

BAUM LYMAN FRANK

DAUGHTERS OF DESTINY

Лаймен Фрэнк Баум

Daughters of Destiny

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L. Frank Baum

Daughters of Destiny

BOOK I

THE MAN

CHAPTER I

PRINCE KASAM OF BALUCHISTAN

“What country did you say, Prince?”

“Baluchistan, my lord.”

The great financier lay back in his chair and a slight smile flickered over his stern features. Then he removed his eye-glasses and twirled them thoughtfully around his finger as he addressed the young man opposite.

“I remember,” said he, “that when I attended school as a boy one of my chiefest trials in geography was to learn how to bound Baluchistan.”

“Ah, do not say that, sir,” exclaimed Prince Kasam, eagerly. “It is a customary thing, whenever my country is mentioned, for an Englishman to refer to his geography. I have borne the slight with rare patience, Lord Marvale, since first I came, a boy, to London; but permit me to say that I expected *you* to be better informed.”

“But, why?” asked the nobleman, raising his brows at the retort.

“Because Baluchistan is a great country, sir. You might drop all of England upon one of its plains – and have some trouble to find it again.”

Lord Marvale’s eyes twinkled.

“And how about London?” he asked. “You have many such cities, I suppose?”

“There is but one London, my lord,” answered the young man composedly; “and, to be frank with you, there are few clusters of houses in my country that are worthy the name of cities. We Baluchi are a wild race, as yet untamed by the influence of your western civilization, and those who wander in desert and plain far exceed in numbers the dwellers in towns.”

“I am not so ignorant as you may suppose,” declared Lord Marvale; “for it is a part of my business training to acquire information concerning all countries of the world, however remote and barbaric they may be. For instance, I know that your country is ruled by the Khan of Kelat, and that the English have established a protectorate over it.”

“Kelat!” cried the other, a touch of scorn in his tone; “that, sir, is not Baluchistan at all. It is the country of the Brahoes, a weak and cowardly race that is distinct from the Baluchi, my own people. Small wonder they need the English to protect them! But Kelat, although placed in Baluchistan by your map-makers, is another country altogether, and the unconquered Baluchi owe no allegiance to any nation in the world.”

For a time the financier sat silently in his chair. Then he asked:

“You have lived here since childhood, Prince?”

“Since eight years of age, my lord.”

“Why were you educated in London, if your people dislike Europeans?”

“For political reasons, sir. I am the sole legitimate descendant of seven generations of Khans of Mekran – rulers of all Baluchistan. But in my grandsire’s time our throne was usurped by Keedar Khan, a fierce tribesman who carried all before his mighty sword. His son, Burah Khan, now an old

man and in bad health, at present rules at Mekran. Therefore I was sent by my kinsmen, who are yet powerful and loyal to our family, to London, that I might escape assassination at the hands of the usurpers.”

“I see; you hope to succeed Burah Khan.”

“That is my ambition. All that stands in my way is a son of the khan, who, however, has been confined in a Sunnite monastery since youth and is reported to be more fitted to become a priest than a ruler of men.”

“Well?”

“My lord, I desire your coöperation and assistance. Twice have I secretly revisited Baluchistan, where my uncle is vizier to the present khan. The adherents to my cause are many. We have no money, but possess vast store of rare jewels, and much gold and silver plate hoarded for centuries – since the day when Alexander’s army, marching through our land, was forced to abandon and cast aside much of its burden of plunder. If we can convert this treasure into money it is our intention to hire an army of Afghan mercenaries to assist us and with their aid to rise at the death of Burah Khan, which cannot be long delayed, and again seize the throne that by right belongs to me. You, my lord, are noted for your shrewdness in financing great affairs. Here is one of magnitude in which you may profit largely. Will you aid me?”

The man appealed to was, through long experience, a competent judge of human nature, and while Kasam spoke he studied the young Oriental critically.

The prince was of medium height, full faced and broad shouldered. His beard was clipped in modern fashion, and he wore a conventional frock coat. But his swarthy skin and glittering dark eyes proclaimed his Eastern origin, and for head-dress he wore the turban of his tribe, twisted gracefully but with studied care into that particular fold which to an Oriental declared as plainly as the written page of a book the wearer’s nationality and tribe and degree. To the Westerner a turban means nothing more than a head-covering; to the Oriental it is eloquent of detail. In the manner of fold, the size, the color and the material of which it is composed, he reads clearly the wearer’s caste and condition in life, and accords him the exact respect that is his due.

Aside from the turban, Kasam wore the tribal sash over his shoulder, thus combining the apparel of the orient with that of the Occident in a picturesque and most effective manner.

The expression of his face was animated and winning; he gesticulated freely, but with grace; the words that flowed from his full red lips were fervent, but well chosen.

Prince Kasam spoke fluent English. His handsome countenance glowed with the eager enthusiasm of youth, with the conscious pride of high station, of powerful friends and of a just cause.

Lord Marvale was impressed.

“Come to me in three days,” said the banker. “I will make enquiries and take counsel with my colleagues. Then I shall be able to consider your proposal with more intelligence.”

Three days later a long conference was held in Lord Marvale’s office, during which Prince Kasam related with clearness yet characteristic Eastern loquaciousness the details of a carefully planned conspiracy to replace him upon the throne of his ancestors. The plot seemed both simple and practical, and Lord Marvale was by no means averse to acquiring the rare treasure of ancient plate and the rich oriental jewels that the adherents of Prince Kasam were anxious to exchange for English money and support.

It was not the only conference before the bargain was finally struck, but Kasam’s proposals met with no serious opposition and it was arranged that he should secretly return to Baluchistan, get together the treasure, and bring it with him to London, where Lord Marvale would convert it into money and also negotiate with the Afghans for an army of mercenaries. The countenance and moral support of the English government the banker could safely pledge.

It did not occur to Kasam that time might become a powerful factor in his future plans, and that all this detail would require considerable time to consummate. He had worn out many years of tedious

waiting in London, and really thought events were beginning to move swiftly. But when he received a message stating that Burah Khan was failing fast and urging him to hasten home, he realized that in order to accomplish his purposes he must lose no single moment in delay. Therefore he hurried to Lord Marvale with the information that he would return at once to Baluchistan.

“Good!” exclaimed the banker. “Your decision will relieve me of a slight embarrassment and enable me, through your courtesy, to serve an influential friend.”

“That will please me very much,” said Kasam.

“There has arrived in London a party of American capitalists representing a great New York syndicate, and our minister in Washington has given their chief a letter to me, asking me to arrange for the safe conduct of the party through Baluchistan.”

“Baluchistan! My own country? Why, my lord, few Englishmen have ever approached its borders, and never an American – so far as I know. What can induce them to visit Baluchistan?”

“I understand it is a matter of some railway enterprise or other. These Americans penetrate into the most outlandish and unfrequented places, and no one ever pays much attention to their wanderings. But the minister’s letter asks me to supply them with a guide. What do you say, Prince, to undertaking the task yourself? It will enable you to return to Mekran incognito, as the conductor of a party of wealthy and influential Americans; and, as you are not likely to be recognized, you may accomplish your task of collecting the treasure more safely than if you travelled alone.”

“That is true,” answered the young man, thoughtfully; and after a moment’s reflection he added: “Very well; inform your Americans that I will guide them to Baluchistan – even to the walls of Mekran – and no one can do it more safely or swiftly than I.”

