

Mitford Bertram

The Sirdar's Oath: A Tale of the North-West Frontier



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Chapter One

“The Stranger within thy Gates.”

“Yer – Kroojer! Kroojer. Go’n get yer whiskers shyved.”

“Ere, chaps. ’Ere’s old Kroojer!”

And the section of the crowd among whom originated these remarks closed up around the object thereof.

The latter, though clad in the frock-coat of European civilisation, was obviously an Oriental. He was a man of fine presence, tall and dignified, handsome in the aquiline-featured type, and wearing a full beard just turning grey. Hence it will be seen that his resemblance to the world-famed President was so striking as to commend itself at once to the understanding of his molesters.

It was night, and the flare of the street lamps, together with a few impromptu illuminations, lit up the surging, tossing, roaring multitude, which filled to packing point the whole space in front of the Mansion House, each unit of the same bent on shouting himself or herself hoarse; for the tidings of the relief of Mafeking had just been received, and the inauguration of the public delirium was already in full swing. Hats and caps flew in the air by showers, the wearers of silk hats not hesitating to hurl on high their normally cherished and protected headgear, those who did so hesitate being speedily relieved of all responsibility on that point by their obliging neighbours, to the accompaniment of such shouts as “Ooroar for B.P. Good old B.P.,” while the strains of “Soldiers of the Queen” rose in leathern-lunged rivalry with those of “The Absent-minded Beggar” – save when, in staccato volleyings of varied timelessness and tunelessness, those of “Rule Britannia” availed to swamp both. Thus the multitude rejoiced, characteristically, therefore, for the most part, roughly.

“Wot cher, myte?” drawled an evil rough, shouldering against the Oriental. “You ortn’t to be ’ere. You ort to be in the Trawnsawl, you ort. Why you’re Kroojer, you are.”

“I sy, Bill!” shrilled a girl to her swain. “Let’s shyve ’is whiskers, shall we?”

The pair had exchanged hats, and while the speaker’s oily fringe was set-off by a bowler, wide and curly of brim, the ugly face of the other leered red and beery from beneath a vast structure of nodding ostrich plumes.

“Rawther. Come on, cheps. Let’s shyve old Kroojer’s whiskers!” And reaching over, as a preliminary to that process, he snatched the Oriental’s high, semi-conical black cap – the only article of un-European wear about him – from his head, and flung it high in the air, emitting a raucous yell.

At this assault, delivered from behind, the stranger turned, his eyes flashing with resentment and hate. As he did so a violent push, again from behind, sent him staggering, would have brought him to the ground indeed but that the crowd was too dense, and its only effect was to bring him right against the rough who had snatched off his cap. In a moment the long, brown sinewy fingers had shot out and closed round the bull throat of the cad, while with the snarl of a wild beast, the Oriental flashed forth something from his breast pocket. A roar of warning broke from the bystanders, likewise of rage, for these lovers of fair play were virtuously indignant that one well-nigh defenceless man, and a stranger, should protect himself as best he might when set upon by numbers. In a second the weapon was knocked from his hand, and he was violently wrenched back from the man whose throat he had gripped; and well indeed for the latter that such was the case. Then he was hustled and punched and kicked, his beard pulled out in wisps – the virago who had first instigated the assault,

and who fortunately was separated from him by the crowd, struggling and screaming in the language of the slums to be allowed to get at him – only just once.

“Let him alone, cawn’t yer?” cried a voice, that of another woman. “He ain’t Kroojer! ’E’s a bloomin’ Ingin. Any fool could see that.”

“E’s a blanked furriner – it’s all the syme. And didn’t ’e try to knife my Bill,” retorted the other, making renewed efforts to reach him – and the vocabulary of this young person earned the delighted appreciation of even the toughest of her audience. Then a diversion occurred.

“Myke wy? Oo are you tellin’ of to myke wy?” rose a voice, in angry and jeering expostulation, followed immediately by the sound of a scuffle. The attention of the crowd was diverted to this new quarter, which circumstance enabled the luckless Oriental to gain his feet, and he stood staggering, glaring about him in a frenzy of wrath and bewilderment. Then he was knocked flat again, this time by the pressure of those around.

What followed was worth seeing. Straight through the mass of roughs came upwards of a dozen and a half of another species, in strong and compact order, hitting out on either side of them, scrupulously observing the Donnybrook principle, “When you see a head hit it” – only in the present instance it was a face. Most of these were members of an athletic club, who had been dining generously and had caught the prevailing excitement. They had seen the predicament of the Oriental from afar, and promptly recognised that to effect his rescue would furnish them with just the fun and fight for which they were spoiling.

“Make way, you blackguards. Call yourselves Englishmen, all packing on to one man? What? You won’t? That’ll settle you.”

“That” being a “knock-out” neatly delivered, the recipient, he who had begun the assault. Still crowned with his female companion’s headgear the abominable rough sank to the ground, permanently disabled.

“Here – you, sir – get up. Hope you’re not much the worse,” cried the foremost, dragging the stranger to his feet.

“I thank you, gentlemen,” said the latter, in excellent English. “No, not much, I think.”

“That’s right,” cried the foremost of his rescuers, admiring his pluck. For undoubtedly the stranger was considerably the worse for what he had gone through. His cheek bones were swollen, and one eye was bunged up, and his now tattered beard was matted with blood flowing from a cut on the lip; and as he stood, with somewhat unsteady gait, the forced smile wherewith he had greeted his deliverers changed to a hideous snarl of hate, as his glance wandered to the repulsive and threatening countenances of his late assailants. Here, obviously, was no shrinking, effeminate representative of the East, rather a scion of one of its fine and warrior races, for there was a mingled look of wistfulness and aroused savagery in his eyes as instinctively he clenched and unclenched his defenceless fingers as though they ought to be grasping a weapon.

But the moral effect of the first decisive rush having worn off, the rough element of the crowd, roughest of all just here, began to rally. After all, though they had science, the number of these new arrivals constituted a mere mouthful, so puny was it. Yells, and hoots, and catcalls arose as the surging rabble pressed upon the gallant few, now standing literally at bay. Those in the forefront were pushed forward by the weight of numbers behind, and the pressure was so great that there was hardly room to make free play with those fine, swinging out-from-the-shoulder hits – yet they managed partially to clear a way – and for a few moments, fists, feet, sticks, everything, Teere going in the liveliest sort of free fight imaginable. The while, over the remainder of the packed space, shrill cheers and patriotic songs, and the firing off of squibs and crackers were bearing their own part in making night hideous, independently of the savage rout, here at the top of King William Street.

“Kroojer! Kroojer! ’Ere’s Kroojer!” yelled the mob, and, attracted by its vociferations, others turned their attention that way. And while his deliverers had their hands very full indeed, a villainous-looking rough reached forward and swung up what looked like a slender, harmless roll of brown paper

above the Oriental's head. Well was it for the latter that this move was seen by one man, and that just in time to interpose a thick malacca cane between his skull and the descending gas pipe filled with lead, which staff, travelling down to the wrist of him who wielded the deadly weapon, caused the murderous cad to drop the same, with a howl, and weird language.

"A good 'Penang lawyer' is tough enough for most things," muttered the dealer of this deft stroke. "Here, brother, take this," he went on, in an Eastern tongue, thrusting the stick into the stranger's hand.

The effect was wondrous. The consciousness of grasping even this much of a weapon seemed to transform the Oriental completely. His tall form seemed to tower, his frame to dilate, as, whirling the tough stick aloft, he shrilled forth a wild, fierce Mohammedan war-cry, bounding, leaping, in a very demoniacal possession, charging those nearest to him as though the stick were a long-bladed, keen-edged tulwar. Whirling it in the air he brought it down with incredible swiftness, striking here and there on head and face, while looking around for more to smite. And then the rabble of assailants began to give way, or try to. "Cops" was the cry that now went up, and immediately thereupon a strong posse of the splendid men of the City Police had forced their way to the scene of disturbance – or very nearly.

