

# A DESERT BRIDE



HUME NISBET

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# **A DESERT BRIDE**

*A Story of Adventure in India and Persia.*

# BY HUME NISBET

AUTHOR OF "BAIL UP!" "THE DIVERS," "THE BUSHRANGER'S SWEETHEART,"  
"THE QUEEN'S DESIRE," "THE SAVAGE QUEEN," &C., &C.

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## Dedication.

WITH GRATEFUL AND TENDER REMEMBRANCE  
I BEG TO DEDICATE THIS STORY  
TO MY REVEREND FRIEND AND EARLY TEACHER IN HUMANITY,  
THE REV. DR JAMES CULROSS, LL.D.,  
OF BRISTOL COLLEGE.

---

*Dear Friend, who taught me first to say  
"Our Father," take this war-full story.  
It tells of one who in his day  
Strove hard for freedom, faith and glory.*

*It may perchance take back your thoughts  
To days when you inspired the writer  
With tales where men for virtue fought,  
Until he too became a fighter.*

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## PREFACE.

This is the story of two brave yet not extraordinary young men, who took a strange notion into their heads, as most fellows do at times, and went out to the world of India in search of adventures—and riches, of course, for we all would like that termination to our efforts, as far as earthly endeavours are concerned at least.

One of the youths had heard, and the other had read, about that seventh wonder of the world, the gem-covered "Peacock Throne," which the Great Mogul of Delhi, Shah Jehan, had made for him at a cost of nearly six millions of pounds sterling, which took the Court jewellers seven years to make, and which the Persian conqueror, Nadir Shah, carried away, after one day of fearful and wholesale slaughter of the subjects who had helped to pay for this very expensive ornament.

The framework of this throne was made of pure gold encrusted with precious stones, and overshadowed by a golden canopy decorated with pearls. Two peacocks formed the back of the throne, with their tails expanded, the radiant colouring being produced entirely by rubies, sapphires, emeralds, diamonds and pearls of the purest water. So lavishly used were these rare stones, that an ignoramus might have taken them for bits of coloured glass and paste.

Now, the notion that these young men took into their extravagant brains was to go and seek for that Peacock Throne, which had been carried away and completely lost sight of for so many years. They reasoned that such an expensive piece of furniture must be somewhere hidden, and that Persia, the home of Nadir Shah, was most likely to be the locality; also, with that unbounded confidence and faith which only youth is capable of feeling to the miracle-working instinct, they considered that they were the heroes to find it.

Where they went, what they passed through, and how they eventually did discover this wonderful piece of art-work, you will also find out if you go along with them in their journeyings; how they were fortunate enough to meet with a native prince who had all the qualities of the heroes they had read about in ancient stories of chivalry, and who entranced them with his old-world nobility and heroism, as I fondly trust every true man and woman may be also with this daring real knight of the nineteenth century, and become the better for reading about his gallant actions and troubles.

And with this hope, I leave my story to unfold its own length, and beg to remain each reader's

Humble and sincere Servant,

THE AUTHOR.

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# A DESERT BRIDE.

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# CHAPTER I.

## INTRODUCING JACK BANGLES AND RONALD MACIVOR.

The extraordinary adventures of my two heroes might cause some people to doubt their authenticity, were it not already well known that the chronicler is a man of the strictest veracity.

One of my heroes was, alas! a very common youth, that is, he had no sort of correct bringing up at all, but picked most of his education from about the streets, which not being edifying, gained for him the title of a bad boy unmistakably, and what was worse, he never had any aspirations to become better, in spite of all that the chaplain and some of the benevolent ladies of the mission tried to do for him.

Benares was the city where, like Topsy, he "grewed." Benares, that beautiful and holy city on the river Ganges, where the pilgrims came to wash away their many sins. Perhaps the pilgrims left a number of their sins, along with their loose hairs, on the banks of this sacred river, and which may partly account for this foolish young fellow picking up so much that was objectionable to respectable and orderly people.

His name was Jack; now, I fancy that Jack is the most appropriate name for a reckless and untrained young man. At least, all the bad boys are generally known as Jack, while the staid and good ones are called John.

Jack Bangles was the name he went by, although he had been christened John Adolphus D'Arcy, and his surname was Norman and ancient like the family his scapegrace father belonged to; however, the soldiers of Benares had dropped the Adolphus D'Arcy, and given him Bangles as a friendly nickname, as they are generally so fond of doing with their favourites, so as Bangles we must know him through this story.

His father, at one time a captain in the army, had deserted his wife and company very early in Jack's career, leaving mother and son destitute in this holy city; and as for that mother, there is not much to say about her, for she was a very ordinary if hard-working and honest little woman. She had been a pretty but fifth-rate actress before her marriage, but her beauty had soon faded in India, while she was forced to utilise her poor abilities at concerts and music-halls, in order to keep herself and little Jack from starvation; painting her face up and decorating herself with the cheap ornaments of the East, and with all the other stage devices, only making at the best of times starvation wages, so that they had both to go to bed very often hungry, until Jack grew big enough to cater for himself, after which things didn't go so badly with them.

Ronald MacIvor was the name of my other hero, the son of an English officer who had been about a twelvemonth located in the land, and who, a fine frank fellow himself, trusted his son out of sight without any conditions, satisfied that he had the blood of the MacIvors in his veins, and that this lofty strain was quite sufficient to help his boy in the only path which a perfect knight and gentleman can possibly walk.

The two boys had met by accident one day. Ronald MacIvor, passing aimlessly along the streets on this hot day, had seen Jack Bangles trying to defend himself against a crowd of cowardly Eurasians; and Ronald, like his father, being a creature of impulse and chivalry, without much consideration for caste, rushed to the rescue, helped to scatter the assailants, and only then turned to examine the side which he had taken, to find himself being thanked by a fearfully tanned and tattered demalio boy of his own age, yet who appeared more like a stage prince in disguise than a *bona fide* pariah beggar of Benares.

A boy of about thirteen, slender and straight as a dart, with limbs beautifully proportioned, and complexion, although almost as dark as a native's with the fierce sunshine beating so constantly upon it, yet showing unmistakably European; for there can be no mistaking the sickly olive of the native for the sun-tan on the skin of a brunette Englishman. Jack Bangles looked English to the back-bone in spite of his rags, and, what was more, he looked like what the pure-bred aristocrat of long descent is supposed to appear.

Classical and strongly-marked features, flashing brown eyes, with the whites as they should be, snow-white teeth behind those ripe-red lips—the gnawing of old bones and dry crusts had polished those ivories as no dentifrice could have done—small shell-like ears, small yet strong and well-shaped hands, and finely arched and pointed feet. With his wavy and tangled shock of dark hair and general pose of grace, resolution, fearlessness and innate strength, Ronald MacIvor did not take long to sum up this ragged prince, or decide about offering him his friendship.

"You are a mem-sahib boy, are you not—a mother's darling, ain't you?" observed this youthful cynic a little scornfully, as he looked over the other's neat clothes, while he contrasted his own rags, with the feeling that gratitude might exist, but friendship never, with such inequality.

"I have no mother," replied Ronald, a little sadly.

"But you own a father, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Then he'd never allow you to take up with the likes of me."

"Yes, he would; you come and see him."

"Hum! I'll tell you what I am game to do. You've got a father, and I have a mother; come and see my old woman first, and if you can stand her into the bargain, I'll go with you and see what sort your dad is, then perhaps we can be friends after that, for you can fight—almost as well as I can myself."

Jack took his finely-dressed new-made friend into the hovel where his mother spent her days, and introduced her to the boy, who did not seem in the least degree affected either by her appearance or her surroundings.

Mrs Bangles was, at this hour of the morning, a withered, shrivelled, yellow-visaged little scarecrow, with hollow eyes, who passed most of the time smoking cheroots until the moment when the mysteries of the toilet began. Then she would retire from sight to an inner apartment, and after a couple or so of hours' seclusion, she would emerge round-faced, clear-complexioned and almost beautiful, with her golden tresses and flashing eyes. That, however, was only, of course, when she had an engagement to sing. When Ronald first saw her, she was at her smoking and withered stage, so that he saw nothing to alter his determination to be the sworn friend of her handsome son, for the hovel, although poorly furnished, was clean and tidy. Jack, who was watching him jealously, grew softened at the utter unconscious of this rich boy, and said,—

"You're a good sort, Ronald, and if your father lets us, I'll be your friend."

The boys then went out together to interview the captain, who, when he had examined Jack, saw nothing to prevent the compact; he might be a bad boy certainly, but he was not a cringing one, and as for his clothes, that evil could easily be remedied.

So Jack Bangles and Ronald MacIvor became chums, or rather Ronald the rich boy became the dutiful henchman and follower of the more dominant Jack, whom privations and scorn had made older than his years.

No greater contrast could be imagined than these two friends; for while Jack was dark and finely built, Ronald was thick-set, large-boned and fair as a Norseman, with fearless blue eyes, golden hair and ruddy skin. He had spent most of his young days in the Highlands before coming to India, and therefore had to depend altogether upon the native knowledge of the other, so that, before the first day of the league was over, Jack Bangles had taken the post of leader quite naturally and easily; and as he had now a suit of Ronald's clothes on, he looked the character to perfection, while Ronald did not at all object to be patronised, or play the subordinate part. He had a vast amount of generous affection in his disposition, with an utter unconsciousness of dignity, and although he would have quarrelled instantly, and fought as well, if he had seen anything low or mean about his companion, yet, not seeing this, he was content to follow where the other led.

As for Jack, well, he was a boy who was getting his chance for the first time in his life; who had been regarded by most of the people who knew him as a hopeless case, who might by-and-by make a fairly good soldier when he was old enough to enlist, but who at present could not be too much kicked and hunted about.

But there was nothing mean or cruel about him for all that; he hated liars, and would have abhorred himself if, to save his hide, he could have stooped to tell a lie. Animals were safe also at his hands, for, indeed, hitherto they had been his only friends; and, with all his ignorance of books, he had a singularly imaginative mind, well stored with native legends, and a sturdy idea that the time would yet come when, by a lucky stroke, he would conquer all their misfortunes, and raise his poor mother, whom he loved in a fierce sort of way, from her present position of poverty and neglect.

These were some of the vague ideas which filled the mind of this dark-eyed boy in his serious moments, but which were not quite so common, perhaps, as the moods that made him the terror of Benares.

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## CHAPTER II.

### THE ANCIENT FAKIR.

"Why don't you 'list, Jack? I'm going to be a soldier shortly," asked Ronald one day, as the two boys were sitting on the river banks.

"So I will by-and-by, Ronald; but I want to keep my liberty for a purpose."

"What purpose, Jack?"

"Did you ever hear about the Peacock Throne, which used to be in Delhi once upon a time?"

"Of course I've read about it; but what of that?"

"I'm going to hunt until I get that throne."

"My!"

Ronald opened his eyes with wonder at his friend's daring idea.

"Yes. Now, tell me what you have read about that throne, and then I'll let you know what I have heard."

"Well," observed Ronald, "we know from our school-books that the great Shah Jehan got this throne of gems and gold made for him, regardless of expense, and that it was carried off by Nadir Shah, the Persian, with a lot of other loot from Delhi."

"Exactly; but do your school-books tell you where Nadir Shah took all those jewels to?"

"No; but I suppose he took it back to Persia with him."

"Yes, that is where he took them first. Now you come with me, and I'll introduce you to an old fakir, who can show us both where they are now, and where we may find them if you are game to go with me after them. We shall come home rich men, and see something like life between this and then."

The river side at Benares is very beautiful and animated, and has been so for many centuries, with its numerous minarets, pyramids and temples, its lining of ghauts, and multitude of native boats and bathers.

The bright sunshine laved this gaily-coloured and busy scene, which was perpetually like a fair, for never was that muddy-coloured water allowed to settle down and get clear. The worshippers were there by the thousand, dipping over their heads, and coming up the bank or steps purified, but not any cleaner, afterwards to get their foreheads painted by the priests, and then continuing their pilgrimage to the sacred, but very much befouled, wells of Knowledge and Purification, which would enable them to pass through life all wise and all stainless, happy Hindoos that they were.

To the two boy companions these sights were too common for them to heed them much. Commonplace also had become the temples, so closely ranked together with the mansions of the rich princes and rajas, the constant processions and droves of sacred cows walking through the narrow streets.

Jack Bangles led his companion down one of the narrowest of those streets, and also, perhaps, one of the most sanctified, as far as the accumulated droppings from the holy cattle was concerned, until they came to a place of lodging devoted to the entertainment of travelling fakirs, so sordid and evil-odoured that Ronald had to pause and take hold of his nose before he could summon up courage to enter.

"Can't we have the fakir outside, Jack?" he whispered imploringly to his friend, as he paused at the gateway, and looked ruefully within.

"No, Ronald," replied Jack; "this fakir hasn't seen the daylight for forty years, and he has become so holy that it is only a few special favourites who are admitted to his den, which hasn't been cleaned out either during that time; forty years ago, they tell me, he took his last wash in the Ganges, while he vowed that it was to serve him his lifetime, and he hasn't stirred from his seat since then."

"Then he must be a moss-covered statue now, I should say."

"Oh, he's a marvel of wisdom and dirt, but I have become a favourite of his, and he has promised me good fortune; come on, old fellow, he doesn't smell half so strong as you would think, for the time he has been kept in the cellar."

Through the courtyard they went, where a crowd of these self-torturers were disporting themselves in the interesting but blood-curdling manner peculiar to fakirs in general.

For their special convenience this yard had been arranged something after the style of a school gymnasium, with swings, hooks, chains, and iron prongs fixed in the walls, in as varied a manner as the fancy of the genial host could invent.

Some of the performers were going round about in a razzle-dazzle fashion attached to the chains and hooks, which were firmly imbedded in their flesh, on the parts of their bodies which they considered wanted mortifying mostly. All were free to choose upon their pet instrument of torture, with the portion of their anatomy which they desired to operate upon, after they had paid their fees of admission; and this was all that the kindly landlord had to do—take the door-money, and watch the voluntary performers.

The place had not been cleaned out since its inauguration, as it would have been sacrilege to clean it out, even had it been possible to do so, which no one short of Hercules could have done.

It takes a good deal of this kind of sport to revolt boys, therefore both Ronald and Jack stood for a time, like stoics, looking upon the varied and ghastly sights around them; or rather they got excited over the grimaces and contortions of the whirling or crucified devotees, and encouraged them on with such words as—

"Go it, black hair, you've beat bald head by an inch; stick in that hook a bit deeper, blind eye, or you'll be dropping off; never say die, skeleton, as long's you've got a piece of skin to hook on to."

Which words seemed to encourage the holy men so much that they redoubled their efforts, shrieking out louder while they swung faster on that roundabout way to paradise.

After crossing the yard, they passed through some of the inner chambers well crammed with worshippers, who were vying with each other as to who could the soonest disfigure that masterpiece of the Creator, and make themselves vile. Still Jack went on, careless and unchallenged, for he had been here before, and beyond the owner of this inquisition, none of the victims noticed the intruders, as they were all too intent upon their own practices.

Down some slimy and foul steps Jack led his friend into an utter darkness of awful smells, until poor Ronald almost gave up, he felt so sick and choking.

At last, after following a dank passage, they came to a small cell, or rather what appeared to be a niche in the wall, which was lighted up by a tiny oil lamp, and within which sat a figure that at first sight seemed to be a dust and mud-covered image of some kind—the image of some uncouth and uncanny-looking god.

A naked figure it was, with the dirt and accumulations of years clothing it as with a horrid vestment, while it sat motionless and in the attitude of meditation, with its lack-lustre eyes reflecting blackly the shine of the little lamp in front of it.

The fakir's hands were resting upon his naked knees, into which the long, uncut nails had grown, so that it was now an impossibility for him even to move them, while the sinews and muscles of his legs had so stiffened that he could never again rise or stand upright. Long locks of dingy white hung over his face and shoulders, showing up like a sheep's fleece before washing time; while what those locks might contain, no man nor boy dare conjecture.

He was reckoned to be one of the holiest and wisest of his peculiar craft, and had been fed for the forty odd years of his rest by devotees who visited his shrine for the purpose of consulting him as to their future, and giving him donations; in fact, he was the most profitable lodger of the establishment, for beyond what he required to eat, the owner of the place got all the surplus alms, which were considerable.

On this day he appeared to be dozing, but woke somewhat when Jack, who had come prepared, went up and stuck a chapati between his lips, while Ronald hung back respectfully as far as he dared do.

After the first chapati had disappeared, another followed, and then the dim eyes grew brighter as he fixed them upon his

feeder.

"You know what I come for, father, to-day?" said Jack, as a gleam of recognition flashed from the hollow eyes.

"Yes, my son; you wish to go at once after the treasure, and so you shall soon now,—after Death has come to help you on your way."

It was a strange, rumbling voice that uttered those words, indistinct and slow, as if speaking were an effort, yet Jack understood them, and answered,—

"Have I to die, father?"

"No, not yet, not until you have enjoyed what you want; yet death has to come and give you liberty."

"My mother?"

"No, she will live yet awhile. Who is that beside you?"

"My friend, Ronald MacIvor, sahib."

"Ah, death stands near to him, yet not to claim him, but someone dear to him; he will go forth with you on the quest."

"That is what we want; and where have we to go?"

"To the land of the fire-worshippers; north, north and west, through jungles and mountain passes, as the armies came you will go, and when you approach the end, the secret way will be shown to you by one who now waits for your coming."

"But how shall I know this one when I meet him?" asked Jack.

"The gods will direct your footsteps to a mountain cave, where waits one like as I am, who has waited many years with his right arm and forefinger pointing the rest of the way."

"And what more?"

"In his left hand he holds a paper with the secret engraved, and under his foot lies the key which will open the door behind which the treasure lies."

"But how have I to know when I am near to this place, father?" again urged Jack, who had heard something like this before, but now wanted more definite instructions.

"If you are destined to win the treasure, go to the holy magician Mahadev, who sits by the Well of Knowledge, and he will show you the way; if you are not to win it, then you will not see anything. I can speak no more; farewell, my sons."

The light died out of the old man's sunken orbs as he finished speaking, yet he still mumbled broken words behind his shock of matted beard and hair.

"Through the kingdom of death they will pass,—past the lair of the man-eater,—but if they are destined to reach the cave, no force in Nature can harm them. Yet, Ah Savi! how they must endure before the reward is theirs; if they are not, then the end will be swift, as it has been with so many who have tried to follow that deadly track. I have said."

Jack the fearless heard and understood those muttered words, but they did not shake his resolve, neither did he translate them to his friend, for he had no desire to dishearten him; he only said,—

"Come on, Ronald, the old fellow has once again gone back to meditation-land, and will give us no further information; but I know enough for the present, the rest we can learn afterwards when we make the start."

"I hope my father won't object, Jack, to us going together, for of course we must consult him first."

"Of course, we shall see him about it at once; but if he does, Ronald?"

"Why, then, it will be all over as far as I am concerned, for I must obey orders, or else I could never hope to become a good soldier."

"Oh, he'll give his consent when I tell him I shall be with you to look after you. Why, I'm as good as a native guide and shikari; in fact, it's going to be a pleasure trip, so that Captain MacIvor could not possibly say no. Come on."

The boys hurriedly scrambled up the stairs, and left this temple of filth and fanaticism as rapidly as they could.

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## CHAPTER III.

### THE BEGINNING OF THE JOURNEY.

Ronald MacIvor did not get the chance of asking his father's permission to go on that adventurous journey, because death, as the old fakir had predicted, passed in before him, and claimed the gallant captain for his own with that suddenness which this grim autocrat so often displays in India.

While the boys were within the fakir's den, Captain MacIvor had been seized in the street with cholera, and, before they reached his bungalow, poor Ronald was an orphan, with few to take interest enough in him to question his intentions or actions, for his father, as so many of us have, had many acquaintances, but few friends.

The captain had no means apart from his pay, and he had lived up to that; therefore, when his effects came to be summed up, after the funeral expenses, Ronald found himself penniless, and in the possession of two friends only, and these were Jack Bangles and his mother, the very occasionally employed concert singer.

Of course the brother-officers of the late lamented MacIvor sent round the hat during mess, and raised about twenty-five pounds, like the good-hearted but desperately hard-up fellows they always are, while the colonel proposed either to send the lad home to his friends in Scotland, or else get him into the regiment as a drummer-boy.

But Ronald had no friends in Scotland; at least his Scotch friends had not impressed him with any desire to test the strength of their relationship from the recollections he had of them, and, as he told the colonel, he had other views at present, which that gentleman was very glad to hear, for he held the opinion that the pauper sons of gentlemen don't make good drummer-boys; therefore Ronald took the twenty-five sovereigns subscribed, and the other five which came to him from the sale of his father's effects, and, handing his stock of thirty pounds to Mrs Bangles, she adopted him straight away, and, as long as the money lasted, treated him to the best that the city of Benares could yield, as is the way with professional people when they have a little money in hand.

For the six weeks following the burial of his adored and revered father, mundane matters were regarded by poor Ronald MacIvor with perfect indifference. He was of too manly a temperament to go mooning and moping about, making a parade of the grief, that was gnawing at his heart, to the outside world. Like all manly boys, he was mightily ashamed to be caught shedding tears; yet, although he bore up bravely during the daytime, he often longed for the friendly cover of night, when, sure of his companion Jack being asleep, he could give way to the sweet, if selfish, luxury of grief. There, in the darkness, he could weep out his overcharged heart, and at length fall asleep, feeling that he was being rocked within four clasped arms, the embraces of his dead father and mother.

Mrs Bangles was one of those people who have learnt to be philosophic by experience and the hard rubbing of a phlegmatic world. When, therefore, Ronald came to her in his hour of trouble, and brought with him his tiny fortune, her most natural instinct was to expend that sum of money, and make it go as far as possible in the shape of comforts—bodily comforts, for, as the past had proved to her, sorrow seems doubly hard to stand out against when the body is starving as well as the soul. As she sagely remarked, in the language of Shakespeare,—

"'Things without all remedy should be without regard. What's done is done.' I shall do my best to be a mother to you, Ronald, and try my hardest to comfort your mind; but while this money lasts you shall not go to bed supperless, and this is the best way I can sympathise with you, for I have had my losses also."

There was no rouge on the little woman's cheeks at this time; therefore Ronald, as he looked at her, felt that what she said was true.

"Yes, Jack has told me a little of your troubles, Mrs Bangles."

Mrs Bangles took two or three vicious puffs at her cheroot, and then she answered,—

"Troubles! I should think that I have had them—kicked and cuffed about all my girlhood by a drunken father and a harassed mother, who had to dance for us all to keep us in bread and cheese. Then came my own time, when I had to work for the whole gang, until Jack's father met me, and married me offhand on the beggarly pay of a subaltern, bringing me out to India, and filling my arms with children without thinking how they were to be kept."

"You had more than Jack, then, Mrs Bangles?"

"I had eight, besides Jack, at one time," replied the poor mother softly, "six fine boys and three pretty girls; and then my noble husband got into disgrace somehow, and bolted, leaving me with his children to do what I could for them in India. That's how I came back to the miserable profession which I thought I had left for ever. Ah! that was the time, Ronald, my lad, for a woman either to break down completely, or else get her heart changed to stone. I didn't break down, so I became what I am, able to face life in all its phases, able to crush down memories, and bear with courage the evil hour, or enjoy the pleasant moment while it lasts. One after one my children left me to go to God, who could take more care of them. The first wee bairn I lost nearly killed me also, though; but, after that, I learnt to look at them before they were carried out of my sight, and say: 'Thank God for His goodness in taking another spirit away from this wicked and miserable world.' And then once more, like King David, I could rise up and feast, with the words: 'I shall go to them, but they cannot return to me.'"

Ronald felt she was wise, and that her advice was the best for his troubles. Therefore he let her lay out in her own reckless way his money. She was a first-rate cook, and, as we have said, spent her time with the boys, cooking, feasting, and driving about. Then, when the funds became low, they sat down to consider matters, and plan out their future.

Mrs Bangles' life had been one of adventure and excitement, so she entered with eagerness into the Peacock Throne jewel hunt. Yet, being an actress, nothing but a stagey way of going to work would please her, and this suited the boys exactly.

She would go along with them, for she wasn't going to be parted from Jack. At first they would work their way up country in a legitimate fashion by stages, resting at such places as Allahabad, Cawnpore, Agra, Delhi, and the other towns where the British were quartered, where they would give performances to provide themselves with travelling expenses; and after that they would dress themselves up like natives, for both mother and son could speak the language perfectly; and plunge into the wilds, and trust to luck for the rest. They would be three boys while they were natives.

The idea was romantic enough to drive all thoughts of moping out of Ronald's mind. Therefore, while they were feasting, Mrs Bangles set to work and prepared their wardrobes, besides planning out a little entertainment in which they could all take a part. It was after the variety order, and did not require much rehearsing, for the English residents in India were at this date easily pleased in the way of public performances.

Jack could play the banjo, and Ronald soon mastered the bones, while Mrs Bangles managed the castanets and dances; and with a few outrageous print dresses, paints, wigs, topical songs and comic patter, they were ready for the tour as far as the towns were concerned.

For the jungle portion of the way, powder and shot were about the whole thing required, for Ronald had a good stock of guns and other weapons which his father had left him, and Mrs Bangles had her brass pots and pans, without which no one travels in India.

The three of them had visited the holy magician Mahadev, and got their fortunes read; and, what was better to Jack, had had revealed in a series of mirage pictures several of the most eventful episodes in their future, and from which he trusted to be able to pilot them to that Persian cave, at the entrance to which sat the pointing fakir; for, now that he had seen his likeness, he thought that he would be able to recognise him again in the flesh, only the worst of it was, as they afterwards found out, these mirage pictures had not been the least like the reality.

According to this holy magician, the dangers in this journey would be numerous and terrible; yet in each of the visions he had seen three figures going forward unhurt, and that was very consoling and pluck-inspiring, for really, after all, it doesn't take much courage to go into danger if one is perfectly convinced that one will get out of it all right. Such a knowledge as this is equivalent to shot and steel-proof armour, and makes one feel very much as the dauntless knights of old must have felt when, cap-a-pie, they boldly and singly charged down upon an army of naked savages. It was only a matter of time and exertion how soon the enemy were despatched, and the champion could ride back to his lady's bower triumphant and unhurt.

With the last few pounds of Ronald's legacy they began their journey from Benares to Allahabad by boat, starting at early morning, before daybreak, on the 1st of June 1857, and reaching Allahabad on the 3d, by easy stages.

Here Mrs Bangles made her arrangements to begin her entertainment on the following night at the fortress, where the

officers had provided them with quarters. She was to have a week's run here in the little theatre which was set aside for strolling companies and private performances.

It was here that they heard, for the first time, about the revolt of the natives at Delhi, but, as yet, the mutiny had not assumed the alarming proportions which it was presently to take; therefore, at Allahabad the garrison were not too greatly alarmed, although discipline was a little stricter than usual. Still, the first night they had a good house, and when they counted up the proceeds, they considered that the agent had every cause to congratulate himself upon the success of his little company. Mrs Bangles had a champagne supper after the performance with some of the officers who had known her husband at Benares, after the boys had gone to bed, and felt that things were once more beginning to look coloured.

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## CHAPTER IV.

### AN INTERRUPTED PERFORMANCE.

Ronald MacIvor was mightily scared when he first went on the stage, even although the audience was such an indulgent one, and his own features were masked under a substantial coating of blackened cork and butter; but he soon recovered his presence of mind, for was he not a soldier's son, and was not the daring and larky Jack beside him to support him.

Therefore, crushing down the shivering which had fastened upon his limbs, and controlling the throbbing of his heart, he plunged desperately into his part, and very quickly forgot the sea of faces in front of him in the enjoyment of the songs first, and the intoxication of the applause afterwards.

Mrs Bangles did not sing much, for her voice had long since lost its freshness; but she was a very lively dancer, and good at burlesque business, and therefore for the time she became quite a lioness amongst the very young subs, who forced their way behind the scenes, and escorted her about the town the following days, proud to be seen in her company, and also delighted to offer her presents of gloves and other nick-nacks, which she was as pleased to accept. Poor lady, she had to do her toilet very early in the morning during those three harvest days, and work hard also at the selling of tickets from sunrise to sunset, so no wonder that she yawned sometimes while she was dressing in the evenings.

Jack and Ronald went about the town, however, and enjoyed themselves very much during the day; in fact, theatrical life, now that rehearsal was over, seemed to be a constant life of enjoyment to Ronald, the only difference between it and other pleasures being that, as a theatrical, one got paid for playing, while outside one had to pay for playing; that, of course, was the early stage of the life which had made Mrs Bangles so old and reckless, and fortunately there were no harsh critics in Allahabad to poison the pleasure. Something, however, worse than critics was coming to cure him of this budding fancy for theatrical life.

On the night of the 6th they were to give a charitable performance in the schoolroom of one of the churches, and they were just finishing dressing in the side-room, and almost ready to go on the stage, when the clergyman and half a dozen of the audience rushed in with white faces, and announced that the natives had risen, and were murdering all the Europeans they could meet in the streets, and that they must get at once to some more secure place for shelter.

Mrs Bangles was a brave woman, if little, and prompt at emergencies.

"Quick, boys, wash off that burnt cork, and make up with umber instead," she cried out, as soon as she heard the tidings. "Fortunately I have our native rigs-out here in my bag. I'll not keep you five minutes, gentlemen."

Saying which, without heeding her audience, the little woman began with lightning speed to transform herself from a golden-haired Cupid into a brown-skinned native, the boys following her example with equal promptitude.

The clergyman turned his head aside with a little cough while the change was being made, and, when next he looked, three native boys of the poorer class stood before him, the smallest of the three hard at work with his sponge and walnut dye touching up the places on arms, legs and necks which had been missed.

"Yih t-heck hy Sahib?" (Is this right, sir?) asked the small Hindoo, with a salam to the clergyman.

"Wonderful!" murmured that astonished gentleman.

"Ha! ha! now we can look after ourselves in the crowd, and perhaps help you also. We shall go outside and see if we can find a way. First let me go on the stage and speak to the audience."

With a bound the disguised Mrs Bangles appeared on the stage, and held up her hand to the terrified people, who were now crouching in their seats, thinking the rebels had got in by the back.

"Listen to me, friends; there will be no performance to-night, but, instead, I wish you all to come up to the stage and wait here till I find a way out for you to your own homes; while, for your own safety, meanwhile, the lights are going to be put out, so that the enemy may not be attracted to this hall. Do you understand me? I am Mrs Bangles."

The audience proved that they did understand, by leaving their seats and rushing pell-mell towards where she stood; that is, the women portion did so, while the men were following more leisurely.

"Put out the lights before you leave the hall, gentlemen, and lock the doors," called out that stage-trained voice calmly.

Fortunately the doors had been seen to at the first alarm, so that the quenching of the lights did not occupy much time; and very soon the company were crowding the platform and the dressing-room, one lamp only illuminating them dimly, as they waited on further orders from this little leader.

"Didn't I tell you I had good reason to be proud of my mother, Ronald?" whispered Jack to his friend, as they stood beside the third-rate actress, burlesque and comedy, now taking the leading part in this tragedy, as if to the manner born.

"She is real," answered Ronald, as briefly as a boy could utter a sentiment of entire approval, while he clasped the hand of his friend.

"Yes, there are two of us, and she's another."

Great heroes generally have been little men, so I expect the same rule holds with heroines. Napoleon once disarmed the ire of some vengeful Amazons by pointing to his own insignificant body, and asking if he looked like a bloated aristocrat, changing their fury into laughter, and so preventing a catastrophe.

Mrs Bangles, even in the full glory of her warpaint, was a miniature and fairy-like female. Once she had made a burlesque out of Hamlet by acting that melancholy Dane in all seriousness; for, although she did her part very well as far as declamation and action went, the audience had to laugh when they looked at that tiny figure.

This night she stood in the centre of that company, while the distant sounds of a disturbed city filled the ears, calm and resolute in her disguise, yet, as to size, like a boy of ten years of age; Jack and Ronald were head and shoulders over her.

A little boy she appeared to be, brown skinned and barefooted, with shanks very spindley, and arms so thin that a touch might have broken them, while the features under the turkey-red rag of a turban were impish in their leanness and wrinkles.

That was a merciful lamp towards her vanity as a woman, if she had any left, for it burned dimly, and only showed the white cotton tunic and waistband which she wore in her assumed character, veiling a good deal of the other umber-stained outlines; but, for all that, the people who towered above her looked down upon her with as much respect, and listened for her next words with as much expectancy, as did the followers of the little Napoleon.

"I am going outside to see if the way is clear to some better place of defence than this, and if so, I shall lead you there. Meanwhile, wait for my return in darkness, and with as much patience as you can. Jack, Ronald, you will come with me now."

With a puff she blew out the last lamp, and left the company in a condition easier to be imagined than described.

There was a back exit from the schoolhouse which led through a small yard and into a side street. Here the three disguised ones made their way with the sounds of the fighting, or rather massacring, going on in the street beyond.

Fiendish yellings from the rebels mingled with vain shrieks for mercy from the victims, while the star-filled sky was ruddy with the flaring of burning buildings; and from the fort came the reports of guns, the heavy booming of which made the ground tremble under their feet.

The night was intensely hot, for there had been a blazing sun all day, so that the earth was like a heated oven—hot fumes below which as yet held the cooler air-waves aloft—therefore the scanty costumes of those sham natives felt appropriate to the sultriness of the evening.

As yet they had not met anyone, the way they were taking being a narrow lane between high walls; but at the end, where the wider street crossed, they could see the hurrying and excited crowds rushing along with torches and weapons of all kinds—a crowd reeling with the drunkenness of revenge and slaughter.

"Ha!" suddenly said Mrs Bangles to her son Jack in Hindoostanee, "here is an open door; perhaps we may find shelter here."

A small side door in the wall stood open, leading into an extensive garden, and into this they all glided silently.

"Ugh!" exclaimed Mrs Bangles with a shudder, as her bare feet slipped over something wet in the pathway, while she fell upon a body still warm, from which the life blood was pouring. "The monsters have been here, Jack, and this is one of their victims. Let us go carefully."

The lustrous stars were above them, shining and sparkling between the over-arching trees; also in front they could make out a building with the ruddy lamplight, showing up many of the windows, while over the roof loomed a massive tower.

Silence reigned over this garden and building. Not a moan came to disturb the peace, only the distant shoutings and stifled shrieks; but it was the silence of disaster and death, for too completely had the marauders done their fell work here before they had quitted it for other outrages.

As they approached the house, they could see that all the doors stood open, some of them broken from their hinges, and lying on the murdered bodies of the defenders. Along the garden walk they passed three bodies, it being too dark to distinguish the sexes. On the terrace in front of the house lay four more; inside, on the ground hall, were stretched eighteen men, with horrible gashes on their corpses, while the furniture had been broken in pieces and scattered about recklessly.

The lamps, still burning, showed them this; also in the lobbies leading to the inner chambers lay the women, where they had been dragged and butchered, dressed still in their evening costumes.

Mrs Bangles took a quiet survey of the premises inside and out, and saw that it was a curiously-built place, but one which might be easily defended, now that they were warned.

The entrance to the tower was from the outside, a zig-zag, open, stone staircase, with a hand-rail of bronze, which led up to the chamber or chambers above. Possibly it had been originally designed by some native sage as an observatory or place for midnight meditations.

"Boys," said the mother of Jack, "this is the best possible place in which our friends can quarter to-night, up in that tower, for the Sepoys have finished their work here, and it isn't so likely they will look again here, at least not before daylight. I am going back to guide the church people here, and while I am away I want you to gather all the ammunition, weapons and eatables you can find, and carry them up to the observatory. You will do so?"

"Yes, mother," replied Jack obediently.

"Don't disturb the bodies, for the same party may return; and if they do, remember, Ronald, that you are a mute; Jack will do the talking for you."

"I'll remember," said Ronald quietly.

"Good. Now, I'm off; be diligent, like brave boys as you are."

Saying which, Mrs Bangles went back by the way she had come, while the two boys began their explorations.

The mutineers and rabble had been in too great a hurry to get away to other scenes for them to do any very serious damage to the building; they had hunted down the residents from room to room, stabbing or shooting them as they fled or tried to hide, and only breaking what articles of furniture were likely to conceal a Feringhee, or contain treasure. Therefore the boys found food in abundance in the kitchens, pantries and cellars, and these they carried with all despatch up the zig-zag stairs; and after placing their first load on the upper balcony, they went down again for some weapons, not knowing who might be waiting for them in that upper darkened chamber.

They found on the bodies of the slain men several pistols which had been discharged, with some knives swords and three muskets. These pistols and muskets they loaded from the powder-flasks and bullet-pouches which each armed man had carried, and which the infuriated but careless crowd had left behind. Jack also possessed himself of the kitchen chopper, which, being of the tomahawk order, commended itself to his notice as a most useful weapon.

In one of the smaller apartments, which had been fitted up as a smoke-room, they discovered on the walls an ornamental display of armour and curious weapons. Most of these they detached from their nails and carried off with them; in fact, they had a heavy load next time they went up those narrow stairs.

"We must have a light up there, Ronald, for who knows what may have possession of the upper story," remarked Jack to his friend, as they neared the platform.

"Yes; we'll leave these things where we did the provisions, and go back for a lamp and some lights. I think I saw a box of lucifers in the smoke-room," replied Ronald.

"Right you are."

They had now reached the platform, which was faintly illuminated by the scarlet lights from the distant burning houses, and were about to lay down their loads, when suddenly Jack stopped with an exclamation of surprise.

"Hallo! Ronald, where have our provisions gone to?"

The bundles which they had lately left on the platform had been removed during their absence.

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## CHAPTER V.

### IN THE TURRET.

There was a stronger feeling than surprise in full possession of the boys as they stood on that narrow platform overhanging the stone-paved court, fifty feet below, with the yawning and ominous blackness of the open door in front, and the ruddy, if faint, light from the blazing, far-off houses behind them, making of them such splendid targets to whoever might be watching them from that cavity.

A full moment they stood thus, leaning against the low, carved, bronze hand-rail, without considering the weapons which they had let fall to their feet, paralyzed, and unable to make any effort at defence or escape; only one sensation gripped them both with an icy clutch, deadly fear, out of which evolved the thought: when would the blow come, and where would it fall?

A moment of chilled horror, during which they glared with dilated eyeballs into that open doorway, imagining shapes, seeing lights like phosphorescent eyes shifting about, and waiting for the death-stroke.

Then the brave young blood rushed once more through their veins as they heard the voice of Mrs Bangles from below,—

"Jack, Ronald, are you there and safe?"

"Yes, mother," replied Jack, stooping quick as thought, and possessing himself of the axe and a loaded horse pistol. "We are all right; only be careful as you come up, and bring a lamp with you, for I think there is someone in the tower before us."

"Have you arms?"

"Plenty for the whole company."

"Then hold on where you are, and we'll be up in a moment."

Both Ronald and Jack felt all right now, for as the inmates hadn't tackled them before, they did not expect they would do so now with this added force; therefore they bravely advanced right up to the door, and stood there with their weapons ready.

A glance downward showed them the confused mass of fugitives in the courtyard, while up the steps came some of the men, Mrs Bangles following them and bearing a small oil lamp, which she was shading with her hand.

As the men reached the platform, they armed themselves from the mound of weapons lying there, and then took their stand beside the lads.

"What makes you think anyone is inside?" asked the chaplain.

"Because we left a load of provisions on the platform, and when we returned with the arms, the provisions were gone."

"That's conclusive; but we shall soon be positive. Give me the lamp, Mrs Bangles."

The clergyman was a brave man, for, armed only with an Afghan knife, he took the lamp from Mrs Bangles, and, without a pause, went inside, the others following closely at his heels.

An apartment of about thirty feet square met their eyes, destitute of any other furniture except a large telescope which stood on a raised platform in the centre, its end pointing from an open sky window.