CHAPTER II

THE AMERICAN COMMISSION

When the American Construction Syndicate, of New York and Chicago, conceived the idea of laying a railway across Baluchistan, through the Alexandrian Pass and so into the Lower Indies – thus connecting Asia and Europe by the shortest possible route – it was regarded as a bold undertaking even for this gigantic corporation. But the Syndicate scorned the imputation that any undertaking might be too hazardous or difficult for it to accomplish; so, when the route was proposed and its advantages understood, the railway was as good as built, in the minds of the directors.

There were preliminaries, of course. A commission must be sent to Baluchistan to secure right of way. And the route must be surveyed. But these were mere matters of detail. Already the Syndicate had built a road across the Balkans; even now it was laying rails in Turkestan. And this Baluchistan route was but a part of a great system wisely and cleverly projected.

The Alexandrian Pass was the same that nearly proved fatal to Alexander the Great on the occasion of his invasion of India. Since then little had been heard of it. But doubtless the Pass was still there, and had been waiting all these years for some one to utilize it. It was part of the domain of the Khan of Mekran, who also ruled the greater part of Baluchistan.

The directors had the histories consulted. Baluchistan seemed practically unknown to history. There were no books of travel in Baluchistan. Strange! The country was there – very big on the maps – and some one ought to know something about it. But no one apparently did.

Well, the Commission would discover all there was to know, and a semi-barbarous country would be easy to deal with.

Next the Commission itself was considered, and Colonel Piedmont Moore was selected as its chief. Colonel Moore was one of the Syndicate's largest stockholders and most respected officers, and the gentleman himself directed the selection of the chief, because he had decided to get away from the office for a time and travel, his health having become undermined by too close attention to business.

Dr. Warner, his intimate friend, had repeatedly counselled him to break away from work and take better care of himself. Travel was what he needed – travel in such remote lands that no temptation would exist to return to New York to “see how the Syndicate was getting on.”

When the Baluchistan Commission was first spoken of the Colonel mentioned it to his old friend, who was also a stockholder in the concern, the doctor having grown wealthy and retired from active practice several years before.

“Just the thing!” declared the old gentleman. “A trip to Baluchistan would probably set you on your feet again. Let me see – where is it? Somewhere in South America, isn't it?”

“No; I believe it's in Asia,” returned the Colonel, gravely. “And that is a long distance to journey alone.”

“Why, bless your soul! I'll go with you,” declared Dr. Warner, cheerfully. “I've intended to do a bit of travelling myself, as soon as I got around to it; and Baluchistan has a fine climate, I'm sure.”

“No one seems to know much about it,” answered the Colonel.

“All the better! Why, we'll be explorers. We'll find out all about Darkest Baluchistan, and perhaps write a book on our discoveries. We'll combine business and pleasure. I'm in the Syndicate. Have me appointed as your second on the Commission, and the Syndicate shall pay our expenses.”

So the plans were made, and afterward amplified to include the Colonel's son, Mr. Allison Moore, as official surveyor. Not that Allison Moore was an especially practical or proficient man in his profession – indeed, the directors feared just the contrary was true – but this was going to be a sort of family party, and the Colonel was a person absolutely to be depended upon. He was willing to vouch for his son, and that settled the matter.

In fact, the Colonel was glad to have Allison with him on this trip. Glad to have the young man under his eye, for one thing, and glad of an opportunity to advance his son professionally. For Allison seemed to have some difficulty in getting the right sort of a start, even though he had spent years in making the attempt.

At first the young man declined to go to Baluchistan, and there were angry words between father and son. But Dr. Warner acted as peacemaker and Allison finally consented to go provided his father would pay certain debts he had accumulated and make him an allowance in addition to his salary from the syndicate. It was the first salary he had ever received, and although the syndicate thought it liberal enough, it seemed absurdly small to a gentleman of Allison's requirements.

All this having been pleasantly settled, the doctor proposed taking along his daughter Bessie, who had been pleading to go ever since the trip was suggested.

At first the Colonel demurred.

"It's a business expedition," said he.

"Business and pleasure," amended the doctor, promptly.

"And I don't know what sort of country we're going to. It may not be pleasant for ladies."

"We'll make it pleasant for them. Better take Janet with you, Colonel, and we'll induce Aunt Lucy to go along as chaperon."

"She wouldn't consider such a trip an instant."

"Who wouldn't?"

"Janet."

"Ask her about it."

So the Colonel mentioned it at dinner, in a casual way, and Miss Janet Moore at first opened her beautiful dark eyes in surprise, then considered the matter silently for a half hour, and at dessert decided she would go.

The Colonel was pleased. It was difficult to interest Janet in anything, and if the Baluchistan trip would draw her out of her dreamy lassitude and awaken in her something of her old bright self, why, the syndicate be thanked for conceiving the idea of a Commission!

The old gentleman tolerated his son as a cross to be borne with Christian resignation: he was devoted to his beautiful daughter.

Janet Moore in face and form represented that type of American girl which has come to be acknowledged in all countries the ideal of womanly grace and loveliness. The delicate contour of her features did not destroy nor even abate their unmistakable strength and dignity. The well-opened eyes were clear as a mountain pool, yet penetrating and often discomfiting in their steadiness; the mouth was wide, yet sweet and essentially feminine; the chin, held high and firm, was alluringly curved and dimpled, displaying beneath it a throat so rarely perfect that only in the Sicilian Aphrodite has sculptor ever equalled it. Her head was poised in queenly fashion upon a form so lithe and rounded that Diana might well have envied it, and while Janet's expression at all times bore a trace of sadness, a half smile always lingered upon her lips – a smile so pathetic in its appeal that one who loved her would be far less sympathetically affected by a flood of tears. The girl had suffered a terrible disappointment seven years before. The man she loved had been proven an arrant scoundrel. He had forged her father's name; been guilty of crime and ingratitude; worse than all else, he had run away to escape punishment. It had been clearly proven against Herbert Osborne, yet Janet, by a strange caprice, would never accept the proof. She had a distinctly feminine idea that in spite of everything Herbert was incapable of crime or any sort of dishonesty. And, knowing full well that she stood alone in her belief, the girl proudly suffered in silence.

There was more to Janet's old romance than anyone ever dreamed; but whatever the girl's secret might be, she kept all details safely locked within her own bosom.

The Colonel was surprised that his daughter should so readily agree to undertake a tedious and perhaps uninteresting journey to a far-away country; but he was nevertheless delighted. The change

would assuredly do her good, and Bessie Warner was just the jolly companion she needed to waken her into new life.

So the doctor was informed that the two girls would accompany the Commission, and Bessie at once set out to interview her Aunt Lucy and persuade that very accommodating lady to go with them as chaperon. Aunt Lucy was without a single tie to keep her in New York, and she was so accustomed to being dragged here and there by her energetic niece that she never stopped to enquire where Baluchistan was or how they were expected to get there. In her mild and pleasant little voice she remarked:

“Very well, dear. When do we start?”

“Oh, I’ll send you word, auntie. And thank you very much for being so nice.”

“We’ll be back by Thanksgiving, I suppose?”

“I hardly know, dear. It’s a business trip of papa’s, and of course the length of our stay depends entirely upon him and the Colonel, who is some way interested in the matter. By the way, it’s called a Commission, and we’ll be very important travellers, I assure you! Good bye, auntie, dear!”

