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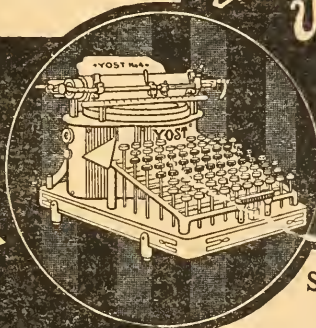
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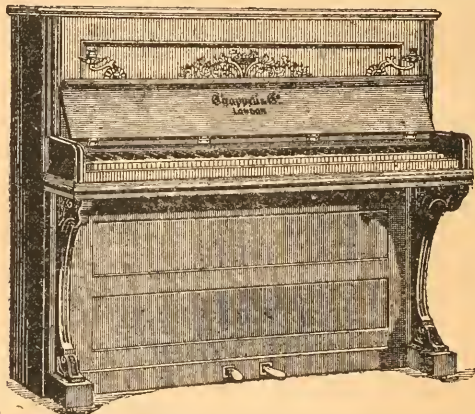
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A Fury in White Velvet

CHAPTER I

A GOD AND SOME LITTLE FISHES

“WHAT is it all about, Jenkinson?” asked the Viceroy, pushing away, with a gesture of petulant irritation, a docket of printed papers which his secretary laid before him. “And how did I ever come to give this Mr—Mr Howard an audience?”

“You will remember, your Excellency, he is a connection of Lord Westerham, and he sent in a Memorial—”

“Westerham? Ah, yes—of course. But this change in the Ministry alters the situation. Westerham has lapsed into a neglectable quantity. And this— Really!” His Excellency pointed fretfully to the bundle of papers and sighed. “What is it all about? Tell me in ten words if you can.”

“The Memorialist is Lieutenant Howard of the Political Department. He was assistant to Mr Badger on the Punjab Frontier. When the Afghan tribesmen made their raid last December, and took the outpost of Putghurri, it appears Howard was out shooting somewhere. Badger ascribed the surprise to want of intelligence which Howard should have obtained, and applied for the appointment of another assistant. Howard contends that Badger’s action was unjust, and the result of personal feeling; and files copies of several official letters to show how he was treated—”

“Pooh! Pooh!” broke in his Excellency. “And I am supposed to waste my time adjudicating between a Political Resident and his trumpety assistant who are squabbling? What did the Lieutenant-Governor do in the matter?”

“Sir Henry supported Badger, but mainly on a side issue.”

“And what was that?”

“A passage in one of Howard’s letters of which Badger filed a copy. It was a private letter, and Howard wrote, ‘He would not be addressed, either privately or officially,

in such offensive terms as Badger used, by a gentleman whose ancestors for three generations had supplied the Howard family with trousers.’”

“And was the ancestral relationship between the Howard family and Badger really sartorial?” asked the Viceroy, with a grim smile.

“There is no denial of it, sir.”

“What did Sir Henry do?”

“Gazetted Howard for transfer to Juggra-pore, which was tantamount to reducing him a grade.”

“Well—introduce Mr Howard.”

Mr Jenkinson left the chamber, and a minute later returned accompanied by a young officer, in full-dress uniform, whom he formally presented to the Viceroy before retiring.

“Sit down, Mr Howard,” said his Excellency, with a slight bend of the head in return for the young man’s elaborate salute.

Howard dropped into a chair, within whose capacious arms many hearts had beaten fast and heavily at interviews with the Pro-Consul, who has been called His Majesty’s Greatest Subject.

The subaltern was a handsome, soldierly-looking young man of six-and-twenty, with clear grey eyes, black hair and moustache, and an aristocratic cast of features. He exhibited none of the nervousness usually associated with the chair of doom he sat in.

“And so you were out shooting when Putghurri, which was under your jurisdiction, was surprised?” began his Excellency, with a suave air of omniscience implying complete knowledge of the case.

“It is so far true, your Excellency, that I was on a tour of inspection duty, and in marching from camp to camp carried my gun.”

“It would have been better, Mr Howard, if you had denied yourself the distraction of carrying a gun, under the circumstances of your district being in a disturbed state, and confined your attention to your duties.”

“With every respect for your Excellency’s assumption, my district was not in a disturbed state. The raid was made unexpectedly by a tribe that lived forty miles beyond the border. And in those parts a gun is necessary for self-defence.”

“You had your escort?”

“Two troopers were all Mr Badger allowed me ; and they were in charge of my baggage.”

The calm, almost cool, attitude of the young officer, albeit perfectly respectful, and the easy and resourceful way in which he parried the points raised were not calculated to propitiate this terrestrial god of three hundred million destinies. His Excellency's knowledge of the facts of the case being limited, he was glad of the aid to memory afforded by the mention of Mr Badger.

“You appear, Mr Howard, to have addressed a most unwarrantable letter to your superior ?”

“The letter of which Mr Badger complains was a private one, relating to a social dispute which originated at the club. I am quite prepared to justify my letter and my action on that account to your Excellency. It has, however, nothing whatever to do with the official differences—”

“But the phrase you used was *privately and officially*. Is that not so ?”

“I admit that. And if Mr Badger degraded the dignity of his office by using such language officially as he did privately,

I should resent it coming from an individual whose social status—”

“That will do, Mr Howard,” interposed the Viceroy, snapping the elastic band of the docket with a click which seemed to punctuate the interview with a full stop. “The Government of India, in its official capacity, takes no cognisance of what you are pleased to call ‘social status.’ The Commission of the Sovereign is the only hall-mark that carries weight, and should carry respect, in My Administration.” Then, in a sterner tone, “You have been guilty of a very imprudent and impudent act. To sneer at your superior, for what you are pleased to call his ‘social status,’ is deserving of the reprimand and punishment the Lieutenant-Governor has very properly awarded. I confirm his order as passed, and I trust that a month’s quiet reflection at—at—h’m—the station to which you have been transferred, will enable you to more rightly understand your official, as apart from your social, duties in life.”

His Excellency pressed a bell. It was a little thing, this performing of the happy despatch for a subaltern, who—poor devil—

smarting for three months under a sense of injustice, had been confidently buoying all his hopes on his Memorial. But little things, neatly and swiftly performed (such, for instance, as making a cannon at billiards, or hitting off a reference in a book) sometimes soothe and satisfy majestic minds, and his Excellency was pleased with the dexterous way in which, on very insufficient data, he had polished off this little fish.

Howard was staggered when he realised this abrupt dismissal terminated an interview in which he had not been allowed to utter one word of justification or explanation about the real merits of the case. It had been his chief complaint that the Lieutenant-Governor had burked the facts; and the plain facts were that Badger was a cad, and had behaved caddishly. Was it possible the Viceroy was going to adopt the same line as the L.-G.?

Not only possible, but accomplished. "You can retire, Mr Howard," said his Excellency. "I have nothing more to say."

Then arose in Howard a spirit of contrition. Was it for this he had memorialised the Satrap of India, to be flicked aside

as a man flicks a fly off his writing-table? Instead of retiring, as was evidently expected, Howard took two steps forward.

"I thank your Excellency for your advice," he said in a measured voice, "which I regret I cannot follow."

The Viceroy jibbed as though a piece of plaster, falling from the ceiling, had just missed carrying his nose away.

"The appointment at Juggrapore does not suit me, and a prospect of reflection there is distasteful," murmured Howard.

At this moment the private secretary entered the room, and his Excellency loftily pointed to the door.

"For the more I pondered over your Excellency's assertion," went on Howard, ignoring the gesture, whilst the colour rose in his face, and his voice grew very distinct and assertive, "that I had been impudent to the son of my tailor—in a private dispute of which your Excellency does, and can, know nothing—the more dissatisfied I should be with your Excellency's consideration of my Memorial, which, I fear, your Excellency has not even read!"

“Jenkinson!” gasped the Viceroy, with a signal that commanded him to expel the Memorialist, “Jenkinson! Jenkinson!”

But Howard held his ground. “How would your Excellency like to be insulted, say, for instance, by the son of your shoemaker?” he asked argumentatively, but not offensively.

The Viceroy shut his eyes, as a lady might when confronted by a charging cow.

“Come, sir,” said the secretary, severely, to Howard, laying a hand on his arm.

“Coming,” declared Howard, without doing so.

The Viceroy opened his eyes. “A re-legation to your regiment to learn discipline will be endorsed on your Memorial, Mr Howard.”

“Unfortunately, your Excellency will be too late to benefit me,” said Howard, turning to retire, “for I have no intention of continuing further under your Excellency’s authority or control.”

He was in the act of working off a final salute when the secretary ejected him and shut the door. He might figuratively have

been said to have been chucked out—of course with the due etiquette demanded by the Viceregal Presence.

Cramming his helmet on his head, he strode through the ante-halls, crowded with native *chupprassis* and orderlies, gorgeous in their scarlet liveries and magnificent in their deportment, as befitted the decorative fringe of Viceregency. He was bubbling up with wrath and indignation, and choking over the swift and ignominious termination of that audience on which he had based everything, as a gambler does on his last stake. For a man who memorialises the Viceroy, over the head of the Lieutenant-Governor of the Province he belongs to, has, at least, a personal conviction of the justice of his cause.

Howard did not allow himself to think. He knew, without thinking, he had crossed the Rubicon and burnt his boats. He had, in vulgar parlance, but in a polite way, "cheeked" the representative of his Sovereign. You cannot cheek a Viceroy, and come off scathless—unless he has a very sound sense of humour.

There was only one course for Howard

to follow—to send in his papers. It meant the absolute shipwreck of a career that, six months before, had seemed as bright and promising as any young officer's in India, until that fatal promotion which placed him under Badger—a Government official who represented in his person all the vulgarity and social nausea the Competitive System introduces into State appointments

But more than Howard's material prosperity was affected by his ill-considered conduct. The possession of private means, moderate, but sufficient for his own bachelor needs, had enabled him to air his independence in preference to stifling his pride. That is often a grateful and comforting thing: but sometimes it has its contingent disadvantages. As in this case. For Howard was engaged to be married, and now he had to communicate the result of his appeal to the Viceroy to Edith Ponsonby. This in itself did not cause him much anxiety; for he believed her to be as true as most men believe the girls they love; but he had also to communicate with Edith Ponsonby's mother, which caused him to quail a little.

“I wonder what Mrs Ponsonby will

say?" was Howard's question to himself as he sat down to write the necessary letters.

A little reflection and he might have saved himself the speculation. There was only one thing she could say, being a lady with twenty years' experience of Indian society, and a perfect appreciation of the social, financial, and prospective value of every branch, and every grade, of the Government Service.

A young man without any ladder to climb was a very different *parti* from one whose foot was on the first rung that leads to the rich prizes of that most prized of all departments of State—the Political.

There was only one logical reply possible. A young man who "in a fit of pique could act with such folly" suggested prospects Mrs Ponsonby could not contemplate without serious alarm for her daughter. Mr Howard had wrecked his career, and the engagement must be broken off.

And from Edith Ponsonby herself no letter at all! Perhaps she was not altogether to blame for that, her mother being a strong-minded lady. But her silence gave Howard the cruellest cut of all.

His papers had been sent in. It only needed the formal sanction of publication in the *Gazette* to retire him into private life. For a week he was wracked and tormented, and could find no repose of mind. The regret that comes too late, the repentance that misses the psychological moment, made his life a misery. Whispers, too, were getting abroad: "the whole world was against him," as it always seems to be against a man who is jilted. Cold looks and cold shoulders were his portion at the club, where half a dozen men had already glanced askance at him. "Young ass," "Cut his own throat," were fragments of conversation he had overheard. And at all times he really began to feel a young ass, and sometimes a suspicion came to him that he would not mind cutting his own throat.

"I will book my passage and go back to England," was the determination that came to him one morning; but the next he had swept it aside. England was no place for him now—at least, not until he had done something to re-establish himself. There would be people asking questions there, as well as here. He wanted to get out of

the way, out of sight, out of mind, until fools ceased to be curious about this cursed business and stopped their inquisitorial cackling.

It was in this frame of mind that some stray reference in one of the papers to Central Asia—that portion of it which lies north of India—set his mind speculating on those snows and solitudes. Love of sport was strong in Howard. The joys of the jungle and the pleasures of the plain had ever appealed to him ; and to bag an ibex or *ovis ammon* had been as great an object of his ambition as to plant himself in a Political Resident's chair, or append his name to a State Treaty.

Shooting and Exploration—they would form a panacæa for his troubles ; they would enable him to forget a fickle woman and an act of folly, and carry him into scenes and surroundings where, amidst the breathless joys of sport, he would soon learn to smile at what he had suffered at the hands—Ye gods and little fishes!—at the hands of Viceroys and private secretaries, of spinsters and tailors.

CHAPTER II

“SHIKARI” GOTCH

ALL roads lead to Rome, but practically only one to Lahoul, Ladak and Yarkand, in the heart of Asia—and that road crosses the Himalayas, fifteen thousand feet above the level of the sea, by way of the Rotang Pass. For two-thirds of the year the Pass is a contradiction in term, being impassable. During the four summer months you may scurry over, at your peril, before 10 a.m. and after 4 p.m. Those are its working hours, when there rush and whirl through it violent gusts and eddies of icy, killing wind, with such irresistible fury that human life cannot survive under the deadly blast. A simoom of sand is less fatal than the cyclone of snow which rages here.

The Pass runs through a narrow gullet or slot which Nature has chiselled, more than a mile deep, into the granite barrier that hedges in India on the north—a barrier to which the great Wall of China is but a sort

of "keep off the grass" netting. On either side of the Pass perpendicular cliffs, towering many thousands of feet, rear up until they are lost in the cloud canopy overhead. For two miles the rough narrow track runs like a funnel, grooved deep through the mountains. Two miles of inky shadow, of appalling stillness (if the wind is down) and of a sharp, keen atmosphere that pierces the gasping lungs like a rapier. And to the traveller hurrying through there is ever present the perpetual terror that the icy cyclone may suddenly rise, and rave, and hoot and screech, and sweep the fatal passage clear of every living thing.

Although ordinarily punctual in its peculiarities, during the four short months the Pass is open the Rotang is not without its vagaries, and occasionally in the summer, for three or four days at a stretch, rages like a raving maniac. Then all the weather-bound traveller can do is to sit patiently at its feet and wait for the hurricane to expend itself. Which it does, after whitewashing the precipices with granulated snow, and, mayhap, chalking some "death returns" on the roadway.

It happened on a certain day in the month of June succeeding the events related in the last chapter, that a couple of tents were pitched on the southern slope of the hill leading to the Rotang Pass. They belonged to Howard, who had arrived three days before to find the Pass closed by one of the periodical blizzards, and was waiting patiently for a change in the weather and a chance to snick over into Central Asia.

And here, to his surprise, late one afternoon another traveller and sportsman turned up. He introduced himself as Godfrey Gotch —“*Shikari* Gotch—you may have heard of me? I write about shooting in the *Field* and the *Asian*.”

He was an ex-official in the Woods and Forests Department, who had resigned the Service because he was appointed to a district in which there was no sport.

This independence of spirit appealed to Howard in his present state of mind, which may be briefly described as “dead against all governments.” To find a man who, like himself, had “chucked the Service” suited him to the ground. A community of grievance draws men quicker and closer together

than a single umbrella in a shower of rain.

“Of course I’ve heard of you,” said Howard. “Read no end of your articles on shooting, and I am delighted to meet you in the flesh.”

After the manner of Englishmen meeting unexpectedly in Central Asia, Africa, South America, or Australia, Howard and Gotch had fraternised, and established a *commune* under canvas. You have but to find yourself in Thibet, or Uganda, or up the Amazon, or amidst sand and spinifex to realise how easily that is done.

Done without thought or consideration, as in this instance. Done from the gregarious instinct of mankind. Done with that spontaneous hospitality that prompts a man with a lantern, on a black night, to play the Good Samaritan to some luckless wight barking his shins in the dark. And, it may be parenthetically mentioned, the arrangement was considerably in favour of Gotch, whose camp equipage, carried by coolies, and consisting apparently of iron bars and wooden frames, was Spartan in its simplicity compared to Howard’s snug Kabul tent and servant’s

"pal," and his six baggage mules—the whole constituting the nearest approach to luxury that the roads, the region, and his own tolerably easy resources permitted.

Sunset found the two men thus strangely met and mated sitting down to dinner. In twenty minutes, with the swift chill that clings to the skirts of night in Himalayan altitudes, the thermometer had fallen to forty degrees. Outside the tent a camp fire crackled and glowed, and, when dinner was over, invited an adjournment to its seductive warmth.

"Go and make yourself comfortable, Gotch, whilst I give Flirt her dinner," said Howard, as he proceeded to make a dainty collection of scraps from the plates for his little fox terrier, and while she ate it patted and fondled her with a tenderness that told of affection reciprocated.

Two seats were the complement of the tent—a comfortable deck chair and a businesslike camp stool. Gotch dragged the former to the fire, and proceeded to spread himself out horizontally, without the slightest diffidence or apology for appropriating the only comfortable lounge.

Howard joined him a moment later, after

enveloping himself in a huge ulster great-coat, within the capacious folds of which Flirt very contentedly nestled, as her master balanced himself on the camp stool, and, lighting a cigar, handed his case to his companion.

“And so you are in search of a snow-leopard?” he observed. “I’ve heard of such a beast, but I did not know they were catchable.”

“Every wild beast can be caught by a trapper who has studied their ways,” said Gotch. “I’ve spent fifteen years of my life circumventing the beasts of the jungle.”

“Who for?”

“Who for not? All the Zoos in Europe to begin with. Half a dozen private collections to go on with. And for old Shadrach, the wild beast dealer, when there was no one who paid better. I have supplied him with no end of stuff. Twenty-seven live tigers, to order, for instance. But tigers don’t pay nowadays; you can pick them up out of the advertisement columns of the *Pioneer*. They are a drug on the market.”

“And a snow-leopard?”

“Ah, that’s a different thing. No wild

beast collection in the world that I know of possesses one. It is the about rarest, most fierce and most beautiful creature that exists. Its pelt is worth a hundred guineas. The Czar of Russia has a cloak of fabulous value lined with snow-leopard's fur. It was given him by the Emperor of China. That is how my little job got started.”

“Indeed. This sounds interesting. I should like to hear more about your little job.”

“Well, I daresay it is worth hearing about. And, perhaps, I don't mind telling you. But, of course, business is business. I'm a trader as well as a trapper. We are both going into the same ground. If I tell you what I am after, and why—you might go after it too. And that would spoil my market.”

Howard gave a laugh. “I've never done a stroke of trade in my life, and spoiling markets is not in my line. I'm a sportsman out for sport.”

“Good man. I wish I could afford to be. But I am out on strict biz. Look here. Suppose we make a *bundobast*—a bargain, and then I'll tell you the strangest story that

you ever heard, camped out ten thousand feet above sea level."

"Let's hear the *bundobast*?"

"You are after ibex, you tell me. The snow-leopard lives on the ibex ground. It is just possible you may come across one out shooting. And by George, coming across a snow-leopard sometimes means coming across its cubs. Suppose you give me the firm refusal for cash of all or any live cub or cubs you may bag? An off chance, you know?"

"Right you are."

"Name your price."

"Oh, I'll leave that to you."

"Well—shall we call it one hundred rupees a cub?"

"Call it that."

"Done with you. Mind it's *pucca*."

"There'll be no crying off."

"Good. Then I'll book it. Business is business. And bets and bargains should always be booked red-hot." Saying which, Gotch very gravely unbuttoned his sheep-skin coat, and drew out an old pocket-book, on a blank page of which he proceeded to write,—

“*If the undersigned happens to capture one or more snow-leopards, he hereby binds himself to give Godfrey Gotch the absolute option of purchasing them at rupees one hundred each.*”

“Just sign that as a matter of form,” said Gotch, handing Howard the open page.

The latter read it through with a tickled twinkle in his eye. “Your’e an original character,” he said, taking a side view of Gotch’s long, lean face, with its wispy, unkempt, brindled beard, and its sly, slanting eyes. “‘If I catch one, or more, snow-leopards’—if I *keddah* a wild white elephant—if I kidnap the Cham of Tartary. Well, *if*—” he italicised the “if,” good humouredly scrawled his name under the writing, and tossed the book back to its owner.

“You’re out for sport,” said Gotch, soberly, not omitting to scrutinise the signature, “and I’m out for business. Trade is trade. I never let a chance slide. I’ve lived twenty years in the jungles, and in hunting it is oftener than not that the shot you never dreamt of comes to you. So I always insure against the unexpected, and keep my gun loaded till I reach camp.”

“That’s right enough,” responded Howard, amused rather than annoyed at his companion’s idiosyncrasy. “Good sound hunter’s craft, I don’t doubt. And as you have taken the precaution to book my cooperation, and have the call of my snow-leopards, fire ahead with your yarn.”

CHAPTER III

THE PEARL OF THE SNOWS

"It is a queer and difficult contract I've taken up," began Gotch. "I'm working, directly or indirectly, for the three richest kings in the world."

He paused and rubbed his lean hands together, and heaved a sumptuous sigh.

"That's good," interjected Howard. "How does it happen?"

"In this way. About six weeks ago I was calling on Shadrach, the wild beast dealer, down by the docks in London—took home a consignment of poisonous snakes for him—and he asked me if I would undertake a tough job in mountain country.

"I told him I had no objection, provided there was money in it. And then he said he wanted a live snow-leopard.

"Well, that seemed a pretty tall order. Old Shadrach, I could see, was jolly keen

about it. So I asked him who the beast was for, but devil a bit would he let on. I pretended I didn't care, and inquired casually what he was prepared to give. He answered 'Two hundred and fifty pounds for a healthy specimen, delivered alive on board ship at Bombay.'

"It was evident the old fellow had a fat commission up his sleeve. And it occurred to me that if I could get to headquarters it would pay better. So I told him that of course I could supply what he wanted, but two hundred and fifty pounds would not cover expenses. All the same I thanked him for the tip, and thought I'd have a try on my own account to get the beast, and chance my market.

"Now, Shadrach knows I'm in touch with all the Zoos in Europe, and he saw I should soon ferret out his principals.

"So he offered to go halves with me if I would undertake the business. Of course I couldn't do that without knowing all about it. Not such a damned fool. He hum'd and ha'd a bit, and at last came out with it.

"It seems that about a year ago the

Emperor of China presented the Czar of Russia with a cloak lined with snow-leopard's fur. The Czarina took a monstrous fancy to this lining, and, Empress-like, wanted a live snow-leopard. The sort of whim a woman takes, like wanting the moon—and when that woman happens to be the wife of a Czar, it has got to be attended to. The Czar gave an order that a snow-leopard should be obtained at any cost, and a circular was sent to all the Russian ambassadors, ministers and consuls in Asia to procure one.

“Amongst others to the Russian Minister at Teheran, who mentioned it to the Shah of Persia during an audience. It was one of those out-of-the-way requests that appeal to the Oriental imagination. But what gave it a special importance was the fact that here was something the Czar *wanted*—personally. Anyone could stuff him out with diamonds, and Arab horses, and furs, and all those sorts of things that the kings who rule on the Russian frontiers are accustomed to present to the Despot of the North. But the gift of a live snow-leopard was something it would be hard to duplicate.

Something practically unique. Something that was as good as asked for.

“Now, between the Shah of Persia and the Sultan of Turkey there has been a long-standing dispute about their boundary in Asia Minor, just where it adjoins the Black Sea and the Caspian. And in this dispute, by the natural order of things, it is bang sure the Czar must come to be arbitrator. You know what the Oriental mind is? ‘Give and get. Don’t give and go without.’ From Constantinople to China *backsheesh* is God. You can’t *backsheesh* a Czar: but if you can get him something he particularly wants, and which it is improbable anyone else can supply, it comes to pretty near the same thing.

“It was the Prime Minister of Persia who realised this, and gave the Shah the tip, who determined to act on it. He sent agents to the Chiefs in the Hindoo Koosh, north of Afghanistan, commissioning them to snare a snow-leopard for him at any cost.

“Naturally, this came to the ears of the Sultan. Those two kings have a system of *espionage* that beats the French and German Secret Services hollow. The Sultan decided

he must have a snow-leopard before the Shah. Snow-leopards go up in the market. Shadrach is the largest wild beast dealer in the world, and an agent from the Turkish Embassy visits him, and gives him an open commission to obtain a live specimen of this beast.

