed, we could see the footprints of the horses. We drew rein, and looked at each other, for the horsemen seemed to have gone both ways—up the watercourse and down it.

"Which way?" I asked Edwards.

"Haven't a ghost of an idea," said he.

"Well, it cannot matter very much," said I; "whichever way we go, we shall find some of them. We must trust to luck to take our Turkish pursuers the other way."

So we rode westward in the trough of the nullah, which in places was sunk almost twenty feet below the surrounding country, and which turned and twisted at every fifty yards. For half an hour or more we pressed on, ever looking behind, to see if we were being pursued, until at last we reached a point where a smaller nullah joined the main one, and here again the horsemen had divided, as many going one way as the other.

"This is worse than a paper-chase," said Edwards, drily. "Suppose we give it up, wait for the Turks, and hail them as our friends and deliverers."

As we stood at the junction of the watercourses, debating which one to follow, we suddenly became aware of the presence of a horseman, standing motionless at the bend of the smaller nullah. He beckoned to us, and, on riding up, we found, to our joy, that it was Sedjur himself.

"You were fortunate, Hakim," said he smiling, "in taking the right way. We could not wait for you, for fear of the Turkis. We are all safe enough now, for they never follow the windings of the watercourse, knowing that at any turn they might be ambuscaded. Come along to our tents, and we will make you truly welcome."

The mention of tents was a great relief to both of us, for I at any rate had had visions of travelling day and night for ever so long, and enduring endless privations. Still, the encampment was not as near as I at first imagined, for, although Sedjur described it, with a wave of his hand, as "yonder," it proved to be distant several hours' ride. For a mile or more we followed the bed of the nullah, until it grew too narrow to ride in, when our guide suddenly turned his horse's head up the steep bank. Thence we crossed a wide strip of desolate desert leading gradually up to a sandy ridge, from the summit of which Sedjur pointed out, several miles away, a green patch of vegetation, around which there appeared to be a goodly collection of tents.

"What are all these tents?" I inquired of Sedjur, as we drew near the encampment.

"This is our large camp," he replied, "with all our people and flocks. Where you spent last night was only a *ghazu* camp, from which my father was making a foray."

We were duly impressed by what we saw before us, and we began to understand that the sheik was a man of some importance. A considerable number of horses, camels, and sheep were grazing on the outskirts of the encampment, and quite two hundred tents lay scattered among the tamarisk and other bushes. On the extreme flank was pitched the somewhat imposing-looking tent of the sheik—large enough, as we afterwards found, to accommodate not only himself and his family, but also two of his mares. In front of the tent, fixed upright in the ground, was his long, gleaming spear, adorned with tufts of black ostrich plumes. As we approached, men came to take our horses, and we were ushered into the audience-room of Faris's tent, where we were received with much ceremony, being reintroduced by Sedjur, as if the sheik had never met us before. This procedure puzzled me at first, but later on I discovered that it was a matter of Bedouin etiquette, as at our previous meeting the sheik had had nothing to offer us. Now we were made welcome to all he possessed, and a special tent was handed over to us.

The conversation was most formal; spiced coffee was handed round, and long pipes were brought in. Then, after a short while, Sedjur relieved our minds by suggesting that we might like to go to our tent and rest, after our long ride. We jumped at the idea, and being warned that we were expected to have supper with the sheik a little before sundown, we sought the seclusion of the goat's-hair dwelling that had been reserved for us.

"Thank goodness," said Edwards, sitting on his saddle-bags, which had been brought into the tent, "that they have given us a place to ourselves. Now let us hold a mass meeting of two, and discuss the whole situation."

"What situation?" I asked.

"Why, yours and mine," said he.

"Right you are," said I. "So far I think we have done pretty well. We have discovered old Faris, and have become his honoured guests. We have only got to persuade him to tell us about the Golden Girdle, and then we shall be as right as rain."

"All very nice," said Edwards. "But suppose it does not come off, what is going to happen? We are miles and miles from anywhere."

"Oh, we will get along. Don't you fret," I replied. "Besides, we are seeing desert life, living with real Bedouins, and all that sort of thing. Do be a bit romantic. But, to be serious, I will take on our host to-night, if we can make him at all communicative; and if we fail to get anything out of him, we will take an affectionate farewell in the morning, and ride back to Hillah. I daresay we are not more than fifty miles away."

"How shall you start the subject?" asked my companion.

"That is the difficulty," said I. "I expect the best way will be to mention Shahzadi and her shoe, and see how the old man takes it."

So we continued to talk and puff at our pipes, until at last Sedjur came and told us that supper was ready. We found that one or two of the headmen of the tribe had been invited to meet us, and after going through the usual ceremonial introductions, we settled down to our meal, Edwards being placed on the right hand of the sheik, I on the left, and Sedjur on the other side of Edwards. It was our first Bedouin feast, and the novelty of everything interested us considerably. A huge copper bowl was brought in and placed in front of us, its steaming contents consisting of a kind of porridge in which lumps of meat and vegetables, some hard-boiled eggs, and dates were concealed. Into this each member of the party plunged his hand, and after the manner of dipping in a bran-pie, brought out a prize in the shape of something to eat. Hunger and the desire to

appear *au fait* in the customs of the desert enabled Edwards and myself to do fair justice to the meal, even without spoons, knives, or forks. Little conversation was indulged in while the eating was in progress, but at length the dish, replenished again and again, had satisfied everyone, and at a signal from Faris we rose, washed our hands, and went and sat outside, to smoke our pipes and chat in the cool evening air.

While at supper I had made a study of our host, and although apparently a reserved and silent man, his quiet dignity and courteous manner made a great impression on me. In appearance he was tall—far above the average Arab height, spare in form, but with broad, square shoulders, which made his flowing robes hang loosely from his body. He was a fair man, and his brown beard as yet showed few white hairs, though his handsome face was weather-beaten, and bore more than one tell-tale scar. His eyes were remarkable, and their actual colour impossible to describe; at times they were the eyes of an eagle—almost golden red, wide open and piercing; then, while he was speaking, they would suddenly change to the soft liquid eyes of a deer, full of tenderness and compassion. As I learned later, the sheik's whole character was discoverable from a study of his eyes.

Puffing at my pipe, I began to think that the time had come when I ought to give our host some idea of our future movements, for I knew that he himself would consider that he would be outraging all the laws of hospitality if he even displayed any curiosity as to our wanderings in the desert. How I was to turn the conversation round to the Golden Girdle I could not see, but I made a beginning by discussing the day's ride, and the relative merits of our horses and the sheik's horses, their paces and staying powers. To my delight I found that the great man gradually unbent, and in a few minutes became voluble. Thinking that I was deeply interested in the subject, he insisted on taking me into his tent to see his two favourite mares, one of whom he fondled, and addressed in the most loving terms.

"She is your favourite, sheik," I said.

"Yes," he replied, "even so. She has carried me in many a bloody fight with the accursed Shammar, and has borne many good colts. Moreover, her grand-dam was my father's much-prized mare, a true Kuhailan, so he always affirmed. He captured her from the Shammar—a fact which I cast in their teeth when I prevail over them by reason of the handiness and swiftness of the mare. She is indeed a bird without wings."

I now had my opening, for of course I remembered what was written in the document wherein mention had been made of the Golden Girdle.

"I have heard of the Kuhailan mare," I remarked quietly.

"Of what mare?" inquired Faris, looking at me intently.

"Shahzadi," I replied, "the daughter of a Kuhailan Haifi, out of the dam Labadah. Was it not so?"

"That indeed was what my father always told me, and the Shammar themselves told him how the mare was bred. How do you, an Ingleezee, know of such matters as these? It may be that you have learned them from the Shammar."

"Not so, Sheik of Sheiks," I replied. "What I know of the mare I have read in my own country."

"Wonder of wonders!" exclaimed Faris. "They speak truly when they say that you Englishmen know everything. Tell me more of what you know."

"I will tell you *all* I know," I said, "and if you will allow me to go to my tent, I will fetch you a translation of what I believe to be a true document relating to the famous mare, which your father captured from the Shammar."

"You astonish me beyond measure," said the sheik; "be pleased to go and bring the paper."

At that moment the thud of horses' hoofs broke the stillness of the night air, and, thinking that it meant a night attack, I turned to the sheik, who stepped out in front of his tent, and shouted a few words in a deep voice. An answer came back out of the darkness, and then Faris explained to me that the horsemen were those of his party whose duty it had been to lay a false scent for the Turkish police to follow, and who had ridden into camp by a circuitous route.

"For years," said he, "we have done the same thing. On reaching the nullah, some of us go one way and some another. The Turkis fear to follow either party, knowing that if once they enter the nullah, they are liable not only to be ambuscaded by one party but to be taken in rear by the other party. But they are simple folk these town-bred Turkis, and in driving us as far as the nullah, they consider that they have done their duty. So they return to their coffee-houses to drink their coffee and tell their companions how they encountered the Bedouins, and defeated them. Yet, to-morrow, if we wished, we could ride in and pillage half the villages on the outskirts of Hillah. However, the ways of these Turki dogs are of no interest to either you or me, for I know, from my many friends in Baghdad, what you Englishmen think of them. Let us talk again of our horses, and let me hear what you know of Kushki's ancestors."

I went off to my tent, and returned with my note-book, when the sheik took me into his private apartment, and motioned me to a seat on a pile of soft cushions. I showed him the sketch of Shahzadi's shoe, and he at once commented on the eight nail holes. Then I turned to my copy of the document, which, re-translating into Arabic, I read out to my host. He was deeply moved, and

drank in every word that I uttered, nodding his head as I concluded each sentence, and vouchsafing that what I said was true. When I came to the last line I hesitated for a second—from excitement, I suppose—but, recovering, I translated leisurely, "The man bore away the serpent belt of pure gold coveted by the desert tribes."

"Quite true," said the sheik. "Everything that you have read is true. But now tell me, was it indeed an accident that brought you and your friend the Hakim to our tents?"

The question came so suddenly, that I confess it quite staggered me. But I felt that the man with whom I was dealing was upright and honest, and I decided that I would meet him on his own ground, and risk the consequences. I stood up and met his gaze.

"Faris-ibn-Feyzul, Sheik of the Jelas Aeniza," I said, "I am an Englishman, and, I trust, a man of honour. Believe me, that in accepting your hospitality, I had no intention of deceiving you. I waited only for an opportunity to speak to you, and that opportunity has now come. It was no accident that brought us to your tents."

I then explained fully the nature of my mission, and how I hoped to be able to obtain from him some information about the Golden Girdle. He listened attentively, and without showing any sign of displeasure. At last he took my hand in his, and spoke solemnly and quietly.

"Friend and honoured guest," he said, "you have spoken to me straightforwardly, and straightforwardly shall I always deal with you. Stay with us as long as you will, and you shall be welcome, but take my advice, and abandon all idea of possessing that accursed belt of gold. Did you but know the havoc that it wrought among the tribes ere it disappeared, you would let it lie for ever in its resting-place. If you would hear more of it, then to-morrow will I tell you what I know, and willingly. To-night we have already talked late."

"What a time you have been," grunted Edwards, as I entered the tent after saying good-night to the sheik. "You have lost all your beauty sleep. I have been in bed for hours."

"Business, my boy," I replied. "I have been having a most interesting talk with Faris."

Edwards sat up wide awake, while I related, as shortly as possible, what our host had told me.

"Do you think I did right," I asked, when I had finished, "in making a clean breast of everything?"

"You could not well have done anything else," he replied. "Both the father and the son are thorough gentlemen. Besides, one cannot humbug these Bedouins; they would see through you at once. I wonder if they really know where your golden treasure is buried. I did not say a word about it to Sedjur, as I was afraid of making a mess of things. By the way, he and his father are going off in the morning to an oasis somewhere or other miles away in the desert, where they have got some brood mares and camels, and he thought we might like the ride with them. So I accepted for both of us. Are you on for it?"

"Of course I am," said I. "I don't let old Faris out of my sight until I have heard what he has to tell about that blessed belt."

CHAPTER V.

RAIDERS.

Barely a streak of dawn had shown itself in the eastern sky, when Sedjur clamoured at our tent door, shouting to us that it was time that we were up and in the saddle. Silence reigned in the encampment, as we stepped out into the grey morning, to find the sheik and his son already mounted, and awaiting us. An Arab stood close at hand holding the two horses which we were to ride, and the sheik, giving us a friendly greeting, told me that the beasts which he had selected for us were both sons of his favourite Kushki, the fleetest that he possessed, and far better than our own. He and Sedjur we noticed were armed with spear and sword, and before starting they made certain that we carried our revolvers.

"One can never tell," said Sedjur, "what the day may bring forth, and to go unarmed in the desert is to court death."

So, with the cold invigorating air almost cutting our faces, we set out on our ride into the unknown, at first picking our way slowly among the low bushes, then, on reaching the great sandy wastes, quickening our pace to a gentle canter. How our companions knew the way puzzled us considerably, for no landmark could we distinguish in any direction. Everywhere was sand—hard, red, baked sand; a veritable ocean of sand, and, like the ocean, wind-swept into mighty billows. The sun gradually rose, and we soon discovered that no landmark was necessary, as our route evidently lay due west, and the sun at our backs gave us our course.

For several hours the ride was monotonous in the extreme, then, at about noon, the sandy plains began to show signs of a change of country. Stones cropped up here and there, and in the far

distance we could distinguish the filmy outlines of hills and mountains. The hills gradually drew nearer, and in a short time we found ourselves in a new land. Below us was a hollow filled with verdure, date trees, acacias, tamarisks, and luxuriant grassland, through which flowed trickling streams. This was the principal grazing ground of Faris's camels and mares, which we saw scattered in all directions, their herdsmen—all armed with spears and matchlocks—keeping a good look-out on the surrounding high ground.

"Hide yourselves behind the rocks," said the sheik, quietly, "and we will soon see if the men are on the alert."

Then stepping forward himself on to the sky-line, he stood quite motionless, while we peered from behind our shelters into the valley below. Far down in a date grove we heard the neigh of a horse, followed by the barking of a dog; then, as we looked, we could see each sentry turn instinctively towards the figure of the sheik. They had discovered the cause of the alarm, and Faris, satisfied, shouted a watchword which was evidently understood. The chief of the herdsmen rode up to greet us, and we descended with him to the shady spot where his tent was pitched, and where he soon regaled us with coffee and dates.

"Well, Hussein, what is the news?" asked the sheik.

"Nothing of great consequence, Lord Protector," answered the herdsmen, "but I am glad you have come. For three days now single Shammar horsemen have been observing us from different points, and we fear that they intend a raid on the beasts so soon as the moon gives sufficient light. We fully expected it last night, but no one came."

"Ah, Hussein," said the sheik, "it is the old story which you always have to tell. Rest assured that no Shammar dares to touch the property of Faris-ibn-Feyzul. Bring some more coffee, and then we will smoke our pipes until it is time for us to start again for our tents."

The sheik was in the best of spirits, and even talkative. Sedjur and he were evidently devoted to each other, and we could see that the father was as proud of his son as was the son of his father. They had ridden side by side in many a fight, though even now Sedjur was but twenty-four; and each had many tales to tell of the prowess of the other.

"How many of the accursed robbers did you say you encountered at Babil the day before yesterday, father?" asked Sedjur.

"Ten of the Shammar," was the reply, "and one other, of what tribe or nationality I know not. He was not of the desert, though wearing the dress. Perchance he came from Bokhara, or Yarkhand, or, God knows, from India. But whatever land gave him birth must be glad to be rid of him, for he showed not the courage of an Arab townsman. When we bore down on the band he incontinently rode off, and did not rein up and turn to see what was going on until at a safe distance. The dog valued his skin greatly."

"And you put them all to flight?"

"Surely did we," answered the sheik, vehemently, "and sent that black villain, Abbas, to Gehennum."

"What, Abbas-ibn-Rashid?"

"Even so, he who nearly killed you outside Baghdad, when our good friend, the Hakim, here, saved your life. It was an old score, my lad, and I wiped it out, praise be to Allah! We would have sent some more of his followers after the scoundrel, had not the soldiers come down on us, and I doubt not but that Abbas himself had previously warned them to be prepared."

"I am almost sorry, father, that you slew Abbas," said Sedjur, softly.

"Why?" asked the sheik, frowning at his son. "Have you turned woman? Do you wish to show mercy to your bitterest foe?"

"Nay, father, but I had lived for the day when I should meet the man face to face, sword to sword, and spear-point to spear-point. I grieved that you had robbed me of my chance of revenge."

"Well, well, Sedjur," laughed the sheik, "save his ghost, the desert will hear no more of Abbas."

"You secured no booty, then?" inquired Sedjur.

"His mare galloped off when her master fell," replied Faris, "and I brought away only his broken spear, and this."

The sheik raised his cloak, and revealed to our astonished eyes *my chamois-leather money belt*. Edwards and I instantly recognised it, and involuntary uttered an exclamation of surprise, when Faris, not understanding the reason for our excitement, but thinking that we were admiring his prize, took it off and handed it to us to examine.

"It is filled with money," said he, "and of much value. How Abbas gained possession of it I neither know nor care. It became the prize of war, and is now mine."

"Sheik of Sheiks," I exclaimed, holding the belt in my hand, and looking into his flashing eyes, "I can tell you what money that belt contained a little while since; for it was stolen from my waist as I slept outside the khan at Mahmoudieh not half a moon ago."

"Wonder of wonders!" ejaculated Faris and Sedjur simultaneously, the former appearing to be somewhat sceptical, though fearing to show any distrust of his guests.

"Let us examine the pockets one by one," I said, wishing to prove my *bona fides*. "In each of the five small pockets on either side of the buckle there should be five English gold pieces, and in the larger pocket at the back some odd kerans and rupees. Come, let us count them out."

I turned out the pockets one by one, and emptied their contents on to the sleeve of Sedjur's cloak. The thief had had no opportunity for spending the money, which was found to be exactly as I had stated. Faris's face wore an expression of utter bewilderment.

"We knew," said he at last to Sedjur, "what manner of man was our guest the Hakim, but we knew not that his friend was a magician, who, when he lost his property, could recover it at his pleasure. Yet now that I bring it to mind, he did but last night read to me the true description of Shahzadi, the grand-dam of my beloved Kushki, and, moreover, he showed me, on a paper, the impression of her eight-nailed shoe, the old Talisman of the Muntafik of which we have heard. All this is magic."

I felt that I had suddenly acquired a reputation by no means desirable, and I hastened to reassure my host, who, having replaced the money in the belt handed it to me, saying that, now that he knew that it was stolen property, he wished to restore it to its rightful owner.

"Nay, nay, sheik," said I, "you obtained it in a fair fight. I lost it through my own carelessness, and I can no longer claim it by right. I never thought to see it again."

"Then," answered Faris, "I see but one way out of the difficulty. If you refuse to take back your own, I offer the belt and all it contains to your friend the Hakim, as a present, in return for all the kindness which he showed to my son Sedjur. We of the desert have an unwritten law, by which no guest of the Aeniza can decline to accept a present from a sheik. Were this not so, then would I straightway ride to the Euphrates, and hurl the thing into its depths; for, knowing what I know, I can never now lay finger on it again. Come, Hakim, my honoured guest, buckle on the belt, and end the trouble; otherwise, who knows? it may prove to me as evil a possession as did that golden curse to many a Bedouin in the days gone by."

So Edwards, at my suggestion, took the belt and fastened it round his waist, offering profuse thanks to his host, who was apparently greatly relieved.

"Tell us, sheik," I said, seeing that he had recovered his equanimity, "something of the golden curse to which you alluded just now, and about which I spoke to you last night. We are all friends here; Sedjur has doubtless heard it all before, and the Hakim and I are one."

Faris looked stealthily round, to make sure that there were no eaves-droppers, and then suddenly turning his eyes on me exclaimed:—

"Think no more of it; forget it; for it will bring you nothing but ruin. I called you 'magician.' Whether I did so rightly or wrongly I cannot say, but this I do know, that your magic, be it ever so strong, can avail nothing against that circlet of gold. As you are aware, it disappeared long years back—even before dear Kushki saw the light of day. No man could ever say what became of it, though there be necromancers (not reckoned by us as men) who have the reputation of knowing all things, and who have been heard to affirm that they could, were they so minded, unearth that hidden curse. Yet even they fear to be so rash. As soon would they let loose in the world Shaitan and all the Jins. Do you suppose your Western magic to be more powerful than that of the East? Do you imagine that you are capable of combating all the evil that fell on every man who ever touched the dreaded thing? No, I cannot believe that you have such conceit."

"I am no magician, sheik," I said, interrupting him, "and I make no pretence to any power not possessed by yourself or any other man. We Englishmen consider all those who practise magic to be impostors. In all honesty, I told you last night that I had come to the desert in search of the Golden Girdle of the Great Queen; and I told you how my acquaintance with the story of the Muntafik talisman had led me to seek information from you."

"I know," said Faris, sorrowfully, "I remember all you said, and if I ever doubted you, the doubt has left me. I believe all that you told me. I swear it. Gladly would I help you to carry out the task imposed upon you; yet, I, Faris-ibn-Feyzul, Sheik of the Jelas Aeniza, who have faced death on countless occasions, and who would face it again at a moment's notice, out of pure love of fighting, I confess to you that I fear to have a hand in resuscitating the golden circlet. Mere death I count as nothing. All must die—whether it be sooner or whether it be later; and so long as I die, as every true Bedouin should, fighting the foes of his forefathers, I care nothing for myself. But how should I feel if, when dying, I knew that I had been instrumental in reviving, and in leaving behind me as a legacy to posterity, a curse on the inhabitants of the world?"

I began to think that the Golden Girdle had a most fearsome reputation, but I remembered that my uncle had specially warned me not to be influenced by the superstitious dread of the natives. I had always laughed at superstition, and though I had sufficient good sense not to laugh at the sheik, I inwardly considered his fears as ridiculous and childish.

"So be it, sheik," I said. "Far be it from me to attempt to influence you to do anything against the guidance of your conscience. Let us forget that we ever spoke of the Golden Girdle. Let us forget that it ever existed. There are troubles enough in the world without adding to them. We will converse on other matters."

"What thought you of the horse you have been riding?" inquired Faris proudly.

"Perfection," I replied. "Never have I sat on the back of his equal."

"I thought so," said Faris, beaming with delight "He is indeed a worthy son of my Kushki."

"And to think that we foreigners," said I, "possess her grand-dam's shoe!"

I had hardly finished speaking, when the sheik sprang to his feet, seized sword and spear, and rushed to his horse, shouting as he did so that the Shammar were upon us. Sedjur was in the saddle almost as soon as his father; and Edwards and I, not fully realising what was going on, followed suit in all haste. Then we saw what our host's keen eyes had seen a couple of seconds earlier. Over the ridge above us a long line of horsemen were sweeping down into the valley; the watchmen posted among the rocks fired their matchlocks as a signal of alarm, and ran for their horses, which were mostly tethered close to the spot where he had been resting. There was little time to think, but it was easy to understand the enemy's intentions. The mares and camels were all grazing down the valley, a quarter of a mile or so below us, while the herdsmen, in order that they might be able to obtain a wide view of the surrounding country, had been stationed on the higher ground above us and to our right and left. The raiders, evidently well aware of this somewhat faulty arrangement, had somehow crept up unnoticed to the vicinity of the ridge, and had then galloped in between the herdsmen and the herd, the foremost horsemen descending swiftly into the valley and rapidly working round and overlapping the grazing animals. This was an almost instantaneous evolution; in fact, when Faris first gave the alarm, the line had already shaped into a crescent, and before we had mounted, it had become a semicircle, separating the mares from the camels, and driving the former before it and away from us. The camels, being too refractory and slow to carry off, were left behind.

"Quick, Sedjur lad," shouted the sheik without any sign of excitement, "rally the herdsmen, and get ready for pursuit, while I watch the direction they take."

Then the lad, as his father called him, opened his lungs and sent up a war-howl, which rang through the whole valley, and came echoing back from every rock and every hollow. If it did not strike terror into the hearts of the raiders, at any rate it had a most inspiriting effect on the wretched herdsman, who showed the greatest keenness to get to their horses and form up for pursuit. How long it was before all the men had come in I do not remember; it could not have been many minutes, though it seemed like an hour. At last all were ready, and away we went at a hand-gallop, up the stony side of the valley, to the spot where the sheik awaited us. Sedjur—no longer the calm, imperturbable youth, but a fierce warrior, with long, gleaming spear raised aloft —led the party, Edwards and I abreast of him, on either side.

"This is no work for you," said Sedjur, addressing me as we rode along. "You and the Hakim had best drop behind and await our return."

"Have you such a poor opinion of us town-dwellers, then?" I replied. "We are your guests, and it is our duty to assist you. Besides, we want to see the fun."

"Bravely said," exclaimed the sheik, who had overheard my reply as we approached him. "Come on and help us to deal death to the Shammar thieves. They have crossed the plain, and are away on the other side of the ridge yonder."

How our little well-bred horses flew over that sandy strip! Their hoofs seemed barely to touch the ground. In front galloped the sheik; close behind him, we three; then the Bedouin herdsmen, some twenty in number, like a troop of cavalry in single rank.

We topped the ridge, and without drawing rein drank in the scene before us. There lay another stretch of rolling desert, which in the far distance appeared to slope gradually up to a network of bold hills. Midway between us and the hills, we could see clearly enough the mares being driven off, and raising a vast moving column of dust, resembling a sand-storm. That our enemies were expert cattle-lifters was evident, for they kept the beasts all going at a swinging trot, in one compact body.

Faris raised a wild shout as his quarry came in view, and pressed forward into the plain.

"Take half to the left, Sedjur; quick lad, and work round, so as to head them off from the hills. I will take the rest to the right. If the devils reach the hills, we shall not recover a single mare."

A strong breeze was blowing from one side, and carried the dust raised by the fugitives well away to leeward, enabling us to see and almost count the number of men with whom we would have to reckon. That they out-numbered our party was certain; though, as far as we could judge, not by very many. For the moment, however, actual numbers were of small account; speed was the sole thought; for the necessity of cutting in between the enemy and the hills was now very apparent. Though they were almost a mile away from us, and had little more than another mile to traverse before reaching the shelter of the hills, we certainly had the great advantage of being unhampered by loose beasts; while our opponents had to keep the mares together, so as to prevent them from breaking away. As our party divided, Edwards and I happened to be rather more to the left than to the right, so we naturally drifted off with Sedjur, who, waving his spear above his head, led his handful of men away to the flank. Rapidly we gained on the bulky column of dust; we were soon abreast of it, and it blew across our path and enveloped us, so that we were almost choked. As we emerged from the dense cloud, we saw that the sheik's party had out-distanced us by a little, and had already reached a point between the enemy and the hills, so

Sedjur wheeled half right, and went straight for the stolen mares; while his father, observing the movement, instantly swung round and brought his men down pell-mell on the foremost of the enemy. Panic seized the raiders, and before we could reach them, they abandoned their booty, and fled in a disorganised mass away to the flank farthest from us. The mares were saved, though there was still the risk of their terror causing them to scatter over the desert. Sedjur and his party, however, understood their business, and rounding them up, soon pacified them. Meanwhile, the sheik had seen his opportunity, and at the very moment that the enemy took flight, he suddenly changed his direction, and went off in hot pursuit of the fugitives.

"Come on, Henderson," said Edwards, "let's be in at the death."

"Right you are," I shouted. And away we went. It was a stern chase and a long one; but when we had almost caught up our friends, we found that they had overhauled the tailmost of the band, and that a brisk fight was imminent. Then Edwards, who was a little ahead of me, suddenly reined up his horse, so that it nearly fell over backwards, and I instinctively did the same.

"What is the matter?" I asked.

"This is not *our* game," replied Edwards, somewhat sternly. "The poor devils could not stand our revolvers. It would be sheer butchery to use them. *I* don't want to shoot any of them, and I am sure *you* don't. Besides, look, the sheik is drawing off his men, and I expect he considers that honour is satisfied."

At first I felt that I had been rebuked; for, on joining in the pursuit, I certainly had had every intention of using my revolver freely. But I soon saw that my companion's argument was perfectly sound, and I was glad that the combat had suddenly come to a close without our being called upon to take part in it. The sheik and his party presently returned, the enemy having disappeared into the hills, and we now learned the reason of the rapid withdrawal.

"They were leading us into an ambuscade," said Faris, as he rejoined us. "If it had not been for you, I, in my excitement, should have gone on, and doubtless we should all have been killed. I saw you pull up, and I instantly understood that you realised the stratagem I thank you both for giving me the signal."

Now, although I believe that Edwards and I were as honest as most men, we did not think it at all necessary to enlighten the sheik as to our real motive in suddenly coming to a halt. As a matter of fact, we were so astonished at what he said that we did not reply, thus leaving him with a high opinion of our astuteness, which, as we never undeceived him, he probably retained to the end of his days. There was, however, little time to think about what had occurred, for the main object now was to return to the mares, and conduct them back to a place of security. Naturally, everyone was very jubilant at having recovered the stolen beasts, and Sedjur and his party had already set them in motion towards home. Then the great cloud of dust once again rose upwards, almost obscuring the fast sinking sun, and darkness had set in before the mares were once again at the grazing ground from which they had been carried off.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SHEIK'S STORY.

That night we stayed at the grazing-ground, half expecting another attack, the sheik thinking it by no means unlikely that there was a large number of the Shammar tribe on the hills. But nothing occurred to disturb our rest, though we took it in turns to watch all night, Edwards keeping Sedjur company, whilst I sat with Faris. For half an hour or so after we came on duty the sheik remained silent, then he began to speak in a low tone.

"Magician," he said.

"Do not call me by that name," I said laughing. "I am nothing of the kind."

"Well," he replied, "if the name does not please you, I will not call you by it. Still, the man who can tell one all about the breed of a mare directly he sees her, who can recover his own stolen property whensoever he chooses, and who has just now returned to me all my stolen mares—a man who can do such things, I say, must possess powers of no ordinary kind. Such a man we desert folk call by the name magician."

"So be it, sheik," said I, not caring to argue further about the matter, "call me what you will. But what was it you were going to say when I interrupted you."

"It was a small thing," said he. "I had been thinking of Shahzadi's shoe, the Muntafik talisman. Where did you say it was kept?"

"In the biggest building in the biggest town in all England," I replied.

"Why should your people wish to keep in such a place so unimportant a thing as the shoe of one of our mares? I cannot understand you Europeans. Men come and pay much money for bricks and pieces of stone picked out of the ground at Babil, and carry them away on the backs of asses. The

Bedouins laugh at them. Do these also go to the big house where the horse-shoe is?"

"Yes, the house is full of such things, and were it possible to obtain the Golden Belt of the Great Queen, that likewise would be placed there."

"Better not," said Faris, "for the big house would totter and fall, and the whole town would be destroyed. Such things have happened in years gone by in this land—and, they say, because of that accursed belt. I do not know if what they say is true, but you have yourself seen what is left of such a great town as Babil, and I know of many another which has been levelled, and swallowed up by the sand. I say again, forget that belt of gold. Tell those who live in the big house that it is lost for ever. But Shahzadi's shoe is a different thing. Tell me, do the people who live in the big house keep all they possess for ever?"

"You want to know," I said, "whether you could possibly obtain the horse-shoe. I will copy the drawing, and write out for you, in Arabic, a copy of the document which I read to you."

"It would be of small value," said the sheik, with a sigh; "but, oh, if I could obtain the real shoe of the great Shahzadi, then would I be for ever happy."

"Sheik," I replied, "it can never be—at least it would be very difficult. Perhaps if I were to find the Golden Girdle, and were able to lay it before the keepers of the big house, perhaps, I say, they might regard me with favour and ask what I would in return. If at that moment I could reply, 'One, Faris-ibn-Feyzul, a great Sheik of the Aeniza, and my devoted friend, even he whose assistance enabled me to be successful in my quest of the Golden Girdle, is the owner of the mare Kushki, whose grand-dam was the famous Shahzadi. He desires above all things to possess the shoe of his noble Kushki's grand-dam, and this shoe is in your keeping.' Then, perhaps, the great men would consult together, and might say to me, 'You have done well in recovering the Great Queen's belt, and Faris ibn-Feyzul must be a truly worthy man; it is well that he should receive a fitting reward for his valuable services; therefore we ordain that the shoe of the mare Shahzadi shall be handed to you for conveyance to the sheik.'"

"That would indeed be a day of days for me, and for all the Aeniza," said the sheik. "But, alas, it can never be more than a dream. For, if I understand you rightly, the price of the shoe is that belt of gold."

"Yes," I answered, "that is what I meant."

"You cannot forget the wretched thing," said he, almost angrily. "Let the world go on its way. Do not seek to destroy all that is good in it. There are things which Allah has decreed shall be left alone; and if its history has been handed down to us truly, this golden circlet is one of them."

"Sheik," I said, "you are a great man, and chief of an important branch of a great tribe. Your men regard you with reverence and respect, and your position has doubtless given you a vast knowledge of men and of the affairs of the world. Yet you believe in superhuman and supernatural occurrences; or you think that you believe in them. You think that I am a magician, because I have been connected with certain events which had results different from what you expected. You believe in the mysterious powers of this Golden Girdle, because you have always heard wild stories about it."

As I concluded, I was astounded at my audacity in thus rating a Bedouin sheik in his own country, but my object was to draw him out, and to induce him to divulge what he knew of the Golden Girdle. I was aware that I could not persuade him that I was not a magician, and I now began to hope that he was superstitious enough to think that I could see through him and everything else. I firmly believe that he had the idea that there was something mysterious about me; otherwise I cannot account for the fact that this man, the terror of all the neighbouring tribes, should now, and on many other occasions, have allowed me to speak to him, and even dictate to him in a manner such as I often did.

Faris remained silent for a long while. I was afraid that I had insulted him. I did not dare to break the silence, and in the black hours before dawn this silence became oppressive. At last I summoned up courage, and put the question—

"I trust, sheik," I said, "that I did not offend you by my open speech."

"No, my son," he replied. And I knew that by thus addressing me, he bore me no malice.

"You townsmen," he went on, "and especially you Europeans, do not understand the minds of the dwellers in the desert. Sedjur, after his return from the Hakim's house in Baghdad, told me many things about you and your curious ways. In the towns you may not have strange things influencing your destinies, as we in the desert have always with us. Perchance, you are protected from them by the soldiers and the watchmen. In this manner your eyes are blinded, and you do not see such things as we see."

"Perhaps you are right, sheik," I replied, wishing to appease him. "But tell me some of the strange things that this golden belt has done?"

"Of myself," he replied, "I know nothing about it. All that I know and believe was told to me by my father, who saw and was an actor in many of the events. Other tales, as numerous almost as the stars in the heavens, I have heard from time to time. Some of them may be true; others are undoubtedly false. Of the long, long ago, when the belt was worn by the living queen, I am

ignorant. My knowledge is only of modern times, when my father was a young man. Before I had arrived at years of discretion the belt had been laid to rest again. I can just recollect my father's return to camp with his prize of war, the beautiful young mare Shahzadi, to whose daughter in later years was born my mare Kushki—and she was born full twenty summers ago."

"You never saw the belt, then," I asked.

"Never," said the sheik, "but my father and other men with whom I was acquainted had often handled it, and they were fond of describing its magnificent workmanship—so much so that I have often thought that I must have seen it myself."

"What was it like?" I inquired, curious to know if his description would agree with that furnished to me by my papers.

"It was of pure gold," said Faris enthusiastically, "and wonderfully fashioned. It represented on the outer side, as seen on the waist of anyone wearing it, twelve life-like serpents intertwined in various contortions. The flat head of each serpent was thick-set with rare gems, and the body of each beast was composed of a thousand or more small links, so that the belt was as flexible as a piece of cord. It was solid and of great weight, and the fastening consisted of the heads of four of the serpents, two on either side, with wide-opened jaws whose fangs interlocked. Thus much I remember of what was told to me; and I remember also that my father affirmed that no man fastened the belt round his body with impunity. So great was the power contained in it, that the wearer appeared instantly to become demented, to rave, and foam at the mouth, and in some instances even to die before the belt could be removed from his body. A party of the Khazail who first dug up the thing suffered considerably in this respect, and perhaps it was fortunate for them that when attacking a caravan of Persian pilgrims returning from Mecca they were worsted, and in the fight lost their treasured circlet. The Persians, shortly afterwards, perished to a man, when the winds of the desert swept up, and buried them and their camels in the hot sand. The belt was lost for a while, and forgotten. Then came the day when some merchants of Hayil, on a journey to Baghdad, chanced to come across the remains of the Persian caravan, and found the belt lying half buried in the sand. The finder's claim to its possession was disputed by his fellows, and in the altercation that followed, he, as well as three friends who espoused his cause, were killed. The others, deciding to sell the belt in Baghdad and divide the proceeds, went on their way. They travelled by night, hoping thus to avoid the bands of robbers by whom the road was infested, and they lost the direction, so that they found themselves at length far to the south of Baghdad near to the river Tigris. One night they slept in the great ruined hall of the Kosroes at Ctesiphon, and while they slept a vast portion of the walls gave way and fell, crushing all that remained of the party save two men who fled in terror, but not before they had secured the golden belt. They were almost immediately overtaken by robbers, who stripped them of their clothes, took all their possessions, and decamped with everything, including that girdle. All those things occurred when my father was quite a young man, and when my father's father was sheik. I have said enough to show you that there was a curse on the belt, and that all who touched it paid the penalty—usually a severe one."

"But, sheik," I said, "tell me more of these weird tales, which interest me greatly. Had you been a servant of the great Harun-al-Rashid you could not have learned to tell stories better. Come, the Shammar have no intention of annoying us, so relate all that you know of the mysterious workings of the belt until it disappeared for ever. What became of the robbers who left the two merchants naked in the desert, and what became of the merchants?"

"Well, story-telling passes the dark hours pleasantly, and though I would prefer to hear from you the doings of your own people in your native land, I am your host and therefore your servant, who needs must obey his master. What became of the merchants I cannot say, for no man ever knew. Perhaps they perished from exposure to the scorching sun; perhaps they died of hunger and thirst; or perhaps they fell an easy prey to the wild beasts. But in what manner they met their death Allah alone knows. Of the robbers I can tell you what was told to me. They were Khazail, and strange as it may appear, there were among them some men who had been of the party that dug up the belt and afterwards lost it to the Persians. Now these men had been witnesses of the evil that befell those of their tribesmen who had worn the belt—how some had died, and some had for a time become mad—and they cautioned their companions against having anything to do with it. After a long discussion, they decided that they would bury it on the bank of the river, send the chief of the party to Baghdad to interview a Jew dealer, and endeavour to sell it. The Jew eventually returned with the chief, examined the belt, and bought it for a thousand kerans, after which he rolled it up carefully in his cloak and conveyed it home. Next day, he repaired to the palace of the Governor-General and offered the belt for sale for five thousand kerans; but the Governor-General refused to buy it for so great a sum. That night the Jew's house was consumed by fire, the Jew himself being burned to death, and nothing remained of the contents of the house.

"That the golden belt did not perish in the flames is certain, since it appeared again after some little time; and many years afterwards a slave-attendant of the palace harem stated that she had seen a mysterious snake-girdle hanging therein. It may be that its presence there accounted for the fact, which was well known at the time, that a grievous sickness attacked the ladies of the harem and their children. Many died, for there was nothing that would cure them. But of that little ever came to light.

"In the course of time the Governor-General, returning to Turkey, took the road to Damascus, accompanied by a large following and a strong escort. The news that so large a party was leaving

Baghdad to cross the desert soon got noised abroad among the tribes, but none were found daring enough to risk an attack on it. A band of Shammar, however, followed on the heels of the great caravan at a safe distance for some days, watching their opportunity to waylay stragglers, and eventually came up with two camels which had broken down and were being urged on by a few men. The Shammar made short work of the men, and looted the packages carried by the camels. They contained much valuable property, and sewn up carefully in several silk *kaffiyas* was found the Golden Belt. Fearing to be followed, the robbers made off with their booty as rapidly as possible, and did not stop until they had put many miles between them and the caravan. Now it would seem, from what has been related, that the silk covering which enclosed the belt deprived it of its power of causing harm; for, it is on record that so long as it was wrapped up, no man suffered any evil effects from touching it, and it remained in the possession of the Shammar for some years. Those Khazail who had first dug it up, and later on sold it to the Jew in Baghdad, came to see it in the Shammar tents, and identified it as the same belt. They warned the Shammar of its hidden power, but were derided. Other tribes, hearing of the Shammar treasure, for which even a Baghdad Jew had paid a thousand kerans, made friends with its owners, so that they might inspect it. In this manner this offshoot of the Shammar made alliances with many tribes who had hitherto been hostile to them, and the Aeniza—too proud to approach their ancient enemies—were forsaken by many of their old friends.

"About this time my father's father died, and my father became Sheik of the Jelas. When he addressed his people, he told them that their hereditary foes, the Shammar, had grown strong because of their ownership of the serpents of gold, and he urged upon them the necessity of breaking the power of the Shammar, by attacking the small Salama tribe who held the belt, and seizing their treasure. It was my father himself who told me of this, so I know it to be true. He picked thirty of his best fighting men, rode all night, and attacked the Salama's camp at dawn. They resisted bravely, and a fierce fight ensued, but so sudden had been the onslaught, that the victory was easy. In those days, the Jelas neither gave nor expected quarter, and though they lost several men, they utterly destroyed the whole family of the Shammar Salama occupying these tents, with the exception of the sheik, Jedaan-ibn-Mirshid, and his spear-bearer, who, leaping to their horses, fled away. The pursuit was immediately taken up. Jedaan's mare cast a shoe, which caused her to stumble and fall, and my father, riding up, slew his enemy with his own hand—capturing the priceless Shahzadi, who, as you know, was none other than the grand-dam of dear Kushki."

"But how," I asked, "did Shahzadi's shoe become the talisman of the Muntafik?"

"Ah, that," said the sheik, "is a story for another time."

"And so," I said, "your people secured the Golden Girdle."

"No," replied Faris. "Do you not remember what was written in the paper which you read to me? Jedaan's spear-bearer escaped in the confusion attending the combat between my father and the Salama sheik; and, as was discovered later on, he carried the belt with him. What happened to him and the belt was only learned many years afterwards. He fled for refuge to the abode of a seer with whom many of the Bedouin tribes were on friendly terms, and whom they were in the habit of consulting. This seer dwelt alone in an underground chamber amongst the ruins of a town named Katib, at no great distance from Meshed Ali, and he received the refugee kindly, hiding him in his chamber for several days. When he heard the tale that he had to tell, and saw that he had with him the Golden Belt, he was much troubled; for he was convinced that, since the Shammar had worn the belt round his waist, he would either die before long or become mad. The seer determined to do what he could to save his guest, and after going through various ceremonies, which we people do not understand, he affirmed that he had held converse with the spirit of the dead Queen, who had told him that if the man proceeded to the ruins of Babil and buried the belt in the spot from which it had been dug up, so that no man should ever be able to find it again, and if he afterwards went and bathed in the Euphrates river, then no further harm should come to him. The Shammar, now beginning to feel ill, said that he was willing to obey any command that the seer should give him, but that it was impossible for him to discover the spot where he should bury the belt. This his friend assured him would be simple, since the spirit of the Great Queen could be procured to lend assistance. The Shammar late that night was given a potent draught; and the seer, after lengthy incantations, declared that the spirit had entered into him, and that he could conduct his guest to the very spot. So the two, taking the belt, proceeded to the ruins of Babil, and there buried the thing. Then the seer said that the spirit of the Queen required that a great fire should be lighted over the burial-place, as a signal to the gods that the Golden Belt was once again at rest. The bushes grew dense all around; to fire them was a simple matter; and the wind blew the flames till the fire spread far and wide. This done, the seer commanded the Shammar to ride with all speed to the river, and there bathe. The serpents, however, had already eaten into the flesh of the man, and he was no longer sane. He reached the river bank at dawn, and there, after a few hours, his body was found impaled on his own spear. Such was the end of the Golden Belt, and of the last man who wore it. That it happened as I have told you I am certain, as I had it from the very lips of that self-same seer."

"Then you knew him yourself," I exclaimed, in astonishment.

"Certainly," replied the sheik.

"How long ago did he die?" I asked.

"He still lives," said the sheik. "He is an old man, but many believe that he will never die."

The day was already dawning as Faris concluded his strange story, and the mares were being collected together to continue the journey to the sheik's headquarters, as it was not considered safe to leave them at this outlying grazing ground. I thanked my host for having taken the trouble to talk at such length for my entertainment, but he impressed on me that his main object had been to show me how useless it was for me to think of endeavouring to find the Golden Girdle. As a matter of fact, the end of his story had quite the opposite effect; for the knowledge that the seer was still in the land of the living gave me a ray of hope.

CHAPTER VII.

THE FIRE OF THE GODS.

"Well," said Edwards, after I had given him the sheik's account of the mysterious girdle, "what is your programme now? We cannot with any respectability go on sponging off Faris much longer. Besides, I am not a free man like yourself; I only obtained a month's leave, and three weeks of it have already gone. In fact, I am beginning to be nervous about the prospects of my being able to reach Baghdad before my leave is up."

"Never mind about your leave," I replied. "Forget the wretched fact that you are tied down to time. Think of the honour and the glory of running the Golden Girdle to earth. We are on the scent, man. It is breast high. With any luck, we shall kill in the open. So take a bit more leave, and risk it."

Edwards laughed.

"All right," he said, at last, "I suppose I cannot help myself. But I was beginning to have visions of being able to slip off with this money belt of yours, which I think is more likely to be useful than the other golden one that you are worrying about."

He took off the belt and threw it across the tent to me; as I caught it, some money dropped out of the pockets; and in picking up the gold coins, I noticed that two of them were not English sovereigns, but 10-mark pieces.

"That is curious," I remarked; "I wonder where these came from. I am perfectly certain my gold was all English. I suppose the thief had found a German wandering about the desert at some time or other."

I then examined all the pockets carefully, and found all my own money where it had always been; but there were two pockets at the back which I had not used, and in these I discovered, to my astonishment, eight more 10-mark pieces, and a sheet of paper on which something was written in German.

"Can you read German?" I asked.

"Yes, a bit," said Edwards.

"Then come along," said I, "and let us see what it is all about."

Edwards took the scrap of paper, looked at it for a second, then gasped.

"You have been properly done. Listen to this:"

> "To the merchant of Baghdad who shall be nameless. This to acquaint you of my success. The bearer will hand you the Serpent Belt of the Great Queen. On receipt of it, examine it thoroughly, and having assured yourself that it is genuine, pay the Arab 5000 kerans. Pack the belt carefully in a box of dates, and proceed with it immediately on the steamer to Bussorah. I send the Serpents to you, so that the sheik may be paid his money, and because I fear that I may be robbed of it if I keep the belt on my person. Your own reward as agreed upon you can deduct from my account. A thousand thanks for your assistance, from your devoted friend whose name you know."

"Is that all?" I asked.

