

The Ruby Sword
A Romance
Of
Baluchistan

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*Free*editorial 

THE RUBY SWORD

"A ROMANCE OF BALUCHISTAN"

Chapter One.

The Ghazis.

"We love to roam, the wide world our home,
As the rushing whirlwind free;
O'er sea and land, and foreign strand,
Who would not a wanderer be!

"To the far off scenes of our youthful dreams
With a lightsome heart we go;
On the willing hack, or the charger's back,
Or the weary camel slow."

Thus sang the wayfarer to himself as he urged a potentially willing, but certainly very tired hack along the stony, sandy road which wound gradually up the defile; now overhanging a broad, dry watercourse, now threading an expanse of stunted juniper—the whole constituting a most depressing waste, destitute alike of animal, bird—or even insect—life.

The wayfarer sang to keep up his spirits, for the desolation of the surroundings had already begun to get upon his nerves. He was thoroughly tired out, and very thirsty, a combination of discomfort which is apt to get upon one's temper as well. His steed, a sorry quadruped at best, seemed hardly able to put one leg before another, wearied out with a long day's march over arid plains, where the sun blazed down as a vast burning-glass upon slabs of rock and mounds of dry soil, streaked white here and there with gypsum—and now the ascent, gradual as it was, of the mountain defile had about finished both horse and rider.

Twice had the latter dismounted, with a view to sparing his worn-out steed by leading it. But the exasperating quadruped, in shameful disregard of the superabundant intelligence wherewith popular superstition persists in endowing that noble—but intensely stupid—animal the horse, flatly refused to be led; standing stockstill with every attempt. So his efforts in the cause of combined humanity and expediency thus defeated, the wayfarer had no alternative but to keep his saddle, where, sitting wearily, and with feet kicked limply from the stirrups, he now and then swung a spur-armed heel into the

bony ribs—which incentive had about as much effect as if applied to an ordinary jog the while he went on half singing, half humming, to himself:

“There’s a charm in the crag, there’s a charm in the cloud,
There’s a charm in the earthquake’s throe;
When the hills are wrapt in a moonlit shroud
There’s a charm in the glacier’s snow.

“We bask in the blaze of the sun’s bright rays
By the murmuring river’s flow;
And we scale the peak of the mountain steep,
And gaze on the storms below.

“For use around a snug camp fire, that would be an excellent traveller’s song,” said this one to himself—“But in the present instance I fear it will be ‘gaze on the storms above,’ and I don’t like it.”

Away up the pass a dark curtain of cloud, ominous and now growing inky black in the subdued light following upon sunset, seemed to justify the wayfarer’s foreboding. It was distant enough as yet, but hung right over what would surely be the said wayfarer’s path.

“No, I don’t like it,” he went on, talking out loud to himself as he frequently did when travelling alone. “It looks very like a night in the open; nothing to eat, though there’ll be plenty to drink presently in the shape of rain-water, no shelter unless one can light upon an overhanging rock. A sweet country to be landed down in without any of the appliances of civilisation, and, from all accounts, not altogether a safe one for the homeless wanderer. Decidedly the prospect is gaudy. It positively corruscates with cheerfulness.”

For which grim irony there was ample justification. Sundown had brought no abatement of the boding oppressive heat, wherein not a breath of air was stirring. Great hills shot up to the fast glooming sky on either hand; now from the edge of the road itself, now from the valley bottom, in no part of great width—beyond the stony bed of the dry watercourse; their sides cleft here and there from base to summit by a jagged, perpendicular rift—black and cavernous—their serrated ridges piled on high in a confused jumble of sharp peak and castellated formation—the home of the markhoor and mountain sheep. Here a smooth, unbroken slab of rock, sloping at the well nigh precipitous angle of a high-pitched roof—there, at an easier slant, a great expanse of rock face, seamed and criss-crossed with chasms, like the crevasses on a glacier. No vegetation, either, to relieve the all pervading, depressing greyness, save where a ragged juniper or pistachio had found anchor along a ledge, or fringed the lip of some dark chasm aforesaid.

No turn of the road brought any relief to the eye—any lifting of the unconscious oppression which lay upon the mind; ever the same hills, sheering aloft, fearsome in their dark ruggedness, conveying the idea of vast and wellnigh untrodden fastnesses, grim, repellent, mysterious. Nor below did variety lie; the same lifeless juniper forest, its dreary trees set wide apart, its stoniness in places concealed by a coarse growth of grass, or sparse and stunted shrub. For of such are the wild mountain tracts of Baluchistan.

From an adjacent crag a raven croaked. The hoarse “cauk-cauk” cleft the air with a startling suddenness, breaking in as it did upon the lifeless and boding silence. High overhead a huge bird of prey circled in the now glooming twilight, as though searching with lingering reluctance for some sign of life, where there was no life, ere seeking its roost among the black recesses of yon cliff-walled chasm.

“The sole signs of life emblems of fierce predatoriness and death—” thought the wayfarer to himself. Very meet, indeed, for the surroundings in which they were set. Below, ere leaving the plain country, he had passed flocks of black-haired goats grazing, in charge of armed herdsmen; or now and again a string of camels and asses—the motive power of a party of wandering Baluchis. Some had given him the “Salaam,” and some had scowled resentfully at him as an intruder and an infidel; but even of these he would almost gladly have welcomed the sight now, so entirely depressing was the utter lifelessness of this uninhabited land. Yet it could not be entirely uninhabited, for here and there he had passed patches of corn land in the valley bottom, which must have been under cultivation at one time, though now abandoned.

The cloud-curtain away in front began to give forth red fitful gleams, and once or twice a low boom of distant thunder stirred the atmospheric stillness. But the double crash that burst from the hillside now—those red jets of flame—meant no war of the elements. At the same time, with a buzzing, humming noise, something passed over the wayfarer’s head.

Even the weary, played out steed was startled into a snort and a shy. The rider, on his part, was not a little startled too, as he recalled the evil reputation of the hill tribesmen, and realised that he himself was at that moment constituting a target to some of these. Still, he would not show alarm if he could help it.

“Salaam!” he shouted, raising his right hand with the palm outward and open; a peace sign recognised by other barbarians among whom he had at one time moved. “Salaam!” And his gaze was fixed anxiously upon the group of boulders whence the shots had been fired.

For a moment there was no answer—Then it came—took shape, indeed, after a fashion that was sufficiently alarming. Five figures sprang from their place of concealment—five tall, copper-coloured, hook-nosed barbarians, their fierce eyes gleaming with fanatical and racial hatred—their black hair flowing in long locks beneath their ample white turbans. Each held aloft a wicked looking, curved sword, and two carried jezails, whose muzzles still smoked from the shots just fired from them.

All this the wayfarer took in as in a lightning flash, as these wild beings whirled down upon him. Their terrific aspect—the white quiver of the naked swords, their ferocious yells stunning his ears, conveyed meaning enough. He realised that this was a time to run—not to fight.

Luckily the horse, forgetting for the moment its weariness in the terror of this sudden onslaught, sprang forward without waiting for the spurs now rammed so hard and deep into its ribs. But the assailants had chosen their ground well. The road here made a sudden descent—and was rough and stony withal. The fleet-footed mountaineers could travel as fast as the horse. Their flight over that rugged ground seemed as the flight of a bird.

The foremost, wellnigh alongside, held his sword ready for a fatal sweep. The awful devilish look on the face of this savage appalled the traveller. It was now or never. He put his hand behind him; then, pointing the revolver straight at his assailant, pressed the trigger. The pistol was small, but hard driving. At such close quarters it could not miss. The barbarian seemed to double up—and fell backwards on to his head, flinging his arms in the air—his sword falling, with a metallic clang, several yards away among the stones.

Just that brief delay saved the traveller. His assailants, now reduced to four, halted but momentarily to look at their stricken comrade, and by dint of rowelling the sides of his steed until the blood flowed freely, he was able to keep the exhausted animal as near to a gallop as it was capable of attaining. But the respite was brief. Their bloodcurdling yells perfectly demoniacal now, the barbarians leaped forward in pursuit. They seemed to fly. The tired horse could never hope to outstrip them.

And as he thus fled, the wayfarer felt the cold shadow of Death's portal already chill upon his brow, for he realised that his chances were practically nil. He had heard of the "Ghazi" mania, which combined the uncontrollable fighting frenzy of the old Norse Berserk with the fervid fury of religious fanaticism. There was no warfare then existing with any of the tribes of Baluchistan. These people, therefore, were Ghazis, the most desperate and dangerous enemies to deal with, because utterly fearless, utterly reckless.

He had still five chambers in his pistol, but the weapon was small, and quite unreliable, save at point blank—in which case his enemies would cut him down before he had time to account for more than one of themselves.

All this flashed through his mind. Then he realised that the ferocious yelling had ceased. He looked back. A turn in the road hid the pursuers from view, and now it was nearly dark. But the darkness brought hope. Had they abandoned the pursuit? Or could he not conceal himself in some of the holes and crevices on the stony hillside until they should be tired of searching?

Still keeping his steed at its best speed—and that was not great—so as to ensure a good start, he held on, warily listening for any sound of his pursuers—and thus covered about two miles. A thunder peal rolled heavily—its echoes reverberating from crag to crag—and the cloud-curtain in front was alive with a dazzle of sheeting flame, which lit up the road and the dreary landscape like noonday. By its light he looked back. Still no sign of the pursuers, whose white flowing garments could not have failed to catch his eye. Hope—strong hope—rekindled within him.

But not for long. His horse, thoroughly blown, dropped into a walk. A walk? A crawl rather, for the poor beast staggered along, its flanks heaving violently, swaying at times, as though the mere effort to drag one leg after another would bring it down, and once down well its rider knew there would be no more rising. And then? One man—alone, dismounted, inadequately armed—in the vast heart of an unknown country, tracked down by fleet-footed pitiless destroyers, stung to a frenzy of massacre by a twofold incentive—blood feud for a comrade slain, and the fanatical dictates—or supposed dictates—of the most merciless religion in the world. There could be but one end.

Again he dismounted. The horse, relieved of so much weight, seemed to pant less distressingly. Every moment thus lost was a moment gained by his bloodthirsty enemies to come up with him, yet he felt it to be the wisest policy to spare his steed to the very utmost. Then he climbed into the saddle once more.

Now the storm was wellnigh overhead. The thunder roared and crashed, and great drops of rain shone like silver in the momentary dazzle of the lightning gleam—In that livid flare, too, the peaks stood forth on high, silhouetted against the heavens, and every bough of the ragged juniper trees was clearly and delicately defined.

Something else, too, was clearly but appallingly defined—to wit, four white-clad figures—with bronzed faces and flowing hair and flaming eyes; and the sheen and flash of four curved naked swords. They had been running in silence hitherto—but now—with a deafening howl they hurled themselves forward on their prey—

Without even cocking his revolver, the hunted man dropped it to the present and pressed the trigger. It would not move. Then he drew up the hammer—no—tried to—It, too, would not move. The cylinder was jammed. The cartridges—which he had purchased at one of those large co-operative stores, where they sell many things, but nothing reliable—were too tight a fit. The weapon was as useless as a bit of stick.

With a bitter curse upon the pettifogging dishonesty of his trading fellow countrymen, the now desperate man wrenched off one of the stirrups—not a bad weapon at a pinch—But once more fortune befriended him. The horse, spurred by terror to one more effort, plunged down the road, which now made a sudden descent. The stunning report of a jezail, which the Ghazis had presumably stopped to reload, added to its terror, but the missile hummed harmlessly by. And now in the ceaseless gleam of the lightning, the fugitive saw right before him at the base of the slope, the wide stony bed of a watercourse.

On, on, on, anyhow—though where safety lay was too great a hope to enter his despairing brain—Then, drawing nearer and nearer from the hills on his right came a strange, swirling, rushing roar. It was not the thunder. It had a note of its own as it boomed louder and louder with every second. It was as the breaking of surf against the base of an echoing cliff. And as another vivid lightning flash lit up the whole landscape with a noonday flare, the traveller beheld a sight that was appalling in its wild terror.

A wall of water was sweeping down the dry nullah—a vast brown muddy wave, many feet high. His escape was cut off. Yet not. So far it had not reached the point where the road crossed. Could he be before it there was safety. Otherwise death, either way.

In the nullah now, the slipping, stumbling horsehoofs were flashing up showers of sparks in the blackness—Then another lightning gleam. The fugitive glanced to the right, then wished he had not. The advancing flood, tossing against the livid sky, was so awful as to unnerve him, and he was just half way across. The four Ghazis arrived on the bank, but even they shrank back from the roaring terror of that wave wall. But the remaining loaded jezail spoke—and the miserable steed, stricken by the missile, plunged forward, throwing the rider hard upon his head.

The wild triumph scream of the furious fanatics, leaping like demons in the lightning's glare, was drowned by the bellowing voice of the flood. It poured by—and now the whole wide bed of the watercourse was a very hell of seething roaring waves. But on the further side from the bloodthirsty Ghazis lay the motionless form of a man—He lay at full length, face downwards, and the swirling eddies on the extreme edge of the furious flood

were just washing the soles of his riding boots, and leaving little wisps of twigs and straws sticking in his upturned spurs.

Chapter Two.

Through Flood.

Ernest Aurelius Upward was the chief official in charge of the Government forests of Baluchistan.

Now the said "forests" had about as much affinity to the idea of sylvan wildness conveyed by that term as many of the Highland so-called deer forests; in that they were mainly distinguishable by a conspicuous lack of trees; such trees as there were consisting wellnigh entirely of the stunted, profitless, and utterly unpicturesque juniper, which straggling over the slopes of the hills and devoid of undergrowth imparted to the arid and stony landscape somewhat of the aspect of a vast continental burying-ground, badly kept and three parts forgotten.

Being thus devoid of undergrowth, the land was proportionately depleted of wild life, since game requires covert. This added not to its attractions in the eyes of Ernest Aurelius, who was a keen Nimrod. He had been a mighty slayer of tiger during an experience of many years spent in the Indian forest service. Long indeed was the death roll of "Stripes" when that energetic official was around with rifle and camp outfit among the jungly hills of his North West Province section. Of panther he had long since ceased to keep count, while cheetah or blackbuck he reckoned in with such small game as partridge or snipe. We have said that the great rugged slopes and towering crags of his present charge still held the markhôr and wild mountain sheep; but Upward was not so young as he had been and remembering the fine times he had had with the far easier shikar of the lower country, frankly declared his distaste for the hard labour involved in swarming up all manner of inaccessible heights at all sorts of unearthly hours of the day or night on the off-chance of one precarious shot. So the gadh and markhôr, so far as he was concerned, went unmolested.

But its lack of sport notwithstanding, his present charge had its compensations. Life in camp among these elevated mountain ranges was healthful and not unpleasant. At an altitude of anything up to 8,000 feet the air stirred keen and fresh, and the climate of Shâlalai, the cantonment station where he had his headquarters in the shape of a snug, roomy bungalow and a garden in which he took much pride, was appreciated alike by himself and others, to whom recollection was still vivid of the torrid, enervating exhaustion of plains stations. Furthermore his term of retirement was not many years distant and on the whole, Upward found no great reason for discontent.

And now as we first make his personal acquaintance, he is riding slowly across the valley bottom towards his camp. His mackintosh is streaming with wet, and the collar tucked

up to his ears, for the rain is falling in a steady pitiless downpour. Two men of his Pathân forest guard walk behind, one carrying his master's gun, the other a few brace of chikór or grey partridge, an abominable unsporting biped, whom no amount of education will convince of his duty to rise and be shot. The evening has closed in wet and stormy, and the lightning gleam sheds its red blaze upon the white tents of the camp. These tents, in number about a dozen, are pitched among the trees of an apricot tope, whose leafage is just beginning to bud forth anew after the devastations of a flight of locusts. In front the valley bottom is open and comparatively level but behind, the mountain range rises rugged and abrupt—its face cleft by the black jaws of a fine tangi, narrow, but with perpendicular sides rising to an altitude of several hundred feet. This picturesquely forbidding chasm acts in rainy weather as a feeder to the now dry watercourse on whose bank the camp is pitched.

The lamps are already lighted, and in one of the larger tents a lady is seated reading. She looks up as Upward enters.

“What sport have you had, Ernest?”

“Only seven brace and a half.”

“Oh come, that's not so bad. Are you very wet?”

“No—but my Terai hat is about spoiled; wish I had put on another,” flinging off the soaked headgear in question. “These beastly storms crop up every afternoon now, and always at the same time. There's no fun in going out shooting. Khola, Peg lao.”

The well trained bearer, who has been assisting his master out of his soaked mackintosh, moves swiftly and noiselessly in quest of the needed “peg.”

“Well, I'll go and change. Where are the girls?”

“In their own tent. Hurry up though. Dinner must be quite ready.”

By the time Upward is dried and toiletted—a process which does not take him long—“the girls” are in. Two of them are not yet out of the short frock stage. These are his own children, and are aged fourteen and twelve respectively. The third, however, who is a couple of years beyond her teens, is no relation, but a guest.

“Did you have any sport, Mr Upward?” says the latter, as they sat down to table.

“No—there’s no sport in chikór shooting. The chikór is the most unsporting bird in the world. He won’t rise to be shot at.”

“What on earth do we stay on here for then?” says the elder of the two children, who, like many Indian and colonially raised children, is not slow to volunteer an opinion. “I wish we were going back to Shâlalai to-morrow.”

“So do I,” cuts in the other promptly.

“Oh—do you!” responds her parent mingling for himself a “peg”—“Why, the other day you were all for getting into camp. You were sick of Shâlalai, and everybody in it.”

“Well, we are not now. It’s beastly here, and always raining,” says the younger one, teasing a little fox terrier under the table until it yelps and snarls.

“Do go on with your dinner, Hazel, and leave the dog alone,” urges her mother in the mildest tone of gentle remonstrance.

“Oh, all right,” with a pout and flounce. She is a queer, dark-complexioned little elf is Hazel, with a vast mane of hair nearly as large as herself—and loth to accept reproof or injunction without protest—The other laughs meaningly, and then a squabble arises—for they are prone to squabbling—which is finally quelled.

“Well, and what do you think, Miss Cheriton?” says Upward turning to their guest, when this desirable result has been achieved. “Are you sick of camp yet?”

“N-no—I don’t think I am—At least—of course I’m not.”

“I’m afraid Nesta does find it slow,” puts in Mrs Upward—But before Nesta Cheriton can utter a disclaimer, the other of the two children gives a whistle.

“Lily, my dear girl!” expostulates her mother.

“I can’t help it. Slow? I should think Nesta did find it slow. Why, she was only saying this morning she’d give ten years of her life for a little excitement.”

“Lily is simply ‘embroidering,’ Mr Upward,” pleads Nesta, with a bright laugh. “I said—at anytime—not only now or here.”

“We could have found you excitement enough in some of my other districts. You could have come after tiger with me.”

“Oh no—no! That isn’t the kind of thing I mean—And I can’t think how Mrs Upward could have done it”—with a glance at the latter. For this gentle, refined looking woman with the pretty eyes and soft, charming manner, had stood by her husband’s side when the striped demon of the jungle, maddened with his wounds, ears laid back and eyes flashing green flame, had swooped upon them in lightning charge, uttering that awful coughing roar calculated to unnerve the stoutest of hearts—to drop, as though lightning-struck, before the heavy Express bullet directed by a steady hand and unflinching brain.

“Well, the kind of excitement you mean will roll up in a day or two in the shape of Bracebrydge and Fleming”—replies Upward, with a genial twinkle in his eyes—“they want to come after the chikór. It’s rather a nuisance—This place won’t carry two camps. But I say, Miss Cheriton, those fellows won’t do any chikór shooting.”

“Why not?—Isn’t that what they are coming for?”

“Oh, yes. But then, you see, when the time comes to go out, each of them will make some excuse to remain behind—or to double back. Neither will want to leave the field open to the other.”

“Ah, but—I don’t care for either of them,” laughed Nesta, not pretending to misunderstand his meaning.

“Not? Why everybody is in love with Bracebrydge—or he thinks they are—There’s only one thing I must warn you against, and that is not to spell his name with an ‘I’. There are two girls in Shâlalai to my knowledge who wrecked all their chances on that rock.”

“Nonsense Ernest”—laughed his wife. “How can you talk such a lot of rubbish? To talk sense now. I wonder when Mr Campian will turn up?”

“Any day or no day. Campian’s such an uncertain bird. He never knows his own plans himself. If he didn’t know whether he was coming overland from Bombay or round by sea to Karachi, I don’t see how I can. Anyway, I wrote him to the B.I. agents at Karachi telling him how to get to Shâlalai, and left a letter there for him telling him how to get here. I couldn’t do more. Khola, cheroot, lao.”

Dinner was over now, and very snug the interior of the tent looked in the cheerful lamplight, as Upward, selecting a cheroot from the box the bearer had just deposited in front of him, proceeded to puff away contentedly. The rain pattered with monotonous regularity on the canvas, and, reverberating among the crags, the thunder rolled in deep-toned boom.

“Beastly sort of night,” said Upward, flicking the ash from his cheroot. “The storm’s passing over though. By Jove! I shouldn’t wonder if it brought the tangi down. It must be falling heavy in that catchment area.”

A shade of alarm came into Nesta Cheriton’s face.

“Should we be—er—quite safe here if it did?” she asked.

“Rather,” said Upward. “The water comes through the tangi itself like an express train, but the nullah widens out below and runs off the water. No fear. It has never been up as high as this. In fact, it couldn’t. By George! What was that?”

The two younger girls had got out cards and were deep in some game productive of much squabbling. The conversation among their elders had been carried on in an easy, placid, after-dinner tone. But through all there came, distinctly audible, the sound of a sharp, heavy report, not so very distant either.

“That’s a shot, I’ll swear!” cried Upward excitedly, rising to his feet and listening intently. “Thunder? No fear. It’s a shot. No mistaking a shot. But who the deuce would be firing shots here and at this time of night? Shut up Tinkles—shut up you little soor!” as the little fox terrier charged savagely towards the purdah, uttering shrill, excited barks.

Various emotions were manifest on the countenances of the listeners—one or two even expressing a shade akin to fear. As they stood thus, with nerves at tension, a new sound rushed forth upon the silence of the night—a sort of hollow, bellowing roar—nearer and nearer—louder and louder.

“The tangi!” cried Upward. “By George! the tangi is down.”

“Hurrah! hurrah!” crowed Lily, clapping her hands. “Let’s go and look at it. Come along, Nesta. Here’s some excitement at last!”

“Wait for the lantern. Wait—wait—do you hear?” cried her mother. “It’s very dark; you might tumble in.”

“Oh, hang the lantern,” grumbled Lily. “The water will have passed by that time, and I want to see it rush out.”

She had her wish, however, for the lantern being quickly lighted, the whole party stepped forth into the rain and the darkness. At first nothing was visible, but as the radius of light struck upon the vertical jaws of the great black chasm, they stopped for a moment, awed, appalled—almost instinctively stepping back.

Forth from those vertical jaws vomited a perfect terror of roaring, raging water. It was more like a vast spout than a mere stream was this awful flood; of inky blackness save where the broken waves, meeting a projection, seethed and hissed; and, amid the deafening tumult, the rattle of rocks, loosened from their bed, and shot along like timber by the velocity of the waters, mingled with the crash of tree trunks against the smooth cliff walls of the rift. In a moment, with a roar like a thunder burst, it had spread itself over the dry face of the nullah, which was now rolling many feet deep of mountainous swirling waves.

For a few moments they stood contemplating the wild tumult by the light of the lantern. Then Mrs Upward, her voice hardly audible through the bellowing of the waters, said:

“Now girls, we’d better go in. It’s raining hard still.”

This drew a vehement protest from Hazel and Lily. It was such fun watching the flood, they urged. What did it matter about a little rain? and so forth. But Tinkles, the little fox terrier, was now barking furiously at something or other unseen, keeping, however, very close to her master’s legs, for all her expenditure of vocal ferocity. Then a voice came out of the darkness—a male voice which, although soft and pleasing, caused Nesta Cheriton to start and cling involuntary to Upward’s arm.

“Huzoor!” (A form of greeting more deferential than the better known “Sahib.”)

“What is it, Bhallu Khan?” said Upward, as the voice and the light of the lantern revealed the chief forest guard.

The latter now began speaking quickly in Hindustani. Had the Huzoor heard anything? Yes? Well there was something going on yonder. Just before the tangi came down there was a shot fired. It was on the other side of the nullah. Something was going on.

Now Bhallu Khan was inclined to be long-winded in his statements. It was raining smartly, and Upward grew impatient.

“I don’t see what we can do,” he bellowed through the roar of the water. “We can’t even go and see what’s up. The tangi is down, and the tumasha, whatever it is, was on the other side.”

“Not all the time, Huzoor,” urged the forest guard. “While the roar of the water was yet distant, we heard a strange noise—yes, a very strange noise—It was as the clatter of hoofs in the bed of the dry nullah, of shod hoofs. And then there was another shot—and the hoof-strokes seemed to cease. Then the water came down and we could hear no more of anything.”

“Eh! another shot!” cried Upward, now thoroughly startled. “Why, what the devil is the meaning of it?” This last escaped him in English—and it brought the whole party around him, now all ears, regardless of the rain. Only Nesta was out of it—not understanding Hindustani.

It was where the road crosses the nullah, Bhallu Khan explained. He could not tell what it might be, but thought he had better inform the Huzoor. It might even be worth while going that far to see if there was anything to find out.

“Yes, let’s go!”—cut in Lily. “Hurrah! here’s a new excitement!”

“Let’s go!” echoed her father sharply. “To bed, you mean. So off you go there, both of you. Come—clear in—quick! Likely one wants a lot of children fooling about in the dark on a night like this.”

Heedless of their grumbling protest, Upward dived into his tent, and, quickly arming himself with his magazine rifle and revolver, he came forth. Bhallu Khan he instructed to bring another of the forest guard to accompany them while a third was left to look after the camp.

In the darkness and rain they took their way along the bank of the flood—Upward hardly knowing what he was expecting to find. The country was wild, and its inhabitants wilder still. Quite recently there had been an upheaval of lawlessness among a section of the powerful and restless Marri tribe. What if some bloody deed of vendetta, or tribal feud, had been worked out here, almost at his very door? He stumbled along through the wet, coarse tussocks, peering here and there as the forest guard held the lantern before him—his rifle ready. He hardly expected to find anything living, but there was a weird creepiness about this nocturnal quest after something sinister and mysterious that moved him by sheer instinct to defensive preparation. Twice he started, as the dark form of a half-stranded tree trunk with its twisted limbs suggested the find of some human body—ghastly with wounds—distorted with an agonising death. Suddenly Bhallu Khan stopped short, and with a hurried and whispered exclamation held up the lantern, while pointing to something in front.

Something which lay half in, half out of the water. Something which all felt rather than saw had had life, even if life were no longer in it. No tree trunk this time, but a human body. Dead or alive, however, they were only just in time, for even as they looked the swirl of an eddy threw a volume of water from the middle of the trunk right over the neck—so quickly had the flood risen.

“Here—give me the lantern—And you two pull him out, sharp,” said Upward.

This, to the two stalwart hillmen, was but the work of a moment. Then an exclamation escaped Bhallu Khan.

“It is a sahib!” he cried.

Upward bent over the prostrate form, holding the light to the face. Then it became his turn to start in amazement.

“Good God! it’s Campian!” he exclaimed—“Campian himself. But how the devil did he get here like this, and—Is he alive or dead?”

“He is alive, Huzoor,” answered Bhallu Khan, who had been scrutinising the unconscious features from the other side.

Chapter Three.

The Forest Camp.

The following morning broke bright and clear, and save that there was a coolness in the air, and the bed of the tangi which had poured forth its black volume of roaring destruction the night before was wet and washed out—no trace of the wild whirl of the elements would now be visible.

Campian awoke, feeling fairly restored, though as he opened his eyes after his sound and heavy sleep he could hardly recall where he was, or what had happened—nor in fact, did he particularly care whether he could recall it or not. This frame of mind lasted for some time, then his faculties began to reassert themselves. The events of the previous night came back to him—the long, wearisome journey, the exhausted steed, the sudden onslaught of the Ghazis, the pursuit—then that last desperate effort for life—the rolling flood, the jezail shot, and—oblivion. Now a thought struck him. Where was he? In a tent. But whose tent? Was he a captive in the hands of his recent assailants? Hardly. This was not the sort of treatment he would have met at their hands, even if the unmistakably European aspect of all the fittings and tent furniture did not speak for themselves. And at that moment, as though to dispel all further grounds of conjecture, the purdah was moved aside and somebody stole softly in. Campian closed his eyes, surveying this unexpected visitant through the lids. Then he opened them.

“That you, Upward, or am I dreaming?”

“It’s me right enough, old chap. How are you feeling—eh? A bit buzzy still? How’s the head?”

“Just as you put it—a bit buzzy. But I say, where are we?”

“In camp, at Chirria Bach.”

“So? And where the devil might Chirria Bach be? I was bound for Gushki. Thought you were there.”

“Didn’t you get my letter at Shâlalai, saying we were going into camp?” said Upward.

“Not any. I got one—There was nothing about camp in it—It told me to come on to Gushki. But I fell in with two Johnnies there who were going on a chikór shoot, and wanted me to cut in—I did—hence concluded to find my way here across country instead of by the usual route. I’m fond of that sort of thing, you know.”

“Where are your things—and how is it you are all alone? This isn’t the country to ride around in like that—all alone—I can tell you.”

“So I’ve discovered.” And then he narrated the events of the previous day’s journey up to the time of his falling unconscious in the riverbed.

“Well you’ve had a devilish narrow squeak, old chap,” pronounced Upward, when he had done. “Do you know, if it hadn’t been for old Bhallu Khan, my head forest guard, hearing your gee scrambling through the nullah, you would never have been seen again. We heard the first shot. It seemed fishy, but it was no use bothering about it, because it was on the other side of the water. Then the tangi coming down kicked up such a row that we couldn’t hear ourselves speak, let alone hear the other shot. You were more than half in the water when we found you, and—I’ve been down to the place this morning—and the water has been over more than twice your own length from where you were lying when we hauled you out. Lucky old Bhallu Khan heard the racket—eh?”

“Rather. But, I say, Upward, I shot one of those brigands. Likely to be trouble raised over that?”

Upward looked grave. “You never can tell,” he said. “You see, in a case of that sort, the Government has a say in the matter. Don’t give away anything about the shooting to anybody for the present, and we’ll think over what is best to be done—or not done—Perhaps you only winged your man.”

“I hope so, if it will save any further bother. But, it’s a dashed cool thing assailing a peaceable traveller in that way. There’s no sort of war on here?”

“No, but the fact of your being alone and unarmed—unarmed, at least, so far as they could see—was a temptation to those devils. They hate us like poison since we took over the country and prevented them—or tried to prevent them—from cutting each other’s throats, so they are not likely to let slip an opportunity of cutting ours instead.”

“And after that first shot, practically I was unarmed, thanks to the swindling rascality of the British huckster in guaranteeing ammunition that jammed in the pistol. No more co-operative stores for me, thanks.”

Now again the purdah was lifted, and the bearer appeared, bringing in tea and toast. Salaaming to Campian, he told his master that the mem-sahib would like to see him for a moment. Upward, responding to the call, promptly received a lecture for not merely allowing, but actively inducing, the patient to talk too much. It could not be good for one

just recovering from a shock to the head to talk—especially on exciting topics—and so on—and so on.

Meanwhile in another tent Nesta Cheriton and the two younger girls were discussing the somewhat tragic arrival of the expected guest. To the former, however, his personality appealed more than the somewhat startling manner of his arrival.

“But what is he like, Lily?” she was saying—not quite for the first time.

“Oh! I told you before,” snapped Lily, waxing impatient, and burying her nose in a book—She was wont to be petulant when disturbed in the midst of an absorbing tale.

“He’s rather fun,” replied Hazel. “He isn’t young, though. He’s not as old as father—still he isn’t young.”

“I expect he’s quite an old fogey,” said Lily. “I don’t want to talk about him any more,” which reply moved Hazel to cackle elfishly, while cutting weird capers expressive of the vein mischievous.

“Rather. He’s quite an old fogey. Isn’t he, Lily?”

“I wish you’d shut up,” snapped that young person. “Can’t you see I want to read?”

But later on, viz about tiffin time, Campian being recovered enough to put in an appearance, Nesta found good and sufficient reasons for the reversal of her former verdict. As Hazel had said, the new arrival was not young; yet her own term, “quite an old fogey,” in no sense applied. And the reversal of her said verdict took this form: “He’ll do.”

This indeed, in its not very occult meaning, might have held good were the stranger even less qualified for her approval than she decided at a glance he was—for they had been quite a fortnight in camp, and on any male—save Upward, middle-aged and rangé, Nesta Cheriton’s very attractive blue eyes had not rested during precisely that period. And such deficiency had to her already come to spell boredom.

In Shâlalai the British army of all branches of the service had been at her feet, and this for obvious reasons. She was young, attractive beyond the ordinary, and a new importation. Now the feminine counterpart of the British army as represented in Shâlalai, though in some cases young, was unattractive wellnigh without exception. Furthermore, it was by no means new—wherefore Nesta had things all her own way; for Shâlalai, for social and every other purpose, was the British army—Upward and the

agent to the governor-general being nearly the only civilians in the place. So in Shâlalai Nesta was happy, for the British army, having as usual when not in active service, nothing particular to do, swarmed around her in multifold adoration.

“Last time we saw each other we hardly reckoned to meet in such tragic fashion, did we, Mrs Upward?” said Campian, as they sat down to tiffin. “I only hope I haven’t drawn down the ire of a vast and vendetta nourishing tribe upon your peaceful camp.”

“Oh, we’re not nervous. The people who attacked you belong in all probability right the other end of the country,” she answered, easily.

“I sent over to Gushki to let the political agent know about it,” said Upward. “Likely they’ll send back a brace of Levy sowars to have a look round. Not that that’ll do any good, for these darned ‘catch-’em-alive-ohs’ are all tarred with the same brush. They’re raised in the same country, you see.”

“Seems to me a right casual section this same country,” said Campian. “You are all never tired of laying down what entirely unreliable villains these border tribes are, yet you simply put yourselves at their mercy. I’ll be bound to say, for instance, that there’s no such thing as a watch kept over this camp at night, or any other.”

“No, there isn’t Tinkles here, though, would pretty soon let us know if any one came too close.”

“Yes, but not until they were on you. Say four or five like those who tackled me—or even more—made up their minds to come for you some night, what then? Why, they’d be in the tents hacking you to bits before you had time to move a finger.”

“Ghazis don’t go to work that way, Campian. They come for you in the open, and never break out with the premeditation a rush upon a camp would involve.”

“I’ve often thought the same,” struck in Nesta. “I get quite nervous sometimes, lying awake at night. Every sound outside makes me start. Fancy nothing between you and all that may be in that horrible darkness, but a strip of canvas. And the light seems to make it worse. I can never shake off the idea that I can be seen.”

“Why don’t you put out the light then, Miss Cheriton?”

“Because I’m more frightened still to be in the dark. Ah now—you’re laughing at me”—she broke off, in a pretty gesture of protest.

The stranger was contemplating her narrowly, without seeming to. Good specimen of her type was his decision, but these fair haired, blue-eyed girls, though pretty enough as pictures, have seldom any depth. Self conscious at every turn, though not aware of it, or, at any rate of showing that she was. Pretty? Oh, yes, no mistake about that—knows what suits her, too.

Whether this diagnosis was entirely accurate remains to be seen—that its latter part was, a glance at Nesta left no doubt. She was attired in white and light blue, which matched admirably her eyes and golden hair, and she looked wonderfully attractive. The suspicion of sunbrown which darkened her complexion had the effect of setting off the vivid whiteness of her even teeth when she smiled. And then her whole face would light up.

“What would you like to do this afternoon, old chap?” said Upward, as tiffin over, the bearer placed the cheroot box on the table. “Don’t feel up to going after chikór, I suppose?”

“Well, I don’t know. I think I do. But I left my shot gun down at Chotiali with my other things.”

“You’d much better sit still and keep yourself quiet for the rest of the day, Mr Campian,” warned Mrs Upward. “A nasty fall on the head isn’t a thing to be trifled with, especially in hot climates. I’ve seen too much of that sort of thing in my time.”

But the warning was overruled. Campian declared himself sufficiently recovered, provided there was no hard climbing to be done. Tiffin had set him up entirely.

“Do just as you like, old chap,” said Upward. “You can use my gun. I don’t care about chikór. They are the rottenest form of game bird I know. Won’t rise, for one thing.”

“Let’s all go,” suggested Lily. “We can keep behind. And we shall see how many misses Mr Campian makes,” she added, with her natural cheekiness.

“It’s hardly fair,” objected the proposed victim—“I, the only gunner, too—Why, all this ‘gallery’ is bound to get on my nerves.”

“Never mind—you can put it down to your fall, if you do miss a lot,” suggested Nesta.

“Well, we’d better start soon, and not go too far either, for I shouldn’t wonder if this evening turned out as bad as last,” said Upward, rising from table. “Khola—Call Bhallu Khan.”

The bearer replied that he was in front of the tent.

“So this is the man whose sharp hearing was the saving of my life?” said Campian, as the head forester extended his salaam to him—And he put out his hand.

The forester, a middle-aged Pathân of the Kakar tribe, was a fine specimen of his race. He looked picturesque enough in his white loose garments, his head crowned with the “Kulla,” or conical cap, round which was wound a snowy turban. He had eyes and teeth which a woman might have envied, and as he grasped the hand extended to him, the expression of his face was pleasing and attractive in the extreme.

“By Jove, Upward, this man is as different a type to the ruffians who came for me last night as the proverbial chalk and cheese simile,” remarked Campian, as they started for the shooting place. “They were hook-nosed scoundrels with long hair and the expression of the devil, whereas this chap looks as if he couldn’t hurt a fly. He has an awfully good face.”

“Oh, he has. Still, with Mohamedans you never can be absolutely certain. Any question of fanaticism or semi-religious war, and they’re all alike. We’ve had too many instances of that.”

“Oh, come now, Ernest. You mustn’t class good old Bhallu Khan with that sort of native,” struck in his wife. “If there was any sort of rising I believe he’d stand by us with his life.”

“I believe so too. Still, as I say, with Mohamedans you can never tell. Look, Campian, this is where we found you last night. Here’s where you were lying, and here’s where the water came up to during the night.”

Campian looked somewhat grave as he contemplated the jagged edge of sticks and straws which demarcated the water-line, and remembered that awful advancing wave bellowing down upon him.

“Yes—It was a near thing,” he said—“a very near thing.”

But a word from the forester dispelled all such weighty reflections, and that word was “Chikór!”

In and out among the grass and stones the birds were running—running. The more they were shouted at the more they ran. At last several of them rose. It was a long shot, but down came one.

