

Mitford Bertram

The Ruby Sword: A Romance of Baluchistan



Bertram Mitford
The Ruby Sword: A
Romance of Baluchistan

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=23170003

The Ruby Sword: A Romance of Baluchistan:

Содержание

Chapter One.	4
Chapter Two.	15
Chapter Three.	27
Chapter Four.	37
Chapter Five.	50
Chapter Six.	62
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	71

Mitford Bertram

The Ruby Sword: A Romance of Baluchistan

Chapter One.

The Ghazis

“We love to roam, the wide world our home,
As the rushing whirlwind free;
O’er sea and land, and foreign strand,
Who would not a wanderer be!

“To the far off scenes of our youthful dreams
With a lightsome heart we go;
On the willing hack, or the charger’s back,
Or the weary camel slow.”

Thus sang the wayfarer to himself as he urged a potentially willing, but certainly very tired hack along the stony, sandy road which wound gradually up the defile; now overhanging a broad, dry watercourse, now threading an expanse of stunted juniper – the whole constituting a most depressing waste, destitute alike of animal, bird – or even insect – life.

The wayfarer sang to keep up his spirits, for the desolation of the surroundings had already begun to get upon his nerves. He was thoroughly tired out, and very thirsty, a combination of discomfort which is apt to get upon one's temper as well. His steed, a sorry quadruped at best, seemed hardly able to put one leg before another, wearied out with a long day's march over arid plains, where the sun blazed down as a vast burning-glass upon slabs of rock and mounds of dry soil, streaked white here and there with gypsum – and now the ascent, gradual as it was, of the mountain defile had about finished both horse and rider.

Twice had the latter dismounted, with a view to sparing his worn-out steed by leading it. But the exasperating quadruped, in shameful disregard of the superabundant intelligence wherewith popular superstition persists in endowing that noble – but intensely stupid – animal the horse, flatly refused to be led; standing stockstill with every attempt. So his efforts in the cause of combined humanity and expediency thus defeated, the wayfarer had no alternative but to keep his saddle, where, sitting wearily, and with feet kicked limply from the stirrups, he now and then swung a spur-armed heel into the bony ribs – which incentive had about as much effect as if applied to an ordinary jog the while he went on half singing, half humming, to himself:

“There's a charm in the crag, there's a charm in the cloud,
There's a charm in the earthquake's throe;
When the hills are wrapt in a moonlit shroud
There's a charm in the glacier's snow.

“We bask in the blaze of the sun’s bright rays
By the murmuring river’s flow;
And we scale the peak of the mountain steep,
And gaze on the storms below.

“For use around a snug camp fire, that would be an excellent traveller’s song,” said this one to himself – “But in the present instance I fear it will be ‘gaze on the storms *above*,’ and I don’t like it.”

Away up the pass a dark curtain of cloud, ominous and now growing inky black in the subdued light following upon sunset, seemed to justify the wayfarer’s foreboding. It was distant enough as yet, but hung right over what would surely be the said wayfarer’s path.

“No, I don’t like it,” he went on, talking out loud to himself as he frequently did when travelling alone. “It looks very like a night in the open; nothing to eat, though there’ll be plenty to drink presently in the shape of rain-water, no shelter unless one can light upon an overhanging rock. A sweet country to be landed down in without any of the appliances of civilisation, and, from all accounts, not altogether a safe one for the homeless wanderer. Decidedly the prospect is gaudy. It positively corruscates with cheerfulness.”

For which grim irony there was ample justification. Sundown had brought no abatement of the boding oppressive heat, wherein not a breath of air was stirring. Great hills shot up to the fast

glooming sky on either hand; now from the edge of the road itself, now from the valley bottom, in no part of great width – beyond the stony bed of the dry watercourse; their sides cleft here and there from base to summit by a jagged, perpendicular rift – black and cavernous – their serrated ridges piled on high in a confused jumble of sharp peak and castellated formation – the home of the markhoor and mountain sheep. Here a smooth, unbroken slab of rock, sloping at the well nigh precipitous angle of a high-pitched roof – there, at an easier slant, a great expanse of rock face, seamed and criss-crossed with chasms, like the crevasses on a glacier. No vegetation, either, to relieve the all pervading, depressing greyness, save where a ragged juniper or pistachio had found anchor along a ledge, or fringed the lip of some dark chasm aforesaid.

No turn of the road brought any relief to the eye – any lifting of the unconscious oppression which lay upon the mind; ever the same hills, sheering aloft, fearsome in their dark ruggedness, conveying the idea of vast and wellnigh untrodden fastnesses, grim, repellent, mysterious. Nor below did variety lie; the same lifeless juniper forest, its dreary trees set wide apart, its stoniness in places concealed by a coarse growth of grass, or sparse and stunted shrub. For of such are the wild mountain tracts of Baluchistan.

From an adjacent crag a raven croaked. The hoarse “cauk-cauk” cleft the air with a startling suddenness, breaking in as it did upon the lifeless and boding silence. High overhead a huge

bird of prey circled in the now glooming twilight, as though searching with lingering reluctance for some sign of life, where there was no life, ere seeking its roost among the black recesses of yon cliff-walled chasm.

“The sole signs of life emblems of fierce predatoriness and death – ” thought the wayfarer to himself. Very meet, indeed, for the surroundings in which they were set. Below, ere leaving the plain country, he had passed flocks of black-haired goats grazing, in charge of armed herdsmen; or now and again a string of camels and asses – the motive power of a party of wandering Baluchis. Some had given him the “*Salaam*,” and some had scowled resentfully at him as an intruder and an infidel; but even of these he would almost gladly have welcomed the sight now, so entirely depressing was the utter lifelessness of this uninhabited land. Yet it could not be entirely uninhabited, for here and there he had passed patches of corn land in the valley bottom, which must have been under cultivation at one time, though now abandoned.

The cloud-curtain away in front began to give forth red fitful gleams, and once or twice a low boom of distant thunder stirred the atmospheric stillness. But the double crash that burst from the hillside now – those red jets of flame – meant no war of the elements. At the same time, with a buzzing, humming noise, something passed over the wayfarer’s head.

Even the weary, played out steed was startled into a snort and a shy. The rider, on his part, was not a little startled too, as he

recalled the evil reputation of the hill tribesmen, and realised that he himself was at that moment constituting a target to some of these. Still, he would not show alarm if he could help it.

“*Salaam!*” he shouted, raising his right hand with the palm outward and open; a peace sign recognised by other barbarians among whom he had at one time moved. “*Salaam!*” And his gaze was fixed anxiously upon the group of boulders whence the shots had been fired.

For a moment there was no answer – Then it came – took shape, indeed, after a fashion that was sufficiently alarming. Five figures sprang from their place of concealment – five tall, copper-coloured, hook-nosed barbarians, their fierce eyes gleaming with fanatical and racial hatred – their black hair flowing in long locks beneath their ample white turbans. Each held aloft a wicked looking, curved sword, and two carried jezails, whose muzzles still smoked from the shots just fired from them.

All this the wayfarer took in as in a lightning flash, as these wild beings whirled down upon him. Their terrific aspect – the white quiver of the naked swords, their ferocious yells stunning his ears, conveyed meaning enough. He realised that this was a time to run – not to fight.

Luckily the horse, forgetting for the moment its weariness in the terror of this sudden onslaught, sprang forward without waiting for the spurs now rammed so hard and deep into its ribs. But the assailants had chosen their ground well. The road here

made a sudden descent – and was rough and stony withal. The fleet-footed mountaineers could travel as fast as the horse. Their flight over that rugged ground seemed as the flight of a bird.

The foremost, wellnigh alongside, held his sword ready for a fatal sweep. The awful devilish look on the face of this savage appalled the traveller. It was now or never. He put his hand behind him; then, pointing the revolver straight at his assailant, pressed the trigger. The pistol was small, but hard driving. At such close quarters it could not miss. The barbarian seemed to double up – and fell backwards on to his head, flinging his arms in the air – his sword falling, with a metallic clang, several yards away among the stones.

Just that brief delay saved the traveller. His assailants, now reduced to four, halted but momentarily to look at their stricken comrade, and by dint of rowelling the sides of his steed until the blood flowed freely, he was able to keep the exhausted animal as near to a gallop as it was capable of attaining. But the respite was brief. Their bloodcurdling yells perfectly demoniacal now, the barbarians leaped forward in pursuit. They seemed to fly. The tired horse could never hope to outstrip them.

And as he thus fled, the wayfarer felt the cold shadow of Death's portal already chill upon his brow, for he realised that his chances were practically *nil*. He had heard of the "Ghazi" mania, which combined the uncontrollable fighting frenzy of the old Norse Berserk with the fervid fury of religious fanaticism. There was no warfare then existing with any of the tribes of

Baluchistan. These people, therefore, were Ghazis, the most desperate and dangerous enemies to deal with, because utterly fearless, utterly reckless. He had still five chambers in his pistol, but the weapon was small, and quite unreliable, save at point blank – in which case his enemies would cut him down before he had time to account for more than one of themselves.

All this flashed through his mind. Then he realised that the ferocious yelling had ceased. He looked back. A turn in the road hid the pursuers from view, and now it was nearly dark. But the darkness brought hope. Had they abandoned the pursuit? Or could he not conceal himself in some of the holes and crevices on the stony hillside until they should be tired of searching?

Still keeping his steed at its best speed – and that was not great – so as to ensure a good start, he held on, warily listening for any sound of his pursuers – and thus covered about two miles. A thunder peal rolled heavily – its echoes reverberating from crag to crag – and the cloud-curtain in front was alive with a dazzle of sheeting flame, which lit up the road and the dreary landscape like noonday. By its light he looked back. Still no sign of the pursuers, whose white flowing garments could not have failed to catch his eye. Hope – strong hope – rekindled within him.

But not for long. His horse, thoroughly blown, dropped into a walk. A walk? A crawl rather, for the poor beast staggered along, its flanks heaving violently, swaying at times, as though the mere effort to drag one leg after another would bring it down, and once down well its rider knew there would be no more rising.

