

HALL SIR CAINE

THE WHITE PROPHET,
VOLUME II (OF 2)

Hall Caine

The White Prophet, Volume II (of 2)

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The White Prophet, Volume II (of 2)

BOOK THREE —*Continued* THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

CHAPTER XI

When Helena awoke next morning she was immediately conscious of a great commotion both within and without the house. After a moment Zenoba came into the bedroom and began to tell her what had happened.

"Have you not heard, O Rani?" said the Arab woman, in her oily voice. "No? You sleep so late, do you? When everybody is up and doing, too! Well, the Master has news that the great Bedouin is at Omdurman and he is sending the people down to the river to bring him up. The stranger is to be received in the mosque, I may tell you. Yes, indeed, in the mosque, although he is English and a Christian."

Then Ayesha came skipping into the room in wild excitement.

"Rani! Rani!" she cried. "Get up and come with us. We are going now – this minute – everybody."

Helena excused herself; she felt unwell and would stay in bed that day; so the child and the nurse went off without her.

Yet left alone she could not rest. The feverish uncertainty of the night before returned with redoubled force, and after a while she felt compelled to rise.

Going into the guest-room she found the house empty and the camp in front of it deserted. She was standing by the door, hardly knowing what to do, when the strange sound which she had heard on the night of the betrothal came from a distance.

"*Lu-lu-lu-u-u!*"

It was the zaghareet, the women's cry of joy, and it was mingled with the louder shouts of men. The stranger was coming! the people were bringing him on. Who would he be? Helena's anxiety was almost more than her brain and nerves could bear. She strained her eyes in the direction of the jetty, past the Abbas Barracks and the Mongers Fort.

The moments passed like hours, but at length the crowd appeared. At first sight it looked like a forest of small trees approaching. The forest seemed to sway and to send out monotonous sounds as if moved by a moaning wind. But looking again, Helena saw what was happening – the people were carrying green palm branches and strewing them on the yellow sand in front of the great stranger.

He was riding on a white camel, Ishmael's camel, and Ishmael was riding beside him.. Long before he came near to her, Helena saw him, straining her sight to do so. He was wearing the ample robes of a Bedouin, and his face was almost hidden by the sweeping shawl which covered his head and neck.

But it was *he*! It was Gordon! Helena could not mistake him. One glance was enough. Without looking a second time she ran back to her bedroom, and covered her eyes and ears.

For a time the voices of the people followed her through the deadening walls.

"*Lu-lu-u-u!*" cried the women.

"*La ilaha illa-llah! La ilaha illa-llah!*" shouted the men.

But after a while the muffled sounds died away, and Helena knew that the great company had passed on to the mosque. It was like a dream, a mirage of the mind. It had come and it was gone, and in the dazed condition of her senses she could almost persuade herself that she had imagined everything.

Her impatience would not permit her to remain in the house. She, too, must go to the mosque, although she had never been there before. So putting on her Indian veil she set out hurriedly. When she came to herself again she was in the gallery, people were making way for her, and she was dropping into a place. Then she realised that she was sitting between Zenoba and little Ayesha.

The mosque was a large, four-square edifice, full of columns and arches, and with a kind of inner court that was open to the sky and had minarets at every corner. The gallery looked down on this court, and Helena saw below her, half in shadow, half in sunshine, the heads of a great concourse of men in turbans, tarbooshes, and brown felt skull-caps, all kneeling in rows on bright red carpets. In the front row, with his face to the Kibleh (the niche towards Mecca), Ishmael knelt in his white caftan, and by his side, with all eyes upon him, as if every interest centred on that spot, knelt the stranger in Bedouin dress.

It was Friday, and prayers were proceeding, now surging like the sea, now silent like the desert, sometimes started, as it seemed, by the voice of the unseen muezzin on the minarets above, then echoed by the men on the carpets below. But Helena hardly heard them. Of one thing only was she conscious – that by the tragic play of destiny *he* was there while *she* was here!

After a while she became aware that Ishmael had risen and was beginning to speak, and she tried to regain composure enough to listen to what he said.

"My brothers," he said, "it is according to the precepts of the Prophet (peace to his name!) to receive the Christian in our temples if he comes with the goodwill of good Moslems and with a heart that is true to them. You know, O my brothers, whether I am a Moslem or not, and I pray to the Most Merciful to bless all such Christians as the one who is here to-day."

More of the same kind Ishmael said, but Helena found it hard, in the tumult of her brain, to follow him. She saw that both the women about her and the men below were seized with that religious fervour which comes to the human soul when it feels that something grand is being done. It was as though the memory of a thousand years of hatred between Moslem and Christian, with all its legacy of cruelty and barbarity, had been wiped out of their hearts by the stranger on whom their eyes were fixed – as though by some great act of self-sacrifice and brotherhood he had united East and West – and this fact of his presence at their prayers was the sign and symbol of an eternal truce.

The sublime spectacle seemed to capture all their souls, and when Ishmael turned towards the stranger at last and laid his hand on his head and said —

"May God and His Prophet bless you for what you have done for us and ours," the emotions of the people were raised to the highest pitch, and they rose to their feet as one man, and holding up their hands they cried, the whole congregation together, in a voice that was like the breaking of a great wave —

"You are now of us, and we are of you, and we are brothers."

By this time the women in the gallery were weeping audibly, and Helena, from quite other causes, was scarcely able to control her feelings. "Why did I come here?" she asked herself, and then, seeing that the Arab woman was watching her through the slits of her jealous eyes, she got up and pushed her way out of the mosque.

Back in her room, lying face down upon the bed, she sought in vain to collect her faculties sufficiently to follow and comprehend the course of events. Yes, it was Gordon. He had come to join Ishmael. Why had she never thought of that as a probable sequel to what had occurred in Cairo? Had he not been turned out by his own? In effect cashiered from the army? Forbidden his father's house? And had she not herself driven him away from her? What sequel was more natural – more plainly inevitable?

Then she grew hot and cold at a new and still more terrifying thought – Gordon would come *there*! How could she meet him? How look into his face? A momentary impulse to deny her own identity was put aside immediately. Impossible! Useless! Then how could she account to Gordon for her presence in that house? Ishmael's wife! According to Mohammedan law and custom not only betrothed but married to him!

When she put her position to herself so, the thread of her thoughts seemed to snap in her brain. She could not disentangle the knot of them. A sense of infidelity to Gordon, to the very spirit of love itself, brought her for a moment the self-reproach and the despair of a woman who has sinned.

In the midst of her pain she heard the light voices of people returning to the house, and at the next moment Ayesha and Zenoba came into her room. The child was skipping about, full of high spirits, and the Arab woman was bitterly merry.

"Rani will be happy to hear that the Master is bringing the stranger home," said Zenoba.

Helena turned and gazed at the woman with a stupefied expression. What she had foreseen as a terrifying possibility was about to come to pass! She opened her mouth as if to speak but said nothing.

Meantime the Arab woman, in a significant tone that was meant to cut to the core, went on to say that this was the highest honour the Moslem could show the unbeliever, as well as the greatest trust he could repose in him.

"Have you never heard of that in your country, O Rani? No? It is true, though! Quite true!"

People supposed that every Moslem guarded his house so jealously that no strange man might look upon his wife, but among the Arabs of the desert, when a traveller, tired and weary, sought food and rest, the Sheikh would sometimes send him into his harem and leave him there for three days with full permission to do as he thought well.

"But he must never wrong that harem, O lady! If he does the Arab husband will kill him! Yes, and the faithless wife as well!"

So violent was the conflict going on within her that Helena hardly heard the woman's words, though the jealous spirit behind them was piercing her heart like needles. She became conscious of the great crowd returning, and it was making the same ululation as before, mingled with the same shouts. At the next moment there came a knock at the bedroom door and Abdullah's voice, crying —

"Lady! Lady!"

Helena reeled a little in rising to reply, and it was with difficulty that she reached the door.

"Master has brought Sheikh Omar Benani back and is calling for the lady. What shall I say?"

Helena fumbled the hem of her handkerchief in her fingers, as she was wont to do in moments of great agitation. She was asking herself what would happen if she obeyed Ishmael's summons. Would Gordon see through her motive in being there? If so, would he betray her to Ishmael?

Already she could hear a confused murmur in the guest-room, and out of that murmur her memory seemed to grasp back, as from a vanishing dream, the sound of a voice that had been lost to her.

She felt as if she were suffocating. Her breathing was coming rapidly from the depth of her throat. Yet the Arab woman was watching her, and while a whirlwind was going on within she had to preserve a complete tranquillity without.

"Say I am coming," she said.

The supreme moment had arrived. With a great effort she gathered up all her strength, drew her Indian shawl over her head in such a way that it partly concealed her face, and then, pallid, trembling, and with downcast eyes she walked out of the room.

CHAPTER XII

Gordon had that day experienced emotions only less poignant than those of Helena. In the early morning, after parting with Osman, the devoted comrade of his desert journey, he had encountered the British Sub-Governor of Omdurman, a young Captain of Cavalry who had once served under himself but now spoke to him, in his assumed character as a Bedouin, with a certain air of command.

This brought him some twinges of wounded pride, which were complicated by qualms of conscience, as he rode through the streets, past the silversmiths' shops, where grave-looking Arabs sold bracelets and necklets; past the weaving quarter, where men and boys were industriously driving the shuttle through the strings of their flimsy looms; past the potter's bazaar and the grain market, all so sweet and so free from their former smell of sun-dried filth and warm humanity packed close together.

"Am I coming here to oppose the power that in so few years has turned chaos into order?" he asked himself, but more personal emotions came later.

They came in full flood when the ferry steamer, by which he crossed the river, approached the bank on the other side, and he saw standing there, near to the spot on which the dervishes landed on the black night of the fall of Khartoum, a vast crowd of their sons and their sons' sons who were waiting to receive him.

Again came qualms of conscience when out of this crowd stepped Ishmael Ameer, who kissed him on both cheeks and led him forward to his own camel amid the people's shouts of welcome. Was he, as a British soldier, throwing in his lot with the enemies of his country? As an Englishman and a Christian was he siding with the adversaries of religion and civilisation?

The journey through the town to the mosque, with the lu-lu-ing and the throwing of palm branches before his camel's feet, was less of a triumphal progress than an abject penance. He could hardly hold up his head. Sight of the bronze and black faces about him, shouting for him. – for him of another race and creed – making that act his glory which had led to his crime – this was almost more than he could bear.

But when he reached the mosque; when he found himself, unbeliever though he was, kneeling in front of the Kibleh; when Ishmael laid his hand on his head and called on God to bless him, and the people cried with one voice, "You are of us and we are brothers," the sense of human sympathy swept down every other emotion, and he felt as if at any moment he might burst into tears.

And then, when prayers were over and Ishmael brought up his uncle, and the patriarchal old man, with a beard like a flowing fleece, said he was to lodge at his house; and finally when Ishmael led him home and took him to his own chamber and called to Abdullah to set up another angerib, saying they were to sleep in the same room, Gordon's twinges of pride and qualms of conscience were swallowed up in one great wave of human brotherhood.

But both came back, with a sudden bound, when Ishmael began to talk of his wife, and sent the servant to fetch her. They were sitting in the guest-room by this time, waiting for the lady to come to them, and Gordon felt himself moved by the inexplicable impulse of anxiety he had felt before. Who was this Mohammedan woman who had prompted Ishmael to a scheme that must so surely lead to disaster? Did she know what she was doing? Was she betraying him?

Then a door on the women's side of the house opened slowly and he saw a woman enter the room. He did not look into her face. His distrust of her, whereof he was now half ashamed, made him keep his head down while he bowed low during the little formal ceremony of Ishmael's presentation. But instantly a certain indefinite memory of height and step and general bearing made his blood flow fast, and he felt the perspiration breaking out on his forehead.

A moment afterwards he raised his eyes, and then it seemed as if his hair stood upright. He was like a man who has been made colour-blind by some bright light. He could not at first believe the evidence of his senses that she who appeared to be before him was actually there.

He did not speak or utter a sound, but his embarrassment was not observed by Ishmael, who was clapping his hands to call for food. During the next few minutes there was a little confusion in the room – Black Zogal and Abdullah were laying a big brass tray on tressels and covering it with dishes. Then came the ablutions and the sitting down to eat – Gordon at the head of the table, with Ishmael on his right and old Mahmud on his left, and Helena next to Ishmael.

The meal began with the beautiful Eastern custom of the host handing the first mouthful of food to his guest as a pledge of peace and brotherhood, faith and trust. This kept Gordon occupied for the moment, but Helena had time for observation. In the midst of her agitation she could not help seeing that Gordon had grown thinner, that his eyes were bloodshot and his nostrils pinched as if by physical or moral suffering. After a while she saw that he was looking across at her with increasing eagerness, and under his glances she became nervous and almost hysterical.

Gordon, on his part, had now not the shadow of a doubt of Helena's identity, but still he did not speak. He, too, noticed a change – Helena's profile had grown more severe, and there were dark rims under her large eyes. He could not help seeing these signs of the pain she had gone through, though his mind was going like a windmill under constantly changing winds. Why was she there? Could it be that the great sorrow which fell upon her at the death of her father had made her fly to the consolation of religion?

He dismissed that thought the instant it came to him, for behind it, close behind it, came the recollection of Helena's hatred of Ishmael Ameer and of the jealousy which had been the first cause of the separation between themselves. "Smash the Mahdi," she had said, not altogether in play. Then why was she there? Great God! could it be possible ... that after the death of the General ... she had —

Gordon felt at that moment as if the world were reeling round him.

Helena, glancing furtively across the table, was sure she could read Gordon's thoughts. With the certainty that he knew what had brought her to Khartoum she felt at first a crushing sense of shame. What a fatality! If anybody had told her that she would be overwhelmed with confusion by the very person she had been trying to avenge, she would have thought him mad, yet that was precisely what Providence had permitted to come to pass.

The sense of her blindness and helplessness in the hands of destiny was so painful as to reach the point of tears. When Gordon spoke in reply to Ishmael's or old Mahmud's questions the very sound of his voice brought memories of their happy days together, and, looking back on the past of their lives and thinking where they were now, she wanted to run away and cry.

