

THE
ADVANCED
-GUARD



SYDNEY C. GRIER



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THE
ADVANCED-GUARD

BY

SYDNEY C. GRIER

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'THE WARDEN OF THE MARCHES,'
ETC., ETC.

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THE ADVANCED-GUARD.

CHAPTER I.

LADY HAIGH'S KIND INTENTIONS.

FIFTY years ago the great port of Bab-us-Sahel was in its infancy. The modern ranges of wharfs and breakwaters were represented by a single half-finished pier, and vessels still discharged their passengers and cargo a mile from shore, to the imminent peril of life and property. The province of Khemistan had only recently come under British rule, by an operation which was variously described as "the most shameless piece of iniquity ever perpetrated," and "the inevitable working of the laws of right and justice"; and the iron-willed, iron-handed old soldier who had perpetrated the iniquity and superintended the working of the laws was determined to open up the country from the river to the desert and beyond. His enemies were numerous and loud-voiced and near at hand; his friends, with the exception of his own subordinates, few and far away; but he had one advantage more common in those days than these, a practically free hand. Under "the execrable tyranny of a military despotism," the labour of pacification and the construction of public works went on simultaneously, and although the Bombay papers shrieked themselves hoarse in denouncing Sir Henry Lennox, and danced war-dances over his pre-

sumably prostrate form, no one in Khemistan was a penny the worse—a fact which did not tend to mollify the angry passions concerned.

The wand of the Eastern enchanter was not in the possession of the nineteenth-century empire-builder, even though he might be the great little man whom the natives called the Padishah, and (under their breath) the Brother of Satan; and despite the efforts of a small army of engineers, the growth of the new seaport was but slow. Yet, though the native town was still obnoxious to sight and smell, and the broad roads of the symmetrically planned cantonments were ankle-deep in dust and sometimes knee-deep in sand, there was one improvement to which General Lennox had been obliged to postpone even his beloved harbour-works, and this was the seaside drive, where his little colony of exiles might meet and condole with one another in the cooler hours of the day. Every one rode or drove there morning and evening, exchanging the latest local gossip on ordinary occasions, and news from home on the rare mail-days. It was most unusual to see a man not in uniform in the drive, for mufti was a word which had no place in the General's vocabulary; and it was even whispered that his well-known detestation of civilians sprang from the fact that he could not arbitrarily clap them into scarlet tunics. As for the ladies, their skirts were of a generous amplitude, although the crinoline proper had not yet made its appearance; but instead of the close bonnets universal in fashionable Europe, they wore lace and muslin caps, as their ancestresses had done since the first Englishwoman stepped ashore in India. The more thrifty-minded guarded their complexions with native umbrellas of painted calico; but there were few who did not exhibit one of the miniature parasols, very long in the handle and very small in the circumference, which were usual at home.

The one interest which all the promenaders had in common was the daily recurring uncertainty whether General Lennox would take his ride late or early.

He never failed to put in an appearance and bestow paternal greetings on his flock, who all knew him and each other, keeping a vigilant eye open the while for any newly arrived subaltern who might have broken his unwritten law; but when he was in good time he made a kind of royal progress, saying a word or two to a man here and there, and saluting each lady in turn with the noble courtesy which went out with the last of the Peninsular heroes. He was specially early one evening, able even to notice absentees, and he asked more than once with some anxiety why Lady Haigh was not there—a question which excited the wrathful contempt of ladies of higher official rank. Lady Haigh was only a subaltern's wife, in spite of her title; but she was amusing, a quality which has its attractions for a grizzled warrior burdened with many responsibilities. However, one lady was able to tell him that Sir Dugald Haigh had only just come in with Major Keeling from their trip up-country, and another added that she believed a friend of Lady Haigh's had arrived that morning by the steamer,—there was only one steamer that plied between Bombay and Bab-us-Sahel,—and the General was satisfied. Life and death were not so widely separated in Bab-us-Sahel as in more favoured places; and it happened not unfrequently that a man might be riding in the drive one evening, and be carried to his grave the next.

The Haighs' house stood on the outskirts of the cantonments. It was a small white-washed bungalow, remarkable for the extreme neatness of its compound, and the pathetic attempts at gardening which were evident wherever any shade might be hoped for. Very widely did it differ from its nearest neighbour, a rambling, tumble-down cluster of buildings inhabited by a riotous colony of bachelors, who were popularly alleged to ride all day and drink all night. In view of the amount of work exacted by Sir Henry Lennox from all his subordinates, this was obviously an exaggeration; but the patch of unreclaimed desert which surrounded Bachelors' Hall, its broken fences, and the jagged

heaps of empty bottles here and there, distinguished it sufficiently from the little domain where Sir Dugald and Lady Haigh were conducting what their friends considered a very risky matrimonial experiment. The festive young gentlemen next door lavished a good deal of wonder and pity (as upon a harmless lunatic) upon Sir Dugald. That a man who was hampered by a title and an unproductive Scotch estate should let the latter and carry the former into the Indian army, where it would array all his superiors against him as one man, instead of remaining at home and using title and estate as a bait for an heiress, was strange enough. But that he should proceed further to defy the opinion of those in authority by bringing out a wife—and a plain wife, without money and with a tongue (the bachelors had learnt through an indiscreet lady friend that the bride had dubbed their cheerful establishment “Beer and Skittles”)—seemed to show that he must be absolutely mad. Lady Haigh’s relations, on the other hand, regarded her marriage with trembling joy. Girls with aspirations after higher education were fewer in those days than these, and perplexed families did not know how to deal with them. By sheer hard fighting Elma Wargrave had won leave to study at the newly founded Queen’s College, but her family breathed a sigh of relief when, after less than a year’s work, she announced that she was going to marry Sir Dugald Haigh, whom she had met on a vacation visit. Whatever Elma might take it into her head to do in the future, her husband and not her parents would be responsible, and it would happen at a distance of some thousands of miles. The baronetcy was an undeniable fact, and there was no need to obtrude on people’s attention the other fact that the bridegroom was merely a subaltern in the Company’s artillery. Hence, when the wedding had safely taken place, the parents allowed themselves to rejoice more and tremble less, only hoping that poor Sir Dugald would not find he had undertaken more than he could manage. It would have surprised them a good deal to learn that never until

this particular evening had the Haighs known even the semblance of a serious disagreement. Lady Haigh had taken her young husband's measure, and adapted herself to it with a cleverness which was really heroic in the case of a high-spirited, quick-tempered girl; and since her arrival in Khemistan had been wont to assure herself that "after the voyage, one could be angelic anywhere."

Perhaps she saw reason to repent of this hasty assurance just now, as she sat facing her husband across a table littered with letters and papers which had formed part of the mail brought that morning by the steamer. Sir Dugald, a small fair man, with the colourless skin which becomes parchment-like instead of red under the influence of an Eastern sun, was still buttoned up in his uniform,—a fact of itself not calculated to improve his temper,—and punctuated his remarks by swinging one spurred heel rhythmically to and fro as he leaned back in his chair. His wife had rushed out to welcome him and pour her story into his ear in the same breath the moment that he dismounted after a long and dusty march; and he could not but be conscious that her muslin gown was tumbled and not of the freshest, her neck-ribbon awry, and her ringlets in disorder. Those ringlets were in themselves a cause for irritation. Elma Wargrave had worn her hair in severe bands of unassuming hideousness, but soon after her marriage Elma Haigh had horrified her husband by adopting ringlets, which were singularly unbecoming to her pleasant, homely face, under the delusion that he liked them. It cost Sir Dugald a good deal to refrain from proclaiming his abhorrence of the change which had been made for his sake; but he was a just man, and even at this moment of tension did his best not to allow his mind to be prejudiced by the obnoxious curls.

"Surely you must see," he was saying with studied moderation, "that you have placed me in a most unpleasant position? What if Ferrers should call me out?"

"I should like to see him do it!" was the uncompromising reply. "I should just go and tell the General, and get him arrested."

Sir Dugald sighed patiently. "But look at it for a moment from Ferrers' point of view, Elma. He is engaged to this friend of yours, Miss Andromache—what's her name? Penelope?—and waiting for her to come out. She comes out quite ready to marry him,—trousseau and wedding-cake and all,—and you meet her at the steamer and tell her such things about him that she breaks off the whole thing on the spot, without so much as giving him a chance to clear himself."

"He drinks, he gambles, he is in the hands of the money-lenders," said Lady Haigh tersely. "Was she to marry him in ignorance?"

"I don't for a moment say it isn't true. But if a man had done such a thing he would have been called a brute and a low cad. I suppose a woman can go and dash all a poor girl's hopes, and separate her from her lover, and still be considered a friend to her?"

"But he wasn't her lover, and it was her fears, not her hopes, that I put an end to."

"My dear Elma!" Sir Dugald's eyebrows went up.

"She didn't love him," persisted Lady Haigh. "Of course it sounds horrid as you put it, but when you know the circumstances you will say that I couldn't possibly have let it go on. Penelope and Colin used to know Captain Ferrers when they were children. He lived near them, and their father was very kind to him, and used to get him out of scrapes about once a-week. Ferrers was fond of the children, and they adored him. When he went to India, Penelope can't have been more than fourteen, but he asked her if she would marry him when he came home. I can't imagine that he took it seriously, but she did; at any rate, she felt bound by it. A romantic child of that age, with a brother as romantic as herself to keep her up to it—of course she dreamed of him continually. But he scarcely ever wrote to her father, and never to her,

and as she grew older she left off thinking about him. Then her father died, and she went to live with her uncle in London while Colin was at Addiscombe. That was when I used to meet her at the College. Why, she never even told me she was engaged! Of course, I didn't know her very well, but well enough to have heard that. And since we came out her uncle died, and her aunt and cousins didn't want her. She's too handsome, you know. And Colin wanted her to come out with him—did I tell you they were twins, and absolutely devoted?—but the aunt said it wasn't proper, until Colin remembered that old foolishness with Ferrers, and at once—oh, it was the most delightful and suitable and convenient plan that could possibly be devised! They had the grace not to thrust her on Ferrers unprepared, but Colin wrote to him to say he was bringing her out by the Overland, and poor Pen wrote to me—and both letters were lost when the *Nuncomar* went down! It was only with dreadful misgivings that Penelope had consented to the plan, and she got more and more miserable when they found no letters at Alexandria or Aden or Bombay. When they arrived here this morning, and still there were no letters and no Ferrers, she made Colin come to me, though he wanted to go and hunt up Ferrers, and I brought her up here at once, and settled matters.”

“And may I ask how you managed that?”

“I told her the sort of reputation Ferrers bears here, and how, after the way they were keeping it up next door last night, he could not have been down at the steamer even if he had got the letter, and then I sent to ask him to come and see me.”

“Slightly high-handed. But go on.”

“You needn't pity him. I am sure in his heart he regards me as his dearest friend. I never saw a man so horrified in my life as when I told him that Miss Ross was here. He was positively relieved when I said that from what Miss Ross had learnt of his circumstances, she was sure he had no intention of claiming the promise she gave him in her childhood, and

she hoped they would meet as friends, nothing more. He was really thankful, Dugald."

Sir Dugald allowed himself the luxury of a smile. "Possibly. But surely the right thing would have been to help the poor wretch to pull himself together, and reform him generally, and let her marry him and keep him straight? That would have been a triumph."

"Let him reform first, and then get her to marry him if he can," snapped Lady Haigh. "Would you have let a sister of yours marry him?"

"Not if I could help it. But you will allow me to remark that a sister of mine would have had a home open to her here, instead of being thrown upon a brother as young as herself who knows nothing of the place and its ways, and who is coming up-country with us next month."

"Oh, of course I offered her a home with us," said Lady Haigh, with outward calmness, but inward trepidation.

Sir Dugald's eyebrows were slowly raised again. "You offered her a home with us? Then of course there is no more to be said."

He drew his chair nearer the table, and from the mass of papers selected a book-packet from the ends of which a familiar green wrapper protruded. Opening the parcel carefully with the paper-knife, he threw away the cover, and settled down with an anticipatory smile to enjoy his monthly instalment of Dickens. But he had gone too far. Anger Lady Haigh had expected, to his deliberate movements she was slowly growing accustomed, but that smile was intolerable. She leaned across the table, and snatched the serial from his hand.

"Dugald, I will not have you so rude! Of course I want to talk things over with you."

"My dear Elma, what is there to talk over? In some miraculous way you have overcome the Chief's objections to ladies on the frontier, and got leave to bring Miss Ross up with you. Anything that I could say would only spoil your excellent arrangements."

"But I haven't seen Major Keeling. How could I, when he only came back with you? And I haven't got his leave. I want you to do that."

"No," said Sir Dugald resolutely. "I had enough to do with getting leave for you to come to Alibad, and I am not going to presume upon it. The Chief will think I want to cry off."

"Then I'll ask him myself," recklessly. "I'm not in abject terror of your great Major Keeling. He's only a good man spoiled for want of a wife."

Lady Haigh meant to be irritating, and she succeeded, for her husband had told her over and over again that such a view was purely and hopelessly feminine. Sir Dugald threw down the paper-knife with a clatter, and drew back his chair as if to leave the room.

"If I can't get him to do it," she pursued meditatively, "I'll—let me see——"

"Appeal to Cæsar—otherwise the General, I suppose? That seems to be your favourite plan."

"Oh dear, no; certainly not. I shall make Penelope ask Major Keeling herself."

"Now, Elma!" Sir Dugald detected something dangerous in the tone of his wife's remark. "That's no good. Just let the Chief alone. He isn't the man to give in to anything of the kind."

Lady Haigh seemed impressed, though perhaps she was only thinking deeply, and her husband, instead of resting on his prophetic laurels, unwisely descended to argument.

"He's not a marrying man; and to go throwing your friend at his head is merely lowering her in his eyes. He would see it in a moment."

"My dear Dugald!"—Lady Haigh awoke from a brown study—"what extraordinary things you are saying! I haven't the slightest intention of throwing Penelope at any one's head. It's really vulgar to suspect every woman that comes near him of designs on Major Keeling."

"Then why do you want to take Miss Ross up with us?"

"Because I am her only friend in India, of course. I wish you wouldn't put such thoughts into my head, Dugald," plaintively. "Now if anything should come to pass, I shall always feel that I have helped in bringing it on, and I do hate match-making."

"But you said she was handsome," objected the discomfited husband.

"Well, and is Major Keeling the only unmarried man in the world? Why, Captain Ferrers is coming up to Alibad too."

"So he is. By the bye, didn't you say he hadn't seen her since she was a child? My word, Elma, he will have a crow to pluck with you when he finds what you have robbed him of."

"I haven't robbed him," said Lady Haigh serenely. "I have only kept him from taking an unfair advantage of Penelope's inexperience. He may win her yet. He shall have a fair field and no favour. He is coming here to-night."

"Oh, that's your idea of a fair field, is it? No favour, certainly."

"Of course I want them to meet under my eye, until I see whether there is any hope of his reforming."

"Well, we shall be a nice little family party on the frontier."

"Shan't we? Let me see, Major Keeling is going because he is the heaven-sent leader, and you because you fought your guns so well at Umarganj, and I because you got leave for me. Colin Ross is going because his father was an old friend of Major Keeling's, Ferrers because the General begged Major Keeling to take him as the only chance of keeping him out of mischief, and Penelope is going because I am going to ask leave for her."

"Don't you hope you may get it? Well, if you have no more thunderbolts to launch, I'll go and get into some cooler things."

CHAPTER II.

THE AUTOCRAT.

THERE was a little informal gathering at the Haighs' that evening. People often dropped in after dinner for some music, for Lady Haigh had actually brought her piano (without which no self-respecting bride then left her native land) up to Bab-us-Sahel with her. True, it had been necessary to float it ashore in its case; but it was unanimously agreed that its tone had not suffered in the very least. To-night there was the additional attraction that Lady Haigh had staying with her a handsome girl just out from home, who was understood, from the report of the other passengers on the steamer, to play the guitar and sing like an angel. Lady Haigh herself had no love for music whatever, and in these days public opinion would have forbidden her to touch an instrument; but she did her duty as hostess by rattling off one of the dashing, crashing compositions of the day, and then thankfully left her guest to bear the burden of the entertainment. The ring of eager listeners that surrounded Penelope Ross, demanding one song after another, made her feel that she was justified in so doing; and after she had seen the obnoxious Captain Ferrers enter, and satisfied herself that he perceived too late what a treasure he had lightly thrown away, she slipped out on the verandah to think over the task she had rashly set herself in her contest with her husband. How was Major Keeling, who hated women, and had merely been induced to condone Lady Haigh's own existence because he had

asked for Sir Dugald's services without knowing he was married, to be persuaded to allow Penelope to accompany her to Alibad?

"I know he is dining at Government House to-night," she reflected forlornly, "or I might have asked him to come in for some music. But then he would have been just as likely to send a *chit* to say that he disliked music. Men who hate women are such bears! And if I ask him to dinner another night, he will see through it as soon as he finds Penelope is here. And yet I must get things settled at once, or Penelope will think she is unwelcome, and Colin will persuade her to do something quixotic and detestable—marry Ferrers, or go out as a governess, or—— Why, surely——"

She ran to the edge of the verandah, and peered across the parched compound to the road. Above the feeble hedge of milk-bush she could see the head and shoulders of a horseman, of the very man with whom her thoughts were busy. The shock of black hair and short full beard made Major Keeling unmistakable at a time when beards were few, although there was no "regulation" military cut or arrangement of the hair. The fiercest-looking officer in Lady Haigh's drawing-room at this moment, whose heavy moustache and truculent whiskers gave him the air of a swashbuckler, or at least of a member of Queen Cristina's Foreign Legion, was a blameless Engineer of strong Evangelical principles. Lady Haigh saw at once the state of the case. The gathering at Government House had broken up at the early hour exacted by Lady Lennox, who was a vigilant guardian of her warrior's health, and Major Keeling was whiling away the time by a moonlight ride before returning to his quarters. To summon one of the servants, and send him flying to stop the Major Sahib and ask him to come and speak to Lady Haigh, was the work of a moment; for though Major Keeling might be a woman-hater, he had never yet rebelled against the sway which his subordinate's wife established as by right over all the men around her, for their good. Lady Haigh disliked the idea of

putting her influence to the test in this way, for if Major Keeling refused to yield there could be nothing but war between them in future; but the matter was urgent.

"You wanted to speak to me, Lady Haigh?" Major Keeling had dismounted, and was coming up the steps, looking almost gigantic in the picturesque full-dress uniform of the Khemistan Horse.

"I want you to do a kindness," she responded, rather breathlessly.

"I know what that means. I am to break a rule, or relax an order, or in some other way go against my better judgment."

"I—I want you to let me bring a friend of mine to Alibad with me."

Major Keeling's brow darkened. "I knew this would come. You assured me you could stand the isolation, but I knew better. Of course you want female society; it is quite natural you should. But you professed to understand that on the frontier you couldn't have it."

"Not society—just this one girl," pleaded Lady Haigh.

"Who is she? a sister of yours or Haigh's?"

"No relation to either of us. She is Mr Ross's sister—your old friend's daughter—an orphan, and all alone."

"Engaged to any one who is going with me?"

"No—o." The negative, doubtful at first, became definite. "I won't say a word about Ferrers, even to get him to let her come," was Lady Haigh's resolute determination.

"Then she can't come."

"Oh, Major Keeling! And if I had said she was engaged, you would have said that the man would be always wasting his time dangling round her."

"But as she isn't, the whole force would waste their time dangling round her," was the crushing reply. "No, Lady Haigh, we have no use for young ladies on the frontier. It will be work, not play."

"Play! Do you think a girl with that face wants to spend her life in playing?" demanded Lady Haigh,

very much in the tone with which she had once been wont to crush her family. "Look there!"

She drew him to the open window of the drawing-room and made him look through the reed curtain. The light fell full on Penelope's face as she sang, and Lady Haigh felt that the beholder was impressed.

"What's that she's singing?" he growled. "'County Guy'? Scott? There's some good in her, at any rate."

Lady Haigh forbore to resent the slighting imputation, and Major Keeling remained watching the singer through the curtain. Penelope's contemporaries considered her tall and queenly, though she would now be thought decidedly under middle height. Her dark hair was dressed in a graceful old fashion which had almost gone out before the combined assault of bands and ringlets,—raised high on the head, divided in front, and slightly waved on the temples,—a style which by rights demanded an oval face and classical features as its complement. Judged by this standard, Penelope might have been found wanting, for her features were at once stronger and less regular than the classical ideal; but the grey eyes beneath the broad low brow disarmed criticism, they were so large and deep and calm, save when they were lighted, as now, by the fire of the ballad she was singing. Those were days when a white dress and coloured ribbons were considered the only evening wear for a young girl; and Penelope wore a vivid scarlet sash, with knots of scarlet catching up her airy white draperies, and a scarlet flower in her hair. As Major Keeling stood looking at her, Lady Haigh caught a murmur which at once astonished and delighted her.

"That is a woman who would help a man—not drag him back." Then, apparently realising that he had spoken aloud, he added hastily, "Yes, yes, as you say. But who's the man with the unlucky face?"

His finger indicated a tall thin youth who stood behind the singer. The face was a remarkable one, thin and hawklike, with a high forehead and closely com-

pressed lips. The hair and small moustache were fair and reddish in tint, the eyes grey, with a curious look of aloofness instead of the keenness that would have seemed to accord with the rest of the features.

"That? Why, that's Colin Ross, Penelope's brother. What is there unlucky about him?"

"Oh, nothing—merely a look. Her brother, do you say?"

"Yes, her twin brother. But what look do you mean? Oh, you must tell me, Major Keeling, or I shall tell Penelope that you say her brother has an unlucky face."

"You will do nothing of the kind. Hush! don't attract their attention. I can't explain it: I have seen it in several men—not many, fortunately—and it has always meant an early and violent death."

"But this is pure superstition!" cried Lady Haigh. "And, after all, he is a soldier."

"Call it superstition if you like: I only speak of what I know, and I would not have spoken if you had not compelled me. And there are worse deaths than a soldier's. One of the men I speak of was poisoned, one was murdered in Ethiopia, one was lost in the *Nuncomar*. That's how it goes. What sort of man is young Ross?"

"Very serious, I believe," answered Lady Haigh. The word still had its cant meaning, which would now be expressed by "religious."

"So much the better for him. I can trust you to say nothing to his sister about this?"

"Now, is it likely? But the least you can do now is to let her come with us. His twin sister! you couldn't have the heart to separate them when he may have such dreadful things before him?"

"How would it be better if she were there?" he asked gloomily; but, as if by a sudden impulse, parted the curtain and advanced into the room. Penelope, her song ended, was toying with the knot of scarlet ribbons attached to the guitar, while her hearers were trying to decide upon the next song, when the group

was divided by the abrupt entrance of a huge man, as it seemed to her, in extraordinary clothes. It struck her as remarkable that every man in the room seemed to stiffen into attention at the moment, and she rose hesitatingly, wondering whether this could possibly be Sir Henry Lennox.

"Do me the honour to present me, Lady Haigh," said the stranger, in a deep voice which seemed to be subdued for the occasion.

"Major Keeling, Miss Ross," said Lady Haigh promptly. She was enjoying herself.

"I hear you wish to come up to Alibad with us," said Major Keeling abruptly. "Can you ride?"

"Yes, I am very fond of it."

"I don't mean trotting along an English road. Can you ride on through the sand hour after hour, so as to keep up with the column, and not complain? Complaints would mean that you would go no farther."

"I can promise I won't complain. If I feel I can't stick on my horse any longer, I will get some one to tie me into the saddle." Penelope smiled slightly. This catechism was not without its humorous side.

"Can you cut down your baggage to regulation limits? Let me see, what did I promise you, Lady Haigh? A camel? Well, half that. Can you do with a camel between you?"

"I think so." Penelope was conscious of Lady Haigh's face of agony.

"You must, if you come. Can you do what you are told?"

"I—I believe so. I generally do."

"If you get orders to leave Alibad in an hour, can you forsake everything, and be ready for the march? That's what I mean. If I find it necessary to send you down, go you must. Can you make yourself useful? Oh, I daresay you can do pretty things like most young ladies, but can you put yourself at the surgeon's disposal after a fight, and be some good?"

"I would try," said Penelope humbly. It was before Miss Nightingale's days, and the suggestion sounded

very strange to her. Major Keeling stood looking at her, until his black brows relaxed suddenly.

"All right, you can come," he said. "And," he added, as he left the room, "I'll allow you a camel apiece after all."

"What an interesting-looking man Major Keeling is!" said Penelope to her friend the next morning.

"Some people think so. I don't particularly admire that kind of swarthy picturesqueness myself," was the meditative answer. "I won't praise him to her on any account," said Lady Haigh to herself.

"It's not that so much as his look and his voice. Don't you know——"

"Why, you are as bad as the girls at Bombay. One of them told me they all perfectly doated on dear Major Keeling; he was just like a dear delightful bandit in an opera."

"Really, Elma!" Penelope's graceful head was lifted with dignity, and Lady Haigh, foreseeing a coolness, hastened to make amends.

"I was only in fun. We don't doat, do we, Pen? or gush, or anything of that sort. But it was only the happiest chance his letting you come with us. If he had caught you singing Tennyson, or your dear Miss Barrett—Mrs Browning, is it? what does it signify?—there would have been no hope for you. But it happened to be Scott, and that conquered him at once. They say he knows all the poems by heart, and recites them before a battle. Dugald heard him doing it at Umarganj, at any rate. The troopers like it, because they think he is muttering spells to discomfit the enemy. Isn't it romantic?"

"How funny!" was Penelope's disappointing comment.

"He was very fond of Byron once, but he has given him up for conscience' sake," pursued Lady Haigh.

"For conscience' sake?"

"Yes; Byron was a man of immoral life, and his works are not fit for a Christian's reading."

"He must be a very good man, I suppose. I shouldn't have guessed——"

"That he was good? No; he might be mysteriously wicked, from his looks, mightn't he? But I believe he is really good, and he has the most extraordinary influence over the natives. Dugald was telling me last night that at Alibad they seemed inclined to receive him as a saint—as if his reputation had gone before him, you know. He never drinks anything but water, for one thing; and he doesn't dance, and he never speaks to a lady if he can help it—— Oh, Pen, were you very much astonished by the catechism he put you through last night?"

"Yes," admitted Penelope. "He asked me such strange things, and in such a solemn voice. I should have liked time to think before answering."

"Well, it was nothing to what he asked me. I had to promise never to keep Dugald back—or even to try to—from anything he was ordered to do. Wasn't it barbarous? You see, in that fight at Umarganj Dugald had got his guns up just in time to take part, and they decided the battle. Major Keeling was so pleased that he said at once, 'We must have you at Alibad,' and of course Dugald was delighted. But when the Chief found out he was married he almost refused to take him, for he had sworn he would have no ladies on the frontier. And there was I, who had said over and over again that I would never stand between Dugald and his chances! It really looked like a romantic suicide, leaving pathetic letters to break the cruel Major's heart, didn't it? But Sir Henry Lennox interceded for me, and I told Major Keeling I would promise anything if he would only let us both go. And now I wake up at night dreaming that the Chief has ordered Dugald to certain death, and I mustn't say a word, and I lie there sobbing, or shaking with terror, until Dugald hears me, and asks me why I don't control my imagination. That's what husbands are. What with keeping them in a good temper when they are there, and missing them when

they are away, one has no peace. Don't invest in one, Pen."

"I have no intention of doing it—at any rate at present. But, Elma——"

"Of course I mean it all depends on your getting the right man." Lady Haigh was uncomfortably conscious that she might one day wish to explain away her last remark. "Only find him, and he shall have you with my blessing. Pen, did you notice anything about Major Keeling's eyes? I mean"—she went on, talking quickly to cover her sudden realisation that the transition must have appeared somewhat abrupt to Penelope—"did he seem to be able to read your mind? The natives believe that he can, and say that he can tell when a man is a spy simply by looking at him. He seems to have funny ideas, too, about being able to foretell a person's fate from his face. He was very much struck by—at least"—she blundered on, conscious that she was getting deeper and deeper into the mire—"he said something last night about Colin's having a very remarkable face."

"Oh dear, I hope he hasn't second-sight! Colin has it sometimes, and if two of them get together they'll encourage one another in it," said Penelope wearily. "Colin is not quite sure about its being right, so he never tries to use it, but sometimes—— Oh, Elma, I must tell you, and I'm afraid you won't like it at all. Colin was here before breakfast, and talked to me a long time about George Ferrers. I think they had been having a ride together."

"Colin ought to know better than to have anything to do with Ferrers. He will get no good from him."

"Why, Elma, he has always been so devoted to him, and George used to seem quite different when he was with us. Colin is terribly grieved about what you—I—did yesterday. He says it was very wrong to break off the engagement altogether, that I was quite right not to marry George at once, but that I ought to have

put him on probation, giving him every possible hope for the future."

"I think I see you putting Captain Ferrers on probation," said Lady Haigh grimly, recalling her brief interview with the gentleman in question. "He would be the last person to stand it, however much he might wish to marry you——" She broke off suddenly.

"But, Elma, he does," said Penelope piteously, understanding the "But he doesn't" which her friend suppressed for the sake of her feelings. "That's the worst of it. He told Colin that he was so taken aback, and felt himself so utterly unworthy, when you told him I was here, that he felt the best thing for my happiness was to break off the engagement at once. But when he came in in the evening, and saw us both again, and heard the old songs, he felt he had thrown away his only chance of doing better. Colin always seems to bring out the best in him, you know, and——"

"Do you know what happened as soon as he had said good night to you?" asked Lady Haigh coldly. "He was beating one of his servants, who had made a mistake about bringing his horse, so frightfully that Dugald had to go and interfere. He said to me when he came back that it was a comfort to think Ferrers would get a knife into him if he tried that sort of thing on the frontier."

"But doesn't that show what a terrible temper poor George has, and how hard it must be for him to control it?" cried Penelope. "He says he feels he should just go straight to the dogs if we took away all hope from him. I know it's very wrong of him to say it, but I dare not take the responsibility, Elma. And Colin says he has always had such a very strong feeling that in some way or other George's eternal welfare was bound up with him or me, or both of us, and so——"

"Now I call that profane," was the crushing reply. "Oh, I know Colin would cheerfully sacrifice you or himself, or both of you, as you say, for the sake of saving any one, and much more George Ferrers, but it doesn't lie with him. What if he sacrifices you and

doesn't save Ferrers? But I know it's no good talking. Colin will take his own course in his own meek unbending way, and drag you after him. But I won't countenance it, at any rate. What has he got you to do?"

"I know it's my fault," sobbed Penelope, "and I must seem dreadfully ungrateful after all your kindness. I had been so miserable about George's silence, that when you told me about him yesterday I felt I had known it all along, and that it was really a relief the blow had fallen. And when you said he quite agreed that it was best to break off the engagement, a weight seemed to be taken off my mind. Of course I ought to have seen him myself—not shuffled off my responsibilities on you, and found out what he really felt, so as to keep him from sacrificing himself for me, and——"

"Stuff and nonsense!" ejaculated Lady Haigh, very loudly and firmly. "Penelope, will you kindly leave off reproaching yourself and me, and tell me what the state of affairs is at present between you and George Ferrers? You don't care a rap for him; but because he says he can't take care of himself without a woman to help him, you are afraid to tell him that he is a coward to try to thrust his burden off on you. Are you engaged?"

"No," explained Penelope; "Colin did not wish that. It is only—only if he keeps straight, as he calls it, at Alibad, we are to be engaged again."

"And suppose you fall in love with some one else?"

"Elma! how could I? We are practically engaged, of course."

"Not at all," said Lady Haigh briskly. "You are under my charge, and I refuse to recognise anything of the kind. Until you're engaged again Ferrers is no more to you than any of the other men, and I won't have him hanging about. Why"—reading a protest in Penelope's face—"what good would it be putting him on probation if he had all the privileges of a *fiancé*? And nothing is to be said about it, Penelope. I simply will not have it."

“I only want to do what is right,” said Penelope, subdued by her friend’s authoritative tone. “As you say, it will be a truer test for him if he does not come here often.”

“Trust me to see to that. And Master Colin shall have a good piece of my mind,” said Lady Haigh resolutely.

CHAPTER III.

A BLANK SHEET.

A DESCRIPTION in detail of the journey from Bab-us-Sahel to the frontier would be as wearisome to the reader as the journey itself was to the travellers. Lady Haigh and Penelope learned to remain resolutely in the saddle for hours after they had determined that human nature could do no more than slip off helplessly on the sand, and they discovered also how remarkably little in the way of luxuries one camel could carry when it was already loaded with bedding and camp-furniture. They found that there was not much to choose, so far as comfort was concerned, between the acknowledged desert, diversified by sand-storms and mirages, and the so-called forests, where trees above and bushes below were alike as dry as tinder, and a spark carelessly dropped might have meant death to the whole party. An interlude in the shape of a river-voyage might have seemed to promise better things, but the small flat-bottomed steamers were cramped and hot, incredibly destitute of conveniences, and perversely given to running aground in spots where they had to remain until a levy had been made on the neighbouring population to drag them off. Scenery there was none, save banks of mud, for the river ran high above the level of the country through which it flowed; and it was with positive relief that the travellers disembarked at a little mud settlement embowered in date-palms, and prepared for a further ride. A fresh trial was awaiting Lady Haigh here in the shape of a peremptory order to

Sir Dugald to push on at once to Alibad by forced marches, leaving the ladies to follow quietly under the care of the regimental surgeon. Major Keeling, with a portion of his regiment and the little band of picked men he had gathered together to help him administer his district, had preceded the Haighs' party, travelling as fast as possible; and now it seemed as if his restless energy had involved him already in hostilities with the wild tribes. Lady Haigh turned very white as she bade her husband farewell; but she made no attempt to hold him back, and he rode away into the sand-clouds with his two or three horsemen. She would have liked to follow him as fast as possible; but Dr Tarleton, a dark taciturn man, remarkable for nothing but an absolute devotion to Major Keeling, had his orders, and meant to obey them. He had been told to conduct the ladies quietly to Alibad, and quietly they should go, taking proper rest, and not pushing on faster than his medical judgment allowed. The desert was even drier, hotter, and less inhabited than that between Bab-us-Sahel and the river, and to the travellers it seemed unending. Of course they suffered torments from prickly heat, and became unrecognisable through the attacks of mosquitoes; and Lady Haigh's ringlets worried her so much that nothing but the thought of her husband's disappointment restrained her from cutting them off altogether. As the distance from Alibad became less, however, her spirits seemed to revive, though this was not due to any special charm in the locality. Even Penelope was astonished at the interest and vivacity with which her friend contemplated and remarked upon a stretch of desert which looked like nothing so much as a sea of shifting mud, with a small group of mud-built huts clustering round a mud-built fort, like shoals about a sandbank, and a range of mud-coloured hills rising above it on the left. No trees, no water, no European buildings: decidedly Alibad, sweltering in the glaring sun, did not look a promising abode. Sir Dugald must be very delightful indeed if his presence could render such a place even

tolerable. And why had he not come to meet his wife?

"Look there!" cried Lady Haigh suddenly. "What's that?"

She pointed with her whip to the desert on the right of the town. A cloud of dust, followed by another somewhat smaller, seemed to be leaving the neighbourhood of the fort and the huts at a tremendous pace, crossing the route of the travellers at right angles.

"I think it must be one man chasing another," suggested Penelope, whose eyes had by this time become accustomed to the huge dust-clouds raised by even a single horseman.

"Not quite, Miss Ross," said Dr Tarleton, with a grim chuckle. "That's the Chief taking his constitutional, with his orderly trying to keep up with him. There!"—as a patch of harder ground made a break in the cloud of dust—"you can see him now. Look there, though! something is wrong. He's riding without any cap or helmet, and that means things are very contrary indeed. It would kill any other man, but he can stand it in these moods, though I got him to promise not to run such risks. Look out!"

He checked his horse sharply, for the two riders came thundering across the path, evidently without seeing those who were so near them—Major Keeling with his hair blowing out on the wind and his face distorted with anger, the orderly urging his pony to its utmost speed to keep up with the Commandant's great black horse.

"Don't be frightened. He'll work it off in that way," said the doctor soothingly to his two charges. "When you see him next, he'll be as mild as milk, but it's as well not to come in his way just now. Look Lady Haigh! isn't that your husband coming?"

It was indeed Sir Dugald who rode up, spick and span in a cool white suit, but with a worried look about his eyes which did not fade for some time. "You look rather subdued," he remarked, when the

first greetings had been exchanged. "I am afraid Alibad isn't all you expected it?"

"Why, it's perfectly charming!" cried Lady Haigh hurriedly. "So—so unique!"

Sir Dugald turned to Penelope. "I shall get the truth from you, Miss Ross. Has Elma been horribly depressed?"

"Not at all. In fact, I wondered what made her so cheerful."

"Ah, I thought so. Sort of place that there's some credit in being jolly in—eh, Mrs Mark Tapley? Whenever I find Elma in uproariously good spirits, I know she is utterly miserable, and trying to spare my feelings. Wish I had the gift of cheerfulness. The Chief has been biting our heads off all round this morning."

"Yes, we saw him. What is the matter with him?" cried Lady Haigh and Penelope together.

"Well, it's a good thing you ladies didn't run across him just now. You've defeated one of his most cherished schemes. He meant to blow up the fort and use the materials for housebuilding, but he was kind enough to remember that either tents or mud huts would be fairly uncomfortable for you, so he spared the old place until we could get a roof over our heads. But meanwhile the Government heard of his intention, and forbade him to destroy such an interesting relic, so the new canal has to make a big bend, and all his plans are thrown out. And as if that wasn't enough, in comes a *cossid* [messenger] this morning with letters from Sir Henry, hinting that his differences with the Government are so acute that he feels he'll be forced to resign, and then we are safe to have a wretched civilian over us. Of course the Chief feels it, and we've felt it too."

"Poor Major Keeling! I feel quite guilty," said Lady Haigh.

"Oh, you needn't. You'll have a crow to pluck with him when I tell you why he sent me that order to hurry on from the river. It was simply and solely to test you—to see if you would keep your promise.

If you had protested and raised a storm, Tarleton had orders to pack you both down-stream again immediately."

"Really! To lay traps for one in that way!" Indignation choked Lady Haigh's utterance, and she rode on in wrathful silence while her husband pointed out to Penelope the line of the projected roads and canals, now only indicated by rows of stakes, the young trees just planted in sheltered spots, and carefully fenced in against goats and firewood-seekers, and the rising walls or mere foundations of various large buildings. Crossing an open space, dotted with the dark tents and squabbling children of a wandering tribe of gipsy origin, they rode in at the gateway of the fort, where the great doors hung idly against the wall, unguarded even by a sentry. Sir Dugald helped the ladies to dismount, and led them into the first of a range of lofty, thick-walled rooms, freshly white-washed.

"You'll be in clover here," he said. "The heat in the tents is like nothing on earth. The Chief is a perfect salamander; but your brother, Miss Ross, has been living under his table with a wet quilt over it, and I have scooped out a burrow for myself in the ground under my tent. Porter" (the Engineer officer already mentioned) "makes his boy pour water over him every night when he goes to bed, so as to get an hour or so of coolness. By the bye, Elma, the Chief and Ross and Tarleton are coming to dine with us to-night."

"Dugald!" cried Lady Haigh, in justifiable indignation. "That man will be the death of me! To dine, when there is no time to get any food, and the servants haven't come up, and there isn't any furniture!"

"Well, perhaps I ought to say that we are to dine with him up here. He provides the food, and we are to have it in the durbar-room over there. It's a sort of festivity to celebrate your coming up. He really means it well, you know."

Lady Haigh was perceptibly mollified, but she took time to thaw.

"It is a pretty idea of Major Keeling's," she said, in a less chilly tone. "At least, if—— Dugald, tell me: he hasn't asked Ferrers?"

"Why should he? And he couldn't, in any case. Ferrers is in charge of our outpost at Shah Nawaz, miles away."

"And Major Keeling knows nothing—about Penelope?"

"How could he? I haven't told him, and I shouldn't imagine Ferrers has. Besides, I thought there was nothing to tell? But there are complications ahead. If the General goes home we are bound to have Ferrers' uncle, old Crayne, sent to Bab-us-Sahel, and then I don't think his aspiring nephew will stay long up here."

"Well, Penelope shan't go down with him. Did you call me, Pen?" and Lady Haigh rose from the box on which she and her husband had seated themselves to enjoy a brief *tête-à-tête*, and hurried after Penelope, who was exploring the new domain.

However troubled Major Keeling's mind may have been when he started on his ride, he seemed to have left all care behind him when he appeared in Lady Haigh's dining-room—as he insisted on calling it, although he himself was responsible for both the dinner and the furniture. He laid himself out to be amiable with such success that Sir Dugald averred afterwards he had sat trembling through the whole meal, feeling certain that the Chief could not keep it up, and dreading some fearful explosion. The ladies and Colin Ross, who were less accustomed to meet the guest officially, saw nothing remarkable in his courteous cheerfulness; and though Penelope's heart warmed towards the man who could so completely lay aside his own worries for the sake of his friends, Lady Haigh, whose mind had recurred to her wrongs, could barely bring herself to be civil to him. He turned upon her at last.

"Lady Haigh, I am in disgrace; I know it. I have

felt a chill of disapproval radiating from you the whole time I have been sitting beside you. What have I done? Ah, I know! Haigh has let the cat out of the bag. How dare you betray official secrets, sir? Well, Lady Haigh, am I never to be forgiven?"

"I could forgive your sending for my husband," said Lady Haigh, with dignity, "especially as there was no danger; but to doubt my word, after I had promised——"

"I had no doubt whatever of your intention of keeping your word. What I was not quite sure about was your power. I expect heroism from you two ladies as a matter of course. Every British commander has a right to expect it from Englishwomen, hasn't he? But I want something more,—I want common-sense. I want you, when your husband, Lady Haigh, and your brother, Miss Ross, and the rest of us, are all away on an expedition, and perhaps there's not a man in the station but Tarleton, to go on just as usual—to sew and read, and go out for your rides as if you hadn't the faintest anxiety to trouble you. While we are away doing the work, you'll have to represent us here, and impress the natives."

"Why didn't you tell us that you only wanted people without any natural feelings?" demanded Lady Haigh.

"I did, didn't I? You seemed to think so when I gave you leave to come up. At any rate, if you bring natural feelings up here, you must be able to control them. Whatever the trouble is, you must keep up before the natives, or our friends will be discouraged, and our enemies emboldened. Did you think I could allow the greatest chance that has ever come to this district to be jeopardised for the sake of natural feelings?" He emphasised the words with an almost savage sneer. "Think what our position is here. Alibad is an outpost of British India, not merely of Khemistan; we are the advanced-guard of civilisation—not a European beyond until you come to the Scythian frontier. We hold one of the keys of India; any enemy attacking from this side must pass over our

bodies. And how do we expect to maintain the position? Not by virtue of stone walls. When I came up here first I found a wretched garrison shut in—locked in—in this very fort, with the tribes plundering up to the gates. I turned them out, and gave orders that the gates were never to be fastened again. Out on the open plain we are and we shall be, if we have to sleep in our boots to the end of our lives. Peace and security for the ryot, endless harrying for the raider until he gives up his evil ways. There shall not be a spot on this border where the ruffians shall be able to pause for a sip of water without looking to see if the Khemistan Horse are behind them, and before long their own people will give them up when they go back to their tribes. Teach the whole country that we have come to stay, that it pays better to be on our side than against us—there is the beginning.”

“And then?” asked Penelope breathlessly.

“And then—you know the old saying in Eastern Europe, ‘The grass never grows where the Turk’s hoof has trod’? Here it shall be, ‘Where the Englishman’s hoof has trod, the grass grows doubly green.’ Down by the river they called all this part Yagistan, you know—the country of the wild men,” he explained for Penelope’s benefit, “but now the name has retreated over the frontier. That’s not enough, though. We have the district before us like a blank sheet—a sea of sand, without cultivation or trade, and precious little of either to hope for from the inhabitants. What is our business? To cover that blank sheet. Canals, then cultivation; roads, then travel; fairs, then trade. The thing will be an object-lesson all the way into Central Asia. Only give me the time, and it shall be done. I have the men and the free hand, and——” He broke off suddenly, and laughed with some embarrassment. “No wonder you are all looking at me as if you thought me mad,” he said; “I seem to have been forcing my personal aspirations on you in the most unwarranted way. But as I have burdened you

with such a rodomontade, I can't well do less than ask whether any one has any suggestions that would help in making it a reality."

"I have," said Lady Haigh promptly. "If you want the natives to think we mean to stay here, Major Keeling, we ought to have a club, and public gardens."

"So we ought, and it struck me only to-day that this old fort might serve as a club-house when your house is built, Lady Haigh, and you turn out of it. I won't have it used for anything remotely connected with defence or administration, but to turn it over to the station as a place of amusement ought to produce an excellent effect. But as to the gardens——"

"Why, that space in front!" cried Lady Haigh. "Turn those gipsies off, and you have the very place, with the club on this side, and the church and your new house and all the government buildings opposite."

"Excellent!" said Major Keeling. "The gipsies have already had notice to quit, and a new camping-ground appointed them, but I meant to use the space for godowns until my plans were thrown out. Really I begin to think I made a mistake in not welcoming ladies up here. Their advice seems likely to be distinctly useful."

"What an admission!" said Lady Haigh, with exaggerated gratitude. "But don't be deceived by Major Keeling's flattery, Pen. Very soon you'll find that he has set a trap to see whether you have any natural feelings."

"How could I subject another lady to such a test when you have objected so strongly, pray? Miss Ross need fear nothing at my hands."

"Well, I call that most unfair. Come, Pen. Why!"—Lady Haigh broke off with a little laugh—"we have no drawing-room in which to give you gentlemen tea."

"Have you visited the ramparts yet?" asked Major Keeling. "You will find them a pleasant place in the evenings, and even in the daytime there will sometimes be shade and a breeze there. I had one of the tower

staircases cleaned and made safe for your benefit, and if you will honour me by considering the ramparts as your drawing-room this evening, the servants shall bring the tea there."

The suggestion was gladly accepted, and a move was made at once. The rampart, when reached, proved to afford a pleasant promenade, and the diners separated naturally into couples. Lady Haigh had much to say to her husband, while the doctor and Colin Ross gravitated together, rather by the wish of the older man than the younger, it appeared, and Penelope found herself in Major Keeling's charge. They stood beside the parapet after a time, and he pointed out to her the watchfires of the camp below, the stretch of desert beyond, white in the moonlight, and beyond that again the distant hills, the portals of unexplored Central Asia.

"Do you hear anything?" he asked her suddenly.

She strained her ears, but beyond the faint sounds of the camp, the stamping of an impatient horse, the clink of a bridle, or the clank of a sentry's weapon, she could hear nothing.

"I knew it," he said. "It is only fancy, but I wondered whether this night-stillness would affect you as it does me. You know what it is to stand alone at night and look into the darkness, and listen to the silence? Whenever I do that on this frontier I hear footsteps—hurrying steps, the steps of a multitude, passing on and on for ever. I pray God I may never hear them turn aside and come this way!"

"Why?" asked Penelope, awed by his tone.

"Because they are the footsteps of the wild tribes of Central Asia, whose fathers poured down through these passes to the conquest of India. They wander from place to place, owning no master, obeying their chiefs when it suits them, always ready for plunder and rapine. And to the south, spread out before them, is the wealth of the idolater and the Kaffir. Of course, it would take something to move them—a cattle-plague,

perhaps, leading to famine—and a leader to unite them sufficiently to utilise their vast numbers to advantage; but who is to know what is going on beyond those hills? There are men who have gone there and returned—that splendid young-fellow Whybrow is there now—but they see only what they are allowed to see. I tell you, sometimes at night the thought of those wandering millions comes upon me with such force that I cannot rest. I get up and ride—ride along the border, even across it into Nalapur, to make sure that the tribes are not at our very doors.”

“You ride alone at night? But that must be very dangerous!”

“Dangerous? If I was afraid of danger, I should not be here.”

“But your life is so valuable. Has no one begged you to be prudent?”

“My officers used to preach to me, but I have broken them of it—all but the doctor. Poor Tarleton! he is a very faithful fellow. But will you think me quite mad, Miss Ross, if I tell you that there is another sound as well? It is as if the warder of a fortress should listen across a valley, and hear the tread of the sentry on the ramparts of a hostile fortress opposite. And the tread comes nearer.”

“Major Keeling, you frighten me. Who—what do you mean?”

He laughed. “Oh, the tread is a good thousand miles away yet. But it is coming nearer, all the same. Nominally it is stopped by the Araxes, but it is already pressing on to the Jaxartes. The Khanates will be absorbed, and then—will the two warders meet face to face then, I wonder? It may not be in my day, or even yours, but it will come.”

“You mean Scythia? But is she advancing? Why——?”

“Is it for me to say? She explains it as the trend of her manifest destiny; we say it is her hunger for territory. But she advances, and we remain stationary, or

worse, advance and retreat again. But retreat from this point we will not while the breath of life is in me," he cried passionately; "and when I die, I mean to be buried here, if there is any burial for me at all, that at least the bones of an Englishman may hold the frontier for England."

"But," hesitated Penelope, "if we don't want to advance, why shouldn't she?—up to our frontier, I mean, not beyond."

"Because she wouldn't stop there. How could she, after sweeping over all the barren worthless regions, pause when a rich fertile country lay before her? I couldn't myself. Otherwise, one would say that at any rate her rule could not be worse than the present state of things. There are plague-spots in Central Asia, like Gamara, which ought to be swept from the face of the earth. But we ought to do it, not they. It's our men who have been done to death there—not spies, but regularly accredited representatives of the Government—and we don't stir a finger to avenge them. Whybrow takes his life in his hand when he enters Central Asia, and so will any man who follows him."

"But why don't we do anything?" asked Penelope, wondering at his impassioned tone, and little dreaming of the sinister influence which the wicked city of Gamara was to exercise over her own life.

"Because we are too lazy, too meek, too much afraid of responsibility—anything! Old Harry—I beg your pardon—Sir Henry Lennox would do it. I heard him say so once to the troops at a review—that he would like nothing better than to conquer Central Asia at their head, plundering all the way to Gamara. He got pulled up for it, of course. He isn't exempt from official recognition of that kind any more than meaner people, though I really think I am particularly unfortunate. Just now I am in trouble with Church as well as State. I was so ill-advised as to write to a bishop about sending missionaries here."

"Oh, I am so glad!" said Penelope. "Colin—my brother—is so disappointed that you haven't asked for any."

"Ah, but wait. I want to pick the men. To let the wrong man loose up here would be to destroy all my hopes for the frontier. There's a fellow at the Cape named Livingstone—the man who made a long waggon-journey a year or two ago to look for some great lake the natives talked of, but found nothing, and means to try again—if I could get him I should be happy. He's a doctor—physics the people as well as preaches to them, you see, and that's the kind of Christianity that appeals to untutored savages like his flock and mine. Well, I asked the bishop if he could send us up a man like that, and his chaplain answered that I was evidently not aware that the Church's care was for men's souls, not their bodies. I wrote back that the Church must be very different from her Master if that was the case; and the answer came that in consequence of the unbecoming tone of my last communication, his lordship must decline any further correspondence with me. But that's nothing. When I have fought for months to bring some exploit of the regiment's to the notice of the authorities, and got an official commendation at last, I have had to insert in regimental orders a scathing rebuke of the insubordinate and unsuitable letters from me which had extorted it. But why am I telling you all this? It must have bored you horribly."

"Oh no!" cried Penelope. "I have been so much interested. And even if not, I am so glad to listen, if it is any help to you——"

"Help?" he asked sharply. "Why on earth should it be a help?"

"I don't know," answered Penelope, with some surprise. "I only thought—perhaps you don't care to talk things over with your officers—it might be a relief to say what you think sometimes——"

"I believe that's it," he answered; "and therefore I

pour out the bottled-up nonsense of years on your devoted head, without any thought of your feelings. You should have checked me, Miss Ross. I ought to have been asking you if you adored dancing, or what the latest fashion in albums was, instead of keeping you standing while I discoursed on things as they are and should not be. Another time you must pull me up short."

CHAPTER IV.

UNSTABLE.

CAPTAIN FERRERS was jogging gloomily across the desert from Fort Shah Nawaz to Alibad, and his face was only the index to his thoughts. At the moment he did not know whether he hated more the outpost of which he was in command or the errand that was taking him to Alibad, and as he rode he cursed his luck. There was no denying that everything seemed to go wrong with him. Harassed by debts and awkward acquaintances at Bab-us-Sahel, he had acquiesced with something like relief in Sir Henry Lennox's suggestion, which was practically a command, that he should sever himself altogether from his old associates by taking service on the frontier. But, knowing as he did that he was sent there partly as a punishment and partly in hope of saving him for better things, he felt it quite unnecessary to conciliate his gaoler, as he persisted in considering Major Keeling. The two men were conscious of that strong mutual antipathy which sometimes exists without any obvious or even imagined reason, and Major Keeling was not sorry when Ferrers showed an inclination to claim the command at Shah Nawaz as his right. It was not an ideal post for a man who needed chiefly to be saved from himself; but Ferrers was senior to all the other men save Porter the Engineer, who could not be spared from the head station. Therefore Ferrers had his desire, and loathed it continuously from the day he obtained it. The place was no fort in reality, merely a cluster

of mud-brick buildings, standing round a courtyard in which the live stock of the garrison was gathered for safety at night, and possessing a gateway which could be blocked up with thorn-bushes. On every side of it spread the desert, with some signs of cultivation towards the south, and in the north the dark hills which guarded the Akrab Pass, the door into Central Asia. To Ferrers and his detachment fell the carrying out in this neighbourhood of the policy outlined by Major Keeling in his conversation at the dinner-table—the protection of the peaceable inhabitants of the district, and the incessant harrying of all disturbers of the peace, whether from the British or the Nalapuri side of the frontier. At first the life was fairly exciting, though Ferrers' one big fight was spoilt by the necessity of sending to Alibad for reinforcements; but now that things were settling down, it was irksome in the extreme to patrol the country unceasingly without ever catching sight of an enemy. Ferrers panted against the quietness which Major Keeling's rigorous rule was already establishing on both sides of the border. He would have preferred the system prevailing in the neighbouring province, where a raid on the part of the tribes was answered by a British counter-raid, when villages were burnt, crops destroyed, and women and children dismissed homeless to the hills, the troops retiring again immediately to their base of operations until the tribes had recovered strength sufficiently for the whole thing to be gone through again. It was a poor thing to nip raids in the bud, or arrest them when they were only just begun: a big raid, followed by big reprisals, was the sort of thing that lent zest to frontier-life and stimulated promotion. However, Major Keeling's whole soul was set against thrilling experiences of this kind, and Ferrers was forced to submit. But his love of fighting was as strong as ever, and had led to the very awkward and unfortunate incident which he was now to do his best to explain at Alibad, whither he had been called by a peremptory summons.

The root, occasion, or opportunity of all crime on

the border at this time was the practice of carrying arms, which had grown up among the inhabitants during many years of oppression from above and incursions from without. Now that protection was assured them, the custom was unnecessary and dangerous, and any man appearing with weapons was liable to have them confiscated—the people grumbling, but submitting. Hence, when word was brought to Ferrers that a company of armed men had been seen traversing the lands of one of the villages in his charge, it was natural to conclude that they were raiders from beyond the border, who had escaped the vigilance of the patrols, and hoped to harry the countryside. Ferrers at once started in pursuit, and the armed men, their weapons laid aside, were discovered in the village cornfields, busily engaged in gathering in the crop. The impudence displayed fired Ferrers, and he ordered his men to charge. His *daffadar*, a veteran soldier, ventured to advise delay and a parley, but he refused to listen. He meant to make an example of this party of robbers, not to offer them terms, and a moment later his troopers were riding down the startled reapers. These made no attempt to resist, though they filled the air with protests, and before the troop could wheel and ride through them again, a voice reached Ferrers' ear which turned him sick with horror.

“Sahib! sahib!” it cried, “we are the Sarkar's poor ryots! Why do you kill us?”

This time the parley was granted, and Ferrers learned too late that the men he had attacked were the inhabitants of the village to which the field belonged, that they had brought their weapons with them owing to a warning that the people of another village intended to attack them and carry off their harvest, and that the second village had revenged itself for its disappointment by sending Ferrers the information which had led him wrong. There was nothing to be done but to rebuke the village elders severely for not warning him of the intended attack instead of taking the law into their own hands, assuage the sufferings of the wounded

by distributing among them all the money he had about him, and return drearily to Shah Nawaz to draw up a report of the occurrence. It was his luck all over, he told himself, ignoring the reminder that he had not attempted to avert the fight—in fact, that he had hurried it on for the mere sake of fighting. It was all the fault of the life at this wretched outpost, where there was nothing a man could do but fight, and that was forbidden him. It was little comfort to remember that Major Keeling, in his place, would have found the day all too short for the innumerable things to be done. He would have been in the saddle from morning till night, visiting the villages, holding impromptu courts of justice, looking for traces of old irrigation-works or planning new ones, and filling up any odds and ends of time by instituting shooting-competitions among his troopers, or making experiments in gardening. Ferrers was a very different man from his Commandant, though he could be brave enough when there was fighting to be done, and owed his captaincy to his gallantry on a hard-won field. Without the stimulus of excitement he was prone to fits of indolence, when the monotonous round of daily duty was intolerably irksome; and he was further handicapped by the fact that whereas the change to the frontier had been intended to cut him off from his old life, he had, unknown to the older men who were trying to direct his course anew, succeeded in bringing a portion of his past with him.

The fashion among the young officers at Bab-us-Sahel at this time might be said to run in the direction of slumming. The example had been set a year or two before by a young man of brilliant talents and unscrupulous audacity, whose delight it was to escape from civilisation and live among the natives as one of themselves. This man was the despair of his seniors, but in the course of his escapades he contrived to pick up much curious and some useful information. To follow in his footsteps meant to defy the authorities now and possibly gain credit later, and this was sufficiently good reason for doing so. In the case of men

of less brilliance or less audacity the natural result was merely to lead them into places they had much better have shunned, and acquaint them with persons whom it would have been wiser not to know. Ferrers was one of those who had followed the pioneer's example without gaining the slightest advantage, and he knew this; so that when the chance of freeing himself came to him, he was almost ready to welcome it. Almost, but not quite. It so happened that a rule had lately been introduced requiring a literary knowledge of the local language from officers employed in the province. Major Keeling, while remarking to Ferrers, with his usual contempt for the actions of his official superiors, that in his opinion a colloquial acquaintance with it was all that was really needed, advised him to take a munshi with him to Shah Nawaz, and employ his leisure there in study. No sooner had the advice been given than the munshi presented himself in the person of one of Ferrers' disreputable associates, the Mirza Fazl-ul-Hacq. Originally a Mohammedan religious teacher, this man was in some way under a cloud, and was regarded by his co-religionists much as an unfrocked clergyman would be in England. This fact was in itself an attraction to Ferrers and the young men of his stamp, to whom there was an actual delight in finding that one who ought to be holy had gone wrong, and the Mirza professed a strong attachment to him in return. Now he begged to be allowed to accompany him to the frontier as his munshi, asserting, with perfect truth, that he was well acquainted with all the dialects in use there. Ferrers, who had begun to look back regretfully at the pleasures from which he was to be torn, closed with the offer, and the Mirza was duly enrolled in his retinue. The two were closeted together in all Ferrers' hours of leisure at Shah Nawaz, but remarkably little study was accomplished. The Mirza was an adept at various games of chance, he brewed delicious sherbets (not without the assistance of beverages forbidden by his religion), and he was a fascinating story-teller. Thoroughly worth-

less as Ferrers knew him to be, the man had made himself necessary to him, and he half hated, half condoned, the fact. When a fellow led such a dog's life, how could he refuse any chance of congenial companionship that offered itself?

It might have been objected that Ferrers was within riding distance of Alibad, and that there was no law cutting him off from his friends there; but since Colin and Penelope Ross had come up-country he had avoided the place as if it were plague-stricken. Lady Haigh had been quite right in her interpretation of his feelings, and though he had succeeded in winning over Colin to plead his cause with Penelope, he now wondered gloomily why he could not have let well alone. He was always acting on impulse, he told himself, in a way that his cooler judgment disapproved, and it did not occur to him that he had to thank the Mirza's influence over him for this fresh change. In fact, he was not conscious of it, for the subject was never mentioned between them; but in the Mirza's society he felt no desire for that of his old friends. He had a real fondness for Colin, the one man of his acquaintance who believed in him, though he found it terribly fatiguing to keep up in his company the pretence of being so much better than he was. Colin had no idea of his real tastes and pursuits, and, curious though it may seem, Ferrers was prepared to take a good deal of trouble to prevent his becoming aware of them. The thought that Colin's eyes would never rest upon him in kindness again was intolerable; and if Colin alone had been concerned, his mind would have been at ease. But if he married Penelope, he must either give up the Mirza, or she must know, and therefore Colin would know, a good many things he would prefer to keep secret—and what counterbalancing advantage would there be? Though he had felt his interest in her revive when he saw her admired and courted, she was not the type of woman who could keep him in thrall: she would suffer in silence, and look at him reproachfully with eyes that

were like Colin's, and there would be little pleasure in that.