"Every word," replied Edwards. "Isn't it enough?"

"I should have liked a date," said I.

"There isn't one," said Edwards; "but it has not been written long. You can see that by the pencil writing."

I looked at the paper again. There was no doubt that someone else had found my treasure, and had thus anticipated me. Then it suddenly occurred to me that the man who was carrying this note had been killed; that the note had never been delivered, and that consequently the Golden Girdle had never been handed over to the nameless Baghdad merchant. Still, the fact remained that, to all appearances, the girdle had been dug up by a European—German, Swiss, Austrian, or some other—and was undoubtedly above ground. I had lost it, that was certain; for, if another European had become possessed of it, he had just as much right to it as I should have had if I had

been fortunate enough to find it. I was bitterly disappointed; and Edwards, who hitherto had rather scoffed at my enthusiasm, was even more angry at the turn of events than I was. We held a long consultation as to what we should do, and we came to the conclusion that we were powerless to do anything. It was evident from the note that my rival knew the value of his find as well as I did, otherwise he would not be paying away large sums of money for it. Therefore it would be useless to try and find him and offer to buy it. I decided to take Sheik Faris into my confidence and ask his advice; so I went off to his tent, and told him about the note. At first he laughed at the whole thing, saying that it was absurd to believe that anyone had been able to find the girdle.

"When I slew Abbas-ibn-Rashid the other day," he said calmly, "I took care to search his body carefully. He certainly was not in possession of the Golden Belt of Serpents, or it would now be with me."

"Perhaps," I suggested, "some other member of the party had it, and rode away with it."

"I cannot believe," said the sheik, "that anyone has found it. Still, now that I reflect, there was that stranger—Indian, Syrian, or whatsoever he was—who, as I told you, fled in such haste from the field. Can it be possible that he was escaping with the serpent belt? Can he be the writer of that note?"

I saw it all. Undoubtedly the foreigner, aided by this party of Shammar, had succeeded in finding the girdle, and the dead man had been entrusted with it to convey to the Baghdad merchant. When Faris and his men appeared on the scene, the foreigner probably took the girdle and rode off out of harm's way. This seemed to me a very obvious solution of the problem, but when I put it before Faris, he shook his head.

"If," he said, after a pause, "I could believe that that was really so, I would gather every Jelas horseman, and I would hunt down that Shammar family until I found the stranger and the girdle. I would destroy the whole gang, and would lay the girdle at your feet."

"And thereby become entitled," I replied, with a laugh, "to the shoe once worn by the renowned Shahzadi."

The sheik smiled and rubbed his hands together with delight.

"No, sheik," said I, "I would never accept the girdle obtained in such a manner. If another man has found it, and has lawfully become its owner, I should honour him in that he had succeeded where I had failed. To take from him what was his own by right would be theft."

At this my host was somewhat abashed, though he explained that in the desert might was right, and that what a man could not keep he must lose.

"But," said he, "my curiosity is now as great as your own, and I will satisfy it. There is one who can tell me truly if the Great Queen's Girdle has returned to curse the world."

"Who is he?" I asked excitedly.

"That same seer," said the sheik, "who was the last to see the serpent belt. If anyone has disturbed its resting-place, the seer, by communicating with the spirit of the Queen, will be able to discover all that has occurred. You smile! You would mock at my belief in the powers of the seer! Such incredulity we desert folk ascribe to town-bred ignorance. We are aware that you of the towns—and especially you Ingleezee—know many things of which we have never so much as heard; yet, I tell you, there are things in the desert which no townsman can fathom. You are a strong man, and courageous, as I have seen with my own eyes. Therefore, I make this proposal to you; that you shall leave the Hakim here with Sedjur, and shall come with me to the abode of the seer, to hear from his lips if aught hath disturbed that accursed girdle. I warn you that the journey will be no easy one; two days and two nights in the saddle, carrying our own food and water; always liable to be attacked by roving Shammar, Muntafik, and Khazail; and only our two selves to resist attack, or to trust to the speed of our horses."

"Enough, sheik," I replied, "I will accompany you whenever you are ready to make the journey."

"It is well," said Faris. "I did not misjudge my man. We will have supper, and start with the moon an hour later. But you cannot go in those clothes of yours; the seer would be afraid of you. You shall wear garments which Sedjur and I will lend you."

Poor Edwards! I can see his face now. How he argued with me about my madness in thinking of such a crack-brained expedition! But he argued in vain, and when he saw that I was too obstinate to listen to him, he changed his tone and did all he could to help me prepare for my ride, dressing me up in my borrowed clothes, packing my light saddle-bags, and insisting on stuffing my pockets with enough revolver ammunition to wipe out half the Bedouins of the desert. I handed him over my money belt, for safe keeping; gave him instructions about returning to Baghdad if I failed to put in an appearance within a certain time; then, after grasping his hand, I mounted my little horse, and rode off by the side of the sheik.

We followed no visible track, but my companion never hesitated. Occasionally he looked up at the stars, but otherwise he sat motionless in the saddle, forging ahead at a fair pace hour after hour. I kept close on his heels, with my eyes intent on the blade of his spear, which was visible high above his head. I did not dare to break the silence, as I had been warned that at any moment we

might run across Bedouins who would probably prove enemies. Throughout that whole night, I may say, I rode with my heart in my mouth, and with my hand on my revolver. When the moon had sunk, the darkness was intense, and Faris slackened his speed, and more than once dismounted, to place his ear to the ground and listen. At dawn we halted on a rise, from which we could see the whole country for many miles around, when the sheik told me to get an hour's sleep while he watched; and I required no second bidding. On being awakened, I found my companion preparing to continue the journey; and after eating some dried dates and small cakes, we set out again, just as the sun commenced to rise over the boundless plain. No incident occurred to break the weariness of that day's ride; no human being, no beast, no bird was visible at any time; but before us always lay the mirage of distant water and the reflections of many buildings. Sometimes we halted to rest the horses and to snatch a meal or a nap; but such halts were of short duration, as the sheik insisted on pushing with all haste through what he now explained was a waterless region. We had almost expended on our horses and ourselves the water that we carried in our water-skins, and it was, therefore, a relief, at sundown, to see before us a far extending lake and marsh, which my friend assured me was no deceitful mirage. Tired as I was, I fully appreciated the delightful change of scene, as we rode through the scrub and green grass bordering the swamp, flushing snipe and waterfowl at almost every step.

"Are you sorry that you came?" asked the sheik, as we watered our gallant little beasts.

"No," I replied, "this alone is well worth it all. But, tell me, how far have we yet to go? I confess to you that I feel that I am in very truth a townsman, and not made of the same stuff as your horses and yourselves."

Faris smiled, and it was a pleasure to see his face relax, for throughout our ride he had worn a hard set expression, with eyes ever keen and restless. I knew, from the change, that he was no longer anxious, and he apologised profusely for having taxed my powers of endurance so highly.

"The worst is over," he said. "Because of the water, it was advisable to hurry. By midnight we shall have accomplished our journey."

It wanted yet an hour of midnight when, having ridden for some miles beyond the marsh, the moon showed us that we were entering extensive ruins. After picking our way through the débris of stone and brickwork for a considerable distance, the sheik stopped, and taking out some cords, thrust his spear into the ground and fastened our horses to it.

"Now listen," said he. "Twice will I call the owl, and once the jackal. If the cry of the hyæna comes back in reply all is well, and we can proceed."

Then, raising both hands to his mouth, he imitated both shriek-owl and jackal, the weird cries echoing again and again through the ruins. We listened intently, but there was no reply. Again the owl and the jackal called; and yet a third time. Then, after a short pause, there arose, within a few yards of us, the unmistakable cry of the hyæna.

"Good," said the sheik, "he has heard. Do you remain here, while I go and interview him. It would not be wise to take you with me, for I must first warn the old man to expect a stranger."

So Faris disappeared into the darkness, and I sat on a heap of brickwork anxiously awaiting his return. He may not have been absent long, though it seemed that he was away for hours. I was dead tired, and more than once I found myself dropping off to sleep, waking up suddenly each time with a start. Then I began to think that I saw beasts crawling about among the ruins; I slipped off my seat, and crouched as low as I was able, with my finger on the trigger of my revolver, which I had drawn ready for an emergency. Lions, I knew, were not uncommon in these parts, and each moment I expected to be set upon by some hungry beast. Gradually I worked myself up to the highest pitch of nervous excitement, prepared to empty my revolver into the first moving object that became visible. As I looked, I saw something crawling towards me; there was no doubt about it. I raised my revolver, fingering the trigger, and nerving myself for the shot, but the object had dropped behind a rock before I could fire. A moment later, I heard the sheik's voice calling to me in an almost inaudible whisper, and fearing that he would discover the state of nervousness at which I had arrived, I hastily put away my revolver, and answered him.

"Quietly," he said, on creeping up to my side, "do not make a noise. There is trouble, and other people are about. The seer is expecting visitors, some of the ruffianly Shammar, of whom he is in great fear. It is within an hour of the appointed time, and I have promised to watch, and help him should he call on me to do so. Keep quiet now, and listen with both ears."

Faris lay flat on the ground with his ear close to it, whilst I sat listening intently. The minutes passed, and no sound disturbed the deathly silence. Suddenly, the sheik whispered to me that he could hear their horses galloping towards us. Save the beating of my own heart, I could hear nothing.

"They have left their horses," said the sheik, "and are walking up to the seer's abode. We will give them time to enter, and then we will follow."

In a few minutes Faris arose, and, bidding me keep close behind him, led the way up a slight incline, and then down into what appeared to be a deep hollow. In the feeble light I could just distinguish some roughly cut steps, which with difficulty we descended. At the bottom, the sheik took me by the wrist and guided me rapidly along a paved path ending in a narrow gateway. Through this we passed, and entered a courtyard, at the far side of which we could see a light

streaming through the wide cracks of a massive wooden door. On reaching the door, my companion gripped my arm, and motioned me to halt. Through the cracks we could see clearly all that went on in the chamber within. Several oil lamps burned in little niches in the walls, which were white-washed and bare; from the centre of the domed ceiling hung an iron lamp, containing half a dozen lighted wicks; and another lamp hung over a doorway leading to an inner chamber. Seated on a low couch against one of the walls was a tall thin old man, clothed in a camel's-hair cloak, the hood of which concealed the upper part of his face. Opposite to him sat three stern-faced Bedouins, each with a spear in his hand and daggers protruding from his waistband. High words were already in progress.

"You agreed, Gat-tooth," said one of the Bedouins, "to sell it to us for 2000 kerans; my friends here are witnesses."

"Yes," said another, "and you agreed to meet us at the grove outside Babil, four days since, and deliver it to us."

"I was ill," said the old man, "and unable to do so."

"Know you," said the first Arab, "that your illness cost us the life of our sheik, Abbas-ibn-Rashid, who was ever your friend?"

"I know that he was killed," was the reply, "but he died as he would have wished, and you must all die at one time or another."

"That is indeed true both for you and for us," said the first speaker, "but I would have you know that I am now sheik in my uncle's place, and I have neither his generosity nor his kindness. I have sworn to avenge his death, not only by slaying his murderer, Faris of the Jelas curs, but also by demanding that you shall render up forthwith that for which you would have received 2000 kerans had you kept to your agreement."

"Fine words, Ahmed," replied the seer, quite unperturbed. "Yet pause before you act foolishly. You and your men have come here with naked spear points, which in itself is an insult to the goddess whom I serve. You come to this sacred spot prepared for robbery of the basest kind—robbery from an old man, unable to defend himself with weapons made by human hands. Now, look you, I take these eight beads from my rosary, and I shall let them fall one by one to the floor; when the fourth bead drops you will know that my appeal has reached the gods whom I serve; ere the sixth strikes the ground you must have gone out from this chamber; for, the seventh is the bead of ruin and destruction, and the eighth brings the avenging fire."

What was about to happen I could not conjecture; the old seer, now standing, broke the string of his rosary, and slowly counted out eight beads. I held my breath as I watched him, and wondered if I were dreaming. Faris laid his hand on my arm and held it as in a vice. Then the seer, muttering a few words, stretched out his hand with a bead between the finger and thumb. It dropped to the ground and, rebounding from the bricks, rolled away. The three Bedouins looked at one another and smiled; and Ahmed, rising, addressed the seer.

"Let fall your beads," said he, "and invoke your gods to the utmost. We know them not, and we curse them as vile impostors."

The seer did not vouchsafe a reply, but holding out his hand, let fall a second bead. A slight pause ensued, then the third bead dropped. It seemed to me that the Bedouins now showed some signs of wavering; they no longer smiled; and they shifted in their seats uneasily. The fourth bead was already between finger and thumb, and, like the others, it fell to the ground. Then the Bedouins rose, and I momentarily expected to see them hurl themselves on the strange figure confronting them. But the fifth bead had dropped before they moved, and as it struck the brick floor, it broke in pieces, and, as I thought, gave out some sparks. Whatever occurred was better seen by the Bedouins than by myself, and I noticed that all three of them recoiled. As the sixth bead was raised by the seer, I thought that I saw Ahmed clutch at his spear, but he and his companions now seemed unable to move. The sparks this time were unmistakable; and their effect on the Bedouins was to cause them to step hurriedly back, as if in flight. It was, however, too late, for the seventh bead left the seer's fingers immediately after the sixth; and the eighth followed the seventh as rapidly. In place of dropping this last one like the others, he hurled it with all his force at the very feet of the Arabs. It struck the ground with a report like that of a bomb, and instantly that portion of the floor seemed to open, and give forth great tongues of flame, which leaped up to the roof, and filled the whole chamber. It was a dreadful sight, and I could not restrain myself from shrieking aloud at the horror of it all.

"Fly," shouted Faris, clutching convulsively at my arm, "fly, before we also perish."

Great flames licked up the door in front of us, sweeping it away, then, bursting into the air, shot up, and cast a lurid glare over the ruins. By the light thus given, we were able to dash up the steps and through the piles of broken masonry, out of the hollow, with all speed. At last, when at a safe distance, we stopped, and turned to look back. The flames still poured forth, but now spasmodically, and the smoke grew thicker and blacker. Neither of us spoke, and from what I could see of his face, my companion was as much puzzled at what had occurred as was I. Dawn was approaching, and, as if afraid of the daylight, the flames died down, though the black smoke continued to belch forth through the doorway.

"Sheik," I said in a low voice, hardly daring to break the silence, "what was it?"

"As I have told you many times," he replied, "things happen in the desert which no man can account for. Can you, with all your knowledge of magic, say why fire suddenly issued from the ground and destroyed the inmates of that chamber?"

"I have no knowledge of magic," I said, "and the shock occasioned by what I saw has left me without power to think of a reason for it."

"Then I will tell you," said Faris, impressively. "The seer called on his gods to bring fire and burn up his enemies, yet he as well as they must have perished in the flames; for no man could have remained alive in that chamber."

I knew the uselessness of attempting to argue; neither at that moment was I at all sure that the sheik's solution was not the correct one. So I held my tongue, and sat and watched the smoke hurtling into the air, until, before long, my eyes grew heavy, my head dropped forward, and I sank into a deep sleep.

CHAPTER VIII.

RASPUL, THE SEER.

I slept for hours, and should have continued to do so for many hours longer, had not the sheik roused me.

"It is past mid-day," said he, "and we must be thinking of doing something. You have slept soundly, and should be refreshed. See, the fire is almost out."

Then the horrors of the past night came back to me; it had been no dream after all. I looked towards the doorway in the hollow, and now only a thin wreath of smoke was issuing from it.

"Shall we ride back to camp?" I asked.

"Not yet," replied Faris. "I must go down to the chamber and look. Will you also come?"

I hated the idea, but I felt that it would be cowardly to let the sheik go alone; so we walked down together, and finding that the smoke had now ceased, we peered through the doorway into the blackened chamber. A thick grimy soot caked the walls and the stone ceiling, and the air was laden with a foul smell, not unlike that of the boiling asphalt being prepared for a London street. Hesitating to enter, we stood on the threshold, not knowing that the flames might not burst out afresh; and the remembrance of those long tongues of fire curling through the doorway was sufficient to make us cautious. After a little, Faris took a step forward, and shading his eyes with his hand, looked into the gloom of the interior. I followed, but not without some misgivings. I looked first at the spot where the seer had been standing when I saw the last bead leave his hand. The couch from which he had risen had disappeared; nothing remained but a handful of ashes on the floor. I gazed across at the other side of the chamber, and when my eyes had become accustomed to the dim light, I was able to see a large hole in the floor exactly where I recollected to have seen the couch on which the three Bedouins had been seated. Faris saw it at the same instant, and uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"Let us go carefully, and look at it," he said.

We reached the edge, and found a great pit, how deep we were unable to see. Pungent fumes still issued from it, and we were forced to draw back. I turned to my companion for an explanation, and he dragged me out of the chamber, the atmosphere of which was oppressive.

"It was a bitumen well," said he, "and the seer purposely set it on fire through the agency of his gods. I am as much astonished as yourself; for, I have sat on that couch scores of times, never thinking that such a thing was beneath me. Perhaps it was not always there. Perhaps it was brought by the gods only when the seer invoked their aid. But little did he think that in thus destroying his enemies, he would also bring his own death."

The sheik had hardly finished speaking before we heard a low wailing chant coming from beyond the fatal chamber. Spellbound, we stood and listened. Now the sound grew louder; now died away. Again it came clear and strong. It was a strange unearthly crooning; and, had I been alone, I should have fled from it. That I trembled I have no doubt, and Faris saw my fear.

"Courage, lad," he said, taking me by the arm. "It is someone in the temple beyond. Come, let us go and see. Death only comes once, and our fate has already been arranged for us. If we are to die to-day, then we shall die. We cannot alter our fate."

I made no reply, but nerving myself with a great effort, walked with him through the chamber to the inner doorway. There was no door—whether it had been destroyed by the fire, or whether there never had been one, I cannot say. Beyond the doorway was a narrow bricked passage, with here and there long slanting slits admitting the daylight. A steep flight of steps led us to another stone doorway, on the lintel of which were carved queer figures of beasts. Here we stood and listened. The chanting still continued; and we moved on for a short distance along the tunnel-like passage. Presently we found ourselves in a circular vaulted room, with bare walls rising to a

height of some fifteen feet before the dome of the roof began. In the centre of the dome was a hole, a foot or so in diameter, through which the sky was visible. Eight passages, similar to that by which we had entered, radiated from the chamber, so that its walls appeared like solid pillars supporting the roof. We listened again, but no sound could we now hear.

"Sheik," I whispered, fearing to speak aloud, "do you know which way to take?"

"No," he replied, "I know not this place. I have never before penetrated it."

"Then let us return by the way we came," I urged.

"Courage, lad," said the sheik; "we will go on."

The rebuke, uttered a second time, stung me, although I knew that it was meant kindly. I had always thought that I possessed an ordinary amount of courage, but it seemed now to have deserted me.

"Well, which way shall we go?" I asked in desperation.

"We will try this one," said Faris, moving to the nearest entrance on his right.

I followed him closely along the new passage, just able to see the way by the glimmer of daylight falling through the occasional narrow loopholes, which slanted upwards towards the heavens. That the walls were thick and solid we could see from the depth of the loopholes—four feet they must have been, at the least. For some thirty yards or so the tunnel was straight; then it took a sudden turn to the left; then, after a few yards, a sudden turn to the right; again to the left, and twice more in succession to the left; after which we turned at right angles to the right, and going for a short distance, found ourselves in another circular chamber, alike in all respects to the first one. There was again the hole in the vaulted roof, and there were the nine passages leading out of it.

I sighed audibly, and the sheik looked at me and laughed.

"You are a magician," he said, "come, try your magic. Divine for us which path we had better take."

"I know no magic that could avail us in this accursed spot," I replied. "Let us take the way that we came, and retrace our steps out of these underground dungeons; or shall we cast lots as to the road we shall follow?"

"We will do that," said Faris.

I took nine revolver cartridges out of my pouch, and, shaking them in my hands, said that I would throw them on the floor; then we would enter that passage whose entrance lay nearest to a cartridge. The sheik seemed much impressed by this, imagining, no doubt, that I was working magic. So, hurling the cartridges into the middle of the chamber, I watched them roll away. One of them stopped quite close to an entrance, and the sheik forthwith led the way into the tunnel. Our wanderings were much the same as before, and had the same result, in that, after several turns and twists, we arrived at another circular chamber, from which nine passages radiated.

The sheik was now beginning to lose his temper, and he cursed the man who had designed the building that was causing us all this trouble. Then he suddenly stepped forward, and stooping down, picked up something, which he handed to me. That something was one of my own revolver cartridges!

"Do you understand?" asked the sheik.

"I must have just dropped it," I replied.

"No," said he, "it is one of those that you threw on the ground. We have returned to the chamber from which we set out. These tunnels have made fools of us. Shall we leave them, and abandon our search?"

"Yes," I said eagerly, "it is the best thing we can do, for I see that you are right; we certainly have come back twice to the same place."

But now arose a difficulty; there was no difference in appearance between the entrance to one tunnel and that to another. Nine of them confronted us. We knew which one we had just issued from, but we knew nothing else. We walked round the chamber and examined each passage, but found no clue. My heart sank, for I observed that the scanty light which came into the dungeon was rapidly growing less, and that the day, in the outside world, was evidently fast drawing to a close. Faris, though annoyed at being outwitted, was still cheerful—and his cheerfulness irritated me.

"Come, magician, cast lots again," said he. "Maybe this time they will avail us better. The nearest cartridge to the tunnel which shall bring us freedom. Throw the nine."

Again I threw the cartridges, and, as before, we wandered through a passage, now almost dark, expecting each moment to reach the flight of steps by which we had descended some hours before. We were, however, doomed to disappointment. The passage turned and twisted, and eventually brought us back to the prison chamber, with its high walls and its domed roof.

It was now so dark that we could barely see the entrances to the various passages; there seemed

to be nothing for it but to spend the night where we were and again attack the tunnels in the daylight. I, myself, was dejected, dead tired, hungry, and thirsty; perhaps, I thought, we should never get out of the place, but wander about until we died of hunger and thirst. Faris, however, was quite hopeful.

"We will sleep here in comfort," he said, "like true townsmen, with a roof over our heads. There is no water, certainly, but I have some dried dates in my pocket, and they will sustain us. When daylight returns, we will try each passage in turn, until we find that one which leads to the steps."

"Could not we break through the wall," I asked, "and so escape?"

"The walls are thick and firmly cemented, as you must have noticed," he replied. "Save my knife, we have no instruments with which to pick out the bricks. Still, if, when the light comes, we fail to find the passage that we want, then will we attack the walls. Come, here are some dates, eat and be joyful; after which we will sleep and have pleasant dreams. Then to-morrow we will gallop our little horses across the desert. Poor beasts, they must be tired of waiting for us."

All light soon left the chamber, and through the opening in the roof we could see the stars mocking at us. From each of the nine tunnels the chill air appeared to pour in upon us, so that, for warmth, we sat close together, with our backs against the portion of wall which separated one passage from the next. In this position, in absolute darkness, we ate our hard, dried dates, and tried to sleep. Whether or not the sheik and I actually slept I am not certain. I think that I, at any rate, must have done so, because I have no recollection of hearing or seeing anything until I felt the sheik's great horny hand gripping my thigh, and I became aware that something was happening. A light was streaming into the chamber, and, as I looked, I saw the wall between two tunnels exactly opposite to us gradually opening like a hinged door. The portion of wall was, in fact, an actual door, and when it had opened wide, I could see behind it a narrow passage, lighted with small lamps. In the doorway there stood what appeared to me to be an immensely tall naked figure, and so thin that it might have been the representation of a living skeleton. The head and face were streaked with paint, so that they resembled a fleshless skull, and the ribs and other bones of the body were also painted to look like the outline of a skeleton. For a second it hesitated on the threshold, with one arm stretched out towards us; then slowly stepping into the chamber, it closed the door, and thus left us again in darkness.

Neither of us spoke. I, personally, imagined that what I had seen was merely in a dream; but I was wide awake, and could clearly hear my companion breathing. The spectre, or whatever it was, was shuffling about in front of us, and I expected each moment to feel the touch of ghostly hands. Then in a deep sepulchral voice came the words:—

"Strangers are here within the sacred precincts. Let them account for themselves, ere the fire comes to destroy them."

"We are not willingly here," answered the sheik, fearlessly. "We are lost, and if you will guide us to the outside world, we will gladly follow."

"Who are ye who speak thus lightly?" inquired the spectre.

"Faris-ibn-Feyzul," replied the sheik, "and a friend."

Then we heard a click, and the wall-door opened, showing the strange figure standing in the entrance to the lighted passage. The outstretched arm pointed down the passage, and presently the figure turned and motioned to us to follow.

"Come," whispered Faris to me, "we will see what it means, even though it be Death that is enticing us on."

So we started on our new and fearful journey, being led, as it seemed to me, to execution. The passage was not of great length, and it ended suddenly in a blank wall. There was again a clicking sound, and a portion of the wall swung back to allow us to pass through, and what a sight met our gaze!

We entered an octagonal-shaped temple, evidently of a most ancient date, with walls of glazed bricks of various colours and arranged in strange patterns. All around was a species of colonnade, supported by carved pillars, standing on the heads of winged bulls, and in the alcoves of the colonnade were long stone benches. Numerous small lamps illuminated the interior, and in the centre was a black wooden altar, with, immediately above it, an opening in the roof. Even at such a moment as this I could not help thinking what my uncle would give to see this magnificent specimen of a Babylonian temple; and I wondered how it had happened that all the scientific excavators had failed to discover these extraordinary and interesting remains. Such thoughts as these, however, did not occupy my mind for long, for the stern reality of the present soon drove away all musings on the past.

As soon as the door had shut to with the uncanny click, the sound of which was beginning to be familiar, the ghost-man turned and faced us. My hand involuntarily moved towards my revolver; for I had made up my mind that, whatever line the sheik might take, I would defend myself in the event of attack. The figure saw my intention.

"Fear not," said he, in a soft voice, "you are my guests here, in the Temple, and are under the protection of the gods. Faris, it is I, Raspul the Seer, who welcome you. When I heard you in the

outer chamber, I was offering a sacrifice to the gods who have recently befriended me. It is a great occasion, and before attending to your wants, I must finish the ceremony required of me."

The sheik's face was a study of utter bewilderment. He looked at our strange host, but said nothing. Neither had he time to do so; for the seer abruptly left us, and began his devotions, while we sank on to a bench in the nearest alcove. The air of the temple and its surroundings was heavy with intoxicating perfumes, which appeared to mount to one's brain; and I noticed that Faris more than once put his hand to his forehead, as if feeling their effects. As to myself, I found it difficult to realise that I was not dreaming. But that things happened as I am about to relate I firmly believe; for I afterwards cross-questioned Faris carefully, and what he described that he saw agreed exactly with what I am convinced that I saw, and he could have had no object in deceiving me. Yet, I have often thought that both of us must have been under some extraordinary influence, which, for the time being, at any rate, warped our intellects, and caused us to see, or to imagine that we saw, things which in more sober moments we should have ridiculed.

CHAPTER IX.

IN THE TEMPLE OF SOPHANA.

One by one the lamps that flickered in the temple were extinguished by the seer, who left burning only those two which hung on either side of the altar. Then Raspul stood before the altar, with arms upraised, and head thrown back so as to look through the roof-hole, apparently wrapped in meditation. His lips moved rapidly, and at times his whole body became convulsed. Finally, he bowed before the altar, and threw dust on his head.

As we watched, we saw the weird figure rise up and walk slowly across the pavement to a small door, through which it passed, and disappeared for a while. When the seer entered the temple again, he was a changed man. He was no longer disguised in paint, but was clothed in a long yellow silken robe. I now for the first time saw his face clearly. It was thin and wan, with a parchment-like skin almost of the same colour as his robe, and clean shaven—as was also the whole of his head. Such a face I had never seen before, and I gazed on it in wonder.

"Is this really the seer of whom you told me," I whispered to Faris, "and the same that we thought had perished in the fire?"

"Yes," he replied, "but do not speak, for fear of breaking the spell which is upon him."

So I remained silent, and watched intently the movements of the seer, who was now busying himself around the massive wooden altar. From the doorway he brought faggots, and piling them up, poured oil over them; then he took a lighted wick from the hanging lamp, and set fire to the pile on all sides. The burning sticks crackled, and the flames shot up towards the hole in the roof, and we could see that the altar itself was ablaze. Why should the man—or priest, as he evidently was—destroy his own altar, I wondered. Could it be that the seer had become mad? Yet he appeared to be perfectly calm, as, standing back from the heat of the fire, he gazed on his handiwork.

He was now praying earnestly, and at times stretched out his hands towards the altar in supplication. At first only his lips moved, and no sound came from them; but, presently, in his fervour, he began to speak aloud, and then slowly but clearly came the words.

"O Queen! Great Goddess-Queen! Think not that Raspul, thy slave, thy worshipper, hath done aught to merit thy displeasure. Never had he any intention of betraying his trust, and had not the fire come to help him, he would have willingly died in the defence of the secret. He lied to the tribesmen who sought the treasure, and he made false promises. For such things, I, Raspul, humble myself before my Queen and the gods, and seek their pardon. Manifest thyself, Immortal Sophana, and thus let thy slave know that his deeds have not been misunderstood."

As he spoke, the seer continuously flung handfuls of incense on to the fire, and the flames streaked upwards in varied colours, while the temple was filled with penetrating odours. The glare, the heat, and the heavily-perfumed air made my head throb until I thought it would burst, and the sheik, I noticed, was equally overcome. The altar was rapidly being consumed; the flames had died down; curls of smoke ascended; while the massive timbers, glowing red, began to crumble away and fall to the ground. Then, suddenly the whole structure tottered and fell with a crash, an immense volume of smoke leaping towards the roof-hole, and filling every corner of the temple. Nearly blinded and half-suffocated, I began to fear that the seer was attempting to destroy us in the same way that we had seen him destroy his three Bedouin foes.

"Let us escape," I said to Faris, as I jumped to my feet; "quick, before we are smothered."

"Lie down flat on the floor," he replied, "and keep quiet. The smoke will, in the course of time, all pass through the hole."

"Look!" he said presently, touching me on the arm.

I raised myself from the floor, and turned my eyes towards the spot where the altar had been. The smoke was clearing off; and, as it cleared, I saw, by the dim light of the single lamp, two

figures among the pieces of charred wood. One was kneeling, and I recognised in it the form of the seer. The other was standing, and it was the figure of a woman.

"O Goddess-Queen!" muttered the seer in a low tone, "I thank thee for once again coming to me in my old age. It shall be as thou commandest. It were better to destroy it for ever, than to permit it to be the cause of further bloodshed. Maybe, its spirit shall be wafted to the palace wherein thou now dwellest; and, Great Goddess, if it be thy pleasure, permit the spirit of Raspul, thy slave, to pass, at the same time, into thy service in the other world."

The smoke had by this time completely cleared away, and the sheik and I, eager to see the better, quietly rose from the ground, and stood behind one of the pillars. I was now able to see the figure of the goddess distinctly. I looked intently, and it seemed to me that what I saw was a corpse, tightly swathed in grave-clothes. It stood motionless, and as the face was turned away from us, we were unable to distinguish its features. Once or twice I thought that I detected a slight quiver in the body; but I was in a state of intense nervous excitement, and was capable of imagining almost anything. Thus, behind the shelter of the pillar, we stood looking at the strange pair, and anxiously awaiting developments. There was now no sound; Raspul still knelt before the goddess, who neither spoke nor moved; and the moments that passed seemed to us to be endless. At length, the seer rose slowly from his knees, and stood erect, his head bent forward, and his arms hanging by his side. Then, turning in our direction, as if suddenly remembering our presence, he spoke in a solemn, impressive voice which resounded through the whole temple.

"Faris-ibn-Feyzul and that other man," he said, "listen to the command of the Great Goddess Sophana. When you leave this her temple, if you ever leave it alive, you must banish from your minds aught that you have witnessed herein. You will not move from the spot whereon you are now standing until the goddess grants you permission to do so. Should you disobey, then will the curse of the gods be upon you, and by their fires shall you perish. These are the words of the Beloved of the Gods, that Immortal Sophana, who during her sojourn in this world was Queen of the Assyrians. I, Raspul, her slave, have said it."

Having delivered himself of this warning, to which neither of us replied, the seer turned again towards the goddess, and raising his robe took from his waist a roll of silk. Sweeping clean a small space on the floor, he laid the roll upon it, and then began to unwind fold after fold of silk wrappings, and it was soon apparent that a belt was hidden within. Have I lived another life, in another world? I kept saying to myself, as I watched what was taking place. I had, perhaps, dreamed of it; but certainly I had somewhere before seen it all clearly enough. I knew exactly what was going to happen, and that which I expected did actually happen. The last fold of silk was unwound, and there lay in Raspul's hands the GOLDEN GIRDLE. I was not astonished, but the sight of it made me shiver with excitement, until my teeth chattered, and so close was I standing to the sheik that I could feel that he was in much the same state as myself. Even he, the immovable Bedouin, was showing emotion.

"The Serpent Belt," he gasped out in an undertone.

"Yes," I whispered in reply, "it is good to have lived even to have seen it. But what will he do with it?"

"Hush," said the sheik, "let us wait and see."

We were not left long in suspense as to forthcoming events, for no sooner did the seer expose the belt to view than, kissing it reverently, he clasped it round the waist of his goddess. Then, kneeling once more before her, he prayed aloud.

"To the Immortal Goddess," he said, "I, her servant, return that which in her worldly existence ever bore her to victory, and which, when she was taken to rule over the gods, remained behind to become the curse of the covetous inhabitants of the world. It was at thy command, Great Goddess-Queen, that I caused the last man who ever saw it to re-inter it in its abiding-place. It was at thy command that death afterwards came to him. It was at thy command that I, Raspul the seer, recovered it, and by none other than thyself, Sophana Great Goddess-Queen, was I appointed its guardian. The time has now, doubtless, come when it is meet that I should quit this world and pass into the service of the gods. For that reason I willingly obey the behest of my mistress, who ordereth that, through fire, the spirit of the Sacred Belt shall soar into the realms of the Great Unknown."

Much more he said, but he spoke in an undertone and we could only catch a word here and there. I now feared the worst. He was evidently going to destroy the Golden Girdle; and the thought that all my hopes of obtaining it were about to be dashed to the ground made me forget fatigue, hardship, fear, and everything else. I quietly drew my revolver, hardly knowing what I intended to do, but Faris saw the movement, and seized my wrist.

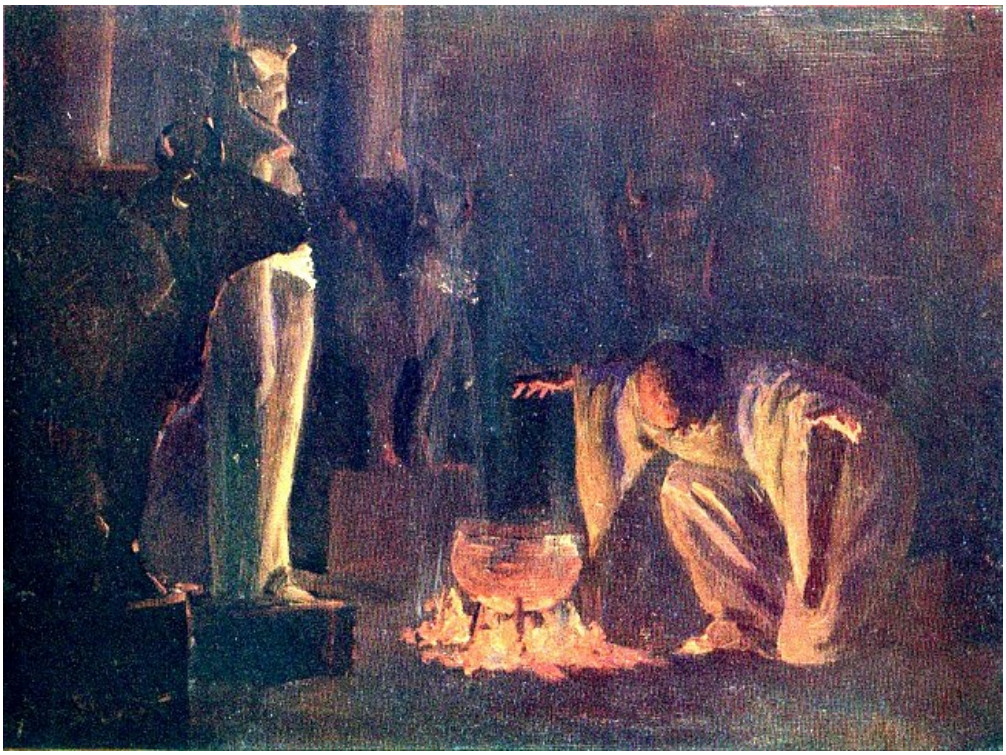
"Fool," said he, "would you murder a priest in the presence of his goddess, in her own temple? Tush! it were madness."

I knew that it would be so; yet, was I to stand by and see the whole object of my journey, the one thing that I imagined that I lived for, destroyed before my very eyes? There was the Golden Girdle almost within my grasp—barely twenty paces from me. I could see each serpent that composed it clearly outlined on the white figure of the goddess. One shot from my revolver would secure the treasure. But the sheik's grip brought me to my senses and saved me from being a murderer.

"Speak to him, then," I said, in a state of agitation. "Offer him a price for the Serpent Belt."

"It would be useless," answered Faris. "He is possessed, and cannot control his actions. See, he is preparing the fire which is to consume it."

The seer had already brought cakes of bitumen and charcoal, and had kindled a small but hot fire. With difficulty he placed a heavy iron vessel over it, and then, blowing on it through a hollow bamboo, watched the fuel ignite and grow red. Every now and then, he prostrated himself before the goddess, and besought her to give heat to the fire, which, it seemed to me, she must have done; for, before long the iron vessel began to glow, and was soon red hot. That the end was near I realised; and as Raspul, after examining the vessel carefully, moved towards the goddess, my hand again sought my revolver—but only again to be arrested by my companion.



"HE PROSTRATED HIMSELF BEFORE THE GODDESS, AND BESOUGHT HER TO GIVE HEAT TO THE FIRE"

Then Raspul knelt, and began to unclasp the belt, while I held my breath. It was undone. The seer took it in his hands, turned it over, and fondled it. Great beads of perspiration stood out on my forehead as I saw the glitter of the golden serpents, which seemed to writhe and twist about as if alive. Faris grew impatient and, to my horror, stamped his foot on the ground.

Whether Raspul and his goddess heard that stamp no man can say; but, as if in response to it, there occurred the most fearful noise that has ever fallen on my ears. With a terrific crash, huge portions of the roof surrounding the hole rained down on the head of the unfortunate seer, who must have been instantly killed. Enormous masses of masonry hurtled on to the goddess, who, however, stood unmoved. At first, I imagined that the wrath of the gods had overtaken Faris and myself for my companion's thoughtless stamp, but why the faithful Raspul should have suffered I could not understand. All this, and many other thoughts, passed through my mind in the space of a second; for, no sooner did we see the seer stricken down than we forgot all dread of the consequences and rushed to his assistance. Yet, barely had we advanced a couple of steps into the actual temple, before another portion of the roof fell, and with it the lamp which provided the only light. Suddenly we heard a chorus of voices above us; and, looking up at the great gap in the roof, we could see that day was just dawning, and that a number of men were peering down into the temple.

"Stand quiet," said the sheik, softly. "Get your revolver ready, and we will fall on them when they enter. By their speech I take them for some of the twice-accursed Shammar."

Then, by the scanty light coming through the hole, we saw a rope lowered from above, and immediately a man descended to the ground. In another second he gave a shout, and before we realised what was taking place, he was swiftly hauled up again through the gaping roof. We waited for others to descend, but no others came. Presently, we heard a wild shout of exultation, and the sounds of many feet hurrying over the roof. Then all was quiet.

"What is it that has happened?" I asked the sheik, when I could find my tongue.

"Allah alone knows," said he. "It may be that the Shammar came to avenge their three friends whom the seer caused to perish by fire. They are satisfied, and have gone. But, come, there is light enough now, let us see if the unfortunate man is truly dead."

Over the pile of fallen masonry, in the fast growing light, we clambered to the spot where Raspul lay. There we found his body, with the life crushed out of it by great heaps of stone and brickwork. Close by stood the goddess, beautifully sculptured in white stone, but broken and chipped by the avalanche that had recently descended on it. Faris looked at the figure with a certain amount of reverence, then sat on some stones in silence—a silence which I, for my part, felt no inclination to break. I had passed through enough in the last few hours to desire nothing but quiet, so, sinking on to the ground, I endeavoured to collect my thoughts.

After a while, the sheik suddenly turned to me, and looked steadily into my face.

"You are a great magician," he said, "to have caused all this to happen. I told you once that your magic could not prevail against that of Raspul. I spoke foolishly, for he lies dead before you."

"Sheik," I replied, vehemently, "I have denied to you that I am a magician. I swear it before my God, before Allah, and before the gods of the heathen. I have had no hand in these terrible events. I possess no power to work good or ill; and I beseech you to believe my words."

"Then I will believe you," he replied, holding out his hand and grasping mine; "for, under such circumstances as these, I doubt if any living man would dare to speak otherwise than truly. But what is done is done, and we cannot alter it. It was Raspul's fate to die thus, and from what we heard him say, he knew that he was to die soon. His spirit has doubtless gone whither he wished it to go, but he cannot have taken the Golden Serpents with him. That will be your reward for all that you have passed through."

It seemed to me that there would be something of sacrilege in taking the belt from the hands of the dead seer, lying at the feet of the image of his goddess. I did not like the idea of it—in fact my heart failed me. I argued with myself on the folly of neglecting the opportunity now that it had come; but the longer I reflected the less inclined did I feel to have anything to do with the mysterious girdle. I brought to mind all that the sheik had told me of its strange history, and I remembered that so long as it remained wound round with silk it was harmless. Here with my own eyes I had seen a dire calamity follow the unwinding of the silk wrappings, and the exposure of the shining metal. Superstition had seized hold of me, and I dreaded to touch the thing. I confessed my misgivings to Faris, and I saw him smile.

"You are a Christian," he said, "yet you fear the wrath of the gods of the heathen! I myself will take the serpent belt, and if evil befalls me then I shall count it my fate. I do not want the belt, nor the money that it is worth, but if I can but obtain the shoe of Shahzadi, as a reward for sending it to the big house of which you spoke, then shall I go down to my grave in happiness."

He stepped across to the pile of rubbish under which Raspul was almost buried, and I felt impelled to follow. We looked on the ground among the débris, but could not see the object of our search. Removing the stones and bricks from the body of the seer, we placed it gently on a bench in one of the alcoves. The belt was not in his hand, as we imagined that it would have been; neither could we discover it anywhere near the spot where he had fallen. I became as excited as did the sheik, and together we removed the stones, and hunted everywhere for the lost treasure. At last we desisted, and looked at one another in bewilderment.

The Golden Girdle had disappeared.

CHAPTER X.

A DASH FOR FREEDOM.

"Possibly," I suggested, "the unfortunate seer flung the belt into the cauldron as he fell, and it was melted."

"No," said the sheik, "that he did not do. I saw the serpents glittering in his hand when he was on the ground. Besides, look, there is no melted gold in the cauldron."

That was certainly true; for, though the great iron vessel had been overturned, there was no sign of gold upon it, or anywhere on the ground about it.

Suddenly leaping to his feet, Faris swore a fearful oath.

"Fools that we have been!" he almost shrieked in his rage. "Fools, ten thousand times fools! That Shammar devil with the rope came to steal it, and he carried it off. I see it all now; and we let him escape! To think that I, Faris-ibn-Feyzul, should have been outwitted thus by my enemies! I swear by yonder corpse," he continued, solemnly extending his hands, "that I will avenge the death of Raspul; that, so long as my life continues, I will war against the Shammar scoundrels who have done this thing. I will pursue them to the uttermost ends of the earth, though it may cost me my own life, and though it may cost my tribe the lives of all the fighting men. I have sworn it, and may the curse of the Golden Serpents, which is the curse of Sophana, the Great Queen, again

harry the Shammar, as it did of yore."

The man's wrath was terrible to witness. I did my best to calm him; for, in reality, the disappearance of the girdle was rather a relief to me than otherwise; and, after a while, he became more reasonable, and suggested that I must be hungry. Under the circumstances it was a somewhat prosaic suggestion; but it was certainly a fortunate one, in that it recalled both of us to our senses. More dried dates furnished us with a meal; and, to our joy, we found, standing in a corner of the temple, some pots of water, of which we drank greedily. To sleep, or even rest, was out of the question, for neither of us wished to remain longer than necessary on the spot. How to get out of it was our next thought, and we simultaneously decided that our only possible way of escape would be by the hole in the roof. The idea of again attempting to enter the maze of tunnelled passages we never for a moment entertained; and we at once set about to discover a means by which we might reach the opening above us. The height of the centre of the dome was at least fifteen feet from the ground. We searched for a ladder, but could find none; we sought in vain for wood and cords out of which we might improvise one; and after each fruitless search I became more and more dejected. Things had been bad enough before; but now I saw before me a lengthy incarceration in this temple prison, if not even death by starvation. Yet, the sheik's courage never left him. He was impatient, certainly, at not being able to pursue his enemies forthwith; but he did not appear to think for a moment that there was any great difficulty in our way to freedom.

"Well," I asked at last, "what do you propose that we shall do?"

"Build a tower," replied Faris, laughing, "like that of the Birs Nimroud, until we reach the outer world. Then for our poor little horses; a long gallop home to our tents; and, before many days, with spear and sword against the Shammar."

I caught the sheik's enthusiasm when I realised that his plan was feasible; and we both set to work with a will to collect and arrange carefully the blocks of stone and brickwork that lay scattered about. The goddess, we found, was firmly fixed in the ground, so around the figure we formed the foundation of our tower, and before long we had built up to the level of her head and had completely concealed her. Each of us in turn, like children, climbed to the top of the loose pile to see how high we were from the ground, and then continued to add stone after stone to the fast-growing heap. Occasionally we were delayed by a sudden collapse at the bottom; but we built up again rapidly, and at length came the time when, standing upright, I was able to place my fingers on the edge of the broken roof. It was a glorious moment, and I could almost sniff the desert air outside. The thought of being once more free sent a thrill through me, and I remembered a certain gymnastic feat at which I had excelled when at school. It occurred to me that I was confronted with the identical thing, the only difference being that in place of having to pull myself up over the edge of, and on to, a smooth wooden platform, I now had before me a rough, jagged edge of brickwork. It was worth the attempt, and I tried it.