Crushed, borne along by the swaying crowd, the man who had so effectually aided the distressed Oriental had become separated from his friends. For his foes he cared nothing, and, indeed, these had all they could think of to effect their own retreat, the motive being not so much fear of immediate consequences as the consciousness with many of them that they were desperately wanted by the police in connection with other matters, which would infallibly assert their claims once identity was established. At last, to his relief, he found himself in a side street and outside the crowd.

"You're better 'ere, sir," said a gruff voice, whose owner was contemplating him curiously.

"Yes, rather. I've been in a bit of a breeze yonder."

"So I should say, sir," answered the policeman, significantly. "Thank'ee, sir. Much obliged."

"They were mobbing a stranger, and I and some others went to help him."

"Was it a Hindian gent, sir, with a high black sort of 'at? I seen him go by here not long since."

"Yes. That was the man. Well, I suppose he's all right by now. Good-night, policeman."

"Good-night, sir, and thank'ee, sir."

An hour and a half later one corner of the supper-room in the Peculiar Club was in a state of unwonted liveliness, even for that by no means dull institution, where upwards of a dozen more or less damaged members were consuming devilled bones and champagne.

Damaged, in that bunged up eyes and swelled noses – and here and there a cut lip – were in evidence; but all were in the last stage of cheerfulness.

"Why isn't Raynier here, I wonder?" was asked.

"He? Oh, I expect he went on taking care of that Indian Johnny. He likes those chaps, you know, has to do with them out there. He'll turn up all right – never fear."

"Don't know. Don't like losing sight of him," said another.

"Oh, he'll turn up all right. He knows jolly well how to take care of himself."

But as the night became morning, and the frantic howling of patriotism gone mad rent the otherwise still hours, Raynier did not turn up. Then the revellers and quondam combatants became uneasy – such of them, that is, as were still capable of reflection in any form.

Chapter Two

The Day After

Raynier awoke in his club chambers the next morning, feeling, as he put it to himself, exceedingly cheap.

When we say awoke, rather are we expressing a recurring process which had continued throughout the few remaining night hours since, by force of circumstances and the swaying of the crowd, he had become separated from his companions, and had wisely found his way straight to bed instead of to the Peculiar Club. On this at any rate he congratulated himself; and yet hardly any sleep had come his way. The howling of patriotic roysterers had continued until morning light, and, moreover, his head was buzzing – not by reason of last night's revelry, for in such he never got out of hand, but an ugly lump on one side of his forehead, and a swelled eye, reminded him that it is hard to rescue a maltreated stranger from the brutality of a London mob, and emerge unscathed oneself.

"Well, I do look a beauty," he soliloquised as he stood before his glass, surveying the damage. "I shall have a bump the size and colour of a croquet ball for the next fortnight, and an eye to match. How a man of my age and temperament could have cut in with those young asses last night, I can't think. Might have known what the upshot would be. And now I've got to go down to Worthingham to-day. Wonder what nice remark Cynthia will have to make. Perhaps she'll give me the chuck. The fact of my being mixed up in a street row may prove too much for her exceeding sense of propriety." And a faintly satirical droop curled down the corners of the thinker's mouth.

Having fomented his bruises, and tubbed, and otherwise completed his toilet Raynier went down to breakfast, soon feeling immeasurably the better for the process. But in the middle a thought struck him; struck him indeed with some consternation. The malacca cane – the instrument with which he had almost certainly saved the life of the assailed Oriental, and which he had put into the hands of the latter as a weapon. It was gone, and – it was a gift from his *fiancée*.

Apart from such association he was fond of the stick, which was a handsome one and beautifully mounted. How on earth was he to recover it? His initials were engraved on the head; that, however, would furnish but faint clue. How should he find the man whom he had befriended – and even if he did, it was quite possible that the other had lost possession of the stick during the scrimmage. It might or might not find its way to Scotland Yard, but to ascertain this would take time. He could make inquiries at the police stations adjacent to the scene of last night's *émeute*, or advertise, but that too would take time and he was urgently due at the abode of his *fiancée* that very day, for his furlough was rapidly drawing to a close, and his return to India a matter of days rather than of weeks.

Herbert Raynier served his country in the capacity of an Indian civilian, but most of his time of service had been passed in hot Plains stations, engendering an amount of constitutional wear and tear which caused him to look rather more than his actual age, such being in fact nearly through the thirties, but the sallowness of his naturally dark complexion had given way to a healthier bronze since he had come home on furlough five months back. By temperament he was a quiet man, and somewhat reserved, and this together with the fact that his countenance was not characterised by that square-jawed aggressiveness which is often associated in the popular estimation with parts, led people to suppose, on first acquaintance, that there was not much in him. Wherein they were wrong, although at the present moment there were chances of such latent abilities as he possessed being allowed to stagnate under sheer, easy-going routine: a potentiality which he himself recognised, and that with some concern. Physically he stood about five foot ten in his boots, and was well set up in proportion. He was fond of sport, though not aspiring to anything beyond the average in its achievement, and was not lacking in ideas nor in some originality in the expression of the same.

As he sat finishing his after-breakfast cheroot in the club smoking-room there entered two of his brethren-in-arms of the night before.

"There you are, Raynier, old chap. That's all right. Why didn't you roll up at the Peculiar after the fun? We were all there – Steele and Waring were doosid uneasy about you – thought you'd come to grief, that's why we thought we'd look in early and make sure you hadn't."

"Early?"

"Why, yes. It's only eleven. But I say, you jolly old cuckoo. You *have* got a damaged figurehead."

"Yes, it's a bore," pronounced Raynier, pushing the bell, to order "pegs." "And the worst of it is I've got to go down to the country this afternoon – to an eminently respectable vicarage, too."

"Remedy's easy. Don't go."

"That's no remedy at all. I must."

"Stick a patch over the eye, then."

"But he can't stick a patch over his head as well," said the other.

"You two chaps have come off with hardly a scratch," said Raynier – "and yet you were just as much in the thick of it as I was."

"So we were. But I say, Raynier, I believe it's a judgment on a staid old buffer like you for 'mafeking' around with a lot of lively sparks like us. Ha – ha – that wasn't bad, I say, don't-cher-know. 'Mafeking!' See it? Ah – ha – ha!"

"Oh, go away. It's an outrage. At how many people's hands have you courted destruction by firing that on them this morning?"

"Not many. But it's awfully good, eh, old sportsman? Why I invented it."

"Then you deserve death," returned Raynier. "Oh, Grice, take him away, and drown him, will you; but stay – let him have his 'peg' first – since here it comes."

"Anyone know what became of that interesting stranger?" went on Raynier, after the necessary pause.

"The Indian Johnny? Not much. We all got mixed up in the mob, and what with all the 'bokos' that were hit, and the claret flying, and then the bobbies rushing the lot, none of us knew what had happened to anyone else until we all found ourselves snug and jolly at the Peculiar." And then followed an animated account of wounds and casualties received and doughty deeds effected.

"We thought you were taking care of the Indian Johnny, Raynier," concluded Grice, "and that was why you didn't turn up."

"I wish I knew where to lay finger on the said Indian Johnny," was the rejoinder.

"Why? Was he some big bug?"

"I don't know. But he's got my stick – or had it."

"Rather. And didn't he just lay about with it too. Looked as if he was quite accustomed to that sort of thing."

