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Title: A Soldier's Daughter, and Other Stories

Author: G. A. Henty

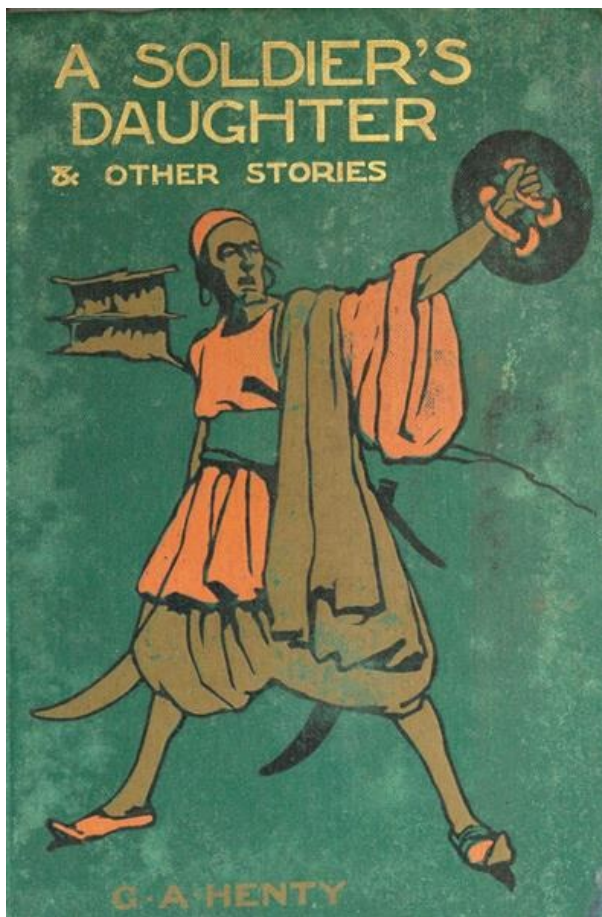
Illustrator: Frances Ewan

Release date: February 17, 2015 [EBook #48297]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Shaun Pinder, Haragos Pál and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net> (This file was produced from images generously made available by The Internet Archive)

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A SOLDIER'S DAUGHTER, AND OTHER STORIES ***





**"SHE STOOD ADMIRING HERSELF FOR A LONG
TIME"**

A Soldier's Daughter

AND OTHER STORIES

BY

G. A. HENTY

Author of "With Buller in Natal" "The Lion of St. Mark" "The Young Carthaginian" "In Freedom's Cause" &c.

ILLUSTRATED BY FRANCES EWAN

BLACKIE AND SON LIMITED
LONDON GLASGOW DUBLIN BOMBAY
1906

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A SOLDIER'S DAUGHTER

CHAPTER I

A PUNITIVE EXPEDITION

On the North-West frontier of India stood the little fort of Darlinger. It had been erected two years previous to the opening of this story, and was occupied by three companies of a Punjaubi regiment under the command of Major Ackworth. It was intended to act as a check to the incursions of the fierce tribes across the frontier. One of these raids had recently been made, and the major was about to start with two and a half companies and two field-guns to punish the invaders. He was a strict officer but not unpopular, being very particular about the comfort and well-being of those under his command; in other respects, however, he was a silent and reserved man. He had lost his wife a year before, and this had completely broken him down; the only being he seemed now to care for was his daughter Nita. Nita's mother had intended to return to England with her daughter just before death put an end to the plan. [Pg 8]

The major talked often of the necessity of sending Nita home, but so far it had only been talk. "I have quite made up my mind at last, Nita, when I return from this expedition, to pack you off to your uncle in England; you are getting a great deal too old to be knocking about in a barrack-yard, and there are no ladies here who would keep you up to the mark. I know that you are a favourite with all the officers, but that only makes matters worse. You have been a regular tomboy for the last five years, and it is quite time that you were taught to behave as a young lady."

"I can behave like that now when I like, father, and I am sure I don't want to grow up a young lady like the colonel's two daughters, who used to walk about as if their feet were pinched up in wooden shoes, and simper and smirk whenever anyone spoke to them. Then there was Captain Mann's wife, who seemed to think of nothing but dress, and expected to be waited on by all the officers."

"That is all very well," the major said. "I admit that they were not favourable specimens of their sex, and I by no means advise you to take them as models; you know well enough that I should not be sending you home to England unless I was absolutely convinced of the necessity for so doing. I shall miss you very sorely, and shall count the days till, in three years' time, I shall take my leave and come home to you, to bring you out again when I return. You must admit yourself that your accomplishments are not strictly feminine in their character. You are as good a shot as there is in the regiment both with rifle and revolver, you can fence very fairly, you have a very good idea of cricket, but you know nothing of music." [Pg 9]



"I WISH I HAD BEEN A BOY INSTEAD OF A GIRL,"

NITA SAID

"Well, father, you know you have said many times that you don't like musical women."

"No, I am not fond of them, though I like a woman who can play an accompaniment to a good old English, Scotch, or Irish song; but as for a woman who is always strumming on a piano, I think that she is a bore of the worst kind, so we won't say much about the music. Then you could not make a garment for yourself to save your life, and there is no more necessary accomplishment on the frontier than for a woman to be able to make her own clothes. You can cook very decently, I admit; but as for anything else you know no more than a child of ten. I am afraid that your uncle will be sadly shocked at your ignorance of everything except barrack life."

"I wish I had been a boy instead of a girl," Nita said.

"I rather wish so too, Nita; but as a boy, you would have been obliged to go home and work desperately hard to get a commission. No, I think you had better be contented with matters as they are, and if we can't turn you out a soldier we can, at least, make a lady of you."

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Nita made a little grimace which showed that the prospect did not delight her. "What is the use," she said, "of my being able to hit the ace of diamonds ten times following at twelve paces?"

"It is not impossible that it may be of use if you come out here again. It is more than probable that you will be a soldier's wife, and in a country such as this, it is by no means unlikely that your skill with a pistol may be of use to you. You remember in the mutiny how women fought at the side of their husbands. There has been more than one massacre since we have been here, and such an event might occur again. At the present moment the tribes are restless, and may break out in a general insurrection at any time. However, that is as it may be. Young Carter will take his leave and go down country in a month's time, and I shall place you under his care."

Nita laughed. "I should rather say, father, that you would place him under my care, for he is the most stupid man in the regiment."

The major smiled. "He is not popular, Nita, but he is a good honest young fellow; he doesn't say much, certainly, but as you talk enough for two I have no doubt that you will get on very well when you are once in a railway-carriage on your way down South, and he will be able to look after you when you get to Bombay, and see all about your passage, and make general arrangements for your comfort. I do not know any one in the regiment to whom I would rather trust you."

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"Well, father, as you say so, of course I must go. If it were only for six months I should not mind, for I want to see the sea, and the shipping, and of course it will be all new to me in England. I have no doubt that my aunt will be very kind and make allowances for my deficiencies, but it will be terrible work saying good-bye to you when we have never been separated even for a day. I will promise you that I will do my best to be trained up to be a lady. Shall I have to go to school?"

"Certainly, dear; I shall ask your aunt to find a first-rate finishing school to which you can be sent for the three years that you are in England, except for your holidays."

"The girls will all think that I am a little savage. I have heard you say that they go out for walks two by two, like an awkward squad being drilled, and they never run races, but have to walk along with their arms down by their sides, and their feet turned out. Oh dear, it will be dreadful!"

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"Not so bad as that; I believe there are schools now where girls play games—hockey, football, and cricket, and have gymnastics; and I shall ask your aunt to choose one of that sort."

"That will be better," Nita said more cheerfully; "at any rate, I think that I shall be able to hold my own."

"I dare say you will feel very happy when you have been settled there for a time. The great point is to make the best of things. You are a big girl for your age. You are as tall as many village girls at sixteen, and if you are bright and cheerful you will soon make yourself liked. Naturally in every school there are one or two disagreeable girls, but there will be no reason why you should quarrel with them."

Nita threw back her head. "They had better not quarrel with me," she said; "you know that I have had lessons in boxing."

"Why, you little savage," he said, "you don't suppose in a finishing school for girls they use their fists against each other! I gave you permission to learn to box, for I think it well that every man or woman should be able to protect themselves if necessary. Moreover, boxing gives quickness of thought, and doubtless improves the pose and figure. If you were to hit a girl at school, it would lead to your instant expulsion. Women fight with words, not with fists. I think after your constant verbal skirmishes with the officers that you will be able to hold your own."

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"I think so, father," Nita said; "oh, yes! I think I shall get on very well at school."

On the following day the major marched away, and he told his daughter that he should probably be back in a fortnight. "Take care of yourself," he shouted as he waved his hand before giving the order to start; "I expect to hear, when I come back, that you have been doing junior subaltern's work to Lieutenant Carter."

As soon as the force were beyond the gate she went up to the lieutenant. "You heard, sir," she said, saluting in military fashion, "that my father has deputed me to act as your sub?"

The young man looked at her in surprise. "I understood that the major was joking, Miss Ackworth."

"Partly in jest, partly in earnest, sir," she said calmly; "one white officer to fifty men is quite enough under ordinary circumstances, but it might not be enough here if we were attacked in force by the Pathans. I might not be of any use in directing the men's movements, they have their own native officers for that, but in case of trouble I could keep watch and carry orders for you and act as hospital nurse, and do no end of things."

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"I trust that there will be no necessity at all for your efforts in any direction."

"Look here, Charlie," she said; "if that is the way you take my well-meant offers, I shall withdraw them." This she said in a tone of contempt.

"I think you are quite right to do so, Miss Ackworth. I do not think there is the most remote chance of your services being called into requisition."

"I don't know," she said; "somehow or other I have a sort of uneasy conviction that there is trouble brewing."

The lieutenant's face changed its expression instantly. "Have you any reason whatever for such an idea?" he asked, with a sharpness and directness differing widely from his usual manner.

"No, I cannot quite say that I have; still, there are sundry little things which might afford some foundation for it. To begin with, you know that thirty of the camp-followers went off a week ago. Why should they have done that? They are always well treated. There has been no grumbling among them, and yet, without a moment's notice they stole away, just before the gates were closed at night."

"Yes, Miss Ackworth, we discussed that matter among ourselves, and came to the conclusion that the men thought they wanted a change and had gone off to their villages."

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"Yes, of course, it might have meant that. I heard you talking it over when you were sitting in the veranda outside our bungalow. I thought you were all very stupid, because you only seemed to have one idea between you. Why, I could have given you several reasons at least.

"The men all belong to the hill tribes, and, I have no doubt, had an inkling that an expedition was going to start, and so went to join their friends. They took, I heard, half a dozen rifles with them, which would certainly seem to show that they had no intention of returning here.

"Well, that is one solution. The other is that the raid that my father has gone out to punish is really a feint to get him to take the greater part of the garrison away, and during his absence to fall upon us tooth and nail."

The young lieutenant looked at Nita gravely. "What you suggest is quite possible; I never thought of it before, and I don't think the major can have done so, or he would have left some more of his force here. I beg your pardon, Miss Ackworth. I see that in case this supposition turns out to be correct you will make a very useful subaltern, and I at once accept your offers in that direction. I trust sincerely that your fears will not come to anything, but at any rate I will at once take every precaution in my power—forewarned is forearmed, you know."

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"That is right, sir," she said, saluting again; "I hope that when you are assigning a place in the defence to everyone else you will not forget me. I am as good with the rifle as anybody, and, as you know, I am a pretty certain shot with my revolver, and if it came to close fighting should not waste much ammunition."

"I will remember," he said, with a slight smile; "but I should say that, to begin with, your place would be in one of the officer's bungalows, which we will turn into a hospital. There will be plenty of work for you there if we are attacked. I again apologize for having treated your first proposal so lightly."

"Oh, never mind about that, Charlie! I am glad that it is you that they left behind, for most of the other officers would only have chaffed me, and then I should have got into a rage."

Greatly satisfied, she returned to her father's bungalow, and set herself to going through his belongings, and putting aside all old garments she could find that could be torn up and used for dressings.

Charlie Carter at once called up the two native officers and told them that he did not consider the fort safe from attack while the troops were away. The soldiers were formed up, and with these they made a tour of the walls, telling off a man to every twenty yards, and additional men to the points that were weakest and most open to attack. "You will let half the men off duty every day, but see that all are ready for work at night; there will be no occasion for them all to remain on guard, but you will station a third of them at their posts, and change these three times during the night. Those not on sentry will sleep with their rifles beside them, magazines charged, so as to be ready at once if the alarm is given. One of you by turns will be on night duty, to see that the sentries are vigilant, and that all is going on quietly. The troops who are off duty will, of course, hurry to take their respective posts on the wall should the alarm be given by day."

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The officers appeared in no way surprised at the orders. There had been some discussion among them on the previous evening about the fort being left so slenderly guarded, and they were pleased to see that their officer was determined not to be caught napping. A tour of inspection was made, and each man was instructed in the position that he was to occupy in the case of assault. The weakest spot was the gateway, which was commanded by a native mosque a hundred yards away, several low buildings surrounding it.

"I wish I could pull that place down," he said to Nita; "but it is more than I can venture to do when we have really nothing to go upon. The major has always said that if we were going to be

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attacked he should not hesitate to level it to the ground, but he could not venture to do so unless the danger were imminent, as its destruction would be bitterly resented by all the people round."

"Don't you think, Charlie, that if we were to plant a couple of barrels of powder under it, and lay a train by which it could be fired, that it would smash it up pretty completely? We have a large store of powder, and can spare two or three barrels for the purpose."

"It is a capital idea, Miss Ackworth, and I will carry it out to-night when the people in the village are all asleep. Upon my word, if it were in accordance with military discipline, I should feel disposed to hand over my command to you, for your brain works quicker than mine does, by a long way."

"I am quite content to serve under you," she said. "I dare say I shall have other suggestions to make later on; some, no doubt, will be possible, others the contrary, but I shall submit them for your approval or rejection, knowing very well that some of them would be impracticable. Now look here: I shall find it frightfully dull taking my meals by myself, and I don't suppose you will find it lively, so I wish you would join me on the veranda of our bungalow."

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"I don't know, Miss Ackworth, whether your father would quite approve of that."

"Nonsense!" the girl laughed; "you know I am not in any way to be regarded as a young lady yet. Besides, my father was going to send me very soon down to Bombay, and from there to England, under your escort, which shows that he considers you a prudent and trustworthy guardian for me. If I were at home all day by myself I am sure that I should get the jumps. My brain is always busy, and, as father's representative here, I think I ought to be able constantly to confer with you; and I am sure it will be more pleasant for you to sit in our veranda and smoke your pipe and put up with my chatter, than it would be for you to be moping by yourself in the ante-room. If you like I will promise to talk as childishly as I can, and with all due respect to you as commander of the garrison."

Carter laughed. "Very well, Miss Ackworth; it would certainly be a great deal more pleasant for me, and you must take the responsibility when the major returns."

"I will do that," she said; "my father must see that it would be ridiculous for us each to be taking our meals alone all the time that he was away."

"Do you know, Charlie," Nita said on the second evening, "I have always thought you rather slow, and now I see that you are really nothing of the sort."

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Carter laughed. "I am quite conscious that I am slow, Miss Ackworth. I am not quick in taking in ideas, or in expressing my own. I often wish that it wasn't so, but I have lately been getting better. I can't chaff as most of them can, but I find myself able to join in general conversation more easily. Some day, I dare say, I shall become quite a conversationalist."

"How very serious you are!" she said; "you talk with me as if I were a woman, and not, as most of the others do, as a little girl to be chaffed."

CHAPTER II

ATTACKED

"Have you got another uniform, Charlie?" the girl asked on the following evening.

"Certainly I have," Carter answered in some surprise.

"Well, I wish you would send it over here."

"Send it over here, Miss Ackworth! What on earth do you want it for?"

"Well, it is this. It is as well to be prepared for all contingencies. I certainly do not mean to be carried away, if the fort should be captured, and made the slave of some Afridi chief. If I find things going badly I shall run back here and put on the uniform, cut my hair off short, and then go out and fight till the last. It would be a thousand times better to be killed fighting than to be captured."

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"Certainly it would," the young officer said gravely; "it would be a hard lot for a woman to be carried off a captive by these Afridis."

"Very well, then, you will lend me a uniform?"

"Yes I will, Miss Ackworth, but I should advise you to keep the last bullet in your revolver for yourself."

"I mean to," she said, "but something might happen; I might fall seriously wounded and be unable to use it, and then, if they found me lying wounded, they would fire a bullet into me and so finish me."

"God forbid that it should come to that!" he said, "though it is as well to make provision against it. I am now quite of your opinion that there is a possibility of our being attacked. For the last two days many of the villagers have abandoned their homes and cleared off. There must be some reason for this, and the only one that I can see is that the men are aware that we are going to be attacked. They have no ground for complaint against us, we have always paid for everything that we have had of them. There has been no enforced labour, and we have every reason for supposing that they are well content to have us established here, as the fort would be a protection in case of an Afridi raid. This move on their part certainly is ominous. Should we be driven from our walls, which, I hope, will not take place, I suppose that we must rally in the mess-house and make our last stand there. The walls are solid, and I have this morning set some of the men, who know something of carpentering, to work at once to make thick shutters for all the windows and to store the house with provisions. I think we could make a stout defence there."

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"I think it is a very good plan, Charlie; a bugle call would bring all the men down from the walls in no time. There are no buildings round, and the enemy would have to attack us across the open; I believe if only twenty men get there in safety we ought to be able to drive them off."

"We will have a good try for it, anyhow," the young lieutenant said; "they will know that the major will not be many days before he is back, and after one or two sharp repulses they may deem it expedient to move off, lest they should find the tables turned upon them. You are rather a bloodthirsty little person, Miss Ackworth!"

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"Do you think so? I hope not. I know very well that if we are attacked it will be a very serious matter, and I fear there will be great loss of life. But I do think that if they made a trifling attack, and drew off, I should enjoy the excitement. I most certainly hope that there will not be any regular attacks. Still, if there are, I fancy that I should, in a sort of way, enjoy them. It would be very wrong, I have no doubt, but I don't think that I could help it."

"I think that is the way with all soldiers, Miss Ackworth. They may feel nervous before action, but when they are once engaged they lose all sense of fear, and their great anxiety is to get hand to hand with the enemy. If it were not for that feeling, I fancy that very few attacks would ever succeed. The man who deliberately said to himself, 'No one could live under such a storm of bullets as this', would not be likely to march steadily through it."

"It is a funny thing, isn't it, that men should be so fond of fighting?"

"It is; I have wondered over it many a time. All savage races love fighting, and certainly our own people do. If there were a great war, hundreds and thousands of men would volunteer at once. I am afraid this instinct brings us very near the savage. I think no other nation possesses it to anything like the same extent as the British race. The Germans are fine soldiers and fight well, but they do it purely because they are commanded and have to obey. The Frenchmen are nearly the same, and I think it is something like this with the Russians. The Turk, now, is a thorough good fighter, and with him it is a matter of religious fanaticism. It is curious that our Indian subjects, for the most part, go into battle with the same feelings as do our own people. There are no finer fighters in the world than the Sikhs, the Punjaubis, and the Ghoorkhas. They are all magnificent, but are equalled in Africa by the Hausas and other tribes from whom we draw our soldiers. All these people go into a fray as if they were going to a feast."

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"I expect," Nita said, "it is because we have that feeling that we always win our battles."

"No doubt that is so, and I only hope that the feeling will not be knocked out of us by school-boards and other contrivances of that sort."

Nita shook her head. This was beyond her. "Why should it do so?" she asked.

"The school-board trains up the boys to despise their fathers' callings. I am afraid they all want to go into shops, or to get some small clerkship, and to struggle, in fact, for anything where they can wear black clothes instead of fustian. Still, I hope they won't lose the courage that our race has always possessed. At any rate a very large number of young fellows who have been to board schools become Volunteers afterwards, and I thoroughly believe that the Volunteers would turn out as one man if we had a very serious war, say, with France or Germany."

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"That would be a serious war," Nita said. "Those nations have tremendous armies, so I have heard my father say."

"They have; but they are, in my opinion, *too* tremendous. If they were to fight in solid masses they would be literally swept away. If they fought in the open order, which is now the rule with us, the battle would extend over such an area that no general in the world could handle an army covering such an enormous space. I should say that from a hundred to a hundred and fifty thousand is the greatest body that could be efficiently worked under one command. I don't think the French are ever likely to fight us. The way the Fashoda affair was settled seems to show that their rulers are very adverse to plunging into war with us. When we fought them at the beginning of the century we had a population of five or six million, while the French had six times that number. Now our British Islands have something like forty million, and are every day increasing, while the French are stationary, if not going back. Besides, if there were a big war, I believe that the colonists would, if we were hardly pushed, send us half a million fighting-men. Between us and Germany the matter is different. They are entering the field as our commercial rivals, and they fret that we should hold almost all the land in the world where a white man can work. I except, of course, North America. The Germans are uneasy in themselves. Democracy is making great strides, and the time may well come when a German Emperor may be driven to quarrel with us in order to prevent civil war at home. At present, however, the power of the emperor is supreme. Germany is adding to her navy, for without a powerful navy they could not hope to get into contact with us; but while they build one war-ship we can build three, so that we need not fear our supremacy at sea being threatened save by an alliance between France and Germany and Russia, an alliance which there is little fear of coming about, for the Germans hate the Russians and the Russians hate the Germans. You might as well think of an alliance between a dog, a cat, and a rat, as that those three Powers should pull together. No, the next war, when it comes, may be between us and Russia; and as it is certain that the little Japs would join us, I think that between us we should make things pretty hot for her. There, Miss Ackworth, I have been giving you a sort of lecture on the politics of the world. I hope that you did not find it dull."

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"Certainly not," Nita said. "I am very much obliged to you. Of course, I have heard these things talked over before, but never in such a way that I could exactly understand them. It seems funny to be discussing such matters up here on the frontier with the chance of being attacked every hour."

"Well, I must go my rounds. Good-night, Miss Ackworth! I hope your sleep will not be disturbed."

"I hope not, indeed," the girl said; "I have slept soundly every night so far. There has been so much to arrange and work out that I go off as soon as I lay my head upon the pillow."

Four hours later she sat suddenly up in bed. It was certainly a rifle-shot that she heard. This was followed almost instantaneously by a heavy roar of musketry. "It has come!" she exclaimed as she leapt out of bed and hurriedly dressed herself. She paused a moment as she looked at the suit of uniform, and then muttering "There will be time enough for that later on", she proceeded to put on her own clothes. She slipped a handful of cartridges into her pocket, and with her revolver in her hand sallied out. It seemed to her that the place was attacked on all sides at once, for flashes of fire spat out round the whole circle of the walls; but this was as nothing to the roar outside. By the sound, she assured herself that the main attack was directed on the gate, and here the fire of the defenders was also exceptionally heavy. She made her way up to the top of the wall. Here she found the greater part of the men who had been in reserve, although some of them had, as arranged, hurried to other threatened points.

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"Take steady aim, men, take steady aim!" Lieutenant Carter shouted. This told her where he was stationed, and she made her way to him. When his eye fell on her he said, "You ought not to be here, Miss Ackworth. If things were going badly with us I should say nothing against it; but at present, at any rate, you have no business here, and I must ask you to retire at once. What do you suppose the major would say if, on his return, he found that you had been killed by a chance shot on the walls? I must really beg of you to descend at once."

Never before had Nita heard the young lieutenant speak in such a tone of command and determination. "All right!" she said meekly; "just let me have one peep over the wall and then I will go down."