All this time Ishmael saw nothing, for he was talking rapturously of the great hope, the great expectation, the near approach of the time when the people's sufferings would end. A sort of radiance was about him, and his face shone with the joy and the majesty of the dreamer in the full flood of his dream.

When the meal was over the old man, who had been too busy with his food to see anything else, went off to his siesta, and then, the dishes being removed and the servants gone, Ishmael talked in lower tones of the details of his scheme – how he was to go into Cairo, in advance, in the habit of a Bedouin such as Gordon wore, in order to win the confidence of the Egyptian Army, so that they should throw down the arms which no man ought to bear, and thus permit the people of the pilgrimage, coming behind, to take possession of the city, the citadel, the arsenal, and the engines of war, in the name of God and His Expected One.

All this he poured out in the rapturous language of one who saw no impediments, no dangers, no perils from chance or treachery, and then, turning to where Helena sat with her face aflame and her eyes cast down, he gave her the credit of everything that had been thought of, everything that was to be done.

"Yes, it was the Rani who suggested it," he said, "and when the triumph of peace is won God will write it on her forehead."

The afternoon had passed by this time, and the sun, which had gone far round to the West, was glistening like hammered gold along the river, in the line of the forts of Omdurman. It was near to the hour for evening prayers, and Helena was now trembling under a new thought – the thought that Ishmael would soon be called out to speak to the people who gathered in the evening in front of the house, and then she and Gordon would be left alone.

When she thought of that she felt a desire which she had never felt before and never expected to feel – a desire that Ishmael might remain to protect her from the shock of the first word that would be spoken when he was gone.

Gordon on his part, too, was feeling a thrill of the heart from his fear of the truth that must fall on him the moment he and Helena were left together.

But Black Zogal came to the open door of the guest-room, and Ishmael, who was still on the heights of his fanatical rapture, rose to go.

"Talk to him, Rani! Tell him everything! About the kufiah you intend to make, and all the good plans you proposed to prevent bloodshed."

The two unhappy souls, still sitting at the empty table, heard his sandalled footsteps pass out behind them.

Then they raised their eyes and for the first time looked into each other's faces.

CHAPTER XIII

When they began to speak it was in scarcely audible whispers.

"Helena!"

"Gordon!"

"Why are you here, Helena? What have you come for? You disliked and distrusted Ishmael Ameer when you heard about him first. You used to say you hated him. What does it all mean?"

Helena did not answer immediately.

"Tell me, Helena. Don't let me go on thinking these cruel thoughts. Why are you here with Ishmael in Khartoum?"

Still Helena did not answer. She was now sitting with her eyes down, and her hands tightly folded in her lap. There was a moment of silence while he waited for her to speak, and in that silence there came the muffled sound of Ishmael's voice outside, reciting the Fatihah —

"Praise be to God, the Lord of all creatures —"

When the whole body of the people had repeated the solemn words there was silence in the guest-room again, and, in the same hushed whisper as before, but more eagerly, more impetuously, Gordon said —

"He says you put this scheme into his mind, Helena. If so, you must know quite well what it will lead to. It will lead to ruin — inevitable ruin; bloodshed — perhaps great bloodshed."

Helena found her voice at last. A spirit of defiance took possession of her for a moment, and she said firmly —

"No, it will never come to that. It will all end before it goes so far."

"You mean that he will be ... will be *taken*?"

"Yes, he will be taken the moment he sets foot in Cairo. Therefore the rest of the plan will never be carried out, and consequently there will be no bloodshed."

"Do you *know* that, Helena?"

Her lips were compressed; she made a silent motion of her head.

"*How* do you know it?"

"I have written to your father."

"You have ... written ... to my father?"

"Yes," she said, still more firmly. "He will know everything before Ishmael arrives, and will act as he thinks best."

"Helena! Hel —"

But he was struck breathless both by what she said and by the relentless strength with which she said it. There was silence again for some moments, and once more the voice of Ishmael came from without —

"There are three holy books, O my brothers — the book of Moses and the Hebrew prophets, the book of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus, and the plain book of the Koran. In the first of these it is written: 'I know that my Redeemer liveth and that He shall stand at the latter day upon the earth.'"

Gordon reached over to where Helena sat at the side of the table, with her eyes fixed steadfastly before her, and touching her arm he said in a whisper so low that he seemed to be afraid the very air would hear —

"Then ... then ... you are sending him *to his death*!"

She shuddered for an instant as if cut to the quick; then she braced herself up.

"Isn't that so, Helena? Isn't it?"

With her lips still firmly compressed she made the same silent motion of her head.

"Is that what you came here to do?"

"Yes."

"To possess yourself of his secrets and then – ?"

"There was no other way," she answered, biting her under-lip.

"Helena! Can it be possible that you have deliberately – "

He stopped, as if afraid to utter the word that was trembling on his tongue, and then said in a softer voice —

"But why, Helena? Why?"

The spirit of defiance took possession of her again, and she said —

"Wasn't it enough that he came between you and me, and that our love – "

"Love! Helena! Helena! Can you talk of our love *here ... now?*"

She dropped her head before his flashing eyes, and again he reached over to her and said in the same breathless whisper —

"Is *this* love ... for me ... to become the wife of another man? ... Helena, what are you saying?"

She did not speak; only her hard breathing told how much she suffered.

"Then think of the other man! His wife! When a woman becomes a man's wife they are one. And to marry a man in order to ... to ... Oh, it is impossible! I cannot believe it of you, Helena."

Suddenly, without warning, she burst into tears, for something in the tone of his voice rather than the strength of his words had made her feel the shame of the position she occupied in his eyes.

After a moment she recovered herself, and, in wild anger at her own weakness, she flamed out at him, saying that if she was Ishmael's wife it was in name only, that if she had married Ishmael it was only as a matter of form, at best a betrothal, in order to meet his own wish and to make it possible for her to go on with her purpose.

"As for love ... *our* love ... it is not *I* who have been false to it. No, never for one single moment ... although ... in spite of everything ... for even when you were gone ... when you had abandoned me ... in the hour of my trouble, too ... and I had lost all hope of you ... I – "

"Then why, Helena? You hated Ishmael and wished to put him down while you thought he was coming between you and me. But why ... when all seemed to be over between us – "

Her lips were twitching and her eyes were ablaze.

"You ask me why I wished to punish him?" she said. "Very well, I will tell you. Because – " she paused, hesitated, breathed hard, and then said, "*because he killed my father.*"

Gordon gasped, his face became distorted, his lips grew pale, he tried to speak but could only stammer out broken exclamations.

"Great God! Hele – "

"Oh, you may not believe it, but I *know*," said Helena.

And then, with a rush of emotion, in a torrent of hot words, she told him how Ishmael Ameer had been the last man seen in her father's company; how she had seen them together and they were quarrelling; how her father had been found dead a few minutes after Ishmael had left him; how *she* had found him; how other evidence gave proof, abundant proof, that violence, as a contributory means at least, had been the cause of her father's death; and how the authorities knew this perfectly, but were afraid, in the absence of conclusive evidence, to risk a charge against one whom the people in their blindness worshipped.

"So I was left alone – quite alone – for you were gone too – and therefore I vowed that if there was no one else *I* would punish him."

"And that is what you – "

"Yes."

"O God! O God!"

Gordon hid his face in his hands, being made speechless by the awful strength of the blind force which had governed her life and led her into the tragic tangle of her error. But she misunderstood his feeling, and with flashing, almost blazing eyes, though sobs choked her voice for a moment, she turned on him and said —

"Why not? Think of what my father had been to me and say if I was not justified. Nobody ever loved me as he did – nobody. He was old, too, and weak, for he was ill, though nobody knew it. And then this ... this barbarian ... this hypocritical ... Oh, when I think of it I have such a feeling of physical repulsion for the man that I can scarcely sit by his side."

Saying this she rose to her feet, and standing before Gordon, as he sat with his face covered by his hands, she said, with intense bitterness, as if exulting in the righteousness of her vengeance —

"Let him go to Damietta or to death itself if need be. Doesn't he deserve it? Doesn't he? Uncover your face and tell me. Tell me if ... if ... tell me if —"

She was approaching Gordon as if to draw away his hands when she began to gasp and stammer as though she had experienced a sudden electric shock. Her eyes had fallen on the third finger of his left hand, and they fixed themselves upon it with the fascination of fear. She saw that it was shorter than the rest, and that, since she had seen it before, it had been injured and amputated.

Her breath, which had been labouring heavily, seemed to stop altogether, and there was silence once more, in which the voice of Ishmael came again —

"When the Deliverer comes will he find peace on the earth? Will he find war? Will he find corruption and the worship of false gods? Will he find hatred and vengeance? Beware of vengeance, O my brothers! It corrupts the heart; it pulls down the pillars of the soul! Vengeance belongs to God, and when men take it out of His hands He writes black marks upon their faces."

The two unhappy people sitting together in the guest-room seemed to hear their very hearts beat. At length Gordon, making a great call on his resolution, began to speak.

"Helena!"

"Well?"

"It is all a mistake – a fearful, frightful mistake."

She listened without drawing breath – a vague foreshadowing of the truth coming over her.

"Ishmael Ameer did not kill your father."

Her lips trembled convulsively; she grew paler and paler every moment.

"I know he did not, Helena, because –" (he covered his face again) "because I know who did."

"Then who ... who was it?"

"He did not intend to do it, Helena."

"Who was it?"

"It was all in the heat of blood."

"Who was –"

He hesitated, then stammered out, "Don't you see, Helena? – it was I."

She had known in advance what he was going to say, but not until he had said it did the whole truth fall on her. Then in a moment the world itself seemed to reel. A moral earthquake, upheaving everything, had brought all her aims to ashes. The mighty force which had guided and sustained her soul (the sense of doing a necessary and a righteous thing) had collapsed without an instant's warning. Another force, the powerful, almost brutal force of fate, had broken it to pieces.

"My God! My God! What has become of me?" she thought, and without speaking she gazed blankly at Gordon as he sat with his eyes hidden by his injured hand.

Then in broken words, with gasps of breath, he told her what had happened, beginning with the torture of his separation from her at the door of the General's house.

"You said I had not really loved you – that you had been mistaken and were punished and ... and that was the end."

Going away with the memory of these words in his mind, his wretched soul had been on the edge of a vortex of madness in which all its anger, all its hatred, had been directed against the General. In the blind leading of his passion, torn to the heart's core, he had then returned to the Citadel to accuse the General of injustice and tyranny.

"'Helena was mine,' I said, 'and you have taken her from, me, and broken her heart as well as my own. Is that the act of a father?'"

Other words he had also said, in the delirium of his rage, mad and insulting words such as no father could bear; then the General had snatched up the broken sword from the floor and fallen on him, hacking at his hand – see!

"I didn't want to do it, God knows I did not, for he was an old man and I was no coward, but the hot blood was in my head, and I laid hold of him by the throat to hold him off."

He uncovered his face – it was full of humility and pain.

"God forgive me, I didn't know my strength. I flung him away; he fell. I had killed him – my General, my friend!"

Tears filled his eyes. In her eyes, also, tears were gathering.

"Then you came to the door and knocked. 'Father!' you said. 'Are you alone? May I come in?' Those were your words, and how often I have heard them since! In the middle of the night, in my dreams, O God, how many times!"

He dropped his head and stretched a helpless arm along the table.

"I wanted to open the door and say, 'Helena, forgive me, I didn't mean to do it, and that is the truth, as God is my witness.' But I was afraid – I fled away."

She was now sitting with her hands clasped in her lap and her eyelids tightly closed.

"Next day I wanted to go back to you, but I dared not do so. I wanted to comfort you – I could not. I wanted to give myself up to justice – it was impossible, there was nothing for me to do except to fly away."

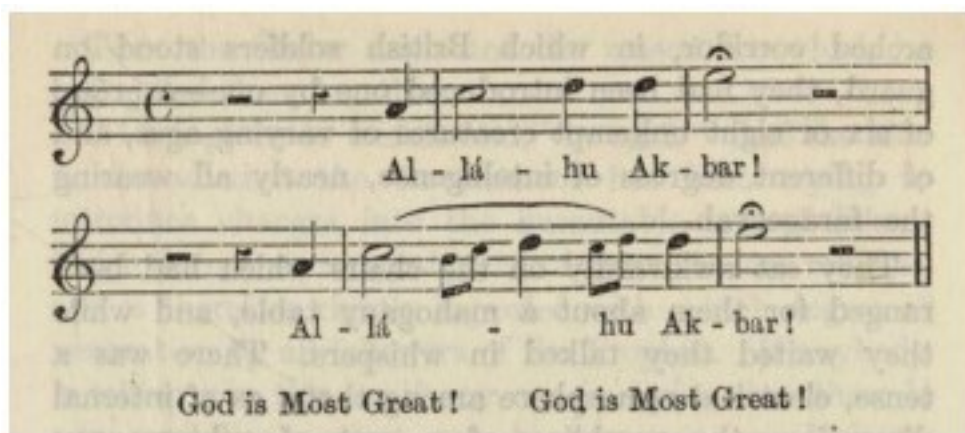
The tears were rolling down his thin face to his pinched nostrils.

"But I could not fly from myself or from ... from my love for you. They told me you had gone to England. 'Where is she to-night?' I thought. If I had never really loved you before I loved you now. And you were gone! I had lost you for ever."

Emotion choked his voice; tears were forcing themselves through her closed eyelids. There was another moment of silence and then, nervously, hesitatingly, she put out her hand to where his hand was lying on the table and clasped it.

The two unhappy creatures, like wrecked souls about to be swallowed up in a tempestuous ocean, saw one raft of hope – their love for each other, which had survived all the storms of their fate.

But just as their hands were burning as if with fever, and quivering in each other's clasp like the bosom of a captured bird, a voice from without fell on their ears like a trumpet from the skies. It was the voice of the muezzin calling to evening prayers from the minaret of the neighbouring mosque: —



Music fragment: God is Most Great! God is Most Great!

It seemed to be a supernatural voice, the voice of an accusing angel, calling them back to their present position. Ishmael – Helena – the betrothal!

Their hands separated and they rose to their feet. One moment they stood with bowed heads, at opposite sides of the table, listening to the voice outside, and then, without a word more, they went their different ways – he to his room, she to hers.