Then she hurried away; for that suggestion of returning by Thanksgiving day, scarcely a month distant, showed her how little Aunt Lucy really knew of the far journey she had so recklessly undertaken.

So this was the personnel of the famous Commission that was to invade Baluchistan and secure from the Khan of Mekran a right of way for a railroad through the Alexandrian Pass: Col. Piedmont Moore, Chief; Dr. Luther Warner, Assistant; Allison Moore, Civil Engineer; Janet Moore and Bessie Warner, chaperoned by Mrs. Lucy Higgins, Accessories and Appendages.

The Commission crossed the ocean in safety; it reached London without incident worthy of record, and there the Chief endeavored to secure some definite knowledge of Baluchistan.

Not until he had presented the British minister’s letter to Lord Marvale did the Colonel meet with any good fortune in his quest. Then the atmosphere of doubt and uncertainty suddenly cleared, for a real Baluch of Baluchistan was then in London and could be secured to pilot the Americans to their destination.

To be sure this native – Kasam Ullah Raab by name – was uncommunicative at first regarding the character of the Khan of Mekran or the probability of the Syndicate’s being able to negotiate for a right of way through his country; and, indeed, the Baluch could be induced to commit himself neither to criticism nor encouragement of the plan. But, after all, it was not to be supposed that much information of value could be secured from a mere guide. The main point to be considered just then was how to journey to Mekran with comfort and despatch, and incidentally the accomplishments and attainments of the guide himself.

Kasam’s charming manners and frank, handsome countenance soon won the confidence of the entire party. Even Allison Moore did not withhold his admiration for the “gentlemanly barbarian,” as Aunt Lucy called him, and the young ladies felt entirely at ease in his company.

“Really,” said Bessie, “our Kasam is quite a superior personage, for a guide.”

And the prince overheard the remark and smiled.

During the journey the guide proved very thoughtful and gallant toward the young ladies, and with the friendly familiarity common to Americans they made Kasam one of themselves and treated him with frank consideration. It was perhaps natural that the prince should respond by openly confiding to them his rank and ambition, thus explaining his reason for journeying with them in the humble capacity of guide. Before they had reached Quettah the entire party knew every detail of Kasam’s history, and canvassed his prospect of becoming khan as eagerly as they did the details of their own vast enterprise. Indeed, the Colonel was quick to recognize the advantage the Commission would acquire by being on friendly terms with the future Khan of Mekran, and since Burah Khan was old and suffered from many wounds received in many battles, the chances were strongly in favor of the young prince being soon called to the throne.

“My uncle is vizier to the usurper,” said Kasam, “and I will secure, through him, an interview for you with Burah Khan. Also my uncle shall extend to your party his good offices. He is the leader of the party which is plotting to restore to me the throne of my ancestors, and is therefore entirely devoted to my interests. Of course you will understand that I dare not publicly announce my presence in Mekran; therefore I will guide you as a hired servant, and so escape notice. Only my uncle Agahr and two of the sirdars – or leaders of the tribes – are acquainted with my person or know who I really am. But the spies of the Khan are everywhere, as I have discovered during my former secret visits to Mekran, and it is best for me to avoid them at this juncture.”

All this was intensely interesting to every member of the Commission, and it is no wonder Bessie smiled upon the handsome guide who possessed so romantic a story. But Bessie’s brightest smiles seemed less desirable to Kasam than one sympathetic look from Janet’s Moore’s serious dark eyes.

The evident adoration with which the “foreign prince,” as she called him, came to regard Miss Moore was a source of much uneasiness to Aunt Lucy; but Janet did not seem to notice it, and the young man was ever most humble and discreet while in her presence. In fact, there was nothing in the prince’s behavior that the gentle old lady might complain of openly. Yet she had her own suspicions, clinched by experienced observation, of the foreigner’s intentions, and determined to keep a sharp lookout in the interests of her charge. Soon they would enter a barbarous country where this handsome prince would be more powerful than the great Commission itself. And then?

At Quettah they secured camels and formed a caravan to cross the corner of the Gedrasian Desert and so journey on to Mekran; but there was more or less grumbling when this necessity was disclosed. Allison Moore, who had behaved fairly well so far, flatly declined to go further toward the wild and unknown country they had come so far to visit. The inn at Quettah was fairly good. He would stay there. Vainly his father stormed and argued, alternately; he even threatened to cut his son off with a dime – the nearest approach to the legendary shilling he could think of; but Allison proved stubborn. Having once declared his intention, he answered nothing to the demands of his father or the pleadings of Dr. Warner. He smoked his pipe, stared straight ahead and would not budge an inch from Quettah.

“I’ll wait here till you come back,” he said, sullenly. “If you ever do.”

This was the first disagreeable incident of the journey. Even Bessie was depressed by Allison’s inference that they were involved in a dangerous enterprise. As for Aunt Lucy, she suddenly conceived an idea that the band of Afghans Kasam had employed to accompany the caravan were nothing more than desperate bandits, who would carry the Commission into the mountains and either murder every individual outright or hold them for an impossible ransom.

Kasam’s earnest protestations finally disabused the minds of the ladies of all impressions of danger. It was true that in Baluchistan they might meet with lawless bands of Baluchi; but their caravan was too well guarded to be interfered with. They were supplied with fleet saddle horses and fleeter dromedaries; the twenty Afghans were bold and fearless and would fight for them unto death. Really, they had nothing at all to fear.

So at last they started, an imposing cavalcade, for the Khan’s dominions, leaving Allison in the doorway of the inn smoking his everlasting pipe and staring sullenly after them. The ladies rode dromedaries, and found them less uncomfortable than they had at first feared they would be. The Colonel did not seem to mind his son’s desertion, for Kasam had whispered in his ear an amusing plan to conquer the young surveyor’s obstinacy.

An hour later one of the prince’s Afghans, selected because he spoke the English language, returned from the caravan to warn Allison that he was in grave danger. The night before a plot had been overheard to murder and rob the young man as soon as his friends had departed.

"If you shoot well and are quick with the knife," added the Afghan, coolly, "you may succeed in preserving your life till our return. His Highness the Prince sent me to advise you to fight to the last, for these scoundrels of Quettah have no mercy on foreigners."

Then Allison stared again, rather blankly this time, and the next moment requested the Afghan to secure him a horse.

Kasam was assuring the Colonel for the twentieth time that his son would soon rejoin them when Allison and the Afghan rode up at a gallop and attached themselves without a word to the cavalcade. And the Colonel was undecided whether most to commend the guide's cunning or his son's cautiousness.

This portion of their journey was greatly enjoyed by all members of the party. The doctor declared he felt more than ever like an explorer, and the Colonel silently speculated on all that might be gained by opening this unknown territory to the world by means of the railway. The distinct novelty of their present mode of progression was delightful to the ladies, and Aunt Lucy decided she much preferred a camel to an automobile. Even Janet's pale cheeks gathered a tint from the desert air, and despite the uncertainties of their pilgrimage the entire party retained to a wonderful degree their cheerfulness and good nature.

At the end of four days they halted in a small village where Kasam intended them to rest while he alone went forward to Mekran to obtain their passports. For they were now upon the edge of the Khan's dominions, and without Burah's protection the party was liable to interference by some wandering tribe of Baluchi.

