

The
Drum



A · E · W · MASON

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THE DRUM

“The Yudeni drum, or fairy’s drum which was kept on the top of every Chief’s castle, played a part in the ancient ceremonies. It was very unlucky to look towards it whilst the sounds rang out; if the fairy drummer was seen, then direst calamities followed. I never to my knowledge heard the fairy drum myself, but no feast was complete without its note, no warlike expedition could be expected to succeed which started without the fairy approval.”

DURAND in
The Making of a Frontier.

THE DRUM

By

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1

CAPTAIN FRANK CARRUTHERS, lately transferred from the 20th Punjab Infantry to the Political Department, went home upon long leave, where nature in its ordinary course startled him, humbled him and lifted him beyond the stars. In other words, Frank Carruthers, aged thirty-one, met Marjorie Drew, aged twenty-two, for the first time on Lord's Cricket Ground at the Eton and Harrow match; proposed to her between drives in a butt on a Yorkshire moor towards the end of August; married her at St. George's in October; and brought her out to Peshawur with pride and exultation at the end of the year.

The Governor of the North-West Province, however, so far from sharing that pride and exultation, was distinctly annoyed. It was his business to keep the rickety wheel of Administration revolving, and to him young officials' young wives were no better than spanners put ready to be thrown into the works. He sent for Carruthers on the day following his return to Peshawur, and ignoring this ill-timed marriage altogether, began very heartily:

"I am delighted that you are back, Carruthers. For there's some interesting work for you. Just sit down, will you? The Khan of Tokot has invited the Government to send him a small mission, and the Government has accepted the invitation. As a preliminary," he added after a pause.

"A preliminary?"

Carruthers repeated the word with his heart sinking just a little.

"Yes," Sir Arthur Brooke, the Governor, continued easily. "As a preliminary to establishing a permanent British Agency there. There's always unrest up there, there's selling the people into slavery, there are raids and blood-feuds—but why should I tell you? Year after year you have had permission to go shooting in those valleys. You have shot red bear and ibex, and you've never got into trouble. You speak Pushtu and you've learnt some of the dialects. Yes, I have got your reports."

He turned away to his big table and his fingers flicked the reports, which young Carruthers had been at such pains to compile, of his travels amongst the little, treacherous, and savage kingdoms between the borders of India and the Hindu Khush.

"So the Government has done you the honour of choosing you to be its representative—at all events on this first mission."

"Me!" Carruthers exclaimed.

A year before he would have uttered his exclamation with shining eyes and an incredulous enthusiasm. Freedom from the routine of his desk, authority following him and not squatting on his shoulders, the opportunity to prove himself alone, to do something real and fresh and valuable, the chance to write a memorable name like Robertson's or Durand's or Warburton's on the records of the Frontier, and tip-top shooting thrown in—a year ago he would by now have been upon his feet, crying "When do I start?" But he had married a young wife since then, and if there was a lower pit into which his heart could sink than that into which it had sunk, Carruthers could not imagine its location.

"Me?" he repeated.

His Excellency failed entirely to notice the consternation in the voice and looks of his subordinate.

"You, yes," he answered cheerfully. "But of course you must have guessed some while ago that you were being groomed for a job of this kind."

Carruthers, indeed, had been a little astonished at the official complacency which had permitted his shooting expeditions into those debatable bad lands where the least want of tact, the smallest act of rashness might start a little war which would strain the resources of the Government in India and bring thunder and lightning from the Parliament at home.

"So you will set out for Tokot as soon as the snow has melted on the passes," His Excellency resumed. "We shall send an Engineer Officer with you and a suitable escort. You will arrange with the Khan for the establishment of the Agency. We have a house there, for we sent a Mission to Tokot a few years ago, although nothing came of it. But the house will want reconditioning. You'll see to that."

Sir Arthur Brooke rubbed the back of one hand with the palm of the other.

"The Khan's invitation—Sher Afzul-ul-Mulk, that's his name—was urgent—unusually urgent. We know that he has a Chieftain, a Kafiristan on his border, Umra Beg, threatening him. But there's probably something more behind which we don't know. But remember we don't interfere in their internal affairs. Tokot must rule Tokot in its own way. No doubt it won't be a very good way, but alteration can only come through the peaceful extension of British Influence. Got that?"

"Yes, Sir," said Carruthers.

"And don't get into trouble yourself! For if anything happens"—the Governor alluded to murder—"to an agent of ours, such as has happened here and there, we have to march in and take over. That's to be avoided. You ought to be back within four or five months from the date of setting out. But Captain Morris will discuss the details with you. Good morning." With a nod of his head he dismissed Captain Carruthers, but when Carruthers was fumbling with the handle of the door like a man who has gone blind, he spoke again.

“By the way, Carruthers.”

Sir Arthur Brooke had a passion for folk-lore, and there is no richer field for the study of folk-lore than the northern borders of India. On some distant day he meant to sit at his ease in a study looking out upon the South Downs and write a book about the folk-lore of the tribes of the Hindu Khush.

“By the way, you might find out the story of the Yudeni drum, and how much truth there is in it.”

Carruthers was perplexed. The legends of the Hindu Khush were innumerable. The dwellers in those deep valleys between dark forests and glistening scarps of snow had other gods besides the Allah of their official creed—gods of the ice and the storm, and in a lower hierarchy the imps and the goblins whom witchcraft could appease. Carruthers had heard many a story about his camp-fire of their malevolence and the devices by which it might be diverted. But the Yudeni drum was new to him.

“The drum and the fairy drummer,” the Governor repeated.

“I’ll make enquiries,” said Carruthers.

“There’s another thing,” and His Excellency switched his thoughts away from his hobby. “The Khan is an oldish man, but he has a young son, a boy about twelve years old, to whom he’s devoted. The old man, in his love of English ways, sent the boy to the school at Ajmere for a year or two. He was his heir, so he had to be brought back. They spoke well of him at Ajmere and he knows some English.”

“I’ll look out for him, Sir,” said Carruthers, and he went home to his wife.

Half-way through luncheon Marjorie asked:

“Something has happened to you this morning, Frank?”

Frank nodded his head.

“I shall have to leave you for a time.”

“Now?”

“No. But early in the spring.”

Marjorie nodded her head, looking down at her plate. “We have till then together at all events. You’ll be long away?”

“Four to five months. You’ll have to go up to Murree, Marjorie, as soon as the hot weather begins.”

Marjorie Carruthers dismissed that consideration as of no importance.

“Dangerous?” she asked.

“My journey?” Carruthers shrugged his shoulders. “In the day’s work.”

Marjorie had now the control of her voice. She reached out her hand and laid it on her husband’s.

“My dear, I didn’t marry you to interfere with it.”

At the luncheon-table of the Residency His Excellency also was talking to his wife of Carruthers’ new appointment.

“I hope he succeeds in getting what I want.”

“The Agency established,” said his wife.

“Oh yes, that, of course,” remarked the Governor. “I was thinking of the story of the Yudeni drum. Anyone who sees the fairy drummer on the top of the tower is booked, it seems, for a sticky end. I wonder whether that happens.”

“I don’t know, my dear,” said Lady Brooke indulgently. “But before it does, we had better have Captain Carruthers and his pretty wife to dinner. It’s the least we can do.”

2

IT was still early in the year when Carruthers reached the head of the Tokot valley. But in that long, deep combe spring had come over-night. The terraced fields were already green with young wheat, and the orchards in the wealth of their blossom repeated the tumbled snows of the upper passes.

“Forward,” he said and rode down the winding track. He had behind him an escort of sixteen Pathans of his old regiment, a section of the 15th Sikhs, a Captain Morris and a squad of Royal Engineers, a baggage-train of mules, a doctor and a drummer-boy and a bugler borrowed from the Middlesex Infantry, then stationed at Peshawur. On that night he camped by a village at the waterside and in two days’ time saw ahead of him the high towers of the Khan’s fort. In the afternoon a group of young nobles gay with Bokhara silks and long coats of velvet rode out to meet him. At the head of them was a boy of twelve years or so mounted on a great horse with trappings of silver. The boy set his horse to a gallop and, reining up by Carruthers, swung himself out of the saddle to the ground.

“I am Shuja-ul-Mulk, the Khan’s son,” he cried with a broad grin. “My father welcomes you to Tokot and prays you not to measure the welcome by the size of the messenger.”

“I will not,” Carruthers replied as he shook hands with the boy. “I will measure it by the width of his messenger’s smile.”

Shuja-ul-Mulk swung himself up again into his saddle, and riding on Carruthers’ left side led him towards a wooden platform set up under a walnut-tree at the gates of the Fort, where the Khan and his Court awaited him.

“A guide will take your men to your house,” said Shuja-ul-Mulk as he dismounted again.

Carruthers and Morris got off their horses too, and ascending to the platform shook hands with the Khan, Sher Afzul-ul-Mulk. He was a man of sixty, dressed in a quilted choga of flowered silk, a large, heavy man with a haggard and apprehensive look which even the warmth of his welcome could not quite conceal. He presented to the English officers his brother Nizam, a sleek, smiling person ten years younger than himself, and his Wasir, Dadu.

“Whilst they make your house ready,” said Sher Afzul, “I shall try to entertain you.”

Carruthers dropped into a seat at the right hand of the Khan with no more

than a sigh. His years in the East had taught him to tolerate the long ceremonies of a reception. Below the dais, against a background of foaming river, orchards in blossom, hillsides black with forests of cedars and snowslopes glistening like silver soaring into the heavens over all, the villagers of Tokot sat about a semicircle of grass. There were but two kinds of entertainment in these regions—a wild polo-match with a dozen players on a side or a ballet of dancing boys. This afternoon it was obviously to be the ballet, and as the Khan clapped his hands, his troupe glided into the open space. They wore a special uniform of blue sleeveless coats over shirts of white muslin and red trousers. The leader threw a flower into the centre of the arena and about it the boys swung and twirled to the music of a pipe.

“It is a love story,” the Khan explained, whilst he nodded his head and beat his foot to the rhythm of the melody. “The flower represents a maiden and the boys her suitors.”

And indeed at that moment the music of the pipe rose to an ecstasy and the dance grew faster and more passionate.

“Here’s something, at all events, for Sir Arthur to put into his book,” Carruthers reflected, and having fixed the scene clearly in his mind, he fell to wondering why Sher Afzul had so pressingly invited this mission—what was “the something behind it all” of which the Governor of the North-West Province had spoken?

“There’s nothing to see but smiles and good humour and a gentle gaiety,” he argued. “But that means nothing too. . . . They’re a volatile people. The smiles can vanish, the good humour become anger, the gaiety a savage rage, in the course of an hour. . . . Every one of these sixpenny thrones is built up on blood and treachery. Brother murders brother, son murders father, father murders son.”

This last possibility, however, could be ruled out. Shuja-ul-Mulk sat on the dais at his father’s feet, and from time to time the old man’s hand fell caressingly upon the boy’s shoulder, as if he must needs make sure from time to time that his son was at his side.

“I shall conduct your Excellencies to your house,” said the Khan when, after an hour of it, the entertainment came to an end.

The Mission House stood upon a bluff above the river a quarter of a mile from the Fort. A couple of acres of ground had been cleared of boulders; stables and outhouses were built on the side away from the river; and the whole demesne was surrounded by a wall. At the gate the Khan stopped.

“Beyond this line you are upon your own territory,” he said with a smile. “To-morrow, when you have rested, I shall come and ask for your hospitality. For we have much to talk over.”

He was holding out his hand when something arrested him. He stood with

his lips parted and his head thrown back, immobile, a man stricken to immobility. Yes, but by no ill-tidings. There came a rapt look upon his face, the lines upon it smoothed themselves out, he might have been hearing the music of the spheres. He was certainly listening; and certainly some message reached his ears which lifted him high above his troubles.

Carruthers listened too. For a few moments he could hear nothing but the roar of the river tumbling over the boulders below. But in a little while, very faintly, above that roar, he too heard just what Sher Afzul heard, but whereas the one was uplifted by the sound to ecstasy, Carruthers was plunged in amazement. For what he heard was the distant beating of a drum.

The Yudeni drum, then! It couldn't be that there was any truth in that pretty legend. Yet how else account for the rapture upon Sher Afzul's face?

