

# THE HUNDRED DAYS

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TALBOT MUNDY



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# **The Hundred Days**

**Talbot Mundy**

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## **I. "They said You Have a Tale for Me; and so, by Allah, I am Here to Listen."**

They kept this out of the papers at the time, there being a fine-meshed censorship in force. Enough months have elapsed since, and enough events have happened to smoke-screen this one as effectually as if Julius Caesar and the Gauls had played the leading parts. The Prince went home alive. India resumed worrying about the price of homespun cotton, the next monsoon, and whether rupee-paper was likely to rise or fall. The *Pioneer* found front-page space for an account of spooks in a planter's bungalow. And all was well again.

"Set it down, why don't you?" King said; and Grim nodded. I demurred. Either King or Grim could have told the story better. But as

they sat on the end of my bed in the little white-washed ward, the one cleaning spurs and the other resplicing the wire-woven handle of a Persian scimitar, it was small use arguing with them.

King's excuse, that he had sore fingers and could not punch a typewriter, was possibly half-valid. It was why he was cleaning spurs for instance, instead of playing polo to get fit for the next adventure Fate might hold in store for him. Grim's argument, that he should not write the account because he had a hand in the affair, was more ridiculous, but just as useful, since it cloaked his incurable delight in doing lots and saying nothing, or, rather, less than nothing. What he does say usually adds to his obscurity.

"Write it, and omit me," Grim suggested. But you might as well omit Hamlet from the play.

Well, here I am, with a month of convalescence still ahead of me, sore from head to foot, sick of reading, and still more sick of the Peshawar climate, hospital diet, the squeak of a punkah, and the view of Allah's Slagheap from the window. So they've set a table for me in a corner where the flap of the punkah won't scatter the paper all over the place. My jaw being bandaged, the sweat, in all likelihood, won't drop down and make the ink run. Lord knows there's paper enough; the genial sawbones who runs this outfit (between bouts of preaching to wounded border-thieves) seems to think I propose to rewrite the Encyclopaedia—or one of his sermons. He has lent me his dictionary and a big jar of tobacco. Here begins:

Joan Angela came to India. That's the prelude to anything whatever except common-place. I believe she is twenty-six. I will bet she has twenty-six hundred admirers, including me, who would like to act Herod and kill off eligibles in order to destroy beforehand the inevitable lucky, but as yet unknown, blade who will some day persuade her to marry. And I daresay twenty-six million dollars would

look rather small beside her fortune since they brought in oil on her land in California. (Not that that matters; she would be Joan Angela Leich if she had only twenty-six cents.)

She came because the Prince's visit was likely to prove spectacular, and when we're young most of us will go a long way to see a circus. But it soon palled. The home papers got wind of it, too, and drew conclusions, the Prince being still a bachelor and about her age. So she cut short the round of visits and started to see India for herself, without so much as a by-your-leave or a hint to the Indian Government, which was a great deal too busy just then to notice much that wasn't obviously dangerous.

In times like that a Government falls back on odds and ends of stray resources. Undesirables are given short shrift, with apologies in the proper quarter later on, if called for. Men whose courses up and down the earth will bear investigation find surprising details forced on them, without much explanation and no insurance. You carry unexpected overloads at your own expense and risk, with no more prospect of reward than any decent fellow gets who likes to know he did not grudge the gift of manliness and muscle.

So Athelstan King, James Schuyler Grim and I—an Englishman and two Americans—with Narayan Singh, who is a Sikh and was a sepoy once, were under canvas by the left bank of Jumna River, swatting flies, smoking much more than was wholesome, and wishing the Prince were in London in the care of Scotland Yard.

There was a brigade of Indian Cavalry camped on our left hand, about two miles away; we could hear the horses neighing, as bored as we felt. On our right, two miles away again, was a regiment of Bombay Infantry. And there was a rumour to the effect that the Cavalry were there to watch the Infantry almost as much as to keep a

sharp eye on the border. But rumours are rife in these days, and the mere fact that a Bombay regiment had been ordered north was no proof that its loyalty had really been undermined by agitators. The men had their rifles. There was ammunition. And the officers looked more or less at ease, with their long legs sticking out from under home newspapers beneath the awnings, and all routine as usual.