At this point Ferrers' meditations were suddenly interrupted. Intent upon his mental problem, it was with a shock that he found himself confronted by a trooper of the Khemistan Horse. He tried to discover what emergency could have dictated the posting of vedettes at this distance from the town, but learned only that it was the Doctor Sahib's order. Wondering vaguely whether there was plague in the district, and the doctor was establishing a sanitary cordon, he rode on, to see more vedettes in the distance, and to be sharply challenged by a sentry as he entered the town. The squalid streets seemed wholly destitute of the military element which usually gave them brightness; but in the courtyard of the mud building which served as a hospital Dr Tarleton was hard at work drilling a motley band of convalescents and hospital assistants, with a stiffening of dismounted troopers, who appeared to be bored to extinction by the proceedings.

"What's up, Tarleton?" cried Ferrers, after watching in bewilderment the strange evolutions of the corps and their instructor's energetic endeavours to get them straight.

Hearing the voice, Dr Tarleton turned round and hurried to the wall, wiping his face as he came. "Oh, the Chief and all the rest are away, and I'm in charge. Nothing like being prepared for the worst, you know. This is my volunteer force—the Alibad Fencibles. I say, tell me the right word, there's a good fellow! I've got 'em all massed in that corner, and I can't get 'em out without going back to the beginning."

Ferrers whispered two or three words into the doctor's ear, watched him write them down, and rode on towards the fort, taking some comfort in the thought that his unpleasant interview with Major Keeling must necessarily be postponed. It was clear that it was his duty to pay his respects to the ladies, and by good luck it was just calling-time.

Lady Haigh and Penelope had now been two or three months at Alibad, and the heat and burning winds of the shadeless desert were leaving their mark upon them. Both had lost their colour, and even Lady Haigh moved languidly, while Penelope was propped up with cushions in a long chair. She had had a sharp attack of fever, and Ferrers, with an inward shudder, wondered how he could have thought her handsome when she landed. But both ladies were unfeignedly pleased to see him, principally because they were glad of anything that would divert their thoughts; and he experienced a pleasant sense of contentment and wellbeing on finding himself established in the dark cool room, with two women to talk to him. He found that the station had been bereft of almost the whole of its defenders for nearly twenty-four hours. Two nights ago Sir Dugald had started with a small force in pursuit of a band of Nalapuri raiders who were reported to be ravaging the most fertile part of the border, and yesterday an urgent message had come from him asking for reinforcements and Major Keeling's presence.

"But if Haigh and his guns are gone out, it must be a big affair," said Ferrers.

"Oh no, the guns are left at home," said Lady Haigh. "All of us are people of all work here. Sir Dugald digs canals, and Captain Porter conducts cavalry reconnaissances, and Major Keeling works the guns——"

"And the doctor drills the awkward squad," supplied Ferrers. "What a lively time you seem to have!"

"Oh well, that was more at first. Then there was scarcely a night without an alarm, and we used to hear the troops clattering out of the town at all hours after bands of raiders. There are plenty of alarms still, but generally in the daytime. Two villages have quarrelled over their lands, or some ryots have objected to the survey or resisted the digging of the canal, and Major Keeling is wanted to put things right."

“But how calmly you speak of it! You and Pen—Miss Ross—must be perfect heroines,” said Ferrers. It was clear that Lady Haigh did not intend to leave him alone with Penelope, and with a resentment which had in it more than a touch of relief, he set himself to tease her. “How pleased Haigh must be to know that, whatever is happening to him, you are just as quiet and happy as if you were at home!”

The malice in his tone was evident, and Lady Haigh knew that he guessed at the terrors of those broken nights, when Sir Dugald was summoned away on dangerous duties, and she brought her bed into Penelope’s room, and they trembled and prayed together till daylight. But she had no intention of confessing her weakness, and answered quickly—

“Of course he is. How clever of you to have gauged him so well!”

“And do tell me what you find to do,” asked Ferrers lazily. “At Bab-us-Sahel you used to be great at gardening.”

“Yes, until you rode across my flower-beds and ruined them,” retorted Lady Haigh. “You won’t find any opportunity of doing that here. Oh, we have only poor silly little things to do compared with the constant activity and splendid exploits of you gentlemen. We look after the servants, of course, and try to invent food enough to keep the household from starvation; and we get out the back numbers of the ‘Ladies’ Repository’ and the ‘Family Friend,’ and follow the fancy-work patterns; and we read all the books and papers that come to the station, and sometimes try very hard to improve our minds with the standard works Miss Ross brought out with her; and in the evening we go out in our *palkis* to inspect the progress of the building and road-making, and offer any foolish suggestions that may occur to us. I think that’s all.”

“But what a life! and in the hot weather, too! Why don’t you go to the Hillis, as the Punjab ladies do?”

“The Punjab ladies may, if their husbands can afford it. Have you any idea what it would cost to go to the Hills, or even down to Bab-us-Sahel, from here?”

“But why come here, then? What good does it do? Of course”—for Lady Haigh was beginning to look dangerous—“it’s delightful for Haigh to have you, and all that; but you won’t tell me he’s such a selfish chap that he wouldn’t rather know you were comparatively cool and comfortable down by the sea? You can’t make me believe it’s his doing.”

“No,” snapped Lady Haigh, “it’s ours. We are here for the good of the station. We are civilisation, society—refinement, if you like. We keep the gentlemen from getting into nasty jungly ways. You are looking rather jungly yourself.” She delivered this home-thrust suddenly, and Ferrers realised that his aspect was somewhat careless and unkempt for the place in which he found himself. “We keep things up to the standard, you see.”

“Ah, but I have no one to keep me up to the standard,” he pleaded. “Out at my place there’s no one to speak to and nothing to do.”

“Then I wonder you chose to go there,” was the sharp retort.

“There was plenty to do just at first, but my rascals are quiet enough now. A good many of them are dead, for one thing. You heard of our big fight before you came up—with a raiding-party six hundred strong? I had to send here for help, worse luck! but even when the reinforcements came up we were so few that the fellows actually stood to receive us. We charged through them again and again—I never remember a finer fight—and there were very few of them left afterwards.”

“You speak as if you liked it!” said Penelope, with a shudder.

“Like it? it’s the finest thing in life—the only thing worth living for. You see a great big brute of a Malik coming at you with a curved tulwar just sweeping down. You try to parry, or fire your Colt point-blank into

his face, and for the moment you can't quite decide whether you are dead or the Malik, until you suddenly realise that your horse is carrying you on towards another fellow, and the Malik is down. Splendid is no word for it!"

"Don't!" said Lady Haigh sharply. "You'll make Miss Ross ill again. What's that?" as a long-drawn, quavering cry seemed to descend from the upper air, "Mem Sahib, the regiment returns!"

Lady Haigh sprang up, and was rushing out of the room, when she suddenly remembered Penelope, and ran back to her. "Yes, I'll help you, Pen—how selfish of me! It's our *chaprasi*," she explained hurriedly to Ferrers. "I stationed him on the tower above this to watch for any one who might be coming. He was horribly frightened, and said he knew he should fall down and be killed; but of course I was not going to give in to that. Carry this cushion up for Miss Ross, please. There's a doorway on the ramparts where she can sit in the shade."

Ferrers followed obediently, as Lady Haigh half helped, half dragged her friend up the narrow stairs, and, after allowing her one look at the moving cloud of dust, which was all that could be seen in the distance, established her in the doorway on the cushion, taking her own place at a telescope which was fixed on a stand.

"This is my own idea," she said to Ferrers. "Now, why don't you say I may justly be proud of it? I am as good as a sentry, I spend so much time up here scanning the desert. I'm glad they're coming from that direction, for we shall be able to distinguish them so much sooner. They must pass us before getting into the town. Now I begin to see them. They have prisoners with them, Pen, and there are certainly fewer of them than started, but somehow they don't look as if they had been fighting. No, I see what it is. There's a whole squadron gone!"

"What!" cried Ferrers, who was standing by, unable to get a single glance through the telescope,

which was monopolised by his hostess. "Clean gone, Lady Haigh? Must have been detached on special duty, surely? It couldn't have been wiped out."

"No, no, of course," and Lady Haigh withdrew from the glass, and allowed him to look through it; "that must be it, but it gave me such a fright. But I saw Dugald and Colin, Pen, and the Chief. Muhabat Khan!" she called to the *chaprasi*, who descended slowly from the top of the tower, and stood before her in a submissive attitude but with an injured expression, "go and meet the regiment as it comes, and say to the Major Sahib that Ferrers Sahib is here, and that I should be glad if he and Ross Sahib will come in to tiffin with us. Now, Pen, I shall take you down again," as the messenger departed. "Captain Ferrers will bring the cushion."

Deposited in her chair once more, Penelope looked very white and exhausted, and Lady Haigh reproached herself loudly in the intervals of exchanging mysterious confidences with various servants.

"I ought never to have taken you up to the rampart," she said; "but I knew you would like to see them ride in; and besides——" She checked herself, but Ferrers guessed that she had been afraid to leave Penelope alone lest he should try to speak to her, and he smiled as he thought how unnecessary her precautions were. But by this time there was a clatter of horses' feet and accoutrements in the courtyard, and Sir Dugald ran up the steps and kissed his wife, who had sprung to the door to meet him.

"The Chief and Ross are here," he said. "Glad you sent that message, Elma. You all right, Ferrers? Didn't know you were coming in."

Major Keeling and Colin Ross were mounting the steps with much clanking of spurs and scabbards; but it struck Ferrers, as he stood in the doorway, that his Commandant seemed suddenly to have remembered something, for as he reached the verandah he lifted his sword and held it in his hand, and walked with extreme care. After greeting Lady Haigh, he passed

on into the room, and Ferrers observed with astonishment that the big man was evidently trying to step softly and speak low. It was not until Major Keeling bent over Penelope's chair, and, taking her hand very gently, asked her how she was, that the watcher realised for whose sake these precautions were taken.

"I felt obliged to come in when I received the order from our beneficent tyrant over there," said Major Keeling, in a voice which seemed to fill the room in spite of his best endeavours; "but if our presence disturbs you in the least, we will all go and tiffin at my quarters, and take Haigh off with us too."

"Oh no, please!" entreated Penelope. "It will do me good, really. It is so nice to see you all back."

There was a faint flush in her cheeks, which deepened when Major Keeling remarked upon it approvingly; and Ferrers remembered, with unreasonable anger, that her colour had not risen for him. It made her look pretty again at once, and that great lout the Chief (thus unflatteringly did he characterise his commanding officer) evidently thought so too. Once again the younger man was a prey to the curious form of jealousy which had led him into the impulsive action that he now regretted. Penelope, for her own sake, had little or no charm for him, but Penelope, admired by other men, became at once a prize worth claiming. Ferrers regretted his impulsive action no longer. His appeal to Colin had at any rate placed him in a position of superiority over any other man who might approach Penelope.

CHAPTER V.

COLIN AS AMBASSADOR.

“THE curious thing was that we had no fighting,” said Major Keeling. They were seated at the luncheon-table, and Lady Haigh had imperiously demanded an account of the doings of the force since its departure.

“No fighting!” she cried reproachfully. “And you have kept us in agony two whole days while you went out for a picnic!”

“It was more than a picnic,” said her guest seriously. “It is one of the most mysterious things I have ever come across—a complete success, and yet not a match-lock fired, though every one and everything was ready for a big fight.”

“I must get to the bottom of this,” said Lady Haigh, with the little air of importance to which Major Keeling always yielded indulgently. “Let me hear about it from the beginning. Dugald, you don’t mean to say that you started out under false pretences when you told me you were going after a band of raiders?”

“Not at all,” answered Sir Dugald, with imperturbable good-humour. “We found the raiders, sure enough, at the village which gave the alarm. They had plundered the granaries, got the cattle together ready to drive off, and were just going to fire the place when we came up. It was rather fine when they realised it was the Khemistan Horse they had to deal with, and not a scratch lot of villagers, for they left the cattle and decamped promptly. Our only casualty was a trooper who came upon two laggards at bay in a corner,

and tried to take them both prisoners. Of course we went after them, and several of the villagers, who had appeared miraculously from their hiding-places, came too. It was a long chase, and we stuck to them right up to the frontier. Well, we guessed that this was the band which has made its headquarters at Khudâdad Khan's fortress, Dera Gul. The Amir of Nalapur has always protested his inability to catch and punish them, so, as we had caught them red-handed on our ground, I thought we would run them to earth. The raiding must be stopped somehow, and if the Amir can't do it, he ought to be grateful to us for doing it for him."

Major Keeling nodded emphatically. "If he doesn't show proper gratitude, I'll teach it him," he said.

"They rode, and we rode," Sir Dugald went on; "and as they had the start and travelled lighter, we had the pleasure of seeing them ride into Dera Gul and shut the door in our faces. When we summoned Khudâdad Khan to give them up, he told us to come and take them, and they jeered at us from the walls and bade us be thankful they let us go home safe. The place is abominably strong, and they had several cannon ready mounted, and plenty of men, so I thought the best thing I could do was to take up a position of observation, and send for reinforcements and the guns. But as I was writing my message, one of our friendly ryots advised me to send for Kilin Sahib, and not trouble about the guns. 'You will see that they'll surrender to him,' he said. I didn't believe it, but he stuck to his text, and my ressalidar, Bakr Ali, agreed with him, though neither of them would give me any reason; so I added to my *chit* an entreaty that the Major would accompany the reinforcements if possible. And he came, saw, and conquered."

"No thanks to myself," said Major Keeling. "I summoned Khudâdad Khan to surrender, and he did so at once, with the worst possible grace, merely stipulating that he and his men should be considered our prisoners, and not handed over to Nalapur. I knew

the Amir would be precious glad to get rid of them, so I consented. And after that—Haigh, you will agree with me that it was a queer sensation—we rode up into the fortress between the rows of scowling outlaws, spiked the five guns, took stock of the provisions, and left Harris and a squadron in charge of the place until we can hand it over to the Amir. The outlaws we brought back with us, and I mean to plant them out on the newly irrigated land to the west after they have served their sentences. ‘It was a famous victory.’”

“Yes, but how?—why?” cried Lady Haigh. “What made them surrender when they saw you?”

“If you could tell me that I should be much obliged. There’s a mystery somewhere, which is always cropping up, and this is part of it. Why, almost wherever I go, the Maliks and elders meet me as an old friend—no, not quite that, as a sort of superior being—and inform me with unction that all my orders are fulfilled already, and that they are ready to join me with all their fighting men as soon as I want them. It’s the same with the wild tribes, even those from over the frontier. Sometimes I have thought there must be a mistake somewhere, and asked them if they know who I am, and they say, ‘Oh yes, you are Sinjāj Kilin Sahib, the ruler of the border for the Honourable Company,’ with a sort of foolish smirk, as if they expected me to be pleased. I can’t help thinking they are mistaking me for some one else.”

“Or some one supernatural—some one of whom they have heard prophecies,” suggested Lady Haigh breathlessly.

“But you can’t very well ask them that—whether they take you for Rustam come to life again—lest they should say they never thought of comparing you to any one of the kind,” said Ferrers. The tone, rather than the words, was offensive, but Major Keeling ignored it.

“But they do think something of the sort, I believe,” he said. “At least, when I was present at a tribal *jirgah* the other day, an old Malik from a distance

remarked that as he had not seen me before, it would be very consoling to him if I would give a slight exhibition of my powers. He would not ask for anything elaborate—if I would just breathe fire for a minute or two, or something of that kind, it would be enough. I told him I wasn't a mountebank, and the rest hustled and scolded him into silence. But after that very meeting another old fellow, who had been most forward in nudging the first one, and had looked tremendously knowing as he told him that fire-breathing was not a custom of the English, got hold of me alone, and whispered, 'You won't forget, Highness, that on the night of which I may not speak you promised I should ride at your right hand when the time comes?' Without thinking, I said, 'If the night is not to be spoken of, why do you speak of it?' and the old fellow stammered, 'Between you and me, I thought it was no harm, Heaven-born,' and after that I could get no more out of him. Whatever I asked him, he thought I was trying to test him, and took a pride in keeping his mouth shut."

"It really is most mysterious," said Lady Haigh, "and might be most embarrassing. Do you think you go about paying visits to Maliks in your sleep, Major Keeling? Because, you see, you might do all sorts of queer things as well."

"I know nothing whatever about it—it is totally inexplicable," said Major Keeling shortly, rising as he spoke. "I am sorry to break up your party, Lady Haigh, but Captain Ferrers and I have some business together, and he ought to be on the way back to his station before very long."

Seeing that he was not to escape, Ferrers followed the Commandant, and passed a highly unpleasant half-hour in his company. From a scathing rebuke of the criminal carelessness which had led to the late regrettable incident, Major Keeling passed to personalities.

"What have you been doing to yourself?" he asked sharply. "You ought to be as hard as nails with the

life you lead at Shah Nawaz. But perhaps you don't lead it. You look like a Bengal writer."

"With this examination in view——" began Ferrers with dignity.

"Hang these examinations! They spoil the good men and make the bad ones worse. I'll have no one up here who would sacrifice his real work to them. If you can't keep your studies to the hot hours, when you young fellows think it'll kill you to go out, better give them up. Your munshi must be a queer sort if he's willing to work all day with you. Who is he, by the bye? Fazl-ul-Hacq?—not one of the regular Bab-us-Sahel munshis, surely? Next time you come in, make some excuse to bring him with you, and I'll have a look at him. He never seems to be forthcoming when I hunt you up at Shah Nawaz, and when a man keeps out of sight in that way it doesn't look well. You think he's all right, I suppose?"

Now was Ferrers' chance. With one effort he might break with his old life and throw off the Mirza's yoke, exchanging his solitary indolence at Shah Nawaz for the incessant activity which was the portion of all who worked under Major Keeling's own eye. But to do this he must confess to the man he disliked that he felt himself unfit for responsibility, and that he had practically betrayed the trust reposed in him. Moreover, not a man in the province but would believe he had been deprived of his command as a punishment. This thought was decisive, and he answered quickly—

"Yes, sir; I believe he is an excellent teacher, and he makes himself useful as a clerk when I want one."

"Well, don't let him become indispensable. That plays the very mischief with these fellows. They think they've got the Sahib under their thumb, and can do as they like, and very often, when it's too late, the Sahib finds out that it's true. Give your man his *rukhsat* [leave to depart] in double quick time if you see that he's inclined to presume."

Wondering savagely what Major Keeling would think of the actual terms which prevailed between Fazl-ul-

Hacq and his employer, Ferrers acquiesced with outward meekness, and took his leave. Colin Ross had promised to accompany him part of the way back, and with a couple of troopers as escort they rode out into the desert. As they passed the hospital, Dr Tarleton appeared on the verandah, and shook his fist at Ferrers.

"You rascal!" he cried. "Those words of command you gave me were all humbug. Just wait until I get you in hospital!"

"What does he mean?" asked Colin, as Ferrers rode on laughing.

"Oh, he was trying to drill a lot of non-combatants this morning, and asked me how to get them out of a corner. Of course I favoured him with a few directions, with the result that his squad got more gloriously mixed up than ever. Only wish I had seen them!"

"Tarleton is a good fellow," said Colin, with apparent irrelevance.

"Don't be a prig, young 'un. Must have a bit of fun sometimes. What is a man to do, stuck down in a desert under a commandant who's either a scoundrel or silly?"

"You mean what the Major was telling us at tiffin? But it's perfectly true: they did surrender the moment they saw him."

"I daresay. He has carefully circulated all these rumours about his miraculous powers, and then pretends to be surprised that the niggers believe them. He's a blatant theatrical egotist—a regular old Crummles. 'I can't think who puts these things in the papers. I don't.' Oh no, of course not!"

"If you mean that Major Keeling is a hypocrite, I don't agree with you."

"Now don't get white-hot. If he isn't, then he has read Scott till his brain is turned. You're such an innocent that you don't see the man does everything for effect. His appearance, his perpetual squabbles with headquarters, his popularity-hunting up here,

the idiotic things he does—they're all calculated to produce an impression, to make the unsophisticated stare, in fact. Why, one of my patrols came across him riding alone at midnight not long ago, miles away from here. The man must be either mad or a fool."

"I think you are wrong," said Colin seriously. "I believe him to be sincere, though mistaken on some points."

"What! he's in your black books too? How has he managed that?"

"He has forbidden me to preach publicly to the men," was the answer, given in a low voice, but with strong feeling—"said it would lead either to religious persecution or the suspicion of it, and that I must be satisfied with showing them a Christian life, and teaching any one who might come to me privately of his own accord. But that isn't enough. They don't come, and how can I reach them?"

"Poor old Colin!" said Ferrers, much amused. "What a Crusader you are, far too good to live nowadays. Fancy finding you in rebellion against constituted authority! I'll back you to get more and more stubborn the worse he bullies you."

Colin's face flushed. "No, I was wrong to speak as I did," he said. "It is possible the Major may be right, though I cannot see it. In any case, it is my duty to submit for the present."

"Which means that you won't accept my sympathy against the great Keeling. You always were a staunch little chap, Colin. Bet anything you stick up for me behind my back just as you do for him."

"Of course," said Colin simply; "you are our oldest friend."

"That's all very well, but your sister doesn't feel as you do. It was pretty clearly intimated to me to-day that I was not to call her Penelope, by the bye. She's done with me, I see. She scarcely spoke a word to me the whole time I was there."

"No, no; indeed you are wrong," said Colin eagerly. "She is ill, and can't talk much. She knows your

wishes perfectly. Why, you can't think I would ever let her disappoint you?"

"You wouldn't, perhaps, but Lady Haigh would be precious glad to see her do it. Look here, Colin, give your sister a message from me. Put it properly—that while I accept her ruling, and won't venture to address her at present—you know the sort of thing?—yet I fully intend to claim her promise some day, and I regard her as belonging to me, and I trust she does the same. Make it as strong as you like."

"I will. I didn't know you took it to heart so much, and Penelope will be glad to know it too. I'm sure she has an idea that you don't—well, care for her as you once did. But now I can put that right. You know that there's no one I would sooner have as a brother-in-law if—if all was well with you."

"Yes, yes, all in good time. There is one of my patrols over there, so you had better turn back now. All right!"

Colin turned back with the escort, and Ferrers pursued his way, fuming inwardly. He did not wish to deceive his friend. Was it his fault if Colin was so ridiculously easy to deceive, and persisted in believing the best of him in spite of all evidence to the contrary? Ferrers knew what his last sentence had meant. There were certain books with which Colin had provided him, entreating him to read them, when he went to Shah Nawaz, and which he was always anxious to discuss with him when they met. Since the only form of religious study to which Ferrers had given any attention of late was the convenient philosophy expounded by the Mirza, which proved right and wrong to be much the same thing, and man to be equally irresponsible for either, he congratulated himself on having so skilfully evaded cross-examination.

As for Colin, he rode back to Alibad with a serious face, and, instead of stopping at his quarters, went on to the fort to find Penelope. He was full of generous indignation over the treatment Ferrers had received, and he was glad Lady Haigh was out of the way.

Penelope raised her tired head from her cushions in surprise as he entered.

"Why, Colin! Is there anything the matter, dear?"

"I am disappointed in you, Pen," he returned gently, sitting down beside her. "You have treated poor George very unkindly to-day."

Reproof from Colin, though he was only her own age, was very grievous to Penelope. "Oh no," she cried, trying to defend herself; "I scarcely spoke to him, and I'm sure I said nothing unkind."

"That was just it. You said nothing to him, and he is deeply hurt."

"But he was so rough and noisy, Colin, and talked so loud. I could scarcely bear him to be in the room."

"It is not like you to be selfish. He wants a helping hand just now, and you think only of his voice and manners. It is a terrible responsibility to push a man back when he is trying to climb up."

"If that was all," said Penelope, rather warmly, "I would give him any help I could. But you know you said he wanted more than that."

"Of course he does." Colin drew back and looked at her in astonishment. "Why, Pen, he has your promise."

"No, no," she said restlessly, "not quite a promise. I—I don't like him, Colin. He is quite different from what he used to be. Even his face has changed."

"Your promise," he repeated. "I know you took advantage of his generosity to withdraw it for a moment, but you renewed it again immediately when I pointed out to you what you had done. Penelope, is it possible that you—my sister—wish to break a solemn promise? What reason can you possibly have for such a thing?"

Penelope writhed. She had no reason to give, even to herself. All she knew was that she had felt to-day as never before the incubus of George Ferrers' presence, the utter lack of sympathy between herself

and him. If she contrasted him with any one else, it was done unconsciously.

"I don't believe he wishes it himself," she said. "He doesn't care for me. He doesn't behave as if he did."

"He told me himself," returned Colin's solemn, accusing voice, "that while he would not venture to appeal to you at present, it was his dearest hope to claim your promise some day. It is your privilege to help him to raise himself again to the position he has lost. What can be a more noble task for a woman?"

Penelope could not say. Alone with Lady Haigh, it was easy to agree that woman was an independent being, with a life and rights of her own; but she would never have dreamt of asserting this to Colin, to whom a woman was a more or less necessary complement to a man. Ferrers needed her, therefore she would naturally accept the charge—that was his view.

"Would you wish me to marry him as he is now?" she asked desperately.

"No," he answered, after a moment's consideration: "I am not quite happy about him, and that is why I am most anxious you should be kind to him. With your sympathy to help him on, and the hope of claiming you at last, he will find the path much easier to climb. Surely this is not too much to ask?"

It sounded eminently fair and reasonable, but Penelope felt that it was not. There was a flaw somewhere which Colin did not see, and she could not point out to him, even if she could be sure that she saw it herself. Ferrers did not care for her, she was convinced, even in the careless, patronising style of his early days, and yet he insisted on keeping her bound. But perhaps he loved her in some strange fashion of his own, of which she could have no experience or conception. And Colin thought that the sacrifice was called for. She turned to him.

"I—I will try to like him, and help him—and do as he wishes," she said, finding a strange difficulty in speaking.

“Of course. I knew you couldn’t do anything else,” said Colin, with such utter unconsciousness of the mental struggle she had just gone through that Penelope found his calm acquiescence almost maddening. She was glad to be saved the necessity of answering by the sudden entrance of Lady Haigh, who turned back to rebuke a servant for not having drawn up the blinds, and then discovered Colin.

“You here?” she cried. “Why, an orderly came up ten minutes ago to ask if you had come back, and I said you hadn’t. That old wretch Gobind Chand, the Nalapur Vizier, is to come here to-morrow instead of next week, and every one is as busy as possible. And you have been making Penelope cry! Well, I hope Major Keeling will give you the worst scolding you ever had in your life—for being so late, I mean, of course.”

CHAPTER VI.

MOUNTING IN HOT HASTE.

GOBIND CHAND, to whom Lady Haigh had alluded, was the Hindu Vizier of the Mohammedan state of Nalapur, the boundary of which marched with that of Khemistan on the north. It was no secret to the rulers of Khemistan that the consolidation of their power, of which Major Keeling's settlement on the frontier was only one of the signs, could not be particularly welcome to the Amir Wilayat Ali. Formerly the country beyond his own border had been a happy hunting-ground, whither he could despatch any inconvenient Sardar or too successful soldier to raid and plunder until he was tired, reserving to himself the right of demanding a percentage of the spoil when the exile wished to return home. There were also pleasant little pickings derivable from the passage of caravans through the Akrab Pass, and the payment by weak tribes or unwarlike villages of what one side called tribute and the other blackmail, as the price of peace. These things gave the Amir a distinct pecuniary interest in the frontier district, and during Major Keeling's first sojourn on the border, every effort had been made by the Nalapuris, short of actual war, to convince him that his presence was both undesired and useless. The lapse of time, however, and the activity of the Khemistan Horse, proved to the Amir that his unwelcome neighbour had come to stay, and whereas at first any raider had only to cross the border to receive asylum, Wilayat Ali now persisted in regarding the regiment

as his private police. It was quite unnecessary for him to take any trouble to secure marauders when the Khemistan Horse had merely to come and seize them, and would do so whether he liked it or not, and he announced that he left the task of keeping order on both sides of the frontier to them, though this was not at all Major Keeling's intention, which had been to secure the Amir's active co-operation for the good of both states. To the English the ruler posed as an obliging friend, but when he wished to demand support or subsidies from his Sardars, he became a helpless victim coerced by superior force; and as he could play both parts without disturbing his own tranquillity by taking any steps whatever, he opposed a passive resistance to all projects of reform. Major Keeling had visions of a time when he would have leisure to arrange a conference at which various outstanding questions might be discussed, and the Amir brought to see what was expected of him; but in view of the Amir's obvious preference for the present state of things, there seemed little prospect of this.

Apparently, then, the Khemistan authorities should have been pleased when Wilayat Ali suddenly despatched his Vizier, Gobind Chand, to bear his somewhat belated congratulations to Sir Henry Lennox on becoming a K.C.B. To the more suspicious-minded it appeared, however, that the Amir had heard rumours of the General's approaching departure, and wished to inquire as to their truth. This suspicion was confirmed when Gobind Chand, after postponing his departure from Bab-us-Sahel on endless pretexts connected with his own health and that of every member of his suite, suddenly took a house at the port and announced that he was going to learn English, and would remain until his studies were completed. As this would at the lowest computation allow ample time for Sir Henry to depart and his successor to arrive, the pretext was a little too transparent, and it was politely intimated to Gobind Chand that his own state must be in need of his valuable services, and he was set on his homeward

way. In advance went a message to Major Keeling, ordering him to receive the distinguished traveller with all due attention, but to see him over the frontier without delay, and this caused a good deal of bustle and excitement at Alibad.

In spite of the activity with which building operations had been carried on, the gaol and the hospital were still the only edifices actually completed, and as Major Keeling refused hotly even to consider the possibility of receiving the envoy in the fort, it was necessary to erect a large tent in the space which had been set apart for public gardens, but which could not be laid out until the hot weather was over. Gobind Chand and his retinue would encamp outside the town for the night, be received by the Commandant in the morning, and resume their homeward journey in the afternoon—this was the programme. There were various ceremonies to be gone through, gifts had to be presented and accepted, and provision was made for a private interview between the two great men, to which only their respective secretaries were to be admitted. But when the time came for the interview, Gobind Chand surprised his host by requesting that even the secretaries might be excluded; and for more than an hour the officers of the Khemistan Horse kicked their heels in the anteroom, and gazed resentfully at the contented immobility of the Vizier's attendants opposite them, wondering what secrets the old sinner could have to tell the Chief. Their waiting-time came to an end suddenly. Raised voices were heard in the inner room, Major Keeling's storming in Hindustani, Gobind Chand's, shrill with fear, trying to urge some consideration upon him. Then the heavy curtain over the doorway was pulled aside with such force that it was torn from its fastenings, and the cringing form of the Vizier appeared on the threshold, with hands upraised in deprecation. He seemed to be in fear of a blow, but Major Keeling, who towered over him, gripping the torn curtain fiercely, made no attempt to proceed to personal chastisement.

“Go!” he said, and the monosyllable came from his lips with the force of an explosive. Gobind Chand’s attendants were on their feet in a moment, and hurried their master out of the tent, Captain Porter, in obedience to a gesture from the Commandant, following them to superintend their departure.

“Haigh!” said Major Keeling, and Sir Dugald detached himself from the rest. “In my office—at once,” and he led the way, Sir Dugald following. For a moment or two Major Keeling’s indignation seemed to deprive him of speech, as he tramped up and down the little room; then he turned suddenly on his subordinate.

“What are you waiting there for? You will take twenty sowars and ride to Nalapur with a letter for the Amir. Go and change your things,” with a withering glance at Sir Dugald’s full-dress uniform, “and the despatches will be ready when you are. Or before,” he added savagely.

It was fortunate that Sir Dugald was a man of even temper, and had some experience of his leader’s peculiarities, for Major Keeling’s manner was unpleasant in the extreme. But as he was leaving the room he was recalled—

“You must get a guide from Shah Nawaz. Ferrers has several Nalapuris in his detachment. I will ride with you part of the way myself, and post you in the state of affairs. Send Ross to me for orders.”

The tone was quite different, and Sir Dugald had no longer reason to fear that he might unwittingly have excited his Commandant’s displeasure. He hastened to his quarters, sent a hurried message to his wife, and reappeared in undress uniform before the letter was finished, or the twenty horsemen, picked and duly equipped by Colin, had ridden into the compound before Major Keeling’s quarters. Each man carried, as was the rule on these expeditions, three days’ rations for himself and fodder for his horse, with a skin of water. When Sir Dugald had been summoned into the inner office to receive the letter, Major Keeling’s

black horse Miani was brought up, and presently the little troop clattered out into the desert, the two Englishmen riding ahead, out of earshot of the sowars.

“Now!” said Major Keeling, when they had settled into the pace which experience had shown was the best for a long march, “I suppose you would like to hear what the row is about. I’m glad I kept my hands off that fellow, though I don’t know how I managed it. He wanted me to help him to murder his master and make himself Amir.”

“And what inducement did he offer?” Sir Dugald’s frigid calm in asking the question was intentional, for Major Keeling’s wrath was evidently bubbling up again.

“Half the contents of the treasury, whatever that might prove to be. But is that all you think about? Do you mean to say you don’t see the insult involved in the offer—the fellow’s opinion of us who wear the British uniform? Good heavens! are you made of stone?”

Sir Dugald smiled with some difficulty, for his face had grown tense. “You are the only man who would say such things to me, Major Keeling, and the only man I would allow to do it. With you I have no choice.”

“No, no; I beg your pardon. That abominable coolness of yours—but I shall be insulting you again if I don’t look out. But if you had sat listening to that villain for an hour, while he depicted Nalapur as a perfect hell on earth, and Wilayat Ali as a wholly suitable ruler for it, and then at last brought things round to the point he had been aiming at all along, but which I had never seen, you’d know something of what I feel. Why, the fellow had the inconceivable impudence to say that he thought I understood all the time what he was driving at, and only held back so as to make certain that he put himself completely in my power!”

“But he could never have thought we should set a Hindu over a Mohammedan state.”

“What have we done in Kashmir?”

“But Nalapur is outside our borders. We don't claim any right to interfere in their choice of a ruler.”

“Whether we claim it or not, we have interfered already. It was before your time, of course, just after that wretched expedition to Ethiopia, where we ought never to have gone, but having gone, we should have stayed. Nasr Ali was Amir then, and his behaviour throughout was most correct, even when our fortunes were at the lowest. Unfortunately for him, it was thought well that the General and he should meet, so that he might be thanked for his loyalty, and a halt was made for the purpose. Things went wrong from that moment. The General and his escort were attacked by tribesmen in one of the passes, and when they got through, with some loss, the news came that Nasr Ali was ill, and not able to meet them. You know what Old Harry is, and how he was likely to receive such a message after the impudence of the tribes; and just as he was working himself up into a fine fury there came to his camp in disguise these two scoundrels, Gobind Chand and Wilayat Ali, the Amir's brother. They made out that they had stolen away at the risk of their lives to warn the General that Nasr Ali meant to murder him and the whole escort. Sir Henry didn't wait to inquire why Nasr Ali should choose the time when a victorious army was within call to assassinate its leader, for the fugitives' news just fitted in with his own suspicions. They gave him a sign by which he was to judge of their good faith. Nasr Ali had promised to receive the mission at the gate of the city the following day: if he did not appear, that would be proof of his treachery. Sir Henry sent an order back to the army for a brigade to be in readiness, and waited. Sure enough, before they reached the city gate Wilayat Ali, in his own person this time, came to meet them and say that his brother was too ill to come out, but would receive them in the *killā* [palace] if they would enter the city. To Sir Henry, and all who remembered the Ethiopian busi-

ness, it was simply an invitation to come and be murdered; so he rode back to camp, sent another messenger to order up the brigade, and passed a horribly uncomfortable night, expecting to be attacked at every moment. Much to his astonishment, he was not attacked, though bands of Nalapuris were said to be circling round, hoping to catch him off his guard, and then the brigade arrived after a forced march. Old Harry allowed the men two or three hours' rest, occupied the hills overlooking the city in the night, and sent in a demand for its surrender in the morning. Nasr Ali, posing, so the General thought, as an injured innocent, protested against the whole thing as a piece of the blackest treachery, carried out under the mask of friendship, and refused to surrender. I don't want to go into the whole sickening business; the place was stormed, and Nasr Ali killed in the fighting. Wilayat Ali opened the gates of the *killa*, and allowed the treasury (there was remarkably little in it) to be looted. He was the natural heir, for Nasr Ali's women and children had all been massacred. Of course Wilayat Ali gave us to understand that our troops had done it, but that is absolutely untrue. The first man that broke into the zenana found it looted, and dead bodies everywhere—a shocking sight. I haven't the slightest doubt that Wilayat Ali had admitted a set of *badmashes* to wipe out his unfortunate brother's family, and intended to charge it on us, but there's no proving it. Well, he was placed on the *gadi* with Gobind Chand as his Vizier, and we marched home again. Little by little things came out which made me think a horrible miscarriage of justice had occurred, and when I laid them before Sir Henry he had to believe it too. That Wilayat Ali deliberately traduced and betrayed his brother in order to obtain his kingdom I am as certain as that I am here, and now I have to interfere to save him from being murdered by his fellow-scoundrel!"

"There is no chance of putting things right," said Sir Dugald, in the tone of one stating a fact rather than asking a question.

“None. If any of poor Nasr Ali’s children survived, we might do something, but the fiends took good care of that. There were two boys, certainly, and I believe some daughters as well, but they are beyond reach of any atonement we can make. And since no good could come of it, it would look rather bad for the paramount Power to have to confess how easily it had been hoodwinked; so we let ill alone.”

“Poetic justice would suggest that you should allow Gobind Chand to murder Wilayat Ali, and to be murdered in his turn by the Sardars.”

“And put young Hasrat Ali, Wilayat’s son, who by all accounts is a regular chip of the old block, on the *gadi*? That wouldn’t better things much, and would mean a nice crop of revolutions and tumults. Nalapur is too close to our borders for that sort of thing. I don’t say that I wouldn’t have welcomed poetic justice if it had had the sense to take its course without consulting me; but as it is, I can’t connive at the removal of an ally, even an unsatisfactory one. Your business is to see the Amir as soon as you arrive, if bribes or threats will do it, so as to forestall Gobind Chand; but don’t leave without delivering the despatch into his hands, if you have to wait for a week. Even if Gobind Chand succeeds in getting round him and persuading him of his innocence, the warning will make him keep his eyes wide open. And—I am not a particularly nervous man, but this is a wicked world—see that your men mount guard properly day and night while you are in Nalapur, and go the rounds yourself at irregular intervals. Since you know something now of Wilayat Ali, I needn’t remind you not to trust a word that he says. Well, I’ll turn back here. Take care of yourself.”

Sir Dugald saluted and rode on with his detachment, and Major Keeling, putting spurs to his horse, galloped back to Alibad, still in the gold-laced uniform and plumed helmet he had donned for his interview with the Vizier. He had never many minutes to waste, and Gobind Chand had robbed him of half a working day

already, but he made time to pause at the fort and send Lady Haigh a message that he had seen her husband on his way.

“As if that was any consolation!” cried Lady Haigh when she received it. “If he had seen him coming back, now——! The way he keeps poor Dugald running about all day and every day is really shameful. I do believe”—with gloomy triumph—“that he picks him out for all the dangerous and awkward bits of work on purpose. If anything happened to any of the other men, their sweethearts or mothers or sisters might reproach the Major, and so he sends Dugald, knowing that I have sworn not to say a word, whatever happens.”

Penelope smiled feebly. She was very long in recovering from her attack of fever, and Lady Haigh was anxious about her, even throwing out hints as to the possibility of emulating the despicable conduct of the Punjab ladies, and taking a trip to the Hills or the sea. But Penelope only shook her head, and said she should be better when the cool weather came. No change of scene could alter the fact that she had finally and deliberately taken upon herself the responsibility of Ferrers and his failings, or relieve her from the haunting feeling that henceforward there would be a blank in her life. What caused the blank she had not courage to ask herself. People were not so fond of analysing their sensations in those days as in these; it was enough to be conscious of an ever-present sense of loss, to know that she had put away from her something that it would have been a joy to possess.

Three days passed without news of any kind, dreary days to the two ladies, who devoted themselves, as in honour bound, to their unsatisfactory pursuits, and only emerged from the fort for their evening ride. The “gardens”—for the name which sounded ironical had by general consent been adopted as prophetic—boasted a nondescript erection of masonry which did duty as a band-stand; and here a band in process of making struggled painfully through various easy exer-

cises and a mutilated edition of "God Save the Queen." Lady Haigh and Penelope always halted their *palkis* dutifully in the neighbourhood of the band, and stepped out to walk and talk a little with Major Keeling and the other men. It was as necessary to appear here once a-day as on the sea-drive at Bab-us-Sahel, and if Major Keeling was in the town he never failed to show himself. Riding, fighting, building, surveying, planting, exercising his men, administering his district, he had ten men's work in hand, and his only moment of leisure in the whole day was this brief evening promenade. Lady Haigh told him once that it was very good of him to devote it to social purposes. He replied gravely that it was his duty, the least he could do—then hesitated, and confessed that he did not dislike it, nay, that the thought of it sometimes occurred to him pleasantly in the intervals of his day's labours, and Lady Haigh received the information with suitable surprise and gratitude.

When the watchman on the fort tower announced at last that Sir Dugald's detachment was in sight, Major Keeling broke up abruptly the court he was holding, and rode out to meet him. As soon as details could be discerned through the haze of sand, he assured himself that the numbers were complete, and that no fighting had taken place; but Sir Dugald's face, as he met him, did not bear any look of triumph.

"Well?" asked the older man sharply.

"The Amir absolutely refused to receive me until the morning after we arrived, and by that time Gobind Chand had turned up, of course. They make out that Gobind Chand's proposal to you was inspired by his master, and intended to test your friendship."

"I hope they were satisfied that it had stood the test?"

"Well, hardly. They said that if you were really friendly you would hand over to them some fugitive called the Sheikh-ul-Jabal."

Major Keeling nodded his head slowly two or three times. "So that's it, is it? Rather a neat plan, if

my righteous indignation hadn't knocked it on the head. But somehow I don't fancy Wilayat Ali would care to suggest to Gobind Chand the idea of murdering him. And yet, if you got to Nalapur before Gobind Chand, how could he have managed to delay the audience until he had put things right with the Amir? Of course he may have anticipated my action, and left directions, but—— Who was your guide, after all?"

"Ferrers' munshi, Mirza Fazl-ul-Hacq."

"What!" Major Keeling smote his hand upon his knee. "That man, of all men? The very last—— How in the world——?"

"Is there any objection to him? Ferrers did not want to weaken his garrison, for the outlaw Shir Husseïn is in the neighbourhood again, and he hopes to catch him. This man knows Nalapur well, and has friends in the city. Ferrers trusts him implicitly—— with all that he has in the world, if you are to believe the Mirza himself."

"I can quite believe it. Well, no matter. I ought to have warned you. No, I know nothing against the man; but why does he always keep out of my way, if it isn't that he's afraid to meet me? And he has friends in Nalapur, has he? Did he go to see them as soon as you arrived?"

"Fairly soon after. I thought it as well to let him trot off, so that he might bring us warning if there was any talk of attacking us."

"Quite so. But I hardly think he'd have done it. So they want the Sheikh-ul-Jabal given up? I'll see them hanged first!"

"Is there anything peculiar about the man, Major,—— any mystery——?"

"None that I know of. Why?"

"Both the Amir and Gobind Chand looked at me very hard when they made the demand, almost as if they expected to stare me out of countenance. And there was a sort of uneasiness about the whole interview, as if either they knew more than I did, or sus-

pected me of knowing more than they did—I couldn't make out which. And perhaps you didn't notice, sir, that when Gobind Chand met you first he gave a great start? I noticed it, and so did Porter."

"No, I didn't see it. That wretched mystery cropping up again, I suppose! I wish I could get to the bottom of it. But there's nothing mysterious about the Sheikh-ul-Jabal. He was a great friend of our unfortunate victim, Nasr Ali, who married his sister, and he managed to escape into our territory, with a few followers, when the trouble came. He had done us good service in the Ethiopian war, and Sir Henry, whose conscience was pricking him pretty badly, was glad to promise him protection, though Wilayat Ali has never ceased to press for his being given up. He is a heretic of some sort, and the orthodox Nalapuri Mullahs hate him like poison."

"A Sufi, I suppose?" said Sir Dugald.

"No; he is the head of a sect of his own—the remnant of some organisation which was very powerful at the time of the Crusades, I believe. Even now he seems to have adherents all over Asia, and several times he has given us valuable information. But Wilayat Ali swears that he is perpetually intriguing against him, and so the Government have rewarded him rather scurvily— forbidden him to quit Khemistan. The poor man laid it so much to heart that he took a vow never to leave his house again as long as the sun shone upon the earth."

"Then he is a state prisoner somewhere? Is he down at the coast?"

"No, he has furbished up a ruined fort which he found in the mountains, and calls it Sheikhgarh. He has an allowance from us, and he could range all over the province if he liked. It is only his vow that prevents him, and, curiously enough, I have reason to know that it's not as alarming as it sounds."

"Why, have you ever seen him?"

"I have, and I have not. I met him out in the desert one night—saw a troop of men riding, and

challenged them. When he heard who I was, he came forward to explain that for a person of such sanctity it was easy to dispense himself partially from his vow—so as to let him take his rides abroad at night. He was muffled up to the eyes, and it was dark, besides, so I can't say I saw him, but I liked his voice. I told him he need fear no molestation from me, that I considered both he and Nasr Ali had been treated scandalously, and that I was on his side if the Government troubled him any more."

Sir Dugald hid a smile. Major Keeling's opinion of any government he might happen to serve was never a matter of doubt, and no prudential motives would be likely to induce him to keep it secret.

CHAPTER VII.

EYE-WITNESS.

SIR HENRY LENNOX had resigned his post, and the military despotism in Khemistan proper was at an end. The Europeans at Alibad journeyed in two detachments to the port on the river to bid farewell to the old warrior, who was making his last triumphal progress amid the tears and lamentations of the people to whom, according to his enemies and their newspapers, his name was a signal for universal execration. The General and his flotilla of steamers passed on, and Major Keeling returned to Alibad, refusing to be comforted. The epoch of the soldier was over, that of the civilian had begun, and, like his old commander, he detested civilians as a class, without prejudice to certain favoured individuals, with a furious hatred. Mr Crayne, the newly appointed Commissioner, was not only a civilian but a man of such an awkward temper that it was said his superiors and contemporaries at Bombay had united to thrust the post upon him. It was not his by seniority, but they would have been willing to see him made Governor-General if it would remove him from their immediate neighbourhood. In him Major Keeling perceived a foeman worthy of his steel, and before the new ruler had fairly arrived in the province, they were embarked upon a fierce paper warfare over almost every point of Mr Crayne's inaugural utterance. After a hard day's work, it was a positive refreshment to the soldier to sit down and compose a fiery letter to his obnoxious superior; and since he was one of those to whom ex-

perience brings little wisdom, he repeated with zest the old mistake which had made him a by-word in official circles. More than once in former years, when he thought he had made a specially good point in a controversy of this kind, or forced his opponent into a particularly untenable corner, he had sent the correspondence to the Bombay papers, which were ready enough to print it, salving their consciences by printing also scathing remarks on the sender. They gave him no sympathy, and the military authorities sent him stinging rebukes; but as if by a kind of fatality he did the same thing over again as often as circumstances made it possible. His friends and subordinates looked on with fear and trembling, and whispered that the only reason he was still in the service was the fact that no one else could keep the frontier quiet: his enemies chuckled while they writhed, and said that the man was hard at work twisting the rope to hang himself, and it must be long enough soon.

It was unfortunate that Ferrers should have chosen this particular time to ask for leave in order to pay a visit to his uncle. He was heartily sick of the frontier, and the prospect of the Christmas festivities at Bab-us-Sahel was very pleasant. Moreover, he was anxious to bring himself to Mr Crayne's remembrance. These months of hard service in a detestable spot like Alibad ought to have quite wiped out the memory of his past follies, and the uncle who had refused a request for money with unkind remarks such as made his nephew's ears tingle still, might be willing to help him in other ways now that he could do so without cost to himself. By dint of studiously respectful and persistent letters congratulating Mr Crayne on his appointment, Ferrers had succeeded in eliciting a sufficiently cordial invitation to spend Christmas at Government House, provided he could obtain leave. His uncle did not offer to pay his expenses; but for the provision of the heavy cost of the journey he relied, in his usual fashion, on the trustfulness of the regimental *shroff*—an elastic term for an official whose functions included both banking and

money-lending. The obstacle came just where he had not expected it, for Major Keeling refused to grant him leave. It was true that Ferrers had already had the full leave to which he was entitled, and had spent it in hunting, but a more prudent man than the Commandant might have felt inclined to stretch a point, with the view of conciliating the ruling power. Not so Major Keeling. If he had felt the slightest inclination to grant Ferrers' request, the fact that he was Mr Crayne's nephew would have kept him from doing so; but as it was, he rated Ferrers severely for asking for leave at all when the freebooter Shir Hussein was still at large in his district and foiling all attempts to lay him by the heels. Exasperated alike by the refusal and the rebuke, Ferrers rode back to Shah Nawaz in a towering passion, and casting aside the restraint which he had hitherto maintained, gave vent to his feelings by inveighing furiously against the Commandant in the presence of Mirza Fazl-ul-Hacq. The Mirza listened calmly, and with something like amusement, saying little, but the few words he uttered were calculated to inflame his employer's rage rather than to allay it.

"Keeling has made up his mind to persecute me for being my uncle's nephew!" cried Ferrers at last. "I won't stand it. I'll appeal to the Commissioner. He can't refuse to take my side when he sees how I'm treated."

"It may be he will remove you to another post, sahib," suggested the Mirza.

"I only wish he would! I'd go like a shot."

"It may be that Kilin Sahib wishes it also." The suggestion was made in a meditative tone, and Ferrers turned and looked at the Mirza.

"What do you mean? Hasn't he just refused to let me go?"

"It is one thing to go for a while and return, and another to depart permanently, sahib," was the answer.

"You mean that he hopes to make me throw up the frontier altogether? What business has he to try and turn me out?"

“Nay, sahib, it is not for me to say. But it may be he has no desire that there should always be one near him who might carry tales to your honour’s uncle.”

“What tales could I carry? The man’s straight enough. He does himself more harm by one of his own letters that I could do him in a year.”

“Even if your honour told all that you know?”

“Why, of course. What are you driving at, Mirza? I wish you wouldn’t be so abominably mysterious.”

“If Firoz Sahib knows nothing now that his honoured uncle would care to hear, it may be he might learn something.”

“There you go again! What is it? Do you know anything?”

“Is it for the dust of the earth, the poor servant of Firoz Sahib, to utter words against the great Kilin Sahib, the lord of the border? The lips of my lord’s slave are sealed.”

“That they’re not. You’ve gone too far to draw back now. If you don’t tell me what you mean, I’ll have it out of you one way or another.”

“Nay, my lord will not so far forget himself as to utter threats to his servant?” said the Mirza, in a silky tone which nevertheless reminded Ferrers that his dependant could make things very unpleasant for him if he liked. “As I have said, I may not bear testimony against Kilin Sahib; but who shall blame me if I enable my lord to see with his own eyes the things of which I speak?”

“By all means. Splendid idea!” said Ferrers, divided between the desire of conciliating the Mirza and a certain reluctance to spy upon the Commandant. But this quickly gave place to excitement. What could he be going to discover? “When can you do this?” he asked. “And how can you manage about me?”

“If my lord will deign to put on once more, as often in the past, the garments of the faithful, and will pledge himself to say nothing of what he sees save what I may give him leave to reveal, I will lead him

this very night to a certain place where he shall see things that will surprise him."

"Oh, all right!" said Ferrers, forgetting that he was putting himself once more into the Mirza's power. "The *daffadar* must know we are going out in disguise, in case of an alarm in the night, but he had better think we are going to try and track Shir Hussein. You look after the clothes, of course. Do we ride or walk?"

"We will ride the first part of the way, sahib, and two ponies shall be in readiness; but the place to which we go is a *pir's* tomb in the hills this side of the Akrab Pass, and there we must walk. But we shall return to the ponies, and be here again by dawn."

The Mirza bowed himself out, and Ferrers whiled away the rest of the day in vain speculations. Was he about to discover that Major Keeling amused himself with such adventures as he and his friends at Bab-us-Sahel had been wont to undertake? He thought not, for, though born and partly brought up in India, the Major had always spoken with contemptuous dislike of Europeans who aped the natives, or tried to live a double life. Of course that might be only to throw his hearers off the scent, but still—and Ferrers went over the ground again, with the same result. He had not come to any decision as to what he was to expect to see by the time the Mirza thought it was safe to start, and he could get no satisfaction from him. He was to judge with his own eyes, and not be prepared beforehand for what he was to be shown.

It was a long ride over the desert, which shone faintly white in the starlight. There was no wind, and the whirling sand which made travelling so unpleasant in the daytime was momentarily still. The distant cry of a wild animal was to be heard at times, but no human beings seemed to be abroad save the two riders. It was different, however, when they had reached the mountains, and, picketing the ponies in a convenient hollow, began to climb a rocky path, for

here and there in front of them was to be seen a muffled figure. Once or twice they passed or were overtaken by one of these, with whom the Mirza exchanged a low-toned greeting, the words of which Ferrers could not distinguish. Sooner than he expected they found themselves entering a village of rough mud-huts, which had evidently grown up around and under the protection of a larger building, a Moslem sanctuary of some sort. This must be the tomb of the *pir*, or holy man, of whom the Mirza had spoken, thought Ferrers; and he noticed that muffled figures like those he had seen on the way up seemed to be thronging into it. The place was built of rough mud-brick, but there were rude traces of decoration about the walls, and some architectural features in the form of a bulb-shaped dome and two rather squat minarets. Ferrers and his guide joined the crowd at the entrance, and were pressing into the building with them, when Ferrers felt the Mirza grasp his arm, and impel him aside. They seemed to have turned into a dark passage between two walls, while the rest of the crowd had gone straight on, and a man with whom the Mirza spoke for a moment, and who was apparently one of the keepers of the tomb, closed a door behind them as soon as they had entered. Still guided by the Mirza, Ferrers stumbled along the passage until a faint gleam of starlight through a loop-hole showed him that there was a spiral staircase in front. The steps were choked with sand and much decayed, but the two men made shift to climb them, and came out at last on a fairly smooth mud platform, which was evidently the roof of the tomb. The Mirza walked noiselessly across it until he came to the dark mass which represented the bulging dome, and Ferrers, following, found that rude steps had been devised in the mouldering brickwork, so that it was possible to mount to the top. Once there, a sudden rush of oil-fumes and mingled odours reached him, and he would have coughed but for the Mirza's imperative whisper ordering silence. Following his guide's

example, he lay down on the slope of the dome, supporting himself by gripping with his fingers the edge of the brickwork, over which he looked. He had noticed that although from the ground the top of the dome appeared roughly spherical, it was in reality flattened, and now he found that this flat effect was caused by the absence of the concluding courses of brickwork, which would answer to a key-stone, so that a round hole was left for the admission of light and air. They could thus look right down into the building, upon the actual tomb, marked by an oblong slab of rough stone, immediately below them, and upon the men whom they had seen entering, now seated on the floor in reverential, expectant silence. The place was lighted by a number of smoking oil-lamps, which revealed the rude arabesques in blue and crimson decorating the walls, and brought out a gleam of shining turquoise and white higher up, where were the remains of a frieze of glazed tiles, and which were also accountable for the fumes which obliged Ferrers to turn his head away every now and then for a breath of fresh air.

After one of these interruptions, he became aware that a service of some kind had begun. A voice was droning out what sounded like a liturgy, and the congregation were kneeling with their foreheads to the floor, and performing the proper genuflexions at suitable intervals. Presently the Mirza grasped his arm again, and directed his attention to the officiating reader. Ferrers could only discern him dimly, and saw him, moreover, from behind; but presently it began to dawn upon him that the figure was in some way familiar. The man was very tall, and, for an Oriental, of an extraordinarily powerful build. His flowing robes were of purest white, but his girdle was scarlet; and round a pointed cap of bright steel, in shape like the fighting headgear of the Khemistan Horse, he wore a scarlet turban. After a time he had occasion to turn round, and Ferrers, with a thrill for which he could not at first account, saw his face.

Again there was that impression of familiarity. The thick black hair, the bushy beard, the strongly marked features, the keen eyes—Ferrers knew them all; and when he realised what this meant, he was only prevented by the Mirza's arm from slipping off the dome. To find Major Keeling reading Arabic prayers in a Mohammedan place of worship was a shock for which nothing he had hitherto seen had prepared him.

Presently the service came to an end, and the reader disappeared from view. From the movements of the audience, it seemed that they were grouping themselves round him at one end of the building; and, at the Mirza's suggestion, Ferrers slipped and shuffled round the dome until he reached a point opposite to his former position. Here he could again obtain a glimpse of the white and scarlet figure, seated now in a niche in the end wall, with the congregation sitting before him like disciples in the presence of a teacher. What followed was more or less of a mystery to Ferrers, for it was difficult to see clearly, and almost impossible to hear. All spoke in low voices, and the mingled sounds rose confusedly to the opening in the dome. But it seemed evident that reports of some kind were given in by certain of the audience, whose attire showed them to belong to various tribes, or even to different regions of Central Asia; that orders were issued, and small strips torn from the teacher's white robe blessed and distributed among those present. All this was highly interesting; but from what followed, Ferrers, whose religious sense was by no means keen, drew back revolted. To see his Commandant breathing on the eager hearers who crowded round him as he rose, or laying his hands on their heads, according as they entreated a blessing or the favour of his holy breath, was bad enough. But there were some who suffered from bodily ailments, and the teacher must needs lay his hand upon the spot affected and mutter a prayer; and for those who had sick friends at home he must write charms on scraps of paper and mutter incantations over them. Then, just as he was about to leave

the place, a very old man pushed forward and grasped his robe.

“O my lord!” he cried, and his high quavering voice reached Ferrers clearly, “strengthen the faith of thy servant. Months ago I disobeyed thy commands, and sought a sign from thee in the daytime and in the presence of the ignorant and the infidel. Thou didst pour scorn upon me, such as I well deserved, but pardon me now. All those that are here have seen thy power, save only thy servant. Only a little sign, O my lord—to behold fire breathed from thy lips, or a light shining round thee——”

The teacher held up his hand for silence, and answered in the same low voice as before. Though Ferrers strained his ears, he could not hear what was said, but the Mirza was at his side.

“The Sheikh says that he will show the faithful a new miracle,” he whispered. “Many of them have seen him breathe fire, but now a sweet odour, as of roses, shall suddenly encompass him, that they may know the worth of his prayers.”

“The odour of sanctity!” chuckled Ferrers, in mingled amusement and disgust; and presently, rather to his astonishment, a faint but distinct perfume of attar of roses made itself felt among the oil-fumes which rose through the opening. To the crowd below the scent must have been much more evident, and their expressions of joy and wonder broke out loudly. The old man who had asked for a miracle flung himself down in transports of delight, and kissed the ground before the Sheikh’s feet, and there were urgent entreaties to be led forth at once against the enemy, which were promptly refused. When the teacher had disappeared from view, the Mirza touched Ferrers’ arm, and they scrambled down the dome and crept to the side of the roof, where, sheltered by the minaret, they looked over the edge. The red and white of the Sheikh’s dress were clearly discernible, but it was not easy to see what was going on among his supporters.

As Ferrers' eyes became accustomed to the darkness, however, he perceived that a shallow grave had been dug, and that a coffin was ready to be committed to it. He looked round at the Mirza with horror. Were these men about to dispose of the body of some member of their mysterious association who had been false to his vows, and suffered for it? But the Mirza's whisper was reassuring—

“It is the body of a man of Gamara, who died here yesterday. The Sheikh will utter spells which will preserve it from decay, that when the friends are about to return home they may take up the body and bury it in the burial-place of his fathers in his own land.”

The Sheikh's incantations were lengthy, and before they were over the Mirza and Ferrers descended the staircase again. As they passed the loophole at its foot, the Mirza directed Ferrers' attention to a brazier filled with glowing charcoal which stood in a recess in the opposite wall.

“The Sheikh had smeared the wooden walls of the niche in which he sat with attar of roses before the service began, and placed this brazier here,” he said. “He knew that as the heat penetrated through the wall, the perfume would make itself felt.”

“Wily beggar! he leaves nothing to chance,” said Ferrers, and stopped suddenly with sick disgust. The successful charlatan of whom he spoke was a British officer, a man whose hand he had grasped in friendship.

They groped along the passage, and slipped out noiselessly by the door into the crowd of disciples. When the funeral was over the Sheikh bade farewell to his followers, and mounted a black horse which had been brought forward in readiness. Ferrers restrained himself with difficulty from whistling to the horse.

“If it was Miani, he might know my whistle,” he said to himself; “but I can't believe Keeling would use him on such a business as this.”

