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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE SIRDAR'S OATH: A TALE OF THE NORTH-WEST FRONTIER ***

Bertram Mitford

"The Sirdar's Oath"

"A Tale of the North-West Frontier"

Chapter One.

"The Stranger within thy Gates."

"Yer—Kroojer! Kroojer. Go'n get yer whiskers shyved."

"Ere, chaps. 'Ere's old Kroojer!"

And the section of the crowd among whom originated these remarks closed up around the object thereof.

The latter, though clad in the frock-coat of European civilisation, was obviously an Oriental. He was a man of fine presence, tall and dignified, handsome in the aquiline-featured type, and wearing a full beard just turning grey. Hence it will be seen that his resemblance to the world-famed President was so striking as to commend itself at once to the understanding of his molesters.

It was night, and the flare of the street lamps, together with a few impromptu illuminations, lit up the surging, tossing, roaring multitude, which filled to packing point the whole space in front of the Mansion House, each unit of the same bent on shouting himself or herself hoarse; for the tidings of the relief of Mafeking had just been received, and the inauguration of the public delirium was already in full swing. Hats and caps flew in the air by showers, the wearers of silk hats not hesitating to hurl on high their normally cherished and protected headgear, those who did so hesitate being speedily relieved of all responsibility on that point by their obliging neighbours, to the accompaniment of such shouts as "Ooroar for B.P. Good old B.P.," while the strains of "Soldiers of the Queen" rose in leathern-lunged rivalry with those of "The Absent-minded Beggar"—save when, in staccato volleyings of varied timelessness and tunelessness, those of "Rule Britannia" availed to swamp both. Thus the multitude rejoiced, characteristically, therefore, for the most part, roughly.

"Wot cher, myte?" drawled an evil rough, shouldering against the Oriental. "You ortn't to be 'ere. You ort to be in the Trawnsawl, you ort. Why you're Kroojer, you are."

"I sy, Bill!" shrilled a girl to her swain. "Let's shyve 'is whiskers, shall we?"

The pair had exchanged hats, and while the speaker's oily fringe was set-off by a bowler, wide and curly of brim, the ugly face of the other leered red and beery from beneath a vast structure of nodding ostrich plumes.

"Rawther. Come on, cheps. Let's shyve old Kroojer's whiskers!" And reaching over, as a preliminary to that process, he snatched the Oriental's high, semi-conical black cap—the only article of un-European wear about him—from his head, and flung it high in the air, emitting a raucous yell.

At this assault, delivered from behind, the stranger turned, his eyes flashing with resentment and hate. As he did so a violent push, again from behind, sent him staggering, would have brought him to the ground indeed but that the crowd was too dense, and its only effect was to bring him right against the rough who had snatched off his cap. In a moment the long, brown sinewy fingers had shot out and closed round the bull throat of the cad, while with the snarl of a wild beast, the Oriental flashed forth something from his breast pocket. A roar of warning broke from the bystanders, likewise of rage, for these lovers of fair play were virtuously indignant that one well-nigh defenceless man, and a stranger, should protect himself as best he might when set upon by numbers. In a second the weapon was knocked from his hand, and he was violently wrenched back from the man whose throat he had gripped; and well indeed for the latter that such was the case. Then he was hustled and punched and kicked, his beard pulled out

in wisps—the virago who had first instigated the assault, and who fortunately was separated from him by the crowd, struggling and screaming in the language of the slums to be allowed to get at him—only just once.

“Let him alone, cawn’t yer?” cried a voice, that of another woman. “He ain’t Kroojer! ‘E’s a bloomin’ Ingin. Any fool could see that.”

“‘E’s a blanked furriner—it’s all the syme. And didn’t ‘e try to knife my Bill,” retorted the other, making renewed efforts to reach him—and the vocabulary of this young person earned the delighted appreciation of even the toughest of her audience. Then a diversion occurred.

“Myke wy? Oo are you tellin’ of to myke wy?” rose a voice, in angry and jeering expostulation, followed immediately by the sound of a scuffle. The attention of the crowd was diverted to this new quarter, which circumstance enabled the luckless Oriental to gain his feet, and he stood staggering, glaring about him in a frenzy of wrath and bewilderment. Then he was knocked flat again, this time by the pressure of those around.

What followed was worth seeing. Straight through the mass of roughs came upwards of a dozen and a half of another species, in strong and compact order, hitting out on either side of them, scrupulously observing the Donnybrook principle, “When you see a head hit it”—only in the present instance it was a face. Most of these were members of an athletic club, who had been dining generously and had caught the prevailing excitement. They had seen the predicament of the Oriental from afar, and promptly recognised that to effect his rescue would furnish them with just the fun and fight for which they were spoiling.

“Make way, you blackguards. Call yourselves Englishmen, all packing on to one man? What? You won’t? That’ll settle you.”

“That” being a “knock-out” neatly delivered, the recipient, he who had begun the assault. Still crowned with his female companion’s headgear the abominable rough sank to the ground, permanently disabled.

“Here—you, sir—get up. Hope you’re not much the worse,” cried the foremost, dragging the stranger to his feet.

“I thank you, gentlemen,” said the latter, in excellent English. “No, not much, I think.”

“That’s right,” cried the foremost of his rescuers, admiring his pluck. For undoubtedly the stranger was considerably the worse for what he had gone through. His cheek bones were swollen, and one eye was bunged up, and his now tattered beard was matted with blood flowing from a cut on the lip; and as he stood, with somewhat unsteady gait, the forced smile wherewith he had greeted his deliverers changed to a hideous snarl of hate, as his glance wandered to the repulsive and threatening countenances of his late assailants. Here, obviously, was no shrinking, effeminate representative of the East, rather a scion of one of its fine and warrior races, for there was a mingled look of wistfulness and aroused savagery in his eyes as instinctively he clenched and unclenched his defenceless fingers as though they ought to be grasping a weapon.

But the moral effect of the first decisive rush having worn off, the rough element of the crowd, roughest of all just here, began to rally. After all, though they had science, the number of these new arrivals constituted a mere mouthful, so puny was it. Yells, and hoots, and catcalls arose as the surging rabble pressed upon the gallant few, now standing literally at bay. Those in the forefront were pushed forward by the weight of numbers behind, and the pressure was so great that there was hardly room to make free play with those fine, swinging out-from-the-shoulder hits—yet they managed partially to clear a way—and for a few moments, fists, feet, sticks, everything, Teere going in the liveliest sort of free fight imaginable. The while, over the remainder of the packed space, shrill cheers and patriotic songs, and the firing off of squibs and crackers were bearing their own part in making night hideous, independently of the savage rout, here at the top of King William Street.

“Kroojer! Kroojer! ‘Ere’s Kroojer!” yelled the mob, and, attracted by its vociferations, others turned their attention that way. And while his deliverers had their hands very full indeed, a villainous-looking rough reached forward and swung up what looked like a slender, harmless roll of brown paper above the Oriental’s head. Well was it for the latter that this move was seen by one man, and that just in time to interpose a thick malacca cane between his skull and the descending gas pipe filled with lead, which staff, travelling down to the wrist of him who wielded the deadly weapon, caused the murderous cad to drop the same, with a howl, and weird language.

“A good ‘Penang lawyer’ is tough enough for most things,” muttered the dealer of this deft stroke. “Here, brother, take this,” he went on, in an Eastern tongue, thrusting the stick into the stranger’s hand.

The effect was wondrous. The consciousness of grasping even this much of a weapon seemed to transform the Oriental completely. His tall form seemed to tower, his frame to dilate, as, whirling the tough stick aloft, he shrilled forth a wild, fierce Mohammedan war-cry, bounding, leaping, in a very demoniacal possession, charging those nearest to him as though the stick were a long-bladed, keen-edged tulwar. Whirling it in the air he brought it down with incredible swiftness, striking here and there on head and face, while looking around for more to smite. And then the rabble of assailants began to give way, or try to. “Cops” was the cry that now went up, and immediately thereupon a strong posse of the splendid men of the City Police had forced their way to the scene of disturbance—or very nearly.

Crushed, borne along by the swaying crowd, the man who had so effectually aided the distressed Oriental had become separated from his friends. For his foes he cared nothing, and, indeed, these had all they could think of to effect their own retreat, the motive being not so much fear of immediate consequences as the consciousness with many of them that they were desperately wanted by the police in connection with other matters, which would infallibly assert their claims once identity was established. At last, to his relief, he found himself in a side street and outside the crowd.

"You're better 'ere, sir," said a gruff voice, whose owner was contemplating him curiously.

"Yes, rather. I've been in a bit of a breeze yonder."

"So I should say, sir," answered the policeman, significantly. "Thank'ee, sir. Much obliged."

"They were mobbing a stranger, and I and some others went to help him."

"Was it a Hindian gent, sir, with a high black sort of 'at? I seen him go by here not long since."

"Yes. That was the man. Well, I suppose he's all right by now. Good-night, policeman."

"Good-night, sir, and thank'ee, sir."

An hour and a half later one corner of the supper-room in the Peculiar Club was in a state of unwonted liveliness, even for that by no means dull institution, where upwards of a dozen more or less damaged members were consuming devilled bones and champagne.

Damaged, in that bunged up eyes and swelled noses—and here and there a cut lip—were in evidence; but all were in the last stage of cheerfulness.

"Why isn't Raynier here, I wonder?" was asked.

"He? Oh, I expect he went on taking care of that Indian Johnny. He likes those chaps, you know, has to do with them out there. He'll turn up all right—never fear."

"Don't know. Don't like losing sight of him," said another.

"Oh, he'll turn up all right. He knows jolly well how to take care of himself."

But as the night became morning, and the frantic howling of patriotism gone mad rent the otherwise still hours, Raynier did not turn up. Then the revellers and quondam combatants became uneasy—such of them, that is, as were still capable of reflection in any form.

Chapter Two.

The Day After.

Raynier awoke in his club chambers the next morning, feeling, as he put it to himself, exceedingly cheap.

When we say awoke, rather are we expressing a recurring process which had continued throughout the few remaining night hours since, by force of circumstances and the swaying of the crowd, he had become separated from his companions, and had wisely found his way straight to bed instead of to the Peculiar Club. On this at any rate he congratulated himself; and yet hardly any sleep had come his way. The howling of patriotic roysterers had continued until morning light, and, moreover, his head was buzzing—not by reason of last night's revelry, for in such he never got out of hand, but an ugly lump on one side of his forehead, and a swelled eye, reminded him that it is hard to rescue a maltreated stranger from the brutality of a London mob, and emerge unscathed oneself.

"Well, I do look a beauty," he soliloquised as he stood before his glass, surveying the damage. "I shall have a bump the size and colour of a croquet ball for the next fortnight, and an eye to match. How a man of my age and temperament could have cut in with those young asses last night, I can't think. Might have known what the upshot would be. And now I've got to go down to Worthingham to-day. Wonder what nice remark Cynthia will have to make. Perhaps she'll give me the chuck. The fact of my being mixed up in a street row may prove too much for her exceeding sense of propriety." And a faintly satirical droop curled down the corners of the thinker's mouth.

Having fomented his bruises, and tubbed, and otherwise completed his toilet Raynier went down to breakfast, soon feeling immeasurably the better for the process. But in the middle a thought struck him; struck him indeed with some consternation. The malacca cane—the instrument with which he had almost certainly saved the life of the assailed Oriental, and which he had put into the hands of the latter as a weapon. It was gone, and—it was a gift from his *fiancée*.

Apart from such association he was fond of the stick, which was a handsome one and beautifully mounted. How on earth was he to recover it? His initials were engraved on the head; that, however, would furnish but faint clue. How should he find the man whom he had befriended—and even if he did, it was quite possible that the other had lost possession of the stick during the scrimmage. It might or might not find its way to Scotland Yard, but to ascertain this would take time. He could make inquiries at the police stations adjacent to the scene of last night's *émeute*, or advertise, but that too would take time and he was urgently due at the abode of his *fiancée* that very day, for his furlough was rapidly drawing to a close, and his return to India a matter of days rather than of weeks.

Herbert Raynier served his country in the capacity of an Indian civilian, but most of his time of service had been passed in hot Plains stations, engendering an amount of constitutional wear and tear which caused him to look rather more than his actual age, such being in fact nearly through the thirties, but the sallowness of his naturally dark complexion had given way to a healthier bronze since he had come home on furlough five months back. By temperament he was a quiet man, and somewhat reserved, and this together with the fact that his countenance was not characterised by that square-jawed aggressiveness which is often associated in the popular estimation with parts,

led people to suppose, on first acquaintance, that there was not much in him. Wherein they were wrong, although at the present moment there were chances of such latent abilities as he possessed being allowed to stagnate under sheer, easy-going routine: a potentiality which he himself recognised, and that with some concern. Physically he stood about five foot ten in his boots, and was well set up in proportion. He was fond of sport, though not aspiring to anything beyond the average in its achievement, and was not lacking in ideas nor in some originality in the expression of the same.

As he sat finishing his after-breakfast cheroot in the club smoking-room there entered two of his brethren-in-arms of the night before.

"There you are, Raynier, old chap. That's all right. Why didn't you roll up at the Peculiar after the fun? We were all there—Steele and Waring were doosid uneasy about you—thought you'd come to grief, that's why we thought we'd look in early and make sure you hadn't."

"Early?"

"Why, yes. It's only eleven. But I say, you jolly old cuckoo. You *have* got a damaged figurehead."

"Yes, it's a bore," pronounced Raynier, pushing the bell, to order "pegs." "And the worst of it is I've got to go down to the country this afternoon—to an eminently respectable vicarage, too."

"Remedy's easy. Don't go."

"That's no remedy at all. I must."

"Stick a patch over the eye, then."

"But he can't stick a patch over his head as well," said the other.

"You two chaps have come off with hardly a scratch," said Raynier—"and yet you were just as much in the thick of it as I was."

"So we were. But I say, Raynier, I believe it's a judgment on a staid old buffer like you for 'mafeking' around with a lot of lively sparks like us. Ha—ha—that wasn't bad, I say, don't-cher-know. 'Mafeking!' See it? Ah—ha—ha!"

"Oh, go away. It's an outrage. At how many people's hands have you courted destruction by firing that on them this morning?"

"Not many. But it's awfully good, eh, old sportsman? Why I invented it."

"Then you deserve death," returned Raynier. "Oh, Grice, take him away, and drown him, will you; but stay—let him have his 'peg' first—since here it comes."

"Anyone know what became of that interesting stranger?" went on Raynier, after the necessary pause.

"The Indian Johnny? Not much. We all got mixed up in the mob, and what with all the 'bokos' that were hit, and the claret flying, and then the bobbies rushing the lot, none of us knew what had happened to anyone else until we all found ourselves snug and jolly at the Peculiar." And then followed an animated account of wounds and casualties received and doughty deeds effected.

"We thought you were taking care of the Indian Johnny, Raynier," concluded Grice, "and that was why you didn't turn up."

"I wish I knew where to lay finger on the said Indian Johnny," was the rejoinder.

"Why? Was he some big bug?"

"I don't know. But he's got my stick—or had it."

"Rather. And didn't he just lay about with it too. Looked as if he was quite accustomed to that sort of thing."

"The worst of it is I rather value it," went on Raynier. "In fact I'd give a trifle to recover it. Given me, you understand."

"Oh—ah—yes, I understand," said the other, with a would-be knowing wink.

"Why not try the police stations?" suggested the self-styled creator of the above vile pun. "The darkey may have been run in with a lot more for creating a disturbance."

"Or the pawnbrokers," said Grice—"for if it was captured by the enemy, why that honest fellow-countryman would lose no time in taking a bee-line for the nearest pawnshop with it. All that yelling must have been dry work."

"But, I say, old chappie. What a juggins you were to give it him," supplemented the other, sapiently.

"Oh, he didn't know how to use his fists, and the poor devil was absolutely defenceless. And a good 'Penang lawyer' in a row of that kind is a precious deal better than nothing at all."

"The darkey seemed to find it so," said he named Grice. "Why it might have been a sword the way he laid about with it. I bet that chap's good at single-stick. Wonder who he is. Some big Rajah perhaps. I say Raynier, old chap. You'll have some of his following finding you out directly, with no end of lakhs of rupees, as a slight mark of gratitude, and

all that sort of thing. Eh?"

"If so the plunder ought to be divided," cut in the other gilded youth. "We all helped to pull him through, you know."

"All right, so it shall," said Raynier, "when it comes. As to which doesn't it occur to you fellows that 'some big Rajah' is hardly likely to be found frisking around in the thick of an especially tough London crowd all by his little alones? But if he'd find me out only to return my stick it would be a 'mark of gratitude' quite sufficient for present purposes."

"Why don't you buy another exactly like it, old chap?" said Grice, who knew enough about his friend to guess at the real reason of the latter's solicitude on account of the lost article. "Nobody would know the difference."

Here was something of an idea, thought Raynier. But then the mounting and the engraving—that would take time, even if he could get it done exactly like the other, which he doubted. It was not alone on the score of an unpleasant moment with the donor that his mind misgave him. She would be excusably hurt, he reflected, remembering that the thing must have been somewhat costly, and under the circumstances represented a certain amount of self-denial. Decidedly he was in a quandary.

"Well, ta-ta, old chap," said Grice, as the two got up to go. "We'll try and find out something about the Rajah—in fact it's our interest to do so, having an eye to those lakhs of rupees."

"Yes—and let me know when you've made an end of Barker, here, as you're bound to do if he fires off that 'Mafeking' outrage much more."

"Raynier's jealous," said that wag. "I say, don't go firing it off as your own down in the country, Raynier."

"No show for me, because about one hundred thousand people scattered over the British Isles have awoken this morning to invent the same insanity."

Speeding along in the afternoon sunshine, looking out upon the country whirling by, pleasant and green in its rich dress of early summer, Raynier was conscious of a feeling of relief in that he was leaving behind him the heat and dust of London, likewise the racket and uproar of a city gone temporarily mad; albeit a more or less profuse display of bunting in every station the express slid through, notified that the delirium was already spreading throughout the length and breadth of the land. He had the compartment to himself, which was more favourable to the vein of thought upon which he had embarked. When he had arrived home five months previously he had no more notion of returning an engaged man than he had of building a balloon and starting upon a voyage of discovery to Saturn. Yet here he was, and how had it come about? He supposed he ought to feel enraptured—most men of his acquaintance were—or pretended to be—under the circumstances. Yet he was not. How on earth had he and Cynthia Daintree ever imagined that they were suited to go through life together, the fact being that there was no one point upon which they agreed? But now they were under such compact, hard and fast; yet—how had it come about? Her father, the Vicar of Worthingham, had been a sort of trustee of his, long ago, and on his arrival in England had invited him to spend as much of his furlough at that exceedingly pretty country village as he felt inclined. And he had felt inclined, for he knew but few people in England, and the quiet beauty of English rural scenery appealed to his temperament, wherefore, Worthingham Vicarage knew how to account for a good deal of his time, and so did the Vicar's eldest daughter. Here, then, was the answer to his own retrospective question—not put for the first time by any means. Propinquity, opportunity, circumstances and surroundings favourable to the growth and development of such—idiocy—he was nearly saying. All of which points to a fairly inauspicious frame of mind on the part of a man who in half an hour or so more would meet his *fiancée*.

Chapter Three.

"Above Rubies."

"What's the matter, Cynthia?" said the Vicar, looking up from his after-breakfast newspaper, spread out in crumpled irregularity of surface, upon the table in front of him.

"Nothing, father, unless—well, I do wish people would learn to be a little more regular. The world would be so much more comfortable a place to live in."

The Vicar had his doubts upon that subject. However, he only said,—

"Well, it's only once in a way, and won't hurt anybody. And you can't ask a man to stay with you, and then tie him down to rigid hours like a schoolboy."

The time was nine o'clock on the second morning after Herbert Raynier's arrival. It need hardly be said that he was the offender against punctuality.

Cynthia frowned, rattling the crockery upon the tea-tray somewhat viciously.

"Why not? I hate irregularity," she answered. "I should have thought regular habits would have been the first essential in Herbert's department—towards getting on in it, that is."

"Well, he has got on in it, regular habits or not. You can't deny that, my dear, at any rate."

"It delays everything so," went on the grievance-monger. "The servants can't clear away, or get to their work. Herbert knows we have breakfast at half-past eight and now it's after nine, and there's no sign of him. I can't keep the house going on those lines, so it's of no use trying."

"Well, you'll soon be in a position to reform him to your heart's content," said the Vicar with a twinkle in his eye—and there came a grim, set look about the other's rather thin-lipped mouth which augured ill for Raynier's domestic peace in the future.

Cynthia Daintree had just missed being pretty. Her straight features were too coldly severe, and her grey eyes a trifle too steely, but her brown hair was soft and abundant, and there were occasions when her face could light up, and become attractive. She was tall, and had a remarkably fine figure, and as she managed to dress well on somewhat limited resources, the verdict was that she was a striking-looking girl. But she had a temper, a very decided temper—which, it was whispered, was accountable for the fact that now, at very much nearer thirty than twenty, her recent engagement to Herbert Raynier was by no means her first.

Now the offender entered, characteristically careless.

"Morning, Cynthia. Hallo, you look disobliged. What's the row? Morning, Vicar."

This was not the best way of throwing oil upon the troubled sea, but then the whole thing was so incomprehensible to Raynier. He could not understand how people could make a fuss over such a trifle as whether one man ate a bit of toast, and played the fool with a boiled egg, half an hour sooner or half an hour later. There was no train to catch, no business of vital importance to be transacted, here in this sleepy little country place. His *fiancée* could have had precious little experience of the graver issues of life if that sort of thing disturbed her.

"You've only yourself to thank if everything's cold," answered Cynthia, snappishly.

"I don't mind—even if there isn't anything to get cold. Feeding at this end of the day isn't in my line at all. I hardly ever touch anything between *chota hazri* and tiffin over there."

"Well, but over here you might try to be a little more punctual."

"Too old. Besides, I'm on furlough," returned Raynier, maliciously teasing. It was the only way of veiling his resentment. He did not take kindly to being perpetually found fault with, and still less so the first thing in the morning. "Don't you agree with me, Vicar? A man on furlough should be allowed a few venial sins?"

"Oh, I think so," said Mr Daintree, with a laugh. And then he began to discuss the war news in that morning's paper, which soon led round to the events wherewith our story opens.

"That must have been after the fashion of our old Town and Gown rows at Oxford," said the Vicar. "They are a thing of the past now, I'm told."

"And a good thing too," struck in his daughter. "What horrid savage creatures men are. Never happy unless they are fighting."

"Don't know. I much prefer running away," said Raynier.

"Pity you didn't carry out your preference. Then you wouldn't have come down here looking such a sight," with a glance at his somewhat disfigured visage.

"And there'd have been one Oriental the less in the world. Phew! that was a vicious mob if ever there was one. By the way there's a saying that if you rescue anybody he's bound to do you a bad turn. Wonder if it'll hold good here, and if in the order of fate that chap and I will meet again out there. Stranger things have come off."

"Only in books," said Cynthia, contemptuously.

"No—in real life. I could tell you of at least three remarkable if not startling circumstances of the kind that have come to my knowledge, but I won't, for two reasons—one that they wouldn't interest you—two, that you wouldn't believe a word of them."

"What are you going to do to-day, Herbert?" said the Vicar.

"Fish. You coming with me, Cynthia?"

"No."

"Meaning I'm not fit to be seen with," answered Raynier, interpreting her glance.

"If you will go getting yourself disfigured in common street brawls you must expect to suffer for it. So low, I call it."

She was in a horrible humour that morning—so much was evident. Raynier wondered how she would receive the news of the loss of the malacca cane, and felt steeled to tell her about it then and there. In another moment he would have done so when an interruption occurred. A girl's voice came singing down the passage, and its owner burst into the room.

"Hallo, Herbert. You're jolly late again. I expect you have been catching it," with a glance at the thunder-cloud on her elder sister's face. This was the Vicar's youngest daughter, aged nineteen; there were two between her and the other, both married, likewise sons, helping to buttress up the Empire in divers colonies.

"Right you are. I have. I'm going to try for a trout or two, Silly. Feel like coming along?"

"I sha'n't if you call me that," answered the girl, with a shade of her sister's expression coming over her face; "that," however, not being an epithet but a teasing abbreviation of her own name—Sylvia.

"All right. I withdraw the Silly."

"Then I'll go. But isn't Cynthia going?"

"She says I'm too ugly just at present," returned Raynier, tranquilly. "And I believe I am."

"Yes. You're rather a sight," with a deliberate glance at his damaged figurehead. "Never mind. There's no one to see us here. Where are we going?"

"How about the hole below Blackadder Bridge?"

"That's it," returned Sylvia. "There was a regular 'boil' on there the day before you came, but that was in the evening. I took out seven trout in twenty-five minutes. Then the 'boil' stopped and you couldn't move a fish. But we'd better start soon."

"All right. I'll go and get my rod."

The Vicar went out on to the lawn to see them off, and smoke his after-breakfast pipe.

"Cynthia, my dear," he called. "Come outside and walk up and down a bit."

She made some excuse about seeing to the things being cleared away. However she soon joined him.

"That nest of young thrushes is gone," he said, peering into the ivy which hid the garden wall. "Some cat has found them, I expect. By the way, Cynthia, do you really intend to marry Herbert Raynier?"

"Why, what on earth do you mean, father?" she answered, resentment and astonishment being about evenly divided in her tone.

"Precisely what I say, dear—no more and no less. Because if you don't you're going the right way to work to let him see it."

"If I don't. But I do—of course I do. I can't think what you're driving at."

"Oh, it's simple enough. Couldn't you manage now and then, if only for a change, to give him a civil word? Men don't like to be perpetually found fault with and hauled over the coals," pronounced the Vicar, speaking with some feeling, moved thereto by sundry vivid recollections of his own, for he was a widower. Cynthia coloured.

"But they require it—and—it's only for their good," she answered.

"No deadlier motive could be adduced," returned her father, drily. "Because, you see, if you use the whip too much they're apt to kick. And I descry symptoms of such a tendency on the part of Herbert I thought I'd give you a hint, that's all. It would be a pity to lose him. His position is excellent and his prospects ditto; besides, he's a thoroughly good fellow into the bargain."

The pool beneath Blackadder Bridge was wide enough for a rod on each side, so that neither interfered with the other, but Raynier and his future sister-in-law had met with scant sport. The surroundings, however, were lovely: the soft roll of the wooded hills resounding with the joyous shout of the cuckoo, the blue haze of spring beneath the cloudless sky, and meadows spangled with myriad butter cups; while, hard by, skipping perkily in and out of their knob-like nest against the hoary mossiness of the buttressed bridge, a pair of water-ouzels took no count whatever of their human disturbers. The bleating of young lambs was in the air, mingling with the tuneful murmur of the brown water purling out from the breadth of the deep pool into a miniature rapid.

"Well, you two? What have you got to show for yourselves?"

Raynier looked up, almost startled, so amazed was he. For the voice was Cynthia's—and it was quite pleasant, even affectionate. And there was Cynthia herself, looking exceedingly attractive in her plain, and therefore tasteful, country attire. In her hand was a basket.

"I thought I'd bring you something better for lunch than those dry old sandwiches," she said, smilingly, as she proceeded to unpack its contents. And Raynier, wondering, thought, could this be the same Cynthia whom he had last seen, acid and disagreeable, who, indeed, had scarcely had a civil word to throw to him since his arrival.

"Beastly bad luck," screamed Sylvia, from the other side, reeling in her line, preparatory to coming over to join in the lunch.

This proved quite enjoyable. What on earth had happened to Cynthia between then and breakfast time, thought Raynier. No trace of acidity was there about her now. Her manner was soft, indeed affectionate, and she looked up into his disfigured countenance quite delightfully, instead of turning from it in aversion as heretofore. Why on earth couldn't she be like this always, he thought regretfully, feeling softened and relenting, under the combined influence of the soothing surroundings and an excellent lunch.

In the afternoon sport mended, and more than once a "boil" came on the water, for a few minutes only, but so lively while it lasted that they took out trout almost with every cast, and then he noticed how carefully in the background Cynthia kept, and when he hung up his cast in that confounded elder tree just as the rise began, she it was who came to the rescue of his impatience, and so deftly and quickly disentangled the flies. Why on earth could not she

always be like that? And then, during the two-mile walk home together in the glowing beauty of the cloudless evening there was simply no comparison between the delightful attractiveness of this woman, and the frowning, shrewish scold of the opening of the day, and again and again he thought,—“If only she were always like this!”

Chapter Four.

A Timely Reconsideration.

For a few days matters ran smoothly enough. The weather was lovely, ideal May weather, in fact, and Raynier keenly appreciated the soft beauty of this typical English landscape, seen at its best at the loveliest time of the year—the fresh green of the foliage and the yellow-spangled meadows; the cool lanes, shaded with hawthorn blossoms; the snug farmhouses with their blaze of glowing flower-beds and the background of picturesque ricks; the faint hum of the mill at the end of the village, and the screech of swifts, skirring and wheeling round the church tower, seen beyond the wall of the Vicarage garden. Such homely sights and sounds appealed to him the more by contrast to the brassy skies and baked aridity for which he would so soon be bound to exchange them. For his furlough was drawing very near its end.

Strange that, under the circumstances, it should be almost entirely this that constituted his regret. Cynthia seemed to forget her chronic ill-temper, and became quite affectionate; yet the recollection of her outbursts remained. Even when at her best Raynier could not for the life of him rid his mind of such recollections. That sort of nature does not change, he told himself, and the prospect of spending his days with the life-long accompaniment of such was as a very weight. And his was not one of those easy-going, quickly-forgiving dispositions; far from it.

For one circumstance, as time went on, he felt devoutly thankful, although at first he had reproached her with it, and that was that Cynthia was not of a demonstrative temperament, and to this extent the necessity of make-believe was spared him. He observed, too, in the course of their conversations she seldom spoke of the future, or dwelt upon their life together, and, observing it, he more than met her half-way; and as they went about together, both in speech and demeanour they were more like two people of very recent and ordinary acquaintance than a betrothed couple whom a few days more were to separate by nearly half the width of the globe.

At the actual state of things the Vicar, for his part, shrewdly guessed, but being a sensible man forebode to interfere. Cynthia was quite old enough to manage her own affairs, and so too was Raynier. Possibly, when the thing was irrevocable they would hit it off together as well as most people did under the circumstances, which, to be sure, was not saying much. Cynthia, with her faults, had her good points, and of Raynier he entertained a very high opinion. It would turn out right enough, he decided, but if he had any misgiving, the Vicar was forced to own to himself that it was not on behalf of his daughter.

