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KING-ERRANT



"I WOULD THE COURT PAINTER WERE NOT A FOOL,"
SHE SAID REGRETFULLY."

"I would the court painter were not a fool," she said regretfully.

KING-ERRANT

BY

FLORA ANNIE STEEL

Author of "On the Face of the Waters," etc.

**WITH FRONTISPIECE IN COLOR AND TWO
ILLUSTRATIONS IN BLACK-AND-WHITE
BY THE AUTHOR**

**NEW YORK
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PREFACE

This is not a novel, neither is it a history. It is the life-story of a man, taken from his own memoirs.

"Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor, gentleman, apothecary, ploughboy, thief."

So runs the jingle.

The hero of this book might have claimed as many personalities in himself, for Zahir-ud-din Mahomed commonly called Babar, Emperor of India, the first of the dynasty which we mis-name the Great Moghuls, was at one and the same time poet, painter, soldier, athlete, gentleman, musician, beggar and King.

He lived the most adventurous life a man ever lived, in the end of the fifteenth, the beginning of the sixteenth centuries; and he kept a record of it.

On this record I have worked. Reading between the lines often, at times supplying details that must have occurred, doing my best to present, without flaw, the lovable, versatile, volatile soul which wrote down its virtues and its vices, its successes and its failures with equally unsparing truth, and equally invariable sense of honour and humour.

The incident of the crystal bowl, and the details of Babar's subsequent marriage to Mahâm (the woman who was to be to him what Ayesha was to Mahomed), are purely imaginary. I found it necessary to supply some explanation of the curious coincidence in time of this undoubted marriage with the pitifully brief romance of little Cousin Ma'asuma; for Babar was above all

things affectionate. I trust my imagining fits in with the general tone of my hero's life.

If not, he will forgive me, I am sure. He forgave so many in life that he will not grudge forgiveness in death, to his most ardent admirer.

F. A. STEEL.

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SEED TIME

1493 to 1504

KING-ERRANT

CHAPTER I

".... for I
know
How far high failure overleaps the bounds
Of low successes--"

Lewis Morris.

The fortified town of Andijân lay hot in the spring sunshine. Outside the citadel, in the clover meadows which stretched from its gate to the Black-river (a tributary to the swift Jaxartes which flows through the kingdom of Ferghâna) a group of boys and men were playing leap-frog.

"An *ushruffi* he falls," cried one watching the leaper.

"A *dirrhm* he doesn't!" retorted another who had a broad, frank, good-natured face.

"There! He's done! I said so," continued the first not without satisfaction, for he was rival for championship.

"Not he!" asserted the second gleefully as the stumble was overborne by an extra effort. "Trust him and his luck! He wins! Babar wins!"

And Nevian foster-brother's voice was the loudest in acclaim as the frog-like figure with wide-spread legs, after successfully backing the long row of bent slaves arranged--with due regard to difficulty--adown the meadow-path, finally overtopped the last and with a "*hull-lul-la la!*" of triumph subsided incontinently into the white clover. And there it lay on its back gazing at the blue sky cheerfully.

It was that of rather a lanky boy; to western eyes a well-grown one of at least fifteen, with a promise of six feet and more of manhood in its long, loose-jointed limbs. But Babar, heir-apparent to this little kingdom of Ferghâna was only in his twelfth year. His face, nevertheless, was extraordinarily intent, with an intentness beyond his years, as he lay silent among the clover; for something had come between him and his game, between him and the work-a-day world. Something that came to him often with the sight of a wide stretch of blue sky, a narrow stretch of blue river, or even with the sight of a flower upon that river's brim.

How glorious! How splendid it was--this world in which he, forsooth, played leap-frog! The clover on which he lay, how sweet it smelt, how soft it was! It was just like a mantle of lambskin, covered as it was, till you could hardly see a speck of green, with its white, furry blobs of blossom.

A lambskin mantle!--that was a good description!

And the sky was like the turquoises that folk brought down from the higher hills in the summer when they were not weaving the purple cloth, which somehow always got mixed up in his mind with the pale blue. Why both recalled the multi-coloured tulips on the mountain slopes was a puzzle, except that one beauty recalled another. At that rate, however, memory in Ferghâna would be unending, for though it was, as everyone knew, situated on the extreme boundary of the habitable world, it was abundantly pleasant!

The lad's amber-tinted hazel eyes darkened as he ran over in his mind the excellencies of his native valley hidden away at the back of the Pamirs.

Its snow-clad hills clipping it on all sides save the west; its running streams; its violets--so sweet, but not piercing-sweet like a rose;--its profusion of fruits! Truly, that way they had over in the township of Marghinân of removing apricot stones and putting in chopped almonds instead was excellent indeed--

"Most Mighty!" came a voice breaking in on his thoughts. "There is news--bad news!"

The voice was breathless, yet full of concern, and Babar sprang to his feet, alert in a second. A messenger stood before him; one who had come far and fast. And in his hand was a blue kerchief; therefore he was a messenger of death.

Death? Incredible in this splendid joyful world! A sudden surge of resentful life-blood seemed to stop the boyish heart with its tumultuous claim for free passage.

"Well?" he asked thickly.

The answer came like a blow; dully, yet with stunning force.

"Your father, O King!"

His father! And he, Babar, was King! In the rush of realisation incredulity came uppermost.

"But how--?"

He stood there bare-headed, unbelieving, while the others crowded round to listen.

It was a simple enough tragedy. Omar-Shaikh, his father had been feeding his tumbler pigeons on the scarp of a precipice which overhung the steep ravine below the fort at Âkhsi. He had been watching them against the blue void, throwing golden grain to make them play their antics, when the ground had given way beneath his feet and he had been precipitated on to the river rocks beneath. That was all. The little group of listeners showed shocked faces, but Babar, even as he heard the tale with dismayed grief, seemed to see the fluttering white wings of the startled pigeons, to see the startled soul amongst them, taking its flight--

Whitherwards?--Gone!... Never to be seen again! Yet how clearly he saw him now ... short, stout, a bushy beard hiding a humorous mouth ... the turban without folds and with such long ends ... the tunic all over tight ... how often the strings had burst and how angry he had been at consequent childish giggles ...

A sudden spasm of remorse for idle thoughts sent the son's memory back to his father's kindness ... a good sportsman too, though but a poor shot with the bow ... still with uncommon force in his fists--everyone he had ever hit had gone down before father's....

The last word brought memory of a still dearer tie.

"My mother?" asked the boy swiftly, "my mother? How--"

Then the real meaning of what he had heard came to him. He gave a little short, sharp cry and cast himself face downwards on the sweet-smelling white clover.

And all the joy of splendid life passed from him.

Nevian foster-brother who worshipped him, went over to him and crouched beside him.

"It is God's will, sire," he mumbled mechanically. "Kwâja Kâzi says so, and Kwâja Kâzi is a saint."

But saintship did not interest that young human heart, face to face for the first time with the deprivation of death.

Meanwhile those others, the bearded nobles and broad-faced courtiers who had crowded out at the news, looked at each other in doubt.

What had best be done? The times were troublous. Their new King was over-young. The King of Samarkand, the King of Tashkend, his paternal uncles, were already on the war-path. The former almost within striking distance; and this news of death would hasten, not retard.

In such case, might not refuge in the hills be wise? At any rate till Kâsim-Beg, most faithful of Governors, and Hassan-Yakoob, wiliest of advisers, could be recalled from the front?

But, while they still cogitated, Babar, who even at that age was not to be handled, rose suddenly, the tear-stains still on his sun-tanned cheeks. His voice, however, was firm.

"To horse, gentlemen!" he cried. "I go to secure my kingdom!"

He was on his lean-necked, goose-rumped Turkhestan mare Zulaikha almost before the words passed his lips, and ere two minutes had sped the low arched gateway of the city echoed and re-echoed to the hoofs of horses, as--the riders low bowed upon their saddles--they swept through in a stream of tails and tassels. So had it echoed many a time to the wild Turkhoman cavalry, since life in those days was one long war and rumour of war.

"My King!" said Shirâm-Taghâi spurring close as Barbar drew rein on the citadel terrace, and laying a detaining hand on his bridle. "That way lies death! Thine uncles mean evil! Come with us to the hills."

For an instant the boy hesitated and his eyes sought the distant blue of the mountains.

There, doubtless, lay safety--but what of that unknown quantity--kingship?

He had no ideals of it. He had not even been brought up to expect the chiefship. In those days succession was too uncertain for anticipation. But it was something now within his grasp. What if he lost it?

Still the faces around him were anxious and their owners were old; they had experience. And he was so young! How young none knew but himself. As this thought came he felt inclined to cry out-loud for his mother as in his heart he was crying for her loving care.

Then from the citadel came a running messenger to bid him enter without fear.

"It is a trick, Sire," protested Shirâm-Taghâi. "Safety lies with us."

And others echoed his words; so the lad wavered, uncertain, till an old man seated in the sunshine mumbling to himself, his long white beard wagging the while, spoke chance words that gave him the clue.

"Whatever happens is God's will, as the saints say."

Five minutes afterwards the young King knelt before Khwâja Kâzi, the saint of his family, for his decision. He was a thin ascetic-looking man whose sunken eyes, hollowed by many fasts, hardened by much thought, but softened by the unshed tears of a lonely life, dipped critically into the clear, shadowless youth of the hazel ones and appraised the character of the young face with its fine-lipped mouth that tempered the strong square of the chin. And Khwâja Kâzi knew the inside of the boy as well. He had watched him from birth; and lawyer and judge by profession, had accurately gauged the volatile, versatile vitality which would carry him triumphantly over all the obstacles in the leap-frog race of life. But he saw the dangers ahead also, and he loved the lad as his own soul; as indeed, despite all his faults, most people did love Babar in fortune and misfortune, in sickness and in health.

And the keen observer noticed how firmly the young hand closed over his scimitar-hilt. It was enough for one accustomed to weigh evidence and give verdicts.

"Draw thy sword, my son! and stand firm!"

The decree fell on glad ears. The boy was on his feet in a second and the war-shout of his race rang through the smoke-grimed old hall. Kingship lay before him.

As yet, however, the tragedy of death clouded his outlook. His dead father awaited burial at Âkshi, thirty miles distant; but ere he could start thitherwards many arrangements and new appointments had to be made. The novelty of power carried him far from thought. It was dream-like to be giving orders when but an hour before he had existed solely by the pleasure and permission of his father; as every other son in Moghulistân lived in those quaint old days.

It was dark, therefore, ere he and his galloping party stumbled over the stone causeways leading up to the high-perched citadel at Âkshi. Too late to disturb the women-folk, who, outworn by wailing, had gone to rest. But a little knot of long-robed physicians showed him the dead body of his father, lying ready for the funeral on an open bier in the Audience Hall. Babar had often seen death before, but never in this guise, with watchers and flaring torches and all the insignia of chiefship discarded, before the poor deserted shell of power.

It impressed his emotional nature vividly, and the mystery and the pity of it went with him to the dim royal room--so rough in its ancient royalty--where his father had been wont to sleep, and where the very touch of the royal quilts, surcharged with the personality of the cold dead in whose place he lived, seemed to burn in upon his young body and keep it awake. Not with concern or regret for things past, but with keen curiosity as to what was going to happen in the future to one Zahir-ud-din Mahomed commonly called Babar.

Lineal descendant of Timur the Earth Trembler; also of the Great Barbarian Ghengis Khan, was he to follow in their footsteps of conquest? Or would he be snuffed out at once by Uncle Ahmed of Samarkand? Wherefore, God knew, since he, Babar, had never done his uncle any harm. On the contrary; if he lived, he would have to marry that uncle's daughter Ayesha.... Here his vagrant thoughts wandered to remembrance of how sick he had been from overeating himself on sweets at the betrothal ceremonies;--that was his very earliest *real* recollection--when he was five years old.

Then there was Uncle Mahmud of Tashkend. Even in the dark the boy's cheek flushed at the mere remembrance of him; equally devoid of courage and modesty, of unbelieving disposition, keeping buffoons and scoundrels about him who enacted their scurvy and disgraceful tricks in the very face of the court, and even at public audiences!--of no outward appearance either, but all rough-hewn and speaking very ill ...

The lad, always unsparing of epithet, painted the portrait with remorseless hand. So his thoughts passed to Mahmûd's sons, his first cousins. He knew them well, but Masaud the eldest was a nincompoop, and as for Baisanghâr? What was there that jarred at times in Baisanghâr? Baisanghâr who was so charming, so elegant, so clever, so sweet-tempered?

Here the lad's mind passed swiftly, without conscious cause, to his own sister, Dearest-One as he always called her; for he was given to caressing nicknames for those he loved. And he loved none better than the tall, straight girl, five years his senior, who hectored him and petted him by turns. But she ought really to get married; it was nonsense to say you preferred being a sainted Canoness!

Baisanghâr did not say that, though, he, too, refused to marry. He said women were unnecessary evils. Was that true? Not that it mattered, since he, Babar, would have to marry, because he was King ...

King! Would it make him happier, he wondered? Could anyone be happier than he had been in

this splendid world? Supposing it was to make him unhappy? Supposing it took the charm from life ...

The idle thoughts went on and on. He felt sleepy, yet he could not sleep. And by and by the glimmering oblong of the unglazed window kept him watching the slow growth of light.

Out on the hills, the still dawn must be stepping softly so as not to waken the world too soon ... soft, sandalled feet among the snow-set flowers....

The mere thought of it was sufficient to rouse him thoroughly. He rose, passed to the window, and thrust his young body into the chill air of dawn. All shadow! A deeper shadow in the valley, a lighter shadow in the encircling hills, and above it all the clear, grey, pellucid shadow of the sky.

Hark! That was the dawn cry of the wild fowl on the marsh and he held his breath to listen like the young Narcissus, while the whole joy of splendid life seemed to fill his world once more. He did not realise--few humans do--that he was but listening for the echo of himself; the self which came back to him from sights and sounds, that many a better man might have seen and heard unmoved.

So he waited and watched till the eastern sky showed pale primrose, and the unseen sun encarnadined the distant snows, and separated the white morning mists from the blue shadows of the hills.

It was a new day, and yonder over the brow of the road were pennons and lance-points. The tribesmen were coming to bury the dead, to do homage to the living.

It was a busy day, filled up with long-drawn, intricate ceremonial. Bare time for more than one tight clasp of tearless mother and tearless son, while that Dearest-One, his sister, stood by silent, the tear-stains still on her cheeks. But that did not matter; those three understood each other.

And old Isân-daulet, his maternal grandmother, had set emotion aside also, and, stern old disciplinarian as she was, had bidden him--in high staccato phrases which betrayed her effort to keep calm--take his father's place as bravely as he could.

And he did what he could, though it was a strain upon his twelve young years, for the long night had left him feverish and the long day with its need for initiative had outwearied him. So that when at last the ordeal was over, and he was free to seek the women's apartments for rest, his nerves were all a-rack, his pulse fast and irregular.

He found his grandmother alone by the big coal fire. Mother and sister, outwearied also, had gone to bed; the best place, the old lady said oracularly, for sore eyes and broken hearts. And Babar felt it was better so. The company of the stern-featured, soft-hearted old woman of whose sagacity and clear-sightedness he stood somewhat in awe, would be more bracing than the tears which must come sooner or later.

People said he was like his grandmother. Was he, he wondered, as he lay prone on the sheepskin rug watching the firelight on her fine old face.

"Tell me!" he said suddenly, "the tale of thy youth--of Jaimal and the lover who was slain."

But Isân-daulet, though she smiled, shook her wise old head.

"Nay, child! Such tales do to stir phlegm. They are not meet when the humours are already disturbed."

The boy leaned over on his elbows and looked up at her.

"Like cures like by comparison! 'Twould steady my pulse to know others throbbled. Feel mine, Grandam--how it beats!"

She took the thin, muscular wrist held out to her and appraised it judicially.

"I will give thee a purge the morrow's morn," she said shortly. "That will keep thy head cooler than idle tales; there is nothing for hot boy's blood like a purge."

Babar's face showed obstinate yet whimsical. "I will not take it, *nanni*, if thou wilt not tell--so there! And Kings are not to be coerced, see you, by black draughts, as mere boys are. And 'tis the first boon I have asked from thee--*as I am*."

The ring of almost apprehension in the last words was too much for the old woman, who loved the lad as the apple of her eye. She laid her hand caressingly on the boy's hair. It was cut, Florentine fashion, to the ears, and the ends, outswEEPing in a gentle curve were sun-burned browner than the rest of the dark head.

"It is little to tell, sweetheart, save that it shows how even womanhood may confound strength by being resolute. It was not many years after my lord, your grandfather, married me in my father the Khân's tents upon the Steppes. He was a bold, brave man, was my lord, and like all bold, brave ones, he fought sometimes and won, and sometimes he fought and lost. 'No battle is

ended save by Death,' remember that, O! Zahir-ud-din Mahomed! And once when he lost, his women--I was one--fell into the hands of Jaimal Shaikh, his enemy. And he--low-bred hound who knew not the first principles of politeness!--did not even keep me for himself!--I was not ill-looking in those days, my child--but sent me to his officer. I, the wife of Yunus Khân, Chagatâi, of the house of Timur the Earth Trembler! Well! the fool came decked as for a bridal with blandishments and perfumes, and I welcomed him. Wherefore not? for the supper was good and he played on the lute passably. But when that was over, and we withdrew smiling to the inner room, my maids locked the door by my orders, stabbed the silly rake to death and flung his bescented body through the window to the gutter. 'Twas its proper place."

The old voice which had gained strength and fire in the recital, dropped to cold, hard finality.

"And Jaimal Shaikh?" queried Babar unwilling to lose a word.

"He sent for me and I went. 'Why hast thou done this evil thing?' he asked. 'Because thou didst worse,' I answered. 'Because thou sentest me, the wife of a living man, to another's embrace. Therefore I slew him. Slay me also, if so it pleases thee.'

"But it did not please him. 'Take her to her husband's prison,' he said, 'and leave her there. They are one flesh indeed.' So I stopped with thy grandfather and comforted him until his star rose again. Now, get thee to thy bed, child, and see thou take the draught without demur. Remember 'God is no maker of the promise breaker.' 'Twill make thee feel sick, doubtless; but what matter if the result be good."

Babar made a wry face and laughed. "Thou hast done me more good with thy tale, revered one! Lo! I can see thy would-be lover in the gutter and my esteemed grandmother, all beautiful as a bride, peeking through the lattice for a glimpse of his corpse--"

"Go to thy bed, child," put in the old lady, delighted. "There be more than pictures for thy sight now; so may the Great Maker of Kings guard thee, his creature."

And that night Zahir-ud-din Mahomed commonly called Babar, forgot that he was King in sound, dreamless, boyish sleep.

CHAPTER II

"There's a sweet little cherub who sits up aloft
To keep watch for
the life of Poor Jack!"

In truth, Babar needed such a cherub in the first days of his King-ship, for Kâsim and Hussan, his two advisers, fell foul of one another. The former, bluff, honest, facetious, a pious, faithful, religious Moslem who carefully abstained from forbidden meats and drinks, and whose judgment and talents were uncommonly good though he could neither read nor write, was for the forward policy. Hussan, polished, active, a man of courage who wrote excellent verses and was remarkable for his skill in playing polo and leap-frog, was for diplomacy. And against these latter qualifications even honest Kâsim's ingenuous and elegant vein of wit could not stand.

At least in young Babar's judgment. Old Isân-daulet his grandmother was, however, of a different opinion, and even Dearest-One, his sister, ventured to rally him gently on his choice of Prime-minister.

"What," asked Babar hotly in reply, "is Hussan the worse for playing games? Is a man the worse for doing all things well?"

"Nay! but rather the better--so be it that they be men's things," she replied, going on imperturbably with the embroidery of a new pennon for her brother. It was green and violet, his favourite colours, and she was scrolling a text on it in crinkled gold. As she sat in the sunshine on the flat roof of the citadel, her bare head gleaming brown in the glare of light, her mourning garment of dark blue short in the sleeves and low at the neck showing her wheat-coloured skin, she was a pretty creature, though her nose was too long, her chin too short for real beauty: that lay in her eyes, amber-tinted like her brother's.

"Man's things! What be man's things?" argued Babar irritably. "Is cousin Baisanghâr no man because he could help thee embroider two years ago?"

The princess held her head very high. It was not nice of her brother to import strange young men into the conversation, and distinctly mean of him to mention that old breach of etiquette. Had she not heard enough of it from her mother, ever since? Luckily grandam Isân-daulet, being desert-born, had not been so shocked, or life would have been unendurable. And as for Baisanghâr! Everyone knew he was not at all a proper young man, though he was so charming, so sweet-tempered, so ...

"Lo! brother!" she said with asperity, checking her vagrant thoughts, "if one fool shook a baby's rattle better than another, he would be wise man to thee. But 'tis not I only who find leap-frog Hussan a smooth-tongued hypocrite. Grandmother has her eye on him."

"Then can no harm happen," said the boy-King cheerfully, rising, however, with suspicious alacrity as if to escape from the subject. In truth he was somewhat afraid of old Isân-daulet though he tried to minimise his awe by asserting that very few of her sex could equal her in sagacity!

Events, however, had marched with great rapidity, and Sultan Ahmed, his uncle, was now with his army but sixteen miles from Andijân.

So something must be settled. Kâsim was for defiance and defence, Hussan for diplomatic and dutiful submission; since the King of Samarkand was, ever, indubitably suzerain-lord of Ferghâna.

"Words against works," quoth honest Kâsim, who loved to be epigrammatic. His experience told him that if you fought fair you failed at times, but in the end you came out top dog in the general scrimmage of claims and clans.

"Nay!" retorted Hussan, "I desire diplomacy, not dare-devil disregard of common precautions."

Babar, however, frowned at both as he sat listening to the council of war or peace. He favoured neither pugnacity nor deceit.

"Look you, gentlemen," he said, frowning. "All admit my Uncle Ahmed to be a fool whom fools lead by the nose; but is that cause why I should treat him foolishly, and so disgrace myself? I will neither fight nor yield till I have made him understand how the matter lies. So, let a scribe be brought and I will indite him a letter."

"No letter ever did any good," grumbled illiterate Kâsim.

"Especially if it be not received nor read," suggested Hussan sardonically. "The King of Samarkand is supreme and may refuse aught but a personal interview."

Kâsim shot furious glances: such talk savoured to him of treason; but Babar only looked gravely from one adviser to the other.

"So be it," he said cheerfully. "If he refuse reception or understanding, then--if so it pleases God--I can defeat him at my leisure. Meanwhile write thus, O scribe!--with all proper titles, compliments and reverences--'I, Zahir-ud-din Mahomed Babar, rightful heir, and *by acclaim* (underline that, scribe!) of this Kingdom of Ferghâna, do with courtesy and reasonableness point out that it is plain that if you take this country you must place one of your servants in charge of it, since you reign at Samarkand. Now I am at once your servant and your son. Also I have a hereditary right to the government. If therefore you entrust me with this employment, your purpose will be attained in a far more easy and satisfactory way than by fighting and killing a number of people (and horses) needlessly. Wherefore I remain your loyal feudatory Zahir-ud-din Mahomed Babar.'"

He beamed round on the council for approval of this logical argument, then added hastily, "And, scrivener! put 'Zahir-ud-din Mahomed Babar' large; and 'King of Ferghâna' larger still at the very end. That will show him my intentions."

If it did, the effect was poor: for though the letter was duly engrossed on silk paper sprinkled with rose-essence and gold-dust, enclosed in a brocade bag, and sent to the invading camp at Kâba, the only answer to its irrefutable logic was a further advance of spear-points and pennons to within four miles of the citadel.

Kâsim was jubilant. Jocose and bellicose he routed out armouries for catapults, and kept long files of men busy in passing up stones from the river bed, while forage parties raided the bazaars for provisions.

If there was to be a defence it must be the longest on record, even if it were unsuccessful in the end.

Babar himself donned mail and corselet for the first time. But he discarded the latter soon; it made him, he said, feel like a trussed pheasant, and he preferred the wadded coatee which would turn most scimitar cuts. It made him look burly as he strode round the ramparts, so that the sentries smiled to themselves and felt a glow at the heart remembering how young he was.

The stoutness, resolution, and unanimity of his soldiers and subjects to fight to the last drop of their blood, the last gasp of their life, without yielding, filled the boy with unmixed admiration. It was part of the general splendour of things which almost dazzled him.

"My younger troops display distinguished courage," he said gravely, and Kâsim hid a smile with difficulty as he replied, "They have youth in their favour, Most Excellent. It is a great gift."

Then he went out and roared over the joke on the ramparts to the sentries' huge delight. When next the young King went his rounds, smiles greeted him everywhere. He was a King to be proud of, and his family was worth fighting for--all of them! Especially the tall, slim figure with close-drawn veil which would often accompany the King at dusk. For Dearest-One was keenly interested in things militant, and was free to come and go, as the Turkhi women were, with due restrictions. And these were few in Babar's clan, which, as Grandmother Isân-daulet would boast, was "desert born."

But, after all, the preparations were unnecessary. The little cherub intervened, rather to the boy's chagrin, though he admitted piously that Providence in its perfect power and wisdom had brought certain events to pass which frustrated the enemies' designs, and made them return whence they came without success, and heartily repenting them of their attempt.

An exceedingly satisfactory but at the same time a disappointing end to his first chance of a real fine fight; and he watched one reverse after another overtake his foes on the other side of the Black-river with almost sympathetic eyes.

"There is a murrain amongst their horses now," reported the chief farrier one day, "my sister's son who is in service with the Samarkandis crept over last night to beg condiments for Prince Baisanghâr's charger which is down--the same that the Most Excellent gave him three years ago."

"Baisanghâr?" echoed Babar hurriedly. "I knew not that he was--amongst mine enemies!" Then he paused, and reason came to him. "Likely he is with his father of Tashkend who hovers on the edge of invasion, and hath ridden over--there is no harm in that. What didst give the fellow?"

The farrier laughed. "A flea in his ear, Most Clement! A likely story, indeed, that I should help our enemies."

Babar frowned and turned away. "'Twas a good horse, poor beast," he murmured. And afterwards, he went over to the women's quarters, and, as his wont was, retailed the story to those three, Isân-daulet, his mother and Dearest-One. The grim old Turkhoman lady was sympathetic about the horses, as a daughter of the Steppes must needs be, but stern over the necessities of war. His mother, more soft-hearted than ever by reason of her mourning, wept silently. But Dearest-One, was, as ever, a joy.

"I would bastinado the farrier," she said vindictively. "The poor brute; and then think of cousin Baisanghâr. He loved the horse!"

Her beautiful eyes flashed and yet were melting, her long brown fingers gripped her embroidery closer yet more caressingly. Her brother sate and looked at her admiringly, yet with a certain diffidence. Sometimes Dearest-One went beyond him; she seemed to unfold wings and skim away into another world. And when he asked her whither she went, she would smile mysteriously and say:

"Thou wilt unfold thy wings also, some day, O little-big-one, and find a new world for thyself."

There was little leisure now, however, for aught but watch and ward. Any moment of the day or night might bring assault; but the days passed and none came. And then one morning broke and showed a smaller camp than had been on the low lying river bank the night before; there was a bustle, too, about the still-standing tent pegs, and with the first glint of sunlight one Dervish Mahomed Turkhâu rode over the narrow bridge and demanded, on the part of his master, an audience with Hussan. Old Kâsim looked daggers, but there was no objecting. By virtue of his position as Prime-minister Hussan was the man to go, and he went. So out in the Place-of-Festivals beyond the gates, they met and parleyed: thus patching up a sort of peace, as Babar reported contemptuously to his faithful three. He was intensely disgusted and disappointed, while Kâsim looked sorrowfully at his piles of stones.

"They will do for next time," he said finally, cheering himself up with the remembrance that there were many other claimants to the throne of Ferghâna to be reckoned with besides Sultan Ahmed. And by evening most of the garrison had found solace for their disappointment in overeating themselves, after the disciplined rations which Kâsim-Beg, mindful of the possibility of a long siege, had already ordained; but Babar and his foster-brother Nevian were out all day on their little Turkhoman horses, chasing the white deer and shooting with their bows and arrows at a cock pheasant or two.

They brought home one in the evening which, as the boy boasted, was so fat, that four men could have dined on the stew of it!

"'Twill do for our dinner anyhow," said Babar's mother, and thereafter she and Isân-daulet

bullied cooks and scullions and gently quarrelled with each other for a good two hours over the proper family recipe for making "*ishkânah*."

And afterwards they sat together in an arched sort of balcony vestibule between the women's apartments and the men's rooms and talked happily, yet soberly of the future. Old Isân-daulet indeed, waxed prophetic. "See you, my sons-in-law will come to harm, not good. Ahmed has had to renounce his evil desires. Mahmûd will have to do the same; and let them pray God He send not punishment also." And she pursed up her thin lips and looked as if she knew something.

But the Khânûm, Babar's mother, said little; her heart was still sad and she crept away early to her bed, followed after awhile by Isân-daulet, leaving stern injunctions on Dearest-One not to sit up over-long.

So brother and sister were left alone, and she went and sat beside him as he dangled his legs over the parapet of the balcony; for he dearly loved looking down from a height. It was to be a dark night so he could see little even of the roofs below, or the slabs of stone let into the wall at intervals to form a sort of ladder by which a bold man could climb from one to the other. And beyond, all was shadow, darker in some places than others. Besprinkled too with stars: the moving star or two of a lantern in the earth-shadow, but in the sky those changeless, changeful beacons, those twinkling tireless stars, motionless in their constellations, yet ever moving on and on ...

Round what?...

"Look!" he cried suddenly, "the scimitar of the Warrior is sheathed in the hills--my hills!"--

And it was so. Orion shone to the north, setting slowly behind the mighty rampart of shadowed mountains in which the starry sword was already hidden.

They sat silent for a little while, hand in hand, like the children that they were. And then suddenly a noise below them, made Babar swing his legs to the ground and stand firm before his sister.

"Who goes?" he asked and his voice rang through the darkness; but no answer came.

"'Twas a falling stone, methinks," said his sister carelessly; yet even as she spoke she also sprang to her feet, every atom of her, soul and body alert for something, she scarce knew what.

She knew, however, in a second, for a darker shadow showed vaguely at the end of the balcony, vaulted lightly over the parapet, and a pleasant voice said gaily--

"Mirza Baisanghâr of the House of Timur, cousin to the King of Ferghâna, at your service."

"Baisanghâr!" echoed Babar. "How camest thou?--" then, even in his confusion remembering, as he generally did, *les convenances* for others he added: "Thou hadst best retire, my sister, after making thy appropriate salutation."

So, for one second the girl's eyes straining through the starlight could see her cousin. A charming figure truly! Not dressed, like her brother, in country clothes, but in the silks and satins of the town. A dainty figure too, of middle height and slender make, yet manly withal. The round face, unlike the faces of his cousins, showing Turkhoman descent unmistakably, yet with such indescribable attractiveness.

"May the Peace of the Most High be upon you, my cousin," she said softly and her voice fluttered.

"And may His Peace remain with you, fair lady," he replied gravely, with the finest of Court salutes. That was all; then she withdrew and the shadows hid her going.

"By my soul, Baisanghâr," said Babar joyously, when he had seated himself and his cousin side by side among the cushions, "I am utterly rejoiced to see thee again; though how, or wherefore thou camest--"

Prince Baisanghâr interrupted him with a light laugh. "How, sayest thou? By the roof of course; have I not been in Andijân before? and did I not once climb hitherwards--but of that, no more! Only thou wilt have to set thy masons to work, coz; for by God's truth my foothold was but rotten more than once. Sure I must be born to the bowstring since sudden death will not have me elseways! Yet of all seriousness, I came nigh to being dashed to pieces. And as for wherefore? Sure I came in duty bound to thank my kingly cousin for his courteous gift of horse-medicine. Aye! and for my horse too--for the second time--since, thanks to the drugs, he is alive and kicking."

Babar sat back. "Horse-medicines?" he echoed. "What horse-medicine?--I sent thee none."

Baisanghâr turned his head instantly to the darkness, and his voice rose perceptibly. "Yet it came from thee, my cousin," he replied blandly, "with thy salutations. In a packet of silken paper--such as ladies use for their trinkets, and tied with crinkled gold-thread such as ladies use--"

"Yea! it was I, Mirza Baisanghâr," came a voice from the darkness; a voice clear, unabashed. "I sent it--I, the Princess Royal, so there is no need for fine wit to beat about the bush. I sent it, because--because my brother the King gave thee the horse and I was loth--loth it should die."

The voice trailed away faintly, and Mirza Baisanghâr's eyes brimmed over with soft mirth; while Babar, forgetful of all save outraged etiquette, said sternly:

"Sister! and I told thee to go."

"And I went," retorted the voice rebelliously, "so far as eyesight goes. None can see me and 'tis the woman's right to listen."

Prince Baisanghâr laughed aloud. "By the prophet! she speaks truth, coz; ladies have the law of listening all over the world; aye! and of speaking too. So let be, since we are cousins and free-born Chagatâi of the house of Ghengis."

But Babar stickled. "Aye, *we* are; but thou art not--not on thy mother's side."

"My mother!" echoed Baisanghâr, his voice full of amusement. "Lo! I admit it! On my mother's side I am beyond salvation, being of the wild Horde-of-Black-Sheep! for which may God forgive me since 'tis not my fault I was not born a White-Lamb!" He named the two great divisions of his Turkhoman ancestry with infinite zest, then went on lightly: "But I fail of myself in other ways--many of them. I made an ode concerning it, a while past, that sets Baisanghâr Black-Sheep-Prince forth to a nicety!" and he began airily to hum a tune.

"Sing it to us, cousin," came that sweet voice from the darkness.

There was a moment of silence, as if the hearer were startled, perhaps touched; then came the almost stiff reply:

"My fair cousin is too kind. The ode as verse is nothing worth. And its subject is, beyond belief--bad! Still, since she is Princess-Royal and I am but her slave, the order is obeyed."

So through the night and out into the stars his high tenor voice rose and trilled in minor quavers.

The image shows two staves of musical notation in treble clef with a common time signature. The first staff is followed by three verses of lyrics, each enclosed in curly braces. The second staff is followed by a second verse of lyrics, also in curly braces.

1. { Some - times with pi - ous - ness I crawl }
 { To - wards High Heav'n on whit - ed wall }
3. { Back to the dust and dirt I fly }
 { Where un - sub - stan - tial shad - ows lie. }

2. { Or rest a - while on tree or flow'r }
 { And dream but on - ly for an hour. }

1. Some-times with pi-ous-ness I crawl
 Towards High Heav'n on whit-ed wall
2. Or rest a-while on tree or flow'r
 And dream but on-ly for an hour.
3. Back to the dust and dirt I fly
 Where un-sub-stan-tial shad-ows lie.

The quavers ceased, and there was silence from the darkness; but Babar's boyish voice rose cheerful as ever.

"'Tis good, cousin, and, in a measure, true. Yet need it not be so, surely. Thou hast no lack of parts. Who is more accomplished, of more pleasant disposition or more charming manners?"

"I came not hitherto to be catalogued for sale," interrupted Baisanghâr curtly. "Of a truth I am admirable. I sing, I dance, I paint--yea! I paint uncommon--I could paint one fair lady's portrait could I but see her--"

Still there was silence from the shadows, and a frown came to the laughter-loving face. "But I waste time," he continued, "and I have much to say, for thine ear alone."

He spoke to the darkness, and he waited, his face softening while a whispering sound as of light departing feet rose for a space then died away in the distance.

It was a good half hour afterwards that Mirza Baisanghâr, who knew his way well about the palace at Andijân, came with buoyant step down the spiral stairs which ended in a narrow vaulted passage that led to the sally-port.

His cousin, from whom he had parted most affectionately, had given him the pass-word, so, secure from molestation, he was carelessly humming the refrain of his own ode ...

"Back to the dirt and dust I fly
Where unsubstantial shadows lie."

The light-hearted, cynical words echoed along the arches and on them rose a curious sound, half cry, half sob, followed by a torrent of hot denial.

"It is a lie! It is not true and thou knowest it. Why shouldst thou say such things of thyself, O Baisanghâr?--they--they--hurt!"

The young man stood still as if turned to stone.

"Dearest-One," he whispered at last, using the familiar name he was accustomed to hear-- "Dost really care--so much?--And I--" he paused and a mirthless laugh rang false upon the darkness--"Princess--I cannot even thank thee--I--I dare not--save for the horse-medicines--" Here the artificial note left his voice and with a sudden cry "If I could--if I could, beloved," his eager hands went out and found what they sought, a lithe, warm, young body ready to his arms. But almost ere he clasped it he thrust it from him roughly.

"Go!" he said briefly. "Go, girl--and forget me--if thou canst. Yet remember this--if ever woman's lips touch mine, they would be yours--but that will be never--never!"

The next instant he was gone. Dearest-One stood, straining her eyes unavailingly into the darkness for a space: then she cowered down in on herself and sat shivering, her wide eyes open, fixed. But there was nothing to be seen in her heaven or earth: nothing to be realised, save that he would not even touch her.

CHAPTER III

"Draw near, O Man! and lift thy dreamy eyes.
See! this the ball; this the arena too
Where, mounted on the steed of Love, the prize
Is to be won by him who--God in view--
Strikes skilfully.
The Goal is distant; narrow too the Field;
Yet strike with freedom. God will send the Ball
Thy hand as sped in faith, where it should fall.
Backwards and forward strike and if thou yield
Yield cheerfully."

Grandmother Isân-daulet proved true prophet. Ere forty days had passed from that patched up peace, another hasty messenger bearing a blue 'kerchief of death had arrived at Âkshi whither the court had gone to celebrate the late king's obsequies. Ahmed, the King of Samarkand had been seized with a burning fever and after six days had departed from this transitory world.

Babar was sorry. His uncle, he said, had been better than most. A plain, honest Turk not favoured by genius, who had never omitted the five daily prayers except when honestly drunk. And that was but seldom, seeing that when he did take to drinking wine, he drank without intermission for a month or six weeks at a stretch and thereafter would be sober for a considerable time. So there had always been periods for piety.

The womenkind wept, of course, for blood feuds enhanced blood relationships when Death the peace bringer stepped in between the combatants. Besides, mourning was already afoot; so they could kill two birds with one stone. Even Fâtima Begum, the late King's first wife, who, losing her

premier position through childlessness had retreated in a huff to a separate establishment, joined in the chorus of wailing. And she brought her belated son Jahângir--nigh three years younger than Babar--to take his rightful place in the palace; much to old Isân-daulet's indignation.

"Set her up, indeed," she said with a toss of her head, "her and her belated brat. Mark my words, had the child been lawful, 'twould have come betimes. But when 'tis hoighty-toighty and a separate house, only God knows to what an honest man may be made father."

Still the function was a function, and the ladies enjoyed all the ceremonies; for they were simple folk, content with little, and that little rough and rude, for all they were Queens and Princesses.

Babar, however, wearied of all save the giving of victuals to the poor. He loved to see joy at a portion of *pillau* and butter cakes. Indeed he surreptitiously ordered more sugar for the children's thick milk. It made him feel hungry, he said, to see them eat it. And there was no better enjoyment in the world than real hunger; provided always that food was in prospect. For he was tender-hearted over frail humanity. He could not see, for instance, why the Black-eyed Princess, his father's last and low-born wife who was, of course, quite beyond the circle of distinction, should not be allowed, if it pleased her, to discover a roundabout relationship to the family of Timur. It did not alter facts. But Isân-daulet sniffed.

"'Twill not alter her manners or her speech anyhow; though 'tis true in a way. We be all descended from Adam, as I tell her morn, noon, and night."

So Babar had to listen to the Black-eyed one's wails; which he did in kindly kingly fashion, for he liked the good-natured, stupid, pretty creature. He had, however, other things to think of. His Uncle Ahmed's death had vaguely disturbed him; for Uncle Ahmed left no male heirs; and the question of succession was a burning one, since, by all the laws of Moghulistân, Babar had a double claim to the throne through his maternal grandfather Yunus Khân.

"Of a surety," he said to Dearest-One who was ever *confidante* of his ambitions and innermost thoughts, "there is no doubt that, now, Uncle Mahmûd, as brother, succeeds of right. But at his death? Cousin Masaud and Cousin Baisanghâr are not so close to Yunus Khân as I. Then Masaud is a nincompoop, and Baisanghâr--" he paused.

"Well! what of Cousin Baisanghâr?" asked the girl hotly.

Babar whittled away with his knife at the arrow he was making--for he was ever useful with his hands--ere he replied slowly:

"Baisanghâr will never make a king. Wherefore I know not; but there it is. He is not fit for it."

Dearest-One was aflame in a second. "Not fit for it?" she echoed. "That is not true. He is as fit for it really as--as thou art, brother. Only he will belittle himself! He will talk of himself as a shadow--an unsubstantial shadow! It is not true, it is not right, it is not fair, and so I told him the other night."

Babar put down his knife and stared.

"Thou didst tell him so--but when?"

Dearest-One hung her head, though a faint smile showed on her face. She had given herself away; but she was not in the least afraid of her brother. Many youngsters of his age might, from their own experiences in love affairs, have been seriously disturbed at the idea of their sister speaking to a young man on a dark stair; but Babar was an innocent child. To him it would be but a slight breach of decorum. Yet something made her breath short as she replied coolly:

"I met him on the stairs. It was dark, so he could not see me, brother; and I spoke to him as--as a mother to her son." The head went down a little more over the last words; true as they were in one sense, she knew better in her heart-of-hearts.

"And he--what said he?" asked Babar alertly, taking his sister completely by surprise. With the memory of that cry "Beloved! beloved!" in her mind--it had lingered there day and night--she faltered.

"Dearest-One!" said the boy, grave, open-eyed, after a pause, "did he kiss thee?"

The girl looked up indignantly, a dark flush under her wheat-coloured skin. "Kiss me?" she echoed--"he did not even really touch me--"

And then, suddenly, she hid her face in her hands and burst into tears. True--he had not touched her--he had shrunk from her eager body. Why? oh, why?--

Babar was full of concern. He laid down his knife and arrow, and went over to his sister. "Then there is nothing to weep about, see you," he said stoutly, "save lack of manners, and for that thou art sorry. Is it not so, dearest?"

The girl's sobs changed to a half-hysterical giggle. "So sorry--" she assented, "and thou wilt not

tell Grandmother--"

"The prophet forbid!" cried her brother aghast; "I should never hear the last of it."

And Dearest-One's tears changed to real laughter.

"Brother," she cried, "thou art the dearest darling of all! I would do aught in the whole world for thee."

"Nay," replied Babar gravely, "that will I never ask of thee. My womenkind shall have no task to do that my hands cannot compass alone."

He felt virtuous as he spoke; rather uplifted, too, by that same virtue. He did not know what Fate held in store for him. He did not dream that he would have to ask of her the greatest sacrifice a woman can make, and that she would make it willingly.

Meanwhile it was gorgeous summer tide, and Hussan played forward in the King's game of polo, down in the river meadows. He was the best of forwards; the best of men consequently to the boy-King.

"Thou art a young fool, child!" said old Isân-daulet who never minced her words, "as thou wilt surely find out ere long unless God made thee stupid blind. Luckily mine eyes are open; so go thy way and knock balls about after the manner of men."

Thus it was early autumn ere Babar's eyes opened; but then what he saw made his young blood surge through him from head to foot. The meanness, the deceit of it! To conspire with the ambassador from wicked Uncle Mahmûd at Samarkand who had come ostensibly to present an offering of silver almonds and golden pistachio nuts, to depose him, Babar, and put "the brat" Jahângir on the throne. And all the while to be playing forward in the King's game! It was too much! It was not fair! It was emphatically *not* the game!

"Throw away bad butter while it's melted," said Isân-daulet firmly; "Send Kâsim-Beg and other trustworthy friends to strangle him with a bow string! Then wilt thou be quit of such devils' spawn."

But Babar was a sportsman. Even if it came to killing the forward in the King's game, he was not going to do it underhand. So he looked round the assembly of loyalists who had met to convince him in his grandmother's apartments in the stone fort, and said briefly: "To horse, gentlemen! I go to dismiss my Prime-minister from his appointment."

But that gentleman had already dismissed himself. When they arrived at the citadel, they found he had gone hunting; and from that expedition he never returned. Someone must have blabbed; for he had posted off to Samarkand, rather to the boy-King's relief. It would have been a terrible thing to imprison or blind the best forward in the kingdom.

And even when news came that the offender had paused by the way to make an attack on Âkshi, and in the consequent *mêlée*, having been wounded in the hinder parts by an arrow from his own men, had been unable to escape and so had fallen a victim to the loyalists the boy-King was glad that Providence had taken judgment from his hands. Hussan had but himself to thank. As the poet said:

"Who does an evil deed
But sows the seed
Of his own meed."

This was finely philosophic; but it did not quite comfort the philosopher. The first actual experience of ingratitude and disloyalty made its mark upon him and sobered him. He began to abstain from forbidden and dubious meats and but seldom omitted his midnight prayers.

Mercifully, however, the season for polo was past, and Nevian Gokultâsh was almost as good at leap-frog as the deceased statesman. Nevian Gokultâsh, who, as foster brother, was above the possibility of suspicion.

"Truly," said Babar one evening, throwing his arm round his playmate's neck affectionately, "rightly are thy kind named *Gokultâsh*--'heart of stone.' Thy love is founded on rock, whereas my brother by blood--" he broke off impatiently--"but there! 'tis not his fault--he is so young--two whole years younger than I."

Despite the good-natured excuse which in all his chequered life, ever came easily to Babar's kindly nature, he felt the first chill of the cold world at his heart. He found to his great irritation and annoyance, that his *milieu* was not nearly so reasonable as he was himself. It was the irritation and the annoyance which besets capability and vitality. Other folk had not nearly such good memories, were not half so nimble-minded, or straight-forward, as he expected.

When, for instance, he sent an envoy to a rebellious chief, in order to remonstrate with him, before proceeding to arms, the wrong-headed man, instead of returning a suitable answer,

ordered the ambassador to be put to death.

Such, however, not being in the pleasures of God, the envoy managed to escape, and after having endured a thousand distresses and hardships, arrived naked and on foot, to pour the tale of his wrongs into Babar's indignant ears. Urged by wrath at such ill-manners, the boy-King proposed instant reprisals, and set off; but a heavy fall of snow on the encircling hills and a slight sprinkling on the clover meadows warned him that winter was approaching, and his nobles added their opinion, that it was no time in which to commence a campaign.

So he returned to Andijân and to a boy's life of study and sport. The saintly Kâzi was his tutor, and kept the boy to his Al-jabr (algebra) and Arabic, and abstruse dialectic dissertations on the nature of the Kosmos. There were not many books to be read in Andijân, but Babar knew them all. He had the *Epic of Kings* almost by heart, and used to regret there were not more details about the great Jamsheed with his wonderful divining cup; Jamsheed who reigned with might, whom the birds, and beasts, and fairies, and demons obeyed; Jamsheed of whom it was written "and the world was happier for his sake and he too was glad." That was something like a King!

And Babar learnt also, in a rude, unrefined way, all the accomplishments of a Turkhi nobleman. He could strum on the lute, bawl a song fairly, and play with singlestick to admiration. The latter was Kâsim's care; Kâsim who was the best swordsman in the kingdom and who used to quarrel with the Kâzi as to whether the young student's strongest point was fencing, or the fine *nastalik* hand-writing in which Babar excelled.

As for sport, the snow falling early brought the deer down to the valleys; and the undulating country about Andijân was always full of wild fowl, while pheasants by the score were to be shot in the skirts of the mountains.

The boy was growing fast and in his lambskin coat worn with the fleece inside, the soft tanned shammy leather without all encrusted by gold-silk embroidery to a supple strength that kept out both cold and sabre cuts, he looked quite a young man; and his high peaked cap of black astrachan to match the edgings of his coat and bound with crimson velvet suited his bright animated face.

Dearest-One admired him hugely.

"I would the court painter were not a fool," she said regretfully as he came in one day from the chase and held up for her inspection a cock *minâwul* pheasant all resplendent in its winter plumage. "But he cannot see. When he paints thee he makes thee all as one with Timur Shâh and Ghengis Khân--on whom be peace--but I want *thee*."

In truth it needed a better artist than Andijân held to do justice to the fire which always leapt to the boy's face when beauty such as the iridescent bird's struck a spark from his imagination and made the whole world blaze into sudden splendour.

"Baisanghâr might do it likely," replied Babar thoughtlessly; "he hath a quaint turn with his brush that is not as others; and he said he would love to paint thy portrait--" he broke off suddenly, aware that this was a subject which had better not have been introduced. But, indeed, there seemed a fate that he should always talk of Baisanghâr to his sister. Could it be her fault? He looked at her with boyish reproach, but the girl's face was lit up with smiles and dimples.

"Aye! he said that. Did he say more after I had gone? Tell me, brotherling."

But he walked off in dignified fashion with the cock pheasant. His sister thought too much of Baisanghâr. And it was time she married.

He talked to his mother quite seriously about it, and she met his anxiety by the calm remark:

"Why should she not marry Baisanghâr?"

Why not, indeed, now he came to think of it. Somehow it had not occurred to him before. But when he suggested it to his sister she met him with a storm of tears. She was never going to marry. She was going to be a sainted canoness and pray for her brother. Why could he not leave her alone; and Cousin Baisanghâr also, who apparently was of the same mind, since, though he was nigh nineteen, he had never taken a wife. And, if it came to weddings, was it not high time that he, Babar, King of Ferghâna, bethought himself of bringing *his* betrothed home? That would procure festivities enow, if *that* was what he was wanting.

From which deft shaft in the enemy's camp, Babar fled precipitately. The very idea irked him; he had no time for such nonsense. In fact he wearied even of the three loving women who insisted upon consulting him by day and by night.

But ere the winter was over yet another messenger of death arrived, and this one made the boy-King feel like a caged young eagle longing for his first flight.

Wicked Uncle Mahmûd after disgusting Samarkand for six months with his unbridled licentiousness and tyranny, until great and small, rich and poor, lifted up their heads to heaven in supplications for redress, and burst out into curses and imprecations on the Mirza's head, had, by

the judgment that attends on such crime, tyranny, and wickedness, died miserably after an illness of six days.

The women wept, of course, though old Isân-daulet's tears were considerably tempered by smiles at her own prophetic powers. Had she not said that both the men who dared to attack the apple of her eye, young Babar, would suffer? And so they had. And now ...

The old lips pursed themselves and were silent. But the old thoughts were busy. Her grandson was, mayhap, over young to try his luck this year, yet for all that he was the rightful heir to the throne of Samarkand. In this way: Father Yunus Khân, Suzerain of all Moghulistân, had been suzerain also of Samarkand. None questioned that. Had not the triple marriage of Yunus Khân's three daughters with the King of Samarkand's three sons been arranged especially in order to put an end to the Khân of Moghulistân's undoubted claim, by joining the two families? Well, one of those marriages had produced no son. Mahmûd who had married the younger daughter, had but one son by her, a perfect child. But Babar, son of the eldest sister, was adolescent; therefore, by every right, every claim, he was the heir.

But she was a wise old woman. There was no use being in a hurry. Samarkand might as well seethe in its own sedition for awhile. By all accounts the Turkhâns were up in arms; and the Turkhâns were ticklish folk to deal with. Then Khosrau Shâh, the late King's prime-minister was an able man and might be trusted to fight for what he wanted. The time for intervention would be when the combatants had weakened each other.

And the shrewd old woman once more proved herself right. For Khosrau Shâh, having plumped for the nincompoop Masaud--doubtless because he knew that with a nonentity on the throne, his power would be absolute--the Turkhâns declared for Baisanghâr, sent for him express, and having driven out Khosrau, who had attempted to conceal his master's death until his plans were completed, placed the former on the throne.

And here another factor came in to the wary old woman's mind. What if her granddaughter were to marry Baisanghâr? Babar could lay claim to other kingdoms when he was fit to fight for them, and thus there would be a down-sitting for both her daughter's children. So, most of the affairs of importance at Andijân being conducted by her advice, Kâsim's swashbuckler instincts were held in check for the time. Something however must be done to occupy the lad meanwhile; and the news that his uncle by marriage and cousin by descent, Hussain, King of Khorasân, meditated an expedition against Hissâr, the neighbouring province, prompted the suggestion that the boy-King should take advantage of proximity to pay his respects and make acquaintance with the premier prince of the age.

Babar's imagination was aflame in an instant. Tales of the splendid court at Herât were broadcast in Asia. Folk said they had even spread to Europe--that dim unknown horizon to which the boy's thoughts often reverted. And Sultan Hussain was as his father and his elder brother. It was always wise to make the personal acquaintance of such; it dispelled misunderstanding on their part, and gained for yourself a nearer and better idea of their strength and weakness.

So one day at the beginning of winter, with stout Kâsim wrapped to the eyes in furs and a hundred-and-a-half or so of hardy troopers equipped for a mountain march, Babar started for the low passes by the White Hills to the valley of the Oxus river.

"Have a care of thy soul, my son," said the saintly Kwâja, "and remember what the poet sings:

"The soul is the only thing to prize;
Heed not the body: it is not wise.
The wiles of the Devil are millionfold,
And every spell is a fetter to hold.
Thou hast five robbers to keep at bay,
Hearing and sight, touch, taste and smell,
So chain them up and govern them well.
Some things are real and some but seem;
The mundane things of the world are a dream."

But Isân-daulet sniffed. "So be it that he keep the institutes of Ghengis Khân as his forebears did, he will do. They be enough for a brave man, and death or the bastinado sufficient punishment."

The Kwâja looked grave. "Yet be they not the law of Islâm, sister; and we, of the faith, are not heathens."

"Heathens or no!" retorted the old lady, "my grandson will do well if he touch Ghengis Khân's height." And she sniffed again.

Perhaps her words put it into the boy's head, but in this, his first flight beyond his hill-clipped kingdom his thoughts were with his great ancestors. He rather swaggered it in consequence round the camp fires at night, and was overbold in the chase; so that more than once on the higher hills Nevian-Gokultâsh had to pick him out of a snow-drift. But his dignity was always equal to the occasion, and when at last Sultan Hussain Mirza's camp showed in ordered array on

the low ground beyond the passes, he took it as if he were quite accustomed to see the large pavilions, the rows on rows of orderly tents, the *laagers* of chained carts.

He held his head very high too, as he rode down the central alley, his pennant carried before him by two jostling troopers. The smart soldiers, lavish of buckles and broideries, who lounged about, smiled at the uncouth troop; but each and all had a need of praise for the boyish leader who sat his horse like a centaur and whose bright eyes seemed everywhere.

"He is a gay enough young cockerel," admitted a scented noble with a smile. "Let us see if his uncle will make him fight."

But even if Babar had been more pugnacious than he was, sheer astonishment at his first interview would have kept him quiescent. Even Kâsim-Beg, stickler as he was for etiquette, gave up the hopeless attempt at ceremonial.

"Thou art welcome, nephew," said the old man whose long white beard contrasted with his gay-coloured, juvenile garments, that better matched the vivacity of the straight narrow eyes. The black astrachan cap perched on the reverend head, however, suited neither. "Sit ye down, boy, and watch my butting rams! Yonder is the Earth Trembler--peace be on my ancestor's grave ... and this is the Barbarian Ghengis--no offence meant to thine, young Chagatâi! Three *tumans* of gold, Muzâffar, he smashes the other's horn first butt!"

The man he addressed, who had been, Heaven knows why, prime favourite for years, and showed his position by the most arrogant of airs, turned to his neighbour. "Not I; a certainty is no bet for me, though by our compact, Excellence, I would get my fair share of two-thirds back, if you won! But Berunduk Birlás here, having lost his best hawk after bustard to-day, is in a mood for tears, and would like to lose gold also."

Berunduk Birlás, the ablest man at the court, shook his head sadly. "Of a truth, friend, my loss is great enough to content me. Had my sons died or broken their necks I could not grieve more than for my true falcon-jinny Brighteyes! No man could desire a more captivating beauty."

Sultan Hussain went off into a peal of laughter. "Li! where is Ali-Shîr? Where is our poet? Brighteyes the captivating beauty who catches hairs, eh? There is a subject for word-play. Out with a *ghazel* on the spot, friend Ali."

A thin, elegant-looking man with a pale, refined face, got up and made a perfect salute. From head to foot he was exquisite, the Beau Brummel of his age.

"Look," nudged one young courtier to another enviously, "he hath a new knot to his kerchief. How, in God's name, think you, is it tied?"

The incomparable person paused for one second only; then in the most polished of voices he poured out a lengthy ode, deftly ringing the changes on the word "*baz*" (falcon) which in Persian has at least a dozen different meanings.

A ripple of laughter followed his somewhat forced allusions, and he sat down again amid a chorus of applause.

Babar stood dum-founded, yet in every fibre of his body sympathetic. Here was something new indeed! A new world very different from the rough and tumble clash of arms and swords and polo sticks at Andijân; but a world where, mayhap, he might hold his own.

"Well done! Well done!" he cried with the rest, and his uncle the Sultan nodded approval at the lad.

"Sit ye down, sit ye down!" he said; "and, cupbearer! a beaker of Shirâz wine for the King of Ferghâna!"

For the life of him the boy could not refrain from one swift look at Kâsim's face, Kâsim who was all shocked propriety at such a violation of the rules both of Islâm and Ghengis Khân; but after that one scared glance dignity came back.

"Your Highness!" he said, with pomp, waving his hand towards one of the butting rams, "like my ancestor the Barbarian I drink water only."