Into the empty guest-room, a moment afterwards, came the rumbling and rolling sound of the voices of the people, repeating the Fatihah after Ishmael —

"Praise be to God, the Lord of all creatures... Direct us in the right way, O Lord ... not the way of those who go astray."

CHAPTER XIV

That day the Sirdar had held his secret meeting of the Ulema, the Sheikhs and Notables of Khartoum. Into a room on the ground floor of the Palace, down a dark, arched corridor, in which British soldiers stood on guard, they had been introduced one by one – a group of six or eight unkempt creatures of varying ages, and of different degrees of intelligence, nearly all wearing the farageeyah.

They sat awkwardly on the chairs which had been ranged for them about a mahogany table, and while they waited they talked in whispers. There was a tense, electrical atmosphere among them, as of internal dissension, the rumbling of a sort of subterranean thunder.

But this subsided instantly, when the voice of the sergeant outside, and the clash of saluting arms, announced the coming of the Sirdar. The Governor-General, who was in uniform and booted and spurred as if returning from a ride, was accompanied by his Inspector-General, his Financial Secretary, the Governor of the town, and various minor officers.

He was received by the Sheikhs, all standing, with sweeping salaams from floor to forehead, a circle of smiles and looks of complete accord.

The Sirdar, with his ruddy and cheerful face, took his seat at the head of the table and began by asking, as if casually, who was the stranger that had arrived that day in Khartoum.

"A Bedouin," said the Cadi. "One whom Ishmael Ameer loves and who loves him."

"Yet a *Bedouin*, you say?" asked the Sirdar, in an incredulous tone, and with a certain elevation of the eyebrows.

"A Bedouin, O Excellency," repeated the Cadi, whereupon the others, without a word of further explanation, bent their turbaned heads in assent.

Then the Sirdar explained the reason for which he had called them together.

"I am given to understand," he said, "that the idea is abroad that the Government has been trying to introduce changes into the immutable law of Islam, which forms an integral part of your Moslem religion, and is therefore rightly regarded with a high degree of veneration by all followers of the Prophet. If anybody is telling you this, or if any one is saying that there is any prejudice against you because you are Mohammedans, he is a wicked and mischievous person, and I beg of you to tell me who he is."

Saying this, the Sirdar looked sharply round the table, but met nothing but blank and expressionless faces. Then turning to the Cadi, who as Chief Judge of the Mohammedan law-courts had been constituted spokesman, he asked pointedly what Ishmael Ameer was saying.

"Nothing, O Excellency," said the Cadi; "nothing that is contrary to the Sharia – the religious law of Islam."

"Is he telling the people to resist the Government?"

The grave company about the table silently shook their heads.

"Do you know if he has anything to do with a conspiracy to resist the payment of taxes?"

The grave company knew nothing.

"Then what is he doing, and why has he come to Khartoum? Pasha, have *you* no explanation to make to me?" asked the Sirdar, singling out a vivacious old gentleman, with a short, white, carefully oiled beard – a person of doubtful repute who had once been a slave-dealer and was now living patriarchally, under the protection of the Government, with his many wives and concubines.

The old black sinner cast his little glittering eyes around the room and then said —

"If you ask me, O Master, I say, Ishmael Ameer is putting down polygamy and divorce and ought himself to be put down."

At that there was some clamour among the Ulema, and the Sirdar thought he saw a rift through which he might discover the truth, but the Pasha was soon silenced, and in a moment there was the same unanimity as before.

"Then *what* is he?" asked the Sirdar, whereupon a venerable old Sheikh, after the usual Arabic compliments and apologies, said that, having seen the new teacher with his own eyes and talked with him, he had now not the slightest doubt that Ishmael was a man sent from God, and therefore that all who resisted him, all who tried to put him down, would perish miserably. At these words the electrical atmosphere which had been held in subjection seemed to burst into flame. In a moment six tongues were talking together. One Sheikh, with wild eyes, told of Ishmael's intercourse with angels. Another knew a man who had seen him riding with the Prophet in the desert. A third had spoken to somebody who had seen angels, in the form of doves, descending upon him from the skies, and a fourth was ready to swear that one day, while Ishmael was preaching in the mosque, people heard a voice from heaven crying, "Hear him! He is My messenger!"

"What was he preaching about?" said the Sirdar.

"The last days, the coming of the Deliverer," said the Sheikh with the wild eyes, in an awesome whisper.

"What Deliverer?"

"Seyidna Isa – our Lord Jesus – the White Christ that is to come."

"Is this to be soon?"

"Soon, O Excellency, very soon."

After this outburst there was a moment of tense and breathless silence, during which the Sirdar sat with his serious eyes fixed on the table, and his officers, standing behind, glanced at each other and smiled.

Immediately afterwards the Sirdar put an end to the interview.

"Tell your people," he said, "that the Government has no wish to interfere with your religious beliefs and feelings, whatever they may be; but tell them also, that it intends to have its orders obeyed, and that any suspicion of conspiracy, still more of rebellion, will be instantly put down."

The group of unkempt creatures went off with sweeping salaams, and then the Sirdar dismissed his officers also, saying —

"Bear in mind that you are the recognised agents of a just and merciful Government, and whatever your personal opinions may be of these Arabs and their superstitions, please understand that you are to give no anti-Islamic colour to your British feelings. At the same time remember that we have worked for the redemption of the Soudan from a state of savagery, and we cannot allow it to be turned back to barbarism in the name of religion."

Both the Ulema and the other British officials being gone, the Sirdar was alone with his Inspector-General.

"Well?" he said.

"Well?" repeated the Inspector-General, biting the ends of his close-cropped moustache. "What more did you expect, sir? Naturally the man's own people were not going to give him away. They nearly did so, though. You heard what old Zewar Pasha said?"

"Tut! I take no account of that," said the Sirdar. "The brothers of Christ Himself would have put Him down, too – locked Him up in an asylum, I dare say."

"That's exactly what I would do with Ishmael Ameer, anyway," said the Inspector-General. "Of course he performs no miracles, and is attended by no angels. His removal to Torah, and his inability to free himself from a Government jail, would soon dispel the belief in his supernatural agencies."

"But how can we do it? Under what pretext? We can't imprison a man for preaching the second coming of Christ. If we did, our jails would be pretty full at home, I'm thinking."

The Inspector-General laughed. "Your old error, dear Sirdar. You can't apply the same principles to East and West."

"And your old Parliamentary cant, dear friend! I'm sick to death of it."

There was a moment of strained silence, and then the Inspector-General said —

"Ah well, I know these holy men, with their sham inspirations and their so-called heavenly messages. They develop by degrees, sir. This one has begun by proclaiming the advent of the Lord Jesus, and he will end by hoisting a flag and claiming to be the Lord Jesus himself."

"When he does that, Colonel, we'll consider our position afresh. Meantime it may do us no mischief to remember that if the family of Jesus could have dealt with the founder of our own religion as you would deal with this olive-faced Arab there would probably be no Christianity in the world to-day."

The Inspector-General shrugged his shoulders and rose to go.

"Good-night, sir."

"Good-night, Colonel," said the Sirdar, and then he sat down to draft a dispatch to the Consul-General —

"Nothing to report since the marriage, betrothal, or whatever it was, of the 'Rani' to the man in question. Undoubtedly he is laying a strong hold on the imagination of the natives and acquiring the allegiance of large bodies of workers; but I cannot connect him with any conspiracy to persuade people not to pay taxes or with any organised scheme that is frankly hostile to the continuance of British rule.

"Will continue to watch him, but find myself at fearful odds owing to difference of faith. It is one of the disadvantages of Christian Governments among people of alien race and religion, that methods of revolt are not always visible to the naked eye, and God knows what is going on in the sealed chambers of the mosque.

"That only shows the danger of curtailing the liberty of the vernacular press, whatever the violence of its sporadic and muddled anarchy. Leave the press alone, I say. Instead of chloroforming it into silence give it a tonic if need be, or you drive your trouble underground. Such is the common sense and practical wisdom of how to deal with sedition in a Mohammedan country, let some of the logger-headed dunces who write leading articles in England say what they will.

"If this man should develop supernatural pretensions I shall know what to do. But without that, whether he claim divine inspiration or not, if his people should come to regard him as divine, the very name and idea of his divinity may become a danger, and I suppose I shall have to put him under arrest."

Then remembering that he was addressing not only the Consul-General but a friend, the Sirdar wrote —

"'Art Thou a King?' Strange that the question of Pontius Pilate is precisely what we may find in our own mouths soon! And stranger still, almost ludicrous, even farcical and hideously ironical, that though for two thousand years Christendom has been spitting on the pusillanimity of the old pagan, the representative of a Christian Empire will have to do precisely what he did.

"Short of Pilate's situation, though, I see no right to take this man, so I am not taking him. Sorry to tell you so, but I cannot help it.

"Our love from both to both. Trust Janet is feeling better. No news of our poor boy, I suppose?"

"Our boy" had for thirty years been another name for Gordon.

CHAPTER XV

Grave as was the gathering in the Sirdar's Palace at Khartoum, there was a still graver gathering that day at the British Agency in Cairo – the gathering of the wings of Death.

Lady Nuneham was nearing her end. Since Gordon's disgrace and disappearance she had been visibly fading away under a burden too heavy for her to bear.

The Consul-General had been trying hard to shut his eyes to this fact. More than ever before, he had immersed himself in his work, being plainly impelled to fresh efforts by hatred of the man who had robbed him of his son.

Through the Soudan Intelligence Department in Cairo he had watched Ishmael's movements in Khartoum, expecting him to develop the traits of the Mahdi and thus throw himself into the hands of the Sirdar.

It was a deep disappointment to the Consul-General that this did not occur. The same report came to him, again and again. The man was doing nothing to justify his arrest. Although surrounded by fanatical folk, whose minds were easily inflamed, he was not trying to upset governors or giving "divine" sanction for the removal of officials.

But meantime some mischief was manifestly at work all over the country. From day to day Inspectors had been coming in to say that the people were not paying their taxes. Convinced that this was the result of conspiracy, the Consul-General had shown no mercy.

"Sell them up," he had said, and the Inspectors, taking their cue from his own spirit but exceeding his orders, had done his work without remorse.

Week by week the trouble had deepened, and when disturbances had been threatened he had asked the British Army of Occupation, meaning no violence, to go out into the country and show the people England's power.

Then grumblings had come down on him from the representatives of foreign nations. If the people were so discontented with British rule that they were refusing to pay their taxes, there would be a deficit in the Egyptian treasury – how then were Egypt's creditors to be paid?

"Time enough to cross the bridge when you come to it, gentlemen," said the Consul-General, in his stinging tone and with a curl of his iron lip.

If the worst came to the worst England would pay, but England should not be asked to do so because Egypt must meet the cost of her own government. Hence more distraining and some inevitable violence in suppressing the riots that resulted from evictions.

Finally came a hubbub in Parliament, with the customary "Christian" prattlers prating again. Fools! They did not know what a subtle and secret conspiracy he had to deal with while they were crying out against his means of killing it.

He *must* kill it! This form of passive resistance, this attack on the Treasury, was the deadliest blow that had ever yet been aimed at England's power in Egypt.

But he must not let Europe see it! He must make believe that nothing was happening to occasion the least alarm. Therefore to drown the cries of the people who were suffering not because they were poor and could not pay, but because they were perverse and would not, he must organise some immense demonstration.

Thus came to the Consul-General the scheme of the combined festival of the King's Birthday and the – th anniversary of the British Occupation of Egypt. It would do good to foreign Powers, for it would make them feel that, not for the first time, England had been the torch-bearer in a dark country. It would do good to the Egyptians, too, for it would force their youngsters (born since Tel-el-Kebir) to realise the strength of England's arm.

Thus had the Consul-General occupied himself while his wife had faded away. But at length he had been compelled to see that the end was near, and towards the close of every day he had gone to her room and sat almost in silence, with bowed head, in the chair by her side.

The great man, who for forty years had been the virtual ruler of millions, had no wisdom that told him what to say to a dying woman; but at last, seeing that her pallor had become whiteness, and that she was sinking rapidly and hungering for the consolations of her religion, he asked her if she would like to take the sacrament.

"It is just what I wish, dear," she answered, with the nervous smile of one who had been afraid to ask.

At heart the Consul-General had been an agnostic all his life, looking upon religion as no better than a civilising superstition, but all the same he went downstairs and sent one of his secretaries for the Chaplain of St. Mary's – the English Church.

The moment he had gone out of the door Fatimah, under the direction of the dying woman, began to prepare the bedroom for the reception of the clergyman by laying a side-table with a fair white cloth, a large prayer-book, and two silver candlesticks containing new candles.

While the Egyptian nurse did this the old lady looked on with her deep, slow, weary eyes, and talked in whispers, as if the wings of the august Presence that was soon to come were already rustling in the room. When all was done she looked very happy.

"Everything is nice and comfortable now," she said, as she lay back to wait for the clergyman.

But even then she could not help thinking the one thought that made a tug at her resignation. It was about Gordon.

"I am quite ready to die, Fatimah," she said, "but I should have loved to see my dear Gordon once more."

This was what she had been waiting for, praying for, eating her heart and her life out for.

"Only to see and kiss my boy! It would have been so easy to go then."

Fatimah, who was snuffling audibly, as she straightened the eider-down coverlet over the bed, began to hint that if her "sweet eyes" could not see her son she could send him a message.

"Perhaps I know somebody who could see it reaches him, too," said Fatimah, in a husky whisper.

The old lady understood her instantly.

"You mean Hafiz! I always thought as much. Bring me my writing-case – quick!"

The writing-case was brought and laid open before her, and she made some effort to write a letter, but the power of life in her was low, and after a moment the shaking pen dropped from her fingers.

"*Ma'aleysh*, my lady!" said Fatimah soothingly. "Tell me what you wish to say. I will remember everything."

Then the dying mother sent a few touching words as her last message to her beloved son.

"Wait! Let me think. My head is a little ... just a little ... Yes, this is what I wish to say, Fatimah. Tell my boy that my last thoughts were about him. Though I am sorry he took the side of the false prophet, say I am certain he did what he thought was right. Be sure you tell him I die happy, because I know I shall see him again. If I am never to see him in this world I shall do so in the world to come. Say I shall be waiting for him there. And tell him it will not seem long."

"Could you sign your name for him, my heart?" said Fatimah, in her husky voice.