"You hear it," said the Khan in a whisper of awe. "Yes, you hear it. The drum lies on the roof of the tower of my Fort. No man ever touches it. Yet it is beaten when great things are impending for my house. You are here sent by your Government! Could there be a better omen?"

Carruthers turned his eyes towards the tower, but Sher Afzul gripped his arm in a panic.

"Look away!" he cried roughly. "For your life's sake, for my honour's sake, look away! No harm must come to you whilst you are my guest. But no man can avoid disaster who sees the ghostly beater of the drum."

Carruthers, gazing around at the little throng of courtiers who were clustered at the gate, saw that every eye was averted from the direction of the tower.

"Until to-morrow," said the Khan, and he shook Carruthers by the hand. "My son, come and say good-bye——"

But Shuja-ul-Mulk was not amongst that throng.

"Yet he came with us," said Sher Afzul. "My hand was upon his shoulder for awhile."

And thereupon Dadu the Wasir cried with a curious inflection in his voice: "No, his Highness is not here."

He was a smallish man with the broad face of a Tartar and small, cunning eyes, which were now agleam.

"He shall beg your pardon for his ill manners to-morrow," said the Khan to Carruthers, and he turned to the Wasir happily:

"You hear the drum, Dadu!"

And Dadu, with a sudden violence, answered:

"Do I hear? Do I not? Is it true? Is it false? The dark lies to the light, the day lies to the darkness. It may be. Yes, I hear."

And with this outburst he followed his master away from the gate. Carruthers watched him go with some disquietude. There had been an

arrogance and a challenge in his voice—yes, the challenge of a man so sure of the ground he stood on that he could afford the luxury of slipping off his mask to get a breath of fresh air. Carruthers turned to find Morris at his elbow, with a broad grin upon his face.

“I’ll tell you one thing,” said Morris. “The fairy drummer is a rank amateur at his job. It’s all spluttery and unsteady and muddled. If I was the fairy bandmaster, I’d use the drumsticks for a bit on the drummer’s own particular little drum.”

But Carruthers was not amused. He answered “Yes” absently and, turning, walked quickly into the house. A few minutes later Morris found him upon the roof gazing through his field-glasses at the tower of the Fort.

“It’s the old man’s boy, eh?” Morris stated a fact rather than asked a question.

“Yes.”

Carruthers handed the field-glass to his companion.

“See for yourself! If you can tell me that I’m mistaken, I shall be glad.”

Morris took the glass, surprised at the gravity of Carruthers’ voice. The lenses were powerful and drew the tower across the quarter-mile of brush until it seemed to stand within arm’s reach. There was no doubt possible. Standing back from the parapet to get what concealment he could, and with his boy’s face concentrated in a frown, the old Khan’s son was beating the drum, now quietly so that at this distance the sound of it was quite lost, now furiously so that it rose above the noise of the Tokot river.

“The young rascal!” said Morris with a laugh. “He’s working away as if his life hung upon it.”

Carruthers turned his face quickly to the engineer.

“But doesn’t it?” he asked.

“He’s just having a lark,” said Morris.

“Is he? A dangerous lark, then. Who likes to discover that the things he believes are tricks? Who laughs when he’s shown up for a fool? Not a Mussulman fanatic, anyway.”

“Oh, I see!” Morris returned. Here was an aspect of the affair which he had overlooked. “And there’s more to it, isn’t there? That old ruffian Dadu is getting wise to the trick. Did you notice him?”

“And heard him,” Carruthers agreed.

“But I am wondering,” he added slowly, “whether that boy is having a lark. Whether he isn’t saving his own life, and his father’s life, and the continuance of his house.”

He stood for a little while longer in doubt. Underneath the smiles and the friendly chatter was there really trouble and treachery in Tokot? Was that the secret of the invitation to the Government in India?

“I had a very knowledgeable orderly in the 20th Punjab,” he said. “And I have got him as my orderly now.”

He went down to the living-rooms on the first floor, where he found the orderly, a tall and intelligent Pathan from a village in the Khyber Pass, laying the table for dinner.

“Zarulla,” he said, “you must hand this job over to someone else. I want to know how things are in Tokot. Is there peace? Is there danger? And I want to know to-night.”

He did not have very long to wait. Before midnight Zarulla was standing before the two officers telling them his story. The Khan’s brother Nizam was plotting the murder of the Khan and his son. He was making promises, he had a party. It was believed that Dadu the Wasir was on his side. Certainly there was a Mullah who was preaching rebellion at night on the river-side close beneath this Mission House. The moment was near. It would come after the mission had gone back to Peshawur. In all Zarulla’s story there was but one small point of comfort for Carruthers. It was not known that the Khan’s son was the drummer on the top of the tower.

3

THE next morning Sher Afzul brought his son and half a dozen attendants to the Mission House. The boy made his apology for not waiting upon Carruthers the afternoon of yesterday and was dismissed by his father. He found Captain Morris giving orders for the reconditioning of the house. The ground-floor was to be given up to the guard-room and the stores, the outhouses were to be turned into barracks. All this Morris explained to Shuja-ul-Mulk, whilst two servants stood near.

“Those are your personal servants?” Morris asked.

“Yes,” said the boy with a grin. “They follow me by my father’s wish, but I escape from them when I can.”

He called to the taller of the two.

“Wafadar, there is no need for you to follow me in His Excellency’s camp. Wait for me at the gate.”

Even so, the man demurred, and when Shuja sauntered away on a tour of inspection, they remained not within his view, but not very far away.

“Zarulla was right,” Captain Morris inferred. “The boy’s in danger and the old Khan knows it. However, that’s Carruthers’ pigeon,” and he returned to his own job.

At the back of the house Shuja-ul-Mulk came upon an open space and looking out upon the space an open door. By the side of the door stood a stool, and on the stool lay a regimental drum.

The boy’s eyes lit up at the sight of it. He approached it cautiously and reverentially. He looked about him. There was not a soul in sight. The drum might have been one of the Crown jewels.

The drum-sticks were thrust through the side-lacing. The temptation to Shuja-ul-Mulk was beyond resistance. He lifted the drum from the stool and, squatting on the ground with his back to the door, he set it on his knees. He took the drum-sticks from the lacing and very quietly tapped and tapped and tapped. Still no one interrupted him. He took his courage in his hands and beat out a tattoo. He was so engaged when the drummer-boy, to whom the drum belonged, dashed out from the door and stopped. He put his fists into his ribs and squared his elbows. Shuja-ul-Mulk went on beating the drum. The drummer-boy, with a look of anguish in his face and a deep sense of outrage in his heart, planted himself in front of the Khan’s son.

“And wot d’yer think yer a-doin’ of, Mister?” he asked with a dangerous and exaggerated politeness.

Shuja-ul-Mulk beamed up at the drummer-boy.

“I think I play a tattoo.”

“Well, I should think again.”

“You teach me, then, to do it properly?”

“On that there drum? Not bloomin’ likely! I think as you’d better know about that there drum. The Prime Minister giv’ it me ’isself in Westminster Abbey. ‘Bill,’ he says—Bill, that’s me—‘Bill, that ’ere drum means a lot ter me,’ he says, with a sort of crack in ’is voice, same as you’ll ’ave when I’ve done with yer. ‘And if ever you lets any ’eathen nigger play on it, I’ll larrup the trousers off yer.’ ”

The Khan’s son looked up from his drum quietly.

“Heathen nigger,” he repeated, with an impassive face.

“That’s what I said,” answered Bill.

“I am Shuja-ul-Mulk.”

“Oh, are yer? Then please understand that you are sugar-and-milk from now on.”

“I am the young Khan,” said Shuja-ul-Mulk with dignity.

“You’ll be the old Can’t when I’ve done with you,” said Bill the drummer-boy. “Come on! Git up and come on.” He turned away from Shuja-ul-Mulk and began to unbutton his coat. Shuja-ul-Mulk looked at him sorrowfully.

“You want to fight me?”

“I’m a-goin’ to fight yer,” said Bill.

The Tokoti boy put the drum aside, fitting back the sticks into the lacing.

“Bill, I’d much rather be friends with you.”

Bill had by then stripped off his coat and hung it up upon the wall. He now turned up his shirt-sleeves.

“We’ll talk about that afterwards, my friend Sugar-and-Milk.”

Sugar-and-Milk sorrowfully whipped out a big Afghan knife from the back of his waist and whetted it on the sole of his boot slowly.

“But, Bill,” he said, “if we fight, of course there won’t be any afterwards.”

“Wot’s that?”

Puzzled by a statement so bewildering, Bill swung round, and saw the Khan’s son now on his feet with the long curved knife flashing in his hand.

“Gawd!” said Bill in a voice of awe.

And then the unequal combat ended before it had begun. Wafadar and his fellow-guard, whilst dutifully keeping out of Sugar-and-Milk’s sight, had no less dutifully not lost sight of him. With a cry of alarm they dashed round the corner of the house and flung themselves on Bill.

“’Ere, ’ere what’s up?” cried Bill.

“Let him go!” shouted Sugar-and-Milk, and aroused by the uproar, Captain Morris came running forward from the door of the house. It was the Khan’s son who was the first to see him. He called again to Wafadar, stamping his foot in anger.

“Bill is my friend, Wafadar! Let him go!”

Captain Morris was never a fussy man. He was not for pushing in where standing pat would serve as well; and generally he found it served better. So he stood quite still, and his eyes were rewarded with a curious scene.

“Bill is my friend,” the boy repeated. “Shall I not show him my new knife? What more trouble will you give, you rogues?”

He stood up, a young Prince from head to foot, with a flashing eye and a face of disdain. His two servants released the drummer-boy and grovelled on their knees. Wafadar, murmuring prayers for pardon, lifted Sugar-and-Milk’s foot and placed it on his head.

Even Bill, who was not easily impressed, stared at the upright little figure with his eyes popping out of his head.

“Gawd!” he whispered.

“Take my knife,” the young Khan commanded of Wafadar, “and give it to my friend.”

The two men rose as one. Bowing humbly, Wafadar took the knife from his Prince’s hand. He carried it as though it were some priceless and fragile jewel to Bill, and then with his companion he prostrated himself at the drummer-boy’s feet.

“The friend of my master is my master. As I serve my master, I serve my master’s friend. I beg my master’s friend to forgive me.”

“Gawd!” said Bill, and Captain Morris discreetly retired. Bill’s awe, however, changed to a keen pleasure as he balanced the long knife in his hand and felt the sharpness of its edge. When he looked up, the two attendants on the Tokoti lad had gone. The two boys were alone. Bill shifted his feet in discomfort.

“It’s all true, then,” he said awkwardly. “I thought as you was pullin’ my leg. ’Ere,” and he raised his hand to his forehead in a private’s salute to his officer.

Sugar-and-Milk shook his head and a smile of friendliness broadened all over his face. “Shakeapaw!” he said, holding out his hand. “That’s good English?”

“Oxford Dictionary,” said Bill, as he grasped the hand. “I tell you wot! I’ll teach you to roll that there drum of mine in a way that’d make Tommy Beecham stand on ’is bloomin’ ’ead in the middle of Coving Garden. Come on!”

The two boys squatted again on the ground with the drum between them,

Bill still in his shirt-sleeves.

“Now, watch me!”

He crossed the drum-sticks above his head.

“Watch me, Sh—I ’aven’t got yer name right.”

“My name’s Sugar-and-Milk,” said the other.

“Good! Off we go, then.”

And the drum rolled out its thunder, so that it was heard in the upper room where the Khan and Carruthers were sitting in conference. The Khan lifted his head and smiled.

“Why should all the boys through all the world love to beat a drum?” he asked as one putting a grave problem.

“Because it makes a damned row,” answered Carruthers, and whilst the debate was continued in the living-room on the first floor, the lesson was earnestly conducted on the grass plot in the garden.

For an hour it went on, and then Sugar-and-Milk, looking up at the position of the sun, said:

“My father will be returning. I must wait for him at the gate.”

“Right,” said Bill. “Wot abaht ter-morrow? I’m free at ten.”

“Ten to-morrow,” said Shuja-ul-Mulk, and bidding Bill the drummer-boy good-bye, he made his way to the gate. Wafadar and his companion fell in behind him, and at the gate they waited until the Khan and Carruthers came out from the house and joined them.

