

STEEL FLORA WEBSTER

THE ADVENTURES OF
AKBAR

Flora Steel

The Adventures of Akbar

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Flora Annie Webster Steel

The Adventures of Akbar

A DEDICATION

Oft when the house lay silent in the heat
My thoughts would be so full of you, my sweet,
That dreaming half—I seemed to hear once more
Your little fingers fluttering at the door,
The pitter patter of your childish feet
In joyous rhythm cross the echoing floor.

Then small, soft hands would nestle into mine,
And warm soft arms around my neck would twine,
As soft and warm the dream child on my knees,
Cuddling so close in clear young voice would tease
And tease and tease in mimicked glad young whine
For "Just one little story if you please."

So half in jest and half in earnest, too,
Mostly I think to dream my dreaming true,
I'd conjure up long tales of lands afar
And days gone by that yet remembered are;
Shaping my stories with this end in view
To gain the verdict "Tell some more, Mamma."

For I was happy when I had beguiled
Into my life the spirit of a child.
Thus one by one the weary hours flew
And page by page a little volume grew,
So—that my dreams with truth be reconciled,
Take it, my darling, it was writ for you.

April, 1875

Long years have sped since that poor book was penned.
None read the pages. Therefore at the end
Of this world's life I dedicate to two
Small boys—her sons—whose question'ng eyes of blue
Tell me that dreams of childhood never end
This book. So take it boys—'twas writ for you.

1911

PREFACE

This book is written for all little lads and lasses, but especially for the former, since it is the true—*quite* true—story of a little lad who lived to be, perhaps, the greatest king this world has ever seen.

It is a strange, wild tale this of the adventures of Prince Akbar among the snowy mountains between Kandahâr and Kâbul, and though the names may be a bit of a puzzle at first, as they will have to be learned by and bye in geography and history lessons, it might be as well to get familiar with them in a story-book; though, indeed, as everybody in it except Roy the Râjput, Meroo the cook boy; Tumbu, the dog; and Down, the cat (and these four *may* have been true, you know, though they have not been remembered) really lived, I don't know whether this book oughtn't to be considered real history, and therefore

A LESSON BOOK

Anyhow, I hope you won't find it dull.

CHAPTER I FAREWELL

Bismillah Al-la-hu Akbar!

These queer-looking, queer-sounding words, which in Arabic mean "thanks be to God," were shrilled out at the very top of Head-nurse's voice. Had she been in a room they would have filled it and echoed back from the walls; for she was a big, deep-chested woman. But she was only in a tent; a small tent, which had been pitched in a hurry in an out-of-the-way valley among the low hills that lead from the wide plains of India to Afghanistan. For Head-nurse's master and mistress, King Humâyon and Queen Humeeda, with their thirteen months' old little son, Prince Akbar, were flying for their lives before their enemies. And these enemies were led by Humâyon's own brothers, Prince Kumran, Askurry and Hindal. It is a long story, and a sad story, too, how Humâyon, so brave, so clever, so courteous, fell into misfortune by his own fault, and had to fly from his beautiful palaces at Delhi and wander for years, pursued like a hare, amid the sandy deserts and pathless plains of Western India. And now, as a last resource, his followers dwindled to a mere handful, he was making a desperate effort to escape over the Persian border and claim protection at the hands of Persia's King.

So the poor tent was ragged and out at elbows, for all that it was made of costly Kashmir shawls, and that its poles were silver-gilt.

But Head-nurse's "Thanks be to God!" came from a full heart.

"What is it? What *is* it?" called an anxious voice from behind the curtain which divided the tent in two.

"What?" echoed Head-nurse in high glee. "Only this: His Imperial Highness, Prince Akbar, the Admired-of-the-World, the Source-of-Dignity, the Most-Magnificent-Person-of-the-Period—" She went on, after her wont, rolling out all the titles that belonged of right to the little Prince, until the soft, anxious voice lost patience and called again, "Have done—have done; what is it? Heaven save he hath not been in danger."

Head-nurse, stopped in her flow of fine words, sniffed contemptuously. "Danger! with me to guard him? No! 'Tis that the High-in-Pomp hath cut his first real back tooth! He can eat meat! He has come to man's estate! He is no longer dependent upon milk diet." Here she gave a withering glance at the gentle looking woman who was Baby Akbar's wet-nurse, who, truth to tell, was looking just a little sad at the thought that her nursling would soon leave her consoling arms.

"Heavens!" exclaimed the voice from within, "say you so?" And the next instant the curtain parted, and there was Queen Humeeda, Baby Akbar's mother, all smiling and eager.

Now, if you want to know what she was like, you must just think of your own dearest dear mummie. At least that was what she seemed to little Prince Akbar, who, at the sight of her, held out his little fat arms and crowed, "Amma! Amma!" Now, this, you will observe, is only English "Ma-Ma" arranged differently; from which you may guess that English and Indian children are really very much alike.

And Queen Humeeda took the child and kissed him and hugged him just as any English mother would have done. Head-nurse, however, was not a bit satisfied with this display of affection. That would have been the portion of any ordinary child, and Baby Akbar was more than that: he was the heir apparent to the throne of India! If he had only been in the palaces that belonged to him, instead of in a miserable tent, there would have been ceremonials and festivities and fireworks over this cutting of a tooth! Aye! *Certainly* fireworks. But how could one keep up court etiquette when royalty was flying for its life? Impossible! Why, even her determination that, come what might, a

royal umbrella must be held over the blessed infant during their perilous journeys had very nearly led to his being captured!

Despite this recollection, as she listened impatiently to the cooings and gurglings, she turned over in her mind what she could do to commemorate the occasion. And when pretty Queen Humeeda (thinking of her husband, the king, who, with his few followers, had ridden off to see if a neighboring chief would help them) said, "This will be joyful news wherewith to cheer my lord on his return," Head-nurse's irritation found voice.

"That is all very well," she cried. "So it would be to any common father of any common child, Your Royal Highness! This one is the Admired-of-the-Whole-World, the Source-of-Dignity, the Most-Magnificent-Person-of-the-Period—"

And she went on rolling out queer guttural Arabic titles till Foster-mother implored her to be silent or she would frighten the child. Could she not see the look on the darling's face?

For Baby Akbar was indeed listening to something with his little finger up to command attention. But it was not to Head-nurse's thunderings, but to the first long, low growl of a coming storm that outside the miserable tent was turning the distant hills to purple and darkening the fast-fading daylight.

"Frighten?" echoed Head-nurse in derision. "The son of Humâyon the heroic, the grandson of Baber the brave could never be frightened at anything!"