The walls were smooth and bare, and the roof above was flat, while leaning against the aperture was a ladder, there being no signs about the floor of either provisions or abstracter.

"Whoever it is has gone on the roof," remarked the chaplain, as he held the lamp up and looked round him carefully.

In a moment Jack and Ronald were climbing up the ladder, while the others waited below anxiously, to hear their report.

After another minute of suspense, with a merry laugh Jack showed his face at the skylight.

"We have found the thief and the provisions."

"Who is it?"

"A big monkey, and so tame that Ronald and he are already cuddling each other. Bring up the women, mother, for it's all right; we'll be down presently with our prize."

Soon after this they were all safely assembled in the tower chamber; the monkey, one of the most sacred species, sitting demurely in their midst, gravely examining the company, yet making no effort to escape. He had evidently been a much petted favourite with his former master, and well accustomed to strangers, for he seemed to know the clergyman, as he approached him with quite a human expression of interest and welcome.

"Ah, Falko, you rascal, so you are the only survivor, are you?" said the chaplain, as he tickled the neck of the animal, "I might have known that Falko would be here, if I had considered for a moment, for this is where he spent most of his time; his poor master, Mr Duncanson, who lies below, was a great student in astronomy, and Falko acted as his attendant; a wonderful monkey this, I can tell you, my friends, for sagacity."

Falko nodded his head gravely, as if he understood what was said to him, after which he returned to the two boys, with whom he seemed to have sworn a sudden friendship.

"Can he use a pistol?" asked Ronald.

"He can do almost anything, yet I think I would hardly trust him so far."

"What an addition to our troupe he would be," murmured Mrs Bangles speculatively.

The clergyman heard her, and at once said,—

"All his former friends lie murdered below, Mrs Bangles; and as he seems to have taken to your boys, there is no one left to contest him with you; therefore, if he will go with you, and we manage to escape this evil night, I would say take him by all means, for he is a clever little chap, and almost leads one to believe in the humanity of his species. My friend Mr Duncanson has trained him to a very high state of perfection."

"Jack," said Mrs Bangles resolutely, "cultivate the friendship of Falko, for he may be of more use to us in the future than the most lovely breakdown ever invented. Now, sir, let us consider what is to be done meantime for our own safety; the city seems to be given over to the mutinous demons to-night."

"In the city, yes, they have it all their own way, but the fort holds out, although that will not help us much, as it is already environed," returned the clergyman a little gloomily. "And this is only the beginning, I fear; Delhi and Meerut have fallen into their hands already, besides a number of other stations. Perhaps we are, after all, as safe here as anywhere, for in no place throughout India lies safety to the handful of British who are left to face these rabid hordes."

"But Cawnpore and Lucknow?"

"Are surrounded by rebels thirsting for the blood of those within; it is the most awful uprising which India has ever experienced, as I foresaid it would be, although the commanders and officers would not listen to me. There remains only one plan, and that is, to get to Calcutta if we can."

"Yes," replied Mrs Bangles thoughtfully. "If that can be accomplished, it will be the best for you, until order is once more restored; but we intend going on towards Persia."

"Good heavens, Mrs Bangles, that is madness!"

"No; my son and his friend Ronald have made up their minds to see this country, and I must go with them."

"But the route lies right through the ranks of the rebels."

"Yes; then we will be rebels while we pass through, that's all," returned Mrs Bangles, with a smile. "We can act our part fairly well, but before we go, I want to see you all safe, and this is my plan."

"Yes," replied the chaplain, while the others came closer to listen, for the thunder of cannon and yellings of the populace, though distant, filled the air with a horrid din.

"Jack!"

"Yes, mother."

"Go on guard, and watch the stairs."

"Yes, mother," answered the obedient Jack, going at once outside, followed by his friend Ronald and their latest addition, Falko.

Mrs Bangles' plan was a repetition of her first idea—to go forth and see how the fortress was holding out, while they remained in their present position until she came back with her report.

It was the only thing to do under the present crisis, for the streets below them were crowded with savage insurgents, and illumined by a hundred fires, where a European, once seen, would be instantly pounced upon and slaughtered; and although even the most timid of the women agreed that it was their only prospect of ultimate escape, they saw the little woman go forth on her self-imposed mission of danger with the same feelings that a party of soldiers might watch the exit of their general. While she was with them she inspired them with courage; without her, they felt strangely weakened.

Swiftly, in her disguise, did Mrs Bangles dart down those narrow steps and disappear within the shadows of the gardens, while the women crouched inside the darkened chamber, and the men waited close to the door, the foremost party getting a glimpse of the ruddy lights beyond the trees, the two boys, with the monkey, lying side by side on the top platform, and listening for suspicious sounds, while they watched the courtyard below them.

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## CHAPTER VI.

### THE ATTACK ON THE TOWER.

Mrs Bangles fluttered into that obscurity like a very small but active bird, making no more noise than a spectre is supposed to do as she crossed the courtyard, and, after a careful look round, darted along the garden pathway as close to the leafy side as she could creep, and then out by the still gaping doorway into the lane.

The side door she had left as the insurgents had left it—open, and hanging slantways from its single hinge, as were the other forced doors of the mansion. The straggling portions of the rabble would easily read what these broken-in doors meant, and be likely to look upon a second visit as wasted time, at least during this first night of slaughter and wanton destruction.

She was a brave woman, with nerves which had been tempered by so many years of exciting trials and troubles that they had become almost impervious to any sudden shock; and, therefore, on this night, as she paused for a single moment before taking the plunge from that sheltering lane into the crimsoned street, it was not exactly to still the beating of her heart that she paused, but rather to put a final touch of grease and umber upon her face and brow, where the perspiration had begun to start, and also to make her choice of which rushing and gesticulating mob she might join the most easily.

Most of the people were rushing in the direction of the fortress, after looting other portions of the town, some carrying heads of male and female Europeans upon their pikes, while others dragged the guns they had captured to help in the bombardment. Around them was an indiscriminate crowd, that rushed aimlessly to and fro, now going a little way with the forward companies, and then being attracted by the distant shouts which announced the discovery of another European hiding-place.

The object of Mrs Bangles was to get to the fortress as soon as possible; therefore she watched her chance, and dived forward into the outer ring of the first dense crowd which passed close to her, waving the knife she was holding wildly above her head, and shrieking as the others were doing,—“Death to the vile Feringhee.”

She saw many a ghastly sight during that passage, but, with her actress instinct, and habit of working up to her part, she gnashed her teeth and rolled her eyes, simulating the fury which possessed the others until it felt almost natural, while it supported her through horrors which at another time might have made her grow sick and faint. But now having that female vent, her voice, to carry off the excitement, she shrieked savagely, as the rest were doing, until her voice grew hoarse and guttural, as she flung herself about as madly as any fanatic could have desired.

“Well done, youngster!” shouted a tall sepoy at her side; “have you wetted your little knife yet with Feringhee blood?”

“Not yet, brave one,” gasped the disguised actress.

“Then stick to me, and I’ll give you the second lunge at the first dog we fall in with.”

It was a generous offer from one of the faithful, and, as a token of his admiration of her spirit, ought to have been appreciated, but at the first opportunity she had Mrs Bangles allowed him to slip from her side, and took as companion another less effusive.

Fortunately for Mrs Bangles’ after peace as well as present safety, the rest of the crowd were too eager to get the honour of slaughtering a Christian, and when one or two were met, the fanatics fought over these victims as a pack of hungry wolves might over a stray sheep; so that, although she could not prevent the sacrifice, she was able, without difficulty, to keep out of it.

But the horrors of that night stamped themselves upon her mind for ever afterwards; the shrieks of the tortured victims rang within her brain, the awful sights from which she could not turn away her eyes, the demoniac faces, with their horrid, gurgling laughter, as they glutted their rabid passions and Oriental cruelty to the utmost limit, made the after danger of the jungle and town seem like a pleasant excursion.

Allahabad, on that first night of the uprising, surpassed all the other cities of India for ruthless cruelty and ferociousness, and what this brave little woman witnessed on that occasion cannot be put into words. She went through it with starting eyes and choking throat, nerving herself to appear callous for the sake of those she had vowed to save, if possible, while

her heart lay frozen within her bosom.

As usual in these risings, the gaols had been broken into and the criminals released; also most of the guns and ammunition captured, and the banks looted; while all who had not succeeded in gaining the fort in time were being hunted for, or, when discovered, mutilated and tortured—although on this night the murderers were too furious to spend the time which they afterwards did over their victims. Therefore, in most cases, they were slaughtered quickly in the savage eagerness of the mob to get at fresh victims.

On they swarmed through the streets, with the ruddy flames from fired houses lighting them up with their ferocious expressions of murder-joy. They, who had been so long subdued and meek, woke up at last, and the result was raving madness. Each victim was lacerated and punctured with a hundred slashes and stabs before they were finally torn limb from limb, and tossed about from one to the other. The Mahommedans were the savage butchers in this raid, with the casteless pariahs and vile criminals, for the Hindoos, although no less furious, shrank from the sight and contact of blood.

Mrs Bangles soon found out the Hindoo portion, and kept with them, helping to haul at one of the guns which they were bringing along; and thus provided with an occupation, she was able to keep out of the carnage, although she could not shut her eyes upon the horrors.

They passed a portion of the river where some boats were moored—at the present time completely deserted—and at the sight of these boats the idea came to her that if she could only get her party that length, they might be able to cross the river and get within the walls from the other side of the Dooab, for a glance at the red walls on this side of the fort, already commanded, showed her that they had no chance of getting inside by the main gate.

Overhead the shot and shell spun amidst that horrid din, while the sky was dusky with the dense clouds of smoke as the defenders and the besiegers kept up the devilish concert without intermission. Yes, she could steal unperceived from the busy crowd, and try to get her party down to the river before daylight came. In an hour or so, at the rate the natives were crowding up to the fort, the streets would be comparatively empty, and they might get along by the lanes without mishap.

Braced up by this hope, she wormed her way through the masses, and retraced her steps as quickly as she could, getting, after many a rebuff, back to the lane and into the garden.

Quietness reigned still in the garden and about the half-dismantled mansion, that is, the comparative quietness between a distant din and the actual vicinity of pandemonium; but before she was half-way along this secluded side path, she saw and heard that what she had been dreading had come to pass.

A company of marauders had come to finish up what the first demolishers had left half done. Possibly it was the same party, and as she hastily ran forward and joined that yelling mob, she prayed fervently that it might be the first lot, for then they would be satisfied with a cursory examination.

"Hallo, youngster!" shouted out one of the leaders as she boldly flung herself in front of the torches. "Where have you come from, eh?"

"The big house there, sahib."

"Any of the accursed ones left alive, eh?"

"Nothing. I have been all over the place, and there isn't a groan left there."

"I thought not," chuckled the ruffian. "Nor is there where we've been since; but there is still enough left to make a blaze up there, and we want some more light in this quarter of the town. Come along, sons of the faithful, we'll teach this Bachna how to raise a fire. Children like fires; don't they, little one?"

"Yes, sahib," answered the disguised mother, shrinking back amongst the less bold followers of these ferocious incendiaries, her active mind busy with how to turn this new aspect of affairs to her own advantage.

Meanwhile, the rabble poured into the house and courtyard by the open door, spurning the dead victims that lay about, all intent for the present in seeking for inflammatory materials for the bonfire they had promised. To her relief, they stuck to the lower rooms, evidently satisfied with their previous overhauling of the upper regions.

Chairs, hammocks, tables, sideboards, pictures, and everything that was likely to burn were trailed into the front saloon and broken up by that busy crowd; then the cooking and lamp oils were brought from the kitchen region and poured over the raised pyre, after which it was fired at different points, while they retired outside to watch the effect.

"If any stray rats have found a refuge in the upper parts of the house, this ought to make them show their noses," said the leader, as he stood on the terrace and watched the upper windows, his musket ready to pot any head that might appear.

Mrs Bangles watched also, with palpitating heart and whirling brains, the lurid flickering of the flames as they licked their way round the base of that pyre and into its oil-drenched centre, her main desire being to get through the yet unnoticed little courtyard and up those narrow stairs, a horrible fear upon her lest those above should let their presence be known before she could get up to warn them.

She was waiting for the smoke to come, which would hide the outside stairs from the watchful, remorseless eyes, and praying with all her soul that she might be with her friends before the upcurling volumes could alarm them.

Slowly, as she watched, with her head turned behind those windows, she crept backwards from the crowd towards that open door in the wall.

No one noticed her leaving at first, for they were too intent upon the growing fire, and then like a shadow she stole through the yard, and placing her hands on the rails, waited for the first cloud to hide her upward course.

She knew well that the watchful eyes of Jack had already seen that crowd, and that a bullet was waiting for the first who attempted to mount those stairs; and there was no chance of letting him know that she was there except by a call, which would at the same time bring the enemy upon those she signalled to; therefore that veil of smoke was her only prospect of getting up unseen.

Five minutes passed like years as she crouched at the foot of the stairs, listening to the crackling inside and the hoarse yells outside; then she saw the smoke forcing its way through every crevice of that filled house, and curling gauze-like round where she waited.

Another moment and the heated windows burst with the sound of exploding guns, and then the stairs were swallowed in the dense cloud while she sprang up them like a bird on the wing.

"Jack!"

It was just in time that gasp came from her choking throat, for Jack had grasped her fiercely by the arm with one hand, while the other had raised his dagger to plunge into her breast. At the whisper, however, his hand dropped, while he drew her on to the platform and pushed her inside.

"They have fired the house from the basement, but they have no suspicion that anyone is here, so we must wait until they go," said Mrs Bangles, as soon as she was in.

"How many are there?" asked the chaplain.

"Over three hundred."

"But we shall be burnt if we stay."

"No; they will go off as soon as they see the place properly lighted, if we keep under cover. Ah! what is that now, Jack?"

"Only Falko, mother, who has betrayed us," answered Jack, pointing to where the monkey was now jumping about on the platform in a mad state of excitement, full in the light of the now blazing house, while a volley of bullets, wildly directed, rattled against the walls of the tower from the rabble who had seen that figure moving on the platform, and were now rushing pell-mell to get to the staircase.

"We must go down now," muttered the clergyman with set teeth, as he gripped his musket firmly with the bayonet fixed to it, while the women screamed their affright at the sound of the bullets. "Fix bayonets, lads, and we will force a passage through the cowards yet."

"Stop a moment," cried Mrs Bangles; "can you guide us to the river?"

"Yes; when we get outside."

A couple of daring sepoys at this moment showed themselves on the platform, and without listening for more, the chaplain rushed outside with the others following him, and plunged their weapons into this advance guard, lifted them up and pitched them over the railing to the crowd below.

"Follow me, lads," shouted the chaplain; "and you, Mrs Bangles, bring down the women without a second's delay; we'll surround you when we reach *terra firma*."

He with the others were busy while he spoke, for the stairs were literally crammed with the insensate crowd, who forced each other up, regardless of their own danger, like a theatre gallery crowd at a popular piece.

The decided advantage lay with those coming down, who were provided with bayonets for the clearing of the way; so while the front rank used their arms digging in and pitching over the staircase, those behind occupied themselves with loading and firing amongst the crowd below.

Those strongest in the arms took the front ranks, and prevented a deadlock by that ever-repeated side heave over after the plunge, but it was heavy work for all that, and doubly so with this awful heat from the burning house and the early Indian summer night.



## CHAPTER VII.

### A LEAP FOR LIFE.

There was no lack of light to show to that hungry rabble their enemy, for the flames were now swathing the building from the open windows, and but for the fierce passions which held them all in thrall, that overpowering heat would have driven back even the hardiest natives. But a madness was upon them to get at those hated masters, and they could not think how they were defeating their own purpose in their wild forcing of each other upwards upon these terrible bayonets.

It was like a horrible nightmare, with those swarming demoniac faces pressing up to their doom, and the stern defenders of the screaming women getting down so slowly towards that yellow ocean of fire, and sending body after body with sickening thuds upon the heated flagstones of the courtyard.

Already have they flung down over sixty natives, and yet they have only descended five steps out of the forty-five to be traversed; and on these forty steps are packed over two hundred natives as close as they can jam; and in the court, the thin scattering left are trampling each other to get at those stairs, in the manner an infuriated or a panic-struck crowd without a leader to control it always behaves.

Ah, they have broken the hand-rail, and are falling by dozens over the side, while the chaplain and his fellow heroes are making better progress.

Dead bodies crushing down upon maimed and living ones, those below getting roasted as well as smothered; while the shrieks which rise from that writhing mass are appalling, and drown the affrighted screams of the horrified women above.

The walls are crumbling at the inner side of the stairs, and the steps are shaking under their feet; and as they feel this, they redouble their efforts to get down.

"Hurry up behind there!" shouts the reverend leader, as he moves his arms quicker and sends more dead bodies to join that writhing sea of living ones.

This break in the rail has been a fortunate accident for them, although it takes Mrs Bangles all her energies to get the ladies to pass over that unprotected place; yet she is getting them along with the joint efforts of Ronald and Jack, who take the outside.

Thirty out of the forty-five steps are safely accomplished without the loss of a European, when with a crash the remaining fifteen steps break from the walls with their living burden, and complete the discomfiture of those below.

Without a pause the foremost rank follow after the chaplain, and, at the risk of breaking their limbs, leap from that crumbling porch upon the human mound below, then righting themselves, the chaplain shouts,—

"Quick, ladies, quick! Jump without pausing, for the walls are about to fall, and you will be swallowed amidst the flames or crushed outside."

It was a wild leap, which none of them liked afterwards to recall, although at the moment they did not realise their risk, and in most instances their guardian angels watched over them while they took it with closed eyes, and those bruised and dead bodies received them. The men who had sprang first hauled them quickly out of the way of those coming after, and then rushed them across the court and out to the garden, where, suddenly remembering their remaining foemen, they formed a square and looked about them, to see the remnant of that coward gang rushing toward the main gateway, to get reinforcements as well as to save their ugly carcasses, while the tower, which they had left, was swaying backwards and forwards before it collapsed into that roaring sea of yellow fire.

"Just in time, but no more," remarked the gallant chaplain, as he wiped the perspiration from his smoking brow. "Now, Mrs Bangles, what were you going to say?"

"That some boats are lying deserted at the side of the river, between this and the fort, and if we can get to them we may reach the fort from the other side of the Doob."

"Then let us force our way with our bayonets. Forward, ladies and gentlemen; all those who cannot walk we must carry."

And picking up those who had been hurt with that leap, the resolute band of heroes and heroines, with the monkey Falko on the shoulder of Jack, began its second perilous march that night through the by-streets of Allahabad.

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## CHAPTER VIII.

### TOWARDS THE AFGHAN PASSES.

Six months have passed since that awful night at Allahabad, and the adventurers have fairly begun their journey, that is, they have at last got free of the British stations with the Indian mutineers, and have plunged into a country which the natives alone are as yet accountable for; the natives and other predatory owners of the land who have to be propitiated, avoided, or battled with. They are at last in the jungles and forests of the great Northwest, and approaching the mountains of Afghanistan.

These vanished six months had added years to the boys, and although they did not look much older at first sight, yet there was an alertness about their bearing, and a stern resolution about their lips, which compressed them as the lips of boys seldom are. They had been baptised in blood and fire, and had come out of the ordeal men as far as decision and action were concerned.

Some men, whose lives fall on fertile places, always remain boys. These are not always the best or noblest of men, although they are mostly the pleasantest of companions for a flourishing hour. Others, again, who have been tried by adversity, and have gazed upon death face to face, acquire a grave steadfastness of gaze which may pass for sternness or sullenness to the lightly observant. These men seldom laugh outright, or if they do, it is a boisterous laugh which is forced from their weighted hearts; but they can smile, and when they do, it is the charm which enthral, for it is the smile of experience, tempered with divine charity.

Ronald MacIvor and Jack Bangles had become experienced shikaries during these six months of privation, so that, when they wanted to laugh, they chuckled as a good shikari must do, as silently as possible.

But they used to smile often—although they had got over the loud laughing stage—graver smiles than boys usually smile, and fuller of intention.

The effect of these six months of bodily danger and hardship had been quite the reverse on Mrs Bangles than it had been on her son and his friend. She seemed to have cast off years of care and taken up the youth which they were so rapidly setting down. Her eyes were clearer; many of the wrinkles had shifted their places from the brow and corners of the eyes to the sides of her still pretty mouth.

She was gay as she had not been since her short honeymoon, and her eyes sparkled with health and happiness, for the excitement which she had now, and which that bundle of nerves composing her little anatomy required, was no longer the morbid excitement of the stage, or poverty as it becomes degraded and accentuated within cities, but the healthy excitement of open-air danger, constant variety and exertion, so that she did not now require opiates to make her sleep sound at night, for downright fatigue did that for her most effectually. Ah, if some of the ladies who stay at home and fall victims to that most horrible of all diseases, *ennui*, would only accompany their adventurous husbands, how much less danger there would be from lions, tigers and tempests, than there is from this brain-sapping monster of civilisation. And if the men only knew what an injury they were doing to their women by taking so much care of them, they would not leave them so often behind.

This tiny mother of Jack had become the spirit and life of the expedition. She was always ready to laugh at any mishap now that they were clear of the human carnage; she was the one who directed them in their moments of indecision, nursed them when ailing—for even hardy boys cannot go through a journey of this sort without suffering some of the sicknesses which afflict even veteran travellers in a land like India.

She cooked for them the game which their guns brought down, and performed a hundred of those tender duties which only a woman can do for those she loves, and which are never noticed by the recipients thereof until the tender heart has gone from them; then, like the sage Carlyle, they wake up wondering how it was that they never noticed this close hedge of affection which had environed them about, keeping the harsh winds from them so long.

But one thing the boys excelled her in, and that was the guns. She never could bring down what she aimed at, although she sometimes killed something unexpectedly, and wide of the mark; therefore, although at close quarters she could be depended upon for her courage, she left the hunting entirely to the boys, concerning herself mostly in the mending of their light costumes, and, as I have said, cooking their food.

There were four travellers in this company, for the monkey Falko had accompanied them; a wonderful monkey that was to be sure, who as nearly as possible supplied the missing link between his species and man. He understood every word that was said to him, which was, of course, not at all surprising; but what *was* astonishing, he was beginning to make himself understood by his friends. Already he could utter the Hindoo words for food, heat, cold and love, and Jack, who was his instructor, felt hopeful that he would get him to converse just like an ordinary human, even although he could not master the English language.

"You see, I expect Hindoo must be the original language of the world, so that it comes more natural to Falko than our mixed up lingo," remarked Ronald.

"I expect so," returned Jack.

Falko had been accidentally wounded on that retreat from the tower after saving the lives of the refugees more than once, for, being one of the sacred order of monkeys, Jack had carried him in front of the procession; and when they came to a crowd, he had only to hold up the little fellow for the Hindoos to bend down and let them go past, while the others, who had taken the advice of Mrs Bangles, and borrowed the robes from the dead men, kept their turbans well over their faces until the danger was past.

In this way they had reached the river without serious mishap, and confiscating the boats, rowed round to the back of the fort, and, making themselves known to those inside, were admitted.

It was while trying to make themselves known that Falko got his wound—a shot in the leg—which, for a time, made a cripple of him. However, thanks to the nursing of Mrs Bangles, he was soon able to move about; and now, with the exception of a decided limp, which reminded one of some of the half-pay captains we see halting about the parks and clubs, he was as well as ever, and passionately devoted to his little nurse, Mrs Bangles.

With an eye to future business, she paid great attention to his education as a gymnast, acrobat and breakdown dancer.

Falko took very naturally to the acrobatic and gymnastic part of the profession. The step-dancing was a little more difficult to get him to understand; yet his instructor was an old hand at the training of professional dancers, so that, before a couple of months was over, he could do the native nautch dance, the Highland fling, and was making great progress in the Irish jig, with the sailor hornpipe, and had almost succeeded in that most most difficult of all performances, the egg dance.

"I'll have Falko yet able to sing a comic song, now that he has begun to pick up words, and then we don't need to bother about the Peacock Throne, for he'll make our fortune in England," exclaimed the enthusiastic music-hall singer, as she caressed her wonderful and affectionate prodigy, while he answered her back with "Han," which was as plain as could be, "Yes."

They had waited at the fort until they were released by General Neill, and then, against all the remonstrances of their friends at Allahabad, had started on their perilous journey, bearing with them the good wishes of all.

Through the heart of the mutineers they had wandered in this assumed character of mendicant performers, Ronald as a mute, and Falko, the sacred one, as their safeguard.

The Orientals were not difficult to please as far as talent was concerned. Mrs Bangles and Jack made quite a sensation with their free and impromptu translations of the comic songs of the times; and as they were going northward instead of south, there was the less inquiry about their purpose. They sang and danced in the camps and small courts of the Zamindars, did their share in the temples of the monkey god with Falko, and managed to escape from the clutches of dacoits and other more legalised robbers, with a share of the proceeds of their industry.

Past Cawnpore and Delhi—both places they gave a wide berth to when they found them in possession of the sepoy—past Loodiana and Lahore, doing most of their business at the little villages *en route*, and everywhere charitably and generously treated by the small farmers and peasants, who always shared their best with them, and sent them on their way full-handed and with a blessing.

Of course they witnessed many horrid sights as they went through this war-devastated portion of the land, for the blood of the sepoy was boiling with real or fancied wrongs; and when such is the case, death and disaster must be expected.

They had also many narrow escapes, sometimes from discovery of their nationality, sometimes from quicksands in crossing rivers, or snake-bites and tigers; also from those crafty, insinuating devotees, the Thugs, who travel about in small bands and lure strangers to their death; but they made a strict rule not to take up with anyone on the road, giving as an excuse that they had made vows to that effect, and as India is the land where vows are respected, they were permitted to go unquestioned.

As for the serpents, Falko stood their friend by warning them of danger; while as to tigers and panthers, they had already won the gratitude of several terror-stricken villagers by slaying their exterminators.

Ronald had with him his father's hunting gun, and had learnt to use it with deadly effect, so that already the tawny-striped tyrant of the jungle had ceased to inspire him with the terror that the thought of it gave him at first; and no one doubted the story which they told about the firearms being given them by their friends, the sepoys, as payment for their theatrical performances down south, particularly when they had that sacred Falko along with them.

From Lahore they struck up towards the beautiful Cashmere country, and then began to make their way to Afghan Land.

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## CHAPTER IX.

### THE PASS OF BHOWANU.

They had taken Cashmere on their way, because the natives had informed Mrs Bangles that money was to be made there in her line of business, and she was too keen a professional to miss a single chance.

They did exceedingly well at Cashmere with their comic ditties and sacred performing monkey, and pleased the natives so much that it was with great difficulty they could get away. There were strange visitors to the city, chiefs from Hindoo Koosh and elsewhere, who testified their delight in a very substantial fashion, so that when the little company left they were able to afford mountain mules and the services of some guides and servants who knew the passes and river crossings. Therefore, providing themselves with warm clothing and other needful luxuries, they set out in high spirits.

Up to this stage they had experienced a great variety of country, as well as weather; dry and scorching plains, over which the dust flew in choking clouds; jungle land, where the savage beasts lay basking and unperceived until the travellers were almost right upon their lairs. They had passed through shady groves beautiful to look at, and delicious to rest in after the fierce heat of the jungle and desert, yet even more dangerous than the open. They had plunged into deep and sombre defiles, and been more than once nearly engulfed in the quicksands at the rivers, for every step of the way had its own peculiar species of dangers in this land of mystery and wonder.

At nights they had shivered round their camp fires as they listened to the awful chorus of cries while the famishing beasts of prey hunted after their food, and during this time they had been getting innured to the open air changes of intense heat and sharp cold, so that now they hardly felt the changes, and were almost fever-proof by the time they started for Afghanistan.

After a day or two they found that they had been fortunate in their choice of servants, who were all patient, meek and trustworthy, as well as cheerful fellows, who sang as they went along, and did not trouble themselves about a little extra work or hardship; they knew where they were going, and what was expected from them, so that, for the first time since leaving Allahabad, the wanderers laid down their responsibilities, and could enjoy the wild scenery through which they were passing.

They had reached the highlands now, at perhaps the best time of the year for travelling, and were experiencing extreme changes of temperature as they ascended or descended the different ranges.

Now, amongst the snow and ice, with the alpine vegetation about them, while they shivered in their warmest sheepskin costumes; again descending gloomy defiles and edging steep precipices as they crept down to valleys dense with tropical "téraï," and almost intolerable in this moist, unwholesome heat.

It was night, and the little party were encamped as best they could on a narrow ledge half-way down the mountain; above them the straight cliffs rose thousands of feet, almost as if closing in at the top, and leaving only a narrow bar of sky, while below them the precipice sheered down as far again, and as straight as those walls which hemmed them in.

It was a bleak and bare gorge, with a solemn, if sterile, majesty about it, although there was nothing to break the monotony of rocks. Not a blade of grass could be gathered for their mules; but they were prepared for such emergencies, having brought fodder with them, so that the animals were munching contentedly a little distance away, while there was no danger about them wandering or losing themselves in the dark, for they liked to keep as close to their human companions as they could get, particularly in such a gloomy situation as this was.

The sudden darkening of that strip of sky overhead warned the travellers that it was time to bivouac; and much as they would have liked to get down to some more secure resting-place, there was no possible chance that night.

The cliff face at this point was much more broken up than it had been at former portions of the way. Vast boulders piled up and seemed to support each other, while at places they could make out cave-like gaps and fissures, to reach some of which would have been comparatively easy.

But as they were approaching this part of the journey, they had seen an enormous python glide from one of these cavities, and after lolloping upon the roadway, trail its sinewy length over it in a horribly suggestive and leisurely fashion, and

then drop limply out of their sight down that unknown dusky depth of precipice.

The gloom of the place with the want of sunshine had weighed upon them terribly all the afternoon, and that great silent serpent put the finishing touch to their nervous depression. It appeared large enough, in that fading light, to have enveloped the entire company, mules and baggage into the bargain; and they had all stopped in a fascination of horror, and watched its graceful yet languid progress from the cavern to the abyss, wondering when that vast and vibrating coil would disappear.

True, it had gone straight across the track without turning to the right or left, yet it seemed so suitable to its gloomy surroundings, so deadly in its trailing strength and remorseless silence, that when the guides suggested one of the caves as a good camp, Mrs Bangles, Jack and Ronald with one accord said "No." Better the bare and comfortless ledge than the probable horrors of these gaping fissures.

Falko also had seen that awful object of terror, and added his protest by clinging tightly round the neck of his friend Jack and grinding his white teeth, while he relapsed into his own original language, not finding the Hindoostanee strong enough to express his abject feelings.

Therefore, after getting as far away from the track of that snaky monster as they could, they settled upon a portion of the road a little more roomy than were some of the other parts, and, dismounting, they quickly had the necessary fire burning with the faggots which they had gathered higher up on the ridges; and as they had been successful with their guns that morning, the venison was soon grilling away, a pleasant sight and grateful odour which did much to restore their lost courage.

Still, for all that, they could not help glancing now and again to the rocks round them as far as their firelight penetrated, with a nervous expectancy which they had never felt before, holding their loaded weapons in their hands, and almost wishing that they could hear the roar of a tiger or the yelping of a jackal to break that appalling stillness.

Mrs Bangles made several brave efforts after supper to raise the drooping spirits of her boys; but they were futile efforts, because her heart was not in them. She felt in the midst of a land of horror, and a strange anticipation of evil made her shiver with a vague uneasiness. Like Jack and Ronald, the boisterous wild beasts she could have faced bravely, but not this silent and deadly ancient enemy of mankind.

From the venomous small serpents all mankind—except, perhaps, the snake-charmers—shrink; but when their proportions are magnified to the anaconda or constrictor, then the fear and repulsion increases.

The natives also seemed to appreciate the gloomy influence of the place, for, contrary to their customary habits, they had crept closer to their employers, as if seeking the protection of their guns, and now sat with downcast eyes and sad faces without speaking.

"By George, but there's another one!" whispered Ronald, as he pointed with trembling finger to the outer edge of light, where a vast body was moving along, blacker than the shadow through which it moved, while the red light glittered faintly on its heaving and polished skin. "Shall I shoot?"

"No, no!" answered Mrs Bangles in a husky voice. "Let it go if it will."

"It is the wife looking after her husband," said one of the natives quietly. "If you kill her he will come with all his relations and eat us up."

They saw the enormous head, with its sparkling eyes, turn towards them for a moment, while the red jaws opened slightly with a horrible grin; then it again turned on its way and dipped over the ledge as the other had done, and slowly the yards of glittering ebony disappeared from view.

"What a fearful place! What is it called?" asked Jack, with a shudder.

"It is the Pass of Bhowanee, and these are her servants. To see them is very bad for the traveller."

"Who is Bhowanee?" asked Ronald, to whom alone the dread name meant nothing, although, when Jack and his mother heard it, they trembled more than ever.

"Do not mention the divine one too often, or you are doomed," whispered one of the natives softly. "To-morrow, when

we get out of this evil place, I will tell you."

"And we must watch carefully this night if we are to see to-morrow," muttered Jack, as he rose and put on some more firewood, noticing, as he did so, that the supply of fuel was lamentably short.

"Ronald, come here for a moment," he said, standing apart from the others.

"Well, old fellow, what is it?" said Ronald, getting up and going to his friend's side.

"We are in a desperate fix, I reckon, Ronald. This Bhowanee is the Goddess of the Thugs."

"What are they?"

"Murderers, stranglers, that's what they are, who kill people in their sleep; and I am much mistaken if some of our followers are not in the service of this goddess as well as those anacondas—not all of them, of course, or we should not have been told about her. The one who gave us the name of the place must be all right, but who can say how many of the others are."

"Surely not, Jack; they look all such nice fellows, and have behaved so well hitherto."

"Yes; Thugs generally do look fine fellows, or else they never could carry on their deadly work with safety," replied Jack gloomily.

"And what do you propose?"

"Well, we must keep our eyes open this night, and, if possible, also keep the fire burning, although the wood is very short; and that is another suspicious thing about our carriers, for they have never left us with such a meagre supply before. Hallo, where are you going with those faggots, Ismal?"

This he shouted to one of the natives, whom he saw lifting the last of the wood.

"To feed the fire, sahib," replied the man, with a mild surprise on his face.

"I'll look after the fire myself; you go off to sleep."

"Very well, sahib."

"Say nothing to mother about this. Although she knows who Bhowanee is, still I don't want to frighten her about our followers; and if we two keep awake, we can manage these fellows easily. We'll keep them on the other side of the fire, and spin it out log by log as we can. It ought to last till after midnight, and after that the moon may be over our heads, and give us all the light we require."

"It is a full moon to-night," observed Ronald, clutching his gun.

"Yes, thank goodness for that," replied Jack. "Now, come let us arrange the camp."

Jack returned to the fire, and directed the attendants to arrange themselves on the other side of the fire, the side farthest from the provisions and mules, which these obedient fellows did without remark; after which he placed the sheepskins so as to make as soft a couch as it was possible to do on the hard stones, saying,—

"Lie down, mother, and have the first sleep. Ronald and I will take the first watch."

"No, Jack, let us all watch this night."

"All right; only do your watch horizontally, and we will do ours on the perpendicular."

The natives, obedient to the command, were now lying in the places assigned to them, with closed eyes, breathing softly, as if composing themselves to sleep, while Jack and Ronald stood leaning upon their guns, and Mrs Bangles lay watching their faces with anxious eyes.

Falko also crouched close beside the low embers, warming his little hand-like paws, and nodding his head after the manner of a watchman who is determined to show that he is all awake. Simultaneously with the paws, the head would

sink slowly on the hairy chest, then, with a jerk, both head and paws would be lifted, while the lashless lids snapped open and shut viciously, as the gleaming eyes glanced suspiciously and restlessly round. Falko was uneasy in his sacred monkey mind about snakes or some other danger which his instinct warned him about, and could not settle himself to repose.

Mrs Bangles meant to keep awake, and strenuously tried to do so, but she was tired out, and the fresh air of the mountains proved too much for her resolve; therefore, after once or twice imitating the tactics of Falko, the earth slid from her, and she was in dreamland.

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## CHAPTER X.

### THE ANACONDAS.

It is said that, at the moment before death comes, the events of a lifetime flash before the dying. Sufferers who have been brought back to life after they were apparently drowned have related their experiences as identical with each other; for instance, few of them can recollect the sensation of choking which they must have experienced during the first second of time of their immersion, but they remember that vivid panorama which so rapidly rolled before their mind's eyes, the scene after scene that spread out, from their earliest infancy until the moment that they sank. After that exhibition came perfect rest and peace, when they were ushered into a fairyland, and gently laid upon a velvety bank in the midst of rare and lovely flowers.

When Mrs Bangles fell asleep, she had a dream which might well have been inspired by the angel of death. She saw the whole of her past life—not as a panorama to an outsider, but rather she reacted it scene by scene, from the hour when she had first comprehended the sensation of life.

It was a pessimistic drama all through, which she took the leading part in; a drama of the Ibsen rather than of the Shakespeare order, where all the humorous and sunshiny incidents were ruthlessly cut away.

She was a child, crying with hunger unsatisfied and over broken toys; in real life the hunger must have been satisfied at times, and before the toys were broken she must have played with them in their complete state; but those light passages she could no more take up than can those morbid writers of the *fin-de-siècle*, for her present dream, like their creations, was a distorted nightmare. Yet it was the picture of life, at least the shadowy side of it.

She left this hopeless childhood and passed into the stage of a girlhood of work and hardship; she was dancing and singing for her pittance, and could not realise any of the pride and joy which she must have felt at the applause, the lights, the music, or the admiration which she had experienced.

Her love period came next, but her lover stood revealed to her as her husband had been, and she took no joy out of his soft speeches; then the wife, the mother and the Rizpah stage passed with all their pains and none of their consolations.

Down to the moment when she had fallen asleep she passed through a series of scenes with the lights turned low until that life drama seemed to have passed in the gloomy twilight of that walled-in Bhowanee pass.

Hopeless tears trickled from her weary eyes and over her wan cheeks as she thought about her wasted life, then all of a sudden they ceased to flow, and a grip of terror caught her heart instead of dreary woe, for, although still sleeping, she seemed to be awake and see what was around her.

The camp fire was still burning dimly, but overhead the full moon was streaming between the rifted rocks with a cold clear lustre which, for the time, lighted up the ridge on which she was lying, but leaving the other side of the abyss in inky blackness.

She saw Jack and Ronald still leaning like statues on their muskets, with Falko at their feet, and the bodies of their attendants prone at the other side of the almost dead fire.

But Jack and Ronald had their heads bent, and she knew that they were fast asleep, although they stood so steadily.

Then she looked towards the mules, and at what she saw there she became frozen with horror, and tried to shriek out her warning to those other sleepers. In vain she tried, for her limbs seemed chained to the rock, and her tongue refused to act.

The pythons which she had seen were back again, not two as before, but swarms of them, stealing up from the abyss, dropping down from the cliff, filling out the ridge with their horrible writhings as they coiled their loathsome links round the cracking ribs of the shrieking mules; while still those sleepers slept on, and would not be warned.

Horror! the great open jaws of a monster rose out of the gulf almost opposite to where she lay, with a phosphorescent gleam in his eyes as he fixed them upon hers; and still she could not move or cry out, although the effort to so almost burst her heart.

Slowly the body followed the head, until he lay beside her, breathing his fiery, poisonous fumes in her face for a moment, as he passed her head and raised himself up the side of the cliff behind her.

Softly that clammy vibration of joints rubbed against her shuddering body, until she saw and felt the extremity wave gently over her feet and waist, and finally reach her neck, under which it slid and met at the other side; and still she could not move.

Round her neck that awful living necklace twisted, and then she felt it beginning to contract, and the next instant she was at peace, wafted from that moonlit scene of horror to a fragrant garden of roses, all dewy and bright with morning sunshine.

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"She is coming round, Ronald. I'll be with you in a moment. Quick, mother, rouse up, rouse up, for we are in deadly danger."