This was repeated again and again. All the shots were long shots, and there were as many misses as birds. There were plenty of birds, but they persistently forebore to rise.

“Now you see why I’m not keen on chikór shooting, old chap,” said Upward, as after a couple of hours this sport was voted hardly worth while. And subsequently Bhallu Khan expressed the opinion to his master that the strange sahib did not seem much of a shikari. He might have made quite a heavy bag—there were the birds, right under his feet, but he would not shoot—he would wait for them to rise—and they invariably rose much too far off to fire at with any chance of bringing them down.

Chapter Four.

Incidental.

“I’m afraid, Nesta, my child, that your soldier friends will have to alight somewhere else if they want any chikór,” pronounced Campian, subsiding upon a boulder to light his pipe. “We’ve railroaded them around this valley to such purpose that you can’t get within a couple of hundred yards. When are they due, by the way—the sodgers, not the chikór?”

“To-day, I think. They have been threatening for the last fortnight.”

“Threatening! Ingrate! Only think what a blessing their arrival will shed. You will hear all the latest ‘gup’ from Shâlalai, and have a couple of devoted poodles, all eagerness to frisk, and fetch and carry—wagging their tails for approving pats, and all that sort of thing. And you must be tired of this very quiet life, unrelieved save by a couple of old fogies like yours truly and Upward?”

“Ah, I’m tired of the ‘gup’ of Shâlalai. I’m not sure I’m not quite tired of soldiers.”

“That begins to look brisk for me, my dear girl, I being—bar Upward—nearly the only civilian in Baluchistan. The only flaw in this to me alluring vista now opened out is—how long will it last? First of all, sit down. There’s no fun in standing unnecessarily.”

She sat down on the boulder beside him, and began to play with the smoothness of the barrels of the gun, which leaned against the rock between them. It was early morning. These two had strolled off down the valley together directly after chota hazri—as they had taken to doing of late. A couple of brace of chikór lay on the ground at their feet, the smallness of the “bag” bearing out the accuracy of Campian’s prognostication as to the decadence of that form of sport. The sun, newly risen, was flooding the valley with a rush of golden ether; reddening the towering crags, touching, with a silver wand, the carpet of dewdrops in the valley bottom, and mist-hung spider webs which spanned the juniper boughs—while from many a slab-like cliff came the crowing of chikór, pretty, defiant in the safety of altitude—rejoicing in the newly-risen dawn.

Some fifty yards off, Bhallu Khan, having spread his chuddah on the ground, and put the shoes from off his feet—was devoutly performing the prescribed prostrations in the direction of the Holy City, repeating the while the aspirations and ascriptions wherewith the Faithful—good, bad and indifferent—are careful to hallow the opening of another day.

“You were asserting yourself tired of the garrison,” went on Campian. “Yes? And wherefore this—caprice, since but the other day you were sworn to the sabre?”

“Was I? Well perhaps I’ve changed my mind. I may do that, you know. But I don’t like any of those at Shâlalai. And—the nice ones are all married.”

This escaped her so spontaneously, so genuinely, that Campian burst out laughing.

“Oh that’s the grievance, is it?” he said. “And what about the others who are—not nice?”

“Oh, I just fool them. Some of them think they’re fooling me. I let it go far enough, and then they suddenly find out I’ve been fooling them. It’s rather a joke.”

“Ever taken anyone seriously?”

“That’s telling.”

“All right, then. Don’t tell.”

She looked up at him quickly. Her eyes seemed to be trying to read his face, which, beyond a slightly amused elevation of one eyebrow, was absolutely expressionless.

“Well, I have then,” she said, with a half laugh.

“So? Tell us all about it, Nessita.”

She looked up quickly—“I say, that’s rather a good name—I like it. It sounds pretty. No one ever called me that before.”

“Accept it from me, then.”

“Yes, I will. But, do you know—it’s awful cheek of you to call me by my name at all. When did you first begin doing it, by the way?”

“Don’t know. I suppose it came so natural as not to mark an epoch. Couldn’t locate the exact day or hour to save my life. Shall I return to ‘Miss Cheriton?’”

“You never did say that. You never called me anything—until—”

“Likely. It’s a little way I have. I say—It’s rather fun chikór shooting in the early morning. What?”

“That means, I suppose, that you’re tired of talking, and would like to go on.” And she rose from her seat.

“Not at all. Sit down again. That’s right. For present purposes it means that you won’t go out with me any more like this of a morning after those two Johnnies come.”

“You won’t want me then. You can all go out together. I should only be in the way.”

“That remark would afford nine-tenths of the British Army the opportunity of retorting, ‘You could never be that.’ I, however, will be brutally singular. Very probably you would be in the way—”

“Thanks.”

“If we all went out together—I was going to say when you interrupted me.”

A touch on the arm interrupted him. It came from Bhallu Khan, who, having concluded his devotions was standing at Campian’s side, making vehement gesticulations of warning and silence.

“Eh—what is it?” whispered Campian, looking eagerly in the direction pointed at by the other.

The forester shook his head, and continued to gesticulate. Then he put both forefingers to his head, one on each side above the ears, pointing upwards.

“Does he mean he has seen the devil?” said Campian wonderingly. “I guess he’s trying to make us understand ‘horns.’”

Nesta exploded in a peal of laughter, which, though melodious enough to human ears, must have had a terrifying effect on whatever had been designated by Bhallu Khan. He ceased to point eagerly through the scrub, but his new gesticulations meant unmistakably that the thing, whatever it might be, was gone.

All the Hindustani they could muster between them—and that wasn’t much—failed to make the old forester understand. He smiled talked—then smiled again. Then they all laughed together—But that was all.

Although actually on the scene of his midnight peril, Campian gave that experience no further thought. Nearly a fortnight had gone by since then, and no further alarm had

occurred. Bhallu Khan had made inquiries and in the result had learned that the adjacent and then somewhat dreaded Marri tribe was innocent of the playful little event which had so nearly terminated Campian's allotted span of joys and sorrows. The assailants were Brahuis, of a notoriously marauding clan of that tribe, located in the Khelat district. What they were doing here, so far away from their own part of the country, however, he had not learned, or, if he had, for reasons of his own he kept it to himself. This intelligence lifted what shadow of misgiving might have lingered in the minds of Upward and his wife, as showing that the incident was a mere chance affair, and no indication of restlessness or hostility on the part of the tribesmen in their own immediate neighbourhood.

Another fact gleaned by Bhallu Khan was that the man who had fallen to Campian's shot was not killed—nor even fatally wounded. This relieved all their minds, especially that of the shooter. It saved all sorts of potential trouble in the way of investigation and so forth—likewise it dispelled sundry unpleasant visions of a blood feud, which now and then would obtrude in spite of all efforts at reasoning them away; for these fierce fanatical mountaineers were hardly the men to suffer bloodshed to pass unavenged. However, no one was much hurt, and the marauders had taken themselves off to their own side of the country. Thus for about ten days had life in Upward's camp held on its way just as though no narrow escape of grim tragedy had thrown the visitor into its midst. Its inmates rejoiced in the open air life, and, save at night or for an afternoon siesta, were seldom indoors. The male section thereof, notwithstanding plentiful denunciation of the wily chikór and its ways, devoted much time to the pursuit of that exasperating biped, and all would frequently join hands in exploring the surrounding country—tiffin accompanying—to be laid out picnic fashion at some picturesque spot, whether of breezy height or in the cool shade of a tangi. Thus did Upward perform his forest inspections, combining business with pleasure—and everybody was content.

And this statement we make of set purpose. No more aspirations after a return to Shâlalai were now in the air. The infusion of a new element into the daily life of the camp seemed to make a difference. Campian and the two younger girls were friends of old. He did not mind their natural cheekiness—he had a great liking for them, and it only amused him; moreover, it kept things lively. And Nesta Cheriton—sworn worshipper of the sabre, speedily came to the conclusion that all that was entertaining and companionable was not a monopoly vested in the wearers of Her Majesty's uniform.

For between her and the new arrival a very good understanding had been set up—a very good understanding indeed. But he, in the maturity of years and experience, made light of what might have set another man thinking. They were thrown together these two—and camp life is apt to throw people very much together—He was the only available male, wherefore she made much of him. Given, however, the appearance of two or three

lively subalterns on the scene, and he thought he knew how the land would lie. But the consciousness in no wise disquieted him; on the contrary it afforded him a little good-humouredly cynical amusement. He knew human nature, as peculiar to either sex no less than as common to both, and he had reached a point in life when the preferences of the ornamental sex, for any permanent purpose, mattered nothing. But the study of it as a mere subject of dissection did afford him a very great amount of entertainment.

Mature cynic as he was, yet now, looking down at the girl at his side as they took their way back through the wild picturesque valley bottom, the dew shining like silver in the fast ascending sun, a moist woodland odour arising from beneath the juniper trees, he could not but admit to himself that her presence here made a difference—a very great difference. She was wondrously pretty, in the fair, golden-haired style; had pretty ways too—soft, confiding—and a trick of looking up at one that was a trifle dangerous. Only that he felt rather sure it was all part of her way with the male sex in general, and not turned on for his benefit in particular, he might have wondered.

“Well?” she said, looking up suddenly, “what is it all about?”

“You. I was thinking a great deal about you. Now you are going to say I had much better have been talking to you.”

“No. But tell me what you were thinking.”

“I was thinking how deftly you got away from that question of mine—about the one occasion when you did take someone seriously. Now tell us all about it.”

“Ah—I’m not going to tell you.”

“Not, eh?”

“No—no—no! Perhaps some day.”

“Well you’ll have to look sharp, for I’m off in a day or two.”

“No? you’re not!” she cried, in a tone very like that of real consternation. “Ah, you’re just trying to crowd it on. Why, you’re here for quite a long time.”

“Very well. You’ll see. Only, don’t say I never told you.”

“But you mustn’t go. You needn’t. Look here—You’re not to.”

“That sounds rather nice—Very nice indeed. And wherefore am I not to go, Nessita, mine angel?”

“Because I don’t want you to. You’re rather a joke, you know, and—”

”—And—what?”

“Nothing.”

“That ought to settle it. Only I don’t flatter myself my departure will leave any gap. Remaineth there not a large garrison at Shâlalai—horse, foot, and artillery?”

“Oh, hang the garrison at Shâlalai! You’re detestable. I don’t like you any more.”

“No? Well what will make you like me any more?”

“If you stay.”

“That settles it. I cannot depart in the face of that condition,” he answered, the gravity of his words and tone simply belied by a whimsical twinkle of the eyes. She, looking up, saw this.

“Ah, I believe you’ve been cramming all the time. I’ll ask Mr Upward when we get in, and if you have, I’ll never forgive you.”

“Spare thyself the trouble O petulant one, for it would be futile in any case. If I have been telling nasty horrid wicked little taradiddles, Upward won’t give me away, for I shall tip him the masonic wink not to. You won’t spot it, though you are staring us both in the face all the time. So you’ll have to keep your blind faith in me, anyhow. Hallo! Stay still a minute. There are some birds.”

In and out among the grass and stones, running like barn-door fowl was a large covey. This time a whoop and a handful of gravel from Bhallu Khan was effective. The covey rose with a jarring “whirr” as one bird. A double shot—a bird fell to each.

“Right and left. That’s satisfactory. I’m getting my hand in,” remarked Campian. “They’re right away,” looking after the covey, “and I feel like breakfast time. Glad we are almost back.”

The white tents half-hidden in the apricot tope, and sheltered by the fresh and budding green, looked picturesque enough against a background of rugged and stony mountain

ridge, the black vertical jaws of the tangi, now waterless, yawning grim like the jaws of some silent waiting monster. Native servants in their snowy puggarees, flitted to and fro between the camp and the cook-tent, whence a wreath of blue smoke floated skyward. A string of camels had just come in, and were kneeling to have their loads removed, keeping up the while their hoarse snarling roar, each hideous antediluvian head turning craftily on its weird neck as though watching the chance of getting in a bite. But between them and their owners, three or four wild looking Baluchis—long-haired and turban-crowned—the understanding, whether of love or fear, seemed complete, for these went about their work of unloading, the normal expression of impassive melancholy stamped upon their copper-hued countenances undergoing no change.

“Well, how many did you shoot?” cried Hazel, running out from the tents as the two came in. “Only six!” as Bhallu Khan held up the “bag.” “Pho! Why we heard about twenty shots. Didn’t we, Lily?”

“More. I expect they were thinking of you when they named this place,” said the latter.

“Thought something cheeky was coming,” remarked Campian tranquilly. “The ‘cow-catcher’ adorning thy most speaking countenance, Lilian my cherub, has an extra upward tendency this morning. No pun intended, of course.”

“Oh—oh—oh!” A very hoot was all the expression that greeted this disclaimer. But a sudden summons to breakfast cut short further sparring.

“Upward, what’s the meaning of Chirria Bach?” asked Campian when they were seated. Lily and Hazel clapped their hands and cackled. Upward looked up, with a laugh.

“It means ‘miss a bird’ old chap. Didn’t you know?”

“No. I never thought of it. Very good, Lilian my seraph. Now I see the point of that extra smart remark just now. What do you think, Mrs Upward? she said this place must have been named after me.”

“They’re very rude children, both of them,” was the laughing reply. “But I can’t sympathise. I’m afraid you make them worse.”

A wild crow went up from the two delinquents. Campian shook his head gravely.

“After that we had better change the subject,” he said. “By the way, Upward, old Bhallu Khan went through an extraordinary performance this morning. I want you to tell me the interpretation thereof.”

“Was he saying his prayers? Have another chikór, old chap?”

“No—not his prayers. Thanks, I will. They eat rather better than they shoot. Nesta and I were deep in the discussion of scientific and other matters—”

“Oh, yes.”

This from Lily, meaningly.

“Lilian, dearest. If you can tell the story better than I can”—with grave reproach.

“Never mind—go on—go on”—rapped out the delinquent.

”—In the discussion of scientific and other matters,” resumed Campian, eyeing his former interruptor, “when Bhallu Khan suddenly enjoined silence. He then put his fingers to his head—so—and mysteriously pointed towards the nullah. It dawned on me that he meant something with horns; but I knew there couldn’t be gadh or markhôr right down here in the valley, and close to the camp. Then Nesta came to the rescue by suggesting that he must have seen the devil.”

“Ah, I didn’t suggest it!” cried Nesta. But her disclaimer was drowned in a wild yelp of ecstasy that volleyed forth from the two younger girls; in the course of which Hazel managed to swallow her tea the wrong way, and spent the next ten minutes choking and spluttering.

Upward was shaking in quiet mirth.

“He didn’t mean the devil at all, old chap, only a hare,” he explained.

“A hare?” uttered Campian.

The blankness of his amazement started the two off again.

“Only a hare! Good heavens! But a hare, even in Baluchistan, hasn’t got horns.”

“He meant its ears. Come now, it was rather smart of him—wasn’t it? Old Bhallu Khan is smart all round. He buks a heap, and is an old bore at times, but he’s smart enough.”

“Yes. It was smart. Yet the combined intelligence of Nesta and myself couldn’t get beyond the devil.”

“Speak for yourself then,” she laughed. And just then Tinkles, rushing from under the table, darted forth outside, uttering a succession of fierce and fiery barks.

“I expect it’s those two Johnnies arriving,” said Upward, rising. “Yes, it is,” as he lifted the “chick” and looked outside.

They all went forth. Two horsemen were turning off the road and making for the camp.

Chapter Five.

Concerning Two Fools.

“Major Bracebrydge—Captain Fleming”—introduced Upward. The first lifted his hat punctiliously to Campian, the second put out his hand. To the rest of the party both were already known.

“Well—ar—Upward—lots of chikór, eh?” began the first.

“Swarms. But they’ve become beastly wild. Campian has been harrying them ever since we found him one dark night half in half out of the nullah in flood.”

“Oh, yes; we heard something of that I suppose—ar—Mr Campian—it wasn’t one magnified by half-a-dozen—ah, ha—ha. You were travelling after dinner, you know—ah—ha—ha?”

A certain amount of chaff in fair good fellowship Campian didn’t mind. But the element of bonhomie was lacking alike in the other’s tone and demeanour. The laugh too, was both fat and feeble. He did not deem this specimen of garrison wit worthy of any answer. The other seemed disappointed.

“I see our camels have turned up,” he went on. “By Jove, Upward, I’ve got a useless lot of servants. That new bearer of mine wants kicking many times a day. Look at him now—over there. Just look at the brute—squatting on his haunches when he ought to be getting things together. I say though, you’ve got all the best of it here”—surveying the apricot tope, which was incapable of sheltering even one more tent—“we shall get all the sun.”

“Sorry they didn’t plant more trees, old chap,” said Upward. “But then we are here for a longish time, whereas it’s only a few days with you. Come in and have a ‘peg.’ Fleming—how about a ‘peg’?”

“Oh, very much about a ‘peg,’” responded Fleming with alacrity. He had been renewing his acquaintance with Nesta about as volubly as time allowed.

“Well, what khubbur from below?” asked Upward, when they were seated in the large dining tent, discussing the said “pegs.”

“Oh, the usual thing,” said Bracebrydge. “Tribes restless Khelat way—that’s nothing—they always are restless.”

“Ever since you’ve been in the country, old chap?” rejoined Upward, with a dry smile, the point of which lay in the fact that the man who undertook to give an exhaustive and authoritative opinion on the country was absolutely new to it. He was not quartered at Shâlalai, nor anywhere else in Baluchistan; but was up, on furlough, from a hot station in the lower plains.

“There is some talk of disturbance, though,” said Fleming. “Two or three of the Brahui sirdars sent a message to the A.G.G., which was offhand, not to say cheeky. Let them. We’ll soon smash ’em up.”

“You may do,” said Upward. “But there’ll be lively times first. Then there’s all that disaffection in lower India. Things are looking dicky—devilish dicky. I shouldn’t wonder if we saw something before long. I’ve always said so.”

Then they got away from the general question to gup of a more private nature—even station gup.

“When are you coming back to Shâlalai, Miss Cheriton?” said Fleming, in the midst of this.

“I don’t know. I’ve only just left it,” Nesta answered. “Not for a long time, I think.”

“That’s awful hard lines on Shâlalai, Miss Cheriton—ah—ha—ha,” said Bracebrydge, twirling the ends of his moustache, which, waxed out on a level with the line of his mouth, gave him a sort of barber’s block expression, which however, the fair of the above city, and of elsewhere, deemed martial and dashing to a degree. This effect, in their sight, was heightened by a jagged scar extending from the left eye to the lower jaw, suggestive of a sword slash at close quarters, “facing the foe”—and so forth. As a matter of hard fact this honourable wound had been received while heading a storming party upon the quarters of a newly-joined and rather high tempered subaltern, for “hazing” purposes. The latter, anticipating such attentions had locked his door, and on the arrival of the “hazing” party, had given out that the first man to enter the room was going to receive something he wouldn’t like in the least. The door was burst open, and with characteristic gallantry the first man to enter was Bracebrydge, who found the destined victim to be as good as his word, for he received a heavy article of crockery, deftly hurled, full in the face—and he didn’t like it in the least—for it cut him so badly right along the cheek that he had to retire perforce, bleeding hideously. The next day the newly-joined subaltern sent in his papers, saying he had no wish to belong to a service wherein it was necessary to take such measures to defend oneself against the overgrown schoolboy rowdyism of “brother” officers, and subsequently won distinction and the

V.C. as a daring and gallant leader of irregular horse in other parts of Her Majesty's dominions.

"I suppose you fellows will want to give the birds a turn," said Upward, after tiffin. "We'll get the ponies and start shooting from about four miles down the valley. I'm afraid they're beastly wild until we get that far."

"Don't know that I feel up to it," said Fleming. "Beastly fag the ride up this morning. Think I'll just take it easy here in camp, Upward. You and Bracebrydge can go. It'll be all the better for yourselves; three guns are sure to have more sport than four."

Campian, who was in the joke, caught a sly wink from Upward, and mightily enjoyed it. Here was the latter's prediction being already fulfilled.

"What sort of fellow are you, Fleming?" said Bracebrydge. "What's the good of coming up here on purpose to shoot, and then hanging up in camp? Now I had thought of not going out. The fact is, I want to fetch a snooze."

"Oh you don't want a snooze. You snored for ten hours at a stretch the way up last night," retorted Fleming. "Now I didn't, and feel cheap in consequence. You go along now, or you'll spoil the party. Upward and Mr Campian are both keen on it."

"Rather. One of you fellows must come," declared Upward, bent on keeping up the fun. "We might spare one of you, but not both. Three guns we must have, to cover the ground properly."

"Then Fleming had better go," said Bracebrydge. "I'm sleepy."

"No fear, I'm going to remain in camp," declared Fleming. "I'm sleepy, too."

"Why don't you toss for it?" suggested Upward. "Sudden death—the winner to do as he likes."

The idea took on, and Fleming came out the winner.

"All right, Bracebrydge," said the latter, jubilant. "I'll have my snooze while you sacrifice yourself in the cause of others—and sport."

The latter snarled, but even he drew the line at backing out of his pledge.

Meanwhile Campian, no longer able to restrain a roar, had hurried from the dining tent.

“What’s the joke, now?” called out Nesta, who, with Mrs Upward, was seated beneath the trees.

“Yes, it is a joke.”

“Well, we’re spoiling to hear it; go on.”

“Ssh—ssh! little girls shouldn’t be impatient. The joke is this—Wait. They’re coming,” with a look over his shoulder.

“No. They’re not. Quick quick. What is it?”

“Well, the spectacle of two fellows old enough to know better, who have come all the way up here on purpose to shoot, both keenly competing as to who shall have the privilege of remaining in camp, is comical—to say the least of it.”

“Ah, I don’t believe it—” said Nesta.

“Not, eh? Well they have even gone so far as to toss for the privilege.”

“And who won?”

“Him they call Fleming. Where are you going to take him for his afternoon stroll, Nessa? I warn you we are going down the valley.”

“Then we will go up it,” laughed the girl. “Yes, I think he is the best fun of the two.”

“A pair of great sillies, both of them,” laughed Mrs Upward.

“Steady. Here comes Fleming. But you won’t see much of him. He is only remaining behind with the express object of having an afternoon snooze. Ta-ta—I’m off.”

Fleming, who was at that moment emerging from the dining tent came over to the two ladies, and throwing himself on the ground, lighted another cheroot and began to talk. He was still talking animatedly when the shooters started.

“I say, Fleming, when are you going to have your snooze?” called out Bracebrydge nastily. “You don’t look so sleepy now as you did—Ar—ha—ha!” The shooters proceeded on the plan laid down, except that Bracebrydge suggested they should leave the ponies much sooner than was at first intended. Then, being in a villainous temper, he shot

badly, and wondered what the devil they had come to such an infernally rotten bit of shooting for, and cursed the attendant forest guard, and made a studiously offensive remark or two to Campian, who received the same with the silence of utter contempt. Before they had been at it an hour, he flung down his gun and burst out with:

“Look here Upward, I can’t shoot a damn to-day, and my boot is chafing most infernally. I shall be lame for a month if I walk any more. Couldn’t one of these fellows fetch my pony? I’ll go back to camp.”

“All right, old chap; do just as you like,” replied Upward, giving the necessary orders.

“Why not get on the gee, and ride on with us”—suggested Campian, innocently. “The scenery is rather good further down.”

“Oh, damn the scenery! Look here though. I don’t want to spoil you two fellows’ shoot. You go on. Don’t wait for me. The nigger will be here with the horse directly.”

“No. There’s no point in waiting,” assented Upward. “We’ll go on eh, Campian? So long, Bracebrydge.”

The two resumed their shoot, cutting down a bird here and a bird there, and soon came together again.

“That’s a real show specimen, that man Bracebrydge,” remarked Campian. “What made you freeze on to him, Upward?”

“Oh, I met him in the Shâlalai club. I never took to the man, but he was in with some others I rather liked. It was Fleming who brought him up here.”

“So? But, do you know, it’s a sorrowful spectacle to see a man of his age—already growing grey—making such an egregious ass of himself. Mind you, I’m not surprised at him being a little ‘gone’—she’s a very taking little girl—but to give himself away as he does, that’s where the lunacy of the affair comes in.”

Upward chuckled.

“Bless your life, old chap, Bracebrydge isn’t really ‘gone’ there.”

“Not, eh? Then he’s a bigger idiot than even I took him for, letting himself go like that.”

“It’s his way. He does just the same with every woman he comes across, if she’s at all decent-looking, and what’s more is under the impression she must be wildly ‘gone’ on him; and by the way, some of them have been. Wait till we get back to Shâlalai; you may see some fun in that line.”

“They must be greater fools even than himself. I’m not a woman-hater, but really the sex can roll out some stupendous examples of defective intelligence—but then, to be fair, so can our own—as for instance Bracebrydge himself. What sort of place is this, Upward?” he broke off, as they came upon a low tumble-down wall surrounding a tree; the enclosure thus formed was strewn with loose horns, as of sheep and goats, and yet not quite like them.

“Why, it’s a sort of rustic shrine, rigged up to some Mohammedan saint. Isn’t it, Bhallu Khan?” translating the remark.

The forester reached over the wall, and picking up a markhôr horn, worn and weather-beaten, held it towards them.

“He says it’s where the people come to make offerings,” translated Upward. “When they want to have a successful stalk they vow a pair of markhôr horns at a place like this.”

“And then deposit it here, and then the noble Briton, if in want of such a thing to hang in his hall, incontinently bones it, and goes home and lies about it ever after,” cut in Campian. “Isn’t that how the case stands?”

“I don’t think so. The horns wouldn’t be good enough to make it worth while.”

“I suppose not,” examining the one tendered him by the forester. “I didn’t know the cultus of Saint Hubert obtained among Mohammedans. Do these people have legends and local ghosts, and all that kind of thing?”

“Rather. You just set old Bhallu Khan yarning—pity you can’t understand him though. Look. See that very tree over there?” pointing out a large juniper. “He has a yarn about a fakir who used to jump right over the top of it every day for a year.”

“So? What did he do that for? As a pious exercise?”

“Something of the kind. But the joke of it is, the thing happened a devil of a time ago. When I pointed out to him that any fool could have done the same, considering that the tree needn’t have been more than a yard high, even then he hardly sees it.”

“I should doubt that, Upward. My opinion is that our friend Bhallu Khan was endeavouring to pull his superior’s leg when he told that story.”

“They are very stupid in some ways, though sharp as the devil in others. And the odd part of it is that most of their local sacred yarns are of the most absurd kind—well, like the tree and fakir story.”

“They are rather a poor lot these Baluchis, aren’t they? They don’t go in for a lot of jewels, on their clothes and swords, like the Indian rajahs?”

“No. Some of the Afghan sirdars do, though—or at any rate used to.”

“So? And what became of them all?”

“They have them still—though wait—let me see. There are yarns that some are hidden away, so as not to fall into the hands of other tribes as loot. There was a fellow named Keogh in our service who made a good haul that way. A Pathân brought him an old battered sword belt, encrusted with rough looking stones, which he had dug up, and wanted ten rupees for it Keogh beat him down to five, and brought the thing as a curio. How much do you think he sold it for?”

“Well?”

“Four thousand. The stones were sapphires.”

“Where was this?” asked Campian quickly. “Anywhere near here?”

“No. Out the other side of Peshawur. You seem keen on the subject, old chap! You haven’t got hold of a notion there’s anything to be done in that line around here, eh?”

“Hardly. This sort of country doesn’t grow precious stones, I guess, except precious big ones.”

“Where’s Bracebrydge?” queried Upward, on their return to camp two hours later.

“He isn’t back yet,” replied Nesta, with a very mischievous laugh.

“What? Why, he left us more than a couple of hours ago. What can have become of the chap? He ought to have been back long before us.”

“He was back, but he started off again,” said Mrs Upward. “This time he went the other way”—whereat both Nesta and Fleming laughed immoderately.

“I think he started to hunt us up, didn’t he, Mrs Upward?” spluttered the latter.

“Oh, I don’t know. But—I believe you saw him and gave him the go-by”—whereat the inculpated pair exchanged glances, and spluttered anew.

“I see,” said Upward, amusing himself by beginning to tease Tinkles—whose growls and snaps afforded him considerable mirth. “How’s his chafed foot now—Oh-h!” The last as the little terrier, getting in a bite, half play, half earnest, nipped him through his trousers.

“He didn’t say anything about his chafed foot. Why, here he comes.”

A very sulky looking horseman rode up and dismounted. Upon him Fleming turned a fire of sly chaff; which had the effect of rendering Bracebrydge sulkier than ever, and Bracebrydge sulky was not a pleasant fellow by any means. He retorted accordingly.

“Never mind, old chap,” cut in Upward. “It’s all right now, and nearly dinner time. Let’s all have a ‘peg.’ Nothing like a ‘peg’ to give one an appetite.”

Chapter Six.

Of the Ruby Sword.

Not without reasons of his own had Campian made such careful and minute inquiries as to the traditions and legends of the strange, wild country in which his lot was temporarily cast, and the key to those reasons was supplied in a closely-written sheet of paper which he was intently studying on the morning after the above conversation. It was, in fact, a letter.

Not for the first or second time was he studying this. It had reached him just after his arrival in the country, and the writer thereof was his father.

The latter had been a great traveller in his younger days, and was brimful of Eastern experience; full too, of reminiscence, looking back to perilous years passed among fierce, fanatical races, every day of which represented just so many hours of carrying his life in his hand. Now he was spending the evening of life in peace and quiet. This was the passage which Campian was now studying:

“It came to me quite as a surprise to hear you were in Afghanistan; had I known you thought of going, there are a few things we might have talked over together. I don’t suppose the country is much changed. Oriental countries never do change, any more than their people.

“You remember that affair we have often talked about, when I saved the life of the Durani emir, Dost Hussain, and the story of the hiding of the ruby sword. It—together with the remainder of the treasure—was buried in a cave in a long narrow valley called Kachîn, running almost due east and west. The mountain on the north side is pierced by a very remarkable tangi, the walls of which, could they be closed, would fit like the teeth of a steel trap. I never saw the place myself, but Dost Hussain often used to tell me about it when he promised me half of the buried valuables. I was not particular to go into the subject with him in those days, for I had a strong repugnance to the idea of being paid for saving a man’s life; indeed I used to tell him repeatedly I did not need so costly a gift. But he would not hear of my objections, declaring that when he was able to return for his property half of it should be mine, and I fully believe he would have kept his word, for he was a splendid fellow—more like an Arab than an Asiatic. But Dost Hussain was killed by the Brahuis, and, so far as I was concerned, the secret of the hidden valuables died with him. The only man I know of who shared it was his brother, the Syyed Aïn Asrâf, but he is probably dead, or, at any rate must have recovered it long ago. The sword alone would have been of immense value. I saw it once. Both hilt and scabbard

were encrusted with splendid rubies and other stones, but mostly rubies—and there were other valuables.

“It occurs to me that all this must have been hidden somewhere about where you are now, and, if so, you might make a few inquiries. I would like to know whether the sword was ever found or not. Find out if Aïn Asrâf is still alive. If so, he must be very old now. It would be interesting to me to hear how that affair ended, and would give an additional object to your travels...” Then the letter went on to touch upon other matters, and concluded.

As we have said, it was not the first time Campian had pondered over these words, but every time he did so something in them seemed to strike him in a fresh light. Well he remembered hearing his father tell the story by word of mouth, but at such time it had interested him as a story and no more. Now, however, that he was in the very scene of its enactment, it seemed to gain tenfold interest. What if this buried treasure had never been recovered, had lain hidden all these years. The affair dated back to the forties. Afghanistan his father had called it—but this was Afghanistan then. In those days it owned allegiance to the Amir of Kâbul.

A long, narrow valley running almost due east and west! There were many such valleys. And the tangi? Why the very tangi at whose mouth their camp was pitched was the only one cleaving the mountain range on the northern side, and its configuration was exactly that of the one described in his father’s letter. He could not resist a thrill of the pulses. What if this splendid treasure were in reality right under his hand—if he only knew where to lay his hand upon it? There came the rub. The mountain sides here and there were simply honeycombed with caves. To strike the right one without some clue would be a forlorn quest indeed; and he could talk neither Baluch nor Hindustani. The very wildness of the possibility availed to quell any rising excitement to which he might have felt inclined upon the subject; besides, was it likely that this treasure—probably of double value, both on account of its own worth, and constituting a sort of heirloom—would have been allowed to lie buried for forty years or so, and eventually have been forgotten? Somebody or other must have known its hiding place. No; any possibility to the contrary must be simply chimerical.

Just then the “chik” was lifted, and Upward’s head appeared within the tent.

“Can I come in, old chap? Look here, we are all going on a little expedition, so you roll out and come along. There’s a bit of new enclosed forest I want to look at and report on, so we are going to make a picnic of it. There’s a high kotal between cliffs, which gives one a splendid view; then we can go down into the valley, and home again round another way, through a fine tangi which is well worth seeing.”

“I’m right on, Upward. I’ll roll out. Do you mind sending Khola in with the bath?”

“That’s it. We are going to have breakfast a little earlier, and start immediately afterwards. Will that suit you?”

“To a hair!”

The start was duly made, and Lily and Hazel found immense fun in watching the efforts of the two knights of the sabre to secure the privilege of riding beside Nesta, with the result that, as neither would give way, the path, when it began to narrow, became inconveniently crowded. The girl was looking very pretty in a light blouse and habit skirt; her blue eyes dancing with mischievous mirth over the recollection of the wild rush they had made to assist her to mount; and how she, having accorded that privilege to Fleming, the other had promptly taken advantage of it by manoeuvring his steed to the side of hers, thus, for the time being, effectually “riding out” the much disgusted Fleming.

“What’s the real name of this place, Upward?” said Campian, when they were fairly under way.

“Chirria Bach,” said Lily. “We told you before. It was named after you.”

“Not of thee did I humbly crave information, mine angelic Lil. I record the fact more in sorrow than in anger,” he answered.

“It’s called that on the Government maps,” said Upward. “I think it has another name—Kachîn, I believe they call it—don’t they, Bhallu Khan?”

“Ha, Huzoor, Kachîn,” assented the forester, who was riding just behind.

“Is it the whole district, or only just this valley?” went on Campian.

“Only just this valley,” translated Upward, who had put the question to the old Pathân.

“Strange now—that I should be here, isn’t it? I’ve heard my father speak of this place. You know he was out here a lot—years ago—I suppose there isn’t another of the same name, is there?”

“He says, nowhere near this part of the country,” said Upward, rendering Bhallu Khan’s reply. “But what made your father mention this place in particular? Was he in any row here?”

“Perhaps he ‘missed birds’ here, too,” cut in the irrepressible Lily. “I know. It was named after him—not you.”

“That’s it. Of course it was. Now, I never thought of that before,” assented Campian, with a stare of mock amazement. “I believe, however, Upward, that as a matter of fact, he remembered the rather remarkable formation of that tangi behind the camp.”

Then he dropped out of the conversation, and thought over what he had just heard. Truly this thing was becoming interesting. He had located the very place. There could be no mistake about that. He had been on the point of asking if Bhallu Khan had heard the story of the flight of the Durani chief, or of Syyed Aïn Asrâf, but decided to let that alone for the present.

“Who is that bounder, Campian?” Bracebrydge was saying. “Does anyone know?”

“He isn’t a ‘bounder,’” returned Nesta shortly. “He’s awfully nice.”

“Oh, awfully nice—ah—ha—ha—ha!” sneered Bracebrydge, with his vacuous laugh. “Very sorry. Didn’t know he was such a friend of yours.”

“But he is.”

“Pity he goes about looking such a slouch then, isn’t it?”

“It would be—if he did. But then everybody doesn’t see the sense of knocking about among rocks and stones got up as if he was just turned out of a band box, Major Bracebrydge,” she returned, quite angrily.

“Oh. Sorry I spoke—ah—ha—ha!” he retorted, recognising a shaft levelled at his own immaculate turnout. Fleming came to the rescue.

“Don’t know what’s wrong with this fellow, Miss Cheriton. He’s been so crusty the last day or two. He ought to be invalided. Bracebrydge, old man, buck up.”

A couple of hours of easy riding, and the whole party gained the kotal, to which we heard Upward make reference, and his eulogy of the view afforded therefrom was in no sense undeserved. Right in front the ground fell abruptly, well nigh precipitously, to a great

depth; and in the valley, or basin beneath, here and there a plot of flat land under cultivation stood out green among the rolling furrows of grey rock and sombre vegetation. Opposite rose a mighty mass of mountain, piled up tier upon tier of great cliffs, and beyond this, far away to the left, a lofty range dark with juniper, swept round to meet the heights which shut in the amphitheatre from that side. Down into this the bridle path over the kotal wound, looking like a mere crack in a wall. A great crag towered right overhead, its jutting pinnacles and ledges standing defiantly forth against the sky.

“Not a bad spot for a picnic, is it?” said Upward complacently, as, having dismounted, they stood taking in the view.

“By Jove, no,” said Fleming. “Phew! what an idea of depth it conveys, looking right down into that hole. Look Miss Cheriton. There are some people moving down there. They seem about as big as flies.”

“How big are flies? I always thought flies were small?” cut in Lily, the irrepressible.

“Not always. Depends upon the fly,” murmured Campian.

“Well, I shall have to leave you people for a while,” said Upward. “There’s a new plantation up the hill I want to look at. Sha’n’t be more than an hour, and we can have tiffin then. It’s quite early yet.”

“I’ll go with you, Upward,” said Campian. And the two started, attended by Bhallu Khan, mounted on his wiry Baluch pony.

“I’m getting deadly sick of that fellow Bracebrydge,” began Upward. “I wish to heaven he’d clear. He always wants to boss the whole show as if it belonged to him. Did you hear him trying to dictate where we were to pitch the tiffin camp?”

“Yes.”

“He always does that sort of thing, or tries to be funny at somebody else’s expense. I’m getting jolly sick of it.”

He was still more sick of it, when, on returning, he found that Bracebrydge had carried his point, and actually had caused a removal of the said site. However, Upward was of an easy going disposition, though addicted to occasional fidgety fits, so he came to the conclusion that it couldn’t be helped now, and didn’t really matter after all, and the tiffin

was plenteous and good, and the soda water well cooled. So they fed, and chatted, and had a good time generally.

“I say, Upward. Can’t someone throw a few bottles at that brute?” remarked Bracebrydge, as, cheroots having been lit, the male element stretched at full length on the ground, was lazily puffing at the same. “He’ll crack the drum of one’s blessed ears directly, the howling lunatic.”

The noise complained of was a soft, melancholy, wailing sound, something between a flute and a concertina, and it proceeded from one of the forest guard, who was tootling into some instrument of native make.

“Does it dik you, old chap?” replied Upward good naturedly. “I can shut him up, but we rather like it. Bulbul Khan swears he invented that instrument himself, and is immensely proud of it. We look upon him as our Court minstrel of sorts. He’s always tuning up when we go out anywhere. Never without his pipes.”