“Curious thing that will of old Jervis Raynier’s,” he said one day, when he and his son-in-law elect were walking up and down smoking their pipes. “He left a good deal, and all to a girl who was hardly any relation at all. You only come in after her.”

“Which is tantamount to not at all. But the same holds good of myself in the matter of relationship. I’m only a distant cousin—so distant as hardly to count.”

“You’re a Raynier, at any rate. But she—By the way, do you ever think about it, Herbert? My advice to you is not to. The chances are too slight. The girl is young, they tell me, and attractive. She’s bound to marry, and then where do you come in?”

“Nowhere, unless I were to marry her myself,” laughed Raynier. “But that’s scratched now. By the bye—who is she, Vicar—?”

“Herbert! Oh, there you are,” shrilled the voice of Sylvia at this juncture, followed by its owner, somewhat hot, and armed with two trout-rods. “They told me you had gone on, and I got half-way down the village before I found out you hadn’t. Here’s your rod. Come along. We’re losing the best part of the morning.”

There was no gainsaying the crisp decisiveness of these orders, and with an apology to the Vicar, he started off. He was forced to own to himself that these expeditions with the younger girl constituted his best times. It never occurred to Cynthia to be jealous of her sister, not in the ordinary sense, although once or twice she was rather acid on the subject of his preferring so much of the latter’s society. The fact was, Sylvia was lacking in feminine attractions, being plain and somewhat angular. But she was always lively and good-natured, and to that extent a positive relief from the other, albeit an effective foil to her in looks.

Sunday had come round, and Cynthia had got up in a bad temper—we have observed that upon some people the first day of the week has that effect—consequently, when Raynier hinted at the possibility of his not going to church it exploded. The idea of such a thing! Why, of course he must go, staying at the Vicarage as he was. What would be said in the parish?

“But it didn’t matter what was said in the parish last Sunday. You wouldn’t let me come then because I was too ugly,” he urged, with a mischievous wink at Sylvia.

“Well, so you were, but your face is nearly all right again now,” answered Cynthia, briskly, and with acerbity, for she had no sense of fun.

“Not it. You’ll see it’ll keep all the choir boys staring, and they can’t warble with their heads cocked round at right

angles to the rest of them."

Sylvia spluttered.

"All the more reason why you should come, Herbert," she said. "I want to see that. It'll be good sport."

"If you were a boy you'd be a typical parson's son, Silly," he laughed.

"Shut up. I'll throw something at you if you call me that."

"Do, and you'll keep up the part," he returned.

Worthingham Church was in close resemblance to a thousand or so other village churches of its size and circumstance, in that it was old and picturesque, and gave forth the same flavour of mould and damp stones. There was the same rustic choir with newly-oiled heads and clattering boots and skimpy surplices, singing the same hackneyed hymns, and the Vicar's sermon was on the same level of prosiness, not that he could not have done better, but he had long since ceased to think it worth while taking the trouble. But Cynthia Daintree, seated in the front pew, well gowned and tastefully hatted, and withal complacently conscious of the same, was the presiding goddess, at whom the rustics aforesaid never seemed tired of furtively staring—in awe, which somewhat outweighed their admiration—therein well-nigh overlooking the discoloured countenance of her *fiancé*.

"Cynthia always looks as if she'd bought up the whole show," pronounced Sylvia, subsequently and irreverently.

Raynier had answered one or two inquiries after his "bicycle accident"—Cynthia having deftly contrived to let it be understood, though not in so many words, that such was the nature of his mishap—and they were re-entering the garden gate. Suddenly she said,—

"Where's your stick, Herbert? The malacca one. Why, you haven't used it at all this time."

It was all up now, he thought. As a matter of fact his main reason for endeavouring to avoid going to church that morning was that it would be one opportunity the less for her to miss that unlucky article.

"No, I haven't. The fact is I've lost it."

"Lost it? Oh, Herbert!"

She looked so genuinely hurt that he felt almost guilty.

"Yes. I'm awfully sorry, Cynthia. I wouldn't have lost it for anything, but even as it is I'm sure to get it back again. I'm having inquiries made, and offering rewards, in short doing all I can do. It'll turn up again. I'm certain of that."

"But—how did you lose it, and where?"

He told her how; that being a detail he had purposely omitted in previous narration of the incident. It was but frowningly received.

"I didn't think you would attach so little value to anything I had given you, and yet I might have known you better."

What is there about the English Sunday atmosphere that is apt to render contentious people more quarrelsome still, and those not naturally contentious—well, a little prickly? Raynier felt his patience ebbing. She was very unreasonable over the matter, and, really—she was quite old enough to have more sense.

"I don't think you're altogether fair to me, Cynthia," he answered, his own tone getting rather short. "The thing was unavoidable, you see. Unless you mean you would rather the man's brains had been knocked out by that bestial mob than that I should have given him some means of defending himself. I value the stick immensely, and am doing all I can to recover it, but I should have thought even you would hardly have valued it at something beyond the price of a man's life."

"Only a blackamoor's," she retorted, now white and tremulous with anger.

"Sorry I can't agree with you," he answered shortly, for he was thoroughly disgusted. "I have seen rather too much of that sort of 'blackamoor,' as you so elegantly term it, not to recognise that he, like ourselves, has his place and use in his own part of the world. I repeat, I am as sorry as you are the stick should have been lost, but I should have thought that, under the circumstances, no woman—with the feelings of a woman—would have held me to blame."

"That's right. Sneer at me; it's so manly," she retorted, having reached the tremulous point of rage. "But why didn't you tell me of it at first? Rather underhand, wasn't it?"

"Oh, no. I don't deal in that sort of ware, thanks. I did not tell you, solely out of consideration for your feelings. I had hoped the thing might have been recovered by this time—then I would have told you. And look here, Cynthia. Would it surprise you to learn that I am getting more than a little sick of this sort of thing. I am not accustomed to being found fault with and hectoring every minute of the day. In fact, I'm too old for it, and much too old ever to grow used to it. And since I've been down here this time there's hardly a moment you haven't been setting me to rights and generally finding fault with me. Well, if that's the order of the day now, what will it be if we are to spend our lives together? Really, I think we'd better seriously reconsider that programme."

She looked at him. Just her father's warning. But she was too angry for prudent counsel to prevail.

"Do you mean that?" she said, breathing quickly.

“Certainly I do. It is not too late to warn you that mine is not the temperament to submit to perpetual dictation.”

“Very well, then. It is your doing, your choice, remember.” And turning from him she passed into the house.

Chapter Five.

Murad Afzul, Terror.

Peaks—jagged and lofty, peaks—stark and pointed, cleaning up into the unclouded but somewhat brassy blue. Rock-sides, cleft into wondrous, criss-cross seams; loose rocks again, scattering smoother slopes of shale, where the white gypsum streaks forced their way through. Beneath—far beneath—winding among these, a mere thread—the white dust of a road. Of vegetation none, save for coarse, sparse grass bents, and here and there a sorry attempt at a pistachio shrub. A great black vulture, circling on spreading wing, over this chaos of cliff and chasm, of desolation and lifelessness, turns his head from side to side and croaks; for experience tells him that its seeming lifelessness is but apparent.

“Ya, Allah! and are we to wait here until the end of the world? In truth, brother, we had better seek to serve some other chief.”

Thus one dirty-white-clad figure to another dirty-white-clad figure—both resembling each other marvellously. The same bronze visage, the same hooked nose and rapacious eyes, the same jetty tresses on each side of the face, and the same long and shaggy beard, characterised these two no less than the score and a half other precisely similar figures lying up among the interstices of this serrated ridge, watching the way beneath. The dirty-white turbans had been laid aside in favour of a conical dust-coloured *kulla*, the neutral hue of which headgear blended with the sad tints of the surrounding rocks and stones.

“I know not, brother,” rejoined the second hook-nosed son of the wilderness. “Yet it seems that since the *Sirkar* (Note 1) has been changed at Mazaran, a great change too has come over our father the Nawab.”

“Nawab!” repeated the first speaker, with disgust. “Nawab! How can our chief take such a dirty title, only fit for swine of Hindu idolators. It is an insult on the part of the accursed Feringhi to offer such a title to a freeborn son of the mountains; and such a one as the chief of the Gularzai. Nawab!” and the speaker spat from between his closed teeth, with a sort of hiss of contempt.

“Yet, if it serves to place him higher in the estimation of the Feringhi and of the tribes our neighbours, what matter?” returned the other. “The Nawab Mahomed Mushim Khan sounds great in the ears of such.”

The sneering laugh which rattled from the other’s throat was checked, for now the attention of all became concentrated on a cloud of dust coming into view, and advancing along the thread of road winding beneath. Eagerly now, thirty pairs of fierce eyes were bent on that which moved beneath their gaze—a passing of men, mounted and armed, to the number of about three score; and fierce brows bent in hatred, as they scowled upon the representative of that irresistible Power, which, with all its failings and errors of judgment, yet in the long run held in salutary restraint the excesses of their wild and predatory race. For this was the escort of the British Political Agent, returning from an official visit to their tribal chieftain.

A squad of Levy Sowars rode in front, and a larger one of Native Cavalry, the official himself, with two or three attendants being between; the servants with camp necessities and furniture bringing up the rear, yet taking apparent care to keep somewhat close upon the heels of the armed escort. Upon this array the wild hillmen gazed with many a muttered curse. The time for that might come, in the orderings of Allah and His Prophet; but it was not to-day—was the thought that possessed several of their minds.

The cavalcade held on its way, winding round a high precipitous spur, to reappear again further on, small and distant, then to vanish entirely where a great *tangi* cleft the heart of the mountain. And look! Below, once more, in the direction whence it had first appeared, whirled another cloud of dust, insignificant this time compared with before.

The eyes of the marauders gleamed from beneath shaggy brows, and a stir ran through their numbers. Brown, claw-like hands gripped the barrels of firearms—no antiquated, if picturesque jezails these, but Lee-Metford magazine rifles up to date, save for a few Martinis—while tulwars were half drawn from their scabbards, and gazed at with lovingly murderous graze ere being replaced again. Yet the group of figures which emerged into view on the road beneath was not formidable, consisting in fact of but four human beings.

Two were mounted, and two on foot, and between them they were driving several pack animals, laden to their fullest capacity. At sight of these, the band, all its tactics prearranged, moved down from its eyrie-like lurking place, dividing, as it did so, into three.

Chand Lall, general trader, who was mounted, and his two assistants who were afoot, were uneasy, and the former was secretly cursing his own avarice which had prevented him from purchasing an extra pack animal or two, which would have enabled him and his possessions to have kept beneath the wing of the Political Agent’s escort, whereas now he was very considerably behind the tail of the same. But the fourth of the group, the other mounted man, was quite cool; indeed, it looked as though he actually preferred the solitude of their wild surroundings—and perhaps he did.

“Be at peace, brother,” this one was saying. “Are we not safe, for we are in the hand of Allah? Wherefore then this hurry? Nothing can be but what is written. But there, I forget, my memory groweth old with its owner. Thou art not of

the number of true believers." And he deliberately and leisurely dismounted, as though discovering a sudden lameness in the near foreleg of his horse.

"That is all very well, Ibrahim, who art a Moslem," said the fat Hindu, whose distressed impatience was painfully manifest. "None will harm thee. But I—"

The words died in his throat, choked there by the sight of a number of stealing figures, flitting down from rock to rock. The countenance of the unfortunate trader grew a dirty leaden white. Already the road before him was barred. Wildly he gazed around. That behind him was barred too. His companion, quite unmoved, was still examining the hoof of his horse. High overhead, a speck in the ether, above the gnomelike crags, the black vulture still turned his head from side to side and croaked.

Already the marauders had seized the pack animals. The two young men who drove them had fallen flat and were grovelling and wailing for mercy. Rough hands had flung the Hindu from his saddle, and he lay on the ground, moaning with fear, and quaking in every limb, as he stared frantically at the dull flash of razor-edged tulwars, brandished over him, the savage, hairy faces glowering down upon him, fell and threatening with religious hate and racial contempt.

"Rise up, fat dog," said one of the marauders, kicking him. "Rise up, and come with us."

"Mercy, Sirdar Sahib, and suffer me to go my way," whined the terrified man, as he tremblingly obeyed the first clause of the injunction. "I am but a poor trader, but have ever been generous to such as ye. Take therefore of my poor store, yet leave me a little that I may begin life again."

The leader of the band laughed evilly and spat.

"Thy poor store! Ha! We will take all and afterwards skin thee of yet more, thou usurer, who comest into our country but to leave it poorer."

"Not so, Sirdar Sahib," expostulated the trader, plucking up a little courage by virtue of the name he was about to invoke. "What I have, I have from the Nawab—the Nawab Mushîm Khan—given in honest trade. Shall I then suffer ill-treatment at the Nawab's very gates?"

"The Nawab. Ha—ha!" jeered the leader, spitting again. "Walk, fat infidel dog. Dost hear?"

And a buffet on the side of the head, which nearly felled him, convinced the unfortunate trader that this was no time for further expostulation; and, accordingly, panting, wheezing, stumbling, he strove his painful utmost to keep pace up the steep hill with his perilous and unwelcome escort. His attendants were undergoing but little ill-treatment. They were young and lithe, and gave no trouble; moreover, they had little or nothing to lose, so feared nothing. Ibrahim, who happened to be a *mullah*, and whom the other had subsidised for the supposed protection of his own company, to whom no violence whatever had been offered, was leading his steed tranquilly over the rough, stony slope, chatting and laughing familiarly with the band; and at the sight the unhappy Chand Lall's soul grew more bitter within him. Why had he been so ready to accept this plausible rogue's benevolent sanctity, he thought, as now fifty instances occurred to him of delays, slight at the time, but on colourable pretext, to retard him more and more—to increase subtly and imperceptibly more and more the distance between him and the armed force with which he had obtained permission to travel. Bitterly he reproached himself. He saw through it now—in fact, he did not believe that Ibrahim was a *mullah* at all; but *mullah* or not, certain it was that he was the confederate and decoy of the ferocious and predatory gang who had so daringly swooped down upon himself and his goods, almost within call of the Political Agent's armed escort.

On they fared, higher and higher, until at length, utterly exhausted, Chand Lall realised that he lay powerless and beyond all reach or hope of aid in one of the fastnesses of his captors, away in the most savage and frowning recesses of the mountain world. And then something in the very hopelessness of it all as he saw the fruits of a long and toilsome expedition utterly thrown away, moved the wretched man to a sort of desperation. He threatened.

"See you," he said, "I am not a man who can be smuggled away and no inquiries made. I am not a man who can be ill-treated with impunity. I am a man of consequence, and of importance to the *Sirkar*. I am a friend of the Nawab—"

He stopped short. There was that in the look of the leader—to whom he had addressed these words—which seemed to freeze the half delirious desperation within him.

"A friend of the Nawab! Ha—ha! Hearken, O man of consequence and of importance to the *Sirkar*," bending down a savage face to note and revel in the terror he was about to strike into his victim. "Is it possible that thou hast never yet heard the name of Murad Afzul? Is it possible, I say? Ya, Allah! is it possible?"

Note 1. Government ordinarily. In this instance the representative of Government.

Chapter Six.

The Victim.

The effect of his mere name upon his prisoner answered the robber chief's own question, nor had the latter any reason to feel disappointed over the method of its reception. The wretched trader's countenance became ghastly, and his mouth fell open, while the perspiration oozed from him at every pore. He would about as soon have fallen into the power of the Enemy of mankind.

"Mercy, Sirdar Sahib. Take what I have and suffer me to depart," was all he could articulate, slobberingly.

Murad Afzul laughed, and a harsh evil laugh it was. He was a fine-looking man, tall and with good features, which would have been pleasing, but for the quick, predatory look, and the savage scowl which would cloud them upon very slight provocation.

"Tell me, fat dog," he said. "Canst thou name one of thy sort who fell into my hands and came forth again?"

The trader fairly howled with terror, for this was just where his position came home to him. If there was one thing for which this Murad Afzul and his band were known and dreaded, it was for their absolute mercilessness. Mere death was the greatest mercy their victims could expect. True, there were some who had come forth alive, but so hideously maimed and shattered that they had better have been dead, and with awful tales to tell of torture and horror either witnessed or undergone. Indeed, such a scourge had these freebooters become, that strong pressure was brought to bear upon the chief of the Gularzai, and in the result these outrages had ceased, in recognition of which prompt compliance Mahomed Mushim Khan had been invested by the Indian Government with the title of Nawab—somewhat to the contempt of these fierce mountaineers, as we heard them express it.

With all of this was the unfortunate Hindu so well acquainted that he would never have dreamed of trusting his person or possessions in these mountain solitudes, but that he, like others, was under the impression that Murad Afzul had taken himself and his depredations clean away to the territory of some other potentate, and the possibility of that redoubted outlaw taking advantage of the advent of a new Political Agent to break out afresh had escaped him altogether.

Now, under the direction of their chief, the freebooters were rifling the packs—and at first found not much in them, for they were for the most part stuffed out with dummy matter, to convey the idea that their owner had done so bad a trade as not to be worth plundering. But everything that could possibly conceal a coin was promptly laid open by the expeditious process of a blow with a stone hammer or the slash of a tulwar, and soon a goodly pile of rupees lay heaped up ready for division. Murad Afzul grinned with delight.

"God is good," he said, rubbing his hands. "The spoils of the infidel hath he delivered to the true believer. Yet, O fat pig, it is not enough. Ha! not enough."

"Not enough? But it is my all, Sirdar Sahib; yea, my all," groaned the trader.

"Wah-wah! but I am poor, and have not the wherewith to start life afresh."

"It is not enough," repeated the other, the glitter of his eyes and the fell meaning of his tone becoming terrible in its significance. "Ten thousand rupees must be added to it."

"Ten thousand! How can I find such a sum, Sirdar Sahib, I who am but a poor man? I have not a tenth of it."

"Now art thou blowing up the fire which shall consume thine own limbs, yet slowly, thou foul dog. Wait. Thou shalt taste how it feels."

At a signal the prisoner was seized and bound. The while, others were heating an old gun-barrel in a fire which had been kindled when they first halted. Then they brought it towards him. At the sight the miserable wretch uttered a loud scream of terror and despair.

"Squeal louder, pig," jeered Murad Afzul. "There is none to hear thee save these rocks, and they are accustomed to such sounds. Ha! ha!"

The miserable man struggled frantically, promising to pay anything if they would refrain from torturing him. But the lust of cruelty, now awakened in those ferocious natures, would not be allayed, and the hot iron was laid hissing to the thigh of their victim, whose frenzied and agonising yells rang in deafening and fiend-like echoes from the surrounding rocks, grim and pitiless as though rejoicing in the act of savagery upon which they glared down. Then Murad Afzul, too experienced in such matters to prolong the agony unduly, made a sign that it should cease.

"How likest thou that, pig?" he said. "Did not thy fat frizzle? I have a mind to send a slice of it to the swine-eating Feringhi at Mazaran. Did it hurt, the kiss of the hot iron? Yet that was but the beginning. How would it feel lasting the whole day. Think, for thou wilt now have a little time."

It was the hour of prayer, and now the whole band, with their shoes off, and their chuddas spread on the ground, facing in the direction of Mecca, were going through the prescribed prostrations and formulae of the Moslem ritual. Ibrahim the *mullah*, a little in front of the rest: led the devotions, intoning each strophe in a nasal, droning key, the others ranged behind him in rows, now kneeling, now rising, responded somewhat after the manner of the recital of a litany, but perhaps, to an outside observer, the absolute and wholehearted devoutness of their demeanour would have constituted the strangest part of it. Not a shadow of compunction had they for the hideous act of barbarity in which they had a moment ago indulged, and which they would almost certainly repeat. Why should they, indeed? What was the agony of an infidel dog more or less to them or to Heaven? Why, the very cries of such must be as music in the ears of the latter. So they continued laying this brick in the edifice of their salvation; and, having concluded, resumed their shoes and turned their attention once more to their victim.

The latter, the while, had been thinking if haply some hope of rescue might not occur to him. The Sahib had known of his presence, for he himself had given him permission to travel under his protection. Would he not miss him, and, as a consequence, order a body of men to ride back to his rescue? These would assuredly come upon the scene of his capture and follow upon his tracks. But—would they? The Levy Sowars were drawn from the same region and were of the same faith as his captors, of whom they would know the strength and resource, and with whom they would

certainly avoid engaging in a fight on behalf of such as he. Besides—and again Chand Lall had reason to curse his own stinginess, in that he had been more than “near” in bestowing the expected *dasturi* upon the Sahib’s chuprassis, wherefore these would infallibly take care that no suspicion of his disaster should reach their master’s ears. Further, was it not a matter of absolute certainty that, rather than allow his rescue, Murad Afzul would give orders for his throat to be cut from ear to ear? No, there was no hope—not a ray.

“Talk we again of the rupees,” began Murad Afzul. “I am moved to require double the amount now, but Allah is merciful, and shall I be less so? I will be content with ten thousand. Wherefore, O dog, thou shalt write and deliver to Ibrahim, our brother—who is holy and learned—a letter which shall cause those who guard the fruits of thine avarice and usury, to pay over to him that sum. Yet think not to write aught that shall render this void, for Ibrahim is learned as well as holy, and can read in many tongues. Further, should he not return to us, thine own fate shall be even as though thou wert already writhing in the lowest depths of Jehanum.”

“It were better, Sirdar Sahib, that I myself travelled to Mazaran to procure it, for our people are distrustful of strangers.” Murad Afzul laughed evilly. “But we are doubly so, O worshipper of debauched idols,” he said. “So thou wouldst fain fare forth thyself? Ha, ha, then how long would it be before we beheld thee again, or one single one of the ten thousand rupees?”

“Why, as soon as I could collect them, and to do that I would spare no pains, no trouble, Sirdar Sahib, although it would leave me a poor man, and in debt for life,” replied Chand Lall, eagerly thinking, poor fool, that his jailor was going to set him free on so slender a security as his bare word. But the shout of laughter that went up from all who heard quickly undeceived him.

“Who having a caged bird of value turns that bird loose to stretch his wings in the hope that it will return to its cage?” said the chief. “Thou art to us a caged bird of value, thou eater of money—wherefore we keep thee until thou hast no further value. Show him,” he added, turning to his followers.

In obedience to this somewhat mysterious mandate one of them turned and dived into a cleft, producing therefrom an object which he gleefully unrolled, and held up before the gaze of the horrified captive—and well, indeed, might the latter quake, for it was the skin of a man.

It had been most deftly taken off. Face, head, ears—everything in fact. Staring at the horrid thing, Chand Lall felt his very marrow melt within him.

“See,” said Murad Afzul. “He did not die, even then. He lived to taste of fire and boiling ghee.” And the rest of the band laughed like fiends, but the wretched Hindu covered his face and shook.

“Well mayst thou tremble,” went on his pitiless tormentor. “For should Ibrahim return without ten thousand rupees, or not return at all, by the setting of the third sun, thine own skin shall dry beside that one.”

The victim uttered a loud cry.

“The third sun! Why, Sirdar Sahib, that will be impossible. I can never have so much money collected in so short a time. Make it the sixth sun.”

Murad Afzul consulted a moment with his followers. Then he said,—

“Allah is merciful, and so, too, will I be. I will say then by the setting of the fifth sun after this one. Yet try not to play us any false trick, thou dog, for it will be useless, and for what it will mean to thyself, look on yonder and be assured,” and, as though to emphasise the chief’s words, he who held the horrible human skin shook it warningly and suggestively in the face of the thoroughly terrified hostage.

The Political Agent, having dined well in his evening camp, was going over some official papers by the light of the tent lamp.

“Oh, Sunt Singh,” he said, looking up as a chuprassi entered, “what became of that trader who was with us? I didn’t see him when we first camped.”

“*Huzoor*, he is camped just below the sowars’ tents, I believe.”

“Yes? You may go,” and the official resumed what he was doing, without further thought for the luckless Chand Lall, who certainly was not where the lying chuprassi had said.

Chapter Seven.

A Surprise.

Herbert Raynier ran lightly up the steps of his verandah, feeling intensely satisfied with himself and things in general.

Though summer, the air was delightfully balmy, and the glow of the sunset reddening the heads of the mountains surrounding the basin in which lay Mazaran, was soothing and grateful to the eye. The bungalow was roomy and commodious, and stood in the midst of a pleasant garden, where closing flowers distilled fragrant scents upon the evening air—all this sent his mind back in thankful contrast to hot, steaming, languid Baghnagar, its brassy skies and feverish exhalations, where even at this late hour the very crows lining the roof would be open-billed and gasping. And thus contrasting the new with the old order of things he decided for the fiftieth time that the luckiest moment of

his life was when he opened the official letter—which met him on landing at Bombay—appointing him Political Agent at Mazaran.

Hardly less in contrast between the climate of his new station and the last, were the people with whom he now had to deal. There was nothing whatever in common between the meek subservient native he had hitherto ruled and the stalwart independence of these wild mountain tribes, whose turbulent and predatory instincts needed nice handling to keep in efficient control. But all this appealed to him vividly, and he threw himself into his new duties with an eager zest which caused those who had known his predecessor to smile. He recognised that here at least was a chance; here he might find scope for such latent ability which the stagnant routine of his old Department had been in danger of stifling altogether. In fact, he was inclined to regret the abnormally tranquil state of things, when Jelson, his predecessor, had congratulated him upon the fact that Mushîm Khan, the chief of the powerful, and often turbulent, Gularzai tribe, had become so amenable since the Government had created him a Nawab that the meanest *bunniah* might almost walk through the Gularzai country alone and with his pockets bulging with rupees, in perfect safety.

Herbert Raynier flung himself into a comfortable chair on the verandah and lighted a cheroot. He had half an hour to spare before it should be time to dress and go out to dinner, and how should such be better spent than in a restful smoke: yet, while enjoying this, his thoughts were active enough. His prospects, rosy as the afterglow which dwelt upon the surrounding peaks, kept him busy for a time, and over all was a sense of great relief. If he had saved the life of an unknown Oriental at the hands of a particularly brutal mob, assuredly he had been repaid to the full, for, but for that circumstance, matters would never have come to a head with Cynthia. He would still be bound hard and fast by a chain of which he only realised the full weight since he had broken it. For he had broken it—finally, irrevocably, unmistakably, he told himself. Since that last scene in the Vicarage garden he and Cynthia had exchanged no word. The remainder of that day had not been of a pleasant nature, and he had left by an early train on the following morning, to return three days later to India. No letter, either of farewell, or reproach or recrimination—as he had half feared—reached him at the last, and it was with feelings of genuine relief that he watched the shores of the mother country fade into the invisible.

Tarleton, the Civil Surgeon, at whose bungalow Raynier was dining, was somewhat of a trying social unit, in that he was never even by chance known to agree with any remark or proposition, weighty or trivial, put forward by anybody, or if there was no conceivable room for gainsaying such, why then he would append some brisk aggressive comment in rider fashion. As thus,—

“How do, Raynier? How did you come over? Didn’t walk, did you?”

“No. Biked.”

“Ho! Bicycle’s not much use up here, I can tell you.”

Raynier remarked that he found the machine useful for getting about the station with, and that the roads in and immediately around the same were rather good.

“Well, you didn’t expect to find them all rocks and stones, did you?” came the prompt rejoinder.

Tarleton was white-haired and red-faced, which caused him to look older than his actual years. Another of his peculiarities was that he was continually altering his facial appearance. Now he would grow a beard; then suddenly, without a word to anybody, would trim it down to what they call in Transatlantic a “chin-whisker,” or shave it altogether. Or, one day he would appear with a long, carefully-waxed moustache, and the next with that appendage clipped to the consistency of a toothbrush. And so on.

Just at this stage, however, Raynier, recognising that he was on the high road to cordially detesting the man, had laid himself out to be extra long-suffering.

“Wonder if those women ever mean to come in?” went on Tarleton, with a fidgety glance at the clock, for the two were alone in the drawing-room just before dinner.

“Oh, one has to give the ornamental sex a little ‘law,’” said the other, good-humouredly.

“Well, you can’t expect them to put on their clothes and all that as quickly as we can,” was the rejoinder to this accommodating speech. And just then “those women,” in the shape of Mrs Tarleton and a guest, entered. The first was a good-humoured, pleasant-looking little Irishwoman, the second—

“How d’you do, Miss Clive? Why, this is a surprise,” began Raynier, without waiting for an introduction.

“I like surprises,” laughed the hostess. “They’re great fun. We thought we’d give you one, Mr Raynier.”

“They are, if, as now, they are pleasant ones,” he answered.

“Why, Mr Raynier, I didn’t think that kind of speech-making was at all in your line,” said the “Surprise,” demurely.

She was a tallish girl, rather slight, with refined and regular features, which nineteen out of twenty pronounced “cold.” She had a great deal of dark brown hair, and very uncommon eyes; in fact, they were unequivocally and unmistakably green. Yet framed in their dark, abundant lashes, they might be capable of throwing as complete an attraction, a fascination, as the more regulation blue or hazel ones. She was not popular with men. Not enough “go” in her, they declared. Seemed more cut out for a blue-stocking.

She and Raynier had been fellow-passengers out; but had had little to say to each other on board. He had danced with her three or four times, which was rather remarkable in view of that being a form of exercise which he favoured but little. Both had this in common, that they held aloof from the usual ‘board-ship amusements, yet they had not

come together at all. It was only when they landed at Bombay, and the friends she had expected to meet her had not arrived, that Raynier, noticing the look of intense consternation, of bewilderment even, upon the girl's face, as she realised how she was stranded, a total stranger in a very strange land, had come to the rescue—had even foregone his train and remained over until the next day to be of service to her. This he had done out of sheer kindness—the other passengers having gone their respective ways without giving her a thought—and having handed her over to her friends who had been unavoidably delayed, had bidden her good-bye and had gone his own—he, too, scarcely giving her another thought.

"Hilda says you were so kind to her at Bombay, Mr Raynier," went on his hostess.

"Oh, no—that's nothing, Mrs Tarleton. Glad to have been of any service, of course," he replied, in that hurried, half-confused way to be expected of a man of his disposition under the circumstances.

"But it isn't nothing," struck in the girl, decidedly. "Do you know, Mrs Tarleton, Mr Raynier even waited till the next day to look after me. And it's odd, because we hardly knew each other on the ship."

"Oh, well," mumbled Raynier, jerkily, "you can't see anybody stranded like that—a lady especially—in a totally strange place without doing something to straighten things out for them."

Hilda Clive smiled.

"None of the others seemed to be of that opinion, at any rate," she said.