The Sheikh rode off alone, and the assembly melted

away quickly. Ferrers and the Mirza picked their way down the path in silence, found their ponies, and said nothing until they were at a safe distance from the hills. Then Ferrers turned to his companion.

“What does it mean?” he said.

“He that you have seen is the Sheikh-ul-Jabal, sahib. Whether he is also any one else is for you to say.”

“But is it possible that the man can be a British officer all day and a Mohammedan fanatic at night? Who is the Sheikh-ul-Jabal, by the way—not the old joker who lives in the hills to the west?”

“The same, sahib.”

“But what is he driving at? Who is he going to war with?”

“It is not for me to say, sahib; but it may be that he designs to conquer the nations even as far as Gamara.”

Ferrers reflected. To Major Keeling, as to many British officers at the time, the name of Gamara was like a red rag to a bull, and it was one of their favourite dreams that one day a British Indian army would sweep the accursed spot from the face of the earth. It was not inherently impossible that, despairing of seeing the dream ever fulfilled by constituted authority, Major Keeling should proceed to make it a reality by methods of his own. But the means—the mummery, trickery, dissimulation that were necessary,—how could he stoop to them, and yet pose as an honourable man?

“Have you ever spied there before?” asked Ferrers of the Mirza.

“Often, sahib.”

“And what have you seen at other times?”

“Always the same sort of things, sahib—plannings and pretended miracles. But I can show you more than this in another place, only it may not be yet for a time.”

“Let it be as soon as possible.” Ferrers rode on silently. It did not occur to him to inquire what had suggested to the Mirza the idea of spying on Major

Keeling, or what result he hoped to gain from it. He scarcely heard Fazl-ul-Hacq's voice adjuring him not to breathe a syllable about what he had seen until he gave him leave, for he was asking himself a question. Next week he must go into Alibad for Christmas, and meet Major Keeling at every turn. How could he treat him as if he knew nothing of his proceedings?

CHAPTER VIII.

SEEING AND BELIEVING.

WHEN Ferrers rode into Alibad next week, to spend his Christmas there, his excitement had died down. He had not received the additional evidence against Major Keeling which the Mirza had promised him, and he understood that he must be content to wait for it. But he had schooled himself into quietness since that eventful night by dint of dwelling chiefly on the ridiculous side of what he had seen, and found the recollection rather amusing than otherwise. He felt that he could meet the delinquent without any inconvenient display of wrath, and was prepared to enjoy to the full such Christmas festivities as the resources of the station might provide. He wondered, with something very like mirth, on what sort of footing he would find himself with Penelope this time. Hitherto it had seemed as if he could not remain in the same mind about her for two days together. But surely it must be her fault, if she could not keep him faithful. No doubt if he found her looking well and bright, more especially if the other men seemed inclined to pay court to her, his suspended affection would revive; but if she looked pale, and was too dull for any one to care to talk to her, it was not likely he would wish to seek her out. If she was no longer interesting, how could he possibly be interested in her, and was he to blame that this was the case?

Thoughts of this kind were vaguely forming themselves in his mind as he rode, when a cloud of dust in

front announced the approach of another horseman, and presently resolved itself into Colin, his face wearing a determined expression which told that, as his Covenanting forefathers would have said, something was "laid upon his mind." Ferrers wondered what was the matter, but Colin said nothing until he had turned his horse and they were riding side by side. Then he inquired with startling suddenness—

"Are you still in the same mind about Penelope as when we last talked about her?"

"Why, Colin, have you come out to ask me my intentions?" asked Ferrers, much amused.

"I'm not joking. If you feel as you did when you sent her that message by me, I think the time is come to announce it openly. Do you feel inclined to speak to her yourself on the subject?"

Ferrers shrugged his shoulders, and yielded, in his usual fashion, to the influence of the moment. "I should be delighted, but how is it to be managed? Lady Haigh watches over her like a dragon when I am there."

"I will undertake Lady Haigh if you will seize your opportunity. Penelope is unhappy in her present anomalous position, I am certain. She distinctly gave me the impression that she had thought you unkind and neglectful. Of course I defended you as best I could, but you should have been there to speak for yourself."

"But I thought it was Penelope's own wish that I should keep my distance?"

"So I thought," was the troubled answer; "but now I think it might have been better if you had not held aloof quite so much. I may have mistaken her—I was so anxious to bring you together again that I would have agreed to almost any terms." Ferrers laughed involuntarily, but Colin's forehead was puckered with anxiety. "Perhaps you should have refused to take her at her word—"

"Or at your word," suggested Ferrers.

"Well, perhaps if you had been more eager, refused

to be kept at a distance in this way, she might have liked it better. Women seem to find some moral support in an engagement, somehow——”

“What a young Solon you are, Colin! Well, give me a lead at the right moment, and I’ll play up to it. So poor little Pen is miserable, is she?”

“She is not happy, and she won’t talk about you. She must think you have treated her badly—don’t you agree with me? I daresay she has the idea that I might have helped her more. I hope it will be all right now, and that I am not wrong in——”

“Oh, look here, Colin, don’t trot out that conscience of yours,” said Ferrers, with rough good-nature. “We’re going to put things right, at any rate, and you can’t quarrel with what you’ve done yourself,” and Colin consented to leave the subject. He was honestly anxious to do what was best for his sister, with an unconscious mental reservation in favour of what he thought was best; and the barrier which the last few months had raised between Penelope and himself was a real grief to him. Penelope had learnt to carry her burden alone. Colin could not understand why it should be a burden at all, and she could not confide in Lady Haigh without seeming to accuse Colin. Her sole comfort hitherto had been that Ferrers made no attempt to enforce what she regarded as his threats in the message sent by Colin, and she looked forward to Christmas-week with absolute dread. She hoped desperately that he might still hold aloof; but this hope was destined to be shattered as soon as he reached Alibad.

Colin brought him up immediately to pay his respects to Lady Haigh, who still held her court in the fort, for at the very beginning of the rains one of the newly built houses had subsided by slow degrees into its original mud, and Major Keeling would not allow the ladies to move until the others had been tested and strengthened. Lady Haigh’s policy was unchanged, it was evident. She kept the conversation general, and made it clear that she would remain on guard

over Penelope until Ferrers was safely off the premises. But Colin had come prepared to throw himself heroically into the breach.

"I think Captain Ferrers and my sister have something to say to each other," he said, and offered his arm to Lady Haigh with formal courtesy. "Perhaps you would not mind showing me the view from the ramparts again?"

No one was more astonished than Lady Haigh herself at her compliance with the invitation; but, as she said later, when she was politely handed out of her own drawing-room, what could she do but go? The one glimpse she had of Penelope reassured her. The girl's colour had risen, and it was evident she resented her brother's action, and was not inclined to accept his ruling tamely. For the moment Ferrers was the more embarrassed of the two. He fidgeted from one chair to another, and then took up a book on the table near Penelope and played with it, not noticing the start with which she half rose to rescue it from his hands. It was a battered copy of Scott's Poems, the pages everywhere decorated with underlining and marginal notes.

"Why, I believe you have got hold of the Chief's beloved Scott!" he cried. "He might have found a respectable copy to lend you."

"I should not have cared for that," she replied. "It is his notes that interest me."

"Oh, you find the Chief an object of interest?" Ferrers looked up sharply. "Do you see much of him?"

"He comes in fairly often." Penelope's tone was curiously repressed. "I think he likes to talk to—us."

"And what may you and he find to talk about?"

"The province, chiefly. Sometimes the battles he has been in."

Ferrers laughed forbearingly. There was little need to fear a rival in a man who could see a girl constantly for six months, and still talk to her on military and civil themes at the end of the time. "And you find

that enlivening?" he asked. "Well, there's no harm in it, but I wouldn't advise you to become too confidential with him. He's not the man you think him."

"I did not know I had asked your advice on the subject," said Penelope coldly.

"Oh, didn't you? but you see I have a right to give it; and I tell you plainly I don't wish you to make an intimate friend of Keeling."

"Even supposing that you had such a right, I should never think of bowing to it unless I knew your reasons."

"Do you really wish me to give them? I thought you might prefer to go on believing in your friend."

"I wish to hear the worst you can say of him, and I shall go on believing in him just the same."

"Will you? I think not. What would you say if I told you I had seen him, a week ago last night, playing *imam* at a *pir's* tomb out near the Akrah—reciting prayers, writing charms, pretending to work miracles, and all the rest of it?"

"A week ago last night?" said Penelope faintly. Then she pulled herself together. "I should say you had been mistaken."

"Mistaken? Am I not to believe the witness of my own eyes?"

"I would not believe the witness of my own eyes in such a case."

Ferrers wondered at the decision with which she spoke, not knowing what was in her mind. On the night he mentioned, she had remembered, while lying awake, that she had left the book she was reading—one of Sir Dugald's—on the ramparts. Fearing it would be spoilt by the dew, she roused her ayah and told her to go and fetch it, but the woman whimpered that she was afraid—there were always ghosts in these old forts—and hung back even when Penelope said she would come too. They reached the rampart safely, however, the clear starlight making a lamp unnecessary, and rescued the book. As they turned to descend the steps again, the pad of a horse's feet upon

the sand reached their ears, and looking over the parapet, they saw Major Keeling ride past on Miani. There was no possibility of mistake, and Penelope had never dreamt of imagining that the rider in undress uniform and curtained forage-cap could be any one but the Commandant. He was bound on one of his restless wanderings over the desert, and her heart sent forth a silent entreaty to him to be prudent. But now, as she said, she was willing to disbelieve the evidence of her own eyes if it gave support to this story of Ferrers'.

"I suppose you think I am a liar?" he demanded resentfully.

"I think you have either made a mistake or been deceived. Do you believe it yourself? What are you going to do?"

Ferrers was nonplussed. He had disobeyed the Mirzâ's injunction, and spoken without waiting for the further evidence promised him. He might have put himself into a very awkward position if Penelope should tell any one of what he had said, and he decided to temporise.

"Of course I should never think of saying anything about it. As you say, it's a case in which one can't take seeing as believing. You won't say anything about it, of course?"

"Is it likely?" demanded Penelope indignantly. Ferrers surveyed her with growing interest, and became suddenly sorry for himself.

"You flare up if any one says a word against the Chief, and yet you believed a whole string of accusations against me, simply on Lady Haigh's word," he said.

"I thought you acknowledged they were true? At any rate, you did not value my opinion of you sufficiently to take a single step to justify yourself."

"What was the good? You were prejudiced against me. If you had cared for me enough to give me a chance, it would have been different, but I saw you didn't, so I set you free."

“And bound me again the next morning.”

“I had seen you by that time, and I couldn't let you go. But what sort of life have you led me since—keeping me at arm's-length all these months? Surely you might have been a little kinder——” Ferrers stopped abruptly, for there was something like scorn in Penelope's eyes. “The fact is, you don't care a scrap for me,” he broke out angrily.

“Why should I?” asked Penelope.

For the moment he was too much astonished to answer, and she spoke again, quietly, but with an under-current of indignation which drove her charges home. “Why should I care for you, when you have never shown the slightest consideration for me? Have you ever thought what a position I should have been in, but for Lady Haigh's kindness, when I landed at Bab-us-Sahel? No, I know it was not your fault that the letters miscarried; but you know you had no wish to see me when you heard I had arrived. You were glad—glad—to be rid of the bond, and so was I. And then you got Colin on your side—why, I don't know—and made him persuade me to renew my promise, because it would be a help and comfort to you, and you could work better if you saw me now and then. You have never been near me if you could possibly help it, and for all the help and comfort I have been to you I might as well have been at home. You may say I don't care for you if you like, but I know very well that you don't care for me.”

“But I do!” cried Ferrers involuntarily. “On my honour, Pen, I never knew what there was in you before. You are the girl for me. I always felt you could keep me straight, but it never struck me till now how sharply you could pull a fellow up.”

“You seem not to understand that I don't want the task. I wish you to give me back my promise.”

“I won't, then. Come, Pen, we shall have a week together now, and I'll show you I do care for you. Let's forget all that's gone by, and begin again. I have fallen in love with you this moment—yes, by

Jove! I have"—he spoke with pleased surprise—"and we'll be as happy as the day is long."

"You don't seem to see——" began Penelope, in a scared tone.

"Oh well, if you are going to bear malice——" he spoke huffily. "I hadn't thought it of you. Why shouldn't you let bygones be bygones, as I do? Of course I haven't been exactly what you might call attentive, but I'm going to begin fresh, as I said, and you needn't think I'm going to let you go. My uncle will get me a post in Lower Khemistan, in a nice lively station, with plenty going on; and I'll cut the Mirza, and you shall have a jolly big bungalow, and horses and carriages, and get your dresses out from home. When shall we be married?"

Penelope's eyes gathered a look almost of terror as she listened in mingled perplexity and alarm. "I don't want to marry you," she said, forcing her lips to utter the words.

"Then you must want to marry some one else. Who is it?"

For a moment she hesitated. Could she, did she dare, confess to him the secret which she had only lately acknowledged even to herself—that she had given her heart unasked to the keen-eyed swarthy man who never talked to her of anything but war and work? To some men it would have been possible to confide even this, but she felt, rightly or wrongly, that with Ferrers it was not possible. She could never feel sure that he would not in time to come fling her sorrowful confession in her face, and use it to taunt her. She answered him with desperate hopelessness, and, as she told herself, with perfect truth. She had never had any thought of marrying Major Keeling. It would be enough for her if their present friendship continued to the end of their lives, or so she believed.

"There is no one," she said. "Can't you understand that—that——"

"That you don't want to marry me?" cried Ferrers, laughing, his good-humour quite restored. "No, Pen,

I can't. You're feeling a little sore now, because you think I've neglected you, but you shan't complain of that in future. I shall make furious love to you all this week, and before I go back to that wretched hole we'll announce the engagement."

He was so gay, so well satisfied with himself, so utterly incapable of understanding what she felt, that Penelope's heart sank. She made a final effort. "Please listen to me," she faltered. "I ask you definitely to release me from my promise."

"And I definitely refuse to do anything of the kind. There! is honour satisfied now? You've made a brave fight—enough to please even Lady Haigh, I should think—but it's no good. The fortress has surrendered. I'll allow you the honours of war, but you mustn't think you are going to escape scot-free. Come!"

She allowed him passively to kiss her, and then sat down again at the table, utterly exhausted. "Please go away now," she said. "I will tell Lady Haigh of—what you wish, and no doubt she will arrange for you to come here when you like. I will try—to be a good wife to you."

"You'd better!" said Ferrers gaily, as he departed. He was conscious of a new and wholly unaccustomed glow of feeling—a highly creditable feeling, too. He was actually in love, and with the very person who would make him the best and most suitable wife he could choose. He had not the slightest faith in the seriousness of Penelope's resistance, and felt genuinely proud of having overcome what he regarded as her grudge against him. If she had only shown herself capable of indignation and resentment earlier, he would have fallen in love with her long ago. As it was, she might make their engagement as lively as she pleased, and then settle down into an adoring fondness like Colin's, which would suit him admirably. Meeting Colin, he told him the good news, adding that they had decided not to announce the engagement for a week, as Penelope was still rather sore about their past misunderstandings, and Colin hurried back to

the fort, to find Penelope with her head bowed on her arms on the table.

"Why, Pen!" he said in astonishment, "I hoped I should find you so happy."

Penelope raised her head, and looked at him despairingly. "Oh, Colin!" was all she said. It seemed incredible to her that, after the long years in which they had been all in all to each other, he could be as blind as Ferrers to her real feelings.

"But, Pen, is it right to imagine slights in this way? I know he may have seemed cold, but he thought it his duty to hold aloof. And he has worked so hard and so steadily at Shah Nawaz, looking forward to the time when he might speak to you again. I am sure the thought of you has helped him; I know it. And now you turn against him, when he needs your help as much as ever."

"I can't help any one, I am too weak," moaned Penelope. "I want some one strong, who can help me."

"A strong man would not need your help," said Colin, in the slightly didactic tone with which he was wont, all unconsciously, to chill his sister's feelings. Her heart protested wildly. She could help the strong man of whom she was thinking, she knew, but the opportunity was denied her. "George does need you," Colin went on, "and will you refuse to help him because he has wounded your self-love?"

"You don't understand. We should never be happy."

"One must not think too much of happiness in this world—only of what one can do for others."

"I know that, but still—— Colin, do you mean to tell me that if you were married you wouldn't want your wife to be happy?"

"That is different," said Colin, flushing. "If she was not, I should fear it was my fault; but what has George done that you should not be happy with him? He is a splendid fellow—his good temper and rough kindness often make me ashamed of myself. He wouldn't hurt a fly."

“I suppose not, if he thought about it,” said Penelope doubtfully. “But oh, Colin, he doesn’t know when he hurts. You think only of him, and he thinks only of himself, and no one thinks of me—except Elma. I wish I had listened to her all along!”

“If you are determined to be so uncharitable,” said Colin gravely, “you had better break your promise, and send Ferrers about his business. I could not advise you to do such a thing, but I quite allow that my conscience is not a law for yours. I see no prospect of happiness for you, certainly, while you are in your present frame of mind. I think you have met with too much attention since you came to India, Pen, and it has warped your judgment. But, as I said, don’t let my opinion influence you.”

He stood before her in his unbending rectitude, rigid and sorrowful, and Penelope gave way. She could not add alienation from Colin to her other troubles, and how could she tell him that in addition to her personal distaste for Ferrers there was against him the insuperable bar that he was the wrong man?

“I can’t but be influenced by your opinion, Colin,” she said. “And I never meant to say all this. Don’t let us refer to it again, please; I shall not break my promise.”

CHAPTER IX.

COUNSEL FOR THE PROSECUTION.

FERRERS was very well pleased with himself. He had done his duty, which had turned out, in a most unwonted manner, to be also his pleasure, and he felt justly entitled to enjoy his Christmas holiday to the full. It amused him immensely to see Lady Haigh forced to countenance his constant presence at the fort, and his attendance on Penelope whenever she went out. On learning the state of affairs, Sir Dugald had absolutely and categorically forbidden his wife to do anything that might lead to a second rupture of the engagement. Once was enough, he said grimly; and, fume as she might, Lady Haigh judged it well to obey. It could not be expected that the fact should improve her temper, but Ferrers was in too complacent a state of mind to be affected by her sharp speeches. He did not even fear that she would succeed in prejudicing Penelope against him a second time, guessing shrewdly that after one irrepressible outburst of disgust, she would prefer to maintain silence on the subject, and in this he judged correctly. Penelope's anxious endeavours to do as he wished flattered him pleasantly, and he reciprocated her efforts with a kindness which had something of condescension in it. "Feeble as they are," it seemed to say, "you want to please me, and I will be pleased," and Penelope was too much broken in spirit to resent his attitude. She was not altogether unhappy. Even in Khemistan there were at this season bright bracing days, when a gallop over the desert

could not but be a joy, even though an unwelcome lover and an uncomprehending brother were riding on either side of her. If at night she dedicated a few tears to the memory of that vain dream of hers, it was only because it returned to her in spite of her strenuous efforts to bury it. There was a kind of restfulness in feeling that her fate was fixed without reference to her own desires, and she was fervently anxious to be loyal to the two young men who were both so willing for her to be absolutely happy in their way.

In his abounding self-satisfaction Ferrers thought less of Major Keeling's delinquencies than before, and as the days passed on without any fresh instance of them, became inclined to let the matter drop. If the poor beggar found any fun in dressing up as a native and pretending to work miracles, why in the world shouldn't he? It would not affect Ferrers when he got transferred to another district, and this might happen at any moment. Keeling must be a perfect fool to have spent his time in Penelope's society to such little purpose, and might really be left to his folly. But in coming to this conclusion Ferrers was reckoning without the Mirza, whom he had not brought with him to Alibad. After what had passed, he could quite understand the man's desire to keep out of Major Keeling's sight, and he accepted the responsibility of turning aside any questions that might be asked about him. But on the last evening of his stay, when he was in his room at Colin Ross's quarters, whistling gaily as he tried on the emerald ring with which he intended to clinch his formal engagement to Penelope on the morrow, a low tapping reached his ears from the back verandah, and it flashed upon him at once that the Mirza was there. With a muttered curse on the man for disturbing him, he put away the ring and went out softly, to find his follower standing in deep shadow by a pillar.

"*Salaam, sahib!*" was the Mirza's breathless greeting. "Now is the moment of which I spoke to you. I have watched and spied around Sheikharh night

after night, until at last I can show you the full measure of Kīlin Sahib's treachery."

"Oh, hang it all! I don't want to go pottering about the desert to-night," said Ferrers angrily. "Why can't you tell me what you've found out?"

"Nay, sahib, it is for you to see it with your own eyes. So far it is only the sahibs who will turn their backs on the man. After to-night, the Memsahibs also will draw away their garments from touching him."

The idea sounded promising. It would be good policy to be able to prove to Penelope the reasonableness of the warning he had given her, and which she had scouted, and he beckoned the Mirza in.

"You have brought my disguise, I suppose?" he said.

"Yes, sahib, and I have the ponies waiting outside the town. The moon will not ride till late, so that we may hope not to run across Kīlin Sahib on his way to Sheikhgarh."

"Defend me from ever leading a double life! It's too much trouble," said Ferrers, with a yawn, for he was sleepy. What an immense amount of riding Major Keeling must get through night after night, if he went first westwards to Sheikhgarh and then eastwards to the Akrab! And how in the world did he manage to cram so much activity into the daytime? He must be able to do almost without sleep. It was really a pity such a fine soldier and ingenious plotter should be such a rascal! "Why don't you go into partnership with Keeling Sahib, Mirza, instead of showing him up?" he asked. "You two might rule Asia, he as Padishah and you as Vizier."

"Am I a dog, to work with perjured men and those false to their salt?" snarled the Mirza. Ferrers laughed unkindly.

"Oh, don't try to come the righteous indignation dodge over me: I know you a little too well for that. Now just touch up my face a bit. If there's a moon, it'll be harder for me to pass muster if we meet any one than it was by starlight."

The toilet completed, they slipped out, and, by dint of traversing unsavoury alleys and skulking close under walls, managed to evade various sentries and reach the desert unchallenged. The Mirza made straight for the spot where he had picketed the ponies, and directed their course rather to the south of the hill which commanded the town on the west. The route on this occasion did not lead through the open desert, but up and down hill-paths and dry nullahs, and Ferrers wondered where they would find themselves at last. When they reached a kind of cave in which the Mirza remarked that they must leave the ponies, they were in a part of the hills with which he was totally unacquainted, so far as he could tell in the darkness. The Mirza seemed to know the way well, however; and warning him that the slightest noise would be dangerous, as the Sheikh-ul-Jabal's servants kept the neighbourhood closely patrolled, led him up what seemed a goat-track in the rocks. He would not allow any loitering for rest, saying that the moon would soon rise, and they must be in shelter first, and by dint of great exertions they reached their goal in time. It was a kind of ledge or shelf on the side of the cliff, overlooking what seemed to be a pile of huge rocks below; but as the moon rose, Ferrers perceived that the apparently shapeless masses were the rude towers and buildings of a hill-fort. The site had been well chosen, for, with the short range of the native matchlocks, it could not be commanded from any of the surrounding hills. From his position Ferrers could see between two of the towers down into the courtyard, and he was startled to perceive a black horse standing saddled in front of the building which represented the keep or chief apartments of the place. The horse was held by a servant, and presently another servant appeared with a torch, and a third brought a bag of food and a skin of water, and fastened them to the saddle. Then, as Ferrers watched, there appeared on the threshold the majestic figure in white and scarlet which he had last seen at the *pir's* tomb.

The Sheikh turned for a moment, apparently to give directions to several women, the flutter of whose robes could be seen by the torchlight, and then came out upon the steps, followed by three children, two boys and a girl, whose ages might run from ten to twelve. All three kissed the Sheikh's hand, the boys holding his stirrup while he mounted, and he gave them his blessing as he rode away. In the clear mountain air the opening of the gate in the entrance-tower was plainly audible, and presently a gleam of white and scarlet and steel beyond the fort showed that the Sheikh was riding down the path. Ferrers stood up, in a state of anger which surprised himself.

"What does it mean?" he demanded. "Who are those children?"

"It is for you to say, sahib. As for me, I have no doubt. They are the children of the Sheikh-ul-Jabal."

"Which means that Keeling is married to a native woman, and they are his children," said Ferrers. "Is it conceivable that a man can be such a traitor? False to his country and his race! I say, Mirza, let us go after him and put an end to his treachery."

But the Mirza held him back. "Nay, sahib, it must not be. Has it not often been told me that the way of the English is to do all things slowly and according to forms of law? You know how the traitor can be punished after the English manner; then do not act as would one of the hill-people, which can only harm yourself."

Ferrers saw the force of the reasoning, and followed his guide slowly down the dangerous path. His mind was in a whirl. Marriages between Englishmen and native women were far more common in those days than in these, but Major Keeling was the last man he would have expected to contract one. This, then, was the explanation of his insensibility with regard to Penelope! But he had sat beside her, talked to her, touched her hand, behaved like an honourable man who was free to seek her if he chose, while only a few miles off his unacknowledged wife and children were

leading a secluded existence within stone walls. It occurred to Ferrers that it would be a good idea to arrest them and bring them to Alibad, there to confront Major Keeling with them suddenly; and he asked the Mirza whether the fort was well defended. The Mirza assured him that not only was the garrison ample for defence, but watchmen were posted on all the hill-tops round, and it was only by bribing one of these, over whom he had obtained some hold in the past, that he had been able to reach the point of vantage they had occupied. It was practically impossible to approach the place undetected, he said, and before long there came a startling proof of the truth of his words. Just before they reached the cave where the horses had been left, Ferrers trod on a loose stone, which rolled down the hillside with a terrifying clatter. Instantly a hail from the hill on their left was answered by another from the right, and followed by one from the fort itself.

"Mount and ride for your life," panted the Mirza to Ferrers, as they stumbled into the cave. "There is no hope of escaping unnoticed now."

They had the ponies outside the cave in a twinkling, and were mounted and riding down the path in another second. Stones rolled down under the ponies' feet, voices ran from hill to hill, and presently, when the forms of the intruders were perceived, bullets began to fly around them. Fortunately for Ferrers and the Mirza, the ponies were sure-footed, and none of the Sheikh's matchlockmen waited to take good aim. They dashed out on the plain at last, unhurt, and from the nullah behind them there rang out a last shot and a sharp cry, a man's death-cry.

"The sentry who suffered us to pass," remarked the Mirza casually. "They have a short way with brethren who have been false to their oaths, as I should know."

He seemed to feel he had said too much, and refused to answer Ferrers' eager questions as to when he had been a member of the brotherhood, and why he had left it. They rode briskly back to the outskirts of the town, and dismounted. The Mirza guided Ferrers

through the byways to Colin's quarters, and left him there, carrying off his disguise for safety's sake, and Ferrers tumbled into bed and slept heavily.

He did not wake till late, when he found the whole place in excitement over the arrival of the mail. There were letters for him, but he disregarded them all in favour of a telegram which had been forwarded by boat and messenger from the point where the wires ended. It was dated from Government House, Bab-us-Sahel, and came from his uncle, announcing curtly that Mr Crayne was cutting short his Christmas festivities on account of some complication which had arisen over the affairs of a deposed native prince up the river. He considered that his presence on the spot would enable the difficulty to be more easily settled, and he was coming up the river by steamer as far as the station which was the window by which the Alibad colony looked into the larger world. He would be glad to see his nephew during his stay there, and he was requesting Major Keeling to grant him a week's leave, which would be ample for the purpose.

Ferrers' feelings when he read the missive were mixed. Much depended on this interview, and the impression he might make on his uncle. But should he go to meet him as an engaged man or not? It was impossible to tell what Mr Crayne's mood at the moment would be, but the probability was that he would find grounds for a grievance in either alternative. On the whole, thought Ferrers, it would be better to suppress all mention of Penelope until he had fathomed his uncle's intentions towards him. If he had no benevolent design in view, his prejudices need not be considered; but if he had anything good in store, it might be necessary to proceed with caution, and not reveal the truth until Mr Crayne had seen Penelope and honoured her with his approval. Ignoring his own former changes of feeling, Ferrers was now sufficiently in love to feel certain that his uncle must approve of her.

With this in his mind he left the emerald ring in Colin's charge, and prepared for his journey, receiving

a curt notice from Major Keeling that the leave requested by his uncle was granted, riding out to Shah Nawaz to inform the man who was taking his place that another week's exile was in store for him, and bidding farewell to Penelope and Lady Haigh. Penelope was too much relieved to see him go to take any offence at the postponement of the engagement, and Lady Haigh hailed his departure in private as offering an opening for the "something that might happen," much longed for by herself, to prevent matters going any further. Ferrers saw through her at a glance, and rode away laughing. He had an idea that he might be able to induce his uncle to pay a flying visit to Alibad and make Penelope's acquaintance, and then he remembered suddenly that he had in his possession information that would bring Mr Crayne to Alibad if nothing else would. He had given up the idea of extending mercy to Major Keeling by this time. He wanted to see him disgraced, driven from the army and from the society of Europeans, and forced to herd with the natives whose company it was clear that he preferred. He had not a doubt that his uncle's feelings would accord with his, and he devoted a good deal of time while on his journey to going over the different points of his evidence, and deciding on the form in which he would present it.

It was not until his second evening at Mr Crayne's camp on the river that he found his opportunity. The secretary and other officials who were dragged in the Commissioner's train, gathering that he would like a talk with his nephew, had gladly effaced themselves on various pretexts, and Ferrers and his uncle were left alone together. For some time, while they smoked, Ferrers endured a bombardment of short snappy questions, delivered in tones expressive of the deepest contempt, as to his past career and his financial position, and heard his answers received with undisguised sniffs. Then his chance came.

"What d'ye think of that man of yours—Keeling?" demanded Mr Crayne.

"He is—a fine soldier," responded Ferrers guardedly.

"What d'ye hum and haw like that for, sir?" Mr Crayne added a strong expression. "I won't be put off by puppies like you."

"I have no wish to put you off, sir," said Ferrers with dignity; "but you will understand it is difficult to give a candid opinion of one's commanding officer."

"I'll give you a candid opinion of him, if you like!" cried Mr Crayne. "He's the most arrogant, hot-headed, interfering, cantankerous fool that ever wrote insubordinate letters to his superiors!"

"Oh, is that all?" The nephew's face wore a pitying smile.

"All? What more d'ye want, sir? And what d'ye mean by grinning at me like that, sir? I won't stand impudence."

"And yet you have to stand Keeling's? He is indispensable, isn't he?"

Another volley of strong language, which Ferrers understood to convey the information that Mr Crayne would feel deeply indebted to any one who would enable him to bundle Major Keeling out of the province for good and all. When the flow of vituperation ceased for a moment, he spoke—

"I have been anxious to ask your advice for some time, sir. Circumstances have come to my knowledge about Major Keeling——"

"That would break him—smash him—if they came out?" gasped Mr Crayne, becoming purple in the face. "Go on, boy; go on."

Ferrers began his tale, at first interrupted continually by what he considered impertinent questions as to his relations with the Mirza, his grounds for accepting evidence from him against Major Keeling, and so on; but by degrees the interruptions ceased, and he was allowed to finish what he had to say in peace. Then Mr Crayne chuckled.

"I knew the man was a hot-headed fool, but I never thought he was a double-dyed ass!" he cried triumphantly. "He's set a trap for himself, and walked into

it. He might have written insubordinate letters till he died, and not given me such a handle against him as this. What are you looking horrified about, sir, eh?"

Ferrers disavowed the charge stoutly, though his uncle's glee had set his teeth on edge. "I don't quite see——" he began.

"Eh? What? Don't see it? Don't see that the fellow has personated this Sheikh-ul-Jabal for ten years, and made away with the allowance he was supposed to pay over to him? Used it to support his precious black-and-tan family, of course. No, there's no law against a man's marrying a black woman, or a dozen, if he wants 'em, and he's at liberty to become a heathen, for all I know, if he doesn't force his notions down other people's throats; but embezzlement—that's a different thing."

"Oh, but—by Jove! this is disgusting," said Ferrers. "I really don't think——"

"Oh, you're young, and innocent, and romantic," said his uncle, drawling out the epithets, which Ferrers felt were quite undeserved, with immense relish. "What does it matter if the man chooses to live like a nigger when he's off duty? Plenty of 'em do. But giving false receipts for government money—that's where we have him."

"But how can he have managed it?"

"Oh, it's been cleverly done. I allow that. It must have begun with that Nalapur affair ten years ago. Of course the real Sheikh-ul-Jabal was killed with his brother-in-law Nasr Ali, and old Harry Lennox, in his eagerness to get his conscience whitewashed for what he had done, never took the trouble to see whether he was alive or dead, but granted the allowance when it was asked for. And your fine Commandant has simply pocketed it from that day to this!"

"But how did he impose himself on the brotherhood and the Sheikh's followers?"

"Why d'ye ask me? I wasn't there. But we'll call my secretary, and ask him about the Mountain

sect. It's his business to get 'em all up, and he's a dab at finding out facts. Not that I let him think so. Here, you sir, Hazeldean!" he raised his voice, "Come here!"

The secretary came hurrying up, in evident perturbation. He was a nervous-looking youth, with the round shoulders and hesitating manners of the student, and gave the impression of having been waked from a dream by a rough shock.

"Why are you never at hand when you're wanted, sir?" demanded Mr Crayne. "It's scarcely worth while asking you, but perhaps among all the perfectly useless information you manage to stow away you may have picked up something about the Sheikh-ul-Jabal and his sect?"

"Indeed I have, sir. The subject has interested me very much since I came to Khemistan, and learned——"

"Then let's hear what you know about it," snapped Mr Crayne.

"The Mountain brotherhood claims to be the direct survival of a terrible secret society formed in Crusading times," began the secretary, as if he were repeating a lesson, "which furthered its objects by the murder of any one who stood in its way. There were seven stages of initiation, and in the lower the brethren professed the most rigid Mohammedanism, but in the higher the initiates were taught that good and evil were merely names, and all religions alike false. Absolute obedience to the rule of the Sheikh-ul-Jabal was the chief point in the vows taken, and when he ordered the removal of any one, it took place at once. Some of the Crusading leaders were accused of having entered the brotherhood, and this accusation was especially brought against the Templars. The order seems to have existed in secret ever since it was supposed to be stamped out, and the present Sheikh-ul-Jabal is actually a pensioner of the Company's, living somewhere near Alibad, which was what attracted my attention to the sect at first. Some writers think that the Druses——"

"That'll do," said Mr Crayne curtly, interrupting

the hurried monologue. "I didn't ask you for a lecture. Can you tell me the exact membership of the order at the present time, or anything else that is practical?"

"I—I'm afraid not, sir. There are no means of ascertaining such facts as that, I fear. But I believe an important book has been published in Germany dealing with the sect, if you would permit me to order it for you——"

"No, I won't. What good is a German book to any civilised man? You are always ready to stock my library with books you want to read. You can go back to your grinding, sir."

The secretary departed with alacrity, and Mr Crayne turned to his nephew—

"We see that the sect has always been willing to accept European recruits, at any rate, which looks promising. The murder part of the business has been dropped, apparently, or I should scarcely be sitting here, after Keeling's letters to me. Well, I shall pay a flying visit to Alibad, and thresh the matter out. Must give the man a chance to justify himself, though he'll be clever to do it. If he offers to pay back the money, I may have to let him retire and lose himself. If not, there must be an inquiry. You'll be prepared to give evidence, of course?"

"It's an awkward thing to witness against one's commanding officer, sir."

"What, trying to back out of it, eh? What d'ye mean, sir? I'll have your blood if you fail me."

"I could not remain in the regiment after it, sir."

"Oho, you want to get something out of me, eh? Well, other regiments won't exactly compete for your services, either. It must be something extra-regimental, then. What about the languages? I hear you used to knock about among the niggers when you were down at the coast. Do any good with it? Like to go to Gamara?"

"In what capacity, sir?"

"Governor-General's agent, I suppose. They're talking of sending an envoy to hunt up that fool Why-

brow. You know he's disappeared? If you come well through the business, you're a made man."

Ferrers did not hesitate. Whybrow was not the only man who had entered the Central Asian city and been seen no more. It was the dream of every generous mind in India to force an entrance into the dungeons there, and set the captives free. How proud Penelope would be of him if he accepted and performed the coveted task!

"I should like nothing better, sir," he said.

"Well, I think I have influence enough to get you the appointment. But you've got to do your work first, or I'll break you."

CHAPTER X.

ARRAIGNED.

"WHAT can it be? Who is coming?" cried Lady Haigh, running out on the verandah, as a horse galloped into the courtyard of the fort.

"There's only one man who would come to pay a call in that style," said Sir Dugald, following her more slowly. Before he reached the verandah, Major Keeling had thrown himself from the saddle, flinging Miani's bridle to a servant who ran up, and was at the top of the steps.

"I want your help, both of you," cried the Commandant. "Was anything ever more unlucky? There's Crayne taken it into his head to come on here from the river, and we've never exchanged a civil word in our lives. I can't even put him up, either. The only room I have that's big enough to hold his magnificence is full of saddlery—that new cavalry equipment, you know—and he'll be here to-night, so there's no time to cart it away. Can you take him in, Lady Haigh? There are those unoccupied rooms, if you don't mind, and we could dine him in the durbar-hall. Of course I'll send up every stick of furniture I have, for the Parsee's stock is precious limited—I looked in as I came along. We must do our best for him, for the credit of the frontier, though he is such an unpromising brute."

"Of course," said Lady Haigh eagerly, "and we must try to put him into a good temper, for the sake of the frontier. We'll do everything we can. You

will send up what servants you can spare, won't you? and I'll set them to work. And you will act as host at the dinner?—oh, you must. Your position and his demands it. We can pretend that the durbar-hall is our recognised room for dinner-parties.”

“Very well, but this reminds me that I must build some sort of place to lodge strangers in when I have time. One never expects distinguished visitors up here now, somehow. A quiet dinner to-night, I suppose, as he'll only just have ridden in, and a regular *burra khana* to-morrow? He'll scarcely stay more than the two nights. Well, I'll send up my servants and household goods. I'm really tremendously obliged to you, but I knew I could count on you and Haigh.”

He galloped away, and Lady Haigh proceeded to plunge her household into chaos, and thence into a whirl of reconstruction and rearrangement. She was in her element on occasions of this kind, and such servants as averred that their caste did not permit them to do anything they were told found it advisable to keep out of her way. Sir Dugald retired to the ramparts with the work he had in hand, thus escaping from the turmoil; but Penelope was kept as busy as her hostess, and, like her, had only time for a brief rest before it was necessary to welcome the distinguished visitor. Wonders had been done in the few hours at their disposal, if only Mr Crayne had had eyes to recognise the fact, and the sole *contretemps* that marred the evening was not Lady Haigh's fault. Major Keeling was summoned away to inquire into a complicated case of *dacoity* and murder at a village some miles off, and it was impossible for him to return in time to join the party.

To those present it seemed, however, as if this was not altogether a misfortune. Mr Crayne had a playful habit of jerking out unpleasant remarks in the interval between two mouthfuls of food, without even lifting his eyes, and continuing his meal without regarding any protest or disclaimer. Before dinner was half over he had told Lady Haigh that her cook did not know how

to make curry, criticised adversely the gun-horses, which were the pride of Sir Dugald's life, and dear to him as children, and sent Ferrers' heart into his mouth by the announcement that things seemed to have got precious slack at Alibad, but that he was come to pull the reins tighter, thanks to a warning from his nephew. Soon afterwards he told Colin that he ought to have been a parson instead of a soldier, and Penelope that if she came down to Bab-us-Sahel she would see how far behind the fashion her clothes were—which is a thing no self-respecting girl cares to hear said of her, however hopelessly crossed in love she may be. But the climax was reached when he frowned malevolently at his plate, and observed—

“Fine state of things up here. For years Keeling has blazoned himself throughout India as the only man who could get this frontier quiet and keep it so, and yet he can't make time to eat his dinner or show proper respect, but has to go and hunt murderers.”

Every one was thunderstruck by this outburst, but to the general astonishment it was Penelope who responded to the challenge.

“That is not fair, Mr Crayne,” she cried indignantly. “If you knew the frontier as we know it, you would wonder that it's as quiet as it is. The settled inhabitants are perfectly good, and so are the tribes close at hand that know Major Keeling. But fresh tribes are always wandering down here, who haven't heard of the new state of things. They were always accustomed to raid the villages, and rob and murder as they liked, and they don't know that they can't do it now. In time they will all have learnt their lesson, but it may not be for a long while yet.”

“Upon my word, young lady!” said Mr Crayne, actually pausing to look at her. “Has Major Keeling engaged you as his official advocate? He ought to be thankful to have found such a champion.”

“Miss Ross has only said what we all know and feel,” said Lady Haigh, coming to Penelope's rescue as she sat silent, flushed but undaunted. “We are all Keel-

ingolaters here, Mr Crayne; and don't you know it's very rude to say things against your hostess's friends at her own table?"

Mr Crayne accepted the rebuke with remarkable meekness. "I bow to your ruling, ma'am," he said, with something like a twinkle in his eye. "At your table, and in your hearing, I am a Keelingolater too. Sir Dugald, a glass of wine with you, if you please."

"You have conquered that old bear, Elma!" said Penelope afterwards to her friend. "I could never have made a joke of what he said."

"My dear, it was what you said that gave me courage to do it. I wanted to throw the plates at him, or box his ears, or something of that kind; and while I was trying to repress the impulse you answered him, and I was in such abject terror as to what he might go on to say that I spoke in desperation."

"Nice little girl that—fine eyes," said Mr Crayne to his nephew later. "The one who stood up for Keeling, I mean. Anything between them?"

"Certainly not, sir," replied Ferrers with decision. "Quite the contrary."

"Oho, that's the way the wind blows, eh? Well, sir, understand me. There's to be no talk of anything of the sort until you're back from Gamara, d'ye hear? The Government won't send a married man, and for once they're right. If you do anything foolish, I'll ruin you. No, it won't be necessary—you'll ruin yourself. Be off."

Ferrers returned to his room at Colin's quarters in a somewhat subdued frame of mind. He had fully intended to get Penelope to marry him before he started for Gamara, not so much, it must be confessed, with the idea of providing for her as of precluding any possibility of a change of feeling on her part. This was now out of the question; but it occurred to him as a consolation that the nature of his errand would appeal to her so strongly that he might feel quite secure. The future looked very promising as he mounted Colin's steps; but even as he did so, his past rose up to greet

him. A beggar was crouching in the shadow of one of the pillars of the verandah, and held up his hand in warning as Ferrers was about to shout angrily for the watchman to come and turn him off.

"It is I, sahib. The business is urgent. To-morrow you will see your desires fulfilled, but there is still one thing to be done. Give me an order to Jones Sahib at Shah Nawaz for two sowars, whom I shall choose, to accompany me on the track of a notorious marauder."

"But what has this to do with our affair? Who's the fellow?"

"Nay, sahib; have you not yet learnt that there are questions it were better not to ask? Fear not; the man shall be duly tracked and followed, but he shall not be brought in alive, nor shall his body be found. On this all depends."

"Look here," said Ferrers; "do you mean to tell me you are proposing to murder Major Keeling in cold blood, and hide his body in the sand? Give me a straight answer."

"Nay, sahib," said the Mirza unwillingly, "not Kilin Sahib—it is the other. He must not be found to-morrow."

"The other? What other?"

"Him that you know of. Why make this pretence? The man must die, or all our work goes for naught."

"I don't know of any one of the kind, and I'm hanged if I know what you're driving at. But it seems you're trying to get me to countenance a murder, and I'm going to have you put in prison."

"Nay, sahib, not so," said the Mirza softly. "There are many things I could tell Kilin Sahib and Haigh Sahib's Mem which they would like to know. And they would tell the Miss Sahib, and what then?"

Ferrers hesitated for a moment. Could he allow the facts to which the Mirza alluded to become public? His uncle might laugh at them, though there were details by which even he would be disgusted, but Colin and Penelope would never speak to him again—of that he was certain. He moved away from the steps.

“Go,” he said. “I will not give you the order you ask for, but if you keep secret what you know, I will allow you to escape.”

“Then you will let Kīlin Sahib go free?”

“Most certainly, if I can only convict him with the help of murder.”

“And all that I have done—my services, my duty to those who sent me forth—am I to have no satisfaction?”

“You shall have a halter if you don’t take yourself off. Never let me see your face again.”

“Nay, sahib, think not you can cast me off; our fates are joined together. Rāss Sahib and his sister may seem to have gained possession of you for a time, but it is not so. The contest is yet to come, and the victory will be mine. We shall meet, and before very long, and you will know the full extent of the power I have over you.” The confidence of the man’s tone made Ferrers’ blood run cold. He took a step towards him, but the Mirza seemed to vanish into the darkness, and, search as he would, he could find no trace of him.

Ferrers’ sleep was disturbed that night. He had often puzzled over the difficulty of breaking off his intercourse with the Mirza, but now that the Gordian knot had been cut for him he did not feel happy. It was clear that, for some reason or other, he could not imagine why, the evidence against Major Keeling was destined to break down, and this made it seem probable that he had been duped all along. And yet, as he had said to Penelope, how could he disbelieve the witness of his own eyes? He tossed and tumbled upon his bed, turning things over in his mind involuntarily and as if of necessity, as often happens in the wakeful hours of night. When at length he fell asleep, he woke again in horror, with a cold sweat breaking out all over him. What a detestable dream that had been! and yet it seemed to have no sense in it. There was a snake, and in some way or other the snake was also the Mirza, and Penelope was standing between

him and it, trying to defend him. He himself seemed unable to move, and only wondered stupidly how it was that the snake did not attack Penelope. Then she stood aside for a moment, and he felt that the snake was beckoning to him—but how could it, when it was a snake?—and he slipped past Penelope, only to find that the snake was coiling itself round him. It was cold and clammy and stifling; its head was close to his face; it was just about to strike its murderous fangs into his temple, when not Penelope but Colin seized it by the neck and dragged it away, calling out, "George! George! get up!" With a vague idea that the snake had bitten Colin he sat up, to find that it was morning, and Colin was standing in the doorway of his room, and shouting to him to wake. For a moment he stared at him with eyes of horror, then looked round for the snake, and, realising that it was all a dream, smiled feebly.

"You must have been having frightful nightmare," said Colin. "You were lying on your back and groaning shockingly, and the mosquito-net has fallen down, and you've got it all twisted round you. Your boy must have fastened it very carelessly."

"Oh, I'll blow him up about it. Enough to give one bad dreams, isn't it? with this horrible row going on as well. Of course it's the eclipse to-day."

An eclipse had been predicted, to begin in the course of the morning, and all the Hindus in the town were doing their heroic best to rescue the sun from the clutches of the black monster which was intending to devour it. Tom-toms, gongs, and fireworks were among the remedies tried, apparently with the idea of frightening away the monster before he came near enough to do the sun any harm, and every native appeared also to think it his duty to howl, groan, or shriek with all his might. Ferrers and Colin took their *choti haziri* to the accompaniment of deafening uproar, and when one of the Haighs' servants appeared to say that Mr Crayne desired his nephew's presence at once at the fort, they could scarcely hear his message.

Ferrers was in no uncertainty as to the reason for this summons, for Colin had mentioned having seen Major Keeling riding by in the direction of the fort, doubtless to apologise to the Commissioner for his absence the evening before. The moment had come, and he mounted his horse and rode soberly through the town, feeling confident of the strength of his evidence, and yet nervous as to the result of the trial. On the verandah before the Haighs' quarters Lady Haigh and Penelope were wandering restlessly with anxious faces, exchanging frightened whispers now and then, and starting whenever the sound of raised voices reached them from the drawing-room.

"What can it be?" asked Lady Haigh breathlessly, forgetting her dislike of Ferrers. "It must be something dreadful. They have been quarrelling frightfully."

Ferrers made some excuse, he did not know what, and hurried indoors. In the drawing-room Mr Crayne was seated magisterially in the largest chair, Major Keeling was striding up and down with spurs and sword clanking, and Sir Dugald was leaning against the window-frame, looking unutterably worried and disgusted.

"So this," said Major Keeling, pausing in his walk as Ferrers entered, and speaking in a voice hoarse with passion,— "this is the spy you employ to bring false accusations against me?"

"My nephew is no spy, sir, and it is for you to prove that the accusations are false," said Mr Crayne, quailing a little under the fire of the other's eyes.

"Oh, pardon me. When I find one of my own officers set to watch and report upon my movements— Why, he doesn't even do that. He invents movements for me, and founds lies upon them. Spy is not the word—"

"Keep cool, Major," interjected Sir Dugald.

"You will not improve your cause by this violence, sir," said Mr Crayne, relieved from his imminent fear of a personal assault. "I understand that Captain

Ferrers' attention was first drawn to your proceedings when he was following your advice and paying visits at night to different parts of his district to see that the patrols worked properly. It is for him to say what he has seen, and for you then to justify yourself. Captain Ferrers, you will be good enough to repeat what you told me some nights ago."

Ferrers told his story, Major Keeling gathering up his sword and creeping to and fro with noiseless steps and set face, in a way which reminded the Commissioner unpleasantly of a tiger stalking its prey. When Ferrers ceased speaking, he turned upon Mr Crayne.

"I fancy I could shed a little light on the beginning of that story," he said, with restrained fury, "but I won't ask any questions now. You accuse me of personating the Sheikh-ul-Jabal, and applying his allowance from the Company to my own use. Perhaps you accuse me of murdering him as well?"

"No," murmured Sir Dugald, as no one answered, "they 'don't believe there's no sich a person."

"Well, there is only one way of clearing myself, and that is to produce the Sheikh-ul-Jabal. I'll have him here, dead or alive, before sunset, if I have to pull Sheikhgarh stone from stone to get him."

"By all means," said Mr Crayne. "The course you suggest would be far more effective than any amount of shouting."

"Wait until you are accused as I am before you talk of shouting," was the explosive answer. "Haigh, come with me."

"Oh, what is it? what is it?" cried Lady Haigh and Penelope together as the two men emerged from the room.

"It's a fiendish plot," said Major Keeling. "Don't come near me, Lady Haigh. If I have done what they say, I have no business to breathe the same air with you and Miss Ross."

"But you haven't! We know you haven't—don't we, Pen? Whatever it is, we know you didn't do it. And you're going to prove it, and make them ashamed

of themselves! Don't say you mayn't be able to. You must."

"Thanks, thanks!" He held out one hand to her and the other to Penelope. "While you two ladies and Haigh believe in me, there's something to live for still. Haigh, you and I are going to make straight for Sheikhgarh, and try fair means first. I am glad I didn't ride Miani this morning, in case I don't come back. We will leave orders with Porter to march to our support if he gets a message."

They rode out of the gateway, followed by Major Keeling's two orderlies, gave Captain Porter his orders, and struck off across the desert to the south-west, in the direction taken by Ferrers and the Mirza a week before. By the time they reached the hills the eclipse was just beginning, and in the ghastly half-light, which seemed to be destitute of all warmth and to suck the colour from the rocks and sand, they pushed on towards the fortress. It was not long before they were challenged and their path barred by a patrol wearing the white and scarlet dress of the brotherhood. Major Keeling bade the orderlies remain where they were, taking precautions against surprise, and if neither Sir Dugald nor himself had returned in an hour, to ride for their lives to Alibad and Captain Porter.

"Tell the Sheikh-ul-Jabal," he said to the men who had stopped him, "that his friend Keeling Sahib is here, and desires to see him on a matter of great importance to them both."

One of the men was sent with the message, and presently returned to say that the Sheikh was willing to give audience to the visitors if they would consent to be blindfolded until they reached his presence. Sir Dugald demurred, whereupon his leader told him to stay with the orderlies if he liked, but not to cavil about trifles, and he submitted. Their horses led by a man on either side, they rode on, able only to distinguish that the path wound uphill and downhill a good deal, and was sometimes pebbly and sometimes rocky. Then they passed under an echoing gateway,

where their guides warned Major Keeling to stoop, and across a paved courtyard, and were told they must dismount. Sir Dugald felt to make sure that his sword was loose in the scabbard and his pistols untouched, and allowed himself to be guided up a flight of steps. They entered some building, and the bandages were removed from the eyes of the two Englishmen. The light was very imperfect, for the eclipse was approaching totality, but they were able to distinguish a majestic bearded figure in white and scarlet facing them

"Sheikh Sahib," began Major Keeling impulsively; but he was interrupted by an involuntary exclamation from Sir Dugald—

"Why, the beggar's the living image of you, Major!"

A smile passed over the features of the Sheikh-ul-Jabal, and he ordered the attendants to bring lights. Torches arrived, and Major Keeling gazed in astonishment into a face which was bewilderingly reminiscent of his own, while Sir Dugald compared the two feature by feature, and could find no difference.

"This explains the mystery, then!" he said.

"Why, so it does!" said Major Keeling, "and Ferrers is not quite the hound we thought him. Did you know of this likeness?" he asked of the Sheikh.

"I discovered it the night we met in the desert," was the answer, "and the reports of my disciples would have informed me of it if I had not. It has had advantages for both of us," and he smiled again.

"It will have very grievous disadvantages for both of us," cried Major Keeling, "unless you will go to Alibad at once and see the Commissioner. He thinks I have personated you to get your allowance, and he is determined to thresh the matter out."

The Sheikh considered the request gravely. "Will the Commissioner Sahib come here if I do not go to him?" he asked.

"If he doesn't, Captain Porter will come, and the Khemistan Horse with him. The Commissioner means to satisfy himself about this, and he is not one to be turned aside."

"I have heard of him. But what if he should keep me a prisoner?"

"I have thought of that. I will remain here as a hostage, while you go to Alibad with Lieutenant Haigh here. Never mind about your vow. It's the best day you could have in the year, for the sun isn't shining, and if it was, it would be better to dispense yourself from your vow than have your fort destroyed."

"Kilin Sahib speaks wisely," said the Sheikh, stroking his beard. "Let the children be called," he said to a servant. The two Englishmen waited in some perplexity while the three children whom Ferrers had seen were summoned from behind a curtain. The boys came forward with eager interest; but the girl, who drew her head-shawl across her mouth, eyed the visitors with unconcealed hostility.

"Ashraf Ali," said the Sheikh to the eldest boy, "this Sahib will remain here as a hostage while I ride to Alibad with his friend. You will deal with him as the Sahibs there deal with me. If they kill me, you will kill him, and defend the fort to the last. Take your post in the gate-tower, and keep good watch, while your brother remains to watch the Sahib."

The boy seemed perturbed, and drew the Sheikh aside. "He is armed," they heard him say, looking askance at Major Keeling's sword, "and while I am keeping watch he may frighten the women, and make them help him to escape."

"I won't give up my sword to any man on earth!" cried Major Keeling hotly, anticipating the demand which would follow; but after a pause, as the Sheikh looked round at him doubtfully, he added, regardless of Sir Dugald's muttered expostulations, "I see your difficulty, and I'll take a leaf out of your book, and dispense myself from part of my vow. I will intrust my sword to your daughter, if she will honour me by taking charge of it."

"Wazira Begum," said the Sheikh, "take the Sahib's sword, and keep it safely until I ask for it again."

The girl came forward reluctantly, and, darting a look of hatred at the Englishmen, took the sword as if it defiled her fingers, and retreated with it behind the curtain. Sir Dugald's protests against Major Keeling's remaining were met by a peremptory order to be off at once, and he unwillingly allowed himself to be blindfolded again. The Sheikh's horse was brought round, and he rode away with Sir Dugald and a dozen followers. Major Keeling sat down on the divan, and prepared to wait with what patience he might. Suddenly a thought struck him.

"What a fool I am!" he cried. "It proves nothing to produce the Sheikh alone. If they don't see us together, they may still make out that I am personating him. Haigh would be considered a biassed witness, I suppose. But it's too late to change now, and I could never have left him here as the hostage."

CHAPTER XI.

JUSTIFIED.

"THEY'RE coming back!" cried Lady Haigh. She and Penelope had taken up a position upon the western rampart, and were straining their eyes in the direction of Sheikhgarh. To their extreme disgust Mr Crayne had followed them, and wishing to make himself agreeable, sent for his secretary to deliver an impromptu lecture on the subject of eclipses, being apparently under the impression that they had come up to get a good view of the sun. It was this lecture that Lady Haigh interrupted by her sudden exclamation.

"You must have wonderful sight, ma'am," said Mr Crayne politely; "but you are accustomed to this sandy atmosphere, ain't you?" The Commissioner's manner of speech was not vulgar, only old-fashioned. Forty years before, when he had sailed for India, every one in polite society said "ain't."

"Oh dear, I wish it wasn't so dark!" sighed Lady Haigh, disregarding the compliment. "I can only see that there are four riders in front, and some more behind. No, I caught a glimpse of Dugald that moment, and I saw the turbans of two troopers—no, three. Why, it is Major Keeling in native dress!"

"He throws up the sponge, then!" chuckled Mr Crayne grimly.

"Elma, what can you mean?" cried Penelope. "Major Keeling is not there at all."

"My dear young lady"—Mr Crayne was decidedly shocked—"the warmth of your partisanship does you

credit, but allow me to say that you are carrying it to extremes. Perhaps you observe that the guard is turning out and presenting arms?"

"Oh, but that shows it must be a distinguished stranger—doesn't it?" said Lady Haigh, in rather a shaky voice. "Major Keeling does not go about turning out guards all day long."

"Lend me your field-glass, please," said Penelope sharply to the secretary, and when he complied she looked through it steadily at the approaching party. Then she thrust the glass into Lady Haigh's hand with a gasp that was almost a sob. "There, Elma, look! I knew it wasn't. It's not in the least like him."

"My dear Pen, I'm quite ready to agree that it isn't Major Keeling if you say so, but it's the image of him."

"Oh, there may be a slight surface likeness, but there isn't the least look of him really. The expression is absolutely different," said Penelope calmly. "Let Mr Crayne look."

"I can't pretend to judge of expressions at this distance," said Mr Crayne drily; "but it strikes me you are fighting in a lost cause, Miss Ross. Here is one of the troopers riding on first with a message, which will no doubt show you your mistake."

But when the message was delivered, Mr Crayne's face hardened. It was from Sir Dugald, to the effect that the Sheikh-ul-Jabal desired an audience of the Commissioner, and it would be well to receive him in the durbar-hall with the formalities due to his rank.

"So he means to brazen it out!" said Mr Crayne. "Well, see to it, Hazeldean. I don't know what good it can do, though."

The secretary descended the steps in a great hurry to beat up the Commissioner's escort, and Mr Crayne followed more slowly. Lady Haigh and Penelope moved to the inside of the rampart, and awaited feverishly the appearance of Sir Dugald and his companion. At last they came, and riding up to the steps of the durbar-room, dismounted.

"You see, Elma?" whispered Penelope triumphantly.

"Look at the dogs!" was Lady Haigh's only answer. Two terriers had rushed tumultuously from the Haighs' verandah opposite, and were barking and jumping round Sir Dugald. One of them was his own dog, the other belonged to Major Keeling, who had left it at the fort lest the Sheikh-ul-Jabal should be offended if it approached the sacred precincts of Sheikhgarh. Even now the Sheikh withdrew himself ostentatiously from the demonstrations of the unclean animals, and as Sir Dugald ordered them to be quiet they sniffed suspiciously round the stranger at a respectful distance.

"Pen, an idea! I'll send a *chit* down to the Major's quarters to have Miani brought up here," cried Lady Haigh. "He will never let a native ride him. It'll be another proof," and she called a servant to take the note.

Meanwhile Mr Crayne and his little court had received the Sheikh-ul-Jabal with due ceremony, and were now plunged in the most hopeless perplexity. The face before them was Major Keeling's, but the voice differed very decidedly from his, and the visitor's gestures and turns of speech served alternately to settle and to disturb their minds. The conversation, which was conducted in proper form through an interpreter, dealt first with the flowery compliments suitable to the occasion, and then with the momentous question of the health of Mr Crayne, the Governor-General, and Sir Henry Lennox on one side, and of the Sheikh and his household on the other. In all this there was nothing to decide the matter at issue. Then the Sheikh remarked that he had long desired to express his gratitude to the Company, which had provided him with an asylum and maintenance, and Mr Crayne seized the opportunity.

"And how long have you been the Company's pensioner?" he asked.

"I have eaten the Honourable Company's salt for ten years, more or less."

"And in all that time you have never presented

yourself before the Company's representatives to express your gratitude?"

"It is true. Nevertheless I have served the Company in many ways."

"But why have you never appeared at any of Major Keeling's durbars?"

"By reason of the vow which I swore. If the sun were shining on the earth I should not be here now."

"And yet you take long rides at night?"

"True. But is the sun shining then? Are durbars held at night?"

"What object have you in these rides of yours?"

"I am a *murshid* [religious leader], as the Commissioner Sahib knows. I gather my disciples together and exhort them to good deeds."

"Are all the tribes of the desert your disciples?"

"Nay, they follow but at a distance, in hope of the rewards of discipleship."

"And you have promised them the plunder of Nalapur? Complaints reach me continually of your intrigues."