“Twenty-four hours later, down comes an agent from the Persian legation, saying the King of kings wants ‘The Pearl of the Snows,’ which was his flowery language for a snow-leopard. Expense no object. But must have it. Shadrach books both orders.

“And there you have the biz in a nutshell—two of the richest kings in the world bidding against each other for a rarity which is to obtain for the successful chap the favour of the Czar in an arbitration over a disputed boundary. Very ridiculous and very venal, but likewise very Oriental and very true.

“I told Shadrach I would think his offer over, and let him hear from me; and, in the process of doing so (as I was returning to India), I came out by way of Constantinople.

“What happened there I am not going to tell you, beyond that I arranged matters satisfactorily for myself. This is June. By

the 31st of December I have got to land a snow-leopard alive at the Golden Horn, and I am going to do it."

"And what about Shadrach?" asked Howard.

"Oh, Shadrach is not in it now," answered Gotch, airily. "You see, he wanted to sweat me. I was to have all the risk, danger and expense, and he to sneak half the profit. That's not treating a trader fair. I wrote and told him so, after I had landed in India, and advised him to engage someone else."

"But, hang it, he gave you the tip."

"More fool he. I didn't ask him for it. And to go and offer me only two hundred and fifty pounds—"

"Better than a hundred rupees anyway," interrupted Howard.

"Ah, that's different. You are on the spot. It does not put you to any expense. And, besides, I asked you to name your own price, didn't I? You might have asked five thousand dibs. But with me it's different. I have come up here specially for this job. Suppose I fail, or the Shah of Persia gets a specimen down from the Hindoo Koosh first—where am I? Why, I

shall have lost eight months' income. But you don't stand to lose anything. You took up a sporting offer, like the sportsman I see you are, and I know you'll stick to it. You don't think I'd have given myself away otherwise, do you?"

"Oh, you're quite safe with me," laughed Howard. "But if you secure the beast, how are you going to carry it along?"

"I've got three collapsing cages with me. Had them made especially in Bombay. Teak wood and steel bars. Fold up flat till they're wanted."

"'First catch your hare,' the cookery-book says."

"Improvident advice. If your oven isn't ready, when does dinner come in?"

"How are you going to set to work?"

"Well, I'm turning it over. Lahoul is the natural home of these beasts. Unfortunately, they are nocturnal animals, and very seldom seen in the day. But when the *Gadhis* or nomad shepherds are crossing with their flocks, as they are doing now, the snow-leopards give over hunting ibex high up, and come down lower to prey on the sheep. That is what I am

chiefly depending on. I shall offer a reward to any shepherd who will bring me news of a kill. I've got noose nets, spring nets and a cage trap. If I can track a beast to its cave I'll smoke it out; or snare it, with a kid or a dog, in a dropping-door cage. All leopards and panthers are death on dogs—you had better look out for that little fox terrier of yours," and Gotch pointed to Flirt, the tip of whose nose was peeping from the folds of Howard's ulster. "Finally, there is a chance of finding cubs, for this is the breeding season. I'm bound to come through all right, one way or the other. If I can only track a leopard to its lair, leave me to catch it by hook or by crook."

"You're sanguine," observed Howard.

"Well, perhaps I've a right to be. I'm the only man who has circumvented and trapped the maneless lion of Kattywar. I netted a male in the forests of Junaghur, and it is in the London Zoo now. There are few men who can set a net, or fling one, better than I can. I haven't lived in the forests with the *Bheels* and *Naiks* for nothing. Only that was in the plains, and

this is up here. I don't like the distances and the climbing. A man can't tramp the whole of Lahoul—cursed if he can. And there are so few villages in these parts to get news from. If it wasn't for these shepherds I should shy off. But you'll see — I'll have hundreds of eyes speering for me, and when once a beast is marked down—home—I'll have it pop sure."

"You have undertaken a pretty tough contract."

Gotch winked his eye. It was of a light brown colour, very like a wild animal's. "And I've a pretty tough payment on account in my pocket. When the Sultan is spending for himself, he doesn't choke at a cipher. The price of snow-leopards is riz," declared Godfrey, with satisfaction, "and I've got ten per cent. for expenses, which will see me along."

"You don't seem doubtful of catching it?"

"I'm going to catch it," said Gotch, with calm confidence. "I've never hunted a wild beast yet, from rhino to ravine deer, that I didn't bag. This snow-leopard will be as good as a pension for life to me. Three

kings coveting it. Man, it's the finest chance any trapper in the whole wide world ever had. And if the Shah doesn't get one from the Hindoo Koosh I'm going to work him and the bally old Sultan against one another."

"But you have already received an advance from the Sultan?"

"Oh, I'll refund that. My goods go to the best market—the one that bids the most. That's trade."

Howard made no reply. He realised he had stumbled across a rather rough diamond, not to call him a sharp crystal.

"And now where have you come from?" asked Gotch.

"From Simla."

"In the Service?"

"I was in the Political Department, but I resigned."

Gotch turned his eyes round and expressed his surprise with a whistle.

"Nibbling the loaves and fishes? Gad, there is money to be made in the Political Department. Christmas boxes all the year round. I wouldn't have chucked that. Damn it—no!"

The younger man shrugged his shoulders.

"Ah, I see," said Gotch, with a confounded air of discovery. "A woman in the case, of course?"

Howard lowered Flirt from his lap and rose from the camp stool. "I think," he said, without replying to the question, "it is time to turn in."

"Oh, hold on a minute! I'd like another whack of that whisky," and with ludicrous eagerness Gotch rose and replenished his glass. "This sort of liquor doesn't travel far. If I had a case of 'green-seal' I'd give it about twelve marches. But I never carry luxuries about with me out in camp."

"I'm glad you appreciate it," said Howard, wishing that the appreciation extended to the decent conservancy of an article that could not be obtained anywhere within three hundred miles, and of which his stock was rigorously limited.

"Well—here's to Her. And better luck next time," was the form of toast Gotch considered appropriate.

"Confound it!" ejaculated Howard, "drink your peg without any toasts."

And turning round abruptly, he walked to the edge of the little plateau on which the tent was pitched.

"Good-night," shouted the irrepressible Gotch. "It's fining up and we shall be able to get over the Pass to-morrow, I think." And without more ado he turned up the huge collar of his sheep-skin *choga*, or coat, over his ears, and slipping his feet and legs into a sheepskin bag, settled himself to sleep with the unconcern of a man who has passed many nights under the stars.

"Better luck next time," sighed Howard, mechanically, to himself, as he looked at the young setting moon.

He was thinking of Edith Ponsonby.

"Flirt," he cried suddenly, "you're worth a thousand of her. You at least are faithful and true to me."

He snatched the dog up, and rubbed his face against its head. "I don't want any companion but you, Flirt. There is no calculation in your affection. It is the man, not his appointment, that you are attached to. These Indian spins—they marry appointments."

He turned and looked towards the hills behind him.

“And our appointment, Flirt, is over there. India lies behind us. So hurrah for Central Asia!”

CHAPTER IV

INTO WILD LAHOUL

THE shivering dawn found the camp struck, the mules loaded, and Howard and Gotch climbing the Rotang.

The Pass lay four thousand feet above them. The path leading to it had been carved and scarped out of the mountain-side, up which it zig-zagged, presenting an Observation Point at every turn. When the sun rose and painted the snowy peaks with warm and tender tints, relieved with blue and purple shadows, it added the charm of contrast and colouring to the cold aloof snowdrifts and glaciers. It was a scene to impress the human mind with the Infinite.

Thousands of feet below, the valley of the Beas River wound in and out, now widening, now narrowing, through ravines and gorges draped with forests of graceful pine and majestic deodars. Patches of emerald green denoted the little hamlets hanging on the

hill-sides. Flocks of sheep, straggling up towards the Pass on their annual migration, dotted the grassy slopes of the lower hills. More beautiful than an oasis in a desert smiled this sinuous green valley, nestling up amongst its bleak surroundings of grey steeps, rugged rocks and snow-clad mountains. It was a finger of fertile India thrust into the arid heart of Asia. The range which the Rotang Pass crossed marked the utmost limit of the monsoon current. Against these mighty walls the storm-clouds flung themselves, and then rolled sullenly back, scattering their precious blessings over the peninsular. Beyond them lay the rainless region — treeless, stony, barren, and deserted, but for the few hardy inhabitants who clustered in small communities by the rivers that flowed through this drear waste, feeding the Indus with the melting drainage of the Great Divide.

In the bustle of striking camp, hurrying the servants, loading the mules, and collecting coolies, the little over-night *contretemps* had been obliterated, and Howard found himself interested in his companion. *Shikari* Gotch was a name well known to Indian

sportsmen, for he was an authority on big game shooting. His articles in the *Field* and the *Asian* had secured for him a newspaper reputation. He had hunted in Kashmir and Gharwal, shot in the Terai and jungles of Central India; and from Sinde to Assam, from Gilgit to the Neilgherries, there was not a branch of Indian sport he was unacquainted with. He was a hunter and trapper by profession, and a trader by the light of nature. One of the most lucrative branches of his business was to supply English cold-weather shooting parties with "spoils." He was a dead shot, and shot purely as a matter of business. So long as horn or hide of beast, or feather or spray of bird, paid a profit on powder and shot, he would slaughter it; but if it did not pay he preferred to save his cartridges. To him cartridges were a sort of coin, and each one had to be accounted for. And very thrifty he was of the currency.

These characteristics were not yet known to Howard, who, as they toiled up the hill together, was glad to avail himself of Gotch's knowledge of Himalayan sport, and dip into

him as he would into a *vade mecum*; and Gotch, who thoroughly appreciated Howard's style of travelling, particularly his whisky and his cigars, assumed the *bonhomie* of a fellow-sportsman, and discounted future hospitality by the cheap method of paying for it in advance with sporting hints and tips. Given a man who wants and values your advice, and you may reckon on much hospitality from him, whether it be a champagne lunch in the vicinity of the Stock Exchange, or "green-seal" and *Flor-de-Javas* on the confines of Central Asia. "Give and get" sometimes applies in the West as in the East—especially if you are giving to the stomach and getting from the brain.

As it happened, a couple of incidents on the road depicted Gotch in the spirit better than any laboured description could do. A little while after leaving camp a musk deer broke from the ravine and crossed their path. Howard, who carried a rifle, bowled it over with a clever shot, as it paused for just a second. A coolie was despatched to bring the carcass, and no sooner had it arrived than Gotch cut off the musk pod, and slipped

it into his pocket, observing quite casually, "This no good to you."

The bristly skin being useless, the pod was the only valuable part of the deer, containing as it did the secretion of musk whose sickly scent is so fascinating to the Oriental olfactory sense. It is worth, in fact, twenty or thirty rupees in any Indian bazaar. Howard, out of curiosity, asked what it was.

"Oh, something the natives use as medicine," was all the enlightenment Gotch afforded him.

A little later they flushed some partridges, and although it was the close season, Gotch walked the birds up and secured three.

"I say," expostulated Howard, "you ought not to be shooting partridges in June?"

"Pooh! They are good for the pot. And the beggars here are charging sixpence apiece for fowls in the villages. I call it a rank swindle! But a cartridge only costs twopence," was Gotch's reply, which to his mind was conclusively logical and satisfactory.

By eight o'clock they had reached the entrance of the Pass. Snow still lay on

the ground, and the rarefied atmosphere made them pant painfully as they struggled up the last few hundred yards. But there was no time to halt. If once the wind arose, it would mean putting back. So the mules were loaded up, the coolies hustled along, and they began the passage.

It was early in the season and the road—to allow it that name—had not been trampled smooth by the feet of sheep. Here and there the drifts of snow were still deep. High above, on either side, reared precipices, throwing the Pass into sombre shadow. The air struck chill, and they caught their breath, and once or twice halted for a minute or two, to shelter in the caves, of which there were several in the sides of the cliffs.

Many bones lay scattered about, and Gotch pointed to them.

“Two hundred men lost their lives here one day in a blizzard that bottled them in,” he said, “and I don’t suppose there is a more deadly place in the whole of the Himalayas.” It was not a cheerful observation; but then Gotch was not cheerful, only commercial.

Half way through the Pass one of the coolies carrying Gotch's "kitchen-box" stumbled and fell. Gotch insisted on opening it to see if any damage had been done, and found a teacup broken.

"What's the price of teacups on the top of the Rotang Pass?" he asked Howard.

"Twopence-halfpenny," replied Howard, jocularly, treating the broken fragments to a kick.

"Twopence-ha'penny. Hang it all, I'll give you a rupee for one!" exclaimed Gotch in a burst of extravagance.

"I haven't one to spare, or you should have it."

"There you are. You haven't one to spare! Why does a bottle of beer cost a guinea on newly-discovered goldfields? Because there's none to spare. Demand and supply rule prices. The fortunate man with teacups to sell can corner the market on the Rotang Pass."

Howard could not make out what Gotch was driving at, but imagined he was exploiting some joke too profound to follow. But he chanced to learn a few days later that his companion had fined the poor

wretch of a coolie who had met with the accident four days' wages—which amounted to exactly a rupee—for breaking his teacup. Of such was Gotch.

It was a toilsome two miles, but they were lucky enough to make the passage without even a nip of wind on their noses, and very glad to call a halt on the further side under the lee of a rock. Breakfast was ordered, and Shere Ali Khan, Howard's *khansamah*, with the marvellous adaptability of Indian servants, soon had a substantial banquet of chops, eggs, and curry and rice ready.

And now they had an opportunity of looking into wild Lahoul, which to the north stretched beneath them like a panorama. It was a new and strange scene that burst on their vision. The green valleys, the forested mountains, the sheep-dotted slopes, the smiling farms and cornfields of the southern side of the range — India, in short, had been left behind. Before them stretched nothing to gladden the heart of anyone save a Sportsman or an Explorer.

As far as eye could reach a monstrous

cataclysm of rock and broken ground, of ice and snow, tumbled and jumbled. Ridges, and crags, and precipices; hills piled on hills; humps and hollows; gorges and ravines; glaciers and snowdrifts; a relieve map, natural size, on which they could look down. It was Lahoul—the barren, inhospitable, pitiless, waterless, wild waste of icy Lahoul.

Conceive some vast paleocrystic ocean in storm, whose lashing waves had been caught, as they reared aloft, and frozen, but on a Titanic scale, and you may faintly realise the grandeur and ruggedness of the scene that met their gaze.

“So this is Central Asia!” exclaimed Howard.

“The home of the snow-leopard,” was Gotch’s conception.

Below them, almost as a plummet drops, the River Chandra swirled in flood, charged and discoloured with the silt of avalanches that turned its turgid torrent brown. Like a snake it wriggled and squeezed through gloomy narrow chasms, deep hid beneath cliffs: chasms into which the sun could only penetrate for two or three short hours

in the day. Opposite—perhaps ten miles as the crow flies—a vast glacier spread its gleaming surface, its dazzle more trying to the eye than the mirage of the tropical desert. And everywhere ice and snow—ice and snow.

“Fine ibex ground,” observed Gotch, as he took stock of the sterile scene, “and there’ll be good grazing in another week or ten days.” He nipped off a little bud of bluish-coloured herbage, and showed it to Howard. “There is no grass like that in the world for fattening sheep, or tempting ibex into the lower ground. A pair of forty-five-inch horns, my boy—what do you say to that?”

Howard’s eyes glistened. The spirit of sport stirred within him. A pair of forty-five-inch ibex horns marked a man with distinction. If he could only bag a trophy like that, what could any Viceroy—or any tailor—do to mar his satisfaction?

“Give me an ibex—a forty-five incher—fairly stalked, and fairly slain,” he cried enthusiastically, “and I’ll say I’ve not come to Central Asia in vain.”

“I like your enthusiasm, Howard,” said

Gotch, with the placid air of a veteran hunter. "You don't show it often, but when it comes it bubbles up refreshingly."

"It's bubble or bust," said Howard, as he thought of some unavailing regrets that still troubled him at times. "Over there, on the other side," he jerked his thumb behind him in the direction of India, "it was bust. It shall be bubble here."

CHAPTER V

BEWARE THE "SEMCHOON"

As they were chatting there came a sudden weird shriek that filled the welkin. The wind had risen in the Pass. Thin wisps and torn tatters of mist and cloud swirled out of the gap behind them, and from it proceeded an unearthly concert of howls and wails, eerie and fearful to listen to, as the gale was compressed within the granite walls. You might have thought that the spirits of all the human beings who had lost their lives in that trap of destruction were calling in fright and agony to be freed.

"By George, it is time to be tumbling down!" cried Gotch. "The hurricane is rising. Come along."

He led the way down the steep northern side of the Pass, whither the mules and baggage coolies had already preceded them. There was a look of supernatural horror on the face of Shere Ali Khan as

he flung the breakfast things and implements of his craft, hugger-mugger, into a basket, and glanced timorously towards the Pass, from whence those ghostly calls came down like spirit voices.

"Buck up, old chap!" Howard called to him jocularly, "they don't bite."

"My lord laughs," protested the Mohammedan in a tone of pious reproof, "but all the ghouls of the other world are in that *Jehanum* (hell), and well for us we have passed through in safety. Praise be to the Prophet for his mercy."

Tucking Flirt under his arm, Howard hurried off after Gotch. The road presented several ladder-like short cuts, and in less than an hour they arrived at a little group of huts, dignified by the name of the village of Kokser. Here the shepherds and Lahouli traders, who passed by this route, were accustomed to encamp. A couple of flocks were folded in the vicinity.

Howard's tents were soon pitched. Gotch, too, rigged up something that looked like a bath sheet drying on a towel-horse. He could crawl under it,

but there was no room to invite a guest in, which suited Gotch, and saved his commissariat. He set up this apology for a tent as a sort of insignia of his presence, and sponged on Howard, contributing the partridges he had shot as his share towards the larder. By this plan he preserved his apparent independence, whilst benefiting by his companion's hospitality.

After dinner that evening Gotch sent for one of the shepherds in camp near by in order to make inquiries about the haunts and habits of the snow-leopard, and the prospect of snaring one. He had hurried upon this quest with but little practical knowledge of the animal, for it was one of the very few wild beasts in India he had never shot, or even seen. His scanty information was derived from books; but here again he was forced to be content with the barest details, for little was mentioned about the beast owing to its rarity. However, one fact seemed assured: at certain seasons of the year the snow-leopard descended from its solitudes and preyed on the shepherds' flocks. This inferred a period when it came

into contact with man. And in the inquiries he now proceeded to institute, Gotch laid much store by this circumstance.

The shepherd who attended in reply to his summons was a remarkable and picturesque character. He might have sat for the model of a Jewish Patriarch. His complexion was no darker than the olive ones seen in Spain or the southern provinces of France. His face was wrinkled like that of a weather-beaten sailor, for during his long nomad life he had only known the shelter of trees and caves. A long white beard, descending half way down his breast, set off his handsome features. A *choga*, or loose, capacious coat, of home-woven undyed wool, reached to his knees, and a pair of baggy pantaloons completed his attire. His name was Rehlu.

Gotch had soon extracted his story. Rehlu owned a flock of two thousand sheep and goats. In the winter he pastured them in the State of Mundi, where he disposed of his wool, and sent his surplus stock for sale to Simla. In the summer he wandered grazing through Lahoul, as far as Ladak. For over sixty years he had crossed and

re-crossed the Rotang Pass twice annually. As for Lahoul, he knew every portion of it, where grew the "*neeroo*," or blue-grass, for his sheep, and birch and bush-willow for his goats.

"And now," said Gotch, after he had allowed Rehlu to have his say, "tell me, grandfather, have you ever seen a *shoon* (snow-leopard)?"

"I have seen many *semchoon* (human beings)," said the shepherd.

"*Semchoon*? It is not concerning human beings that I inquire, but about the snow-leopard," corrected Gotch. "Of a surety all have seen *semchoon* in Lahoul. Is it not an inhabited country? But the *shoon*, the *burruf ki merig* (leopard of the snows), with the soft white fur, dotted with dark circles, and the tail like a squirrel—it is concerning that I seek information."

"*Shoon* is *semchoon*. Oh, honourable sir," answered Rehlu, solemnly and oracularly, "surely the wisdom of my lord knows that?"

"Indeed not. What you tell me I have never heard."

"My lord is learned. He can read and

write. And yet he has not heard of the *semchoon*. Rehlu wonders."

"Cease wondering, grandfather, and explain thy words."

"What is there to explain? Is it not known to every shepherd of the mountains—every inhabitant of Lahoul, man, woman and child? Are not the souls of all men ordained to be born again in a lower state? To some it is given to re-enter the world in the happy image of noble wild beasts who rule, like Rajahs, over the animal creation. Others are condemned to lives of toil, as with the mule that bears burdens; and the buffalo that drags at the plough in the valley below. Those who have lived evil lives, do not their souls enter into dogs, and rats, and suchlike unclean creatures? But the souls of the highest and the noblest find a tenement in the bodies of the snow-leopards. *Rajah*, and *Rai*, and *Thakor* (king, and prince, and baron), who have ruled with justice, and mercy, and generosity, to them is permitted this happy transmigration of soul into the bodies of those pure and sacred animals that live amongst the perpetual snows."

"And those pure and sacred animals," asked Gotch, with a touch of sarcasm, "do they not prey upon your flocks?"

"Of a surety, sahib," answered Rehlu. "But it is their right. And we render them tribute without murmuring."

"Verily, old man, thou art long-suffering. It is not wise or provident. But listen to me. I have a desire to learn where the snow-leopard lives. I do not fear its supernatural powers. In short, it is my business and my intention to catch one. And for that purpose I have come hither to this land of Lahoul."

"My lord will never catch a *semchoon*," answered Rehlu, gravely, and with emphasis.

Gotch gave a superior smile. "I have captured the lion and the tiger alive, the elephant and the stag, the *monál* pheasant, that drops faster down the gorge than a stone, and the antelope that scuds over the plain swifter than an arrow. And thou say'st I shall not capture a snow-leopard? We shall see, grandfather."

The old shepherd bowed his head before these related wonders, but held fast to his opinion. "The *semchoon* is the Spirit of

the snows. In the black night it wanders forth, descending from the untrodden crags; at dawn it returneth to where the feet of mortal may not reach. It is no common beast. It is *semchoon*. The departed souls of the high and noble are not subject to the dominion of man. My lord will be wise to beware of the *semchoon*."

Gotch laughed contemptuously. "Thou art superstitious."

"All men who dwell in these lonely mountains, who risk their lives in yonder Pass, know there are spirits and ghosts and demons in the air around them, and pay respect to the Unseen."

"I dwell here now," retorted Gotch, "and yet have no belief in thy foolish fancies. Enough of this creed concerning the Transmigration of Souls. I am not here to talk religion. I have told thee what I am seeking. Give me thy help in finding a snow-leopard."

"My help!" cried Rehlu, aghast. "My help! Never!"

"Folly speaks without thought. At thy age the answer should be slow. Thou art an old man, experienced in these parts. Be

wise and turn thy experience to profitable account." Gotch ostentatiously drew a few rupees from his pocket, and tinkled them before Rehlu's eyes. "Assist me in my search for a snow-leopard, and I will pay thee liberally for thy service."

"Ask a Hindoo to slaughter a cow! Ask a *Llama* to turn his praying-wheel backwards! What shall be my lord's mead of success? And I—Rehlu, who live in these solitudes—shall I tempt the wrath of the *semchoon*? My lord little knows what he asks."

"Thou art a fool, old man. I have made thee a profitable offer, and thou hast rejected it. Thou wilt be sorry. There are a thousand shepherds crossing the Pass presently who will show more wisdom than thou hast done, for all thy grey hairs."

"A thousand shepherds are coming across the Pass, truly. Is not this the season of the blue-grass? But not one amongst them will help my lord in his quest. We *Gadhis* worship the *semchoon*, and we fear it. We are a simple folk. Peradventure we can earn a few rupees; but many rupees will not buy us immunity from doom."

“Did you ever see such idiots as these hill folk?” asked Gotch, testily, turning to Howard. “Do you follow the talk?”