The accommodations they were able to secure in this unfrequented village were none of the best, and Allison began to grumble anew, thereby bringing upon himself a stern rebuke from the guide, who frankly informed the young man that he was making his friends uncomfortable when nothing could be gained by protesting.

"You cannot go back, and you dare not go forward without passports," said Kasam. "Therefore, if you possess any gentlemanly instincts at all, you will endeavor to encourage the ladies and your father, instead of adding to their annoyance. When one travels, one must be a philosopher."

"You are impertinent," returned Allison, scowling.

"If I yielded to my earnest desire," said the prince, "I would ask my men to flog you into a decent frame of mind. If I find, when I return, that you have been disagreeable, perhaps I shall punish you in that way. It may be well for you to remember that we are no longer in Europe."

The young man made no reply, but Kasam remembered the vengeful look that flashed from his eyes.

Heretofore the prince had worn the European frock coat; now he assumed the white burnous of his countrymen. When he came to bid adieu to his employers before starting for Mekran, Bessie declared that their guide looked more handsome and distinguished than ever – "just like that famous picture of the Son of the Desert, you know."

Kasam was about to mount his horse – a splendid Arabian he had purchased in the village – when a tall Baluch who was riding by cast a shrewd glance into the young man's face, sharply reined in his stallion, and placed a thumb against his forehead, bowing low.

Kasam's brown face went ashen grey. He gazed steadily into the stranger's eyes.

"You are bound for Mekran, my prince?" asked the tall Baluch, in the native tongue.

"I ride at once."

"Make all haste possible. Burah Khan is dying."

"Dying? Blessed Allah!" cried Kasam, striking his forehead in despair. "Burah Khan dying, and our plans still incomplete! I have waited too long."

"Perhaps not," retorted the other, significantly. "It is a lingering disease, and you may yet get to Mekran in time."

"In time? In time for what?" asked Kasam.

“To strike!”

Kasam stared at him. The tall Baluch smiled and shook the rein over his horse’s ears.

“I am of the tribe of Raab, my prince. May Allah guide you to success.”

Kasam did not reply. His head rested against the arched neck of his horse, and his form shook with a slight nervous tremor. But next moment he stood erect. The dazed look inspired by the bitter news he had heard was giving way to his old eager, cheery expression.

“All is not lost!” he said, speaking aloud. “Fate knocks, and I will throw open the door. Allah grant that Burah Khan lives until I reach Mekran!”

He sprang to the saddle, put spurs to his steed and dashed away at full speed into the desert.

“I hope,” said the Colonel, looking after him anxiously, “that nothing has gone wrong.”

CHAPTER III

THE PERSIAN PHYSICIAN

Burah Khan, known as the Lion of Mekran, Headsman of the Nine Tribes of Baluchi and Defender of the Faith, was, without doubt, a very sick man.

He lay upon a divan in the courtyard of his palace, propped with silken cushions redolent of the odors of musk. The waters of the fountain that splashed at his side were also scented with musk, and the heavy and stifling perfume permeated the entire atmosphere of the court. At the head of the divan sat a girl, indolently waving a fan above the head of the Khan. Not far from his feet a white-bearded man squatted upon a rug and eyed the sick one with curious intentness. This was Agahr, the vizier. Behind him sat a group of officers and sirdars, silently watching the scene.

Burah Khan, despite his sad condition, was fully clothed in his customary regalia. He wore a waistcoat of dingy white plush upon which were sewn enough rubies to have ransomed a kingdom. His yellow satin trousers were soiled and crumpled. The long outer robe was of faded rose-color and had nine stars, formed of clustered diamonds, down the front. The deep collar was stiff with masses of the same precious gems. The entire dress seemed as tawdry as a circus costume at the end of the season; but it was of enormous value, and the Khan, with oriental love of magnificence, clung to it even as he lay upon his death-bed.

He was a notable character, this Burah Khan, son of the terrible Keedar Khan who had conquered all of Baluchistan and ruled it with a rod of iron. Burah had inherited with the throne the fierce hatred with which his father was ever regarded; yet he had not only held every province secure, but had won the respect and fear of all his people. The thirty years of his rule had not been void of wars and bloodshed, yet at the head of his nine Baluch tribes the Khan had swept aside all opposition and won for himself the title of "The Lion of Mekran," Mekran being his dwelling-place when not in the saddle.

Today, gaunt and haggard, he lay gasping upon his divan. His fingers opened and closed convulsively in the meshes of his iron-gray beard; his drooping eyelids were sunk in deep sockets. The pallor of death showed through his swarthy skin. To Agahr and the silent group behind him it seemed that the Khan was conquered at last.

The sick one moved restlessly and raised his hand.

"Has – has – he come?" he asked, speaking the words with much difficulty.

Agahr leaned forward, without rising, and answered his master with composure:

"Not yet, lord."

It was a question often repeated and as often answered with the same words.

A moan came from the Khan. The vizier noted the patient's restlessness and made a sign with his hand. At once the curtains of the rear entrance were swept aside and a troop of girls entered. They were robed in white; vines of the mountain iral were twined in their hair; in their hands were bellalas. The girls danced. A tall Arab with immense hoops of gold in his ears beat a tambo to mark the time, and the bellalas chimed a tinkling chorus.

The eyes of the Khan never opened, but he made an impatient gesture and moaned again. The intent Agahr noted this and at his command the noise of the tambo ceased and the girls withdrew. Evidently the Khan could no longer be amused in this fashion.

For a brief space of time the courtyard again became silent. Then, so suddenly that a thrill crept over the watchers, a tall imposing figure glided to the side of the divan and cast a shadow over the face of the sick man.

Burah Khan moved, opened his eyes and fixed his gaze eagerly upon the new arrival. The vizier arose quickly and approached the couch, bowing low and looking into the calm countenance of the

stranger with undisguised anxiety. The group of minor officials also looked their interest, and the girl forgot to wave her fan while she examined the person of the man so long awaited.

"The great physician is here, my master," whispered the vizier. But Burah Khan did not heed him. An expression of relief had come to his pinched features, and his eyes were fixed earnestly upon the face bent above him, as if he would read his fate in the countenance of the famous Persian who had been brought all the way from Kelat to minister to his imperative needs.

The physician raised the sick man's eyelids and glanced beneath them. He placed his right hand under the Khan's head and at the same time pressed an ear to his chest. It seemed enough. He stood erect, with folded arms, bending a searching yet kindly gaze upon the face upturned to his.

"Tell me!" pleaded the Khan, feebly.

The Persian gave a quick glance around. Then he answered:

"They listen."

"Let them hear," said the Khan, raising himself with an effort upon his elbow. "They – are all – friends."

A queer look came over the stranger's face. But he said, in a calm voice:

"The sickness is fatal. You will die."

For a moment the Lion of Mekran returned the other's gaze steadily. Then he lay back upon his pillows and sighed.

Agahr, who eyed his master as if fascinated, heaved an echoing sigh, and the group of officials exchanged looks of consternation.

"When?" asked the Khan, his voice now strong and clear, his eyes on the impassive face before him.

"A day – an hour," replied the Persian, slowly. "It is Death's secret."

For a few moments the silence was unbroken save for the splash of the fountain as its perfumed spray fell into the marble basin. Then the Khan again aroused himself.