Snapped Tarleton, "Well, you can't expect a lot of people just landed from a voyage to think about anything but themselves and their own belongings."

For once Raynier felt frankly grateful to the contentious one—if only that it was sufficient for Tarleton to lay down a statement on any given subject to cause his ordinary hearers to drop that subject like a red-hot bar. Wherefore these promptly turned to another.

Sunt Singh and Kaur Singh, chuprassis, were aroused from the drowsy enjoyment of their hubble-bubbles by a very unwonted intruder in the Political Agent's compound late at night, and were well-nigh speechless with supercilious amazement. The fat trader they had left on the road! See the *Huzoor!* At that time of night! It was the Police Station the fool wanted. Something of the highest importance? Let him come in the morning. It would keep until then. Besides, the *Huzoor* was out dining.

In a direful state of fear and perplexity Chand Lall, thus rebuffed, got out into the road again, and with a scared look over each shoulder, took his way as quickly as he could from the gate. But this was not quick, for even in the darkness it might have been seen that he walked with a painful limp. In the darkness too, something else might have been seen—two figures stealing along in the deeper shade of the tamarisk hedge. He whom they shadowed saw them not—at first—then having chosen their spot, they quickened their pace, and darting forward flung themselves upon him.

The yell which the assailed man opened his mouth to utter died in his throat as the white light of a long knife blade streaked before his eyes.

"Silence or thou art dead," snarled a harsh voice. "So, dog, thou wouldst betray us?"

In the dirty-white turbans and hairy, hook-nosed faces, Chand Lall knew only too well who were these. Already they had begun to drag him swiftly along. Then in his frenzy of terror at the recollection of the fate he had escaped from and which certainly waited him now, even the fear of instant death did not avail. A loud, quavering shriek for aid rang from his lips.

But it died in a choking gasp. The white knife blade disappeared, to emerge again red—and this not once only. A corpse lay wallowing in the road, and two loosely-clad figures vanished into the darkness, even as they had come out of it.

Chapter Eight.

The Mark of Murad Afzul.

Raynier was wondering over several things. He was wondering how anyone living could stand Tarleton for life—as his wife did; how anyone could stand him for a week, or two or three—as his guest was doing; or for two or three hours—as he himself was trying to do. Then, constantly observing Hilda Clive—opposite him, for they were a party of four—he was wondering how it was that she had held out so little attraction to him hitherto. For nearly three weeks they had been pent up together in the close proximity of shipboard—yet he had hardly been aware of her existence. While he was looking after her at Bombay, she had seemed more attractive, but not much. Yet now, meeting her again and unexpectedly, he was conscious of this or that subtle trait which interested him.

Still, why had he not discovered it before? Time, opportunity—all had been favourable. He supposed it was that the recollection of Cynthia Daintree had left a bitter taste in his mouth, and that he had been passing through a misogynistic stage accordingly.

"I don't believe these 'budmashes' are as quiet as they seem," Tarleton was saying. "Or if they are, it's because they are hatching devilment. I've been longer among them than you have, Raynier, and Mushîm Khan isn't the sort to turn into a lamb all of a sudden, as he seems to have done lately."

They were talking over Raynier's visit to the Nawab, and Tarleton, as usual, was contradictory.

"What is the Nawab like, Mr Raynier?" said Hilda Clive.

"Rather a fine-looking man—in fact, very."

"And is his palace very splendid?"

Raynier stared.

"Very splendid?" he repeated—"Oh, I see! The idea is quite a natural one. But, as a matter of fact, he hasn't got any 'palace' at all. He lives in a mud-walled village."

"No. Not really?"

"Miss Clive thinks he ought to wear a crown and go about blazing with jewels," said Tarleton.

"Well, that isn't an inexcusable mistake," rejoined Raynier, "considering the ideas people generally associate with his title. You see, Miss Clive, the Gularzai are almost savages—fine savages, but still savages—something akin to our ideas of the desert Arab."

"Well, they can't help that, can they?" struck in Tarleton, apparently for no earthly reason, unless that nobody had dreamed of saying they could.

"I should like to see something of these people in their own homes," said the girl. "They must be rather interesting. I admire these I see walking about the station. It is a fine type of face. Are they Gularzai, Mr Raynier?"

"Fine type of face!" cut in Tarleton. "Why, they're the most villainous-looking scoundrels unhung. Any one of them would cut your throat for eight annas."

"A good many are Gularzai, Miss Clive," answered Raynier. "But all these mountain tribes are very much alike in appearance."

Now Tarleton broached a subject which an hour or two earlier would have been unwelcome to the other in the last degree. Raynier was going on a camping expedition very shortly—together with Haslam, the Forest Officer—and Tarleton was anxious to join it.

"There's precious little to shoot," was the answer, "though one might do a clamber after markhôr. But it would give Miss Clive the very opportunity she was wanting."

"Eh? How?" said Tarleton.

"Why she'd see something of the country, and incidentally of the people."

This was putting matters in a new light to Tarleton. He had not proposed to include his womenkind in the scheme. But now both his wife and their guest declared the prospect a delightful one, and as there was no valid reason against it, Tarleton, for a wonder, consented.

It was midnight when Raynier bade his entertainers good-bye, and as he bowled along the smooth high road he found himself wondering again—and this time over two things. One was that he had spent an uncommonly pleasant evening at Tarleton's; the other that he should actually have welcomed the prospect of Tarleton's society for a matter of a couple of weeks or so, on the projected camping expedition. Well, as to the latter he need not see much of Tarleton.

His bicycle ran smoothly, and, absorbed in his thoughts, he was nearly passing his own compound, when—what was that? A cry—a little distance further on—and it expressed terror. Passing his own gate he whirled straight on, and in a moment, there in the middle of the road lay a human form. But before he could dismount, another sound caught his ear. Without giving the man who lay there another thought he started in pursuit.

The stripe of the road lay before him in the darkness, dim yet clearly defined. At the side of it, under the high tamarisk hedge, he made out two figures. Peremptorily, and in Hindustani, he called upon them to halt. They obeyed. But so far from such compliance affording Raynier any satisfaction, he felt at that moment that he would give a great deal to see them get through the hedge somehow, and disappear from his sight for ever. In a flash he realised that he had embarked on a very dangerous and foolhardy undertaking, as he recognised that a brace of tall, savage, mountain desperadoes were waiting to receive him, he being totally unarmed, and the road as lonely at that hour of the night as any wild peak he could see looming dimly against the stars around.

A bicycle, moreover, is a desperately bad steed to fight on, but knowing this he realised at the same time that it is an excellent one to run away on, given a clear road ahead. But would they allow him such? No, they would not.

It was all done in a flash. Raynier saw the two figures, in half-bent, crouching attitude, glide suddenly into the middle of the road—and he knew that each held a long knife. There was no time to stop. He saw his bicycle strike one of them full in the chest, as he put it at him at full speed—then became conscious that he himself was whirling through the air to land with a crash beneath the tamarisk hedge. He saw the other of them coming towards him knife in hand; saw in a moment the shaggy tresses, and the savage eyes glaring beneath the great turban, and then—there crashed forth a couple of shots, seemingly over his head.

His assailant had disappeared. At the moment he realised the position. The occurrence had taken place just in front of the Forest Officer's compound, and the Forest Officer being a very great sportsman, his bungalow was a miniature arsenal of weapons of all sorts. Moreover, he was a man of experience and quick wit. He too had heard the expiring yell of the murdered man, and had come forth to investigate, armed with a large and business-like revolver which he well knew how to use. In this instance, however, the darkness, and some fear of hitting the wrong man, had spoiled his shots. But of either at whom they were directed there remained no sign. Both had made themselves scarce.

"What's all the bobbery about?" sang out this friend in need, descriing the doubled-up figure under the hedge. "Who is it?"

"Me—Raynier."

"The devil! Not hurt, are you?"

"Someone up the road is—that's why I was chevying those 'budmashes.' Come along up there and we'll investigate."

The Forest Officer shouted lustily to his servants to bring a lantern, and they, aroused by the shots, were not long in doing so. Raynier picked himself up, somewhat gingerly.

"I say—you did get a toss," said the other. "Not hurt, eh?"

"N-no. I think not. Shaken up a bit—like a tonic bottle."

Strange to say the bicycle had received little or no damage either.

"These Pathans are tough," said the Forest Officer. "Fancy being able to clear out after a collision like that."

They reached the spot where the dead man was lying. A shout or two from Raynier brought out his own people, with more lanterns. It was not a nice sight to gaze upon at midnight—the ghastly fear and agony stamped upon the dead face, and the great pool of blood still welling forth afresh as they turned the body over. Raynier could not help contrasting it in his mind with the scene he had just left hardly more than a quarter of an hour ago.

"I seem to know the face too," he said, in a puzzled way. "Who is he, Kaur Singh? Do you know?"

"*Ha, Huzoor.* It is the trading man whom your Highness allowed to travel on the skirt of your protection when we had been visiting Mushîm Khan."

But the rascal took very good care to say nothing about having turned him away from the gate that very night. The man was dead, and therefore he himself was safe. But the offender was happily ignorant of the fateful consequences that rebuff was destined to entail upon his master, upon others—and, perchance, upon himself.

For what they gazed upon here was but a beginning. It was the mark of Murad Afzul.

Chapter Nine.

A Legacy of Vengeance.

The Nawab Mahomed Mushîm Khan, commonly known as Mushîm Khan, Chief of the Gularzai, was seated beneath the shade of an apricot tope, discussing affairs of state with his brother and vizier, Kuhandil Khan.

The hour of prayer was just over, yet here and there a group of belated worshippers was still engaged in the prescribed ceremonial, bowing down, low and oft, in the direction of the Holy City, while others were wending their way towards the gate in the long low mud wall behind which stood the village. Here and there, too, knelt camels, in process of being loaded for a journey, eternally snarling and roaring, as is the way of those cross-grained, hideous, but essentially useful animals, and flocks of black goats and of fat-tailed Persian sheep moved lazily off to their browsing grounds attended by tall, shaggy herdsmen armed with their long-barrelled, sickle-stocked guns—and accompanied by great savage dogs, a match for wolf or panther, and far more dangerous than either to any human being not well armed, who should incur their hostility. Even as Raynier had set forth, there was not anything here of the jewelled gorgeousness and architectural splendour popularly associated with the conventional Nawab, yet it was Mushîm Khan's principal and favourite place of abode.

It lay in a basin-like hollow. Overhead and around, a grim array of chaotic peaks towered to a considerable height—the slopes lined with cliffs, and strewn with tumbled rocks, representing a vastness of area which the unaccustomed eye took some time to appreciate. Through this valley a small river flowed, having for its outlet a narrow, cliff-hung pass, which was, in fact, the principal access to the great natural amphitheatre.

In describing the chief's personal appearance Raynier had not exaggerated. Mushîm Khan was unquestionably a fine-looking man. Tall and straight, his powerful frame was well set off by the flowing whiteness of his garments, and the symmetrical folds of his snowy turban made an effective framework to the strong and dignified face. It was a finer face than those possessed by most of his countrymen, being somewhat fuller, and, though regular of feature, yet had not that hawk-like and predatory expression engendered by the lean and exaggeratedly aquiline cast of profile of the rest. His full beard and the two long tresses hanging low down on either side of his broad chest were jet black, but in view of the custom of dyeing such his age would be hard to determine approximately. His brother, the Sirdar Kuhandil Khan, was scarcely his inferior in appearance—in fact, there was so strong a family likeness between them that they might easily have been mistaken for each other.

"I know not why we should join in this *jihad*," the chief was saying, "nor do I know who is this Hadji Haroun who is stirring it up. He comes from the Orakzai, and he had better return to them in peace."

"That had he," agreed the other. "And yet, wherever he goes unrest remains behind him on his path. It seems that he of Kabul has too many *mullahs*, and when such become troublesome he sends them forth to stir up unrest among such as need them not."

"And our people are being inflamed by unrest, brother?"

"Are they not?" answered Kuhandil Khan. "Murad Afzul is here among them again, and it seems that he is drawing all men with him."

"Murad Afzul?" and the chief's brows darkened. "Murad Afzul! I have a mind to make an end of that robber. To what purpose should we allow such as he to draw us into war with the Feringhi? And what should come of such war? Will our land grow fat beneath it or our people increase?"

"It would not be good to make an end of him at this moment," said the vizier. "His following is large and powerful, and our people are ever turbulent. For long has he been teaching them to cast eyes upon Mazaran, whose garrison is weak, and where there is much plunder."

"Then Murad Afzul is chief of the Gularzai," said Mushîm Khan, bitterly. "Well, we shall see, for I will order him to take his possessions and depart."

"The omen is favourable," said the vizier, lifting his eyes. "Lo—here he comes?"

Two men were approaching—one tall and of middle age, the other of medium height and old. These drew near and salaamed, yet without the obsequious servility customary on approaching the presence of the more despotic Eastern ruler; for these mountain chiefs ruled more by patriarchal prestige than despotic power. Mushîm Khan gave them peace, and they seated themselves.

With the taller and younger of the two we are already acquainted. The other was lean and wrinkled, with fierce eyes staring restlessly out from beneath shaggy brows. He had also a trick of clenching and unclenching his claw-like fingers as though gripping something, and this, together with his bony, hawk-like countenance and rolling eyes, gave him an indescribably cruel, not to say demoniacal, aspect.

"Peace to the chief of the Gularzai," began this man, in a nasal grating snuffle. "Peace to him whom the Feringhi hath created a Nawab, for men say he loves peace."

"And on you peace, who have beheld the tomb of the Prophet," returned Mushîm Khan, in deep tones, for he was not pleased to behold this stranger, this interfering *mullah*, who stirred up strife whichever way he went, and was, in fact, engaged in preaching *jihad* throughout the mountain tribes.

The *mullah*, Hadji Haroun, was possessed of a very evil gift of eloquence, evil because invariably turned towards the stirring up of strife, and the sowing of plot and intrigue. For long he spoke, unfolding his plan, the design of which was to involve the Gularzai in common with other of the mountain tribes in an aggressive war with the Indian Government. An insignificant military expedition was then on foot against an insignificant unit of these, and here was a grand opportunity to assert themselves, and enjoy some sport in the shape of the slaughter of infidels, which would be pleasing to Allah at the same time—and the seizing of considerable loot, which would be pleasing to themselves. The opportunity was here. The Feringhi were unsuspecting that any hostility could be in existence against them, for had not the *Sirkar* just created Mushîm Khan a Nawab. The town of Mazaran simply lay in the hand of the Gularzai, and could be taken without a blow, captured by a clever surprise.

What tribe or combination of tribes had ever prevailed in the end when pitted against the *Sirkar*? No—not in the end, but which of them was any the worse? Soldiers were sent. There was a fight or two, and peace was made. Then things were just as they had been before. The Gularzai would soon become as women, and forget what battle was, if they sat still much longer.

To all of this the chief listened gravely. He distrusted the speaker, and wholly disapproved of the plan, for he had already been sounded on the matter, and that not once. Murad Afzul spat from time to time, nodding his evil head in approval as he gloated in anticipation over the delights in store—of the bazaar in Mazaran running with blood, and the camel loads of choice loot which should find their way to his mountain retreat. Oh, there were merry times ahead.

Yet assuredly disappointment awaited, for Mushîm Khan, having heard all that had been said, absolutely declined to join in the plot. He had given the *Sirkar* assurances of his friendship. The new Sahib who had come as representative of the *Sirkar*, had treated him straightforwardly and as a brother, and he refused to behave towards him treacherously and as a liar. Infidel or not, to act thus towards him would not be pleasing to Allah, nor could it be justified out of the teaching of His Prophet.

"As a brother?" repeated the crafty *mullah*, now about to throw his trump card. "And was not the Sirdar Allahyar Khan a brother of the Nawab?"

"Surely," answered Mushîm Khan, looking slightly puzzled, for he saw no coherence in the question.

"And his end—peace to his soul?" went on the *mullah*. "And his end, what was it?"

"His end was that of a brave man if a mistaken one," replied the chief, in a deep voice, and frowning, for he disliked and resented the raking up of this matter. But Hadji Haroun nodded, looking as though awaiting further particulars.

"He died fighting the Feringhi, by whom he was shot—and is now in Paradise," supplemented Kuhandil Khan.

"But if he was not so shot?" pursued the *mullah*, a gleam of triumphant malice darting from his cruel eyes.

"Then he is alive?"

The words broke simultaneously from the chief and his brother. But the *mullah* dropped his eyes to the ground, and for a moment kept silence. Then he said,—

"Would that he were. Would that his end had been that of a soldier. But it was not. Ya, Mahomed! What an end was his! Wah-wah! what an end!"

And the crooked, claw-like fingers clenched and unclenched upon empty air. Murad Afzul, who had been prepared for this psychological moment, now rose, and having salaamed, moved away, for it was not fitting that he should hear the terrible disclosure about to be made to the two brothers.

"The Sirdar Allahyar Khan was a havildar in one of the regiments serving under the Feringhi at the time of the great rising?" went on the *mullah*, in a kind of slow monotone.

"And by them he was shot, by reason of the part he took against them in the rising," said the chief. "And, after all, it was what he might expect, for many of the Feringhi were then slain."

"By them he was not shot, O Chief of the Gularzai whom the Feringhi have named Nawab," returned the *mullah*. "By them he was hanged."

"Hanged?" broke from both, in incredulous horror. "Now that cannot be. The Feringhi would never put to so shameful a death a man of his descent."

"Yet he was hanged, O chiefs—hanged in such fashion as is not to be named—hanged with a portion of swine flesh tied to his body."

Both the listeners had half sprung to their feet, and all unconsciously had struck a crouching, wild-beast attitude—and in truth their faces were in keeping. Their lips had gone back from their teeth and their eyes were glaring.

"Is this a lie, old man?" gasped Mushîm Khan. "For if it is thou shalt die. Yes, thou shalt die the death of the boiling fat unless thou canst prove its truth, and this wert thou a hundred times a *mullah* or even the grandson of the Prophet himself."

But the other did not quail.

"It is no lie. Ya, Mahomed! To such a death did they put a Sirdar of the Gularzai. Many were so put to death by the Feringhi, they declaring that such had slain their women and children, having first been lashed, and so also did Allahyar Khan die. But before he died there was one who stood by to whom he whispered his bequest of vengeance, and from that one at his own death came the knowledge to me. Read; here is proof."

He drew a soiled, faded parchment from beneath his clothing, and tendered it to the chief. It was traced in Pushtu characters, and set forth how the Sirdar Allahyar Khan, havildar in a regiment recruited from all the border tribes, having been accused—and falsely—of being concerned in the murders of women and children, was adjudged to be hanged as the speaker had described; but the name of the officer in command who had ordered this savage retribution was somewhat difficult to decipher. Watching the two brothers, their heads meeting over the scroll, their features perfectly convulsed with horror and fury, Hadji Haroun smiled evilly to himself, though his countenance wore rather a snarl than a smile.

"The name?" they growled, looking up. "The name, the name?"

"General Raynier Sahib," answered the *mullah*, fairly quivering with delight. "Say now, Chief of the Gularzai. Is the Sahib yonder at Mazaran still as thy brother?"

"What has *he* to do with this?" thundered the chief.

"Ya, Allah! Observe, O Nawab. He who is now as the *Sirkar* at Mazaran is named Raynier Sahib. He is the son of the man who thus slew the brother of the chief of the Gularzai. Say; is he still as thy brother?"

Chapter Ten.

The Syyed's Tangi.

"Are you superstitious, Miss Clive?"

"Well, I don't know. Not more than other people, I suppose."

"That is tantamount to an answer in the affirmative," rejoined Raynier. "Believer in 'luck.' Observances connected with the new moon—the finding of a horse-shoe. Things of that kind."

"Oh no, I'm not," she answered decidedly.

"What? You would really upset the salt, and omit to throw some over your shoulder—or walk under a ladder?"

"As to that, I'd make sure there was no one on it with a paint-pot first."

"That's better. And you're not afraid of ghosts, eh?"

"Well, I've never seen one," she answered, demurely mischievous. And then they both laughed.

It was near sundown—also near the camp. They were returning from an afternoon ride, and the rest of the party, Haslam and the Tarletons to wit, were some way on ahead. These two were alone together.

This they had frequently been, since accident had thus thrown them together, and in that brief period of time Raynier had fallen to wondering more and more what there was about Hilda Clive that already he had begun to think how he would miss her later on, and how on earth they could have been shut up together on board a ship all the time they had, and yet that he should hardly have taken any notice of her. Now in their daily intercourse she was so companionable and tactful—and withal feminine. She was really attractive too, he thought, not for the first time, as he looked at her and noticed how well she sat her horse. As an actual fact she really had improved in the point of appearance, and that vastly; for the healthy outdoor life in that high climate had added a colour to her face which gave it just that amount of softness in which it had seemed lacking before.

"If you are absolutely sure you are free from superstition," went on Raynier, "I'd like to show you something that's worth seeing."

"What is it?"

"There's a real thrill of curiosity in that question," he laughed. "It's a *tangi*—and a haunted one."

"Oh, I must see it. Where is it, Mr Raynier?"

"Close here. But before you venture you had better think over the penalty. The belief is that whoever enters it meets his death in some shape or form before the end of the next moon."

"That's creepy, at any rate. But is the idea borne out by fact?"

"They say it is, without exception. You would not get any of the people here to set foot in it on any consideration whatever."

"Then none of them ever set foot in it?"

"I should rather think not."

"Then how do they know what would happen if they did?"

"They know what *has* happened—at least, they say so. This is the place."

They had been riding over a nearly level plain, sparsely grown with stunted vegetation, and shut in by hills, stony and desolate, breaking up here and there into a network of chasms. Under one of these and at the further edge of the plain was pitched their camp, and from where they now halted they could distinguish the smoke of the fires rising straight upward on the still air, could make out the glimmer of a white tent or two. Right in front of them reared a mountain side, steep and lofty, rising in terraced slopes—and, cleaving this there yawned the entrance of a gigantic rift.

"I'm not surprised they should weave all sorts of superstitions about such a place as this," said Hilda Clive, as she gazed up, with admiration not unmixed with awe, at the sheer of the stupendous rock portals, so regular in their smooth immensity as almost to preclude the possibility of being the work of Nature unaided.

"Well, now, I've warned you what the penalty is," went on the other. "Do you still want to go in?"

"Why, you are so solemn over it, Mr Raynier, that anyone would think you believed in it yourself."

"They could hardly think that, could they, seeing that I've been through it already."

"Been through it? Have you really? How long ago?"

"From end to end. A couple of days after we came up here."

"But did you know the tradition?"

"Yes. Haslam told me. I questioned Mehrab Khan about it, and he is a firm believer in it. In fact, all the people are. That's the reason I sent him on to the camp now. I didn't want him to know what we were going to do, if only that there's nothing to be gained by jumping with both feet upon other people's prejudices, especially natives'. And these might look upon it as a desecration."

"Has Mr Haslam been through it himself?"

Raynier whistled, then laughed.

"Haslam! Why, he'd about as soon go into it as Mehrab Khan."

"Really, Mr Raynier, I couldn't have believed you people out here were so superstitious. You are as bad as the natives themselves. I suppose you get it from them."

“You? Count me out, please. Didn’t I just say I’d been through the place? I’m doomed anyhow, you see,” he added banteringly, “but there’s no reason why you should be. So now we’ll get back to camp.”

“No. I want to go through it too.”

“Quite sure you won’t feel uncomfortable about it afterwards?” he said. “You might, you know.”

But a strange expression had come over her face, the set, far-away look of one whose thoughts were not with her words. In after times that look came back to him.

“I want to go through it too,” she repeated.

“Very well, then—you’ve been warned.”

As they entered the grim portal the sun was just touching the horizon, but it occurred to neither of them that it might be pitch dark before they emerged. At first the slant of the rock walls caused one of these to overhang, shutting out the sky, but the rift gradually widening, they could see the brow of these stupendous cliffs, far above against the sky at a dizzy height. Unconsciously the tones of both were lowered as they conversed.

“It isn’t healthy taking too long to get through a *tangi* like this when there are rain storms going about,” Raynier was saying. “It makes a most effective waterway for ten, twenty, forty feet of flood. Ah, I thought so. Look.”

High over their heads, caught here and there in a crevice of the rock, was a wisp of withered grass or a few sticks. There was no mistaking how these objects had got there, and the awful magnitude of the flood which at times bellowed through this grisly rift.

“Why is the place supposed to be haunted?” said Hilda Clive. “You didn’t tell me.”

“The usual thing—a curse. There was a man killed here by the people of the neighbourhood—not an incident of very great moment in this country, you would think. But this one was a great character in the sanctity line of business—a Syyed or a Hadji, or something of the sort—and so his ghost appeared and took it out of the neighbourhood, and indeed the human race in general, by planting a rigid embargo on the place. And it was a pretty practical way of taking it out of them too, for they used this *tangi* as a thoroughfare—it’s scarcely a mile long, you know—whereas now they’ve got to go round the mountain instead of through it, which makes a difference of at least eight.”

“It’s an eerie place, anyhow,” said the girl, looking up a little awe-stricken at the immensity of the cliff walls. The sun had gone off the world now, and a tomb-like twilight prevailed here in the heart of the mountain. It was chilling enough to have begotten a whole volume of grim legends.

“Wonder if the old Syyed’s ghost is on hand now,” said Raynier, who was cynically and frankly sceptical in such matters. “We’ll give him the salaam anyhow.” Then, raising his voice but very slightly, he exclaimed,—

“Salaam, Syyed!”

What was this? The whole of the immense vault was roaring and bellowing with sound. In waves it rolled, now running along the ground at their feet, now tossed on high as though escaping into outer air. “Salaam, salaam, salaam!” it replied in every conceivable tone and key, then roared along the cliffs again as in a peal of thunder, the whole accompanied by a mighty rattling. The noise was simply appalling.

Raynier, the sceptical, was more than startled. Not to put too fine a point on it, he was just a little bit scared, though no manifestation of it escaped him. The horses of both, too, were backing and snorting, evincing a degree of terror not at all calculated to soothe the nerves of their riders. The suddenness of it all, the booming of the spectral voices here in the grisly depths, was rather startling.

He looked at his companion somewhat apprehensively, expecting to see her pale and shaking, perhaps hysterical. To his surprise she was laughing. His first thought even then was that this was a form of hysteria.

“Don’t you see?” she said.

“Don’t you see? Don’t you see?” boomed the vault around. “Don’t you see? Don’t you see?” shrieked and wailed the heights above. And then Raynier felt secretly more than a little ashamed of himself—for he did see.

As they were talking they had rounded a sudden bend in the defile, and the salute he had jocosely directed to the dead Syyed—if such a person had ever existed in fact—had been caught up by a most astounding echo, which, for no apparent reason, was given forth precisely at that spot. Still, it was not a little curious that they should have entered within its scope simultaneously with the utterance of the half-mocking words, which, mingling with the rattle of the horses’ hoofs upon the loose stones of the *tangi*, had produced the horrible din.

Now it was she who said in a whisper,—

“We had better not talk out loud or these horses will go quite mad. It is all I can do to stay on mine as it is.”

In fact the animals were in the wildest stage of snorting, trembling fear, and could hardly be persuaded to proceed at all. Their shying and plunging created a rattle which the echo reproduced and magnified as before. At length they quieted down.

“We may be through the sphere of the echo,” said Raynier, tentatively raising his voice a little. And the result showed that they were.

"How is it the same thing did not happen when you came through here before?" said Hilda Clive, as soon as it became safe to converse again.

"Easily explained. I left my horse at the entrance and walked. I always wear very silent boots, and I had nobody to talk to. Look, we are through now, but we sha'n't have much time to admire the view on the other side because it's rather late, and we ought to get back to camp."

A tower of light now rose in front of them, light only in comparison to the gloom of the *tangi*. It was the exit at the other end, similar in every particular to the entrance.

They stood looking out over a wild wide valley shut in by the same eternal hills. From far beneath among the gloomy rifts and sparse vegetation arose the long-drawn howl of a wolf.

"What a wilderness!" exclaimed the girl. "Do you know, it's splendid. I'm so glad I came."

She had turned her eyes full upon his face. What wonderful eyes they were, he thought—and they were fascinating too. How on earth had he been so long in making the discovery? He thought, too, how she had been the one whose nerves had remained entirely unshaken during that very startling surprise—how she it was—not he—who had at once seen through its perfectly natural solution, and he felt small accordingly. But his admiration for her had strangely increased.

They turned to retrace their way, hardly able to make it out in the gloom. They had been descending all the time, and now it took a little longer, for the floor of the *tangi* was stony and rough.

"I'm not surprised they have set up a ghost here," said Raynier, when they had passed the echo point. "That is one of the most extraordinary effects I have ever experienced."

"Is it not?" she answered quietly. "Don't look up just yet—it has disappeared—but there was the head of someone watching us just over the ledge a little above you on the right. There. Now look."

Raynier could hardly repress a start, as his hand went instinctively to his pistol pocket nor did he feel any the easier because, by some inadvertence, it was empty. Then he looked up.

Right over the way they were to pass was a small ledge, apparently inaccessible to mortal foot, or incapable of sustaining a single human being could such attain to it. Yet, there was the head again—huge, shaggy, menacing—staring down upon them in the gloom. Then it again disappeared.

Chapter Eleven.

Concerning the Occult.

"How would it be to move camp to-morrow?" Tarleton was saying. "We've been here long enough, and there's nothing to shoot, or next to nothing. What do you think, Raynier?"

"No great hurry, is there? It's breezy and picturesque here, and has its advantages. What do *you* think, Haslam?"

"I'm with Tarleton," said the Forest Officer. "All our fellows are grumbling. They say it's an unlucky place."

It was the evening after the somewhat eventful ride just recorded, and they were all assembled within the large tent which was used as a common dining-room. Dinner was over and cheroots were being discussed.

"Yes. My Babu was telling me something of the kind only to-day," rejoined Raynier, tranquilly. "By the way, Haslam, how is it all this while we've never been through that *tangi*? You know, the one you were telling me the yarn about?"

Haslam stared.

"Well, you know, old chap—I—I told you the yarn, didn't I? Well, that explains it."

"But you don't really mean to say you believe in such arrant tomfoolery?"

"I don't know about believing in it. But—well, it's best to be on the safe side."

"Goodness gracious, I should think so," struck in Mrs Tarleton. "Why, I wouldn't go into that place if anyone were to offer me a million pounds."

"Well, I wish they'd offer it to me, that's all," said Raynier. "For I mean to go through it to-morrow, gratis. Who'll volunteer? What do you say, Miss Clive?"

"I'll go, with pleasure," was the answer.