"Why should I intrigue against Wilayat Ali and his accomplice? They will receive from Allah the reward of their evil deeds in due time. What good would Nalapur be to me? I would not sit on the *gadi* were it offered me. My disciples are many and faithful, I have a shelter for my head and bread to eat, I can sometimes help my friends. What more do I need?"

"You must understand that in no case will you be permitted to invade Nalapur from British territory."

"Why should I invade Nalapur? The Commissioner Sahib may be assured that I will make no war without the consent of Sinjāh Kīlin Sahib."

Mr Crayne was baffled. "If you wish to please the Company," he said, "you will leave your fort in the hills and settle down to cultivate a piece of irrigated land. You shall be allotted sufficient for your servants, according to their number, and rank as one of the nobles of the province shall be granted you."

"And I and my servants shall become subject to the ordinance that forbids the carrying of arms? Nay,

if that were so, the Company would soon be seeking a new tenant for the land. When one of the Commissioner Sahib's own house helps a Nalapuri spy to plot against me, am I a lamb or a dove that I should refuse to defend myself?" He pointed fiercely at Ferrers, who was dumb with astonishment.

"What does this mean, sir?" sputtered Mr Crayne, turning on his nephew. "How dare you accuse a British officer of plotting against you?" he demanded of the Sheikh.

"Because it is true," was the calm answer. "Last night, as I returned from one of my journeys, I was attacked among the hills, not far from my fortress, by three men. The two in front I cut down with my sword; but the third, watching his opportunity while I was engaged with them, leaped upon me from behind, thinking to stab me in the back. But he knew not that I wear always under my garments a shirt of iron links, which has descended from one Sheikh-ul-Jabal to another since the founding of the brotherhood, and though the blow left a mark upon the mail, yet the dagger broke, and I took no hurt. I saw the man's face in the moonlight as I turned round, and knew him to be one who had once been of the number of my disciples, but had broken his vows and stolen away. I would have slain him, but he was swift of foot, and my horse had been wounded by one of those who attacked in front, so that he escaped me, though I set the servants who came to my help to scour the neighbourhood for him. But one of the other men yet lived, and confessed to me before he died that he had been hired in the Alibad bazar by the Mirza Fazl-ul-Hacq, who was in the employ of Firoz Sahib at Shah Nawaz, to assassinate me, and upon him and his fellow both we found five gold *mohurs* of the Company's money. Have I not need of protection, then?"

"What d'ye make of this, sir?" demanded Mr Crayne furiously of his nephew, and Ferrers pulled himself together.

"All I can say is, sir, that the Mirza came to me last

night, and asked me to let him have two troopers. I understood he wanted to put some one out of the way, though I couldn't make out who it was, and I threatened him with punishment, and told him to go to Jericho."

"You let him go?" Mr Crayne's voice was terrific. "And why, sir—why?"

Alas! Ferrers knew only too well why it was, but he could not disclose the reason. "Well, sir, he had not done anything, and I never thought of his going to work on his own account."

"Yet you knew he was the kind of man who would commit a treacherous murder of the sort? You will do well to send to Shah Nawaz and have him arrested immediately, for your own sake."

"I will go myself at once, if you will allow me, sir." Ferrers spoke calmly; but as he left the durbar-room he saw ruin before him. He could only hope that the Mirza would not allow his desire for revenge to weigh against his personal safety, and would have made his escape before he arrived. If he had not, what was to be done? To connive at his getting away would be to confess himself an accomplice, to bring him to justice meant a full disclosure. If only the Mirza would have the sense to escape when he might!

Having disposed of this side-issue, Mr Crayne returned to the charge. He was not yet fully satisfied, although he was fairly convinced by this time that it was not Major Keeling who sat in front of him, baffling his inquiries so calmly.

"You appear to have a great regard for Major Keeling?" he said brusquely. "Why?"

The Sheikh permitted a look of surprise to become evident. "Why not? Does not the Commissioner Sahib know that Kilin Sahib has changed the face of the border, making peace where once was war, and plenty where there was perpetual famine? The name of Kilin Sahib and his regiment is known wherever the Khemistan Horse can go—and where is it that they cannot go?"

“And do I understand that you have been of assistance to Major Keeling in this work of his?”

“Surely. Is not Kilin Sahib the channel through which the Company’s bounty flows to me? Has he not treated me as a friend, and shown himself a friend to me?”

“Then in what way have you helped him?”

The Sheikh stroked his beard, perhaps to conceal a smile. “I have bidden my disciples obey him in all things as though he were myself.”

“Oh—ah”—Mr Crayne was baffled again—“is it or is it not a fact that there is a great personal likeness between Major Keeling and yourself?”

“It may be. I have heard as much,” was the indifferent answer.

“Is there—are you aware of any relationship that would account for it?”

The Sheikh’s eyes blazed. “My house is of the pure blood of the sons of Salih, from the mountains above Es Shams [Damascus], and of Ali the Lion of God; and all men know the descent of Kilin Sahib. Was not his father the great Jān Kilin Bahadar of the regiment called Kilin Zarss [Keeling’s Horse], who, after the death of his Mem vowed never to speak a word to a woman again, and kept his vow, as all men bear witness? It has pleased Allah to make two men—one from the East and one from the West—as like one another as though they were brothers born at one time of the same mother, and who shall presume to account for His will?”

“Quite so, quite so,” agreed Mr Crayne. “No insult was intended. Then you imply that a considerable amount of Major Keeling’s success on this frontier is due to you?”

“No; the Commissioner Sahib wrests my words. Kilin Sahib would have done his work without my help, though not so quickly. But when I saw the manner of man he was, and how he dealt with those that resisted him, could I see my followers—even those among them that were ignorant, and not true disciples—

slaughtered, and their land remaining desert? So I spoke with Kīlin Sahib, and found him not like the rest of the English, for he said, 'We were wrong when we stormed Nalapur and slew Nasr Ali, thy friend and brother; I myself was wrong also. What is past is past, and the future is not ours, but thou and thine shall dwell safely while I am on the border.' Then I knew he was a true man, and what I could do to help him I have done."

"It is well," said Mr Crayne, and gave the signal for the conclusion of the audience. When the closing ceremonies were over, and the Sheikh was escorted out into the grey light of the reappearing sun in the courtyard, he uttered an exclamation of pleasure.

"Surely that is Kīlin Sahib's horse? He is heavier than mine, but save for that, they might be brothers."

"Would you like to try him?" suggested Sir Dugald, to whom a note had been handed from his wife. He spoke in obedience to her imperious suggestion, but with misgivings. "I don't know what the Major will think of my inviting a native to mount his beloved Miani," he said to himself. "And I shall have the fellow's blood upon my head in another minute!" springing forward to assist the Sheikh as Miani backed and plunged, resisting all attempts to calm him. "Let him alone, Sheikh," he advised. "He is never ridden by any one but his master."

"Nay," was the indignant answer, "shall the Sheikh-ul-Jabal be beaten by a horse?" and forcing Miani into a corner, the Sheikh whispered into his ear. The horse stood stock-still at once, eyeing the stranger uneasily, and the Sheikh followed up his victory by stooping down and breathing into his nostrils. There was a sensation among the natives round. "Kīlin Sahib's horse has received the blessing of the holy breath!" went from one to the other. "Now he will be doubly the devil he was before!" lamented the groom who had brought him to the fort. But at present Miani seemed completely subdued. There was a look of terror in his eye and his ears were laid back; but though he swerved

away, as if with invincible repugnance, when the Sheikh led him out of the corner, he allowed himself to be mounted, and cantered obediently round the courtyard. The Sheikh laughed as he dismounted.

"He would come home with me if I bade him, and Kilin Sahib would bear a grudge against me," he said. "I will reverse the spell," and he slapped the horse smartly on the muzzle, then whispered into his ear again, and retreated precipitately from the storm of kicks with which Miani sought to avenge his temporary subjugation. Sir Dugald and the groom caught the bridle in time to prevent a catastrophe, and Miani was led away in custody, his behaviour fully justifying the groom's unfavourable prediction.

In the meantime Major Keeling, seated on an uncomfortably low divan in the Sheikh's hall of reception at Sheikhgarh, was enduring the unwinking stare of the boy who had been left in charge of him, and who had curled himself up happily among the cushions. He seemed to find the stranger full of interest, and Major Keeling felt that he was anxious to pour forth a flood of questions, but conversation languished, for whenever the hostage made a remark the boy entreated silence, with an alarmed glance in the direction of the curtain. At last, under cover of a loud rasping metallic noise, which seemed to come from behind the curtain, he edged nearer to Major Keeling, and said in a low voice—

"The women are sharpening knives."

"So I hear," replied the visitor.

"It is to kill you," the boy went on.

"Very kind of them to make sure the knives are sharp," replied Major Keeling, smiling, and wondering whether the ladies thought so highly of his chivalry as to imagine he would sit still to be murdered.

"Then you are not afraid?" pursued the boy. "I thought Englishmen were all cowards. Wazira Begum says so."

"I fear your sister is prejudiced. Where did she pick up her unfavourable idea of the English?"

“Oh, don't you know? It is your fault that we have to live in the desert, and old Zulika says Wazira Begum ought to be married; but how can a proper marriage be made for her here, where no one ever comes?”

“If I were you, I think I should leave that to your parents,” said Major Keeling, much amused by this original reason for hatred. “Your father will make a suitable marriage for your sister when the right time arrives.”

“But it is my brother Ashraf Ali who would have to do it. The Sheikh-ul-Jabal is not——”

“O Maadat Ali! O my brother!” came from behind the curtain, and the boy realised that the knife-sharpening had ceased, and that his last remark had been audible. He tumbled off the divan, and evidently received urgent advice behind the curtain, to judge by the whispering that went on there, and returning, seated himself in an attitude of rigid sternness, with a frown on his youthful brow, and his eyes fixed threateningly upon the hostage. Major Keeling gave up the attempt to make him talk, and yielded himself to his own thoughts, which were coloured somewhat gloomily by the surroundings and by the absence of daylight. It seemed to him that many hours must have passed, although the shadow had not fully withdrawn from the sun, before the welcome sound of horses' feet and of opening gates heralded the return of the Sheikh-ul-Jabal. Sir Dugald, who was led in after him by the boy Ashraf Ali, was blindfolded as before; but as soon as he was inside the house, he tore off the handkerchief and sprang at the Commandant.

“Thank God you're all right, Major! I've been perfectly tormented with fear lest that little vixen should have attempted some treachery. But the whole matter is cleared up, and the Sheikh will ride down with us to the spot where we were first challenged, that the Commissioner, who has ridden out, may see you and him together, and be able to feel quite certain. Do let us get out of this place!”

“Why, Haigh, I never heard you say so much in a

breath before. I should like to recover my sword first, if you are not in too great a hurry." He turned to the Sheikh and repeated the request.

"Let Wazira Begum bring the Sahib's sword," said the Sheikh, but there was no response. He called again, raising his voice, and this time the curtain was pulled slightly aside and the sword flung through the opening, so that it fell clanging on the floor at Major Keeling's feet. The Sheikh turned pale with anger, and took a step towards the curtain, but changed his mind suddenly.

"Ashraf Ali, kneel and restore Kīlin Sahib his sword," he said, in imperious tones. The boy looked at him incredulously, but durst not disobey, and picking up the sword, knelt to give it into Major Keeling's hands. In an instant his sister had sprung from behind the curtain and snatched the sword from him.

"Get up, get up!" she cried fiercely. "I am the dust of the earth in the presence of Kīlin Sahib Bahadar, but not thou," and to Major Keeling's horror she fell down before him, and tried to lift his foot to set it upon her head.

"Stand up, Wazira Begum," said the Sheikh, and she obeyed, and stood glaring defiantly at the Englishmen, her whole form shaking with passion. "Now give the Sahib his sword, and remember that if evil befalls me, it is to him I commend you all. He is your friend. Go!"

The girl vanished immediately, and the Sheikh led the way down the hall. At the door he stopped. "Swear to me," he said, "that you will not betray the secrets of this place, nor that these children dwell here with me. I will not blindfold you again."

"We promise, by all means," said Major Keeling; "but it is only fair to tell you that Captain Ferrers and the spy who guided him here saw the children a week ago. Ferrers I can silence, but the other——"

"It is destiny," said the Sheikh, mounting his horse. "The man has long sought my life, and I knew not that he dwelt almost at my doors. Long ago, having

fallen into disgrace in Nalapur, he was promised his life by the other Mullahs if he could avenge them on me, and he became one of my disciples by means of false oaths. But when he should have been advanced to the next stage of discipleship, he was refused, for I suspected him and desired to prove him further, whereupon, thinking he was discovered, he made his escape. What did he tell Firoz Sahib concerning the children?"

"Nothing, so far as I know. But perhaps I ought to tell you that from something the younger boy let drop, I gathered that they were not yours."

"It is true, but I will not tell you whose they are; and I beseech you not to inquire into the matter, that if you are asked you may not be able to answer. Their lives, as well as mine, will be in jeopardy if Fazl-ul-Hacq succeeds in discovering anything about them."

"Bring them in to Alibad," suggested Major Keeling.

"No, they are safer here, where no one is admitted without my orders. But if evil should befall me——"

"Then bring or send them in to Alibad, or send a message to me for help," said Major Keeling. "I owe you a good turn for to-day."

CHAPTER XII.

WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN.

‘COME! all’s well that ends well,’ said Major Keeling to Sir Dugald, as they rode into the town after escorting Mr Crayne back to the fort. “I don’t remember ever feeling so happy before.”

“I don’t wonder,” was the laconic reply.

“But I do. After all, Ferrers’ charge was a preposterous one. Why should I feel so extraordinarily glad to have cleared myself? The relief seems out of all proportion to the trouble.”

“I hope you are not fey, Major, as we say in Scotland?”

“If you are asking whether I have a presentiment of approaching misfortune, I never was freer from it in my life.”

“No, it’s just the other way. You feel particularly happy, and you can’t see any reason for it. Then you know that misfortune is on its way.”

“Oh, that’s what it is to be fey? Haigh, I’ll tell you what would have been a misfortune—if your wife and Miss Ross had turned against me.”

“Do you think they’re fools?” growled Sir Dugald.

“No; but the charge must have seemed very serious to them. By the way, I don’t think they ever asked what the charge was, though!” He laughed, a great ringing laugh. “They acquitted me on trust. On my honour, Haigh, if those two women had believed me guilty, I should have been ready to blow out my brains!”

"The ladies ought to be flattered," said Sir Dugald soberly. Major Keeling gave him a sharp look, but he was gazing straight between his horse's ears, with an absolutely impassive face. No one looking at him would have guessed that he was trying to break through his natural reserve so far as to inform the Commandant of Penelope's engagement. What instinct impelled him to the effort he could not have told, and the fear of committing a breach of confidence combined with his Scottish prudence to keep his mouth shut. Major Keeling leaned over from his tall horse and slapped him on the back.

"Don't look so doleful, Haigh!" he commanded. "We shall see better things for the frontier from to-day. The old man's apology was really handsome, and I like him better than I should ever have thought I could like a civilian. I can even forgive Ferrers, if he doesn't do anything to put my back up again before I see him next."

Sir Dugald turned and looked at him in silence—a look which Major Keeling remembered afterwards; but if he had at last made up his mind to speak, his opportunity was gone, for Dr Tarleton came flying out of his surgery to demand whether all was right. In spite of the secrecy Mr Crayne had honestly tried to preserve, some rumour of the crisis had got about through the gossip of the servants at the fort, and every white man in Alibad felt that he was standing his trial at the side of the Commandant. One after another dropped in at Major Keeling's office, all with colourable excuses, but really to learn the news, and were received and sent on their way again with a geniality that astonished and delighted them. Better days must indeed be in store for the frontier if the Chief had time not to be curt.

Sir Dugald had gone round to the artillery lines after leaving the office, and returned thither in the course of an hour or two, expecting to find Major Keeling still at work; but the room was empty, save for the presence of young Bigg, the European clerk,

and the native writers. Bigg looked up and grinned when Sir Dugald entered.

"Want the Chief? He's gone up to the fort."

"Already? Why, dinner isn't for two hours yet."

"I didn't say he had gone to dinner, did I? If you asked me, I should say he had gone for something quite different. I heard him giving his boy *gali* [a scolding] because his spurs were not bright. What does that look like, eh?"

"Looks to me as if you wanted your head punched. It's like your impudence to go spying on the Chief," said Sir Dugald gloomily, but Bigg chuckled unabashed.

At the fort Lady Haigh, immersed in preparations for the dinner-party, found herself suddenly addressed by Major Keeling.

"Miss Ross is not helping you?" he said.

"No, she was worn out after all the excitement this morning, so I made her go and rest in the drawing-room with a book. I wanted her to be fresh for to-night."

"Then I will go and find her." There was repressed excitement in his manner, and Lady Haigh, looking after him, found herself confronted with the question her husband had already faced. Ought she to tell him?

"No," she said to herself, setting her teeth with a snap. "Dugald forbade me to interfere in the matter in any way, and I won't. And I only hope the Major will be able to persuade her to have him and give up Ferrers."

Penelope, in the shaded drawing-room, lifted her heavy eyes from the book she had obediently chosen, and saw Major Keeling's tall figure framed in the doorway. She had heard him ride up, had heard his voice speaking to Lady Haigh, and had assured herself, with what she thought was relief, that he would come no further. Mr Crayne had brought him in, when he returned to the fort, and demanded the congratulations of the ladies on his behalf, and what more could he have to say? But here he was, entering the

room with the care which had aroused Ferrers' derision months before, and trying to lower his voice lest it should be too loud for her.

"Shall I worry you, Miss Ross, or may I come and talk to you a little? I feel as if I couldn't work this afternoon."

"I don't wonder," said Penelope, surprising herself in a sudden pang as she thought how splendid he looked. "Won't you sit down?"

To her surprise he took a chair at some distance from her, and seated himself thoughtfully. "I am going to ask you to let me talk about myself," he said—"unless it would bore you?"

"Oh no!" she answered quickly. "I should like to hear it very much."

He looked at her with a questioning smile. "You know they call me a woman-hater?" he said. "I wonder whether you agree with them? Don't believe it, please; it is not true. A woman-worshipper—at a distance—would be nearer the truth. But I see you think I must be off my head to begin in this way. Well, it was thinking of the way I was brought up that made me do it. My mother died when I was barely three years old: I can just remember her. When she died my father simply withdrew from society altogether. It was said he had vowed never to speak to a woman again: I don't know whether that was true, but he never did. It was easier for him than for most men to drop out of the usual run of life, for he was not in the regular army. He had raised a body of horse towards the end of the Mahratta Wars, and done such good service that when they were over his commission was continued, and his regiment recognised as irregular cavalry. But Keeling's Horse was never brigaded with other regiments. He had a *jaghir* [fief] of his own from the Emperor of Delhi, and lived there among his men and their relations, with only one other white man, his second in command. They both fell in love with the same woman, the daughter of a King's officer, and agreed

to draw lots who should speak to her first, the loser to abide loyally by the lady's choice. My father won, and was accepted—though how it happened I don't know, for my mother's friends swore to cast her off if she married him, and did it, too. The two of them lived perfectly happily away from other Europeans, except poor old Franks, whose friendship with my father was not a bit interrupted, and when my mother died, those two chummed together again as they had done before the marriage. They both kept a sharp eye on me, and brought me up something like the Persian boys—to ride and shoot and to speak the truth. I shall never forget the day when I came out with something I had picked up from the servants—of course I was a restless little beggar, always about where I had no business to be. My father gave me the worst thrashing I ever had in my life, and he and Franks rubbed it into me that I had disgraced my colour and my dead mother. I feel rather sorry for myself when I remember that night, for I knew my father's high standard, and I felt as if I could never look a fellow-creature in the face again. After that the two were always consulting together, and at last they announced to me that Franks was going to take me home and put me to school. That was how they settled it: my father could not leave his people and his regiment, but Franks took the business upon himself without a murmur, and he did his duty like a man. The funny thing was, that we were almost as solitary on the voyage and in England as we had been in India. Franks must have grown out of the society of his kind, —I had never known it. We took lodgings in a little country town; there was a school there recommended by the captain of the Indiaman we came home in. I think the country-people looked on us as a set of wizards, Franks and I with our brown faces and queer nankeen clothes, and his boy who couldn't speak English. The boy cooked for us, and we managed to get along somehow. I went to school, and hated the place, the lessons, the usher, and the boys about

equally. My only happy time was when I could get home to Franks and talk Hindustani again. I suppose there must have been kind people who would have been good to us if we had let them, but we were both as wild and shy as jingly ponies, and they seemed to give it up in despair. I think the general opinion was that Franks had sold himself to the devil, and was bringing me up to follow in his footsteps, and yet, except my father, I never knew a more honourable, simple soul. Well, the years passed on, and we began to feel that the end of our exile was at hand. When I was fifteen we might come back to India, my father had said. And so I did go back, but not poor Franks. Our last winter was a frightfully severe one, and he fell ill. He gave me full directions about going back, sent messages to my father, and died. The clergyman of the place was kind, and it was only by piecing together what the people said as they whispered and nudged one another when I passed that I learned they grudged my dear old friend a grave in consecrated ground. However, the parson put that right, and found some one who would take me up to London and secure a passage back to India for me. This time I was so desperately lonely that I made friends among the youths of my own age on board as much as they would let me. They thought me rather a swell, travelling with a boy of my own, and only a few of them turned up their noses at me because my father was nothing but a commandant of black irregulars, and lived away among the natives. There were several ladies on board, but I never attempted to go near them. I should as soon have thought of trying to make the acquaintance of so many angels. When we reached Calcutta, I spent only a few days in the town, and hurried up-country as fast as I could, for I heard tales of my father that made me anxious. He had resigned the command of his regiment two or three years before, on learning that it was to be assimilated with the rest of the irregular cavalry, and people said that he had become quite a native in his way of living.

Very few had ever seen him, for when travellers came in his direction, he had a way of leaving his house and servants at their disposal, and retiring to a garden-house at some distance, where he shut himself up till they were gone. Well, I found him, and the pleasure of seeing me seemed to give him new life for a while. He took me out shooting, and taught me all I know of *shikar*. But he was not satisfied; he would not have me live on among natives when he was gone, and suddenly he astonished me by saying he had managed to get me attached as a volunteer to the —th Bombay Cavalry. The Commander-in-chief was an old friend of his, and had promised to nominate me for a commission on the first opportunity, and meanwhile I was to pick up my drill and any other knowledge that might be useful to me. This time I was fairly thrown out to sink or swim, for I had no Franks to take refuge with when I was off duty, and a pretty tough fight I found it. I got on well enough with my comrades, though there has always been a prejudice against me for entering the army by a backdoor, as they say, and it has been against me with my superiors too. And then I was not the kind of chap who makes himself pleasant and gets liked. I have always been a sort of Ishmael, and I suppose I always shall be. As for the ladies—well, I tried hard to get in with them at first to please my dear old father, who had no idea that he and poor Franks between them had made me a regular wild man of the woods. But I couldn't do it. I could never talk of things that interested them, or pay them compliments, or do the things that it seemed natural to them to expect. One or two kind creatures did take me in hand, but they dropped me like a hot coal, and at last I gave it up. I got my commission in the end, and I told my father I meant to marry my regiment. He agreed with me, I am glad to say, for it was the last time I saw him. His *jaghir* lapsed to the Emperor, for I was on the frontier by that time, and never meant to go back to the jungle. My chance came when it fell to me to raise the Khemistan Horse,

and I knew I had found my place in the world. Sir Henry Lennox put me here, and I have given all my thoughts and every rupee I could lay my hands on to the frontier ever since. I made up my mind almost at once that I would have no married men up here. A wife was a drag to a man in such a service as this, I said, and even if she was content to endure it, it was not fair to her. Then—you know the way I was taken in about Haigh and his wife?" Penelope smiled. "Then you came," he went on, "and you were different from any woman I had ever met. When I saw you first, I knew that you would help a man, not hinder him, in his work, and you have helped me all these months. I could talk to you of what I was doing and hoped to do, and you would understand and sympathise. You can never guess what it has been to me, and until this morning I thought there was nothing more I could want. But it is not enough. I want more."

"Don't! don't! oh, please don't!" entreated Penelope, covering her eyes with her hands as he rose and stood over her.

"You must let me finish what I have to say. I will speak very quietly; I don't want to frighten you. See, I will sit down again, quite at the other side of the room. This morning it struck me like a blow, What should I have done if you had believed me guilty? If it had been Lady Haigh I could have stood it, though it would have cut me to the heart; but it was not Lady Haigh whose sympathy had made Alibad a different place to me. Then I remembered that the Haighs can't remain here always, and if they went away, you would go with them, and I should be left here without you. But you have spoilt me for my old solitary life. You have drawn my soul out to talk to you—I know it was not your fault, you never meant to do it," as Penelope tried to speak, "but you can't give it me back. I know I have nothing to offer you. I am unpopular with my superiors and with the civil government; my life is devoted to the frontier. I

don't know how I have the face to ask you to think whether you could possibly marry me, but I only ask you to think about it. Tell me when you have decided. I can wait. The only thing I cannot bear is to lose you."

Utter misery and pent-up feeling combined to give Penelope's words a thrill of bitterness. "If you have only felt this since the morning, it cannot hurt you much to lose me," she said.

He rose and came towards her again. "I think I have felt it all along without knowing it," he said. "It is as if I had been looking for something all my life, and had found it to-day."

"Oh, if you had only spoken sooner, I might have stood out against them!" The words were wrung from Penelope, but she crushed down her pain fiercely. "No, no, I did not mean that," she said hastily. "It is too late, Major Keeling. There is some one else."

"Some one to whom you are engaged?" She bowed her head. "Forgive me for boring you so long, but I had no means of knowing. It is Porter, I suppose? He is a fine fellow. I hope you will be very happy; I believe you will."

"It is not Captain Porter," said Penelope. She must tell him the truth, or he might congratulate Porter—poor Porter, who had proposed to her and been refused three months ago. Her voice fell guiltily. "It is Captain Ferrers."

"Ferrers! Not Ferrers?" He repeated the name, as if the idea was incredible. "It cannot be Ferrers. Why, you can't know——"

"Yes, I know; but he is different, he has given it all up. He says I can help him, and I have promised to try."

"But it is not fit. He is no more worthy of you—— Of course I am not worthy either, but still—— I must speak to your brother. Who am I to say that I am better than Ferrers? But I can't see you sacrificed. Your life would be one long misery."

"Please, please say nothing. Oh, forgive me, but don't you see you are the one person who ought not to interfere?"

He looked at her with something of reproach. "If it set up an eternal barrier between you and myself, I would still try to save you."

"But indeed, it is no use speaking to Colin. I have promised——"

"Do you care for this man?" he interrupted her.

"I have promised to marry him in the hope of helping him, and I shall keep my promise."

"You don't care for him. You have not even that hold over him, and how do you think you can do him any good?"

"He thinks I can, and I have promised. I am bound by that promise unless George Ferrers himself gives me release, and he won't."

"I'll wring it out of him."

The growl, like that of an angry lion, terrified Penelope. She laid her hand on her champion's arm.

"Major Keeling, I ask you—I entreat you—to do nothing. It is my own fault. Elma Haigh warned me against Captain Ferrers, and if I had listened to her, I should never have renewed my promise. But it is given, and I must keep it. One can't wriggle out of a promise because it turns out to be hard to keep. You would not do it yourself; why should you think I would?"

He took her hand and held it between his. "Do you ask me," he said slowly, "to stand by, and see you give yourself to a man who at his best is well meaning, but generally isn't even that? It's not as if you cared for him. You might manage to be happy somehow if you did, but as it is——"

"Don't make it harder for me," entreated Penelope.

"Am I doing that? Heaven knows I don't want to, unless I could make it so hard you couldn't do it. Why, it's preposterous!" he broke out again. "That you should feel bound to sacrifice yourself——"

"Is a promise a sacred thing to you? You know it

is. So it is to me. I must keep it, but you can make it much harder to do."

"I will do anything in the world that will help you."

"Then please go away, and never speak of this again." Penelope's strength was exhausted. In another moment she must break down, she knew, and if he pleaded with her again, how could she resist him? He seemed about to protest, but after one look at her face, he dropped her hand and went out. She moved to the window, and watched him between the slats of the blind as he mounted Miani and rode away. Would he ride out into the desert, she wondered, and try to rid himself of his grief in the old way? But no, he turned in that direction at first, but almost immediately took the road to the town again. If he were absent from the dinner-party that night, she might be questioned, as the person who had seen him last, and he must do nothing that might reflect on her. He rode to his own house, and going into his private office, sat down resolutely at his desk and pulled out paper and ink. He had been promising himself a controversy with no less a person than the Governor-General, a fiery, indomitable little man of a type of character not unlike his own. Lord Blairgowrie had observed, in a moment of irritation, that every frontier officer in India was a Governor-General in his own estimation, and would have to be taught his mistake, whether he were Major Keeling, C.B., or the latest arrived subaltern. An injudicious friend—he possessed a good many of these—had passed on the remark to Major Keeling, who had been prepared to resent it in his usual style. But on this occasion he got no further than writing, "To the Right Honourable the Earl of Blairgowrie. My Lord——" It was no use. The caustic words he had been turning over in his mind would not come. His thoughts were running on a very different subject, and he pushed away the pen and paper, and buried his face in his hands.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE DIE IS CAST.

How long Penelope sat in the drawing-room, staring with stony eyes straight before her, after Major Keeling had gone out, she did not know, but she was roused at last by hearing another horseman ride into the courtyard, and walk across the verandah with clinking spurs. She could not face any one just now, whoever it might be, and she ran to the door, intending to take refuge in her own room, but found herself confronted by Ferrers, who broke into a cheerful laugh.

"Just the person I wanted!" he cried. "Now, don't run away."

"I—I must," she faltered. "It's time to dress for dinner."

"Oh no, it isn't, not even for me, and I have to go to my quarters and get back here. I want to speak to you."

"But have you arrested that man—your munshi?"

"No; he knew better. Went back and collected his belongings, and made himself scarce. We shan't see any more of him, so it's all right."

"All right, when he brought false charges against Major Keeling, and tried to support them by murder? How can you say so?"

"Well, the poor wretch was very useful to me, and I never had any reason to complain of him. Of course he's done for himself now, but I'm glad I haven't got to hunt him to earth. Why shouldn't he get away if

he can? Now, don't look horror-struck and reproachful. It isn't as if I had helped him off, even. He was gone long before I got there, and I left orders that he should be arrested at once if he showed his nose about the place. What more could I do? You women are so vindictive. You're as bad as my uncle. He rode out to meet me with Colin, and his language was quite disgraceful when he heard the Mirza had decamped. I knew Colin would feel called upon to testify in another minute, so I told him to ride ahead with the escort, while I had it out with my respected relative."

"But I don't understand. What made him so angry?"

"Why, of course he wants the Mirza caught and punished, lest people should say he had employed him to trump up a false charge against Keeling. And so he turned regularly nasty to me, and said I had got him into a most unpleasant position, and in future I might go to the dogs in my own way, for he washed his hands of me. When he became offensive like that, I thought it was time to open his eyes a bit, and I did. I told him he had ruined my prospects here by coming and trying to make a tool of me to satisfy his grudge against the Chief, and I wasn't going to be thrown aside now. It was all very well for him to fall into Keeling's arms and swear eternal friendship; but if that friendship was to remain unbroken, my mouth would have to be shut. He had got me to bring charges against my commanding officer, promising me protection, and if I chose, I could show up a very pretty little conspiracy for getting Keeling out of the province——"

"But surely"—gasped Penelope—"you believed in the charges yourself? and Mr Crayne too?"

"Of course we did. It was the Mirza who played us false, but that has nothing to do with it. It's my uncle's business to cover the retreat of his own forces, and so I told him, and he swore he'd never lift a finger to save me from being hanged. So then I tried him

with you. He's taken rather a fancy to you, you know, and I gave him a hint last night how things were. So I told him I knew you'd never drop me, whatever happened, and asked him how he'd like to see you sticking to a disgraced man, and marrying him upon nothing but debts. Of course he said if you were such a silly fool as to do it you'd deserve what you got, but I could see he was a bit waked up. He cooled down by degrees, and at last we came to an agreement. He's to put matters right with Keeling, so that I can stay on here for the present, and as soon as possible he'll put me into an extra-regimental appointment of some kind. He may be able to get me sent as envoy to Gamara. What do you think of that?"

"Gamara—that dreadful place? Oh no!"

He laughed, with some condescension. "Why, of course it's the danger that makes the post such a splendid thing to get, little Pen."

"I wasn't thinking of the danger. It is the frightful wickedness of the place."

"And you couldn't trust me there! What a flattering opinion you have of me! But that doesn't signify. Look here, Pen, I want our engagement announced to-night. My uncle will do it at the dinner-party; he was quite pleased with the idea. Here's the ring I've been keeping for you. Let me put it on."

But Penelope drew back from him. She had endured much, but this was impossible. To sit at dinner between Major Keeling and Ferrers, and be the subject of the congratulations, toasts, and jests which the suggested announcement would involve, conscious all the time that the heart supposed to belong to the one man had been given to the other—how could she stand it? She spoke with indignant decision. "No, you must wait till to-morrow. You may make your announcement to-night if you like, but I shall not appear."

"Nonsense, Pen! What do you mean? What would the fellows say?"

"They may say and think what they please, but if

the slightest allusion is made to anything of the kind, I will never speak to you again. I won't wear your ring. Take it back, or I will throw it away."

"Well, of all the——!" Ferrers was puzzled and slightly alarmed. "There's no need to fly out at me like a little fury, Pen. If you don't want the engagement announced to-night—why, it shan't be, of course. But what am I to say to my uncle?"

"Anything you like. Say I don't feel well. Tell him it was the eclipse, if you want an excuse." She laughed mirthlessly.

"Oh, very well; but I hope you're not going to take up fancies, and go on like this——"

"If you are not satisfied, you have only to release me from my promise."

"Not I. If you said you hated me I'd marry you just the same, and you don't quite do that, do you?"

Her gleam of hope had vanished. Ferrers' smile showed he had no intention of releasing her, and she wished with impotent rage that she could give him the faintest idea of the utter repulsion, the loathing dislike, with which he inspired her. But he would not see it for himself, and she would not stoop to entreat her freedom again. With a laughing recommendation to get a little colour into her cheeks before the evening, he left her, and she was thankful to be allowed to escape.

The evening was a terrible one to her, although she had foreseen that it would naturally fall to Major Keeling to take her in, as the only lady in the place besides Lady Haigh. The Chief was in one of his black moods, so the other men whispered to one another; and Penelope sat beside him through the stages of that interminable dinner, and waxed desperate. He could do much for her sake, but he could not speak and act as if the interview of that afternoon had never taken place, and he said barely a word during the meal, while the settled gloom in his eye when it rested upon Ferrers terrified Penelope. She threw herself into the breach, talked nonsense with


the other men, as if despairing of getting a word from him, tried manfully to cover his silence, and knew all the time that she was wounding him afresh with every word she spoke. As soon as she and Lady Haigh were in the drawing-room she went straight to her guitar-case, and, getting out the instrument, tuned it to the utmost pitch of perfection. Presently Lady Haigh, who had been watching her anxiously, came and tried to take the guitar out of her hands.

"You mustn't sing to-night, Pen," she said; "I'm going to make you rest quietly in a corner." But Penelope resisted her efforts.

"No, Elma," she said. "I am going to sing the whole evening. If you want to help me, ask for another song whenever I stop—only not sad ones. Otherwise——"

The entrance of the men prevented the rest of the sentence, and Lady Haigh could do nothing but obey. She was conscious of the thundercloud on Major Keeling's brow, and thought she could guess at its cause; but she seconded Penelope's efforts nobly, scouted any sad songs that were suggested, and made the gentlemen agree with acclamation that Miss Ross had never sung with such archness and expression in her life. In her mind was running a line from one of the songs which Penelope had laid down with a shudder,—

"Go, weep for those whose hearts have bled
What time their eyes were dry,"—



and she knew that the only chance was to leave her not a moment for thought. It did not surprise her when, after the guests were gone, Penelope took up the guitar once more, and deliberately snapped the strings one after the other. It would be long before she could touch it again without living through that evening's agony afresh.

Morning came, and with it Ferrers, but by no means in a lover-like frame of mind. His feelings were deeply injured, and he was full of grievances. After leaving

the fort the night before, his comrades, taking their cue, as they considered, from Major Keeling, had all but cut him. It had been understood that Ferrers had made a full apology, and expressed his deep regret for the charges he had brought, and that Mr Crayne's mediation had induced the Commandant to overlook the matter. But Major Keeling's attitude at the dinner-party, his apparent inability to address a single word to Ferrers, had given the other officers a welcome opportunity of marking their sense of the younger man's conduct. Ignorant as they were, and as Ferrers himself was, of the new cause of quarrel between the two, they came to the conclusion that his behaviour had been so unpardonable that only the strongest pressure from Mr Crayne had prevailed upon Major Keeling to overlook it even officially, and in their loyalty to their Chief they hailed the chance of copying his demeanour. The faithful Colin, who was much perplexed by Major Keeling's uncharitable behaviour, and almost felt impelled to remonstrate with him, was the only exception, and managed, quite unintentionally, to fan the flame of Ferrers' indignation by the fulness of his sympathy. Fortunately for Penelope, Ferrers had not time to recount his ill-treatment at length, and was only concerned to have the engagement fully recognised before he started to escort his uncle back to the river.

"Now, Pen," he said as he came in, without troubling himself to bid her good morning, "I must have this thing settled. My uncle wants to see you before he goes, so don't try and play fast and loose with me any more."

Silently Penelope held out her hand, and he put the ring on her finger, only to find that it would not stay on.

"Why, your hand must have got thinner since I had the ring made!" he cried, taking the fact as a personal injury. "And I wish you wouldn't look so white and washed-out. It was quite unnecessary for you to sing so much last night—though of course it

was just as well to try to cover Keeling's bearish behaviour as much as possible—and naturally you're tired after it. This place doesn't suit you, I'm certain."

"I will wind some silk round the ring to keep it on," said Penelope wearily; "and I shan't sing any more, George."

"While I'm away, do you mean? How fearfully touching! Well, you won't see much of me for some time now. I mean to go back to Shah Nawaz and see if I can't do something to cut the ground from under the feet of these fellows who think they're too good to speak to me. Then I shall be off to Gamara, and when I come back we'll be married, and my uncle will find me a berth somewhere. Hang it, Penelope! can't you look pleased? I never saw such a girl for throwing cold water on everything. You know how fond I am of you, and how I want to have a good position to give you, and you don't care a scrap! I might as well be going to marry a statue."

"I am very sorry," she said, screwing up her courage for the effort, "but you know how it is. I have asked you to release me, and you refuse."

"Oh, it's that again, is it? You're trying to work on my feelings by looking pathetic? Then just understand, once for all, that I won't release you, and it's no good trying to drive me to it. You haven't the least idea what it means to a fellow to be really in love with a girl; but I can tell you this, that I won't give you up to any man alive—do you hear?—to any man on earth. So you may as well make up your mind to it."

Did he suspect? Penelope could not decide, but she resigned her hope of freedom once more, and allowed him to take her to his uncle, who received her very kindly, and promptly despatched Ferrers to see whether things were nearly ready for the start.

"I wanted to say this to you, my dear," he said, with obvious embarrassment, "that you'll be wanting to send for pretty things from home, and I should like you to look upon me as your father for the occasion.

Young brothers don't know anything about gowns and fallals, do they?"

Penelope looked at him, unable to speak. Pretty things from home for a wedding at which sackcloth and ashes, or the deepest mourning, would be the only wear that could accord with her feelings! The old man misunderstood her look.

"There, there! don't thank me, my dear. I'll settle it with your friend Lady Haigh, but I thought you might like to know. Pretty gowns for pretty girls, eh? And I'm doing it with an eye to my own advantage, too. Don't stint yourself in frocks, Miss Pen. I rather want a lady to do the honours down there at Government House. What if I gave George some post that would keep him at Bab-us-Sahel, and you two set up housekeeping with the old man, eh? How would you like that, my dear? Better than the frontier, eh?"

Penelope owned to herself frankly that it was. Latterly the possibility of finding herself alone with Ferrers in some isolated station, with no other Europeans within reach, had weighed upon her day and night. In Mr Crayne's house, eccentric as he might be, she would find protection if she needed it. She did not ask herself from what she would need protection, or renew the useless reflection that the prospect in which she expected to need it was hardly a hopeful one. She looked up at Mr Crayne again.

"I should like it much better," she said; "and it is very, very kind of you to think of it."

Mr Crayne did not seem wholly satisfied. Perhaps it struck him as strange that his company should be welcome in the circumstances. He pushed back Penelope's hair, and kissed her forehead.

"My dear," he said, "the pleasure will be wholly mine. And if George beats you—why, I shall be at hand to interfere, you see." He looked for a laughing, indignant denial, but Penelope started guiltily, and flushed crimson. For the moment she felt as if he had read her secret thoughts. "My dear," he cried,

in real alarm, "I don't think you are quite happy about this. What is it?"

But Penelope had regained her self-possession. Bad as the state of affairs might be, she had too much loyalty to discuss it with Ferrers' uncle. "I am going to try to be happy," she said, looking him straight in the face. "And Captain Ferrers is satisfied."

"Yes, George is satisfied, and so he ought to be, lucky young dog! Found a wife much too good for him, eh? I don't mind saying that George has disappointed me in the past; but with you to help him, my dear, he must do well. And you mean to keep him in order, eh? So much the better! Why, there he is clinking his spurs outside. Thinks I'm encroaching on his privileges, eh?"

Bestowing a second kiss on Penelope, Mr Crayne left her to his nephew, and went out to see the camels loaded, and incidentally to wrestle with his misgivings, which were difficult to banish.

"It's Keeling if it's any one. I thought so from the first, and his face last night makes it almost certain. And the girl ain't happy either. But why should I look after Keeling? He's old enough to manage his own affairs. No one could expect me to take his side against George. Besides, this is George's one chance. If any one can keep him straight it'll be a woman. Keeling can get on all right by himself. Daresay the girl sees it. She seems to have made up her mind—wouldn't thank me for interfering. Hang it all! I'm not going to interfere, if she's willing to take George in hand. Must think first of one's own flesh and blood."

And his meditations having thus led him, by a somewhat different route, to much the same conclusion as that which Colin had long ago reached, Mr Crayne bade his scruples trouble him no more.

Four days later Ferrers dropped in at the fort again, on his way back to Shah Nawaz, after leaving his uncle at the river, and was asked to stay to tiffin. The in-

vation was given, with impressive solemnity, by Sir Dugald, Lady Haigh having flatly refused to offer Ferrers any hospitality. She would have liked to see him forbidden the house, and urged that Penelope would be much happier if he were, to which Sir Dugald replied that in that case it was a pity she had promised to marry him, but that it was not her hostess's business to keep them apart. The Chief had accepted the man's apology, considering that he had acted in good faith, and it was impossible to go behind his decision. Nothing could have been more correct than Sir Dugald's attitude, nothing more heroic than his efforts to treat Ferrers as he might have done any other comrade; but the old frank friendliness was gone. Come what might, Ferrers had put himself out of the circle of those who loved to call themselves "Keeling's men." It was not merely the charges he had brought, but the attitude of mind that they revealed—the readiness to admit the possibility of a stain on Major Keeling's honour—which had made the difference. Sir Dugald's anxious cordiality and laborious attempts to make conversation on indifferent topics confirmed the impression produced by the scarcely veiled aversion of the other men the night of the dinner-party, and showed Ferrers that he had committed the unpardonable sin of the frontier. Many things could be forgiven, but not a want of loyalty to the leader. From henceforth he was an outsider.

Out of sheer pity for Penelope, Lady Haigh softened so far as to second her husband's efforts, and do her best to make the meal less uncomfortable, but the harm was done. Ferrers had come in excited, brimful of some news which he was anxious to tell, but withheld in order that he might be pressed to tell it, until the constraint by which he found himself surrounded sealed his lips. It was no better when he was alone with Penelope afterwards. She did all in her power to make him feel himself welcome, and questioned him on every point of his journey, with the double object of convincing him of her interest in him, and of keeping Major

Keeling's name out of the conversation. It was far easier not to mention him at all than to hear him belittled, and she knew Ferrers' opinion of him by this time. But her efforts to please her lover were vain, perhaps because of this very reservation, and Ferrers expressed his disappointment to Colin as they rode out of the town together.

"It's pleasant to feel that there's some one who cares for one's news," he remarked. "You could guess I had something to tell, couldn't you?"

"I was sure you had news of some sort. Well, what is it?"

"I gave Penelope a hint of it the other day, but she didn't seem to take any interest," Ferrers grumbled on; "and to-day again—I said I'd tell her about it if she'd ask me nicely, but she wouldn't. There's no meeting you half-way with Pen; one has to make all the running oneself. She doesn't care what happens to me; but when I said that as soon as we were married we would drop that fellow Haigh and his ugly wife, she looked ready to cry."

"She and Lady Haigh are great friends," said Colin, anxious to make peace, "and they have both been very kind to her. You would not wish her to be ungrateful, surely? But I haven't heard your news yet."

"Ride as close to me as you can, then. I don't want those sowars of yours to hear. Well, then, my chance is in sight at last. I know where to find Shir Hussein!"

"The outlaw?" asked Colin, rather disappointed.

"Of course. And I mean to catch him and his gang, and so leave Khemistan in a blaze of glory. You shall have a share in it, because you're the only fellow that has treated me decently over this business. The rest will look pretty blue when they hear about it."

"But where is he? Is his band a large one?"

Ferrers looked round mysteriously. "A good deal bigger than most people think. No wonder he has given us so much trouble! But he makes his headquarters in one of the ruined forts in my district, not so far from Shah Nawaz. The fact is, that's why he

has gone free so long—I never thought of looking for him there. But one of my spies met me on my way back from the river with the news, and the joke of it is that I know the place. I camped there for a week once, trying to get some shooting. Well, you see, since I know my way about there, we can do with a much smaller force than would otherwise be needed. I shall have to ask for some help from here, which I should hate if Porter or Haigh, or Keeling himself, had to come too, but I shall only ask for a small detachment with you in charge. Then we'll astonish them all."

"But why don't you want the Chief or any one to know about it?"

"They'll have to know that I want help to capture Shir Hussein, unfortunately, but I don't want them to know what a stiff job it is until it's over. Don't you see that they would do me out of the credit of it if they could? They're jealous of me—horribly jealous—because I happen to be the Commissioner's nephew. Can I help it? Is it my doing if he gets me a post somewhere else? I didn't come here because I liked the frontier—merely as a sort of favour to Old Harry—and if I'm offered a chance of leaving it I won't refuse, but I don't want to go as if I had been kicked out. Of course they would do anything rather than let me end up with a blaze of fireworks, but I think we can manage it in this way. Only mind you keep things dark, and make a point of coming when I send for help."

"Am I to tell the Chief what you think of doing?"

"Certainly not. He's as bad as any of them, now that I've managed to put his back up. It's all his own fault, too. If he had been like some men, one could have asked him long ago in a chaffing sort of way about the suspicious facts that had come to one's knowledge, and we should have been saved a lot of trouble. You stand by me, and keep your mouth shut, and we shall do it."

CHAPTER XIV.

INTO THE TERRIBLE LAND.

IT was not long before Ferrers' request for an accession of force reached Major Keeling, but it came at an unfortunate moment, for the Commandant was just setting out in the opposite direction, taking with him every man he could muster except those needed to guard the town. News had arrived that a band of Nalapuri raiders had crossed the frontier to the westward two days before, and as nothing more had been heard of them, it was evident they were hiding in the hills and waiting for an opportunity to swoop down and attack the labourers engaged upon the new canal works. The various raids of the kind which had occurred hitherto had been dealt with by the native police, but having received timely warning of this organised and more formidable incursion, Major Keeling meant to make an example of its promoters. They should not cut up his coolies in future, however tempting and defenceless the prey might appear. The matter was urgent, for delay would enable the raiders either to accomplish their object, or, on learning his intention, to make good their retreat over the frontier. Once in their own country they need only separate and mingle among their fellow-countrymen, who were all as villainous in looks and character as themselves, and there would be no hope of tracking them. Hence Major Keeling's face was perturbed when he sent for Colin to his office shortly before the hour fixed for starting.

“I have just had a *chit* from Ferrers, asking for a

small reinforcement in order to effect the capture of Shir Hussein, and suggesting that you should be sent in charge of it," he said. "Had you any idea that he had found out where he was?"

"He mentioned to me that he had reason to believe Shir Hussein had taken refuge in a fort which he knew very well, sir."

"And that was when he was here the other day? Most extraordinary of him not to have said anything to me."

"I think he meant to reconnoitre the place, sir, and see how large a force would be needed, before he said anything about it."

"Lest I should rush in and carry off the honour, I suppose? And he promised to ask for you—and you are wild to go? It won't do, Ross. He can't have reconnoitred the place to much purpose, I fear, from his letter. He talks about Shir Hussein's 'sheltering in a ruined fort,' and 'hopes to turn him out of it.' Curiously enough, independent information on the subject reached me only this morning, from which it appears that Shir Hussein has between two and three hundred men with him, and that he has repaired his 'ruined fort' in a very workmanlike way."

"Perhaps his strength is exaggerated, sir?" pleaded Colin, seeing Ferrers' chance of distinction fading away; but Major Keeling shook his head.

"The information comes from one of my most trusted spies. No; I should certainly have dealt with Shir Hussein myself if I had not been starting on this business. How he can have managed to support such a following in that district is most mysterious, and argues a good deal of slackness on Ferrers' part."

"I—I think perhaps he was outwitted, sir. I mean that he seems to have looked for the man everywhere except comparatively near at hand."

"Possibly; but he ought not to have been outwitted. Well, Ross, you see that it's out of the question for you to go. Shir Hussein and his fort won't fly away, and I'll take them in hand when this raiding-party is dis-

posed of, Ferrers co-operating from Shah Nawaz. No; it's his discovery, after all, and he shall have the credit of it and be in command. If I go, it will be as a spectator."

"But they might escape first, sir—when they know they are discovered, and that messengers are going backwards and forwards between here and Shah Nawaz, I mean—and Ferrers will lose his chance."

"I can't sacrifice my coolies that Ferrers may distinguish himself. But look here. I will call out the doctor and his Hospital Fencibles to guard the town again, and you shall take the detachment I was intending to leave here, and join Ferrers. Then he will be strong enough to keep the fellows from breaking away as you suggest. It's really important that they should not vanish and give us all the trouble of looking for them over again. But mind, there is to be no fighting. The troops—your detachment and Ferrers' own—are to be used purely for keeping guard over the approaches to Shir Hussein's fort and preventing his escape. My orders are stringent—I will send them in writing as well as by word of mouth—that no attack is to be made on the fort until I come up with the reinforcements. I know Ferrers would be perfectly ready to run his head against a stone wall, expecting to batter it down. Perhaps he might, but I distrust his prudence, and I won't have the town left open to an attack from Shir Hussein. You understand?"

"Yes, sir," said Colin dolefully. He knew by intuition that not even Major Keeling's chivalrous offer of self-suppression would make his orders palatable to Ferrers, and his foresight was justified when he arrived at Shah Nawaz with his small detachment, and found the whole place in a turmoil of preparation. Ferrers was first incredulous, then wrathful.

"Didn't I tell you how it would be?" he cried furiously. "Keeling is determined that I shan't leave the frontier with flying colours. It's nothing but mean, miserable jealousy on his part—and you side with him. I expected it of the others, but you——!"

"But your force is not large enough. Major Keeling believes that Shir Hussein has over two hundred men with him."

"As if I didn't know that! A surprise would make it all right."

"But he has repaired his fort, so the Chief says."

"He has made a new gate, which I am going to blow in, and piled up a few of the stones which had fallen down. Do you think I don't know more about it than Keeling, when I reconnoitred up to the very gate two nights ago, and not a soul stirred?"

"If you had only said so in your letter! He thought you underrated the difficulties."

"You fool! If I had told him all I knew about the strength of the place, would he ever have sanctioned my attacking it? I thought I had made that right, at any rate, and then this cursed spy of his turns up! What business has he sending spies into my district? —to spy upon me, I suppose, and make sure I get no chance of distinguishing myself."

"You are unjust, George. He will let you have all the credit when he brings up the reinforcements. You are to be in command, and he will only be a spectator."

"You are too green. Don't you know his dodge of getting these chaps to surrender by the magic of his name? Where should I be then? If they surrender, he gets the credit; if they don't, he'll get the fighting. You don't catch him sitting still and looking on, or joining as a volunteer under me."

"I really think that was what he meant, and you couldn't expect it of any one else," said Colin thoughtfully.

"And I don't expect it of him, you may be sure. I am going to carry out my original plan, and surprise the fort to-night."

"But that would be disobeying orders!"

"What do I care for orders? It's a plot to rob me of my last chance of distinction while I'm here. Dare you look me in the face and say it isn't? Porter and Haigh and the rest hate me like poison, and all toady

the Chief, so it's no wonder that he tries to push them on, and not me. But I won't stand it."

"Then you must attack with only your own men—not mine."

"What! are you afraid?" There was an unpleasant smile on Ferrers' face. "Then you shall stay in command here, and I'll take over your men for the occasion."

"No, you won't. They are under my orders, not yours."

Ferrers flung an ugly word at him, but could not alter his determination, and all might have been well if Colin had not felt moved to improve the occasion. "Don't think I don't sympathise with you," he said. "I know how hard it must be, but I can assure you Keeling means well by you. After all, it is only keeping our men on outpost duty for a day or two, and having the fight then."

"No," said Ferrers earnestly—his mood seemed to have changed—"that's not all. I know the place too well to think we can guard all its outlets. Shir Hussein and his men will simply make themselves scarce, and we shall lose them. Colin, I'm going to put the glass to my blind eye." Colin moved uneasily. "Isn't it Keeling's boast that he commands men, not machines—that he can trust his officers to disobey an order if circumstances make it desirable?" Colin gave a doubtful assent, and Ferrers went on, "I call upon you to second me. If you are afraid of the responsibility, stay behind here; but unless you are bent upon my death, you will let me have your men. We shall never have such an opportunity again. By to-morrow morning Shir Hussein will have heard you are here, and the chance of a surprise will be over. To-night he knows nothing; there is no watch kept. I have the powder and the fuse all ready for blowing in the gate, and once inside, we shall have them at our mercy. Dare you risk the responsibility and come?"

"I do. We will come," said Colin, carried away by his friend's unusual earnestness, and Ferrers went out

well pleased. His preparations were in such a forward state that they had not suffered from his temporary withdrawal, and at the appointed time all was ready for the night-march. It was his intention to reach the fort about an hour before dawn, and this part of his plans was carried out admirably. After posting Colin and the larger portion of his force in readiness to rush forward as soon as the smoke cleared away, Ferrers himself went forward with one of the native officers to place the powder-bag against the gate. It was impossible to follow their movements with the eye, but as Colin gazed into the darkness, there came a crash, a glare, a blinding explosion, shouts of dismay. He gave the word to the eager men behind him, and they rushed forward with a cheer. But before they were half-way across the space which separated them from the fort gate, Colin became aware that bullets were whistling round him, that men behind him were falling. Could it be that the men left in reserve with their carbines loaded to keep down any fire that might be opened from the wall were firing too low? No, the bullets came from before, not from behind. As Colin realised this, he tripped over something and fell into a hole, and was followed by several of his men. Before they could extricate themselves, there was a tremendous rush from in front, and a band of swordsmen, cutting and slashing with their heavy tulwars, threw themselves upon the disordered force. The men behind durst not fire, for fear of hitting their comrades; Colin, struggling vehemently to his feet at last, was cut down and trampled upon; and if a wild figure, with face streaming with blood, and hair partially burnt off, had not burst into the fray, scarcely one of the storming-party would have escaped. But Ferrers, who had been flung senseless to a distance when the burst of firing from the wall—which proved that it was he and not Shir Hussein who was surprised—had exploded the gunpowder he was carrying and killed his companion, was able to rally his force, and even press the enemy's swordsmen back to the gate. There was no prospect

now of pushing in after them; all he could do was to send orders to the men held in reserve to fire at any flash of a matchlock from the wall, while he extricated Colin's body from the hole torn in the ground by the explosion, and his men carried off their wounded comrades. The dead must be left behind—disgrace unprecedented in the history of the Khemistan Horse. To retire on the reserve, then to retreat slowly, with frequent halts to drive back the pursuers, to the spot where the horses had been left, and to return with sorely diminished numbers to Shah Nawaz, was all that could be done. Had Shir Hussein chosen to follow up his advantage there would have been little hope of defending the place successfully; but the tradition of the invincibility of the regiment stood it in good stead in this dark hour, and Ferrers was able to despatch a messenger to Alibad, and then turn to and help the native hospital assistant who was doing his best for Colin's ghastly wounds.

The news of the repulse created great excitement at Alibad; and as soon as Dr Tarleton had sent off another messenger to Major Keeling, he summoned Lady Haigh and Penelope and as many other non-combatants as could be accommodated there to take refuge in the gaol, while he armed his volunteers and appointed them their stations. But all fear of an attack was at an end on the following morning, when Major Keeling and his force swept like a tornado through the town, flushed with victory over the Nalapuri invaders, and burning to avenge the most serious check which the Khemistan Horse had met with since its first formation. Kilin Sahib had roared like a bull, the messenger said, when he heard the news, and his face was black towards the officers who sought to dissuade him from setting out at once for Shah Nawaz. The men had had a severe fight and a long march, they reminded him; to which he replied that the Khemistan Horse had often met with hard knocks before, but had never retired. He was prevailed upon at last to allow the force a night's rest;

but before daylight he was parading the men, and selecting the freshest and best mounted to accompany him, while the others were to escort the prisoners and spoil to Alibad, and remain to guard the town. Sir Dugald was sent on ahead to pick up two of his field-pieces, and he rejoined the force with them as it passed through Alibad, bound first for Shah Nawaz, and then for Shir Hussein's stronghold.

Shir Hussein was a man who knew when he was beaten. His first overwhelming success was entirely unexpected, for, once run to earth, he had only hoped to make his fortress a hard nut to crack, and keep the Shah Nawaz detachment occupied with it for some time, while he stood out for better terms. When he found all his approaches commanded by marksmen posted among the rocks, and learned that it was the height of folly for a man to show so much as his head above the parapet, he congratulated himself on having made such an impression upon the foe that they had decided upon a blockade rather than an assault, and made up his mind that he could hold out for weeks. But when a small group of men and two disagreeable-looking objects made their appearance at the top of a precipitous cliff, the steepness of which seemed to suggest that wings would be needed to get guns up there, and a far from charming variety of round-shot, shell, and grape began to fall inside his enclosure, Shir Hussein followed the example of the historic coon, and intimated that he would surrender without further persuasion. The resistance had been much too brief to satisfy the outraged feelings of the regiment and its Commandant, but it afforded these some relief to blow up the fort, and tumble the shattered fragments down into the valley. Major Keeling ordered a halt at Shah Nawaz on the way back, that he might install Lieutenant Jones there a second time in place of Ferrers, whom he had already suspended; but found to his disgust that there was no punishment involved in this, since Ferrers had just received his appointment as envoy to Gamara. The only thing to be done

was to cold-shoulder him out of the province as quickly as possible.

“Envoy or no envoy,” said Major Keeling savagely to Lady Haigh in a rare moment of confidence, “I’d have court-martialled him if it hadn’t been for the private grudge between us. You can’t go persecuting the man who’s cut you out.”

Ferrers’ departure from Alibad, hurried and almost ignominious as it was, was not wholly without its compensations, for Penelope and he were drawn nearer together than ever before by their common anxiety about Colin. Ferrers was so genuinely anxious and distressed for his friend that he could think of nothing else, and his farewells to Penelope consisted almost entirely of charges to take care of Colin, and to let him know exactly how he was getting on. Penelope was not likely to resent this preoccupation—indeed, she caught herself reflecting what a sympathising friend she might have been to Ferrers if he had not insisted upon being regarded as a lover,—and she parted from him with kinder feelings than she would have thought possible before. Thus he started on his journey to the river, whence he was to cross the desert to the eastward and to travel to Calcutta, so as to receive his orders and credentials from the Government before he betook himself beyond the bounds of civilisation. Major Keeling saw him depart with unconcealed pleasure, and promptly ordered up from the river to replace him a young officer on whom he had had his eye for some time, sowing the seeds of future trouble by seconding him from his regiment and appointing him to the Khemistan Horse on his own authority.

As for Ferrers, he discovered very soon that his mission was not likely to be either an easy or a particularly glorious one. When the unfortunate Lieutenant Whybrow had disappeared, the Government expressed its official regret at his probable fate, and seemed to think it had done all that could be

expected of it. But Whybrow had possessed relations and many friends, and these were so unreasonable as to hold the opinion that the Government was responsible for the lives of its accredited agents. They induced a section of the home press to take up the subject, and there was something like an agitation about it in London. Finding that it was not to be left alone, the Government decided on a compromise. Nothing but overwhelming physical force could bring the fanatics of Gamara to their knees, and this could only have been applied by an army, under the command of Sir Henry Lennox or an officer of his calibre, whose calculated rashness might, like Faith, "laugh at impossibilities, and say, It shall be done." But no one would have ventured to propose such an expedition at this time, and it was therefore determined to try moral suasion once more. Ferrers was supplied with the means of obtaining abundance of money (which was to be rigorously accounted for), but denied an escort; instructed to obtain the release of Whybrow, if he was still alive, by all possible means, but strictly forbidden to indulge in threats which might seem to pledge the Government to take action. To most people the affair seemed hopeless from the first; but Ferrers' failing was not a lack of self-confidence, and he felt that he had it in him to secure success where other men would only suffer signal defeat.