"Can you hold Death at bay – for a time?" he asked.

"How long?"

"Speak, Agahr!" turning to his vizier. "How long to get my son here – to assemble the Sirdars of the Nine Tribes?"

Agahr was trembling visibly. He clasped and unclasped his thin hands nervously and glanced first at his master and then at the physician.

"Speak!" said the latter, sternly.

"To the monastery of Takkatu is three days' journey – three days, at least," he said, hesitatingly. "And for Prince Ahmed to return will require three more. Seven days – a week – with fast riding."

"Then," said the Khan, calmly, "they must ride fast." He turned to the Persian. "Can you fight Death so long?"

The Persian nodded. The pluck of Burah Khan aroused his admiration.

"I will fight Death so long," said he, gravely.

"And the sirdars?" asked the sick man, once more turning to his vizier.

"They can be assembled in five days," answered Agahr, after a moment's reflection. "Three are already here."

"Good!" declared the Khan. "Let Dirrag ride within the hour."

"For the sirdars?"

"For Ahmed."

He fell back again, and a man rose from the group behind Agahr and with an obeisance toward the divan glided swiftly from the courtyard.

The physician, noting the action, turned to the vizier.

"Dirrag?" he enquired.

"Dirrag," responded the other, mechanically.

The Persian gave his patient a sharp scrutiny, and drawing a phial from his bosom placed it to the now colorless lips of the Khan.

“Clear the place,” he commanded Agahr, and without awaiting a response himself stepped quickly through the outer arch.

Outside Dirrag was mounting a strong Arabian mare. The Persian arrested him with a gesture.

“The Prince must be here in six days,” he said, in a low but commanding voice. “Six days, or – ”

“I understand,” said Dirrag, and put spurs to the mare.

CHAPTER IV

THE DAUGHTER OF THE VIZIER

Upon a stone gallery overlooking the courtyard of a handsome dwelling not far from the palace of the khan reclined a girl, beautiful with that mysterious Eastern beauty that has been for ages the despair of poets and artists and which attains its full charm only in the Orient. She was scarcely seventeen years of age, yet her rounded outlines, her graceful poise, her sedate demeanor, all proclaimed her a maiden on the verge of womanhood. Her eyes, round and soft as those of a fawn, were absolutely inscrutable; her features in repose held the immutable expression of the Sphinx. When she smiled sunbeams danced in her eyes and a girlish dimple showed in her chin. But she rarely smiled. The composed, serious, languorous expression dominated her exquisite face.

The girl was richly dressed. Her silken gown was of finest texture; pearls of rare size were twined in her dark hair; a golden serpent whose every scale was a lustrous diamond spanned her waist; upon her breast glittered a solitary blood-red ruby of historic fame, known in song and story for generations.

For this maiden was Maie, only daughter of Agahr, Grand Vizier to the Lion of Mekran and to his father before him – the terrible Keedar Khan.

Next to Burah himself in rank, virtually directing all the civic affairs of the nation, responsible to none save his stern master, Agahr was indeed a personage of vast importance in the realm. The sirdars of the nine fighting tribes of Baluchi, the main support of the Khan, might look upon the vizier scornfully; but they obeyed his laws and avoided any interference with his civic functions.

Maie was the daughter of Agahr's old age, his only companion and his constant delight. To her he confided many of the problems that from time to time confronted him, and often a quiet word from the girl's lips showed him the matter in a new light and guided him in his actions. The old man had discovered a store of common sense in the dainty head of his daughter; the inscrutable velvet eyes were wells of wisdom from which he drew solace and counsel in all difficulties.

On the evening of this eventful day came Agahr to the gallery where his daughter reclined. And as he sat beside her she turned her eyes upon his face and seemed to read it clearly.

"The Khan is worse," said she, quietly.

"He is dying," answered the vizier. "The Persian physician has come from Kelat, and he says there is no hope."

"We shall be making history soon," remarked the girl, in soft tones. "The Khan will pass away, and Kasam is here."

The vizier moved uneasily on his seat.

"Kasam is here; yes," said he. "But no one knows the secret save us. No one knows who our Kasam is."

"They will know soon," returned the girl in a calm, expressionless voice. "Our cousin Kasam is rightful heir to the throne – when the Lion's eyes are closed in death."

"You forget that Burah Khan has also a son," said the old man, harshly. "Even now Dirrag is riding full speed to the Sunnite monastery at Takkatu to bring hither the Prince Ahmed."

"That he may be acknowledged successor to the throne by the assembled sirdars of the Nine Tribes?"

"Yes."

"But the Khan is dying. The Prince cannot arrive in time."

"Perhaps not. Yet that accursed Persian has promised to prolong the Khan's life for seven days. If he succeeds –"

The girl bent forward suddenly.

"He must not succeed!" she exclaimed, in a clear voice.

Agahr shrank from the intentness of her gaze.

"Hear me!" she continued. "Kasam is our kinsman; the throne is his by right. Most of our citizens and many of the members of the Nine Tribes secretly favor his claim. A crisis approaches, and we must take advantage of it. The Lion of Mekran must not live seven days. If his son Ahmed, who has been secluded for twenty years in a monastery, and is said to be devoted to Allah, is not here to be recognized as the successor to the throne, the people will acclaim Kasam their khan. It is all very simple, my father. The Lion of Mekran must not live seven days!"

"What, plotting again, cousin?" cried a cheery voice behind them. Agahr gave a sudden start and wheeled around with a frown, meeting the smiling face of Prince Kasam, but the girl moved not even an eyelid.

"Pardon me, uncle, for startling you," said the young man, coming forward and taking a seat beside the vizier. "I arrived in time to hear cousin Maie doom Burah Kahn to an early death, as if the dark angel fought on our side. What a wonderful little conspirator you are, my Maie!"

She looked into his face thoughtfully not caring to acknowledge the compliment of his words or the ardor of his gaze. But Agahr said, gruffly:

"The conspiracies of women cost many men their heads."

"Very true, uncle," replied Kasam, becoming grave. "But we are in sore straights, and a little plotting may not come amiss. If the son of the old Lion – who, by the way, is also my cousin – is acknowledged by the sirdars, he is liable to make a change in his officers. We may lose our vizier, and with the office more than half our power with the people. In that event I can never become kahn."

"The son of Burah must be a weakling and a dreamer," said the girl, thoughtfully. "What can be expected of one who for twenty years has associated with monks and priests?"

"Twenty years?" exclaimed Kasam; "then my cousin Ahmed must be nearly thirty years of age."

"And a recluse," added Maie, quietly. "You, Prince, are not yet twenty-five, and you have lived in the world. We need not, I am sure, fear the gentle son of Burah – even though he be acknowledged by his father and the sirdars of the tribes."

"Which will surely happen if the Khan lives seven days. Is it not so? But if Allah calls him sooner, and my friends are loyal – why, then, I may become khan myself, and much trouble spared. The English have an injunction to 'strike while the iron is hot.' We may safely apply it to ourselves."

Maie glanced at her father, and there was a glint of triumph in the dark eyes.

"It is what I have said," she murmured. "The Lion of Mekran must not live seven days."

"Do you know, fair one," remarked Kasam, lightly, "that only yesterday I bewailed the approaching fate of the usurper, and longed to have him live until we could secure England's support?"

"England!" she cried, scornfully. "What is that far-away nation to our Baluchistan? It is *here* that history will be made."