Mrs Bangles came back from the exquisite after-part of her dreadful nightmare with a burning and choking sensation in her throat, and an apoplectic fulness of blood in her head, which for an instant prevented her from seeing anything, or paying much heed to the agonised entreaty of her son Jack.

But, as we have seen, she was an alert and prompt little woman, who never had been able to afford much consideration about her actions, so, at the sound of the shots which rang through her dazed senses, she sprang to her feet and looked about her.

Merciful heavens! her dream in its latter stages was reality after all. The moon was streaming down upon them still, only nearer the tops of the precipice above her than it had been in her dream, so that shortly they would be buried in shadow.

The fire was black out, while beside her lay the bleeding bodies of a couple of the native guides, one of whom still clutched *a scarf* in his cold hand.

Over by the mules she saw the writhing monsters of her dreams coiled round the crushed carcasses of three of the animals, while the others had disappeared; while Jack and Ronald were loading their muskets as they glared down the pass with excitement and horror in their starting eyes.

"Ah, mother, you are better!" shouted Jack. "We must go at once, for this place is a regular nest of anacondas. We have just sent two over the side of the track; but I fear there are more about, not counting the three behind, who have settled our mules. Can you run yet?"

"Yes, Jack; but what about our attendants?"

"Dead; but we'll speak about that presently. Let us move on past these holes. Come on, Falko, old boy, we'll be right yet. Good boy, he has saved our lives once more."

With a shivering glance at that indistinct blending of crushed mules and serpents, Mrs Bangles turned and fled with the boys and the monkey past the dead natives, and along the narrow, slanting ridge, with the sensation still upon her of that clammy coil of tail round her aching throat, and the awful anticipation of another grip, which at any moment might be thrown over her.

They raced along recklessly, never thinking about the provisions or clothing they were leaving behind, or the fatal consequences of a false step or stumble; possessed only by one intense desire, which was to put as great a distance between them and the monsters before that moon passed over the sky aperture and left them in the dark.

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## CHAPTER XI.

### ON THE BRINK OF THE TERAI.

Morning found the wanderers exhausted at the entrance of a forest which crossed the valley lying at the bottom of that awful pass.

The excitement and horrors of the night were over, and they were resting by the side of a brawling torrent, as yet breakfastless, and as far as they knew lost, with only their weapons and what ammunition they carried to help them along.

How they had passed through those awful hours before daylight came to guide their footsteps none of them could recall without a shrinking of the flesh; after the moon had disappeared they had gone on blindly, trusting to the instinct of Falko, as he led them down through the darkness. They did not look any older, and yet Mrs Bangles vowed that it was enough to have bleached even Falko's soft hair.

However, Falko possessed that rarest and happiest of all gifts which can be bestowed upon either beast or human—of being able to put off care or old troubles as one puts off an overcoat when no longer required, even if he was not yet magnanimous enough to forget old wrongs. But then we cannot expect more from the soul of an ape than humanity generally gives. Falko was progressing wonderfully, he had already acquired gratitude and fidelity, which are two paces above animal affection.

At the present moment he had left them for a scamper amongst the trees, to relax his muscles while picking up his breakfast, they naturally supposed, which they would have also liked to have done, only that their ammunition was limited now, and for the future they would have to be very sure of their marks, and reserve their shot for large game, and this would require a deal of hunter caution and careful stalking.

Jack had told his mother what their experience had been while she slept.

It had happened exactly as she had dreamt. In spite of both their efforts to keep awake, they had lost consciousness for a few minutes, and might all have fallen victims but for the better watch of the monkey, who had roused them both just in time to save their own lives and hers.

Five out of the seven guides were Thugs, and after finishing their unlucky comrades, they had stolen across the fire, and had just passed the *roomál* round Mrs Bangles' neck, when Falko woke the boys by biting them on the legs; then the pistols and guns had done the rest.

As the Thugs fell, the avengers became aware of the other peril threatening them; and then their hands were kept busy until Mrs Bangles recovered her consciousness.

"How long was I insensible?" asked the little mother.

"About two minutes, I should say," replied Jack.

"And yet it was long enough for me to remember ages of paradise. I wandered through miles on miles of beautiful gardens, and experienced more pleasure than could be compressed into three lifetimes. I passed through forty years of misery, and I don't know how many forties of happiness, during those few hours of sleep. It is wonderful, this eternity which is independent of time. I don't think I can ever fear death again."

"Only not to be administered by a strangler, whether Thug or python," replied Jack laughing, and yet shivering at the thought of the night.

"I don't know, boys, that it matters much how the fiat comes," said Mrs Bangles dreamily; "I feel like one who has been in heaven, and come back again with an added gift."

"You have perhaps got the gift of Thomas the Rhymer," observed Ronald.

"Who was he?" asked Jack.

"A man who once lived for seven years with the fairies, and when he got back he could read the hearts of men, and had the gift of prophecy."

"That is exactly how I feel," said Mrs Bangles earnestly. "I can see things in front of us that I never saw before, and I know that we will pass through all our adventures safely."

"Can you see what Falko is doing now?" asked Jack the practical, with a laugh.

"Yes; he has caught a nice fat peahen, and is bringing her to us for breakfast," replied his mother quietly.

"Ha! ha! not bad for the first prediction of our wise little prophet," cried Jack boisterously. "And I only hope it will come to pass, for I am jolly hungry."

"By George, but your mother is right," shouted Ronald, looking over his shoulder, "for here comes Falko with his prize."

"Good old mother; good boy, Falko; now to raise a fire, and cook the beauty."

It was true. Falko, after satisfying his own hunger, had actually thought about the wants of his friends, and was now straddling along towards them, dragging a fine young peahen by the neck, which he had caught and killed, looking as proud of his achievement as a sportsman could do over his first tiger.

"Bravo! Falko the shikari, what luck we had when we discovered you," cried both the lads gleefully, as Falko came up to them, looking as solemn as a judge, and after dropping the fowl at their feet, waiting for the applause which he was so sure of getting; then, after being cuddled all round, he sat down quietly to munch some nuts that he had also brought with him.

A fire was soon lit, and with some wet clay from the bed of the river; plastered round the feathers, they put it gipsy-fashion amongst the embers, and let it bake, piling on more wood meanwhile above it, which the monkey assisted them to bring in.

In less than an hour the clay casket was baked solidly and hard; then Jack rolled it out of the heat, and breaking it open with a rock, the fowl lay before them, plucked, white, juicy and smoking hot; for after all, although it may appear a rude and savage way of cooking, there can be no better system of cooking feathered game than this, or with less trouble, for the clay, which used to be our ancestors' only soap, cleans the skin, while being hermetically sealed it keeps in all the juice and flavour, as well as the nourishing qualities which so often escape up the chimney.

It was a delicious breakfast, washed down with the water from that cool fresh mountain stream, and amply sufficient for the wants of the little party.

"Well, boys, now that we have become reduced to the condition of primitive man, what do you propose?" asked Mrs Bangles, when she saw that they could eat no more.

"First thing to be considered is our ammunition," replied Jack; for Ronald, being quite content to do as he was ordered, left the planning out to Jack and his mother. "We must make that spin out as far as possible, therefore the best thing we can do while we are here, with such good clay at hand, is to make a few dozen bullets; and while they are baking, Falko and I will go into the forest, and cut down some saplings to make bows from. Then we can all push on, keeping as close to the river as we can; it's bound to lead us into some other pass, as it flows from the west."

"Very well, Jack, you and Falko go and cut the saplings, and Ronald will help me to make the bullets," said Mrs Bangles.

"Are these bows for the small game?" asked Ronald.

"Yes, old chap, to save our powder."

"And what are the clay bullets for?"

"To use instead of arrows. I'll show you how to fix up a sling-bow when I come back. Mother knows what size the bullets ought to be, and with them and a little practice we never need run short of painted pheasants, pea-fowls or small game, besides having the advantage over muskets, that they can be fired without making a noise, which may be of service

to us in these strange parts until we find out what like the natives are."

For the next hour or two Mrs Bangles and Ronald engaged themselves digging out and rolling up good-sized marbles of clay, which, after being dried in the sun, they carried over to the fire and baked, and then by the time they were getting hungry again Jack and Falko came back, the boy carrying over his shoulder a little pig, which he had managed to kill with his axe, while the monkey carried the saplings. It had taken them some time to get the exact kind of wood wanted for their purpose, so that the day was pretty well advanced by the time they had discussed the merits of that juvenile porker, therefore they decided to camp where they were for that night, and continue their journey fresh on the morrow.

The ground where they were now resting was bare and rocky, with patches here and there of jungle, but no sign of human habitation. Behind them lay the sterile range over which they had passed, closing in gradually to that terrible gorge through which the river swept along, a place of shadow and gloom unutterable.

In front of them the valley widened out gradually, and spread away for many miles, how far they could not calculate; but as it trended westward, and the track was a well-worn one, they felt that they were on the right direction, and might any day meet with a caravan of merchants going either east or west.

A fertile valley the upper portion of this was that stretched before them. At a distance of about half a mile the vegetation began, ushering the way to the dense and bosky cover of virgin forest and terai land, which, lovely as it appeared, was about as deadly with its vegetable miasma to human life as it was prolific in the lower animal product.

Yet the track led through this tangled and mighty forest of gigantic trees and radiant creepers, proving that man had made it for his convenience; and that was sufficient to inspire them with the hope that it might be traversed with comparative safety.

Far away, and swimming in blue haze, they could see the rugged outlines of mountains, some of the more distant cones being snow-covered, while the rapidity and coldness of that turbulent stream proved to them that it at least found an unimpeded course through the forest from those white mountains beyond.

There is always something sympathetic with human life about a swift-flowing river. It is bracing and hope-inspiring, whereas the stagnant streams suggest, in a tropical land, deadly swamps and poisonous lagoons, with their swarms of alligators and other noxious life.

Here, of course, they knew that they would be in the midst of animal life in its most savage and dangerous aspect. The enormous tigers and panthers might be encountered at any time, as well as countless varieties of wild game, the antelope, wild boar, untamable bull, and colossal elephant—all the fauna as well as flora of India waited for them in those leafy recesses, so that they would have to walk warily by day and take up their abode each night in the branches with the different varieties of Falko's ancient family. They knew also that even larger pythons might have to be encountered than those they had fled from in the mountains, as well as other strange and terrible monsters, the Metchis, who looked more like beasts than human beings, and who were even more ferocious than the most remorseless of hunger-pressed animals.

They knew likewise that this was not the way which had been described to them at Cashmere, therefore, for some purpose, they had been taken out of the ordinary course. But it was too late now to turn back; better to face unknown dangers than again traverse that terrible Bhowanee Pass.

And they were once more hopeful, for had not Mrs Bangles predicted that they would live to see the end of their journey, while she had already given them a proof that her predictions were worthy of credence.

Therefore, hopeful, as boys will be under the most adverse circumstances when they are healthy, Ronald and Jack lay back and enjoyed themselves, watching the setting of that golden sun behind those far-distant, snow-covered peaks, while Falko took his well-earned rest beside them.

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## CHAPTER XII.

### THROUGH THE TERAI.

That night passed, without particular incident, while they kept watch and watch about.

It was a delicious night, mellow and summery, in green lustre, with that electric moon sailing above the earth through a cloudless sky, and the shadows of the wild herds coming over the plains to drink in the open.

The underlife of the forest woke up and greeted the rising moon with their different voices; the jackals howled, the tigers shrieked like giant cats, the elephants trumpeted, while, all night long, the frogs kept up a chorus, and the grasshoppers chirruped, so that only people who, like our travellers, had grown accustomed to the din, could have slept at all.

Next morning they were up at daybreak, and had started with hardly a pause.

The track was a broad one, and kept at most parts pretty near to the river. Elephants had passed along that way quite recently they could see from the tendrils and branches, as well as young trees that had been swept away on either side, so that it was easy for them to follow the trail, therefore they made fair progress.

As the sun rose, the branches above them became alive with bird life and baboons, who regarded the wanderers with great curiosity, but particularly Falko. They sprang from branch to branch after them, but that sedate and civilised monkey did not even condescend to notice his kindred, keeping alongside of his friends, and trying, as far as he could, to imitate their gait, as he carried on his shoulder one of the bows which Jack had made the day before.

It was not long before Jack saw his chance, and brought down with his clay bullets some pigeons and a partridge, which served for the first wood meal. His bows were composed of two long pieces of bamboo, fastened together at the top and bottom, and kept apart with cross pieces, so that when he drew the string, the bullet passed through the centre space with great force; and as he had practised this kind of weapon before, he seldom failed to bring down what he aimed at. Ronald, also, was not long in acquiring the knack, as the birds found to their cost, it being after the style of a catapult, only much stronger and surer.

All that day they travelled swiftly, with the forest growing denser, until the track became like a long tunnel, with only a dim, green twilight breaking in upon them; great trees, with moss-covered trunks and massive branches blending together overhead, while tendrils hung down in every direction like long snakes.

At times they would come upon side passages which the droves of wild elephants had made from other parts of the forest to the river; these side tracks troubled them a good deal, and brought them often to a stand, while they had to hunt about for the right track; but otherwise, as yet, they found nothing to impede their progress.

As they penetrated farther into the woods the daylight grew dimmer, owing to the great mass of leafage overhead; trees growing larger as they went on over the damp and heated soil—fir trees, tamarinds, mangoes, bamboos and banyans, with the great variety of parasites and creepers which clung to the enormous interlacing branches and off-shoots, until they seemed to be walking through the centre aisle of some endless cathedral, with pillars of all sizes and designs on each side of them, cross-rafters overhead, and beautiful designs in green and brown on the transparent roof, while here and there side passages led away to dusky spaces within which the eye could not pierce.

The chattering of apes, screeching of parrots and peacocks, and everlasting cooing of doves fell on their ears from the far-off intricacies of that living roof with a sleepy effect, while the peopled forest about them was deathly silent, for the monsters were sleeping in the dark dens, and waiting on night to begin the endless struggle of life and death.

Sometimes they saw in front of them a drove of antelopes or deer flying across the track from one of these side passages, while after them ran the stalking lithe panther, who had not fed the night before, and therefore could not sleep as did the gorged ones; or they were in time to witness the fierce battle between two bull bisons or buffaloes, while the cows stood waiting on the victor, and watching, as females will, the deadly fight with profound yet heartless interest.

There were no lack of provisions during that march, for the feathered tribes were nearly as tame as farm fowls, and so plentiful that a random shot fired into the branches was almost sure to bring down something, while Falko taught them to know what was edible in the form of the vegetable world; for, as they reasoned, what was good for such an astute

monkey could not be bad for man or woman.

So the first day passed; and when they had gauged that sundown was near at hand, they hastily fixed upon a tree easy to climb, and gathering sufficient firewood to last through the night, they lit their fire, cooked their supper, and then went up to their elevated nest, which would be a protection from the tigers and elephants, while the fire would help to scare away the tree-climbing panthers.

Hardly were they seated when the night fell suddenly over the forest, a night of chaotic blackness, which made their fire gleam doubly bright below them, and helped to cheer them up wonderfully.

As the night advanced, the famishing marauders woke up and raised the echoes with their terrible roarings; while Jack, who was taking the first watch, sat gun in hand, looking about him keenly.

He saw the sleek forms of the royal striped monarchs glide past, with a startled glance out of their green, flaming eyes at the strange sight of that fire. A pack of wolves rushed past, hounding on a blue bull with their snappings and yellings, keeping him on that broad track, and running him to death. He was panting with fatigue as he passed, while the blood-stained froth flicked his burly neck, so that the watcher knew that his race would soon be over.

So the long night passed away, and daylight stole down between the branches, waking up the feathered tribes and monkeys; and they were once more on the road, plunging deeper and deeper into that maze of stems and trunks.

They were now approaching more swampy land, and guessed that they were getting towards the centre of the valley, which would at the hot season have been fatal to them; as it was, they could feel the poisonous effects of the malaria creeping over them, making their steps slow and languid, so that Falko had no difficulty in keeping up with them now.

Every mile seemed harder to traverse as the ground grew softer under their feet, and black oily mud oozed up about their ankles, while the atmosphere was hot and steamy, and the vegetation became ranker and greener at every foot of the way.

They had used one of their cartridges that day on a python that rose against them from the trees, and which at first they had taken for a branch until he opened his terrible jaws and hissed at them. Other venomous reptiles they had seen gliding out of sight, and already they had tackled two black cobras, while on every side swarmed fat centipedes, scorpions and great, revolting-looking spiders.

When night came they had hardly energy enough to light their fire and climb the tree.

Ronald was a big-made boy, who, being new to the country, they were most fearful about; but it was Jack who first succumbed to the fever. On the second day of this marsh journey he caved in completely, and then Ronald had to take him on his back and carry him, while Mrs Bangles carried the guns.

Ronald belonged to a hardy and plucky race, and although he felt a splitting pain in his head, and his limbs as if they were loaded with iron chains, yet devotion to his companions nerved him on, and gave him for the time a false strength as he staggered after Mrs Bangles, with Jack lying limp and helpless on his back.

Fortunately the worst portion of the swamp was over before Jack broke down. Luckily, also, his mother had with her a bottle of quinine that she had provided and carried on her person, and which she administered freely to them both, as well as taking lavish doses herself; for after about an hour of walking and resting the ground became firmer under foot, and the forest began to show signs of coming to an end.

Then Jack began to mend, the fever for the time leaving him as suddenly as it came on. After that he was able to walk slowly for perhaps half an hour, when they would rest till the shivering fit left him, and he could go on again.

That evening they could see the red glow of the setting sun fire up the trunks ahead of them, and by noon the following day they had passed the last of the giant trees, and were once more able to breathe the pure air of heaven. Then Jack became himself again, energetic and hopeful.

"We won't come back that way, mother?"

"Not if we can find another," replied his mother; "but where are we now, I wonder?"

Behind them lay the forest; before them rose a range of mountains with a great split in the centre, through which rushed

the river, and into this gorge the track was plainly trenching.

After a good long rest they started off once more on the ascent, and by night were able to camp on the crest of the first ridge, with the river half a mile under their feet, and before them a flat tableland leading on to another and loftier range of hills.

This plain was grass-covered, with a few trees growing upon it, while a fine fresh breeze was blowing over it, and, as they could perceive, it was a first-rate place for game of the deer order; in fact, as Ronald said, it was quite like one of the Scotch moors.

What pleased them more than all this was to see a stone building standing about a mile from them, and towards this they hastened, trusting that it might be inhabited, for they were longing to look once again upon some other humanity.



## CHAPTER XIII.

### A MEDIEVAL KNIGHT.

The tower stood out boldly and grimly against the darkening sky and those hazy, far-off ranges as they approached it, a green sky above, with violet hills, a grey fireground of boulders and tufted grass, and that warm-tinted granite pile greeted them like a friend after the trials they had undergone.

It was built upon a slight eminence, composed of grass and scaurs, round which a small brooklet babbled along over the stones which lay about its shallow bed, reflecting in a lighter gleam the dusky green of the hasty twilight, while a bridle-path wound round to the other side, where the gateway evidently was.

This tower was massive, square built, and almost gothic in its simplicity, punctured at places with narrow-port holes, and seemingly built on this spot to command the highway which ran past its foot. Sternly and silent it stood, without a light shining from it, or any other sign that it was inhabited.

They followed the bridle-path, and soon saw that, at the front, a high wall protected it, making an inner courtyard, with a horse-shoe gate of solid iron between them and it.

Whether inhabited or not they could not yet tell, but as the gate resisted all their attempts to open it, they resolved to give it the benefit of the doubt, so with the butt of his musket Ronald began to hammer lustily against the iron, raising echoes which must have woken the seven sleepers had they been inside.

After doing this for a few minutes without any reply, Jack, who was standing a little distance off, looked up to the top of the wall, and was a little startled to see a figure clad in mail, with an arrow fixed to his bow, taking a deliberate aim at him.

"Hold there," he shouted in the native language, "there is no necessity to shoot us for merely knocking at your castle; we are not an invading army."

"How many are there of you?" asked the figure harshly.

"Three small fellows and a monkey, that's all," answered Jack.

"Where do you come from?"

"Cashmere."

"What do you want?"

"Shelter for the night."

"What are you?"

"Minstrels and dancers."

"You speak the truth, Bachna?"

"By the prophet, yes."

"Wait where you are and I will see; move an inch, and an arrow will pierce your foolish brain."

The mail-clad watchman disappeared as he finished this warning, and the three wanderers stood-stock still while they waited on further developments; that warning, with these slits in the wall, being too significant for them to neglect.

"Nice reception this, Jack," observed Mrs Bangles, gently.

"I expect they have to be careful who they admit, particularly in the dark," answered Jack, standing as easily as he could manage it, with the sensation of being such a fair target for those inside.

A few more minutes and they heard the bolts drawn, while the door swung open and a voice said,—

"Enter in the name of Allah, and peace be with you."

It was not without a little tremor that they passed under the gateway into the dark courtyard, nor were they much reassured when they heard the clashing and bolting of the heavy gate behind them. However, they were in now, and must make the best of the situation.

"Come this way, strangers."

Each felt himself grasped firmly by the arms and led across the yard into a side door and along a dark passage; then, after mounting some steps, another door was suddenly pushed open, and they found themselves inside a chamber lighted by torches.

For a moment the transition from darkness to this ruddy glare made them blink like owls, and then the scene unfolded itself.

A bare stone chamber of about forty feet square, with some skins flung about the floor, on which also was placed the remains of a hunter's supper, while before them stood a score of tall warriors in various stages of armament, the whole lighted by torches which had been stuck into iron hoops round the walls—a robber-like and medieval picture worthy of the pencil of Salvator Rosa.

Had they, by some strange freak of witchcraft, been suddenly transposed from the nineteenth to the early middle ages? It almost seemed so to Ronald as he regarded the strange company he was amongst—bearded and fierce-looking warriors, with their faces tawny and scarred as the Black Douglas, with their gyves and casques, chain-armor and shields, spears, swords, battle-axes and maces, and their slings, bows, arrows and cross-bolts scattered about.

A few months ago they had been in the thick of modern warfare, with its attendant yet generally more distant horrors; when cannon and musket more often decided the battle than the close-quarter take-and-give style.

Ronald had been a great devourer of history and tales of doughty deeds of olden pluck and chivalry, and had often wished that he could roll back the centuries and be a warrior knight armed cap-a-pie, riding out as St George of Merry England, or St Andrew of Sturdy Scotland, in search of adventures, to do battle with dragons and all sorts of strange monsters, ready to die in shining armour so that no flaw stained his character as a perfect knight.

Some of these enthusiastic ideas he had also imparted to the more modern and practical Jack Bangles, who, however, had a great many of the impulses which mould the followers of the Lion-hearted Richard than those which were supposed to govern the companions of the Round Table; so that, while the glory seemed enough for Ronald's ambition, Jack meditated very deeply on the amount of gold likely to be picked up at the termination of the adventure; but then they had been trained in such different schools.

Mrs Bangles, or, as they had agreed to call her, Carlo, in her assumed character, as her Christian name was Caroline, liked the idea of gold very much for what it could purchase, which, after all, is the only practical way of regarding this precious metal. As a stage-trained heroine, she liked also the glitter and pageantry of glory as it was represented in the present case, or the medieval days much better than the uninteresting uniforms of the nineteenth century; but dearer than all else she loved change and excitement, therefore she was happy in her present life in spite of all its discomforts and dangers, and satisfied with the stage effect of the tableaux before her. Her days were over for playing the part of the distressed damsel, but she adored masquerading as a page or a troubadour, and here was a glorious opportunity.

Like Ronald, she was not at all satisfied with the style in which battle was conducted, as she had seen it during the past six months. It seemed so paltry and methodical to see generals standing on hills with their field-glasses, and conducting a battle as if it were a game of chess. The great heroes of modern battles were all such sedate little fellows, and their tactics so wholesale and uninteresting that no one could possibly grow enthusiastic about them, however much they might admire the individual prowess of isolated subordinates; but with men like these, who wielded battle-axes instead of field-glasses, and who took as well as gave manly blows at close quarters, there was something which even a withered little middle-aged woman might get a heart-throb over.

And they were worth looking at, these medieval men with their stalwart limbs, handsome faces, and bold, swashbuckler ease and swagger, hardly one of which did not wear a cut or a mark of battle about him, as they stood around, waiting on their leader to question the new arrivals.

This leader was a young man of about twenty-five, tall and commanding in his manner, with a slight beard, jet black, framing his handsome but strong face, while his inky hair fell in a heavy and wavy cloud over his broad shoulders—a lion-like young man he looked with his bright, bold, dark eyes flashing from each side of a well-shaped Jewish-looking nose, even while a hospitable smile parted his firm lips, and showed the milky teeth within.

He had removed his helmet and leg armour, and wore over his tunic a finely-wrought close-fitting shirt of chain-mail, with a broad belt of gold glittering with precious stones, which held up his keen-edged tulwar and dagger in their velvet and ornamental scabbards.

"A hero," Ronald thought, "if ever there was one; as Sir William Wallace might have looked before his troubles came on."

"A man to stick in with," Jack thought; "for where he goes money and loot must follow."

"What a stage presence!" thought Mrs Bangles; "and what a splendid Antony he would make to my Cleopatra."

"You come from over the hills; you are not Indians, I see, although you have painted your skins to look like them; what are you?" asked this hero, in a pleasant and musical voice.

"We are English, what you call Feringhees," answered Mrs Bangles honestly; for something about this young man forbade equivocation.

"Good! I have heard of your people and their mode of fighting, which is not ours." An expression of contempt flitted over his expressive features, which was reflected in the faces of his men, but quickly controlled in his as he continued,— "But of that I may speak more to you another time; meanwhile, you are our guests, and doubtless ready for supper."

He clapped his hands as he spoke, and at the sound an attendant entered.

"Bring some fresh cooked meat for these our guests; we have already supped," he added, turning courteously to Ronald, who, being the biggest, he concluded must be the leader, "therefore you will excuse us sharing with you; but make yourselves at home, for this place is yours entirely."

The servants must have anticipated some such order, for he had hardly finished speaking when the door at the end opened and several retainers appeared, carrying smoking dishes from which floated most appetising vapours, while others bore in fruits which made the sunken orbs of Falko sparkle. These they placed on the floor, with skins of panthers and tigers in front of them for the visitors to recline upon in the Oriental fashion.

While they were satisfying their hunger, the leader sat himself down at a little distance from them, while the other warriors flung themselves carelessly about; then, taking up an instrument of the harp order, he began to sing a soft and tender ditty, the chorus of which the others took up.

After the leader had given his contribution, one of the others began in a deep, strong voice to recite a war-chant, which, being half song half ballad, occupied the full time that the wanderers were eating. After this Mrs Bangles, who was dying to show off the accomplishments of herself and company, offered her services.

"If you are not too tired, we should enjoy this above all things," said the leader, with restrained eagerness.

He was a most considerate host, but it was easy to see that oral performances formed the only amusement they had.

Mrs Bangles excelled herself that night, for her audience were enthusiastic, easily pleased, and handsome men. Jack and Ronald also performed with spirit; while as for Falko, his contortions and gags were watched with absorbing interest and spellbound silence. They had never witnessed anything before like this, and were awed beyond words, thinking it the result of witchcraft.

One part of the show was a display of swordsmanship between Ronald and Jack, and this was watched with the most excitement by the leader and his men. When it was finished, he started up and said,—

"You two boys can fight as well as sing and dance. Can you, Bachna, do the same?"

"No," replied Mrs Bangles; "I can only dance and sing."

"Then you will be our minstrel, but we shall make warriors of your brothers, for it would be a pity for such fine boys to spend their lives dancing and singing only. Now to sleep, for we must be on the march at daybreak."

Obedient to the command, each man rolled himself in his own rug, and shortly afterwards, the deep breathing and nasal trumpetings were only to be heard in that primitive sleeping-chamber.

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## CHAPTER XIV.

### A TIGER HUNT.

Khalim Khan, the Afghan prince, whose hospitality our wanderers accepted, was a young man of so many knightly and noble qualities that he seemed almost out of place in the non-chivalrous nineteenth century. He would have been one of the chosen flowers of chivalry in the days of the honour and glory-loving warriors, who devoted themselves to the pure and proud causes of Faith, Honour and Beauty, for he could no more think of taking even the wild beast he was hunting at a disadvantage than he could deny help to the needy.

As they galloped out of the castle next morning—for he had given them good mounts—he informed them that he and his companions had been hunting in the terai forest for the past ten days, so that it was only by chance that they had not met before, as they had not been more than a couple of hours in front of them on that day.

He had been hunting for tigers, panthers and elephants, and had succeeded in capturing forty-eight young tiger and panther cubs alone, and over a score of young elephants, which they had left in the castle to be tamed until his next hunting visit.

"Your people hunt the tiger as they fight their other enemies, by standing at a safe distance and murdering them with guns. Ah! yes, we have enemies whom we go to war with who use the same methods when we let them, but we do not mind that. My people love battle, not for slaughter or the lust of conquest, but because it is manly to fight hand to hand on equal terms. If my foeman has a tulwar, I use only a tulwar, and place my trust in Allah; but if he has a gun, I rush on him and take the coward weapon from him, and then kick him out of my way if he cannot use his steel."

"Why do you capture so many tigers, Behádúr?" inquired Mrs Bangles.

"It is a fancy of my royal sire to have these beasts about him; they are very powerful, swift and smooth in their running, so he has a regiment of charioteers with tigers and panthers to draw them instead of horses; but the poor beasts do not take kindly to our snow-clad mountains, and therefore seldom live long. Thus I have to replenish the stock very often."

It was a gallant cavalcade which rode out of that moorland turret on this early morning. Those warriors whom they had seen the night before were the knights and captains of the band, the troopers being located in some other part of the building, so that when they were marshalled, five hundred men-at-arms followed their leaders, with a troop of tame and half-broken elephants, and about fifty half-grown tigers, who were for the present yoked to the baggage and provision waggons, taking their servitude in a sullen and rebellious manner. Mrs Bangles and her companions gave these dangerous-looking feline slaves as wide a berth as they could.

The young chief rode along fully caparisoned, as were his followers, with a tame hawk at his wrist, as also had most of his followers, for hawking was evidently a favourite pastime with them. Jack and Ronald, wearing suits of chain armour that he had bestowed upon them, and which made them both look very manly and knight-like, while Mrs Bangles was attired in a rich tunic and leggings, and behind her perched that clever mountebank, Falko.

Fully a couple of hundred great, black and thick-coated hunting-dogs accompanied the cavalcade, trotting sedately on each side, and forming a bodyguard for the captive tigers. Splendid animals they were, each nearly as large as the half-grown tigers they were looking after.

Prince Khalim bestrode a powerful black stallion, well suited to his own majestic and powerful frame; his helmet of polished steel, with a fillet of gold round the base, and a large ruby set in the front of the spike, which was further adorned with a tuft of scarlet feathers. On his breast he wore over his chain shirt a heavy cuirass of the same polished metal, and his legs, knees and thighs were protected with sheet armour; also a richly-embroidered cloak floated from his broad shoulders, so that he looked a very gallant and commanding object; while the easy way he managed his steed was grace impersonified. A little behind him rode his squire, carrying a round and beautifully-damascened steel and gold-wrought shield, set with uncut gems, and a heavy spear.

With a rare courtesy he made his guests ride on each side of him, explaining to them the country they were passing through, while his followers laughed and chatted amongst themselves with a freedom which proved that, whatever he might be in the hour of battle, he was no stickler for ceremony in the hour of peace.

As they reached the moor, and a little way from the castle, they turned round to wave farewell to those whom they had left behind, and who now lined the tops of the massive walls.

"That tower marks the limit of my father's dominions, and has to be guarded carefully, for we have troublesome neighbours, which must be my apology for receiving you as we did last night. Our hunting ground, the terai forest, is no man's land, but beyond that we have many enemies."

They were off at a gallop across the jungly moor as the prince spoke, with the early morning breezes fanning their faces as they blew cool from the distant snow-covered mountains, and the sky above them clear as an opal, for the sun had not yet risen over the Bhowanee ranges. A delicious morning ride that was, which effectually banished the last traces of swamp languor that remained in their blood.

"The tigers and panthers sneak up here from the forest, and work rare havoc amongst the wild game, lying so close to the rocks that it is almost impossible to see them. Ah, there goes one now; let us have a chase."

As the great striped monster bounded from its cover, the horsemen spread themselves out fan-like, and made off after it with loud hunter shouts, while the dogs followed at full speed, leaving the baggage waggons and elephants to come on at their leisure.

A splendid full-grown specimen of the jungle the hunted tiger was, looking fully twelve feet long as it stretched out to its fullest extent, and bounded with high leaps over the low grass, like a great, frightened cat.

But swift although it was at the start, it was no match in endurance for either the fresh horses or those magnificent dogs, for after half an hour of running it showed signs of fatigue, while the dogs got well beyond it, and with their fierce yelpings turned it at bay; then Ronald for the first time saw the savage monarch of the jungle in a passion of rage, a sight he was not likely to forget soon.

After running to right and left in a frantic desire to escape if possible, the tiger retreated to a rising mound, and faced his approaching hunters.

"Shall I give him a bullet, your highness? he is in fine position for a shot," asked Ronald, turning to the prince.

"No, Bachna, let us hunt him fairly, his teeth and claws against my steel; see."

The prince as he spoke flung himself carelessly from his horse, and drawing his tulwar, advanced on foot to meet the enemy, while the others drew rein and looked calmly on.

Both Ronald and Jack shuddered as they witnessed this foolhardy proceeding, while Mrs Bangles clung to her pommel with white lips, for against those terrible grinders and iron-like sledge hammers of fore-feet what chance had that mail-clad figure?

As the hunter advanced warily and slowly, the tiger stood and watched him, a study of the most devilish fury which could be imagined, its ears laid flat back, his great jaws wide open, with a horrid contraction on its brows, and its yellow eyes blazing, as if lighted from behind. Every hair on its back was stiff and upstanding, while its lithe body quivered in every muscle, and its tail was swollen to three times its ordinary size, and waved from side to side as the claws struck out and scraped the earth in a most suggestive fashion.

Then all at once, while the prince was about ten feet from it, it suddenly crouched down, while a wave passed over it like the undulating movement of a huge serpent, and with a hoarse, barking roar of defiance and unutterable rage, it made its deadly spring.

Next instant it was rolling helplessly and in its death agony on the spot where the prince had been, tearing the ground up in great ruts, while it spat out its impotent wrath, and filled the air with its awful roars.

The deed was so swiftly done that they had hardly time to see how it had been performed. They saw the hunter leap to one side as the tiger made his swift spring, then a flash like lightning as the tulwar sung through the air and descended upon the back of the beast's neck, cutting through the spinal cord, and nearly severing the massive head from the mighty body.

"That is how we kill tigers," remarked the prince with a laugh, as he wiped his tulwar with a tuft of grass, and returned it

to its scabbard; then he sprang lightly upon his horse's back, while the tiger uttered its last cry, and lay still and terrific, even in death, on the torn ground.

Leaving the carcase to be looked after and skinned by the attendants coming behind, the cavalcade once again resumed its marching order, and rode on rapidly till the mid-day halt, when the tents were quickly raised, and food placed before the company.

Two hours were allowed for resting the horses, and then they were off again, reaching another town at the farther end of the plateau, and covering a distance of nearly eighty miles between sunrise and sunset. Mrs Bangles, Jack and Ronald were glad to stretch their wearied limbs on the rugs, but the hardy Afghans seemed to think nothing of that day's journey; for while the three lay with heavy lids and aching bones, the singing went on with as much spirit as it had done the night before.

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## CHAPTER XV.

### A DANGEROUS PASSAGE.

For seven days they travelled hard through fearsome passes, over dangerous rivers, up ice and snow-bound ridges, and on the eighth day they were climbing the last mountain that stood between them and the royal city towards which they were bound.

They had passed many castles and villages during that journey, the prince being greeted everywhere with enthusiasm by his father's subjects, while he replied to these greetings kindly, speaking to the meanest as if he was a personal friend, and listening patiently to their troubles and complaints, after which he put personal questions to them, which proved that he had a good memory for each individual, a quality that ever endears the ruler to his subject.

Sometimes at these halts a criminal had to be tried and punished, either with the bastinado or the gallows; but these were the unavoidable duties of his high position, and he gave each a fair and patient hearing before condemnation, so that, while the guilty had to own that their judgments were just, the innocent sent the judge on his way with blessings.

They were a warlike race, who did not spend too much time over the cultivation of their fields, for, as Prince Khalim explained to his visitors, since he had been able to hold a tulwar he had been forced to use it, along with his father, in the defence of their country; and that the present time of peace had been the longest truce they had experienced for many years, and that had lasted fully three months.

"We shall have an opportunity of keeping our swords from rusting very shortly," he added, with a pleasant smile, "for I hear that our neighbours to the north are getting ready for a grand raid, and there are some brave and impetuous warriors amongst them, worthy of any man's steel."

"You believe in war, then, Khalim Khan?" inquired Mrs Bangles curiously.

"Yes, Carlo; love and battle are the greatest of all pleasures to a real man. Don't you think so also?" replied and asked the prince in a grave tone.

"Ah, yes, all wom—I mean all men like me, who have not the strength themselves for fighting, believe it is the noblest and most admirable thing on earth; but as for love—"

"Do you not believe also in love, Carlo?"

"No, Khan, not much," replied Mrs Bangles, with a contraction of her brow.

"Then have you been most unfortunate in your own experiences, Carlo, for I perceive, although you are small and slender, that you are no longer a boy," answered the prince, with gentle kindness.

"No, Behádur, I am no longer young, and never was a boy—like my brothers, and I do speak from experience," replied the poor disguised actress with intense bitterness; and then she continued, in a lighter vein,— "Although I can sing better about battles than share in them, yet I think I can understand the thrill of excitement which must light up the heart of a strong man like you when he plunges into danger; also the passion which must possess him when he sees his foemen fall beneath his sword."

"And yet all this is but the beastlike and ignoble part of battle which the noble warrior ought to subdue and feel ashamed of, Carlo Bachna," replied the prince gravely. "Listen, and I will try to tell you the noble part of battle which we strive to keep before us. When a tyrant oppresses his fellow-man, or invades the domain of another for his own selfish aggrandisement, then the true warrior feels that he is fighting the cause of Allah, and he goes out to battle without the passion or the pride you speak of, but with a purer glow within his breastplate, and that makes him doubly armed. He does not fight to kill, but to punish the wronger and free the wronged, and he strives his hardest with his antagonist to prove to all mankind that his cause is the right one. He is humble about his own strength and skill, because the first is an accident in which he had no voice, and the other is the result of training; yet must he be proud also of these perfections, because they are gifts from Allah, who has chosen him to be his servant and champion.

"Still, above all, must he learn to subdue passion and rancour if he would be a true knight, otherwise his strength,

courage and skill are only to be likened to that of the savage tiger, who, beastlike, can feel no pity for the victim that his strength has overcome. The great warrior must be able to face death bravely, yet calmly, and never draw his tulwar unless his conscience tells him that it is right to do so; but he must always have justice and mercy to temper his strokes, even in the hottest hour, otherwise he may become a criminal with a stain upon his soul, which many prayers cannot take away."

"Do you always fight in this spirit, Behádur?" asked Mrs Bangles, surprised at these sentiments; while Ronald and Jack looked at the tawny hero with sparkling eyes.

"Not always, alas!" replied the prince sadly; "but then I am only a young warrior as yet, and full of faults, but I can repent when passion has led me astray, and strive to do better the next time."

"And what about love?" asked the inquisitive actress.

"I have a wife whom you shall see when we reach home, for with us we do not hide our women as if we were afraid to trust them, and as do some others of our faith. Also, although the prophet permits us to have more than one wife, yet I have learnt that love cannot divide itself, although friendship may. My wife is to me the fairest and best of all the many gifts which Allah has bestowed upon me, and her soul travels with me wherever I go, so that I cannot be unfaithful to her without being false to myself; thus when I approach her it is with the same fullness of faith and reverence that I kneel to Allah, my reward being joy from her and courage from the giver."