A smile went round the assembly and young Babar felt a glow of pride that he had not fallen so far short in wit. Thereinafter he sat and listened with wide eyes. His uncle was certainly a lively, pleasant man; but his temper was a bit hasty and so were his words. Still, despite that and overfreedom with the wine cup, he evidently had a profound reverence for the faith, since at the proper hour he put on a small turban tied in three folds, broad and showy, and, having placed a plume on it, went in this style to prayers!

That night when Kâsim was snoring in the tent and the hundred-and-a-half or thereabouts of his followers were slumbering peacefully, full up of kid *pullao*, Babar lay awake. He was composing an ode for the first time in his life. It was a sorry composition of no value except that it filled him with desire to do better.

CHAPTER IV

In this world's inn, where sweetest song abounds
There is no prelude to one song that sounds;
The guests have quaffed their wine and passed away
Their cups were empty and they would not stay.
No sage, no stripling, not a hand but thine
Has held this goblet of poetic wine;
Rise, then, and sing! Thy fear behind thee cast
And, be it clear or dull, bring forth the wine thou hast.

Jami.

Babar could not tear himself away from his uncle's camp. He lingered on and on, watching the military operations with a more or less critical eye, but absorbing culture wholesale.

It was a revelation to him, meeting men to whom fighting was not the end and aim of life; and these Begs and nobles of his uncle's court, though they were all supposed to be engaged in warfare with Khosrau Shâh who was holding Hissâr over the river, for his nominee the nincompoop, had yet time for other things.

Ali-Shîr, for instance, was wise beyond belief in all ways. Incomparable man! So kind, so courteous. Babar profited by his guidance and encouragement in his efforts to civilise himself. Thus becoming--since there is not in history any man who was greater patron of talent than Ali-Shîr--one of that great company of poets, painters, professors, and musicians who owe everything to him, who, passing through this world single and unencumbered by wife or child, gave himself and his time up to the instruction of others.

So far, therefore, as the clash of intellect went, young Babar was satisfied. In regard to the clash of arms it was different. How such a mighty body of Mirzas, Begs, and chiefs, who, with their followers, if they were not double the number of the enemy over the water were *at least* one-and-a-half times that number, could content themselves with practical inaction passed his understanding.

When, too, they had such battering rams and catapults as positively made his mouth water! There was one of the latter which threw such a quantity of stones and with such accuracy that in half an hour--just before bedtime prayers--the enemy's fort was beautifully breached. But the night being deemed rather dark for assault and the troops preferring the safety and comfort of their trenches, no immediate attack was made; the result being that before morning the breach was repaired.

There was absolutely no real fine fighting, and at this rate his uncle, the Sultan, would doubtless spend the whole winter on the banks of the Amu river, and when spring came, patch up some sort of a peace from fear of the floods which always came down with the melting snow.

"That is his way," asserted Kâsim with a shrug of his shoulders. "He leads his army forth with pomp and state, and in himself is no mean general; but ever it comes to naught. It is so, always, when folk take to rhyming couplets, and putting spices to their food. Give me orders that hang together, and plain roast venison."

But all the while the honest man was stuffing his mouth full of lamb and pistachio nuts, and Babar smiled. Still he felt that, so far as the art of war went, he might go back to little Andijân without fear of leaving behind him any knowledge worth the learning. It was otherwise with the culture, and he flung himself with characteristic vitality into music lessons, and dancing lessons, elocution lessons and deportment lessons, until as he entered the court audience no one could have told that but a few weeks before, he had been as rough and as uncouth as old Kâsim, who stoutly refused veneer.

"What I am, God made me," he would say, "and if folk like it not let them leave. I budge not."

To which uncompromising independence, one pair of hands--delicate, long-fingered, ivory hands--gave fluttering applause. They belonged to a young man who, almost at first sight, impressed young Babar more than anyone he had seen in all his life. He was a helpless cripple who yet took his part in life like any other man. Every evening his spangled litter would be brought into the big audience tent and set down just below the King's. For Mirza Gharib-Beg (who styled himself Poverty-prince in allusion to the meaning of his name--poor) was the King's son by a low-born woman who had been passionately loved. So, despite the fact that he had been born misshapen, ugly, and that ill-health had always been his, Poverty-prince still had a hold on

his father's affection. And no wonder; since, though his form was not prepossessing he had a fine genius, and though his constitution was feeble, he had a powerful mind. There was nothing, it seemed to Babar, that he could not do. He could rhyme with Ali-Shîr, play the guitar with Abdulla-Marwârid and paint with Bahzâd. What is more, he could talk mysticism far better than Kamâl-ud-din, with his wagging black beard, who pretended to raptures and ecstasies and had written a portentously dull book about Sufism which he called "The Assembly of Lovers"--portentously dull and also profane--which was inexcusable.

But when Poverty-prince spoke of roses and nightingales and even of the red wine cup, he took you into another world; and he evidently believed what he said, whereas Kâmal-ud-din was all pose.

Yet the next instant the thin ugly face would show almost impish in its amusement and its owner would burst out with some sally that would set them all a-laughing; and him a-coughing for the change of air which was to have done him good was doing him harm; though he would not admit it.

"Wherefore should I?" he laughed gaily in some anxious face. "A man is as ill as he thinks himself--he is all things that he believes himself to be. So I am strong, and well, and young, and deeply enamoured of a beauteous lady. She is called Feramors--a pretty name," and he would catch up a lute over which his thin, long, ivory hands would flutter like butterflies and sing:

"Say! is it Love or Death, O Feramors!
That hides behind thy bosom's pearly doors?
I care not, so I reach the heart within.
Oh! let me in;
Open the closed doors, O Feramors!"

Truly he was a marvellous person! To Babar, boy as he was, the most marvellous thing in the camp. How could he, cripple, suffering, almost dying as he was, keep life at bay as it were? How could he sit so free of it? He, Babar, with his health and strength was not so independent, though he was more so than most, for, almost unconsciously, he set himself as free as he could from encumbrance even of thought.

He shrank even from so much as came to him from Gharîb, and avoided his cousin in consequence, spending such time as he could spare from his numerous lessons, and the watch Kâsim made him keep on military matters, in hunting amid the low hills.

But it was no use. That dark, curiously be-scented tent wherein the cripple lay laughing at life, had a strange attraction for him. He took to dropping into it on his way elsewhere, until old Kâsim grew uneasy.

"He lays spells on you, my liege," he protested. "They tell me he can do it to all young folk--so have a care!"

"Smear my forehead with lamp-black against the evil eye; then shall I be safe," laughed the boy, and yet in his heart he felt the spell. And, oddly enough, he liked it. He was fascinated by something in this distant, faraway cousin of his; so far-away that it scarcely seemed worth while calling him cousin. Yet, as grandmother Isân-daulet would say: "all men were descended from Adam!"

"Come in on thy return from the chase," said Poverty-prince one day when he had looked in on the scent sodden tent, a picture of youth and strength and health, in his fur *posteen* and his high peaked cap. "And bring thy bag with thee for this lifeless log to see. What shall it contain? *Imprimis*--a brace of chameleon birds. I love to see their iridescent necks and the six different colours between head and tail--mark you! how I remember thy description, cousin-ling?"

Babar blushed. "Thou said'st thou had never seen them," he began apologetically.

"Save through thine eyes and they are good enough for most folk. Be not ashamed, coz, of the gift God hath given thee. And thou shalt bring me a fat deer and some *kalidge* pheasant--and, with luck, a cock *minâwul*. Then we will look at it with the same eyes--thou and I--" A wistfulness had crept into his voice, and he said no more.

But the curious thing was that the bag was ever just what Poverty-prince had predicted, neither more, nor less.

"Thou art a wizard, for sure," said Babar half seriously. "The thought of thy words makes my aim sure at times, and at another sets my bow arm a-quiver. Wert thou to say '*naught*,' I should return empty-handed."

"So be it," laughed the cripple. "Why should we kill God's pretty creatures?"

And thereafter two whole hunts produced nothing. Whether it was a fresh fall of snow in the hills that brought ill luck Babar could not say, but he looked at his cousin with awe.

"Thou hast more power I verily believe," he said, "than the Dream-man whom Uncle Hussain keeps--"

"For his amusement," put in Poverty-prince with a frown. "But *that* is black magic; mine is white. I do naught. 'Tis thy mind that answers--" he broke off and his large eyes--the only unmarred feature in his face--narrowed themselves to a piercing glance. "Wherefore should I not say it, cousin? Has it not struck thee, that had'st thou been born crooked and not straight, or had I been born straight and not crooked, we should have been as two twins? That is why I like thee, and thou likest me."

The boy sat and stared at him, almost incredulously. He could not imagine his youth and strength pent up in that prison of a body; and yet ...

Yes! without doubt there was some tie. Else why should he feel so intimate--why should he speak to Poverty-prince of things which every decent young Mahomedan was taught to keep to himself; for instance of Dearest-One and the possibility of her marrying Baisanghâr?

The blood rushed to his face, however, with shame when he felt his cousin's hot, long-fingered, trembling hand close on his wrist in quick arrest.

"Marriage--say not the word! Dost not know? Nay--I forgot thy youth--and I will not soil thine ears with the tale. But we in foul Herât know most wickedness, most degradations. And there is that in miserable Baisanghâr's life that bars marriage with any woman worthy the name. Aye! and he knows it--poor maimed soul enmeshed for ever by the wickedness of one who should have protected him--May God's curse light on him for ever. So think not of marriage, cousin."

Babar shook off his cousin's clasp haughtily. It was not that he resented having substance given to his vague doubts of Baisanghâr--it was better to know for sure; but interference with his womenkind was intolerable. And he had brought it on himself!

"By your leave," he said with terrific dignity, "we will speak no more on such private matters. 'Tis my own fault. Such subjects are not meet for public conversations."

Poverty-prince lay back on his cushions and kindly raillery took possession of his face. "Not meet, sayest thou cousin-ling? Yet are they the best half--nay! the three quarters of life. Dost know that even to me, cripple, marriage hath played the major part?"

Babar's eyes involuntarily travelled over the distorted body, the crumpled limbs, and Poverty-prince laughed cynically.

"Thou art right, boy," he went on; "loathsome to sight and touch, what had I to do with weddings. But princedom weighs heavy with the pandars of the court. And 'twas done early. Mayhap they did not dream I would grow up so monstrous--as I did." He paused and his pale face grew paler, his hot fingers clasped and unclasped themselves. "Mayest thou never--nay! thou wilt not--see fear upon a girl's face. I saw it. Dost understand? Nay, thou art but a child still. Thank God! I did. So she waits for release by my death. And then--" He paused again and this time bright, cold raillery took possession of his face as he said: "Thou wilt make a fine bridegroom, cousin-ling, some day! Fair maids will not be alarmed at thee!"

"Likely I shall be of them," answered the boy stoutly; and it was true; barring Dearest-One, the stupid, mincing creatures filled him with dismay.

This passed but a few days before Kâsim, who thought his young charge had had quite enough of the camp, proposed starting homewards. There seemed no prospect of the campaign coming to a close. Quite a variety of strategical movements had been made, mines had been dug, forts besieged, but the result was nil. And time was passing. Events had not been going smoothly at Samarkand, the moment for intervention might be near and Grandmother Isân-daulet had sent a messenger advocating return.

None too soon, for the very same day King Hussain's runners brought news of a conspiracy to turn out Baisanghâr, and bring in a younger brother Ali-Khân.

"But he is not of the blood, either," said Babar hotly. "Kâsim! we must go back at once." The desire for conquest was stirring in him once more.

"The sooner the better, sire," replied the stout warrior, settling his sword belt. He had wearied terribly among the smart soldiers and was longing for a real raid once more.

"To say farewell," echoed Poverty-prince, when Babar looked in that night at his cousin's tent; "I thought it was not to be for a week yet." And his hot hand clasped the cool one with a lingering touch.

"There was news from Samarkand," replied the lad, regret tempering the keenness which had come to his face with the prospect of action. "And, cousin, it matters little--'tis but a few hours' difference--"

"A few hours?" echoed the cripple, speaking, for the first time since Babar had known him,

almost regretfully; "that means much to one who has but a few days or weeks to live. Not that it does so really, coz," he added, recovering his usual serenity. "And thou wilt spare me one of the hours? I dare claim so much of my twin?"

The pathetic playfulness of the appeal went straight to the lad's soft heart; he fell on his knees beside the cushions, then sat back in the Mahomedan attitude of prayer. "Nay, brother," he said--and there was quite a tremble in his young voice--"say not so--I am but a poor creature beside thee. Thou art--truly I know not what! Sometimes I think an angel from God's paradise--thou art so splendid!"

"Knowest thou if angels be splendid?" asked Poverty-prince with radiant raillery. "For myself I know not--only this--that I shall miss my double--" He looked at the lad's lithe limbs, at his long legs, his great stretch of arm. "And to think," he muttered, "that I might have been born so--My God! to think of it."

Then suddenly he clapped his hands and gave a peremptory order to the servant who appeared.

"See that I be not disturbed--that no one enters."

He waited till they were alone, then drew something from his bosom and held it before him in both hands. It was a tiny crystal bowl scarce large enough for his finger tips. But they held the glittering thing lightly. It looked like a diamond body to two fluttering ivory wings, as he said slowly, musically.

"It hath lain in my breast, ever. I found it in the hand of death," he said dreamily, "but the Riddle-of-Life ends for me, and begins for thee. So take it, when I have told thee how it came to me."

Those ivory hands of his seemed more like wings than ever as, still holding the bowl before him, he lay back and it showed clear against the shadows of the tent.

"Thou knowest," he went on, "the graveyards of the hill-folk? Set on an hill and thick with iris flowers--the flowers of immortality--the green sword leaves guarding the blossoms, guarding the quiet dead below? It was the day I saw fear in a maiden's eyes--there was such a graveyard not far from her father's dwelling--he is dead now and she awaits the release of death amongst beneficent ladies in a House-of-Rest at Herât--and I bid them carry me there; for my heart was aflame and I cursed God for this carcass, seeing she was fair. So they left me there overlooking the valley, and when they had gone I lay amid the crushed iris and writhed--but of that no more. It hath passed.

"So, suddenly, between my empty wide-spread arms and clutching fingers I saw something amid the crushed blossoms. It must have been a very old grave on which I lay, since the iris roots matted thick upon it as if to hide the dead that lay in the hollow of it; for the rams and the winds sweeping on that high exposed spot had torn the covering of soil from Mother Earth's bosom. What I saw was this crystal cup. Perchance it had been used when the dead was laid to rest, and forgotten. Perchance some sad lover had set it there with flowers and tears in the poignancy of first grief, and gone away to love another. Who knows? The iris-roots had grown to a cup around it; twisted, white, iris-roots like dead fingers; and I took it from them. Take thou it, O Zahir-ud-din Mahomed, from one close to the Adventure of Death. I burden the gift with but one condition--if ever thou comest across a frightened maid--" here his whole face became radiant with smiles--"be not afraid of her. So take it cousin-ling. It is no cup of King Jamsheed to bring thee counsel in thy need. Yet it hath its virtue to those, who, like thou hast, have eyes to see. It can bring content."

Content! was this the secret of Poverty-prince's charm? Babar, bold, young, every fibre of him keen-strung for the Life, on the brink of which he stood, cared little for content. Yet he took the cup and looked at it curiously. Quaint of a surety! Taller than it was broad. Small enough to lie in the hollow of the hand. The brim over-thick by reason of heavy bosses below the edge: five bosses like those in blown glass, but oval, like eyes. The rest faintly frosted by fine scratchings (were they without or within?--within surely) which, were they letterings, would need a magnifying glass ere they could be deciphered. But at the bottom, so disposed that one must read in drinking, these words showed clear:

"Save the cup of life, what gift canst thou bring?"

That was from Hâfiz surely?

"Aye! divine Hâfiz," replied his cousin answering his thought boldly. "Now, hold it to the light, cousin-ling, and see its virtue."

The boy did as he was bid, feeling dazed and dreamful. A seven-lamped tripod behind his cousin's cushions had been lit--at least he could not remember that it had been there when he came in--Seven little lamps ...

Why! those five bosses were deftly arranged to gather the light and send it ... God and His

Prophet! How beautiful!

Through the clear eye before his eyes he saw his cousin's face--all glorified--splendid utterly ...

That something which came to him ever with the sight of beauty, filled him with joy ...

But stay! the bosses must be magnifying glasses also! He could read something.

What was it?

Ishk (love)? or *Ashk* (tears)?

"Thou wilt see more clearly when thou hast learnt to use the five eyes of the soul," came his cousin's voice; "then thine own thoughts will return to thee from the Mirror-of-Life. Now put it into the bosom of thy fur coat. There is room there for it and majesty likewise. And now I will sing the Song-of-the-Bowl ere thou goest."

He clapped his hands once more, and the boy sighed and rubbed his eyes dreamily. Surely the seven lamps had been lit? But now they were not; the semi-darkness of the scent-sodden tent closed in on him, and that was his cousin's every-day voice:

"Bring me my dulcimer, slave! Lo! King-ling, it suits the measure better than the *cithâra* and I am proud of the tune! 'Tis my own."

So, after a while, the tinkling notes began, the voice rose plaintively:



"Clear Crystal Bowl! Thy sun-sparkles blind
Every poor soul whose eyes seek to find
Way through Life's wilderness on thy bright brim,
Crystal Bowl!
What wilt thou bring to him,
Darkness or Light?"

Clear Crystal Bowl! Thy touch, icy cold,
Chills lovers lips that lay overbold
Hot clinging kisses on thy bright brim,
Crystal Bowl!
What wilt thou bring to him,
Love or Despair?"

Clear Crystal Bowl! I laugh like thy wine!
Bring me Life's whole! all things must be mine!
Is not the wide world mirrored in thee
Crystal Bowl?
I bid thee bring to me
Joy, Grief, Life, Death--"

The voice ceased and there was silence for a little while.

But in all the long after-years the memory of those tinkling notes, that thin voice claiming the whole of life, remained with Zahir-ud-din Mahomed.

"Well! God's peace go with thee," said Poverty-prince brightly at the last; "methinks thy boyhood is about past, and sterner stuff hath to come. But keep the gift of death and if thou lose it--at least remember my poor verses. And, coz--" here the wizened face almost dimpled with laughter, "if thou comest across the frightened maid--I give no names, they are an encumbrance,

remember to make her not frightened of my twin! Farewell."

It was a stirring night. The river had to be crossed silently in the very face of Khosrau Shâh's pickets (for he was holding the north bank for his nominee the nincompoop) and a stealthy way made skirting the enemy's camp, ere they could reach the hills beyond. Some of the party felt inclined to put Andijân tactics in force, make a rush through the out-posts, give and take a few sabre cuts, and so make off; but Babar, even though old Kâsim hesitated, had learnt something besides accomplishments in his uncle's camp; he had learnt that time was long, and that it was well to choose your own. So he rode canny.

It was dawn ere they reached the last vantage ground whence they could see the camp they had left. It lay curiously calm and peaceful. Kâsim, more than half-asleep on his horse now there was no chance of a fine fight, yawned, and stretched his arms wide.

"No more of that for me," he said lustily. "I am for cut and thrust and a good bellyful of plain food."

"But I am for all things," laughed Babar. He was trying to pick out his cousin's tent, and as he spoke he put his hand into the bosom of his coat to feel for the Crystal Bowl.

He could not find it!

Had it dropped out or what...?

"I must go back," he said, half to himself--"I must, I must!"

"Go back? Wherefore?" asked old Kâsim. "What is it, sire--to go back is Death; the enemy is awake by now."

The boy-King looked at him keenly. "Aye!" he said shortly, "and to go on is Life. I must remember, as he said. Forward! gentlemen!"

CHAPTER V

The day of delight has come and the wind brings scent
Of musk and rose and lilies and peppermint.
Oh! day of delight pass slow!
God's flowers must blow.

The day of despair has come and the wind brings dust
To bury the flowers; the song of the birds is hushed.
Oh, day of despair pass swift!
Let God's clouds lift.

The days of despair and delight have come;
Ah, me! I care not away from my home.
The days of God pass swift and slow.
Allah-i-hu--allah-i-ho!

Ashrâf the Exiled.

Old Isân-daulet, who had been Queen-regent to all intents and purposes during Babar's absence, welcomed him back to Andijân somewhat charily. She had sent for him in a hurry when news came that the Turkhâns of Samarkand had revolted against Baisanghâr, captured that prince by stratagem, and put Mirza Ali his younger brother on the throne.

But now the tables were turned. Baisanghâr, whom all knew to be wily as a fox, had not only managed to escape, but having somehow gained the sympathy of the townspeople, they had risen tumultuously against the Court-folk and the Turkhâns, had besieged the citadel which had not been able to hold out for a single day, and had replaced Baisanghâr--why only God knew!

"'Twill be because of his love odes, grandmother," said Babar gravely; "there is not a house in Samarkand where a copy of them is not to be found."

Isân-daulet sniffed captiously. "I would he would keep his love-songs to himself. There is Dearest-One sick as a magpie still with the shock of his death, and he is not dead, the good-for-nothing."

Babar's lip set. "He is dead to her anyhow," he said, "so no more dreams of that, grandmother."

I forbid it, and so I will tell her."

"Houghty-toighty!" sniffed the old lady; but in her heart of hearts she was glad.

"Look you!" she said to her daughter afterwards, "he spoke for all the world like his grandfather when things went wrong. Lo! he is boy no longer. We must treat him as a man, with wiles."

Such, however, was not Dearest-One's treatment of her brother; nor was his of her, what might have been expected from his peremptory tone to his grandmother. How could it be, when he found her pale and dispirited, despite her joy at seeing him? He beat about the bush uncomfortably for quite a long time, until with characteristic clarity he blurted out: "And, sister, thou must think no more of Baisanghâr--he is a worthless scoundrel--"

The girl, ill as she was, looked as if she could have stabbed him with her eyes.

"That he is not," she said proudly; "thou art like the rest of them,--even the Kwâja--yea! I have talked with him concerning it and he knows, mayhap, more than thou dost--who confound the sinner with the sin. But look you, Zahir-ud-din Mahomed, were there no man on earth but Mirza Baisanghâr I would not have him; and yet I love him dearly, dearly." She sank back on her bed, hid her face in the quilt, and sobbed.

Babar stood aghast, yet feeling as if he could cry too.

"I wish thou had'st known Cousin Gharîb," he said suddenly, causelessly. "He would have understood. I cannot--not yet."

Then he turned and left her. What was the use of trying to comfort anyone when you did not know the cause of their sorrow? And Joy and Grief, Life and Death had to come if one were to live.

Then life was so full just at the present. The very story of Baisanghâr's escape was enough to make one's heart beat. Under sentence of death, and such a death! To be taken with pomp and ceremony to the foot of the throne in the Gokserai--the Green-palace--that wonderful palace, four stories high, built by the Great Timur in the citadel, where every kingly descendant of his must be enthroned, where every kingly descendant of his must die--and there to be strangled! With *that* before him, to have the nerve in a few minutes to unbrick a closed door, run to the bastion, fling himself over the parapet wall, and so find shelter in Kwâja Kwârka's house--the holiest man in the city! A thousand pities, indeed, that Baisanghâr had sunk so low. Aye! Dearest-One was right. One could condemn the sin, and yet do justice to the sinner. Yet there was a lack of kingliness too that was inexcusable. To allow his brother Ali to escape also was perhaps to err on the side of mercy, but to submit to be beaten by him in battle immediately afterwards was distinctly unnecessary!

It complicated matters, too, most dreadfully. For here was Baisanghâr, acclaimed by the people, more or less imprisoned in the City of Samarkand, and Ali-Mirza, nominated by the Court, beleaguering him from the Bokhâra side, while Khosrau Shâh, relieved from the necessity of defending Hissâr for his nincompoop by the withdrawal of Sultan Hussain back to Khorasân, was hastening all he knew to put in his oar for *his* nominee from the Hissâr side!

This being so, and neither of the three claimants having a shadow of right beside his, Babar's, there was nothing for it, but to be on the spot at once.

So kettledrums were beat and pennons unfurled, while Nevian-Gokultâsh saw to his young master's coat of mail, and the latter pored over the memoirs of his great ancestor Timur to see what wrinkles he could pick up in regard to the disposition of troops in a real fine fight; for, being a born general, he was dissatisfied with what he had seen, even with Uncle Hussain's smart soldiers.

Only Dearest-One took no interest in the military preparations; she embroidered no flag with crinkled gold. She sat on the roof and watched the young King ride out in all his bravery and then she prayed God for his safety, and also for the safety of that other one, who deserved none.

And, for a time, both her prayers were answered. The summer passed on to winter and still Samarkand, the protected city that has never really fallen, sat gaily secure in its wide suburbs and vast network of fortified gardens. Scarcity, indeed, pressed harder outside the walls than within. Then the nincompoop whose only object apparently in advancing on Samarkand had been to pursue his mistress, the daughter of a high Court official, succeeded in marrying her, and so retreated.

Thus Babar found himself confronting Baisanghâr supported by the populace, and Ali by the Court. They waited and looked at each other for some time; and then one morning, after preliminaries, Babar moved his army some twelve miles down the right bank of the river Kohik, and Ali-Mirza moved his down the left. So, with their armies behind them (though it would seem, somewhat helpless either for support or protection) the two young Princes each with five followers rode from their own side to the middle of the stream and with the chill water just touching their horses' bellies, agreed that if the summer came again they would harry

Samarkand together.

After which solemn ceremonial Ali returned to his side of the river, and Babar to his; whence he set off to Ferghâna.

It was not a very distinguished campaign but it was his first. Perhaps it was as well it was uneventful for he was busy working his small army into something like discipline. Therein, he saw clearly, boy as he was, lay success; without it, there was nothing but one long succession of isolated raids, incoherent, useless, leaving the people ready, as they had been in the beginning, for a new, and yet another new conqueror.

It was something, therefore, when in the next spring, he found himself able to restrain his troops and to punish severely many straggling Moghuls who had been guilty of great excesses in the different villages through which they had passed. It was an unheard-of idea, but it had a marked effect; for shortly afterwards when his camp was close to a place called Yâm, a number of persons, both traders and others, came in from the town to buy and sell, and somehow, about afternoon prayer-time a general hubbub arose during which every shop and every stranger was plundered. Yet an order that no person should presume to detain any part of the effects or property thus seized, but that the whole should be restored without reserve before the first watch of the next day was over, resulted in not one bit of thread or a broken needle being kept by the army!

It was a glorious victory for pure ethics and quite repaid Babar for having to remain for six weeks outside Samarkand. Besides, the peach gardens were in full bloom. It was curious going out into the pleasure ground of the city, to slash, and hack, and hew, and kill! But there was no other way for it, and many were the sharp skirmishes that took place with the townspeople where folk as a rule had been wont to disport themselves on holidays. But in war-time things got upside down; witness the dastardly deceit of the Lover's Cave where five of Babar's most active men were killed. Seduced by a treacherous promise to deliver up the fort if a party came thither by night, a picked troop was chosen for the service, with this result.

It rankled bitterly in the young commander's heart; he felt himself at fault for his greatest weakness--an inveterate habit of believing what he heard.

Yet he had his consolations. Day by day, as he waited, doing his best with the small force at his command to cut off the supplies from the city, the number of townspeople and traders who came out to traffic in the camp bazaar increased, until it became like a city and you could find there whatever is procurable in towns. And day by day, the inhabitants of the country around came in and surrendered themselves, their castles, their lands, high and low. Only the city of Samarkand held out. It was in the end of September and the sun was entering the Balance, when Babar, weary of waiting, made a feint march to the rear and the garrison of Samarkand, jumping to the conclusion that he was in retreat, rushed out in great number, both soldiers and citizens. Then orders were given to the cavalry in reserve to charge on both flanks; whereupon God prospering the proceeding, the enemy were decisively defeated; nor from that time forward did they ever again venture on a rally. No! though Babar's soldiers advanced through the now leafless peach gardens to the very ditch and carried off numbers of prisoners close under the walls.

And still fair Samarkand stood secure. Seven whole months had the blockade lasted, and now the winter's cold was coming on to aid the garrison. In addition, the great Turkhestân raider Shaibâni Khân was said to be on his way with a large force to intervene in the quarrel. Both dangers had to be faced. Babar felt, in view of the first, that he must cantoon his men, and set to work marking out the ground for the huts and trenches; so, leaving labourers and overseers to go on with the work, he returned to his camp. None too soon, for the very next morning a hostile army showed to the north. It must be Shaibâni, prince of Free-lances!

Nothing dismayed, by the fact that fully half his soldiers were away seeking winter quarters, Babar put the forces he had with him in array, and marched out to meet the enemy. Boldness met with its reward. Shaibâni withdrew, and after giving the young King some nights of sleepless anxiety went back whence he came, and Baisanghâr, disappointed in relief, resigned himself to despair and fled accompanied by two or three hundred naked and starving followers.

"In the whole habitable world are few cities so pleasantly situated as Samarkand." So wrote Babar when at the age of fifteen he found himself met as King by the chief men of the city, by the nobles, by the young cavaliers, and escorted to the Garden-Palace where Baisanghâr had lived. It was a great relief to him that his cousin had escaped, indeed he had taken no precautions to prevent his doing so. Babar's quarrel was not with him, but with his claim, and as the lad--for he was but a lad still--sat that night under the roof which had sheltered the deposed prince, he told himself he had been right when he had said to Dearest-One that Baisanghâr would never make a king. There were no signs of kingship in that Garden-Palace. No plans or sketches, no dry-as-dust schedules. Not one of the papers and models such as he, Babar, already carried with him. Only a lute, a dulcimer, some dice-boxes. Not even luxury! Poor Baisanghâr! Rightly had he called himself an unsubstantial shadow. His poetry was the best part of him; and his painting.

Babar sitting alone in the alcoved room which Baisanghâr had evidently left in a hurry, lay back among the cushions of the divan and thrust his hand beneath them to adjust them to his head. There was something hard beneath their softness. He drew it out and found a small square

frame. Of gold--no! it was green enamel and on it were set, like flowers, turquoises, rubies, amethysts, topazes.

Why did it remind him of the spring meadows about Andijân? The spring meadows set with forget-me-nots and tulips? It was a bit too dark where he was to see the pale painting it held, so he rose and took it to the light.

Dearest-One!

And with a rush came back accusingly something he had almost forgotten all these months of striving and stress. Poverty-prince! the Cup-of-Life! those bosses that gathered the Light and magnified what was written by Fate. Once or twice he had thought of it carelessly; but now...?

Why had the thought come back to him?

It was a speaking likeness. Faint-coloured, delicate as a dream. Perhaps Baisanghâr had meant it to be so. It was likely he did. Poor Baisanghâr! For the life of him Babar could not help pity, even when he found the back of the frame was covered with fine writing--with verses!--not even when he recollected that it was to his sister that they were dedicated!

In truth there was little in them of offence, and Babar as he went to sleep that night, King of Samarkand, caught himself repeating them. They were certainly very neat--very neat indeed. And now that he had had time to think, why should not poor Dearest-One see them? They had given him a kindlier feeling towards the writer, so why should not she...?

Why not, indeed! The Cup-of-Life held all things for all.

Yes! he would send, or give her the portrait as it stood. It was really an excellent piece of work; and the words were perfect--the construction, and the *grammar* so good.

He fell asleep reciting them.

HEFT-AURANG^[1]

THE SEVEN THRONES

Seven thrones and each a star
Set in God's Heaven afar;
Seven thrones and each for thee;
Thank God there is no place
Beside thy face
For me! for me!

Seven sins! Ah! more than seven
To cast me down from heaven;
Seven sins; and each of me!
Thank God there is no place
Beside my face
For thee! for thee!

Seven stars and one a pole
To guide the wandering soul
To rest; but not for me--
There is no grace or place
Beside thy face.
Ah me! Ah me!

"Samarkand is a wonderfully elegant city." So wrote its young King the next evening. He had spent the day in going round his new possessions and had found them to his liking. Not only was the little Mosque with its carven wooden pilasters quaintly beautiful, but the big one was magnificent with its frontispiece on which was inscribed in letters so large that they could be read a mile off:

"And Abraham and Ishmael raised the foundations of the House of God saying 'Lord accept it from us; for Thou art He who heareth and knoweth.'"

Then the gardens were a joy, the baths the best he had ever seen, the bakers' shops excellent, the cooks skilful. And the dried prunes of Bokhâra, a fruit renowned as an acceptable rarity and a laxative of approved excellence, were to be found in perfection. Then there was the Observatory built by Ulugh-Beg, his ancestor, who had been a great mathematician. Babar had never seen an observatory before; indeed there were at that time but seven in the whole world, so it was an honour to possess one. He spent many days poring over its astronomical tables, trying to understand them; and finally put on a mathematical master, since no science could possibly come amiss to a King. Meanwhile Nevian-Gokultâsh and Kâsim and all the Andijân nobles, bickered inevitably with the Samarkand grandees, and Babar found no small difficulty in keeping the peace.

Still, life was once more splendid; at any rate for the young King. But the soldiers grumbled at the lack of loot. It was all very well to say that the country had voluntarily submitted and was therefore beyond plunder, and that from a city which had suffered the vicissitudes of war for two years and withstood a siege of seven months, it was impossible to levy anything by taxation. It was all very well to supply the inhabitants with seed corn and supplies to enable them to carry on till harvest time. But charity began at home, and home under these circumstances was best.

The wild Moghuls deserted first; then by twos and threes, the other men slipped away by night.

Yet still life was splendid. On those same clear winter's nights Babar could watch the stars with new-found knowledge.

"If the Most Excellent would watch the barracks instead," growled old Kâsim, "it would be well. Our men grow thin. There are scarce a thousand of them left, all told; and new friends are not so good as old ones. The Samarkandis are doubtless fine fellows, as the Most Excellent appears to find them; but would they follow back to Andijân if occasion occur?"

And occasion did occur. A letter arrived from Babar's maternal uncle the Khân of Moghulistân who, urged doubtless by the deserters, wrote saying that as the former had possessed himself of Samarkand, it was only fair that his younger brother Jahângir, who, after all, *was the son of Omar Saikh's first wife* should be given Andijân.

Kâsim, who with his usual frown at all letters sat listening, spat solemnly on the ground. "Poison breeds poison," he said; "I deemed that talk had been spilt in the blood from Hussan Yakoob's hinder parts four years past. But 'tis never too late for mischief when women are left to themselves as they are at Andijân."

"But my grandmother is sagacious," began Babar.

Kâsim shrugged his shoulders. "Saw you ever a woman who could manage a woman, sire? So have not I. Begum Fâtima and she have been spitting at each other like wild cats, and what is wanted is a stick. Now, what is to be said?"

Babar spoke hotly. "That I will not hear of it! No! though I might of myself have made my brother governor. But of myself. This savours of command. He knows my men have gone back! I will not hear the tone of authority."

And Babar as he spoke felt himself tremble with anger. His voice was hoarse, too, and his head ached. He had been sitting up all night in the Observatory to watch an eclipse of the moon, and despite his fur coat had felt chill; for February had brought bitter winds.

"So be it!" said old Kâsim gleefully. He was getting weary of Samarkandi side, and foresaw more fighting now the spring was at hand.

Next day a special messenger, foot in hand from Andijân, found Babar in bed with a severe cold. And the letter from Kwâja Kâzi did not mend matters. Briefly, the deserting soldiers, discontented, disloyal, were giving trouble, and if help were not sent at once events might come to a very bad termination.

That night delirium came to the young soul, as the young body lay fighting for breath against pneumonia.

The physician bled him, of course, and fed him with almonds and ginger. And they closed every door and window, so that the wood-smoke filled the room and such little lung-space as was left. But splendid youth and health were his, and after a few days he lay outwearied with his hand-to-hand fight with Death, looking at the letters which had followed fast upon each other during his illness. And each brought worse news than the last. Andijân was besieged. Any moment his women-folk might fall into the hands of the enemy. He must start at once. To set aside Nevian-Gokultâsh's protestations, was easier than to rise and dress. Once up, however, he managed the council of war creditably, and for a day held his own bravely, giving orders for this and that.

A tall, thin, haggard young figure with sharpened features and eager eyes defying Fate; until suddenly voice left him, he struggled on for an hour or two, then lay unconscious. So weak that they did not dare bleed him again, but mercifully left him as he was. Only Nevian-Gokultâsh at his right hand, moistening the dear lips with cotton dipped in water, while Kâsim sat still as a statue, the tears running down his furrowed cheeks.

Was this, then, the end of that vivid young life, the like of which had never been seen?

But the Samarkandi fellows who did not really care might go about the city as dogs, and yelp the news that Zahir-ud-din Mahomed their King was dying, nay! was dead. It was easy to see that this had been done, for hour by hour, day by day the Garden-Palace became more and more empty, more and more solitary.

A runner from Andijân, bearing further news found it so, and, anxious for the truth, stole

upstairs on tiptoe to see for himself.

How still! How cold! How silent! And that half-seen form in the dusk, motionless among the quilts? Dead! Dead! or so close to Death that no alternative remained.

That night as his bells tinkled from his post-runner's pike as he ran past village, and field, and wood, they jangled the refrain that was on his mouth for all who cared to listen.

"Babar is dead! Life has ended! The cup is finished!"

Yet, even as the words rang out on the chill air, other words, faint, scarce to be heard, were startling those two sad watchers in the Garden-Palace.

"The Crystal Bowl. Give it back to me ... I ... I laugh as I drink.... Bring me the whole, I say, the whole."

The boy's brain, faintly conscious, was taking command once more.

And the body obeyed. In four or five days he was reading letters of despair from his mother, from old Isân-daulet, from Dearest-One. Samarkand, they said, had been taken with troops from Andijân. Could not *one* man be spared from Samarkand to keep Andijân?

Babar had not the heart to delay, and ill as he was set off in a litter with such followers as he could gather together. It was a Saturday in March that he started; just a hundred days since he had entered Samarkand, and he knew he could not hope to return as King. "*One hundred days only*," he thought, as he jolted through the peach gardens that were once again swelling to bud.

He reached Khojend by forced marches in a week's time; but by then he was on his horse again, beginning to regain strength and colour.

So he wondered why the people looked at him so strangely as he rode through the town. Did they take him for a ghost?

Yet he was even as one when they told him the news. Just a week before, on the very Saturday when he had started in such haste from Samarkand, Andijân had capitulated, needlessly capitulated, to the enemy on the news of Babar's death brought by a returning post-runner.

For the sake of Andijân he had lost Samarkand, and now found that he had lost the one without preserving the other.

Worse still, he had lost a dear friend; for the saintly Kwâja Kâzi, protesting against the premature yielding of the citadel while there was yet no lack of provisions or of fighting men, had been barbarously martyred by being hanged in a shameful manner over the gate of the citadel.

No wonder Babar wrote in the diary he had begun to keep: "I was in a very distressed condition and wept a great deal."

CHAPTER VI

Blest is the soul that is lifted above
The paltry cares of Self's selfish love,
Which adds no weight to another's care
And gives no soul a burden to bear,
Which takes what comes as its part and lot,
Which laughs at trouble and worries not,
Which sleeps without malice or fraud in its breast
And rises pure from its daily rest.

Jâmi.

There was a sad meeting, naturally, with the womenfolk Babar had hoped to help, and who were--somewhat contemptuously--sent to him, unharmed, after a few days. Or perhaps that "divinity which doth hedge a king" or whatever it was, which all his life long ensured Babar's own safety, extended itself to those who were dear to him.

Anyhow they came, and fell with tears on the neck of their dethroned darling. Dearest-One, slim and tall, her face still showing the lines of conflicting anxieties, yet still sweet utterly, without trace of bitterness for her brother. The Khânun, too rejoiced at seeing her son alive and well to care so much about his loss of dignity. Old Isân-daulet, keener of look and sharper of

tongue than ever, but with a world of sympathy in her stern eyes for the lad who had lost all save honour. For she realised that Babar had practically given up Kingship for the sake of his womenkind. He had had fair grip of Samarkand, and even with but a thousand devoted followers of his own to help him hold it, could, nay would have done so.

Babar, himself, did not attempt to deny his virtue. He never did; he was too frank to glose over any of his actions, good or bad. He had done the right thing and he accepted the fact gravely; perhaps a trifle pompously; but that was his nature. In the same way, he could not fail to see, that what had placed him in the unfortunate position of having insufficient followers to hold both Samarkand and Andijân, was no error of judgment on his part, but simply his extreme and unusual justice in refusing to grind down the distressed inhabitants of the former city for the benefit of his soldiery. Could he only have shut his eyes to the usual undisciplined plunder his army would not have deserted wholesale.

He was not introspective, but he knew, vaguely, that he had, somehow, had no choice in the matter. He had been born with this strong sense of justice, so he could not help himself; therefore despite this recognition of his own virtue, it slipped from him like water off a duck's back leaving no self-conceit behind.

So he welcomed his loving women quite whole-heartedly, and then wept more profusely than ever at the difficulty of maintaining them in proper fashion. Not that they wanted this. The Khânum, gentle, kindly soul, was only too glad that her quite capable hands should do all things for her darling, Dearest-One brisked up with work that took her out of herself, and Isân-daulet had roughed it too much in her youth not to enjoy the familiarity of roughing it again. And life, even at Khojend, a miserable place in which a single nobleman would have found it difficult to support his family, was not without its interests. Of the rather more than two hundred, and considerably less than three hundred followers who chose exile with their young King, quite a number were men of good family, whose wives and children joined them.

There was, therefore, company of a sort. Then Babar, despite his tears, was not one to give in. Inspired as he was by an ambition for conquest and extensive dominions, he could not, on account of one or two paltry defeats, sit down and look idly about him.

So, at any rate, he told the three loving women with his usual serious pomp, when he sent a request for assistance to his uncle, the Khân of Moghulistân, and then set off to reconnoitre around Samarkand. He returned ere long disappointed; but was soon on the march again to see his uncle in person at Tashkend. In this he was encouraged by Isân-daulet who remembered her brother of old. "Lo! I know him. A good soul but a stupid. The brains of my father, Yunus, went in the female line. But if you beat his ears with words he will listen. And keep on the soft side of Shâh-Begum, my husband's widow--God rest his soul! Anyhow he is at peace from her! A clever woman, but like a camel in mud--slippery!"

And this expedition was so far successful that the young leader actually returned from it once more at the head of some seven or eight hundred horsemen. Rather a wild lot, mostly free-lance Moghuls eager for loot and violence. But it was better than nothing, though Khojend was not large enough to hold them, even for a night. Mercifully, however, there was an enemy's fort some forty miles off, so, taking scaling ladders with them, they rode on to it and carried the place by surprise. But even one day of Babar's strict discipline was more than enough for the wild men of the desert, and the very next morning the Moghul Begs represented that, having but a mere handful of men, no possible benefit could result to anyone from the keeping of one miserable castle; and so, there being truth in this remark, they rode off to their desert again unabashed, leaving Babar to return annoyed, but not despondent. For at this particular fortress there grew a particular melon, yellow in colour, with skin puckered like shagreen leather. A remarkably delicate and agreeable melon, with seeds about the size of those of an apple, and pulp four fingers thick, which everyone agreed was not to be equalled in that quarter.

It was as well, certainly, to have gained *something* if only a good melon, and the little party at Khojend feasted on it and thanked God they had their boy back again safe and sound.

The summer was passing to autumn when another fit of despondency came to young Babar in the news of his cousin Gharîb-Beg's death. The invalid had lingered far longer than had been expected, but still the certainty that he was gone brought grief; the more so because it re-aroused regret for the lost Crystal Bowl; regret which had almost been forgotten in the clash of arms of the last few months. But now he had time--only too much of it--for thoughts. Not given to mysticism in any form, he yet wondered vaguely if the Crystal Bowl had ever existed, or if the whole incident had not been part of the curious hold Poverty-prince had had upon his imagination; and not on his only, but on the imagination of all with whom the cripple had come in contact.

And now he was dead! Gone for ever, like so many friends in these last troublous times.

Babar, translucent as the crystal itself, gloomed under the shadow of his regrets till his mother began to fret with the fear of on-coming illness.

But Dearest-One knew her brother better. "He must get away from us all," she said. "Yea! even from old Kâsim and his warriors. Let him go to the White Mountains a-hunting for the

winter."

But Babar would have none of it.

The White Mountains? Aye! they would be splendid--there were more bears there than in any other part of the country. Aye! and snow leopard too--the lad's eyes glistened as he admitted this--but he *could* not leave his women-folk again, and he ought not to leave those who, to their own cost, had chosen to stick by him.

"Then we will go also," said Dearest-One, nothing daunted. "We are not of towns more than thou art, and thou canst divide thy magnificent army!--take a hundred men with thee and leave an hundred to guard Khojend!"

Her sweet eyes smiled at him, and he agreed. No one in all his life had understood him like Dearest-One, he thought; there was perfect confidence between them, though, strangely enough, he had never yet given her the portrait he had found in the Garden-Palace--the portrait left by Baisanghâr in his flight.

Why had he not done so? He scarcely knew, except that he had felt shy of broaching a subject that seemed buried. 'Twas best not to rouse coiled snakes, and Baisanghâr, who had taken refuge in Bokhâra, had gone out of their lives altogether; out of his, Babar's, at any rate.

But everything seemed gone out of that; as the Turkhi couplet said:

"No home, no friends, no roof above my head;
Six feet of earth, no more, to make my bed."

The White Mountains, however--white indeed during winter with their snowy slopes invading all save the tiny cleft of the valley where the skin tents of the little party had been pitched--soon brought back content. It was as if the soft covering of snow had blotted out the past, and the winter slipped by, full up with trivial distractions.

Babar, returning long after dark to the encampment with half-a-dozen or so of bear-skins, forgot he was, or ever had been, King. And when early spring came on, and the bears were breeding, he took to hunting tulips instead. There were so many different kinds of them. Over thirty; and one yellow, double and sweet-scented like a rose. Dearest-One used to accompany him on these expeditions, for she was a real Moghul maiden, and the bright, cold winter had braced her up, until her cheeks glowed once more. Yet still Babar had never given her the portrait of herself, though he carried it with him more than once with that determination. Again, he scarcely knew why, except that it seemed to him the right thing to do. Why should she not have it?

But one day the brother and sister had wandered high over the melting snow slopes, where the flowers lay thick as a carpet. Blue spring gentian and clustered pink primrose, purple pansy, and deep brown nodding columbines above a mosaic of forget-me-not and yellow crowsfoot. Great sweeps and drifts of flowers where the snow-drifts ended, and beyond in the far, far distance, in a dip of the hills, a level line of clear cobalt-blue.

"Yonder lies Samarkand," said Babar, glooming in a second with the thought of past defeat; but his mind, ever vagrant, followed swiftly a line of new thought as he narrowed his long eyes to see better. "Had I the quaint contrivance at the Observatory there," he went on; "did I not tell thee of it?--no!--Well! 'twas a thing with curved glasses in a box and it made far-off things seem near--but blurred sometimes. Still had I it, I could mayhap see the Green-Palace. It stands high above the town."

Dearest-One, her hands clasped idly over her knees as she sat on a little peak of rock and ice that rose out of the flowers, was silent for a space; then she said dreamily:

"'Twas in the Green-Palace, was it not, where Kingship comes and goes, that Baisanghâr was to die that time he escaped?"

Babar hesitated. It was the first time his sister had mentioned her cousin's name to him; but now that the subject had been broached, might it not be better to take the opportunity offered? He had the portrait with him. Why not have it out and have done with it? After all it was a fitting place; the green alp all starred with flowers reminded him of the Andijân meadows and they of the green enamel frame starred with ruby, turquoise, amethyst, topaz.

"I have something here," he said, fumbling in his fur coat, "that I have meant to give thee for some months; but--I know not why--" So he began haltingly; then warming to his subject told her in his own inimitable way, every tiny touch giving life to the picture, how and where he had found what he finally placed in her hands.

The girl who had listened coldly looked at it still more chillily.

"'Twas not meant for me," she said at last, and her tone was as ice--"And he prized it little, since he left it behind him."

Babar with the returned miniature in his hand, stared at her in confused amaze, feeling that, of a truth, women were kittle cattle. One could never count on them--and all these months he had been afraid of exciting a storm of tears!

Distinct ill-usage was in his voice as he said gravely: "But thou hast not seen the verses writ behind, and they are good. I stake my word they are excellent and correct in every elision, every poetic licence."

It may have been the bathos in the lad's last eager protest which kept the pathos of poor Baisanghâr's words from making full mark, which kept the girl's lips from quivering overmuch, which kept the mist of tears from overflowing to her cheeks as the words fell on the flower-scented air. So little, to frail humanity, turns grief to laughter and smiles to tears.

Anyhow Dearest-One sat silent, and a faint smile curved her thin red lips.

"Yea!" she said softly, "they are good verses; but he was ever a poet."

And then suddenly the poetry which lies hid at the heart of all sorrow, all longing, all deprivation, surged on her and her face lit up with passionate feeling. "Give it me back, brotherling! give it me back. Let us leave it here! Here! on this high unknown place among God's flowers! Here! amid ice and snow! Here! overlooking the Palace where he would have died. Here! close to high heaven where there is understanding!" Her voice had risen as her thought rose, and now rang out joyous, triumphant. "Lo! the *Heft-Aurang* will look down on my face night after night and the pole star will point the way to him.... Ah! Baisanghâr! have patience, have patience! love will point the way!..."

She laid the portrait face upwards to the clear blue sunshiny sky on a cold slab of ice that filled up--and looked as if it had filled up for centuries of chill summers and frost-bound winters--the wide clefts of the rock beside her; then stood up and stepped down amid the flowers, tearless, radiant.

"Come, brother!" she said. "It grows late. Let us descend, they will be waiting."

But Babar looked meditatively at the pictured face, and then at the one before him transfigured by emotion.

"So that is love!" he said at last with a curious impersonality in his tone. "Truly it is wonderful; and after all there is not so much difference between it and tears!"

So in a flood, came back to him that one glimpse he had had in the Crystal Bowl of his cousin's face. He saw it again clearly; he seemed to hear his voice telling of the frightened maiden. He had never thought of her since; such things passed quickly from his boyish mind. But now the wonder came as to whether he *would* ever meet her. He might, without recognising her, since he did not know who she was.

But Dearest-One might know; such things were part and parcel of the woman's life. His sister, however, was already half way down the slope and he had to run to overtake her.

"Do I know?" she echoed to his question, quite calmly, having had time to recover her serenity. "Wherefore not? Such knowledges have to be kept by someone; so we women guard it. She whom Mirza Gharîb-Beg deserted--" she spoke with distinct blame--"was well within the circle of distinction, being both of the royal house and also of the lineage of Sheik Jâmi, the divine poet--on whom be peace! Therefore she deserved a better fate than to live her life in a House-of-Rest--as I shall live mine," she added with conviction.

"But thou art so young," protested Babar, ever ready to follow any new lead of thought.

Dearest-One flashed out on him in her old way. "Young! One year older than she--so there! She was but a child, and Gharîb-Beg, remember, was but two years older." She paused, then added hurriedly: "Did I not tell thee we silly women guarded such trivial knowledge as our lives?"

To judge by Babar's women-folk (one of his many widowed aunts had joined the little camp on a visit--he had endless aunts and he seemed to be a favourite with all--) they guarded other trivial knowledges as their lives also. Babar returning home of an evening would find a regular Turkihi feast including goats' milk cheese fritters, made, of course, after the family recipe, spread out for his delectation, and Dearest-One never forgot to put violet essence in the thick milk. And plenty of sugar, for the lad had a sweet tooth. Then as they sat round the great, pine-log fire at night, Isân-daulet would call for a song; none of those niggling Persian odes, about the Beloved's Eyebrows and a Cup of Wine--the which was forbidden, though many good men fell away from grace and were none the worse for it--not in *this* world at any rate, and for the next who could tell since the dear Kâzi was not there to lay down the law ...

"The Kâzi was a saint," interrupted Babar with certainty; "I know it; first because the men who martyred him have all since died. That is one proof. Then he was a wonderfully bold man. Most men have some anxiety or trepidation about them. The Kwâja had not a particle of either, which is also no mean proof of sanctity."

Old Isân-daulet chuckled. "Then are all my family canonised," she said, "and Paradise will have small peace! But sing, boy, a rattling Turkhomân ballad and bawl it fairly, if thou canst, now-a-days."

But Babar had learnt better than bawling over in Uncle Hussain's camp, and though his grandmother shook her head over his rendering of "Toktâmish Khân" still 'twas a fine song with a good stirring chant to it:

The pale white willows grow in the sand,
Toktâmish Beg.
Choose one to hobble thy horse's leg
That thy bay steed stand.

Thy red blood drips on the yellow sand,
Toktâmish Khân.
Wilt bind his wound, wife of Mirza Jân
With thy jewelled hand?

The wound is doleful, the kiss was sweet
Toktâmish Kull.
Which poison, man! makes thine eyes so dull
And thy breath so fleet?

Oh! my bay horse neighed when I did sing,
And Mir Jân's wife
Swore she would love me all my life
And gave me a ring.

Thy steed will find him a rider soon
And fair Narghiss
Will have a new lover to cuddle and kiss
Ere another moon.

But thy mother is old; she has lost her brave
Toktâmish Khân;
Let her carry her sheaf to Death's wide barn
And dig her a grave!

The firelight danced on the young face as it sang cheerily. The Khânûm, his mother, wept unobtrusively at the thought of what she would do if *her* young brave were to die. Old Isân-daulet beat time with precision; Dearest-One smiled gently; but Nevian-Gokultâsh--the Heart-of-Stone--held up his finger.

"Hist!" he said, "a horse's steps."

Not one but many. A little detachment of loyalists headed by Kâsim Beg, arriving in hot haste with renewed hope!

Babar stood up tall, strong, and threw his wide arms out as if to shake off inaction.

"Whence?" he asked briefly; "East, west, north or south?" There was weariness in the thought, not in the tone. He was ready to fight anywhere for Kingship again, though his heart sank at the futility of it all. Bokhâra, Samarkand, Hissâr, and half-a-dozen other chief-ships always changing hands. But this, a message of treaty from Ali Mirza who had held Samarkand since it had dropped from Babar's hand might mean something. So he was in the saddle and off; only to return then, and half-a-dozen other times, despondent, to admit that his star was not yet in the ascendant.

Isân-daulet wearied of waiting at last, and set off herself to Moghulistân to levy troops to aid her grandson in the name of her dead husband. The Khânûm went with her, and Dearest-One took the opportunity of retiring with one of her old aunts, to a House-of-Rest. So Babar was left alone. He would not remain at Khojend, however; he felt that he had already taken too much from the loyalists there, so in a state of irresolution and uncertainty he made for the border land of the Pamirs beyond the White Mountains. There he remained amongst the nomad tribes, perplexed and distracted with the hopelessness of his affairs.

And here, as winter passed to spring once more, a saintly Kwâja--also an exile and a wanderer--came to visit him. And having no help to give, no advice to offer to one so down-cast, prayed over him and took his departure much affected.

"And so was I," writes Babar frankly. Doubtless he was; and yet before sunset that very day he must have been out on the hillside, possibly hunting for new tulips in this new country; for he descried a horseman making his way rapidly up the valley.

A horseman!

Within half-an-hour, without an instant's delay, Babar had backed his lean Turkhomân mare and, followed by a leaner troop of such friends as still clung to him (Kâsim and Nevian-Gokultâsh of course amongst the number) was galloping for Marghinân (the place where they remove the

stone from apricots and put in chopped almonds!). For a message had been sent by the governor of the town to say he was ready to give it up to its rightful owner, and would hope for forgiveness for past offences.

It was then sunset, and Marghinân lay more than a hundred miles away as the crow flies. All that night till noon next day the little band rode fiercely on. On those wild hills there was no road to speak of; one could but follow the water-courses as the streams sought their level. At noon next day they drew bridle for the first time. They had not come far, or fast, yet so hard had been the way that their horses needed rest. Twelve hours to give them a chance, and also, in the close valley of Khojend to secure night time for the first part of the march, and they were off again; this time to let sunrise pass to sunset and sunset pass to night before they again drew rein in the grey dawn. Drew rein and looked at each other doubtfully. Yet their goal lay not four miles ahead of them, a shadowy hill crowned by a fort and scarce seen in the half light.

But the doubt was this:

They had ridden for forty-eight hours up hill and down dale, over breakneck precipices and roaring torrents, without ever considering that they had no real warranty for so doing!

The Governor of the town was one who was known to stickle at no crime. With what confidence then could they unconditionally put themselves in his power?

So at least urged Nevian-Gokultâsh. Others joined in, and Babar, ever reasonable, saw cogency in the doubt, and ordered a halt for consideration.

Out in the dawn, the horses, heads down, taking a nibble of grass between heaving breaths, the sweat running down from their polished backs, the tired troopers, too tired to dismount, arguing *pros* and *cons* wearily, until Babar rising in his stirrups, showed tall, straight, strong, commanding.

"Gentlemen!" he said. "Our reflections are not without foundation, but we have been too late in making them. We have now ridden three nights and two days without sleep or rest. Neither horse nor man has strength left. There is no possibility of retreating, since there is no place of safety to which we *could* retreat. Having come so far we must proceed. Therefore let us go forward remembering that nothing happens save by the will of God. Right turn, gentlemen! Forward!"

And forward it proved to be from that moment. Marghinân his, the country people, disgusted with the late usurpers, crowded round their old young King.