“Perfectly,” replied Howard, who had a good colloquial knowledge of the native language. “But I don’t see why you should blame him. It is the belief he has been brought up to, and at threescore years and ten it is difficult to change one’s creed. Indeed, I should have a very poor opinion of the old chap—who looks honest and sincere enough—if, believing that the snow-leopard is endowed with a human soul, he rounded on it for a few rupees. His faith may be erroneous, but his fidelity to it is creditable.”

Gotch cast a slanting look at Howard. He loved an argument; but he suddenly remembered it was not wise to dispute with a man whose whisky and cigars he was enjoying in the wilds of Lahoul. So he turned to Rehlu.

“Get out, old fool! Verily thy beard dangles from an ass’s chin. Go and graze on grass! And may the *semchoon* feast on thy carcass.”

The old shepherd drew himself up with

offended dignity, and clasped his staff. "The *kiang* (the wild ass of Thibet) wanders at will, and the *semchoon* never stalks it. But when the hunter comes it is the wild ass that gives all the game warning."

It was a neat retort; for the *kiang*, from its inveterate habit of giving alarm to every wild animal within reach, is the worst enemy of the sportsman in Central Asia.

"Well done, Rehlu!" cried Howard, with a laugh, as he clapped the old man in a friendly way on the shoulder. He was not ill-pleased at the sally, and returned the shepherd's kindly smile and *salaam* courteously. Without another word or look at Gotch, Rehlu stalked off. "Take care, Gotch, or the ass with the beard on his chin will mar your plans."

"I'll *mar* (beat) him if he does," rejoined Gotch, savagely, making a pun in the dialect. "And he might have earned five rupees."

The contemplation of such a reward, contumeliously rejected by a common hill shepherd, struck Gotch as amazing, and he could not get over it. "Five rupees!" he

kept muttering to himself, "five rupees! What an ass!"

But all the same he found that Rehlu had spoken prophetically. The shepherds regarded the snow-leopard with the same awed reverence that the snake worshippers display towards the cobra. Gotch's reward went up from five to fifty rupees, each increase costing him as much pain as the extraction of a tooth, and yet brought no success in bribing a single *Gadhi* to assist him in his quest.

His face grew gloomier and gloomier. "Damn it," he confessed at last, "this is a bad look-out. I shall have to hoof it all over these cursed hills hunting for a snow-leopard by myself."

The hundreds of eyes he had reckoned upon hiring to help him he had reckoned upon in vain. And a lucrative task, that had seemed so hopeful of execution when he started, now appeared very far from promising.

CHAPTER VI

STALKING AN IBEX

LEAVING the Rotang Pass, the road lay along the valley of the Chandra River, towards *Kailang*, the capital of 'Lahoul, some marches distant. Howard and Gotch travelled in a leisurely way, for they were now in ibex and snow-leopard country. Howard was becoming a little weary of his companion, and would have been glad enough to part company, but Gotch was far too satisfied with the existing condition of things to do anything but stick to them. There had been an informal agreement when first they met to travel together, and as there was only one road they could hardly travel apart without an actual breach.

There came, however, a compensation for uncongenial company when Howard shot his first ibex. It gave him a laborious and difficult stalk, but ended in a tremendous triumph, destined to remain green and

grateful in his memory for many a long day. There are few more exquisite personal delights than success in field sport—be it after fur, feather, or fin; antler, brush, or skin. The death of the fox, the shot that snaps a woodcock, the bullet that gives its quietus to a tiger or a stag, the fly that, deftly cast, hoodwinks and hooks the salmon, and brings it to net—all these things are often an epic in themselves to the one man. And the death of Howard's first ibex was an epic to him.

Gotch had first sighted the herd grazing high up on an opposite mountain which was divided from the camp by a deep gorge. A long investigation with the glasses and a consideration of the wind had decided the policy of the stalk. It necessitated a descent of a thousand feet, and a climb of five thousand, traversing, probably, six miles of ground, and requiring three to four hours to accomplish.

"You're on the bubble, so take the turn at them," said Gotch, magnanimously.

Howard thanked him cordially. A coin tossed should, by the custom of craft, decide who was to have the stalk, and to

get it given up to him was a graceful concession.

Away started Howard, with a single attendant. The descent to the hill stream which had to be crossed was easy enough, but then came the tug of war—the hideous tug. The ibex could no longer be seen, but Howard had carefully noted their locality under the base of a cliff that fell away from a glacier of snow. That glacier was his landmark and steering point. He had to work well to its right, until he reached the same level, and then take his chance of the ground being suitable for his stalk towards the herd.

The first thousand feet was all well enough; he was fresh and vigorous, and stiff and keen with excitement. But after surmounting the base of the hill, by which time all spring had been taken out of his action, he had to proceed with extreme caution. That which, from the comfort of a cosy camp over the way, seemed only a bit of simple mountaineering, now assumed the proportions of an acrobatic feat. The loose shale and rubble stone slid away from under his tread, and he had to pick

and choose a foothold so as to avoid dislodging stones that must go rolling and rocketing noisily down the hill. The ground beneath him inclined almost perpendicularly in places, and there were horrid moments when he found himself glancing giddily between his straddled legs into a yawning abyss. Constantly he was compelled to use his hands, as well as his feet, to haul himself up.

Excelsior! Himalayan mountaineering is murderous work, even under conditions which do not require silence and sleuth-like genuflections. The calves of Howard's legs, and the muscles of his thighs kept collapsing; his wind in the rarefied atmosphere failed him at every few steps, and forced him to rest and blow, like a horse dragging a heavy load up a slippery hill. The exertion was positively painful; the sensation of physical fatigue and "doneness" overpowering; he experienced those agonies which the spent runner does in the last lap of a three-mile race.

Then came to him those insidious suggestions which assail every novice hunting in hill country, and tempt him—even as

Christian was tempted—from the steep and narrow path to the downhill grade. Was the game worth the candle? Would he get a shot at the ibex? Suppose he staggered on to the end of this hellish climb, and did not see a horn—what a fool he would look when he lolloped back to camp empty-handed!

And Gotch would smile at him and his disappointment with the superiority of the old and experienced sportsman. He had got to dislike Gotch notwithstanding all his infernal complaisance. The idea galled him, but it also acted as a spur. He might be laughed at for being unsuccessful, but, confound it! he should not be laughed at for giving in.

So he stuck to it like grim death. Foot after foot he won his way, keeping the glacier as his landmark. A pebble in his mouth was his only refreshment. "He dared not trust his lips to his flask, or crunch a mouthful of the frozen snow that lay temptingly in the cracks and crevices. One sip would mean several—one mouthful many. And the man who sips on the hill-sides is laying up for himself much store of sorrow,

It seems a small thing to climb a hill to kill a wild goat—but try it. Put sport aside, and offer the mere toil to a thousand men as contract labour to be paid for, and not one in the thousand will carry it out. “It’s *devilish* work,” a great hunter once confessed. It requires the fever of sport to keep the frame knit. And it was that spirit which, after three hours of hooking and hauling himself up by fingers and toes, carried Howard to the point he started to reach.

And he was rewarded. He found it a spot suitable for approach to the ibex. The wind held favourable. He marked a coign of vantage, left his attendant below, and crawling up peered cautiously over.

And there—two hundred yards’ distant—squatting, utterly unconcerned, on a little grassy plateau, were the herd of ibex, four males and five females.

It was a long shot, and in that rarefied atmosphere not easy. Howard was excited and distressed with exertion, and well for him he had the wisdom to compel self-control.

“If I shoot now I’ll miss,” he candidly confessed, “and I won’t shoot until I am sure of hitting.”

So he crouched down behind his shelter, took out his watch, and deliberately allowed five minutes to elapse, until his breath came easily and his hand had ceased to tremble.

“What if the ibex had gone during those five minutes?” The idea made his heart go pitter-patter again, and that was the very thing he was trying to avoid. “Don’t be a damned fool, Howard,” he abjured himself. “Gotch is sure to be looking at you through his glasses. Show him you’re not a griffin with a gun.”

Which Howard certainly was not—but a man’s first ibex generally disturbs the nerves.

At last he decided he was in a fit and proper frame of mind and body to chance it. He raised himself up again, rifle in hand, ready cocked.

Even as he did so a distant shot rang out, and its echoes reverberated across the gorge, like the clatter of Rip Van Winkle’s ninepins.

“Gotch—the brute! It could be nobody else.”

Up started the ibex. Another second and

Howard's toil had been wasted. Quick as lightning he selected his beast, the one with the big horns, and fired. It gave a spring into the air, bounded forward, and stood still for a second. Another shot, and the rest of the herd disappeared with leaps and bounds down the break-neck steep.

But the old patriarch of the flock did not follow them! Rigid as a statue he stood. Presently he began to paw the earth, and before Howard could cram in another cartridge, swayed and sank to the ground.

At what speed Howard crossed those two hundred intervening yards it would be idle to speculate. Before he had reached the carcass of the ibex his tape was out of his pocket, and in another half minute he had the satisfaction of knowing that, in his first stalk, he had bagged a pair of thirty-eight-inch horns!

And what can Himalayan hunter want more?

If he danced, and he did dance—if his antics were idiotic, and they were certainly not conventional — if he *backsheesh'd* his attendant with five rupees on the spot, and he was guilty of that crowning act of folly—

well, no one but an Irishman shoots his first ibex every day.

It was sunset by the time he reached camp, luckily for Gotch, in a sublimely good temper.

“What the devil did you go blazing away for, when you knew I was stalking those ibex?” he demanded.

“Could you hear it up there?”

“Hear it. It simply sprang the herd. If I had been a second later I should not have had a shot at all.”

“The wind must have changed,” declared Gotch, by way of excuse. “I spotted a hare and got it for the pot.”

“Damn your hare!” cried Howard, indignantly. “I might have had a right and left but for you.”

Gotch would have liked to have resented this plain spokenness, but he had a little scheme on. There were still whisky and cigars to be enjoyed free, gratis, and for nothing.

“Well, my boy, I’ve got some news for you that will make up for it,” he said. “Whilst you were shinning up there, a man passed down the road from *Kalakot*

(the Black Castle), where the *Thakor* (Baron) Sona Singh lives, who is one of the ruling chiefs of this territory. The man told me that the ibex are as common as cows on the ranges round Kalakot. How's that for you, old chap?"

"Common as cows! Hang it! let's hear more of this."

"Let's see more of it, you mean. Anyway, I'm off to Sona Singh's territory. For, by George, you'll hardly believe it, but he has got a live snow-leopard!"

"By gad, you're in luck, Gotch."

"Ain't I? And what about you? Red bears as plentiful as jackals! How's that for high sport?"

"Great Scott, you don't say so!" exclaimed Howard in a rapture. He had the ibex fever on him after those thirty-eight-inch horns.

"So come along with me. I'm bound that way."

"Right you are," assented Howard, joyfully.

CHAPTER VII

THE BLACK CASTLE

KALAKOT lay six marches distant. It was the Castle of Thakor Sona Singh, the chief of the semi-independent Principality of Kalapore.

Lahoul is divided into several small states, governed by alien rulers, cadets of the Rajpoot caste, who formed the warriors of Ancient India, and were famed for their chivalry. To them every woman is a queen, every antagonist a belted knight.

In the high, cool altitudes of Lahoul a curious physical change had crept over these Rajpoots. They had lost the swarthy complexion of sunny India, and might almost be accounted a white race. But they retained the striking physiognomy of their ancestors, who were deemed the most beautiful people in the East. The exquisite loveliness of their women-folk had crystallised into a proverb, and "as beautiful as a

Lahoul Rajpootni" was a synonym for female perfection.

To Kalakot came Howard and Gotch one afternoon. The Thakor sent them gifts of sheep, and milk, and fodder for the mules, and invited them to a *darbar*, or reception, the next day.

"He's a cheeky young cock!" declared Gotch, as they lounged about whilst their tents were being pitched, "and is standing on his dignity. The impudence of his not calling on us sahibs first! But these old Rajpoot families, buried in the hills here, retain all the pride and insolence their ancestors possessed five hundred years ago. They claim to be descended from the sun, and have pedigrees that go back to before Adam. I'd like to jam the Thakor into a third-class railway carriage, and level him down to the life of India as it is to-day. *Caste* be damned; cash is *caste* in the nineteenth century. This beggar couldn't table a thousand pounds if he were to be shot. Very small potatoes are these hill princes. But their side—why, the Czar himself couldn't show more. It sickens me."

It was sunset. The Castle stood a couple of hundred yards away from where their tents were being pitched. A quaint picturesque old ruin, built on the edge of a cliff, over whose side it seemed tumbling. Below a valley, that, for Lahoul, was most wondrously fertile, being irrigated with numerous small artificial canals. Behind the Fort circled a matchless background of craggy mountains, from whose summits the snow never melted. The Castle itself, built of rough-hewn granite, was black with age, and weather-beaten with the storms of centuries. The crumbling battlements, the tottering look-out towers, the creviced walls which gaped and cracked from many an earthquake shock, the dry moat round its upper side, now turned into a garden, all told a tale of a time when life was fierce and full of battle, and men built castles to sustain sieges and protect their lands from rapine and foray.

But with the *Pax Britannica* all that had passed away. War remained the privilege of the dominant race only. The ancient dynasties might not unsheath the sword. The Punjab to the south, once the cock-pit

of India, was turned into a cornfield: Kashmir to the west, where the clash of arms for generations had never ceased, was now as peaceful as a pocket borough. Only the traditions of olden days lingered to be read by the fading light of this ruined Castle.

The Thakor Sona Singh, now seated on the throne, was a young man of five-and-twenty. His predecessor, Lal Singh—"The Lion of Lahoul"—had died a year before. Lal Singh was a Baron of the old school, and ruled with all the feudal state and ceremony his ancestors had observed. But he had left no heir, and the present chief, a distant relative, was a very different personage to the grand old warrior who was gone.

Howard was not without romance, and not without reading. The history of the Rajpoots is as full of stirring legend and thrilling tradition as the history of the Paladins. And this Black Castle, perched on its grey crag, guarding the valley below like some ancient armoured sentinel, appealed to him with its rugged beauty, and symbolised in its crumbling walls the sad wreck of all the legendary pride, heroism and chivalry decaying in these unvisited wastes.

And here was Gotch talking about third-class railway carriages, and wanting to jam the Thakor into one to level him down! Really, to be with Gotch was to be constantly tasting garlic.

The conversation at dinner was about the snow-leopard Gotch had come to obtain. He was full of it, for he had been making inquiries. It was full-grown and perfectly tame. It had been taught to pursue game, like the hunting cheetahs of the plains. It actually lived in the *Zenana*, or Women's Quarters, and belonged to the Thakorine, the widow of old Lal Singh.

"Sona Singh, the present Thakor, is a confirmed opium-eater," said Gotch. "Half sotted with it I am told, like thousands of these old Rajpoot nobles are. The main thing is to get him sober enough to sell, and yet stupid enough not to know the value of the beast. I wonder what I can beat him down to! I wish I had brought some Malwa opium with me. Malwa opium is to the hill drug what a Havana cigar is to a Penny Pickwick. Work on a man's weakness when you want to trade with him. The

best rifle I ever owned—a hundred-guinea one—I got from an army officer who drank. He was up shooting in Kashmir, and had run out of liquor, and was pegging away at Worcestershire sauce. You may laugh, but it's a frozen fact. I whipped down to Srinuggur, bought a couple of dozen of brandy, double marched it back, hit his camp off, and by the time he was fuddled off the first case, had bought his rifle for two hundred dibs and the remaining one. That's business. Ah, if I only had a *seer* of Malwa opium, I'd beat Sona Singh down to a bagatelle."

Howard was too disgusted to comment on this reminiscence. "I think I'll have a stroll out and give Flirt a run," he said, as he rose from the table; "it's a lovely moonlight night."

"Scoot away," said Gotch. "I have plenty to do to put my cages together against to-morrow. I reckon I'll have a snow-leopard rounded in by that time."

Whistling to Flirt, Howard strolled down the road that led to the Black Castle. Beautiful as the old ruin had appeared by daylight, it looked more

picturesque now, with the moonbeams glinting on its battlements and towers, and picking out the quaint irregularities of the rambling buildings clustered within its walls. Passing the frowning gateway, the iron-clamped door of which was closed and bolted, Howard wandered along until he reached the further side of the Castle. Here a small artificial canal had been cut, and carried like a streamlet past the walls, to the cliff's edge, where it leapt into the valley below, a thousand feet sheer down, in a slender cascade of silver foam; and a fairly successful attempt had been made to plant the precincts with hardy trees and flowering shrubs.

It was the Castle garden. Howard was unaware that he was trespassing, but, as it happened, although no wall or fence surrounded the spot, he was intruding where he had no right to be. For this garden was the recreation place of the ladies of the Thakor's Zenana.

Quite innocent of any wrong-doing, Howard strolled along, skirting the Castle wall, towards the unprotected cliff over which the stream flung itself. From time

to time, unaware of its dangerous proximity, he threw a stone for Flirt to run after, and anon stopped to admire the picturesque outlines of the castellated battlements, silhouetted against the eastern sky, in which the full moon was now rising.

Once, as he was doing so, his attention was suddenly arrested by a curious white shape that appeared in one of the embrasures, and lightly lifted on to the edge of the wall.

In the faint, misty light, for some smoke issuing from the Castle was drifting like a blue gauze between him and the object, Howard mistook it for one of the occupants of the Fort who, like himself, was enjoying the exquisite evening.

But in another instant he perceived his mistake, for the white shape leaped from the battlements, with an agility that could belong to nothing but a wild animal, and, before he had realised what had happened, a scream of agony from Flirt struck cruelly on his ear.

"Flirt! Flirt!" he shouted, and sprang forward to the place from which the sound

proceeded, under some dwarf willows that fringed the canal.

A long, lithe white body, its tail lashing the air, its eyes gleaming like opals, lay extended on the ground in the deep shadow, and in its clutch the motionless body of Flirt.

Howard had not even a walking-stick. But the moaning cry of his little pet was irresistible. Without a moment's thought or consideration he snatched up a stone, and hurled it with true aim, and all his force, at the ravening beast.

A fierce snarl, a crouch back, a spring like a flash of forked lightning leaping from a cloud, and the snow-leopard was charging at him.

CHAPTER VIII

THE LEOPARD WOMAN

Too late Howard realised his folly. He had no time to prepare for defence. Instinct guided his hand to the Terai hat he was wearing, and snatching it off his head, he flung it full in the snow-leopard's face, and profited by the momentary baffle to leap aside and avoid its charge.

The white body swept past him from the shadow of the black battlements into the shining flood of moonlight beyond, where, furious at missing its stroke, it stood lashing its sides with its tail.

Truly it was an exquisite beast! Lithe and graceful, agile and undulating as only a leopard can be. A leaf fluttering to the ground could not touch earth more lightly, a dolphin rising from the waves never leapt with less apparent effort.

But apart from this poetry of motion was its wonderous coat and contour. Its long,

soft, dense fur, almost resembling a silken fleece of creamy white, was picked out with dark spots and circles; and its tail spread like the wake of foam behind a yacht. Fair and velvety to look upon, but fierce and violent to deal with. As it whipped round, and crouched for a moment in the moonlight, there came to Howard's mind the thought, "A Fury in White Velvet!"

But he had no time for imagery. With a spring he cleared the little water-course, snatched up Flirt's body, and sought refuge behind a willow tree. The snow-leopard, balked in its first charge, shifted its legs uneasily with a movement that was clearly marking time for another.

Crouching in the silver beams, it almost looked like a leopard moulded in snow, save for the angry quiver of its tail, and the glitter of its eyes. By some muscular undulation of its body, some subtle contraction of its claws, it worked itself imperceptibly forward, and closer, into the shadow of the battlements. Larger and larger it loomed in the dim light; its round eyes scintillated with the quenchless iridescence of opals; and something

between a growl and a snarl reverberated with regular intonation in its throat.

Howard attempted further retreat, only to find himself driven back to the edge of the cliff, where the thin thread of water from the stream was tossed into a gulf of mist below. All escape was barred in that direction; he was between the devil and the deep sea.

Taking up his position behind the last willow tree that grew on the bank of the stream within ten feet of the precipice, he waited. Nearer and nearer crept the brute. Without visible effort, without apparent movement, and yet indisputably lessening the distance between them. It was stalking Howard.

Nearer — nearer — nearer! Howard had plenty of natural pluck, and yet in that extreme moment his nerve deserted him. Those opal eyes fascinated; the indistinct tremor of the white body, now clearly perceptible, made him start in spite of himself, like a feint flutters a man at fencing. The spring was coming. He could have yelled. He ever afterwards wondered why he did not yell.

And then, suddenly and swiftly, there glided between him and the crouching beast a second form. White and willowy, and, as it seemed to him, actually leopard-like itself. With a step as light, with a movement as lithe, and with an action as graceful as the leopard's, the figure passed between him and the white, sinuous body on the ground, whose back was now arched for the final bound.

A human voice sounded; two words, sharply spoken, and the next instant the snow-leopard was rolling on its back at the foot of the figure, like a fawning spaniel pleading not to be beaten.

The transition of circumstance was too sudden to be grasped in an instant by one whose brain was strung to such an acute state of tension as Howard's. Vaguely he recognised the danger was over, and as vaguely remembered the shepherd Rehlu's superstition, and connected his salvation therewith.

“The *Semchoon!*”

What else could it be—this thing that had saved him—but the manifestation of the human spirit that inhabited the tenement of the snow-leopard?

A grotesque idea, and yet not so grotesque as may appear. There was something to lend colour to the fancy. The form that stood before him seemed, to his imagination, moulded in the accepted outline of a ghost.

Moreover, it was a woman's form, and is not the eternal feminine supreme in Spirit-land?

The tall and beautiful figure of a woman, of about twenty years of age, draped in the softest white raiment of that rare and costly material of which the shawls of Kashmir are woven. A material so soft and pliable that you can pass a *chudder* through a wedding-ring without crumpling it; as light as a feather to the touch, as dense as velvet to the eye.

Its folds clung to the woman's figure, following its exquisite proportions, and displaying every curve of limb and line that seemed as graceful and sinuous as those of the snow-leopard which crouched at her feet. It required no great stretch of an imagination—dazed by danger—to be persuaded there was some weird connection, it might almost be some congenital link,

between the woman form and the leopard form. That here was the *semchoon* actually prevailing in its double character—human and animal.

Howard put his hand to his forehead. The sweat was dripping from his brow, like water. His limbs were still trembling. It did not occur to him that it was his right hand, and all gory from holding Flirt's mangled body; and that, by the action, he had smeared his forehead with blood, and given his face an appalling appearance. Even as he did so he saw the figure was that of a girl, who bent down and snapped a silver chain on to a collar round the leopard's neck. The tinkle of the metal recalled him to his senses.

This, then, was the tame snow-leopard Gotch had come to obtain, and the woman, doubtless, one of those who served in the Baron's Zenana.

And now Howard was furiously indignant at the danger he had been subjected to, and the death of his little dog. He emerged from the shadow of the willow tree and faced the girl.

She gave a cry of consternation, and fell

back a few steps, whilst the snow-leopard dragged at its chain and pricked its ears uneasily.

Howard, unconscious of the gruesome spectacle he presented, mistook the cry for one of affright uttered by a native woman of high caste surprised with her face unveiled. For many a Rajpoot lady, even in these advanced times, would die sooner than permit a strange man (especially an Englishman) to behold her features. Great was his surprise when, instead of scurrying off with the panic-stricken air of an inmate of the Zenana, the girl dropped the silver chain and came towards him, whilst the snow-leopard bounded back to the battlements, its leash clanking against the stones as it sprang up.

The moon was shining full in the girl's face. He had been startled by her apparition at first, when for a few bewildered moments he believed her to be some spirit form, but now, when he could see her features clearly, his astonishment gave way to marvel and admiration.

He had looked on many lovely faces—but never such a one as this. It was a rare and perfect type, entirely new to him. The

delicate beauty of a high-caste Hindoo girl, with large, luminous brown eyes, fringed with curling lashes, and the exquisite oval face and sensitive features of the East. In a graceful, but concerned and dignified pose she stood unveiled before him, yet displayed the sweet hesitancy of the *pardah nashin*, and the indefinable air of timidity which a woman cannot hide who has never looked into a strange man's eyes before.