His journey to Gamara seemed to justify him in this opinion, for it was a triumph of what a later age has learnt to call bluff. Taking with him only his personal servants, he attached himself, for the greater part of the way, to a trading caravan, and speedily made himself the chief person in it. It could only be some very important man, with unlimited power behind him, who would dare to adopt such an insolent demeanour, and bully his travelling companions so unconcernedly, thought the merchants. Somewhat sulkily they accepted him at his own valuation, and the marches and halting-places came to be settled by reference to

him. He it was also who rebuked the guides when it was necessary, bringing those haughty mountaineers to reason by displaying a proficiency in many-tongued abuse which astonished them, and who forced the headmen of inhospitable villages to turn out of their own houses for his accommodation. True, the merchants sometimes looked forward with misgiving to the next time they would traverse these regions, when there would be no champion to help them; but such a splendid opportunity of paying off old grudges was not to be let slip, and the caravan led by the overbearing Farangi was long a proverb on the route.

When the mountains had been crossed, and the irrigated plains of Gamara were in view, the caravan broke up into several portions, and Ferrers pursued his way to the city in company with one of these. His heart was high, for his reputation had preceded him, and the villagers received him with marked respect. It was clear, he thought, that the men who went before him had failed by going to work too gently, and truckling to the prejudices of the people. The right thing was to go on one's way regardless of opposition, to browbeat the haughty and meet the insolent with an insolence greater than their own, and in general to act as no sane man, alone and without support in a hostile country, could be expected to act. The natives, like his fellow-travellers, would conclude that he had some mysterious reserve of strength, or he could never be so bold. Thus he saw without misgiving the distant masses of green which marked the neighbourhood of the city, and rode calmly along the narrow dikes, which were the only roads between the sunken fields, without a thought of turning back while there was time. Dimly seen through their screen of trees, the brick towers and earthen ramparts of Gamara had nothing very terrible about them, and was not Ferrers entering the place as an accredited envoy, with permission from the Khan to reside there until the business on which he came was done? Even the contemptible little dispute into which he was

forced by the action of the officials at the gate, who wished to make him dismount from his horse, did not trouble him. What did it signify that the law of Gamara forbade a Christian to ride in her streets? He, at least, was going to ride where he liked, and ride he did. It was when he had passed triumphantly through the gate that he was first conscious of a sense of uneasiness, of a feeling that a net was closing round him. The city boasted flourishing bazaars, and streets bordered by canals of clear water and shaded by trees, but his way did not lie through them. Possibly by reason of his self-assertion at the gate, or merely in order to avoid the crowds which thronged the business part of the town, he was led through the dullest by-lanes of the residential quarter. The narrow alleys through which he passed looked absolutely blank, the houses on either side presenting nothing but high bare walls to the public eye. Their roofs were flat, and such windows as there were looked into the inner courtyards. It was like passing a never-ending succession of prison-walls with occasional doors. Where the line was broken by a mosque, which generally served also as a college, there was some little relief in the shape of stately dome and lofty minaret, and occasional dashes of colour produced by the use of enamelled tiles; but it gave forth a throng of young fanatics clad in black, who made outrageous remarks about the Kafir, which were as audible to their object as they were intended to be. For convenience' sake, and to avoid attracting a crowd round him by his mere presence, Ferrers had made the journey in native dress; but he had not attempted to alter his appearance in any other respect, and his fair colouring rendered him distinguishable at once.

Having presented his credentials to the favourite who occupied the position of the Khan's foreign minister for the nonce, he was received with suitable compliments, and assured that his arrival had been expected, and a house and servants prepared for him. He was half afraid that this house might prove to be

within the circuit of the inner wall enclosing the hill on which the Khan's palace and the public offices stood, in which case he would have anticipated the possibility of foul play, but it turned out to be one of the ordinary houses of the town. It was furnished sufficiently, according to oriental ideas, with carpets and cushions; the servants in it accepted with remarkably little friction the direction of those he had brought with him; and when he had seen to the securing of the door opening into the street, he felt that what looked like a prison from without might be a fortress from within.

CHAPTER XV.

A LAND OF DARKNESS AND THE SHADOW OF DEATH.

AFTER a night's rest Ferrers prepared to pursue the inquiry on which he had come, but he found that the blank walls of the city were only a type of the passive opposition to be offered to his efforts. The mob of the place was so fanatical and so threatening that, as he persisted in maintaining his right to ride, he found it advisable to comply with the request of the Khan's advisers, and only show himself when he was to be granted an audience at the palace or the house of one of the ministers. Visitors he had none—none at least of the type that in most oriental cities delights in calling upon a new-comer and spending long hours in eliciting all manner of useless information. Gamara was the scene of a perpetual reign of terror, exercised from above by the Khan, and from below by the mob, reinforced by the hordes of theological students, and between these two forces the mere moderate man was crushed out of existence or frightened into silence. A whisper against the orthodoxy of even a high official would send a raging crowd to attack his house or to tear him limb from limb in the public street, and the truth of the rumour would only be inquired into afterwards, if at all. The Khan maintained his unquestioned ascendancy by outdoing all his subjects in their zeal for orthodoxy, which had no connection with morals, and by repressing that zeal with atrocious severity when it clashed with his own wishes. Mob-law offered a very useful means of getting rid of

undesirable persons; but one or two stern examples had been needed to teach the mob not to proceed to extremities unless they were smiled upon by the palace. The presence of a Christian in the sacred city was a standing defiance of its inhabitants, and it was only the drawn scimitars of the Khan's bodyguard that protected Ferrers from certain death as he rode to and from the palace in full uniform.

There was a community of Jews in the place, and it was from this that his unofficial visitors were drawn—scared, furtive men, distinguished from the true believers by their dress, who skulked along back-lanes, and entered the house by a private door in terror of their lives, but emboldened to the enterprise by the hope of turning a more or less honest penny. They were anxious to be Ferrers' agents in communicating secretly with personages whom he could not directly approach, and, in general, to do any dirty work that might be requisite. One of them, more courageous than the rest, actually offered to disguise Ferrers and take him about the city, but he felt compelled to refuse the offer, much against his will. The man was only too probably a spy, and what could be easier than to lead the stranger, ignorant of his whereabouts, into the precincts of one of the mosques, and raise the cry of "Kafir!" after which the Indian Government would have to lament the loss of another envoy who had mysteriously disappeared. It was very likely that the missing Whybrow had been trapped in some such way, but Ferrers was beginning to doubt whether exact information as to his fate would ever be obtained. The one indisputable fact was that he had disappeared, and not he alone, but his servants, horses, arms, and equipment, as completely as if they had never existed. The last of his written reports which had reached Calcutta was dated half a day's march from the city, and in it he said that in view of his projected entry thither he thought it well to send off beforehand the results of his explorations up to this point. From inquiries made on the spot, Ferrers was certain that he had left this

camping-ground and gone towards the city, but there his information stopped. No one could or would testify to the lost man's having passed the gates, though rumour was rife on the subject of his doings and his fate. Ferrers' emissaries brought him a different report every day. Whybrow had been turned back at the gates and had returned to India; he had been arrested on entering; he had been honourably received by the Khan and provided with a house and escort; he had performed his business and gone away in peace; he had been arrested during an audience at the palace and straightway beheaded; he had been torn to pieces in the streets; he had turned Mohammedan and been admitted to the Khan's bodyguard; a mutilated body alleged to be his had been subjected to disgusting indignities at the place of execution,—all these mutually contradictory reports were submitted, apparently in perfect good faith, by the very same men, but they shed no certain light on the fact of Whybrow's disappearance.

Ferrers had recourse to bribery. Presents judiciously distributed, by means of his Jewish agents, among the Khan's chief officers, brought him the honour of an audience of each of the gentlemen so favoured, and various interesting confidences. Whybrow Sahib had never entered the city; he had died in it from natural causes; he had left it and started safely on his return journey to India,—it seemed a pity that the worshipful hypocrites had not taken counsel together beforehand to tell one story and stick to it. Ferrers gathered only one more grain of fact after all his expenditure, namely, that Whybrow had actually been in Gamara. If he had not, there would not have been such anxiety to assert that he had left it in safety. But nothing of this sort was officially acknowledged. At each successive audience the Khan inquired blandly whether Firoz Sahib had yet been able to learn anything as to his friend's fate, and even condescended to remark further that it was most extraordinary a stranger should be able to disappear so completely just outside Gamara, and leave no trace.

Thus time went on, and Ferrers began to feel that he might remain in Gamara for the rest of his days and get no further. Meanwhile, the failure of his efforts and the restricted life he led were telling upon his nerves and temper, and he began to say to himself that if there was much more prevarication he would beard the Khan in his very palace, and give him the lie to his face. When he had reached this point, an excuse for the outburst was not long in offering itself. One of his agents came to him one day with even more than the usual secrecy, and produced from the inmost recesses of his garments something small and heavy, wrapped up many times in a piece of cotton cloth. It was a miniature Colt's revolver—then a comparatively new invention—beautifully finished and mounted in silver, and bearing on a small silver plate the letters L. W., the initials of Leonard Whybrow. Questioned fiercely as to where he had found it, the man confessed by degrees that he had stolen it from the palace—"borrowed it" was his way of expressing the fact. It had been in the charge of the keeper of the Khan's armoury, with whom he had some acquaintance, and recognising from its make that it was a Bilati (European) pistol of a new kind, he had secured it when the keeper's back was turned, intending to return it to its place at the earliest opportunity after Ferrers had seen it. He further put in a claim for the repayment of a sum of money which had been needed to induce the keeper to turn his back at the right moment, and urged that the pistol should be given back to him at once, or both the keeper and he would lose their heads, since the Khan often amused himself by firing away the ammunition which had come into his possession at the same time as the weapon. To this, however, Ferrers refused to accede, paying the money with an alacrity which made the agent wish he had asked double the sum, but refusing to surrender the pistol. He was to have an audience of the Khan on the morrow, and he would confront him with this proof of his treachery.

The next day came, and Ferrers rode to the palace with his usual escort. The audience proceeded on the ordinary lines; but when the Khan asked the stereotyped question as to the envoy's success in his mission, he did not receive the usual answer. Ferrers took the revolver from his sash, held it up to the light, pointed out the significance of the letters, and threw it on the floor at the Khan's feet. Then, without another word, he went back to his place and sat down, but not in the cramped position prescribed by Eastern etiquette, for instead of sitting on his heels, he turned the soles of his feet towards the Khan—thus offering him the worst insult that could be devised—and waited calmly for the result. The court was in an uproar immediately; but the Khan, pale with anger, contented himself with announcing that the audience was at an end, and dismissed the assembly. Perfectly satisfied with the result of his *coup*, purposeless though it was, Ferrers rode home with much elation. The news of his action had quickly spread from the palace into the town, and his path was beset by an angry mob, who threw stones until they were charged by the escort; but he felt an absolute pleasure in facing them. The long succession of insults heaped upon him had been more than revenged at last.

As he neared the house, it occurred to him for the first time that it would have been prudent to be prepared to take his departure immediately after defying the Khan. His servants should have been warned to pack up as soon as he started for the palace, and to await him with the laden horses at the gate nearest to the house. Even now it was not too late. He might ride straight to the gate himself, sending word to the servants to bring whatever they could snatch up and follow him, or he might go to the house and fetch them. This was the best plan, for he did not like the thought of abandoning all his possessions, and he almost decided to adopt it. It was vexatious to appear to run away, of course, but he could scarcely doubt there was danger in remaining. He had just turned

to the officer in command of the escort, intending to request his company as far as the gate, when a messenger from the palace clattered along the street and dashed up, shouting his message as he came. In the most insulting terms Firoz Sahib was bidden take his servants and depart from Gamara immediately. The Khan's safe-conduct would protect him to the gates, and no farther. The effect on Ferrers was instantaneous. Submit to be ordered out of the city—driven forth with insults—never!

“Tell his Highness that I leave Gamara to-morrow, and at my own time,” he said to the messenger, in tones quite audible to the crowd which had collected. “Am I a beggar to be driven forth with words?”

The crowd listened with something like awe, and the messenger, apparently impressed, made answer that he would return to the palace and represent to the Khan that the envoy had had no time to make preparation for the journey, and could not, therefore, start at once. The officer of the escort, seeming to be satisfied that the plea would be allowed, asked whether Firoz Sahib would like a guard left in the house for the night, in case of an attack by the mob; but Ferrers declined, with a shrewd idea that the danger might be as great from the one as from the other. Remarking that he would be ready to start on the following afternoon, he was about to enter the house, when an elderly woman, not of the best character, with whom he had several times exchanged a smile and a jest, looked out at her doorway on the opposite side of the narrow street.

“When the wolf sees the trap closing upon him, he does not wait to escape till it is down,” she cried, with a shrill burst of laughter, and Ferrers recognised that a timely warning was intended. But he set his teeth hard. Depart in obedience to the Khan's insulting mandate he would not, even though he had been prepared to start at once before receiving it. It seemed to him, however, that it would not materially compromise his dignity if he stole a march on the

authorities, and made a dash for the gate with his servants as soon as it was opened in the morning. They would not expect him to start until the time he had mentioned, and the mob would not have opportunity to collect in sufficient numbers to bar the passage of several resolute, well-armed men. He gave his orders accordingly; but the process of packing up was interrupted by the servants belonging to the house, who collected in an angry group, and demanded loudly to be given their wages and allowed to depart. The house and all in it were marked for destruction, they said, and why should they be sacrificed to the madness of the Kafir?

“The rats desert the sinking ship,” said Ferrers grimly; but he paid the men their wages, and allowed them to steal out separately by the private door, each hoping to lose himself in the labyrinth of narrow lanes, and so elude the vengeance of the authorities until he could find refuge with his friends. One of the men Ferrers had brought from India also petitioned to be allowed to take his chance in this way, and lest his presence in the house should be an element of weakness, he was suffered to depart. The rest obeyed in silence the orders they received. They could not understand their master’s proceedings, but they knew well that all Sahibs were mad, and that it was expedient to humour them even at their maddest. Moreover, this particular Sahib had brought them through so many dangers already, apparently by virtue of his very madness, that they felt a kind of confidence in him, and provisions were prepared and loads made ready for an early start on the morrow—the morrow which, for all but one in the house, was never to come.

The street was quiet when Ferrers went his rounds before going to bed, but he posted a sentry at the door and another at the postern, lest an attempt should be made to break in. He had little fear of an attack while he was behind stone walls, however; it was the ride through the city to the gate which he really dreaded. But in the night he was roused by the

clank of metal: some one had dropped a weapon of some sort on a stone floor. Hastily catching up his sword, he seized his revolver and rushed out into the courtyard, to descry dimly against the starry sky a man climbing over the wall which separated his roof from that of the next house, and dropping down. Before he had time to wonder whether the man was alone or had been preceded by others, he was borne down by a sudden rush from the dark corners of the courtyard. The revolver was struck from his hand, his sword was wrenched away, and though he fought valiantly with his fists, he was tripped up by a cunning wrestler and thrown to the ground, and there bound hand and foot with marvellous celerity. Without a moment's pause his assailants lifted him and carried him to the door, where they tied him upon a horse which was waiting. Hitherto he had been absolutely dazed. Not a word had been uttered, not a sound made since that first clang which had awakened him; and while the men were evidently armed, they had been careful not to wound him, though he had caught sight of more than one dead body in the courtyard and the passage. The very stillness roused him at last to coherent thought. There was not a soul in the street, not a ray of light nor the creak of a cautiously opened door from the blank houses on either side. He knew the truth now. As Whybrow had disappeared, so he was to disappear, without a sound or cry to attract the attention of the prudent dwellers in the neighbourhood. The bodies of his servants and all traces of their fate would be removed, his horses and possessions conveyed away before daybreak, and only the empty house would be left, and the usual sickening uncertainty as to one more envoy's fate. And what would that fate be? His blood ran cold at the thought, but it nerved him to one supreme effort. This street, after many windings, ended at the city wall; if he could once reach that point, he might scale the sloping earthen rampart and succeed in escaping, destitute of everything and in a country swarming with enemies,

but with life and honour left him. Gathering all his strength, he burst one of the cords that held him, and flung himself upon the men nearest him, fighting hopelessly with his bound hands. For a moment astonishment made the group give way; but before he could free himself further, one of them, grasping the situation, struck him on the head with a club, and he dropped senseless on the horse's neck.

When he recovered consciousness he was lying on a stone floor. His hands were free, but heavy fetters were round his ankles, and these were connected by a chain to which was attached a heavy weight. He could drag himself slowly about, but to move fast or far was impossible. He felt about his prison; it was all of stone, small and filthy, but dry, and from this, and the fact that a gleam of light came through an aperture near the top of one of the walls, he gathered that he was what might be considered a favoured prisoner. He was in the dungeons of Gamara, which were a name of terror throughout Asia, but not in one of the horrible underground cells. Not that this softened his feelings towards the gaoiers. Escape was out of the question, but failing that, his mind fastened itself on the possibility of a speedy death, accompanied preferably by as much damage to his captors as he could succeed in effecting. What was needed was a weapon of some sort. He did not expect to find furniture in the dungeon, but he hunted about for some time in the hope of lighting upon a loose stone, or even a bone from some predecessor's rations. Nothing of the kind offering itself, he felt about for a jagged edge in the wall, and at last found one, not too far from the floor. Crouching beside it, he lifted the chain attached to the weight, and began to use the rough stone as a file. He worked away with frenzied eagerness, though his hands were soon streaming with blood, and the cramped position caused him intense agony. His mind had no room for anything but the one idea, the obtaining of a weapon. At last his task was accomplished—the link gave way. He was free from the weight, though his

feet were still fastened together by a chain only some eight inches long. He tried to work on this next, but in vain, as he could not get the chain into such a position as to reach his file with it. But he had his weapon, and he lifted it with difficulty and placed it where he thought it would be most useful. Then he took up a position behind the door and waited.

At last there were sounds outside, and the door creaked slowly open. A man's head appeared, looking round in surprise and alarm for the prisoner. By a tremendous effort, Ferrers raised the weight as the gaoler advanced into the cell, and brought it down on his head. He fell with a crash, and an earthen vessel of water which he had been carrying was shattered on the floor. Ferrers had formed some vague plan of dressing himself in the gaoler's clothes and taking possession of his keys, but this was now out of the question, for there was a sound of voices and a rush of steps towards his cell. He drew back into the shadow, intending to knock down the first man that entered as he had done the gaoler, but his temporary strength was gone. His arms refused to raise the weight more than an inch or two. With a cry of rage he dropped it, and charged furiously into the group of men who had been attracted by the noise, and were trying to screw up one another's courage to enter the cell. One or two of them went down before his blows, others fled at the sight of the apparition, but there remained two who flung themselves upon Ferrers and grappled with him. Weakened by fasting and the blow he had received, he yet fought manfully, but they were slowly and surely forcing him back towards the cell, when one of them caught his foot in the chain. All three went down, Ferrers undermost, and once more he lost consciousness, the last thing he heard being a warning cry, "Do not kill him: it is his Highness's order."

When he awoke next he was again in his cell, but now his hands were also fettered, and he was chained to a ring in the wall. The death he desired had eluded him, and he was worse off than before. He was stiff

and sore all over after his fight, and his head gave him excruciating pain. At his side were a cake of rough bread and a very moderate allowance of water, and he seized upon them greedily, then lapsed into semi-consciousness. For an unknown length of time after this he lived in a kind of delirium, in which past, present, and future were inextricably mingled in his mind, and his only clear feeling was a vehement hatred of any one who came near him. When his brain became less confused he gave himself up to imagining means of gratifying this hatred, walking ceaselessly backwards and forwards in the semicircle of two or three paces' radius, which was all that his chains would allow. His new gaoler never ventured within his reach, and put his food where he could only touch it by dint of strenuous efforts, and the difficulty was to induce him to come closer. But the words he had heard recurred to Ferrers' half-maddened brain, and when the gaoler entered the cell one day, expecting to find the prisoner walking about and muttering to himself as usual, he saw only a confused heap by the wall. He called, but received no answer, and in terror lest the Khan should have been balked of his revenge by the death of his captive, ventured near enough to touch him. The moment he came within reach Ferrers sprang up with a howl like that of a wild beast, and, joining his two fettered hands, smote him on the head with all his strength. The man fell; but the authorities had learnt wisdom from the fate of his predecessor, and Ferrers' triumph was shortlived. Several men rushed in from the passage, dragged out the gaoler, and, turning upon the prisoner, beat him so cruelly with whips of hide that he sank on the ground bleeding and exhausted. When they left him at last, it was with a promise that he should taste the bastinado on the morrow, and, unhappily for him, his mind was now sufficiently clear to understand all that this implied.

All day he lay more dead than alive, and when the door of his cell opened gently, hours before the usual time, he had not strength to look up, even when a light

was flashed in his eyes. It was not until a leathern bottle was held to his lips, and a voice said, "Drink this, sahib," that he awoke from his lethargy, to see a well-known face bending over him.

"What, is it you, Mirza?" he asked feebly.

"Hush, sahib; I am come to save you," was the whispered answer. "Only do what I tell you, or both our lives will pay for it."

Ferrers drank obediently, and as he drank his strength seemed to return. He sat passive while the Mirza unlocked the fetters from his ankles, and filed through the chain which fastened him to the wall, but the thought in his mind was that now he would run through the prison and kill any one he met. He felt strong enough to face an army. But the Mirza's hand was on his arm as he sprang up.

"Nay, sahib, we must go quietly. Put on the turban and garments I have here, and hide your hands in the sleeves, for it would take too long to file the fetters from your wrists now. Then follow me without a word. You are my disciple, and under a vow of silence. If you meet any one, I will speak for both."

The authoritative tone had its effect in calming Ferrers, and he obeyed, putting on the clothes as best he could with his trembling, fettered hands, assisted by the Mirza, and pulling the loose sleeves down to hide his wrists. Then the Mirza took up his lantern and beckoned him to follow, fastening the door of the cell noiselessly as soon as they were both outside. They passed along a corridor with cell-doors on either side, and then through a kind of guardroom, where several men were lounging, either asleep or only half-awake. These saluted the Mirza, and looked with something like curiosity at his disciple, making no objection to their passing. Then came a courtyard which was evidently that of the common prison, for from a high-walled building on one side came shouts and groans and cries and wild laughter, making night more hideous even than day, and the ground was strewn thickly with bones and all kinds of filth. The Mirza did not turn

towards the gateway, but to a corner near it, where he opened a small door and secured it carefully again when Ferrers had passed through. Then he led the way up a flight of stone steps and through various passages, and finally brought his guest into a room fairly furnished and—joy of joys!—clean.

“This house is yours, sahib,” he said, turning to him. “There are slaves at your orders, a bath, food, clothes. I myself will dress your wounds, since there might be danger in calling in a physician from the town, but here for the present you are safe.”

Ferrers looked round him like one in a dream. The thing was absolutely incredible after the squalor and brutality, the ineffectual struggles, of the days and nights since he had been captured. “I—I don’t understand,” he said feebly. “I thought you and I had quarrelled.”

“Am I one to forget the kindness of years in the hasty words of a night?” asked the Mirza reproachfully. “Nay, sahib; now the time is come for me to repay all I have ever received from you.”

“I don’t understand,” murmured Ferrers again, and reeled against the Mirza, who laid him on a divan, and called for the servants. Still half unconscious, the prisoner was stripped of the horrible rags he had worn in the prison, and clothed afresh in rich native garments. His wounds were dressed, food and cooling drinks were brought him, and he was left to rest in comfort and security.

CHAPTER XVI.

“ENGLAND’S FAR, AND HONOUR A NAME.”

His arrival at the Mirza’s house was the beginning of what appeared, in contrast with the days that had gone before it, a period of perfect bliss to Ferrers. The extreme peril of his position, and the danger which would face him if he wished to leave the city, occurred to him only as considerations that enhanced the comfort of the present moment. He had nothing to do but to enjoy life within somewhat circumscribed limits, and to feel his strength returning day by day under the care of the Mirza and his household of obsequious slaves. From time to time the Mirza would appear perturbed, and a question would elicit the admission that a rigorous search was being made, now in one part of the city and now in another, for the escaped prisoner. But Ferrers thought this an excellent joke; and under its influence the gloomy brow of his host would also relax, for was not the Mirza the keeper of the prison, and was not his house the last place where the fugitive would be sought? Still, there were certain precautions to be taken, and for gratitude’s sake Ferrers was careful to observe them. He found that the Mirza was far more strict in the performance of his religious duties than he had ever known him—in fact, the man who had posed at Shah Nawaz as a freethinker was here the most orthodox of Moslems, and Ferrers, as became a disciple, also reformed his earlier heterodox behaviour. In the course of his adventures in disguise at Bab-us-Sahel

he had gained a fair working knowledge of the points of Mohammedan ritual; now he became acquainted with its extremest minutiaë, even to the incessant use of the *Fattha*, or first verse of the *Koran*, with which, in the contracted form of “*Allahu!*” the devout *Gamaris* were wont to preface most of the actions of life. Even had any of the slaves been ill-disposed, they could have alleged nothing against the orthodoxy of their master and his disciple; but they seemed to vie with one another in showing a deference to *Ferrers* only second to the veneration with which they regarded the *Mirza*.

It was but to be expected that as *Ferrers* grew strong again he would begin to chafe against the close confinement which his host assured him was necessary, and even to hint that it was time he made some attempt to escape from the city. These hints were always turned aside by the *Mirza*, however, and it was impossible to know whether he had understood them or not; but he was more accommodating in the direction of providing for his guest a certain amount of recreation. At the beginning, when visitors appeared, *Ferrers* was always smuggled out of the way in good time; but by degrees he was allowed to remain, at one time only hovering on the outskirts of the circle, ready to do the *Mirza*’s commands like a dutiful disciple, then, keeping in the shadow, to lean against a pillar and listen to the words of wisdom that fell from his teacher, and at last to make one of the group. He had grown a beard by that time, and this, with the aid of various skilful touches from the *Mirza*, altered his appearance completely, while his earlier practice in behaving as an Oriental stood him in good stead. At length the *Mirza* considered that it was safe to take him out of doors, and they entered afresh on their old course of adventures, the zest of which was heightened now to *Ferrers* by the imminent presence of extreme peril. The scenes which they passed through were many and various, showing undercurrents of life in the sacred city which it would be

by no means profitable to describe. Ferrers was wont at first to salve his conscience by assuring himself that this all formed part of an exhaustive inquiry which would have important results when he returned to civilisation; but he soon began to feel a fascination in the life he was leading,—to feel that he was being gripped by something to which one side of his nature, and that not the highest, responded with fatal facility.

It was one night that this idea came to him, bringing with it the unpleasant conviction that he was a great deal happier in Gamara than he had any business to be; and in the morning he was moody and troubled, almost making up his mind to speak plainly to the Mirza and demand the means of escape, then deciding that it was better not to touch on a subject which his host so pointedly avoided. They were bidden to an entertainment that day at the house of Ghulam Nabi, one of the Mirza's friends, an old and trusted servant of the Khan, and renowned even in Gamara for the strictness of his orthodoxy. The company was a very small one, for only a few could be trusted with the secret that besides the invariable tea and sherbets, fruit and sweetmeats, Ghulam Nabi was wont to amuse his confidential friends with entertainments of a more questionable character; but among them was a nephew of the old man's who was a student at a neighbouring mosque, and who threatened to be a disturbing element. Ferrers had become by this time so used to his assumed character that he no longer took the precaution of seating himself with his back to the light under the pretence that his eyes were weak, as he had done at first, and he found the student's gaze fastened on him almost continuously. Aware that to show agitation would be the worst possible policy, he nerved himself to maintain his usual calmness, and succeeded, as he believed, in dispelling the youth's suspicions. But presently, as the guests rose to accompany their host to a pavilion in the garden, the student flung himself forward with a shout.

“That man is a Kafir!” he cried, pointing at

Ferrers. “I have been to India, and seen the Sahibs, and he is one. He does not eat like us, he rises from his seat differently. He is here in the holy city to spy upon us!”

There was a stir among the guests, and they fell away from Ferrers as if he had been denounced as plague-stricken. He himself, as if by a sudden inspiration, attempted no defence. He looked at the Mirza, then bowed his head, and stood in a submissive attitude. The Mirza came to his rescue at once.

“The man is my disciple, and no Sahib,” he said. “Is this the way that the Sahibs receive an accusation, O far-travelled one? Nay, but I have been training this disciple of mine in patience and submission, until I verily believe he thinks I have devised this scene to test him. Truly he has learnt his lesson, and when I go hence, my mantle shall be his. Is he not a worthy successor, brethren?”

“He is no true believer,” protested the student, but less confidently than before. The rest of the company were evidently coming over to Ferrers’ side, and Ghulam Nabi clinched the matter.

“It can easily be proved,” he said. “I am not wont to put tests to those who come under my roof; but in order to quiet the foolish tongue of this low-born nephew of mine, let the Mirza’s disciple repeat the *Kalima*, that the ill-spoken boy may bow down in the dust before him.”

Much relieved by so easy a solution of the difficulty, Ferrers repeated promptly the Moslem creed, without hurry and with the proper intonation. The confusion of the student was complete, and his uncle and the other elders heaped reproaches upon him, while the Mirza’s face beamed. No further incident disturbed the harmony of the evening, and Ferrers returned home with his host in good spirits. His nerve, at any rate, must be untouched by the trials through which he had passed, since he could confront such an emergency without a single tremor. He had forgotten all about the remonstrance he had intended to address to the

Mirza, and was going straight to his own room, when he was called back.

"A load has been removed from my mind to-day," said the Mirza. "I had not looked to hear Firoz Sahib confess himself of his own free will a follower of Islam, and it has often grieved me to think of his returning to the dungeons whence I took him."

"It was merely a joke, of course," said Ferrers lightly, "but it served its purpose. Good thing I remembered the words all right!"

"There can be no jest in repeating the *Kalima* in the presence of witnesses," was the reply. "It saved Firoz Sahib's life to-day."

"And will save it a good many times yet, I daresay; but of course it's nothing but a joke. Hang it, Mirza! you don't expect me to go on pretending to be a Mussulman when I get back to India?"

"You will never get back to India, sahib. Those that have seen the things that have been shown to you do not leave Gamara."

"What in the world do you mean? I shall leave Gamara as soon as I can—in a few days, I suppose."

"When you leave this house you will either leave it as a Mussulman, in which case honour and riches await you, or as a Christian, when you will return to the dungeon from which I brought you. Or rather, as one who has once professed the faith of Islam and afterwards denied it, you will pass to such tortures as are reserved for renegades. But you will never leave Gamara."

Ferrers stood gazing at him, unable to utter a word, and the Mirza went on, speaking in a meditative tone—

"Yet is there no cause for sorrow in this, for there is greater honour for you here than you would ever have attained in India. And when the alternative is death—Nay, is it not better to command the Khan's bodyguard, and to receive at his Highness's hand houses, and riches, and fair women, and all marks of favour, than to be roasted alive, or flung headlong from the minaret of the Great Mosque, only

to fall upon the sharp hooks set midway in the wall, there to hang in torture until you die?”

“You don’t seem to think it worth while to enter upon the religious side of the question,” sneered Ferrers savagely.

“Nay, Firoz Sahib and I have lived and talked together too long for that. He knows that among unbelievers I am even as they, among Sufis I am a Sufi, among the Brotherhood of the Mountains I am one of themselves. To Rāss Sahib I have even presented myself as an inquirer into Christianity. In Persia I should be a Shiah, here in Gamara I am the most orthodox of Sunnis. To the wise man all creeds are the same, and he adopts that one which is most expedient for the moment. And as it is with me, so is it with Firoz Sahib, my disciple. To no man is it pleasant to change the customs in which he has grown up. When Firoz Sahib came to Gamara he put on the garments of this land; when he came into this house he shaved his head, according to the custom of the people, and these things he did of his own free will for a protection. But had any man ordered him to do them with threats, he would have stiffened his neck and refused with curses. So is it with this matter of creeds. Christianity is to Firoz Sahib as the garments of his own land, which he will lay aside of his own free will, for the sake of his own safety. He is too wise a man to see in the change anything but a matter of expediency.”

“And faith? and honour? and my friends?” demanded Ferrers fiercely, with bloodless lips.

“To your friends you died the day you entered Gamara. Nothing that now happens to you can reach their ears. Whether you live long and enjoy his Highness’s favour, or brave his wrath and die the deaths of a hundred men, they will know nothing of it. The matter is one for yourself; they can have no part in it.”

“This is your doing!” burst from Ferrers.

“And why not? When you destroyed in a moment all my labours, refusing me the means of justifying

myself to those that had employed me in Nalapur, so that having failed to slay the Sheikh-ul-Jabal, the accursed, it was needful for me to flee from their wrath also, I said to you that we should meet again. I thought to journey at some future time to Khemistan, and finding you in high place and established with a wife, trouble your tranquillity by whispers of what I might tell if I chose. I did not expect you to come to me here, where all was at hand for a vengeance of which I had not dreamt. But when I heard you were coming to Gamara, I knew that destiny had delivered you into my hand. You are here, and being such as you are, you will choose life and happiness, having only lately been very close to Death, and gladly turned your back on him. So that my vengeance has nothing in it that is cruel, but the truest kindness, for your life will be saved in this world, and your soul in the world to come, if there be such a thing."

"I won't do it!" cried Ferrers. "Call in your slaves and denounce me. Then you will have your precious vengeance after all."

"Nay," said the Mirza musingly, "it would be long in coming. Death is not all that is in store for the renegade, nor is it swift. Moreover, his Highness desires a Farangi to train his guard in the manner of Europe, and I would not willingly disappoint a second master. You are young, and life is sweet, and before you are war and wealth and the love of women on the one side. On the other—nay, but I will show you what is on the other. Come with me, but utter no word, for your own sake."

The Mirza took up a lantern and a long cord, and led the way towards the door by which he had first brought Ferrers into his house.

"To the prison?" asked Ferrers, with a shudder which he could not repress at the thought of entering again the place where he had suffered so much.

"To the prison. But fear not, you shall return hither. After that, it will be for you to do as you choose."

Once more they passed through the low doorway, crossed the filthy courtyard, received the salutations of the sleepy watchers in the guardroom, and entered the dark passage, Ferrers trembling from head to foot as the full recollection of what he had suffered there returned to him. But instead of opening the door of his cell, the Mirza turned aside into a second passage, and led the way through a labyrinth of narrow corridors and winding staircases, the trend of the route being always downwards. The air grew thick and damp, and the lantern burned dimly. There was a smell of mould, and where the light fell on the walls, they seemed to move. Ferrers stumbled on after the Mirza, who appeared to know his way perfectly. At last their nostrils were assailed by a horrible stench, and the Mirza, moving the lantern from side to side, showed that they were in a cave or room of some size, hollowed in the rock. In the middle of the floor was a hole or well, from which the stench seemed to come, and above it in the roof was another hole.

“Not a word!” whispered the Mirza, leading the way to what looked like a doorway on the farther side of the place. He lifted the lantern and threw the light inside. Horrible things wriggled and ran along the floor and crept upon the walls as he did so. He put one foot inside the doorway, and there was a kind of stampede. Small bright eyes and sharp teeth shone in every corner. But Ferrers’ gaze was fixed upon a crouching heap, which might have been a wild animal, at the very back of the cell. It moved, and disclosed the face of a man, gaunt, wasted, fever-stricken, with bleached unkempt hair and beard.

“Be off! I won’t do it!” The words were uttered with difficulty, but they were in English. Ferrers started violently, and the Mirza threw him a menacing look. The captive, seeming to recollect himself, repeated the words in Persian, but the Mirza made no reply. After turning the light of the lantern once more on the man and his surroundings, he motioned Ferrers back. Ferrers obeyed. The moment before,

it had been in his mind to say some word of cheer to the prisoner, at whatever risk to himself, if only to let him know that there was another Englishman—another Christian—within those terrible walls. But the words remained unspoken, and with a clank of chains the prisoner sank back into his former position, his chin supported on his knees.

Meanwhile the Mirza had been fastening to the lantern the cord he had brought with him, and now he let it down into the well, ordering Ferrers to look over the edge, but not to go too near. Once more he obeyed, to behold a sickening chaos of human bones and dead bodies in all stages of decomposition, among which moved and scampered obscene creatures such as he had seen on the walls and floor of the cell.

“All that die in the prison are cast here,” said the Mirza, and Ferrers realised that the hole in the roof must communicate with the courtyard above-ground.

“And who was—that?” he asked fearfully, as they began to retrace their steps. The Mirza gave him a glance full of satisfied malignity.

“That,” he said slowly, and as if enjoying each word, “is Whybrow Sahib.”

“Whybrow, whom I came here to——?”

“Whom you came to save. He is not a wise man, like Firoz Sahib. He will neither embrace the faith of Islam nor enter his Highness’s army. Therefore he lives here, with the rats and the scorpions.”

“And what—what will become of him?”

“Who can say? Perhaps he will die—the rats are often hungry—or he might be forgotten. Or it may be his cell will be needed for some other prisoner,—then he will be thrown into the well and left there. But that may not be for years.”

Years—years of such captivity as that! Ferrers laughed harshly. “You should have brought him up into your house and made life mean as much to him as you have done to me,” he said.

“We have,” was the answer; “and even into the very palace of his Highness, where one of the dancing-

girls, pitying him, pleaded for his life with her lord and with him, but he would not yield. He returned hither, and she died, as a warning to her companions.”

Again they made their way through the passages and up the stairs, again crossed the courtyard and entered the Mirza’s house. Ferrers turned aside to the steps which led up to the roof.

“Take counsel with yourself,” the Mirza called after him. “To-morrow you must decide.”

Take counsel! Ferrers had meant to do it; but even as he began to pace to and fro, with the sleeping city outspread all around him, he knew that the matter was decided already—had been decided from the moment when he withheld the words he had tried to utter to Whybrow. The test was more than flesh and blood could stand. In open day, Ferrers could have charged alone into an overwhelming host of enemies, and died gloriously. Had he lived in earlier days, he could have faced the lions in the amphitheatre, unarmed, and not have flinched, or have fought as a gladiator and received his death-blow by command of the audience without a sign of fear. But die slowly by inches underground, submit to be eaten alive by vermin, perish unknown, un-honoured, this he could not do. If only he had had companions in misfortune, if even Whybrow and he could have stood shoulder to shoulder from the first, and encouraged one another, it would have been different, but there was not a creature within hundreds of miles to whom steadfastness on his part would seem anything but foolishness. As the Mirza had said, no one in the world he had left would ever know whether he had died a hero or lived a craven; and if they did, what good would it do him? Penelope, who ought to care, would expect him to hold out. He felt angrily that if Penelope had loved him better he might have been a better man, even able to hold out, perhaps. It would have been something, on the other hand, to be able to assure himself that she would wish him to yield, but he could not take this comfort. And,

after all, what was he giving up? To trample on the cross, to curse the claims of Christ—these were disagreeable things to do, but, as the Mirza had said, they had no particular poignancy for him. With Colin it would have been different, of course. Christ was more than a name to him, Christianity other than a mere set of formulæ. But how could it be expected of Ferrers—could any one in his senses ask it—that he should die for Colin's faith?

CHAPTER XVII.

THE STRENGTH OF TEN.

FOR some months after Ferrers' departure for Gamara, Colin was kept a prisoner by the wounds received in the unsuccessful first attack on Shir Hussein's stronghold. Lady Haigh had insisted that he should be brought to the fort, and she and Penelope nursed him unweariedly. His convalescence was long and tedious, and complicated by attacks of fever; but he exhibited a constant patience which, as Lady Haigh said, was nothing but a reproach to ordinary mortals, and only showed what terrible people the Martyrs must have been to live with. From the first return to consciousness, his question was always for news of Ferrers; and when he was at last promoted from his bedroom to a couch in the drawing-room, he was still eager on the subject.

"Have you had many letters from George, Pen?" he asked his sister the very first day.

"Two, I think. No, there must have been three," she answered indifferently.

"Do you mean to say you're not sure? If poor George only knew what an affectionate sweetheart he has!"

"They came when you were very ill. How could I think of them then?"

"I don't know. It seems the proper thing, doesn't it? Wouldn't they be generally supposed to be a comfort to you?"

"Possibly, by people who didn't know the circumstances."

"Why, Pen!" Colin gave her a puzzled look. "Couldn't you read me a bit here and there?" he asked coaxingly. "I should like to hear how the old fellow is getting on."

"I'm not sure that I can find them. I'll look."

She went into her own room, and returned presently with some crumpled papers in her hand.

"There must have been three, but I can only find two. I remember the *dhobi* sent some message about a paper in the pocket of a dress that went to the wash. I must have thrust it away and forgotten all about it. Don't look at me with huge reproachful eyes in that way, Colin. I suppose you think I ought to work an embroidered case for George's letters, and keep them next my heart, don't you?"

"I thought that was the sort of thing girls did generally. Of course I mightn't be allowed to see them, Pen?" He spoke in jest; but his eyes were fastened hungrily on the letters.

"Oh dear, yes! I don't mind. Why shouldn't you?"

Colin was taken aback. He had no experience in love-affairs, but it struck him that this was not quite as it should be. He smoothed out the crushed sheets as she handed them to him.

"Why, they look just as if you had crumpled them up and thrown them across the room!" he said.

"Well, if you are anxious to know, that is exactly what I did do, and the ayah picked them up and put them carefully into a drawer."

"Pen!" Colin was shocked. "What could you have been thinking about?"

"Oh, I happened to be in a bad temper, that was all, of course. Don't worry your head about it, dear. Now that you are better, I don't so much mind all the other things. I oughtn't to be cross and horrid, when I'm so thankful about you, ought I? but I'm tired, and we've been anxious about you for so long."

She bent over him and kissed his forehead, and Colin, though perplexed, acquiesced in her evident

desire to change the subject. But he watched her anxiously, noticing the irritability which was so new in her voice, and the restless unhappiness of her face when she thought herself alone.

"Pen," he said suddenly one day, "has anything gone wrong between you and George?"

"Oh, nothing particular," she answered listlessly. "It's only that if I knew I should never see him again, I should be perfectly happy."

"Penelope!" he cried, aghast. "You would like him to disappear, perhaps to be killed, like poor Whybrow?"

"No, I don't want anything bad to happen to him. But if he would only fall in love with some one else, and never come back here!"

"I don't think you are at all in a right state of mind, Penelope." Colin's didactic instincts were roused by this heartless speech.

"Nor do I," she answered promptly. "I have known it for a long time. The best that can be said of it is that I am forcing myself to do evil that good may come—or that you are forcing me."

"I?" cried Colin indignantly. "You know I want nothing but your happiness."

"You don't think of my happiness at all. You think of me merely as a means of reclaiming George, not as a person to be considered separately."

"I hope you are not going to adopt Lady Haigh's jargon, Pen. It doesn't sound nice from a young lady's lips."

"Do you think that what I have gone through since Christmas has been nice to feel?" she demanded hotly, then broke down and fell upon her knees by his couch in tears. "Oh, Colin, I am very miserable. I can't bear it. Help me. Be kind as you used to be. Think of me a little, not only of George. He has come between us ever since we came to India. I can't marry him—I can't!"

Colin put out a shaking hand to touch hers. He had honestly thought he was doing the best both for

his sister and his friend in bringing about a marriage between them, and the sudden revelation of Penelope's state of feeling came upon him with a shock. "Don't, Pen," he said feebly. "I didn't know you felt like this about it. I'll speak to George—awful blow—poor fellow——" his voice failed, and Penelope sprang up in alarm.

"Oh, I have made you ill again! You are faint!" she cried in terror. "Oh, Colin, don't. I will marry him—it was always to please you."

"No, no." He lifted his hand with difficulty. "We will talk of this again—not just now. I will think about it. Poor George! poor fellow!" and as she fetched him a restorative Penelope felt, with a renewal of the old bitterness, that his first thought was still for Ferrers, not for her.

It was not until the next day that he returned to the subject; but in the interval she caught his eyes following her wistfully, as though he was trying to discover the reason for such hardness of heart. But his voice was gentle as he held out his hand to her when they found themselves alone, and said, "Now, Pen, come and sit here, and let us talk things over." It did not occur to her to resent this fatherly attitude on the part of a brother no older than herself. He had always stood somewhat apart, and taken the lead, and until the last few months she had never admitted a doubt of his insight or his wisdom. He looked at her searchingly as she sat down beside him. "There is one thing I must ask first," he said. "Is there any one else?"

The blood rushed to Penelope's face, but she looked him straight in the eyes. "There is," she said. "But don't look at me in that way, Colin, as if I had been encouraging some one else while I was engaged to George. I think you might know me better than that."

"You should have told me about it."

"How could I? There was nothing to tell. He didn't speak until it was too late."

"But when he spoke, you came at once to the conclusion that you preferred him to George?"

"Not quite that. It wasn't so sudden. I—I liked him before, but because he said nothing I thought he—didn't care."

"And now you wish George to release you that you may become engaged to him?"

"It's not that! He promised never to speak of that sort of thing again. How dare you say such things to me, Colin? It's not just—you know it isn't. If you knew anything about love—but you don't— It is simply that I can't promise to love and obey one man when I know in my heart that I don't love him, but some one else."

She had sprung up from her low seat and confronted him with flushed cheeks and grey eyes flashing. Colin hardly knew his quiet sister, and he felt abashed before her indignation. "Forgive me, Pen," he said. "I only wanted to know all the ins and outs of the matter. Why didn't you tell me about it before?"

"Do you think you are an encouraging person to tell things to?" demanded Penelope, still unreconciled. "No, I'm sorry; I didn't mean to say that. It was my promise, Colin. You were so shocked at the idea of my breaking it, I thought I would sooner die. And so I tried to forget the—the other, and to like George, but I couldn't make myself feel as I ought. I don't want to hurt you—I know how fond you are of George—but it was the difference, the dreadful difference between the two men. I couldn't help seeing it more and more."

"And so you were very miserable?" She was beside him again now, with her face buried in his cushions, and his tone was tender.

"So miserable. And I have felt so wicked, Colin. It was almost a relief when you were so ill, and I couldn't think of any one but you. When Elma came and made me go and rest, I couldn't sleep, because the thought of George used to seize me like a terror. It was horrible to think of his coming back."

Colin was stroking her hair, but there was a little bitterness in his voice as he said, "I seem to have been making a mistake all along. If I had guessed there was another man it would have been different; but I thought a girl could not want anything more than a kind husband, whom she might hope to help by her companionship. I knew Lady Haigh had prejudiced you against poor George——"

"No, that is not fair. I was quite willing to believe in George again on your word, but he never took the slightest trouble to show me that he cared for me. Even when I told him that before Christmas, he only made a kind of pretence, as if he knew I should have to marry him whether I liked him or not. I know I have been very wrong, Colin, but it was in listening to George at all, when I knew I didn't care for him. It isn't fickleness, really. I have tried hard to like him."

"And now I must tell him that you prefer some one else, and want him to release you?"

"No, tell him that I can't marry him."

"That is not enough. Do you think it is a pleasant thing for me to have to confess that my sister has made a promise she cannot keep, and that I must throw myself on his mercy to set her free? And poor George himself! You may tell me I know nothing about this sort of thing, but it will be a terrible blow to him. No, it is not your fault, Pen—altogether. You should have spoken before, but I am to blame too. I will undertake to settle the matter with George, and I only trust that I may be mistaken in thinking how much he will feel it."

"He won't release me," she said hopelessly. "I asked him myself."

"Without giving any reason? Of course he thought it was merely girlish fickleness or a love of teasing." Penelope moved her head unrepentantly. "Pen, you talk of my being unjust to you, but you are frightfully unjust to George. As if any gentleman would keep a girl bound when he knew she cared for some one

else! You try to excuse yourself by making him out a blackguard."

"I can only judge him as I have found him," she said, wondering whether Colin's firm faith in his friend had really a power to bring out the best side of Ferrers' character. Colin looked for good in him, and found it; she expected nothing better than lack of sympathy and consideration, and duly met with it. Was she herself in part to blame for the unsatisfactory features of his conduct? If she had been able to love him and believe in him with the whole-hearted confidence he had inspired in her as a child, if she could have continued to regard him as an ideal hero, accepting his careless favours with rapture, and never dreaming of demanding more affection than he chose to give, he might possibly have developed into the being she believed him. Possibly, but not probably. An unreasoning devotion would in all likelihood have wearied him, even if her sharp eyes had not beheld the flaws in his armour; but it was not possible to Penelope to go about with her eyes shut. Perfection she did not expect, but Ferrers could never have satisfied her now that she was no longer a child, even had his deficiencies, not been accentuated by the contrast with that other lover of whom she strove conscientiously not to think, but whose very faults she owned to herself that she loved.

For some time after her explanation with Colin, the subject of Ferrers was not mentioned between them. Colin had discarded the idea of writing to him, lest the letter should be lost or fall into the wrong hands; but there was a tacit understanding that he was to meet him as soon as he returned to India, and tell him everything. Even this unsettled state of affairs brought comfort to Penelope. Her cheerfulness returned, and she was uneasily conscious that Colin must think her absolutely heartless when he heard her talking and laughing with Lady Haigh, who was quite aware that he was inclined to consider her Penelope's evil genius. But one day there came news that put an effectual end to all cheerfulness for the time. Penelope was

crossing the hall when she heard Sir Dugald, who was just coming out of the drawing-room, talking to Colin.

"After all," he was saying, "it's much too soon to give up hope. Many things might happen to interrupt communications. He may even be on his way back already."

A groan from Colin was the only answer, and Penelope asked anxiously, "What is it, Sir Dugald? Is anything the matter?"

He looked at her before answering, and the look convinced her that Lady Haigh kept him informed, possibly against his will, of the course of affairs. "We are anxious for news of Ferrers," he said. "Since the letter which told of his arrival at Gamara, neither the Government nor any one else has had a word from him."

"And they think——?"

"They think—but we trust they are beginning to despond too soon—that he may have shared poor Whybrow's fate, whatever it was."

For a moment—a moment for which she could never forgive herself—Penelope was conscious of an involuntary feeling of relief. No more of those letters, which had caused her such indignant misery at first, with their calm assumption of the writer's authority over her, and their wealth of affectionate epithets (mentally repudiated by the recipient), and which she had felt as a constant reproach since her talk with Colin. Then came a quick revulsion of feeling. To what horrors was she willing to doom this man who had loved her, merely to save herself humiliation and discomfort? She ran into the drawing-room, where Colin was lying on his couch with his face to the wall.

"Colin, he must be saved!" she cried. "Don't let us lose time. They waited so long after the news of poor Mr Whybrow's disappearance before doing anything. Can't he be ransomed? There is Saadullah Kermani, the trader—he travels to Gamara, and would arrange it. I will give all my money—it isn't much

in the year, but we could realise the investments, couldn't we?—and my pearl necklace is worth a good deal, and there are my brooches and things. You would give what you could, wouldn't you? and I know Elma would help. Oh, and there is Mr Crayne. We can get quite enough money together, surely?"

"It's not a question of money." Colin turned a white, drawn face towards his sister. "If we knew that he, or Whybrow either, was in prison, there might be some hope. Whether he was seized in order to extort money or political concessions, we might come to terms. But if he disappears, as Whybrow did, without leaving a trace, and the Khan's government deny that they know anything about him, what can we say? The only thing is for some one to go and search for him, and it must be done."

"Oh, not you, Colin! not you!" cried Penelope, almost frantically.

"I shall not decide in a hurry. I mean to wait a week, in case the letters have been delayed by snow in the mountains, or by fighting among the tribes. If we hear nothing then, I shall write to the Government of India, asking to be sent to look for him."

"Oh, Colin, you mustn't go!" she wailed. "You are all I have now."

"It may not be necessary," he said. "I can't say more than that."

Penelope thought afterwards that she had never spent such a long week in her life. In terrible contrast to her former wish that Ferrers might not return was her feverish anxiety to be assured that he was actually on his way back. But no news came, and telegrams from Calcutta told that the authorities there had very little hope. They pointed out that they had agreed most reluctantly to send Ferrers to Gamara, and their forebodings seemed in a fair way of being justified. Nothing had been heard of Ferrers or from him by the end of the week, and Colin wrote at once to offer his services to go in search of his friend. The reply was prompt and decisive. The

Government had no intention of sending any further mission to Gamara.

"I must get leave of absence, and travel as a private individual," was all the comment Colin vouchsafed when he saw the joy which Penelope could not hide. "It will make things a little more difficult, but Government aid really doesn't seem to do much good."

"Oh, I wish I could speak to Major Keeling before he does, and beg him not to grant him leave!" thought Penelope, as she saw him mount his pony—he was allowed to ride a little by this time—and take the direction of the town; but it seemed as though Major Keeling had divined her wishes without hearing them. He was in his office, digesting an acrimonious rebuke from headquarters on the subject of the young officer upon whom he had seized to replace Ferrers, and his refusal of Colin's request was sharp and short.

"Go to Gamara—six months' leave? Certainly not. We are short-handed already. I wonder you have the face to ask it."

"You can't expect me to leave my friend to be tortured to death, sir."

"What does it signify to you what I expect? You won't get leave from me to go on such a wild-goose chase."

"Major Keeling, I earnestly entreat you to grant me this six months. I cannot leave Ferrers to his fate."

"What are you standing there talking for—taking up my time? You won't do any good if you stay till to-morrow."

"He is my friend. I must try to save him."

"And your brother-in-law that is to be? It makes no difference."

"No, sir, that is not my reason. In fact, my sister has determined to break off her engagement, and I shall have to tell him so, but——"

Major Keeling sprang up furiously. "What do you mean by coming here and trying to tempt me, sir?"

You shall not go to your death for Ferrers or any one else, unless it's in the way of duty. Be off!"

Nothing but the enlightenment which broke suddenly upon Colin would have sufficed to make him leave the office without irritating the Commandant by further argument, but for a moment the discovery overshadowed in his mind even the thought of Ferrers. He had felt some natural curiosity as to the identity of the man whom Penelope preferred to his friend; but as she did not offer to gratify it he had not pressed her, thinking that Porter was almost certainly the person in question. Now it occurred to him that Penelope might be of use in asking for the leave which Major Keeling was so determined not to grant, but he repressed the thought sternly. He would do nothing that would allow Penelope or any one else to think that he recognised the slightest bond between her and the man who had supplanted Ferrers.

Leaving the office, he saw Sir Dugald riding past, and joined him, telling him of the unsuccessful issue of his application. Sir Dugald, who may have been primed beforehand by Penelope, was much rejoiced, and inwardly blessed Major Keeling's wisdom, but was careful not to hurt Colin's feelings.

"It would mean certain death for you, after all," he said; "and you have your sister to think of, you know. Why not see what money can do? Let us go and see that old sinner Saadullah. He might be able to make inquiries for you, and he starts for Gamara in a week or two."

They rode out to the piece of land on the north of the town which had been set apart as a camping-ground for traders and small bands of nomads, and threaded their way between the lines of squalid tents and through the confusion of camels, horses, and human beings, towards the encampment of Saadullah Kermani, which was somewhat withdrawn from the rest. Most of the men who were hanging about saluted the two officers with more or less goodwill, but

a hulking fellow who was lounging against a pile of merchandise stared at them open-mouthed, and on being hastily prompted by a neighbour as to his duty, burst into an insolent laugh. Sir Dugald turned his pony sharply aside, and seizing the man by some portion of his ragged garments, shook him until his teeth chattered, then released him and ordered him to beg pardon unless he wanted a thrashing. Forced to his knees by his companions, the man stuttered out some kind of apology, adding in a sulky murmur something that the Englishmen could not hear.

"What does he say?" asked Sir Dugald of the trader himself, who had come up by this time.

"Nothing, sahib, nothing; he is the son of a pig, one who cannot speak truth. He utters lies as the serpent spits forth venom."

"He said something about Gamara, and I wish to know what it was."

"I said," interrupted the cause of the discussion, "that the Sahibs who ride here so proudly, and ill-treat true believers, would find things rather different in Gamara, like their friend Firoz Sahib."

"What do you know about Firoz Sahib?" demanded Sir Dugald.

"Only that he has turned Mussulman to save his life," grinned the man. "Oh, mercy, Heaven-born, mercy!" as Saadullah and his servants fell upon him, all trying to beat him at once.

"No, let him speak," commanded Sir Dugald. "Is this true that you say?" he asked the man.

"I know only that one morning Firoz Sahib was not to be found in the house that had been appointed for him, and it was said that he had insulted his Highness, and had been given his choice of Islam or death," was the sulky answer.

"Did you hear anything of this?" asked Sir Dugald of Saadullah.

"It was talked of in the bazars, sahib; but many things are spoken that have no truth in them," replied the trader deferentially.

“Well, we will see you again. I would advise you to teach that fellow of yours to keep his mouth shut.”

“It shall be done, sahib. He is a fool, and the grandson of a fool,” and Saadullah pursued the two officers out of his camp with profound bows. As soon as they were clear of the tents, Colin turned to Sir Dugald.

“This settles it,” he said. “I shall throw up my commission and go to Gamara.”

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE ALLOTTED FIELD.

FROM this determination Colin could not be moved. He wrote off immediately to Mr Crayne, asking him to obtain leave for him to resign his commission without delay, since Major Keeling remained obdurate, and join Saadullah Kermani's caravan when it left Alibad for Gamara. Mr Crayne, whose anxiety for his nephew's safety was embittered by the remembrance that it was he himself who had obtained him his perilous post, made a flying journey to the river station, and summoned Colin to meet him there, that they might talk things over. The old man was aghast when he heard Colin's plans. He would attempt no disguise, seek no credentials from the Government, invoke no protection if danger threatened. Bible and Koran in hand, he would go to the wicked city simply as a friend in search of a friend, proving to the orthodox of Gamara from the books they held sacred their abuse of the duties of hospitality. Eager as he was that some definite step should be taken, Mr Crayne recoiled from sending Colin to what seemed certain death, and could hardly be dissuaded from dismissing the project as summarily as Major Keeling had done. But at last Colin's entreaties induced him to send for Saadullah from Alibad, and after long and anxious consultations with the trader he began to see a glimmering of hope in the scheme. During the short time he had been on the border, Colin had acquired a high reputation for sanctity among the natives. His austere

life, the ascetic qualities which made him unpopular among his comrades, his willingness for religious discussion, were so many causes for pride to the men of his troop, from whom his fame spread first to the bazar-people of Alibad and then to the tribes. He was not credited with the possession of miraculous powers, like Major Keeling, but it was very commonly believed that he was divinely inspired. The discussions which took place in his verandah might have bred ill-feeling but for the courtesy and tact with which he conducted them, and the bigoted Mussulmans who came to confound him and went away defeated took with them a feeling almost of affection for their antagonist. He might be a Kafir and a smooth-faced boy, but he could argue against the wisest Mullahs and send them away with a lurking doubt that what they had heard and rejected might in reality be a message from God communicated by an angel.

Since this was the case, Saadullah thought there was good reason to hope that Colin might be able to visit Gamara in safety. The undertaking was fraught with peril, of course, but it was significant that the only European who had in the course of many years been allowed to leave the city uninjured was an eccentric missionary who had followed much the same plan. There was little likelihood of rescuing Ferrers, the trader admitted; but if Rāss Sahib obtained the Khan's ear, he might at any rate be able to ascertain his fate, perhaps even bring back his bones for burial. It was from Saadullah that Mr Crayne learned the unpalatable fact that Ferrers was the last man who should have been sent to Gamara, that his self-assertion and absence of tact would be a standing irritation to the Khan and his people, and that the sporting characters of the Alibad bazar had only disagreed as to the shortness of the time in which he would offer deadly insult to the prince or his religion, and duly disappear. With Rāss Sahib it was different, for he cared nothing for slights to himself, only to his faith, and his courage in opening discussion at the very seat of Moslem culture,

coupled with his kindly and courteous bearing, ought to win him friends enough to ensure his safety.

Thus urged, Mr Crayne consented, with many misgivings, to further the project. He obtained leave for Colin to resign his commission, and persuaded the Government not to veto the journey. He saw that he had ample command of money, and intrusted Saadullah with a further supply, to be used in case his charge found himself in any difficulty or danger, and also authorised them to draw upon him should more be needed. Colin's way was rendered as smooth as possible, and the resulting conviction that he was right in undertaking the journey made it easy for him to bear the contemptuous coldness of Major Keeling and the wondering remonstrances of his friends. He was very kind to Penelope, who could hardly bear him out of her sight, clinging to him, as it were, in a desperate endeavour to hold him back, while he put her gently aside, pressing on towards the goal he had in view. Her unavailing misery angered Lady Haigh to the point of fiery indignation, and at last she determined deliberately that she would at least make an attempt to bring Colin to a sense of the error of his ways. She gave Sir Dugald orders to take Penelope for a ride one morning, and fairly hunted them both out of the place, promising to overtake them before long, then pounced upon Colin as he rode up, and informed him that he was to have the honour of escorting her. It gave her a malign pleasure to note his evident unwillingness, though he could not well refuse to ride with her, and she wasted no more words until they were out in the desert.