"You may take just one peep, but there is nothing to see. They have failed in the expectation that they would take us by surprise. At present they are lying down and using up their ammunition."

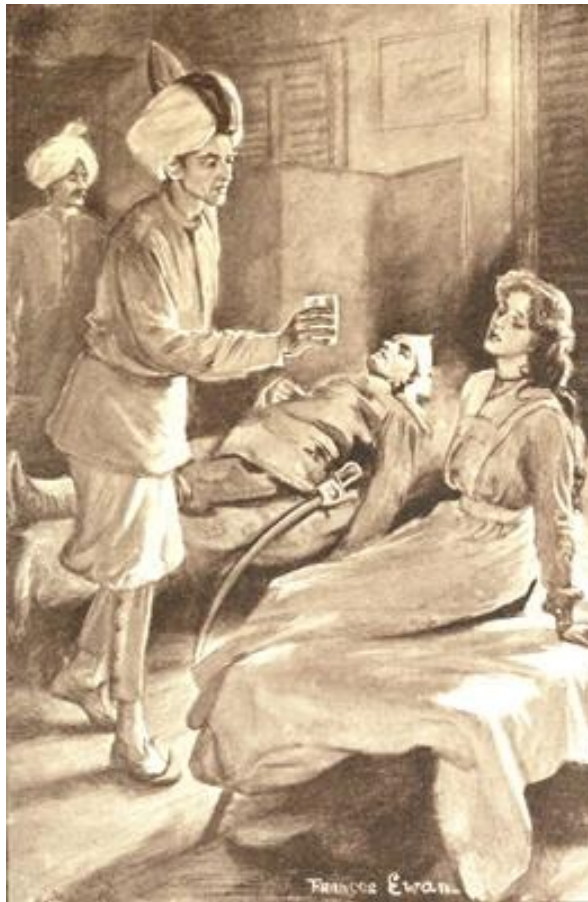
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Nita took a hasty glance over the parapet, and then, descending the steps, made her way to the bungalow, which it had been decided had better be used for the wounded, as it was a bullet-proof building, although less well ventilated and comfortable than the hospital would have been. She set to work to light the lanterns ranged along the wall, to get out bandages, and to prepare for the reception of the wounded. Two of the men had been told off to assist her, and these were already there when she arrived. It was not long before the first patient was brought in. He had been severely wounded in the head while firing over the parapet. Nita shuddered, but, putting on

a thick white canvas apron which she had made on the previous day, began her work. The surgeon had unfortunately gone with the expedition, and she felt that the responsibility was a heavy one. She knew a little of bandaging, having been present when the doctor had given some lectures to the officers on the subject, but this was a case altogether beyond her. She could only bathe the man's head and then put a loose bandage round it. She gave him a drink of water and then sat suddenly down on the next bed, faint and sick. She held out her hand to one of the men for a glass of water, drank it up, and then with a great effort got on to her feet again, and waited for the next patient.

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Five or six more men were brought in during the night. All had been hit either in the head or shoulder; some of them, however, were only gashed in the cheek, and these, as soon as their wounds were bandaged, took up their rifles and went off again to the wall. So the night passed; the fire had slackened a good deal, and it was evident that the Afridis had abandoned the idea of taking the fort by assault. Although it was two o'clock when the attack had begun, the night seemed endless to Nita, and she was grateful indeed when the first tinge of daylight appeared in the east. Presently Carter arrived. "You have done well indeed, Miss Ackworth," he said, "and have been far more useful than you could have been on the wall. It required a deal of nerve to carry out your work, and your looks show what a strain it has been. I beg that you will go and lie down for a time. Half the men have come down from the wall, and a good many of them are adepts in the art of bandaging wounds, having been enlisted among fighting tribes. Your bandaging has been really effective, but these men will make a neater job of it."



**"SHE SUDDENLY SAT DOWN ON THE NEXT BED,
FAINT AND SICK"**

"How are things going on?" she asked.

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"Very well. They have fallen back now to the mosque and village, and no doubt will spend the morning in consultation."

"You have not fired off the barrels, then?"

"Oh no! I shall keep that as a pill for them when matters become more serious. Now please go and lie down. Of course if there is a fresh attack you will get up and come out again."

Nita walked slowly across the yard to her room. "Why are my legs so ridiculously weak?" she said to herself; "I am sure that I have not been afraid, and as to the work of bandaging those poor fellows, it was nothing. I suppose it was the sight of blood, and having to wait so long for something to do. I am sure that I should have borne it ten times better if Mr. Carter had allowed me to remain on the wall. I should not have thought that I could have been overruled by what he said, but he spoke so sternly and sharply that I felt that I must obey him. I would not have believed that Charlie could have spoken so. I shall not be so quick in forming my opinion about people again. I think I spoke of him as 'stupid' when father said he was to take me down country, but I see that there is nothing stupid about him. He is very quiet, certainly, but he takes the command as if he had been accustomed to it all his life. I am quite certain that if anyone can defend this place he can. How silly of me! I forgot to ask him what was the strength of the force attacking us. However, that will keep till I get up."

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So saying, she lay down on the bed, dressed as she was, and in two minutes was fast asleep. It was eleven o'clock when she woke. "I did not think that I should have slept five minutes," she said indignantly to herself; "here I have had nearly six hours." She dipped her face in water, brushed her hair, and made herself as tidy as possible. When she went out Lieutenant Carter was talking to the two native officers; she waited till they both saluted and retired, then she went up to him. "Please tell me a little more about it, Mr. Carter. How many are there of the attackers? What do you think they are going to do? Did you kill many of them?"

"Three questions at once," he said with a smile, "and to none of them can I give you a satisfactory answer. In the first place, they are very strong; we have put them down as having fifteen hundred men. As to their intention, I can tell you nothing yet, for there has been no development. Thirdly, I think that we must have killed fifty at their first rush at the gate; but that is pure surmise, for they carried off the bodies as fast as they fell. I am waiting somewhat eagerly to see what their next move will be. We have heard outbursts of yells twice in the last hour, and I expect that we shall soon see the result."

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"It is long odds," the girl said.

"Very long," answered the lieutenant; "for there is no doubt that it is a preconcerted thing. An attack was made on that outlying post, a considerable distance from the fort, and probably only with the intention of getting our garrison to march away, while all the assembled tribes came down upon us, feeling, no doubt, that with the benefit of a surprise, and knowing how small our garrison must be, it would be carried at the first rush. Now that that has failed they will, no doubt, adopt some quite different tactics. I have had the men at work ever since daybreak, piling up sacks full of earth against the gate to within two or three feet of the top, where I have made some loopholes, so that our men can lie down on the sacks and keep up a heavy fire. That is all that I can do at present, until we see what game they mean to play."

"That is capital," the girl said; "if they make a real attack, that is the position where I shall place myself. There will be no chance of my being hit there, and at that distance I could calculate on bringing down an enemy at every shot."

"I am afraid that you are a very wilful young person," he said with a smile; "but as I know how good a shot you are, I shall not refuse your aid in case of extremity."

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CHAPTER III

HARD PRESSED

Towards daylight next morning a tremendous fire opened suddenly, and Nita dressed hastily and ran out. Running up to the walls, she saw that a large number of men were approaching the gate, covered by a rain of bullets from the mosque and village, and that, as it seemed to her, an equally strong attack was being made from the other side. The Punjaubis were hard at work, and from the number of dead that covered the ground behind the enemy, she felt how accurate their fire had been. This time the Afridis seemed to have worked themselves up to a pitch of fanatical bravery. Two or three times they halted for a minute, but their leaders came to the front, and, waving their flags, led them forward again. At last, in spite of the fire of the twenty-five men on that side, they reached the gate, at which they began to hack with their heavy knives.

Half a dozen men now ran down from the wall, and, climbing up the barricade, opened fire through the loopholes on the mass below, causing terrible destruction among them. The men who could not get at the gate opened fire at these loopholes, and it was not long before two of the defenders fell, shot through the head. Nita at once went up and took the place of one of them. The two men who had been killed were lying next to each other. Taking a careful aim from one loophole she fired—a man dropped; then she shifted her place to the next vacant loophole, and fired from that. Sometimes she lay still for two or three minutes, and then fired several shots in rapid succession from the loopholes; sometimes using one and sometimes the other, and thus avoiding the storm of bullets that followed each shot. She had no sense of fear now. She was proud of doing her share of the work. That she was doing a share she knew, for scarcely one of her shots missed the mark.

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Presently the men before the gate began to sneak off, and in five minutes more all was over, the Afridis suffering heavily as they retreated across the open. Then Nita went down into the courtyard. As she did so, she saw Carter run across the court to the other side, where the combat was still raging. She mounted the wall a short distance away. The enemy had each brought up a great faggot, and thrown it down against the foot of the wall, giving a slope almost to the top. Up this they had again and again rushed, only to be beaten back each time by the Punjaubis. Fortunately the faggots were insufficient to reach quite to the top of the wall, and the Afridis had to help their comrades up the eight feet between the crest and the top of the parapet, only to see them fall back shot or bayoneted. The arrival of ten men from the gate turned the tables. With thirty rifles playing upon them the Afridis felt that no more could be done, and retired sullenly, taking advantage of every bit of rising ground or bush to lie down and fire.

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"Well, Miss Ackworth, *that* affair is over. I saw you standing at a distance, and was thankful that you did not come up to join us."

"I did my fighting on the other side," she said with a smile. "You know you said that—"

"You did!" he said angrily. "I shall have to put you under arrest, Miss Ackworth, for disobeying orders."

"Thank you! but it happens that I did not disobey orders. You particularly said that I might fire through the loopholes of the gate when it was seriously attacked, and I took advantage of the permission to get possession of two holes where the defenders had been killed, and I flatter myself I did some good. I fired thirty shots, and know enough of my shooting to be sure that there were not many of them thrown away. The circumstances were exactly what you pointed out. The gate was very seriously attacked, and it was therefore open to me to do a little shooting on my own account."

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"It was really wrong of you, Miss Ackworth. The attack was serious, but I never thought for a moment that they would take the gate, and it certainly never entered my mind that you would expose yourself to being killed in this way."

"I took every precaution, Charlie, and fired sometimes from one loophole and sometimes from another; and as I must have accounted for quite twenty-five men, I honestly believe that I, at least, did as much as any of your soldiers, and probably a good deal more."

"That is all very well," he said; "I don't say that you did not do good service, and I admit that my orders did give you some sort of license; however, this must not occur again, or I shall consider it my duty to order you to keep your place in the hospital, and shall have to put a sentry at the door to prevent you from coming out under any pretence while fighting is going on. You must remember that I shall have to account for your safety to the major when he returns, and that were anything to happen to you the blame would fall upon my shoulders, and would not be put down to your wilfulness. However, should the time ever come when we are driven to our last corner, I shall then authorize you to use your pistol."

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Glad to have got off so easily, Nita went down to the hospital. There were but few wounded, and these, as before, had been hit principally on the head and shoulder. Lieutenant Carter came in shortly afterwards: "Let me have a look at your patients, Miss Ackworth; I have gone through the St. John's ambulance course and am pretty good at bandaging. I see that you have taken great pains with the men, but I think that I can possibly make a little improvement here and there. Besides, in some cases, I may be able to get the balls out. It will be more than a week before the surgeon is back with your father, and extracting a bullet might make all the difference between life and death. I have brought in a case of instruments the doctor left behind him. Do you think

that you could help me?"

"Certainly I could," she said; "I think my first attack of weakness will be my last."

"Well, then, let us set to work."

With two or three of the patients the ball had penetrated too deeply, but where it had lodged comparatively close to the surface, Carter managed to find its position with a probe, and in four cases he succeeded in getting it out. The patients behaved with heroic fortitude, and although the operation was necessarily painful, bore it without a murmur. When the work was done and the wounds bandaged again, he said: "Now, Nita, a little fresh air would do you good; come with me up to the ramparts. I am going to try the effects of an explosion. It is certain that the enemy are all gathered now in the mosque and village, and possibly after their defeat of this morning such a blow will disconcert them altogether, and send them to the right-about."

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"I should think it would," Nita agreed. "What loss did they suffer this morning, do you think?"

"I should say at least a hundred and fifty of their bravest men."

They went together to the spot where the train of gunpowder ended. "You go on to the walls," he said, "and watch. I will run up as soon as I have lighted the fuse. We calculated that it would last five minutes before it fires the train of gunpowder."

Nita ran up to the wall and a minute later was joined by the officer. He took out his watch and counted the minutes as they went past. "Now, Miss Ackworth," he said, putting his watch into his pocket again, "the fuse ought to be done in forty seconds, but we must allow a minute or two for miscalculation in its length."

Two minutes passed, then there was a deep roar; the mosque came down like a house of cards, and many of the dwellings collapsed from the shock of the explosion. Timbers and stones flew up high into the air. There was a moment's pause, and then an outburst of wild yells and screams. "I think that ought to frighten them a bit," the lieutenant said; "unless their leader has great power over them, and is a man of iron nerves, they will be off. The worst of it is, they won't like to return home to face their women after the disasters that they have suffered, and without having obtained some great success. The men scarcely know what nerves mean, and they may very well make up their minds to try one last attempt. You may be sure it will be a formidable one if they do, and they will probably adopt some entirely new scheme. We shall have to be doubly cautious for the next two nights."

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Although a sharp look-out was kept, there was no sign of the enemy retreating. Towards evening a scattered fire was opened from the village against the gate, but otherwise the night passed quietly.

"I don't like it," Carter said the next morning; "the enemy have not gone yet, and they have not renewed the attack. I have no doubt that the beggars are up to something. I wish I knew what it was. It worries me."

"It does seem strange," Nita said; "but perhaps they have been burying their dead, which would keep them pretty well occupied all day. However, as we have beaten them off twice with the loss to ourselves of only six killed and eight wounded, I suppose that we shall be able to resist them again."

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"I am sure we shall if they attack us openly. It is only the unknown that I am afraid of. I was on the walls the whole night, but except for a continued random fire from the village they were quiet. I wish we had a moon. In that case we could make them out comfortably at a hundred yards, whereas on these dark nights one can't see twenty."

The officer's prevision of danger told upon Nita, and when she reached the bungalow that night she dressed herself in Carter's uniform, cut her hair carefully close to her head, and lay down in readiness to leap up at the first alarm.

Had anyone been keeping special watch in the courtyard, they would have seen a number of dark figures clustering between the wall and the hospital. During that and the preceding night a party of Afridis had gathered at the foot of the wall, crawling forward, one by one, on their stomachs. They were armed only with spear and knife, and with these had attacked the wall noiselessly, working the stones out one by one, unobserved and undreamt of by the watch on the wall above. The first night they had almost completed their work, and by three in the morning on the second had made an opening through which two men could pass abreast; then one had gone back to the village, and presently a stream of men were passing through the wall.

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When all was ready they burst out with triumphant yells. They were, however, ignorant of the position of the various houses, and scattered miscellaneously. A moment later the bugle sounded, and twenty men in reserve at once made a rush to the mess-house. The defenders of the wall came running down the various steps leading from the battlements. Many of these were cut down on the way, but twelve of them managed to join their comrades at the mess-house.

Nita sprang up when the first yell broke out, seized her revolver and a box of cartridges, and had reached the mess-house just as the party in the yard came in. The door was kept open until the last fugitive entered, desperately wounded, and followed by a mob of the exulting Afridis, who, however, were prevented from entering the building.

Each man had been instructed as to the place he should occupy in case they were driven from the wall, and the Punjaubis took up their positions in stern silence.

"Where is Lieutenant Carter?" Nita asked. "Has anyone seen him?"

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"I am here, Miss Ackworth, and, thank God, you are here too. I was one of the last to come in, for I hung round your bungalow to help you if necessary."

Candles and lanterns had been placed on the table, and Nita took a match-box from her pocket and lit several of them.

"Hullo, Miss Ackworth, is that really you?" said the astonished lieutenant as soon as a light was struck.

"Really and truly," she said; "you rather scared me yesterday by your talk, so I got into your uniform before I lay down."

"You did well," he said; "and I should certainly take you for a lad who had just joined the regiment. Well, I must not stay here. The first thing is to go round and rearrange the posts, for we have little more than half our original number now. I shall only leave three or four men on this floor at present, and shall at once open fire from the upper windows. I shall be much obliged if you will stay down here."

"Certainly I will do so. I will place myself near the main door, and will let you know if the enemy seem to be collecting for an attack upon it."

"You are a brave girl," he said, "and I wish I had two or three dozen like you."

The Afridis at once pulled down the barricade from the front gate, and the tribesmen swarmed in. Very soon, however, they were obliged to take shelter in the various buildings, for the galling fire from the windows of the mess-house rendered it impossible for them to stay in the open.

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At daylight firing ceased altogether and refreshments were served out to the troops, and the lieutenant and Nita sat quietly down to breakfast.

"There is no disguising it," he said, "our position is a very critical one. In the first place, have you any idea how these rascals got into the fort?"

"I have no certain idea at all, Charlie, but I think that in the dark they must have somehow cut a hole through the wall.

"I should think that it was something of that sort; they certainly did not get over it, they could not have done so without being seen by the sentries. That they should have got in has certainly changed our position greatly for the worse. They have shown themselves amazingly determined and enterprising. I have no doubt they will fill every house whose windows bear on ours, and keep up such a fire that we shall not be able to show ourselves. Under cover of that fire they will attack us. We may kill a great many of them, but I fear that in the long run it will come to the same thing. Our only hope, I think, lies in the chance that the major has received news of the attack upon us, and has abandoned all idea of the expedition and is hurrying back to our relief. God grant that he may arrive to-day, or at latest, to-morrow. It is no use our shutting our eyes to the fact that our position is a very grave one."

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Nita herself had already seen this, and yet she turned a little pale at her companion's words. "Well," she said, "I am glad indeed that I put on your uniform. One can but be killed once, and if they fail to kill me I shall do it myself. The only thing that troubles me is the thought of father returning and finding me dead;" and her eyes filled with tears.

"It is awful; I can say nothing to comfort you," he said sadly, "but we must keep up each other's courage till the last. There will be no great occasion to keep up yours, though, for you are the pluckiest girl that I ever saw. As for my own courage, I am in command here, and must keep up a brave face, no matter what I may think."

"I am afraid that I am not so brave as I seem to be. It is as much as I can do really to keep myself from breaking down and crying."

"That is only natural, Nita, and if you would like to have a good cry I will leave you to yourself for half an hour."

"Oh no, I don't mean that I am going to, for if I began to cry I don't know when I should stop; and," she added, with an attempt at a smile, "that would shake my hand, and I shall want it to be as steady as I can. I think that I can promise that every shot shall tell this time. I dare say it seems horrid to you that I should be so bloodthirsty, but I hate them all so for coming down and attacking us like this that I would kill them all with one blow if I could."

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"I wish you could, very heartily," he said with a smile. "You have been a great friend to me," he went on, taking her hand; "your high spirits have kept me up, and I don't know what I should have done without you. It was you that thought of blowing up the mosque, which I should say must have accounted for a great number of them, not to mention those you brought down with your pistol. You have forgiven my speaking so sharply to you, I hope?"

"I have never thought of it since; you were quite right to blow me up, and I felt that at the time. Yes, we have been great friends, and I have told myself scores and scores of times what a little fool I was to have thought that you were rather stupid because you talked so little and didn't seem to care much for entering into the amusements of the others."

"No, I know that I was not what you call a good comrade, but I could not help it. I fancy I was shy, and I did not care much for any of their sports; besides, I knew that they regarded me rather as a killjoy, and that kept me from mixing with them much."

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"Well, you have had your turn now, Charlie, and no one could have come out of it more splendidly. You will be a great soldier some day, if—" and she stopped.

"If I live, yes. I hoped some day to have got a chance of distinguishing myself. And the chance has come, but, as you say, it is unlikely that it will ever come again. But, as you also said, one can but die once, and at least I hope that I shall die with credit, and a soldier can wish no more. But I would give all the few hours I may have left to me to know that you would escape."

"That is all nonsense, Charlie; I am only a girl, and a girl's life is not worth anything. If it wasn't for my father I should be fairly content."

"Well," he said, "it is no use talking. We shall have to do the best we can when the time comes. I must go round and see after the men."

CHAPTER IV

PRISONERS

There was but a short cessation of hostilities, and then from every building round a blaze of musketry burst out. The men were at once called down from the upper rooms, where there were no shutters, and planted at the loopholes of those on the ground floor. "Don't throw away a shot," was the order given to them; "keep well in shelter, and when you do fire take care that you bring down your man."

So the fight went on all day. The losses of the enemy were far greater than those of the garrison, but the men lost to the latter could be ill spared.

"It is awful to think of the fate of those in the hospital," Nita said, when she took a hasty meal in the middle of the day with Lieutenant Carter. "Four or five of them managed to get in here alive, the rest must have been massacred in cold blood."

"Do not fret over that, Nita; it may be the fate of all of us in a few hours. We shall sell our lives dearly, but I cannot shut my eyes to the fact that the enemy are not far off a big rush. Then the doors will give way, for we have no means of strengthening them; and as there are two entrances at the back as well as those in front, nothing but the return of the major can save us. There is no doubt that in spite of their losses the enemy are determined to capture the place. We have now only eighteen men left capable of firing a rifle, and they are fifty to one against us. It is of no use disguising it from ourselves. To-night will see the end of the fight."

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"If it must be so, it must," Nita said quietly. "You don't think that anyone is likely to see that I am a girl?"

"Certainly not; your disguise in that way is complete. Perhaps you had better allow me to trim your hair as closely as I can to the masculine style. There is more chance for you and me than for the men, for it is just possible that they may take us and carry us off as hostages. That means that they will keep us as slaves till they are attacked in such force that they may think it prudent to make terms. The chances are against it, but there is a possibility that it is the course they will take."

"I would rather die than that," Nita said. "I might keep up my disguise for a time, but they would be sure to detect it sooner or later. I dare not think of this."

"I don't believe that you would be detected, Nita. I should not penetrate your disguise myself, and if I who know you cannot do so you may well pass with these ruffians. You have plenty of spirit and may very well sustain your character."

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"I shall blow my brains out before I am taken," she said passionately, "I have quite made up my mind to that."

"That must be your own choice," he said gravely. "While there is life there is hope, and sooner or later you may be restored to your friends. Sooner than later, I should guess, for you may be sure that when the news of this massacre reaches the authorities they will lose no time in getting together a strong punitive expedition against the tribes, and as soon as they find that resistance is hopeless they will try to make terms on the strength of any hostages that they may have in their hands."

Nita shook her head. "It is all very well for you to give me hope, Charlie, but you know as well as I do that the chances are hundreds to one against us."

At night, as soon as it became dark, there was a tremendous rush against all four doors. "It is of no use, men," Carter said, in firm tones which rose above the din, "the doors will not hold out five minutes. We will assemble here and fight till the last. We have done all that men can do, and I thank you for the way that you have stood by me; but the odds are too great for us, and we have nothing to do now except die like men. They will find that, handful as we are, we can account for a good many of them yet."

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**"NITA HAD ONE SHOT LEFT IN HER REVOLVER,
AND SHE DIRECTED THIS AGAINST HER
FOREHEAD"**

The men gathered in a ring, with Carter and Nita in the centre. Three minutes later two crashes were heard, and the Afridis burst in. They paused a moment on seeing the compact little body waiting their attack, then with yells of triumph rushed at them. They were met with a stream of musketry, every shot of which took effect, and the crack of the revolvers of Carter and Nita added to the din. In vain the enemy endeavoured to break the circle. Then they betook themselves to their muskets. The ground was speedily piled with dead, but numbers gradually prevailed. The little ring of defenders grew smaller and smaller, and at last, when but six men were standing, the enemy burst into the circle. There was wild fighting for a minute, bayonets against sword and spear, but gradually the din ceased.