"Yes, oh yes, easily," said the old lady, and then with an awful effort she wrote —

"Your ever-loving Mother."

At that moment Ibrahim in his green caftan, carrying a small black bag, brought the English chaplain into the room.

"Peace be to this house," said the clergyman, using the words of his Church ritual, and the Egyptian nurse, thinking it was an Eastern salutation, answered, "Peace!"

The Chaplain went into the "boys' room" to put on his surplice, and when he came out, robed in white, and began to light the candles and prepare the vessels which he placed on the side-table, the old lady was talking to Fatimah in nervous whispers —

"His lordship?" "Yes!" "Do you think, my lady —"

She wanted the Consul-General to be present and was half afraid to send for him; but just at that instant the door opened again, and her pale, spiritual face lit up with a smile as she saw her husband come into the room.

The clergyman was now ready to begin, and the old lady looked timidly across the bed at the Consul-General as if there were something she wished to ask and dared not.

"Yes, I will take the sacrament with you, Janet," said the old man, and then the old lady's face shone like the face of an angel.

The Consul-General took the chair by the side of the bed and the Chaplain began the service —

"Almighty, ever-living God, Maker of mankind, who dost correct those whom Thou dost love —"

All the time the triumphant words reverberated through the room the dying woman was praying fervently, her lips moving to her unspoken words and her eyes shining as if the Lord of Life she had always loved was with her now and she was giving herself to Him — her soul, her all.

The Consul-General was praying too — praying for the first time to the God he did not know and had never looked to —

"If Thou art God, let her die in peace. It is all I ask — all I wish."

Thus the two old people took the sacrament together, and when the Communion Service came to a close, the old lady looked again at the Consul-General and asked, with a little confusion, if they might sing a hymn.

The old man bent his head, and a moment later the Chaplain, after a whispered word from the dying woman, began to sing —

"Sun of my soul, Thou Saviour dear,
It is not night if Thou be near ..."

At the second bar the old lady joined him in her breaking, cracking voice, and the Consul-General, albeit his throat was choking him, forced himself to sing with her —

"When the soft dews of kindly sleep
My wearied eyelids gently steep..."

It was as much as the Consul-General could do to sing of a faith he did not feel, but he felt tenderly to it for his wife's sake now, and with a great effort he went on with her to the end —

"If some poor wandering child of Thine
Have spurned to-day the voice divine ..."

The light of another world was in the old lady's eyes when all was over, and she seemed to be already half way to heaven.

CHAPTER XVI

All the same there was a sweet humanity left in her, and when the Chaplain was gone and the side-table had been cleared, and she was left alone with her old husband, there came little gleams of the woman who wanted to be loved to the last.

"How are you now?" he asked.

"Better so much better," she said, smiling upon him, and caressing with her wrinkled hand the other wrinkled hand that lay on the eider-down quilt.

The great Consul-General, sitting on the chair by the side of the bed, felt as helpless as before, as ignorant as ever of what millions of simple people know – how to talk to those they love when the wings of Death are hovering over them. But the sweet old lady, with the wisdom and the courage which God gives to His own on the verge of eternity, began to speak in a lively and natural voice of the end that was coming and what was to follow it.

He was not to allow any of his arrangements to be interfered with, and, above all, the festivities appointed for the King's Birthday were not to be disturbed.

"They must be necessary or you would not have them, especially now," she said, "and I shall not be happy if I know that on my account they are not coming off."

And then, with the sweet childishness which the feebleness of illness brings, she talked of the last King's Birthday, and of the ball they had given in honour of it.

That had been in their own house, and the dancing had been in the drawing-room, and the Consul-General had told Ibrahim to set the big green arm-chair for her in the alcove, and sitting there she had seen everything. What a spectacle! Ministers Plenipotentiary, Egyptian Ministers, ladies, soldiers! Such gorgeous uniforms! Such glittering orders! Such beautiful toilets!

The old lady's pale face filled with light as she thought of all this, but the Consul-General dropped his head, for he knew well what was coming next.

"And, John, don't you remember? Gordon was there that night, and Helena – dear Helena! How lovely they looked! Among all those lovely people, dear... He was wearing every one of his medals that night, you know. So tall, so brave-looking, a soldier every inch of him, and such a perfect English gentleman! Was there ever anything in the world so beautiful? And Helena, too! She wore a silvery silk, and a kind of coif on her beautiful black hair. Oh, she was the loveliest thing in all the room, I thought! And when they led the cotillion – don't you remember they led the cotillion, dear? – I could have cried, I was so proud of them."

The Consul-General continued to sit with his head down, listening to the old lady and saying nothing, yet seeing the scene as she depicted it and feeling again the tingling pride which he, too, had felt that night but permitted nobody to know.

After a moment the beaming face on the bed became clouded over, as if that memory had brought other memories less easy to bear – dreams of happy days to come, of honours and of children.

"Ah well, God knows best," she said in a tremulous voice, releasing the Consul-General's hand.

The old man felt as if he would have to hurry out of the room without uttering another word, but, as well as he could, he controlled himself and said —

"You are agitating yourself, Janet. You must lie quiet now."

"Yes, I must lie quiet now, and think of ... of other things," she answered.

He was stepping away when she called on him to turn her on her right side, for that was how she always slept, and upon the Egyptian nurse coming hurrying up to help, she said —

"No, no, not you, Fatimah – his lordship."

Then the Consul-General put his arms about her – feeling how thin and wasted she was, and how little of her was left to die – and turning her gently round he laid her back on the pillow which Fatimah had in the meantime shaken out.

While he did so her dim eyes brightened again, and stretching her white hands out of her silk nightdress she clasped them about his neck, with the last tender efforts of the woman who wanted to be fondled to the end.

The strain of talking had been too much for her, and after a few minutes she sank into a restless doze, in which the perspiration broke out on her forehead and her face acquired an expression of pain, for sleep knows no pretences. But at length her features became more composed and her breathing more regular, and then the Consul-General, who had been standing aside, mute with anguish, said in a low tone to Fatimah —

"She is sleeping quietly now," and then he turned to go.

Fatimah followed him to the head of the stairs and said in a husky whisper —

"It will be all over to-night, though — you'll see it will."

For a moment he looked steadfastly into the woman's eyes, and then, without answering her, walked heavily down the stairs.

Back in the library, he stood for some time with his face to the empty fireplace. Over the mantelpiece there hung a little picture, in a black-and-gilt frame, of a bright-faced boy in an Arab fez. It was more than he could do to look at that portrait now, so he took it off its nail and laid it, face down, on the marble mantel-shelf.

Just at that moment one of his secretaries brought in a despatch. It was the despatch from the Sirdar, sent in cypher but now written out at length. The Consul-General read it without any apparent emotion and put it aside without a word.

The hours passed slowly; the night was very long; the old man did not go to bed. Not for the first time, he was asking himself searching questions about the mystery of life and death, but the great enigma was still baffling him. Could it be possible that while he had occupied himself with the mere shows and semblance of things, calling them by great names — Civilisation and Progress — that simple soul upstairs had been grasping the eternal realities?

There were questions that cut deeper even than that, and now they faced him one by one. Was it true that he had married merely in the hope of having some one to carry on his name and thus fulfil the aspirations of his pride? Had he for nearly forty years locked his heart away from the woman who had been starving for his love, and was it only by the loss of the son who was to have been the crown of his life that they were brought together in the end?

Thus the hoofs of the dark hours beat heavily on the great Proconsul's brain, and in the awful light that came to him from an open grave, the triumphs of the life behind him looked poor and small.

But meantime the palpitating air of the room upstairs was full of a different spirit. The old lady had apparently awakened from her restless sleep, for she had opened her eyes and was talking in a bright and happy voice. Her cheeks were tinged with the glow of health, and her whole face was filled with light.

"I knew I should see them," she said.

"See whom, my heart?" asked Fatimah, but without answering her, the old lady, with the same rapturous expression, went on talking.

"I knew I should, and I have! I have seen both of them!"

"Whom have you seen, my lady?" asked Fatimah again, but once more the dying woman paid no heed to her.

"I saw them as plainly as I see you now, dear. It was in a place I did not know. The sun was so hot, and the room was so close. There was a rush roof and divans all round the walls. But Gordon and Helena were there together, sitting at opposite sides of a table and holding each other's hands."

"Allah! Allah!" muttered Fatimah, with upraised hands.

The old lady seemed to hear her, for an indulgent smile passed over her radiant face and she said in a tone of tender remonstrance —

"Don't be foolish, Fatimah! *Of course* I saw him. The Lord said I should, and He never breaks His promises. 'Help me, O God, for Christ's sake,' I said. 'Shall I see my dear son again? O God, give me a sign.' And He did! Yes, it was in the middle of the night. 'Janet,' said a voice, and I was not afraid. 'Be patient, Janet. You shall see your dear boy before you die.'"

Her face was full of happy visions. The life of this world seemed to be no longer there. A kind of life from the other world appeared to reanimate the sinking woman. The near approach of eternity illumined her whole being with a supernatural light. She was dying in a flood of joy.

"Oh, how good the Lord is! It is so easy to go now! ... John, you must not think I suffer any longer, because I don't. I have no pain now, dear – none whatever."

Then she clasped her wasted hands together in the attitude of prayer and said in a rustling whisper —

"To-night, Lord Jesus! Let it be to-night!"

After that her rapturous voice died away and her ecstatic eyes gently closed, but an ineffable smile continued to play on her faintly-tinted face, as if she were looking on the wings that were waiting to bear her away.

The doctor came in at that moment, and was told what had occurred.

"Delirium, of course," he said. A change had come; the crisis was approaching. If the same thing happened at the supreme moment the patient was not to be contradicted; her delusion was to be indulged.

It did not happen.

In the early hours of the morning the Consul-General was called upstairs. There was a deep silence in the bedroom, as if the air had suddenly become empty and void. The day was breaking, and through the windows that looked over to the Nile the white sails of a line of boats gliding by seemed like the passing of angels' wings. Sparrows were twittering in the eaves, and through the windows to the east the first streamers of the sunrise were rising in the sky.

The Consul-General approached the bed and looked down at the pallid face on the pillow. He wanted to stoop and kiss it, but he felt as if it would be a profanation to do so now. His own face was full of suffering, for the sealed chambers of his iron soul had been broken open at last.

With his hands clasped behind his back he stood for some minutes quite motionless. Then laying one hand on the brass head-rail of the bed, he leaned over his dead wife and spoke to her as if she could hear.

"Forgive me, Janet! Forgive me!" he said in a low voice that was like a sob.

Did she hear him? Who can say she did not? Was it only a ray from the sunrise that made the Egyptian woman think that over the dead face of the careworn and weary one, whose sweet soul was even then winging its way to heaven, there passed the light of a loving smile?

CHAPTER XVII

Within three days the softening effects on the Consul-General of Lady Nuneham's death were lost. Out of his very bereavement and the sense of being left friendless and alone he became a harder and severer man than before. His secretaries were more than ever afraid of him, and his servants trembled as they entered his room.

It heightened his anger against Gordon to believe that by his conduct he had hastened his mother's end. In his absolute self-abasement there were moments when he would have found it easier to forgive Gordon if he had been a prodigal, a wastrel, prompted to do what he had done by the grossest selfishness; but deep down in some obscure depths of the father's heart the worst suffering came of the certainty that his son had been moved by that tragic earnestness which belongs only to the greatest and noblest souls.

Still more hardening and embittering to the Consul-General than the memory of Gordon was the thought of Ishmael. It intensified his anger against the Egyptian to feel that having first by his "visionary mummery," by his "manoeuvring and quackery," robbed him of his son, he had now, by direct consequence, robbed him of his wife also.

All the Consul-General's bull-necked strength, all his force of soul, were roused to fury when he thought of that. He was old and tired and he needed rest, but before he permitted himself to think of retirement, he must crush Ishmael Ameer.

Not that he allowed himself to recognise his vindictiveness. Shutting his eyes to his personal motive, he believed he was thinking of England only. Ishmael was the head-centre of an anarchical conspiracy which was using secret and stealthy weapons that were more deadly than bombs; therefore Ishmael must be put down, he must be trampled into the earth, and his movement must be destroyed.

But how?

Within a few hours after Lady Nuneham's funeral the Grand Cadi came by night, and with many vague accusations against "the Arab innovator," repeated his former warning —

"I tell you again, O Excellency, if you permit that man to go on it will be death to the rule of England in Egypt."

"Then prove what you say — prove it, prove it," cried the Consul-General, raising his impatient voice.

But the suave old Moslem judge either could not or would not do so. Indeed, being a Turkish official, accustomed to quite different procedure, he was at a loss to understand why the Consul-General wanted proof.

"Arrest the offender first and you'll find evidence enough afterwards," he said.

An English statesman could not act on lines like those, so the Consul-General turned back to the despatches of the Sirdar. The last of them — the one received during the dark hours preceding his wife's death — contained significant passages —

"If this man should develop supernatural pretensions I shall know what to do."

Ha! There was hope in that! The charlatan element in Ishmael Ameer might carry him far if only the temptation of popular idolatry were strong enough.

Once let a man deceive himself with the idea that he was divine, nay, once let his followers delude themselves with the notion of his divinity, and a civilised Government would be bound to make short work of him. Whosoever and whatsoever he might be, that man must die!

A sudden cloud passed over the face of the Consul-General as he glanced again at the Sirdar's despatch and saw its references to Christ.

"How senseless everybody is becoming in this world," he thought.

Pontius Pilate! Pshaw! When would religious hypocrisy open its eyes and see that, according to all the laws of civilised states, the Roman Governor had done right? Jesus claimed to be divine, His

people were ready to recognise Him as King; and whether His kingdom was of this world or another, what did it matter? If His pretensions had been permitted they would have led to wild, chaotic, shapeless anarchy. Therefore Pilate crucified Jesus, and, scorned though he had been through all the ages, he had done no more than any so-called "Christian" governor would be compelled to do to-day.

"Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." Why would not people understand that these words were written not in derision but in self-defence? There could be only one authority in Palestine then, and there could be only one authority in Egypt now.

"If this visionary mummer, with his empty quackeries, should develop the idea that he is divine, or even the messenger of divinity, I will hang him like a dog!" thought the Consul-General.