"You are determined to take this journey to Gamara?" she asked him, slackening pace suddenly.

He looked at her in surprise. "Yes," he answered simply.

"And not even the thought of your sister will make you change your mind? You are leaving her absolutely alone in the world."

"She is not without friends. You and Haigh will

always look after her. Poor George Ferrers has no one. Moreover, I feel that to some extent I am taking the journey in Penelope's place."

"You don't mean to say that you expected her to go?"

"No, no, though she did cry out at first that she ought to go, not I. What I mean is that it was for her sake Ferrers went to Gamara, hoping the mission would lead to some appointment on which he might marry, and as soon as he is gone she turns round and declares that nothing will induce her to marry him."

"If you asked my opinion, I should say that he went to Gamara because he had made Alibad too hot to hold him; but if you prefer the other view, I can't help it. Mr Ross, tell me, what is there about Captain Ferrers which captivates you? You are not generally a lenient judge, but you condone in him things which you would rebuke unsparingly in your other comrades, and you can't forgive your sister for refusing to marry him, though it's clear it would mean lifelong misery to her if she did. Why is it?"

Colin looked at her in unfeigned perplexity. "He is my friend, Lady Haigh. When I was a little chap, and he a big fellow always getting into scrapes, we were like Steerforth and Copperfield,—no, I don't mean that"—perceiving that the comparison might be interpreted unfavourably to Ferrers—"like David and Jonathan—he was David, of course. In those days Pen was as fond of him as I was. I may be unjust to her, as you seem to imply, but I can't get over her fickleness. It was settled so long ago that he was to marry her and I was to live with them—what better arrangement could there have been? George has never changed, I have never changed, but Penelope has. What led to the change, you know best."

"Not I," returned Lady Haigh warmly; "except that it was a very natural repugnance to a lover who seemed to take everything for granted, and who, as we now know, never thought of her at all."

"Lady Haigh," said Colin earnestly, "you are doing

him an injustice. He did not know of her arrival in India, was not expecting her; but if he had been allowed to meet her, and she had met him on the old footing, without interference, this sad alienation would never have taken place. You meant well when you warned her against him, but——”

“Mr Ross,” said Lady Haigh, settling herself firmly in the saddle, and punctuating her sentences by little taps of her whip on the pommel, “I meant well, and I did well. You would have sacrificed your sister to a man who was not worthy to black her shoes. I saved her.”

“You have always misjudged him, and I fear you always will. I know he has done many wrong and foolish things—he has told me so himself, with bitter regret. But he had cast them behind him; all he needed to help him to rise was the love of a good woman, and he and I both hoped he had found it. I begin to fear now that even before he started on his mission he must have felt some misgivings about Penelope’s affection for him——”

“Probably,” said Lady Haigh savagely. “Oh, go on.”

“Some fear that her heart was not really his. What is the result? This terrible, miserable rumour which is taking me to Gamara.”

“Then you actually hold your sister accountable for Captain Ferrers’ becoming a Mohammedan? Now will you kindly tell me what you think a man’s Christianity is worth if it depends on a girl’s feelings?”

“A girl’s actions, rather,” said Colin sorrowfully. “Think, he has met with a terrible shock. All his ideas of woman’s truth and steadfastness are destroyed. I know that ought not to destroy his faith; but he has always been one who depended upon the visible for his grasp of the invisible. And that is why I am going to Gamara, in the hope that he may yet be saved.”

“Do you really expect to bring him back with you?” she asked, awed.

“No. I feel that I shall not return,” he answered.

“But I have also the feeling that in some way, even if it is only by my death, George will be brought back.”

“After this”—Lady Haigh spoke brusquely, that he might not see how much she was moved—“I quite understand that it is no use asking you to consider Penelope. She doesn't count in such a case.”

“I have done what I can for her,” he replied. “I have left her all I have. And I suppose”—he spoke with evident distaste—“that some day she will marry the Chief.”

“Ah, I thought even you would scarcely venture to think she was still bound to Captain Ferrers. Well, Mr Ross, since you have got so far, you must do something more. You must leave a message with me that I can give her if that ever comes about. If I have to persecute you unceasingly till the day you start, I will have it.”

“No; that is too much. I may foresee such a marriage, I cannot prevent it, but I will not encourage it.”

“You will give me leave to tell your sister that you thought such a thing might possibly happen, and that you wished her all happiness in it. She has gone through agonies in trying to keep the promise which you imposed upon her, and she did keep it till it nearly killed her. I believe you think you are the only person who has a right to quote texts, but I ask you what good it will do if you are willing to give yourself up to be killed at Gamara, and yet can't show common charity to your own sister?”

Colin rode on in silence with a rigid face, and Lady Haigh wondered whether he would refuse to speak to her again. She had caught sight of Sir Dugald and Penelope coming towards them, and felt that her chance was nearly over. Would he speak? She held her breath with anxiety. Suddenly he turned to her with a smile which transfigured his whole face.

“You are right, Lady Haigh, and I am wrong. I have judged poor Pen hardly, and she must have thought me unkind. If it—this marriage should ever come off, tell her that from my heart I prayed for her

happiness and Keeling's. And I thank you heartily for showing me what a Pharisee I have been."

Lady Haigh scarcely dared to believe in her success, but she noticed a new tone of tenderness in Colin's voice when he spoke to his sister presently, and the look of incredulous joy in Penelope's grey eyes showed that she saw it too. "I have done a good morning's work," said Lady Haigh to herself.

For the few days that remained before Colin's departure, Penelope was happy. The barrier which had existed between her brother and herself since their arrival in India seemed to have suddenly disappeared, and she felt she was forgiven. Ferrers' name was not mentioned between them, but Colin was able to allude to the object of his journey without unconsciously reproving his sister by the sternness of his voice. Lady Haigh could not discover whether he had told her of his presentiment that he would not return, though she guessed that Penelope must have divined it, for the girl was clearly hoping against hope, unable to believe that the renewed confidence between Colin and herself could be brought to an end so quickly.

All too soon, as it seemed to Penelope, Colin started in the train of Saadullah Kermani, and life at Alibad resumed its ordinary course, sadly flat, stale, and unprofitable in the estimation of one at least of the inhabitants. Penelope's occupation was gone. She had joyfully resigned her interest in Ferrers, she could do nothing for Colin but pray for him, and she missed daily, almost hourly, the interest which Major Keeling had been wont to bring into her life. He never tried to see her alone now—in fact, his visits to the fort had ceased, and all her information as to the affairs of the border was derived from the stray pieces of news extorted from Sir Dugald by Lady Haigh, who was bent on educating him up to the belief that she and Penelope took an intelligent interest in public affairs. Not that these were exciting at this time. The young officer whose services Major Keeling had requisitioned

was peremptorily restored to his original regiment, much against his will, and the usual heated correspondence followed. The border was quiet—in the case of Nalapur much too quiet, Major Keeling considered, and his demand for two additional European officers was finally refused by the authorities. The Haighs moved into their new house, which was at last pronounced safe, and Major Keeling took up his quarters in the imposing but gloomy building he had erected for himself. He abjured punkahs and every other kind of device for modifying the heat of the place, but he had laid aside his heroic views in planning the Haighs' house. The lofty rooms were fitted with every appliance that had yet been discovered for making a Khemistan summer less intolerable, and there was a large *tai-khana*, or underground room, for refuge in the daytime, and a spacious roof for sleeping on at night. Lady Haigh and Penelope found plenty to do in making the bare rooms habitable with the small means at their disposal. Those were the days when anything of "country" make was regarded by the English in India as beyond the pale of toleration; but Lady Haigh, looking round upon the remnant of her belongings which had survived the journey up-country and the hands of the native servants, came to a heroic decision. It was all very well for people down at the coast, or generals' wives and other *burra mems*, to have things out from home, but the subaltern's wife must do her best with country goods; and she and Penelope worked wonders with native cottons and embroidered draperies, and the curious rugs which were brought by the caravans from Central Asia. Perhaps, as she herself confessed, she might not have been so courageous had it not been practically certain that none of the great ladies from the coast would ever see and criticise her arrangements, but for her part she did not think the native designs were so very hideous after all, or their colouring as barbaric as it appeared to most English people in those far-off days of the Fifties—devotees as they were of grass green and royal blue.

Into the midst of these domestic labours came the thunderbolt which Penelope told herself she had been expecting, but which was no less appalling. Saadullah Kermani's caravan returned, without Colin. There had been no remissness on Saadullah's part, no rashness on Colin's; but there was a factor in the case the presence of which they had not suspected. Colin had entered Gamara in the humble and distinctive attire prescribed for Christians approaching the holy city, and had behaved with the utmost prudence, making no attempt to penetrate where he should not, or attack the usages of the place. His travelling-companions bore unanimous testimony to his gentleness when he was engaged in controversy by different Mullahs, and to the absence of bitterness when these took leave of him. Many came to visit him at the Sarai, and some even invited him to their houses. There was every hope that his presence would come to the Khan's ears, so that he might be commanded to the palace as a guest, and have a chance of attaining the object of his journey, when one day some of his first acquaintances brought with them to the Sarai no less a person than the Mirza Fazl-ul-Hacq. He had been one of those who had held controversies with Colin during flying visits to Alibad, and he had expressed his determination to vanquish the Kafir at last. His language had been violent in the extreme, his taunts and provocations almost unbearable; but Colin had kept his temper, and discomfited his opponent by appealing to the audience to contrast the tone of their respective arguments. The Mirza had departed in a rage, and the very next day, in passing one of the colleges, Colin had been assailed by a tumultuous throng of students, who poured out upon him, and, seizing him, demanded that he should abjure Christianity. Upon his refusal to repeat the *Kalima* they had set upon him with sticks and stones, and he was only rescued by a body of the city police, who arrested him and carried him off to the palace, the precincts of which included the prison. Since then nothing had been heard of him. Saadullah

had made tentative and cautious inquiries in every possible direction, but the only result was to bring upon himself a warning from the head of the police that he also was suspected, as having brought the Kafir into the city, and would do well to keep his mouth shut and finish his business in Gamara as quickly as he could. By inquiry from the friends of other prisoners, it was ascertained that Colin was not in the common prison; but this only lent fresh horror to his fate, for to the awful regions beyond no one penetrated. And nothing had been heard of Ferrers, either good or bad.

When Penelope heard the news she fainted, and recovered only to beg Lady Haigh piteously to ask Major Keeling to come to her. She must see him, she said, when her friend demurred; and Lady Haigh, with some misgivings, sent off the note. She felt that she would like to warn Major Keeling when he arrived, and yet she did not know exactly what she feared, but there had been a wild look in Penelope's eyes which frightened her.

"She is not herself. You will make allowances?" she said eagerly, as she took him into the drawing-room.

"Make allowances—I, for her?" he said, with such an accent of reproach that Lady Haigh was too much flurried to explain that she was anxious he should not be drawn into doing anything rash. It was some comfort to her to notice how big and strong he looked, not the kind of man who would allow himself to be hurried into un wisdom, and she could not wonder that Penelope felt him a tower of strength. But the words which reached her as she left the room made her stop her ears and hurry away in despair. She knew exactly how Penelope had run to meet him, white-faced, trembling, with dilated eyes, and seized his hand in both hers as she cried, "Oh, Major Keeling, save him, save him!"

"What is it you want me to do?" he asked her, the laborious speeches of condolence he had prepared all forgotten.

"I thought—oh, surely, you will go to Gamara, won't you? You are so well known, and the natives have such a regard for you—you could make them give him up."

He shook his head. The childlike simplicity of the appeal was almost irresistible, but he knew better than she did how hopeless such an attempt would be made by the very fame of which she spoke.

"Oh, don't say you won't do it!" she entreated. "He is all I have."

"Listen," he said. "You know I thought the journey so dangerous that I refused to the last to let your brother go. Yet there was a chance for him. For me there would be none, the moment I set foot beyond our own border. You will do me the justice to believe that I would not grudge my life if losing it could do any good, but it could do none. And even if it would, I could not go. I am in command here, and I cannot desert my post."

She looked at him as though she had not heard him. "It is Colin," she said; "all I have. And you said—you cared."

"And you say I don't if I won't go?" he asked sharply. "Then you are talking of what you don't understand. I could not leave Khemistan if—even if it was your life, and not your brother's, that was at stake—even if it tore my heart out."

Penelope passed her hand over her brow. "No," she said feebly, "it would not signify then. But for Colin!"

"Sit down and listen to me quietly. I have pacified this frontier, and I am the only man who can keep it quiet. Nalapur is only looking for a pretext to break with us; if my back was turned they would invade us without one. My post is here; it is my duty to remain; I will not—dare not leave it. Penelope, do you ask me to leave it? If you do, I am mistaken in you. Look up, and tell me."

Penelope raised her head as if compelled by his tone, and her eyes met his. "No," she said helplessly, "it

would be wrong. You must not go. But oh, Colin, Colin!"

She bowed her head again and broke into a passion of sobs, for her last hope was gone. She heard Major Keeling get up and walk up and down the room, and knew that her sobs were agonising to him, but she could not restrain them. At last she found him close to her again, his hand on her shoulder.

"Dear," he said, "let us bear it together. When you are in the doctor's hands after a fight, it helps if there's a friend beside you, whose hand you can grip hard. Take mine, Penelope."

Her sobs ceased, and she looked at him wonderingly through her tears. He went on speaking in the same low, deeply moved voice—

"I can't bear to leave you to go through it alone. Let me help. You know I know what trouble is. Give me the right to share yours."

"Now—when Colin may be tortured, starving, dying? Oh, how can you?" cried Penelope. "Oh, go, go away, and never talk like this again. I don't want my trouble to be less. Why should I? Share it! how can you share it? you won't even—no, I don't mean that. I have only Colin, and he has only me."

He looked down hopelessly at her bowed head. "I cannot desert my post," he said, and turned to leave her.

"Oh no, no!" cried Penelope, following him. "It was wicked of me to say what I did. Only, please don't talk like that again. Let me feel you are a real friend. Oh, you will help him if you can, won't you?"

"I dare not encourage you to hope for your brother's safety, but it might be possible to obtain news of him. If it can be done, it shall be. Trust me—and forgive me."

CHAPTER XIX.

A WOUNDED SPIRIT.

INSTEAD of appearing in the gardens that evening, Major Keeling rode out, accompanied only by an orderly, to Sheikharh. He had never met the Sheikh-ul-Jabal face to face since the day of the eclipse and of his triumphant vindication, but important pieces of information had come to him several times by strange messengers, testifying to the friendliness of the recluse. Curious to relate, the destruction of the marvellous legend which had grown up about the supposed identity of the two men seemed to have had little or no effect. The dwellers on the border and the tribesmen alike possessed a strong love of the miraculous, and resented the attempt to deprive them of a wonder. Taking refuge in the fact that only a very few people, and most of those Europeans, had seen Major Keeling and the Sheikh side by side, they maintained with obstinate pertinacity their original theory that the one man led a double existence—as British commandant by day and head of the Brotherhood of the Mountains by night. From this belief nothing could move them, and as the result tended to the peace of the border, their rulers had left off trying to convince them against their will. It is to be feared that Ismail Bakhsh, the orderly, foresaw a large increase of credit to himself from this journey, by the unconcealed joy with which he entered upon it; and yet, marvellous as were the tales he told on his return, his experiences were confined to remaining with his horse at the point where

visitors to the fortress were first challenged. To Major Keeling's astonishment, no attempt was made to blindfold him on this occasion, the guards saying that they had orders from the Sheikh to admit Kilin Sahib freely whenever he might come, and he rode with them to the gate of the fortress, noticing the care with which the place was defended. This time the Sheikh came to meet him at the entrance, and taking him up to the room over the gateway, possibly from fear of eavesdroppers in the great hall, sent away all his attendants as soon as the proper salutations had passed. He seemed anxious, and was evidently expecting news of importance.

"There is no message from Nalapur—no outbreak?" he asked eagerly, as soon as they were alone.

"I have heard nothing," answered Major Keeling in surprise. "What news should there be?"

"It is well. Yet there must be news soon. The Amir and Gobind Chand are, as it were, crossing a gulf by a rope-bridge—one false step means destruction. But they will not return to firm ground."

"But you sent me word that the Sardars refused to stand their exactions and oppression any longer, and that they had been obliged to promise to meet them, and inquire into their grievances."

"True, and the assembly is to meet this week; but what will follow? Are Wilayat Ali and the Vizier men who will render back the gains they have extorted? Not so; they will divert the minds of the Sardars by making war upon one of their neighbours. And which neighbour will that be?"

"All right. Let them come!" laughed Major Keeling. "If they are fools enough to hurl themselves on our guns they must. I have done all I could to keep the peace. When is it to be—at the end of the week?"

"Nay, not so soon. They will but inflame the minds of the Sardars, and send them home to prepare for war. It cannot begin yet."

"Then what were you afraid of? You seemed to expect danger of some sort."

“I feared one of those false steps of which I spcke. The Amir and Gobind Chand might have acted foolishly in trying to seize or murder some of the Sardars, or the Sardars might have sought to avenge their wrongs by killing them. Then the country would have fallen into such confusion that I must needs act, and the time is not come.”

“Then you have an axe of your own to grind!” cried Major Keeling. “It can’t be allowed, Sheikh. You must not plot against a neighbouring power while you are on British territory.”

The Sheikh looked at him with something like contempt. “Why does Kilin Sahib thus allow his wrath to bubble up? To what purpose should I plot against the Nalapur usurper? For myself I need no more than I have here.”

“But what do you mean? Why should you take action?”

“Does not Kilin Sahib see that it might fall to me to use all possible efforts to restore peace if there should be civil war in Nalapur? I am known to all parties, but attached to none of them, and I am near of kin to the royal house.”

“I don’t believe that was what you meant, but you look honest enough,” muttered Major Keeling in English. Aloud he said, “Well, Sheikh, understand that you must not undertake anything of the kind on your own account. I am responsible for this frontier, and I may be very glad to make use of your good offices, but I can’t have you forcing my hand.”

“Fear not,” said the Sheikh. “For another month I can do nothing, and it is my strongest hope that Nalapur will remain peaceful at least as long. If there is opportunity, I will send word to Alibad before taking any step, but if Wilayat Ali and Gobind Chand move first, do not blame me.”

“I don’t like all these mysteries, Sheikh. What is it that holds you back for a month, and also keeps Nalapur quiet?”

“They are two different things, sahib. The lapse

of time will set me free to act, but the Amir and Gobind Chand will not go to war until their embassy has returned from Gamara."

"From Gamara? Why, that was the very—
What are they doing there?"

"Their embassy to the Mirza Fazl-ul-Hacq," said the Sheikh, evidently enjoying his visitor's astonishment.

"But I came to speak to you about that very man. What in the world have they got to do with him at Nalapur?"

"Has Kilin Sahib forgotten that the man was employed by Gobind Chand and his master as a spy upon me, and that after attempting to slay me he escaped? Disowned by Firoz Sahib, in whose service he had been, he durst not remain in Khemistan, and he feared to return to Nalapur, having failed in his mission. But both at Bab-us-Sahel and at Shah Nawaz he had gained much information as to the plans and methods of the English, and he knew that the Khan of Gamara would rejoice to obtain this. Therefore he fled thither, and by reason of the news he brought, and his own art and cleverness in making himself useful to the Khan, was speedily raised to be one of his councillors and keeper of the prison." Major Keeling nodded assent. "But now the Amir and Gobind Chand need his services again, for he knows many things about the Brotherhood—of which he is a perjured member—and this stronghold of mine, and some months ago it came to my knowledge that they had sent messengers with rich gifts and great promises, to desire him to return to Nalapur. That he dares not do, for if he sought to leave Gamara after the favours he has received, the Khan would kill him; but if the gifts were large enough, doubtless he would tell the messengers all, or nearly all, that he knows. Therefore I say that Wilayat Ali and the Vizier will not make war until the messengers return."

"But you may not hear of their return. They may come back secretly. They may have returned now."

Again the Sheikh smiled pityingly. "Nay, sahib; was the Sheikh-ul-Jabal born in the town of fools? Following close upon the Nalapuri embassy went a messenger of mine in the garb of a holy dervish, who entered Gamara only very shortly after them, and was bound to remain in the city, performing the proper rites at each mosque and holy place in turn, as long as they were there, and then to attach himself to their caravan for the return journey. Having gone with them as far as Nalapur, he will change his disguise and return hither."

"Then he has not returned yet?" asked Major Keeling meditatively.

"Have I not said it? Moreover, a secret word was brought me from him by one in Saadullah Kermani's caravan to the effect that he thought the messengers would not leave Gamara for three or four weeks."

"Three or four weeks after Saadullah? Then he may bring later news. This is the very matter on which I came to speak to you, Sheikh. You know that two of my officers have gone to Gamara and disappeared?"

"Firoz Sahib, who has adopted the faith of Islam, and Rāss Sahib, whom the people call the Father of a Book," said the Sheikh calmly.

"Those two; and we—I—want to know the truth about them, not simply bazar gossip. When your man comes back, ask him if he has learnt anything. If he has been keeping watch on Fazl-ul-Hacq, he ought to have found out something, surely. If there is no news, it may mean that they are both in prison still, and you might be able to suggest some way of getting them liberated."

The Sheikh stroked his beard slowly. "It may be so," he said. "Nevertheless, you may be well assured, sahib, that the bazar talk is true so far as relates to Firoz Sahib. As to Rāss Sahib, they say he is dead, and I am ready to believe it. But when my messenger returns I will send him to you, and you shall ask him any questions you will. But when he returns, then

will be the time to keep good watch along the Nalapur border."

Quite agreeing with this opinion, Major Keeling took his leave, and as he rode home, thought over what he had heard. The still unexplained reason which kept the Sheikh from taking any active part in the affairs of Nalapur must be in some way connected with his vow of seclusion, he thought. Perhaps it had been taken for a term of years, which would end in a month. He was more disappointed than surprised by the Sheikh's evident reluctance to help in taking any steps for Colin's rescue, but he could not help feeling that there was a change in the man. Had he worn a mask hitherto, and was he now letting it fall; or were his feelings towards the English altering, and his friendship turning to hostility? Major Keeling had hoped that by means of the host of agents who kept the Sheikh in touch with all parts of Central Asia he would have been able to arrange at least that Colin should be ransomed; but he could realise the risk involved in any step that might reveal to the orthodox supporters of tyranny the presence in their midst of members of the heretical brotherhood. However, if the dervish brought no news, it might be possible to engage him to undertake another journey to Gamara for the express purpose of inquiring into Colin's fate, and this was all that could be hoped for at present.

To this conclusion Major Keeling came reluctantly just as he reached the point from which Alibad could first be seen as he emerged from the hills. The sun had already set, but the desert was lighted up by a gorgeous after-glow, which was equally kind in bringing out the best points of the view and in hiding its defects. Alibad was no longer the cluster of mud huts which its ruler had found it. The white and buff and pink walls of the new houses shone out brilliantly over their screen of young trees, and the dun mass of the fort, with its squat turrets, seemed to brood protectingly above the lower buildings. The native town was a formless blur in the gathering darkness to the

left, and on the right, along the line of the temporary canal which supplied the place until the great works already in progress should be completed, were blots and splashes of green, marking the patches of irrigated land where cultivation was in full swing. The programme which Major Keeling had drawn up when he came to Khemistan was in process of realisation, and that very fact chained him to the soil. He had not allowed Penelope to see how much he was tempted to undertake the mission she had proposed to him. It was the kind of thing that appealed to him most strongly—to throw off the burden of routine, have done with office-work, and plunge into the desert, where his hand would be against every man's, and his life would depend alternately on his sword and his tongue. The proposal fascinated him even now; but before him lay the town which was at once the sign and the result of his labours. He shook the reins, roused Miani from a blissful contemplation of nothing, and trotted briskly home across the plain, followed by Ismail Bakhsh.

After this visit to Sheikhgarh there was another month of waiting. Major Keeling warned all his officers to be on the look-out for a fakir or dervish who might come with a message; but although several members of the fraternity presented themselves as usual in search of alms, and were given every opportunity to speak if they would, none of them had anything particular to say. The month had more than elapsed when one day a respectable elderly man, dressed like an attendant of some great family, and with a scribe's inkhorn at his girdle, asked leave to present a petition to Kilin Sahib. Applicants of this sort were always plentiful, owing to the breaking-up of the huge households maintained by all the native princes before the annexation; and it was Major Keeling's policy to find employment for as many of them as possible, lest they should seek to obtain a precarious livelihood by going up and down among the ignorant peasantry and agitating against British rule.

The man was admitted into the office, and Sir Dugald, who was sitting at a little distance, saw him put his hands together in a submissive attitude, and heard him begin to pour out a long rigmarole in low tones. But almost as Sir Dugald distinguished the words "dervish" and "Gamara," Major Keeling rose from his chair.

"Come in here," he said, opening the door of his private office. "Haigh, you come too. Now, Kutb-ud-Din, let us have your story."

"The servant of my lord has little to tell him, but it is that which he is anxious to know. For when my lord's servant was at Gamara disguised as a most holy dervish, so that he wore no clothes but a rough mantle, and painted his body blue, and left his hair and beard wild and long, he heard one day of a great sight that was to be seen in the square before the palace. And forasmuch as his religious meditation was interrupted by the passing to and fro and the loud speaking of those that hurried to see this sight, he asked them what it might be. And one told him one thing and one another, but all agreed that it was such a sight as would rejoice the heart of a holy man, and therefore my lord's servant determined to go thither. And coming to the square, the people made way for him, so that he stood at last in a good place, and saw the Khan and a great company of soldiers and counsellors come out of the palace. And at the head of the Khan's bodyguard he saw the Farangi, Firoz Sahib, of whose conversion all the city had been talking, so great were the festivities at his initiation——"

"Stop!" said Major Keeling hoarsely. "Are you certain it was Ferrers Sahib?"

"My lord's servant will swear it, if my lord so wills. Has he not often beheld Firoz Sahib, both here and at Shah Nawaz? Moreover, his history was known to all in Gamara. It seemed to my lord's servant that Firoz Sahib had been drinking *bang*, for his eyes were bright and his face flushed, and Mirza Fazl-ul-Hacq, the renegade, rode at his bridle-rein, as though to re-

strain him. And afterwards, when the people were slow to disperse, he ordered the soldiers to charge the crowd, and escaping from his friend the Mirza, rode down a Jew who stood in his way, so that all who saw him fled. But that was not until after——”

“After what? Go on,” said Major Keeling impatiently, as the man hesitated.

“Let my lord pardon his servant, if that which he has to say is not pleasing to his ears, for the dust under my lord’s feet can but tell what he saw. There was led out into the square, before the Khan and his court and army, another Farangi, wearing chains that would not suffer him to walk upright; and clothed in shameful rags; and a whisper went about among the people that it was the young sahib whom they called the Father of a Book.”

“And was it?” demanded Major Keeling.

“How can the servant of my lord say? It so chances that his eyes never rested upon the young sahib while he was among his own people. But this sahib was young and tall and lean, and white like a wall—yea, even his hair was white, yet reddish-white like that of the sahibs, not pure white like that of the people of this land——”

“White—in those few weeks!” breathed Sir Dugald.

“Yes, yes, go on,” said Major Keeling to the narrator.

“And when the Farangi was brought out, proclamation was made by a herald that his Highness, in his clemency, would offer the Kafir his life on certain conditions, and that questions should be put to him in Persian, and translated into Turki, so that the people might hear. Then came forward Mirza Fazl-ul-Hacq, the accursed, and by command of his Highness, asked the Farangi, ‘Wilt thou adopt the creed of Islam and enter my army, like thy countryman yonder?’ But the Farangi, drawing himself up in spite of his chains, made answer, ‘I am an Englishman and a Christian, and I will neither enter thine army nor become a Mohammedan. I choose rather to die.’ Then his

Highness, in great wrath, cried, 'And die thou shalt!' and the Farangi's head was struck off by an executioner with a great sword."

"And did he never look at Ferrers Sahib, or speak to him?" asked Major Keeling.

"Nay, sahib; he kept his eyes turned away from him."

"That was not like Ross," said Major Keeling to Sir Dugald.

"But suppose Ferrers had visited poor Ross in prison, sir—tried to get him to abjure Christianity?" suggested Sir Dugald. "He could not have much to say to him after that."

"I don't know. I should have expected Ross to think of him to the end. And that was all?" asked Major Keeling of the messenger.

"That was all, sahib; except that the Farangi's body was exposed at the place of execution, with the insults customary when a Kafir has been executed, and that among the crowd there were some who said, in the hearing of my lord's servant, that in slaying the young Sahib the Khan had certainly invited judgments, for there was a spirit in him."

"And that is all!" said Major Keeling heavily. "You have done well, O Kutb-ud-Din, in bringing us this news. Here!" he scribbled an order hastily, "take this to the pay-clerk without, and receive the rupees he will give you. You may go. Now, Haigh," he turned to Sir Dugald as the old man bowed himself out with profuse thanks, "you must go home and get your wife to break this to Miss Ross—and God help them both!"

Once more there had come to Penelope, who thought she had given up all hope, a blow which showed her that she had been unconsciously cherishing a belief in Colin's safety. He might escape from prison, might be ransomed, his captors might even relent and release him—there was always the chance of one of these; but now hope was definitely taken away. And one terrible thought was in Penelope's mind day and night

—it was her fault that he had gone to Gamara. At present she could not even remember for her comfort the happier days which had preceded his departure; she could only look back upon the past and judge herself more harshly than Colin had ever judged her. Day after day and night after night she tormented herself with that most unprofitable of mental exercises—unprofitable, because the same circumstances are never likely to recur in the experience of the same person—of going over the events of the last two or three years, and noting where she might have acted differently, with how much happier results! If she had only been altogether different! If she had never allowed herself to lose faith in Ferrers, if she had refused to believe in the revelations which met her at Bab-us-Sahel, if she had been willing to marry him before coming to Alibad, instead of putting him on probation! If she had only loved him better—so that he would not have had the heart to leave her to go to Gamara, or, having gone there, would have found her love such a shield to him that he could not have denied his faith! Her reason told her that it was impossible, that Ferrers and she had grown so far apart that the woman could not have given him the enthusiastic devotion which had been showered upon him by the romantic little girl; but she blamed herself for the change. Colin had never altered—why should she? It must have been something wrong in herself that had made her first fail Ferrers when he needed her, and at last draw upon herself Colin's stern rebuke by declaring that she could not keep her promise. If it had not been for her Ferrers would not have gone to Gamara, and, but for him, Colin would not have gone either. She was morally guilty of Colin's death and Ferrers' abjuration of Christianity. And thus the awful round went on, every variation in argument or recollection bringing her to the same terrible conclusion, until Penelope almost persuaded herself that she was as guilty in the sight of others as in her own. Every one must know that she had those two lost lives on her conscience.

They were sorry for her, but how could they help blaming her? and she withdrew herself from their pitying eyes. Lady Haigh humoured her at first, when she insisted on taking her rides at a time when no one else was about; but when Penelope refused to go out at all, and sat all day in a sheltered corner of the house-top, looking northward to the mountains, she became seriously alarmed.

"Miss Ross not coming again?" asked Sir Dugald when the horses were brought round one evening, and he had helped his wife to mount.

"No, I can't get her to come. The very thought seems to frighten her."

"Must be frightfully bad for her to mope indoors like this," was Sir Dugald's prosaic comment. "Can't you get her to exert herself a little?"

"Really, Dugald, one would think I was Mrs Chick. Why don't you tell me to get her to make an effort? She and I are so different, you see. If I was in dreadful trouble I should work as hard as I could—at anything, and entreat my friends, if they loved me, to find me something to do. But Pen has left off even the things she usually does, and simply sits and cries all day. I can't very well suggest to her that it's rather selfish, can I?—though I know it must make the house dreadfully dull for you."

"Oh, don't mind me," said Sir Dugald kindly. "I have my consolations. You are not a pale image of despair, at any rate."

"And the way she refuses to see people! Of course, no one would dream of expecting her even to appear at a dinner-party, but to rush away if poor little Mr Harris comes in, or any of them! Dugald"—her voice was lowered—"do you remember that poor Mrs Wyndham at Bab-us-Sahel, whose husband died of cholera on their honeymoon? She went mad, you know."

"My dear Elma, pray don't suggest such horrors. Why not get Tarleton to come up and see Miss Ross?"

"She won't see him; that's just it. But I have

asked him to seize the first opportunity he can of dropping in and taking her by surprise. Then we shall know better what to do. Dugald!—I have an idea. Are you ready to make a sacrifice?"

"When I know what it is, I'll tell you."

"Oh, but it would be better for you not to know, you see."

"Thanks. I would rather not find myself pledged to throw up the service, or get leave home, if it's all the same to you."

"It's nothing of that sort—merely a way of spending the next two or three months. No, it's not expensive—not like going down to the coast or to the Hills. But it will be very quiet and dull, and no chance of fighting. Oh, don't guess. I want to be able to tell the Chief that you know nothing about it, so that if he is angry he mayn't scold you. You would sacrifice yourself to help Penelope, wouldn't you?"

"H'm, well—within limits," said Sir Dugald.

CHAPTER XX.

THE ISLE OF AVILION.

“MISS SAHIB, the Doctor Sahib!”

“The door is shut,” said Penelope hastily; but Dr Tarleton had followed the servant up the stairs, and now stood on the house-top confronting her. She glanced wildly round for a way of escape, but there was none, and she was obliged to go forward and hold out a nerveless hand to him. He looked her steadily in the face.

“It’s no good trying to run away from me, Miss Ross. I was determined to see you.”

“Thank you, but there is nothing the matter with me,” wilfully misunderstanding him.

“Not with you, perhaps, but with other people.” He sat down, uninvited.

“Oh, if I can be of any use——” but she spoke listlessly, and her eyes had sought the mountains again.

The doctor regarded her with a kind of restrained fury. “It makes one’s blood boil,” he burst out, “to see a man—old enough to know better, too—breaking his heart over a girl’s silly whims, and then to find the girl absolutely wrapped up in herself and her own selfish sorrow!”

“Are you speaking of me?” asked Penelope, turning to him in astonishment. She could scarcely believe her ears.

“I am, and of the Chief. How dare you treat him in this way? Isn’t it enough for a man to have the whole military and civil charge of the district, and the

burden of keeping the peace all along this frontier, upon his shoulders, without his work being made harder by the woman who ought to help him? Do you know that he worries himself about you to such an extent that it interferes with his work?"

"I didn't know—— What do you mean? Did he tell you?" stammered Penelope, utterly confounded by this attack.

"Tell me? Do you know him no better than that? Of course not. But I have eyes, and Keeling and I have been friends for five-and-twenty years. Do you expect me to be blind when I know he can't settle to anything, and snaps at every one who comes near him, and contradicts his own orders, and rides all night instead of taking proper rest? Don't pretend it's not your fault. You know it is. For some reason or other he does you the honour to care for you, and you won't see him or speak to him or send him a message, until he takes it into his head that he has mortally offended you—how or why, you know best."

"I didn't know," murmured Penelope again. "Oh, but you must be mistaken. It isn't like him. Why should he care so much—all because of me?"

"Don't know, I'm sure. Some men are made that way," said the doctor grimly. "But there it is. And you, who ought to be on your knees thanking God for the love of such a man, are doing your best to drive him mad. What is a woman's heart made of? Don't you see what an honour it is for you that he should even have thought of you? Don't let me see you laugh. Don't dare."

"I—I'm not laughing," she faltered hysterically. "But—but—oh, why didn't he come himself instead of sending you? I never thought——"

"I should imagine he didn't come because you have never allowed him to see you for weeks. But as for his sending me——!" the doctor laughed stormily. "If you want to punish me for what I have said to you, all you have to do is to tell him I have been here, and what I came for. I don't think the province

would hold me. But I don't care, if it meant that you would treat him properly. Do you know what Keeling did for me? You mayn't think it to look at me now, but I was as wild as the best of them when I knew him first. He was a queer, long-legged youngster when he joined the old —th, as dark as a native, pretty nearly—'fifteen annas' was what they generally called him—and the greenest, most innocent creature you can imagine. He must have had a terrible time, for there was scarcely a single thing he did like other people—I know I took my share in making his life a burden to him. Well, we had been having a big *tamasha* of some sort one night, when I was called to a bad case in hospital. An operation was needed, and I insisted on doing it at once. It was a thing that demanded a steady hand—and my hand was not steady—you can guess why. Something slipped—and the man died. An inquiry was called for, and I knew that I was ruined. There was only one thing to be done that I could see—to blow out my brains—and I was just going to do it when Keeling came in. None of the other men had come near me, though they must have guessed, as he had done, what I was up to, but I suppose they thought it was the best way out of it for me. He stopped me, though I fought him for the pistol—vowed I should not do it, and talked to me until I gave in. Of his own free will he offered never to touch wine or spirits again if I would do the same, and actually entreated me to accept the offer. He came and chummed with me in my bungalow—the other men had cleared out; I daresay I was as savage as a bear—and stood by me all through the inquiry. I lost my post—had to begin again at the bottom of the list of assistant-surgeons—but he stood by me. We were through the Ethiopian War together, and when Old Harry picked him out to come up here and raise the Khemistan Horse, he got leave for me to come too. Now you see what I owe to him; but he may kick me out of Khemistan, and welcome, if it means that you will only treat him decently."

"Indeed, indeed I have tried," cried Penelope, with tears in her eyes, "but I cannot meet him. It is like that with the others—I make up my mind that I will see them, and try to talk, but as soon as I hear them in the verandah I feel that I cannot meet their eyes, and I rush out of the room."

"Pure nervousness. You must get over it, Miss Ross. No one expects you not to grieve for your brother, but this sort of thing can do the poor fellow no good, and it is very hard on those who are left."

"I know they must feel it is my fault——"

"What?" shouted the doctor. "Your fault that your brother was murdered? Come, come, this is arrant nonsense. You don't mean to say that you are making Keeling miserable on account of this delusion?"

"No, it is worse with him." She spoke very low. "I have never told even Lady Haigh; but whenever I see Major Keeling, or even think of him, Colin's face seems to rise up before me—not dead, but as the dervish described it, white and thin, and his hair white too. And I can't help feeling that it may be a—warning."

"A fiddlestick! Oh, you Scotch people, with your portents and your visions! A warning of what?"

"You don't know—perhaps I ought not to tell you—but I am sure Colin would have disapproved of my—caring for Major Keeling. And we were twins, you know—what if he comes to show me that he disapproves of it still?" She looked at him with wide eyes of terror.

"Then you don't know that in talking to Lady Haigh he gave her to understand that he had no objection to your marrying the Chief—excuse me if I speak plainly—and even looked forward to it? She told me as much when she was confiding to me her anxiety about you."

"Colin said that to Elma, and she told you—and never told me!"

"Why, how could she? Of course she felt the time hadn't come—that you would think her brutal, or

horrid, or whatever young ladies call it. She mentioned it to me in confidence, and I had no business to repeat it; but I'm the sort of person that rushes in where angels fear to tread—am I not? Having once opened my attack, I couldn't keep my biggest gun idle, could I? What! you won't condescend to answer me?"

"I am trying to understand," she said in a low voice. "It ought to make such a difference, and yet—there is Colin's face."

"My dear Miss Ross," he spoke earnestly, as her eyes questioned his, "this illusion of yours is purely physical. You have been brooding over your brother's fate for months, and living a most unhealthy life—eating only enough to keep body and soul together, and refusing to take exercise or accept any distraction. The wonder would have been if you had not seen visions after it. Now that you know the truth about your brother's feelings, don't you agree with me that nothing would have grieved him more than to know you had made such a bugbear of him? At any rate, let us put the illusion to the test. You must have a thorough change—Lady Haigh and I will arrange it—and see nothing for a time of any of the people here. You don't mind the Haighs, I suppose? Very well; then the illusion will disappear, if I am right. If not, you must see Keeling once, and definitely bring things to an end. He is not the man to break his heart for a woman who hasn't courage to accept him"—he saw that Penelope winced—"but it is this undecided state of affairs that is the trouble. And if you have any heart at all, you will let him know that it is not his fault, and that you hope things will be different in future."

"But how can I?" cried Penelope, following him as he took up his *topi* and went towards the stairs.

"How can I tell you? I only know what you ought to do; surely you can devise a way of doing it. I wouldn't have wasted my trouble on most women, but it seemed to me that the woman Keeling cared for

ought to have more sense than the general run, and you've taken it better than I expected. Put all that nonsense about warnings out of your head, and leave the dead alone and think of the living. That's all I have to say," and he was gone.

It seemed as if Penelope was to have no reason for refusing to follow Dr Tarleton's advice, for Lady Haigh found an opportunity of unfolding her plan to Major Keeling that very evening. He had invited her to dismount and walk up and down with him while listening to the band, and she gathered her long habit over her arm and seized her chance joyfully.

"You will think I am always asking for favours, Major Keeling, but I want this one very much. Will you send my husband to inspect the south-western district instead of Captain Porter?"

"But Porter has his orders, and is making preparations," he said, looking at her in astonishment. "Have you quarrelled with Haigh, that you are so anxious to banish him?"

"Quarrelled? banish him? Oh, I see what you mean. How absurd! Of course Miss Ross and I are going too."

"Are you, indeed? And may I ask whether the idea is Haigh's or yours?"

"Oh, mine. He doesn't know anything about it."

"So I imagined." He was looking at her rather doubtfully. "And have you any particular reason for wishing to go?"

"I think it will do Miss Ross good—to take her away from old associations, and people that she knows, I means."

"And from me especially?" he asked bitterly. Lady Haigh answered him with unexpected frankness.

"Exactly—from you especially," she said. "I really believe she will appreciate you better at a distance—no, not quite that. I want her to miss you. At present it is a kind of religious duty to Colin's memory not to have anything to do with you; but when you are not there I think she will see that she has been turning her

back on what ought to be her greatest blessing and comfort."

Major Keeling looked as if he could have blushed. "Very well," he said meekly. "If you can bring Haigh round to it, you shall go."

"And shall I put it right with Captain Porter?" asked Lady Haigh, with an easy assurance born of success. "I know he'll be quite willing to stay here if I tell him it's for Pen's sake," she added to herself.

"Thank you, I think I am the best person to do that," he replied, and again Lady Haigh caught the doubtful look in his eyes, of which she was reminded later when she found that the change of plan had put her husband into a very bad temper, though he would not give her any reason for it. The fact was that, as the Sheikh-ul-Jabal had predicted, the return from Gamara of the envoys sent to consult Mirza Fazl-ul-Hacq, with whom his dervish follower had travelled, seemed to have been the signal for the Nalapuri authorities to begin a series of hostile acts. Troops—or rather the ragged levies of the various Sardars—were being massed in threatening proximity to the frontier, fugitive criminals were sheltered and their surrender refused, and a preposterous claim was put forward to the exclusive ownership of all the wells within a certain distance of the border-line. The Amir was undoubtedly aiming at provoking hostilities, and war might begin at any moment. To Major Keeling it was a most comforting thought that the European ladies could so easily be placed in safety without alarming them, for the south-western district was protected against any attack from Nalapur by a natural bulwark, the hills in which Sheikhgarh was situated; and the obvious course for an invading army was to pour across the frontier by way of the plains, with the undefended Alibad as its first objective. But to Sir Dugald, who knew the state of affairs as well as the Commandant, the case was different. He was the natural protector of his wife and Penelope, and it was only to be expected that he

should remain to guard them, even in the place of safety to which Major Keeling was so glad to consign them—and this while there would be fighting going on round Alibad, and his beloved guns would be delivered over to the tender mercies of little Harris or any other subaltern who might choose to turn artilleryman for the nonce! Sir Dugald registered a solemn vow that when the news of hostilities came, he would leave his wife and Penelope in the nearest fortified village, and make all speed back to Alibad himself. Elma could not protest, after all she had said, and he would miss only the very beginning of the fight. The thought consoled him, and he was even able to take pleasure in withholding the reasons for anxiety from Lady Haigh, who would have refused point-blank to leave Alibad if she had guessed that fighting was imminent in its neighbourhood. Accordingly he interposed no obstacles in the way of an immediate start, and as Lady Haigh was as anxious to be gone as Major Keeling was to hurry her off, the necessary preparations were soon made. Penelope was roused perforce from her lethargy, and set to work, and she responded the more readily to the stimulus that Dr Tarleton's vigorous expostulation seemed already to have waked her to something like hope again. Nevertheless, she still felt unable to face Major Keeling; and it was with a shock that on the afternoon of the start from Alibad she saw him riding up the street, with the evident design of seeing the travellers on their way. He made no attempt to attach himself to her, however, apologising for his presence by saying that he had some last directions to give Sir Dugald, and the two men rode on together. They had nearly reached the hills before Major Keeling turned back, and Lady Haigh at once claimed her husband's attention.

“Dugald, do you think my horse has a shoe loose? There seems to be something queer about his foot, but I didn't like to interrupt you before.”

Calling up one of the grooms, Sir Dugald dismounted and went to his wife's assistance, and in the hum of

excited talk which ensued, Major Keeling had a momentary opportunity of speaking to Penelope.

"Am I to hope that this change will do you good, and enable you to come back here?" he asked, bending towards her from his tall horse.

"Oh, I—I hope so," she stammered. "Why?"

"Do you hope so? Wouldn't you rather be ordered home?"

His tone, restrained though it was, told Penelope that the question was a crucial one. With a great effort she raised her eyes to his. "I hope with all my heart to come back to Alibad quite well," she said. "Because"—voice and eyes alike fell—"Khemistan holds all that I care for—now."

She felt his hand on hers for a moment as she played with her pony's mane, and heard him say, "Thank you, thank you!" in a voice as low as hers had been; but she knew that she had removed a load from his mind, and she was glad she had conquered the shrinking repugnance which had held her. The vision of Colin's face had floated between them when she looked at him; but she had taken her first step towards breaking the spell, and he could not know the effort it had cost her to defy her brother's fancied wish as she had only once defied him in his life. As for Major Keeling, he rode back to Alibad in a frame of mind which made his progress a kind of steeplechase. He put Miani at every obstacle that presented itself, and drove his orderly to despair by leaping the temporary canal instead of going round by the bridge. As in duty bound, Ismail Bakhsh did his best to follow; and it was only when he had helped him and his pony out of the water, and explained matters to a justly indignant canal official, that Major Keeling realised the unconventional nature of his proceedings. He made the rest of the journey more soberly, planning in his own mind the last steps to be taken to make Alibad impregnable to a Nalapuri army. The Amir thought the place was defenceless, not knowing that in a few moments any street could be swept from end to end by guns mounted

in improvised batteries. It was not for nothing that Major Keeling's own house and the various administrative buildings were so gloomy and massive in appearance, or that the labyrinth of lanes in the native town could be blocked at any number of points by the simple expedient of knocking down a few garden walls. The Commandant had no misgivings as to the fate of the town, but he was much exercised in mind by the necessity of waiting to be attacked. The Nalapuri Sardars knew better than to let a single man put his foot over the border until they were quite ready, while in the absence of an actual declaration of war Major Keeling could not cross it to attack them, and his only fear was that they might succeed in dashing upon Alibad and spreading panic among the inhabitants (though they could do no more), without giving him time to intercept them and cut them up in the open desert. He could only rely upon the efficiency of his system of patrols, and wait for the enemy to make the first move.

Beyond the hills there was no rumour of war. The agricultural colonies, so to speak, planted by Major Keeling on the land reclaimed from the desert by irrigation, were prosperous and contented, and the reformed bandits, of whom a large proportion of the colonists consisted, were even more industrious and energetic than the hereditary cultivators. This part of the district was kept in good order by a European police-officer with a force composed of the boldest spirits among the colonists, so that Sir Dugald had little to do in the way of dispensing justice, and he passed on rapidly to the wooded country nearer the hills. This was a kind of New Forest, constructed by the former rulers of Khemistan as a *shikargah* or pleasance for hunting purposes, regardless of the objections of the ryots, who saw their villages destroyed and their lands given over to wild beasts. On the expulsion of their tyrants, the people had begun to

creep back to their confiscated homes; and it was one of Major Keeling's anxieties to ensure the proper control of this re-immigration. The forests were valuable government property, and as such must be protected; but where a clear title could be shown to land on the outskirts, and the claimants were willing to face the wild animals, he was inclined to let them return, under due supervision. But no European officer could be spared to undertake the task; and Sir Dugald, as he moved from place to place, found little colonies springing up in most unpromising spots. To organise the people into communities with some form of self-government, appoint elders who would be responsible for the behaviour of the rest and prevent wanton destruction of the forests, and devise the rude beginnings of a legal and fiscal system, was his work. Nothing could be satisfactorily done while there was no permanent official in charge; but at least the people understood that the Sahibs meant well to them, and they were in a measure prepared for a more formal rule when it could be established.

Lady Haigh and Penelope, who had not the cares of government upon their shoulders, were much more free to enjoy themselves. They made advances to the shy women and children of these sequestered hamlets, who fled in terror from the white ladies, never having seen such an alarming sight before. Sweetmeats and gaily coloured cloths were the bribes that attracted them most readily, and after a time they would become quite friendly, listening with uncomprehending patience while Lady Haigh, who was a true child of her generation, tried to teach them to adopt Western instead of Eastern ways. Those were the days in which much stress was laid by reformers on the importance of anglicising the native, and Lady Haigh was a good deal disheartened by the slight result of her efforts. The women listened to her with apparent docility, sometimes even did what she told them, under her eye, and then went home and made their tasteless *chapatis*,

or put charms instead of eye-lotion on their babies, just as they had always done. She gave up trying to teach them at last, and vied with Penelope in making botanical collections, which were also a hobby of the day. Penelope collected grasses, of which there were many varieties; and Lady Haigh, not to be behindhand, began to collect wild-flowers, which were much less abundant. Sir Dugald, whose tastes were not botanical, collected skins and horns, for he managed to get a good deal of sport in his leisure hours, and when there was nothing to shoot, he inspected his wife's and Penelope's sketches, and sternly corrected mistakes in drawing. It was a happy, healthy life, and the colour began to return to Penelope's cheeks and the light to her eyes. She could think of Major Keeling now without the vision of Colin's anguished face rising between them, and the morbid feelings which had preyed upon her so long had become by degrees less acute. She and Lady Haigh called the district "the island-valley of Avilion," rather to the mystification of Sir Dugald, who knew his Dickens better than his Tennyson. He was far too prudent, however, to show his bewilderment further than by pointing out mildly that the district was neither an island nor a valley—and besides, how could a valley be an island?

"Dugald," said Lady Haigh one evening, when Penelope happened to be out of earshot, "don't you think Major Keeling would like to pay us a visit here?"

"It's not a bad place," returned her husband, glancing round at the tents pitched among the trees. "But who ever heard of a sub inviting his chief out into camp to stay with him?"

"Oh, I didn't mean that exactly. He might come without being definitely asked. He would be sure to like to hear how we are getting on, wouldn't he? Well, if I mentioned that you have had five tigers already, and were going after another soon——"

"You won't mention anything of the kind," growled

Sir Dugald. "I'm going to bag that man-eater, if any one does."

Lady Haigh laughed gently. "Well, perhaps I might find other attractions as strong," she said. "But I mean to get him here."

But circumstances over which she had no control were destined to intervene.

CHAPTER XXI.

FIRE AND SWORD.

“WHY, Dugald, where are you off to so early?” cried Lady Haigh, coming out of her tent at breakfast-time, and finding her husband and his boy busy selecting guns, filling powder-flasks, and laying in a store of bullets, flints, percussion-caps, and other necessaries unknown to the sportsman of to-day.

“After the man-eater. They’ve sent me *khubber* of him at last. It’s right out at Rajkot, so I shall be gone all day, even if I don’t have to wait over to-night. You needn’t get nervous if I do.”

“You might just as well let us come,” she sighed argumentatively.

“I have far too much respect for your life—and mine. If you came you wouldn’t be satisfied without a gun, which would go off of its own accord, like poor Mr Winkle’s, and then—well, I would rather be the tiger than any human being in your neighbourhood.”

“Isn’t he horribly rude, Pen? We don’t want to go pushing through jungle-grass after an old mangy tiger, do we? We are going to engage in light and elegant employments suited to our sex. He knows quite well that if I can’t shoot straight it’s his fault for not having taught me. If only I had had the sense to learn before I came out, I would slip away and get to Rajkot before him, and the first thing he saw when he got there would be a dead tiger.”

“More likely that I should find myself a sorrowing widower,” said Sir Dugald, who was in high good

humour at the prospect of getting a sixth tiger. "No, no, stick to your weeds and straws, ladies, and don't get into mischief while I'm gone. You talked of going out to that dry *jheel* to the eastward, and you can't do much harm there. Take Murtiza Khan with you, of course."

"He's insufferably proud because he thinks he's going to bag the man-eater," said Lady Haigh. "What he will be when he comes back I really can't imagine. I wish I could bewitch tigers, as that old man in the village says he can. Then I would give this one something that would keep it miles away from Dugald, however far he went."

Sir Dugald laughed pleasantly over this uncharitable wish as he handed his second gun to the *shikari* who was to accompany him. The ponies were already saddled, and he had only time for a mouthful of food before starting, his last counsel to his wife being not to venture farther from the camp than the *jheel* he had mentioned, as the sky was curiously hazy, and he thought the weather was going to break up. The winter rains had been unusually slight this year, so that the country was already beginning to look parched, and the forest foliage, which should still have been soft and fresh, was becoming quite stiff, and what Lady Haigh called "rattly," though the heat was not yet too great for camping. The climate of Khemistan is so uncertain that a thunderstorm was at least possible; but after Sir Dugald had ridden away to the southward, his wife decided that the haze portended heat rather than thunder, and that it would be perfectly safe to undertake the expedition to the *jheel*. She and Penelope started soon after breakfast, attended only by their two grooms and Murtiza Khan, a stalwart trooper who was Sir Dugald's orderly on occasions like the present, when he was in separate command. The *jheel* proved a disappointment, for it was so dry that the delicate bog-plants Lady Haigh had hoped to secure were all dead, and the grasses were the ordinary coarse varieties to be found all over the country.

Lady Haigh and Penelope soon tired of the fruitless search, and sat down to rest on a bank pleasantly scented with sweet basil before taking to the saddle again. They were conscious of a strong disinclination for the ride back, the air was so hot, the track so dusty, and the forest so shadeless.

"It really is more like smoke than cloud," said Lady Haigh, looking up at the lowering sky, "and whenever there is the least breeze one almost seems to smell smoke. I wish it wasn't coming from the direction of the camp. It's horrid to leave the clear sky behind, and ride straight into twilight. I wonder how far Dugald has got—whether he will be out of the storm. He is sure to have fever if he gets wet. I think I will send one of the servants after him with fresh clothes. They would keep dry if I packed them in a tin box——"

"What can that boy be saying?" interrupted Penelope, pointing across the swamp to the belt of forest on the opposite side. A native boy, unkempt and lightly clad, had appeared from among the trees, and paused in apparent astonishment on catching sight of the two ladies sitting in the shade, and the horses feeding quietly close at hand under the charge of their grooms. Now he was shouting and gesticulating wildly, and Murtiza Khan had hurried to the brink of the reed-beds to hear what he was saying.

"He must be warning us that the storm is coming on," said Lady Haigh, as the boy pointed first at the darkening sky, and then back in the direction of the camp. "Pen! I am sure I smelt smoke at that moment. Did you notice it?"

Murtiza Khan turned his head for a second and shouted a sharp order to the grooms, which made them bestir themselves to get the horses ready, then asked some other question of the boy, who answered with more frenzied gesticulations than ever. When the trooper seemed to persist, he ran to a convenient tree and climbed up it like a monkey, and from a lofty branch shouted and pointed wildly, then slid down,

and abandoning any further attempt at conversation, took to his heels and ran at his utmost speed along the edge of the swamp towards the east, where the sky was still clear.

"What is it, Murtiza Khan?" asked Lady Haigh breathlessly, as the trooper hurried up the bank towards her.

"Highness, the forest is on fire. Will the Presences be graciously pleased to mount at once? We must ride eastwards."

"But the camp? the servants? We must warn them!" cried Lady Haigh.

"They will have seen the fire coming, Highness, for they are nearer it than we. They will stand in the lake, and let the flames sweep over them, and so save themselves. But we cannot go back, for we should meet the fire before we reached the lake."

"But the Sahib!" cried Lady Haigh frantically. "He will be cut off. I will not go on and leave him. We must go back."

"Highness, the Sahib is wise, and has with him the *shikari* Baha-ud-Din, who knows the forest well. He will protect himself, but the care of the Presences falls to me."

"I tell you I won't go," cried Lady Haigh. "Take the Miss Sahib on, and I will go back alone."

"It must not be, Highness. The Sahib gave me a charge, and I swore to carry it out at the risk of my own life. 'Guard the Mem Sahib and the Miss Sahib,' he said; and I will do it. Be pleased to mount, Highness," as she still hesitated.

"Sir Dugald would tell you to come, Elma," urged Penelope. "If we could do anything, I would say go back at once; but we don't even know exactly where he is, and delay now will sacrifice the men's lives as well as ours."

Lady Haigh looked round desperately, but found no remedy. Reluctantly she allowed herself to be helped into the saddle, and the ponies started off at once. For some time the grooms had found it difficult to hold them,

for they were turning their heads uneasily towards the west, snuffing the air, and pricking their ears as though to listen for sounds. Now they needed no urging to fly along the strip of sward between the forest and the *jheel*; and it was with difficulty that their riders pulled up sufficiently to allow Murtiza Khan to get in front when the end of the swamp was reached, and a way had to be found through the jungle. The trooper, on his heavier horse, rode first, crashing through the underwood which had overgrown the almost invisible track, then came the two ladies, and the grooms panted behind, holding on to the ponies' tails when the forest was sufficiently open to allow of a canter. From time to time Murtiza Khan looked back to urge his charges to greater speed, and on all sides the voices of the forest proclaimed the imminence of the danger. Flights of birds hovered distressfully over the riders' heads, unwilling to leave their homes, but taking the eastward course at last; and through the undergrowth could be seen the timid heads of deer, all seeking safety in the same direction. When a more open space was reached the scene was very curious, for antelopes, wild pig, and jungle-rats, regardless alike of the presence of human beings and of each other, were all rushing eastwards, driven by the same panic. One of the grooms even shrieked to Murtiza Khan that he saw a tiger, but the trooper dismissed the information contemptuously. The tiger would have enough to do to save himself, and would not pause in his flight to attack his companions in misfortune.

By this time there was no mistaking the smoke-clouds which travelled in advance of the fire, and brought with them the smell of burning wood and a confusion of sounds. The roar of the advancing flames, the crackling of branches, with an occasional crash when a large tree fell, filled the air with noise. The dry jungle burned like tinder, so that a solid wall of fire seemed to be sweeping over it. Underfoot were the dry weeds and sedges and jungle-grass,

then a tangled mass of brushwood, above which reared themselves the taller trees, poplar or mimosa or acacia, all of them parched from root to topmost twig, an easy prey. Presently one of the grooms jerked out an inquiry whether it would not be better to abandon the ponies and climb trees, but the trooper flung back a contemptuous negative.

"There were three Sahibs did that," he said, "and when the trees were burnt through at the root, they fell down into the fire. Stay and be roasted if ye will, sons of swine. The Memsahibs and I will go on."

They went on, the roar of the flames coming nearer and nearer, the hot breath of the fire on their necks, the crash of falling trees sounding so close at hand that they bent forward involuntarily to escape being crushed, the frenzied pack of wild creatures running beside and among the horses, forgetting the lesser fear in the greater. Suddenly in front of them loomed up a bare hillside, steep like a wall. Murtiza Khan gave a shout.

"To the left! to the left!" he cried. "We cannot climb up here."

They turned the horses, noticing now that the stream of wild animals had already divided, part going to the left and part to the right. One side of their faces was scorched by the hot air; a sudden leap, as it seemed, of the flames seized a tamarisk standing in their very path. Murtiza Khan caught the ladies' bridles and dragged the ponies past it, then lashed them on furiously. The fire was running along the ground, licking up the parched grasses. He forced the ponies through it, then pulled them sharply to the right. A barren nullah faced them, with roughly sloping sides, bleak and dry, but it was salvation. On those naked rocks there was no food for the flames. Murtiza Khan was off his horse in a moment, and seizing Lady Haigh's bridle, led her pony up the steep slope to a bare ledge. His own horse followed him like a dog, and one of the grooms summoned up sufficient presence of mind, under the influence of

the trooper's angry shout, to lead up Penelope's pony. They spread a horsecloth on the ground, and Lady Haigh and Penelope dropped thankfully out of their saddles. They were trembling from head to foot, their hair and habits singed, but they were safe. On a barren hillside, without food or water, in a desolate region, but safe.