"The worst of it is I rather value it," went on Raynier. "In fact I'd give a trifle to recover it. Given me, you understand."

"Oh – ah – yes, I understand," said the other, with a would-be knowing wink.

"Why not try the police stations?" suggested the self-styled creator of the above vile pun. "The darkey may have been run in with a lot more for creating a disturbance."

"Or the pawnbrokers," said Grice – "for if it was captured by the enemy, why that honest fellow-countryman would lose no time in taking a bee-line for the nearest pawnshop with it. All that yelling must have been dry work."

"But, I say, old chappie. What a juggins you were to give it him," supplemented the other, sapiently.

"Oh, he didn't know how to use his fists, and the poor devil was absolutely defenceless. And a good 'Penang lawyer' in a row of that kind is a precious deal better than nothing at all."

"The darkey seemed to find it so," said he named Grice. "Why it might have been a sword the way he laid about with it. I bet that chap's good at single-stick. Wonder who he is. Some big Rajah perhaps. I say Raynier, old chap. You'll have some of his following finding you out directly, with no end of lakhs of rupees, as a slight mark of gratitude, and all that sort of thing. Eh?"

"If so the plunder ought to be divided," cut in the other gilded youth. "We all helped to pull him through, you know."

"All right, so it shall," said Raynier, "when it comes. As to which doesn't it occur to you fellows that 'some big Rajah' is hardly likely to be found frisking around in the thick of an especially tough London crowd all by his little alones? But if he'd find me out only to return my stick it would be a 'mark of gratitude' quite sufficient for present purposes."

"Why don't you buy another exactly like it, old chap?" said Grice, who knew enough about his friend to guess at the real reason of the latter's solicitude on account of the lost article. "Nobody would know the difference."

Here was something of an idea, thought Raynier. But then the mounting and the engraving – that would take time, even if he could get it done exactly like the other, which he doubted. It was not alone on the score of an unpleasant moment with the donor that his mind misgave him. She would be excusably hurt, he reflected, remembering that the thing must have been somewhat costly, and under the circumstances represented a certain amount of self-denial. Decidedly he was in a quandary.

"Well, ta-ta, old chap," said Grice, as the two got up to go. "We'll try and find out something about the Rajah – in fact it's our interest to do so, having an eye to those lakhs of rupees."

"Yes – and let me know when you've made an end of Barker, here, as you're bound to do if he fires off that 'Mafeking' outrage much more."

"Raynier's jealous," said that wag. "I say, don't go firing it off as your own down in the country, Raynier."

"No show for me, because about one hundred thousand people scattered over the British Isles have awoke this morning to invent the same insanity."

Speeding along in the afternoon sunshine, looking out upon the country whirling by, pleasant and green in its rich dress of early summer, Raynier was conscious of a feeling of relief in that he was leaving behind him the heat and dust of London, likewise the racket and uproar of a city gone temporarily mad; albeit a more or less profuse display of bunting in every station the express slid through, notified that the delirium was already spreading throughout the length and breadth of the land. He had the compartment to himself, which was more favourable to the vein of thought upon which he had embarked. When he had arrived home five months previously he had no more notion of returning an engaged man than he had of building a balloon and starting upon a voyage of discovery to Saturn. Yet here he was, and how had it come about? He supposed he ought to feel enraptured – most men of his acquaintance were – or pretended to be – under the circumstances. Yet he was not. How on earth had he and Cynthia Daintree ever imagined that they were suited to go through life together, the fact being that there was no one point upon which they agreed? But now they were under such compact, hard and fast; yet – how had it come about? Her father, the Vicar of Worthingham, had been a sort of trustee of his, long ago, and on his arrival in England had invited him to spend as much of his furlough at that exceedingly pretty country village as he felt inclined. And he had felt inclined, for he knew but few people in England, and the quiet beauty of English rural scenery appealed to his temperament, wherefore, Worthingham Vicarage knew how to account for a good deal of his time, and so did the Vicar's eldest daughter. Here, then, was the answer to his own retrospective question – not put for the first time by any means. Propinquity, opportunity, circumstances and surroundings favourable to the growth and development of such – idiocy – he was nearly saying. All of which points to a fairly inauspicious frame of mind on the part of a man who in half an hour or so more would meet his *fiancée*.

Chapter Three

“Above Rubies.”

“What’s the matter, Cynthia?” said the Vicar, looking up from his after-breakfast newspaper, spread out in crumpled irregularity of surface, upon the table in front of him.

“Nothing, father, unless – well, I do wish people would learn to be a little more regular. The world would be so much more comfortable a place to live in.”

The Vicar had his doubts upon that subject. However, he only said, —

“Well, it’s only once in a way, and won’t hurt anybody. And you can’t ask a man to stay with you, and then tie him down to rigid hours like a schoolboy.”

The time was nine o’clock on the second morning after Herbert Raynier’s arrival. It need hardly be said that he was the offender against punctuality.

Cynthia frowned, rattling the crockery upon the tea-tray somewhat viciously.

“Why not? I hate irregularity,” she answered. “I should have thought regular habits would have been the first essential in Herbert’s department – towards getting on in it, that is.”

“Well, he has got on in it, regular habits or not. You can’t deny that, my dear, at any rate.”

“It delays everything so,” went on the grievance-monger. “The servants can’t clear away, or get to their work. Herbert knows we have breakfast at half-past eight and now it’s after nine, and there’s no sign of him. I can’t keep the house going on those lines, so it’s of no use trying.”

“Well, you’ll soon be in a position to reform him to your heart’s content,” said the Vicar with a twinkle in his eye – and there came a grim, set look about the other’s rather thin-lipped mouth which augured ill for Raynier’s domestic peace in the future.

Cynthia Daintree had just missed being pretty. Her straight features were too coldly severe, and her grey eyes a trifle too steely, but her brown hair was soft and abundant, and there were occasions when her face could light up, and become attractive. She was tall, and had a remarkably fine figure, and as she managed to dress well on somewhat limited resources, the verdict was that she was a striking-looking girl. But she had a temper, a very decided temper – which, it was whispered, was accountable for the fact that now, at very much nearer thirty than twenty, her recent engagement to Herbert Raynier was by no means her first.

Now the offender entered, characteristically careless.

“Morning, Cynthia. Hallo, you look disobliged. What’s the row? Morning, Vicar.”

This was not the best way of throwing oil upon the troubled sea, but then the whole thing was so incomprehensible to Raynier. He could not understand how people could make a fuss over such a trifle as whether one man ate a bit of toast, and played the fool with a boiled egg, half an hour sooner or half an hour later. There was no train to catch, no business of vital importance to be transacted, here in this sleepy little country place. His *fiancée* could have had precious little experience of the graver issues of life if that sort of thing disturbed her.

“You’ve only yourself to thank if everything’s cold,” answered Cynthia, snappishly.

“I don’t mind – even if there isn’t anything to get cold. Feeding at this end of the day isn’t in my line at all. I hardly ever touch anything between *chota hazri* and tiffin over there.”

“Well, but over here you might try to be a little more punctual.”

“Too old. Besides, I’m on furlough,” returned Raynier, maliciously teasing. It was the only way of veiling his resentment. He did not take kindly to being perpetually found fault with, and still less so the first thing in the morning. “Don’t you agree with me, Vicar? A man on furlough should be allowed a few venial sins?”

“Oh, I think so,” said Mr Daintree, with a laugh. And then he began to discuss the war news in that morning’s paper, which soon led round to the events wherewith our story opens.

“That must have been after the fashion of our old Town and Gown rows at Oxford,” said the Vicar. “They are a thing of the past now, I’m told.”