It will be seen that these two had kept their former experience to themselves, and this they had done by mutual agreement, mainly to get some fun out of the rest of the party, and it was to this object Raynier was now leading up. The head which both had seen watching them they had since accounted for by optical delusion, even as the startling sounds had been accounted for by perfectly natural causes.

Mrs Tarleton gave a cry of genuine consternation.

"Hilda, you must not go," she implored. "Oh, Mr Raynier, don't take her—if only as a favour to me."

"But I'm not in the least superstitious, Mrs Tarleton," said the girl, looking up from the work she was engaged upon. "In fact, I like to demonstrate the absurdity of these childish beliefs. Why, I can hardly count the number of times I've got up first of thirteen from table."

"Well, there must be something in these ideas, I suppose, or else they wouldn't be so universally accepted," cut in Tarleton.

"No? Then of course the world has only lately become round, seeing that for ages it was 'universally accepted' as flat," said Raynier.

"Ah, but that's quite a different thing."

Then Haslam told a weird and wonderful story or two illustrating the strange power of native prophecy, which interested Hilda, and Tarleton would cap such with the coincidence type of anecdote, such as the first of thirteen at table—and at these she laughed.

"None of those instances come anywhere near carrying conviction," she said. "Now, remember. In good time I will supply you with just such an instance to the contrary. No; I won't tell you anything about it now. But you'll see at the right time."

"I believe Miss Clive means to go into the *tangi*," said Haslam.

"No, I don't," Hilda answered. "I won't go into it now. I don't want to frighten all you poor creatures."

They laughed, rather weakly it must be owned—all but Raynier, that is, for he was in the know, and was enjoying the situation immensely. How well she looked when she was animated and her face lighted up like that—was what he was thinking as he sat watching her. Somebody touched on the subject of clairvoyance. In a moment Hilda's manner changed. She became grave, almost earnest.

"Hullo!" cried Tarleton. "We've got hold of something at last that Miss Clive does believe in."

"To a certain extent, yes."

"I remember going to a *séance* once," said Mrs Tarleton. "There was a dreadful woman going into trances, and pointing out people's dead relations standing behind their chairs. She described them, and all sorts of things. It made me feel quite creepy."

"Yes, but how many times was she wide of the mark for every time she made a good shot?" said Raynier.

"Hardly once. It is quite wonderful."

"There's nothing in that sort of clairvoyance; it's sheer quackery," said Hilda, speaking in a decisive, authoritative tone that astonished her hearers.

"I should think so," said Raynier. "Whatever may be the state or locality of the dead, it is not to be supposed that they would be empowered, or would even wish, to appear in London, to enable a cad in a second-hand dress-suit to take up so much a head in gate money, nor a female fraud either, for the matter of that."

"Well, but I don't see why they shouldn't," cut in Tarleton, characteristically.

"No! It doesn't strike you as improbable?" said Hilda, with a pitying look.

"Why should they be quacks?" persisted Tarleton. "Why shouldn't there be anything in what they do?"

"I don't know why there shouldn't be, I only know there isn't," she replied. "Why, the gift—for clairvoyance is a gift—is so rare that it is hardly surprising its very existence is disbelieved in. I know it—at least, I mean—er—anybody can reason out the matter for themselves."

The concluding words were lame and stammering, and the change from the firmness and decision of tone which had marked her utterances hitherto, as though she had suddenly found herself out in saying too much, could not but strike her hearers as strange, to say the least of it. To Raynier it suggested a new idea, which indeed came to him with a sort of mental start. But he came to the rescue.

"Its existence is undoubted, though as rare as Miss Clive says. Why, that feeling that comes to us sometimes of having done or said some given thing before, or found ourselves in some given place, is a sort of an approach to the art, or gift, or whatever you like to call it."

"Oh, I don't know what that is," said Mrs Tarleton. "Thank goodness that sort of thing doesn't come my way. But we've been talking about creepy things all the evening. I'm sure I shall dream. Ugh!" with a shiver. "What is it like outside?"

It was time to separate for the night, but they lingered a while chatting in front of the tent. There was a very wildness of desolation in this sudden transition from light to darkness. All within the camp was silent, and away beyond, the loom of the hills was just discernible, black against the stars. The ghostly cry of a night bird echoed from the craggy height which overhung the camp, and far away over the plain a most weird and melancholy howling was borne upon the night wind.

"That's a wolf—or wolves," said Haslam, his *shikari* instincts metaphorically pricking up his ears. "Aren't you afraid, Miss Clive? There's nothing between you and them but a strip of canvas, all night through."

Hilda laughed.

"Afraid?" she repeated. "Why, this is positively delightful. It is such a contrast. Inside the tents—why, we might be in Mazaran, or even in London. Outside—the very ideal of savage wildness. Afraid? Why, I'm positively revelling in it. I like to hear that. Hark! There it is again. I'd like to see those wolves close—to watch them prowling for prey and doubling back and signalling to each other—if only I could get near enough to observe them without scaring them."

"My goodness, child! Why, they'd eat you," said Mrs Tarleton.

"Not they." And Hilda laughed again.

"I say, old chap," said Haslam, later, as Raynier lounged into his tent for another "peg" and a final smoke, "that's a strange sort of girl the Tarletons have picked up. Who is she? Do you know?"

"No more than you do."

"Well, there's something dashed uncanny about her. The way she talks—there's something sort of creepy about it. Eh? And did you ever see such eyes as she's got? Eh?"

"N-no, I don't think I ever did," answered Raynier, slowly and between puffs, but in no wise with the same meaning as Haslam had in his mind.

"I say, she'd make a rum sort of a wife for most fellows, with those rum uncanny ideas of hers. Eh?" And then the speaker stopped rather short, remembering, all of a sudden, that Raynier and the object of his remarks had been getting a bit thick of late. But, then, Raynier was rather a queer chap himself, he reflected. Anyway, he felt a trifle embarrassed, as though he had been putting his foot in it.

"I daresay," answered Raynier, equably. "'Most fellows' are like shot—assorted into sizes, and might safely be numbered in the same way." At bottom, however, the remark jarred upon him, and set him wondering for the fiftieth time what insidious fascination the strange personality of Hilda Clive was beginning to set up within his innermost being, and that such was the case he was only beginning to admit, hugging to himself the very secrecy of the thought, and the subtle stimulus it afforded. Yet, what did it all mean? He was not in love with Hilda Clive, but some strange fascination radiated from her. It might be uncanny—as Haslam had said—yet he liked it—nor would he have bartered it for the artless advances of conventional attractions, and of such he was not without experience, for natural and unassuming as he constitutionally was, the Political Agent of Mazaran, on the right side of forty, was something of a *parti*, by reason of his position and its emoluments; and when, added to this, he who filled the one and enjoyed the other was in the prime of physical health and strength, why, then, so much the more eligible did that *parti* become.

Haslam the while had turned in, and was yawning profusely—in fact, could hardly give a coherent answer to any question or remark, wherefore Raynier adjourned to his own tent. But not the slightest inclination was on him to follow Haslam's example. He felt extraordinarily wide awake, wherefore he got out a camp-chair, and, having extinguished the lamp within his tent, lit another cheroot and sat there to enjoy the beauty of the night and think.

It was very still. What little wind there had been had dropped completely. A glow had begun to suffuse the velvety darkness of the star-gemmed sky, and, widening, the black loom of a rocky ridge away beyond the plain became clearly defined, then a rim of fire, and lo!—a broad moon soared majestically upward.

It was beautiful. The white tents lay like blocks of marble in its light, which silvered over the plain and the scant foliage of a few scattered junipers. The crunch, crunch of ruminating camels, and the stamp and snort of a horse, alone broke the stillness, save for the long-drawn howl still heard from time to time over the wilderness afar, where wolves prowled. Dark peaks, in softened outline, stood clear against the sky.

His thoughts ran back to the time of his furlough, to England and what had transpired there. Again and again he congratulated himself that he was free from that bond; how on earth he could ever have entered into it seemed more incomprehensible than ever. And what a long while ago it seemed, and—

What was this? A figure moving in the moonlight, a figure clothed in white draperies. In a brief flash the solution of a midnight marauder—the first of others—occurred to him, and his hand went to his pistol pocket—this time not empty. But he quickly withdrew it. For as the figure glided swiftly among the tents he knew it—knew it for that of Hilda Clive.

Heavens! What was she doing, what was she bent upon, just as she had risen from bed like this? She was walking, erect and rather swiftly, and now in a straight line; stepping forward, looking neither to the right nor to the left, yet there was something about the gait that was not usual, a something as though she was walking unconsciously. And—she had left the tents behind her now, and was walking swiftly and straight for the open country. He gazed for a moment, dumbfounded, after the receding form, then, rising, started to follow.

Chapter Twelve.

A Strange Midnight Ramble.

She was walking in her sleep.

This was the conclusion Raynier instinctively arrived at as he followed stealthily and noiselessly behind; and to his mind the problem occurred as to what he had better do. He had always been under the impression that to awaken a person under such circumstances was likely to produce an alarming, if not rather a disastrous, shock. But what on earth was to be done? She could not be suffered to walk on like this, Heaven knew where. Should he go back and rouse up Tarleton? But at the pace she was going she would be away and out of sight by the time he had hammered into the understanding of that contentious idiot the urgency of the situation, and this was no sort of country for any woman to go wandering about in at night. There were wolves around, too, for had they not been making themselves heard? and however chary such were of letting themselves be seen if anyone were anxious to get the sights of a rifle upon them, a solitary woman was a different story—and he was cognisant, moreover, of the fact that even the most skulking of wild animals are, strangely enough, far less afraid of the female of the human species. No, he must follow on after her, and that at once.

But where on earth was she going to lead him? On, on, she pressed, walking swiftly, and although the ground itself was, in places, none of the smoothest, yet, while not seeming to notice the way, she sped over it almost quicker than he did, looking carefully where he was going. It was a weird sort of undertaking. He could see in the moonlight her splendid hair streaming like a mantle about her shoulders, and noted the grace and ease with which she walked. On—ever. They were nearing the edge of the plain—and lo!—there in front of them rose the mountain which was cleft by the great *tangi*—the haunted *tangi*, equally feared seemingly by the enlightened and highly-educated Europeans who were his fellow-travellers as by the superstitious natives of the land.

Straight for this the unconscious pedestrian was heading. What strange influence was drawing her thither, thought he who followed: and for the first time something of the superstitious shrinking which caused them to shun the place began to creep over him. He glanced over his shoulder with some faint hope that others might have discovered the girl's absence and be following, but no. All was dead and silent. Nothing moved in the silvery moonlight.

And now in front rose the great rock portal—and on, ever on, kept the white and gliding figure before him. He saw it stand forth whiter than ever against the gloom of the entrance, then disappear, swallowed within the cavernous blackness of the great chasm.

Would the sudden change both of light and atmosphere awaken her? Would she come rushing forth wild with terror, instinctively making for the light? For a moment he waited in case this should be so—then plunged within the darkness of the place.

Raynier felt that here her wandering would end. Some strange psychological wave, acting with their experience of the day before, stimulated by the subject of their conversation that evening, had moved her to rise in her sleep and come hither. But to what end? There was something uncanny about her, Haslam had remarked, but Raynier was conscious of a very lively sense of thankfulness that he had been awake, and thus ready to follow and watch over her on this eerie and far from safe adventure upon which she had all unconsciously embarked.

The light from without hardly penetrating here, Raynier found himself slipping and stumbling in the gloom, yet, with it all, his quick ears could hear the footsteps in front moving easily and firmly without trip or stumble. It was marvellous—nor did the noise he made on the rattling stones seem in any way to disturb her whom he followed.

Now it grew light again in front. The white figure had reached the point where the rock walls widened out, and—had halted. The moon, immediately overhead now, darted down its light right into the chasm. Should he go forward and gently awaken her, if indeed she were not already awake? Surely she must be, for now she turned slowly round and faced him. He could see her great eyes, wide open and stamped with a wondering look; then, as he was about to advance and address her, she turned again and moved slowly onward.

And then a sound struck upon Raynier's ears which caused every drop of blood within him to freeze, and well it might, for well he knew that sawing, grating cough drawing nearer. A panther was coming up the *tangi*. Heavens, and the girl was between it and him.

Then the brute appeared—and with it a cub. Raynier knew with what deadly peril the situation was now fraught, for a revolver, save in the hand of a thorough expert, is an uncertain weapon, especially in an indifferent light. At sight of them the brute stopped, then crouched, uttering a hideous, purring snarl. In that second of time the scene was photographed upon his mind; the ghostly moonlight glinting down between the great rock walls, the spotted, sinuous shape of the savage beast, every muscle quivering as it crouched there ready for its spring, its tail softly waving to and fro, and the white gliding figure advancing straight upon it; straight upon destruction in the most horrible of forms. Yes, in a flash the whole scene was before him as, pointing the pistol past her, he steadied his nerves to take the best possible aim.

But—what was this? Instead of edging forward preparatory to making its fatal rush, as he had often seen a cat do when stealing upon a bird or mouse, the brute was stealthily backing. Was it fear of the strange sight that was actuating the beast? Was there indeed some latent magnetic force about those wide open eyes? For the gliding white figure advanced unwaveringly, and as it did so the crouching brute shrank back more and more—now in unmistakable alarm. Then suddenly snatching up its cub in its mouth, it turned and bounded away beyond the elbow of rock wall round which it had first appeared.

Every nerve in the spectator's being thrilled to the revulsion produced by this sudden removal of the awful tension of those few moments. At all risks he must awaken her and take her back to the camp. But as he advanced to do this, she halted again, turned round, passed a hand over her brow and face, looked upward at the great cliffs, then down again at him. Then she spoke,—

“So we are here together again.”

That was all. Her tone was even, placid, and evinced no astonishment whatever, as though it were the most natural

thing in the world to get up in the middle of the night, and take a moonlight stroll away over a particularly wild, and, as the recent incident showed, somewhat dangerous country, or to wake to consciousness in the heart of a vast rock chasm of awe-inspiring and savage grandeur and enjoying an eerie reputation. To her listener this was well-nigh the most astounding part of the whole adventure. Was she conscious? was his first thought.

Again she passed a hand over her brow, and her great eyes rested calmly upon his face.

"Now I remember," she said, in the same even tones. "Something threatened me—there, just now," looking toward the spot where the panther had crouched. "It was an animal—a panther. But—it went," she added, with a slight smile.

"That it certainly did," rejoined Raynier, "and thank Heaven it did. Do you know that that was about the tightest situation I have ever heard or read of—a panther with a cub—with a cub, mind, for in that lay nearly the whole of the peril—coming along this narrow tube where there's no possible means of getting out of its way—and you walking straight into its jaws. And this, under the circumstances, is a precious unreliable weapon," showing the revolver he still held in his hand. "You or both of us might have been horribly mauled before it even began to take effect."

"So we might. But I had a better plan with it, don't you think so? Anyhow, the thing got in my way, and—it had to get out of it."

The same cool tone, the same confident, but rather captivating smile. Two subjects of wonderment were at that moment crowding Herbert Raynier's mind to the exclusion of all others. What was there about this girl—what magnetic compelling power had enabled her, by the sheer, unflinching fearlessness of her presence, to put to flight what, under the circumstances—the narrowness of the place to wit, the suddenness of the encounter, and, above all, the cub—was one of the most dangerous and formidable of wild beasts? This was one. The other was, how on earth he could ever have passed her by as being without attractiveness, and that not once, but day after day. Here, standing before him in the moonlight, looking tall in her loose white wrapper—for her strange excursion had not been so impromptu as he at first supposed—her splendid hair flowing in masses over her shoulders, her great eyes smiling upon him with something of the compelling force which had given her power over the brute, he decided that she was scarcely, if anything, short of beautiful. And then the somewhat uncommon circumstances of this interview came back upon him.

"What made you come here?" he said, the lameness of the remark striking him even while he uttered the words.

"The very question I was going to ask you."

"Well, the answer to that should be obvious," he said. "I saw you start out, and thought you were walking in your sleep—and I need hardly remind you that this is not an over-safe part of the world for that kind of exercise."

"And you came to take care of me? That was very sweet of you."

"If I had gone back to wake up Tarleton, you might have got to Heaven knows where by the time he was under way," went on Raynier, conscious that her tone and manner had become insidiously alluring. Was he going to drift into the common idiocy? he thought, with something of dismay. "You might have altered your course and got right away from us. Then, when I did come up with you I didn't like to wake you, because I thought it might give you a shock of sorts."

"But I was not asleep—at least, I don't think I was."

Raynier stared.

"Not asleep? But you won't mind my saying that that is—er—rather an unusual kind of walking attire."

She laughed, glancing at her wrapper.

"Isn't it? The fact is I hadn't gone to bed yet I was sitting reading in the tent, and some impulse moved me to come to this place again—I can't explain it, but it was there. Yet, I must have been asleep at times, when I walked. But I was half conscious, too, that you were near to me."

"Well, you did not seem surprised when you woke up, so to say, and found I was."

"No. And in a way it was a waking-up. I can't explain it—unless it was a kind of sleeping consciousness."

"What a strange girl you are, Miss Clive. Somehow I can't make you out at all."

"No? And yet you wish you could. Am I right?"

The smile she flashed at him was inexpressibly winning and sweet. Raynier recalled Haslam's dictum. Something uncanny about her, he had said—something sort of creepy. Well, there might be from the point of view of some, even of most. But what would have repelled most men appealed to him, and the proof of it was that he was conscious of no inclination to terminate this interview—rather the reverse. Still, it had to be done.

"We ought to return to the camp, I think," he said, in the same unconcerned tone as though suggesting a return from an ordinary walk or ride. And she acquiesced.

"I want you to promise me something," Raynier said, rather earnestly, and perhaps a little tenderly, as they wended their way back over the moon-lit wildness of the plain, and the tents of the sleeping camp were quite near, "and that is not to repeat to-night's adventure. It's anything but safe. And if the same impulse comes over you, you must combat it."

"I'll almost promise that. Do you know, you are awfully unlike other men. For instance, all this time you have scarcely given a single thought to the awkwardness of this situation. Most men would have been fidgety and thinking what everyone would say, and so on."

He laughed.

"Magician as you are, that is not difficult to divine," he said. "What I want to get at is, how do you know I have not?"

"There's no magic in knowing that. It is almost like setting yourself out to prove a negative. I can see—by the absence of all signs of it. Shall I tell you why that strange place has a fascination for me? Something warns me there will come a day when our knowledge of it will make all the difference between life and death. There—the thought has gone, nor can I pick up the thread of it. It has left me."

That same movement of the hand as though clearing away an invisible mist from before her eyes. Upon her face, earnest and serious in the moonlight, there rested that same look which he had seen there when they were discussing clairvoyance and things occult, during the evening, and he felt just a little awed. Did she really possess the gift of seeing into the future?

"Good-night now, and get a good rest," he said in a low tone and somewhat concernedly, as they regained the tents. And with a bright nod she disappeared within hers.

Chapter Thirteen.

Of the Dak—and Mehrab Khan.

"Halloa, Raynier. I see the *dak* coming," cried Haslam, putting his head into the tent where the other was sitting, going over some official papers with his Babu; for, even though this was a sort of holiday trip, there were things to be attended to, and every day a Levy Sowar rode into and out from Mazaran, a distance of about forty miles. To the rest of the party this daily post was a daily event. They got English mail letters—or news from the outside world. Haslam, for instance, whose family was away in England, was wont to wax excited over the event. But to Raynier it was more of a nuisance than otherwise. It brought him official correspondence, but as for English letters he never got any, and did not want any. So Haslam's announcement failed to awaken any interest within him.

A little later there entered a chuprassi bearing a leather bag. This Raynier unlocked, and proceeded to extract the contents by the simple process of turning it upside down. The usual official matter—but—what was this? An English mail letter?

There it lay amid the heap of long envelopes, and even before he took it up a frown came over Raynier's face, for it was directed in the handwriting of Cynthia Daintree.

What on earth could she have to write to him about? The envelope had been re-directed on from Baghnagar, so she was evidently ignorant of his transfer and promotion. He sat staring at the envelope, and the frown deepened. He felt in no hurry to explore its contents, for his instincts warned him that they would certainly prove unpleasant, possibly mischievous. Well, it had to be done.

The letter was long and closely written, and a feeling of weariness and repulsion came over him at the anticipation of having to wade through all this. And—it began affectionately.

But before he had read far the mystified expression upon his face became one of blank astonishment and dismay.

"Great Scott! The woman must be mad," he ejaculated, bringing his hand down upon the table; all of which afforded huge if secret delight to the Babu, whose keen native scent for an intrigue had led him to put two and two together—the receipt of the letter in a feminine hand, and the bewilderment and disgust evoked thereby in his master.

Good cause indeed had the latter for both. For the writer, after referring to their quarrel, lightly, daintily and in a prettily repentant way, proceeded to set forth that an excellent opportunity to join him having now occurred in the shape of some friends who were returning to India, she was coming out immediately—would, in fact, already have sailed by the time he received this letter, and that they could be married at Bombay when she landed, or from her friends' house at Poonah. Then there was a good deal that was very high sounding and gracious about turning over a new leaf and learning to understand each other better and so forth, with a deft rounding off of affection to close the missive effectively and clinchingly. No wonder he was dazed.

"You can go now, Babu," he said.

The Bengali rose and salaamed. There was going to be some fun now about some mem-sahib, he was thinking to himself with an inward chuckle, for he had seen that kind of thing before.

Raynier sat there thinking, and thinking hard. What on earth was the meaning of it all? He went over in his own mind that parting scene. There was no sort of ambiguity about it, he decided; no loophole or possibility of doubt that it was absolute and final. He recalled her own words, "Very well, then. It is your doing, your choice, remember." There was no sort of reserve, no double meaning there, even if her silence ever since had not shown that she had considered her acquiescence final. And now she wrote coolly announcing her intention of coming out, and marrying him straight off hand. Marrying him!

It is possible that never until that moment had he so completely realised the intense feeling of emancipation which had been with him day and night since the breaking off of that most mistaken understanding. Of late, too, it had been

stronger still upon him, yet now it was the strongest of all.

The thing was preposterous—in fact, preposterous was hardly the word for it. But what was to be done? To suffer himself to be led as a sheep to the slaughter was simply and entirely out of the question. But the unpleasantness of it all, the scandal it would create, the ridiculous and even scurvy position in which it would place himself—why, it was intolerable!

He scanned the letter. Even as she had said, she was well on her way now. It was absolutely too late to cable and stop her—even if he knew where, for he did not fail to notice that so important a little detail as the name of the ship, or even of the Line, was deftly omitted. How then could he meet her? Easily enough. She would cable him from Aden as to the time of her arrival, she had said. And Aden was the last port of call.

For all that he would cable on the off-chance of being in time to stop her. Such messages were expensive, and he had an idea that it would in this case prove a sheer waste of money. Ha! That was it. He would send the message to the Vicar direct. He of course would know the ship *Cynthia* was on board of, and would send after her to the first port of call, and thus avoid humiliation for herself and all concerned. He got out telegraph forms, and rapidly, though carefully, indited a couple of messages. Then he lifted up his voice,—

“*Koi ha!*”

There entered a chuprassi.

“Take those at once, and tell Mehrab Khan he is to send them in to Mazaran, now, immediately. Let him pick out the man with the best horse, and tell that man to *ride* it. You hear?”

“*Ha, Huzoor.*”

To another in the camp the post had seemingly brought tidings of moment. Hilda Clive, in the seclusion of her tent, was scrutinising her correspondence with anything but indifference. Several envelopes were opened, their contents just glanced at, and thrown down. Then a quick, eager look came into her face as she drew one sheet from its cover, and settled herself to read. As she read on the look of interest deepened, and a very soft, velvety glow rendered her eyes dangerously fascinating and winning had any been there to see them.

“Just as I have thought,” she said to herself, as she came to the end of the communication.

“Now it will all come right. And yet—and yet—do things ever come right? Well, this shall—yes, it shall.” And the smile that parted her lips and the light in her eyes rendered her face positively radiant, as she rose, and with extra care locked away the correspondence she had just been perusing with such happy effect. And ten minutes later Raynier’s bearer was notifying him, with profuse apologies for presuming to intrude upon the notice of the great, that the Miss Sahib was waiting, and ready to start upon the ride they were to take together.

Hilda Clives spirits were simply bubbling over, for she had just discovered something she had set herself to find out, and the result was in every way satisfactory. But they had not been long on the road before she discovered something else—viz, that her escort, usually so equable, and full of ideas and conversation, was to-day not himself. He would give random answers, and his thoughts seemed to be running on something entirely outside; in short, it took no more than a couple of searchingly furtive glances to convince her that he had something on his mind.

Their objective was the village of a sirdar of the Gularzai, and their way lay through ten miles mostly of craggy mountain, all tumbled and chaotic—shooting upward in a sea of jagged peaks. The path by which they threaded the labyrinthine passes was in places none too safe, frequently overhanging, as it did, the boulder-strewn bed of a mountain torrent, now nearly dry. All of this Hilda Clive thoroughly enjoyed, although she had to dismount while Mehrab Khan led her horse. This Mehrab Khan was jemadar of the Levy Sowars, and wore a sort of khaki uniform and a blue turban and *kulla*. For the rest, he was a very smart and intelligent man, and by nationality was a Baluchi of the Dumki tribe. By some intuition Raynier had at once singled him out as one to be trusted. He liked to have him in attendance on such expeditions as the present one, and would talk with him for hours at a time, and of this preference the man was intensely proud.

As they emerged from the mountain passes upon the more open country, they approached a camp of four or five shaggy herdsmen, who would hardly give the salaam, but scowled evilly at them, leaning on their queer long guns with sickle-shaped stocks. Hardly had they gone by than there was a rush of two great dogs—guardians of the flocks pasturing along the mountain side. Open-mouthed, with one ferocious bay, they came straight for Hilda, who was riding on that side. In a moment she would have been dragged from her horse, for Raynier’s steed had taken fright, and it was all he could do to keep the idiotic beast from incontinently bolting, let alone come to her assistance. But Mehrab Khan, who was behind, spurred alongside of her, and with a lightning-like sweep of his tulwar cut down the foremost beast, nearly severing it in half.

The other sheered off, growling. But a savage, vengeful shout behind told of a new danger. The herdsmen they had just passed came running up, and it could be seen that two or three of them had drawn their swords.

“Stay, brothers,” called out Mehrab Khan. “Stay. It is the *Sirkar.*”

Would they stop? It was little enough these wild mountaineers cared for the *Sirkar*. The situation was critical. There were five of these fierce, fanatical savages, fired with hate for the infidel intruder, burning with a desire for revenge upon the destroyers of their property. Raynier had got in front of Hilda Clive, whispering hurriedly to her on no account to move, while Mehrab Khan and the other Levy Sowar, with their rifles ready, faced the oncomers.

The latter, not liking the look of things, slackened their speed and came to a halt, spitting curses.

“Why do they keep savage animals to rush out at people?” Raynier asked, for, though he could talk Pushtu fairly well, he chose to put it through Mehrab Khan. “Dogs of that kind are more dangerous than a pack of wolves.”

The men answered scowlingly that they were kept to protect the flocks, and that dogs were of no use at all for such a purpose unless they were fierce. Besides, they were not accustomed to strangers in a strange dress.

“There’s something in that,” said Raynier.

“Would not the Huzoor pay for the property he had destroyed?” the spokesman asked. “Such a dog as that was valuable.”

Raynier replied that he would, but they must send or come to the camp to receive it, as he did not carry money about with him. Then a bargain was struck, allowing a trifle over for their trouble in travelling that distance, and with a surly salaam, the herdsman withdrew.

“Of course I might have refused to pay a single pice,” Raynier said, as he explained to the girl what had transpired. “But it is not sound policy invariably to stand stiffly on one’s rights, and it’s better to pay a few rupees than make enemies of these people. Besides, poor devils, it is a loss to them.”

Hilda agreed, only insisting that, as the liability was incurred in her defence, she ought to be allowed to discharge it—a proposal which was laughed to scorn.

“You see, now, what might have happened during that little moonlight stroll of yours,” Raynier went on. “And I don’t think you’d find these brutes so ready to turn tail as that panther was. By the way, I daresay you’d rather turn back now?”

“Of course not. Why?”

“Only that you must have seen enough of the interesting Gularzai at close quarters for one day.”

“Then I haven’t,” she answered gaily. “I wouldn’t give up this visit to a real native magnate for the world.”

“It was well done, Mehrab Khan,” said Raynier, in Pushtu. “Thy stroke was a worthy one, strong and swift.”

And the Baluchi, proud and pleased, murmured his thanks.

Chapter Fourteen.

A Visit—and its Sequel.

Sarbaland Khan’s village was similar in every particular to that of the greater potentate which we have already seen. Many eyes were watching the approach of the party of four from the loop-holed mud walls, and the glances directed at them as they entered the central courtyard, if not uniformly expressive of good will, were visibly so of curiosity. For these wild beings, to whom raids and forays and blood feuds were as the very salt of existence, now beheld a strange sight—that of a man and a woman—Feringhi infidels—with no other protection than a couple of Levy Sowars, entering their village, quietly, fearlessly, unconcernedly, as though in their own town at Mazaran, and the man was of importance, for he represented the *Sirkar* at Mazaran; yet here he walked alone into their midst, and to all appearances unarmed. Ya, Allah! but these Feringhi were a mad race—mad and incomprehensible. So pondered these wild mountaineers, salaaming gravely, as they peered at the strangers from beneath their shaggy brows.

The chief received them courteously, inviting them at once into his house. Sarbaland Khan was a tall man with a fine presence and dignified manner, and was clad in snowy white from head to foot. But the appointments of his dwelling were plain in the extreme—the only ornaments being a curious lamp or two, and a beautifully decorated sword, which last, together with a couple of good magazine rifles, hung on the wall. Three or four of his relatives helped to entertain them, and Hilda Clive was vastly impressed with their natural dignity—indeed, she could hardly believe they were of the same race as the shaggy, scowling savages who had so lately threatened them. Tea was brought in, served after the Russian method, and preserved fruits, and then she asked if she could visit the chief’s wives.

“I can do more than even you can, you see, Mr Raynier,” she said gaily, as permission having been given, she rose to follow the veiled figure who was summoned to guide her. “So now for the mysteries of the harem.”

Raynier’s talk with the chief was purely non-official, this being a merely friendly visit. He was asked about his predecessor, whom these people seemed to have held in some estimation—and then they talked about *shikar*. There were plenty of markhôr in the mountains around his village, declared Sarbaland Khan, and if Raynier Sahib would like to come and stalk some, he would certainly find some sport. Then he sent for some fine heads that had been recently shot to show his guest, and presently these two, the up-to-date Englishman and the mountain chieftain, having got upon this one grand topic in common, set to discussing this branch of sport as animatedly as though fellow-members of an English house party. In the midst of which discussion Hilda Clive returned.