“Then, if we make a treaty,” said the Khan, “you will bring it back to me engraved upon copper?”

“On copper?” Carruthers asked, a little bewildered.

“Yes,” said the Khan. “It is known, of course, that the British Government does not hold treaties to be binding unless they are engraved upon copper.”

Carruthers stared at the Khan and laughed.

“Well, that’s a new one on me,” he said. “We are accustomed to think that the British Government’s word is enough. But if you would prefer it on copper, I have no doubt that the resources of India can run to it.”

“I should prefer it on copper,” said the Khan simply.

At the back of the house Bill the drummer-boy set the drum back upon the stool and passed the drum-sticks through the lacing.

4

BILL HOLDER hung over the wall at the end of the Mission garden and looked down at the river foaming in a cataract below and the narrow path which ran between the river and the steep cliff-face. Sugar-and-Milk was late to-day for his lesson, and Bill was a trifle disconsolate. For to-morrow the Mission went home over the passes now clear of snow, back to Peshawur and the cantonments and the parades. Bill Holder heaved a great sigh as he thought of them. The enchantment of these deep valleys and soaring mountains of the Hindu Khush had caught him. He lived on the edge of adventure. There was not much poetry in this drummer-boy from Bermondsey, but it seemed to him that these vast snowslopes and cedar forests stood so still on dark nights and bright days, in moonlight or mist, because they knew that something tremendous was going to happen and were just holding their breaths until it did. Moreover, for the first time in his life, he had made a real friend. And the friend was late to-day of all days.

“Good morning, Bill.”

Bill swung round in astonishment. Sugar-and-Milk was standing just behind his shoulders with a broad grin on his face.

“Well, I’m jiggered! And where did you spring from?”

“My secret!”

Sugar-and-Milk looked all round and back to the house. No one was visible. He caught Bill Holder eagerly by the arm.

“I’ll show you, Bill.”

In the angle of the wall was a great pile of boulders and stones which had been collected into this corner when the ground was cleared.

“There was a fort here a long time ago,” said the boy, “with a hidden way down to the water. It was all covered up by these stones, and I don’t think anyone now knows of it except me. I found it out by chance.” He showed Bill Holder a gap in the pile of stones.

“I keep that slab over there across the entrance.”

“Coo!” said Bill, staring down into the mouth of the passage. “It’s as black as your ’at, isn’t it?”

“It winds about a bit and is pretty well choked up,” the Tokoti boy agreed, “but it’s all right if you know the way.”

“Let’s go down,” said Bill. He, too, gazed about. Here was a real secret. In

all the adventure books there were hidden passages that you kept to yourself and escaped by when Mohicans were after you to tie you to trees and push burning slivers of wood, dipped in oil to make them burn better, into your flesh and take your scalp off you in the end. What Bill Holder didn't know of Fenimore Cooper wasn't worth knowing.

"I tell you wot, Shuggy." It had come from Sugar-and-Milk to "Shuggy" now. "There's an electric torch on the winder-sill of that room and the room's empty."

Bill edged from tree to tree in the enclosure until he reached the house. Weren't there Mohicans everywhere? Wasn't there a message brought in by a friendly redskin that the Cherokees were on the warpath too? By jingo, Bill had got to watch his step this morning! He felt his scalp loose upon his head. He snatched the torch from the window-sill and ran doubled up back to Shuja-ul-Mulk.

"I've pinched it," he said in a whisper. "Wait a sec!"

He took off his coat and hung it over the wall and rolled up his sleeves.

"You're not going to fight me, Bill, again, are you?" said the Khan's son with a smile.

"Not on yer life," said Bill. "Haven't we smoked the caloomet o' peace together in your wigwam? Didn't I give you a pull at my fire-water? Take the torch, Shuggy, and lead the way."

The two boys climbed down into the darkness of the passage, Shuja-ul-Mulk silent as a wraith, Bill Holder setting the stones rattling under his heavy boots. Here and there the roof had fallen in, almost blocking the passage, but Shuja-ul-Mulk found his way round each obstacle and lighted Bill behind him.

"Fancy findin' yer way all by yerself down 'ere! You're a rum 'un, Shuggy. I'd 'a bin scared out of my life," said Bill.

"Sh!" replied Shuggy. "We're nearly down"; and beyond the next bend in the path, the daylight showed—a slit of daylight like the morning between your bedroom curtains.

They squeezed through a crack in the rock and came out into a small cavern. In front of them the river tumbled, blindingly bright. Between the river and the cavern the footway passed.

"Coo!" said Bill Holder. "The crack's in the corner, ain't it? Yus, no one on the path'd spot there was a way up."

They climbed back to the garden again and replaced the slab over the entrance, piling the edges round with little stones so that it looked as if it had been flung on to the heap amongst the other boulders. Bill put on his coat and the two boys went back into the open space, and the drum was again between them.

"This is our last lesson, Shuggy."

The last clauses in the proposed treaty between the Khan of Tokot and the Indian Government were being temporarily drafted in the living-room on the first floor, where the Khan and the Wasir Dadu sat with Carruthers. Wasir Dadu pleaded for a fat subsidy. The Indian Government could not contemplate such an arrangement, said Carruthers. It would protect Tokot against the attacks of Umra Beg from Kafiristan or any other outside chieftain who might cast a covetous eye upon this rich valley. But no subsidies; and above all no interference in the internal affairs of the Tokot State. Carruthers was insistent upon that provision. The more he knew of the undercurrents of greed and jealousy and hatred which threatened to undermine its stability, the more he insisted that the Indian Government must stand aloof from them. Carruthers had his sympathies, which had been greatly quickened during his months of residence. But he had his orders too.

“Tokot must govern Tokot,” he said firmly. “We offer protection for your borders, and we look to you in return for the gradual extinction of those practices, such as selling your subjects into slavery, which are repugnant to the English idea.”

“It shall all be engraved upon copper?” said the Khan nervously, for the hundredth time.

“It shall all be engraved upon copper,” Carruthers returned, “even though the price of the copper means my extermination.”

Thus he spoke in the upper room whilst Bill Holder in the garden desolately explained that the last touches in the fine art of beating a drum must be acquired by Sugar-and-Milk without the help of a preceptor.

“But I am better than I was?” Sugar-and-Milk eagerly enquired.

“Shuggy, you do the greatest credit to your instructor,” said Bill. He continued on a note of remorse: “I think as I ought to tell you, Shuggy—us bein’ friends of long standin’—that I lied to you. It wasn’t the Prime Minister who giv’ me that there drum, and it wasn’t giv’ to me in Westminster Abbey neither.”

“No?” said Shuggy. “But, Bill, he ought to have.” And he added sympathetically, “I expect he didn’t know you as I do.”

“Well, that may be,” said Bill. “There’s a lot of dirty dogs hangin’ round Prime Ministers and wantin’ a bit. Anyway, it was a great hulkin’ bandmaster who giv’ me that drum, and he didn’t use them noble words as I spoke to you.”

“No, Bill?”

“No. He just said, contemptuous like, ‘ ’Ere’s yer drum, yer lousy little bastard, and if yer lets it get wet’ ”—Bill nodded solemnly, “that’s when he mentioned that he’d wallop the trousers off o’ me.”

“But he didn’t, Bill,” urged Sugar-and-Milk, aghast lest such an ignominy should have befallen his friend.

“No,” cried Bill, throwing out his chest. “I should think ’e jolly well”—he suddenly looked round in real alarm and dropped his voice—“no, ’e didn’t.”

Sugar-and-Milk, greatly relieved, took up the drum-sticks. “Bill,” he said. “I’ve got an idea. We won’t have a lesson to-day.”

Bill said, “Won’t we?”

“No. We’ll fix up a private signal between you and me.”

“On the drum?”

“That’s what I mean.”

“Coo!” said Bill. “So if the Mohicans are after you with their scalpin’-knives in their ’ands, you beat yer drum and I rush to the rescue.”

“Yes, and if you’re tied to a tree with bits of burning wood——”

“Steeped in oil,” interrupted Bill, who knew his Fenimore Cooper.

“Yes, steeped in oil, blazing in your flesh, I’ll come to you.”

There were many dangers waiting round the corner for Sugar-and-Milk, in which neither Mohicans nor Cherokees had any hand, but the two boys were away in the distant lands of imagined adventure. There were forests here about them more vast than the forests of Fenimore Cooper’s America; there were enemies as silent in their movements as braves and more treacherous and more bloodthirsty. But in their cloaks of brown hair-cloth and their turbans, they were much less picturesque, and less considered.

“Yes,” said Bill. “Let’s see!”

He took the drum-sticks from Shuja-ul-Mulk.

“We’ll begin with two distinct taps, so!”

“Yes, and we’ll follow that with a real roll,” said Shuggy.

He took the drum-sticks away from Bill and executed the roll with an efficiency which no fairy drummer had ever equalled.

“That’s fine!” cried Bill, and now he snatched the drum-sticks from Shuja-ul-Mulk. “Then we’ll do a couple o’ short, sharp taps, like this. See?”

“And we’ll follow it with two more just the same,” said Shuja-ul-Mulk, and in his turn he took possession of the drum-sticks and struck twice and sharply. “And that’ll be all.”

“Yus,” said Bill Holder, “but”—and his excitement fell away into melancholy—“there’s a catch in it. Gor’ blimey, if there isn’t a catch in everything!”

“What’s the catch, Bill?” Shuggy asked anxiously.

“Why, Shuggy, you ain’t got a drum.”

Shuggy was silent for a moment. Then he leaned forward:

“But I know where there is a drum.”

“Ah, but can you get hold on it?”

Said Shuggy, with the effort of a man making a daring promise, “Bill, I can.”

“Well, then,” said Bill, “let’s see that we’ve got it orl right. You go first.”

Carruthers had come to the end of his conferences and discussions. He had said all that he had got to say, promised all that he had to promise, and had received the assurances which he had any right to expect. A permanent agency would be established, the Principality, such as it was, would be maintained by the forces of India against external aggression. Meanwhile Tokot must govern Tokot. He said good-bye to the Khan and descended the stairs and came round the house at the moment when Bill Holder wanted to make sure that his private signal with his friend would be as unmistakable to either of them as the reveillé of a trumpet.

“You go first, Shuggy,” said Bill, and Shuggy tapped out his two sharp notes, set the long roll of sound reverberating over the garden and finished up with a neat double rat-tat like the knocks of an impatient postman upon a door without a letter-box.

“Oke,” said Bill the drummer-boy.

Carruthers five minutes before had just said good-bye, with many flourishes and excellent phrases, to the Khan Sher Afzul-ul-Mulk and, hearing the roll of the drum in the garden, bethought him that he had a word to say to the Khan’s son. He came round the corner of the house just in time to hear the boy tap out the signal. And he stood unnoticed in the background whilst Bill Holder took the drum-sticks in his turn and beat out the same . . . what was it, Carruthers carelessly wondered? A call? A summons? Something of the kind. Carruthers smiled as he watched the tremendous earnestness and concentration with which the two boys repeated this—what?—this message?—yes, this message, to make sure that they had got it exactly right. The picture remained pleasantly in his mind, and with it an echo of the call or summons or message, whichever it was. So that when, in the course of a little time, he heard it again, he knew it for what it was, and had good reason to thank his stars that he had wandered round the house instead of going back to his room and writing up his report to the Governor of the North-West Province.

“That’s all, then,” said Bill, standing up.

“Shakeapaw,” said Sugar-and-Milk.

Carruthers stepped forward. Bill duly saluted and moved off to the house with the drum. Sugar-and-Milk bowed gravely.

“As a performer on the drum,” said Carruthers, “you have greatly improved since I heard you beating one on the day of our arrival at Tokot.”

“Your Excellency heard me on the day of your arrival?” the Khan’s son asked.

His face had become a mask, but not a mask stamped with a particular emotion. It was vacant of all expression. Even the boy’s eyes were as the eyes of the dead.

“On the afternoon of the day we arrived,” Carruthers specified.

Shuja-ul-Mulk said nothing in reply, and no hint of comprehension altered his face or gleamed in his eyes.

“I’ll put it in another way,” said Carruthers. “The fairy drummer on the top of the tower has improved exactly to the same degree.”