“And a good thing too,” struck in his daughter. “What horrid savage creatures men are. Never happy unless they are fighting.”

“Don’t know. I much prefer running away,” said Raynier.

“Pity you didn’t carry out your preference. Then you wouldn’t have come down here looking such a sight,” with a glance at his somewhat disfigured visage.

“And there’d have been one Oriental the less in the world. Phew! that was a vicious mob if ever there was one. By the way there’s a saying that if you rescue anybody he’s bound to do you a bad turn. Wonder if it’ll hold good here, and if in the order of fate that chap and I will meet again out there. Stranger things have come off.”

“Only in books,” said Cynthia, contemptuously.

“No – in real life. I could tell you of at least three remarkable if not startling circumstances of the kind that have come to my knowledge, but I won’t, for two reasons – one that they wouldn’t interest you – two, that you wouldn’t believe a word of them.”

“What are you going to do to-day, Herbert?” said the Vicar.

“Fish. You coming with me, Cynthia?”

“No.”

“Meaning I’m not fit to be seen with,” answered Raynier, interpreting her glance.

“If you will go getting yourself disfigured in common street brawls you must expect to suffer for it. So low, I call it.”

She was in a horrible humour that morning – so much was evident. Raynier wondered how she would receive the news of the loss of the malacca cane, and felt steeled to tell her about it then and there. In another moment he would have done so when an interruption occurred. A girl’s voice came singing down the passage, and its owner burst into the room.

“Hallo, Herbert. You’re jolly late again. I expect you have been catching it,” with a glance at the thunder-cloud on her elder sister’s face. This was the Vicar’s youngest daughter, aged nineteen; there were two between her and the other, both married, likewise sons, helping to buttress up the Empire in divers colonies.

“Right you are. I have. I’m going to try for a trout or two, Silly. Feel like coming along?”

“I sha’n’t if you call me that,” answered the girl, with a shade of her sister’s expression coming over her face; “that,” however, not being an epithet but a teasing abbreviation of her own name – Sylvia.

“All right. I withdraw the Silly.”

“Then I’ll go. But isn’t Cynthia going?”

“She says I’m too ugly just at present,” returned Raynier, tranquilly. “And I believe I am.”

“Yes. You’re rather a sight,” with a deliberate glance at his damaged figurehead. “Never mind. There’s no one to see us here. Where are we going?”

“How about the hole below Blackadder Bridge?”

“That’s it,” returned Sylvia. “There was a regular ‘boil’ on there the day before you came, but that was in the evening. I took out seven trout in twenty-five minutes. Then the ‘boil’ stopped and you couldn’t move a fish. But we’d better start soon.”

“All right. I’ll go and get my rod.”

The Vicar went out on to the lawn to see them off, and smoke his after-breakfast pipe.

“Cynthia, my dear,” he called. “Come outside and walk up and down a bit.”

She made some excuse about seeing to the things being cleared away. However she soon joined him.

"That nest of young thrushes is gone," he said, peering into the ivy which hid the garden wall. "Some cat has found them, I expect. By the way, Cynthia, do you really intend to marry Herbert Raynier?"

"Why, what on earth do you mean, father?" she answered, resentment and astonishment being about evenly divided in her tone.

"Precisely what I say, dear – no more and no less. Because if you don't you're going the right way to work to let him see it."

"If I don't. But I do – of course I do. I can't think what you're driving at."

"Oh, it's simple enough. Couldn't you manage now and then, if only for a change, to give him a civil word? Men don't like to be perpetually found fault with and hauled over the coals," pronounced the Vicar, speaking with some feeling, moved thereto by sundry vivid recollections of his own, for he was a widower. Cynthia coloured.

"But they require it – and – it's only for their good," she answered.

"No deadlier motive could be adduced," returned her father, drily. "Because, you see, if you use the whip too much they're apt to kick. And I descry symptoms of such a tendency on the part of Herbert I thought I'd give you a hint, that's all. It would be a pity to lose him. His position is excellent and his prospects ditto; besides, he's a thoroughly good fellow into the bargain."

The pool beneath Blackadder Bridge was wide enough for a rod on each side, so that neither interfered with the other, but Raynier and his future sister-in-law had met with scant sport. The surroundings, however, were lovely: the soft roll of the wooded hills resounding with the joyous shout of the cuckoo, the blue haze of spring beneath the cloudless sky, and meadows spangled with myriad butter cups; while, hard by, skipping perkily in and out of their knob-like nest against the hoary mossiness of the buttressed bridge, a pair of water-ouzels took no count whatever of their human disturbers. The bleating of young lambs was in the air, mingling with the tuneful murmur of the brown water purling out from the breadth of the deep pool into a miniature rapid.

"Well, you two? What have you got to show for yourselves?"

Raynier looked up, almost startled, so amazed was he. For the voice was Cynthia's – and it was quite pleasant, even affectionate. And there was Cynthia herself, looking exceedingly attractive in her plain, and therefore tasteful, country attire. In her hand was a basket.

"I thought I'd bring you something better for lunch than those dry old sandwiches," she said, smilingly, as she proceeded to unpack its contents. And Raynier, wondering, thought, could this be the same Cynthia whom he had last seen, acid and disagreeable, who, indeed, had scarcely had a civil word to throw to him since his arrival.

"Beastly bad luck," screamed Sylvia, from the other side, reeling in her line, preparatory to coming over to join in the lunch.

This proved quite enjoyable. What on earth had happened to Cynthia between then and breakfast time, thought Raynier. No trace of acidity was there about her now. Her manner was soft, indeed affectionate, and she looked up into his disfigured countenance quite delightfully, instead of turning from it in aversion as heretofore. Why on earth couldn't she be like this always, he thought regretfully, feeling softened and relenting, under the combined influence of the soothing surroundings and an excellent lunch.

In the afternoon sport mended, and more than once a "boil" came on the water, for a few minutes only, but so lively while it lasted that they took out trout almost with every cast, and then he noticed how carefully in the background Cynthia kept, and when he hung up his cast in that confounded elder tree just as the rise began, she it was who came to the rescue of his impatience, and so deftly and quickly disentangled the flies. Why on earth could not she always be like that? And then, during the two-mile walk home together in the glowing beauty of the cloudless evening there was simply no comparison between the delightful attractiveness of this woman, and the frowning, shrewish scold of the opening of the day, and again and again he thought, – "If only she were always like this!"

Chapter Four

A Timely Reconsideration

For a few days matters ran smoothly enough. The weather was lovely, ideal May weather, in fact, and Raynier keenly appreciated the soft beauty of this typical English landscape, seen at its best at the loveliest time of the year – the fresh green of the foliage and the yellow-spangled meadows; the cool lanes, shaded with hawthorn blossoms; the snug farmhouses with their blaze of glowing flower-beds and the background of picturesque ricks; the faint hum of the mill at the end of the village, and the screech of swifts, skirring and wheeling round the church tower, seen beyond the wall of the Vicarage garden. Such homely sights and sounds appealed to him the more by contrast to the brassy skies and baked aridity for which he would so soon be bound to exchange them. For his furlough was drawing very near its end.

Strange that, under the circumstances, it should be almost entirely this that constituted his regret. Cynthia seemed to forget her chronic ill-temper, and became quite affectionate; yet the recollection of her outbursts remained. Even when at her best Raynier could not for the life of him rid his mind of such recollections. That sort of nature does not change, he told himself, and the prospect of spending his days with the life-long accompaniment of such was as a very weight. And his was not one of those easy-going, quickly-forgiving dispositions; far from it.