So strange are the writings in the book of Fate. At that very moment a horseman was spurring—his objective the village of Sarbaland Khan. No great time would it take him to reach it either, and did he do so with the message he bore while this friendly conversation was in progress, why, then, Herbert Raynier would never leave Sarbaland Khan’s village alive.

Yet now they took leave of each other with great cordiality—Raynier expressing the hope of welcoming the Sirdar at the *jirga*, or assembly of all the chief's and maliks, to be held shortly at Mazaran; and so they fared forth.

"You have given me a most delightfully interesting experience, Mr Raynier," said Hilda Clive, as they rode campward. "And I admire the chief's taste. Two of his wives were very pretty, indeed, one quite beautiful."

"How many has he got?"

"Only three. I expected he would have had about thirty."

Raynier laughed.

"They're only allowed four apiece by the Koran," he said. "But I believe they find ways of driving a coach-and-six through that enactment. Fine fellow Sarbaland Khan, isn't he?"

"Very. Why, he's a perfect gentleman. Really he's quite a splendid-looking man."

"Many of these people answer to that description, that's why they are so interesting. Tarleton describes them as 'niggers.' But then the British are first-rate at misnomers."

"I should think so. But how well you talk to them, Mr Raynier. Is it a difficult language to learn. Anything like Hindustani, for instance?"

"No. There's a lot of Persian in it. I went in for learning Pushtu some years ago, thinking it might come in useful—and it has. By the way, a strange thing happened in London not long before I came back. I can't help thinking that the man belonged to one of these tribes—but I never saw him again, nor yet the stick I armed him with."

Then he proceeded to tell her about the incident of the Oriental in the crowd on Mafeking night, and the part he and others had borne in his rescue. Hilda listened, keenly interested.

"And you never got back the stick?" she said.

"No, never. I was going to say—worse luck—but it wasn't. On the contrary, it was the only 'lucky' part of the whole business."

The dry, satirical tone did not escape his listener's abnormally acute perceptions. But the recollection seemed to revive the abstraction of thought which had characterised him when they had first set out, and which the incidents of their expedition had gone far to dispel. Now it all seemed to return. This, too, did not escape her, and she was striving to piece the two circumstances together. But as yet all connectedness failed.

They were returning by a somewhat different route, and were already about half-way to the camp. The sun was sinking, and the barren and rugged surface of rock and stunted vegetation was taking on a softer tinge as the westering glow toned down its asperities. But there was a feel in the air as of impending change, and the wind, which had died down altogether, now began to rise in fitful puffs, raising thin spiral columns like dust waterspouts, which whirled along at intervals on the plain around.

"Is there going to be a storm?" said Hilda.

"Yes. But not before we are in camp again."

He subsided into silence. It was possible that the strange oppressiveness in the atmosphere affected him, to the exaggeration of that which was on his mind, to wit the very disagreeable burden of the news he had just received. Or it may have been that the certainty was brought home to him that a month ago it would not have affected him to any appreciable extent. The unpleasantness, the scandal, would have been just the same, but, somehow, it would have mattered little then. Now it did. But why?

What was to be done? was his ever-present thought. It was simply abominable that he should be pursued in this way. Had the woman no sense of shame? Evidently not. He had heard of ships going down at sea with all on board; was he tempted to feel that this was clearly too good a piece of luck—seen from his point of view—to happen to the one which comprised among its passengers Cynthia Daintree?

What was to be done? He looked at his companion. Should he frankly put the case to her? She was like no other woman he had ever known for clear insight into and ready grasp of the main facts or probabilities of any given question—at least, so he had found reason to decide during their somewhat short acquaintance—which, somehow or other, did not seem short. She could not be more than five or six and twenty at the outside, and yet the knowledge of human nature and capacity for the analysis of human motives she displayed was simply wonderful. He could put it to her as the case of a third party, or simply a case in the abstract, such as they had often debated and threshed out together, and then he laughed at himself in bitter contempt. Where were the qualities with which he had just been endowing her, that she could fail for one single instant to see through so miserable a device? He must put it to her frankly or not at all; and somehow Hilda Clive was the last person in the world to whom he desired to put it at all.

She, for her part, riding beside him, perforce in silence, was thinking of him and his unwonted taciturnity. Some trouble had come upon him—that was certain, and she connected it with the arrival of the mail. Could she but induce him to confide in her? Yet, why should he? She did not know. Still, she wanted him to; for a strange indefinable instinct moved her to the conviction that she could help him. During their acquaintance she had learnt to hold him in high esteem. She admired him, too, for his unassuming nature, the more so that she was able to gauge the real depth of quiet power that lay beneath it. She had noted the ease of his intercourse with these wild and turbulent, but interesting people—for this visit to Sarbaland Khan's village was not the first time she had been among them in

Raynier's company—and noting it, knew that it bore testimony to the estimation in which he was held by them; for these sons of the desert and mountain, in common with all barbarians, are quick readers of character, and have no respect for that which is weak. And yet, could she have divined what was troubling him then it would have assumed such trivial proportions to her mind, so simple a solution, as to make her laugh outright. And she knew a great deal more about him than he did about her; indeed, the news she had received that morning, and which had somewhat elated her, mainly concerned him.

"What abstruse problem is weighing on your mind, Mr Raynier? Do you know that since we left the chief's village you have hardly spoken a word. And we are almost home again."

He started.

"I beg your pardon. How very remiss of me. Well, I was thinking of something. As a matter of fact, it's something that's worrying me more than a little."

"You had bad news?"

"Yes. And yet hardly in the sense of what people understand by bad news. But it was something of an extremely vexatious and worrying nature, and likely to cause me no end of unpleasantness."

"I'm so sorry," she said, in a tone which invited further confidence. It decided him. He would tell her.

A high ridge rose between them and the camp. This they were the while ascending by a rough road leading to the kotal by which it was crossed. Now, from the other side of this, there boomed forth a long, low, rattling thunder roll.

"Hallo! The storm is a great deal nearer than I thought," he exclaimed, looking up. "We must hurry on, Miss Clive. I don't want you to get caught in the thick of it."

No time for confidences was this, he decided. All women were afraid of thunder and lightning, though all would not admit it. What, then, would be the use of consulting this one on a delicate and highly unpleasant matter what time her thoughts would be running on how quickly at the earliest they could reach the camp?

Another peal rolled forth, dull and distant, tailing off into a sort of staccato rapping rattle.

"Well, these mountains do give out the most extraordinary thing in echoes I ever struck," he said. "Or else that's about the strangest peal of thunder I ever heard."

A clinking sound behind caused both to turn. Mehrab Khan, who, with the other sowar, had been some way behind, was galloping to overtake them, and that at a pace which is hardly put on in ascending such an acclivity unless under weighty necessity. But even before he could come up with them, the dark figure of a horseman appeared on the kotal above, and came flying down the rough and stony road. They made him out to be another of the Levy Sowars.

The pace was too great, or the rider too weak. He was flung off, almost at their very feet—a terrible sight, covered with blood and dust. With a word to Hilda Clive to wait where she was, Raynier and Mehrab Khan went forward to examine the man.

They were only just in time. He could gasp forth a few words, and then fell back dead. Raynier's voice was very serious as he returned to the girl.

"We cannot go back to camp now, Miss Clive," he said. "We must travel the other way. But keep up your courage—you have plenty of it—and we will bring you through all safe."

Chapter Fifteen.

"A Land of Surprises."

"Raynier may be a smart chap, and a smart official, and all that, but he doesn't know this country a little hang. He oughtn't to get wandering about all alone as he does. It isn't safe—and—it isn't *pukka!*"

And Haslam, having delivered himself of the above opinion, drained his "peg" and yelled for his bearer to bring him another.

"But he isn't all by himself," objected Tarleton. "He's got Miss Clive with him, and two Levy Sowars."

"Oh, as to the first, that of course," returned the Forest Officer, looking knowing, "he generally has. Think that'll be a *bundobust*, Tarleton?"

"I don't know—and don't care. It's no concern of mine."

"Don't care what?" said Mrs Tarleton, joining the two, who, seated in long chairs and clad in easy attire, were indulging in "pegs" and cheroots.

"We were talking about Raynier, Mrs Tarleton," said Haslam. "We agreed he oughtn't to go and look up a man like Sarbaland Khan attended by only two Levy Sowars."

"And Miss Clive, Haslam said," appended Tarleton.

"It isn't *pukka*, you know," repeated Haslam, "nor is it altogether safe."

"Mercy on us, Mr Haslam! Why, he'd never go taking Hilda anywhere that's dangerous, surely? Besides, the country's quite quiet now, and the people friendly."

"Yes. Still, you never know exactly what may happen next. This is a land of surprises. I don't trust these *soors* any further than I can see them, and however friendly it may suit them to be for the moment they hate us like poison underneath it all."

"Why, you quite frighten me," said Mrs Tarleton, anxiously. "I wish they'd come back. It's getting late too. Oh, what if anything should happen!"

"Something is going to happen, and that before long," growled Tarleton, looking up, "and that'll be a thunderstorm. Phew! how close it is. I must have another 'peg.'" And he, too, shouted for his bearer.

It was even as he had said, close—close and brooding. The sun was getting low, but the blue of the sky on the northern side had merged indefinitely into a leaden, vaporous opacity which was gradually and insidiously creeping upward to the zenith. Against this, the peaks stood up, black and bizarre, and here and there, caught by a fitful wind puff, a trail of red dust would stream outward from the summit of a ridge, to lose itself in midair, or perchance to mingle with one of the column-like "dust-devils" which rose gyrating from the plain. Something was bound to come of it—an earthquake, a tornado, or a thunderstorm—probably the latter, for a muffled boom in the direction of the advancing blackness now became audible.

"We're going to get it," said Haslam, looking upward. "I only hope it isn't a blow—we don't want the tents suddenly whirled away over our heads. Rather not."

"I wish those two were back," repeated Mrs Tarleton, looking out over the forbidding waste, now more forbidding than ever. "I have a presentiment something is going to happen. Do you think these Levy Sowars are reliable, Mr Haslam?"

"I say, Mrs Tarleton, I believe Miss Clive has been infecting you with her forecasts and clairvoyance and all that sort of thing. I don't know about the Catch-'em-alive-ohs being reliable—but I don't believe they could hit a town-hall unless they were put inside it and all the doors locked. Even then they'd miss it by the windows."

"Well, but—surely they must be some good or they wouldn't be enlisted," objected Tarleton.

"I remember trying a chap once. There was an old door stuck on end about sixty yards off. I got him to take three shots at it with his Martini, and he missed it clean twice, the third time just knocking a chip off one of the top corners."

"Well, but you can't judge them all by one," objected Tarleton.

"Hallo. Here comes somebody," cried Haslam.

"Oh, I'm so glad," said Mrs Tarleton. Then, disappointedly, "It isn't them at all. It's some horrid natives. It's not in the right direction, either."

Down amid the sparse vegetation, below the camp on the more open side, the troop horses and baggage camels were grazing, and here it was that a group of figures appeared, surrounding a central one who was mounted on a fine camel. It could be seen that all were armed to the teeth, having Lee-Metfords and Martinis, over and above the inevitable curved sword, but there was nothing unusual in this. It was a national custom among these wild northern tribes.

The group had come to a halt just outside the camp. Haslam sent down one of his forest guards to inquire who was there, and what could be done for them. But it might have been seen that the section of the camp occupied by the Levy Sowars was the scene of some little excitement. The occupants had turned out to a man, and were gazing attentively at the new arrivals.

Soon Haslam's envoy returned to say that a Sirdar of the Gularzai was anxious to salaam to Raynier Sahib, but, as the latter was absent, perhaps the jungle wallah Sahib would confer with him instead. No, the Sirdar could not rest at their camp. He was journeying on a matter of family and religious importance, and must push on immediately. But he had a communication of official import to make. Perhaps the jungle wallah Sahib would hear it in the absence of the Government's representative, and transmit it.

"Here's a 'dik,'" (bother—perplexity—nuisance) grumbled Haslam. "I don't want to be 'dikked' with Raynier's official affairs. As if I hadn't enough of my own. Wonder what he wants—and who he is. Well, here goes." And gulping down the remainder of his "peg" he strolled down towards the group, doing so, moreover, with a leisureliness of gait that was rather put on, being designed to impress the Sirdar with a sense of his condescension in thus going to him at all.

The man on the camel did not dismount, nor did he cause the beast to kneel. This, again, aroused Haslam's resentment. What business had a native to remain seated, and talk down to him, so to say? Not only that, but the man on the camel returned his salaam somewhat coldly and haughtily—and the salute of his followers was equally curt. Haslam began to feel downright angry.

"Where is the *Sirkar* Sahib?" began the chief—his voice taking additional haughtiness, coming down, as it did, from his rather lofty eminence.

"You have been told. He is away," returned the Forest Officer no less curtly, and speaking in Hindustani.

"Where?"

Haslam did not answer immediately. He stared. He was boiling with rage. To be addressed in this way, and in such a tone. Moreover, he thought to detect an evil grin on the faces of the hook-nosed, turbaned savages standing around, who seemed to be fingering their rifles in a manner that was unpleasantly suggestive.

"Are you the jungle wallah?" went on the man on the camel.

"The jungle wallah *Sahib*" blared forth Haslam, white with fury. But what was the use? and then he remembered that he had not even his revolver upon him. He had thrown it down upon his camp bed, and there it was. And an unarmed man is a demoralised man.

The chief laughed evilly and spat.

"Well, jungle wallah *Sahib*," he said. "I asked—Where is the *Sirkar* wallah *Sahib*? I am not accustomed to repeat a question twice."

"Oh, you are not, your Mightiness, and lord of all the world," answered Haslam, adopting the other's sneering tone. "Salaam to you then, for you are far too great a king for me to talk with," and he turned to go.

"Move not."

The order came, sharp and stern. Haslam's first impulse was to ignore it, but a second, and perhaps a safer one, caused him to halt, and half turn. It was high time. Four rifles were levelled straight at him at the distance of a few yards.

Haslam was as brave a man as ever lived, yet at that moment, gazing at the deadly muzzles and the scowling, shaggy visages behind them, well might he have quailed, for his peril was great indeed. But he returned the threatening stare of the chief firmly and unflinchingly.

For a few moments both thus looked at each other in silence. Then Haslam, who had none of the imperturbability of the Oriental, thought he might as well say something, if only to show them he was not cowed.

"Who is the Sirdar with whom I am talking?" he asked.

"Murad Afzul, Gularzai."

Then Haslam felt more than uncomfortable. The name of this noted border ruffian was known to him, likewise some of his deeds. But it was supposed that he had disappeared from that side of the country for some time past.

"Look now at thy camp," went on the latter. "But move not, or thou art dead."

The words were nearly drowned in what followed. A long, rattling roll as of thunder, from the ridge overhanging the camp—then another, and lo! the slope was alive with rushing white figures, and the flash of waving tulwars, as the crowd of fierce assailants charged down with lightning speed upon the practically defenceless camp. Many of the Levy Sowars—upon whose especial side of the camp the volleys had been poured—were dead, or writhing in death agonies and wounds. The remnant huddled for a moment like sheep, then made a rush for their horses, but between these and them was Murad Afzul's bodyguard—practised marksmen. Coolly, and with deliberate aim, they picked off the units of the demoralised force, bringing the whole to a standstill—and a sorry whole it was by now.

Not all, however—not quite all—were demoralised. One, a brave man, a clansman of Mehrab Khan, who had been detailed for *dak* duty, leaped on his horse, which was standing ready saddled and bridled, and dashed off at full gallop, to warn the *Sirkar* Sahib and, incidentally, his fellow-tribesman. Bullets were rained after him, but now, in the excitement of immediate massacre and loot, aim had become wild. Yet, had they looked more closely, a tell-tale squirm or quiver might have told those marksmen that of the multitude of the bullets, one or two—or perchance more—had found a billet.

It was all over very quickly. There was no question of defence. In a moment the whole crowd of copper-coloured, frenzied savages was overrunning the camp. Those that were left of the Levy Sowars, being Moslems, appealed to their assailants in the name of Allah and the Prophet for quarter, and were spared. But the other camp servants—bearers, kitmutghars, syces, and the rest, being Hindus, were cut down without mercy, those who had striven to hide being dragged forth and butchered—and the barbarians, yelling aloud in the madness of their blood lust, surged to and fro, brandishing aloft their red and reeking swords, looking around for more to slay. But there were none.

Throughout the attack and massacre Tarleton had been too staggered to do anything at all. As for his wife, the sight of the butchery of the wretched servants, cut to pieces before her eyes, in spite of their heartrending yells for mercy, had been too much for her, and she saved all trouble on her account by incontinently fainting. He reckoned his only chance was to sit quiet, wherein perhaps he was wise, for, although many pressed, cursing and threatening, around them both, none offered them violence, and indeed it looked as if such abstention were part of their orders. But what was the whole bobbery about, he kept putting to himself, for there was no open war with any of the tribes? He was soon to know.

Chapter Sixteen.

How Tarleton Yielded.

"This is a land of surprises," Haslam had said, and indeed if ever words had been vividly, literally and luridly borne out, here was an instance. Within one short half hour of their utterance this camp, then the very embodiment of peaceful repose and fancied security, had been overrun by savage massacre and turned into a reeking human shambles. Corpses, many of them horribly hacked, lay in every attitude of agonised contortion, and great smears of blood spattered the canvas of the tents, as also the dirty-white garments of the assailants. As for the hapless Europeans, though for the moment alive and uninjured, they were helpless captives in the power of the most notoriously cruel and unsparing brigand of the whole northern border. Of a truth this was a land of surprises.

The first idea that occupied Haslam and Tarleton was to attend to the unfortunate lady, and this they did, as carefully as though it was an ordinary fainting fit, and there were no barbarous enemies within a thousand miles of them.

"She'd better not come to again just yet," Tarleton said. "We'd better get her into a tent, if they'll let us."

Permission to do this was granted gruffly, but two of their captors were ordered to enter with them lest they should possess themselves of weapons, nor was this precaution superfluous, for they had fixed upon Haslam's tent as being the nearest, and Haslam's revolver lay upon his charpoy. At the sight he stifled a deep and muttered curse, as the Gularzai pounced greedily upon it. He had reason to curse deeper still as they ordered him to at once deliver up any arms and ammunition he might have in his possession. Inwardly he groaned again as he saw his beautiful shot gun and Mannlicher rifle in the eager grip of the hooked claws of these copper-hued brigands. Then he was ordered outside again.

Murad Afzul had not dismounted from his fine camel, and from the altitude of his seat—for he had ridden into the centre of the camp—was directing operations. Several of his followers were ransacking the tents, trundling out their contents; and soon trunks and despatch boxes, bags and tins of provisions, articles of clothing and kitchen utensils were piled together in promiscuous heaps. But what delighted the warrior soul of the freebooter was the sight of four or five good, up-to-date rifles and a brace of revolvers. The shotguns, too, he contemplated with satisfaction, but the rifles appealed to him most, and these he caused to be handed up to him one after the other as he sat on his camel, and each he would bring to his shoulder, sighting it at some object far or near, away over the plain. The weapons of his followers were good, but they were only Martinis. But these—magazine and repeating guns, spick and span, and of first-rate workmanship! Ya, Mahomed, what a find!

Now he beckoned Haslam to him. The Forest Officer, standing there under this arch-brigand looking down upon him from the height of his towering camel, felt that humiliation was indeed his lot to-day.

"So, jungle wallah," began Murad Afzul, speaking in Hindustani, and sneeringly withal, "so, jungle wallah, I told you I was not accustomed to ask the same question twice; yet this time I will give you yet another chance, and ask it the third time. Where is Raynier?"

"That I can't tell, for I don't know," answered Haslam, with perfect truth.

The chief bent over, and whispered instructions to some of his followers on the off-side of his camel. These came round, and laying a hand on Haslam's shoulder ordered him to go with them. Resistance was absolutely useless, and Haslam was marched away. They were taking him in the direction of the Levy Sowars' camp, he noticed, of course to execute him there. His time had come, he concluded. Rapidly, as he walked to his doom, his past life flashed through his recollection. He had been a careless sort of chap, he supposed, like others, no better—he would have shrunk from the imputation of making any other claim—but, he hoped, no worse. He had not troubled his head much about what lay beyond the grave, nor had he ever shrunk from death when duty or dangerous sport had brought him within gazing distance of it. Perhaps, if all that was taught of what came after it were true, or even a portion, why, he was surrendering his life rather than give information which should place the lives of others in danger, and it might be taken into consideration. But of mercy at the hands of yon ruthless freebooter he had no hope. At any rate, he would meet a swift death—they would shoot or behead him, and they might have done him to death by slow torture. He thought of his wife and young family away in England. Would they miss him much, and, more important still, would the Government do anything for them over and above the rather moderate pension which they would draw from the fund to which he had subscribed throughout his term of service? It was not probable. Government was seldom liberal. Then his thoughts were broken in upon. They had reached the tents of the Levy Sowars, and into one of these he was ordered.

Wonderingly he obeyed. What did it mean? Were they not going to put him to death after all, for it occurred to him they would hardly have brought him into a tent for such a purpose? But he was ordered to seat himself, and remain perfectly still—and informed that any movement he might make, or sound that he should utter, would be his last. And then, immediately outside the canvas which screened him from the outer world, he heard the loud sharp, double report of a rifle.

One other heard it too, and that one was Tarleton. To his mind it suggested but one solution—possible rescue to wit—acting upon which idea he did what a man of his bull-headed temperament would be expected to do, but which, had his idea been correct, was the very worst possible thing he could have done. He came to the tent door, and looked eagerly and anxiously out.

Murad Afzul still sat there on his great camel, his countenance as cold and impassive as the graceful folds of his snowy turban, while upon his followers a strange hush had fallen. At sight of the Feringhi it was broken—broken by muttered curses and threats. But—where was Haslam?

The chief beckoned him forward, and he had to obey. Yes, obey. There was no mincing the word. He was in the power—absolutely in the power of this man, this "nigger," as he would have described him about half an hour ago.

"You heard those shots," said the Gularzai, haughtily, from the loftiness of his tall steed. "Yes? Look around. Where is the jungle wallah?"

Tarleton did look around—with some alacrity, moreover. But no sign of Haslam rewarded his glance. He began to see the grim drift of the injunction.

“You will see your friend no more,” went on the chief. “I asked him a question—for the third time. He would not answer—so he was shot—over there.”

He paused, with intent to let the full weight of his words sink deep in the other’s mind. Like most wild or semi-civilised people, the Gularzai freebooter was a character reader, and knew his man. But, before the other had time to answer, an interruption occurred, as startling as it was unforeseen.

All were watching the result of the dialogue between the chief and the prisoner. Fierce eyes glared beneath shaggy brows, claw-like fingers felt the edge of tulwars, foul and sticky with blood that had already been shed. Eagerly heads were bent forward, awaiting the word that should hand this Feringhi over to their scarcely-glutted blood lust and hate.

“Hear me, O great Sirdar,” cried a voice, pitched in loud, harsh tones. “Hear me, I can give the information thou requirest, O Sword of the Prophet.”

The Levy Sowars who had surrendered, to the number of about a dozen, were grouped on the outskirts of the freebooters. From one of these the voice proceeded.

“Let him come forward,” said Murad Afzul.

Way being made the speaker advanced. He was a youngish man, tall and well built, with aquiline features and a short curling beard.

“Who art thou?” said the chief, shortly.

“Mahomed Afa, Waziri,” answered the man.

“Well, what dost thou know?”

“This, O great Sirdar, Murad Afzul. This, this. That as thou didst slay my father Mahomed Jan, so now enter Jehanum by the hand of his son.”

Quick as thought, while uttering these words he had snatched a rifle from the loose, unguarded grasp of the man next to him, and without waiting to raise it to his shoulder discharged the piece well-nigh point blank at the chief. But the ball hummed viciously past, just ruffling the edge of Murad Afzul’s voluminous turban. For the camel, whether acting under the influence of the ineradicable cursedness which is inherent in its species, or irritated by the harsh vociferation right at its ear, had suddenly reached round its head with a resentful grunt, making a vicious snap at the would-be slayer, with the double effect of somewhat marring his aim and moving its rider by just the few inches requisite to the saving of his life. In a twinkling the man was seized.

“Ya, Allah!” he mouthed, struggling furiously in the grasp of those who held him. “Avenge me of this robber-dog, this vulture-bred coward who only strikes those who are too weak to oppose his numbers. Mahomed Prophet! strike him down into the burning pit of Hâwiyat, where his gnawing vitals shall consume for ever and ever.”

The declamatory voice had risen to a wild scream. Murad Afzul, seated on his camel, had not moved throughout the whole scene. Now he spoke.

“So thou art the son of Mahomed Jan, that Waziri thief and enemy of Allah?” he said, gazing down upon his would-be slayer. “Allah is great and His Prophet has rendered thee as unskilful in the use of weapons as others of thy kind. Well, ye twain, father and son, have been parted long enough, so now thou shalt join thine in Jehanum, yet not at once, for I think I will show thee some foretaste of its fires here.”

He signed to those who held the frantic man—then something in the aspect of the latter caused him to change his intention. For he recognised that the Waziri’s mind had given way, in short, that he had become a frenzied maniac, and to harm him as such would be clean contrary to all tribal tradition and sanction. Yet he had no intention of letting him off scot free.

“I will spare him the fire,” he said, “for of that he will have plenty. So—shorten him by the head.”

Willing feet sprang to do his bidding. Willing hands seized the mouthing, cursing maniac, who by dint of a camel halter was forced to stretch forth his neck. Then the flash of a keen tulwar in the air, and the deluging, headless corpse was writhing and squirming right at Tarleton’s feet.

Tarleton, surgeon though he was, turned sick at the horrid sight, the more so that in all probability it presaged his own fate. The voice of Murad Afzul recalled him to this.

“You have seen, Feringhi. Now, that is thy fate, if my question is unanswered. Where is Raynier?”

Tarleton looked at the gushing, headless corpse, then at the stern, uncompromising countenance of the chief. He noted, too, the eager, cruel visages of those around, who seemed to hang upon his answer. Life was as good to him as to anybody else, nor did he feel the least inclination to part with it at that moment. Besides, what would become of his wife, now lying unconscious in the tent behind him, if left alone and at the mercy of these ruthless barbarians? Haslam was dead, and thus no one need ever know, for no one was left to witness against him, and if ever there was a case of “every man for himself” this was surely it. So he replied,—

"He has gone to visit Sarbaland Khan."

Chapter Seventeen.

"Better Than Nothing."

"What has happened?" said Hilda, quickly, gazing from one to the other, and then at the dead man who lay a little way off.

"Our camp has been rushed by Ghazis, and they are in possession."

"But—has there been a fight? Have they killed anybody?"

"They had killed some of the servants when that poor fellow broke away to warn us. He was one of Mehrab Khan's tribesmen. But our people were alive, he says."

"But we can't leave them, Mr Raynier."

"That is not spoken with your usual sense. Are we going to walk straight into the jaws of the enemy and say, 'Here we are'? No. I am responsible for your safety, Miss Clive, and you may be sure I shall do the uttermost in my power to secure it."

Even while he had been speaking his mind had rapidly reviewed the situation, and it was one that filled him with the gravest misgiving and concern. He knew that a *jihad*, or fanatical rising, was being fomented among the tribes further along the border, but that the Gularzai could by any possibility take part in it he had reckoned as clean out of the question. He had trusted Mushim Khan thoroughly, had reckoned the Nawab as no more likely to take up arms against the Government than he himself. But that a bold outrage on a large scale could thus take place here right under the nose of the Nawab without the knowledge and therefore sanction of that potentate, he could not believe. What a fool he had been, and how utterly blind not to have seen some sign or warning of the dangerous unrest having spread. Well, this was no time for regrets, but for action—and to this end he would consult Mehrab Khan.

But what then? Would the Baluchi be true to his salt? All these border tribes were akin. Ties of friendship, of gratitude, of honour, of self-interest even, all were swept aside when they made common cause together against the Feringhi and the infidel—and the acquaintance between himself and Mehrab Khan was of the shortest.

But the latter, even at that moment, was giving some indication of what line he was going to take in the crisis. For the other Levy Sowar had been gradually edging away. These two Feringhis would soon be found and cut to pieces, *Sirkar* or not, argued this man, and he had no intention of identifying himself with them any further, and thus sharing their fate; wherefore he resolved, while there was yet time, to effect his own escape. But Mehrab Khan, who knew the workings of his mind, was equally resolved that he should not.

To this end Mehrab Khan dismounted, and levelling his rifle called upon him to stop. The result of this order was to cause the defaulter to ram his spurs into his horse's flanks, and start off along the hillside at a gallop. Now Mehrab Khan was an old and practised stalker of markhōr and wild sheep, consequently now, when, without further warning, he pressed the trigger, the runaway toppled heavily from his saddle, and lay without a kick.

"He would have betrayed us, *Huzoor*," said the Baluchi, laconically, as he slipped a fresh cartridge into his piece. "Now he will not."

To Raynier's plan of returning straight to Sarbaland Khan's village, and not only placing themselves under the protection of that chief, but even ordering him, by virtue of his own office as representative of the Government, to collect a strong force and safeguard those in the camp, if any were left there, or pursue the aggressors if they were not, Mehrab Khan was strongly opposed. He was somewhat mysterious on the point; mysterious but emphatic. On no account must they go there, indeed, he had been glad to get out of the place when they were there before.

Was Sarbaland Khan disaffected then? That he could not say exactly. But the *Huzoor* must trust him. He had seen signs which might have meant much or little. By the light of what had happened he now knew they meant much. The *Huzoor* knew his people, and he, Mehrab Khan, knew his. The gist of all of which was that they must go at once into hiding, and the sooner the better.

All this, however, took far quicker to decide than it has taken to narrate, and now, Mehrab Khan taking the lead, they moved, under his guidance, down into the valley, turning their backs on the site of the camp altogether.

"I shall never forgive myself for getting you into this fix, Miss Clive," said Raynier, with great concern, as he thought on the hardships the coming night would entail upon her, even if it were not the first of many such nights.

"There is no necessity for you to do anything of the sort," she answered. "You could not help it. You could not have foreseen things."

"But that is just what I ought to have done," he answered bitterly. "I have simply acted like a fool, and have made an utter mess of the whole situation."