For some time they could do nothing but sit helplessly where they were, watching with dull eyes what seemed the persistent efforts of the fire to reach them. Tongues of flame shot out of the burning mass and licked the bare hillside, then sank back thwarted, only to make a further attempt to pursue the fugitives and drive them from their refuge. The fire was no longer inanimate; it was a sentient and malign creature, determined that its prey should not escape. Its efforts ceased at last for lack of fuel, and the castaways on the ledge were able to think of other things. Murtiza Khan began to improvise a sling with a strip torn from his turban, and Lady Haigh, wondering what he could intend to aim at, saw that a little higher up the nullah one of the forest antelopes had taken refuge on a ledge similar to their own. She turned on the trooper angrily—

“What, Murtiza Khan! so lately saved and so soon anxious to destroy? Let the creature escape, as God has allowed us.”

“As the Presence wills,” said Murtiza Khan, with resignation, while the antelope, catching the sound of human voices, took alarm and bounded away. “I was but desirous of providing food, for we have here only some broken *chapatis*. Is it the will of the Presence that we should leave this place, and seek to find some dwelling of men in these mountains?”

“No,” said Lady Haigh shortly, “we wait here for the Sahib. If he is alive he will seek us; if not, we will seek him.”

The trooper did not venture to offer any opposition, and Lady Haigh returned to her former attitude, gazing over the smoky waste, from which the

blackened trunk of a tall tree protruded here and there. She had some biscuits in her plant-case, which she shared with Penelope, and Murtiza Khan and the grooms made a meal of the fragments discovered in the trooper's saddle-bags, after which the three men went to sleep, having duly asked and received permission. Lady Haigh and Penelope scarcely spoke at all through the long hot thirsty hours that followed. The sun beat down on them, reflected from the steep walls of the nullah; but if they moved into the shade lower down, they would lose the view. The fire had long burned itself out, and the smoke-clouds lifted gradually, disclosing a gloomy expanse of black ashes. The ground had been cleared so thoroughly that it seemed as if it ought to be possible to see as far as the spot where the camp had been, but the air was still too hazy, a dull grey taking the place of the ordinary intense blue of the sky. There was no sign of life anywhere on the plain which had been forest, but as the afternoon wore on Penelope started suddenly.

"Did you see, Elma?" she cried. "I am sure I saw a man's face. He was looking at us over those rocks," and she pointed to the crest of the cliff on the opposite side of the nullah.

"It can't be one of our men, for why should they want to hide?" said Lady Haigh gloomily, returning to her watch. "I don't see anything."

"But it must be one of the tribesmen, then, and they will attack us. Do wake up Murtiza Khan, and let him go and look. Elma! you don't want to be taken prisoner, do you?"

Thus adjured, Lady Haigh aroused the trooper, who descended into the dry bed of the nullah and scaled the opposite height with due precaution, but found no one, and reported that he could see nothing but more rocks and barren hills. In returning, he ventured out on the plain, at Lady Haigh's order, that he might see whether it was yet possible to traverse it. But when he turned up the black ashes with

the toe of his boot, they showed red and fiery underneath.

"It may not be, Highness," he said. "Neither man nor horse can cross the forest to-day. Is it permitted to us to leave this spot?" Lady Haigh's gesture of dissent was sufficient answer. "Then have I the Presence's leave to send the grooms, one each way, along the edge of these cliffs? It may be that the Sahib is looking for us round about the place of the fire, and one of them may meet him."

To this Lady Haigh consented, and the two men started, rather unwillingly, since both were afraid of going alone. The one who had gone to the right returned very quickly, saying that he had seen a man's face in a bush, which turned out, however, to be perfectly normal when he reconnoitred cautiously behind it, and that he was going no farther, since the place was evidently the haunt of *afrit*. The other was longer absent, and when he appeared he was accompanied by another man, who was rapturously recognised by the fugitives as one of the grass-cutters from the camp, who had gone with Sir Dugald to Rajkot. Carefully hidden in his turban he bore a note, very dirty and much crumpled, and evidently written on the upper margin of a piece of newspaper which Sir Dugald had taken with him to provide wadding for his guns. Lady Haigh read it eagerly, but as she did so her face changed.

"What happened when the Sahib had given you this *chit*?" she asked imperiously of the grass-cutter.

"The Sahib started with the *shikari* Baha-ud-Din in the direction of Alibad, Highness, leaving his groom behind to tell any of the servants that might have escaped from the camp to follow him."

"Bid them make ready the horses," said Lady Haigh shortly to Murtiza Khan, then read the note again with renewed disapproval.

"Elma, what is it?" asked Penelope anxiously.

"It's nothing. I am a fool," was the laconic answer. "Only—well, I suppose one doesn't care

to have one's heroism taken for granted, however much one has tried to be heroic."

"But Sir Dugald is safe? He must be, from what Jagro said."

"Yes, I'm thankful for that. But this is what he says: 'News just brought by a villager that a Nullah-pooree army under Govind Chund has crossed the frontier through the mountains behind Sheykhgur, intending to surprise Ulleebad from the south-west. They were guided by some one who knows the country well, but must have fired the *shikargah* accidentally in their march. I am sending this by Juggro, in the earnest hope that he may fall in with you. I dare not delay; Ulleebad must be warned. I join Keeling immediately; do you take refuge at Sheykhgur. Moor-teza Khaun knows where it is; he went there with the Chief and me when Crayne was here. Tell the Sheykh of the invasion, and ask him to give you shelter till I can come for you.' Really Dugald might be issuing general orders! The rest is to me—that he feels it a mockery to write when he doesn't know whether I am alive or dead, and so on."

"But if he durst not lose any time——?" hesitated Penelope.

"My dear, I know that perfectly well. If we were dead he could do nothing more for us; if we were alive we could look after ourselves. His attitude is absolutely common-sensible. But he might have asked me whether I minded before levanting in this way. No, he couldn't very well have done that. It's a fine thing to have a Roman husband, Pen."

"Of course it is, and you are proud of him for doing it."

"Well, perhaps I am; but all the same, I wish he hadn't! There's consistency for you. And now to try and make Murtiza Khan understand what is required of him."

The task set before the trooper was not a light one. He could have found his way to Sheykhgarh with tolerable ease from the direction of Alibad, but from this

side of the hills he had only the vaguest idea of its position. It must lie somewhere in the maze of rocks and ravines to the north-east, that was all he knew, and he led his party up the nullah, which appeared to lead roughly in the desired direction. It turned and twisted and wound in the most perplexing manner, however, and it seemed a godsend when the figure of a man was discernible for an instant on the summit of the cliff. He disappeared as soon as he caught sight of the travellers; but the stentorian shouts of Murtiza Khan, promising safety and reward, brought him out of his hiding-place again, to peer timidly over the rocks. He belonged to a distant village, he said, and was seeking among the hills for three sheep that had been lost, and he could guide the party as far as the Sheikh-ul-Jabal's outposts, beyond which he durst not go. Even with reward in view, he would not come down into the nullah, but took his way along the top of the cliff, often lost to view, and guiding the trooper by shouts. When at length he stopped short, demanding the promised coin, evening was coming on, and still there was no sign of human habitation to be seen, but only dry torrent-beds and frowning rocks. It chanced that Lady Haigh had a rupee about her—a most unusual thing in camp-life—and this was duly laid upon a rock indicated by the guide, who would not come down to secure it while the travellers were in sight.

It was not without some trepidation that Lady Haigh and Penelope saw that their path now dipped down into a deep ravine, bordered by dark overhanging cliffs; but they would not betray their fears before the natives, and went on boldly. As soon as they had set foot in the ravine, however, their ears were suddenly assailed by a tumult of sound. Shouts ran from cliff to cliff, and were taken up and returned and multiplied by the echoes until the air was filled with noise. Even Murtiza Khan was startled, and the grooms seized the ponies' bridles and tried to turn them round. The ponies kicked and plunged, the trooper

stormed, and his subordinates jabbered, while Lady Haigh tried in vain to make herself heard above the din. In vain did Murtiza Khan assure the grooms that what they heard was only the voices of the Sheikh's sentinels, posted on the rocks above them; they swore that the place was bewitched, and that legions of evil spirits were holding revel there. Murtiza Khan was obliged to lay about him with the flat of his tulwar before they would let go the reins, and allow the ladies, whose position on the steep hillside had been precarious in the extreme, to follow him farther into the darkness. They yielded with the worst possible grace; and when the trooper, a few steps farther on, shouted back some question to them, only the dispirited voice of the grass-cutter answered him. The other two had fled. A little later, and even the grass-cutter's heart failed him, as the twilight became more and more gloomy, and he slipped behind a projecting rock until the cavalcade had passed on, then ran back to the entrance of the ravine as fast as his legs could carry him. Lady Haigh suggested going back to find the deserters, but the trooper scouted the idea. The light was going fast, and to spend the night in this wilderness of rocks was not to be thought of. They must press on into the resounding gloom.

CHAPTER XXII.

TAKEN BY SURPRISE.

AT last the ravine broadened a little, and almost at the moment when this became evident, voices were heard ordering a halt. It was difficult to tell where the voices came from, but presently the travellers distinguished a steel cap and a scarlet turban, and the barrel of a matchlock, among the rocks on either side of the path. Halting at the prescribed spot, Murtiza Khan entered into conversation with the sentries, requesting that word might be sent to the Sheikh of the arrival of the two ladies, who asked shelter for the night. A third man who was within hearing was summoned and despatched with the message, and the travellers resigned themselves to wait. The answer which was returned after a quarter of an hour had elapsed was not a gracious one. The Memsahibs and their attendant might enter if they pleased, but they must put up with things as they found them, and conform to the rules of the place. As the alternative was a night in the open, Lady Haigh accepted the offer, with considerable reluctance, and whispered to Penelope that if they were to be blindfolded on the way up to the fortress, they must go on talking to one another until the bandages were removed, to guard against any attempt to separate them. But this precaution was not called for. It was now quite dark, and three of the Sheikh's men took the bridles of the ponies, and began to lead them along, without the assistance of any light whatever. The ladies and Murtiza Khan strained their

eyes, but could not distinguish anything in their surroundings beyond varying degrees of blackness. Nevertheless, their guides seemed to have no difficulty in keeping to the path, although in some places, judging by the sound of the stones which rolled from under the ponies' feet, it led along the verge of a tremendous precipice. After what seemed hours of this kind of travelling, the creaking of bars and bolts just in front announced that a door was being opened, and Murtiza Khan was warned to stoop. The gateway passed, they were led across the courtyard, and up to the steps of the keep, where two old women were holding flaring torches. Between them stood a boy of twelve or so, who came forward and salaamed with the greatest politeness.

"The Memsahibs are more welcome than the breaking of the rains in a thirsty season. This house is at their disposal. Let them say what they wish and it is already done. In the absence of the lord of the place, let them behold their slave in me."

"Then the Sheikh-ul-Jabal is away?" said Lady Haigh, interrupting the flow of compliment. "And you are his son, I suppose?"

The boy answered as though he had not heard the second question. "The Sheikh-ul-Jabal and my brother Ashraf Ali rode away last night with thirty horsemen, to attend a sacred feast. My sister Wazira Begum and I are left in charge of the fortress, and I bid the Mensahibs welcome in her name."

Accepting the assurance, the ladies dismounted, and the boy bustled about with great self-importance, sending one of the old women-servants to hasten the preparations for the guests' comfort, giving the ponies into the charge of the men who had led them to be taken to the stables, and arranging that Murtiza Khan should be allowed to sleep in the great hall, so that his mistresses might feel he was not far off in case they needed protection. He had so much to do, and so many orders to give, that it almost seemed as if he was waiting as long as possible before introducing the

visitors to his sister; but at last he appeared to feel that there was no help for it, and led the way resolutely behind the curtain, guided by the second old woman with her torch. In the first room to which they came, a girl was sitting on a charpoy. She had evidently put on her richest clothes, and her fingers and wrists were loaded with jewels; but her toilet was not complete, for she was so busy plaiting her hair that she had no leisure even to look at the visitors. An old woman who stood behind her was assisting in the hair-dressing, but apparently under protest, for her young mistress was scolding her energetically.

"O my sister, here are the Memsahibs," said the boy, with considerable misgiving in his tone, when he could make himself heard.

"Oh, these are the women?" Wazira Begum vouchsafed them a casual glance. "This is the first time that Farangi beggars have come to our door, but Zulika will find them a quilt to sleep on, and there are plenty of scraps."

"O my sister, the Memsahibs are our guests," began the boy distressfully, but Lady Haigh interrupted him.

"It strikes me you are making a mistake, young lady," she said, marching across the room, and taking, uninvited, the place of honour on the charpoy, at the hostess's right hand. "Penelope, sit down here," indicating the next seat. "When the Sheikh-ul-Jabal returns, will he be pleased to hear that his daughter has insulted two English ladies who sought his hospitality? The English are his friends, and he is theirs."

The girl had sprung from the charpoy as Lady Haigh sat down beside her. "The English are pigs!" she exclaimed. "O Maadat Ali! O Zulika! who is lady here, I or this Farangi woman? Will ye see her thrust me from my own place?"

"Nay, my sister, it is thou who art wrong," returned the boy boldly. "The women are great ladies among the English, and friends of Kīlin Sahib, for so their servant told me. Thou art not wise."

"Then be thou wise for both! I will not stay here with these shameless ones. Zulika may look to them."

"You are going to bed?" asked Lady Haigh placidly. "I think you are wise, after all. And let me advise you to think things over. I don't want to get you into trouble, but the Sheikh must hear of it if we are not properly treated."

Wazira Begum vouchsafed no reply, quitting the room in such haste that she dropped one of her slippers by the way, and Maadat Ali, taking the responsibility upon himself, ordered the old women to bring in supper. While he was out of hearing for a moment Penelope turned to Lady Haigh—

"You know much more about it than I do, Elma, but we are quite alone here. Is it prudent to make an enemy of the Sheikh's daughter? She has us in her power."

"That she hasn't, I'm thankful to say. She is the little fury that Dugald and Major Keeling fell in with when they were here, and the Sheikh made short work of her then. She has some grudge of her own against the English, evidently, and she thinks this is a good time to gratify it. Why, Pen, to be prudent, as you call it, now, would make every native in the place think that the day of the English was over in Khemistan, and that we knew it, and were trying to curry favour with them in view of the future. You must be more punctilious than ever in exacting respect—in fact, I would say bully the people, if I thought you had it in you to do it. It's one of the ways in which we can help the men at Alibad."

Penelope laughed, not quite convinced, and the conversation was interrupted by the reappearance of Maadat Ali, heading a procession of women-servants bearing dishes. These were duly arranged on a small low table, and the guests were invited to partake, the boy watching over their comfort most assiduously. When the meal was over he delivered them solemnly into the charge of old Zulika, adjuring her to see that they wanted for nothing, as she dreaded the Sheikh's

anger. The old woman, on her part, seemed genuinely anxious to efface the impression of Wazira Begum's rudeness, and bustled about with a will, dragging in another charpoy, and bringing rolls of bedding. She apologised to Lady Haigh for not coming herself to sleep at the door of the room; but her place was always with her young mistress, and she would send Hafiza, the servant next in seniority to herself, to wait upon the visitors. Her excuses were graciously accepted, for Lady Haigh and Penelope were both feeling that after the exertions and anxieties of this exciting day, tired nature stood much in need of restoration. They tried to talk for a moment when they had settled themselves in their unfamiliar beds, but both fell asleep with half-finished sentences on their lips.

They were roused in the morning by the voice of Maadat Ali, in the passage outside their room, eagerly inquiring of old Hafiza whether the Memsahibs were not awake yet; and as he gave them little chance of going to sleep again, they thought it better to get up. Tired and stiff as they were, it was a little disconcerting to remember that riding-habits were perforce their only wear. Happily these were not the brief and skimpy garments of to-day, but richly flowing robes, long enough almost to reach the ground when the wearer was in the saddle, and their straw hats and blue gauze veils were also devised with a view to comfort rather than smartness. Clothes-brushes and hair-brushes were alike unknown at Sheikharh, so that dressing was a work of some difficulty; and it was rather a shock to find that the frugal breakfast of *chapatis* and hard-boiled eggs, which was brought in when they asked for food, was regarded as a piece of incredible luxury. After breakfast they went to the curtain which separated the zenana from the great hall to speak to Murtiza Khan, who had already been out with some of the Sheikh's men to look for the deserters of the night before, but had not been able to find any trace of them. He brought the news that the Nalapuri army had been seen on its march round the southern

extremity of the hills, moving towards Alibad—which showed that Sir Dugald had not been wrong in thinking there was no time to waste. The trooper also desired permission to reconnoitre in the direction of the town by the usual route, in case it might prove possible to get through with the news of the ladies' safety, and this Lady Haigh granted before she turned back into the zenana with Penelope.

The women's apartments were built round a small inner courtyard, gloomy in the extreme from its want of outlook, but possessing a tank of rather stagnant water which was called a fountain, and some shrubs in pots. In the verandahs round this court the whole life of the place was carried on, the servants—all of them women of a discreet age—performing all their duties in the open, to the accompaniment of much chattering. Among them moved, or rather flashed, Maadat Ali, questioning, meddling, calling down endless explosions of wrath on his devoted head, but undoubtedly brightening the days of the old ladies whom he alternately coaxed and defied. When he saw the visitors he left the servants at once, and after ordering a carpet to be spread for the Memsahibs, seated himself cross-legged on the ground, with his back against the coping of the tank, and began to ask questions. His subject was Major Keeling, whose brief visit more than a year before seemed to have left a vivid impression. Was it true that Kilin Sahib was invulnerable to bullets, that he could make water flow uphill or rise from the ground at his word, that he could read all the thoughts of a man by merely looking him in the face? These inquiries and many others had been answered, when a peculiar look on the boy's face made Lady Haigh turn round. Behind her, leaning against the wall of the house, stood Wazira Begum, twisting a spray of mimosa in her fingers, and trying to look as if she had not been listening to what had passed. Lady Haigh rose and saluted her politely, prompting Penelope to do the same, and after a moment's hesitation the girl returned the salutation courteously, if a

little sulkily. It was evident that the meeting of the night before was to be ignored, and Maadat Ali made room for his sister joyfully at his side.

"I knew she would come when she heard us talking about Kilin Sahib," he said. "She hates him very much."

"Yes, very much," echoed Wazira Begum.

"When he came here," pursued the boy, "she tried very hard to make him afraid; but he would not be afraid, and therefore she hated him even more than before. She has part of a tassel that she cut from his sword——"

"From his sword? Oh, from the sword-knot," said Lady Haigh.

"And she keeps it wrapped up in linen, like an amulet——"

"Thou liest!" burst forth Wazira Begum furiously.

"But I saw it, O my sister, and thou didst tell me it was to make a great charm against him, to destroy him."

"Thou wilt spoil the charm by talking of it," pouted the girl, but the angry crimson faded from her face.

"Ask her why she hates him so much," said Penelope to Lady Haigh, preferring to rely, as she usually did, on her friend rather than try to make herself understood in the native dialect.

"I hate all the English," said Wazira Begum proudly, when the question was translated to her; "and he is a chief man among them."

"But what have the English done to you?" asked Lady Haigh.

"Have they not driven us here?" with a wave of her hand round the courtyard. "Are not my brothers and the Sheikh-ul-Jabal deprived of their just rights?"

"And no marriage can be made for her," put in Maadat Ali sympathetically. "What go-between would come to Sheikhgarh to seek a bride?"

"You should persuade your father to settle in Ali-bad," said Lady Haigh.

"I am not a sweeper girl, to wed with the scum of towns!" cried Wazira Begum.

"Isn't your sister inclined to be a little difficult to please?" asked Lady Haigh of Maadat Ali. "You are Khojas, of course, but we have plenty of Khojas, and even Syads,¹ living in the plains."

"If that were all!" cried the girl contemptuously. "But for a princess of Nalapur, as I am——"

"O my sister!" gasped Maadat Ali.

"Nay, I have said it, and these unbelievers shall be convinced." She sprang up and stood before the visitors, drawing herself to her full height. "My father was the Amir Nasr Ali Khan, not the Sheikh-ul-Jabal, and my brother Ashraf Ali should now be sitting in his father's place. But the English took the side of the murderer and usurper, and we are banished to this desert."

"You three are Nasr Ali's children!" cried Lady Haigh. Then, regret succeeding astonishment, "Why in the world didn't your father—the Sheikh, I mean—let Major Keeling know this before? He would have had you back at Nalapur long ago."

"These are words!" said Wazira Begum. "My uncle judges the English by their deeds. His own wife and sons and our mother were among the dead in the Killa at Nalapur, and he would not have us murdered also."

"But, dear me! he ought to know Major Keeling by this time," said Lady Haigh impatiently. "He had no share in the massacre, and has been most anxious to right the injustice ever since it happened. But he thought there was no heir of Nasr Ali left, so he could do nothing." She stopped, for a curious smile was playing about Wazira Begum's mouth.

"My uncle has found a way of doing something," she said. "Even now he has taken my brother Ashraf Ali, who was fourteen years old six weeks ago, to show him to the faithful followers of our father's house,

¹ *Syads* are descendants of the Khalif Ali by the daughter of Moham-med, *Khoias* his descendants by other wives.

that they may raise an insurrection in his favour in Nalapur."

"Then your uncle has acted very unwisely—to say no more—in not confiding in Major Keeling," was the warm response. "I suppose he means to reach the capital while the Amir Wilayat Ali is with his army on the frontier? And so he has weakened his garrison, and withdrawn his distant patrols, and allowed Gobind Chand's army to get past him and threaten Alibad. There must be spies all round you, for it's clear his movements have been watched—I suppose the men we saw in the mountains were there to keep an eye on him—and he will never be allowed to reach Nalapur. And if he was, it wouldn't be much good to proclaim your brother Amir if the enemy cut him off both from this place and from Alibad."

"I cannot tell," said Wazira Begum sullenly. "My uncle is a wise man, and will do according to his wisdom. As to Kilin Sahib and the English, I will trust them when I see a reason for it," and she marched away with great dignity.

Maadat Ali remained, obviously ill at ease on account of his sister's revelation, but relieved that his true dignity need no longer be concealed; and from him Lady Haigh learned that the wife of the Amir Nasr Ali, suspecting treachery on the part of her brother-in-law, had intrusted her three children to the two nurses, Zulika and Hafiza, the night before the storming of the city. In the disguise of peasants the women had contrived to escape from the palace, and on the arrival of the English had been suffered to depart. They made their way to the Sheikh-ul-Jabal, who had succeeded in crossing the frontier into safety, and he had conceived the idea of bringing up the children as his own, knowing that, much as he himself was hated by Wilayat Ali and his Vizier, nothing could protect the heirs of Nasr Ali if they were known to be living.

The day passed slowly to Lady Haigh and Penelope. Maadat Ali was their constant companion, but his

never-ceasing flow of questions became rather wearisome after a time. Wazira Begum seemed unable to make up her mind how to treat the visitors. She would come and engage in friendly conversation, then suddenly turn sullen or flare up at some imagined slight, and depart in dudgeon. Lady Haigh decided that she was ill at ease about her uncle and her elder brother, whose plans had been so signally deranged by Gobind Chand's move, and that she would like to discuss future possibilities, but was too proud to do so. Murtiza Khan came back from his reconnaissance, and announced that the Nalapuri army had emerged from the hills in the early morning and threatened Alibad, but had been driven back in confusion by a small force with two field-pieces posted on the canal embankment. In spite of their numbers, Gobind Chand's men refused to remain in the plain, and had retreated into the hills. They were now occupying the broken country extending from the frontier to the track on the south by which they had made their circuitous march, and were in force between Sheikgharh and Alibad; but the trooper thought it might be possible for him to get through to the town, and relieve Sir Dugald's mind, by using by-paths only known to the men of the Mountains. Lady Haigh was very much averse from the idea, but Murtiza Khan was so anxious to be allowed to try that she consented to his making the attempt after dark, guided by one of the brotherhood.

The evening seemed very long in coming, not only to the eager trooper, but to the two ladies, who could scarcely keep their eyes open after the fatigues of the day before. They sat side by side on a charpoy in the room in which Wazira Begum had first received them, with Maadat Ali cross-legged on a carpet opposite, pouring forth a flood of questions which still seemed inexhaustible. A brazier of glowing charcoal supplied warmth and a dim religious light, and Wazira Begum wandered restlessly in and out. The day had been hot, for the sun beat down with great force on the

unshaded walls and courtyards of Sheikhgarh ; but the evening was cold and even frosty. Suddenly through the chill air came the sound of a horn, and Maadat Ali leaped up as if he had been shot.

"Some one comes!" he cried. "I will bring thee news, O my sister."

He rushed out and under the curtain, and was lost to sight. The women-servants came crowding into the passage, and listened to the confused sounds which reached them from the gateway. Presently Maadat Ali came rushing back.

"O my sister," he gasped forth, "it is our uncle, sorely wounded. He and his troop were attacked by the accursed one, the usurper."

"And our brother—Ashraf Ali?" shrieked Wazira Begum.

"They said nothing of him, but they are bringing the Sheikh in a litter, and those that have returned with him are relieving the men on guard, that they may gather in the great hall and receive his commands. I must go back."

"Won't you send the servants to light the hall with torches?" asked Lady Haigh of Wazira Begum, as the boy ran away; but she shook her head.

"Nay, no woman must be present when the Sheikh gives his commands to the brotherhood. They will bring their own torches. We should not even be here; but I cannot go back into the zenana without knowing what has befallen my brother. It is forbidden, but I cannot."

The women were all gathered at the curtain now, peering through holes which long experience had shown them where to find, and Lady Haigh laid an encouraging hand on Wazira Begum's shoulder. To her surprise, it was not shaken off. The girl was trembling with anxiety, and her breath came in sharp gasps. Outside the curtain Murtiza Khan stood rigid, partially concealed by the recess in which it hung. With admirable good-breeding, he feigned to be ab-

solutely unconscious of the crowd of women who were pressing and whispering so close to him.

At last the sound of feet was heard, and the gleam of white and scarlet was revealed by the light of a smoky torch at the doorway of the hall. Eight men in the dress of the brotherhood carried in a rude litter, and were followed by others, all bearing marks of fighting. Behind them came the men who had been guarding the walls, and with them Maadat Ali; but a sob broke from Wazira Begum as she realised that her elder brother was not there. The litter, still covered with the mantles of the men who had carried it, was placed in the middle of the hall, and the members of the brotherhood proceeded to arrange themselves in their proper ranks; but there was some confusion, as if all did not know their places. Lady Haigh's hand gripped Penelope's, and she directed her attention to the back of the hall. Behind the men in scarlet and white crept a silent crowd of figures in ordinary native dress, and these were dividing in the semi-darkness so as to line both sides of the hall. Almost at the same moment two cries broke the stillness. Wazira Begum sprang up from her crouching position, and shrieked with all her strength, "Treachery! treachery! sons of the Mountains!" and Maadat Ali, who had contrived to make his way unobserved to the side of the litter and lift the covering, dropped it in amazement, and cried shrilly, "It is not the Sheikh-ul-Jabal at all!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

PRISONERS AND CAPTIVES.

IN a moment all was confusion. Behind the curtain, Zulika and Hafiza threw themselves upon Wazira Begum, and carried her off by main force, regardless of her struggles, locking her into a small room where jewels and best clothes were kept. They had seen the man in the litter raise himself and deal Maadat Ali a blow that stretched him senseless on the floor, and their sudden action had only just prevented the girl from rushing unveiled into the turmoil of armed men. The hall was ringing with battle-cries: "Jabal! Jabal!" from the brotherhood, "Dīn! Dīn!" from the men who had carried the litter and those who had dogged their steps. Swords were flashing; but such was the confusion that the garrison of Sheikharh did not know who was friend or who foe. The dark-clothed strangers, who had almost succeeded in surrounding them, were obviously enemies; but mingled among themselves were the litter-bearers in their own distinctive dress, headed by the man who had been carried in the litter, and who had now sprung to his feet and unsheathed a sword. Beset and outnumbered, the men of the Mountains turned furiously upon the nearest foe each could distinguish, and a wild turmoil raged, which swayed for a moment towards the entrance of the hall, leaving clear the remains of the litter and the form of Maadat Ali lying beside it. Lady Haigh put a hand round the curtain and gripped the arm of Murtiza Khan, who still stood

motionless in his niche. These bewildering changes were nothing to him; his duty began and ended with the defence of his Memsahibs.

"Fetch in the boy, Murtiza Khan!" said Lady Haigh sharply. The trooper hesitated for a moment, then assured himself that the archway was not threatened, and dashed across the hall, returning with the motionless body of the boy.

"Bring him inside—quick!" said Lady Haigh authoritatively, moving the curtain aside; and with horrible reluctance Murtiza Khan obeyed, to the accompaniment of a chorus of shrieks from the old women within, who improvised hastily makeshifts for veils. He looked anxiously round for a bed on which to lay the boy, preparatory to an immediate retreat.

"Hold him! You are not to go outside again," cried Lady Haigh, stamping her foot. "Unlock that door!" she commanded the two old women, pointing to the room where Wazira Begum could be heard beating the woodwork with her fists and demanding furiously to be let out. Hafiza seemed inclined to remonstrate, but Zulika obeyed promptly, and the girl dashed out, with dishevelled hair and bleeding knuckles, bestowing a furious blow on the old nurse as she passed, and nearly knocking her down. Catching sight of her brother, she tore him from the trooper's arms and pressed him to her breast, crouching in a corner and moaning over him. Lady Haigh laid a firm hand on her shoulder.

"Listen to me, Wazira Begum. Is there any door or gate at the back by which you can let a messenger out?"

"Take thy hand away!" shrieked the girl. "How dost thou dare touch me? It is thou who hast brought all this evil upon us. O my brother, my little brother, do I behold thee dead in my arms?"

"Answer me," said Lady Haigh, giving her a slight shake. "You can do your brother no good by crying over him."

"There is a secret door, but the Sheikh alone can

enter or depart by it," was the unwilling reply. "Now leave me to bewail my dead."

"Then we must let Murtiza Khan down over the wall. Wazira Begum, you must come and show us the best place, and give orders to your women. Your brother is not dead. I saw him move just now."

"I will not leave him, O accursed Farangi! Why should I desire to save the life of thy servant, who has profaned the very zenana?"

"To save your own life and your brother's, to say nothing of ours. Murtiza Khan must bear the news of this treachery to Alibad, and bring help, if it can be managed. Come! leave the boy with Hafiza."

Suddenly and reluctantly Wazira Begum obeyed, and wrapping herself in the veil which Zulika brought her, led the way through the passage. Lady Haigh paused to speak to the old woman—

"Stay at the curtain, and parley with any who may desire to enter. Keep them back at any cost until we return."

Hurrying after the rest she caught up Murtiza Khan, who was following the women in intense misery, with his eyes on the ground.

"Do you understand, Murtiza Khan? You are to get through to Alibad at any cost, and tell Keeling Sahib that the enemy have surprised Sheikharh."

"How is this?" asked Murtiza Khan. "Does not the Presence know that I was charged to protect her and the Miss Sahib, and how dare I leave them defenceless to the enemy?"

"What could one man do? You could only fight till you were killed."

"Nay, I could slay both the Presences before the enemy broke in."

"Thanks, we can do that for ourselves if necessary. There are knives here, at any rate, whatever there may not be. But if the Sahibs are not warned, they will come to Sheikharh thinking it is in friendly hands, and will be ambushed in the mountains. That must be prevented."

"It is the will of the Presence," said Murtiza Khan, with a resignation as sulky in its way as Wazira Begum's. The girl had led the way up to the roofs of the buildings surrounding the zenana courtyard, which formed a terrace from which the defence of the place could be carried on. She sprang up on the parapet, and looked over the wall.

"Here is the place," she said. "My brother Ashraf Ali once dropped a jewel from his turban over the wall, and we let him down to recover it. Bring ropes, O women."

The servants ran wildly in all directions, and produced a heterogeneous collection of cords, which were knotted together and pieced out with strips torn from sheets. The trooper tested them carefully, and expressed himself as satisfied, only entreating that Lady Haigh would herself hold the cord and give the orders. Then he let himself down over the parapet, hung for a moment to the edge by his fingers, and loosed his hold. Lady Haigh restrained the eagerness of the women who held the rope, insisting that they should pay it out slowly and steadily; and after what seemed an age, the trooper's voice was heard, telling them to slacken it a little, that he might unfasten it. Then the rope came up again free, and not daring to wait on the wall, Lady Haigh and Wazira Begum left the servants to untie and hide the separate parts, and fled back into the house. Wazira Begum was madly anxious about her brother, and Lady Haigh now remembered that Penelope had not accompanied them to the wall. They both caught sight of her at the same moment, and Wazira Begum sprang forward with a cry of rage, for Penelope was kneeling by the charpoy on which Maadat Ali lay, and binding up his head. The fierce jealousy which made the native girl rush to drive her away did not even occur to her, and she looked up at her with a smile.

"He is only stunned, and he is beginning to come round. Take my place, so that he may see you when he opens his eyes, but don't startle him. I'm sure he ought to be kept very quiet."

Her anger disarmed by Penelope's unsuspectingness, Wazira Begum obeyed meekly, and kneeling down by the charpoy, murmured endearing epithets as she pressed her lips passionately to her brother's hands. But Lady Haigh had moved to the curtain, beyond which Zulika had just been summoned by an imperious voice which demanded that some one from the zenana should come forth and speak. The contest in the hall had ended in the triumph of the invaders. The bodies of the dead and dying which cumbered the floor showed that the men of the Mountains had fought hard for their stronghold; but they were much outnumbered, and utterly taken by surprise. Their assailants were evidently kept well in hand by their leader, the man who had been carried in the litter, for instead of dispersing through the fortress in search of loot, they were methodically removing the dead and caring for their own wounded. The wounded among the defenders were promptly despatched. It was the leader who now stood before the curtain, and before whom Zulika grovelled abjectly, her forehead on the ground.

"Who is within?" asked the leader.

"My lord's servants the daughter and the young son of my master, the Sheikh-ul-Jabal, and the women of the household."

"No one else? What of the two Farangi ladies who took shelter here last night, and their servant?"

"Truly the wisdom of my lord is as that of Solomon the son of David! The Farangi ladies are indeed within, the guests of my master's house."

"And their servant—is he also within?"

"Nay, my lord! A man behind the curtain! Truly the fellow was in this hall before the entrance of my lord, but seeing that there was fighting on foot, doubtless he stole away to hide himself, or it may be he is even among the slain," lied Zulika glibly.

"I will have search made and a watch kept, and if I find thou hast deceived me——" he laid his sheathed sword lightly across Zulika's neck, so that she cowered nearer to the floor. "Thou and the children of the

impostor may remain here for the present, until the will of his Highness be known; only see to it that ye make no attempt to escape or to send warning to those who are away. But the Farangi women bid to be ready to start on a journey an hour before dawn, for they must go elsewhere."

"My lord would not slay the women?" ventured the trembling Zulika, with unexpected courage.

"What is that to thee? Enough that they must be kept in safety until it may be seen of what use they are."

"My lord's handmaid will carry his commands," responded Zulika, and returned with her alarming message behind the curtain, where the other servants filled the air with wailing on hearing it. Lady Haigh bade them peremptorily to be still, and turned to Wazira Begum, who was still kneeling beside her brother, assiduously keeping the cloths on his forehead wet, in the way Penelope had shown her.

"Let us talk this over as friends," she said, "for we are in much the same position. We are to be kept as hostages in order to extract concessions from Major Keeling, and you and your brother, Wazira Begum, as a means of bringing pressure upon the Sheikh-ul-Jabal. At least that shows that he has not been killed or defeated, but I suppose he might return here and be lured into an ambush at any moment. Now think; Murtiza Khan cannot possibly reach Alibad before daylight to-morrow, even if he is not seen and wounded or captured. Major Keeling would never attack a place like this by daylight, so that even if he sent a force to our help at once, we could not be relieved until to-morrow night. Is there any chance of barricading ourselves in the zenana, and holding out for all those hours?"

"Nay," said Wazira Begum wearily; "we might block up the door with charpoys, and ye might refuse to go out; but they would only need to set fire to the barricade, and then they would break in and slay us all. Do as thou wilt. Who am I to give commands,

when thou art present? It shall be done as thou sayest, and my brother and I, and these women, can but die in the hope of saving thee and thy sister."

"Nonsense!" said Lady Haigh. "If there's no chance of defending ourselves successfully, of course we won't attempt it. You know that perfectly well, Wazira Begum, or you wouldn't have put your lives into my hands in that despairingly confiding way."

The girl looked slightly ashamed. "Thou art better to me than I deserve, better than I thought thee," she said. "Were it not for my brother, I would refuse to give you up; but how can I bring death upon him? I will send my handmaid Hafiza with you, to wait upon you and to be your interpreter with the men sent to guard you, for ye are great ladies, and must not speak with them face to face. Also ye shall have bedding, and such other things as this place can supply and ye may desire. And forgive me that I can do no more, for truly woe is come upon this house, and the shadow of death."

She broke into loud wailing again, in which the other women followed her, and Lady Haigh grew angry.

"Penelope, lie down here and try and get some rest. Wazira Begum, as you are good enough to lend us bedding, please let Hafiza get it out and have it ready to strap on the horses. And tell me, had we better wear veils like yours instead of our hats?"

"Nay, ye would be known everywhere as Farangis by your tight garments, and your manner of sitting on one side of your horses," said Wazira Begum. "But this is what ye must do." She unfastened the gauze veil from Lady Haigh's hat and doubled it. "Now no man can see clearly what manner of woman is beneath."

This settled, Lady Haigh sat down on the floor, and leaning against the wall, prepared to get a few hours' uncomfortable and more or less broken sleep, while Hafiza was assisted in her preparations by the other women, who were all much relieved that they had not been chosen to attend the visitors, and were anxious to

administer the kind of comfort which is easier to give than to receive. The disturbed night seemed extraordinarily long, but at last the summons came from behind the curtain. Wazira Begum bade farewell to her guests with something of compunction, and pressed upon them a string of pearls, which might serve as currency in case of need. The old women carried out the bundles of bedding, which were tied on a horse in such a way that Hafiza could perch herself on the summit of the load. Then Lady Haigh and Penelope, disguised in their double veils, walked down the hall, and found, to their delight, their own ponies awaiting them. Lady Haigh looked over the harness critically before mounting from the steps, and ordered one or two straps to be tightened—orders which were obeyed, apparently with some amusement, by the men who stood by. The leader of the enemy, who stood on the steps watching the start, gave his final instructions to a man named Nizam-ul-Mulk, who was, it seemed, to escort the ladies with ten men under him, and the gate was opened. Lady Haigh, who was looking about for any chance of escape, saw that every precaution was to be taken for the safe-keeping of the prisoners. On the narrow mountain paths, where it was necessary to rid in single file, there was always one of the guards between herself and Penelope, and when the valley widened, the whole of the escort closed up at once. Several small encampments were passed, from which startled Nalapuris looked out as they heard the horses' feet to ask if Sinjāj Kīlin was coming; and it was clear that though the enemy might be said to be occupying the hills, there would be no great difficulty in dislodging them. Cowardly though they might be, however, they had the upper hand at present, and Lady Haigh and Penelope felt this bitterly when their party debouched from the hills about dawn, and struck off across the desert towards the north-east, leaving the great mass of the Alibad fort, touched with the sunrise, well to the south.

“If they only knew!” sighed Lady Haigh. “Just

across there, and we here! How they would ride if they knew!"

"What is going to happen to us?" asked Penelope. They were riding side by side now, in the midst of their guards.

"Well, the worst that could happen would be that we might be carried right up into Central Asia, which all but happened to the captives in the Ethiopian disaster," said Lady Haigh, ignoring decisively possibilities even darker, "and I suppose the best that could happen would be that Major Keeling should make terms for us almost at once."

"But if he had to make concessions, as you said? Ought we to want him to do it?"

"Of course we oughtn't to, and I don't—but yet I do. Perhaps he won't. You see I know already how high-minded my husband can be where I am concerned, but I don't know what Major Keeling would be willing to do for you."

"I know. He would refuse, even if it tore his heart out."

Lady Haigh looked at her curiously. "You seem to know him pretty well," she said. "Well, it's something to feel that our poor little fates won't be permitted to weigh against the safety of the frontier. But what nonsense we are talking!" as Penelope shuddered. "My dear, don't we know that those two men would invade Central Asia on their own account if we were taken there, and bring us back in triumph? Don't let us pretend they're Romans. They're good Englishmen, and would no more leave us to perish than turn Mohammedan!"

This robust faith, if a little unfortunate in the mode of its expression, was very cheering, and Penelope withdrew her eyes from the fast diminishing fort, and set her face sternly forward. But if there was no sign of a force riding out from Alibad to the rescue, there was a cloud of dust in front which showed that some one was approaching, and the escort were visibly nervous. Seizing the bridles of the ladies' ponies they

urged them aside behind a sandhill, and there waited, gathered in a close group. It was a large company that was coming, and the dust it made was sufficient to have prevented its noticing the smaller party, so that it passed the sandhill without turning aside. A sudden lull in the wind revealed the white mantles and scarlet turbans of the men who composed it when they had gone some distance.

"The Sheikh and his followers!" gasped Penelope. "They will go back to Sheikharh and be captured."

"Not if Murtiza Khan got through," said Lady Haigh, trying to hide the anxiety in her tone, "for Major Keeling would be certain to send some one to intercept the Sheikh before he could reach the hills. No," she added acidly, in response to the gesture of Nizam-ul-Mulk, who had tapped a pistol in his girdle significantly as he saw her gazing after the riders, "we are not quite idiots, thank you. It wouldn't be much good to signal to the Sheikh, who doesn't know anything about us, and would never think of going out of his way on the chance of helping some one in distress."

"But he might have told them at Alibad, and they would have known where we were," suggested Penelope.

"And have come out to find us shot, which wouldn't be much good," said Lady Haigh.

They rode on again after this brief halt, taking the direction of Fort Shah Nawaz, but leaving it out of sight on the right hand. The dark rocks which marked the mouth of the Akrab Pass were visible in the distance on the left, and Lady Haigh expected that Nizam-ul-Mulk would lead the way thither. But to her surprise, they still rode straight on, leaving the pass on one side.

"Where are you taking us?" she could not refrain from asking him at last.

"To Kubbet-ul-Haj. There is safe-keeping in Ethiopia for any Farangi prisoner," answered the man with an insolent laugh, and Lady Haigh grew white under her veil.

“Ethiopia! That means Central Asia, then!” she said. “Never mind, Pen. They’ll catch us up before we get there. We can’t possibly get farther than the Ethiopian frontier to-night, if as far.”

Although she spoke rather to encourage Penelope than because she believed what she said, Lady Haigh proved to be right. The discipline of the guards seemed to disappear as they were farther removed from their leader at Sheikhgarh; and at noon, thinking that all danger was past, they insisted on a rest of two or three hours, despite the remonstrances of Nizam-ul-Mulk. Hence, when evening came on, the Ethiopian frontier was still an hour’s ride away, and they positively refused to attempt to reach it that night, demanding that a camp should be formed on a low hill covered with brushwood—an excellent position both for concealment and for discerning the approach of an enemy. Nizam-ul-Mulk was forced to yield. The horses were picketed in a hollow on the Ethiopian side of the hill, a rude tent was pitched for the ladies, and a due portion of the rough food of the escort sent them through Hafiza. When the comfortless meal was over, they were thankful to lie down, without undressing, on the *resais* with which Wazira Begum had supplied them; and Hafiza, at any rate, was soon audibly, as well as visibly, asleep. But presently Penelope sat up and said softly, “Elma, are you awake?”

“Ye-es,” responded Lady Haigh sleepily. “What’s the matter?”

“Oh, do let us talk a little. I can’t sleep. Elma, if they should separate us—if they are only pretending to go to sleep——”

“Nonsense! after such a day of riding they are as tired as I am, and that’s saying a good deal. Don’t conjure up horrors.”

“But if they took us to different places! Oh, Elma, if I was alone among these people I should die!”

“Oh no, you wouldn’t. You’d get on much better than you think.”

"I couldn't do anything. You can say what you like to these people and they obey you. No one would obey me."

"Well, you conquered Wazira Begum, at any rate. I only made her hate me, though she did what I told her."

"But as long as you're there, I feel safe—as if you were a man."

"What a testimony! But, Pen, you're horribly old-fashioned. You shouldn't be such a honeysuckle kind of girl—always leaning on some one and clinging to them—and yet you are so obstinate in some ways. I suppose it's no good telling you to stand up for yourself, though. You seem born to cling. Colin was your prop for a long time, and you let him drag you out to India to marry Ferrers, whom you didn't want, and he very nearly succeeded. I suppose I'm the support just at present, until Major Keeling comes to the front. He will be a good stout prop, at any rate. I couldn't stand his domineering ways, but I suppose you like them."

"Oh yes," said Penelope thankfully. "You don't know him. Elma——"

"I know you," interjected her friend.

"Elma, doesn't it seem extraordinary that it is only a few weeks since I really wanted to die? It felt as if it was the only way of settling things—as if I ought not to marry him, and yet couldn't bear not to—and now the only thing I care for is to see him again. I should be perfectly happy——"

"It isn't extraordinary at all—merely that you've come to your senses. My dear, I was in love with Dugald once, you know——"

"But if we should never see them again, either of them! Oh, Elma, if they should never find us! What do you think——?"

"I think you'll have a touch of fever if you don't try to go to sleep. Listen to Hafiza. She is going among strangers, just like you and me, but she doesn't sit up and talk. Say your prayers, and lie down."

"She can sleep because she has so little to lose, whatever happens. So long as she was kindly treated, I suppose she could make herself happy anywhere."

"Well, I have about as much to lose as you have," with a terrific yawn, "and I should very much like to go to sleep."

"I oughtn't to be so selfish. But listen, Elma. We'll take turns to sleep, and then they can't separate us. I will watch first."

"Oh, very well. Wake me when you feel drowsy," and Lady Haigh turned over on her hard couch, and composed herself to sleep. When Penelope roused her, however, it was not to take her turn at watching. She was kneeling beside her, with her lips very close to her ear.

"Elma, wake up! Don't say anything, but listen. Don't you hear noises? I'm sure something is going to happen."

CHAPTER XXIV.

RAHMAT-ULLAH.

LADY HAIGH sat up, and listened attentively. "It may be only the sentries moving about," she whispered at last.

"No, there are none. I peeped out to see. They are sleeping all round the tent, so that we could not pass, but they have no one on the watch. There it is again! Listen!"

But this time there was no difficulty in distinguishing the sounds, for a tremendous voice, so close at hand that Lady Haigh stopped her ears involuntarily, shouted, "At them, boys! Cold steel! Don't let one of them escape!" and immediately the wildest tumult arose outside the tent. It aroused even Hafiza, who sat up and with great presence of mind opened her mouth to scream, but was forestalled by Lady Haigh, who flew at her like a wild cat, and gagged her with a corner of the *resai*.

"Do you want us all to be killed?" she demanded fiercely. "Our only chance is that they may not remember us."

"Elma, are you there?" said a voice outside the tent at the back, and Lady Haigh released Hafiza and turned in the direction of the sound.

"Is it you, Dugald?" she cried joyfully, trying to tear up the edge of the tent-cloth from the ground, but it was well pegged down.

"Stand aside!" said the voice, and there was a rending sound as a sword cut a long slit in the cloth,

revealing Sir Dugald dimly against the starry sky. "Out with you!" he said, "and stoop till I tell you to stand up."

Determined to obey to the very letter, Lady Haigh and Penelope crawled out through the slit on their hands and knees, followed by Hafiza, who was so anxious not to be left behind that she kept a firm hold on Penelope's riding-habit. Sir Dugald led the way through the brushwood, away from the clash of swords and the wild confusion of shouts and yells in front of the tent, and when they had passed the brow of the hill, he gave them leave to stand up.

"We are to make for the horses," he said. "I only hope they won't have run away, or we shall find ourselves in a hole. But Miani has the sense of a dozen, and wouldn't go without his master."

They ran and stumbled down the hill, Sir Dugald assisting any one of the three who happened to be nearest, and a little way back on the road they had come, found Miani and four other horses waiting in a hollow, secured to a lance driven into the ground.

"But where are the rest?" cried Lady Haigh. "The men can't have walked from Alibad here."

"There's a horse for each man," was the grim reply. "Keeling and I, his two orderlies, and Murtiza Khan—there's our rescue party."

"It's perfect madness!" she cried piteously, collapsing on a heap of stones. "There was no need to risk your lives in this way."

"All that could be spared. This is a little jaunt undertaken when we are supposed to be asleep. No one knows about it."

"It's just the sort of mad thing Major Keeling would do, but you—oh, Dugald! if anything happens to you I shall never forgive myself," and Lady Haigh sat on her stone-heap and wept ignominiously.

"Good heavens, Elma! you'll call together all the enemies in the neighbourhood if you make that noise. I'm all right at present. Why don't you weep over the Chief? He's in danger, if you like."

“Yes, and why aren't you with him?” she demanded, with what might have appeared a certain measure of inconsistency.

“Orders,” he replied tersely. “I have to see you home. Hope we shall be able to collar your ponies. Where did you manage to pick up an ayah? Not one of your captors' people, is she?”

“No, she must go back with us. She belongs to Sheikhgarh. Oh, Dugald——”

“Hush! I believe I hear the Chief coming. Here, Major! we've got them all right.”

“Good!” returned Major Keeling, hurling himself into the group after a run down the hillside. “How are you, Lady Haigh? Pretty fit, Miss Ross? Got a good ride before us still. We must have an outpost here some day—splendid place for stopping the smuggling of arms into Ethiopia.”

“And call it after you,” suggested Lady Haigh, now quite herself again. “What shall we say—Kilinabad? or Kilingarh? or Kīlinkôt?”

“Has this hill any name, Kasim?” asked Major Keeling, turning abruptly to one of the orderlies who had come up.

“It is called Rahmat-Ullah, sahib, from one who was saved from death by a pool of water that he found here.”

“Then there is its name still. Rahmat-Ullah, the Compassion of God—what could be more appropriate? But now to think of present needs. Surviving enemy has escaped with the horses, unfortunately. We didn't venture to fire after him for fear of rousing the neighbourhood, so we must ride double.” As he spoke, he was unstrapping and rearranging the greatcoat which was rolled in front of Miani's saddle. “Haigh, take your wife.” He unfastened the black's bridle from the lance, and was in the saddle in a moment. “Miss Ross, give me your hands. Put your foot on mine. Now, jump!” and as Penelope obeyed, she found herself seated before him on the horse, the greatcoat serving as a cushion. “Don't be afraid of falling.

I shall hold you," he said. "Besides, Miani is too much of a gentleman to try any tricks with a lady on his back. You all right, Lady Haigh? Ismail Bakhsh, you are the lightest weight; pick up the old woman, and fall in behind. Murtiza Khan may lead; he has deserved well for this three days' work. Kasimud-Daulat, bring up the rear, and keep your ears open for any sounds of pursuit. Now, forward!"

They were in motion at once, Miani making no objection to his double burden. Penelope smiled to herself, realising the strangeness of her position, and also Major Keeling's anxiety that she should not realise it. His left arm was round her, the sword which must have dripped with blood only a few minutes ago hung almost within reach of her hand; but he was careful not to say a word that could make her feel that there was anything odd in the situation.

"He is determined to behave as if he was a stranger," she said to herself. "No, not quite. A stranger would have asked me if I was quite comfortable before starting. But why doesn't he let me ride behind him, so as to leave his arms free? I know! it is from behind that he expects to be attacked. Oh, I hope, I hope, if there is an attack, it will be in front. Then the bullets must reach me first, and he might escape."

As if in answer to her thought, Major Keeling's deep voice remarked casually at this moment, "If we are attacked in front, Miss Ross, I shall drop you on the ground. It sounds rude, but you will be safer there than in the way of bullets. Keep out of the way of the horses as best you can, and we will pick you up again when we have driven the rascals off."

"Ye-es," said Penelope faintly, with the feeling very strong upon her that there were some seasons at which women had no business to exist. Again, as if to comfort her, Major Keeling laughed happily.

"Never felt so jolly in my life!" he cried. "This is the sort of adventure that's worth five years of office and drill."

The assurance was so cheering, though entirely

impersonal, that Penelope accepted the comfort perforce. They rode on steadily, and the regular beat of the horses' hoofs was pleasant in its monotony. A continuous low murmur from Lady Haigh, punctuated by an occasional word or two from Sir Dugald, showed that she, at any rate, had no doubt of her right to exist and to demand a welcome. Penelope's thoughts became somewhat confused. Scenes and images from the exciting panorama of the last three days danced before her eyes. She knew that they were unreal, but could not remember where she actually was. Suddenly they ceased, and she knew nothing more until a deep voice broke upon her slumbers—

"You would make a good cavalryman, Miss Ross. You can sleep in the saddle!"

Bewildered, she gazed round her. The silvery light of the false dawn was spreading itself over the sky, and the familiar front of the Haighs' house at Alibad looked weird and cold. They were actually inside the compound, riding up to the door, and startled servants were running out from their quarters to receive them. Lady Haigh dismounted with much agility, and came running to assist Penelope, who was still too much confused to allow herself to drop to the ground, but Major Keeling and Sir Dugald both remained in the saddle.

"Don't expect me till you see me," said Sir Dugald to his wife. "I'll send you a message when I can."

"And he shall have an hour's leave when it can be managed," said Major Keeling, turning his horse's head. Then he looked back at the two ladies standing forlorn on the steps. "Now my advice to you is, go to bed and get a thorough rest. You needn't be afraid. Tarleton and the Fencibles have the town in charge, though we are out on the plains."

"Oh, Elma, and we never thanked them!" cried Penelope, horror-struck, as the two officers and their escort disappeared.

"*Thanked* them! My dear Penelope, what good would thanks be? If we thanked those two men on

our bended knees for ever, it wouldn't come anywhere near proper gratitude for what they have done for us to-night. But come indoors, and let us hunt up some bedding. It's all very well to advise us to go to bed; but every single thing we took into camp is burnt, so we must do the best we can."

"But the servants?" cried Penelope.

"Oh, they stood in the water and escaped, and made the best of their way back to Alibad when the fire was over, but they didn't save anything. Now I must give Hafiza into the charge of the *malli's* wife, and then we will go indoors."

The gardener's wife was a Nalapuri woman, and quite willing to give shelter to her compatriot, who had been eyeing the European house with much disfavour; and Lady Haigh called up the two ayahs, and set them to work at making up some sort of beds, while she and Penelope had some tea. The moment they were alone she turned to Penelope and said, "Well?"

"I don't know what you mean," said Penelope.

"Oh, nonsense! Did he say anything?"

"He said he should drop me on the sand if we were attacked in front."

"Of course, Dugald said that to me. But what else?"

"Nothing, really. I—I went to sleep, Elma."

"Penelope, you are perfectly hopeless! I should dearly like to beat you. You haven't one scrap of romance in your whole composition. You went to sleep!"

"I was so dreadfully tired—and I felt so safe, so wonderfully safe."

"I suppose you expect him to take that as a compliment. But I am disgusted. Oh, Pen, I didn't think it of you!"

"I couldn't help it," pleaded Penelope, "and he didn't mean to say anything then, I'm sure." But Lady Haigh refused to be mollified.

"You gave him no chance. And, as you say, you

never even thanked him. My dear, it was touch and go, as Dugald says. By the greatest mercy, one of the Sheikh-ul-Jabal's men caught sight of our party just before the guards made us hide behind that sand-hill. They thought it was an ambush, and were all prepared, so that it was rather a surprise when they were allowed to pass. When they were crossing the plain towards Sheikhgarh, they were met by a patrol which Major Keeling had sent out to try and intercept the Sheikh as soon as ever he had heard Murtiza Khan's news——"

"But that must have been in broad daylight."

"So it was. The Sheikh's vow expired, it seems, as soon as his nephew Ashraf Ali was fourteen. He couldn't afford to be handicapped when it was a question of putting the boy on the throne, you see. Well, Major Keeling had guessed that the enemy would probably send us away somewhere, lest Sheikhgarh should be retaken; but the only thing he could do when he heard what the Sheikh had seen was to send out the *shikari* Baha-ud-Din, who most happily went back to Alibad with Dugald, you know, to examine the trail, and he found the marks of our ponies' shoes, quite distinct among the native ones. And as soon as it was dark, he and Dugald and the orderlies started after us. But it was a near thing."

"Very," agreed Penelope, with a shudder. "If they had taken us just that one hour's journey farther, Elma—into Ethiopia!"

"Well, if you ask me, I am not sure that it would have made very much difference. A frontier has no peculiar sacredness for Major Keeling, unless it's his own. But of course there might have been an Ethiopian fort, and five men could scarcely have attacked that. Yes, Pen, we ought to be very thankful. And now here is Dulya to say that our rooms are ready. I needn't tell you to sleep well. You seem to have quite a talent for it!"

After behaving with sufficient heroism during their

three days' trial, Lady Haigh and Penelope collapsed most unheroically after it. Two whole days in bed was the smallest allowance they could accept, and they slept away, peacefully enough, hours in which the fate of the province might have been hanging in jeopardy, with a culpable indifference to the interests of civilisation and their race. The military situation was curious enough, and to the eyes of any one not trained in the topsy-turvy school of the Khemistan frontier, eminently disquieting. Gobind Chand's army still remained in occupation of the whole hill-district on the west, a potential menace, if not an active one. The Sheikh-ul-Jabal and his troop of horsemen had left Alibad by night, intending to make an attempt to regain possession of Sheikharh by means of the secret door to which Wazira Begum had alluded; but as this necessitated a very wide flanking movement, in order to approach the place from behind, it was not surprising that nothing had been heard as yet as to their success. Just across the frontier was Wilayat Ali's army, which had let slip its opportunity of combining with Gobind Chand by attacking Alibad from the desert while he moved out from the mountains, but still remained willing to wound, if afraid to strike. Between the two was Major Keeling, with the whole of his small force mobilised, so to speak, and holding the positions he had devised to cover the town, while the town itself was inadequately garrisoned by Dr Tarleton and his volunteers. The dangers of the position were perceptible to the least skilled eye. In the possession of artillery alone lay Major Keeling's advantage; for the fact that the rest of his force consisted wholly of cavalry, though advantageous in ordinary cases of frontier warfare, was a drawback when the operations were of necessity altogether defensive. It was not until four days after their return to Alibad that the ladies obtained a coherent idea of Major Keeling's plan of action, and this was due to a visit from Sir Dugald, who had come in with orders for Dr Tarleton.

"I suppose you're able to take an intelligent interest in all that goes on, with the help of that telescope of yours?" he asked lazily, while Lady Haigh and Penelope plied him assiduously with tea and cake in the few minutes he had to spare.

"Oh, we see the guns plodding about from place to place, and firing one or two shots and then stopping, but we can't make out what you are doing," said his wife.

"We are shepherding Gobind Chand's men back into the hills whenever they try to break out. In a day or two more we ought to have them fairly cornered, unless some utterly unexpected gleam of common-sense on Wilayat Ali's part throws us out; but just at present we can do nothing but 'wait for something to turn up.'"

"But how will things be better in a day or two?" asked Penelope.

"Because the enemy's supplies must be exhausted by then. These border armies never carry much food with them, expecting to live on the country. We are preventing that. There is no food to be got in the hills, and when they burned the forest they destroyed any chances in that direction. We have sent Harris with one of the guns to make a flank march to the south and take up a strong position with Vidal and his police across the road by which the enemy came, and the Sheikh will take good care that no stragglers get past him. So far as we can see, they must either fight or surrender."

"But isn't it rather cruel—starving them out in this way?"

"Cruel! If you talk of cruelty, wasn't it cruel of them to fire the best *shikargah* in Khemistan? Isn't it cruel of them now to be keeping us grilling out on the plains, without time even for a change of clothes? Why, until I managed to get a bath just now, I hadn't taken off my things since the night we rode out to find you!"

"You looked it, when you rode in two hours ago," said Lady Haigh, with such fervent sympathy that

her husband requested her indignantly not to be personal.

“And if we’re not to starve them out, what are we to do?” he demanded, still smarting under the accusation of cruelty. “Of course, when an enemy takes up his quarters in broken country inside your borders, any fool will tell you you ought to clear him out; but what are you to do with one weak regiment against an army? Perhaps they will let the Chief raise another regiment after this—if we come through it—and give him the two more European officers he’s been asking for so long. Wilayat Ali might have swept us from the face of the earth if he had a grain of generalship about him, and Gobind Chand’s army might have rushed the guns a dozen times over if he could have got them to stand fire.”

“But what is it that paralyses them?” asked Lady Haigh.

“Mutual antipathy, so far as we can make out. It seems that Wilayat Ali carefully picked out the most disloyal Sardars to serve under Gobind Chand, evidently in the hope that either we or they would remove him from his path, and that the Sardars would also get their ranks thinned. He hasn’t forgotten Gobind Chand’s attempt to get the Chief’s help in deposing him, after all. But Gobind Chand is not eager to take the chances of war, and the Sardars don’t quite see hurling themselves against our guns that Wilayat Ali may have a walk-over; and, moreover, they see through his scheme now. It’s really as good as a play, the way the two chief villains are trying to betray one another to us.”