Kasam laughed merrily.

"What a logical little head you have, cousin!" he answered, laying his hand upon her own, caressingly. "To us, indeed, Baluchistan is the world. And England's help is far away from us in this crisis. Tell me, Maie, what is your counsel?"

"It is your duty, Prince, to prevent Burah Khan from living until his son arrives to be acknowledged his successor."

Kasam's face became suddenly grave.

"My duty, cousin?" he replied. "It is no man's duty to murder, even to become khan. But perhaps I misunderstood your words. I am practically a stranger in my own land, and can do little to further my own interests, which naturally include the interests of my friends. If Burah Khan fails to live until his son's arrival it will be through the will of Allah, and by no act of mine."

"You are a coward," said the girl, scornfully.

"Yes," he answered, coldly; "I am afraid to become a murderer."

“Peace, both of you!” commanded the vizier, angrily. “You are like a pair of children. Do you think that I, who have been Burah’s faithful officer for thirty years, would countenance treachery or foul play while he lies upon his death-bed? I long to see Prince Kasam seated upon the throne, but it must be through honest diplomacy, and by no assassin’s stroke.”

“Right, my uncle!” cried Kasam, seizing the vizier’s hand in a hearty clasp. “Otherwise, were I khan, you should be no officer of mine.”

Agahr and his daughter exchanged a quick glance, and the girl said, languidly:

“I was doubtless wrong, urged on by the intensity of my feeling and my loyalty to the Tribe of Raab. But a woman’s way is, I think, more direct and effective than a man’s.”

“Even if less honest, cousin?” retorted the young man, playfully pinching her cheek. “Let us bide our time and trust to the will of Allah. This evening I must set out on my return to Quanam. What answer shall I take to my foreign friends who await me?”

“Tell me, Kasam; why do they wish to cross our territory – to visit our villages and spy upon our people?” asked Agahr suspiciously.

“It is as I told you, my uncle. They are people of great wealth, from the far western country of America, and it is their custom to penetrate to every part of the world and lay rails of iron over which chariots may swiftly speed. We have no such rails in Baluchistan.”

“Nor do we desire them,” returned the vizier, brusquely.

“But they would bring to us all the merchandise of that wonderful western world. They would bring us wealth in exchange for our own products,” said Kasam, eagerly.

“And they would bring hundreds of infidels to trick and rob us. I know of these railways,” declared the vizier.

“I also,” answered Kasam, lightly. “I have been educated in Europe, and know well the benefits of western civilization.”

“But the Baluchi do not. Our own high and advanced civilization is enough for us.”

The young man smiled.

“It is not worth an argument now,” he remarked. “The present mission of this party of infidels is to examine our country and consider whether a railway across it would be profitable. All that I now require is a passport and safe conduct for them. It will benefit our cause, as well, for only as the guide to these foreigners dared I return to my native land. If I am permitted to depart tonight with the passport I can easily return in time for the crisis that approaches. Then perhaps our American friends will be of service to us, for no one will suspect their guide of being the exiled heir to the throne.”

The vizier hesitated.

“But the railway – ”

“Bother the railway!” interrupted Kasam, impatiently. “That is a matter of the future, a matter for the new khan and his vizier to decide upon, whoever they may chance to be.”

“Here is the passport,” said Agahr, reluctantly drawing a parchment from his breast. “Burah Khan was too sick to be bothered with the request of the infidels, so I made out the paper and signed it by virtue of my office.”

“Ah, and affixed the great seal, I perceive,” added Kasam, taking the document. “I thank you, uncle Agahr. We shall get along famously together – when I am khan.”

He bade them adieu the next moment, embracing the vizier and kissing his cousin’s hand with a gallantry that brought a slight flush to the girl’s cheeks. And soon they heard the quick beat of his horse’s hoofs as he rode away.

Maie and her father looked into each other’s eyes. Presently the old man spoke, slowly and thoughtfully.

“You will share his throne, my child.”

The girl nodded and fanned herself.

“The life in Europe has made Kasam foolish,” said she. Then, leaning forward and regarding the vizier earnestly, she added in a whisper:

“Nevertheless, Burah Khan must not live seven days!”

CHAPTER V

THE PERIL OF BURAH KHAN

Three days had passed. The khan remained sunk in a stupor caused by the medicines administered by the Persian physician, who hovered constantly around the bedside of his patient. Burah now lay in a well aired, high vaulted chamber. The musk-scented cushions had been ostracised, the dancing girls dismissed. Quiet reigned throughout the vast palace.

Occasionally Agahr would thrust his head through the curtains draping the entrance, as if seeking to know that all was well; but the Persian merely gave him a reassuring nod and motioned him away.

This summary banishment did not please the vizier. His daughter had assisted him in forming several plans of great political import, and the conduct of the foreign physician prevented their being carried to a successful issue.

Thus Agahr, appearing again at the entrance, beckoned with imperative gesture the Persian to join him; and, after a careful inspection of his patient, lying peaceful and unconscious, the physician obeyed.

Together they paced up and down the deserted marble passage, the Persian's quick eye never leaving the entrance to the khan's chamber, while Agahr plied him with eager questions concerning his master's condition.

"He will live until his son, the Prince Ahmed, arrives," said the other, calmly. "He will remain unconscious, but he will live."

"And then?" asked the vizier, anxiously.

"Then I will awaken him. He will have full command of all his faculties for a brief period – and then he will pass away quickly."

Agahr sighed.

"Is it not possible for him to pass away during this stupor?" he enquired.

"Yes, it is possible," answered the Persian. "But I believe I can prevent that. My task requires constant vigilance: that is why I dare not leave the Khan's chamber."

"I will send a man to relieve you," said the vizier. "You can instruct him in his duties and he will be faithful."

"No," returned the Persian.

An awkward silence followed. Then Agahr stopped suddenly and said:

"I will be frank with you. The son of Burah Khan is not the rightful heir to the throne of Mekran. It is the exiled Prince Kasam, from whose grandsire Keedar Khan by right of sword wrested all Baluchistan. Therefore it is best for the country that Burah does not live until his son arrives."

He paused, wiping the perspiration from his brow and glancing half fearfully into the grave face of the physician. The latter nodded.

"I understand," said he.

Agahr became reassured.

"The ancestors of Prince Kasam," he continued, earnestly, "ruled the land for nine generations. Then the Baluchi rebelled and put their Headsman, the fierce Keedar Khan, upon the throne his own brother was forced to vacate. I being at the time vizier, remained Keedar's vizier, as I have remained vizier to his son. By means of wars and bloodshed these terrible men have for forty-six years dominated all Baluchistan. It is now time, in the interest of justice and humanity, that the rightful heir should recover the throne."

"Did not Prince Kasam's ancestors conquer this country with the aid of the Afghans, and put to death every member of the then reigning family?" asked the Persian.

"It is a matter of history," said Agahr, proudly. "They were my ancestors, these bold conquerors, as well as the ancestors of Prince Kasam."

"Yet Keedar Khan made you his vizier, and his son retained you?"

"Yes; and I have been faithful."

"But now, it seems to me, you are speaking treason," said the physician.

"Not so," declared the vizier, indignantly. "Burah Khan, by your own showing, is virtually dead at this moment. I owe no allegiance to his son, whom I have never seen."