CHAPTER XVIII

Five days after the death of Lady Nuneham the Consul-General was reading at his breakfast the last copy of the *Times* to arrive in Cairo. It contained an anticipatory announcement of a forthcoming Mansion House Banquet in honour of the King's Birthday. The Foreign Minister was expected to speak on the "unrest in the East, with special reference to the affair of El Azhar."

The Consul-General's face frowned darkly, and he began to picture the scene as it would occur. The gilded hall, the crowd of distinguished persons eating in public, the mixed odours of many dishes, the pop of champagne corks, the smoke of cigars, the buzz of chatter like the gobbling of geese on a green, and then the Minister, with his hand on his heart, uttering timorous apologies for his Proconsul's policy, and pouring out pompous platitudes as if he had newly discovered the Decalogue.

The Consul-General's gorge rose at the thought. Oh, when would these people, who stayed comfortably at home and lived by the votes of the factory-hands of Lancashire and Yorkshire, and hungered for the shouts of the mob, understand the position of men like himself, who, in foreign lands, among alien races, encompassed by secret conspiracies, were spending their strength in holding high the banner of Empire?

"Having chosen a good man, why can't they leave him alone?" thought the Consul-General.

And then, his personal feelings getting the better of his patriotism, he almost wished that the charlatan element in Ishmael Ameer might develop speedily; that he might draw off the allegiance of the native soldiers in the Soudan and break out, like the Mahdi, into open rebellion. That would bring the Secretary of State to his senses, make him realise a real danger, and see in the everlasting "affair of El Azhar" if not light, then lightning.

The door of the breakfast-room opened and Ibrahim entered.

"Well, what is it?" demanded the Consul-General with a frown.

Ibrahim answered in some confusion that a small boy was in the hall, asking to see the English lord. He said he brought an urgent message, but would not tell what it was or where it came from. Had been there three times before, slept last night on the ground outside the gate, and could not be driven away – would his lordship see the lad?

"What is his race? Egyptian?"

"Nubian, my lord."

"Ever seen the boy before?"

"No ... yes ... that is to say ... well, now that your lordship mentions it, I think ... yes I think he came here once with Miss Hel ... I mean General Graves's daughter."

"Bring him up immediately," said the Consul-General.

At the next moment a black boy stepped boldly into the room. It was Mosie. His clothes were dirty, and his pudgy face was like a block of dark soap splashed with stale lather, but his eyes were clear and alert and his manner was eager.

"Well, my boy, what do you want?" asked the Consul-General.

Mosie looked fearlessly up into the stern face with its iron jaw, and tipped his black thumb over his shoulder to where Ibrahim, in his gorgeous green caftan, stood timidly behind him.

At a sign from the Consul-General, the Egyptian servant left the room, and then, quick as light, Mosie slipped off his sandal, ripped open its inner sole, and plucked out a letter stained with grease.

It was the letter which Helena had written in Khartoum.

The Consul-General read it rapidly, with an eagerness which even he could not conceal. So great, indeed, was his excitement that he did not see that a second paper (Ishmael's letter to the Chancellor of El Azhar) had fallen to the floor until Mosie picked it up and held it out to him.

"Good boy," said the Consul-General – the cloud had passed and his face bore an expression of joy.

Instantly apprehending the dim purport of Helena's hasty letter, the Consul-General saw that what he had predicted and half hoped for was already coming to pass. It was to be open conspiracy now, not passive conspiracy any longer. The man Ishmael was falling a victim to the most fatal of all mental maladies. The Mahdist delusion was taking possession of him, and he was throwing himself into the Government's hands.

Hurriedly ringing his bell, the Consul-General committed Mosie to Ibrahim's care, whereupon the small black boy, in his soiled clothes, with his dirty face and hands, strutted out of the room in front of the Egyptian servant, looking as proud as a peacock and feeling like sixteen feet tall. Then the Consul-General called for one of his secretaries and sent him for the Commandant of Police.

The Commandant came in hot haste. He was a big and rather corpulent Englishman, wearing a blue-braided uniform and a fez – naturally a blustering person with his own people, but as soft-voiced as a woman and as obsequious as a slave before his chief.

"Draw up your chair, Commandant – closer; now listen," said the Consul-General.

And then in a low tone he repeated what he had already learned from Helena's letter, and added what he had instantly divined from it – that Ishmael Ameer was to return to Cairo; that he was to come back in the disguise of a Bedouin Sheikh; that his object was to draw off the allegiance of the Egyptian army in order that a vast horde of his followers might take possession of the city; that this was to be done during the period of the forthcoming festivities, while the British army was still in the provinces, and that the conspiracy was to reach its treacherous climax on the night of the King's Birthday.

The Commandant listened with a gloomy face, and, looking timidly into the flashing eyes before him, he asked if his Excellency could rely on the source of his information.

"Absolutely! Infallibly!" said the Consul-General.

"Then," said the Commandant nervously, "I presume the festivities must be postponed?"

"Certainly not, sir."

"Or perhaps your Excellency intends to have the British army called back to Cairo?"

"Not that either."

"At least you will arrest the 'Bedouin'?"

"Not yet at all events."

The policy to be pursued was to be something quite different.

Everything was to go on as usual. Sports, golf, cricket, croquet, tennis-tournaments, polo-matches, race-meetings, automobile-meetings, "all the usual fooleries and frivolities" – with crowds of sight-seers, men in flannels and ladies in beautiful toilets – were to be encouraged to proceed. The police-bands were to play in the public gardens, the squares, the streets, everywhere.

"Say nothing to anybody. Give no sign of any kind. Let the conspiracy go on as if we knew nothing about it. But –"

"Yes, my lord? Yes?"

"Keep an eye on the 'Bedouin.' Let every train that arrives at the railway-station and every boat that comes down the river be watched. As soon as you have spotted your man, see where he goes. He may be a fanatical fool, miscalculating his 'divine' influence with the native soldier, but he cannot be working alone. Therefore find out who visit him, learn all their movements, let their plans come to a head, and, when the proper time arrives, in one hour, at one blow we will crush their conspiracy and clap our hands upon the whole of them."

"Splendid! An inspiration, my lord!"

"I've always said it would some day be necessary to forge a special weapon to meet special needs, and the time has come to forge it. Meantime undertake nothing hurriedly. Make no mistakes, and see that your men make none."

"Certainly, my lord."

"Investigate every detail for yourself, and above all hold your tongue and guard your information with inviolable secrecy."

"Surely, my lord."

"You can go now. I'm busy. Good-morning!"

"Wonderful man!" thought the Commandant, as he went out at the porch. "Seems to have taken a new lease of life! Wonderful!"

The Consul-General spent the whole of that day in thinking out his scheme for a "special weapon," and when night came and he went upstairs – through the great echoing house that was like the bureau of a department of state now, being so empty and so cheerless, and past the dark and silent room whereof the door was always closed – he felt conscious of a firmer and lighter step than he had known for years.

Fatimah was in his bedroom, for she had constituted herself his own nurse since his wife's death. She was nailing up on the wall the picture of the little boy in the Arab fez, and, having her own theory about why he had taken it down in the library, she said —

"There! It will be company for your lordship, and nobody will ask questions about it here."

When Fatimah had gone the Consul-General could not but think of Gordon. He always thought of him at that hour of the night, and the picture of his son that rose in his mind's eye was always the same. It was a picture of Gordon's deadly white face with its trembling lower lip, as he stood bolt upright while his medals were being torn from his breast, and then said, in that voice which his father could never forget: "General, the time may come when it will be even more painful to you to remember all this than it has been to me to bear it."

Oh, that Gordon could be here now and see for himself what a sorry charlatan, what a self-deceived quack and conspirator, was the man in whose defence he had allowed his own valuable life to rush down to a confused welter of wreck and ruin!

As the Consul-General got into bed he was thinking of Helena. What a glorious, courageous, resourceful woman she was! It carried his mind back to Biblical days to find anything equal to her daring and her success. But what was the price she had paid for them? He remembered something the Sirdar had said of "a marriage, a sort of betrothal," and then he recalled the words of her first letter: "I know exactly how far I intend to go, and I shall go no farther. I know exactly what I intend to do, and I shall do it without fear or remorse."

What had happened in the Soudan? What was happening there now? In what battle-whirlwind had that splendid girl's magnificent victory been won?

CHAPTER XIX

Meantime Helena in Khartoum was feeling like a miserable traitress.

She had condemned an innocent man to death! Ishmael had *not* killed her father, yet she had taken such steps that the moment he entered Cairo he would be walking to his doom!

One after another sweet and cruel memories crowded upon her, and in the light of the awful truth as Gordon had revealed it, she began to see Ishmael with quite different eyes. All she had hitherto thought evil in his character now looked like good; what she had taken for hypocrisy was sincerity; what she had supposed to be subtlety was simplicity. His real nature was a rebuke to every one of her preconceived ideas. The thought of his tenderness, his modesty, his devotion, and even the unselfishness which had led to their betrothal, cut her to the heart. Yet she had doomed him to destruction. The letter she had written to the Consul-General was his death-warrant.

That night she could fix her mind on nothing except the horror of her position, but next morning she set herself to think out schemes for stopping the consequences of her own act.

The black boy was gone; it was not possible to overtake him; there was no other train to Egypt for four days, but there was the telegraph – she could make use of that.

"I'll telegraph to the Consul-General to pay no attention to my letter," she thought.

Useless! The Consul-General would ask himself searching questions and take his precautions just the same.

"I'll telegraph that my letter is a forgery," she thought.

Madness! The Consul-General would ask himself how, if it was a forgery, she could know anything about it.

"I'll go across to the Sirdar and tell him everything, and leave him to act for both of us as he thinks best!"

Impossible! How could she explain her position to the Sirdar without betraying Gordon's identity and thereby leading to his arrest?

That settled everything. There was no escape from the consequences of her conduct, no way to put an end to the network of dangers by which she had surrounded Ishmael. Mosie was now far on his way to Cairo; he carried to the Consul-General not only her own letter but also the original of Ishmael's letter to the Chancellor of El Azhar. The hideous work was done.

Two days passed, during which her over-excited feelings seemed to paralyse all her powers of thought. Then a new idea took possession of her, and she set herself to undo what she had done with Ishmael himself. Little by little, in tremulous tones, and with a still deeper sense of duplicity than before, she began to express halting doubts of the success of their enterprise.

"I have been thinking about it," she said nervously, "and now I fear –"

"What do you fear, O Rani?" asked Ishmael.

"I fear," said Helena, trembling visibly, "that the moment the Government learn from the Sirdar, as they needs must, that the great body of your people have left Khartoum, and are travelling north, they will recall the British army to protect the capital and thus –"

But Ishmael interrupted her with a laugh.

"If the day of the Redeemer has come," he said, "will human armies hinder him? No!"

It was useless! Ishmael was now more than ever an enthusiast, a fanatic, a visionary. His spiritual ecstasy swept away every obstacle, and made him blind to every danger.

Helena felt like a witch who was trying to undo the effects of her charm. She could not undo them. She could not destroy the potency of the spell she herself had raised, and the effort to do so put her into a fever of excitement.

Two days more passed like this, and still Helena was in the toils of her own actions. From time to time she saw Gordon as he sat at meals or moved about the house. He did not speak to her, and

she dropped her head in shame as often as they came close together. But at length she caught a look in his face which seemed to her to say, "Are you really going to let an innocent man walk into the jaws of death?"

That brought her wavering mind to a quick conclusion. Gordon was waiting for her to speak. She must speak! She must confess everything! She must tell Ishmael what she had done, and by what tragic error she had done it. At any cost, no matter what, she must put an end to the false situation in which she lived, and thus redeem herself in Gordon's eyes and in her own.

At noon that day, being Friday, Ishmael preached in the mosque, delivering a still more fervent and passionate message. The kingdom of heaven which the Lord Isa had foretold was soon to come! When it came God would lend them legions of angels, if need be, to protect the oppressed and to uphold the down-trodden! Therefore let the children of God fear nothing from the powers and principalities of the world! Their pilgrimage was safe! No harm could come to them, for however their feet might slip the arms of the Compassionate would bear them up!

As Ishmael's ecstasy had increased so had the devotion of his people, and when he returned home they followed him in a dense crowd through the streets shouting the wildest acclamations.

"Out of the way! The Master is coming! The Messenger is here! Allah! El Hamdullillah!"

Helena heard them, but she did not hear Ishmael reprove them, as in earlier days he had been wont to do. She was standing in the guest-room, and the noise of the approaching crowd had brought Gordon from his bedroom, at the moment when Ishmael, surrounded by a group of his people, stepped into the house.

Ishmael was in a state of excitement amounting to exaltation, and after holding out hands both to Helena and Gordon he turned to his followers to dismiss them. "Go back now," he said, "and to-night, two hours after sunset, let the Ulema and the Notables come to me that we may decide on the details of our pilgrimage."

"Allah! El Hamdullillah!" cried the people.

More than ever they were like creatures possessed. Hungry and ragged as many of them were, the new magnificence that was to be given to their lives appeared to be already shining in their eyes.

Helena saw this, and her heart was smitten with remorse at the thought of the cruel confession she had decided to make. She could not make it in sight of the hopes it must destroy. But neither could she look into Gordon's searching face and remain silent, and as soon as the crowd had gone, she made an effort to speak.

"Ishmael," she said, trembling all over, "there is something I wish to say – if it will not displease you."

"Nothing the Rani can say will displease me," said Ishmael.

He was looking at her with the expression of enthusiastic admiration which she had seen in his eyes before. It was hard to go on.

"Your intentions are now known to everybody," she said. "You have not hidden them from any of your own people. That has been very trustful, very noble, but still –"

"Still – what, my sister?"

"If somebody ... should betray your scheme to the Government, and ... and the moment you set foot in Cairo –"

Again Ishmael interrupted her with a laugh.

"Impossible!" he said, smiling upon her with his bright and joyous eyes. "Islam has only one heart, one soul, one mind."

Then taking her quivering hand and leading her to the door, he pointed to the camp outside and said —

"Look! Ten thousand of our poor unhappy people are there. They have come to me from the tyrannies of cruel taskmasters and have been true to me through the temptations of hunger and thirst. Some of them are from Cairo and are waiting to return home. All are the children of Islam, and are

looking for the coming of the Expected who brings peace and joy. Is there one of them who will betray me now? Not one! Treachery would injure me, but it would hurt the betrayer more."