And then? One man – alone, dismounted, inadequately armed – in the vast heart of an unknown country, tracked down by fleet-footed pitiless destroyers, stung to a frenzy of massacre by a twofold incentive – blood feud for a comrade slain, and the fanatical dictates – or supposed dictates – of the most merciless religion in the world. There could be but one end.

Again he dismounted. The horse, relieved of so much weight, seemed to pant less distressingly. Every moment thus lost was a moment gained by his bloodthirsty enemies to come up with him, yet he felt it to be the wisest policy to spare his steed to the very utmost. Then he climbed into the saddle once more.

Now the storm was wellnigh overhead. The thunder roared and crashed, and great drops of rain shone like silver in the momentary dazzle of the lightning gleam – In that livid flare, too, the peaks stood forth on high, silhouetted against the heavens, and every bough of the ragged juniper trees was clearly and delicately defined.

Something else, too, was clearly but appallingly defined – to wit, four white-clad figures – with bronzed faces and flowing hair and flaming eyes; and the sheen and flash of four curved naked swords. They had been running in silence hitherto – but now – with a deafening howl they hurled themselves forward on their prey —

Without even cocking his revolver, the hunted man dropped it to the present and pressed the trigger. It would not move. Then he drew up the hammer – no – tried to – It, too, would not move. The

cylinder was jammed. The cartridges – which he had purchased at one of those large co-operative stores, where they sell many things, but nothing reliable – were too tight a fit. The weapon was as useless as a bit of stick.

With a bitter curse upon the pettifogging dishonesty of his trading fellow countrymen, the now desperate man wrenched off one of the stirrups – not a bad weapon at a pinch – But once more fortune befriended him. The horse, spurred by terror to one more effort, plunged down the road, which now made a sudden descent. The stunning report of a jezail, which the Ghazis had presumably stopped to reload, added to its terror, but the missile hummed harmlessly by. And now in the ceaseless gleam of the lightning, the fugitive saw right before him at the base of the slope, the wide stony bed of a watercourse.

On, on, on, anyhow – though where safety lay was too great a hope to enter his despairing brain – Then, drawing nearer and nearer from the hills on his right came a strange, swirling, rushing roar. It was not the thunder. It had a note of its own as it boomed louder and louder with every second. It was as the breaking of surf against the base of an echoing cliff. And as another vivid lightning flash lit up the whole landscape with a noonday flare, the traveller beheld a sight that was appalling in its wild terror.

A wall of water was sweeping down the dry nullah – a vast brown muddy wave, many feet high. His escape was cut off. Yet not. So far it had not reached the point where the road crossed. Could he be before it there was safety. Otherwise death, either

way.

In the nullah now, the slipping, stumbling horsehoofs were flashing up showers of sparks in the blackness – Then another lightning gleam. The fugitive glanced to the right, then wished he had not. The advancing flood, tossing against the livid sky, was so awful as to unnerve him, and he was just half way across. The four Ghazis arrived on the bank, but even they shrank back from the roaring terror of that wave wall. But the remaining loaded jezail spoke – and the miserable steed, stricken by the missile, plunged forward, throwing the rider hard upon his head.

The wild triumph scream of the furious fanatics, leaping like demons in the lightning's glare, was drowned by the bellowing voice of the flood. It poured by – and now the whole wide bed of the watercourse was a very hell of seething roaring waves. But on the further side from the bloodthirsty Ghazis lay the motionless form of a man – He lay at full length, face downwards, and the swirling eddies on the extreme edge of the furious flood were just washing the soles of his riding boots, and leaving little wisps of twigs and straws sticking in his upturned spurs.

Chapter Two.

Through Flood

Ernest Aurelius Upward was the chief official in charge of the Government forests of Baluchistan.

Now the said "forests" had about as much affinity to the idea of sylvan wildness conveyed by that term as many of the Highland so-called deer forests; in that they were mainly distinguishable by a conspicuous lack of trees; such trees as there were consisting wellnigh entirely of the stunted, profitless, and utterly unpicturesque juniper, which straggling over the slopes of the hills and devoid of undergrowth imparted to the arid and stony landscape somewhat of the aspect of a vast continental burying-ground, badly kept and three parts forgotten.

Being thus devoid of undergrowth, the land was proportionately depleted of wild life, since game requires covert. This added not to its attractions in the eyes of Ernest Aurelius, who was a keen Nimrod. He had been a mighty slayer of tiger during an experience of many years spent in the Indian forest service. Long indeed was the death roll of "Stripes" when that energetic official was around with rifle and camp outfit among the jungly hills of his North West Province section. Of panther he had long since ceased to keep count, while cheetah or blackbuck he reckoned in with such small game as partridge or snipe. We

have said that the great rugged slopes and towering crags of his present charge still held the markhôr and wild mountain sheep; but Upward was not so young as he had been and remembering the fine times he had had with the far easier *shikar* of the lower country, frankly declared his distaste for the hard labour involved in swarming up all manner of inaccessible heights at all sorts of unearthly hours of the day or night on the off-chance of one precarious shot. So the *gadh* and markhôr, so far as he was concerned, went unmolested.

But its lack of sport notwithstanding, his present charge had its compensations. Life in camp among these elevated mountain ranges was healthful and not unpleasant. At an altitude of anything up to 8,000 feet the air stirred keen and fresh, and the climate of Shâlalai, the cantonment station where he had his headquarters in the shape of a snug, roomy bungalow and a garden in which he took much pride, was appreciated alike by himself and others, to whom recollection was still vivid of the torrid, enervating exhaustion of plains stations. Furthermore his term of retirement was not many years distant and on the whole, Upward found no great reason for discontent.

And now as we first make his personal acquaintance, he is riding slowly across the valley bottom towards his camp. His mackintosh is streaming with wet, and the collar tucked up to his ears, for the rain is falling in a steady pitiless downpour. Two men of his Pathân forest guard walk behind, one carrying his master's gun, the other a few brace of chikôr or grey partridge,

an abominable unsporting biped, whom no amount of education will convince of his duty to rise and be shot. The evening has closed in wet and stormy, and the lightning gleam sheds its red blaze upon the white tents of the camp. These tents, in number about a dozen, are pitched among the trees of an apricot tope, whose leafage is just beginning to bud forth anew after the devastations of a flight of locusts. In front the valley bottom is open and comparatively level but behind, the mountain range rises rugged and abrupt – its face cleft by the black jaws of a fine *tangi*, narrow, but with perpendicular sides rising to an altitude of several hundred feet. This picturesquely forbidding chasm acts in rainy weather as a feeder to the now dry watercourse on whose bank the camp is pitched.

The lamps are already lighted, and in one of the larger tents a lady is seated reading. She looks up as Upward enters.

“What sport have you had, Ernest?”

“Only seven brace and a half.”

“Oh come, that’s not so bad. Are you very wet?”

“No – but my Terai hat is about spoiled; wish I had put on another,” flinging off the soaked headgear in question. “These beastly storms crop up every afternoon now, and always at the same time. There’s no fun in going out shooting. Khola, *Peg lao*.”

The well trained bearer, who has been assisting his master out of his soaked mackintosh, moves swiftly and noiselessly in quest of the needed “peg.”

“Well, I’ll go and change. Where are the girls?”

“In their own tent. Hurry up though. Dinner must be quite ready.”

By the time Upward is dried and toiletted – a process which does not take him long – “the girls” are in. Two of them are not yet out of the short frock stage. These are his own children, and are aged fourteen and twelve respectively. The third, however, who is a couple of years beyond her teens, is no relation, but a guest.

“Did you have any sport, Mr Upward?” says the latter, as they sat down to table.

“No – there’s no sport in chikór shooting. The chikór is the most unsporting bird in the world. He won’t rise to be shot at.”

“What on earth do we stay on here for then?” says the elder of the two children, who, like many Indian and colonially raised children, is not slow to volunteer an opinion. “I wish we were going back to Shâlalai to-morrow.”

“So do I,” cuts in the other promptly.

“Oh – do you!” responds her parent mingling for himself a “peg” – “Why, the other day you were all for getting into camp. You were sick of Shâlalai, and everybody in it.”

“Well, we are not now. It’s beastly here, and always raining,” says the younger one, teasing a little fox terrier under the table until it yelps and snarls.

“Do go on with your dinner, Hazel, and leave the dog alone,” urges her mother in the mildest tone of gentle remonstrance.

“Oh, all right,” with a pout and flounce. She is a queer, dark-

complexioned little elf is Hazel, with a vast mane of hair nearly as large as herself – and loth to accept reproof or injunction without protest – The other laughs meaningly, and then a squabble arises – for they are prone to squabbling – which is finally quelled.

“Well, and what do you think, Miss Cheriton?” says Upward turning to their guest, when this desirable result has been achieved. “Are you sick of camp yet?”

“N-no – I don’t think I am – At least – of course I’m not.”

“I’m afraid Nesta does find it slow,” puts in Mrs Upward – But before Nesta Cheriton can utter a disclaimer, the other of the two children gives a whistle.

“Lily, my dear girl!” expostulates her mother.

“I can’t help it. Slow? I should think Nesta did find it slow. Why, she was only saying this morning she’d give ten years of her life for a little excitement.”

“Lily is simply ‘embroidering,’ Mr Upward,” pleads Nesta, with a bright laugh. “I said – at anytime – not only now or here.”

“We could have found you excitement enough in some of my other districts. You could have come after tiger with me.”

“Oh no – no! That isn’t the kind of thing I mean – And I can’t think how Mrs Upward could have done it” – with a glance at the latter. For this gentle, refined looking woman with the pretty eyes and soft, charming manner, had stood by her husband’s side when the striped demon of the jungle, maddened with his wounds, ears laid back and eyes flashing green flame, had swooped upon them in lightning charge, uttering that awful coughing roar calculated

to unnerve the stoutest of hearts – to drop, as though lightning-struck, before the heavy Express bullet directed by a steady hand and unflinching brain.