"Ah, that is a rare and terrible faith; supposing she was taken from you, Behádur?"

"By the will of Allah?"

"Yes—perhaps."

"Then I would still be her husband and her companion, waiting, I trust, with the courage of a man until I meet her again in the beautiful land."

"But if her heart went from you?"

The prince rode on for some moments in silence, his face working with strong emotion; then he subdued this with a mighty effort, and said, with a forced laugh,—

"That is impossible with me, for when love like mine envelops a woman, she becomes blind to all else—she is my wife."

Mrs Bangles stole a side glance from under her lids to that kingly face, which her feminine but cruel suggestion had for the moment clouded, and then she sighed heavily as she murmured to herself,—

"Happy woman if she can appreciate the priceless gift which God has given her."

They were now ascending one of the most tremendous of the many passes which they had traversed during their seven days' passage through this mountainous and rugged country.

High above them loomed the precipices; at the base, fantastic-shaped masses of rock, and at the tops, peaks of solid ice and snow.

They had to walk carefully without speaking, as the slightest noise became magnified into a hundred hoarse echoes, that rolled upwards like the reports of cannons, and shook down overwhelming avalanches from those dizzy heights.

They had left the last village in the valley, as usual, at dawn, and for five hours had pushed along as fast as they could travel up the sides of the mountains, where the path zig-zagged through pine trees and cedars, intermixed with granite cliffs of various colours, over which waterfalls flashed whitely as they sank into streams that gushed across the ridge and fell again into the river as it flowed below them. Some of these cliffs were rose-tinted, and looked very beautiful with the bright green tendrils which clung about them.

In five hours' time they were above the line of vegetation, and had reached the region of ice and snow, so that they seemed to be climbing along a ledge of glass with crystal walls on the one side of them, and blue space on the other.

A slip would precipitate them into unknown depths; while before them the defile was gradually narrowing, until in the distance it appeared like a narrow slit between upright blocks of ice, some of which lurched forward as if they were about to collapse with their top weight of snow, while others, again, completely roofed-in their gloomy passage.

When they had started, the morning had been sultry and dead calm, the sure sign of a storm before long; therefore the prince had hurried on his company without pausing to rest, for to be caught by a storm in that pass meant almost certain death. Hundreds of thousands of tons of ice now trembling on the summit would fall at the first clap of thunder, carrying all before them to that far off river bed.

"Not a word now, as you value your lives, until we get through yonder chimney," the prince whispered, as he turned back to his guests, after telling them to dismount and lead their horses as he was doing.

Above their heads the sky had grown yellow and misty, and appeared like an opaque awning of unbleached cotton pressing against the blue and white peaks.

A strange and brooding silence pervaded the space with an oppression even at that altitude, where the air should have been thin and cold. In the valley beneath and behind them that yellow haze was denser, and came creeping up and swallowing the outlines of the landscape with incredible rapidity.

The prince watched those ominous signs with an anxious eye, as he stood and motioned for those in the rear to make haste,—a signal, however, which these experienced mountaineers hardly required, for even the half-tamed tigers seemed to feel the necessity of walking swiftly, softly and silently.

Nearer they all crept toward those terrible and overhanging blocks of ice, looking only to their feet as they went along that slippery ledge.

It was at the most dangerous portion of the pass that this Moslem type of perfect chivalry, who boasted that he had never taken a foeman at a disadvantage, did what might have been expected from him at such a crisis as this, when the tempest might at any moment break upon them; for, signing to his chief captain to take his place as guide he halted with his horse behind him at the extreme edge of the cliff, and waited calmly for the procession to defile past him, as if he had been watching a review.

Closer that yellow patch of daylight seemed to press down upon those icy peaks; higher crept up those waves of yellow haze from the valley; while that majestic form stood calmly on the ledge, with those bulging blocks bending over him; and his followers, inspired by his rigid bearing, crept along past him towards that tunnel in front.

The warriors walked along first; then came the dogs and tigers with their light waggons; and lastly, the elephants with their mahouts—a long line, which left him and his steed behind, and the mist almost up to his feet.

Past the overhanging cliffs the spectral-like procession glided in that dead stillness, only broken by the cracking of ice above them—slight crackling sounds, which made the heart stand still as they were heard.

Through the tunnel they wound, and up the last narrow defile, with the mist now covering them up. A short distance it was in reality, yet to Mrs Bangles and the boys it seemed to stretch out miles, and take up hours before they reached the end, and halted on a smooth plateau of snow on the other side, and watched the others creeping out of that narrow defile.

"Thank Allah, who has permitted us to see the world again," said the prince, as he came out last, leading his horse, and then vaulted lightly on to his back.

As he did so, a loud peal of thunder broke from the mists, and rolled in a thousand vibrations through the pass, followed almost immediately by a louder crashing and grinding of breaking ice.

"We are quite safe here until the storm passes," he remarked calmly. "It will clear our path for us down the hill, and when the clouds go, you will be able to see our capital, the city of Kimwah."

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## CHAPTER XVI.

### THE CITY OF KIMWAH.

It was an appalling tempest while it lasted, with those awful crashings taking place behind them, but it was soon over.

While it lasted, though, it was an "*aging* sensation," as Mrs Bangles shiveringly remarked, to stand there on that snow-covered tableland, with the sulphur-charged, yellow fog, like gunpowder smoke, belching out of that funnel-like gorge, while the thundering artillery went on, and damp chills quivered through them as they waited on the coming of the rain.

Then the sky grew suddenly black above them, and, with a hoarse roar, the winds and the rain swooped down, while the vivid forked lightning flew to right and left as the thunder broke, clap after clap, with fearsome, ear-stunning rapidity, while the half-tamed tigers laid their striped heads between their forepaws, as they crouched down on their bellies, whimpering with fear, and shivering with the unaccustomed cold.

The elephants and the dogs, however, turned their tails to the wind and stood upright, as did Khalim Khan and his armed heroes, lightning conductors each one of them, with those glittering breastplates and helmets. Still they bestrode their horses, and looked calmly at the flashes which darted about them with such startling vividness.

After about half-an-hour of this war of the elements, the black clouds were dashed open, torn into a thousand tattered shreds, and sent skurrying over the peaks, like wind-driven crows, while the mid-day sun came blazing out of the blue vault once more, and the atmosphere became keen, light and exhilarating.

With the wind and rain also swept the mists which had covered the landscape; layer upon layer they unfolded and vanished like clouds of smoke amongst the ice and snow summits of the mountain, above where the caravan waited, while, shortly, a view met their eyes which, for extent and beauty, they had not looked upon before.

Ten or twelve thousand feet below their feet lay a plain of about sixty miles in length and forty broad, through which a large river twisted in a serpentine fashion, forming many a peninsula, and fed by numerous other streams of varied sizes. This plain was green and fertile, with cultivated fields, gardens and grazing ground, over which could be seen the dark spots which denoted herds of cattle, and with red coloured roadways intersecting the plain, bordered by double fringes of trees and hedges.

On every side of this extensive valley or plain towered lofty peaks of snow-covered mountains; lap beyond lap they lay, grand and solemn in their white majesty and picturesque shapes, until they became merged in the extreme distance like a white-crested ocean, while, where the snow limit ended, they became dark with their forest clothing of pines.

In the centre of this rich valley lay the city, nestling amongst its gardens, and spread over one of the peninsulas, and on both sides of the winding river; bridges of boats spanned the river, which was also lined with boats and sails.

A high and massive wall surrounded the city, with numerous towers protecting it, while inside they could see the buildings, streets and gardens, white and ruddy, and rich in their colouring, with many a glittering dome and minaret glinting back the rays of the sun.

It was a closely built and thickly populated city, in the centre of which, and on the peninsula, stood the palace of the king, easily picked out even at that distance from the other buildings by its vast size, as well as its parks, gardens and lake.

"Come, we have some distance to go yet before we are at home," said the prince, after he had allowed them to gaze awhile at the landscape.

"It is lovely," said Mrs Bangles with enthusiasm, as she prepared to mount her horse.

The prince smiled, as if pleased with her approval, but did not reply in words; and then, giving the word, they began the descent.

In an hour's time they had reached the belt of pine forest, and then the rest of the way was easy, for a good mountain road had been made, and they passed several woodmen's huts; so while they rode along leisurely, a messenger galloped off in front to announce their coming.

Down through the woods, fragrant and balmy, they cantered, passing from winter into mild summer with every bound.

The sky was growing golden as they reached level ground, and the roadways looked ruddy after the rain, while the hedges were covered with honeysuckle, jasmine and roses.

The outrider had reached the city in good time, so that the gates were opened, while a cavalcade of horsemen dashed out to welcome the homecoming of the heir, with banners waving and trumpets blaring, and armour glittering in the red beams of the setting sun.

Foremost amongst the oncoming riders galloped two figures on cream-tinted horses—richly caparisoned, as the riders were gorgeously costumed—a man and a woman who kept up side by side.

"Yonder comes Artema and my brother Humayun," cried the prince joyously, as he put spurs to his black stallion, and rode forward rapidly to meet the pair.

In another moment they had met and were side by side, the princess reaching over to embrace her stalwart husband, while the brother patted him affectionately on the back as he got between them; then they waited for the others to come up with them, while the fiery sun went down over the distant snow peaks, staining them rosy like a fierce blush.

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## CHAPTER XVII.

### SUPPER WITH THE KING.

"The king, our father, he is well, I trust, Humayun?" asked Khalim, as he turned from his laughing young wife to his smiling brother.

"Well, but wearying for the return of his favourite son," replied the gaily-dressed cavalier softly.

At the sound of his voice Mrs Bangles turned to look at him critically, after giving a woman's quick flash at the princess.

She saw a slender young man of about twenty with only a slight silky down on his upper lip, not so tall as his brother; and although bearing a slight resemblance, not nearly so good-looking.

The features were thinner and smaller, while the face was long and narrow, with deep-set, small yet piercing black eyes, too close to the bridge of the nose for the ideal of beauty and exact proportion which is usually given as a standard.

His eyebrows grew in a straight line, and without a break, across his low and narrow brow; while his mouth was rather large, with full, red lips, looking very moist.

The chin was long and pointed; and the hair, which lay in thick clusters on his neck, looked dry and lustreless, like coal which has been baked in the sun. It was the face of a pleasure-loving yet crafty intriguer, rather than that of a brave, frank warrior.

In his attire he also displayed the courtier rather than the fighting man; for, with the exception of a light shirt of netted steel, which was nearly covered by a rich tunic of silk, the original texture almost hidden by the hand-sewn patterns in gold thread and gems, while his turban, belt, scarf and shoes positively blazed with the wealth that was upon them. He was the leader of fashion amongst the young bloods of Kimwah, and filled the evening breezes with the perfume of attar of roses which he had about him.

The young wife of Khalim was all that her fond husband described her to be, as far as the artistic sense of beauty could have desired, for she was so vividly and perfectly lovely that even the actress was startled by her face, and for a moment forgot to look at her dress.

Large, liquid and bewitching brown eyes, shaded by lashes so long that they might have hidden ordinary-sized orbs; a clear, creamy skin, with the colour of the blush rose on the cheeks; ripe, dewy and rosebud lips—laughing lips which, as they were parted, now displayed to full advantage the small and dazzling teeth; this, with the mass of rippling hair that fell about her like a dark cloud, was all which could be taken in at the first glance.

The boys, Jack and Ronald, never saw any more, for the serpent-like litheness and superb grace of that form, the richness and coquetry with which it was draped, and the regularity of the other features, were all grasped intuitively, and approved without being classified.

But Mrs Bangles was a woman of great experience, and not likely to be fascinated out of her critical acumen, and this is what she saw:

A young girl of about seventeen, with a face delicate and faultless in its outline, except the fault of those over-large eyes, which was the charm of the other spectators.

A figure perfect in its slender proportions, and as full of vitality and nervous grace as that of a young tigress, and draped with all the art and study of a woman twice her age. Not a gem or fold was about her which did not seem to increase the charms that nature had already endowed her with. She was a youthful Cleopatra, already formed and educated to play her deadly game of conquest.

The sheen in her star-like eyes, the joyous glow and flush of her dusky face, the laugh on her rosy mouth, and that inimitable grace with which she bent from her cream-tinted horse to lay that perfumed head against her husband's breastplate, were the same gifts from nature which create a great actress, finished by constant study before the mirror. Yet Mrs Bangles saw more than all this; for, as the proud husband stooped to kiss the hair that floated about him, she

caught the slow, steady glance which the rich brown eyes threw under those long lashes into the answering black eyes of Prince Humayun, with the smile that had changed to mockery, and straightway the stage-trained actress hated the actress taught only by nature, with an honest abhorrence.

"I have been fortunate, my beloved," said the husband, "not only in the chase, but I have brought back four treasures to amuse the Court."

"You have returned, my husband, safe, and that is enough for Artema;" saying which the beauty righted herself in her saddle and glanced quickly round the company.

"These are the treasures I mean, my princess," continued Khalim, waving his disengaged hand towards his visitors; "three rarely-gifted minstrels and a monkey, that almost would persuade one to believe in the Hindoo god Hunamun, he is such a marvel of cleverness and intelligence."

"Indeed!" answered the princess, with a very careless glance over the introduced company. "They will serve to pass the lonely hours while my lord is absent."

"The saucer-eyed, calculating Jezebel!" muttered Mrs Bangles to herself viciously, as she and the boys fell into their places behind the royal party.

"Is she not beautiful, mother?" whispered Jack, as they rode along side by side towards the city walls.

"Yes," replied the mother shortly.

"And so tender, and loving and gentle!"

"Yes, as the cat is tender when she is being stroked by her master."

"Don't you like her, mother?"

"No!"

"Don't you, Ronald?"

"I think so," replied Ronald, just a little doubtfully; "but I like her husband better."

"That's right, Ronald," retorted Mrs Bangles warmly. "He is a man ten thousand fold too good for such a thing."

"We'll stay here for a hit, mother. Don't you think we'll do well in this place?"

"Yes, Jack, I fancy we shall find ourselves of use here before long, and perhaps do well enough without seeking farther for your Peacock Throne."

"Oh, we must find that treasure eventually; but this will help us on the way to it. Just see how the prince is scattering his coin about."

They had by this time reached the city gate, within which the populace were waiting in a compact mass to welcome this champion prince, who, as he rode amongst his subjects, flung to the right and left a shower of copper and silver pieces that he took from the purse hanging at his side. As he did so, loud shouts rang through the darkening space as the poorer citizens scrambled for the gifts, and the richer ones ran alongside of the glittering cavalcade with fond and familiar greetings, which the warriors answered back as freely.

In this fashion they passed through the narrow streets, with the bazaars and windows lighted up, and over the bridge of boats, while the river gleamed greenly under the fading light; then up the winding steps, where attendants waited with lamps to show them into the illuminated grounds, and on to the great banqueting hall, where the feast was already spread out for their coming.

During their past months' journey through the native courts, Mrs Bangles and the boys had seen a great deal of Oriental ostentation and display, so that they were prepared for anything in the shape of extravagance and barbaric show; but in this great hall into which they had been ushered there was nothing in the least degree like what they had expected.

A Gothic simplicity was the keynote which first struck them on entering—long tables set out with flagons of mountain beer and meed, wild fowl and venison, with haunches of beef and mutton, roasted and cold, stood ready for the carvers.

The walls were left in their plain state, and ornamented only with armoury and trophies of the chase. The pavement was marble, polished by the generations of feet which had passed over it, while the windows were narrow, and protected only by blinds and iron bars. It was a place strong enough to stand a siege, with nothing about it to tempt cupidity.

Yet a great deal more comfortable and homely for all that, Mrs Bangles thought, as with her companions she took her place at the table appointed to them, while the whole troop marched in and ranged themselves according to their military rank in different parts of the hall. The regal party took a table which was raised a couple of feet above the others, and next to the dais on which stood the throne six feet above the floor of the hall, and surmounted by a canopy of crimson velvet and gold.

The throne itself was composed of ivory forcibly carved, with crimson cushions; and in front of this stood a small table only large enough for one person.

When each man had taken his seat, there was a pause of expectancy, and then a door at the far end opened, and the king appeared, leaning on the arms of two attendants, and followed by many other dignitaries and ladies.

"My son!"

"Father!"

The Prince Khalim sprang towards his father, and knelt at his feet, until the old man had placed his hands on his head and blessed him; then, rising, he took the place of the attendant on the right side, and led the king over to the dais and throne, on which he seated him tenderly.

The king was a man over sixty years of age, who had passed the most of his reign fighting hard for his kingdom, surrounded as it had ever been by turbulent and aggressive neighbours. Tall and stalwart he had been in the past, but even the strongest cannot fight constantly for so many years without being worn out.

And he was a worn old warrior before his time, worn with constant anxiety, worn with many wounds until he appeared more like eighty than sixty.

His massive face was scarred with furrows, and his hair and beard were white as snow, which made the dark face look doubly swarthy. Yet he was a striking looking figure in spite of his trembling gait, rounded shoulders and lameness, and looked a king as he sat on his ivory throne gazing proudly over the assembled company, and a gratified father as he looked upon his noble son.

He had resigned the sword and spear for ever now that the Prince Khalim could wield them so well, and spent most of his well-earned leisure in the durban, or superintending his last pet hobby, his tiger-drawn chariot regiment, who were kept as a household troop, to impress his visitors, and add to his royal show and procession—the weakness of an old man, which his warlike son and heir was too pleased to cater for, in spite of the discreet sneers of the younger brother.

Amongst the other Moslem and Hindoo courts, Mrs Bangles had never seen the ladies present as she saw them here on that night. True, with the exception of the Princess Artema, they mostly wore transparent apologies for veils, but these rather added to than concealed their charms, while they sat freely beside their husbands or friends, and joined in the conversation and jests in a way that would have shocked an orthodox follower of the Prophet; in fact, before the feast was over, she saw that they were as unorthodox, indeed, both in their eating and drinking, as well as in their freedom of action, as if they had been Christians.

Ronald MacIvor was delighted with his surroundings, for it more than ever carried him away to the feudal times of Wallace and Bruce, which he so much delighted in reading about. There sat the old king on his throne, in his royal robe, smiling kindly on his children and faithful subjects; there were the ladies, like the fair dames of olden times, in their tight-fitting vestments; the warriors, who had only waited to lay aside some of their heavier armour, and slacken their belts before sitting down to the feast. He would have liked, though, if they had let him have a turn at the bath before beginning, for he was terribly dust-covered, and his hands gave him some discomfort as he looked at them. Yet that was medieval also, for he could not recall in his reading any instances of the olden knights bothering themselves with soap and water before sitting down to the pasties and flagons, and as no one seemed to pay any heed to the state of his hands

or face, he gradually recovered his presence of mind, and acted as the others were doing round him.

There were a few young dandies, however, present, who evidently followed the example of Prince Humayun, and spent their time whispering to the ladies instead of doing justice to the homely viands; but these were decidedly in the minority on this occasion, and did not seem to be greatly respected by the fighting men, who so largely made up the company.

It was a substantial feast altogether, and well suited to men who had done a heavy day of exercise. The servants brought on great dishes of smoking roasted and stewed meats, while the carvers cut lavish hunks for the hungry guests, who devoured them rapidly, with dishes of roasted peacocks for those more delicately inclined.

After this came a course of fiery curries, followed by sweetmeats and coffee for those that liked them.

The King, with his son Khalim, drank native-made beer, as did most of the armed men; indeed, a great quantity of this refreshment was consumed by these thirsty heroes, who passed the tankards about in a brotherly fashion, and pledged each other loudly, with an occasional thanksgiving to Allah for the good things provided for them. And as they ate and drank, the musicians, who occupied the outer end of the hall, played on their instruments and enlivened the feast with martial strains, while a crowd of mendicants waited beyond the open portal for the remains to be taken out to them—this fine old monarch keeping open house for those of his subjects who cared to come and share in the supper which he presided over.

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## CHAPTER XVIII.

### SOME STATE SECRETS.

It is the same with a nation as with an individual: the man who has always to fight against adversity cannot be expected to shine in the domestic duties as the man may do who is safely secured in a snug and constant post. So the nation who is always at war does not make much headway in the arts of peace or real civilisation.

The mountain kingdom of which Kimwah was the capital, was surrounded on all sides by ruthless and ever-watchful enemies, and had never been long left at rest, neither in the present king's reign nor in those of his ancestors; so that war was the only art which they were ever permitted to cultivate, while their principal revenue was drawn from the enemy whom they were able to beat back and conquer. At such times they carried fire and sword into the country which had dared to encroach over their borders, and brought home loot, slaves and ransom. Even to the Quixotic mind of Prince Khalim, the laws of chivalry sanctioned this reprisal.

On the morning after their arrival there was a council held amongst the leaders, for news had been brought in that the expected enemy had declared war, and were already on the march.

While the Khans were deliberating, hearing reports, and arranging other details, Jack and Ronald set out to see the city and natives; Mrs Bangles deciding to stay in the grounds along with the idlers of the Court, and exhibit her own and Falko's accomplishments.

Prince Humayun and a number of his gaily-dressed followers were amongst these idlers, waiting upon the ladies, chief of whom shone that dazzling young beauty Princess Artema, as full of laughter and merriment as ever, which neither the chase nor a war impending could in any way suppress.

The morning was like an early summer day in England, clear, balmy and fragrant, with the aroma of many flowers; and as both boys had enjoyed a good bath and a substantial breakfast before setting out, they were prepared to be happy with their surroundings.

Prince Khalim had not overlooked their wants, even although he might well have been excused had he done so, coming home to such a bride, and with this important business to consider; but then he was one of those great generals who never forget details. He had sent them as a gift a complete rig-out each, and must have consulted his fashionable brother about them, for the costumes were very rich in their design and decoration, so that the wearers looked like two young noblemen as they walked proudly out of the palace, with a couple of attendants to look after them and guide them about.

Prince Khalim had added to his gifts two well-plenished purses, which showed that he still remembered his own early youth; and this made them both feel very kindly towards their benefactor, and be just a little indignant at the princess for appearing so easily pleased with the company of her brother-in-law, when she was so soon to be parted from such a husband.

The palace grounds were very tastefully laid out, with beds of flowers, grassy parks, bowers of creepers, and winding pathways shaded by overhanging trees. They sauntered along these sheltered walks, with here and there a fountain sending out cooling spray, until they came to the broad lake, with the lilies and other water plants lining its margins, while beautiful swans floated lazily over its surface.

Tame peacocks flaunted their gorgeous tails in every direction, and amongst the sheltered branches the birds sang blithely.

After enjoying this pleasant retreat, they went down to the river side and passed over the bridge of boats into the busy town. Here they spent the forenoon wandering about the streets, looking at the wares displayed in the open shops, and watching the people.

It was a bustling picture of life, as it might have been had they lived in the middle ages. Streets crowded with soldiers, on horseback and afoot, bargaining with the armourers or watching them at work, while women and girls went along selling refreshments and flirting with their customers. They were all talking about the coming war, and satisfied as to the results with such a general to lead them as their hero prince, and, the men take after their masters generally. These

soldiers vied with each other in their courtesy and politeness, behaving respectfully to the women, who acted as women mostly do under such circumstances, by giving themselves superior airs.

All the able-bodied men appeared to belong to the army, and the boys noticed that the workers were either cripples or had been incapacitated from fighting by some accident or other. There were a good number of mendicants about also, and holy men who did good business by begging and selling charms and texts from the Koran; for when the soldiers had any money left they were generous with it.

They noticed also that the army seemed to be divided into two distinct classes, and that these were not over friendly with each other. There were hardy fellows, like the five hundred who had accompanied them on the journey, and who were mostly men over thirty, while the others were young and more tastefully dressed; indeed, they soon learned to distinguish the one class from the other by the amount of finery they wore, as compared with the unostentatiousness of the others.

These veterans were the frontier army, and under the personal orders of Prince Khalim, while the others were Prince Humayun's home guard, whose duty consisted of protecting the city. They were the militia of Kimwah—cavalry men, charioteers, archers and foot soldiers who had not yet been tried in active service.

The houses were all strongly built and clean, but without much attempt at decoration; while the women, being mostly wives, widows or daughters of soldiers, looked upon every man child as a future soldier, and only the deformed or weakly as artisans, so that trade was not much respected. Still, those who did work were thriving looking, and had plenty to do; the field workers and labourers being slaves who had been captured in war.

The boys mounted the walls, from where they had a good view of the fields beyond. They saw gangs of these miserable captives working under the superintendence of military overseers, who rode about on horseback, and kept them diligently at their work, raising fruit, grain and vegetables for the markets; and then, satisfied with their sightseeing, they turned back towards the palace with their patient guides.

The inhabitants were very affable with our two heroes, as it was already known that they were under the protection of the prince, so that, as they went about, they found themselves objects of curiosity and admiration, for some of the soldiers had told the people about their performances, therefore they had no lack of polite attention shown to them.

The children followed them with round, open eyes of wonder, while the young girls smiled encouragingly upon them; but this they took as a matter of course.

On the way back they went through the market square, which was thronged with buyers and sellers, horses and camels on view, stalls with fruit, sweetmeats and sherbet, and merchants exhibiting coats and shirts of mail, with scarfs, tunics and cloth of gold.

Being a little tired with their walking, they asked the guides to take them to some place where they could rest and get refreshments; and at once several of the young dandies standing near offered their services, and took them into what proved to be the most select place of call in the city.

Here, in a shady but large room, they sat down, and were shortly enjoying some delicious curried kabobs, with iced claret, while their new companions introduced them to the other *habitués* of the place. As it was more of a club than a public-house, they were not allowed to pay for anything—Prince Humayun being the patron.

They were now able to see the other side of Kimwah society, and discovered that the Arthurian ideas which inspired Prince Khalim were by no means shared by these cynical young bloods, who followed the example of their own leader, and greatly preferred peace with enjoyment to the dangers and glory of war.

"It is all confounded nonsense, you know, this fighting for fighting's sake; for with a little wisdom and diplomacy, such as Khan Humayun possesses in such a high degree, we could easily propitiate all these border thieves, and become civilised," remarked one languid young fellow. "I have no desire to endanger my precious life by fighting for any country under the sun, for what's the use when life is so short as it is."

"Oh, let the fools go and fight if they like it, so long as they leave us behind to look after the ladies," answered another with a laugh, in which the whole company joined, with the exception of Ronald and Jack.

"There will be a grand review of the army to-morrow, most likely, winding up with a tournament before Prince Khalim

leaves us again, and, if you are wise, you will apply to be enrolled in our regiment, the "Stay-at-homes," for we have all the fun and none of the risks; and this battle will not be a joke, I can tell you, for it is going to be a big affair. Half-a-dozen great chiefs have joined together to teach us a lesson."

"And which might easily have been avoided had the king taken the advice of our prince and made terms; but there, he is as crack-brained as his favourite son on the subject," added another.

"Let the fools go," again said the one who had made the company laugh. "It will be all the better for us, as our master has not been idle."

Jack and Ronald listened quietly to this conversation without venturing a remark, and shortly afterwards took their leave.

"It strikes me, Ronald, that all isn't quite concord in this kingdom of Kimwah, and that we shall have to take sides definitely. Which do you fancy will be the best?" asked Jack, as they walked back.

"Prince Khalim is my choice, Jack, through thick and thin."

"And mine also. We don't want to be bothered dancing like footmen after the ladies when there is a chance of picking up jewels and gold galore on the field of battle."

"Or helping the friend who has been so good to us," added Ronald enthusiastically.

It was mid-day when they got back to the palace grounds, and having already lunched, and, indeed, imbibed rather freely of the iced claret, they both came to the conclusion that it would be better to seek out some shady spot and have a siesta before putting in their appearance amongst the grandees. Therefore, finding exactly what they wanted—a soft green bank close to the lake, where, beside a small trellis and creeper-covered summer-house, some thick and overhanging bushes grew, which, when they had crawled under, completely screened them from observation as well as from the shifting rays of the hot sun.

Halting here, they dismissed their attendants, and were soon afterwards comfortably placed and sound asleep.

It was rather a long siesta, for when Jack, who woke up first, opened his eyes, he could see that the lake and its little island in front of him were bathed in a golden fume, while the trees cast heavy shadows over the walks and mossy banks.

For a moment or two he lay in a dreamy state, his ears drinking in the twittering of the birds all round him, with the chirping of the grasshoppers; and then the sound of human voices brought him to his full senses, and, looking cautiously out, he saw the Prince Humayun and his beautiful sister-in-law walking towards his place of concealment, and speaking earnestly together—at least the princess was speaking, while the prince listened with an impatient frown on his sinister brow.

"Let us rest here, Artema, while I reason with you on your woman's folly," remarked Humayun, throwing himself languidly on the grass in front of the bush where the boys were concealed.

Then Jack wished it was possible to have been anywhere rather than where he was, for something whispered that he was about to listen to dangerous secrets.

With a petulant sigh the princess sat down beside Humayun and said,—

"I am sick of these long delays, Humayun. Do you think it is nothing for me to go on acting a part I abhor, while you are maturing your slow plans?"

"Nothing to you, sister mine," said her brother-in-law mockingly; "for you enjoy fooling this noble knight of yours. Indeed, I don't know how you will be able to amuse yourself after we have succeeded in removing him, for, of course, you will never be able to fool me."

"No! I am tired of that long ago, for he is so simple that any woman could twist him about as she liked, and so guileless and trusting that he makes my soul rise with loathing and rebellion, so that when with him I could strike him rather than take his kisses."

"In fact, he is too good for the like of us, eh?"

"Yes, I suppose that must be it, too good and too ponderous for me. I want a husband who does not worship honour and glory so much, or think of women as angels; someone who can stay beside me and amuse me when I am tired of my women folk and want a change; one who can even be abusive and insulting, as you are very often; but perfection like this makes me feel as if I was confined in a mosque, and I want to be at liberty, or have something human as my master."

"Exactly, Artema! I know what you want, but you must have patience yet awhile, and obey me until the time is ripe, which it is not at present."

"But it is so hateful to have to wait, and with you it is always wait, wait."

"Listen, Artema; if I say wait it is that we may have no risk of failure, and after this war there will be none, for I have planned it very carefully out, and made friends with our ancient enemies, so that we may have a long reign of peace. While Khalim has been away lately, as you know, we have been hard at work trafficking with these neighbours of ours for supplies of ammunition and guns—the modern implements of warfare which my stupid brother despises. These are all safely planted in our mountain city of Bhaji—through which the troops must pass both coming and going—with gunners which I have borrowed to teach my soldiers the art; and this excursion is got up in order to draw the men too faithful to my brother to be lured from him, so let them go and fight, and if beaten, so much the better, while if victorious, then your part will come when the chivalrous one comes back."

"And have I to go on as I am doing?"

"Yes, Baba; send the fool away with an easy mind. Indeed, we will accompany him to Bhaji, and wait there for his return with the remnant of his followers."

"And after that, brother Humayun?"

"We will take him during the night from your side when he is unarmed and helpless; that will be your task—to deliver the deluded one into my power. After that we shall reign together in peace and quiet."

"But the king, your father?"

"Bah! a red-hot needle passed across his eyeballs will finish him as far as we need fear that old lion. That can be done by some of my trusty fellows while we are on the mountains."

"And you will take me away to see the world you have told me so much about, Humayun?"

"Yes Artema, my sister, I'll let you see and enjoy the world as you desire, for the league I have entered into with our neighbours will leave me at liberty to go and do as I please."

"Ah, then, I shall try to subdue my impatience for a little longer."

"Hush, no more now, for yonder comes your husband; now let me see your talent once more displayed, my clever Artema."

The horrified listener saw this wicked woman rise to her feet, with her face wreathed in smiles, and throw herself into the arms of her advancing and deceived husband.

"What a time you have been at the council, my beloved; Humayun is such a dull companion when his brother is not near him."

"It is all over now, and I shall not leave you again until we march."

"Nor then, my husband, for I have persuaded the indolent Humayun to take me with you as far as Bhaji, and protect me there until you come back."

A pleased look came into the fond, trusting eyes of this hero of a hundred fights. Then he turned towards his brother.

"Surely you are not with the vizer Sherefeddin when he advised peace at this crisis, Humayun, my brother?"

"If it could be gained with honour, I think it might be advisable," replied the crafty Humayun calmly.

"Then that will be when we have conquered them, and driven them into the centre of their own country, not before," replied Khalim, proudly. "But come, Artema, we'll talk no more of business this day—excepting that of love."

With his strong arm pressed fondly round the waist of this false young traitress, Prince Khalim moved away, with Humayun following them like an evil shadow, smiling sardonically upon the pair.

Then the horrified Jack turned about to wake Ronald, and found him lying pale-faced and with staring blue eyes. He had also been listening to the vile plot.

"If ever I am tempted by a pretty face, Jack Bangles, remind me of this afternoon. Will you, old fellow?"

"Yes, Ronald; but neither of us are likely ever to forget it. Oh, the pair of demons. What are we to do?"

"Nothing!" whispered Mrs Bangles, as she glided from the back of the summer-house, where she had also been a witness. "If anything can be done, just you leave it for me to do, and remember that it is as dangerous to meddle with the plots of princes as to try to take a raw bone out of the jaws of a tame tiger."

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## CHAPTER XIX.

### A GRAND PARADE.

The rest of the afternoon was devoted to a rehearsal against the evening, for Mrs Bangles had been requested by the old king to play before him with her troupe, and she did not mean to lose sight of the boys again until she had time to think out some way of warning the deluded prince without endangering her own neck.

"I thought she'd turn out to be one of the sort who are ready to risk everything for a new toy. There are lots of that kind in the profession, as well as good, sensible women who never get a chance; but fancy how poetical and imaginative men are over the women they love, investing them with all sorts of inner virtues and graces, instead of seeing them as they are—vicious cats, with velvet paws and soft purrs.

"I might take a cue from Hamlet, and try to warn the king and husband in a set of verses, or a bit of pantomime, only that it's impossible to shake such faith as his even by plain words, far less by innuendoes; indeed, the only ones who would sniff out the rat would be the guilty pair, and then it would be all U P with us. Therefore, I suppose, being strangers to the intrigues of the place, and not knowing friends from foes, I must just let things slide for the present. Poor fellow! poor fellow! it would break his noble heart if he knew half of what we have learned already. There, Jack, do that tumble over again, for I want you to shine to-night."

So Mrs Bangles ruminated as she drilled her company in the chamber which had been allotted to them for their practice.

Prince Khalim, with his wife and brother, came in while they were rehearsing, and watched them with interest; then after a little while Humayun spoke to Jack and Ronald.

"The Prince Khalim tells me that you have muskets with you. Are you good shots?"

"Fairly good, your highness," answered Jack.

"He also tells me that you would like to be soldiers."

"Yes, your highness."

"Well, you are likely young fellows. What say you to join one of my regiments?"

"We would rather see a little active service, your highness; and our first friend has promised to take us with him," replied Jack, looking at the elder brother, who smiled approvingly.

"That is right, boy. If you like action come with me."

"And you, Bachna?" continued Prince Humayun, turning to Mrs Bangles.

"I am no fighter, your highness, so by your leave I'll stay with the Court and amuse the lonely ones until the heroes come back to comfort them," replied the sprightly actress modestly, as she cast down her eyes, and tried to look her part as a bashful boy.

"How old are you, boy?" asked the princess calmly, as she looked at the disguised actress curiously.

"Past twelve," replied Mrs Bangles gently.

"Yes, I should say you had seen all those years. I think I'll take this old-fashioned boy for one of my own pages, Khalim. Will you serve with me?"

"It will be an honour, your highness, to serve a lady so beautiful," replied Mrs Bangles.

"Then," said her husband, "you, Ronald and Jack, shall get a post amongst my own bodyguard; and you, Carlo, will remain behind to look after my lady."

"Oh, thank you, your highness!" cried the boys with one voice, their faces flushing with pleasure, while Mrs Bangles looked as well pleased with the post she had secured.

"I'll be able to look after that precious pair now while the husband is away, and maybe spoil their game, while the boys can warn him if there's a chance," she muttered to herself, as they went through their gymnastics after the royal spectators had left them.

"Some women ought to be kept in harems, for they are mad, and not fit to be trusted with liberty, or any kind of rights; and she is one of them, blind to her own advantages, ungrateful, heartless, and as selfish as a lunatic can be. Ah! if I only could have had a hundredth part of her chances in my young days."

Mrs Bangles sighed heavily as she thought on what she might have been, with her experience of the world, which the Princess Artema was ready to sacrifice everything to get.

"When you marry, boys—if ever you do such a foolish thing—never idealise your wives, nor think them better than other women, or even as good as yourselves; for there never was a woman yet worthy of a really good man."

"Don't preach that sermon to us, mother," replied Jack, with a laugh. "If ever I marry, I'll take an elephant, and not a tigress."

That night they won a high place in the estimation of the court by their performance. The Princess Artema was even so far interested with its novelty, that she noticed the fact that Jack and Ronald were very good-looking lads in their different styles. Ronald particularly struck her, with his fair hair and blue eyes, so that she began at once to ask her husband to let her take them also into her service; but the prince, having given his promise, was forced to refuse, much to her disgust.

Like all very little souls, hatred and malignancy flourished where generosity could not bud in the narrow imagination of this perfect young animal, and shrank appalled before greatness, as a bat might do before the sunlight.

Her husband was the sunshine before which her bat-like soul shrank with repugnance. That he loved and trusted her so utterly was an injury done to her; that he loved honour and truth and faith, and imagined them to be centred in her, fed her resentment. It was merely the natural effect of two opposite natures jarring in everything; for the evil had the more knowledge, and the good was as yet blind.

Whatever he did to please her must have been distasteful to her, as coming from him; but that he should oppose her wishes in this little matter for the sake of his word, or honour, qualities which she did not know, and therefore despised, made her selfish heart boil over with savage hatred and fury.

But she was an Oriental, and therefore an adept at deception, so that although a momentary flush dyed her soft face, and a brighter sparkle came into her eyes, she never acted so tenderly nor so effusively towards her intended victim as she did on that evening after he had refused her request to add the boys to her own service.

"You are right, my love, as you are always with your foolish little wife and her silly fancies. They are bold boys, and will make gallant soldiers." And then she changed the subject, and sunned him with the glamour of her wonderful eyes, and her soft and loving tenderness, until he was intoxicated with delight, and reverently grateful to Allah for the fancied gifts of love and truth which had been bestowed upon him.

Following out the same policy of duplicity which made her extra effusive to her husband, this radiant young creature became attentive and kind to our heroes, who received her graciousness with much the same feelings that a visitor to the Pope Borgia might have felt when asked to dinner along with Cæsar and his playful sister. They approached her side timidly as she sat caressing the husband she meant to destroy; listened to the approval which her clear voice spoke with so much sweetness, as if it was the hiss of a serpent before whose fangs they were helpless; and received the jewels which she gave to them with pallid cheeks.

They had both been a good deal frightened by the pythons, who were also beautiful in their own style, but they were armed then against those reptiles, which helped to counteract the fear; yet never had they been so horribly afraid as they now felt when standing and listening to the praises of this perfect young fiend and her evil counsellor, the sinister Humayun.

The princess noticed their agitation, as did the youngest son of the king; but they both attributed it to the awe which they supposed their lofty station must inspire in strangers, and were almost flattered into taking almost a careless interest in such insignificant objects who could venerate them so highly.

The next day a general holiday was declared, with a grand review of the home and frontier armies in the plain outside the walls.

Ronald and Jack rose early, and proudly dressed themselves in the uniform of the Prince Khalim's own guards. They were both tall enough to pass the standard of this crack regiment; and as the prince kept them both closely attached to his own person, their present duties consisted in merely sitting on their horses and looking about them.

And it was a sight well worth watching, to see the people flocking through the sunlit streets to the plain where the royal pavilion had been erected, with the tents for the visitors and soldiers.

The king rode out on the royal elephant with his attendants and fan-bearers, he being too feeble to sit on his old war steed, which, however, was led close behind him.