Carter was one of the last to fall. Nita had one shot left in her revolver and directed this against her forehead. But at the moment when she was about to draw the trigger she was felled to the ground by a blow from the butt-end of a musket. Then the Afridis, seeing that all was over, scattered for plunder, leaving the bodies of the slain where they lay.

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Daybreak dawned, and Nita opened her eyes. She saw that Carter, herself, and two others had been removed from the heap of slain and placed by themselves. She closed her eyes again with a shudder, and yet with a feeling of relief. The removal of the three men as well as herself must have been the result of an examination of the slain, and, like herself, the other three must have been found breathing. Her head ached as if it would split, and she lay for a long time without moving. Then two men, who were evidently chiefs, came up and examined them.

There was some discussion between them, and then Carter and another were taken away, and she and the remaining man, who was one of the native officers, were also carried out. The wounds of the four were all roughly bandaged, and then Carter and his companion were taken up by four natives and borne away. Nita remained for another hour. By this time the fort had been completely ransacked. Then she and her companion were also placed on stretchers and carried out of the fort, which was at once set on fire in a dozen places. Some water was given them, and the tribe then started off. Nita lay with her eyes closed all day, scarcely able even to think, for her head throbbed as if it would split. They travelled fast and did not halt till nightfall. Then she was given a piece of dry bread and a little water. She made an effort to eat, but it was useless; she drank most of the water, however, and soaked her handkerchief in the rest, and placed it on her head, and managed at last to doze off to sleep. In the morning she felt better. The chief then came up and spoke to her. She shook her head, and he went away, and presently returned with one of the tribesmen who had served in a Punjaubi regiment.

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"Who are you?" he asked, and in that language, which Nita could speak fairly well.

"I am an officer in the regiment," she said, "and am a relation of the major who commanded the fort." The man translated this to his leader, who looked pleased.

"Tell him that he will be my servant," he said, "and will be well treated if he gives no trouble, but

if he attempts to escape he will be shot at once."

This was translated to Nita. Then he went on: "You are very young to be an officer, you are no more than a boy."

"I am young," Nita replied, "but when one has a major for a relation one can get a commission at a much younger age than one otherwise would."

"Here are some peaches;" he said, "you will eat them better than bread."

"Thank you very much!" Nita replied.

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"You have nothing the matter with you," the chief went on, "except that you have a big swelling at the back of your head. I suppose you were knocked down by a musket. It is fortunate for you that you were supposed to be dead at the time, for the men would not have spared you after the loss that you had inflicted upon us. By the time we found that you were alive their passion had died down, and I was able to show them that you and the other three might be much more useful alive than dead."

"Is my friend the other officer seriously hurt?" Nita asked.

"Yes, he's badly wounded, but I think that he will recover, and also the other two." So saying, he turned off and went away.

Nita felt most grateful for the peaches. She gave a couple of them to the havildar, who evidently needed them even more than she did. Then she sat down and ate her own slowly, the sweet juice cooling her parched tongue, and even the pain in her head seemed to abate somewhat. Half an hour later the tribe again set off. They ascended two steep passes, and at the end of the sixth day halted in a small valley. There were several villages scattered about, and every foot of the ground was cultivated. They were greeted with shouts of welcome by the inhabitants who flocked out; but soon cries and lamentations mingled with the cheering, from women whose husbands had not returned. These, however, soon retired to their homes to grieve in solitude, while the others went on with their dances of triumph, and the tribesmen scattered to their own villages.

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In the centre of the valley stood a strongly-fortified house, and to this the prisoners were taken. That day Nita had been strong enough to walk, and the pain in her head had abated, though the pressure of her cap still hurt her. The chief's wife, who walked beside her husband, glanced at the prisoners, and was evidently by no means pleased at their being quartered upon her, but when the chief explained that they would both be slaves at her service she looked mollified. They were taken to a small room in an upper story. Then she gave Nita a large jug and signified to her that she was to draw water from the stream that ran through the valley. Anxious to please the woman who was to be her mistress she fulfilled the mission, although feeling very tired with her walk. The woman seemed more gracious when Nita returned with her burden. While she had been away the chief had explained to her the value of the captives, and that he should either get a large sum for restoring them to their friends, or might use them to arrest the progress of a large party of troops sent against him.

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"Only to think," she said, as Nita went wearily upstairs, "that that slight boy should be an officer! Why, with us it is the bravest and strongest men who are the chiefs. How can they expect to fight against us, when they are led by boys like that? I could twist him round my finger."

"The ways of the English are unaccountable," the chief said. "He is, as you say, but a boy, though he and another officer, not much bigger than him, with only fifty men, have killed nearly three hundred of us. Not one offered to surrender, and they fought to the last. These two, and two others who have gone with the Orokzais, were the only ones found breathing when we examined the dead. They are strange people these men, but they are men, and these fought like lions. If they had offered to surrender we would have given them their lives, and carried them off as captives. It is a good thing to have a certain number of prisoners in our hands, for then we can always make peace with their countrymen. But it was not to be. This little garrison were determined to die, and they did die. However, both their officers are in our hands. Treat them well, wife. It will pay us to do so. I rather like that fair-haired boy; he has shown himself very patient and plucky, and himself volunteered to walk instead of being carried to-day. I think you will find him very willing and cheerful."

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"He had better be," she said savagely. "As to his being cheerful, I care not for it one way or the other; but if he is not willing, he will soon get a taste of my stick."

"I should advise you not to try it. I was in the room in the last fight and saw how steadily and straight he shot. Certainly fourteen or so of our men fell at his hands, and I would have saved him then if I could have done so, for never did I see a lad fight so stoutly. He fired as deliberately as if he were aiming at a mark. His eyes shone strangely, and he cheered on his men to the end. I am sure that if you strike him he is capable of doing you harm, at whatever cost to himself."

The woman muttered to herself. She was evidently impressed with her husband's warning, and also with the glance Nita had given her when ordered to fetch water. "Can he cook?" she said. "One of our women has died since you have been away, and I have all the work on my own shoulders."

"I am not sure if he knows anything of cooking," the chief replied, "but you can teach him, and he will not be long in picking it up. Now I will show you the things that I have brought you home."

The sight of the various articles of spoil completely mollified the woman. There was a large copper cooking-pot and two small ones. There were some clothes that Nita recognized as belonging to Carter, a looking-glass, a dozen knives and forks, and a meat-chopper, all of them

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precious things indeed in an Afridi village. Besides this, outside there were a dozen cattle and some forty sheep, the chief's share of the animals picked up at various villages in the neighbourhood of Darlinger. The chief's wife was specially delighted with the mirror, and, fixing it against the wall, she stood admiring herself for a long time, twisting her head from side to side and grimacing with such an air of affectation that it was as much as Nita could do to refrain from breaking into a scream of laughter.

"This is all my own," she said at last, turning to the chief; "your other two wives have nothing to do with it, and are not even to look into it unless I give them permission?"

The chief nodded gravely. The other two wives had, while this was going on, been occupied with domestic duties and in bringing in the various goods. Nita made up her mind at once that they had a very bad time and were little better than slaves.

As the chief left the hut his wife turned to Nita. "Go and help the others," she said.

Nita understood her action though not her words, and with a shrug of her shoulders went to help the other women. Presently a large bowl of rice slightly flavoured with condiment was brought in. The chief, who had returned, sat gravely down by himself to eat it. When he had finished, his head wife seated herself and took her share. After she was satisfied the other women sat down together.

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Nita hesitated, but she had now recovered her appetite and sat down quietly with them. Instead, however, of grabbing handful after handful, as did the others, she took as much as she wanted, placed it on the ground in front of her, and quietly began to eat it.

The head wife laughed derisively and made some remark to her husband, but the chief was evidently not pleased and spoke sternly to her, and Nita guessed that he said she was a valuable captive, and being an officer must be fairly treated. It was, of course, all important that if a British army entered the valley the prisoners should give a good account of their treatment while captive there. The woman was, without doubt, cowed. The Afridis use their sticks freely on their wives, and it was evident that although a tyrant in the house she stood in wholesome fear of her husband.

The chief moved across the hut, took down an earthenware plate, and placed it before Nita, who let him see by her manner that she appreciated his act of kindness. He further signified by gesture that she might regard this plate as her own and use it upon all occasions.

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When the meal was over, Nita assisted to tidy up the room, then went down with a large earthenware jug to the stream and brought it back full of water. She had not been ordered to do this, and the woman nodded to her more kindly than she had hitherto done, seeing that the captive was ready to make herself useful.

After doing this Nita returned to her room. It was now nearly dark. She went and chatted to the native officer, bathed his wound, and gave him some of the food that she had put by for him.

"Don't get well sooner than you can help," she said; "the woman of the house is a vixen of the worst kind, and will set you to work the moment you are able to crawl about. Her husband is disposed to be friendly. I think I frightened the woman. Of course, she would not have understood anything I said, but I am sure my manner showed her that it wouldn't be safe to touch me."

Nita went down early in the morning. The mistress of the house had not yet appeared, but the two women were hard at work grinding meal. Nita went at once to their assistance. She was clumsy at the work, and her share was very inconsiderable. Still, the women were grateful. Nita could not understand all that they said, but by the way they patted her on the back and shook their fists menacingly at the room where the head wife was sleeping, it was apparent that they hated her with a deadly hatred, and recognized in Nita a friend animated by the same feelings as themselves.

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Matters went on quietly for some little time. Nita set to work to pick up the language, and as their oppressor evidently thought that she could make more use of the prisoner if she understood what she said she threw no impediment in the way, and she suffered Nita to chat freely with the others while they were at work. She even went so far as to admit to her husband that the prisoner was very willing to work, and understood what she wanted done. Still, the fact that her husband had placed Nita to some extent beyond her power galled her, and she frequently indulged in violent ejaculations and threats. She was the more furious because Nita received her upbraidings with quiet contempt and did not appear even to hear her. She would many a time have struck her, but was, in truth, a little afraid of Nita, and was convinced that did she attempt to do so "the lad" would, regardless of consequences, return the blow with interest.

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CHAPTER V

ESCAPED

As Nita picked up the language she heard to her delight that Carter was recovering from his wounds, and that he was held a prisoner by a chief who lived fifteen miles away among the mountains. She learned that his captivity was much more severe than hers, and that while she was allowed, when not engaged indoors, to wander about the village, he was held a close prisoner in the house of the chief. As soon as she found this out she became restless. It would be an easy thing for her to escape alone, but the idea possessed her that she ought to do something to free Carter, and this seemed almost an impossibility. One thing was evident—she must, in the first place, get an Afridi dress. This would not be difficult. Much more serious was the question how she was to subsist. She saw that it might be the work of a week, or possibly of a fortnight, after she got away before she could communicate with Carter and arrange for his escape. She would then need a considerable quantity of food, and also a long rope, and a disguise of some sort would be required for Carter.

Nita began by taking flour and meal from the storehouse downstairs. These she put in a sack, which she hid in some bushes a short distance from the house. Every day she added to the store, and as it swelled she took two or three goat-milk cheeses. She hesitated a good deal whether she should adopt a male or female dress, but finally decided upon man's attire. She did not intend to show herself by daylight, but the casual glimpse of a female on the hillside would almost assuredly excite observation and suspicion; moreover, she intended to carry a rifle if she could obtain one, which would be altogether out of character with the dress of a woman. Three weeks were spent in her preparation, by the end of which time the sack was as heavy as she could lift. She had from the first made up her mind that it would be necessary to carry off a donkey or mountain pony, and intended to sling the sack on one side of him, with a skin of water on the other.

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The sack was about a third full of grain, another third of meal, and the remainder was made up of cheeses, some rough clothes, and the rope. She had also cut a pliant stick some four feet in length, with notches at each end to carry a string; for it would clearly be necessary to shoot a note, to begin with, into the window of the prisoner's room. She made three or four rough arrows, which she tied to the bow. She was now ready, but the first thing was to get hold of a pony. In order to do this she once or twice a day took a handful or two of grain to the pony belonging to one of the Afridis, and in a short time it would come eagerly to her when she called. At last all her preparations were ended, and one evening, as soon as the house was asleep, she took a rifle and a bag of cartridges from the corner where they stood, then some of the chief's robes down from the wall, and very cautiously unbarred the door, and, carrying the water-skin with her, closed it behind her and started for the hiding-place of the sack. Then she went to the little enclosure where the pony was standing, and calling softly to it, it came at once to the gate, which she opened, gave it a mouthful of grain, and taking hold of its mane led it to where her goods were hidden. She placed two or three of the cloths folded across its back, then, with some difficulty, fastened the sack and water-skin on to it. She followed the path leading to the south for four or five miles, and then struck off in the direction of the village in which Carter was confined. She had chosen a moonlight night, and made her way some miles without encountering any great difficulty. Then she came to a piece of country so rough that she was compelled to halt. At the first break of dawn she was off again, and succeeded in crossing the crest of the line of hills separating the valley she had left from the next. Down this she went for some distance, along places so precipitous that even the sure-footed pony had difficulty in making its way. At last she came upon a small ravine which she could see broadened out lower down. Here she lay down and slept, after giving the pony two or three handfuls of corn and fastening it up to a bush.

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After a time she continued her journey. From the description she had heard of the village she knew that it stood in a strong position on the hillside. When she got down to the bottom of the ravine she again fastened the pony up and went out into the valley. She was glad to see that water ran down it. This was a great relief to her, for although the water-skin would last her for many days, it would not suffice very long for the pony's needs. She walked on five or six miles, and then caught sight of a village three miles ahead, which exactly answered the description she had gathered of that in which Carter was confined. Keeping along the sides of the valley, and taking advantage of every spur of the hill, she got to within a mile of it, and then ascended the slope till she reached a spot a quarter of a mile behind the village, and here she lay down and reconnoitred it. It differed but little from the one she had left, and consisted of five or six fortified houses.

Its position was a strong one, as the hill in front of it sloped steeply down. She selected a clump of scrub a mile away, and, wrapping herself up in a blanket, lay down to sleep, as it was already becoming dusk. In the morning she started at daybreak, spent the day with the pony, and late in the afternoon returned again with it, and by midnight was safe in the spot she had chosen. The scrub was high enough for the pony to stand unseen, and after giving it a good feed, and eating some of the grain and a piece of cheese, she lay down till the morning. Looking round she saw another clump of rather larger trees in a dip half a mile behind her, and at once moved to it, for there she thought that she would be able to light a fire without fear of being seen. She then again started for the village, and found that, by keeping to a small ravine that came down behind it, she could approach within three hundred yards of it without running the risk of being seen. This she

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did, taking advantage of every rock.

From here Nita could see all that was going on in the village. The men had already driven out their cattle and other animals to the valley, the women moved about gossiping. One of the houses was larger than the others. This she guessed to be the abode of the chief. For hours she lay watching its upper windows, and at last, to her delight, saw a khaki-clad figure come to one of them and stand for a time looking out. His air was listless, and as the window was at the back of the house and looked up the hill, there was but little to interest him. Now that she had ascertained his room she strolled away again and remained for the rest of the day in the wood, practising with her bow and arrows. Then she wrote on a sheet of her pocket-book, of which she had not been deprived:

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"Look out for me at eleven o'clock to-morrow night. I will shoot up a string, there will be a rope attached to it, strong enough to hold you, and you can slide down it.—Yours, Nita."

At ten o'clock she started from her hiding-place, and at eleven reached the village. The house was surrounded by a wall, but, as she hoped, the gate was unbarred. It opened quietly, and, going round to the back, she took post as far away from the house as she could, and shot the arrow, on which she had fastened her little note, at the window-opening. At the third essay she was successful, and the arrow went right into the room; then she quietly withdrew. He was, she thought, certain to see it when he awoke, as the rooms were generally very small, and he would, she hoped, be certain to wake before any of the people of the village entered his room. Carefully closing the gate again behind her, she made her way back to the wood, and lay down and slept till morning. She passed the day in a state of feverish anxiety. Now that success seemed almost certain she was far more apprehensive of being discovered than she had been before, and she spent the day at the edge of the wood on the look-out for any approaching figure. But the day passed as quietly as the others had done, and as soon as it was dark she strolled down to her look-out near the village, carrying with her her bow and arrows, and the rope.

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It seemed to her that the village would never go to sleep that evening, but finally all became quiet and the last light was extinguished. She waited half an hour to allow the occupants of the village to settle down. Then she ventured to move, and in five minutes stood opposite to Carter's window. It was, of course, without glass, being closed only in cold weather by a blanket hanging before it. The moonlight permitted her to see a figure standing there. Four times she missed before she succeeded in shooting an arrow into the room. In a minute the string attached to it was pulled. She then fastened the end of the rope to it. This was drawn up by Carter, and a minute later he slid down. As he came up to her she whispered "Hush!", led the way out through the gate, and ascended the ravine.

Not until she was two or three hundred yards away from the tower did she stop.

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"My dear Miss Nita," he said, "by what miracle have you managed this?"

"There is no miracle in it," she answered; "I got away, and naturally I was not going to leave without you. I hope that you have quite recovered from your wounds."

"Quite," he said, "though just at present I seem hardly able to use my legs, for I have had no exercise except what I could get in a room eight feet square. However, I dare say that I shall recover their use again before long. Where are you taking me?"

"To a wood a mile and a half away, where there is a pony and provisions. When we get there we must discuss which way we should go. It seems to me that it would be better to cross the river and go over the opposite hills. As far as I can make out that leads away from the frontier, which is the direction in which they will no doubt look for you, as I am sure they are looking for me. They would be certain to suppose that I should go that way. But I think you will know best, for you have travelled about the country a good deal more than I have."

"I really don't know what to say in the way of thanks," he began after a pause.

"You will make me very angry if you thank me at all; you may admit, however, that girls can be of some good sometimes, and are not meant only to be looked at."

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"I will never say anything against their courage again," the young officer said. "Now tell me how you have fared, and how you succeeded in getting away."

"I got on fairly well. The chief's wife was a harridan, but her husband rather took me under his protection, and insisted on my having fair treatment. I think he was rather uneasy as to the consequences of his attack on the fort, and wished to keep in well with me. So I was fairly fed and allowed a certain amount of liberty in the village during the day. They did not seem to have any suspicion that I was likely to try to escape. They were confident, I think, that I should not be able to cross the mountains alone. Therefore I was able to collect stores little by little. The chief's magazines were generally open during the day, and I own that I robbed them shamelessly. Then I had but to slip away after the house was asleep. I had collected a sackful of flour and meal, some grain, and a few cheeses, for I knew that I might have to live a long time before I could discover the place where you were confined, and even if I were lucky enough to do so without much waste of time, we might have to exist a considerable period among the hills before we got to the frontier."

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"But how on earth could you carry such a weight?"

"I made friends with a pony by treating him to handfuls of grain, and had no difficulty in getting him to follow me; and a large skin full of water very fairly balanced the sack of provisions. I annexed two of the chief's robes and turbans and four or five blankets. So we start under good

auspices. Of course I brought that rope that you came down by, and a rifle and ammunition which were in a corner of the chief's room. I wish I could have brought a rifle for you, but there was not one handy, and I was sorry that I could not get my revolver; but that fell to the share of someone else when all our goods were taken after the fight."

"Splendid, splendid! But how did you find the place where I was confined?"

"I picked up a little of the language, and learned that the chief in whose hands you were, lived about fifteen miles away, nearly due west; that the village stood on the hillside, and was strongly fortified. And I was fortunate enough in lighting upon it without much difficulty, and, lying hidden a short distance away, was not long in making you out at the window. The rest was, of course, easy. Now I put the command into your hands."

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"No, you followed my orders when I was in command of the fort, and now you have escaped yourself and freed me, you have shown such a capacity that I certainly do not wish to interfere with your plans. I think that what you proposed, namely, that we should cross the river and strike into the mountains away from the frontier, is the best, and we should hold on in the same direction as long as we are able before trying to strike down. I have no doubt the search for us both will be very hot for the next week or ten days, but it is certain to be pursued on the downward track, as they will make sure that we have made off in that direction. The news that I have also got away will not be long crossing the hills to your village, and they will have no difficulty in connecting the two events, and will think that when they catch one, that they are sure to catch the other. Is this wood the place where your pony is hidden?"

"Yes, I have given him a good meal, and he will be ready to start as soon as we have loaded him up. It is fortunate, indeed, that we have the moon, and shall therefore have no trouble in keeping the right direction."

In five minutes they were moving, and made their way down to the river. At Nita's suggestion they kept up the stream for about a mile and then struck across for the hills. By morning they were fifteen miles away in extremely rocky and precipitous country. Here they halted for some hours, and then made their way downhill. They found that they were in fact travelling along near the edge of a precipice, at whose foot a stream ran between lofty cliffs. So steeply did the hills slope down to the edge of the precipice, that they could only travel with extreme caution; and even the pony, sure-footed as it was, had difficulty in keeping its feet. At length, however, the slope became more gradual, and the ravine widened out into a valley, apparently about half a mile wide and a mile long. They chose a dip in the descent, and found when they arrived at the bottom that they were completely sheltered from the view of anyone passing along the valley. But that the ravine was to some extent used was evident from the fact that a few cattle were scattered about.

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"I think that we shall be obliged to confiscate one of these animals for our own use," Carter said; "a diet of flour and grain would be apt to pall a little even when varied by cheese, and our eventual success depends on our keeping up our strength."

"I quite agree with you," Nita said; "one thing is certain, however, that meat will be of no use to us until we can light a fire to cook it."

"I think that we shall be able to manage that," he said. "You see this depression, which looks as if it had once been a water-hole, is eight or ten feet below the level of the hillside; that's the very place we want for cooking. They will not see the fire itself, but only its light reflected on the ground above us; but I think if we collect stones, and build a circular wall, say four feet in diameter and a few feet high, with a small opening at the foot for feeding the fire and putting on the meat, there will be no fear of any reflection falling on the hillside."

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"No, I should think that that would do very well," Nita agreed. "We have another two hours of daylight, and as the hill is everywhere scattered with rocks and boulders we ought to make considerable progress with our oven in that time."

"Well, will you please sit down, then, and I will collect stones. This depression is scattered pretty thickly with them."

"Oh, but you must let me do my share of the work," Nita said; "I am just as keen to have a piece of roast beef as you are. At any rate I will gather up the smaller stones, and as soon as it becomes dark, will go out and cut some brushwood with the sword-bayonet."

"But I have no matches," Carter said, in a tone of dismay.

"I have some," Nita said; "not many, but a dozen or so. I put some loose into the pocket of the tunic, so that I could at once get a light in case of a sudden attack; I had no time even to think of them when the Afridis broke into the fort, but I did think of them when I got to the village, for I saw that if I could make my escape they would be of great use."

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"They certainly will be invaluable," Carter said. "We will get the wall up as high as we can and then spread brushwood over the top. This will help to deaden the reflection, but will allow the smoke to escape freely."

They worked very hard till it became dark, by which time the rough wall was some three feet high.

"Now," he said, "if you will lend me the sword-bayonet I will go out meat-hunting, while you collect fuel for the cooking and for covering over the top of the oven."