Of course Grandmother Isân-daulet was in at the finish with her horde of two thousand wild Moghul horsemen; who nevertheless did good, if barbarous, service at Âkshi, where treachery met with its just reward. For the Moghuls, stripping their horses, rode barebacked into the stream and sabred the escaping traitors in their boats.

So the peach trees had not shed their blossoms before, by the Grace of the most High (and many real fine fights) Babar recovered his paternal kingdom, of which he had been deprived for two years.

Two years!

He could hardly believe it as he rode through on the mantle of lambskins between the fort of Andijân and the river, where not so long ago he had been playing leap-frog when first King-ship came to him.

"Nevian-Gokultâsh!" he cried suddenly, "an thou lovest me! off from thy horse and give me a back like a kind soul. I must leap to my kingdom once more!"

He stood there laughing, the embodiment of boyish youth and energy; forgetful of past troubles, eager to enjoy life.

"Ul-la-la!" shouted some of the nobles catching the spirit of the thing and throwing themselves from their horses.

So leap Babar did, not over Nevian only, but over half-a-score or more of the friends of his adversity including Kâsim who nearly tumbled over with laughter and joy.

And the young King, as he once more cast himself face upwards on the soft furry little blobs of blossom amid a chorus of applause, felt that the whole world was splendid indeed.

CHAPTER VII

Blessed is he who has not to learn
How the favour of fortune may change and turn,
Whose head is not raised in his high estate
Nor his heart in misfortune made desolate.

Nizâmi.

"There is no use in talking," quoth Isân-daulet decisively. "Send the trays to Ayesha Begum, my daughter, and prepare the wedding comestibles. It has been high time, these two years back, that Zahir-uddin Mahomed got himself married, but of a truth there was not the wherewithal. One cannot marry out of a basket. But now all is smooth, so send for the bride. God grant she be not so unwilling as the groom."

And in truth Babar, seated on the floor, of course, between his grandmother and his mother, looked far from happy. His hands lean, supple, strong, hung over his grasshopper knees, and his head--small for the rest of his body--had not its usual frank bearing.

"I am not unwilling," protested the young man; "Lo! it has to be done, that I know. 'Tis the duty of Kings to marry and have sons; but, see you, I have no experience at all; indeed I have never been so circumstanced as either to hear or witness any words expressive of the amorous passion, and I have never seen my betrothed since I was five."

"God forbid!" ejaculated the Khânnum piously.

"But how then can I love her?" protested Babar; "'tis not like Dearest-One and Cousin Baisanghâr--"

A shriek of outrage drowned what he would have said. Not that either of the two good ladies really felt shocked, but that in dealing with Babar they held it wiser to adhere to the strictly conventional; otherwise, heaven only knew if he would not go off at a tangent as Dearest-One had done. Poor Dearest-One on whom the blow of uttermost fate had fallen at last. For a terrible tale had come to Andijân but a month before, snuffing out the lamps of festival like a dust-storm at a wedding. For who could rejoice when they thought of a poor young prince who was nobody's enemy but his own, like Baisanghâr, strangled with a bowstring by the orders of the miserable and infidel-like wretch, worthless, contemptible, without birth or talents, reputation or wisdom, Khosrau Shâh? Babar had been beside himself with rage, and had expended every known epithet on the murderer, who though he prayed regularly, was black-hearted and vicious, of mean understanding, slender talents, faithless and a traitor. A man who for the sake of the short and fleeting pomp of this vain world had done to death the sweetest prince, the son of his old benefactor, in whose service he had been and by whom he had been patronised and protected. Thus rendering himself accursed of God, abhorred of men, and worthy of shame and execration till the judgment day. Perpetrating his crimes too for the sake of trivial enjoyment, and, despite his power and place, not having the spirit to face a barn-door chicken!

The young man had poured all this and much more into his sister's ears, hoping to comfort her, but she had only turned her face to the wall, and wept.

Strange, indeed, were women-folk; she had been so composed when she herself renounced him, but now that Death had stepped in she was all tears.

The thought of her weeping brought him a quick excuse. "Anyhow," he remarked, with evident relief, "there can be no weddings yet awhile; my sister is not in condition for festivals."

Isân-daulet sniffed. "Sisters are not indispensables to a marriage. So be good boy, Babar, and listen to reason. Do I not ever advise thee to thy benefit?"

"Not ever," retorted the young King sulkily; "thou did'st advise me to set my promise aside and let thy cursed Moghuls and others plunder those I had sworn to protect."

"Not plunder, boy!" replied the old lady shrilly, "but to resume their own property."

"I care not," said Babar sternly, and rising to go; "I say I was wrong to yield. 'Twas senseless, to begin with, to exasperate so many men with arms in their hands. And then--Lo! grandam--I was precipitate, and in affairs of state many things that appear reasonable at first sight require to be well weighed and considered in a hundred different lights ere orders are given. I shall have trouble over that yet."

He stalked away in dignified fashion, and his mother sighed. "He grows a man, indeed. 'Tis time he married; but I wonder will she be good daughter to me?"

"She will be good granddaughter to me, that I'll warrant me," retorted Isân-daulet viciously. She would stand no nonsense from young chits.

So the marriage went on, and Babar performed his part of it with grave politeness and

propriety. He wore his wedding garments with a difference, and when he sat beside his bride for the first time, holding her hand and repeating the words after the officiating Kâzi he felt quite a thrill. In fact he would like to have squeezed the little hand he held, only it was so covered with rings and gew-gaws that he was afraid of hurting it. Altogether the fateful she looked rather small; but distinctly fetching--though of course he could not see her face, in her veil of jasmine blossoms. They smelt, however, rather sickly.

That was in fact all that he vouchsafed to Dearest-One who, late in the evening, slipped in, dressed in white from head to foot, to wish her darling brother happiness.

"I would she smelt of violets instead," he said thoughtfully; "dost think, Dearest-One, it could have been the jasmine perfume and not the sweets that made me sick when I was five?"

And Dearest-One laughed; a laugh with a sob in it, and said to her mother ere she returned to her House-of-Rest:

"He is not fond of her, see you?"

"God forbid!" snapped Isân-daulet tartly. "Lo! he will love her when she is the mother of his son."

And Dearest-One was silent; that might be; though she doubted it. But for the present she was right. Babar was not in love; what is more he was shy.

The Khânum, his mother, who found her town-bred, mincing and thoroughly amiable daughter-in-law quite an amusing distraction, began by rallying him on his bashfulness; but as the first period of his married life went on, bringing a decrease of such affection as he had had, and a corresponding increase of shyness, raillery turned to tears, then to anger, until the gentle lady, outraged by her son's behaviour, would scold him with great fury and send him off like a criminal to visit his wife.

Babar had, however, some excuse for his lack of interest. Marriage had come to him in the very moment when he needed all his vitality to keep his newly-recovered throne. What he had said to his grandmother concerning his overprecipitate permission for modified plunder had been true. The inconsiderate order, issued without sufficient foresight had caused commotions and mutinies.

The Moghuls, still dissatisfied, had marched off in a huff; good riddance of bad rubbish, as Babar said, though he chafed inwardly at not having been able to control them amicably. Still the Moghul Horde had ever been the authors of every kind of mischief and devastation. Five separate times had they mutinied against him; and not only against him--that might have pointed to incompatibility of temper on his part--but against every one in authority, especially their own Khâns.

It was in the breed. True was the verse:

"If the Moghul race had an angel's birth
It still would be made of the basest earth;
Were the Moghul name writ in thrice-fired gold
'Twould be worth no more than steel, wrought cold.
From a Moghul's harvest sow never a seed,
For the germ of a Moghul is false indeed."

Thank God! he was no Moghul; he was Turkhomân born and bred!

Before winter came on, indeed, the position of affairs had become critical. Half the nobles had sided with young Jahângir who still claimed the throne, and fighting was general all over the valley of Ferghâna. To shut himself up in the town of Andijân for the winter months would only be to leave the enemy free to ravage the country outside. He therefore chose a spot on the skirts of the hills and cantoned his army there. A pleasant spot with good cover for game! An excellent sporting ground, in fact, containing plenty of mountain goats, antlered stags, and wild hogs. In the smaller jungle, too, were excellent jungle fowl and hares.

Then, when such sport palled, there were always the foxes, which possessed more fleetness than those of any other place. Babar rode a-hunting every two or three days while he remained in those winter quarters, and regaled himself on the jungle fowl, which were very fat. Keeping an eye all the time, however, on the enemy's movements, and guarding Andijân, where the Khânum and old Isân-daulet appeared to have forgotten wars and war's alarms in something more cognate to their woman's hearts; something that was almost too delightful to be true.

Babar, when he first heard of the delightful prospect, was all that could be desired. Affectionate, overjoyed, proud. What else could he be when his mother hung round his neck hysterically, and even Dearest-One's pale cheeks flushed at the future.

"He shall be my son as well as yours, brotherling," she said. "Lo! I will be his best-beloved aunt. So that settles it, and all silly women's talk about my marrying somebody--does it not, O

King!"

And Babar, as he sat holding his sister's hand as in the old days, saw a vista of happiness before him. It would be delightful. Imagine having a son of his very own! Ayesha Begum could not complain of his coldness on that visit, and he returned to his camp jubilant.

But the knowledge of what was to come, made him restless. Of what use was an heir, unless he was heir to something tangible? Ferghâna, divided against itself, was no permanent position for either claimant.

But what of Samarkand? There, his cousin Ali (who had no claim) had just beaten Weis, his younger brother who had a claim, doubtless, through his mother: but after his, Babar's, since she was the younger daughter.

He sat on the snowy slopes waiting for *bara-singha*, or bear, and ciphered it out; he came back to camp and talked it over with Kâsim and the nobles.

"Praise be to God!" said the old swashbuckler, "we may see some fine fighting once again."

They were to see more than they had bargained for; since, when with the advancing spring Babar and his army arrived before Samarkand it was to find that they were pitted, not against the weakling Ali and his half-hearted troops, but against the great Usbek raider, Shaibânî Khân, who, God knows why or wherefore, had attacked Bokhâra, taken it, marched on to Samarkand, taken it by the treachery of a woman, and was now there in undisputed possession. Babar felt that to attack the position overtly with his small force was madness. But what of a surprise? The Usbek horde were strangers. Babar himself had been beloved, during his short reign of a hundred days. If once he could find himself within the walls, the people of Samarkand might declare in his favour. At any rate they would not fight for the Usbek. *That* was certain.

It was worth a trial. But those who were to attempt the forlorn hope must be picked men, and there must be no attacking force before the city. That would put the garrison on the alert.

In the meantime he would go to the mountains; one thought clearer in high places.

Summer was nigh on, ere preliminaries were settled, and Babar with his picked band, ready for swift attempt, stood on the heights of Yâr-Ailak once more. Above him, unseen in the darkness of the moonless night was the flower-carpeted alp where Dearest-One's face watched the stars wheel. The *Heft-Aurang*, the seven thrones, showed in ordered array on the purple velvet of the night. Was one of them kept vacant for him, he wondered, or had Baisanghâr's poor ghost found it? Babar's mind was ever full of such whimsical thoughts; they came to him, unasked, making his outlook on life many-facetted, many-hued, like the iridescent edge which had set a halo round all things in the Crystal Bowl.

The future seemed thus glorified to him as he sat looking out over the unseen city in the valley beyond.

His nobles, his comrades, were sitting round him, revelling over the camp fire; holding a sort of sacramental feast before the dangerous surprise.

"Come!" cried Babar, turning, a light on his face brighter than the firelight; "let us have a bet on when we shall take Samarkand. To-night, to-morrow or never!"

"To-night!" cried Nevian-Gokultâsh and the others followed suit.

Half-an-hour afterwards they were in their saddles, low-bowed upon their peaks, light scaling ladders slung alongside, riding for all they were worth. Now or never! The time was ripe. Shaibânî Khân himself, lulled in security, away on a marauding expedition, the garrison unalarmed, confident.

It was midnight when they halted in the Pleasure-ground before the walls of Samarkand. Here Babar detached eighty of his best men. They were, if possible, to scale the wall noiselessly by the Lovers' Cave--most deserted portion of the fortifications,--make their way silently to the Turquoise Gate, overpower the guard and open the doors.

Babar himself, with the remainder of his men was to ride up to the Gate and be ready to force their way in.

How still the night was! The stars how bright! The Seven Thrones wheeling in their ordered array to the dawn. What had Fate ordered in his life? Babar, waiting, his hand gripped on his sword-hilt in the dark way of the Gate, listened eagerly for a sound. The horses' hoofs, deadened by enswathing felt, had made no sound, the very chink of steel on steel had not been heard. All was silent as the grave.

What did Fate hold in store? Hark, a sentry's sleepy call: "What of the hour of the night?"

What, indeed?

Then in one second, tumult, uproar, a clashing of sword on sword.

"The Gate! Open the Gate!" shouted Babar.

A swift bombardment of dull blows--stones, anything on iron bolts and bars. A shiver, a sudden yielding, and the wide doors swung open.

An instant after Babar was through the gateway, King of Samarkand. He knew it, even as he galloped on through the sleeping streets to the citadel. A drowsy shopkeeper or two, roused by the clatter, looked out from the shops apprehensively, then offered up prayers of thanksgiving. So, by ones and twos, the city woke to relief and gratitude. By dawn the hunted Usbeks had disappeared; dead or fled. And the chief people of the town, bringing such offerings of food ready dressed as they had at hand were flocking to the Great Arched Hall of the Palace, to do homage to their new King, and congratulate him on his success.'

Babar received them with his usual frank, simple dignity. For nearly a hundred and forty years, he said, Samarkand had been the capital of his family. A foreign robber, none knew whence, had seized the kingdom unrighteously. But Almighty God had now restored it, and given him back his plundered and pillaged country which he would proceed to put in order.

He did it to his heart's content! He was now nineteen, the birth of his son was nigh at hand, and all must be ready for the expected heir.

So the next month or two passed in preparations and congratulations. Babar, who felt the strength of the pen as well as that of the sword, wrote endless letters to the neighbouring princes and chiefs, assuring them of his favour, and requesting like return from them. These he despatched duly accredited with rose-scent and gold-dust and brocaded bags; but not so many came back as went out.

Moghulistân was slow to recognise the value of peaceful persuasion, and looked askance at the young general who could surprise so wily a foe as Shaibâni Khân and yet think it worth while to write missives like a scrivener.

But one letter came which brought the young King unmixed delight; for it was from the incomparable Ali-Shîr at Khorasân; an incomparable letter without one word astray; a pure pleasure from start to finish. The young King answered it boldly: even daring so far as to write a Turki couplet of his own composing on the outside thereof; a Turki couplet that was not half-bad; for he was growing to be a man in mind as well as body.

So all things went merry as a marriage bell. His grandmother, his mother, and the mother of his expected heir, arrived by slow marches from Andijân and were lodged in the Birthplace and Deathplace of Kings, the Green-Palace. And Dearest-One came too in the white robes of a sainted canoness, eager to take up her position of aunt-in-ordinary; a position of honour with the Chagatâi family. Babar himself had half-a-dozen or so such Benificent-Ladies ready for all festivities, all condolences.

So, one hot night, he found himself looking distractedly at the moon in a balcony of the women's apartments.

Hurrying feet and whisperings had gone on, it seemed to him, for hours.

But these feet did not hurry; they lagged.

"A daughter! a miserable daughter!" said his mother's voice, full of tears. "Lo! I wonder Ayesha could think of such a thing ... It is unpardonable."

"Let us say no more," put in Isân-daulet. "When a woman disgraces herself, the less said the better. We will get thee a more dutiful wife, sonling."

Even Dearest-One's face was downcast utterly.

"A daughter!" echoed Babar and paused. Then he said eagerly: "May I not see it, motherling?-- 'Tis my first child, anyhow."

And they showed it him, a naked new-born baby wrapped in a cotton quilt.

"It looks old; as if it had been born a long time," he said reflectively; then his fine, strong, young hand touched the tiny crumpled fingers tentatively. "Lo! they are like little worms," he said and laughed aloud suddenly, a gay young laugh. "She is not bad, my daughter. I will call her 'Glory of Women.'"

And almost every day he would find time to go in to the women's apartments and look at her.

But, after a month or forty days, the little Glory of Womanhood went to share the Mercy of God.

She was his first child, and at the time he was just nineteen.

CHAPTER VIII

A Moment's Halt--a momentary taste
Of Being, from the Well amid the Waste,
And lo!--the phantom Caravan has reached
The Nothing it set out from.

Omar Khayyam.

Fate had called a halt in Babar's life. A court had once more gathered round him, and, as King of Samarkand, a city of colleges and culture, this was of different stamp from that of Andijân. It occupied itself with other things than the edge of a sword-blade or the merits of a polo-ball.

"Lo!" said Mulla Binâi the poet, his voice lubricated with artificial adulation to extreme oiliness, "I have at last found fitting memorial for the magnificent victory of the King in these poor words:

"Tell me, my soul, the conquering day
Fateh Babar Bahadur, I say."

The horrid doggerel, with its inlay of numerical letters giving the date of Babar's surprise of Samarkand, was allowed to pass muster in that crowd of flattering courtiers.

Only Kâsim Beg, bluff as he had been from the beginning, said, smartly:

"Good enough, if so be 'tis accurate; but of that, thank God, I know naught; for whilst thou rememberest fine fights by dots and strokes, I keep them by the dents on my good sword."

The old noble disliked Binâi; he disliked all poets in general; but this one in particular. He knew nothing good of him but his *riposte* to Ali-Shîr--who was worth ten of him since he had at least been born a Beg and who, before he was bitten by the mad craze for jingling words, had struck a good few shrewd blows for the right. Besides, he had been author and patron of many useful inventions, and it was not his fault if the gilded youth of Herât named every new fashion after him, and when he, in consequence of an earache, bound up his face with a kerchief, bound up theirs also and called it *à la mode* Ali-Shîr. Still Binâi's *riposte* to the sarcasms which had driven him from Herât was a good joke. To order a ridiculous pad for the ass he was to ride and call it the Ali-Shîr pad! The recollection of it always made good old Kâsim laugh broadly. The humour of it suited his sturdy outlook. An outlook that was disturbed by the jingle-jangle of words and wits that began to arise about his young master. It was all very well, and affairs were doubtless in a most prosperous state. All the same there was no counting on any continuance of fine weather with half-a-dozen claimants to the throne and Shaibâni-Khân close at hand. The Usbek raider was no man to give in because of one reverse; his whole life was war.

So Kâsim frowned at culture, and as Prime-Minister looked to his weapons.

It was not however for many months that his fear came true and Shaibâni, reinforced, appeared again on the horizon of Babar's world.

But when he did, the young King set aside everything else and buckled on his sword once more with zest. He had been studying military art in his great ancestor Timur's memoirs, and was eager for a pitched battle. No sooner, therefore, did Shaibâni's hordes show themselves, than the young general marched to meet them, and, over-impatient, precipitated a collision before his own re-enforcements of over five thousand men had time to join him.

But it was his first pitched battle, he was keen as mustard, and had planned it all out on paper beautifully on strategical lines.

And the astronomers were to the fore with a lucky conjunction of stars.

So the right and left wings marched out in orderly array, and wheeled admirably to meet the first attack of their flank. But somehow this separated Babar from his staff of veterans, who possibly did not believe in the virtue of disciplined movements; and though in person he led a dashing and impetuous charge of his centre on the foe, which drove the Usbeks back to the point of rout, Shaibâni would not accept defeat. He stood firm, despite his officers' advice to withdraw while he could, and continued the wild desert tactics of repeated charges on the enemy's flank, repeated withdrawals to wheel and reform.

And Babar's army, but half-disciplined, divided by conflicting ideals became hopelessly confused. His Moghul troops, refusing to obey orders, reverted to their old habit of killing and

plundering, with the result of rout--complete absolute rout.

That night the young leader, stern and calm, despite the ache at his heart for his own broken ideals as well as for the loss of the many Begs of the highest rank, the many admirable soldiers, the many devoted friends who had perished in the action, held a council of war in the citadel as to what had best be done under the circumstances. Capitulation on terms, or unconditional defence?

Belief in their leader and the devotion of the Andijân nobles carried the day against the more lukewarm Samarkandis. It was resolved to hold the citadel to the death, to the very last drop of blood; and with vitality renewed by the need for immediate action Babar set to work strengthening the fortifications. Here at any rate he was master; bricks and earth could not disobey orders; they must remain where they were put.

Yet most of the nobles sent away their wives and families secretly. Babar's mother and sister, however, refused to leave their beloved one whose fortunes they had followed for so long through thick and thin. Grandmother Isân-daulet, also, remained of course. Her brave old heart rather gloried in the thought of a siege, and with all the hatred of a desert-born Chagatâi, she hated the Usbek raider who had dared to beat her grandson.

Though on that point she and Babar had many words. He reviling her Moghul horde as the cause of his failure; she asserting it to be his cramping conditions which had prevented the success of the old methods of warfare that had served his fathers well enough.

As for Ayesha Begum she had long since retired in a huff to her own relations, making as her excuse the plea of grief for the death of the little Glory of Womanhood. But Babar knew better. She had not cared at all. Her other plea that he did not love her was more to the purpose. Anyhow it was as well, thought the young husband grimly; she would only have wept and been uncomfortable.

For discomfort was inevitable even from the very beginning of the siege; at any rate for the men. The nightly round of the ramparts alone entailed lack of proper sleep, since but a small portion of them was rideable, the rest had to be done on foot. And so long was the circuit that, starting at dusk, it was dawn before every place had been inspected. Still, even with the small force at his command, Babar kept the foe at bay, though, more than once he had a narrow squeak of it. Once when a feint attack of Shaibâni's on the Iron-Gate covered a daring escalade at the Needle-makers Gate. An escalade that was all but successful. Four of the attacking party were actually over the wall, dozens of others were swarming up it, when one Kuch-Beg, noble by birth and by nature, caught a glimpse of someone where someone should not be. To draw his sword single-handed as he was, and spring to the attack was the work of an instant. It was an exploit for ever to be cited to his honour, though his ringing war-shout brought three more heroes to his aid. Even so, there were but four against dozens; but furious blows, daredevil recklessness do much, and almost before the nodding guards were roused, the danger was over, the escaladers driven back, to fall a confused heap of ladders and men leaving a dead body or two on the ramparts.

Then Kâsim Beg sallied out again and again to engage the enemy's pickets and returned, bringing heads to set on pikes upon the walls.

For war was war in those days; there was no talk of Red-Crosses and ambulance-wagons.

And yet two women went about inside the fortress, bandaging wounds and applying simples. For the Khânum, Babar's mother, could not bear to see pain, and though old Isân-daulet sniffed at new fangled ways, asserting that men could but die once and that it was waste of time to tend a common soldier as though he were a noble, she came of a fighting tribe and could give many an inherited recipe for the healing of cuts, the prevention of wound fever. Then Dearest-One despite her youth, had a claim, as one who had renounced the world to freedom for good works; so mother and daughter went about in their close white veils applying the simples which the old woman pounded and compounded, and doing all they could for the brave men who were helping the beloved of their eyes to keep his kingdom. They could do no less; they could do no more; so at least said the Khânum, as often in the dark nights the mother and daughter lay awake trembling in each other's arms, listening during an attack or a sally.

Grandmother Isân-daulet would fall foul of them for their red eyes.

"When a man comes in to his food," she would say, "reeling from blows at his head or sick at stomach with hunger, 'tis no comfort to him to see tears, or the signs of tears. Thou sayest, daughter, thou can't do no more for thy son? Then I can. I can make him angry."

And she did: so that Babar went from his breakfast with his soft heart hardened to disdain.

Dearest-One used to admire her grandmother's pluck. Not to care if one hurt the beloved for his good! That was great. And she would wring her hands tight and say to herself: "I told him long ago that there was nothing I would not do for him; but there is nothing, nothing I can do."

So the months dragged by. Harvest came and went without bringing fresh supplies to the beleaguered fortress, and Shaibâni, cynical, somewhat afraid of his daring young antagonist, withdrew from actual collision, and contented himself with blockade. Starvation would do the

work without his aid.

The grain for the horses had already given out; however, while the leaves lasted the mulberry trees and the rose-wood trees in the fortified gardens were stripped and did for fodder. But the winter winds ended this supply, and the shift was made to keep some few horses alive with the risplings of wood moistened with water and sprinkled with salt. A sorry appearance was that of the poor steeds on such miserable fare; but Babar's charger did better, with a daily share of his master's bread; though the big-boned lad could ill spare it. For all alike were on short commons; and they grew shorter day by day. The dying horses were killed and eaten, the donkeys went next--then the cats and dogs. When matters came to this pass, however, night after night men--brave men--began to let themselves down over the wall and make their escape. The haggard young King never knew when he called a council of war, what trusted, what honoured face, might not be absent. Yet still he clung to that last drop of blood. The oath might have been foolish, since, as the ancients said, a fortress can only be maintained by the joint action of head, and feet, and hands; that is to say by generalship, two friendly forces on either side, and a good supply of water and stores as the starting point of all. Still he had made it, and he meant to stick to it. The others might go if they pleased.

"If I could only secure thine and my mother's and my grandmother's safety," he said to Dearest-One--"the other few women also," he added--"though there is little fear for them, they count not enough for harm; and Shaibâni hath his army well in hand. That is how he scored against me. Those accursed Moghuls of my grandmother's would not obey orders. If they killed a man they plundered him--and what is that, when a turning movement hath been ordered? Ah! it was devilish! devilish!" And the tall, thin, young figure would throw out its arms almost appealingly. For Babar was ever high-strung, and his nerves were going.

He gave himself no rest either. Night and day he was always on the watch. So it did not matter so much to him as to others when Shaibâni Khân, changing his tactics, commenced making the darkness hideous by beating large kettle drums and sounding the alarm. Yet the young King shook his fist over the battlements at his foe, who had now pitched his headquarters tent close to the Lovers' Cave, and said to Dearest-One, "It is not fair, and yet it is! I would do it in his place--and yet I don't know--I don't know!" He was very near the end of his tether, yet his grip was tight as ever and he would sit on the top of the gateway with a crossbow and shoot at everyone and everything living that showed itself.

"I struck a palish white-coloured horse to-day," he said to his sister with a cruel exultant look in the eyes that had always been so tender for God's dumb creatures, "and it fell dead--would it had been a man!"

And Dearest-One turned pale. This was worse than death; worse than anything--anything in the wide, wide world!

She lay face downwards beside her mother that night and thought, and thought, and thought, until the grey dawn came. Then she sat up and looked at her mother sleeping beside her.

Yes! it was best. The plan was worth the trying at any rate; and she would be the only one to suffer.

She lay down again, and laid her head on that gentle, loving, sleeping breast. And the motherly arms, unconscious as they were, closed round her and held her fast until she, too, slept, outwearied. That morning she was closeted with her grandmother for hours, and at the midday meal the old woman's eyes showed red; but Dearest-One's were clear and bright; when the mind is made up there is no use in tears.

The evening was stormy. The bitter east wind swept along the ramparts and drove the dust in blinding clouds into the eyes of all. The very foe ceased from their disturbing shouts of alarm, and on many a post the sentry slept awhile.

Did one at the wicket gate by the Lovers' Cave sleep or did he not; and did the white-robed figure that slipped after dusk through the deserted streets pass out, unseen, to challenge fate in the Usbek leader's camp?

Or did Dearest-One send a message only?

Or was it only chance which the very next morning brought the ultimatum to the haggard young King? Who knows? Certain it is it came.

There was no reason, Shaibâni wrote, why those who had been brave foes should not be brave friends. None could deny the King of Samarkand's bravery; few would care to deny his own. Why then should they not be friends? A marriage was ever the best way of securing peace. Let Babar therefore give his sister Khanzâda Begum in lawful marriage to his foe--who, he it said, was in strong enough position to take her--and so form a lasting alliance.

"My sister!" burst out Babar in a fury. "Go back to the savage Usbek Shaibâni, robber, raider, sir ambassador; and tell him that Zahir-ud-din Mahomed is not his peer--he is his master!"

This was all very well in the saying; it sent the blood, growing a bit sluggish from sheer

starvation, flooding to heart and brain; but afterwards when the envoy had gone, and the hungry anxious faces of the few who still remained to him showed bitter disappointment, he leant his head on his hands drearily in the quiet of the women's room, and tried to put himself in the place of those bearded Begs to whom a woman's honour or happiness or indeed affection, was, as a rule, of small account.

He could not, of course, assent; and yet it seemed a pity that he could not.

And while he sat crouched in upon himself, spent and weary, Dearest-One herself came and crouched beside him and laid her pretty head on his shoulder.

"Brother!" she said, "I have heard. Come let us talk it over as in old days. So let me hold thy poor hand as we used to do; for we have ever been friends, Babar-ling--have we not?"

Her voice was calm and steady despite the clamant note of tears that was in every word.

"Talk not of it, sister! I will not have it," he muttered; and his voice was broken, husky. "By God and his prophet! I could strike him dead for the thought that I could be such a cur as even to think of it."

She shrank just for a second. "Many men would think it naught," she said, "but it is because it means much to thee that thou must think."

"I will not think," he cried passionately, "I will not be coerced. I will not be cozened. I, Babar, take the consequence."

He left her, baffled, yet still determined, to return to the charge in a day or two; and in starvation times a day or two means much. So much, that she spoke sternly with finality.

"Wilt thou kill thy mother by thy pride, Babar? Listen! Long years ago I said I would do aught for thee--"

"And I answered I would never ask aught," interrupted her brother hotly; but she went on unheeding:

"And now thou deniest me the right to save thee. I who have so few pleasures. Lo! as thou knowest, my heart is dead for love; and this man--this Shaibâni--is not all bad--I--I know he is not. Brotherling! women have borne more for love than I shall have to bear maybe--for the man must be kind in a way--for--for if it ended, Babar--he could take me--without marriage--so grandmother says--"

Babar started up with an oath. "So she also is against me!"

Yet in his heart of hearts he knew that the old woman spoke truth. It was generous in Shaibâni even to offer marriage.

"I will not have it!" he cried. "I will not yield! I would sooner kill thee, myself."

"Thou wilt kill--us all," she said calmly. Then she broke down and clung to him sobbing. "Let it be, brotherling, for my sake. There is so little I can do--let me do this."

The quick tears of understanding ran down his cheeks, but he shook his head and left her.

So, after a day or two, yet another proposition came from Shaibâni to his brave foe. Babar might go with bare life, taking his womenkind with him if he chose, provided he capitulated utterly and acknowledged he was beaten.

There were parleyings and parleyings and who knows what secret promisings beside, what innocent lies, what heart-broken yielding on Babar's part. At last, protesting vainly that had he had the slightest hope of relief, or had he had another week's stores remaining he would never have listened to either threats or entreaties, he agreed to capitulate for bare life to him and his. His mother, his sister, his grandmother, these three must share his freedom. The others must take their chance of horses, or remain, unharmed. Grandmother Isân-daulet, however, flatly refused to come. She was too old, she said, to be cocked up on a horse for days. She was not afraid. Thrice, already, when she was young and good-looking she had fallen into the enemies' hands and had been unmolested--save once and how that business ended Babar knew. So, being now wrinkled and undesirable she would just remain and mayhap give Shaibâni a piece of her mind. So her horse had better go to Mingilek-Gokultâsh who was perchance over good-looking. It was ever best not to put temptation in men's way. Besides Dearest-One might like to have her foster-sister with her. It was convenient to have some woman one could trust beside one in dangerous times.

As the old woman spoke, she held her granddaughter by the hand, and her old fingers tightened themselves on the young ones with a grip firm as steel, soft as a caress. And Dearest-One stooped and kissed the old face on the lips.

So by midnight all was ready for the preconcerted escape. The few sorry horses left in the citadel were standing saddled, the enemy's pickets, it is to be presumed, were looking another

way. Babar, fierce, miserable, helped his mother to her pad and settled the stirrups for her. He could scarcely see for the hot tears held back so angrily in his eyes. He could scarcely speak for the hard-held breath that seemed to choke him.

Defeated, flying for his life--No! not for his own only; for theirs also!

He gave a glance round at his party. "Is everyone there? Is everyone ready?"

And from the midst of the little crowd clustering round the fugitives with sobs and tears a voice came clearly:

"Yea! brother! I am ready."

It was Dearest-One's voice. That must be she leaning from her horse to whisper a word to old Isân-daulet who stood waving farewells.

"Then in God's name let us begone, and end the business," he shouted fiercely, leapt to his charger, dug spurs to its flanks and was off careless of disturbance. He had sold himself for the sake of those who loved him, man and woman alike; but the blackness as of death was before his eyes; he could not think; he could do nothing but dig spurs to his horse, and ride on recklessly.

And the night itself was dark as death; he had to rein up amid the great branches of the Soyd Canal, and with difficulty rallied his party to the right road. Yet, still entangled in the intricacies of the irrigated fields, there was time for no other thought save that of getting as far from Samarkand as possible before the dawn. Since though the Usbek leader himself had given order for free pass, his followers, still less his allies, were not to be trusted.

The sky was grey with coming day before they reached the comparative safety of a wild valley set amid encircling hills. Here Babar called a minute's halt to breathe the horses, and for the first time turned to take stock of those who followed him.

His keen eye took in his mother's veiled form. But that bundle like a sack of corn, that crumpled heap like a withered rose leaf--neither of these were Dearest-One? *She* rode! In a flash, a sense of pride at her upright carriage on her horse came to him, even as a suffocating leap of his heart made him speechless for a second. An awful fear seized him. He knew, and yet he would not know what had happened.

"Khanzâda Begum!" he muttered hoarsely. "Where--where is she?"

No one spoke, and anger--hopeless, helpless anger and grief kept him silent. Then someone said almost fearfully:

"Mayhap in the night time--in the darkness--"

"It is a lie!" burst out Babar. "It is a lie!--I have been tricked!" Then something of the innate truth that was ever in his soul made him pause. He ought to have known--he ought to have guessed. Foes were not usually so generous, and he saw himself not altogether free from blame. "I have tricked myself--I ought to have known," he burst out. "I--oh! may God's curse light on everyone--everyone--"

So he stood, his face turned towards the distant city for a moment, then with a reckless laugh he loosed the rein on his horse's neck and threw his arms above his head.

"Come on!" he shouted as the horse bounded forward. "We are free! Let us ride to hell--to hell and damnation!" And his laughter echoed back, bringing terror to his mother's heart.

"He is beside himself," she cried. "After him, Kâsim--for God's sake keep him from harm."

But Kâsim and Kambar-Ali his squire, were already at the gallop, and the sound of their horses' feet followed Babar as he fled.

From what?

From everything in the wide world. From anger, love, remorse, helpless grief, even from resolve not to be beaten. His nerves were unstrung; for the moment his one thought was escape.

But only for a moment. The sound of those galloping hoofs behind him brought immediate self-control, immediate grip on kingly dignity.

He turned back on his saddle to cast a word that would re-instate him in sanity to those following fools.

"A race!" he cried gaily. "Come on! A race let it be!--Ten *dinars* ..."

But even as he spoke, he overbalanced. Perhaps he felt giddy, perhaps the girths on his starving horse were all too slack. Anyhow the saddle turned with him and he fell; fell clear on his head.

He was up again, however, ere they reached him, standing unsteadily with dazed eyes, passing his hand gently backwards and forwards over his brow.

"What was it all about?" he murmured cheerfully. "I've clean forgotten it all." And he had.

He mounted again after a minute and rode on; but the memory of that night had gone out of his mind for ever and aye.

CHAPTER IX

Think, in this battered Caravanserai
Whose doorways are alternate Night and Day,
How Sultan after Sultan with his Pomp
Abode his Hour or two and went his way.

Omar Khayyam.

Those first few days of despair were as a dream. The world and all that is in it showed to Babar's eyes like a phantasy of sleep. He lay and rested at a friendly village, passing from the extreme of famine to plenty; from an estate of danger and calamity to peace and ease. The nice fat flesh, the bread of fine flour well baked, the sweet melons and excellent grapes in great abundance, all these made him feel sensibly the pleasures of peace and plenty; for enjoyment after suffering, abundance after want, come with an increased relish and afford a more exquisite delight. It was the first time in his life that he had passed from the injuries of his enemies and the pressure of actual hunger to the ease of security, and he revelled in it like the wholesome-hearted, and, for the time, mindless creature that he was.

But memory of a sort came back to him after a few days and he grew restless; so they marched on. And as he rode over the hills or walked, leading his mother's pony, discontent began once more to leaven his glad content. The world in these lower lying districts was beautiful in the early springtide, but there was something more in life than mere beauty. There was something else needed to make it splendid.

"I will go back to where we were in the White Mountains," he said one day. "I was happy there and so was Dearest-One."

It was the first time he had mentioned his sister's name, and his mother looked at him anxiously. But he said no more. Nature was dealing in kindly fashion with him and bringing memory back by slow degrees.

But at Bishâgher, where they halted a few days, it was like to have been otherwise, for there they came across an old duenna of Babar's mother who having been left behind in Samarkand because of the scarcity of horses, had, nothing daunted, trudged after her mistress on foot. The two women sobbed on each other's necks, while the one told and the other listened to the piteous tale of a marriage, which after all had not been so bad as it might have been, because of old Isândaulet's masterful spirit. But they said nothing to the menfolk about it all. It was as well that their boy should hear as few details as possible.

And here--the first possible place for news since those long months of siege--tidings came of family deaths at Tashkend. It was fourteen years since Babar's mother had been there and seen her people, and now, when they were hopeless, homeless, and when, moreover, she had her old governess to serve her once more, the time seemed fitting for a visit.

So she went, and for the first time for many years Babar was left alone without any hostages to fortune.

And one of the first things he did with his liberty was to climb a certain hill all set with flowers, which he and his sister had climbed one spring day in the past. The gentians were as blue, the primulas as pink as ever, and the mosaic of forget-me-nots and yellow crowsfoot lay almost inconceivably bright as ever. The blue sky, grazing ground for fleecy white flocks of clouds, stretched away beyond the hills to that faint bluer line of distant Samarkand.

All was as it had been. And the green enamel frame set with jewels, like flowers, lay on the transparent ice where she had put it. He had not noticed that before; one could see through the slab--see green grass-blades, and a half opened flower bud that had been held in chill prison for years and years and years--It was quaint, utterly, when her face, her portrait had gone! The rain had washed it away. The vellum on which it had been painted lay white as snow.

Yes! quaint utterly. The icy grip had kept its hold, the warm sunshine had let slip its prize. He sat down idly, his head resting in his hands.

Yes! her face had gone! What matter now if there was place or grace beside it for another? Poor Baisanghâr! and poor--infinitely poorer Dearest-One! For the first time the full meaning of what had happened came over him; he turned round passionately, hid his face among the flowers and cried like a child.

Ishk and *ashk*! Love and tears. How little divided them. So the thought of his dead, crippled cousin came to him and the memory of that vivid, fate-defying face stood between him and despair. The Crystal Bowl! Yes! he would laugh as he quaffed: life had brought him strange adventures; let her bring more! He was ready for them--quite ready, in his manhood, to take what the years might hold. For boyhood had gone. That had capitulated with Samarkand.

He did not formulate all this clearly; he simply felt it. Felt the keen joy in life come back to him as he sat up once more and looked out over God's beauties with still swimming eyes; and the tears were magnifying glasses!

A quaint conceit that might be worked up into a couplet or perchance a quatrain. Baisanghâr would have done it finely: he worked well on such finniken fancies. But he had been wrong in the verses he had written on the back of the enamel frame. Were they there still? Aye! they had been protected from the tears of rain.

He read the lines over, feeling as he read them that there was something in them that lacked. So, as he felt, words came to him; for he was born with that artistic temperament which cannot help trading on its own most sacred emotions; perhaps because such natures see vaguely that individualism is a snare to the soul, that all things worth recording are part of a Greater Personality than their own. And the outcome of feeling and words ran thus:--

"Seven thrones, seven sins, seven stars,
But not one thing that bars
Life's love, Life's tears.
The crushed grape fills the bowl
With wine for the sad soul
Beyond these years."

He jumped up feeling quite pleased with himself, for they were the first verses in that measure he had ever composed!

After this when he was wandering barefoot over hill and dale, he would sit down when he found some pleasant spot and string rhymes together; for he was in a backwater, mentally and bodily. For twenty years he had battled with Fate over trivialities; since what, after all, were Ferghâna and Samarkand and Hissâr? Only tiny little bits of God's earth. He was beginning to be a trifle weary of it all, to long for a larger horizon. So he sent off on the pretext of getting news, the few followers who had remained with him while he, Nevian-Gokultâsh, and another wandered farther and farther, higher and higher up the White Mountains until they reached the Roof-of-the-World. And there they lodged awhile in the felt tents of a shepherd and lived on sheeps'-milk, cheese and buckwheat-cakes. Their host was a man of some eighty years; but his mother was still alive, and of extreme age, being at this time no less than one hundred and eleven years old, and in full possession of her faculties. Indeed, the circumstances of the great Timur's invasion of India remained fresh in her memory owing, doubtless, to her having been in her youth greatly interested in one who had been in his army.

She was a hale old woman, smoke-dried yet apple-cheeked, who loved to hear herself talk, especially when the tall good-looking young stranger sat at her feet, fixing his hazel eyes that were at once so sad and so merry on her whirling pirn as she twisted the brown wool for the blankets.

How it whirled, and leaped, and spun, as the withered old hand jerked the thread! So the Hand of Fate jerked men's lives, setting them spinning like tops into the shadows, out into the firelight again; always, always spinning!

"So the Great Khân was feeding his dogs, being in those days infidel, when Shaikh Jumâl-uddin the divine came to him. 'Am I better than this dog?' quoth Timur, 'or is he better than I?' And the Shaikh smiled. 'If the King has faith he is better than his dog; but if he has no faith, then is his dog better than he, since the dog believes in a master.' So the Great Khân said the Creed immediately."

"Wah!" murmured the circle of shepherds; but Babar would press for tales of the Great Invasion. And sometimes the old lady would begin at the very beginning, and tell how Timur's soldiers, imitating their leader, would make their left arms straight as the letter "I" and their right arms crooked as a "K" and so write death in the blood of their enemies. How they let fly their arrows as the moon lets fly shooting stars so that the blood-sodden hillsides showed like a drift of red tulips. Or she would drone on--it was a long story--over the "Battle of the Mire," where the enemy not having strength to fight, sought help from the magic rain-stone, so that though the

sun was in the Warrior, a host of dark clouds suddenly filled the sky. The thunder resounded, the lightnings flashed, the water descended from the eyes of the stars until the voice of Noah was heard praying a second time for deliverance from the Deluge. Then the beasts of the field swam like fishes, the skin of the horses' bellies adhered to the crust of the earth. The feathers of the arrows damped off, their notches came out, neither men nor horses could move by reason of the rain ...

So she would maunder on until Babar would say impatiently:

"Get on to India, mother! I would fain be there myself."

And he would hardly listen as she, once more beginning at the very beginning, would detail the eight-hundred-thousand men, provided with rations for seven years and each accompanied with two milch-kine and ten milch-goats, so that when stores were exhausted they might live on milk, and when milk dried up they could convert the animals themselves into provisions.

It was all doubtless very wise of Timur--God rest his soul!--who was ever great on the commissariat; but he, Babar, preferred the laconic remark in his great ancestor's autobiography, "The princes of India were at variance with one another. Resolved to make myself master of the Indian empire. Did so."

It was however the more intimate personal experiences which the old woman held by virtue of that dead "interest" of hers, which fired Babar's imagination; but these fragments of a half-forgotten past were not always to be got at. The long years of common round and daily task had overlaid them; it needed a subtle touch upon the instrument to make it vibrate once more. But Babar found a key. There was a certain Turkhomân ballad called "The Maid-of-the-Spring," which invariably unlocked the old woman's memory. So, often, as they sat over the camp fire at night, Babar, smiling to himself, would say, "A song, a song! Let us sing 'The Maid-of-the-Spring' together once more, grandmother! There is none sings it as thou dost."

Which was true! Still the toneless treble of the old voice whining away like the fine whing of a mosquito did not sound so bad against the rich baritone. And the youngest maiden could not have nodded and becked more, or looked more arch. And perhaps the old heart beat as quickly as a young one; such things do not go by age.

And this is what they sang in somewhat monotonous antiphon:

HE.

Maid of the Spring! I'm thirsty! I pray
A drop of water! I must away.
God bless you, my girl! And don't be slow!
Give me a drink and let me go.

SHE.

I don't give drinks to strange young men
Who come a-swaggering down the glen;
Naught you'll get from my pitcher to-day,
Drink for yourself and go your way.

HE.

Maid of the Spring! I cannot alight,
I'm far too tired! I'm wearied quite!
I haven't time! God bless you, my dear!
Give me a drink--I *can't* stay here.

SHE.

The birds sing sweet in the spring, they say,
It's sweeter still when I tune my lay,
But tired man should sleep in his bed--
Farewell! God's blessing be on your head.

HE.

Give me some water, you pretty dear!
If I'd only time, you need not fear.
My darling! a drink from that stoup of thine,
Be it water or be it wine.

SHE.

Many men travel along this way,
All are thirsty but none can stay.
Take my pitcher and drink if you will,
A thirsty man must have his fill.

HE.

Your brows are arched by a pen, I swear,
Your teeth are pearls--I will treat you fair,
Get down from my horse and wait an hour.
Give me your lips, my sweet, my flower.

SHE.

Roses and violets grow our groves,
No one may pluck them but he who loves.
My brother has slaves, and sticks a-main;
Drink and be off--it soon will rain!

HE.

Darlingest dear! let it storm or rain,
My wide felt cloak shall shelter us twain.
Pitcher and all, leap up and ride,
We'll find a kiss at the water's side.

SHE.

My love! my love! have you come at last?
Drop the pitcher and hold me fast!
There are my lips before we fly
Out to a new world--you and I.

"And now for India!" Babar would cry when the applause was over. "I want to hear about the size of it, and the fruit and flowers of it, and all about it. See you, grandmother, begin and tell me of the young woman thy man met at Lahore--then thou wilt remember to a nicety!"

So the summer passed, until old Isân-daulet arriving from Samarkand with news of Dearest-One, set Babar's mind a-jogging once more over his enemy Shaibâni. But there was nothing to be done in winter time: such a bitter cold winter, too. More than one man died of it, and even Babar himself admitted that, after diving sixteen times in swift succession into a river that was only unfrozen in the middle by reason of its swift current, the extreme chilliness of the water quite penetrated his bones; as well it might.

Then early spring brought a great grief which gave pause to energy. Nevian-Gokultâsh was done to death, by a scoundrel who was jealous of Babar's affection for him, and who had the temerity to say that faithful creature had fallen over a precipice when he was drunk. Nevian, who adhered so strictly to the law of Islâm! Nevian, who had always sided for sobriety, who had been to the full as urgent as old Kâsim Beg against a King giving himself up to wine. Babar, helpless to follow the murderer, felt deeply the death of his playmate in childhood, the companion of his boyhood. There were few persons for whose loss he would have grieved so much or so long. For a week or ten days, he thought of nothing else and the unbidden tears were ever in his eyes.

After this, a great restlessness set in, fostered by old Isân-daulet, whose whole life had been one long succession of battles and murders and sudden deaths, and whose belief in Moghul troops never wavered. Why, she suggested, not go to his uncles the Khâns at Tashkend? His mother had been ill; she would like to see him once more. And if his tongue was sufficiently careful amongst his thirty-two teeth, he might get substantial help.

"For what?" gloomed Babar--"to get back Âkshi and lose Andijân or get Andijân and lose Âkshi? 'Tis all one in the end."

"Not the fine fighting, child!" replied the old lady craftily. "That is the same, be it in *Gehannum* or *Bihisht*." (Hell or Heaven.)

That was undoubtedly true; and there was no good to be gained by rambling from hill to hill as he had been doing.

So, once more, the young adventurer gathered together a very scanty band of followers; for old Kâsim Beg, who till then had never left him, had come to words with Isân-daulet over these same Moghuls, and refused to accompany him.

"I say not, sire," remonstrated the wise old soldier, "that these men are bad soldiers for me; but they are for the Most Exalted, who has ideas of discipline. Besides, I care not to risk my own neck for a chance. In obedience to the Most Exalted's commands I beheaded quite a number of these men in the last campaign, for marauding. Wherefore, therefore, should I go amongst their mourning relatives? I will come if there be fighting. Then there is no leisure and little desire for private revenge; blood can be let anywhere and one corpse is as good as another."

So Kâsim went with his immediate adherents towards Hissâr; and Babar set off to Tashkend with rather a heavy heart. In a somewhat didactic mood also, for resting for a day or two beside a spring in the lower hills, he caused a verse to be inscribed on a stone slab which formed one side of the well where the water gushed in from the hill above, to disappear into the earth when it had run through a masonry trough.

"Many a man has rested and has drunk
Thy water, and like thee, O spring, has sunk
Swift to a grave where he lies all forgot,
Conqueror or vanquished, libertine or monk."

He was not, however, at home in the *rubâi*, as he had not, at that time, studied with much attention the style and phraseology of poetry.

Indeed, one of his first actions on reaching Tashkend was to submit some of his compositions to the Khân who had pretensions to taste, and who, moreover, wrote verses himself; though his odes, to be sure, were rather deficient in manner and substance. The younger poetaster, however, did not get either explicit or satisfactory criticism, and came to the conclusion that his uncle had no great skill in poetic diction. He did not know, for instance, that in the Turki language it was allowable, by poetic licence, to interchange certain letters for the sake of the rhyme.

"He will think thee a nincompoop," stormed Isân-daulet. "Why did'st not show him thy sword play?"

"He may see that ere long," quoth Babar, grimly, and went straight away to write the first *ghazel* of six Couplets he ever composed.

"I have found no faithful friend
In the world save my own sad soul.
Dear heart! thou must give and spend
On thyself thy confidence whole.
Nightingale sings to the rose,
Roses give scent to the bird,
Dreams one of the thorny foes?
The other of passion deferred?
The exile must live apart,
To his coffers none give or lend.
The banished one holds his heart
To his soul as lover and friend."

He was quite pleased with this effusion and sang it at a festive party soon after with great gusto; but the next morning he found that the golden clasp of his girdle had been stolen by one of the appreciative audience!

Moghuls again!

CHAPTER X

"A blow or two and then the Fighting ends,
The Sword seeks Scabbard, and the Warrior wends
Through Death's wide Door. Were it not wiser then
To sleep until Retreat its message sends?"

So, vaguely thought Babar as life went on dully with the family party at Tashkend. Most of his

servants had left from absolute want; one, or at most two attendants were all that he could muster when he went to pay his compliments to the Khân, his uncle. Once, indeed, he accompanied the latter on a foray; but it was a useless sort of expedition. He, the Khân, took no part, beat no enemy; he simply went out and came back again.

The young man spent much of his time with his mother who was convalescing but slowly; and she naturally, after so many years of absence, saw much of her sisters and cousins; most of them elderly women, inclined to make much of the handsome young King-errant whose melancholy never could withstand the faintest joke.

For all that Babar, at the bottom of his heart, was utterly dissatisfied with himself and his world. Never since the debacle at Samarkand had he found himself again, the light-hearted, intensely vital person, who, taking things as they came, could yet turn them to his own uses. He began to tell himself privately that, rather than pass his life as he was now doing, homeless and purposeless, it would be better to retire into some corner where he might live unknown and undistinguished; that, rather than exist in distress and abasement far better were it to flee away from the sight of man, so far as his feet could carry him. In his infancy he remembered he had always had a strong desire to see China, but had never been able to accomplish his wish because of being a King and having a duty towards his relations and connections.

Now he no longer had a throne. Now, his mother--the only tie left, for Ayesha his wife had never returned to him--was safe with her mother and her brother.

Now, therefore, was the time. His mother, however, he knew well would not support the proposition; besides he had still a few followers who, having attached themselves to him with very different hopes, would be bitterly disappointed at his project. He could not bear to hurt anyone's feelings, so he devised a plan in order to get away quietly. He had never seen his other uncle, the younger Khân of Outer Moghulistân. Why should he not go, in this slack time, and pay him a visit?

There seemed, indeed, no reason against this; and Babar was on the very point of starting when a messenger arrived hot haste, to say that the younger Khân himself was on his way to see his nephew and his nephew's mother!

It was a blow; Babar's plan was utterly disconcerted, but being, like all his race, full of family affection, he set off with ever so many elderly Khânisms with beautiful high-sounding names to meet his uncle. Such a meeting as it was; so many embracings and kneelings and yet more embracings; some ceremonious, others quite without form or decorum. After which the great circle of cousins and aunts, and uncles and nephews, sat down and continued talking about past occurrences and old stories till after midnight.

His younger uncle had, according to the custom of his tribe, brought Babar a complete dress of state. A cap embroidered with gold thread, a long frock of China satin ornamented with flowered needle-work. A cuirass of fine chain-mail, Chinese fashion, with a whetstone and a purse-pocket from which were suspended a lot of little trinkets such as women wear, including a bag of perfumed earth. He looked very smart in it indeed, and when he returned to his own, tricked out in all this finery, they declared it was only by his voice they recognised him; that they had thought he was some grand young Sultan!

Life at any rate did not seem quite so empty; since the two Khâns, having got together, began to propose a joint expedition to recover Andijân--*for Babar*, being an understood corollary so long as they remained under the influence of stern old Isân-daulet, who ruled her sons in matriarchal fashion.

So they set off with flaunting pennons and kettledrums, after the manner of Moghul armies, and at their first halt held a muster of the troops, also in the Moghul fashion. In groups of three, three horse-tail standards were erected, and from the centre staff of each a long strip of white cloth was fastened, on the loose end of which stood the foot of the leader of that division. All around, in a huge circle, the troops were drawn up. Then with many ceremonials and sprinklings of mares'-milk spirit, each leader estimated the total number of the force. The final verdict being received with a wild war-shout; and then, at full speed, the whole army galloped centre-wards, the foremost troopers drawing bridle within a foot or two of the standards. On this occasion Babar looked with a certain awe, yet some misgiving, at no less than thirty thousand wild horsemen of the desert.

But he had more certain aid than this. He found that he was not all forgot in the little valley at the extreme limit of the habitable world; and the country people welcomed his return with acclaim. So as soon as he could, with that curious distrust of Moghul blood, which makes the name given to the dynasty he founded in India so quaintly ironical, he parted company with his uncle's forces, and pushing on with such of his own people as had come together, sought for fine fighting.

And he got it. Still reckless, almost without definite aim, he followed swift on every opportunity for a skirmish. When he saw a body of the enemy, he advanced at full gallop without minding order or array; and in nine cases out of ten the sheer daredevil clash succeeded. The enemy could not stand the charge and fled without exchanging blows. But sometimes his ill-luck

with the Moghuls pursued him. Once when he, with his staff, was waiting outside Andijân for the return of a messenger. It was about the third watch of the night, and some of them were nodding, others fast asleep on their horses, when all at once the saddle-drums struck up with martial noise and hubbub. The few men who were with Babar were seized with a panic and took to flight; except three, all the rest ran off to a man. In vain these four galloped after the fugitives; in vain they horsewhipped some of them.

All their exertions were ineffectual to make them stand.

There was nothing for it but to try and check the pursuers themselves as best they could. So the four turned, stood and discharged flights of arrows, until the enemy was almost within sword thrust; then, wheeling swiftly, they galloped on to take up a fresh position of offence.

In this way they covered and protected the retreat, until by good fortune they fell in with a patrol party of their own. Then, of course, came immediate charge, to discover that the pursuers were Moghuls from his uncle's force, who were out on a pillaging expedition of their own! In this manner, by a false alarm, the plan which Babar had conceived came to nothing, and he had to return after a fruitless journey.

Truly, if the young man had wished to throw away his life, he could scarcely have dared Fate more recklessly. More than once he found himself almost alone facing stupendous odds. Once, when surprised at night in negligent security without advanced guard and without *videttes*, he had to gallop out almost unarmed to meet a large body of the enemy and found himself in the midst of them with but three supporters. Even so Fate was against him. He drew out of his quiver by mistake a green-tipped finger guard instead of an arrow, and being unwilling to throw it away because his uncle the Khân had given it to him, lost as much time in returning it to its place as would have sufficed for the despatch of two arrows, and, ere he was ready, his companions had been swept back by the onslaught and he was alone. To draw up to his ear and let the foremost foe have it for all he was worth was easy, but at the same instant an arrow struck him on the right thigh unsteady his aim, and the next moment that foremost foe was on him and smote him such a blow on the head with a sword, that, despite his steel cap he was nigh stunned. And then, through his having neglected to clean his sword after swimming a river, it had rusted a little in the scabbard and he lost time in drawing it. Still, he won through that time, and, despite continual anxiety and irritation because of the behaviour of the Moghul troops which his uncles detached to help him, and who *would* insist on plundering and were with difficulty restrained from putting honourable prisoners to death, he was fairly successful, until a final act of treachery threw him on his beam ends, and he was forced to retreat, fairly beaten.

He was invited to a parley by the enemy and the Moghuls urged him to accept the invitation, and by hook or by crook, to seize or murder the leaders. Babar was indignant. Such artifice and underhand dealing were, he said, totally abhorrent to his habits and disposition. If he made an agreement for peaceful interview, he would not violate it.

Nor did he. But whether from perversity or sheer stupidity, his orders were disobeyed, and he found himself committed to battle in the very heart of the opponents' defences, and without a sufficient force to secure success. Even then he challenged Fate, by waiting for personal retreat a full hour or more, unwilling, as he thought, to leave some of his friends in danger. Finally news came that having been beaten, at the other side of the city in about as much time as milk takes to boil, they, and half Babar's men, had escaped long before by another gate!