After him came his latest fad, the two hundred tiger-drawn chariots. To each car a couple of these striped and powerful beasts were yoked, wearing strong steel muzzles over their jaws, like dogs during the hot days. The chariots were also very strongly constructed of hard wood, sheathed in steel and ornamented with gold, as were the other furnishings and trappings of the fierce animals, who glided along with noiseless, trailing steps and side glances at the crowds they were passing through. They were very docile, and did not appear to feel any inconvenience from the load they dragged behind them. But whether they would behave equally well on active service when unmuzzled was a point yet to be tested. However, they made a brave addition to that barbaric display.

The war elephants came next. There were six hundred of these massive beasts, with their steel plates over them, and their howdahs filled with archers. After them came the militia regiments, commanded by Prince Humayun and his young peace-loving chiefs.

Prince Humayun was, perhaps, the most conspicuous object on the field, for his armour was of pure beaten gold, and lay over him in scales, so that he shone like a golden fish. His officers also were very splendidly got up, and even the meanest of his followers looked gayer than the prince whom Ronald and Jack had decided to follow.

Two thousand cavalry and four thousand infantry defiled from the gates after Prince Humayun, none of them more than twenty-five years of age, and many of them much younger than Ronald and Jack. All the young men of the kingdom who could hold a sword or a spear were enrolled in the home army.

After this glittering line of splendour and youth came the ladies, with the sages who had relinquished the fatigues of war and taken up the ambitions of statecraft. Some of these rode on horseback, others were borne on palanquins, or sat aloft in richly-comparisined howdahs, catching the sunbeams as they went along, and almost blinding the eyes of the spectators with the richness of their dresses, golden ornaments and priceless gems.

Music was not wanting either, for with each company came its own band of trumpets, cymbals, tom-toms and pipes, which clashed and brayed and drummed with a discord that was truly martial and deafening.

Prince Khalim and the Princess Artema rode side by side—he, the most gigantic and heroic figure of the army, costumed severely yet formidably in his well-used suit of armour, with his handsome and noble face uncovered and gravely serene—she, a vision of fresh and lovely youth, full of animation and beaming smiles, which she shared with her lord and the crowd impartially.

His warriors brought up the rear, among whom Ronald and Jack had been placed. All these were tried men, and, like their master, got up for utility rather than display.

Fifteen hundred horsemen and less than a thousand archers and infantry, they rode and marched like one man, so perfect was their discipline and order, looking neither to the right nor left, but straight ahead in dead silence, as men are apt to walk who face death constantly. The banners they carried were tattered by many a battle, while the ground shook under that united, firm tread of conquerors.

The boys felt proud when they looked back on this army to think that they had been admitted into such a company of heroes, and were not afraid of their minority as to numbers when compared with the six thousand untried and flashily-apparelled youths who served under the brother of this great warrior prince. They forgot for the moment about the guns which Prince Humayun had spoken of as being concealed in the mountains, with the treachery that might prove more than a match for courage, strength and skill. They only thought that these heroes were like the Romans of old in their

invincible days, who had never yet left a field without having won it, and they felt like going again to victory.

"This is worth coming to see, Jack, even if there was nothing else to follow," said Ronald, with enthusiasm, to his friend, as they rode after their leader through the clouds of dust which were flying around them.

"But there's a good deal more to follow, you take your davy on that," replied Jack confidently.

When the pavilion was reached, the king dismounted, and, with his dignitaries and ladies, took their seats, while the two brother princes sat side by side on their horses, watching the troops march past and go through their manœuvres.

The veterans did not show off much—they merely marched past, saluting their king, and then took up their posts near the throne, and looked indulgently at the performances of the young fellows, who did some brilliant feats of horsemanship, in which they exhibited their individual tricks of agility without much regard to order; after this was over, the real sports of the day began—the tournament, sword exercise and archery.

As in olden times, the champions entered the lists with their heralds, and challenged the others to combat, while Artema and the other ladies awarded the prizes to the victors. Then came the feats of archery, after the charioteers had raced each other round the course, and the boys were astonished at the few misses which the bowmen made, as well as the force and distance that the arrows carried.

This part of the programme over, Jack and Ronald, who had been requested by the Prince Humayun, and permitted by their own leader, to give an exhibition of their shooting qualities with their muskets and pistols, took their places at the most distant part of the field, and, in their turn, surprised the natives by their dexterity and long range.

The young men of the army were delighted with these deadly weapons, and showed their appreciation with loud shouts, at which Prince Humayun smiled triumphantly, while Artema once more called them up and complimented them as brave Behádurs; but neither the king nor his eldest son displayed any pleasure, nor did the veterans, who looked grimly on; they had been under fire before. Indeed, the wound which had lamed the monarch had been the result of a bullet, so that the memory was not a pleasant one for him.

"These are the weapons which we shall have to introduce yet, Khalim, if we are to hold our own against our enemies."

"Never with my will," replied that prince proudly, to his brother. "These are the weapons of cowards, who are frightened to face steel, and who hide themselves behind rocks, at a safe distance, and commit murder."

"All is fair in love and war," answered Humayun, with a laugh.

"That is not my creed, brother."

"Nor mine," growled their father, from the throne above them; "let my sons die with their swords in their hands, and their faces where the enemy can see them, not skulk behind walls or in caves, with things like these, which are only fit for frightened women, and not brave knights."

Prince Humayun only shrugged his thin shoulders and murmured,—

"Yes, women and children can do as well as the men when they are armed with magic toys like these."

After this the troops were once more marshalled, and returned to the city to spend the evening in a general parting feast.

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## CHAPTER XX.

### THE MARCH.

The fortified town of Bhaji occupied one of the most sterile portions of this mountainous kingdom, and was distant from Kimwah about sixty miles.

Perched on the summit of a wild pass, it commanded that highway and overlooked another gorge, which led down through a narrow valley, walled in with forbidding precipices, and up again to great snow-covered steppes, which formed the northern borderland of the kingdom.

These steppes had been the scene of many a conflict, for they lay open and exposed by numerous passes to the north, east and west, and it was here that the prince calculated to encamp and wait for the coming of the enemy, as he had waited before.

Bhaji was strongly guarded, while one of the chief duties of its governor was to keep parties of scouts and spies constantly prowling about the different passes to look out for the coming of the enemy.

While Khalim had been busy elsewhere, however, the former governor had died and been replaced by a creature of Humayun's own choice and training; this, of course, the prince knew about, but so infinite was his trust in his brother, and so simply grand was he in his own generosity, that he never for a moment disputed the wisdom of the choice, naturally considering that his brother must have the same patriotic love for his fatherland which inspired him.

We know already how patriotic Humayun was. He had carefully posted this new governor in the part he was to play, as he had corrupted the young men on whom the army depended for fresh blood; and already he had sold the country for which his forefathers had died to keep independent, and pocketed the advance sum for this base treachery, so that, even although he now wished to draw back, which he did not, it would have been impossible.

He was a servant in the pay of implacable masters who were not likely to let him play fast and loose with them, while in that citadel of Bhaji were concealed over a thousand of the enemy already, with their guns and ammunition, and amongst the caverns overlooking the pass which led up from Kimwah others were waiting patiently on the hour when the victims would be delivered into their clutches. They also occupied the strong places of the pass beyond, so that Prince Khalim and his faithful veterans were already doomed, although they marched on so confidently.

The reports as sent down by this treacherous governor were that two strong tribes had risen and united, and were now on the march; but nothing was said about the great northern Power who had merely employed these rival tribes to lure the prince and his devoted army out of the way, while the master force marched on and took possession of their purchased property. Humayun's price was to be a yearly sum paid to him during his lifetime, the title of king, and liberty to go where he liked afterwards—terms which suited him exactly, for he wanted pleasure and private liberty of action, and had no desire to spend his life in harness.

As arranged, the Princess Artema, with Humayun and a large retinue, accompanied her husband up to Bhaji, where they were received by the governor with great respect.

A quiet journey that was up the mountain pass, with no sign to warn them of the many watchful eyes that were following them as they struggled up. When night came, they lit torches and went on without pausing, for Khalim, when on the war-trail, never lost time.

He did not enter that betrayed citadel, but heard the latest news at the gate before bidding farewell to his wife and brother. By going straight on, the false guardian told him, he would reach the steppes in good time to fix his camp and prepare for battle.

No one wanted him or his army at that moment inside the walls; but when he came back he and the remnant of his army would be eagerly received.

Mrs Bangles had come in the retinue of the princess, and while that delectable siren was bidding a fond and effusive farewell to her lord, the actress drew the boys aside and gave them a few final instructions.

"Take good care of yourselves, and stick as close to the prince as you can, but say nothing to him now, for I expect the time for warning has long gone by. I shall keep my eyes and ears wide open, and may be able to serve him when he returns—if he does. You'll both come back safe, *I know*, and I think he will also, for bigger sorrow than if he met his death out there; but, as the Mahommedans say, it is 'Kismet.'

"When you come back, you will find me here waiting and watching for you both, with perhaps means to help you all. It is a young woman and a crafty scoundrel against an old woman who knows both the world and them, so we'll see who comes in best at the finish. Good-bye, my brave lads, and God keep you both safe."

The farewells have been said, and the trumpets once more sound for the fatal march. Mrs Bangles looks after her boys with tears streaming over her withered cheeks. Artema leans on the arm of her brother-in-law, as if her strength had deserted her, and watches the retreating form of her heroic husband with gleaming eyes from which no tears start, while he looks back to wave his gauntleted hand, which grasps the dark lock of hair he has cut from her luxuriant tresses, and which he will kiss, after he has lost sight of her, with a holy prayer to Allah for that rare treasure, before he puts it in his breast, to warm his tender, trusting, chivalrous heart. While he has that piece of her with him, and that faith in his soul, he can never commit an unknighly part, or give way to ignoble revenge.

They ride down the pass, through the valley, and up the snowy steppes without an incident, with a thousand hidden foemen watching them from the holes above; then, as the sun is setting redly over that frozen plain, they light their camp fires and fix their tents.

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## CHAPTER XXI.

### THE FIRST ENGAGEMENT.

Jack and Ronald were roused up at sunrise by the bustle in the camp, and the blaring of the trumpets' call, and, getting out of their rugs, they came from the canvas and looked about them.

A glorious morning, cold but crisp, and decidedly appetising, for as the smells of the roasting meat and coffee wafted towards them, they longed with a mighty longing after the flesh-pots.

The unaccustomed cold had made them oversleep themselves by a couple of hours, of which they were a good deal ashamed when they saw that the whole camp was up and preparing for action.

Warriors were grooming their horses and burnishing their armour, as if they were going to a ball. The boys had noticed how careless and dingy these plates and helmets had looked at the review, as if they disdained to compete with the flash militia; but now each man was doing his best to make himself conspicuous by his glittering armour, while a general air of boyish mirth pervaded, and lit up the ordinary grim and grave faces. They were preparing for what they cared most for on earth—to meet the invader.

A solitary trumpet call occasionally broke through the keen air, while the whirr of grindstones, sharp ringing of hammers on steel, and neighing of horses; with that grateful frizzling of beef amongst the embers, imparted to the field an animation which braced up the hearts of the listeners, and forbade fear to find a place there.

The sky overhead was clearly blue, while the lemon-tinted fleecy clouds melted amongst it like flecks of cream. In the east the golden sun was rising, and flinging molten shafts along that dazzling white surface, making the shadows from the tents and figures fall azure along the ground. High up they could see the floating forms of vultures, kites and eagles, which the smell of the freshly-killed oxen, or the instinct of coming carnage, had attracted already to the bustling scene; while, as far as they could look in front of them, spread those billow-like furrows of frozen snow.

Prince Khalim welcomed them with a pleasant smile as they approached his tent, before which he was standing in his tanned under-suit with some of the other leaders, while his servant was putting the finishing polish to his glittering panoply and gold-embossed casque.

"Well, my young squires, I hope you have rested well, and feel ready to take a good breakfast this morning; for before yonder sun travels many hours we shall all be busy."

"Yes, your highness; we are ready for breakfast."

"Then we shall have it together, and at once," replied the prince heartily.

There was no ceremony about this meal. The attendants quickly fixed up some trestles in the open air, with boards upon them, and a number of rough stools; then, placing the plates and jugs, they brought the freshly-killed and cooked steaks and ribs straight from the fire, which blazed near at hand, to the table, with steaming kettles of boiling coffee and chapates.

A short prayer preceded this rough but appropriate meal, and then they fell to it like hungry hunters, helping themselves to whatever was nearest, and making the viands disappear before they had time to get cold.

While they were thus keeping the cooks busy, a horseman rode in at full gallop straight up to the prince, and, halting in front of him, he saluted.

"Your news, Ashmed?" said the prince, with his mouth filled.

"Five thousand of the Pami men are coming up the Kali Pass."

"Good; we will wait for them here. Are you sure there are no more?"

"No more, Behádur Khan."

"It will take them two hours to get before us; we have plenty of time. Sit down, Ashmed, and eat."

The messenger flung himself from his horse, and at once began to follow the good example of the others.

After breakfast the prince rose, and gave the sign for the removal and packing up of the utensils; and while this was being done, he began to arm, Ronald and Jack being assigned the duty of helping him, as a compliment, along with his ordinary man-at-arms, to keep them right; and while he was being armed, he gave his orders for the arrangement of the camp and disposal of the regiments.

Then the tents were struck, and packed once more inside the waggons, and these drawn together in a circle, in the centre of the camp. Inside that circle were placed the cattle destined for food.

The order of battle was simple, and already understood by these veterans, who had been in so many engagements of a similar kind. A reserve guard of the infantry was placed round the waggons, while the cavalry stood ready to charge.

So a couple of hours passed away, while the prince and his staff sat on their horses, waiting on the coming of the expected enemy.

They all waited in their appointed places, grimly impassive, without any speaking or eagerness. A small space of that vast white steppe they took up, for they were arranged compactly, and appeared but a little blot upon that otherwise stainless sheet.

Jack and Ronald stood behind the prince, trying to get accustomed to the weight and stiffness of their steel suits; also a little apprehensive of the prolonged silence.

The morning sun shone warmly now upon them; indeed, the beams were beginning to make their close-fitting casques, with the chain neck-guards, rather uncomfortably hot—when all at once the blank space in the far-off distance to the north became occupied with black, ant-like spots. This was the vanguard of the coming enemy.

Over by the west a solitary speck broke on the waste; it was another messenger of Prince Khalim's coming in with his report.

The boys looked alternately from these numerous specks, which gradually became multiplied as they spread out over the northern horizon, to that single spot over by the west, which was growing bigger every moment, until before long the horse and rider could be distinguished as they rushed at full speed over the ground; the invaders were coming along more leisurely.

Nearer that solitary horseman came, with the powdered snow rising behind him like fine dust, while the prince and his followers waited like statues. The five thousand Pamees were still ant-like in their dimensions, although they had all emerged from the gorge; for they had halted to form themselves into something like order.

They could see the glitter of his armour now, while the sound of the hoofs could be heard through that crisp air; and when the boys turned their faces again, after a prolonged look at the slowly-advancing hordes, he was within half a mile of them.

He never paused in that headlong gallop until within a few paces of the prince, then he halted abruptly and salaamed.

"Eight thousand horsemen of Axius are behind me, Khan Khalim."

"How far distant?" inquired the prince calmly.

"They will reach the steppes in three hours."

"That will give us time to scatter yonder horde before their allies come up. They have miscalculated their time for joining together, therefore we will go and meet them instead of waiting for them to come. Forward, my Behádurs, for Allah and our rights!"

The prince in an instant laid aside his impassiveness, and, drawing his heavy sword, dashed forward at the head of his cavalry, leaving the infantry and archers to follow, with the exception of the appointed guardians of the waggons.

Five thousand horsemen against barely one thousand five hundred were terrible odds, without taking into consideration

the eight thousand who were still to come; but to see the way that those veterans rode forward it did not seem to impress them as much out of their ordinary course of business.

But when an army win for themselves the reputation of being invincible, and have a long series of uninterrupted victories in their past records, they are apt not to look upon numbers or other difficulties in any other light than as giving them opportunities of gaining more renown; and these warriors had been so long accustomed to regard themselves as being equal to seven or eight times their number that they spoke about the polishing off of these five thousand Tartars as nothing more than a prelude to the more serious engagement which was to follow.

They therefore rode steadily and swiftly, yet without taxing their horses, across the intervening space which divided them from their enemies with the calm confidence of a body of troopers going to disperse an unruly mob.

And an unruly and disorganised mob the two boys thought these foemen to be when they compared their scattered line of battle with the compact square, of which they were units, now riding forward.

This sudden advance evidently was a surprise to the invaders, as, knowing of old the prince's generous contempt for them, they had reckoned on having time to approach at their leisure, and fix their own position, as well as hold some preliminary parleying until their allies came up. This was the customary method of fighting between the nations; but even his chivalry drew the line on this occasion, and this leader for once acted wisely as well as generously. The thought of his wife so near at hand had made him prudent.

The Pami horde halted irresolutely as they saw this charge, and appeared as if they were about to retreat; then hastily trailing their big guns to the front, the gunners prepared to fire a volley.

This was exactly what the prince anticipated, for as soon as he saw that the guns were pointed he gave the order to part, which was obeyed without a pause, half of the army riding to the right and the other half to the left, leaving a clear lane where they had been riding before. This order they had only just completed when the fire and smoke burst from the ranks of the enemy, while the shot hummed between the open battalions harmlessly; then, covered by the clouds which for the time blinded the enemy, they reunited and charged forward impetuously and at full speed, with swords gleaming and spears at the rest.

"That is how guns serve our purpose," shouted the prince, as he darted on, while Ronald and Jack followed closely behind, their blood now up with the excitement of the gallop and the roaring of those cannons, so that they no longer cared for danger or anything, except the work before them.

In another moment, avoiding the guns, they were amongst the yelling barbarians, doing their part like the rest, and seeing nothing except that mighty hero in front of them, who was swinging his glittering weapon to right and left like a reaper at work amongst ripe corn.

Straight through the ranks they plunged, with the smoke still misty about them; to the right and left they wheeled as if they had been a single machine instead of separate men, never breaking that terrible compact square; and as they rode and struck with resistless fury, death followed with them.

It was like a large steam vessel at full speed, ploughing through a stormy sea, and was finished almost before the smoke from that first and last volley had blown away, leaving the snow-field clear; and only for the blood dyeing their sword blades could either of the boys tell whether they had slain their men or not.

They had stuck close to the prince, and were beside him still when the trumpet sounded a halt; but whether that engagement had lasted two minutes or ten, it was impossible to tell, for time, with sensation, were blanked out during that fierce and thrilling excitement. Now, however, they felt their tongues parching with thirst, and their right arms as if they had been wrenched from the socket.

Also, when they could look about them, they saw in their tracks hundreds of bodies of men and horses weltering in the blood which stained that white surface, with disjointed parties of horsemen in tens, fiftens and hundreds, scattered over the plain and flying in a panic of craven fear, while overhead the vultures and eagles were soaring in their thousands, blackening the sky and craning earthwards their bald necks.

Another trumpet call, and the compact mass of conquerers had divided themselves also into detachments and were pursuing those disorganised flying bands, cutting and spearing them as they fled, and leaving long lines of trampled dying

and dead.

The pause after the first resistless charge had lasted hardly a second before that pursuit began. There was nothing impassive about the veterans now, for like wild cats they sprang after their victims, giving them no time to re-form, but chasing them on for miles, and slaughtering them ruthlessly.

It was a complete rout, and almost an extermination, for when the trumpets again sounded, and the troopers once more turned obediently, and trotted back to where the leader sat calmly waiting for them, scarcely two hundred horsemen of the enemy were left to tell the story of this shameful defeat, while riderless horses were rushing wildly in all directions.



## CHAPTER XXII.

### THE FIGHT IN THE DARK.

One thousand four hundred and twenty-five mail-clad warriors rode back to camp after their prince, carrying with them the slain and wounded of their comrades who had fallen in that first engagement. Sixty men killed outright, and twenty-five sorely wounded, but leaving behind them a great and gory feast for those hungry vampires of the air.

The guns, tents and other baggage of the defeated were left behind as not worth the taking; and neither were they, for these tribes when on the warpath travelled lightly cumbered; and, like the Highland clans of Scotland, depended on what they might pick up on the way for their keep and comfort.

The first duty on reaching the camp was to identify and bury the slain and see to the wounded, and after this to strengthen their position as far as possible against the approach of the other party. These duties over, they once more stood to their posts and waited.

Mid-day passed without any signs of the Axiurs in the distance, while the boys were beginning to think about dinner, when the prince abruptly gave the command to set up the tents and make fires.

"The cowards are afraid to appear by day. They have been warned by some of the runaways, and will try to steal upon us under the cover of night."

"Can we not go and meet them, your highness?" asked Jack boldly.

"No, Bachna; they are not worthy of that honour. Besides, we should have our trouble for nothing, for by the time we reached the defile they would have vanished. To-night they will come when they think us asleep, and try to surprise us."

"Eight thousand against two thousand?" said Ronald in surprise.

"Eight thousand jackals against two thousand and odd lions. Yes, they know us as we know them," replied the prince, with a laugh. "Those Pami men have a little courage, but the others are but thieves and assassins, who come from a great distance, bringing only their spears and swords, and act as dacoits. They do not know that we have been warned against their coming, and will naturally conclude that we will make merry after this little victory before beginning our march of retribution; then about the hour they fancy we shall be sleeping soundest they will creep in on their hairless horses and wake us up with their pistols and old muskets. Bah! these are not the enemies I expected to encounter from the reports of the Governor of Bhaji, for although we must kill hungry Kuttas when they hunt over our fields in packs, there is no honour in the game."

Ronald and Jack looked at each other meaningly, as they mutually thought on the conversation of Prince Humayun in the garden with the Princess Artema. He had spoken of several Powers having combined. Were there more coming up behind these two tribes? and could they with discretion give the prince a hint of what they had heard?

"Whom did your highness expect?" inquired Ronald, feeling his way.

"A nation worthy of our steel, who have learnt and who practise the real art of warfare; who come to the battle armed properly, and fight like men—not subordinates of the Great Bear, like these whelps, although I have heard that they also have bent their necks under the yoke of this northern tyrant."

"May not this great Power have sent them also?" continued Ronald.

"Hardly, to join issues with such thieves. No; they are cruel and without mercy in the hour of triumph; but they are proud, or at least they had some pride while the last king lived, and before the kingdom was divided amongst his sons."

"He has only lately died, then?"

"Nine months ago I slew him in single combat on this field, while our armies looked on. In this way it fell:—We were drawn up in battle order against each other, when he challenged me to meet him alone, and so decide the question. The terms were, that if he killed me, my country would give so much treasure as a sign of their defeat, while the armies would part without molesting each other, and the same oaths were taken on his part.

"For one hour and a half we stood before each other, and fought without ceasing, for he was a mighty warrior; but at last Allah blessed my sword and he fell."

"And did his sons keep their part of the contract?"

"Yes, to the letter, and since that time we have had peace with them; but I heard a month ago that they were getting ready for another raid, yet from this issue it appears that we are not to be so highly favoured."

"Who knows, your highness? Perhaps the sons are not so particular as their father was."

"Perhaps; who knows, excepting Allah, what our fortune may be. Meanwhile, we will feast as these dacoits expect us to do, and then rest until they come to be punished."

The Prince Khalim, although so confident in his own prestige, was by no means neglectful about the safety of those under his charge; and as they had now to deal with a treacherous enemy, on whom any of the rules of chivalry would be completely thrown away, the rest of that day was devoted to the arranging of the camp.

Palisades were fixed up round the lines, occupied with passages so contrived that they could act both as gateways and traps, while in front of these they dug a trench, so that the horses might fall into it in the dark. Then, having lit their fires and erected their tents, they sat down to a great feast, slaughtering half of their cattle for this purpose.

Thus night fell upon them without any signs of the enemy, while they sat round their blazing fires and sang loudly, for they knew that out on the plain white-coated spies were watching and listening to them; and although they took no trouble to look out for these spies, every soldier was on the alert, as well as in his proper place, despite their seeming carelessness and abandon.

"It's marvellous where all the birds of prey come from at so short a notice in India," remarked Jack to Ronald as they both stood, at the closing in of day, beside one of the great fires, warming their backs, and looking at the unburied dead, over whom dense masses of vultures and eagles were disputing. "Five minutes are enough to bring them in shoals to a carcase, although there has been no trace of them before."

"It is horrible to watch them, and to think our bodies may be the next feed they will settle down to," replied Ronald, with a shiver.

"You're not getting *skeered*, are you, Ronald, after seeing how easy it is to disperse these savages?"

"No, Jack; only look at that sky. It's enough to give anyone the cold creeps."

The appearance of the sky at this moment was not cheerful, certainly. The sun had gone down dimly, and now a pile of black clouds were lying near the horizon, with a cold green back-space looking like gleaming water.

A depressing and brooding sky decidedly this was, with the sable clouds lying like palls ready to drop upon the distant and desecrated dead; while ever on the wing moved those evil birds, breaking up the solitary bar of light which divided the battlefield from the sky.

And over the plains came a fitful wind, cold and raw, from the north, wailing and sighing as if weary of passing over such utter desolation.

Then the light died out of the west, and night came on dark and starless—for the clouds had spread themselves over the sky-dome and all beyond—the camp-fires were buried in impenetrable blackness. Still that melancholy wind howled louder and grew colder as it blew against their faces.

"There is a snowstorm coming on, I fancy," said Jack, who did not seem greatly impressed by the signs about him.

As he spoke, the first broad flake fluttered down and stuck to his cheek, where it quickly melted and ran down like a tear.

By-and-by another snow feather came with a whirl and struck Ronald full in the eyeball causing him to utter a hasty exclamation as he blinked suddenly and wiped the drop away.

The wind was rising as the night deepened, and what had been a sigh, ending in a low wail, became a howl, terminating

in a savage shriek, as it swept round the tents and waggons, and entered the deadwood thicket, which stood a little distance in their rear—the thicket which they had already half depopulated for their firewood, and the building of the palisades that surrounded them.

"When snow comes on slowly like this, Jack, it generally ends in a heavy fall," observed Ronald, brushing aside another solitary flake which had settled upon his nose, and remembering the winters in old Scotland.

"Is that how snow falls?" asked Jack, a little awed at the strange experience.

"Yes; have you never seen it before?"

"No! How lightly they flutter down; how they dance and gambol before the wind, like as if someone was scattering the down from the breast of a duck upon us. It looks very strange to me, and very fine."

"It is fine at the start off, but wait a bit and you'll not fancy it so much when you are a couple of inches thick with those same soft feathers."

Some of the men were still busy carrying wood from the thicket, and heaping the fires up, which blazed out merrily, and sent their eddies of smoke and sparks flying far on the inky darkness, mingling with the flakes which were now sinking or dancing about madly, and every moment becoming more dense.

A dozen large fires were burning at different parts of the camp, and lighting up the figures that lay or stood around them with crimson luridness, or bringing them out in startling dark relief.

Those nearest were distinct enough, but the more distant objects looked soft, with the violet mists about them, which the falling curtain of snowflakes caused. The tents also gleamed out redly, and began to appear like huts with the heavy covering they were getting; while nothing could be seen beyond the circle of light which the fires cast from them.

"You had better go under the tent for an hour or two and get some sleep," observed the prince, as he returned from surveying the men. "We are all prepared, so you have no cause to keep awake, for there are plenty on the watch, and our enemies will not come before midnight. Come with me."

Silently they followed the leader as he walked towards his own tent and entered.

"Lie down on these rugs and sleep while you can, but keep your swords ready for action."

"But what of your highness?"

"I have had my sleep already, while you were wasting time. I am now going to watch over you."

Ronald and Jack were really tired with the excitements of the day, and knowing that with such a guardian they need have no fear of being surprised, they flung themselves down on the skins which constituted his own private couch. So they quickly drifted into dreamland, their last consciousness being the trail of red light which fell across the ground from that half-open flap, or gleam of ruddy firelight outside, with the thousands of snowflakes falling between, and that stalwart figure, still enveloped in its heavy mail, sitting over against them, smoking a pipe.

It struck Ronald as being rather funny, as well as somewhat incongruous, to see this medieval warrior with the soothing calumet of the nineteenth century, for he had not seen him smoking before; then he began to speculate why anything should be strange to him now, after the experiences of the last months. The songs outside had ceased, and the wind also appeared to be dying away, while the atmosphere was mild, and all betokened peace and rest; so he drifted, as the snow was falling, softly away to dreamland.

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"Wake, Bachnas; the hour has come."

"What's up?—it isn't six o'clock yet," exclaimed Ronald, still under the influence of his dream of being at school and called up by the usher.

Jack woke up alert and with all his senses about him, and with one roll over sprang upon his feet, to find himself in the dark.

"Hush!" murmured the prince's voice, "our foemen have come. Can you not hear them?"

Jack listened intently for a few moments, and then he heard a faint sound like soft breezes blowing through leaves. It was the breath of a great host, stealing upon them through the darkness.

"Hah! Sound the call, Askar; the Kuttas are in the trap."

There was no longer need for silence, for the front guard of the enemy had betrayed themselves by their exclamations as they fell into the trenches; and, as the trumpets pealed out the alarm, the prince dashed outside and sprang with one bound upon his waiting stallion, while Ronald and Jack followed in his wake.

The snow was still falling densely, and the ground was a foot higher than when they went to sleep, while the night, or morning, was palpably black, for the fires had been allowed to go out, or rather they were discreetly covered, yet prepared so as to burst out into flames at a moment.

One instant passed while the trumpets sounded to arms, and the next instant the camp looked like a lighted ballroom, for every warrior held in his hand a flaming torch; then the boys saw in the trench a confused mass of horses and riders, with the swarm of astonished Tartars reining up their horses on the other bank, while they glared with their little eyes at those flaring lights.

They saw also the archers lining the inside of the palisades with their bows at the bend, and next instant a heavy shower was piercing those astonished ranks, while the prince and his horsemen were galloping from the different passages, clearing the trench with daring leaps, and carrying with them their firebrands to light them in their work of destruction.

This wild phantasmagoria of light and death passed before the dazed eyes of the boys through that veil of snow, and then the blood rushed to their heads as they seized the torches which one of the attendants held out to them, and with a yell as savage as the others were shrieking, they gave the reins to their steeds, and, with naked swords, were borne madly along after the others.

The spectator who looks on at a battle from the distance may be able to tell how it is going on, with its accompanying horrors, but to those engaged it is nothing more or less than the unconscious delirium of five minutes or an hour, as the case may be. Time, like fear, is vanquished, also fatigue and pain; therefore what Jack or Ronald may have felt during the first second after they had vaulted on their horses' backs were forgotten in the passion of fury which possessed them now.

They saw demoniac faces starting on every side of them as their horses rushed about, and arms outstretched, with gleaming weapons, which the hissing torches lit up with ruddy effect.

Instinct guided them and their horses, and gave them the cue to strike out or ward off the coming stroke, while they dashed the firebrands in some faces and cut at other opposing obstacles, and that was all they knew about that fire-lit battle in the snow; that, and the feeling that fortune was bearing them along unhurt.

There was method, of course, about it all, although this did not concern them. A master eye was upon each individual, for at times the horses went to the right or the left, or wheeled about and rushed back. They were in the centre of a steel-clad, flame-bearing torrent of avengers, that poured over a field of living obstacles, and crushed them as it poured.

Yells of the living, shrieks of the dying, screams of wounded and maddened horses filled their ears, and found echoes in their throbbing hearts; resinous fumes from the firebrands filled their throats, and dusky smoke eddied about those heavily falling snowflakes, and blinded their eyes as their horses trampled amongst the soft snow, the denser yet yielding masses.

In the camp, and seemingly miles away from where they struggled, the fires were now blazing furiously like the burning down of a hamlet, but that was only a trifling incident.

Through the masses they plunged, cutting to right and left as they went; then along the outer ring they rode, driving their enemies about like a pack of wolves; and, like wolves also, that pack leapt at them from the storm, while the archers

played their deadly showers of arrows on those nearest to them.

Sometimes they were completely surrounded and isolated from their own side. Then they saw the opposing ranks broken down and the foe fall back, leaving them a clear passage back again to their own friends.

Their torches burnt down, and had to be flung aside; yet still the battle went on in the dark, and still they remained unhurt.

Then the blackness of that night, which had lately been illumined only by the distant light from the camp fires, gave place to the faint pallor of coming day; grey and dim it came through that curtain of falling snow, which was rapidly covering up the dead where they lay; and still that desperate horde fought like wild beasts, as the carnage went on.

They were all over the field now, battling in detached masses, the horse and the infantry mixed up without order, and struggling each man for himself.

Lighter grew the chilly dawn, and what had been a general confusion once more became an army. The trumpets were again blaring, and the horsemen were rushing to their own centres, while the infantry rapidly formed into compact lines with the enemy between them.

It was the final charge of discipline against disorder, the foot on the one side with their spears, against which the cavalry were driving those desperate masses; and as Ronald and Jack drew forward with the others, the crowd before them seemed to melt as they sank under the trampling hoofs.

The long and fierce struggle was over at last, and they were once again conquerors. How many had perished none could say, for that snow had already covered up the bulk; nor could they see who had escaped, for the snow was still falling so thickly that it enveloped them like a dense fog; but their work was over at last, and all were riding and marching towards the camp, worn to death with their exertions, and with a dull apathy stealing over them like that numbing drowsiness which comes to the frozen before they lose their senses.



## CHAPTER XXIII.

### WHAT THE SNOWSTORM CONCEALED.

Human endurance had reached its extreme limit. Never in their young lives had Jack or Ronald felt fatigue like this which now lay upon them as they crawled back from that hard-contested field; they were blind with it, and felt as if every bone had been crushed.

Many of the veterans also drooped over their horses' necks, and only the prince still held himself erect, but that was with an effort of his iron will.

They were conquerors, and yet they came back to their tents silent and painfully, as if they had been defeated; and in spite of the snow falling so thickly upon them, many flung themselves down by the side of the fires without troubling to go under shelter, and straightway fell asleep, leaving their wearied horses to do as they liked.

Others managed to stagger inside, but no one took the trouble to loosen a belt or remove a breastplate. As they had fought so they pitched themselves down.

Prince Khalim, however, with a few of his retinue, kept their senses about them, and went over the camp, rousing up the sentinels and forcing them to their duty. It was the old men he appointed to that first watch, leaving the younger and stronger men to rest, for he knew that he could depend upon the elders most. After this duty was performed he looked personally to the wounded who had been brought in, and after that gave directions to the cooks and slaughter-men.

"Get coffee for the guards as quickly as possible, and bring me also a jug."

He strode backwards and forwards between the fires, with his head bent forward in deep thought, and a perplexed look upon his handsome face.

"They did not run away as I expected them to do last night, but fought like wild cats," he muttered to himself. "They should have scattered at our first charge, but they held obstinately on to the last, as even cowards will do when between two fires, or *when expecting help*."

The snow was beginning to abate as the morning light grew stronger; and where the sun should have been a kind of lustrous haze was beginning to glow through the clouds and falling flakes. At this moment one of the sutlers brought to him a large dish of boiling coffee, which he took from him with a pleasant smile and cheerful word of thanks.

"Have the sentinels been served?"

"They are being attended to now, your highness," replied the man.

"Now, tell the cooks to have a good breakfast ready for the waking of the wearied ones."

The sutler took the jug which the prince had emptied from his hand, and retired with a salam which the prince courteously returned as he continued his promenade.

"Did they expect assistance, and can there be more than I have been told about in this invasion?" he muttered. "There is a strange depression on my spirits this morning that I have not felt before, an anticipation of evil coming upon me, that makes my heart feel like lead."

The sun was struggling to break up that snow curtain which obscured the desolate landscape, now a mass of white and dirty grey, and the flakes were becoming thinner. Already objects a little distance away could be seen, the unevenness of the ground over by the trenches, now nearly filled up, and the covered mounds which last night had been living men and horses.

It was a picture of misery and discomfort, for the air was raw and moist, and the snow lay loosely and chilly over everything. Inside the camp an attempt had been made to keep the ground clear, so that the snow lay piled high up on the other side of the palisades, and gave them the appearance of battlements. The fires also had been kept burning brightly, and the cooks were hard at work roasting the quartered animals; but for all that it looked like an encampment of the dead, with the tents appearing like cone-shaped hills of snow.

The prince looked about him anxiously as he strode to and fro, oppressed with apprehensions which had never troubled him before. Sometimes he stretched up his arms and prayed that the snow might cease falling, so that he could penetrate that mystic curtain that enveloped him so closely about, and be able to see what lay beyond. Then he would stop to listen, but nothing came from that obscurity save the muffled sobbing of the cold, raw wind.

"Thanks, O Allah, for listening to my cry, and answering it—the sun is coming at last."

As he spoke, the wind suddenly shifted a point or two, and came keener and dryer, whirling with it great volumes of the loose snow, which it was quickly freezing into powder. The flakes had now almost ceased, and the clouds were rolling from the east and furling themselves in the west. Once more the blue sky could be seen, while the sun-shafts pierced those powdery, whirling masses of white.

Harder, and as if from all points, the wind rushed shrieking round the camp and over the steppes, while the clouds above broke up and seemed to be drawn earthwards and driven in a mad dance along the plain, rising up in spiral columns like water-spouts at sea, and then dissolving in showers of dazzling whiteness, making hills where before the ground had been level. All at once the prince, who had been watching this wild game of the elements, rushed over to one of the waggons, and climbing to its highest point, he stood upright, balancing himself, and peering from under his hands at the distance.

He had seen something more than the whirlwind-driven snow. What was it?

Intently he watched for a few moments, and then he leapt down again, and striding over to where one of the trumpeters lay before the fire, he seized his clarion from the man's sleeping hand, and putting it to his own lips sounded loudly the call to arms.

"To arms! to arms!! to arms!!!"

His peal was answered from different parts of the camp, after he had repeated it several times, as the men woke up and struggled to their feet from their short and disturbed sleep stiff and wearied still.

As the whirlwind swept the sounds away, it also seemed to have heard and obeyed that sonorous call of the trumpet, for the pillars and rolling clouds sank as if by unanimous agreement, and left the view unimpeded; and then the wearied army saw what their leader had disturbed them for.

A mighty column of trained horsemen, forty deep, and stretching away far as the eye could reach, were struggling towards them, the vanguard not a mile distant, with the snow up to their horses' girths, their helmets and armour glittering brightly in the sunbeams, and their banners fluttering high above them.

And on each side of this orderly and armed legion spread thousands of skin-clad barbarians, swarming forward in wild disorder, yet evidently bent for the same goal, and in unity with the disciplined middle force which they were flanking.

"Brothers," cried the prince, with a hard laugh, as he stretched out his gauntleted hand towards these overpowering hosts, "we have had our play yesterday and this morning, but lo!—yonder comes the work."

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## CHAPTER XXIV.

### EXTERMINATION.

The sun was once more setting over that dreary, snow-covered tableland.

A blood-coloured sun, with the last of the snow clouds heaped about it in fantastic and weird shapes. Crimson shapes they were in colour as well as in outline, and so Prince Khalim thought as he turned his weary eyes despairingly upon them.

He and his devoted army had fought a host twenty times their number for the past eight hours without a moment of surcease—fought like demi-gods or demi-devils, for the prestige which had rendered their names a sound of terror to all who hated them. Wearied as they were at the beginning of the contest, yet they had faced and beaten back each successive charge of the overwhelming and ungenerous enemy, who in their numbers gave the feebler army no chance of respite or truce—an enemy who could easily afford to lose thousands to their twenties, who made barricades of their own slain, and gradually, by their numbers alone, exterminated the dauntless heroes, who could die but would not be conquered.

They had looked upon these unexpected legions creeping up with dazed astonishment, both sides too utterly tired out to begin fighting all at once; the one with their late exercise, the other with their present heavy marching.