And in truth the little lad was not a bit afraid, even when a distant flash of lightning glimmered through the dusk.

"Heavens!" cried gentle Queen Humeeda, "his Majesty will be drenched to the skin ere he returns." She was a brave woman, but the long, long strain of daily, hourly danger was beginning to tell on her health, and the knowledge that even this coming storm was against them brought the tears to her eyes.

"Nay! Nay! my royal mistress," fussed Head-nurse, who, in spite of her love of pomp, was a kind-hearted, good woman, "this must not be on such an auspicious day. It must be celebrated otherwise, and for all we are so poor, we can yet have ceremonial. When the child was born were we not in direst danger? Such danger that all his royal father could do in honor of the glad event was to break a musk-bag before his faithful followers as sign that the birth of an heir to empire would diffuse itself like perfume through the whole world? Even so now, and if I cannot devise some ceremony, then am I no Head-nurse!"

So saying she began to bustle around, and ere long even poor, unhappy Queen Humeeda began to take an interest in the proceedings.

A mule trunk, after being ransacked for useful odds and ends, was put in a corner and covered with a worn satin quilt. This must do for a throne. And a strip of red muslin wound about the little gold-embroidered skull cap Baby Akbar wore must, with the heron's plume from his father's state turban, make a monarch of the child.

In truth he looked very dignified indeed, standing on the mule trunk, his little legs very wide apart, his little crimson silk trousers very baggy, his little green brocade waistcoat buttoned tight over his little fat body, and, trailing from his shoulders in great stiff folds, his father's state cloth-of-gold coatee embroidered with seed pearls.

So, as he always wore great gold bracelets on his little fat arms, and great gold jingling anklets fringing his little fat feet, he looked very royal indeed. Very royal and large and calm, for he was a grave baby with big, dark, piercing eyes and a decided chin.

"He is as like his grandfather as two splits of a pea!" cried Head-nurse in rapture, and then she went to the tent door and shrilled out:

"Slaves! Quick! Come and perform your lowly salute on the occasion of the cutting of a back tooth belonging to the Heir-to-Empire, the Most—"

She cut short her string of titles, for a crash of thunder overhead warned her she had best be speedy before the rain soaked through the worn tent.

"Quick, slaves!" she added; "keep us not waiting all day. Enter and prostrate yourselves on the ground with due reverence! Quick! Quick!"

She need not have been in such a hurry, for it did not take long for the "slaves," as she called them, to perform their lowly salaam by touching the very ground with their foreheads. There were but three of them—Old Faithful, the trooper; Roy, the Râjput boy; and Meroo, the scullion; the rest were away with their master, King Humâyon.

Old Faithful, however, tall, lank, grey-bearded, brought enough devotion for half a dozen followers. He had served with little Akbar's grandfather, Babar the brave, and when he saw the child standing so fair and square, he gave almost a sharp cry of remembrance and delight. And when he stood up after his prostration, in soldier fashion he held out the hilt of his old sword for the baby to touch in token that its service was accepted. Queen Humeeda, who stood beside her little son, guided his fat fingers to the sword; but at the very moment a vivid flash of lightning made her give a shriek and cover her face with her hands. But little Prince Akbar having got a hold of the hilt, would not let go. And to Old Faithful's huge delight he pulled and pulled till the sword came out of the scabbard.

"An omen! An omen!" cried the old man. "Like his grandfather, he will fight battles ere he be twelve!"

Then there was Roy, the Râjput lad, whom the royal fugitives had found half dead from sunstroke in the wide, sandy Râjputana deserts, and whom, with their customary kindness, they had succoured and befriended, putting him on as a sort of page boy to the little Heir-to-Empire. He was a tall, slim lad for his twelve years, was Roy, with a small, well-set head and a keen, well-cut face. And his eyes! They were like a deer's—large, brown, soft, but with a flash in them at times.

For the sunstroke which had so nearly killed the lad had left his mind a little confused. As yet he could remember nothing of what had happened to him before it, and could not even recollect who he was, or anything save that his name was Roy. But every now and again he would say something or do something which would make those around him look surprised, and wonder who he could have been to know such things and have such manners.

After him came Meroo, the misshapen cook-boy. He was an odd fellow, all long limbs and broad smiles, who, when his time arrived, shambled forward, cast himself in lowliest reverence full length on the ground and blubbered out his delight—now that the princely baby could really eat—at being able to supply all sorts of toothsome stews full of onions and green ginger, to say nothing of watermelons and sugar cane. These things, strange to say, being to little Indian children very much what chocolate creams and toffee are to English ones.

So far all had gone well, and now there only remained one more salute to be made. But little Adam, who was Head-nurse's own son, and who had hitherto been Baby Akbar's playmate, refused absolutely to do as he was bid. He was a short, sturdy boy of five, and nothing would induce him to go down on his knees and touch the ground with his forehead. In vain Meroo, the cook-boy, promised him sweets if he would only obey orders; in vain Old Faithful spoke of a ride on his old war-horse, and Roy, who was a most wonderful story-teller, promised him the best of all, Bopuluchi. In vain his mother, losing patience at such a terrible piece of indecorum, rushed at him and cuffed him soundly. He only howled and kicked.

And then suddenly Baby Akbar, who had been listening with a solemn face, brought his little bare foot down on the mule trunk with such a stamp that the golden anklets jingled and jangled, and his little forefinger went up over his head in the real Eastern attitude of royal command.

"Salute, slave, salute," he said with a tremendous dignity. And there was something so comical about the little mite of a child, something so masterful in the tiny figure, something so commanding in the loud, deep-toned baby voice, that every one laughed, and somehow or other Adam forgot his obstinacy and made his obeisance like a good boy.

And then once more pretty Queen Humeeda hugged and kissed her little son, and all the rest applauded him, and made so much of him that he began to think he had done something very fine indeed, and crowed and clapped his hands in delight.

But the merriment did not last long, for there was a clatter of horses and swords outside the tent.

"My husband!" cried Queen Humeeda in a flutter. "What news does my lord bring?"

CHAPTER II

THE FIRST VICTORY

The next moment a tall, handsome man entered the tent; but one look at his pale, anxious face was enough to tell those inside that the news was bad. So for an instant there was silence; and in the silence, with a deafening roar and a blinding blaze of blue light, came a terrific crash of thunder followed by a sudden fierce pelt of hail upon the taut tent roof.

It sent a shiver through the listeners. They felt that the storm had broken indeed upon their heads, that danger was close beside them.

Then the King stepped to his wife's side and took her hand, and as he spoke there was a sob in his breath as of an animal who after a long chase finds himself at last driven to bay.