“Well, the kind of excitement you mean will roll up in a day or two in the shape of Bracebrydge and Fleming” – replies Upward, with a genial twinkle in his eyes – “they want to come after the chikór. It’s rather a nuisance – This place won’t carry two camps. But I say, Miss Cheriton, those fellows wont do any chikór shooting.”

“Why not? – Isn’t that what they are coming for?”

“Oh, yes. But then, you see, when the time comes to go out, each of them will make some excuse to remain behind – or to double back. Neither will want to leave the field open to the other.”

“Ah, but – I don’t care for either of them,” laughed Nesta, not pretending to misunderstand his meaning.

“Not? Why everybody is in love with Bracebrydge – or he thinks they are – There’s only one thing I must warn you against, and that is not to spell his name with an ‘I’. There are two girls in Shâlalai to my knowledge who wrecked all their chances on that rock.”

“Nonsense Ernest” – laughed his wife. “How can you talk such a lot of rubbish? To talk sense now. I wonder when Mr Campian will turn up?”

“Any day or no day. Campian’s such an uncertain bird. He never knows his own plans himself. If he didn’t know whether he

was coming overland from Bombay or round by sea to Karachi, I don't see how I can. Anyway, I wrote him to the B.I. agents at Karachi telling him how to get to Shâlalai, and left a letter there for him telling him how to get here. I couldn't do more. Khola, cheroot, *lao*."

Dinner was over now, and very snug the interior of the tent looked in the cheerful lamplight, as Upward, selecting a cheroot from the box the bearer had just deposited in front of him, proceeded to puff away contentedly. The rain pattered with monotonous regularity on the canvas, and, reverberating among the crags, the thunder rolled in deep-toned boom.

"Beastly sort of night," said Upward, flicking the ash from his cheroot. "The storm's passing over though. By Jove! I shouldn't wonder if it brought the *tangi* down. It must be falling heavy in that catchment area."

A shade of alarm came into Nesta Cheriton's face.

"Should we be – er – quite safe here if it did?" she asked.

"Rather," said Upward. "The water comes through the *tangi* itself like an express train, but the nullah widens out below and runs off the water. No fear. It has never been up as high as this. In fact, it couldn't. By George! What was that?"

The two younger girls had got out cards and were deep in some game productive of much squabbling. The conversation among their elders had been carried on in an easy, placid, after-dinner tone. But through all there came, distinctly audible, the sound of a sharp, heavy report, not so very distant either.

“That’s a shot, I’ll swear!” cried Upward excitedly, rising to his feet and listening intently. “Thunder? No fear. It’s a shot. No mistaking a shot. But who the deuce would be firing shots here and at this time of night? Shut up Tinkles – shut up you little *soor!*” as the little fox terrier charged savagely towards the purdah, uttering shrill, excited barks.

Various emotions were manifest on the countenances of the listeners – one or two even expressing a shade akin to fear. As they stood thus, with nerves at tension, a new sound rushed forth upon the silence of the night – a sort of hollow, bellowing roar – nearer and nearer – louder and louder.

“The *tangi!*” cried Upward. “By George! the *tangi* is down.”

“Hurrah! hurrah!” crowed Lily, clapping her hands. “Let’s go and look at it. Come along, Nesta. Here’s some excitement at last!”

“Wait for the lantern. Wait – wait – do you hear?” cried her mother. “It’s very dark; you might tumble in.”

“Oh, hang the lantern,” grumbled Lily. “The water will have passed by that time, and I want to see it rush out.”

She had her wish, however, for the lantern being quickly lighted, the whole party stepped forth into the rain and the darkness. At first nothing was visible, but as the radius of light struck upon the vertical jaws of the great black chasm, they stopped for a moment, awed, appalled – almost instinctively stepping back.

Forth from those vertical jaws vomited a perfect terror of

roaring, raging water. It was more like a vast spout than a mere stream was this awful flood; of inky blackness save where the broken waves, meeting a projection, seethed and hissed; and, amid the deafening tumult, the rattle of rocks, loosened from their bed, and shot along like timber by the velocity of the waters, mingled with the crash of tree trunks against the smooth cliff walls of the rift. In a moment, with a roar like a thunder burst, it had spread itself over the dry face of the nullah, which was now rolling many feet deep of mountainous swirling waves.

For a few moments they stood contemplating the wild tumult by the light of the lantern. Then Mrs Upward, her voice hardly audible through the bellowing of the waters, said:

“Now girls, we’d better go in. It’s raining hard still.”

This drew a vehement protest from Hazel and Lily. It was such fun watching the flood, they urged. What did it matter about a little rain? and so forth. But Tinkles, the little fox terrier, was now barking furiously at something or other unseen, keeping, however, very close to her master’s legs, for all her expenditure of vocal ferocity. Then a voice came out of the darkness – a male voice which, although soft and pleasing, caused Nesta Cheriton to start and cling involuntary to Upward’s arm.

“*Huzoor!*” (A form of greeting more deferential than the better known “Sahib.”)

“What is it, Bhallu Khan?” said Upward, as the voice and the light of the lantern revealed the chief forest guard.

The latter now began speaking quickly in Hindustani. Had the

Huzoor heard anything? Yes? Well there was something going on yonder. Just before the *tangi* came down there was a shot fired. It was on the other side of the nullah. Something was going on.

Now Bhallu Khan was inclined to be long-winded in his statements. It was raining smartly, and Upward grew impatient.

“I don’t see what we can do,” he bellowed through the roar of the water. “We can’t even go and see what’s up. The *tangi* is down, and the *tumasha*, whatever it is, was on the other side.”

“Not all the time, *Huzoor*,” urged the forest guard. “While the roar of the water was yet distant, we heard a strange noise – yes, a very strange noise – It was as the clatter of hoofs in the bed of the dry nullah, of shod hoofs. And then there was another shot – and the hoof-strokes seemed to cease. Then the water came down and we could hear no more of anything.”

“Eh! another shot!” cried Upward, now thoroughly startled. “Why, what the devil is the meaning of it?” This last escaped him in English – and it brought the whole party around him, now all ears, regardless of the rain. Only Nesta was out of it – not understanding Hindustani.

It was where the road crosses the nullah, Bhallu Khan explained. He could not tell what it might be, but thought he had better inform the *Huzoor*. It might even be worth while going that far to see if there was anything to find out.

“Yes, let’s go!” – cut in Lily. “Hurrah! here’s a new excitement!”

“Let’s go!” echoed her father sharply. “To bed, you mean. So

off you go there, both of you. Come – clear in – quick! Likely one wants a lot of children fooling about in the dark on a night like this.”

Heedless of their grumbling protest, Upward dived into his tent, and, quickly arming himself with his magazine rifle and revolver, he came forth. Bhallu Khan he instructed to bring another of the forest guard to accompany them while a third was left to look after the camp.

In the darkness and rain they took their way along the bank of the flood – Upward hardly knowing what he was expecting to find. The country was wild, and its inhabitants wilder still. Quite recently there had been an upheaval of lawlessness among a section of the powerful and restless Marri tribe. What if some bloody deed of vendetta, or tribal feud, had been worked out here, almost at his very door? He stumbled along through the wet, coarse tussocks, peering here and there as the forest guard held the lantern before him – his rifle ready. He hardly expected to find anything living, but there was a weird creepiness about this nocturnal quest after something sinister and mysterious that moved him by sheer instinct to defensive preparation. Twice he started, as the dark form of a half-stranded tree trunk with its twisted limbs suggested the find of some human body – ghastly with wounds – distorted with an agonising death. Suddenly Bhallu Khan stopped short, and with a hurried and whispered exclamation held up the lantern, while pointing to something in front.

Something which lay half in, half out of the water. Something which all felt rather than saw had had life, even if life were no longer in it. No tree trunk this time, but a human body. Dead or alive, however, they were only just in time, for even as they looked the swirl of an eddy threw a volume of water from the middle of the trunk right over the neck – so quickly had the flood risen.

“Here – give me the lantern – And you two pull him out, sharp,” said Upward.

This, to the two stalwart hillmen, was but the work of a moment. Then an exclamation escaped Bhallu Khan.

“It is a sahib!” he cried.

Upward bent over the prostrate form, holding the light to the face. Then it became his turn to start in amazement.

“Good God! it’s Campian!” he exclaimed – “Campian himself. But how the devil did he get here like this, and – Is he alive or dead?”

“He is alive, *Huzoor*,” answered Bhallu Khan, who had been scrutinising the unconscious features from the other side.

Chapter Three.

The Forest Camp

The following morning broke bright and clear, and save that there was a coolness in the air, and the bed of the *tangi* which had poured forth its black volume of roaring destruction the night before was wet and washed out – no trace of the wild whirl of the elements would now be visible.

Campian awoke, feeling fairly restored, though as he opened his eyes after his sound and heavy sleep he could hardly recall where he was, or what had happened – nor in fact, did he particularly care whether he could recall it or not. This frame of mind lasted for some time, then his faculties began to reassert themselves. The events of the previous night came back to him – the long, wearisome journey, the exhausted steed, the sudden onslaught of the Ghazis, the pursuit – then that last desperate effort for life – the rolling flood, the jezail shot, and – oblivion. Now a thought struck him. Where was he? In a tent. But whose tent? Was he a captive in the hands of his recent assailants? Hardly. This was not the sort of treatment he would have met at their hands, even if the unmistakably European aspect of all the fittings and tent furniture did not speak for themselves. And at that moment, as though to dispel all further grounds of conjecture, the purdah was moved aside and somebody stole

softly in. Campian closed his eyes, surveying this unexpected visitant through the lids. Then he opened them.

“That you, Upward, or am I dreaming?”

“It’s me right enough, old chap. How are you feeling – eh? A bit buzzy still? How’s the head?”