Prince Khalim had watched them slowly surround the camp with an iron ring, and while this was being accomplished, his men sat down and devoured their last meal, resigned to the doom they saw before them, and only murmuring, "It is Kismet!"

The invaders had settled down and were feeding also, while the heralds crossed the lines and interviewed the prince and his staff of captains.

The heralds told the truth, which Jack and Ronald could not venture to do, that Kimwah was sold, while they offered the prince the only terms left—his own and the lives of his followers, on condition that they laid down their arms at once.

"It is a base lie," replied the prince. "My brother is my father's son, as I am, and will never yield while life remains. What say you, captains, are you tired of your good names? Is life more precious to you than glory?"

"We will die as we have lived, with our faces to the enemy," replied his council with one accord.

"That is your message, envoy," said the prince quietly; and then the heralds left, and the doomed ones prepared to meet their fate.

So from the early morn until sunset they had stood round their waggons doing battle, as only men who have made up their minds to die can fight. They slew their thousands, fagged out as they were, and kept the enemy at bay during these long hours, envying the comrades who fell first, and so got the reward—Rest—which they were longing for.

Not a man budged from his post or gave in until his heart stopped beating, and each rendered a good account of himself before he fell, or, as his grudging comrades said, rushed to paradise.

They all expected to perish, and envied the fortunate ones who died before them. But their duty was clearly marked out to each individual, and that was to protect their native land as long as possible, and reduce the number of its enemies as much as they could, so that the young defenders of Bhaji would have the less to do; for to a man they discarded the evil suggestion that they had been betrayed. One idea ruled in every one of these devoted brains, and that was to sell their own lives as dearly as possible, or leave a record on this last day that their race would sing about, and to preserve the life of their leader, so that he might avenge their death.

It was so decided in the final council that for the first time in his life the prince was to keep inside the ranks, and act as the general only—a harder task for him than the fighting—yet he obeyed as far as he could for the best part of the day, and with Jack and Ronald beside him, he stood calmly a conspicuous object, directing the obstinate defence, and closing the ranks around him as they were cut down by that ever-recruited tide which surged against them.

So the hours passed away, and the sun travelled over their heads and cast its beams upon the shambles, while the snow became crimson as life became death in this heroic but vain struggle.

At last the end had come, for fifty warriors alone remained round the prince, and thousands were still left of the enemy.

"We have done enough here; let us get to Bhaji, your highness, while we can do so," said one of the chiefs who stood beside him.

It was then that the prince looked towards the setting sun with that despairing glance.

"Must we leave the field, conquered, who never were conquered before?"

"Yes; to return again and wipe out this stain. We must warn those who wait for us at the citadel, otherwise they also may be surprised and slain. Your brother, your wife are waiting there."

"My wife Artema. Yes, you are right, we must protect them also in spite of our present shame."

The enemy had been driven back for a moment, and were now preparing for the final charge, which would demolish this remnant, who had resisted them so long. A moment only remained to decide whether they would die at their posts or make a dash for liberty, and the mention of his wife decided the question at issue.

With a groan wrung from his despairing heart, he gave the word, and next instant was at the head of his little troop, and in the midst of his enemies, wielding his sword and mace with a fury such as he had never before shown.

Jack and Ronald, coming behind, had nothing left to do save follow through that lane which he cleared for them, for neither horse nor man could stand before that gigantic and desperate impetuosity. Perhaps, also, the enemy had their orders to spare his life for the present, for all retreated who could do so before the sweep of those merciless arms, and let the remnant go through; then, with savage yells, they closed up again and followed.

They might have fled, for their horses were now fresh, but that was a part in the science of war which they had not learnt, so after going a little way they turned and charged again those nearest to them, cutting them down furiously, and then making good their retreat for another short distance, to turn again and beat back their foremost hunters.

Meantime, the rear-guard took advantage of these delays, and making a detour on both sides, got in front of them before they reached the defile. Here another desperate engagement took place, in which half of that fifty were left behind, while the remaining twenty-five, with Jack, Ronald and the prince, plunged into the darkness of that narrow way, for the time protected by the night which had now fallen upon them.

It was fortunate for the safety of this miserable remnant that darkness concealed them from the hidden enemies who were lying in wait for their return in this rocky and cave-punctured glen; for as they clattered down its stony sides many a musket was discharged in their direction from the ledges above, but the shots were random ones, and found a target in those coming after, or were flattened on the rocks.

Few amongst those galloping to Bhaji who did not carry fresh wounds, although at this time they were unfelt. Yet the two boys were amongst the few who had come off scathless.

Not a word passed amongst those shame-stricken fugitives as they clattered along, while the crash of their hoofs prevented them from hearing the reports of these dastard shots; and when at last the lights of the fortress shone upon them, there was not one who did not wish that he had been left behind on the field.

Had they also been expected, the gates could not have been opened quicker to their demands, a fact which even the prince in his dejection noticed and complimented the warders upon before he rode under the solid archway which bridged the pass, and gave his directions for the force to be increased, and the beacons to be at once lighted.

"Line the battlements with archers, for the enemy is coming close behind; we have been defeated," said the prince sternly, as he rode slowly through the second gate, with hanging head.

Silently they made their way up the steep and narrow street which led to the governor's castle, which they found lighted up, for it was yet early; and then, leaving their wounded horses to be looked after by the grooms, they entered that building to deliver their melancholy tidings.



## CHAPTER XXV.

### THE CAPTURE OF KHALIM KHAN.

It is a consolation to a man to be made welcome at home, even although the tidings he brings are misfortune. His work or actions may be criticised outside and condemned, yet if he is sure of admirers within his own family circle, he can afford to bear the censure of the world at large.

Prince Khalim appeared before his wife and brother with woe and shame in his heart that he was still alive to tell of his own defeat, a deadly weight to carry which not even the fact that he was sorely wounded could lighten; and lo! never was brother or husband so tenderly received.

Artema, with her women, unarmed him and his wounded followers with lavish words of welcome and praise, bathing the wounds, and, as they anointed and bandaged them, pouring the sweet and soothing balm of flattery and tenderness—as only a woman can in her best moments do—into the bruised minds.

That they were snares and delusions, false words of deception, was beside the question. For the time they revived the drooping and fainting souls of those humbled men, which was a medicine heaven-sent and priceless; for even the smooth words of a false traitor have their value in the summing up of life's fleeting pleasures.

The vanquished hero was comforted by his wife, and his heart made once more hopeful by the readiness with which his brother offered to replace his army to the best of his power with his own young men, *on the morrow*.

"To-night you must rest, Khalim, my brother, for I have seen to the placing of the guards and the firing of the beacons. Already they are gathering out to the night, and telling the enemy that we are on the alert; besides, you know that this place is impregnable from the north. I have also sent a messenger to Kimwah to bring up reinforcements, so at daybreak to-morrow you can, if it pleases you, take three thousand men with you; or, if you like to wait for another day, have the bulk of my forces."

"To-night, husband, you are mine," murmured the siren Artema, nestling closely to him, and kissing his pallid lips tenderly, "my prisoner of war; to-morrow I shall give you your liberty—*perhaps*."

So the poor trusting prince was comforted, and for the time almost forgot his terrible disaster.

After supper Mrs Bangles got the chance she had been looking for since she had welcomed the boys—that of having a chat with them. She withdrew with them from the hall, and, taking them into a little chamber where there was no opportunity for listeners, she spoke to them in English, as a double precaution.

"The lives of the prince and his followers are safe for the present, for during your absence I have heard the whole plot. To-night they will be arrested in their beds and carried down to Kimwah, where they will be tried publicly as traitors to their country, and condemned openly to death, for Humayun means to be elected by general consent as king. Already the old king has been made prisoner, and condemned to be blinded by his own council for plotting with his heir against the liberty of the people, so we can do nothing at present, for the prince must see for himself before he will listen to anyone."

"But have you made no plans, mother?" asked Jack.

"Yes. You are safe and unwounded, and I have seen five others who came with you have also escaped with whole skins. Can you manage to bring those heroes to me here while the others are feasting, without attracting attention?"

"Yes," answered the boys. "They will come if we ask them."

"Then bring them here without delay."

The boys returned to the hall, and spoke to the unwounded warriors separately, but found it difficult to tear them from their flagons. Yet they managed it at last, and in company they returned to the apartment where Mrs Bangles waited for them.

When they heard of the trap they had entered, their surprise was unbounded, while rage rendered them almost

speechless. Yet they were Orientals who could grasp the situation and understand it without incredulity.

"We must all make our escape to-night," said Mrs Bangles, "for the town is filled with the traitors and their masters, and we must go at once."

"Without our prince and comrades?" asked the warriors.

"Yes. We cannot help them now, but if we get away we can lie in wait for them in the pass, and rescue them as they are taken down to Kimwah. I saw a part where five men could do this easily; but if you remain here there is no chance."

"But how can we get out?"

"I have ropes all ready; and at the present time all the interest is centred in the north walls. I have also provided some robes, hidden in the garden, so that you may cover your armour while stealing through the streets. Your muskets are also there, boys, and all the ammunition, with arms enough for all. Meanwhile, as I have said, your prince and comrades are safe as far as their lives are concerned, for they will be overpowered in their sleep, and to-morrow we can rescue and arm them, for by that time they will know their fate."

"But we'll be missed," said Jack.

"No; they are sure that no one outside themselves suspect their plot, and as for us, they will think we have gone out for a walk and been trapped in the town. They are too confident of success, now that you have been defeated, to trouble themselves about a few stragglers, so long as they capture the prince."

Everyone saw the wisdom of a speedy escape, so without further talk they followed the intrepid little actress out to the garden, and covered themselves with the female garments which she had provided for them; then, with the weapons divided amongst them, they slipped out, and keeping to the shadows, crept along to the quietest part of the walls.

Falko went with them, and as Mrs Bangles had spent the intervening time training that intelligent animal, he was not long in climbing the walls and throwing the loop over one of the spikes at the top; then one after the other mounted and descended on the outside. They were clear of that nest of traitors, and unsuspected, for Falko had been the last to descend, and he had brought along with him the tell-tale rope.

Another moment and they had plunged into the walled-in pass, leaving the watch-fires flaring brightly on the walls, and the sentinels taking it easy, for the prince's enemies were their present friends.

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The Princess Artema was full of childish and boisterous gaiety on that night of the defeat, and made light of that terrible loss, saying that it was no misfortune as long as her husband had returned so soon.

It was the divine love and charity of woman, the prince thought, which was now exerted to soothe his troubled mind, and he smiled gratefully upon her for that effort, and drank deeply from the cup which she so frequently filled for him.

He had lost a good quantity of blood, but his wounds were not serious, although many, and therefore it was not long before he gave out signs of fatigue; then the princess rose, and with her servants conducted him to her chamber.

"I shall watch over my lord to-night while he sleeps," said this fair creature, after he was disrobed and placed on the couch.

"Leave my tulwar where I can reach it, Artema," murmured the prince drowsily, as he closed his wearied eyes.

"Yes, my lord," answered the princess, as she handed his sword and dagger to one of the women, and signed to her to take them out of the room.

Shortly after this, silence fell upon the castle, and the prince slept, while the beautiful young wife sat beside him and watched his troubled, pale face and frequent starts.

Time passed, and his sleep grew deeper and quieter, then softly the curtain was moved aside, and Humayun entered

softly with twenty men behind him, armed with daggers only, and carrying strong ropes. As they entered, the princess rose from the side of the couch and went over to the doorway, where her brother-in-law stood.

"Are the others secured, Humayun?" she whispered softly.

"Yes."

"Then fall upon the leader, for he is sound asleep."

The twenty men stole forward and surrounded the couch with their ropes, waiting on the word.

"Now!" said Prince Humayun.

At this moment a clarion sounded outside. It was the signal for the guards changing on the walls, but at the peal Khalim woke suddenly, and sprang to his feet with startled eyes.

"What is it?"

As he asked the question, the twenty men hurled themselves upon him, and tried to throw him once more back while they cast the ropes around him. But he was awake, and like a lion amongst the dogs, and although half naked and unarmed, he struggled like a giant, and flung those nearest to him back easily.

Again they closed round him, while Humayun clapped his hands for more assistants, who came pouring through the doorway until the room was crowded.

"Cut him down if he will not yield," cried out Artema in a shaky voice, as she stood on the outside of the room, trembling now with fear at the ease with which he was scattering his assailants.

"Artema, my wife."

He had seen her and heard that cruel order, and as he wailed out the cry his strength went from him. In another second the ropes were once more round his body, and he was a prisoner. Then the princess grew suddenly brave.

"Yes, traitor, Artema, but no longer your wife. Bind him fast and take him to the dungeon, for at last I am free."

Prince Khalim struggled no longer, but stood upright while they bound him tightly, looking on the woman he had loved and trusted so utterly, and who had now revealed herself.

"I thought last night that I had emptied the cup of bitterness, but now, surely, it is finished," he said, in a dull voice.

"Not even yet, Khalim Khan. You have only lost your reputation and your wife; your life still remains to be taken from you, and then I shall be satisfied for the hours of weariness you have made me suffer, you solemn son of an ass."

A violent shudder moved the cords with which the prince was bound as he listened to those pitiless words, and looked into those large, dark eyes, flashing with a mirth of hatred which seemed to be so reasonless.

"Artema, bid them kill me now, and I will forgive you for those words," he said humbly.

"No; that would be too great a boon for me to grant you yet. You must live to know that the thing you thought most upon has been as much of a shadow as my love; that the battles you and your foolish fathers have fought have been fought in vain. Your country has been sold, and the owners are already in possession of their property. I never loved you even at the first, and have hated you long ago, and now I despise you for being such a fool. You will be tried before the elders of your people, and disgraced for sacrificing the lives of your men and saving your own; and then your eyes will be put out, as your father's have been already, so that you may do no more harm. No, we shall not kill you yet, Khalim Khan, my noble hero of a hundred fights, my visionary knight."

A smile, soft and gentle, crept over his lips as the false girl was pouring this mocking speech out, while his eyes lost their despairing gloom, and shone brighter and more steadfastly as he replied,—

"It is the will of God that I should hear all this for the forgotten sins which I have committed."

"Bah! the fool will be thanking me next for what I have done. Take him out of my sight, or I'll spit on him."

She stepped back as she almost shrieked out these savage words, and stood as far from him as she could get while he was led past her and the false Humayun, as if she still feared he might snap those thick ropes and hurt her; but he walked quietly and meekly along, with that strange glow still on his face that looked almost like pleasure, and his eyes shining as they looked before him. So he left the evil pair, without even a word or a glance at his brother.

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## CHAPTER XXVI.

### IN THE PASS.

The pass between Bhaji and Kimwah was an exceedingly narrow, sterile and precipitous waterway for the first half-dozen miles, with gloomy and almost unbroken walls on both sides.

At this part, however, it changed its character somewhat, and became more broken up and, if possible, wilder; at least it added the picturesque to its former gloomy grandeur, for here a second gorge crossed it to north and south, down which rushed two large torrents, that clashed against each other, and joined in one great waterfall with two separate heads.

Hitherto the pathway had led along the foot of the gorge, but at this place it took a sudden dip, excavated by the force of these united torrents, or by some convulsions of nature, and descended abruptly eight hundred feet; and into this tremendous depth these two volumes of water plunged from the opposite sides of the pass with a turmoil which was appalling, while above them floated, like an arch, a connecting rainbow.

It was an awesome and blood-curdling place, with the resounding and unceasing thunder for ever echoing up, and that deadly swiftness and blackness of waters rushing down, and changing to dazzling whiteness as they mingled in that fierce embrace, and went headlong to the rocky bed below, and from there foamed down the channel in a hundred lesser falls and whirlpools.

A wooden drawbridge, with low bulwarks on each side, had been laid over the southern torrent, from two boulders, just where it took its plunge, and beyond that a natural ledge, built up at parts, led at a rapid slant down to the bed of the angry, snow-fed river.

Strong chains riveted into the rocks held this bridge in its place, yet it was so constructed that it could be raised from either side, and so effectually bar further progress, although it took the strength of several men to raise it, for it was a substantial affair, as it required to be, when an army had at times to cross on it. It was worked by pulleys and powerful cranks.

This was the spot which Mrs Bangles had fixed upon as the scene for the rescue of Prince Khalim and his followers. The bridge and ledge were narrow, so that only one rider at a time could cross over; the rocks also here were broken up and full of fissures, and at a pinch could be climbed by desperate men, towards that opening to the south.

The distant and thunderous booming of the falling waters warned them not to continue their journey until daylight came to show them the way; therefore they waited at a considerable distance from the brink, and sat down to rest, watching the dazzling world of stars and planets above them as they sparkled and glowed within that narrow, black-fringed aperture.

The night air blew past them cold and icy, and chilled them to the bone, so that they were glad to keep as close together as they could while they waited for that tardy dawn.

At last it came slowly, and they were able to see objects; then they rose shiveringly and walked on to the bridge, and crossing that, examined the sides of the cliffs.

"Have you ever climbed those rocks?" asked Mrs Bangles, and one of the warriors answered,—

"Yes, when I was young I have done so."

"What is there beyond?"

"Narrow ledges, caves and rocks."

"Is it possible to reach the top?"

"Yes, a bold fellow can go on until he reaches the snows, and at times go over them, and get down again to the plain. There are many ways, but none like this."

"Well, this is my plan," said Mrs Bangles. "We shall hide amongst these boulders, and watch for the coming of the captives. Do you know the order in which they will ride?"

"Yes, Bachna; the chiefs will come first with their private henchmen, and then the prisoners, while the main guard will follow to see that they do not escape."

"They will be numerously attended?"

"Yes; with such a prisoner as our prince all who are not required at Bhaji will come," replied the soldier.

"Can you lift this bridge?"

"It will take five men to turn the crank."

"How soon can it be lifted?"

"I'll show you, Bachna."

He strode over the bridge, and unhooked the chains at the other side, trailing the loose ends after him, and attaching them to the chains hanging from the pulleys; then the five put their arms to the crank-handles and turned the wheels. In a few seconds the bridge was standing upright before them like a great door, for the machinery was kept in good order.

"That will do. Now, lower it again."

It was done as smoothly and as expeditiously as it had been raised.

"We have the prince and your twenty comrades to liberate, and that bridge to lift as soon as they are over. This is how we will do it: we shall be concealed until they come; then, after the van passes, and as the first captive is crossing the bridge, you five warriors will drop in front of him, and protect him from the guards in front, while we cut their bonds and give them weapons. If we are quick, it will be accomplished easily before those coming behind can know about it, for that boulder over there on the other side of the torrent conceals all except those who are actually on the bridge."

"Yes; only those nearest us in front can see us, and, being on the hill, we can keep them easily at bay."

"The horses we shall drive on past us as we liberate their riders, which will also protect us; and as each man drops from his horse he will be one more to help you to protect the bridge."

"That is so, Bachna."

"Ronald and Jack, you will stay amongst the boulders above us, with your muskets, where you can command the other end of the bridge; and after the last of the captives are on the bridge, keep the others from coming after them, and I will cut the cords; then up with the drawbridge, and over the rocks to freedom."

This plan was at once agreed to by all, and without delay they scrambled to their hiding-places and waited; for they knew well that the march would not be delayed by the successful conspirators, Kimwah being the goal of their desires.

"I wish we had brought some tucker with us, Ronald," observed Jack, as they lay together on their high perch, with Falko beside them.

"Yes; that was a forget that we are not likely to mend now for a bit, unless we can fall across some animal on the hills."

Three long hours passed while they watched for the first appearance of the cavalcade. They must watch for them, for no sounds could be heard over that mighty crashing of the waters below them.

It was a terrific sight which met their glances when they looked down. That dark flood rolling like oil under the bridge, with the smooth edge, where it rolled over the rocks; the chasm at the other side, with that limp fall, and the rainbow circling the gulf, out of which all that demoniac clatter came which fritted their brains so that they felt as if they would never be able to hear another sound all their lives.

The great boulder, against a ledge of which the bridge rested, almost covered the pathway, for whoever was coming had to come from behind it, so that they were almost upon the bridge before they could be seen; but this would be an advantage to those who were lying in wait, for it gave them a better aim, while, after that, they had the whole range of the bridge.

At last their patience was rewarded, and the foremost of the procession made his appearance, and leisurely walked on to the bridge—one of the gaily-caparisoned horse-militia of Prince Humayun's bodyguard.

Another appeared a few yards behind him, for they had to approach this chasm carefully with their spirited horses, and it took some coaxing to get them on to the wood with that thunder under their feet, so that they were forced to walk slowly, and let one over before the other ventured on.

Thirty men of the guard followed the first, and then came the Prince Humayun and Princess Artema.

The prince went over first and paused on the other side for her to follow, and while he did so the boys were strongly tempted to pot him and his wicked companion, they were such capital marks; this desire, however, they resisted and let them go on.

No sound of hoofs or voices could be heard, of course, above that roaring of waters; they appeared to be walking with noiseless feet, like spectres gliding along. Artema looked a little frightened and pallid as her cream-tinted palfrey danced her along those planks, but the sinister-eyed prince looked as sarcastically calm and composed as ever. He was sneering at the terror of the princess, but made no effort to help her over, although he lingered for her on the other side.

As they disappeared down the winding slope, some of the officers and young khans followed, and behind them the female waiting-ladies of the princess. One by one they walked warily across, while the one behind halted until the foremost one was over. It was a tedious progress to those who waited amongst the rocks.

Fifty armed men came next. It took them fully half-an-hour to pass the torrent; then, as the last of these appeared, the boys saw that he was holding a halter, and they knew that the time had come for their plot to succeed or fail—the prisoners were close behind.

Yes, the last man led the horse, a sorry beast, on whose bony and bare back the noble and chivalrous hero Khalim was strapped down, with his face turned to the tail, so that his friends could only see his back.

All the ignominy which Asiatic contempt could heap upon him had been done, for the royal pair in front knew the effect of such an exhibition on the fickle minds of the crowd. Khalim in his armour at the head of his victorious troops was an object to be admired and revered; but Khalim in his rough tanned under-garment, with his head bare, and his body bound with cords, riding with his face to the tail of that bony scarecrow of a hack, was an object only to be laughed at and mocked.

His past deeds would be forgotten, and that last ride to Kimwah only remembered by the majority of his father's subjects, for the past efforts of a man are not generally set against the failure of the present by the people to whom, as a mass, memory and generosity are qualities unknown. Here and there a stray individual would recall acts of kindness received or glorious deeds, which had made his heart beat at the time they occurred; but such a one will be afraid or ashamed to give voice to his recollections. He will rather shrink aside and conceal his blushes, while the thoughtless ones are braying out their scorn.

The widows and children of those slaughtered braves will also curse loudly, and call down heaven's vengeance on that figure which is coming backwards; and if he hears these cries he will crouch like a slave beneath the lash, no matter how calmly he may meet the storm of jeers and mockery; for the grief of the widows and orphans has been pressing heavily upon his heart since the husbands and fathers fell around him, and this full well the gorgeously-apparelled pair in front knew, and mean to trade upon; full well they know that before he reached the slimy dungeons of Kimwah, the bulk of the masses will have condemned him, and hailed them as the saviours of their country, because they bring with them the promise of peace and security of life. And what do the people care to which master they pay their taxes, so long as they are allowed to sleep quietly in their beds, and enjoy their feasts and friends.

Humayun and Artema, the joint governors of the land under the new order, mean to let their people feast and dance the hours away, for their masters will rule them with a velvet paw yet awhile. He, the great White Bear, has no desire to rob them of their crops or cattle *for the present*; he has only bargained for a safe passage through the land to the country he courts with greedy longing. He has steppes enough, and snow more than enough, to content him in his own wilds; by-and-by, of course, he will claim his full pound of flesh, but for the present he will permit them to dance, love, marry and get future subjects.

If Ronald and Jack felt any compunctions before, when they saw their hero being led along in this ignominious fashion their scruples fled, for boys are boys all the world over, and the man or bigger boy who first captures their hearts is the one for their money, to use a sporting phrase.

They tried to curb their impatience and obey orders as far as they could—that is, they watched with clenched teeth the back of the prince as he crossed the bridge, and the coming of the first of his vanquished army, which, with crafty premeditation, the conspirators had robed in their armour and bound in the more dignified fashion to their steeds of face to head. The prince alone was to be degraded and executed; the others were to be forgiven as victims to duty.

They watched the prince and his jailor go over safely, and then, forgetting that there were others to do that part of the work, they aimed their muskets at the last and next of the young troop and fired.

Their guns exploded, but they did not hear the report; only the kick back of the butts let them know they had gone off, and the silent collapse and dropping down of the riders, while the horses still kept steadily on their downward path; and then they saw Mrs Bangles and the five warriors spring down to the path and begin operations, while they reloaded.



## CHAPTER XXVII.

### THE RESCUE.

A couple of cuts at the bands and the royal captive had burst asunder his fastenings, and was on the ground, with one of the spare weapons in his hand. It all passed like a silent pantomime, for the loudest cry of astonishment would be drowned by that continuous booming of falling waters.

The riderless horse followed the others round that angle of rock, while, as the rest came on to the bridge, they were liberated and ready to help.

So the twenty-one captives were freed, and their horses sent on without them.

Then the first of the escort made his appearance, and Ronald shot him between the eyes, for his casque was lying back, while his horse, startled at the sudden wrench that the man gave the reins, backed out of sight with its dead rider, and doubtless barred the way, for although Jack was watching for the next shot, no other mark appeared until the bridge had been raised and fastened securely, thus shutting out the view.

How energetically men can work, and what feats of strength they are capable of when it is a matter of life and death, is beyond calculation; in the working of the pumps in a sinking ship, or the lifting of a drawbridge; in less time than it could have been considered possible, that bridge was locked up tightly, and the ex-captives and their rescuers were scrambling up the rocks and out of sight.

Then some of the fifty militia rode back to learn the cause of the riderless horses, and occupied themselves with lowering the bridge for their comrades, who were now waiting on the other side; and as no one had seen the rescue, or where they had gone, after a consultation they decided that the wisest course to follow would be to kill the horses and pitch them over the precipice, and tell the prince and princess that the prisoners had driven their horses over the bridge, and so destroyed themselves.

This would save all trouble, which they did not want, and satisfy their leaders.

To kill the horses before the alarm had been given in front was easy, for they had been driven back to the bridge, so that a cut or two hamstrung the poor beasts, and some vigorous pushes sent them over the ledge into that awful grave. Then one of the butchers rode on to give in his lying report, while the others passed over the bridge and continued their way.

The prince and princess were furious with rage and disappointment when they heard that their victims had escaped them in this tragic fashion. However, they did not pause to question the messenger, but continued their journey down to the plain, thinking how best to turn the suicides to their own credit. Khalim had escaped their paltry vengeance, but at least he was removed from their path, and even if he could not be exhibited to the people as a traitor, still his memory could be always covered with disgrace.

"As long as an enemy lives, Artema, he is dangerous, so perhaps it is better for us that this has happened," said Humayun. "For now we can go on without impediment, and you are free to look out for another husband."

"Yes, brother, I prefer to be at liberty from him, but I have no desire to be again a slave to any man," replied Artema. "I shall go where I please now, and do as I like, after we have settled our affairs at Kimwah."

She meant after the joint payment of their treachery had been divided between them when she said this; for already she began to speculate if it would not be possible to put Humayun out of the way also, and get the whole to herself; and what she was meditating her companion was also calculating upon, for both had the true Asiatic love for money and fraud, and an equal distrust for each other, so they rode along silently, and with busy brains. The wrongs of Prince Khalim were already beginning to be avenged.

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Meanwhile, after a stiff and dangerous climb up these rugged cliffs and narrow ledges, the escaped party reached one of the many caves without being seen, and sat down to rest and consider upon their future course of action.

Their escape had been as easily effected as the overthrow of the legitimate government, but it was apparent to one and all that Kimwah had rejected them; and that, as they were not strong enough to retake their rights, henceforth they must either be exiles from their native land, or become outlaws and robbers of their own people if they stayed.

They stood round the prince, watching him silently, and waiting for him to decide upon their immediate future; and he sat on a boulder, with his face resting within his palm and his eyes fixed upon the ground. At length he raised his fine eyes, now clouded with melancholy, and fixed them upon one of the oldest of his followers, a wound-scarred veteran of about sixty.

"My mother was an Armenian, and the daughter of a powerful chief; you were one of those who went for her and brought her to my father, Murjah Behádur, were you not?"

"Yes, my lord," replied the old man.

"The mother who died giving me life—thank Allah that she was not also the mother of Humayun—could you guide me to the tents of my mother's people?"

"Yes, my lord, but it is far from here, and there are many dangers by the way, and deserts to cross, and many enemies to encounter, before we reach your kinsmen."

"That is better than an easy journey, for it will keep us from thinking on what we have lost. We shall only wait until we can take my father with us, and then you will guide me to my mother's race."

The prince spoke gently and evenly, as if he were discussing some ordinary event, and the pathos lay more in the words themselves than in the manner of expressing them, yet little Mrs Bangles began to cry as she listened to them, while she murmured,—

"Yes—yes; when a man loses all his worldly hopes and possessions, he turns like a child to his mother for comfort."

"No, Carlo!" quickly said the prince, who had heard that murmur. "The true man should turn first to Allah for comfort and deliverance. I did so last night, and lo! He delivered us this morning. He also sent the thought of my mother's kindred, as a hope, without which no man can continue to live. I therefore now live in hopes that I shall liberate my father, the king, from his cruel enemies, with the help of you and my other friends; and also that I shall be able to return and restore the lost independence of my native land."

"And punish your enemies," added Mrs Bangles.

"No; those who have betrayed me have already planted their own punishment. Yesterday I dreamt that I had a brother and a wife, but that was only a dream, and no man can cherish rancour for the shadows of a vision after he is awake. We may remember with regret the vision, and wish that it had been reality, but that is all we can do. To-day I have only a father to think about, and a country to liberate; the other things have passed away. Bismillah! let us go on."

Prince Khalim rose to his feet, and, with a wave of his hand, as if brushing the subject aside, and a stifled sigh, he addressed his followers.

"I have been over the mountains more than once before, and so have you, Murjah, therefore we shall be able to find our way to the plain, and there are places in the woods where we can lie concealed while we wait; so let us push on in the daylight."

Another climb of about two hours' duration, and they found themselves on the crest of the mountains, where the snow lay thinly, with other peaks in front more thickly covered.

Over these they wandered, making some wide detours, and passing along ledges which were hardly wide enough to rest a foot, while below them yawned deep crevices, again to find themselves struggling waist-deep among snow.

During the afternoon they encountered a large and ferociously hungry bear, which, however, they despatched, and then, cutting it up, they carried each a piece of the flesh for their supper.

About nightfall they found themselves in a hollow between two ridges, where amongst the drifted snow some scanty trees were projecting. These furnished them with the firewood they required, and then clearing a space they lit their fire,

cooked their bear-steaks, and afterwards fell asleep inside the snow walls that they had piled up round their little camp.

Next morning they once more started at daybreak, and after another toilsome march were able to bivouac within a deserted woodman's hut under the heavy foliage of the larches and giant cedars which belted the plain, with a clear mountain stream rushing past the door and the ground waist-deep in undergrowth.

It was a delightful and romantic spot, where they were not likely to be discovered, for the hut had been long standing empty, so that the parasites had completely covered the outside, and in many places had also festooned the walls and ceiling inside—a solitary spot, given over to the birds and wild game with which it was plentifully stocked, so that it would afford them a shelter and give them food as long as they cared to stay. Here the prince decided to fix his quarters, while five of his men, taking off their armour, slipped away in the evening light to discover what they could in the shape of news.

They were absent the whole of that night, and when they returned next morning brought back the account of their supposed suicide in the pass.

All the people were convinced of their death, and had given themselves up to a general feasting over the new order of things. Prince Humayun had been accepted as the ruler in conjunction with Artema, while the royal coffers had been opened lavishly and the great peace proclaimed. Already the city was thronged with envoys from the over-rulers, and nothing was spoken about but love and friendship with their hereditary enemies, while the prince and princess who had brought this concord about were lauded as the benefactors of their nation.

"Great cannons have been planted on the walls, and in every house the gun-carrying strangers are billeted. Bhaji had been full of them when we passed by it on our march upward, and a large army are on the way to take more complete possession, and drill our militia to be soldiers to the Czar; while as soon as the army comes there is to be a grand parade, and decorations given out to the leaders who have sold their country."

"And my father?" asked the prince anxiously.

"He is still alive, and a prisoner; he was caught as we were, in his bed, dragged that same night before the Council, and condemned to be blinded with red-hot wire."

"Has the order been carried out?"

"Yes; the deed was done at once, while we were waiting on the steppes for our enemies. He is now confined in the palace."

"Ah! then we must act at once before the full force of the invaders come. You have succeeded in getting some disguises, I see," he said, looking at the bundles they had thrown down.

"Yes; we entered several huts on the way which we found deserted, for the owners were all in the city, and took what we could find."

"Then we shall be fakirs for the time, and as they feel so sure that we are dead, we can easily deceive them by covering our faces; and, with so many strangers about, we shall not be questioned even if we are seen, which, as the night is moonless, will not be likely, for we can cross the bridge of boats, and swim over the river inside, and get into the palace garden without much trouble; and once there I know a secret way to the dungeon, and when we get my father out, then we shall force our passage back, if needful."

After this they spent the day sharpening their weapons, and getting ready for the coming adventure.

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## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### THE BLINDED KING IS LIBERATED.

It was night once more—a clear, starry night, making the edge of the forest, through which the company were passing, black as ebony.

Before them gleamed the illuminated city, with the cultivated fields between them and it. Fires were blazing in the market square, and the bazaars were still open, and doing a thriving trade, for the streets were thronged with people, and the fields outside the walls were deserted.

Discipline was hardly kept up on this night, for there was no longer any necessity; they had yielded up their liberty, and the masters were coming to protect them. They had no longer any responsibility, therefore they could enjoy their rest, and sleep securely, as slaves sleep on their owners' property; it is only the freeman, or the masters, who need to lock their doors.

A great wave of rejoicing had passed over the people at this unaccustomed sense of security. It felt like the one perfect holiday of their lives, and in its novelty was seized upon eagerly, as the one who had given it had predicted, for people get wearied of any state when it is prolonged. They were sick of war for the present, and had gone mad over the change to ignoble peace. By-and-by they would wake up, when it was too late, and curse their loss of independence, but as yet it had not been felt.

The servants of the master, to whom they now also belonged, treated them with excessive friendship and respect, and as allies rather than the slaves they had become, for they lay too close to the borderland of British India to be trampled upon at the first; therefore, as Humayun and Artema had been bribed, so the envoys had brought with them caravans of presents to please the citizens, from the highest and most important to the meanest.

Humayun and Artema had began their rule with great policy, announcing that the reign of peace was also to be the reign of plenty. The captives of war had been set at liberty, and rewarded for their past slavery, and were now entertained as friendly guests by their former jailers and drivers. The prisoners in jail had been pardoned, with the exception of the few most desperate criminals, who had been re-tried, and where it was found impossible to pardon, they had been promptly executed in the new fashion to Kimwah, by being blown to pieces from the guns, which had also proved a novel exhibition to the people; so that, with the exception of the royal and now universally execrated prisoner, the dungeons stood empty, and the jailers could also enjoy the season of general rejoicing.

The widows and orphans of that slaughtered army had been consoled with, and their grief lightened, by this crafty betrayer of his country, who had publicly announced that he would protect them against want, and provide them with fresh husbands and fathers, who would not leave them to go to the battlefield as did their first husbands; and the widows of soldiers and sailors, who during their lives have seen so little of their husbands, and who have lived in constant expectation of being made widows, are not generally difficult to comfort. Their princess was also now a widow, and bore her loss so lightly that it made them almost ashamed to show any grief, for fashion is the deity of most women, and the princess was the acknowledged leader of fashion in Kimwah, in morals as well as costume, and as she dressed and acted, her female subjects did their best to imitate.

Prince Khalim and his followers, for they had all come—even Falko was with them—stole over the fields and along the deserted roads by twos and threes, for they did not wish to attract the notice of any straggler. They had left their heavier mail behind at the hut, and concealed their arms under the humble garments which they had borrowed, without asking leave, from the peasants' wardrobes, and having appointed the place to rejoin by the river bank outside the walls, they kept as far apart as possible, and as near to the shadows of the sweet-scented hedges.

Jack, Ronald, Mrs Bangles and Falko were together, with the prince and a couple of his men a little way in front; the rest were coming up by different ways, and in separate groups.

Jack and Ronald could swim, of course, and thought nothing of a plunge amongst the chilly waters of that snow-fed stream; but neither Mrs Bangles nor poor Falko had learnt that most useful accomplishment, talented although they were, and yet it was necessary for them to get across that river, for their direction towards Persia lay on the other side of the plain.

When the difficulty was first discussed, Mrs Bangles proposed to go with Falko openly through the gates, but this was considered too risky. They would be recognised, for their performances had already made them celebrities; and if they had been already missed—as it was likely they were—then their absence and sudden appearance would be questioned, to the danger of the whole party. Then it was at last decided that Jack should take one of the prince's own boats from the other side, where a number were always lying near the palace garden, and come for them while the others waited.

But fortune favoured them more than they had expected; for when they reached the little ghat where they had agreed to meet, they discovered three boats which had been carelessly left there. In former times this would have been considered a very grave offence if discovered by the watchful patrols, but in these piping times of peace the patrols, like the guardians of the city gates, were all enjoying themselves, while the citizens had already grown careless of old laws and regulations.

However, as these boats served their present purpose, and permitted them to cross over without wetting themselves, it was not the time to grumble at the loose order of things under the new *régime*, as that same carelessness, if extended to the palace, might be the means of getting them through their adventures quietly and without mishap. Therefore, taking advantage of what Providence had sent them, they all got into the boats and rowed themselves safely over, drifting down the stream until they were well within the walls. Then they landed at an obscure part of the royal garden.

Prince Khalim knew every inch of the way, and without more than a sorrowful glance towards the lighted and crowded streets, where his people were holding high festival over his downfall and supposed death, he plunged into the well-kept thicket, his company following as lightly as they could walk.

They avoided the main pathways, which were illuminated with coloured lamps, and along which many people were passing—for the prince and princess were also holding high carnival and entertaining the envoys of their new master—and thus the adventurers gradually approached the palace, the reception rooms of which were brilliantly lighted up, with the windows open to the night air, and the spectators outside.

The unmourned husband of Princess Artema stood amongst the crowd of mendicants, who were gazing on the lavishness displayed before their admiring eyes, while they waited on the remains of the feast being cast out to them after the favoured ones were fed.

He stood with his shawl covering his face, and only the mournful eyes visible—he, the husband who had poured out his heart's affection and generosity upon the woman who abhorred and despised him while she knew he was alive; who had repudiated and despised him, and now that he was dead to her, could feast and laugh as joyously as ever.

He never looked in the direction of his false brother, who sat also facing the window. He appeared to have forgotten that brother's share of the baseness. His mother had been a slave, and it was only natural for the son of a slave to be ungrateful and base; but the woman who had lain against his heart and kissed him with her lying lips now engrossed his attention, while his followers waited behind him. He was looking his farewell at her, and wondering how falsehood could look so like truth.

She was reclining a little distance from Humayun, and engaged in fascinating a tall, fair-haired, blue-eyed Muscovite, who sat at the table beside her, and who had to turn his back to the window and lean over his seat to speak to her as she reclined on the couch.

She was gorgeously dressed and sparkling with jewels, the gifts of her husband, which glistened on her neck and amongst her artfully arranged and abundant tresses. The same soft rich light shone in her velvety eyes and caressed the stranger which he once had thought beamed for him only; the dewy red lips parted in the well-remembered, half-tender, half-mirthful smile.

No jealousy touched his great heart as he watched. He had never been jealous even while he loved her, for love with him meant respect and trust; and now that respect had departed, love had also gone, and he was too noble to permit jealousy to stain his knightly soul. Only an intense pain of pity and unselfish regret filled his heart—regret that a thing so lovely should be so vile, that one who had been so rich should have become so poor, and a prophetic pity for the unblest future before her.