Only about twenty men were left to the young King. It was no longer season to tarry; they set off, a great band of the enemy's troops in full pursuit.

And then commenced a memorable ride for life. Man after man dropped out, maimed by the flights of following arrows.

"Help! Help!" cried a well known voice behind him and Babar instantly turned bridle to aid a dear friend. But those who rode on either side the young King would not have it; this was no time to defy Death. It was the time to keep hold on Life. So, with strong hands upon his reins, Babar had no choice but to ride on. There were but eight of them left now; a wearied, hurried band of hunted men struggling through broken glens remote from the beaten road. The enemy behind was now out of sight, but, as at sunset the fugitives passed into more level ground, a shadow darker than the shadows of evening should be, showed on the plain.

Placing his men under cover, Babar dismounted, and on foot, ascended an eminence to see what this might be. When suddenly from behind, a number of horsemen showed coming towards them. It was too dark to see their number but, doubtless, it must be a detachment in pursuit, and the only hope flight.

"There is no use, sire," said a noble, "going on thus. They will outweary and take us all. Better by far, that you and Kâli-Gokultâsh choose two extra horses from amongst us, your devoted servants; so by keeping the four horses at full speed you may escape--it is a last chance."

But Babar shook his head. To leave anyone dismounted in the midst of the enemy was beyond him; so he set his teeth and rode on.

"The Most High is heavier than I am," urged an entreating voice at his elbow, "and it is my

lord they want, not this slave whose horse is fairly fresh."

Babar set his teeth again; but he felt the truth of the words and exchanged horses. Jân-Kâli could slip aside down some ravine. They would not follow him. It was he, Zahir-ud-din Mohamed Babar, that was wanted.

Again came the plea--"My horse is fresher than the Most High's."

And yet again Babar exchanged steeds.

On and on, the horses flagging, followers dropping out, until but two remained--the King and his foster-brother Kâli-Gokultâsh.

"Sire!--you had best go on!" muttered the latter as his horse stumbled and almost fell.

"Whither?" called back the King bitterly. "Come on! be it Life or Death, let us meet it together."

And ever and ever, as they went on blindly, he paused to look back, to wait ...

And once, when he looked back there was no one near at hand. Only in the far distance, coming closer and closer, dark figures--were there two or more?

But now, alone, hopeless, the worst seemed over. Babar dug spurs into his horse, weary but willing, and was off with renewed vigour in his veins. It was himself against the world once more! He would fight it out to the end--the bitter end!

It was now dark and before him lay a hill. If he could reach it, and dismount, he might trust to his own nimbleness in climbing. But his horse was dropping, and two of the pursuers were within bowshot, ere he could fling himself from his steed on rising ground and dash up a glen to the right. He did not pause to shoot, though he had arrows in his quiver. A few of these he had stuck in his belt as he flung off his accoutrements piece-meal; they were for use at the last--the very last!

But voices followed him; eager, protesting voices. They were no enemies; neither were they friends. But they could not leave a King in such a desolate situation Let him confide in them and he might yet find safety.

It was a desperate chance; still it was a chance. And there were but two of them. One brave man could surely keep them in check--or kill them before he died. Babar pulled up, went back to his horse and faced Fate. So, all that night, they rode together, and when dawn came, one of the troopers commandeered some loaves of bread. All that day they lay watchfully in hiding, and when night came they passed on to a half-ruined house on the outskirts of a town. Here the troopers brought Babar an old fur coat; which was welcome, for the nights were bitterly cold. They also brought him a mess of boiled millet-flour pottage, which he ate and found wonderfully comfortable.

So comfortable, that having lit a fire, Babar actually fell asleep beside it, despite his imminent danger, despite his distrust of his comrades who were for ever whispering amongst themselves. But he was outwearied after three nights' riding, and two days of watchful hiding. Indeed when they roused him at dawn on the pretext that there were spies about, and that a change was imperative, he was so spent and outdone that he felt inclined to bid them do their worst, or leave him to his fate. Yet he followed them dully, to a garden on the outskirts of the town--as well die there as elsewhere.

But it was a primrose dawn, with a promise of brilliant sunshine, and the garden, partially walled, held a few flowers, a few birds.

It needed no more to re-arouse vitality, and Babar, with fresh vigour in his veins after his few hours of sleep, began to emerge from the slough of despondency in which he had passed the last three days. These would-be guides of his were doubtless traitors; could he escape them?

The day passed on to noon. Babar, in a corner of the garden, performed his religious ablutions and recited his prayers, adding to them the consolations of poetry by repeating the couplet:

"Long or short be your tenancy past
You must quit the Palace-of-Life at last."

That was a self-evident proposition, and as such gave his simple, clear-sighted soul much comfort. So much so, that he fell asleep under the trees, and dreamt a dream of victory and triumph.

From which he awoke to find three men standing over him, to hear whispers of how best to seize and throttle him.

To spring to his feet and face them did not take long.

"Ill-begotten, treacherous hounds!" he cried, ablaze with anger. "So canst thou dare when Babar sleeps--let us see who will lay hands on him awake!"

The villains fell back; but at that moment the tramp of horsemen was heard beyond the garden wall, and one of the trio laughed.

"Crow away, cockerel!" he cried. "Mayhap, hadst thou trusted us at first we might have let thee escape according to our oath. But now is the work of death taken out of our hands; for yonder comes a troop to seize thee and save our promise unbroken."

He turned as he spoke to welcome the newcomers, then started. For the horsemen hurrying in to the garden were not Babar's foes, but his friends!

"Kutluk! Babâi!" cried the young King, recognising two of his most devoted adherents. They flung themselves from their horses.

"The King! Long live the King!" they shouted, as bending the knee at a respectful distance they rushed forward to fall at the feet of their dear leader.

It had been a wonderful ride for life; yet in a way a needless one, as Babar told his uncles when he rejoined them. Since, had he but known, as he afterwards discovered, that the following party was not a whole detachment, but only a band of twenty troopers, he and his seven would of course, have made a stand and engaged them with every hope of success.

Not that it would have made much difference; for both the elder Khân and the younger one had become weary of their expedition, and on news of the Great Usbek raider Shaibâni's appearance in their country, had retired in hot haste to their dominions.

So Babar once more was at the end of his tether. The Moghuls he told his grandmother, to her great dudgeon, were no good as conquerors. Nature had made them pillagers, and an inch of plunder was worth more than an ell of honour.

"He is out of joint with life," said his mother, weeping.

Old Isân-daulet sniffed. "Try him with a pretty girl," she suggested.

The Khânum shook her head. "He is not that sort--he will not even marry and that is nigh shameless--since he is one and twenty, yet without a child. 'Tis hard indeed on a woman of my age to have no grandchild."

"Except Dearest-One's boy," said the old woman, her stern face softening. "Lo! perfidious barbarian though the father be, I should like to see the child. It should have the makings in it of a man--from its mother." And she was silent for awhile; perhaps she was thinking of that night in Samarkand when a girl had waited patiently for worse than death. Then she spoke:

"See you, daughter! Your boy is not all King, no more than he is all my grandson. He hath material for half-a-dozen different persons in him and he hath not yet made choice of which to take. Lo!--mayhap--I have had too big a hand in the pease-porridge. Let be a bit. Let him do as he likes for a while and if that be to leave us for the time--so be it. Hurry not God's work."

It was wise advice. None wiser. So for two whole years, the King was King-errant indeed. Even whither he went none know. Most likely he fulfilled his boyhood's desire to see China; but this much is certain. He and a few intimate friends, not half-a-dozen at most, wandered for months and months. Over the White Mountains likely, amid eternal snows, across the high lying steppes to Kashgâr, and so onwards.

Or perhaps from Tashkend he may have wandered over high plateaux and past wide lakes to the Great Tian-Shan mountains. But either way, from some high peak, he must have caught one glimpse at least of a sight never to be forgotten. The sight of the wide plain of Eastern Turkheshân lying like a lake of pale amber beneath an encircling rim of snowy pearls, that change to rubies in the sunset. Marvellous indeed! All around the everlasting hills contemptuous of man and his finite work, glittering icily on that ever-present haze of dust, which effaced alike, the sand of the central desert, and the faint fringe of cultivation on the skirts of the hills. Over a thousand feet of golden dust-pall covering the corpses of the six sand-buried cities of Khotân!

Buried when, and how? And wherefore, in God's name, did humanity found its houses on the Moving Sands?

Fine stimulation here, for the imagination of a poet born.

Babar must have sat and looked, sat and learnt from the slow invincible march of the sand waves piled by the desert winds, something of the strength of patience. Slow and sure. Under the gentle call of a summer breeze, mayhap, one sand atom shifting place; then another and another. But in the end, a high-piled wave, ready to fall over and engulf what lay beyond, when the whistle of the winter winds rang over the wastes, rousing the hidden devil in those harmless sand grains, to whirls of death.

Shifting, shifting; never still for a second. Unearthing there, burying here.

With what end?

And doubtless Babar heard the oft told tale of the Muâzzim of Kâr, and of the minaret of the mosque which the sand can never hide for long; which even in these later days the dry biting winds of the desert lay bare, ever and anon, until the golden finial of its blue dome shines bright as ever over the wide plain.

Perhaps,--being a poet born--he may have tried to put the legend into verse with better success than the following:

The Preacher preached; his words were austere
So was his Life. "Oh! sinners, hear!
I oft have warned you--oft and amain,
Gentle and stern; yet all in vain.
From off my feet by order of God
Shake I the dust in which I've trod.
I rend my garments, go on my way.
Not for my soul His Judgment Day.
No more I preach, no more will I warn;
Wait till the resurrection morn!"
He left the pulpit; garments he rent;
Forth from the Lord's own House he went.

"Thou com'st with me," he said as he strode
Past the Muâzzim. "Thine the road
Of Mercy too." The singer bowed,
Bit at his lips, then said aloud:
"The Grace of God I cannot gainsay,
Fain would I go, fain would I stay,
Once more I'd waken sinners to prayer."
Frowning the Priest said "Fool! beware
Our God is Fire! He burns and He rends,
Message of Peace, once only sends."
The singer shivered. "So be it, yet
Prayers must be called from the minaret.
Yet once again singing must rise
Out of the night to dawning skies."
The Preacher spat. "It lies on thy head."
Gripped at his purse; smiled as he fled.

* * * * *

The minaret was slender and high,
Blue was its dome; blue like the sky,
Its gilded finial shone like a star
Over the sinful town of Kâr.
The singer climbed its narrowing stair,
Stood in his place, then breathed a prayer:
"O God, most great, no atom of sand
Slips through Thy Fingers' grip; Thy Hand
Heeds not man's worth. Thou fillest his need.
Wake those who sleep, Dear God I plead!"

* * * * *

No star, no moon, the gloom of the night
Making the snow peaks rim with light
The purpling sky, the darkening world.
Was it a sand grain sharp that whirled
To touch the watcher keen on his cheek?
Waiting so patient until a streak
Of cold grey dawn should come to the sky
Bringing the time for clamant cry
"Ul-sul-lah-to-khair-un-mun-nun-nu!
Sleepers! awake! Prayer time has come to you!
Awake! Far better Prayer than Sleep to you!
Ul-sul-lah-to-khair-un-mun-nun-nu!"

* * * * *

The night was silent: that was a gust
Wind hot as fire, laden with dust.
The singer wiped salt tears from his eyes--
God! if the sand-storm should arise,
The storm of sand that comes like a pall
Gliding soft as snow flakes to fall
On good, on bad. "Oh! sleepers awake!
Waken and fly!" His voice could make
Small sound against the sound of the storm
Whistling the sand grains, "Rise and form
In serried order! carry the town!
Bury each fool, knave, sinner, clown,

Who sleeps unheeding God's gracious grace,
Mercy is tired. Go! leave no trace
Of saint or sinner within this place."

* * * * *

The singer fought for breath as he prayed.
"Lord! give me one more chance," he said.
And lo! the sand-storm faltered away;
Still as the grave the city lay.
The singer he sang as never before,
Piercing through gateway, wall and door
The clamant cry. "Oh! sleepers rise!
Better is prayer than sleep! Be wise!"
Awakened all; they saw and they fled
Forth from the town, bewildered
Forth from the town, bewildered
To seek for refuge far from the sands
Out of the wind. But still he stands
And still he sings. Perchance there be one
Soul in the town who might be won!
The storm fresh-gathered swept on its task,
Covered all things with deadly mask
Of sand high-piled like waves of the sea
Till there was naught save sand to see.
No soul was left; no need for him more!
Downwards he crept. He found the door
Was blocked by sand waves! Merciful Heav'n!
Not for his soul was ransom given!
So back he went to the minaret
--Stood in the wind, the sandy fret--
Giving the call. It echoes yet
O'er wastes of sand when the sun has set.
When shifting winds in gusts and in whirls
Part of the dead town's shroud unfurls,
When dimly blue the minaret shows
Dim as a lamp its finial glows,
And soft and low and faint as a sigh
Comes to the ear that clamant cry,
"*Ul-sul-lah-to-khair-un-mun-nun-nu!*
Awake! Awake! Prayer time has come to you!
Awake! Better Prayer than Sleep to you!
Ul-sul-lah-to-khair-un-mun-nun-nu!"

BOOK II

BLOSSOM TIME

1504 TO 1511

CHAPTER I

"Youth asked the lark,
'Why dost thou sing
When clouds are darkling?'
Replied the lark,
'Behind the dark
The light is sparkling.'

Youth begged the Hours
Death not to bring

Though clouds were lowering.
Replied the Hours,
'In Heaven's bowers
Roses are flowering.'

"To-day I will shave," said Babar with conviction; and his long, fine fingers felt his rather ragged young beard reflectively.

He was altogether a bit ragged after his long wanderings. But he had come back from them wiser, steadier in mind, still stronger in body. The record of years of clean, hard living showed in his bright hazel eyes, and the general alertness of his lithe young body.

But he *was* ragged! The brilliant June sunshine poured down on the sorry encampment set out on the summer pasturage of the high alps of Ilâk, and revealed the rents and patches of the two tents which were all that Babar possessed; his own, terribly tattered in its royalty, reserved for his mother's use; a common felt tilt, flexible in its cross-poles, for his own.

And then his followers! Some two hundred in all; mostly on foot with brogues to them: blanket frocks over their shoulders; clubs in their hands. A miserable court, indeed, for a Prince of the Blood Royal!

Yet the sense of Kingship rose stronger than ever in the young mind.

"Yea! I will be shaven!" he said, magisterially, and summoned the court barber. He came running barefoot with a tin basin.

"There should be ceremonials and entertainments," said the Khânum, his mother, plaintively. "Even at my brothers' first shavings there were ever illuminations and feasting, and thou art King; but what will you, here in the wilderness?"

Babar laughed. "One King is as like another King as split peas, when there is lather to his face, motherling; so quick, barber, image me to Sulaiman-the-Wise, or Haroun-ul-Raschid. Lo! I could be Emperor as well as they, were fate but kind."

So, out in the June sunshine, the young man sat while the white lather foamed up into his eyes and made them smart.

"Have a care! slave," he said sharply. "Lo! I shall see things cloudy--and I would fain see clear."

See clear! Aye! that was what he wanted. The past was leaving him--with his beard! He had made up his mind to that. Never again would he quarrel possession of that sweet valley on the extreme limits of the habitable world. He would go farther afield; how far depended--On what? On himself chiefly. So for the present he was on his way to Khorasân, the centre of civilisation.

Ay! Bare feet and blanket frocks were well enough in boyhood; but when a man came to his own there were other Kingships to be fought for besides those which involved a temporal throne. There was Kingship in thought, Kingship in Art; a dozen or more Kingships ready to be gripped.

The razor sweeping backwards and forwards, seemed to be shaving away all the disappointments of his past life; he leapt to his feet when the business was over and stretched his strong young arms out as if to embrace the whole world.

"Lo! I feel a new man. I am ready for anything--for everything!"

So, as he stood there, the memory--never very far distant from his mind in his moments of exaltation--of the Crystal Bowl of Life came back to him and he sang the last verse, his full voice rolling away among the hills:

"Clear Crystal Bowl, I laugh as I quaff.
Bring me Life's whole! I won't take the half!
Crystal Bowl, I bid thee bring to me
Joy, Grief, Life, Death."

"Where didst learn that song, sonling?" said his mother, fondly. "And how well thou singest now! Thou hast learnt much of late, Babar."

"I learnt it," replied her son, his face sobering, "from my cousin Gharîb. Dost know, motherling," he added swiftly, the light coming back to his eyes, "I learnt more of him than I wist at the time. Sometimes I think I owe all to him."

"All?" echoed the Khânum, hurt. "Dost owe nothing to me--or at least to thy grandmother?"

Babar's face showed whimsically reverent. "Oh, yea! Oh, yea!" he assented readily; "I owe much to my revered grandparent; yet at this present it shows but little."

And he pointed to the two ragged tents, the two hundred tatterdemalions. "I would I were a tulip at times," he added irrelevantly, as he flung himself down on the grass that was all starred with the blood-red blossoms. "Think of it, motherling! To lie cosy all winter at your own heart, and when the sun has warmed the world to unfurl your banner and flaunt it independent-disobedient, if you choose!"--he rolled over on his stomach to look clear into one ruby cup--"Yea! little one!" he said patronisingly. "Rightly art thou called '*na farmân*.'^[2] Thou holdest thine own treasure secure, caring for none--yet will I touch it with my hand," and the tip of his long finger dived into the chalice to touch the stiff stamens, and come out all covered with pale, yellow pollen. "An augury!" he said gravely, as he smeared his forehead with the powder of life. "Lo! I am marked like a Hindu--I shall conquer Hind yet."

"God forgive thee, child," exclaimed his mother hastily. "Say not such things--they tempt Providence. Even not thyself to an idolater."

Babar looked contrite. "Yet if I conquer Hind, I cannot kill all my subjects," he replied thoughtfully. "There is a puzzle for thee, motherling--how to be true Mussulman and yet not a fool?"

His mother looked at him and shook her head. Dear son as he was, always loving, always affectionate, he had a bad habit of getting away from her ken mentally and bodily. It all came of leading such a wandering life. If only he would marry and settle down. But there seemed no chance of either.

Yet Fate held the latter to close quarters. It almost seemed as if that shaving of his beard, that setting aside once and for all of his boyish aspirations had had a magical effect on Babar's environments; for within two months, seated at his ease in a splendid tent, he was writing in his diary:

"The Lord is wonderful in His might! That a man, master of twenty or thirty thousand retainers, should, in the space of half-a-day, without battle, without contest, be reduced to give up all to a needy fugitive like myself, who had only two hundred tatterdemalions at his back (and they, all in the greatest want); that he should no longer have any power over his own servants, nor over his own wealth, nor even his own life, was a wonderful disposition of the Omnipotent!"

Undoubtedly! And as the enemy who was thus discomfited was no less a person that Khosrau-Shâh, the man who had so treacherously caused Prince Baisanghâr to be strangled, it is certain that his lack of power over his own life was a sore temptation to Babar. The man undoubtedly deserved death: it was indeed conformable to every law, human and divine, that such should meet with condign punishment. But an agreement had been entered into, so he must be left free and unmolested, and allowed to carry off as much of his personal property as he could.

For Babar was no promise-breaker. Perhaps also the memory of poor, miserable Khosrau's appearance when this pompous man (who for years had wanted nothing of royalty save that he had not actually proclaimed himself King) presented himself for audience and bent himself twenty-five or twenty-six times successively, and went and came back, and went and came back, till he was so tired that he nearly fell forward in his last genuflection, may have weighed with the keen young observer. The man was getting old; let him go with his sins upon his head.

So he went. And Babar with the thirty thousand retainers at *his* back set out promptly for Kâbul.

His paternal uncle, its King, had died leaving a young son. A perfidious minister had ousted this boy from the throne, but had himself been assassinated at a grand festival. Thereinafter all was disorder and tumult. Fitting opportunity then for a *coup d'état*.

So, over the peaks and passes, Babar at the head of a movable column passed swiftly. Still more swiftly--since surprise is the essence of success--when news came that the usurper for the time being had left Kâbul at the head of his army to intercept another adversary. The instant this information was received, the young leader gave his orders; within an hour the force was on the march. A hill pass lay before them; it must be mastered ere dawn; they must go up and up all the night through, the laden mules stumbling over the stones, dismounted troopers hauling their horses up rock ladders. A troublous time, indeed; but at last the crest of the hill was reached, and there, bright to the South, showed a star.

The young leader's heart leapt to his mouth--Could it--could it be Canopus?--the lucky star of the conqueror? The star of which he had read--the star he had never seen before ...

"That--that cannot be *Soheil*," he said almost timorously.

"It is *Soheil*, Most High," replied Bâki Cheghaniâni in a courtier's voice; then repeated pompously the well known verse:

"How far dost thou shine, *Soheil*?
And where dost thou rise?
Who knows? But this cannot fail:
Thy light brings luck to the eyes

Who see it and cry, 'All hail!

Soheil!"

"Gentlemen!" rang out Babar's jubilant young voice, cutting the clear night air like a knife. "Let us give it all we can...! All hail!--*Soheil!"*

"All hail! *Soheil!"* The cry clamoured round the rocks and surged up from the ravines where men were still striving upwards; while on that downward path to the pleasant valleys below where spear points were already beginning to cluster, the troopers paused to echo and re-echo:

"All hail! *Soheil!"*

And Babar's star was veritably in the ascendant. Within a month--yet once more without battle, without contest--he had gained complete possession of Kâbul and Ghazni with the countries and provinces dependent thereon.

It had been almost unbelievable success ever since that day when on the uplands of Ilâk, he had shaved off his beard and set aside, once and for all, his childish hopes and aims!

Really, it was rather quaint! The thought of it, with its hint of imagination, its something beyond the dull routine of the inevitable, added zest to the young King's almost rapturous appreciation of his new dominions.

To begin with Kâbul was in the very midst of the habitable world. That was a great point in its favour. Then it was in the fourth climate; and so of course its gardens were perfection. Its warm and its cold districts were close together; in a single day you could go to a place where snow never falls, and in the space of two astronomical hours you might reach a spot where snow lay always (except now and then when the summer happened to be peculiarly hot).

Then the fruits! Grapes, pomegranates, apricots, peaches, pears, apples, quinces, jujubes, damsons, walnuts, almonds, to say nothing of oranges and citrons! The wines, also, were strong and intoxicating; indeed, that produced on the skirts of one mountain was celebrated for its potency. This, however, was only a matter of hearsay since Babar was still a tee-totaler; and as the verse says:

"The drinker knows the virtue of wine
Which those who are sober can't divine."

Then the honey was delicious, the number of beehives extraordinary, and the climate itself was so extremely delightful that in this respect there was no other such place in the known world.

But it was the gardens, after all, which made Kâbul what it was, a place that filled the imagination with joy. Years and years afterwards the mere thought of them was to make Babar homesick almost to tears; now every moment of time he could spare was spent on the skirts of the Shâh-Kâbul hill where terraces rise one above the other to touch the Summer Palace of the New Year. It was early October; the plane trees were dropping their golden leaves, the peaches were crimson and pale red, the vines vied with each other in vivid colouring. It was all so much pure joy to the young King, and he passed on his content to all. His dearest mother was housed as she never had been before. And when old Isân-daulet came, just to have a peep at her grandson's success, he lodged her in the New Year's palace where the old lady could have her fill of the garden. Since, quaintly enough, it was from the ancient desert-born dame that Babar inherited his keen delight in flowers. Kâsim-Beg was back too, and so was Dost-Ali, his oldest friend amongst the nobles of Andijân; but Kambar-Ali had left; he was a thoughtless and rude talker and the more polished courtiers of Kâbul could not put up with his manners. Not that he was a great loss, for besides talking idly--and those who talk persistently cannot avoid at times saying foolish things--his wits were but skin deep, and he had a muddy brain.

There was but one fly in the honey, and that was the desire of all Babar's female relations that he should marry. There was justice, he felt, in his mother's claim for grandchildren. Undoubtedly it was his duty; but ...

He was too good-natured, however, to resist making everyone as happy as he was himself, especially after old Isân-daulet arrived with a bride in her pocket; so, before he quite realised the magnitude of the affair, he was duly wedded to yet another cousin, a half-sister of dead Prince Baisanghâr. She was some years older than her groom and very, very beautiful.

But Babar came out from the bridal-chamber with a stern, set mouth and went straight to his mother.

"Tell her to say no more of Dearest-One," he said briefly; "or there will be trouble. And 'twere as well if she left Baisanghâr in peace also. She loved him, doubtless--but--but so did I." His voice softened over the last words.

Trouble, however, was not to be avoided. Babar made no more complaints; possibly because he gave few opportunities for fresh injury.

His mother wept and scolded in vain. That hurt him; but for his cousin-wife he cared not at all. He was proud; he could not understand a woman's petty spite, especially when shown to *him*, a good-looking young King in the zenith of success.

"We do not agree," he said gloomily. "Lo! it is true what Saádi saith:

'In a good man's house a cross-grained wife
Makes hell upon earth with ill-tempered strife.'

Mayhap if we part we may come together again in better fashion; and sure I pray God that such a thing as a shrew be not left in the world."

He would not acknowledge any fault on his side. Perhaps there was none. Anyhow he was determined this year of good fortune should not be marred by silly domestic squabbles. So, with affectionate farewells to his mother, whom he left determined to bring her choice to reason, he set off in light-hearted fashion to make that irruption into Hindustan which he had threatened when he had marked his forehead with pollen dust. He was not strong enough as yet, his army was not yet sufficiently disciplined for any attempt at real conquest; but he meant at least to cross the river Sind and set foot on Indian soil. The expedition, however, fizzled out into a mere plundering raid along the western bank of the Indus. But Babar at least saw India, getting his first glimpse of it across the wide waters and sandbanks of that great stream. He was deeply impressed by the sight. At some places the water seemed to join the sky; at others the farther bank lay reflected in inverted fashion like a *mirage*. And he saw other strange and beautiful things also. Once between this water and the heavens something of a red appearance like a crepuscule cloud was seen, which by and by vanished, and so continued shifting till he came near.

And then with a whirr of thousands--nay! not ten thousand nor twenty thousand wings, but of wings absolutely beyond computation and innumerable--an immense flock of flamingoes rose into the air, and as they flew, sometimes their red plumes showed and sometimes they were hidden.

So, with his mind stocked with endless new ideas, for he had been struck by astonishment--and indeed there was room for wonder in this new world where the grass was different, the trees different, the wild animals of a different sort, the birds of a different plumage, the very manners of the men different--he returned in early summer to Kâbul.

But here he once more found trouble. There was an epidemic of measles in the town and one of the first victims was his cousin-wife. He was vaguely distressed; mostly it is to be feared because of his mother who had nursed her daughter-in-law devotedly. Partly also from a remembrance of his own parting wish. Yes! it was distinctly wrong to say such ill-advised things, for if anything did happen one always regretted one's own words. And yet one had meant nothing.

"I will marry again, motherling! I will indeed; but this time let me choose for myself," he said consolingly as the fond woman clung to him in mingled joy at seeing him again, and grief at the failure of her schemes. Not that they would have come to much, likely, even had the cousin-wife not died; for she had been a handful doubtless, all those months.

"Lo! motherling," said her son once more, "let us forget the mistake for a time. Thy hands are hot, thou art outwearied. Lie so among the cushions, and I will sing to thee."

She loved to hear him sing, and even in the old Turkhomân ballads, she did not--like old Isândaulet--claim to have them fairly bawled. This new soft fashion was utterly sweet. So was her son's close-shaven chin. He had gone far from the wild Turkhomân tents; far ahead of her; God only knew how much farther he was to go.

"Motherling! Thou art not so well to-night," he said with solicitude as he noticed how fever-bright were her kind, worn eyes. "I will bid the Court physician send for him of Khorasân. He will likely know all methods; for I cannot have thee ill, my motherling."

The Khânum held him fast with her hot hands. "I care not, sonling," she sobbed suddenly; "so long as thou art here to the last--the best--the bravest son--"

"But I?" he said in tender raillery, though a sudden fear gripped at his heart. "Whom have I in the wide world but thee, mother? Lo! thou art the one thing feminine left to me after all these years." And his eyes grew stern as he thought of that dearest Dearest-One away in far Samarkand. Thank God she had a child.

"Have I not always said so?" wailed his mother. "Have I not bid thee have children? Ah, Babar! if I live, promise thou wilt marry."

"I will marry either way, motherling," he said. "Lo! I promise that; so cease thy tears and try to sleep. Thou wilt be better by morn."

But morning found the palace hushed with the hush of mortal sickness. There was no longer any doubt that the Khânûm had contracted measles in its worst repressed form, and regret, vague almost unreasonable regret, seized on Babar. He was responsible. It was his fault. His mother had nursed his wife. The Khorasân physician came and ordered water-melons; he of Kâbul let blood. And Babar sat dry-eyed beside his mother, holding her hot hand. She did not know him. Those words of hers, begging him to marry had been her last to him. His to her his promise that he would marry. Even amid his dazed grief he remembered this; remembered it keenly as, when the end came in quiet unconsciousness, he bent over her to give the last caress before Death claimed the body and it lay soulless, impure. But she? She was received into the Mercy of God.

He said that over and over again to himself as, on the Sunday morning, he put his strong shoulder under the light bier and carried it to the Garden of the New Year. It was summer-time now, the roses were beginning to blow, the tulips were nigh over, but the wild pansies were in full blossom. They had dug a grave under the plane trees and here, after the committal prayers had been said and flowers strewn, Babar, holding the head and Kâsim, his foster brother, the feet, laid the light, muslin-swathed, tinsel-bound corpse in the long, low niche, cut coffin-wise in the side. His voice scarcely trembled at all as he laid a handful of earth upon the breast with the solemn words of admonition and hope.

"Out of the dust I made you, and to dust I return you, to raise you yet once more out of the dust upon the Day of Resurrection."

But his eyes brimmed with tears as, with lavish hand, he scattered pansy blossoms till the white shroud was hidden by them.

Then without one word he drew himself up from the grave, and taking a shovel worked his hardest to fill in the earth.

Afterwards he sat down and looked out over the valley.

When his time came, he, also, would lie here. One could not desire a more peaceful, a more beautiful spot. But he would have no tomb built over him to blot out the blue sky. No! He and his mother should rest together till the Resurrection morn out in the open, among the birds and flowers.

CHAPTER II

I set Death's Door wide open for thee, Friend,
That thou might'st go.
I did not weep; I did not even send
One sign of woe
To follow, lest the way thou had'st to wend
The harder show.
But thou? Thou shut'st the Door upon my face,
Thou hid'st from me
One tiny gleam of glory from the place
Where thou would'st be;
In this world or the next there is no trace
No trace of thee!

With the swift family affection of their clan, relatives gathered round Babar in his bereavement. His paternal aunts came from Khorasân, and ere the forty days of mourning were over, a small cavalcade arrived from Tashkend. But it brought an aggravation of grief; for old Isân-daulet had predeceased her daughter by a few days. Babar's uncle, the little Khân, had also died; but beyond the fact that this deepened the Shadow-of-Death which seemed to have fallen over his young life, it brought no sorrow to the King. It was different with his grandmother. With her passing he had veritably no feminine thing left to whom he owed affection and duty, to whom he could go for comfort and counsel.

There were his paternal aunts, of course; good creatures every one of them, especially Ak Begum, though the others always flouted her because she had not married. Which was very unkind, since anyone with half-an-eye could see it was because she had devoted her life to her fat, half-witted lame sister. Poor Badul-jamâl-Begum! What an irony of fate it was that she had been called that! The "Lady of Astonishing-Beauty." But feminine names were beyond reason. Even Ak Begum--the "Fair Princess." What a name for that little bird-like, dark creature who twittered and preened herself at every word.

Yet she was the only one of them who understood, who gave the young man's sore heart any comfort at all.

She came to him, looking as if no pin were out of place, so natty, with her scanty hair still braided in virginal fashion on her wrinkled forehead, and said in her high piping voice:

"Lo, nephew! here are violets. A man brought them from the snows. Are they not sweet? Sniff them! Thy mother was ever so fond of them."

And Babar sniffed at them and afterwards took them to his mother's grave. Yes! The Fair Princess was certainly his grandfather's daughter; of the same blood as he was.

Still, grief must have its way, and here it was unbounded. Regret and remorse were mixed with it; and, yet once again, Babar gave way before the mental strain.

He tried to resume his ordinary life and actually started to lead his army afield, but was struck down with a sort of sleeping sickness. For days no matter what efforts they made to rouse him, his eyes constantly fell back to sleep. Yet after a time he pulled himself together again and started once more, but this time with no definite plan. Nor did he quite recover his normal health all that winter, which was spent in half-hearted attacks, and whole-hearted forgiveness of all and sundry of his enemies; for it was not his wish to treat anyone harshly. The snow lay very deep that winter in the high glens and passes. At one place off the road it reached up to the horses' cruppers and the pickets appointed for the night-watch round the camp had to remain on their horses, from sheer inability to dismount.

Half the army suffered, and Babar himself had to be carried back to Kâbul, helpless with lumbago. Mental unhappiness always seemed to affect his bodily health. But spring comes early in Kâbul and the pulse of renewed life began to beat once more in Babar's veins. By March, when the red tulips he had planted there were in full bloom about his mother's grave in the garden of the New Year, he was once more looking out from that high ground at the world beneath his feet, and straining his bright eyes over new horizons.

One thing he must do. He must marry. But this time he would choose for himself. This time he would give himself a chance of finding that new world he had seen when he was a boy in Dearest-One's eyes. Poor Dearest-One! He had had letters from her concerning their mother's death, and their pitifulness had almost broken his heart. Yet he could do nothing, nothing! She was as one dead; only not at peace like his mother.

But she also had urged marriage. Yes! he must marry, and no one should have a finger in the matrimonial pie but himself; least of all his paternal aunts. If needs be he would marry privately. The idea attracted him; he pondered over it. The question arose, in that case, whom he was to choose. Amongst the well born, those who lived in the circle of distinction as the phrase ran, it would be impossible. Without a *confidante* the mere broaching of marriage was out of the question.

And yet the very idea of one low born was distasteful to him.

So, as he pondered vaguely over possibilities, an idea came to him.

What of the frightened girl? Why not?

She could not be more than a year or two his senior; if that, for she had been much younger than his Cousin Gharîb. And her father was dead. And she lived in a House-of-Rest. That is to say if she still lived--or if she was not married.

Bah!--he was a fool to let his fancy run so far. Still he could enquire when he went to Khorasân as he meant to do some time that summer. Meanwhile a feeling of content came to him; partly because his imagination endorsed the idea as delightfully sentimental; mostly because it postponed necessity for immediate action.

And yet, when a day or two after a missive arrived from his uncle, Sultan Hussain, begging for his assistance at Khorasân against the arch enemy and raider Shaibâni-Khân who threatened an inroad, Babar felt pleased at what seemed an order from Fate; especially as the missive came by the hands of rather a quaint ambassador; namely by the son of his uncle's professional Dreamer-of-Dreams. To be sure Cousin Gharîb had made fun of the man's pretensions; but there was more in that sort of thing than could be accounted for by reason. Anyhow, it was a clear duty to set off at once. If Shaibâni was the enemy, then, if other princes went to the attack on their feet it was incumbent on him to go if necessary on his head! and if they went against him with swords, it was his business to go, were it only with stones!

"The Most High must have a care of Kâbul nathless," said wary old Kâsim. "Look you the saying runs:

Ten dervishes in one rug
Lie comfy, and warm, and snug,
But two Kings upon one throne--
Such a thing never was known.

The most High's brother--and his cousin--"

But Babar cut him short. He never would listen to suspicions of his own relations.

"I have done nothing," he said, with just that little touch of conscious virtue that in him was so translucent, so simple, though in one less artless it might have been offensive, "to provoke either of them to hostility; neither have they given me ground for dissatisfaction."

Kâsim shrugged his shoulders and muttered under his breath that it would need the Day of Judgment to make some folk believe in sin, and applied himself to seeing that the garrison left was sufficient to keep order.

Babar himself was full of spirits. Apart from other considerations the prospect of, at last, seeing Herât, the most civilised city in Central Asia, filled him with keen interest. It was full, he knew, of poets, painters, philosophers, and its luxuries were things to speak of with bated breath. In addition, he had a pleasant remembrance of his Uncle Hussain. It was more than ten years since he had seen him over in the camp which had struck him, the hardy barbarian, with awe. Did the old man--old now with a vengeance since he had reigned a good fifty years--still keep butting rams and amuse himself with cock fighting? Above all, did he still on festival days put on that small turban tied in three folds, broad and showy, and having placed a plume nodding over it in that style go to prayers? Babar wrote in his own hand--in the Babari writing which he had just invented and of which he was vastly proud--a letter to the kindly old man, telling him that he had set out from Kâbul and hoped to be with him shortly. This he entrusted to an ambassador who with the Dreamer-of-Dreams started express for Herât; he himself having a small job on hand by the way, in the punishment of some wandering tribes to the west.

It was not much of a task; but summer quarters in the hills had a fascination for Babar, and he remained on the top of one of the many ranges he had to cross; despatching Kâsim-Beg meanwhile with a body of troops to scour the countryside for rebels.

There was a sense of freedom about the wide upland stretches of sweet grass, where flocks and herds grazed placidly, where flowers blossomed by the million, and the tall fir forests edged the downward slopes. The whole world of blue waving hills touched the blue sky. One might be adrift on a huge raft in the River of Life. Babar would doff shoes and wander barefoot for hours, content with a chance shot after an escaping deer, or a chance following of his own vagrant thoughts. And these often fled in the direction of a House-of-Rest wherein dwelt a frightened girl. He could not help it. He was made sentimental to his heart's core. Remove the pressure of fine fighting, of ardent ambition, and there he was, ready to be touched by pity, love, admiration. And the thought of the woman to come was a perpetual stimulus to his imagination. The mere fact that he did not know her name was delightful; it took from the idea all trace of earth. And Babar, though the very reverse of ascetic in his tastes and pleasures, had ever been repulsed by sensuality. His was the Epicurean enjoyment of the spirit, as distinct from that of the mind, or that of the body. So in his thoughts he called the woman he intended should be his wife "My moon," which is the eastern equivalent of "My queen"; and, in easy dilettante fashion wrote more than one ode to that luminary. Most of them were in Persian and contained exactly the proper number of feet, and rang the appointed interchanges of meaning and words with faultless accuracy. He was quite proud of them, and thought better of them than of the one in Turkhi; which, however, he set to music and sang, for his innate good taste was for ever breaking loose from scholastic tradition. He twanged the tune on a *cithâra* as he sat on a rock in the moonlight and felt quite light-hearted over his own unworthiness; it fitted so neatly into the rhyming fall ...

Moon of still night!
Whence the bright light
that enfolds
In its pure smile
Earth's untold guile;
that upholds
Silver in glow,
whiter than snow,
this my hand
Tuning thy praise?
Whence come thy rays?
From what land
Bringest thou peace,
thus to release,
from its sin
Stricken sad heart,
wailing its part
in Life's din?
Lo! from God's sun
must thou have won
thy kind light.
Though I am clay,
watch me alway
through the night.
I am of earth;
thine is the birth-
right divine.

Moon of my soul,
thine is this whole
heart of mine.

The distance from Kâbul to Khorasân was over eight hundred miles; so with even every-day marching the journey would have taken some time, and Babar was in no particular hurry. Less so than ever when news came to him with the return of his ambassador, that Sultan Hussain had suddenly died from an apoplectic seizure. At first Babar felt inclined to turn back. His uncle, he knew, had left his kingdom, in unheard of fashion, to his three legitimate sons, in defiance of the old saw about the ten dervishes, and Babar had too much experience to believe that such an arrangement could work satisfactorily. However he had other motives for advancing, and therefore he continued his route, and, passing over the last range of high hills, found himself in the country where the advanced detachments of the Usbek force were already raiding. This in itself was an attraction, bringing as it did a chance of fine fighting. He found his cousins, the new Kings, encamped, ready to meet the advancing foe on the Murghâb river; or rather he found two of them. The third, from private motives of pique had refused to join the confederacy. This appeared to Babar to be inexpressibly mean, when everyone else had united and were sparing no efforts to oppose an enemy so formidable as Shaibâni. He could not understand how any reasonable man could pursue a line of conduct which must after his death, stain his fair fame. Surely everyone with the commonest grace would push forwards his career, so that, even if closed, it would conduct him to renown and glory, since fame is truly a second existence?

These sentiments, however, fine as they were, did not make much mark on the luxurious camp on the banks of the Murghâb. His cousins received Babar fairly well, though their manners required some polishing up by old Kâsim-Beg's inflexible rules of etiquette. Of course, the fact that two of the younger and illegitimate princes did not come out as far as they ought to have done to welcome their Kingly cousin was objectionable; but that might be put down to delay in starting due to an over-night debauch, rather than to intentional slight. But when it came to the State reception in the Audience Tent, Kâsim had to pluck at his young master's girdle and remind him with this jog, that he was to go no further, but to await his eldest cousin's advance. Which he did obediently, knowing that old Kâsim held his King's honour as his own, and was keenly alive to his consequence.

But he, himself, was always forgetting these *convenances*, where he was concerned. If you really felt affectionate it was a nuisance having to wait, and bow, and scrape.

The State reception, however, went off very well and it was followed by a sort of entertainment at which wine was served in goblets of silver and gold, that were put down by the meat!

Fateful innovation which sent old Kâsim back to his own camp hungry, in the highest of dudgeons.

"Had it been a drinking party, sire," he protested, "'twould have been my own fault for being there. But at an official dinner, 'twas scandalous. No faithful Mussulmân could touch a morsel of food so defiled."

Babar, somewhat regretful at a rather abrupt departure, murmured an excuse to the effect briefly, of "*autres tempes, autres moeurs*"; whereat Kâsim-Beg, a purist for the old ways, broke out hotly:

"Lo! sire! the Institutions of Ghengis Khân have brought your Highness' family well through much trouble. Sacredly have they observed them in their parties, their courts, their festivals, their entertainments, their down sittings, their risings up, and it would ill become their descendant to flout them."

Babar flushed up; in his heart of hearts, he was not quite such an admirer of the old Turk. "Lo! the Institutes are good enough," he said; "a man may well follow them; yet are they not of Divine authority, so that one be damned for disobeying them. Besides, see you, what hope would there be for the world if folk made no change? If a father has done wrong why should not a son change it to what is right?"

Old Kâsim, munching away at the dry bread and pickles which was all his servants could produce, snorted. "'Tis the other way round most times; and see you, sire, I give those Kings your cousins one year, one little year, to hold Herât! Then the Kingdom of their father--God rest his soul since he had gleams of grace and once let one of his God-forgetting sons go before the magistrate--held--despite wine bibbing--for nigh fifty years, will have gone for ever."

"Aye," replied Babar, thoughtfully. "I have noticed that myself. Some men drink with impunity. I wonder if 'twould hurt me?"

"God forbid! your Majesty!" said old Kâsim with a tremble in his voice. "Shall all our care, mine and the saintly Kwâja who held you as a boy in his guardian care, be wasted? God forbid, say I."

But Babar said nothing; he knew that in his inmost heart he had had for years a great longing

just to see what it was like to be drunk! It could scarcely hurt for once, and the land of inebriety could hardly be the arid desert it had been painted for him, or so many folk would not wander in it.

He was always open to reason on all points. Nevertheless he gave out solemnly that he drank no wine, and his cousins, being good hosts, refrained from pressing him to do so.

Badia-zamân, the elder of the three, doubtless thought little of him for the abstinence. To be young, good-looking, able to enjoy yourself in every way and yet not to take the best of Life, seemed to him sheer foolishness; and he showed his estimate in his manner, so that Babar came home from his second interview in a fume of anger.

"This shall not be!" he said hotly. "Kâsim! send proper representations that young as I am, I am of high extraction. Twice have I by force regained my paternal Kingdom, Samarkand. To show want of respect to one who has done so much for his family by repelling the foreign invader is not commendable."

For a marvel the young King was on his dignity, much to old Kâsim's joy. And with good result; for nothing more could have been desired at the next audience which Babar attended with his full retinue. And a fine figure he looked, dressed in the very latest fashion with a gold brocade coat, a flowered undershirt and white silk baggy trousers all lined with gold thread. His hair, too, was scented and curled and his turban tied with a difference. A very different person this from the ragged, out-at-elbow fugitive, or even the stern young soldier in his tarnished coat of mail, fighting for life against overwhelming odds.

He rather liked the change. It was a new experience to ruffle with gilded youth, and he ruffled fairly until his boon companions began to play indecent and scurvy tricks, when he left, disgusted for the time being. But the entertainments were wonderfully elegant. There was every sort of delicacy on the comestible trays, and *kababs* of fowl and goose; indeed dishes of every sort and kind. The Prince-Kings vied with each other in the refinement of their luxuries, and certainly Badia-zamân's parties deserved to be celebrated; they were so fine, so easy, so unconstrained. On the other hand Mozuffar's entertainments were more amusing, especially when the wine began to take effect. There was a man who danced excessively well; a dance of his own invention.

"Dance or no dance," grumbled old Kâsim, "the Princes thy cousins have taken four months to reach this place. And now news comes that a plundering party of Usbeks is well within touch not more than forty miles off--and they dance! 'Twill be to another tune ere long."

"Mayhap they would let me go," said Babar eagerly, "'twould be a diversion."

So he was off to lay his proposition before his Cousins; but they, afraid of their own reputations, would not suffer him to move. The fact was, as he admitted to old Kâsim privately, the Princes, though very accomplished at the social board or in the arrangements for a party of pleasure, and though they had a pleasing talent for conversation and society, yet possessed no knowledge whatever of the conduct of a campaign, and were perfect strangers to the arrangements for a battle, or the danger and spirit of a soldier's life.

This left nothing more to be said; especially as his hearer agreed with every word.

Early autumn, however, had passed, and Shaibâni, being a careful general, prepared to withdraw his forces against the winter's cold. This being so, there was no longer any reason--there had been but little before--for remaining in camp at the Murghâb, and the Prince-Kings proposed a return to Herât and invited Babar to accompany them.

"Were I your Highness," said old Kâsim sturdily, "I would not go. So far God in His mercy has kept virtue on the lips of the King, and kept wine away from them. But in that God-forsaken city of Herât who knows what might happen? They tell me even the women there are castaway, and that your uncle the late King's widow drinks like a fish--may God reward her!"

"I have never seen a woman drink wine," said Babar quite thoughtfully. "Have you?"

Kâsim looked at his young master critically.

"New things are not always good things, sire," he replied drily, "and, as was mentioned ere we set out from Kâbul, God only knows what may happen there if we delay our return too long. Already have five months passed and 'tis a fifty days' march homewards."

"Not if we take the high road," said Babar.

"The high road," echoed the old general; "that may be covered with snow any moment now."

"Yet will I chance my luck," returned Babar gaily. "See you, old friend, I have my reasons! I must see Herât--in the whole habitable world they say there is not such a city; besides ..."

He paused, for his was a truthful soul even to itself; and he knew that the past six weeks of jollity and convivial male merry-making had considerably dimmed his desire to do his duty and marry. Still he had promised himself he would try and seek out his Cousin Gharîb's betrothed--for

she had never been his wife--and he meant to do it. Between whiles of course. For he must make the most of his time in Herât. Yes! it would be a pity to miss the chance of his life. To be in the most refined of cities which possessed every means of heightening pleasure and gaiety; in which all the incentives to, and apparatus for, enjoyment were combined into one vast invitation to indulgence, and *not* to indulge, would be foolish. If he did not seize the present moment, even to the point of tasting wine, he was not likely to have such another.

And, certainly, wine seemed to raise the level of a man's mind. His cousins were but dullards out of their cups. And there was no need to exceed. To be dead-drunk was no pleasure to anyone.

CHAPTER III

The Load of Love, nor Earth nor Heav'n can bear,
Yet thou, Improvident! wouldst lightly wear
The lovers' yoke, give up the flaming sword,
Fool! Love only can bear love! Beware! Beware!

Ebd-ul-Homid.

Herât was entered. It was his!

Babar, his eyes wide with curiosity and appreciation had ridden through what were to him interminable streets. He had seen towers and pleasure houses and palaces rising on all sides, had noted the crowds which surged out from every side alley to see one who was already renowned in the songs of half Central Asia, as the embodiment of youthful valour. And all had been simply inconceivable in its beauty, its size.

Yusuf-Ali who had been appointed his guide, rode at his right hand, and supplied him with endless information. Close on a million of people in the town and suburbs. Over a hundred and seventy thousand occupied houses. Nigh on four hundred public schools.

Shops! Why there must be at least fifteen thousand of them!

The statistics went in at one ear and out at another. It was the sheer beauty of the place which held Babar's mind. The wide valley, the surrounding hills just touched with snow. The white buildings following the blue curves of the river. The marble colonnades terracing the slopes, the marble palaces crowning the heights; and, dense-packed between high carven houses, the multi-coloured crowd all intent on pleasure. Roars of laughter rising from it at every passing jest, a chorus of "Victory, young champion!" following him as he rode along.

By God and his prophet! Life was a splendid thing to live!

Had he had Prince Fortunatus' purse in his pocket he would have flung gold pieces along every inch of the way.

Even in the mausoleum of his lately deceased uncle, where, in accordance with etiquette he had, before even taking up his quarters in the palace assigned to him, to pay his respects to the female members of his uncle's family, his ceremonial condolences were somewhat marred by the *joie de vivre* which simply exhaled from him. Yet he was none the less sympathetically impressed by the dim Dome-of-Kings all lit up darkly by swinging lamps, by tall funereal tapers throwing flickering shadows on the purple-crimson pall fringed with gold that covered the catafalque.

Dim blue clouds of incense filled the air; their scent mixed with the perfume-sodden rustle of the silks and satins beneath the circle of ivory-tinted mourning veils that enshrouded the crouching figures of the female mourners. The low guttural chant of canons appointed to sing prayers for the repose of the dead, rose monotonously, a fitting background to the little conventional sobs and cries, as each lady in turn stood up to embrace the newly arrived member of the family.

There were so many aunts to embrace; but Babar went through them decorously; with a little real emotion when he hugged Aunt Fair, and some rather obvious impatience when fat, silly, Astonishing Beauty--who loved young men--hugged him.

They did not, however, keep up the "*marsiâh*" for long; the ladies--who after the expiry of five months had got over the first flush of grief--being anxious to have their handsome relative's budget of news.

So they all repaired to Khadîjah-Begum's house and had a repast. It was very refined and--

rather to Babar's disappointment, for he was curious to see a woman drink wine--strictly teetotal; doubtless because Payandâ-Begum, the late King's chief wife and--as his father's sister--Babar's real aunt, was present. And she was naturally of the highest circle of distinction and of the most correct behaviour.

Khadijah-Begum on the other hand, whom Babar now saw for the first time, showed her low birth despite the fact that as favourite wife she had managed the court for years. Even the knowledge that she was Cousin Gharîb's mother could not prevent Babar's putting her down at once as a vulgar talkative woman who posed for being a person of profound sense.

There was another Begum of the late King's present, however, on whom the young observer, seeing her for the first time, passed a very different opinion. This was one Lady Apak, a delicate fair woman who spent her childless life in nursing other people's children, and who Babar felt deserved all the respect and kindness it was in his power to give.

He was not sorry however, when, various other visits paid, he found himself in the house assigned to him. And sure, no better place could have been discovered in the whole habitable world! For it was the garden palace which the great Master-of-all-Arts, Messer Ali-Shîr--dead this while back, God rest his soul!--had designed and built for himself. Babar spent hours wandering through its cool corridors, sitting awhile in cunning alcoves whence the enchanting view, framed in gilt filigree arch, showed like a picture indeed. He sampled the rose-water baths, all mosaicked like a garden with buds, and leaves, and blossoms; he sat stroking the soft silk pile of carpets, green and set with flowers as thick as Andijân meadows in spring. And there was one, deeply darkly verdant and almost covered with the softest, fleeciest white furry blobs, on which he could have lain down and cried, so keenly did it bring back the mantle of clover lambskin into which he had poured the first grief that had come to his young life.

He read round the walls of the central marble hall, veined and mosaicked with precious stones, the boast that in after years one of his descendants was to use in the Court-of-Private-Audience at Delhi.

"If Earth holds a Paradise--it is this, it is this, it is this."

Yes! it was true! Not only in the hall, but in every niche and corner--in the ivory carven bedstead, in the crystal goblets inlaid with coral, in the curiously beaten metal-work, in the very shading of the coloured tiles, here was perfection of Beauty. Even with their shoes doffed in respectful Oriental fashion, Babar could hardly endure to see servants, whose minds he knew were not attuned to that high level, passing backwards and forwards in what he felt to be a Shrine. He dismissed them all and sat, pillowed by the softest down, looking out from the colonnade which gave on the garden. It, also, must be beautiful beyond compare. He would see that to-morrow. To-night it was sufficient to revel in the burnished dusk of the orange trees, seen in the soft moonlight, to watch the glittering radiance of the fountain drops against that background of distant hills--purple--aye! positively purple even in this light. Lo! it was beauty concentrated almost to pain. Beauty, unearthly, beyond the senses. Something not to be seen, or heard, or tasted, or touched, or even felt. Beauty that brought an utter abnegation of Self.

"This slave has a letter for the Most High," came a clear sweet voice. "It is from his Cousin Gharîb. It was to be given--if occasion came--in private, and in person if possible. So I have brought it."

Babar turned quickly. At first to see nothing. Then several paces away faintly outlined against one of the square white pilasters he caught the silhouette of a white, curiously shadowless figure. A woman's figure surely; slim, elegant, despite the enshrouding veil.

He rose swiftly; his heart beating. His dead cousin! Could it be--No! Impossible--And yet--

"With deepest reverence--mother," he said almost mechanically, as the figure remaining quiescent he stepped forward to take what it held out. He could see the hand--a marble hand in the moonlight--beyond the line of the pilaster.

A pretty hand too, with fingers pointed and delicate.

"May God reward you," came his mechanical thanks, as instinctively he stepped back again.

The figure remained quiescent, silent. In the moonlight he could see clearly the sweeping black curves of the writing. The letter was very brief.

"Shouldst thou, cousin, ever come to Khorasân, I have counselled her, who was my wife in name, to give you this. I make no claim, I express no wish save this--I should like her to be happy, for I have loved her--and thou also, O Babar. Farewell! May the Crystal Bowl give Love, not Tears."

For an instant Babar stood confounded, irresolute: it was so unconventional: so almost

impossible. Yet it fitted strangely with the place; with his vague feeling that had been beyond even Time and Space.



"THIS SLAVE HAS A LETTER FOR THE MOST HIGH"

"THIS SLAVE HAS A LETTER FOR THE MOST HIGH"

There was a ruby jewelled lamp swinging from the arch between them. It scarce gave light, but it sent a patterned shimmering rose upon the white marble floor. A gentle breeze swayed the lamp; the rose flickered between them backwards and forwards. His eyes were on it as he stood holding the letter, the moonlight catching at the signet ring he wore, dallying with the gold embroidery of his light silken coat.

"Is it possible," he said at last, fluttering a bit like a girl, "that she who stands before me--"

"Yea, I am she," came the composed reply.

It settled the young man by bringing conviction of his own confusion.

"But how--" he began, a certain blame in his surprise; and once again the answer was ready, grave, sufficient.

"My lord's slave comes every Friday after the custom of her family--she is of the blood of the divine Jâmi as doubtless my lord knows--to place flowers on the tomb of the now sainted Messer Ali-Shir--may his ashes rest in peace--who is interred by his own wish in this garden, and who was her distant relative. But in life he was ever kind to this dust-like one, teaching her, and allowing her to be his disciple. So her litter comes hither often. It awaits her return yonder at the grave. Thus the letter was easy to deliver in person, and it is delivered. May God keep the King."

Faintly the figure moved as if to go; but Babar stepped a step forward. His head was in a whirl, his heart curiously steady.

"And has the cupola of chastity no word to say of herself?" he asked.

"What word is there to say, my lord?" came the quick reply. "I have performed my duty. The rest lies with my lord."

There was just a suspicion of raillery in the voice which spurred Babar to hardihood.

"Then I would fain know if--if she who thus deigns to honour me is satisfied with--with what she sees?"

"But yea! my lord, quite satisfied! And this is not the first time she has seen my lord. She was at the window when he made his entry to the town."

"Then the lady has doubly the advantage," said Babar with an irrepressible laugh. "Yet will I not ask her to make us equal and unveil. That were not meet at such a time and place."

There was just that faint suspicion of conscious virtue about the remark, but it was met promptly, coolly.

"Nor is there need. My lord would not be frightened at what he saw, as I, poor foolish child, was frightened. But I lived to be wiser. I lived to know that deformity of body is as naught before deformity of mind. But my lord has neither. Nor has this dust-like one. She is counted beautiful, and though she catalogues not her own charms, she hath two eyes, somewhat large, that look straight, a passable nose, thirty-two sound teeth, even and white, and a mouth that can say kind things harshly, and--an' it please my lord--harsh things kindly. Shall the recital proceed further, my lord?"

"By God and the prophets no!" cried Babar catching fire at last. "There is but one more thing between us. Lady, wilt thou take me for husband?"