"Come!" he said briefly, "there may yet be a chance for us. My horse, weary though it be, will suffice for thy light weight. In the mountains lies possible safety. Come! There is not a moment to lose."

"But—but the child—" faltered the Queen.

King Humâyon's voice failed him. He could not speak for a moment; but he shook his head.

"I will not leave the child—" began the wretched mother. "My lord! thou canst not have the heart—"

"It is his only chance—" interrupted the poor King, his face full of grief and anger, of bitter, bitter regret—"His only chance of life! In the mountains yonder, with winter snow upon us, lies certain death for one so young. Were we to stay with him here, he would find death with us—for my brother Askurry is close behind us. But if we are gone, God knows, but he might spare the child. Askurry is not all unkind, and the little lad favors my father so much that his blessed memory may be safeguard. God send it so. It is his best chance, his only chance. So come—"

"I cannot! I cannot!" moaned the poor mother distractedly.

"There is no other way, sweetheart!" said the King, "so be brave, little mother, and come for thy son's sake. He will be safer here than with thee. Come! trusting in God's mercy for the child. And come quickly while the darkness of the storm shrouds our going."

Then he looked round on those others—Head-nurse, Wet-nurse, Old Faithful, Roy the Râjput, and Meroo the cook-boy—not much of a bodyguard for the young prince, and yet, since force would be useless, perhaps as good as any other, if they had a head between them. But the nurses were women, Faithful nothing but an old soldier, and the two others were mere boys. Some one else must be left. Who? Then he remembered Foster-father, Foster-mother's husband. He was the man. Solid, sober, clear-headed. So, as Queen Humeeda was being hurriedly wrapped in a shawl by the two weeping nurses, he gave them a few directions. They were to stay where they were, no matter what happened, until Foster-father returned from showing the fugitives a path he knew to the mountains, and then—

King Humâyon could say no more. Only as, after a hurried, tearless, hopeless farewell to his little son, he paused at the tent door to take a last look, his half-fainting wife in his arms, he said suddenly in a sharp, loud voice:

"Remember! In your charge lies the safety of the Heir-to-Empire."

The words sank into the very hearts of those who stood watching the group of hurrying figures making its way rapidly toward the hills.

"Pray Heaven," muttered Old Faithful anxiously, "that they be over the rise before those who follow see them."

So they stood fearfully watching, watching. And Heaven was kind, for though one great blue blaze of lightning showed the fugitives clear against the sky line, when the next came there was nothing but the rugged rocks.

Then for the first time Baby Akbar, who had been silent in his nurses' arms, watching with the rest, lifted up his deep-toned baby voice:

"Daddy, Amma," he said contentedly, "gone up in a 'ky."

Whereupon Foster-mother wept loudly and prayed that good angels might protect her darling.

But Head-nurse was more practical, and set about considering how best that safety might be secured. Who was there who could help? No one of much use, truly, though every one was brimful of devotion and ready to give his or her life for the Heir-to-Empire.

"I will kill the first man who dares—" began Old Faithful.

"Aye! The first! But how about the last, old man?" interrupted Head-nurse. "Force will be of no avail. Askurry hath half an army with him."

"Harm shall only come to the child through my body," wept Foster-mother, whereat Head-nurse laughed scornfully.

"Woman's flesh is a poor shield, fool! God send we find better protection than thy carcass."

"Boo! hoo!" blubbered Meroo the cook-boy. "Lo! Head-nurse! I could kill a whole army by poisoning their suppers."

Head-nurse nodded faint approval. "Now, there is some sense in that, scullion, but what about that they may do supperless? If they should dare—"

"They will not dare," said a clear, sharp voice, and Roy the Râjput lad stepped forward, a light in his great eyes. "My mother used to say, 'Fear not! A king's son is a king's son always, so be that he forgets not kingship.'"

Head-nurse stood puzzled for a second, then she caught the meaning of the lad's words, for she was a clever, capable woman, and had all a woman's quickness.

"Thou art right, my lad," she said slowly, looking curiously at Roy, from whose face the flash of memory seemed to have passed. "Thou art right. In royalty lies safety. The Heir-to-Empire must receive his enemies as a King! Quick! slaves! Close the tent door and let us bring forth all we have, and make all things as regal as we can. There is no time to lose."

And they did not lose any. The result being that when, quarter of an hour afterward, Prince Askurry, bitterly disappointed at finding that his real quarry, the King and Queen, had escaped, strode with some of his followers into the tent where he was told Baby Akbar was to be found, he paused at the door, first in astonishment and then in amusement.

It was really rather a pretty picture which he saw. To begin with the tent had been lit up with the little rushlight lamps they call in India *chiraghs*—tiny saucers which can be made of mud in which a cotton wick floats in a few drops of oil—and a row of these outlined the mule trunk throne. Then Meroo's misshapen limbs had been hidden under a chain corselet and helmet, so he made quite a respectable fellow to Old Faithful, as the two supporters stood bolt upright with drawn swords one on either side, while beneath them, on the ragged old Persian carpet which had been spread to hide the dirty tent drugget, crouched Head-nurse and Foster-mother, their faces veiled with their best gold embroidered veils.

A great pile of cushions had been placed on the muletrunk, and in the centre of these sat Baby Akbar, the Royal heron's plume of his turban waving gently in the breeze caused by the slow dignified sweep of the Royal fan which Roy, who stood behind his young master, was swinging backwards and forwards.

But it was not the prettiness of the picture which made Prince Askurry pause. It was the child's open fearless face which reminded him at once—as King Humâyon had hoped it might—of that dear, beloved father whose memory, even in their worst wickednesses, was ever a good influence in the lives of his sons. Babar the Brave! Babar of the Generous Heart! the Kindly Smile! Who could forget him?

But behind Prince Askurry were others who did not remember; who were eager to kill and have done with Humâyon and his son for ever.

And when they saw Prince Askurry pause, they were quick with advice.

"It is unwise to spare snakes' spawn," said one.

"The boy is father to the man," said another. "He who is wise kills young rats as well as old ones."

And still Prince Askurry paused while poor Head-nurse and Wet-nurse went sick with fear under their veils at what might be going to happen, and Old Faithful's hand clasped the hilt of his sword tighter, since come what may he meant to strike one blow for his young master. But Roy's keen eyes showed—as the peacock's feather fan swept past them backwards and forwards—like a hawk's as it hovers above a partridge. There was in them a defiance, a certainty that victory must come.

Suddenly a wicked laugh filled the tent. "Peace! brothers," said a sneering voice, "Prince Askurry prefers to leave the snake to fight with his own son in the future."

The taunt told. It was true! Better to scotch the snake now, than to leave it to be dangerous by and by; dangerous perhaps to his own little son who was but a few years older than Baby Akbar.