Shuja-ul-Mulk bowed again.

“Your Excellency knows that foolish beliefs can be wisely used,” he said.

“If all the fools believe in them,” said Carruthers.

Shuja-ul-Mulk shook his head gently.

“No one of our people dares look towards the tower when the drum is beaten.”

“Are you sure?” asked Carruthers.

The boy reflected with a frowning face.

“Not even the Wasir Dadu?” Carruthers suggested.

And now there came into the boy’s impassive face a look of real trouble, and anxiety stared out from his eyes.

“I thank Your Excellency for the warning,” he said.

But the warning came too late.

For a month after the mission had departed, the boy climbed on a dark night over the wall into the garden of the Mission House, which was now shut up in the charge of a caretaker. He removed the slab from the mouth of the water-way, being careful to make no noise. He crept down to the cavern at the river’s edge. The sound of a voice preaching reached his ears. Cautiously he crept out of the cavern and drew his cloak down over his face. He drew nearer to the voice preaching. He could hear some words now. A few steps more and he could make out a great throng of people squatting upon the ground and one man standing up, his figure outlined against the gleam of the river. The boy crept behind a boulder and heard the Mullah’s fiery voice calling aloud for murder and rebellion.

“The sceptre falls from a weak hand. Let a strong one grasp it as it falls. Nizam shall be your king. He is strong, he is young. Umra Beg of Kafiristan will quail before him. And let no one cry that whilst the Yudeni drum beats on the roof of the tower, Sher Afzul and Sher Afzul’s son are protected by God. Who is it beats the drum on the roof of the tower but the Khan’s son? Let the Wasir Dadu bear witness!”

And above the voice of the preacher, a rough cry like the bellow of an animal broke from the mouth of Dadu:

“It is so. I dared to look.”

“Shall we be made fools of by a boy?” the Mullah thundered. “A sacrilegious boy who laughs at us in his sleeve—at us men? And who taught him to laugh at us? The English tutors at Ajmere.”

Murmurs of agreement rose into growls of anger. Excitement grew. The Mullah raved and cursed and promised, whipping up his audience to a frenzy. There would be plunder for everyone when Nizam was king. He would lead his army against Umra Beg and possess his lands and sell his men and his women into slavery.

“But if Sher Afzul’s son reigns in Tokot, what then? You must bide in your borders, spiritless and poor. For he will have fixed the shackles of the English on your legs.”

Shuja-ul-Mulk crept back undetected to his cavern. He would have had short shrift, as he knew very well, had he been seen. He hurried back to the Fort. His father was away with his hawks and his dogs at one of the upper villages, and Nizam his brother was with him. Shuja-ul-Mulk could do nothing that night. He could do nothing the next day but send a messenger at his utmost speed praying his father to return. But the messenger got no farther than half-way when he received news which sent him flying back. Towards evening Wafadar carried the news to Shuja-ul-Mulk. Sher Afzul had been shot deliberately by one of Nizam’s servants.

“It is the signal,” said Wafadar. “The valley is up. This night your Highness must go.”

The boy sought out his mother in the women’s quarters. When the morning broke and the men of Tokot surged against the gates of the Fort with old matchlocks and new rifles, Shuja-ul-Mulk with his mother and Wafadar had disappeared. Nizam ruled over Tokot.

5

THE Government of India, however, thought it unnecessary to communicate these facts to Bill Holder the drummer-boy. Indeed, they were not sufficiently unusual to cause a stir anywhere. It was said that the shot which killed Sher Afzul was fired by accident, and undoubtedly people have been shot by accident at partridge-shoots in England. The policy of the Government was not to be deflected on grounds as debatable and inconclusive as these. It was intended to make Tokot a centre of influence in the little countries of the Hindu Khush.

“They live in fear, every one of them,” said Sir Arthur Brooke, “and fear makes men cruel. I want neither lion nor lamb beyond the passes, but good neighbours. We shall see in a little while how Nizam is disposed. Let us not hurry!”

He spoke thus to Captain Carruthers, and he added:

“It is the intention of the Government, which is well pleased with your work, Captain Carruthers, that you should be the first Resident Agent in Tokot.”

Captain Carruthers took the news home to his wife, who was thrilled by it.

“We shall be on our own,” she said.

She was too clever to open up a discussion as to whether or no the Resident’s wife would be a suitable member of the Resident’s staff. Other wives had lived with their husbands in outlandish corners of the world. She meant to be one of those wives, and the surest way to become one was to assume from the beginning that she was one. Carruthers shifted about in his chair uneasily.

“After a little time, no doubt, Marjorie . . . when one saw how things were working out. . . . Let us not hurry,” he said, catching at a phrase of the Governor.

“No doubt we shall have reasonable notice,” said Marjorie.

This conversation took place at the close of the year, when the Middlesex Regiment was making some route-marches. On the afternoon of one of these days it tramped back from Ali Musjid at the foot of the Khyber Pass, and with its band playing and its drums beating marched at attention through the Peshawur bazaar. It passed through an oblong open space with shops and tall houses at the side and booths in the middle. But for the clear passage-way the

space was thronged with people, whilst others squatted in the dust—a potter with his clay, a carpenter with a primitive lathe. At the head of the battalion marched the four drummers, with Bill Holder on the right. The music which was being played came to its end, and then for a little while the battalion marched to a single tap of a drum—Bill Holder’s drum. The drum-major, Bill noticed, was twirling his staff a few paces in front of the drums, and flung it high up into the air. He was exactly level with a tiny bridge which crossed a little runnel of rushing water. As he caught it, Bill Holder heard upon his right hand, from somewhere in the crowd, two measured taps on a drum, then a long roll, then two sharp rat-tats, like an impatient postman’s knocking on a closed door. Bill’s heart gave a great jump. It was perhaps the first time that Bill was made aware that he had a heart. Shuggy was here—in Peshawur! And in some sort of trouble. Bill couldn’t look. The battalion was marching at attention, eyes to the front. But as he raised his drumstick in marking the time, he gave it a little flick to the right. Shuggy would know that he had heard the signal and recognised it.

The march thence to the barracks seemed to Bill Holder longer than the whole tramp to Ali Musjid and back. But Shuggy was still waiting by the little bridge over the runnel when at last he was free; and as a consequence of the conversation they had together, when Carruthers sat down to breakfast the next morning he saw His Highness the Prince of Tokot and Bill the drummer-boy waiting his pleasure on his verandah.

“That’s Sugar-and-Milk,” he cried to his wife. “He got away, then!”

Both the boys stood up and grinned: Bill saluted: Sugar-and-Milk bowed as to an equal.

“What in the world happened to you?” Carruthers asked, going to the open window.

Marjorie Carruthers had a shrewd eye and a practical mind. “We’ll hear their story when they have had breakfast. Sugar-and-Milk,” she said, with a friendly smile, “doesn’t look to me to have breakfasted at all, and I never heard of a drummer-boy who couldn’t tuck away a second one.”

She clapped her hands to summon her Pathan butler and sent the boys away with him to be fed; and half an hour later Shuja-ul-Mulk told the pair of them the story of his escape.

“We escaped in the darkness—my mother and I and Wafadar,” he explained. “The news of my father’s death was not known in Tokot until the next morning. We took three ponies, and by daylight we were far away. At one or two places, where the road ran over a wooden gallery built against a cliff-face, Wafadar broke it down behind us, and here and there in the villages Wafadar had friends who sent us on our way.”

They had reached Peshawur with a few rupees in hand and made some

more by the sale of their ponies. They had a small lodging in the bazaar, and Wafadar was working in a shoe factory.

“And what do you want to do?” Carruthers asked of Shuja-ul-Mulk.

Shuja-ul-Mulk grinned all over his face.

“I want to be a drummer in the Punjab Infantry,” he said. “Perhaps Your Excellency can pull a string.”

“You poor boy!” cried Marjorie. She had not yet learned with what ease an Oriental can accept the reverses of Fortune.

Carruthers had an idea. He leaned forward in his chair.

“You have got a drum?” he asked, and the Tokoti boy nodded vigorously.

“*The* drum. I would not leave it behind. I carried it on my pony.”

“The Yudeni drum? From the top of the tower?”

“Yes.”

“Good! Now I tell you what you shall do. We have a hut in our compound. You and your mother and Wafadar shall live in it. Meanwhile I will see what I can do.”

What Carruthers did was to ask that morning for an interview with the Governor of the North-West Province.

“The young Prince of Tokot, Shuja-ul-Mulk, is in Peshawur,” he pleaded, “without money. He escaped with his mother.”

“We can’t put him back,” answered the Governor. “For us Nizam is the Khan of Tokot. He has already sent representatives to the Government of India, asking for the continuance of our policy and the establishment of the Agency.”

Carruthers proceeded to pull a string as Shuja-ul-Mulk had put it.

“It wasn’t to suggest an expedition to restore Shuja-ul-Mulk to his position that I asked for this interview, Sir,” he said meekly. “But I thought that it would interest you to know that he brought away the Yudeni drum with him.”

Sir Arthur’s face lit up.

“Did he?” he cried. “I should like to see that drum.”

Carruthers was afraid to make too much of that instrument, lest the Governor should be disappointed when he saw it.

“It’s just an ordinary native drum.”

“Have you seen it?” asked the Governor.

“I was never on the roof of the tower,” answered Carruthers. “If you like, Sir, I’ll bring Shuja-ul-Mulk up here with it.”

“Yes, that’s a good idea,” said Sir Arthur. “I should like to see the boy.”

Shuja-ul-Mulk, the contributor to a chapter on Folk-lore, was a very much more welcome personage than Shuja-ul-Mulk the Pretender to a principality in the Hindu Khush. Sir Arthur could see how the chapter would begin. It would be a picturesque beginning after the style of the *Golden Bough*: the young

Khan fleeing in the night and taking the sacred drum with him so that it might not defend and protect the usurper. Sir Arthur felt much more humanly disposed towards Sugar-and-Milk.

“Poor boy!” he said sympathetically. “About twelve, you said? Is he? Sad! Yes! Well, I don’t know; perhaps something might be done for him. A little pension, perhaps. Let him bring the drum here this afternoon. At five. The Yudeni Drum! Ha!”

His Excellency received Carruthers and Shuja-ul-Mulk in the Rose Garden at the side of the Residency. The boy put his drum upon a garden-table and bowed with due ceremony and deference. But Brooke was moved to an unusual warmth by the good-humour of the outcast princeling and by a quiet dignity which the lad wore.

“I am very sorry,” he said, holding out his hand, “both for your father’s death and your own misfortune. I shall take pains to find a way by which the misfortune can be lightened. Your mother is with you, I understand.”

“Yes, Your Excellency.”

“Of course, officially, you understand that your uncle Nizam is Khan of Tokot.” There must be no doubt of that. There would be only one cause which would force the Government to interfere in the internal administration of Tokot or any other of the border States: a definite act of hostility against the Sirkar—the English rule—in the person of one of its Representatives. And the sooner Shuja-ul-Mulk was certain about that the better.

But the boy was not pleading for assistance.

“Carruthers Sahib and his wife have given me a lodging in their compound. Wafadar, a faithful servant of my father, is with us. He works and provides for our wants, which are few. In a little time I shall hope to earn money myself. If your Excellency will use your great influence to make me a drummer-boy in the Punjab Infantry, I shall begin at once. For the rest, what God has taken away from me, He can restore to me if He will.”

Sir Arthur Brooke’s experience of ruling families beyond the frontier was of greedy people clamouring for subsidies. He was a trifle abashed by the quiet and graceful independence of this boy.

“We shall see,” he said. “Yes, we shall see.”

“Meanwhile Your Excellency wished to see my drum,” and a smile lightened up the grave, small face and set the eyes dancing.

“Ah, yes, the Yudeni drum! To be sure! I had an idea that I would like to see it.”

His Excellency spoke with the most admirable detachment. But the effect was not as careless as it was meant to be. For all through the short conversation his eyes had been straying towards that drum as covetously as the eyes of any Pathan chieftain to a bag of rupees.