"No—no. I am sure you have not. Things may not be so bad as you think—and if they are, you are not to blame."

What was this? He looked at her strangely. There was not so much in the words—but the tone, the soothing sympathy of it, as if she realised, even as he did, that, apart from their imminent and common danger, the result for

him would be something like official ruin. The colour had returned to her face—for she had gone rather white as she witnessed Mehrab Khan's grimly successful shot—and there was a look in her eyes which, combined with the tone of her voice, went far to compensate for all. It struck him, too, that she showed no alarm, no anxiety whatever on her own account. Afterwards it was to occur to him how easily she was reassured as to the safety of those they had left in the camp.

Darker and darker it grew, as they threaded their way behind their guide through those lonely defiles, for now the sky was black and overcast, and a lurid flash or two lit their way—and the accompanying boom rolled, deep voiced, among the cliffs and chasms.

"Here we should halt, Mehrab Khan," said Raynier, at last, as two or three great drops splashed down upon them. "The Miss Sahib will get wet through if we go further, and here under this rock is shelter."

But the Baluchi shook his head.

"See there, *Huzoor*," pointing upward.

"We are in a sort of *tangi*, only it is closed at one end. If it should rain here, and rain hard, the water would roll off the smooth rock slopes above, and sweep us out of this like wisps of dried grass. We cannot rest here. We must go on and upward."

The horses were needing rest badly, yet on they struggled. It was quite dark now, but their way was lit by the red flashes. Rain had begun to fall, hard, heavy rain, as, stumbling over the slippery stones, they held on their wet and weary way. And through it all Raynier did not fail to notice that from the girl at his side there came no word of complaint, no sigh of weariness—whereat he marvelled.

He himself was feeling the strain: but with him the strain was as much a mental as a physical one. He felt weighed down with responsibility. If this rising took large and destructive proportions he it was who should have foreseen and coped with it, yet he had gone off, easily and carelessly, upon a pleasure trip, and that right into the heart of the very peril itself. And now the safety of this girl beside him was in his hands; and by way of a beginning to the adventure she would have to spend the livelong night, wet and cold and hungry, lying out among the rocks, for, of course, they had not taken a food supply when starting upon an afternoon ride. And what a contrast it was. The highest official of the district, with, but a few hours ago, servants and armed sowars at his beck and call, surrounded by every comfort and not a few luxuries, was now a fugitive in the heart of a hostile land, soaked by a drenching rain, with no prospect of either food or shelter at the end of it all. It was a contrast, but he was hard and could worry through it—but what of his companion in adversity? She was not inured to rude hardships of this kind. She was not even representative of the stalwart type of her sex, who could scull a boat or play golf all day. She was high couraged and cool of nerve; he had seen enough to convince him of that, yet, physically, she did not look altogether strong. But still no word of complaint escaped her as, stumbling onward and upward through the darkness and the rain, they held on their way.

"Here we will rest, *Huzoor*," said Mehrab Khan at last.

They must be among the mountain tops now, Raynier reckoned. The air blew raw and piercing, and tall slimy rocks glistened around in the red glare of the now more distant lightning. Dismounting, with stiffened limbs, he aided Hilda Clive from her saddle. To his surprise she slid off as lightly as though returning from an ordinary ride.

"I believe you are more tired than I am," she said, with something like a laugh, as she let her hand rest just a moment in his after he had assisted her down. "Tell me. Did you ever have fever?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Oh, nothing. Only you are very wet. Shall we be able to make a fire?"

"I'm afraid not. There's nothing to make it with."

"That's a pity. You ought to get dry. Let me think it out."

Raynier marvelled, and well he might. What sort of a woman was this? Any other woman who had ever come within his experience would not have behaved like this. She would probably have begun by abusing him roundly for ever bringing her into such a hobble at all. Once in it, she would have grumbled and whined, or hysterically howled. She would have been full of herself and her own miserable plight, and what *she* should do, and what would become of *her*, and so forth. But this one—her chief thought seemed to be for him. She didn't seem to think of herself at all.

"Great Heavens, Miss Clive!" he burst forth, "what does it matter whether I am dry or wet. It is of you I am thinking—of you, who have to get through this abominable night somehow. Why, it is nothing to me—but what about you?"

"But I have never had fever."

The answer came so equably, so matter-of-fact in tone, yet Raynier's quick ear thought to detect something further. He turned straightway and began vehemently haranguing Mehrab Khan.

The place to which the latter had brought them afforded shelter from the rain, though little or none from the piercing wind. A great slab of rock overhung, yawning outward like an open mouth. Now Mehrab Khan astonished them still further, for, from a cleft at the back of the hole, he produced some billets of dry juniper wood. It would burn wretchedly, he explained apologetically, but was better than nothing. The place had been an old resort of mountain herdsmen, and the wood had been kept ready stored for emergencies. And then, still further amazement followed, for Mehrab Khan produced—this time from his own store—a little rice and corn meal tied up in a rag. Would the *Huzoor* deign to accept it for himself and the Miss Sahib? he said. It was poor fare, but it might be better than

nothing.

This, then, was the man for whose good faith he had feared, thought Raynier, inwardly ashamed, and then again came the whimsical thought of contrast, and the highest official in the district becoming dependent on the Levy Sowar's humble store, yet not for himself. But Hilda Clive looked at it, then beamed on the giver.

"What will he do?" she asked. "It is all he has."

"What then? Let the Miss Sahib take what Allah provides through His slave and praise Him. More can be provided, and will be," was the answer of the follower of the Prophet to the follower of the Redeemer. Said the latter,—

"The blessings of Allah be upon you, Mehrab Khan, and that of His Prophet."

And Raynier again translating, the fine face of the Baluchi beamed in turn.

Chapter Eighteen.

In the Mist.

A more wretched night than that passed by the fugitives—two of them, at any rate—it would be hard to imagine. The wind blew piercingly cold at that altitude; the juniper wood, which at its best is about the worst fuel in the world, would not burn, but made up for the deficiency in the fabrication of abundant smoke. There was no way of baking or doing anything with the frugal aliment which Mehrab Khan had so unexpectedly produced, and so generously withal, for he might easily have kept it for himself. Wherefore it had to be consumed in the form of a raw paste mixed with rain water, and even this, both men, the European and the Oriental—whose creed ignorant people imagine to teach that women have no souls—refused to touch until Hilda insisted, and then they made a pretence.

Towards dawn, but while it was yet dark, Mehrab Khan sallied forth to obtain provisions somehow or other, and, haply, intelligence, leaving the most stringent injunctions that on no account short of actual discovery were they to move from their hiding-place. Shortly after sunrise he returned with both. A kid was slung behind his saddle, and a bag of grain in front, but he did not think it necessary to state that the owner, having been injudicious enough to refuse to give or sell either, and further, to manifest suspicion on the subject of himself, he had incontinently slain the said owner, and borne away the spoil—a feat which, to his wild Baluchi nature, represented an adequate commingling of business with pleasure, but which he knew that these Feringhis would regard in another light. The latter noticed, however, that he no longer wore his khaki, but was attired in the loose garments and turban of the Gularzai, and this he explained was for reasons of safety.

The intelligence which he had gleaned was partly satisfactory to them, and partly the reverse. Murad Afzul had surprised the camp, but the sahibs had not been injured, although carried away as prisoners. The Gularzai had raised the standard of the Prophet and joined in the *jihad*—the Nawab Mahomed Mushîm Khan being one of its most earnest and enthusiastic supporters. Sarbaland Khan, too, had joined, and the Nawab had appointed Murad Afzul one of his principal leaders. In brief, the whole country was up in arms, and a large force had been sent to surprise and overpower Mazaran.

"Well, that's cheering sort of *kubbur* at any rate," said Raynier, as he translated the burden of this communication to his companion. "One thing, it's possible we are better off here than we would be in Mazaran, for the garrison there is no great shakes, and Polwarth the biggest ass that was ever given command even of a box of tin soldiers."

Polwarth, it may be observed incidentally, was the commanding officer at Mazaran, and he and the new Political Agent did not love each other.

There was one item of news which Mehrab Khan had not thought necessary to disclose to his superior, and this was that the Nawab had issued orders to secure Raynier Sahib alive and at all costs, but alive. Great reward was promised to whoever should accomplish this, and bring him unharmed to Mushîm Khan, but should any slay him the reward should be death. But he who should deliver him up alive, the reward would make him a man of consequence for the rest of his days. And this was within the Baluchi's power to earn.

"How is it you still cleave to us, Mehrab Khan?" Raynier said half bitterly, half affectionately. "All your fellow tribesmen and fellow believers are up against us. Why are you not with them?"

The man smiled. No well-simulated horror did he affect, for he felt none. The question struck him as practically and nakedly natural. Nor did he break into vehement protestations of fidelity, and so forth. He merely replied,—

"It is written, *Huzoor*."

And the high Government official answered the Levy Sowar,—

"Be it so, my brother."

Shut off from the world for days they remained thus in their lofty eyrie among the crags. A better shelter was found, and this not before it was needed, for the rainy weather continued and the cold at night was more than uncomfortable. Then Mehrab Khan went forth upon the maraud one night and stole a blanket or two and a *poshtîn*—a sort of ulster made of soft leather and fur-lined—as well as some more food. But from their hiding-place he steadfastly refused to allow them to budge.

On Hilda Clive these conditions of hardship, which would have driven the average civilised and cultured woman

nearly out of her senses, seemed to have no effect at all—neither on her spirits nor on her health. As to the latter they positively seemed to suit her. She had acquired a colour and a brightness of eye such as had never lit up her face under conditions of civilisation, and Raynier, looking at her, would wonder twenty times a day how he could ever have passed her every day of his life for about three weeks, and taken no notice of her whatever. So much for looks. But as a companion, as a fellow castaway, she was perfect, he decided. She was full of ideas. She could converse on every subject under the sun, no matter what; the only topic she seemed to avoid, he was prompt to observe, being herself. More, he thought to notice even that she purposely avoided it, yet in such wise as to convey no idea of purposely concealing anything, but rather as not choosing to be drawn. She would beguile the time, too, in trying to learn Hindustani and Pushtu, under the joint tuition of himself and Mehrab Khan, frequently to the amusement of both.

Thus, as the days wore on, something uncommonly like a very real contentment settled down upon these two, here in the solitude of their vast mountain world—nay, more. Their converse began to take on a sort of insidiously familiar, not to say caressing, form of confidence, alike on the part of the one as on that of the other. Raynier began to forget that they were fugitives from a whole countryside, eager for their blood. To forget the perils to be encountered ere they should once more mingle among their kind. To forget the havoc and massacre and misery that had come about since last they had so mingled. And, more difficult still to forget, perhaps, the official ruin which would most probably await himself. Strangely enough, the only thing he could not forget, the only thing that would force itself upon his memory, and that with a horrid and most discordant jar, was the fact that Cynthia Daintree was on her way out to claim him—to claim him, upon whom she had absolutely no claim at all; would, in fact, by this time soon be landing.

Without, the elements stormed and raged. For two whole days at a time they would be unable to see outside their mountain abode, so thick and unyielding were the mists that encompassed it, and the rain poured down unceasingly, while now and again the roll of intermittent thunder would shake the mountain peaks in stunning reverberation the night through, and the red gleam seek out every corner of their cave abode. And when the mists parted, they gazed down upon shiny rock surfaces labyrinthed with ragged black chasms, or the dark wildness of a juniper forest swept by the wreaths of the flying scud.

But this state of comparative peace was not to last—was, in fact, destined to be brought to a most startling termination. One morning Mehrab Khan, who had been away on a foraging expedition, failed to return. The day passed, and still no Mehrab Khan. Night likewise failed to bring him, and now things began to look serious for these two, for their food supply was all but exhausted. As for the Baluchi, there was only one conclusion to be arrived at—he had been found by the enemy, and either killed or detained as a prisoner. As for themselves, something must be done, for it was clear they could not remain there to starve. With his own knowledge of the country, supplemented by further detail which Mehrab Khan had given him, Raynier thought he could find the way to Mazaran.

It was scarcely daylight when they started from their place of refuge. The weather had cleared overhead, but the ground was miry and slippery to the last degree, so much so indeed that, until they should reach smoother and more level ground, the horses were of more hindrance than help. But at the start Raynier discovered that his steed had gone dead lame to such an extent that to ride it would be downright dangerous here, where cliffs and slippery slopes abounded. It was decided to abandon the animal.

“Seems as if our troubles were beginning over again,” he said ruefully. “By Jove, it looks as if the story about the Syyed’s *tangi* was going to prove true again in our case.”

He spoke half jestingly, glancing at her the while. To his surprise she was looking very serious.

“No,” she answered. “I don’t think so. At least, unless—No—it’s of no use. I can’t see.”

She had passed her hand over her eyes, as he had seen her do on that strangely memorable night, and her face wore the same dreamy look. That, he knew, accounted for the seeming incoherence of her words. For Hilda Clive possessed in some degree the gift of clairvoyance, and what she saw now in front of them she preferred not to tell him just then. Whatever it was it took no definite shape in her own mind, hovering there vague but ominous. He looked at her curiously.

“Well, we’ll cheat that superstition yet,” he said, with a gaiety that was just a trifle forced.

They made but sorry headway, the horse slipping and stumbling to such an extent that Hilda preferred to walk, so that by the time day had fairly dawned they were scarcely more than three miles from their starting-point. It was deemed advisable to go into hiding once more, and here they were forced to finish what little food remained.

Towards dusk they started again. An unaccountable and wholly unwonted depression had come upon Hilda, while her escort, walking beside her horse, began to feel strangely weak and faint. He supposed it was the result of recent bad living and want of exercise, and then, with a chill of dismay, he recognised the infallible symptoms of his old fever. No—this would never do. He must pull himself together; and by way of doing this, he stumbled and fell dizzily forward.

With a little cry of alarm Hilda was off her horse in a moment and was beside him. She raised his head, laying a hand upon the damp and clammy brow.

“There, there! Do you feel better now?” she exclaimed, with a rush of tenderness in her tone.

“What an idiot I am,” he answered, but the smile was a sickly one as he tried to raise himself. “I shall be all right in a minute. Heavens! the horse! Hilda—quick—go after the silly brute. It would never do to lose it.”

In her anxiety to reach his side, Hilda had let the reins go, and now the animal was walking steadily off. She tried to coax it, but the result only seemed to be to accelerate its pace. She was quite a little way off now. Raynier had staggered to his feet, and had managed to take a few steps after her. Then he sank down in a dead faint.

The horse stopped. Now she would have it. Speaking soothingly, Hilda drew near. She had all but got her hand on the bridle rein, when the perverse brute slewed round. This manoeuvre he repeated three or four times and then resumed his stroll. After him again she went.

No—it was too bad. She would try no further. She must have come quite far already, but how far? She stopped and looked back. Great Heaven! what was this? The cloud which had encompassed the hilltop had extended, stealing silently and insidiously downward, blotting out the whole mountain side, blotting out the way she had come, blotting out everything save three or four yards of slimy wet ground immediately around her. How would she find her way back to where she had left her companion, and—what if she could not?

Chapter Nineteen.

In Strange Quarters.

Murad Afzul was in high glee, for which he had good reason. The Tarletons and Haslam he had released, conditionally on the promise of payment of a good round sum of rupees. True, the promise was so far on paper only, but curiously enough Murad Afzul, robber and general freebooter as he was himself, entertained a high opinion of the promises of the Sahibs—Feringhi infidels as they were; besides, there was just this amount of additional security, that did they repudiate their promise in this instance, why then, they had better go away and dwell right at the further end of India, and that at a day's notice, even if they did not put the sea between them and him, for any closer proximity would certainly prove fatal to their health. As it was, the terms were satisfactory all round, for all observation had gone to convince that shrewd marauder that though it might be safe sport flaying and burning such of his Asiatic fellow-subjects who should fall into his hands, it did not pay to extend such operations to the Sahibs. They would stand robbery, but at the murder of themselves they drew the line. So a *bundobust* was entered into, and for what was, under the circumstances, a moderate ransom, the British captives were allowed to return to Mazaran, and they, reckoning that the Government would pay, deemed themselves mighty lucky in getting off so cheap. But Murad Afzul could afford to be moderate just then, for he was standing in for a stroke of business beside which the gains already secured were as a fleabite, and this was the capture of Herbert Raynier, and the reward offered by the Nawab for that feat.

Incidentally Murad Afzul had other kine to milk—which in their way would give a good, rich, profitable yield. The wily freebooter had issued orders that two men should be exempted from the slaughter which had taken place of the camp servants, and these two were Raynier's chuprassis. He knew his way about, did Murad Afzul, whereupon he argued that if any man was likely to be the possessor of a considerable hoard of ill-gotten gains, that man would be a Government chuprassi. Accordingly he named a good round sum apiece, which Sunt Singh and Kaur Singh were invited to disgorge, and on their protesting their utter inability to do so, were immediately treated to an instalment of the consequences of such refusal duly persisted in.

It is curious how, even outside the covers of a book, or off the stage, poetic justice will sometimes overtake delinquents, and that as a sheer matter of cause and effect, and now for instance, as they yelled and writhed, each with a red-hot coal bound up within his left armpit—not the right, lest they should be unable to indite the requisite document authorising payment of their ransom—it did not, of course, occur to Sunt Singh and Kaur Singh that this was indirect result of their supercilious repulse of Chand Lall from their master's audience, because they were unaware of the nature of his errand. But it is none the less certain that had that luckless trader been able to communicate that Murad Afzul and his gang of "budmashes" were out in the district, and dacoity in full blast, Raynier would never have ventured forth thus on a practically defenceless camping expedition, nor suffered others to do so either, in which contingency the events just recorded would, so far, never have taken place.

Raynier, awaking to consciousness, stared at the opposite wall, then at the furniture, then at the window, then closed his eyes again. A confused medley was flitting through his clouded brain. He seemed to see, but as if in a far-off time, the hiding-place among the mountain tops, the rain and mist and wild storms, to feel in a dull and uneasy form of sense the oppression of some peril hanging over him, but sequence of thought refused to come. Events chased each other in wild phantasmagoria through his mind, a sense of being hurled through space, a shock of some sort, a ring of shaggy fierce countenances and the flash of uplifted tulwars. Then, of a sudden, his mind cleared. He remembered the runaway horse and how his last sense had been that of being whirled into space, wrapped in a chill mist. But Hilda? What of her? Where was she? Had she been found too. Was she here, and—where on earth was he?

He opened his eyes wide now, and stared around the room. Yes, it was a room, but a strange one. The walls were of a dull brown colour, and unpapered. The window was a tall, narrow embrasure, glazed and partly open. In the doorway was a *chik* of fine split bamboo, draped by faded curtains, and a lamp of strange, but very artistic, design hung from the ceiling. Where was he? And he made a movement to spring out of bed.

A figure glided to his side, a figure clad in white and wearing a turban, and a hand was laid upon his wrist.

"Do not move, Sahib. The Sahib must lie quiet. The Sahib has been ill."

The words were spoken in Hindustani, and now Raynier answered in the same tongue,—

"I suppose I have been. But where am I, and—who are you?"

"I am a Hakim (native physician.). The Sahib must not talk," was the answer, ignoring the first part of the question. This the patient did not fail to notice.

"That is all right, Hakim Sahib"—Raynier was always polite in his address with natives, and if they had any title or

rank never failed to give them the benefit of it. "But what I want to know is, where am I?"

The question was asked with some impatience. The doctor, seeing that he was likely to become excited, which would be highly prejudicial to the patient, and therefore equally so to his own interest, replied,—

"You are in the house of his Greatness the Nawab."

"What?" almost shouted Raynier.

"In the house of the Nawab Mahomed Mushîm Khan," repeated the Hakim.

"Oh, then, I am in good hands. The Nawab and I are friends. Is the Miss Sahib here too?"

Even if the doctor had not turned away to conceal it, Raynier would not have noticed the strange look which had come over his face, as indeed how should he?

"Yes, yes," was the hurried answer. "Now the Sahib must not talk any more."

"But I must see her if only for a minute. She will come, I know. Bring her to me, Hakim Sahib, then I will be as quiet as you wish."

"That cannot be," was the answer. "She is getting on well, but not well enough to talk to the Sahib. In a few days, perhaps. Now the Sahib must rest quiet or he will not get well enough to see her at all."

Raynier sighed. There was sense in what the other said, he supposed, yet it was hard. Hilda would naturally have suffered from reaction, and could conceivably be anything but well. Why, he himself was as weak as a cat, as the sapient simile for some inscrutable reason puts it, the harmless, necessary domestic feline being, proportionately, of the strongest and most wiry of the animal creation.

"Can I see the Nawab, then?" he said.

"The Nawab is absent."

"Then his brother, the Sirdar Kuhandil Khan? Will he not come and see me?"

"He too is absent, Sahib. In a few days, perhaps, when the Sahib is well."

With this answer Raynier must fain be content. A drowsiness stole over him, begotten of the exertion of talking, and a great sense of security and comfort Mushîm Khan was his friend, and although he might have been drawn into the present bobbery—all these mountain tribes dearly loved the fun of fighting—why, he and Hilda would be perfectly safe under his roof. Hilda, of course, had been found at the same time as himself, and brought here. They would meet in a day or two, as the doctor had said, and when the fighting was over, why, then, they would return to Mazaran, and—good Heavens! why would the thought of Cynthia Daintree obtrude itself? And as, in consequence, he began to turn restlessly, the Hakim glided to his side.

"Drink this," he said, pouring something from a phial. Raynier did so, and in another moment was slumbering hard and peacefully.

For two or three days longer was Raynier thus tended, but day and night the Hakim was with him, or in the room which lay behind the *chik*, or, if absent for a while, his place was supplied by an attendant. But not by any chance, not for one single instant was he ever left alone. Had he been a criminal awaiting the gallows he could not have been more closely and continuously watched. He tried to obtain information as to what was going on outside, but without avail. On general subjects the doctor or the attendant would converse, but let him once touch that of the present disturbance and they were closeness itself. Then he thought it was time to insist on seeing Hilda.

With deprecatory words, and far from easy in his mind, the Hakim told him that the Miss Sahib was not there. He had told him the contrary, it was true, but he was very weak and ill, and good news is better for a sick man than bad news, wherefore he had told him what he had.

What, then, had become of Miss Sahib? Raynier asked. Had she not been found at the same time as himself? He was repressing a murderous desire to leap upon and throttle this liar of a Hakim, and only the knowledge that violence would serve no good purpose whatever availed to restrain him. He controlled his voice, too, striving to speak calmly.

No, she had not been found, the doctor answered. It was not even known that there was a Miss Sahib with him at all. He had been found by a party of Gularzai in the early morning lying unconscious on the mountain side, and brought here. But there was nobody with him. And then the Hakim, looking at him with something like pity, it might have been thought, suggested that the time had come when the Sahib might take a little fresh air.

A few moments ago, and how welcome the idea would have been. He was longing to see something beyond the four walls of his room—of his prison; and from his window nothing was visible but another wall. But now the shock was too great, too stunning. He had pictured Hilda here with him, here in security, and, after their hardships, in some degree of comfort. And all the time this infernal Hakim had been feeding him on lies. What had become of her? He remembered how she had gone after the horse, but of the descent of the mist he remembered nothing. Had she wandered too far and been unable to find him again? Great Heaven! how awful. A defenceless woman, alone, lost, in that savage mountain solitude, with night coming on, and that woman Hilda Clive. And then by a strange inspiration came a modicum of comfort in the thought that it was Hilda Clive; for it brought back to him certain recollections. He remembered her bizarre midnight walk in a semi-trance, the perilous episode in the *tangi* and the consummate nerve and utter unconcern she had displayed. She had qualities, properties, gifts, what you will, which placed her utterly

outside any other woman he had ever known—and these might now carry her through where another would succumb.

Following the Hakim and the attendant mechanically, Raynier found himself in a kind of courtyard, rather was it a roof, flat and walled in. He could see two or three other similar roof courtyards, with people on them. But where was he? He had been in Mushîm Khan's dwelling, an ordinary mud-walled village similar in every way to a hundred others inhabited by the Gularzai and kindred border tribes, but this place was akin to a castle or rock fortress. He could not see much of it, but it seemed to him that the place he was in crowned the summit of a rock eminence, into which it was partly built. Had Mushîm Khan another dwelling, then—a mountain stronghold which he used in times of disturbance? It looked so.

How blue the sky was, how bracing the air. Raynier drew in deep draughts of the latter. He felt recovered already, and earnestly he longed for the return of the Nawab, that he might be set at liberty, and at once start in search of Hilda. Little he cared now about his official prospects or anything of the kind. This girl who had been his companion in danger and hardship filled all his thoughts.

And then immediately beneath him arose an outburst of the most awful cries and shrieks, such as could have been wrung only from a human being undergoing the extremity of anguish and bodily torture. With blanched face and chilled blood he rushed to the parapet and looked over.

Chapter Twenty.

The Mullah Again.

Beneath, at a distance of some thirty feet, ran a narrow alley way, and on the opposite side of this were doors. Round one of these several men were clustered, as though gazing upon and rather enjoying something that was going on within. And it was from this door that those horrible shrieks and screams proceeded.

Raynier's blood ran chill within him. What act of devilish cruelty was going on within that sinister chamber? He noticed that a kind of thin steam was issuing from the upper part of the door, wafting up a nauseous and greasy odour to where he stood. He could hear a mutter of voices within the place, and a plashing sound, then the shrieks of agony broke forth afresh louder than ever till he was forced to stop his ears.

Still, a horrible fascination kept him riveted—his gaze fixed on that grisly door. What did it all mean? Then he was conscious that the yelling had ceased, and now those clustering around parted to give way to several persons who issued from the place. Among them was a tall, fine-looking man, who had the air and importance of a chief. At him Raynier looked somewhat curiously, for he thought he was acquainted with all the Sirdars of the Gularzai. Then this man stopped, and half-turned, and Raynier saw dragged forth between two others a limp, quaking figure, its quivering features expressing an extremity of terror that was akin to mania. And in this object he recognised his quondam smart, well-groomed—and, to all but himself, somewhat arrogant—chuprassi, Kaur Singh. This was the man they had been torturing, then. But the words of the chief told him the next moment that it was not.

“Dog of an idolater,” the latter said, “thou hast seen the torments in which thy brother has died, which are but the beginning of what he is now undergoing. Wherefore, if thou wouldst preserve thy miserable carcase a little longer I advise thee to write that which shall hurry those who are collecting thine ill-gotten gains.”

The answer was an abject whine, and the follower of Brahma wallowed and cringed before the follower of Mahomed.

Raynier remained rooted to the spot, gazing after the receding forms of those beneath. That the unfortunate Sunt Singh had just been put to some ghastly and lingering form of death within that gruesome chamber, his brother being forced to look on, he now gathered. The motive, too, was apparent, and now he deduced that the man who had spoken must be the far-famed Murad Afzul; and the discovery inspired him with a very genuine misgiving on his own account. What if the Nawab and his brother never returned? What if they were killed or captured in some engagement, and he were thus left at the mercy of this ruffian, whose barbarities were a byword upon that border? What would be his own fate, helpless in such hands? He rejoiced now that Hilda did not share his captivity, the more so that a conviction had been growing upon him that she must have found her way into safety. Then he remembered that Mehrab Khan had learned that Murad Afzul had released Haslam and the Tarletons for money, which looked as though that arch-dacoit deemed it bad luck to murder Europeans. If the worst came to the worst, he, too, might find safety and deliverance that way.

He turned quickly. An interruption, sudden and somewhat startling, had broken in upon his meditations, a most venomous curse to wit, hurled at himself. Framed in the doorway by which he himself had entered this roof courtyard, stood a figure. The face was aged and lined, and the beard grey and undyed. A ragged green turban crowned the head, while the immense hooked nose and the opening and shutting of the extended claw-like hands suggested some weird and exaggerated bird of prey. Raynier recognised that he had to do with some professional fanatic, a *mullah* most likely.

“Why dost thou curse me, father?” he said in Pushtu. “What harm have I done thee or thine?”

“Hear him!” cried the *mullah*. “Ya Allah! he calls me father, this son of countless generations of infidels. Hear him, Mahomed, Prophet of Allah ever blessed! Me, thy servant Hadji Haroun, who has three times visited the sacred and inviolable Temple, who has kissed the sacred Stone, this unbeliever calls ‘father.’”

And he spat forth a renewed and envenomed string of curses, pausing now and again to raise his eyes heavenward, clasping and unclasping his hooked claws—and then, as though having gained new inspiration, breaking forth afresh.

Raynier felt annoyed. He was not altogether unfamiliar with this rabid and aggressive type of fanaticism, though he had found it more among Hindu fakirs than Mahomedans. He answered shortly,—

“I thought but to please thee, old man, but since I offended thee, though I am sorry, it might be good to depart and leave me in peace.”

At this the *mullah* broke forth into fresh curses—but something of a tumult beneath seemed to interrupt him, for with his head on one side he paused and listened. There was a confused murmur of voices—almost a roar—mingled with the trampling of horses. Of what was going on beneath Raynier could see nothing, nor did he care to turn his back—for longer than the briefest of glances—upon the fanatical *mullah*.

“In peace!” repeated the latter, echoing his last words. “In peace! Here is he who will give thee peace, O infidel dog. Now will the blood of Allahyar Khan—whom the Prophet console in Paradise—be avenged.”

“I know not of what thou art talking, old man,” returned Raynier, shortly. “Thy curses matter not greatly, but if thou namest me ‘dog’ again I will throw thee over yon parapet even though thou hadst visited the sacred and inviolable Temple thirty times instead of three.”

At these words the other uttered a wild, shrill yell, and turning fled down the stairs crying that the Feringhi dog was insulting the tomb of the Prophet and threatening one who had kissed the sacred Stone—and Raynier began to realise that he had made a grave mistake in losing his temper with this old fool, whom he should have allowed to abuse him till to-morrow morning rather than give him any pretext for raising the fanatical hatred of these fierce and easily-roused tribesmen in whose power he was. It was too late now, for already there was an approaching hubbub on the stairs and several of them rushed in, their fierce countenances blazing with wrath. But that their weapons were undrawn Raynier would have expected to be cut to pieces. As it was they flung themselves upon him, and he was dragged and hustled to the door, and down the stairs—along passages and through doorways, with incredible force and rapidity. Totally unarmed, and weakened by his recent illness, resistance was out of the question. He supposed his time had come and that he was being dragged to his death.

They had halted. He was in a large open courtyard, surrounded by the doors of dwellings built apparently into high walls, except on the further side, which was constituted by a solid cliff face, towering up high overhead. This he took in at a glance, but what was more to the point, the place was full of armed men, and there in the midst was Mushîm Khan.