For one circumstance, as time went on, he felt devoutly thankful, although at first he had reproached her with it, and that was that Cynthia was not of a demonstrative temperament, and to this extent the necessity of make-believe was spared him. He observed, too, in the course of their conversations she seldom spoke of the future, or dwelt upon their life together, and, observing it, he more than met her half-way; and as they went about together, both in speech and demeanour they were more like two people of very recent and ordinary acquaintance than a betrothed couple whom a few days more were to separate by nearly half the width of the globe.

At the actual state of things the Vicar, for his part, shrewdly guessed, but being a sensible man forebode to interfere. Cynthia was quite old enough to manage her own affairs, and so too was Raynier. Possibly, when the thing was irrevocable they would hit it off together as well as most people did under the circumstances, which, to be sure, was not saying much. Cynthia, with her faults, had her good points, and of Raynier he entertained a very high opinion. It would turn out right enough, he decided, but if he had any misgiving, the Vicar was forced to own to himself that it was not on behalf of his daughter.

“Curious thing that will of old Jervis Raynier’s,” he said one day, when he and his son-in-law elect were walking up and down smoking their pipes. “He left a good deal, and all to a girl who was hardly any relation at all. You only come in after her.”

“Which is tantamount to not at all. But the same holds good of myself in the matter of relationship. I’m only a distant cousin – so distant as hardly to count.”

“You’re a Raynier, at any rate. But she – By the way, do you ever think about it, Herbert? My advice to you is not to. The chances are too slight. The girl is young, they tell me, and attractive. She’s bound to marry, and then where do you come in?”

“Nowhere, unless I were to marry her myself,” laughed Raynier. “But that’s scratched now. By the bye – who is she, Vicar – ?”

“Herbert! Oh, there you are,” shrilled the voice of Sylvia at this juncture, followed by its owner, somewhat hot, and armed with two trout-rods. “They told me you had gone on, and I got half-way down the village before I found out you hadn’t. Here’s your rod. Come along. We’re losing the best part of the morning.”

There was no gainsaying the crisp decisiveness of these orders, and with an apology to the Vicar, he started off. He was forced to own to himself that these expeditions with the younger girl constituted his best times. It never occurred to Cynthia to be jealous of her sister, not in the ordinary sense, although once or twice she was rather acid on the subject of his preferring so much of the latter's society. The fact was, Sylvia was lacking in feminine attractions, being plain and somewhat angular. But she was always lively and good-natured, and to that extent a positive relief from the other, albeit an effective foil to her in looks.

Sunday had come round, and Cynthia had got up in a bad temper – we have observed that upon some people the first day of the week has that effect – consequently, when Raynier hinted at the possibility of his not going to church it exploded. The idea of such a thing! Why, of course he must go, staying at the Vicarage as he was. What would be said in the parish?

“But it didn't matter what was said in the parish last Sunday. You wouldn't let me come then because I was too ugly,” he urged, with a mischievous wink at Sylvia.

“Well, so you were, but your face is nearly all right again now,” answered Cynthia, briskly, and with acerbity, for she had no sense of fun.

“Not it. You'll see it'll keep all the choir boys staring, and they can't warble with their heads cocked round at right angles to the rest of them.”

Sylvia spluttered.

“All the more reason why you should come, Herbert,” she said. “I want to see that. It'll be good sport.”

“If you were a boy you'd be a typical parson's son, Silly,” he laughed.

“Shut up. I'll throw something at you if you call me that.”

“Do, and you'll keep up the part,” he returned.

Worthingham Church was in close resemblance to a thousand or so other village churches of its size and circumstance, in that it was old and picturesque, and gave forth the same flavour of mould and damp stones. There was the same rustic choir with newly-oiled heads and clattering boots and skimpy surplices, singing the same hackneyed hymns, and the Vicar's sermon was on the same level of prosiness, not that he could not have done better, but he had long since ceased to think it worth while taking the trouble. But Cynthia Daintree, seated in the front pew, well gowned and tastefully hatted, and withal complacently conscious of the same, was the presiding goddess, at whom the rustics aforesaid never seemed tired of furtively staring – in awe, which somewhat outweighed their admiration – therein well-nigh overlooking the discoloured countenance of her *fiancé*.

“Cynthia always looks as if she'd bought up the whole show,” pronounced Sylvia, subsequently and irreverently.

Raynier had answered one or two inquiries after his “bicycle accident” – Cynthia having deftly contrived to let it be understood, though not in so many words, that such was the nature of his mishap – and they were re-entering the garden gate. Suddenly she said, —

“Where's your stick, Herbert? The malacca one. Why, you haven't used it at all this time.”

It was all up now, he thought. As a matter of fact his main reason for endeavouring to avoid going to church that morning was that it would be one opportunity the less for her to miss that unlucky article.

“No, I haven't. The fact is I've lost it.”

“Lost it? Oh, Herbert!”

She looked so genuinely hurt that he felt almost guilty.

“Yes. I'm awfully sorry, Cynthia. I wouldn't have lost it for anything, but even as it is I'm sure to get it back again. I'm having inquiries made, and offering rewards, in short doing all I can do. It'll turn up again. I'm certain of that.”

“But – how did you lose it, and where?”

He told her how; that being a detail he had purposely omitted in previous narration of the incident. It was but frowningly received.

"I didn't think you would attach so little value to anything *I* had given you, and yet I might have known you better."

What is there about the English Sunday atmosphere that is apt to render contentious people more quarrelsome still, and those not naturally contentious – well, a little prickly? Raynier felt his patience ebbing. She was very unreasonable over the matter, and, really – she was quite old enough to have more sense.

"I don't think you're altogether fair to me, Cynthia," he answered, his own tone getting rather short. "The thing was unavoidable, you see. Unless you mean you would rather the man's brains had been knocked out by that bestial mob than that I should have given him some means of defending himself. I value the stick immensely, and am doing all I can to recover it, but I should have thought even you would hardly have valued it at something beyond the price of a man's life."

"Only a blackamoor's," she retorted, now white and tremulous with anger.

"Sorry I can't agree with you," he answered shortly, for he was thoroughly disgusted. "I have seen rather too much of that sort of 'blackamoor,' as you so elegantly term it, not to recognise that he, like ourselves, has his place and use in his own part of the world. I repeat, I am as sorry as you are the stick should have been lost, but I should have thought that, under the circumstances, no woman – with the feelings of a woman – would have held me to blame."

"That's right. Sneer at me; it's so manly," she retorted, having reached the tremulous point of rage. "But why didn't you tell me of it at first? Rather underhand, wasn't it?"

"Oh, no. I don't deal in that sort of ware, thanks. I did not tell you, solely out of consideration for your feelings. I had hoped the thing might have been recovered by this time – then I would have told you. And look here, Cynthia. Would it surprise you to learn that I am getting more than a little sick of this sort of thing. I am not accustomed to being found fault with and hectored every minute of the day. In fact, I'm too old for it, and much too old ever to grow used to it. And since I've been down here this time there's hardly a moment you haven't been setting me to rights and generally finding fault with me. Well, if that's the order of the day now, what will it be if we are to spend our lives together? Really, I think we'd better seriously reconsider that programme."

She looked at him. Just her father's warning. But she was too angry for prudent counsel to prevail.

"Do you mean that?" she said, breathing quickly.

"Certainly I do. It is not too late to warn you that mine is not the temperament to submit to perpetual dictation."

"Very well, then. It is your doing, your choice, remember." And turning from him she passed into the house.