Shuja-ul-Mulk fetched the drum, and Sir Arthur took it into his hands. It was not a thing of beauty. It was just an old weather-beaten native instrument which had lain out in the open through rain and shine, night and day upon the top of a tower. Yet Sir Arthur handled it as though it were as precious as the Royal Crown. In the end he set it behind his seat on an iron garden-table, and if he saw, he did not heed the anxiety which strained the boy's face when he saw his treasure put out of his reach.

"I shall tell you what I will do," said Sir Arthur Brooke, with the air of one conferring a favour. "I shall, in exchange for this old drum, make you a present of the very best one which can be bought in the bazaar. You will like that. Yes, indeed, you will like that very much."

But it was evident that Shuja-ul-Mulk did not like it at all. His mouth dropped at the corners. A look of intense distress convulsed his face. There crept into his eyes a stubbornness which was not to be denied.

"Your Excellency is generous, but I must not part with that drum."

His Excellency was annoyed. His first thought was to hand back the drum to the ungrateful little beggar at once, and have done with him. On the other hand, he was curious. The boy was running a risk of losing his favour and goodwill. And the boy knew it. What was the overpowering motive which compelled him—he had used the word "must"—not to part with the Yudeni drum?

"Why?" asked the Governor.

"I beat that drum when it was not for me to beat it," the lad explained gently. "It was on the roof—a sacred thing—and I meddled with it. I am not sure now that all the evil which has happened to my family was not a retribution."

The Governor nodded his head. Here was something much better than the drum. Here was the complete chapter on the Yudeni drum for his Folk-lore book, with a perfect conclusion. Had he been given the drum, what would he have had? A photograph of it, a sketch of it, to insert in the letter-press. But he had a much better picture now: the picture of a lad surreptitiously beating it in the dusk on the roof-top to deceive the people, falling upon ruin in consequence, stealing the drum and not daring to part with it lest his misfortunes be multiplied a hundred-fold.

"Yes, I understand," said Sir Arthur.

But even now he did not completely understand. It needed yet another remark of the lad to open his eyes altogether to the remorse which was at work in him.

"I have been thinking much about it since I have been idle here at Peshawur. It was a sin for me, a mortal, to beat the drum and give the sign that all was well with us. It was perhaps a worse sin to take it away from its

appointed place. Some day, when I am quite forgotten, I shall creep back to Tokot and try to put it once more in its place.”

There was something so forlorn in the aspect of the boy—nay, in the very sound of the words he used—that it drove the very thought of that masterpiece of a chapter out of Brooke’s mind. He was moved to a greater tenderness. Almost he regretted that he couldn’t send his troops and the boy and the drum up over the passes to Tokot, and replace the one on his throne and the other on the roof-top. He gave back the drum, and said gently: “Keep it safely, then, until the time comes.”

At dinner that night he said to his wife:

“I must do something about that boy. When the spring comes, the Carruthers will be away at Tokot. There will be a stranger in their house, and others will use the compound.”

“So you are letting Marjorie Carruthers go up to Tokot,” said his wife with a smile. There had been skirmishes and a pitched battle upon that question, as she very well knew, and Marjorie had won.

Sir Arthur shrugged his shoulders.

“I couldn’t prevent it. Nizam is now as eager for a Resident as his brother was. Umra Beg is quiet. There is no sign of trouble in the valley. And Carruthers will be at Tokot for two years. He’ll do his work ever so much better if he hasn’t to worry over a wife at Peshawur,” and his thoughts went back to Shuja-ul-Mulk.

“A little pension, I think—that is, if he’ll take it. A drummer-boy in a regiment? That’s absurd. No! A little pension. Ha!”

Whilst he thus talked, Shuja-ul-Mulk was sitting at the feet of Marjorie Carruthers on the verandah of her house. To her he was a lonely and unhappy little boy, and softened by the warm pity of her voice, the mask of indifference which he usually wore melted away. He was frightened too. Each religion has its unforgivable sin. Wise men leave it alone. They don’t waste their time guessing which of all the possible sins it might be and whether they have committed it. But the imagination of boys takes hold of it. They are sure it was this bad thing they did yesterday, and that they are damned for ever. Or it is this wickedness which, in a fit of bravado or to spite their parents, they are going to commit to-morrow. Shuja-ul-Mulk was a little boy like another—a little more courage, perhaps, a little more fatalism, a little more cheeriness than are usual, but swayed by the same terrors and moved by the same kindness. In the dark of the verandah he wrung his hands over his drumming on the tower-top—half of it fun, half of it defence against the treachery of Nizam, and all of it unforgivable sin. Marjorie Carruthers set her kind wits to comfort him, and the boy’s tears flowed from his eyes and took away from him the worst of his misery. She leaned forward and set her hand upon his shoulder.

“Shuggy, we shouldn’t love you so much unless we knew you to be true and lovable. Unforgivable things leave their mark upon the face and forehead so that we run away at the sight of it. But we don’t run away from you, Shuggy. And when we go away from here we shall leave behind us others who will be as kind to you.”

Shuggy sat back upon his heels.

“You are going away?” he whispered aghast. “You and Carruthers Sahib?”

“For awhile. But we are going to your country, Shuggy, and we’ll want your help. You know so much of Tokot; we know nothing at all. You have friends there; we shall have none. You must tell us about them, and we shall send news of them and messages from them to you.”

She led him on to talk of his country, of the friends he had made, of the little incidents which had given savour to his life. She sent him back to his mother’s hut in the compound soothed in spirit and with an adoration for Marjorie which was a greater pride and delight to him than he had ever known.

“I shall never forget to-night,” he said to her as he went down the steps.

“No. We’ll both remember it, Shuggy,” she said.

6

HALF-WAY through the month of May in that year, a small man in a brown hair-cloth robe girded up at the waist strode through the Bajauri gate of Peshawur. He carried a long staff in his hand and, stopping a water-carrier, drank eagerly and thirstily. He asked for a man named Wafadar and, on the water-carrier disclaiming any knowledge of the name, he passed quickly on into the town. He was tired and hungry, but some fever kept him on his feet and drove him forward. From bazaar to bazaar he pushed, asking eternally for any who knew Wafadar. Some laughed and, seeing that he was a stranger, sent him upon useless journeys. Others, no more kind, said: "Is it the Wafadar with the hump back? No. Then it may perhaps be the Wafadar with the eight fingers on his right hand? No. Let me see! There is a Wafadar who breathes fire through his nose. Would it be that one, perchance?"

But the stranger did not wait for the end of the question. Nor did he quarrel with those who made a butt of him. He pushed between the jesters and went on. Towards the evening, when he was dropping from hunger and fatigue, he stopped at a native eating-house close to a tiny brick bridge which spanned a runnel of water in the middle of an open space. Whilst he ate he put his question.

"Do you know one Wafadar who comes from Tokot?"

And at last he got an answer.

"A cobbler who waits upon a little boy with a drum?"

"That is he," and he rose from his chair.

But the other man forced him down again.

"Nay, rest easily. He comes here sometimes to eat, sometimes to hear the news. For many men from the hills look for their friends at my shop."

Wafadar indeed was already approaching. He caught sight of the stranger. He uttered a yell.

"Rajab!"

And in a second he was at his side.

"You have news?" Wafadar asked eagerly.

"And good news," replied Rajab.

The two men were talking a language which the keeper of the eating-house did not understand. It was the dialect of Tokot, and this travel-worn stranger who had descended upon Peshawur was the man who with Wafadar had

formed the bodyguard of the old Khan's son.

"The young Prince is with you?" Rajab asked.

"Yes."

"And well?"

"You shall see him for yourself."

Wafadar led his companion to an open spot which no one could approach unnoticed.

"But first tell me what brings you."

Nizam had been a disappointment. The poor were still poor. No army was sent out to seize the lands of Umra Beg. Only a few families had been sold into slavery, and those were Tokotis, and they had been sold for Nizam's private profit. For the most part of the day he sat in his Fort fuddling himself with drink and timid as a girl. And what policy he had was to play with both sides. Carruthers and his wife were at the Residency, and no man could be more friendly or submissive than Nizam. At the same time he was treating with Umra Beg. The Mullah and the Wasir Dadu had gone over to Umra Beg. The Mullah preached that Nizam had sold his country to the British. He was carrying the torch of Islam far beyond the borders of Tokot. All the tribes of the Hindu Khush were to rise at a given signal and the flames of war would burn from Dir to Hunza and Turkestan.

Wafadar was at a loss to see how this would profit Shuja-ul-Mulk. Nizam would disappear, no doubt, but Umra Beg would rule in his place with the authority which his army gave him. His power would be wider and more sure.

"It is the signal," Rajab answered, his face all wreathed in smiles and his eyes darting this way and that lest he be overheard. "All lies in that."

"The signal?"

"The signal for the rising. In six days from now falls the great carnival of Muharram. On that night, when the bonfires are lighted, the British Agency will be stormed. It has but a handful of levies to protect it, and of those three are already on our side."

Wafadar was startled. He began to understand the gleeful hopes of Rajab.

"Carruthers Sahib and his wife——" he whispered.

"That's it," Rajab agreed, nodding his head. "They will be put to the sword on the sixth night from now. And then? Good Wafadar, what then?" and he tapped Wafadar joyfully on the knee as he sat beside him on the ground.

"Yes . . . yes . . ." Wafadar said thoughtfully.

The whole of Rajab's tortuous reasoning was plain to him now. The Indian Government never allowed the murder of its Agents to go unpunished. The wild priest, the cunning Minister, might light the countryside, but the troops of India would beat the flames down and exact the penalty. They would bring young Shuja-ul-Mulk up from Peshawur and set him firmly on his throne with

a British Regency until he was old enough to take the reins of government into his own hands.

“We have but to wait for six days. To do nothing but to wait. Yes. And the Sirkar will roll its men and its guns over the passes and set the young Prince in his father’s place.”

It was a good plan—an excellent plan. Only a doubt stayed in Wafadar’s mind. Would Shuja-ul-Mulk accept it? He should, of course, according to all Tokoti reasoning. But he had made friends among the English, and he was loyal to his friendships. There was a simplicity in Wafadar’s young master which had a strength of its own.

“Carruthers Sahib and his wife are very dear to our Prince,” he said.

“Well, then, we shall not tell him,” urged Rajab. “We shall wait until the Feast of Muharram and keep this a secret between us two until then.”

But Wafadar would not hear of it. He had run the risk of death, he had lost his place in his country, he was an exile with the boy and for the sake of the boy. He had been devoted to the father Sher Afzul, he had transferred that devotion to the son. He would at any moment have cheerfully given his life to serve him, and the more he served him, the greater grew his passion to serve him. Not for anything in the world would he now be false to him.

“His Highness must know to-night,” he said.

“He is a boy,” said Rajab doubtfully. “What should he know?”

“What he does know,” answered Wafadar. “That he is our master. That the last word is his. Let us go and find him.”

The two men got up from the ground and went to the house on the edge of the town where the refugees lived. Shuja-ul-Mulk came up to them as they reached the door, breathing quickly like one who had been running; as indeed he had been doing. In these days he was turning his hand to whatever work offered. Now he held a horse, now he watched a stall while its owner was away. To his neighbours of the bazaar he was just a penniless little boy glad to earn a few annas towards the upkeep of his lodging, and, for a wonder, honest. Just now he had carried a thin tussore suit, which a native tailor had been making, to a tourist at the dak bungalow, and had a couple of rupees as his reward.

But he took Wafadar and Rajab into the grimy little room, lit the kerosene lamp and became what by right he was, the Kahn of Tokot. Had the tourist of the tussore suit pushed his head into that room, he would have carried away a picture in his mind which would have made his tour memorable. He would have seen by the light of the cheap lamp his messenger-boy sitting with great dignity and a grave face upon the side of his bed, whilst two grown men, kneeling before him on the floor, bent their foreheads to the ground and spoke humble words of obeisance.

“May Your Highness live for ever! May his servant speak?”

“Speak,” said Shuja-ul-Mulk, and he listened to the end of Rajab’s story, and then for a long while was silent.

Neither of his two servants could know to what last word his thoughts were leading him. Now and then a draught made the flame of the lamp waver across his face, now and then it smoked and cast a shadow. But Shuja-ul-Mulk sat like an idol, a boy of twelve years, deciding whether two people who were his good friends should live or die, whether a kingdom—oh, a tiny one, but still a kingdom—should be regained, whether the misery of this dragging, poverty-stricken existence in Peshawur, this nightmare of an existence should cease.