“What did you say the soor’s name was?” growled Bracebrydge.

“Bulbul Khan. That’s my name for him,” laughed Upward. “His real name’s Babul Hân, but I christened him Bulbul Khan, because he’s always making melody. Not bad, eh?”

“Oh yes—beastly funny—Ah—ha—ha—ha!” sneered Bracebrydge.

Now the trampling of horse hoofs arrested the attention of the party, and about a dozen mounted Baluchis, riding at a foot’s pace, emerged from the juniper forest. They made a picturesque group enough in their white flowing garments and great turbans.

“Why, who can these be?” said Nesta, gazing upon the new arrivals with some interest. “Who are they, Mrs Upward?”

“I’ll ask Bhallu Khan.” Then—“He says it is a sirdar of the Marris, who has been up to Gushki to see the Political Agent, and is on his way home.”

“So?” said Campian, interested. “Wonder if he’d stop and have a talk. Upward, roll up, old man. I want you to interview this very big swell.”

“We don’t want to be ‘dikked’ by a lot of niggers,” grunted Bracebrydge, in an audible aside.

The cavalcade had halted some threescore yards away, and one of the men now came forward to ask if the “jungle-wallah sahib” was there, because the Sirdar Yar Hussain Khan would be glad to have a talk with him on an official matter.

“Yar Hussain Khan?” repeated Upward, choking back a yawn. “I say, Campian, you’d better take a good look at this fellow. He’s no end of a big chief among the Marris, though he’s really of Afghan descent. Come along with me and meet him.” Then, turning to the Baluchi, he gave the necessary answer.

All the party were armed with the inevitable tulwar—four of their number, who were in immediate attendance on the chief, with Martini rifles as well. These, however, they laid down, as, having dismounted, they advanced to meet Upward.

The sirdar himself was a man of stately presence, standing over six feet. His strong, handsome face, with its flowing black beard, was well set off by the great turban wound round a blue kûlla, whose conical peak was just visible above the snowy folds. Two jetty tresses of long hair fell over his broad chest, almost to the hem of a rich vest of blue velvet embroidered with gold; the only colour which relieved his white garments. Campian, for his part, as he returned the other’s handshake, and noted the free, full fearlessness of the glance which met his, decided that here indeed was a noble specimen of an Oriental chieftain.

The subject of the latter’s official talk with Upward was of no especial importance, relating merely to certain grazing rights in dispute between a section of his tribesmen and the Government. Then he accepted an invitation to sit down and smoke a cigarette. But with the remainder of the party he did not offer to shake hands, acknowledging their presence by a dignified salute.

Upward, talking in Hindustani, brought round the conversation to matters semi-political. “Was there anything in the rumours that had got about, that the tribes were becoming restless all over the country?”

“The tribes always had been restless,” was Yar Hussain’s reply. “The English had taken over the country not so very long ago. Was it likely that the people could change their nature all at once? The English sahibs found sport in stalking markhôr or tiger shooting or in other forms of shikar. The Baluchis found it in raiding. It was their form of shikar.”

Campian, who perforce had to await Upward’s interpretation, had been carefully observing their visitors, and noted that one among the chiefs attendants was gazing at him with a most malevolent stare. This man never took his glance off him, and when their eyes met that glance became truly fiendish.

“That’s a first-class explanation, and a candid one,” was the comment he made on Upward’s rendering. “Tell him I hope they won’t take any more potshots at me when I’m wandering about alone—like they did that night I arrived at your camp, Upward. Tell him I rather like the look of them, and wish I could talk, so I could go in and out among them.”

A slight smile came over the dignified gravity of the sirdar’s features as this was interpreted to him, and he replied.

“He says,” translated Upward, “he will be very pleased if at any time you should visit his village. The shooting at you he knows nothing about, but is sure it could not have been done by any of his people.”

Campian, looking up, again met the hostile glance above mentioned. The man, who was seated a little behind his chief, was regarding him with a truly fiendish scowl, and noting it he decided upon two things—that Yar Hussain was a very fine fellow indeed, but that if he had any more followers of the stamp of this malignant savage, it were better for himself or any other infidel who desired to live out his length of days to pause ere accepting this cordially worded invitation. Then, after a few more interchanges of civilities, the sirdar and his followers rose to take their leave.

Now the diabolical scowl wherewith that particular Baluchi had greeted him, Campian at first set down to the natural hatred of a more than ordinarily fanatical Moslem for the infidel and the invader. But as the other drew nearer, spitting forth low envenomed curses, he half expected the Ghazi mania would prove too much for the man, even in the presence of his chief, and his hand instinctively moved behind him to his pistol pocket. The fellow however, seemed to think better of it.

“Fine specimen, that sirdar, isn’t he?” said Upward, as they watched the party defiling down the steep hill path into the valley beneath.

“He is. By the way, did you notice the infernal scowl that hook-nosed brigand of his turned on for my benefit all the time you were talking?”

“I thought he wasn’t looking at you very amiably when they went away. He can see you’re a stranger, I suppose, and some of these fanatical devils hate a stranger.”

“There was more in it than that, Upward. Did you happen to notice he walked with a slight limp?”

“No; I hardly—er yes, by the way, now I think of it, I did.”

“Well, what if he should turn out to be the very identical cuss I winged that night?”

“Phew!” whistled Upward. “But then, Bhallu Khan says they were Brahuis. These are Marris.”

“There may have been both among them. What is the sirdar’s name, again?”

“Yar Hussain Khan.”

“Yes. Well, Sirdar Yar Hussain Khan seems a very nice fellow, and I should much like to see him again; but probably I sha’n’t, for the simple reason that I don’t in the least want ever to behold that particularly abominable follower of his again.”

But he little thought under what circumstances he was destined to behold both again.

Chapter Seven.

The Tangi.

“It’s a thundering mistake allowing these fellows to wander all over the country armed, like that,” said Upward, commenting on their late visitors, while preparations were being made for a start. “They are never safe while they carry about those beastly tulwars. A fellow may take it into his head to cut you down at any moment. If he has nothing to do it with he can’t; if he has he will. Government ought to put the Arms Act into force.”

“Then there’d be a row,” suggested Campian.

“Let there be. Anything rather than this constant simmering. Not a week passes but some poor devil gets stuck when he least expects it—in broad daylight, too—on a railway station platform, or in the bazaar, or anywhere. For my part, I never like to have any of these fellows walking close behind me.”

“No, I don’t want either of you. I’ve had enough of you both for to-day. I’m going to ride with Mr Campian now. I want to talk to him a little.”

Thus Nesta Cheriton’s clear voice, which of course carried far enough to be heard by the favoured one, as she intended it should. The pair of discomfited warriors twirled their moustaches with mortification, but their way of accepting the situation was characteristic, for while Fleming laughed good-humouredly, if a trifle ruefully, Bracebrydge’s tone was nasty and sneering, as he replied:

“Variety is charming, they say, Miss Cheriton. Good thing for some of us we are not all alike—ah—ha—ha!”

“I quite agree with you there,” tranquilly remarked Campian, at whom this profoundly original observation was levelled. Then he assisted Nesta to mount.

The path down from the kotal was steep and narrow, and the party was obliged to travel single file. Finally it widened out as they gained the more level valley bottom. Here were patches of cultivation, and scattered among the rocks and stones was a flock of black goats, herded by a wild looking native clad in a weather-beaten sheepskin mantle, and armed with a long jezail with a sickle shaped stock. Two wolfish curs growled at the passers by, while their master uttered a sulky “salaam.” A blue reek of smoke rose from in front of a misshapen black tent, consisting of little more than a hide stretched upon four poles, beneath whose shelter squatted a couple of frowsy, copper-faced women.

Two or three more smoke wreaths rising at intervals from the mountain side, and the distant bark of a dog, betokened the vicinity of other wandering herdsmen.

“I never seem to see anything of you now,” said the girl suddenly, during a pause in the conversation, which up till then had been upon the subject of the surrounding and its influences.

“Really? That sounds odd, for I have been under the impression that we are looking at each other during the greater portion of every day, and notably when we sit opposite each other at the not very wide, but pre-eminently festive board.”

“Don’t be annoying. You know what I mean.”

“That we don’t go out chikór shooting together any more. You may remember I foretold just such a possibility on the last occasion of our joint indulgence in that pastime.”

“Well but—why don’t we?”

“For exactly the reason I then foretold. You seem better employed. I amuse myself watching the fun instead.”

She looked at him quickly. Was he jealous? Nesta Cheriton was so accustomed to be spoiled and adored and competed for and quarrelled over by the stronger sex, that she could hardly realise any member of the same remaining indifferent to her charms. As a matter of fact, this one was not indifferent. He appreciated them. Her blue-eyed, golden-haired prettiness was pleasant to behold, in the close, daily intercourse of camp life. He liked to notice her pretty ways, and there was something rather alluring in her half affectionate and wholly confidential manner towards himself. But—jealous? Oh no—no. He had lived too long, and had too much experience of life for that phase of weakness. Nesta was disappointed. She read no symptoms of the same in his face, her ear detected no trace of bitterness or resentment in the tone.

“But I want to go out with you sometimes,” she said. “Why do you avoid me so of late?”

“My dear child, you never made a greater mistake in your life than in thinking that. Here we are, you see, all crowded up together. We can’t all be talking at once—and—I thought you rather enjoyed the fun of playing those two Johnnies off against each other.”

“Ah, I’m sick of them. I wish they’d go back to Shâlalai.”

“I don’t altogether believe that. Which is the favoured one, by the way?”

“No, really. I rather like Captain Fleming, though.” She laughed, branching off with the light-hearted inconsequence of her type. “And—I don’t know what to do. He’s awfully gone on me.”

“And are you ‘awfully gone’ on him?”

“Of course not. But I rather like him. I don’t know what to do about it.”

“You don’t know whether to buckle yourself for life to some one you ‘rather like’—or not. Is that the long and short of it?”

“Yes.”

“If you are a little idiot, Nessie, you will do it—if you are not, you won’t. You are dreadfully lacking in ballast, my child, even to dream of such a thing, are you not?”

“I suppose so. I don’t care a straw for anybody for more than a week or so. Then I am just as sick of them as I can be. That’s how I am.”

“Except on that solitary occasion when you did take someone seriously. Tell me about that, Nessita.”

“No—no!”

“But you promised to, one of these days. Why not now?”

“What a tease you are. I won’t tell it you now. No—nor ever. There!—Hark! Wasn’t that thunder?” she broke off suddenly.

“Yes. It’s a long way off, though, travelling down yonder ridge. Won’t come near us.”

Away along the summit of the further range a compact mass of cloud now rested, and from this came a low distant peal. It represented one of the thunderstorms common at that time of year, restricted in locality, and of limited area. They gave it no further thought, and the conversation running on from one subject to another, now grave, now gay, carried them a long way over the road. The rest of the party were far ahead. Bracebrydge was consoling himself by teasing Lily, and receiving from that young person, not unaided by Hazel, many a repartee fully up to the viciousness of his own thrusts. Fleming was riding with Mrs Upward, while Upward and Bhallu Khan were constantly diverging from the road, inspecting various botanical subjects with

professional eye. Thus Nesta and Campian, whether by accident or design of the former, gradually dropped behind. Again, a long low boom of thunder pealed out upon the stillness of the air.

“That’s much nearer?” exclaimed the girl, looking up. “I say! I wish it wouldn’t! I don’t like thunder.”

“Scared of it?”

“Rather. What shall we do if it comes right over?”

“There may be some shelter of sorts further on. Meanwhile, don’t think about it. Go on talking to me. What subject shall we find to wrangle about?”

She laughed, and very soon found a subject; and thus they continued their way, until the path opened out from the narrow, stony, juniper-grown valley they had been descending, on to a wide, open plain, utterly destitute of foliage of any kind. The bulk of the party were now visible again, further in advance, looking mere specks, nearly three miles distant.

“They will be in the tangi directly,” said Nesta, shading her eyes to watch the distant figures. “There, they are in it now,” as the latter disappeared in what looked like the mountain side itself, for no rift was discernible from where these two now rode.

“We had better get on, hadn’t we?” urged Campian.

“Oh no. I hate hurrying, and there’s no earthly reason why we should.”

So they held on at the same foot’s pace over the plain, which stretched its weary desolation far on either side of them. Here and there a great hump of earth, streaked with white gypsum, relieved the dead level monotony, but not a living thing—man, beast or bird—was in sight. Not even a sound was audible, except the deep-toned growl of the thunder, growing louder as they neared the mountain wall.

“Good study for a subject illustrating the jaws of Death,” remarked Campian, as, now before them, the mountain seemed to yawn apart in a vertical fissure, which the stupendous height of the cliffs on either hand caused to appear as a mere slit.

“Yes. And—it’s beginning to rain.”

Large drops were pattering down as they entered the jaws of the great chasm, but once within them there was shelter for a space, for the cliffs took an abrupt slant over at about a hundred feet above, so that the sky was no longer visible. A trickle of muddy water was already running down the stony footway. This should have warned Campian, at any rate; but then his experience of the country and this particular feature thereof, was not large. Nesta shivered.

“I don’t like this at all,” she said. “It is horrible. What if the tangi should come down?”

The other glanced upward. The cliff walls were smooth and straight. Not a sign of ledge or projection to afford a foothold, no clinging shrub or tree anchored in a cleft.

“Shall we go back?” he said. “There must be some way over.”

“No, no. I came through here once before, and I remember Mr Upward saying it would take a whole day to cross over the mountain. The tangi is only about a mile long.”

“That means twenty minutes riding slow. Come along. We shall soon do it.”

But, even as his tone was, an ugly picture came before the speaker’s mind—that of a rush of black water many feet high, syphoned between those smooth walls. Anxiously but furtively his glance scanned them as they rode along.

As the narrowness of the passage wound and widened a little, the sky once more became visible overhead. The sky? But it had clouded over, and the rain fell somewhat smartly now upon the two wayfarers. A blue gleam of lightning shot down into the depths, and the reverberating peal which followed was as though telephoned in menacing boom through this tube-like chasm. Hundreds and hundreds of feet they towered up now, those iron-bound walls. It was like penetrating deeper and deeper into the black heart of the mountain.

“See that place up there?” said Nesta, pointing to a kind of slanting ledge quite twenty feet above and which might be reached by a strong climber, though even then with difficulty. “Last time we came through here, Bhallu Khan told us that two men had been overtaken by a rush, and succeeded in getting to that point; but even there the water had reached one of them and swept him away. Horrible, isn’t it?”

“Very likely he invented the whole thing. He has an excellent imagination, has our friend Bhallu Khan.”

This he said to reassure her, not that he thought the incident improbable. Indeed, glancing up at the spot indicated, he saw that evidence in the shape of sticks and straws was not wanting to show that the water had at some time reached that altitude, and the idea was not pleasant. In the vivid sunshine of a cloudless day it would have added interest to their way; now, with a gathering storm breaking over their heads, and another half mile of what might at any moment become a raging death-trap before them, it was dismal.

Another turn of the chasm, and the way, which had hitherto been level and pebbly, now led up over steep and slippery slabs. It became necessary to dismount, and here—Nesta's pony which she was leading, for it became necessary to adopt single file, slipped and fell badly on its side. By the time the terrified beast was on its legs again, shivering and snorting, and sufficiently soothed down to resume the way, some precious minutes had been lost.

"We might mount again now," said Campian, noting that the way was smoother. "Come. Jump up."

But instead of placing her foot in the hand held ready to receive it, the girl stood as though turned to stone. Every drop of blood had forsaken her face, which was now white as that of a marble statue, her lips ashy and quivering.

"Hark!" she breathed, rather than uttered. "It is coming! We are lost!"

His own countenance changed, too. He had heard it as soon as herself—that dull raving roar, echoing with hollow metallic vibration along the rock walls. His heart almost died within him before the awfulness of this peril.

"Oh no, nothing like that," he replied. "We must race it. We shall distance it yet, if we only keep our heads."

The while he had put her into the saddle. Then taking the bridle, he began to lead her pony over the dangerous point of the way. The brute slipped and stumbled, now sliding, now about to pitch headlong, but both got through.

"Now for it, Nessie. Give him all the pace you can, but keep him in hand. We'll race it easily."

Down the tangi now, giving their steeds all the rein they dared, these two rode for dear life. Then Nesta's pony stumbling over a loose stone, came right down, unhorsing his rider.

“Don’t leave me! Oh don’t leave me!” she shrieked despairingly. “I can’t move, my skirt is caught.”

“Leave you. Is it likely? What do you take me for?” came his reply, as in a moment he was dismounted and beside her. “Keep your head. It will be all right in a moment. There!” as a vigorous tug brought the skirt clear of the fallen animal, which lay as though stunned.

But as she gained her feet, the dull hollow booming, which had been deepening ever behind them, became suddenly a roar of such terrible and appalling volume, that Campian’s steed, with a wild snort of alarm jerked the bridle rein from his hand, and bolted wildly down the pass. It all came before him as in a lightning flash. The utter hopelessness of the situation. The flood had turned the corner of the reach they were now in. He saw it shoot out from the projecting ridge, and hurl itself with thunderous shock against the opposite rock face. Hissing and bellowing it sprung high in the air, then, flung back, amid a vast cloud of spray, it roared down upon them. One glance and only one, lest the terror of the sight should paralyse him, and he realised that in about two or three minutes that flood would be hurling their lifeless bodies from side to side against those grim rock walls.

Chapter Eight.

The Dark Jaws of Death.

All as in a lightning flash some flicker of hope returned. For he saw they were underneath the place which Nesta pointed out to him as having afforded refuge to at any rate one in their position. It was their only chance. Hope well nigh died again. To climb there alone would be something of an undertaking—but with a helpless girl—

Yet he reached that point of refuge, but how he did so Campian never knew—never will know to his dying day. The superhuman effort; the hellish deafening din of the black flood as it shot past, so near as to splash them, clinging there to the steep rock face, not more than half way up to the place of refuge; of the words of encouragement which he whispered to his half-fainting charge athwart the thunder-roar of the waters, as he literally dragged her up beside him; of the tearing muscles and cracking joints, and blazing, scintillating brain—of all these he has a dim and confused recollection, and can only attribute the accomplishment of the feat to a well nigh superhuman mania of desperation.

Higher still! No time for a pause or rest—no permanent foothold is here—and the waters are still rising. He dared not so much as look down. The daze of the lightning striking upon the rock face aided his efforts. The crash of the thunder peal was as entirely drowned in the bellowing and strident seething of this huge syphoned flood, as though it were silent.

The refuge at last, but what a refuge! Only by the most careful distribution of weight could two persons support themselves on it for any length of time. It was hardly even a ledge, hardly more than a mere unevenness in the rock's surface. Yet, one of these two persons was a terribly frightened and far from robust girl; the other seemed to have expended all the strength within him in the effort of getting there at all. Thus they clung, mere pigmy atoms against this stupendous cliff wall; suspended over the seething hell of waters that would have churned the life out of them within a moment or so of reaching its surface.

"There! We are safe now!" he gasped, still panting violently after the exertion. "We have only to wait until the water runs off. It will soon do that, you know."

"No, it will not," she replied, her blue eyes wide with terror, and shudderingly turning her face to the cliff to avoid the awfulness of the sight. "It may take days. The tangi by the camp took a whole night once. It was the night you came."

“Well, even then? Upward will have had time to get through safely, ample time, and at the first opportunity they will come for us.”

“They won’t find us,” she moaned. “You know that place I showed you where Bhallu Khan told us the water had risen high enough to sweep a man off. It was higher than this.”

“I think not I think this is the higher of the two,” he answered mendaciously. In her fear she had not recognised the place, and he would not undeceive her. For his part, he blessed the chance that had put the idea into his head. But for her having narrated the incident as they rode past, it might never have occurred to him that the attempt was feasible, and—what then?

“We mustn’t discount the worst,” he went on.

“The chances of it rising any higher are nil, and even if it does, there is plenty of margin before it reaches us. It isn’t as if it were a case of an incessant and regular downpour. It is only one of those sharp afternoon thunder showers that run off these great slab-like rocks as off a roof on a huge scale. My dear little girl, you must be brave, and thank Heaven we were able to fetch this place at all. Look, I believe it has run off a little lower already.”

“Oh, no—no! I can’t look. It is horrible—horrible!” she answered, as venturing one peep forth, she again hid her face, shuddering.

And in truth her terror was little to be wondered at. It was growing dusk now in the world without, and the roar and hiss of the vast flood coursing with frightful velocity between those grim, cavernous cliffs in the shades, would have tried the nerves of anybody contemplating the scene from the impartial vantage ground of a place of safety. How then did it seem to these two, crouching on a steep slant of rock, whose unevenness alone sustained them in position; cowering over this awful flood, which might at any moment, rising higher, sweep them into a horrible death? And then, that the situation should lose nothing of its terror, Campian noticed, with a sinking of the heart, that the water actually was rising.

Yes. A mark upon the iron-bound face of the opposite cliff, which had caught his attention on first being able to look round, was now covered. Was it the gathering gloom, or had the scratch been washed away? No. The latter was stratified. The water had risen nearly two feet.

The depth at first he judged to be about ten feet. Two more had been added. He fixed another mark. The roaring was already so fearful it could hardly be increased. The hissing, boiling eddies of the rush, leaped over the new mark, then subsided—leaped again, and this time did not subside. They streamed over, hiding it completely. And still the rain poured down pitilessly, and he thought he could detect a peal of thunder above the roar of the waters, which suggested a renewed burst over the very catchment area which had supplied this flood. Well, he had done what he could. The end was not in his hands.

“Oh-h—how cold it is!” moaned Nesta.

“Of course; I was forgetting,” he replied, with great difficulty divesting himself of his coat, for hardly so much as a finger could be spared in the effort involved to hold himself—to hold both of them—in position. But it was done at last, and the garment, all too light, he wrapped around the girl’s shivering form. She uttered a feeble protest, which took not much overruling.

“What a precious pair of drowned rats we must look, Nessita,” he said; “and what a sight we shall be when they find us in the morning.”

“But they never will find us in the morning—not me, at any rate.”

“Won’t they? They will though, and you will be the first to think of the appearances. Why, that pretty curled fringe that I and those two sodger Johnnies were eager to die for a little while ago is all over the shop. You should just see it now.”

Thus he bantered, as though they were in the snug dining tent at Upward’s camp instead of amid a raving hell of terror and of imminent death. But the while the man’s heart died within him, for in the last faint touch of light he noticed that yet another mark, higher than the rest, had disappeared.

“I wonder which of those two Johnnies aforesaid would give most to be able to change places with me now,” he went on, still bantering. “Or, at any rate, won’t they just say so to-morrow? Here, you must get up close to me,” he said, drawing her right to him. “It will serve the double purpose of keeping you from going overboard and keeping you warmer, and me too, perhaps.”

If ever there was time and place for conventionality, assuredly it was not here. Her violent shivering quieted down as she nestled against him. The warmth of the contact and the additional sense of protection combined to work wonders.

“Now, talk to me,” he said; “or try and go to sleep, if you would rather. I’ll take care you don’t fall over.”

“Sleep? I don’t suppose I shall ever sleep again.”

“Rather, you will. And, Nessie, shall I tell you something you’d rather like to hear? The water is already beginning to go down.”

“What else has it been doing ever since we came up here?”

“That’s right!” he cried, delighted at this little spark of the old fun loving nature reasserting itself. “But, bar jokes, it really is lowering. I have kept an eye upon certain marks that were covered just now. They are visible again.”

The rain had ceased. The bellowing of the flood was as loud as ever, and but that they were talking into each other’s ears, their voices would have been well nigh inaudible. What he had said was true, and with a great gladness of heart, he recognised the fact.

“No, no! You are only saying that to make me think it is all right,” she answered, the wild eagerness in her tone betraying something of the strain she had undergone. “It can’t be really—is it? Say—is it really?”

“It is really, so far as I can judge. But it has turned so confoundedly dark, one can hardly see anything. Keep up your spirits, child. You have had an adventure, that’s all.”

“Well, you are a good one to share it with,” she murmured. “Tell me, were you ever afraid of anything in your life?”

“I should rather think I was, of heaps of things. I should have been hideously so before we started to climb up here, only there wasn’t time. Oh don’t make any mistake about me. I know what funk is, and that of the bluest kind.”

Thus he talked on, lightly, cheerily, and the girl, if she could not quite forget her numbness and terror and exhaustion, was conscious of no small alleviation of the same. It was pitch dark now, but the thunder of the waters, and the cavernous rattle of the stones and pebbles swept along by their rush, seemed to have abated in volume. An hour went by, then two. Nesta, half asleep, was answering drowsily. The gloom of the great chasm lightened. A full moon had risen over the outside world, and its rays were penetrating even to these forbidding depths. The roaring of the flood had become a mere purling ripple. The water had almost run off.

Campian was becoming frightfully exhausted. Not much longer could he support this strain. Would Upward never arrive? He had succeeded, providentially, in climbing up here, under stress of desperation, but to descend safely now, cramped and exhausted as they both were, would be impossible. A broken neck, or a broken limb or two, would be the sure and certain result of any such attempt.

As the moon-rays brightened, he could make out the bottom of the tangi, and it looked hideously far down, almost as if the rush of water had worn it deeper. It was all seamed and furrowed up, and the water was now babbling down in several little streams. Would help never arrive!

Ha! At last! Voices—native voices—then, although talking in an Oriental tongue, other voices, recognisable as European ones. The sound was coming down the tangi.

“Wake up, Nessita. Here they are, at last.”

But the girl had already heard, and started up with a suddenness which would have hurled her to the base of the cliff but for his restraining grasp.

“Wait, wait!” he urged. “Be doubly careful now. We don’t want to break our necks after a narrow shave of drowning.” Then lifting up his voice, he gave forth a mighty shout.

It was answered—answered by several voices. In the moonlight they could make out figures hurrying down the tangi.

“Where are you?” sung out Upward, who led the way. Then he stopped short, with an ejaculation of amazement, as the answer revealed the objects of his search high overhead. “Good heavens! how did you get up there?”

“Never mind now. What we want to know is how to get down.”

But with Bhallu Khan and one of his forest guard were two or three sturdy Baluchis, who had joined the party—all wiry mountaineers—and by dint of making a kind of human pyramid against the rock wall, the pair were landed safely beneath.

Then many were the questions and answers and ejaculations, as the full peril of the situation became apparent. Those who had undergone it had not much to say. Nesta seemed half dazed with exhaustion and recent terror, while Campian declared himself too infernally tired to talk. Fleming however produced a flask, which went far to counteract the cold and wet. The whole party was there. They had got safely through the tangi, when the rain began to come down in torrents, and in an incredibly short space of

time the slab-like slopes of the hills had poured down a vast volume into the dry nullah, which drained the valley area. They themselves were through only just in time, but had felt no great anxiety on account of the other two, reckoning them so far behind that the impassability of the tangi would be obvious to them directly they reached it. Of course they would not attempt it. But to find them here, half way through—saved as by a miracle, and then with the loss of two horses—no, they had not reckoned upon that.

All this Upward explained. Then, looking up at their place of refuge:

“I don’t suppose there’s another place in the whole length of the tangi you could have taken refuge in, and how the mischief you ever got to this one is a mystery to me.”

“Well, for the matter of that, so it is to me, Upward,” rejoined Campian. “I’m perfectly certain I couldn’t do it again for a thousand pounds.”

“Why, that’s the place a man was swept off from the year before last. Isn’t it, Bhallu Khan?”

“Ha, Huzoor!” asserted the forester, taking in the burden of their talk.

“Well, you’ve had a narrow escape, old chap—both of you have. I don’t know how you did it, but here you are. We were coming back to look for you, thinking you had got turned round, and might get trying some other way back, and this isn’t an over-safe country for a couple of strangers to get lost in at night. By the way, I can’t make out why you got so far behind. More than once we kept signalling you to come on. It occurred to us you might miss the way. Didn’t you see us?”

“No.”

“None so blind as those who won’t see—ah—ha—ha—ha!” sneered Bracebrydge, tailing off his vacuous laugh in would-be significance. But of this remark Campian took absolutely no notice. It was not the first time Bracebrydge had rendered himself offensive and quarrelsome in the presence of ladies, and the inherent caddishness of this gallant worthy was best recognised by the silence of contempt.

It was late before the party reached camp—later still when they got to bed. All was well that ended well—so far, that is, for Nesta Cheriton’s nervous system had received a shock, which rendered her more or less out of sorts for some time, during which time, however, Bracebrydge and Fleming were recalled to Shâlalai.

Chapter Nine.

After Long Years.

“Let’s get the ponies, and jog over and look up Jermyn. Shall we, Campian?” said Upward, during breakfast a few mornings later.

“I’m on. But—who’s Jermyn when he’s at home?”

“He isn’t at home. He’s out here now,” cut in Lily.

“Smart young party, Lil,” said Campian, with an approving nod. “And who is he when he’s out here now?”

“Why, Jermyn, of course.”

“Thanks. That’s precisely what I wanted to know. Thanks, fair Lilian. Thine information is as terse as it is precise.”

“I should say Colonel Jermyn if I were you, Lily,” expostulated that young person’s mother; whereat Hazel crowed exultantly, and Campian laughed. The latter went on:

“As I was saying, Upward, before we were interrupted, who is Jermyn?”

“Oh, he’s a Punjab cavalry man up here on furlough. He’s had fever bad, and even Shâlalai wasn’t high enough for him, though he doesn’t want to go home, so he rented my forest bungalow for the summer. It’s about eight miles in the Gushki direction. You haven’t been that way yet.”

“So? And what does Jermyn consist of?”

“Eh? Ah, I see. Himself and a niece.”

“What sort of a niece?”

“Hideous,” cut in Hazel.

“Really, I can’t allow that sort of libel to pass, even for a joke,” said Mrs Upward. “She isn’t hideous at all. Some people admire her immensely.”

“Pff!” ejaculated Lily, tip tilting her nose in withering scorn. “Too black.”

“Mr Campian likes them that way,” cackled Hazel. “At least, he used to,” added this imp, with a meaning look across the table at Nesta. “I was only humbugging. She isn’t really hideous. We’ll ride over too, eh, Lil?”

“No, you won’t—not much,” retorted Upward decisively. “You two are a precious deal too fond of running wild as it is, and you can just stay at home for once. Besides, we don’t want you at all. We may take on some chikór on the way, or start after some from Jermyn’s. Shall you be ready in half an hour, Campian?”

The latter replied in the affirmative, and they rose from the table. While they were preparing to start, he observed Nesta standing alone under the trees.

“Well, Nessita, and of what art thou thinking?” he said, coming behind her unnoticed. She started.

“Of nothing. I never think. It’s too much trouble.”

“Phew! Don’t take it so much to heart. They’ll soon be back.”

“What a tease you are,” she retorted petulantly. “I hope they won’t. If you only knew how sick I am of the pair of them.”

“That so? I was going to say you’d have to make shift with me for the next few days, but—There, it’s a sin to tease her. What’s the matter? You’re not looking up to your usual brilliancy of form and colouring, little girl.”

“Oh, I’ve got a most beastly headache. I’m going to try and go to sleep all day, if those two wretched children will let me.”

“Poor little girl! Shall I persuade Upward to let them come with us?”

“No, no. It doesn’t matter. You’d better go now, or you’ll start Mr Upward fussing.”

“And cussing?”

“Yes, that too. I’m going in now. Good-bye.”

“Nesta looks very much below par this morning, Upward,” said Campian, as they rode along.

“Does she? Finds it dull, perhaps, now, without those two jokers. She’s never happy without a lot of them strung around her.”

“So? These blue-eyed, fluffy headed girls usually are that way, I have observed. They are wonderfully taking, but—lacking in depth.”

“Thought at one time she was rather stringing yours on to her collection of scalps, old chap,” said Upward, with a sly chuckle.

“Because we went out chikór shooting together once or twice?” replied Campian tranquilly. “Talk of the devil—there are some chikór.” And the next few minutes were spent in dismounting—a rapid fifty paces through the sparse herbage—a whirr of wings—the triple crack of guns—and a brace and a half of birds retrieved by the attendant forest guard; while the remainder of the covey, having gained the mountain side, was crawling up the rock slopes like spiders on a wall.

“See that hole, Campian?” said Upward, soon after they had resumed their way. “That’s the markhôr cave. There’s always a markhôr there, the people say.”

“Let’s go and see if he’s at home now, except that we’ve only got shot guns,” replied Campian, looking up at the black fissure pointed out, and which cleft the rock face some distance overhead, seeming to start from a grassy ledge. It looked by no means an inaccessible sort of place.

“Bhallu Khan says he wouldn’t be in now,” said Upward, who had been talking in Hindustani to the old Pathân. “He only sleeps there.”

“So? Well, I don’t believe in his markhôr then, Upward. If the brute was so regular in his habits as all that, he’d have been shot long ago.”

“Very likely. But Bhallu Khan says the people are afraid of him. They don’t believe he is a real markhôr, but a spirit that takes the form of one. He is guarding some buried treasure, and it’s unlucky to go near the place.”

“It wouldn’t be unlucky if they found the treasure, by Jove! What does it consist of?”

Upward spoke again to the old forester, whose answer, translated to Campian, caused the latter fairly to start in his saddle, his scepticism dispersed.

“He says it is supposed to be old sword hilts and things, encrusted with the most priceless jewels. Hallo! You seem to believe in it, old chap?”

“Not I. Only it reminded me of something else. But I suppose they have a yarn of the kind attached to pretty nearly every hole and corner of the land, eh?”

“Yes. I have heard of others; but, curiously enough, now I think of it, this jewelled sword hilt idea doesn’t seem to come into them. It’s generally a case of tons of gold mohurs, and all that sort of thing.”

“I suppose so,” asserted Campian tranquilly. But his tranquillity was all outward, for as they continued their way, his mind was very lively indeed. Was there really something in the legend? Had he struck upon the clue at last—not merely a clue, but the actual spot? How he wished he had learned Hindustani, so as to be able to communicate, at first hand, with those who might be able to furnish other clues. All save the wild Baluchis of the more remote and nomad clans spoke that language, and it was of primary importance to obtain information of this kind at first hand, and unfiltered through a third party.

“Campian’s very chûp to-day,” thought Upward, peering furtively at his companion, who, during the last couple of miles, had hardly spoken, except in monosyllables. “I wonder if the sly old dog is really smashed on Nesta, and is thinking it over—I wonder?”

He would have wondered more could he have read the thoughts of “the sly old dog” aforesaid, for they ran not upon love but upon lucre.

“There’s the bungalow,” said Upward presently, pointing out a white low-roofed dwelling high up on the hillside. “Not a bad little place for a while, but most confoundedly out of the way.”

The path wound around the spurs, ascending more abruptly, mostly in the shade of the junipers, here growing to greater size, and more thickly. Presently they came out upon a small plateau, and the bungalow.

“Hallo, Upward! Glad to see you. Don’t get many visitors up here.”

“How do, colonel? This is Mr Campian—stopping with me. Nearly got shot by some Pathân budmashes, and then drowned by the tangi coming down, on the night he arrived. You may have heard about it.”

“Not a word—not a word. Haven’t seen a soul for weeks. Glad to meet you, Mr Campian. Fine view from here, isn’t there?”

“Splendid,” assented Campian, who had been taking in both the speaker and the view. The former was of the pleasant, genial type of soldier—elderly, grizzled, upright, well-groomed. The latter—well, it was fine—uncommonly so. From its eyrie-like position, the bungalow commanded a vast sweep of mountain and valley. Embedded against a background of juniper slope the front of the plateau looked out upon a scene, the leading idea conveyed by which was that of altitude and vastness. Opposite, a line of great mountains shot up in craggy heads to the sky; their slopes alternating in slab-like cliffs and gloomy chasms running up into lateral valleys. Juniper forest, more or less sparse, straggled along the base; and but for the aridity of the all prevailing stone and the scattered vegetation, the view would have been lovely. As it stood, it was only immense. Circling kites, uttering their plaintive whistle, floated in clouds against the blue of the sky, or, gracefully steering themselves with their long forked tails, soared out over the valley.

“Fine air, too,” went on Colonel Jermyn. “After the awful heat of some of those plains stations you can appreciate it, I can tell you. But I daresay, you got a taste of that on your way up?”

“Rather. Coming through Sindh, for instance, if you leaned back suddenly in the train against the back of the seat, it was like leaning against a lot of fizzling Vesuvian heads.”

“Ah, prickly heat. We know what that is down below—don’t we, Upward?”

But the reply was lost in the soft rustle of draperies, and a softer voice:

“How do you do, Mr Upward?” As the three rose, it needed not the formal introduction. The colonel’s words seemed to sound from far away in Campian’s ears. “My niece—Miss Wymer.”

The first utterance had been enough for Campian. There was no other such voice in the world. And as he stood there, exchanging the formal hand-clasp of ordinary every-day greeting with Vivien Wymer, small wonder that his self-possession should be shaken to the core. For, five years earlier, these two had parted—in anger and bitterness on the side of one, a whole world of heart-consuming love on that of both. They had parted, agreeing to be strangers thenceforward, and had been so, nor had they set eyes on each other since. Now, by the merest of chances, and totally unprepared, they met again amid the craggy mountain ranges of wild Baluchistan.

“We were talking about the prickly heat, Vivien,” went on the colonel. “Mr Campian says it was like leaning against burning match-heads coming up in the train—ha, ha! You

look a trifle below par even now,” turning to Campian. “Won’t you have a ‘peg’? Upward, excuse me—what a forgetful ass I am. So seldom I see anyone up here I’m forgetting my manners. After your long, hot ride, too!”

“Not feeling fit to-day. A new climate sometimes does knock me out at first,” replied Campian mendaciously, he being both by constitution and practice as hard as nails. He was savage with himself for losing his self-possession, even for a moment. “No lack of that article on the other side, anyway,” he thought bitterly.

Outwardly there was not. Vivien Wymer’s manner in greeting him had been so perfectly free and unconcerned that not one in ten thousand would have dreamed she had ever set eyes on him before. Nor, as she sat there talking to Upward, could the keenest ear have detected a trace of flurry in her soft-voiced, flowing tones; and what ear could be keener than that of the man who sat there, straining to catch every word—every tone—while endeavouring to avoid replying at random to the conversation of his host.

“That’ll pick you up,” said the latter, as the bearer appeared with a tray containing very tall tumblers and a bottle and syphons. “Nothing like a ‘peg’ after a hot ride. We can’t get ice up here, but I always have the stuff kept in a cooler. Mix for yourself.”

“You must come down to our camp for a day or two, Miss Wymer,” Upward was saying. “You’ll come, too, won’t you, colonel? There are still some birds left. It’s rotten shooting, but all there is here.”