"How is that?" asked the physician, in surprise.

"When Ahmed was a child his father, fearing a revolt and that his boy might fall by an assassin's knife, placed him in the Sunnite monastery at Takkatu for safe keeping. There he has remained ever since. It will be necessary for Burah Khan to officially acknowledge him before the chiefs of the Nine Tribes and to appoint him his own successor, before Ahmed can legally occupy the throne. If this is not done the people, who are weary of the rule of these tyrants, will acclaim Kasam as khan."

"But Prince Ahmed will arrive, and be acknowledged. Burah Khan has so willed it, and he is still the master."

Agahr faced the Persian with an angry frown.

"Do you refuse to assist us?" he asked, sharply.

"I refuse to betray the man whose life I have promised to preserve until his son arrives," declared the physician.

"But you are a stranger – a Persian."

"Even so."

"And you expect a reward, or you would not have hastened to Mekran when summoned by the Khan. Name your price. I will double it, and you shall depart this very night."

The Persian smiled.

"Here, and throughout the world," said he, "the strongest argument is the clink of gold. Listen well, your Excellency. I have promised Burah Khan life for seven days. I shall keep my promise. Then, if the Prince does not come, I can do no more."

The vizier started.

"If the Prince does not come?" he repeated, thoughtfully.

"To be sure."

"Ah! I had not thought of that!" exclaimed the old man.

"It is the only thing I fear," said the other, with exasperating coolness; "but I rely upon Dirrag. If you are able to delay him you will doubtless win the throne for Prince Kasam."

Before the mocking tones had died away the physician disappeared behind the draperies of the khan's chamber, and the vizier, controlling his anger and chagrin as best he might, walked away to concoct further plans.

The woman who brought the Persian his evening meal became confused under his sharp scrutiny and started to retire hurriedly. He arrested her with a stern command, saying:

"Sit here and taste of the dish you have brought."

Then she began to tremble.

"Master, I dare not!" she wailed.

"Very well. Take away this food and bring me eggs boiled in the shell."

The physician was bending over the couch of the khan when one of the under cooks entered silently with the eggs. The man was of the Brahoe caste, small and wiry. He placed the eggs upon the table and eyed for a time the back of the tall Persian, who seemed intent upon his patient. But a moment later he suddenly straightened, threw back his hand and caught the wrist of the Brahoe in a firm grasp.

A dagger fell upon the rug, and the man shrank back shuddering before the gleaming eyes of the physician.

An instant they remained motionless. Then, releasing his prisoner, the physician picked up the dagger, placed it within his own bosom and seated himself quietly at the table. One of the eggs he cast aside; there was a tiny pin-hole through the shell. The others he ate with his usual composure. As he raised a cup of water to his lips the Brahoe, who had watched him with amazement, suddenly stretched out his hand in warning.

“Wait! it is poisoned,” he whispered. “I will bring you more.”

Swiftly he glided away and presently returned with a fresh bowl of clear water.

The physician drank without hesitation.

“You may go,” said he, setting down the bowl.

“Master,” said the man, “be warned. You are surrounded by dangers. But you are brave, and I am your servant henceforth. Eat hereafter only the food I bring you.”

The Persian nodded and gave the Brahoe a smile. Still the man hesitated, peering cautiously about as if suspecting listeners. Finally he came nearer and said in a low voice:

“I do not know all; your foes are cunning and powerful. But the old khan is not to live the seven days. And life is lightly esteemed in Mekran – if it stands in the way of a purpose. Do not sleep tonight.”

“I never sleep,” returned the Persian, looking upon the man curiously.

Indeed, the critical condition of Burah Khan seemed to require his constant attention. The strange physician watched the silent form carefully throughout the night, and only once noted a slight movement of the draperies that guarded the entrance to the chamber.

At daybreak he drew the curtains of the windows to let in the light, and turned about in time to dash his heel upon the head of a small but venomous serpent that was poised to strike him with its fangs. Some one had placed it in the room during the night – a messenger of death to either the Khan or his physician, it mattered little which.

The Persian stared at the writhing snake a moment and made a gesture of impatience.

“It is only the fourth day,” he muttered. “I wonder where Dirrag is.”

An hour later the woman brought in his breakfast.

“Where is the Brahoe?” he demanded, sharply.

“He was found dead this morning,” said the woman, shuddering. “Some enemy, it seems, strangled him while he slept.”

The frown upon the Persian’s brow was so fierce that the woman slipped away in terror.

“It is only the fourth day,” he growled again, between set teeth; “but the Khan shall live until the seventh day – unless Dirrag comes before. I have sworn it, and, by Allah, I will keep my oath!”

CHAPTER VI

THE MAN OF DESTINY

A young man paced with nervous strides an open gallery of the ancient monastery of Mehmet, set high upon the mountain peak of Takkatu. He was tall and slender, his face worn thin by fasting and endless vigils, his shoulders stooping, his hands so emaciated that the fingers resembled eagles' talons. His forehead was high and protruding; his eyes bright and glistening; but the lower part of his face, from the small, delicate nose to the receding chin, indicated a weak and vacillating character.

Prone upon a narrow divan against the wall reclined another man, also young but of stalwart, rugged frame and with calm and well-fashioned features. His pose was absolutely without motion: not even a muscle twitched. The dark lashes lay over his closed eyes without a tremor.

Both wore the loose yellow gowns and high turbans of the Sunnite novitiates, but the one who paced the marble tiles had a band of white around his flowing sleeve – an indication of his superior degree.

Through the open peristyle came spicy breezes from near-by Araby. The sun cast intense shadows; a mighty stillness enveloped the monastery, as if the world slept.

The two novitiates were not alone. On a stone bench near the outer arches was seated an aged priest, clothed all in pure white, whose set face and hard, unseeing eyes indicated him wholly oblivious of his surroundings. Neither the young men seemed to consider his presence, although from time to time the nervous pacer would cast a swift glance in his direction.

Suddenly the latter paused before the divan.

"Give me your counsel, Hafiz!" said he, addressing the prostrate form. "Tell me what I must do."

The man upon the divan moved and sat up, regarding the other gravely with clear grey eyes.

"Well?" said he.

"Must I submit to it?" asked the other, eagerly. "Has my father the right to make this unreasonable, unjust, shameful demand?"

Hafiz nodded.

"After all these years of study and research," continued the slender brother, with a passionate gesture, "after a life devoted to religious concentration, to the worship of Allah and His divine manifestations on earth; after delving far into the inner mysteries of the Faith and seeing the day approach when I shall become of the Imaum – after this holy life in this holy temple must I be dragged into the coarse, material world again? Bah! it is outrageous – impossible!"

"Yet imperative," added the man on the divan.

His companion had resumed his agitated walk, but suddenly paused again and cast a frightened look at the placid countenance turned upon him. Then the frown faded from his own brow; his eyes softened and he said, gently:

"Forgive me, dear Hafiz! I am beside myself with grief. Tell me what I must do!"

"They have sent for you?" asked Hafiz.

"Yes. My father, the Khan, who has forgotten me since I came here, a little child, is now dying, and he commands my presence that I may succeed him as ruler of the tribes of Mekran."

"Have you known e'er this that you were Prince of Mekran?"

"Not till this hour, when our beloved mufti revealed to me the tidings."

"But *he* knew it?" said Hafiz, with a glance toward the entranced priest by the arch.