Firmly, with both hands, I gripped the edge, and slowly I let my weight hang on my hands, when, horror of horrors, an immense portion of roof broke off, and fell with a crash to the ground. At the same moment I lost my balance, and though, fortunately, I kept my feet, my descent was so unpremeditated that I brought down half our loosely-built structure on my heels. Faris, standing at a little distance, could not make up his mind whether to laugh or be angry. Of one thing, however, both of us now became aware: it was improbable that the roof of the dome would support our weight, so loosened had the materials composing it become by the rough treatment it had received at the hands of the Shammar. Still, there remained the fact that we had heard people walking about on it with impunity, and this gave us hope; moreover, I had brought down such a huge sheet of the roof, that it was now broken away in one part almost to the wall that supported it. We soon made up our minds, therefore, that our tower would have to be built over again, and closer in to the side wall, so that, by breaking down another piece of the dome, we should be able to climb out over the actual top of the wall. How we laboured at the new tower! Hours passed before it had attained the required height; but, at last we were able to again reach the edge of the roof, when, with the greatest care, we pulled down the foot or two that remained between it and the wall top. Then we added to the height of our pile, until the happy moment came when the sheik, climbing slowly upwards, was able to rest his elbows on the wall, and haul himself up. I quickly followed; and there we two lay panting, and looking down with joyous eyes on the surrounding ruins and the boundless desert in the distance.

If I had had my way, I should have remained there for hours, and rested; but Faris was on his feet in a few minutes, and urged me to hurry after him, so that we might get to our horses, and start on our journey. When I come to think of it now, after a lapse of many months, I am astonished at the absurd confidence that we had, that we should find our horses where we had left them. I myself never gave the matter a thought; and if the sheik had any misgivings, he did not disclose them. As can be imagined, therefore, when we reached the spot where the hobbled horses had been left, and found that they had disappeared, our hearts sank. The sheik examined the ground in all directions, and soon broke it to me that the Shammar had carried off our horses; he was able to trace their footprints among those of the Shammar horses; and they had added insult to injury by breaking his spear in pieces and taking away the blade.

"I ought to have known that it would have been so," he said, almost in despair. "The Shammar dogs have again made fools of us."

"Never mind," I said, trying to treat the matter lightly; "we must walk."

"Walk!" he replied, derisively. "How think you we shall walk through that waterless waste, when even to ride through it is courting death?"

"Perhaps," I suggested, "Sedjur, finding us gone so long, will come to meet us."

"He may do so," said the sheik hopefully "In any case, we may as well die in the desert, as among these infernal ruins. So, come, let us walk."

I never in my life felt less inclined to start on a long tramp; and the knowledge that we had no water and nothing to carry it in, and no better food than a few dried dates, did not add to my spirits. However, I pulled myself together, and stepped out behind Faris, whose swinging pace was terrific. Towards sundown we approached the marsh through which we had ridden two days before, and to our astonishment saw, on the far side, a thin curl of smoke rising upwards.

"Sedjur to the rescue," I said.

The sheik smiled, and bade me remain where I was, while he went to reconnoitre. On looking carefully, we could see that there were tents, camels, horses, and a goodly number of men, and the spot which they had selected for their encampment was close to the edge of the lake, a mile or so from us. To approach them was easy, as the rushes of the marsh grew almost up to the encampment. Divesting himself of his clothes, and cutting some of the rushes, Faris quickly knotted them together in large bunches, and tied them in wisps round his head and the upper part of his body. Then he waded into deep water towards the edge of the rushes, and concealing himself carefully, gradually worked his way round towards the tents. As he said, there was little chance of our being noticed, as no Bedouins would think of looking out for anyone on foot in such a desolate and remote part of the desert.

I sat on a tuft of rush grass, and watched the waterfowl taking their evening flight, hopeful that relief was not far off, and expecting each moment to hear a wild shout of welcome from across the water. I thought of the delight of finding George Edwards, Sedjur, and others, waiting to receive us, with fresh horses, good food, and a comfortable tent in which to sleep in peace for hours. So I dreamed on, and nearly fell off to sleep, but no shout came. Then, in an hour or so, the sheik returned, and shattered all my hopes. He had crept up close to the tents, and had discovered that the party evidently consisted of some important personages, probably proceeding, from some interior town, on a pilgrimage to Meshed Ali, or returning home, with a strong escort of a tribe, the men of which he was unable to identify.

"Suppose," I said, "we go boldly up to the encampment, tell the strangers that we have lost our horses, and seek their hospitality. They cannot refuse to befriend us."

"It would be worse than folly," said the sheik. "For all I know, they may be my bitterest foes. Besides, they would never be taken in by your disguise, and would suspect us at once."

"But," I argued, "I could tell them from the first that I was an English traveller."

"No," said the sheik, "it would not do. The risk would be too great I have a better plan. I observed how their horses were fastened to pickets; and where their water-skins lay ready filled. When it is dark, and they have gone to rest, we will take two of the horses and some water-skins, and proceed on our journey."

I did not like his plan, and I told him so.

"If we are caught," I said, "they will give us what we deserve as horse-thieves."

"Inshallah!" he replied; "what matter? As good a death as starvation, and, at any rate, a quicker one. But, if you will follow my instructions, we shall not be caught."

"All right," I unwillingly acquiesced, "I will do whatever you wish."

We waited for a couple of hours, and then moved through the rushes in the direction of the encampment. The moon was in the first quarter, and gave us a little light, thus enabling us, when we approached the tents, to see how things were situated. The sheik pointed out to me the position of the water-skins, and two outlying horses which he had decided that we should seize. We were now in the lake itself, standing almost up to our necks in water, and not more than ten yards from the bank. About a hundred yards to our right front were the tents; between us and them, lying on the edge of the lake, were the filled water-skins; while fifty yards or so to our left front stood the two horses. Faris now gave me my orders. I was to wade straight to the water-skins, secure two of them, and make my way as stealthily as possible to the horses; while he himself cut them loose, and waited for me.

I at once started to carry out my instructions; reached the water-skins, but was appalled by their weight. I was afraid to stand up and carry them in the ordinary way; to crawl on the ground with a bulky skin in each hand was out of the question. Fortunately, however, I had always possessed a certain amount of ready resource, and I quickly took out my knife, ripped my saturated cloak into strips, with which I secured a skin loosely to either side of my waist. Then I began to crawl towards the horses, and a toilsome operation it was; but it was successfully accomplished, and in far less time than I had expected. Faris, too, had played his part, and not only had he freed the horses, but he had managed, moreover, to find saddles for them.

"Quick," he said, seizing the two water-skins and flinging them across his saddle, "mount and away."

I required no second bidding, and I followed my fellow-robber, as he forged ahead into the sandy desert skirting the lake. Hour after hour, through the night did we keep going, and when, soon after dawn, the sheik pulled up among some low sand-hills, and dismounted, we had put many miles between ourselves and the former owners of our horses. Faris was in better spirits than I had ever known him to be; he appeared to have forgotten all our strange adventures, and to be living only in the present—a free man in a free land; but even he, inured to endless hardships, I soon discovered, was suffering from exhaustion. I inwardly rejoiced when I observed it, for I myself was completely done up. All our garments were wet through, and most of them in a filthy condition of slimy mud; so we agreed unanimously that it would be quite safe to rest for a time; and, taking off our clothes, we spread them out in the sun to dry.

We hobbled the horses, partook of a few hard dates and a mouthful of water, and, stark naked, lay down on the slope of a hummocky sand-billow to rest our wearied limbs. How delightful was the warmth of the sun to my damp body! But how miserably tired and sleepy I felt!

"A little sleep, sheik," I said, "would be a good thing."

He made no reply, and looking at him, I found that he had forestalled my suggestion, and was already breathing heavily. I roused myself to a sense of duty; both of us must not sleep at the same time; I would watch while he slept; and then my turn would come. I began to wonder how long it would be before he woke up. I wondered why people wanted to sleep, and I remember that I found it most difficult to find a solution for the problem—so many things kept crowding into the argument. I was annoyed with myself for not being able to work it out successfully; and then, somehow or another, all my good intentions must have faded away, and unwittingly I must have dropped off to sleep.

CHAPTER XI.

ONLY HALF A CAPTURE.

I awoke suddenly with a start. People were talking. I rubbed my eyes and looked. Was I dreaming, I wondered; for, within a couple of yards of me, I saw Sedjur and George Edwards in Arab dress, sitting on their horses and talking to the sheik. I jumped up to greet them, but I grew dizzy and sank back again. Edwards dismounted and ran across to me.

"What is the matter, old man?" he asked, taking my hand.

"I am a bit done," I replied.

"You are in for a bout of fever," he said, "and no wonder, from what I have just heard from the sheik. But we will soon put you to rights. You have been lying out in the sun here for some time, I expect, judging by the blisters on your body. You had better get into your clothes again, and have another snooze."

I struggled into my dirty garments as best I could, and wished that I had something cleaner to put on, but I had hardly finished dressing before Faris and Sedjur rushed up to us in a state of excitement, telling us that they could see a party of horsemen galloping towards us from the direction of the lake.

"They have followed our tracks," said the sheik to me, "and hope to recover their horses. We must get away at once."

I looked over the sand-hill nearest to me and could just make out a small black mass some miles away. I got up and moved towards my horse, but I was too feeble to mount.

"I cannot manage it, George," I said, "I shall stop here, wait till they arrive, and give myself up. You clear off with the others—I shall be all right."

"Likely!" replied Edwards, indignantly.

Faris, seeing that something serious was the matter, came back to us, and asked why we were not hurrying.

"We are not coming," said Edwards; "he is too ill. You and Sedjur escape while you have time."

"No," replied the sheik, "we will stand here and fight."

But Edwards and I besought him to go, and at last he consented.

"We should have no chance against them," he said; "they are ten to one. But Sedjur shall take their horse, and leave you his, when they will find that you two have your own horses, and are not the thieves that they are after."

A hasty word of parting, and our two Bedouin friends were in the saddle and away. For some reason, they did not take the direct route by which Faris and I had ridden a few days before, and which Edwards and Sedjur had followed, but struck off, half right, towards a low ridge. The country was undulating, and, to our relief, in a few seconds we saw them disappear from view. Then Edwards looked over our sand-hill, and told me to prepare myself, as the band of horsemen

were approaching; and in another minute we were surrounded by some forty wild-looking Arabs, armed with matchlocks and spears. I fully imagined that they would finish us off, without inquiry; but the chief of the party motioned to his men to stand back, and advanced towards us. Edwards stood up, and greeted him.

"Where are our horses?" demanded the chief.

"Horses," said Edwards, "you appear to have many."

"I speak," said the Bedouin, frowning, "of the two that you stole from us in the night."

"I have stolen no horses at any time from any man," replied Edwards, with considerable force. "I and my friend here, who is sick with fever, are Englishmen, travelling in the desert. We have only our own horses, as you can see."

The chief and his followers looked perplexed, and not a little surprised at the sight of two foreigners. A long consultation then took place, after which the chief, regarding us with evident suspicion, addressed us again.

"See, now, Ingleezee," he said, "last night two horses were stolen from our camp. We have followed their footprints up to this point; and here we find you, but with two other horses. We do not believe that even you are able to change a horse's skin and shape. Tell me, from which direction did you ride hither?"

Edwards pointed out the direction.

"I believe it," said the Arab, "for the hoof marks which brought us here are certainly not those of your horses. Answer me yet again, did you meet any Bedouins as you rode hither?"

"Not a soul," replied Edwards, equivocating perhaps, but nevertheless speaking the truth.

While this cross-examination was going on, some of the party were casting round and looking at the horses' footprints on the ground. I soon saw that they were on the right scent, and one of them shouted to the chief that he had found the marks of their two stolen horses. This caused tremendous excitement, and a dozen horsemen were sent off in pursuit, while the chief and the remainder looked after us. Then came another surprise, when someone discovered that, besides the hoof marks of our own two horses, there were also the marks of two other horses, though apparently two or three days older, but all coming from the same direction.

"What abominably cunning brutes they are," I said to Edwards.

"Yes," said he, "they will worm it all out of us before they have done. But they will have their work cut out if they mean to overtake the sheik and Sedjur, with the good half-hour's start that they had."

We could see that this new discovery had upset their calculations considerably, and presently the chief informed us that, though he did not now suspect us of being implicated in the theft of the horses, we must accompany him to the camp, in order that we should be properly examined by his lord and master, the Governor of Adiba. Ill as I was, I was compelled to mount my horse and ride with the party. As we started, we found that two or three men had taken up the tracks left by the horses which Faris and I had ridden on our journey to the seer. They had not come across them on their way from the camp, as they lay a considerable distance to one side, since Faris had taken a straight line to the margin of the swamp, and the spot from which we had stolen the horses was a mile or more to the east of it.

We appeared to have hoodwinked the party most successfully, and the chief discussed the situation with us quite affably. His views were fairly reasonable, and he was convinced that he had fathomed the mystery up to a certain point. He imagined that, two or three days before, two horsemen had passed through the gap in the sand-hills, and had proceeded to a point at the southern end of the lake. The footprints, he affirmed, were not those of our horses, and our horses had evidently never gone beyond the gap; neither had the other horses ever returned from the lake to the gap. The men who had stolen the horses might have been those whose horses' tracks were now being followed towards the lake; but what he could not understand was why they should have discarded their own horses and stolen the others.

"Of course," he said, "there may be no connection whatever between the two horsemen and the thieves, and that matter is of no real consequence. We know where the scoundrels have gone, and our men will doubtless catch them. Who they are is immaterial—so long as they suffer the penalty of their crime."

The only point of doubt seemed to be whether we were or were not in league with the robbers, and that, the Arab said, was for his master, the Governor, to decide. He himself felt certain of our innocence, and thought it probable that the thieves had passed through the gap and disappeared before we had reached it from the opposite direction.

Eventually we came within sight of the encampment, and, from the excitement that prevailed, it was apparently thought that the thieves had been caught. Bitter was the disappointment when it was learned that the stolen horses had not been recovered; and the Governor, who stood waiting for us outside his large tent, vented his wrath on his unfortunate captain before the latter could offer an explanation. When, however, he had heard what the chief of the escort had to relate, the great man changed his tone and ordered us to be taken away to a tent and looked after, until

such time as the two absent parties should return and give an account of themselves. As it proved, the ride had not done me much harm; I was wretchedly weak, but the fever had passed off, and I was able to eat heartily of the supper which our friend the chief provided for us. After my diet of dried dates, the steaming dish placed before us was a positive feast, and neither before nor since have I ever partaken of a meal with greater relish.

How Edwards and I talked that night! I had to tell him all my adventures, and answer a thousand questions; but, all through, I had the feeling that he thought I was romancing, and he politely but firmly refused to believe that I had really seen the Golden Girdle.

"I am afraid, my dear boy," he said, "that was hallucination, produced by your old friend's intoxicating perfumes."

"All right," I replied, almost angrily, "you need not believe it unless you like; but if we ever meet old Faris again, we will get him to give his version."

"I wonder," said Edwards, changing the conversation, "how we shall get out of this hole. It seems to me that ever since we left Baghdad, we have been in a perpetual state of jumping out of the frying-pan into the fire. However," he concluded philosophically, "they say that everything has an end, and I trust that our end may be peace."

At an early hour next morning, the captain of the escort paid us a visit, and brought us food. We discovered that he considered himself our host, and he chatted with us in a most friendly way. He told us that both parties of horsemen had returned; that those who had tracked the two horses to the lake had come in early in the night, with the information that the horses had passed through the swamp and had gone straight on, so they had given up the search as not likely to lead to any result. The other party, he said, after a fruitless pursuit of the missing horses, had just come back. They stated that they had seen the two thieves riding in the far distance, but all hope of overtaking them had gone, and, their horses being exhausted, they had been forced to abandon the chase. The Governor was very angry, because the stolen horses were his own property, and what attitude he would adopt towards ourselves was extremely doubtful. But this before long we would discover for ourselves, as he had given orders that we should be brought before him in an hour's time.

"For my own part," added our friend, "I think he will order you to proceed with him to Adiba. If you cannot satisfy him as to your innocence, he will probably take your horses from you. But he will be afraid to keep you at Adiba for any length of time; doubtless he will give you asses and tell you to depart to Baghdad."

Our interview passed off much more satisfactorily than we had anticipated. Ali Khan, the governor, asked us endless questions as to who we were, where we had been, and where we were going, and finally gave his opinion that we knew nothing about the theft of the horses. He upbraided us for our folly in wandering about the desert without an escort, and he told us that we should remain as his guests until he reached his home, when he would endeavour to send us with some caravan to a place from which we should be able to return to Baghdad in safety. We thanked him profusely, and, afraid of showing any disinclination to accompany him, we agreed to accept his offer. We were soon on very good terms with our new host, and, in the course of the conversation that followed, I told him that Edwards was a great doctor.

"If that be so," said the Governor, turning to Edwards, "when we reach Adiba, you shall try your skill on my small son, whom none of my own doctors are able to cure."

"That will I certainly," replied Edwards enthusiastically.

"Good," said the Governor, "and should you want for anything, ask for it, and it shall be yours. We shall proceed on our journey in the morning, and, if it please Allah, in about two weeks from now shall be in the town."

Edwards and I were overjoyed at our good fortune, for it seemed to us that we were going to make a most interesting expedition under the most favourable circumstances, and when we returned to our tent we solemnly shook hands and congratulated ourselves.

"We shall be back in Baghdad in no time," said Edwards. "I have already overstayed my leave, but I daresay, when I turn up safe and sound, the Consul-General will understand, and will put matters right."

"You do not mean to say," said I, "that you propose rushing back to Baghdad?"

"As straight as a die," said he, "and jolly glad I shall be to get there."

"But what about our old friends, the sheik and Sedjur?" I asked.

"Oh," said he, "I can find out what happened to them when I get back to Baghdad. You surely do not suggest that we should continue to fool about in the desert any longer?"

"My dear boy," I said, "you can think of nothing but that wretched leave of yours. Do, for goodness' sake, forget it. You are overdue now, and if you start from Adiba the day after you get there, you will be weeks late. In all probability, the authorities have killed us, buried us, and put up memorial tablets to us by now. Much better let them go on grieving a bit longer."

Edwards looked at me and laughed.

"You are the most extraordinary person that I have ever come across," said he. "Here you are, a perfect wreck, and looking as if you had seen a hundred ghosts in the last few days; yet you do not seem at all anxious to get back to an ordinary life of peace and comfort."

"You do not understand," I argued. "You have not been inspired by the sight of the glittering serpents. Think, George, what it would be to get hold of it, and ride into Baghdad with it!"

"It would be tolerably nice," he replied, "to ride into Baghdad even without it. Honestly, I do not much care which it is. I waive all claim to carrying the Golden Girdle."

"What a scoffer you are," I said. "You do not really believe in its existence. For my part, I should not be a bit surprised if at this very moment it was in the Jelas camp. Faris is as keen about it as I am, and he would not waste any time in preparing for his raid on the Shammar. I agree that we must go to Adiba now, but as soon as we leave the place, we will make straight for our old quarters, see what the sheik has been about, and find out if he has heard anything of the girdle."

"All right," said Edwards, "I will see you through the business. You shall have your way, and I will stick to you. But I beg of you not to let me in for adventures such as you and Faris have just been indulging in. My feeble brain would not stand that sort of thing."

During the journey of the succeeding fortnight or more, we made friends with all the members of the caravan, and George Edwards covered himself with glory by looking after the ailments of the party. Fortunately, no one had attempted to rifle his saddle-bags, and, when starting with Sedjur on the ride to meet me, he had taken the precaution to bring with him his travelling medicine-case and instruments. It was an uneventful ride, through a barren and ugly country, and glad were we when, at last, we came in sight of the walls of Adiba, and saw a body of horsemen issuing out to greet their Governor.

CHAPTER XII.

RIVAL DOCTORS.

Our entry into Adiba much resembled the procession in the Lord Mayor's Show. There were trumpeters and drummers, camelmen armed with matchlocks, horsemen with spears, and foot soldiers carrying bludgeons, knives, and a variety of weapons. Crowds of people lined the principal thoroughfare, leading from the gateway by which we had entered to the palace of the Governor—for it was dignified by the name of palace, though in reality it was by no means a sumptuous dwelling. Edwards and I rode on either side of the great man, and our presence created a considerable amount of interest, since the news had already spread that we were Englishmen, and that one of us was a famous doctor. Yet, I noticed that there were faces in the crowd that did not look on us with favour, which, as I said to myself, was only natural in a country hitherto practically forbidden to Europeans.

A separate apartment in the palace was allotted to us, and we were made thoroughly comfortable, the floor being spread with rich Persian carpets and hung with silken draperies; but the most delightful part of our quarters was the flat roof, up to which a flight of steps led from the corner of the room. The palace itself abutted on the fortified wall of the town, and our room and roof-top formed a kind of bastion, surmounted by a low parapet with loopholes. It had the advantage of seclusion, since it was a little higher than the other buildings of the town; and on the roof, during our stay in Adiba, we slept at night and enjoyed the cool hours of the day.

Hardly had we settled down than Edwards was summoned to visit the sick child, and as, during our march, I had always assisted him in his medical duties, I went with him. We were conducted, through several apartments, to the women's quarters, where we found Ali Khan and his chief wife, sitting by the side of a frail boy of about twelve years of age. The mother was weeping bitterly, and begged us to do what we could to save the life of her only son. Three grave-looking and aged native physicians were also present, and were evidently none too well-pleased at our interference, one of them even going so far as to remonstrate with the Governor for having called in a foreigner and an unbeliever, an act which he pronounced to be equivalent to lack of faith.

"By the will of Allah," he said, "the child is sick; by the will of Allah, he will either live or die."

"'BY THE WILL OF ALLAH,' HE SAID, 'THE CHILD IS SICK'"

"You speak with wisdom, O Sea of Learning," said Edwards quietly, "but does the Prophet anywhere forbid the use of medicines for the relief of a sufferer? If so, how comes it that you yourself practise medicine?"

"I and my brethren," replied the other, with an obvious sneer, "are of the True Faith, and though we may possess as great a knowledge of the art of healing as even yourself, we do not take to ourselves any credit for our cures. They are effected through Allah alone. The works of infidels ——"

"Enough," shouted the Governor, cutting him short; "this is no place or time for wrangling. These are my guests, and must be treated with due respect."

Edwards's rival bit his lip with rage at the rebuke, and with a sullen gaze watched the "unbeliever" examining the little patient. This did not take long, and after offering some consoling words to the parents, Edwards said he would go and prepare some medicines for their child, adding that, if his instructions were properly carried out, he saw no reason why he should not eventually recover. The Governor and his wife were overjoyed at the news, but the old Arab doctor merely shrugged his shoulders, and remarked "if it be the will of Allah."

"Well, what is the matter with the poor little chap?" I asked, as we walked back to our room.

"He is pretty bad," said Edwards. "High fever. Been hideously neglected, I should say. I shall try antipyrine, and then pile in quinine for all I am worth."

"Those old native impostors mean to be nasty," I said. "The chief villain would cut your throat as soon as look at you."

"I believe he would," said Edwards, laughing, "and display very little surgical skill in the operation."

The medicine was soon prepared, and sent off by a servant, with injunctions that he was to deliver it into the hands of the Governor or his wife, and that it was to be administered at once. A little later, we repaired to the Guest Hall, where a feast was to be given in our honour, and where we were introduced to all the notables of the town. It was a magnificent entertainment, and there was no lack of food, the principal dishes consisting of camel's flesh, and sheep roasted whole. The Arab physicians were there, and it seemed to me that they went out of their way to make themselves affable, so I imagined that they had got over their scruples concerning the infidel practitioner. Our old friend Haroun, the captain of the Governor's escort, was also present, and he told us that he was leaving Adiba in a few days, as he had to take his men off on another expedition. Until then, we had thought that he and his men were in the permanent service of Ali Khan, but now we gathered that he was more or less of a free lance, and that he hired out himself and his horsemen for the protection of caravans wishing to cross the desert.

The supper passed off pleasantly enough, and the guests eventually dispersed, when, expressing many good wishes for the speedy recovery of his son, we took leave of our host, and, accompanied by Haroun, made our way to our room. At the door we found two of Haroun's men armed with naked swords; and, on inquiring why they were there, we were informed that the Governor had given orders for them to be posted, to prevent anyone entering our apartment.

Haroun came in with us, and closing the door behind him, said that he wished to have a word with us in private.

"Before long," he said, in a low voice, "you will desire to return to Baghdad. Indeed the Governor dare not detain you here for any length of time; for the news of your presence in the town will soon reach Majma and Hayil, when the Governor will receive peremptory orders to send you on your journey. The Amir of Hayil will not permit foreigners to sojourn in Nejd; but, since he finds it to his advantage to keep on good terms with the Turks, he will be afraid to lay violent hands on two Europeans. Otherwise, so far as he himself is concerned, he would not hesitate to have you put to death. Now, I myself make a living by safe-guarding travellers in the desert; moreover, it is my desire to visit Baghdad, where not only have I many friends, but also a brother who is a merchant in the bazaar. For the protection afforded by my horsemen I will charge but a small sum—only just sufficient for their maintenance. What say you?"

"What can we say," I replied, "except that to journey with you would be a great joy to us. But you told us a little while ago that you were shortly leaving Adiba on other business."

"True," said Haroun, smiling, "but when I spoke I was counting on being employed by yourselves. Shall we, then, fix a day for your departure?"

"That is hardly possible," said Edwards, "for I have undertaken to treat the sick child of our good host, as a return for his kindness to us, and it may be many days before he recovers; it may, indeed, be many weeks."

"And you would remain here for so long?" asked Haroun.

"If the Governor wishes," said Edwards.

"But he will not wish it," said Haroun; "for, before the child can be restored to health, Hayil will have ordered Majma to march against Adiba and destroy it, for harbouring foreigners. The fear of Hayil is great."

"Well," said I, "if you will give us a day or two to see how events turn out, we shall be able to decide as to the future."

"The future," said Haroun, with a sigh, "is known only to Allah. I shall, however, remain here, in Adiba, for a space, in the hope of journeying with you to Baghdad. But I would warn you that there are some who, even now, are desirous of your speedy departure from the town."

The next few days were full of interest, as well as of a certain amount of excitement. Both Ali Khan and Haroun were keen sportsmen, and each morning we rode out with the former's hawks in search of gazelles, which gave us some glorious gallops. We had also a lion hunt—not in the programme, but forced upon us while hawking, and the memorable occasion gave us an insight into the characters of our two Arab friends, at whose dauntless courage Edwards and I were simply astounded. We were riding home after a successful morning, when we saw a shepherd running across the plain towards us and gesticulating wildly. He told us that a lion had for some time played havoc with his flocks, and that he had just marked him down into some thick bushes at a little distance. We all went off at once, and Ali Khan, stationing the matchlock-men who accompanied him round the beast's lair, ordered other men to throw stones into the bushes, with the intention of driving the lion out. To everyone's astonishment, this had the desired effect almost at once. There was a loud roar, and, without any further warning, out bounded the great brute, who knocked over one of the matchlock-men before a shot was fired. Edwards and I, sitting on our horses a little way off, instinctively pressed towards the lion, now standing defiantly over the fallen man; but, before we reached the spot, we saw both Haroun and Ali Khan simultaneously leap from their saddles and rush in. They were armed only with the daggers which they had drawn from their waists, yet they never hesitated until close up to the beast, when, to our surprise and no little amusement, they stopped and addressed it in the most flowing language.

"O lion," said the one, "do not waste thy strength on so feeble a man as that."

"O king," said the other, "thy victim is an unworthy meal for thy royal jaws. Try something of more noble blood."

Then with one accord they attacked their enemy in the most reckless manner with their knives, and several men with spears coming up, the lion was soon dispatched, when it was found that the matchlock-man had received only a few scratches, though suffering from a severe shock to his nerves. Many were the tales which we subsequently heard of the daring of our two friends on similar occasions, and no one could say which of them had slain single-handed the greater number of lions.

Such recreations as these, however, occupied only a fraction of our time, and the remainder was decidedly dull, or if not dull, then full of anxiety. Edwards soon discovered that his skill as a doctor was being put to the test, for the days passed, and his patient seemed to make no headway.

"Do you suppose," I asked him at last, "that they have been giving him your medicine properly?"

"That is just what I have been wondering," he replied. "I do not believe that they have. But I cannot imagine how Ali Khan and his wife, who are both devoted to the child, would fail to do

what I told them. However, I will make certain about it, by going straight to the Governor and asking him."

So Edwards went off, and, in the course of half an hour or so, returned, with a face almost livid with rage. He did not wait for me to ask him questions, but relieved his mind forthwith.

"Could you possibly conceive," he blurted out, "that the world could contain such a pack of bigoted idiots? The poor wretched little beggar is weaker than ever, and had not been given any of the things that I prescribed. I only discovered it by the merest accident. When I got to the room, I found one of the waiting-women watching over the sick child, and she told me that his mother, worn out with grief, had gone to her chamber to rest, while Ali Khan was busy administering justice in his hall. I seized the opportunity, and tackled the woman about the medicine. At first she pretended that she had never heard that I had supplied any medicine; but after I had reassured her by swearing that I would respect her confidences, and worked on her fears by telling her that if the boy died she would undoubtedly be held responsible for his death, and would probably frizzle in Gehennum, the old lady found her tongue. Bit by bit I dragged from her the whole miserable story. It seems that when my first draught was delivered at the sick-room, those abominable old native doctors were all there, and they harangued the Governor for his folly in consulting an infidel, about whom he knew nothing, and whose medicines might be, and probably were, poisons. High words followed, but in the end Ali Khan agreed that he would abide by the decision of the mulla, who was immediately sent for. Perhaps you have never seen a mulla playing the oracle. It is quite simple: he shuts his eyes, opens the Koran, plumps his finger on to a line, and then reads it out. Well, in this case, of course, the mulla said that the Koran decreed that my medicine would be most harmful to the child, and it was accordingly thrown away. The same thing has been happening every day since, and the only medicine given to the poor little chap has been some water swilled round a cup inside which the mulla has scribbled a text. Is it not positively sickening?"

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

"I have done it," he replied, with a chuckle. "I saw that it was neck or nothing, and fortunately I had taken some antipyrine with me. I made the woman fetch the cup with the text inside, and I told her that I was a bigger mulla than any mulla she had ever seen, and that I possessed the Evil Eye, which I would cast on her and her relations for ever and ever, if she disclosed a word of what I had said, or even mentioned that I had been there. She was what they call 'all of a tremble,' and I gave the child as strong a dose as I dared—antipyrine, Koran text, and all."

"Well done, old man," said I, slapping him on the back.

"It may be all right," said Edwards, "but it may not be. I am not very sanguine, for I am half afraid it was too late. However, we shall know to-night."

When we went down to the sick-room before going to bed that night, we found the Governor, his wife, and the Arab doctors in a state of ecstasy. The child was in what Edwards described as a "beautiful perspiration," and we were naturally overjoyed. Then the principal native doctor stepped forward and addressed Edwards.

"We have to confess to you," he said, "that none of your remedies have been applied to the patient, as the mulla, whom the Governor consulted, decided that they would be harmful to him. By the will of Allah, I and my learned brethren have been able to ease the child's sufferings."

I looked at my companion, whose face was ashy white, but who kept himself under perfect control. Addressing the Governor quietly, he told him that he thought it would be injurious to the health of his son if any further discussion took place in the sick-room, and he begged that he would permit us to adjourn to another apartment, as he wished to make a disclosure to him in the presence of the Arab physicians. The Governor agreed to the proposal, and, bidding the doctors and ourselves follow him, led the way to his private audience hall.

"What is it, my friend," he asked, "that you wish to say?"

"Great Lord of the Arabs and Protector of the Poor," said Edwards, standing forth boldly, "it is most unpleasant for me, who have received the greatest hospitality at your hands, to lay a complaint against the members of your household. But I would beg of you to bear in mind that I have only at heart the welfare of your sick child, and that anything I say is solely for his good. You yourself did me the honour to place confidence in me and seek my advice; yet, when I gave that advice, you pretended to be satisfied with it, but, unbeknown to me, you rejected it, because your mulla, who is in league with your court physicians, pretended that your sacred book forbade the application of my remedies."

I trembled at Edwards's temerity, and the Arabs looked at Ali Khan as if they expected him to rise in his wrath and destroy us both, but our host merely bowed his head and told Edwards to proceed, which he did with increased warmth.

"I am aware," he continued, "that I am not of your Faith, but I hold to as great a belief in the powers of Allah as do yourselves. I maintain, however, that although I am younger than the youngest of your physicians, I have had far greater experience in the treatment of diseases than he or any of his brethren. From the first I prescribed such medicines as I considered likely to benefit the patient. You yourself know that those medicines were thrown away. I knew it for certain some few hours ago, though I had suspected it earlier. I only discovered the truth on

visiting the patient when he was alone this afternoon. Then I understood that he had never been given my medicines, and, in your absence, I took it upon myself to administer at once a strong dose, the result of which is now apparent."

"Sire," broke in the chief physician excitedly, "believe not a word that he says. He is seeking to misappropriate to himself the good that your own physicians have accomplished. What proof is there that the child had any of his medicines?"

"One person," said Edwards, "was present, and saw everything. It was the waiting-woman, Habisha, but I made her swear to reveal what she saw to no one."

The Arab doctors, evidently still believing that they had treated the child successfully, openly derided Edwards's assertion, and Ali Khan, wavering between loyalty to his own men and politeness to his guest, thought to settle the matter by interviewing the waiting-woman. Edwards at once realised the difficulty, for it was improbable that the woman, with the foreigner's Evil Eye in her mind, would disclose anything; so he volunteered to accompany the Governor, in order that the woman might be assured that she could now speak. The quarter of an hour that the two were absent was an uncomfortable one for me, left alone with the physicians; but, to my relief, they ignored my presence, and conversed amongst themselves.

The expression on Edwards's face, on his return, conveyed to me plainly that all had gone well; and a moment later Ali Khan told the Arabs that he had convinced himself that what his guest had said was true, that he had actually administered a dose to his son, but that fortunately it had been given in the cup which was inscribed with a text from the Koran. Ali Khan now assumed a judicial air, as if pronouncing judgment in his hall of justice, and he said that, after due consideration, he had come to the conclusion that, although the foreigner had acted wrongfully in secretly administering the medicine, nevertheless he had been requested to treat the child, and that having once given the child his medicines, it would be most dangerous to alter the course which had been commenced. He therefore decreed that the foreigner should continue to treat his son, and that his own wise and worthy physicians should refrain from visiting the sick-room, until such time as he should invite them. I could see that the decision was a terrible and an unexpected blow to the Arab gentlemen, but they bowed politely to their master, asked permission to retire, and pompously sailed from the room.

No sooner were we alone than Ali Khan, throwing off all reserve, seized Edwards by the hand, thanked him fervently for what he had done, and apologised for his own weakness in allowing himself to be influenced by his doctors. Henceforward, he said, Edwards should have sole charge of the sick boy, and he begged him to forget the past and to do all that lay in his power to bring about his recovery. Edwards, of course, agreed to do his best, on the condition that he was not interfered with in any way, and he returned to his patient, with whom he now decided to spend the night.

The next week was a most anxious one. Edwards almost lived in the sick-room, being unwilling to risk the chance of some busybody undoing all his work. The child had ups and downs, but by the end of the week he was pronounced to be out of danger, and after that he regained his strength so rapidly, that before many days Edwards was able to hand him over to his parents to be taken care of. Their gratitude is indescribable; there was nothing that they would not have done for us. Ali Khan offered us horses, permanent quarters in the palace, and many other things, all of which we politely declined, Edwards assuring him that he had done nothing more than that which was due from a guest to his host.

All this while, we were surprised that the Arab doctors never put in an appearance, but we came to the conclusion that they were nettled by Edwards's success, and so kept out of the way. That they had lost their practice in the town soon became evident, as the gates of the palace were besieged each day by sick people, begging for the advice of the all-powerful foreign doctor. For some time Edwards did his best for them, but at last he grew weary of the increasing labours thus thrust upon him, and asked our host where his own physicians were. Ali Khan, with some hesitation, then confessed that they had left the town, and had gone off in high dudgeon, he knew not whither.

"But," he added, "while you are my doctor, I care not how long the others remain away."

That night, just as we were going to bed, we heard a knock at the door, and Haroun, who was still in Adiba, entered the room. We at once became aware, from the mysterious air that he assumed, that he was the bearer of news of no ordinary importance.

CHAPTER XIII.

WAR'S ALARM.

"What is the matter, Haroun?" I asked, "you seem perturbed."

"And small wonder," he replied. "The Governor's spies, whom he sent to discover the whereabouts of his physicians, have just returned, and have brought grave tidings. They tracked the men to Majma and then to Hayil, where they found that the ungrateful dogs had spread false

reports about affairs at Adiba, denouncing the Governor as an infidel and a companion of infidels. The Amir, ever credulous, accepted their statements, and, moreover, gave all three of them appointments in his household. Majma was ordered to prepare for war against Adiba, and to assemble all its fighting men, three days since, at a certain ford on the road to Hayil. The spies remained in Hayil and watched the preparations, which the Amir declared were for the purpose of suppressing the tribes dwelling in the mountains to the south. But this they knew to be false, and they have ridden day and night in order to warn their chief of the coming storm."

"What will the Governor do?" I asked.

"He will fight his old enemy of Majma to the death," said Haroun. "On that point he is determined. Moreover, he has ever rebelled against the authority of the Amir, and he is prepared now to defy him."

"Surely," said Edwards, "that will be the height of folly, when an explanation would probably prevent bloodshed. We two Europeans are, doubtless, the cause of all the trouble. Let the Governor publicly expel us from the town, and secure its safety."

"That course," said Haroun, "he would never consent to take; but he has ordered me to inform you privately of the events that are likely to occur, and to request that you will save yourselves while there is yet time. He does not wish you to risk your lives by remaining here, and though he cannot spare my services at present, he will mount you on swift camels and give you a guide, who will conduct you to Baghdad, or at any rate as far as some place of safety in the neighbourhood of that city."

Edwards and I discussed in English the situation as it presented itself to us, and we each thought that our presence in Adiba was accountable for all the unpleasantness; that if, therefore, we removed ourselves, Ali Khan would patch up peace; and that in all probability he wished to get rid of us, but was unwilling to appear inhospitable and ungrateful.

"If," I said, addressing Haroun, "we accept the Governor's suggestion, will he then send an envoy and sue for peace?"

"No," was the reply, "whether you go or whether you remain, he will defend the town, and he will perish in its defence rather than humble himself before the Amir. You yourselves know that he is a man who, his mind made up, cannot be talked over."

"Well," said Edwards, "we cannot decide off-hand what we will do. Besides, we should like to discuss matters with the Governor himself. When do you expect that the town will be attacked?"

"The army," replied Haroun, "must still be some seven days' march from us, but the horsemen will ride swiftly, so as to intercept any fugitives, and it is therefore advisable that you should get away as soon as possible."

"Will you allow us the night to decide?" I asked.

"If it be your wish," he acquiesced; "but you should leave the town by dusk to-morrow."

As soon as we were alone, Edwards began to pace the room in silence, and continued to do so for some little time.

"You seem to be excited, George," said I, at last.

"You do not mind a bit," he replied. "In fact, as far as I can make out, you positively revel in this frying-pan-fire existence of ours. What are we going to do?"

"Why, stick it out, of course," said I, "and see the old man through his fight. I expect the whole thing will be rather interesting, and when it is all over we will begin to think of moving off."

"About time!" said Edwards. "I have had enough of this place, and should like to see another—Baghdad, for choice. It is not much fun spending all one's time prescribing for the rag-tag-and-bob-tail of Adiba, free, gratis, and for nothing. But we may as well turn in now, and interview the chief early in the morning. Perhaps the whole story of the impending attack is a deeply-laid scheme to get rid of us, though when Ali Khan told me to-day that I was his one and only physician, my heart positively sank. I thought he was under the impression that I was going to set up in Adiba, and remain with him for ever. I had intended disabusing his mind to-morrow, and I certainly shall do so, if I get the chance."

"You will not chuck him over until after the fight, will you?" I asked.

"No, I will play the game all right, though I cannot say that I am desperately keen about it," was his answer.

Next morning, when we went to see our host, we found that he took a much more serious view of the state of affairs than we had anticipated. He evidently intended that it should be a fight *à outrance*. In vain did we try to dissuade him. We even offered to ride off and surrender ourselves to the Amir of Hayil, so as to stay the war; but he was adamant itself. He said that he and his people were growing rusty for want of a fight, and that our departure would make no difference. Whatever happened, he would not rest until he had dipped his spear in the blood of his old enemies. Seeing, therefore, that argument was useless, we told him that we intended to remain his guests until he was at peace once more with his neighbours, and that we were ready to assist him in the defence of his town. He was greatly touched at our desire to help him, though he

expressed his unwillingness to allow us to run the risk of losing our lives in a quarrel which was no concern of ours.

"The whole matter," said Edwards, "concerns us. Had we never come to Adiba, there would have been no quarrel."

"And," replied Ali Khan, "my son would have surely died. That is enough. Praise be to Allah that he sent you to me."

Our conversation was interrupted by Haroun, who came to consult about the preparations for the defence of the town, and we accompanied the two warriors on their inspection of the fortifications. Haroun, I soon saw, had little idea of a passive defence, and placed no confidence in the strength of the walls. He was a cavalry leader, pure and simple, and his sole notion was to employ all available horsemen in attacking the enemy as they advanced on the town. The Governor, on the other hand, was sublimely satisfied with his walls of sun-baked bricks, and proposed that when the enemy appeared, the gates should be barricaded and the walls manned by the matchlock-men; then, when the assailants had expended all their energies in attacking the walls, Haroun should issue with his horsemen, and smite them with vigour. This, he concluded, was the plan adopted by his father, half a century before, when Majma had attacked the town; and so successfully did it work that barely a handful of Majma's fighting men returned to their homes to tell the tale. The only thing that appeared to trouble him was the fact that he had been told that the Amir of Hayil possessed European weapons of war, presented to him by the Turks, and he had heard that the big guns had been known to knock down walls from distances beyond the range of his matchlocks.

It did not take me long to realise that, although I knew practically nothing of war, Haroun and the Governor knew considerably less. Neither of them had ever seen a field-gun or a rifle, and consequently they were absolutely ignorant of the effect of such things. To enlighten them was no easy matter, and for some time I was afraid that it would be impossible to bring the situation home to them until the first shell landed in the town. However, after much explanation, Ali Khan confessed that he did not understand anything of the inhuman practices of which I had told him; he and Haroun understood the honest warfare of the desert, but to attempt to fathom the mean devices to which the Turks and their adherents stooped was quite beyond them.

"Then," I said, "let us ride out unarmed to meet the Amir, and sue for peace."

"Never," said Ali Khan, firmly, "never. I care nothing for their tricks and stratagems. Our fate is already written down. On my side I have right; Allah protects the righteous, and punishes the oppressors."

I did not try to persuade him that might, in the shape of modern guns, was stronger than right; but I did all in my power to harrow his feelings by describing what it would be like when the shells began to burst in and over the town. I could see, however, that he did not believe half I told him, and when we returned to the palace, he bade us leave him to himself, to think out how it would be best to frustrate the evil designs of his enemies. Edwards and I went off with the intention of occupying ourselves in a similar manner.

"Our friends," said Edwards, "seem to be a trifle sanguine."

"Antediluvian asses I call them," said I. "But look here, George, if old Hayil is bringing modern guns against this mud-heap, we are in for a pretty warm time. If his people have learned how to serve the guns, the place will be knocked to smithereens before we know where we are. If they have rifles, then our ancient matchlock-men will never get a look in."

"Surely something can be done to fortify the place," said Edwards. "They do not expect to be attacked for another six days or more."

"Yes," said I, "if we can only get Haroun and Ali Khan to grasp the situation, we might certainly work out some scheme of defence. I wish I had not forgotten most of the things I learned at Sandhurst. I might have run the whole show for them. Suppose we send for Haroun and hold a council of war; he is more modern in his ideas than the Governor."

Accordingly, we sent a servant with an urgent request to Haroun to come and see us, and then we began to talk. He was still absurdly obstinate about the use of his horsemen, and he quite thought that his seventy men, with the addition of some forty or fifty others which the town could muster, were capable of ambuscading the hostile army before they came near the town, and wiping it off the face of the earth. He had fixed on the very spot where he would lay in ambush, and he scoffed at the idea that it would be possible for his plan to fail. So convincing was he in his arguments, that both Edwards and I began to think that perhaps, after all, he was right, and that we were ignorant of the methods of Arab warfare.

"Suppose," I said, "you do not succeed in all you propose. Suppose you are defeated, or your retreat cut off. Then where would Adiba be? She would have lost the services of a hundred trained fighting men, and who would be left to repel the eventual attack on the town?"

"There are plenty of others for the purpose," said Haroun, "and the defence of the town walls is no concern of mine. As you are aware, I and my men have nothing to do with Adiba, and it is only my personal friendship for the Governor that has induced me to espouse his cause. To be honest, I am a child of the desert, and a friend of anyone who hires me. The rôle of my men is to smite in the open, and not to sit down behind the walls of a town—that is the duty of the town guard."

"I am beginning to understand," I said. "Hitherto I was under the impression that the Governor regarded you as his sirdar."

"He himself is sirdar," was the reply, "and he has already ordered every able-bodied man to be at his allotted post on the walls this afternoon, so that he may inspect them in fighting array."

While we were talking, a messenger came to ask us to wait on the Governor, who had assembled the chiefs of the various quarters of the town in the Audience Hall. We went at once, and found rows of respectable-looking old Arabs seated on the ground in front of the Governor's daïs. With many of them we were already acquainted, and all greeted us most cordially. The Governor then opened the discussion by explaining that, as Europeans, his two guests were thoroughly acquainted with the barbarous methods of European warfare, of which they themselves were entirely ignorant. He had therefore decided to beg us to undertake the defence of Adiba, and show them how to defeat their enemies. The suggestion quite staggered me; for I knew what broken reeds the unfortunate people were being forced to lean on. George Edwards, civil surgeon, aged twenty-three, Walter Henderson, ex-Sandhurst cadet—and a failure at that—aged twenty-one, suddenly appointed to the joint command of all the forces of Adiba! But, knowing that it was a case of the superiority of one-eyed men over the blind, we accepted the responsibility without a blush, and we were soon bustled off to inspect the fortifications and their defenders. Had it not been that we considered the state of affairs as most serious, we should have laughed at the whole thing as a huge joke. There were some rusty old guns and mortars, which probably had remained loaded and undischarged for half a century, and behind each loophole on the parapet squatted a matchlock-man, in deadly earnest and intent on slaughter. But it was no time for jesting, and, having seen all that there was to see, Edwards and I had a long consultation with our host and Haroun. In the end we two promised to think out a plan for defending the town, and lay it before Ali Khan the next morning.