Chapter Five

Murad Afzul, Terror

Peaks – jagged and lofty, peaks – stark and pointed, cleaning up into the unclouded but somewhat brassy blue. Rock-sides, cleft into wondrous, criss-cross seams; loose rocks again, scattering smoother slopes of shale, where the white gypsum streaks forced their way through. Beneath – far beneath – winding among these, a mere thread – the white dust of a road. Of vegetation none, save for coarse, sparse grass bents, and here and there a sorry attempt at a pistachio shrub. A great black vulture, circling on spreading wing, over this chaos of cliff and chasm, of desolation and lifelessness, turns his head from side to side and croaks; for experience tells him that its seeming lifelessness is but apparent.

“Ya, Allah! and are we to wait here until the end of the world? In truth, brother, we had better seek to serve some other chief.”

Thus one dirty-white-clad figure to another dirty-white-clad figure – both resembling each other marvellously. The same bronze visage, the same hooked nose and rapacious eyes, the same jetty tresses on each side of the face, and the same long and shaggy beard, characterised these two no less than the score and a half other precisely similar figures lying up among the interstices of this serrated ridge, watching the way beneath. The dirty-white turbans had been laid aside in favour of a conical dust-coloured *kulla*, the neutral hue of which headgear blended with the sad tints of the surrounding rocks and stones.

“I know not, brother,” rejoined the second hook-nosed son of the wilderness. “Yet it seems that since the *Sirkar*¹ has been changed at Mazaran, a great change too has come over our father the Nawab.”

“Nawab!” repeated the first speaker, with disgust. “Nawab! How can our chief take such a dirty title, only fit for swine of Hindu idolators. It is an insult on the part of the accursed Feringhi to offer such a title to a freeborn son of the mountains; and such a one as the chief of the Gularzai. Nawab!” and the speaker spat from between his closed teeth, with a sort of hiss of contempt.

“Yet, if it serves to place him higher in the estimation of the Feringhi and of the tribes our neighbours, what matter?” returned the other. “The Nawab Mahomed Mushîm Khan sounds great in the ears of such.”

The sneering laugh which rattled from the other’s throat was checked, for now the attention of all became concentrated on a cloud of dust coming into view, and advancing along the thread of road winding beneath. Eagerly now, thirty pairs of fierce eyes were bent on that which moved beneath their gaze – a passing of men, mounted and armed, to the number of about three score; and fierce brows bent in hatred, as they scowled upon the representative of that irresistible Power, which, with all its failings and errors of judgment, yet in the long run held in salutary restraint the excesses of their wild and predatory race. For this was the escort of the British Political Agent, returning from an official visit to their tribal chieftain.

A squad of Levy Sowars rode in front, and a larger one of Native Cavalry, the official himself, with two or three attendants being between; the servants with camp necessities and furniture bringing up the rear, yet taking apparent care to keep somewhat close upon the heels of the armed escort. Upon this array the wild hillmen gazed with many a muttered curse. The time for that might come, in the orderings of Allah and His Prophet; but it was not to-day – was the thought that possessed several of their minds.

¹ Government ordinarily. In this instance the representative of Government.

The cavalcade held on its way, winding round a high precipitous spur, to reappear again further on, small and distant, then to vanish entirely where a great *tangi* cleft the heart of the mountain. And look! Below, once more, in the direction whence it had first appeared, whirled another cloud of dust, insignificant this time compared with before.

The eyes of the marauders gleamed from beneath shaggy brows, and a stir ran through their numbers. Brown, claw-like hands gripped the barrels of firearms – no antiquated, if picturesque jezails these, but Lee-Metford magazine rifles up to date, save for a few Martinis – while tulwars were half drawn from their scabbards, and gazed at with lovingly murderous graze ere being replaced again. Yet the group of figures which emerged into view on the road beneath was not formidable, consisting in fact of but four human beings.

Two were mounted, and two on foot, and between them they were driving several pack animals, laden to their fullest capacity. At sight of these, the band, all its tactics prearranged, moved down from its eyrie-like lurking place, dividing, as it did so, into three.

Chand Lall, general trader, who was mounted, and his two assistants who were afoot, were uneasy, and the former was secretly cursing his own avarice which had prevented him from purchasing an extra pack animal or two, which would have enabled him and his possessions to have kept beneath the wing of the Political Agent's escort, whereas now he was very considerably behind the tail of the same. But the fourth of the group, the other mounted man, was quite cool; indeed, it looked as though he actually preferred the solitude of their wild surroundings – and perhaps he did.

"Be at peace, brother," this one was saying. "Are we not safe, for we are in the hand of Allah? Wherefore then this hurry? Nothing can be but what is written. But there, I forget, my memory groweth old with its owner. Thou art not of the number of true believers." And he deliberately and leisurely dismounted, as though discovering a sudden lameness in the near foreleg of his horse.

"That is all very well, Ibrahim, who art a Moslem," said the fat Hindu, whose distressed impatience was painfully manifest. "None will harm thee. But I – "

The words died in his throat, choked there by the sight of a number of stealing figures, flitting down from rock to rock. The countenance of the unfortunate trader grew a dirty leaden white. Already the road before him was barred. Wildly he gazed around. That behind him was barred too. His companion, quite unmoved, was still examining the hoof of his horse. High overhead, a speck in the ether, above the gnomelike crags, the black vulture still turned his head from side to side and croaked.

Already the marauders had seized the pack animals. The two young men who drove them had fallen flat and were grovelling and wailing for mercy. Rough hands had flung the Hindu from his saddle, and he lay on the ground, moaning with fear, and quaking in every limb, as he stared frantically at the dull flash of razor-edged tulwars, brandished over him, the savage, hairy faces glowering down upon him, fell and threatening with religious hate and racial contempt.

"Rise up, fat dog," said one of the marauders, kicking him. "Rise up, and come with us."

"Mercy, Sirdar Sahib, and suffer me to go my way," whined the terrified man, as he tremblingly obeyed the first clause of the injunction. "I am but a poor trader, but have ever been generous to such as ye. Take therefore of my poor store, yet leave me a little that I may begin life again."

The leader of the band laughed evilly and spat.

"Thy poor store! Ha! We will take all and afterwards skin thee of yet more, thou usurer, who comest into our country but to leave it poorer."

"Not so, Sirdar Sahib," expostulated the trader, plucking up a little courage by virtue of the name he was about to invoke. "What I have, I have from the Nawab – the Nawab Mushîm Khan – given in honest trade. Shall I then suffer ill-treatment at the Nawab's very gates?"

"The Nawab. Ha – ha!" jeered the leader, spitting again. "Walk, fat infidel dog. Dost hear?"

And a buffet on the side of the head, which nearly felled him, convinced the unfortunate trader that this was no time for further expostulation; and, accordingly, panting, wheezing, stumbling, he strove his painful utmost to keep pace up the steep hill with his perilous and unwelcome escort. His

attendants were undergoing but little ill-treatment. They were young and lithe, and gave no trouble; moreover, they had little or nothing to lose, so feared nothing. Ibrahim, who happened to be a *mullah*, and whom the other had subsidised for the supposed protection of his own company, to whom no violence whatever had been offered, was leading his steed tranquilly over the rough, stony slope, chatting and laughing familiarly with the band; and at the sight the unhappy Chand Lall's soul grew more bitter within him. Why had he been so ready to accept this plausible rogue's benevolent sanctity, he thought, as now fifty instances occurred to him of delays, slight at the time, but on colourable pretext, to retard him more and more – to increase subtly and imperceptibly more and more the distance between him and the armed force with which he had obtained permission to travel. Bitterly he reproached himself. He saw through it now – in fact, he did not believe that Ibrahim was a *mullah* at all; but *mullah* or not, certain it was that he was the confederate and decoy of the ferocious and predatory gang who had so daringly swooped down upon himself and his goods, almost within call of the Political Agent's armed escort.