"Of a surety; therefore came I here." So far the reply was as ever, cool, collected, without shadow of emotion; now the sweet, polished voice broke faintly. "There is but one matter of which I would remind my lord. I am older than he by three years. And I am not quite like other women. Messer Ali-Shîr taught me much. If my lord would rather someone else--"

The rose light on the pavement flickered between them backwards and forwards.

"Lady," said Babar, and involuntarily he drew himself up to his full height, "in my childhood they married me to one for whom I cared little. She left me, saying truly, I did not love her. Awhile back my mother--God rest her soul for she was very dear to me--married me to yet another wife whom, mercifully, God took; since we were as cat and dog. But I have never loved a woman. I do not now; perhaps I never shall. 'Tis well to be prepared."

Was it a faint sigh, or only another breath of wind that set the swinging lamp swaying.

"I am prepared. And God may send the father's love to the mother of his son."

There was silence. The splash of the glistening fountain made itself heard faintly; the soft coo of a dove in the orange trees seemed a lullaby to the whole wide world.

"Lady," said Babar when he spoke at last, "I have sworn to myself that none should know of my marriage till it was accomplished. Till I could place my wife before them and say 'See her whom I have chosen.' I stay but a week or two in Herât. My kingdom calls me back. Is it possible that ere I go the formulas may be said privately, so that when good fortune enables me to send to Herât it may be for my wedded wife that I send?"

There was a pause Then the cool, quiet voice replied, "Wherefore not, my lord? I have said I am ready."

"But when?" Babar spoke anxiously, almost appealingly. He felt himself as wax in a woman's hand--a woman he had never seen.

"Next Friday, my lord, when I come again to lay the flowers at the shrine. If my lord makes preparation, and if he changeth not his mind, his servant will be there."

"Unless she also changeth her mind," interrupted Babar with forced lightness.

"That might be," came the answer. "Yet is it not so likely as the other. The caged bird does not choose its song. And now farewell. God have you in his keeping."

The figure stooped to gather its flowing robes together, and something in the supple elegance of the movement sent Babar's blood to his heart and head.

"Not so, my moon," he cried, every atom of him vibrant with emotion. "Not so do we part." And with two swinging strides he was across the flickering rose light on the marble floor, took the hand held out to him unflinchingly, and stooped to kiss it.

"Wife and mother, guardian and friend, so shalt thou be to me, so help me God."

The next instant he was alone staring into the night, wondering if he had fallen asleep and dreamt it all.

No! It was a reality. His signet ring was gone. He must have put it on that firm delicate hand, the memory of whose touch thrilled him through and through.

And he had called her his moon. Yet his heart was beating tranquilly.

When he lay down on the carven bed he did not toss and turn. He did not even feel inclined to indite a sonnet to his mistress's eyebrow or compare her to anything in heaven above or the earth beneath.

He was simply content, and fell into a dreamless sleep. It was not till the next morning that he recollected that he did not know the lady's name, nor where she lived.

Not that either ignorance mattered. He would find out next Friday.

CHAPTER IV

Noisy the Tavern where Life's wine has sped
From variant cup to fuddle variant Head;
Love peeps through crannied Door; each Drinker straight
Flings cup aside to follow Her instead.

Ebd-ul-Hamid.

There was not much time for thought in Herât. Early in the morning Babar was astir to ride out with Yusuf to some of the sights, and find the first collation of the day spread in some suitable place.

Then on his return there was the State visit to the Court, where with pomp and circumstance he took his place as King of Kâbul.

After that, each day had its entertainment at some new palace of delight, and sometimes after dinner had been served, the party would be carried off by one of the guests to a further and more intimate circle of amusement.

Once this was done by no less a person than Khadîjah-Begum herself. She took a few of the young princes to the King's Pleasure House, a delightful little edifice of two storeys high which stood in the midst of a still more delightful garden. The upper storey was simply perfect! Four little apartments at the four corners, each with a wide balcony, and between them and enclosed by them, one large central arched Hall. Every portion of this upper storey was covered with frescoes representing the battles of Babar's grandfather Sultan Abusa'id.

And it was all so charmingly arranged. Carpets and hangings everywhere; especially in the balcony where the party assembled and where Babar as the guest of the evening was placed above his hosts. These little attentions always flattered Babar and he never failed to notice them. So the entertainment began with a cup of welcome which was charged and drunk by the host in chief. Then the cupbearers began to fill up the cup of the others with pure wine which everyone, including Khadîjah-Begum, quaffed as if it had been the water of life! Only the tall good-looking young King refused, even when, the party waxing warm, and the spirit mounting to their heads, they took a fancy to make the young abstainer drink also.

The night was fine, the moonlight streamed in upon fruit and flowers. Jelâl the flute player fluted to perfection, and Bechâb on the harp might have wiled doves from their nests. Then Hâfiz sang well in the Herâti style, low, delicate, equable. Everything tempted to pleasure and Babar sat with a half-frown on his kindly face watching the others get lordily drunk.

Then mercifully a false note was struck by one of his own following. Jahângir Mirza, who was far gone, insisted that his favourite singer of Samarkand should delight the company. And the man sang (as he always did) in a loud harsh voice and out of tune; altogether a dreadful, disagreeable performance. So disagreeable that the Khorasân Princes, though far too polite to stop it out of respect to Babar, had to yawn and furtively protect their ears. This, and the reflection that if he was to yield and taste wine it would be more courteous to do so when he was the guest of the eldest of the Princes, and not of the younger, decided him not to give way; at that party at any rate.

But he was no wet blanket; for after a time, having had enough of the Pleasure-House, they repaired to the new Winter-Palace, where Yusuf, being by this time extremely drunk, rose and, for a marvel, danced remarkably well; possibly because he was a musical man. Here they all got very merry and friendly. Babar was presented more or less ceremoniously with a corselet, a sword, a belt, and a whitish Tipchak horse, and someone sang a Turki song well. On the other hand while the party was hot with wine two slaves again performed indecent scurvy tricks. But this time Babar did not leave. He remained to the bitter end when the party broke up at such an untimely hour that Babar thought it best to stay where he was; the others doubtless, being too drunk to move.

Perhaps it was this experience, coming in such close contrast to the marvellous peace of that moonlight night when, as if in a dream, he had handfasted a nameless woman, that made Babar listen to old Kâsim's horror-struck remonstrances concerning his young master's failing adherence to orthodoxy in the matter of wine.

The rigid old Mahomedan was fairly scandalised, and made such a fuss that the Khorasân

Prime-Minister intervened, and took *his* young masters to task so severely that they wholly laid aside any idea of urging their cousin further to drink.

Rather perhaps to that cousin's private regret. It seemed a thousand pities to leave Herât without having tasted all Life's pleasures; all, that is, that were not indecent or scurvy. And a man could be drunk and yet remain a gentleman.

Still, when the elder prince did give the promised party, at which Babar had promised himself he would for once drink wine, he still refrained, though he fretted because his nobles thought it necessary only to drink by stealth, hiding their goblets and taking draughts in great dread. It was so foolish; when they knew he was never one to object to the following of common usage, if so be the follower could reconcile it to his own conscience.

He was altogether a trifle hoity-toity at this supper party; for a whole goose, after Herâti fashion, being set down before him, he did not touch it; and, on his host's asking if he did not like it, said frankly, that being accustomed to the unrefined habit of having his food served in gobbets, he did not know how to carve it.

Whereupon his host obligingly sent for the goose, cut it up, and placed it himself before his guest. Badia-zamân was, of course, unequalled in such attentions, and life was very delightful; yet still Babar's thoughts began to turn to the next Friday, and after that to Kâbul. His future life seemed more settled than it had ever been before.

But Fate had a surprise in store for him, as he found out one afternoon, when, after his usual kindly custom, he had gone to pay a duty visit to his paternal aunts. Running down the narrow stairs which led to Payandâ-Begum's upper storey, he came full tilt on two veiled women coming up. The stair was but shoulder wide; no room to pass, even had the first figure not been so appallingly stout. Impossible to pass, rude to turn one's back on those who were evidently of the circle of distinction--

Nor could he, King of Kâbul, retreat step by step like a lackey. He stood for a second gracious, debonnaire; then with a merry "Your pardon, mother," wedged his arms tight between those narrow walls, so swung himself back. And there, in two such bounds, he was up the six steps and at the top of the stair.

"Have a care, nephew," shrieked a fat, familiar voice from the first bundle. "Thou wilt fall and crush thy Yenkâm!"

"My bridesmaid!" cried Babar joyously, repeating the pet nickname. "Say not so! When didst thou come?" And he was down the stairs again to embrace a favourite aunt he had not seen for years, and help her mount the remaining steps.

So, still panting, the elderly matron unwound her veil and stood revealed; fat indeed.

"Lo! Yenkâm," said Babar, his eyes twinkling. "Had I fallen, I should have fallen--soft."

"Fie on thee, scapegrace! God send thee not a skinny old age," retorted Habee-ba-Begum good humouredly. "But what of thy cousin Ma'asuma here? Ma'asuma that is like the fairy princess, weighing but five flowers--have a care of thy veil, child!"

The tiny little figure, slim and graceful, which now stood beside the fat one, apparently made a court salutation beneath her thick veil, and a bird-like voice said, with a laugh in every tone, "My cousin Babar, never having seen my smallness, Mother, cannot gauge it."

The young King returned the salute in his best manner. "If the gracious lady would allow me to judge," he began, when his Yenkâm cut short his hardihood.

"Fie! no nonsense, children! Ma'asuma! Follow me. Thou must be presented at once to thy eldest aunt. I shall see thee, scapegrace! doubtless, later on."

So, with a nod to Babar, bundled propriety moved off down the corridor.

Was it chance?--Was it really a trip over a tiresome veil...?

Anyhow Habee-ba-Begum had rounded a corner, and those two young things stood staring at each other as if they had never seen anything in the wide world before.

It was a real case of love at first sight.

As for him, he did not even realise what she was like. He only knew that she was beautiful exceedingly. And she knew he was a Prince indeed.

The mirth in their eyes died down. Then hers grew startled, his caught fire. So they stood; till suddenly hers flamed back into his, and with a low cry she huddled her draperies round her, turned, and fled after her mother.

Babar stood still as a stone. What had happened to him? He felt confused, lost, yet utterly, entirely, absurdly happy.

After a time he walked soberly downstairs feeling vaguely that the world was a new world, and that he must go and find himself.

Once in the street he went on walking blindly, on and on, till he found himself in desert places outside the town. Then, aimlessly, he turned back and walked as he had come, wandering through the city as though in search of mansions and gardens.

Yet all the while he felt as if he could neither sit nor go, neither stand nor walk.

He was literally obsessed by a passion, pure in its very intensity; a passion which at one and the same time made him long to be with its object, yet covered him with shame and confusion at the mere thought of her beauty.

He returned after long hours to Ali-Shîr's palace, worn out in body, but yet more restless in mind. He had decided that this must be love--love at long last. In that case he must write verses, and began to catalogue the beauty of the face he had seen.

He remembered, now, that they were unusual; for little Cousin Ma'asuma had the rare distinction of fairish hair and blue eyes. A little flowerful face, merry, sparkling; rebellious curling hair flecked with red gold--a tint of rose and creamy *champak*--

All this he remembered dreamily as he laboured to fit together the fine mosaic of a Persian love ode.

"Impassioned loved one! fairest of the fair,
The waving tendrils of thy bronze gold hair
Spread round thy face each one a separate snare;
Thine eyes are vi'lets, centred by black bees
Who seek to drain their sweetness to the lees;
Thine eyebrows arch--"

He got so far as this, then threw away his pen in disgust.

Anyone could write that sort of stuff. He had read pages of it in books: had sung such rhymes by the score. But that sort of thing had nothing to do with his great love for Ma'asuma and hers for him.

For she had loved him, of course. The reverse was incredible, absurd.

He turned round and buried his face in the downy cushions that had, as usual, been spread for him in his favourite corner of the colonnade.

He had had no dinner. He did not want any. He had refused his cousin's invitations with some excuse. He forgot what--it did not matter. Nothing in the wide world mattered but his love for Ma'asuma and hers for him.

The moon was still bright. Not quite so bright as it had been that night, five days ago, when he had promised to marry someone else.

Babar sat up, leant his head on his hand and began to consider how matters stood. Oriental in mind, marriage was to him by no means synonymous with love. He could legitimately have four wives at a time. If he liked. But honestly he felt he would rather not. Still--as nothing possibly could prevent his making Ma'asuma his wife--if the other nameless lady wanted to be his wife also, he would acquiesce. He would not go back from his promise. Only--what a pity he had called her his "Moon"! That name belonged to his love by right.

So, as he sat dreaming, a voice said with the nasal twang of the common folk--

"A letter for the Presence."

The coincidence of time and place startled him. He looked up half-expectant of that tall, slim, female figure. But this was a lad in the uniform of the Palace servants. A message mayhap from one of the Begums. He took it carelessly from an awkward brown hand and opened its seal.

A scent of fresh violets came to him as he did so.

And the letter?

It was written in the finest Babari hand--the hand he had invented!--with a delicacy, an accuracy at which even the inventor of it marvelled, and it contained but a quatrain; but such a quatrain! Babar's scholastic appreciation of the form forced its way through his emotional delight at the words. Ali-Shîr himself could not have written anything neater, more absolutely correct in prosody. And in such difficult metre too, with its enlay of rhymes.

"My heart has part in this thy smart.
Dear heart! have part in this my smart!"

Our sighs do rise twin to the skies;
Thy heart, my heart, are not apart."

And it was signed:

"Thy true friend Ma'asuma."

Yea! That was worth writing! That told the tale. Babar sprang to his feet. The whole world seemed filled with radiance. He and Ma'asuma were the only people in it.

But what should he answer? What should he write? Nothing but the truth--God's truth.

"I love thee. I love thee, Ma'asuma. I love thee."

In his haste, his brimming emotion, the words fell from his lips, as seizing pen and paper he set them down and signed them.

"Is that the answer?" asked the waiting lad as Babar held out the missive impatiently. "Am I to take that to my mistress?" A faint hesitancy over the latter words made the young man look at the boy--a dull, rather sullen face, but not ill-looking.

"Yes!" he replied joyously. "Take it to thy mistress. It is my answer, now and always!"

The lad *salaamed* and went, leaving Babar in a heaven of perfect content.

Two days later, on Friday evening, however, he was waiting to fulfil his promise in Ali-Shîr's tomb. Absolutely Oriental as his outlook was, so far as marriage was concerned, he yet wondered, vaguely, if he were fool or knave in acting as he did. For the path of true love, never very rough when Kings are concerned, had been made very smooth, indeed, for the two young people. Babar had sent his Akâm to see his Yenkâm and the whole affair had been settled in five minutes with enthusiasm. Even the preliminaries had been arranged. It being nigh December, Babar should return to Kâbul and make preparations there, while Yenkâm would complete hers at Herât, and with the first blink of returning spring, the marriage should take place at some intermediate place. Meanwhile the young people, after Chagatâi fashion, had been allowed to see each other and were in the seventh heaven of delight. The betrothals were to be made public in a few days; though already Babar's conduct was suspicious. For he refrained from his cousin's convivial parties and mooned about in the gardens composing "Sonnets of the Heart," as he was pleased to call them, in his native Turkhi which gave him much more freedom than the severely technical Persian odes.

These he sent as written to his dearest dear, and they invariably brought back the most beautiful replies, more correct, if not quite as genuine in feeling, as his own effusions. He felt he was, indeed, in luck to find so peerless a maid, perfect in beauty and in intelligence. One of these compositions--the last--lay in his waist-wallet, as he waited in Ali-Shîr's tomb. The moon had not yet risen, and all was dark. Yet he got up once or twice from the parapet rail on which he sat, and paced aimlessly up and down.

In truth he was restless; vaguely dissatisfied with himself. He was going to explain, of course--oh, yes! he would explain; but it might have been better to write. Yet how could he, knowing neither her name nor where she lived? He could have found out of course; but that might have been to put his paternal aunts on the scent. They were dear creatures, but dreadful scandalmongers. Besides he had so much to say. A personal explanation would be easier; less abrupt, kinder. Not that he meant to back out--far from it. He was ready to be a good, just, generous husband; unless of course, the nameless one preferred not to take second place, as she must do. There was no helping that. It was not his fault. Love had come ...

He paced quicker as he remembered the words which had so touched him-- "And God the Father may send a father's love to the mother of his son." Well! God send He might; though that would be a different sort of love altogether from this absorbing passion. Anyhow he could do no more. A Kâzi, able if necessary to perform the marriage ceremony, was within call. He, himself, was ready. All that was wanting was the lady. Surely she was late in coming.

A rustle made him start and listen; but it was only the doves in the orange trees.

No one! No one!

The moon rose after a time over the garden and flooded the terraces with such silvern brilliance that the very pebbles on the path showed distinct.

But no one came--no one!

Could she have heard?

Impossible; it was still a Court secret, and she was a religious recluse--so far as he knew.

Besides; even if she had changed her mind, she might have come--or sent a message.

So, at last, in rather an ill humour he went back to the Palace and dismissed the waiting Kâzi with a handsome fee.

There was one more Friday ere he left Herât; and, feeling ill-used, sore, yet in a way mightily relieved, he waited in Ali-Shîr's tomb for another hour or so. No one should say *he* had failed in his part of the bargain! He was quite ready. Besides he had told the woman plainly that he was not in love with her; so she had no right to feel aggrieved. If she did.

But that could scarcely be. Every good Mussulmân knew she had no claim to a whole man--though little Ma'asuma had every bit of him. Yea! every bit. So it was as well, doubtless, that no one came.

And as he went back to the palace his only regret was that he should have called the nameless one "My moon."

The title belonged to his love, of right; but she would, she could never bear it because of the nameless one who had changed her mind--apparently; but she had not sent back his ring!

CHAPTER V

Forward and onward! do not ask the task,
Fortune importune! Is not strife true life?

Kâsim-beg was in a fever to leave Herât. Marriage, he said, was good, and it was proper to choose a cousin, who was doubtless charming; though for his part he believed the rather in choice by outsiders; for if the result was not happy there was no self blame, and self blame was the devil for destroying decent calm. But Kingship was more important still, and as the Most High had not been so very secure on his new throne before he had started, he simply could not afford to be away more than six months.

And Babar could not but admit his faithful old minister was right. So he said farewell reluctantly to little Ma'asuma and started at the head of his small army for Kâbul. And as he rode up the last slope whence he could see the gilded city of Herât, he told himself he could not have done it better. He had seen everything--he ran over the list of the sights in his mind, and found eighty-two of them! In fact the only one worthy of notice which he had omitted was a certain convent. He flushed a little at the remembrance, and set the thought aside with self-complacence that he had come through the temptations of the most luxurious town in the world quite unscathed. He had not played any indecent or scurvy tricks, he had not touched wine. He had altogether been quite a virtuous prince. So, with characteristic buoyancy, despite the fact that he had said good-bye to his first and only love, he settled himself in the saddle, and his face for home.

Here difficulties arose at once. It began to snow the very day they left Herât, and Babar was for taking the low road for safety's sake. It was the longer of course, but the hill road was at all times difficult and dangerous; in snow practically impassable.

But Kâsim-Beg, who had been in a fuss for days, behaved very perversely, so that in the end Babar gave way and they started for the passes, taking one Binâi, an old mountaineer, as their guide. Now whether it was from old age, or from his heart failing him at the unusual depth of the drifts, is uncertain; but this is sure--having once lost the path he never could find it again so as to point out the way!

However, as Kâsim-Beg and his sons were anxious to preserve their reputation as route-choosers, they dismounted, beat down the snow and discovered something like a road along which the party--much reduced by defections due to the delights of Herât--managed to advance for a day, when it was brought to a complete stand by the depth of the snow, which was such that the horses' feet did not touch the ground. Seeing no other remedy, Babar ordered a retreat to a ravine where there was abundance of firewood, and thence despatched sixty or seventy chosen men, to return by the road they had come, and, retracing their footsteps, to find on the lower ground any Huzâras or other people who might be wintering there, and to bring a guide who was able to point out the way. This done they halted in the ravine for three or four days awaiting the return of the men who had been sent out. These did, indeed, come back, but without having been able to find a guide.

What was to be done? Nothing but place reliance on God and push forward. So said Babar, a light in his clear eyes as he recognised that he was in a tight place, that before him and his lay

such hardships and sufferings as even he had scarcely undergone at any other period of his life. But then at no other period of his life had Love been waiting, her rosy wings fluttering, for him to win through.

"Warm yourselves to the marrow this night," he said to all. "Eat your fill and carry firewood in place of the victuals. We shall need every atom of strength we can save and spend."

But he himself spent a wakeful night and wrote a Turki verse to console himself. It ran thus and was rather poor; though nothing else was to be expected under such circumstances:

"Fate from my very birth has marked me down,
There is no injury I have not known,
Not one! So what care I what fortune bring?
No harm unknown can come to me, the King."

They were up betimes, a long straggling party doing their best to struggle on by beating down the snow and so forming a road along which the laden mules could go. It was luckily a fine day and by evening they could count on an advance of three miles. What was more, as no snow had fallen, they were able to send back along the beaten track for more firewood. So it went on for two or three days. Then the men began to be discouraged, and Babar set his teeth. With Love awaiting him at the other side, he meant to get over the Pass.

He only had about fifteen volunteers from his immediate staff, but those fifteen, headed by vitality incarnate, worked wonders. Every step taken was up to the middle or the breast in soft, fresh-fallen snow; but still it was a step, and he who followed did not sink so far. Thus they laboured. As the vigour of the person who went first was generally expended after he had gone a few paces, another advanced and took his place.

"Lo! gentlemen, 'tis as good as leap-frog," cried the young leader joyously, and thereafter they strove for steps. And as ever Babar came out first. "See you," he said gravely, in explanation of his own prowess, "'tis I brought you hither; and if we do not beat hard we shall be beaten."

At which mild joke Kâsim laughed profusely, though he felt as if he could have killed himself for having thus jeopardised his young hero's life.

The fifteen or so who worked in trampling down the snow, next succeeded in dragging on a riderless horse. This generally sank to the stirrups and after ten or fifteen paces was worn out. The next fared better and the next, and the next. And after all the led horses had thus been brought forward, came a sorry sight. The rest of the troops, even the best men and many who bore the title of "Noble" advancing (not even dismounted!) along the road that had been beaten down for them by their King! Some of them, certainly, had the grace to hang their heads. But this was no time, Babar felt, for reproach or even for authority. Every man who possessed spirit or emulation must have hastened to the front without orders; and those without spirits were worse than useless at such a time.

"We must do without them, Kâsim," said the young King, when his minister would have spoken his mind. "'Twill not mend matters with cowards to tell them they be such. Could any tongue circle the lie I would praise them for their bravery, but with Death staring us in the face I stick to Truth."

And to work also. The life and soul of the fifteen, he kept them going by jokes and quips and the singing of songs. Aye! even when storm and snow came with blinding force and they all expected to meet death together. Then it was that, ahead of all, Babar's full mellow voice rang out in such ballads as:

THE HAND OF THE THIEF

The bog was black outside Kazân,
now it is red!
Last night there came a rich car-wân,
Blood has been shed!

Now Adham-Khân was over-lord,
Judging the right
Of quarr'l betwixt the Black-Sheep-Horde
And they of the White.

"Oh! Adham-Khân avenge the wrong,
Thou art the head."
"My hand holds fast the skirt that's long,"
Smiling he said.

Then rose in wrath young Zulfikâr,
Girt on his sword.
"Now show I him in full durbâr

Right is the Lord."

He saddled steed and rode away
Over the sand,
His hauberk rattling roundelay,
God at his hand.

And Adham-Khân, he sat in state
Holding his court.
"Now who is he who comes so late
What has he brought?"

"I bring a gift from the Black-Horde-chief,
Thy honour's friend,
And lay the hand of a common thief
On thy skirt's end."

The stiff dead hand skimmed through the
air,
Lay like a stone.
Of all the court not one did dare
Right to disown.

"Oh! warrior hear! Against the right
Keep thou from strife;
But if the wrong is *done* then fight
Fight for thy life."

They were, in truth, fighting for dear life. And there was a chance of it ahead of them; for, nigh the top of the great Zerrin pass, lay a cave wherein shelter might be found. At least so said Binâi the guide. But the snow fell in such quantities, the wind was so dreadful, so terribly violent, it needed all Babar's courage not to give in.

But the rosy fluttering wings of Love would not let him yield. He could not lose little cousin Ma'asuma. The very thought of her warmed him; the scent of her hair came to him with the snow.

The drifts deepened, the possibility of path narrowed in the steep defile, the days were at the shortest, with difficulty could the horses be kept on the trampled road, yet all around was certain death in unfathomed snow-depths.

Babar's face was stern. He was nigh his end, and he knew it.

And then, suddenly, a shout from keen-eyed Tengâri, old Kâsim's son. "The cave! The cave! Yonder is the cave."

And it was; but to all appearance disappointingly small. Not large enough to hold one-half of those seeking shelter, though the surrounding cliffs in some measure tempered the bitter fierceness of the wind.

"The Most High had better go in," said Kâsim, as Babar set to work arranging what best he could for his troopers. "I will see to the men."

But Babar shook his head and went on. He felt that for him to be in warmth and comfort while his men were in snow and drift, for him to be enjoying sleep and ease while his followers were in trouble and distress would be inconsistent from what he owed them and a deviation from that society in suffering that was their due.

"'Death in the company of friends is a feast.' At any rate, so runs the proverb," he remarked lightly. "And indeed, Kâsim, having brought these poor souls to this pass, it is but right that whatever their sufferings and difficulties, whatever they may have to undergo, I should be equal sharer in all."

So when he had done what he could and shown others what to do, he took a hoe and dug down in the snow as deep as his breast without reaching the ground, then crouched down in it. The day was darkening, evening prayer time had passed, and still belated troopers came dropping in. The snow was now falling so fast that the men in the dug-out shelter ran some chance of being smothered as they slept from sheer fatigue. Babar himself found four inches of snow above him as he scrambled out of his hole when a last party straggled in, bringing Binâi the guide, with the welcome news that the cave was far larger than hasty observation would expect, and that a narrow passage led to quite a spacious cavern within where there was ample room for all.

Joyful news indeed! Sending out to call in all his men, Babar soon found himself, by one of his own extraordinary changes of luck, in a wonderfully warm, safe, and comfortable place. For there proved to be firewood within the cave, and such as had any eatables, stewed meat, preserved flesh, or anything else they might have, produced them for a common meal. Thus all escaped, as by a miracle, from the terrible cold, the snow, the bitter, bitter wind.

And the rosy wings of Love fluttered gaily, as Babar laid himself down to sleep--the first sleep

he had had for days.

It was the turning point; though there was still distress and misery to come.

The snow, however, had ceased to fall by the morning, the wind had died down. Moving with the first blink of dawn they still had to tread down the snow in the old way: but it was with more hope. The cave in which they had rested was, as they were aware, close to the beginning of the last steep ascent to the Great Pass. This, the shortest way, they knew to be impassable, and even Kâsim and his sons, warned by experience, did not advise its attempt. Bad enough was a lower valley road of which old Binâi the guide had vaguely heard. Yet it was their only chance, so they took it. But evening found them still in the defile; and such was its precipitate nature, that there was nothing for it but for every man to halt where he found himself, dismount, scrape a hole in the snow for himself and his horse if possible, and so await the tardy dawn to bring sufficient light for safe advance. It was an awful night. The retreat of the storm had brought frost; icy, keen, piercing; and though none of the hardy troopers actually lost their lives, many lost hands and feet from frostbite. Babar himself kept his blood warm by pacing up and down, singing at the top of his voice with that curious instinct of shouting which comes always to humanity with the grip of cold. Mayhap it cheered the others to hear the mellow melodious chants echoing so blithely over the snow.

He sang many things, but his favourite was the

SONG OF THE SMILING SHEPHERD

From Sunset until Dawn-of-Day,
My forehead frozen with the Frost,
I shut mine eyes like Wolf-at-Bay
And sing to find the Sheep I've lost.

When Angels walk at Break-of-Day
Among pale wormwood on the lea,
Upon the Night-of-Power, they say,
My smiling soul came unto me.

It had a palace of pure gold
In Paradise and yet it chose
To leave the Heat-of-Heaven for Cold
And help me find the Sheep I love.

So in the Dark and in the Snow
We twain make up one Perfect-Whole
And sing glad songs the while we go
A Smiling-Shepherd, Smiling-Soul.

Dawn came at last and they moved down the glen. It was not the usual road,—that was more circuitous—but with the snow filling up the valley and obliterating precipices, ravines, crevasses, there seemed a chance of being able to manage a shorter route, and time meant so much to those exhausted men.

Yet Babar himself halted for awhile, and so did a few of his immediate followers when his horse stumbled, fell, could not rise.

"Take mine, my liege," said half-a-dozen voices. But the young man's face set.

"I will not leave the beast," he said resolutely. "It hath done me good service and may do it again. See you! bring some of the men's lances and their halter ropes. Samûr and I live together, or die together," and he laid his young cheek to the horse's soft muzzle affectionately.

Then starting up, he set the men to work to form a criss-cross raft or sledge of lances on to which Samûr was pulled by main force.

"'Tis all down hill now," said he when it was finished, and seizing a rope strained at it.

"Nay! Sire!" remarked old Kâsim drily—"If the Most Excellent choose to risk lives for the sake of a dumb brute, let them be the lives of dumb brutes, not Kings. Troopers! Six horses to save one!"

Babar hung his head, but held to the rope.

"Doubtless I am a brute also," he murmured half to himself, "so let me be dumb; save for this—God made me so!"

The staunch old warrior heard the words and shook his head. Yet in his heart of hearts he would not have altered one jot or one tittle in his idol. Zahir-ud-din Mahomed Babar was for him the first gentleman in the world.

"Truly," said the latter with pious cheerfulness after a time, during which the sledge slipped easily down the steep slopes of snow, "it is well said

'Looked at wisely with clear eyes
Ills are blessings in disguise.'

But for this extreme depth of snow which till now hath seemed our worst enemy, we should all be tumbling down precipices and being lost in crevasses."

This was obvious; but it cheered the party, until in the far distance something more tangible showed to bring sudden alacrity to outworn steps.

A hut surely!

And that figure on the lessening snow slopes--was it a man?

Still it was nigh bed-time prayers before they extricated themselves from the mouth of the valley and the villagers of Yâka-Aulang came out to meet the forlorn party, to help, and even to carry, some of them into warm houses, and thereafter to slaughter fat sheep for them, bring a superfluity of hay and grass for their horses, and abundance of wood to kindle their fires.

Once again Babar felt that to pass from the cold and snow into such a village with its warm houses, and to escape from want and suffering to find such plenty of good bread and fat sheep as they did, was an enjoyment that can only be conceived by such as have suffered similar hardships, or endured such heavy distress.

But better by far to him than this material satisfaction, was the glow at his heart when an old white-headed patriarch nodding by the fireside, mumbled--

"Never has it been done before, never since the memory of man hath Zerrin been passed in such snow. Never hath any man ever conceived even the idea of passing it at such season--Never! Never!"

It was something to have done! After this, marching was easy. But the strain had told upon the courage of the rank and file, and once when the little party came upon a clan of Hazâras who disputed passage in a narrow defile, there was near disaster. The young King, who was in the rear, galloped up to find his force retreating before a deadly flight of arrows.

"Stand!" he shouted. "Stand!" But the men would not be rallied. "Fools!" he cried, rising in his stirrups, a fine young figure, unarmoured, without sword or lance, without helmet or aught but his bow and quiver--for the attack was entirely unforeseen and he had been, for the time, off-duty--"Call ye yourselves servants to stand still while the master works? Lo! He who hires a servant hires him for his need; not to stand still like a slipped camel!"

So with a wild *huroosh!* he set his horse spurring forward. The reckless bravery did its work. The men roused by it turned to follow. The ambushade was reached, the hill beyond climbed after the enemy, who, seeing the troopers were in real earnest, fled like deer. So the danger passed; but Babar wondered vaguely that night if it was to be ever so; if the great mass of humanity ever needed a flaming match ere they would catch fire.

But there was more trouble to come, as, with such haste as was possible--for the snow which was very heavy that winter, hindered them even in the valleys--they pushed on towards Kâbul.

It was one day at noon when, being almost perished with the frost, they had alighted to kindle fires and warm themselves ere going on, that a messenger on horseback arrived with ill news. The Moghuls left behind in Kâbul had risen, and, aided by outsiders and some of the immediate relations of the King, had declared for Babar's young cousin Weis-Khân, on whose behalf they were now besieging the Fort, which in capable and loyal hands was still holding out for the rightful King.

"Said I not so, sire?" remarked old Kâsim drily. "The devil is in it when women are left alone too long."

Babar flushed. "The devil is in a Moghul thou meanest."

Kâsim sniffed. "The Most High's step-grandmother Shâh-Begum is of pure Moghul descent, I grant, if that is what my liege means. I stake my word she is in it. Did I not beg the Most High to send her packing back to Tashkend? Aye! and the boy and his mother too. Also the other aunt of my liege's who married the commoner Doghlat; wherefore, God knows, since some of us had better right to royal wives than he. But if 'tis a question of aunts! the Most High is soft as buffalo butter."

Babar bit his lip. He felt that old Kâsim had right on his side; but what could one do? They were women, and he was undoubtedly the head of the family. But this was serious; the more so because the messenger said that reports had been diligently circulated to the effect that he, Babar, had been imprisoned in Herât by his cousins; and would never return.

"They must know that I shall return," said the young leader grimly, and forthwith wrote despatches to be conveyed to known loyalists in the town, advising them of his immediate appearance, of which, however, they were to say nothing. A blazing fire on the last hill-top would herald his approach; this was to be answered by a flare on the top of the citadel, showing that it was ready for a combined surprise-attack on the besieging force.

With these orders given stringently, Babar set out at nightfall. By dawn Kâbul lay before them and a glow of light from the citadel answered their signal fire. All therefore was in readiness, so they crept on to Syed Kâsim's bridge. Here Babar detailed his force, sending Shirim-Taghâi with the right wing to another bridge; he himself with the centre and left, making for the town. Here, instantly all was uproar and alarm. The alleys were narrow; the assailants and defenders crowded into them could scarce move their horses.

"Dismount! cut your way through!" rang out the order and it was obeyed. A few minutes later Babar was in the Four-corner Garden where he knew the young aspirant was quartered, but he had fled. Babar followed in his track. At the gate he met an old friend, the Chief-Constable of the town, who made at him with a drawn sword. Babar, after his usual fashion, had despised either plate-mail or helmet, and when, whether from confusion of ideas arising from the battle of fight, or from the snow and cold affecting his eyesight, the swordsman failing to recognise his King or heed his cry of "Friend, Friend," hit a shrewd blow, Babar was like to have his arm shorn off. But the grace of God was conspicuous. Not even a hair was hurt.

So, as quick as he could to the palace of Doghlat-commoner, where he found Kâsim already on the track of the traitor; but the latter had escaped! Here a Moghul who had been in Babar's service deliberately fitted an arrow to his bow, aimed at the King and let go. But the uproar raised around him, the cries and shouts "That is the King! That is the King!" must have disconcerted his aim, for he failed of his mark. And here also one of the chief rebels was brought in ignominiously, a rope round his neck. He fell at the young King's feet.

"Sire," he whined, "what fault is mine?"

The young face was stern indeed. "Is there greater crime," came the clear, cold answer, "than for a man of worth and family as thou art, to conspire and associate with revolutionaries?" Then the contemptuous order came sharp, "But remove that rope and let him go hang himself. He is of my family, no harm shall happen to him through me."

So on again through the town (where the rabble had taken to clubs and were making a riot) in order to station parties here and there to disperse the crowds and prevent plunder.

Thus, growing cooler, more dignified as stress ceased, to the Paradise-Gardens where the Begums lived. No time like the present to show his mettle, to let these foolish women know that he did not consider their intrigues worth a man's consideration. He found the chief-conspirator Shâh-Begum huddled up, out of all measure alarmed, confounded, dismayed, ashamed. All the more so when that brilliant young figure paused at the door to make its accustomed and reverential salutation. He looked well, did Babar, with the fire of fight still in his eyes, a certain quizzical affection about his mouth. "I salute thee, O revered step-grandmother," he said cheerfully, good-humouredly.

So crossing, he went down on his knees in filial fashion and embraced the old lady cordially.

Whereupon, of course, she began to whimper. Babar sat back and looked at her kindly.

"Wherefore, revered one? Lo! I am not vexed. What right has a child to be so because his mother's bounty descends upon another? The mother's authority over her children is in all respects absolute, save that this grandson, and not the other is King of Kâbul!" Then he laughed: "Lo!" he added, "I am so sleepy. I have not slept all night. Let me rest my hand on thy bosom, grandmother, as I used to rest it on my mother's."

The whimper changed into a storm of sobs.

And afterwards when the young aspirant and the Doghlat-commoner had been caught and brought up for condign punishment by Kâsim, he forgave them both.

"But the traitor deserves death, sire," stuttered the stern old martinet. "He hath been guilty of mutiny, rebellion. He is criminal, guilty; and the younger one is devil's spawn."

"You mistake, old friend," said the young King quietly; "they are of my family."

Poor old Kâsim had to content himself by assenting loudly in whatever company he found himself that however much the King might try to wear away the rust of shame with the polish of mildness and humanity he was unable to wipe out the dimness of ignominy which had covered the mirror of those miscreants' lives.

CHAPTER VI

Yes! Love triumphant came, engrossing all
The fond luxuriant thoughts of youth and mind;
Then in soft converse did they pass the hours,
Their passion like the season fresh and fair.

Nizâmi.

The Judas trees were in full blossom. But a day or two before they had been dry branches, brown, wrinkled, to all appearances dead. Now, with a swiftness nigh miraculous they had flushed, every inch of finest twig, to rosy red under their mantle of sweet-scented bloom. The ground underneath them was already carpeted with fallen flowers, their five-petalled cups, like those of a regal geranium, still perfect utterly.

"'Tis like the blossoming of love in the heart, is it not, little one?" said Babar idly, as, lying amid the spent blossoms he raised one to perch it coquettishly on the goldy-brown curls that rested on his breast.

He had been married five months to little Cousin Ma'asuma but it seemed to him like five days. Aye! though happenings stern and sad had filled the interval, Kâsim had been right. Herât had been plundered by the arch-enemy Shaibâni. His cousins had fled, leaving wives and children to fall into the hands of the conquerors.

At another time Babar's hot anger might have led him to attempt reprisals, though he knew it would be but an attempt. But in these first months of marriage he could not find it in his heart to leave little Ma'asuma for any time--if, indeed she would have allowed him to do so. For small, young, delicate as she was, those violet eyes of hers could set hard as sapphires. Aye! and have a gleam in them too, like any gem.

The first time Babar saw it, he caught her in his arms and half smothered her with kisses until she bade him peremptorily put her down. And then they had both laughed, and Babar had vowed in his heart, that never had lover been so fortunate as he. His mistress was--what was she not? Briefly, she was all things to him. He had never been in love with a woman before, and his self-surrender was complete.

Small wonder, indeed, if it were; for there was something almost uncanny in the beauty of the face which looked up at him, love in its eyes.

"Put it on thine own rough head, man," she said superbly, "thou needest ornament more than I."

And it was true. From the tiny silvern and golden slipper she had kicked off, to the light, gold-spangled veil which just touched her curly head, she was ornament personified. The dainty heart-shaped opening of the violet-tinted gauze bodice she wore over a pale green corselet was all set with seed-pearls and turquoises, hung on cunning little silvern tendrils. And the corselet itself! all veined with golden threads and pale moonstones. So with the flimsy, full, almost transparent muslin petticoat, pale pale green, that lay in shrouding folds over the violet-tinted under garment. All edged and embroidered, all scent-sodden with the perfume of violets--his favourite flower then; to be his favourite flower till his death. Truly a marvellous small person from head to foot!

"Have a care, man," she said sternly, as he crushed her closer to him, "or we shall quarrel; and 'tis not good for me to quarrel--now."

He released her quickly, yet cautiously; gentle as he was, he was always forgetting, he told himself, that she was doubly precious to him--now.

"Lo! dear heart!" he said penitently, "we have not quarrelled these five days."

"Not since I was angry because the tire-woman overdyed my hands with henna," she replied mischievously. "And thou didst tell me there were worse evils for tears. As if I cared; so long as my hands were not pretty ... for thee." She held them up for him to admire. And they were pretty. Delicate, and curved, and pink, like rose-petals. He kissed them dutifully; so much he knew was expected of him, and he loved the task.

"And as penance for rudeness, man," she went on, her face all dimples, "thou wert to write me a love ode on the subject. Hast done it, sirrah?"

"That have I," assented her lover husband gladly. "Dost know, little one, I string more pearls now than ever; but thou--thou hast not written one line since we were married; yet thou hadst the prettiest art."

Ma'asuma lay back on her resting-place and laughed softly. "Someday, stupid, I will tell thee why. But now for thy verses."

Babar caught up his lute and sat tuning it, his eyes wandering away to the girdle of snows that clipped the blue hill-horizon. They were in the garden of the New Year; alone, save for that dear grave yonder where the jasmine flowers were drooping their scented waxen stars.

Dear mother! How glad she would have been to see Ma'asuma, to think of the grandson who was so soon to make life absolutely perfect. Yes! the cup of life, the Crystal Bowl could hold no more. He lost himself in dreams, to be roused by an impatient, "Well! I listen."

Then he turned and smiled at her as he began with exaggerated expression.

"Oh, fair impassioned, whom God hath fashioned
My love to be,
Thy hands so tender, thy fingers slender
Rosy I see.
Be they flower-tinted or blood-imprinted
From my poor heart?
Torn by thy smiling, tears and beguiling
Feminine art.
Yet, sweet calamity! dwell we in amity
Each perfect day.
Yea! in the bright time. Yea! in the night time,
Lovers alway."

"Sweet calamity!" she echoed, pouting her lips and trying hard to frown, as the song finished. "Couldst find no other title for thy lawful wife? And yet--" here smiles overcame her--"Lo! Babar! 'tis a beautiful name and I am thy sweet calamity alway, alway!" Then suddenly, to his dismay, she began to cry softly, the big tears running down her pretty cheeks in easy childish fashion. "Nay!" she went on, half-smiles again at his solicitude, "I am not ill,--there is naught wrong. 'Tis only that I am lonely when thou art doing King's work, which must be done. If only foster-sister would come, I should not be so frightened."

"But my Yenkâm, thy mother, will be here--" protested Babar.

Ma'asuma shook her head. "It is *now*, dear heart! And foster-sister will not come unless thou askest her. She said so. Couldst not write to her, Babar?"

"But I know not foster-sister, nor aught of her, save that she was good to my Ma'asuma, for which, may Heaven reward her!"

Ma'asuma sat up, her charming face happy in thought. "Oh! so good, my lord! Not a real foster-sister, either; but we sat under one veil and drank milk out of one cup. That was when we first came to Khorasân, thy Yenkâm and I. And since then she--Babar!--Be not angry but I will tell thee--I meant to have told thee--I should have told thee before--"

The violet eyes showed trouble once more and Babar kissed them deliberately. "What, sweetheart?" he asked carelessly. He knew the gentle kindly heart too well to fear any revelation.

"Only it was she, not I, who wrote the verses--the verses I sent--I was too stupid. And she is clever--oh! so clever!"

Despite his certitude the young man looked startled. "So," he said at last, "Fortune hath not given me the grace of a poetess to wife. So be it. But who is this paragon?"

Ma'asuma, however, was too delighted at having got over her confession so happily to refrain from autocratic dignity.

"That I have said. She is foster-sister and of the circle of distinction. Thy Yenkâm can tell thee of genealogies; they tire my head. So write! Dost hear?"

Babar laughed. He loved to take orders from those sweet lips; besides a certain zest came with the idea of writing to an unknown poetess.

"Yea! I will write," he said meekly, "but I will have to regard *zals* and *zes*; for more elegant *nastâlik* saw I never than hers."

So the letter was written and despatched express to the care of his Yenkâm at Khorasân, and six weeks later little Ma'asuma sat beside her foster-sister in the summer house of the new Garden of Fidelity which Babar was laying out at Adinahpore, and whither he had taken his young wife whose daily increasing delicacy filled him with concern. Of all the gardens that Babar planted and watered, this was the one nearest his heart. In a most romantic situation, on the south side of, and overlooking the river, its groves of oranges and citrons grew untouched by hard winter frosts, while every flower, every tree of his beloved hill country flourished side by side with those of warm climates. Above it towered the White-Mountain and the Almond-Spring Pass, below it the valley debouched into wide fertility.

And Babar was hard at work, delving away himself like any Adam; making a four-square cross of marble reservoirs, through which the clear, hill stream might run, planting new flowers from here, there, everywhere. The tan of his sunburnt face and hands contrasted sadly with the sallowing skin of the girl-wife, who, despite his care, was sinking under her task of son-bearing.

"Then he knows not who I am," said the tall, slender woman on whose knee Ma'asuma was resting her pretty, weary head. "I deemed thou hadst told him, as we agreed." She spoke gravely and her level black brows were faintly knit. The rest of the face was richly beautiful in strong sweeping curves, but those level brows and the dark, thoughtful eyes beneath them held the attention. "Not that it matters," she added quickly, seeing tears ready to brim over the violets upturned to her. "After all, 'tis nothing to thy lord--or to any other man--whether I be widow to Mirza Gharîb Beg or no, so long as I be honourable woman. Therefore tell him not, now that I am here." And Babar coming in to see his wife found the veiled new-comer courteous in speech, charming in manner. Found also such favourable change in his darling's spirits, that a glow of comradeship for his *aide* rose up in his soft heart at once.

So they were very happy together, those three, and by degrees foster-sister's thick enshrouding veil was changed for a more filmy one and Babar could get a glimpse of those glorious eyes and see the little satirical smile about the strong curves of the mouth.

They reminded him vaguely, why he knew not, of his dead Cousin Gharîb; but he never spoke of this to Ma'asuma. With her burden of coming life it would be unlucky to speak of the dead. Thus a week or two went by, and all insensibly the man learnt to rely on the woman who shared with him the charge of the girl.

"The Most-Benevolent one is very good to my wife," he said suddenly one day, "and my gratitude can only lie in words."

The Most-Benevolent bowed gravely. "Thanks are not needed. Ma'asuma-Begum came into this dust-like one's life, when it was unhappy. She hath been God's best boon to me."

"And to me also," answered the young husband sadly. Do what he would he could not escape from fear, the shadow of impending evil seemed to darken his life. He had to brisk and hearken himself up to face the future; for perilous times were at hand. The fateful seventh month, so much dreaded by Indian midwives was beginning; but his Yen-kâm would be with her daughter in a day or two, they would together take Ma'asuma back in her litter to Kâbul by easy stages, and all would, all *must*, go well.

It was one glorious morning in early August when this feeling of ill to come, made him catch up his lute to chase away thought by song. He had carried little Ma'asuma himself down to the tank half surrounded by burnished orange trees which was the very eye of the beauty of the garden. They had dismissed all attendants, bidding them leave behind them their trays of sherbet and sweetmeats. But not even the perfect loveliness of hill, and sky, and garden, not even the faint flush, as of returning health, on the invalid's face could charm the splendour of Life into Babar's soul. The Crystal Bowl seemed dull, opaque.

This must not be.

He set the strings of his lute a-twanging and began--

"Clear crystal bowl. Thy wine bubbles laugh--"

The figure seated by the tank side, its reflection in the water, rose suddenly as if startled, gathered its draperies round it, so, with face averted, strolled off into the garden.

"There!" came Ma'asuma's reproachful voice, "thou hast driven her away, stupid!"

The young man arrested in his song looked hurt. "But wherefore? 'Tis a good song."

"Good mayhap," came the thoughtless answer, "but, see you! It reminds her of Gharîb-Beg who wrote it."

"And wherefore not?" asked Babar swiftly.

Little Ma'asuma looked scared. "Lo! There I have told thee! and I said I would hold my tongue! Because, see you, Gharîb-Beg married and left her in the old days; whether rightly as some say, or foolishly, as others, I know not; but 'twas so. She was religious for long years and when I went to the school to learn the Holy Book, we became friends. And oh! Babar, thou wilt never know how good she was to me when I fell in love with my lord--and he with me." The roguish face, looking more like itself than he had seen it for months, nestled on to his shoulder.

He put his arm round the slender figure and drew it to him mechanically, grateful that her words had given him time to pull himself together.

Gharîb-Beg's wife! The woman he had called "Mahâm--his moon!"

"So." he said with an effort, "she was my cousin's wife; but wherefore ... was I not told?"

Ma'asuma pouted. "Because I did not at first. And then when she came, she would not have it--why I know not--save that mayhap, before the son was coming, I wanted thy praise for--for such things as verses. And now, my lord must say naught. Promise me he will not, or she will be vexed."

"I will not vex her," he said diplomatically, and changed the subject adroitly by picking up a tiny red-silk cap half embroidered with seed pearls on which his wife had been working, and which had fallen on the path.

"Lo!" he laughed, "is that the way to treat my son's head-dress!" And he held the ridiculous little object out on his forefinger and twirled it round. So the question passed. But he was of too frank a nature to palliate concealment and that night when the moon had risen, he found himself once more confronting a tall, slender figure that stood, aggressively this time, against a marble pillar. But there was no swinging lamp to cast a rose reflection between them.

"Yea! Zahir-ud-din Mahomed Babar," said the proud voice. "It is even as my lord hath divined. I knew. I was the lad who brought my lord his mistress's message--which *I* had written. It was to me that my lord gave his 'I love thee, ever, ever!' This being so, what else was there left to do, save what was done?"

The finality of her words struck Babar like a blow. He never minced matters even with himself.

"Naught," he said gloomily. "Naught." Then he added, "But now?"

The veiled figure caught him up quickly. "Now? She must not know; she must never know."

Babar stood still and leaning his head on his arm against the pilaster, looked out into the garden. It lay silvern, peaceful, a thing of perfect beauty, a place wherein no sinful man should walk or set foot. "Lo!" came the sweet voice. "I have kept--I will keep my lord's ring. It was not he who broke faith, but I."

"The Most-Noble is very good," he said simply and left her. There was no more to say.

Had there been more, there would have been little time for it.

A hasty twinkling light showed ere long adown the palace colonnade. Voices came in excited whispers. Her Highness, the Begum, was not well. God send it might be nothing; but 'twas the fateful month.

Fateful, indeed! All that night long Babar waited in a fever of anxiety, listening to the fitful wails, the thousand and one slight sounds of sudden, direful sickness. What were they doing to his Ma'asuma? his little Ma'asuma, his love, his heart's darling, his little one? Would he ever see her again?

The dawn came, and still he watched, still he waited. The birds in the bushes began to sing--to sing forsooth! while she lay in the shadow of death! Heartless! cruel! For she must die! so small, so slender, how could she stand out against those long hours of agony. Noon passed and still he waited, every nerve in his strong young body wearied by imagined pain.

It was not till sun-setting that a voice roused him as he sat crouched in on himself:

"My lord has a daughter."

He was on his feet in a second, setting the idea aside as trivial. What was son or daughter to him beside his dearest dear?

"She?" he asked breathlessly.

"My lord had best come and see," replied the kind, sympathetic voice; he recognised it faintly, but it made no impression on him.

The small room was hot and close; full of smoke also from a useless fire hastily lit up. And Ma'asuma lay covered by endless quilts. But it was Ma'asuma herself who lay there peaceful as if already dead; but her face was alight with feeble smiles. Only for a moment, however; then the curly, goldy-brown head turned restlessly on the pillow.

"I am sorry--" she murmured, "I--I wanted it to be a son, but--but--" the voice trailed away into weaker sobbing.

"Hush! silly one!" said Babar gently, his heart in his mouth as he noted her looks. "What God gives is best. If she is like thee she will be all I need."

A small trembling hand fluttered out to a corner of the coverlet. "Like me. I know not. Babar! What wilt thou call her, when I am gone?"

The words cut him like a knife, because he knew they were true; there was something which

told him that the dearest thing on earth to him was fast slipping from his grasp. Yet the simplicity of his nature kept him calm.

"I will give her her mother's name," he said quietly.

Ma'asuma sighed with content and was silent for a space. Then after a while her voice, weaker than ever, rose again, a low, monotonous voice that told of ebbing strength.

"Babar! who will nurse my child? Give her not to strange women. Lo! I never loved strangers; nor dost thou, thou, dear heart. Foster-sister where art thou? Send the strangers away and the slaves, and come close. I want thee."

One wave of Babar's hand cleared the little room, and once more came that faint sigh of content.

"That is nice. Only thou, and I, and she, and little Ma'asuma--all the folk I love in the world. That is right." For a moment she seemed to sleep, and when she opened her eyes there were dreams in them.

"Set the window wide. I would see the sunset," she said in quite a strong voice and when the red light flooded into the little dark room she lay in it peacefully.

"Will it not mayhap hurt?" whispered the tall figure in white.

"She is past hurt," whispered Babar back. His heart was as a stone. He could not have wept, he could not even feel grief.

"Thy hand, my heart," came the voice feeble again, "and thine, sister--how warm they are and mine grow so cold--so cold. Yet that matters not. I am only--only the Kâzi." The ghost of a flickering smile hovered over the lips that, in the monotonous Arabic drawl of the professional priest, began on the opening sentences of the Mahomedan wedding service.

The man and the woman standing instinct with Life, looked helplessly at each other and instinctively drew apart.

Ma'asuma's violet eyes seemed to strive with coming darkness. "Don't," she murmured. "It is not kind! Look you, I cannot see; and my hands are so weak. Be quick or I shall not hear. Say it quickly and then there will be peace, then I shall have given my lord a son--then we shall all be at rest. It is the last thing--"

There was a second of silence and then Babar's clasp on the hand he held beneath that small chill one tightened, and his voice rang clear.

"Before God I take this woman to be my wedded wife."

And swift on the words came a woman's voice, "Before God I take this man to be my husband, the father of our son."

A sigh of content seemed almost to end life, and there was silence for a space. But it was broken by a pitiful, helpless murmur, "The ring! I have forgotten the ring."

"I have it already, sweetheart," came the woman's voice, soft, calm, soothing. So they stood, till the chill little hands grew more chill in the warm clasps that held them; finally one withdrew itself slowly, slowly, and Babar was left alone with Death and Love.

The tall white figure fell on its knees and wept softly; but Babar stood still, stern, calm. What use to kiss unconscious lips? What use to strain at broken cords?

"She hath found freedom," he said after a time. Then he turned to the kneeling figure. "Mahâm," he said quietly. "Thou wilt see to little Ma'asuma for me, wilt thou not?"

It was sunrise when they laid to rest Babar's first and in a way, his only love. The birds were singing in the garden he had made so beautiful. The roses that decked the grave were full of scent. But Babar noticed none of these things, he moved about calm, self-controlled, conscious of but one thing, that he was glad he was not at Kâbul where he would have had wailing women and ceremonial condolences. Here, in the open, among the flowers, all was peace. He need not even realise that his dearest-dear was dead.

But he had overrated his emotional strength, or rather he had underrated it as he always did. All the day long, as he went about as usual, his face haggard, his manner courteous and gentle, a storm was brewing within, and when sunset came again, bringing the sadness of a dead day with it, the tempest burst.

Mahâm, her eyes red with weeping, was seated in the dusk of the little room where Ma'asuma had died, with the dead woman's babe on her lap when she looked up to see a tall, swaying figure standing at the door. A helpless, bewildered figure that stretched out bewildered hands to her.

"Mahâm! Mahâm!" it cried, "save me! Save me from myself."

She rose instantly, laid the sleeping infant on the bed, and went to him.

"Thou art tired," she said, as a mother might have said it. "Come hither and rest awhile, my lord. Sleep will bring peace."

CHAPTER VII

I am the dust beneath thy feet, my sweet;
Thou art the cloud that sprinkleth rain amain.
Lo! as green tongues of grasses spring to bring
Their thanks for moisture given to root and fruit,
So, all my being blossometh and saith
"Dear God be praised for Love of Thee and Me."

Mahâm had her work cut out for her. But she was a wise woman and from the first gauged Babar's volatile, kindly, affectionate nature to a nicety.

He had had a shock, and one with such fine-strung nerves as his required time for recovery. Therefore, with easy ability, she took the tiller ropes and steered his craft and hers through the troubled waters which instantly raged about him. She even, rather to their resentment, succeeded in pacifying Babar's step-grandmother and his paternal aunts as to her position (which she claimed at once) as Babar's wife. They had been betrothed for months, she told them; indeed for long years the intent to marry had been existent. So much so that they had her late husband Gharîb-Beg's hearty assent to their union. She had come from Khorasân at Ma'asuma Begum's earnest wish, and the marriage had taken place when it did--this she left hazy--entirely to please her when she was ill and ailing. Doubtless the dear little thing had had a prescience of her own death. Such angels of Paradise often had. She, Mahâm, could never hope to hold the same place in the King's affection; still it was lucky things had happened so, or the Most-Clement might have gone out of his mind with grief, deprived as he was in the wilds of Adinapur of the consolations of all his womenkind. And the gracious ladies knew how dependent he had always been on them, as well as on his deceased mother--on whom be God's peace--and his unfortunate sister. Besides, she could be useful in bringing up the King's little daughter.

"If thou wilt give him a son 'twould be to more purpose," quoth outspoken Shâh-Begum.

"God helping me, I will, madam," came the cool reply.

"She is well spoken," admitted the old lady grudgingly, after the interview was over.