We now went off with note-book and pencil, and walked leisurely round the whole extent of the walls, making notes and sketches at various points, and carefully examining the surrounding country. The town was of no great size, covering an area of barely half a square mile; and from outside had the appearance of a square fort, situated in a slight depression. The walls in most parts were some fifteen feet thick at the base, and stood about twenty feet above the general level of the plain, but were somewhat higher at the four angles, in one of which, as I have said, was situated that portion of the palace given over to us. There were four gateways, known as the Hayil, the Majma, the Bussorah, and the Baghdad, and placed each in the centre of one of the side walls, our quarters occupying the angle between the Hayil and the Baghdad gates. From attacks by ordinary Arabs, armed with no better weapons than matchlocks and spears, the place had nothing to fear, the walls being unscalable, and the gateways being so planned as to be capable of great resistance. Against modern arms of precision it would stand no chance whatever, unless strenuous efforts were made to provide some sort of cover for the defenders, as well as for the women and children.

All that night we sat up, with pencils and paper, working out our scheme, which was simplicity itself. We decided that, as we might have to withstand a siege of some duration, and as it would be quite impossible to store sufficient fodder for horses and camels for more than a few days, we would send Haroun, in command of all the horsemen and camelmen, out of the place, with instructions to keep well away to the north, and to watch his opportunity for dealing a blow at the enemy. We thought it would be useless to tie him down to stringent orders, since he knew more about the country and the methods of desert warfare than we did. Moreover, we knew that he was an independent individual, and would take his own line. With regard to the actual defence of the town, there was no time to do more than provide shelters from the bombardment which we anticipated. These we arranged to place close under the walls which faced towards Hayil and Majma, and we went into all the details of each portion of work, so that we might be able to tell the Governor exactly how many men would be required for digging and such-like operations at every point, and how long they should take to complete the work. In order to have a good margin, we calculated to get the defences finished within three days, after which, any time that remained could be devoted to drilling the inhabitants to seek shelter rapidly.

"There," said Edwards, standing up and stretching himself, "that is good enough for them. I am quite anxious to see the result."

"So am I," said I. "Give me another cup of coffee, and then let us go up on to the roof and watch the day break."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE BURST OF THE STORM.

Standing on the parapet of our bastion roof, Edwards and I gazed out into the blackness which preceded dawn. Across the town, we saw presently a pale glimmer in the eastern sky. Day was breaking. We watched the light gradually spreading upwards; then, turning, we looked westward, where the outline of a low range of hills, a little more than a mile away, bounded the view. Each portion of that outline remains engraven on my memory, although, since that day, I have never set eyes on it.

The fitful light appeared to me to be continually altering the shapes of the rounded hill-tops. Want of sleep, I imagined, had upset my powers of vision; for the more I looked the more I became convinced that the outline kept changing. Edwards also had noticed the phenomenon.

"It is an extraordinary thing," said he, "but those hills over there look as if they were moving."

"Just what I was thinking," said I; "I did not like to mention it, because I thought you would say that I had got the jumps."

"I tell you what it is," said Edwards, shading his eyes with both hands, "there are people walking about up there. Look. Do you see them?"

Before I could reply, a bright flash shot out from the hill-side, followed by a volume of smoke and then a loud report; and simultaneously a weird shrieking noise rent the air. We saw the shell fall short of the town by a hundred yards or more, and, exploding on impact with the hard sand, send up a column of dust.

Never did sleeping town receive a ruder awakening; and Edwards and I, rushing down to see what could be done, encountered Ali Khan hastening to meet us.

"What is it that has happened?" he shouted.

"They have surprised the town," I answered, "and are shooting with their foreign guns. We must prevent the people being seized with a panic. Send messengers in all directions to warn everyone to seek cover close beneath the western walls, or in their underground chambers, and wait till the fire slackens. Order the matchlock-men to be prepared to hasten to their posts as soon as the enemy advances to the attack; and despatch Haroun, with the horsemen and those who fight on camels, immediately, by the Bussorah gate, to ride round and attack any who come down from the hills."

Ali Khan was calm and unruffled, issuing his orders rapidly, and disdaining to notice our suggestion that there was still time for him to hoist the white flag and submit. Then came a fearful moment, when a shell, bursting in the principal street of the town, produced the panic which we had hoped to allay. Wild shrieks and yells went up on all sides, and the women and children and the majority of the men rushed madly about in every direction. Edwards and I dashed into their midst, and literally drove them in herds beneath the shelter of the wall. It was then that we saw Haroun, marshalling his horsemen, ready to leave the town; and his men, as they passed us, cursed us freely for belonging to a people who had invented such diabolical instruments of warfare. Haroun, however, forced them to restrain their feelings, otherwise their spears would doubtless have made short work of us.

Seeing the horsemen and camelmen leaving the town the inhabitants imagined that flight had been ordered, and soon long streams of fugitives were pressing on the heels of Haroun's horses, through the Bussorah gate, and out into the desert. But a small body of the enemy's horsemen had already swept round to that side of the town, and was menacing the fugitives, who, seeing their predicament, turned and fled back to the gate. Haroun by this time was out in the open, and was soon engaged with the hostile force. I had run across to the eastern wall to order the Bussorah gate to be closed, and I had an excellent view of the sharp little cavalry skirmish then in progress. I remember thinking at the time what a picturesque sight it was, and I could hardly believe that what I witnessed was real warfare. Now one side fled, and the other pursued, their spears glittering in the sun, and their loose cloaks flying in the wind. Now, opening out and circling widely, the pursued turned and swiftly bore down on their pursuers, who, as if following the rules of a game, allowed themselves to be chased. Again the positions of the combatants were reversed; and it was not until I had watched the evolutions for some little time that I became aware that each side was manœuvring for a purpose. Then I understood that Haroun was striving to lure the enemy towards the spot where the men on the camels sat ready to discharge their matchlocks; while the enemy appeared to be endeavouring to draw our horsemen towards the hills, behind which the whole army was doubtless concealed.

As far as I could judge, in these preliminaries neither party was particularly anxious to close with the other, but as both were equally well mounted, and to all appearance equally skilled in the art of manœuvring, it may not have been possible for the one to overtake the other. At length I observed that Haroun allowed himself to be drawn farther and farther into the plain, until, after a while, the curious struggle was being carried on midway between the town and the enemy's guns. So far, the fire from the guns had done very little real damage. A second shell had landed in the town very soon after the first one, but the gunners husbanded their ammunition with care, only firing at long intervals, and generally ranging short. This was a great relief, and reassured the people, who had now got over their first alarm, and were busily employed in throwing up retrenchments within the town. Edwards had formed a hospital in the palace, and had the few people who had been wounded carried in and attended to; while Ali Khan and I superintended the work going on from positions on the parapets, whence we could also watch the progress of the fight outside.

How many guns the enemy had in reserve we could not say, but so far he had only brought three into action, and these soon found their fire masked by the horsemen in their front. For some hours, therefore, the guns remained silent, and it was quite evident that Haroun had grasped the situation, and was holding his opponents to the ground which intervened between the guns and the town. Hour after hour passed in this way, but towards sundown we heard a mighty shout go up from the direction of the hills, and before it died away we saw Haroun's foes in full flight, with

Haroun's men straining every nerve to outstrip them. Fondly we hoped that our gallant friend's opportunity had come, and I trembled with excitement as I watched the stern chase. Inch by inch our men gained on the enemy, until they were almost within striking distance, when suddenly, as we watched, we saw, to our horror, a fresh body of horsemen issue from a gap in the hills by the side of the guns, and descend with fury on Haroun's flank. At that very moment the long-silent guns belched forth a salvo at the town, two of the three shells falling among the houses, and causing hideous destruction, though fortunately no casualties among the people. Concerned with the havoc wrought by the shells, we lost sight of Haroun, and when we again looked out on the plain, no trace of any horsemen was to be seen.

Satisfied with their work, the guns did not fire again that night; and when darkness had set in, a messenger came from the Amir of Hayil, offering terms to Adiba, but such terms as no self-respecting chief could accept. The town was to surrender unconditionally; the Governor's property to be confiscated and he himself deposed; his two European guests to be handed over forthwith to the Amir; and all the horses and camels to be given up. The Governor was to be allowed until daybreak to accept or reject the terms; and if he refused to accept them, then at sunrise all the Amir's guns would play on the town until it was levelled to the ground, and no quarter would be given either to the Governor or the inhabitants. The message concluded by stating that the Amir's force consisted of no less than ten cannon and eight thousand soldiers. The messenger did not wait for an answer, which was perhaps fortunate, as Ali Khan was so incensed by the Amir's high-handedness, that his reply probably would have been a most insulting one. As it was, he decided to send no reply, and to occupy the night in the further strengthening of the defences of the town.

While we were debating how best to continue the work, who should arrive but Haroun, cool and collected, and even smiling, but dishevelled, begrimed, and bloodstained. His long day of manœuvring had been entirely satisfactory, and in the end he had reaped a brilliant victory—far more brilliant than he had ever dreamed of. There was no time now, he said, to describe what had occurred, for he had come to warn the Governor that the situation was critical, and that something must be done at once; but he could tell us this much of his fight, that not one of the enemy's horsemen whom we had seen pursuing him at dusk was now alive.

"The name of Haroun," said the Governor, with emotion, "will be for ever in the mouths of Adiba."

"Alas," said Haroun, "it is already too late. I have come to tell you that your people are quitting the town. As I brought my men back, I encountered hundreds of the townsmen in the desert, and though I did all in my power to persuade them to return, they mocked at me, and continued their flight in the direction of Bussorah. When, having left my men at a little distance, I came to the Bussorah gate, I found it so densely thronged with people passing through, that I was forced to obtain entrance by the Baghdad gate."

Ali Khan, with a look of intense anger on his face, sprang to his feet, and said that he would go and see for himself what was happening. We followed him as he strode rapidly out of the palace, and the deserted streets through which we passed soon confirmed what Haroun had told us. Reaching the Bussorah gate, we were just in time to see the last of the panic-stricken people crushing through. They were making no noise, and were evidently in a condition of abject fear, intent only on escape from the town. Ali Khan and Haroun, getting among the crowd, alternately cursed them as cowards and cajoled them to return, but their threats and their persuasions were of no avail. No mortal man could have stemmed the tide, so great had proved the moral effect of a few shells on a people ignorant of modern arms.

Between grief and rage at the disloyalty of his subjects, the Governor was, for a time, completely overcome, and was only roused by a stern rebuke from Haroun, whose courage never seemed to forsake him, and who remained unmoved by what had occurred.

"We will go round," said Ali Khan, hopefully, "and see if our captains and their men are not still at their posts. It may be that the fugitives consist only of the women and children, and such of the men who are too old to fight."

"I fear it is not so," said Haroun, "for I met many of the matchlock-men on the road outside, and they told me that it was impossible for anyone to stand another day of the accursed thunderbolts."

Ali Khan, however, was sanguine, and it was not until he had visited several parts of the town, and found the whole place deserted, that he abandoned all hope and returned to the palace. There the same thing met us; the panic had spread during our short absence, even to the servants of the household and the wounded in the hospital; so that there remained with the Governor's wife and child only one faithful man and two women. The others had joined in the flight.

Seeing that our host was now in a state bordering on madness, in that he insisted that our small party should barricade the palace and defend it to the last, Edwards and I determined to take the law into our own hands, and not permit such folly, while there was yet time to get away. So we took Haroun aside, and informed him of the terms that had been offered by the Amir, telling him also that there were still many hours before an answer would be expected. No sooner did he hear what we had to say than he promptly made up his mind how to act, and without replying to us, he went across the room to Ali Khan.

"Lord," said he, in a determined and clear voice, "you are my master, but you are also my friend

and my brother. We have all seen you challenge the lion, on many occasions, to single combat, and we are aware of your personal bravery. The lion which you would now fight has claws which no human being can resist, and to engage him single-handed is certain death. Were there any hope of success, I should be the last man to counsel aught but resistance. As it is, I counsel you to accept the fate that has come, and to leave Adiba for a while, if not on your own account, then for the sake of your wife and child. Come, forget your own vanity, which would impel you to display your courage to the last, and remember that there are others to be thought of. All your camels and mares have already left their grazing ground, as before riding in here I despatched an escort to drive them away to the north, and they have been now some hours on the road. My own men, as well as the riding camels with their matchlock-men, are waiting for me at a little distance from the walls. I will go and bring them in, while you prepare your household for departure, and I will escort you to Meshed Ali, where you can remain until such time as Adiba is restored to you."

Ali Khan made no reply, until Haroun, growing impatient, moved towards the door, and said he would fetch his men. Then our host, with a deep-drawn sigh, spoke slowly and sadly.

"So be it, Haroun," he said. "I will go, but only that I may not see my child suffer before my eyes, and with the hope that he may live to wreak revenge on the tyrant of Hayil, and on those cowardly physicians who for years ate of my salt and then betrayed me."

Haroun hurried off, and we remained to assist the Governor to get ready for the journey. That he had no intention of leaving many of his personal belongings for his enemies was evident, and he, his wife, the servants, and ourselves were kept busy carrying his possessions to the courtyard of the palace, until we heard the clatter of Haroun's horses outside. The camels were brought in, loaded up, and sent forward, half a dozen at a time, under small escorts. Most of the horsemen and camelmen were employed for the space of nearly an hour in securing everything of value in the Governor's stores, all being promised extra rewards if Meshed Ali were reached in safety. Then, when the last bale of silk had been hoisted on to a camel's back, we saw the women and the child placed on other camels, and leading our horses out of the stable in the courtyard, we rode through the dark and silent streets to the Baghdad gate. It was a most painful experience, and I pray that I may never assist at a similar one. No word was spoken; but, mingled with the noise of the horses' hoofs, I could hear, as I rode close behind Ali Khan, what were, only too plainly, his suppressed sobs.

As far as I could estimate, it was about eleven o'clock when we left the empty town to its fate, and we had before us six or seven hours of darkness within which to escape. For, until daybreak, the Amir would take no measures against the town, and it was probable that he was already confident of the acceptance of his terms. That he would pursue, Haroun said, was most unlikely, as the capture of Adiba and the sacking of it would keep his army employed for many days.

So it proved; and throughout our long journey we were never troubled by the thought of pursuit.

CHAPTER XV.

FATE.

We travelled fast all night, and overtaking the laden camels, the milch camels, and the mares, at different points, left them to come on with their escorts, while we trotted ahead as rapidly as the riding camels could go, though Haroun's horses were somewhat knocked up after their hard day's work. No regular halt was made next day, as Haroun wished to put as great a distance as possible between ourselves and Adiba, and we must have covered quite sixty miles before it was decided that we might encamp in safety, and await the arrival of the parties still in rear. The route followed was that which we had taken in the reverse direction a month or more before, when we accompanied Ali Khan to his town; but how different were the circumstances—then it was the triumphal home-coming of a great man; now, the best that could be said for it was that it resembled an ignominious flight.

Once only during that long day's ride did Ali Khan recover his spirits. It was when Haroun related the details of his fight of the day before—as bloody an encounter as perhaps the desert ever witnessed. It seems that when, towards sunset, the guns opened fire on the town, and the fresh body of horsemen issued from the enemy's position, to relieve those who had been engaged all day, Haroun welcomed their appearance on the scene. Throughout the day he had manœuvred, as we had surmised, in such a position as to mask the fire of the guns; but his plan was twofold, and he had great hopes of being able to draw his opponents away to the trap which he had carefully prepared for them. About a mile and a half to the north-west of the town was a steep-sided watercourse, at this season devoid of water, and at a certain point the pilgrim track descended into it and out on the other side. In the bed of this watercourse Haroun, in the morning, had ordered the matchlock-men with the camels to ensconce themselves and await events. In vain he tried to break away towards the watercourse, but each time he found himself outmanœuvred and headed back, and he began to think that his foes understood his design. When, however, in the evening, they fled from the field, and he followed in pursuit, he became hopeful of cutting them off and driving them in the required direction. But since they rode straight for the hills, he feared that if he followed he himself would be ambuscaded. His heart, therefore, gave a great leap when he saw the new arrivals riding down upon him, for he felt

confident that horsemen, probably waiting for hours to be slipped from the leash, would not refuse to pursue him whithersoever he should lead them; and his judgment was not at fault.

Before the wind flew Haroun's men, driving in their spurs, and urging their tired beasts to a final effort; behind followed the exultant pursuers, overhauling their quarry at every stride, and filling the air with their victorious war-howl. Barely fifty yards separated the one party from the other, as they galloped down the incline into the bed of the ravine. Haroun, glancing to the right and left, assured himself that his camelmen were prepared, and without checking his pace, crossed the watercourse, and led his men, now in a dense mass, up through the cutting in the bank on the far side. Then commenced the fusillade of the matchlock-men, and the sound of the first shot told Haroun that the moment for decisive action had come. He pressed forward until he saw that all his party had reached the level of the plain, when, with a mighty yell, he ordered them to wheel round and descend again into the watercourse. Half way down the slope they encountered the foremost of their pursuers, attempting to force their way through the cutting, and a fierce fight ensued. Then, seized with a panic, the unfortunate men of Hayil broke back into the watercourse, where they were met by the fire of the camelmen, who had now closed round their flanks and rear, and fired into them from a distance of only a few yards. Many of the eighty or ninety had already been killed, but the others fought gallantly, and made repeated charges on the camelmen, as well as on Haroun's horsemen, who, now frenzied by the sight of blood, made use of their spears with deadly effect. Haroun gloated over the affair as he related the tale, and Ali Khan was no less delighted at the Arab's exploits; as to myself,—and I fancy that Edwards had much the same feeling,—the wholesale butchery of brave men made me positively sick. That Haroun did not do things by halves was clear; for, not content with the slaughter in the ravine, he pursued the few of the enemy who succeeded in cutting their way out, and ruthlessly slew them. As a proof of his prowess, the chief drew attention to the spears of his men, and we could see that the blood that had been spilled still clotted the tufts of ostrich feathers on each man's bamboo. Disgusted at the whole thing, we two Englishmen could hardly speak for the rest of the day; but when we discussed it afterwards, we came to the conclusion that it was not fair to judge these men according to our accepted standard. Their business was to kill, by fair means or by foul; to them the bloodshed was of no more account than the shooting of pheasants to ourselves; moreover, they knew that their enemies would not have let slip a similar opportunity.

We halted two days at our first camp, so that all the camels and horses might be assembled before we went any farther, and it was a comfort to everyone to learn from the last party that came in that there had been no sign of pursuit. Then we resumed our journey northwards, and, with all the horses and camels, made a goodly show. Day after day passed almost without incident; occasionally a small body of Bedouins was seen hovering about on our flanks, but they always made off as soon as a few of our escort rode out towards them; and at last we pitched our camp on the memorable spot, beside the lake, where, alas, Faris and I had stolen the horses—an act which I now grieved to think had been at the root of all the misfortune that had fallen on Adiba and its ruler. There we remained almost a week, as the beasts required rest and good grazing, and before we moved on again, I had grown to loathe the place.

"I wish you would cheer up a bit," remarked Edwards one evening; "you have been in the blues ever since we got here, and it is not very lively for me, especially as it is all your show, and I only came to keep you company."

"I simply cannot help it, old man," I said; "I am beastly sorry, but my conscience worries me dreadfully. If I could only go off to our poor old host, and tell him that I assisted in the stealing of his two wretched screws, I should feel ever so much better. Do you think I might?"

"Rubbish!" said Edwards. "What earthly good would it do? You cannot undo what has been done. Besides, the knowledge that he had been humbugged would only add to his sorrow. Try to look at things as he does; ascribe it all to Fate, or, if you prefer it, to the Will of Allah. Think how ripping it will be to get back to Baghdad!"

"I am not desperately keen about it," said I, "though I must confess that I would not mind a general clean up and a white man's dinner, before having another try for the Golden Girdle."

"Haven't you forgotten that miserable bauble?" said my friend. "I hoped that it had quite gone out of your mind. As far as I am concerned, I have a return ticket for Baghdad, *viâ* Meshed Ali. My circular tour is complete, and I do not propose to break the journey at Golden Girdle Junction."

"All right," said I. "You wait till, one fine day, I walk into your house in Baghdad and tell you that I have got it."

"Then," said Edwards, laughing, "I will send for the kawas' trusty tulwar, smack your kneeling form severely, and give you the order, 'Rise, Sir Walter Henderson, Knight of the Golden Girdle.'"

"Scoffing sceptic," said I, "likewise sceptical scoffer—but here comes Haroun, and bubbling over with news, I can see. Well, sheik, what have you got to tell us?"

"Something that will amuse you in these dull times," said he. "Last night some Shammar were disturbed in the camp while trying to steal our horses, and they succeeded in getting away. Of course, we thought that they were the same men who had stolen our other horses here on the occasion that you will remember. Some of my men pursued at once, and they have just now returned with three men and their horses, which they succeeded in capturing two hours from here. Last time we lost two horses; now we have got three, so we are the better by one, and two of them are of a good breed. Come and see them."

No sooner did I see the captured horses than I recognised two out of the three as the property of Faris, and as the beasts that he and I had ridden on our visit to the seer. The horses were tied to the pegs of the Governor's tent, and the three Shammar, bound hand and foot, lay close by, awaiting sentence. I looked furtively at Haroun, wondering if he could possibly know anything, and my fear increased when I saw him shake out the contents of my own saddle-bags. There was my long-lost brush and comb, tooth-brush, underclothing, and various precious odds and ends, and I longed to seize them all up in my arms, carry them off, and purr over my old friends. Yet, I had to be most circumspect, and I dreaded lest Edwards should unwittingly give me away. A glance, however, told me that he quite understood the state of affairs. Then my discomfiture was further increased by Haroun calling to Ali Khan to look at the things, when the two turned over everything, while we explained their use.

"Some unfortunate fellow-countryman of ours," said Edwards, "must have been robbed by these scoundrels."

"So it seems," said Ali Khan, "but what I would like to know is what all you Englishmen are doing in the desert; is your country going to appropriate Arabia, as it has done, they tell me, nearly all the rest of the world."

He was in a good humour, and I saw that he was only chaffing us; so I laughingly told him that when England conquered the country, he should be proclaimed Sultan of Arabia, which appeared to please him a good deal, for he forthwith made us a present of the Ingleezee's stolen property.

"It's an ill wind, and so forth," murmured Edwards, as we bore away our treasures in triumph. "Lucky for you that Faris is not here; for after this you would never be able to induce him to believe that you were not a real live magician."

"To tell you the truth," said I, "I am beginning to think that I *am*. But my conscience is troubling me again; I wonder if they will slaughter those three wretched thieves. I have a kind of fellow-feeling for them. I think I shall go and intercede for them."

"Much better not," said Edwards. "It might only lead to complications; besides, as I said before, we really must try to be fatalists."

"Yes, I know," I answered, "but perhaps it has been written in the fate of those men that a foreigner shall save their necks. Of course it was vile and wicked of them to try and steal the Governor's horses, and it certainly was more vile and more wicked of them to steal the horses that Faris and I had left in the ruins; but, after all, did I not myself steal a horse and sundry water-skins?"

However, I thought that for once I would act on my own initiative, so while my companion was taking a siesta I slipped away and found Haroun, who was just going to take the thieves before the Governor. I asked him what sentence he thought they would receive, and was told that it was doubtful, but I was glad to hear that, in any case, it would not be death. Out of curiosity I went to the Governor's tent to hear him dispose of the prisoners, and I was much impressed with the trouble he took to arrive at all the facts. Haroun explained to me aside that if they were found guilty of attempting to steal from friends of their tribe, they would have their right hands cut off; otherwise they would be kept as prisoners until their tribe ransomed them, the ransom going to the men who had caught them. The trial took an immense time, but in the end Haroun proclaimed all Shammar to be his enemies, as his own tribe was a branch of the Aeniza; and Ali Khan declared that they had attempted to steal from their enemies, and would therefore remain prisoners until ransomed by their people. The next question was the amount of the ransom, and how their tribe was to be informed that they were prisoners. The Bedouins pleaded poverty, but finally suggested that if one of them were allowed to go and interview the members of the tribe, the necessary amount might be forthcoming. This course Haroun refused to allow, explaining to the Governor that it would undoubtedly lead to a powerful band of Shammar attacking the caravan, rescuing the prisoners, and probably looting everything. It was, therefore, arranged that the men should accompany us to Meshed Ali, from which place they should be permitted to communicate with their tribe.

The day after this, we started on the last week of the march to Meshed Ali, and we soon learned that a prisoner's lot was no pleasant one. Each morning the wretched thieves were brought out, with their legs and hands tied, and placed on the backs of camels; and at the end of the day's march, three grave-like holes were dug in the ground for their reception. In these they were laid, with hands tied, legs chained to pegs, and their twisted hair fastened to other pegs on either side of their heads. Neither was this all, for, in order to render escape quite impossible, sticks were laid across the graves, and on them were piled up as many weighty articles of baggage as were thought necessary, only one small breathing-hole being left over the face. I remonstrated with Haroun on this harsh treatment, but he declared that it was the invariable custom, and that they did not really mind it.

On the third day's march one of the prisoners was taken ill, and Edwards was asked to go and see him.

"Now's your chance," said I, "tell the Governor that they have all three got symptoms of small-pox or something, and had better be turned adrift. The poor devils have had quite enough punishment for a crime which, in this land, is really no crime at all."

"I will see what I can manage," said Edwards, as he went off.

When he returned later on, he said that his courage had failed him at the last moment. He had quite made up his mind to act on my suggestion, but he was afraid that Ali Khan or Haroun might know the symptoms of small-pox, and so find him out. He thought, however, that by judicious questioning he might discover what the two chiefs knew of the disease, and if he found that they knew nothing, then, the next day, he would settle with his conscience whether humanity or honesty should have the first place.

"The unfortunate man," said Edwards, "has dysentery, and is as weak as a cat. I have done this much for him: I went to Haroun and told him, without mentioning what was actually the matter, that the prisoner was very ill, and unless properly attended to might die at any moment. I pointed out that if he remained in that prison-hole he would certainly be dead before morning. Haroun, at first, went off on the old fate tack, and said he could not interfere; but when I told him that I would go and interview the Governor, he gave me leave to do what I thought best about the man. Well, the long and the short of it is that, if you do not mind, I am going to give the invalid a shakedown for the night in our tent."

"Of course I do not mind," said I.

"I thought you would not," said Edwards, "and I arranged with Haroun that, as soon as it was dark, he should come and help us bring the man over here. The only condition he made was that I would be responsible that he was handed over, dead or alive, in the morning, before we march."

Great was the astonishment of the Shammar when we took him out of his hole, and conveyed him to our tent; and when Edwards explained to him that he was to remain with us for the night, so that he might be looked after, he almost wept with gratitude. He willingly promised that he would not betray our trust in him by attempting to escape, and he swore that, if he ever recovered his health and freedom, he would find a means of repaying us for our kindness.

Little did we imagine that we were entertaining unawares, if not actually an angel, a man who, before long, would influence our every action.

CHAPTER XVI.

RESCUE.

So ill was the unfortunate prisoner, that Edwards insisted that during the next day's march he should ride unfettered and in comparative comfort on a camel. He stood the journey well, and on reaching camp he was no worse than he had been at starting in the morning. Again he was consigned to our care and accommodated in our tent.

We were now within four days' ride of Meshed Ali, and the Governor (as we still called him) decided that, before entering the town, it would be necessary to send forward messengers, with presents to the notables, requesting an asylum, and asking permission to rent suitable quarters. This, we learned, might take some considerable time, and in the meanwhile the *kafila* was to halt and prepare for the entry into the Holy City. This delay was most annoying to Edwards and myself, for having returned, as it were, to the outskirts of civilisation, we were anxious to take an affectionate farewell of our friends, to whom we could be no longer of any assistance, and get away on our own business. Edwards, of course, wished to return to Baghdad as soon as possible; and I was equally desirous of seeking out Faris, with a view to learning if he had discovered anything about the Golden Girdle.

"I have been thinking," said Edwards, "that we might clear out from here. I do not see any use in going on with Ali Khan to Meshed Ali. Our presence cannot make much difference, and I do not suppose that he and Haroun really care whether we see them all the way to the town or not. They will not want a doctor any longer, and they know that as soon as we reach Meshed Ali we shall continue the journey to Baghdad."

"I quite agree," said I; "the only thing is that we must not do anything to wound the feelings either of Ali Khan or of Haroun. I am still haunted by the idea that it was entirely through us that the poor old Governor came to grief, and he has been a perfect brick about it. Just think what it all means to him."

"Of one thing," said Edwards, "you may be certain. Directly I get back to Baghdad, I will induce the Consul-General to espouse his cause, and I will do my utmost to persuade him to worry the Turkish authorities to death, or at any rate until they have seen justice done to Ali Khan. If they choose, they can easily give Hayil a slap on the face, and reinstate Ali Khan at Adiba, that is to say if the town has not been destroyed."

"Well," said I, "shall we go and suggest that we would like to go off to Baghdad at once, without waiting to go to Meshed Ali?"

"We cannot tackle the business to-night," said Edwards. "It is too late now; I expect they have all turned in; but we will see about it in the morning. We have not yet settled what we are going to do about this feeble prisoner and his two friends."

"Perhaps," I suggested, "they will let them go as our guides."

"Not they," said Edwards. "Each of them means a bit of money—a ransom of a hundred camels for the lot, at least."

"There is nothing for it then," said I, "but the small-pox yarn."

"But I told Haroun to-day that I thought the sick man was ever so much better," remarked Edwards.

Just then we noticed that our patient was sitting up on his rugs in the corner of the tent, and gazing at us intently.

"Do you want anything?" asked Edwards.

"Yes, Beg," said the Shammar, "I want to speak to you. I am so much better, thanks to your care, that I can now talk."

"Probably you wish," said Edwards, "to ask me to let you escape. If that is what you want, I must tell you at once that, although I would gladly see you and the others go free, it cannot be, for I have promised that you shall not escape."

"That does not trouble me," said the Bedouin, "since I have friends in Meshed Ali, and as soon as I reach the place, we shall be ransomed."

"Then what is it that you wish to say?" asked Edwards.

"I have travelled," said the man, "for several days now with you two Ingleezee; and, without your knowledge, I have watched all your actions. You are both kind and good men, but neither of you is the man whom we were seeking when we entered your camp by the marsh and were captured as supposed stealers of horses. We had no intention of taking horses or anything from any man, but we had heard that there were two Ingleezee travelling with the caravan, and we thought that one of them would be the man with whom we have a blood feud. We knew that two Ingleezee had come to the desert, because we found, at the ruins of Katib, the horse and saddle-bags of one of them, and had actually seen him. The other we know well, and for him have dared much, but only to be deceived, to be cheated, robbed, insulted, and even murdered. There must have been three of you. What have you done with the other?"

"According to you," said Edwards, "there should be four, that is two besides my friend here and myself. There is the man with whom you are so anxious to settle accounts, and there is the man whose horse you say you found at the ruins of Katib."

"No," said the Shammar, turning his eyes on me, "only three. The horse that we took at the ruins belonged to your friend."

"How do you know this?" I asked, thrown off my guard by the suddenness with which the statement had been made.

"Thus," he replied; "I met with an accident at the ruins, and was lying alone among the stones, not ten paces from the spot where you had left your horse, when you and that Faris of the Jelas came by, and I laughed when I saw that my friends had taken your horses and left you to walk. But of this I have spoken to no man outside of my own tribe."

I now began to feel uncomfortable, for, as I said to myself, if this man were to disclose what he knew to Ali Khan, I should be in a very awkward predicament. Here was evidence that I and Faris, deprived of our horses, had been seen walking away from the ruins towards the marsh, just at the very time that Ali Khan's horses had been stolen, and I was quite sure that any Arab of ordinary intelligence would be able to put two and two together.

"Why did you not tell this to your captors when you were taken?" I asked.

"Because," said the man, "they would not have believed me. But when I felt very ill, some days back, I was on the point of disclosing everything. Then you came to succour me, and since that time I have been filled with gratitude towards you both—so much so, that even if I were now to be in peril of my life, I would hold my peace concerning what I saw at those ruins, unless it should be your wish that I should speak."

"What harm would it do my friend," asked Edwards, "were you to proclaim that you saw him at Katib? The ruins are free to all."

"Even so," said the Shammar, "but we in the desert know all things. News travels fast. We have heard that Faris did not enter the Jelas encampment on foot, but riding a horse stolen from this self-same Governor of Adiba, then encamped by the marsh at no great distance from Katib. Another horse was stolen at the same time. By whom was it stolen?"

He looked at me, and smiled; but I did not reply at once to his question. I was convinced that he was trying to drive a bargain; that in return for his silence he was to be given his liberty; and I felt that he had got me up into a corner, with power to do much as he pleased with me. At first I thought I would bluff him; then I remembered a piece of advice that Faris once gave me, which was to the effect that one might humbug a townsman with success, but that with a true Bedouin, honesty would be found to be the best policy.

"What matter does it make," said I, "by whom the horse was stolen? The man who stole it required it. The man who lost it could well do without it. So we will say no more on that point.

But tell me of this third Ingleezee whom you know so well, and whose blood you wish to shed."

"Whence he came," said the Bedouin, "I cannot tell you, but our sheik, after a visit to Kerbela, brought him back with him to our tents. Since that time, I and all the men of the tribe have had misfortunes. Sheik Abbas was slain in battle by your cruel friend Faris; his nephew, even he who became sheik at the death of Abbas, disappeared at Katib with two trusty companions. We doubt not that they were murdered by a shaitan who dwelt in the ruins. I and ten others—all that remained of our family—went to Katib to find them, but our search was fruitless."

"So, in revenge," said I, "you slew the shaitan, otherwise Raspul, Priest of the Goddess Sophana."

"How know you?" asked the man.

"How I know matters not," I answered. "But I know it, and, furthermore, I know that you stole from his dead body that golden belt, which undoubtedly has proved as great a curse to you as it has to all men who have touched it."

"Since you know these things," said he, "you and Faris must have watched us from some hiding-place."

"True," said I.

"Then you saw all?"

"We saw you break in the roof of the temple, and kill Raspul; and we saw a man descend by a rope."

The Shammar opened his eyes wide, drew a deep breath, and sighed.

"Come now," said I, "tell me what happened to you afterwards."

"There were eleven of us," said he, "and that Ingleezee. As we fled from the ruins, my horse tripped and rolled over with me, leaving me with an injured leg, and galloping loose after the others. It was then that I lay among the stones for many hours, and after a time I saw you and Faris go by. Next day three of my friends came back to fetch me, and we went together to the place where they had left the Ingleezee and the others. All had disappeared. We found the horses' hoof marks, and we followed them up. They were galloping fast, and though we rode rapidly we could not overtake them. At length, after several days, we found the body of one of our friends, lying in the desert. He had been shot by a bullet from the Ingleezee's pistol. Farther on, we came on another of our men, who had also been shot, but was not yet dead; and from him, before he died, we learned all that had occurred. How the Ingleezee had seized that serpent belt, refusing to pay anything that he had promised; how he had ridden away with it; how my people had pursued him; and how when they were overtaking him, he turned upon them and shot them with his pistol. But that was not all the evil that he did; for as we journeyed on, we overtook the rest of the men in a *wadi*, four of them had been wounded, three, as it proved, mortally, and the others had abandoned farther pursuit, in order to attend to their friends. Then we all bound ourselves by an oath that we would not rest again in our tents until we had buried our knives in the body of that Ingleezee. Whither he escaped we could never discover, for shortly afterwards a great sand-storm blew over us, and we were unable to again find the footprints of his horse. It may be that he perished in the storm, but we continued to search for him in all directions. After some weeks, we heard that two Ingleezee were living at Adiba, and I and my two companions started for that place; but, before we had gone very far, we met some Bedouins who told us that the town had been captured by Hayil, and that the Governor and the two Ingleezee were fleeing in our direction. So we halted near the marsh of the great lake, and the rest you are acquainted with. But when I am again free, I shall continue the search for your countryman, and one day, if it please Allah, I shall see him die."

I had purposely refrained from interrupting the Shammar as he told his tale, though I frequently wished to break in and ask questions. Now, however, I could satisfy my curiosity.

"What manner of man," I asked, "is that Ingleezee?"

"A fat man," was the reply, "and dark, not of a red colour like you two."

"Are you sure that he is an Englishman? May he not be a native of some other country of Europe?"

"That I cannot say. I know nothing of the distinctions between the inhabitants of one country and of another. I only know that he is a European."

"Did you not know," I asked, "why he came with your sheik from Kerbela?"

"At first, we were told that he came to see the desert, as Europeans do sometimes. Then, one day, Sheik Abbas called us together and told us that the seer at Katib possessed a gold belt, which the Ingleezee desired to buy; that he would give 5000 kerans for it, and that two of us should go and ask Raspul to sell it. So I and another went to the ruins, and interviewed the seer. He told us that he had no belt, but afterwards he brought it and showed it to us, and expressed his willingness to part with it. We arranged with him that the price should be 2000 kerans, so that we might all share with Sheik Abbas the other 3000, and he agreed to bring the belt to a certain spot near Babil on a certain day. Proudly, we returned to our tents, and told the sheik what we had done, and the Ingleezee, on hearing it, gave each of us some gold money as bakhshish."

"But," I inquired, "had the Ingleezee 5000 kerans with him, so that he might purchase the belt?"

"No," said the Bedouin, "he had only a little money, but a Jew in Kerbela had told our sheik that, if the Ingleezee wrote on a piece of paper the amount of any sum that he required, then Yusuf Mersina, the Baghdad merchant, would pay it. So the Ingleezee wrote down 5000 kerans and gave the paper to the sheik, and it was agreed that when Raspul delivered over the belt, Sheik Abbas should take it and the paper to Baghdad, and receive the money, and we were to ride with the Ingleezee to Bussorah."

"Why was not the Ingleezee to take the belt?" I asked.

"Because Sheik Abbas would not let it go out of his possession until he received the money, since he was to be responsible to the seer for the payment of the 2000 kerans."

"I understand," said I. "But tell me, did the seer bring the belt to the appointed place?"

"No," said the man, "a curse on him! We waited for him for three hours: in his stead came your Faris; and Sheik Abbas fell at his hands. Then the Ingleezee spoke to Sheik Ahmed, and said that if he procured the belt he would give 5000 kerans. Ahmed went to Katib to see Raspul, taking with him two men; and those three we have never seen since. It was thus that the rest of us went to the ruins, and carried off the belt, hoping to obtain the 5000 kerans from the Ingleezee. But my friends tell me that he took the belt and sewed it up in his cloak, and when they demanded the money, he told them that he had already paid Sheik Abbas 5000 kerans, and that he could pay no more. It was then that he rode away, as I have already related."

The man was so exhausted by talking, that Edwards now insisted on his taking a draught and going to sleep. We ourselves sat up for some time, discussing matters, and trying to unravel the mystery of the stranger who had defeated me over the Golden Girdle. As we worked it out, the whole thing seemed clear enough. Some foreigner knew as much as I did about the Girdle, and had somehow learned that it was in existence above ground. He had apparently discovered this from someone at Kerbela, who had handed him over to the Shammar. The German note which we had read was, of course, his order for the payment of the 5000 kerans to Sheik Abbas. The courage of the man astounded us; he made up his mind to annex the Girdle; to keep it, he had made free use of his revolver, and though I did not admire his bloodthirsty methods, it was a bitter thing to me to have to acknowledge that I was not in the running with such a man.

"I am afraid it is all up with the prize now, George," I said.

"Yes, I am afraid so," said Edwards. "But we will get back to Baghdad, and put the screw on this Yusuf Mersina, until he divulges the name of the villain."

"That will not help much," I said. "He has probably reached Bussorah long ago, and is half way to Europe by now."

"A wire will stop him at Karachi, or Aden, or somewhere, and have him arrested for murdering Turkish subjects," said Edwards.

"That would not be very sporting," I replied. "I expect the best thing will be to say nothing of what we have heard."

We were both soon asleep, and of what actually happened after that, and when it happened, I have no knowledge. All I can say is that at some time in the night I was aroused by a slight rustling noise in the tent, and before I was half awake I felt myself being smothered by something like a rug being held over my face. Thinking that I was suffering from nightmare, I kicked and struggled, and wondered when I was going to wake up, but the comforting feeling that it was only a dream never came. Instead of it, several hands seemed to hold me down, and presently, as I still struggled, they gripped me harder and harder, and I found that my legs and arms were being bound with ropes. Then suddenly, fingers passed across my face, under the rug; my mouth was prised open, and, before I could utter a sound, a great wooden gag was thrust between my teeth, and secured by a string behind my neck. In this state, and in total darkness, I was left for a few minutes; then two men quietly lifted me up, and carried me outside the tent, away into the black night, at a jog-trot One man had his arms round my knees, while the other supported my shoulders; and I soon found that by no amount of struggling could I free myself. After travelling in this uncomfortable manner for, it may have been, half a mile, I was deposited on the ground, and a moment later was hoisted on to the back of a squatting camel, and secured with ropes to one side of a pannier-like framework. What weight on the other side balanced mine I could not see, as, although there was a certain amount of light from the stars, the great hump of the beast blocked my view. Several men held on to me as the camel was made to rise, and it was as well; for otherwise, in all probability, I should have had many broken bones. A lurch backwards, a lurch forwards, and a final lurch sideways, brought me high above the ground; then came a frantic plunge, and I knew that the "ship of the desert" had set sail.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE TRAIL OF THE SERPENT.

The pace was rapid, and the motion painful in the extreme. So uncomfortable was I, that I found it quite impossible to collect my thoughts, and I could not understand why I was being subjected to this hideous torture. My bones ached all over, my body was becoming numbed, and the gag in my mouth almost choked me. Yet I was powerless to do anything, except gaze upwards at the stars, which appeared to swish wildly backwards and forwards, as if attempting to fall in with the gait of the camel. Was I another Mazeppa? Was I to be thus carried about the desert until death came to my relief? Had all this been brought about by the goddess Sophana, wrathful at my desire to possess her sacred girdle? Such thoughts passed rapidly through my brain, and became jumbled up with countless other thoughts. I lost consciousness, and regained it only to find the same eternal condition of affairs, to hear the same thud of the camel's feet, and to feel the same dipping plunge, as the legs on my side of the beast flew forward. At last, I felt that I could stand it no longer, and I prayed fervently that I might die before I went mad. I thought that my prayer was about to be answered; I thought that I was dying, when suddenly I heard shouting, and, without any warning, the camel's legs appeared to scatter in all directions. The "ship of the desert" had cast anchor, and so severe was the shock to my feeble body, that every atom of breath was knocked out of it.

When I recovered, I found myself lying in a delightfully shady grove of date trees, my arms and legs free, and a saddle-bag supporting my head. I looked listlessly around, and saw a few camels and horses, and, at a little distance, a group of Arabs squatting round a fire, and eating their food. I turned over, and looked on the other side, and there, to my surprise and delight, I saw George Edwards lying peacefully asleep, within a yard of me. I tried to speak, but my jaw was stiff, and my tongue would not move; so I sank back, and, utterly exhausted, dropped off to sleep again. When next I awoke, Edwards was sitting by my side, and our Shammar patient was holding a vessel of water to my parched lips. How I drank! And, as I drank, new life seemed to enter into me.

"WHEN NEXT I AWOKE EDWARDS WAS SITTING BY MY SIDE."

"If this is a dream, George," I remarked, "it is the most beastly nightmare that I have ever assisted at."

"It is no dream, old chap," he said. "It is a stern reality. Thank goodness that it is over."

"What has been going on, then?" I asked.

"I have just been hearing about it from our sick friend here," said Edwards. "Unbeknown to him, his pals planned a rescue, and it seems that they had been watching us for days. They managed to bring away all three of the supposed horse-thieves, as well as their three horses and two others, so they did pretty well."

"Why did they bother to bring *us*?" I asked.

"They have apologised most humbly," said Edwards, "but they say that it was absolutely necessary that Ali Khan should be induced to believe that we had assisted in the escape of the

prisoners."

"Rather rough," said I, "that we should be made the scape-goats, considering all the trouble you took about the sick man. Nice sort of Englishmen old Ali Khan will think us, eating of his salt and accepting his hospitality, and then assisting to rob him of his lawful prisoners and his horses."

"I know," said Edwards; "but we will look up Ali Khan some day, and set matters right. How are you feeling after that awful jolting?"

"Limp," I answered, "disgustingly limp. Were you also trussed up on the side of a camel?"

"Much like yourself," said he. "I was on the same beast as yourself—only that mountain of a hump between us. But I did not discover it until I was taken down. I expect we shall be stiff for days."

Then we talked over all that had occurred, and I found that our experiences had been very similar, except that our kidnappers very nearly did for Edwards by keeping the cloth too tight over his face while they were tying him up. In fact, he had no recollection of anything until he felt the cold air rushing across his face, as the camel bore him along. We congratulated each other on having weathered the tempestuous voyage, and we actually laughed over it—so ludicrous did it seem, now that it was all over. According to what Edwards had heard from the men, we must have come sixty or seventy miles straight on end, as they were afraid of being followed; and how our sick man had survived the journey we could not understand. There did not, however, seem to be much the matter with him, and while we were talking he appeared on the scene, bringing us some food.

"We were just wondering, Daud," said Edwards, addressing him, "why you are alive. Surely you must be feeling ill after the long ride."

"Lord," answered the Bedouin, "it is good to be once more free in the desert. It was the confinement that was killing me."

Naturally anxious to find out what was in store for us, we set to work to cross-question our friend, while we ate the food which he had brought. We learned that he and his two fellow-prisoners knew nothing of the proposed rescue until it was an accomplished fact. Their rescuers had never been able to communicate with them, although they had entered the camp on more than one night, and had discovered how everything was situated. Then they formed their plan, which was certainly a bold one. Originally, the party had consisted of no more than six men, but not daring to attempt the rescue with so few, the chief went off and secured the services of ten of his kinsmen; and to each of the sixteen was allotted a separate task. That they were all men to be trusted to carry through a desperate enterprise the chief knew well; for he was aware that if the courage of one man failed, the plan would be wrecked. He himself and three others were to remain at some distance from the camp, in charge of two camels and the horses of the party; five men were to capture the horses; three to release the two prisoners from their holes in the ground; and four to carry off ourselves and the man lying sick in our tent. Nothing was left to chance; each man knew exactly where he had to go, and each had sworn that if he were detected in the act of performing his part, he would do all in his power to induce his captors to believe that he was a thief who had entered the camp alone. Everything worked without a hitch, and our friend was delighted at the brilliant success.

"I am sorry," he said, as he concluded his story, "that it should have been necessary to put you, my two kind friends, to so much discomfort, but you may be sure that I will ever look after your welfare, and when you shall have accomplished that for which the chief brought you away, then you shall take your horses, and we will see you to within a safe distance of Baghdad."

"I thought," said Edwards, "that you said that we were carried off, so that Ali Khan might be deceived about your rescue."

"That was so," replied the Arab, "and that was what the chief of the party at first told me. He has since given me a second reason; but he will come presently to pay his respects to you, and will then explain everything."