CHAPTER VI

ROUGH TRAVELLING

Carter was away two hours, and he returned, carrying a prime joint of beef. "I was lucky in finding an animal that was lying down. I stalked him from behind, and came upon him before he could spring on to his feet and get into motion."

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"That is good indeed," Nita said, "but what have you done with the remainder?"

"He was fortunately lying near the river. I cut the remainder of the carcass up into a number of pieces and threw them all into the stream, which is strong and rapid enough to carry them away down the pass before morning. Of course the owners will light upon the blood, but will most likely put it down that the beast has been killed by a bear from the mountains. How have you been getting on?"

"I made a fire at once and have laid in a good stock of fuel, and have got a batch of chupaties almost ready for eating. They would have been better if I had had a little of that beef fat to mix with them, but I shall be thankful for them as they are, after having eaten nothing but unground corn for the last four days. Now will you please cut off some slices for spitting over the fire? I have never done any work of that sort, and I am afraid that I should make a very poor hand at it."

In a couple of minutes four good-sized slices of meat were grilling over the fire.

"We have neither salt nor mustard," Nita said merrily, as her companion placed two of the savoury slices on the chupaties. As neither had knives, and the sword-bayonet was a somewhat clumsy instrument for feeding with, they were reduced to making unaided use of their teeth. However, the meal was a merry one, and their spirits rose high at the thought that they were again free, and that with good fortune it might not be long before they rejoined their friends.

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After the meal was over they had a consultation on the best course to be pursued, and finally agreed to travel west for some time and then to turn south towards the frontier. They would thus at least, they thought, farther throw their pursuers off the track, and would then only have to run the ordinary risk of detection from the tribes through whose territory they passed.

They discussed their prospects for the next day's march, but finally decided to take a day's rest. Nita had suffered much from the anxiety, and the very long journey had told on her, and as the spot where they then were was well hidden, it was improbable in the extreme that any of the herdsmen or passers through the valley would be at all likely to come upon them.

After their meal and talk, Carter made a shelter tent of the large blanket for Nita, and wrapping himself up in another rug, lay down a short distance away.

The next day passed quietly. They had not replenished the fire when they lay down, nor was it necessary to light one in the morning, as they had purposely cooked sufficient to last them for a couple of days. Towards evening they observed three or four herdsmen gathered by the stream at the point where Carter had killed the bullock the night before. They were evidently greatly puzzled at the occurrence, and from their gestures while Carter was watching them, he formed the conclusion that the theory of its being carried away by a bear did not find much acceptance among them. "However," he said, on returning to Nita, who had been having a nap, "they won't start off on a search this afternoon, and before morning we shall be well away. We sha'n't want to repeat the offence for some little time, for the store of meat we now have ought to last us for seven or eight days, that is to say if it does not get bad before that, but I should think that up in these high altitudes it would keep for some time."

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Two hours before daylight they were on the move. The water-skin was refilled at the river, and they put a bundle of firewood on the top of the sack, as they could be by no means certain of finding water and wood on the way. They were so far up the hillside by the time the sun rose that they had no fear of their appearance being noticed by people in the valley that they had left. They went on merrily, laughing and joking, and were delighted with their progress, though at times the cold was severe in the extreme. They met with no signs of a pass or even the smallest track. Sometimes Carter would ascend to some point which commanded a view of the line that they were following; at others they came to precipices so steep that they had to make a detour of miles before they found a place where a descent could be made into a ravine which, as a rule, was but a water-course covered with boulders of every shape and size.

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After some days of perpetual toil, they agreed at their camp-fire at night, that they must now have got far enough west and could strike for the south.

"I suppose you have no idea whatever how far the frontier is, Charlie?"

"Not in the slightest. I don't even know how far it was from Darlinger to the village, for I was insensible during most of the journey."

"It took us six days, Charlie, and I suppose the two villages where we were confined were about the same distance from Darlinger."

"What rate did you travel?"

"I fancy about forty miles the first day, but considerably less afterwards, making it somewhere between one hundred and fifty and two hundred miles."

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"Yes, I suppose so, but of course the calculation is mere guesswork, and it may be forty or fifty

miles out. Since escaping we have only steered by the sun, and may be a good deal north or south of due west. Besides, we have made such bends and turns as would make it impossible to keep anything like a true reckoning. However, suppose we call it two hundred miles from here to Darlinger, we shall be lucky if, travelling among the hills, we don't have to go twice that distance. Certainly, unless we get into a very different country from that through which we have been travelling so far, ten miles a day is the extreme that we can calculate upon."

"In that case, Charlie, even if all goes well it will be from forty to fifty days before I see my dear father."

"But I think we shall travel a good bit faster than that," Carter said encouragingly. "Everywhere through these mountains are valleys, some of them of considerable size, and containing a dozen or more villages. Of course when we come upon these we could travel at night, and ought to be able to do from twenty to thirty miles. We could not have done that at first, but the practice we have had at this work has put us into first-rate marching condition."

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"Yes, except my feet, Charlie; think of my poor feet. My shoes are fast disappearing, and I don't know what I shall do when they come quite to pieces."

"I must kill a goat and make a pair of sandals for you of its skin."

"Thank you, Charlie, that would be first rate; still, these shoes will do for a bit yet, and I am a little doubtful as to your capabilities as a shoemaker. Well, I think we shall do better to-morrow. From the high ridge we last crossed I could see a large valley in front of us, and I am not sure but I saw villages."

"Then your eyes are sharper than mine are; I saw the valley, but I failed to make out anything like habitations. However, in any case, we are not likely to go very fast to-morrow, for I should say that we must be still some fifteen miles from the valley."

"Oh well, one day will not make any very great difference. We will go on as long as it is light enough to see, and then camp for the night, go down the next day to a point low in the hills, and can either camp for the night or stop twenty-four hours."

"I certainly vote for the halt," Carter said, "I am sure that we deserve it. How did you think the valley lay?"

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"I should think, from the appearance of the hills behind it, that it must run north and south, which is the right direction for us."

"Probably when we get to the other end," Carter said, "we shall find a track of some sort, through which we can pass into the next valley. I don't know whether there is much traffic between these villages; if so, we shall have to travel at night; if not, we can risk it and go on by day. I hope the latter will be the case. It will be bad enough finding our way along the valleys now that there is no moon, and we should make very slow work of it on the tracks connecting them on a dark night."

"We shall have a new moon this afternoon," Nita said.

"Yes, it was full the night that I stood at the window, and that is a fortnight ago to-day."

"It will be splendid, Charlie, if it gets even half full, then we shall make good travelling, whatever ground we are crossing over. At any rate, when we get into the valley you will let me carry the rifle, won't you? You insisted on taking it, you know; but if it comes to fighting, I have a right to it, haven't I?"

"Certainly you have, and as you are a very much better shot than I am, it will be more valuable in your hands than in mine."

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The following evening they camped some three miles from the valley. The next day they only moved to a spot where they commanded a full view of it. They thought it was some twenty miles long and contained many villages.

"Thank goodness there is a river running down it," Nita said; "that will be some guide, anyhow. There are only one or two villages on the banks, as far as I can see, the rest are on the hillsides."

They started as soon as it was dark, made their way down into the valley, and, striking the river, kept along down it; not keeping close, however, for the course meandered so much that it would add very greatly to the distance to be travelled.

"There is the north star," Carter said; "if we keep it on the same hand and steer by it we sha'n't be very far out."

They plodded steadily on. More than once they would have walked into a village, but were warned of its exact position by the barking of dogs. However, after what seemed an almost interminable journey they arrived at the end of the valley as morning was breaking. They found that a path ran up the hill in front of them. As soon as they had satisfied themselves about its position they entered a grove close by it and camped there. Eating a chupatie or two from the store she had cooked the evening before, Nita threw herself down and fell asleep at once. Carter, however, placed himself on watch near the edge of the wood. Four times during the day parties of two or three men went up the path, and this led him to believe that the next valley could not be far away, and that a good deal of communication was kept up with the one they were now in. Late in the afternoon Nita opened her eyes. She looked about for a minute or two before she caught sight of her companion. She at once went up to him.

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"You don't mean to say, Charlie, that you have been watching all this time while I have been

asleep?"

"It was absolutely necessary to keep watch," he said, "and I was very glad to do so. It was nothing to me to miss a night's sleep."

"I am very angry with you," she said, "and insist on taking my turn in future. Now you must lie down at once without a minute's delay. The sun is already getting low, and we cannot have more than three hours before it is time to start. I suppose it is not very necessary to stand quite still and watch all the time?"

"By no means. From this point you can see well down the valley, and would be able to make out any one approaching at some distance."

"Very well, then, I will get some meat cooked. I am sorry to say that we have come to our last piece. It has held out a good deal better than we expected." [Pg 85]

"I have no doubt that we shall be able to replenish it," he said; "there are a considerable number of cattle in these valleys."

Three hours later they again set out. It was in many places very difficult to keep to the path, and they had to hark back several times, but at length they began to descend so rapidly that they felt that they could be but a small distance from the next valley. They therefore halted and sat down till daylight broke, and then moved away from the path to a mass of great boulders, among which they lay up for the day. Three more valleys were passed in safety. Carter had succeeded in replenishing their supply of meat, and the water-skin was regularly filled whenever they got the chance.

"Things are going on first-rate," Nita said, when they halted early one morning.

"Yes, but we must not expect them always to go so well. This valley is getting larger. The houses are more carefully built, and it is, no doubt, inhabited by an increased population. You see, the robes that we are wearing will do well enough to pass at a distance, but they would not bear close inspection."

The next evening, emboldened by their good fortune, they started some time before the sun was down, and at a sudden turn in the pass came upon three Afridis. [Pg 86]

"Walk straight on," Carter said.

Nita happened to be carrying the rifle, while Charlie had been obliged to lead the pony. The men paused when within twenty yards of them, and then a sudden exclamation broke from the party, and one raised his rifle and shouted, "Who are you?"

"We are travellers on our way to our homes, twenty miles off."

"You lie," the man said, pointing his gun at them, "you are not natives of the country."

Nita had thrown her rifle forward and fired at the same instant as the native. His bullet knocked off her turban, while she shot him through the body. With a shout of rage the other two men raised their rifles, but one fell dead before he could get it to his shoulder. The other fired a shot and then fled with the agility of a deer, getting cover in a moment round a sharp corner of the defile.

"It is unfortunate, but there was nothing else to be done," Carter said; "now what is our best course?"

Nita stood a minute without speaking, and then said:

"My opinion is that we had better find some spot to hide as close here as possible." [Pg 87]

"Hide as close to this place as possible?" Carter said, in surprise. "I should have thought that we had better turn down the pass at once, or push on."

"I do not think so," Nita said; "we must take it as certain that the man who has fled will return as quickly as possible with twenty or thirty others. As they will not see us on our way here they will suppose that we have either returned or have taken to the hills, one side or the other; they would never think of searching close here."

"You are right," Carter said. "What do you say to that pile of boulders on the right?"

"That will do excellently, if we can find a place among them."

"We are sure to be able to do that by moving two or three of them. We have probably got a couple of hours to make our preparations."

Accordingly they set to work at once, and by using their united strength, managed to move enough of them to make a first-rate place of concealment for themselves and the pony. The animal's legs were fastened, and it was made to lie down, and they took their places beside it. Carter went down the path, and looked at the hiding-place from all sides, in order that he might feel sure that it could not be made out from any point close by. The heap of boulders lay at the foot of a steep precipice, and it was evident that no one from above could approach near enough to the edge to look down upon them. Having made sure of this he returned to the hiding-place. Three-quarters of an hour passed, and then a score of wild figures armed with rifles, muskets, and other weapons appeared round the corner of the pass. [Pg 88]

Carter took a glimpse at what was going on. There was an excited conversation; some of the men pointed to the hills on both sides, while some were evidently of opinion that their assailants, whoever they were, had returned to the valley beyond. Finally they broke up into three parties,

seven or eight men going on each side, while the remainder pushed on along the path. Half an hour later another sixteen men came up and also divided, half climbing the hills on either side. But night was now falling. For some time the shouts of the searchers could be heard, but these gradually ceased as the men abandoned the hunt as hopeless for the night. They came down in twos and threes, until presently the fugitives were convinced that all had returned.

"It was certainly an admirable plan of yours, Miss Ackworth, and has completely thrown them off the scent. Now we had better be going. The moon gives us enough light to make our way, and we must be as far as possible from here before morning, when, no doubt, the men of this valley, and perhaps the one that we have just quitted, will turn out in search of us."

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"I am quite ready," Nita said, "and I have no doubt the pony is too. His sack has been getting lighter and lighter every day, and I think that we haven't more than thirty or forty pounds left, and as we have always been able to get water, I don't think that there is more than enough in the water-skin to balance the sack."

"I am sorry that the provisions are getting short," Carter said, "but it is an immense advantage, in climbing about among these hills, to have such a light burden. The pony ought to be able to make its way wherever we can, so, as we don't want to cut ourselves adrift from the valleys, I should say that we had better work round the foot of the hills, in which case we ought to be well to the south of the next valley before day breaks. Fortunately they can have no idea who we are. That we are strangers, and curious ones, they of course know, but we are so far out of the road which they would think the escaped prisoners would take, that it is not at all likely that they will in any way associate us with them, even if they have heard of our escape, which is very improbable. They will therefore have nothing to indicate the road we are taking. All they really do know of us is that we have a rifle, and can shoot straight."

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CHAPTER VII

A SKIRMISH

They started at once, not trying to mount the hillside above the point where they had been hidden, but to keep along as far as possible at the same height. After making their way painfully for a couple of hours, they came to a spot from which they could see the valley below them. They then gradually made their way down till only two or three hundred feet above its bottom, and then kept along its side. In the still night air they could hear many voices, and knew that the coming of these mysterious and dangerous visitors was being warmly discussed. Lights burned much later than was usual in the villages, but at last these altogether disappeared, and they ventured still lower, keeping, however, a sharp look-out for any villages situated on the spurs. The valley was not above eight or ten miles long, and they were well past it before morning dawned.

The country they now entered was a little more precipitous and rugged than that they had recently passed, and they agreed that it would be impossible to climb over it, and that they would have to make use of the pass. They therefore chose a good hiding-place some distance up on the hill. It was sheltered from behind by a precipice, at whose foot grew a clump of bushes of considerable size.

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"We cannot do better than this," Carter said, "and as the people will be starting in search of us in less than an hour we have no farther time to look for another hiding-place, and, indeed, I don't think that we should be likely to find a better one if we did. There is one comfort: however numerous they turn out, they will take care not to scatter much, in view of the lesson you gave them, and unless they do scatter, their chance of lighting upon us is small indeed. I don't suppose their heart will be very much in the business, except on the part of the relatives of the men you shot, who are, after all, as likely to belong to the valley we left as to this one. These tribesmen are good fighters when their liberty is threatened, but they are not very fond of putting themselves into danger.

"I feel much more comfortable," Carter continued, "now I am no longer condemned to go about unarmed. It was a grand idea taking the rifles of those two men we shot. The pony carries one, and I carry the other."

"But you have carried one all the time."

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"Yes, but as I was under orders to hand it over to you whenever you wanted it, it has not been any great satisfaction to me. Now I can feel that I can play my part, and although these Martinis are not quite as good as your Lee-Metford, they are quite good enough for all practical purposes, and with your magazine always in readiness we ought to be able to give a good account of ourselves."

The day passed quietly. Parties of men were seen moving about on the hills, but none came near them. At night they went forward again, but moved with great caution, as it was possible that as fugitives could hardly get across the mountains the Afridis might keep a watch in the pass. They had crossed the highest point, and were descending, when they saw rising before them, by the side of the path, an old Buddhist temple. When within a short distance from it half a dozen men jumped out and fired a volley. The shots all went wide, but the reply was not so futile. Four men fell, and the rest, appalled by the heavy loss, fled down the hill.

"That is sharp," Carter said, "but soon over. However, this is but the beginning of it; they will carry the news down to the next valley, and we shall be besieged here. However, fortunately, it appears to be very steep on both sides of the temple, and I don't think even the Afridis, firm-footed as they are, will be able to climb the hill and get behind us."

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"But we can no more get up than they can."

"No, but at least it will give us only one side to defend, and we can keep an eye on the hills and pick off any who try to make their way along the top, and if the worst comes to the worst we must retire down the pass again to-night, and try to strike out somewhere over the hills. It doesn't much matter which way so that we get out of this neighbourhood, which is becoming altogether too hot for us."

Daylight was just breaking when a number of men were seen coming up the pass. The two fugitives had already ensconced themselves and their pony in the temple, and had posted themselves at two of the narrow windows. Nita shouted, "Keep away, or it will be worse for you. We don't want to hurt you, if you will leave us alone, but if you attack us we shall defend ourselves."

The answer was a volley of shots, to which the defenders of the temple did not reply, as they were anxious not to waste a cartridge. Emboldened by the silence, the enemy gradually approached, keeping up a steady fire. When they were within eighty yards the defenders answered steadily and deliberately. By the time twenty rounds had been fired the enemy were in full flight, leaving six dead upon the ground, while several of the others were wounded.

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"I expect that will sicken them effectually," Carter said, "and that, at any rate, they will not attempt to renew the attack until it becomes dark again. I think we had better wait an hour and see what they intend doing."

The hour was just up when a white figure was seen high up on the hillside, making his way cautiously along the face of the precipitous hill.

"What is the distance, do you think?" Carter said.

"Five to six hundred yards, I should say."

"I suppose it is about that. Well, he must be stopped if possible." And, levelling his rifle, he took a long steady aim and fired. The man was seen to start as the bullet sung up close to him. "You can beat that, Nita," he said in a tone of disgust.

"I will try, anyhow," she said, "but the range puzzles one, the man being so far above us." She steadied her rifle against a stone and fired. The man was seen to disappear behind a rock.

"A splendid shot!" Carter exclaimed.

"I am not sure that I hit him, I think he fell at the flash. However, there is a space between that stone and the boulder ahead of it."

It was five minutes before any movement was seen, then the man started forward suddenly. Nita was kneeling with her rifle aimed at a spot half-way between the stones, and as he crossed she pressed the trigger. This time there was no mistake; the man fell forward on his face and lay there immovable. [Pg 95]

"I have no doubt that they are watching down below, and when they see him fall no one will care to follow his example. Now I think we had better be moving. We must risk meeting people coming over the pass. If we can get over the worst of it, we must hide and then climb the mountain, on whichever side appears easiest."

No time was lost. It was still early, for daylight was scarcely breaking when the attack had taken place. Leaving the temple they started at once, travelling as fast as the pony could pick its way along the steep path. Two hours later they saw, far in the distance, two men coming up. There was fortunately some shelter near, and here they took refuge and lay hidden until the men had passed them, and then continued their journey. They were three parts of the way down the pass, when on their right-hand side they saw a slope that seemed practicable, and they made their way up slowly and cautiously till they reached a plateau, the mountain still rising steeply in front of them. They travelled along this plateau, and presently saw an opening in the mountain range. They halted now, lit a fire in a hollow, and cooked some food, and then, confident that they were well beyond the area likely to be searched, they lay down to sleep. [Pg 96]

A start was made at daybreak. They found the difficulty of crossing the range enormous, and had frequently to retrace their steps, but at last struck the head of a small ravine and decided to follow it down. Late in the evening they found themselves at a spot where the ravine widened into a valley. They waited until morning, when they were able to obtain a view down this. It was of no very great extent—about a quarter of a mile wide and half a mile long, and contained but a few houses. They remained quiet all day, and at nightfall moved along the valley on the side opposite to the village. They found that a small stream ran through it, and they decided to follow its course, the next morning halting well beyond the valley in a deep gorge.

"It is strange," Nita said, as they settled themselves for a rest, "how these narrow gorges can have cut their way through the mountains."

"Yes; it can only be that ages since these valleys were all deep lakes. At the time of the melting of the snows they overflowed. No doubt in some places the strata were softer than others, and here the water began to cut a groove, which grew deeper and deeper till at last the lake was empty. Then of course the work stopped and the water would run off as fast as it fell." [Pg 97]

"It must have taken an enormous time," Nita said, "for the hills bordering the ravines must in some places be three or four thousand feet deep."

"Fully that. It certainly gives us a wonderful idea of the age of the world, and the tremendous power exercised by water; in dry weather these ravines formed the chief roads of the country, though some, no doubt, are so blocked with boulders fallen from above, or washed down by torrents, that they cannot be used by laden animals. I fancy there is not much communication between the valleys. They are governed by their chiefs, and it is only in cases of common danger that they ever act together. They prize their independence above everything, and are ready to gather from all parts of the country for common defence. No European except ourselves, I feel certain, has ever entered these valleys, and the inhabitants are absolutely convinced that their ravines and passes are impregnable. No doubt at some time or other the British will be driven to send an expedition to convince them to the contrary. I think that if there were no such things as guns their belief in their impregnability would be well justified. The men are brave and hardy, and thoroughly understand how to take advantage of the wonderful facilities of their ground for defence, and even in the most remote valleys they have managed to accumulate a store of first-rate rifles. [Pg 98]

"How they have got them is a mystery. A good many, perhaps, have been carried off by deserters from our frontier regiments. Many of these enlist for this purpose alone. They serve faithfully for a time, but at the first opportunity make off with their rifle. Still, numerous as these desertions are, they would not account for a tithe of the rifles in the hands of the tribesmen. Some, I fancy, must be landed by rascally British dealers, in the Persian Gulf, or on the coast of Beluchistan. Some have been imported by traders from India. At any rate it is unquestionable that a vast number of rifles are in the hands of the Afridis, and will give us a world of trouble when we set ourselves in earnest to deprive them of them."

"I wonder the government doesn't forbid the exportation of rifles altogether," Nita said indignantly.

"It would be well if they did so, but there are difficulties in the way. The Indian princes buy them in large quantities for their followers, and nominally they are no doubt imported for that purpose, but when well up country they are taken north and disposed of to the Afridis, who are ready to pay any price for them, for an Afridi values nothing as he does a good rifle, and he would willingly exchange wife or child to get possession of one."

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"But nobody wants to buy a wife or child," Nita said. "It doesn't seem to me that they possess any sort of property that could pay for the rifles by the time they got into the country."

"I fancy they are paid for largely in cattle. Herds are driven down the country, and no watch that we can keep can prevent the traffic. The cattle are always consigned to some large town well past the frontier, where the rifles can easily be handed over."

"I think it ought to be stopped altogether," Nita said indignantly; "the people of the towns can do very well without Afridi cattle, and if not, they should be made to. It would be much better for them to have to pay an anna extra a pound for their meat, than for us to have to spend hundreds of lives and millions of pounds in getting the rifles back again."

"Yes, there are many things that we soldiers, who are only here to do the fighting, can make neither head nor tail of. If India were governed by soldiers instead of civilians, things would be very differently managed. As it is, we can only wonder and grumble. The authorities are so mightily afraid of injuring the susceptibilities of the natives that they pamper them in every way, and even when it is manifest that the whole of the community suffer by their so doing. It is the more ridiculous, because, in the old days, their own rulers paid not the slightest attention to these same susceptibilities, or to the likes or dislikes of their subjects."

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"It is all very strange," Nita said, "and very unaccountable."

"Everyone on the frontier knows that sooner or later we shall have to deal with the Afridis, and that it will be an enormously difficult and expensive business, and will cost an immense amount of life."

"Don't let us talk about it any more; it makes me out of all patience to think of such folly."