"And of the inner circle. 'Deed! now that one comes to consider it," wept Babar's Yenkâm, "more suited for the work than my fairy, who was ever too lightsome for such task. And, look you! there be no question of evil eye or such things. She loved my Ma'asuma as herself, and was ever good to the child. It is doubtless God's will."

"Yea! Yea! God's will," snivelled fat, silly Princess Astonishing Beauty; but little Ak-Begum's keen eyes were soft.

"There is more in it than mayhap we know," she said softly. "And she hath a good, clever face. So God send our kind Babar peace."

Good wishes were well enough doubtless, but Mahâm felt that action must be taken; and at once. My lord the King must not be allowed to lounge at home, eating his heart out; and to this purpose she sent for old Kâsim and explained her views.

"Lady," he replied, "I would rather, in faith, have had my master free of all feminine wiles. The last seven months have passed without much glory, and my sword rusts in its scabbard. But this I will say, for a woman, the cupola of chastity shows much sense. The King would be best away from Kâbul."

"And from me," added Mahâm, coolly. "So look to it, Sir General, and take him--where thou canst."

As it so happened, the times fell in with her desire. The Timurid family was at its lowest ebb; Babar himself, being, for the moment the only member of it which had kept his kingdom independent; the rest having either succumbed utterly to the great Usbek-raider or become mere vassals to his power. Thus the King's position was weak, even if he had been himself. But Mahâm's clear eyes appraised her haggard young King as he went about grave, silent, doing everything by an effort. That was not the stuff for single handed combat against Fate. Then

sorrow set his feet firmer than ever on the path of what he considered right; and this mood was not one in which to rely on those Moghul troops of his who were ever ready to take offence at strict discipline. No! he must be induced to divert attention from Kâbul by carrying war to some further field. The further the better, so long as it gave those same Moghul troops opportunity for legitimate raiding.

Babar himself never knew how much one woman's influence had to do with his resolution to march on Hindustân; even old Kâsim, though he had the key, did not realise how Mahâm managed to set aside his proposal of an attempt on Badakhshân in favour of the larger, more imaginative project; but it was done.

So one day Babar, sad-faced still, but with a certain spring in his walk came to say good-bye to his little daughter and to the woman who quietly, unobtrusively, had done so much for him.

"Yea!" she said smiling, "I will be Queen whilst thou art gone, Babar, never fear. Nor Shâh-Begum, nor Mihr-Nigar nor any other woman in the Palace shall give trouble, this time, I warrant me. And the child will thrive! Aye! it will thrive. So there is no gnawing thought at thy heart, remember--"

She paused for a second and something in her face made Babar say hastily:

"Nor in thine, I pray, kind wife."

"Nor in mine," she echoed with a brilliant smile. "And now, ere he go, I have something for my lord--a remembrance of someone he loved well and whom I--respected."

She put her hand in her bosom and drew out thence all warm and faintly scented a small crystal bowl.

Babar gave a cry of delight. "The Bowl! The Bowl! How didst find it? Did he give it thee? Did he really give it me?"

Her kind eyes smiled on him. "That I cannot say; and this is not the Bowl, but perchance a likeness of it. 'Twas the dear dead one, my lord, who told me the tale when thou didst tell it to her. So, knowing what sort the cup must be, since there is an old man in my native village who still can make them after a fashion, I sent to him pressing for one. My lord will remember that 'twas in this village graveyard that the Crystal Bowl was found. Doubtless one of olden time. This is but a copy--and poor doubtless, since the old craftsman can scarce see--but it may serve to remind my lord--of many things."

"And much kindness--" said Babar gravely, and as he took the bowl he kissed the hand that held it out to him.

No! it was not the Bowl. It was but a dim likeness of it; but as he placed it in his bosom he felt vaguely that he had more than he deserved.

The next few months passed swiftly. Once in the saddle and out of Kâbul, Babar's spirits began to rise. But he soon found it inadvisable to pursue his intentions on India. The very idea of his absenting himself so far, roused the insolence of the wild border clans. Here was their opportunity, whilst the cat would be away, to resort to their favourite plunder. So it was mid-winter before it was possible for him to advance, and by that time the complexion of affairs had changed.

To begin with the Usbek-raider had retreated, patching up a sort of peace hurriedly, and returning westward over more important business. Then, whether by reason of Mahâm's firm hand or from mere ambition, old grandmother Shâh-Begum announced her intention of leaving Babar's protection, and going with her grandson to snatch at the sovereignty of Badakhshân. The crown had been hereditary in her family, she declared, for over 3,000 years and though as woman she could not claim it, she knew her grandson would not be rejected.

This intention, involving as it did a breaking up of conventional family life, brought back Babar in protest. The old lady had never been on the best of terms with him, she had once almost succeeded in her intrigues against him, but he had always treated her generously; and then, worse than her defection, was that of his own mother's sister who insisted on accompanying her.

It was intolerable! Babar went straight to his grandmother and argued with her; coming back irritated and annoyed by failure to make any impression on the old lady's obstinacy, to his own palace, where, without giving notice, he made his way alone to Mahâm's apartments.

As he entered her room he could see her reclining amongst cushions in the cupola'd balcony, his little sleeping daughter in her lap. She was crooning to it the lullaby which Turkhomân women sing sleepily during a night march. Her pose was exquisite; there was a look of almost motherhood in her face; he paused to listen as she sang:--

"Sleep, croodie! Talk with God!
Know not the path I've trod.
Dad knows not! Why shouldst thou!

Sleep, childie! Sleep just now.
Don't fear! I keep awake.
Heigh ho! My bones do ache.
Heigh ho! My horse does pull.
Can't it see river's full!
No pebbles in *that* bed,
Mine holds an hundred.
Dreams! Dreams! Who lies dead?
Someone in the river's bed.
Praise God! *He* rests his head.
Hush! Hush! I hear thee, sweet.
Mums arms around thee meet.
Praise God! The night's nigh past;
Darling sleeps at last! at last!"

The curious drowsiness of the rhythm held him almost silent for a while, so did a great surge of admiration for this self-restrained, kindly, capable woman who had taken her full position as his wife so firmly, without any feminine flutterings or sentimentalities. Truly that sort of thing was what he, with his volatile emotionality, needed to make him not only successful, but persistent.

"Mahâm," he said almost timorously, "I have come back to thee--and the child."

She gave a little cry, started to rise, then pointed to little Ma'asuma. "I should waken her!" she said in a low voice, "but welcome, thrice welcome is my lord--to me and to the child."

Her voice lingered over the words; her smile had a certain gravity in it.

"But thou," he said anxiously. "Hast not been well, wife? Thy face shows ill--why didst not write to me?"

"Because 'twas not worth while," she replied. "And I am most better. The spring comes and with it health. And I have had anxiety over thy grandmother. What said she?"

The deft turn succeeded. Babar gave vent to his dissatisfaction in no measured terms. "See you," he said, "Have I ever failed in my duty or service? When my mother and I had not even a single village nor a few jewels, I treated all my relations, male or female, as members of my family. I have made no difference between my maternal and my paternal connections. I say not this to appraise myself. I simply follow the scrupulous truth as everyone knows. And now, even my mother's sister desires to leave me! I am her nearest relation. It would be better, and more becoming for her to remain with me."

Mahâm's face showed whimsical smiles. "Not, my lord, unwillingly. God's earth holds not a more deadly poison to happiness than a discontented woman. So let them go; my lord has plenty of paternal aunts."

There was a certain patience in her tone! But Babar, still protesting, yielded; and set himself solemnly to settle the judicial as well as the executive system of his kingdom. It was about this time that he wrote his famous Essay-on-Jurisprudence which for many long years was to be a work of reference.

His enquiries took him out often into the out districts which, now that spring was advancing were excessively pleasant, abounding in tulips and indeed in all plants of every description. He began again to write poetry; pretty things still touched by profound, if somewhat scholastic, melancholy such as this--

"My heart's a rose full flaming,
Its petals opened wide,
To give her without shaming
Myself and all beside.

Ah me! in vain I lavished
My love on her dear heart,
An envious thorn has ravished
Her hand with deadly smart.

Her life-blood is a-falling
To dim my petals o'er.
Oh, Springtime! cease thy calling,
This rose will bloom no more."

He used to send them to Mahâm, who used to reply in her beautiful *nastâlik* hand that was always a joy to Babar's simple delight in anything and everything artistic. And he wrote, also, and told her of the thirty-five different kinds of tulips he had gathered, and of the inscriptions he caused to be cut on springs and rocks. And of a certainty when he visited, as he did, the Garden-of-Fidelity at Adinapur, he must have had much to tell her of a small flowerful grave there, where his sad heart was laid.

It was all very pathetic; sweetly pathetic. A noble young King, doing his duty bravely, though glad life was over for him forever.

Even the crystal cup which he carried in his bosom, and from which he drank ever the water of the cool mountain springs, brought him only modified comfort. Perhaps, because, from a sense of duty to himself, he would not allow it to bring more.

And then suddenly the whole wide world changed for him.

"Mahâm! My son!--my son!" was all that he could say when urgent summons brought him to a smiling mother and a new-born infant.

"He is like thee," she said, a tremor in her calm voice.

"God forbid!" interrupted the father hastily. "God send he be like thee--the best woman in the world--the best--the very best!"

Never were such rejoicings. The paternal aunts, who of late months had been let into the secret, were almost crazy with delight. And wherefore not? When a King has lived to be six-and-twenty without a son; when despite three marriages only two children have been borne to him, miserable little daughters, one dead, one but a few months old, it is time to be festive over a proper birth. And was there ever such a baby? So tall, so strong, so handsome and so altogether satisfactory. No wonder his father, who ever had a pretty wit, called him Humâyon. That might portend the phœnix, the bird of good omen, besides half-a-dozen other side meanings, each charming in its way.

But Babar, leaning over the happy mother said softly, "He shall be my protection in the future. Lo! Mahâm! I have put myself outside myself as they say in the child-stories of our youth. Who was't who put his life safe in a gold box? Well! my life is hid in my son's. So there, my wife, have a care of us both--for, verily in some ways, Mahâm, I need looking after like an infant."

The feast of nativity was a very splendid feast. Everyone who was Big, and everyone who was Not, brought their offerings. Bags on bags of silver money were piled up, until everyone was forced to confess that never before had they seen so much white money in one place.

And the entertainments! There were fireworks and marionettes and conjuring tricks. In fact a perfect fair for a whole week in the Great Four-square-Garden on the hill.

But the greatest amusement of all was one to which the Palace Ladies invited a select audience.

It was organised by the Fair Princess who had a genius that way, and its *piece de resistance* was a huge roc-egg brought in by fairies, which, cracking in most realistic fashion, disclosed the most magnificent phœnix that ever was seen, with feathers of every hue and plumes galore (it had, of course, a gold crown on its head) which monstrous bird being removed, like a tea cosy, appeared no less a personage than

"The Heir Apparent"
"Humâyon."

Endless was the laughter, the tears, the embracings, the congratulations.

But that evening as Mahâm and Babar sat hand in hand, looking at the sleeping infant, its mother cried suddenly--

"'Tis Ma'asuma's child also, thou must remember, husband. 'Twas for her sake I married thee."

"Not for mine own, one little bit, Mahâm?" he queried a trifle sadly. "Well! if that be so, I must be lover instead of husband for a time."

CHAPTER VIII

"Like a wide-spreading tree whose roots en-thread
Earth's bosom, gaining Life from out a grave,
So stood he stalwart while each weary head
Sought for the shelter that his courage gave."

"Look you! what a young man sees in a mirror, an old one can see in a burnt brick," quoth old Kâsim crossly to Shirâm-Taghâi. "Did I not tell the Most-Clement that benevolence such as his, is doubtless fit for Paradise where man shall have shed his sins; but 'tis in this world, pure incentive to wickedness. To leave Prince Abdul-Risâk in Kâbul where, seeing he is the late King's only son, he hath some right to claim power, was foolish; not to believe when old servants as you and I, Shirâm, tell him intrigue is going on, is well nigh criminal. Yet God knows it all comes from kindness of heart! In truth, old friend, to be king one should be as Timur, the Earth Trembler, who never spared man, woman or child who stood in his way."

"Aye," assented Shirim-Beg whose beard by this time, after long years of faithful service, required a purple dye to pass muster. "And yet, to my mind, the King is most hard on the Moghul soldiery. What means life to a Moghul without rapine and plunder? Bread without salt, friend! Bread without salt! Yet the Most-Clement is so inclement that thou hadst trouble to save the lives of those three last week."

Kâsim gloomed. "Aye! and I know not now if I were not wrong, since those same are the head and front of this present offending of which--God save his innocence--the King takes no heed, having it forsooth, that my surmisings art not entitled to credit! Look you! he is so set on making his men wheel in step and to time, that he hath forgotten how quick honest rebellion can step when it chooses."

It was true. Babar, profoundly happy in the birth of his son, profoundly absorbed in the new title of Emperor which he had, in consequence, bestowed upon himself, was impervious to suspicion, and busy expending his exuberant vitality in marshalling and manœuvring his troops. He was out all day in camp; thus, at once, being more ignorant than usual of what was happening in the city, and having less time to listen to cautions; the latter being, in truth, the last words suitable to his feelings. He could not, for the life of him, see a single cloud ahead, and being absolutely full of good intentions towards his world, refused to believe that the world could have any ill intentions towards him.

But his eyes were opened one night, and that rudely.

He took his evening meal as a rule in the Four-corner Garden on his way back to sleep in the Secluded-Palace. It was a charming place; the summer house all lit with coloured lamps, hung with beautiful draperies; and there were ever musicians, singers and dancers ready to amuse the King, who lingered late at times, especially on moonlit nights when the garden showed entrancingly beautiful.

But it was moonless and fairly early, when two friends arrived from the city in hot haste, full of the discovery of a plot to seize and assassinate His Imperial Majesty that very night.

Babar downright refused to believe it. Even treacherous Moghuls, he said, must have some reason for rebellion; and what had he done to them?--Nothing! Nor to anyone else. There might be disaffection. In what kingdom was it not to be found? But for wide-spread disloyalty?--No! it was frankly impossible. So he set warning aside.

Nevertheless the party broke up early and started through the darkness for the city. The running lanterns ahead threw light only on the forward path, and Babar was engrossed in solving a question of drill; so it was not till he reached the Iron Gate that he realised he was alone, save for the three or four household slaves who ran beside his horse. In the darkness every one of his escort had disappeared!

In a second he saw that something was, indeed, amiss. But in the same second he saw what had to be done. Mahâm and her son must be reached and placed in safety. That accomplished he would have time to consider.

But as, with a rapid order to the slaves, he turned sharp down a more secluded alley, a man running full tilt, brought up suddenly at the sight of him. It was an old friend, one Mahomed-Ali.

"Thank God! I have you, Sire," cried the runner breathlessly. "Go back! Go back! The Moghuls are in arms, the traitor Abdul-Risâk at their head--I was in the market place a minute syne and they await the Most-Clement there. Go back! Go back!"

Babar dug his spurs to his horse's flank. "Nay! I go on," he said recklessly.

But Mahomed-Ali hung to the bridle. "Most-Clement! listen. They will await thee there till midnight. If the King does not come till then what signifies it? Naught; since the Most-High is given to gardens and is often late. So they are there--safe! Now 'tis not yet ten of the chime. If, therefore, the King will be wise, turn his horse, and ride out to the Camp-of-the-Veterans beyond the Hill Garden, I and my following--if the Most-Noble will send a token to the Gracious-Lady--will bring her safe thither before the carrion have wind of anything. Sire! 'tis the better way! To go on is certain death--for all--The Moghuls...."

"God curse them!" muttered Babar. But he was no fool to let his own wild anger needlessly endanger those two precious lives. Therefore his resolution was taken at once, and he fumbled for his signet ring--

No! not that--it might be used to ill purpose. The Crystal Bowl was better--none would send that but he, and so she would be the readier to act upon it.

"Aye" he said slowly. "But mark you! I turn but to the Ditch by the Khorasân gate. There will I wait. Take this to the Queen and say I pray her come--in half-an-hour mind, in half-an-hour! If thou comest not by then--"

His face said the rest and augured ill for failure, as, gathering the few slaves together lest any might escape and blab, he drove them and the torch bearers before him towards the further gate. With time for thought he reviewed the position and was satisfied at his action. At the worst, it meant but a delay of half-an-hour when time was literally no object; since it was his appearance which would start the traitorous scheme. He set his lip and his hand clenched on his sword at the very thought. Again, his retreat amongst tried loyalists might save the situation altogether; for he would be ready for instant retaliation if needs be. If not, no harm was done. He had simply spent the night amongst his oldest friends, the Andijân troopers.

Yet, as he stood waiting in the darkness of the ditch at the Khorasân gate, his heart beat in his ears. He could hear nothing. And time passed--It must be nigh on the half hour! Time to tighten sword-belts ... Hark! that was a jingle--the jingle of a swift borne doolie!...

"Mahâm?"

"My lord, I am here," came the answer and Babar shook his fist at the darkling city. All was quiet nigh at hand, but from the distant market place came sounds of rough merriment.

"Till to-morrow, friends!" he muttered, then paced his horse beside the doolie with a whispered word or two of encouragement.

Now that imminent danger was over anger, sheer, almost reckless anger took the place of anxiety.

"To-morrow!" he whispered to himself again; "To-morrow!"

But that to-morrow to which he had appealed so confidently brought bitter disappointment.

Dawn showed him an almost empty camp. Out of all his soldiers a bare five hundred remained with him. The rest, with most of the Kâbul courtiers had slipped off to the city during the night on pretence of looking after their families, or saving their property from the Moghul plunderers. Disloyalty was widespread indeed!

Kâsim-Beg, of course, was at his beloved young master's side, and so was Shirâm-Taghâi and half-a-score other trusty friends, all of the old school. They waited the livelong day for the old order to up saddle and away; since what could five hundred swords, be they ever so nimble, do against a city full of soldiers? But the order never came. It was close on sunset when Kâsim, impatient at the delay, suggested that it was time to move.

"I go not," replied Babar coolly; "See you, old friend, never again do I seek shelter like a rat in its hole till I have no other chance. I fight in the open."

Old Kâsim's jaw dropped. "My liege!" he exclaimed. "When fortune was against the Chagatâi in one place, he ever sought her favour in another."

"And found it not, most times," put in Babar with a grim smile. "I have had too much of fighting and running away. I have been at it my life long. Now let us see how it does to fight and stick to it--to the death."

"To the death by all means, sire," said old Kâsim with affectionate admiration, "but 'tis madness all the same."

If it were so, there was distinct method in it. Babar threw up strange earthworks round his camp and disposed pickets in quaintly modern fashion on the points of vantage in the hills. This done he sat down calmly and awaited events, much to the discomfiture of those within the city. They were not besieged, of course, but there was an enemy to be reckoned with beyond the gates where an enemy should not be. Being hopelessly in a minority, he ought to have run away.

"Lo!" said one soldier to another doubtfully, as, hand over his eyes, eaves-wise, he looked out keenly from the watch towers, "I dare swear that is the King going his rounds. How I mind me of his smile as he passed the meanest."

"Aye!" would come the assent, "but none were mean in his army. We all felt brave men. At least so 'twas with me. I could have swaggered it with Rustam."

And both pair of eyes would hold a vague regret. A regret that deepened as day after day skirmishes that were almost battles, resulted invariably in a retreat back to the walls of Kâbul for the night.

For Babar's five hundred were ready to fight all the twenty-four hours, while the insurgent twelve thousand preferred their beds.

And the next dawn rose calm over that orderly encampment, which it was no use trying to rush because of its cunning defences. Then Babar's cavalry had learnt to charge without an inch of spare room between stirrup and stirrup, so that there was no hope of passage or escape between that close-linked, supple, chain of lance and sword.

Altogether it was disconcerting. Then no one had a moment's peace. To show your head beyond the gates was to bring down on you the King in person, heading a reckless band of picked swordsmen.

"Kâsim-Beg is the best fencer in Asia," murmured a trooper with a slash on head and arm; "'tis small wonder I got this from him. And his teaching hath made even the rank and file better at swordplay than our leaders--curse them--who sit at cards and drink, while we--" The rest was sullen silence.

"Yea!" said another, with a leg bandaged. "And I got this from a mere back blow of the Most-Clement's. See you, he hath youth on his side, as well as all old Kâsim's art. I saw him, as I fell, cleave a Moghul to the very chin."

So round the watch fires at night it became the fashion to applaud the prowess of the foe. With this result that in the morning, more than one place was vacant on the ramparts; the holder of it had slipped away in the night to join Babar's forces.

As time went on, the latter grew more and more adventurous. His military skill, his personal strength, his courage, his invincible spirit, brought mingled admiration and dread to his enemies.

"Lo! he is a true *Shaitan*," admitted one of the chief rebels. "Didst hear that when he was at the Khârwa Fort he amused himself by leaping from battlement to battlement--and there is sheer fall of a thousand feet to the river below."

"Aye!" assented another gloomily. "And Shirbâsh saith he hath seen him do it with a trooper under each arm."

So ran the stories, the one outdoing the other.

At last, one day, just before the opposing forces began the clash of arms, the armies stood thrilling, aghast, expectant, as a tall young figure rode out alone, and in a voice that echoed and re-echoed, challenged Abdul-Risâk, the usurper, to single combat.

The challenge was refused.

"Then send your best man," cried Babar, "and may God show the right."

There was a pause; and then from out the rank and file of the insurgents rode one Ali-Beg, and a chorus of approval went up on both sides.

The opponents were well matched. Both young, both in the very pink of training.

"Art ready, friend?" came Babar's clear joyous voice, and with a dash they were at each other.

"Now God send he remembers the trick of wrist," said Kâsim-Beg under his breath, "for Ali-Beg hath it to perfection. He was my best pupil at Samarkand."

But Babar remembered it. How, he felt, could he forget anything with so much for which to fight? His eyes blazed, not with anger--what cared he for the actual enemy?--he was but the dummy of possible defeat--but with calm will. He meant to disarm this fellow--not to hurt him.

The horses reeled against each other, the sword arms were interlocked, for Babar, at close quarters, would not let his antagonist break loose.

God and his prophets! they would be down! Nor horse nor man could stand that boring pressure, that invincible strength. Wrist against wrist; and beneath them struggling legs and tails and fear-snorting crests!

There! over!--A confused heap upon the ground, but Babar uppermost with two swords in his hand.

A shout of triumph rose from the five hundred. But as the discomfited champion rode back without his sword, another rode forward to take his place.

This was not in the bond; still Babar, checking his laboured breaths to more even rhythm, threw away the second sword and sprang to his horse, which had risen unhurt but dazed.

"Come on, friend!" he shouted; "I am ready!"

This was a very different sort of adversary. A lean, ewe-necked horse, a nimble, dapper, little swordsman with a blade like a razor, who buzzed and wheeled, and settled and fled again like a hungry mosquito.

Babar with his half-dazed horse was at a disadvantage for a time and the razor-like edge caught him on the little finger once. But only once. The next instant in one furious charge, a back-hander with the flat of the sword had sent the King's antagonist spinning from his saddle like a tee-totum.

So it was with five champions, one after the other.

Babar more and more weary, yet more and more triumphant in fierce vitality with every victory, unhorsed, disarmed, or routed every one of them. Raising a laugh, indeed, in his own favour when Yakûb-Beg, last but not one, escaped by hard riding from the rain of pitiless blows which fell instead on his horse's rump, urging it to greater speed.

Only once did sheer merciless anger leap to Babar's eyes, and that was when Nâzir, the Usbek, letting go his horse's bridle during a close-locked tussle of sword arms, drew a dagger with his left hand and would have plunged it in his adversary's heart.

Then, with one wild cry of rage, Babar's hand left his sword, clipped his adversary round the middle, literally tore him from his horse and flung him head downwards on the ground, where he lay unconscious, the dagger still in his hand, the blood oozing from his nose and ears.

"Take the carrion away," shouted the young champion, breathless, "and come on, if there be any more."

But there were none ready for personal combat; so the battle began.

It was one of Babar's best battles--at least in his own opinion. And it was the prelude to many another, in every one of which Babar drove home his lesson of sheer courage. Finally Abdul-Risâk fell into his hands, and from that moment there was peace; since folk could withstand the King's prowess, but they were helpless beneath his magnanimity.

To be forgiven, not grudgingly or of necessity, but with open-hearted friendliness, was disarmament pure and simple; for all but Moghuls. And the Horde in this instance, disgusted at defeat, took abrupt French leave. Abdul-Risâk also, ever a weakling, had the gratitude and good taste to die comfortably and conventionally ere long, so Kâbul was left at peace.

Such peace as Babar's life had never known before. He was in the plenitude of his manhood, his strength, and, even after all these years, the imagination warms to the picture of his glad content. A trifle flamboyant, perhaps, he may have been in his consciousness of virtue, in his very successes. But nothing came amiss to his happy nature. The plants he planted thrived, the flowers he loved blossomed, he was as keen over repairing a ruined aqueduct as he had been over taking a fort. He knew the name of every bird and beast in his kingdom; he learnt their habits, when and where they are to be caught. He tells of the strange migration of fishes, and with keen appreciation of the pathos and poetry hidden in the tale, how the flights of summer birds are driven in stormy weather against the chill glaciers of the Hindu-Kush Mountains and perish in their thousands. Then he interests himself in his people. Knows the race of which they come, the language they speak, and the superstitions in which they believe. And he is stern over some of these. There is a celebrated rocking tomb much frequented by pilgrims of which he discovers the trick and visits his hot wrath on the manipulators, daring them to repeat the imposture; for deceit is the one thing he cannot forgive.

So during the next three years, not only peace, but happiness reigned at Kâbul. Humâyon grew and flourished. A daughter and then a son were born, and Mahâm remained the anchor to which Babar's versatile, volatile, affectionate nature was moored. A woman of education, of natural talent, she could enter into that side of his life from which the majority of his companions were shut out; and between the two there was always the inward and spiritual tie of which the Crystal Bowl was the outward and visible manifestation.

There was another soul, however, which touched Babar in a lower plane. Sultan Said Khân, his cousin, the son of the dead and dispossessed younger Khân of Outer Moghulistan, sought refuge at Kâbul, and there sprung up between the two young men perfect love, accord, and trust.

"The two-and-a-half years I spent as exile in Kâbul," writes this same Said Khân, "were the freest from care or sorrow of any I have experienced, or am likely to experience. I lived on friendly terms with all, welcomed by all. I never had a headache (except from the effects of wine) and never felt sad (except on the account of the ringlets of some beloved one)."

But Babar himself still abstained from wine, or at any rate from intoxication. Love had stepped in at Herât to keep him from yielding to the first of Said Khân's temptations, and the other form of amusement was never to his liking.

Then there was another refugee who forty years afterwards sets down his impressions of Kâbul and its King. This was Haidar, yet another cousin, ten-year-old-orphan, whose father had been that Doghlat-commoner rebel of two years back.

What matter? His mother had been a maternal aunt. That was enough for Babar. Besides the poor child had no other protector.

His welcome must have made a vivid impression on Haidar, for, as one reads, the scene rises before one. The timid child wrapped in the one old shawl which the forlorn party of refugees possessed, attempting to kneel at the feet of that glorious figure with life or death in its hands. The merry laugh, the swift stoop to catch up the child and hold it close with comforting words. Then afterwards, the elegant mansion, its rooms all spread with many coloured carpets and soft cushions, with everything in the way of furniture, food, clothing, servants, and slaves, so fully prepared as to leave nothing to be desired in the whole building. And afterwards, again, the promises of kindness, the threats of severity by which the little lad's love of study was stimulated and encouraged. The lavish praise bestowed on any little virtue or new accomplishment, the quick blame for anything mean or lazy; these were such as most men would scarce do for their own sons. "It was a hard day for me when I lost my father," writes Haidar; "but I scarce felt the loss owing to the kindness of the Emperor."

"Have a care, youngster," he would say when, study time over, young Haidar came as usual to play with Baby Humâyon. "He is smaller than thou art. Never be rough with weaklings. 'Tis not their fault. God made them so. And he is thy cousin, likewise."

"But Humâyon holds his own already," said Mahâm, proudly. "There is no boy of his age in the court can come nigh him."

Babar laughed and put his arm round her. "Yea! Yea! little mother! He is true phoenix, and we are the happiest folk in Kâbul, which means much." Then his face fell, he walked to the arched window-way and looked out over the garden.

"What is't, my lord," said Mahâm, at his elbow in an instant.

He looked at her affectionately.

"Nothing, my moon! 'Tis only this. The dear mother lies yonder in the Mercy-of-God. I would not bring her back, if I could. And little Ma'asuma--" he paused--"I would not bring her back either, wife, if I could. She was too tender for this world--aye! even for me. So she sleeps peacefully--God rest her!--but Dearest-One--" his voice broke--he turned away and Mahâm had nothing to say.

That thought was the fly in the pot of ointment, it was the one bitter drop in the Crystal-Bowl-of-Life.

CHAPTER IX

"Bring! bring the musky scented wine!
A draught of wine the memory cheers,
And wakens thoughts of other years."

So the months, even the years sped on bringing calm. Sometimes Babar felt a trifle regretful over the old storms. The glints of sunshine between had seemed, mayhap, the brighter for them. He was now only nearing his twenty-ninth year, and yet he felt almost as if life had ended for him. He looked round on his growing family, on his gardens, his aqueducts, his highly-disciplined small army; all were well in their way, but for all that his restless eyes followed the doings of Shâh-Ismael of Persia, who, young as he was, a mere boy in fact, had dared to send the arch-enemy, the Usbek-raider, Shaibâni Khân, a spinning-wheel and a spindle, and bid him if he would not fight, go sit in a corner and busy himself with the little present like the woman he was!

It had been splendid, that interchange of discourtesies. First of all, the Shâh's demand for a treaty followed by Shaibâni's contemptuous advice to make no claim for kingship through his mother, who had withdrawn herself from the circle of distinction by her marriage; since he, Shaibâni, made one through his father, a Sultan and son of a Sultan. This was accompanied by a beggar's bowl and staff with the script: "In case you wish, as is fitting, to follow the profession of your father, I remind you of it and the verse--

"Clasp the bride of sovereignty close to you if you will, But don't
you dare to kiss her until the swords are still."

Shâh-Ismael, however, had been no whit behind. Back had come the spindle and distaff with the rhyming insult--

"Who boasts of his dead fathers only owns
Himself a dog that loveth ancient bones."

After that, naturally, there was but one end--extermination of one or the other. Which would it be?

Shâh-Ismael, with his thousands of disciplined and heretical *kizzilbâshes*, or Shaibâni Khân with his hordes of wild Mongols?

"God's truth," said Babar to old Kâsim who had been ailing this while back, "I scarce know which to choose. I hate the Red-caps almost as much as the Moghuls."

Old Kâsim's eyes were growing a little dim for the things of this world; perhaps he saw those of the next more clearly in consequence. "There be good men on both sides, Most-Clement. A flat face and split eyes count no more than a red-cap when we have lost clothes and bodies at the Day-of-Judgment."

The shrewd commonsense of the remark clung to Babar's receptive brain long after the speaker had gone to his account.

"Yea, I am restless," admitted Babar to calm Mahâm. "I cannot help it, my moon! I am not made as thou art. There was a book at Samarkand when I was a lad that treated of the Great Waters. And it said they rose and fell as the moon waxed and waned. So 'tis thou who art responsible, sweetheart; though God knows, thou art ever full moon to me." And he sat down instantly to write a *rubai* on that fancy. He had not half finished it, however, when news came that drove everything else out of his head.

Shâh-Ismael had defeated Shaibâni in full force at Meru; the Usbek-raider was dead, smothered in a band of escaping Mongols.

"I must go," muttered the young King hoarsely; "I must go. Samarkand is mine by right."

So, with hardly more than an hour's preparation he was off, though it was the dead of winter, across the snows to join forces with his cousin of Badakhshân.

The fighting fever was on him once more. He could not, he did not even try, to resist it. And Mahâm let him go; she was too wise to attempt to chain her wild hawk.

"When spring comes we will meet in Samarkand," she said quietly.

He took Haidar, the boy, with him though, because the lad wept and refused to be left behind. And right proud was the lad, when at the very first fight, it was the opportune arrival of a party of his father's old retainers who had come out to join their young master, that turned the tide of victory towards Babar.

"Let the name of Haidar Mirza be inscribed on the first trophy," said the Emperor smiling; and the boy's blood went in a surge of sheer delight to his face.

But, despite the fact that he was able to reach the river, and settle himself in some measure of security at Kundez, Babar felt himself not sufficiently strong to attempt Samarkand without help. And there was none to whom he could apply save Shâh-Ismael, who had already sent him a letter containing guarded offers of friendship. It rather went against Babar's orthodox grain to ask a favour from a persecuting Shiah heretic; but old Kâsim's words came back to him.

Yes! there was good on all sides, and--*pace* the priests!--a man might be an honest fellow in spite of his saying "Ameen" in schismatic fashion. For Babar, like many of his like, had no taste for dogmatic differences and preferred to differentiate by visible and audible signs.

So Mirza-Khân, his cousin, was despatched to Irâk in order to make the best terms possible, and Babar, meanwhile, sent for his family from Kâbul. The spring had passed to summer ere they arrived at Kundez, and Babar, now reinforced by some of the surrounding tribes, crossed the Amu and marched on to await events at the strong fortress of Hissâr. It was close on eighteen years since he had been encamped with his old uncle, Sultan Hussain, upon the opposite bank. Close on eighteen years since, one darkling dawn, he, a lad of thirteen, dear old Kâsim-Beg and half-a-hundred or so of rough, honest Andijân troopers had ridden through Khosrau Shâh's picket, and he, Babar, had lost the Crystal Bowl which Gharîb had given him.

And now? He looked across to the frightened girl, the mother of his children, in a way the mother of himself, and thought what a marvellous thing Life was. Even as he saw it, limited by Birth and Death, isolated by those five personal, bodily senses which none could say he shared exactly with his fellow, how strange it was to watch the compensating balance at work on all things, keeping all things as it were to true, perfect level. He looked back over his life and saw that balance everywhere, save in one thing. The tragedy of Dearest-One remained as ever poignant, unappeased.

"Thou art sad, husband! what is't?" asked Mahâm, fondly. She was ever quick to see his moods.

"Nothing, wife," he answered gaily. "Save that today or to-morrow at least comes the answer from Shâh-Ismael. What will the red-cap heretic reply?--God knows!"

So with a laugh he left her for the cares of State.

But he had scarcely gone before he was back again, white, trembling, a gold-dust-sprinkled letter in his hand.

"It hath come," he said brokenly. "It hath come--and oh! Mahâm--Dearest-One! Dearest-One!"

He fell at her feet, buried his face in her lap and sobbed like a child. She must be dead, thought Mahâm, and to her lips came the usual blankly-tame commonplaces of consolation.

"Nay, 'tis not that!" he said, recovering his calm. "She is alive and well--and Shâh-Ismael, who hath found her, is sending her back to me with all honour--" he sprang to his feet suddenly and raised his right arm high.

"Oh, God! may my arm wither if ever it strike a blow against this just man, may my tongue dry up if ever it utter word of blame; I, Babar, am his servant for ever! There is nothing I will not do for him."

"Does he not desire aught of thee in return?" asked Mahâm when Babar had fairly outworned himself in joy, in confessions of past regret, in promises of future content.

"Aye! Yea! he asks much, but not more than he has a right to ask--not more than I will give cheerfully. And he is sending men also, Mahâm. I shall have an army of sixty thousand! With that Samarkand is assured, and, of a truth, no man can deem it a disgrace to own justice as his sovereign lord! I hold it an honour."

And he upheld this view of Shâh-Ismael's proposal that if the aid of the Persian *kizzilbâshes* were given to conquer Samarkand, Babar should acknowledge the Persian Satrapy as over-lord, against all the criticism of his nobles; not that there was much, for it was indubitable that without such help Samarkand would remain unwon. And Babar had many arguments in favour of this nominal vassalage. To be part of a great Empire, was always an advantage; besides the Kings of Samarkand had always in the past acknowledged a suzerain lordship. It had given stability to the dynasty; and it was of late years only, since this dependence had been removed, that Samarkand had been bandied from one ruler to another.

When a man is set on a thing, arguments for it grow in the very hedgerows; and Babar with the tempting bait of his sister's safe return before his eyes, was too full of real gratitude to hesitate an instant.

But it was not for a month or more that he was to enter Samarkand victorious.

It was a perfect autumn day when, after dismissing the Persian contingent, Babar made his triumphant entry. All along the route, high and low, nobles and poor men, grandees and artisans, princes and peasants, alike testified their joy at the advent of one who had already twice before come to them as King, and who had endeared himself to them by his kindness and generosity.

The streets were all draped with cloth and gold brocades; pictures, drawings, wreaths, were hung up on every side. Such pomp and splendour no one has ever seen or heard of before or since. He was received at the Gate by the great men of the city, who assured him that the inhabitants had for years been longing that the shadow of his protection might be cast upon them.

Babar, who was dressed, rather to their regret, in the uniform of a *kissilbâsh* General (which smacked of heresy, almost of unbelief) responded heartily, and all eyes followed his splendid figure as he rode through the streets saluting the crowd right and left. He was in the highest spirits, for he knew that in the very Palace where she had been left ten long years before, his dearest sister was awaiting him.

Dearest-One! It seemed almost too good to be true.--God save the man who had brought this happiness into his life!

Impatient, headstrong in all his emotions, he would gladly have cut short his reception and gone straight to her; but the people would not be denied a sight of their hero. If the angels were crying aloud "Enter in peace!" and the populace was shouting "God save the Emperor!" the least he could do was to listen to them patiently.

So it was nigh dusk before he found himself, trembling with sheer joy, in the Garden-Palace and saw before him a tall, slender figure in white--

"Dearest-One! Dearest-One!" he cried and was kissing her feet, her hands, her thin, worn face.

"Brotherling! Brotherling!"

That was all they said. And then they held back to see each other. She saw strength, and health, and manhood such as she had scarce dreamed of, even for him; a man of past thirty in the

very prime of all things. And he saw a woman of nigh forty with streaks of silver in her dark hair, upright, tall, but with a weariness even in her joy.

"I am sorry, Dearest-One," he said humbly as he had said to her many a time when as a child he had grieved her.

"And I am glad," she replied softly.

That night the city seemed on fire. Flares blazed from every house, the flickering lines of countless lights seemed to interlock one street with another. Vast crowds surged through them, and far and wide rose Babar's praise.

But at the door of a mosque an old white-bearded *mullah* sat and spat calmly. "He wore the accursed red-cap of the schismatic--Wherefore?"

And the folk who heard him looked at each other and echoed:

"Wherefore?"

That was the question. Asked by one to-day, it was asked by half-a-dozen the next, by a hundred the week after, when Babar, faithful as ever to his promises, had the Kutba, the Royal Proclamation, read in the name of Shâh-Ismael as over-lord. A thousand asked it when the first gold coin was struck bearing the hated Shiah legends. The Emperor, the man they had welcomed, was a heretic. He and his army wore the red-cap.

Samarkand, head centre of orthodoxy, became alarmed, began to whisper.

"I am no heretic, but a keeper of promises," said Babar grimly, and went on his way. He had become a trifle arrogant, and inclined to resent any interference. The Samarkand folk were rude, ignorant, bigoted; he would not even try to pacify them.

So the winter passed and spring set in--(the plentiful drops of her rain having clothed the earth in green raiment)--and with the warmer weather the Usbeks once more appeared like locusts on the edge of the Turkhestân desert and the fight for Samarkand began all over again.

And this time Babar with not a wish ungratified, Babar in the plenitude of his pride and strength, was forced to flight; for religious bigotry is the hardest of all foes to fight.

A horde of *kizzilbâshes*, it is true, was sent by his over-lord to help him; but they only made matters worse. First by their confirmation of heresy; next by their brutality in murdering high and low, the sucklings and the decrepit.

Sick at heart, Babar found himself once more a wanderer; once more a prey to the treachery of Moghul troops, from which he escaped one night with bare life and in his night clothes.

His one consolation was that Mahâm, Dearest-One and his children, were safe with relatives in Khost.

No! he had another consolation; for the man who had set aside wine as an enhancement of pleasure, now took to it as a lessener of care. The Cup-of-Life for him was filled again and again with the Wine-of-Death, and he laughed as he quaffed at its bubbles on the rim. Vaguely, too, came to him a sort of disgust at dogmatic creeds. He would sit and sing Sufic odes with fervour, and praise.

Perhaps with a man of his temperament, it was only to be expected.

"The wine, the lamp which night and day
Lights us along our weary way.
Sâki! thou knowest I worship wine,
Let that delicious cup be mine,
Wine! pure and limpid as my tears."

BOOK III

FRUIT TIME

1525 TO 1530

CHAPTER I

"The Long Years slide,
The Door of Life stands wide,
Ghosts creep inside,
With their dead fingers hide
Present from Past.
Dear God be kind!
Grant that I keep enshrined
Within my mind
The Love of Human-kind,
Until the Last"

Babar sat overlooking a Kâbul valley, a tall, straight, still athletic man of two-and-forty.

Twelve years had passed since, broken, crestfallen at his failure to keep the loyalty of Samarkand, he had shaken the dust of his kingly hopes in Transoiana from him for ever, returned to Kâbul and set himself another emprise--the conquest of India. Thus far he had not succeeded. Three or four attempts had been made, in themselves satisfactory, in result futile. On his last expedition he had got as far as Lahore; but he had had to return for reinforcements to Kâbul, leaving a doubtfully-loyal governor in the Punjâb. So he was still no more, no less, than King-of-Kâbul; for those twelve years had brought a marked diminution in the vivid initiative of his younger years. He was up at dawn as usual, it is true; the wine he had drunk overnight had never been allowed to cloud his days; yet those twelve comparatively empty years remained, and remain, in mute testimony to the toxic power of the body over the mind. He felt this himself vaguely; for he was always sensitive to the touch of truth.

He had begun wine-bibbing of deliberate intent. He had told himself that he would only indulge for ten years, until he was forty. Indeed, wanting one year of that age he had drunk more copiously as a sort of send-off to virtue. But virtue had not come. As he sat overlooking the valley where his twelve thousand troops were encamped, the instinct to enhance his keen enjoyment of the beauty he saw found words in an order for a beaker of good Shirâz wine, and an intimation that the Pavilion-of-Spirits was to be prepared, his friends and boon companions warned.

The royal cup-bearer brought a golden goblet filled to the brim, and he quaffed it down like mother's milk; so--the cup still in his hands that hung between his knees--sat drinking in that intoxicating beauty of the splendid world.

For it was still splendid to him; though for twelve years he had seldom gone to bed strictly sober. His face, however, showed no sign of his life, save in a certain premature haggardness of cheek. The eyes were clear as ever, and had gained in their falcon-like keenness by reason of his slight stoop, not from the shoulders, but the neck.

It was sunset. The crests of the surrounding hills showed softly violet against the clear, primrose sky. The girdle of the distant snow peaks were losing the last faint flush of day; the cold icy pallor that was Creeping over them, matched the low, level mist streaks which were beginning to stretch, like a winding sheet, over the darker purple shadow of the valley. A shadow that looked like the sky at night, all set as it was with constellations of camp fires ...

"Slave! Another goblet of wine!"

But, even as he gave the order, a twinge of conscience made him remember the Arabic verse: "The breach of a promise avenges itself on the promise breaker." But it was only a twinge. After all, most of the wine parties had been guileless and innocent. He could scarcely recollect being miserably drunk more than once or twice; and then he had always suffered horribly in the stomach for his sin. And but one or two parties had been disagreeable, as when one Gedâi, being troublesome-drunk had tried to recline on the royal pillow, and had had to be turned out neck and crop by royalty itself; such royalty having invariably a stronger head than the other carousers.

But even that had been rather funny; though not so funny as on the day when, drinking in the

open, they had been apprised of the enemy's approach and Dost-Mahomed could not--despite skins full of water--be got on his horse; so Amni, being solemn-drunk, had suggested that rather than leave him in that condition to fall into the enemy's hands it would be better at once to cut off his head and take it away to some place of safety!

The very remembrance brought laughter. Babar tossed off the second beaker of wine, and stood up quoting Nizâmi's verses:

"Oh! bring the musky scented wine,
The key of mirth which must be mine,
The key which opens wide the door
Of rapture rich and varied store,
And o'er the temper casts a spell
Of kindness indescribable."

In those last words lay the secret of Babar's superiority to the debasing influence of his life.

His kindness was simply indescribable, and he stuck to his code of honour and morality with a certain fastidiousness. Men must carry their liquor like gentlemen, no man must be pressed to drink wine, no private house be unwillingly defiled with its use, even if the Emperor were the guest. Above all things, wine must not interfere with duty. He would follow the advice he had had cut on the side of the little, red granite cistern among the Judas trees in the Four-corner Garden of Kâbul--the little cistern that was so often filled with redder wine--he would sing with the singers and lutists:

"Sweet are the smiling Springs,
Sweet what each New Year brings,
Sweet is a cup of wine,
Sweeter is Love divine.
Oh, Babar! Seize them all.
They pass beyond recall."

He would seize all; but he would remain a kindly gentleman.

And so--if he were to send his letter to Mahâm, his dear wife, his ever-sweet guardian and friend, that night, he must finish it ere going up the Pavilion-of-Spirits!

They were constant correspondents, those two, and although they had only parted from each other at the Garden-of-Fidelity a day or two before, he had plenty to say to her, both as his moon, the woman who was the chief influence of his life, and also as the head of his family. For Mahâm's other children having died in infancy, leaving none but Humâyon in direct descent, Babar, by her advice, had married again. The youngest of three sons thus born he had made over at birth to Mahâm who was bringing the little Hindal up as her own. At the tribunal of his own heart, this was ever an action to be slurred over. It had doubtless brought great grief to the real mother, a good woman who had done her duty by him in giving him children. Still it had all been settled by usual custom. The auguries had been consulted before the birth of the child, and Mahâm had taken the chance of its being a girl. Yet ... In good sooth that whole year, with its episode of the taking of Bajour, touched a lower level than any other in Babar's thoughts. He had been six and thirty, it was the first time he had used match-lock men or artillery, and somehow--possibly because he had begun to take drugs as well as wine--he had reverted to inherited instinct. He had been minded to emulate his ancestor Timur--he had done so ...

Three thousand infidels put to the sword!...

Babar escaped from the remembrance and palliated the action by telling himself that the Afghâns were an impossible race, strangely foolish and senseless, possessed of little reflection and less foresight. What trouble had not the Yusufzâis given him until he had attached them by marrying the daughter of their chief.

That, anyhow, had not been sordid. Babar recalled the whole incident with pleasure. How he had gone, disguised as a wandering mendicant to the chief's fort, during a feast, in order to spy out the land. How the Lady Mubârîka--the Blessed-Damozel--had noticed the handsome beggar and sent him food from her own dish. How he had thanked her, found out she was not betrothed, and had wrapped the food she had given him in his handkerchief, hidden it in a hole in the wall, and gone back to claim her as his bride.

"I have no daughter," came back the proud answer.

"Ask her concerning a wandering mendicant," Babar replied, "and if more proof be wanted, find the food the gracious Lady gave wrapped in my handkerchief and hidden in a breach of thy fort. So let it be peace!"

And peace it had been; for the Lady Mubârîka...! Could he ever forget her grace and dignity as she stood before him for the first time as a bride? When she had let slip her veil and laid her pale hands on her pale bosom.

"My lord! Remember that the whole tribe of Yusufzâis sits enshrined in my heart!"

It had been fine!

No! Even though Mahâm had held his soul, that, and his passionate appreciation of it, had been a gleam in a dark year. And no one had ever had an unkind word for the Lady Mubârîka. Childless, reserved, quiet, she was yet a power in that household he had left behind him in Kâbul. So he wrote to his moon:

"Thou hast good friends with thee. That Dearest-One and the Blessed-Damozel are as sisters to thee, is ever a consolation to me. Also that our farewell was in that same garden where my first love died, and rose again in thee. In truth it was in its greatest glory; the flowers yellow, purple, red, springing everywhere, all mingled together as if they had been flung and scattered abroad from the full basket of God. The pomegranate trees so beautifully yellow, the fruit hanging red upon the boughs. The grass plots covered with the second crop of white and pink clover. The orange bushes so green and cheerful, laden with their golden globes. In good sooth, of all the gardens I have planted--God knows how many--this one is the crown; none could view it without acknowledging its charm. Humâyon hath come to join me as arranged, though somewhat tardily, for which I spoke to him with considerable severity; nathless with difficulty, my moon, since he is thy son and the beauty, and vigour, and valiance of his seventeen years would disarm an ogre.

"Bid Ma'asuma be a good girl till my return and tell her I will keep her husband's life safe as my own; and greet little Rosebody from her father. Lo! is there aught in the wide world more captivating to a man's heart than his female children. Except perchance, my moon! his wife."

Ten minutes after despatching this, sealed and signed, by special runner, Babar was the centre of the merriment in the Palace-of-Spirits. In good sooth at that early hour, it was innocent and guileless enough. A party of men, chosen chiefly because they were of like temperament to himself, all of them distinguished by general *bonhommie* and not a few by wit and accomplishments, all met together to enjoy themselves, sometimes with the aid of aromatic confections, sometimes with wine or spirits.

To-night it was the latter, so the fun waxed fast.

The screens of the tent had been thrown back; they could see the valley beneath them studded with fire stars.

"Look! Most-Clement!" cried Târdi-Beg. "Yonder, I swear, is the *Heft-Aurang*."

Babar bent his keen eyes hastily on the flickering lights. Aye, the *Heft-Aurang*--the Seven thrones! The thought took him back with a rush to Baisanghâr, dead these twenty years; from him, memory fled to Gharîb and the Crystal-Bowl-of-Life. He carried the copy Mahâm had given him in his bosom always, though he seldom used it. It was too small for wine! But some day--aye!--some day soon--he would keep his promise to himself and forswear drinking.

"Yea!" remarked Ali-Jân, not to be outdone, "and yonder to the right are the Brothers."

"And look you to the left, the Warrior," stuttered Abul-Majîd. "His sword is somewhat crooked."

"'Tis thine eyes are askew," laughed Shaikh-Zîn. "Thou never hadst a head worth a spoonful of decent Shirâz."

So in laughter, and quips, and cranks, the merriment waxed. They could most of them string verses after a fashion, and some of them began reciting their latest efforts. The climax being reached when Ali-Jân gravely gave a well-known couplet as his own!

"When lovers think, their thoughts are not their own,
But each to each Love's communings have flown."

"Hold thy peace, pirate!" came Babar's full joyous voice. "That is Mahomed Shaikh. Thou couldst not write such an one for thy life."

Ali-Jân, who was already far gone, waggled his head. "Lo!" he said with a hiccup, "I could do--doz-shens!"

"And I." "And I," chorused others militantly, for the spirits were rising fast.

"So be it!" cried Babar, as ever the most sober of the party. "Let us all try and parody it *extempore*! Now then, Ali-Jân--'tis thy turn first. Rise and out with it *instanter*!"

Ali-Jân rose gravely and stood swaying. "When--" he began solemnly. "When--"

Then he subsided, gravely and solemnly. The roar of consequent laughter was dominated by Babar's joyous shout, "I have it! I have it!"

"When Ali drinks, his legs are not his own,
Each seeks support and neither stands alone."

"Shâbâsh! Wâh! Wâh! Ha! Ha! Ha!" The uproarious mirth echoed out into the still night.

"The Emperor is merry," quoth the sentries in the valley, with a smile.

"Aye! but he looks ill for all that," said an orthodox old trooper. "I saw him shiver yestere'en when he swam the stream in his clothes, and the water was lukewarm. Time was, not so long ago, when he would have swum an ice torrent and felt no cold; now, he hath taken a chill."

Whether the man was right in the cause thereof, he was correct in the illness. The next morning found Babar down with so severe a defluxion, fever, and cough, that he spat blood. The court physician dosed him with narcissus flowers steeped in wine, and Ali-Jân, Târdi-Beg and all the other boon companions sat with the monarch to cheer him up by laying the blame of the illness on the cold, or the heat, or what not. But Babar himself knew whence the indisposition proceeded, and what conduct had led to this chastisement. What business had he to laugh at folk in verse for his own amusement? Still less, no matter how mean or contemptible the doggerel, to take pride in it and write it down? It was regrettable that a tongue which could repeat the sublimest productions, should lend itself to unworthy rhymes; it was melancholy that a heart capable of nobler conceptions should stoop to meaner and despicable verses. From henceforth he would abstain religiously from vituperative poetry.

This excellent resolution--or something else--proved curative; and Babar was soon on the mend and was able to write the following:

"Oh! what can I do with you, flagrant tongue?
On your account I deserve to be hung.
How long will you utter bad parodies,
One half indecent, the other half lies?
If you wish to escape being damned--Up rein!
Ride off--nor venture near verse again."

To which he appended a quatrain in his best Arabic:

"Oh, God! Creator of the World! My soul
I broke upon the Wheel of Evil sore.
Cleanse me from sin, my God, and make me whole,
Else cursed shall I be for evermore."

He felt better after thus committing his penitence to writing. So with renewed vitality, and gathering his force together as he went along, he crossed the Sind river to find the moment ripe for his emprise. India was in a turmoil, divided by two rival claimants to its throne.

The whole country was over-run by armies, more or less independent; the whilom Governor of Lahore at the head of one, numbering over forty thousand men, chiefly Afghâns.

It broke up, however, by sheer invertebrate disintegration, ere Babar could reach it, and he passed on, unopposed, by the lower Kashmir hills, by Bhimber and Jhelum till he arrived at Sialkot, keeping all the while close to the skirts of the mountains where retreat and safety might be found if needs be.

But now, before him, lay the wide plain of the Punjâb. Here for the first time in his life, Babar faced a real galloping country where horsemen could, indeed, charge to some purpose. But with flat plain behind him it was necessary that the plain should be friendly. To ensure this needed delay, he had to negotiate, to threaten, to pacify. Half-a-dozen petty chiefs had to be brought to their senses, and those senses were so dull, so rude, so provokingly stupid. What for instance could be said to a man who actually claimed to be seated in the Presence, when nobles and princes of the blood-royal stood by in all humility?

Babar's language on such occasions was always frank, truthful, utterly unanswerable.

"The Most-Clement hath settled *his* hash," remarked the Prime-Minister with a smile, when the old ex-governor of Lahore, having been caught, was brought before the Emperor, with the two swords which the rebel had boastfully hung round his neck as sign of unyielding opposition, still dangling under his chin. This by Babar's own order, to emphasise the trouncing which sent the old sinner away unharmed, but sadder and wiser.

"Yea!" replied the Emperor quite gravely. "Yet I told him naught but what he deserved most truly, for I had done much for him. And, as thou sawest, he had no answer. He did, indeed, stammer out a few words, but not at all to the purpose, for what reply could he make to such confounding truths?"

"Of a surety, none," assented his hearers, still with a smile. Folk had to smile often over

Babar's frank, outspoken clarity.

So, by slow degrees, and not without many a drinking-party, Sirhind was reached; and here the Emperor's soul was refreshed by the sight of a rivulet of running water! It was almost unbelievable; and no doubt he drank a libation of something stronger in its honour.

Then, but a few miles farther on, he came upon an extremely beautiful and delightful place with a charming climate, where, perforce, he had to halt a few days if only to explore the neighbouring country which promised well. Doubtless he was close to the southern spurs of the Sewâlik hills, and here, in one of the side valleys, he found himself on the bank of one of those oleander-set streams, where the butterflies get mixed up with strange sweet-scented flowering shrubs. One of those streams which in the dry season are beds of boulders with a half-hidden trickle of water amongst the stones; but which, in the rains, swell extremely and rush down in a perfect torrent to join that strange Gaggar river which rises forty feet in a night, and sweeps away, resistless, to a still stranger fate--to total disappearance in the sands of the Rajputâna desert. A fate which must have impressed the Emperor with his keen appreciation of the poetry in life.

And here, in early March, these same flowering shrubs must have been budding, the butterflies must have been fluttering over the new russet shoots of the maiden-hair fern; and in sheltered spots Babar's favourite Judas trees must have been in bloom.

The temptation was too great! He called another halt, and set to work, not to drink, but to make a garden; while, not to lose time, he sent out scouts and spies to bring him intelligence as to his enemy's movements. Doubtless as he laid out his favourite Four-cornered Garden, he drank success to it, and dreamt happy, if confused, dreams of stone-watercourses and bright fountains after the Kâbul pattern; for he wrote and told Mahâm all about it. And he told her also that her son Humâyon was bearing himself like a hero and had gone out with a light force to reconnoitre and disperse some wandering bands of marauders; but that he would be back again of course, for his eighteenth birthday on the 6th, when there was to be a great festival on the occasion of the first beard-cutting; such a festival as would have delighted the heart of the old grandmother Isândaulet--on whom be peace!

And his thoughts waxed soft and young again with the remembrance of that shaving of his own--on his eighteenth birthday--on the upland meadow close to the Roof-of-the-World when there was but one real tent in his encampment, and his following had consisted of more than one and less than two hundred tatterdemalions. Times had changed; and yet he was defying Fate to the full as much as in those far away days; for against his twelve thousand troops all told, the whole strength of Northern India was gathering itself upon the plain above Delhi. That fateful plain where hundreds of thousands of men had already given up their lives in battles which for their time had decided the fate of Hindustân.

What would that fate be now?