"The sahib is wounded?" she exclaimed in a low voice, like music. "Alas! that this misfortune should have happened in the Castle of Sona Singh."

The tones were those of tenderest concern—soft, pitying unaffected, of a woman touched.

Howard could not understand her mention of blood flowing, and thought she alluded to the terrier, whose body he still held. He bent his head in silence; it was an unconscious tribute to her loveliness. And then, in a sort of agitation that seized him, knelt down, and laying Flirt's body upon the grass by the side of the stream, vainly sought to revive it with water scooped up in his hand.

The sudden realisation that the dog was

dead transferred his immediate attention to his little pet. It had been so true, so devoted to him. He stroked it and called it by name, and all so naturally and with such simplicity of sorrow that the action was far more eloquent than words.

But the girl only comprehended there was blood on Howard's forehead, and she feared he had been wounded by her leopard. His inattention to his own hurt increased her solicitude. She approached and knelt beside him, and dipping her hand in water, attempted to apply it to his fancied wound.

Amazed at her action, which from a native woman seemed audacious, Howard rose to his feet, and demanded, "Why do you do this?"

"There is blood on the sahib's brow. Bijli has hurt him. Let me lave the wound," she answered, with a gesture that indicated her intention.

"I am not hurt," said Howard, as he drew the cuff of his coat across his forehead, and perceived a red stain upon it. Then more gently, "You mistake. The blood is not mine. It is my little dog's, which that cursed beast yonder has killed."

Again he stooped down and fondled the small white body at his feet.

“A dog! And the sahib loves it thus?” exclaimed the girl in amazement. For to her a dog was an outcast animal, altogether unworthy of human affection.

“Ay—a dog. But it was as a child to me. It ate at my table, and slept on my bed. It loved me more than any human being ever did. Thou, a Hindoo, can’st not understand my loss.”

“Oh, sahib, I am very sorry,” came the whispered regret from the girl’s lips. “What can I do? I will punish Bijli.”

“And is Bijli the name of the snow-leopard that has killed my dog? Well may you call the brute ‘Lightning.’ He would have killed me too, but—but—” it suddenly occurred to him that to this girl he owed his own escape, and he had not even thanked her, “but for thee, who came to rescue me.”

“Alas, would I had come sooner, to have avoided this disaster. For Bijli is my child, even as this little dog was thine. He is *Semchoon*. The Spirit of my son dwells in him. Oh, my lord, I pray thee forgive Bijli.

He knew not thou wert here. This is the garden of the Castle. Herein only we of the Zenana are allowed to wander. And every evening I bring Bijli hither that he may gambol and play and stretch his limbs."

Standing before Howard in an attitude of appeal, her hands clasped, her slender girlish figure bending forward, the soft, fleecy folds of her creamy drapery revealing her willowy grace of form—again there came to Howard the suggestion of the *semchoon*. Verily she seemed to him a leopard woman.

"And who art thou?" he asked.

"I am Doolchi, the Thakorine," she answered, "the girl widow of Lal Singh, the Lion of Lahoul."

CHAPTER IX

BY THE CLIFF OF SUICIDE

IT requires an acquaintance with the iron law that governs the seclusion of ladies of high caste in India to appreciate Howard's utter astonishment when he learnt that this lovely girl in front of him was not, as he had taken for granted, some inferior waiting-woman of the Zenana, but the widow of the late ruling Baron. For, in our Eastern Empire, not one Englishman in a thousand has ever seen the face of a native lady of high caste, and not one in a hundred thousand the face of a princess of pure Rajpoot blood.

Human nature is human nature, be it in London or be it in Lahoul, and the first inspiration that occurred to Howard was, "By George! what a lovely widow."

But the next moment he was ashamed of himself. Here was a lady of lofty lineage, over whose caste scruples the tenderness of the woman had prevailed, and compelled her,

under the misapprehension that he was wounded, to discard for a moment the reserve of the Zenana, and display the emotions pity and regret awakened.

“Thakorine,” he said, and bowed low—bowed, as he felt in his heart, before the beauty of the girl—“I have addressed you without the consideration due to your rank. I did not know it was the widow of Lal Singh, the Lion of Lahoul, to whom I had the honour of speaking.”

“Little honour,” she cried, with a strange echo of bitterness in her tone. “Time was when Doolchi, the Thakorine, was verily a queen in the Castle of her lord. I ruled this land.” She swept her shapely arm round with a gesture that might have included all Asia. “But now, by the will of God, all is changed. Sona Singh rules where my son should have ruled. I am a widow, and I have only Bijli left to comfort me.”

She gave a soft, peculiar call, and the snow-leopard sprang from the battlements and came bounding towards her.

“Only Bijli left,” she repeated sorrowfully. “My lord knows the Hindoo widow’s lot in life?”

“Alas, I know it, Thakorine,” said Howard in a sympathetic voice. And, noticing, now, how she was devoid of jewels and ornaments, which the Hindoo widow must renounce, he wondered he had not before observed by this indication that her husband was dead.

“Bijli,” she cried, and shook its silver chain, “what hast thou done, O darling of my soul? Eat the dust of shame, heedless and impetuous! that has brought pain to the heart of the stranger — the sahib from distant Hindostan who deigns to visit us.”

She affected to raise her hand to strike, but the next moment, with a woman's impulsiveness, dropped on her knees and began to caress the leopard, burying her bare white shapely arms in its soft, velvety fur and nestling her beautiful face against its cheek as she kissed it.

At the sound of those kisses, at the sight of that abandon, Howard felt strangely stirred. For this woman was lovely—lovely beyond compare. And yet, in some mysterious way, so like the leopard she fondled in her twining arms. He

could not explain it, save that the suggestion came clearly in the supple curvings of her slender figure, and the white, soft texture of her raiment that seemed akin to the leopard's fleece as the two forms blended in one embrace.

Bijli half closed its eyes with content, and lifted its chin, like a huge Persian cat, to be petted. The fierce, opalesque glitter of its eyes had given way to a dull, phosphorescent gleam, like that of a glow-worm. A mellow purring sound issued from its throat. White woman and white leopard, there in the white moonlight—surely such a picture as no man's eyes had ever seen before.

“See how it loves Doolchi! Doolchi, the widow, the despised. Whose lord is dead, whose son is dead, whose star is set. What have I but Bijli?”

She seemed to lose herself kissing and caressing the snow-leopard, and to forget the presence of Howard. And, it so happened, a tress of her raven hair became unloosed, and strayed down. Howard marvelled to see how long and wavy it was. As she knelt its ends trailed on the

ground, and a gust of wind stirred it. Whereupon Bijli, like a playful cat, caught at the strand with its paw, and tossed it to and fro.

“Shame on thee, Bijli,” she cried hastily, as she perceived what had happened; and drawing back the lock coiled it behind her head with a deft action that displayed her rounded arms and bosom. “Shame on thee, Bijli, to tease me thus, and remind me my head should be shaved in mourning for my lord, Lal Singh!” She spoke to the beast, unconscious, for the moment, that Howard stood by, and making reference to that cruel custom which compels the Hindoo widow to cut her hair off.

Then she suddenly remembered herself, and turning to Howard, “My lord,” she cried, “thou see’st how Bijli loves me. How can I punish him? Verily he is *Semchoon*. The Spirit of my dead son dwells in him. He came to me when my son died. I have had him since he was a little blind ball of snow, no bigger than that”—she rounded her two hands together in illustration. “I nursed him. I reared him. I have played with him. I have never struck

him. He knows no fear of me. He is my very child. In his ignorance he killed thy little dog. Let thy resentment fall on me, not on Bijli."

Kneeling before him, pressing the snow-leopard to her bosom, enfolding it in her arms, Doolchi, the Thakorine, looked pleadingly up at the handsome young Englishman. And did not look in vain.

"I would not have thee punish it, Thakorine," he replied. "The fault was mine that wandered here unwittingly."

A load was lifted from the Thakorine's heart as she heard these words. It was something Howard could not comprehend. This Englishman, almost the first who had visited Kalapore, was, in her belief, a representative of the great White Power which had conquered India; and the fact that her snow-leopard had killed his dog made her fear greatly. But for that circumstance she had long since fled from one whose coming had filled the Castle with rumours and alarm. It was, therefore, a great relief to her to be assured that she was forgiven, and the unpardonable act overlooked.

“My lord is gracious and generous,” she said.

She was still kneeling, with one arm round the leopard's neck, and the sight of her there at his feet set the hot blood coursing through Howard's veins. Had she been a woman of his own race he would have known how to act, but the social gulf between the European man and the native woman kept her aloof from him, as oceans keep races asunder.

She waited a little spell, and then crept nearer to him, still on her knees. “Let Doolchi ask one more favour of the sahib?” she pleaded softly.

“Ask many, Thakorine. They shall all be granted.”

She glanced up to him and their eyes met. And, in an instant, without knowing why, she felt a sense of comfort. Her hesitancy left her; she rose to her feet, and joined her hands in supplication as she might have done to an idol in a temple.

“My lord will not tell of what has happened to-night. Did Sona Singh hear of it he would command Bijli's death.”

Howard could not resist taking her out-

stretched hands. It was the first time he had touched her. A thrill ran through him, as when for the first time a woman accepts a man's embrace. This was no embrace, and yet a mingling of pulsation. Warm flesh and blood touched blood and flesh that were warm. And in that touch the social gulf dividing them was bridged.

“Thakorine, my mouth is sealed. I would sooner cut off my right hand than that thou should'st suffer an instant's anxiety.”

A shy glance from her melting eyes thanked him. She bent low as one receiving a favour, and carrying his hand up pressed it to her forehead.

It was a tacit sign of submission—the surrender of the woman to the man.

The next moment the memory of her condition, in that lonely moonlit garden alone with this man, overwhelmed her. The last hand she had carried to her forehead, in wifely homage, had been that of her lord and master, Lal Singh. All her womanly feelings returned—and yet did not return, for unconsciously they had guided her in her treatment of this stranger. She marvelled at it, for this white man from the

Far Yonder represented the great ruling race of whom she had heard such grim and terrible stories told in the Zenana. And, lo, he was kind and gentle; he had forgiven Bijli's sin, and treated her with such deference as womankind in the East never experiences. He was young, he was handsome, and he had pressed her hand.

What had she done? This was a crime. She—a *pardah nashin* princess, and a widow—to carry the hand of another man to her brow, as though he had been her lord and husband!

Bijli crouched at her feet. In an access of emotion she flung herself upon the snow-leopard, twining her arms about its neck, and fondling it with some of the devouring affection of a dam towards its offspring.

As he looked down on her there came to Howard the sudden recollection of Gotch, and the reason of his visit here. He felt he could not leave the Thakorine in ignorance of it.

“Thakorine,” he said, “I must set thee on thy guard. The Englishman that accompanies me has come hither in search of a

snow-leopard. He has heard of thine, and desires to purchase it."

The Thakorine sprang to her feet. "To buy Bijli?" she cried, flinging back her small shapely head. "To buy my *semchoon*—the Spirit of my son. All the gold in Hindostan could never do that," and she laughed scornfully.

"Craft succeeds where gold fails," answered Howard, gravely. "My companion is crafty. And Sona Singh—they say—besots himself with opium."

There came into the Thakorine's face a sudden expression of awakened alarm. "But Bijli is mine! Mine own! The Spirit of my son! Have I not told my lord I reared him?"

"My companion is crafty," repeated Howard, significantly, "therefore I set thee on thy guard."

A new idea—a new danger, such as she had never dreamt of before, suggested itself to the Thakorine's mind.

"And Sona Singh is terrified," she soliloquised to herself. "He fears thy coming, sahib. He believes that thou and thy companion are sent by the British Govern-

ment to make inquiry into his misrule. It is known to all that the people complain—that Debi Ram, the Minister, administers injustice, and practises extortion—that Sona Singh is but a senseless sot, and coward, and tyrant, in whom the blood of his race has turned sluggish. Debi Ram is my enemy, and Sona Singh is as dough in his fingers.”

“So much I had learnt. Wherefore I warned thee.”

“And if—and if—” her lips slowly framed the words, “the Thakor orders Bijli to be given up—what can I do? The Zenana has no voice in the affairs of State.”

“Thou must be firm, and refuse, Thakorine.”

“I—a widow—and oppose my will?”

Her gesture was more eloquent than words, as she stood wringing her hands, and looked appealingly at Howard.

And then happened something very strange. The sad inflection of her voice seemed to convey her sense of sorrow to Bijli, who, lifting lightly on its hind legs, laid a paw on each of her shoulders, and buried its soft head in her bosom.

She clasped it to her with a passionate

caress, and kissed it wildly. Marvellous was the degree of love, almost maternal it seemed, of this woman for her leopard. And even more marvellous the strange, subtle similarity between them that indefinitely suggested an almost incomprehensible community of form and nature. The white, velvety outline of the leopard, erect, the voluptuous, willowy grace of the slender girl figure, draped in that exquisitely soft, white raiment; the white faces close together, white limbs and white arms clasped and intertwined. Howard looked at the conjunction, and his soul seemed to accept the superstition of the *semchoon*.

A silence followed—long and almost painful. And then there came a sob from Doolchi.

“Thakorine,” said Howard, “thou must be brave.”

“Alas, my lord speaks without knowing the disabilities under which I am placed. Thy words have opened my understanding. I perceive a great danger. Thy companion has but to demand Bijli, and it will be given to him. There is a great fear in the Castle. A woman of the Zenana was

murdered a month ago. Whispers of it went abroad, and thy coming was connected therewith. She was the daughter, young and comely, of a *Gadhi* who is a subject of the British Raj. Sona Singh would have left his slippers at her door, but she repelled his advances. There was trouble in the Zenana—a great scandal it was difficult to hush. One night the girl was carried here—the Thakorine took a few steps forward to the edge of the precipice, and pointed down it. “They said it was suicide. Is not this called the Cliff of Suicide? And we of the Zenana who rebel, hither we are forced to come, and no more is heard of us! Many have trod this path. The stream that splashes on the rocks below has washed away the blood of many. Who knows but that it may yet wash away the blood of Doolchi, the Thakorine?”

Howard glanced at her with awe, and a great feeling of pity crept over him as he saw her standing there, and realised something of the secret tragedies of the Zenana.

“But why tell my lord of these things?” she went on. “Only there is fear in the Castle, and whatsoever thy companion

demands that will be given him. And unless thou wilt help me I shall lose Bijli."

"What help I can render is assuredly thine. But between me and my companion there is no friendship. He has come from across the Black Water to secure an animal of this rare species. He is avaricious and crafty. It means to him much money. I cannot turn him from his covetousness."

"And he will seek to buy Bijli?"

"Has he not come hither to buy it?"

The Thakorine lowered Bijli to the ground. For a moment she stood irresolute. Then, after the common suppliant custom of the East, knelt down, and bending her head to the ground, touched Howard's feet with her hands joined together at her forehead.

Men had done this a hundred times to him. Amongst the lower castes of India it is an ordinary form of appeal. Towards the priestly Brahmin it is almost universally adopted by suppliants of other castes. But from a native lady to an English gentleman the action assumed an entirely new light.

Howard stooped rapidly down, caught her by both arms, and raised her to her feet.

For a moment he held her and she made no effort to break free. Again their eyes met.

The moon was shining on her face. He could see its every feature. Her large, luminous eyes glistened, and tears gathered on their fringes. There was appeal in her face—the appeal of the weak to the strong—of the woman to the man.

Much might have happened in another minute. Human nature might have bridged the racial gulf, and made light of those limits which the East imposes on the West. But, from the battlements, came the quavering voice of a woman, calling to the Thakorine. Doolchi started with a timid look. “I must go,” she whispered. “It will be death to me if I am discovered thus with the sahib.”

“Go then,” he answered, deeply anxious not to compromise her, “and trust to me to help thee if I can.”

“My lord,” she answered, with one fleeting look of gratitude, “I trust thee. Am I not thy slave?”

And the next moment, to the tinkle of the silver chain, the Thakorine and Bijli were running towards a small door that opened through the battlements into the Castle.

CHAPTER X

THE DURBAR

THAKOR SONA SINGH, ruling chief of Kalapore, sat in Durbar awaiting his visitors.

The Hall of Audience was hung with gorgeous draperies, and carpeted with rich rugs, disposed with barbaric splendour. At the upper end a cushioned divan represented the throne. In front of it a magnificent carpet was laid, flanked by two dilapidated chairs, and surrounded by cushions, spread in a semi-circle, for the officials of State. Behind the throne two windows, concealed by grilles, indicated that the ladies of the Baron's Zenana were permitted, under suitable precautions, to witness the scene. For a Durbar at the Castle of Kalakot, attended by two sahibs, was a function without precedent.

The Castle had been laid under contribution to lend magnificence to the event. Troops

lined the approaches — handsome, stalwart Rajpoots, with fierce mustachio'd beards, whose ends were twined and tucked behind their ears. Their scarlet uniforms might have lacked consistency, but they excelled in colour. Crimson and gold gleamed and glittered everywhere. Flags flaunted and steel flashed, drums beat and horns were blown. Half a dozen sentinels, in chain armour that had been made a century before, and wearing lacquered steel helmets of an antique shape, plumed with scarlet egrets, recalled a mediæval age.

The Hall of Audience was crowded. The Thakor's subjects had been commanded to muster from miles around. Every man was in his gayest garments to do honour to the occasion.

Sona Singh sat on his cushioned throne—a tall, thin debauchee, who might have been handsome but for the ravages of the drug to which he was a slave. The smudge of *surma* under his eyes, the tints of *henna* on his nails and fingers, the languid attitude and gestures he affected marked him as effeminate as well as weak and sensual. More than one in the hall whispered to his neighbour, "Alas

for the days of Lal Singh, the Lion of Lahoul!"

At the Thakor's foot, in a crouching position of humility, squatted the Minister, Debi Ram. He was a Hindoo of the commercial caste, keen, cunning, unscrupulous, extortionate, and, where he could be so with safety to himself, tyrannical. He fawned on his master, like the sycophant he was, and yet he wielded supreme power in the State. He was rich, as riches went in those parts, notwithstanding you might have mistaken him for a menial pipe-bearer, so unpretending was his Durbar dress, so mean and mincing his bearing.

And hidden in his girdle he carried Gotch's promise to pay five hundred rupees if he arranged the matter of the snow-leopard.

There came the report of matchlocks fired in an indiscriminate fusilade. It was the Kalakot substitute for a salute of State, and a herald announced the *Sahib Bahadhurs* Gotch and Howard.

Gotch, appreciating the importance of thrusting himself into the place of seniority, pushed forward, and striding up to Sona Singh, who had risen to his feet, shook him

by the hand. To Debi Ram he vouchsafed a most polite salaam. Then he coolly introduced Howard, as if he were a subordinate.

The usual florid compliments passed. The stereotyped polite inquiries as to each other's health and happiness were formulated. Sona Singh was a semi-independent chief, who, had he ever entered civilised British territory, would have been entitled to a salute of nine guns. He was as full of pride and punctilio as his miserable physical condition permitted.

Howard, as an ex-political officer, took his measure at once. He had often dealt with debauched Rajahs and Nawabs — half maudlin, wholly wrecked figure-heads, whom their ministers encouraged in vicious habits in order to incapacitate them from State duties. The brandy bottle, the opium bowl, the stimulating drugs of the Zenana, are all lavishly used to enfeeble the brain of the Indian potentate in those out-of-the-way places where the protecting influence of the British power is not represented by a Resident.

Before coming to the Durbar, Gotch had told

Howard nothing of his intentions or designs. The latter had to explain the loss of Flirt, whose body he had cast over the Cliff of Suicide—with a grievous pang—and whose death he attributed to an accident. When he endeavoured to find out Gotch's plans, a knowing wink was the only answer he got.

So all he could do was to wait and watch events, and trust to luck and his own wit to find a way to assist the Thakorine.

Presently Gotch, with a significant look at the Minister, broached the subject that was nearest to his heart.

“Your Highness is aware,” he said, flattering the Thakor with a title he had no claim to, “that it is a custom with great rulers to collect menageries of wild animals. Your illustrious kinsman, the Maharajah of Jey-pore, possesses a magnificent collection of beasts of the jungle, and has presented several noble specimens of tigers, and other lordly animals, to the Great Queen, who has accorded him her particular favour.”

“That is true,” concurred the Minister, “Would that my lord might enjoy such a favourable opportunity!” And he leant forward and whispered into Sona Singh's ear

some concocted story of benefits derived by the means indicated.

“Possibly it is in your Highness’s power to so benefit,” suggested Gotch, “for I am informed there is a tame snow-leopard in your Castle. Have I heard aright?”

“The sahib has been truly informed,” said the Minister.

“Then assuredly the possession of it places your Highness in a most fortunate position.”

Sona Singh blinked his eyes, and looked at his Minister for elucidation.

“Let the sahib explain his words,” said Debi Ram.

“The Great Queen,” went on Gotch, “desires to obtain a snow-leopard for her menagerie, and I am commissioned to get one.”

“The Great Queen,” gasped the Minister, with assumed surprise, whilst a murmur of wonder arose from the crowded hall.

“Assuredly the Great Queen.”

“Then great is my master’s good fortune,” declared Debi Ram, amidst a clatter of “*Wah Wah’s*” from the populace.

“I say, Gotch, this is not fair play!” protested Howard.

"What d'ye mean?"

"Well, you know you're not getting this snow-leopard for the Queen, but for yourself."

"Pooh. What does it matter? Don't put a spoke in my wheel. This is my business," answered Gotch, roughly. "Mind your own!"

Meanwhile the Thakor and Minister were whispering together, the latter evidently intent on impressing his master, who lolled over the cushion with sottish eyes.

"Debi Ram," insinuated Gotch, smoothly, "a Minister of your special wisdom and penetration must see how golden is the opportunity presented to the Thakor Sahib?"

"My master can, of course, refuse the Great Queen nothing," said Debi Ram, and leant over towards the Thakor. "It is for the Great Queen," Howard heard him whisper. "My master must tender it as a gift."

"But the *semchoon* belongs to the Zenana," objected Sona Singh. "And thou knowest *her* temper, Debi Ram!"

"And shall a voice from the Zenana prevent my lord from advancing his own interests?" demanded the Minister, in a

sneering tone, that could be plainly heard by those immediately surrounding. "Give the command, my lord, and I, thy servant, will see it obeyed."

"Be it so," said Sona Singh, wearily. And then to Gotch, "Sahib, I present thee with the *semchoon* for the Great Queen."

"Great is your Highness's generosity, and great shall be your Highness's reward. In the name of the Queen I accept the gift with thanks."

"Stay! Sona Singh," cried Howard, "you are misinformed. This sahib is no agent of the Queen of England. He is a *bopari*—a trader, whose business it is to snare and sell wild animals. He has been offered a fabulous price for this snow-leopard, and seeks it only to enrich himself."

"By God, Howard, I'll make you pay for this," burst out Gotch, furiously, "spoiling my trade."

"Don't Howard me. Do you think I am going to sit here quietly and listen to you deceiving these people with deliberate lies?"

"Lies you call them?" retorted Gotch; and changing his speech into the native dialect, drew from his pocket a red silk bag,

from which, with much parade, he extracted a document, and holding it up for all to see, "This is a *Firman* from the Sultan of *Roum*," he cried, "commissioning me to obtain a snow-leopard for the Empress of Russia—the Great Queen of Asia. Here is the Sultan's seal—here his august signature. And this sahib, who has come hither to shoot goats by your Highness's favour, has dared to call me a liar. Well for him your Highness's presence prevents me from punishing this insult to my birth and breeding, who represent the Sultan of Turkey, and the Emperor and Empress of Russia. These are my credentials. I command they shall be read!"

As he spoke he flourished a parchment with portentous seals attached to it, and covered with Arabic characters.

Then, turning to Howard, asked him with a sneer, so that all might understand, "Do you dispute this?"

The Minister took the parchment with reverend hands, salaamed, and held it up before Sona Singh.

"Who is the Empress of Russia in the Queen of England's dominions?" demanded

Howard, impetuously. "It was of the Great Queen—the Queen of England—this trader spoke."

"North of these snows," cried Gotch, pointing dramatically through the open windows at the mountains, "there is but one King—the Czar of all the Russias; but one Queen—the Empress of Asia. It is for her Majesty that I am here to accept his Highness's gift."