“We have only to hold our tongues—only to wait for the night of Muharram. A mere six days.”

The temptation was strong. He looked at the blackened walls, the sordid horror of this hovel—and they fell away and his eyes dwelled upon the orchards of his own uplands, white with their blossom as the snows of the Himalayas high above them or the foam of the river at their feet. A mere matter of holding the tongue. Oh, if he did, it was sure that the passes would ring with the tramp of battalions and that he would ride in the midst of them. He had the sound of that marching in his ears. But there was a sound which would break through it, close his ears to it as he might—the sound of a young woman’s voice. And, hearing it, he felt the kind touch of her hand upon his shoulder and his own tears wet upon his cheeks.

He thought for a little longer, and then, rising from his bed, he went to a corner of the room and picked up his drum.

“You will wait here, both of you. I shall be away for a little while,” he said.

But as he turned towards the door, Rajab stood between it and him.

“Where are you going?” he cried violently, his face working with passion.

“It is not for you to ask,” the boy answered. “Stand aside, Rajab!”

“And if I will not?”

Wafadar suddenly seized Rajab by the arm and flung him against the wall.

“I shall see to it that he does,” said Wafadar, and the boy walked out of the house.

The swift darkness of the East had fallen upon Peshawur, but it was still early. The houses and the booths were bright with lights, and though the roadway between them was black and silent, now a white robe flashed or a sharp, gaunt Afghan face showed for a second in the glare of a lamp. There were many abroad taking the coolness of the night into their lungs. The boy slipped between the groups as swiftly as a snake, his drum slung upon his shoulder. He was in a great fear lest he should be too late. As soon as he was clear of the Bazaars and the thronged roads, he took to his heels again and ran between walled lanes. A wide parade-ground opened out. Before him, across

the parade-ground the windows of a line of barracks were alight and a porticoed building in the centre of them was ablaze. It was the guests' mess-night of the Middlesex Regiment. The boy's heart was beating furiously and his body ran with sweat. At every moment he expected to hear the fifes and bugles blow the last call of the day—"Lights out." But without hearing it he reached a spot long since agreed upon, and swinging his drum in front of him he summoned his friend—all the more forcing himself to a sharp, staccato note because with each tap he was destroying a hope of his own.

He repeated the call, and Bill Holder came out of the darkness towards him.

"Bill, I must see the Colonel Sahib."

Bill was startled by the audacity of the request.

"Oh, you must see the Colonel, must you, Shuggy? Just like that!"

"Yes. He will take me to the Governor of the Province."

"Ow indeed!" said Bill. "Wouldn't yer like the Viceroy to join yer party too, Shuggy! He's got nothin' to do to-night. I'll send him a wire to Simla."

"Bill, it's terribly serious."

Bill Holder came close to Shuja-ul-Mulk and stared at him. Then he said in a changed voice:

"You know, Shuggy, if you let me in, I'm for it."

"I wouldn't, Bill."

"Orl right. I'll see what I can do."

Bill Holder, greatly daring, asked for an immediate word with Captain Morris, who by the best of fortune was dining with the Regiment that night. An orderly, after much argument, went into the dining-room.

"Holder says, Sir, that there's a boy you'll know as Sugar-and-Milk here with news that can't wait."

Captain Morris turned to his neighbour, the Second in Command.

"I think I ought to find out what's up."

The Second-in-Command passed on the message to the Colonel, who was not very pleased, but consented with a short nod.

Morris found Bill Holder shivering at his own presumption.

"Where is the boy?" he asked.

"Out there, Sir. Beyond the sentries."

"Fetch him in. If you're stopped, say that the boy has a message for me!"

Bill disappeared at a run. Morris heard a challenge, and in a minute Shuja-ul-Mulk stood in front of him. It took Morris just five minutes to grasp the importance of the message. Then he wrote an urgent note and sent it in to the Colonel. Luckily dinner was nearing its close. The Colonel told the Mess-Room Steward to take Morris and the boy into the Colonel's Office. He waited to give the Loyal Toast and then, calling the Second-in-Command to take his

chair, he hurried thither himself.

“This, Sir, is Shuja-ul-Mulk, the son of the old Khan of Tokot,” said Morris.

Lieutenant-Colonel Marsh was a soldier of the modern school, neither over-conscious of his dignity nor obsessed by the drill-yard. He nodded at the boy standing in front of him, rather liked the look of him, and said:

“Well, let’s hear your story!”

For the second time that evening Shuja-ul-Mulk told it; and he was not interrupted. When he had finished the Lieutenant-Colonel asked:

“And this man Rajab? He’s honest? He can be believed?”

Shuja-ul-Mulk nodded his head vigorously.

“He wanted me to keep the news secret. There would have been no sense in doing that if it was false.”

“To make merit with you, perhaps?”

Shuja-ul-Mulk’s face expanded in a smile.

“But, Sir, what have I to offer him if it is false?”

Marsh looked the boy over with a new interest.

“That sounds reasonable. Why did he wish you to keep the news secret?”

“He thought it would be to my advantage.”

“Oho!” said the Lieutenant-Colonel. He followed out that train of thought. A punitive expedition would mean inevitably a new ruler at Tokot. And here he was, in rags, with every inducement to hold his tongue, yet not holding it. “And it might have been, too,” said Marsh.

The boy said nothing. Not to anyone was he going to describe, in whatever poor way he could, that night upon the verandah, the warm sound of Marjorie Carruthers’ voice, the comforting touch of her hand upon his shoulder.

“Right!”

He turned to Captain Morris.

“Would you mind getting on to the Residency and asking if I can see His Excellency?”

Whilst Morris rang up the Residency, Marsh rang a bell. An orderly came into the office and saluted.

“I want my car at the door at once. Then ask Major Carvil”—he was naming the Second-in-Command, who now sat in his place at the high table—“to apologise for my absence. There is business which cannot be delayed.”

As the orderly went out of the room Captain Morris got his answer from the Residency.

“His Excellency will see you at once, Sir.”

“Good!” said the Lieutenant-Colonel. Then, brushing his moustache with his fingers, he said to Shuja-ul-Mulk.

“You know, my lad, if you’ve let me in, I’m for it.”

In spite of an effort to retain his gravity, Shuja-ul-Mulk laughed aloud to the indignation of Captain Morris.

“And what the devil are you laughing at?” exclaimed Lieutenant-Colonel Marsh, at once suspicious that some trick was being played upon him.

Shuja-ul-Mulk begged his pardon contritely, but those were the very words which his friend Bill Holder the drummer-boy had used when he had prayed him to secure for him a moment’s interview with the Colonel Sahib. The Colonel Sahib’s face relaxed.

“Yes, we’re all in the same boat, Bill Holder the drummer-boy and the Colonel Sahib. He’ll get a whacking from the band-master’s cane and I’ll be told where I get off by the Commander-in-Chief. There’s the car! We’ll go. You’d better come too, Morris.”

The Colonel Sahib noticed that a drum was on a chair outside the office door and that Shuja-ul-Mulk picked it up. But it was not a regimental drum, and he knew when to ask questions and when to leave them alone. An anxious drummer-boy was loitering at the end of the passage, and he stood at attention and saluted. The Colonel Sahib halted.

“Are you Bill Holder?”

“Yes, Sir,” and the drummer-boy’s voice quavered a little with apprehension.

“Well, you’ve done very well,” said Lieutenant-Colonel Marsh.

He stepped with Morris into the back of the car. Shuja-ul-Mulk, drum and all, climbed in beside the chauffeur.

“The Residency,” said Morris and the car drove off.

“Gawd!” said Bill Holder the drummer-boy.

A FEW minutes later a curious scene was presented in the library of the Residency. Sir Arthur Brooke, a Lieutenant-Colonel of Gurkhas who had been dining with him, a short, broad, sunburnt man, renowned from one end of the frontier to the other for his immense strength and the adoration his soldiers had for him, and an aide-de-camp, all three in black ties and dinner-jackets, Lieutenant-Colonel Marsh and Captain Morris in full dress, were, the five of them, seated in a semicircle listening without a word or a movement, whilst a little boy from the hills in rags told for the third time that night a grim story of a double murder planned and a frontier in flames.

“Carruthers had a wireless with him,” said Sir Arthur to his aide-de-camp when the boy had finished, and the aide-de-camp went off to try to get communication with Tokot.

“Meanwhile we must prepare for a rush expedition,” Brooke continued. To him, who had spent the most of his life upon the frontier, the boy’s story had the very stamp of truth. A fanatic and ambitious priest, the murder of an agent of the Sirkar, a people whipped up into a frenzy—here were the elements of many a tragedy of that wild region.

“What can we do? It wouldn’t need a great force if we move quickly. We could stamp the fire out before it’s well alight.”

A company of Gurkhas, half a battalion of the Middlesex, a section of Engineers and a battery of mountain-guns could be got off to-morrow if the orders went out to-night. A battalion of the Punjab Infantry stationed at Rawal Pindi could follow in support. The whole force to be under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Marsh.

“It’s a time proposition,” said the Governor.

According to Marsh, the force could be rushed up to Tokot in seven days.

“But seven days won’t do,” cried Brooke.

“I can cut a day off that,” said Adare of the Gurkhas.

“Six days. But Muharram falls on the fifth!” said Brooke. “The evening of the fifth day is the day set apart for the murder. If we could anticipate that, the situation may be saved altogether. There’ll be no signal, and, with our men on the spot, no revolt. But once murder’s done——”

It was at this moment that the aide-de-camp came back into the room, and before he spoke it was evident to all that he had failed.

“I could get no answer.”

The instrument might be out of order, of course. Jolted about on the back of a mule over those parodies of roads, it was very likely to have been damaged on the way up. Mountains too did affect the wireless, didn't they? But in everybody's mind was the conviction that treachery had been at work.

“Three men of Carruthers' levies have been tampered with, you said,” the Governor asked of Shuja-ul-Mulk.

“Yes, Sir.”

“I'll send a telegram to Carruthers to move out quickly,” said Brooke and he drafted a telegram there and then. “If he started at night, it might not be discovered that he had gone before it was too late to catch him”; and Brooke handed the telegram to his aide-de-camp. “Code that and send it off. But it's very likely that the line is cut or even accidentally broken.” He looked anxiously at Adare.

“Six days, you say?”

“The best we can do, Sir.”

“There's no snow on the passes.”

“I have allowed for that.”

Sir Arthur Brooke beat upon his table with his fist.

“Six days and Muharram's on the fifth day.” He was conscious of a dreadful helplessness. “A good officer, Carruthers. Too good to lose! . . . A young wife too!” He had a picture before his eyes of men in a frenzy beating down the doors by the light of torches with a man and a girl standing at bay within. “Ghastly! Well, six days, then!”

But Shuja-ul-Mulk said eagerly.

“Sir, Sir, with a mule and some rations, I could do it in five.”

Brooke, who was moving restlessly about the room, stopped and stared at the boy. The Lieutenant-Colonel of Gurkhas sized him up. “Light—not an ounce of waste flesh—lithe and strong. I wonder.” But he did so silently. There was a complete silence in the room, a silence of amazement, incredulity, and the boy's clear treble broke it again.

“A boy who carries no baggage but a cloak with a hood and his food, a boy who knows the road and has a strong mule—he can go fast.”

“You?” cried the Governor.

“I shouldn't wonder,” said Adare. “He's as hard as nails, I should think, and he has lived hard. He'll sleep when he must—for an hour or two. A poor boy on the road with a fast mule. Five days? I shouldn't wonder.”

“But he's known,” argued Brooke. “He's the son of Sher Afzul. If he reaches Tokot, it'll be only to get his throat cut.”

“No, Sir,” the boy pleaded. “I could slip through when the light falls. Nothing will be done until night has come and all the bonfires are alight.”

“But, good God, boy, if you got through to the Agency House, what could you do, except be killed with the Agency people?”

The Agency people! He was avoiding the names of Carruthers and his wife. It was he who had sent Carruthers to Tokot—who had not refused a permit for his wife.

“I have a hiding-place there. A safe one! Even if it was discovered, two or three men could hold it against all comers for a day—oh, for much more than a day.”