Prince Askurry strode forward drawn sword in hand; but whether he really meant to use it or not cannot be told, for a very strange thing happened. Baby Akbar had been listening to the fierce voices just as he had listened to the angry voices when Adam had refused to salute. And now he saw some one before him who appeared to have no intention—as Adam had no intention—of making his reverence; so, remembering the fine thing he had done when the latter had been naughty, up went the little hand again, and once more the loud, deep, baby voice said imperiously:

"Salute! Slave! salute!"

The words were barely uttered when by pure chance Prince Askurry's foot caught in the ragged carpet, and—?

And down he came flat as a pancake on the floor in the very lowliest salute that ever was made!

The next moment, however, he sat up, half-stunned, and looked wrathfully at his little nephew.

But Baby Akbar's honest open face was full of grieved sympathy.

"Poor, poor!" he said, shaking his quaintly crowned head, "tumbu down. Nanna kiss it, make it well."

Prince Askurry sat stupidly staring for a moment or two. Then the memory of many a childish hurt cured by like gracious offer from his father came back to him, making his heart soft. He sprang to his feet and waved by his councillors to cruelty.

"Go, my lords!" he cried fiercely. "Go seek the King who is no true King if ye will, and kill him. But this boy goes with me to Kandahâr; the stuff of which he is made counts for life, not for death."

Then with a sudden generous impulse, for he was at heart his father's son, he held the hilt of his drawn sword in token of vassalage for Baby Akbar to touch.

And the child, clever, observant beyond his years, remembering how his mother had guided his fingers to Old Faithful's weapon, put out his little hand solemnly and touched it.

Behind their close-folded veils Head-nurse and Wet-nurse wept for joy. And the old trooper's grip relaxed and the hard relentless look faded from Roy's face.

For here was safety, for a while at any rate, for the Heir-to-Empire.

He, and Fate between them, had won his first victory. No! his second, since the first had been the conquering of Adam's obstinacy.

But for that Baby Akbar might not have behaved with such dignity.

CHAPTER III

THE ROYAL UMBRELLA

That night even Roy the Râjput, who as a rule woke every hour to see to his little master's safety, slept sound. And so did the others, though they sat up till Foster-father crept in to the tent about midnight, after having seen the Royal Fugitives safely over the Persian border. Of course, there was nothing but miles on miles of snowy mountains before them, nothing but long struggle and privation to be hoped for; still they were out of India, out of an enemy's country. For which Heaven be thanked!

So they wrapped themselves in their quilts and lay down to rest with hearts eased for the time of immediate anxiety.

Head-nurse, however, began at once, after her wont, to make plans for resuming some of the courtly ways which hurry had made impossible. The gold embroidered royal red umbrella was one thing she was determined to have.

But who was to hold it over the Royal Infant? Roy would get tired of it during a long march. He was but a boy; and after all there should be a Deputy, Assistant, Second, Umbrella Bearer to Majesty.

Could Meroo, properly dressed, of course, be promoted to the position?

She actually woke Foster-father from his well-earned first sleep to propound this knotty question.

"Good woman," he murmured patiently, "make what court appointments ye will. Create the scullion Prime Minister, so I have my sleep."

And he was snoring almost before the words were out of his mouth.

So next morning Head-nurse, refusing the baggage camel with panniers which Prince Askurry sent for the use of the little Heir-to-Empire, organised a procession of her own.

First of all came Foster-father, stout and solid, on his skew-bald hill pony which was called Horse-chestnut because it was patched all over, like an unripe chestnut, with yellow, brown and white.

It had a lovely tail that touched the ground, and a coat that was long and wavy like an Irish setter's. A wise, sober pony was Horse-chestnut; he never attempted to climb up anything he thought too difficult, but just gave a look at it to make sure and then put down his head calmly, and began to graze until his rider found an easier path.

Next came Trooper Faithful on his old white charger Lightning. Once upon a time it had been like its name, swift exceedingly, but now, like its master, it was slow and stiff.

Then followed Head-nurse, astride, in Indian fashion, the bay Belooch mare which had been Queen Humeeda's favourite mount until it had had to be left behind in one of the hasty moves which had of late been so common in the hunted life of the Royal Fugitives. The mare, of course, had been taken by the pursuers, and brought along with them; and the groom in charge of it had come grinning with delight to Foster-father when he found himself in the same camp again. Foster-father was for riding the bay mare himself and giving sober Horse-chestnut to the Heir-to-Empire, but Head-nurse would not hear of this. The bay mare was, she said, altogether more royal. So there she was, with Baby Akbar astride a cushion in front, perched on the skittish creature, feeling at heart very nervous, for she was but a poor rider. However, she held on very tight with one hand, held Baby Akbar still tighter with the other, and trusted to Providence, while Roy and Meroo ran beside her on either side, alternately holding up the Royal Umbrella as best they could.

Foster-mother on a mule, with little Adam perched in front of her brought up the rear of the procession. It was a poor one for progress even along the levels, because of the bay mare's fidgeting and caperings, but when the steep hill sides were reached it became impossible to keep up with the rest of the equipage. So Prince Askurry and his men pushed on ahead leaving the little party alone, since escape was impossible on that wild mountain road, especially with the rear guard of the camp

coming a few miles behind them. And, indeed, if such an idea had entered the heads of any of the party it must soon have fled before the difficulty of getting along at all. It was a steep zig-zag path, and looking upwards you could see it zigging and zagging right away to the sky line. Poor Foster-mother, who came last, could not take her eyes off it, for the bends immediately above her were filled with the most terrifying sights. First her stout husband, who seemed to be in the act of slipping over Horse-chestnut's tail. On the next Old Faithful, driven to dismounting and laboriously lugging Lightning up by the bridle. But the last zig-zag in front of her called forth piercing shrieks. For the bay mare, not having been ridden for some time, was full of beans. Baby Akbar insisted on holding the reins, and Meroo, whose turn it was to hold the umbrella, *would* slip and slither among the stones, thereby bringing its fringe right on the bay mare's nose.

"Oh! Head-nurse, have a care! The blessed child!" shrieked poor Foster-mother as a more than usually bad stumble sent the umbrella on to the mare's tail.

This was too much for it. Frightened out of its senses, it gave a frenzied bound forwards, then rearing straight up, hung over the edge of the path, as if it meant to take a downward plunge.