The journey was resumed the next morning, and continued day after day and week after week. Sometimes they were obliged to turn quite out of their direct course, and they had to run considerable risks to get fresh supplies for themselves and forage for the pony. Both were obtained by entering villages at night, and filling their sack from stacks of grain and forage. The grain they pounded between flat stones as they sat by their fire, and so made a coarse meal which they generally boiled into a sort of porridge, their sauce-pans being gourds cut in the fields. Meat they had no difficulty about, as Carter managed, when necessary, to kill a bullock and take sufficient meat for ten days' supply.

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They seldom caught sight of a villager when travelling through the valleys, for the Afridis have a marked objection to moving about after nightfall. Once or twice one or two of them approached them, but Carter raised such a loud and threatening roar, that they in each case retreated with all speed to their village, which they filled with alarm with tales of having encountered strange and terrible creatures.

Gradually the difficulties decreased, the mountains became less precipitous, the valleys larger and more thickly inhabited, a matter which caused them no inconvenience as they always traversed them at night. During their journey Carter had filled Nita's note-book with sketches and maps, which, as the country was wholly unexplored, would be of great advantage to an advancing army when properly copied out on a large scale. He was clever with his pencil, and Nita used to be greatly interested in his lively little sketches of the scenery through which they passed.

"It will be very useful to me," he said; "and in the event of troops having to march through this district, should go a long way towards securing me a staff appointment, for in such a case these sketches and maps would be invaluable, and I should get no end of credit for them."

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"So you ought to," Nita said; "you have taken a lot of pains about them, and anyone with those maps should be able to find their way back by the route we have come."

"I have my doubts about that," he said; "that is, if I were not with them to point out the places we have passed. I should find it difficult myself, for we have come by a very devious road. Of course, I have had no chance whatever of getting compass bearings, and have only been able to put them in by the position of the sun. And besides, a great part of our journey has been done by night. Although, of course, I can indicate the general direction of the valleys through which we have passed, our routes at night among the mountains are necessarily little more than guesswork, for except when we had the moon we have practically nothing else to tell us of our position, or the direction in which we were going."

"We had the stars," Nita said.

"Yes, when I get back and work out the position of the stars it will, of course, help me a great deal, and the pole-star especially has been of immense use to us. In fact, had it not been for that star we should not, except when there was a moon, have been able to travel."

"I am sure it will all come right when you work it out," Nita said confidently, "and that you will get an immense deal of credit for it. It has been a jolly time, hasn't it, in spite of the hard work

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and the danger? I know that I have had a capital time of it; and as to my health, I feel as strong as a horse, and fit to walk any distance, especially since my feet have got so hard."

"It is a time that I shall always look back upon, Nita, as one of my most pleasant memories. You have been such a splendid comrade, thanks to your pluck and good spirits, and no words can express how much I feel indebted to you."

"Oh, that is all nonsense!" she said; "of course I have done my best, but that was very little."

"You may not think so, but in reality I owe you not only my escape, and the various suggestions which have been of so much use to us, as, for example, our hiding in that place close to the road instead of starting up into the hills, where we should have certainly been overtaken; but you have helped on many another occasion too, to say nothing of the constant cheeriness of your companionship. It has certainly been very strange, a young man and a girl thus wandering about together, but somehow it has scarcely felt strange to me. The defence of the fort brought us very close to each other, and was so far fortunate that it prepared us for this business. However, I agree most thoroughly with you, that in spite of the hardships and dangers we have had to go through, our companionship has been a very pleasant one."

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"Oh, dear!" Nita sighed; "how disgusting it will be to have to put on girl's clothes again, and settle down into being stiff and proper! Fancy having to learn school lessons again after all this."

CHAPTER VIII

DARLINGER AGAIN

At length they came upon a burned village, whose walls showed the marks of cannon-shot and shrapnel. The towers had been blown up, and the valley appeared to be entirely deserted.

"This is a good sign!" Carter exclaimed; "this work is evidently quite recent, and no doubt is the result of a punitive expedition sent out to revenge the destruction of the fort. I expect from here onwards we shall find that every village has been destroyed. Of course, we must still travel cautiously; the natives will doubtless be returning and setting about rebuilding their homes—still, we are not likely to meet many of them."

Continuing their journey, they found traces of fire and sword everywhere. "The work has been done well and thoroughly," Carter said; "there is not a roof left standing. I have no doubt every village on our frontier has been visited and punished. It was the most serious attack that has been made for years on one of our border forts, and you may be sure that no pains have been spared to make the punishment proportionate to the offence. There will not be many rifles left in this part of the country, for you may be sure that all will have to be handed in. I don't want to run any risks, but if we did fall in with the natives I should doubt if, after this punishment, any of them would dare to meddle with us."

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Presently, indeed, they did meet a party consisting of a dozen natives. These were evidently returning to their homes. They were armed only with old muskets, and, seeing the three rifles carried by the strangers, they simply saluted and walked on.

"We may fairly consider ourselves among friends, at least among men who no longer venture to be enemies. I fancy I know this village. It is about fifty or sixty miles from the fort; I rode out here with a troop to demand the instant surrender of some cattle that had been stolen from across the frontier. The country is fairly open all the way, and we shall have no difficulty whatever with the rest of our journey."

They now pressed forward with all haste, travelling by day, and towards evening, two days later, they made out, far away on the plain, a group of white tents. As they came nearer they saw that a considerable number of men were employed in rebuilding the houses in the fort, and in adding additional works round them. The sun was just setting as they arrived at the edge of the camp.

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Evident surprise was caused among the soldiers at the appearance of two officers in khaki. Their uniforms were in ribbons, and so dirty and travel-stained that it was difficult to make out that they were officers. Presently one of the soldiers recognized Carter and raised a shout, and immediately the soldiers flocked round them, cheering loudly at the reappearance of their officer, who they had deemed was killed at the capture of the fort.

No one noticed Nita, who, seized with a new shyness, followed Carter, who could move but slowly, for the soldiers pressed forward to salute him. Soon some officers appeared on the scene, and these too gave the lieutenant an enthusiastic welcome.

"Who is it you have with you?" one of these asked.

"I will explain to you later on," Carter said, "At present I want to go to the major's tent. I hope he is here."

"Yes, he is here, poor fellow, but he is quite a changed man. He is frightfully cut up at the loss of his daughter."

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"Did he find her body?" Carter asked innocently.

"No, it was doubtless among those destroyed by fire in the mess-house. We thought that you were there also, for on uncovering the ruins we found nothing but a charred mass of bodies utterly unrecognizable. There, that is the major's tent. He is standing at the door, waiting, no doubt, to ascertain the cause of the hubbub."

As Carter approached the entrance to the tent, the major stepped forward, having gathered from the shouting who the ragged figure approaching him was. He shook the lieutenant cordially by the hand.

"I am glad, indeed, to find that you are alive, Carter," he said. "Everyone thought that there was not a single survivor of the massacre; though we hear now that the havildar and one of the men were taken prisoners, and only last week we sent off into the mountains to offer terms for their ransom."

"I will enter your tent, if you will allow me, major. I have something of importance to tell you."

The major entered, followed by Carter, with Nita three or four paces behind him. The major, who had not before noticed the lieutenant's young companion, looked at the youthful figure in surprise. Then he staggered a pace or two back as Nita, holding out her hands, exclaimed, "Don't you know me, father?"

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With a hoarse cry the major held out his arms and Nita ran into them, while Carter at once left the tent.

For a time the major could only murmur exclamations of thankfulness, but as he calmed down at last, he asked, "What are you doing in this masquerade, Nita?"

"The explanation is this, father. When the place was attacked I dressed myself up in a suit of Carter's clothes, because I was determined to fight till the last and be killed rather than be carried away a captive. I did fight, father, and was at the last knocked down with the butt-end of a rifle, and left for dead, but by the next morning I recovered consciousness, and when they examined the bodies they found that I was sensible; but Carter was still insensible. We were carried off, in different directions, the idea being, I suppose, either to obtain ransom for us, or to pacify you if you should bring an expedition into the mountains."

Then she gave a full account of their wanderings, keeping herself entirely in the background and giving all the credit to Carter.

"But if you and he were carried off by different parties, how did you come together again?"

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"I escaped eventually and made my way over the hills to where I had learned that he was confined, and then he got away and joined me. We have been a long time in the mountains together, travelling all the time."

"But how did you get food?"

"I stole a good part of it, father. I suppose I ought to be ashamed of having done so, but it was absolutely necessary. Before I escaped I collected it gradually till I had a sack full; then I stole a pony to carry it, and a skin for water. This supply lasted us over a fortnight. Carter went down sometimes into a valley and killed a bullock, and kept us well supplied with meat. As to the grain, we occasionally rifled a village storehouse. So we really were never short of food, though I must say that I shall be very glad to have a piece of good bread between my teeth again."

"I should not have known you in the least," the major said; "you are altered a good deal, but Carter is much more so. Of course, he has had no opportunity of shaving since he has been away, and so has grown quite a respectable beard. Now I suppose the first thing that you would like to do would be to get into your own clothes again. But how you are to manage I do not know, for of course everything was destroyed at the capture of the fort."

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"I should like some clothes indeed, father. Of course I got quite accustomed to these when I was a prisoner, and have had no time to think about them since, indeed I did not even feel strange in them when the attack upon the fort was going on. But I should not like to be seen wearing a man's uniform here. Still, I suppose a few traders have come up and have opened temporary stores, and if you would go over and buy me some cloth, I can soon make up something in which I shall not mind appearing."

"No, I do not think any have arrived yet, but I will go across to the quarter-master's tent and see what he has got." And the major went out.

In ten minutes he returned, followed by a sepoy carrying a roll of karkee serge.

"There, Nita," he said, "you can make yourself a skirt out of that, and with one of my jackets you will be all right, although I do not suppose you will be quite fashionably dressed. You will find needles and thread in that haversack. Now, my dear, while you are arranging matters I will go across to the mess-room. No doubt all the officers are gathered there to hear Carter's story."

The major returned a couple of hours later. Nita, except that her hair was still short, and her face and hands sunburnt, was herself again.

"Do you know, father," she said as he entered, "I feel horribly uncomfortable in these clothes. Of course I shall get accustomed to them in time, but at present they seem to cling about me in a most disagreeable way."

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"You would have been pleased, my dear, if you had heard the hearty cheering there was in the mess-tent when I told them who Carter's companion was, for he had kept a profound silence on the subject, and had simply told them that it was a fellow-captive. I never saw men more pleased, and it shows how popular you are in the regiment. But Carter has told us a very different tale from what you told me. He went, of course, much more into detail, and the details related largely to your doings. First of all he gave us a description of the siege, and of the desperate stand made when the Afridis burst in, and how you fought until the last of the little group was overpowered. Then he told us how, when he recovered consciousness, he found himself carried along, and how, after some days' travel, he was imprisoned in the upper room of one of their fortified houses. He said that he found the captivity was exceedingly strict, and that no real hope of escape entered his breast, until one morning he found a note from you fastened to an arrow lying on the ground."

"It told him that you would shoot in another arrow the next night with a string fastened to a rope attached to it. Then he went on to tell how, when he had got down, you took him to your camp, a mile and a half away, where you had a pony and a large sack of provisions. He says that during your travels you showed a marvellous amount of pluck and endurance, and that in the first skirmish that occurred you shot two out of the three of your assailants, and that, in consequence, you both became possessed of rifles, which you used to good purpose when you were afterwards seriously attacked. He said that when you both concluded that large bodies of tribesmen would be at once sent out in search of you, it was you advised that you should take shelter among rocks but a few yards away from the spot where you were attacked, as it was not at all likely that your enemies would begin their search so near to the scene of action. Altogether he gave you the highest credit."

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"Then he was both foolish and wrong, father," Nita said angrily, "and I am sure that he will admit that I always followed his advice without question; but indeed, except in the way of travel, and we did go through an awfully rough country, and had continually to change our course to avoid

impossible difficulties, we really had no adventures to speak of except these two skirmishes. Of course we were greatly helped by the Afridi custom of staying indoors after nightfall."

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The next day Nita held a sort of reception, and was called upon by all the officers of the regiment. Whereas during her journey she had felt no feeling of shyness, she now felt timid and embarrassed, but, as her father told her, this feeling would wear off before long.

A few days later, the major sent Nita home to England, where she at once went to a school close to her aunt's, and it was two years before she rejoined the regiment. She found that several changes had taken place. Carter had obtained his company, and had received very high credit for the sketches and maps that he had furnished of the hitherto unknown country through which they had passed. Of course they could not be the same chums as before, but it was not long before it was evident that they had not forgotten their perilous journey together. Within a month they became engaged, with her father's complete approval, for Carter, in addition to his captain's pay, possessed an income of £400 a year. Since then he has passed through the Tirah campaign, where his maps proved of great value, and gained for him a brevet majority. And with his cherished companion, who has become his wife, his life bids fair to be a perfectly bright and happy one.

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HOW COUNT CONRAD VON WALDENSTURM TOOK GOLDSTEIN

"A cheerful home-coming, Johann," Conrad von Waldensturm said bitterly. "Fool that I was to believe that Goldstein would be bound by any oath! 'Tis well that I had heard the news, and that I did not learn it for the first time looking at the ruins of my home."

"The Elector of Treves should do you justice, master."

"The elector has his hands full with his quarrels with his neighbours, and would not care to take up arms against a powerful vassal. It would need a strong force indeed to take Goldstein, and there are many who, although they love not the baron, would not care to war against him in a quarrel which did not greatly concern them. Had I been at home I do not think that the baron would have dared thus to attack our castle without further pretext than that our families had always been on bad terms; but when the emperor called upon all honourable gentlemen to aid him in his struggle with the Turks I had no thought that harm might come in my absence, or that death would take away my father, the bravest and best knight in the province, and that my sister Minna would be left unprotected. Had I received the news earlier of my father's death I might have been home in time, but if a messenger was sent to tell me, which I doubt not was the case, some harm befell him on the way, and it was not until four months later that a knight from Treves, joining the army, told me the news. Then, as we fortunately defeated the Turks with heavy loss, the emperor permitted me to return home, but before I left the army this blow came: the castle was destroyed, most of the retainers on the estate killed, and Minna carried away."

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The speaker, Count Conrad von Waldensturm, was a young man some twenty-five years old. His father's castle stood on a steep hill above the Moselle. When he had left two years before it was strong and shapely—as fair a castle as any in the valley—now it was a ruin. The stonework was for the most part but little injured, but the interior had been gutted by fire, and the empty windows looked mournfully out on the fair prospect. The gate was gone, and in several places the battlements had been demolished; the moat was empty, the drawbridge had disappeared.

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This was the work of Baron Wolff von Goldstein, whose castle lay some twelve miles lower down the river. It was a much larger and stronger place than the abode of Conrad's ancestors. For nigh a century there had been little friendship between the lords of Waldensturm and those of Goldstein; they had taken different sides in the troubles of that time, and the enmity thus created had never died out. The Baron von Goldstein had been on the winning side and had been rewarded by the gift of fully half the lands of Waldensturm.

When the emperor had called upon the nobles and barons of Germany to aid him against the Turks, he had issued an order that all feuds should, during their absence, be laid aside, and when allowing his son to go to war the Count von Waldensturm had called upon Wolff von Goldstein to take an oath that there should be peace between the two families during his absence, and this the baron had done without hesitation. But a month after the count's death Von Goldstein suddenly fell upon the castle, put all the retainers to the sword, ravaged the whole of the estate, and carried off Minna, a girl of fourteen, to his castle.

The other speaker was Johann Bernkof, a stout man-at-arms and the leader of the little troop of eighteen retainers, the sole survivors of fifty men who had followed their young lord to the war. These were sitting on their horses, some twenty yards behind the speakers, looking in speechless wrath at the ruined castle, the remains of the village which formerly stood down by the river's edge, the untilled fields, the wasted farms. What had befallen their families none knew. Fathers, brothers, and friends, who had been among the retainers of the castle, had almost certainly perished; where the women were sheltered, or what had become of them, they knew not. As the count was speaking to Bernkof they insensibly moved their horses up closer. The young count turned suddenly.

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"Well, men," he said, "you have been fighting well and manfully against the enemies of our country and our religion; it seems to me that we have an enemy at home more faithless and more cruel than the Turks. Will you fight less manfully against him?"

"We will fight to the death," the men shouted, drawing their swords, "for home and vengeance."

"When the time comes I will call upon you," the young count said, "though I fear that we can do nothing at present. Were you ten times as strong you could not hope to storm Goldstein. The first thing is to take care that no news that we have returned shall reach the baron, therefore scatter to your homes quietly and singly. If, as I fear will generally be the case, you find them destroyed, take shelter among friends who remain; lay aside your armour and appear as peaceful men; find out as far as possible where all who have escaped Von Goldstein's attack are sheltered. Some, no doubt, will have gone elsewhere. Let these be sought out and told, under promise of secrecy, that I have returned. Bid all capable of bearing arms be in readiness to gather on any day and hour I may appoint. That is all at present. I shall take up my abode in the ruins here, and any who have aught to tell me will find me there every evening. In three days let me have news where each of you has bestowed yourself. Arrange with your friends that a few lads shall come here every evening to act as messengers should I have need of them."

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The little troop broke up at once, and Conrad rode with his sergeant up to the castle. Dismounting, they entered the courtyard. The tears came into the young count's eyes as he looked round at the ruins. The thought of how his father and the household had bidden him farewell, how his young sister had placed a scarf of her own embroidering over his shoulders,

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and had wept freely as she did so, at the thought of the months that would elapse before she would see him again, for the moment unmanned him. However, with an effort he roused himself, and said: "They have not done so much harm as I had feared, Johann; the stonework has suffered but little, and it is carpenters' work rather than masons' that will be needed. Timber is cheap, and happily my purse is well lined with the ransom that Turkish emir I captured paid for his liberty. Still, that matters nothing at present. So long as Goldstein stands, Waldensturm will never be rebuilt. The first thing to do is to look round and see where we had best bestow ourselves and our horses."

There was no difficulty in this; the offices on the ground floor were strongly arched, and although most of these chambers had been crushed in by the fall of the floors above, or by the battlements that had been toppled down upon them, three or four remained intact. The horses were led into one of them, and the young knight and Johann set to work to clear another of the debris and rubbish for their own habitation.

"That is better than I had hoped," the former said, when the work was done. "Now, Johann, we must wait for our supper till the men I charged to obtain food for ourselves and forage for the horses return. We are accustomed to hard fare, and it matters not, so that we can obtain bread and enough of it. More than that we cannot expect, for such of our vassals as have remained in the neighbourhood must be beggared, as we have not seen a head of cattle or sheep since we crossed the border of the estate, and the fields all stood uncultivated."

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Two of the men presently returned; one brought some black bread, another two fowls and a flask of wine.

"I got the wine at old Richburg's, my lord," he said; "he had a small store that escaped the plunderers, and the fowls I got elsewhere. They had been out in the fields when the raiders came down, and Carl Schmidt, on his return, gathered a score or two, and these have multiplied. He lets them run wild, so that should the raiders come again they may escape as before. He has built himself a shelter of sods where his house stood. He will bring you two fowls every day so long as he has any left. He says that to-morrow he will gather a dozen of them in, and maybe he will be able to add a few eggs to the fowls he brings. He told me that many of the people have returned. Some have built shelters in the woods, others, like himself, have established themselves in rough huts on the spot where their old homes stood, and have sown small patches of grain. All have been living in hopes of your return, and there is not a man or boy who will not take up arms as soon as you give the word."

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"I am glad to hear it. Take my thanks to Schmidt and Richburg, and tell them that I have not come home penniless, and that whether we succeed or not against this perjured baron they shall have help to rebuild their houses, and to enable them to live until they can raise crops."

A fire was soon laid, for the yard was strewn with unburned beams which had fallen from the roofs and sheds. Johann plucked and split open the fowls, and grilled them over the fire.

"We have done worse than this many a time when we were with the emperor," Conrad said as they ate their meal. When he had finished he sat for a long time in deep thought, then he remarked: "We must think over our plans. So far we have been able to form none. That the castle had fallen I knew, but I was not aware how absolutely the vassals were ruined. To-morrow morning we will mount early and ride to a point where we can have a view of Goldstein. I see now that we cannot hope to gather a force that could attack the castle, and that if we are to succeed it must be by some well-devised trick. If I had my sister out of their hands I could afford to wait, and could go round among my father's friends, and endeavour to obtain aid from them; though I own I have no great hopes that many would adventure lives and fortunes in a quarrel that is not their own."

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"Von Goldstein is the most powerful baron in these parts, and stands well with the Elector of Treves. If I fail to right myself I shall go to Vienna and again lay my case before the emperor. I saw him before I left, and told him what had befallen me. He was greatly angered when he heard that Von Goldstein had broken his oath, and taken advantage of my absence to destroy my castle. Active aid he could not give me, but he gave me rescript proclaiming the baron to be a false and perjured knight, whose estates were forfeited by his treachery. He called upon the elector to deprive him of his fief, and to bestow it upon me, declaring that in case of his failure to do so, he himself would intervene, and would, by force of arms if need be, expel Von Goldstein and hand over the fief to me, to be held, not under the elector, but directly from himself."

"It would be useless at present for me to produce this document, for the elector knows well enough that the emperor's hands are full with the wars against the Turks, who are a trouble at the best of times. His authority is but slight over the western provinces, and the elector would write making all sorts of excuses for not meddling with Von Goldstein. It were better, before I appeal to the elector, to raise a troop from my own resources; but even if I laid out every penny of the emir's ransom I could scarce gather a force that would suffice to storm the castle. No, I feel that if I am to recover Minna it must be by stratagem. At present I can see no way by which this can be done, but maybe as I look at the castle my brain may work to more good purpose. And now, Johann, it were well to lead the horses out and hobble them. There was a field we passed half-way down, where the grass was growing long and thick. When the boys come to-morrow night, I will arrange with them to cut and bring in bundles of it."

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"Shall I stay out there with them, count? Should any rough-riders catch sight of them standing unguarded they might well take a fancy to them, for yours at least is an animal such as is not often seen."

"There is no need for that, Johann; it is dark already, and it is not likely that anyone will pass here after nightfall. But it would be well to fetch them in at daybreak."

"That will I do, my lord; our arms and horses are our chief possessions now. Though we might replace mine, such a steed as yours would cost a noble's ransom."

"Yes, and indeed, apart from his value, I would not lose him, since it was a gift of the emperor himself." [Pg 125]

The next morning they rode out early, entered a wood on an eminence a mile from the baron's castle, then, dismounting, walked to the edge of the trees, and the count sat down on a fallen tree and gazed at the castle for half an hour in silence.

It was indeed a strong place. The castle itself was perched upon the edge of a precipitous cliff, which on three sides of it fell away almost perpendicularly. On the other side, the approach, though steep, was more gradual. In front of the castle was a large courtyard. Inside and at the foot of the side walls, which rose apparently sheer from the edge of the precipices, were the quarters of the garrison. The end wall was very strong and massive, with a flanking tower at each corner and another over the gateway. At its foot the rock had been cut away perpendicularly, forming a dry moat some twenty feet deep and forty wide. On the other side of the moat was a similar enclosure open towards the castle, but larger and with even more massive walls, with strong flanking towers at short distances apart. Here the vassals would drive in their cattle and herds on the approach of a hostile force. This exterior fortification was in itself unusually strong, and would have to be taken before the second wall could be attacked, as it could only be approached on that face. [Pg 126]

"It is a strong place, indeed," the count said at last. "It would be necessary to scale the outer wall, and, even could this be done by stealth, there would be that deep cut and the next wall to cross, and the castle itself, which is indeed a fortress, to enter; a well-nigh impossible undertaking."