On they fared, higher and higher, until at length, utterly exhausted, Chand Lall realised that he lay powerless and beyond all reach or hope of aid in one of the fastnesses of his captors, away in the most savage and frowning recesses of the mountain world. And then something in the very hopelessness of it all as he saw the fruits of a long and toilsome expedition utterly thrown away, moved the wretched man to a sort of desperation. He threatened.

"See you," he said, "I am not a man who can be smuggled away and no inquiries made. I am not a man who can be ill-treated with impunity. I am a man of consequence, and of importance to the *Sirkar*. I am a friend of the Nawab – "

He stopped short. There was that in the look of the leader – to whom he had addressed these words – which seemed to freeze the half delirious desperation within him.

"A friend of the Nawab! Ha – ha! Hearken, O man of consequence and of importance to the *Sirkar*," bending down a savage face to note and revel in the terror he was about to strike into his victim. "Is it possible that thou hast never yet heard the name of Murad Afzul? Is it possible, I say? Ya, Allah! is it possible?"

Chapter Six

The Victim

The effect of his mere name upon his prisoner answered the robber chief's own question, nor had the latter any reason to feel disappointed over the method of its reception. The wretched trader's countenance became ghastly, and his mouth fell open, while the perspiration oozed from him at every pore. He would about as soon have fallen into the power of the Enemy of mankind.

"Mercy, Sirdar Sahib. Take what I have and suffer me to depart," was all he could articulate, slobberingly.

Murad Afzul laughed, and a harsh evil laugh it was. He was a fine-looking man, tall and with good features, which would have been pleasing, but for the quick, predatory look, and the savage scowl which would cloud them upon very slight provocation.

"Tell me, fat dog," he said. "Canst thou name one of thy sort who fell into my hands and came forth again?"

The trader fairly howled with terror, for this was just where his position came home to him. If there was one thing for which this Murad Afzul and his band were known and dreaded, it was for their absolute mercilessness. Mere death was the greatest mercy their victims could expect. True, there were some who had come forth alive, but so hideously maimed and shattered that they had better have been dead, and with awful tales to tell of torture and horror either witnessed or undergone. Indeed, such a scourge had these freebooters become, that strong pressure was brought to bear upon the chief of the Gularzai, and in the result these outrages had ceased, in recognition of which prompt compliance Mahomed Mushîm Khan had been invested by the Indian Government with the title of Nawab – somewhat to the contempt of these fierce mountaineers, as we heard them express it.

With all of this was the unfortunate Hindu so well acquainted that he would never have dreamed of trusting his person or possessions in these mountain solitudes, but that he, like others, was under the impression that Murad Afzul had taken himself and his depredations clean away to the territory of some other potentate, and the possibility of that redoubted outlaw taking advantage of the advent of a new Political Agent to break out afresh had escaped him altogether.

Now, under the direction of their chief, the freebooters were rifling the packs – and at first found not much in them, for they were for the most part stuffed out with dummy matter, to convey the idea that their owner had done so bad a trade as not to be worth plundering. But everything that could possibly conceal a coin was promptly laid open by the expeditious process of a blow with a stone hammer or the slash of a tulwar, and soon a goodly pile of rupees lay heaped up ready for division. Murad Afzul grinned with delight.

"God is good," he said, rubbing his hands. "The spoils of the infidel hath he delivered to the true believer. Yet, O fat pig, it is not enough. Ha! not enough."

"Not enough? But it is my all, Sirdar Sahib; yea, my all," groaned the trader.

"Wah-wah! but I am poor, and have not the wherewith to start life afresh."

"It is not enough," repeated the other, the glitter of his eyes and the fell meaning of his tone becoming terrible in its significance. "Ten thousand rupees must be added to it."

"Ten thousand! How can I find such a sum, Sirdar Sahib, I who am but a poor man? I have not a tenth of it."

"Now art thou blowing up the fire which shall consume thine own limbs, yet slowly, thou foul dog. Wait. Thou shalt taste how it feels."

At a signal the prisoner was seized and bound. The while, others were heating an old gun-barrel in a fire which had been kindled when they first halted. Then they brought it towards him. At the sight the miserable wretch uttered a loud scream of terror and despair.

“Squeal louder, pig,” jeered Murad Afzul. “There is none to hear thee save these rocks, and they are accustomed to such sounds. Ha! ha!”

The miserable man struggled frantically, promising to pay anything if they would refrain from torturing him. But the lust of cruelty, now awakened in those ferocious natures, would not be allayed, and the hot iron was laid hissing to the thigh of their victim, whose frenzied and agonising yells rang in deafening and fiend-like echoes from the surrounding rocks, grim and pitiless as though rejoicing in the act of savagery upon which they glared down. Then Murad Afzul, too experienced in such matters to prolong the agony unduly, made a sign that it should cease.

“How likest thou that, pig?” he said. “Did not thy fat frizzle? I have a mind to send a slice of it to the swine-eating Feringhi at Mazaran. Did it hurt, the kiss of the hot iron? Yet that was but the beginning. How would it feel lasting the whole day. Think, for thou wilt now have a little time.”

It was the hour of prayer, and now the whole band, with their shoes off, and their chuddas spread on the ground, facing in the direction of Mecca, were going through the prescribed prostrations and formulae of the Moslem ritual. Ibrahim the *mullah*, a little in front of the rest: led the devotions, intoning each strophe in a nasal, droning key, the others ranged behind him in rows, now kneeling, now rising, responded somewhat after the manner of the recital of a litany, but perhaps, to an outside observer, the absolute and wholehearted devoutness of their demeanour would have constituted the strangest part of it. Not a shadow of compunction had they for the hideous act of barbarity in which they had a moment ago indulged, and which they would almost certainly repeat. Why should they, indeed? What was the agony of an infidel dog more or less to them or to Heaven? Why, the very cries of such must be as music in the ears of the latter. So they continued laying this brick in the edifice of their salvation; and, having concluded, resumed their shoes and turned their attention once more to their victim.

The latter, the while, had been thinking if haply some hope of rescue might not occur to him. The Sahib had known of his presence, for he himself had given him permission to travel under his protection. Would he not miss him, and, as a consequence, order a body of men to ride back to his rescue? These would assuredly come upon the scene of his capture and follow upon his tracks. But – would they? The Levy Sowars were drawn from the same region and were of the same faith as his captors, of whom they would know the strength and resource, and with whom they would certainly avoid engaging in a fight on behalf of such as he. Besides – and again Chand Lall had reason to curse his own stinginess, in that he had been more than “near” in bestowing the expected *dasturi* upon the Sahib’s chuprassis, wherefore these would infallibly take care that no suspicion of his disaster should reach their master’s ears. Further, was it not a matter of absolute certainty that, rather than allow his rescue, Murad Afzul would give orders for his throat to be cut from ear to ear? No, there was no hope – not a ray.

“Talk we again of the rupees,” began Murad Afzul. “I am moved to require double the amount now, but Allah is merciful, and shall I be less so? I will be content with ten thousand. Wherefore, O dog, thou shalt write and deliver to Ibrahim, our brother – who is holy and learned – a letter which shall cause those who guard the fruits of thine avarice and usury, to pay over to him that sum. Yet think not to write aught that shall render this void, for Ibrahim is learned as well as holy, and can read in many tongues. Further, should he not return to us, thine own fate shall be even as though thou wert already writhing in the lowest depths of Jehanum.”

“It were better, Sirdar Sahib, that I myself travelled to Mazaran to procure it, for our people are distrustful of strangers.” Murad Afzul laughed evilly. “But we are doubly so, O worshipper of debauched idols,” he said. “So thou wouldst fain fare forth thyself? Ha, ha, then how long would it be before we beheld thee again, or one single one of the ten thousand rupees?”