All seemed lost! Foster-father and Faithful stood petrified with despair. Meroo would have dashed forward to catch at the rein but Roy, knowing with that curious instinct of his, that that would only make matters worse, as it would still further frighten the mare, held him back by main force. The only person who was not spellbound with fear was Baby Akbar. He thought it a fine joke that his mount should stand up on its hind legs and paw the air. So he shrieked with delight, and dropped the reins to clap his hands, as he always did when he was pleased. Now this was the very best thing he, or anybody else, could have done. The mare, feeling herself free, thought better of it, and wheeling round dropped her fore feet on the path once more.

Foster-father's loud Arabic thanksgiving ended in an equally loud order. "Get off the mare, woman. Horse-chestnut is the only mount thou art fit for. Roy! carry that foolish umbrella behind."

"In front—the emblems are ever carried in front," protested Head-nurse feebly.

"I said behind," was all the answer she got, and behind it went while they toiled up and up.

After a while the road became surprisingly bad; nothing in fact but a watercourse, and Foster-father began to doubt if they could be on the right way. Possibly, when they were all excited over the mare's bad behaviour, they had taken a wrong turning. But as the path led ever upwards, he judged it better to go on, though it was terribly hard work. Every moment the road became worse and worse until it ceased to be more than a mere ladder of rocks which puzzled even Horse-chestnut. More than once he stopped dead and would no doubt have refused any further attempt to climb had there been anything at which to graze. But there was nothing; nothing but rocks. So, after a pause he made the best of a bad bargain, raised himself on his hind legs, sought a foothold for his fore feet in some crevice, and then scrambled up. Only the two children enjoyed themselves, Baby Akbar laughing with delight and clapping his hands over all the slips and slitherings which even nimble Horse-chestnut made, and which reduced Head-nurse and Wet-nurse to piteous wails to Roy not for Heaven's sake to let go of the Heir-to-Empire's baggy trousers. And Adam enjoyed himself, also, running on in front and making snowballs in the drifts which, ere long, were to be seen sheltering from the sun in the clefts of the rocks.

The sight of them made Foster-father frown. "We go too high," he said. "Heaven send we have not to climb to a higher pass."

His remark made Head-nurse give way altogether. She wept loudly, saying in that case she had better stay and die where she was, thus saving them the trouble of carrying her down the hill.

At that very moment, however, Adam who had run far ahead began waving his arms and shouting:

"He says 'The top! the top!'" cried Roy, who was keen in hearing as in everything else. "Courage, mother! our troubles are over!"

They had not *quite* ended, but in a few minutes more they had reached the beginning of the pass proper. Before them lay a grassy boggy slope curling gently upwards between higher rockier slopes. A little stream plashed softly adown it, through a perfect wilderness of flowers, and without one word the tired travellers threw themselves beside it for rest and refreshment.

But Baby Akbar looked a little troubled.

"Amma, Dadda 'way 'way in a 'ky," he said solemnly, and essayed to crawl on over the grass. For he could not walk yet, though he spoke so well. They say he began to talk when he was nine months old.

CHAPTER IV

TUMBU-DOWN

After a while the party started on their way once more feeling greatly brisked up. But the heat of the day was now upon them, and though the snow lay close beside the path, the fierce sun melting it made the vapour rise and turned the narrow valley into a regular steam bath.

The perspiration ran down the travellers' faces and especially down poor Head-nurse's; for she had insisted on taking off her veil to twist it turbanwise round Baby Akbar's head since the Royal Umbrella was forbidden. Foster-mother had tried to take off hers also, but Head-nurse had angrily forbidden her to do any such thing. If she, Head-nurse, died of sunstroke what matter, but if Foster-mother failed, what—even though one back tooth had been gloriously cut—would become of the Heir-to-Empire, the Admired-of-the-World, the Great-in-Pomp, etc.?

So, to comfort herself she went on mumbling titles as she struggled along, the sun beating fiercely on her bare head. Such a quaint head, with sleek black hair parted and plaited and hung with jewels, even down the long pigtail of brown wool that was added on to the back to make the hair look more plentiful.

It was a piteous sight and Foster-mother was so conscious of the devotion it meant that she said "Lo! Head-nurse, thou art a good, good soul though a hard one to me; but I will never, never, never, forget this day."

"Nor I," groaned Head-nurse, "but 'tis for the Heir-to-Empire."

It was a full hour before the slope ended in a level bog, on the other side of which began a visible descent. Then in the angled hills a blue shadow began to rise, telling of a valley below them.

"Bismillah!" (Thanks be to God) cried Foster-father piously. And every one echoed the remark except Baby Akbar. He turned round and looked back at the snowy peaks which were beginning to show behind them.

"Amma, Dadda 'way 'way mountains," he said regretfully and his little mouth went down as for a cry, when everybody's attention was distracted by the sudden appearance of a huge furry black dog which came bounding down the hill side, its big white teeth gleaming as it uttered shrill, sharp, growling barks.

Head-nurse and Foster-mother shrieked with fright, little Adam ran like a hare for the shelter of his mother's petticoats, and Meroo the cook-boy, remembering his bare legs—for like all Indian scullions he wore short cotton drawers—squatted down where he was standing, in order to protect them. Even Roy, brave boy that he was, looked uncomfortable, and both Foster-father and Old Faithful whipped out their swords.

These were not needed, however, for the next instant a wild-looking figure clad in a brown blanket started up from behind a rock and shouted to the dog. It stopped instantly, but stood still—snarling, though obedient.

It was the funniest looking dog you can imagine. Bigger than a big collie, it was furry all over even to its tail. And it was black as ink. In fact with its tiny prick ears and small sharp pointed muzzle all lost in a huge soft black ruff and nothing to be seen but red tongue, white teeth and beady black eyes, it was a regular golliwog of a dog.

When Foster-father saw the man in the brown blanket, who from his crook was evidently a shepherd, he heaved a sigh of relief. "Now," he said, "we shall be able to find out our way."

But he was mistaken. The man did not understand a word they said, neither could they understand a word he said.

Head-nurse was in despair. "He speaks like a ghost of the desert," she wept. "We shall all die of starvation before he understands."

"Die?" echoed Foster-father stoutly. "Not so, woman! There is one language all understand."

Whereupon he placed himself right in front of the shepherd, opened his mouth wide and then shook his head. Next he pointed to his stomach and shook his head again. Finally he began to chew violently, rubbed his stomach and grinned.

The shepherd grinned too and rubbed *his* stomach, whereupon Foster-father turned triumphantly to Head-nurse.

"Said I not sooth, woman," he asked. "Hunger hath a tongue of its own, and all men know it."

Once begun, signs soon brought so much understanding, that, whistling to his dog, the shepherd started down the hill at a great pace, beckoning them to follow.