"I do not think it would be necessary to scale the wall of the outer court, my lord, for there is open ground on either side, as far as the point where the cut is made. Beyond that, methinks, there will be space enough to walk between the edge of the rock and the wall. The castle itself is most likely so built that the cliff goes sheer down from its foot, but I do not think that is so with the wall of the courtyard. There would be no occasion for it; the bravest men would not venture upon a narrow ledge where they could be overwhelmed by stones or missiles from the wall above."

"I think that is so, Johann; but at any rate that cut would have to be passed. No, the castle is impregnable save by stratagem, or treachery within, or against an army with battering-machines. 'Tis stronger than I thought it; I never took so good a look at it before, for it was but seldom that I rode in this direction."

"It would need an army," Johann agreed, "and might well cost the loss of a thousand men." [Pg 127]

"I should be well content, Johann," the young count said gloomily, "if I could but carry my sister off, to ride back with her to Vienna, where the emperor would place her under the protection of some dame at his court, and where I might carve out a new inheritance with my sword; but it seems to me as difficult to get her away as it is to storm the castle. We know not where she is placed, and assuredly that knowledge is the first that we must gain before any plan can be contrived. That could only be done in one of two ways: either by bribing one of the servitors at the castle or by introducing some friend of our own."

"The latter would not be easy, count," Johann said, shaking his head. "If the baron were apprehensive of attack he might increase his strength, and one presenting himself as a man-at-arms out of employment might be enrolled in his band; but at present he is scarcely likely to increase his force."

"I see that, Johann; I would go myself as a minstrel, but among those in the castle there might well be some who would recognize me. As you know, I have some skill with the lute, and could pass well enough if it were not for that; but were I detected and captured, 'tis certain that I should never leave the castle alive."

"That is not to be thought of, count. Your person is so well known to the country round that you would certainly be recognized, if not by the baron himself, by some of those who were with him at Treves when you were there with your father, before you started for the war. Methinks the other is the only plan. The baron's garrison consists not so much of his own vassals as of wandering men-at-arms, whom he has gathered round him, and who serve him for pay and not from duty or love. Among these there must be many who would willingly accept a bribe. If your lordship think well of the plan, I will myself go down to the village and endeavour to gather news. I am not likely to be known. I was a simple man-at-arms when you went out, and it was only when Rudolph and Max were killed that you made me officer over the rest. There has been little communication for years between our people and those of the baron. To make matters sure, I might put a patch over my eye. I should say that I was a wandering soldier, who, being disabled in the war, was now returning unfit to my friends at Luxembourg. I shall pretend to be very hard of hearing, in order that they may speak more freely before me. I can even stay there for a day or two, alleging that I am wearied and worn out. 'Tis certain that the baron is not loved by his people. He is a hard man and a rough one; he goes far beyond his rights in the dues he demands. I do not know that I may learn anything, but it is possible that I may do so." [Pg 128]

"'Tis a good plan, Johann; I would carry it out myself, but I am full young and too healthy-looking [Pg 129]

to pass as a discharged soldier."

"'Tis well that you should run no risks, my lord; did aught happen to you there is not only your own life that would be lost, but your vassals would have no more to hope for. So far, from what the others said last night, the baron does not concern himself with them at present; but were they to cultivate the land he would assuredly gather the produce, and with none to protect them or speak for them they would be driven to go elsewhere. At any rate, my lord, I will gladly try. Naught may come of it, but maybe I may hear some discontented soldier growling over his cup, and may find an opportunity of sounding him, taking care, you may be sure, not to mention your name, but merely saying that I know of a manner in which a handsome sum may be earned by one willing to do a service. If I find he rises at the bait, I will bid him meet me again, and will, before I see him, discuss the matter with you, so that you may be with me, and judge for yourself how far it would be safe to go with him."

"At any rate, Johann, no other plan presents itself at present, and though I do not think it likely that much may come of it, it is at least worth the trying." [Pg 130]

They rode back to Waldensturm, and an hour later Johann set out on foot, leaving his breast-and-back-pieces behind him, and taking only his steel cap, which was dented by many a blow, and his sword, for without a weapon of some kind no one in those days would think of travelling.

It was afternoon when he entered a wine-shop in the village half a mile from Goldstein. He chose a quiet-looking house of the better class, which would be more likely to be frequented by people coming in from the country round, than by the men from the castle. With a black patch over one eye, and his well-worn garments, he looked his character well. The landlady glanced with some disfavour at him, for she did not care for the custom of wayfarers.

"I can pay my way," he said, "and am no beggar, but a broken-down soldier, who has saved a little money in the wars;" and he laid a crown piece on the table. "I have been fighting against the Turks, and, as you see, lost an eye, and have almost lost my hearing; so I pray you to speak loudly. I have journeyed far, and am wearied, and desire to rest a day or two before I continue my journey to Luxembourg, my native town. I can promise you that I shall give you but little trouble." [Pg 131]

"We will talk of that later on," the landlady said. "I do not know whether I can take you in, but if I cannot I will tell you where you can obtain a lodging in the village."

Johann made her repeat this twice, each time in a louder voice; then he nodded. "Thank you, mistress, I know that worn-out soldiers are not welcome customers at a house like yours, but I have ever been a quiet man, given neither to quarrelling nor drinking beyond what is seemly. I only desire a quiet house and such food as there may be, and a flask of the best wine; for it is long since I drank a flagon of good Moselle. And as my money will last me well until I get to Luxembourg, I can afford it. With it I will take, if it pleases you, some cold meat, if you have it, or if not, some cheese and fruit."

The landlady, seeing that the wayfarer was able to pay, and was likely to give no trouble, presently placed before him the food he asked for. When he had finished it, he took his seat in the corner of the room, taking the jug of wine, of which he had drunk sparingly, with him. The landlady paid no further attention to him till the day's work was over, and some of the neighbours dropped in, together with three or four persons from other villages on the estate, who had been in Goldstein on business, either to sell their vintage or crops or to arrange for their carriage by boat to Ems. In an hour or two these left, and only three or four of the traders of the village, who were accustomed to use the house as a sort of meeting-place, remained. They chatted for some time on different matters, casting occasionally somewhat suspicious glances at Johann, who was leaning back in his chair as if asleep. The landlady, observing this, said to them: "You need not mind him; he is an old soldier on his way back to Luxembourg. He is a very civil-spoken man, but he is almost as deaf as a post. I had almost to scream into his ear to make him understand me, and even if he were awake he would not hear a single word you say. I suppose that you have heard that Bertha Grun and Lisa Hermann will be released from the castle in a few days, and that Gretchen Horwitz and another girl have got to take their places. I hear that Bertha was told that she and Lisa and the other two were to wait on Minna von Waldensturm during alternate weeks." [Pg 132]

"Yes, I heard it," the other said. "It passes all bearing that damsels should be thus taken against their will and that of their parents. Save for two or three old crones there have been no women in the castle since the baron's wife died, till Minna von Waldensturm was taken there after the sacking of their castle. They say that the baron is determined that she shall marry his son. I suppose he reckons upon young Waldensturm being killed in the wars, and then he can unite Waldensturm with Goldstein without anyone making an objection." [Pg 133]

"I am sorry for her, for the youth is a lout, and they say as savage and as brutal as his father. We all know that the baron's ill-treatment brought his wife to her grave, and I should say that his son's wife would not fare much better."

"I am sorry for Conrad von Waldensturm," another said; "all spoke well of him who knew him. He was a gallant youth and kindly, and was likely to prove as good a master as his father was. It was a bad business, and I fear that there is little chance of his ever being righted; the elector is a great friend of the baron, whose castle, in case of troubles, would act as a bulwark against any enemy advancing up the river."

The conversation then turned to local matters: the amount of the vintage and the probability that it would turn out unusually good in quality. A quarter of an hour later Johann went up to the room that the landlady had told him he could occupy. The next morning, after a hearty breakfast, he

told her that he felt so much better after a good night's rest that he would continue his journey, and after paying his reckoning he left the inn and returned to Waldensturm.

"You must have news for me, Johann," the count said as he came in; "I had not expected you for two or three days."

"I have news, and I think of importance;" and he related the conversation that he had overheard. "It struck me at once that this was the very thing that we wanted. One of the young women, who have been carried off against their will, to act as chamber-maidens to the Countess Minna, might be induced to befriend her, who is even more hardly dealt with than they are, and who is beloved by all who know her. Her escape, too, would release them from further attendance at the castle."

"You are right, Johann; 'tis a stroke of good fortune indeed that you have learned this, and it is of the more importance since it is evident that no time must be lost. For if the baron has once set his mind upon marrying Minna to his son, he may at any moment force her to do so. However great her repugnance to the match, it would weigh as nothing against his determination. I will myself take this matter in hand, and although I might be known were I to appear in my own dress, it is not likely anyone would recognize a well-to-do young farmer, or, what might be still better, a trader travelling with his wares, as Conrad von Waldensturm, whom all suppose to be far away, fighting against the Turks. The fathers of the girls are evidently substantial men, since their names were familiar to all those you heard talking. There would be no difficulty in finding them, and their places are probably not very far from Goldstein, as the baron would hardly send to distant farms or villages for the young women he required. I wish that I knew something of the men's disposition, for there are some who would put up with the outrage of their daughters being carried away against their will, meekly and quietly, while others would be stirred to the greatest anger."

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"That is so, my lord, but as I believe that the baron is generally hated by his vassals, I think that there are few who would not be glad to do him an ill turn. Then you are thinking of speaking to them, and not to the girls themselves?"

"It would depend upon the fathers. A timid man, however much he might hate the count, would shrink from allowing his daughter to run the slightest risk, while a bold man would heartily enter into the scheme. It is easier to speak to a man than to get speech with a maiden. If, when I see them, it appears to me that they would not be likely to consent to their daughters taking any part in a plot, I would then wait, however long, for an opportunity of addressing one of the girls. You cannot go again, Johann, but we might send Henrick, who is a sharp fellow, to Goldstein. He might be dressed as a hind, giving out that he was seeking employment on a farm. He might say that he had been told that either of these two men was likely to give him employment, and might reasonably ask questions as to their characters before going to either."

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"That would be a good plan, count. Henrick is lodging in a cottage down by the river, which escaped the notice of the baron's men. I can fetch him up in a quarter of an hour, and if he started at once he would be there this afternoon."

"Fetch him, by all means, Johann."

The sergeant had already told the soldier the nature of the work that he was required to undertake, and on his arrival he at once expressed to Conrad his willingness to carry it out.

"In the first place, you will go to Goldstein and find out where the men live, then you will go to the hamlet nearest to them, and you will have no difficulty whatever in learning the reputation in which they stand with their neighbours, and the characters they bear. They may live some distance apart, but it is important that you should find out about both. It is probable that they are well-to-do men, for the baron would not have taken the daughters of mere boors as attendants on his captive, but would have chosen maidens of good repute and manners."

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It was not until late the next afternoon that Henrick returned.

"The men lived in different directions, count," he said, "and were each four miles from Goldstein, so that I could only hear about one yesterday evening, and had to walk to the village near where the other lived, which was six miles away, the next morning. Both are men with considerable holdings, and the fact that the baron has carried off their daughters has excited great indignation among their neighbours, though, of course, no one dares express his sentiments openly, least of all the two men themselves. Horwitz is said to be a man of sullen disposition, a hard man to those who work under him, very close and parsimonious in his dealings. Grun is much more popular among his neighbours; he is a kindly man and not easily stirred to anger. He is passionately attached to his daughter, who is his only child, and since she has had to go to the castle has not, it is said, left his house even to attend to the vintage."

"Then I will try Grun first," the count said. "A man of the nature you describe will not be likely to betray me even should he refuse to allow his daughter to assist me in any way. You have done very well, Henrick. To-morrow morning you will ride to Weisenheim and buy for me a suit of clothes such as the small traders who journey through the country selling goods would wear. Then go to various shops and buy such articles as they might carry—materials for dresses, ribbons, kerchiefs, and cheap silver ornaments,—make them up into a pack, and bring them hither. Do not buy all at one shop, even if they should have in store all that you require; your doing so would excite curiosity. Get materials for at least a dozen dresses—not common goods, but such as are worn on fête days. Here is money which will be amply sufficient for your purchases. You, Johann, will go to-morrow morning to a village beyond the estate and buy a small horse, with a saddle such as would be used for packing goods on; then I shall be ready for a start

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the next morning."

Both commissions were executed, and the young count started, leading the pony, whose burden was by no means a heavy one. He had learned the prices that Henrick had paid for each article, and fastened a ticket to each, as it was possible that he might be invited in by some of the country-people, and might ask either too much or too little for his wares, and so create suspicion that he was not what he seemed. He was indeed asked to show his goods several times, and as he charged rather under the price that he had given for them in the town, he effected several sales. About noon he arrived at the house of the farmer Grun. One of the maids, who saw him coming up, ran out.

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"'Tis no use your stopping here," she said. "In bygone times it would have been different, but the master and mistress are both in deep grief."

"So I have heard," Conrad said, "and yet I would fain be allowed entrance, having need of speech with your master on a matter of importance. I pray you to tell him so."

She returned in a minute. "The master says that your visit is untimely, but that if the matter is of importance he will see you."

Tying up his pony to a hook in the wall, Conrad followed the maid into the house. A big powerful-looking man was sitting on a chair before the empty grate; he looked up listlessly at Conrad's entrance.

"I hope," he said, "young man, that you have not disturbed me in my trouble needlessly, or entered here under a false pretext?"

"Assuredly I do not enter needlessly, though I own that it is under a false pretext. And yet it is not so though; the matter I would speak of to you is of importance. I have heard, Herr Grun, that you are a kindly man, just in your dealings, and one to be trusted. I am going to trust you."

The farmer listened with increasing surprise as he spoke; his manner of speech was not one that a travelling pedlar of goods would have adopted, but was rather that of a man of rank.

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"I am Conrad von Waldensturm," the young count went on. The farmer gave an exclamation of surprise, and rose to his feet. "I have just hurried back from the war, at the news that my castle had been destroyed, my estate ravaged, and my sister carried off. I have come home to rescue her. I heard of the outrage of which you and your daughter have been the victims, and, having made enquiries, I judge that you would not be one to sit down tamely under it."

"Tamely, no," the man said passionately, "and there is the pain of it! What can I, a tiller of the soil, do against my feudal lord? Show me the way to avenge myself, Count von Waldensturm, and be assured that you will not find me backward. There is not a man in the barony who would not see the castle razed to the ground with joy. What can we do? He has two hundred armed men within its walls, and could crush us as a hammer would crush an egg. We have suffered unnumbered wrongs at his hands and at those of his son, who is even worse than himself; but how with clubs and staves could we attack a castle that is the strongest in the electorate, and has never yet been taken. However, count, you have doubtless some plan in your mind that you have thus come to me. All knew and honoured your father, and envied those who held land under him, and it was reported that you, his son, would tread in his footsteps, and were already beloved by all his vassals."

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"My first object," Conrad said, "is, as you may suppose, to rescue my sister from his hands. With that intention I returned home, and you may well believe that the news that the baron intends to wed her to his son has added to that desire, and has shown me the need for haste in carrying it out. The first thing is to ascertain exactly in what part of the castle she is confined, how she is guarded, and the manner in which her chamber could be approached. Having ascertained this, I must, of course, open communications with her so that she may be cognizant of my plans, and be ready to assist in their being carried out. But this is not all; the baron, and no doubt his son, with a party of men-at-arms, will set off in pursuit, and I shall have an ambush prepared. I have but some twenty men with me, all good soldiers, who have fought in the wars, and I hope to gather fifty more from our former vassals; this should be enough to ensure that none of the party who sally out shall return alive to the castle. Had I as many more determined men I might carry the castle by surprise, for I could, with my own troop, ride forward, and being taken for the baron, would find the gate open and the drawbridge down. Entering, I could hold the gate with my men until the rest, who would have followed close behind, rushed in, when we might well overcome the garrison, taken by surprise as they would be."

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"'Tis a good plan!" the farmer said, striding up and down the room, "and methinks that not only can I promise you the aid of my daughter, but can bring some score of stout fellows to aid you. The hired ruffians of the baron are hated as much as he is; they enter every house they choose and demand victuals and wine, insult the women with their foul oaths and coarse manners, lay hands on anything they fancy, and treat us as if we were a conquered people and they were our masters. 'Tis worse than useless to complain of them to the baron. A neighbour of mine did so, and he was hung over the gate as a lesson to the rest of us. Some of us have talked the matter over again and again, as to whether it would not be possible to attack the baron when he rode out with a party of his men; but if we did so, and were successful, the neighbouring lords would all unite against us as rebels against our master, and the whole country would be harried, and those who were caught hung like dogs. But under your leading it would be a different matter; it would be a feud between two nobles. What would you do with the castle, sir?"

"I should hold it as my own," Conrad said. "Goldstein has destroyed Waldensturm. Waldensturm

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in turn captures Goldstein. I should appeal to the emperor, if the elector takes part against me, and shall offer to hold the fiefs of Goldstein and Waldensturm as the emperor's vassal. I know that he would grant it to me, and that, were the elector to besiege the castle he would lay his orders on some of the neighbouring princes, either Hesse or Luxembourg, to give me aid."

"Then in that case, count, you may reckon upon the aid of fully a hundred men. There is not only the hate against the baron and his followers, but the prospect of becoming your vassals instead of those of the baron; which would mean prosperity and happiness instead of being ground down by his unjust demands, and exposed to constant insults and injury from him and his. And now, my lord, I will call my daughter in, tell her your designs, and bid her not only to answer your questions, but to aid you by every means in her power."

Bertha was sent for; she was a pretty, modest-looking girl, but her face told of recent suffering.

"Bertha," her father said, "this is the Count von Waldensturm. He has returned home from the wars to rescue his sister, and I charge you to answer all his questions, and to aid him in every way to the best of your powers."

"That will I readily, for the young countess has been very kind to me, and we pity her deeply. She saved us from insult on the part of the baron's son, and she appealed to the baron himself to allow us to remain always with her, and not even to descend to the kitchens to fetch her food; and the baron, who evidently wishes to humour her in small matters, gave the order."

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"That is just what I should have thought of Minna," Conrad said in a tone of deep pleasure. "Now, fräulein, in what part of the castle is my sister confined?"

"In a room in the north angle. It is some fifty feet from the courtyard into which it looks."

"Is the window barred?"

"No," the girl said; "the lower windows are strongly guarded, but on this floor they are not so."

"Then I take it, that, if she had a rope, you and the other maiden could easily lower her to the ground?"

"We could do that easily enough, count; but were she there she would be no nearer escaping. There is always a guard at the gate, and the drawbridge is up at night; and even when across that there is the outer court to be passed."

"Are there stairs to the wall near where she would alight?"

"Yes, sir, there is a flight of stairs in the angle just below our window."

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"The next thing I have to think about is your safety. As you sleep in her room it would be clear that she could not have escaped without your knowledge and assistance, and the baron, in his fury, would be capable of slaying you both."

"And he would certainly do so," the farmer said shortly.

"Then it is clear that either they must escape with my sister or must hide somewhere."

"But we must be found sooner or later," the girl said.

"Not if my plan succeeds, Bertha. I intend that the escape shall be known as soon as it is completed, that the baron shall set out in pursuit, that we shall have an ambush prepared for him, and that he shall not return to the castle, which I, with my retainers and vassals, and your father's assistance, will then capture.

"In that case it would be easy enough for us to hide," the girl said. "There are chambers in the castle that none ever enter, and we could without difficulty conceal ourselves there. We could either do that or escape with the young countess."

"I will think it over," Conrad said. "Are there sentries on the walls?"

"There are two on the tower over the gate, but none along the wall itself. At least, the two are there in the daytime, but I have never looked out at night."

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"It was only yesterday morning that you were released, so we have five days to think over our plans. By the way, would it be possible for you to descend from your room to the courtyard at night without passing through occupied rooms or otherwise attracting attention? because, if so, there would be no necessity for lowering my sister from the window."

"I think so, sir. There is a staircase by which there is communication both with the floor above and that below. It is a small stone winding stair in the thickness of the wall. I have never been up or down it; it connects with our room by a short passage in which there is a door, but this is always kept closed, and at night we lock it. The young countess obtained the key from the baron, saying that, did she not have it, anyone ascending or descending could come into her room without let or hindrance."

"There can be little doubt that the stairs descend to the courtyard, and that they are used by men going up and down to sentry duty on the upper platform; the only question is whether the door at the foot, opening into the courtyard, is kept locked."

"That I cannot say, sir; we never went down to the courtyard when we were at the castle."

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"Is there a sentry posted on the top of the tower?"

"Yes, sir, I believe so; at any rate, we often hear the tread of men going up and down, and that by night as well as by day."

"In that case it is possible that the door is not kept locked; as it is so often used it would give unnecessary trouble if the key had to be fetched each time the sentry was changed. It is very important that we should know for certain, because it would save much risk and trouble if you could leave the keep without descending from the window. But I do not see how you could let us know, and I do not like putting the adventure off until you are again on duty, for there is no saying when the baron may carry out his intention of forcing my sister to become his son's wife."

"I could manage that, count," the farmer said. "I might well enough go to the castle with a present of fruit, or with some woman's gear that Bertha might have left behind her. I might not be able to see the girl, but she might send down a message. If the door is locked, she need send only her thanks; if it is open, she could say that I need not trouble to send her fruit, as they had an abundance of everything they wanted."

"That would be a very good plan," the young count said. "I will return here in three days, by which time I hope to have all my plans laid out." [Pg 148]

On his return to Waldensturm, Conrad ordered two or three of his men to make a light ladder some twenty-five feet long, and sent Henrick over to Weisenheim to buy a hundred yards of light but very strong cord. The next night he rode with Johann to within a short distance of Goldstein, the latter carrying the ladder. It was a dark night, and, leaving their horses half a mile from the castle, they made their way towards it, reached the foot of the outer wall, taking great care to avoid making a noise, proceeded along the edge of the wall of the outer court until they came to the cut in the rock. Then the ladder was lowered down, they both descended, and, shifting the ladder to the other side, were soon at the foot of the wall of the inner court. They found, to their satisfaction, that there were some two feet of level ground between this and the edge of the precipice. As they went on, this sometimes widened to twenty feet or more, sometimes narrowed to three feet, as the wall kept straight along without following the irregularities of the rock. At length the masonry rose up in front of them extending to the very edge of the crag, and they knew that they had reached the castle itself, and that some sixty feet above them was the chamber in which Minna was confined. [Pg 149]

"So far everything is well, Johann, and if only the door at the bottom of that flight of steps is unbolted it seems to me that we shall have no difficulty. Everything has succeeded beyond our expectation. But three days ago the rescue of my sister seemed almost impossible, but now, thanks to Bertha Grun and her father, everything is in train."

Returning as they came, they carried the ladder to the wood where they had left their horses, and hiding it there rode home.

The boys had not been idle; every day they had gone out, sometimes to places many miles away, to warn the vassals that their young lord had returned, and that they must hold themselves in readiness to assemble at Waldensturm, with the best arms they could obtain, immediately upon receiving a summons. The tenants were all delighted when they heard the message. The boys had carried with them money, to give to those who were in want, to purchase long pikes and swords in readiness for whatever service their lord might require of them.

The day after his expedition to Goldstein, Conrad resumed his trader's dress, and, taking his pack pony as before, went to Grun's.