Thereupon the conversation turned on shikar in general, and tiger in particular, and Campian felt relieved, for now he could drop out of it. Five years ago it was that he and Vivien had parted—yes, exactly five years—and now, as he sat watching her, it seemed as though but five days had passed over her, for all the change they had brought—outwardly, at any rate. All was the same—the poise of the head—even the arrangement of the rippling waves of soft dark hair had undergone but slight alteration; the quick lifting of the eyelids, the glance, straight and full, of the heavily fringed eyes. Yet, if taken feature by feature, Vivien Wymer could not have been summed up as beautiful. Was it a certain grace of movement inseparable from a perfect symmetry of form—an irresistible, sensuous attractiveness side by side with a rare refinement—that would have set her on the highest pinnacle, while other women, beautiful as a dream, would have been passed by unnoticed? He could not say. He only knew that she had appealed to him as no other woman had ever done before or since; that the possession of her would fill every physical and mental want—we desire to emphasise the latter phase, in that it was a question of no wild whirlwind of infatuated passion. She had drawn out in him—as regarded herself, at any rate—all that was best; had even been the means of implanting within him qualities wholly beneficial, and which he would have repudiated all capacity

for entertaining. In her he had recognised his destined counterpart. He might live a thousand years and never again meet with such. He was no longer young. He had known varied and eventful experiences, including a sinister matrimonial one, mercifully for himself, comparatively short. But Vivien Wymer had been the one love of his life, and the same held good of him as regarded herself, yet they met again now as strangers. One thing he decided. They were to keep up the rôle. Since she wished it—and evidently she did wish it—he would offer no enlightenment.

“Is your friend keen on sport, Upward?” the colonel was saying. “You ought to take him to try for a markhôr.”

“Don’t know that I care much for sport in that form,” cut in Campian. “It represents endless bother and clambering; all for the sake of one shot, and that as likely as not a miss. The knowledge that it is going to be your one and only chance is bound to make you shoot nervous. Now, I like letting off the gun a great deal, not once only.”

“Yes, it means a lot of hard work. Well, you’ve come to the wrong country for sport.”

“By the way, colonel,” said Upward, “my head forester points out a cave on the way here, where they say there’s always a markhôr. It doesn’t seem difficult to get at I don’t believe in it myself, because there’s a legend attached.” And thereupon he went into the whole story.

Vivien was listening with deepening interest.

“I should like to see that place,” she said. “Anything to do with the legends of the people and country is always interesting. Could we not arrange to go and explore it? You say it is easy to get at?”

“I think so,” answered Upward. “We might make a picnic of it. Two fellows from Shâlalai who joined camp with me are coming back to-morrow or the next day, and we might all go together. What do you say, colonel?”

“Oh, I don’t mind. Getting rather old for clambering, though. Come along in to tiffin; that’s the second gong.”

Throughout that repast, Vivien addressed most of her conversation to Upward. Campian, however, who had pulled himself together effectually by now, was observing her keenly. When she did have occasion to answer some remark of his, it was as though she were talking to a perfect stranger, beheld that morning for the first time. Very good. If that were the line she desired to keep to, not in him was it to encroach upon it. He had

his share of pride, likewise of vindictiveness, and some of the aggrieved bitterness of their parting was upon him now. But he remembered also that the ornamental sex are consummate actors, and felt savage with himself for having let down his own guard. And this impassiveness he kept up throughout the ordeal of again saying good-bye.

“Well, and what did you think of Colonel Jermyn, Mr Campian?” queried Mrs Upward, when they were seated at dinner that evening. The two men had returned late, having fallen in with more chikór on the way, and she had had no opportunity of catechising him before.

“He seems a pleasant sort of man,” returned Campian. “There was some scheme of cutting them into a kind of exploration picnic, wasn’t there, Upward?” he went on, with the idea of diverting an inevitable cross-examination.

“Them! You saw the niece, then?” rapped out Hazel. “What did you think of her?”

“Think? Why, that you are a shocking little libellist, Hazel, remembering your pronouncement.”

“It wasn’t me who said she was too black; it was Lily.”

“He’s mashed too,” crowed that young person, grinning from ear to ear.

“Why ‘too,’ Lilian? Is the name of those in that hapless plight legion?”

“Rather. You haven’t a ghost of a show. Down at Baghnagar she had three regiments at her feet. But she wouldn’t have anything to say to any of them.”

“That looks as if one had a ghost of a show, Lil,” replied Campian, serenely bantering. In reality, he had two objects to serve—one to cover the situation from all eyes, the other, haply to extract from the chatter of this hapless child anything that might throw light on Vivien’s life since they parted.

“Pff! not you,” came the reply, short and sharp. “There was one—once. She chucked him. No show for anybody now.”

“What a little scandalmonger it is,” said Campian, going off into a shout of laughter. He had to do it, if only to relieve his feelings. The information thus tersely rapped out by Lily, and which drew down upon the head of that young person a mild maternal rebuke for slanginess, had sent his mind up at the rebound. “Where did she get hold of that for a yarn, Mrs Upward?”

“Goodness knows. Things leak out. Even children like that get hold of them in this country;” whereupon Lily sniffed scornfully, and Hazel fired off a derisive cackle. “Do you think her good looking, Mr Campian?”

“Decidedly; and thoroughbred at every point.” The humour of the situation came home to the speaker. Here he was, called upon to give a verdict offhand as to the one woman who for years had filled all his thoughts, who still—before that day to wit—had occupied a large portion of them, and he did so as serenely and unconcernedly as though he had never beheld her before that day. “Why did she chuck—the other fellow?” he went on, moved by an irresistible impulse to keep them to the subject.

“He turned out a rip, I believe,” struck in Upward. “Lifted his elbows too much, most likely. A lot of fellows out here do.”

“You’ve got it all wrong, Ernest,” said his wife. “You really shouldn’t spread such stories. It was for nothing of the sort, but for family reasons, I believe; and the man was all right. And it wasn’t out here either.”

“Oh, well, I don’t know anything about it, and I’ll be hanged if I care,” laughed Upward. “I asked them to come down here for a few days soon, and they said they would. Then you can get it out of her yourself.”

Chapter Ten.

The Markhôr Cave.

“There is a large section of our fellow subjects that votes Alpine climbing the most incomprehensible form of lunacy known to science, on the ground that to spend half one’s life, and putting the whole of it in pawn, scrambling up rocks and ice and snow, for the sake of getting to the top of some pinnacle which a hundred people have already got to, and thousands more eventually will, is to place one’s self beyond the pale of ordinary intelligence. But I wonder what such would say of a being of mature age, and laying claim to the possession of ordinary intelligence, who skips up in the middle of the night, and under the guidance of an Asiatic whom he can’t understand, and who can’t understand him, spends several hours crawling over boulders and along blood curdling precipices, on the off-chance of one shot—and the certainty of a miss—at an infernal wild goat, which is of no earthly use to you when you get him, except to stick up his head and brag about it ever after. The Alp-climber would have to cede to him the proud distinction of prize imbecile, I guess.”

Thus mused Campian, as, following in the wake of Bhallu Khan, he wormed himself warily around an elbow of rock, between which and space, was a foothold just twenty inches as to width, and precarious as to stability, he bearing in mind the while two considerations—firstly, the desirability of refraining from dislodging so much as a pebble; secondly, the necessity of refraining from dislodging himself. The first grey of early dawn was just breaking upon the mountain world, and here he was spread-eagled against a cliff of dizzy height and well nigh perpendicular formation: raked by a piercing wind, and wondering whether he should eventually get off it by the ordinary tedious process of slow and sure progression or by the rapid one of a false step—leading to pulverisation. As to one consideration, however, he laboured under no ambiguity of mind. Nothing on earth should induce him to return by the way he had come, even if it must needs take a week to go round by some safer way.

In due course however, the situation improved. The rock face grew less perpendicular, the path wider, and finally they found themselves in a steep gully. Here the old Pathân, pointing upward began signalling vehemently, the gist of which Campian took to be that he must proceed more noiselessly than ever, and that the ridge above being gained, they would find markhôr.

A clamber of a hundred feet—one pebble dislodged with a clatter, bringing his heart to his mouth, and a reproachful glance from Bhallu Khan—and they were cowering behind the top of the ridge. Campian wanted a few moments to steady himself after their long, hard climb. He could not shoot straight in a state of breathlessness, he declared.

It was quite light up here now, but the sun had not risen above the eastern mountain-tops. As they peered over the ridge, the valley beneath still lay in the grey half-dawn. But between it and their point of vantage, on the rock-strewn slopes beneath, something was moving, and it needed not the touch on the arm from the old Pathân and the barely articulated whisper to set Campian's nerves tingling. He had already taken the rifle from the forester so as to be in readiness.

"Markhôr," he whispered.

Bhallu Khan nodded. A solitary ram, with fine horns, was browsing unconcernedly. There was no getting any nearer. Campian set the sight at four hundred yards. Then resting the rifle upon the rock in front of him, he took a steady aim and drew trigger.

The roar of the piece among the echoing stillness of the craggy solitudes was like a peal of thunder. The markhôr gave one wild bound into the air, and a thrill of exultation went through the shooter. But the disappointed headshake of Bhallu Khan would promptly have undeceived him, even had not the quarry taken to its heels and gone bounding down the slope at a flying gallop. He let go a couple more shots from the magazine, but wider than the first. Then he threw up the rifle in mingled disgust and resignation, the markhôr now being a mere bounding and very badly frightened speck.

"No good!" he exclaimed. "Can't do anything with certainty over two hundred yards, and that brute was nearer five than four. Well, I didn't expect to, so am not disappointed, and it doesn't really matter a little damn."

The only word of this reflection understood by Bhallu Khan being the last, he smiled, and proceeded to expatiate in Hindustani, profusely illustrating his harangue with signs. But of this, for his part, Campian understood not even the last word.

He cared the less for his failure to bring down the game in that this had not been his primary object. The pretext of sport had been a pretext only. He wanted to explore the markhôr cave, and that quietly and by himself, wherefore, when a couple of days after their visit to Jermyn he had suggested to Upward a markhôr stalk, the latter, remembering his expressed views on the subject of hard toil inadequately rewarded, had evinced considerable surprise, but excused himself from joining on that very ground, which was exactly what Campian had expected.

Now they were no great distance above that cave, and he soon signalled Bhallu Khan his desire to proceed thither. Somewhat to his surprise, remembering the superstition attached, the old Pathân cheerfully acquiesced, and a downhill climb of about three

quarters of an hour brought them to a position commanding its entrance. Signing him to remain there and watch, the forester crawled round to the rock above the gaping black fissure, where by dint of making a considerable noise, and rattling down showers of stones, he hoped to drive forth its inmate. But there came forth nothing.

“This markhâr is a fraud, anyway,” said Campian to himself. And he signalled Bhallu Khan to return just as that estimable Asiatic had himself arrived at the conclusion that there was no point in making further efforts to scare out of a hole something which was not within it. Then they sat on the rock together and conversed, as best they could by signs, while Campian breakfasted on some sandwiches and the contents of a business-like flask.

The sun had risen now, and was reddening the great craggy pinnacles on high with the new glow of day. Later on these would bear an arid and depressing aspect, but now they seemed to soar up proudly to the deepening blue. Meditatively Campian watched the line of light as it dropped lower and lower, soon to flood the valley with its fierce heatwave. Now it had reached the kotal, now it was just touching the junipers which embedded the forest bungalow. He could not see the latter from his present position, it being shut off by a rounded spur; but the immediate surroundings of it drew his glance. Not that they reminded him—oh, no! He had needed no mere reminder since that chance meeting three days ago. Bother thinking! Thinking was worse than useless. Springing to his feet, he signed Bhallu Khan that he wanted to explore the cave.

The fissure was easily approached, opening as it did on to a grass ledge. Campian produced a couple of candles, thereby betraying premeditation in this quest, and, lighting one, gave the other to the old Pathân. Then they advanced into the darkness.

The fissure ran at a slant for about ten yards, then it widened out, with a tolerably level floor, to an irregularly shaped rock chamber, seeming to extend about thirty yards back. The light was flickering and uncertain, and Campian, who was a little in front, felt his arm suddenly and violently seized, and a voice vociferated in his ear. For a brief fraction of a second the idea of treachery flashed through his mind; then he recognised in Bhallu Khan’s tone the vehemence not of menace but of warning.

He had been about to step on a broad, black stripe which lay across the floor of the cavern. Now he halted, his foot already raised. He lowered his candle. The broad, black stripe was a fissure—a crevasse. Of no great width was it—at that point only just wide enough to admit his own body—still it was wide enough. But what of its depth?

Motioning him to stand still, the forester picked up a handful of loose stones, and dropped them in one by one. Both listened. The stones took some time to strike

anything, and then it was very far down. There was yet a further and fainter concussion. Bhallu Khan smiled significantly, and shook his head. Campian whistled. Both looked at each other. Then they examined the crevasse again. No current of air arose, which argued no outlet. But the thing was of ghastly depth.

“Your markhôt is a fraud, Bhallu Khan,” said Campian, as they inspected the floor of the cave, and emphasising the statement by signs. “There is no trace of such a thing ever having been into it.”

The other smiled again, and nodded assent. But just then a sound outside made them start and look at each other. It was that of a human voice. Bhallu Khan blew out his light, and Campian followed his example. Thus for a moment they waited.

Footsteps were advancing into the cave. Then the striking of a match. They made out the figure of a man approaching—a native—bearing a lighted candle, which he shaded with his hand. Behind him came another figure, which they could not make out.

“Salaam, brother,” said Bhallu Khan in Hindustani, at the same time lighting his own candle.

The effect on the newcomer was disturbing. He gave a violent start, dropping the candle, which went out. But by their own light Campian could see a business-like revolver pointed straight at him, while a full, clear, feminine voice cried out in purest English:

“Don’t move, or I fire!”

It was his turn to start now. That voice! There was no other like it in the world. He replied calmly:

“Yes. Pull off. You may as well. It won’t really matter much.”

“Oh!” Just a little cry escaped Vivien Wymer. She lowered the weapon, then laughed, and there was a note in her laugh which, in one less self possessed, less self reliant, might almost have been taken for hysterical. “Who would have thought of finding you—anyone—here?” she went on. “But I believe I was the more startled of the two.”

“Yes, I am sure you were,” he replied, advancing now into the light. “We haven’t said ‘How d’you do?’ yet, and it’s as well to keep up the conventionalities.”

She put forth her hand to meet his, and again they clasped hands. Again they had met under strange and unlooked for circumstances—here, in the semi-gloom of the mountain cave.

“I was so interested in hearing about this place,” she said. “Mr Upward’s account of it seemed to hold my imagination, and I felt moved to explore it for myself. I did not feel inclined to wait for a scheme that might never come off. Besides, the associations of mystery and a touch of eeriness would have no effect in the midst of an every day, sceptical crowd.”

“Great minds jump together! That was precisely my own idea. But who is with you? Surely you are not alone, with only one servant, and not a very reliable one at that, judging from his behaviour just now. It is hardly safe, is it?”

“Yes, it is. All these northern border tribes are of the best type of Mohammedan, and respect women. No, I am not afraid.”

“You did not seem so just now, at any rate. But it is not only of that sort of danger I was thinking. A gloomy hole like this might conceal all kinds of hidden peril. It might be the den of a panther, or a wolf, or even a snake. For instance, look at this. Keep behind me, though.”

He led the way—it was only a few steps—to the scene of his own narrow escape. There yawned the cleft, black and hideous.

“Keep back,” he said, extending an arm instinctively, as though to bar a nearer advance, and in doing so his hand accidentally closed upon hers. He did not let it remain there, but it seemed as though a magnetic touch were conveyed from frame to frame, and there came a softness into his tone which accorded well with the protecting, shielding attitude.

“Is it very deep?” asked Vivien, holding her candle over the brim, and peering down into the blackness.

“Well, judging by the sound, it takes a stone a good while to get to the bottom. I should have been there myself long before this but for Bhallu Khan here. In fact, I was placidly walking into it when he laid violent hands on me.”

“Really? How horrible! Let’s leave it now, and go outside. The idea of such a thing oppresses one in here.”

She turned away. Her voice was unshaken. Beyond just a faint quickening in her tone, she might have been listening to some mere abstract risk run by somebody she had never seen or heard of before, and Campian could not see her face.

“Just take one more look around before you go outside,” he said. “The idea of those hidden valuables being here won’t wash. Both floor and walls are of solid rock. There is no possibility of burying anything.”

“Hardly, I should think,” she answered, after a few moments’ critical survey of the interior. “But, this is not an artificial cavern, surely?”

“No. I have seen others rather like it, though none quite of its size. But if you follow out the formation of the place, it is all on the same slant. The crevasse, to be sure, is at something of a different angle, but that is nothing to go by here, where the whole side of a mountain is seamed and criss-crossed with the most irregular network of fissures.”

“What if the things are at the bottom of that cleft?” said Vivien.

At the bottom of it! This was a new idea. Was it a new light? But he replied:

“Then they will remain there till the crack of doom. The hole is of immense depth—Bhallu Khan and I sounded it from every point—and is sure to contain noxious gas at a certain distance below the surface. Do you mind if I ask you a favour?—oh nothing very great!” seeing her start. “It is not to talk about this, or speculate before others as to the possibility of such a thing existing.”

“Why, of course, if you wish it! But—do you believe in it, then?”

“Perhaps partly. But it may be that I have something to go upon. When I have more I will tell you more—but—I am forgetting—how on earth can it interest you?”

“But it will interest me very much—and—” “you know it,” she was going to add, but substituted: “life is prosaic enough for a romantic search of this sort to add new interest to it. How is it I did not know you were here?”

“Here—on this spot, or in this country?”

“On this spot, I mean. The other is easily understood. We have been living out of the way so long, and I see so few people. And you have only recently arrived?”

“Yes. As to being in here, I had no pony to leave outside. I have been climbing the mountains after markhôr, hence a tolerably disreputable old Khaki suit, and a battered and general air of not having been to bed all night.”

“Did you have any success?”

“No. I got in one shot, but missed it of course, just as I was saying when up at your place the other day. However, what I really wanted to do was to come in quietly here and explore.”

“So did I. Where is my syce, I wonder? There is my pony,” looking around, for they had regained the entrance of the cave. “Ah! I see him. He is at his prayers. Your man has joined him.”

“Yes. Old Bhallu Khan is a whale at piety. I should think he stood a first-class chance of the seventh heaven.”

“These people are very devout,” said Vivien, looking towards the two Mohammedans, who, with their shoes off, and their chuddas spread on the ground as praying carpets, were prostrating their foreheads to the earth, and otherwise following out the prescribed formula—facing towards the holy city. “I sometimes wonder if it is all on the surface.”

“I don’t know why it should be. We make a good deal of show, too, though in a different way; but I doubt if we are any better than they. In fact, it is more than possible we are actually worse. But John Bull has a fine, hearty, overgrown, schoolboy contempt for anything he can’t understand, and to him the bowings and prostrations enjoined by the Moslem form of worship is sheer nonsense. For my part, I am not sure it is not even too refined for him.”

“Perhaps. I have often thought that to these people we must seem something worse than Pagans. I hardly wonder at their fanatical hatred of us.”

“Neither do I, the more so that our attitude towards them is for the most part well exemplified in the remark made to me by a fine wooden specimen of John Bull the other day coming down the Red Sea. Two or three of these travelling traders had got up on the forecastle, and were praying towards Mecca. ‘Ever see such humbug in your life?’ says this chump. I said I had, and far greater humbug; in fact, couldn’t see any humbug in the present performance at all. Oh, but it was all on the surface! How did he know that? I asked him. Oh, because they would lie and cheat and so forth. But so would nine-tenths of the English commercially engaged, I answered. Whereat he snorted, and moved off. He thought I was a fool. I knew he was one.”

“Very much so,” assented Vivien. “I detest that wooden-headedness which no amount of moving about the world will ever teach to think. And now that those two good people are through with their devotions, it is time I got home again. Oh, Meran Buksh, ghora lao!”

The syce sprang to execute this order, and in a minute Vivien’s pony was before her, ready to mount.

“Why this is the first time you have ever put me on a horse,” she said, as Campian seemed to be arranging her skirt with minute care, “and how well you did it.”

“Thanks,” he said. “There. I hope you will not have too hot a ride home. Good-bye.”

“Good-bye. You will be coming up to see us again soon, I suppose, or we shall be going to see Mrs Upward. You are going to make some stay, are you not?”

He replied in the affirmative, and, looking at her as she sat there with easy grace, he felt that never had his self-possession been in greater peril. Cool and fresh and sweet in her light blouse and riding-skirt—her glance full and serene meeting his—the flush of health mantling beneath the soft skin, she was a picture in her dark, brilliant attractiveness, framed against the background of savage rocks and ragged junipers.

“Good-bye,” was all he said.

A pressure of the hand, and she turned her pony and rode away at a walk, the syce following.

Campian watched her out of sight. Then he did a curious thing—at any rate for a man of mature age and judgment. He returned to the cave and picked up a small rough stone, quite an ordinary stone it was, but while they had stood talking Vivien had been rolling this stone absently to and fro beneath the sole of her boot. Now he picked it up, and, glancing at it for a moment, put it in his pocket. But he seemed to change his mind, for, pulling it forth again, he hurled it away far over the rocks.

Then he started out in the direction of Upward’s camp, old Bhallu Khan, carrying the rifle, following close at his heels.

Chapter Eleven.

Introspect.

“You’re late, child. Had a long ride?” said Colonel Jermyn, who was already at breakfast when Vivien entered.

“Not very. The mountain paths here are so rough, you have to keep almost entirely to a walk. And I met Mr Campian, so we stopped and chatted a little.”

“Did you? Where?”

“Somewhere on the side of the mountain. I don’t know the localities here yet,” replied Vivien, with perfect ease. She had been about to say, “at the markhôr cave,” but remembering Campian’s hint, refrained. “He had been out after markhôr, with that nice-looking old forester of Mr Upward’s, and was on his way back.”

“Did he get any shots?”

“One, and missed it. He was quite unconcerned about it though, and didn’t go out of his way to invent half a hundred excuses for having missed it.”

“Ha, ha!” laughed the colonel. “So many of these young fellows—and old ones too—are always full of reasons of that kind. A stone slipped from under their foot, or the shikari sneezed, or something. There is something I rather like about that man. Who is he? Do you know anything about him?”

This was shooting the bolt home with a vengeance. But Vivien’s self-possession was equal to the strain.

“Isn’t there a family of that name in Brackenshire?” she asked carelessly.

“I believe there is. Yes, very likely. I thought we might ask him to come and stay a week or so when he has done with the Upwards, or even before. What do you think about it, Vivien?”

“Wouldn’t he find it desperately slow here, Uncle Edward?” she said, as serenely as before.

“Perhaps; I don’t know. If he did, he could always take himself off again. And now, if you’ll excuse me, dear, I’ll do likewise, for that confounded Levy sowar will be here directly for the dâk, and I’ve got a whole pile of letters to write. It’s mail day, too.”

Left to herself, Vivien moved about the room arranging here, dusting a little there. No flowers were obtainable in this arid region of rocks, save a few wild ones, but even of these she had made the best; and what with little touches of feminine tastefulness in the arrangement of the rooms, the old forest bungalow, rough and racketty, and hardly better than a mere rest-house, stood quite transformed. Then, passing into her own room, she shut the door, and sat down to think.

Far away from wild, craggy Baluchistan her thoughts went back. A chance call, a chance introduction in a room full of people. A few minutes of ordinary conversation as between strangers who met for the first time, and—she had learned the mystery of life when life is young—though not always then—had gazed within the golden gates of love; had trodden the flower-springing sod of that radiant and mystic realm; and not only that, but she had known, with a wondrous magnetic instinct, that in the same moment of time another had learned that mystery too. Then she had begun to live; then she had begun to realise what life could contain.

Other scenes rose before her as she sat here thinking—a vision of the Park corner, in all the joyous glow and brilliancy of the London season at its height—with one ever at her side—one who there in the midst of all the varied types of beauty, and style and attractiveness of the kingdom collected together, never—as she used to tell him half playfully, but all proudly—never had eyes for any but herself. Ah, it was something to be loved like that; and yet this was not the perfervid enthusiasm, the red-hot glow of youthful adoration, but the love of one considerably past that illusive stage; whose experiences had been multifold, and frequently bitter. Again, she saw the green glories of the Cliveden woods, mirrored in the broad placid surface, as she and one other floated down that loveliest of lovely reaches in the fire-path of the westering sunlight, alone together, the murmur of their voices and the dipped wing of the hovering swallow blending with the lazy splash of the sculls. Again, in the opera box, while the most splendid staging perhaps that “Faust” had ever been put on with, held the entranced and densely packed multitude in the lowered light, she dwelt in a paradise all her own, for had she not the presence, even the contact of that one? Many and many a scene came before her now. Ah, that year! It had been indeed a year of love. And in every such scene, in every such recollection he had been ever the same. Never a moment of time that he could spare but had been spent with her—indeed not a few also that he could not—and throughout it all how perfectly free and happy together, how thoroughly at home with each other they had been.

Why, then, had such a state of things been allowed to come to a close? Heavens! It is a rare—well nigh unique—one, in all conscience. Had he deceived her—disappointed her? Not any. But there had come stalking along that goggle-eyed, sheet-and-turnip bogey hight Duty—that Juggernaut which has crushed far more lives than it has ever fortified, and now, in her retrospect, Vivien Wymer realised, not for the first time, and no less bitterly, that this is just what it had done for hers. For at the period to which her thoughts went back, she owned a mother—and a selfish one, as mothers now and again are, all cant to the contrary notwithstanding—and this devoted parent could not do without her daughter, although she had another. Here was the jagged rock beneath the surface of their unruffled sea, and upon it their freight of happiness had been wrecked and cast away.

At the time Vivien had thought herself passing strong, and the consciousness of this had done much to buoy her up amid such an experience of agony and heartbreak that even now she hardly cares to look back to. That had been five years ago. She was young then, and now that she is nearer thirty than twenty she is able to realise that she acted insanely; is able to realise that the love which that one had lavished upon her was worth more than that of all the kindred in the world ten times over, let alone such a consideration as an imaginary duty towards a thoroughly selfish and exacting woman, merely because the latter happened to be her nearest relation. She has come to realise the absolute truth of his words, and the realisation brings with it no solace, for, like most other experiences worth gaining, it has come too late. Her mother has been dead for three years past, and her younger sister, now married, is not eager to see too much of her; and to Duty, as represented by these, Vivien has sacrificed her life.

But he—will he not relent and return? Can he live without her? Well, five years have passed since they parted, and he has kept to their agreement. She knows his nature—unswerving, vindictive—indeed the very contrast afforded between this and the completeness of his love for herself had not a little to do with drawing her to him. His words during that awful parting had been few, and their raging bitterness to some degree suppressed, and that he should come second to anything or anybody, was what he never could and never would forgive.

Would he relent? Never. She went back to their chance meeting in the markhôt cave but a few hours ago, recalled every word of their conversation. The very tone of his voice had never swerved. Her ear, quick to detect any change, had detected none—not even by the smallest inflection. His manner had been kind, friendly, full of a certain modicum of regard—but that was all. Had he not often told her that a lost illusion was gone for ever? Never could it be set up again. His love was dead, and she had killed it.

But—was it? Surely not. It was only sleeping, deeply perhaps, but would re-awaken. She would re-awaken it. It was impossible that such a love as theirs had been could die in either of them as long as life should last. Then a blank misgiving seized her. They had not met for five years. Then she was twenty-three. What changes had the intervening period effected in her?

She gazed into her mirror long and steadily. Yes, she was growing old—old and plain, decidedly, she told herself with an aching bitterness of heart. The soft sprightliness of five years earlier was no longer in her face. It had gone. Alone with herself she need not dissimulate. In those days the bright and sunny spirits of rejoicing youth had radiated from her eyes; now, though her eyes were as lustrous and brilliant as ever, their glance was a tired one, reflecting but the sadness of a lonely and disappointed woman. Undoubtedly the change had struck him, and with startling force. No; his love would never re-awaken now. Why should it? In the day of her power she had let it go; now her power had departed.

Then another thought came to her. That blue-eyed girl staying with the Upwards—she was wondrously pretty. Vivien had seen her once in Shâlalai. The two would be thrown together day after day, and all day long—had been so thrown together. They had even shared a common peril. And she had youth on her side. What sort of tone would his voice have taken while talking to her, Vivien wondered, again recalling the perfect composure of his conversation but an hour or two ago in the cave. No reference—not even a veiled one—to the past; no remark upon the unexpectedness of their first meeting. True, he had seemed a trifle disconcerted on the occasion of that meeting; but that was only natural—and momentary. Yes, Nesta Cheriton was wonderfully pretty and taking. Thus she tortured herself.

But while she could do that alone and with her own thoughts, Vivien would rather have died than have allowed any glimmering of their gist to be so much as suspected by any living soul, let alone the object of them. She forgot to wonder at her own self-possession on the occasion of that first meeting; and indeed on that of the subsequent one. It had proved even more complete than his own, and she forgot to speculate as to whether he might not be taking his cue from her and playing up to her lead. That is the worst of introspection of the vehement kind, it is absolutely blinding as regards the attitude towards the object which inspires it.

Then, by a curious twist in her meditations, pride sprang into arms. If one man could so completely dismiss her from his heart and memory, there were others who could not. She unlocked a drawer of her writing-table and took out a letter. Spreading it open before her, she glanced through it. It was from one who was the owner of a fine old country place and a good many thousands a year, and contained a passionate appeal to

her to reconsider her former refusals. This letter she had intended to answer last week. But now?

She read it through again. Why should she continue to throw away life, grieving over what was past and done with; what was inevitable; what was dead and buried? It was more sensible to take life as it is, and make the best of things. She would accept the man. There was no reason why she should not, and every reason why she should.

She drew a sheet of paper to her, but before she had got further than the address, a new thought struck her. What if she had so replied by last mail—that is to say, the day before this other had been so unexpectedly thrown back into her life? Nay, worse. What if she had so replied to a like appeal from the same quarter nearly a year ago? That decided her. She wrote her reply—and it was in the negative, very unequivocally so—stamped and directed it, and threw it aside.

Then she did a strange—and in view of her former meditations—an utterly inconsequent thing. She took another sheet of paper and wrote:

“We were to be strangers to each other. Had we not better remain so? You will understand my meaning fully within the next few days. Of course I have no right to try and influence your movements, so must leave it to your own judgment to order them in what seems to me the only rational and sensible way.

“Vivien.”

This she put into an envelope, which she sealed, but did not stamp. Then she directed it to “Howard Campian, Esquire, Chirria Bach.”

No; she could not bear it. To be under the same roof with him for days, possibly weeks at a time, and keep up the rôle of strangers to each other, would be too great a strain. Now, when he should receive her uncle’s invitation he would know what to do. On the face of such an intimation there was but one course open to him. A rap came at the door, and her uncle’s voice:

“Got any letters to send, Viv? The Levy sowar is here.”

“Only one,” she answered, opening the door, and handing him the one bearing the English address. “The other I want to go in the opposite direction. The man can take it this evening when he passes here with the Upwards’ dâk.”

“All right.” And in a moment more the clatter of the horse’s hoofs died away down the path, and the swarthy Baluchi, in his Khaki uniform, jogged indifferently upon his way, as though he were not the bearer of that which by a turn or freak of thought had just escaped being an agency for entailing solemn consequences upon one or more lives.

“By George! this hill air seems to suit you, child,” cried the jolly colonel, gazing upon his niece with undisguised admiration. “I can’t make out what all these young fellows— young fools, I call them—are about. Eh?”

“Have I not got a dear old uncle, who talks shocking nonsense on privileged occasions?” returned Vivien, slipping her hand within his arm. “Why, I am getting as old as the hills, and am ‘going off’ perceptibly every hour. Do I not own a looking-glass?”

“A looking-glass? Pooh! it’s a lying one then. We’ll pitch it over the khud, and send Der’ Ali down to the bazaar for one that is more truthful. But, then—I am forgetting. This isn’t Baghnagar, and there’s no bazaar.”

“No, there isn’t, and a good thing too, if it is going to conduce to such scandalous waste,” retorted Vivien brightly.

“I believe it’s not fair, eh? It seems hard lines on you, child, shutting you up here, with no one to talk to but a prosy old fellow like me, eh?”

“Now, Uncle Edward, it is you who will have to go over that khud instead of my poor, unoffending, candid looking-glass, if you persist in talking such a prodigious quantity of nonsense.”

That evening the Levy sowar arrived in due course, with Colonel Jermyn’s post, and clattered off, bearing that of Upward. But the letter addressed to Howard Campian, at Chirria Bach, still lay upon Vivien’s writing-table.

Chapter Twelve.

Umar Khan—Freebooter.

Umar Khan was a Baluchi who bore a very bad record indeed.

One of his earlier exploits, in fact, that which was destined to start him in his career of budmâshi, and ultimately, in all probability, land him on the scaffold and faggot pyre (Note 1), had taken place many years before the events narrated in our story. He had been summoned before the Political Agent to answer for complicity—real or alleged—in the raiding upon and blackmailing of certain wandering herdsmen, belonging to a weaker clan. The British official found him guilty, and sentenced him to a term of imprisonment, a terrible punishment to the free, wild man of the deserts and mountains.

The manner in which this one received the penalty to which he was doomed was characteristic. His eyes blazed, and, his features working with demoniacal fury, he spat forth a volume of curses and threats.

“What does he say?” inquired the Political Agent.

The interpreter replied that, apart from calling down all the most forcible anathemas known to the Moslem creed upon the heads of those concerned in his then discomfiture, the substance of the prisoner’s declaration was as follows:—The Sirkâr (Ruling power, i.e., Government) was strong, but those who had borne witness against him were not. Let them beware. He would have ten lives for that day’s work. The Sirkâr could not shut him up for ever. It could kill him, but there were plenty left—several, even, who heard him that day—who would accept his legacy of vengeance; and the witnesses against him had better go across the wide sea, if haply they might, for no corner of the land wherein they now dwelt was remote enough to hide them from the vengeance of Umar Khan.

To this manifesto the Political Agent replied in words of weighty warning. As the prisoner had said, the Sirkâr was strong—strong to punish, as he had already discovered. If, on the expiration of his term of imprisonment he continued his evil ways, or made any attempt to fulfil his threat, he would speedily find that there was no corner of the land remote enough to hide him from the vengeance of the Sirkâr, which in that case would be swift, condign, and terrible—in fact the most terrible that could overtake him, viz: death with ignominy.

So Umar Khan duly served his term, and in the fulness of time was released. For a while the authorities kept an eye on him, and all went well. He was in no hurry, this wild,

brooding, vindictive mountaineer. He employed his period of enforced quietude in secretly locating every one of those who had borne witness against him, and when the surveillance over his movements had relaxed, he became as good as his word. One night he started for some of the objects of his feud, and, taking them by surprise, killed three. Two more he found in a neighbouring village, and these also felt the weight of his tulwar. But now things grew too lively. With half of his account of vengeance settled, Umar Khan found himself forced to flee, unless he were prepared to forego—and that forever—the other half. So flee he did, both fast and far, hotly pursued by the Political Agent and a strong posse of Levy sowars.

Now, the said Political was a staff corps man who had seen some service, and, moreover a very energetic and zealous official; consequently, he allowed the fugitive no more start than he could help, with the result that the latter had no time to collect any following so as to afford him the satisfaction of selling his life dearly. So day and night fled Umar Khan; but turn and double as he would, the avenging force pressed him hard, for the Levy sowars were men of the country, and knew all the twists and turns of the mountains as well as he did; and their commander was a seasoned campaigner, and as hard as nails. However, fortune favoured him, and the hunted man succeeded in reaching a place of refuge and of safety—as he thought.

As he thought! For, persistent as bloodhounds, that avenging band held steadily upon his track. Finally they came up with him. Umar Khan was in a tent asleep. Stealthily the pursuers drew up in crescent formation, and their commander summoned Umar to come forth. For a moment there was dead silence. Then swift as thought, a rifle muzzle was poked through the flap of the tent. A loud report, and a bullet sang past the official's ear. The latter, more than ever bent on securing his prisoner alive, reiterated the summons, with the alternative in the event of noncompliance, of ordering a volley to be fired into the tent. The reply came as before, in the shape of another bullet, which this time killed the horse of one of the sowars. The order was given to fire.

The rattle and smoke of the volley rolled away—and lo! the sides of the tent were riddled like a sieve. There was a moment or two of silence, and again the officer challenged any who might be left alive to come forth. There emerged from the tent door, a figure clad in the full voluminous draperies and close veil of an Afghan woman.

She did not even look at the troop. She fled away over the plain as fast as her legs could carry her, uttering shrill screams. Those who looked on were filled with wild amaze. How could any living thing have escaped that volley? A movement made to pursue her was simultaneously checked, and then the Political Agent and some of the sowars entered the tent, but cautiously.

Their caution in this instance was unnecessary. One human being alone was in that tent—lying on the ground in a pool of blood. Such rude furniture and utensils as there were had been riddled, and the ground itself ploughed up with bullets. The human figure was limp and lifeless, and—it was that of another woman.

An idea struck the official. He leaped outside the tent; his gaze directed at the fast fleeing figure, now some distance away. He—and those present—saw it drag out a horse from among the rocks and stones of a dry nullah, and, flinging off the female attire, spring upon the animal's back. Then darting forth a hand with defiant gesture, and hurling back a final curse and menace, the fugitive—a wiry, muscular male—flogged his steed into a furious gallop, and was speedily out of range of the hurried volley sent after him.

The officer stared, and, we fear, cursed. The Levy sowars stared, and certainly invoked Allah and his Prophet; while laughing at both, yet storing up deeper vengeance for the slaughter of one of his most faithful wives—who had shared and aided his flight, and eventually laid down her life for him—fled Umar Khan far over the plains of Afghanistan—further and further into that welcome land of refuge.

There lay the rub. They dare not pursue him further. Already a violation of international law had been committed in carrying the pursuit thus far. Well might the official feel foolish. That their bird should be allowed to skip off right under their very noses in the garb of the supposed female whom they had so very humanely spared was enough to make him feel foolish. But he was destined to feel more so subsequently, when an acrid representation from the Amir of Kâbul entailed upon him a Departmental wiggling, although but a technical one. After all, a man may be too zealous.

After that Umar Khan disappeared for a while. The Amir of Kâbul, when mildly requested to hand him over, declined crustily, on the ground that an armed force had pursued a fugitive over his border without so much as a by-your-leave. If the English attempted to police his country and failed, he was not going to step in where they left off.

So the years went by, and Umar Khan was lost sight of and forgotten. Then, suddenly, he reappeared in his old haunts.

Changes of administration had supervened. The Government did not care to bother itself over a man who had been a desperate outlaw under its predecessors, as long as he behaved himself and showed a disposition to amend the error of his ways. Moreover, he was a member of one of the most powerful and turbulent tribes in Baluchistan. The

Sirkâr concluded to let sleeping dogs lie. So it shut its eyes, and Umar Khan was left in peace.