“Just as you put it – a bit buzzy. But I say, where are we?”

“In camp, at Chirria Bach.”

“So? And where the devil might Chirria Bach be? I was bound for Gushki. Thought you were there.”

“Didn’t you get my letter at Shâlalai, saying we were going into camp?” said Upward.

“Not any. I got one – There was nothing about camp in it – It told me to come on to Gushki. But I fell in with two Johnnies there who were going on a chikór shoot, and wanted me to cut in – I did – hence concluded to find my way here across country instead of by the usual route. I’m fond of that sort of thing, you know.”

“Where are your things – and how is it you are all alone? This isn’t the country to ride around in like that – all alone – I can tell you.”

“So I’ve discovered.” And then he narrated the events of the previous day’s journey up to the time of his falling unconscious in the riverbed.

“Well you’ve had a devilish narrow squeak, old chap,” pronounced Upward, when he had done. “Do you know, if it hadn’t been for old Bhallu Khan, my head forest guard, hearing

your gee scrambling through the nullah, you would never have been seen again. We heard the first shot. It seemed fishy, but it was no use bothering about it, because it was on the other side of the water. Then the *tangi* coming down kicked up such a row that we couldn't hear ourselves speak, let alone hear the other shot. You were more than half in the water when we found you, and – I've been down to the place this morning – and the water has been over more than twice your own length from where you were lying when we hauled you out. Lucky old Bhallu Khan heard the racket – eh?"

"Rather. But, I say, Upward, I shot one of those brigands. Likely to be trouble raised over that?"

Upward looked grave. "You never can tell," he said. "You see, in a case of that sort, the Government has a say in the matter. Don't give away anything about the shooting to anybody for the present, and we'll think over what is best to be done – or not done – Perhaps you only winged your man."

"I hope so, if it will save any further bother. But, it's a dashed cool thing assailing a peaceable traveller in that way. There's no sort of war on here?"

"No, but the fact of your being alone and unarmed – unarmed, at least, so far as they could see – was a temptation to those devils. They hate us like poison since we took over the country and prevented them – or tried to prevent them – from cutting each other's throats, so they are not likely to let slip an opportunity of cutting ours instead."

“And after that first shot, practically I was unarmed, thanks to the swindling rascality of the British huckster in guaranteeing ammunition that jammed in the pistol. No more co-operative stores for me, thanks.”

Now again the purdah was lifted, and the bearer appeared, bringing in tea and toast. Salaaming to Campian, he told his master that the *mem-sahib* would like to see him for a moment. Upward, responding to the call, promptly received a lecture for not merely allowing, but actively inducing, the patient to talk too much. It could not be good for one just recovering from a shock to the head to talk – especially on exciting topics – and so on – and so on.

Meanwhile in another tent Nesta Cheriton and the two younger girls were discussing the somewhat tragic arrival of the expected guest. To the former, however, his personality appealed more than the somewhat startling manner of his arrival.

“But what is he like, Lily?” she was saying – not quite for the first time.

“Oh! I told you before,” snapped Lily, waxing impatient, and burying her nose in a book – She was wont to be petulant when disturbed in the midst of an absorbing tale.

“He’s rather fun,” replied Hazel. “He isn’t young, though. He’s not as old as father – still he isn’t young.”

“I expect he’s quite an old fogey,” said Lily. “I don’t want to talk about him any more,” which reply moved Hazel to cackle elfishly, while cutting weird capers expressive of the vein

mischievous.

“Rather. He’s quite an old fogey. Isn’t he, Lily?”

“I wish you’d shut up,” snapped that young person. “Can’t you see I want to read?”

But later on, viz about tiffin time, Campian being recovered enough to put in an appearance, Nesta found good and sufficient reasons for the reversal of her former verdict. As Hazel had said, the new arrival was not young; yet her own term, “quite an old fogey,” in no sense applied. And the reversal of her said verdict took this form: “He’ll do.”

This indeed, in its not very occult meaning, might have held good were the stranger even less qualified for her approval than she decided at a glance he was – for they had been quite a fortnight in camp, and on any male – save Upward, middle-aged and *rangé*, Nesta Cheriton’s very attractive blue eyes had not rested during precisely that period. And such deficiency had to her already come to spell boredom.

In Shâlalai the British army of all branches of the service had been at her feet, and this for obvious reasons. She was young, attractive beyond the ordinary, and a new importation. Now the feminine counterpart of the British army as represented in Shâlalai, though in some cases young, was unattractive wellnigh without exception. Furthermore, it was by no means new – wherefore Nesta had things all her own way; for Shâlalai, for social and every other purpose, *was* the British army – Upward and the agent to the governor-general being nearly the only

civilians in the place. So in Shâlalai Nesta was happy, for the British army, having as usual when not in active service, nothing particular to do, swarmed around her in multifold adoration.

“Last time we saw each other we hardly reckoned to meet in such tragic fashion, did we, Mrs Upward?” said Campian, as they sat down to tiffin. “I only hope I haven’t drawn down the ire of a vast and vendetta nourishing tribe upon your peaceful camp.”

“Oh, we’re not nervous. The people who attacked you belong in all probability right the other end of the country,” she answered, easily.

“I sent over to Gushki to let the political agent know about it,” said Upward. “Likely they’ll send back a brace of Levy sowars to have a look round. Not that that’ll do any good, for these darned ‘catch-’em-alive-ohs’ are all tarred with the same brush. They’re raised in the same country, you see.”

“Seems to me a right casual section this same country,” said Campian. “You are all never tired of laying down what entirely unreliable villains these border tribes are, yet you simply put yourselves at their mercy. I’ll be bound to say, for instance, that there’s no such thing as a watch kept over this camp at night, or any other.”

“No, there isn’t Tinkles here, though, would pretty soon let us know if any one came too close.”

“Yes, but not until they were on you. Say four or five like those who tackled me – or even more – made up their minds to come for you some night, what then? Why, they’d be in the tents

hacking you to bits before you had time to move a finger.”

“Ghazis don’t go to work that way, Campian. They come for you in the open, and never break out with the premeditation a rush upon a camp would involve.”

“I’ve often thought the same,” struck in Nesta. “I get quite nervous sometimes, lying awake at night. Every sound outside makes me start. Fancy nothing between you and all that may be in that horrible darkness, but a strip of canvas. And the light seems to make it worse. I can never shake off the idea that I can be seen.”

“Why don’t you put out the light then, Miss Cheriton?”

“Because I’m more frightened still to be in the dark. Ah now – you’re laughing at me” – she broke off, in a pretty gesture of protest.

The stranger was contemplating her narrowly, without seeming to. Good specimen of her type was his decision, but these fair haired, blue-eyed girls, though pretty enough as pictures, have seldom any depth. Self conscious at every turn, though not aware of it, or, at any rate of showing that she was. Pretty? Oh, yes, no mistake about that – knows what suits her, too.

Whether this diagnosis was entirely accurate remains to be seen – that its latter part was, a glance at Nesta left no doubt. She was attired in white and light blue, which matched admirably her eyes and golden hair, and she looked wonderfully attractive. The suspicion of sunbrown which darkened her complexion had the

effect of setting off the vivid whiteness of her even teeth when she smiled. And then her whole face would light up.

“What would you like to do this afternoon, old chap?” said Upward, as tiffin over, the bearer placed the cheroot box on the table. “Don’t feel up to going after chikór, I suppose?”

“Well, I don’t know. I think I do. But I left my shot gun down at Chotiali with my other things.”

“You’d much better sit still and keep yourself quiet for the rest of the day, Mr Campian,” warned Mrs Upward. “A nasty fall on the head isn’t a thing to be trifled with, especially in hot climates. I’ve seen too much of that sort of thing in my time.”

But the warning was overruled. Campian declared himself sufficiently recovered, provided there was no hard climbing to be done. Tiffin had set him up entirely.

“Do just as you like, old chap,” said Upward. “You can use my gun. I don’t care about chikór. They are the rottenest form of game bird I know. Won’t rise, for one thing.”

“Let’s all go,” suggested Lily. “We can keep behind. And we shall see how many misses Mr Campian makes,” she added, with her natural cheekiness.

“It’s hardly fair,” objected the proposed victim – “I, the only gunner, too – Why, all this ‘gallery’ is bound to get on my nerves.”

“Never mind – you can put it down to your fall, if you do miss a lot,” suggested Nesta.

“Well, we’d better start soon, and not go too far either, for I shouldn’t wonder if this evening turned out as bad as last,” said

Upward, rising from table. "Khola – Call Bhallu Khan."

The bearer replied that he was in front of the tent.

"So this is the man whose sharp hearing was the saving of my life?" said Campian, as the head forester extended his salaam to him – And he put out his hand.

The forester, a middle-aged Pathân of the Kakar tribe, was a fine specimen of his race. He looked picturesque enough in his white loose garments, his head crowned with the "Kulla," or conical cap, round which was wound a snowy turban. He had eyes and teeth which a woman might have envied, and as he grasped the hand extended to him, the expression of his face was pleasing and attractive in the extreme.

"By Jove, Upward, this man is as different a type to the ruffians who came for me last night as the proverbial chalk and cheese simile," remarked Campian, as they started for the shooting place. "They were hook-nosed scoundrels with long hair and the expression of the devil, whereas this chap looks as if he couldn't hurt a fly. He has an awfully good face."

"Oh, he has. Still, with Mohamedans you never can be absolutely certain. Any question of fanaticism or semi-religious war, and they're all alike. We've had too many instances of that."

"Oh, come now, Ernest. You mustn't class good old Bhallu Khan with that sort of native," struck in his wife. "If there was any sort of rising I believe he'd stand by us with his life."

"I believe so too. Still, as I say, with Mohamedans you can never tell. Look, Campian, this is where we found you last night.

Here's where you were lying, and here's where the water came up to during the night."

Campian looked somewhat grave as he contemplated the jagged edge of sticks and straws which demarcated the water-line, and remembered that awful advancing wave bellowing down upon him.