"The spirit of evil has touched her and made her mad," he murmured brokenly. "May Allah never wake her to know her misery, or if she wakes, may He send his angels to comfort her wicked soul."

That was Prince Khalim's prayer.

She was laughing merrily now at something her companion said to her—laughing, with the thought in her heart that perhaps this man might help her to overthrow Humayun.

"Farewell, poor butterfly, that I once thought a seraph; I would fain spare you if I could," and with a last look the injured husband turned slowly away.

"Poor wasp," muttered Mrs Bangles viciously, as she followed the prince, whose murmuring she had overheard, "I'd like to jump on her and squash her."

Prince Khalim left the lighted-up portion of the palace, and making his way to the back, passed down a vine-covered lane until he came to a small, mosque-like building shrouded in darkness.

"This is the place which leads to where my father lies, but I will go to him alone. Wait for me here and be ready."

They all knew why he wanted to meet his father alone, and quietly surrounded the building which he entered. They waited silently, and listened intently for any sounds.

It was fully half-an-hour before he appeared, leading the limping figure of his blinded and aged father, upon whose seared eyes a cloth had been placed. They had spoken together all that they had at present to say to each other, and now they came forth in silence, the son trembling almost as much as the father.

Grimly the warriors surrounded these two, after they had bent their knees and kissed the gnarled, palsied hand of their deposed king.

"Now for the stables, my Behádurs; we will not skulk out of our kingdom like thieves."

The royal stables lay in another part of the garden, surrounded by a wall and court, and were very extensive, as they would be in a land of horsemen. They were also carefully watched over by a large establishment of grooms, who would have to be overpowered and made prisoners before they could give the alarm.

They had to watch their opportunity as they crossed the main paths, for the gaudy-coloured lamps hung from the branches of the trees, and clustered over the bushes like great glow-worms; and many pedestrians were walking about outside—soldiers of the standing army, servants to the guests who were dining inside, Cossacks, Tartars, Turcomen, and the fair-haired, shaggy-bearded serfs of the great master, all fraternising.

The tall forms of the ex-king and his eldest son were not easily disguised, particularly that well-known limp, with the added helpless groping of the blind, which every man, woman and child knew had been his recent fate, therefore they had to make a wide detour and cross quickly at a part where the wall terminated the walk. After this they skirted the margin of the lake and made for the stables, which stood on the western side, extending from near the lake to the outer wall of the palace grounds.

At length, however, they reached the courtyard in front of the stalls, where the horses could be heard trampling about, while a number of dogs were lying outside, and beside them on the ground the grooms and stablemen resting themselves while they watched over their charges.

The prince paused for a moment within the shadow of the bushes while he arranged his men.

"Ten of us will be sufficient to overpower the attendants, while the others guard the doorway so that no one slips outside," whispered the leader; "and do not forget that they are our own people, therefore we must spare their lives if possible."

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## CHAPTER XXIX.

### THE ESCAPE FROM KIMWAH.

The horses were well cared for in the royal stables of Kimwah, each pair having a special attendant, and there was accommodation for over six hundred.

On this night, however, although there were few empty stalls, the horses had been already fed, and not more than a dozen of stablemen were at their posts; the others, now that work was over, having gone into the city to enjoy themselves.

These dozen men also were taking it easy; in fact, the most of them were fast asleep, for, with that feasting going on up at the palace, they knew that they would not be wanted for hours. The dogs were the only watchers there, and they were portions of Prince Khalim's own hunting pack.

Softly the prince and his nine chosen followers passed into the yard, which was lighted up by lanterns hung between each of the closed doors, while the king remained outside with the others.

They walked boldly forward amongst the dogs, who knew them at once, and who began bounding about and testifying their joy at the return of their friends with loud yelps, which at length woke up the sleepy grooms, who sat up, rubbing their eyes; and then, seeing who stood before them—for the prince had uncovered—they salamed, for the moment seeing nothing unusual in his appearance.

"Saddle me thirty horses at once, boys," said the prince in a kindly voice; and, instinctively, they turned to unlock the stable doors.

Then, all at once, the recollection flashed upon them simultaneously that these men were dead who stood beside them, and that it must be ghosts or devils who had appeared in their semblance, and at the appalling thought they turned about to fly, shrinking with affright as they did so, and covering their eyes with their hands. Indeed, two of them fell to the ground as if shot, and fainted dead away.

"Do your duty at once, or die, dogs!" shouted the prince sternly, laying his hands on the two nearest, and swinging them towards the doors. "Is my own horse in there?"

"Yes," gasped the native, with chattering teeth.

"Fetch him and the king's out with their caparisons. I shall saddle them here."

Meantime, the other grooms had been forced by the ten strong hands to their duty, and the horses led out, with their trappings handed over to the warriors, who put them on with rapid haste. In less than ten minutes from the time they had entered, the thirty horses stood ready, while the stablemen were safely barred in.

Then the wide gates were flung open, and those watching outside entered and sprang into their saddles, happy once more to find good horse-flesh under them. The prince assisted his blind father to mount before he did so himself, while Falko crept up behind Jack, and put his little arms round his waist in quite a human fashion.

The prince cast his eyes, over his followers in a critical way, and, seeing that they were all ready with their swords drawn, he said,—

"Remember in your ride to-night that the men who may oppose us are our brothers, and spare them where it is possible. For the strangers, do as you please. Now, follow me to the western portal. Come, dogs, if you wish it, also."

He took the reins of his father's horse and led it forward, turning from the open gate into a side-path, which was dark, and where only two could ride abreast, the huge dogs following obediently at their heels, as they were accustomed to do during the hunting expeditions, and silently, now that the first exuberance of their joy was over.

A few minutes sufficed to reach the postern, which, like the other gates, stood wide open on this night. One by one they passed through, and emerged on the river bank outside the palace walls, with the lights from the streets over the western side gleaming on the smoothly flowing river.

Not many people were on this side of the river, and the few they passed moved aside without curiosity. Thus uninterrupted they reached the other connecting floating bridge, and began to cross.

A long, straight and wide street stretched before them as it cut through this side of the city; a street crowded with people, and well lighted up.

Processions and horsemen passed constantly to and fro along the centre, while on the side-path the citizens of both sexes were promenading; and at the end stood the second main gate, with its towers flanking it, the gate through which they must pass before they were free, and which was now shut for the night.

Cantering briskly across the wooden bridge, they dashed into this street at a gallop, careless whether they were recognised or not; for now that they were once again mounted, all their old courage and easy contempt of danger had come back to them; and this very carelessness carried them through better than caution would have done under the circumstances.

The people, of course, looked after that resolute and orderly band of muffled riders as they moved out of their way, and wondered if it was a new patrol organised by their fresh rulers. Things had been changing so rapidly during the last few days that no one knew what next to expect.

The foreigners, who made up a considerable portion of that crowd, regarded them without curiosity, interested more in the pack of magnificent dogs than they were in the riders; while the processions drew aside when they saw them coming, and waited patiently until they had wheeled past, raising the dust of the unwatered streets about them in clouds. So they spun along that street as if they had been on a deserted highway.

Reaching the gate, a dozen of the warriors vaulted from their horses, and, banging at the tower door, ordered the gate to be opened at once. Then the captain of the watchmen came out, and demanded their reasons for asking out at such an hour.

"We are in the prince's service," answered one of the disguised men. "The keys without delay, or your fate be on your own head."

The captain, however, was not to be threatened out of his duty, and three or four of his men came out with their spears in their hands. At the other end of the street a sudden tumult was taking place, while riders and pedestrians were rushing along shouting out loudly. The prince, glancing behind him, saw at once that the escape had been already discovered.

"If you are on the service of the prince, what sign have you to assure me of it?"

"This," said Khalim, moving forward and tearing the shawl from his head. "I am your prince. Now, open the gate and let us pass, or you are dead men."

With a shriek of horror the watchmen fell back from that spectre, and would have fled indoors, as the stablemen were disposed to do, only the dozen warriors were too quick for them; for, clutching the captain by the throat, one of them tore his keys from his belt, while the others threatened the guard with their drawn swords.

"Stop them!" "Do not let them pass!" "The king has escaped!"

These were a few of the shouts which could now be distinguished above the uproar even as the warrior who held the keys was inserting the largest in the lock, while another was pushing the bolts back; and behind, the dense crowd who now packed the streets were coming a regiment of Prince Humayun's household guards.

"Back for your lives!" shouted the warriors behind the prince and king, as they wheeled round upon that stupid mass, and cleared space enough for the gates to be flung open—that excited crowd that were doing no good except barring with their closely-packed bodies the advancing regiment, who trampled them down brutally.

Now both fugitives and crowd were forced through the open gates, while the regiment were close behind.

"Give us the word, oh my lord, and we will scatter these flash boys like chaff," cried one of the veterans as he spurred up to the side of the prince. "Don't let us fly as if we were afraid of the like of them."

"No, Majah, they are only doing their duty, and they are our sons also; let us ride on."

Into the darkness they plunged without looking back, the dogs still at their heels, and that regiment of gaily-costumed young men after them in hot haste, eager to win favour by capturing them, and full of courage now that they saw the once formidable veterans were flying before them.

Over the plains the hunters and the hunted rode at full gallop, in a straight line, leaping over lofty hedges and broad canals, until they reached the black pass.

"One charge only, your highness, to send the kittens home; they will not wait to be knocked down," panted Majah, as they were about to plunge between the trees.

"Yes, Majah, you can give them a fright if you like, but no cuts, remember, for we may have use for these youngsters yet," answered the prince with a laugh, as he reined up his own and his father's horses to breathe them.

At the word the twenty-five men wheeled about like lightning, and with their fierce battle-cries, which had so often before struck a panic to the hearts of more courageous foemen than those before them, they made for the dark masses that could be distinguished under the starlight.

That first yell reached the ears of the young braves, and made them rein in their steaming horses; a second and nearer cry demoralised them completely, for without waiting on the coming charge they broke away in mad terror, thinking a whole army was behind, and never paused until they were once more safe within the gates of the city.

Then the veterans laughed grimly, while they trotted back to their leader.

"We might have taken the city had our prince chosen to lead us, for there is no more courage left in the traitors than in a parcel of women."

Saying which they walked leisurely, after a farewell glance at their native city, into the pass which led up to those arid and salty deserts beyond the lofty chain of mountains.

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# CHAPTER XXX.

## IN THE DESERT.

Ten days had passed since leaving Kimwah, and that devoted band were in the midst of the great salt desert, which spread between them and their destination.

They had lost their horses, and everything except their weapons, for they had been passing through a land of horse and men stealers, who were adepts at their business, although cowardly with such resolute enemies; yet they had managed to deprive them of those four-legged friends, with whose help they might have gone over this waste land easily, but without which they were well-nigh desperate and doomed in spite of their indomitable courage and endurance.

On every side since they had left their own boundary land they had been surrounded by watchful and implacable enemies, for in the mountain regions every stranger was regarded as a foeman, and a fair prey to the turbulent tribes, so that they had literally fought their way to the desert. However, as this had been the chronic condition of these warriors' past lives, they did not feel this much of a hardship so long as they had their horses, and were traversing a country where they could find game.

And some of the valleys through which they had passed had been exceedingly tempting in their fertility, and rich in their fauna. Flowers and wild fruit met them at every turn. They came across also the ruins of cities which had once played their part in ancient history, founded by the great conquerors who had passed this way with their armies, and left these crumbling tokens behind them to mark epochs. Here the wolf and the fox now made their lair in the roofless halls where sages had sat propounding theories which still perplex the world.

The sages were forgotten, the nations overthrown, and the halls dismantled, but in the gardens, so long ago planted, the flowers and the fruit still went on producing and spreading their wealth and welcome to the travellers of all ages.

How Falko revelled in these classical gardens, now run to waste, amongst the wild vines, the nuts and dates! His friends also refreshed themselves here after many a toilsome march and harassing engagement with the wandering tribes, who, like vultures, were in the habit of swooping upon them at the most unexpected places.

It was in one of these deserted and ruined cities, which lay at the verge of the last of these paradisaical valleys, that they were robbed of their horses. They had dispersed a large company of nomads that afternoon, and were all heartily fagged out with the exertion, when they arrived at what appeared to be a place completely dead as far as humanity was concerned.

Crumbling remains of walls and pillars alone met their eyes, almost concealed by the herbage and creepers which grew over them.

A clear stream flowed past the ragged walls and overhanging trees, its murmuring the only sound which broke upon that solemn silence. Beyond them they could see the beginning of the vast desert, where the dry soil absorbed that shallow stream, while above spread out a sky of translucent beauty, with the new moon lying like a silver sickle in the east.

It was a place that invited the weary to rest, and they resolved to camp there for a day or two, and take in the quantity of provisions they required for the journey before them, for the old king had failed very much on the way, and wanted a rest badly, as indeed did also the horses and the men.

That night the silence remained undisturbed, and the next day was spent in hunting, cutting up and drying the strips of flesh, and gathering the fruits that could be easily carried, while the horses wandered about the grass-covered streets filling themselves and happy.

Another night came upon them as serene as the former, and again they lay down to sleep after a hearty supper; their sentinels placed as usual at the different points where they thought danger was likely to come from.

Prince Khalim, like the tender son and able commander that he was, after making his father comfortable for the night, and bandaging afresh his burnt eyes, which still smarted horribly, remained awake, and also spent the first part of the night with the sentinels, for although there appeared to be little cause for anxiety, yet he had rested well the night before, and, like so many men who have been brought up to warfare, he could do with very little sleep, while fatigue seemed to have

no effect upon his iron frame.

Jack and Ronald lay, with Falko between them, under the undressed skins which they had gathered by the way in their hunting expeditions, with the dense foliage of a tamarind tree above them, and a slab of moss-covered marble for their pillow. Mrs Bangles was near at hand, also snugly wrapped up, for the nights were cold, although during the day it was warm enough. The warriors lay, regardless of heat or cold, uncovered on the ground, and the horses were contentedly nibbling within call.

A peaceful yet melancholy scene, this grass and moss-covered city looked under the starlight and that silver crescent; at least it had that effect upon the young leader, who was thinking upon the past of that city and blending its fate with his own. These builders had lived for the glory of war as he had done, and now all their glory had come to nothing as his efforts had done. The trees which their slaves had planted still left sturdy representatives, but the work which their active brains had projected had vanished—all but these few stones which nature also had almost buried.

Towards midnight he was startled out of his gloomy reverie by a heavy drop of rain falling upon his neck, and looking up, he perceived that the sky was now starless, and so black that he could not see a yard in front of him. With the first dutiful instinct of a son, he strode over to where his father lay, and saw that he was protected from the coming storm; then, taking a couple of the fresh skins which had been laid out to dry, he spread them over the lower branches of the tree under which his father slept, so that no rain might reach him. After this he hastily covered the provisions with the other skins, the fur side under, and then stood waiting.

It was characteristic of the prince that he did all this with his own hands instead of waking any of the sleepers. Throughout that march he had always taken the hardest part, as well as the foremost place in the fighting; he had also attended upon his father, always with the devotion and respect of a faithful subject with his king, speaking with confidence about their triumphant return to Kimwah, even while his heart was least inclined to regard that lost kingdom with regret. Yet, while his father lived, it was his duty to devote his life to replacing him on his throne, and he meant to do it. After that was accomplished he would bid farewell to the aims and ambitions of the life which had proved so valueless and false.

It was only when alone, however, that he gave way to these broodings, as on this night. Before his father and his followers he was still the cheerful and intrepid warrior he had been before.

There was a pause after that warning drop had fallen, while the night grew warmer and closer, as if a thick blanket had been thrown over the world, and then, with a deep growl, the thunder burst upon them, followed immediately by a vivid flash of blue lightning, which made every sleeper except the blind king jump to his feet, broad awake, and active in an instant.

After that peal and flash there was hardly a cessation as the storm came nearer. It was rushing from the desert before a hurricane of wind which carried volumes of briny sand that covered them, and struck upon their faces with stinging strokes, as if nettles had been dashed at them from that arid waste; the forked lightning darting through the blackness at every second, and the thunder clattering through their brains like tremendous cannonade.

They were blinded by that dense sand, and bent nearly double with that resistless blast, as they were deafened by those hurried rollings of thunder, which seemed as if they would never end, so that the sentinels and late sleepers buried their heads within their shawls, and threw themselves upon the ground face downwards, while the lighter trees bent nearly double, and great branches snapped and flew like birds over them.

No watch could be kept during that storm. The prince had flung himself down beside his father, and was holding the skins over him, while the horses, panic-driven, galloped wildly past the camp, with their hindquarters to the wind, and their heads bent low.

Then, as the hurricane swept past, the rain came on like a deluge, swamping everything, and changing that gentle stream to a roaring torrent, continuing, without a pause, for over an hour after the lightning and the thunder had shifted, and rolled away up the valley.

There was no more sleep that night for any of them. They could only stand waiting for day to dawn amongst the swamp that the deserted city had become, and hope that the frightened horses might return meanwhile.

So they gathered together round that sheltering tree under which the king had slept, and waited in the darkness and wet, while the sky gradually cleared, and the stars once more came out.

Once or twice they heard the breathing of horses near them, and that comforted them somewhat, for they thought their beasts must have returned, therefore they waited with more patience on the light.

It dawned at last, faint and grey, and revealed the cause of the sounds which had comforted them during the darkness.

The nomads who had harassed them two days before had now again surrounded them, and, like themselves, were only waiting on day breaking to begin the attack.

They saw, also, what concerned them even more than the proximity of these mounted foes—their strayed horses had been captured, and now stood tethered on the outskirts of the enemy.

Then began a desperate fight, in that grey dawning, between them and these desert thieves and slave dealers, who had the advantage of both overwhelming numbers and mounts—a heroic but futile battle, for the enemy melted before them whenever they charged, to harass them again on their rear.

It was like battling with shadows, for the prince and his men had only their swords left, and these desert-bred horsemen would not stand a charge. The dogs alone were of any use, and they did their part well by keeping the circle back.

At last the prince had to give up the attempt to rescue his horses, after losing three of his men from the arrows that were launched against them; therefore, getting back to the shelter of that great tree, he watched, with a swelling heart, the robbers, at last wearied out, gallop away towards the open plain, with the stolen horses amongst them.

Then, each one taking up what they could carry of the provisions, they started on their journey in the track of the nomads, the prince leading his blind and lame father by the hand.



# CHAPTER XXXI.

## THE WONDERING MOON.

It was a terrible and slow march through that arid desert, every mile becoming worse. First the vegetation was left behind, and the ground became broken up into ridges of clay and hard rocks, amongst which swarmed venomous reptiles and insects, the only living things except themselves on the ground, while overhead the sun glared hotly upon them without a shadow to rest in, and the nights were cold and icy.

Before many miles had passed, the king could no longer walk; then the prince took him upon his back and carried him that way; but although now feeble with age and infirmity, the old monarch was a heavy load even for so strong a man as his son, and their progress was slow.

But the warriors were devoted and resolute, and when the prince could carry his load no farther, two of the others joined hands and for a time relieved him, and in this way they got along slowly, not many miles each day. The monkey Falko had no longer any trouble in keeping up with them.

After the rocky soil was passed, their sufferings increased, for at every mile the steppe was getting more impregnated with salt, which mixed with the dry sand and glittered in the sunbeams like powdered snow, while the gases exhaling from it increased their thirst tenfold. A march over a sand desert without water is bad enough, but over this salted, hot sand-plain it was ten thousand degrees worse.

Sometimes they came to depressions where pools were shining, but these were like sea water, and only aggravated their sufferings; and although they had brought with them a large quantity of wild grapes, these required to be husbanded, like their more solid food; for with their slow progress they could not tell how many days they might have to spend before they reached an oasis, or met with a chance caravan.

Majah knew the road well, although it was twenty-five years since he had last gone over it, and a waste country like this changes greatly in a couple of decades, so that he could promise nothing definitely. They would see the oasis when they came to it, and possibly they would have to fight before they were allowed to share in it, with the chance, if beaten, that they would be made slaves—although that was a prospect that they were prepared to risk. A caravan of merchants would be the best fortune which could befall them.

Slowly, painfully they struggled along, the prince ever speaking bravely, and sacrificing himself for the comfort of his followers, and doing his utmost to make things easy for his royal father.

Jack and Ronald also walked along cheerfully, for they were getting nearer to the land where the fakir had promised them that the jewels were. They had no idea whereabouts it was, but they were young and credulous, and the fakir had told them they would find it, so this must be the road. They were quite prepared to see the other fakir sitting at the entrance to his cave pointing the way to the treasure when they came to the right mountain; and as faith is said to be able to move mountains, they had faith enough to find their particular hill when they came to it.

They were thirsty, yes, desperately thirsty always, with the constant desire to suck in all their share of grapes at one gulp; but with the noble example of that self-sacrificing prince-hero before them, and those grim and hardy warriors who walked on without complaint, sucking the pebbles which they had each provided themselves with before they started, they would never have held up their heads again if they had taken one over the regulation number allotted to them.

Mrs Bangles acted as she had done all through, and as only a tough little woman with an intense admiration for a chivalrous prince, and a mother's love for her son, could act. She may have, and most likely did, suffer more than all the rest, but she locked her own troubles up in her brave heart, and appeared the most contented with the sun-tanning and salt-pickling she was going through, storing as much of her own share up against a greater need as she could possibly deny herself and continue to exist, and doling out the nuts which she carried to Falko.

The dogs, ah! what they suffered, who could ever tell! They walked on after their masters with hanging tongues, dry and swollen, and sunken eyes, their ribs showing every day through their rough coats, yet with never a whimper. As long as dogs have their masters left to follow, they can endure.

So the sun rose and set day after day as they staggered on mile after mile, men and beasts suffering mutely and horribly, looking out for the caravans which never came, looking out for the oases which never broke the horizon line, getting weaker as they watched the sun rise golden and set crimson, while that crescent moon became larger and thicker as it sank later each night, and the salt fumes grew more overpowering as their stock of provisions became less.

At last the time came when the last strip of belibong had been chewed, when the last grape had been sucked, when Falko had cracked his last nut, and even the dauntless Khalim Khan could carry his blind father no longer. Then the moon, now almost at the full, rose up from that bleak horizon, and with those dark spots, which seem like goggling eyes on its expressionless surface, looked down upon that exhausted band of hopeless and helpless wanderers like a well-fed, supercilious and pampered flunkey, who stands staring and wondering at the impudence of the starving outcast who has dared to fall in front of his master's door.

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## CHAPTER XXXII.

### THE NOMADS.

Perhaps it is as well that misfortunes generally come to a man in battalions, instead of in single file, for it is the single ones that kill him; the hosts are apt to act as some poisons do when taken one after the other—as counteracting influences.

If Job had only lost his children, his wife might have been successful in her gloomy temptings; but in the dividing of his thoughts between his property, his own personal sufferings and his affections, he grew careless, and rose above his harrowing circumstances, for the power to inflict pain upon life has its limitations, and the pricking of a pin is often more agonising than a mortal wound.

When one looks forward, in the flush of prosperity, on the engrossing thrall of love, and tries to imagine what he could do if he were unhappy enough to lose either of those possessions, the vague participation is too terrorising a contemplation to dwell upon; he pushes it from him with a shudder, and tries to comfort himself that this doom can never be his. But when the heavy strokes fall, somehow he finds that he has been already prepared to receive them by a gradual leading up of lesser misfortunes which have brought him to the ground deadened and torpid. Thus the mighty buffets come from right and left, and knock the torpidity out of him, for, lo! what he imagined would be death-stabs are only some smacks in the face from the devil's open hands; and the brave man finds that this is the worst that the enemy can inflict upon him, so that he rises once more to his feet, and looks about him with indifference and contempt.

When Prince Khalim had lost his army, that crushed him to the ground and took all desire to live out of him, so that the loss of his wife, the blinding of his father, and all the other misfortunes coming so hard, after that first blow, fell almost unheeded upon him, or rather they diverted his thoughts from dwelling too morbidly on the first overwhelming disgrace. In fact, these divided elements of evil saved him from utter despair, and braced up his heart to endure whatever else might come, for it is the concentration of our ideas with our focus of grief which produces the madness of despair.

The physical sufferings of that desert march completed his mental cure, so that, when with his followers he sank down exhausted on the saline sands, he was in reality happier than he had been since the fatal termination of that battle on the snow-covered steppes; glory, love and power had all become merged in the one fierce animal craving for a drink of fresh water, and, like Esau, he would willingly have bartered his birthright to have that desire gratified.

As they lay there, with that white, fat-faced moon goggling down upon them, the sound of clattering hoofs broke upon their ears, and caused them to raise their heads languidly and look in front of them.

The nomads were coming back in force, sure now of their victims; in fact, they had never been very far away, for, like the sharks, they were patient in their pursuit, and meant to get these strong men without injury if they could.

Instinctively the weakened men staggered to their feet, grasped their swords with trembling hands, closing round the prostrate form of their king, and determined to die standing and with their faces to the enemy. The famished dogs also rose and watched the coming host with husky growls.

Nearer they came at a brisk gallop over that moon-bathed steppe, until they were close at hand; then dividing, they circled gracefully and surrounded the devoted band, halting simultaneously in a close ring with horse against horse.

Prince Khalim watched their motions without stirring from his post or giving an order, for he was past speaking, and could hardly hold himself upright. The dogs also remained passively, showing their teeth in weak snarls which had no fight about them, and this the horsemen knew as well as they did.

"You are hungry and thirsty; we have water and food for you in exchange for your swords," shouted the leader in a loud voice, as he sat in his saddle watching them.

Prince Khalim stood for a moment irresolute, wondering vaguely which was best—to see his faithful followers slain, or to take the offer and let them live as slaves.

As he meditated upon this point, he heard his father murmur, as he lay at his feet, "Water, water."

That agonised call decided his weakened and wavering mind.

"For my father," he thought, as he suddenly stooped and broke his sword across his knee, flinging down the bits upon the earth before the robber chief. His humiliation was now complete, for he had yielded up his liberty, without a stroke, for the sake of a gourd of water.

All at once, however, a thought seemed to strike him suddenly as he flung the pieces from him, for, stepping quickly forward from the ranks, where his men stood stupefied at seeing their leader yield so easily, he caught hold of the heft end, and cried,—

"Not yet, my men—say, are you willing to follow me into slavery, or do you prefer death?"

"We are yours, to do with as you please, my lord," answered the men with one voice.

"You hear, khan? We are as ready to die as to live."

The chief nodded sullenly, and replied,—

"What more do you want, except meat and water?"

"My father; he is blind, and useless as a slave. Will you protect him and treat him with kindness if we yield?"

"Yes, he can live in the tents and be your hostage, and we will ask no other service from him, so long as you serve us well, my head be upon it; but we will not harm him so long as you give us no trouble. You are brave men, and we respect bravery; but if we leave you now you will all surely die, and life is always better than death. Bismillah! I promise."

"I am your servant, khan; do with us as you will. Children, lay down your swords."

Three of that company heaved sighs of relief when they heard this prudent decision of Prince Khalim, and those were Mrs Bangles, Ronald and Jack; for as the nomad chief had wisely said, life was better than death any turn of the wheel, and just now they wanted to live, even more intensely than when they were well fed, for hunger and thirst are terribly demoralising agents, and they had reached that stage when the gratification of the moment was of more importance than aught else.

In another five minutes they were in paradise, with the water-bags at their lips, while the desert thieves were unloading their provisions and making arrangements for the night. The blind king they left Khalim to attend upon, placing the price of their liberty on the earth before them, while they also dismounted and prepared to join in.

Now that these late enemies had become their legitimate property by right of barter, the robbers proved themselves very good-natured fellows, and treated the famished band with every consideration. Falko and the dogs also were not forgotten, while the chief sat beside Khalim and chatted to him as if he had been his guest instead of his prisoner. It was all the chance of war who were slaves and who were masters amongst these primitive people, and they did not abuse their power.

What the prince felt could not be gathered from his face, for he seemed content to watch his father eating and drinking. His followers also had no time yet to realise the change in their position; they were happy for the hour.

"You are a khan in your own land?" asked the chief.

"I was," replied the prince gravely.

"And your tribe will ransom you, doubtless?"

"We have no longer a tribe; we are friendless and landless."

"Ah! you tell me this because you wish me to put a low price on you."

"No, khan, I do not lie; we have no possessions, only our bodies, and no one who would ransom us."

"Then I must sell you."

"Yes, that will be best," replied the prince simply.

He had accepted his position so quietly that in a less heroic character it would have seemed lack of spirit. The brave man does not murmur at the inevitable, it is only the petulant and unrestrained that grow restless under the yoke; and as he had accepted the conditions, so he was prepared to be cheerful under his bondage. But the chief could not understand the workings of such a mind, therefore he grew suspicious.

"You think to escape when your strength comes back, slave?"

"No," replied the prince quietly; "I have given you my word as I have taken yours, and that is enough."

"But by-and-by, eh?"

"We are in the hands of God. When you have your price for us, then the bond is ended between us; until then we are your property."

"All the same, I must tie you up as I do my horses, and then I shall know that you are safe."

"As you will, master."

So, after they had hobbled their horses, they brought ropes and bound the captives hand and foot for the night, all except the king, and him they left free, as he was blind; yet it was not roughly done, and none of the prisoners could complain.

Next morning they started early and travelled all that day, the king, as he was lame, sitting on one of the spare horses, but the others being driven along as fast as they could walk.

Another night was spent in the desert, and on the following afternoon they came in sight of the oasis in which the tents of the tribe were fixed.

As they approached this oasis, the ridges became more stony and the ground higher, with less of salt-mixed sand; farther on patches of clay appeared, and earth scantily covered with grass; then the welcome sight of trees, with herbage becoming more lavish, until finally they saw before them a fertile plain, varied by low hills, over which were clustered huts rather than tents—it was the winter home of the nomads.

Camels, horses and sheep grazed about in flocks within this desert-surrounded spot of fertility, portions of which lay under cultivation, while over four hundred large tent-shaped huts formed the settlement, and gave shelter to a tribe of about three thousand souls, whose main means of livelihood was derived from the proceeds of robbery; for while the old men, women and children stayed at home, the younger men took long and arduous journeys in search of the unwary travellers—a precarious life which they and their ancestors had lived without thought or ambition for any other.

Immediately upon their arrival they were surrounded and conveyed by a large and clamorous crowd of veiled women and almost nude children to the tents of the chief. Those women and children gave free vent to their disappointment at the sorry appearance of the captives, and the poorness of their attire. However, the captors scattered these importunate ones to right and left without ceremony, and ordered supper to be prepared at once.

A spare tent was then assigned to them, into which they were glad to drag their wearied limbs, while the horsemen attended to their beasts, and explained matters to their wives.

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## CHAPTER XXXIII.

### PRINCE KHALIM IS CONSOLED.

A most uneventful month passed away in this oasis, and then the tribe began to prepare for their summer migration to the hills.

Beyond the fact that they were slaves, the captives had little to complain about in their treatment. Their duties consisted in carrying water and wood, grooming the horses and herding the cattle, but they were not driven, beaten or abused in any way. This was perhaps because, following the good example of Prince Khalim, they did the work allotted to them cheerfully, and made no attempt at escape, so that gradually all suspicion of them was laid aside, and they were allowed to come and go as they pleased, and treated very much as the other tribesmen were.

The chief had a great admiration for their courage and strength, and hoped that he might induce them to join his tribe as brothers, rather than be sold as slaves; and therefore he acted towards them with more consideration than he might have done had they been ordinary merchants and travellers, who, as a rule, were of no use as fighting men.

When their work was over for the day, they were allowed to share in the general amusements of the camp. Indeed, Mrs Bangles, who could not let her lights be long hidden, very soon gave them the opportunity of knowing what she and her troupe could do in the way of giving amusement; and after this she had no cause to complain of her audience's want of appreciation or lack of practice; while the male portion of the tribe were at home, as she remarked, business was as brisk, and the performances as often repeated, as during a holiday week.

But she was good-natured, and not easily tired out, so seldom stood on her professional dignity. Falko also delighted in his work; while the boys preferred to sing and dance rather than undergo the field-work of their companions. So day after day passed in a peaceful and easy existence, which, at the first, was grateful after their toilsome experience.

The chief had his own ideas of gaining recruits to his company of freebooters, knowing that, unless they entered freely and willingly, they would be more trouble than profit. So with his wives—for he was blessed with four sharers of his family tent—he plotted artfully to entrap these powerful strangers, and get some of his single girls also settled in life at the same time.

He had six grown-up daughters to dispose, and he made his selection of husbands for them in Mrs Bangles, who still kept up her character as Carlo, Jack and Ronald for the younger ones, and the Prince Khalim and two of his strongest young followers for the more mature maidens.

He did not mention his designs to the intended victims, for he was a patient as well as an artful father; but he privately instructed his daughters as to the course they were to pursue, and the ones they were to favour, and these dutiful heiresses obeyed him faithfully.

The other eligible maidens of the tribe, also instructed by their parents, decided upon their future husbands, and lost no time in letting them know how they were likely to be favoured. Altogether, affairs were getting a little complex, for the game was being carried on very openly, despite the veils, which, according to law, the females were supposed to hide their charms under until marriage enabled them to uncover to their husbands.

Mrs Bangles was the safest in reality, although she was greatly perplexed at times, how to evade the attention and partiality shown her by the chief's youngest daughter, a shapely girl of fifteen, and who was greatly fascinated by the theatrical qualities of this strange-looking *boy* (?), who owed the intended honour entirely to *his* gifts of amusing the father, as he wanted to retain *his* services always as a member of his own family.

There was a great deal of freedom of communication between the different sexes and families of this outlaw community, and small observance shown to the religion which they in a vague kind of way professed, so that Ronald MacIvor could hardly discern much difference between the young women of this clan and the Highland villagers of his own parts. They wore veils as the girls at home wore shawls and snoods, and were about as bare in the lower extremities; but the veils were most untrustworthy screens, which, like unruly tresses, were for ever dropping from their fastenings, and betraying the comely faces to those who chose to look; while between the dropping and the replacing the dark eyes managed to execute their share of witchery.

The men, also, were by no means averse to a prize of Persian wine, or even more fiery liquids, and at times sat down to some pretty powerful sherbet—at least they christened the brands afresh under the simple name of sherbet, as some renegade Jews have done with the forbidden flesh of the unclean porker. They said their prayers, however, with steady regularity, but in an extremely simple fashion; for nearly everyone possessed a kind of rotating machine, in which was enclosed a set of prayers and sacred texts from the Koran, so that all they had to do was to turn round the wheel, and it ground out the prayer without them having to exert their memory. They had no mosque to keep up, and only one holy man, who had a good deal of the characteristics of Friar Tuck about him, and devoted himself chiefly to marrying, burying, and taking a large share of the different kinds of sherbet as they were brought in.

There was as little dignity about the chief as there was of honesty or bravery; in fact, the camp was not unlike an ordinary low-caste gipsy gang, so that the advent of such men as the prince and his followers was like the pouring of new blood into very degenerate veins, and if they could only be persuaded to join fortunes as allies, the tribe recognised that they would be in a position to attempt greater things in the way of robbery than ever they had contemplated in their lives, or their fathers before them.

Very soon, also, the heroic influence of the prince began to be felt amongst these skulking sons of the desert, while his blind father was treated with unusual respect; while the stories he entertained them with of his former battles were hearkened to with keen attention, the warlike spirit which he, with the hardy veterans, spread unconsciously around them, produced in a very short time an effect that was astonishing.

The men no longer boasted about the sneaking way they formerly had entrapped small parties, but hung their heads when the prince recited his country ballads. He had no idea of reproaching them for their skulking habits, for he was very grateful for the consideration they had shown to his father and the rest, but it is impossible to sing about heroic actions to cowards without leaving an unconscious sting. A dishonest tradesman may boast about his sharp practice amongst craftsmen of the same grade of morality, but when an honest man explains the simple code of morality, he must either raise shame or hatred in the hearts of his degraded listeners, for every word he utters becomes a reproach.

They were no longer slaves, except in name, for the work they did was only the daily routine in such a primitive community as this; but while Mrs Bangles and her troupe entertained them, the prince and his followers were hourly instructing them, and elevating their minds, so that, instead of being the master, the chief was fast becoming an admiring and devoted follower. He could not, of course, grasp the nobility and unselfishness of this heroic chivalry which impressed him so much, as he could not comprehend the grandness which made this brave man accept his position of slavery with such obedience and cheerfulness, but he regarded some of it from his own standard, and yearned with a mighty desire to make this band his friends and supporters.

"We have had to take the meanest places on the mountains because we were not strong enough to take the best, but with these braves we shall be able to take our own choice. I must make them my sons, and this blind king my brother."

Then he became more eager than ever to hurry on the love-making, and the young women threw all reserve aside, while their veils dropped oftener than ever. Never were veils so wilful before, or eyes more mischievous.

The eldest daughter of the chief had fixed upon Khalim, and, as his duties lay amongst the horses, she also developed a passion for horse-flesh, and was seldom far from the herd under his charge, so that most of her days were spent in his company, while no one could have had such an enthusiastic or sympathetic listener to his accounts of his old battles.

She was a tall and stately girl, who, as far as appearance went, might have sprung from a race of hero kings instead of that dirty and thievish but good-natured sire, and, if not quite so beautiful as Artema, yet she was much more unsophisticated and womanly, and, while obeying her father at the first, yet it was not long before her own heart became interested in her duty as she watched that handsome face and noble form.

She also did instinctively what would never have struck the callous mind of Artema. She became devoted to the blind king, liking him for himself as well as for the sake of his son, which Prince Khalim observed with keen gratitude; and although as yet woman could not be a pleasant subject for him to ponder upon, he began to feel less desolate when she was near him—a state of things which did not escape the lynx eyes of little Mrs Bangles.

The other warriors fell easy victims, for, having no longer war to occupy their minds, they turned to the only other distraction available for soldiers, so that altogether this oasis was getting quite an interesting place during the months of rest that they spent upon it.

But Jack and Ronald would have none of it. The blandishments of their forced partners passed over them like the water from a duck's back. Let who liked fall in love or get married, they intended to be bachelors, and showed this intention in that remarkably blunt and straightforward style which boys have. Poor girls, they might drop their veils and pick them up again with affected cries of horror, and pretend as much as they liked to be stage-struck, so that they might be taught by their young heroes, these bluff young men handed them brutally over to the delighted mother, who managed to keep the three employed without letting their budding hopes get too severely dashed.

These desert maidens had not the ghost of a chance with the two boys, no more than had the other unfortunate sister with Mrs Bangles herself; but this did not matter much, for they were young enough to be all the better for a little love sorrow. It is those luckless women who are petted all their youth, and have their pick out of life, who grow up to be the bane of domesticity in their middle age. It is as good for the human heart to have its sorrows over early as it is for children to take the measles and hooping-cough while they are tender—at least so Mrs Bangles said, with a remorseless chuckle. She watched the growing friendship between the prince and Jika, the eldest daughter of the chief, with interest and pleasure, and set herself straightway to study the disposition of the girl, who met her approval.

"If she wins him she will restore his shattered faith in the goodness of women, for she will bring peace to his heart, and be his devoted slave, which is the woman a disappointed man requires to give him back his lost self-respect; so good luck to her efforts, which I'll help if I can."

Then she went to work discreetly, and took every chance to show the prince the good qualities of the girl who loved him, and the tender care she took of his father, until the prince's eyes softened, and he said, with a sigh,—

"Then you think women can be good as well as beautiful, Carlo?"

"It is almost as difficult for some beautiful women to be tender and good as it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven, your highness; but Jika has not that kind of beauty."

"I have not observed her looks, Carlo; but she is kind to my father, and I am grateful to her."

After this conversation, however, the prince did observe his companion a little more closely, and saw how graceful and dignified she was, and how ready she was to listen to his instructions, and he began to feel more than a little interest in her. The seeds were beginning to take root in his disturbed heart.