In peace? Yes, so far as he was concerned. But he fixed his dwelling among the wildest and most impracticable of mountain deserts—always ensuring for himself a safe retreat—and thence he began to prey upon all and any who had the wherewithal to pay up smartly for further immunity.

Then complaints began to reach Shâlalai. Peaceable banyas had been plundered of all the gains they had made during a travelling trade. Merchants on a larger scale trading with Kâbul had been relieved on a proportionate scale, or even held to ransom. Umar Khan adopted a method of his own for putting a stop to the complaints of such. It was the method best expressed by the saw, “Dead men tell no tales”—and by way of doing the thing thoroughly, he seized the whole of the plunder instead of merely the half as heretofore, but took care that the owner should not be on hand to lay any complaint. And leaving out many other unchronicled misdeeds, we think we have said enough to establish our opening statement, viz: that Umar Khan was a Baluchi who bore a very bad record indeed.

He was not a sirdar, nor even a malik. He was, in fact, a nobody, who—as not unfrequently happens among barbarian races—had raised himself to a sort of sinister eminence by a daring fearlessness and a combination of shrewdness and luck in evading the consequences of his countless acts of aggression. Added to this, his enforced outlawry and the exploits, half mythical, wherewith rumour credited him during that period, had thrown a kind of halo around him in the eyes of his wild, predatory fellow-tribesmen. Nominally he lived under and was responsible to the Sirdar Yar Hussain Khan, who was chief over a large section of the powerful Marri tribe; actually he was responsible to nobody in the wide world. His own particular following was made up of all the “tough” characters of the tribe, which is saying much, for the Marris bore the reputation of numbering in their midst some very “tough” characters.

The saw relative to the endowment of anybody with a sufficiency of rope was beginning to hold good in the matter of Umar Khan. Things were going badly with him. He had been obliged to be more than liberal with his ill-gotten gains in order to retain the adherence of his following, and the shoe was beginning to pinch. Then his tribal chief had given him a hint to sit tight; in short, had given him two alternatives—either to behave himself or clear out.

He had about concluded to embrace the latter of these—and the motive which had led him up to this conclusion was dual—and akin to that which tells with like effect upon men far more civilised than the Baluchi ex-outlaw. Umar Khan was hard up; likewise he

was hipped. He was perfectly sick of sitting still. Times were too peaceful altogether. So he sold what few possessions he had left, and with the proceeds laid in a stock of Snider rifles and ammunition.

Umar Khan sat in his village at sunrise. It was the hour of prayer, and several of the faithful, dotted about, were devoutly prostrating themselves, in the most approved fashion; indeed Umar himself had only just finished the performance of his devotions, for your Moslem is a logician in such matters, and has no idea of heaping up great damnation to himself by committing two sins instead of one, as would be the case were he to omit the prescribed devotion simply because he had just cut somebody's throat. The low, flat, mud-walled houses were in keeping with the surroundings—looking indeed as if they had but been dumped down and left to dry, like other piles of earth and stones which had rolled down the arid slopes and remained where they fell. A flock of black goats and fat-tailed sheep, mingled together, was scattered over the plain, though where they could find sustenance in such a desert, Heaven alone knew. Camels, too, were stalking around, also making what seemed an ironical attempt at browsing.

The sun had just risen beyond the far off limit of the desert plain, tinging blood-red the line of jagged peaks shooting skyward behind the village. Umar Khan sat in gloomy silence, smoking a narghileh, and, like most Orientals, indulging in much expectoration. His grim, hawk-like face, with the shaggy hanging brows meeting over his hooked nose, looked more cruel and repulsive than ever, as he stroked his beard, or pulled at the long black tresses, which hung down on each side of his face. Then he looked up. A fellow-tribesman was coming towards him. Umar Khan's glance now lit up with animation. The man came to him and sat down. Their talk was short, but the ex-outlaw's expression of countenance grew positively radiant, as the new arrival went on unfolding his tidings.

Umar Khan rose and ordered his best horse to be saddled. As he rose, it might have been noticed that he suffered from a slight limp. Then taking with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself—if that were possible—he rode forth.

For many hours they fared onward, avoiding the more frequented ways, and travelling over precipitous mountain path and through wild tangi, by routes well known to themselves, halting at convenient places to rest and water their horses. All had rifles, as well as their curved tulwars, and this savage band of hook-nosed, scowling copper-coloured ruffians, armed to the teeth, looked about as forbidding, even terror striking a crew as the peaceable wayfarer would not wish to meet—say half way through a tangi where there was precious little room to pass each other.

The sun was now considerably past the meridian, and at length the band, at a word from Ihalil Mohammed—the man who had brought the news which had led to this undertaking—halted amid some rock overlooking a broad high-road.

Far away along its dusty length a speck appeared, growing larger as it drew rapidly nearer, until it took the shape of a vehicle, containing but one man, and he the driver. It was an ordinary “gharri,” or hackney cab. To meet this Ihalil and four others now rode down.

“Salaam, brother,” they exclaimed, drawing up across the road.

“Salaam, Sirdar sahib,” returned the driver, in tremulous tones, turning pale at the sight of these fierce armed figures barring his way. The man was an ordinary specimen of the low caste Hindu, and as such held in utter contempt by these stalwart sons of the desert, and in repulsion as a heathen and an idolater.

“Who art thou, brother; and whither faring?” queried Ihalil.

The man replied, in quaking tones, that he was but a poor “gharri-wallah” hired to meet a certain holy mûllah who was travelling from Shâlalai to a village away far out in the desert. He was to bring him on a stage of his journey, and expected to meet him not far from that point.

“Good. Now turn thine old box on wheels out of the road and follow to where we shall lead thee,” commanded Ihalil.

The poor wretch dared not so much as hesitate, and presently the rickety old rattle trap was drawn up behind the rocks. At sight of the rest of the band the miserable Hindu gave himself up for dead.

“Salaam, Sirdar sahib,” he faltered, cowering before the grim stare of Umar Khan.

The latter then questioned him, in process of which one of the freebooters stole up behind, his tulwar raised. The badly scared “gharri-wallah,” his eyes starting from his head, had no attention to spare from the threatening scowl and searching questions of Umar Khan; and of danger from behind was utterly unconscious. Then, at a nod from Umar Khan, down came the tulwar upon the neck of the doomed Hindu.

It was badly aimed and did not sever the head, but cut far and deep into the neck and shoulder. The miserable wretch fell to the ground, deluged with a great spout of blood, but yet wailing dismally in agony and terror. In a moment two more tulwars swung

through the air, and the sufferings of the murdered man—literally cut to pieces—were over, though his limbs still beat the ground in convulsive struggles.

Umar Khan spat in derision, while the other barbarians laughed like demons over this atrocious deed. The murderers wiped their swords on the garments of their victim, and examined the keenly-ground edges solicitously, lest they should be in any way notched or turned. But now their attention was diverted. Another speck was growing larger and larger on the road, this time advancing from the direction in which their late victim had been proceeding. Drawing nearer it soon took shape. Another “gharri” similar to the one whose driver they had slaughtered.

The whole band rode down to meet it. Besides the driver it contained another man.

“Peace, my sons,” said the latter as they drew up.

“And on you peace,” returned Umar Khan. “But first—for this dog. Hold—Alight, both of ye.”

There was that about the aspect of these armed brigands that would admit of no hesitation. Both obeyed. This driver, too, was a low caste Hindu. His “fare” was an old man, white-bearded, and wearing a green turban.

No sooner were both fairly out of the “gharri,” than Ihalil Mohammed rode at the Hindu and cut him down. Others fell upon him with their tulwars, and the miserable wretch, like his fellow-craftsman, was literally hewn to pieces then and there. With savage shouts the murderers waved their bloodstained weapons aloft, curvetting their steeds around the survivor.

The latter turned pale. Quick as thought, however, he had drawn a volume of the Korân from beneath his garments, and placed it upon his head.

“La illah il Allah”—he began.

”—Mohammed er rasool Allah,” (Note 2) chorused the blood thirsty savages, as though in one fierce war shout, turning to hack once more at the mangled carcass of the miserable Hindu.

“Hearken, my father,” said Umar Khan, pointing his rifle at the traveller. “A true believer is safe at the hands of other believers. But, father, delay not to deliver over the seven hundred rupees which are in thy sash.”

The other turned paler still.

“Seven hundred rupees?” he exclaimed, holding up his hands. “What should a poor mûllah do with such a sum?”

“Thou hast said it, my father. What indeed?” sneered Umar Khan. “What indeed, save as alms for the poor, and the debtors and the insolvent, as enjoins the holy Korân? And such thou seest before thee. Wherefore we will receive them, father, and pray the blessing of Allah, and a rich place in the seventh heaven for thee and thine.”

“Do ye not fear God, O impious ones, that ye would rob His servant?” said the mûllah, waxing wroth in his desperation.

“We fear nobody,” returned Umar Khan, with an evil sneer. “Yet, my father, delay not any longer, lest this gun should go off by accident.”

“Wah—wah!” sighed the mûllah. “Be content my children—it may be ye are poorer than I. Receive this packet, and the blessing of a servant of the Prophet go with it. And now I will proceed upon my way.”

“Wait but a few moments,” replied Umar Khan, receiving the bag which the other tendered him, and which he immediately handed to Ihalil with one word—“Count!”

“It may not be, for the hour of evening prayer draws near. Peace be with you, my children.” And he made as though to move on.

“We will say it together then,” replied Umar Khan, barring the way. “What is this? Two hundred and fifty rupees? Two more packets hast thou forgotten, my father, and—delay not, for the hour of evening prayer draws near.”

There was a grim, fell significance in the speaker’s tone and countenance. The mûllah no longer hesitated. With almost trembling alacrity he drew forth the remaining bags, which being counted, were found to contain the exact sum named.

“We give thee five rupees as an alms, my father,” said Umar Khan, tendering him that amount. Gloomily the mûllah pocketed it. “And surely God is good to thee, that in these days thou hast been able to relieve the necessities of Umar Khan.”

A start of surprise came over the face of the other, at the mention of the name of the dreaded ex-outlaw. He had more than a shrewd suspicion that but for his sacred office

he would be now even as his Hindu driver—which went far to console him for the loss of his substance.

“Wah—wah!” he moaned, sitting down by the roadside. “My hard earned substance which should comfort my old age—all gone! all gone!”

“The faithful will provide for thine old age, my father. And now, peace be with thee, for we may not tarry here. But,”—sinking his voice to a bloodcurdling whisper—“it is well to give alms in secret, for he who should boast too loud of having bestowed them upon Umar Khan, not even the holy sanctuary of Mecca would avail to shelter him.”

“Blaspheme not, my son,” cried the mûllah, affecting great horror, and putting his fingers to his ears—though, as a matter of fact, the warning was one which he thoroughly understood.

They left him seated there by the roadside, despondent over his loss. They left the two mangled bodies of their victims to the birds and beasts of prey, and gave vent to their glee as they dashed off, in shouts and blood thirsty witticisms. They were in high good humour, those jovial souls. They had slain a couple of human beings—that was to keep their hands in. They had robbed another of seven hundred rupees—that would replenish the wasted exchequer for a time; and now they cantered off to see if they could not do a little more in both lines—and the goal for which they were heading was the Kachîn valley.

Umar Khan had burnt his boats behind him.

Note 1. To lend additional terror to capital punishment in the eyes of Moslems on the northern border, the dead bodies of those executed for fanatical murder were sometimes burned.

Note 2. “God is the God of gods—Mohammed the Prophet of God.”—The Moslem confession of faith.

Chapter Thirteen.

Experimental.

The days had gone by, and now Campian was installed in the forest bungalow. Colonel Jermyn's invitation had gone forth, but the missive which would have counteracted it had not, so here he was.

Not without some deliberation had he decided on accepting it. He had thought himself safe; had reckoned he had safely parted with all illusions, as conducive only to disturbance and anxiety, and the greatest of all illusions was Vivien Wymer. But the sudden and unlooked for reappearance of the latter had reopened a wound. Yet why? She was the same as before. She had failed him once. She had sacrificed him to others once, and would of course do so again unhesitatingly. Why not? There was no such thing as love as they two had once looked at it—had once imagined it. A mere illusion; pleasant while it lasted, painful when its illusoriness became evident. But then the wrench, though painful, even agonising, was over—and in its effect salutary. Five years make a difference in a man's life. He had not been young then; he was older now. Sensibility was blunted. The capacity for self-torment was no longer his.

Love, the ever endurable! He had believed in that once. He was no misogynist, even now. His experience of the other sex had been considerable. He was ready to accord the members thereof the possession of many delightful qualities. As friends they were staunch, as companions unrivalled. Life unbrightened by feminine presence and feminine influences would be a dull affair. But as exponents of Love, the ever endurable, they were a failure; and exactly as he came to appreciate this did he come to appreciate the other sex the more because he had ceased to expect too much.

His experiences had been many and varied, and took in all types of the softer sex, and he had found them wonderfully similar. The fire and passion of to-day became chill and indifference a year hence. Then Vivien Wymer had come into his life, and lo, all was changed. Here was a glorious exception to the rather soulless rule. She met his every want; she appealed to him as he could never have believed any woman could, and by some strange, magnetic instinct, his own personality appealed to hers. They seemed made for each other—and yet—he had been sacrificed. Not even there was he to be all in all—to be first and everything.

They had seen each other again once since that chance meeting in the markhôr cave. The colonel and his niece had ridden over to Upward's camp to tiffin, and it was on that occasion that the hearty old soldier had pressed him to come and pay them a visit. He

had not even glanced at Vivien, striving to read to what extent she would second the invitation, but had accepted on the spot, yet not without a mental reservation.

For there was one point which he desired to debate within himself, and that was the very one which had occurred to Vivien. How could they two be together under the same roof, in close, daily intercourse as mere acquaintances, they two who had been so much to each other? How could they bear the strain, how keep up the rôle?

Then when his meditations had reached this point, a strange exultant thrill seemed to disturb the balance of his clearer judgment. Why should the rôle be kept up? After being parted for five years, they had met again—nay, more—had been thrown together again in this strange, wild country, that in former times had been to either of them no more than a mere geographical name. Both were unchanged. There was a softening in Vivien's voice, when off her guard, as on the last occasion of their meeting, which seemed to point to the fact that she was. For himself—well, he had grown older, wiser—and, he imagined, harder. Still, the wound did seem to be reopening. Why, the whole was almost as though Fate had gone out of her way to bring they two together again.

Yes, he had grown harder. Love, the ever endurable! Ridiculous! She had sacrificed him before, and would do so again if occasion arose. If she did not do so it would be because occasion had not arisen, and this consideration constituted a state of potential unreliability, which was not reassuring. The idea even served to re-awaken much of the old bitterness and rankling resentment, and he decided that it would be an interesting, if coldblooded, study in character to observe how Vivien herself would come out under such an ordeal as the close, intimate intercourse which life beneath the same roof could not but involve.

Once there, he had no cause to regret his decision. The colonel was a fine old soldier of the very best type. Most of his life had been spent in India, and he was full of anecdote and reminiscence. He had served through the Mutiny, and in several frontier disturbances, and his knowledge of the country and its natives was intelligent and exhaustive. He had been a sportsman, too, in his time—and, in short, was a man whom it was a pleasure to talk with. He and Campian took to each other immensely, and the two would sit together under the verandah of an evening, smoking their cheroots and exchanging ideas, while Vivien discoursed music through the open doors, upon a cottage piano which had been lugged up, at some risk to its tuning and general anatomy, on board the hideous necessary camel.

Decidedly it was very close quarters, indeed, this party of three, isolated there in that remote forest bungalow, away among the chaotic, piled up mountain deserts of wild Baluchistan; but there was no element of monotony about it; indeed, how could there be

when to two out of the three life thus represented an ordeal that meant so much, that might mean indeed so much more. Yet it spoke volumes for the self control of both that no suspicion should have entered the mind of the third that they had ever beheld each other elsewhere, and under very near circumstances. Their intercourse was free and unrestrained, but it was the easy intercourse of two people who had ideas in common and liked each other's society, and totally devoid of any symptom of covering a warmer feeling. They would frequently take rides or walks together through the juniper forest, or to some point overlooking a new or wider view of the great chaotic mountain waste, and it spoke volumes for their self control that no allusion was ever made to the past. They would not have been human if occasionally some undercurrent of feeling had not now and then come unguardedly near the surface, but only to be instantly repressed. It was as though both were engaged in a diplomatic game requiring a high degree of skill, and in which each was watching the next move of the other with a jealous eye.

Once, in course of their rides together, the two were threading a tangi, and the sense of being shut within those high rock walls moved Vivien to broach the subject of the adventure which had so nearly ended in tragedy for her companion and his.

"It must have been a dreadful experience," she said, looking up at the cliffs overhead.

"Yes. It was awkward. I've no use for a repetition of it."

His tone was discouraging, as though he would fain have changed the subject. But she seemed to cling to it.

"I think that was a splendid feat," she went on, looking straight at him. "I wish I knew what it was like never to be afraid."

"So do I—most heartily. But I simply don't believe in the existence of that enviable state; if you can talk of the existence of a negative, that is."

"But you do know what it is. Were you ever afraid of anything in your life?"

The very words Nesta had used. Then he had not taken them in a complimentary sense. He had thought the remark a foolish one. Now coming from this woman, who had idealised him—who did still—with her wide luminous eyes turned full upon his face, and that unguarded softening which had again crept into her tone, there was a subtle flattery in it which was delicious, but enervating. As a matter of fact he really thought nothing of the feat, beyond what a lucky thing it was they should have been able to save both their lives. He answered so shortly as to seem ungracious.

“Very much and very often. I would rather run away than fight any day. Fact.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“No? People don’t, I find. Some day I may do that very thing—then when everybody is howling me down I can always turn round and say—‘I told you so, and you wouldn’t believe me.’”

“But do you want them to believe you?”

“Why, of course. You don’t know me at all, Vivien, even now.” Then, as if to hurry away from a dangerous slip. “By the by, I never can understand the insane way in which even civilised and thinking people elect to deify what they call courage or pluck. There is no such thing really. It is purely a matter of opportunity or temperament—in short, sheer accident. To get out of a tight place a man has got to do something. While doing it he has no time to think. If he had, in nine cases out of ten he’d run away.”

“Yes? And what about when he has to go into a tight place?”

“Why, then he’s got to go. And as a matter of fact it is funk that drives him in. The opprobrium and possibly material penalty, he would incur by backing out constitute the more formidable alternative of the two. So of the two evils man, being essentially a self preserving animal, instinctively chooses the least.”

“Plausible, but not convincing,” returned Vivien, with a laugh. “And is there not something of what they call a ‘crank’ underlying that philosophy?”

“‘They’ are apt to say that of any application of the principles of common sense,”—“as I have so often told you before,” he was nearly adding.

“Was Miss Cheriton very much scared that day? She says she’ll never get over it as long as she lives.”

“Poor little girl. It must have been a ghastly experience. She behaved very well; was no more scared than any other woman would have been, and a good deal less so than some.”

“What a pretty girl she is.”

“Very—of her type.”

Vivien was conscious of two emotions—swift, simultaneous as a lightning flash; first a pang over the readiness with which he endorsed her remark, then a heartbeat of relief, for those three words constituted a whole saving clause.

“You must have seen a great deal of her?”

No sooner uttered than Vivien would have given anything to recall the remark. What construction would he put upon it other than jealousy of this blue-eyed, golden-haired girl, who had several years of youth the advantage over herself?

“That depended upon circumstances. Nesta Cheriton has a great penchant for the British Army, and the British Army thoroughly reciprocates the predilection. While the British Army was represented at Chirria Bach I saw not much of her, over and above the occasions when one had to meet in ordinary life. While it was unrepresented she seemed to make herself equally happy in going chikór shooting with me. On the whole, I rather like the little girl. She is bright and amusing, and acts, I suppose, as a passing tonic to one’s jaded and middle-aged spirits.”

His tone had been that of absolute and unaffected ease, and now it occurred to him suddenly, and for the first time, that Vivien was putting him through something of a catechism. The moral dissection which he had promised himself in risking a sojourn beneath the same roof with her had already begun, and this was only a phase of it. At such times the old feeling of rankling bitterness would come upon him, and with it a wave of desolation and heart-emptiness. Why had she failed him—she his destined counterpart? Why had she proved so weak under a not very strong ordeal? He had indeed become hard, when he could go through day after day in closest companionship with her, and yet keep on the mask, never once be betrayed into letting down his guard.

One consideration had acted as a salutary cold douche in the event of the smouldering fires of his nature rising too near their restraining rock crust. One day Vivien was telling him all about her uncle and how she came to be keeping house for him. She had done so since her aunt’s death, and supposed she would go on doing so. He was such a dear old man, she said—so thoughtful and kind and unselfish, and he had no one to look after him but her. All of which her listener, even from his short opportunity of observation, was inclined to endorse; but the sting lay in the concluding consideration, for it recalled that other time. In it had lain the pretext for sacrificing him to an imaginary duty. He was not going to risk a repetition of what he had then undergone. The iron entered deeper and deeper.

Once an incident occurred which nearly availed to shatter and melt it. Vivien had gone into his room during his absence, as she frequently did, to see if there was not some

little touch she could add to its comfort or attractiveness. An object on his table caught her attention. She picked it up and examined it, and her eyes filled. Yet it was only an old tobacco pouch, and a very worn and weather-beaten one at that—so worn and frayed that hardly more than a few threads of the original embroidery still hung to the cover. Then she did an extraordinary thing. Instead of replacing it she took it away with her. That night she sat up late, and lo, in the course of the day, going into his room Campian found that the old battered pouch for which he had hunted high and low was replaced by a beautiful new one, the embroidery of which was a perfect work of art.

“Why did you take so much trouble?” he said when next they met. “You could not have known I had lost the other.”

“Is that why we were so glum last night?” she returned, a glad light, struggling with a mischievous one, in her eyes. “Never mind. This is a much better one.”

“I loved that one. I would give a great deal to recover it, as you ought to know.”

“Wait a moment.” She left him and returned almost immediately.

“Here it is—or what is left of it. Now—? What will you give?”

She held it out to him—then drew it back. Her eyes were raised to his. Her voice was soft and caressing as ever he had heard it in the old days. Just one of those trivial accidents bringing about the most crucial moment in two lives—when, as usual, the most trivial of causes availed utterly to mar its effect. That most trivial of causes was the voice of Colonel Jermyn, followed by the entrance of its jolly possessor.

“Here’s the dâk just come from Upward. They’re all going back to Shâlalai the day after to-morrow Campian, and want to know if you’ve had enough of us yet. If you have they say they are leaving early and you’d better be down at the camp to-morrow night. If you haven’t—why—all the better for us.”

“The point is whether you haven’t had enough of me, Colonel.” But while he made the laughing remark his glance travelled round to Vivien’s face. It was one of those moments when her guard was down. The interruption had come so inopportunistically. Decidedly the study he had promised himself was bearing rich results.

“Pooh! Of course we haven’t. Why, you’ve only just come. Besides, you can get to Shâlalai at any time. That’s settled then. But I have an idea. We might go down to Mehriâb station and see them off. There are some things I am getting up, and that idiot of a Babu in charge can’t send an intelligent answer to any question I write him. It’s not

a bad sort of ride down there, and we'll kill two birds with one stone. What do you say, Viv?"

"I beg to second it, Uncle Edward. The idea is an extremely good one."

To him who watched it, while not seeming to, there was an entire revelation in Vivien's face during that momentary lifting of the veil. She was as anxious to prolong the time as—he was. Yes, that is what it amounted to. The experiment, from its coldblooded side, seemed to have failed.

"We shall be up here some weeks longer, Campian"—went on the Colonel—"but of course if you have to go, it is easy enough to get to Shâlalai. Meanwhile my boy, as long as you can make yourself happy here we are only too glad."

"Oh, I can do that all right, Colonel. And I'm not tied to time in any way either."

Again that relieved look on Vivien's face. Some weeks! What might not be the result of those weeks was the thought that was in the minds of both of them? What might not transpire within those weeks? Ah, if they had only known.

"By the way there's another item of kubbar in Upward's letter," went on the Colonel, fumbling for that missive. "A budmâsh named Umar Khan has started out on a Ghazi expedition down Sukkâf way. He and several others rode out along the road and cut down a couple of poor devils of gharri-wallahs. Killed 'em dead as a door nail. There was a mûllah in one of the gharris, and they plundered him. He got out a Korân and put it on his head—singing out that he was a mûllah. 'Mûllah or not,' says Umar Khan—'hand out those seven hundred rupees you've got on board.' And he had to hand them out. Sacrilegious scamps—ha, ha! But if he hadn't been a mûllah they'd have cut him up too. Well these budmâshes will have to swing for it. They'll soon be run to earth. Nice country this, eh, Campian?"

"Rather. It seems to me only half conquered, and not that."

"Yes. It's run at a loss entirely. A mere buffer State. We hold it on the principle of grabbing as much as we can and sticking to it, all the world over—and in this particular instance putting as much as we can between the Russians and India."

"And what if Umar Khan is not speedily run to earth?"

"Oh, then he'll knock around a bit and make things generally unpleasant. Do a little dacoity from time to time. But we are bound to bone him in the long run."

“There’s an uncommonly queer closeness in the air this evening,” said the Colonel as they were sitting out under the verandah a little later. “As if there was a storm of sorts working up. Yet there’s no sign of thundercloud anywhere. Don’t you notice it, Vivien?”

“I think so. It has a dispiriting effect on one, as if something was going to happen.”

The sun had gone down in a lurid haze, which was not cloud, and the jagged peaks of the opposite range were suffused in a hot, vaporous afterglow, while the dark depth of juniper forest in the deep, narrow valley seemed very far down indeed. What little air there was came in warm puffs.

“We all seem rather chûp this evening,” said the Colonel. “Viv, how would it be to play us something lively to wake us up?”

She rose and went inside. Campian could still see her as she sat at the piano, rattling off Gilbert and Sullivan at their liveliest. He could continue the very favourite occupation in which he had been indulging—that of simply watching her—noting every movement, the turn of the head, the droop of the eyelids, the sweet and perfect grace which characterised her most trivial act. This woman was simply perfect in his sight—his ideal. Yet to all outward intent they were on the easy, friendly terms of two people who merely liked each other and no more.

“Come and have a ‘peg,’ Campian,” said the Colonel presently.

“No thanks—not just now.”

“Well, I’m going to,” and away he went to the dining room.

Then Campian, sitting there, was conscious of a very strange and startling phenomenon. There was a feeling as though the world were falling away from beneath his feet, together with a dull rumble. There was a clatter of glass and table ornaments in the drawing room, and he could see Vivien sway and nearly fall from the music-stool. He sprang to his feet to rush to her aid, and seemed hardly able to preserve his own balance. Both staggering they met in the doorway.

“Oh, Howard, what is it?” she cried, seizing in both of hers the hand which he had stretched out to help her.

“Quick. Come outside,” was all he said. They were able to walk now, and he drew her outside the verandah, right into the open. Then again came that cavernous rumble, and the earth fairly reeled beneath their feet.

“That’s what all this heaviness in the air has been about,” he said, as the ground felt firm again. “A shock of earthquake.”

“Is it over? Will there be any more?” she gasped, her white face and dilated eyes turned up to his. She still held his hands, in her sudden terror, casting all considerations of conventionality to the winds.

“I don’t think so,” he answered, a very tremble of tenderness in his voice as he strove to reassure her. “These shocks generally go in twos or threes, like waves. And even if there are any more we are all right outside.”

Here the humorous element asserted itself, in the shape of Colonel Jermyn choking and coughing in the verandah. In his hand he held a tall tumbler, nearly empty.

“Look at this, Campian,” he cried. “A man can’t even have a ‘peg’ in his own house without the whole world rising up against it. Flinging it in his face, and half choking him, by George.”

“Some awful big teetotaler must have gone below, Colonel, to raise racket enough to knock your ‘peg’ out of your hand. I hope you’ll take warning and forswear ‘pegs.’”

“Ha, ha! Well, Viv? Badly scared, child?”

She laughed, but the colour had not yet come back to her cheeks.

“I predicted something was going to happen, didn’t I?” she said.

“And it has happened—and now there’s another thing going to happen, and that is dinner, so we’d better go inside and begin to think about it. What? Is it safe? Of course, though, my dear, I don’t wonder at it if you were a little scared. It’s an experience that is apt to be alarming at first.”

The while the speaker was chuckling to himself. He had been a witness both by ear and eye to the foregoing scene, having overheard Vivien’s alarmed apostrophe.

“So? It has come to that, has it?” he was saying to himself. “‘Howard,’ indeed? But how dark they’ve kept it. Well, well. They’re both of them old enough to look after

themselves. ‘Howard,’ indeed!” and the jolly Colonel chuckled to himself, as with kindly eyes he watched the pair that evening, reading their easy unrestrained intercourse in an entirely new light.

Chapter Fourteen.

The Tragedy at Mehriâb.

Mehriâb station, on the Shâlalai line of railway, was situated amid about as wild, desolate and depressing surroundings as the human mind could possibly conceive.

A narrow treeless plain—along which the track lay, straight as a wall—shut in by towering arid mountains, rising to a great height, cleft here and there by a chasm overhung by beetling cliffs—black, frowning and forbidding. At the lower end of the plain rose sad-hued mud humps, streaked with gypsum. There was nothing to relieve the eye, no speck of vivid green standing out from the parched aridity prevailing; but on the other hand all was on a vast scale, and the little station and rest-house looked but a tiny toy planted there beneath the stupendous sweep of those towering hills.

In the latter of the buildings aforesaid, a tolerably lively party was assembled, discussing tiffin, or rather having just finished discussion of the same. It had been done picnic fashion, and the room was littered with plates, and knives and forks, and lunch baskets, and paper, and all the accompaniments of an itinerant repast.

“Have another ‘peg,’ Campian,” Upward was saying. “No? Sure? You will, Colonel? That’s right. We’ve plenty of time. No hurry whatever. Hazel, don’t kick up such a row, or you’ll have to go outside. Miss Wymer, don’t let them bother you. What was I saying just now?”

He took up the thread of what he had been saying, and in a moment he and the Colonel were deep in reminiscences of shikâr. Vivien and Nesta had risen and were strolling outside, and there Campian joined them. The dâk bungalow extended its accommodation to travelling natives, for whom there was a department opposite. Camels—some standing, some kneeling, but all snarling—filled the open space in front of this, and wild looking Baluchis in their great white turbans and loose garments were squatting around in groups, placidly chatting, or standing alone in melancholy silence.

“Look at this!” said Campian. “It makes quite a picture, taken against the background of that loop-holed mud wall, with the great sweep of mountain rising behind.”

Several camels, some ready laden, some not, were kneeling. On one a man was adjusting its load. He was a tall, shaggy, hook-nosed black bearded ruffian, who from time to time cast a sidelong, malevolent glance at the lookers on as he continued his work. In business-like manner he proceeded to adjust each bale and package, then when all was complete, he lifted from the ground a Snider carbine and hung it by its ring to a hook on

the high wooden pack saddle. Then he took up his curved sword; but this he secured to the broad sabretache over his shoulder.

“Isn’t that a picture in itself?” went on Campian. “Why, adequately reproduced it would bring back the whole scene—the roaring of the camels, the midday glow, the burning heat of this arid hole. I wonder who they are by the way”—for others who had similarly accoutred their camels were jerking the animals up, and preparing for the start.

Vivien turned to Bhallu Khan who was just behind, and translated his answer.

“He says they are Brahuis from the Bolân side, going further in.”

“Why are they all armed like that? Don’t they trust their own people?”

“He says they may have heard that Umar Khan is on the warpath, and they are not of his tribe. Nobody knows who anybody is who is not of his tribe—meaning that he doesn’t trust them.”

It was something of a contrast to turn from these scowling, brigandish looking wayfarers, to the beaming, benevolent, handsome countenance of the old forest guard. They strolled around a little more, then voted it too hot, and returned to the welcome coolness of the dâk bungalow.

Campian, always analytical, was conscious of a change, or rather was it a development? Now that they were together—in a crowd—as he put it to himself, there was a certain feeling of proprietary right that seemed to assert itself in his relations with Vivien. It was something akin to the feeling which was over him in the old time when they moved about together. And yet, why? Well, the close intimate intercourse of the last ten days or so had not been without its effect. Not without an inward thrill either, could he recognise that this intercourse had but begun. They were returning together, and to be candid with himself that hot stifling arid afternoon here on one of the wildest spots on earth’s surface, he could not but recognise that this elation was very real, very exhilarating indeed.

“I think we’d better stroll quietly up to the station,” said Upward, as they re-entered. “We may as well have plenty of time to get all this luggage weighed and put right.” Then relapsing into the vernacular: “Khola, you know what goes in and what has to be weighed.”

“Ha, Huzoor,” assented the bearer.

“Then get away on ahead and do it.”

The rest-house was about half a mile distant from the station. On the way to the latter Campian found himself riding beside Nesta Cheriton.

“You don’t seem elated over the prospect of returning to Shâlalai,” he said. “Five thousand of the British Army—horse, foot, and artillery! Just think what that represents in the shape of its heroic leaders, Nessita—and yet you are just as chûp as if you were coming away from it all.”

“Oh, don’t bother—just at the last, too,” retorted the girl, almost petulantly. “Besides—that joke is becoming rather stale.”

“Is it? So it is. So sorry. What about that other joke—is it stale too? The one time you ever took anybody seriously. Won’t you tell me now, Nessie?”

“No, I won’t,” she said, this time quite petulantly. “Come along. We are a long way behind.”

“Then you will tell me when next we meet, in Shâlalai in a week or two.”

“No, I won’t. And look here—I don’t want to hear any more about it.” Then, with apparent inconsequence—“It was mean of you to desert us like that. You might just as well have put off your stay up there until now.”

They had reached the station and were in the crowd again by now. And there was somewhat of a crowd on the platform. Long-haired Baluchis, all wearing their curved swords, stood about in threes and fours; chattering Hindus with their womenkind, squatting around upon their bundles and packages; a native policeman in Khaki uniform armed with a Snider rifle—with which he probably could not have hit the traditional haystack—and the joint party with their servants and two or three of the forest guard, constituted quite a crowd on the ordinarily deserted platform; for the arrival of the train—of which there was but one daily each way—was something of an event.

Having arranged for the luggage and tickets, Upward was chatting with the stationmaster—a particularly civil, but very ugly Babu from down country—as to the state of the country. The man grinned all over his pockmarked countenance. What would the Sahib have? A Government berth was not one to throw up because it was now and then dangerous, and so many only too eager to jump into it. Umar Khan was not likely to trouble him. Why should he? No defences? No. There was an iron door to the

waiting room, loop-holed, but the policeman was the only man armed. Upward proceeded to inspect the said iron door.

“Look at this, Colonel,” he said. “Just look, and tell me if ever you saw anything more idiotic in all your life. Here’s a thick iron door, carefully set up for an emergency, loop-holed and all, but the window is utterly unprotected. Just look at it. And there’s no one armed enough to fire through either, except one policeman, who’d be cut down on the first outbreak of disturbance.”

“You’re right, Upward. Why, the window is as open as any English drawing room window. There’s a loft though, and an iron ladder. Well, you’d be hard put to it if you were reduced to that.”

“Rather. That’s how we British do things. I’ll answer for it the Russians wouldn’t. Why, every one of these stations ought to be a young fort in itself. It would be if the Russians had this line. And they’ll have it too, one of these days at this rate.”

And now a vehement ringing of the bell announced the train. On it came, looking, as it slowed down, like a long black centipede, in contrast to the open vastness of Nature; the engine with its cup shaped chimney, vomiting white smoke, its pointed cow-catcher seeming as a living head of the monster. The chattering Hindus were loading up their bundles and hastening to follow; heads of all sorts and colours protruded from the windows, but Mehriâb was not a station where passengers often alighted, so none got out now. The Upwards were busy looking after their multifold luggage—and good-byes were being exchanged.

“Now, Ernest, get in,” called out Mrs Upward. “We are just off.”

“No hurry. Where’s Tinkles? Got her on board?”

“Yes, here she is,” answered Hazel—hoisting up the little terrier to the window, from which point of vantage it proceeded to snarl valorously at a wretched pariah cur, slinking along the platform.

“All right. Well, good-bye, Colonel. Good-bye, Miss Wymer. Campian, old chap, I suppose we’ll see you at Shâlalai in a week or two. Ta-ta.”

The train rumbled slowly away, quickening its pace. Our trio stood looking after it, Vivien responding to the frantic waving of handkerchiefs from Lily and Hazel.

The train had just disappeared within a deep rift which cut it off from the Mehriâb valley like a door. The station master had retired within his office. The Colonel and his niece were in the waiting room collecting their things. Campian, standing outside on the platform, was shielding a match to light a cheroot, when—Heavens! What did this mean?

A band of savage looking horsemen came clattering up—ten or a dozen, perhaps—advancing from the open country the other side of the line. They seemed to have sprung out of the earth itself, so sudden was their appearance. All brandished rifles. They dashed straight for the station, springing from their horses at the end of the platform. Then they opened fire on the armed policeman, who was immediately shot dead. The stationmaster ran outside to see what the disturbance was about. He received a couple of bullets the moment he showed himself, and fell, still groaning. Three coolies walking unsuspectingly along the line were the next. A volley laid them low. Then, with wild yells, expressive of mingled fanaticism and blood thirst, the savage Ghazis rushed along the platform waving their naked swords, and looking for more victims. They slashed the wretched Babu to pieces where he lay—and then seeing that their other victims were not quite dead—rushed upon them, and cut and hacked until there seemed not a semblance of humanity left. Whirling their dripping weapons on high in the bright sun, they looked heavenward, and yelled again in sheer mania as they tore back on to the platform.

The whole of this appalling tragedy had been enacted in a mere flash of time; with such lightning celerity indeed, that Campian, standing outside, could hardly realise that it had actually happened. It was a fortunate thing that three or four tall Marris, standing together in a group, happened to be between him and the assassins or he would have received the first volley. Quick to profit by the circumstance, he sprang within the waiting room.

“Back, back,” he cried, meeting the other two in the doorway. “There’s a row on, of sorts, and they are shooting. Help me with the door, Colonel.”

It was a fortunate circumstance that Upward had called their attention to this means of defence, and that they had all looked at it, and partly tried it. Now it swung to without a hitch—and no sooner had it done so than four of those without flung themselves against it with a savage howl. These were the Marris who had unconsciously been the means of saving Campian’s life—and realising that fact, promptly decided to join their Ghazi countrymen, and repair if possible the error. And, indeed, the same held good of the others on the platform. They were there by accident, but, being there, their innate savagery and fanaticism blazed up in response to the maddening slogan of the Ghazis, with whom, almost to a man, they decided to make common cause. If ever a sharp and

vivid contrast was to be witnessed it was here. The peaceful, prosaic, commonplace railway station platform of a few moments ago, was now a very hell of raging shaggy demons, yelling with fury and fanatical hate, rolling their eyes around in search of more victims, as they splashed and slipped in the blood of those they had already massacred.