“Why, as soon as I could collect them, and to do that I would spare no pains, no trouble, Sirdar Sahib, although it would leave me a poor man, and in debt for life,” replied Chand Lall, eagerly

thinking, poor fool, that his jailor was going to set him free on so slender a security as his bare word. But the shout of laughter that went up from all who heard quickly undeceived him.

“Who having a caged bird of value turns that bird loose to stretch his wings in the hope that it will return to its cage?” said the chief. “Thou art to us a caged bird of value, thou eater of money – wherefore we keep thee until thou hast no further value. Show him,” he added, turning to his followers.

In obedience to this somewhat mysterious mandate one of them turned and dived into a cleft, producing therefrom an object which he gleefully unrolled, and held up before the gaze of the horrified captive – and well, indeed, might the latter quake, for it was the skin of a man.

It had been most deftly taken off. Face, head, ears – everything in fact. Staring at the horrid thing, Chand Lall felt his very marrow melt within him.

“See,” said Murad Afzul. “He did not die, even then. He lived to taste of fire and boiling ghee.” And the rest of the band laughed like fiends, but the wretched Hindu covered his face and shook.

“Well mayst thou tremble,” went on his pitiless tormentor. “For should Ibrahim return without ten thousand rupees, or not return at all, by the setting of the third sun, thine own skin shall dry beside that one.”

The victim uttered a loud cry.

“The third sun! Why, Sirdar Sahib, that will be impossible. I can never have so much money collected in so short a time. Make it the sixth sun.”

Murad Afzul consulted a moment with his followers. Then he said, —

“Allah is merciful, and so, too, will I be. I will say then by the setting of the fifth sun after this one. Yet try not to play us any false trick, thou dog, for it will be useless, and for what it will mean to thyself, look on yonder and be assured,” and, as though to emphasise the chief’s words, he who held the horrible human skin shook it warningly and suggestively in the face of the thoroughly terrified hostage.

The Political Agent, having dined well in his evening camp, was going over some official papers by the light of the tent lamp.

“Oh, Sunt Singh,” he said, looking up as a chuprassi entered, “what became of that trader who was with us? I didn’t see him when we first camped.”

“*Huzoor*, he is camped just below the sowars’ tents, I believe.”

“Yes? You may go,” and the official resumed what he was doing, without further thought for the luckless Chand Lall, who certainly was not where the lying chuprassi had said.

Chapter Seven

A Surprise

Herbert Raynier ran lightly up the steps of his verandah, feeling intensely satisfied with himself and things in general.

Though summer, the air was delightfully balmy, and the glow of the sunset reddening the heads of the mountains surrounding the basin in which lay Mazaran, was soothing and grateful to the eye. The bungalow was roomy and commodious, and stood in the midst of a pleasant garden, where closing flowers distilled fragrant scents upon the evening air – all this sent his mind back in thankful contrast to hot, steaming, languid Baghnagar, its brassy skies and feverish exhalations, where even at this late hour the very crows lining the roof would be open-billed and gasping. And thus contrasting the new with the old order of things he decided for the fiftieth time that the luckiest moment of his life was when he opened the official letter – which met him on landing at Bombay – appointing him Political Agent at Mazaran.

Hardly less in contrast between the climate of his new station and the last, were the people with whom he now had to deal. There was nothing whatever in common between the meek subservient native he had hitherto ruled and the stalwart independence of these wild mountain tribes, whose turbulent and predatory instincts needed nice handling to keep in efficient control. But all this appealed to him vividly, and he threw himself into his new duties with an eager zest which caused those who had known his predecessor to smile. He recognised that here at least was a chance; here he might find scope for such latent ability which the stagnant routine of his old Department had been in danger of stifling altogether. In fact, he was inclined to regret the abnormally tranquil state of things, when Jelson, his predecessor, had congratulated him upon the fact that Mushîm Khan, the chief of the powerful, and often turbulent, Gularzai tribe, had become so amenable since the Government had created him a Nawab that the meanest *bunniah* might almost walk through the Gularzai country alone and with his pockets bulging with rupees, in perfect safety.

Herbert Raynier flung himself into a comfortable chair on the verandah and lighted a cheroot. He had half an hour to spare before it should be time to dress and go out to dinner, and how should such be better spent than in a restful smoke: yet, while enjoying this, his thoughts were active enough. His prospects, rosy as the afterglow which dwelt upon the surrounding peaks, kept him busy for a time, and over all was a sense of great relief. If he had saved the life of an unknown Oriental at the hands of a particularly brutal mob, assuredly he had been repaid to the full, for, but for that circumstance, matters would never have come to a head with Cynthia. He would still be bound hard and fast by a chain of which he only realised the full weight since he had broken it. For he had broken it – finally, irrevocably, unmistakably, he told himself. Since that last scene in the Vicarage garden he and Cynthia had exchanged no word. The remainder of that day had not been of a pleasant nature, and he had left by an early train on the following morning, to return three days later to India. No letter, either of farewell, or reproach or recrimination – as he had half feared – reached him at the last, and it was with feelings of genuine relief that he watched the shores of the mother country fade into the invisible.

Tarleton, the Civil Surgeon, at whose bungalow Raynier was dining, was somewhat of a trying social unit, in that he was never even by chance known to agree with any remark or proposition, weighty or trivial, put forward by anybody, or if there was no conceivable room for gainsaying such, why then he would append some brisk aggressive comment in rider fashion. As thus, —

“How do, Raynier? How did you come over? Didn’t walk, did you?”

“No. Biked.”

“Ho! Bicycle’s not much use up here, I can tell you.”

Raynier remarked that he found the machine useful for getting about the station with, and that the roads in and immediately around the same were rather good.

“Well, you didn’t expect to find them all rocks and stones, did you?” came the prompt rejoinder.

Tarleton was white-haired and red-faced, which caused him to look older than his actual years. Another of his peculiarities was that he was continually altering his facial appearance. Now he would grow a beard; then suddenly, without a word to anybody, would trim it down to what they call in Transatlantic a “chin-whisker,” or shave it altogether. Or, one day he would appear with a long, carefully-waxed moustache, and the next with that appendage clipped to the consistency of a toothbrush. And so on.

Just at this stage, however, Raynier, recognising that he was on the high road to cordially detesting the man, had laid himself out to be extra long-suffering.

“Wonder if those women ever mean to come in?” went on Tarleton, with a fidgety glance at the clock, for the two were alone in the drawing-room just before dinner.

“Oh, one has to give the ornamental sex a little ‘law,’” said the other, good-humouredly.

“Well, you can’t expect them to put on their clothes and all that as quickly as we can,” was the rejoinder to this accommodating speech. And just then “those women,” in the shape of Mrs Tarleton and a guest, entered. The first was a good-humoured, pleasant-looking little Irishwoman, the second —

“How d’you do, Miss Clive? Why, this is a surprise,” began Raynier, without waiting for an introduction.

“I like surprises,” laughed the hostess. “They’re great fun. We thought we’d give you one, Mr Raynier.”

“They are, if, as now, they are pleasant ones,” he answered.

“Why, Mr Raynier, I didn’t think that kind of speech-making was at all in your line,” said the “Surprise,” demurely.

She was a tallish girl, rather slight, with refined and regular features, which nineteen out of twenty pronounced “cold.” She had a great deal of dark brown hair, and very uncommon eyes; in fact, they were unequivocally and unmistakably green. Yet framed in their dark, abundant lashes, they might be capable of throwing as complete an attraction, a fascination, as the more regulation blue or hazel ones. She was not popular with men. Not enough “go” in her, they declared. Seemed more cut out for a blue-stocking.

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