"A gift to a trader," exclaimed Howard in a tone of contempt. "Ask him, Sona Singh, how many thousands of rupees he will receive for this gift? You are tributary to the Queen of England; pay not tribute to another. Beware!" He shook a warning finger at the Thakor. "What will the Power at Simla say if it is whispered Sona Singh sends gifts to Russia?"

The Thakor paled at this sudden turn of the argument, and from the people in the body of the hall arose a murmur of disapproval, which showed that the point had struck home.

But Debi Ram was a cunning knave, and had no intention of letting the discussion wander out of strict lines.

"A gift is a gift," he cried, "and the gifts that pass between rulers can never be recalled."

"I have heard," declared Howard, as a last resource, "that the snow-leopard is not Sona Singh's to give."

"Your Highness," cried Gotch, "I pray you rebuke this sahib who dares to question your authority in your own State."

"Whose, then, is the *semchoon*?" sneered the Minister.

"It is mine!" cried a woman's voice, as the purdahs parted that curtained an alcove behind Sona Singh, and forth into the Hall of Audience stepped Doolchi, the Thakorine, leading Bijli by its silver chain.

CHAPTER XI

DOOLCHI, THE THAKORINE

A CRY of shocked astonishment and condemnation reverberated through the Hall of Audience. Never before in the history of the Court of Kalakot had such a shameful public incident as this occurred. A Rajpoot princess, unveiled, and standing there for all men to see.

The Thakor was staggered. It was as a blow struck in his face. The sluggish blood drained into his sapless cheeks, and he lifted his lean arms in frantic expostulation.

“Wanton, and without modesty,” he cried, “back to thy purdah.”

“Wanton,” echoed the Thakorine, in accents of superlative scorn, as she drew her tall figure proudly up. “Thou darest to call me ‘wanton’? Thou—the opium-soddened disgrace of the illustrious line, whose honour culminated and died with my goodly lord, Lal Singh. Thou—that would’st rob me, his

widow, of her most precious possession ; that would'st give this shop-keeping sahib"—she flung a contemptuous gesture at Gotch—"the *semchoon* of the widow of Lal Singh. Where is thy chivalry? And thou"—she turned and pointed her finger at Debi Ram—"mean fawner—flatterer—huxter, who hast had the effrontery to declare that if this puppet prince gave thee the command thou would'st see it obeyed—here is Bijli. Make good thy words."

She drew the snow-leopard forward by its silver chain, and uttered a peculiar cry that roused its temper. In a moment its fur was standing on end, as with ominous growls it slowly turned its head round, only waiting its mistress's further command.

Debi Ram slid behind Gotch's chair, terror in his fat, oily features, whilst Gotch backed his seat with an action that indicated inconvenience.

"Witch," he cried, "keep back thy cursed leopard. The brute is dangerous."

Holding the chain to restrain it to a limit, the Thakorine deliberately allowed Bijli to sniff the face of the shrinking Englishman. Then, with a contemptuous laugh, snapped her

fingers, and gave a low, soft call. Bijli returned and crouched at her feet.

A murmur of extorted admiration cluttered in the crowded Hall of Audience. The transcendent beauty of the girl, draped in her exquisite garb of white, and her weird mastery of the wild beast, appealed in all its dramatic force.

The Thakor had drawn a jewelled sword, and attempted to assume an attitude of menace. A score of retainers and sepoy, from the back of the hall, came hurrying forward with clank of arms, unceremoniously pushing their way through the crowd of onlookers who had risen to their feet.

“Death to her!” cried the Thakor, choking with rage. “Death to her, who has disgraced the purdah of my house! Death to her, who so shamelessly parades her face before strange men!”

There was more than anger, there was jealousy, in his features as he looked at this beautiful girl whom he had long desired. It was as a stab to him to think that other men should gaze on one whom he had marked for his own, and used every endeavour to gain, but as yet without success.

And now he could have killed her. At his orders the soldiery circled round the Thakorine. Amongst them were warriors worthy of the traditions of their tribe; men who, in another case, would sooner have cast themselves upon their own swords than drawn blade against a woman. But in their eyes this girl had not only irrevocably disgraced her sex, but their chief, and through him the whole clan. Death was her due!

Motionless as a statue stood the Thakorine, the snow-leopard couchant at her feet. Her head was poised high, her eyes flashed with a strange light, she was a woman insensate to fear of death. Then, with a frenzied sweep of her hand, she struck her heaving bosom.

“Strike!” she cried. “Strike here! Let the widow of Lal Singh die by the sword blades of his warriors.”

“Back with you!” cried Howard, “cowards and craven-souled! Would you raise weapons against a princess?”

“She is no princess,” shouted Sona Singh, furiously. “Immodest and dishonoured strumpet, let her die the death.”

Goaded on by excitement and curiosity in

the extraordinary spectacle, the populace were pressing forward almost to the edge of the carpet. A few cries of pity, but more of shame and condemnation rent the air. The scandal was insupportable. Shrill voices sounded from the latticed windows behind the throne, calling for the Thakorine to be killed.

But Debi Ram did not lose his head. Creeping to his master's side, he eagerly whispered into his ear words of caution.

"Later, my lord, later! Not here—not now! It were not wise to kill her thus publicly. Blood spilt in the open cannot be washed away with a *lota*. There are too many unfriendly eyes that witness. Simla will hear of it."

"Back with you!" shouted Howard, stepping forward, as he noted a waver in the ranks. "One step forward, and by Holy Gunga the rule of the chief of Kalapore shall be ended."

But Sona Singh had been roused from his lethargic state by a stimulant more powerful than opium. The poison of jealousy had driven him half mad, and as he looked at the Thakorine a conflicting tumult of thoughts

filled his breast. His evil passions were aroused; she had by her action put herself out of his reach, for she had made her beauty public property, and other men had enjoyed what he had hoped to monopolise. Shaking off the Minister with an angry movement, he advanced himself to do the deed his soldiers hesitated at. His besotted brain comprehended only that the honour of his Zenana was compromised, and the fairest and most coveted flower in it besmirched by this exposure of her charms.

Howard caught sight of him reeling forward, drunk with anger and jealousy, and a demonish look in his face. The feeble hands of the debauchee raised a shaking sword, the curved blade trembled in the light.

With a quick movement Howard grasped the uplifted wrist, and forced the Thakor back. "Enough! Be seated, or—" and he raised a threatening hand to add meaning to his words.

A cry of indignation burst from the populace. To lay a rude touch upon their chief was an insult to the State. Howard's liberty, if not his life, hung in the balance.

And now Gotch intervened. "You fool," he cried, "to act like this. You, an ex-Political!"

Simultaneously the Minister came forward. "Peace! peace!" he shouted, holding up his arms to keep the guards and populace back. Then to the Thakorine, "Retire, lady, to the Zenana, and await his Highness's pleasure. But for this wild beast, it belonged to the Thakor Lal Singh, and has passed to my lord, Sona Singh, by right of inheritance. It is his Highness's command that thou shalt deliver it up, and so soon as the Sahib Bahadhur is ready, it will be required of thee."

"Oh, I'm all ready now," said Gotch. "I have a cage for the beast, and nets outside. Let them be brought in."

Men were despatched for them, and a minute later a cage was carried into the Hall of Audience and set down.

During these proceedings the Thakorine had remained standing in the centre of the carpet like a woman in a dream. She made no sign that she was conscious of what was going on.

Gotch opened the cage door and set it

ready to receive the animal. "Command her, your Highness, to make the beast enter."

Sona Singh did so. But the Thakorine, standing motionless, save for her hand that gently fondled Bijli's head, took no heed.

Debi Ram came forward, and whispered to Gotch, who nodded, "Yes. I can manage it."

Then he began to unfold the nets, and hand them to attendants, with instructions how they were to be spread.

Once more Howard attempted to intervene. "I protest against this," he cried in a loud voice. "The leopard belongs to the Thakorine, and shall not be taken from her."

For an answer Gotch made a sign to the guards, who immediately grouped themselves round Howard, and prevented his further interference by interposing themselves between him and the girl.

Gotch advanced with the net poised to cast it over the snow-leopard. It was an extraordinary scene—an extraordinary task—to snare a savage beast in open Durbar. It needed skill and courage, but, where his craft was concerned, Gotch was not lacking in either.

In this last extremity the Thakorine gave

a pitiable glance round for her champion, only to realise he was practically a prisoner in the hands of the sepoys.

The snow-leopard lay at her feet; Gotch was stealthily approaching; the net was ready to be flung. Urged on by Sona Singh, who was making signs, three men were closing in to seize the Thakorine and drag her away. A tragedy was imminent.

But ere the net was cast, the circle completed, the Thakorine assumed the offensive. A cry to Bijli and the leopard reared up. An imperious gesture, and the men fell back. With stately steps she walked forward to the edge of the carpet, and stood facing the assembled host, her hand pressed to her bosom.

“People of Kalapore!” she cried, “to you I appeal. Brothers! Descendants of the Sun! Warriors of my lord and husband’s caste—listen to the complaint of Doolchi, the Thakorine, she who was wedded and who bore a son to thy ruler, Lal Singh!

“He whosits on the throne, this Sona Singh, the cousin of my honoured lord, is my enemy. And why? Because I have spurned him many a time, as I now spurn him in public.

He would have left his slippers at my door. That is the honour he contemplated for the widow of the Lion of Lahoul. This dog, this jackal, would have lorded it in the dead lion's den.

“He, and yon rogue who robs you, Debi Ram—the panderer to his master's lust—have never ceased from persecuting me since my lord died. The walls of the Zenana are high and thick, from within them no whispers penetrate to the outer world. There are things done there to helpless women that may not be spoken of. My jewels have been taken from me; my lands, that my lord dowered me with, have been escheated; I have been deprived of my waiting women, all save one; month by month my station has been rendered more and more humiliating. And Bijli—Bijli, my *semchoon*—has been my only protection against these vile creatures and panderers who design dishonour against me.

“And to-day there comes this trading sahib. He would buy Bijli for his profit. He has arranged the matter with Debi Ram. The widow is not without friends in the Zenana, and knows all.

“And this”—she knelt down and laid her white arms about the snow-leopard’s neck—“is to me a son. In it dwells the Spirit of my son. Ye know of the *semchoon*—the human soul that enters into the snow-leopard. Ye know I bore a son to my lord, Lal Singh—a man-child who died. Had he lived he would have ruled over Kalapore. But Siva, the Destroyer, willed otherwise, and I who was a happy wife and a proud mother—widowed and childless am I.

“It was when my man-child died that my lord, Lal Singh, brought Bijli to my chamber. My lord’s heart was broken with grief. But even in his sorrow and affliction he thought of me. ‘Take this,’ he cried. ‘It may be that the Spirit of thy son is here.’

“I took it. Little, and small, and white, and helpless—like my dead son had been. I placed it in my bosom to warm it. Had not my lord said that the soul of my son might be in this new-born *semchoon*? Was it for me to question my lord’s wisdom?

“And Bijli—little, and small, and white, and helpless—lay in my bosom, where my dead son had lain. The yearning of maternity came to me. And I thought,

‘the soul of my dead man-child has passed into thee, little helpless thing.’ I suckled it. And Bijli is to me my son.”

For a moment she bowed her face, and buried it in the leopard’s neck. Then, with an effort, rose to her feet and faced the people.

“And now, brothers, ye know what all the Zenana knew — what this dog, Sona Singh, knew—what Debi Ram knew when he accepted the bribe now in his girdle to part my son from me, and consign my *semchoon* to the cage of this white outcast *bopari*. And ye know, too, the reason of this act that would have deprived me of my sole protection against this shameless kinsman of Lal Singh’s, who sought to dishonour the chamber of my dead lord.”

She slipped her hand into her bosom and drew forth a small glittering object. It was an idol in the image of Siva, the Destroyer, of pure gold, with emerald eyes, and ruby lips, and flashing diamonds for ears. Pressing it to her forehead, she held it up aloft for all to see and venerate. Immediately an awe fell on the people, as their hands were carried to their foreheads in adoration.

“Listen to my vow! I, Doolchi, the Thakorine, standing here unveiled before you, command you to take heed and bear witness thereto. I renounce allegiance to Sona Singh, I renounce the Zenana, I renounce my caste. By this image in my hand I call on Siva, the Destroyer, to accept me as his slave, and into his mighty keeping I confide the Spirit of my son. And if he harkens to my prayer, I vow that I will go forth and serve in his Temples by Holy Gunga’s stream. To Siva I offer up my body, and my soul, in return for his protection for my son!”

She stopped speaking and again elevated the idol. With one accord all heads were bent before that awful symbol. Turning slowly round, she passed towards the door, and disappeared behind the purdah, followed by the *semchoon* tinkling its silver chain.

CHAPTER XII

SOME REFLECTIONS AND A BEAR HUNT

THREE days later Howard's camp was pitched outside the boundaries of the territory of Thakor Sona Singh, and he found himself looking back at his strange experiences at the Black Castle as a dream.

Directly the Thakorine had left the Durbar Hall, Howard had taken advantage of the effect caused by her dramatic exit, to inform the Thakor that a full account of all he had seen and heard that day would be submitted to Simla, and, in the sensation this public announcement created, stalked out of the Hall of State.

Gotch, who was not aware of the peculiar circumstances under which Howard had retired from the Service, conceived that a young man who had been so fortunate as to obtain an appointment in the Political Department, must necessarily be acquainted with a host of influential friends. He intimated this to Debi Ram. The Minister

was exceedingly anxious to hush up the scandalous incident of the Durbar. Too much had already leaked out about the secrets of the Zenana. So, in collusion, these two conspirators agreed upon a plan of action.

The next day a State intimation was sent to the Englishmen's camp, politely requesting them both to quit Sona Singh's territory. Gotch at once assented and Howard had no choice but to acquiesce. He dared not exhibit any personal anxiety about the Thakorine, but he ventured on a stipulation that she should remain unmolested, and be allowed to retain Bijli.

"The wanton can no longer remain in the Castle," declared Debi Ram, decisively. "She will be sent to join the courtesans in the Temple of Siva. As for the snow-leopard, it was poisoned last night."

Between Howard and Gotch the briefest parting words sufficed. "You go your way, and I will go mine," said the *Shikari*. Howard selected the west; Gotch took the east.

It was with a heavy heart Howard resumed his journeyings. Visions of the

Thakorine, sorrowing for her slaughtered pet, haunted his memory. He was far from satisfied as to her own fate. The poisoning of Bijli might be a prelude to her murder. He remembered with a shudder the Cliff of Suicide—that path so many had been forced to tread.

He recalled the picture of Doolchi as it lingered in his recollection; not the one during that last scene in the Hall of Audience, when she faced, unveiled, the assemblage of men, and dared the soldiers to strike; but the gentler picture of the leopard girl, whose melting eyes had pleaded and glanced timidly at his in the moonlit garden.

Alas, between them yawned the gulf that divides West from East; the gulf of Caste and Custom, of race and religion. In the India of to-day, as in the India of olden ages, a Rajpootni woman is further removed from an Englishman than a European nun. Easier to pierce the walls of a convent than the purdah of a Zenana. What, then, was the use of thinking of her? Thinking would never bring him in touch with the Thakorine again.

Despite the ridicule that has been lavished on it, it is easy to fall in love at first sight. And Howard had fallen in love. He knew it was with "the impossible," but that did not alter the initial fact. He endeavoured to analyse his feelings, with the result that he found himself wondering how he had ever imagined himself in love with Edith Ponsonby.

A photograph of her remained in his possession, and he drew it out and looked at it. It was no longer able to stir his feelings. It even seemed commonplace. It represented an artificial, modern, civilised woman. And yet she was what the world calls "a pretty girl." Pretty! What, then, was Doolchi?

He lay back on the hill side (it happened he was out shooting, without an attendant, in search of solitude rather than sport), and closing his eyes, tried to summon a picture of the Thakorine as he had seen her in the Castle garden. There rose before him a vision of a woman elegant and willowy in form, almost leopard-like in her grace, with her captive snow-leopard nestling in her arms; a face as fair, and more beautiful

far, than the fairest in the West; and eyes that burned into his soul. He recalled it all with a thrill, to think he should have been permitted to look upon this forbidden flower of the Zenana.

With a deliberate action he tore the photograph in pieces, and let the fragments fall. That romance was ended.

He was about five miles away from his camp. Beneath him lay a deep, narrow valley facing the north, where a drift of snow still lingered, for the sun only shone on it for a few hours daily. Down the centre ran a stream which appeared to be frozen over, its surface from bank to bank, a distance of about fifty yards, presenting a tolerably even sheet of ice.

Suddenly, as he looked across the gorge, his attention was attracted by three figures moving erratically down the opposite steep. Adjusting his glasses, he discovered they were red bears, feeding and travelling downhill. He glanced at the sun. There was time, he thought, to have a try at them, and get back to camp before nightfall. No hunter likes to return empty-handed, and although he had climbed high and descended

low, and tramped far, it had been in no spirit of sport, or seeking sport.

And here sport had come to him. It was more than he deserved. Perish the ignoble fellow who lets a westering sun deter him from taking advantage of a piece of luck!

He immediately began to descend the steep hill under cover of scant bushes and jutting boulders. The wind was favourable, the bears too busily engaged in grubbing for food to notice him, and too far to hear. Scent, sight and sound are the three dangers sportsmen have to contend against in stalking Himalayan game. In all three fortune favoured Howard.

He reached the bank of the frozen stream whilst the bears were still high up, and crouched behind a rock. Down-hill they came, snouting and jogging each other in their clumsy way, the dam scratching up roots for her young. She was a magnificent beast in full coat; the cubs, too, carried splendid pelts, and were nearly full grown. It was evident they were coming to drink from the melted drainage that percolated from the base of the hill, and formed a swamp by the side of the ice.

Howard waited patiently and allowed them to descend to the opposite edge of the frozen surface. He might have shot one, even two, several times over, but his ambition was to bag all three. He had made up his mind what to do—to take the cubs first, for the dam would certainly not desert them.

They had reached the swamp, and were beginning to drink when he fired. Crack! One cub fell. Crack! The other toppled over. There is joy in a right and left at bears! The reverberating echoes of the two rifle shots rang like thunder through the narrow valley, with appalling reiteration. The dam looked up, sighted him (for he had risen to his feet), and with a growl of deadliest rage, and glistening teeth, came charging blindly across the river bed. Scarce had she shambled twenty paces, than the ice broke and she fell through.

On the impulse of the moment Howard ran forward to shoot, expecting to see her scramble up immediately from what he conceived to be the shallow bed of the stream.

As he trod the frozen surface, there came several ominous cracks that should have

warned him. But he never suspected danger. He took it for granted the stream was shallow, and its bed, like the frozen surface, flat.

“Take nothing for granted that snow covers in the Himalayas!” He had forgotten the tritest precaution of the hunter in high altitudes. The rotten crust of ice gave way beneath him, and instead of plumbing bottom with his feet, he found himself falling through dark space.

CHAPTER XIII

THE CHASM UNDER THE SNOW

ALTHOUGH, as a matter of actual fact, Howard only fell twenty feet, his whole life history passed through his brain in the brief space between the crust of frozen snow giving way beneath his tread, and his summary establishment on a sufficiently soft substance at the dark bottom.

The jerk of his advent caused his rifle to explode. In the pent-up space the report sounded like a salvo of artillery, and was instantly followed by an icy shower which dripped from the roof of the extraordinary place he had fallen into. The fumes of the smoke hung round him, and the echoes of the discharge jostled each other in what seemed a subterranean eternity. Fortunately, he was not injured by the fall, and his first anxiety was about the bear. He crammed a couple more cartridges into his rifle, and paused to listen. There came to his ears

the thrashing sound of rushing water, and battering boulders, proceeding from some deep, indistinguishable cavity near at hand.

Instinct warned him not to move. He glanced up and saw the hole through which he had fallen. It appeared small, out of all proportion—a mere pennyworth of blue sky to his wistful eyes. Around him all was deepest gloom, and continual dripping; the air clung close and chill as in a deep mine; and there was a suggestion of a horrible inferno in the crunching sound that rumbled he knew not where.

In a few moments he was satisfied there was no danger to be anticipated from the bear. So he struck a match and took stock of his surroundings. Not till then did he realise his awful escape from instantaneous death. Another couple of steps and he must have fallen into an apparently fathomless abyss which yawned within two yards of him.

For that seemingly fair surface above covered no shallow stream bed, as he had imagined, but a chasm bored deep into the earth, through which the drainage of the gorge forced its way, the boiling water

escaping by a fissure whose bottom was lost in blackness.

He had lodged on a ledge that bordered the chasm. The bear must have fallen into it. Groping round, inch by inch—for his stock of matches was small—he cautiously explored his surroundings. Behind him a steep, slimy wall of rock, twenty feet high, prevented his escape; the ledge was semi-circular, shaped like a wall bracket, and the chasm wound all round it.

An avalanche had fallen here, and frozen into a miniature glacier, which had been hollowed out by the torrent cutting and sapping at it from below, and subsequently by a summer thaw, until but a thin ceiling of frozen snow, stretching from bank to bank above, and held up by an art which would have defied engineering science, remained to transform the place into a vast dark natural cellar. It was clear that he was hopelessly trapped between cliff and chasm. And he was six miles from camp, in the centre of solitude where, perhaps, a wandering shepherd passed with his flocks half a dozen times in the year.

He examined his belongings. A rifle and

twenty-one cartridges, a box containing seventeen sulphur matches, the remains of some *chuppati* and mutton sandwiches, a flask of whisky, a pouch of tobacco, a pipe, a knife, a watch, a pair of smashed binoculars, and the clothes he stood in.

An uncommonly poor outfit for a prolonged residence in the bowels of the earth. Prolonged? By heavens! it burst upon him it might be a permanent residence.

He must do something. What? Fire shots as signals of distress? He doubted whether the sound would penetrate through that little aperture in the roof. He looked up. The blue sky had turned to violet. Night was drawing on.

It was horribly cold. Was it possible to light a fire? In his exploration of the ledge, which extended for some thirty or forty feet, his hands had come in contact with brambles and tufts of grass and wreckage of driftwood. He set to work to collect them, and had soon gathered a goodly heap.

Divesting himself of his shirt, he tore it into strips, and rubbed it with a mixture of gunpowder and whisky. Then, selecting the driest materials, and interweaving some strips

into it, he carefully built them together, and applied a match. By dint of infinite patience, and nearly bursting his lungs with blowing, he started a fire, and, when he had dried some of the other brushwood, eventually coaxed it into a good blaze.

The fire gave light, and enabled him to see. He foraged round and gathered more fuel. The ledge extended further than he had at first imagined. With a knowledge of his bearings his nervousness decreased. He was no longer fearful of taking a header into eternity every time he moved. The ruddy flames illumined the vast artificial underground chamber in which he was imprisoned; the dripping roof sparkled like a stalactite cave, the reflection of the fire danced on the slimy wet rocks and walls, and the smoke collected in a thick canopy overhead, unable to force its way out through the narrow aperture.

And so he watched through the long night, feeding the fire, and wondering if his servants would come to search for him in the morning. A little nip of whisky and several pipes of tobacco comforted him. Among his many inconveniences was the

ceaseless dripping of the water overhead, which he attributed to the warmth of the flames and smoke. At last, overcome with fatigue, he piled a stock of wood on his fire, and curled himself up to sleep, when his watch (which he fortunately remembered to wind up) indicated it was five of the morn. For he knew there was little or no chance of his servants ranging thus far until noon, as they would not have left camp before day-break.

When he awoke his fire was nearly out, but the chasm was now filled with dull light. He looked up. The ceiling was opaque. It was evident the sun had climbed over the hill, and was shining directly into the valley, and on to the snowfield.

He stoked up his fire, and noted with satisfaction that the smoke was being drawn through the aperture by the natural draught, knowing he could not have devised a better signal for those regions.

At mid-day he decided to fire a shot. It was possible the report might be heard outside. He loaded his rifle, aimed through the aperture overhead, and, to increase the sound, pulled both triggers simultaneously.

Instantly a tremendous cracking sound stunned his ears; the whole roof caved in above him, jagged slits and rents of blue sky opened in a score of places, and photographed themselves on his mind. The snow ceiling collapsed, and came crashing down—as when the ice breaks up on Canadian rivers, and the liberated floes swirl swiftly down the stream.