Then someone brought news that there were more coolies, hiding for their lives behind a wood pile a little way up the line. With howls of delight, a dozen barbarians started to find some fresh victims, and the defenceless wretches were butchered as they grovelled on the ground and shrieked for mercy.

Those left on the platform now got an inspiration. They had killed the Babu in charge, but there would be others. Fired with this idea, they rushed into the station master's office. Nobody! Into an inner room. Still nobody. They were about to turn and leave, when one, more knowing than the rest, noticed that a large chest was standing rather far out from the wall, and that a shower of dust was still falling from the top of it. He looked behind. Just as he suspected. A man was crouching there, and now quickly they hauled him forth. It was the Eurasian telegraph and ticket clerk, who had hoped to hide away and escape. His yellow face was pale with terror, and he shook in every limb at the sight of those fierce faces and blood dripping tulwars. One of the latter was about to descend upon his head, when somebody in authority intervened, and the murderous blade was lowered.

"The money—where is it?" said this man in Hindustani. "Give us over the rupees."

"You shall have them, Sirdar sahib. Don't let them kill me!" he pleaded, frantic with fear. Then he began fumbling for the safe keys. In his terror he could not find them.

"Hurry up, thou son of a pig and a dog!" urged the one who seemed to be the leader; "else will I have thee slain inch by inch, not all at once."

The wretched Eurasian went nearly mad with fear at this threat, but just then, by good luck, he found the keys. His hand, however, shook so much he could hardly open the safe. When he did so, it was found to contain less than they had expected.

"Where is the remainder, thou son of Shaitân? Quick, lest we flay thee alive, or broil thee on red-hot coals," growled the leader.

Frantic with fear, the miserable wretch fumbled wildly everywhere. A few loose rupees, and a bag or two containing no great sum were found, but no more.

"And is that all, food for the Evil One? Is that all?"

“Quite all, Sirdar sahib.”

“Good.” And, with the word, the barbarian raised his rifle and shot the other dead.

Chapter Fifteen.

Hard Terms.

Meanwhile those in the waiting room were doing all they could to make good their position, and that was not much. Their first attempt at forcing an entrance having failed, the four Marris had rushed among their countrymen who had firearms, striving to bring them against the door in force, or rake the room with a volley through the window, but their attention at the time was taken up with other matters, which afforded the beleaguered ones a brief respite.

“Non-combatants up here,” said Campian, pointing to the ladder and the trap door which has been mentioned. “Isn’t that the order, Colonel?”

“Yes, certainly. Up you go, Vivien.”

But Vivien refused to stir.

“I can do something at close quarters, too,” she said, drawing her revolver.

“Give it to me. I’ve not got mine with me. Now—go upstairs.”

“I may be of use here. Here’s the pistol, though,” handing it over.

“Will you obey orders, Viv? What sort of a soldier’s niece are you?”

“Do go,” said Campian, looking at her. “Well, I will, then.”

As she ascended the iron ladder Campian followed her up, under pretext of aiding her. In reality he managed so he should serve to screen her from any shot that might be fired, for the ladder was in full view of the window.

“I know why you came up behind me,” she whispered as she gained the loft. “It was to shield me in case they fired.”

Then, before he had time to begin his descent, she bent her head and kissed him, full on the lips.

Not a word did he speak as he went down that ladder again. The blood thrilled and tingled through his frame. Not all the fury of fanaticism which spurred the Ghazis on to

mania could surpass the exaltation of fearlessness which was upon him as he tried to treasure up the warm sweetness of that kiss—and after five years!

“Campian, confound it! We have only a dozen shots among us,” growled the Colonel. “What an ass I am to go about without a pistol.”

“We can do a lot with a dozen shots. And Der’ Ali has his tulwar.”

Der’ Ali was the Colonel’s bearer, who had been within at the time of the onslaught. He had been a trooper in his master’s old regiment, and they had seen service together on more than one occasion. What had become of the two syces and the forest guard, who were outside, they did not then know, for then the whole volume of the savage fanatics came surging up to the door. In their frenzy they fired wild shots at the solid iron plates.

“Tell them, Der’ Ali,” growled Colonel Jermyn, in Hindustani, “that they had better clear out and leave us alone. The Sirkâr will hang every man Jack of their tribe if they interfere with us. And the first man in here we’ll shoot dead; and the rest of them to follow.”

The bearer, who understood Baluchi well, rendered this, not minimising the resource and resolution of those within as he did so. A wild yell greeted his words. Then one, more frenzied or enterprising than the rest, pushed his rifle through the window, and the smashing of glass mingled with the report as he blazed into the room. But those within were up to that move. The window being on a line with the door, they had only to flatten themselves against the wall, and the bullet smashed harmless.

Then there was a rush on the window. Two men crashed through, badly cut by the glass. Before they could recover themselves they were shot dead. Even Campian’s wretched stores revolver did its work on this occasion. That halted the rest—for the moment.

Only for the moment. By a rapid movement, crawling beneath the level of the window sill, several managed to discharge their rifles well into the room. Narrowly the bullets missed the defenders.

“Look here. This is getting hot,” growled the Colonel. “Let’s give them one more volley and go into the loft. There one of us can hold the place for ever against the crowd.”

Campian had his doubts about the strategical wisdom of this. However, just then there was another rush through the window, and this time his revolver jammed. Outside were thirty furious Ghazis, urging each other on with wild fanatical yells. If they two were cut

down what of Vivien? That decided him. She could hold that trap door against the crowd.

“All right, Colonel. Up you go. I and Der’ Ali will hold the window.”

“You and Der’ Ali be damned,” growled the staunch old veteran. “Obey orders, sir.”

“No, no. You forget I’m only a civilian, and not under orders. And—you must be with Vivien.”

No time was this for conventionalities, but even then the old man remembered the evening of the earthquake. “Well, I’ll cover your retreat from the ladder,” he said, and up he went.

Campian, by a wrench, brought the cylinder of his weapon round. Then, sighting the head of a Ghazi thrust prominently forward, he let go. It was a miss, but a near one. Under cover of it both he and the bearer gained the loft. A strange silence reigned. The assailants seemed to have drawn off.

It was a breathing space, and surely these needed it. The excitement and energetic action brought a relapse. So sudden was the change from a quiet ordinary leave taking to this hell of combat and bloodshed, that it told upon the nerves more than upon the physical resources. Then, too, they could sum up their position. Here they were beyond all possibility of relief. It was only three o’clock in the afternoon. No train would be due at Mehriâb until eleven the next morning. Meanwhile these bloodthirsty barbarians would stick at nothing to reach their victims. These were cut off from human aid as entirely, to all intents and purposes, as though thousands of miles within the interior of Africa instead of in the heart of a theoretically peaceful country, over which waved the British flag.

“If only the telegraph clerk had been able to send a wire,” said the Colonel. “But even if the poor devil wasn’t cut down at the start, he’d have been in too big a scare to be able to put his dots and dashes together.”

Suddenly, with an appalling clatter, two or three logs were hurled through the window on to the floor of the waiting room below. Then some more, followed by a splash of liquid and a tin can. But the throwers did not show.

“By the Lord, they are going to try burning us out,” said Campian, in a low tone, watching the while for an enemy to show himself.

Then came more logs. They were old sleepers which had been piled up beside the line, and were as dry as lucifer matches. On to them came a great heap of tattered paper—the return forms and books found in the station offices. The assailants could load up a great pyre thus without incurring the slightest risk to themselves—could set it alight, too. That was what came of the British way of doing things—a heavily armoured and loop-holed door, and, alongside of it, an open and entirely unprotected window. Truly Upward had been right when he conjectured the Russians would have had a different way. No nation under the sun is more wedded to shortsightedness and red tape than that which is traditionally supposed to rule the waves.

Now indeed a feeling of blank despair came into the hearts of at any rate two out of the four as they watched these preparations. Vivien, fortunately, could not see them, for with splendid patience she sat quite still, and refrained from hampering her defenders, even with useless questions. The reek of paraffin rose up strong and sickening. The assailants had flung another can of it upon the pile of combustibles. All this they could do without exposing themselves in the least.

“Heavens I are we to be roasted or smoked in a hole?” growled the Colonel. “Cannot we cut our way through?”

Campion said nothing. His thoughts were too bitter. He had some belief that these barbarians would not harm Vivien. But death had never been less welcome than at that moment.

“Could we not propose terms to them, Colonel? Offer a big ransom, say?”

“Nothing like trying. Der’ Ali, ask the budmâshes how many rupees they want to clear out and leave us alone.”

The bearer, who spoke Baluchi well, did as he was told. The reply came sharp and decided. “Not any.”

“Try again, Der’ Ali. Tell the fools they’ll be none the better for killing us, and we’ll promise to do nothing towards having them caught. In fact, promise them anything.”

Then Der’ Ali, who was no fool, put the offer before them in its most tempting light. Everyone knew the Colonel Sahib. His word had never been broken, why should it be this time? The rupees would make them rich men for life, and would be paid with all secrecy. A Moslem himself, Der’ Ali quoted the Korân voluminously. It was not for themselves that they feared death, it was on account of the mem-sahib, for if they were

slain what would become of her? And what said the Holy Korân? “If ye be kind towards women, and fear to wrong them, God is well acquainted with what ye do.”

For a time there was silence. The suspense of the beleaguered ones was terrible. Then the reply came.

“If the Colonel Sahib would give his promise to pay over the sum of five thousand rupees to an accredited messenger at a certain spot in eight days’ time he and the mem-sahib and their servant should be spared. But the other sahib must come down and deliver himself into their hands.”

“That’s all right,” said Campian cheerfully, when this had been rendered. “They want me as a hostage. Things are looking up. When they finger the rhino they’ll turn me adrift again, and meanwhile I shall see something of the inner life of the wily Baluch.”

“Tell them we’ll double the sum if they let all four of us go,” said the Colonel.

Der’ Ali put this, but the reply of the leader was again prompt and decided. It was in the negative. The other sahib must come and deliver himself into their hands.

“The question is, can we trust them?” said the Colonel. “Will they keep to their conditions in any case? Once we are out of this we are at their mercy.”

“Are we less so here?” said Campian. “A match put to that nice little pile and we shall be smoked or roasted in no time. No. Strike while the iron’s hot, say I. Der’ Ali, make them swear by all that they hold sacred to keep faith with us, and then I’ll come down.”

“Who is your leader, brothers?” called out the bearer.

“I, Ihalil Mohammed Khan,” returned the same deep voice that had before spoken.

Then Der’ Ali put to him the most binding oath he could call to mind, and Ihalil accepted it without hesitation. He bound himself by all the virtues of the Prophet, by the Korân, and by the holy Caaba, faithfully to observe the conditions he had laid down—in short, he almost swore too much.

“Say we accept, Der’ Ali. I’m coming down.”

“God bless you, my boy,” said the Colonel, as he wrung the other’s hand in farewell. “If it was only ourselves, I’d say let’s all hang together. But for Vivien’s sake. There, good-bye.”

“Rather—so long, we’ll say,” was the cheerful reply. “I’ll show up again in a few days.”

Vivien said nothing. A silent pressure of the hands was the extent to which she could trust herself.

For all his assumed cheerfulness it was a critical moment for Campian, as once more he stood upon the floor of the waiting room, and, stumbling over the heaped-up combustibles, stepped outside into the full glare of daylight. His nerves were at their highest tension. The chances that he would be cut to pieces or not the moment he showed his face were about even. As in a flash, that question as to whether he was ever afraid of anything darted through his mind. At that moment he was conscious of feeling most horribly and unheroically afraid.

No one would have thought it to look at him, though—certainly not those into whose midst he now stepped.

“Salaam, brothers!” he said in Hindustani, with a glance at the ring of shaggy scowling faces which hemmed him in.

The salute was sullenly returned, and then Ihalil, beckoning him to follow, led the way down the platform, surrounded by the whole party. They passed the body of the murdered policeman and that of the stationmaster, and at these some of the barbarians turned to spit, with muttered curses; and the platform, smeared and splattered with blood, was like the floor of a slaughter-house. Even the dirty white garments of the murderers were splashed with it.

Out through the gate at the end of the platform they went. Heavens, was the whole thing a dream—a nightmare? Why, it was less than an hour ago they had entered that gate all so light hearted and unthinking. He remembered the badinage he had been exchanging with Nesta as they passed in through it—and more than one reference as to meeting in Shâlalai in a week or two. Now—who could say whether he would meet anybody again—in a week or two or ever? And then his sight fell upon that which caused him well nigh to give up hope.

In the shade before the station master’s private quarters, a man was squatting—a wild, fierce-looking Baluchi. Before him the whole party now halted, treating him as with the deference due to a leader. But one glance at the grim, cruel face and eagle beak, and shaggy knotted brows, sufficed. In him Campian recognised the man who had scowled so demoniacally upon him in the retinue of the Marri sirdar—the man he had wounded

and lamed for life when set upon by the Ghazis in the Kachîn valley. And this man was no other than the celebrated outlaw Umar Khan, and now, he was his prisoner.

And at that very moment it occurred to those left behind in the loft that any sort of stipulation as to the said prisoner being returned unharmed on the payment of the sum agreed upon had been entirely left out of the covenant.

Chapter Sixteen.

At Shâlalai.

“By Jove, but it is good to be back again!” said Upward, in tones of intense satisfaction as he sat down to tiffin in his bungalow at Shâlalai. “The garden is looking splendid, and then all the greenery in the different compounds after those beastly stones and junipers—I’m sick of the whole circus. Only a year or two more, thank goodness.”

“Yes, it is always nice to be at home again,” assented his wife. “Nesta must be sick of roughing it, too.”

“Well, I won’t say that,” answered the girl. “I’ll only agree that I am rather glad to be back again.”

“So they will be at the club this afternoon,” laughed Upward. “By the way, why don’t those children come in? They are always late. It’s a perfect nuisance.”

A wrangle of voices, and the children did come in. Racket in hand, they were disputing vehemently as to the rights and wrongs of a game they had been obliged to break off in the middle of.

“Wonder how long Campian will stick at Jermyn’s? I believe the old chap’s getting a bit smashed there.”

“Nonsense, Ernest,” laughed his wife. “You’re always thinking someone or other must be getting ‘smashed.’”

“Why shouldn’t he? She’s a deuced fine girl that niece of Jermyn’s—and then just think what a lot they’ll see of each other. What do you think about it, Miss Cheriton?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I’ve never thought about it.”

“Too black,” put in Lily the irrepressible. “If he could run the gauntlet of Nesta all this time, I don’t think he’s likely to go smash there.”

“Of course you’re an authority on such matters, Lily,” laughed her mother. “Ernest, you see now what notions you put into the children’s heads.”

“I don’t want any tiffin,” pronounced Hazel. “I only want to get at those nectarines. They just are good. Bother camp! I like it much better here.”

The large, lofty, cool room in which they were was hung around with trophies of the chase, all spoils of their owner's unerring rifle. One end of the room was hung with the skin of an immense tiger, draped, as it were, from ceiling to floor, the other with that of a somewhat smaller one, which had clawed a native out of a tree and killed him before Upward could get in a shot. Hard by was a finely marked panther-skin whose erewhile wearer had badly mauled Upward himself! Panther and jungle cat and cheetah and others were all represented, and with horns of the blackbuck and sambur, tastefully disposed, produced an effect that was picturesque and unique. It served another purpose, too, as Upward used to say in his dry way. It gave people something to talk about when they came to tiffin and dinner. It was sure to set them comparing notes, or swearing they had seen or shot much bigger ones, and so forth. At any rate, it kept them going.

The bungalow was surrounded on three sides by a garden of which Upward was justly proud, for it was all of his own making. In front a trim lawn, bright with flower beds, and beyond this a tennis court, of which his neighbours did him the favour to make constant use. They likewise did him the favour to plant their bicycles, dogs, and other impedimenta, about his flower beds, or against the great crimson and purple convolvulus blossoms entwining his summer-house, whereat he fumed inwardly, but suffered in silence, from a misplaced good nature; and, after all, it was a little way they had in Shâlalai. Peaches and nectarines and plums attained a high degree of excellence in their own department, likewise every kind of green vegetable—and the verandah was green and cool with all sorts of ferns.

"I wonder none of the garrison have been up, Miss Cheriton," he went on. "They can't have got wind that you're back. What's that? Some of them already?" For Tinkles, suddenly leaping from her chair, darted out into the hall, barking shrilly and making a prodigious fuss. At the same time steps were heard on the verandah.

"That's Fleming," said Upward, recognising the voice—then going out into the hall. "Come in here, old chap. Well, what's the news?"

"There is some news, but—Hallo! Excuse me, Mrs Upward. Didn't know you were at tiffin."

"It's all right. We're just done. Get into that chair and have a 'peg'—and then we can hear the kubbur."

“Well, it’s not very definite as yet,” replied Fleming, subsiding into the chair indicated. “Thanks, Upward—only a small one, I’ve just had one at the club. They say—By the bye, didn’t you come in from Mehriâb yesterday?”

“Yes, of course. But why?”

“Was it all right?”

“Was what all right?”

“Why, the look of things?”

“We didn’t see anything out of the ordinary. Jermyn and his niece and Campian came down with us to see us off. There was nothing wrong then. But why? What do they suspect?”

“Dunlop had occasion to wire officially to the stationmaster at Mehriâb yesterday afternoon and could get no reply. He kept on wiring, but it was no good.”

“Maybe some budmâsh has been playing gooseberry with the wire.”

“Cutting it? No. The communication is quite all right with the stations next to Mehriâb on either side.”

“It was all right yesterday at Mehriâb, for I sent a couple of wires myself,” said Upward. “Perhaps the telegraph clerk is taken ill.”

“It might be that of course. But there’s a rumour flying around the bazaar this morning that Umar Khan has been raiding up the Kachîn valley. What if he has stuck up Mehriâb station to plunder the safe?”

Upward whistled.

“Yes—that might be,” he said. “Only I wish he had done it while we were all there. I had two rifles and a shot gun and a six shooter. I think among us all—myself and Campian and old Jermyn and my two foresters—we’d have given Mr Umar Khan very particular what for. But what should bring him up to those parts? He was supposed to be making the other way when he cut up those two ‘gharri-wallahs.’”

“I don’t know. It’s only bazaar rumour, mind.”

“Now I think of it,” went on Upward, “there did seem rather more than usual of the evil-looking soors hanging about the platform. They’d all got tulwars too. By Jove—what if they were only waiting till the train had left to break out, and Ghazi the whole show? Oh, Lord! That puts things in a new light. There were enough of them to do it too.”

Fleming looked grave. “Then what about your friend and the Jermyns?” he said.

“Heavens, yes. Perhaps the soors waited until they had gone. Hallo, Miss Cheriton. What’s the matter?”

For Nesta had gone as pale as death—looking as if she would faint dead away.

“It’s nothing. I shall be all right again in a minute. Why do you suggest such horrible things?” she broke off quite angrily. “It is enough to upset one.”

Both men looked foolish—and all stared. The outburst was so unlike her.

“Let’s go and see if we can get at something definite,” said Upward, jumping up. “Did you drive here, Fleming?”

“No—biked.”

“All right I’ll jump on mine and we’ll spin round to McIvor’s. He may have got kubbur of sorts—but these Politicals are so dashed close.”

A three minutes’ spin along the level military road brought the two men to the Acting Political’s. That official looked grave at sight of Upward. He guessed his errand—and at once handed him a telegram.

“This is the latest,” he said.

It was a long message, but the substance of it was that on the arrival of the train due at Mehriâb that morning at eleven, not a living soul was in sight, nor was any signal down. The engine-driver slowed down and advanced cautiously, when the fact of the massacre became apparent. Then they had been signalled by Colonel Jermyn and his niece, who were in a great state of horror and distress, and reported that their guest had been taken away as prisoner by the Ghazis. They and the Colonel’s bearer were taken on to the next station beyond Mehriâb, whence they would return to Shâlalai by the afternoon train.

“What’s going to be done about it?” said Upward.

“We’ve started a strong body of Police after them, and two troops of Sindh Horse are to follow,” said the Political.

“Yes, and then they’ll cut Campian’s throat. In fact I wonder they didn’t already. It looks as if they wanted him ransomed, and if so—by George—the way to do for him is to start dusting a lot of Police after them.”

The Political was a man of few words. He shrugged his shoulders, and observed that the matter did not rest with him. He could give them all the information he had at his disposal, but that was all.

“This wants thinking out, Fleming,” said Upward, as they were spinning along on their bicycles again. “What can be done? What the devil can be done? As sure as they run those Ghazis close—then, goodnight to Campian. But Jermyn will be here this evening—then we shall get at the whole story.”

The evening train arrived in due course, bringing with it the three survivors of the outbreak. The Ghazis had kept faith with them, and had retired, leaving them without further molestation. But the whole night had to be got through, and a very trying one it was, for they were not without fear lest some of the people in the neighbourhood, becoming affected with the contagion of bloodshedding, should come and complete what the Ghazis had left undone. Fortunately there was the dâk bungalow for them to retire to—and they were thus enabled to escape from the immediate proximity of the ghastly slaughter-house scenes which the platform, and indeed the railway station generally, presented. No further alarm however had come their way, and they had been picked up by the morning train, as detailed in the telegram.

They had come away, of course, with scarcely any luggage, but Upward’s bungalow was elastic, and therein they were promptly installed. Vivien, now that the tension was relaxed, succumbed to a nervous reaction that prostrated her for days—and which, indeed, was not entirely due to the horrors she had gone through. The Colonel was loud on Campian’s praises. But for him they would never have got out of the mess, by Jove, he declared. The fellow’s coolness in venturing among those cut-throats was splendid—and so on. When he got back again in a week or two he would have some experiences, and he seemed the sort of fellow who was partial to experiences. Thus the Colonel. But Upward, listening, was not so easy in his mind. He hoped Campian would be back among them in a week or two, but—Heavens! what if he were not? The Marris were a savage lot, and these particular ones were a combination of Ghazi and brigand. He felt uneasy—most infernally uneasy—in which predicament he did two things—he sent for Bhallu Khan, and consulted long and oft with the authorities.

The latter were not so eager to fall in with his views as he considered they ought to be. It might be true, as he said, that aggressive action against Umar Khan would imperil the life of the hostage, but on the other hand, were they to sit supine for eight days, while that notorious ruffian raided and plundered and murdered at will all over the country.

The knot of the difficulty however was cut, as is frequently the case, by circumstances. Each movement against him, undertaken with great promptitude and spirit, resulted in failure, whereat Upward, and others interested in the fate of the hostage rejoiced. It was not likely that such a ruthless barbarian as Umar Khan was known to be, would allow his prisoner to be taken out of his hands alive—no, not for a moment—whereas having kept faith so far he might do so until the end, especially if a handsome baksheesh was added to the stipulated sum. After that, the sooner he was caught and hanged the better.

Meanwhile the affair caused great excitement in the outlying parts, and not a little scare. Outlying shooting parties deemed it advisable to return and some of the railway employés on the lonely stations along the line—natives or Eurasians mostly—resigned their posts in panic, fearing lest a similar fate should overtake themselves. On the arrival of Bhallu Khan some news was gleaned, but not much. The Ghazis had hung about the Kachîn valley for a day or two, and had looted the forest bungalow—refraining, however, from firing it. Then they seemed to have disappeared entirely, and if he had any sort of inkling of their probable destination, Bhallu Khan, a Baluchi himself, could not or would not reveal it.

Chapter Seventeen.

In the Enemy's Hand.

For a while the scowling barbarian contemplated Campian from under his shaggy brows. Then he gave an order to his followers. There stepped forward a man. This fellow had a villainous cast of countenance and a squint. He was of mixed blood, being a cross between Baluch and Punjâbi. He had been at one time a chuprassi in a Government office, and talked English fairly well.

“Chief say—you know who he is?” he began.

“Can’t say I do.”

“Chief say—you ever see him before?”

“Can’t be sure of that either. Yet, I have an idea I saw him once while having a friendly talk with the Sirdar Yar Hussain Khan.”

At mention of the Sirdar’s name, a faint show of interest seemed to come into the saturnine features of those around. Then the interpreter went on:

“Dis chief—he Umar Khan.”

The interest wherewith he would have received this announcement was dashed with a feeling as of the last glimmer of hope extinguished. It was bad enough to know that he was in the power of a revengeful barbarian with every motive for nourishing a deadly grudge against himself, but that this man should turn out to be the famous outlaw, whose savage and cruel nature was a matter of notoriety—well, he felt as good as dead already.

Now he recognised that Umar Khan’s object in leading the Ghazi outbreak was not merely that of indiscriminate bloodshed, or even plunder. It was to get possession of himself—for the purpose of wreaking some deadly vengeance which he shuddered to contemplate—and well he might.

“Tell Umar Khan,” he said, “that the money we have promised him will be punctually paid—and that when I am back among my friends again in Shâlalai I will add to it another two thousand rupees.”

The outlaw chief received the rendering of this with a contemptuous grunt, and continued to glare none the less vindictively upon his prisoner. Then he gave certain orders, in the result of which those who had horses prepared to mount them, the remainder following on foot; for those Marris who had been surprised into participating in the massacre had now decided to cast in their lot with Umar Khan. A steed was also provided for Campian, but over and above being an inferior beast, a check rein, held by one of his custodians, was passed through the bit.

Before they set forth, however, the leader issued another order, and in the result there stepped out from the stationmaster's house two men. To his surprise the hostage recognised in these Bhallu Khan and the other forest guard. So these were the traitors? These had brought this crew of cut-throat murderers down upon them—and would share in the spoil. Such was his first thought, but he had never made a greater mistake in his life; the fact being that the two foresters were as innocent of complicity as he himself. They had been squatting outside the station after bidding farewell to their official superior. As fellow countrymen and fellow believers, the Ghazis had refrained from putting them to the sword, but had ordered them to remain within the outbuilding while the work of blood and plunder proceeded—and neither to come forth nor to look forth on pain of death. Now they were released. But first Umar Khan treated them to a long harangue, to which they listened with profound attention.

Campian—hailing the man who had acted as interpreter—told him to ask the chief if he might write a line to the Colonel Sahib and send it by the foresters. A curt refusal was returned, and he was ordered to mount.

As the band receded over the plain, from its midst he could see the white figures of the two foresters moving along the platform—but no others. Yes—he could. He could make out Vivien's figure. He thought he knew what was in her mind as she strained her glance over that amount of space, if haply she might distinguish him in that throng of retreating forms—and it seemed to him that their very souls went forth to each other and met in blissful reconciliation. Then all was shut from his gaze. The band was entering the black portal of a great tangi.

The sight of its smooth rock walls brought back the recollection of that other day, and the result was, on the whole, a cheering one. Then how sore had been his strait. He had come through it, however. Why not again?

At sundown they halted, and spreading their chuddas and putting off their shoes, the whole band proceeded to perform their devotions in most approved fashion. Behind them lay the mangled remains of their unoffending and defenceless victims, slaughtered in cold blood; but then these were heathens and infidels, and to slay such was a

meritorious act. So these sons of the desert and the mountain prayed in the direction of Mecca with enhanced faith and fervour.

Throughout half the night they travelled onward. Onward and upward, for they seemed to be ascending higher and higher among the jagged mountain crests. The wind blew piercingly cold, and Campian shivered. They threw him an old poshteen or fur-lined coat, and this he was glad to pull round him in spite of qualms lest it should already be more or less thickly populated. Soon after midnight they halted, and building a large fire under an overhanging rock, lay down beside it. Campian, worn out with fatigue and the reaction after the day's excitement, went into a heavy dreamless sleep.

He was awakened by a push. It seemed as though he had been asleep but five minutes, whereas in point of fact it must have been nearly midday, so high in the heavens was the sun. He looked forth. Piles of mountains in chaotic masses heaved up around; all stones and slag; no trees, no herbage worthy of the name. One of the Baluchis handed him a bowl of rice, cold and insipid, and a chunk of mahogany looking substance, which smelt abominably rancid—and which he turned from with loathing. It was in fact a hunk of dried and salted goat flesh. Having got outside the first article of diet, he remembered ruefully how he had been cheerful over the prospect of seeing something of the inner life of the lively Baluchi, but this, as a beginning, was decidedly discouraging.

This appeared to be a favourite halting place, judging from the old marks of fires everywhere around, and a better hiding place it seemed hard to imagine, such an eyrie was it, perched up here out of reach, where one might pass below again and again and never suspect its existence. The band seemed in no hurry, resting there the entire day. Part of this the hostage turned to account by trying to win over the good offices of the squint-eyed cross-breed.

This worthy, who rejoiced in the name of Buktia Khan, was not indisposed to talk. He too was promised a largesse when the prisoner should be set at liberty.

“What you do to dis chief?” he said, in reply to this.

“Eh? I don't quite follow.”

“Dis chief, he hate you very much. What you do to him?”

“Oh, I see,” and the prisoner's heart sank. His chances of escaping death—and that in some ghastly and barbarous form—looked slighter and slighter. “I never harmed him, that I know of for certain. I never harmed anyone except in fair fight. If he has suffered any injury from me it must be in that way. Tell him, Buktia, if you get the opportunity,

and if you don't, make the opportunity—that a man with the name for bravery and dash that he has made does not bear a grudge over injuries received in fair and open fight. You understand?”

“I un’stand—when you slow speak. Baluchi, he very cross man. You strike him, he strike you. You kill him, his one brother, two brother, kill you, if not dis year, then next year.”

A rude interruption there and then occurred to bear out the other’s words. Campian, who was seated on the ground at the time, felt himself seized from behind and flung violently on his back. Half-a-dozen sinewy ruffians had laid hold of him, and he was powerless to move. Bending over him was the savage face of Umar Khan, stamped with the same expression of diabolical malignity as it had worn when he had first beheld it.

“O dog,” began the outlaw, pushing his now helpless prisoner with his foot, “dost guess what I am going to do with thee?”

“Put an end to me, I suppose,” answered Campian wearily, when this had been rendered. “But it doesn’t seem fair. I yielded myself up on the understanding that I should only be detained until the five thousand rupees were paid. And now I have promised you two thousand more. What do you gain by my death?”

Buktiar duly translated this, and the Baluchi answered:

“What do I gain? Revenge—blood for blood. But hearken. I had intended to strike off thy head, but thou shalt have thy life. Yet if Umar Khan must walk lame for the remainder of his life, why should the dog whose bite rendered him lame walk straight? Answer that, dog—pig—answer that,” growled the barbarian, grinding his teeth, and working himself up into a frenzy of vindictive rage. “Tell him what I said just now, Buktiar—that a brave man never bears malice for wounds received in fair fight,” was the answer.

But this appeal was lost on Umar Khan. He spat contemptuously and went on.

“I had meant to strike off thy head, thou pig, but will be merciful. As I walk lame, thou shalt walk lame. I will strike off both thy feet instead.”

A cold perspiration broke out from every pore as this was translated to the unfortunate man. Even if he survived the shock and agony of this frightful mutilation, the prospect of going through life maimed and helpless, and all that it involved—Oh, it was too terrible.

“I would rather die at once,” he said. “It will come to that, for I shall bleed to death in any case.”

“Bleed to death? No, no. Fire is a good hakîm,” (Physician), replied the Baluchi, with the laugh of a fiend. “Turn thy head and look.”

Campian was just able to do this, though otherwise powerless to move. Now he noticed that the fire near which they had been sitting had been blown into a glow, and an old sword blade which had been thrust in it was now red hot. The perspiration streamed from every pore at the prospect of the appalling torment to which they were about to subject him. Not even the thought that this was part of the forfeit he had to pay for the saving of Vivien availed to strengthen him. Unheroic as it may sound, there was no room for other emotion in his mind than that of horror and shrinking fear. The ring of savage, turbaned countenances thrust forward to witness his agony were to him at that moment as the faces of devils in hell.

Umar Khan drew his tulwar and laid its keen edge against one of the helpless man’s ankles.

“Which foot shall come off first?” he snarled. “You, Mohammed, have the hot iron ready.”

He swung the great curved blade aloft, then down it came with a swish. Was his foot really cut off? thought the sufferer. It had been done so painlessly. Ah, but the shock had dulled the agony! That would follow immediately.

Again the curved blade swung aloft. This time it was quietly lowered.

“Let him rise now,” said Umar Khan, with a devilish expression of countenance which was something between a grin and a scowl.

Those who held him down sprang off. In a dazed sort of way Campian rose to a sitting posture and stared stupidly at his feet. No mutilated stump spouting blood met his gaze. The vindictive savage had been playing horribly upon his fears. He was unharmed.

“I have another thought,” said Umar Khan, returning his sword to its scabbard. “I will leave thee the use of thy feet until to-morrow morning. Then thou shalt walk no more.”

The prospect of a surgical amputation, even when carried out with all the accessories of scientific skill, is not conducive to a placid frame of mind, by any means. What then must be that of a cruel mutilation, with all the accompaniments of sickening torture, for no other purpose than to gratify the vindictive spite of a barbarian? The reaction from the acute mental agony he had undergone had rendered Campian strangely helpless. It

was a weariful feeling, as though he would fain have done with life, and in his desperation he glanced furtively around to see if it would not be possible to snatch a weapon and die, fighting hard. A desire for revenge upon the ruffian who had subjected him to such outrage then came uppermost. Could he but seize a tulwar, Umar Khan should be his first victim, even though he himself were cut to pieces the next moment. But he had no opportunity. The Baluchis guarded their weapons too carefully.

“Does that devil really mean what he says, Buktiar?” he took occasion to ask, “or is he only trying to scare me?”

“He mean it,” replied the cross-breed, somewhat gloomily, for were the prisoner injured the prospect of his own reward seemed to vanish. “Once he cut off one man’s feet—and hands too—and leave him on the mountain. Plenty wolf that part—dey eat him.”

This was cheering. How desperate was his strait, here, in the power of these cruel savages—in the heart of a ghastly mountain waste that a month or two ago he had never heard of—even now he did not know where he was. Their route the day before had been so tortuous that he could not guess how near or how far they had travelled from any locality known to him.

“I will give you a thousand rupees, Buktiar, if you help me to escape,” he said. “If you can’t help me, but do nothing to prevent me, I’ll give you five hundred.”

The cross-breed squinted diabolically as he strove to puzzle out how he was to earn this reward. Like most Asiatics he was acquisitive and money loving, and to be promised a rich reward, and yet see no prospect of being able to earn it, was tantalising to the last degree. He shook his head in his perplexity.

“Money good, life better,” he said. “Dey see me help you—then I dead. What I do?”

Then Umar Khan spoke angrily, and in the result Buktiar left the side of the prisoner, with whom he had no further opportunity of converse that day.

The night drew down in gusty darkness. A misty drizzle filled the air, and it was piercingly cold. The Baluchis huddled round their fires, having lighted two, and presently their deep-toned drowsy conversation ceased. One by one they dropped off to sleep.

Then a desperate resolve took hold of Campian’s mind. He was unbound, and, to all appearances, unguarded—why should he not make the attempt? Any death was

preferable to the horrible prospect which morning light would bring. He might be cut down or shot in the attempt. Equally great was the probability of coming to a violent end among the cliffs and chasms of this savage mountain waste. No sooner resolved upon than he arose, and, drawing his poshteen tighter round him, walked deliberately forth; stepping over the unconscious forms of the sleeping Baluchis. His very boldness aided him. None moved. In a moment he was alone in the darkness outside.

A thrill of exultation ran through his veins. Yet what was there to exult over? He was alone upon the wild mountain side—unarmed, and without food—in a perfectly unknown land. Every step he took fairly bristled with peril. The wind increased in volume; the rain pattered down harder. He could not see an inch in front of him. Any moment might find him plunging from some dizzy height to dash himself into a thousand fragments and Eternity. Here again his very desperation saved him. Trusting entirely and blindly to luck, he skirted perils that would have engulfed a more careful and less desperate man. Anything rather than a repetition of his experience of that day.

On through the darkness—on ever. The howl of a wolf ranging the mountain side was now and then borne to his ears upon the wind and rain: and more than once the dislodgment of a loose stone or two, and its far away thud, after a momentary space of silence, told that he was skirting some vast height, whether of cliff or tangi—but even that failed to chill his blood. He was moving—his energies were in action. That was the great thing. He was no longer cold now. The exertion had warmed him. He felt more and more exultant.

Yet with morning light his enemies would be upon his track. Here, among their native rocks and crags, what chance had he against these persistent, untiring hillmen? The savage hatred of Umar Khan, enhanced by being deprived of a sure and certain prey, would strain every source to effect his recapture. Well, he had the long night before him, and the darkness and turbulence of the night were all in his favour.

If only he had some idea of his locality. The tidings of the outrage would have reached Shâlalai, and by now a strong military force would have been moved up to Mehriâb station to investigate the scene of the massacre, and follow up its perpetrators. But he had no idea in which direction Mehriâb station lay, or what mountain heights might have to be crossed before he could gain it.

Morning dawned. Weary eyed, haggard, exhausted with many hours of the roughest kind of walking, stumbling over boulders and stones, bruised, faint for want of food, the fugitive still held on. He was descending into a long, deep valley, whose sides were covered with juniper forest. Shelter, at any rate, its sparse growth might afford him. Ha! He knew now where he was. It was the Kachîn valley.

Yes, in the widening dawn every familiar feature was made more plain. He had come over the high kotal which he and Bhallu Khan had climbed to when stalking markhôt. There was the spur which shut out Chirria Bach, and away up yonder the forest bungalow. Could he gain the latter he could obtain food, of which he stood sorely in need, as well as arms and ammunition. Some of the servants were still there. They would have heard nothing of the tragedy on the railway line, and would be momentarily expecting the return of the household. Turning to the right he struck off straight for the house, full of renewed hope.

But that huge, practical joke entitled Life is, in its pitiless irony, fond of dashing such. He had barely travelled half a mile when a rattle of stones on the mountain side above arrested his attention. A score of turbaned figures were clambering down the rocks. Spread out in a half circle formation they were nearly upon him. There was no escape. Umar Khan and his savage freebooters were not going back on their reputation just yet. The fugitive's long night of peril, and labour, and perseverance, had all gone for nothing. Several of the Ghazis were already pointing their rifles, and in loud, harsh tones were calling on him to halt.

Chapter Eighteen.

“Mohammed Er Rasoul Allah?”

“Ping-ping!” The bullets sang around him—splattering the rocks with blue lead marks. Not for a moment did he think of stopping. They might shoot him dead, but alive he would not yield. Besides there was one last desperate chance, and he meant to try it.

The markhâr cave! A final spurt would bring him to that. It was just round yon shoulder of cliff, which at present concealed it. His pursuers would not even see him enter it, and there were smaller holes and crannies around which would puzzle them. Besides, he remembered there were superstitions attaching to it. These might possibly deter them from entering at all. It was a straw, but a slender one.