"Yes – It was a near thing," he said – "a very near thing."

But a word from the forester dispelled all such weighty reflections, and that word was "Chikór!"

In and out among the grass and stones the birds were running—*running*. The more they were shouted at the more they ran. At last several of them rose. It was a long shot, but down came one.

This was repeated again and again. All the shots were long shots, and there were as many misses as birds. There were plenty of birds, but they persistently forebore to rise.

"Now you see why I'm not keen on chikór shooting, old chap," said Upward, as after a couple of hours this sport was voted hardly worth while. And subsequently Bhallu Khan expressed the opinion to his master that the strange sahib did not seem much of a shikari. He might have made quite a heavy bag – there were the birds, right under his feet, but he would not shoot – he would wait for them to rise – and they invariably rose much too far off to fire at with any chance of bringing them down.

Chapter Four.

Incidental

“I’m afraid, Nesta, my child, that your soldier friends will have to alight somewhere else if they want any chikór,” pronounced Campian, subsiding upon a boulder to light his pipe. “We’ve railroaded them around this valley to such purpose that you can’t get within a couple of hundred yards. When are they due, by the way – the sodgers, not the chikór?”

“To-day, I think. They have been threatening for the last fortnight.”

“Threatening! Ingrate! Only think what a blessing their arrival will shed. You will hear all the latest ‘gup’ from Shâlalai, and have a couple of devoted poodles, all eagerness to frisk, and fetch and carry – wagging their tails for approving pats, and all that sort of thing. And you must be tired of this very quiet life, unrelieved save by a couple of old fogies like yours truly and Upward?”

“Ah, I’m tired of the ‘gup’ of Shâlalai. I’m not sure I’m not quite tired of soldiers.”

“That begins to look brisk for me, my dear girl, I being – bar Upward – nearly the only civilian in Baluchistan. The only flaw in this to me alluring vista now opened out is – how long will it last? First of all, sit down. There’s no fun in standing unnecessarily.”

She sat down on the boulder beside him, and began to play

with the smoothness of the barrels of the gun, which leaned against the rock between them. It was early morning. These two had strolled *off* down the valley together directly after *chota hazri*— as they had taken to doing of late. A couple of brace of chikór lay on the ground at their feet, the smallness of the “bag” bearing out the accuracy of Campian’s prognostication as to the decadence of that form of sport. The sun, newly risen, was flooding the valley with a rush of golden ether; reddening the towering crags, touching, with a silver wand, the carpet of dewdrops in the valley bottom, and mist-hung spider webs which spanned the juniper boughs – while from many a slab-like cliff came the crowing of chikór, pretty, defiant in the safety of altitude – rejoicing in the newly-risen dawn.

Some fifty yards off, Bhallu Khan, having spread his chuddah on the ground, and put the shoes from off his feet – was devoutly performing the prescribed prostrations in the direction of the Holy City, repeating the while the aspirations and ascriptions wherewith the Faithful – good, bad and indifferent – are careful to hallow the opening of another day.

“You were asserting yourself tired of the garrison,” went on Campian. “Yes? And wherefore this – caprice, since but the other day you were sworn to the sabre?”

“Was I? Well perhaps I’ve changed my mind. I may do that, you know. But I don’t like any of those at Shâlalai. And – the nice ones are all married.”

This escaped her so spontaneously, so genuinely, that

Campion burst out laughing.

“Oh that’s the grievance, is it?” he said. “And what about the others who are – not nice?”

“Oh, I just fool them. Some of them think they’re fooling me. I let it go far enough, and then they suddenly find out I’ve been fooling them. It’s rather a joke.”

“Ever taken anyone seriously?”

“That’s telling.”

“All right, then. Don’t tell.”

She looked up at him quickly. Her eyes seemed to be trying to read his face, which, beyond a slightly amused elevation of one eyebrow, was absolutely expressionless.

“Well, I have then,” she said, with a half laugh.

“So? Tell us all about it, Nessita.”

She looked up quickly – “I say, that’s rather a good name – I like it. It sounds pretty. No one ever called me that before.”

“Accept it from me, then.”

“Yes, I will. But, do you know – it’s awful cheek of you to call me by my name at all. When did you first begin doing it, by the way?”

“Don’t know. I suppose it came so natural as not to mark an epoch. Couldn’t locate the exact day or hour to save my life. Shall I return to ‘Miss Cheriton?’”

“You never did say that. You never called me anything – until –”

“Likely. It’s a little way I have. I say – It’s rather fun chikór

shooting in the early morning. What?"

"That means, I suppose, that you're tired of talking, and would like to go on." And she rose from her seat.

"Not at all. Sit down again. That's right. For present purposes it means that you won't go out with me any more like this of a morning after those two Johnnies come."

"You won't want me then. You can all go out together. I should only be in the way."

"That remark would afford nine-tenths of the British Army the opportunity of retorting, '*You* could never be that.' I, however, will be brutally singular. Very probably you would be in the way – "

"Thanks."

"*If* we all went out together – I was going to say when you interrupted me."

A touch on the arm interrupted *hint*. It came from Bhallu Khan, who, having concluded his devotions was standing at Campian's side, making vehement gesticulations of warning and silence.

"Eh – what is it?" whispered Campian, looking eagerly in the direction pointed at by the other.

The forester shook his head, and continued to gesticulate. Then he put both forefingers to his head, one on each side above the ears, pointing upwards.

"Does he mean he has seen the devil?" said Campian wonderingly. "I guess he's trying to make us understand 'horns.'"

Nesta exploded in a peal of laughter, which, though melodious enough to human ears, must have had a terrifying effect on whatever had been designated by Bhallu Khan. He ceased to point eagerly through the scrub, but his new gesticulations meant unmistakably that the thing, whatever it might be, was gone.

All the Hindustani they could muster between them – and that wasn't much – failed to make the old forester understand. He smiled talked – then smiled again. Then they all laughed together – But that was all.

Although actually on the scene of his midnight peril, Campian gave that experience no further thought. Nearly a fortnight had gone by since then, and no further alarm had occurred. Bhallu Khan had made inquiries and in the result had learned that the adjacent and then somewhat dreaded Marri tribe was innocent of the playful little event which had so nearly terminated Campian's allotted span of joys and sorrows. The assailants were Brahuis, of a notoriously marauding clan of that tribe, located in the Khelat district. What they were doing here, so far away from their own part of the country, however, he had not learned, or, if he had, for reasons of his own he kept it to himself. This intelligence lifted what shadow of misgiving might have lingered in the minds of Upward and his wife, as showing that the incident was a mere chance affair, and no indication of restlessness or hostility on the part of the tribesmen in their own immediate neighbourhood.

Another fact gleaned by Bhallu Khan was that the man who had fallen to Campian's shot was not killed – nor even

fatally wounded. This relieved all their minds, especially that of the shooter. It saved all sorts of potential trouble in the way of investigation and so forth – likewise it dispelled sundry unpleasant visions of a blood feud, which now and then would obtrude in spite of all efforts at reasoning them away; for these fierce fanatical mountaineers were hardly the men to suffer bloodshed to pass unavenged. However, no one was much hurt, and the marauders had taken themselves off to their own side of the country. Thus for about ten days had life in Upward's camp held on its way just as though no narrow escape of grim tragedy had thrown the visitor into its midst. Its inmates rejoiced in the open air life, and, save at night or for an afternoon siesta, were seldom indoors. The male section thereof, notwithstanding plentiful denunciation of the wily *chikór* and its ways, devoted much time to the pursuit of that exasperating biped, and all would frequently join hands in exploring the surrounding country – tiffin accompanying – to be laid out picnic fashion at some picturesque spot, whether of breezy height or in the cool shade of a *tangi*. Thus did Upward perform his forest inspections, combining business with pleasure – and everybody was content.

And this statement we make of set purpose. No more aspirations after a return to Shâlalai were now in the air. The infusion of a new element into the daily life of the camp seemed to make a difference. Campian and the two younger girls were friends of old. He did not mind their natural cheekiness – he had a great liking for them, and it only amused him; moreover,

it kept things lively. And Nesta Cheriton – sworn worshipper of the sabre, speedily came to the conclusion that all that was entertaining and companionable was not a monopoly vested in the wearers of Her Majesty's uniform.

For between her and the new arrival a very good understanding had been set up – a very good understanding indeed. But he, in the maturity of years and experience, made light of what might have set another man thinking. They were thrown together these two – and camp life is apt to throw people very much together – He was the only available male, wherefore she made much of him. Given, however, the appearance of two or three lively subalterns on the scene, and he thought he knew how the land would lie. But the consciousness in no wise disquieted him; on the contrary it afforded him a little good-humouredly cynical amusement. He knew human nature, as peculiar to either sex no less than as common to both, and he had reached a point in life when the preferences of the ornamental sex, for any permanent purpose, mattered nothing. But the study of it as a mere subject of dissection did afford him a very great amount of entertainment.

Mature cynic as he was, yet now, looking down at the girl at his side as they took their way back through the wild picturesque valley bottom, the dew shining like silver in the fast ascending sun, a moist woodland odour arising from beneath the juniper trees, he could not but admit to himself that her presence here made a difference – a very great difference. She was wondrously

pretty, in the fair, golden-haired style; had pretty ways too – soft, confiding – and a trick of looking up at one that was a trifle dangerous. Only that he felt rather sure it was all part of her way with the male sex in general, and not turned on for his benefit in particular, he might have wondered.

“Well?” she said, looking up suddenly, “what is it all about?”

“You. I was thinking a great deal about you. Now you are going to say I had much better have been talking to you.”

“No. But tell me what you were thinking.”

“I was thinking how deftly you got away from that question of mine – about the one occasion when you *did* take someone seriously. Now tell us all about it.”

“Ah – I’m not going to tell you.”

“Not, eh?”

“No – no – no! Perhaps some day.”

“Well you’ll have to look sharp, for I’m off in a day or two.”