The Nawab and his brother had just dismounted from horseback, and a follower was leading away their steeds, fine animals showing blood and muscle in every movement. In spite of the rough and undignified treatment of which he had just been a victim Raynier was mindful of the dignity of his high office, and his attitude and tone were not lacking in this when, having waited for the buzz which greeted his appearance to subside, he gave the chief’s the salaam.

To his surprise and inward dismay, neither replied. They stood contemplating him in stern and hostile silence. He felt utterly nonplussed, especially having regard to the good treatment and hospitality which had been extended to him hitherto. Ah! the *mullah* of course. That was it. He had been stirring up their fanatical animosity, and once touch that you never know where you are with an Oriental. There was the old villain over there, glaring at him with his beady eyes.

“There has been a mistake, Nawab Sahib,” began Raynier, perfectly cool and collected.

“Yon holy man declares I spoke against the Prophet and his tomb, but it is not so. You who know me are aware I am not one to do any such thing. The *mullah* is quite mistaken.”

But the stern hostility on the countenances of the chiefs relaxed not one atom—that upon those of their followers deepened, and mutterings of hate rumbled forth from the rows of grim and shaggy faces which encompassed him. Sinewy fingers instinctively tightened round sword hilts and rifle locks. Raynier went on,—

“Believers, although of another creed, we are all the children of one Father, for such is the teaching of the Prophet as revealed to him and set forth in the Holy Koran. And I have seen enough of the followers of the Prophet to respect their faith, and never have I uttered word against that faith—no, not even now. But yon *mullah* cursed me and named me dog—me, the representative of the *Sirkar*. Should I accept that meekly, think you?”

But all the reply that this drew was a deeper and renewed execration.

“What of Allahyar Khan?” hissed the *mullah* at the chief’s side. “What of the Sirdar Allahyar Khan?”

The effect upon the Nawab was as that of a sting. Yet he spoke coldly, as though striving to suppress the rage that consumed him.

“Answer me, Raynier Sahib. Was General Raynier Sahib, who commanded troops at the time of the great rising thy father?”

“Surely, Nawab Sahib. But that is a long past and forgotten misfortune. Why revive it?”

“And he commanded the troops that came to Grampur after it had been reconquered?”

It was impossible but that Raynier’s natural perceptions, let alone his experience of Orientals, should have failed to convince him that here, and not in any tale told by the *mullah*, lay the secret of Mushîm Khan’s changed attitude towards him. Some of their people had been killed at that time, was the solution, and this rascally *mullah* had stirred up the recollection. He knew how the blood feud can be tossed on from generation to generation among these mountain tribes. Still, there was only one answer possible.

"I believe he did, Nawab Sahib," he answered. "But why rake up these dead and buried tales of strife?"

"Dead and buried!" yelled Hadji Haroun, clasping and unclasping his claws. "Ya Mahomed! hear him. Dead and buried! What of Allahyar Khan—what of the dog who sent him defiled to his death, the father of this dog standing here?"

Then for the first time Raynier realised the imminence of his peril, for he saw that no common incident in the fortune of war lay behind this. The noble expression of the Nawab's countenance had disappeared, giving way to one of hate and cruelty, and the same held good of that of his brother, Kuhandil Khan. A roar of execration arose from the close ranks of the Gularzai, and tulwars were drawn, and flashed in the sun. Mushîm Khan turned, and in an undertone gave directions to some of those nearest to him. These advanced upon Raynier.

"There is no need to lay hands upon me, Chief of the Gularzai," he cried in a firm tone. "I am in your power, you who have professed friendship for me. Say what your will is."

But Mushîm Khan answered no word. Raynier was seized and violently dragged away, a roar of execration and hate going up from the gathering, and, rising above it, he could distinguish the high, venomous tones of the *mullah*, shrilling forth,—

"The blood of Allahyar Khan! The blood of Allahyar Khan! Now will it be avenged. Ya Mahomed! Now! Now!"

Chapter Twenty One.

Left Alone.

We must now go back a little.

Standing there on the mountain side, enveloped in the thick mist, nothing visible but a few yards of wet ground, Hilda Clive felt as though she were turned into stone.

How far had she come? how retrace her steps? It occurred to her that she had better not move until she had thoroughly made up her mind which direction to take. To this end she lifted up her voice in a loud, clear call. No answer.

Again she lifted up her voice, and on the principle that a person will more readily catch his own name than any other word she called to her companion by his. Still no answer.

She tried another plan. She thought of every kind of call that she could sound on the highest of notes, so as to produce the most carrying effects. All useless. Still, no answer.

Should she move, or would not her best plan be to remain exactly where she was? The mist might lift, and then she could find her way back, whereas if she began wandering about she might lose her bearings entirely. She knew she was in a mountain cloud, and such lift as suddenly as they come down. On the other hand, they are apt to hang about the slopes for days. And as though to emphasise this side of the question the dark folds seemed to close in around her darker and darker.

She tried her voice again, this time turning to every point of the compass as she sent forth her clear, high-pitched calls. Then her heart seemed to hammer within her as though it would burst. She heard an answer.

Faint and far away it sounded, coming from a little above her. Impulsively she took a few steps in that direction then called again. The answer came this time louder and more distinct.

Poor Hilda! She could have sunk to the ground with sheer heart sickness and despair as she stood there listening. The answer was the mere echo of her own voice. She tried it again and again to make sure of this, and then two or three tears forced themselves from her eyes, and a sob escaped her. It was too terrible, too heart-breaking altogether.

No. It was clearly of no use standing still; besides, she felt the cold and damp. She must move if only to keep off the deadly shivers which were creeping upon her. But in what direction? And as though the bewildering effect of the mist was not enough she remembered that in trying to catch the horse she had been drawn to describe a complete circle, and that three times: in fact the perverse brute had done for her exactly what is done for the blindfolded one in blind man's buff, when he or she is started upon his or her quest, and with exactly the same effect.

Darker it grew. Night was coming on, and far down in the valley beneath a wolf howled—then another and another. Hilda remembered how they had listened to the cry of the ravaging beasts there in the lighted security of the camp, could almost have smiled to herself as she pictured Mrs Tarleton, or any other woman of her acquaintance, here, in her own plight, with the certainty before her of a night in the awful loneliness of these savage mountain solitudes, surrounded, for all she could tell, by prowling beasts of prey. That such would hardly do less than simply expire she firmly believed, and in truth the situation was fraught with every terrifying and exhausting element even for her.

Yet Hilda Clive thought but little of herself in the matter. What would become of her companion, left alone on the wet hill side—ill, fainting, fever-stricken? and this was the idea that caused her to raise her hand to her head and press her brows hard as though to control the working of the busy brain within the limits of coherency.

What should she do, and how do it? Again and again all sorts of expedients would suggest themselves. She would walk a given distance in each direction—not down, for she had been descending slightly in her pursuit of the horse—

then retrace her steps, and try another. She would walk all night if necessary—but she would find him. And then, with a terrible heart sinking, two considerations occurred to her—one that she might pass him within a few yards in the darkness and mist, the other that she herself was beginning to feel faint with fatigue and hunger. No matter. If will power could carry anyone through, it should her.

Then an idea came to her—swept in upon her mind like a lighthouse flash in the gloom; for it seemed just the idea she had been groping after. The quarter of the wind!

It had blown upon her right ear she remembered during her pursuit of the horse—yet rather from behind. She remembered it because of an escaped tress of hair which had played about her cheek. Now by getting it upon her left ear from in front, and keeping it there, she would be able to retrace her steps. Thrilling with renewed thankfulness and hope she started to put this plan into immediate execution.

But alas! for poor Hilda. There was now no wind at all, or but faint breaths of it, and these she thought to perceive were coming from any and every direction. Then she remembered that in following the horse the rise of the slope was on her right. By keeping it on her left she might find her way. Anything rather than remain inactive.

It was quite dark now, but the cloud showed no disposition to lift. Stumbling onward, every now and then lifting her voice in a call, Hilda pressed on, with a determination and endurance well-nigh superhuman. Twice she fell, bruising herself among the stones, then up and on again. He would die if he were not found, would die, fever-stricken, helpless, alone. Die! The word seemed ringing in her brain, and then—and then—what was this? She was beginning to go *downhill*.

Downhill! That could not be. She had kept steadily upward, and yet, without swerving in the least from the course she had been following, she was plainly and unmistakably walking downhill, and this fact once established, the significance of the situation became clear. She was hopelessly and entirely out of her reckoning, and had no more idea as to where she had left Herbert Raynier than she had as to where she herself now stood. And then nature asserted itself over mind. Overwhelmed with despair and hunger and exhaustion poor Hilda sank to the ground in a faint that was more than half slumber.

When she awoke the mist had entirely disappeared, and the sun was well up in the blue sky. A shadow was between it and her, and she started somewhat as her eyes rested on a dark face, crowned by a voluminous turban. A man was bending over her, a man clothed in the loose garments of the Gularzai, and armed with a sword and rifle, and the startled look gave place to one of intense relief as she recognised Mehrab Khan.

“Where is the *Huzoor*?” was her first question in the best Hindustani she could command. Then Mehrab Khan proceeded to explain the situation, partly by signs, partly in Hindustani, of which latter Hilda understood a good deal more than she could talk. The *Huzoor* had been found by a party of Gularzai, lying ill upon the mountain side. They had not harmed him, but had carried him away—probably to the Nawab’s village; which intimation filled poor Hilda with unspeakable relief and thankfulness. For Herbert Raynier had the highest opinion of Mushîm Khan and his brother. He had often talked to her about them, and promised she should see them on the occasion of the next *jirga* at Mazaran. If he was the Nawab’s prisoner, he was safe, she decided. But if Mehrab Khan knew otherwise, his Oriental inscrutability did not betray the fact.

The Baluchi was reproachful, however, that they had left their hiding-place before his return, and he managed to convey to his hearer that he had got in with some people whom it had been impossible to leave at his own convenience without exciting suspicion. When he had found the place deserted he had followed on their track, but the cloud had baffled him, even as it had them. He had found the runaway steed, and now his plan was to take the Miss Sahib into Mazaran at once. The way was clear just now and they ought to take advantage of it.

Refreshed with some food, which Mehrab Khan produced, Hilda felt almost light-hearted. And then, going back over her wanderings now in the clear sunny daylight, she saw that, though the direction taken was not so greatly at fault, she had ascended much too high, and had gained a kotal over which she was passing into another valley, when she had detected the declivity of the ground.

Mazaran made a great deal of Hilda Clive when she returned safe and sound. What an experience she had had, and that poor Mr Raynier, gushed the feminine side of Mazaran. Well, he would soon be back among them again. Mushîm Khan had too much to lose to incur deposition, if not destruction, by allowing harm to happen to so important a representative of the Government as the Political Agent, pronounced Mazaran, and especially Colonel Polwarth C.O., who was not in a position to weaken the garrison by a single man, it being none too strong as it was. Indeed the station was in a state of siege, its European inhabitants spending each night within the fort, and the bearded, long-haired tribesmen, formerly conspicuous in the streets and bazaar, were now conspicuous by their absence. Meanwhile, reinforcements were anxiously awaited, and it looked as if they might be so for long, for a very large force was in the field further along the border, where, according to the reports that came in, fighting was abundant and brisk.

Tarleton was somewhat subdued since his return, and whereas Haslam was rather fond of expatiating upon their adventures, the Civil Surgeon was more inclined to shelve the subject when it was broached. It wasn’t a thing to *bukh* about, he declared, nor could he understand how that fellow Haslam could *bukh* about nothing else. They had neither of them cut so great a figure in it for the matter of that, and he for his part didn’t seem to care if he never heard it mentioned again. Inwardly he was relieved that so far no harm had come to Raynier through the disclosure wrung from him by Murad Afzul.

“Just fancy, dear,” Mrs Tarleton exclaimed, when she had fussed over Hilda enough by way of welcome back. “Who do you think has arrived, just as poor Mr Raynier is away too? Isn’t it sad?—and he not here to welcome her?”

“To welcome whom?” said Hilda, tranquilly.

"Why, his *fiancée*, of course."

"I didn't know he'd got one."

"No more did we, no more did any of us," rejoined Mrs Tarleton, glancing curiously at the girl, yet feeling intensely relieved at the nonchalance of her reply, for she too had noticed, in common with Haslam, how Raynier and her guest had been getting, as the Forest Officer put it, uncommonly thick together. "He was remarkably close on the subject, I must say."

"Well, he naturally would be. That trick of gushing on the subject and running about showing the latest photograph and all that, is idiotic, and I can't imagine Mr Raynier being idiotic. Who is she?"

"A Miss Daintree. Rather a stylish-looking girl, handsome too. She's staying with the Croftons."

"Yes? Well, they'll have a happy reunion and live happy ever after."

Mrs Tarleton felt more relieved than ever. The light laughing badinage of the girl's tone could never have been assumed, she decided. There was nothing between them, then.

But Hilda Clive was putting two and two together. She remembered Raynier's absence of mind and unwonted depression the day they had set forth on their ride which had ended so tragically. This, then, was the news which had disconcerted him. The impending arrival of the girl to whom he was engaged gave him no pleasure—rather the reverse—and if so, why? The puzzle was no difficult one to piece together; indeed, to her perceptions, it constituted no puzzle at all.

Chapter Twenty Two.

At Mazaran.

Cynthia Daintree had heard of Raynier's transfer immediately on landing, and had lost no time in proceeding to Mazaran, which move was facilitated by the fact that the friends with whom she had come out had relatives in the frontier station, to whom they duly passed her on, and with whom she was now staying.

She had received Raynier's telegram at Aden. Her father had forwarded it, without comment, and although its burden caused her a little temporary annoyance it neither surprised nor disconcerted her, for of it she there and then resolved to take no notice at all. More than ever now she congratulated herself that the angry letter she had been on the point of sending him after he had left her so brutally—as she put it—had remained unent; more than ever did she rejoice that no further communication had passed between them, and that therefore he could claim no formal release. What had passed between them she would choose to regard as a mere tiff, which the magnanimity of her disposition moved her unconditionally to condone, and this she would give out if necessary. For the rest, she reckoned on his easy-going nature, which, by reason of his extraordinary forbearance as regarded herself, she had come to regard as weak, and despised accordingly. There was no other woman in the case, she was sure of that, otherwise he might have turned restive. As it was, she would have things all her own way, and he would yield unconditionally.

Another point in her favour was that she would take him more or less by surprise, for she had carefully arranged that the letter which we have seen him receive, should only reach him a few days before her own arrival. But when she arrived, only to learn that the border war had blazed forth in the very neighbourhood of Mazaran itself, and that the man she had come to find was missing, her wrath and chagrin knew no bounds. The first she was forced to conceal, the second she passed off in concern and anxiety on behalf of her *fiancé's* peril. Attempts on all sides were made to reassure her. The missing official would have thrown himself on the protection of someone or other of the chiefs who had not joined in the *jihad*—Sarbaland Khan, for instance, who would certainly remain loyal—and to whose interest it would be to ensure the safety of so high a representative of the *Sirkar*. But if she allowed herself to be reassured on that point, there was a new and wholly unlooked-for aspect of the situation, which in her heart of hearts was fraught with possibilities. With the missing man was the Tarletons' girl guest. Only to think how they would be thrown together, and that day after day, in their wanderings and possible dangers! What was the girl like? She set herself to find out.

It happened that the Tarletons had no portrait of Hilda Clive, but on the subject of the latter's attractions Cynthia was in a great measure reassured. When, apparently in pursuance of a natural interest in the missing girl, she inquired on the point, the answer was never more enthusiastic than "Oh, so-so," with a sort of covert implication that she was not in it with the inquirer herself. For Hilda had made no impression upon the male side of the station, to whom she conveyed an idea of coldness and reserve even when not, as Haslam put it, one of uncanniness. So Cynthia was reassured, and managed to get through time fairly contentedly; and while ever manifesting a becoming degree of anxiety on behalf of her *fiancé*—as she gave him out to be—on the whole the station regarded her as a decided acquisition. And then Hilda Clive had reappeared, alone.

Among the first to visit her was naturally Cynthia, and the consequent reassurance as to Raynier's temporary safety hardly rejoiced her so much as the first glance at his fellow refugee. Why, the girl was downright plain—if not hideous, she decided. She had green eyes, to begin with; large and well-lashed certainly, but—green; green and uncanny, like a cat's. Then, she was white and haggard looking. As for her dress, Cynthia could not judge, for Hilda had only agreed to see her under protest and had appeared in a tea-gown; for she was suffering from lassitude and nervous reaction, following upon physical hardship and the immense mental strain she had undergone. Small wonder indeed if she were not looking her best. Wherefore, Cynthia decided that there was no possibility of rivalry, and having so decided she set to work to make the best of the situation.

Mazaran was practically in a state of siege, yet a matter of twenty-four hours sufficed to accustom its social side to that state of things; and, if it was unsafe to venture beyond the lines, the social side aforesaid took care to amuse itself to the best of its ability within them. And here Cynthia Daintree was in great request. She was a novelty, she was stylish and well dressed, and well looking. She kept up a certain modicum of carefully regulated concern for her missing fiancé, but she allowed herself to be drawn, albeit under protest into all that went on. The general consensus of opinion was—especially among the garrison—that the missing Raynier was a deuced lucky fellow, but why the mischief had he kept his engagement so dark?

Not quite all, however, were so minded. Haslam, the Forest Officer, for instance, was not so sure on the point; possibly, because Cynthia had not thought it worth while laying herself out to captivate him, possibly not. Anyway, he remarked at the Tarletons' one day,—

"I wonder if Raynier will weep for joy when he gets back or not?"

"Why, what do you mean, Mr Haslam?" said his hostess.

"Nothing. Only that I shouldn't like to be in his shoes."

"Sour grapes, Mr Haslam," laughed Mrs Tarleton, not meaning it, for she happened to be one of those who did not take the new arrival at her own valuation.

Haslam chuckled.

"That's just it. You've hit it, Mrs Tarleton. There will be found a good deal of acidity about that particular bunch, and that's why I don't envy Raynier."

"Well, you can't expect anyone to be perfect, can you?" struck in Tarleton, inconsequently oppositious as usual.

"Never said I could," answered Haslam, lighting another cheroot. "What do you think about her, Miss Clive?"

"How can I give an opinion on a 'brother woman,' Mr Haslam, especially to a man?" laughed Hilda. "If I don't say she's perfect, you'll go away and tell everybody I'm jealous. If I do you won't believe me."

"Hallo. That's rather good," said the Forest Officer, who liked Hilda Clive, and resented the fact of the other coming there to cut her out, as he persisted on looking at it. "But, I say. Talking of—er—who we were talking about—it's my belief she's hedging."

"What the doose do you mean by that Haslam?" said Tarleton. The other cackled.

"Why, she's making running up there in the garrison. Supposing Raynier never came back, poor chap—eh? Or supposing he was hauled over the coals for not foreseeing this *tumasha*, as it's not impossible he may be, and sent back to some beastly Plains station—what then? Young Beecher for instance—they say he has no end of expectations. Eh? They do a good deal together."

"Now, really, Mr Haslam, you are a regular scandalmonger," laughed Mrs Tarleton, who was thoroughly enjoying the Forest Officer's strictures. "I'm sure Miss Daintree is a very nice, sweet, affectionate girl, and Mr Raynier is to be congratulated."

"Affectionate dev— h'm, h'm. She's got a cold eye."

"A what?"

"A cold eye. Look at it next time. It's the eye of a fish—a shark for choice."

"Well, you couldn't expect her to have a warm one, could you?" drowsed Tarleton, who was half asleep. Whereat they all roared.

Now in all of this there was more than a little, for, apart from her natural inclination to have as good a time as possible, here amid entirely new conditions of life, and forming as they did a marked contrast to those of a country vicarage, Cynthia had kept her ears open as well as her eyes. Even station *gup* had not as yet linked Raynier's name with that of Hilda Clive. But it had speculated as to the view that would be taken at headquarters of the Political Agent allowing himself to be lulled into a state of absolute blindness on the subject of the ill-affectedness of the Gularzai; the most important and powerful tribe within his jurisdiction. All of which Cynthia had not been slow to take in; and Captain Beecher, who was always on hand with his dogcart, or a very sleek and serviceable Waler—of which she was secretly afraid—if she preferred riding, was very devoted, and substantially sound, and Cynthia was verging on thirty. And a live and frisky dog was very much better than a dead and reduced lion, and Haslam was an abominable cynic who knew his India, and the dominant population thereof, thoroughly.

Hilda Clive, watching this state of things, said nothing, only thought. So completely did she say nothing in fact, that the station decided that in view of the circumstances of the case, she was singularly lacking in appreciation, not to say gratitude. She and Raynier had been together through the winnowing of a common danger. She had come out of it safe and sound, he had not. Yet she seemed to give him no further thought.

Did she not?

"All are forgetting him," she said to herself, in the bitterness of her intense self-concentration. "All are forgetting him—even decrying him, and there are those hungrily ready to step into his shoes. All the more reason to show him that here is one who is not."

She thanked Heaven she was well off; indeed, for a single woman, almost rich. Nothing can be done in this world without filthy lucre. She had been endowed with this if not with the art of drawing men round her like flies around a jar of stale marmalade. Money can buy anything within certain limits, even life. Yet how many there would have expended say one thousand rupees to purchase that of Herbert Raynier's?

But she? She shut herself up in her own room a good deal just then, shut herself up with business papers—which, by the way, she thoroughly understood. And running through all her calculations and correspondence were certainly recollections of a time spent in a free *al fresco* life; and subsequently, in an *al fresco* life which was anything but free, and hedged round with hardship at every turn, and somehow it seemed that that time was not the least enjoyable period of her existence. Then she would push away all the business matter in front of her, and pass her hands over her brows, and if anyone had broken in upon her at that time it would have been to see upon Hilda Clive's face a look that rendered it wondrously soft and lovable and attractive.

But through it all there mingled a puzzled and half-distressed state of mind. Her strange powers of foresight seemed to hover around, and yet refuse to be called into definite action. There was something to be done, they told her, and she was the one to do it; yet what, and how? Ah, now it was clear. Money would purchase anything—even life.

The first thing she had done on her return to Mazaran was to present Mehrab Khan with such a substantial sum in rupees as to cause that faithful Mussulman to stare. Then she had set to work to obtain for him a sort of indefinite furlough, so that he could attach himself wholly and entirely to her service, which he was by no means loth to do. It had not been difficult, because, as it happened, his term of enlistment had all but expired, and Mehrab Khan was far too valuable a jemadar of Levy Sowars to part with at that juncture; wherefore, through Haslam, who, as we have seen, stood her friend, and others, she contrived that the authorities should allow her the use of him *pro tem*. To what she would turn that use we shall see anon.

Chapter Twenty Three.

Of the Sirdar's Oath.

The unhappy prisoner, forced along by strong and ruthless hands, recognised that he was in the alley way upon which he had looked down from the parapet, what time the shrieks of the tortured man had forced him to stop his ears. Heaven help him! To what death of lingering torment were these barbarians going to put him? There was the very door, and through it he was now dragged.

The horrible greasy fumes which had sickened him before hung about the place, which, entering as he did from the light, seemed to lie in a semi-gloom, suggestive of all sorts of hideous imaginings. At the further end was something that looked like a long iron coffin, raised about eighteen inches from the floor. To this he was forced forward.

Raynier's blood curdled within him as the full horror of this awful object broke upon him. No coffin was it, but a bath—and the iron rings and chains let into its sides, two at each end, told their own tale. So too, did the ashes of a dead fire underneath. The upper end was padded. The sufferer might not dash out his own brains; might not seek relief from his frightful torment that way.

Faint and sick, his senses in a whirl, he gazed stupidly at the horrid thing. Was his brain giving way? It seemed so. Hardly knowing how he got there he was outside in the air again.

"Our bathroom does not please thee, Feringhi," said a voice. Looking up, his eyes met the baleful sneering ones of Murad Afzul.

"I have been ill with fever of late. You forget," he answered, instinctively striving to disguise the despair and terror which the sight of the horrid place had stamped upon his countenance. Then he fainted.

When he came to himself again he was in semi-darkness. A man was bending over him, and seemed to be trying to revive him. He recognised the Hakim.

"Where am I? Oh!"

He had tried to rise, only to discover that he was chained by the ankles to an iron ring in the stone floor. His hands, however, were free. He saw further that he was in a damp and gloomy apartment akin to a dungeon, a grating above the door serving to let in air and light.

"Take away your remedies, Hakim Sahib," he said, bitterly. "I have no wish to be revived for the purpose of being tortured, and I suppose it was for that reason I was taken care of before?"

"It is the Nawab's orders," answered the other. "Ill would it fare with me did I not carry them out."

"Well, I will not help you, then."

"You will not be helping yourself in that case, Sahib," said the Hakim, "for then they would work their will on you at once. See—there is food. Bethink. Is there no object in gaining time?"

"If so, I know not what it can be," answered Raynier. And then an idea seized him. This man might help him to escape, of course, for a large reward. But when it was put to him the Hakim shook his head. It was impossible. Besides, what would be his own fate were it suspected he had even thought of such a thing! And as though terrified at the idea he went out, leaving the prisoner alone.

Raynier pondered over the Hakim's words. Was there significance in them? It might be so. But why should he renew his strength in order the longer to endure the tortures which Mushîm Khan, whom he had thought his friend but now proved to be a most bitter and vindictive enemy, had in store for him? There was the food beside him, within his reach. There, too, was wine, which struck him as a strange circumstance, remembering that he was in the midst of rigid Mahomedans. Clearly he was to be fattened up for the sacrifice, and yet—and yet—Nature was strong. He needed the stimulant badly, and—took it.

Immediately thereafter he fell asleep. Sleep, too, he needed badly. In spite of his constrained attitude he slumbered hard and soundly. Once more he was with Hilda, and now it seemed that his whole being was bound up with hers. The horrors he had gone through, the privations and perils they had both gone through, were far behind. They knew each other now, and heart and mind were laid bare to each other as they stood, the world outside, they two, alone. The strong, sweet dream-wave rolled over his soul, and all was forgotten save that they two were together—together for all time.

The harsh creaking of the door, flung open, aroused him. The delusion sped in demoniacal mockery. The prison, the chains, the impending torture were realities.

Three persons had entered—Mushîm Khan, his brother, and a third. Raynier sat up to confront them with what dignity he was able. The Nawab spoke.

"I will not waste words on thee, Feringhi. Know, then, that as our brother, the Sirdar Allahyar Khan, was put to death by thy father at the time of the great rising, so must thy father's son suffer death at the hands of the brothers of Allahyar Khan, even ourselves, a life for a life, for thus is it written in the Holy Koran. Moreover, I have sworn it."

The words were uttered deliberately, almost with a judicial solemnity, but the savage hatred upon the face of the speaker seemed to be struggling with the solemnity of their utterance.

"What proof have ye of this, O Chief of the Gularzai, whom I had reckoned my friend?" answered Raynier, "for the Prophet likewise orders that none be condemned without proof."

"Here is proof." And the speaker handed him the parchment he had received from Hadji Haroun.

Raynier took it, studying it long and earnestly. He was conversant with Pushtu, and could write it almost as well as he could speak it: and the perusal of the document only served to convince him that its substance was, in all probability, correct; and that his father had, in his capacity of commanding officer, sanctioned the execution of the Gularzai sirdar as described. As to the circumstances of ignominy attendant upon the execution, well, he knew that such things had been done in the Mutiny. Moreover, his recollections of his father were such as to convince him that at such a time the latter was not likely to have erred on the side of leniency. Then an idea struck him.

"It may be as you say, Chief of the Gularzai. It is long ago, and who can say for certain what happened then? If it be so, I deplore it. But you have cited the Koran. Hear now the words of the sacred revelation: 'O true believers, the law of retaliation is ordained for the slain: the free shall die for the free, and the servant for the servant, and a woman for a woman: but he whom his brother shall forgive may be obliged to make satisfaction for what is just, and a fine shall be set on him, with humanity. This is indulgence from your Lord, and mercy.' Will ye not, therefore, forgive me, my brothers?"

There was nothing abject in his tone, no suspicion of cringing. For a few moments his listeners stood as though thunderstruck. This unbeliever quoted glibly from the holy volume. Then the third of the trio, who had kept somewhat in the background and of whom Raynier had not taken much notice, spoke.

"Feringhi, thou hast evidently studied the revelations of Mahomed—the blessed of Allah. Wilt thou not now make profession of the faith?"

Here was a loophole. Raynier thought of what he had undergone, of how completely he was in the power of this unsparing and vengeful people; of the horrors he had witnessed, and of what might be in store for himself. He thought of Hilda Clive, and how life might hold out for him a long vista of its fairest and brightest, and the temptation was great. But he thought, too, on the opinions he had more than once expressed when discussing such "conversions," and how they were dishonouring to the British name. He was not an ostentatiously religious man, but when it came to forswearing Christianity, the line had to be drawn. So he answered,—

"I could not do that, for it would be to forswear myself. I honour your religion, but were I to profess it I should be speaking a lie."

Now, while he said this, Raynier's eye had rested on something—something that was in the hand of the man who had spoken last. *It was a malacca cane.*

The blood rushed wildly through his being. He stared at the thing. There it was, a stout, silver-topped malacca cane—a very unwonted article in the hand of a white-clad, turbaned Gularzai. Heavens! what did it mean? He stared at the man who carried it—a tall, handsome, commanding-looking representative of his race—and then his mind rushed back from the stronghold of the Chief of the Gularzai, to the shouting, roaring, riotous mob in the heart of the city of London. And this was the man he had rescued from its uproarious violence.

"Do you not remember me, brother?" he said, in English, his heart seeming to burst in the revulsion of returning hope. "That is the stick I armed you with when you were beset by numbers. Look! In the middle of it is the dent made by the falling iron which would otherwise have crushed your head in."

He stopped short. No flash of recognition lit up the features of the Gularzai, not the faintest sign even of having

understood. He paused. Then he said, in Pushtu,—“Who is yon sirdar, Nawab Sahib?”

“Shere Dil Khan. He is my son.” The answer was curt and cold. Raynier went on,—

“If my father put thy brother to death, Nawab Sahib, I saved the life of thy son, Shere Dil Khan. The dent in that stick was made by the iron which would have crushed his head. Upon the knob are the letters of my name. May I handle it for a moment? It is not a weapon—and, am I not chained?”

The man who held it stepped forward and placed it in his hand. As he did so, with his face close to the prisoner, Raynier recognised him completely. It was the man he had rescued in the midst of the rough and exasperated crowd. But for all the recognition on the face of the other it might have been a mask.