He was not without thought; but he was without fear. He meant to win. Meanwhile till the fateful moment of fight arrived there was the Garden! When that was fairly started, news came that the enemy had begun to advance slowly. It was time therefore to be on the move. But the broad, calm stream of the Jumna river was not to be allowed to slip past without being pressed into the service of pleasure, so, while the army held down the bank for two marches Babar sailed down in an awning-covered boat and explored many a side stream where the bottle-nosed alligators lay on the sand banks like logs, and great flocks of flamingoes, white in the distance, rose startled into flaming red clouds. And in the still evenings so cool, so pleasant, Babar, who had a genius for the comfortable, ordered aromatic confections to be served, and the party floated down stream in dreamy content, trailing their hands in the refreshing water and singing low-toned songs in a whisper, until, suddenly the boat touched a sandbank, and Shâh-Hussan went over on his back, laid hold of Kâli-Gokultâsh, who was cutting a melon, and both fell into the water, the latter leaving the knife he held, stuck point down in the deck! And what is more, he refused to regain the boat, but continued swimming in his best gown and dress of honour till the shore was reached!

But there--a fine figure of a young man, handsomer in face than his father ever was, taller in height, yet without the latter's inexpressible charm--stood Humâyon to join in the laughter for a few moments, but then to give news which ended fooling.

The advance party of Sultân-Ibrahîm's army was within touch.

Babar was ready on the instant. He was out of the boat before it was moored, giving orders, short, sharp, stern.

The time for play was over.

CHAPTER II

"It is the time of roses;
Green are the young wheat fields;
The onward march of the foes is
Hid by a dark night's shield.

Over the sand hills, sun-dried,
Thirsting for blood of men,
An hundred thousand on one side,
On the other only ten!

What will the Dawn be showing,
Fate of the Parched Mouth?
Will the Cup-of-Death be flowing
With blood of North or South?"

All that night the Emperor sat in his tent working out his plan of attack. Even his brief connection with the red-cap Persian Army had given him an insight into a new science of war; for though it was brutal in the details of its methods, these methods had been learnt from the Turks; who in their turn had learnt them still farther West. And Babar was a born general. He had that firm touch on the pulse of his army by which he knew its moments of weakness, and when to seize and utilise the fierce throb of fight-fever, that comes at times to the blood of the most peaceful.

So the Emperor made his plan first; and then, being wise, bowed to the wisdom of his ancestors by calling together a general council of all who had experience and knowledge; but not, be it noted, until every part of his scheme was in order and ready. Not until right and left wings, and centre, had been apportioned; not until the gun carriages--seven hundred in all--had been *laagered* together with twisted hide ropes as with chains; not till the tale of hurdle breast-works and sandbags was complete.

Then he laid his plan before the Council; and naturally, it was approved. Mindful, also, of the prejudices of the rank and file, he performed the old Turki ceremony of the "*vim*" or full dress review, at which, as General, he had to estimate the total number of men at his command.

"The most revered father was out by a good thousand or two, to-day," said Humâyon, who, arrayed in gorgeous trappings, looked a hero after a woman's heart. "He was wont to be more accurate."

Babar smiled gaily. "A thousand or two to the good is better than to the bad, when men's hearts fail them," he replied. "And some, see you, are in great terror and alarm. For sure, trepidation and fear are always unbecoming, since what God Almighty has decreed, men cannot alter. Still I blame them not greatly. Of a truth they have reason. They have come a four-months' journey from their own country; they have to engage an enemy over an hundred thousand strong; and worse than all, a strange enemy, understanding not even their language, poor souls!"

He was full of commiseration; for all that he abated not one jot or tittle of his plan, and his very firmness brought a measure of confidence even to the timid.

The little town of Pâniput reached, Babar took up his position there, the city and suburbs protecting his right. The left he entrenched, leaving the centre free for his *laager* of guns and breastworks, behind which stood the matchlock men. But at every bow-shot distance apart, a space was left through which flanking parties of cavalry might issue forth to charge. When all was ready the army began to feel more secure, and more than one general ventured the opinion that with a position so well fortified, the enemy would think twice about attacking.

But Babar shook his head. "Consider not," he said, "of our present enemy as of our past ones. Judge not of Ibrâhîm-Sultân, as of our Princes and Khâns in the north who *knew what they were about*, who could discriminate when to advance, when to retreat. This young man has shown himself of no experience. Already I find him negligent in movement. He marches without order, he halts without plan, and will doubtless engage in battle without forethought: *therefore* we must be prepared."

It was an anxious time, that wait of six days for assault, but, despite the skirmishing attempts made by small parties of cavalry to induce the enemy to engage, nothing happened. A night attack carried out against Babar's own judgment, fared no better; but, mercifully, it ended without the loss of a single man, though one bold soldier--a boon companion of the Emperor's--was wounded.

That day at sunset there was a false alarm, and the army was drawn up ready for action; only, however, to be drawn off again and led back to camp. Again about midnight, the call-to-arms uprose, and for half-an-hour all was confusion and dismay, many of the troops being new to the work, and unaccustomed to such alarms.

"Lo! it will steady their nerves," said Babar lightly, with another gay smile, "and by God who made me! even mine are somewhat agee this night. Go! saddle me Rakûsh, slave! I am for a ride round for an hour or so."

A minute or two later he was on his favourite charger pacing his way silently over what would be the battle-field. And as he passed on, his horse's feet sinking in the thirsty sand, or echoing on the hard lime-stone soil, his mind was busy over the chances of the future. He meant to win; but many a man whose bones lay buried beneath that useless waste--useless for all save battle--had had as high a hope as his, as steady a determination.

How many thousands--nay! hundreds of thousands of hopes had not that vast sterile plain of Pâniput ended for ever? The common folk told him that on dark nights you could hear, rising from the ground, the voices of the dead men below, the clash of arms, the noise of fight. Mayhap it was so. Mayhap all the sounds of life went on, and on, and on. Tears, love, peace, war, life, death; all were the same in the end. All were part of that Great Whole which somehow, always managed to escape before you could grip at it.

He reined up his horse to listen; but only the familiar sound of the night came to his ear. The distant and persistent baying of a dog, the booming whirr of some night insect as it flew unseen, the faint rustle of a dawn wind over the sand.

It was time he were going back to work; back to face what the day might bring forth.

It brought what he awaited. When the light was such that one object could just be distinguished from another, patrols galloped in; the enemy were advancing in order of battle.

There was no confusion this time. "Use doth breed a habit in a man," was wisdom known to the Emperor. So, swiftly, each fell to his proper place, the flanking parties on the left ready with instructions, so soon as the enemy was in touch, to make a circuit and take them in the rear. Babar himself took his post on a slight eminence. He knew that with such overwhelming odds against him all depended on the handling of his men, so there must be no fine fighting for him. That was not his work.

His keen eyes watched the oncoming line of the enemy. It was bent to the right and the order came immediately--"Reinforcements from the reserve in support." Had he been a modern-day Staff-College man, the martial phrase could not have come more correctly!

And he noticed another thing. The enemy had not expected to find such strong defences. They were coming along almost at the double; yet the front rank hesitated, almost halted. This was the psychical moment. Intensify this hesitation, and the ranks behind would be thrown into confusion. "Right and Left divisions charge! And bid the flanking parties use all possible speed," came the swift order. In a few minutes both Left and Right were engaged and the wheeling horsemen could be seen coming round to the rear. Those overwhelming numbers told, however; the Left, too impetuous, wavered visibly; but Babar's keen eye saw it. To send support from the main body needed but a few words. So, attacked on right and left, with the flanking parties harassing the rear, the huge army was driven in on itself, and, huddled together, fell into confusion, unable either to advance or retreat. Then came the final order to the Centre "Engage!" and the fight was virtually won. After all, the artillery had little to do beyond a few discharges in front of the line to good purpose.

The sun had mounted spear-high when the onset of battle began, but by midday the enemy was completely broken and routed, and Babar's troops victorious and exulting. The arduous undertaking had been made easy, and a mighty army in the space of half-a-day laid in the dust. It seemed incredible. Babar remaining behind while he despatched parties of pursuit, rode, somewhat sad-eyed, over the battle-field. Here had been a fine stand! Five or six thousand dead bodies piled one upon another. Well! those had been brave men, dying for some cause, some point of honour. It was not until late in the afternoon that the cause, the point of honour, was made apparent. Ibrahîm, their King's dead body was found in their midst. One Tahir found it, cut off the head, and brought it into the Headquarters' tent.

"Slave! Why didst do that? He was at least King to those poor souls. Take it back," said Babar sternly, then went on with his work. Humâyon, Kwâjah-Kilân and several more of the best officers, with a light body of troops were despatched in utmost haste to occupy Agra, ere it had time to hear of the victory, and a smaller force to march without halt to Delhi and seize the Fort and treasuries. For Babar, with his small army, could not afford to give time for rally. This done he and his staff rode through the enemy's deserted lines, and visited the dead leaders' pavilions and accommodations.

"They had best bring the dead fool's body here," said Babar briefly, "and bid the men not touch the tent. Stay! set a watch on it till his friends come, as they will, likely, at nightfall."

It was a kindly thought, but in a way it was unwise; for the Afghans of Delhi, seeing their cause lost, kept alive their hatred of the northern invader by raising miserable Ibrahîm to martyr rank, and making pilgrimages to his grave.

But Babar was never clear-sighted in this world's ways; he did most things by impulse and it was Heaven's grace that such impulses generally led him aright.

Three days after this Zahir-ud-din Mahomed Babar was proclaimed Emperor of India in the mosque of Delhi, but the conqueror himself did not go into the city. He preferred to remain with his army encamped by the Kutb-Minâr among the relics of dead Kings, feasting his eyes on the strange new beauty of carven stone and straight architrave. He would not have thought it possible to get so majestic a building without the use of the arch.

But the Kutb-Minâr! Babar found himself looking at it at all hours of the day and night. It fascinated him. That marvellous shaft of stone so deftly modulated in tint, from its purplish red base, through pale rose-pink to vivid orange, as, spurning the world, it shoots into the blue sky, filled him with glad amaze. How and why and in what quality did it surpass all other buildings he had ever seen? Was it because, as folks said, its proportions were correct, or was there in it the secret of all true art? Babar knew his history well; he knew it was but three hundred years since, by order of Eibuk the slave, that column had been built by the Hindu architects who had to work with the material of their own desecrated and destroyed temples.

The temptation to revenge, to follow the destruction of religion by that of art, must have been great; but these men had been true artists. To them Self was nothing. They chiselled, they cut, they planned, perfection before their eyes. And they had touched close upon it; so their work remained, almost as it had left their hands, undimmed by Time, a record of Selflessness.

Babar could feel this vaguely, could spend half the night circumambulating the tombs of the Saints; could climb the dizzy stair at dusk to see Canopus flicker into light on the purpling heavens, and bring memories of the past with it. He could even come down again, full of kindly thoughts for the womenkind at Kâbul and write long letters to his paternal aunts telling them how splendid their grand nephew looked at the head of his troops, and how the army had taken to calling him, Babar, "Kalendar^[3]-King," because he gave away all his own chances of plunder.

"Nathless," he wrote, "I am keeping certain presents for my aunts and cousins, which shall be sent when opportunity offers."

But, almost before the ink of such effusions was dry, he would be out on an awning-covered boat slipping down the sliding moonlit river, trailing his hand in the water while his brain grew dizzy with wine or drugs.

For danger was past at present; he could afford to get drunk.

And he did. The journey down to Agra, where Humâyon had done his part well, and had, in addition, quelled a Rajput rebel to the West, was more like a pleasure-party than a march of war. Babar enjoyed it immensely, and his eyes were everywhere, noting each strange bird and beast, and flower. He even began to write down his impressions concerning his new kingdom.

Perhaps because by now--the end of April--the hot weather had begun to set in, his verdict was distinctly unfavourable. The whole country, and especially the towns, were in his opinion extremely ugly. The latter had a uniform ugliness which was dispiriting. Then the gardens were poor and without wells. The excessive levelness of the plain, also, was monotonous.

On the other hand the fruits were distinctly worthy of notice, though how anyone could eat a jack-fruit was beyond comprehension. It smelt horribly, it looked like a sheep's stomach stuffed and made into a haggis, and its taste was sickly sweet.

He was disappointed also in the mango, and could only damn it with faint praise by saying that "*such mangoes as are good are excellent.*"

The Gazetteer, however, had to be finished another time, for Agra was reached, bringing more urgent work. His first view of the place he meant to make his capital was disappointing in the extreme. It was the 10th of May and a dust storm was raging. None who have not endured one in Northern India can have any idea of the discomfort these electrical disturbances bring with them. The air, hot and heavy, seems to parch the skin; a shimmer, bringing dizziness to the brain, lies between the eyes and all things. Then, suddenly, a puff, as of smoke, drifts past. The sky reddens, lowers. A low, moaning sound as of coming wind is heard; and then, with a furious gust, it is there. For an instant or two, the trees bending, shivering in the storm, show like spectres; the next all things are blotted out by the dancing, raging, stinging sand-atoms which leap into the air and positively fray the skin as they sweep past, driven helter-skelter by the gale. Then a drop or two of dry rain falls, perhaps a little more, and after half-an-hour or so, the weary traveller who has sought shelter behind the first bush, or in the first hollow, can go on his way.

Such a storm was at its height when Babar entered the palace of his predecessor. But he bore it with singular composure. India had been to him for years a Land-of-Dreams, and he meant to stay there, despite dust. But his nobles spat the sand out of their mouths and reviled all things Indian, until Humâyon in full durbar, pulled out the great Moghul diamond which had been given him voluntarily by the Râjah's people of Gwalior in gratitude for saving their lives and property from his soldiery; for Humâyon, so long as he served his father, followed in his footsteps of humanity.

He laid it on a cushion of orange satin embroidered in silver, and handed it to his father. Not so brilliant doubtless then as it is now when it shines as the Koh-inoor, it was still a marvel, and

the northern nobles crowded round it in wondering delight. In value it must have been equal to half the daily expense of the whole world; enough therefore to pay for many discomforts and disagreeables.

But Babar's eyes scarce brightened.

"Tis more suitable to the young than to the old, sonling," he said affectionately. "Take it back, Humâyon, and give it to thy wife--when thou hast one! Thy mother--may her life be happy--cares not for jewels: nor in truth do I. A rose is better than a ruby."

And that night when he had settled some affairs of state, and pardoned a few Hindustâni nobles who had resisted his advance, he set to work upon a *rubai* on that fancy; but he was in too didactic a mood for poetry. He felt that he had done everything that had been required of him; so he wrote in his diary instead--

"In consideration of my confidence in Divine Aid, the Most-High did not suffer the distress and hardship of my life to be thrown away; but defeated my most formidable enemy and made me conqueror of the *noble* country of Hindustân" (this adjective was the result of some thought, for Babar was nothing if not truthful)--"This success I do not ascribe to my own strength, nor did this good fortune flow from my own efforts, but from the fountain of the favour and mercy of the Most-High."

After which he took an aromatic opiate confection and went to bed.

CHAPTER III

"Give me back one hour of Kâbul!
Let me see it ere I die.
Ah! my heart is sick and heavy;
Southern gales are not for me,
Though the hills are white with winter;
Place me there and set me free."

So in anticipation of Prince Charles at Versailles might Babar have said as he stood disconsolate on the banks of the river Jumna at Agra. He had started at dawn, full of high hope to find some place where he could lay out an elegant and well-planned pleasure-garden, and lo! the whole country side was so ugly and detestable, that for the moment he felt inclined to fall in with his courtiers' advice to leave India to stew in its own juice. There was no denying that as a country it had few pleasures to recommend it. To begin with, the people were not handsome. Then they had no idea of the charms of friendly society, of frankly mixing together, or of familiar intercourse. They had little comprehension of mind, no politeness of manner, no fellow feeling. Then they had no good horses, no good flesh, no grapes or musk melons, no ice or cold water, no good food or bread in their bazaars, no baths, or colleges, no candles--not even a candlestick!

Why! Even if their Emperors or chief nobility had occasion for a light, they had to send for dirty, filthy men called "Lighters," who held an iron tripod--smelling horribly and dripping rancid oil--close under their masters' noses!

Pah! It was disgusting!

For a wonder Babar was in a real evil temper. He could scarcely remember having felt so irritable before; except that once, when he had been trying to mount a fidgety Biluch mare and had struck her in his impatience with his half-closed fist and had thereby dislocated his thumb, which had troubled him for months; a just punishment for losing his temper with a dumb animal which knew no better.

Besides, that time, he had been half-drunk. But now?...

He felt inclined to cry. A state of mind in which this man of the West and North has the sympathy of thousands upon thousands of others; since there is scarce an Anglo-Indian who has not felt the same on hot, breathless May mornings when the dull eyes, seeking for some object on which to rest, find none, save a wide waste of sand, an indeterminate *kikar* tree, and an aggressive crow bent on showing you that he is as black inside as he is outside.

"The Most-Clement will forget the unloveliness when he stands once more in the Garden-of-Fidelity," remarked Kwâjah-Kilân with intent; and Babar actually scowled at him. Yet he had not the heart to say in so many words that he had no intention of returning to that Garden-of-Fidelity. The very thought of its beauty made him feel sick; but there was duty as well as beauty to be

considered.

And here again he has the sympathy of how many thousand western workers in Hindustân? In truth Babar should be the patron saint of the Indian Services!

But all things were against him that year. The very heat was uncommonly oppressive; men dropped down as if they had been affected by the simoon wind, and died upon the spot. Then there was always dislike and hostility between the new comers and the people, and it was difficult to find grain, or provender. The roads, too, became impassable, and the villagers, out of hatred and spite, took to thieving and robbery. Yet in such a furnace how was it possible to send out proper protection to the districts?

Still Babar set his teeth and stuck to the saddle.

"What! thou also?" he said reproachfully to Kwâjah-Kilân when in the privacy of the small Audience-Chamber, the latter urged the wisdom of doing as all the past conquerors of India had done; that is leaving so soon as the treasures had been divided. "And I counted thee my best friend."

"The Most-Clement knows I am that," protested the Kwâjah, stoutly. "That is why I urge immediate departure. The men lose heart. The Badakhshânis never engage for more than three months' fighting, and they have stood sixteen. They were promised leave--"

Babar broke in impatiently. "Then let them go! They are but mercenaries; not gentlemen of honour."

Kwâjah-Kilân flushed up. "I have ever been gallant man, sire; but I see no use in stopping to die of ghastly ailments. There is a black death they call cholera which I like not."

So he went on again, and again.

And this was but the beginning of many similar objections, not only by the older Begs and men of experience. Had that been so, there would have been no harm in it. But what sense or propriety was there in all the world eternally repeating the same tale, in different words, to one who himself saw the facts with his own eyes, and had formed a cool and fixed resolution in regard to the business in which he was engaged? For Babar meant not only to conquer India, but to be its Emperor. He meant, with all the strength of his vivid vitality, to found a dynasty; he meant that his son and his son's sons should inherit what he had won for them. What propriety, therefore, was there in the whole army, down to the very dregs, giving their stupid and unformed opinion on a matter which they were not capable of judging? It was bad enough that men whom he had raised from low rank to the dignity of nobles in the expectation that if he had chosen to go through fire or water they would follow him backward and forward without hesitation, should dare to arraign his measures, and show determined opposition to his plans and opinions!

He did not stand their disloyalty for many days. A Council was called of all nobles of whatever rank, and they came to it sheepishly yet stubbornly, full of admiration still for their chief, yet determined not to yield.

It was a grilling afternoon. The Audience-Hall literally throbbed with heat, and more than one man loosened the collar at his throat and gasped as they waited for the Emperor. They had expected him to enter in state; but there he was on the platform of the throne, a plain man like themselves. Despite the heat, he wore chain-mail and helmet, and his hand was on his sword. Plain soldier, indeed; but there was that in his face and mien which marked him out apart, though, as he stood, he shivered visibly and as he began to speak his teeth chattered. For Babar was in grips with his first taste of Indian fever, and the ague-fit was on him sharply. But even as he stood there shivering and shaking, it passed, and with a wild rush the hot stage sent an uncanny light to his eyes, and made the words leap to his blue lips.

"Gentlemen and Soldiers! Empire cannot be achieved without the materials and means of war. Royalty and nobility exist by subjection, and subjects by obedience. After long years, after great hardships, measuring many a toilsome journey, many a danger, after exposing ourselves to battle and bloodshed, our formidable enemy has been routed. We have achieved the end; we are masters of India. And now, without visible cause, after having worn out our very lives in this emprise, are we to abandon what we have gained? A mighty enemy has been overcome, a rich kingdom is at our feet. Are we, having won the game, to retreat to Kâbul, like men who have lost and are discomfited? No! I say! A thousand times no!--"

The fever, swift to flare up, had fair hold of him now and his words seemed to whip like scorpions--

"Let no man who calls himself Babar's friend ever dare to moot the very idea again. But if there be one amongst you who cannot summon up courage to stay--let him go. I want him not."

There was silence, but no one stirred. They had not the courage for *that* at any rate.

So Babar went back to his bed, his blood pulsing in every vein, his head bursting, until the hot stage passed into the sweating stage, and he sat up weakly, half-laughing, half-crying.

"Lo! I felt like a God," he said. "A God with a pain everywhere. Did I say enough?"

"Too much for me, Most-Clement," quoth Ali-Jân with a smile. "I stop till death."

And most of the hearers had come to the same decision. Only Kwâjah-Kilân, obstinate as a mule, refused to remain. So, as he had a fairly numerous retinue, it was arranged that he should return to Kâbul in charge of the presents Babar was sending home.

And this, with the necessary thought it entailed lest any should be disappointed, proved a welcome distraction for the Emperor, who in good sooth, what with recurring attacks of fever and general malaise due to the climate, needed something to keep up his spirits in the long, weary, hot days and nights, during which military operations were perforce at a standstill. And Babar was in his element choosing this and that, apportioning presents with all the fervour of a child at Christmas. No doubt his heart ached the while he wrote instructions for a regular gala to be held in the Four-corner Garden, and he must have felt life flat indeed when Kwâjah-Kilân had set out northwards. A certain interest of anger, however, re-awoke, when a friend returning from escort-duty to the party as far as Delhi, told him, with ill concealed smiles, that ere leaving the Fort there Kwâjah-Kilân had scribbled on one of its walls--

"If safe and sound I cross the Sind,
Damned if I ever wish for Hind."

Babar's cheek flushed dark red when he heard this *jeu d'esprit*.

"As his Emperor still remains in Hindustân," he said with hurt pomp, "there is evident impropriety, first in composing, and then in publishing such vituperative verse; and so I will tell him."

Which he did, by sending after him post haste an urgent messenger with his reply--

"Babar thanks God who gave him Sind and Ind,
Heat of the plains, chill of the mountain cold.
Yea! let the scorch of India bring to his mind
Bitter bite of frost in Ghazni of old."

The touch about Ghazni was, he thought, peculiarly happy, since he had appointed Kwâjah-Kilân Governor of that province! And ere the excitement of this passage of wits had died down to dulness, another touch had come to set the Wheel-of-Life spinning once more at full speed. One of Mahâm's charming, cheery letters brought most unexpected news. After some years, on the very verge in fact of her woman's life, she was again expecting to be a mother. "And I pray it may be a boy," she wrote, "for though Hindal, the son whom my lord gave so generously to my empty arms, is very, very dear to me, my heart leaps at the very thought of one who shall be my lord's and mine also."

Babar was overwhelmed with delight and anxiety. Even by special runner it took weeks for a letter to reach Kâbul, so Mahâm, he knew, must be near her time ere his warnings, his happy hopes, his loving affection could reach her. But he wrote off in hot haste, begging her to rely on Dearest-One for all things, entreating her to behave in all ways as if he were at hand. "And thou knowest, dear heart," he said, "what I would be like were I in Kâbul now. Verily, my moon, who hast so often chidden me for fretting wide-eyed the livelong night because Humâyoun or Gulbadan or one of the others had a stomach-ache, I should be past bearing. But when I think of what has happened and what might happen, I would mount Rakûsh and ride Kâbul-wards, were it not for some small good sense, and these pitiful folk who would deem me traitor to myself.

"Lo, we will call him Farûk, wife, since distance separates us."

After this he set to work upon his abandoned plan of a pleasure garden. Beggars, he said to Ali-Jân, must not be choosers. If there was no better spot than the plain over the river, he must e'en make the best of it. And the first thing to do was to sink a well; the next to plant roses and narcissus in corresponding beds.

The third thing was to hold a drinking party upon the spot close to the river, and make the place as pretty as it could be made with coloured lights and illuminations, garlands of flowers and palms cut off wholesale and planted in the ground. It seemed a pity to destroy the trees; but that was Hindustân fashion. Everything for show at the moment; no thought for the future. Still it was well done, and the Indian jugglers performed some fine feats.

The rains had by this time set in and the air was singularly delightful, though rather moist and damp. It was, for instance, impossible to shoot with the Kâbul bow which is pieced with glue; and everything, coats-of-mail, clothes, furniture, became mildewed. Even books--and Babar was avid concerning books--suffered, and the flat mud roofs leaked. Still, life was more enjoyable than it had been, and jolly Ali-Jân when in his cups, said gravely--

"The chief excellency of India is that it is large, and that it holds plenty of gold and silver."

They were a fairly merry party, these northerners in the Fort at Agra; merry, good-natured, *insouciant*, and they began to win golden opinions for themselves amongst the people, thanks to the Emperor's strict discipline. Here were no robbers, but gallant men ready to drink, or love, and pay for both like honest folk.

And their leader was a friendly soul, who sent assurances of safety and protection to all who voluntarily entered into his service. Then he was a fine fellow to look at, with kindly eyes and a ready smile; active, vivacious. Absolutely unlike, therefore, the solid, solemn, stony-eyed, lazy voluptuary which for hundreds of years had been India's conception of a king. Here, honours and rewards were for ever being bestowed, and the small native Princes invariably received back their lands, after they had made their obeisance. So whatever the northern conqueror's object might be, it was clearly not gold.

That in itself was a relief.

Thus the long months sped on, bringing, to one man at least, continued effort. Fever had laid hold of Babar; without his dear women-kind he felt lost and he had had to send his son and his best friend out with small forces to settle the country. Still he held on dutifully, giving feasts to his people, despite the rain which more than once drenched them through to the skin. As well it might, seeing that it rained thirteen times on one feast day! But in early October a special messenger arrived from Kâbul with the joyful news of little Farûk's birth. And the same post brought a budget of letters written before the event, by Mahâm and by the paternal aunts and cousins to the fifth degree, describing the marvellous festival which had been held according to order in the Four-corner Garden. Everything had been done exactly as His Majesty had directed. Every Begum had had her own tent and screen set up with all due luxury in the garden; it had been lit and beautifully illuminated at night and all the best singers and dancers of Kâbul had been assembled to give music. Never had been such a merry making! Never such a circle of happy faces and sparkling jewels in the sunshine; for the day had been brilliantly fine.

"Then," wrote Mahâm, who was out and away the best scribe, "we made Kwâjah-Kilân read out the instructions given him so that we might hear and rejoice in our lord's thought for us. So he read in a sonorous tone not so sweet as my lord's, but passable--'To each Begum is to be delivered as follows: one special dancing-girl of the dancing girls of Sultân-Ibrahîm, with one gold plate full of jewels, ruby, and pearl, cornelian and diamonds, emerald and turquoise, topaz and cat's eyes, besides two small mother-of-pearl trays full of golden coins. Two brazen trays shall be piled with silver coins and three with rich stuffs of sorts, so that there be nine in each. Another dancing-girl, a plate of jewels, and one each of gold and silver coins, must be presented to each of my elder relations. And have a care that each and all get the *very* dancing-girl and the *very* plates of jewels that I have chosen myself for them. So let jewels, and gold coins, and silver coins, be presented to all the ladies and kinsmen and foster-brethren, while one silver coin is to be given (as an incentive to emulation) to every man, woman and child in Kâbul, to make them remember me, and pray for me.'

"And even so, my lord, 'twas done, though it needed not money to make Kâbul remember its beloved King During those three happy days, every soul was uplifted with pride, and recited the first chapter of the Blessed-Book for the benediction and prosperity of his Majesty, as they joyfully made the prostration of thanks for his victories. But how can this dust-like one convey her thanks for the special gifts so graciously given in private to me and others. Let the others speak for themselves. I sit with a heart full of gratitude before that heaped-up tray, knowing not where to set my first stone of thanks. For, lo! the superstructure will be so heavy that it must have good foundation. Lo! there be two things amid the many quaint conceits of Hindustân, the many rare and beautiful gifts, on which I will rest my load of loving gratitude. First--(or is it second? I know not) the dearest little dresses fashioned after the manner of Indian princelings for your son, so soon to be born. Believe me, my lord, I wept happy tears over them. And yet methinks the book in my lord's own hand--it hath not lost its cunning--giving me the verses he hath composed during the last year is sweeter, more dear. The father comes, see you, before the child. Hindal is beside himself with delight at the wooden toys; so neat, so quaint, so clever! Truly they must be good workmen in Hindustân. So slight they are, yet do they please the little ones more than gold. And Gulbadan--truly she is a rosebud now--hugs her doll and hath taught it already to make the respectful salutation to Majesty she herself hath lately learnt. So we are all smiles. Nay! it was more than smiles when poor, dear, fat Astonishing Beauty Princess sat, the tears streaming down her face, nodding her head over the recitations, while the tassel of the head-ornament my lord sent her, dangled over her nose like a yak's tail on a camel!

"And the trick on old Asâs came off beautifully, even as my lord arranged it. For when the faithful thing asked Kwâjah-Kilân, 'What has my lord sent me?' he replied with truth, 'One gold coin.' So the old man was amazed, and disappointed, and fretted about it and we said nothing. So then at last, as my lord had commanded, the old man was blindfolded and he was led into our apartments to receive his gift. A hole had been bored (as ordered) in the gold coin--(it weighed nigh six pounds) and a string put to it. So it was hung round his neck. My lord should have seen him! He was quite helpless with surprise at its weight, and delighted, and very, very happy. He took it in both hands, and wondered over it and said, 'No one shall get it--no one! No one!' Then we all laughed too and gave him more money, so he was fine and pleased.

"Thus all went well, save for the absence of my lord--"

Babar read so far, stopping at times for a laugh, for a pause of sheer delight. Now he let slip the letter and sat awhile staring out at the ugliness, the fremdness of India.

What would he not have given to be there? To see them all! To see the blaze of July blossom, to hear the water trickling through the stone runnels, to watch the white flocks of clouds on the vast meadows of sapphire overhead ...

The thought was too much for him. His eyes filled with tears; then he brushed them aside with the order:

"Slave! A cup of wine!"

That night over the water, where strange new buildings were fast rising and where new-planted flowers and shrubs were thriving so fast in the kindly rains that already the townspeople, marvelling at the growing beauty, called the place Kâbul, the revels were fast and furious, and Babar, before he got miserably drunk, gained loud applause for a song he had just translated from the Hindi. It ran as follows:

"Oh! Watchman of night, awake!
For the dawning is nigh;
The black bees hum as their way they take
Through the lightening sky.
Oh! far away in the jasmine bowers,
The robbers will rifle the honey-flowers.
Watchman! Awake! Awake!

Oh, watch of the night, arise!
For the windows unclose;
A blue gown hung with pearl-fringing lies
On a bosom of rose.
Oh! close at hand in the old man's tower
The lovers will wanton a happy hour.
Watchman! Arise! Arise!

Oh, rouse thee, watchman, rouse!
Lo! the rain of night is past!
Her veil is dank, 'neath her level brows
The heavy tears fall fast.
Oh, far away lies her lovers part
And close at hand lies her broken heart.
Oh! Watchman, rouse thee, rouse!"

"Tis a rare song," hiccupped Jân-Ali, "but devil take me if I can tell what it means."

"Tis the tale of a wanton," quoth Târdi-Beg gravely, "and see you, she wore a blue gown fringed with pearl."

Babar looked at them both with irritation.

"Before the Lord!" he said almost sharply, "I know not which is best; understanding, or the lack of it."

Then he burst into a roar of laughter.

"They be merry devils over in Kâbul," quoth a surly-faced cook in the royal kitchen. "Mayhap they may laugh the wrong side of their mouths ere long."

CHAPTER IV

Fate knocked at the Door of Death,
My soul in her hollow hand.
Angels opened it. Lo! God saith,
To whom gave He this command?
Take him back to the Gates of Life
And set his feet in the way
So he and his children and his wife
Will praise my mercy alway.

The oncoming of cooler weather brought renewed activity once more. So far Agra was almost the southern limit of Babar's Empire. Below it, and to east and west, the Pagans--as these northern Mahomedans called the Hindus collectively--still held undisturbed sway. In truth they had never been touched by invasion from the north; the marauders had generally turned tail and fled before the scorch of the hot weather ere they had time to reach and harry so far south. And of all the Pagans the one most to be feared was Râna Sanka, the Râjput chief of Udaipur. Sooner or later Babar knew there must be a trial of strength between them; but he meant to put it off as long as he could. Meanwhile there were menaces to Agra closer at hand; notably the strong fort of Biâna which had lately gone over to the Râjput side. That was not to be endured, and Humâyon, who was an excellent second-in-command, set out to reduce the renegades to order, Babar meanwhile remaining in Agra and making preparations for the big fight that was bound to come.

One of these was the casting of a big siege cannon for the purpose of battering Biâna, which was sure to be recalcitrant to the last. The task was entrusted to Master-gunsmith Ali-Kool, than whom no better craftsman lived in all Asia. He had learnt his art away in the far West, and called himself ever Ali-Kool of Turkey. A small, spare bit of a man with sparse whiskers and a faint pitting of small-pox--or gun-powder--over a puffy face. But an excellent artificer, staking his reputation on a big gun that should throw a fifty-pound shot over four miles! It was a big order, and Babar's imagination caught fire. He was down at the furnaces every day watching the preparations. Eight furnaces in a circle, centring the huge clay mould. But it was at night that he loved to see the roaring flames with the naked, black figures of the stokers dancing about them, and the lurid glow of the half-molten metal lighting up the very heavens above. The heat was intense. None of his courtiers could stand it for long, but he, his eyes keen with curiosity, doffed raiment and went about naked as he was born, save for a waist-cloth.

"The Most-Clement prepares himself for Paradise," remarked the most caustic wit of the party; and Babar laughed gaily. "I prefer Hell in time rather than in eternity, friend," he replied; and as usual began an extempore versicle on the idea.

"Will it be at dawn to-morrow, master?" he asked of Ali-Kool late one evening.

"At dawn to-morrow," replied the master-gunsmith boastfully, "the largest cannon in Asia will be found in the armoury of Babar Padishâh!"

He was nearly beside himself with excitement; but at dawn next day he stood, pale to ashen-greyness, still as a stone.

Everything was ready. It only needed the word to open the sluices and let the molten metal run into the mould. And that word was the name the gun was to bear in the future.

"Now! Most-Clement!" palpitated Ali-Kool.

"Deg Ghâzi!" came Babar's full voice; the which being interpreted means Holy-Victorious-Pot. A yell of clamouring voices, a clash of implements half-drowned the christening.

Then like streaks of light the molten metal crept with slow swiftness, gathering speed as it flowed, bringing with it fierce, almost unbearable heat. The mould filled--half-full--three-quarters-

And then? Then the metal ceased to run. There was no more in the furnaces...!

Ali-Kool was like one demented.

"Hold the man," shouted Babar, whose eyes were ever alert for other people as well as himself, "or he will do himself a mischief!"

And indeed it was time! Poor Ali-Kool was on the edge of the mould as if about to throw himself into the molten metal, waving his arms about wildly, and calling High Heaven to witness that it ought not, it could not, have occurred. And Babar's kindly touch on his shoulder, his kindly words--"Nay, Master-*jee*, such things do happen at times to the best of us," only brought grief and shame to strengthen anger. He was disgraced--he had disgraced the Emperor ...

"Not one whit!" laughed Babar. "And as for thee--here! Slaves! Bring quick a robe of honour--the best! and here, where the misadventure--they are sent by God, remember, O Ali-Kool!--occurred will I invest thee and make thee noble!"

It was a fine group. The kingly figure so full of human sympathy, the broken-hearted artificer smiling perforce a watery smile, the crowding workmen, the *insouciant* courtiers, both full of approval. And tuning all to the perfect harmony of true Life, the appeal to that which lies beyond chance and misadventure.

"Lo! His Majesty hath the touch of consolation to perfection," said Târdi-Beg.

"Yea!" assented Ali-Jân, "but I would he had as fine a sense of danger. Dost know that he hath

put on four Hindustâni cooks to his Royal Kitchen, because forsooth, he hath never tasted the dishes of this accursed country and must needs try them?"

"Aye!" said Mahomed Bakshi, who was Superintendent-of-the-Household, "and what is worse, they be the Royal cooks of the late King! Heard you ever such fool-hardiness? Lo! I have put on two new tasters; but what is that? These idolaters have strange ways and strange poisons."

"And strange dishes!" put in Târdi-Beg. "Lo! I eat none at the Emperor's supper parties."

"Nor I," chorused several.

"Gentlemen!" said Mahomed Bakshi. "You speak without thought for the interior of a kitchen. Poison may go into any pot. 'Twere better to eat nothing. Then would my labours be less."

"Thy percentages also," laughed a recognised wit. "Heed him not, gentlemen. 'Tis but his way of keeping our stomachs empty, so that more profit fills his pocket."

So the subject was dismissed with a joke; though in truth it was far from being one. For Babar's somewhat reckless appointment of these four Hindustâni cooks, had set in train one of those fine-drawn female plots to poison which seem inseparable from the seclusion of women. It is as if the concentrated, confined vitality, denied outlet in natural ways, seeks expression in pure venom. The late Sultân-Ibrahîm's mother lived, by Babar's generosity, in comparative State. He had assigned lands to her, treated her with the utmost respect, and when he addressed her, did so as "mother." But the mere chance of having a Hindustâni cook in the royal kitchen was too much for gratitude.

The result Babar wrote to Mahâm when, considerably the worse for the incident, he was still living on water-lily flowers brayed in milk.

"The ill-fated lady, having heard of my appointment of cooks, delivered no less than a quarter of an ounce of poison to a female slave and sent it to Ahmed, her taster, wrapped up in a folded paper. He, seducing the man by promise of vast lands, handed it to one of the cooks, desiring him by some means or another to throw it into my food. The man did not throw it into the pot, because I had strictly enjoined my tasters ever to watch the Hindustânis; fortunately, therefore, he only threw it into the tray. In this fashion. When they were dishing the meat, my graceless tasters must have been inattentive, for he managed to throw about one-half of the poison on a plate which held some thin slices of bread. These he covered with meat fried in butter. The better half in his haste he spilt in the fireplace.

"It was fried hare. I am very fond of hare, so I ate a good deal and also fried carrot. I was not, however, sensible of any disagreeable taste. But while I was eating some smoked-dried meat I felt nausea. Now the day before while eating this smoke-dried flesh I had detected an unpleasant taste in a part of it. I therefore ascribed my nausea to that incident. But it was not so. I was very ill. Now I have never been ill in that way even after drinking wine. Suspicion therefore crossed my mind immediately. I desired the cooks to be taken into custody, and directed the rest of the meat to be given to a dog, and that it be shut up. The dog became sick, his belly swelled, he could not be induced to rise until noon next day when he rose and recovered. Two young menials in the kitchen who had partaken of the food also suffered. One indeed, was extremely ill, but in the end both escaped.

"And so did I.

"Next morning I held a court, and the miscreants being questioned, detailed the whole circumstances of the plot in all its particulars. The master-taster was ordered to be cut in pieces; the cook flayed alive; the female slave to be shot by a matchlock. The ill-fated lady I condemned to be thrown into custody for life: one day, pursued by her guilt she will meet with due retribution in penitence.

"Since then I have lived chiefly on antidotes and lily-flowers, and thanks be to God! there are now no remains of illness. But I did not fully comprehend before how sweet a thing life is. As the poet says:

"'He who comes to the Gate of Death knows the value of Life.' Truly when this awful occurrence passes before my memory, I feel myself involuntarily turn faint; but having overcome my repugnance even to think of it, I write, so that no undue alarm or uneasiness might find its way to you. God has, indeed, given me a new life. Other days await me, and how can my tongue express my gratitude. The ill-fated lady's grandson Ibrahîm had previously been guarded with the greatest respect and delicacy; but when an attempt of so heinous a nature was discovered to have been made by the family, I do not think it prudent to have a son of the late King in this country. So I am sending him to my son Kamran, away from Hindustân. I am now quite recovered."

This was true, but the nervous shock remained. Babar had been close to death in its most sordid form. To die like a poisoned rat was to him, with his breezy, open-hearted love of frankness in all things, a horrible fate. His repugnance even to think of it was real; but he hovered between two methods of forgetfulness--the drowning of thought in the wine-cup, and the anodyne of repentance and forgiveness. Deep down in his heart, he felt himself foresworn in not

having kept to his promise of reform when he was forty; but he could not make up his mind to take the plunge and give up wine. It was, he told himself, the only comfort in that cursed country, the one thing that made life possible. With its help, even fever and ague were bearable.

It was, therefore, in the midst of drinking bouts, that news came which roused him to other activities. It had never needed much to change the habitual toper into a clear-sighted man of arms. And never, in all his life, had news of such significance brought Babar up with a round turn.

Râna Sanka of Udaipur was on the move. The quarrel could no longer be put off. The fight for final supremacy was nigh at hand.

The news came when the Christmas rain was just over, and Babar, exhilarated as he always was by the freshened verdure of trees, the sudden start into growth of the wide wheat fields, was heightening his enjoyment by a feast over the river in "Kâbul," which day by day under his fostering care, showed more and more likeness to the sponsor country. Humâyön was back from a successful expedition and was of the party; no kill-joy, his father thought fondly, though he drank no wine; not from scruples but from lack of liking.

It was, of course, a wonderfully innocent and guileless party. No coarse jokes, no scurvy tricks. But the most of them were incontestably drunk, and even Babar's strong head was fast becoming fuddled when the special messenger arrived. Canopus was shining away like a moon in the South, and Babar looked at it gravely, yet truculently.

"Gentlemen!" he said solemnly, and it was all he could do not to hiccup. "Draw your s-s-words, gentlemen. We have to fight a--a--dam-ned--p-pagan--to--to-morrow. Meanwhile I'll sing you a song:

"Account as wind or dust
The world's pleasures and pain.
Be not raised up or crushed
By its good or its bane.

As a mere throw of dice
Is the life of a man.
Fortune goes in a trice,
Just a flash in the pan.

Take then a cup of wine,
Drink it down to the dregs,
And don't grumble or whine,
'Tis but the fool who begs."

His voice failed him when he had got so far. He sat solemn-drunk gazing at Canopus, wondering how many years ago it was since he had first seen it from the top of the Pass.

How clear, how cold the night-air had been. How the star had sparkled! How the glad life in him had answered to the thrill of that distant, heaven-sent, throbbing light ...

Well! The night was as clear, as cold now. The stars?--how they sparkled and shone, all colours like jewels ...

Yes! all things were the same except himself ...

"Gentlemen!" he said suddenly, rising unsteadily to his feet, "I give you leave. I--I go to my bed."

But he was up before dawn next day to see Ali-Kool put the final touches to the great gun he had been making. For, after all, the casting had been a success, needing only a little alteration to make it perfect. In the afternoon it was tested, and threw one-thousand-six-hundred good paces, which was not so bad.

And all Agra was in a turmoil of preparation for the coming march; but there was so much to be done that a few days passed before Babar, at the head of all his available troops, moved out in battle array to occupy the rising ground at Sikri, where the huge tank promised abundance of water. He had been in a fever of impatience to get there, lest the Pagans, also seeing its many advantages as a camping ground, might forestall him. But the 17th of February found him preparing for the biggest battle of his life in the very place where his grandson Akbar was, in after years, to build his Town-of-Victory.

It was just a year since Babar had entered India. Now he was faced by the strongest man in it, and the fight must be to the bitter end.

Yet he could not resist the seduction of an aromatic comfit before he threw himself, outwearied, on his camp bed. But he said his prayers before he took it, and tried to forget that long-made promise that forty should see him sober.

CHAPTER V

"Like to a thunder cloud that rears itself
In towering mass across the peaceful sky,
Equal in threat, until the vivid snake
Of lightning, shot--God knows from East or West!
Flashes fierce war between the blended foes,
So stood those warriors, each to each a twin
In honour, courage, indivisible."

The camp at Sikri looked West. With the ridge of red rock behind it, the wide tank to the left of it, nothing more could be desired in position. And Babar had fortified it, in addition, after his usual custom. The swivel guns, united every fifteen feet by heavy chains and backed by a deep ditch, gave security to the front, while tripods of wood similarly linked, protected the right flank. Mustapha the Ottoman had done signal service in disposing the remaining artillery according to the Turkish fashion. An exceedingly active, intelligent, and skilful gunner was Mustapha; but unfortunately Master-gunner Ali-Kool and he were at deadly enmity; so they had to be kept apart. Babar, a trifle weary, kept them so with consummate tact. He had, so to speak, lived on diplomacy for the last year. He had pursued his policy of magnanimity without one swerve, and little by little the tide of popularity had set his way.

One by one insurgent chiefs had sent in their submission, so that in this camp at Sikri were many who but a year before had been sworn foes to the Northmen.

So far he had succeeded. Alone, unaided--at any rate in thought--he had won half Hindustân, not so much by the sword as by statesmanship.

And yet on the 24th February as he stood watching the Khorasân pioneers and spademen throwing up further earthworks, he felt for the first time in his life forlorn. Perhaps the darkness of the day depressed him. It was late afternoon, and for days rain had been brewing; the heavy rain which sometimes falls in March to bring bumper crops to the wide fields.

Purple clouds hung like a pall under the sky and brought a weird, vivid glint as of steel to the stretches of green wheat. Far away on the south-western horizon this glint shimmered into a broad band of light that told where, before long, the hidden sun must set.

There, in that light, the spear-points of the advancing foe would glisten. Did they glisten now? Or was that only the shimmer of countless millions of wheat blades going forth to war against starvation?

The fanciful idea came to Babar's brain, as such quaint thoughts did come often, while he was looking over the wide, ominous plains, recognising, also, that it was not an encouraging landscape to the ordinary eye.

But nothing was encouraging. The long waiting had told upon the temper of his troops, it had given time for desertions. Then a trifling defeat to a skirmishing party had intensified the growing alarm; a well-deserved defeat, due to gross lack of judgment on the commander's part; but the rank and file could not be expected to give weight to arguments. A disaster spelt disaster to them, nothing more nor less, especially if they were afraid ...

And they *were* afraid.

Small blame to them! Babar himself did not view his adversary with equanimity. He admitted it. For Râna Sanka of Udaipur was true man; a fitting representative of Râjput valour. There was no need to say more. Aye! true man, though he lacked an eye, lost in a broil with his brother, an arm lost in pitched battle, and was crippled in one leg broken by a cannonball! True man, undoubtedly, though but a fragment of a warrior scarred by eighty lance and sword wounds! Babar thought of his own good luck in many a battle, almost with regret. Aye! Pagan, Râna Sanka might be--it was best anyhow to call him so to the troops--but he was worthy foe for all that, and he could bring two-hundred-thousand horsemen into the field, if need be.

Two-hundred-thousand!

No wonder the troops were timorous; no wonder their nerve was going fast. Babar, tall, lean, with clear, anxious eyes thanked God for the distraction which had come to the camp but yesterday. About five hundred persons attendant on a grandson of his dead uncle of Khorasân had arrived in the environs of the camp, and with quick insight Babar had seized the occasion to send out a numerous escort to hide the smallness of the newly-arrived force, which thereafter

figured in the order book as "important re-inforcement from Kâbul"; since by fair means or foul, the men's courage must be kept up.

And the butler who had been sent to Kâbul for wine had returned too with fifteen camel-loads of choice Ghazni!

But this was no time for drunkenness, though a goblet or two might be--must be--permissible; for of one thing there was no doubt. Never in all his life had Babar stood nearer to habitual toping. He had had a hard time of it; he had been cut off from the domestic life which had ever been his safeguard, he had had to fight fever and poison. Briefly he was overwrought. That was noticeable in the nervous restlessness of his hand upon his sword hilt as he strode about his camp moodily watchful for every sign of discontent or depression. And there were many. It seemed almost as if no one could utter a manly word, or give a courageous opinion. Save his own son Humâyon, his son-in-law Mâhdi (husband to the little Ma'asuma to whom Babar had given her mother's name) and one general, not a soul spoke bravely as became men of honour and firmness. Not one.

Going his rounds that evening a new factor for discouragement cropped up. He was passing the tents of some of his best Kâbul troops, when a voice bombastic, prophetic, met his ear.

"Lo! the stars cannot lie!" it said; "and Mars being in the ascendant to the West, it follows of a certainty that any force coming from the East will suffer disastrous defeat. Be warned, oh! warriors! The heavens cannot lie!"

Before the last words had well ended, Babar stood before the speaker literally blazing with wrath and recognising in him Mahomed Shereef, a well-known Kâbul astrologer. He was seated before a chart of the stars, and swayed backwards and forwards rhythmically, whilst before him, filling the close tent with scented smoke, burnt a brazier. Its blue salt-fed flame flared on the fearful faces of a dozen or more soldiers.

"God send thee to hell!" burst out Babar. "How camest thou hither, infamous fool?--Why didst not stay in Kâbul?"

The man--he had a pompous, self-satisfied face--was shrewd. He knew his power, and held his own.

"I came hither, Most-Clement, with the wine camels, being minded to give the benefit of my science to His Majesty and His Majesty's soldiers."

"Science!" echoed Babar hotly; "thou meanest lies."

"The stars cannot lie," began the soothsayer, but Babar in a perfect passion of wrath had him by the throat.

"Here! guards! seize this rascally fellow," he cried, then hesitated. "No!" he went on, loosing his hold and flinging the man from him in contempt. "Let him go! Punishment would but invite credence. But mark my words, villainous soothsayer! if any more be heard of this opposition of Mars--" He paused again and this time burst into bitter laughter. "No! Let these men sup their fill of horrors if they wish it--but they shall hear me first."

He turned to his soldiers and stretched out his right hand in appeal.

"Men! I have led you all these years. Have I led you into more danger than brave men dare face? Aye, once! for thou, O Shumshir--" his quick eye had seized on an old veteran--"wert with me even then! Aye! once at Samarkand when Babar got the worst beating of his life--when Babar fled like a rat to his hole, starved for six months and escaped with bare life--but--but not with honour--No! with dishonour!" His voice had risen and almost broke over the last word from sheer stress of emotion. "And wherefore was I beaten?" he went on more calmly; "because I fought on star-craft, because the stars lied to me. They said I would win and I was beat! So! set the snivelling sayings of that silly worm against the experience of Babar, your leader, if you will. But you will not! You will leave jugglery and devils'-craft to your foes the Pagans; for the trust of the true Moslem is in the Most High God--*Allah-hu-Akbar!*"

He gave the cry of faith from full lungs and it was echoed by the men. For the time he had scotched fear; but only for a time. The astrologer was at worst a diversion in the long weariness of waiting, and round the camp fires the soldiers talked of nothing else.

"Lo! he is good prophet," said one; "he told my wife's sister her son would die and he did."

"And 'tis all well enough to call it devils'-craft," put in another, "but who made the stars, save God?"

"And to what use were they made?" asked a third argumentatively, "save to guide men aright? There is no other good in them."

This proposition was so palpably true to the knowledge of those days that even Babar himself had no weapon against the argument. Nor could any deny that Mars was in the ascendant in the

West!

The Emperor as he sat wearied out with anger and irritation could see it for himself shining red; steadily, placidly red.

"Oh! for God's sake, gentlemen!" he said captiously when he had exhausted every argument he could think of to allay the evident alarm even of his highest nobles, "let us leave it hanging in the heavens and get to Paradise ourselves. Cup-bearer! the new Ghazni wine. That may help us to forget foolery. Mayhap it would have been better to have brained the knave on the spot--but a man can but do his best."

He drained his cup to the lees, held it out for more, and called for a song.

"Thank God for wine!" he muttered under his breath as he felt the fumes rising to his brain.

Never had merriment been more fast and furious; never had Babar drunk more recklessly.

Song after song rent the night air, mingled with outcries and loud laughter; but there was sufficient decorum left for comparative silence when the Emperor himself lifted up his voice in "The Buss"; a favourite Turkhomân ditty. It had rather a quaint, plaintive tune, and a catching refrain which was duly bellowed by the others.

"He (his moustache twirled) called to her aloud,
'Give me a buss, lass! Lo! your lips are red.'
She (her bright hair curled) spoke him back full proud,
'Give me a gold piece, merry sir,' she said.
'Merry sir,' she said, etc.

'Lass! I would give thee golden fee galore,
But my purse, alas! is in wallet tan
Of the saddle bag my swift camel bore,
And, see you, my dear, that's still at Karuwân,
Still at Karuwân,' etc.

'Lad! I would buss you, were my lips but free,
Only, as you see, they won't ope a span,
Mother locked my teeth! Mother keeps the key,
Mother (like thy camel) 's still at Karuwân,
Still at Karuwân.
Mother (like thy camel) 's still at Karuwân.'"

The endless refrain went on and on sillily, mingled with the twanging of the *cithâras* and boisterous laughter.

It was a roaring night, and Babar, for once blind-drunk, fell asleep at last among his cushions. The others had been carried back to their several tents, so, when he roused to the crow of a cock he was alone save for drowsy servants.

But half-sober, he sat up and listened gravely.

"Oh, Cock!" he quoted with a hiccup. "Oh, Cock...!"

"Cock, flutter not thy wings,
It is not nearly day.
Why with shrill utterings
Drivest thou sleep away?
Lo! in the Land of Nod,
To perfect peace I'd come.
Oh, Cock! there is a God
Will surely strike thee dumb,
Surely--strike thee--dumb--"

He stood up, stretched with a lurch, passed unsteadily to the doorway of the tent, raised the curtain, and looked out.

Far in the east a great drift of spent rose-leaf clouds lay softly between the lightening sky and the lightening earth.

And see! already their curled petals were catching the underglow of the hidden sun.

Babar stood still and held his breath hard, sobered in every fibre of his being, yet elate with something new that fled to heart and brain like molten fire.

A new day! A new day! A new day!

The words surged, not through him only, they echoed to the very sky. It is not given to all, this sudden exaltation, this sudden absorption of the self into something beyond self, and Babar, the

fumes of last night's wine still hanging between him and clear thought, could only realise that something had come to him; that something was irrevocably settled for ever.

"My charger, slave!" he said hoarsely. "It--it is time I went my rounds."

It stood ready at the door; he mounted, and, after his wont, rode off alone.

The fresh cool air of a North-Indian winter dawn bit softly at his cheek and brought him knowledge of his own conversion.

Wherefore he could not tell, but he was going to drink no more. He had done with wine, for ever. All these last four or five years since he was forty, he had been cheating himself--aye! and his God too,--with lies. Now there was to be truth.

There was no special reason for this resolution; it was, indeed, hardly a resolution of his own. It had come to him with those dawn-red, rose-leaf clouds flung from some Garden of Paradise. Wherefore it had come, he could not say. He had often seen dawn-clouds before; he had often--ah! how often--made resolutions. These were different. This resolution was not his.

"Bid a general parade be commanded at the second watch," he said on his return from his survey of the posts; then passed into his office tents, and began his daily work of supervision.

"'Twill be to harangue us all," grumbled a fine-weather soldier sullenly, "but, King or no King, I fight not with one who wars against the fiat of the stars."

"Nor I!" answered another; and though few were so outspoken, a certain dour opposition, sat on almost every face in the great concourse of men who, in the full glare of the noonday sun, massed themselves round the great Audience-Tent in obedience to their leader's command.

He came out from the shadow of the tent, clad in his loose white tunic, jewelless, swordless, a simple man in the prime of life; a man with a kindly, human face, but with a clear eye that seemed to see right to the heart of things. He held a crystal cup in his right hand, full to the brim with red wine.

"Noblemen! Gentlemen! and Soldiers!" rang out the strong mellow voice. "All who sit down to the Feast of Life, must end by drinking the Cup of Death. Therefore it behooves all to be ready for that last Draught by repenting him of the evil he has done. Lo! I repent me of my sin. I repent me of my broken promise. Now! with the salvation of a righteous death before me, I cast away my great temptation!"

As he spoke, the crystal cup he held flew from his hand and the red wine scattered from it as it fell shivered to atoms, soaked into the dry sand leaving a stain as of blood.

"Lo! I repent," he repeated, his face afire; "who follows me?"

"I do, sire!" said one Asâs, the heaviest drinker in the camp, and Babar turned on him a face radiant with friendly thanks.

"That makes it less hard," he said joyously. "Thou hast more to renounce than I!"

"And I also, Most-Clement!" put in a soft grave voice. "I follow fair where Babar goes." It was Târdi-Beg, quaint, frolicsome soul, on whom the Emperor vented much of his boyish fun, and who was satisfied with one kindly glance of perfect sympathy.

"And I!"--"And I!"--"And I!" came here, there, everywhere.

Then followed a memorable, an almost unbelievable scene. From the tent behind Babar came slaves bearing great trays of silver and gold goblets, ewers, measures; strong men bearing casks and skins of wine, a smith or two with his anvil.

"Break up the gold and silver and give it to the poor, and pour the wine back to the storehouse of God!" came Babar's voice. "Where it falls shall be built a well whence travellers may quench their thirst."