"Not so fast, friend, not so fast!" panted Foster-father, "we be not all born on a mountain as thou art. And there are women and children, too." He pointed to poor Head-nurse and Foster-mother, who were indeed dropping with fatigue, and the man seemed to understand, for he pulled up. But he had to keep some way off because his dog, who kept close as a shadow to his master's heels, never ceased growling. So they tramped on wearily until just below them they saw a *marg* or mountain upland, where some goats were grazing. One part of this dipped down into a little valley, and there, in the shelter of some huge rocks, they saw two or three small brown blanket tents, such as shepherds use on the Beluchistan hills. They were just like waggon tilts only not so large.

Here, at any rate, was prospect of food and rest, and the poor travellers brisked up again. But alas! between them and the tents lay a formidable obstacle. Nothing less than a birch-twigg bridge over a rushing stream which filled up the bottom of a wide rift or chasm in the upland. This chasm stretched right across the upland from a steep rock which blocked up the head of the little valley, and out of which the stream gushed, and there was no way of crossing it, so the shepherd explained by signs, except the birch-twigg bridge. Now a birch-twigg bridge is a very terrifying thing to anybody who is not accustomed to them. It is simply a strong flat plait of birch twigs about nine inches wide which is flung from one side to the other, and which, of course, droops and sags like a rope in the middle. Into this plait are stuck every few feet or so cross sticks, and to these sticks a rope is fastened as a sort of hand rail. Across such a bridge as this the hill children walk as easily as an English child does over a great brick span; but Head-nurse resolutely refused to set foot over it herself, much less to allow the Heir-to-Empire to risk his neck on such an appallingly dangerous structure. In vain Foster-father, in order to set a good example, allowed himself to be led over by the shepherd with his eyes carefully bandaged lest he should get giddy in the middle by looking down. As a matter of fact, this only made Head-nurse more frightened, for, of course, the bridge swung and swayed with the weight of the men on it. She would sooner, she declared, try to climb Heaven on a rainbow! That was at least steady. Roy tried to hearten her up by walking over himself with open eyes, though he felt frightfully dizzy and had to fling himself flat on the grass to recover when he did get over. Then Meroo, blubbing loudly that he was going to his death for his young master, climbed up on the shepherd's back and allowed himself to be carried over just to show how easy it was.

It was all in vain! Head-nurse was firm. They must bring the tents to the Heir-to-Empire; the Heir-to-Empire should not go across a tight rope to the tents. And there she would have remained had not a great, tall burly woman with a fat baby on her hip come out of one of the tents, and grasping the position, stalked over the bridge without even touching the hand rail, caught Baby Akbar from Foster-mother, who was too taken aback to resist, set him on her other hip and calmly stalked back again, leaving the two women too surprised and horrified even to scream.

But when they saw the Heir-to-Empire safe on the other side, they consented to be carried across pick-a-back.

So there they were before long eating goats' milk cheese fried like a beefsteak and drinking long draughts of a sort of sour milk.

One of the shepherds could speak a little Persian, and from him Foster-father, to his great relief, learned that Prince Askurry's camp was only a mile or two down the valley, so, feeling certain

of being able to reach it before sundown, he called a halt, and they all lay down to rest in one of the tents, Baby Akbar between his two nurses for safety sake. For one could never tell, Head-nurse remarked, what might happen amongst people who spoke the language of ghosts in the desert, and kept such strange animals. A great golliwog of a black dog who sat on one side of the tent like an image, watching them as if he meant to eat them, and a great fluff of a white cat sitting on the other with her eyes shut as if she did not want to watch them.

No! Indeed it was impossible to tell what might not happen!

And that is exactly how it turned out. What *really* did happen no one knew. It was Foster-mother who, waking first, let loose a shriek while still half awake. This roused Head-nurse, who let loose another. For Baby Akbar was no longer between them. The Heir-to-Empire had gone—had disappeared—was not to be found!

Roy was out of the tent in a second, treading in his haste on Meroo, who was sleeping outside, and who began to howl confusedly. Old Faithful fumbled for his sword, Foster-father rubbed his eyes as if *they* must be at fault.

But there was no Baby! And what is more, both the black dog and the white cat had disappeared also; at least they were no longer on the watch.

Never was there such a commotion. The rocks resounded with cries and every one searched everywhere; even in the great tall basket panniers in which hill shepherds carry their goods and chattels.

But not one sign of the little fellow was to be found, until—horribly, dreadfully, near to that awful birch-twigg bridge—Foster-mother seized on a tiny gold-embroidered skull cap that was lying on the grass.

"It is his!" she sobbed, "it is my darling's! He hath tried to get to the mountains to his Amma, and he hath fallen from that accursed cats' cradle. He is dead! He is killed!"

Every face, except the shepherds', who did not, of course, understand what was said, turned pale. It was indeed possible, perhaps probable, that the faithful little soul, who remembered when others forgot, had tried—

It was a terrible thought. But the shepherds, seeing the cap, at once whistled to their dog, and the one who spoke Persian explained that if it were shown the cap it would take up the track of the child at once.

But though they whistled and whistled no dog came.

Then the shepherds began to look grave and mutter among themselves.

"What are they saying? What gibberish are they talking?" shrilled poor Head-nurse, trying to keep hope alive by being angry. The man who spoke Persian looked at her cheerfully.

"Only that perhaps the dog has eaten the child. We keep it hungry that it may chase the wild animals."

This was too much for the womankind. They simply rent the air with heartbroken sobs.

But Foster-father, grave and silent, would not give up hope. Every foot of the ravine must be searched, first downwards, as, had the child really fallen into the stream it must have been carried with it. Then as a last forlorn hope upwards. So, peering down carefully from either side, they traced the ravine till, gradually becoming shallower, less steep, it merged into the grassy valley. But there was no sign. Then sadly they commenced their upward search, until they were close to the high cliff whence the stream gushed out. Here they found that the ravine was wider, and at the bottom of it a patch of sand and boulders showed that there was foothold beside the roaring torrent.

"I will climb down and see if there is aught," said Roy; "it is easier here—if he had fallen here, he might—" the tears in his voice prevented more, as he tucked up his garments preparatory to the difficult descent.

But the shepherds raised an urgent outcry. There was a demon in the cavern, they said, whence the water came. There was no use angering it, no use in losing another life.

Roy struggled madly in their detaining hands, but Old Faithful and Foster-father looked at each other. Whether there was a demon or not it was a risk to another life and that should not be a young one.

"No, boy!" said the old warrior stoutly. "This is my task, not thine. I am good swordsman to begin with, and demons—if there be any—like not a clean sword thrust. Also I have been pilgrim to Holy Mecca and demons—if there be any—like not pilgrims' flesh."