“But have they actually tried to open negotiations?”

“Not formally, of course; but venerable Mullahs and frowsy *fakirs* toddle casually into our lines, or try to, and unfold their respective employers’ latest ideas. Wilayat Ali offers us the contents of his treasury if we will allow him to join us and help to wipe out Gobind Chand and the disaffected Sardars. Gobind Chand is rather more liberal, and offers us the help of his army

to annihilate Wilayat Ali and his supporters, after which he will take the contents of the treasury and retire into private life, and we may keep Nalapur. No doubt he wishes us joy of it."

"But surely they can't have started the war with these schemes in their minds?"

"Wilayat Ali did, I think; but Gobind Chand seems to have been overreached for once. His eyes must have been opened when Wilayat Ali failed to support him in his attack on the town; and he didn't need a second warning. The assiduity with which the two villains are playing Codlin and Short for our benefit is really funny, but I rather think there's a surprise in store for each of them."

"Something that will punish them both? Oh, do tell us!"

"Well, there seems some indication that the Sardars are as tired of one as the other, and will shunt Gobind Chand of their own accord; and if the Sheikh-ul-Jabal's tales are true, he has worked up a strong party among Wilayat Ali's supporters in favour of his nephew Ashraf. If so, we may expect some startling developments. The pity is, we can't force them on, only sit and wait for them to happen."

CHAPTER XXV.

THE RIGHT PREVAILS.

QUITE contrary to his expectation, Sir Dugald was able to ride into the town again the very next evening, and was received with unfeigned joy by the two ladies, to whom, through the medium of the talk in the bazar as reported by the servants, all sorts of hopeful and disquieting rumours had filtered during the interval. Was it true that Gobind Chand was dead and the Sardars had surrendered, they demanded eagerly, or was Wilayat Ali marching upon the town?

“Not that, at any rate,” said Sir Dugald. “In fact, barring accidents, things are going on pretty well. A deputation from the Sardars came in last night, bringing a gruesome object tied up in a bundle, which they said was Gobind Chand’s head, sent in as a guarantee of their good faith in offering to surrender. Their appearance would have been sufficient proof, for it was clear they were very hard up; but the evidence they preferred was distinctly unfortunate, for as soon as the Chief saw it, he said, ‘It’s not Gobind Chand’s head at all. They have killed some other Hindu of about the same age, and either they intend treachery, or the rascal has escaped.’ We had the deputation in, and put it to them, and in an awful fright they confessed he was right. Gobind Chand, seeing how matters were going, had managed to get away some hours before they found it out; but they caught one of his hangers-on, and thought they would make use of him instead. It was a very pretty little plan, but they hadn’t counted on the Chief’s memory for faces.”

“Served them right!” said Lady Haigh fervently.

“Well,” Sir Dugald went on, “it was arranged that the chief Sardars should come in this morning, as suppliants, and hear what terms the Chief would allow them. But when they came, they were prepared with a plan of their own. They were on the point of de-throning Wilayat Ali before the war began, you know, and his ingenious scheme for employing us to kill them off hasn’t increased their affection for him, so they proposed quite frankly to proclaim Keeling Amir, and then help him to get rid of his predecessor. They seemed to fancy the idea a good deal, and he had quite a long argument with them about it. He would govern them justly, as he had done Khemistan, they said, and they would be quite willing to take service under him and fight any one he chose. He asked them how they ventured to offer the throne to a Christian, and they were very much amused. They had known he was a good Mussulman ever since he came to the frontier, they said, and they were sure he would be glad to be able to give up pretending to be a Kafir. He assured them they were mistaken, and one after another got up and said they had heard him read prayers in a mosque, or seen him do miracles. Of course we knew then what they were driving at; but the trouble was, that the more he denied it the more they were convinced it was true, and that he was afraid of *us*. We had never known of his proceedings, it seemed, and might make trouble for him with the Company. They adjured him pathetically to let them see him alone, and promised that not one of the rest of us should leave the tent alive to say what had happened. If he would only trust himself to them, they would escort him safely to Nalapur, and, once there, the Company might whistle for him.”

“Dugald! you don’t mean to say they would have murdered you?”

“Like a shot, at a word from Keeling. Things were really beginning to look rather unpleasant, when the Sheikh-ul-Jabal, in a towering rage, burst into the

conference. It seems that he is back in possession of Sheikharh, having summarily wiped out the Nalapur garrison. Some of Gobind Chand's men tried to make their escape through the hills, and lost their way and fell into his hands, so he learned something of what was going on from them. He is not exactly the mirror of chivalry, you know, in spite of his saintly pretensions; and having so often traded on his likeness to the Chief, he was seized with a fear that the Chief was returning the compliment, to the prejudice of young Ashraf Ali. He brought the youth with him into the conference, and it was confusion worse confounded when he declared who he was, and demanded that he should be recognised as Amir. Everybody talked at once at the top of his voice, and at last, when they had all shouted themselves hoarse, the Chief had a chance of making himself heard. He made the Sheikh come and stand beside him, so that the Sardars could see how the mistake had arisen; and horribly disgusted they were. Then he invited them to join with us in putting Ashraf Ali on the *gadi*, with proper guarantees as to the powers to be granted him; and they were all inclined to agree to that until a Mullah put in his oar, and said that the youth had been brought up by a heretic, and was no true Mussulman. Thereupon the Sheikh swore solemnly that his sect were rather better Mussulmans than other people, and invited any number of Mullahs to examine into his nephew's orthodoxy. As they had been willing to accept Keeling, whose orthodoxy, on their own showing, must have been extremely shaky, they could not well refuse, and they are hard at it now, collecting all the Mullahs within reach to badger the unfortunate boy. If he survives the ordeal creditably, messengers are to be sent in his name to-morrow to Wilayat Ali, inviting him to recognise his nephew's rights, and surrender, when his life and a suitable maintenance will be granted him. I wouldn't give much for his chance of either when the Sheikh is in authority at Nalapur; and if he's wise he will prefer to cross the

border and take the Sheikh's place as the Company's pensioner."

"And if he isn't wise?" asked Lady Haigh.

"Well, he'll scarcely be such a fool as to fight us and the Sardars together. But if he wants to be nasty, he'll retreat into Nalapur, and hold one place after another till he's turned out, and then wage a guerilla warfare until he's hunted down, which would mean unlimited bloodshed and years of turmoil. That's his only chance; and as he will be desperate and at bay, there's every reason to fear he'll take it. Well, I can tell you more next time I see you."

The next occasion again arrived unexpectedly soon. It was on the morning of the second day—rumour, good and bad, having run riot in the interval—that Sir Dugald galloped up to the verandah, and before coming indoors, shouted for his bearer and gave him hasty orders, sending off also a messenger to Major Keeling's house.

"We're off to Nalapur," he announced hastily, walking in and taking his seat at the breakfast-table, "to set the king on the throne of the kingdom, otherwise to put Ashraf Ali on the *gadi*."

"Then has Wilayat Ali surrendered, after all?" cried Lady Haigh.

"Not voluntarily, exactly, but he has been removed. Sounds bad, doesn't it? and I'm free to confess that the Sheikh-ul-Jabal has managed the affair with a cleverness worthy of a worse cause. We have been simply made use of, all along."

"Oh, tell us what has happened! How can you think of breakfast just now?"

"How can I? Easily, when you remember that we start in half an hour. But I'll do my best to combine breakfast and information. Well, when the messengers went to invite Wilayat Ali to abdicate in favour of his nephew, he very naturally sent back an answer breathing defiance, and containing libellous remarks about the Sheikh's ancestors and female relations. The Sheikh promptly despatched a challenge to Wilayat Ali to

meet him in single combat and decide things by the result. Of course Wilayat Ali returned a refusal, as any man in his senses would, who had everything to lose by such a combat, and nothing to gain but the removal of a single adversary. But here came in the Sheikh's sharpness. As he told us before, the Amir's camp was full of his adherents, and when they heard that Wilayat Ali meant to refuse the challenge, they raised such a to-do that they nearly brought the place about his ears. His soldiers became openly mutinous, and the camp-followers shrieked abuse after him. He must have seen then that he was cornered, for if he had tried to get back to his capital, he would pretty certainly have been murdered on the road, so he accepted the challenge as giving him his one chance. The Sheikh had laid his plans with such deadly dexterity that there was actually nothing else to do, for the Sardars were only too pleased to see him in a hole, after the way he had treated them. So the lists were set—that's how the Chief put it—and we all stood to watch. The Sheikh left Ashraf Ali in Keeling's charge, and rode out. They were to fight with javelins first, then with swords. The javelin part was rather a farce—they threw from such a safe distance, and I don't think one of them hit, though one of the Sheikh's javelins went through Wilayat Ali's cloak. When they had thrown all they had, they drew their swords and really rode at each other. We couldn't see very clearly what happened in the first round, but it looked as if something turned the edge of Wilayat Ali's sword, and the Chief dashed forward and yelled, 'It's murder, absolute murder! Our man wears chain-armour under his clothes. It's not a fair fight.' He wanted to ride in between them and stop it; but we weren't going to have him killed, whoever else was, so we simply hung on to him, and pointed out that as none of us had a spare suit of chain-armour we could offer to lend the Amir, and the Sheikh was probably proud of his foresight in wearing his, and would certainly refuse to take it off, things must settle themselves. He talked about

Ivanhoe and the Templar, but we kept him quiet while they rode at one another again. This time we saw that, putting the armour out of the question, the Sheikh was the better man, quicker, more active, in better training—thanks to the desert life, I suppose. He avoided Wilayat Ali's rush in the neatest way—the sword just shaved his shoulder as it came down—and turned upon him like King Richard in some book or other, standing in his stirrups and bringing down his sword with both hands. It's a regular Crusader's sword, by the way, with a cross hilt, and it cut through turban and head both, and the Amir dropped from the saddle as his horse rushed by. Then came the finest thing of all. The Chief was boiling over with rage—wanted to make the Sheikh fight him next, and so on; but on examining Wilayat Ali's body we found that he had armour on too. They both wore armour, each trusting that the other didn't know it, but each suspecting that the other wore it too, and that was why they both struck for the head, so that it was a fair fight after all—from an Oriental point of view. The Sheikh was proclaimed victor with acclamations, and Ashraf Ali's right was acknowledged by most of those present; those who didn't acknowledge it thought it best to slink away as unobtrusively as possible. Then the Sheikh turned to Keeling, and with the utmost politeness invited him to come to Nalapur as his guest, with an escort—not a force—to witness the youth's enthronement. No British bayonets to put him on the *gadi*, you see. And we are going."

"But hasn't Wilayat Ali a son?" asked Lady Haigh.

"Yes, Hasrat Ali, who is officiating as governor of the city while his father is away. I imagine he would meet with an early death if we were not going to Nalapur; but as it is, the Sheikh intends to marry him to his niece, Ashraf Ali's sister."

"Oh, poor Wazira Begum!" cried Penelope. "Is the young man nice?"

"Very far from it, I should say; but when it's a

choice between marriage and murder, he will probably look at the matter philosophically."

"I wasn't thinking of him," said Penelope indignantly, "but of the poor girl. How can they want her to marry him?"

"They want to have a check upon him if he takes kindly to the new state of affairs, and a spy upon him if he turns rusty, and they seem to think they can trust the young lady to be both."

"Well, I call it infamous!" cried Lady Haigh; "and I only hope that Wazira Begum will refuse and run away. If she comes here, I'll give her shelter."

"You shouldn't say that sort of thing in my hearing," said Sir Dugald, as he rose from the table. "It might become my duty to insist upon your giving her up, and what would happen then?"

"Why, I shouldn't, of course!" cried Lady Haigh defiantly.

It was a fortnight before Major Keeling and his escort returned from Nalapur, but messengers were constantly coming and going between the city and Alibad, so that there was little scope for anxiety. Sir Dugald came home late one night, and was instantly seized upon by his wife and Penelope, and ordered to satisfy their curiosity as to the course of events, which turned out not to be altogether satisfactory.

"The Sheikh has no notion of yielding an inch to make things pleasant on the frontier," he said. "He will give up criminals of ours who take refuge in Nalapur, but merely as an act of grace, and he won't enter into any regular treaty. No doubt it's a piece of wisdom on his part,—for he is regarded with a good deal of suspicion as having lived so long on British soil,—and his attitude will tend to disarm the suspicions of the Sardars and the Mullahs."

"But how ungrateful!" cried Lady Haigh. "I thought he professed to be so friendly to Major Keeling?"

"While he was under his protection, perhaps—not

when he can treat with him as an independent power. And, after all, it has been clear all along that he was an old fox—what with his vows and dispensations, and his steady pursuit of a policy of his own when he persisted he had nothing of the kind in view. He was not exactly our willing guest from the first, you see, only driven to take refuge with us as the result of what he considers our treachery. He can't forget that old grudge, and really one doesn't wonder. It gives him a dreadful pull over us that he can always say he has seen the consequences of admitting a British force within his borders in time of peace, and doesn't wish to see them again."

"Then the Nalapuris will be as troublesome as ever?"

"Pretty nearly, I'm afraid; but as the Chief says, all he can do is to go on his own way, combining fairness with perfect good faith, and trust that Ashraf Ali may be induced to enter into a treaty when he is freed from his uncle's influence. The worst part of the business at the present moment is that Gobind Chand has managed to escape into the mountains between Nalapur and Ethiopia, and has been joined by all who had reason to think their lives might not last long under the new state of affairs; and of course any discontented Sardar or rebellious Mullah will know where to find friends whenever he wants them. Keeling tried hard to induce the Sheikh to let a force from our side of the frontier co-operate with him in hunting the fellows down, so as to stamp out the rebel colony before it can become the nucleus of mischief; but he utterly refused, and professed to see the thin end of the wedge in the proposal. They'll never be able to do it by themselves, and it's bound to give us no end of trouble when we have to take the business in hand at last. But he won't see reason."

"Then has Wilayat Ali's son joined Gobind Chand?" asked Penelope.

"Ah, you are thinking of your young lady friend. No; he was caught in time, and accepted the proposed

marriage with resignation. So did the bride—if she didn't even suggest it herself as a means of strengthening her brother's position. Hasrat Ali is a Syad through his mother, so it is a very good match, and the Sheikh seems quite satisfied; but I rather think Ashraf Ali has some qualms. At any rate, he is giving her the finest wedding ever seen in Nalapur, and emptying the treasury to buy jewels for her. He has given her the title of Moti-ul-Nissa, and has had inserted in the marriage-contract a proviso that neither Hasrat Ali nor his household are ever to quit the city without his leave. That is to guard against his taking her away into some country place and ill-treating her, of course, so he has really done all he can."

"Oh, poor girl! poor Wazira Begum!" cried Penelope, with tears in her eyes. "What a prospect—to marry with such a life before her!"

"They're used to it—these native women," said Sir Dugald, wishing to be consolatory.

"Does that make it any better? And you—all of you—acquiesce, and make no effort to save her!"

"My dear Miss Ross, what can we do? You know what these fellows are by this time. If one of us so much as mentioned the young lady, it could only be wiped out by his blood or hers, or both."

"It feels wrong to be happy when such things are going on," said Penelope, pursuing a train of thought of her own, apparently. "Can nothing be done?"

"Ask the Chief, if you care to," said Sir Dugald. "He's coming to dinner to-morrow."

"It really is most unfortunate," said Lady Haigh, on housewifely thoughts intent, "that if there is any difficulty with the servants some one is sure to come to dinner. I know this new cook will lose his head and do something dreadful. I think you ought to warn Major Keeling, Dugald."

"The Chief never cares much what he eats or drinks," was the reply; "and he certainly won't to-morrow," added Sir Dugald, too low for Penelope to hear.

Lady Haigh's fears were justified. A few minutes before the dinner hour she ran into Penelope's room, looking worried and hot.

"Oh, Pen, you're ready! What a good thing! That wretched cook has ruined the soup, and we can't have dinner for half an hour. I've been scolding him and trying to suggest improvements all this time, and I'm not dressed. Go and talk to Major Keeling till I come. Dugald won't be in for twenty minutes. Such a chapter of accidents!"

Nevertheless, Lady Haigh's voice had not the despairing tone which might have been expected in the circumstances, and she ran out of the room again with a haste which seemed calculated to conceal a smile. So Penelope imagined, and the suspicion was confirmed when Major Keeling came to meet her as she entered the drawing-room—he had been tramping up and down in his impatient way—and remarked innocently—

"At last! Lady Haigh promised to let me see you alone, but I was beginning to be afraid she had not been able to manage it. I have been waiting for hours."

"Oh no, only ten minutes. I saw you ride up," said Penelope, and turned crimson because she had confessed to the heinous crime of watching him through the venetians.

"You knew I was here, and you left me alone—and the time seemed so short to you! Well, it only confirms what I had been thinking—— Don't let me keep you standing. May I sit here? Do you remember, that evening at Bab-us-Sahel, when I saw you first, you promised to leave Alibad at the shortest possible notice if I considered it advisable?"

"Leave Alibad?" faltered Penelope. "I—I know you made me promise, but I never thought——"

"I have come to the conclusion that it may be necessary."

"But why?" she cried, roused to defend herself. "What have I done?"

"You are spoiling my work. I can't tell you how

many times to-day I have had to keep myself from devising ridiculous excuses for taking a ride in this direction. I had a fortnight's arrears of writing to make up, and yet I have spent the day between my desk and the corner of the verandah where I can get a glimpse of this house. Now, I know you are too anxious for the welfare of the province to wish me to go on risking it in this way, and there is only one remedy that I can think of."

"Only one?" Penelope was bewildered and pained.

"Only one—that you should keep your promise and leave Alibad."

"If you wish it I will go, by all means," she said proudly.

"But only as far as Bab-us-Sahel, and I shall come after you. And then I shall bring you back."

"Oh!" said Penelope; then, as his meaning dawned upon her. "I didn't think you could have been so cruel!" she cried reproachfully. Realising that she had betrayed herself, she tried to rise, but he was kneeling beside her chair.

"Cruel? to a little tender thing like you! No, no; you know I couldn't mean that," he said.

"It was cruel," said Penelope, still unreconciled, and venting on him the anger she felt for herself. "It was unkind," she repeated feebly.

"What a blundering fool I am!" he cried furiously. "Why, you are trembling all over. Dear girl, don't cry; I shall never forgive myself. It was only a—a sort of joke. The fact was, I have asked you to marry me twice already, you see, and I was so unlucky each time that it made me rather shy of doing it again. I thought I'd see if I couldn't get it settled without exactly saying the words, you know. Tell me I'm a fool, Penelope; call me anything you like—but not cruel. Cruel to you! I deserve to be shot. Yes, I was cruel; I must have been, if you say so."

"You weren't. I was silly," came in a muffled voice. "I only thought—it would break my heart—to leave—Alibad."

“Only Alibad? Is it the bricks and mortar you are so fond of?”

“I love every brick in the place, because you built it.”

Thus it happened that the journey to Bab-us-Sahel, the suggestion of which had caused so much distress to Penelope, was duly undertaken, and Mr Crayne insisted that the wedding should take place from Government House. He said it was because there was some hope now that Keeling might get a little common-sense knocked into him at last, which might have sounded alarming to any one who did not know that the bride's head barely reached the bridegroom's shoulder. But Penelope had a secret conviction that the old man had not forgotten the morning at Alibad when he welcomed her as his future niece, and that he had penetrated her true feelings more nearly than she knew at the time. Held under such auspices, the wedding was graced by the presence of all the rank and fashion of Bab-us-Sahel; but Lady Haigh, who had received a box from home just in time, raised evil passions in the heart of every lady there by displaying the first crinoline ever seen in Khemistan. The bride was quite a secondary figure, for not only had she refused the loan of the coveted garment, but she defied public opinion by wearing an embroidered “country muslin” instead of the stiff white watered silk which her aunt and Colin had insisted she should take out with her three years before.

It must be confessed that Penelope was not a success when she returned to Alibad as the Commandant's wife, and therefore the *burra memsahib* of the place. The town is still famous in legend as the only station in India where the ladies squabble over giving, instead of taking, precedence. Long afterwards Lady Haigh congratulated herself on having been the means of averting bloodshed on one occasion, when a visiting official, finding himself placed between two ladies of equally retiring disposition, decided to offer his arm

to the baronet's wife. "I saw thunder in Colonel Keeling's eye," said Lady Haigh (Major Keeling had received the news of his promotion shortly before the wedding), so I just curtsied to the General, and said, 'Mrs Keeling is the chief lady present, sir,' and he accepted the hint like a lamb." But at the time, or rather, in the privacy of a call the next morning, she had taken Penelope to task.

"You don't put yourself forward enough, Pen," she said. "Do you think that if I had been *burra mem*, the poor General would have had a moment's doubt as to the person he was to take in to dinner? You make yourself a sort of shadow of your husband—never do anything on your own responsibility, in fact. Why, when the history of the province comes to be written, people will dispute whether Colonel Keeling ever had a wife at all!"

"Will they?" said Penelope, momentarily distressed. "Oh, I hope not, Elma. I should like them to say that there was one part of his life when he got on better with the Government, and left off writing furious letters even when he was unjustly treated, and was more patient with people who were stupid. Then if they ask what made the difference, I should like to think that they will say, 'Oh, that was when his wife was alive.'"

"My dear Pen, you are not allowing yourself a very long life."

Penelope coloured. "I daresay it's silly," she said; "but that is how I feel."

CHAPTER XXVI.

“FOR THINE AND THEE.”

ABOUT a year after Colonel Keeling's marriage, there came a time when troubles crowded thick and fast upon the Alibad colony. An earthquake did terrible damage to the great irrigation-works, which were fast approaching completion; and when this was followed by unusually heavy winter rains, the result was a disastrous inundation. It was a new thing for Khemistan, and especially its northern portion, to be afflicted with too much rain instead of too little; but the change seemed to have the effect of making the climate even more unhealthy than usual. The European officers who rode from village to village distributing medicines and food, and encouraging the people to rebuild their houses and cultivate their spoilt fields afresh, fell ill one after the other; and there was almost as much sickness among the troopers of the Khemistan Horse, most of whom came from another part of India, and found the salt desert a land of exile. The alarm caused by the Nalapuri invasion had at last drawn the attention of the Government to Colonel Keeling's reiterated requests for a larger force; and he had been allowed to raise a second regiment, which he was moulding vigorously into shape when the troubles began. It was these new men and their unacclimatised officers who went down so quickly, and must needs be invalided to the coast; and the Commandant found himself left with little more than his original force and European staff when the news came that Gobind

Chand was threatening the frontier anew. From Gobind Chand's point of view the move was a timely one, if not the only one possible to him, for the Sheikh-ul-Jabal, at the head of the young Amir's troops, was shouldering him mercilessly out of Nalapur, quite content to leave to Colonel Keeling the task of dealing with him finally. By dint of avoiding a pitched battle, and presenting a resolute front to his pursuers, the ex-Vizier had contrived to keep his force almost intact, and a golden opportunity seemed to be presenting itself for dealing a blow at one of his chief enemies while he was already in difficulties.

So black was the outlook that Colonel Keeling thought it would be well to send the ladies down as far as the river, at any rate; but they rebelled, pointing out that such a step would cause the natives to despair of the British cause. Lady Haigh flatly refused to go; Penelope said she would go if her husband wished it, but entreated so piteously to be allowed to stay that he, dreading the journey for her, and little able to spare an escort, consented on the condition that she left off visiting the native town to take help to the sufferers there. After all, it was Lady Haigh who was seized with fever and had to be nursed by Penelope, and she was scarcely convalescent when the two husbands were obliged to leave Alibad once more under the protection of the ever-useful Fencibles, and march to the north-east to repel Gobind Chand. The old Hindu had developed a remarkable power of generalship at this stage in his career. He refused steadily to come out on the plains, or even to show his full strength in the hills. His plan was to lead the small British force a weary dance through broken country, eluding capture when it seemed inevitable that he must be caught, and watching for an opportunity of surprising the weary and dispirited troops.

But it was such an emergency as this that brought out the strongest points in Colonel Keeling's character. To find in the ex-Vizier a foeman worthy of his steel sent his spirits up with a rush; and, as he had no in-

tention of playing into Gobind Chand's hands, a very short experience determined him to strike out tactics of his own. Somehow or other it became known in the British camp that Colonel Keeling felt considerable anxiety as to the good faith of Nalapur, now that he was so far from Alibad. What could be easier than for the Sheikh-ul-Jabal to swoop down on the practically defenceless town and level it with the ground? Hence it was very natural that the Commandant should divide his force, sending back the larger portion, under Major Porter, for the defence of the town, and retaining only one gun and a small number of troops for the pursuit of Gobind Chand. Whether Colonel Keeling had exercised his reputed powers, and actually detected spies among his camp-followers, or was merely making a bold guess, certain it is that two or three individuals who had attached themselves to the British force in order to assure the Commandant that the number of Gobind Chand's adherents had been grossly exaggerated, contrived to become separated from it in the darkness, and by inadvertence, no doubt, to fall in with the enemy's scouts, and relate what Kilin Sahib was doing. Therefore, as Porter marched away with his force, and the dust of their passage was seen vanishing in the direction of Alibad, Gobind Chand was able to concentrate his men round the hollow in which the British camp lay. Incautious as Colonel Keeling might have been, he was not the man to be taken by surprise, and he broke camp in some haste, and effected a safe retreat. But this retreat was in itself an encouragement to the enemy—especially since the British force did not make for the plains, but seemed fated to wander farther into the hills—and Gobind Chand followed close upon its heels. At evening things looked very black for Colonel Keeling. He and his small body of men were holding a low hill which was commanded on all sides by higher hills. The valley surrounding it had only one opening, that to the north, by which he had entered, and across which Gobind Chand was

now encamped, and it seemed quite clear that he had been caught in a *cul-de-sac*. He was clearly determined to fight to the last, however, for his men kept up a perfect pandemonium of noise at intervals all night. They fired volleys at imaginary enemies, performed trumpet fantasias at unseemly hours, and dragged their solitary gun, with much difficulty and noise, from place to place on the crest of the hill, apparently to find out where it would be of most service. In the morning Colonel Keeling looked at Sir Dugald and laughed.

"It's Gobind Chand or me to-day," he said. "If he doesn't advance into the valley in half an hour, we are done."

Before the specified time had elapsed, however, the vanguard of Gobind Chand's force was pouring into the valley, the besieged keeping their gun for use later. Taking advantage of the cover afforded by the rocks with which the valley was strewn, the enemy, cautious in spite of their superiority of numbers, settled down to "snipe" at the hill-top. Colonel Keeling was radiant, and his men needed nothing to complete their happiness when they heard him muttering concerning "stainless Tunstall's banner white," "priests slain on the altar-stone," "Fontarabian echoes," and other things outside their ken. Suddenly, as he was making the round of the hill-top, and pushing his men down into cover, for the twentieth time, he found himself confronted by one of his own *chaprasis* from Alibad, who, with a respectfully immobile face, held forth a letter. The Commandant turned it over as if he was afraid to open it.

"How did you get here, Rahim Khan?" he asked.

"By a rope from the top of the cliff, sahib."

"Fool! could the enemy see you?"

"Nay, sahib; I was hidden by this hill as I crossed the valley."

No further reason for delay offering itself, Colonel Keeling turned his back upon the man and opened the letter. As he drew out the enclosure his hands

shook and his dark face was white. As if by main force he unfolded the paper and held it before his eyes, which refused at first to convey any meaning to his mind:—

“ALIBAD. I A.M.

“Daughter born shortly before midnight; fine healthy child. Mrs Keeling doing well.

“J. TARLETON.”

An exclamation of thankfulness broke from the Commandant, and he brushed something from his eyes before turning again to the *chaprasi*.

“There will be a hundred rupees for you when I return, Rahim Khan. You had no message but this?”

“One that the Memsahib’s ayah brought me, from her mistress’s own lips, sahib. It was this: Say to the Sahib, ‘Is it well with thee, as it is well with me?’”

“Then say this to the ayah: Tell the Memsahib, ‘It is well with me, since it is well with thee.’ Stay,” he wrote hastily on the back of the doctor’s note two or three lines from what Penelope always told him was the only one of Tennyson’s poems he could appreciate:—

“Thy face across his fancy comes,
And gives the battle to his hands.
. . . ‘Like fire he meets the foe,
And strikes him dead for thine and thee.’”

“If you deliver that safely, it will mean another hundred rupees,” he said, giving the note to the *chaprasi* with a smile. “You had better be off at once. It will be pretty hot here presently.”

The man still lingered. “Is there going to be a battle, sahib?” he asked.

“Doesn’t it look like it?” Bullets were flying round Colonel Keeling as he spoke, and he laughed again.

“You are certain you are just going into battle, sahib?”

“Certain; but I am not asking you to go into it with me. Get out of the way of the bullets as fast as you like.”

Rahim Khan retired, but with dragging steps, and made his way slowly to Sir Dugald, who was in charge of the gun. To him he gave a second note, which he took from his turban. Sir Dugald tore it open, and for the moment his heart stood still, for he thought it referred to his own wife; but on turning it over he saw that it also was addressed to Colonel Keeling.

“2 A.M.

“Symptoms less satisfactory. If you could ride over, it might be as well. I don’t say it is necessary, but it would please Mrs Keeling. J. TARLETON.”

“How dare you give me this, when it is meant for the Colonel Sahib?” demanded Sir Dugald.

“I must have given the wrong *chit*, sahib,” and a third note was produced, this time addressed unmistakably to Sir Dugald.

“DEAR HAIGH,—I am not at all satisfied about Mrs Keeling, and she knows it, but is most anxious that her husband’s mind should not be disturbed. I have had to give her my word of honour that if a battle is imminent he shall hear nothing until it is quite over, and the only way of managing this that I can see is to ask you to take charge of the second *chit* I have given Reheem Khaun, and hand it to Keeling at the proper time. Lady Haigh has been my right hand, and has stood the strain well. She is now resting for an hour or two. J. TARLETON.”

“If the Karnal (Colonel) Sahib found that the dust of his feet had hidden the *chit* from him, he would be very angry,” murmured the apologetic voice of Rahim Khan, “but seeing it is Haigh Sahib who does it, his wrath will be appeased.”

"I see. You want to shift the responsibility from your shoulders to mine. Well, be off!" said Sir Dugald, with an uneasy laugh. He could scarcely meet Colonel Keeling's eye when he hurried down to him a minute or two later, brimful of his good news, and anxious to be assured that Lady Haigh also was going on well; and he was grateful to Gobind Chand for choosing this juncture to launch a detachment of his men at the steepest, and therefore least defended, side of the hill.

"Now is our time!" cried Colonel Keeling, hurrying away. "You can fire the signal-shot, Haigh."

The gun boomed forth, and the shot fell in the very opening of the valley, causing the rest of Gobind Chand's men to rush forward, in the belief that they would be safer within the range of fire than at its limit, an idea which seemed to be justified by the fact that Sir Dugald left the gun as it was, instead of depressing the muzzle to cover the enemy actually in the valley. But as the besiegers, much encouraged, rushed forward with shouts to scale the hill, there came a sharp rattle of musketry from the cliffs which commanded it on both sides. The dark uniform of the Khemistan Horse showed itself against the grey and yellow of the rocks, and Porter on one side and Harris on the other became clearly visible as they ran along the ranks pushing down the muzzles of the carbines, and adjuring the men to fire low for fear of hitting the Colonel's party. Then also the defenders of the hill, who had been lying hidden among the rocks, started up and poured their fire into the disorderly ranks of the besiegers, so that only one or two daring spirits survived to reach the summit and provoke a hand-to-hand fight with tulwars. Outwitted, and conscious that they, and not their opponents, were in a trap, Gobind Chand's force remembered only that there was still a way of escape; and the wave which had surged three times halfway up the hill retreated sullenly, then broke in wild confusion, and rushed for the opening of the valley. But Sir Dugald was ready for them. His

gun dropped shot after shot in the narrowest part of the passage, until a barrier of dead and dying barred those behind from attempting the deadly rush, and when the boldest had been able to persuade their more timid comrades, who stood huddled in a terrified mass, to make one last united effort to burst through, they found themselves confronted by a force composed of every alternate man of Porter and Harris's commands. The heights were still occupied, the defenders of the hill had deployed and were advancing on them from behind, in front were stern faces and levelled carbines. There were no Ghazis with Gobind Chand, and the bulk of his followers were not particularly heroic by nature. They knew that their leader was wounded, and they threw down their arms and yelled for quarter. A narrow pathway was cleared beside the ghastly heap in the entrance of the valley, and they were made to step out man by man, and carefully searched, for notwithstanding their losses, they were still more than thrice as numerous as Colonel Keeling's force. There was no question of letting them go, for this would have meant for them either a slow death by hunger or a swift one at the hands of the Sheikh-ul-Jabal; they were to be planted out, under strict supervision, in small colonies in different parts of Upper Khemistan, and they rather welcomed the prospect than otherwise.

It was long before the prisoners were all disarmed, their spoil collected, a meal provided for them, and the different bands set on the march, duly guarded, for their various destinations; and not until then did Sir Dugald venture to give Colonel Keeling the letter which was burning in his pocket. He saw the sudden fury in the Commandant's eyes as he realised the truth, and braced himself to meet it.

"You—you dared to keep this from me all these hours?"

"It was her wish. She made Tarleton promise."

Colonel Keeling turned and shouted for his horse. "I will never forgive you if anything goes wrong!"

He flung the words at Sir Dugald as he mounted, then clattered furiously down the rocky track, followed by his orderlies. One of them fell from his saddle exhausted before half the distance was covered, the horse of the other broke down when Alibad was barely in sight; but about sunset a desperate man rode a black horse white with foam at breakneck speed through the streets, and reined up precipitately in the compound of Government House. The servants, gathered in whispering groups, fell away from him as he sprang up the steps, but the old *khansaman* ventured to speak as he saw his master pause to unbuckle the sword which clanked behind him.

"It is not necessary, sahib," he murmured humbly; but Colonel Keeling looked straight through him, laid the sword noiselessly on a chair, and went on, to be met by Dr Tarleton, who caught him by the arm.

"Keeling, wait! There were bad symptoms, you know——"

His friend brushed him aside as if he had been a feather, stepped past the weeping ayah, who threw herself on her knees before him and tried to sob out something, swept back the curtain from the doorway and crossed the room at a stride, then fell as one dead beside the dead form of his wife, in whose hand was still clenched the note he had scribbled on the battlefield.

There he remained for hours, his arms outstretched across the bed, no one venturing to disturb him, until Lady Haigh, her eyes bright with fever, tottered into the room, and laid a hot hand on his shoulder.

"Come!" she said. "Colonel Keeling, you must. She would have wished it. You must change your clothes and have something to eat, and then you must see the baby—Penelope's baby."

She could hardly bring her trembling lips to utter the name, but it disarmed the angry protest she had read in his face. The child which had cost Penelope's life! how could he regard it with anything but aver-

sion? but how she had loved to think of it, planned for it, worked for it! He turned to Lady Haigh.

"I will see the—the child at once, if you please, that you may feel more at ease. Then Tarleton must take you in hand. Haigh must not be left alone, as I am."

The ayah stood in the doorway, with a curiously wrapped-up bundle in her arms. Lady Haigh took it from her, and started in surprise, for on the child's forehead was a large black smudge, something in the shape of a cross.

"Who did this?" she asked sharply. "Please take her, Colonel Keeling. My arms are so weak."

"My Memsahib did it herself," whimpered the ayah sullenly, with a frightened glance towards the bed.

"Nonsense, Dulya! Make her say what it is," she appealed to Colonel Keeling.

"Speak!" he said, in the tone which no native ever disobeyed.

"It was shortly before the—the end, sahib, and Haigh Sahib's Mem had swooned, so that the Doctor Sahib was busy with her, and my Memsahib, who had the *baba* lying beside her, asked me for water. Then I brought it, and she made that mark which the Sahib sees, on the *baba's* forehead, and uttered a spell in the language of the Sahibs, saying 'Jājia! Jājia!' very loud. Then I saw that she was making a charm to avert the evil eye from the *baba*, but that her soul was even then departing, so that she used water instead of something that could be seen. Therefore, when she was dead, I made the mark afresh with lamp-black, saying 'Jājia! Jājia!' as my Memsahib had done, that her wish might be fulfilled. But the English words I knew not. Perhaps the Sahib can say them?" she added anxiously.

"What can it mean?" asked Lady Haigh, who had dropped into a chair.

"She was baptising her," said Colonel Keeling simply. "Poor little Georgia—Penelope's baby!"

"Surely she must have meant Georgiana or

Georgina?” suggested Lady Haigh, delighted to see him interested in the child.

“No, it was a fancy of hers, she told me so once. She wanted to name it after me, but she didn’t wish people to think my name was George.” He spoke with a laugh which was more like a sob.

“I know. She had a dislike to the name.” Lady Haigh knew well why this was. “She would never even call you St George, I noticed.”

He bent over the child to hide the working of his face, and kissed its forehead. “It’s not even like her,” he said, as he gave it back to Lady Haigh.

“No; she was so pleased it was like you. Colonel Keeling, don’t steel your heart against the poor little thing! Think how Penelope loved it. I know she hoped it would comfort you.”

“Nothing can comfort me,” he answered; then added quickly, “Lady Haigh, do me one more kindness. -Keep the servants, Tarleton, every one—away from me to-night. They will want to take her away from me in the morning, I know. I must stay beside her to-night.”

The strong man’s humble entreaty touched Lady Haigh inexpressibly. She offered no further remonstrance, but signed to the ayah to depart, and drawing the curtain behind her, left him alone with his dead. She gave the servants their orders, which they obeyed thankfully enough, induced even Dr Tarleton to retire, sorely against his will, to his own quarters, and crept wearily into her *palki* to go home. She had risen from her sick-bed to return to the house of mourning, drawn thither by a horrified whisper from her own ayah to the effect that “the Karnal Sahib had fallen dead on beholding the body of the Memsahib,” and she knew that she would pay dearly for the imprudence. But unutterable pity for the desolate man and the motherless child quenched all thought of self.

Silence reigned throughout the great house, whence the servants had departed to their quarters. Even the watchman had been forbidden to occupy his accustomed

post on the verandah, and in the absence of the regiment and the general disorganisation, no one had thought of posting any sentries about the compound. The sounds in the town died out by degrees, until only the occasional distant howl of a jackal broke the stillness. Colonel Keeling did not hear it, any more than he did a stealthy footfall which crossed the compound. The old *khansaman*, crouching, contrary to orders, in a corner of the side verandah, heard the step, and covered his head in an agony of terror. Was not the Sahib seeking to recall the Memsahib's soul to her body? and was it not returning? But Colonel Keeling heard nothing, until the curtain was drawn aside by a hasty hand, and a man stood in the doorway looking at him, and uttered an exclamation of astonishment. For a moment both men gazed at each other, then a change passed over Colonel Keeling's face which was terrible to see. Deliberately he drew the sheet over his wife's face, then crossed the room and hurled himself upon the intruder.

"You—you!" he snarled, forcing him back into the hall. "Was there no grave in Gamara deep enough to hide your shame that you must bring it back here?"

The other man struggled in his grasp a moment, then, realising that his adversary was endowed with a mad strength before which his efforts were like those of a child, submitted to be forced down upon the floor. Colonel Keeling stooped over him with murder in his eyes.

"What have you to say before I kill you as you deserve—traitor, renegade, *Judas*?" he hissed.

"Nothing—except to thank you for saving me the job," was the reply, spoken with difficulty, for a hand was on the prostrate man's throat. The grip was loosed, and Colonel Keeling rose to his feet and stood glaring at him, his fists clenched at his sides.

"You're right. The job is not one I care for. You can go, and relieve the earth of your presence yourself."

"Don't be afraid. Life is not so delightful as to

make me cling to it. Yes; I'm down. Kick me again if you like.”

“Go, while I can keep my hands off you, will you?”

“Tell me where to find Colin Ross, and I will. He's not at his old quarters, and I don't think he would turn his back—even on me.”

“You miserable hypocrite! At his old quarters? when you stood by to see him martyred in the palace square at Gamara! Don't try to throw dust in my eyes. I know the whole story.”

But the man sat up with a look of genuine horror. “On my honour, Keeling—good God! what can I swear by to make you believe me?—I know nothing of this. Tell me what you mean. When did it happen?”

“Less than a year after you disappeared. Colin went to find you—rescue you——” In spite of himself, Colonel Keeling was moved by the terror on the man's face. “He was denounced by your friend Mirza Fazl-ul-Hacq, imprisoned and tortured, then beheaded because he would not turn Mussulman and enter the Khan's army. You were present, in command of the troops. You saw it all.”

“That was not Colin. That was Whybrow. Now I know what you mean.”

“Whybrow—whom you went to save?”

“And did not. Yes. But where is Colin?” he broke out fiercely. “You say he arrived at Gamara, was imprisoned—you know this? It is not merely a rumour of Whybrow's fate? Then he must be there now—in the dungeon where I saw Whybrow——” his voice fell.

“No, no, he could not have lived so long—if all they say is true.”

“How do you know what a man can bear and live? You despise me, and abuse me, but you have never had the choice given you between Islam and being eaten alive by rats in an infernal hole underground. That is where Colin is—and that's what Fazl-ul-Hacq meant when he was dying. There was some order he wished to

give, and did not want me to hear, but he couldn't get it out—curse him! If Colin had died or been killed, I should have heard of it. And that is where I shall be if I can live to get back there."

"You mean to save him?" Colonel Keeling's voice had taken a different tone.

"There is no saving any one from the dungeons of Gamara. But I can die with him. Was there no one"—with sudden fierceness—"who had common humanity enough to put that fellow in irons, or send him home as a lunatic, instead of letting him come after me? He was bound to be a martyr, but to let him rush upon his death in that—that way!"

He stopped in shuddering disgust, then laughed wildly.

"And how has the world gone with you, Keeling? Got your promotion, I see, but not exempt from trouble any more than the rest of us! But what mild, milk-and-water, bread-and-butter lives you lead down here! You should come to Gamara to see what primitive human passions are like."

"Will you go?" asked Colonel Keeling, putting a strong constraint upon himself.

"You might let me have a word or two with the only Englishman I shall see till Colin and I meet among the rats in the well! Any messages for Colin? I suppose Penelope has forgotten us both long ago?"

"If you mention her name again I will kill you." Colonel Keeling's grip was on his throat once more. "She is lying there dead—dead, do you hear? and all the trouble in her life was due to you. Go!" and he released him with a thrust which sent him reeling against one of the pillars of the hall. But the shock seemed to have calmed him.

"Dead—just now? She married you, then? I found all the place deserted—I didn't know. Sometimes I think my mind is going. If you knew what my life has been in that hell——! Forgive me, Keeling. I am going. Wish me good luck!"

"God help you!" said Colonel Keeling fervently.

CHAPTER XXVII.

AFTER TOIL—TOIL STILL.

NEARLY three years after Penelope's death, Sir Dugald rode into Alibad as a stranger. The long illness which followed on Lady Haigh's exertions on behalf of her friend so exhausted her strength that she was ordered a voyage to the Cape as the only hope of saving her life, and despite her frantic protests, her husband applied for two years' leave and took her there, much as an unrelenting warder might convey a reluctant prisoner to his doom. He was rewarded by an opportunity of seeing service in one of the perennial Kaffir Wars of the period as galloper to the general commanding, which served also to mitigate his disappointment at being absent when a little war, outside the borders of Khemistan, gave to Colonel Keeling the local rank of Brigadier-General, and to the Khemistan Horse the chance of distinguishing themselves beyond the bounds of their own district. Mr Crayne had retired, and his successor proved to be that rare being, a civilian who could make himself liked and trusted by his military subordinates—one, moreover, who knew and appreciated the work which had been done on the Khemistan frontier, and was anxious for its continuance. The development of the resources of the country, at which Major Keeling had so long laboured single-handed, was now pressed forward in every possible way; and Sir Dugald, as he rode, noted the handsome bazars which had replaced some, at least, of the old rows of mud huts, and the growth of the

cantonments, which testified to an increase in the European population. The trees which he had seen planted were now full grown, the public gardens were worthy of their name, and there was nothing warlike in the aspect of the weather-beaten old fort, which seemed as if the passage of years would reduce it by slow degrees to a heap of mud grown over with bushes.

Fronting the fort, but almost hidden by the trees with which it was surrounded, stood General Keeling's house, and Sir Dugald rode into the compound, to be saluted with evident pleasure by several of the servants, who came to ask after the Memsahib. As he entered the well-known office, he had a momentary glimpse of a grey-haired man in shirt-sleeves, writing as if for dear life, and then General Keeling jumped up and welcomed him joyfully.

"How are you, Haigh? Delighted to see you, but never thought of expecting you till to-morrow. You haven't dragged Lady Haigh up-country at this pace, I hope?"

"No, sir; I left her at the river. The fact is, Mr Pater wants me to go on with the steamer."

"And not come here at all? Why, man, your house is all ready for you." The bright look of welcome had gone from General Keeling's face, leaving it painfully old and worn. "But I know what it is. King John"—alluding to the imperious ruler of a neighbouring province—"wants more men."

"He does, and he asks specially for gunners. It's by no wish of mine, General; but the Commissioner is anxious to send every man we can spare. The news doesn't improve."

"No, of course not. How could it? Haven't I been telling them for thirty years that we should have to reconquer India if they didn't mend their ways, and they only called me croaker and prophet of evil? Well, time brings about its revenges. For the last ten years John would cheerfully have seen me hanged on the nearest tree of my own planting, and now he steals my officers to keep his province quiet. Go, Haigh, cer-

tainly; and every man I can spare shall go, as Pater says. We have got lazy and luxurious up here of late. It'll do some of these youngsters good to go back to the old days, when a man's life and the fate of the province depended on his eye and his sword. Not but that I have a fine set of young fellows just now. They all want to come up here—flattering, isn't it?—and I have to thin 'em out." He laughed, and so did Sir Dugald, who had heard strange tales of the General's methods of weeding out the recruits who offered themselves to him. "But how long can you stay, Haigh? Only to-night? Oh, nonsense! Where are your things?"

"I left them at Porter's, sir."

"How dare you? I'll have them fetched away at once. Send a *chit* to Porter, and say I'll break him if he tries to detain them. But tell him to come to dinner, and we'll have Tarleton and Harris and Jones, and yarn about the old times—all of us that are left of the old lot."

He broke off with an involuntary sigh, and Sir Dugald wrote his note. Presently General Keeling turned to him with a twinkle in his eye. "Don't tell Lady Haigh on any account, but I can't help feeling relieved that she isn't coming up just yet. I know she'll want to give me good advice about my little Missy there, and Tarleton and I are so sinfully proud of the way we have brought her up that we won't stand any advice on the subject."

Surprised, Sir Dugald followed the direction of his eyes, to see in a corner, almost hidden by a huge despatch-box, a small girl with a curious pink-and-white frock and a shock of dark hair.

"She would play there quietly all day, never coming out unless I call her," said General Keeling. "If she isn't with me, she's with Tarleton, watching him at his work. He gives her an old medicine-bottle or two, and some sand and water, and she's as happy as possible, pretending to make up pills and mixtures. Or she begs a bit of paper from me, and writes for ever so

long, and brings it to me to be sealed up in an official envelope—making up returns, you see. Missy," raising his voice, "come here and speak to Captain Haigh. He held you in his arms when you were only two or three days old, and you have often heard about him in your Godmamma's letters."

The child obeyed at once, disclosing the fact that her embroidered muslin frock (which Sir Dugald had a vague recollection had been sent her by his wife) had been lengthened and adorned by the tailor at his own discretion by the addition of three flounces of common pink English print. She held out a little brown hand to the stranger in silence.

"Does us credit, doesn't she?" asked her father, smoothing back the elf-locks from her forehead. Sir Dugald's domestic instincts were in revolt at the idea of the child's being brought up by two men, without a woman at hand even to give advice; but there was such anxiety in General Keeling's voice that he crushed down his feelings and ventured on the remark that Missy was a very fine girl for her age.

"We are not very successful with her hair," the father went on. "The ayah tries to curl it, but either Missy is too restless, or Dulya doesn't know quite the right way to set about it. It never looks smooth and shiny like children's hair in pictures."

Sir Dugald wisely waived the question, feeling that he was not an authority on the subject. "Can she— isn't she—er—old enough to talk?" he asked, with becoming diffidence.

"Talk! you should hear her chattering to Tarleton and me, or to her favourites in the regiment. But she doesn't wear her heart upon her sleeve with strangers. If she takes a liking to you, it'll be different presently."

"Do you let her run about among the men?"

"She runs nowhere out of my sight or Tarleton's or Dulya's. But the whole regiment are her humble slaves, and the man she deigns to favour is set up for life, in his own opinion. What would happen if she took a dislike to a man I don't know, but I hardly

think his skin would be safe. Commendation from me is nothing compared with the honour conferred by the Missy Baba when she allows a stiff-necked old Ressaldar to take her up in his arms, and is good enough to pull his beard."

"She is absurdly like you, General," said Sir Dugald, disapproval of what he had just heard making itself felt in his tone, in spite of himself, while Missy rubbed her rough head against her father's sleeve like a young colt.

"Horribly like me," returned General Keeling emphatically. "Run away and play, Missy. I can scarcely see a trace of her mother in her," he went on, with something of apology in his voice. "You know what my wife was—that she couldn't bear me out of her sight. I changed the arrangement of this room, you remember, because she liked to be able to see me through the open doors from where she sat, so that I could look up and nod to her now and then. But Missy is almost like a doll, that you can put away when you don't want it, she's so quiet in that corner of hers. No; there is one thing in which she is like her mother. If you say a hasty word to her, she will go away and break her heart over it in her corner, instead of flaring up as I should do——"

"Or writing furious letters?" suggested Sir Dugald slyly.

General Keeling smiled, but refused to be turned from his own train of thought. "Haigh," he said earnestly, "take care of your wife while you have her. Mine took half my life with her when she went. If you could imagine for one moment the difference—the awful difference—it makes, you would go down on your knees and implore your wife's pardon for everything you had ever done or said that could possibly have hurt her, and beg her not to leave you."

"Oh, we rub along all right," said Sir Dugald hastily, in mortal fear that the Chief was going to be sentimental. "Elma takes everything in good part. She understands things almost as well as a man."

General Keeling smiled again, rather pityingly.

Perhaps he had some idea of the lofty tolerance with which Lady Haigh would have heard the utterance of this handsome testimony. "My little Missy and I understand one another better than that," he said.

"Do you think of taking her home soon?" asked Sir Dugald.

"Not of taking her home. My home is here. I suppose I must send her home some day—not yet, happily. If there was only her present happiness and mine to consider, I would never part from her, but dress her in boy's clothes and take her about with me wherever I went."

"Heaven forbid!" said Sir Dugald devoutly.

"Don't be an old woman, Haigh," was the crushing rejoinder. "What harm could come to her where I was—and when the whole regiment would die before a hair of her head should be touched? But Tarleton thinks it would tell against the girl when she grew up, and I remember my own youth too well to subject her to the same sort of thing. No, I shall get your wife or some other good woman to take her home and hand her over to her mother's friend, Miss Marian Arbuthnot. You must have heard Lady Haigh speak of her? They all studied together at that College of theirs, and now Miss Arbuthnot has a school or seminary, or whatever they call it, of her own."

"Surely her views are very advanced?" Sir Dugald ventured to suggest.

"I am glad they are. I hope they are. If it should turn out, when Missy grows up, that she has a turn for doctoring, I shall beg Miss Arbuthnot to cultivate it, if it can be done. There's a lady doctor in America, you know, and I hope there'll be another here."

Sir Dugald looked the dismay he felt. "So unwomanly—so unbecoming a lady!" he murmured.

"Do you mean to tell me that her mother's daughter could be anything but a perfect lady?"

"Considering that she will have been brought up by Tarleton and yourself, sir, I should say she would be more likely to turn out a perfect gentleman," said

Sir Dugald gravely, and General Keeling laughed aloud.

“Well,” he said, “there’s no need to settle Missy’s future as yet, and she will choose for herself, of course. After all, my motives are purely selfish. Do you know that our only trustworthy friend in Nalapur is that excellent woman, the Moti-ul-Nissa, young Ashraf Ali’s sister? Well, you remember what a little spitfire she was as a girl, when you and I saw her. Her friendliness dates entirely from the time when your wife and mine took refuge at Sheikharh, and my wife won the young lady’s heart by showing her what to do for her sick brother. Think what a prop it would be to our influence here if there was a properly trained lady who could win the hearts of other women in the same way!”

“You want to see Missy a female politician, then?”

“I want to see her able to get at these unfortunate secluded women and find out what their real views and wishes are. The Moti-ul-Nissa has about the wisest head in Nalapur, but her wisdom might as well be in the moon for all I hear of it until after the event. Her brother is altogether under the influence of the Sheik-ul-Jabal, and the old man can’t forgive me because I pointed out to him that the same person could not be head of his sect and Amir of Nalapur. He has had to adopt the younger brother as his spiritual successor instead of the elder, and he would like to pay me out; but the Moti-ul-Nissa does all she can for us. That rascal Hasrat Ali leads her a life. Her children have died one after the other, and the brute would divorce her if he dared. The poor woman always sends to inquire after Missy when I am at Nalapur, and I should like to send her to see her, but I daren’t. You never know whose agents may be among the crowds of women in those big zenanas, and I can’t run any risks with Missy. But think what it will be when she grows up, if she cares enough for the poor creatures to do what she can to help them!”

“I shall think more of her if she does what she can

to help you, sir," said Sir Dugald obstinately. "But I suppose this grudge of the Sheikh-ul-Jabal's means that there is no hope of a treaty with Nalapur for the present?"

"None, so far as I can see, which is a bore, just when our authorities have been wrought up to the proper pitch. Pater will back me at the right moment, and we can offer the Amir a handsome subsidy if he will keep the passes open and let caravans pass freely, and allow us to station a resident at his capital. Of course that means practically that we guarantee his frontiers, but have power to move troops through his territory in case of a land invasion; and the increased stability it would give to his throne would make it well worth his while. The Sheikh and I are trying to tire each other out; but I mean to have that treaty if I live long enough, and the Moti-ul-Nissa will throw her influence on my side. When one has served one's apprenticeship one begins to understand the ins and outs of these Asian mysteries."

"Talking of mysteries," said Sir Dugald, "have you ever heard anything more as to Ferrers' fate after—the night you saw him?"

General Keeling's face changed. "Strangely enough, I have," he said; "but whether the story is true we shall probably never know for certain. I had it from a Gamari Jew who came to me in secret, and was divided between fear of his life if it ever became known what he had done, and anxiety to wring the uttermost *pie* out of me for his information. I took down the account from his own lips, and have it here." He unlocked a drawer and took out a paper, glanced across at the corner to make sure that Missy was engrossed in her own affairs, and leaning towards Sir Dugald, began to read in a low voice:—

"I was in the city of Gamara a year ago, when there was much talk concerning Firoz Khan, the Farangi chief of his Highness's bodyguard, who had disappeared. Some said he had been secretly slain, others that he had been sent on a private errand by

his Highness. One day there was proclamation made throughout the city that two men were to be put to death in the palace square,—one a Christian, the other one who had embraced Islam and relapsed into his idolatry. Many desired to see the sight, and among those that found standing-room in the square was I. Now when the prisoners were led forth there was much astonishment among the people, for one of them was Firoz Khan; and those that looked upon him said that he bore the marks of torture. And the other was an old man and bent, blind also, and walking with difficulty, who they said had dwelt in the dungeons for many years. It was noticed that no offer of life was made to these prisoners, nor were any questions put to them; moreover, his Highness's face was black towards every one on whom his eye lighted. But the prisoners spoke to one another in English,—which tongue I understand, having studied it in India,—and the one said, "I am a Christian, and a Christian I die," and the other, kissing him upon the forehead, said, "George, we shall meet in Paradise, in the presence of God," and turning to the people he cried, in a voice of extraordinary strength: "Tell the English that this man, who for his life's sake gave up Christ, now for Christ's sake gives up his life." And when his voice was heard there fell a terror on the people, for they said it was a young Farangi that had long ago disappeared, whom they counted to be inspired of God, and there arose murmurings, so that his Highness commanded the executioners to do their duty at once; and the heads of the two men were struck off with a great sword, and their bodies foully dealt with, as is the wont in Gamara. I know no more concerning them."

General Keeling ceased reading, and his eyes and Sir Dugald's met. For a moment neither spoke.

"I suppose there can't be much doubt that it's true?" said Sir Dugald at last.

"None, I should say; but we can't expect positive proof."

"It's a curious thing," said Sir Dugald, with some hesitation, "but when I told my wife, on the voyage to the Cape, what you had told me about Ferrers' turning up again, she said at once that she believed poor Ross was alive still. She meant to tell you herself—it didn't seem quite the sort of thing to write about—but when she was watching beside Mrs Keeling the day she died, she saw her smile when they thought she was insensible, and heard her say quite strongly, 'They are all there, my father and mother, and my little sister who died—all waiting for me, but not Colin. Elma, where is Colin?'" My wife said something—you know the sort of thing women would say in answer to a thing of the kind—but when she thought it over, it occurred to her that it must mean Ross was not dead. That again is no proof, of course, but it's curious."

"Very strange," agreed General Keeling. "Haigh, the more I think of it, the more I feel certain the Jew's story was true. What conceivable motive could the man have for inventing it? He didn't know that I had any particular interest in the poor fellows. Poor fellows! it's blasphemy to call them that. Colin was a true martyr, if ever man was, and as for Ferrers——"

"Nothing in his life became him like the leaving of it," supplied Sir Dugald.

"Nothing; but what a miracle it seems that he was able to seize the chance! I sometimes ask myself whether I could have done what either of them did—lived out those years of martyrdom like Colin, or gone back to certain torture and death like Ferrers. We are poor creatures, Haigh, the best of us, and those of whom we expect least sometimes shame us by what they do. Well, they have seen the end of it now, I suppose—'in Paradise, in the presence of God.' As for me," he added with a half-laugh, as he turned to lock up the paper again, "I'm afraid I shouldn't be happy, even in Paradise, if I couldn't take a look at the frontier now and then, and make sure it was getting on all right. Why, Missy, what do you want?"

The little girl had crept up to them as they talked, and was standing with something clasped to her breast, looking in wonder at their moved faces. As her father spoke, she held out shyly to Sir Dugald a large octagonal tile, covered with a beautiful iridescent glaze, in a peculiarly delicate shade of turquoise. "For God-mamma," she said, and retreated promptly.

"Why, Missy, isn't that the slab on which you mix your medicines?" asked her father, capturing her. A nod was the only answer. "It's one of her greatest treasures," he explained to Sir Dugald. "The men find them sometimes in the ruined forts round here, but it's very seldom they come on one unbroken, and the man who found this one brought it to her. You really want your Godmamma to have it, Missy?" Another nod. "Well, Haigh, I wouldn't burden you with it if I didn't think Lady Haigh would really like it. These things are thought a good deal of."

"Certainly I will take it to her," answered Sir Dugald. "I am sure she will like it because Missy sent it."

The response was unexpected, for Missy wriggled away from her father's arm, and held up her face to Sir Dugald to be kissed.

"That ought to be gratifying," said General Keeling, laughing. Both men were perhaps not ungrateful to the child for diverting their thoughts from the tragedy with which they had been busied.

"Gratifying, sir? It's better than millions of the brightest diamonds to be kissed by Miss Georgia Keeling."

"As fond of Dickens as evèr, I see. What should we do without him? But you and Missy certainly ought to be friends, for she knew all about Paul Dombey long ago. The doll your wife sent her is called Little Paul, and drags out a harrowing existence of all kinds of diseases complicated with gunshot-wounds, according to the cases Tarleton has in hospital. Sometimes I am cheered by hearing that he 'ought to pull through,' but generally he is following his

namesake to an early grave. But I see your things have come, and you will like to see your quarters. This visit is a great pleasure, believe me, and I only wish it was going to be longer."

There was no further word of regret, but Sir Dugald realised keenly the disappointment that his friend was feeling. When they were breakfasting together the next day, just before his departure, he essayed a word of comfort.

"If things get much worse, General, we shall have you fetched down with the regiment to help in putting them right."

General Keeling's eye kindled, but he shook his head. "No, Haigh, my work lies up here. It would be too much to ride with the regiment through a mob of those cowardly, pampered Bengalis—too much luck for me, I mean. I have made out a list for Pater of the men I can afford to send on by the next steamer, and I must stay and do their work. I'm glad you will get your chance at last. John is a just man—like most of us when our prejudices don't stand in the way—and his recommendations will be attended to. His is the show province, not left out in the cold like poor Khemistan. I only wish you and all the rest could have got your steps for the work you have done here; but at least I can keep the frontier quiet while you have the chance of getting them elsewhere."

He stood on the verandah a little later, tall and bronzed and grey-headed, as Sir Dugald rode out at the gate. Beside him Missy, raised high on the shoulder of Ismail Bakhsh, with one hand clenched firmly in his beard, waved the other frantically in farewell. Reduced in numbers, the Advanced-Guard held the frontier still.



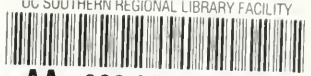
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