“Oh, a hiding-place,” cried Brooke, holding up his hands in exasperation. “Oh, I know! Masterman Ready and Treasure Island and all that. A hiding-place!”

“In the Agency grounds,” the boy continued.

“Others will know of it,” Marsh interrupted.

“It was never found all the time the Mission was at Tokot.”

“And no one knows of it?” asked the Gurkha Colonel.

“Only Bill Holder.”

“And who’s Bill Holder?” exclaimed the Governor.

“One of my drummer-boys,” said Marsh.

“I showed it to him,” Shuja-ul-Mulk urged.

The one man who was frankly on the boy’s side was Adare. The whole scheme was fantastic—mad if you liked it. But they were on the frontier—a part of the world where mad and fantastic things happened every day. A forlorn hope—very well!—the most forlorn of all forlorn hopes, if you will. But the only one!

“Let’s remember that,” he argued. “He wants to go. Let him go! If he can hide Carruthers and his wife and his few people for twenty-four hours—why, they are saved altogether and the frontier spared a costly and murderous war.”

There was no one present with Adare’s knowledge, Adare’s right to speak: and there was no other possibility of bridging the hours between the night of Muharram and the arrival of relief at Tokot. He had his way.

“I can provide you with a mule and rations for your journey,” he said to Shuja-ul-Mulk. “When can you start?”

“To-night,” said the boy. He turned to Lieutenant-Colonel Marsh. “I have two men, very honest and loyal, whom you can rely upon as good guides to Tokot,” and he told him where Wafadar and Rajab were to be found.

The Governor held out his hand:

“If you succeed, we shall hold ourselves deeply in your debt. And in any case we shall honour you for the goodwill of your House and this fine proof of your friendship.”

Shuja-ul-Mulk was very much inclined to say “Shakeapaw,” but he doubted whether in this distinguished company it would be received as

“Oxford Dictionary.” He left the Residency with Adare. The Governor gave his attention to Marsh.

“You have some busy hours in front of you, Colonel. I will not keep you. The expedition is in your hands, not mine. But I take a good deal of comfort from Adare’s confidence. He knows a great deal more about the Hindu Khush than any of us. Indeed, I believe that in any reincarnation he would be a Pathan who would give us more trouble than all the Khans and their Wasirs and their Mullahs rolled up into one.”

The aide-de-camp attended Lieutenant-Colonel Marsh to his car.

“We shall none of us get much sleep to-night, I reckon,” said Marsh.

“Not much, Sir. There will be telegrams to Simla. Good-night.”

The aide-de-camp returned to the library, however, to find the Governor drawing all sorts of ridiculous caricatures of animals with a pencil on a blank sheet of paper. The aide-de-camp knew that trick of Sir Arthur Brooke’s. He might go on with it for a minute. He might go on with it for half an hour.

“You know, Campbell, that boy’s the real thing,” and he drew a quite admirable whale spouting a fountain of water from his nostrils. “It would have paid him to say nothing at all, to let the Carruthers family be wiped out. For we should certainly have marched up over the passes, kicked Nizam out and put Shuja-ul-Mulk in his place.”

“I see that, Sir,” said Campbell, after due consideration.

“A little pension won’t do now, Campbell.”

Campbell had not the remotest idea which of them was to have had the little pension—whether Shuja-ul-Mulk, or Nizam the Khan, or the Colonel of Gurkhas who in a reincarnation was to give them endless trouble, or Marsh who was to command the Expeditionary Force, or himself who was going undoubtedly to sit up all night coding telegrams to the Viceroy at Simla. But he answered dutifully:

“No, Sir, it won’t do.”

“By the way,” said the Governor. He had just drawn Jonah in the belly of the whale, Jonah seated at a deal table and writing his admirable book. “By the way, Campbell, did that boy have a drum with him?”

Campbell was a little taken aback.

“Why, yes, Sir, he did. He left it in the passage outside the Library when he came in and he took it away with him when he went out.”

Sir Arthur Brooke now sketched in a lighted tallow candle with the grease running down the sides, set in a bedroom candlestick on the deal table at which Jonah was working.

“Now that’s very interesting, Campbell. That’s the Yudeni drum. He means to put it back on the roof of the tower if he can.”

“No doubt, Sir,” said Campbell the aide-camp, who was now quite lost in

the nimble diversions of the Governor's mind. But this had happened to him on so many occasions before that he had ceased to be distressed by it.

The Governor pushed his sketch away from him.

"We had better get busy, I think, on a telegram to the Viceroy at Simla."

"Yes, Sir," said Campbell. He was at last upon familiar ground. He drew up a chair to the table. But before he began his work, the Governor, so like are the great men to the small, repeated with an indrawing of the breath the words of Lieutenant-Colonel Marsh and Bill Holder the drummer-boy.

"You know, Campbell, if that lad has let us in, I'm for it and so, I expect, are you."

8

AT TOKOT the secret had been well kept. Carruthers had received no news from Peshawur during the week, but that was nothing out of the common. A telegraph line, temporarily installed in a country where the Passes rose to ten thousand feet, was not a very reliable means of communication; and though he had a portable wireless set, it had been shaken into uselessness on the back of a mule. Instructions and information came by a primitive postal service and took ten days from the day of postage to the day of arrival. The system was on the whole welcome to Carruthers. He was let alone. There was a vast work in front of him. Nizam was to be persuaded into the making of roads, the establishment of dispensaries in the villages, the proper protection of the rich caravans which came from Kashgar and Yarkand. Friendly relations were to be cultivated with the neighbouring States. And the bad customs of raiding and selling into slavery were to be gradually discouraged. It was all work which depended on the personal factor, and the least interference from the centres of Government was desirable. The man on the spot must stand or fall by his own character.

It is probable that had Carruthers been able to retain his old orderly of the 20th Punjab, he might have learnt a little sooner of the plot against his life. But Zarulla had returned to his regiment; and so it was not until the afternoon of the feast of Muharram that he got even an inkling of the danger which beset Marjorie and himself. But on that afternoon the Agency House was deserted by its servants. Marjorie Carruthers was the first to discover it. She rang her hand-bell at tea-time and no one came. She went along to the kitchen. It was empty. She went out towards the servants' quarters. That busy place was undisturbed by any sound or movement. A little disquieted, she sought out her husband in his office.

“Frank, all the servants have left.”

Frank Carruthers got up from his chair. For a moment neither of them spoke. On another day Carruthers himself might have been less uneasy. But this was Muharram, when the passions of Islam would be aroused and fanatics have their way.

“Did none ask for permission to go?”

Marjorie shook her head.

“None!”

“I’ll go down and enquire.”

He opened a drawer in his writing-table, turning his back upon his wife. He took something from the drawer quickly and slipped it into his pocket. But not so quickly that Marjorie was left in any doubt as to what it was. It was a Colt automatic pistol.

“Perhaps after all you had better come with me,” he said.

“Yes,” she answered with a little gasp. Her face had grown white.

“They may all have gone down to the village, to see the bonfires,” he suggested.

“Yes,” she answered with the same sharp note of suspense which she had used before.

Carruthers took her by the arm and went out with her to the gate. One of his seven levies stood on sentry duty and brought up his rifle to the salute.

Carruthers spoke to him in a language which Marjorie did not understand. Neither did she understand the sentry’s replies. But she asked no questions.

“I think we might find the sergeant and hear what he has to say,” said Carruthers. He was neither over-casual nor over-anxious in his speech.

“Yes,” said Marjorie.

A line of outhouses against the wall of the enclosure had been converted into barracks during Carruthers’ last visit to Tokot. Carruthers found the sergeant in the yard and once more talked in a strange dialect. Now, however, it was clear to Marjorie that the sergeant had news to tell. Carruthers’ face became graver. He stood for a moment in thought and then gave an order.

“We’ll go back to the house, I think.”

In the upper living-room Carruthers turned to his wife.

“Three of our levies have gone. They were taking their rifles with them. The sergeant stopped them. I have told the sergeant to bring his men and all arms into the house. There may be danger here to-night. I am sorry, Marjorie.”

Marjorie called up a trembling phantom of a smile to her lips. Neither of them had a taste for heroics. She shook his arm and gave it a pat.

“It’s for me to cook some dinner,” she said, and she went off to the kitchen.

Who shall say what thoughts passed through her mind? A vision perhaps of the cricket-ground where she had first met Carruthers; or of the Yorkshire moor where he had asked her to marry him. She looked out of the window. The light was fading. Already here and there in the villages below a bonfire was alight. In half an hour it would be dark. Marjorie shivered. The loneliness of the house suddenly terrified her. She and Frank were just counters to these—the wild hillmen of the Hindu Khush—but they were counters which could suffer horribly. But she must show nothing of her fear. She could hear the tramp of the four men who were left resounding through the house and the clatter of their arms. Shutters were being closed over the windows, and

loopholes cut in the shutters. Mechanically she lit a lamp and went on with her cooking. Her husband came into the room and closed the shutters over this window too.

“It is best that we should show no lights,” he said. “It may be that we shall be forgotten.”

Neither he nor Marjorie had the slightest belief in any such possibility. What he meant was that it was better to die like a rat than a mouse, and die fighting.

“Shall I help you?” he added, and she replied:

“No, but you can watch whilst I wash. There’s no reason, if we are both going to be killed to-night, why we should dine together for the last time thinking how remarkably unattractive the other one is.”

She put her arms about his neck, gave him a kiss and a hug, ended it all with a sob and bolted out of the room. When she came back with her hair smoothed and her face freshened, and all of her desirable—oh, much more desirable than on the day when he had seen her at Lord’s or on the day when he had proposed to her in a shooting-butt on the Yorkshire moors—and saw his heart leap into his eyes at the sight of her, she said:

“Now you go and do likewise!”

They dined together, talking at the first of simple, trivial things.

“If I had known that you could cook like this!” he cried, with a look of admiration.

Marjorie choked. She had been on the point of saying: “You would have made me cook for you, like the tyrants all men are, before this last time that we dine together.” But they had both to keep away from such rejoinders.

“It was a fluke,” she said.

“Well, you’re a genius at it,” he replied.

The conversation between them became very flat, very difficult. Neither of them could say “I want this or that message to be delivered,” since they were both going to die together. She couldn’t use the conventional old melodramatic phrase “You’ll keep the last cartridge in your revolver for me, won’t you?” because both knew already that he was going to do it. Carruthers changed the plates and she set out the new dish, both with their ears to the window. For though the shutters were closed, the windows were open, and through the interstices of the shutters distant murmurs were growing into a distant roar.

Suddenly Marjorie said:

“I know what you’re thinking, Frank, but you mustn’t think it.”

Frank Carruthers laughed a little too boisterously for his laughter to sound natural.

“As if you could know, my dear girl, the wonderful thoughts that swarm in the brains of the Political Department.”

“You’re blaming yourself,” said Marjorie, and Carruthers’ laughter stopped, as though a knife had sheared it through. “You are blaming yourself for marrying me, for taking me away from cricket matches and grouse-moors. But I’d like you to know now that I have trodden down the stars since we have been together.”

She spoke the words with so much simplicity that they were robbed of all extravagance.

“Marjorie!” he said quietly and all his heart was in his voice. The next moment he rose from his chair, as a louder and nearer outburst broke upon his ears.

“I think they are coming,” he said, and he leaned forward and turned out the lamp. He heard her voice close to him and felt her arm slip through his.

“Yes.”

She drew him towards the window. To both of them the strain of imprisonment had become intolerable. Carruthers swung one of the shutters outwards; and both drew in a breath of the night air. About the village the smoke and the flames of bonfires flung upwards a shifting canopy of red that wavered into brown, and brown that again glared like scarlet. The cries and shouts were louder. Frank Carruthers pointed to the line of the road still some distance from them where torches and the lighted branches of trees tossed and fell. For a second both of them watched:

“They are nearer,” said Marjorie.

Her voice shook ever so little; and suddenly she was aware that Frank Carruthers stiffened at her side. He drew her back quickly from the window into the darkness of the room.

“There’s someone already in the garden.”

“You are sure?”

“There’s not a breath of wind. Yet a bush rustled. Why?”

And suddenly from the foot of the wall beneath the window, he heard the tapping of a drum—very faintly, very secretly. Two sharp staccato strokes, then the roll of thunder so distant that it came from beyond the horizon’s edge, then a pause, then the postman’s rat-tat and that again.