Raynier took the stick. One glance at it was sufficient. There, on the massive silver head, were intertwined the letters H.R.—his initials.

Somehow, hope died again within him. It might be that Shere Dil Khan had forgotten his English, or he might be under some vow not to use it—and, acting on this idea, Raynier told the whole story in their own tongue. Still no sign of recognition, of corroboration lit up that impassive countenance. He could see that the story was aiding him not in the smallest degree, even if it were believed at all.

“Well,” he concluded, realising this, “there is no gratitude in the world. If you save a man’s life, he is the one to seek out your own.”

“Thou hast appealed to our mercy, Feringhi,” said Mushîm Khan, “and not in vain. Thou hast been shown some small glimpse of the torments we had designed for thee, but Allah is merciful and shall we be less so? Wherefore, these we remit and thou shalt only suffer death—death by the sword, at the rising of to-morrow’s sun, in the presence of the warriors of the Gularzai assembled here. For it has been sworn, and who may break an oath?”

And the three chiefs went forth, leaving the prisoner alone. This, then, was how he next saw the silver-mounted stick which had saved the life of a man—and that man the son of his executioner. Was there such a thing as gratitude in the world?

Chapter Twenty Four.

On the Grave’s Dark Brink.

When, immediately on leaving his prisoner, Mushîm Khan was informed that a believer had been brought in, escorting a woman, veiled, who had come far to communicate with him upon a matter of importance, the Nawab betrayed no surprise, nor did the statement that the woman, although dressed as one of their own women, was a Feringhi, elicit any, either. He coldly directed that they should be conducted to his durbar hall, and, accompanied by his son and Khandil Khan, he proceeded thither.

Hilda Clive dropped her veil as she came into the presence of the chiefs. They returned her salaam gravely, eyeing her with the same furtive curiosity as that which she felt with regard to them. What stately men they were, she thought. The very simplicity of their snowy garments and beautifully-folded turbans added a dignity from which any barbaric splendour of jewels and colours would have detracted. So this was Mushîm Khan, she thought, instinctively recognising the Nawab. He was indeed a noble-looking man—and, although cold and stern at that moment, his face was not a cruel one—and the same held good of the others. Surely she would obtain that for which she was here.

And how came it that she was here? Simply one of those strange impressions of *prévoyance* to which she was at times given. It had been borne in upon her with a vivid and startling suddenness that the missing man was in great peril; so incisive and convincing indeed was this impression as to dispel forthwith the idea that he was a courteously-treated prisoner of war in the hands of a generous and honourable enemy. She, and she alone, had power to save him. All Orientals were fond of money, she had heard—fortunately, she had plenty. She would literally redeem him, would buy his release, even though it cost her every farthing she had in the world.

The plan once conceived, she lost no time in carrying it out. She said no word about it to anybody, for fear of being interfered with, but, leaving a note for the Tarletons, she started off with Mehrab Khan for the Nawab’s stronghold.

The Baluchi had raised no objection. He took it as quite a matter of course that she should require him to accompany her alone into the midst of a hostile tribe. So, having adopted the Gularzai attire and being well armed, he had brought her in safety hither.

But now poor Hilda found herself in a quandary at the off-set. Her knowledge of Hindustani was of the slightest, and Mehrab Khan’s knowledge of English *nil*. She could make him understand her in ordinary matters, but as an interpreter she feared he might prove of little use. But here aid came from an unlooked-for quarter.

“If you will allow me to be your interpreter, madam, I will strive to convey to my father what you wish to say.”

Hilda stared. It was Shere Dil Khan who had spoken, and his English was well-nigh faultless. She thanked him, and then without waste of words set forward the object of her visit. But it was hardly necessary for him to interpret the Nawab’s reply. She knew that it was a stern and emphatic refusal.

“Who is this woman, and what is she to the prisoner?” asked Mushîm Khan. “Is she his wife?”

This, though more courteously rendered, brought the colour to Hilda’s face, and she replied that she was not—but

only a distant relation. She thought it was time delicately to hint at the question of ransom.

Delicately—yes—because there was that about these stately chiefs that seemed to render the subject as difficult of approach as though they were Europeans of social equality.

“I know that it is not unusual, Sirdar Sahib, to ransom prisoners of war,” she said. “This I am prepared with. Will a lakh of rupees satisfy the Nawab?”

“I cannot put that to my father,” said Shere Dil Khan.

“Is it not enough? Well, name your own price.” Her colour came and went, and she spoke eagerly and quickly.

“It is not that, but—”

“Well, put it, put it!” returned Hilda, unable to restrain an impatient stamp of the foot. “Put it, I entreat you.”

He looked at her hesitatingly for a moment, then complied. A change came over the features of Mushîm Khan as he listened, and his eyes fairly blazed with wrath.

“Am I a vile Hindu trader to be approached with such an offer?” he said. “Is the blood of my brother—the ignominy of his death—a mere question of rupees, of a lakh more or less? Tell this woman that all the rupees in the treasury of the *Sirkar* for a hundred years would not redeem the man whose father put to death with ignominy one of our house. He dies at sunrise to-morrow. As for her, she came alone and trusting to my protection. Praised be Allah, it shall be extended to her, and to her attendant. Let refreshment be given her, and with my safe conduct let her depart.”

This Shere Dil Khan duly rendered. But Hilda did not move. Great tears rose to her eyes and rolled down her cheeks.

“He must not die, ah—he must not die,” she said. “Listen, Sirdar Sahib. Tell the Nawab I offer him all I have in the world, five lakhs of rupees, in redemption of this life. See, I have braved all and every danger, and travelled alone here to save it. He is brave, he must be generous. Oh, make him relent.”

Animation made all the difference in the world to Hilda Clive’s appearance. When she was animated to this extent she was beautiful—moreover, the Gularzai dress became her well. Shere Dil Khan looked at her with pity and concern. But the faces of the other two remained hard as granite.

“I have said and I have no more to say,” answered the Nawab, when this had been translated to him. “He dies at sunrise. I have sworn it. And now, let her depart.”

Hilda stood for a few moments in silence, her great eyes fixed upon the Nawab’s face. Then she said,—

“May I not see him? May I not bid him farewell? That will not break the chief’s oath.”

Mushîm Khan pondered for a moment and frowned. The terrible vendetta spirit had entirely warped his nature, which was not naturally a harsh or cruel one, rendering him utterly merciless. But he answered,—

“She can see him until the hour of prayer. Then she must depart as she came.”

Hilda thanked the Nawab, then, having directed her Baluchi escort to wait for her there, without the loss of a moment, turned to follow Shere Dil Khan, who had been chosen to accompany her. As they drew near the place of Raynier’s confinement he said,—

“I have been ordered to be present throughout your interview, but I will not carry out that literally. You shall see your relation alone. This is the place.”

She entered the door he held open, then closed it behind her. She and Herbert Raynier were alone together.

“Great Heavens!” cried the latter, sitting up and rubbing his eyes with amazement. “Great Heavens! Hilda!”

“Yes, Hilda,” she answered, her eyes brimming again.

He had never seen her like this, and down went every barrier of conventionality. He had risen to his shackled feet, and now without further words she was locked in his close embrace.

“How and when did they capture you?” he asked at length.

“They did not capture me: I am free.”

“Free?” And his glance rested on her Gularzai attire, and seemed to freeze.

“I am a thought reader, remember,” she said, with a wan smile, as she followed his glance. “No, it is not as you think. I put on this disguise for safety’s sake.” And then, in as few words as possible, for time was valuable, she told him of her plan, and how it had failed.

“But it has not failed,” he answered emphatically. “It has given me the sight of your dear self once more. Oh, darling, to think that you should have undertaken such a thing—and for me. There is no other woman under the sun who would have done it.”

“Not if she—”

"Say it, say it," he urged, holding her more closely.

"Loved you. There. I will say it. I would say anything now. Listen, Herbert, can nothing be done? Can we not bribe some of them? I have money—plenty of it. Think quickly—time is so short. This one who speaks English so well, the Nawab's son. Is he to be bought?"

"Oh, then he does speak English?"

"Yes. Shall I offer him what his father refused? Shall I? Shall I?"

"What did his father refuse?"

"All I am worth—five lakhs of rupees. He said a million would be equally useless."

"Hilda! You did not do this?"

"I did. I would not have told you at any other time. But now—nothing seems to matter. Nothing—nothing."

Words failed him, failed them both—but their understanding was complete; even as it had been during their wanderings together. Then nothing had been said, but every tone, every glance, had been an understanding in itself. And time was so precious.

"Listen, Herbert. I have a plan. You shall put on my clothes, and pass out instead of me. By stooping a little you can diminish your height. And the veil will do the rest."

"And these?" he said, clinking his fetters.

"Ah, I forgot. Heaven help me, I forgot," she cried.

"Do you think, in any case, I would have agreed to save my precious skin at the price of leaving you in their power? Why, Hilda, I wonder you thought me worth stirring a finger for, at all."

She looked at him, long and earnestly and hopelessly, as though to photograph his image in her brain. How ill he looked, pale and haggard, and hollow cheeked. It was not much of a time for thinking of appearances, but he felt thankful that the advantages of the Mahomedan injunctions of cleanliness had been extended to him—a prisoner.

"Sweetheart, God bless you for coming to me at the last," he went on. "It was grand—intrepid. Tell me, Hilda. You have known all the time that I loved you?"

"Yes, I knew," she answered chokingly. Then, with forced gaiety, "You did not on the voyage, though."

"Was I not a born fool? Oh, my darling, what happiness might have been ours. What might not our lives have been but for this?"

A thought of Cynthia Daintree crossed her mind, of Cynthia Daintree amusing herself at Mazaran, while claiming this man's bond. An impulse came upon her to ask about that affair, but she forebore. Nothing of a disturbing nature must come between them now. And time was so short, so precious.

Then for a short sacred half hour they talked—and their words, uttered on the brink of the grave of one of them, were so deep, so sacred as not to bear intrusion. And then Shere Dil Khan's voice was heard outside, proclaiming that the time had come for the interview to end.

"We have found our happiness only to lose it," whispered Raynier. "But that is better than never having known it. Is it not?"

"Yes, yes—a thousand times. God bless you, O my love, my love!"

To the end of her life Hilda will never know how she tore herself from the last close embrace. And Heaven was deaf to the cry of her widowed soul, deaf as the polite but impassive Oriental who conducted her forth from that chamber of heartbreak and despair.

Chapter Twenty Five.

De Talione.

"There *is* gratitude left in the world."

Herbert Raynier was lying in the damp and pitchy gloom of his dungeon, sleeping as soundly and as peacefully as though he were not to be led forth and beheaded with the rising of the morrow's sun. That last interview had calmed and soothed him, and now his slumbers were bright—for he was amid beautiful scenes, far away, and Hilda was beside him. Then he started up—and with the first flash of awaking consciousness came the thought that the time had come, and the hand that had dropped on his shoulder in the darkness was that which should lead him forth to his doom.

"There *is* gratitude left in the world."

The words were uttered softly, and—in good English. Was he dreaming? But immediately a shaded light rendered

things visible. Hands were busy about his shackles, and lo! they fettered his ankles no more.

"I have come to save you, brother," went on the whispered voice. "If you obey me implicitly you will be free immediately. Put on these, and until I give leave, do not speak so much as one little word."

Raynier obeyed him in both particulars. In a moment or two he was arrayed in the white loose garments and turban of the border tribes. For the other injunction, he whispered but one name,—

"Shere Dil Khan?"

"Yes. Now—silence." Following his guide, to Raynier it seemed they were traversing endless and labyrinthine passages. With something of a shudder he recognised that horrible door through which he had passed during those acute moments of living death, then the Sirdar opened another door, and the cool free air of the desert, blowing upon them, told that they were outside the walls.

Still preserving the most rigid silence, they held on, downward, by a steep path. Turning his head, Raynier could make out the loom of the great mountain mass against the stars, and was conjecturing on the ease and absence of obstacle which had characterised his deliverance at the hands of the Nawab's son, for not a soul did they encounter, no guard challenged them; and it occurred to him that, in the strength of his fetters, his safe keeping had lain, wherefore no watch was placed over him; and this was the real meaning of it.

For about half an hour they had been walking swiftly and in silence, when Shere Dil Khan stopped. Before them was a rude herdsman's shelter, and from within came a sound.

They entered this, and, was it imagination? but Raynier thought to perceive a human figure dart out at the other end. But here stood two horses, saddled and bridled.

"Mount," said Shere Dil Khan, breaking the silence. And he thrust a rifle into the other's hand. "It is a Lee-Metford, and the magazine is fully loaded, but here are other cartridges."

"You might well have thought that gratitude was dead in the world, my brother," resumed the Sirdar, as they rode on through the night. "But had I shown any recognition of you then, you would not be here now, for, the Nawab's suspicions once aroused, you would have been strongly guarded. Even to the lady I dared not give the slightest encouragement to hope."

"I misjudged you, brother, forgive me. But would not the Nawab have reckoned what I was able to do for you as a set-off against what my father is supposed to have done?"

"He would not, for he had sworn, and an oath is binding. Now that you have escaped he will not be sorry, when he learns how you saved me from the murderous rabble in your country. But, brother, get your Government to remove you from this border, because now it is the duty of every Gularzai to take your life."

Raynier thought that his Government would not require much "getting" under all the circumstances, and perhaps it was as well.

"But you, brother? Will not you have to suffer for this?"

"No. My father will be displeased, but although he would not have spared you, at heart he will be glad you have escaped, having saved the life of his son."

It had been midnight when they started. Towards daybreak they paused to rest their horses, then on again.

"Yonder is she who would have redeemed you, brother," said Shere Dil Khan.

In front were discernible two mounted figures. Raynier's heart leaped, and he well-nigh blessed his peril, by reason of that which it had drawn forth. But the meeting between the two was subdued, for there were others present Shere Dil Khan and the Baluchi were deep in earnest conference.

"Farewell now, brother," said the former. "I can go no further. Allah be with ye! I think the way is open, yet do not delay, and avoid others if possible." And with a farewell handclasp the Sirdar turned his horse and cantered swiftly away.

Twice they sighted parties of Gularzai, but these were distant and unmounted, moreover, they themselves being in native attire attracted no attention. The sun rose over the chaos of jagged peaks, and to those wanderers it seemed that he never rose upon a fairer and brighter world—yet they were in a desert of arid plain, and cliff, and hump-like hills streaked white with gypsum. Mehrab Khan thought that by swift travelling they might reach Mazaran by the middle of the next night. All seemed fair and promising.

On the right front rose a great mountain range, broken and rugged, and now they were crossing a long narrow plain. Then, at the end of this they became aware of something moving.

"Horsemen—and Gularzai," pronounced Mehrab Khan.

Were they pursued? was the first thought of his hearers. For they made out that this was a party four or five dozen strong perhaps. Yet, why should they attract the attention of these any more than of other groups they had passed? They forgot one thing. Hilda, though in native costume, was riding European fashion, side saddle.

Further scrutiny did not tend to reassure. The horsemen were heading in their direction, and riding rapidly. It began

to wear an ugly look of pursuit. This might prove to be a stray wandering band, but even that did not seem to mend matters.

Raynier and Mehrab Khan held rapid consultation. It would look less suspicious to ride on if they had been seen, they decided, and there was nowhere to hide, if they had not. But soon a glimpse behind placed the question beyond all doubt. The distance between themselves and the horsemen had diminished perceptibly. The latter, strung out over the plain, were coming for them at a gallop.

As they put their steeds to a corresponding pace, it seemed to Raynier that all he had gone through was as nothing to that moment. They would be captured, for, bearing in mind the pace at which they had hitherto travelled, their steeds were urgently in need of a blow. Just as they had reckoned on having gained safety at last, and now—all was lost.

On, on, swept this wild chase, and now the pursuers were near enough to shout to them to halt. Hilda's steed was beginning to show signs of giving in. Then its rider uttered breathlessly,—

“Herbert, I see a chance. That bend of rock just ahead. Beyond it—the *tangi*—the Syyed's *tangi*.”

“A chance, indeed,” he answered, all athrill at the discovery. “The only thing is will they fight shy of it now, as they did in cold blood?”

“They will—they will,” she panted.

Now they had gained the rock portal—towering up grim and frowning overhead, and the pursuers had nearly gained it too. But these last, the foremost of them, drew up a little way from the entrance. So did others who came up. It was evident they recognised the place, and the force of superstition was strong.

Crouched among the boulders the three fugitives could just see what was going on. One who seemed a leader was evidently urging them forward—riding up and down their line haranguing and gesticulating vehemently. At last six or seven men broke from the others, and, followed by these, the chief advanced towards the mouth of the chasm.

“Murad Afzul, *Huzoor*,” whispered Mehrab Khan.

“It is his last quarter of an hour,” grimly answered Raynier, sighting his rifle. And then an inspiration came to him, and he whispered some hurried instructions to Mehrab Khan. The Baluchi immediately left his side, and retired further into the chasm.

“Hilda, dearest, do you think you could hold the horses, in case they get a bit of a scare?” he said. “I have a plan which will save us, if anything will. Stand behind that elbow of rock with them.”

Without a word she obeyed, and now the Gularzai were already within the mouth of the *tangi*, Murad Afzul leading. What followed was weirdly startling. The whole of the grim and gloomy chasm roared with the most appalling sounds, mingled with shriekings and wailings. To and fro—tossed along those gigantic cliff walls the echoes bellowed, giving forth strange mouthings, and then, over all, from the dim inner recesses of the cavernous rift spake an awful voice.

“O unbelievers, violators of my sanctuary, retire, or ye die—die even as those three now lying here, whom none may find until the ending of the world. He who makes one step forward, that moment he dies. In the name of the Great, the Terrible One.”

The suddenness of it, the awful appalling din, the sombre repute of the place, and the consciousness that they were knowingly venturing on sacrilege, had an effect upon the intruders which was akin to panic. They stopped short, reining in their horses cruelly, lest they should accidentally make that one step forward, and their fierce shaggy visages seemed petrified with the terror that was in them. But Murad Afzul's horse at that moment, wildly plunging, half stumbled on a round stone, and the jerk of the bit, and the savage sting of the hide whip, instinctively administered, caused it to take a bound forward. Then it stopped dead still, and its rider half stood up in his stirrups with a quick jerk, then, throwing up his arms, toppled heavily, and with a crash, on to the stones.

One terrified glance at the set face and glazing eyes, and the whole half-dozen venturesome ones turned and stampeded wildly from the terrible spot, muttering citations from the Koran to avert further evil. What could be clearer? Their leader had made a forbidden step forward and—and he had died, even as the ghost of the holy one whose sanctuary it was, had threatened. He had died, stricken by the powers of the air at the bidding of the Syyed.

Raynier, his nerves all athrill with this passing of the crisis, withdrew his rifle, feeling something of savage satisfaction and pride in his successful shot. But it did not at once occur to him that the wild and deafening din of the reverberations had so completely drowned the report of his piece that no shadow of a suspicion lay upon the minds of the now discomfited pursuers that their leader had met his death by mortal agency, or by any other than that of the powers of the unseen. It was left to Hilda to suggest, and the idea was a reassuring one, because it meant that no further pursuit would be undertaken. Her he found struggling with the bridles of the scared and refractory horses, and at the same time convulsively laughing.

“It was so comical,” she explained. “Fancy our being able to turn that echo to such account. It was clever of you to hit upon that idea.” Then gravely, “Do you remember what I said that night, Herbert, the second time we were in here together? ‘Something warns me there will come a day when our knowledge of this place will make all the difference between life and death.’ Well, has it made that difference?”

“I should rather think so. But what puzzles me is how on earth you knew we were anywhere near the place. We

entered it now, mind you, by the end furthest from the camp, and we never went outside that on either of those occasions."

"I knew it by that split rock and the little one beside it, rising up out of the nullah down there. I noticed them opposite this entrance the first time we were here."

"Wonderful! Do you know, Hilda, Haslam says there's something uncanny about you, and I begin to believe there is."

"Only *begin* to believe?" And she laughed gaily, happily.

The comedy side of what had come near being tragedy did not appeal to Mehrab Khan in the least. They found that estimable Baluchi in a serious and gloomy vein. In the first place he had penetrated here and had thus incurred the consequent penalty; in the next by taking the voice of the dead Syyed he had committed an act of sacrilege. Raynier strove to reassure him.

"If Allah used this place as a means of saving our lives," he said, "he does not intend that it shall be the means of our losing them, and it was written that they should be saved here. Besides, O believer, it was upon the people of this country that the dead Syyed laid the curse, not upon us, who are not of this country."

And this, perhaps, was what went furthest towards reassuring Mehrab Khan. He repeated sententiously,—

"It was written."

Chapter Twenty Six.

A Deed of Gift.

At Mazaran Hilda Clive was the heroine of the hour, and the station did not know which to do most—admire her pluck and resolution, or marvel how it could have regarded her all this while as of no account. She had done a wonderful thing, this quiet, retiring girl, on whom the popular verdict had been "Oh, so-so." She had ventured alone into the stronghold of one of the fierce, fanatical tribes then engaged in the border war, and had brought back their prisoner, the man whom they had doomed to death. She had saved his life.

But Hilda declared emphatically that she had done nothing of the kind—on the contrary, her errand had failed signally. He had been released by a different and unexpected agency altogether, and it was only by accident that they had travelled back together. To this side of the story not much attention was given. The fact remained that she had set out to effect his release, and had returned with him, and not without him. And now the station metaphorically winked, and pronounced Raynier a lucky fellow indeed.

Yes, but what about that other time when it had so pronounced him, and the reason thereof? Well, on that head it had seen cause to change its mind. For Cynthia Daintree had not been careful to keep up her part. She had flirted outrageously with Captain Beecher what time the man to whom she declared herself engaged was in daily peril of his life, and had incidentally offended more than one whose good word was worth having. Yet how would Raynier dispose of her, she having come all the way out from home; moreover, she would be rather a difficult subject to negotiate? Clearly there were complications ahead, and the station looked forward to no end of fun.

It was disappointed, however. Raynier, with a promptitude and decision for which she had not given him credit gave Cynthia to understand that he did not consider himself in the very least bound to her, nor had he since that last interview in the Vicarage garden. As for her action in coming out there to claim him, under the circumstances, he preferred not to express an opinion, for fear he might say too much.

He had anticipated a wild and stormy scene. To his surprise she seemed to acquiesce. The only thing was that if he repudiated her after what she had given out, what sort of a figure would she cut? She had better let it be known that she had discovered they were not suited to each other, and so had better part, she suggested.

There was something in this. He could hardly show her up—for every reason. He was intensely annoyed, but finally agreed; resolving, however, that there was one person at any rate who should know the truth.

But now official business claimed Raynier's time and attention to the exclusion of all else. Reinforcements arrived at Mazaran, and field operations were to be opened immediately against the Gularzai, and on the eve of these, Raynier had the good fortune to capture, with the aid of Mehrab Khan and a few Levy Sowars, the *mullah* Hadji Haroun, he having obtained secret information that that pestilent agitator was travelling in disguise and almost unguarded. This was a stroke of luck indeed. There was no question at headquarters of superseding him now, the more so that immediately afterwards he succeeded, through his friendship with Shere Dil Khan, in opening up communications with the Nawab. The Gularzai chief had been drawn into the war unwillingly, as we have seen. The tribes further along the border had suffered severely, and more reinforcements were moving up to reduce him. He had entered upon it mainly as an opportunity of wreaking his vengeance upon Raynier, only to find that the latter had saved the life of his son and successor. Shere Dil Khan, too, had cast doubts on the genuineness of the document used by the *mullah* to secure the adherence of the Gularzai—in fact, believed it to be a downright forgery.

Raynier was an important personage at that juncture, and, in truth, he deserved any prestige he may have earned. For, again trusting to Mushim Khan's safe conduct, he had placed himself alone in the power of the Gularzai chief, with the result that he returned having obtained the Nawab's submission. The Gularzai had taken no very active part as yet in the rising, and the Government were only too glad to receive the submission of so important and powerful a chief as Mushim Khan, wherefore there was peace, and Raynier was marked out for recognition; albeit the military

element cursed him roundly among themselves as one of those infernal meddling Politicals who had done them out of a nice little campaign.

Hilda Clive seemed to have become quieter and more retiring than ever, and the station—whose attempt to lionise her she had resolutely evaded—decided that anxiety about Raynier was her motive, for it was universally opined that “that would be a *bundobust*” once the border trouble was over.

One day she said to the Tarletons,—“Do you remember how scared you all were for fear I should go through the Syyed’s *tangi* with Mr Raynier?”

“Rather,” said Haslam, who was there, helping Tarleton to reduce Mushîm Khan—in theory.

“How long ago was that?”

They fell to discussion; deciding that it was quite two months.

“Well, then, I ought to be dead by now. The tradition says before the end of the second moon. And even when we were talking about the place, I had already been through it once. I have been through it twice since. The third time it saved our lives, as you know.”

The story of this latter event in its completeness they had agreed to keep to themselves, only giving out that the Gularzai had shrunk from following them into the *tangi* from superstitious motives.

“I told you I’d prove that superstition nonsensical,” she went on, her eyes dancing with fun. “Well, what have you got to say for yourselves?”

“You’d already been through it before that night, Miss Clive?” said Haslam. “Well, I’m jiggered!”

“Yes. But what about the rule?” she persisted. “I’m not dead yet.”

Snapped Tarleton, “Well, you can’t expect there to be no exception to every rule, can you?”

Hilda had been giving herself over to business of late, for each mail brought her enclosures, bulky and blue, and of unequivocally legal aspect. With such documents she would shut herself up in Tarleton’s den, which he had made over to her for the purpose, and she was so engaged one morning, when Raynier was announced. He had returned to Mazaran the day before, and they had met—in public; but this visit was one of arrangement—of her arrangement.

Hilda looked up from the papers she had been busy with as he entered—in fact made a guilty and trepidatious attempt at sweeping them out of sight, which suggested a weakness entirely foreign to her.

“Well, how are things going?” she asked gaily.

“Things are going quite right. We have that pestiferous *mullah*, Hadji Haroun, safe by the heels, and Mushîm Khan has cut out of all further part in the *jihad*. That’s good enough to begin with.”

“Yes—and you? You know, you must get removed from here. The blood feud will overtake you sooner or later.”

“No, I think not. I believe Mushîm Khan was wound up by that sweep of a *mullah*. Now he only remembers what I did for his son. And he has done nothing beyond what he did to me individually, and Murad Afzul is dead, so the Government will not be hard on him, and things will be as they were.”

“Yes. And who has he—who have we all got to thank for that? Herbert, had you no thought for me, when you put yourself into their power again? If I could not get you out of it before, could I again, do you think?”

“Darling, it was because I had every thought for you that I worried along at the official business for all I knew how. I wanted to straighten out the muddle they’d be sure to put down to me. And now I believe I have.”

“Yes, indeed, you have.”

“And the stir and work knocked me together again, and all that fever has cleared out of my system. I can never forget what an abject invalid I was, just when I ought to have been taking care of you.”

“Can’t you? But I can, and have.”

She was standing beside him now, one hand toying absently with a button on his coat, a half-absent, half-serious expression in her large eyes that was very sweet. Her mind went back to the period to which he referred, when he was ill and fevered and fainting on the cloud-swept hill side. What a contrast! She saw him now, dominant, restored in every way, having ended the disturbance here in his own jurisdiction by sheer personal intrepidity and weight of influence—the calm, strong, cool-headed official, to whom all looked up.

“Tell me about Cynthia Daintree,” she said.

“Just the very thing I’ve wanted to do. By the way, incidentally, she has hooked that young ass, Beecher. Whether she’ll land him is another matter.”

“I know. I know, too, what you wanted to tell me that day we went to visit Sarbaland Khan. Well, we met with a very uncommon interruption then.”

"Hilda, Hilda. What a witch you are. Is there anything you don't know?"

"Yes, plenty. But I won't bother you to go over all that again, because I know it already. In fact, I knew it on that very day, though not through you. Remember the *dak* may bring me momentous communications as well as you. Oh, by the way, I have a little present here for you. Will you take it?"

"Will I? Will I value anything from you! Darling, how can you ask?"

She did not return his kiss. Her manner was constrained—almost awkward. Turning to the table she placed in his hands a document—large, parchmenty, legal-looking. Then she turned away.

"Why, what on earth is this?" he said as he read through it, and at length mastered how it set forth, amid infinite legal terminology, how shares and property and cash to the amount of thirty-seven thousand pounds was conveyed to "the said Herbert Raynier by his said cousin, the said Hilda Clive."

"Great Scott! What does it all mean?"

"What it says, dear," she answered, still somewhat constrained. "I always thought you had been hardly treated in Cousin Jervis's will. You were much nearer to him than I was, and a Raynier to boot. So I made up my mind to go halves with you—until—until—well, lately. Then I thought you ought to have the whole. I was always reckoned rather eccentric, you know. But I kept a little, just a little for myself. You won't mind that, will you?"

He was staring blankly at her, then at the document.

"I don't quite understand. What is this thing?"

"Well, it's a restoration of what ought to have gone to you. The lawyers call it a deed of gift. It has to be put that way, you know," she added shyly, apologetically.

Still Raynier was staring at her as though he had taken leave of his senses. For there suddenly rushed in upon his mind a scrap of a certain conversation with Mr Daintree in the Vicarage garden. This, then, was the distant cousin, Hilda Clive! He had not even known her name—and then he remembered how he would have learned it then and there but for the younger girl's boisterous interruption. He remembered, too, the Vicar's remark. "She's bound to marry, and then where do you come in?" and his own answer, lightly, banteringly given, "Nowhere, unless I were to marry her myself," and then—

There was a harsh, staccato sound of tearing. The parchment lay upon the floor, crumpled, and torn in several pieces. But she who had handed it to him seemed to share its violent treatment, for she was crushed to him in a close embrace.

"Hilda, darling, I wonder if you have anything approaching a parallel in the world. I never heard of such an act of magnificent generosity. But, unfortunately, it is all thrown away. I don't want that," pointing to the tattered deed. "I want you. I would rather be back in Mushim Khan's prison, with all it involved, and you as you were then, than take what you wanted me to there—without you. The only deed of gift I will accept is yourself. Yourself, do you hear? Am I to have it?"

She was thinking. Almost the spirit of her clairvoyance was in the vivid picture of the dread prison in the Gularzai stronghold that rose before her mind. Then she had stood with him on the brink of his grave, and soul had met soul undisguised. Then it was death—now life—life and such happiness! Her cheek was against his, her lips at his ear. She whispered,—

"Yes. You know you are."

The End.

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