For a minute or two the army watched the hammers falling, watched the red wine sinking into the sand; then it caught fire at the sight and men crowded round in hundreds to cast their wine-cups on to the pile and take the oath of abstinence. But the Emperor himself stood silent. He was thinking how glad Mahâm would be; Mahâm who had so often striven to wean him from his sin.

But after the stir and excitement of the morning, the evening closed in dark and gloomy. A few spots of rain fell, and Babar, made restless probably by the lack of his usual stimulant, decided on moving forwards to meet the enemy. Anything seemed better than inaction. This was done; but even the bustle of marching failed to rouse the men's spirits. The warnings of the old astrologer returned in greater force, a general consternation and alarm prevailed amongst great and small. Something more must be done; so once again Babar called a grand parade; but this time he held the Holy Korân in his right hand. It was many days now since wine had crossed his lips; he had felt no desire to drink, no temptation to break his oath, and yet that abstinence had told upon him physically. He was more high-strung than ever; more exalted. And so he struck even a higher

note.

"How much better is it to die with honour than to live with infamy," he cried. "Lo! The Most-High is merciful to us. If we fall, we die the death of martyrs since we fight the Pagan. If we live, we live the victorious avengers of the Faith. Let us then swear on God's holy word that none of us will turn his face from Death or Victory till his soul is separated from his body. 'With fame, even if I die, I am content. Fame shall be mine! though my body be Death's.'"

The Persian verse came to him unsought, echo from his far youthful days when Firdusis' Shahnamah had been the delight of his boyhood.

But it came to him Godsent. Familiar to almost all, it, and this declaration of Holy War stirred the whole army to its heart. The effect was instantly visible; far and near men plucked up courage.

None too soon. That very evening a patrol brought in the news that the enemy was within touch.

All was bustle, for Babar was too experienced a general to engage an overwhelming foe without having some entrenched position upon which to fall back.

A day or two was occupied in throwing up earthworks a mile or two ahead, so it was not till the 16th of March, 1527, that the guns and the troops moved on to take up their position, Babar himself galloping along the line, animating the various divisions, giving to each special instructions how to act; giving almost to every man orders how he was to behave, in what manner he was to engage.

It was the last opportunity he was to have of bringing the personal equation to bear upon his force, since ere they had settled into camp, the great moment, awaited for six long weeks was on them. Without loss of time the Emperor sent every man to his post, the lines of chained guns and waggons was linked up, the reserves withdrawn from the front--their great strength was ever a special feature of Babar's generalship--and there was nothing more to be done save await the onset.

Humâyon commanded the right. Mâhdi Kwâja, Ma'asuma's husband, the left, Babar reserving the centre for himself. Once again, his plan was to force in the enemy's wings and so create confusion. But ere this could be done, his own wings had to withstand attack.

At half-past nine in the morning, a furious charge of the flower of Râjput chivalry almost shook Humâyon's force. His father was on the watch, however; reserves came up speedily, and Mustapha's guns from the right centre were brought into action. Despite their deadly fire, fresh and fresh bodies of the enemy poured on undauntedly, and Babar saw his reserves dwindling; for the attack had been equally fierce on the left. Now, therefore, was the moment of effort. Now something must be done or nothing. The battle had raged for hours; now it must be decided one way or the other.

"Flanking columns right and left, wheel and charge!" came the order. "Guns in the centre advance! Cavalry charge to right and left of matchlock men! Wings to follow suit if they can! Now then! Master-Gunner Ali-Kool! let us see if thou canst whip Mustapha!"

"The Most-Clement *shall* see!" yelled the old man; and, uncovered by the charging cavalry the big guns with their huge stone balls began on their task. The battle was now universal and the unexpected movements, made all at the same moment, had the desired effect upon the enemy. His centre was thrown into slight confusion.

Babar set his teeth. "Reserves to the flanking columns! And steady, steady, in front!--no rushing--close in--close in."

But this was no battle of an hour or two as at Pâniput.

Step by step the gallant Râjputs disputed the way of that steady boring. They made repeated and desperate attacks on the Emperor's centre in the hopes of recovering the day: but all were received bravely, steadily, without one waver. How could there be one with that marvellous general behind, sitting his horse like an oriental Napoleon, cool, collected, unarmed, ready of resource, of reserve?

By this time one of the flanking columns had got round to the enemy's rear; the Râjputs were forced into their centre. Briefly, Babar had won the battle on his own settled lines. By sunset, the brave defeated, still numerous, had nothing left to them, but to cut their way as best they could through those encircling, suffocating arms and so effect what retreat they could.

But the victory was final, it was complete. When the moon rose that night it shone upon multitudes of gallant dead. Râna Sanka had himself escaped, though severely wounded; but never again was he or any other of his family to take the field against the Moghul power. They had learnt to fear the Northmen.

The enemy being thus defeated, parties were sent after the fugitives to prevent their

reforming. Babar felt, vaguely, that he was guilty of neglect in not going himself, but he was thoroughly spent and weary of bloodshed. He had gained his point; he had proved himself the better man of the two, and for the present that was enough for him. So, after riding a few miles in pursuit, he turned to reach his own camp about bedtime prayers.

At the door of his tent a dim figure showed, and profuse congratulations on victory rose out of the darkness in a well-remembered and bombastic voice.

It was Mahomed Shereef the astrologer. This was too much! Babar, wearied as he was, poured forth a perfect torrent of abuse. No word was too bad for the miserable fool. But when he had thus relieved his heart, he suddenly began to laugh.

"Lo!" he said, "thou art heathenishly inclined, perverse, extremely self-conceited and an insufferable evil-speaker. Yet art thou also an old servant. Therefore, see here!--the Treasurer shall give thee a whole lakh of rupees, so that thou go to the devil out of my dominions. Never, my friend, let me see thy ill-omened face again! All's well that ends well."

Indeed as Babar laid his head on the pillow that night as undoubted master of India, his one regret was that he could not have had a personal tussle with his brave and honourable adversary.

He had been worth beating.

And he had been beaten--effectually.

CHAPTER VI

Distraught am I, since that I gave up wine,
Confused, to nothing doth my soul incline
Regret did once my penitence beget;
Now penitence induces worse regret.

Babar.

Babar wrote these verses from a full heart; for he found much difficulty in reconciling himself to the desert of abstinence.

And it was a desert indeed! After the storm of war had come peace--at least comparative peace--and a flat calm was never to his taste even in youth. And here it was aggravated almost beyond bearing by a thousand-and-one minor troubles. To begin with, ere he had commenced the Holy War against that honourable Pagan, Râna Sanka, he had told his soldiers that if successful, as many of them as wanted it should have leave to return home. And this promise had to be fulfilled. Then Humâyon's division had consisted almost entirely of levies from Badakhshân where the young Prince had been governor, and these were seized with a great longing for home. As Kâbul was imperfectly defended, it seemed best therefore to send both the division and its leader back; indeed Humâyon himself needed a rest. He had worked magnificently and now a young wife was awaiting his return; so, in God's name let him go. And little Ma'asuma should have her husband back also; a good sort, though he need not have shown his discomfort quite so openly. Still, let him go also, to return when the approaching hot weather was past, as governor of Etawah.

Then Târdi-Beg! Babar's heart sank as he thought of life without the man who for years and years had been more of a charge than a help in manners mundane; but in all things supermundane what a joy! Thoughtless, profuse, a lover of the glass, how often had he not turned a frown to a laugh--a merry, innocent laugh? Truly, ever since he, Babar, had come across him, an irresponsible lovable *darvish*, and had prevailed upon him to give up religion in favour of fighting, he had been a perpetual stand-by to that side of Babar's nature which was not even perceived by the mass of his *entourage*. And now to have none ready with quip and crank that held just the salt of life wherewith it must be salted!

Yet Târdi-Beg must go too. That renunciation of his had re-aroused religion in his heart, and it must be allowed free course. He also would see the gardens of Kâbul, would feel its fresh breezes, drink its ice-cold water.... Truly! if one did not drink wine, the water should at least be cold!

Babar gulped down a tepid draught disgustedly, and worked away at the verses he meant to send by his friend to those other friends who had deserted him last year. They were in Turkhi and ran as follows:

"Oh, ye! who left us alone to die
'Neath the sultry heat of an Indian sky,
Who shirked the labour of life to fly
Back to its comfort, its jollity,
Lo! you have had your recompense fair,
Of joy and delight your proper share.

But we have struggled to hold our own,
Have tilled and laboured without a moan,
And God's great mercy a way has shown
To patient content as the seed was sown,
You in Life's garden God's harvest missed.
I gather it here in *Hesht-Bishist*."

Hesht-Bishist or the Eighth-Paradise being the name of his favourite garden in Agra.

In fact verses and gardens were his greatest amusement that hot weather, much of which he spent at Dholpur where he was busy laying out pleasure-grounds and building palaces. He had disbanded most of his troops until the rainy season was over, and sent his nobles to the several districts assigned to them. Thus he was left alone to fight out the temperance battle by himself. It did not agree with him evidently, for twice he nearly succumbed to sudden illness; but he brought religion to bear on the question with a grave simplicity all his own, and kept feasts and fasts with the strictest orthodoxy.

Even here, however, he could not be quite conventional; for, never since he was eleven, having held the Festival of Ramzân two years running in the same place--a fact which gives testimony to his unsettled life--he could not make up his mind to break through the usage. So he ordered a fine camp to be pitched at Sikri, and deserted his capital.

Thus the months sped by bringing disappointments and minor pleasures. The news which came to him that Humâyön--Humâyön the magnificent, the darling of his heart--had on his way through Delhi broken open the treasure-houses there and marched off Kâbul-wards with their contents, hurt him extremely. He had never expected such conduct from him, so he wrote him a letter containing the severest reprehensions, and thereafter fell ill for seventeen days. It was not so bad a fever, however, as that which seized on him in October after he swam the Ganges at Sambal, in order to ride alone (having separated from his people by a finesse--for no reason at all) to Agra. He lay half-delirious then for nigh four weeks, his brain busy all the time with versifications.

He only recollected one of them, however, when at last, a mere skeleton of a man, he rose from his bed. He set it down, however, to show how bad he had been.

"My fever grows each day,
My slumber fades away,
My pains go on increasing--
My patience is decreasing."

He laughed over the doggerel, as he sat joyously eating fruit once more, and reading a letter which told him that in a month's time two of his paternal aunts would actually pay him a visit. They had come south with little Ma'asuma whom her husband was taking to Etawah.

He was full on the instant of preparations. An architect was sent for and orders given for a special palace to be decorated for their reception. He himself, passing rapidly through convalescence went out to meet them in a boat above Secunderabad. It was a most joyful meeting, and Babar hugged the old ladies as they had never been hugged before. It was almost unbelievable, this delight of family life once more. To hear their shrill voices, with the beloved Turki accent, prattling away about the dear loved ones in Kâbul was almost too much for him. But they bewailed his looks and chattered of old Chagatâi recipes for deer's broth and mares'-milk cheeses till he shut his eyes and tried to believe they were his dearest mother and his revered grandmother at Andijân and that he was still King of the valley at the extreme limit of the habitable world, and not Emperor of all India.

Then he opened them and took in and loved the quaint old-fashioned dresses and everything about them that was unlike the gorgeously ugly East which in his heart he loathed. But it was his, and it would be his son's and his son's son's; so there was no more to be said.

Nevertheless the meeting accentuated his dislike to India and he found it necessary to put something into life to make up for its lack of real interest. He had taken the title of *Ghâzi* or "Defender of the Faith" after his victory over Râna Sanka. Now he felt that another Holy War against the heathen might bring the lacking zest to life. It might, anyhow. But he failed to see it clearly in the Crystal Bowl which Mahâm had given him. He used it chiefly as a divining cup now; or rather as a sort of scrying crystal into which he would look, and dream dreams.

But he never saw anything in it save his own thoughts. He could not, however, after his illness, summon up sufficient energy to start this Holy War that winter, and so another hot weather found him still at Agra. It was his third spent alone in a country he disliked fervently. But the

gardens he had planted were growing up, the flowers he had gathered from far and near were blossoming. Kâbul, over the river, now bore some faint resemblance to its namesake. Here he held a grand festival for his veteran soldiers. There were not many now who had been with him since as a boy he had wandered over the upland alps at Ilâk; and it was fitting they should be singled out for distinction.

It was a fine feast indeed. Babar sat in a small octagonal pavilion on the river bank, and before the repast was served, sports and games were displayed on an island just opposite. Here, there were fights between furious camels and elephants, ram fights and wrestling matches. Meanwhile the presents were being given. Vests and rich dresses of honour, besides gifts of other value were bestowed, while Babar, always at his best as bountiful *entrepreneur*, had many a smile and jest, many a kindly remembrance of past days to give with the other presents. Then came food, Hindustân jugglers and acrobats who did surprising tricks; besides many dancing-girls who performed outlandish dances. Finally, towards evening prayer time, a great quantity of gold and silver and copper money was scattered amongst the crowd and there was a precious hubbub and uproar.

Altogether it was like the light-hearted old Kâbul days and Babar felt the better for it. So, the cool setting in once more, he started on his Holy War against the Pagan; but, though he tried hard to take an interest in it, somehow it fell rather flat. He was more struck with the beauty of Râjputana than with the virtue of exterminating the idolaters who lived there. A country where there was abundance of running water, small pretty lakes, where little spots of rising ground afforded beautiful sites for houses, and where the houses in existence were beautiful and capacious, of hewn stone wrought with great skill and labour, was not a country to devastate. So he came back again, to work on annexation with the pen instead of by the sword, and to receive three more paternal aunts who came crowding to claim his boundless hospitality.

They, however, brought sad news from Kâbul. Little Farûk, the son he had never seen, was dead. There was a piteous letter from Mahâm all blistered with tears. The child had never been strong--surely God's judgment must be on her that all her children died--but he had gone to play with his little brothers and sisters in Paradise. So there was none left now but Humâyon, whom God preserve; Humâyon who was looking these days for a child of his own. God send it were a son. Not that it would matter much to heartbroken Mahâm. And scribbled underneath the flourish of a signature were these words: "If my lord desireth another son let him take another wife. I am accursed."

Babar wept over this postscript more than over the rest of the letter. He was very sorry, of course; but the Child was but an abstraction to him, while the thought of his Dearest-dear's grief was bitter indeed.

He wrote her the most loving of letters, begging her not to hurt him by such words. Even had he not had, by her forethought and kindness, other sons, Humâyon would have satisfied him. Humâyon was a son of whom anyone might be proud; so handsome, so courtly, so brave.

And by the same messenger he sent congratulations to the new-made father; for by this time the news of the birth of a grandson had been brought by special runner.

"To Humâyon," he began, "whom I remember with such longing to see him again, health."

It, also, was the most loving of letters. "Thanks be to God," he wrote, "for giving to you a child, to me a comfort and an object of love. You have called him Alamân--the Protected of God--May God protect him and bestow on thee and on me many years made happy by the name and fame of Alamân."

He went on to tell his son gently but firmly that indolence and ease suit but ill with royalty. Did not the poet say:

"The world is his who gives himself to work;
Inaction is no fellow to ambition;
In wisdom's eyes all men may find repose,
Save only he who seeks a King's condition."

And then, with a certain pathetic bitterness, he told him that for two years he had had no direct news of his son, though in the last letter the latter had complained of separation from his friends.

"It is but ill manners in a prince," he wrote, "to complain of this, seeing that if one is fettered by situation, 'tis ever most dignified to submit to circumstance. Truly there is no greater bondage than that in which a King is placed, and it ill becomes him to grumble at inevitable separations."

So, with perhaps a vague sense of injury, he remarked that though Humâyon had certainly written him letters and that with his own hand, he could never have read them over, "for had you attempted to do so," he wrote--and the letter is still extant, "you must have found it absolutely impossible. I did, indeed, contrive to decipher your last, but with great difficulty. It was excessively crabbed and confused; a real riddle in prose! Then, in consequence of the far-fetched words you employed, the meaning is by no means very intelligible. You do not excel, I know, in

letter writing, but if in future you would write unaffectedly, with clearness, using plain words, it would cost less trouble both to the writer and the reader."

Babar himself was at the time in a distinctly literary mood, for as a demonstration of joy on the birth of Humâyon's child and the marriage of Kamran, one of Babar's other sons, he sent--in addition to other lavish presents--two copies written in his own Babari hand of all the translations and original poems he had composed since coming to India.

And this was no small task, for in his last attack of serious illness he had set himself to translating into verse a religious tract, as a curative measure. It had not, however, proved very successful, though in his ardour he had composed on an average, fifty-two couplets a day.

For he still suffered continually from fever and often from dysentery. In fact, though he could still swim over the Ganges in three and thirty strokes, take breath and swim back again in like number, he was beginning to realise that life was passing. Surely, by now, he had set his foot with sufficient security upon the throne of India to warrant his sending for those dear ones who were never very far from his thoughts and resuming the happy, simple family life which suited him best.

He pondered over this question for some months. It meant, of course, a delay in his own return to Kâbul. But that was inevitable. Hindustân was not yet sufficiently settled to allow of his absence. Divided in his mind between intense longing to see his native country again, and his ideal of kingly self-denial, he hesitated; until news of discord in the Royal clan decided him, and he wrote to Kwâjah-Kilân, the Governor at Kâbul, to take instant steps to start the Royal Family for Hindustân. His letter told his old friend that the affairs of the country had been reduced to a certain degree of order; ere long he hoped to see them completely settled. Then without losing an instant of time he would set out, God willing, for his western dominions. "My solicitude to visit Kâbul again is boundless and great beyond expression. How is it possible indeed that its delights could ever be erased from the heart? How is it possible for one like me, who have made a vow of abstinence from wine, to forget the delicious melons and grapes of that pleasant region? Very recently some one brought me a single musk-melon. While cutting it up I felt myself affected by so strong a sense of loneliness, and of exile from my beloved country that I could not help shedding tears even as I ate it."

So, after giving minute instructions on various subjects, especially as to the planting of trees at a place called the Prospect, and the sowing of beautiful and sweet-smelling flowers and shrubs, he went on to detail his own experiences in reconciling himself to the desert of penitence. "Last year my desire and longing for wine and social parties were beyond measure excessive; to such an extent, indeed, that I have caught myself shedding absolute tears of vexation and disappointment. (For God's sake do not think amiss of me for this.) In the present year, praise be, these troubles are over. This I ascribe (in part) to the occupation of my mind in the poetical translation of a tract; of which no more at present. Let me advise you, too, to adopt a life of abstinence. Social parties and wine are doubtless pleasant, in company with our jolly friends and old boon companions. But with whom can *you* enjoy the social cup? Truly if you have only Shîr-Ahmed and Hindâi for the companions of your gay hours and the jovial goblet, you cannot find any difficulty in abstinence."

This, Babar felt, was unanswerable. So far as he was concerned he knew that drunkenness in the company of blockheads had been no better than sobriety. And he was not born to suffer fools gladly.

After he had taken the irrevocable step and sent for his Dearest-dear, he went out and looked at the stars before settling himself to sleep, telling himself that he felt years younger at the very thoughts of seeing them all again.

After four years! four long years. They would not have changed, of course; to him at least they could never change. But how about himself? He had grown gaunt and grey. Still at heart he was young--Aye! as young as when he had first bidden the Crystal Bowl bring him the whole, not the half of Life.

Well! he had had his share. And there was Canopus hanging in the south!

"All hail *Soheil!*"

CHAPTER VII

Good old St. Martini patron of the drunk!
Lo! in thy summer thou givest potent draught

To warm our cockles ere the world be sunk
In winding sheet of snow. This is thy craft,
O cheerful saint! to give ere the year dies
A euthanasian drink of cloudless skies.

There was no question as to the youth of the man who on Midsummer Eve A. D. 1529 was riding post haste from Kalpi to Agra, a distance of close on a hundred miles, to meet his wife and children. He sat his horses, laid out along the sandy sun-bitten roads, as only a Chagatâi Turkh could do, and when he flung himself from his last mount at midnight in the Garden-of-the-Eighth-Paradise, he had indeed passed beyond the Seventh-Heaven-of-Happiness.

It seemed simply incredible that before many hours were over he should see Mahâm again. Mahâm, his moon, his more than wife!

It was no joyous festival to him, this Eve of St. John; but surely in some occult fashion, the youth of all Christendom as it rejoiced with garlands and merry shoutings and dances, must have reached him in far India. Perhaps--since there is no limit to such unconscious influences--the immemorial festival of summer that has been held since the world began, added its quota of perennial life to the vitality that was still ready to leap up at any stimulus.

Certain it is that in this, the commencement of this St. Martin's summer of his life, Babar needed no pity for spent power.

He had been delayed by storm and wind and rain. Only a few days before he had had an awkward experience which might have resulted in serious injury. He had been sitting, writing, in his tent at past midnight when the clouds of the rainy season broke, and there was suddenly such a tempest, and the wind rose so high that it blew down the pavilion, with the screen which surrounded it, on his head. He had had no time even to gather up his papers and the loose sheets that were written; so they all got drenched. However, with much trouble they were picked up here, there, everywhere, and set to dry in a woollen cloth over which carpets were thrown. But he had had to put a jesting postscript to Mahâm's letter to say the blisters were not tears. They wrote to each other constantly, these two, and letters from Mahâm made ever a red-letter day in the Diary which Babar kept.

But now this was over! There would be no more need for writing, since she was within a few miles of Alighur where, God willing, he meant to meet her so soon as he had seen that all things were in order for her reception at Agra.

Never was there such a fussy host as he showed himself.

"Truly, nephew Babar," snorted Khadîjah, his chief paternal aunt, when he cavilled at some domestic arrangement in Mahâm's private apartment, "I am woman and I ought to know. If men, and especially Kings, were to do their own work and leave such things to those who understand, 'twould be better."

He looked quite crestfallen, so that the Fair-Princess, filled with pity, nudged him to say that if he sent her the flowers she would see to their being properly placed.

Whereat he was grateful and went off to his beloved gardens to choose what he wanted. Not roses or marigolds. Those were familiar. He must show his Dearest-dear, and little Gulbadan too, who was to come with this advance party, the beauties of Hindustân. They must be shown that there were some beauties! So he picked the red oleander he had found in the old gardens at Gwalior and the snowy gardenia. Then for scent there was the sweet pandanus. But his favourite of all, the scarlet hibiscus, could not be gathered till the very last, as it withered so soon. In a single hour its beauty would have gone; and Mahâm must see how cunningly the thing like a heart showed in the very middle of the broad flower. She must see the marvellous colour, deeper, richer, more beautiful than the pomegranate.

Then there were endless orders to give about fountains, and fireworks, and food. For everything of good in Hindustân must be laid at Mahâm's feet the moment she arrived.

After this there were papers to be signed, and letters to be sent out to various governors; for Babar had been many months away from his capital on a campaign in Bengal. Still, if Mahâm kept to her programme, he would have plenty of time for the fifty odd miles to Alighar if he rode fast; and she could hardly be due there for another twenty-four hours.

But he had reckoned without the loving heart on the other side. Mahâm, as eager as he for the joyful meeting, had pushed on, and reaching Alighar, had left little eight-year-old Gulbadan to follow at leisure in charge of her nurse, and had come on straight post-haste to Agra.

"Your Majesty!" faltered a breathless messenger, rushing into the Presence unceremoniously--all Agra was on the *qui vive*, and this was no time for the delay of etiquette--"Her Highness is on the road--four miles out--I have just passed Her--"

Babar stood up dazed. Mahâm! To fling his pen aside and start was instant. No time for a horse, not even for shoes. As he was, bareheaded, in his slipper shoon, he was out. In the dust under the stars he ran, and with God only knows what star-drift and dust-atoms in his brain.

Earth there might have been, but of a surety there was heaven also.

Canopus of Victory shone to the South; the Warrior, perchance, showed to the North. But he saw neither. Venus shone like a young moon but cast no shadow on his path. And down the straight dusty road came a litter jingling as it jolted. He laughed aloud in his joy as he sprinted the last few yards.

"Mahâm! Mahâm!"

For the rest, what does it matter? Let those two keep it to themselves for all time and eternity.

"My lord! let me descend and walk, too," faltered Mahâm after a bit, but he shook his head lightly.

"Nay, my moon--that would delay us and thou must get home--*home?*--God! what delight! Now then, ye bearers, a good foot first, or the King will do gangleader and make the pace!"

His joyous threat roused instant laugh, and with a will, the tired men set off at an amble, chanting in time to their steps. At every minute nobles, apprised of the unexpected arrival, came galloping up, to fall into the tail of the little procession after vain efforts to make the Emperor take their horses. But Babar would none of them. He wanted to hold his wife's hand as he strode beside her and hear her sweet familiar voice saying "Yea" and "Nay" to the torrent of his words.

They crossed the river, and were in *Hesht-Bishist*. That is all there is to say; that is all we know.

Except that ere the blessed night was over Babar wrote in his diary:

"Sunday. At midnight I met Mahâm again. It was an odd coincidence that she and I left to meet each other on the very same day."

After all there is no need for more. One can imagine Babar translucently, boyishly, content. One can imagine how fear at his altered looks gripped at his more than wife's heart, bringing with it a passionate determination to stand between him and needless worry.

There was no chance of that for the present anyhow; all was pleasure and delight. Early in the morning little Gulbadan arrived in charge of the Wazir and his wife, who had been sent out to meet her. They came across her close to the Little-Garden, and, the child being hungry, they spread a carpet and gave her a hasty breakfast.

"There are many dishes," remarked the little lady superbly, and afterwards described the meal as having been drawn out to "fifty roast sheep, bread, sherbet and much fruit." For the dainty child of eight had inherited much of her father's gift of words. She was rather small for her age and extraordinarily self-possessed. With a vast discrimination in etiquette also, as befitted a Royal, or rather Imperial Princess.

"There is no need to rise for her," said the Wazir hastily, when his wife entered and little Gulbadan would have saluted her. "She is but your old serving woman."

This, however, did not suit the little lady who had also her father's gracious manners. And all the while she was bursting with impatience to see the man who her little life long had been held up to her as a model of all that was good, and kind, and brave. Five years is a long time when one can but count eight in all; and the child's recollection only carried her back vaguely to someone very tall and straight who used to hold her close so that she could feel something beating inside. Was it her father's heart or her own? That was not likely any more; for she was quite a big girl and her hair was plaited in virginal fashion.

Besides she had all her little bowings and genuflections ready. She rehearsed them gravely in the litter as she went along to pay her respectful duty to royalty.

But after all they did not come into the meeting. She had not even time to fall at the Emperor's feet, for, in an instant, he had her in his arms.

"And then," as she told Mahâm afterwards in the seclusion of the women's apartments, "this little insignificant personage felt such happiness that greater could not be imagined."

Mahâm laughed. "Truly thou art a quaint little marionette, Gulbadan! And what dost think of thy father?"

The little maiden pursed up her lips and sat quiet for a minute. Then she said firmly: "I think he is too beautiful to put into words."

Her father, however, did not share her opinion in regard to *her* looks. He was never weary of praising them, and it was a pretty sight to see him holding her by the hand as he took her round to inspect all his new buildings and gardens. And nothing would serve him but that they must go out, both of them, and see Dholpur, which, in a vague way, might remind them of beloved Kâbul. And from Dholpur they went to Sikri where they spent a happy month rowing about in the big tank. Here little Gulbadan used to sit for hours at her father's feet while he wrote up his memoirs

in the summer house of the great garden.

"Lo! little mouse," he would say, looking round to lay a kindly hand on her smooth head, "mayhap thou mayest write a book thyself some day; thou hast more brains than thy brothers." And he sighed; for of late Humâyon had not been very satisfactory; nor, for the matter of that, were Kamran and Askari, his other two grown-up sons, exactly after his own heart.

Gulbadan shook her head gravely. "The Emperor speaks in ignorance of my brother Alwar," she said, not without hauteur, "but when my mother, Her Highness, Dildar-Begum arrives next week the Emperor will admit that his son is a rarity of the world, and a unique of the age."

Her dignity was supreme, and Babar laughed. "Nicer than Hindal, Gullu?" he asked, knowing her preference for the boy who had been brought up with her under Mahâm's care.

The child flushed up visibly, and tears stood in her eyes. "Lo!" she said, "Hindal is indeed my brother. Mayhap he is not clever; but I love him, I love him!"

The Emperor caught her in his arms and kissed her tears.

"So do I, sweetheart, so does everybody. Lo! I dare swear it! we all love each other, do we not?"

In truth it seemed like it. Babar's three wives were there after a time and yet none of them quarrelled; perhaps because no one in the wide world could have quarrelled with childless Mubârîka, the Blessed-Damozel, and Dildar was too much occupied with little Alwar to think of anything else. He was, indeed, a marvellous child, of extraordinary beauty and brains. One of those children over whom old folk shake their heads and say: "He is not long for this world." Though barely six he was, as his little sister had said, a unique of the age, and Babar, who had not seen him since he was a baby in arms, was almost pathetically proud of him.

His devotion, indeed, raised a suspicion of jealousy even in Mahâm's generous heart for her own son Humâyon--and one evening as the husband and wife were sitting together in the open balcony of the Palace, she hinted that Humâyon might have to play second fiddle in his father's graces.

Babar came over to her and laid his head--it was fast grizzling--on her lap in the old affectionate Turki fashion.

"Little mother!" he said, and there was a break in his voice, "say not stupidities. Lo! thou knowest, as I do, that life became doubly dear to me, when thou didst lay my first-born son in my arms. Thou knowest that I have done all these things--these many things for him--my heir."

There was a faint stir at the door, and Babar turned to look. Then with a bound he was on his feet.

"Humâyon!" he cried joyously; "Humâyon himself! Look! little mother! thy son! thy son!"

And Humâyon it was, unsent for, unexpected, but welcome as roses in May. The Emperor had not the heart to chide him for leaving his governorship, since his presence made the loving hearts of those two open like rosebuds, their eyes shine like torches.

Never was such merry-making as they had that night. It was Babar's rule to keep open table every day, but on this occasion he gave a spread feast, and heaped every kind of distinction upon his handsome son. And in truth he deserved it, for his manners and his conversation had an inexpressible charm, he realised absolutely the ideal of perfect manhood.

So at least his parents agreed, as, after the state dinner was over, they sat, a family party, in the Gold-Scattering-Garden. There was a little tank there, cut out of solid red rock, which in his unregenerate days Babar had intended to fill with red wine. It was now brimming, in honour of this happy meeting of so many, with lemonade, and they sat and quaffed it by gobletfuls contentedly. And Alwar recited his set pieces, and Gulbadan did a stately Turki measure, and nothing would serve Mahâm but that my lord should sing her his latest love-song. She had not heard him sing for years, and though he had sent her and his sons plenty of didactic and pious songs of his composition and translation, he had included no love-songs. And he had had such an excellent touch with them in the old, old days.

Whereat Dildar giggled faintly, till Dearest-One, who, tall, pale, a childless widow now, had also come to see her brother, said softly:

"Aye! it was given him by the Good God who sends Love as His best gift to the World. Yea! Sing to us of Love--brotherling."

So he took the lute and sang sweetly enough, though his voice had lost its youthful ring.

"Ah! would I were the morning wind
To braid her scented hair.
Ah! would I were the noontide sun

To kiss her cheek so fair.
Ah! would I were the lamp at eve
Where she her court doth keep.
Ah! would I were the happy moon
To watch her in her sleep.
My heart is like a famished wolf
That licks the frozen snow
The while it tracks its quarry far
Wherever it may go.
From morn till night I follow her
But she no word doth deign.
Oh! ice chill maid! for pity's sake
Give me at least disdain.
Wind! make each scented tress unbind.
Sun! set her life-blood free.
Lamp! make her weary for true love.
Moon! bring her dreams of me."

"'Tis only a translation," he said thoughtfully, "but I like it--'tis so simple."

And then his mind drifted away to that spring morning among the flowers on the high alps at Ilâk when he had wondered at the look in Dearest-One's eyes. And his hand went out to seek hers and found it. So they sat there hand in hand like children for a space, and a great weariness of the uselessness of life came to Babar.

"Lo!" he said suddenly, "I will make over my kingdom to thee, Humâyon. Thou art young. I grow old and I am tired of ruling and reigning. A garden and those I love--what more can any man desire?" He spoke half in earnest, half in jest.

Mahâm turned pale; Dildar and the paternal aunts and khânuns--by this time there were ninety-six in all!--cracked their thumbs, and even Dearest-One shook her head and said quickly: "May God keep you in His Peace upon the throne for many, many years."

But the Blessed-Damozel who always sat a little apart only smiled. "My lord means the Garden of the Eighth Heaven," she put in quickly. "Yea! there is peace there, and rest for everybody."

"My lady says sooth," acquiesced Babar and their grave eyes met.

But little Gulbadan was agog because it was time the fireworks began or *Nanacha* would be sending her to bed, so the idea of abdication ended in Babar's catching her up in his arms and carrying her off to see how the wheels turned round. Then Alwar, while Dildar gave little shrieks of horror (in which she was joined in louder echo by the Astonishingly Beautiful Princess who invariably wept and laughed to order) actually set fire himself to a bomb and when it exploded clapped his hands with glee.

"When I am a big man like my father, the Emperor," he said boastfully, "I will fire ten guns at a time."

"'Tis silly to say such things," retorted Madam Gulbadan superbly.

But the child's keen little face was not in the least abashed.

"Lo! sister, 'tis silly of thee to say no when thou canst not tell where I shall be as grown man. Likely in some bigger place than this." And he waved his hand contemptuously towards Babar's great palaces.

Whereat they all laughed; for they were a merry, happy party. So they feasted and enjoyed themselves. As little Gulbadan wrote in after years: "It was like the day of Resurrection."

CHAPTER VIII

Death stood among my flowers, his bright wings furred:
"This bud I take with me to that still world
Where no wind blows, where sunshine does not fade,
Yon open rose is yours," he gently said;
But I refused. He smiled and shook his head,
So empty-handed back to Heaven sped
And lo! by sun-scorch and the wild wind shorn
Ere eve, my bud, my blossom both were gone.

Humâyon remained with his father for a week or two. Handsome, *insouciant*, always agreeable and of a curious dignity of carriage he seemed cut out to be a King. Wherever he went, no matter in what society he might be—even his father's—the eye rested on him with pleasure. And yet Babar's eyes, fond as they were, failed to see something he fain would have seen. There seemed no sense of responsibility, such as he, Babar, had had at his years. Yet it was hardly fair to judge the lad by the standard of one who had perforce been thrust into power at eleven years of age. And, after all, Humâyon was barely two and twenty; still quite a lad. There was time yet.

So, weary as he was, Babar said no more about abdicating; he even tried to think no more about a plan he had cherished of going back for the next hot weather to Kâbul and leaving Humâyon in charge of Hindustân.

"My Kâbul," as he ever called it; saying to his sons in jesting earnest—"Let none of you covet it for I will not give it! It is mine own, my very own. The only thing in God's earth I care to keep, for there He gave me happiness."

Still he was happy enough as it was in Hindustân, and, thanks to Mahâm's good care, felt more himself. But, like all women, she was a trifle fussy.

"Lo! my lord," she said, one extremely hot Friday when a dust-storm was blowing, and Babar, despite this, was preparing for his weekly visit to his paternal aunts; a duty he had never once neglected when in Agra for three whole years. "How would it be if you did not go this one Friday? The Begums could not be vexed seeing how good you are to them."

Goodness, she thought privately, was a mild word, considering that each and all of the ninety-six female relations had palaces and gardens assigned to them and that the Court architect had standing orders to give precedence to whatever work, even if it were on a great scale, the ladies desired to have done, and to carry it through with all might and main.

But the bare suggestion hurt the Emperor's affectionate heart.

"Mahâm," he said in pained astonishment, "it is not like you to say such thoughtless things. Think a moment. They are the daughters of my fathers, deprived by God of their parents. Therefore, being female, they are helpless. I am the head of the family; if I do not cheer them, who will?"

Mahâm could not forbear a smile. No one, in truth; but Babar, beloved, kindly Babar, would think twice about a pack of old women; and she would not change him for worlds. So, despite her anxiety for his health, she said no more.

All that winter they were an extraordinarily happy family party. Humâyon had been sent as Governor to an up-country province, and not back to Badakhshân where he and his half-brother Kamran had almost come to blows. And family quarrels were, in the Emperor's opinion, positively indecent, besides being so unnecessary; since there were always plenty of outsiders with whom to have a fine fight. Then the news from Bengal, where the success of his arms was being assured, was satisfactory. Babar did not mind beating the down-country Pagans; it was different in Râjputana where you had to kill real men. But, even there, peace was coming fast; for few brave soldiers could withstand Babar's frankly outstretched hand of friendship. And he asked for so little in return. He took no money, no land. He only claimed suzerainty; and it was much to have a strong man as final referee.

Then Babar's friend Târdi-Beg came back to him, not as soldier, but in the *darvesh's* peaked cap and white blanket frock. However he came he was welcome, especially to Mistress Gulbadan who appropriated him wholesale. They were a quaint pair, as hand in hand they inspected the gardens, and the stables, and all the ins and outs of the Royal household; for the little lady had great ideas of management.

And Babar would follow, as often as not with Alwar, who was but a weakling in body, perched on his broad shoulder.

The "four children," as Mahâm would call them as they played at ball together in the marble alleys; Târdi-Beg with his cap off, his shaven head glittering to match little Gulbadan's tinsel and jewellery; Alwar, a miniature of the Emperor even to the tiny heron's plume in his bonnet; Babar, his haggard face beaming. The men enjoyed themselves quite as much as the children, and if Babar accused his friend of chucking easy ones to Gulbadan, Târdi-Beg asserted that Alwar never got a hard one; whereat the little lad wept; but his sister stamped her foot and said she wouldn't play any more unless they played fair. A remark that, of course, brought the immediate capitulation of Târdi-Beg and Babar.



"THE FOUR CHILDREN, AS MAHÂM WOULD CALL THEM"

"THE FOUR CHILDREN, AS MAHÂM WOULD CALL THEM"

Yes! they were very happy, very guileless, very innocent, as Babar himself had written so often over less commendable amusements.

And then suddenly came a bolt out of the blue. Alwar, little Alwar, to whom every day seemed to bring some new charm of unbelievable intellect beyond his years, fell sick. From the very first he lay quiet, exhausted, spent; but smiling. It was a trick he learnt of his father.

So, after two or three days he died, his hot, thin, little hand in that father's. It was as if the sun had gone out of the sky to the whole household. Even the Blessed-Damozel shed slow tears as she wretched the dead darling in drifts of scented gardenias and put a scarlet slipper blossom with its quaint "something like a heart" upon the breast.

Babar, placing the light corpse in the niche cut for it in the flower-filled grave, felt as if it were his own heart he were burying; but it was *Darvesh* Târdi-Beg who recited the committal prayer, and that gave him comfort.

Besides he was a man, and the women had to be sustained. The poor mother, Dildar-Begum, was literally frantic with grief. Doubtless, she said, the child had been poisoned, because its father loved it so; doubtless, in her mad despair, she accused Mahâm of doing the deed. Polygamy is a fair-weather craft; it is apt to fail in a storm.

But the poor soul was mad. Everyone saw that; and the women took it more quietly than the man. Even blur-eyed, half-silly Astonishingly Beautiful Princess nodded her head and remarked sagely: "They say that sort of thing always in grief-time, nephew; so why fuss about it. She will forget it after a time."

And Ak-Begum came with her bright squirrel eyes all soft with tears to Babar, and whispered: "We all know it is not true, nephew. Our lady is God's kindness itself; so why fret."

But it did fret the man and added a bitterness to his grief, which even Mahâm could not sweeten.

"If my lord will listen to this slave," said the Blessed-Damozel at last, "it will be better to beguile the poor distraught one by change of scene. Lo! the lotus must be out in the Dholpur lakes. Why not go there for awhile? Good rain has fallen; it is cooler now."

So they all went, sailing down the river Jumna in tented boats. Far and near the wide level plain was tinted green with fresh spring grass. The parch of an Indian summer was over. This was the Indian spring. With magical, marvellous quickness the flowering trees burst into blossom, the Persian roses budded in a single night, and down amongst their grey-green, velvet leaves you could positively hear the calyx burst as the scented petals struggled to the sun. The climbing gardenias hung like white scarves round the dark cypresses, the hedges of Babar's favourite slipper flower were ablaze with their great flat scarlet circles.

Yes! it was spring! So as they journeyed, the sad little party became more cheerful. The women, especially, had begun to talk of their departed darling as one of God's angels; even his

mother had sobered down to copious tears, and pathetic requests that she might be given back her other son Hindal--whom Mahâm certainly *had* taken from her as a baby.

"Let her have the boy, my lord," said Mahâm pitifully. "Lo! it is but fair she should have one son; and I have Humâyon."

So Babar blessed her for her kind heart, and sent off a special messenger to Kâbul for Hindal, a boy of nigh ten years old who had been left behind with his tutor to complete his education.

The Emperor felt happier when this was done; perhaps because in his kind heart of hearts he had never been quite sure of the righteousness of giving Hindal over to another woman. It was the only action of his in regard to his womenkind which he could not have conscientiously upheld against all comers at the bar of his own judgment.

It was great gain, therefore, to find his Dearest-dear of a mind with himself. For all that he felt--as strong men so often do when limited by feminine outlook--rather battered and worn.

In no fit state therefore for the bad news which came to him by special runner as he sat by the Water-lily tank at Dholpur.

Humâyon, wrote the Court Physician, in Delhi, was very ill of fever. It would be best if his mother were to come at once, as the Prince was much prostrated.

Humâyon! First, Alwar, his youngest; then his eldest son! Was he to lose them both? Babar was in his essence very man. Trouble came to him overwhelmingly. He might face it bravely; but he always faced the worst. It was Humâyon, bested in his fight for life that he saw; whereas Mahâm with the eternal hopefulness of woman, which springs from her eternal motherhood, would not let herself even think of defeat. Upset as she was by the dreadful news, she yet spoke quietly of how she would bring her invalid son back, and how his father had best return to Agra and have everything ready to receive their darling.

"I would fain come, too, dear-heart," said Babar pitifully.

But Mahâm would not hear of it. Even so much would be to admit danger, and there was none--there could be none. Nathless, let urgent orders be sent along the route so that there should not be an instant's delay.

She was quite calm and collected to him; but she broke down a little to the Blessed-Damozel who somehow or another--why, folk never knew--was ever the recipient of confidences.

"Thou wilt look after him, lady," she said quite tearfully, "and see that he wearies himself not with over-anxiety?"

"All shall be as if thou wast here, sister, so far as in me lies," was the quiet reply, and Mahâm was satisfied. What Mubârîka-Begum said she would do, would be done. Mahâm knew that; for she knew (what Babar did not) that Mubârîka's life had been one long self-denial.

Years and years younger than her husband, she had left a young lover behind her in her father's palace when she had come as a bride to make peace between her clan and the King of Kâbul. She had chosen her part, she had respected and admired, in a way she had loved Babar; but passionate romance had never clouded her eyes.

"Yea! I will guard him as thou wouldst," she said again, "and mayhap in thy absence, and with this common grief and anxiety to soften memory, Dildar also will learn how good, how kind thou art, thou Star-of-the-Emperor's life."

But even Mubârîka, so calm, so gracious, so tactful, could not prevent the mental strain from telling on Babar's bodily health. Prolonged anxiety, great grief had always prostrated him for a time, even as a young man; and now illness and hard work had aged him before his years.

"Would to God he could but drink a bit--he need not get drunk," wailed Târdi-Beg who, being tainted with Sufi doctrines, would orate for hours concerning cups divine, and ruby wines. But Babar had never broken a promise in his life, and was not going to begin now.

Besides, Mahâm had been right. Humâyon was brought to Agra alive. That was much. In the first fulness of his joy at seeing his son once more, Babar almost forgot anxiety.

"He will soon be well, dear-heart," he said cheerfully; "he does not look so very bad. When the fever leaves him--"

But it was Mahâm's turn to be despondent. "It does not leave him," she said.

That was true; as yet the crisis had not come, and it was long in coming. Day after day he grew weaker; day after day the brain, weary of fighting at long-odds for life, grew more and more drowsy.

"My sisters! I want to see my sisters!" would come the low muttering voice, reft of almost all its youth, its tone. And those three, Gulchihra, Gulrang, and Gulbadan, Rose-face, Rose-blush,

Rose-body, Babar's three rose-named daughters, would creep in with tears and kiss him. A pathetic little picture. The girlish faces all blurred with tears, the tinkling of bracelets, jewelled earrings, head ornaments, what not, the rustling of scent-sodden silks and satins, and that poor head on the pillow turning from side to side, rhythmically restless.

Even Babar himself, had to see after a while that the Shadow-of-Death lay on his son.

"Mahâm!" he said pitifully,--"the boy, the boy--"

Poor mother! For nigh on four-and-twenty years she had been this man's stay and stand-by. He had come to her consoling arms as a child comes to its mother. She had given him in passionate devotion more than he perhaps realised, for they had been faithful friends always, and the friendship had overlaid the love; but she failed him now, for she was at the end of her tether. So she stood dry-eyed, almost cold.

"Why should my lord grieve," she said, "because of my son? There is no necessity. He is King. He has other sons--I have but this one!--therefore *I* grieve."

For a second Babar stood as if turned to stone, then he answered almost sternly: "Mahâm! Thou knowest that I love Humâyon as I love no other son of mine, because he is son of the woman I love best. Thou knowest that I have sought and laboured for kingship for him and for him only. Thou knowest--" softness had crept back to his voice--"Nay! what need to tell thee, since thou knowest that there is nothing in the wide world I would not do for Humâyon?"

"Thou canst do nothing! There is naught to be done," she muttered, still tearless, calm; and something in her pitiful despair roused instant response in his ever-ready vitality, and he threw back his head with a gesture of negation.

"There is naught I would not dare, anyhow," he said, "and what is dared is often done. Take heart! my moon! All is not lost. Defeat comes not till Death--who was it said that long years ago--Aye! Defeat comes not till Death--And even then--God knows--He knows...! He knows...!"

CHAPTER IX

"Death makes no Conquest of this Conqueror,
For now he lives in Fame."

"Then there is no hope to save Death," said Babar sternly. He stood, his face blanched, amongst a group of Court-physicians, professional prayer-makers, astrologers, sorcerers; frail reeds at which anxiety caught distractedly in its despair. And they were all silent save a priest who mumbled of God's goodness. Prayer remained, said the unctuous voice.

But that strong human heart was almost past petitions; it craved something more tangible.

"Is there naught to be given--naught that I could do to make God listen from His High Heaven? Naught that would mayhap soften His hard heart?" he asked sharply: he was thinking of a ransom: many a soldier had had to offer one; he, himself, had given a dear one--once....

Some of those who heard, looked at each other. This death to them meant little; but here was an opportunity for personal gain that could do no harm to anyone. So they whispered among themselves, and greed grew to some of the faces that encircled the man, to whose face it had never come, once, in all his life. For Babar had been giver, not taker. He had lavished all things on his world; he had been spendthrift even in forgiveness.

"Is there naught, gentlemen?" he asked drearily.

Then the chief-preacher spoke. "It hath been written, and is, indeed, approved, that in such times of stress some Supreme Sacrifice to the Most High may be effectual--"

"But it must be Supreme," put in a coarse-faced reader of the stars, his mind busy with money, "a small gift will not suffice--"

"Aye," added another voice. "Look, you! It must be the most precious possession of a man; that which he holds dearest. In this case I would suggest--"

But Babar, who was standing, his back to the light, held up his hand for silence.

"Then I give my life," he said quietly, but his voice rang strong and firm; for he had come

straight from his interview with Mahâm and her words had roused every atom of his marvellous vitality.

"Yea! I give my life--for sure there is naught that a man can hold more precious."

Absolute surprise kept his hearers silent for a moment. The very suggestion in one so instinct with life, made it incredible; then dismay came to some faces, disappointment to others.

"Your Majesty!" began his faithful servant, the Wazîr swiftly--"Our Emperor's life is too precious--"

"Naught is too precious, friend, to save Humâyon!" came the equally swift reply.

"Yea! the Wazîr is right," palpitated one who saw money slipping through his fingers. "Some lesser thing, yet still supreme, might be found. What of the Great Diamond--"

"No stone can outweigh my son's life. No! I offer myself to God--it is all I have." The strong voice rang firmer than ever.

"But the offering must be dear to both parties," put in a pompous voice. "And since, by the generosity of the Emperor, the diamond in question--whose value represents they say one day's revenue of the habitable world--was bestowed upon the Prince Humâyon, it fits in double manner the circumstances--"

Babar turned in quick reproof and scorn to the speaker. "Knowest thou so little of love, friend? Lo! I am dearer to my son than many diamonds. Could he speak now--" Babar's voice almost broke--"he would say, 'I am not worth the price of thy life, my father, for it is all the world to me.' But he cannot speak! He is in the grip of Death, so I have my say!"

And he flung out his right arm as he had been used to fling it out when leading on his soldiers to some desperate charge--"Come! gentlemen," he said, command in every word, "let us lose no more time. It is precious. I will give my all--may God be merciful!"

The sick room was hushed. Humâyon lay motionless, unconscious, on a low bed set in the middle of the bare, spacious corridor. A physician sat to one side holding his patient's wrist, so appraising, minute by minute, the fluttering battle between Life and Death. On the other side knelt the poor mother; all unveiled, for they had sent for her, thinking the supreme moment was at hand, and she had no thought for anything save her dying son. Her right hand was stretched out in helpless appeal over the loved form which seemed to take up so little room amongst the quilts. But her left hand was held fast, consolingly, under the folds of a white veil which shrouded another female figure close behind her; for Mubârîka-Begum, the Blessed-Damozel, was ever to the fore in sickness or in trouble.

But Babar did not notice either of them. He stepped swiftly to the head of the bed and stood looking down on the face of his dying son. Almost it seemed as if he were too late; as if Life had already unfolded her wings and fled. Then, with eyes literally blazing with inward fire he stretched out his hands, trembling with nervous strain, and began his prayer of intercession.

"O God Most High! If a life may be exchanged for a life, and they tell me it is so, then I, who am Babar, give mine for his, who is Humâyon! Let my strength bear his weakness."

"Husband! No! No! Not that--" moaned Mahâm, awakened to a sense of what was passing. But the figure behind her bent forward and whispered in her ear--

"Let be, sister! Canst not see that God's mist clouds his brain from this world. Lo! Mahâm, both thy dear ones stand before the Throne. Let God decide!"

And with a low sob, Mahâm fell on her outstretched arms; she said no more; she felt nothing save that cool, tightening clasp of sisterhood upon her hand.

The hot sunshine streamed in upon the floor, the distant sounds of life outside were dulled to a low murmur as of bees, and on it came softly-hurried steps, as Babar, with clasped hands, circumambulated the bed solemnly. That he knew was the ritual of sacrifice. Round and round patiently, his voice rising above the low sobbing of a faithful friend or two ...

"On me, kind God! be all his suffering. May all my strength be his. I gave him life once, Most-Clement! Let me give it to him again! Let my strength be his weakness; his weakness my strength."

Over and over again; over and over! The fire dying out of the man's eyes with the nervous strain, until his very steps hesitated--"On me be his suffering! On me! on me!" Then suddenly, through the room, thrilling every soul in it, a woman's sobbing ghost of a shriek!--

"He moved! His hand moved--I felt it."

Babar swayed towards the voice. "I have prevailed," he muttered. "I have borne it away--"

threw up his arms blindly, staggered and fell in a dead faint on to sobbing Târdi-Beg's breast. The rest crowded round, awestruck, curious.

"He is dead--God hath accepted the sacrifice," they said.

The face of Babar's best friend worked; of that, who could say, but for the present it was not true.

"Not he!" he cried roughly. "Give him air! 'Tis but the strain on him, and what that has been all these years, fools do not know. Here, slaves! Carry him to his chamber! Nay! Madam Mother! there is no cause for anxiety! H'st! no noise, you there, lest you disturb the Prince who in good sooth seems coming to himself!"

And it was true. The nameless change which comes to a fever face when the crisis is passing showed clear upon Humâyon's.

"Her Royal Highness had best stay with the invalid," went on Târdi-Beg, "I can attend the Emperor in this passing indisposition."

But a veiled white figure rose quietly. "I go with His Imperial Majesty," said Mubârîka-Begum. "There is no fear, sister; as the gentleman says it is but a fainting fit. The Emperor hath been over-anxious."

So when Babar came to himself, which he did rapidly, he found the Blessed-Damozel bending over him.

"My son?" he asked faintly.

"The prince is better," she replied. "The fever hath gone--he will recover."

Babar gave a sigh of relief and turned his face to the wall.

Possibly the strain had been too much for him, coming as it did after long years of steady, hard work. Perhaps he had worn himself out with sheer, restless energy. Doubtless those ten years of drink, possibly even the four of total abstinence, had something to say to this premature break-down; for in years he was but forty-eight. Yet, deny it as they would, it was soon evident to all, that he had lived through the tale of heart beats allotted to him by Fate.

Humâyon, with the speed of youth, recovered and came to his father's bedside; but Babar never rose again. Perhaps he would not have done so if he could, for he had made a promise. He had given his life to God in exchange for his son's, and there was an end of it.

But he was quite cheerful. Only to two people did he speak openly of coming death. One was Târdi-Beg who stayed with him night and day. To him he spoke lightly, almost jestingly, of his long desire to follow his example and become a *darvesh*.

"For years--aye! three years--I have desired to make over the throne to Humâyon and retire to the Gold-Scattering-Garden! What gay times we have had there, friend, with the flowers, and the birds, and the children--and our own wits! Now shall I retire to Paradise, and God send it be as innocent, as guileless."

And to Mubârîka he talked of his beloved Kâbul and his mother's grave. "Lo! thou shalt lay me there, lady, for the others have children, and thou dost love thy Kâbul also!"

Then he lay and looked at her with kindly questioning eyes, until he said, "It hath come to me at times, that I did thee a wrong in taking thee, a young girl, from thy tribe. Say, is it so? I would have the truth."

Then she spoke softly. "Yea! it is so, Zahir-ud-din Mahomed Babar Emperor of India. Yet was the wrong righted long ago. By sacrifice comes life. And my people have lived in peace."

"As we have," he said half-appealingly.

She laid the hand she held on her forehead. "As we have, my lord."

But there was one other wrong about which he was not so satisfied. Before death came he wanted to restore Hindal to his mother. And Hindal did not come. He had started from Kâbul but had been delayed by marriages in his tutor's family.

"I must see him," complained his father. "Write and bid him come at once. I need him sorely."

It was the one bitter drop in the cup which he drank contentedly, smilingly. He held an audience every day, laughing and joking with his old friends over past times, and when evening came he would sit with some woman's hand in his and talk of little things.

Sometimes it was his most reverend of paternal aunts, sometimes it was even poor Astonishingly Beautiful Princess. And little Ak-Begum brought him posies of violets, or, best of all, Dearest-One would sit, her hand in his, and both would be unable to say anything because

their thoughts reached so very, very far back.

And there was always a joke when Mahâm gave him his medicine in the Crystal-Bowl-of-Life. It had found its proper use at last, he said: for this it was neither too big nor too small.

So the days slipped by.

"Why does not Hindal come? Where is he?" he said fretfully, one evening; and they told him that the boy had reached Delhi and would be with him in a day or two.

"Who brought the news?" he asked, and when they said it was the tutor's son who had come on in hot haste to re-assure the Emperor, he bid them bring the messenger up, and a tall, half-grown lad appeared.

"Thy name," asked Babar faintly.

"Mîr-Bârdi," replied the youth.

The dying man laughed, his old boyish laugh. "Master Full-of-fun," he translated, "a good name for the companion of my son. Say! how tall hath Hindal grown?"

The lad hesitated. "Lo! I wear a coat the Prince bestowed on his servant. The Most-Clement can judge by that."

"I cannot see," murmured the sick man impatiently. "Come hither, boy, that I may feel how tall my son hath grown."

So with fluttering fingers the hand that had once been so strong felt the brocaded coat.

"It is well," he said at last, "but I would that I had seen him. I wanted to give him back to his mother myself."

All Christmas Day he lay but half-conscious.

"Baisanghâr," he said faintly, when Dearest-One leant over to kiss him. And when Mahâm begged him with tears to drink his medicine, he did so with a smile, then thrust the cup into her bosom and whispered--

"Lie there, friend, and bring her comfort."

Towards evening he roused and sent for his nobles, and for Humâyon.

"To you I leave my son," he said; "fail not in loyalty to him. And to you, my son, I commit my kingdom, and my people, and my kinsfolk. Fail not in loyalty to them."

After that he lay silent, with wide-open, smiling eyes. That was his farewell to splendid life.

Night was passing to dawn when the end came.

Black fell the day for children and kinsfolk and all. They bewailed and they lamented. Voices were uplifted in weeping. There was utter dejection. Each passed that ill-fated day in a hidden corner.

* * * * *

On a hill-side above the town of Kâbul there lies a garden planted long years ago by a man who loved his world.

Thither a new world comes to make holiday. The man himself has gone. As the white marble slab that looks up into the cloudless sky says shortly:

"Heaven is the Eternal Home of the Emperor Babar."

But his spirit remains in the endless Spring of leaf and flower, in the happy vitality of the Children who still lay flowers to cover the words of hope.

FOOTNOTES

[Footnote 1](#): The Persian name for the Great Bear.

[Footnote 2](#): Contempt.

[Footnote 3](#): Kalendars are men vowed to poverty.

THE END

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