It was not long before the promised visit was paid, and our visitor, who was accompanied by nearly all the members of the party, delighted us by his urbanity—if such a term can be used of a real child of the desert. He was frank and open in his speech, and he told us that he and his men felt greatly honoured by having us with them; that he hoped that we had not suffered much bodily pain by our long ride; and that we would not want for anything while we remained their guests. Then he shook each of us warmly by the hand; smiled on us; and, before we realised that he had told us nothing, walked away. We were on the point of calling after him to stay and explain matters, when Daud, our sick man, whispered to us to have patience; the chief, he said, could not speak fully before all his men, but he would return later, when the camp had settled down for the night.

So we possessed our souls in patience, and spent the remaining hour or so of daylight in making ourselves comfortable in the little wigwam that had been erected for us. Soon after dark, Daud returned with the chief, who brought with him his long pipe, whereby we knew that the sitting was to be of considerable duration. His conversation was delightful, and he discussed nearly everything under the sun; but, to our intense annoyance, kept away from the only topic which for the time being was of interest to us. He recounted deeds of personal valour, and told us of his many encounters with the Aeniza; he dilated on the pleasures of Baghdad; and described the

fanaticism of the pilgrims who visit the Holy Shrine at Kerbela each year; and I verily believe that he would have left us in ignorance of the future, had I not summoned up courage to put a direct question to him.

"Tell us now, sheik," I said, "how we can be of service to you. We are willing to assist you in any way that we can, but my friend is eager to return to his duties at Baghdad as soon as it shall be convenient to you."

"Dear me," said he, "I had almost forgotten the object of my visit, so pleasant have I found your company. But now that you have recalled me to myself, we will discuss business."

Long and earnestly did he then speak, and he gave us a full explanation for his having carried us off from Ali Khan's camp. There were three reasons. The first was, as Daud had told us, in order to deceive Ali Khan, and so prevent him from having a cause of everlasting feud with the Shammar tribesmen. As matters stood, it was his hope that Ali Khan would think that Edwards and I had released the three prisoners, and had assisted in the theft of the five horses, for them and ourselves to ride. The second reason was that the sheik knew that Daud was ill and might require the attention of a doctor; he knew that one of us was a doctor, but being uncertain which, had thought it advisable to bring both of us. But the third reason was the most important, and doubtless the real cause of our having been kidnapped.

"From my friend Daud," continued the sheik, "I have learned much information concerning you. From him also you have learned many things, and you know of your mysterious fellow-countryman, as well as of his evil deeds. You know also of the gold belt which he has with him, and for which he promised to pay 5000 kerans. But of more recent events neither you nor Daud have heard."

Then he related how he and his men had come to know that the "ill-born Ingleezee," as he styled him, had taken refuge with two Jews who lived in a hovel close to the Birs Nimroud—the reputed Tower of Babel, a few miles from Hillah. These Jews had always been firm friends of the Shammar, and had helped them out of many difficulties, and for that reason they felt bound to respect the person of the man who had become the *dakhil*, or protected guest, of the Jews. They were thus cheated of their revenge, and the blood feud was at an end. Yet, there was now a hope that the Ingleezee, who was very ill, would be induced to pay them the money for the belt; in fact, he had told the Jews that he would do so, if he should recover sufficiently to reach Baghdad. The long and the short of it was that Edwards was to go and treat the man, so that the Shammar might get their 5000 kerans. We were, we were told, barely twenty-five miles from the spot, and it was proposed that we should rest the next day, starting on the journey at nightfall. We willingly agreed to undertake the work, for we were naturally inquisitive as to the strange individual of whom we had heard such queer tales. Moreover, I saw before me a chance of striking a bargain for the Golden Girdle. I was prepared to pay the Shammar what had been promised, and to give the mysterious foreigner something for himself in addition. I built palatial castles in the air, and continued to build them until long after our host had brought his visit to a close. The Serpent Belt of Sophana lay within measurable distance of my grasp. Two days hence it might be actually mine. Before the week had ended, Edwards and I might be back in Baghdad, when a wire to my uncle announcing my success would make the name of Walter Henderson famous, if not in the world, at any rate in the British Museum. My mother had often told me how, when I was quite a small boy, she had been present, at the Albert Hall, at the reception given to the great Stanley, on his return from the Emin Pasha expedition; and how the Prince of Wales and all London were there to do him honour. I trembled to think what was in store for me. Would I also have to face tier above tier of London society? Would I have to deliver an address, and relate all my experiences? Undoubtedly all these things would happen, and more besides. I should, of course, be commanded to a private audience of the King at Buckingham Palace, so that he might inspect the Girdle, before others had seen it. Then I thought of the endless dinners of various learned societies in London, whereat I should be the guest of the evening. I began to wonder if I could stand it all; or if it would not be better to seek the post of commander-in-chief to Ali Khan, when he should be reinstated at Adiba.

So I dreamed on far into the night, and the sleep that followed was unbroken for many hours of the following day.

At dusk we prepared for our new journey, and our friend Daud himself brought us our horses, smiling as he told us that the chief presented them to us. I was given the horse that I had ridden to the ruins of Katib with Faris, while Faris's own horse was bestowed on Edwards.

"Little did you think," remarked Daud to me, "that you would ever ride this horse again."

"We never know," said I, "what is written in our fate."

"True," said he; "Allah alone knows."

"DAYLIGHT SHOWED US, IN THE FAR DISTANCE, THE MOUND OF THE BIRS NIMROUD"

Then, by the light of a glorious moon, we all rode out across the trackless expanse—a few men ahead, a few on either flank, and others in rear; and thus we continued to ride, Daud and the sheik ever conversing with us, until the moon paled before the rising sun, and daylight showed us, in the far distance, the mound of the Birs Nimroud.

CHAPTER XVIII.

TRUE FRIENDSHIP.

During the heat of the day we halted in a grove, while two men rode on to inform the Jews that an English doctor and his companion were on their way to visit the Ingleezee refugee. Late that night they returned, saying that our arrival would be welcomed by the invalid, who was no better. So, shortly afterwards, we continued our journey, and in the early hours of the morning reached our destination, when the sheik, bidding us remain a few yards away, went on to interview the Jews. He came back almost at once, with the news that the Ingleezee was alone in the hut, as the Jews had left him some hours before. The man was evidently very ill, and wished to see the English doctor as soon as possible, but requested the sheik to keep his Arabs outside the hut.

The squalid dwelling which we entered had but one small room, which was badly lighted by an oil lamp standing on the floor. In one corner lay the man whom we had come to succour. Speaking with a feeble voice, he addressed us in English, but with a foreign accent. The voice was familiar to me, but I could not remember ever to have seen the scrubbly-bearded face of the speaker, who was shading his eyes and gazing into my face.

"Valter 'Enderson," he said, "you do not recollect poor Fritz Kellner."

I stared at him in amazement, and, completely overcome, I could find no words with which to reply. It was a terrible shock to me to see my ever-cheery cabin companion in so desperate a plight, and to think that he and his revolver had played such havoc with the Shammar. I turned away from him almost in horror, while Edwards knelt down and examined him; then, when I had roused myself to a sense of duty, I went across and took his hand.

"My poor friend," I said, "how *could* you have come to this?"

"It was that accursed Girdle," said he. "Take my advice, and touch it not; for within it lies a devil incarnate, goading one to madness, and impelling one to do such things as no sane man would dream of doing. But it is a lovely treasure—the most superb piece of workmanship that I have ever handled; and to have been the possessor of it even for a few days was well worth all the hardships that I have endured."

"Do you not now possess it?" I asked. "You speak as if it were a thing of the past."

"Alas," he replied, "I had to let it go. The Jews who are my hosts heard a few hours ago that a strong party of Aeniza were in search of it, and had discovered that I had it here. They may arrive at any moment; but they will be disappointed, for the Girdle is now being conveyed by the two Jews to a place of safety."

No sooner did I hear that we were likely to be visited by Aeniza, than I slipped out of the hut, to warn our people. Day was already breaking, and the Shammar sheik laughed when I told him that the Aeniza were coming. They feared no Aeniza, he said; though, even as he spoke, he motioned to his men to get to their horses; and as I returned to the hut, I saw him lead them away, at a canter, to a hollow in the ground situated half a mile or so from the spot. For a long while Edwards and I sat silently watching the unfortunate German, who now had sunk into a restless sleep.

"Can he possibly pull round?" I asked in a whisper.

"I should not like to offer an opinion," said Edwards. "I have not overhauled him properly; but, as far as I can make out, he is in an awful state. If I had him in hospital at Baghdad, I might do something for him. Here, without any appliances, I am powerless."

"What can we do?" I asked.

"We ought to send, or one of us go, into Hillah," said he, "and get our friend the Captain to take the man into his hospital. It cannot be many miles from here, as you will remember that we visited the Tower one morning from Hillah."

"I'll go off myself," I said, "if you will stay and look after the man. I daresay the sheik will see me on the way, as he is interested in Kellner's recovery, though I had better not say that the Girdle has got adrift again."

The words were hardly out of my mouth before the sound of countless galloping horses broke on our ears; and, rushing to the door, we opened it a couple of inches and peered out. The whole place seemed to be alive with Bedouin horsemen, and before we could secure the door, the two foremost of the party, springing from their horses, had torn it open. We recoiled towards the corner where lay the feeble Kellner, who, either in a state of delirium, or from force of habit, sat up and snatched his revolver from under his pillow. Edwards, however, seized his wrist, as his finger touched the trigger, and the bullet buried itself in the roof. But the report of the pistol was the signal for a general assault on the hut; we ourselves were quickly overpowered, and the whole place was levelled to the ground almost before we knew what had happened. Then, above the din, I heard a voice which to me was music. It was the rallying shout of the great Faris; there was no mistaking it; and, a second later, my hand grasped his, and Sedjur and Edwards simultaneously recognised each other.

"So it is you," said Faris, after he had recovered from his first surprise, "whom I have been hunting for so long. How did you succeed in carrying off that serpent belt?"

"I have it not," I answered. "I have never seen it since that horrible night when Raspul was killed."

"But they told me," said Faris, "that an Ingleezee had secured it, and had ridden with it to this spot."

"That may have been true," I replied, "yet——"

I broke off suddenly, remembering then for the first time that our Shammar friends were lying in ambush close by, ready to fall on the Aeniza. I was in a dilemma, and I could see that Edwards had also forgotten everything, in his joy at meeting Faris and Sedjur again. To betray the Shammar, I felt, would be base in the extreme. To allow them to surprise the Aeniza would be still more base. Bloodshed must be avoided at all costs. I knew that the mere handful of men of which the Shammar party consisted, would stand no chance against the hundred or more Aeniza who were with Faris; I felt convinced, also, that, however great the risk, the Shammar sheik would not hesitate to attack. All this passed through my mind in the space of a minute, and within that minute I had also decided on the course I would pursue.

"Sheik Faris," I said, and I spoke rapidly, "I am well acquainted with your generosity. Grant me a favour."

"To you, magician," he answered, laughing, "I will grant anything you ask, knowing, as I do, that you possess the power to take it, whether I grant it or not."

"Then," said I, "bid your men mount at once. A score of Shammar lay concealed over yonder. They are my friends, and I ask of you that there shall be no bloodshed."

"You are certainly taxing my generosity," said he, "but, though I do not pretend to be a Hatim Tai, your friends shall be shown the road to safety."

Collecting his men, and leading them out, Faris rode towards the spot which I had pointed out to him while I watched anxiously to see what would happen I had not to wait long, however; for, before the Aeniza had gone a few yards, I saw, to my intense relief, that even the Shammar were aware that discretion is the better part of valour, and were in full flight across the desert. Faris pursued only to such a distance as to lead his foes to believe that he was in earnest, and then, recalling his men, brought them back to the shadow of the Birs Nimroud.

What astonished the sheik more than anything was the recovery of his own two horses, which we had lost at the ruins of Katib; and, as Edwards had foretold long before, he ascribed it to my dealings with magic.

"One thing is certain," said Faris, after he had heard all our adventures, "and that is that we cannot remain here. Hillah is too near, and the Turkis are in a restless state just now. Our tents are but four days' journey away; our riding camels we can reach to-night; the Jews who have made away with your heart's desire we shall yet reckon with; so you and the good Hakim shall come once again to the Jelas tents, and we will start as soon as possible."

"But what shall we do with the sick stranger?" I asked.

"Leave him to the vultures," was the curt reply.

"Great sheik," I said reprovingly, "that was not spoken out of the heart of Faris-ibn-Feyzul. What if the Englishman who found your wounded Sedjur had uttered such words?"

"Then what do you wish to do with him?" asked Faris. "You say that he is too ill to ride, and we must move quickly."

Edwards and I consulted, and, much against my will, I felt bound to act as he advised. We could not abandon Kellner; to take him away into the desert would probably kill him; moreover, since Edwards had no medicines with him, he could do little or nothing for the ailing German, even if the journey did not prove fatal. On the other hand, Hillah lay only a few miles away, and the Turkish hospital there was well-equipped. So we decided that Kellner must be conveyed to Hillah, and as, of course, the Aeniza would not go near the place, we two would have to accompany him. Now came the difficulty; to walk was out of the question, Kellner had no horse, and the horses which we had been riding belonged to Faris, who, however, was in possession of the two horses which we had brought with us from Baghdad. In the end, we agreed to lay the matter before the sheik, and trust to his generosity to help us. At first he was greatly disappointed at the thought that we proposed to leave him, as he had intended to give us a grand reception at his headquarters, and he had hoped that we would have travelled with his people when they moved to their winter grazing grounds in the Hamad. He argued with us about the folly of abandoning our search for the Girdle, after all that we had passed through, and when there was every hope of our obtaining it, but finding that our minds were made up, and that no words of his would make us change them, he accepted the inevitable, and acted in a far more noble manner than we could have expected.

"You shall have your wish," said he, "and some day you will again visit the Jelas tents, where you will always be truly welcome. I shall send away to their camp all my men save six, who, with Sedjur and myself, will ride with you this night to the very walls of the town. There we shall leave you ere day dawns, when we can gallop away out of danger, and overtake our camels on the way to the tents."

How grateful we felt to the great man for this fresh mark of friendship we found it difficult to convey to him in words, and Kellner, on hearing the news that within twenty-four hours he would be lodged safely in the hospital at Hillah, sobbed with joy. The glittering spears of the Aeniza soon passed away over the distant sky-line, and our small party, lying in a sand hollow, awaited the fall of night.

Almost before it was dark, we set out on what Edwards and I felt was our return to the world. It was a slow journey, for we moved at a walk, two of the Bedouins on foot carrying Kellner, who was found to be incapable of sitting on a horse. But the distance was not great, and, soon after midnight, we saw the walls of Hillah outlined against the starlit sky. Faris led us silently to a small date garden, in the corner of which was a hut, where dwelt an old man, who, he told us, was his friend—or, more correctly, his paid spy. Entering the hut, the sheik soon found the owner, sleeping within the doorway, and a conversation of some length followed. Then a candle was lighted in the inner room, and we were informed that we could stay there for the remainder of the night.

Making Kellner as comfortable as was possible in a corner of the room, we received our last instructions from Faris. As soon as the gates of the town were open, the old man would go and interview the doctor at the hospital, and relate how three Europeans had found their way during the night to his house, and that one of them was very ill. In all probability, a Turkish guard would then be sent out to fetch us in, after which it would be for us to act as circumstances dictated. More than that the sheik regretted that he could not arrange. We thanked him profusely for what he had done for us, and I promised that, if it were ever possible, I would come to the desert again and pay him a visit. He made us a present of the two horses, saying that we might require them to reach Baghdad; and then, to my delight, he lifted up his cloak, and unfastened my chamois-leather belt from his waist.

"I have worn it for safety," said he, "ever since I returned to my tent from our ride to the ruins. Your other goods, and those of the Hakim, I will watch over until we meet again."

"And should we not come again," I answered, "then keep the things in remembrance of us. There is little of value."

"The money in your belt, O magician," continued Faris, laughing as he handed it to me, "still remains untouched. Thus again does your magic recover your long-lost goods. Would that it had

brought you Queen Sophana's Serpent Belt also? But I will find it for you. I will yet prove that I am worthy of the reward of the great Shahzadi's shoe. Return to Baghdad, and rest there until a message calls you to the desert. I say no more. Be patient. Allah is great."

Gripping our hands in silence, the sheik and Sedjur parted from us with unfeigned grief, and strode out into the darkness. A moment later we heard a muffled word of command, followed by a clatter of hoofs, and the party had gone.

Sleep was out of the question. The day's work had been full of incident, and a dubious morrow was before us. We had much to think over, and many things to discuss; so, leaving the exhausted Kellner asleep, we went outside, and sat among the palm trees.

"George," said I, "we are in the last lap. It is a straight run home now."

"Yes," he replied, "unless something goes wrong. Personally, I am not altogether sorry, except for your disappointment."

"I suppose the best thing we can do," I remarked, "will be to get away to Baghdad as soon as possible."

"Of course," said Edwards. "What else can we do?"

"Why, slip back to Faris," I answered, "and have another try for the Golden Girdle."

"Believe me," said Edwards, "you will do no good with the thing except through our German friend. He has fought hard for it, and you may rest assured that he was not fool enough to part with it without being perfectly certain that he would find it again. Besides, have you not grasped the fact that it belongs to him. He got it in much the same way as you meant to get it."

"Not quite," said I, "for he did not play fair with the Shammar who helped him to get it. If he had paid them what he promised, then I should certainly agree that he had every right to the Girdle."

"Splitting hairs," said Edwards. "Judging by what we have seen of desert methods, he who possesses a thing considers himself its rightful owner—until he loses it. If I were you, I should wait until Kellner recovers, and then try and come to terms with him."

"I believe you are right, George," I replied. "But, to tell you the honest truth, I have rather lost faith in the gentleman. In fact, since this morning my dull wits have been sharpened, and, if I am not very much mistaken, the German 'shadowed' me all the way from Marseilles to Baghdad, and got out of me all the information that he required. It makes me positively sick when I think of it."

"Never mind," said Edwards, consolingly, "it was not your fault. One cannot go through life in a perpetual state of suspicion of everyone. You have still got something up your sleeve; for, when you tell your story, the world will not count Kellner as much of a hero."

For some reason Edwards and I were both in the lowest spirits. I, for my part, had every cause for being depressed; I had had enough pleasant and unpleasant experiences to last an ordinary man for his lifetime; my labours had borne no fruit; I should return to Baghdad without having effected anything, and, in all probability, my absence would have caused grave anxiety to my parents. But, perhaps, what troubled me most was the knowledge that I had been such a fool as to be taken in by Kellner. Edwards, on the other hand, had, to my mind, very little to complain of. He had seen more of the desert than almost any European had ever done, had come through everything without a scratch, and was as fit as he had been at starting. We had been living a free life for so long, that now that there was the immediate prospect of our having to conform to the conventionalities of civilisation, neither of us relished the idea of the change. That was what was the matter with us; and I believe that if I had argued with my companion for a little longer, he would have agreed to leave Kellner to the old man, and have set out with me in search of Faris. But I restrained my desire to influence Edwards one way or the other, for my conscience told me that it was our duty to look after our invalid.

We talked spasmodically until the stems of the date trees gradually began to stand out against the increasing light in the heavens. Then, when day had come, the old Arab set out on his mission, while we returned to the hut to keep the German company. Thus we waited, it may have been for a couple of hours, occasionally going outside to see if the expected relief was coming; and at last we saw a party of soldiers riding towards us, accompanied by men carrying a stretcher.

CHAPTER XIX.

IN CLOVER.

"Gentlemen," said the Turkish officer commanding the party, as he drew up his men in front of the hut, and addressed us in French, "my instructions are to have the man who is ill removed to the military hospital, and to request that you will consider yourselves as my prisoners, and accompany me to the barracks."

We told him that, of course, we should obey any orders that he gave us, and at the same time

asked him if he knew who we were. To this he replied that his orders forbade him to converse with us on any subject whatever, and he begged us to understand that, disagreeable as his duty was, he was bound to carry out his instructions to the letter. There was nothing more to be said, and though we were permitted to see that Kellner was comfortably settled on the stretcher, we were afterwards ordered to mount our horses, and ride, like real prisoners, in the midst of the guard.

As we entered the town we soon saw that our capture had been noised abroad; crowds of Arabs had assembled in the streets to witness our arrival; but it was evident, from the remarks that we overheard, that there was a good deal of speculation as to what it all meant. Until that moment, I had not considered what queer-looking figures we must be, and when I looked at Edwards and then at my own clothes, I almost laughed aloud. Each of us wore dirty and ragged Arab garments; our hair was long and unkempt, and our beards were thick and stubbly. That we were respectable Englishmen no one would have guessed. Even our own mothers would have failed to recognise us.

In due course we reached the barrack gate and were admitted, when we found ourselves within a large quadrangle, where numbers of conscripts were being drilled. Here we were ordered to dismount, and, our horses having been led away, we were conducted to a house at the far end of the quadrangle and shown into a well-appointed room, when the officer told us that we were to remain there until visited by the Commandant.

As soon as we were alone, Edwards and I looked at one another, and burst out laughing.

"We are a jolly looking couple," said I.

"Just what I was thinking," said Edwards.

"What do you suppose is going to happen to us?" I asked.

"Oh, nothing much," he replied. "As soon as we have proved our identity, things will be all right. They seem to have a great many more troops here than when last we were in the place. I wonder if our old friend, the Captain who showed us round last time, is still here."

While we were talking, the door was suddenly thrown open, and the Commandant himself was ushered in. He was a stout and pleasant-looking old gentleman, with a merry twinkle in his eye, and no sooner did he see us than he broke into a guffaw, at the same time holding out his hand to each of us in turn.

"Pardon my laughing," said he, "but, for the life of me, I could not help it. We will have you washed, and cleaned, and put into respectable clothes, before you are taken before the Governor. In the meanwhile, now that we have got you safe inside the barracks, if you like to give me your word that you will not leave them, I shall be glad if you will become my guests."

At first we thought that he was amusing himself at our expense, but he appeared to be in earnest, so we accepted his proffered hospitality, and were soon enjoying the luxuries of really good coffee and a cigarette.

"How long, Effendi, have you been in Hillah?" I asked, for the sake of something to say.

"Barely two weeks," he replied. "We came up with reinforcements for this place and Meshed Ali, as trouble was expected from the desert."

"Some of the tribes in revolt, I suppose," said I.

"Yes," replied the Commandant, smiling, "but when I have heard you two gentlemen cross-examined by His Excellency, I shall know more about what has been going on. Now I will give you a piece of advice: when you are asked questions, answer straightforwardly, and tell all you know. You will save us all a vast amount of trouble, and you will not do yourselves any harm. Of course we have spies everywhere, but we cannot rely on them entirely, and in any case the views and opinions of two intelligent Englishmen will be of more value to us than the information supplied by a hundred Bedouin spies. The Governor is to interview you this afternoon, and I have no doubt that, before that takes place, you would like the services of a barber, and would wish to have a bath, and some European clothes. I daresay we shall be able to provide them for you."

We were delighted with the turn of events, and agreed to help the Governor with any information that we were able to give, and we jumped at the suggestion of cleaning ourselves up. So calling an orderly, the Commandant told him to conduct us to the bath. There a real surprise awaited us, for no sooner did we enter the room than we saw Edwards's Persian servant boy, busying himself with towels and soap.

"What, Aziz!" gasped Edwards, gazing at him in blank astonishment. "How, in heaven's name, did you get here?"

"Hoozoor," answered the lad, beaming with joy at the sight of his long-lost master, "I was ordered some days back, to pack clothes for your highness and the other sahib, and to leave Baghdad with the dragoman and some zaptiehs, and to come to Hillah. I suffered much on the road from fear of robbers, who were reported to be numerous, but, praise be to Allah, we arrived here safely."

"Where is Dimitri Sahib?" asked Edwards.

"He journeyed a few days since to Meshed Ali," said Aziz, "saying that he went to meet you, and would return with you here."

Then we plied the boy with questions, in the attempt to discover what rumour had said about us, but we could get no coherent story out of him. From what we could gather, at first we were supposed to have been murdered; but, after a time, a report came that we had turned Mohammedans, and were living with the people of some distant desert town. But he did not appear to know very much, and he harked back continuously to what was evidently the most important thing in the world, viz., that he, Aziz, had braved the perils of the journey from Baghdad to Hillah—in his eyes as great an event as a pilgrimage to Mecca. We forgave him, however, for his inability to provide us with news, chiefly because of the skill that he had displayed in his selection of the clothes which he thought we would require. He had forgotten nothing; and it was a real delight to us, after we had passed through the hands of the barber and revelled in our baths, to get into true British suits again.

Our toilet completed, we returned, with the patient orderly who had been waiting for us, to our quarters, where we found the Commandant and several other officers ready to accompany us to the Governor's audience. The Commandant looked us up and down with apparent satisfaction, and then we all marched off. Whether we were still supposed to be prisoners I could not make out; at any rate, we walked along by the side of the Commandant, and conversed with him as if we were his oldest friends, until we reached our destination when everyone suddenly assumed an official air.

A verbatim report of what took place at the great interview which followed I shall not attempt to give. I doubt if any shorthand writer could have done justice to it, for it was what may be described as unconventional. We were treated by the Governor with the greatest deference, and we were asked innumerable questions on everything connected with the desert and the people whom we had come across. The Aeniza and the Shammar, however, did not interest them much, as they were regarded, like mosquitoes, as necessary evils. What they wanted information about was Adiba and the trouble with Hayil, and on this topic we were considered to be (as indeed we probably were) the best authorities. Between us, we related our experiences with Ali Khan, and gave a graphic description of the bombardment of his town and of his enforced flight, striving to impress upon our listeners that he had been basely betrayed by his Arab doctors, and that the Amir of Hayil had behaved in a most high-handed manner. The dropping of the proverbial pin could have been heard while Edwards gave his account of his treatment of the sick child, and his description of the way in which he had outwitted his rival physicians was received with no little applause. Ali Khan became the hero of the hour, and the tyrant of Hayil was freely cursed. Many and various were the questions asked us about the road to Adiba, about the town itself, and about the strength of its defences, and then we learned that Hayil was in the bad books of the Ottoman Empire, and that the Turkish troops would probably be ordered to conduct Ali Khan back to Adiba.

So far we had got on capitally, and had quite enjoyed the interview. Now, however, the conversation took an awkward turn, and the Governor's questions became more or less of a personal nature.

"Some four months ago," said our inquisitor, "you two gentlemen were here, in Hillah. You left the town against the wishes of the Captain of Police; he, poor man, is no more, but I possess a document signed by yourselves, and its contents you will probably remember. In it you stated that you determined to visit certain tribes of the desert, even although he warned you that to do so might place himself and his Government in difficulties. What have you to answer on that count?"

"Nothing," I replied, "except that we regret to have been the cause of any inconvenience to your Government. We were anxious to visit the Bedouins in their encampments, and we were willing to accept all risk in so doing."

"Have you considered," continued the Governor, "what has resulted from your headstrong behaviour? Possibly you may not have given it a thought. Know, then, that had you not cast yourselves adrift in the desert, all this trouble with Adiba and Hayil would never have occurred, and my Government would not now be called upon to expend vast sums of money in restoring order in those outlying provinces. Think again of the misfortunes of Ali Khan and of all his people, driven from their homes into the pitiless desert. Think of those homes, even when the people once more return to them; many destroyed by shells, many burnt to the ground, and all pillaged."

We stood before the assembly, with heads hung down, and feeling as uncomfortable as any pair of naughty schoolboys, while our tormentor, who was a word-painter of no mean order, continued to lash us with his tongue. When, at length, he stopped, I took courage and spoke out.

"Your Excellency," I said, humbly, "all that you have said, we acknowledge to be true, and your condemnation of us appears to be just. Yet, on more than one occasion, we offered full apologies to our protector, Ali Khan, for the great troubles that we had brought on himself and his people; and not only did he freely forgive us everything, but he even told us that he would not have it otherwise, since he considered that, had we not visited Adiba, his child would have died."

"And in return for such generosity," said the Governor, haranguing us again, "you thought it right, when within a few marches of Meshed Ali, to desert your kind host, and not only to desert him, but also to liberate three of his lawful prisoners and to steal five of his horses. Why you

should have acted thus we cannot understand."

The speaker was now wound up, and refused to allow himself to be interrupted, so we were forced to remain silent and listen to what he had to say. He told us how, when we first disappeared from Hillah, and did not return, our escort had proceeded for some distance into the desert in search of us, but failing to find any trace of us went back to Baghdad with the news that we had surely perished. The British Consul-General then induced the authorities to make inquiries about us, and at last it was reported that we had reached Adiba, and were the guests of Ali Khan. Subsequently came the news of the downfall of Adiba, and that we were with the sheik's party in flight towards Meshed Ali. Naturally it was supposed that we would enter that town with Ali Khan; and the British Consul-General, having been informed of events, despatched his dragoman, Dimitri, to meet us and take us back to Baghdad. As far as he himself was concerned, concluded the Governor, the matter was at an end; he did not wish to intrude in our private affairs, as our Consul-General had agreed to hold a full inquiry into our conduct, which would doubtless form the subject of lengthy negotiations between the two Governments, in all probability ending in the payment of full compensation.

"On one point, however," said he, "I am anxious for information: the sick man whom you brought with you. How did you meet with him?"

"We found him yesterday," I replied, "close to the Birs Nimroud, and he seemed so ill that we abandoned our intention of journeying to Baghdad, in order to bring the man to your hospital."

"He shall be properly attended to," said the Governor, "and for what he has done he will have to account later on."

We were not sorry when the call to evening prayer closed the interview, and the Governor, shaking hands with us, consigned us to the care of the Commandant. With the latter we returned to the barracks, and on the way learned that we were to be on parole, until the dragoman should take charge of us. Our restraint was not very irksome, for the Commandant and other officers went out of their way to make themselves agreeable to us, and were evidently proud of having the opportunity of making the acquaintance of men who had penetrated so far into the desert. How much more interested they would have been, if they had known the whole story of our wanderings!

That night Edwards and I talked matters over, and I found that he was wretchedly down-hearted about the future. If things were really as bad, he argued, as the Governor had made out, it was all up with him and his appointment. The Consul-General would, of course, refuse to let him return to duty at Baghdad, and though he might possibly be ordered to India to assume medical charge of a native regiment, the chances were that he had already been either cashiered, or removed from the service for absence without leave.

"As to you," he said, "you have nothing to lose, since you do not hold any official appointment; and you do not understand what it may mean to me to be thrown on the world, without anything to do."

He was so doleful about it all, that he positively made me laugh.

"There is always Adiba," I said. "Ali Khan will take you back with him as physician in ordinary, I am sure, if you ask him nicely."

But he was not to be comforted; and thinking it advisable to leave him alone, I went outside and paced up and down in the moonlight. While thus occupied, I encountered the Commandant, who had just returned from dining with the Governor, and was coming to see us on important business. I told him that my companion was not feeling well and had already gone to bed; so he unburdened his mind to me. Our escapades had been the subject of discussion at the Governor's dinner party, and the end of it was that the Governor had decided that, as Dimitri had not yet been informed of our arrival at Hillah, we should be sent to Meshed Ali and be handed over to him there. It struck me at once as a somewhat strange proceeding, because Meshed Ali and Baghdad lay on opposite sides of Hillah, and there seemed to be no reason for sending us off on a three days' journey and bringing us back again. But on my remarking on this to the Commandant, I was told that the Governor considered that we should be given the opportunity of renewing our friendship with Ali Khan, and of explaining to him why we had deserted him. We were to start early in the morning, and the Commandant himself would accompany us. I expressed myself as delighted at the idea of a visit to Meshed Ali, and of once again seeing Ali Khan; and after arranging that we would be ready to set out soon after daybreak, I bade the Commandant "good-night," and went off to break the news to Edwards. To my surprise, he seemed quite agreeable to fall in with the new plan, saying that the sooner he met Dimitri, the better pleased he should be, as he was anxious to find out how he stood with the Consul-General.

Our ride to Nejf, or Meshed Ali, was a three days' picnic; we had everything that we could want, a large escort, the companionship of the cheery Commandant, the services of a cook who served up excellent dinners, and Edwards's boy, Aziz, to wait upon us. Even Edwards forgot his sorrows, and agreed with me that we were being treated right royally.

"I suppose it will all go down in the bill," said he.

"What bill?" I asked.

"Why, the matter of the compensation to which the Governor referred—the cost of all our evil

deeds," said Edwards.

"Let us live in the present," said I, "and eat and drink all the good things that we can. What is the use of worrying about the future, and about such a hopeless thing as compensation? When nations begin to discuss compensation, it means thousands, if not millions, of pounds. How do you imagine that anyone is going to squeeze a paltry thousand pounds, or even a hundred pounds, out of two such paupers as you and me? My worldly possessions consist of the fifty golden sovereigns in my salvaged money-belt, and they really belong to my uncle. So away with dull care, and let the future look after itself."

"Excellent advice in theory," said Edwards. "However, I will try it for a bit, and will be ever so jovial."

"Good man!" said I. "By the way, I wonder how that poor unfortunate Kellner is getting on. Do you suppose we shall be able to take him to Baghdad with us?"

"I should think not," said Edwards; "besides, he is much better off where he is. I expect that the man in charge of the hospital knows quite as much about his business as I do, and the long journey to Baghdad would probably throw the patient back, and as likely as not kill him."

"Then," said I, "I think I shall try and stay at Hillah for a week or two."

"What on earth for?" asked Edwards.

"To look after Kellner," I replied.

"What possible good do you think you can do him?"

"He might want to ease his mind," said I, laughing. "People do have things on their mind sometimes, when they are sick. He might wish to tell me, for instance, what has become of the Golden Girdle."

"Still that old, old story," said my companion sadly. "Surely you and your Will-o'-the-wisp have done enough harm already. The words of wisdom which we heard in Hillah the other day do not seem to have made much impression on you."

"Water off a duck's back, old man," I replied. "When I have laid Sophana's Serpent Belt at the feet of my uncle, then will I repent of all my sins, and be good for ever afterwards."

CHAPTER XX.

RE-UNION.

We were both quite excited at the idea of meeting Dimitri, and hearing all the news of the world. We had been cut off from everything for more than four months, and had not had a single letter, or a scrap of information of any sort. We speculated as to whether the dragoman would have brought our English letters up with him, and we wondered what sort of a reception the Consul-General would have told him to give us. We could not imagine the obsequious Dimitri being anything but polite, and we knew, of course, that, of himself, he could have no authority over us. We presumed that he had been sent up with an order, or a message, or a letter from the Consul-General, and our presumption proved to be correct. No sooner did we pass through the gate of the town than we met the dragoman, clothed in his best blue serge suit, and wreathed in smiles.

"Here we are again, Dimitri," said Edwards, greeting him heartily. "I suppose you thought that we were lost. We are very sorry to have given you this long journey."

"I am truly delighted," replied Dimitri, "to see you two gentlemen again, safe and well. The Consul-General ordered me to convey an important letter to you, and to return with you to Baghdad."

"Where is the letter?" asked Edwards.

"I have it," said the dragoman, "at my lodgings, and I shall hand it to you as soon as I have seen you accommodated in suitable quarters."

Having paid his respects to the Commandant, with whom he appeared to have business to discuss, Dimitri came and walked by our sides as we rode through the streets of Nejf, pointing out to us the great golden shrine of Ali, and the other buildings of importance. He told us much news, but, to our great disappointment, we learned that he had brought with him neither letters nor newspapers; and he confided to Edwards that he was afraid that there was trouble in store for us.

The next excitement was the Consul-General's letter to Edwards, which was brought to him soon after we had settled down in the room allotted to us. Dismissing Dimitri, with a request that he would come and see us again at sunset, Edwards nervously broke the seal of the letter, and read its contents to himself. I watched his face as he read; at first pale and serious, it presently flushed crimson, and the puckered forehead gradually grew smooth, then came a deep-drawn sigh of relief, and I knew that things were not as bad as Edwards had expected them to be.

"Would you like to read it?" asked Edwards, handing me the letter. "It is marked 'Private and confidential,' but I do not suppose that there is any harm in your seeing it. You will not mind his abusing you a bit, I am sure."

I took the letter, and read it through. It was of considerable length, and began by severely reprimanding Edwards in strong official terms, after which the Consul-General appeared to have laid aside his wrath, for the remainder of the epistle might have been written by one friend to another. He hoped that we had made good use of our opportunities, and would be able to add to the world's knowledge of the desert. He even expressed his admiration of our pluck in having lived for so long in the wilds; and, except that in one sentence I was alluded to as "that crack-brained treasure-seeker," there was nothing in the letter with which I could quarrel. Towards the end, however, he had evidently read over what he had written, and perhaps repented of having said so much; for he added a postscript, which ran as follows:—

> "Do not imagine from the above that I am not annoyed with you both. I am intensely annoyed, and at present I do not see how the matter is going to end. I am unwilling to judge you until I have heard your own explanation. I beg that you will inform Mr Henderson that I request that he will be good enough to accompany you and Mr Dimitri to Baghdad forthwith."

"Well," said Edwards, anxiously, when I had finished reading, "what do you think?"

"I think," I replied, "that your chief is a gentleman, and, though he may think me a hopeless idiot, you may be quite certain that he will see you through any difficulties that may arise."

"I am glad that that is your opinion," said Edwards. "The letter has certainly made me feel happier."

"After all," said I, "we have done nothing extraordinarily sinful or foolish. The Turkish Government gave me a *firman*, which was practically a passport to go where I pleased. We were certainly advised by the police captain, poor chap, not to go into the desert from Hillah, but that was only so that he might not get mixed up in a row himself. If he had thought that there was any real harm in our going to visit Faris, he would not have lent us a guide to put us on our way. The one mistake we made was not coming back that first day, when we found that the Turkish police were after Faris. From that moment we were done. We never had a chance of returning until now. And we have returned; what more can they want? There is the whole business, placed comfortably in a nutshell."

As I concluded my address, Dimitri knocked at the door, and we were soon informed of the programme that had been arranged for us. Next morning, our friend the Commandant was to pay a state visit to the Governor of Adiba, who was in camp on the other side of the water, and we were to go with him. It now transpired that the object of our having been sent to Nejf was not so much to be handed over to Dimitri, as to be confronted with Ali Khan. The authorities, apparently, had a sort of suspicion that we had not played a square game with Ali Khan, and the Commandant was to investigate the matter. Directly our visit was over, we were to start for Baghdad by the direct route, passing some miles to the west of Hillah, and Dimitri hoped that we should reach our destination within four days. The programme seemed to us a most satisfactory one, for our consciences were quite clear about Ali Khan, whom we felt certain we could convince that our disappearance from his camp had been not only unpremeditated but also undesired by us. I, personally, was a little disappointed that we should not return to Hillah, as I would have liked a talk with Kellner; but, after what the Consul-General had said in his letter, I thought it best to accept the situation, and get back to Baghdad as soon as possible.

At an early hour next day we rode out with much pomp and ceremony, round the shores of the Sea of Nejf, to the Adiba encampment, and were met halfway by Haroun and his brave men. He did not recognise us in our European clothes, and doubtless thought that we were two inquisitive Englishmen bent on sight-seeing; while we, fearing to upset arrangements, considered it best to restrain our desire to make ourselves known to him. Ali Khan received the Commandant in front of his tent, and, after the customary compliments had been paid, the latter requested us to come forward and be introduced.

"I have brought with me, your Excellency," said the Commandant, addressing Ali Khan, with much solemnity, "two English gentlemen who are desirous of renewing your acquaintance. This one tells me that he was at one time your court physician, the other your chief military adviser."

I do not know what Edwards's feelings were, but I, at that moment, would have been quite pleased if the earth had suddenly opened and swallowed me up. The abrupt manner in which we were, so to speak, flung at Ali Khan's head was disagreeable in the extreme, and he himself was so taken aback, that for some little time he could do nothing but stare at us open-mouthed. There was an awful silence, and nobody seemed inclined to break it, until, at last, feeling that I could stand it no longer, and observing that Edwards (as was his wont when things were going unpleasantly) was signing to me to say something, I stepped forward and spoke.

"Great sheik," I said, "what the Effendi has said is true. We have come to offer an explanation in connection with a matter which we fear has caused you trouble and pain. We have come to seek your pardon; for I doubt not you have been under the impression that, considering the kindness and hospitality which you always showed to us, we behaved ungratefully and basely towards you, when we deserted your camp some few days ago. Your knowledge of us is not slight, and you

must have found it difficult to believe that two men of honour—as you knew us to be—would have released your prisoners, stolen your horses, and deserted you. Yet that is, doubtless, what you did believe, and do, even now, believe. Now, I declare to you, before Allah, that of our own accord we did none of these things."

I then proceeded to describe fully and graphically how we had been carried off by the Shammar, and the miserable journey that we had been forced to take. I did not think it necessary, or desirable, to enter into details about Kellner and the Golden Girdle, so I merely said that we had eventually ridden away from the Shammar on two of the horses which had been stolen from his camp, that we had now brought these horses with us, and that we wished to return them to him. I concluded by congratulating him on the prospect of his speedy restoration to his kingdom, and expressed a hope that his little son was still enjoying good health.

My speech made an immense impression, not only on Ali Khan, Haroun, and the rest of the Adiba party, but also on the Commandant and his escort; and when I had finished, our two old friends, shaking off all formalities, seized Edwards and myself by the hands, and overwhelmed us with expressions of joy at our safety, and of regret at ever having doubted us. Though pleasant, the *denouement* was decidedly embarrassing; for the Adiba men crowded round us with offers of congratulation, and we were only saved from being carried off our feet in the frantic rush of enthusiasm by Ali Khan's prompt action in leading us to the inner apartment of his tent, to be welcomed by his wife and their beloved boy. Their delight at again seeing us was most gratifying, and they were truly sorry when they learned that we were not returning with them to Adiba. Ali Khan and his wife did all in their power to persuade us to accompany them; but finding that it was a matter of honour that we should return to Baghdad, they made us promise that, should it ever be possible, we would pay a long visit to Adiba, and see the place settled down again in peace and plenty, as they hoped that it would soon be.

The time was all too short, for we had to return to Nejf, and thence ride, some fifteen miles, to the nearest khan before dusk. We therefore prepared to take leave of our friends, and I asked Ali Khan's permission to use his two horses for the return journey to Nejf, promising that we would send them back to his camp by sundown.

"Nay," said the sheik, "I have horses enough, and I beg that you will accept them from me. Take them back with you to Baghdad, to remind you of your promise to visit us at Adiba."

With expressions of gratitude from both of us, with many handshakes and last words of parting, we at length mounted our horses and joined the escort, which had been long waiting for us. Edwards and I rode in silence for some distance; I fancy that we had similar feelings—a decided lumpiness about the throat. Edwards spoke first.

"I had no idea," said he, "that the desert possessed men like Ali Khan. I always thought that all the big rulers were stony-hearted tyrants, who only made themselves agreeable to Europeans for what they could get out of them."

"Dear old Ali Khan has not derived much benefit from us," I answered.

"On the contrary," said Edwards, "we have been a dead loss to him. And he finishes up by giving us two horses."

"These two old horses," said I, "make me laugh. They are becoming rather a stale present. Within the last week they have been given to us no less than three times, first by the Shammar sheik, then by Faris, and now by Ali Khan."

"Well," said Edwards, "I hope that this time we shall keep them, and take them safely back to Baghdad."

Arrived at our quarters in Nejf, we packed up our belongings, and were off again in half an hour, the Commandant seeing us for about a mile on our road, and then bidding us a friendly farewell. In order to make certain that we should not get lost again, he gave us an escort of twenty irregular cavalry, and I firmly believe, although Dimitri denied it, that they had instructions not to let us out of their sight until we had entered the courtyard of the Residency at Baghdad. At any rate, during our uneventful journey of the next four days, they were always about us, and on reaching the city, their sergeant requested the Consul-General to give him a letter practically amounting to a receipt for us.

What the Consul-General said to us, and what we said to him, are things best left untold. Suffice it to say, therefore, that at the conclusion of the interview, we still found ourselves alive. Moreover, on that night, and on many subsequent nights, we were the great man's guests at dinner.

After the life I had been leading, the humdrum existence in the city soon began to pall on me. I had, within a few days, seen everything that there was to be seen, and I grew tired of morning and evening canters outside the walls, and of trying to make the round wicker-work *kufas* go straight up and down the river. I longed to be back in the free desert, and one day, more out of fun than anything else, I suggested to Edwards that we should pay our promised visit to Adiba. He looked at me for a minute, as if he doubted my sanity.

"What you want," said he, "is sea air. You will never be quite right until you have taken a voyage."

"That does not sound very hospitable," said I, "considering that only yesterday you begged me to

stay with you as long as I could."

"Yesterday," said Edwards, "I did not know that you were so unwell."

"To tell you the honest truth," said I, "I am sick to death of this life, and if Faris does not let me have some news of the Golden Girdle soon, I shall chuck the whole thing and go home."

"You do not mean to say," said Edwards, "that you are still building castles in the air."

"No," said I, "not in the air, I hope. But if you mean that you want to know whether I am still thinking of Queen Sophana's belt, I will break it to you gently that, much as I love you, George, nothing earthly would have induced me to hang about here for the last six weeks, unless I had been in daily expectation of getting news either from Faris or from Kellner."

"Then take my advice," said my friend, "and give it up. Kellner, from what the Turkish doctor wrote to me the other day, is too ill to trouble about anything. Faris, I expect, has got other fish to fry. Besides, I believe he is in mortal terror of that Girdle. In any case, even if you did receive news from the desert, you could not go romping about there again."

"Oh, great wet blanket!" I answered, "have you no soul? Wait till I lay out before you, on that very table, the string of twisty-twirly golden serpents!"

"I cannot wait so long, old man," said Edwards irritatingly. "Unfortunately, I shall have to die, like other people."

"Then I suppose," I said, putting out a feeler, "when I go off on my next hunt, you will let me go alone."

"On that point," he replied, "you can be absolutely certain. Nothing that you or anyone else could say would ever persuade me to go on another wild-goose chase with you. Why, the Turks are still saying nasty things about us, and worrying my chief to death."

"That," said I, "is all bluster. Hillah's Governor tried it on when he talked so grandly about compensation. I happen to have discovered from Dimitri that there never was, at any time, any idea of compensation. The mistake I made was getting a *firman*. I shall make my next trip without one."

"By the way," said Edwards, changing the subject, "did I ever tell you the result of the inquiry after Kellner's Baghdad merchant—I mean the man who, Daud or somebody told us, was going to pay the Shammar for the Girdle?"

"No," said I, "the last news I heard was that he had cleared out of this place, bag and baggage, and no one knew what had become of him."

"Well," said Edwards, "he has been seen in the bazaar at Kerbela."

"Then I suppose that he and Kellner have got some deep scheme in hand again," I said; "but, for the life of me, I cannot fathom it."

"Do not bother about it," said Edwards. "Believe me, Kellner has not got a scheme in him at present."

About a week after this conversation had taken place, though many similar ones had intervened, there fell in the midst of my dull existence a very bomb of excitement, whose sudden explosion well-nigh rent me in twain.

CHAPTER XXI.

A DESPERATE PLUNGE.