The next moment he was crushed to the earth!

CHAPTER XIV

A SLAVE OF SIVA

EVEN as the snow roof of the torrent bed collapsed the figure of a native boy might have been seen descending the hill-side, almost by the very track Howard had followed. He had been searching for the missing Englishman when his eyes caught sight of smoke issuing apparently from the river bed, and he knew he had found him.

But before he reached the place the catastrophe occurred in front of his very eyes. First a muffled report rang out, just loud enough to be heard, and the next instant the crash came.

The melting of the sun, the heat of the fire, and the vibration of the explosion acting on a condition of the ice ripe for breaking up, had anticipated what, in the ordinary course of events, would have occurred in a day or two. And with the

collapse a ghastly chasm yawned where all had been smooth to see.

The boy stopped, terror-struck at what he had witnessed. A moment later there bounded towards him a snow-leopard. The boy was Doolchi, the Thakorine.

A moment to catch her breath, and recover courage, and she was hurrying down the hill-side. There had been smoke : smoke meant fire : fire meant life. The smoke no longer curled ; were fire and life extinguished ? A minute before her heart had pulsed with joy. But now—what joy was left ? She had not lived in the mountains all her years without knowing the danger that attended the collapse of the snow bridges or roofs, which, in those high altitudes, span many ravines and river beds.

She reached the edge of the scarp, from the level of which but lately the smooth surface had spread its treacherous pitfall. The *débris* of the disaster was massed on a ledge of ground twenty feet below her. Beyond it gaped a hideous black fissure. And in the centre of the ledge, half buried under the snow, lay the body of a European.

It was her sahib—for there was only one

sahib in the world for her. She had seen but two in her lifetime : this one, her friend ; the other, her enemy.

She gauged the drop on to the ledge, and took in the descent and the ascent back, and her quick wit instantly discovered a way out of the latter difficulty.

Wound round her waist was one of the ordinary, goat's-hair ropes worn by the shepherds of the country for a girdle.

Quickly uncoiling it, she fastened one end to a boulder, and let the other drop over until it reached within four feet of the ledge. Then she lowered herself, whilst Bijli ran backwards and forwards baulking on the brink.

“ Lie down ! I will return ! ” she cried to it, and obedient to her command, the snow-leopard crouched by the side of the chasm.

Cautiously she felt her way to where Howard's body lay. One or two small slabs of snow half concealed it, and she tossed them aside, then turned him over and looked into his face ; and, at that very moment, he opened his eyes and looked into hers.

“ Thakorine, ” he whispered, “ art thou

come to me?" He did not notice she was dressed as a boy. He did not try to understand why or how she had come here. All he knew—and it was sufficient—was that, by some miraculous means, here stood the girl he loved.

"Is my lord badly hurt?" she asked, bending over him.

"I do not think I am hurt. How long is it since I have been here?" He stretched his limbs and slowly raised himself into a sitting posture. "My head is bruised. The ceiling of the chasm fell in. I lost consciousness, and now"—he looked around him in a dazed way—"I see sun and sky. It was all gloom. I was imprisoned. And behold I am free. Tell me, Thakorine, what meaneth it?"

"My lord is safe, though the snow roof fell in upon him. But, praise be to Siva, his life is spared." She drew the golden idol from her bosom, and holding it aloft, apostrophised it. "Oh, Siva, Destroyer, to thee I have dedicated my service, and thou hast already rewarded thy votary!"

"Pray not to Siva, the Destroyer, but rather to Brahma, the Creator—that has

created this day for me!" cried Howard, carried away by his sense of delight.

"My lord, I am already vowed. And my vow is to Siva, the Destroyer, to serve in his Temples."

"That must never be," protested Howard, who knew what such service meant; a service of vice and infamy to which hundreds of maidens are consigned, even in the India of to-day.

"What is vowed—is vowed," murmured the Thakorine, sadly. "And Siva has spared Bijli, and has spared—thee."

"But why," he asked, "why art thou in man's garb?"

She coloured. "It is a long story, my lord. Let us escape from here, and I will tell thee everything. Thy tents are far and thou art weak. Rest a while and eat"—she produced food from her girdle—"and let me make a way for thy escape."

He was thankful to sink back again, and partake of the cake Doolchi had brought him, and drink from his flask. The Thakorine looked on with satisfaction to see the colour returning to his cheeks and strength to his body. Kneeling by his side, she shampoo'd

his limbs, as her waiting women had been accustomed to shampoo her; and this massage—new to the West, but old to the East—worked wonders on a system that was suffering more from the petrifying effects of a shock than from any actual physical hurt.

“Is my lord better?” she asked at length.

“Assuredly I am well, Thakorine,” he answered. “Thou hast cured me—thou and thine eyes.” And if any benefit could be derived from gazing into Doolchi’s eyes, Howard was deriving it.

“I am vowed to the service of Siva, the Destroyer,” she murmured more than once.

“May I not be thy Siva?” he asked her, half in jest, half in earnest, and caught her hand.

“Take not the Destroyer’s name in vain,” she rebuked him gravely, and withdrawing her hand. “Has he not just spared thy life?” She could not comprehend a light word spoken on such a subject. Siva was to her a Satan whose power was actual, and constantly displayed.

“Forgive me,” he cried.

“By me thou art forgiven,” she answered very simply. “May Siva, too, forgive thee.”

She rose to her feet and examined the cliff down which she had descended. Although only twenty feet high, it was perpendicular, and presented no easy exit. But she had discounted the difficulty, and was estimating the best way to carry out her plan.

Selecting a suitable place, she began to set out the foundations of a buttress of snow against the cliff. The material lay to hand in semi-frozen slabs. Howard quickly grasped her intention, and rose to his feet to assist her.

“Nay, but thou must rest, my lord, and let me do this work,” she begged of him, “for toil is pleasure in the service of Siva, who has spared thee.”

“Thakorine, if this is the service of Siva, let me help.”

“For Siva’s sake?” she asked.

“For Siva’s sake—and thine.”

Again she averted her eyes. Conflicting emotions crowded in her breast. If this sahib was minded to do service to Siva, who was she to hinder him? But if for her?—That might not be. She was vowed to Siva.

She compromised with her soul, which

was swayed by superstition, and yet was womanly. If his service was for Siva, surely she might accept it? for the work was heavy, and her hands unused to toil.

She made no further demur, but allowed him to help her, trusting that his service might be for the god.

It was a strange conjunction—the high-caste, delicately-nurtured Rajpootni princess, in male garb, and the young Englishman toiling together building up a buttress of snow slabs to slope against the cliffs. As its height increased the Thakorine climbed up and laid the slabs, which Howard handed to her. It was fatiguing work, for as they used up the material near at hand he had to go further and further for it. But he felt no fatigue; there was a positive charm in working with her.

The buttress took shape and rose higher and higher, affording a graduated flight of steps to the summit of the cliff. As she began to see the development of her invention, and with it a speedy prospect of escape from this trap, the Thakorine could not conceal her satisfaction at the success assured, and playfully tossed little bits of frozen snow

at Bijli above her, until suddenly, with a bound, it descended to her side. Overjoyed at joining her again, it reared itself up on its hind legs, and buried its head in her bosom with a happy purring sound as she caressed it.

“Is he not fond of me? Is he not beautiful—this son of mine?” she asked Howard.

As she stood there, stroking the animal’s velvet head, and glancing at Howard, again he seemed to recognise the weird similarity between the slender figure of this girl and the graceful leopard form. There came to him a consciousness of her confession in the Hall of Audience, and he instinctively bent his face to hide it from her. His soul rebelled at the affection she lavished on this animal. He felt jealous of Bijli, the influence it had over her, and the love it monopolised.

Her quick conception divined his thoughts. To her, too, came the remembrance of the Durbar scene. She felt it was present in his mind now, even as it was in hers. And the consciousness added to her embarrassment.

She gently pushed the leopard back and resumed her work.

At length the buttress was finished. They

completed it in absolute silence. With the advent of the leopard a spell seemed to have fallen on the woman and the man. It was that which kept them asunder.

The road lay clear for exit. At a sign from Doolchi, Bijli leapt out. The Thakorine followed. Howard came last. She gave him a hand to help him up, and as it lay in his he pressed it.

CHAPTER XV

THE THAKORINE'S FLIGHT

THEY climbed the hill together. The shadow was already creeping over the ghastly chasm behind them, but above the sun shone warm and bright. From time to time Howard put out his hand to assist the Thakorine, with the same courtesy he would have extended towards an English lady. It was, of course, a trifling politeness; but for the Thakorine to be thus served, who, since her widowhood, had never known anything but neglect and contumely, his act seemed gracious and condescending. Bijli followed contentedly at her heels after she had given it a short word of command.

At the top of the hill Howard suggested a halt, and they found a little spot, sheltered by a rock, and pleasant to dally by, out of the keen wind.

“My lord,” said the Thakorine, as she

slipped off her sandals out of becoming respect, and sat down a little distance from him, with her leopard by her side, "it is time I told thee why I am here."

"Speak on, Thakorine," said Howard, gently, feeling the relation she must make could not be without its embarrassment for her. "It is needful thou should'st explain what will have to be explained when my camp is reached. For as yet I know and can guess nothing."

"It were difficult to guess such a strange story as mine," answered Doolchi. "I, the daughter of a Rajpoot, the widow of a Thakor, driven to seek refuge with a sahib in his camp. But listen.

"Thou dost remember the Durbar and what occurred there. When I left the hall of Sona Singh, and returned to the Zenana, there broke on my ears such a torrent of reproof and condemnation that verily I felt undone. My lord cannot know the pitiless vindictiveness of woman-kind to a woman who is fallen in their esteem. Those who dwelt behind the purdah mocked at me as outcast and lost to shame."

She sighed and bent her head low. "Outcast and lost to shame am I! And yet what I did, I did for the sake of this, the Spirit of my son. The sacrifice lay between Bijli and myself. And thou dost know what Bijli is to me."

"Seek not to justify thyself, Thakorine. Thy sacrifice has justified thee."

"Alas, the voices in the Zenana are not charitable like my lord's. They rose in judgment against me. They taunted the widow of Lal Singh, as dancing girls are taunted.

"I retired to my apartment, and thought of my lord, whose memory I had disgraced. Ah, that I had committed *suttee* upon his funeral pyre!

"The next morning I heard from my waiting woman, who still remained faithful to me, that it had been agreed between Debi Ram and the evil sahib that the two sahibs should leave Kalakot, and my heart rejoiced (even in the midst of my shame) because I thought the Spirit of my son was saved.

"But on the third day all was changed. The agreement had been a treacherous one,

conceived by Debi Ram, to get rid of my lord. No sooner wert thou reported beyond the Thakor's territory, than back came the evil sahib and demanded Bijli.

"Debi Ram sustained him in his demand, and the order went forth that my *semchoon* should be surrendered from the Zenana.

"I refused obedience. Then Sona Singh grew wrath, and came himself to my apartment. It was not the first time he had striven to enter there since my lord's death. It was not the first time I had barred my door against him. He beat on it now, and clamoured loud and furiously, demanding Bijli.

"Whereat my anger rose, and I cursed him, and bade him depart, swearing I would never obey his command. Muttering revenge, he left; and a little later I heard the tramp of men, and a guard was set at my chamber door.

"Then, indeed, I realised there was no hope left. The sun set, the light faded, and darkness descended on the hills. The hour of food came and went, but none was brought to me. I sat there alone with Bijli, waiting the decree of Fate.

“Some hours passed, and then through my window came a pebble, and fell with a click upon the floor. I rose to see who had cast it. It was my faithful waiting woman, Bhagan, who had come to warn me. Crouching in the shadow of the wall without, she whispered up to me,—

“‘Beware, oh, my dear mistress. Thy doom has been decided upon. The evil sahib, with the face like a goat, cometh to-morrow for Bijli, with his nets and cages. Force will be used, and when thou hast been deprived of thy protector thou wilt be driven to the Cliff of Suicide, and it will be promulgated that thou hast taken thine own life in shame and repentance for what thou hast done.’

“Then a great fear came over me—not for myself, for death were welcome to the widow!—but for the Spirit of my son. Willingly would I have given him his freedom, but he would not accept it. For he will not leave me, not even to return to the Snows where the *semchoons* dwell.

“On an altar in the corner of my chamber stood the Idol of Siva, which my lord, Lal Singh, had given me. Daily I worshipped

at its shrine, and spread the precincts with flowers, and sprinkled them with rice.

“I knelt before it now, in this my extremity of peril, and prayed the god to spare Bijli. I renewed my vow to become henceforth his slave, and surrender myself to the Holy Priests of his Temple, if he would only spare Bijli!

“And Siva heard me, and answered my petition. There, in the dark, I perceived a glitter in his diamond ears as he listened: there came a gleam into his emerald eyes and ruby lips.”

As she spake, the Thakorine, with an air of great veneration, drew forth her idol again and set it on the ground before her. And thrice she made obeisance to it.

“And Siva sent the thought to me to dare to do that which a Rajpoot princess has never done before. To seek thee, oh, my lord, and ask thy help. For thou alone art powerful enough to save me from thy countryman.

“But a woman abroad from the Zenana is as a bat fluttering in the sunshine. I have a brother, who, since the death of my lord, Lal Singh, has gone to India to seek service in the Court of Oodeypore. When he de-

parted he left in my keeping certain garments, and they were in my chamber. I opened the box, and drew them out, and clothed myself in the dress in which you see me. I knotted my hair, and bound a turban round my head. And when I looked in the mirror, behold, it was not Doolchi, but her brother, Lena Singh, that answered the inquiry in my eyes.

“With the *newar* lacing of my bedstead, I fashioned a rope ladder, and escaped to the ground. Bijli leapt after me. From Bhagan I learnt the road my lord had taken. All through the night I fled, with Bijli for my guard; all through the next day. Those I met questioned me.

“‘Who art thou?’ they asked, and I answered, ‘Lena Singh, the brother of Doolchi, the Thakorine, who has been sent by the Thakor Sona Singh to present this *semchoon* to the sahib who is shooting.’ And they directed me to my lord’s camp.

“When I reached it thy servants were awaiting thy return. They, too, questioned me, and I told them the same tale, and showed them this letter” (she drew one from her girdle), “and said it was from Sona Singh to thee.

“When my lord did not return to camp, his servants said, ‘The sahib has been overtaken in the chase. He will return to-morrow. It often happens thus with these hunting sahibs.’

“But I was anxious, and, when morning came, started forth in the direction thou had'st taken. I besought Siva to guide me to thee. For I fear the pursuit of Sona Singh and the evil sahib, and only with my lord dare I look for safety.

“Hope was nearly exhausted, when a flutter of something white attracted Bijli's attention, and he ran playfully after it. I found some fragments of paper on the ground, such as is not manufactured in my country, and on one piece was engraven the face of a white woman. That guided me. My lord had passed that way. Though wherefore he should have destroyed the likeness of beauty, I could not understand. See, I have brought the fragments back to thee.” And the Thakorine unknotted a corner of her turban, and carefully produced the torn pieces of Edith Ponsonby's photograph, and handed them to Howard.

He took them from her, and weighing

them in his hands for an idle moment, tossed them up in the air, and the next moment they were wafted down the hill by the breeze.

"See, see, my lord," she cried, "they are like butterflies. Who was this white woman?"

"She was a butterfly," said Howard. "Verily a butterfly who hovered round me once and was gone—even as these forgotten fragments are gone."

She comprehended there was a parable in his speech and was silent.

"And then you found me, Thakorine, and saved me—even as you saved me in the garden of the Castle from Bijli?"

"Not I, but Siva," she answered. "Siva guided me to my lord. I am but an instrument in his hands. He has accepted my service!"

Howard held his peace. He knew what Doolchi meant, and he shuddered as he thought of the priests in the Temples.

"And what do you propose to do, Thakorine?" asked Howard, after a long silence.

"I am in my lord's hands. He alone can save Bijli and me. I have told thy servants

I am come hither with a letter from Sona Singh, and am charged to give thee this snow-leopard. Let my lord pretend to accept Bijli. Let him say, 'Here is a mistake. The *semchoon* is meant for the other sahib, but I will take care of it until the error can be rectified. And then, my lord, I will offer my services as keeper of the *semchoon*, and thy personal attendant. Give heed to my petition, and entertain my proposal. Let me serve thee as thy servant. I am quick to learn. Look upon me as Lena Singh—the brother of Doolchi, the Thakorine. Forget that I am a woman, saving only that in thy heart thou wilt know I am a helpless one who has sought thy protection. Escort me to the Pass that leads to India. Once that is crossed, all danger will be over. Speak, my lord, and say—'Lena Singh, thou art promoted to my service,' or 'Return, woman, to the Cliff of Suicide.' Pass sentence, and Doolchi will obey."

"Stay with me," cried Howard, "stay with me always, and I will guard thee."

"Nay, my lord," cried the Thakorine, rising to her feet, and catching up the idol, "it must be in thy service."

“Be it so, Doolchi—in my service.”

The Thakorine shook her head sadly. “Doolchi is vowed to the service of Siva. He who craves employment by my lord is Lena Singh.”

“But Thakorine—dear Thakorine—”

“There must be no ‘but,’ my lord,” said Doolchi, gravely. “Doolchi is vowed to Siva. Only Lena Singh can serve my lord.” Her hand in her bosom clutched at the Idol of Siva. It was the talisman that crushed womanhood out of her and made her strong.

“As thou wilt.”

She approached him, and joining her hands touched his feet, and then her forehead.

“Lena Singh is the servant of my lord.”

CHAPTER XVI

LENA SINGH

THERE is a well-authenticated case of a native youth assuming woman's garb, and taking service as *ayah* or lady's maid with an English lady in India, and the penalty he paid for his indiscretion was ten years hard labour. Of the lady it was sympathetically said, where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise. But the worst of it was, she had always sung the praises of the ingenuous and comely youth as an excellent and devoted attendant. And there were cynics who smiled.

What would the cynics have done in such a scandal and gossip-loving stew as an Indian hill station, if Howard and the Thakorine had, by some blunder of Fate, been located therein, instead of amidst snows and solitude? For he could not excuse himself with a plea of ignorance, knowing full well that his newly-engaged

“orderly,” Lena Singh—the phrase comprehends a combination of out-door personal attendant and indoor valet—was a princess with whom he was in love, and he was compelled to admit she was most devoted in her duties, and that he had never been served so capably before by any of the dozen “bearers” or body-servants, who had dressed him and undressed him for five years, taken care of his uniform, polished his accoutrements, diligently looked after his clothes, systematically stolen his cash, and always slept at the door of his tent, as guard, when he was out in camp.

The converse illustration of Doolchi’s case has been paralleled to indicate the practicability of a native man or woman in India assuming the disguise of the opposite sex. Amidst religious medicants the change of garb is common. You cannot distinguish a Buddhist nun from a boy. India is full of effeminate youth, who only need a woman’s costume to carry off the sex. And the young, handsome Rajpoot lad who, on reaching camp, ostentatiously applied to Howard for service, and with whose appearance the sahib seemed so much taken, aroused no suspicion

as to his sex, though a good deal as to his ability. He had given himself out as the brother of the Thakorine, and that excused his delicately-nurtured frame and aristocratic looks, whilst his high caste enabled "Lena Singh" to hold himself completely aloof from Howard's other servants.

There were, of course, many little difficulties, many awkward conjunctions to overcome. But the Thakorine, with a woman's tact, skirted them. Bijli helped her out of most, for the idiosyncrasies of the snow-leopard were ever a convenient excuse for some unusual arrangement that might otherwise have evoked criticism. There was the question where Lena Singh was to live: his caste prevented him from huddling in the servants' pal with Mohammedans and low-caste men; and when he declared Bijli must sleep with him, a positive scare seized the underlings.

"If my lord will permit it," said Lena Singh, calmly, "I will dwell under the fly of the sahib's tent. My wants are small; I shall be very quiet, and not disturb my lord."

But the open fly of a tent at an altitude of

ten thousand feet above sea level, is no sleeping place for a woman; and that night Lena Singh, with her idol in her bosom, and her leopard in her arms, curled herself up on the ground at the foot of Howard's bed, absolutely declining his entreaties to sleep under the outer fly himself, and only consenting to this compromise to prevent him from turning his servants out of their pal, on the plea that Bijli disturbed him, and must be under shelter.

As for her duties, it was marvellous how quickly Lena Singh adapted herself to them.

By the third morning she had learnt the art of tea-making, and that her sahib was always awakened with a cup of tea brought to his bedside. That was bearer's work. Thereafter she called him every morning, with his cup of tea ready. She made the Mohammedan servants teach her everything that was necessary for the proper service of her master, learnt all the secrets of his wardrobe, took charge of it, assumed control of his firearms and cleaned them, made his bed, kept his tent tidy, and, in short, became a most excellent bearer. Howard's other servants fully appreciated the relief of some-

one else doing their work for them. Their personal attendance on their master decreased, until it was limited to cooking and serving him with his meals—for this was a branch of duty Lena Singh's caste would not permit, excepting in the case of such trifles as making tea.

And it was Lena Singh who always accompanied the sahib out shooting, leading Bijli by its silver chain. "For Bijli was a great *shikari*," she declared. "Had not the Thakorine caused him to be trained for the chase like a hunting cheetah? He would pursue and overtake wounded game!" Thus did the youth occasionally introduce the name of the Thakorine in conversation, when the other servants were within hearing, in so natural and precise a way, they were completely satisfied she was at Kalakot.

In short, Lena Singh came to be Howard's shadow. Day and night she lived within closest touch of him. It is often the case in India, where many servants are kept, that one is favoured, and able to assume a sort of proprietorship of his master. The others recognise this, and every petition is presented through the favourite, through whom

the sahib's favour is supposed to be reflected. The post of favourite is in complete accord with Oriental sentiment, and the immediate favour Howard's comely, high-bred young Rajpoot bearer found in his eyes created no wonder.

So much for the outward relations between this Englishman and the Rajpoot princess. As for their private relations, they were but little different. Doolchi was Lena Singh to Howard. She was his orderly, his bearer, his man-servant in everything but the secret knowledge they shared concerning her real sex. Once or twice, in a slip of the tongue, he called her Doolchi or Thakorine; and then she would rebuke him with a stern, displeased look, that sent him back to his compact. Indeed, it could not have been otherwise. She acted her part so excellently, so indefatigably. She never let her secret slip out. And, as for appearances, entered completely into the character of her brother, carrying and comporting herself like a boy.

And even as she was Howard's shadow, Bijli was hers. Never was girl guarded more closely, day and night, than Doolchi by her snow-leopard. Happily, it soon took

a liking to Howard, and permitted him to stroke it (which he often did, when he saw how his caress pleased its mistress). It learnt to lap milk from his saucer, and looked to him for little delicacies at his meals, when it was generally chained to the pole of the tent. Often it slept on his cot, curling itself up like a monstrous Persian cat, and he would lounge beside it, and toy with it, whilst Lena Singh bustled about duties in the tent, or sat on the ground diligently mending rents in Howard's clothes, or holes in his socks.

Then there were days when the gale blew on the mountains, and he could not go out shooting because of the inclement weather, which forced them to keep within the tent for warmth. Long days and weary they would have been accounted, but there was no weariness in them now with Lena Singh beside him.

Of course the whole original scheme of his shooting expedition had been changed when Doolchi sought his protection. Her safety had become his first consideration, and she could not be accounted safe until she had crossed the Rotang Pass into British

territory. It was true they were outside the dominions of Sona Singh, but they were not outside danger. The Thakorine could never be safe while they lingered in Lahoul, for Sona Singh would assuredly communicate with his neighbouring chiefs, who would keep a look-out for her. Their march was directed so as to skirt round the north of the Kalapore State, by an unfrequented and circuitous route, avoiding villages and hamlets. But in such a long journey it hardly seemed possible always to avoid detection, or conceal Bijli, whose presence was almost sure to betray them, if it were noted by any of the wandering shepherds. Sooner or later gossiping tongues would convey the information of a strange sahib moving about with a snow-leopard in his camp. It was impossible to completely hide the presence of an animal so rare and beautiful.

In the wild and mountainous country they traversed they could not cover great distance in marching, and thus, although in flight, their progress was slow, and Howard as he tramped from camp to camp had ample opportunities for sport.