"Yes; he knew it, but preserved the knowledge. It seems there was reason for this. My father's house has powerful enemies, who would gladly have murdered his heir in childhood. So that no one but the Khan and his trusted vizier knew where I have been hidden all these years. And I – I have grown to manhood with the belief that I might devote my life to religion; yet now, when my soul craves

peace and that exaltation which is accorded only to Allah's chosen servants, I am rudely summoned to a life of worldly turmoil, to take part in endless political intrigues and brutal warfares – all of which my spirit loathes.”

“Tis fate, Ahmed,” said the other, thoughtfully, “and to be borne with the resignation our creed teaches. You are of royal birth, of an ancient line of heaven-born rulers, and you must fulfill your destiny.”

“Ah, now you have given me my argument,” retorted Ahmed, with a quick smile. “I am not of an ancient line of heaven-born rulers. We are usurpers.”

“Yes?”

“Yes. My grandfather, according to the tale I have just heard, was a younger brother of the reigning khan, whom he ruthlessly slew and supplanted. By terrible and bloody wars my grandsire Keedar conquered the tribes that were faithful to his brother's son, and forced them to acknowledge and obey him. A fierce man was Keedar Khan, and always more hated than loved. But before he died all Baluchistan rendered him homage, and his son, my father, proved as stern and warlike as his sire. For thirty years he has ruled with an iron hand, and is today known to the world as the Lion of Mekran.”

“Yet he is dying?”

“He is dying; and he sends for me, his only child, that I may be acknowledged his successor before the assembled sirdars of the nation.”

“You must go.”

“Think what that means!”

“You will be khan.”

“Ruler of a nation of disaffected tribes, half of whom are eager to return to the allegiance of their rightful sovereign and who have only been held in subjection through two generations by the might of an iron will and the right of a gleaming sword.”

“Who is this rightful sovereign you mention?”

“My cousin Kasam, whom I have never heard of until this day. He has been educated in foreign lands, I am told, to guard him from my father – as I have been reared in this holy place to prevent my being killed by the enemies of our house.”

“And you would reject a throne – a throne bequeathed you by a warrior sire – because there is a pretender to the place?” asked Hafiz, with calm features but sparkling eyes. “It was by the sword the first royal family reigned in Mekran; it is by the sword your family reigns. Your duty is to your own kin. Let your strong arm maintain the power your ancestors have won and established!”

Ahmed shrank from the flashing eyes of his friend and spread out his palms with a deprecating gesture.

“I am no warrior, Hafiz. I am an humble servant of Allah. In a month I shall be Imaum!”

Hafiz gazed upon the slender, shrinking form of the heir of Mekran with earnestness. Truly it seemed unwise to urge the gentle devotee to abandon the monastery for the intrigue of a palace. He sighed, this stalwart, broad-shouldered monk of Takkatu, and reclined anew upon the divan.

“I wish,” he said, regretfully, “I had been born the son of your father.”

For a time Ahmed resumed his fretful pacing of the gallery, and no sound but his footsteps fell upon the ears of the three. The aged priest still sat, immobile, at his post, and the tall monk reclined as motionless upon his divan.

At times Ahmed would pause and wring his thin hands, murmuring: “I cannot! I cannot leave this holy place. In a month I shall be Imaum – a chosen comrade of the Prophet!”

A bell, low-toned and sweet, chimed from a neighboring spire. At the summons the priest stirred and turned himself to the east, the involuntary action being imitated by the younger men. Then all three cast themselves prone upon the marble floor, while a distant voice came softly but clearly to

their ears, chanting the words: "*Allah is great. There no god but Allah. Come ye to prayer. Come ye to security!*"

As the tones faded away Ahmed groaned, repeating the words: "Security! come ye to security! O Allah, help me!"

But the others remained silent and motionless for a protracted time, and even Ahmed ceased his muttering and succumbed to the impressiveness of the mid-day prayer.

Finally the priest arose and made a sign.

"Retire, my son," said he to Ahmed, "and compose thy soul to peace. Allah has shown me the way."

The young man gave a start, his features suffused with a glow of delight, his eyes sparkling joyfully. Then he bowed low before the mufti and left the gallery with steady steps.

Hafiz remained, curiously regarding the aged priest, whose lean face now wore a look of keen intelligence. He came close to the stalwart novitiate and fixed upon him a piercing gaze.

"Allah is above all," he said, "and Mahomet is the Prophet of Allah. Next to them stands the Khan – the Protector of the Faith."

"It is true," answered Hafiz.

"Prince Kasam has been educated in London. His faith, be he still true to Mahomet, is lax. For the glory of Allah and the protection of our order, a true believer must rule at Mekran. The son of Burah Khan must sit in his father's place."

"It is true," said Hafiz, again.

"Yet our beloved brother, Ahmed, is about to become of the Imaum. His soul is with Allah. His hand is not fitted to grasp the sword. Shall we rob the Faith of its most earnest devotee?"

The calm grey eyes and the glittering black ones met, and a wave of intelligence vibrated between them.

Hafiz made no reply in words, and the priest paused in deep thought. At length he continued.

"For seven years, my brother, you have been one of us, and we have learned to love you. You came among us fresh from a life tragedy. You suffered. Allah comforted you, and within our walls you found peace. The sun and wind kissed your cheeks and turned them brown; your strength increased. The purity of your soul was grateful to the Prophet, and he granted you knowledge and understanding. But you were not destined to become a priest, my Hafiz. Allah has chosen you for a more worldly life, wherein you may yet render Him service by becoming a bulwark of the Faith!"

A smile softened the stern chin of the novitiate and lent his face a rare sweetness.

"I understand, O Mufti," he answered; but there was a thrill in his voice he could not repress.

The priest clapped his hands and an attendant entered.

"Send to me Dirrag the messenger," he commanded.

No word was spoken on the gallery until the son of Ugg appeared.

Dirrag was still white with the dust of his swift ride across the desert. He came in with a swinging stride, glanced with a momentary hesitation from one to the other of the two men, and then knelt humbly before Hafiz.

"My lord," said he, "your father commands your presence in Mekran. We must ride fast if you are to find him still alive."

"In an hour," answered the priest, calmly, "Prince Ahmed will be in the saddle. I commend to your wisdom and loyalty, good Dirrag, the safety of the heir to the throne of Mekran."

CHAPTER VII

DIRRAG

When Burah Khan picked Dirrag of the tribe of Ugg as his messenger to the monastery of Takkatu, he knew his man.

Dirrag was brother to the sirdar of his tribe, and the tribe of Ugg was Burah Khan's tribe, prominent above all others for having furnished two great rulers to the nation: Keedar the Great and his warrior son the Lion of Mekran. Well might the tribe of Ugg be proud, and well might Dirrag be faithful to his own kin.

The messenger was thin and wiry; he was not a tall man, but neither was Burah Khan, for that matter. Dirrag wore a black, thick beard that covered nearly his entire face. His eyes, as they glinted through the thicket of whisker, were keen as a ferret's. One of his ears had been sliced away by a cimenter; his left hand had but one finger and the thumb remaining; his body was seared with scars on almost every inch of its compact surface. Dirrag was no longer ornamental – if he had ever possessed that quality – but he was an exceedingly useful man in a skirmish and had fought for years beside Burah himself. They knew each other.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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