Where had he heard just that combination of sounds? And while he tried to remember the call came again but more urgently. Before they had finished, Carruthers uttered a low cry.

“It’s Sugar-and-Milk.”

He ran down to the hall where the sergeant and one of the levies were posted. He unbarred the door, and unlocked it. A boy blackened with dust and grime tumbled through the entrance.

“Shuggy,” said Marjorie.

His tongue was so swollen in his mouth that he could not speak. Carruthers

brought him a tumbler of water and he gasped out.

“The troops are on their way. . . . I know where we can hide until they come. Only we must be quick! We want food—candles—cartridges. Even if they find us, we can hold out.”

There was no time for any argument. Shuja-ul-Mulk had to be taken on trust or thrust out of the door as a traitor. But a traitor he could not be. They got together some tinned food, some bread, some water. Carruthers ran upstairs and brought down the two levies who were stationed at the topmost windows. They crept out of the house, and Carruthers locked the door behind him.

Shuja-ul-Mulk whispered.

“Follow me,” and each one, holding on to some fringe of a garment worn by the person in front of him, followed Shuja-ul-Mulk into the screen of trees to the corner of the garden above the river. The noise and uproar of the crowd upon the road were louder still. A pile of boulders was heaped in a corner.

“Here,” said Shuja-ul-Mulk and the slab was moved aside. “I’ll go first,” the boy whispered, and he slid into the dark mouth of the entrance. One by one they followed him, and when all were in the slab was fitted into its place again. Carruthers had a flashlight torch in his pocket.

“No one knows of this passage,” whispered Shuja-ul-Mulk. “A little farther down there is a corner to turn where two men could hold up an army.”

Carruthers stationed two men at the corner and going farther down came to a wide space. They made a little camp for Marjorie there and, going on, posted the other two levies at the opening into the cavern.

Shuja-ul-Mulk was fainting when they brought him back to the clear space half-way down the passage. They gave him food and water and he raised Marjorie’s hand to his forehead with a very pretty gesture.

“Rajab brought the news that on the night of Muharram this was to happen,” he said. “The great Lord of the Province did not believe that I could get here in time, but the Colonel of the Gurkhas—you know him?—square and hard to knock against like a stone, when he stands still, and all india-rubber when he moves——”

“Adare,” said Carruthers.

They were all squatting upon the ground with a lighted candle in the midst of them, Marjorie upon a fur cloak which she had picked up as she had followed Carruthers down the stairs.

“The Colonel Adare said I could do it. So he gave me a mule—oh, the mule of mules—and food, and I put the food and myself and my drum on the back of my mule and I come.”

Shuja-ul-Mulk had never let go of his drum. He had it now beside him and he drew it close to him as he spoke.

“To-morrow night perhaps, perhaps the morning after, the soldiers will be here. Colonel Adare—he promised me”—but even whilst he spoke his voice trailed away and his eyes closed.

“I’ll sleep down there by the cavern,” he said, rising unsteadily.

Carruthers picked him up in his arms and, guiding himself by the light of his electric torch, carried him down to the two soldiers and laid him as comfortably as he could on the ground. But Sugar-and-Milk was already fast asleep with a smile upon his face.

Meanwhile above their heads a crowd, frenzied with passion, tore through the rooms of the Agency, overturning furniture, wrenching down curtains in search of their victims. The old Mullah goaded them on.

“Seek, you dogs! Fools, rogues, bring them out!”

He lashed about him with his stick.

“They are not here. You have betrayed us!” and a gigantic man turned furiously upon him.

“In the garden, then, seek, seek!” cried the Mullah, and the Wasir Dadu trembled in a corner. They had between them promised the lives of the British Agent and his wife to the Tokotis, to Umra Beg, to all the peoples of the border. They were to be the great sacrifice on the day of Muharram, the signal which would set alight the frontier from Dir to Kashgar and Yarkand. And they were nowhere! The search spread over the garden. They were nowhere. The spirits had protected them. . . . The Tokotis fell and slept where they lay. Only the Mullah was awake, foaming in his rage, and the Wasir Dadu, trembling for his life.

9

NOT a sound reached down to those hidden in the water-passage. The guards watched and slept in turn. Marjorie and her husband dozed fitfully. Once Carruthers sat up, sure that morning had come, and, examining his watch, saw that it was just half-past one. Towards dawn Shuja-ul-Mulk crept out of the cavern on to the road with one of the sentries. They filled the bucket they had brought with them from the house and their water-bottles from the river and crept back again. The morning light filtered in through the crevice in the rock; Marjorie and Frank Carruthers moved down the cluttered passage to where the daylight showed that they might breathe the sweetness of the air.

“We shall have to-day to get through,” said Frank; and he looked with envy on Shuja-ul-Mulk, who, stretched on the ground, slept as only tired boyhood can sleep.

On the ground above the search was renewed in the morning. Once the sentries at the upper end of the passage heard the mob thrusting spear and stick into the pile of boulders just over their heads. It was the voice of the Mullah who saved the fugitives. For he cried aloud that they had been given shelter by Nizam, and the whole of the rabble marched off to the Fort. The gates were closed, but a parley took place between one of the Khan’s household mounted on the wall and the Mullah on the ground below. The Mullah and one of his partisans were admitted under a flag of truce and conducted over the Fort, so that they might assure themselves by the evidence of their eyes that the Agent and his wife had not sought sanctuary there. Thereafter the search was extended through the orchards, up the hillsides, and guards were posted on all the paths. Meanwhile Umra Beg waited behind the hills across the river. Tokot must seal its pact with the blood of the English runaways, before he was going to move. And so the day dragged on to twilight and the dark.

Shuja-ul-Mulk, waking then, explained that he would creep out and bring them news. But as he rose, the levy who was standing sentry bent forward and in a whisper bade him keep still. There was someone close to the mouth of the cavern on the road, with a sword in his hand.

Shuja-ul-Mulk crept to the narrow crevice and looked through. The moon had risen, a bright full moon in a sky of cloud; so that now the man’s shadow fell across the floor of the cavern like a black figure on a tomb, and now the darkness hid it altogether. Shuja-ul-Mulk took his long knife from its sheath at

his back and drew his brown cloak over his head. Marjorie raised an arm to hold him back, but he slipped from her grasp. When the next cloud had covered the moon and passed, Shuja-ul-Mulk had disappeared from the refuge, but another big, rough boulder was added to those which already littered the floor of the cavern. There it remained motionless until again the moon was hidden, but when it shone again the boulder had moved nearer to the mouth of the cavern and to the watchman on the road. A third time the boulder changed its place, and now it lay so close to the watchman that he could have kicked it with his foot. Shuja-ul-Mulk waited until his chance came. Then he sprang with a great leap from the ground. His left hand clutched and held the watchman's throat, and his right drove the knife into his back until the hilt smacked against the flesh. The man made a little bubbling sound as the blood burst from his mouth and his sword clattered on the ground. He fell and lay still. The boy dragged the body across the road and toppled it into the river. The torrent rushing over its great rocks took charge of it. As Shuja-ul-Mulk gathered up the sword, the rain began to fall. It fell in a sheet with the roar of many drums. There would be no more search for the fugitives that night.

Towards morning, however, it ceased, and the sun rose in a clear sky. As the light spread into the cavern and made a twilight in the recess on the inner side of the crevice, the sentry made a movement. Carruthers joined him and looked out. Across the river, through the fields men were streaming away, seeking their homes, to hide their weapons and resume their occupations.

What had happened?

One of the men rising from his sleep in the Agency grounds had climbed on to the top of the wall. Looking to the skyline at the head of the valley, he had seen men come over the crest and begin to descend. For a moment he had stood staring. Then he had uttered a loud cry:

“They are coming! They are coming!”

In a second there were twenty men watching as he watched. Over the crest, against the sky, still they came like a wheel turning, the troops of the relief expedition. The grounds of the Residency rang with the cries of alarm, the cries of fear.

“To your homes!”

The warning was taken up on every side, and panic followed upon it, panic and flight. . . .

10

A DAY later Carruthers, standing at the door of Colonel Marsh's tent, said:

"Do you bring any instructions for me from the Governor?"

"None," said Marsh; and a wave of relief swept over the Agent's face.

"Thank the Lord!" he said, and then more formally, "I have summoned the chief men of Tokot to a durbar in the Fort at eleven o'clock. I ask for your presence and that of your chief officers."

At eleven o'clock, then, in a big inner room of the Fort, Marsh, Adare, Morris, Shuja-ul-Mulk took their places. There was a guard of British soldiers outside the door, a Sergeant-Major and a file of men within the room. A big arm-chair stood empty in the middle of a row of chairs. On the right of it sat Carruthers, and next to him Shuja-ul-Mulk, and next to him again Adare of the Gurkhas. On the left of the big chair sat Marsh and Morris.

Carruthers turned to a servant of Nizam's household and said:

"We are now ready for the Khan."

Nizam came into the room, and though all stood ceremoniously to receive him, never could a man have looked more uneasy and confused. He had compliments of a fawning kind on the tip of his tongue, but Carruthers cut into them, the moment he began to stammer them out.

"We have business," said Carruthers coldly, and to the Sergeant-Major at the door, "The durbar is open."

The Sergeant-Major threw open the door, and the chief men, and the young nobles, arrayed in their best clothes, filed in and knelt facing the chairs. At a sign from Carruthers, the door was closed. Then Carruthers spoke:

"It is obvious that Tokot is not well governed. The Government of India offered to Tokot its friendship and protection. In return Tokot has allowed itself to be led astray by a false adviser like Dadu and a treacherous Mullah. Both these scoundrels have fled. Fugitives they are, and if they wish to live, fugitives they will remain. Meanwhile your Khan, Nizam, has not been equal to his work. I depose him."

A little gasp broke from Marsh, and a smile spread over the broad face of Adare.

"That's the stuff," he said in a low voice.

With a contemptuous gesture Carruthers told Nizam to leave his chair and take a seat at the end of the row. In a dead silence, Nizam obeyed.

Carruthers stood up.

“Your Khan by right of birth, by right of courage, by right of loyalty, is Shuja-ul-Mulk.”

He took the boy by the hand and seated him in the great chair. A murmur ran along the rows of kneeling courtiers, a murmur of astonishment.

“The Khan will accept the help and advice of the British Agent until he reaches man’s estate, and will have an escort worthy of his rank. I have spoken. You will in turn make your obeisance to your Khan.”

Cowed by the firmness of Carruthers’ language and discountenanced by the swiftness of his procedure, one by one the head men and the young nobles prostrated themselves before the boy. Finally Nizam himself, humiliated and shamed, shuffled along to the big chair. A gasp of stupefaction passed round that audience, as Nizam put his knee on the ground. But he went no further. The young Khan bent forward quickly and raised him to his feet.

“My uncle, you shall not do that,” he said gently; and Carruthers got to his feet again and said:

“The durbar is closed.”

The head men and the courtiers filed out first. Adare touched Marsh on the arm:

“Our turn,” he said.

Carruthers and Shuja-ul-Mulk were left alone in that big hall.

“What will you do?” Carruthers asked.

The boy turned to him with the shine of tears in his eyes.

“Great changes have come,” he said. “I shall thank you for them on another occasion. I shall listen to you on all occasions. You have been my father and my mother. But on this day I should like for a few minutes to sit here alone.”

And Carruthers left him, a little boy swallowed up in a great chair, alone in the Council Chamber of Tokot.

But after a few minutes the boy rose, he went out through a door at the back of the throne. He passed down a passage and climbed a stair. He pushed open a door. He stood in a bedroom looking down the valley. On a table in the bedroom stood the Yudeni drum with the drum-sticks held by the lacing. Picking up this drum, he climbed a dark and narrow stairway. At the top he opened yet another door and came out upon the flat roof of the tower fenced in with a low parapet. Far and wide now, his little kingdom extended on every side of him, orchards and fields and foaming river flanked by the hillsides black with cedars and overtopped by the eternal snows.

Shuja-ul-Mulk gently laid the drum on the roof where it had always lain, and turning towards Mecca, made his obeisance.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *The Drum* by A. E. W. (Alfred Edward Woodley) Mason]