So, muttering prayers and holding his drawn sword in his teeth, since both hands were needed for the parlous descent, he commenced his task while the others watched him eagerly.

About half way down he paused, looked up and called back; but they could not hear what he said.

"Take thy sword out of thy mouth, man," shrieked Head-nurse almost beside herself with grief and rage; "it isn't manners to speak with the mouth full."

True enough, but Old Faithful had some difficulty in obeying orders. However, he managed to steady himself for a moment on his two feet; so sword in hand he bawled back.

"'Tis true! There *is* a demon. It growls. I hear it plainly. Farewell! I go on, secure in my sword and Holy—"

Here a foot slipped and he went sliding, slithering, slipping down to the bottom where, happily only bruised, he sat half-stunned staring in front of him.

And then there echoed up to the listeners the most terrible barking, and yelping, and growling, and spitting, that ever was heard!

"The demon! The demon!" yelled the shepherds in terror, and ran for their lives.

But Roy, ear over the cliff, listened for a second, and the next had followed Old Faithful. Foster-father was not long behind him, and Meroo was close on his heels. Foster-mother and Head-nurse were not to be left out, and somehow they all managed to get down in safety.

And then they all stood and sat silent and agape with surprise and delight.

For what they saw was this. A low cavern in the rock, and on a shelving bank of dry sand Baby Akbar sitting up and rubbing his eyes, while on one side of him was the golliwog of a black dog, his fur all bristling, his white teeth gleaming as he filled the air with furious barks; while on the other was the white fluff of a cat, her back arched, her tail the size of two, spitting and growling fiercely.

How had he got there? Foster-father looked at Foster-mother, Head-nurse looked at Old Faithful, and Roy looked at Meroo, and they all looked at each other.

But Baby Akbar only put out one fat hand towards the black dog and said "Tumbu," and the other fat hand towards the cat and said "Down," and that was all he would say.

He had tumbled down; but how, when, and where, and how the dog and the cat came to be with him no one ever knew from that day to this.

CHAPTER V ON THE ROAD

Naturally when, after an uneventful journey with the shepherd as guide, they reached Prince Askurry's camp that evening, they came to talk over the incident. Foster-father was not sparing of Head-nurse. The whole tissue of misfortunes, which had ended in Baby Akbar so nearly losing his life—and that he had been spared was simply a miracle—arose from her insisting on a Royal Procession. But for that, both she and the child would have gone comfortably on a camel. They would have kept up with the other baggage animals and none of the distressful events would have happened. It should not, however, happen again. Of course, Head-nurse tried to brazen it out and assert that the Heir-to-Empire could always count on a miracle in his favour; but in her heart-of-hearts she knew that Foster-father was right.

So next morning she said nothing when she saw a camel with two panniers kneeling in front of the tent, ready for its load. *That* had to be endured, but she revenged herself by objecting to the black dog and the white cat, who sat expectantly one on either side, evidently prepared for a start.

"Whose are those uncouth beasts?" she asked of Roy angrily. "Did I not tell those ghosts of the desert who call themselves shepherds to remove them last night? Why have they come back? Take them away! Catch them! Tie them up! Such mean born animals have no right to attend the Mighty-in-Pomp, the Lord-of-Light," etc., etc.

She rolled out the titles sonorously, determined that if she was docked of dignity in one way she would have it in another.

Now it was not very hard to catch the big black golliwog of a dog, even though he did snarl and snap and try to bite. There were a lot of camp followers who were only too glad to have the amusement of capturing him, so, after a very short space poor "Tumbu," for Baby Akbar insisted on calling him so, was being dragged off at the end of a long rope to his masters the shepherds, looking very sad, with his tail between his legs.

But it was quite different with "Down," the cat. She had made up her mind to stay where she was, and it is very hard, indeed, to make a cat change its mind when it is once made up.

So she moved about gently, from one place to the other, purring softly and looking as mild as milk, her blue eye—for real Persian cats often have their eyes of different colours and one of them is always blue—ever so friendly, as if she were just longing to be picked up. Only the very tip of her bushy tail swayed a little, and that is a sure sign that a cat is contrary. And contrary Down was. The very instant any one tried to pick her up—why! she was somewhere else!

Head-nurse ere long joined in the chase, saying all the rest didn't understand cats. But she soon lost patience and declaring that she had never been done by a dumb animal yet, started capture by force. A circle was formed round the point where Down sat blinking in the sunlight, and shawls and veils were held up to make it complete. Then step by step they advanced towards the cat, who, in truth, viewed the enclosing wall with polite indifference. It was really rather a funny sight to see stout Head-nurse without her veil tip-toeing in line towards pussy and shrilling out her orders to the others to close in and be sure to leave no loopholes. Step by step her voice became more and more triumphant, and it really seemed as if the cat *must* be caught this time, for Down sat sweetly purring until she was actually hidden from sight behind the high-held screening cloths.

"Now then! quick!" shrilled Head-nurse. "Close in—close—"

But her order ended in a scream of fright, for there was pussy in one flying leap on her bare head, scrabbling up her scanty hair, and with another away up the hillside leaving nothing but claw-marks behind her!

Head-nurse wept with angry tears; but Foster-father, always sensible, said "Enough! cry on the camel if you will, but now is the time to slip away before the obstinate animal can return."

There was wisdom in this; therefore Head-nurse composed herself comfortably in one pannier while Foster-mother, who was lighter, settled into the other with Baby Akbar. So off they set at the dignified lollop which camels affect, and Head-nurse began to congratulate herself on having successfully evaded the "uncouth beasts."

But there is no counting on cats. If they are here one moment and gone the next, they are also gone one moment and here the next. So, as the camel was passing under a thorn tree about half a mile out from camp, a great fluff of white hair sprang from the branches and landed right in Head-nurse's broad lap. And there was Mistress Down looking as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth, and purring away like a kettle on the boil.

Head-nurse gave in *altogether* then. "When a cat really makes up its mind," she said with forced wisdom, "it is little use any one else making up theirs!"

So pussy sat in her lap, and after a while the warmth of the pretty creature and even the very roughness of the small three-cornered red tongue that licked her hand, as half-unconsciously she began to stroke the long soft fur, made her say suddenly:

"Who knows but it is the Will of the Creator! This mean-born thing may in the future be of use to the Light-of-the-World, the Observed-of-all-Observers," etc., etc., etc.

And her words were to come true, for, as you will see by and bye, Down was of great use to her little master. Nevertheless when, at the very next camping ground, a great big black golliwog of a dog with a gnawed end of rope still round his neck was seen calmly awaiting them at the door of the tent that was pitched for their reception, Head-nurse became tearful again and said that if Providence intended to send all the wild beasts of the field to look after Baby Akbar, there was no need for her; so she would give up her place.