"The matter will be easier than I expected," he said to the farmer, who gave him a hearty greeting. "I have found that once at the foot of the castle there is no difficulty in making one's way along. If your daughter finds that the door at the bottom of the staircase is unlocked, there are no difficulties whatever;" and he then described how they made their way along to the foot of the walls of the castle itself. [Pg 150]

"As it can be but a few paces from the bottom of that staircase to the one in the angle, they could, if in dark clothes, mount the wall unperceived, even were there guards in the courtyard itself, which is most unlikely, as the baron has no fear whatever of attack, and it is only upon the outer wall that any shrewd watch would be kept. I think that, to avoid all danger, it would be better that your daughter and her companion should also fly. When once beyond the walls I would have a guide in readiness to take them to one of the cottages still standing on my estate. In my pack is a long rope, well knotted; it is not bulky, and your daughter could wind it round her under her garments. When they get on to the wall they will fasten one end securely, and drop the other down. I shall be there, and shall at once climb to the top and lower my sister and the girls down, one by one. My sergeant will be there to receive them. Then I shall descend by the rope, and we will make off. I have received promises from forty men to join me, and have fixed on a spot where they shall be placed in ambush a mile from the castle. Have you done anything?" [Pg 151]

"Yes, I have sounded many of my neighbours, and one and all will gladly join in any attempt to overthrow the baron and his son. Each of them will communicate with others. I have not mentioned your name, or given them any particulars, but have simply said that there is a plot on foot which is in my opinion certain to be successful, and that in a manner that will prevent any of the neighbouring lords taking up the baron's cause. And that I have reason to believe that a new lord, who will be a just and good master, will be forthcoming. I think I can promise that by the middle of next week there will be a hundred and fifty men ready for the work."

"That should be ample, Grun; and if we are successful I promise that your farm shall be for ever exempt from all feudal obligations, rents, and quittances. I shall not come over again until your daughter has returned to the castle, and you have learned from her whether that door is open. If it is not so, she must examine the bolt carefully. It is probable that it could be shot from the inside if she had a suitable tool, in which case we must defer it until she again returns to the [Pg 152]

castle, unless she and her companion find that they can get the bolt back without difficulty. Ask her to ascertain this the first day she returns. I have thought that possibly you might not be able to see her, and that the message that she sends down to you might not be rightly reported. Therefore, instead of your paying her a visit, tell her that, on the morning after she returns to the castle, she is to go to the window between eight and nine o'clock, and to shake a cloth or a garment out of it if the door is unlocked, or she finds that she can open it. We shall be watching for the signal. If it is not made, the attempt shall be deferred; if it is made, it will be at midnight on the third night after she returns. At that hour they are to descend the stairs to the courtyard, mount the steps to the wall, and drop the rope over, having previously firmly fastened the end. I had better see her myself, and give her the instructions, so that there may be no possibility of a mistake. If the signal is made, a boy will bring a message to you that the affair will come off on the night I have arranged, and you with your friends will then be by ten o'clock at the point where the road runs through a wood about a mile away from the castle. Two or three of you bring axes, so that we can fell some trees across the road behind them and so enclose them. It is of the utmost importance that not one shall escape to carry the news to the castle."

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Bertha was called in, and the instructions were repeated to her until Conrad was perfectly satisfied that she knew what she had to do. She was at once to inform Minna that her brother had returned, and was prepared to rescue her. "Tell her this directly you get back, Bertha, and then, if the baron should determine to hurry on her marriage, she can beg for a week's further grace before it takes place."

Everything being now arranged, Conrad returned home, and waited impatiently for the hour when the signal would be made. On that morning he and three of the men, all dressed as peasants, took up their positions at various points a quarter of a mile or so from the castle, hiding behind the bushes so that they should not be perceived from the castle. Soon after eight o'clock the watchers saw a figure come to the window, and shake a garment as if to free it from dust. Then one by one they got up and strolled carelessly away, mounted their horses in the wood, and rode back to Waldensturm. The men and a number of boys were assembled at the ruins, and all were at once sent off to order the vassals to assemble there by eight o'clock on the evening of the next day. At the appointed time all were there, full of delight to see their young lord again, and protesting their readiness to die in his service.

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They now learned for the first time the nature of the enterprise in which they were about to take part, and their delight at the prospect of slaying the author of their misfortunes, and of capturing his castle, was unbounded. Many of them had provided themselves with bows or cross-bows, the boys having carried messages to that effect a few days before. One or two of the men still on the estate carried axes and coils of rope. Conrad and his men-at-arms were mounted at eight o'clock, by which hour the last of those summoned had come in. These followed on foot, and by half-past nine reached the wood selected for the ambush. The men with axes at once set to work to fell three or four trees across the road where it entered the wood on the side farthest away from Goldstein, the rest were distributed along it among the trees on both sides. Half an hour after their arrival, Grun, at the head of a hundred and fifty men, came up. Most of these had pikes, others were armed with scythes, while a few of the poorer class carried only flails; but all had long knives.

After saying a few words of thanks to them, Conrad distributed them also by the sides of the road. Ropes were then fastened from tree to tree across it, at a height of two feet from the ground, others being laid across the road where the baron with his retainers would enter. These were to be tightened as soon as he had passed, so as to trip over any of the rearmost horsemen who tried to escape. Some trees were cut almost through at this point, and men with axes stationed there so as to bring them down as soon as the horsemen had passed. Having seen that everything was in readiness, Conrad left Johann in command, and with three of his followers rode on to the edge of the wood nearest the castle. Here two of the men remained with the horses, which, when they heard Conrad's horn sound, they were to bring up towards the castle, and to stop just beyond bowshot. Henrick, carrying the ladder, accompanied him. As before, they had no difficulty in gaining the foot of the castle wall. After waiting a quarter of an hour there was a slight sound and the end of the rope fell near them. Conrad gave a slight pull to show that he was there, waited till he was sure that the other end was securely fastened, and then began to climb it. He had left his riding-boots in the cut, so that he might climb without any noise being made by their scraping against the wall. Being strong and active he had no difficulty in reaching the top, and as soon as he gained his footing there a figure threw herself into his arms.

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"Thank God I have you, little sister! let me put this round your waist." "This" was a broad band made of a saddle-girth, which was fastened to the end of the rope which he had brought up with him.

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"You will be quite safe," he said. "Hold the rope with both hands; it has plenty of strength and would hold twenty of you."

A moment later she was over the wall, and he lowered her steadily down until he felt the rope slacken. Then he drew it up again and lowered Bertha and her companion, and then joined them on the ledge.

"Now," he said, "you must go on together with Henrick. Walk one behind the other and keep touch of the wall. As you go, you will have to descend a ladder on one side of a deep cut, and climb it on the other. When you get to the top you are to stop till I join you, as Henrick will have to move the ladder for me to follow you. Go on at once; you will know afterwards why I have stayed behind."

He waited till Henrick rejoined him with the news that the others had passed the cut, then he shouted: "Hullo there, watch!"

"Who is that?" a voice called down from the top of the tower.



THE ESCAPE FROM THE CASTLE

"Tell the baron that I, Conrad von Waldensturm, have carried off my sister, and give him my defiance;" and then with Henrick he hurried along and soon rejoined the women. Already there was a tumult in the castle; the sentry had blown his horn, and then run down from the wall and entered the castle to arouse the baron. Conrad sounded the note that his followers knew, and they then hurried along until they arrived at the spot where the men were standing with the horses.

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"Now," he said to Minna, "you must mount behind me, two of my men will take your maids."

The din in the castle was now prodigious; a horn continued sounding and the alarm-bell of the castle ringing, orders were being shouted, and it was evident that the garrison were fully roused, and that in a few minutes the pursuit would begin. Conrad and two of the men sprang into their saddles. Henrick lifted Minna to her place behind Conrad, and the two girls behind the men.

"Hold tight, girls, we have not far to go," Conrad said. Henrick mounted, and all started at a gallop. Conrad was glad to hear the watchman on the tower over the gate shout at the top of his voice: "I hear the tramp of horses; they have just started."

There was no need for haste; it would be another five minutes at least before the baron could start. Still, as Conrad wished to see that everything was ready, he maintained his pace until he reached the wood where his party were assembled. Then they dismounted. The men led the horses to the spot where the others were tied up, near the farther edge of the wood. Conrad led his sister and the maids to a distance from the road; he had already told her what was going to take place.

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"Wait here till I come to fetch you," he said; "I must see that all is in readiness." He joined the men, who were gathered thickly by the road, and took his place by the ropes which would bring the head of the column to a halt. Here his own vassals were chiefly gathered, while his men-at-arms were stationed, under Johann, at the point where their pursuers would enter the wood. This he considered to be the most important post, as many of the troopers would certainly try to escape when they found that they were caught in an ambush. Two minutes after his arrival he heard the sound of a party of galloping horsemen.

"I think," he said to Grun, who was standing next to him, "there are from thirty to forty of them. The baron would probably ride off as soon as a score or two of his men had mounted." In a minute the troop came along at a furious gallop, led by Von Goldstein and his son. Suddenly the head of the column seemed to collapse; men and horses rolled over; those behind, unable to check their horses, crashed into a confused heap on the ground, and before they could check themselves well-nigh half the party were heaped upon each other. As the baron and his son fell, Conrad's bugle rang out, and a flight of arrows and of cross-bow bolts poured into the rearmost files of the troop, and at the same moment a crowd of men sprang out from the trees and assailed

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them with pike and sword, scythe and flail. Taken utterly by surprise, appalled by the suddenness of the attack, and by the catastrophe in which their leaders and half their comrades were involved, the remainder of the troop offered but a feeble resistance. Johann, with his men, came rushing up from the rear, for not one of the troopers had time to turn his horse before being surrounded by his foes. Conrad took no part in the fight, but, on seeing how complete was the success of the ambush, sheathed his sword, and returned to the spot where he had left Minna, leaving it to the infuriated peasants and troopers to complete the work.

"The first blow has been struck, Minna. Von Goldstein and his son have paid with their lives for their crimes and for the ruin that they have brought upon us. I shall send you off to the castle under the guard of four of the vassals, and you will remain there until you hear from me."

"But why should you not come yourself?"

"Because I have only begun my work. I hope before morning to finish it. I am going to take Goldstein by surprise, and I have little doubt that I shall succeed. I have nearly two hundred men, and as some thirty of the garrison have fallen, we shall outnumber them considerably."

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The four men had already been told off to escort the young countess and her maids, and horses having been brought up, the party at once started, and Conrad returned to the scene of conflict, where all was now quiet. Not a man of the baron's party had escaped; he himself and his son had been found dead when the horses had either recovered their feet or been dragged off. Whether they had broken their necks or been smothered by the mass piled over them none cared to enquire, but many a vengeful stab showed that the peasants were determined to make sure of their deaths. Some torches had been brought for the purpose, and these having been lit, the peasants had carefully examined the fallen troopers to make sure that the work of vengeance was complete.

Conrad, on his arrival, called them all together. "So far the work has been well begun," he said; "your tyrant is dead. Now for the next blow. Herr Grun tells me that he has, as I requested him, chosen fifty of the most active for special work. Let these form in a body." When the young men had obeyed his order he continued: "Now, Johann, you and Henrick and the four men I have already told off will go with this party, Johann in command, and do the work with which I charged you. You will proceed along the foot of the castle wall till you get to the spot where I descended. There you will remain quiet until you hear the attack at the gate; then you will climb the rope, and, as soon as you are all assembled on the wall, will rush down and seize the inner gate, cut down all who are guarding it, and then, leaving Henrick and ten of the men there, will run into the outer court and take the baron's men in rear. Henrick, as soon as the others have gone, will close the gate behind them. There is little fear that you will be disturbed, for all the defenders of the castle will rush down when they hear the fighting in the outer court."

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"I understand, my lord," Johann said; "never fear but that we will do our part in the business."

"Remember," Conrad went on, "everything depends on your carrying this out silently. Do not go in a solid body; steal along as quietly as possible. There is little fear of their seeing you, but beware of striking a foot or weapon against a stone."

As soon as Johann and his party had moved off, he continued: "Now, strip the armour and steel caps from the dead troopers. How many are there of them?"

"Thirty-four, count," Grun said, "and there are twenty-five of their horses uninjured, and the five of Johann and his party."

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"Then choose thirty-nine men," Conrad said, "and let them divide the armour among them, and let each take a horse and mount at once. We shall, with my fifteen, be a stronger party than rode out, but in the darkness they will not notice that. All the rest will follow us on foot, keeping a hundred yards in rear. When we enter the courtyard, ride, in the first place, and cut down any of the troopers who may be there; it is probable that the greater part of them will be gathered on the wall to await the baron's return. When you have cleared the courtyard you will, at the sound of my bugle, dismount. By that time we shall be joined by those on foot, and we shall then see what steps we had best take against the men on the walls."

In a quarter of an hour all was ready, and at the head of over fifty mounted men Conrad rode off at a foot-pace, the unmounted men following close behind. When within a quarter of a mile of the castle, Conrad gave the order, and at a canter they rode towards the gate. As they approached, the men broke into a cheer, and the garrison, taking this as a proof that success had attended them, and that the fugitives had been captured, answered with shouts of welcome. As Conrad had expected, the drawbridge was down and the gate open. As he rode in with his men Conrad raised a shout: "A Waldensturm! a Waldensturm! kill! kill!" and instantly attacked the men who were gathered inside the gate to welcome the baron's return. Taken wholly by surprise, their resistance was feeble, and the thirty or forty men in the courtyard were speedily despatched; but by this time those on the walls were pouring down to the assistance of their comrades. Conrad blew his horn; his followers dismounted and rushed for the new-comers, and just as they did so the unmounted men ran in through the gate with loud shouts. A panic seized the baron's retainers, and these again ran up the steps to the top of the wall. Many of the assailants would have followed them, but Conrad called them off. He knew that the stairs could not be carried without great loss, as a dozen men at the top of each of the flights of steps could hold them against hundreds. The fight had not been conducted in darkness, for there were many torches burning in the courtyard. "We will wait till morning," he said; "they are like rats in a trap." At this moment a sudden uproar was heard in the inner courtyard, and shouts of "Waldensturm! Waldensturm!" and a couple of minutes later Johann and his party rushed in through the upper

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gate, where they stopped, astonished at the quietness that prevailed.

"They are all on the wall, Johann; there is nothing more to do at present," Conrad said. "I will go back with you, and we will take possession of the castle itself. There is not likely to be any resistance; few men will have remained there, and these, when they see that both courtyards are in our hands, will hardly resist. If they surrender, we will kill no one, and no damage must be done to anything; the castle is mine now. Herr Grun, will you remain in command here; I do not think the men on the wall will make an attack, but keep a close watch on them."

The castle gate was closed when they reached it, and five or six men with cross-bows were at the windows commanding it.

"What ho there!" Conrad said. "It is useless for you to resist. I, Conrad von Waldensturm, call upon you to surrender. The baron and his son are killed, and half the garrison; the rest are in our power. If you surrender peacefully your lives shall be spared; if not, every man will be put to the sword."

There was a short pause, and then a voice said: "We surrender, relying upon your knightly word." A minute later the sound of bars being withdrawn was heard, and the door opened. Conrad, with his own followers, entered, letting the others remain without. The men were first disarmed and placed in the guard chamber at the gate, and a sentry posted outside. Then, taking torches from the walls, Conrad made a hasty survey of the interior, telling the frightened scullions and other servants that no harm would come to them.

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"'Tis indeed a stately castle," he said to Johann, "and I have made a good exchange. Now, do you remain here in charge; I will go down and see how matters are proceeding. Day is breaking already." Then with those who had remained outside the castle gate he joined the main body in the outer courtyard.

"Now, Grun," he said to the farmer, "we will summon the men on the walls to surrender. They must see that their case is desperate. There are but sixty or seventy of them, and they are hopelessly outnumbered. If they refuse, I shall not attack them; hunger and thirst will soon tame them. We have not lost a life, and I would not that any of your good fellows or mine should be killed, and were we to storm the walls we should assuredly lose many. I should be sorry indeed were any wives left widows, or children fatherless, by this night's work."

Accordingly, as soon as it became light, Conrad summoned the men on the walls to surrender on promise of their lives being spared. The answer was a yell of defiance. When this subsided he said: "Well, if it pleases you to starve like rats in a trap you can do so; there is no hope of your escape or of aid arriving. The baron, his son, and all the party who rode with him are dead, the castle is in my possession, and you are as much prisoners as if you were in a dungeon." He now ordered his own men and a dozen of his vassals to leave the courtyard and form a line across the narrow neck by which the castle was approached, and to see that no one passed; for he deemed it possible that a man might be lowered from the wall to entreat aid from some of the baron's neighbours. Food was brought out from the castle and distributed. The men were divided into four parties, each of which was to take up its station near the foot of the four flights of steps up to the wall. Two mounted men were sent off to Waldensturm to fetch the young countess back, and the courtyards were cleared of the bodies that had fallen. Three hours later Minna arrived. On the way she had heard the details of the capture of the castle, and was delighted to hear that it had been taken without the loss of a single man.

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"I am proud of you, indeed," Minna said. "I always was so, but after capturing in this way a castle that the baron considered impregnable, I shall always regard you as a hero indeed."

"The credit is chiefly due to Grun and his daughter," Conrad said. "Without them we could have done nothing; with their aid the matter was simple enough."

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The brother and sister sat for a long time talking together in the great hall of the castle. They had much to tell each other of what had happened since they had parted two years before.

"And you are really to be lord of this castle?" she said. "But can you keep it, Conrad? the elector may bring an army against it."

"I think I can hold it if he does; but I do not think that he will. I have an order from the emperor to the elector to declare the baron's estates forfeited, and to install me in his place, and it contains a threat that he would himself send a force to carry this out if he failed to do so, and that I should hold it direct from him. Had I not captured the castle, the parchment would have been of little good; the elector would know that the threat was a vain one, since the emperor has no force that he could send on such a long expedition, needing every man in his struggle with the Turks. Moreover, the elector regarded the baron as a great friend of his, and even did he feel constrained by the command of the emperor to aid me, he would know that he would need all the force that he could raise to capture the castle. But now that it has been done, and I am its master, the matter has changed altogether, and he would rather have me as his friend than his enemy, especially as most of the vassals that he could call upon to aid in recapturing the castle must have viewed with displeasure the baron's attack on my hold in my absence, after having taken the oath of peace. No, I have no fear whatever of that. A large portion of the vassals of the estate have aided me, and all would take refuge here if a force marched against me, and would fight till the last, knowing that no mercy would be shown to them. No, Minna, I think that we need have no fear for the future."

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At four o'clock in the afternoon Conrad was summoned to the courtyard, as the men on the wall had shouted that they were ready to surrender.

"I thought that they would soon be tired of being cooped up there without food or drink," Conrad said as he went out; "I have been expecting it for the last two or three hours."

Thirst rather than hunger had done its work, and the certainty that sooner or later they must give in had broken their spirit. As the count appeared in the courtyard, there was a general shout of: "We surrender, on the promise of our lives."

"I promise you that. Now let every man take off his armour, and lay it and his arms on the wall, and then come down four at a time. You shall have food and water given to you, and you will then leave the castle, and anyone found within the limits of the estate by nightfall will receive no mercy."

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In an hour the last of the garrison had left the castle. The tenants on the estate at once dispersed to their homes, all receiving a present from the count, and a promise of remission of half that year's dues. His own vassals he kept there, to form, with his retainers, the garrison until he could hire a sufficient force for that purpose. At the end of that time they could return to their ruined homes, Conrad promising them aid to rebuild their houses, and an entire remission of all dues for the next two years. Conrad then drew up a document, addressed to the elector, stating what he had done, and enclosing a copy of the emperor's order, saying that he would himself present the original when he visited the court of Treves. As he had anticipated, the elector's reply was favourable.

"He had been," he said, "shocked at the conduct of the baron in attacking and ravaging the castle and estates of Waldensturm, and the punishment inflicted upon him was a just one. He would, therefore, willingly accept Conrad as his vassal for the feoff of Goldstein, and begged him to speedily repair to his court to take the oaths."

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Thus Conrad von Waldensturm revenged his wrongs, and obtained the finest estate and the strongest castle in the Electorate of Treves.

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A RAID BY THE BLACKS

A STORY OF AN OUTLYING STATION

I begin to think we were wrong in coming so far out into the bush, but I was tempted by what Hawkins told me of the place, which he had come across when exploring the country. It seemed everything that could be desired: plenty of water, timber for all purposes, and fine grazing; and I admit that it is all that he said. The blacks were quiet enough then, and, though it was a good bit beyond the nearest station, I thought, when I came and had a look at the place, that it was well worth risking. We have not done badly here. The sheep and cattle have pretty well doubled their number each year; the wool has paid all our expenses. Everything has been comfortable enough, except the difficulty we have had in bringing up groceries and flour. In another ten years, if all had gone well, I should have been a really prosperous man, with a big flock of sheep and a fine herd of cattle, to say nothing of horses; but now the blacks have got nasty I begin to think that I have made a great mistake.

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"Have you heard any more bad news, William?" his wife asked anxiously.

"Yes; Harry Read rode up half an hour ago, and said that he and his brother were going to drive their animals in, and take them to the station of a friend of his forty miles nearer Sydney, till things settled down a bit, for he had heard that two or three stations had been attacked by the blacks and every soul murdered. What do you think, wife? Shall we do the same?"

Mrs. Roberts was a courageous woman. "I don't know what to say," she replied. "We are getting on very well here. As you said, of course, we always knew that there was some risk. We could not have got a big station like this down-country without paying a large sum for it, far more than we could have afforded. I think it would be a pity to give it up at present. After all, we may not be attacked. You see, you have three men now, and we only had one when we came here. You built the house specially for defence, with squared logs, and even logs for the roof, so that it could not be set on fire. We could get the shingles off in an hour and, as it is the dry season, I think it would be as well to do that at once. I can shoot fairly well, and so can Effie, and with six rifles we ought to be able to keep off a mob of natives."

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"But how about the animals?" her husband said.

"Well, I should say that the best plan would be to send the greater part of them away for a bit. Talbot has nothing like enough stock on his place, and I have no doubt he would be glad to graze them for a bit at a very small rent. Of course, if you think it best, I am quite ready to give the place up, though in my opinion it would be a pity. After all, the chances of the blacks coming here are not great. There are dozens of other stations as exposed as we are. We have had two or three alarms before, but nothing has ever come of them."

"I am glad that that is your opinion, wife, mine is exactly the same. Certainly, for my own sake I would a great deal rather stay here and take my chances. It was of you and Effie that I was thinking. Well, then, we will consider it settled. I will ride down to Talbot's at once and arrange with him. I shall get back late this evening. To-morrow morning we will take a lot of the stock over there. Thompson shall go with me to help to drive them down, but I shall bring him back, as it is as well to keep as strong a garrison here as possible. I can arrange with Talbot that one of his men shall be specially told off to look after our animals. I will pick out three hundred of the best ewes and a few rams, a hundred cattle, and half a dozen of the best horses. I need not take more horses than that. They are all shy of a blackfellow, and there is not much fear of their being caught; so we need not bother about them, especially as, if they were taken away to new ground, they would give a lot more trouble than the sheep and cattle."