Whilst I was living in Baghdad, I used to amuse myself by a daily visit to the bazaar, overhauling the *antikas* and other wares of the Jew dealers, and to save myself the unpleasantness of being mobbed by a crowd of Arab boys, on these occasions I dressed in simple Persian garments. The shop people, of course, knew who I was, but I mingled with the crowd without attracting attention. On the particular day of which I am writing, I noticed, as I walked about the bazaar, that I was being followed from place to place by a ruffianly-looking Arab, who, whenever I stopped to look at a stall, always seemed to be at my elbow. I began to be a little nervous about him, thinking that possibly he might be a fanatic, who, having returned from a pilgrimage to the Holy Shrines, and having discovered that I was an unbeliever, thought to ensure his entry into Paradise by putting a knife into me. At last I stopped, turned on him suddenly, and asked him what he wanted. He was so taken aback, that without offering a reply, he bolted into the crowd, and disappeared.

A little later I left the bazaar, and strolled along the narrow lanes towards Edwards's house. As I was nearing home, I heard footsteps behind, and glancing over my shoulder, saw that my

supposed Arab fanatic was running after me. Thinking that I should have to fight, and seeing nobody else about, I stepped back against the wall, and prepared to make the best use of my heavy stick.

"Master," said the man, as he drew near, "it is you who were with Sheik Faris in the desert; is it not so?"

"Yes," I replied, "I am that man. Why do you follow me about?"

"I was told," said he, "that you would be in the bazaar, but I could not be certain that I had found you. I did not recognise you with the hair absent from your face, and in those clothes."

"But why are you so anxious to find me?" I asked.

"I have come," said the Arab, "from Sheik Faris, who bade me seek you out with all haste, and tell you, in secret, certain words."

"What were they?" I inquired, excitedly.

"I know not their meaning," he replied, "but the words Sheik Faris spoke to me were these: 'Go tell the Hakim's friend that *snakes which do poison mankind cower before the eye of the magician; that winged snakes drop their wings at the sound of his coming; and that the shoe of a desert-born mare must needs have a desert home*.' Thus spoke Sheik Faris-ibn-Feyzul; I have said it."

I knew what it all meant. This was the message which I had eagerly awaited for many weeks. Faris, brave Faris, had secured the Golden Girdle for me, but he evidently intended that I should go and get it. I wondered why he had not sent it. It would, I thought, have simplified matters considerably.

"Sheik Faris," I asked, "sent, by you, nothing for me?"

"No," answered the man.

"Did he not give you any other message?" I inquired.

"I was to tell the Beg," said he, "that when the moon rises to-night, three Aeniza, with a spare horse, will be on the western bank of the river, opposite the great ruins of Ctesiphon, and will there await you until daybreak to-morrow. The howl of the hyæna repeated three times will cause them to make known their presence."

"It is well," said I, and giving the Arab a keran to spend in the bazaar, I dismissed him.

Hurrying home as fast as I was able, with steps as light as air, I bounded up the stairs to break the news to Edwards. He was out, and on the table I found a note addressed to me. I tore it open, and read the hasty pencil scrawl, which ran as follows:—

> DEAR WALTER,—
>
> Just had a message from the C.-G., saying he is very ill at Mosul. Has sent the launch down for me. Do not expect me back for at least a week. If I am detained longer, I will drop you a line. Mind you do not start for home before I come back. So long,
>
> Yours
>
> G. E.

Calling a servant, I asked when his master had left, and was told that the launch had gone up the river about an hour before. Utterly knocked out of time by this unexpected turn of events, I sank into a chair, and endeavoured to think out the situation. Something had to be done, and done quickly. Nothing should prevent my reaching the rendezvous opposite Ctesiphon that night. On that point I was determined. I would get the Golden Girdle without saying anything to anyone, and with luck I might be able to lay it in front of Edwards on his return from up-river. What a grand surprise it would be for him, and how I should crow over him! After all, it was rather a good thing, I thought, that both Edwards and the Consul-General were away from Baghdad; otherwise they might have interfered with my movements. I was, at anyrate, free to do as I pleased. But how I was to cover the fifty miles to the spot where I was to meet the Aeniza I could not decide. It was already two o'clock; I had about four hours of daylight I could order my horse and say I was going for an afternoon ride, then make straight for Ctesiphon. It was a long journey to accomplish on one horse in four hours, and I had never followed the road before. If I did not succeed in reaching the ruins before dark, I doubted if I should ever reach them, and even if I succeeded, I still had to cross to the opposite bank of the river. I should have to swim it—there was no other means of crossing. I did not like the idea. Then I thought I would cross the river by the Baghdad bridge, and try to find my way to the appointed place by following the right bank of the river. That, however, I abandoned as hopeless, for I was acquainted with no road on that side of the river. My next idea was to hire a *kufa*, and paddle away down stream. It would not be a very great undertaking, as I could certainly cover six or eight miles an hour by simply drifting, which would bring me to my destination well before break of day. There was only one thing against this plan: I was not at all sure that, being at such a little height above the water-level, I

should be able to identify landmarks. There would be a good moon, I knew, and I had been to Ctesiphon by water once or twice from Baghdad. It was a risky undertaking, but I did not see what else I could do. All at once a sudden inspiration came to me. I leapt from my chair, rushed across the room, and hunted among my papers for the river steamer time-table. At last I found it, and, as I had hoped, discovered that this was the day that one of the steamers left Baghdad for Bussorah. Nervously I ran my finger along the line to learn the hour of departure, and when my eyes fell on the announcement "4 P.M.," I could have shouted for joy.

I had a couple of hours to make arrangements, though there were few to make. Still, certain matters had to be worked out. In the first place, I had qualms of conscience about going off without telling anyone, and I began to think that I had better take Dimitri, the dragoman, into my confidence. But I was afraid to trust him, as I thought that perhaps he would consider it his duty to frustrate my plan. Then I could not make up my mind whether to disguise myself as a native, and take a deck passage; or whether to go on board with a bag, and book first-class to Bussorah. My difficulty was that the captain of the steamer was a well-known member of the small English community in Baghdad, and a personal friend of mine. In either case, whether I shipped as a native or as myself, I should have to slip overboard when approaching Ctesiphon, and swim ashore, and in either case I should have to deceive my friend the captain. I hated the idea; but I came to the conclusion that, as a desperate man, I must bury my conscience for the time being. To fail now would probably be to throw away the opportunity of a lifetime. I would tell as few lies as possible, and trust that some day I might be able to make reparation for my evil doings.

My plan matured, I immediately set to work to collect a few odds and ends to fill my bag, fastened it up, called my boy, and sent him down to the steamer with it, at the same time giving him a note for the purser, in which I asked for a cabin to Bussorah. Having taken the first step, I felt easier in my mind, and telling Edwards's servants that I was going for a trip down the river, and should be away for a few days, I strolled leisurely down to the wharf, and went on board the steamer. From that moment I forgot my conscience altogether. I told the captain that, as Edwards had been called away to Mosul, and as I did not care about my own society, I had decided to spend the time in running down to Bussorah. He expressed himself as delighted to have my company, and I settled myself in my cabin, as if I really intended to remain on board for three or four days. We were a little late in getting off, but I knew that an hour or two would not affect my plans, as, even steaming in the dark, we ought to be off Ctesiphon within six hours or so of our departure from the city.

There being no other first-class passengers, I dined alone with the captain, and, aware that it might be my last respectable meal for some days, I made the most of it, and thoroughly enjoyed myself. Afterwards, we sat long on the upper deck, outside the captain's cabin, discussing many things, and watching the reflections of the bright moon in the river. I began to grow anxious about the time, and a little nervous about the part I was shortly to play. I was a strong swimmer, but even with that knowledge I did not relish the prospect of plunging overboard and making for the shore. I confess that it required every scrap of courage that I possessed, and for a moment my courage almost failed me.

"You are very silent," said the captain, after a long pause in the conversation, "are you getting sleepy?"

"I suppose I must be," I replied. "I expect it is about time to turn in. Whereabouts are we?"

"Getting near Ctesiphon," he answered. "We ought to pass it in about half an hour. I must get on to the bridge, as we are coming to rather a tricky bit of channel."

"Then I shall retire to my cabin," said I. We wished each other "Good-night," and I went down the companion to the lower deck. I had previously inspected the situation of everything most carefully. The first-class accommodation was in the stern of the steamer; the saloon in the centre, cabins on either side of the saloon, with a narrow gangway between the cabin doors and the taffrail. My cabin was on the starboard side, and I had only to walk out of the door, take one step, vault the taffrail, and so into the river. In the daylight it seemed quite simple, but now, as the time for action was at hand, I had many misgivings. The steamer had twin screws, and I was afraid that, if I dropped over the side, I should be caught by the screw before I managed to get clear away. I hastened to the stern of the vessel, and examined the water carefully. The screws churned it horribly. Still, I thought that my best chance would be here, as by stepping out on to the anchor, which lay on the extremity of deck, and then diving well away, I might succeed in finding my way into slack water. There was no one about; the captain and the steersman were both on the bridge, and would, of course, be intent on looking ahead. The time was slipping by, and I ran up the companion to get a better view of the country from the upper deck. I thought I recognised the beginning of the bend in the river close to Ctesiphon. I had forgotten about this bend, but now I knew that it would be all in my favour. Certain now of our whereabouts, I dropped down to the lower deck, and made for the anchor. We were well in the bend and only a few yards from the right bank of the river; moreover, the starboard screw was barely revolving. Now or never, I thought, and clenching my teeth, I stretched out my hands, and made a frantic dive in the direction of the land. So close was the steamer to the bank at the moment I left it, that in half a dozen strokes I found my feet touching bottom, and I was soon lying among the bushes, and watching the steamer continuing its way round the bend.

I took some minutes to pull myself together; in fact, I sat there looking after the disappearing vessel, until I could see nothing but the smoke rising up from the funnel. Then my nerves began to trouble me. My teeth chattered, and I shivered and shook as if I had a violent attack of ague. I

could not make up my mind to move, and I wondered whether I had not made an arrant fool of myself. I had met a perfect stranger in the bazaar, and had come here by his instructions. It was true, that if the man were an impostor, desiring to lure me to this spot with the object of robbing and possibly murdering me, he had worked up his plan with great skill; and I did not think that anyone could have invented the message from Faris. Yet, I did not feel altogether happy about it. Then I thought of what an amount of bother I should give to the captain of the steamer. My absence probably would not be discovered until breakfast time next morning, when, of course, it would be thought that I had fallen overboard accidentally, or had committed suicide. However, I argued with myself that, having taken the fatal plunge, it was useless sitting shivering by the side of the river in a state of inaction; so I got up and struggled through the scrub towards higher ground, eventually reaching a low mound. Here I crouched down, and putting both hands to my mouth, as I had once seen Sheik Faris do, I gave forth a long piercing hyæna call. The whole thing seemed so uncanny, that I shuddered at my own voice. I repeated the howl again, and after a slight interval yet again.

I listened intently, and thought that I heard an answering call in the far distance. Presently there came the unmistakable cry a little nearer, and, before many seconds had passed, dismal howls appeared to echo all around me. In my excitement I stood up and shouted, and almost at the same time I noticed that there were men and horses quite close to me.

"Where are you?" called out one of the men in Arabic.

"Here, on the hillock in front of you," I replied.

I waited a little, while one of the men picked his way towards me; and, as he drew near, I called to him, asking if he had come from Sheik Faris. The only reply that I received was a joyous laugh, and the next moment Sedjur stood by my side. That meeting, so unexpected, was well worth all the trouble that it had cost. Life was full of roses once again, and we stood there talking for, I should think, a good half hour. He could not understand how I had come, as he had expected that I would have ridden from Baghdad, and when I told him what I had done, his admiration knew no bounds.

"It is good that you arrived so early," said he, at last, "for we can now get well on our journey before daylight comes. I have brought some of our desert clothes for you to wear, as you have done before; and my father has sent you one of Kushki's own sons for you to ride."

I thanked him for forgetting nothing; flung my bundle of saturated clothes across my saddle, mounted my horse, and, a true Bedouin in appearance, followed close behind the three long, waving spears. The smell of the desert, after my sojourn in the town, was good indeed; and, though I had had no sleep, and ought to have been dead tired, I felt fresh, and fit for any exertion. I had, of course, asked Sedjur for news of the Golden Girdle, but all that he would say was that his father did not wish the matter discussed until he had seen me; and Sedjur begged that I would not speak about it until we reached the camp. Thus, to my disappointment, I was left, throughout our long ride, in ignorance of the state of affairs.

As far as I could judge by the stars, from our starting-point we rode north-west, scarcely ever deviating from our course during that night; and, crossing the pilgrim route from Baghdad to Kerbela some time before there was any sign of dawn, struck the Euphrates, as Sedjur told me, thirty miles or more above the latter town. After fording the river, we kept along the right bank for the remainder of the day, at nightfall halting at a small village, whose inhabitants were old friends of our party, and who did their best to make us comfortable. My prompt answer to his father's summons had evidently made a great impression on Sedjur, who confessed to me, when we talked that night, that he never expected me to come; that, in fact, he had tried to dissuade Faris from sending him on what he considered would be a fruitless mission.

"How much farther have we to go?" I asked.

"When two more suns have set," said Sedjur, "we should be near the encampment. We shall get on to the Damascus road early to-morrow, and then there will be little difficulty."

"That is good news," said I, "for, as you are aware, I cannot ride long distances for many days together."

"If I were to tell you," laughed Sedjur, "that we were to ride day and night all the way to Damascus, you would not complain. You forget that you have lived in our tents, and that my father and I know you perhaps better than you know yourself."

It was pleasant to think that my friends had such a high opinion of me, though I hoped that they would not try me too severely. I did not mind a long day in the saddle, if it were all straightforward going, but our ride of this day and of the two following days was a perpetual anxiety. There were only four of us, and we had to be continuously on the look-out for prowling bands of hostile tribes. Fighting was out of the question; all that we could do was to avoid everyone whom we saw, and to trust to the speed of our horses, if pursued. But we were particularly fortunate, for only once were we really troubled, and then, though followed for some distance, we showed our pursuers that their horses were no match for ours. Still, always having to be on the *qui vive*, like driving a shying horse, is most tiring work; and I was glad enough when, soon after daylight on the fourth day, Sedjur suddenly shouted to me, "Behold our tents!"

CHAPTER XXII.

BROTHERS AND CONSPIRATORS.

Great was the excitement in the encampment when we were seen to be approaching; some sixty or seventy horsemen, headed by Faris, galloped out to meet us, and wheeling round in front of us, performed a *fantasia* for my benefit all the way into camp. Then everyone turned out to greet me, and my reception was royal, Faris leading me by the hand to his tent, and paying me the greatest honour. I could see at once that his pleasure at my arrival was genuine; for, as he said, he and I had been in peril together, and had seen stranger things than had any two men of his acquaintance, and though we had met for a few hours outside Hillah, he never had had the opportunity of welcoming me to his tents, since the time of our adventures at the ruins of Katib. He would have it that I had saved his life and that of Sedjur on two occasions, first when I and Edwards gave ourselves up to the Governor of Adiba, and allowed him and his son to escape; and secondly, when at the Birs Nimroud, I had warned him of the Shammar lying in ambush. In vain I tried to persuade him that I had done nothing out of the common; in his eyes I was a hero; and, I think, still a little bit of a magician, though he did not rally me on this point.

"Well, now, Sheik of Sheiks," I said, after we had settled down to our pipes in private, "what news of the serpent belt?"

"Much," he answered, "and strange."

"Have you, then, secured it?" I asked.

"Nay!" he replied, "not yet. But it is yours to take when you will."

"How so?" said I.

"It is a long story," said the sheik, "but I will make it as short as possible. After leaving you that night at Hillah, we returned to our men, and immediately we scoured the whole country, in order to find those two Jews who had carried away the belt, as the sick Ingleezee at the Birs Nimroud had told us. We tracked them to Kerbela, and I sent a message to them with a request that they would meet me at a certain time outside the town, near the bridge, promising them gold for their trouble, well knowing that without some reward they would never come. They kept their appointment—the two of them—thinking that I had intended to compensate them for having destroyed their dwelling at the Birs Nimroud, of which event they had somehow heard. I paid them a little money, and promised them more if they would permit me to see the golden belt which the sick Ingleezee had bidden them carry away. They vouchsafed that they knew nothing of such a thing; but, unwittingly, one of them inquired how much I would give. I replied that if they would sell me the belt I would pay them 2000 kerans. Then the two men incontinently wept and tore their beards, saying that they would willingly have accepted the price I offered, had it not been that they had been robbed of it by a party of Shammar soon after they had left the Birs Nimroud. They told me, when I had paid them a few more kerans, who the Shammar were. It was the same band whose members had stolen the belt from Raspul on that memorable night, and with whom you are well acquainted. So those men are in possession of the twice-stolen treasure, and we know where they have their tents, not five days' journey from this."

"Then," said I, overjoyed at the news, "the Golden Girdle is indeed mine. If you will show me the way to the Shammar camp, I shall purchase the belt from them for the value which I know they attach to it. They themselves told me that their reward was to be 5000 kerans."

"Why waste this money," said Faris, "when the golden serpents can be had for nothing. Sedjur and I have laid our plans, and, ere half a moon, we shall hand you that which you desire. Then shall the name of Faris-ibn-Feyzul be made known to those who keep the big house wherein lies Shahzadi's shoe. It is a small undertaking to surround and surprise these few Shammar, and, *inshallah*—if God wills, it shall be accomplished."

"To obtain it thus, by stratagem and bloodshed," I replied, "would be for me to invoke the curses of all the evil spirits which haunt the world. Know you not, sheik, that these very Shammar extended to me full hospitality? How, then, is it possible for me to agree to your proposals?"

"I had forgotten," said the sheik. "Those are difficulties. Can you yourself think of any plan by which they may be removed?"

"I shall require time to consider," I replied. "Allow me until to-night."

"So be it," said Faris, "and to-night I shall entertain you at a feast. It is a great occasion."

Glad of quiet and repose, I lay on the rugs in my tent all the afternoon, and gave myself up to deep thought. That I was bitterly disappointed I need not say. I had fully made up my mind that Faris actually had the Girdle ready to hand over to me. I now learned that it was some two hundred miles away. Truly had Edwards described it as a will-o'-the-wisp. Was I to start again on another interminable ride? It seemed to be my only chance; and yet, when I reached the Shammar tents, I might find that my Golden Girdle had again taken wings. I began to hate the thing; but I had gone through so much in my attempts to obtain it, that I was more than ever determined that it should be mine. So I thought on, and frequently wished that Edwards had been with me, so that I might have had the value of his advice, although I felt that he would have counselled a masterly inactivity, in other words, a retreat to Baghdad. At any rate, I should now

have the satisfaction of playing the game off my own bat.

At sundown came the supper party, and it certainly was a great affair, all the principal men of the tribe being invited, and the dishes being of the best. But I was quite unprepared for the honour that awaited me at the conclusion of the feast. Faris rose and made a speech, in which he told his guests that the time had come for him to prove to me, his principal guest, in how high esteem he held me. He then spoke at some length of the courage displayed by me on several occasions when in his company, though I noticed that he was careful not to go into details concerning our doings at Katib. He regretted that his friend the Hakim, an equally brave man, was not also present; but he hoped some day to welcome him to the desert. It was now, he went on, his earnest desire that I, the bravest of the brave, should hold out to him, Faris-ibn-Feyzul, a Sheik of the Jelas Aeniza, the hand of eternal friendship. Throughout his long speech I had been hot and uncomfortable; all eyes were riveted on me, and I felt that each pair of eyes could read, in my crimson face, that I was a rank impostor. Yet they greeted their chiefs appeal for eternal friendship with shouts of acclamation, and not knowing exactly what was required of me, I stood up and spoke. Thanking the sheik for the kind words which he had used regarding me, but at the same time proclaiming that he had greatly exaggerated my courage, I declared my willingness, and indeed my desire, that we should ever be friends.

"Brothers!" exclaimed Faris.

"Brothers!" shouted everyone in chorus.

Then I knew what was intended. I and Faris were to swear blood-brotherhood, the highest honour that one man can show to another, and by which we should bind ourselves, so long as we lived, to remain true to each other, to fight for each other if necessary, and never to quarrel. There and then, on the spur of the moment, the ceremony was performed, Sedjur, on my other side, prompting me how to act. All stood up in silence, and to the onlookers the scene must have appeared a solemn and impressive one; for my part, I was so nervous that I scarcely knew what I was doing, though Sedjur instructed me that whatever his father did or said, I was to repeat. Facing one another, the sheik grasped my girdle with his left hand, and I grasped his with mine. Then, with our right hands raised to heaven, we pledged ourselves, I repeating the words which Faris spoke, one by one, and each one many times. We called on God to bear witness; we swore by God, and through God, and we declared ourselves to be brothers to-day, to-morrow, and hereafter. It was no light undertaking, and those present regarded the ceremony with much seriousness, remaining silent for some time after it had been concluded.

"Now," said Faris, later on, when the guests had departed, and he, I, and Sedjur were alone, "now, we are true brothers. Praise be to Allah! From this time we have all things in common; should you desire camels, horses, or sheep, take any that I have. Whatsoever is mine is yours, and anything that you ask of me shall be granted."

"Great Sheik and Brother," I said, "I know not how to thank you for all the kindness and generosity which you have shown to me. Would that I could repay you but one half. I desire nothing but the one thing of which you know, and with it to return to my own country. This afternoon I spent in devising a plan for becoming possessed of that Golden Girdle, which we two once saw lying before the altar of Sophana, whom Raspul called Goddess Queen. To unfold my plan and ask you to agree to it will be to put your oath of brotherhood to a severe test."

"Have I not sworn by Allah?" said the sheik. "Speak on, brother."

I then expounded my plan, which was that, in place of my going on what might prove a long and useless journey, we should send to the party of Shammar now in possession of the Girdle, and invite them, as guests, to pay us a visit. As I explained, they were my friends, and they were, therefore, now the friends of Sheik Faris. He saw the argument, and though I am confident that my suggestion was most distasteful to him, he acquiesced without so much as a question. I explained to him my reason for wishing that the Shammar should come to me, rather than that I should go to them: I did not altogether believe in the veracity of the two Jews, who had said that they had been robbed, knowing, as I did, that the Jews of Arabia have reduced lying to a fine art. By persuading the Shammar to come to us, if we should find that the Jews had lied, we should be able to get in touch at once with the latter; whereas if I were to ride away a couple of hundred miles, I should have to come back again before being able to do anything. I was quite certain that if the Shammar had the Girdle, they would sell it to me; for I had been with them long enough to know that they were poor men, and that their sole desire was to obtain Kellner's 5000 kerans. Therefore I proposed that the message which I should send to them should be to the effect that I was anxious once again to see my old friends, and that I would purchase from them the Golden Girdle at the price which Kellner had agreed to give.

As Faris said, the negotiations would require fine handling, but Sedjur stepped into the breach, and immediately suggested that he himself should carry the message. He would go with one other, and he was quite convinced that he would succeed in inducing the Shammar to come and see me. The sheik consented, and, moreover, offered to lead the tribe southwards in the direction of the winter pastures, by which Sedjur's return journey would be considerably shortened, and we should be at no greater distance from Kerbela and the two Jews than we now were. I went to bed that night more contented in mind; I still had every chance of obtaining my prize; I should have to pay for it, of course; but that I had long decided would be necessary. If the Shammar had the Girdle, they should have 5000 kerans for it; if the Jews still possessed it, they would doubtless sell it for that sum, and be glad to get the money. The only question that troubled me at all was

the position of Kellner. I did not wish to do anything mean or underhand, for he had fought valiantly for the thing, and that he had failed to keep it was only due to his loss of health at the last. So I made a vow that, when I had secured the Girdle and had it safe in Baghdad, I would display the utmost generosity to Kellner, and recompense him handsomely. I felt that then I should be able to afford to be generous.

Next morning, Sedjur and his companion set out on their mission, and after they had left, I almost regretted not having accompanied them. The sheik, however, laid himself out to entertain me, and on the following day, the whole tribe commenced its annual migration towards the south. It was an interesting sight, which I thoroughly enjoyed, and I was glad to find that the pace was slow and the day's march consequently short. Thousands of camels and horses moved abreast across the plain, a few horsemen scouting ahead, as an advanced guard, while Faris and I, with a small escort, rode a little in front of the centre of the long line, which extended across country for several miles. There was sport to be had, also; for the sheik did not make these slow marches without his hawks and greyhounds, and many a fast gallop they gave us. The camels and horses were as good as a line of beaters; wolves, foxes, jackals, gazelles, and bustards were frequently turned out of the scrub, and pursued by hound or hawk. For a week or more we travelled in this easy and delightful manner, pitching camp early each evening, and starting again none too early in the morning.

At length we reached the spot at which Faris had agreed to wait for Sedjur, and so satisfactorily did the arrangement work, that we had to wait barely twenty-four hours before we had the joy of seeing four horsemen coming into camp. Sedjur's mission had been successful, and with him rode Daud and another of the Shammar. I was not a little astonished at the politeness with which Faris received his old enemies, and welcomed them as the guests of the tribe. They might have been his dearest friends; and the Shammar themselves were evidently well-pleased at their reception.

It had been my hope all along that Daud would be one of the guests, as I knew him better than his chief, and I was aware that he was much attached to me; but it grieved me to hear that, some weeks before, the sheik had lost his life in a foray, and that three others had also perished. Daud was now the head of this small family of the Shammar, and he and the man accompanying him were the only survivors of the original party who had been responsible for the death of the seer at Katib. I mentioned this to Faris in private. His reply was typical of the man.

"The curse has indeed followed them," said he, softly, "as I was sure that it would. For the murder of Raspul nine lives have been given. His death has been avenged, and the crime expiated. I am sorry for them, for they were daring and brave men."

"I have not told you, sheik," I said, "that this Daud and the other man were both at Katib on that night, and were parties to the death of Raspul the seer."

"That cannot be helped now," said Faris. "I cursed them, and swore, by Allah, that I would not rest until I had slain them. Yet the laws of hospitality are in the eyes of Allah inviolable, and of greater importance than an oath of vengeance taken in hot blood. I wish my guests no ill, and I trust that the curse of Sophana may not fall upon these two men."

It was not long before I approached Daud in the matter of the Golden Girdle, fully expecting that he would show it to me hanging from his waist. But no sooner did I mention it than I realised that my hopes were destined to be dashed to the ground once again. What the two Jews had said was absolutely false. Never had Daud or any of his men set eyes on them since the day that he rode with Edwards and myself to the Birs Nimroud, and had then been forced to retire because of the sudden arrival of Faris and his superior numbers. Certainly, as I had thought probable, the Jews had lied, and undoubtedly with a purpose. I did not altogether blame them, since if they were acting faithfully in Kellner's interests, they were justified in throwing Faris and everyone else off the scent. Faris, however, when I told him all, did not see things in the same light, and declared that he would be even with the Jews who had lied to him.

I was beginning to lose heart. I felt that I was no match for Kellner; and when I remembered that the Baghdad merchant, Mersina, who was evidently Kellner's trusty agent, had been tracked to Kerbela, whither also the two Jews had fled with the Girdle, I saw clearly what had happened. Mersina had received it on behalf of Kellner, and had conveyed it to a place of safety, where it would remain until the German was released from hospital, and able to take it away. My sole hope now lay in the possibility of purchasing the Girdle from Kellner—a poor hope, at the best; and I settled that my wisest course would be to return to Baghdad as soon as possible, and endeavour to discuss matters with him. He might still be in hospital at Hillah; if so, I would persuade Edwards that it would be friendly to visit him there. But, a few hours later, my new plan was wrecked.

We had assembled—we three, Faris, Daud, and I—for the purpose of deciding if by any means we could discover reliable news of the Golden Girdle. Each of us, though for a different reason, was anxious that it should come into my possession. Faris, who had wealth enough and to spare, had but one desire in the world—to become the owner of the shoe of Shahzadi. Daud had dreams of placing himself on an equal footing with the other sheiks of his tribe, as I had promised him that whenever the Girdle should become mine, I would bestow on him the sum agreed upon by Kellner. As to myself, fame spurred me on to exertion; but I argued with myself that it was not a mere craving for notoriety, so much as an ambition to accomplish that which I had undertaken, with perhaps a wish to be able to prove to Edwards, the sceptic, that there was method in my madness. I opened the debate, telling my friends what I had heard of the merchant, Mersina; how

I imagined that he was holding the Girdle until Kellner should claim it, and that, if this were the case, there was nothing to be done, since to dispossess the rightful owner was out of the question.

"The words that you have spoken," said Daud, quickly, "are wise and just. Yet no man can assert that the dead have a claim on the goods of this world."

"I do not understand you," said I, "I was speaking of the living."

"Then," said Daud, "you know not that that Ingleezee is dead?"

"Dead!" I replied in astonishment, "why should you think that he has died?"

"Because," answered the Bedouin, "I myself saw him lying dead in the hospital at Hillah. I happened to have been in the town in disguise, when my nephew, who sweeps out the hospital for the base-born Turks, informed me of the death of a strange Ingleezee who had come from the desert. He took me to see the dead man, and I saw that it was none other than that same man who had brought ruin to my people. I had sworn to kill him, but of that I have told you. No knife of mine was needed to avenge the death of my many relations. It had pleased Allah to strike him."

It seemed to me a dreadful thing that Kellner, of whom, as my cabin-companion, I had the most pleasant recollections, should have thus come to an untimely end, regarded probably by those about him in his last moments as an outcast, if not also as a felon. But his death had changed the whole situation; and though I did not immediately take it all in, my more astute friends saw at once how matters lay.

"There is only one thing to be done," said Faris, breaking the silence, "and I am sure that my guest here will agree with me. Come, Daud, do you understand my meaning?"

"That, sheik, I cannot say," replied Daud, "but I have my own idea of the only plan by which we can succeed. It is that we immediately seek the Jews, and discover from them truly what they have done with the Girdle."

"And after that?" said Faris.

"With spear and sword and with horse," answered Daud, his eyes flashing fiercely, "pursuing to the limits of the earth, and sparing no one, until we have accomplished our end."

"In this matter," said Faris, "we are one. If you agree, let us swear to be loyal to one another so long as we are fighting for the serpent belt, and until our friend the Beg proclaims that he has no further need of our services."

"I agree," said Daud rising, and holding his right hand aloft "By Allah, I swear it!"

"By Allah, I swear it!" repeated Faris.

Great plans were discussed by the two warriors, who apparently intended to be stopped by nothing; and though I counselled moderation and as little bloodshed as possible, I knew that it would be useless to argue with two men of this description when their blood was up. I therefore contented myself with listening to their projects, hoping that before anything desperate occurred I should have an opportunity of interfering and of preventing unnecessary slaughter.

The plan finally decided on, and forthwith set on foot, was, in its initial stage, simple enough. Daud went alone to Kerbela, where, as a mendicant pilgrim from the far interior, he was to display much religious zeal, discover all he could about Mersina and the two other Jews, and remain in the place until he had found out what had become of the precious Girdle.

A week passed without any news, and my patience began to be sorely tried. My hosts did all in their power to make the time pass pleasantly. Among other things, Faris told me the story of Shahzadi's shoe, and how Raspul the seer had prophesied: "*War and constant fighting there will be, until the coming of the eight-nailed shoe. Wealth untold cometh to the man whose mare shall carry the iron with which Shahzadi was shod.*"

At length Daud returned from his reconnaissance. I saw at once that he was a changed man, haggard, and his eyes as if on the look-out for danger. He told us how he had heard of the Girdle from Shustri, a Hindu astrologer of Kerbela. Shustri related that the Baghdad Jew, Mersina, had stolen the Girdle from Kellner and sold it for a large sum to an important sheik bound for Deyr, a long distance up the Euphrates.

CHAPTER XXIII.

DAUD'S ADVENTURES.

Daud confessed to us that he had no very high opinion of the Hindu astrologer. He thought that he was quite capable of lying, if it suited his purpose; and that it was by no means impossible that he was mixed up in the theft of the Golden Girdle. If the latter were the case, the tale of Mersina's flight and subsequent disposal of the stolen property was, of course, an invention, to get Daud well out of the way; and it might be that the astrologer knew that the Girdle was safely

deposited somewhere in Kerbela. The Shammar, however, came to the conclusion that, whatever was going on, his line of action was quite clear. He would ride after the sheik who was said to have bought the Girdle, and find out what truth there was in the story. If it proved to be a lie, he would return and tax the astrologer with the telling of it. So, getting his horse at the village, and taking one of the Aeniza with him, he went off in the direction which the sheik's kafila had taken. From information picked up at the khans and villages on his route, he found that it was quite true that the caravan had passed that way a few days previously, but he failed to ascertain anything reliable about Mersina's presence with it.

Each day, trying his horse's powers of endurance to the utmost, he rode immense distances, and after a while heard that he was rapidly gaining on the sheik's party. Another long day's ride, and he probably would attain the object of his journey. Starting early to make his final effort, at mid-day he reached a small village, where, he was told, the great caravan had halted three nights before. The Arab with whom he conversed had a strange tale to tell him, and one which, if Daud had not known the reputation possessed by the Golden Girdle, would have seemed incredible. In the middle of the night, said the villager, the whole camp and the village close by were aroused by piercing shrieks from the women's tents, and soon it became known that the sheik's favourite wife had suddenly started up in her sleep, had rushed in a state of frenzy from the tent, and was flying screaming into the desert. The sheik himself and several horsemen immediately went in pursuit and in the course of the night brought back the unfortunate lady, who had apparently lost her reason. More than that the Arab did not know, for the kafila continued its journey in the morning, and the sheik, at its head, rode by the side of the camel which carried the *haudaj*, or sedan saddle, bearing his wife.

Later in the evening Daud passed another village, and heard further strange stories of the sheik and his wife; how the latter was raving mad, and was under the impression that snakes were devouring her body; how the sheik had attempted in vain to appease her, and how the mulla had declared her to be possessed of a devil. These tales set Daud thinking, and calling to mind the madness that had seized Kellner when he rode away with the Golden Girdle, and the other curious things which he had heard about its mysterious powers, he felt certain that the sheik had given his wife the precious girdle purchased from Mersina. Rapidly forming his plan, he pressed forward, and before nightfall he found himself approaching the encampment of the sheik. He rode straight up to the sheik's tent, and demanded an immediate interview. This was granted; and Daud, assuming an air of importance, proclaimed that he had been despatched by Shustri, the astrologer of Kerbela, to overtake the sheik, and warn him of the evil that the Golden Girdle was capable of producing. He told him what misfortunes had befallen people who had worn the belt, on which there was undoubtedly a curse, and he pointed out that it was Shustri's opinion that Mersina had committed murder and had stolen the Girdle—acts which in all probability would intensify the curse, causing greater misfortunes than ever to fall on its wearer.

The sheik, on hearing this, became as one demented, and acknowledged that he had paid a large sum to Mersina for the Girdle, because his wife had desired to possess it; and that no sooner had she unwrapped it and fastened it round her waist, than she was suddenly taken ill. No one could say what was the cause of her illness, but now it seemed evident, from what Daud had related, that it must have been brought about by the ill-fated Girdle. The sheik, excusing himself, hurried off to his wife's tent, and presently returned with the Golden Girdle itself, which he cast on the floor at Daud's feet. For a moment Daud imagined that the belt lying before him was his to take away, if he had a mind to do so. He stretched out his hand towards it; but the sheik motioned to him to stop, saying that he had conferred with his mulla, with the result that they had determined that this thing of evil should no longer be permitted to harry the inhabitants of the world. The mulla was now consulting the Koran, and would in due course come and make known in what way it would be possible to drive out the evil spirit.

For some time Daud sat watching the entwined mass of serpents in front of him, longing to snatch up the coveted belt and fly with it. Yet, brave man as he was, he dared not to make the attempt, and shortly before midnight the mulla came in, to declare what the Koran decreed. Carried on the point of a spear, the evil-working Girdle was to be borne with due ceremony to the Euphrates; plunged three times in its waters; then carried, still aloft on the spear, across the river for a day's ride to the east. Here would be found the dreaded Devil's Well, known to all to be haunted by afreets and evil spirits, and the dwelling-place of countless snakes. Down into the depths of this dry well the accursed Girdle should be cast from the spear-point, and there it would find a resting-place in fitting company, the snakes crawling over their golden brethren, and the afreets and jins playing with them for all time. No man would be found courageous enough to descend into the pit and battle with its inmates. Thus would the world be freed from this great curse.

The sheik agreed that the fate which the mulla had interpreted from the Koran for the Girdle was well devised, and regretting that the Jew from whom he had purchased it had left the kafila and had thus escaped being consigned to the well with his stolen wares, he ordered a three days' halt to be proclaimed, while he and a party of chosen men proceeded to convey the Girdle to the Devil's Well. At break of day the party left the encampment, one man riding ahead with the gold belt transfixed to his spear. The sheik and his mulla followed, and behind rode an escort of some twenty horsemen. Daud volunteered to accompany the sheik, explaining that doing so would only entail a slight delay in his return to Kerbela, but the sheik requested that he would go straight back to the town and thank the astrologer Shustri for having sent him with such valuable information. Moreover, he presented Daud with a handsome inlaid knife, as a reward for his

services. So the Shammar and his Aeniza companion took leave of the sheik, and rode away to the south, at the same time as the others moved eastwards towards the Euphrates.

Daud, crestfallen at what he considered to be his failure, travelled slowly, and, before noon, had covered little ground. He was disgusted with himself at having let slip the opportunity of carrying off the Golden Girdle when it lay at his feet. He argued with himself that it would have been quite feasible to have snatched it up, and, while everyone was in a state of bewilderment, made good his escape into the desert. Now, although he had actually seen it, and had had ample leisure to study the form of each serpent composing it, he had lost it for ever. He doubted not that what the sheik and his mulla had said was true; that the last resting-place of the golden snakes would be impenetrable to man, and that, therefore, there was no chance now that it would ever come into my possession. He had never seen the place, neither had his Aeniza companion, and it was at the latter's suggestion that he decided, a few hours later, that he would endeavour to find it, and satisfy himself, before returning to Faris, that all hope had gone.

Towards dusk the two travellers reached a small village, close to the Euphrates, where they intended to spend the night, and try to discover something about the haunted well. Their host knew of it by repute, but said that no one would willingly pass within half a day's journey of it, so evil was the locality supposed to be. From the village it was distant rather more than a long day's ride, and when Daud expressed a desire to see for himself what manner of place it was, the Arab reluctantly agreed that, for a certain sum, he would, on the morrow, show his guests the way thither, but would not journey with them beyond mid-day. Early next morning they set out, crossing the Euphrates on inflated skins, with their horses swimming behind them, and then, striking north-east across the plain, rode rapidly for several hours. At noon their guide said that he must return, but explained to them the direction in which they should proceed, mentioning certain distant landmarks which would assist them to find the way, and warning them that no man had ever been known to spend the night near the well and return alive.

Hour after hour the two determined men rode on, picking up the landmarks one by one, and feeling certain of their direction. But the sun was fast sinking, and there were still several landmarks unpassed. Then darkness coming on, they were forced to abandon further progress until daylight should again open up the country to them. Accustomed to sleep anywhere, a night in the desert was no hardship to them, and, much refreshed, they eagerly pushed on at daybreak. The last part of their ride, they were told, would be in the bed of a wadi; then over a ridge; and then the Devil's Well.

In an hour or so they reached the wadi, and knew that they were nearing their destination. It was now necessary to make certain that the sheik's party had cleared off; so, casting widely round to the westward, they searched for the marks of the horses, and soon found what they sought. These footprints, they presumed, marked the route taken by the party on going to and returning from the well, so they followed what had become a beaten track, to find themselves, almost at once, on the brink of the dreaded well. It was apparent that the place must at one time have been close to a caravan route, though many years must have elapsed since it contained water. In structure not altogether unlike the wells of the Lady Zobeidé which Daud had often visited when roaming to the south of Meshed Ali, it was deeply excavated, and on three sides lined with massive blocks of stone. The fourth side was more open, and seemed to have had a succession of steps leading gently down to the water's edge. Now, however, the greater part of the masonry had crumbled away; and the steps no longer existed, except that here and there their remains could be occasionally seen. Bushes grew densely in every cleft and on each ledge; so that the precipitous sides of the chasm appeared to be clothed with stunted shrubs.

Daud waxed warm as he described the place, and said that from one point it was possible to look sheer down to the bottom, perhaps a hundred feet; and from that spot, he and his friend, lying at full length, had peered into the depths. There they saw a space of some extent, the centre of which was bare and smooth, as if water at times lay there; while all around were strewn heaps of stones, which had rolled down from the walls, with bushes growing between them. The morning sun, shining through the open end, lighted up the whole well, and as Daud gazed down, he could see clearly all that he desired to see. On the bare ground at the bottom was the Golden Girdle, lying unclasped, in a heap, as it had evidently fallen from the spear on which it had been carried; and the mulla's prophecy was even already being fulfilled, for several great snakes were seen coiling and uncoiling themselves close by. For a long while the two men, fascinated by the weird scene below them, continued to look down; then they arose and walked round the edge of the well, surveying it from every point. That no man would ever recover the Girdle they felt satisfied, and cursing the spot and everything connected with it, they decided to leave it as quickly as possible, and return to bring the news to Faris and myself.

Riding throughout the remainder of that day and the night that followed, next morning they reached the Euphrates, some miles below the village whence they had started for the well. The river was in flood, and with difficulty they swam their horses across; but at length, only the open desert separated them from our encampment. Forgetting the distance that still remained to be traversed, they had neglected to carry sufficient food and water for the journey, and on the third day they found that they had little of either left. They were now aware that, unless they rode unceasingly and swiftly, they must perish of hunger and thirst, but fortunately they were well mounted, and thus escaped the death that had threatened them.

With what excitement we listened to Daud's account of his wanderings can be imagined. We praised him for his pluck, and thanked him for all that he had gone through; but that all our

hopes should be thus blighted depressed us deeply. Faris and I talked the matter over for hours in private, and we agreed that until we ourselves had looked into the depths of the well of ill-repute, and had seen that it was impossible to recover the Girdle, we would not rest content. One thing was certain; Daud must guide us to the spot. But he could not undertake such a ride for some days, although, when we spoke to him about it, he was eager to set out at once. Yet we knew that if he broke down, our attempt would prove a failure, and we decided that he should have a week's rest before we put our plans into execution.

As Daud's strength returned his enthusiasm increased. He suggested that we should lower a man into the well at the end of a strong rope, and with a spear-point bent in the form of a hook it would be easy to secure the Girdle without actually touching the bottom and risking the peril of snakes.

In making our preparations the week passed quickly enough, and the world seemed brighter again. We even went so far as to arrange about the future. As soon as the Girdle was ours, we would ride straight to Baghdad, my friends remaining in hiding near Akarkouf, while I rode on in triumph to the city, and afterwards returned with the reward which I had promised to Daud. As to Shahzadi's shoe, I swore to Faris, as his blood-brother, that he should have it as soon as I could obtain it from England.

"Then," said the sheik, smiling, "will all the Aeniza remember the words of Raspul, '*Wealth untold cometh to the man whose mare shall carry the iron with which Shahzadi was shod.*'"

"And, brother," said I, "if it please Allah, that man shall be none other than Faris-ibn-Feyzul."

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE DEVIL'S WELL.

Never did fishing party go a-fishing for stranger fish or with stranger gear, than did we five men, who rode forth, in the chill of the desert winter's morning, on the first stage of the journey to the Devil's Well. At first, it had been proposed that we should go in foray strength, accompanied by some fifty horsemen; but, later, it was thought best to avoid the display which might arouse suspicion, if we should chance to encounter anyone on the way; and, eventually, the party was restricted to Faris, Sedjur, and myself, with Daud and the Aeniza who had previously been his companion.

For three days we followed the route by which Daud had returned from the well; then, turning east, we reached the Euphrates a few miles above Ana. Crossing the river by swimming, we moved north again, and soon hit off Daud's old track, after which all was plain sailing. We had reached the Devil's Well—and no better name could have been bestowed on the awesome spot. Even Faris acknowledged that the sight of the place froze the very marrow in his bones.

We wasted no time, however, in discussing our feelings, but set to work at once to discover a means of reaching the bottom. Daud had not exaggerated matters; to clamber down the scarped sides was beyond the powers of man. There was nothing for it but the rope; so we followed our guide to the point of land from which, as he had told us, the Girdle could be seen. Only one man at a time could lie down and look over into the abyss, and we took it in turn to view our quarry. Faris gazed on it; then Sedjur; and lastly I myself. Sedjur demanded to be lowered forthwith by the rope, but each of us had his own views of the situation, and each hoped to be the one to draw forth the prize.

It was almost noon before we had formed any definite plan of operations, and the sun no longer lighted up the hollow—in fact, it was not easy to see the Girdle lying below, until one's eyes became accustomed to the gloom. Yet we decided, chiefly by my entreaty, to try the grappling iron, and it was ultimately arranged that each man should be allowed three attempts, after the hooks had been lowered down. Faris was to try his luck first; Daud was to follow; then Sedjur, myself, and the Aeniza in succession. When the others had failed, and my turn arrived, I took my place at the rope end, feeling quite confident of success. With two men sitting on my legs, I hung over the edge, and with both hands grasped the rope. Barely a hundred feet separated me from the Girdle. I could see its outline distinctly, and the grappling hooks within a foot of it. Other snakes, besides the golden ones, I could see also—great, grey, loathsome-looking beasts, and one of them, at the moment, was actually crawling over the hooks and the Girdle. Little had I imagined how difficult it would be to move the grappling iron, so heavy was the great length of rope. My first attempt did no more than just turn the iron, and I saw that all my strength would be needed to jerk the hooks towards the Girdle. I drew in my breath, gave a frantic tug at the rope, and succeeded in making the grapple turn bodily over. But it was farther than ever from the desired object; and my third attempt had no better result. I realised that it was hopeless, and, a sadder but a wiser man, I rose from the ground. Neither did the Aeniza, who last of all manipulated the rope, prove himself a more expert fisherman than the rest of us.

"It is useless," said Faris, "to continue thus to play with the matter. Let us get to business, so that we may have done with this place before nightfall. Come, the sun is fast sinking; bring the rope."

Now arose a difficulty: each of us was eager to be the one to descend, but Faris began to fasten

the rope end to his own body. I remonstrated with him, and maintained that the lightest man of the party should be the one to be lowered down. This was, perhaps, selfishness on my part, as I had every reason to believe that I myself weighed less than anyone else. Sedjur willingly agreed to this, and, as the lightest, claimed the right to the rope end, at which I became indignant, and demanded that Faris should decide between us. Under other circumstances the friendly contest between Sedjur and myself would have been intensely amusing. Neither of us would yield; and at length Faris made us strip and stand before him side by side, so that he might compare the size of our limbs and the amount of flesh on them. Daud also was called in to give an opinion, and in the end the matter was decided in my favour. My heart gave a great bound when I knew that I, with my own hands, was to recover the Golden Girdle, which had given me such an amount of trouble; and, seizing the rope, I soon had it looped and knotted to my liking. I considered myself more or less of an expert at cliff work, since I had spent two nesting seasons with the fowlers at Flamborough Head, and I knew that I had nothing to fear from dizziness.