“No? you’re not!” she cried, in a tone very like that of real consternation. “Ah, you’re just trying to crowd it on. Why, you’re here for quite a long time.”

“Very well. You’ll see. Only, don’t say I never told you.”

“But you mustn’t go. You needn’t. Look here – You’re not to.”

“That sounds rather nice – Very nice indeed. And wherefore am I not to go, Nessita, mine angel?”

“Because I don’t want you to. You’re rather a joke, you know, and – ”

” – And – what?”

“Nothing.”

“That ought to settle it. Only I don’t flatter myself my departure will leave any gap. Remaineth there not a large garrison at Shâlalai – horse, foot, and artillery?”

“Oh, hang the garrison at Shâlalai! You’re detestable. I don’t like you any more.”

“No? Well what will make you like me any more?”

“If you stay.”

“That settles it. I cannot depart in the face of that condition,” he answered, the gravity of his words and tone simply belied by a whimsical twinkle of the eyes. She, looking up, saw this.

“Ah, I believe you’ve been cramming all the time. I’ll ask Mr Upward when we get in, and if you have, I’ll never forgive you.”

“Spare thyself the trouble O petulant one, for it would be futile in any case. If I have been telling nasty horrid wicked little taradiddles, Upward won’t give me away, for I shall tip him the masonic wink not to. *You* won’t spot it, though you are staring us both in the face all the time. So you’ll have to keep your blind faith in me, anyhow. Hallo! Stay still a minute. There are some birds.”

In and out among the grass and stones, running like barn-door fowl was a large covey. This time a whoop and a handful of gravel from Bhallu Khan was effective. The covey rose with a jarring “whirr” as one bird. A double shot – a bird fell to each.

“Right and left. That’s satisfactory. I’m getting my hand in,” remarked Campian. “They’re right away,” looking after the

covey, “and I feel like breakfast time. Glad we are almost back.”

The white tents half-hidden in the apricot tope, and sheltered by the fresh and budding green, looked picturesque enough against a background of rugged and stony mountain ridge, the black vertical jaws of the *tangi*, now waterless, yawning grim like the jaws of some silent waiting monster. Native servants in their snowy puggarees, flitted to and fro between the camp and the cook-tent, whence a wreath of blue smoke floated skyward. A string of camels had just come in, and were kneeling to have their loads removed, keeping up the while their hoarse snarling roar, each hideous antediluvian head turning craftily on its weird neck as though watching the chance of getting in a bite. But between them and their owners, three or four wild looking Baluchis – long-haired and turban-crowned – the understanding, whether of love or fear, seemed complete, for these went about their work of unloading, the normal expression of impassive melancholy stamped upon their copper-hued countenances undergoing no change.

“Well, how many did you shoot?” cried Hazel, running out from the tents as the two came in. “Only six!” as Bhallu Khan held up the “bag.” “Pho! Why we heard about twenty shots. Didn’t we, Lily?”

“More. I expect they were thinking of you when they named this place,” said the latter.

“Thought something cheeky was coming,” remarked Campian tranquilly. “The ‘cow-catcher’ adorning thy most speaking

countenance, Lilian my cherub, has an extra upward tendency this morning. No pun intended, of course.”

“Oh – oh – oh!” A very hoot was all the expression that greeted this disclaimer. But a sudden summons to breakfast cut short further sparring.

“Upward, what’s the meaning of Chirria Bach?” asked Campian when they were seated. Lily and Hazel clapped their hands and cackled. Upward looked up, with a laugh.

“It means ‘miss a bird’ old chap. Didn’t you know?”

“No. I never thought of it. Very good, Lilian my seraph. Now I see the point of that extra smart remark just now. What do you think, Mrs Upward? she said this place must have been named after me.”

“They’re very rude children, both of them,” was the laughing reply. “But I can’t sympathise. I’m afraid you make them worse.”

A wild crow went up from the two delinquents. Campian shook his head gravely.

“After that we had better change the subject,” he said. “By the way, Upward, old Bhallu Khan went through an extraordinary performance this morning. I want you to tell me the interpretation thereof.”

“Was he saying his prayers? Have another chikór, old chap?”

“No – not his prayers. Thanks, I will. They eat rather better than they shoot. Nesta and I were deep in the discussion of scientific and other matters – ”

“Oh, yes.”

This from Lily, meaningly.

“Lilian, dearest. If you can tell the story better than I can” – with grave reproach.

“Never mind – go on – go on” – rapped out the delinquent.

– In the discussion of scientific and other matters,” resumed Campian, eyeing his former interruptor, “when Bhallu Khan suddenly enjoined silence. He then put his fingers to his head – so – and mysteriously pointed towards the nullah. It dawned on me that he meant something with horns; but I knew there couldn’t be *gadh* or *markhôr* right down here in the valley, and close to the camp. Then Nesta came to the rescue by suggesting that he must have seen the devil.”

“Ah, I didn’t suggest it!” cried Nesta. But her disclaimer was drowned in a wild yelp of ecstasy that volleyed forth from the two younger girls; in the course of which Hazel managed to swallow her tea the wrong way, and spent the next ten minutes choking and spluttering.

Upward was shaking in quiet mirth.

“He didn’t mean the devil at all, old chap, only a hare,” he explained.

“A hare?” uttered Campian.

The blankness of his amazement started the two off again.

“Only a hare! Good heavens! But a hare, even in Baluchistan, hasn’t got horns.”

“He meant its ears. Come now, it was rather smart of him – wasn’t it? Old Bhallu Khan is smart all round. He *buks* a heap,

and is an old bore at times, but he's smart enough."

"Yes. It was smart. Yet the combined intelligence of Nesta and myself couldn't get beyond the devil."

"Speak for yourself then," she laughed. And just then Tinkles, rushing from under the table, darted forth outside, uttering a succession of fierce and fiery barks.

"I expect it's those two Johnnies arriving," said Upward, rising. "Yes, it is," as he lifted the "chick" and looked outside.

They all went forth. Two horsemen were turning off the road and making for the camp.

Chapter Five.

Concerning Two Fools

“Major Bracebrydge – Captain Fleming” – introduced Upward. The first lifted his hat punctiliously to Campian, the second put out his hand. To the rest of the party both were already known.

“Well – ar – Upward – lots of chikór, eh?” began the first.

“Swarms. But they’ve become beastly wild. Campian has been harrying them ever since we found him one dark night half in half out of the nullah in flood.”

“Oh, yes; we heard something of that I suppose – ar – Mr Campian – it wasn’t one magnified by half-a-dozen – ah, ha – ha. You were travelling after dinner, you know – ah – ha – ha?”

A certain amount of chaff in fair good fellowship Campian didn’t mind. But the element of *bonhomie* was lacking alike in the other’s tone and demeanour. The laugh too, was both fat and feeble. He did not deem this specimen of garrison wit worthy of any answer. The other seemed disappointed.

“I see our camels have turned up,” he went on. “By Jove, Upward, I’ve got a useless lot of servants. That new bearer of mine wants kicking many times a day. Look at him now – over there. Just look at the brute – squatting on his haunches when he ought to be getting things together. I say though, you’ve got all the

best of it here” – surveying the apricot *tope*, which was incapable of sheltering even one more tent – “we shall get all the sun.”

“Sorry they didn’t plant more trees, old chap,” said Upward. “But then we are here for a longish time, whereas it’s only a few days with you. Come in and have a ‘peg.’ Fleming – how about a ‘peg’?”

“Oh, very much about a ‘peg,’” responded Fleming with alacrity. He had been renewing his acquaintance with Nesta about as volubly as time allowed.

“Well, what *khubbur* from below?” asked Upward, when they were seated in the large dining tent, discussing the said “pegs.”

“Oh, the usual thing,” said Bracebrydge. “Tribes restless Khelat way – that’s nothing – they always are restless.”

“Ever since you’ve been in the country, old chap?” rejoined Upward, with a dry smile, the point of which lay in the fact that the man who undertook to give an exhaustive and authoritative opinion on the country was absolutely new to it. He was not quartered at Shâlalai, nor anywhere else in Baluchistan; but was up, on furlough, from a hot station in the lower plains.

“There is some talk of disturbance, though,” said Fleming. “Two or three of the Brahui sirdars sent a message to the A.G.G., which was offhand, not to say cheeky. Let them. We’ll soon smash ’em up.”

“You may do,” said Upward. “But there’ll be lively times first. Then there’s all that disaffection in lower India. Things are looking dicky – devilish dicky. I shouldn’t wonder if we saw

something before long. I've always said so."

Then they got away from the general question to *gup* of a more private nature – even station *gup*.

"When are you coming back to Shâlalai, Miss Cheriton?" said Fleming, in the midst of this.

"I don't know. I've only just left it," Nesta answered. "Not for a long time, I think."

"That's awful hard lines on Shâlalai, Miss Cheriton – ah – ha – ha," said Bracebrydge, twirling the ends of his moustache, which, waxed out on a level with the line of his mouth, gave him a sort of barber's block expression, which however, the fair of the above city, and of elsewhere, deemed martial and dashing to a degree. This effect, in their sight, was heightened by a jagged scar extending from the left eye to the lower jaw, suggestive of a sword slash at close quarters, "facing the foe" – and so forth. As a matter of hard fact this honourable wound had been received while heading a storming party upon the quarters of a newly-joined and rather high tempered subaltern, for "hazing" purposes. The latter, anticipating such attentions had locked his door, and on the arrival of the "hazing" party, had given out that the first man to enter the room was going to receive something he wouldn't like in the least. The door was burst open, and with characteristic gallantry the first man to enter was Bracebrydge, who found the destined victim to be as good as his word, for he received a heavy article of crockery, deftly hurled, full in the face – and he didn't like it in the least – for it cut him so badly right

along the cheek that he had to retire perforce, bleeding hideously. The next day the newly-joined subaltern sent in his papers, saying he had no wish to belong to a service wherein it was necessary to take such measures to defend oneself against the overgrown schoolboy rowdyism of "brother" officers, and subsequently won distinction and the V.C. as a daring and gallant leader of irregular horse in other parts of Her Majesty's dominions.