Then with the same expression of enthusiastic admiration, and in a still tenderer and softer voice, he began to laugh and to rally her, saying he knew well what was going on in his sweet sister's mind – that though her brave spirit had devised the plan they had adopted, yet now that the time was near for carrying it into execution her womanly heart was failing her, and affectionate anxiety for his own safety was making her afraid.

"But have no fear at all," he said, standing behind her and smoothing her cheek with a light touch of his tapering fingers. "If this is God's work will God forget me? No!"

With a sense of stifling duplicity Helena made one more effort and said —

"Still, who knows, there may be some one – "

"None, O Rani!"

"But don't you know – "

"I don't want to know anything except one thing – that God guides and directs me."

Again he laughed, and asked where was the kufiah (the Bedouin head-dress) which she had promised to make for his disguise.

"Get to work at it quick," he said; "it will be wanted soon, my sister."

And then, clapping his hands for the mid-day meal, he went into his room to prepare for it, leaving Gordon and Helena for some moments alone together.

Gordon had been standing aside in the torment of a hundred mixed emotions, and now he and Helena spoke in whispers.

"He is determined to go into Cairo," she said.

"Quite determined."

"Oh, is there *no* way to prevent him?"

"None now – unless – "

"Unless – what?" she asked eagerly.

"Let us ... Let us wait and see," said Gordon, and then Abdullah came in to lay the table.

CHAPTER XX

As soon as the mid-day meal was over Gordon escaped to his room – the room he shared with Ishmael – and throwing himself down on the angerib with his hands clasped across his face, he tried to think out the situation in which he found himself, to gaze into the depths of his conscience, and to see where he was and what he ought to do.

So violent was the state of his soul that he sat there a long time before he could link together his memories of what had happened since he arrived in Khartoum.

"Am I dreaming?" he asked himself again and again, as one by one his thoughts rolled over him like tempestuous waves.

The first thing he saw clearly was that Ishmael was not now the same man that he had known at Alexandria; that the anxieties, responsibilities, and sufferings he had gone through as a religious leader had dissipated his strong common sense; and that as a consequence the caution whereby men guard their conduct had gone.

He also saw that Ishmael's spiritual ecstasy had reached a point not far removed from madness; that his faith in divine guidance, divine guardianship, divine intervention had become an absolute obsession.

Therefore it was hopeless to try to move him from his purpose by any appeals on the score of danger to himself or to his people.

"He is determined to go into Cairo," thought Gordon, "and into Cairo he will go."

The next thing Gordon saw, as he examined the situation before him, was that Helena was powerless to undo the work which by the cruel error of fate she had been led to do; that her act was irrevocable; that there was no calling it back, and that it would go from its consequences to the consequences of its consequences.

Helena's face appeared to him, and his heart bled for her as he thought of how she passed before him – she who had always been so bold and gay – with her once proud head bent low. He remembered her former strength and self-reliance; her natural force and grace; her fearless daring and that dash of devilry which had been for him one of her greatest charms; and then he thought of her false position in that house, brought there by her own will, held there by her own act – a tragic figure of a woman in the meshes of her own net.

"She cannot continue to live like this. It is impossible. Yet what can the end be?" he asked himself.

Hours passed like this. His head under his hot hands burned and his temples throbbed, yet no ray of light emerged from the darkness surrounding him.

But at length the man in him, the soldier and the lover, swept down every obstacle, and he told himself that he must save Helena from the consequences of her own conduct whatever the result might be.

"I must! I must!" he kept on repeating as Helena's face rose before him; and after a while this blind resolution brought him at one stride to a new idea.

Ishmael was determined to go into Cairo, but there was one way to prevent him doing so – that he, Gordon himself, should go instead!

When he first thought of that his temples beat so violently that it seemed as if they would burst, and he felt as if he had been brought to the very brink of despair. Seeing nothing before him but instant arrest the moment he entered the city, it seemed to be a pitiful end to his long journey across the desert, a poor sequel to his fierce struggle with himself, and to the mystic hopes with which he had buoyed up his heart, that immediately after he had reached Khartoum he should turn back to his death.

Work, mission, redemption – all that had so recently had a meaning for him had disappeared. But his heart rose when he remembered that if he did what he had determined to do he would break the cruel error of fate whereby Ishmael had been doomed to die for an offence he did not commit.

What was the first fact of this cruel situation? That Helena had believed Ishmael to be guilty of the death of her father. But Ishmael was innocent, whereas he, Gordon, was guilty! Could he allow an innocent man to die for his crime?

That brought him to the crisis of his conscience. It settled everything. Destiny, acting under the blind force of a poor girl's love for her father, was sending Ishmael to his death. But destiny should be defeated! He should pay his own penalty! Ishmael should be snatched from the doom that threatened him, and Helena should be saved from lifelong remorse.

"Yes, yes, I must go into Cairo instead," he told himself.

It had grown late by this time, and the bedroom had become dark when Abdullah knocked at the door and said that the Sheikhs were in the guest-room and Ishmael was asking for Omar.

Under its roof thatched with stalks of durah, lit by lamps suspended from its rafters, the Ulema and Notables of Khartoum – the same that visited the Sirdar – had gathered soon after sunset, and squatting on the divans covered by carpets and cushions, had drunk their coffee and talked in their winding, circuitous Eastern way of the business before them, and particularly of the White Lady's part in it, while they waited for Ishmael, who was still at the mosque.

"Yes," the vivacious old Pasha had said, "no matter how great a man may be, when he undertakes an enterprise like this he should always consult ten of his friends."

"But great ones are not great in friends," said a younger Sheikh. "What if he has not got ten?"

"Then let him consult one friend ten times over."

"Nay, but if he stands so high that he has not got even one friend?"

"Then," said the old man, with a sly look over his shoulder towards the women's side of the house, "let him consult his wife, and, whatever she advises, let him do the contrary."

When Gordon in his Bedouin dress entered the guest-room, Ishmael was sitting in the midst of his people, and he called to him to take the seat by his right side.

"But where is the Rani?" he asked, looking round, whereupon Abdullah answered that she was still in her room, and the old Pasha hinted that in the emancipation of the Eastern woman perhaps women themselves would be the chief impediment.

"I know! I know!" said Ishmael. "But all the same we must turn our backs on the madness of a bygone age that woman is inferior to man, and her counsel is not to be trusted. Bring her, Abdullah."

A few minutes afterwards Helena, wearing her Indian veil but with her face uncovered, entered the guest-room with downcast eyes, followed by the Arab woman and the child.

It cut Gordon to the heart to see her look of shame and of confusion, but Ishmael saw nothing in Helena's manner except maidenly modesty under the eyes of so many men, and making a place for her on his left, he began without further delay on the business that had brought them together.

They were about to win a dear victory for God, but it was to be a white war, a bloodless revolution. The heartless festivities that were to be held in honour of the birthday of the King who lived across the seas while people perished in Egypt, were to reach their climax something more than a month hence. Therefore the great caravan of God's children who were to cross the desert by camel and horse and ass, in order that they might meet the Expected One when he appeared in Cairo, should start within a week. But the messenger of God who had to prepare the path before them must go by train, and he ought to leave Khartoum in four days.

Other preliminaries of the pilgrimage there were to arrange, and after the manner of their kind the Sheikhs talked long and leisurely, agreeing finally that Ishmael should go first into Cairo in the disguise of a Bedouin Sheikh to make sure of the success of their mission, and that Omar (Gordon) should follow him in command of the body of the people.

At length there was silence for a moment, and then Ishmael said —

"Is there anything else, my brothers?"

And at that Gordon, who had not spoken before, turned to him and answered, in the style as well as the language of the Arabs —

"Listen, I beg of you, to my words, and forgive me if what I say is not pleasing to you or yours."

"Speak, Omar Benani, speak," said Ishmael, laying his right hand, with an affectionate gesture, on Gordon's left.

There was a moment of silence, in which Gordon could distinctly hear the sound of Helena's breathing. Then he said —

"Reverse your order, O my brother, and let me go first into Cairo."

A tingling electrical current seemed to pass through the air of the room, and again Gordon heard the sound of Helena's laboured breathing, but no one spoke except Ishmael, who said in a soft voice —

"But why, Omar, why?"

Gordon braced himself up and answered —

"First, because it best becomes a messenger of God to enter Cairo in the company of his people, not alone and in disguise."

"And next?"

"Next, because I know Cairo better than Ishmael, and all that he can do I can do, and more."

There was another moment of tense silence, and then Ishmael said —

"I listen to your sincere proposal, O my brother, but before I answer it I ask for the counsel of my friends."

Then raising his voice he cried, "Companions, you have heard what Omar Benani has said — which of us is it to be?"

At that the tense atmosphere in the room broke into eager and impetuous speech. First came, as needs must in an Eastern conclave, some gusts of questions, then certain breezes of protest, but finally a strong and unbroken current of assent.

"Master," said one of the Sheikhs, "I have eaten bread and salt with you, therefore I will not deceive you. Let Omar go first. He can do all that Ishmael can do and run no risk."

"Messenger of the Merciful," said another, "neither will I deceive you. Omar knows Cairo best. Therefore let him go first."

After others had answered in the same way Ishmael turned to Mahmud, his uncle, whereupon the old man wiped his rheumy eyes and said —

"Your life is in God's hand, O son of my brother, and man cannot escape his destiny. If it is God's will that you should be the first to go into Cairo you will go, and God will protect you. But speaking for myself, I should think it a shame and a humiliation that the father of his people should not enter the city with his children. If Omar says he can do as much as you, believe him — the white man does not lie."

No sooner had the old man concluded than the whole company with one voice shouted that they were all of the same opinion, whereupon Ishmael cried —

"So be it, then! Omar it shall be! And do not think for one moment that I grudge your choice."

"El Hamdullillah!" shouted the company, as from a sense of otherwise inexpressible relief.

Meantime Gordon was conscious only of Helena's violent agitation. Though he dared not look at her, he seemed to see her feverish face and the expression of terror in her lustrous eyes. At length, when the shouts of the Sheikhs had subsided, he heard her tremulous voice saying hurriedly to Ishmael —

"Do not listen to them."

"But why, my Rani?" Ishmael asked in a whisper.

She tried to answer him and could not. "Because ... because —"

"Because — what?" asked Ishmael again.

"Oh, I don't know – I can't think – but I beg you, I entreat you not to let Omar go into Cairo."

Her agitated voice caused another moment of silence, and then Ishmael said in a soft, indulgent tone —

"I understand you, O my Rani. This may be the task of greatest danger, but it is the place of highest honour too, and you would fain see no man except your husband assigned to it. But Omar is of me and I am of him, and there can be no pride nor jealousy between us."

And then, taking Gordon by the right hand, while with his left he was holding Helena, he said —

"Omar, my friend, my brother!"

"El Hamdullillah!" cried the Sheikhs again, and then one by one they rose to go.

Helena rose too, and with her face aflame and her breath coming in gusts she hurried back to her room. The Arab woman followed her in a moment, and with a mocking smile in her glinting eyes, she said —

"How happy you must be, O lady, that some one else than your husband is to go into that place of danger!"

But Helena could bear no more.

"Go out of the room this moment! I cannot endure you! I hate you! Go, woman, go!" she cried.

Zenoba fled before the fury in her lady's face, but at the next moment Helena had dropped to the floor and burst into a flood of tears.

When she regained possession of herself, the child, Ayesha, was embracing her and, without knowing why, was weeping over her wet cheeks.

CHAPTER XXI

Now that Gordon was to take Ishmael's place, Helena found herself deeper than ever in the toils of her own plot. She could see nothing but death before him as the result of his return to Cairo. If his identity were discovered, he would die for his own offences as a soldier. If it were not discovered, he would be executed for Ishmael's conspiracies as she had made them known.

"Oh, it cannot be! It must not be! It shall not be!" she continued to say to herself, but without seeing a way to prevent it.

Never for a moment, in her anxiety to save Gordon from stepping into the pit she had dug for Ishmael, did she allow herself to think that, being the real cause of her father's death, he deserved the penalty she had prepared for the guilty man. Her mind had altered towards that event since the man concerned in it had changed. The more she thought of it the more sure she became that it was a totally different thing, and in the strict sense hardly a crime at all.

In the first place, she reminded herself that her father had suffered from an affection of the heart which must have contributed to his death, even if it had not been the principal cause of it. How could she have forgotten that fact until now?

Remembering her father's excitement and exhaustion when she saw him last, she could see for the first time, by the light of Gordon's story, what had afterwards occurred – the burst of ungovernable passion, the struggle, the fall, the death.

Then she told herself that Gordon had not intended to kill her father, and whatever he had done had been for love of her. "Helena was mine, and you have taken her from me, and broken her heart as well as my own." Yes, love for her and the torment of losing her had brought Gordon back to the Citadel after he had been ordered to return to his quarters. Love for her, and the delirium of a broken heart, had wrung out of him the insults which had led to the quarrel that resulted in her father's death.

In spite of her lingering tenderness for the memory of her father, she began to see how much he had been to blame for what had happened – to think of the gross indignity, the frightful shame, the unmerciful and even unlawful degradation to which in his towering rage he had subjected Gordon. The scene came back to her with horrible distinctness now – her father crying in a half-stifled voice, "You are a traitor! A traitor who has consorted with the enemies of his country!" and then tearing Gordon's sword from its scabbard and breaking it across his knee.

But seeing this, she also saw her own share in what had occurred. At the moment of Gordon's deepest humiliation she had driven him away from her. Her pride had conquered her love, and instead of flinging herself into his arms as she ought to have done, whether he was in the right or in the wrong, when everybody else was trampling upon him, she had insulted him with reproaches and turned her back upon him in his disgrace.

That scene came back to her, too – Gordon at the door of the General's house, with his deadly white face and trembling lips, stammering out, "I couldn't help it, Helena – it was impossible for me to act otherwise," and then, bareheaded as he was, and with every badge of rank and honour gone, staggering across the garden to the gate.

When she thought of all this now it seemed to her that, if anybody had been to blame for her father's death, it was not Gordon, but herself. His had been the hand, the blind hand only, but the heart that had wrought the evil had been hers.