I determined that, so far as I was concerned, there should be no chance of failure. Securing the rope round my waist with a knot which I was certain could not slip, I took the fathom or so that remained, and, passing it down through my legs, knotted it into the waist rope in the middle of my back. The end I then brought up over my shoulder, and fastened off in the front of the waist rope. Thus, when suspended, my arms and legs would be free, and the rope would not cut me unduly anywhere. My friends, seeing that I was no novice with a rope, willingly listened to the instructions that I proceeded to give them about lowering me down and hauling me up again. Faris was to lie flat on the projecting rock, watching me descend, and directing operations. Near the edge of the point, I drove in a spear as firmly as the rocky ground would permit, and, some little distance behind it, I planted another spear. Passing the rope twice round each upright spear, I directed Daud, Sedjur, and the other man to hold the standing part of the rope in both hands, and pay it out gradually, as Faris should instruct them. Then, when all was ready, I took the spear with the boat-hook head in both hands, and was soon hanging in space.

Down, down, slowly but surely, I commenced to drop. As I descended, the air grew cold and dank; pigeons, startled by my presence, flew out of the fissures in the rocks, and occasionally a great bat made as if to attack me. Owls, also, I could see blinking on the gnarled bushes, and below, whenever I looked down, there were the snakes. It was not a pleasant experience, and for a moment I almost wished that I had been a heavier man than Sedjur. Faris's head was just visible over the edge of the point, and I could see his hands guiding the rope, which passed over a smooth rock close by the side of his head. As far as possible, I kept my eyes fixed on Faris, signing to him at intervals to lower away, and shouting to him cheerily, from time to time, to assure him that all was going satisfactorily. I began to congratulate myself on the success of my undertaking; I looked down to see how much farther I had to go; another twenty feet, and the Girdle would be within reach of my hook. At that moment, the rope suddenly ran out a yard or more with a rush, and then stopped as suddenly with a jerk, causing me to swing backwards and forwards in a most horrible manner. Instinctively I threw out my boat-hook to the cliff-side nearest to me in order to steady myself, and, to my dismay, I found that it had become fixed in a thick bush. I shouted to Faris to hold fast to the rope, but getting no response, glanced upwards. He had disappeared from his look-out post; and a feeling of utter helplessness took possession of me.

I dared not let go my hold on the boat-hook spear, as without it I should be able to do nothing. I was hanging from the rope in mid-air, clasping the centre of the spear-shaft with both hands. Thus I remained for, it may have been, two seconds—not longer, when I gave a sharp pull at the rope to attract the attention of those above. What followed I hardly know. I have a dim recollection of seeing a man come plunging over the edge, mixed up with spears and ropes. I was loose. I clutched the boat-hook in desperation, and felt myself suddenly swing towards the side of the cliff. Then the shaft of the boat-hook dragged through my hands, my body crashed down, and everything became black.

Of what happened after that I know nothing. Neither can I say for certain, even now, whether I lay there unconscious for only a few hours, or for more than twenty-four. On opening my eyes at last, I found that it was night, and for some time I could not understand where I was. Then the whole hideous truth dawned on me, and I recalled what I had last seen—the loose rope, the spears, and the falling man. I was, then, down in the well; and I shuddered as I remembered the snakes that I had seen at the bottom. I was afraid to move, but feeling carefully with my hands, I came to the conclusion that I was lying on a ledge, and had not fallen the whole distance to the bottom. Still, the situation was appalling, for unless my friends found some means to rescue me, I saw no possibility of escape. Exhausted, yet fearing to fall asleep, I lay, and prayed for daylight, not knowing whether the night had just begun, or whether it was drawing to a close. I called loudly to Faris, to Sedjur, and to Daud; but each time there came back only the echo of my own voice, mingled with the shrill screams of countless owls. That the place was haunted did not greatly trouble me, for I argued with myself that all the afreets and jins in spirit-land could do no more than kill me, which, perhaps, would be the best thing that could happen.

Thus I remained motionless, hoping for dawn, and thinking regretfully over the events of my short life. It seemed pitiful to think that I should have been so near the attainment of all my hopes, and should suddenly have lost everything. Then I tried to find a reason for what had occurred, and I became convinced that it was the result of my own folly, that the rope had kinked up, that Faris had left his spot in order to free it, and that my foolish jerk had pulled him off his feet and hurled him into the depths of the well. His dead body, I thought, must be lying

somewhere near me; and I shuddered at the knowledge that I had caused the death of the brave sheik, simply and solely because I had been so obstinately determined to obtain the Golden Girdle. As many another man had done before me, I cursed the thing, and remembered, with bitterness, how Faris had warned me from the first that no good would ever come from it.

In the course of time the sky began to show a faint glimmer of light, and I knew that day was breaking. I could make out the shapes of the rocks and the bushes, and I soon saw how everything lay. As I had imagined, I was lying on a narrow ledge, on to which I must have been cast, by the swing of the spear-shaft, as the rope gave way. I looked above me, and there I saw the spear itself, with its boat-hook head fixed in a dense bush, and the end of the shaft not two feet above my face. When I sat up, I could almost reach it with my hands. I raised myself carefully, grasped the spear, and endeavoured to disentangle its hooked head. It resisted all my efforts for some time, but eventually a small branch broke off, and the boat-hook was loose.

My next thought was to look for the sheik's body, and, craning over the side of the ledge, I glanced down at the bottom of the well. The sun had now risen, and was shining brightly on the wild scene. Not fifteen feet beneath me glittered the Golden Girdle, and the sight of it caused me to tremble violently. Close by it were one or two snakes, basking in the morning sun. I hastily scanned the ledge whereon I was kneeling, to make certain that other snakes were not there also. I could see none, and I gave a sigh of relief. Again I sought the body of Faris, and presently my eyes fell on a shapeless mass of clothing, lying among the débris of rocks on the opposite side of the well. In my agony, my first impulse was to fling myself on to the rocks below, and so end my miserable existence. But I restrained myself, and involuntarily turned my eyes in the direction of the gruesome corpse. A ray of hope suddenly burst in upon me. The clothes were not those worn by Faris, nor by Sedjur, nor by either of my other friends; they were not the clothes of a Bedouin, but of an Arab townsman. Who or what he was I could not imagine.

Half dazed, I sat down and wondered what it all meant. Faris and the others were alive after all; they would shortly come to my rescue; they had probably gone off to obtain another rope. I felt happier. I still lived, and I was certain that Faris, my blood-brother, was not the man to leave me to die. Then a horrible fear came over me as I thought that, perhaps, the sheik had imagined that I had been killed by the fall. Possibly, while I was unconscious, he had called to me, and, receiving no reply, had given me up as dead. If he thought me to be dead, then he would certainly leave the Girdle at rest. These thoughts sent a thrill of horror through me, but at the same time they impelled me to cast about for a means of escape. I roused myself. I would not sit where I was and await death. I would make a fight for life.

The resolution made, I became calm and collected—much to my own astonishment. I looked around me. The rope was still secured to my waist, the bulk of it lying at the bottom of the well. I hauled it up and coiled it by my side on the ledge. With the rope and my long boat-hook, I should be able to manage something—at least I hoped so. With the aid of these two things, I could surely work my way upwards from rock to rock, and from bush to bush. I could not endure another night in this Inferno, and I formed my plans rapidly. I raised the boat-hook, and with it grappled the bush above me. I could see that there was another ledge there, and to reach it meant ten feet nearer freedom; but I found that swarming up a smooth bamboo was more than I could manage; so, drawing down the boat-hook, and poising the loose end of the rope on its top, I raised it again, and, after several vain attempts, succeeded in passing the rope round the stem of the bush. Then, inch by inch, I jerked the rope forward until the end returned to my hand, when, knotting it securely, and fixing the head of the boat-hook in the bush, I clambered up the double rope, to reach the narrow ledge in safety. I drew up the boat-hook and the rope, and now that I had accomplished the first step, I no longer despaired.

Looking down, while resting after my exertion, I caught sight of the fateful Girdle. It had a dreadful fascination for me. Should I leave it there? Could I possibly obtain it? I shook with excitement at the very idea; and I decided that I would drop down again to my former position on the lower ledge, and see if I could in any way get nearer to the bottom of the well. I hung the boat-hook in the bush, tied the rope to the thickest bough, and slipped down. The situation I found was not by any means hopeless; in fact, to reach a spot overhanging the Girdle, and within spear's length of it, seemed to be perfectly simple. About eight feet below me was a projecting rock, quite large enough to stand on, and from it, I estimated, I could easily touch the golden serpents with my hook.

I determined now to run no risk of losing either of the two things on which my life depended. The rope, still looped round the bush above me, I slackened out sufficiently to enable me to reach the rock below, and drawing the long end through the loop that encircled my waist, I made it fast, coiling the remainder round my body, and securing the end to the shaft of the boat-hook. Thus equipped, I descended cautiously, and, in less than a minute, was standing on the rock. Pulling at the portion of the rope to which the boat-hook was fastened, I dragged the latter off the ledge, and soon had it in my hands. My estimate proved correct; the head of the boat-hook could touch the ground a foot or two over and beyond the Golden Girdle.

As the iron hooks scraped on the ground, the live snakes hissed and wriggled away among the fallen stones. Skilfully, I gauged the centre of the belt, and passing the boat-hook beneath it, gently raised my hands. But the belt slipped off, and I had to start afresh. The same thing occurred time after time, until at length I balanced it exactly, and slowly and steadily drew it up. As it came nearer and nearer, my knees shook beneath me, and every moment I expected to see it slither to the ground. Another foot and it would be safe. I thrust out one hand and grasped it. In

my frantic joy I shouted again and again. I defied the whole host of jins and afreets; I cared not for Shaitan himself. I had won the day. The Golden Girdle was mine!

CHAPTER XXV.

FOR DEAR LIFE.

I drew out my knife, cut off several feet from the rope end, and twisting it round and round the Girdle, tied it with strong knots beneath my garments. Joyously, I climbed to the ledge above me, and then again to the second ledge. There I rested, and studied the cliff above me. It was disappointing; for it rose up sheer for almost twenty feet, and no foothold could I see anywhere. I crept carefully round a slightly projecting rock, and found that a narrow cleft, with perpendicular sides, opened back into the cliff. It seemed as if an earthquake or some subsidence had rent the rocks asunder from the top of the well to the bottom. Down below me, the fissure descended full thirty feet; upwards, perhaps for twice that height, the walls towered to what I imagined was the edge of the well.

This was my only chance. I could discover no other possible way of escape from the shelf on which I stood. I wondered if there could be snakes in such a place, but so far I had seen none except at the very bottom. So I dismissed the thought, and began my preparations.

I knew that chimney climbing was a special branch of mountaineering. I had seen it done, but I myself had never attempted anything of the kind. Yet, it was no time for hesitating, and now that I had the Girdle round my waist, I felt nervously anxious to get away. Taking off my sandals and tying them round my neck I unwound the loose coils of rope from my body, tied the end to the boat-hook head, and placed the latter, together with the coiled rope, on the rock at the mouth of the fissure. I might want my trusty boat-hook again, so I decided to keep it secured to one end of the rope, the other end of which was attached to my body. It was a simple matter to get athwart the chimney walls, which were here no more than two feet apart, with rough portions of rock projecting a few inches. My back was flat against one wall, my feet against the other, and once I found myself in that position, I did not stop to think. Raising my feet a few inches, and pressing hard with my back and hands, I found my body gradually ascending, with far less difficulty than I had expected. It was, however, laborious work, and at times I despaired of being able to reach the top. The long rope, also, hanging loosely between my legs caused me a good deal of annoyance, as I was ever in doubt as to whether it would run out freely; though I consoled myself with the thought that, if the worst came to the worst, I could cast it off from my body.

Hour after hour I continued to work my way upwards. My feet, hands, and back were stiff and sore with the constant strain and rubbing; but as I looked down, I realised how magnificently I had done. I felt that I had become a mere machine—up with the feet, up with the back, and another six inches nearer the world. I forgot hunger and thirst, and I thought only of the streak of blue sky that I could see through the top of my prison chamber. I was desperate, I own, but my heart never failed me; and, as I gained confidence in the security of my wedged-in position, I was able, when I became exhausted, to rest occasionally.

At last, I looked up and found that I was nearing the top. Another twelve or fifteen feet, and I should be free. But, alas, I saw that the cleft was widening, and at the top was two or three yards across. Even now, it had become more than three feet wide, and every inch would increase my difficulties. I struggled on a little higher. With the whole of my back flat against one wall and the soles of my feet against the other, my knees were no higher than my waist. I could go on slowly as long as my knees had any bend in them; after that I should be powerless.

I stopped, and gazed up again. How near I was to the edge! Six feet—perhaps not as much. Yet, a step higher, and the chimney would be too wide for my legs to span. An old and straggling bush grew on the edge, with branches extended mockingly above me. Could I but reach that bush, I should be safe. But it was well-nigh impossible. I looked down into the depths of the fissure, and I thought of what was before me; how my legs would soon give way, and how my body would bound from side to side, until the final crash finished everything. Then my eyes followed the long, trailing rope, and rested on the tiny boat-hook, far below. I had forgotten its very existence, but the sight of it gave me fresh hope.

Pressing with all my strength with feet and back, I began to haul away at the rope. Yard after yard came up, and then I felt a check. I knew that I had taken in all the slack, and had come to the boat-hook. I wondered whether its weight would be too much for me. Gradually and carefully I pulled at it; I could hear it grating over the rock; one pull more and it was free, and swinging against the sides of the chimney. Its weight was little, and hand over hand I gathered in the rope, allowing it to fall down again to one side, until, before very long, the head of the boat-hook struck my knuckles. I passed the shaft upwards between my legs; in trepidation I watched the hook approach the bush, and when I saw that the bamboo was more than long enough, I breathed more freely. I was getting horribly nervous and excited, and I nearly lost my footing in my eagerness to grasp the bush with the hook. I took a pull at myself, and the next moment the boat-hook, with the rope attached to it, was round the solid stem of the bush.

But I was not yet free. I knew that I could not climb up the bamboo, and I did not feel equal to

climbing up the rope. Before attempting anything, however, I determined to make myself as safe as possible, so, taking up a portion of the rope, I knotted it firmly into the loop round my waist, and encircled the spear-shaft with my arm. I now considered that I was quite secure; a taut rope stretched from my waist to the hook fastened in the bush, and as long as I held the shaft, so as to prevent the chance of its flying upwards when my weight came on the rope, I felt that I could not come to much harm. Even if my exhausted legs gave way, I should still hang from the bush, but I had no intention of relying on this, unless forced to do so. I sat there and rested, easing first one leg and then the other; I wondered whether the bush would be strong enough to bear the strain that I should presently put on it; and I nerved myself for my final effort.

Raising my hands as high as possible above my head, I grasped the rope, and, still keeping the long bamboo close to my right hip and between it and my right armpit, I hauled myself upwards. Had the cleft remained the same width all the way to the top, my ascent would have been easy; but when I was within a yard of the bush, it widened suddenly, and before I knew what had happened, my feet had lost their hold, and I was hanging by my hands to the rope. Desperation seized me, and I fancy that the roughness of the rocks helped me; for, with a frantic effort, I pulled myself up the rope, assisted by my toes, which seemed to obtain a cat-like hold on the steep cleft-side. I put out one hand and grasped the thick roots of the bush; I let go the rope, and with the other hand snatched at the nearest branch. A second later, I was lying flat on my back in the open desert, a yard or more from the edge of the well.

There I lay, worn out and utterly exhausted, but so fearful was I of falling over the side, that before I collapsed, I had sufficient strength left to cast off the rope from my body, and roll myself away to some distance. Then, I suppose, I must have fainted.

The sun was still well up in the heavens when I again opened my eyes. Instinctively, I felt my waist for the Golden Girdle. It was there. I sat up, and looked around; but I could see nothing except desert, and the few bushes near the well mouth. I crawled towards the spot where I had last seen my friends, and there I was astonished to find all our saddle-bags, as we had thrown them from our horses. But the horses had gone.

I soon had my mouth to a water-skin, drinking as I had never drunk before; and when I had satisfied my thirst, I turned to the saddle-bags for food. There was plenty and to spare, and I ate heartily. Moreover, I found a pipe and tobacco, and I could have hugged myself with delight. This was indeed a stroke of luck, and I sat and smoked, and thought of all that had occurred. I was blissfully happy, and now, for the first time, I raised my cloak to look at the prize which I had secured for myself. I untied and untwisted the rope, and took the Golden Girdle in my hands. It was the most beautiful thing that I had ever seen; but, as I gazed on it in rapture, I remembered its evil reputation. A sickly fear came over me. Should I also go mad from having worn it? Perhaps I was already mad. Perhaps, in my madness, I had leaped into the well, and my companions had fled, in terror, from the spot. Perhaps this was no Golden Girdle after all, but merely a piece of rope. People who are mad, I said to myself, have strange hallucinations. I feared to look long at my treasure; so I rolled the rope about it, and again fastened it round my waist.

I had not yet got as far as thinking of the future. I had gained possession of Queen Sophana's Girdle, and that was my sole thought. Still, I knew that sooner or later I should have to decide what I should do next, for, whether I were mad or sane, I had no intention of spending another night in the neighbourhood of the Devil's Well. I could not understand what had happened to Faris and the others, and I could not account for the presence of the stranger's corpse, which I had seen in the well. But, when I stood up and looked about me, I became aware of the fact that, since I had last been there, the ground was much trodden by horses' hoofs. There were the marks of many more horses than our five, and it suddenly flashed across me that my friends had been attacked by a strong party of horsemen, while I was descending into the well, and that they had been forced to take to their horses and get away. It must have been a sudden affair, otherwise Faris would not have left his saddle-bags behind; and the pursuit must have been a swift and long one, since the victors had not returned to loot the saddle-bags. I failed to understand it, and I gave up thinking about it. I had enough to do to arrange for my own salvation.

I might have to walk for many days before reaching the Euphrates and without coming across a habitation. I therefore made up my mind to go well provided with food. I would carry a saddle-bag, with food, tobacco and pipe in one end, and, as a balance, I would carry a partly-filled water-skin in the other end. With such a supply I could travel, for a week or more, through the most parched country. I knew approximately whereabouts I was, as Faris had told me, as we rode to the well, that we had reached a point which must be about midway between the two great rivers. So, whether I walked due south, or south-east, I was bound to strike eventually either the Euphrates or the Tigris; and, provided that I did not meet with any roaming Bedouins on the way, I should find villages near whichever river I came to, when, I did not doubt, the Arab peasants would befriend me. In cold blood, such a journey as I proposed to take on foot would have been simple madness; but, as I was situated, there was nothing else to be done. I had to go somewhere, and I naturally decided to return by the way that I had come.

I shouldered my saddle-bag and set out on my tramp, without so much as a regret at leaving the spot. As I followed the track of the horses, it occurred to me that I was making a mistake; for, judging by the hoof-prints, my friends had fled in this direction, and had been pursued by the host of horsemen, who in all probability would, some time or another, retrace their steps to the well, in order to look for booty. Thus they might run into me at any moment, when, of course, I

should lose everything that I possessed, if not also my life. So afraid was I of such a disaster, now that I had my precious Girdle on my person, that I struck away from the track at once, and even ran, in order to try and get out of sight I now took a south-easterly course, and succeeded in covering a good many miles before sundown. I laughed at the idea of sleep; and knowing how to keep my direction by the stars, I rejoiced in the safety of the darkness, and in the cold night air. Now and again I was obliged to stop and rest, as my legs refused to carry me, and on these occasions I fell asleep as soon as I touched the ground, but usually to wake with a start and push on again.

On the following day I walked almost continuously, keeping my eyes on the look-out in all directions, and dreading the appearance of Bedouin horsemen. Twice I saw small parties on the horizon, when I lay as flat as possible on the ground for more than an hour each time, and thus avoided being seen. I was more than pleased with my day's work, and when night came on, I ate, drank, and smoked. I cannot say that I was happy, but I was as happy as, under the circumstances, it was possible to be. That night, in spite of the cold, I slept long and soundly, and when I arose some time before daybreak, though terribly stiff, I felt much refreshed, and ready for another long march. In this manner, always marvelling at my powers of endurance, I walked for four nights and three whole days, with seldom a long rest. Then recurred the old thought that I was mad. Madmen, I said to myself, can perform feats impossible to sane people. No sane man could have lived through all this. Yet, I was still alive. I lighted my pipe, and blessed it as a comforter. I began to think that I was all right after all; and when I had finished smoking, I got up and strode ahead.

I had kept a careful mental note of the number of hours (as far as I was able to reckon them) that I walked, and I estimated that I averaged about two miles an hour. When I stopped for a sleep at the end of the fourth night, I totalled up my distance, and calculated that I had covered just over a hundred and thirty miles, which I considered by no means a bad performance. I thought that it might be even a record.

Early on the morning of the fourth day, I saw a long line of trees in the distance, and I felt certain that it marked the course of the Tigris. I was right; and within a few hours I was rapidly approaching the great rolling river, with its waters sparkling in the sun. For days I had lived for this moment, and feeling that I was almost done, I staggered along, until I reached the water's edge, when, without troubling to remove my clothes, I walked in up to my chest, and revelled in my bath. After a while I returned to the bank, and, thoroughly refreshed, sat down to gaze on the glorious scene. I could see no village anywhere; but I lay back, contented and happy, and watched the flocks of sand-grouse flying in from the desert for their morning drink. They came in myriads, each taking its mouthful of water, and without resting, returning at once, miles away, to the burning sands. I shuddered when I thought of the pitiless wastes where they had their homes. Never again would I voluntarily go back to the desert.

The river to me was life. Why I could not say, unless it was because I knew that somewhere downstream lay Baghdad, where was peace, quiet, and rest. But how was I to reach my goal? I certainly could not walk much farther, and it would be no easy matter to walk along the overgrown banks of the winding river. A boat, or a raft, was what I wanted, but I did not see the prospect of obtaining either. In a book, I argued with myself, when the hero had arrived at the stage at which I had now arrived, he would find logs and ropes and such-like things to his hand, and would construct a raft in no time. Unfortunately, I was not the hero of a book, but a stern reality, and consequently there were no rafting materials anywhere about. My clothes were heavy with water, and I was footsore and weary, but I struggled slowly along the river-side, and prayed for the sight of a village.

Presently, on coming round a bend of the river, I saw a solitary fisherman paddling his kufa close inshore. I ran forward and hailed him, but at the sound of my voice he was seized with terror, and, dipping in his paddle, made off as fast as possible. I shouted after him that I was his friend, and that I would pay him handsomely if he would take me in his boat, so after a little he came cautiously back. I could see that he was half afraid and half curious, but my mention of money had impelled him to return and inspect me.

"How far is it to the city?" I shouted.

"A long way," he replied.

"How many days in your boat?" I asked.

"A full day and part of a night, without a rest," said he.

"Will you take me there?" I inquired, as he drew near.

"Impossible," he replied, "I have my fishing to attend to."

"But," I said, "I will pay you more money than you can earn by your fishing in a whole year."

The boat was now close to me, and without more ado I jumped straight into it. I was determined not to lose this chance, even if I had to throw the fisherman overboard. I knew that my strength was fast going. I might last as far as Baghdad, if I could sit quietly in the boat, but I could walk not another mile. My friend, who, I found, was an old man, was somewhat surprised at my action; but when I explained to him that I was an Ingleezee who had lost his way in the desert, he scented money, and told me that he was willing to do whatever I should wish.

"Where is your village?" I asked.

"About two hours up stream," he replied.

"Well," said I, "you cannot return there now. You must take me to the city first, and when you return with a bag full of kerans, all your friends will be pleased with you."

"How many kerans did you say, Beg?" asked the old man.

"How many do you want?" I asked.

"Twenty," said he, evidently asking twice as much as he expected to get.

"Then," said I, "you shall have twenty when we reach the city, and if we pass under the bridge ere the sun has risen to-morrow morning, you shall have thirty."

The fisherman's face was radiant with joy at the prospect of such a haul.

"When will you start?" he asked.

"Now, at once, as quickly as possible," I replied.

"It is good," said he, plunging in his paddle with a will, and making the circular tub swing from side to side.

We were soon out in the current, and travelling at a fair speed. Never had I been in such a blissful state of contentment and ease, as I lay curled round at the bottom of the boat, with my eyes just looking over the edge. We passed other fishermen, and here and there a village; but the paddler kept to his course, and paid no attention to anything except the business in hand. I was too excited to sleep; moreover, I thoroughly enjoyed the river scene, and delighted in the verdure of the banks, which I found a pleasant relief to my eyes, nearly burnt out of my head by the perpetual glare of the desert. By sunset we had accomplished much; and soon after dusk the old man made known to me that the thirty kerans were as good as his; we should certainly reach the bridge before daylight.

Hour after hour of the dark night we continued our voyage; and it was still dark when the Arab ceased paddling, and, turning half round, whispered, "See, the city is at hand."

I strained my eyes, and peered into the darkness; before long, I could see the tops of the buildings outlined against the sky; and my heart almost stopped beating. It all seemed too good to be true. Yet, there they were. There could be no mistake. Then I distinctly heard the swish of the water at the bridge, and day was just breaking as we swept under it. All was silent; Baghdad was still sleeping. I knew a landing-place, a little below the Residency, and thither I directed the paddler to take his kufa. A moment later he jumped ashore, and hauled up the boat.

It was but a step to Edwards's house, and bidding my friend follow me, I dragged my stiff limbs up the steep pathway. I reached the gateway and hammered on the barred door; but, before it was opened, I dropped senseless to the ground.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A HAVEN OF REST.

Of what happened after this I have no recollection whatever, and it was not until many days later that I was in a fit state to be told anything. Then my good friend George Edwards doled out scraps of news in a niggardly manner, and refused to allow me to do much talking. He, however, set my mind at rest on one point. He himself had removed the Golden Girdle from my body, and it had been locked up in the Residency safe.

In the course of time I learned everything, and I had much to hear, though not more than I had to tell the Consul-General and Edwards, who, as I became convalescent, spent many hours of each day sitting with me. I had not yet been allowed to see the Girdle, I supposed because my doctor thought that the sight of it might upset me; and he confessed to me afterwards that, for a long time, he had doubted whether the shock that I had evidently received would not permanently affect my reason. Strange as it may seem, I had no immediate wish to see the thing. I felt that I was afraid to look at it. It might not really be what I imagined—the true Golden Girdle of the Great Queen. I asked Edwards to describe it, but he told me that he had hardly examined it, as the Consul-General had locked it up at once, and would not allow it to be taken out of the safe until I should be well enough to inspect it with him. That it was the Golden Girdle, Edwards affirmed, there could be no doubt whatever. He had seen enough to be certain on that point.

"What became of the boatman who brought me down here, and saved my life?" I asked. "You have never mentioned him."

"Well," said Edwards, "I will tell you all about it. I was sleeping peacefully, when my boy rushed up on to the roof, and nearly upset my bed in his eagerness to wake me. He told me a garbled tale, about two men having come to the door; that one of the men was dead, and that the other man said that the dead man was an Ingleezee whom he had found in the river. So I bolted down,

and heard what the old Arab had to say, and then I overhauled you, and you can imagine my astonishment when I eventually discovered who you were. You had been reported as drowned weeks before, we had had courts of inquiry about it all; and had wired and written home to your people. The whole thing was a mystery, especially when I learned that the boatman had found you miles above Baghdad, and you were supposed to have been drowned on the way down to Bussorah. However, as I found that you were not actually dead, I had you carried indoors, and we soon took your clothes off. Then I came across the gold belt, and I knew that you had been at that desperate game again; so I sent off to the Consul-General, asking him to come round as quickly as possible. He nearly had a fit, and it was a long time before he could believe his eyes. After a bit, he went off with the belt and your boatman, and having investigated the matter thoroughly, paid the old man the thirty kerans which he said you had promised him, and gave him another five as bakhshish."

"He deserved every penny of it," said I; "for, if it had not been for him, I should never have seen Baghdad again."

"There you are right," said Edwards. "You ran things about as close as possible, and you may thank your stars that you tumbled across the fisherman when you did."

The next matter of interest which Edwards related to me was the fate of the unfortunate Kellner. I had told him what I had heard from Daud about his death, but I was surprised to hear that Edwards himself had been with Kellner when he died. Just after I was supposed to have been drowned, the Turkish Governor at Hillah had sent word to say that the German in his hospital was thought to be dying, and that he had expressed a wish to see me or Edwards, or both of us if possible. The Consul-General sent Edwards off to Hillah at once, with a small escort, and when he reached the place, he found Kellner still alive, though in a state of collapse. He lived, however, for another three days, during which time Edwards remained with him continuously, and received from his lips his dying confession—for by no other name can it be called. It was a wretched story, and I was really sorry for the poor fellow. As far as daring and pluck went, if anyone deserved to succeed, he certainly did; but, of course, he had been ill-advised.

From what he told Edwards—and he was most anxious to tell him all—it seems that he was in the employ of a South African millionaire, who was a great collector, and who, in some way, had got possession of my uncle's secret. Kellner, much to his credit, refused to tell the name of his employer, but he made a clean breast of everything else. As I had imagined when I came across him at the Birs Nimroud, he had been put on to my track from the very beginning, and, when I thought of it all, I was astounded at the cunning of the man. In one way and another he had got an immense amount of information out of me during the voyage, and before we reached Baghdad he had made himself acquainted with the contents of all my papers. In one matter I was greatly interested: Kellner and I had jumped together at the document relating to Shahzadi's shoe; but he had an advantage over me, in that his employer had given him instructions to seek out the Jew Mersina, take him into his confidence, make him his agent, and promise him a large reward. Money was to be no object; the Girdle was to be obtained at any cost.

Kellner found Yusuf Mersina the very man for his purpose, a man with a rapid brain, who weighed the pros and cons of everything carefully, and who, having once formed his plans, never hesitated. Now, the Jew had spies and friends all over the country, and as soon as he heard of the paper about Shahzadi's shoe, and the defunct Munshi of Kerbela, he decided to take Kellner to that town, and see what could be discovered there. They were in Kerbela some days before Edwards and I had started from Baghdad; and Mersina went straight to the Hindu astrologer, whom Daud subsequently consulted. Mersina was an old client, and always paid well for information and advice, so the astrologer received him with open arms. He did not, however, altogether like having anything to do with the Golden Girdle, the history of which was well known to him; but, after a time, he confessed that he knew where it was, though, as the secret was his own and his alone, it would require much money to purchase it. In the end, terms were agreed upon: a goodly sum down, and a still larger sum if the Girdle were secured. Kellner was astonished to hear that it was no longer buried, but, as Mersina told him that the astrologer never lied, he was forced to believe what he said.

The next step was to open up communications with the Seer of Katib, who, according to the astrologer, possessed the Girdle. He himself had had a quarrel with the seer, and could not, therefore, communicate with him; but there happened to be in Kerbela at that time a Bedouin sheik, who, if paid adequately, would doubtless be able to obtain the Girdle. This sheik was the Shammar Abbas-ibn-Mirshid, and Kellner and Mersina were soon introduced to him. After matters had been satisfactorily arranged, Mersina returned to Baghdad, and Kellner became the guest of Abbas, accompanying him to his temporary camp near Babil. Kellner now confided in Abbas, and told him about me, and how important it was that I should be balked in my attempt to obtain the Girdle, explaining that he thought it quite possible that I might know that Raspul had it. Abbas decided to watch the Baghdad road and to check my progress, but as Kellner refused to allow him to do me any bodily harm, he contented himself with the theft of my money, under the impression that that would be sufficient to delay me. Why he did not wait to see the result Kellner did not say, but, apparently, they thought it best to get away in the direction of the ruins of Katib as quickly as possible.

What happened after this I knew, or had guessed correctly. Raspul had agreed to sell the Girdle to Abbas for two thousand kerans, and to bring it to a certain place at a certain time. But Faris upset all their plans by overwhelming the Shammar and killing Abbas. All this Edwards and I had

heard from Daud, and Kellner threw very little fresh light on the events that followed. He maintained, however, that when he rode away with the Girdle, he was unaccountable for his actions. He was under the delusion that the Shammar intended to murder him, and when he found himself pursued, he felt bound to defend himself with his revolver. The terrible privations that he underwent from that time until he found himself at the Birs Nimroud put all my own experiences in the shade, and, as I listened to Edwards, I could not help wondering why my luck should have been so good and Kellner's so bad. It would appear that he never heard that Mersina had played him false, and he fully imagined that the Birs Nimroud Jews had taken the Girdle to Mersina, who was to retain it until he arrived to claim it. In proof of this he gave Edwards a note to convey to Mersina, whom he instructed to hand over the Girdle, on payment of a certain sum, for conveyance to the British Museum. He expressed many regrets that I had been drowned, and it pained him to think that I had not lived to receive his apologies for the way in which he had treated me.

The pathos of the story made a great impression on me, and I grieved at the thought that Kellner's end had been such a sad one. But Edwards quite restored my spirits by describing how, for a time, armed with Kellner's note, he had sought Mersina, in the full expectation of acquiring the Girdle, and of taking it home to my uncle.

"You see," said he, laughing, "I could have made a very good story out of all our adventures in pursuit of it, and everyone would have thought that I was no end of a hero."

"Not you, George," said I, "I know you well enough."

"I wonder what became of Mersina," said Edwards.

"As I told you," said I, "Daud fancied that he had cleared off with his ill-gotten gains, to start afresh in Syria or Egypt. I am rather glad, though, that he let in that scoundrel of an astrologer. He is a bad lot, I am sure. He gave away poor old Raspul, and he tried to give away Mersina to the Turks. But it was a case of the biter bitten that time."

"That is all fair enough in this part of the world," said Edwards. "The Turks themselves would give away the astrologer, or anyone else, without a blush, if they thought it to their own advantage to do so. But, as a rule, they find it more profitable to let the various badmashes cut each others' throats."

It was a great disappointment to me to find, when I was well enough to think of such things, that all my letters from home, of which I was told there had been a number, had been packed up, with my other belongings, and sent home to my people, directly after I had disappeared from the steamer. I had written very fully to my uncle as soon as Edwards and I had returned from our wanderings, and I had hoped that I should now find answers to my letters; but the only home news that I received was in a note which my mother had written to Edwards. There was nothing much in it, except thanks for the care which he had bestowed on me when we were together in the desert, and a request that he would take the greatest care of my health, and not allow me to run any further risks. Still, even that short letter was something; it was in my mother's handwriting, and it brought me nearer home. Since she had written it, however, she had heard of my death, and all my papers and clothes had probably reached her. But there was just a chance that the telegram announcing my safety might have arrived before my boxes, and I hoped that it had been so. My one thought now was to get home as quickly as possible, but my gaoler damped all my ardour by telling me that he certainly would not let me think of the journey for another month or six weeks.

Among my earliest visitors was the captain of the river steamer, who had quite forgiven me for all the trouble that I had been to him, though he warned me that if I ever took passage with him again, he would have me chained to my berth. As I had surmised, my absence from the steamer was not discovered until some hours after I had gone. The steward had brought a cup of tea to my cabin, and finding it empty, and that the bed had not been slept in, went and reported matters to the captain. Then the steamer was searched from stem to stern, and a whole day wasted in sending boats up the river to look for me. At last the search was abandoned, the captain coming to the conclusion that I must have walked overboard in my sleep. He laughed heartily over his story, and though, of course, I apologised most humbly for having deceived him, I inwardly enjoyed the description of his discomfiture.

I promised him that I would never willingly jump overboard again, and we remained the best of friends.

So the time dragged on, and I began to have a craving to see the Golden Girdle which the Consul-General guarded so jealously. I noticed that none of my visitors ever referred to it, and if I happened to mention it, they promptly changed the subject. I grew suspicious, and one day I suddenly tackled Edwards.

"Why is it," I asked, "that you will never speak about my Girdle?"

"I am always talking about it," said he.

"Not to me," said I. "Is it still safe and sound?"

"Perfectly," he replied.

"Then I propose," said I, "that we shall have a grand inspection of it."

"Not just at present," said Edwards, "I do not think that you are strong enough."

"Look here, George," I said, "I believe that you are keeping something from me."

"I swear I am not," said he.

"Then," said I, "you are under the impression that, if I gaze on the Golden Girdle, something will go wrong with my brain."

I saw Edwards colour, and I was convinced that I had hit the nail on the head. But our conversation was interrupted by the arrival of a telegram for me. My people had already spent a mint of money in telegraphing congratulations, and in asking almost daily after my health; but the telegram which I now received contained a huge surprise. It was from my uncle, who said that he and my father had decided to come out to Baghdad and bring me home, and that I was to remain until their arrival. They were starting at once, and it was a great joy to me to think that, within five or six weeks, I should be free, and moreover, have no further responsibility for the Girdle, of which my uncle would himself be able to take charge. I now found, after a lengthy talk with my doctor, that he was painfully superstitious about the Girdle; he was evidently afraid that when it was let loose from the safe, something dreadful would happen, and I laughed at his fears. He was greatly relieved at the news that my uncle was coming out, as he did not like the idea of my going off alone with the dreadful serpent belt.

"Of course," he said, "you will not think of examining your treasure now, until your uncle arrives."

"To tell you the truth," I replied, "I intend to ask the Consul-General this afternoon if it will be convenient to him to hold the inquest on it to-morrow."

"Well," said Edwards, "I suppose you will get your own way, as you usually do. Shall I be expected to be present?"

"Naturally," said I, "who else will make the post mortem?"

That evening I strolled down to the Residency, as I was now allowed to do, and sat among the orange trees talking to the Consul-General who, I discovered, shared my eagerness to inspect the Girdle. He confessed to me that on more than one occasion he had surreptitiously peeped into the safe, but as the belt still had my rope wound round it, he could not satisfy his curiosity to any extent, and he did not like to take off the rope until he had my permission to do so.

"Has it ever struck you, sir," I said, "that our friend Edwards is a little bit afraid of it?"

"Well, do you know," he replied, "now that you mention it, I believe that he is. I have suggested once or twice that we should ask you to show us your prize, and he has always put me off by saying that he did not think that your nerves were strong enough to stand the strain, as the sight of the Girdle would bring back so many memories."

I laughed outright, and vouchsafed that, in my opinion, the person with the shaky nerves was Edwards himself.

The words were hardly out of my mouth than I saw the subject of our conversation striding across the courtyard towards us.

"You look as if you had something very important to tell us, George," said I.

"So I have," he replied. "News that will set you thinking."

"I know what it is," I said. "The Golden Girdle has escaped, and you have seen it flying back towards the desert."

"I almost wish that I had," said Edwards.

"If you talk like that," said the Consul-General, sharply, "I shall have to ship you off on six months sick leave. Your nerves are giving way."

When I looked at Edwards's face, I was of the same opinion.

CHAPTER XXVII.

VISITORS.

"I am all right," said Edwards, "but I have just seen someone, and heard something which has upset me a little. Whom do you think I have been talking to, Walter?" he asked, turning to me.

"I give it up," said I. "Who was it?"

"Well, I will tell you," said Edwards. "I was walking my horse over the bridge, when I met a very smart-looking Persian gentleman on foot, and as I came up to him, to my astonishment he salaamed to me, and addressed me as 'Hakim.' I knew his face, but I could not put a name to it. So I stopped and began to talk to him. He hastily told me to go on across the bridge, and wait for him a little way out in the country, as he did not wish to be seen by the Baghdadis in my

company. I now recognised his voice, and glancing round, I made certain that I was right. It was our old friend Sedjur—beautifully disguised. Getting well away from the town, I waited for him, and when he came up, gave him a warm welcome. Then, in reply to my inquiries, he told me what he was doing in Baghdad. He was tracking Yusuf Mersina, who, he said, was supposed to be in Baghdad, with the Golden Girdle in his possession. So far, he had not been able to hear anything of him. I was afraid to tell him a word about your exploits, or that he might ease his mind about the Girdle, because, honest though I believe Sedjur to be, one can never be quite certain what these people are up to. I was going to ask him if he knew that you were alive, when we saw people coming along in the distance, and he begged me to leave him. I did not do so, however, until I had learned from him that his father is also here."

"What, my brother Faris?" I exclaimed. "How extraordinary."

"Yes," continued Edwards, "and, what is more, they are both coming down to see me to-night. Sedjur said that he knew the Residency, and would drop down in a kufa, so as to be under the wall here as the moon rose. I promised to meet him, and give him protection as long as he was within the precincts of the Residency."

"You were making somewhat free of His Majesty's property," laughed the Consul-General.

"I am sorry, sir," said Edwards, "but I thought that you would be interested to see these two friends of ours, about whom you have heard so much."

"I was only joking," said the Consul-General. "I shall be delighted to welcome them. The moon rises at about eleven o'clock, if I am not mistaken. Do you think that Henderson ought to sit up so late?"

"I shall be here, sir," said I, looking defiantly at my medical adviser, "even if I have to go back to bed for another month. I cannot miss seeing Faris and Sedjur."

It was therefore arranged that we should dine at 8.30 at the Residency, and afterwards make a night of it. But, in the meanwhile, Edwards marched me back to his house for two or three hours' rest, though, as a matter of fact, he kept me busy talking for most of the time.

"What do you imagine that Faris and Sedjur are doing here?" he asked me.

"Looking for Mersina, I suppose," I answered. "But I think that they must be on the wrong scent."

"I must say," said Edwards, "that I do not like the look of things. If Mersina has come back to Baghdad, you may be certain that he knows that you got the Girdle; and, as likely as not, he is planning a burglary or something of the kind. I do not suppose that Faris and Sedjur are in with him."

"In any case," said I, "I do not see that it matters. Mersina cannot burgle the safe."

"Perhaps not," said Edwards, "but he might murder or gag the Consul-General in his sleep, and take the key."

"You are a fearful alarmist, George," said I. "Do not worry about the matter, until you hear what the Sheik and Sedjur have to tell us. I am quite excited at the prospect of seeing them again, and hearing what happened to them at the Devil's Well, when they let me go."

Dinner that night was a dull affair. Edwards was morbidly gloomy; I, if not actually depressed, was thoughtful; and our host altogether failed to enliven us. Afterwards, we sat and smoked in the Consul-General's sanctum, overhanging the river, until the hour for which we waited approached. Then Edwards, looking at his watch, rose, and walked out to the low parapet which bordered the river, to meet the expected Bedouins. A few minutes later the door opened, and Edwards ushered in Faris and Sedjur. My heart gave a leap when I saw them again, but instinctively I stooped over the table with my back towards the door, so that I should not be recognised. As soon as the Consul-General's greeting was over I turned suddenly, and, facing Faris, held out my hand.

"Brother," I said, "have you so soon forgotten me?"

The look of amazement and joy that came over the faces of father and son I shall never forget, and throughout the long discussion that followed, I constantly observed each of them glancing furtively at me, as if still doubtful whether I were flesh and blood.

How we talked! First, I had to give my version of my escape from the well, and so often did they interrupt me with questions, that I was a long time relating all that had happened to me.

"And where now is this accursed serpent belt?" asked Faris, when I had concluded.

"Locked up securely," answered the Consul-General "and where it now is there will it remain, until I myself take it out."

"Marvellous!" said Faris, addressing me. "On more than one occasion, brother, you forbade me to call you 'magician,' yet henceforward shall I call you by no other name. For, of a truth, to have raised yourself from the dead entitles you to that name."

"I care little," said I, with a laugh, "how I am called, now that I have accomplished my task. But, tell us of your own adventures. How was it that you let go the rope? And who was the man whom

I saw lying dead among the rocks?"

"That," said the sheik, "must have been the Jew Jusuf Mersina, and I hurled him there with my own arms."

"Then why," I asked, "have you now come to Baghdad to seek him? I do not understand."

"Because," said Faris, "we believed that he had not been killed by the fall, but had escaped with the serpent belt, which the astrologer of Kerbela afterwards told us was here in Baghdad. But I will tell you everything, and then you will understand, for you must have thought that I was guilty of the crime of abandoning my brother, whom I had sworn to defend and succour for all time."

The sheik, assisted by Sedjur, then related fully all that occurred at the fatal moment when the rope by which I was suspended suddenly gave way. My conjectures were fairly correct. Faris lay watching me slowly descending towards the Girdle, when, without any warning, a wild shout was raised close behind him, and looking back he saw a party of horsemen galloping down on him. The Aeniza who was at the tail of the rope, quickly took a hitch round the rearmost spear, and each man ran to his horse. Faris immediately recognised the leader of his assailants as Mersina, and, throwing his horse's bridle to Sedjur, rushed at him and unhorsed him. The Jew fought tooth and nail, but Faris was too strong for him, and managed to drag him towards the edge of the well. Then it was that the Jew, in desperation, clutched at the spear which held my rope. To Faris's consternation, it flew out of the ground, and my weight immediately carried away the remaining spear and the rope. In his rage at my fate, he lifted Mersina bodily from the ground, and hurled him into the depths below. Turning round, he saw that the others of his party were hotly engaged with their enemies, and keeping them at bay until the sheik should mount his horse. The spears of both Faris and Sedjur had disappeared into the well, so the former, deeming it hopeless to stand and fight, gave the signal to his party to disengage and break away, trusting to the speed of his horses to get clear. This was successfully accomplished, for though the pursuit continued for several hours, Faris and his three followers rapidly out-distanced their pursuers, and during the night made good their escape.

Daud, unfortunately, had sustained, during the fight, an ugly spear wound in the thigh, and the severe ride that followed had not improved its condition; consequently, Faris decided to take him to the nearest village by the Euphrates, and leave him there with his old companion, the Aeniza, while the sheik and his son returned to reconnoitre towards the well. Having seen Daud safely deposited in the village, my two friends retraced their steps, and soon discovered that the hostile horsemen had not gone back to the well, but had struck away to the north-west, which seemed to confirm the opinion that Daud had expressed that Mersina's adherents belonged to the kafila of the great sheik who had purchased the Golden Girdle, and had afterwards thrown it into the Devil's Well.

When the well was reached, they shouted down into it, and continuously called to me by name, but getting no reply, they concluded that I had been killed by my fall. So they gave me up as lost, and proceeded to gather up their saddle-bags. One, they found, had disappeared, but they thought that it might have been on the back of my horse, which the enemy had captured and carried off. Before leaving, however, curiosity impelled them to look once more at the Golden Girdle, but though they were certain of the exact spot where it had lain, they were unable to see it. Of this, at the time, they thought little, because dusk was already coming on, and they rode all night towards the Euphrates, which they reached next day.