"I suppose you fellows will want to give the birds a turn," said Upward, after tiffin. "We'll get the ponies and start shooting from about four miles down the valley. I'm afraid they're beastly wild until we get that far."

"Don't know that I feel up to it," said Fleming. "Beastly fag the ride up this morning. Think I'll just take it easy here in camp, Upward. You and Bracebrydge can go. It'll be all the better for yourselves; three guns are sure to have more sport than four."

Campian, who was in the joke, caught a sly wink from Upward, and mightily enjoyed it. Here was the latter's prediction being already fulfilled.

"What sort of fellow are you, Fleming?" said Bracebrydge. "What's the good of coming up here on purpose to shoot, and then hanging up in camp? Now I had thought of not going out. The fact is, I want to fetch a snooze."

"Oh you don't want a snooze. You snored for ten hours at a stretch the way up last night," retorted Fleming. "Now I didn't, and feel cheap in consequence. You go along now, or you'll spoil the party. Upward and Mr Campian are both keen on it."

“Rather. One of you fellows must come,” declared Upward, bent on keeping up the fun. “We might spare one of you, but not both. Three guns we must have, to cover the ground properly.”

“Then Fleming had better go,” said Bracebrydge. “I’m sleepy.”

“No fear, I’m going to remain in camp,” declared Fleming. “I’m sleepy, too.”

“Why don’t you toss for it?” suggested Upward. “Sudden death – the winner to do as he likes.”

The idea took on, and Fleming came out the winner.

“All right, Bracebrydge,” said the latter, jubilant. “I’ll have my snooze while you sacrifice yourself in the cause of others – and sport.”

The latter snarled, but even he drew the line at backing out of his pledge.

Meanwhile Campian, no longer able to restrain a roar, had hurried from the dining tent.

“What’s the joke, now?” called out Nesta, who, with Mrs Upward, was seated beneath the trees.

“Yes, it *is* a joke.”

“Well, we’re spoiling to hear it; go on.”

“Ssh – ssh! little girls shouldn’t be impatient. The joke is this – Wait. They’re coming,” with a look over his shoulder.

“No. They’re not. Quick quick. What is it?”

“Well, the spectacle of two fellows old enough to know better, who have come all the way up here on purpose to shoot, both keenly competing as to who shall have the privilege of remaining

in camp, is comical – to say the least of it.”

“Ah, I don’t believe it – ” said Nesta.

“Not, eh? Well they have even gone so far as to toss for the privilege.”

“And who won?”

“Him they call Fleming. Where are you going to take him for his afternoon stroll, Nessita? I warn you *we* are going *down* the valley.”

“Then *we* will go up it,” laughed the girl. “Yes, I think he is the best fun of the two.”

“A pair of great sillies, both of them,” laughed Mrs Upward.

“Steady. Here comes Fleming. But you won’t see much of him. He is only remaining behind with the express object of having an afternoon snooze. Ta-ta – I’m off.”

Fleming, who was at that moment emerging from the dining tent came over to the two ladies, and throwing himself on the ground, lighted another cheroot and began to talk. He was still talking animatedly when the shooters started.

“I say, Fleming, when are you going to have your snooze?” called out Bracebrydge nastily. “You don’t look so sleepy now as you did – Ar – ha – ha!” The shooters proceeded on the plan laid down, except that Bracebrydge suggested they should leave the ponies much sooner than was at first intended. Then, being in a villainous temper, he shot badly, and wondered what the devil they had come to such an infernally rotten bit of shooting for, and cursed the attendant forest guard, and made a studiously

offensive remark or two to Campian, who received the same with the silence of utter contempt. Before they had been at it an hour, he flung down his gun and burst out with:

“Look here Upward, I can’t shoot a damn to-day, and my boot is chafing most infernally. I shall be lame for a month if I walk any more. Couldn’t one of these fellows fetch my pony? I’ll go back to camp.”

“All right, old chap; do just as you like,” replied Upward, giving the necessary orders.

“Why not get on the gee, and ride on with us” – suggested Campian, innocently. “The scenery is rather good further down.”

“Oh, damn the scenery! Look here though. I don’t want to spoil you two fellows’ shoot. You go on. Don’t wait for me. The nigger will be here with the horse directly.”

“No. There’s no point in waiting,” assented Upward. “We’ll go on eh, Campian? So long, Bracebrydge.”

The two resumed their shoot, cutting down a bird here and a bird there, and soon came together again.

“That’s a real show specimen, that man Bracebrydge,” remarked Campian. “What made you freeze on to him, Upward?”

“Oh, I met him in the Shâlalai club. I never took to the man, but he was in with some others I rather liked. It was Fleming who brought him up here.”

“So? But, do you know, it’s a sorrowful spectacle to see a man of his age – already growing grey – making such an egregious

ass of himself. Mind you, I'm not surprised at him being a little 'gone' – she's a very taking little girl – but to give himself away as he does, that's where the lunacy of the affair comes in."

Upward chuckled.

"Bless your life, old chap, Bracebrydge isn't really 'gone' there."

"Not, eh? Then he's a bigger idiot than even I took him for, letting himself go like that."

"It's his way. He does just the same with every woman he comes across, if she's at all decent-looking, and what's more is under the impression she must be wildly 'gone' on him; and by the way, some of them have been. Wait till we get back to Shâlalai; you may see some fun in that line."

"They must be greater fools even than himself. I'm not a woman-hater, but really the sex can roll out some stupendous examples of defective intelligence – but then, to be fair, so can our own – as for instance Bracebrydge himself. What sort of place is this, Upward?" he broke off, as they came upon a low tumble-down wall surrounding a tree; the enclosure thus formed was strewn with loose horns, as of sheep and goats, and yet not quite like them.

"Why, it's a sort of rustic shrine, rigged up to some Mohammedan saint. Isn't it, Bhallu Khan?" translating the remark.

The forester reached over the wall, and picking up a markhôr horn, worn and weather-beaten, held it towards them.

“He says it’s where the people come to make offerings,” translated Upward. “When they want to have a successful stalk they vow a pair of markhôr horns at a place like this.”

“And then deposit it here, and then the noble Briton, if in want of such a thing to hang in his hall, incontinently bones it, and goes home and lies about it ever after,” cut in Campian. “Isn’t that how the case stands?”

“I don’t think so. The horns wouldn’t be good enough to make it worth while.”

“I suppose not,” examining the one tendered him by the forester. “I didn’t know the cultus of Saint Hubert obtained among Mohammedans. Do these people have legends and local ghosts, and all that kind of thing?”

“Rather. You just set old Bhallu Khan yarning – pity you can’t understand him though. Look. See that very tree over there?” pointing out a large juniper. “He has a yarn about a fakir who used to jump right over the top of it every day for a year.”

“So? What did he do that for? As a pious exercise?”

“Something of the kind. But the joke of it is, the thing happened a devil of a time ago. When I pointed out to him that any fool could have done the same, considering that the tree needn’t have been more than a yard high, even then he hardly sees it.”

“I should doubt that, Upward. My opinion is that our friend Bhallu Khan was endeavouring to pull his superior’s leg when he told that story.”

“They are very stupid in some ways, though sharp as the devil in others. And the odd part of it is that most of their local sacred yarns are of the most absurd kind – well, like the tree and fakir story.”

“They are rather a poor lot these Baluchis, aren’t they? They don’t go in for a lot of jewels, on their clothes and swords, like the Indian rajahs?”

“No. Some of the Afghan sirdars do, though – or at any rate used to.”

“So? And what became of them all?”

“They have them still – though wait – let me see. There are yarns that some are hidden away, so as not to fall into the hands of other tribes as loot. There was a fellow named Keogh in our service who made a good haul that way. A Pathân brought him an old battered sword belt, encrusted with rough looking stones, which he had dug up, and wanted ten rupees for it Keogh beat him down to five, and brought the thing as a curio. How much do you think he sold it for?”

“Well?”

“Four thousand. The stones were sapphires.”

“Where was this?” asked Campian quickly. “Anywhere near here?”

“No. Out the other side of Peshawur. You seem keen on the subject, old chap! You haven’t got hold of a notion there’s anything to be done in that line around here, eh?”

“Hardly. This sort of country doesn’t grow precious stones, I

guess, except precious big ones.”

“Where’s Bracebrydge?” queried Upward, on their return to camp two hours later.

“He isn’t back yet,” replied Nesta, with a very mischievous laugh.

“What? Why, he left us more than a couple of hours ago. What can have become of the chap? He ought to have been back long before us.”

“He was back, but he started off again,” said Mrs Upward. “This time he went the other way” – whereat both Nesta and Fleming laughed immoderately.

“I think he started to hunt us up, didn’t he, Mrs Upward?” spluttered the latter.

“Oh, I don’t know. But – I believe you saw him and gave him the go-by” – whereat the inculpated pair exchanged glances, and spluttered anew.

“I see,” said Upward, amusing himself by beginning to tease Tinkles – whose growls and snaps afforded him considerable mirth. “How’s his chafed foot now – Oh-h!” The last as the little terrier, getting in a bite, half play, half earnest, nipped him through his trousers.

“He didn’t say anything about his chafed foot. Why, here he comes.”

A very sulky looking horseman rode up and dismounted. Upon him Fleming turned a fire of sly chaff; which had the effect of rendering Bracebrydge sulkier than ever, and Bracebrydge

sulky was not a pleasant fellow by any means. He retorted accordingly.

“Never mind, old chap,” cut in Upward. “It’s all right now, and nearly dinner time. Let’s all have a ‘peg.’ Nothing like a ‘peg’ to give one an appetite.”

Chapter Six.