"Oh, it cannot be! it shall not be!" she continued to say to herself, and just as she had tried to undo her work with Ishmael when he was bent on going into Cairo, so she determined to do the same with Gordon, now that he had stepped into Ishmael's place. Her opportunity came soon.

A little before mid-day of the day following the meeting of the Sheikhs, she was alone in the guest-room, sitting at the brass table that served her as a desk – Ishmael being in the camp, Zenoba

and the child in the town, and old Mahmud still in bed – when Gordon came out of the men's quarter and walked towards the door as if intending to pass out of the house.

He had seen her as he came from his bedroom, with one of her hands pressed to her brow, and a feeling of inexpressible pity and unutterable longing had so taken possession of him, with the thought that he was soon to lose her – the most precious gift life had given him – that he had tried to steal away.

But instinctively she felt his approach, and with a trembling voice she called to him, so he returned and stood by her side.

"Why are you doing this?" she said. "You know what I mean. Why are you doing it?"

"You know quite well why I am doing it, Helena. Ishmael was determined to go to his death. There was only one way to prevent him. I had to take it."

"But you are going to death yourself – isn't that so?"

He did not answer. He was trying not to look at her.

"Or perhaps you see some way of escape – do you?"

Still he did not speak – he was even trying not to hear her.

"If not, why are you going into Cairo instead of Ishmael?"

"Don't ask me that, Helena. I would rather not answer you."

Suddenly the tears came into her eyes, and after a moment's silence she said —

"I know! I understand! But remember your father. He loves you. You may not think it, but he does – I am sure he does. Yet if you go into Cairo you know quite well what he will do."

"My father is a great man, Helena. He will do his duty whatever happens – what he believes to be his duty."

"Certainly he will, but all the same, do you think he will not suffer! And do you wish to put him into the position of being compelled to cut off his own son? Is that right? Can anything – anything in the world – make it necessary?"

Gordon did not answer her, but under the strain of his emotion he tightened his lips, and his pinched nostrils began to dilate like the nostrils of a horse.

"Then remember your mother, too," said Helena. "She is weak and ill. It breaks my heart to think of her as I saw her last. She believes that you have fled away to some foreign country, but she is living in the hope that time will justify you, and then you will be reconciled to your father, and come back to her again. Is this how you would come back? ... Oh, it will kill her! I'm sure it will!"

She saw that Gordon's strong and manly face was now utterly discomposed, and she could not help but follow up her advantage.

"Then think a little of me too, Gordon. This is all my fault, and if anything is done to you in Cairo it will be just the same to me as if I had done it. Do you wish me to die of remorse?"

She saw that he was struggling to restrain himself, and turning her beautiful wet eyes upon him and laying her hand on his arm, she said —

"Don't go back to Cairo, Gordon! For my sake, for your own sake, for our love's sake —"

But Gordon could bear no more, and he cried in a low, hoarse whisper —

"Helena, for heaven's sake, don't speak so. I knew it wouldn't be easy to do what I intended to do, and it isn't easy. But don't make it harder for me than it is, I beg, I pray."

She tried to speak again, but he would not listen.

"When you sent the message into Cairo which doomed Ishmael to death you thought he had killed your father. If he had really done so he would have deserved all you did to him. But he hadn't, whereas I had. Do you think I can let an innocent man die for my crime?"

"But, Gordon —" she began, and again he stopped her.

"Don't speak about it, Helena. For heaven's sake, don't! I've fought this battle with myself before, and I can't fight it over again – with your eyes upon me too, your voice in my ears, and your presence by my side."

He was trying to move away, and she was still clinging to his arm.

"Don't speak about our love, either. All that is over now. You must know it is. There is a barrier between us that can never – "

His voice was breaking and he was struggling to tear himself away from her, but she leapt to her feet and cried —

"Gordon, you *shall* hear me – you *must*!" and then he stopped short and looked at her.

"You think you were the cause of my father's death, but you were not," she said.

His mouth opened, his lips trembled, he grew deadly pale.

"You think, too, that there is a barrier of blood between us, but there is no such thing."

"Take care of what you are saying, Helena."

"What I am saying is the truth, Gordon – it is God's truth."

He looked blankly at her for a moment in silence, then laid hold of her violently by both arms, gazed closely into her face, and said in a low, trembling voice —

"Helena, if you knew what it is to live for months under the shadow of a sin – an awful sin – an unpardonable sin – surely you wouldn't ... But why don't you speak? Speak, girl, speak!"

Then Helena looked fearlessly back into his excited face and said —

"Gordon, do you remember that you came to my room in the Citadel before you went in to that ... that fatal interview?"

"Yes, yes! How can I forget it?"

"Do you also remember what I told you then, that whatever happened that day I could never leave my father?"

"Yes, certainly, yes."

"Do you remember that you asked me why, and I said I couldn't tell you because it was a secret – somebody else's secret?"

"Well?" His pulses were beating violently; she could feel them throbbing on her arms.

"Gordon," she said, "do you know what that secret was? I can tell you now. Do you know what it was?"

"What?"

"That my father was suffering from heart-disease, and had already received his death-warrant."

She waited for Gordon to speak, but he was almost afraid to breathe.

"He didn't know his condition until we arrived in Egypt, and then perhaps he ought to have resigned his commission, but he had been out of the service for two years, and the temptation to remain was too much for him, so he asked me to promise to say nothing about it."

Gordon released her arms and she sat down again. He stood over her, breathing fast and painfully.

"I thought you ought to have been told at the time when we became engaged, but my father said, 'No! Why put him in a false position, and burden him with responsibilities he ought not to bear?'"

Helena's own voice was breaking now, and as Gordon listened to it he was looking down at her flushed face, which was thinner than before but more beautiful than ever in his eyes, and a hundredfold more touching than when it first won his heart.

"I tried to tell you that day, too, before you went into the General's office, so that you might see for yourself, dear, that if you separated yourself from my father I ... I couldn't possibly follow you, but there was my promise, and then ... then my pride and ... and something you said that pained and wounded me – "

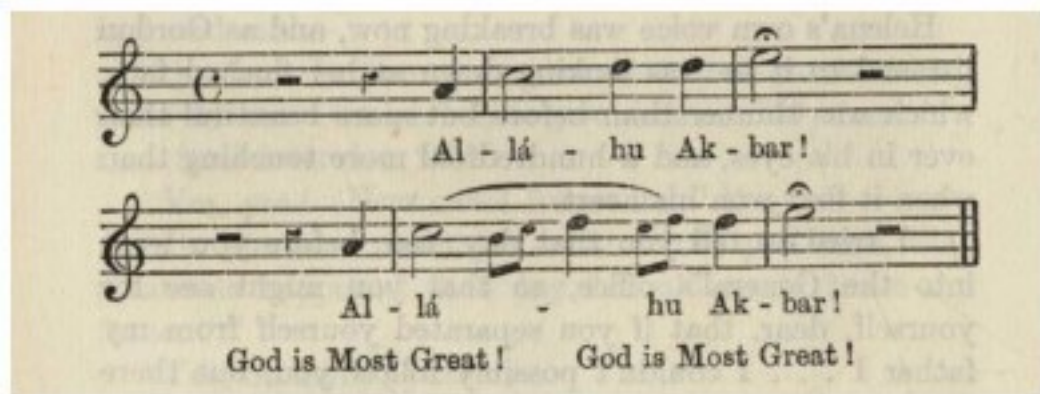
"I know, I know, I know," he said.

"But now," she continued, rising to her feet again, "now," she repeated, in the same trembling voice, but with a look of joy and triumph, "now that you have told me what happened after your return to the Citadel, I see quite clearly – I am sure – perfectly sure – that my dear father died not by your hand at all, but by the hand and the will of God."

"Helena! Helena!" cried Gordon, and in the tempest of his love and the overwhelming sense of boundless relief he flung his arms about her and covered her face with kisses.

One long moment of immeasurable joy they were permitted to know, and then the hand of fate snatched at them again.

From their intoxicating happiness they were awakened by a voice. It was only the voice of the muezzin calling to mid-day prayers, but it seemed to be reproaching them, separating them, tearing them asunder, reminding them of where they were now, and what they were, and that God was over them.



Music fragment

Their lips parted, their arms fell away from each other, and irresistibly, simultaneously, as if by an impulse of the same heart, they dropped to their knees to pray for pardon.

The voice of the muezzin ceased, and in the silence of the following moment they heard a soft footstep coming behind.

It was Ishmael. He did not speak to either of them, but seeing them on their knees, at the hour of mid-day prayers, he stepped up and knelt between.

CHAPTER XXII

When Gordon had time to examine the new situation in which he found himself he saw that he was now in a worse case than before.

It had been an inexpressible relief to realise that he was not the first cause of the General's death, and therefore that conscience did not require him to go into Cairo in order to protect Ishmael from the consequences of a crime he did not commit. But no sooner had he passed this great crisis than he was brought up against a great test. What was it to him that he could save his life if he had to lose Helena?

Helena was now Ishmael's wife – betrothed to him by the most sacred pledges of Mohammedan law. If the barrier of blood which had kept him from Helena had been removed, the barrier of marriage which kept Helena from him remained.

"What can we do?" he asked himself, and for a long time he saw no answer.

In the fierce struggle that followed, honour and duty seemed to say, that inasmuch as Helena had entered into this union of her own free will – however passively acquiescing in its strange conditions – she must abide by it, and he must leave her where she was and crush down his consuming passion, which was an unholy passion now. But honour and duty are halting and timorous guides in the presence of love, and when Gordon came to think of Helena as the actual wife of Ishmael he was conscious of nothing but the flame that was burning at his heart's core.

Remembering what Helena had told him, and what he had seen since he came to that house, he reminded himself that after all the marriage was only a marriage *pro formâ*, a promise made under the mysterious compulsion of fate, a contract of convenience and perhaps generosity on the one side, and on the other side of dark and calculating designs which would not bear to be thought of any longer, being a result of the blind leading of awful passions under circumstances of the most irresistible provocation.

When he came to think of love he was dead to everything else. Ishmael did not love Helena, whereas he, Gordon, loved her with all his heart and soul and strength. She was everything in life to him, and though he might have gone to his death without her, it was impossible to live and leave her behind him.

Thinking so, he began to conjure up the picture of a time when Ishmael, under the influence of Helena's beauty and charm, might perhaps forget the bargain between them, and claim his rights as a husband, and then the thought of her beautiful head with its dark curling locks as it lay in his arms that day lying in the arms of the Arab, with Ishmael's swarthy face above her, so tortured him that it swept away every other consideration.

"It must not, shall not, cannot be!" he told himself.

And that brought him to the final thought that since he loved Helena, and since Helena loved him and not her husband, their position in Ishmael's house was utterly false and wrong, and could not possibly continue.

"It is not fair even to Ishmael himself," he thought.

And when, struggling with his conscience, he asked himself how he was to put an end to the odious and miserable situation, he concluded at once that he would go boldly to Ishmael and tell him the whole story of Helena's error and temptation, thereby securing his sympathy and extricating all of them from the position in which they were placed.

"Anything will be better than the present state of things," he thought, as he reflected upon the difficult and delicate task he intended to undertake.

But after a moment he saw that while it would be hard to explain Helena's impulse of vengeance to the man who had been the object of it, to tell him of the message she had sent into Cairo would be utterly impossible.

"I cannot say anything to Ishmael about that," he thought, and the only logical sequence of ideas was that he could not say anything to Ishmael at all.

This left him with only one conclusion – that inasmuch as it was impossible that he and Helena could remain any longer in that house, and equally impossible that they could leave it with Ishmael's knowledge and consent, there was nothing for them to do but to fly away.

He found it hard to reconcile himself to the idea of a secret flight. The very thought of it seemed to put them into the position of adulterers, deceiving an unsuspecting husband. But when he remembered the scene in the guest-room that day, the moment of over-powering love, the irresistible kiss, and then the crushing sense of duplicity, as Ishmael entered and without a thought of treachery knelt between them, he told himself that at any cost whatsoever he must put an end to the false position in which they lived.

"We must do it soon – the sooner the better," he thought.

Though he had lived so long with the thought of losing Helena, that kiss had in a moment put his soul and body into a flame. He knew that his love was blinding him to certain serious considerations, and that some of these would rise up later and perhaps accuse him of selfishness or disloyalty or worse. But he could only think of Helena now, and his longing to possess her made him dead to everything else.

In a fever of excitement he began to think out plans for their escape, and reflecting that two days had still to pass before the train left Khartoum by which it had been intended that he should travel in his character as Ishmael's messenger, he decided that it was impossible for them to wait for that.

They must get away at once by camel if not by rail. And remembering Osman, his former guide and companion, he concluded to go over to the Gordon College and secure his aid.

Having reached this point, he asked himself if he ought not to obtain Helena's consent before going any further; but no, he would not wait even for that. And then, remembering how utterly crushed she was, a victim of storm and tempest, a bird with a broken wing, he assumed the attitude of strength towards her, telling himself she was a woman after all, and it was his duty as a man to think and to act for her.

So he set out in haste to see Osman, and when, on his way through the town, he passed (without being recognised) a former comrade in khaki, a Colonel of Lancers, whose life had been darkened by the loss of his wife through the treachery of a brother officer, he felt no qualms at all at the thought of taking Helena from Ishmael.

"Ours is a different case altogether," he said, and then he told himself that their life would be all the brighter in the future because it had had this terrible event in it.

It was late and dark when he returned from the Gordon College, and then old Mahmud's house was as busy as a fair, with people coming and going on errands relating to the impending pilgrimage, but he watched his opportunity to speak to Helena, and as soon as Ishmael, who was more than commonly animated and excited that night, had dismissed his followers and gone to the door to drive them home, he approached her and whispered in her ear —

"Helena!"

"Yes?"

"Can you be ready to leave Khartoum at four o'clock in the morning?"

For a moment she made no reply. It seemed to her an incredible happiness that they were really to go away together. But quickly collecting her wandering thoughts she answered —

"Yes, I can be ready."

"Then go down to the Post Landing. I shall be there with a launch."

"Yes, yes!" Her heart was beating furiously.

"Osman, the guide who brought me here, will be waiting with camels on the other side of the river."

"Yes, yes, yes!"