"The pearl is pleasanter to look upon than the diamond after all," he said to himself, as he stroked his beard in a contemplative fashion.

One night, when the chief was sitting smoking with his slave guest, he said,—

"Khalim Khan, you would like to win back your kingdom?"

"Yes, for my father, the king," replied Khalim gravely.

"My daughter Jika tells me all this; what do you think of my little Jika?"

"She is a good daughter, and a modest woman."

"She is all that you say, khan, and will be an ornament in the harem of her husband."

"Yes," answered the young man quietly.

"I should get a good price for her, don't you think?"

"Yes, she is worthy of a good price."

"Well, khan, I am willing to make a bargain with you. I can guide you to your kinsman on the mountains of Armenia, and help you to retake Kimwah, if you agree to pay me afterwards five thousand tomans for your ransom and my daughter Jika."

"But if I fail to get back this kingdom?"

"You shall have Jika all the same, and rule after me over this tribe; but while I live you shall be my bondsman."

"Your terms are fair, Aslan Khan," said the prince, after a pause, "and your daughter Jika is precious in my eyes; but your ways of living are not to my mind. I have never fought with an enemy weaker than myself, nor have I robbed the inoffensive."

"That is as you were brought up, khan," replied the chief good-naturedly; "but if I take you to Armenia, we are more likely to meet with enemies ten times our number than weaker ones. Would you leave me in the lurch in such a case?"

"No, khan, I will help you then."

"Your hand on it, Khalim Khan, my son. Let us fix to-morrow for the betrothal, as the day after we strike our tents. I shall not ask you to help me in my business, so that you lend me your aid against the foemen who may attack us and our women. Ho! there, bring in the sherbet, and tell the moollah, if he is still sober enough, to come along and get his instructions."

That night the camp had a preliminary feast, at which the moollah assisted with professional zeal, while as soon as it was announced that Prince Khalim had been caught, fifteen of his warriors caved in at once to their charmers.

Next day the akds or marriage-contracts were drawn out and agreed to, then almost at once the marriage ceremonies took place, and the company feasted merrily until far into the night. Prince Khalim was once more the calm possessor of, this time, a devoted and true wife.

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## CHAPTER XXXIV.

### CLEARING THE PASS.

All hands were busy the next day striking the tents and packing up, for the winter was over, and for the summer months the mountain ranges would be their retreat.

Already the old herbage was becoming brown and withered on the trees, and the young leaves only beginning to sprout out, while the grass was munched almost bare; also the wells which had supplied them with water were getting low, and beginning to taste brackish. The oasis wanted a rest badly, while it recruited its life for some future winter.

"We must be quick and find a good spot on the mountain before they are taken up," said the chief to his new son-in-law, as they watched the clan working. Khalim was now invested with authority as captain under his father-in-law.

"You have no fixed place there?"

"No; this camp will not be able to feed our cattle for a couple of years. We must fight for another oasis when the autumn floods force us from the hills, as we may likely have to do when we reach them. But when you retake Kimwah, I hope we shall all be happy together as your kinsmen and allies."

"Yes, there is room enough for us all there," replied Khalim.

"Then I have made a fair bargain with Jika," said the old chief with a rough laugh, as he rubbed his hands together with satisfaction.

"And I am satisfied, father."

"Good; you are happy this morning, and so am I, for I am getting too old, like the king there, to enjoy these shiftings as I used to do. Didn't I speak truly when I said that life was better than death always? Last month you were dying in the desert without a hope; to-day you are my son, and almost free!"

And the chief of five hundred tents looked with benevolent patronage on the heir to a kingdom, as one might look on another whom he has highly honoured.

The prince thanked him with the courtesy which ever distinguished him. He was truly grateful for all the kindness the other had bestowed upon him, and, if it was interested kindness it was, as yet, too much of a speculation for him not to feel that the benefit was all on his side, and likely to be so for some time, for he did not attempt to weigh the strength he and his warriors gave to the tribe as equalising the treasure he had found in gentle Jika, who had already restored him much of his lost spirit and self-respect; and although that father-in-law had been ten times more disreputable and mercenary, still he was a good fellow, if a little bombastic and commonplace.

Clothed in the rough sheepskin of the tribe, the prince and his men still looked nearly as formidable as in their armour, with their swords at their sides and their shields slung over their shoulders. Their own war-horses had been restored to them, and the calm resolution of former days shone in their steadfast eyes as they sprang up to the saddles and fell into marching order; and the chief chuckled with delight at his own cleverness in securing such allies, who would cut the way for him to the best place on the hills. He need no longer eat humble pie to more numerous and rival robbers; he would now be able to dictate his own terms.

It is a fine thing to have plenty of money, or the next best thing to it, plenty of power. Either of these factors seem to add to the inches of the meanest of men, and impart a certain air which almost passes at first sight for majesty and bravery.

So the chief, watching the fine and martial calmness of his chivalrous son-in-law, tried his hardest to imitate that distinguished air, and swelled himself out with a new importance that greatly impressed his wives and the rest of the tribe, who, following suit, did their utmost to look like trained soldiers.

The women and children rode amongst the baggage on the camels, while after them were driven the sheep and goats, as the horsemen hedged them in and came behind; the chief and Khalim riding in front with the old king between them, who, since the loss of his sight, spoke but little.

Their progress was necessarily slow with the flocks which they were driving, but scouts were sent on ahead to watch the course.

From the oasis to the hills was a six days' journey, and the track they were following was not nearly so destitute as it had been on the other side a month before. True, they had to pass over plains and depressed places where there was nothing to be seen but salt marshes rapidly drying up into crystallised crusts, yet excessively heavy to walk over. At other portions of the way they skirted the terrible barkhans or shifting sandhills, which were fifty and sixty feet in height, and at times rose before the tempest and buried whole caravans; but at this season these hurricanes were of very rare occurrence.

They passed also chains of salt-water lakes and elongated stream-like depressions of the same undrinkable liquid, but these were the exceptions of the desert at this time of the year, which, in many parts, was covered with a thin cropping of young grass that the animals eat as they walked along; and at regular intervals where they camped were to be found artificial ditches or cisterns, which had been dug in the hard clay soil—some of these as deep as a hundred feet—where the rain water was preserved and remained fairly sweet during the whole year, proving that the desert was only dangerous to the ignorant traveller.

Hares, foxes, jackals, wolves and other animals made these portions of the desert their haunt during the spring, so that the journey was more interesting than they had expected, although, being as yet early on the trail, they did not fall in with any other travellers.

On the morning of the sixth day they saw the ranges of high mountains loom up before them against the clear, pure atmosphere. Faint, filmy washes of blue the more distant ranges looked, with their peaks white like sunlit clouds against the sky, while the nearer lines were sharply defined and rocky.

They left also the grass-covered sand and clay amongst which they had been riding, and entered a more rugged and sterile ground, composed of gravel and boulders, without vegetation, rising gradually as they advanced to slanting slopes of granite and marl. On the sixth night they camped outside a gloomy pass, where the cliffs rose bare and forbidding on either side, and in the bed of which shallow streams flowed over the broken waterway with numerous breaks and interruptions.

Next morning they followed the course of this stream, ever ascending gradually as they pierced this forbidding and narrow chasm, with the sterile walls rising above them four and five thousand feet. For half a day they pursued this path, while the scouts were in front to see if the way was clear.

It was a most zig-zag route, therefore they were continually going to right and left, and hemmed about with these iron walls, so that it was impossible to see more than a little ahead of them, while the tail-end of the tribe were hidden from sight by the turnings of the rocks.

As they advanced, the chief looked more anxious and uneasy in front of him, while the pomposity with which he had started the journey completely deserted him, leaving him a very dejected and terror-stricken robber indeed.

"You are not happy, Khan Behádur," observed Khalim quietly, as he rode alongside of the robber chief at the head of the band. "Are you anticipating any danger?"

"This is a terrible pass, from which I have had to turn back more than once before," replied his new-made father-in-law.

"Why?"

"It leads into one of the most fertile valleys in the mountain chain, besides being our nearest course towards Armenia. Therefore the first arrival has the advantage."

"But then, my father, you did not have us with you before. Keep your mind at ease this time, for if they are only Turcomans whom you fear, we shall force the passage for you, although they are ten times our number."

"Yes, I know you are brave and strong, but some of these are terrible fellows to face in a trap like this."

"Bah! they are in the trap as well as we are," said the prince easily.

"But they have the heights, and can rush upon us."

"All the more credit in pushing them back. Have we far to go yet?"

"Four miles more of this sort of thing," returned the old man dolefully.

"Then let us push on. Ah! here comes your scouts."

As the prince spoke, half a dozen of the scouts thundered down upon them at a frantic pace.

"We are too late, Lion of the Desert. There are ten thousand horsemen in possession of the pass. Turn back."

The chief wrung his hands in misery, and was about to give his orders for a general and hasty retreat, when Prince Khalim stopped him, and proceeded to question the panic-struck scouts.

"Where did you see this vast army?"

"A mile from here, Khan Khalim."

"And does the pass wind about like this?"

"The same."

"Then how can you tell how many there are?" asked the prince contemptuously.

"We know the tribe, and how great they are."

"One tribe only?"

"They may have more."

"No. Say there are a thousand more than we are, and that gives a wide margin, my advice is to go on. Have they seen you?"

"Yes, we were chased."

"Then they ought to be here, and they are not. Let me manage this for you, my father, and I promise you the possession of that fertile valley to-night; and will keep it for you also."

The calm confidence of the prince impressed the trembling chief in spite of himself, and he answered,—

"If we reach that valley, we can all be happy for a while; so take the command, my brave son, and do as you say."

In an instant the prince changed his demeanour, and became once more the lion-like leader of the invincibles. With a few terse orders his men had drawn up the main body of horsemen, leaving only sufficient behind to guard the women and flocks; then, placing his father in the rear, he cried,—

"Now, my Behádurs, forward after me, and bring up the caravans at the usual rate. Khan Aslan, we shall keep the passage clear for you."

Another instant, and he was off at a rapid trot with his devoted band behind him, and the other horsemen bringing up the rear, the pass re-echoing with the clatter of their hoofs.

Jack and Ronald once more felt that infectious rush of excitement which the ringing voice of their hero always produced in his hearers. Even the men who were inclined to fly before now came on with a show of bravery, which proved that they also had felt some of the mesmeric powers of dauntless heroism which the born leader always gives to his followers.

The pathway up which they rode was a gentle slope, with a mixture of sand and gravel under their feet, while the stream still kept rushing in the centre of the passage, with that stone bank on each side. It ran tumultuously over and around the upstarting boulders and rocks, now falling into deep pools and making curds of foam on the surface, or running over sandy shallows with silent swirlings.

A noisy stream in spite of the twilight which for ever brooded over it, for those lofty cliffs shut out the sun-rays. It was

carrying the melted snows from the far-off mountain crests, to empty their coolness on that sandy and saline desert; and yet, like so many human lives which come from heaven and go to waste, it was all importance and clamour.

The prince knew the men who were supporting him directly behind, and that they required no stimulus to urge them along; but the desert children were different. So he kept up the speed, waving his naked sword above his head, and turning his glowing eyes backwards occasionally when he thought they were flagging; and whenever those glances swept over them, they became brave and reckless.

What a man he was, with those free actions, and the waves of coal-black tresses flung behind him, like the tail of the stallion he was sitting upon, and urging him forward; for it was only at the scent of battle that he woke up and showed his Eastern blood. At other times he was grave and placid, so that the sudden change was the more infectious.

Yet, with all his seeming impetuosity, he never lost his wits, for as he rode on he kept his eyes and ears open; and as they approached each turn of the road he spurred on in front and looked carefully ahead to see if the way was clear, after which he would slacken his speed until the others came up, and then on again at the same steady quickness.

They had traversed about a mile and three-quarters, and were coming to another angle, when once more he darted in front and disappeared.

Next instant he had drawn back holding up his sword; and as he did so a rattle of musketry re-echoed through the pass.

Then, with a voice like a bugle blast, he shouted, "Forward!" and once more disappeared round the corner at a furious bound.

Three only could ride abreast along the narrow embankment, but at the cry each man urged on his horse and dashed after him without a pause, and then the battle of the pass began in deadly earnest.

The stretch which lay before them, from that angle just reached to the next, was less than five hundred yards, but it was crammed with the enemy, who had just emptied their muskets, and the prince was so quickly amongst them that they had no time to re-load.

How that sword flashed about and sung with the rapid strokes of that muscular and well-practised arm, while the horsemen fell from their horses, and the riderless animals plunged into the stream and blocked it up.

He drove straight through their ranks on that powerful and ferocious stallion, leaving those who escaped his sword to be demolished by those coming after him, and with his steel-bound shield warding off the blows dealt at him.

Nothing mortal could stop the impetuous rush of that froth-spattering and vicious horse, or ward off the lightning cuts of that flashing sword. Down the foemen went like ripe corn, too closely packed to be able to turn about at the first onslaught, and too bewildered at this demon-like fury and tigerish activity to ward off the blows.

In front of that swinging arm the stream ran clear and transparent, but behind him the foam grew pink and the smooth water crimson as it rolled away to the desert.

They had covered and cleared two hundred yards of that blocked-up path, when with one impulse the enemy turned their horses' heads, and began to struggle frantically to get out of sight. It was a terror-stricken raid and mad struggle for five more minutes, and then the upward chase began, when instead of a fight it became a slaughter.

Under the impression that he had an overpowering force to encounter, and with that promise to clear the pass before him, the prince did not relax for a moment, but drove them in front of him like a drove of frightened sheep, giving them no time to gather their scattered courage. He felt that to be humane now meant the sacrifice of his party, so he kept at them persistently.

From angle to angle he rushed, leaving the ground strewn with slain, while the horses floundered into the stream.

Every man behind him was a hero now that the enemy were flying, and they came on shouting their war-cries and making an appalling din which helped to hurry on those in front.

It was a discordant revelry of carnage which extended for the two miles between them and the head of the pass, but it was quickly over, and then they had rounded the crest and could see the number of their foemen, as they galloped down

the grass-covered valley beyond. The stream had been left behind about a quarter of a mile from the top, where it issued at that portion from a parting in the cliff on the other side, in a lofty waterfall which dashed its spray over them as they passed. After this, however, they were able to ride ten abreast, and so that last portion of the way the slaughter became greater. Five hundred men had fallen during that charge, without a single loss on their side.

As they reached the summit, and were able to look into the valley, the prince reined in his horse abruptly, and looked with intense regret after the flying foe, for he saw that he had already destroyed more than a third of their fighting men, and that less than a thousand men were rushing towards their baggage camels and women.

"No more, my Behádurs; we have been running after a force inferior to ourselves. No more, no more, but let the poor fellows have grace."

As he spoke these merciful words a dozen gun reports broke through the thin air, and he fell suddenly forward on the neck of his stallion, while three of his followers rolled to the ground.



## CHAPTER XXXV.

### THE OUTRAGED VALLEY.

Ronald MacIvor, who was nearest to the prince, caught him before he could slide from his horse, and lifted his head so that the others pressing behind him could see it.

His hour had come, and Jika, the bride of a week, was a widow; for the fatal bullet had sped sure to its mark, and pierced the centre of that open brow, killing him instantly.

With a yell of rage and grief the warriors made a rush with their nomad allies into the valley after that retreating force, shouting, "Revenge, revenge! our lord is dead!"

The stallion was about to follow with his dead load when Jack caught the reins, which the master's hand still clutched, and stopped it; then, with Ronald still holding up the corpse, they watched the termination of that battle with swollen hearts, feeling that the massacre of each of those thousand men would not avenge the loss of this single friend, yet too grief-stricken to share in it any longer.

The noble face was peaceful enough as it lay against Ronald's shoulder, with only that soul-letting wound in the brow, from which the blood was trickling down the cheek and over the ebony beard; the eyes still open, with the bluish light not yet dim, like the lustre which is seen in the glazing eyes of a newly-killed stag. But they knew that their hero was dead, and their young hearts were bursting with the fury of grief which no tears as yet could ease. They could only hold him and watch his men revenge his taking off.

The flying horsemen had paused when they noticed their pursuers stop on the brow of the eminence, and, plucking up enough spirit, had sent those deadly messengers backwards; then, seeing the result, they turned again to escape.

But their baggage was in the way, so that instinctively, as even the most craven will do when they have women with them to protect, after a short rush they wheeled about and prepared for the last desperate stand.

Ronald and Jack saw all this while the horsemen still poured out of the glen and down in a torrent, only the foremost as yet knowing that the leader was not with them. His influence was still surging in their blood, and they felt brave enough for anything.

For five minutes that battle raged furiously, while the last comers galloped in a circle and surrounded the vanquished completely, the victors flushed with conquest and nearly two to one, and the doomed ones demoralised with that race for life.

If mercy was asked for, it was not given, for gradually the circle of gleaming swords came nearer to each other, and at last closed in completely. The sacrifice of vengeance was complete, and not a male survivor had been left. This tribe was exterminated, for of course the wives and children did not count.

Then the victors separated again, and while the predating nomads rushed upon the baggage and women, the survivors of Prince Khalim's army came riding back.

Thirteen men only came back, leaving their own dead to be seen to afterwards. They rode back quickly, and only drew rein when they reached the boys with that burden. Then they gathered round, looking at that pallid, blood-stained face.

"He is avenged; but he is dead, and our lives are over."

Then they bent their war-scarred faces over their horses' necks, and wept like women.

"Our prince is slain! our prince is slain! Why do we longer live?"

As they stooped in this fashion, with the afternoon sun glaring on that white dead face, the tears at last came to the eyes of the boys also, and they sobbed as if their hearts would break.

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The valley which they had won at such a fearful expenditure of human life and misery was undoubtedly one of the prettiest that the boys had seen in their Indian wanderings.

The chasm crossed it, dividing the hills which closed it in, and appearing, with those walled cliffs on either side, like Titanic gateways leading to and from a fairy region of delight, cradled by those rugged ridges which surrounded this garden of loveliness on all sides, and barred out the rough blasts.

A valley falling gently from south-east to north-west, with a varying of width at the bottom of from one hundred yards to two hundred, and with gradually sloping terraces leading to fringes of forest trees, their open parts covered with trailing vines.

The vegetation was beautiful and varied in its character, and extended up the sides of the cliffs in lavish profusion to over three thousand feet, diversified by waterfalls, that dropped from the farther heights, white as lines of milk, dashed over the rocks, and appeared at different points amongst the greenery, as they rushed to join and swell the river which rolled deep and swiftly along the centre of the valley bed.

Here nature had expended all her most lavish gifts, and put forth all her most fascinating touches to make an exquisite gem of loveliness in the midst of her grander conceptions, as the painter might place a radiant butterfly or other gay piece of colouring in a gloomy portion of his picture to break the monotony. Here she seemed to say, "Come, mortal, rest and be happy; fight, if you will fight, like the insensate beasts that you resemble in your passions, within the shadows of those deep gorges, with their ten thousand feet high walls of stern rocks looking down upon your puny blood-shedding, and those sun-unlighted torrents to wash your ruddy stains away; but enter this garden of rest and plenty with only thoughts of peace in your hearts; stain not the emerald brinks, keep that crystal stream pure; be god-like, if but for a little space."

But now the river was running redly from the place where the combatants had met, and the green carpet was torn up with the struggling hoofs of maddened beasts, and over the banks lay scattered in wild confusion, wounded horses and dead men, with their gashed faces turned heavenward, while round and round the valley rushed the steeds which were no longer controlled, their eyes staring wildly and their manes and tails outspread, as with their hoofs they crushed amongst flowers and fruits, and ruined long months of patient labour.

The women and children of these dead men were wailing and filling the valley with their despair, while they crouched upon the bush grass before their conquerors in expectation of the doom which had overtaken their protectors; and at the gorge mouth also lay the cause of all that woe, placid and marble-like, waiting to inflict more misery upon those who were slowly approaching up the pass, while the glowing sky arched over them with a pulsating, golden heat, for the sun had travelled behind the environing walls, and that outraged paradise lay bathed in merciful half-tones.

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## CHAPTER XXXVI.

### THE FAKIR'S CAVERN.

The midnight moon shone serenely from that blue-black upper space upon the tents of the nomads and over the ghastly mounds of slain, while the captive women and children crouched amongst the dews, waiting with heavy hearts upon the morrow, as they wept over and guarded their own particular dead from the prowling wild beasts that roamed about.

At each pass entrance outposts were standing with their arms, whilst amongst the tents the fires were smouldering low, for those who had not been bereaved were sleeping, but, like the captives, the others were watching beside their dead.

Round the tent next to that of the chief, the remnant of Prince Khalim's band lay with their faces turned to the sward, along with the pack of hunting dogs. Ronald, Jack and Mrs Bangles were there also, while inside lay the body of the hero with two mourners seated together,—the blind king of Kimwah and his newly-found daughter Jika.

The chief was greatly divided between pleasure at getting such summer quarters, with loot and captives so wholesale, and grief at the loss of a friend so powerful, and whom he had learnt to like; for, with all his craft and selfishness, Aslan Khan was of an impressionable and kindly nature. But such were the chances of warfare, and it had been the prince's Kismet to perish by one of the bullets which he had so long despised; but he had been able to fulfil his promise, so that was the best thing to take comfort from at present; that and supper. Therefore, leaving the duty of mourning to those principally concerned, he slaughtered some of the enemy's sheep, and washed down a substantial meal of boiled rice and stewed mutton with copious draughts of the heady sherbet, until he and his boon companion, the pious moollah, sank into dreamless slumber.

Mrs Bangles had given way to a wild paroxysm of grief when she heard of the prince's fall, and would have betrayed her sex, had there been any of her own countrymen near, by the long feminine fainting fit which followed on the first sight of his corpse; but there was no one curiously interested in her there, while Jack and Ronald took her in hand and carried her to a secluded part of the river bank, where they revived her in the usual way. After this she rocked herself to and fro, and cried that it was the last straw in a life of bad luck.

"All the good people are taken from me."

"But we are here still, mother," observed Jack soothingly.

"Yes, but our protector is gone, so we may as well die also."

So she moaned and wept until at last sleep overcame her, and she fell asleep.

Meantime, in the tent, Jika and the blind king sat beside the dead body of him whom they both loved so well, both quiet as they had been since they knew their loss. They had gone in together hand in hand, the girl leading the old man, and they still clasped hands as they sat together with their heads resting side by side on that ice-cold breast.

Jika was a silent girl, who did not show much of what she felt, and the king had reached the age when death has become too familiar a visitor for his presence to be much remarked upon; so they knelt side by side without speaking, with that form beneath them in the darkness, while outside the warriors and dogs lay in a circle waiting for morning.

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"Jack," said Mrs Bangles as she started up at sunrise, forgetting for the moment the cause of her affliction before she fell asleep, "we are near the end of our journey. I had another dream last night, and I saw the cave with the other fakir in front of it."

"Tell us that dream, mother," said Jack eagerly.

"It is somewhere about this valley, for I thought I was walking along that river and it led me to the place, but I cannot remember much more about it, for it was all so vague; only I saw the fakir with his outstretched arm pointing towards a dark cave."

"Then we must prospect this river after we have helped to bury the prince," replied Jack.

"Ah, my poor Prince Khalim; what can we do without him, boys?"

"We must try to do as we did before, mother, trust in Providence."

"Ah, life is never the same after we have lost a real friend, and we can never come back to the contentment we had before we knew him."

The warriors had already risen at dawn, and were digging a deep grave for their beloved leader; the rest of the tribe were also engaged in digging pits to bury the slain, while the widows were looking their last on their lost ones. No one had as yet ventured to disturb the king or Jika, although the Moollah was getting ready to read the services.

When all was ready, the tribe gathered round to honour the brave departed with their presence, while the Moollah went inside to read the prayers, but in another moment he rushed out again, wringing his hands, and crying,—

"Woe! woe! they are dead. The king and Jika also have passed away with the brave khan!"

In rushed the warriors, with as many of the others as could find an entrance, and there they saw the two mourners still clasped hand in hand and bending over the corpse, mourners no longer, for they were both as ice-cold as the loved clay which they were embracing. Prince Khalim had at last found a wife with love enough to follow him to the land of shadows, while this last blow had put out the flickering light of the old monarch's disappointed life. They had, all three, gone to seek a better kingdom than Kimwah.

It was all over as far as the earthly hopes of the chief Aslan or the warriors were concerned, and there was no longer any need to go to the Armenian mountains, or build up schemes of future aggrandisement. Artema and Humayun might now plunder their country as they pleased, for they were the legitimate owners of it, and this valley, won at such a sacrifice, must be the future home of Prince Khalim's followers, and the tribe to which their new wives belonged, their tribe to fight for, protect and die amongst.

Sadly they went back to the grave and made it broad enough to hold the three bodies; then, wrapping up their dead, they carried them over and laid them side by side, filling in the earth and placing a small tent over it, with refreshments for the Moollah, who would remain for some days praying and reading the Koran within that tent over the grave.

By noon the other bodies were all interred, and the captive women and children, with the property of the exterminated tribe, divided amongst the conquerors. Then the valley became once again peaceful-looking, with the herds and flocks grazing over it, and the tents lining the margin of that river.

The two boys did nothing for the rest of that day except lie on the banks and listen to Mrs Bangles as she recalled all the acts of kindness on the part of the unlucky prince; but early next morning Jack sprang up resolutely, exclaiming,—

"Come, Ronald, come, mother, there is no use regretting the past. Let us get to work and see if your dream has been a true one or not; we will follow the river to-day. Which way was it, up or down?"

"I don't know; it was all so vague," answered his mother.

"We'll fix the first journey by drawing straws; the short end for up the valley, the long one for down."

He went and gathered two stalks of grass, and having shaped them to the required lengths, he closed his hand over them, and held it out to his mother.

"You draw, mother; sudden death is the decision."

Mrs Bangles drew out the longest piece, while Jack threw the other away.

"It is down the stream and with the tide. Come along, chums."

They set off without delay, and followed the course of the smooth flowing river, passing under the arching trees, now covered with spring blossoms, where the bird life was so plentiful, and seeing those lofty ramparts with their bold outlines, angles and fissures sharply delineated in the morning light, and the signs of an unfailing fertility on every side.

In the winter months that river overflowed its boundaries and deluged the valley, so that when the water had been drained off, nothing could surpass the richness of the greens.

The valley was not of great length, so that they could easily explore its entire round in one day, that is, as far as the river course extended. The chief had told them that the river was the draining of the different waterfalls, and that it made its exit through a rent in the hills at the bottom. A pass of some sort they reckoned it would be, but they weren't at all prepared for the result of their investigations.

As they walked along they kept a keen look out on the rocks to see if there were any caves, but could see nothing of the kind; on both sides the cliffs rose up solidly and without any large fissures, only jutting angles and narrow cracks.

At length they saw the precipice closing in front of them, and knew that they were approaching the lower end of this fertile valley, towards which the river was flowing in a straight line between its verdant banks.

Another push through the undergrowth, and then they beheld what Mrs Bangles had dreamt about: a vast arching cavern, five hundred feet in height, and over fifty broad, into the blackness of which the river emptied its volumes, and became lost to sight.

The river filled the entire floor of the cavern, for it was high at this season of the year, while the walls of the cavern leaned over and dipped into it without any margin, so that the three spectators could only lean against the outer angle and look over each other's shoulders into the darkness of that midnight cavity. For a while they peered into it silently, and then Jack said,—

"This is what anyone might consider to be a cave, and seemingly large enough to swallow a nation as easily as it does this river; but the question comes to be, Is it our cave, and where is the fakir?"

"I see something like a figure, I think," remarked Mrs Bangles, who was the nearest to the rock.

"Where?" asked both boys eagerly.

"On that ledge up there in the wall."

"Yes, yes; now we also see the old chap with his arm outstretched, and as he must have found a way up here so can we. Hallo there! good and holy fakir, we have come."

The figure, if human being it was, in the shadow neither moved nor answered, although the echoes carried Jack's salutations away into the darkness like a hundred answering voices.

"Ah! he is a meditative or silent fakir; we must go to him."

"Take care, Jack; don't fall into the stream, for it is flowing quickly," said Mrs Bangles anxiously, as her son started to climb from the outside to a ledge which, he saw, was about the height of the inner one.

"No danger of that, mother. Stay where you are, Ronald; I'll manage to reach the old fellow easily myself."

Jack was almost as good a climber as Falko, and was not long in working his way to the figure, while they waited below and watched his movements.

"Is it a man, Jack?"

"Yes; at least he seems to have been a dried mummy for a good number of years," replied Jack, "for he is as hard as wood; but I have got the paper—and the key."

In a few more moments they were all sitting on the bank, with a curiously-wrought key in some unrustable metal, and the slip of parchment open to their inspection.

There were only a few words written in Hindoostanee, but these were significant enough to them, although to anyone else they might have been meaningless. They were—"Trust in the river without fear."

"That means that we are to let that river take us to the treasure-house. What do you think, mother; it's a risky thing to plunge into that blackness on the word of a dead fakir, eh?"

"Now I remember the rest of my dream," said Mrs Bangles. "We did go on that river, and swept through the darkness for a time until we came to a lighted part where I saw an idol and altar with a little door at the back."

"And afterwards?"

"I woke as we reached this part."

"That's awkward: I wish you had seen the end."

"So do I, but I did not."

"Well, mother, you decide. Will we venture?"

Mrs Bangles remained in deep thought for a few minutes.

"What do you say, Ronald?" asked Jack to his friend.

"Nothing venture, nothing win. I say yes, if we can get away from our master; remember we are slaves, and it's not likely he'll let us go."

"Oh, that will be easy enough. We can build a raft from the wood about, and make a bolt for it, if mother is willing. What do you say about it, mater?"

"I also agree with Ronald," now answered Mrs Bangles. "When we have risked so much, and come so far, finding all things as we expected, I think we may risk this dark voyage also; it will be another excitement, and may mean liberty and wealth."

"Now we are all of one mind except Falko, and he will go where we go."

They next discussed the raft question, and when they had decided upon that, they returned to the camp, eager to put their plans into execution without delay.



## CHAPTER XXXVII.

### THE PEACOCK THRONE.

It was not at all difficult for them to get away by themselves during this time of mourning in the camp, although Mrs Bangles had a little trouble in keeping their three admirers from following them; but with a little management she gave these maidens some stage costumes to make against a new performance in which they were to take parts, and that kept them busy inside their tent, while she and the boys prepared themselves for their perilous and uncertain journey.

They managed to secure ropes and cords enough to fasten their raft together, and an abundance of food, so that at the end of the third day their raft was floating on the river, and screened from discovery by the overhanging branches which grew quite densely about this end of the valley.

All was ready for the start next morning into that unknown, and they lay down with those peculiar sensations which some bad boys may have experienced the night they were meditating on making a bolt from home, and taking their final good-bye of their unconscious friends.

The chief and his tribe had been kind to them, but he was so fond of their performances that he would never let them go willingly. The remainder of Prince Khalim's men were also dear to them, and the thought of leaving them behind gave a reproachful wrench to their hearts; but the most of those had now taken wives from the tribes, while the others were likely to follow suit, so that it was not likely they would care to go farther in search of fortune, now that their hopes of a return to their native land were over. They were much happier where they were, and would have what they had been accustomed to all their lives, plenty of fighting, therefore the intended runaways crushed down these regretful weaknesses, and went to sleep.

Next morning after breakfast they took their farewell glance round the tents, and then stole away to their raft.

Another half-frightened glance backwards as they sat on their raft, with Falko amongst them, as, now fairly loosened off, they glided smoothly but rapidly towards the mouth of the vast cavern, which gaped like a monster mouth as if about to gobble them up; a glance which swept round the valley, and took in its sunlight and beauty, and then retreat was impossible, for they were sweeping into inky darkness, with the greenery and sunlight far behind them, as if seen through a huge telescope.

Soon that picture of light became a very small miniature, which gradually became blurred as it decreased in size, until at last it disappeared altogether, as the tunnel took a different course. They were now within the blackness of Egyptian night.

On they glided, rapidly yet so smoothly that they seemed to be floating in a still pond, for the swift current had drawn them into the centre of the stream, and they encountered no impediment.

They had their pistols with them, and some ammunition, also their flints and steels, but they were frightened to explode the weapons in case of what they might wake up, and to strike a light might set their raft on fire, so they preferred the uncertainty of that darkness to what light might reveal to them; yet the sensations were horrible that they suffered during this long interval of intense silence and sightlessness.

Were they standing still or moving on? Rushing along with a velocity that might have taken away their breath had there been any wind, for as Jack once put his hand over the side and pushed it backwards, he felt the full force of that resistless speed.

"Where were they going at this rate?" he asked himself uneasily; and only one suggestion could come, and that was "rapids." What if they were to be drawn into some great hole in the earth, and never more heard of? The idea made his young flesh creep.

Yet the air was sweet enough, as if the place had been ventilated from the outside, and nothing horrible touched them. No sound startled their nerves; they might have been flying through still space with that apparent utter want of movement.

Mrs Bangles and Ronald also sat in perfect silence, Mrs Bangles trying to think how long that darkness lasted in her dream, and Ronald suffering, as Jack was, from a nightmare of fright; only Falko was happy, for, thinking it was night, he

had fallen sound asleep, and now lay cuddled within the arms of the actress.

At last, after hours seemed to have elapsed, a faint glimmering of grey light seemed to pierce through that darkness, and then Mrs Bangles spoke.

"We are approaching the end."

"Thank heaven for that!" cried both the boys fervently.

The light grew stronger every moment as they rushed towards it. Now they could see the projecting sides of those walls as they flashed past them; but how would it be possible to stop that raft without being dashed to pieces!

Even as he thought this the water seemed to abate its speed as if they had hitherto been racing down a slope and were now being lifted over a hill.

Then the thundering falling of distant waters echoed through this interminable vault, and woke up Jack's worst fears—that they were nearing the end indeed.

"Be ready, boys, with your ropes and poles," again cried Mrs Bangles. "I remember it all now, and we are nearly there."

They could now see each other's faces, and the sides, while in front of them shone a steady and, after the long blackness, a brilliant white light. The raft also was beginning to tumble about as if on a choppy sea, while its progress was decidedly slower.

Then all at once they were in the midst of that grateful light, and being driven close to the wall.

'Quick, boys, we have arrived.'

Both Jack and Ronald saw in a moment what they were expected to do, and did it without looking round to find out the cause of that counteracting eddy, or the awful uproar which deafened them. A row of posts stood before them beside some steps cut in the rock, and with unerring accuracy they flung the ropes over the prepared posts, and made their raft fast; then they leapt ashore and looked about them with wonder.

The cavern had suddenly grown to the dimensions of an underground valley, with a roof over three thousand feet in height, from which the daylight filtered in countless rents and fissures, filling the entire space with a softened and cool radiance.

What had been a rapid before became a great lake here, eight or nine hundred yards in width, and more than a mile long, while over against them from out of the widest fissures of the roof, poured millions of tons of water through that three thousand feet of space, straight into the fathomless lake, changing its inky colour into dazzling warm and snowlike foam, thus breaking the course of the stream and forcing it against the steps.

They turned their backs to this mighty waterfall to look at their landing place, and found themselves in what might have been the nature designed temple of some prehistoric race, who, instead of being fire worshippers, were water devotees. Nature had originally rough-hewn the temples which faced that monster flood, but man had finished it with carvings and decorations. A great idol or rather colossal statue, of a naïad stood upon a pedestal of fifteen feet in height, the figure standing forty feet at least above this pedestal, all being built up, as the oldest pyramids are, from pink granite.

Jack and Ronald were looking up at this mighty work with amazement, and forgetting all about what they had come for, when their practical mother brought them to their senses by remarking,—

"There is the door, Jack, when you have finished looking round the gallery; and I hope you haven't dropped the key."

With a start Jack turned about and saw a narrow door in the side of the wall, formed from a metal which could never have been iron or steel, for there wasn't a speck of rust upon its black surface, although, from the designs upon it, it must have been carved with that altar-piece and pedestal.

He advanced eagerly, and putting in the key, found to his surprise the lock turned with hardly an effort; then the door rolled back, and disclosed a chamber of about twelve feet square, with a stone stairway at the farther end.

There were a number of large boxes of ebony and silver, and stone-built chests standing round the walls; but what

pleased them most of all was to see in the centre of the floor, and on a raised dais, the veritable Peacock Throne intact, which had been the glory of the great Shah Jehan. Their quest was ended, and they were the possessors of countless wealth.

With exclamations of wild delight, Mrs Bangles, Ronald and Jack rushed forward and prostrated themselves before this magnificent wonder of the East. Falko, seeing them thus bent, with an old recollection, perhaps, of former worshippers, also bounded forward, and, running along their bent backs, perched himself, like the god Hanuman, upon the golden seat, from where he blinked at the devotees gravely, and murmured in his lately acquired Hindoostanee,—

"Ikbal chor."

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## EPILOGUE.

My story is finished, for I have no longer any interest in people who have made their pile.

That was a desperate fortune to carry away, but they managed it, although the heroic effort nearly cost them their lives.

Of course they smashed up the throne for the sake of the gold and gems. One could not expect boys, or a needy fourth-rate actress, to have any respect for the historical value of such a relic; and this is how they got on, in as few words as possible.

They found some of these boxes filled with diamonds, rubies, emeralds, sapphires, and all the other varieties of precious stones, which Amsterdam merchants value at as low a rate as possible. Other cases contained mohurs and rupees by the bushels, and others again were filled with solid bars of silver and gold, all ready for the mint.

Now, their main embarrassment was what to take and what to leave behind at that first visit, so they decided at last to cram themselves with the unset stones, and as many of the mohurs as they could carry, and then they set off to find their way out of that cavern.

They tried these stairs, and went up thousands of steps, until at last they came to a small opening on the lower spur of the mountains, and saw before them a spreading, forest-covered plain and over against the distant horizon a city, a picturesque place to look at in the distance, but most unhealthy, as they found out afterwards.

That city was Astrabad, on the Caspian Sea, so, making a landmark, they set out and soon found themselves once more at a place where people with money are received respectfully and robbed.

It took them six months trafficking back and forward between the mountains and the sea-coast before they had emptied that ancient store of treasures, but at last they managed it, for Mrs Bangles would not give in while there was a solitary rupee left, although they all suffered dreadfully from the unwholesome climate, as well as from the suspicions of the native police.

At last, however, they got their vast possessions shipped, and after a fearful amount of suffering from anxiety and dread of robbers, got them landed in England, where, I believe, they are still, either in the safe vaults of the National Bank or in some other equally secure hiding-place.

Mrs Bangles had become reconciled to her husband, for strange to say he found her out after she came home with all that money, and as he never can get through a hundredth part of her income, no matter how heavily he plunges, they are a wonderfully happy couple in their old age, for he belonged to a very good family, and it was only the want of money which had made him such a blackguard.

They were all made comfortable by that lucky discovery, Falko no less than the others, because, now that he did not require to learn languages for his living, he relapsed once more into happy ignorance, which is, perhaps, the most enviable state of life for *a monkey*.

The kingdom of Kimwah has now become a portion of the Russian frontier, without even the shadow of a hereditary rule, for in less than a month after the escape of the king and Khalim, both Humayun and Artema died suddenly and simultaneously. The idea which that lovely princess had hatched of doing away with her brother-in-law had also, curiously enough, occurred to him with respect to her, as if by odic sympathy at the same time, so that one night they pledged each other in the forbidden cup, each having manipulated with the other's mixture beforehand, the result being prompt and effective. After that sad catastrophe, the paternal government at St Petersburg took affairs into their own hands, and made peace reign at Kimwah.

As for our heroes, Jack and Ronald, excessive wealth did not spoil them. They still stuck together and went to other lands in search of adventures, where, perhaps, at some future time we will follow them; but they never forgot the examples of Prince Khalim wherever they chanced to be.

**THE END.**

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[The end of *A Desert Bride--A Story of Adventure in India and Persia* by Hume Nisbet]