Of the Ruby Sword

Not without reasons of his own had Campian made such careful and minute inquiries as to the traditions and legends of the strange, wild country in which his lot was temporarily cast, and the key to those reasons was supplied in a closely-written sheet of paper which he was intently studying on the morning after the above conversation. It was, in fact, a letter.

Not for the first or second time was he studying this. It had reached him just after his arrival in the country, and the writer thereof was his father.

The latter had been a great traveller in his younger days, and was brimful of Eastern experience; full too, of reminiscence, looking back to perilous years passed among fierce, fanatical races, every day of which represented just so many hours of carrying his life in his hand. Now he was spending the evening of life in peace and quiet. This was the passage which Campian was now studying:

“It came to me quite as a surprise to hear you were in Afghanistan; had I known you thought of going, there are a few things we might have talked over together. I don’t suppose the country is much changed. Oriental countries never do change, any more than their people.

“You remember that affair we have often talked about, when I saved the life of the Durani emir, Dost Hussain, and the story of the hiding of the ruby sword. It – together with the remainder of the treasure – was buried in a cave in a long narrow valley called Kachîn, running almost due east and west. The mountain on the north side is pierced by a very remarkable *tangi*, the walls of which, could they be closed, would fit like the teeth of a steel trap. I never saw the place myself, but Dost Hussain often used to tell me about it when he promised me half of the buried valuables. I was not particular to go into the subject with him in those days, for I had a strong repugnance to the idea of being paid for saving a man’s life; indeed I used to tell him repeatedly I did not need so costly a gift. But he would not hear of my objections, declaring that when he was able to return for his property half of it should be mine, and I fully believe he would have kept his word, for he was a splendid fellow – more like an Arab than an Asiatic. But Dost Hussain was killed by the Brahuis, and, so far as I was concerned, the secret of the hidden valuables died with him. The only man I know of who shared it was his brother, the Syyed Aîn Asrâf, but he is probably dead, or, at any rate must have recovered it long ago. The sword alone would have been of immense value. I saw it once. Both hilt and scabbard were encrusted with splendid rubies and other stones, but mostly rubies – and there were other valuables.

“It occurs to me that all this must have been hidden somewhere about where you are now, and, if so, you might make

a few inquiries. I would like to know whether the sword was ever found or not. Find out if Aïn Asrâf is still alive. If so, he must be very old now. It would be interesting to me to hear how that affair ended, and would give an additional object to your travels..." Then the letter went on to touch upon other matters, and concluded.

As we have said, it was not the first time Campian had pondered over these words, but every time he did so something in them seemed to strike him in a fresh light. Well he remembered hearing his father tell the story by word of mouth, but at such time it had interested him *as* a story and no more. Now, however, that he was in the very scene of its enactment, it seemed to gain tenfold interest. What if this buried treasure had never been recovered, had lain hidden all these years. The affair dated back to the forties. Afghanistan his father had called it – but this was Afghanistan then. In those days it owned allegiance to the Amir of Kâbul.

A long, narrow valley running almost due east and west! There were many such valleys. And the *tangi*? Why the very *tangi* at whose mouth their camp was pitched was the only one cleaving the mountain range on the northern side, and its configuration was exactly that of the one described in his father's letter. He could not resist a thrill of the pulses. What if this splendid treasure were in reality right under his hand – if he only knew where to lay his hand upon it? There came the rub. The mountain sides here and there were simply honeycombed

with caves. To strike the right one without some clue would be a forlorn quest indeed; and he could talk neither Baluch nor Hindustani. The very wildness of the possibility availed to quell any rising excitement to which he might have felt inclined upon the subject; besides, was it likely that this treasure – probably of double value, both on account of its own worth, and constituting a sort of heirloom – would have been allowed to lie buried for forty years or so, and eventually have been forgotten? Somebody or other must have known its hiding place. No; any possibility to the contrary must be simply chimerical.

Just then the “chik” was lifted, and Upward’s head appeared within the tent.

“Can I come in, old chap? Look here, we are all going on a little expedition, so you roll out and come along. There’s a bit of new enclosed forest I want to look at and report on, so we are going to make a picnic of it. There’s a high *kotal* between cliffs, which gives one a splendid view; then we can go down into the valley, and home again round another way, through a fine *tangi* which is well worth seeing.”

“I’m right on, Upward. I’ll roll out. Do you mind sending Khola in with the bath?”

“That’s it. We are going to have breakfast a little earlier, and start immediately afterwards. Will that suit you?”

“To a hair!”

The start was duly made, and Lily and Hazel found immense fun in watching the efforts of the two knights of the sabre to

secure the privilege of riding beside Nesta, with the result that, as neither would give way, the path, when it began to narrow, became inconveniently crowded. The girl was looking very pretty in a light blouse and habit skirt; her blue eyes dancing with mischievous mirth over the recollection of the wild rush they had made to assist her to mount; and how she, having accorded that privilege to Fleming, the other had promptly taken advantage of it by manoeuvring his steed to the side of hers, thus, for the time being, effectually “riding out” the much disgusted Fleming.

“What’s the real name of this place, Upward?” said Campian, when they were fairly under way.

“Chirria Bach,” said Lily. “We told you before. It was named after you.”

“Not of thee did I humbly crave information, mine angelic Lil. I record the fact more in sorrow than in anger,” he answered.

“It’s called that on the Government maps,” said Upward. “I think it has another name – Kachîn, I believe they call it – don’t they, Bhallu Khan?”

“*Ha, Huzoor*, Kachîn,” assented the forester, who was riding just behind.

“Is it the whole district, or only just this valley?” went on Campian.

“Only just this valley,” translated Upward, who had put the question to the old Pathân.

“Strange now – that I should be here, isn’t it? I’ve heard my father speak of this place. You know he was out here a lot – years

ago – I suppose there isn't another of the same name, is there?"

"He says, nowhere near this part of the country," said Upward, rendering Bhallu Khan's reply. "But what made your father mention this place in particular? Was he in any row here?"

"Perhaps he 'missed birds' here, too," cut in the irrepressible Lily. "I know. It was named after him – not you."

"That's it. Of course it was. Now, I never thought of that before," assented Campian, with a stare of mock amazement. "I believe, however, Upward, that as a matter of fact, he remembered the rather remarkable formation of that *tangi* behind the camp."

Then he dropped out of the conversation, and thought over what he had just heard. Truly this thing was becoming interesting. He had located the very place. There could be no mistake about that. He had been on the point of asking if Bhallu Khan had heard the story of the flight of the Durani chief, or of Syyed Aïn Asrâf, but decided to let that alone for the present.

"Who is that bounder, Campian?" Bracebrydge was saying. "Does anyone know?"

"He isn't a 'bounder,'" returned Nesta shortly. "He's awfully nice."

"Oh, awfully nice – ah – ha – ha – ha!" sneered Bracebrydge, with his vacuous laugh. "Very sorry. Didn't know he was such a friend of yours."

"But he is."

"Pity he goes about looking such a slouch then, isn't it?"

"It would be – if he did. But then everybody doesn't see the sense of knocking about among rocks and stones got up as if he was just turned out of a band box, Major Bracebrydge," she returned, quite angrily.

"Oh. Sorry I spoke – ah – ha – ha!" he retorted, recognising a shaft levelled at his own immaculate turnout. Fleming came to the rescue.

"Don't know what's wrong with this fellow, Miss Cheriton. He's been so crusty the last day or two. He ought to be invalided. Bracebrydge, old man, buck up."

A couple of hours of easy riding, and the whole party gained the *kotal*, to which we heard Upward make reference, and his eulogy of the view afforded therefrom was in no sense undeserved. Right in front the ground fell abruptly, well nigh precipitously, to a great depth; and in the valley, or basin beneath, here and there a plot of flat land under cultivation stood out green among the rolling furrows of grey rock and sombre vegetation. Opposite rose a mighty mass of mountain, piled up tier upon tier of great cliffs, and beyond this, far away to the left, a lofty range dark with juniper, swept round to meet the heights which shut in the amphitheatre from that side. Down into this the bridle path over the *kotal* wound, looking like a mere crack in a wall. A great crag towered right overhead, its jutting pinnacles and ledges standing defiantly forth against the sky.

"Not a bad spot for a picnic, is it?" said Upward complacently, as, having dismounted, they stood taking in the view.

“By Jove, no,” said Fleming. “Phew! what an idea of depth it conveys, looking right down into that hole. Look Miss Cheriton. There are some people moving down there. They seem about as big as flies.”

“How big are flies? I always thought flies were small?” cut in Lily, the irrepressible.

“Not always. Depends upon the fly,” murmured Campian.

“Well, I shall have to leave you people for a while,” said Upward. “There’s a new plantation up the hill I want to look at. Sha’n’t be more than an hour, and we can have tiffin then. It’s quite early yet.”

“I’ll go with you, Upward,” said Campian. And the two started, attended by Bhallu Khan, mounted on his wiry Baluch pony.

“I’m getting deadly sick of that fellow Bracebrydge,” began Upward. “I wish to heaven he’d clear. He always wants to boss the whole show as if it belonged to him. Did you hear him trying to dictate where we were to pitch the tiffin camp?”

“Yes.”

“He always does that sort of thing, or tries to be funny at somebody else’s expense. I’m getting jolly sick of it.”

He was still more sick of it, when, on returning, he found that Bracebrydge had carried his point, and actually had caused a removal of the said site. However, Upward was of an easy going disposition, though addicted to occasional fidgety fits, so he came to the conclusion that it couldn’t be helped now, and

didn't really matter after all, and the tiffin was plenteous and good, and the soda water well cooled. So they fed, and chatted, and had a good time generally.

"I say, Upward. Can't someone throw a few bottles at that brute?" remarked Bracebrydge, as, cheroots having been lit, the male element stretched at full length on the ground, was lazily puffing at the same. "He'll crack the drum of one's blessed ears directly, the howling lunatic."

The noise complained of was a soft, melancholy, wailing sound, something between a flute and a concertina, and it proceeded from one of the forest guard, who was tootling into some instrument of native make.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.