"We are to ride as far as Atbara, and take train from there to the Red Sea."

"And what then?"

"God knows what then. We must wait for the direction of fate. America, perhaps, as we always hoped and intended."

She looked quickly round, then took his face between her hands and kissed him.

"To-morrow morning at four o'clock," she whispered.

"At four," he repeated.

A thousand thoughts were flashing through her mind, but she asked no further questions, and at the next moment she went off to her own quarters.

The door of her room was ajar, and the face of the Arab woman, who was within, doing something with the clothes of the child, seemed to wear the same mocking smile as before; but Helena was neither angry nor alarmed. When she asked herself if the woman had seen or heard what had taken place between Gordon and herself, no dangers loomed before her in relation to their flight.

Her confidence in Gordon – his strength, his courage, his power to protect her – was absolute. If he intended to take her away he would do so, and not Ishmael nor all the Arabs on earth could stop him.

CHAPTER XXIII

Gordon could not allow himself to sleep that night, lest he should not be awake when the hour came to go. The room he shared with Ishmael was large, and it had one window looking to the river and another to Khartoum. Through these windows, which were open, he heard every noise of the desert town by night.

Sometimes there was the dead, measured thud of a camel's tread on the unpaved streets; sometimes the light beat of a donkey's hoofs; at intervals there were the faint and distant cries of the night watchmen from various parts of the town, intersecting the air like cross currents of wireless telegraphy, and once an hour there was the guttural voice of Black Zogal at the door of their own house, calling the confession of faith.

"There is no god but God – no god but God!"

It had been late when Ishmael came to bed, and even then, being excited and in high spirits, and finding Gordon still awake, he had talked for a long time in the darkness of his preparations for the forthcoming pilgrimage and his hopes of its progress across the desert – three and a half miles an hour, fourteen hours a day, making a month for the journey altogether. But finding that Gordon did not reply, and thinking he must be sleepy, he wished him a good night and a blessed morning, and then, with a few more words that were trustful, affectionate, warm-hearted and brotherly, he fell asleep.

It was after twelve by this time, and though Gordon intended to rise at three it seemed to him that the few hours between would never end. He listened to the measured breathing of the sleeping man and counted the cries outside, but the time passed as if with feet of lead.

It was never quite dark, and through the luminous dark blue of the southern night, fretted with stars, nearly everything outside could be dimly seen. Of all lights that is the one most conducive to thought, and in spite of himself Gordon could not help thinking. The obstinate questions which he had been able to crush down during the day were now rising to torment him.

"What will happen when this household which is now asleep awakes in the morning?" he asked himself.

He knew quite well what would happen. He would soon be missed. Helena would be missed too, and it would be concluded that they had gone together. But after he had banished the picture which rose to his mind's eye of the confusion that would ensue on the discovery of their flight, he set himself to defend it.

It was true that he was breaking the pledge he had made to the people when he undertook to go into Cairo, but he had made his promise under a mistake as to his own position, and therefore it was not incumbent upon him to keep it, now that he knew the truth.

It was true that Helena was breaking the betrothal which she had entered into with Ishmael, but she, too, had acted under an error, and therefore her marriage was not binding upon her conscience.

But do what he would to justify himself, he could not shake off a sense of deceit and even of treachery. He thought of Ishmael, and how he had heaped kindness and honour upon him since he came to Khartoum. He thought of Helena, and of the shame with which her flight would overwhelm the man who considered himself her husband.

"Go on!" something seemed to say in a taunting whisper. "Fly away! Seek your own happiness and think of nothing else! This is what you came to Khartoum for! This is what your great hopes and aims amount to! Leave this good man in the midst of the confusion you have brought upon him! Let him go into Cairo, innocent though he is, and die by the cruel error of fate! That's good! That's brave! That's worthy of a man and a soldier!"

Against thoughts like these he tried to set the memory of old Mahmud's words at the meeting of the Sheikhs: "Man cannot resist his destiny. If God wills that you should go into Cairo you will go, and God will protect you!"

But there was really only one way to reconcile himself to what he intended to do, and that was to think of Helena and to keep her beautiful face constantly before him. She was on the other side of the wall, and she would be awake now – the only other person in the house who was not asleep – thinking of him and waiting for the hour when they were to escape.

The luminous dark blue of the air died into the soft red of the early dawn, the "Wahhed!" of the night watchmen became less frequent, and the call of Black Zogal stopped altogether. It was now three o'clock, and Gordon, who had not undressed, rose to a sitting position on his bed.

This brought him face to face with Ishmael, whose angerib was on the opposite side of the room. The Arab was sleeping peacefully. He, too, had lain down in his clothes, having to rise early, but he had unrolled his turban, leaving nothing on his head but his Mecca skullcap, which made him look like the picture of a saintly Pope. The dim light that was filtering through the windows rested on him as he lay in his white garments under a white sheepskin. There was a look of serenity, of radiance, almost of divinity, in his tranquil face.

Gordon felt as if he were a thief and a murderer – stealing from and stabbing the man who loved and trusted him. He had an almost irresistible impulse to waken Ishmael there and then, and tell him plainly what he was about to do. But the thought of Helena came back again, and he remembered that that was quite impossible.

At length he rose to go. He was still wearing Hafiz's slippers, but he found himself stepping on his toes to deaden the sound of his tread. When he got to the door he opened it carefully so as to make no noise; but just at that moment the sleeping man stirred and began to speak.

In the toneless voice of sleep, but nevertheless with an accent of affection which Gordon had never heard from him before, Ishmael said —

"Rani! My Rani!"

Gordon stood and listened, not daring to move. After a moment all was quiet again. There was no sound in the room but Ishmael's measured breathing as before.

How Gordon got out at last he never quite knew. When he recovered his self-possession he was in the guest-room, drawing aside the curtain that covered the open doorway, and feeling the cool, fresh, odourless desert air on his hot face and in his nostrils.

He saw Black Zogal stretched out at the bottom of the wooden steps, fast asleep and with his staff beside him. The insurgent dawn was sweeping up, but all was silent both within and without. Save for the Nubian's heavy snoring there was not a sound about the house.

Feeling his throat to be parched, he turned back to the water-niche for a drink, and while he was lifting the can to his lips his eye fell on a letter which had been left for him there, having come by the train which arrived late the night before, and then been specially delivered after he had gone to bed.

The letter, which was in a black-bordered envelope, was addressed —

"SHEIKH OMAR BENANI,

"In the care of ISHMAEL AMEER."

At first sight the handwriting struck him like a familiar face, but before he had time to recognise it he was conscious of a crushing sense of fatality, a vague but almost heart-breaking impression that while he had been spending the long, black hours of the night in building up hopes of flying away with Helena, this little packet of sealed paper had all the time been waiting outside his door to tell him they could not go.

He took it and opened it with trembling fingers, and read it at a glance as one reads a picture. It was from Hafiz, and it told him that his mother was dead.

Then all the pent-up pain and shame of the night rolled over him like a breaking wave, and he dropped down on the nearest seat and wept like a child.

CHAPTER XXIV

Contrary to Gordon's surmise, Helena had slept soundly, with the beautiful calm confidence of one who relied absolutely upon him and thought her troubles were over; but she awoke at half-past three as promptly as if an alarum-clock had wakened her.

The arms of Ayesha were then closely encircling her neck, and it was with difficulty that she liberated herself without awakening the child, but as soon as she had done so she could not resist an impulse to kiss the little one, so boundless was her happiness and so entirely at that moment had she conquered the sense that Ishmael's innocent daughter had been a constant torture to her.

Then dressing rapidly in her usual mixed Eastern and Western costume, and throwing a travelling cloak over her shoulders instead of her Indian veil, but giving no thought to the other belongings which she must leave behind, she stepped lightly out of the sleeping room.

The moment she entered the guest-room she heard a moan, and before realising where it came from, she said —

"Who's there?"

Then Gordon lifted his tear-stained face to her face, and, without speaking, held out the letter which hung from his helpless hand.

She took it and read it with a sense of overwhelming disaster, while Gordon, with that access of grief which, at the first moment of a great sorrow, the presence of a loved one brings, heaped reproaches upon himself, as if all that he had done at the hard bidding of his conscience had been a sin and a crime.

"Poor mother! My poor, dear mother! It was I who made her last days unhappy."

Half-an-hour went by in this way, and the time for going passed. Helena dared not tell him that their opportunity for flight was slipping away — it seemed like an outrage to think of that now — so she stood by his side, feeling powerless to comfort him, and dazed by the blow that had shattered their hopes.

Then Black Zogal, being awakened by the sound of Gordon's weeping, came in with his wild eyes, and after him came Abdullah, and then Zenoba, who, gathering an idea of trouble, went off to awaken Ishmael and old Mahmud, so that in a little while the whole of the Arab household were standing round Gordon as he sat doubled up on the edge of a divan.

When Ishmael heard what had happened he was deeply moved, and sitting down by Gordon's side he took one of his hands and smoothed it, while in that throbbing voice which went to the heart of everybody, and with a look of suffering in his swarthy face and luminous black eyes, he spoke some sympathetic words.

"All life ends in death, my brother. This world is a place of going, not of staying. The mystery of pain — who can fathom it? Life would be unbearable but for one thought — that God is over all. He rules everything for the best. Yes, believe me, everything. I have had my hours of sorrow too, but I have always found it so."

After a while Gordon was able to control his grief, and then Ishmael asked him if he would not read his letter aloud. With some reluctance Gordon did so, but it required all his self-control to repeat his mother's message.

Leaving out the usual Arabic salutations he began where Hafiz said —

"With a heavy heart I have to tell you, my most dear brother, that your sweet and saintly mother died this morning. She had been sinking ever since you went away, but the end came so quickly that it took us all by surprise."

Gordon's voice thickened, and Ishmael said —

"Take your time, brother."

"She had the consolations of her religion, and I think she passed in peace. There was only one thing clouded her closing hours. On her deathbed she was constantly expressing an earnest hope that you might all be re-united – you and she and your father and Helena, who are now so far apart."

"Take time, O my brother," said Ishmael, and seeing that Helena also was moved, he took her hand too, as if to strengthen her.

Thus he sat between them, comforting both, while Gordon in a husky voice struggled on —

"Not long before she died she wished to send you a message, but the power of life was low in her, and she could not write, except to sign her name (as you see below), and then she did not know where you were to be found. But my mother promised her that I should take care that whatever she said should come to your hands, and these were the words she sent: 'Tell my boy that my last thoughts were about him. Though I am sorry he took the side of the false ... the false prophet —'"

"Go on, brother, go on," said Ishmael in his soft voice.

"Say I am certain he did what he thought was right. Be sure you tell him I died happy, because ... because I know I shall see him again. If I am never to see him in this world I shall do so in the world to come. Say ... say I shall be waiting for him there. And tell him it will not seem long."

It was with difficulty that Gordon came to the end, for his eyes were full of tears and his throat was parched and tight, and he would have broken down altogether but for the sense of Helena's presence by his side.

Ishmael was now more deeply moved than before.

"How she must have loved you!" he said, and then he began to speak of his own mother, and what she had done for him.

"She was only a poor, ignorant woman perhaps, but she died to save me, and I loved her with all my heart."

At that the two black servants, Abdullah and Zogal, who had been standing before Gordon in silence, tried to utter some homely words of comfort, and old Mahmud, wiping his wet eyes, said —

"May God be merciful to your mother, my son, and forgive her all her sins."

"She was a saint – she never had any," replied Gordon, whereupon the Arab nurse, who alone of all that household had looked on at this scene with dry and evil eyes, said bitterly —

"Nevertheless she died as a Christian and an unbeliever, therefore she cannot look for mercy."

Then Helena's eyes flashed like fire into the woman's face, and Gordon felt the blood rush to his head, but Ishmael was before them both.

"Zenoba, ask pardon of God," he said, and before the thunder of his voice and the majesty of his glance the Arab woman fell back.

"Heed her not, my brother," said Ishmael, turning back to Gordon; and then he added —

"We all serve under the same General, and though some of us wear uniform of red, and some of brown, and some of blue, he who serves best is the best soldier. In the day of victory will our General ask us the colour of our garments? No!"

At that generous word Gordon burst into tears once more, but Ishmael said —

"Don't weep for one who has entered into the joys of Paradise."

When Gordon had regained his composure Ishmael asked him if he would read part of the letter again, but knowing what part it would be – the part about the prophet – he tried to excuse himself, saying he was not fit to read any more.

"Then the Rani will read," said Ishmael, and far as Helena would have fled from the tragic ordeal she could not escape from it. So in her soft and mellow voice she read on without faltering until she came to her own name, and then she stopped and tears began to trickle down her cheeks.

"Go on," said Ishmael; "don't be afraid of what follows."

And when Helena came to "false prophet," he turned to Gordon and said —

"Your dear mother didn't know how much I love you. But she knows now," he added, "for the dead know all."

There was no further interruption until Helena had finished, and then Ishmael said —

"She didn't know, either, what work the Merciful had waiting for you in Khartoum. Perhaps you did not know yourself. Something called you to come here. Something drew you on. Which of us has not felt like that? But God guides our hearts – the Merciful makes no mistakes."

Nobody spoke, but Gordon's eyes began to shine with a light which Helena, who was looking at him, had never seen in them before.

"All the same," continued Ishmael, "you hear what your mother says, and it is not for me to keep you against your will. If you wish to go back now none shall reproach you. Speak, Omar; do you wish to leave me?"

There was a moment of tense silence, in which Gordon hesitated and Helena waited breathlessly for his reply. Then with a great effort Gordon answered —

"No."

"El Hamdullillah!" cried the two black servants; and then Ishmael sent Zogal into the town and the camp to say that the faithful would bid farewell to Omar in the mosque the following night.

That evening after sunset, instead of delivering his usual lecture to the people squatting on the sand in front of his house, Ishmael read the prayers for the dead, while Gordon and Helena and a number of the Sheikhs sat on the divans in the guest-room.

When the service was over, and the company was breaking up, the old men pressed Gordon's hand as they were passing out and said —

"May God give you compensation!"

As soon as they were gone Gordon approached Helena and whispered hurriedly —

"I must speak to you soon – where can it be?"

"I ought to go to the water-women's well by the Goods Landing to-morrow morning," said Helena.

"At what hour?"

"Ten."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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