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Mr. Roberts had been a small landed proprietor in the old country, farming his own land. Times had been bad, and the failure of a bank, in which he had a few shares, had swept away not only all his ready money, but had brought upon him heavy calls which he was unable to meet. He had a brother who, some years before, had emigrated to New South Wales, and he had given so favourable an account of the country that Mr. Roberts decided to sell his land and emigrate there with his wife and two children, a boy and a girl. After meeting all claims, and paying their passages out, he had arrived at Sydney with the sum of £3000. He had wisely determined not to risk more than a third of this, and, placing £2000 in a bank, he had invested a thousand in sheep, cattle, and horses, and had taken up some land on the extreme border of the settlement. He had now been there four years, and had been well contented with his choice. The site was an exceptionally pleasant one. A small stream ran through the property, which was better wooded than most of the land in that part. His stock had increased fourfold, and although there had been occasional reports of trouble with the blacks, they had hitherto met with no molestation whatever. Natives had come and gone, and had always been hospitably received, and he certainly had no reason to believe that there was anything but good feeling between them and the inmates of the Springs, as the station was called, from a spring that rose some hundred and fifty yards away from the house and was situated some feet above the floor level, the water bubbling up into a barrel which was sunk in the ground. A pipe whose end was inserted in the barrel was buried underground, and through this the water flowed, giving a constant supply to the house. Another pipe conveyed the water to a trough, which had been erected for the use of the animals kept at the station. The other animals watered at the stream.

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The boy, who was now fifteen, had been for the past two years at Sydney, living at his uncle's and

attending school. In another year he was to return to the station. He had gone most reluctantly, but his father had said: "I can quite understand your liking this life, Ned, but I don't wish you to grow up simply a bush farmer. The colony is increasing fast, and there will be plenty of openings for a young fellow of intelligence and a fair education. I hope that by the time you grow up I shall be able to settle you on a farm like mine, and stock it well for you, if you decide upon following this sort of life, or to start you in any line that you may like to adopt in Sydney. You have had two years of running wild, and if you remain here you will speedily forget what little you have learned; but in any case, three years at school will be a great advantage to you."

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Effie, the daughter, was now fourteen, a strong healthy girl who could ride any horse on the station, had been taught to use both pistol and rifle, and was as bold and fearless as a boy.

It was late that night before Mr. Roberts returned, and the next day he and Thompson drove the stock down to Talbot's station, leaving strict injunctions that the other men were not to go far from the house, and were to keep the cattle and sheep in the stock-yard. He returned the following day, and for the next fortnight things went on as usual. Late one night, however, in the third week, Effie knocked at her father's door.

"I think there is something the matter, father," she called. "The animals are all uneasy in the yard. I don't know what has disturbed them, but they are evidently alarmed." In half a minute Mr. Roberts appeared at the door, and followed the girl to her room, which was at the back of the house, overlooking the stock-yard.

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"There is certainly something wrong, Effie," he said, after listening for a moment. "The horses and cattle are both uneasy."

He went downstairs to the room where the men slept. "Get up at once," he said; "there is something the matter. The horses and cattle are uneasy; I am afraid it is the blacks. Throw on your clothes and take your guns. We will go out at once and take down all the bars, so that if it is really the blacks the animals will have a chance of escaping. It is pitch dark, and even if there are some of them in the yard they are not likely to see us."

Two minutes later the door was very cautiously opened and the four men went out. Effie barred it behind them, and then joined her mother, who had hastily dressed. Both took their guns and went to Effie's window, which was already open.

"We shall not be able to see where to fire, mother."

"No, dear; but if the blacks do attack, we shall hear by their yelling whereabouts they are, and can fire in that direction. We may not hit any of them, but it will confuse and alarm them. However, remember, when we hear any stir, the first thing for you to do is to run down to the door in readiness to open it when your father and the men return."

"The sheep are moving about now; they were quiet before, mother."

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"It is likely the blacks will begin there," Mrs. Roberts said. "No doubt they are hungry, and it is always sheep that they make for first. They will very likely kill some and have a feast before attacking. I trust, however, that they may not attack at all. They must know that the house is a strong one, and may not care to risk their lives, but have only come to drive off the stock. Still, I am afraid they will try and attack, hoping we may be asleep and that they may gain entrance before we have time to get our rifles."

Four or five minutes later a low whistle was heard outside. Effie ran down and opened the door, when her father and the men at once entered and the door was bolted behind them.

"Well," Mr. Roberts said, "I fear there is no doubt that there are blacks about, and from the uneasiness of the animals I should say there are a good number of them. However, we are warned, and I think that the surprise will be on their side and not on ours. We removed all the bars, so the animals can get away if they like. Also, I have locked the door of the stable. Except for the uneasiness of the animals we saw no signs of the enemy at all. Now, the first thing to do is to get the shutters closed." This was at once done. Mr. Roberts had always been a little nervous of trouble with the blacks, so in addition to building his house of solid logs he had had strong loop-holed shutters arranged on all the windows of the lower story, which when closed were held in their position by massive cross-bars.

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They discussed the best position for each to take in case of attack, and having arranged this, one of the men went up to keep a look-out from the upper windows, while the rest of the party remained chatting in the sitting-room. "I wish there was a moon," Mr. Roberts said; "it is so dark that we shall be firing quite at random."

"Could we not make some sort of a torch," Effie suggested, "that would light up the place outside?"

"That is a first-rate idea, Effie; but how are we to manage it?"

The party sat silent for some minutes, then Effie said: "There is plenty of wool. How would it be to make a bundle of it about as big as my head, wind it round with wire, then soak it in paraffin. When the natives come we have only to put a match to it and throw it outside."

"Very good indeed, Effie," her father said; "let us try to carry out the idea at once, and as all the materials are to hand it will not take us long." In half an hour six of the balls were finished. Each had a short length of wire by which it could be thrown through the window. Fortunately there was plenty of paraffin, and a bucket being filled with it, the balls were soaked one after another, and were then carried upstairs each in a separate basin. "We shall have to be very careful how

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we throw them," Mr. Roberts said, "or else we shall be setting ourselves on fire. Thompson, you are, I think, the worst shot of the lot, as you are rather short-sighted. I will therefore trust this business to you. Have an old blanket ready to beat out any of the burning oil that may drop on the floor. Be careful also to keep as much in shelter as possible, some of the blacks are sure to have bows ready."

"All right, boss! you need not fear, I will look out. Now, as I am to be on duty upstairs, I might as well go up at once and send James down. I think, boss, you had better take post at the loopholes now, you may catch sight of one of the varmints against the sky-line. I will throw a ball as soon as I hear the first shot."

All was quiet for a quarter of an hour, then Effie suddenly fired. The shot was followed by a wild yell outside, and dozens of dark figures leaped to their feet and bounded towards the door, and strove to break it in with their waddies and axes. The defenders were all hard at work, and an occasional yell of pain showed that their bullets were taking effect. Suddenly there was an even wilder yell as a brilliant ball of fire fell twenty yards from the house, lighting up the front of it almost as if it were day. Every shot told now, and in a minute the natives fled with wild bounds outside the circle of light, but losing heavily before they vanished into the darkness.

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"Well, I do not think they will try that game again," Mr. Roberts said when the firing ceased, and after shaking hands wildly all round they sat down. "I did not expect them to attack so boldly. It is quite contrary to their usual habits, and if it had not been for the fire-ball I do not know how things would have gone. That was a splendid idea, Effie. Why, you ought to set up as an inventor!"

There was no further attack, but two hours later one of the men on watch thought he heard a movement in the neighbourhood of the spring, but on firing a shot in that direction all was quiet, and there was no further disturbance till day broke.

Soon after daylight all the party except the man on watch sat down to breakfast and discussed the events of the night.

"What do you think they will do next, father?" Effie asked.

"I do not know whether they will hunt down the cattle and horses, and drive them off, or whether they will hang round here for a time; it is difficult to say. At any rate I don't think we have any cause for uneasiness, except so far as touches one's pockets. It is lucky, indeed, that we shifted more than half our animals to Talbot's. Henceforth we must divide into two parties, and keep watch by turn, for we have provisions enough to last for a couple of months. They had only one chance, and that was to set the place on fire; but that we practically did away with when we took the shingles off the roof. They would never venture to bring sticks and fire up to the doors in the teeth of our rifles."

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Two hours passed quietly, then loud yells were heard, and a number of specks of fire shot through the air.

"Blazing arrows," the settler said quietly. "I expect they have a white man among them, an escaped convict, of course, and he has put them up to this. I don't fancy they use fire-arrows, though of course they may do so. Well, they can amuse themselves as long as they like; they may go on for four-and-twenty hours, but they will never set those beams on fire."

For ten minutes the flight of arrows continued. Those below could hear the constant tapping as the missiles struck the roof. At the end of that time they ceased to fall, the natives evidently recognizing that for some reason or other their attempt was a complete failure. They made no more efforts, but small groups of them could be seen out on the plain in pursuit of the animals. These, however, were evidently alarmed by the shouts and proceedings of the night before, and made off at the top of their speed whenever the natives approached. The horses were especially wild, and kept a considerable distance away.

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"It will take them a good many days to gather them in," Mr. Roberts said grimly. "Fortunately your horses and mine, Effie, are safe in the shed, and as we fastened the door, and it is commanded by the loopholes in the shutters on that side of the house, as long as we hold out they will be safe. As soon as the rascals have gone off I will ride into the settlements, get a dozen men to help us, and then we will set off in pursuit. I should think that by to-morrow at latest they are likely to give it up as a bad job. They must know that they have no chance of starving us out."

The blacks, however, evinced no intention of leaving. They could be seen moving about among the trees. By the smoke that rose in that direction it was evident that they had kindled large fires, but these were so far within the bush that their exact position could not be made out. A shot was fired from time to time when a black showed himself, but this was done rather for the purpose of showing that the besieged were on the watch than with the hope of hitting the quickly-moving figure. The main body of the sheep were huddled out on the plain half a mile away under the charge of two of the blacks. Leaving Mrs. Roberts and Effie on the watch, the rest of the party now went out and dragged the bodies of the natives who had been killed some distance from the house, and covered them with a thick layer of earth. Two or three of the sheep had been killed by chance shots, and these were carried in, skinned, and hung up.

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"That will be ample to last us," the colonist said; "they will be off long before these are eaten. This evening it is likely they will be making a great feast, but I expect to-morrow morning they will be off to carry out some fresh rascality elsewhere. If I thought they intended to stop here longer, I would try to get through them to-night to fetch help."

"I wouldn't do that, boss, in any case," one of the men said. "That is just what they are thinking

you will try to do, and I warrant they will be as thick as peas round the place to-night."

The next morning, however, it was seen that the blacks had no intention of moving at present. Parties of twos and threes were starting across the plain, evidently with the intention of driving in some of the cattle.

"I cannot make it out," one of the men said rather anxiously; "I can't think what their game can be. As a rule they strike a blow, have a big feast, and then are off at once, driving the sheep before them. It is quite contrary to their nature to loiter about like this. They must be up to some move or other, though what it is I cannot guess, for they must know well enough that they have not the ghost of a chance of taking this place. I feel sure they have got a white man with them. I caught a glimpse of a fellow who seemed to be dressed in white's clothes. He was well in among the trees, but I took a shot at him. It was not broad daylight and it was dark under the trees, so I could not swear to his being white; but if he wasn't he was some black who had rigged himself out in the clothes of some poor beggar they killed at the last station."

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In a few minutes they saw a number of blacks sally out from the wood. They planted themselves in small parties in a circle of half a mile round the farm, and presently all lay down and crept to within half that distance.

"They are determined that we sha'n't get away," Mr. Roberts said grimly. "Happily we do not want to do so."

As he spoke his wife's voice was heard.

"Come down, William, come down!"

There was no question that something was wrong. The settler ran below, and he saw by his wife's face that it was something very serious.

"What is it, Jane?" he asked anxiously.

"There is no water," she exclaimed. "I went to the tap to get some for the kettle; a quart or two trickled out and then it stopped."

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Her husband stood stupefied at the news.

"I thought yesterday that it was not running as fast as usual, but I did not give it a second thought."

"They must have done something to the spring. Some of the natives who have been here must have noticed you drawing water, and have told other blackfellows of the water running out from the side of a wall whenever you wanted it. If there is a white man among them he would, when he heard the story, be sure that water was obtained from a spring. He would hear about a barrel being sunk in the ground, and I have no doubt that, after their attack failed the night before last, he had the pipe stopped up. If you recollect, James thought he heard somebody up there and fired. I have no doubt it was then that they played this trick. There would be enough water in the pipe itself to supply us yesterday; now it has come to an end. This accounts for their stopping here. It is a terrible blow, and it may be a fatal one."

He then went up to the men and explained what had happened. All saw how serious the position had at once become.

"We must hold on till the last, sir," one of them said. "You may be sure that they would spare none of us after losing so many of their men the other night."

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"My wife says there is rather over two quarts of water left. We must content ourselves with half a pint a day; that would last us for three days. When we are thirsty we must chew some of the raw meat; in that way we ought to be able to hold out for four or five days. Before that time the news that we are besieged here may reach the settlements, or some of our friends may ride over. We will fire a rifle every five minutes or so to give them warning that something is up, and they will take care not to fall into an ambush, and as soon as they find how matters stand will ride back and bring help."

It was but a feeble ground for hope, but all agreed that it might happen as he said.

"Do you think that there is any chance of getting through, Mr. Roberts? I could try if you like," Thompson said.

"I should say not the slightest; and now we know what they reckon upon, you may be sure that the whole of them are pretty close round the house at night. They are as cunning as cats at their own work, and a man would be riddled with spears before he had gone twenty yards."

Effie had gone up after her father, and listened in silence to the conversation. Suddenly she said: "You forget the apples, father. Surely they would do to quench our thirst."

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"Capital, Effie! I had forgotten all about them. There are six barrels in the cellar, and with their aid we can hold out for a long time. That alters the position altogether." There was a general exclamation of satisfaction from the men; the grimness of their faces relaxed, and they shook hands heartily in their relief at their escape from what they all felt was a terrible danger.

Two days passed. The cordon round the house was steadily maintained. Shots were fired every five minutes, but the natives all lay under shelter, and there was no sign that the firing had had any effect. Several times the possibility of making a dash through them on one of the horses was discussed, but each time was negatived. The alarm would be given as soon as the horse was led out from the stable, and the blackfellows would have time to gather at any point.

Effie went out twice a day with food for the horses, and each time carried a dozen large apples in her apron, which she gave them after they had eaten their corn. On the evening of the second day she took with her a bottle of oil, with which she carefully lubricated the hinges of the door and the padlock. The first day she had said to herself over and over again: "If Jack were here I am sure he would manage to get out." On the second day she said to herself: "If Jack could do so why shouldn't I? We may hold out till they go away, but if we do they will go somewhere else and kill some other settlers; while if we could but give them a lesson they might not come again for a long time." She waited another day in hopes that the blacks would leave. When they did not do so, she decided to make the attempt that night.

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On leaving the stable she put the padlock into its place, but did not lock it; then she wrote a line to leave in her room, telling her parents what she had done. She had, during the day, taken out a suit of her brother's clothes, which fitted her fairly well. She had already saddled her horse, and put his bridle on. When she went up to bed she changed her clothes, knowing that it would be far easier to crawl in boy's clothes than in her own. Her window had been open all day, and she now fastened two blankets firmly together, tied one end to the leg of a table by the window, and after waiting until she knew that all the house, with the exception of the two men on guard, were fairly asleep, she slid down the blanket. It was but some ten feet to the ground. She was now within a few yards of the stable, which was built facing the house. She opened the door, noiselessly felt her way to her horse, and led it to the door. Then she laid the reins across his neck, stroked his nose—a signal which he well understood was an order for him to stand still until she whistled for him,—and then she lay down and crawled noiselessly along. She had left her shoes behind her lest they should scrape against the wall while she descended.

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The night was pitch dark, and she progressed very slowly, pausing for a moment after each step she made, to listen for the sound of breathing, or for some movement that would tell her she was near one of the enemy. Once or twice she heard slight sounds and changed her course. As it was the stock-yard she was crossing, there was no vegetation by brushing against which she might cause a rustling of leaves. She had, on leaving the stable, made first for the bars dividing the sheep from the horses, judging that the natives would be thickest round the entrance to the horse-pen, as it was through this a horseman would naturally pass on his way out. Once through, she kept for the most part close to the bars, as she would thus be less likely to be observed than if she crossed the open. So she kept on until she came to the outer bars. Here she lay for some time listening intently. She heard murmured sounds on both sides of her, but especially towards the gates of the sheep-yard. At last, convinced that no one could be within some yards of her, she crawled under the lower bar and kept straight on. She had the comfort of knowing that it was not for any slight sound the blacks would be listening, but for the opening of the door of the house or stables. She crawled for a good quarter of a mile before she felt assured that she was well beyond the cordon of natives.

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Then she stood up, put the whistle she always carried to her lips, and blew twice, sharply and loudly. In the stillness of the night she could instantly hear the sound of a horse's feet. Then there was a burst of yells and shouts. This continued, but the rapid tramp of hoofs kept on. She whistled again, and a minute later the horse dashed up to her. She sprang on his back with a word of encouragement, patted him on the neck, and then set off at full speed. A hundred yards behind, the blacks were running as hard as they could, filling the air with their shouts, but she felt that she was safe now. The strong steady pace showed her that the horse could not have sustained any serious injury. This indeed was the case. So swiftly was the distant whistle followed by the approach of the galloping horse that the blacks had scarce time to take up their spears and waddies when the animal dashed through them, scattering those in its path like chaff before him. Spears had been thrown, but they were aimed high, at the rider who they believed was in the saddle, and only one had slightly grazed the animal's back. The girl took a circuit, lest some of the blacks should be on the road, and knowing every foot of the country she regained the track two miles farther on, at which time she had eased down to a speed which she knew the horse could maintain for a long time. The forty miles between the Springs and Talbot's farm were performed under four hours. Leaping from the horse she knocked at the door, and a voice from an upper window soon asked: "Who's there, and what is wanted?" A few words explained her errand. She heard Mr. Talbot's voice shouting to the men, and soon the door was opened.

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"Besieged for four days by blacks, Miss Roberts! I never heard of their doing such a thing before. Have you had hard fighting?"

"No; they made a rush at first, but we easily beat them off. But they cut off our water-supply, and have been lying round to prevent any of us getting away, making sure that we should have to give in from thirst. Fortunately we have plenty of apples and could keep going for another fortnight. They have a white man with them, and no doubt it was he who put them up to cutting the water-pipe. Will you send out to all the settlers round? I am going to ride on to Pickford to fetch the constabulary there."



EFFIE GIVES THE ALARM

"No, indeed!" Mr. Talbot said; "you have done enough for to-night. I will start at once for Pickford, and my men will go off to the settlers round. We shall have at least twenty or five-and-twenty here by nine o'clock to-morrow. I will leave one of my men here, and my wife will look after you, and make you comfortable. It is past two o'clock now. I shall be at Pickford by six, and by ten or eleven Lieutenant Jordan and his twelve men will arrive. I have plenty of horses in the yard, and while the police are having breakfast we can change the saddles. We won't hurry on the way to your place, as we shall want the horses to be pretty fresh, so as to take up the pursuit of the blacks. An hour one way or another will make no difference to your people, as the blacks will hardly attack in daylight. Of course they may make a final attempt to take the place to-night, for your escape will tell them that they have no time to lose. I should not be surprised if they make off the first thing in the morning. However, we will follow them up, and are certain to overtake them if they try, as no doubt they will, to carry off some of the cattle and sheep. Jordan will be delighted at the chance of giving them a lesson that will keep them quiet for some time to come. I won't stop now to ask you how you got out; you can tell us about that as we ride back with you."

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Mrs. Talbot had now come down, and in a few minutes Effie was in bed, having the satisfaction, before she retired, of hearing five mounted men ride off at full gallop, and of knowing that her horse had been well cared for. She was up at eight and assisting Mrs. Talbot to prepare breakfast for the expected arrivals. It was not long before the first comers rode in, all eager to rescue the party at the Springs, and to inflict a heavy blow upon the natives. Each, on the arrival of Mr. Talbot's messengers, had sent off men in other directions, and by nine o'clock thirty had arrived. All carried rifles and pistols, and each brought a led horse with him, as Mr. Talbot had told the men to suggest that they should do so, for they would not be able to obtain remounts at the Springs, and as they might have to follow up the blacks for a considerable distance it was well that each should have two horses.

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As Effie felt shy about appearing in boy's clothes, Mrs. Talbot lent her a blouse and skirt. Great was the admiration expressed when she told how she had undertaken on her own account to fetch assistance, and how she had successfully carried out the attempt. Mr. Talbot, with the party of police, came in at eleven o'clock, by which time a dozen more settlers, who lived at a greater distance than the earlier comers, had also arrived; after a halt for half an hour to give the police a chance of a meal, the whole party started. The horses of the police had a good feed, and each trooper was furnished with another mount from Mr. Talbot's yard. These their officer decided had better be led until they reached the Springs, and they would then be able to start in pursuit on comparatively fresh animals. Effie, of course, rode with them. Although she felt certain that all was well, she was in a fever of excitement to get home. She knew her parents would be very anxious about her. Her absence would have been discovered directly she started, as the outburst of the yells would have caused all to catch up their rifles and run to the windows. If, as Mr. Talbot had thought likely, the natives, on finding that she had got off safely, had made an attack upon the house, the defenders would feel assured that she had got safely away, and in any case the

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absence of any yells of exultation would be almost proof that she had succeeded. It was just four o'clock when they reached the Springs. No signs of the blacks had been met with, and as the party rode down the slope towards the house, Mr. Roberts, his wife, and the men ran out to receive them.

"You have frightened us horribly, Effie," her father said, after the first greetings, "but we felt sure that you must have got away. We could not tell that you would not be overtaken, though we had every hope that you were safe. Thompson, who was on watch on that side, declared that he heard one of the horses gallop off just before the row began, and before that he had heard what he was sure was your whistle some distance away, but he could not tell that the horse had got safely through, or that he had not been so severely injured as to be unable to carry you far. Thank God that it has all turned out well! You ought not to have made the attempt without consulting us, and you may be very sure that we should not have allowed you to try if you had."

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"That was just why I did not do so, father," the girl said. "No one could have done it but I, because neither of the horses would have answered to the whistle. Besides, being so much smaller and lighter, I had a better chance of getting through."

"You must not scold her, Roberts," Mr. Talbot, who had been standing close by, said. "She has done a splendid action, and you and her mother ought to be proud of her. She will be regarded as a heroine by the whole district."

While they were speaking, the police-officer had been questioning the men, and learnt that a few minutes after the girl left there had been a fierce attack on the house, which had been repulsed with the loss of some fifteen of the assailants, and that, when day broke, the natives had been seen making off in the distance with fifty or sixty cattle, and a flock of two or three hundred sheep. No time was lost. Bags of flour and parcels of tea and sugar were made up. No meat was taken, as the natives were sure to spear any animals that could not keep up with the main flock. The saddles were all shifted to the horses that were being led, and half an hour after their arrival the party were in their saddles again, Mr. Roberts riding his own horse and his men three that the blacks had been unable to catch, but which had remained close to the station, and which were now easily driven in. It was not thought necessary to leave any guard at the farm, and when it was proposed, Mrs. Roberts laughed at the idea.

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"The blacks have all gone," she said, "but if there are a few still lurking about, Effie and I can easily defend the house. We will take care not to stir out till you return."

Three days later the party returned. They had overtaken the blacks on the evening of the day after starting, had killed at least half of them, including their white leader, and had recovered all the animals. So sharp was the lesson that the Roberts family were never afterwards troubled by a hostile visit from the natives.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A SOLDIER'S DAUGHTER, AND OTHER
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