“What shall I do, Lena Singh, when thou hast left me?” he asked her one day, as they sat on a hill-side together, resting after a long stalk which had proved unsuccessful. “And what will thou do?”

“My lord must not think of me. My task is assigned, and thou wilt return to thine own people and forget Lena Singh.”

“Nay, that is impossible. When I have seen thee safe I shall turn again to the north—to the snows and the glaciers. And my gun will be my sole companion. What matters it?”

“And will there be no one to look after my lord when Lena Singh is gone?”

“There was no one before thou camest, and the memory of thy service must suffice. I desire none other.”

“It must suffice,” she answered sadly, “for I am vowed.”

“What is this vow of thine?”

“I have sworn by every hair of Bijli’s fur to serve Siva in return for the life and freedom of this the Spirit of my son. The Gods look deep into the souls of men and women. The heart that lies is shrivelled up. Thou hast seen Siva’s power, who

guided me to succour thee under the chasm of snow. Not Bijli only, but thou too, would'st come under his wrath if by sinful, secret thought or wish I deviated from the duty I have undertaken."

"I fear not Siva."

"Oh, my lord, recall thy speech!" cried the Thakorine, starting up, "if only for thy servant's sake, recall it. It is Siva who has permitted me, journeying to his Temples, to serve my lord. Make not my sacrifice unavailing—my task more difficult by thy unbelief."

"Doolchi," he cried, "this is folly!"

"My lord forgets his compact. I am Lena Singh."

"Thou may'st call thyself Lena Singh—but to me thou can'st never be anything but Doolchi, the beautiful."

He bent forward and attempted to take her hand in his, but she eluded his grasp.

"To me thou art the woman that I love."

"Silence!" she cried, "I may not and I will not listen." Her hand slipped into her bosom, and she drew out her talisman, the golden idol, and clasped it with a frenzy, as if seeking support.

“Cast that cursed thing away,” he commanded her. “It is only that which stands between me and thee.”

“And thou—thou too—would'st sacrifice the Spirit of my son? Thou who dost know that in this alone lieth his safety? Thou can'st bid me cast it away?” She looked at him with reproachful eyes, in which the tears welled. “Thy camp, my lord, is no longer a place of refuge for Lena Singh. Suffer me to depart.”

“And where wilt thou go?”

“Where Siva leads me.”

“And if Sona Singh overtakes thee?”

“I can defend myself.”

He laughed bitterly, angry to think how ready she was to leave him, and what little influence he had over her. “And yet will not let me defend thee! How wilt thou defend thyself?”

“With this,” she cried, and drew a *phurpa*, or three-edged dagger, from her girdle. “It is sharp, and can pierce to Bijli's heart and mine.”

CHAPTER XVII

THE DEVIOUS WAY

THE next moment Doolchi had turned, and was walking away, leading Bijli by its silver chain. There was no hesitation in the act of her departure. In the choice she had to make between Howard and the *sem-choon*, the leopard woman had been true to her leopard.

Howard watched her receding figure—watched it with a vague hope that she would stop and turn for a moment. But there was no indecision in her footsteps. The Thakorine was leaving him.

He knew it was his own fault. It was he, not she, who had broken the compact. And she had done so much to carry out her share of it—served him so untiringly, so faithfully, so devotedly as Lena Singh.

He could not bear to let her go. He wanted her back again, no matter the conditions. For deep in his heart, against

hope he hoped that even now something might arise to break this spell that seemed to crush the woman's nature out of her. A forlorn pity filled his soul as he saw the slight girl figure, in its boy's dress, setting forth to brave fate. What would she do wandering by herself amongst those lone mountains? It was he who had transgressed—it was for him to try and make good the transgression.

“Lena Singh!” he called, before she was out of earshot.

And it pleased him to think her ears had been alert for his voice. For she halted in an instant.

“Come hither,” he commanded her. “Return to thy service, Lena Singh. I have need of thee.”

She came back and, with the respect of a discharged servant who had been reinstated in his post, made her salaam.

“Let me carry my lord's gun?” she said.

“There is no need. I am not tired.”

“Nay, but it is thy orderly's work,” and she took it from him with the calm insistence of one performing an ordinary

duty, and followed him as with blundering steps he made his way back to camp.

And thus were they reconciled.

Thereafter he endeavoured to keep a severe guard upon himself not to offend again; and but for this momentary lapse there was no break in the relations she had required between them. But he noticed that she no longer carried her *phurpa*, or dagger, concealed, but wore it openly in her girdle.

The necessity of avoiding Sona Singh's territories carried them far to the north, and prolonged their devious way to the Rotang Pass for nearly a month. After the first few days the Thakorine's anxiety began to abate in the absence of all signs of pursuit, and the rough and impassable nature of the country they traversed engendered a sense of security.

Lena Singh made no complaint of the somewhat dilatory progress. She was sophist enough to persuade herself that Siva was appeased by the main resolution, and that so long as her avowed destination was his Temple, the speed attained in journeying thither was merely a detail.

Delay counts for little to the Oriental mind, where hurry is often considered a sign of bad manners.

And thus it came to pass that the nominal flight degenerated into a delightful journey, during which Howard and Lena Singh branched off and enjoyed daily excursions over hill and vale.

He with his rifle, she with her leopard. Deviating from the road as fancy, or the locality of game, guided them, they wandered together seeking sport. Her sight was marvellously keen, and she it was who, generally, first discovered the bear or the *burhel*, the ibex or the *curt* that afforded him a fine stalk. Great was her delight when sometimes he would allow her to loose Bijli after a wounded animal. It was a beautiful and stirring sight to see the snow-leopard extending itself in chase, springing like a cascade, down the hill-side, and overtaking and bringing to ground the hunted quarry. These opportunities roused the wild blood in Bijli, but though he cowered over the carcass, and growled and snarled and backed his ears at Howard, he would leave it instantly at the Thakorine's call,

and run trotting back to her, obedient as a dog.

The weather was glorious; the sky a brilliant blue, the sun deliciously warm and yet not striking, the keen mountain air as invigorating as champagne. Weather to make life a joy.

And, truth to tell, the Thakorine was happy. She was a very Diana by nature, and enjoyed the sport as much as Howard did. And beyond all she loved to see Bijli leaping down the hill-sides. There is no parallel in European life for the emancipation of a woman from the Zenana—or, at least, a woman like Doolchi, the Thakorine. Born, nurtured and matured on that high table-land, where the keen air braces the body, she had none of the languor of the East. Custom had confined her to the women's apartments: Nature intended her for the mountain-side. She was, in constitution and character, as strong and impatient of confinement as any of the pretty and active shepherd girls who accompanied their fathers, brothers or husbands through the wilds of Lahoul, never sleeping under a roof, and full of the free, wild spirit of their nomad lives. Doolchi

would have made a glorious wood nymph—a fascinating maid of the mist. There were moments when, in her becoming boy's dress, she almost looked an Amazon. India has not unseldom produced such types—heroines in the field of war, Dianas in the chase, Junos in the council chamber. History is full of the noble deeds of women of the Rajpoot race, in the old fighting days, who, although nurtured in the Zenana, showed a spirit worthy of all that was bravest and best in their chivalrous caste.

To Howard her character grew more and more incomprehensible. Although she never seemed to realise the strange conjunction in which they were placed, and acted her man's part as though it were a natural one, to him she remained always a woman. His eyes were blind to the masculine traits she paraded, and saw only those which were feminine. As he looked at her fondling Bijli, the caress was a woman's caress. In her devoted care of himself, the forethought, the diligence to please, the desire to anticipate, were wholly womanly. He found it impossible to regard her as a man, notwithstanding her complete abnegation of womanhood.

And so day followed day, and they neared their destination, the Rotang Pass. The time of parting had arrived, and the prospect of it came to be very hard for Howard.

It was evening, and she was making his bed. It had been a long march, and they had reached the high road again between Kalakot and the Pass. The mules were late in arriving, and it was nearly sunset.

He watched her busying herself, and remembered all these days they had spent together.

“Thou hast been happy with me, Doolchi?” he asked her. “And now the time of parting draws near.”

“Bijli has truly been happy,” she answered, “and when Bijli is happy, how can I be otherwise?”

“Would that I could always think of thee as thus happy.”

“Lena Singh does not trust himself to think of the future, when he shall have left my lord’s service. Short are the sweets of life—the sorrows infinite.”

“But it is wise to take forethought, whilst there is yet time, and consider of the coming day. The hour of thy service in the Temple

of Siva is at hand. Knowest thou the nature of that service?"

"I know it," she answered, and bowed her head.

"Can it not be averted?" he asked.

He saw her hand slip into her bosom, and clutch at her talisman. "It cannot be. My vow is sworn. Whilst Bijli lives, my service belongs to Siva."

"Oh, child!" cried Howard, appealingly. "Reflect ere it is too late. I would save thee if thou would'st let me. I cannot contemplate, save with horror, this fate that awaits thee. Thou, the daughter of an ancient royal race, to mingle with the votaries of the Temple—the dancing girls—the courtesans—the slaves of the priests. Listen to me! The vale of Kashmir lies to the west. Thou hast heard of Kashmir—with its roses and its fruits, its green glades and forests, its lakes and rivers. It is an earthly paradise, and its doors are open to us. Enter it with me, and dwell there."

The Thakorine faced round at him, and her hand fluttered over her *phurpa*. "My lord talks of what is forbidden to Lena Singh, thy orderly." She paused, and suddenly a

wave of weakness seemed to overwhelm her. For a fleeting minute the woman was apparent. She buried her face in her hands. "Oh, my dear lord, tempt me not. I dare not risk the wrath of Siva. I am not as other women are. Between Bijli and me there is the bond thou knowest of. The Spirit of my son dwells in him. Were I to depart from the vow that I have taken, Siva would punish him." She wrung her hands in affliction, and knelt before Howard. "Conceive, my lord, if thou had'st taken a solemn vow to the God that thou dost worship—would'st thou forego it? Hadst thou bartered the life of thy son at the awful altar for a favour vouchsafed—thou, too, my lord, would'st see with Lena Singh's eyes, hard though they seem to be, and feel with Lena Singh's heart, even though it appears to thee a heart of stone."

"But the end of it all—the end of it all?" murmured Howard. "Bijli cannot live for ever?"

"His life is in Siva's hands. And whilst he lives I am vowed to Siva."

There was no shaking her in her superstition. The idea was rooted in her mind

that the life and safety of her *semchoon* depended upon her observance of the vow she had taken.

Howard sadly acquiesced. This girl was not for him.

CHAPTER XVIII

REHLU'S WARNING

THE next morning, as Howard was dressing in his tent, waited on by Lena Singh as usual, his *khansamah* announced that a *Gadhi* desired to see the sahib.

“What Gadhi?”

“It is Rehlu—if so be the sahib remembers him.”

“Rehlu? Ah, yes. Bid him come forward.”

The old white-bearded shepherd appeared a moment later, and made a low salaam.

“What is it, Rehlu?” inquired Howard.

“I have a favour to ask of the sahib.”

“Speak.”

“My wife lies ill. She was stricken with fever after I crossed the Pass, and my flock has been delayed here, until all the pasture is eaten up. Unless I can proceed soon the other shepherds will seize my rightful grazing ground. Wherefore I have come to pray

the sahib for a little medicine for my wife, that she may recover."

"Lena Singh," said Howard, "bring hither my medicine chest." Then to Rehlu, "Sit down, old man. I am going shooting over these hills to-day, and thou can'st tell me the best ground to hunt."

"Alas, my lord, there is no sport left here. My sheep and goats have grazed to within verge of the snows for a radius of eight miles round. As the sahib knows, where the sheep graze the game departs. But what is this?" Rehlu started to his feet, and fell back as Bijli, who had been stretched on Howard's bed, carelessly leaped down when Lena Singh dived under it to bring out the portmanteau that contained the medicine chest.

"A *semchoon*!" cried the old man, amazed. "Verily a *semchoon*!"

"Fear not, it is tame," said Howard, to reassure him.

"A *semchoon*—and tame? Then who is this?" demanded Rehlu, pointing to the Thakorine.

"My orderly, Lena Singh, and the *semchoon*'s keeper."

Rehlu looked hard at the Thakorine, who had now come forward with the medicine chest. Suddenly he bent down before her, and touching her feet with his hand, carried it to his forehead with a profound salaam.

The salutation to one who was, professedly, only a servant of Howard, told its own tale. Rehlu had guessed who Lena Singh was. The Thakorine shrank back from him in consternation. "Why dost thou salaam to me?" she whispered.

"Shall I not salaam to the widow of my Prince, Lal Singh, the Lion of Lahoul?"

"The widow of thy Prince? Thou art mistaken, old shepherd. I am Lena Singh, the brother of the Thakorine of Kalapore."

Rehlu drew near and gazed hard at her. "I have paid taxes to my lord, Lal Singh. I have seen Lena Singh, who is now at Oodeypore. My eyes are old but they do not deceive. And the *semchoon* betrayeth thee. Oh, Widow, thou hast not done wisely to dwell in the tent of *Feringhee*. This garb does not become thee."

The Thakorine paled at the undoubted recognition, and shrank back into the shadow at the back of the tent.

“Rehlu,” cried Howard, realising the situation. “Thou, too, hast not done well or kindly. This—this—youth is Lena Singh, my bearer. He came to my camp a fugitive from the wrath of Sona Singh.”

“I know, my lord. The story is bruited abroad. The scandal is gone forth over the country-side. But the scandal will not escape over the Pass.”

“What dost thou mean, Rehlu?”

“The Gods only know how the sahib has marched thus far without molestation. Surely the *semchoon* has directed thy steps, else thou had’st fallen into the hands of Sona Singh.”

“We came round by the mountains, by tracks the sheep follow for their pasturage.”

“Well for thee thou did’st so. For on every road lurked the emissaries of the Thakor, and the sahib that came to seek the *semchoon*. It is said there is a bond between them. The widow to the Castle, the *semchoon* to the cage. And better the cage than the Castle.”

“Explain thy words.”

“Can it be the sahib is ignorant—that

he thus marches without suspicion, and without precaution."

"What should I know that have come across the hills but yesterday? Speak fully."

"Great is the sahib's good fortune to have escaped from those that are keeping watch for the *semchoon*. The look-out is keen. When the Thakorine left the Castle it was said there was only one place whither she could fly for refuge—to her brother, Lena Singh, who serves in Oodeypore. Directly she was missing, Sona Singh, instigated by the sahib, despatched a guard to the Rotang Pass. At Kokser yonder it watches—is now watching. What the mouth is to the gourd, the Rotang is to Lahoul. To north, to east, to west, lie mountain ranges, where the snow never melts. Three roads pierce through them like threads. All the Passes are guarded—the Ladak Pass, the Slit in the Snows, the Door of the Wind. North, east and west the Sepoys of Sona Singh sit and watch. And at Kokser the Thakor and the sahib are encamped below the Pass."

And so they had been living in a fool's

paradise within Lahoul! And here at the door their enemies lurked, ready to swoop down upon them.

Howard turned to the Thakorine. "We are trapped," he said.

"Say not so, my lord. Verily Siva has sent this shepherd to warn us. Is not the shielding hand of the God manifest in this chance conversation? Old man," she cried to Rehlu, "thou hast done well. Assuredly thy wife is healed."

"Healed?"

"Ay, healed. It was no earthly sickness she was suffering from. I, who am vowed to the service of Siva, know it, and tell thee so. Thou wast detained here for this purpose—to give me warning. Behold, I am Doolchi, the Thakorine. And this is Bijli, my *semchoon*. In it dwells the Spirit of my son. The evil sahib came to buy Bijli, to carry it away in a cage to be a mockery to strangers in a foreign land. Thou knowest what a *semchoon* is?"

"I know," said Rehlu, reverently, "in the body of the snow-leopard are enshrined the departed souls of Rajah, and Rai, and Thakor, of the noble, the merciful and the

good who have ruled wisely and with compassion, as did my lord, Lal Singh, the Lion of Lahoul."

"It is well said," replied Doolchi. "In this, my *semchoon*, is enshrined the soul of him who would have ruled this land had he lived. Take heed! It is the son of Lal Singh who demands a service of thee."

She called to Bijli, who instantly raised himself, and laying his front feet on her shoulders lifted his head to be stroked. It was impossible not to observe the mysterious and subtle similarity the two figures presented.

"*Semchoon* and *semchoon's* dam!" cried Rehlu, recoiling in wonder and veneration; "woman leopard and leopard of the snows."

With trembling limbs the superstitious shepherd sank upon his knees. Here was a manifestation of that belief he held, in the tent of a sahib, not on the mountain-side! Here was the *semchoon* he worshipped, revealed to him in its animal and human form. Doolchi drew from her bosom the golden Idol of Siva, with its emerald eyes, and ruby lips, and ears of flashing diamonds, and held it up aloft. "In Siva's

name I command thee to escort me and my *semchoon* in safety over the Pass. Thou knowest the by-paths on this mountain. Guide me by them, so that I may escape this snare set for me."

The old shepherd bowed his head. "Oh, Widow of my lord and master, be it as thou dost command. There is a goat's track that leadeth to the summit of the Pass. In three hours I will set thee in safety at its entrance."

Withdrawing for a moment, the Thakorine returned with the bundle she had brought with her when she came to Howard's camp, and handing it to Rehlu, bade him lead the way, while she slipped the silver chain on Bijli.

Then she turned to Howard. "Farewell, my lord," she said, and joined her hands to her forehead. "The time has come when I must leave thee. But from my heart I thank thee for the protection thou hast afforded. And when I have reached the Temple of Siva I will daily pray the God to bless thee."

"Nay, but I cannot let thee go, Thakorine," said Howard, "until I have seen thee safe across the Pass."

CHAPTER XIX

THE LAST APPEAL OF LOVE

HOWARD hastily gave his servants orders to make a forced march, as he intended crossing the Pass that afternoon after the gale had died down at four o'clock. If questioned when passing through Kokser, they were to say Howard was following, and to preserve absolute secrecy about the snow-leopard, under threats and penalties of the heaviest punishment if they disobeyed.

The road travelled low down, along the banks of the River Chandra, until it reached Kokser, where it turned at right angles and ascended to the Pass. The goat's track by which Rehlu guided them struck off at once from the road, and by a diagonal, and in places dangerous, route reached the Rotang by traversing one side of a triangle, thus completely avoiding Sona Singh's and Gotch's encampment.

Noon found them half-way up the mountain side, and as it was no use reaching the Pass before four o'clock, they sat down to rest and refresh themselves.

A magnificent view lay stretched at their feet, and they could catch glimpses of the road winding like a ribbon by the steep banks of the river, sheer down below them. In the distance hills and mountains, wastes and wilds, gorges and ravines, snow-fields and glaciers spread and stretched in chaotic confusion.

Presently they made out their caravan, as it emerged into a clear patch of the road. It was close to Kokser, the smoke of which could be seen rising from behind an intervening ridge.

"The sahib's cattle have journeyed well," said Rehlu; "they will reach the Pass in ample time, even if they halt for an hour at Kokser."

Howard rose and looked towards the Rotang, whose great gap, chiselled deep into the mountain, was a prominent landmark.

"Our way seems easy," he said, assessing it with his eye.

“There is no difficulty from here onwards,” declared Rehlu. “The part over which I have led thee is the one that is difficult and dangerous. But the sahib is a hardy mountaineer, and the widow of my Prince treads the hill-side with the confidence of a *Gadhi's* daughter.”

“My lord,” said the Thakorine, “if the road is easy, wherefore should we require Rehlu to accompany us? Let him now return to his wife and satisfy himself that she is cured.”

With the discovery of her sex by Rehlu there had come over the Thakorine a certain sense of shyness she had not exhibited before. The self-consciousness she had been able to overcome while her secret was only known to Howard, asserted itself before a third person, and now made her feel ashamed in her male garb.

Howard intuitively understood this. By many signs he had learnt that Lena Singh, his orderly, no longer existed when Doolchi confessed herself a woman again. He acquiesced in her proposal at once, and presenting Rehlu with a present, gave him leave to depart, which he gladly did, after

prostrating himself before Bijli and the Thakorine, whom he regarded with supernatural reverence.

It was nearly two o'clock when Howard and the Thakorine resumed their journey alone. Their way lay along the stony mountain-side, at an easy gradient. There was no path, but many mingling tracks, the configuration of the ground lending itself to the passage of flocks. Howard was carrying her bundle—a service on his part she strongly deprecated. But he had told her, "Thou art no longer Lena Singh, my orderly, but Doolchi, the Thakorine. In my country no man permits a girl to carry burdens. I must treat thee as I would one of my own race."

The Thakorine consented, but, since he insisted on treating her thus ceremoniously, she, too, must comport herself as a lady of the Zenana, and accord him the respect due to his sex. Tacitly she admitted that their compact was ended: she was a woman now, and, as became a Hindoo woman, walked behind him, leading Bijli, and never speaking unless addressed. All the frank freedom of intercourse that had existed

between them during the last month vanished. A restraint fell on her, and through her on him.

So they climbed the hill, mute as mourners at a funeral. The silence harmonised with his feelings, for they were sad and regretful. With the resumption of her womanhood there came to him that tender thrill, intensified a thousand times, he had experienced in the moonlit garden of the Black Castle. And now, after this happy month, during which she had been everything to him, had, indeed, become essential to his happiness, it grieved him to think they were walking together for the last time.

Nor was this the only thing that made his heart heavy and rebellious against fate. It was the contemplation of the life she had vowed herself to that filled him with dismay and horror.

The unspeakable life of the female votary of the Temple of Siva, with its infamy and degradation for this beautiful, high-bred girl, whose only crime was her widowhood, and who, while she might not marry again, might yet, in the name of religion, sacrifice her beauty to the passions of priests and the hideous service of a heathen god.

Suddenly he halted, as with an irresistible impulse, and turning round, faced her. "Oh, girl," he appealed to her, "this cannot be—this must not be—this shall not be."

"What shall not be?" she asked, with paling cheeks, as she shrank back from him.

"I cannot let thee go from me. Never to the Temple. If go thou must—if between thee and me the inexorable laws of race and religion have set a barrier that may not be passed—at least let me escort thee to thy brother at Oodeypore, with whom thou shalt find repose and happiness."

"Alas! there is no happiness for Doolchi," she said. "I have drunk the full cup of it. In the service of my lord, in the enjoyment of his favour, in the sunshine of his smiles Doolchi has been happy. Henceforth the doors of my caste are closed to me. The Rajpootni woman, who has disgraced and unsexed herself by this garb I wear, has served in the tent of the *Feringhee*—thinkest thou my people would ever admit such a one again behind the purdah? When I sought refuge with thee, my lord, I left my home for ever behind me. I am outcaste! There

remains to me but one thing—this transient gift of comeliness, whereof my mirror tells me. It will gain for me favour in the Temple.”

“Never!” cried Howard. “I will give thee a home. I will build thee a temple, where thou shalt live, and serve, and worship without the payment of price. Yonder, across the Pass, there is a green valley where the sun shines, where birds sing, where water laughs, where fruit and flowers grow and blossom as in fertile Kashmir. Where all is calm, gentle and hospitable, and as beautiful as thyself. There, in thine own estate, I will settle thee, and leave thee.”

“And Bijli?”

“Bijli shall be thy protector.”

“Thinkest thou, oh, my lord, that Siva would spare me if I broke my vow? Never! Consider the dangers I have encountered and passed through. Can'st thou not perceive therein the manifested favour of the Destroyer, who has, up to now, spared me? Who has hitherto protected me from destruction? And now, when safety is within sight—when the gates of escape open for me—is it for me to break my vow? Siva has

inclined his ear unto my prayer, and I must perform my obligation.”

“Say not so, dear Thakorine. I beseech thee renounce this superstition. The God that can exact such a service as is demanded of thee is vile, and cruel, and wicked—”

“Hush! Hush!” broke in Doolchi. “Siva hears. His wrath will descend on thy head.”

“I care not for Siva,” cried Howard. “I care only for thee.”

His eyes met hers in a longing gaze—a gaze there was no mistaking. He held his arms open.