One great and final effort. He penetrated its normally forbidding but now welcome blackness, and sank down panting on the rock-floor. For some minutes he thus crouched, listening intently. He heard the rattle of stones outside; now and then the tones of a deep voice, or the clink of rifle-barrel or scabbard against the rock. The search was proceeding right merrily, yet, why had it not begun here?

Some minutes went by. To the hunted man, crouching there, they meant hours. Then the sound of steps approaching. They were going to search the markhâr cave. His last chance had failed.

The footsteps outside halted. Then he heard the voice of their owner calling, and receiving answers from several other voices. He was calling to his comrades to come and aid in the search. Superstition, evidently, disinclined him to prosecute it alone. It could not be the fugitive that he feared, seeing that the latter was unarmed, and probably quite exhausted.

Then a wild and daring idea came into Campian’s mind—in fact, so utterly desperate a plan that were he allowed time to think of it, the bare thought would suffice to send a cold shiver through his frame. The chasm—into which he had so nearly stepped on the occasion of his first and last visit to this place! The chasm—into whose black depths he and Vivien had stood gazing, side by side. It was his last and only chance, but—what a chance!

His matchbox contained a few wax vestas. The pursuers, probably still collecting to explore the cave in force, had not begun to enter. Groping his way round a rock corner which would partially or entirely shield the light from those without, he struck a vesta,

deadenings, so far as he was able, the sound with his hollowed hands. It flamed forth—a mere flicker in the cavernous gloom. But it was sufficient for his purpose.

There lay the black rift, like the great serpent for which he had at first taken it. He was right at its brink. Then flinging into it the spent vesta, he grasped the edge and let himself carefully down, hanging by the grasp of his two hands alone on the lip of the fissure, in the pitchy darkness over that awful unfathomable depth which seemed to go down into the very heart of the earth.

The tension was fearful. He must let go. Every muscle was strained and cracking. And now a glow of light told that his enemies were entering with torches. Ha! he had overlooked that contingency. The light would reveal his strained fingers grasping the rock. One cut of a tulwar—and—

Then his feet came in contact with something—something that clinked faintly as with the sound of metal. Groping carefully with both feet, lo! they closed on what felt like an iron chain.

Heavens! it was a chain—a massive iron chain depending in some way from the rock above. In the increasing glow of the torches he could make out that. Here was a Heaven-sent chance. Grasping the great links firmly with knees and feet, he let go, first with one hand, then the other, and seized the chain. It, with its rough links, afforded a safe and solid resting place for a time.

The pursuers had now arrived right at the brink. Their bizarre, turbaned shadows on the opposite rock wall looked gnome-like in the smoky glare of the torches. But in the said glare he recognised, with a rush of hope, that unless they peered right over they could not see him, for the chain hung from an iron bolt let into the rock, which here projected just above his head.

The weird shadows on the rock danced and tossed, the guttering light grotesquely exaggerating every movement. He who hung there could hear the deep-toned voices right over him. The chain to which he clung swayed and shivered with the concussion of the tramp of many feet above. They held out a torch or two over the abyss, and dropped a few pebbles down—even as he himself had done when with Bhallu Khan. He could hear their exclamations as the stones struck far below with a faint thud. Could he have understood them, his relief would have been greater still. Among them, however, he thought to recognise the harsh, snarling voice of Umar Khan.

“If the dog has gone down here,” that worthy was saying, “why, then, he is already suffering the torments of hell. If he entered this place at all, how should he not have

fallen in, seeing that it is darker than night within the cave, and this hole is a pitfall to the unwary, and a very entrance to the abode of devils?”

“In here he entered without doubt,” said Ihalil Mohammed, “for every other hole have we searched thoroughly.”

To this the others assented. Their prisoner had undoubtedly given them the slip. Dead or alive he would never be seen again.

All this the hunted man, thus hanging there, could not understand. Would they never give up the search, he was wondering. Well for him that he was in hard form and training—yet he was not so young as he used to be, he recognised bitterly, as every joint and muscle ached with the convulsive tension involved in thus supporting his own weight, for an apparently unlimited period, entirely by compression. Well for him, too, that the links were rough with red, flaky rust, thus affording increased facility of hold. Yet would these hell hounds never give up the search?

They were forced to at last. The red glow of the torches grew fainter, then died out—so, too, did the sound of footsteps and voices. Campian was in pitch darkness, suspended over this awful and unknown depth.

Now that the more active peril was withdrawn, and his attention thus drawn inwards, he was able to think, to realise the full horror of his position. How was he to return? Cramped, aching, exhausted, he felt as though he could hardly hold on, let alone work his way upward. His blood ran cold too as he realised what would have been his fate but for this solid and substantial means of support right to his hand. Half a yard further on either side, and—No, it would not bear thinking of, and no sooner had he arrived at this conclusion than one foot, unconsciously lowered, came in contact with something.

Something hard, wide, horizontal it was, for as he cautiously increased the pressure he felt it sway and tilt slightly. Then, with equal caution, he lowered the other foot on the other side of the chain. It, too, met with like support. Carefully, with both feet, he increased the pressure so as to test the weight, still preserving his hand-hold. Nothing gave way, and his heart leaped within him as he found he had secured a firm resting place whereon to recruit his strength against his return climb.

And now, safe for the time being, his thoughts were busy with speculation as to this structure hung here in the black depths of the gulf. A great massive iron chain supporting a convenient swinging platform, had not found its way there expressly to afford him a secure refuge in the hour of peril, that much was certain. Then his nerves thrilled and tingled as the conjecture uttered by Vivien in this very place came back to

his mind: "What if the things are at the bottom of that cleft?" Heavens! Had this structure to do with the hidden treasure—the priceless ruby sword?

Instinctively he sought his matchbox. No. That would be madness. His pursuers might not even have left the entrance of the cave. Not for hours would it be safe to strike a light.

And for hours, indeed, he hung there and waited. He groped around the platform, first with one foot then with the other, and it dawned upon him that the structure was no ordinary board, or it would have tilted. It was a solid block of wood—no—a box.

A box? A chest! That was it. What if it held the treasure itself? And then by a strange fatality the conviction that this would prove to be the case took firm hold of his mind—and if so, by what a terrible sequence of tragic events had he been constituted its finder. Would not the recent dread experiences be worth going through to have led up to this splendid discovery? All would yet be well. The best of life was before him yet Vivien's last look, as he descended from their place of refuge to purchase her safety by delivering himself into the hands of their enemies, burned warm within his soul. When he returned safe, as one who returned from the dead, what would not her welcome be? Surely the glow of the old days would be as nothing to this.

These and other such thoughts coursed through his mind as he hung there in the pitchy blackness—and indeed it was well for him that such was the case. Nothing is more utterly unnerving than any space of time spent in an absolutely silent and rayless gloom, but when, in addition to that, the subject is swung on a hanging platform, whose very stability he can vouch for with no degree of certitude, over a chasm of unknown depth, and that for hours, why, he needs a mental stimulus of a pretty strong and exalted type.

Judging it safe at last to do so, Campian struck a light. Feeble enough it seemed in the vast gloom, and not until it had burned out were his eyes capable of seeing anything after being for hours in black darkness. Then, stooping as low as he dared, he lit another. Yes. It was even as he had conjectured. The platform he was standing on was a box or chest.

It was of very old and hard grained wood, almost black, and clamped together with solid brass bindings. It showed no sign of having suffered from the ravages of time, and the upper part, which was all he could see, was covered with Arabic characters, curiously inlaid—probably texts from the Korân. He had no doubt but this was what had occupied so much of his thoughts, the hidden and forgotten treasure chest of the fugitive Durani

chief, Dost Hussain Khan. Little is it to be wondered at if even there he felt thrilled with exultation as he remembered what priceless valuables it certainly contained.

But that thrill of exultation sustained a rude shock—in fact died away. For happening to glance up while lighting another match it came home to him that whether the chest contained valuables or not, the probability that he would ever be in a position to put that contingency to the test was exceedingly slender; for to gain the brink of the chasm, and the outer air again, looked from there an absolute impossibility. The chain, and that which it supported, depended from a solid bolt let into the rock, but the latter overhung it in a cornice or lip, which projected nearly half a yard. He would never be able to worm himself over this. And then it came home to him that he was beginning to feel quite faint with hunger, and that his strength was leaving him fast.

Well, the feat must be attempted. Lighting another match—and he had few left now—he sent a long steady look at the projection, the fastening of the chain, and the distance from the edge. Then he began his climb.

This was not great. The rock lip projected only about half a yard above his hands at their highest tension. He drew himself up. He was under the projection—groping outward along it in the darkness. Now he gripped it firmly with both hands—still clinging to the chain with feet and legs. He was about to swing himself off. One hand half-slipped away. No, he could not do it. His strength failed him, likewise his nerve. He was barely able to seize the chain again and let himself down to the vantage ground of the box, where he stood literally trembling.

This would not do at all. He must rest for a few moments and recruit his strength, must quell this shaky fit by sheer force of will. It could not be—he argued with himself—that he had come through all this, had made this royal discovery, by a chain of coincidences signal and tragic, only to fail at the last; to be swept into nothingness; to disappear from all human sight as completely as though dead and buried already. He was a bit of a fatalist, too, and this partially supported him now. If he was to come through safely, why he would — if not—! And with this thought, as by an inspiration, came another idea.

He could never raise himself above the rock projection from which the chain hung—that much was certain. But—the point whence he had let himself down was only a foot to the right. There the edge did not overlap.

Steadying his over-wrought nerves, he drew himself up once more. Holding on tightly he reached forth one hand. It grasped the brink. Carefully he felt along the hard rock. Yes—that would do. Now for it. He put forth the other hand.

And now the moment was crucial. One arm was already along the floor above the edge. Campian's fate hung in the balance there in the pitchy gloom. Beneath him all black darkness, death, horror, annihilation. The merest feather weight either way would turn the scale. He let go of the chain with his feet. A last and mighty effort, and—he was lying safe and sound on the rock-floor above; well nigh unconscious with exhaustion and the awful strain his nerves had undergone.

For long he lay thus. Then the cravings of hunger became more than he could bear. Physical nature reasserted itself. He must obtain food at all risks. The forest bungalow was not far from that place. There he would find it.

It must have been hours since he took refuge here. His enemies had surprised him just at daybreak; now it was high noon. Prudence counselled that he should wait until night—physical craving argued that by then he would hardly have strength left him to make his way anywhere; and the physical argument prevailed, as it ordinarily does.

He stepped forth quickly and gained the shelter of the juniper forest. The glare of the sun blinded him, and the sparse foliage afforded but poor shade. He staggered along exhausted, yet full of renewed hope and resolution.

But for the mental and bodily exhaustion which half dulled his faculties, he would have become aware of a peculiar nasal, droning sound a short distance in front of him. As it was he hardly heard it, or if so, missed its significance. When, however, he became alive to the latter it was too late.

In a small open space, overhung on the further side by rocks, a score of turbaned figures were kneeling. They were in two rows, and, barefooted, were prostrating themselves in the approved method of the faithful at prayer. Then, rising, repeated, with one voice, their orisons, which were led by a single figure a little in advance of the rest. It was too late. With the first footfall of the intruder, round came several shaggy faces. The effect was magical. The entire band of fervid devotees sprang to its feet as one man. Tulwars whirled from their scabbards, and, in a moment, the intruder was surrounded. Well might the latter now despair. Well might he realise that the bitterness of death was indeed past. All that he had gone through was as nothing. He had walked, with his eyes open, right into the midst of his enemies, had placed, of his own act, his life in their hands. Foremost among the threatening, scowling countenances was the repulsive, exultant one of Umar Khan.

“Ah! ah!” snarled this implacable savage, with a grin of exultation. “Lo, the sheep returns to the slaughter, for so wills it God.”

“Allah?” repeated the destined victim, catching the last word. “Hearken, Moslem, in hearken!” he called out in Hindustani, eyeing with unconcern the uplifted sword of his arch enemy. Then, standing there in their midst, and facing in the direction they had been facing while at prayer, he extended both hands heavenward, and uttered in a loud, firm voice:

“La illah il Allah,
Mohammed er rasoul Allah!”

A gasp of wonder went up from those who beheld. As by magic every weapon was lowered. Campian had professed the faith of Islam.

For some moments these fanatical brigands stared stupidly at each other, then at the figure of the sometime infidel, but now believer. The spell was broken by their leader.

“It is well!” he said, advancing upon Campian, and again raising his tulwar. “There is rejoicing in Paradise now, for in a moment it will be the richer for a newly gained soul.”

But before the weapon could descend, an interruption occurred. A little bowed, bent figure came hurrying into the group. Campian recognised the sometime leader of the devotions.

“Hold now, my children,” he cried, in tones quavering with age and excitement, as he interposed his staff and rosary between the weapon of Umar Khan and its intended victim. “Have ye not grievously offended God? Have ye not broken into his hour of prayer, with brawling and strife? Would you further damn your own souls by shedding the blood of a true believer within this holy ziarat (a local shrine or sanctuary)—for I myself have heard the profession of this Feringhi? Have no fear, my son—have no fear,” he added, turning to Campian, and placing an aged, wrinkled claw upon one shoulder. “None shall do thee hurt, thou, who art now one of the faithful—for if any harm thee,” shaking his staff menacingly, “let him shrivel before the curse of the Syyed Aïn Asrâf.”

The only words of this address intelligible to the now ransomed victim—though he understood the burden thereof—was the name—and at that he could not repress a start of amazement. Those around beholding this were equally astonished.

“See,” they said among themselves. “Even to the infidel has the fame and holiness of the Syyed Aïn Asrâf reached.”

Even Umar Khan dare not openly resist the will of one so holy as the Syyed, and that as a matter of fact. But though baulked for the present, he turned sullenly away, meditating further mischief.

Chapter Nineteen.

Hopes and Fears.

A Regimental band was playing in the grounds of the Shâlalai Club, which institution constituted the ordinary afternoon resort of the society of the station.

A row of subalterns were roosting on the railing in front of the exclusively male department of the club, while their dogs fought and frisked, and snarled and panted, on the sward underneath. Every variety of dog—large and small, mongrel and thoroughbred—was there represented; indeed far more variety than might have been discerned among their owners, who, for the most part, were wonderfully alike; as to ideas, no less than in outward aspect.

As the afternoon wore on, more subs would ride up by twos and threes, on bicycles or in dog-carts—or even the homely necessary “gharri”—with more dogs, and after going inside for a “peg,” would emerge to swell the ranks of those already on the rail; their dogs the while engaging in combat with those already on the sward.

This rail-roost was a deeply cherished institution, which no consideration apparently was able to shake; whether the frowns or hints of superiors, or the attractions of the ornamental sex. This was scarcely surprising, for the ornamental sex as represented at Shâlalai was, with very little exception, singularly unornamental; which, though paradoxical, was none the less fact.

The tennis courts were in full blast, with a fringe of spectators. There were many sunshades and up-to-date hats and costumes scattered about the lawn, yet upwards of forty British subalterns roosted upon the railing.

“Hallo, Cox,” sung out one, hailing a new comer. “When are you going to catch Umar Khan?”

“No betting on this time, Cox,” said another, “unless it’s on Umar Khan.”

He addressed was a handsome, pleasant, fresh faced young fellow, who held a somewhat important political post. The point of the banter on the subject of Umar Khan was that Cox had started in pursuit of that bold bandit immediately on receipt of the news of the Mehriâb station affair. He had started absolutely confident of success, but he might as well have started to stalk the wily markhôr with the regimental band playing before him. That had been some weeks ago, but as yet neither Cox nor anyone else had ever come within measurable prospect of laying the marauder by the heels.

“Oh, bus!” retorted Cox. “Pity they don’t turn out some of you fellows after him. A week or so of tumbling about among rocks and stones would do you all the good in life. Anyone know where Upward’s to be found, by the way?”

“The jungle-wallah? He was in the billiard room just now knocking fits out of old Jermyn with that tiger-potting stroke of his. Why? Anything fresh turned up?”

“I expect you fellows will soon be started after Umar Khan,” retorted Cox, looking knowing, as he turned away to find Upward.

“Wonder if he really means it?” said one of the rail-roosters, after he had left, and then they fell to talking about the notorious brigand, and discussing a current rumour to the effect that the Government contemplated arresting the principal Marri chiefs for suspected complicity in Umar Khan’s misdemeanours, and holding them as hostages against the surrender of that outlaw, and the safe restoration of his prisoner.

“Wonder if that poor devil Campian’s throat has been cut yet?” conjectured someone.

“More than likely. If not it will be, directly any of the chiefs are interfered with.”

“They won’t bone Mr Umar Khan,” said another Solon of the rail-roost. “He’s skipped over into Afghanistan long ago, and the Amir won’t give him up, you bet. Shouldn’t wonder if he was at the bottom of it all himself.” At that time the Amir of Kabul was a very Mephisto in the sight of the collective and amateur wisdom of the Northern border.

A wave of interest here ran along the line of the rail-roosters—evoked by the bowling up of a neat dogcart, whose occupants, two in number, were alighting at the door of the feminine department of the club.

“By Jove! Those are two pretty girls. And neither belong here,” added the speaker plaintively.

“She can handle the ribbons, that Miss Wymer,” cut in another of more sporting vein, who had been critically surveying the arrival of the turn-out. “She’s got a fine hand on that high-actioned gee of old Jermyn’s. Isn’t that the brute that Wendsley had to sell because his wife couldn’t drive him?”

“No. You’ve got the affair all mixed,” returned yet another emphatically. And then, while a warm horse argument grew and thrived among one section, another continued and

fostered apace the discussion concerning those just deposited there through the motive power of the quadruped under dispute.

“I don’t think Miss Wymer is pretty,” declared a Solon of the rail. “She’s awfully fetching, though.”

“Rather. There’s a something about her you don’t often meet with, and you don’t know what the devil it is, either. By the way, wasn’t old Bracebrydge properly smashed on her?”

“Oh, he’s that on every woman under the sun—in rotation. This one let him have what for, though.”

“Did she? Eh, what about? How was it?” exclaimed several.

“Rather. They were talking about the Mehriâb affair, and Bracebrydge said something sneering about that poor plucky devil, Campian. You know what a blundering, tactless, offensive beast Bracebrydge can be. Well, he said they were all making too much of the affair, and more than hinted that Campian had only done what he did so as to seize the first opportunity of running away later on. Miss Wymer only answered that she thought she knew one or two who wouldn’t have waited for that—they’d have run away at the start. But it was the way she said it, looking him straight in the face all the time. By George, it was great, I can tell you—great. Bracebrydge looked as sick as if he had just been hit in the eye.”

“Serve him jolly well right,” declared one of the listeners, and his opinion was universally seconded, for Bracebrydge was not popular among those who roosted on the railing.

“I think Miss Cheriton’s the prettiest of the two,” said the youth who had first spoken. “She’s one of the most fetching girls I ever saw in my life.”

“Then why don’t you make hay while the sun shines?” rejoined another. “Go and make yourself agreeable—if you can, that is. They’ve just gone into the library. Go and ask her to play tennis, or something, chappie.”

“I think I will.” And sliding from the rail with some alacrity, away he went. Those remaining continued their subject.

“Bracebrydge must have been a double-dyed ass to have hit that particular nail on the head. It’s my belief he couldn’t have hit the wrong one harder, anyway.”

“The devil he couldn’t!”

“Well, I don’t know, mind. Only look at the opportunities they had, thrown almost entirely upon each other up there, for old Jermyn doesn’t count. If they hadn’t altogether set up a bundobust, it was most likely only a question of time.”

“Miss Wymer hasn’t been to a dance since that affair,” struck in another oracle of the rail. “Looks as if there was some fire beneath the smoke. What?”

“That don’t follow, either. Mind you, the chap deliberately went to have his throat cut so that the others should be let go, and while his fate is a matter of uncertainty it is only what a nice girl like that would do to keep a bit quiet. She wouldn’t care to think, while she was frisking about at dances, that at that very moment they might be hacking the poor chap to pieces.”

It so happened that the theory set forth by the last two speakers expressed with very fair accuracy the real state of affairs. Naturally self-contained, and with immense power of control over her feelings, Vivien was able to support the terrible strain of those weeks without—in popular parlance—giving herself away. And it was a strain. Day and night his image was with her, but always as she had seen him last; calmly and cheerfully delivering himself into the merciless hands of these cruel, marauding fanatics, giving his life for her and hers. Of the old days she dared not even think—and, since this tragedy had come between, they seemed so far away. Small wonder, then, if she refrained from joining in the ordinary round of station gaieties, yet not too pointedly, and she was the better able to do this that, being a comparative stranger in the place, her abstention was ascribed to a natural seriousness of temperament. Even thus, however, it could not entirely escape comment, as we have seen.

She and Nesta Cheriton had become great friends, although as different in temperament as in outward characteristics. In public, at any rate, they were generally about together, and in private, too, seemed to see a good deal of each other. It was almost as though they had some bond in common, and yet Vivien never by word or hint let out the ever present subject of her thoughts to any living soul. She had not quite lost hope, but as the days went by and nothing was heard either of the captive, or of the marauding outlaw who held him, she well nigh did lose it. Both seemed to have vanished into empty air.

For the stipulated ransom had been duly paid. Colonel Jermyn, with the aid of Upward and the head forest guard, had met Umar Khan’s envoy—none other than Ihalil Mohammed himself—he who had negotiated the terms. Great was the amazement and disgust of all when told that the prisoner would not be handed over. It was not in the

bundobust. Nothing had been said as to the restoration of Campian on payment of the five thousand rupees. The Colonel and Der' Ali stared at each other in blank dismay, for they recognised that this was only too true. No such stipulation had been made, they remembered. But, of course, it had been understood, they put it to the envoy. That wily Baluchi merely shook his head slightly, and repeated—as impassable as ever, “It was not in the bundobust.”

Then the Colonel raved and swore. It was treachery, black, infernal treachery. He believed they had murdered their prisoner already, at any rate, not one pice should they get from him until the sahib was handed over safe and sound. Then they should have every anna of it. Not before.

At this Ihalil Mohammed merely elevated one shaggy eyebrow, and remarked laconically:

“Sheep are flayed after they are dead, not before.”

The Colonel stared blankly over the apparent inconsequence of this remark, then, as the fiendish import of it dawned upon him, he lost his temper, and nearly his head. His hand flew to his revolver.

This time Ihalil Mohammed elevated two shaggy eyebrows and observed:

“Sheep are flayed and roasted after they are dead—not before.”

Then he relapsed into his wonted saturnine taciturnity.

The others consulted together. Ihalil seemed hardly interested enough even to watch them. The wily Baluchi knew that the key to the whole situation was in his own hand. He had marked the visible discomfiture produced by his hideous threat. He knew that the stipulated sum would be paid, and that he himself would be suffered to depart with it unmolested—and, indeed, such was the case.

“Is the sahib still alive?” asked the Colonel.

“He is still alive.”

“And well?”

“And well.”

“Very good. Now then, Der’ Ali. Tell this infernal scoundrel to tell his more infernal scoundrel of a chief that if he brings in the sahib safe and well within eight days from, this, and hands him over, we will pay him another five thousand rupees; but if any harm happens to him, then the Sirkâr will never rest until he has hung him and every man Jack of the gang—hung ’em in pigskins, by God, and burnt them afterwards. What does he say to that?”

Der’ Ali, being judicious, substituted courteous epithets for the naturally explosive ones which his master had directed at Umar Khan, and Der’ Ali, being a Moslem himself, refrained from repeating in plain terms so shocking a reference as that of which the blunt Feringhi had not scrupled to make use, substituting for it mysterious and sinister hints as to death by hanging under its most dreaded form. Ihalil’s reply was characteristically laconic.

“Well, what does he say?” repeated the Colonel testily.

“He say—he hears, Huzoor.”

“Are they going to bring the sahib back, Der’ Ali?”

“He say—he can’t say, Huzoor,” answered the interpreter, having elicited that terse reply.

“Tell him to go to the devil, then,” said the Colonel, unable to resist an angry stamp of the foot.

Der’ Ali rendered this as—“Go in peace,” and Ihalil, uttering an impassive “Salaam,” mounted his camel, and—did so.

They watched the form of the retreating Baluchi, fast becoming a mere white speck in the desert waste with every stride of his camel, and shook their heads despondently. Would these wolves ever release their prey? Bhallu Khan was of a kindred tribe. What did he think of the chances? But the old forester, who, like most barbarians or semi-barbarians, always answer what they imagine the inquirers would like best to hear, replied that he thought the chances were good. All men loved money—even the sahibs would rather have plenty than little—he interpolated with a whimsical smile. Baluchi loved money too. Umar Khan would probably release his prisoner if plenty of rupees were offered him.

But the eight days became fifteen, and still of the said prisoner there was no sign; and the fortnight grew into weeks, with like result. Then those interested in Campian's fate felt gloomy indeed. They had almost abandoned hope.

But whatever private woes and trials, the world rubs on as usual. Shâlalai at large was not particularly interested in Campian's fate, except as an item of political excitement. It was far more interested in the capture or destruction of Umar Khan than in the rescue or murder of his prisoner; for that bold outlaw had set up something of a scare. That sort of outbreak was catching among these fierce, fanatical, predatory races, and it struck home. Shooting parties became decidedly nervous, and fewer withal; and those delightful, moonlight bicycling picnics, miles out along the smooth, level, military road, were given up as unsafe—for did not the Brahui villages dotting the plain on either side contain scowling, shaggy, sword-wearing ruffians in plenty, and was there not a wave of restlessness heaving through the lot?

Fleming was one of those who decided that his own affairs were of paramount importance to himself; wherefore he continued to pay assiduous court to Nesta Cheriton. But the girl seemed to have altered somehow. She had grown quite subdued, not to say serious. The old, gay, sparkling high spirits were seldom there. Fleming, turning things over, shook a gloomy head, then dismissed his fears as absurd. Could it be there was anything between Campian and herself? They had perforce been thrown together a lot in Upward's camp—moreover, when he and Bracebrydge had left, they had left the other behind them. Had he improved the shining hour then? Fleming recalled the tangi adventure, and swore to himself; but he soon recovered, and the restoration of his equanimity was effected through the agency of his looking-glass. It was too damned absurd, he told himself, surveying his really good-looking face and well-knit soldierly figure—that any girl could prefer a dry old stick like Campian, and a mere civilian at that—so, giving his gallant moustache an additional twist or two eyewards, he concluded to start off and place the matter beyond a doubt.

But on reaching Upward's bungalow ill chance awaited him. Nesta was not alone, and her mood was unpropitious. What was that? He could hardly believe his ears. She was depreciating—yes, actually depreciating—the British Army.

"I don't know what is the use of all these soldiers here in Shâlalai," she was saying as he came in. "Thousands of them. How many are there, Captain Fleming? How many soldiers have we got in Shâlalai?"

"Oh, about five thousand—of all sorts."

“About five thousand,” she repeated, “horse, foot, and artillery, and yet a dozen ragged Pathâns can race about the country, killing people at will.”

“That everlasting Umar Khan, I suppose?” said Fleming, somewhat shortly, for he was not a little nettled at her disparaging, almost jeering, tone.

“I think he is going to be the ‘everlasting’ Umar Khan,” she retorted quickly. “Why don’t some of you try and catch him, Captain Fleming? There are enough of you, at any rate.”

“We must wait for orders, Miss Cheriton,” he replied stiffly.

“If I were a man, and a soldier, I wouldn’t wait for orders if there was anything of that sort to be done,” she retorted, with delightful inconsistency. “I’d get leave to raise a troop, and I’d never rest till I brought in that Ghazi. All our jolly bicycle picnics are knocked on the head, and then Mr Upward has constantly to go into camp, and of course Mrs Upward will insist on going with him, and—I’m very fond of her.”

Fleming, who had been twirling his moustache eyeward somewhat viciously, suddenly quit that refuge for the perturbed. An idea had struck him. By George, it was not merely on Campian’s account she wanted Umar Khan run to earth! Vastly relieved, he said:

“There’s a good deal in what you say, Miss Cheriton. I must think out how the thing may be done.” Then he talked on other and indifferent matters, and shortly took his leave.

Meanwhile the bi-annual jirgeh, or tribal council, was in progress at Shâlalai, and representatives of all the tribes and clans and septs gathered daily in the durbar hall to meet the Sirkâr and ventilate grievances and settle disputes, and in short to discuss matters generally between themselves and the Executive. Stately chiefs and their retinues—tall, dignified men, picturesque in their snowy turbans and long hair and flowing beards, wending thither beneath the plane-shaded avenue—passed in strange contrast the dapper sub skimming along on his bicycle, or fashionably attired ladies in their high-wheeled dogcart flashing by at a hard trot, bound for club or gymkhana ground. Such, however, they eyed as impassively as they did the crowd of low caste Hindus which thronged the bazaar; for the training of their wild desert home had left no room for the display of emotions. Now and then, recognising some official, they might utter a grave “Salaam,” accompanied by a slight raising of the hand, but that was all. A contrast indeed! The unchanging East, in its melancholy dignity and fund of awe-suggesting power—because power held in the mystery of reserve—jostled by fussy, domineering, up-to-date civilisation; the fierce, wild, untamable spirits masked by those copper-hued and dignified countenances, side by side with the careless, pleasure loving, yet intensely pushing and practical temperament underlying the fresh, tawny-haired

Anglo-Saxon faces. Even the very headgear suggested a vivid contrast—the multitudinous folds of the snowy and graceful turban expressive of absence of all capacity for flurry—cool deliberateness, repose, wisdom—even as the cock of the perky “bowler” seemed a very object lesson in itself of push and bounce and “there-to-stay” tenacity.

Now and then one or two of the sirdars would visit Upward to talk officially on forest matters in their respective districts, or to view his multifold trophies of the chase, which keenly interested them. These visits Upward encouraged, hoping to learn something of Campian’s fate. But it was of no avail. Of the massacre at Mehriâb station, and the doings of Umar Khan in general, the wily Asiatics professed the profoundest ignorance, not with effusive reiteration, but in a grave, nonchalant, dignified way, as though the matter were entirely unworthy of their notice or cognisance, once and for all. But to Vivien Wymer, who never lost an opportunity of studying these people, such visits were of untold interest; moreover, they seemed to result in a certain degree of hope renewed. These stately, courteous-mannered potentates had not got cruel faces. There was a noble look about most of them, even a benevolent one. Surely these were not the men to sanction a coldblooded murder.

Meanwhile, during the jirgeh, the matter of Umar Khan was receiving the full attention of the Executive. It was one thing for the chiefs to protest ignorance in private and unofficial conversation with Upward, with whom, diplomatically, they had no earthly concern. Carefully and with due deliberation the authorities narrowed the net—and it was decided to arrest Yar Hussain Khan, who, as the outlaw’s feudal chief, was responsible for his behaviour—and a sirdar of the Brahuïs who was proved to have sheltered and screened him.

The chiefs in question made no trouble over the decision of the Sirkâr. With Oriental impassibility they accepted the situation, and were placed under guard accordingly. But two nights later Umar Khan swooped down upon a Levy post within ten miles of Shâlalai, surprised and massacred the handful of Hindu sepoy in charge, and rolled a couple of field pieces down the mountain side, retiring as swiftly as he had appeared: while the Brahui clans in the neighbourhood began to make themselves disagreeable by various small acts of aggression which rendered it unsafe to venture many miles beyond the lines.

Things began to look uncommonly lively in and about that station containing five thousand troops—horse, foot and artillery.

Chapter Twenty.

At Darkest Hour.

Away in the Kharawan desert the dust columns are whirling heavenward in many a tall spiral shaft; more like the hissing steam jets of some vast geyser than anything so dry and unadhesible as mere sand.

A dead flat level, stretching afar into misty distance on the skyline on every hand—its only vegetation a low scrubby attempt at growth; the fierce sun at a white heat overhead; the sky as brass—what life can this awful wilderness by any possibility support? Yet so wonderful, so inexhaustible are the resources of Nature that even here both man and beast can fare along, and that moderately well.

Camels, with their loads, kneel on the sand, resting from their labours; with their ugly heads and weird snaky necks and unceasing guttural snarling roar, conveying the idea of hideous antediluvian monsters somehow or other forgotten by the Flood in this desert waste. A flock of black goats, cropping daintily at the sparse attempt at herbage, or crouching in groups chewing the cud, represents the other phase of animal life there, unless three or four gaunt Pathân curs employed at assisting to herd the same. Here and there a tent, or mere shelter of tanned camel hide, blackened by the heat of innumerable suns, stretched upon poles, affords a modicum of shelter from the arid baking heat.

It is the hour of prayer. Grouped together the believers are kneeling—facing towards the holy city; whose exact direction they have a marvellous faculty for determining with accuracy. As one man they sink down in their twofold prostration, forehead to the earth, then rise again, and the droning hum of voices goes out upon the shimmer of the scorching air. One, in front of the rest, leads the devotions, a little, shrunken, aged figure, and by his side is another, but it is the form of a man in all the vigour of his prime.

With more than ordinary unction the prescribed formulae are repeated. No abstraction or looking round is here, such as the faithful when individually devout may occasionally give way to. Perhaps it is the holy character and reputation of the leader that ensures this edifying result, for the Syyed Hadji Aïn Asrâf is justly invested with both of these.

He who prays side by side with this pillar and prop of Moslem orthodoxy is arrayed like the rest. His white turban, cool and voluminous in its folds, is the same as that of these swarthy copper-hued sons of the desert—so, too, are the graceful flowing garments and chudda, in which he is clad. His shoes are off his feet, and his prostrations and general attitude differ in no wise from those employed by the other devotees—the outcome of a

lifetime's habit. Yet, as the orisons over, all rise and resume their shoes and their wonted and work-a-day demeanour, a close observer might well notice that this is no fanatical son of the Orient but a man of Anglo-Saxon blood—in short, none other than Howard Campian.

How then is it that the part has come to him so easily? He had professed Islam, it is true; but that as a mere expedient to save himself from the murderous blades of Umar Khan and his followers. Yet it is strange how the varying phases of life will unconsciously affect the man who is accustomed to pass through many of them. Your wooden headed, groove-compressed John Bull, in his stay-at-home, stick-in-the-mud-ishness, is impervious to any such impressions. He is too devoid of sympathy for the ideas of any other living soul, for one thing. But the true cosmopolitan, the globe wanderer, whose wanderings leave him more and more with an open mind, can see things differently, can even realise that the multifold races and tongues and creeds who inhabit this earth do not necessarily do so on gracious sufferance of John Bull aforesaid, with whom, by the way, they have not the shadow of an idea in common. It happened that Campian had some acquaintance with the Korân, in fact possessed an English translation of the sacred volume; a circumstance which stood him in right good stead with those who held him in durance. The faith of Islam had always struck him as a rational creed, moral and orderly, with the claims of a fair amount of antiquity behind it; wherefore now, under duress and as a matter of expediency, no great shock was entailed upon him in subscribing its tenets. Besides, his profession of faith involved no denial of any article of faith he might previously have held. The assertion that Mohammed was the prophet of God seemed not an outrageous one, looking at the fact that the stupendous creed, founded or revealed by the seer of Mecca, held and swayed countless millions, who for sheer devoutness, consistency to their own profession, and the grandeur of unity, could give large points to the cute, up-to-date Christian with his one day's piety and six days' fraud, and his jangling discord of multifold sects.

He was a good bit of a natural actor, wherefore, having a part to play, he identified himself with it, and played it thoroughly. Partly from motives of convenience, for his own clothing had undergone wild, rough treatment of late, partly from those of expediency, he had adopted the dress of his custodians, and his dark, sunbrowned face, clear cut features and full beard, framed in the white voluminous turban, was quite as the face of one of themselves. Only the eyes seemed to betray the Anglo-Saxon, yet blue or grey eyes are not uncommon among some of the Afghan tribes.

It is by no means certain that his profession of faith would have availed to save his life at the rancorous hands of Umar Khan—that lawless freebooter being impatient of the claims of creed when they conflicted with his own strong inclinations—but for the interference of the Syyed Aïn Asrâf. The dictum of the latter, however, especially in a

matter of faith, was not to be gainsaid. Not by halves, either, had the Syyed done things. He rejoiced over his new convert, insuring for him good treatment, and, in short, everything but liberty. We have just stated that Campian possessed a translation of the Korân, and the fact that he did so seemed a mark to all that his was no sudden forced conversion. He had evidently been making a study of their holy religion, as the Syyed pointed out.

To this lead Campian assiduously played up. The volume was at the bungalow of the Colonel Sahib, where he had been staying, he explained, and thither he prevailed on them to accompany him, in order to fetch it. Nor was that all, for he made use of the circumstance to prevail upon them to spare the house, as having contained a volume of the sacred book, and under whose roof had come many inspirations which had led to his conversion. They had looted the place somewhat, but had refrained from doing much real damage.

The Syyed Aïn Asrâf then, had taken his proselyte completely under his wing, and, through the interpreting agency of Buktiar Khan, was never tired of instructing him in all the tenets and rules and discipline of Islam. This was not altogether unwelcome to the said proselyte, and that for diverse reasons. For one thing the subject really interested him, and greatly did it beguile the tedium and hardship of his captivity: for another he was anxious to establish the friendliest relationship with the old Syyed. The name had recalled itself to his recollection the moment he heard it uttered. This was the other name mentioned in connection with the treasure and the ruby sword—Syed Aïn Asrâf, the brother of the fugitive Durani chief, Dost Hussain Khan.

Did this old man know? Was he in the secret, or had all clue been lost? Again, did that mysterious chest, so startlingly, so grimly lighted upon by himself, actually contain that rare and priceless treasure? Often would Campian's thoughts go back to those awful hours spent hanging over the black depths of the chasm. Often would he wonder whether the discovery was an actual fact, or a dream, a phantasmagoria of his state of over-wrought mind and body, and in the hot glare of the desert he would shade his eyes as though the better to live over again those hours of horror and of pitchy gloom. But when he would have liked to sound the old Syyed on the subject, that curse, the barrier of language, would come in. Save for a smattering of the most ordinary words, which he had picked up, Campian could only communicate through the agency of Buktiar Khan, and Buktiar Khan was at best but a slippery scoundrel, and totally untrustworthy where a matter of such passing importance was involved.

Campian had long since given up his first idea, viz: that he was being held as a hostage, to be released on payment of the stipulated five thousand rupees. That sum he knew had been paid, duly as to time and conditions, but to his representations that he should be

set at liberty the reply was consistently short and to the point. It was not in the bundobust. So he made up his mind to bide his time patiently, keep his eyes and ears open, pick up as much of the language as he could, and pursue his studies of the Korân under the tuition of his now spiritual guide, Aïn Asrâf.

That venerable saint found in him a most promising neophyte—and through the agency of the ex-chuprassi they would hold long theological debates on this or that point of faith, or the exact interpretation of the words of the Prophet, wherein the Moslem doctors were wont to read diverse or ambiguous meaning; and the cheap and spick and span English translation formed yet one more of those strange life contrasts beside the yellow parchment scroll covered with its Arabic text—while the Syyed, with the aid of pebbles placed out, or squares and circles described in the dust, strove to convey to his disciple some idea of the configuration of the holy city and the inviolable temple; the sacred Caaba and the stone of Abraham.