At the village they had to wait for some little time, until Daud had recovered sufficiently to travel, when he went to Kerbela, to endeavour to find out from his friend the astrologer if he had heard of the fate of Mersina and the Girdle. The Hindu appeared to know some of the events that had taken place. He knew that the Girdle had been thrown into the well, and he knew that Mersina had taken a party there to try and recover it. Furthermore, he stated that he had discovered, by divination, that the belt of gold had been taken from the well, and was in Baghdad, hinting at the same time that it was with the Jew Mersina. This information Daud had obtained only quite recently, and as soon as Faris and Sedjur heard it, they set out for Baghdad, in search of Mersina and the Girdle, while Daud remained in Kerbela, with the hope of picking up fresh news.

"Then you thought," said I, "that I was dead."

"We felt certain of it," said Faris, "otherwise I should have remained at the well until I had rescued you."

"Why, then," I asked, "since you believed me to be dead, should you have taken any further trouble about Mersina and the Girdle?"

"Because," replied the sheik, "I considered that I was responsible for your death, and I intended to come and confess all to the good Hakim. But I was unwilling to do so unless I could bring to him, for presentation to your family, the Great Queen's belt, which had cost you your life. Now that I know that you are alive, and have reaped your reward, I can return to the desert in happiness."

"There to await," said I, "the coming of Shahzadi's shoe."

"Nay," said the sheik, with a surprised look, "that can never be now; for I failed to carry out my part of the bargain."

"Who was it, then," I asked, "who lowered me into the well, from which I recovered the Girdle?

Except through you, my brother, I should never have obtained it; and, as Daud will be rewarded by the sum which was promised to him, so also shall Shahzadi's shoe be bestowed on Faris-ibn-Feyzul. Even this day," I continued, "have I sent a message to my friends, who are coming from the big house across the seas to take back Sophana's belt, that they should bring with them the shoe which you desire to possess."

The two Bedouins were delighted, and for some minutes continued to pour out volumes of thanks. Then the Consul-General suggested that the hours had slipped by and that soon day would break. Without wishing to hurry the departure of his guests, he thought that they would desire to leave while it was still dark.

"When, sheik," he asked, addressing Faris, "do you propose to quit Baghdad?"

"We shall leave," replied Faris, "within a few hours. So soon, that is, as we can get our horses and ride away."

"But before you go," said the Consul-General, "you would doubtless like to see with your own eyes, and perhaps touch, this great treasure in which you have been so deeply interested. What says our hero? Eh, Henderson?"

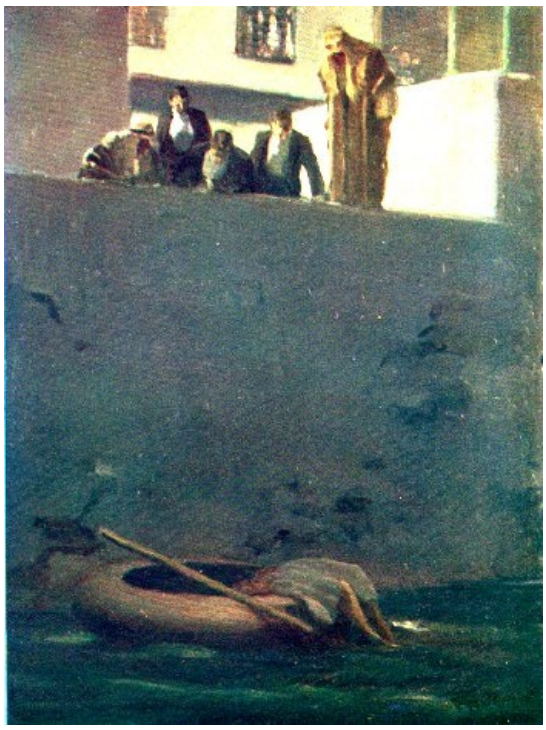
Observing the eagerness depicted on the sheik's countenance, I readily acquiesced, and the Consul-General took out his keys and walked to the safe in the corner of the room. As he did so, my eyes happened to turn towards Edwards. He was clutching convulsively at his chair, and his face had lost all colour. The key turned in the lock with a sharp click; at the same moment Edwards rose from his chair, and, saying that he did not feel well, walked out of the room into the open air. I was so engrossed with the opening of the safe, that I paid little attention to Edwards's action; and, almost trembling with excitement, I watched the Consul-General lift up the mass of intertwined rope and gold. It was just as I had last seen it, and when it had been placed on the table in front of Faris, I explained that it was thus that I had bound it to my body when first I recovered it from the bottom of the Devil's Well.

The Girdle was partly concealed by the rope, and in order that it might be seen the better, I commenced to disentangle it; but I had hardly unwound one turn of the rope than a wild cry from outside electrified us. Dropping the rope and Girdle, I rushed to the door, followed by Faris and Sedjur; for the cry was an unmistakable call for help, and the voice I knew to be that of Edwards. As I crossed the room, I had time to notice that the Consul-General snatched up the Girdle from the table, and, instantly locking it up in the safe, ran after us, to reach the courtyard simultaneously with Sedjur. By the side of the wall above the river, I saw Edwards standing in the moonlight, and looking down into the water.

"What is the matter, old chap," I asked, as I ran up to him.

"I am afraid it is a bad business," said Edwards, "but it served him right, whoever he is. There he is, down in that kufa."

We all looked over the edge of the embankment, and we could see below us, in the dim light, a kufa, with the figure of a man lying across the gunwale, the head and shoulders at the bottom of the boat, and the legs trailing in the water over the side.



"See that he does not escape," shouted Edwards. "He may not be dead."

Quick as thought, Sedjur ran to where his own kufa was fastened, jumped down into it, and soon brought it alongside the other one. Faris and I then assisted to drag the man up and lay him on the ground, while Edwards obtained a lamp from indoors, and made an examination. The man was dead, his skull having been crushed and his neck broken. Death, Edwards declared, must have been instantaneous; and, with some excitement, he told us what had taken place. Feeling faint, he had walked out into the courtyard, and was sitting on one of the seats in the fresh air, when he suddenly saw a figure climb stealthily over the wall from the direction of the river, and creep towards the room where we were seated. Thinking that something was wrong, Edwards rushed across to the intruder, but the man was too quick for him, and fled back to the river-side. Edwards, however, shouting for help, succeeded in cutting him off, and was able to seize, for a second, the end of his cloak as the man leapt over the wall into the river. Whether the fugitive knew that his kufa was immediately below him, and had intended to jump into it, no one can say; but it was evident that the effect of Edwards's temporary hold on his cloak was to throw him off his balance, so that he pitched headlong into the bottom of the boat from a height of some fifteen feet or more.

Holding the lamp to the dead man's face, we sought to identify him, and Faris instantly uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"Wallah!" said he, "it is Shustri, the astrologer."

"Wallah!" exclaimed Sedjur, "and he told Daud that he was going to Damascus."

"Without a doubt," said Faris, "he had come here to steal the Serpent Belt; but death overtakes even a man who knows all things, and who can converse with the dead."

There were already signs of day, and Faris was anxious to depart.

"Twere better," said he "that this man's body should not remain here; for if it became known that such an one had perished in this place, then would it have an evil reputation for all time. We will therefore take the body and the kufa a little way with us, and let them float away in mid-stream, until, if Allah wills, they reach the great Shattu'l Arab."

None of us dissented, and within a few minutes we had grasped the hands of our Bedouin friends, and had seen them drop down into their kufa. Then we lowered the body of the Hindu into the other boat, and Sedjur, casting loose its rope, towed it astern, while Faris paddled away from land. We stood watching the two black specks moving across the water, until, in the growing daylight, we saw them part, the one slowly ascending the river, and the other, caught by the current, sweeping down stream, out of sight.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MYSTERIES, SOLVED AND UNSOLVED.

The adventures of that memorable night laid me low for many a day to come, and Edwards himself suffered a good deal from the shock of having been, as he supposed, the cause of Shustri's death. I argued with him that no blame whatever could possibly attach to him, since the ruffian was evidently up to no good.

"There I am convinced that you are right," said Edwards; "for the Consul-General picked up, just outside his study door, the most diabolical looking knife you ever saw."

"Did he?" said I. "Then I expect he meant business."

"I suppose," said Edwards, after a long silence, "that you are too matter of fact to believe in presentiments."

"I do not know," I replied. "They have never bothered me much. But why do you ask?"

"Well," said my friend, "I will confess to you, in strict confidence, that when you were brought in here that day, by your weird old Sinbad, and I took the Golden Girdle from your waist, I felt a most extraordinary sensation all over me. I cannot explain what it was like, except that it was very similar to the feeling that I have when a cat is anywhere near, about which you always laugh at me."

"My dear George," said I, "I would not dream of laughing at you. But go on."

"The curious thing about it," said he, "was that I felt all right directly the Consul-General locked up the Girdle. But I positively dreaded seeing the thing again. It haunted me day and night, but I

did not like to mention my fears to anyone."

"At any rate," said I, "you did not conceal them very well. I noticed that you looked blue whenever I suggested having a peep at my Girdle. Poor chap, I wish I had known that you had got it so badly. How do you feel now?"

"Since last night," said he, "I have become a different being, but I felt pretty ill when the Consul-General unlocked the safe."

"I saw you," said I; "and I thought you were going to faint. What was the matter?"

"I cannot describe it," said Edwards. "Something seemed to drag me out of my chair, haul me out of the room, and plump me on a bench in the courtyard. My whole body felt as if it were full of pins and needles, darting about in all directions; and this sort of thing continued until the man fell over the wall, when suddenly a delightful feeling of calm spread over me. Now I fear nothing from your Golden Girdle; you might take it out of the safe, and flourish it in front of my face, and I would not move a muscle."

I looked at him out of the corner of my eye, thinking that his mind was unhinged, but he appeared to be quite rational, so I concluded that he had suffered from some temporary delusion, and that he had recovered from it. It struck me, however, as certainly most extraordinary that he should have fought shy of the Girdle, and gone outside just in time to frustrate the astrologer's evil designs. Afterwards, we discussed the matter often, but the enigma remained unsolved; for it was difficult for a plain, untutored brain like mine to follow my friend into the intricate regions of telepathy, second sight, and psychology in general, in which things he professed to be a believer. In the end, I formed my own opinion, which I kept to myself: Edwards's fear of the Girdle was superstitious dread, produced by the various stories which he had heard of it; his experiences on the night of Shustri's death amounted to nothing more than that, suffering from the same superstitious dread, he had left the room at a certain moment, which moment happened to have been selected by Shustri for his appearance on the scene. This I put down as a mere coincidence, and whether my opinion was right or wrong, no man will ever be able to decide. That there was reason enough for superstitious dread I freely admit, and surely no one had more cause to dread the sight of the Girdle than had I. As far as I was aware, death had always followed swiftly after its appearance. Raspul the seer, Yusuf Mersina, and Shustri the astrologer, had each and all been killed before my very eyes, and when I reckoned up the deaths that had occurred within my certain knowledge, they appeared to be legion. At times I found myself speculating as to who would be the victim when next the safe was unlocked; but each time such thoughts rose up I banished them from my mind, as unworthy of a man of intelligence.

On such matters as these I had plenty of leisure to reflect, as I was on my back for several weeks, and unable to do much more than think and sometimes talk. During this time, however, I succeeded in getting into communication with Sheik Daud; and, through the Indian pilgrim agent at Kerbela, paid him his 5000 kerans. He sent a grateful message of thanks to me, and expressed a hope that some day I would honour him by a visit to his tents. But the most pleasant part of his message was the news that he had sworn a perpetual truce with Faris and Sedjur. The two latter, I learned, had gone away to join their people in the Hamad, where they would remain until the coming of spring, or at any rate until I should let them know that Shahzadi's shoe was waiting for them.

Slowly but surely the days and weeks passed. I had received a telegram from Karachi, from my father, who told me that he and my uncle Ambrose had got so far on their journey, and were just leaving for the Persian Gulf. Ten days later, the river steamer panted past the Residency, and Edwards and I were down at the wharf to greet the newcomers. It was a great and glorious occasion, and I was astonished at the change that seemed to have come over my uncle, with his tanned face and his travelling suit taking the place of the colourless cheeks and dingy old black coat to which I was accustomed. In my father I saw little alteration. He was still the smart, soldierly-looking man that he had always been; and looked no older than he did on the day when I had met him at Southampton, on his return from South Africa.

"Well, Walter," said my uncle, after we had recovered from the excitement of our first meeting, "is your golden treasure still safe and sound?"

"Under lock and key at the Residency," I replied, "and only waiting for your arrival to be properly inspected. The Consul-General will be away until this evening, but he sent all sorts of messages to you, and that there are rooms ready for you in the Residency. Have you brought Shahzadi's shoe?"

"Yes," replied my uncle, "but I only got your wire in the nick of time."

Later in the day I told the tale of my second and successful hunt; for my people had received no details, but merely the bald telegram that I was alive and had secured the Girdle. That they were astonished at what I had to tell them, I need not say, and the fuss they made over me was quite embarrassing. My uncle, I thought, was somewhat upset by my descriptions of the evil doings of the Girdle, and I could not refrain from amusing myself by watching his face, whilst I enlarged on them.

"So," said my father, when I had concluded, "you have not let the terror out of the safe since that night."

"No," said I, "we decided that we would restrain our impatience, in order to give you a chance of taking part in the next séance. We thought it would add to your interest in the Girdle, if you could witness a real tragedy."

"What a bloodthirsty young villain you are," said my father, with a laugh.

"Personally," said I, thinking it time to reassure my uncle, "I am quite certain that nothing dreadful will happen again, and Edwards is of the same opinion. He says that he no longer has the tingly feeling and he has no presentiment of evil, both of which I consider good signs. Moreover, he has elaborated a marvellous theory, though I myself cannot follow it. He has worked it out by what he calls the "Law of the Three *plus* Five, equals Eight," and he argues something like this:—Raspul was killed with the Golden Girdle in his hand, after having blown up Three Shammar. Remember the number 3. Then when Kellner fled with the Girdle and was pursued, he shot Five Shammar. Remember the number 5, and the total 8. Now we begin with 3 again, the two Birs Nimroud Jews and Yusuf Mersina; then four Shammar of the original party which stole the Girdle, *plus* Kellner, equals 5. Hence, we have two groups of 3 *plus* 5 equals 8 ——"

"Heavens alive!" interrupted my father, "are you going on with this much longer?"

"Only a little more," said I, laughing, "but it is really interesting. Edwards has spent a deal of time over it. Listen to his deductions. He places the dead Raspul at one end of the Golden Girdle, and the dead Shustri at the other end; and he maintains that as Raspul had directly and indirectly caused the deaths of 8 men; so when Shustri had directly or indirectly caused the deaths of a similar number, then the chain had to be completed by his own death."

"With all due deference to the brain power of your worthy friend," said my father, "I have never heard such a lot of rubbish in my life. I should say that he required looking after. Is he all right otherwise?"

"Perfectly," said I. "But you have not heard quite all. We now go back to the famous mare Shahzadi—the heroine of the shoe. You remember the eight nail-holes. Well, because Shahzadi cast that eight-nailed shoe, the Golden Girdle came into Raspul's possession, and gave him the mystic number 8."

"And what about the numbers 3 and 5?" asked my uncle, who was listening with all seriousness. "The doctor seems to have forgotten his 3 *plus* 5."

"I know," said I. "I attacked him about that, but was told politely that I was dull of comprehension. Edwards explained it away by saying that originally Shahzadi's shoe, of course, had 3 nail-holes on either side, and if they had drilled the two new holes on the same side, then his theory would have been proved undeniably. We should have had the 3 *plus* 5 equals 8. As things are, he considers that the mare's hoof probably would not stand having 5 nails on one side, and so they had to equalise the number."

"Most ingenious!" said my father, "though a trifle weak. But your friend thinks that the evil spirit which was in the Girdle has now flown, does he not?"

"Yes," said I, "he is almost certain on that point, but he suggests that, as there may possibly be what he terms 'a metallic sympathy' between the Golden Girdle and the iron horse-shoe, it would be advisable to lay up the shoe in the safe with the Girdle."

"Pooh!" said my father. "Is not the safe itself made of iron? That should have settled the Girdle long ago, but apparently it did not."

"Not at all," said my uncle, to my astonishment, "it is not the same thing. In my opinion, the doctor has reason on his side. We all know that the ancients had a firm belief in the magical powers of iron, and we all know something of the luck of a horse-shoe. At any rate, whether there is anything in it or not, I shall uphold the doctor in his opinions, and shall ask the Consul-General to place the shoe in the safe, as soon as I meet him."

Thus it came about that, within a couple of hours, Shahzadi's shoe joined the Golden Girdle in its iron prison. Possibly they had never been so close before; yet it was but sixty years since only the height of Shahzadi's withers separated them. Could the one have related to the other its experiences during those six decades, the story would have been well worth writing down, and much more interesting than my own insignificant adventures.

Edwards was overjoyed when I told him what my uncle had done, and at dinner that night he was quite light-hearted and gay. After dinner came the great séance, whereat the death-dealing belt of serpents was to be let loose among us. It was held in the Consul-General's study, in the middle of which had been placed, for the occasion, a bare table—the dissecting table, as Edwards jocosely termed it; and when the Consul-General unlocked the safe, I think that more than one of us expected something desperate to happen. But nothing extraordinary occurred, and everyone craned forward, as I unrolled the rope, and left the Girdle lying at full length on the table.

My uncle, as he took it in his hands and examined it, could not restrain his delight, and, trembling visibly, he pronounced it to be the most glorious and beautiful treasure that it had ever been his good fortune to handle; even my father, who cared little for such things, was deeply impressed; while I myself regretted none of the troubles that it had cost me. I felt that I had not lived in vain. We were each allowed to take it up and gaze on it for a while, and then it was

handed back to my uncle, for his more careful scrutiny.

"Egyptian," he said, "without a doubt, and of great age. Possibly a present from an Egyptian king to Queen Sophana, or to one of her ancestors. It is impossible, of course, to decide these matters until we have it at the Museum, with other things to refer to. But, Walter, I promise you that it will be found to be the most priceless work of art that has ever been brought to light. I know of nothing that can approach it in workmanship."

He then went on to discuss each detail of the Girdle, and as, on this occasion and on several subsequent ones when he examined it again, I acted in my old capacity of secretary and took shorthand notes of all that he said, I am able to give a faithful description of the far-famed belt of the Great Queen.

In length it was a trifle more than thirty inches; in depth it averaged five inches, widening in the centre to almost seven inches. The twelve snakes which composed it were twisted around one another in various contortions; the heads of four of them formed the clasp, their bodies intertwined with those of the snakes behind them; while the heads of the eight other snakes projected, at regular intervals, a little distance beyond either edge of the Girdle. In the centre, the bodies of two snakes were coiled, so as to resemble a circular brooch, some seven inches in diameter.

The delicacy of the workmanship can be understood when I say that the body of each reptile was fashioned out of hundreds of tiny scales, invisibly connected; and when one lifted the belt up at any point, the remainder of it hung limp and quivering. So, also, when placed on the table, the whole thing appeared to be alive, until each restless scale had settled down. But this was not all; for the scales were so arranged that when the Girdle lay flat and open, they closed tightly on each other; yet, as soon as the Girdle was formed into a circle and clasped, the scales on the inner side opened slightly. This peculiarity, we soon discovered, was not unintentional. At my uncle's request, I, one day, fastened the Girdle round my waist, and found that in removing it, it caught in my clothes; then I fastened it next to my skin, when I immediately felt an extraordinary sensation of pricking. We examined the belt again most carefully, and at once became convinced that we had fathomed the mystery of the evil results which we had heard followed the wearing of the Girdle. It was quite evident to me that people, and especially superstitious people, on clasping on the belt and feeling the sharp prickles, would be capable of doing almost anything. This was a most interesting discovery, and, at one fell swoop, it abolished half the magic supposed to be contained in Sophana's Girdle.

To my uncle, however, perhaps the greatest interest was the head of each snake. The eyes were precious stones, and the crown of the head was set with a large stone, in all cases beautifully engraved. The four heads which constituted the clasp were all similar, having small ruby eyes, and on the crown a square of jade upon which was engraved the magic figures, 1, 8, 1, 1 in hieroglyphics.

"Ah!" exclaimed my uncle, "the demon number. Our friend the doctor knows something of it."

"It is as I thought," said Edwards excitedly. "So, Walter, you can no longer scoff. I was right. The 3 and the 8 entered into all my calculations, as you will remember, and there are the mystic numbers at the beginning and at the end of the Golden Girdle. And was it a mere coincidence that Shahzadi's shoe had at first 3 nail-holes on either side, and then 8 nail-holes altogether?"

The heads of the two snakes coiled in the centre had amethysts for eyes, and each was crowned with a square of lapis-lazuli, engraved with the figure of Isis. The six other heads were set with different stones, the eyes being of sapphire, topaz, emerald, garnet, crystal, and cornelian; while the crown stones consisted of circular, oval, or heart-shaped bloodstone, chalcedony, hæmatite, jasper, onyx, and agate. On each of these large stones were engraved magical formulæ, and a figure; the figures representing Osiris, Serapis, Horus, a human-headed lion, a human-headed hawk, and a lion-headed serpent.

Considering the age of the Girdle, and the vicissitudes through which it had passed, it was in a marvellous state of preservation. One or two of the stones had gone from the snakes' eyes, two of the larger stones were cracked, and here and there the bodies of the snakes were a trifle dented. With these exceptions there was little amiss with it; and when my uncle and I had cleaned it, it looked really beautiful.

For days we could talk of little else, and each day we had it brought out from the safe, to examine some particular part. It was photographed from every point of view; careful drawings were made of it; and impressions of each of the stones were taken; but all such things were returned to the safe, each time, to remain with the original, until we should remove the Girdle and everything connected with it, on leaving for England. My uncle refused to allow any description of it to be sent home, as it was his desire that the Girdle itself, in all its glory, should be allowed to burst on the astonished gaze of his *confrères*, without any previous warning.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A PROPHECY FULFILLED.

It was not long before my uncle made known to me the real reason for his journey to the East. The description that I had sent home of the Temple of Sophana had, as he told me, caused the smouldering fire within him to break into flame, and he decided that he was not too old to do something in the world of discovery. The report of my death, however, was a great shock to him, and extinguished the flame of his ambitions. Then, when he heard of my success, he no longer hesitated, but persuaded my father to accompany him, and set out at once. It was therefore, I found, not so much the Golden Girdle that had impelled him to come to Baghdad, as his craving to visit the ruins of Katib, and see with his own eyes what no other European, except myself, had seen. That I should wish to go with him was only natural; but it was not to be, as Edwards declared that I was wholly unfit for such an undertaking.

In due course all arrangements were made; and, at my suggestion, Faris was communicated with, and asked to conduct my father and uncle to the ruins. But it was nearly a month before everything was settled. In the end, Faris agreed to meet the party at the Birs Nimroud on a certain day, and to bring with him a sufficient escort of Aeniza. There he was to receive from my uncle the much coveted shoe of Shahzadi, and he promised to be responsible for the safety of the relatives of his "brother the magician" until he brought them back again to the Birs Nimroud. In my opinion, no expedition ever started under more favourable circumstances, and it was with many heart-burnings that, after seeing the two adventurers and their zaptiehs a few miles on the road, I turned back, and returned with Edwards to Baghdad.

"It is rather sickening," said I, "to be out of this. I must say I should have liked to have had a look at the temple in cold blood."

"Be content," said Edwards, "with what you have already seen and done. Your constitution has been pretty well undermined as it is, and if you are not ever so careful, you will shatter it altogether."

"It will be a trifle dull," said I, "idling about this place until they come back."

"They will not be very long, I fancy," said Edwards. "The professor promised to waste no time, as he is most anxious to get home with the Girdle. I am to go on six months' leave by the same boat, so we will have merry times. In the meanwhile, I have got a job for you, and if you undertake it, you will not be bored by idleness."

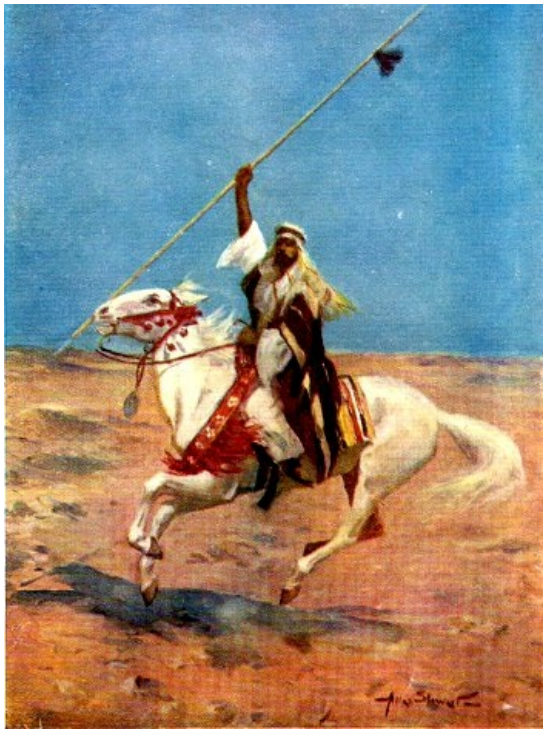
"What is it?" I asked. "Nothing very exciting, I expect."

"Perhaps not quite up to your standard of excitement," said my friend, "but I told your father that I would do my level best to persuade you to carry out his wishes. All you have to do is to take pen, ink, and paper, and put together the story of your wanderings in search of the Golden Girdle."

"How deadly uninteresting," said I, with a groan.

Yet, as the time went on, and I found myself unable to do much riding or take other hard exercise, I began to jot down notes and headings on the paper which Edwards, each day, thrust obtrusively before me; and, at length, I came to the conclusion that such a treasure as the Golden Girdle was indeed worthy of having its history put on record. So I set to work with a will, full of misgivings of my ability to describe the queer things that I had seen and heard in the desert; and, each morning, sitting at my window, overlooking the mighty waters of the Tigris, I added a few sheets to the fast-growing pile.

While thus engaged, I received the first news of the wanderers, contained in a long letter from my father. It was written at Hillah, and finished as the camp was being struck at the Birs Nimroud. Edwards and I read it with intense interest, and both of us blushed when we came to passages dealing with the good names which we had left behind us; for many were the nice things that my father told me he had heard, not only from the Aeniza, but also from the Turkish officials at Hillah. There he had met the cheery old Commandant, who had recently returned from reinstating Ali Khan at Adiba. In the eyes of Ali Khan and his people, we were, the Commandant affirmed, the greatest heroes that Arabia had yet known, and if ever we revisited Adiba, our welcome would be magnificent. At the Birs Nimroud, Faris, Sedjur, two hundred horsemen, and many camels were found waiting, and immediately on his arrival, my uncle presented the sheik, in the presence of his men, with the shoe of Shahzadi, the Aeniza displaying extraordinary enthusiasm on the occasion. "We are just off," concluded my father, "and Sheik Faris is capering around on little Kushki, with the prized shoe dangling from her neck—the two of them as proud as peacocks."



"THE TWO OF THEM AS PROUD AS PEACOCKS"

After this, we received no further news for some time. Then came the first letter from the ruins, my uncle having arranged that his zaptiehs, whom he had left at Hillah, should act as despatch riders, the Aeniza carrying his letters from Katib to a small village on the Sea of Njef, whence the zaptiehs rode on with them to Hillah and Baghdad. When this first letter was written, the party had been only three days in camp near the ruins, and the temple itself had not then been explored, although my uncle had looked down into it from the gap in the roof. The whole time had been occupied in a thorough examination of the outer chamber, with its ramification of passages, of which my father had made several elaborate plan-drawings. Faris and I had been right in thinking that there was only the one chamber, and that the various passages always led back to it, except, of course, the one by which we had originally entered, by way of the steps. Apparently, this form of building was not unknown to my uncle, who, however, had never actually seen anything of the kind, and was delighted with what he had now observed. With the drawings were numerous rubbings from glazed bricks, paper mouldings from carvings, copies of inscriptions, and a few photographic films, which I was to develop. All such things I had been instructed to place in the great safe with the treasured Girdle, and before long the collection began to swell to vast proportions.

Soon, the desert despatches came in regularly once a week, and each one was more bulky than the last, until the safe would hold no more, and cupboards had to be set apart to receive the accumulating mass of papers. Knowing what I did of my uncle's life at the British Museum, I trembled to think of what he was laying up for his old age. Neither did I relish the idea that he would probably persuade me to assist him in unravelling the threads of all his discoveries.

With considerable impatience I awaited the letter which should tell me that the explorers had reached the temple of the queen-goddess, and, when it came, I was relieved to learn that my uncle was in no way disappointed. In fact, it was evident that he was in the seventh heaven of joy, and had no intention of leaving the place until he had overhauled every nook and corner. They had entered the temple, as Faris and I had done, by the tunnelled way, and had found everything just as we had left it. Our tower of escape still stood against the side wall; Raspul's corpse, shrivelled and dried up, lay on the bench on which we had placed it, and the image, or statue, of Sophana looked down serenely on the débris scattered around her feet. No man had been near the place since that awful night, for Faris said that the tribes had become aware of the murder of the seer in his temple, and knowing that his corpse still remained unburied, feared to visit the spot. Even his own Aeniza refused to pitch their camp nearer than a mile from the ruins. The rosary of the seer had been found, but beyond saying that the beads composing it were highly interesting, my uncle did not enter into details.

In thus describing the events of my last days in the City of the Caliphs, I have found it impossible to refrain from mentioning the great things that my father and uncle were doing, whilst I remained, an unwilling prisoner, at the base of operations. These matters, however, are so intimately connected with my quest of the Golden Girdle, that I do not think that any apology for their introduction into my story is needed. Still, I hesitate to forestall my uncle's own account of his wonderful discoveries, which, I have little doubt, when made known to the world, will be found to rival those of the early Babylonian explorers; and with the exception of quoting from one more of his letters, I shall throw no further light on his doings.

The letter in question arrived after I had been without news for a fortnight, and just as I had made up my mind that something was amiss. I had, indeed, gone so far as to suggest to Edwards that he and I should start off for Hillah, and thence try to reach Katib. Many were the papers which accompanied my uncle's letter, which, though written in great haste, was of considerable length. It opened with instructions about the new bundle of papers, and more particularly about the negatives sent for development; then it disclosed information which made my heart thump and my fingers twitch with nervous excitement. The contents of his letter, said my uncle, were on no account whatever to be revealed to anyone, except to Edwards, and to him only on the condition that he swore to keep the secret. This is what he wrote:—

> "I could not send in news last week, as we were much too busy to think of anything beyond the work in hand. How sorry we are that you were not with us to share our triumph; for triumph it assuredly is! We have had, Walter, the most astounding stroke of luck. The temple itself and its extraordinary surroundings have given me the greatest joy, and had the beautiful statue of the goddess been the only thing that I could remove, I should have been more than satisfied. Yet we have found other things, and your father, whose greed is terrible, is in ecstasies over our undreamt-of success.
>
> "You will remember the small chamber, into which, as Sheik Faris tells me, the Seer retired to change his clothes. That was his private dwelling-room, and we found little of interest in it until, about ten days ago, on sounding the walls, I thought that one of them rang hollow. I examined it more carefully, and after a while I discovered a tiny metal knob, similar to the one on the wall door by which we had gained access to the temple. I held my finger on it, and the wall began to move. Then in my eagerness I pushed it with my shoulder, to find myself at the entrance to a large and dark dungeon. I have no time now to describe fully what that dungeon contained, and I cannot say whether it was the store-house of Raspul, or of many generations of priests. But whoever amassed the wealth that lay therein cannot have acquired it honestly in one lifetime, nor yet in twenty, and for what purpose it should have been kept there is incomprehensible. There were wooden boxes filled with gold mohurs, Turkish gold coins, English sovereigns, and even 'spade' guineas; the wood of the boxes in many instances crumbled away with age, and the coins trickling through. Of silver coins there were pagodas, kerans, rupees, and money from almost every country, piled in great heaps in the corners of the chamber. Not a little rare and antique jewellery also, and gems cut, uncut, and engraved; besides pearls representing the produce of Bahrein for a decade or more. I do not attempt to estimate the value of our find, though your father talks of six figures. The intrinsic value is to me nothing. I have as much of this world's goods as I wish for. Your father will, of course, take his share; my share will be divided equally between yourself and your friend the doctor; while the share which belongs by right to Sheik Faris, he refuses to take, and he desires me to say that he gives it all to his 'brother the magician,' to whom it will be of greater use than to himself.
>
> "Ever since we made this wondrous discovery, we have been engaged day and night in packing the treasure, only our three selves and Sedjur being in the secret. The Aeniza, who refused to enter the ruins, are aware that we intend to remove portions of the temple and other parts of the ruins, and so that they shall not suspect the nature of the loads which the camels will take away, we have sewn up the gold and other valuables in small pieces of camel cloth, binding fragments of stones around each package. The statue of the goddess we hope to bring away also; but it is doubtful if there are sufficient camels to carry all the silver. However, we can well spare some of it.
>
> "Sheik Faris has arranged that, in order to avoid all difficulties with the Turkish authorities, he will convey everything across the desert, to a certain small bay in the Gulf, not far from Kuwait, where, he tells me, we shall be able to hire large boats used for shipping smuggled horses, and so get the goods on board our steamer, without any trouble. He and a hundred and fifty horsemen start with the camels to-morrow night; and we, accompanied by Sedjur and fifty men, return at the same time towards Hillah, where we shall pick up the zaptiehs, and ere many days we shall be with you again in Baghdad.
>
> "We must leave Bussorah in the steamer which departs next Monday three weeks, so that we may be off the appointed place at the time at which Faris calculates to arrive there. He assures me that there can be no possibility of failure on his part; for he says that the man who carries Shahzadi's shoe can never fail!
>
> "I can write no more now, as there are still many things to be seen to. It would be well if you were to prepare to leave Baghdad shortly after our arrival. I have every confidence in the noble and generous Faris, whom I hold in the highest esteem. He is now seated in my tent, and bids me remind you of the prophecy of Raspul: *Wealth untold cometh to the man whose mare shall carry the iron with which Shahzadi was shod!*"

"And also," said Edwards, "to the man who recovered the Golden Girdle of the Great Queen."

Updated editions will replace the previous one—the old editions will be renamed.

Creating the works from print editions not protected by U.S. copyright law means that no one owns a United States copyright in these works, so the Foundation (and you!) can copy and distribute it in the United States without permission and without paying copyright royalties. Special rules, set forth in the General Terms of Use part of this license, apply to copying and distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works to protect the PROJECT GUTENBERG™ concept and trademark. Project Gutenberg is a registered trademark, and may not be used if you charge for an eBook, except by following the terms of the trademark license, including paying royalties for use of the Project Gutenberg trademark. If you do not charge anything for copies of this eBook, complying with the trademark license is very easy. You may use this eBook for nearly any purpose such as creation of derivative works, reports, performances and research. Project Gutenberg eBooks may be modified and printed and given away—you may do practically ANYTHING in the United States with eBooks not protected by U.S. copyright law. Redistribution is subject to the trademark license, especially commercial redistribution.

START: FULL LICENSE

THE FULL PROJECT GUTENBERG LICENSE

PLEASE READ THIS BEFORE YOU DISTRIBUTE OR USE THIS WORK

To protect the Project Gutenberg™ mission of promoting the free distribution of electronic works, by using or distributing this work (or any other work associated in any way with the phrase “Project Gutenberg”), you agree to comply with all the terms of the Full Project Gutenberg™ License available with this file or online at www.gutenberg.org/license.

Section 1. General Terms of Use and Redistributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works

1.A. By reading or using any part of this Project Gutenberg™ electronic work, you indicate that you have read, understand, agree to and accept all the terms of this license and intellectual property (trademark/copyright) agreement. If you do not agree to abide by all the terms of this agreement, you must cease using and return or destroy all copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in your possession. If you paid a fee for obtaining a copy of or access to a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work and you do not agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement, you may obtain a refund from the person or entity to whom you paid the fee as set forth in paragraph 1.E.8.

1.B. “Project Gutenberg” is a registered trademark. It may only be used on or associated in any way with an electronic work by people who agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement. There are a few things that you can do with most Project Gutenberg™ electronic works even without complying with the full terms of this agreement. See paragraph 1.C below. There are a lot of things you can do with Project Gutenberg™ electronic works if you follow the terms of this agreement and help preserve free future access to Project Gutenberg™ electronic works. See paragraph 1.E below.

1.C. The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation (“the Foundation” or PGLAF), owns a compilation copyright in the collection of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works. Nearly all the individual works in the collection are in the public domain in the United States. If an individual work is unprotected by copyright law in the United States and you are located in the United States, we do not claim a right to prevent you from copying, distributing, performing, displaying or creating derivative works based on the work as long as all references to Project Gutenberg are removed. Of course, we hope that you will support the Project Gutenberg™ mission of promoting free access to electronic works by freely sharing Project Gutenberg™ works in compliance with the terms of this agreement for keeping the Project Gutenberg™ name associated with the work. You can easily comply with the terms of this agreement by keeping this work in the same format with its attached full Project Gutenberg™ License when you share it without charge with others.

1.D. The copyright laws of the place where you are located also govern what you can do with this work. Copyright laws in most countries are in a constant state of change. If you are outside the United States, check the laws of your country in addition to the terms of this agreement before downloading, copying, displaying, performing, distributing or creating derivative works based on this work or any other Project Gutenberg™ work. The Foundation makes no representations concerning the copyright status of any work in any country other than the United States.

1.E. Unless you have removed all references to Project Gutenberg:

1.E.1. The following sentence, with active links to, or other immediate access to, the full Project Gutenberg™ License must appear prominently whenever any copy of a Project Gutenberg™ work (any work on which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” appears, or with which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” is associated) is accessed, displayed, performed, viewed, copied or distributed:

> This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere in the United States and most other parts of the world at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with

this eBook or online at www.gutenberg.org. If you are not located in the United States, you will have to check the laws of the country where you are located before using this eBook.

1.E.2. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is derived from texts not protected by U.S. copyright law (does not contain a notice indicating that it is posted with permission of the copyright holder), the work can be copied and distributed to anyone in the United States without paying any fees or charges. If you are redistributing or providing access to a work with the phrase “Project Gutenberg” associated with or appearing on the work, you must comply either with the requirements of paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 or obtain permission for the use of the work and the Project Gutenberg™ trademark as set forth in paragraphs 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.3. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is posted with the permission of the copyright holder, your use and distribution must comply with both paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 and any additional terms imposed by the copyright holder. Additional terms will be linked to the Project Gutenberg™ License for all works posted with the permission of the copyright holder found at the beginning of this work.

1.E.4. Do not unlink or detach or remove the full Project Gutenberg™ License terms from this work, or any files containing a part of this work or any other work associated with Project Gutenberg™.

1.E.5. Do not copy, display, perform, distribute or redistribute this electronic work, or any part of this electronic work, without prominently displaying the sentence set forth in paragraph 1.E.1 with active links or immediate access to the full terms of the Project Gutenberg™ License.

1.E.6. You may convert to and distribute this work in any binary, compressed, marked up, nonproprietary or proprietary form, including any word processing or hypertext form. However, if you provide access to or distribute copies of a Project Gutenberg™ work in a format other than “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other format used in the official version posted on the official Project Gutenberg™ website (www.gutenberg.org), you must, at no additional cost, fee or expense to the user, provide a copy, a means of exporting a copy, or a means of obtaining a copy upon request, of the work in its original “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other form. Any alternate format must include the full Project Gutenberg™ License as specified in paragraph 1.E.1.

1.E.7. Do not charge a fee for access to, viewing, displaying, performing, copying or distributing any Project Gutenberg™ works unless you comply with paragraph 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.8. You may charge a reasonable fee for copies of or providing access to or distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works provided that:

- You pay a royalty fee of 20% of the gross profits you derive from the use of Project Gutenberg™ works calculated using the method you already use to calculate your applicable taxes. The fee is owed to the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, but he has agreed to donate royalties under this paragraph to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation. Royalty payments must be paid within 60 days following each date on which you prepare (or are legally required to prepare) your periodic tax returns. Royalty payments should be clearly marked as such and sent to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation at the address specified in Section 4, “Information about donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation.”
- You provide a full refund of any money paid by a user who notifies you in writing (or by e-mail) within 30 days of receipt that s/he does not agree to the terms of the full Project Gutenberg™ License. You must require such a user to return or destroy all copies of the works possessed in a physical medium and discontinue all use of and all access to other copies of Project Gutenberg™ works.
- You provide, in accordance with paragraph 1.F.3, a full refund of any money paid for a work or a replacement copy, if a defect in the electronic work is discovered and reported to you within 90 days of receipt of the work.
- You comply with all other terms of this agreement for free distribution of Project Gutenberg™ works.

1.E.9. If you wish to charge a fee or distribute a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work or group of works on different terms than are set forth in this agreement, you must obtain permission in writing from the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the manager of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark. Contact the Foundation as set forth in Section 3 below.

1.F.

1.F.1. Project Gutenberg volunteers and employees expend considerable effort to identify, do copyright research on, transcribe and proofread works not protected by U.S. copyright law in creating the Project Gutenberg™ collection. Despite these efforts, Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, and the medium on which they may be stored, may contain “Defects,” such as, but not limited to, incomplete, inaccurate or corrupt data, transcription errors, a copyright or other intellectual property infringement, a defective or damaged disk or other medium, a computer virus, or computer codes that damage or cannot be read by your equipment.

1.F.2. LIMITED WARRANTY, DISCLAIMER OF DAMAGES - Except for the “Right of Replacement

or Refund" described in paragraph 1.F.3, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, and any other party distributing a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work under this agreement, disclaim all liability to you for damages, costs and expenses, including legal fees. YOU AGREE THAT YOU HAVE NO REMEDIES FOR NEGLIGENCE, STRICT LIABILITY, BREACH OF WARRANTY OR BREACH OF CONTRACT EXCEPT THOSE PROVIDED IN PARAGRAPH 1.F.3. YOU AGREE THAT THE FOUNDATION, THE TRADEMARK OWNER, AND ANY DISTRIBUTOR UNDER THIS AGREEMENT WILL NOT BE LIABLE TO YOU FOR ACTUAL, DIRECT, INDIRECT, CONSEQUENTIAL, PUNITIVE OR INCIDENTAL DAMAGES EVEN IF YOU GIVE NOTICE OF THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCH DAMAGE.

1.F.3. LIMITED RIGHT OF REPLACEMENT OR REFUND - If you discover a defect in this electronic work within 90 days of receiving it, you can receive a refund of the money (if any) you paid for it by sending a written explanation to the person you received the work from. If you received the work on a physical medium, you must return the medium with your written explanation. The person or entity that provided you with the defective work may elect to provide a replacement copy in lieu of a refund. If you received the work electronically, the person or entity providing it to you may choose to give you a second opportunity to receive the work electronically in lieu of a refund. If the second copy is also defective, you may demand a refund in writing without further opportunities to fix the problem.

1.F.4. Except for the limited right of replacement or refund set forth in paragraph 1.F.3, this work is provided to you 'AS-IS', WITH NO OTHER WARRANTIES OF ANY KIND, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTABILITY OR FITNESS FOR ANY PURPOSE.

1.F.5. Some states do not allow disclaimers of certain implied warranties or the exclusion or limitation of certain types of damages. If any disclaimer or limitation set forth in this agreement violates the law of the state applicable to this agreement, the agreement shall be interpreted to make the maximum disclaimer or limitation permitted by the applicable state law. The invalidity or unenforceability of any provision of this agreement shall not void the remaining provisions.

1.F.6. INDEMNITY - You agree to indemnify and hold the Foundation, the trademark owner, any agent or employee of the Foundation, anyone providing copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in accordance with this agreement, and any volunteers associated with the production, promotion and distribution of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, harmless from all liability, costs and expenses, including legal fees, that arise directly or indirectly from any of the following which you do or cause to occur: (a) distribution of this or any Project Gutenberg™ work, (b) alteration, modification, or additions or deletions to any Project Gutenberg™ work, and (c) any Defect you cause.

Section 2. Information about the Mission of Project Gutenberg™

Project Gutenberg™ is synonymous with the free distribution of electronic works in formats readable by the widest variety of computers including obsolete, old, middle-aged and new computers. It exists because of the efforts of hundreds of volunteers and donations from people in all walks of life.

Volunteers and financial support to provide volunteers with the assistance they need are critical to reaching Project Gutenberg™'s goals and ensuring that the Project Gutenberg™ collection will remain freely available for generations to come. In 2001, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation was created to provide a secure and permanent future for Project Gutenberg™ and future generations. To learn more about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and how your efforts and donations can help, see Sections 3 and 4 and the Foundation information page at www.gutenberg.org.

Section 3. Information about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation is a non-profit 501(c)(3) educational corporation organized under the laws of the state of Mississippi and granted tax exempt status by the Internal Revenue Service. The Foundation's EIN or federal tax identification number is 64-6221541. Contributions to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation are tax deductible to the full extent permitted by U.S. federal laws and your state's laws.

The Foundation's business office is located at 809 North 1500 West, Salt Lake City, UT 84116, (801) 596-1887. Email contact links and up to date contact information can be found at the Foundation's website and official page at www.gutenberg.org/contact

Section 4. Information about Donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

Project Gutenberg™ depends upon and cannot survive without widespread public support and donations to carry out its mission of increasing the number of public domain and licensed works that can be freely distributed in machine-readable form accessible by the widest array of

equipment including outdated equipment. Many small donations ($1 to $5,000) are particularly important to maintaining tax exempt status with the IRS.

The Foundation is committed to complying with the laws regulating charities and charitable donations in all 50 states of the United States. Compliance requirements are not uniform and it takes a considerable effort, much paperwork and many fees to meet and keep up with these requirements. We do not solicit donations in locations where we have not received written confirmation of compliance. To SEND DONATIONS or determine the status of compliance for any particular state visit www.gutenberg.org/donate.

While we cannot and do not solicit contributions from states where we have not met the solicitation requirements, we know of no prohibition against accepting unsolicited donations from donors in such states who approach us with offers to donate.

International donations are gratefully accepted, but we cannot make any statements concerning tax treatment of donations received from outside the United States. U.S. laws alone swamp our small staff.

Please check the Project Gutenberg web pages for current donation methods and addresses. Donations are accepted in a number of other ways including checks, online payments and credit card donations. To donate, please visit: www.gutenberg.org/donate

Section 5. General Information About Project Gutenberg™ electronic works

Professor Michael S. Hart was the originator of the Project Gutenberg™ concept of a library of electronic works that could be freely shared with anyone. For forty years, he produced and distributed Project Gutenberg™ eBooks with only a loose network of volunteer support.

Project Gutenberg™ eBooks are often created from several printed editions, all of which are confirmed as not protected by copyright in the U.S. unless a copyright notice is included. Thus, we do not necessarily keep eBooks in compliance with any particular paper edition.

Most people start at our website which has the main PG search facility: www.gutenberg.org.

This website includes information about Project Gutenberg™, including how to make donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, how to help produce our new eBooks, and how to subscribe to our email newsletter to hear about new eBooks.