The Rajpootni woman, imprisoned in the Zenana, betrothed when she is a mere child, married at the first dawn of womanhood, is a stranger to the emotions of voluntary love. She has no choice, no voice in the selection of a husband. The economy of Hindoo matrimony treats her as a household chattel. She does not know what maiden love is who never sees her husband till the day she is married to him. For her it is a crime to look on the face of another, or speak to any man not related to her by blood.

And if the Thakorine, despite her vow to

Siva, felt her heart tremble, and was conscious of a new emotion, it was but the victory of woman over custom.

She made a step towards him, irresolute, yet full of yielding.

Even as she did so Bijli gave a bound forward and stood erect, gazing down into the valley and growling.

Their eyes instinctively followed his. From where they were standing they could see the whole zig-zag ascent to the Pass. Half-way up it Howard's mules were toiling in a string, the drivers urging them forward. And, in pursuit below, a group of mounted men followed on horses, caparisoned, and carrying weapons in their hands. At their head rode Sona Singh and Gotch.

"Siva speaks!" cried the Thakorine. "Behold his answer to my lord's words. He knows the frailty of woman's nature. He has seen into my weak soul. And thus he directs me anew and aright. There is only one path for me to tread—the path that leads to his Temple."

With hurried steps she climbed the hill, urging Bijli forward. Howard followed her. As they crossed the bleak mountain-side their

figures came into full view and were perceived by those below. With a shout the cavalcade urged their horses into quicker motion.

“Press on! Press on!” cried Doolchi. “Siva will save me.”

They reached the last steep leading to the Pass. There came a cold blast of wind rushing down it, with wisps of torn murky cloud and shattered mist, and the drift and spume of snow, as it was swirled about and swept off the ground like dust.

The Thakorine stopped, and looked at it in alarm.

“The road is impassable,” said Howard; “it is death to enter it. There is no chance of crossing to-day.”

“It is death to stay,” she said, glancing down at the pursuers, who were about half a mile below.

“Not death, Doolchi. For I will save thee. Put thyself under my protection, give me but the right to say that thou art mine, and not all the Thakors in Lahoul shall take thee from me.”

“But my lord cannot shield me from a host?”

“Yonder is Simla,” said Howard, pointing

through the Pass. "The power of that name stretches even to here. Under the British Raj all are free. If thou art Doolchi, the Thakorine—then it is to Sona Singh thy fealty is due. But if—if thou art Doolchi, the Rajpootni, who, of thine own free will, has accompanied Howard Sahib, then I can save thee."

"And the Spirit of my son—my Bijli—will he, too, be free?"

"That I cannot promise. But thee, Doolchi, I can save; and I will strive to save Bijli."

"Strive? Only strive? Then I cannot consent. There must be no uncertainty. See! Bijli sniffs the snowy wind. He drags at his chain to enter the Pass. He leads me. It is Siva's will and I must obey. Oh, Siva!" she cried in apostrophe, drawing forth the idol from her bosom, and extending her arms to the black threatening clouds above, "Saviour or Destroyer, thy woman-slave obeys. Spare, only spare, this the Spirit of my son, and deal with me as thou wilt."

Even as she spoke, Bijli, stirred by some wild, impulsive yearning, stretched his sleek face and sniffed at the hurricane that howled

in the Pass, and tugged at his silver chain. Step by step, as if impelled by some mysterious influence, with eyes uplifted to the snows, Doolchi allowed it to drag her forward.

“Farewell, my lord!” she cried, without looking back, “farewell!”

She dropped the silver chain. Bijli, released from restraint, bounded on ahead. Howard glanced down the steep road; Gotch was spurring his pony; the Thakor and his troops slashing on behind to catch them up. The form of the Thakorine was melting in the thick, driving mist. Bijli could no longer be seen. The hurricane howled; the voices of the Pass shrieked; the snow came sheeting down; the Rotang was in full fury! He could not resist the sight of the slight woman's figure in the boy's dress entering that pass of death all alone.

He turned and followed after her.

CHAPTER XX

THE BREATH OF LIFE

THERE was a thick carpeting of new-fallen snow on the ground that deadened Howard's footsteps, and Doolchi did not hear him coming after her. He caught her up ere she had gone a hundred yards, and touched her on the shoulder. With a startled cry she looked up—for she had been pressing against the hurricane with her head bent low. And he saw she had been weeping.

And then, all in a moment, there came a smile into her face, and through her eyes, on whose lashes the tears were clustered, there beamed a sudden joy and happiness. And it came to him, in an exquisite revelation, she had been weeping because she had left him.

Without a word of explanation he caught her hand and helped her on. A little way beyond its entrance the Pass broadened, the road following the cliff on the left, whilst on

the right embouched a sort of bay. Leaving the track he directed her into this bay, where, if the pursuit was pressed, they might lurk, unperceived, in the thick blinding snowstorm or hide behind one of the many boulders scattered about. Hugging the face of the further cliff they struggled on in the teeth of the tempest until they had put half a mile between them and the entrance of the Pass.

The icy wind froze and numbed them, as it whirled and eddied through the funnel, with eerie sounds that resembled the howling and shrieking of fiends in Purgatory. They could not see where they were going; their feet stumbled and slipped over the uneven stony ground; they floundered in drifts and holes, and collided with objects that seemed suddenly to rise in their path. From head to foot they were wrapped in a covering of snow with which the tempest plastered them. The wind stifled them as it swooped past their faces. Doolchi's slender form could scarce make way against its buffeting, and Bijli, still in front, no longer leaped and gambolled, but crept along the ground on its belly like a stalking animal, its ears laid back

and its beautiful velvety fleece flattened close against its body by the wind.

The girl's steps failed. Accustomed though she was to the rigours of the Central Asian winter, this pitiless blizzard was more than she could face.

Howard, himself, felt his strength failing, and breathed with difficulty. He caught Doolchi, now half fainting, by the waist.

"We must return," he shouted in her ears. But the velocity of the wind swept his words away. The report of a gun could not have been heard in the roaring hurricane that, towards the centre of the Pass, where two opposing currents of wind met, assumed the furious proportions of a cyclone.

She looked helplessly round; a spume of driven snow enveloped them; above their heads upreared an awful cliff, and down its perpendicular face the blizzard dashed and deflected like some material force, and beat upon their faces and bodies as actual blows might have done.

Bijli, a few feet distant, was scratching at a drift of snow piled up against the base of the cliff. Doolchi pointed to it feebly, and strove to call it. But her voice was

failing, and the animal could not hear her.

Again she called — without avail. It seemed to Howard, as they stopped there, they were sacrificing their lives. If they returned at once the wind, as it was blowing, would be at their backs, and it was just possible they might be able to accomplish their retreat before insensibility overtook them. But Doolchi would not leave Bijli.

Howard was conscious of that paralysing feeling creeping over him which compels a human being, overtaken in the snow, to give up struggling and sink into the sweet seductive sleep that is painless and knows no waking. And the Thakorine was more affected than he.

He turned to retrace their steps. Her footsteps dragged, her knees bent under her, and she fell to the ground. Were she to be saved she must be carried. Had he the strength for it?

He stooped to pick her up. As he did so, he looked to see where Bijli was. The beast had disappeared. But, in the drift of snow at which it had been scratching, a hole gaped, through which its body had passed,

It was a cave. And Howard suddenly remembered he had seen several in his first passage through the Pass.

Lifting Doolchi's insensible form, he staggered with it against the blast towards the cave. A few rapid scoops of his arms enlarged the hole Bijli had made. And there, thank God, a cavern loomed; not large, but sufficient to shelter them, and wherein the air was at least still and man might draw breath.

At the further end crouched Bijli, scared by its unaccustomed experience.

With tender care Howard carried Doolchi through the aperture. Her eyes were closed, her face was white and rigid as marble, her limbs already stiff. He thought she was dead, until he placed his hand on her heart and found it fluttering.

As he did so his fingers struck against something hard. It was the golden Idol of Siva, the talisman that kept this woman apart from him, the senseless superstition that had impelled her into this snare of death. He drew it out, and, with a curse, hurled it at Bijli—that other obstacle which interposed between them. With an angry

snarl the snow-leopard darted out of the cave. And for the first time Howard seemed to feel the Thakorine was his.

The cavern was circular and about eight feet in diameter. A bare and dismal place, and yet in comparison to that hellish horror outside, that suffocation of snow and wind in which man could not catch a breath, it was a veritable palace.

With hasty hands he brushed the snow off Doolchi's form. Then, seeing how wet her garments were, the thought came to him to open her bundle. What should he find in it but the white *chudder* in which she had been arrayed the first evening he saw her—an exquisite shawl of the finest Kashmir weaving, dense as velvet, light as down, and warm as a sunbeam.

He wrapped her in it and laid her down in the most sheltered corner of the cavern.

But Doolchi moved not. The hand of death was on her. Howard shampoo'd her limbs; he chafed her hands; he strove to bring back the circulation to her veins. But without success.

A distraction seized him. The distraction of a man seeing the woman he loves

slowly dying before his eyes. He could not let her die—this beautiful girl for whom his soul craved.

He called to her; he pressed her icy fingers; he put his cheeks against her marble face. It was like touching a snow-woman: the coldness of a corpse was on her. Death was dragging her away from him.

“Oh, Death!” he cried in his despair and agony, “thou shalt not have my darling! Or if thou takest her, thou shalt take me too.”

Unfolding the *chudder* he laid himself beside her, and opening his coat took her to his bosom, wrapping and tucking the shawl around them both. And then, with his lips to hers, he breathed the breath of life into her lungs.

Presently he was conscious of some additional warmth. Bijli had crept back into the cavern and stretched itself in its usual place by its mistress's side.

Again Howard sought her lips and breathed the warm air from his lungs into her cold breast. He drew her close to him; he chafed and rubbed her; he tried to exert those mesmeric forces of which he had read and command her back to life.

Half-an-hour passed, and then he felt her move in his arms. There came a throb; her clenched teeth relaxed; her lips opened to receive the breath of life from him; her arms moved and clasped him, and a sigh of returning consciousness broke from her.

He felt that she was saved, and, in the glorious ecstasy of the moment, pressed his lips to hers and covered them with kisses.

“Where am I?” she asked dreamily.

And Howard would like to have answered,—

“In heaven.”

He felt her hand travelling to her bosom. “My idol?” she murmured. “Where is my idol?”

“Forget thy idol,” he commanded her.

And she forgot it, and, clasped close in his arms, fell asleep.

CHAPTER XXI

AND WOMANHOOD PREVAILS

NIGHT passed. At dawn the hurricane abated. The snow had drifted over the mouth of the cavern. It was dark, but warm, and Doolchi slept.

Howard feared to disturb her. She had been so near death, and exhausted nature demanded this repose. Sleep and warmth were as healing medicines to her.

But when Bijli grew restless, and began to scratch his way out of the door of the cave, Howard knew it must be morning. Softly disengaging himself from his cramped position he followed the leopard out. It was broad daylight and the sun was shining upon the heights. Bijli sniffed the keen fresh air whilst Howard reconnoitred the pass. It was calm and still; the short fierce summer storm had exhausted itself. But he knew the tempest would rise at ten and close the passage. He must awaken Doolchi.

Re-entering the cave, he was surprised to find Doolchi had risen and was robing herself in her *chudder*. It gave him a singular pleasure to see her thus arrayed again in the costume of her sex, and to feel there was an end to the part she had acted. The soft white drapery clinging, like velvet folds, around her graceful form vividly reminded him of her as he had first seen her in the garden of the Black Castle.

“Doolchi,” he said, “we must start again.”

There came a new-born timidity into her demeanour, which she vainly strove to dissemble. “Where is Bijli?” she asked.

“Safe. Fear nothing! Only come whilst there is yet time to complete the passage of the Pass.”

“And is it truly morning?” she asked in a bewildered voice.

“The sun strikes on the upper cliff.”

“And it was evening when — oh, my lord, it is not truly morning?” and she averted her eyes.

“Sixteen hours have passed since thou fell fainting in the snow. When I gathered thee in my arms I scarce dared hope to see thine eyes open again.”

“In thy arms! But was it not a dream?”

“It was no dream.”

“And my god—my idol that was my talisman and made me strong? Restore to me my idol thou hast robbed me of.” There came into her face a flush in which both shame and anger seemed to mingle as she drew herself up to her full height, and held out her hand to receive it.

Ever the idol! He pointed petulantly to where it lay in a dark corner of the cave.

She lifted it from the ground with reverence, and thrusting it into the bosom of her *chudder* pressed it to her heart with a passionate glow of thankfulness.

With its recovery her maidenly timidity vanished. She no longer averted her eyes, but met his with a look that had no hesitancy or weakness.

“And Sona Singh—where is he?” she asked.

“I cannot tell. He may be following.”

She passed out of the cave. Bijli bounded towards her and laid its velvet paws on her shoulders. Caressing and stroking its head, she peered anxiously down the Pass.

“There is no pursuit. I am safe. For

have I not my idol back? Nothing can hurt me—or tempt me now from Siva's Temple."

A new strength and resolution stormed her features. She caught Bijli's silver chain, and turning to Howard, said,—

"My lord, for the last time—farewell."

"Thou art free to go," said Howard, bitterly. "It was for the Temple of Siva I breathed my life into thy cold bosom."

His hand clutched at her idol. "I must depart," she said. "Siva has listened to my prayer. He has saved the Spirit of my son. I dare not disobey him now."

Even as she was speaking there came to them on the still air a thud of hoofs, and from behind a bend of the cliff a troop of horsemen galloped. Before Howard and the Thakorine had time to retreat they were sighted, and in another minute surrounded.

Gotch, followed closely by the Thakor Sona Singh, was the first to spur up. Throwing himself from his pony he approached Howard with an insolent air.

"And so, my abductor of Zenana women, you are run to earth! I came to bury you,

but, by George, it seems I sha'n't have that pleasure. Well, that's your luck. And mine is a live snow-leopard, worth a round lakh of rupees."

His eyes looked greedily at Bijli. This unexpected prize, ready to his hand, had awakened all the cupidity in his sordid soul. For a month he had watched for this day. But yesternight it seemed, at the last moment, that his prize had eluded his grasp. This morning's reconnaissance was purely one of speculation. The storm in the Pass left little chance of life surviving. He had come with a faint hope that if the snow-leopard had not escaped he might find its carcass, and the skin was worth a hundred guineas. To find it alive, chained, ready to be captured, transcended his most sanguine expectations.

"You brute!" cried Howard. "This Pass is British territory, and if you interfere with me, or those under my charge, look out!"

"Don't talk rot. It's for you to look out, I rather fancy. A man who abducts a Rajpootni girl from a Thakor's Zenana! Sona Singh would be justified in appre-

hending you and sending you under escort to the nearest European magistrate's court."

And now the Thakor approached. He had been whispering to the commandant of the guard, who had dismounted the men and formed a cordon round the Thakorine.

The Thakor strode up to her. "Strumpet!" he cried, his evil features contorted with jealousy and disappointed desire as he looked at her beautiful face. "Thou hast disgraced my house. Surrender thyself to me thy rightful ruler. The manes of my kinsman call aloud in indignation. And thou"—he turned to Howard—"back to Hindostan! Thou hast wrought evil in the house of Kalapore. Simla shall hear of it."

Had Doolchi given him but one look Howard would have known how to act. Had she thrown herself on his protection he would have had words and deeds ready for the occasion.

But in this extremity of peril the girl was praying to the Idol of Siva, which she had drawn from her bosom, and on which her fervent eyes were fixed.

He made one last appeal to her.

“Doolchi, speak but the word I told thee of. Give me the right to protect thee, as—God knows—I have the will.”

But even in that supreme moment, when, as she knew, she had but to claim him as her champion, the force of superstition prevailed over her. She yet retained her faith in Siva. Elevating the idol above her head she called on the Destroyer to succour her. To Howard she was deaf; to his presence blind.

Meanwhile Gotch slipped aside to his pony. From the saddle-bow hung a bundle of rope nets. He quickly unloosed them and returned, slinking back behind the troopers. Doolchi had dropped Bijli's chain. The sight of so many men crowding round it in a circle had scared the animal. It crouched down and half buried its head under the hem of its mistress's robe.

Howard, unobservant of Gotch, was gazing at the Thakorine. As he saw the girl's beautiful face looking up, her dark eyes fixed in an intense adoration on the insensate image, a sort of hopeless despair seized him. Had she a heart? It was impossible,

He turned his back on her, frantic at this final act of folly.

It was Gotch's opportunity. A swift cast of the net and the snow-leopard was enveloped. An abortive spring, a scream, a struggle, and the noose was drawn.

Then, too late, it regained its fierce, wild nature. With teeth and claws it tore madly at the snare; it bit and scratched, rolling over and over on the ground, indignant at the indignity that fettered and confined the lovely lithe frame and limbs which had always been free. Its soft velvet fur was ruffled and tossed about; its opal eyes gleamed with iridescent fires; its small round ears lay back upon its head, and it displayed its glistening fangs.

But the more it struggled, the tighter the noose was drawn, until it became hopelessly entangled and powerless to move.

Then there burst from it a piercing cry, so weird, so tortured, so unearthly, and yet so human in its intonation of suffering, that it appalled. And from its bonds its eyes looked up with a pathetic appeal to its mistress.

Still the Thakorine stood motionless, holding aloft the golden Idol of Siva and suppli-

cating it. Her face was drawn in agony; her eyes were fixed in an intense stare; her figure stretched tall and rigid.

At last, in a spasm, a prayer burst from her lips.

“Siva!” she shrieked, in a voice that might have pierced to heaven, “Siva! God that dealeth death and destruction! If thou art God—make thyself manifest! Deal destruction to these around! Deal death to me! Only spare my son.”

A white figure standing in the white snow. A woman offering up her life for sacrifice. But Siva hearkened not.

At the awful invocation that threatened them, the Thakor and his troops fell back aghast. Their faith in Siva was as great as hers. They bent their heads low, as in the presence of a living God.

Gradually the Thakorine seemed to realise the truth—to be at last convinced her faith in the impotent image was vain.

In a revulsion of blasted hope and defeated belief she dropped her arms, and, turning her head, looked down at the *semchoon*, entangled and helpless in the snow.

Its eyes met hers with their sad, suffering

animal look of pitiful entreaty ; but the wail that sounded in her ears to her sounded human. She knew every inflection of that voice. It was the cry of the creature she had suckled—the cry of the spirit of her son.

A quiver of agony passed over her frame. Once more she raised the jewelled image up, as if to give it one last chance of vindicating its power. She waited a breathless instant and then dashed it to the ground.

Gotch was bending over the snow-leopard, deftly coiling and knotting the ropes, and smiling to himself.

With a subtle, cat-like approach she moved towards him and touched him on the shoulder.

“ Sahib, the triumph is thine. Siva has deserted me. The *semchoon* is in thy power. Notwithstanding, grant me, I pray thee, one favour. For the last time let me caress Bijli. Let me bid him depart with thee in peace.”

Gotch fell back a step or two, but did not relinquish his hold of the master-rope. Slowly the Thakorine sank down upon one knee by Bijli's side. “ Soul of my soul,” she whispered to it, whilst her trembling fingers passed lightly over its velvet side and lingered by its heart. “ Thy mother's heart is breaking.

Was it for this, my little one, I suckled thee—I loved thee—I warmed thee in my breast?” She bent her face, and laid it against the leopard’s, and twined her arms about its body, whilst the tears rained down her cheeks.

Then she slowly raised her head again. Her right hand was concealed in her girdle. Her eyes, as she turned them on Gotch, narrowed with a hard, strange, devilish expression, and her lips were firm set.

“The sahib has granted me a great boon,” she said in a peculiar voice, “and Bijli will be grateful.”

Instantly a suspicion crossed Gotch’s mind. He sprang forward to arrest the hand she was withdrawing from her girdle.

But, ere he could reach her, out flashed her *phurpa*, and she plunged it into Bijli’s heart.

Her stroke struck true. With a convulsive contortion of its body, and a long-drawn moan, the leopard was dead.

Dropping the dagger, Doolchi sprang to her feet. For one bitter moment she gazed down at the creature she had stabbed, standing there like a statue sculptured out of snow.

Then she turned like a Fury on Gotch and those who accompanied him. Her eyes contracted, her brow was furrowed with a frown as black as thunder, her stiffened, upstretched arms beat the air, and she shook and trembled in the insanity of her passion.

“Curses! Curses!” she shrieked. “Curses on ye all!” In her ungovernable frenzy she tore at her hair, and rent her bared bosom with her nails, and beat herself. “On ye, and yours, and the generations that come after you. Thou — damned *Feringhee*—mayest thou be burnt, and thy ashes scattered over a waterless desert. Thou, Sona Singh, may never a son be born to thee, and thy line die out! And for thee—vile instruments of this vile puppet—may thy women be dishonoured and forced into the harems of the Moslem, and thy sons die as this my son has died.”

She ceased speaking, catching her breath in gasps, and half suffocated by the torrent of her words. Then her eyes fell like a blight on the golden idol, and upon it the full volume of her mad delirium was turned. Tearing off her sandals, she flung herself upon her knees, and battered at the image a

hurricane of blind, indiscriminate blows, cursing it, and hurling at it insults and epithets and imprecations.

At that sacrilegious spectacle Sona Singh and his sepoys pressed their hands to their eyes, attempting to shut out the awful sight. To them, whose faith in Siva was unshaken, it seemed as if the very cliffs must fall and blot out this impious act.

They dared not stay, and mounting their horses fled from the accursed scene.

At last, exhausted with excitement and exertion, the Thakorine paused in her mad emotional cataclysm.

Howard stepped up and laid his hand upon her shoulder. She glanced round and met the troubled, sad look in his face, that spoke from his heart to hers, and recalled her to herself.

It smote to her soul. She prostrated herself before him. "Oh, my lord, my dear, dear lord, what have I done?" she cried, "Shame on me, shame on me that preferred the service of Siva to thine. My eyes are opened! It was thou who succoured me, not this lying and abominated idol."

"I will still succour thee, if thou wilt let me."

“Too late,” she cried, “too late. Bijli is dead.”

She turned and crept towards it on her knees and threw herself upon its body with a broken-hearted sob of anguish.

Gotch still lingered. The trading instinct was strong in the man and he did not care a straw for Siva.

And he was outrageously angry at the slaughter of the snow-leopard.

“Hands off, woman, the leopard is mine! Mad fiend! I would that I could make thee suffer as I have done.”

“Go!” cried Howard, furiously.

“Oh, that’s all very well—but how about my snow-leopard?” protested Gotch. “I’ve paid cash for it. Here is the receipt.” He drew from his pocket a stamped document, written in Persian characters. “And now this woman of yours has killed it, and I am ten thousand pounds out of pocket.”

“Go!” roared Howard again.

“Oh, it’s all jolly fine to say go. But who’s going to make good the loss I’ve suffered? Mind, I hold you answerable for this. As good as a pension for life lost to me. And all through this mad Fury. God’s

truth, but—" He stooped and peered at Bijli, without a thought for the Thakorine whose white arms were clasped around it. "It was a beautiful animal. One in a million! Velvet could not beat that fur. What bad luck! Well, if I can't have the beast, I guess I'll have its skin. It's worth a thousand dibs anyhow. Here! Get out with you, woman! I'm going—"

It was exactly what he did. And his departure was accelerated by a kick.

Howard turned to the Thakorine. She was sobbing over Bijli. Her face was pressed against its head. The bosom of her white robe was stained with blood that had welled from its heart.

And in the mud, a few feet distant, twinkled the emerald eyes of the golden Idol of Siva.

"Come," whispered Howard, "thou art mine now."

And she went with him.

In a far Himalayan valley, aloof from the world, nestling amidst green forests and under the shadow of the perpetual snows that crown the summits of the mountains,

stands a homestead whose smiling fields and orchards surround a picturesque cottage, built in the fashion of a Swiss chalet. Near at hand, on the banks of a stream, rises a temple, and under its white marble shrine repose the ashes of Bijli, the *semchoon*. For its body was duly and reverently cremated with becoming Hindoo ceremonies, and its obsequies performed solemnly, and with tender consideration for her who loved the *semchoon* most.

And the woman who prays daily at its shrine, and sprinkles its precincts with offerings of flowers and rice—outcaste though she be to the proud race for whom once she bore a son that might have been their ruler—is neither lonely, forsaken, nor unhappy in her lot.

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