But the little Prince himself was delighted. He plumped down on the hot sand beside the dog and hugged it, calling it "Dear Tumbu," and when the white cat jealously rubbed her back against his little fat person he hugged her too and called her "Darling Down."

"Hark to the Lord-of-the-Universe giving his creatures names!" said Foster-mother piously. So after that everybody called the golliwog dog Tumbu, and the fluffy cat Down.

This was the beginning of a whole week on camel back; a very pleasant week too, though the minds of the elders were rather on the stretch concerning the fate of King Humâyon and Queen Humeeda.

Still the sky was as blue as blue could be, the sun shone bright and the air was crisp with coming winter. Head-nurse spent most of her days dozing and mumbling long strings of titles in one pannier, while Down slept and purred on her lap. In the other pannier were Foster-mother and Baby Akbar. The little fellow did not sleep much, but spent most of his time craning over the pannier side to see everything there was to be seen. But what amused him most was to watch Tumbu, who would look up and bark and gambol for hours to attract his little master's attention. Whereat Down would become impatient and come over the camel's hump from the other pannier, rub her back against the little Prince and watch, too, with a sort of dignified contempt. It was the way of dogs to be loud and effusive, and gushing; but it didn't mean much. Tumbu, for instance, despite his display of affection, would leave his post to run after every wild thing he saw; and though he always came back to it, he was so helplessly breathless, with half a yard of red tongue hanging out, that he would have been little use had an enemy turned up and his protection been needed.

Cats were far wiser. They sat still and watched; so they were always ready.

And one evening Down watched to some purpose. Baby Akbar was asleep on some quilts and Down, as usual, lay keeping his feet warm, her eyes closed, purring away like a steaming kettle.

You would have sworn she was half asleep, but in a second there was one spring, something reared itself at her to strike, but her paws were too quick. One, two, three, came the blows swiftly like

boxes on the ears, and there was a snake squirming and helpless in the dust. Old Faithful's armoured feet were on its head in a second and the danger was over.

"Truly a cat is a terrible thing," said Head-nurse in a twitter. "There is no fear in them. The reptile had not a chance."

But Down was back on her young master's feet, her eyes closed, purring away as if nothing had happened.

Tumbu was in favour, however, next evening, but for a different cause. He appeared with a great prickly porcupine held gingerly in his mouth and laid it before Baby Akbar.

"Ohi! Porcupine for supper!" cried Meroo, the cook boy, who knew what a delicacy it was; but Head-nurse shrieked, "Take it away quick—the Heir-to-Empire will prick himself with the quills and they are poisonous. Take it away at once, I say."

But alas! The Heir-to-Empire was wilful, like all Eastern Princlings, and he shrieked to match at the suggestion. So there arose such a hubbub, which was only calmed by Baby Akbar being allowed to do as he chose.

"Poor! Poor!" he said as his little hand touched the sharp prickles and no one found out, till Foster-mother came to put him to bed, that he really *did* scratch himself. There was quite a little runnel of blood on the palm; but Akbar, even when he was a baby, was proud. He knew how to bear discomfort and punishment when it was his own fault.

They were all rather merry that night, for they had roast porcupine stuffed with pistachio nuts for supper. And afterward Roy sat by Baby Akbar's pile of quilts and sang him to sleep with this royal lullaby:

"Baby, Baby-ling,
You are always King;
Always wear a crown,
Though you tumble down;
Call each thing your own,
Find each lap a throne;
Dearest, sweetest King,
Baby! Baby-ling!"

When the child had fallen asleep Roy sat at the door of the tent and looked at the stars, which shone, as they do in the East, all colours, like jewels in the velvety sky. They seemed so far away, but not farther than he seemed to be from himself. For Roy's head had been dreadfully confused by that sunstroke in the desert. Only that morning something had seemed to come back to him in a flash, and he had so far forgotten he was only a page boy as to call the little Heir-to-Empire "Brother," but Head-nurse's cuff had brought him back to reality in double quick time. And as he sat there in the dark he saw a man creeping stealthily to the tent. He was on his feet in a moment challenging him.

"Hush!" whispered the newcomer, "I bring a message from King Humâyon. I must see Foster-father at once."

The good man was already between the quilts, but he got up quickly, and when he had heard the message he sent for Head-nurse and Foster-mother and Old Faithful, for he felt that a most momentous decision had to be made. Yet the message was a very simple one. Those in charge of the child were to creep away that very night with the messenger, who would guide them in safety to King Humâyon, who had found help and shelter in Persia.

Head-nurse and Foster-mother wept tears of joy at the glad news, and proposed at once that they should wrap the child in a blanket and start. But Foster-father was more wary.

"You come as a thief in the darkness," he said. "Where is your token from the king, that I may know who you are?"

But there was no token.

"Then the child stays where he is," asserted Foster-father boldly. "Am I not right oh! Faithful?"

"Assuredly my lord is right. Who knows but this man may be an emissary of those who would wile away the little lad from his uncle, Prince Askurry's protection. His other uncle, Kumran, is not so kind."

The messenger scowled at the old man. "As you please," he began blusteringly, "but those who disobey the King's order may find their lives forfeit."

"Mine is forfeit already to the child's service," replied Foster-father with spirit. "And without a token I stir not—Peace! woman," he added to Head-nurse, who would fain have sided with the messenger, "and go fetch the Heir-to-Empire's cap. That shall go as sign that he is his father's vassal, to do what he is told when the order comes accredited. So take that as my answer to those who sent you, sir messenger!"

So despite Head-nurse's protestations the man went off with nothing but the little gold-laced skull cap. And he had not to go far; only into a tent on the outskirts of the camp. For Foster-father's suspicions had been correct, and he had been sent to try and entice the child by some of Prince Kumran's partisans who, booted and spurred, and with a swift pacing camel for the child, were waiting eagerly for the return of their messenger.

Their faces fell as he flung the little cap upon the ground.

"The old fox is too wary," he said. "We must get at the child some other way."

One of the party took up the cap and fingered it, half idly. "He has a large-sized head for his years," he remarked; "if it be full of brains, hereafter he may do well."

CHAPTER VI

AT COURT

Of course, the messenger never returned from King Humâyon with the token; but Foster-father was a good-natured man and did not boast of his wisdom to Head-nurse, who, however, remained wonderfully meek and silent until at the end of a fortnight's marching they saw, against the blue of the distant valley, the white domes of the town of Kandahâr with the citadel rising above them. Then, with the chance of a court before her once more, she began chattering of ceremonials and titles and etiquettes.

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