Strange and wild had been Campian's experiences during the long weeks—months now—since his recapture. His jauntily-expressed self gratulation on the prospect of seeing something of the inner life of the Baluchis he can remember now with a rueful smile. Hurried here and hurried there—now freezing among bleak mountain-tops, now roasting on the waterless desert: subsisting on food perfectly abominable to civilised palate, and housed in low square huts, the nocturnal gambols of whose multifold tenantry tried his as yet scanty stock of Moslem patience—in truth he has had enough and to spare of such experiences. So interminable and tortuous withal have been his wanderings that at the present moment he has not the least idea as to his whereabouts, or whether Shâlalai is north, south, east, or west, or far or near—or indeed anything about it. One redeeming point about the situation is that after the first week of his captivity nothing more has been seen of Umar Khan. That obnoxious ruffian had disappeared as effectually as though death or his own free will had severed his connection with the band.

With the additional security the absence of the arch-brigand brought to him, there came fits of terrible depression. What was going to be the end of all this, and whither did they purpose to convey him? Northward, to wild untrodden regions of Afghanistan or Persia when the band should find it expedient to flee thither—and, what then? Sooner or later the enmity of Umar Khan would take effect in his murder, secret or open. And he was so helpless, for though, as we have said, he had adopted their costume as well as their creed, and was suffered to go out and in among them at will, never by any chance did his custodians allow him aught in the shape of a weapon.

And now, as we see him here in the heart of the Kharawan desert, after the hour of prayer, the old Syyed for the twentieth time and with unswerving patience and copious

diagram is explaining the exact position of the stone of Abraham and its distance from the holy Caaba, he makes up his mind to try and break the ice.

“Ask the Syyed, Buktiar,” he says, “who was the Sirdar Dost Hussain Khan?”

But before the ex-chuprassi can put the question, a light dawns over the aged face. As the question is put it deepens and glows.

“Ya—Allah!” he responds, raising hands and eyes heavenward. “His soul is in the rim of Paradise, my son. Yet, what knowest thou of Dost Hussain Khan?”

Campian debated a moment or so what reply to make. There was nothing suspicious about this, for Orientals are never in a hurry. But he was spared the necessity of replying at all, for a diversion occurred which threw the camp into a state of wild excitement.

Away on the skyline a cloud of dust was rising. Onward it swept at a great rate of speed, whirling heavenward; and through it the tossing of horses' heads, and the white turbans of their riders.

The dust cloud whirled over them. Recovering from the momentary blindness of its effect, Campian beheld a score and a half of wild Baluchis dashing up on horseback. A dozen of these had leaped from their steeds, and—yes—they were coming straight for him. He had no weapon, yet in that flash of time he noticed that not a tulwar was drawn. They flung themselves upon him, bore him to the earth by sheer weight of numbers, and in a trice he was powerless, bound fast in a cruelly painful attitude, being in fact trussed up in such wise as to be brought as nearly into the shape of a huge ball as the human frame is capable of being brought. Nor was this all. They rammed a gag into his mouth—a horrible gag composed of a wedge of wood covered with very dirty rag—and in this plight he was hauled to one of the kneeling camels, and, literally turned into a bale by being wrapped in sacking, was loaded up among the other packages upon the animal's back.

The agony of it was excruciating. Every bone in his body ached with the distortion of the enforced and unwonted attitude. The rack would have been a joke to it. Moreover, what with the filthy gag, and the sacking which covered him, he was more than half suffocated. Flames danced and reeled before his eyes—his brain was bursting. Then a couple of sickening lurches and jolt—jolt—jolt. The roaring, snarling animal had risen and was proceeding at its ordinary pace—and now, in addition to the torture of his strained attitude, the jolting impact of the other packages seemed in danger of crushing the life out of him against the pack saddle.

Wherefore this outrage? A moment before, free, comparatively almost one of themselves, and now—What was the meaning of this abominable treatment?

Ha! What was that? The trampling of horses—the rush of many hoofs—nearer and nearer. Now it was thundering around—and racked, suffocated, half dead, in his agonising and ignominious position, the blood rushed tingling through the unfortunate man's frame, for over and above the sudden tumult rose a loud English voice. Rescue at last! In his sore and painful plight, he nearly fainted with the revulsion of the thought.

“Tell the devils to stop,” it cried. “Now, Sohrâb, ask them who they are, and all about themselves.”

And he who listened there helpless, recognised the fresh, bluff voice. It was that of his quondam camp-mate—Fleming. If only he could make his presence known—but that noisome gag rendered all sound as impossible as his bonds rendered movement. He heard the question put by the Baluchi interpreter, likewise the long-winded reply. Then another English voice—an impatient one.

“I believe we'd better push on, Fleming. These devils'll take half the day jawing here. I'm dead certain that was Umar Khan himself in that crowd just now, and they'll have nearly half an hour's start of us. Let's get on, say I.”

“I don't know quite what to do, Sinclair,” said the first voice. “I've a good mind to overhaul these chaps' loads. There might be some clue in them—some bit of loot perhaps—which might be a guide to us.”

Heavens! How the wretched prisoner strained and tugged at his bonds. If he could but loosen that diabolical gag ever so slightly! He could see in imagination the whole scene—the two English officers at the head of their native troopers; the sullen, scowling Baluchis standing by their camels hardly deigning to do more than barely answer the questions put to them; then the impatience of the subaltern shading his eyes to gaze horizon-ward—and the more cautious, reflective countenance of the captain. Yes, he could see it all. Rescue, within a yard of him! Great God! was it to reach him—to touch him, and yet pass him by? He strained at his bonds till his eyes seemed to burst from his head. One sound would bring him immediate rescue, immediate freedom—yet not by a hair's-breadth would that devilish gag relax its constraint.

“Pho! What could we find that would help us?” rejoined the impatient voice of the subaltern. “And every moment Umar Khan is putting another mile of this infernal desert between him and us.”

The argument seemed to weigh. The sharp, crisp word to advance—the rattle of sabres and the jingle of bits; the thud of the troop-horses' feet, and the swish of the thrown-up sand—all told its own tale to the ears of the wretched prisoner as the troop swept onward, literally within a couple of yards of him, and soon died away. Then the renewed jolt—jolt, told that the camels had resumed their interrupted march. It was the last straw. Physical anguish and mental revulsion proved too much. The unfortunate man lost all consciousness in a dead swoon.

Chapter Twenty One.

The Durani Ring.

When he awoke to consciousness Campian realised that he was lying on a charpoy, within a low, mud-plastered room.

His limbs were no longer bound, but his whole frame ached from head to foot with a racking pain. With the first attempt to move he groaned, and once more closed his eyes. That last fearful ordeal had been too much for nerve and brain. Even now, as he awoke, the recollection of it came back with a rush.

A slight rustling and the sound of a quiet footstep caused him to look forth once more. A bearded, long-haired Baluchi was standing beside the bed with an earthen bowl in his hand.

“Kaha Syyed Aïn Asrâf hai?” queried Campian.

But the man only shook his head, set down the bowl, and departed.

He drank the contents, which consisted of slightly curdled goat’s milk, and feeling vastly better, made up his mind to rise.

The turban he had before worn was lying beside him. Twisting it on, he sallied forth.

The sun was sky high, but the air was no longer the scorching breath of the desert. It was fresh, almost cool. As he looked around he could see the towering head of a mountain beyond the line of roof.

A sort of labyrinth of mud-walls confronted and puzzled him, but of inhabitants he saw not a soul. Making his way carefully forward he came upon an open space, but walled in all round; in fact, he seemed to be in a kind of walled village, and of the surrounding country nothing could he descry but the mountain overhead.

Several savage looking Baluchis stood or squatted in groups. These muttered a sulky “salaam,” but their faces were all strange to him; not one among them seemed to have been of the party amid which his lot had formerly been cast. Women, too, here and there were visible—that is to say, their clothing was, for their closely drawn chuddas, with the two circular, barred eyeholes, conveyed to the spectator no sort of idea as to whether the face within was young or old, pretty or hideous, comely or hag-like.

Again he inquired for the old Syyed, only to meet with the same unconcerned headshake. The mention of Buktiar Khan met with no more satisfactory result. This was bad. The cross-eyed ex-chuprassi, slippery scoundrel as he might be, was, at any rate, somebody to talk to, and, furthermore, a valuable mouthpiece. For the kind-hearted old Syyed he had conceived a genuine regard, and it was with something like a real pang of regret that he missed the benevolent face and paternal manner of that venerable saint. But, more important than all, he missed the feeling of protection and security which the latter's presence had inspired, and which, he realised with a qualm, he might only too soon need; for a more forbidding, murderous looking set of ruffians than the men who inhabited this village he thought he had never in his life beheld.

Two of these, engaged in their devotions, on one side of the square, attracted his attention. Moved by a desire to propitiate, he went over to them, and putting off his shoes, spread his chudda beside them and began to do likewise. And now, for the first time—realising his insecurity, and missing the presence of his kind old preceptor—in his strait and loneliness, a kind of reality seemed to come into the formula; and bowing himself down towards Mecca, he felt that this creed which unified the hearts of millions and millions might even be ordered so as to form a link of brotherhood between himself and the fierce hearts of those surrounding him—and, let it come from whatever source it might, the inspiration was a sustaining one. He arose with renewed confidence—even something of renewed hope.

Such, however, was not destined to last. As the days went by the demeanour of those around grew more and more hostile—at times even threatening. They would hardly reply to his civil and brotherly “salaam,” and would scowl evilly at him even during prayer. It began to get upon his nerves.

And well it might. In the first place he was a close prisoner, never being suffered to go outside the loop-holed walls, and the want of exercise told upon his health. Then, he had no idea as to where he was, or for what purpose he was being kept: that it was with the object of ransom he had more than begun to abandon hope, since the weeks had dragged into months, and yet no sign from the outside world. Into months—for there were signs of approaching winter now. The peak of the overhanging mountain took on more than one cap of powdery snow, and the air, at nights, became piercingly cold. And then with the growing hostility of those around, he framed a theory that they were but awaiting the return of Umar Khan to put him to death, with such adjuncts of cruelty as that implacable barbarian might feel moved to devise.

Would his fate ever be known? Why should it? Orientals were as close as death when they chose to keep anything a mystery. But what mattered whether it were known or not? Vivien? She would soon forget—or find some “duty” to console her, he told himself

in all the bitterness fostered by his unnerved and strained state. No—but of her he would not think; and this resolve, framed from the earliest stage of his captivity, he had persistently observed. He needed all his strength, all his philosophy. To dwell upon thoughts of her—only regained in order to be re-lost—had a perilous tendency to sap both.

All manner of wild ideas of escape would come to him, only to be dismissed. He had made one attempt, and failed. If that had been unsuccessful—near home, so to say, and in country he knew—what sort of success would crown any such effort here in a wild and unknown region, which, for aught he knew, might be hundreds of miles from any European centre? To fail again would render his condition infinitely worse, even if it did not entail his death.

At last something occurred. It was just after the hour of morning prayer. A sound struck full upon his ears. Away over the desert it came—the long cracking roll of a rifle volley. Then another, followed by a few scattered and dropping shots. Others had heard it, too, and were peering through the loopholes in the outer wall. Faint and far it was, but approaching—oh, yes, surely approaching.

Rescue? Surely this time it was. A clue to his whereabouts had been found, and the search expedition had discovered him at last. The blood surged hotly in his veins at the thought—but—with it came another. Would these barbarians allow him to leave their midst alive? Not likely.

Then a plan formulated itself in his mind. He would retire to the room he occupied and barricade the door. That would allow his deliverers time to appear in force. So far, however, the people within the village fort made no hostile movement towards him. They seemed to have forgotten his presence, so engrossed were they in observing what might be going on outside. At last, however, the gates were thrown open to admit three men on camels, supporting a fourth. Him they lowered carefully to the ground, a fresh stream of blood welling forth from his wounds as they did so, crimsoning his dirty white garments; and, in the grim, drawn countenance, with its set teeth and glazing eyes, Campian recognised the lineaments of Ihalil Mohammed.

The man was dying. Nothing but the tenacity of a son of the desert and the mountain would have supported him thus far, with two Lee-Metford bullets through his vitals. There he lay, however, the sands of life ebbing fast, the very moments of his fierce, lawless, predatory career numbered.

“You take care. Baluchi very cross,” murmured a voice, in English, at Campian’s side. No need had he to turn to recognise in it that of Buktia Khan.

The warning was needed—yet even then, fully alive to his peril, he could not forbear hurriedly asking what had happened. As hurriedly the ex-chuprassi told him; which he was able to do while loosening the saddle girths of his camel, the attention of the others, too, being occupied with the dying man. A body of native horse led by two English officers had come up to a neighbouring village, but the malik who ruled it had refused to allow them the use of the wells. The cavalry had persisted, and then the Baluchis had fired upon them. There had been a fight, and then a parley, and the English officers had set off in pursuit of Umar Khan, who had been present until he saw how things were going with his countrymen.

“No. The sahibs not come here. Umar Khan go right the other way,” concluded Buktiar. “But—you take care—Baluchi very cross.”

If ever there was point in a warning it was at that moment. Several of those around Ihalil turned their heads and were eyeing the prisoner ominously. The dying brigand, too, with hate in his glassy stare, seemed to be muttering curses and menace, then with a last effort, spat full in his direction. It was as though a signal had been given.

Campian, however, was quick and resourceful in his strait. In a flash, as it were, he had whirled Buktiar’s tulwar from its scabbard as the ex-chuprassi was still leaning over his camel-gear, and with a rapid cut had slashed the face of the foremost of the ferocious crew which now hurled itself, howling, upon him. Then two or three quick bounds backward and he was within his apartment, with the door banged to, and the charpoy and a heavy chest which stood in the room so wedged against it that it could not be forced by any method short of knocking out the opposite wall.

For a while the hubbub was appalling, as the infuriated Baluchis hurled themselves against the door, bellowing forth terrific shouts and curses. The beleaguered man within stood there, his tulwar raised, panting violently with the excitement and exertion, prepared to sell his life at the price of several, for a desperate man armed with a tulwar and driven to bay, is no joke—to the several. Then there was a sudden silence. Campian, with every faculty of hearing strained, was speculating what new device they would adopt to get at him. He had no hope now. It was only a question of time. Then Buktiar’s voice made itself heard, calling out in English: “You come out I’sirdar—he want speak with you.”

“Sirdar? What sirdar? Oh, skittles! You don’t come it over me with that thin yarn, Buktiar,” replied Campian, with a reckless laugh, evolved from the sheer hopelessness of his position.

“No. I speak true. I’sirdar—he just come—I’sirdar Yar Hussain Khan.”

“Umar Khan, you mean—eh?”

“No—not Umar Khan. Yar Hussain—big sirdar of Marri.”

“How am I to know if this fellow is lying or not?” soliloquised Campian aloud. “See here, Buktiar. You’re a damned fool if you don’t do all you can for me. You know I promised you a thousand rupees.”

“I know, sahib. This time I speak true. You come out or I’sirdar p’r’aps get angry and go away.”

Campian resolved to risk it. Therein lay a chance—otherwise there was none. Cautiously, yet concealing his caution, he flung open the door, and stepped boldly forth, his very intrepidity begotten of the extremity of his strait.

No. The ex-chuprassi had not lied. Standing there, his immediate retinue grouped behind him, was a tall, stately figure. Campian recognised him at a glance. It was the Marri sirdar, Yar Hussain Khan.

Behind the group several horses were standing, the chief’s spirited mount, with its ornate saddle cloth and trappings, being led up and down the square by one of the young Baluchis. Not a weapon was raised as the beleaguered man stepped forth. The village people stood around, sullen and scowling.

“Salaam, Sirdar sahib!” said Campian advancing, having shifted the tulwar, with which he would not part, to the left hand. “Buktiar, remind the chief, that when we met before, at the jungle-wallah sahib’s camp, he said he would be glad to see me in his village, and—here I am.” And he extended his right hand.

But Yar Hussain did not respond with any cordiality to this advance, indeed at first it seemed as though he were going to repel it altogether. However, he returned the proffered handshake, though coldly—and the sternness of his strong, dignified countenance in no wise relaxed as he uttered a frigid “salaam.”

Then a magical change flashed across his features, and his eyes lit up. Throwing his head back, he stared at the astonished Campian.

“Put forth thy hand again, Feringhi,” he said, in a quick, deep tone, as though mastering some strong emotion. Wondering greatly—as the request was translated by Buktiar—

Campian complied. And now he saw light. What had attracted the chief's attention was a ring he wore—a quaint Eastern ring, in which was set a greenish stone covered with strange characters.

“Where obtainedst thou this?” inquired Yar Hussain, still in the deep tones of eager excitement, his eyes fixed upon the ring.

“From my father, to whom it was presented by an Afghan sirdar whose life he was the means of saving. It was supposed to bring good fortune to all who wore it. Have you ever seen a similar one, Sirdar sahib?”

But for answer there broke from several of those on either hand of the chief, and who, with heads bent forward, were gazing upon the circlet, hurried ejaculations.

“The Durani ring!” they exclaimed. “Yes, Allah is great. The Durani ring!”

They stared at the circlet, then at its wearer, then at the ring again, and broke forth into renewed exclamations. Yar Hussain the while seemed as though turned into stone. Finally, recovering himself he said:

“This is a matter that needs talking over. We will discuss it within.”

At these words the malik of the village fort, with much deference, marshalled the sirdar to his own house. With him went Campian and two or three followers. Buktiar Khan, to his unmitigated disappointment, was left outside. When they were seated—this time comfortably on cushions, for this room was very different in its appointments to the bare, squalid one which had been allotted to the prisoner hitherto—one of the Baluchis addressed Campian in excellent English, to the latter's unbounded astonishment.

“The sirdar would like to hear the story of that ring,” he said. “You need not fear to talk, sir. I am his half brother. I learnt English at Lahore when I was Queen's soldier, so I tell the sirdar again all you say.”

Decidedly this was better than being dependent on an unreliable scamp such as Buktiar Khan, and Campian felt quite relieved. For somehow he realised that his peril was over—probably his oft repeated trials and wearing captivity, but that might depend upon his own diplomacy, and what deft use he might make of the circumstance of the ring.

For a few moments he sat silent and pondering. The story of the ring was so bound up with that of the ruby sword and the hidden treasure that it was difficult to tell the one without revealing the other. The information which he himself possessed declared that

the only man who would be likely to know anything about the matter was the Syyed Aïn Asrâf. He, however, had not recognised the ring. Could there be two Syyeds Aïn Asrâf?

Then he remembered that Yar Hussain was of Afghan descent. Did he know anything of the hiding of the treasure, or at any rate where it was hidden? The first was possible, the second hardly likely, or he would almost certainly have removed it.

“What was the name of the Durani sirdar?” asked Yar Hussain at last. “Dost Hussain Khan,” replied Campian. “He is my father,” said the chief, “and he rests on the rim of Paradise. There is truth in thy statement, O Feringhi, who—they tell me—art now a believer. He was saved by a Feringhi, and an unbeliever, yet a brave and true man, and for him and his we never cease to pray.”

“Then are we brothers, Sirdar,” said Campian, “for the man who saved the life of thy father is my father.”

The astonishment depicted on the faces of those who heard this statement was indescribable.

“Ya Allah!” cried the chief, raising hands and eyes to heaven. “Wonderful are Thy ways! Hast thou a token, Feringhi?”

“Is not that of the ring sufficient?” returned Campian, purposely simulating offence. “If not, listen. The Sirdar Dost Hussain Khan, when pressed by his enemies, concealed his treasures, principal among which was a ruby hilted sword of wellnigh priceless value. This treasure is lost. None know of its whereabouts to this day.”

The chief’s kinsman, whose name was Sohrâb Khan, hardly able to mask his own amazement, translated this. An emphatic assent went up from all who heard.

“The treasure was enclosed in a strong chest of dark wood, three cubits in length, covered with words from the blessed Korân, and clamped with heavy brass bindings,” went on Campian. “The Durani sirdar was killed by the Brahuis. And now, why has the secret of its whereabouts been lost? Does not the Syyed Aïn Asrâf know of it?”

The astonishment on the faces of those who heard found outlet in a vehement negative.

Then Sohrâb Khan explained. The Syyed, he said, knew nothing. All that the Feringhi, now a believer, had said was true. But the Sirdar Yar Hussain Khan would fain repurchase the ring, because there was a tradition in their house that its gift to an unbeliever—good and brave man as that unbeliever was—had caused the disappearance

of the treasure. When it was recovered the secret of the whereabouts of the ruby sword and the other valuables would be revealed. Would five thousand rupees repurchase it?

To this Campian returned no immediate answer. He was turning the matter over in his mind—not that of the sale and the proffered price, for on that head his mind was clear. Of whatever value this lost property might be, these people, and they alone, had any claim to it. There was a strange fatality about the way they had been enabled to save his life, and that at the most critical moments—first the Syyed Aïn Asrâf when the sword of Umar Khan was raised above his defenceless head—now the arrival of Yar Hussain and his following in time to rescue him from the savage vengeance of the friends and kinsmen of Ihalil. His father had foregone any claim upon the treasure, even when a share of it was proffered him by the grateful potentate whose life he had saved; and now he, too, meant to make no claim. He had ample for his own needs—all he asked was restoration to liberty. Yet even for this he did not stipulate.

“Listen,” he said at length, and during the time occupied by his meditations it was characteristic that no word or sign of impatience escaped those dignified Orientals, notwithstanding the grave import of the matter under discussion. “It seems that the tradition relating to the recovery of the ring is one of truth. For if it was given to an unbeliever—albeit a brave and true man—now is it recovered by a believer. See”—holding out his hand, so that all might see the green stone and its cabalistic characters—“see—am I not one of yourselves? And now, O my brother, Yar Hussain Khan, I will restore unto thee this treasure, even I; for it hath been revealed unto me. I have described it and the chest which containeth it. Now, let us fare forth to the valley called Kachîn that thou mayest possess it once more.”

Chapter Twenty Two.

The Ruby Sword.

As they rode forth from the village fort, and its gates closed behind them, Campian could not but once more realise the strangeness of life, and the sudden and unexpected turns the wheel of fate will take. He had entered in a state of swooning unconsciousness, swung, in agonising and ignominious attitude, one bale among the many which constitute a camel's load. Now he rode forth at the right hand of the powerful Marri sirdar, whose honoured guest and almost blood-brother he had become, and that by a fortuitous chance which partook of the nature of a triviality. He was mounted on a fine steed, and his worn and dingy garments had been replaced, as though by magic, by the finest and snowiest of raiment—even to one of the chief's highly ornamented vests of state.

How good it was to breathe again the air of freedom. Even the desert waste in its wide expanse, the jagged treeless mountain peaks, took on all manner of soft and changing lights in the golden glow of the cloudless afternoon. Soon his terrible experiences would be as a dream of the past. No impatience was upon him now. Life had taught him a certain amount of philosophy, and so completely had he identified himself with the part he had for months past been forced to sustain, that something of the Eastern stoicism had transmitted itself to him. Now he could allow himself to think—to dwell upon those last days before the tragedy that had forced him into captivity and peril and exile. Yet, why that uneasy stirring—why that misgiving? Could it be that his impending restoration to nineteenth century life brought with it something of the cares and pains and heart-searchings of busy, up-to-date, restless, end of the century struggle after chimeras and will o' the wisps? For months now all trace of him would have been lost. He would have been given up as dead. How would Vivien accept the general opinion? Perhaps she had long since left Shâlalai. He remembered their last parting well—ah, so well! But it had taken place under stress of circumstances—of circumstances abnormal and strained. In cooler moments all might have been different. And acting upon this idea he had made no stipulation or request that he should be escorted to Shâlalai previous to revealing the place of concealment of the long buried treasure. He had known experience of a meeting of this sort—all the anticipation, the dwelling upon the thought thereof day and night, the figuring out of its programme, and all the rest of it—and then, when it came—mere commonplace; disappointment perhaps—not to say a strong dash of disillusionment.

To reach the Kachîn valley would take them some days—but Campian easily prevailed upon the sirdar to despatch a swift messenger to Shâlalai announcing his safety and approaching return—and, indeed, it suited Yar Hussain's own plans to do this.

We left that chief under arrest. Not long, however, was he detained. It was found practically impossible on investigation to hold him responsible for the doings of Umar Khan; moreover he represented, and with perfect truth, that the hostage's interests were likely to suffer from such detention—even if it did not entail upon him actual peril. So he was released.

Even then, however, he was in an ugly and vindictive frame of mind, and whether his intervention or protection would have been extended to the captive under ordinary circumstances, it is hard to say. As it was, the mere accidental glimpse of the ring worn by Campian had worked wonders.

The fact was that Campian seldom wore this ring. He had done so of late, thinking it in keeping with the Eastern dress he had assumed, but formerly he had hardly remembered that it was in his possession. Even of late, however, it had passed unnoticed, partly from the fact of Aïn Asrâf's sight being dim with age partly that none of those who custodied him were of the family of Dost Hussain. Fortunate, indeed, that it had been upon his finger at that critical moment.

At a village on their road they fell in with Aïn Asrâf. The old Syyed was genuinely rejoiced at beholding his neophyte once more. The latter, in spite of his own protests, anger, menaces even, had been spirited off by the lawless and irreligious followers of Umar Khan, nor had he been able to learn his whereabouts.

“Ah, my son,” he said at the close of their cordial greeting, “Allah watches over His own—and His Prophet holds hell in store for they who oppress them. Yet, it is well. I may no more be with thee to instruct thee in the fair flowers of the faith. Yet forget not that Allah has delivered thee in thine extremity, and that not once.”

Then he signed that the hour of prayer was at hand, and all dismounted, and the same orisons—uttered alike by chief and lowest herdsman—by the upright and the criminal—by the true ally and treacherous outlaw—went up from the desert sand from that group with their faces to the setting sun.

The old Syyed attached himself to their band, being readily provided, by the people of the village, with a camel, for they had no horses, and was treated with great deference by all—both as the uncle of the chief, and in his capacity of saint. Through the medium of Sohrâb Khan, the English speaking Baluchi, Campian was able to while away the monotony of the road in converse. He learnt much of what had befallen since his captivity—of the arrest of the Sirdar, the anxiety as to his own fate, and the doings of Umar Khan, with whom his present friends seemed not altogether out of sympathy—in

fact, he decided that if it depended upon their aid, the chances of capturing that redoubted freebooter were infinitesimal. Thus they fared onward, day after day, through tangi and over kotal, threading deep mountain valleys, and traversing sun-baked plains; now resting for the night at mud-walled villages, now camping out in the open beneath the desert stars.

The Kachîn valley at last! How well he remembered its long, deep configuration. Now after his enforced wanderings over those grim deserts, even its sparse foliage was like a cool and refreshing oasis. And what experiences, strange and startling, had he not known within its narrow limits. There, above the juniper growth rose the mass of rock wherein was the markhôr cave. It seemed strange to think that the face of that ordinarily rugged mountain side should contain what it did.

Then a misgiving seized him. What if it should contain nothing? What if he had been allowing his over-wrought imagination to run away with him? The chest was there—no doubt about that, but what if it contained nothing more than a lot of old parchments, or a storage of ordinarily trumpery trinkets? Things might, in that event, take an awkward turn. But no, he would not believe it. The strength of the chain, the weight of the chest, the weird, unheard of place of its concealment, the care and labour involved in designing such a hiding place, all pointed to this being the object of his search. And then, too, the topographical features of the surroundings were all exactly as set forth in his father's instructions. Every piece of the puzzle seemed to fit in to a nicety.

And this chief was the son of the refugee Afghan whose life his father had saved, and in the inscrutable workings of time it had come about that the debt should be repaid twofold, that his own life should be saved, first by the brother, then by the son of Dost Hussain. On the eventual slaughter of the latter by the Brahuis, Yar Hussain then an infant, had found refuge with the Marri tribe, and by dint of descent on his mother's side, had, on reaching years of manhood, claimed and seized the position he now held. All this Campian learned as they travelled along; and a very stirring—if complicated—tale of Eastern intrigue, and fierce, ruthless tribal feud it was.

A feeling of awe was upon the party as they entered the gloomy crack which constituted the portal of the now historic markhôr cave. Upon the Baluchis the superstitious associations which clustered round the place had their effect. The Syyed Aîn Asrâf was muttering copious exorcisms and adjurations from the sacred book, and the wild desert warriors were overawed at the thought that here was about to be unfolded that which had been placed there by the hands of those long since dead. Upon the European, however, the associations were multifold. That first exploration of the cave, the chance arrival of Vivien Wymer, and their long, quiet talk as they investigated it together all came back to him. Then the tragedy, his escape, and the hours he had spent hanging in

the very mouth of that hideous gulf—here again the hidden hoard of the dead chief had been instrumental in preserving the life of his rescuer's son, for what would the latter have done but for the resting place afforded by the chain and that which it supported, what time Umar Khan, with his bloodthirsty brigands had run him literally to earth?

Taking a torch from one of the bystanders, and holding it out at arm's length over the gulf, he said:

"Look down there, my brother, yonder is the Ruby Sword."

"I see nothing," replied Yar Hussain, who, lying flat on the brink, was peering over. "Stay—yes. Something is hanging. It is of iron. It is a chain. You—three of you—hold your lights out over yon black opening of hell." Then as they obeyed he went on—"Yes. There it is. There is a chest—bound with brass. Of a truth the secret is at length revealed."

Even the impassive reticence of the Oriental seemed to relax. There was a note of strong excitement in the deep tones of the chief, and his eyes dilated as he beheld at last that which contained his long buried heirloom. He gave orders that the chest should be at once drawn up.

This was not difficult. By Campian's advice they had come well provided with strong camel-hide ropes. These were noosed, and the loops being swung round the chest on either side of the chain—a very simple process in the strong light of many torches—were drawn tight. Then, at the word from Campian, who superintended the operation, and whose interest and excitement were hardly less than that of the chief, they hauled away. The chest proved of less weight than they expected, and lo!—in a trice—it lay safe upon the floor of the cave.

Many and pious were the ejaculations of those who beheld. The massive chain, somewhat indented in the wood through the weight it had so long sustained, was at length filed through, and the chest borne to the entrance of the cave to be opened in full daylight.

Seen there it was indeed black and venerable with age, and the lettering on the cover so blurred that the old eyes of Aïn Asrâf were hardly equal to the task of deciphering it. But the impatience of those around was deepening every moment, and Yar Hussain with his own hands began to open the chest.

It was secured by cunning locks, the device of which was known to him. The hinges, stiff and rusty with age and damp, at first would not turn, then yielded to a couple of hearty

tugs. The while every head was craned forward, every spectator was breathless with expectation. As an instance of how one can persuade oneself into a belief in any theory, even now no misgiving came to Campian lest the chest should contain nothing of any value.

An aromatic and pungent odour filled the air on the opening of the box. At first a layer of sheepskin vellum, then parchments. At these Yar Hussain merely glanced hurriedly and continued his investigations. One bag—then another—five bags of the same soft sheepskin and carefully tied, each about the size of an orange. On opening these—lo! three of them contained precious stones, cut, and some of splendid size and water. The other two were filled with uncut stones. This was beginning to look promising.

The next layer being uncovered yielded to view some magnificent personal ornaments, bracelets and the like, thickly jewelled. These were lifted out, and then the third skin covering being removed, that contained by the last and lower compartment of the chest lay revealed. Something long, wrapped in several rolls of the soft wash leather. Carefully, almost reverently, Yar Hussain unfolded these and—There it lay, in the bottom of the chest, hilt and scabbard literally glowing with splendid rose red jewels, relieved by the white flash of diamonds, dazzling the eyes of the beholders with the suddenness of its glare—there it lay, in its long hidden splendour, the cherished heirloom of the refugee Durani chief—the priceless Ruby Sword.

For some moments the surrounding Baluchis stood staring in stupefied silence, then they broke forth in ejaculations as to the wonderful ways of Allah, and so forth. Campian, beholding the wealth thus displayed, could not but feel some sort of qualm as he remembered how he might have concealed his knowledge until able to turn it to his own material account. It was only momentary, however, and he was the first to break in with a practical remark.

“Hearken, Sohrâb Khan,” he said. “I think I have now done all that I can do. Tell the sirdar that he and his have returned to me the service that my father rendered to his, have returned it twofold, and I, for my part, am rejoiced to have been the means by which he has come into the possession of his own. But there are those in Shâlalai I would fain see again, and if it is all the same to him, I think”—with a glance at the sun—“we might fetch Mehriâb station in time to catch the afternoon train.”

This very Western and end of the nineteenth century phrase breaking in upon such a scene of Eastern and mediaeval romanticism struck its utterer as almost ludicrous in its incongruity.

“In truth, that is comprehensible,” replied Yar Hussain, when this suggestion was put to him—“and it shall be done. Yes, my brother, who art now one of us, thy wishes shall be fulfilled. But now, receive this,”—placing in his hand one of the bags of cut stones—“and choose from among these,”—pointing to the jewelled bracelets—“that some recompense may be made thee for thy sufferings at the hands of our people, and that the remembrance of thy brethren here may be pleasant and sweet when thou art among thine own people in the years to come.”

Campion, repressing the momentary instinct which moved him to decline so splendid a gift, made choice of one of the bracelets—not one of the best, however. It was a splendid ornament for all that, and a tightening of the heart went through him as he wondered to himself if it would ever be worn. Then he asked if he could keep the Durani ring, which he valued more than ever.

“Surely,” was the sirdar’s reply. “In truth it is restored to a believer, and hath amply fulfilled its mission.”

When the train for Shâlalai stopped at Mehriâb station that day, the few European passengers it contained were lazily astonished by the presence on the platform of an evidently important Baluchi sirdar, accompanied by a large retinue. Their astonishment grew to activity, however, when one of the group, before entering a first-class carriage, took leave of them in excellent English, which was duly translated to the chief and his following by one of their number, the departure of the train being signalled by a perfect chorus of farewell “salaams” from those left behind. They were destined to be still more mightily astonished upon the arrival of the train at the last station or two before Shâlalai by the appearance of a European, of military or official aspect, who greeted the supposed Oriental with cordial handgrip, singing out in a voice that carried the whole length of the train:

“Devilish glad to see you back, old chap. And I’ve brought you your togs, so you’ll have time to get into them as we go along. By George, though, you look no end of a real sirdar in that get-up, all the same.”

And taking a Gladstone bag from the attendant bearer, he jumped in too.

Chapter Twenty Three.

Light.

“After months—which seemed years—of the most abominable hardship, wearying anxiety, and constant danger, the security and restfulness of this sort of thing is simply beyond all words to define.”

Thus Campian, clad in irreproachable evening dress, with a wave of the hand which takes in the lighted table and trophy hung walls. The only other occupant of Upward’s dining room has just entered, likewise in full panoply—with opera-cloak, and fan and gloves.

“Yes. That is indeed true. Do you know, I wish we had not got to go out to-night.”

“Then why do we; for as it happens I entirely share that wish. Suppose we stay at home instead. Or are you going to say ‘Duty’?”

Vivien does not at once reply. Something in the tone, in the scarcely veiled meaning wherewith he emphasises the word, strikes home to her. The Upward party and her uncle have gone on, bound for a regimental theatrical performance at the Assembly Rooms, and they two are left to follow. Not many days have gone by since Campian’s return to Shâlalai; not many more are to go by before he leaves it—almost certainly for ever.

“Shall we stay at home then, dear?” answers Vivien, a little wave of unsuppressed tenderness in her voice. “We may throw duty overboard for once, for the sake of a poor returned wanderer. But—I have made you this, and in any case you must wear it.” “This” being an exquisite little “button-hole” which she is now carefully pinning on for him. The great tiger jaws on the walls seem to snarl inaudibly in the lamplight—as though to remind both of the multifold perils of the beautiful, treacherous East.

Now, the act of pinning on a button-hole under some circumstances is bound to lead to a good deal, therefore in this case, that an arm should close around the operatrix seems hardly surprising.

“Do you still venerate that vacant old fetish? It parted us once, Vivien.”

Again she is silent, and her eyes fill. The great black and orange stripes of the tiger skins seem to dance in angry rays before her vision. Her voice will not come to her. But he continues:

“Has it never occurred to you that you—that we—made a very considerable mistake that time? We each found our counterpart in the other. Surely such an experience is unique. Then what happened? You set up a fetish—a miserable fraud—a mere whimsical conception of an idol—and called it Duty—while I—I was fool enough to let you do it.”

“I don’t know why things were ordered that way,” he continues, for still Vivien makes no reply—“or for what purpose, of earth or heaven, five years of happiness should have been knocked off our lives. But for whatever it is, I don’t believe for a moment it was arranged we should meet so strangely and unexpectedly in this out of the way part of the world—all for nothing. We have been brought together again, and we have tried to keep up the rôle of strangers—of mere acquaintances—and the whole thing is a most wretched and flimsy fiasco. Is it not?”

“Yes.”

She is looking at him now, full and earnestly. Her fingers are toying with the “button-hole” she has pinned on his coat. Unconsciously she is leaning on him as he holds her within his embrace.

“Our love showed forth in every moment, in every word, in every action of our lives,” he continues. “The mask we tried to wear was quite unavailable to stifle the cry of two aching hearts. Listen, darling. There is no room for affectation between us now. Our love is as ever it was—rather is it stronger. Am I right?”

“Yes. You are the one love of my life, and always have been. And you know it—dearest.”

So sweet, so soft comes this reply, that the very tones are as an all pervading caress.

“Those five years are beyond our reach,” he continues. “They are gone never to return, but we can make up for them during the remainder of our lives. And—we will. Will we not?”

“Yes—we will.”

The reply, though low, is full-voiced and unhesitating. Luminous eyes, sweet with their love light, are raised to his, and the man’s head is drawn down to meet again that kiss which seemed to join soul to soul in the dread hour of peril and of bloodshed and self-abnegation. And, with the moment, the long years of desolation and heart-emptiness are as though they had never been—for after the drear gloom of their weary length—the sharp and fiery trial of their culmination, Love has triumphed, and now there is light.

And here with the doings of our two principal characters we have no further concern, and if this holds good of them, still more does it hold good of those among whom their lot has been temporarily cast. But if life, in its fatefulness, has refrained from dashing the cup of happiness—tardily yet finally grasped—from the hands of these two, its normal grimness of irony is not likely to suffer in the long run. For Umar Khan is still at large. Force and diplomacy alike have failed to bring that arch-free-booter and murderer within measurable distance of the gallows and faggot pyre, which he has so richly earned a score of times over. For the twenty-first time the wily evildoer has escaped retribution, and in all probability will continue to do so. Which—if not exactly satisfying to our reader's sense of poetic justice—is Life.

The End

Freeeditorial 