To our rear, about ten miles away, was a fairly strong contingent of the Air Force, with Cavalry and Infantry to guard them from prowling border-thieves. Their 'planes were growling overhead all the time, patrolling in search of a reported lashkar of Pathans. Spies (and everyone is a potential spy for either side across the border) had brought word that the tribes were concentrating and admiring the notion of a row. The mullahs were said to be haranguing them, and the women were carrying about a month's supply of food and fuel. However, the airmen kept reporting they could see nothing, and their cameras told the same tale; and that meant either one of several probabilities.

It was possible the spies were deliberately arousing false expectations of a raid in that quarter in order to cover extensive preparations elsewhere. Or the tribes might have learned how to conceal themselves from the airmen, which should not be very difficult among those rocks and gorges, or even in the open, where the harsh grass in the distance resembled sea with wind across the tide. The other probability lay in the rear. Raids from over that North-West Frontier have been so frequent for a thousand years that an incursion was no more unlikely than rain is in some lands. It would be good strategy for folk who contemplated an uprising on the Indian side of the border to broadcast rumours of Pathan activity and so keep the military alert in the wrong quarter. However, danger of an uprising, and especially of concerted action between the tribes and the disaffected Punjab, presupposes leadership and some lines of

communication; which was how we came to be there. Athelstan King, who was a Colonel until recently, is supposed to understand that border better than the devils do who built it, and the devils' offspring who brew hell there. Jim Grim knows Arabs better, but has made himself a name in India too. I am their friend, which sufficiently accounts for me; they rang me in on it. Narayan Singh would rather risk his neck in Grim's company than be a maharajah.

We looked peaceful and innocent enough, but in fact we were a baited trap. Our servants, knowing no better, informed the world at large that I was the leader of a party contemplating an expedition across the border and into Persia--madness sufficient to account for trade goods lying loose in process of repacking, and for our incessant enquiries about camels, interpreters, guides, and what not else.

Great hairy ruffians oiled themselves and crept along the streams of mist at night to steal the trade-goods. One by one we caught them; for we had pitched camp by a deep, narrow nullah up which they were certain to come; barbed wire, broken glass, some dogs, and two acetylene searchlights made any other approach almost impossible. We noosed some, clubbed others, and caught a round half-dozen in a blunted bear-trap. Narayan Singh was fertile in new expedients; but as to the outcome, we treated all alike.

As soon as they recovered from the usually necessary man-handling we set them on their hunkers in a tent and talked the situation over, offering them liberty, and promising reward if they would put us in communication with a certain Kangra Khan.

"We're Americans," King would explain, telling two-thirds of the truth, which is plenty in that land. "We don't want our business known." That was absolutely true, and ample, since whatever we had said our real business was they would not have believed us. "We have a proposal



that will interest Kangra Khan. If he will come to us here, we will talk with him alone by night. And if he comes with no more than a two-man escort we will guarantee his personal safety."

They believed the last implicitly. That part of the game has always been played straight by the men who hold the border-line, and generally, too, by the wind-weaned rascals whose profitable sport it is to violate line, life, women, and most promises whenever possible. A verbal promise of safe-conduct is as good as a Chinaman's trade acceptance, flood, fire and Act of God alone excepted from the guarantee.

So on the eleventh night after we pitched camp the dogs barked furiously, which they would not have done if there had been another miscreant sneaking up the nullah. This was someone taking chances from the west, where by day we used to open a gap in the barbed wire tangle. We turned a searchlight on, and after a curt exchange of challenge and reply we saw him rise like a bear, dripping wet, out of a wisp of grey mist. His boat must have upset crossing the river.

Narayan Singh opened a gap in the wire, and he strode in with a British Service rifle in one hand and the other held over his eyes because the searchlight dazzled him. A fine, upstanding man he was; and I like that sort. His dripping sheepskin jacket increased an air of cavalierly independence; but it stank like the deuce, and King invited him to take it off and hang it on a stick in front of the fire to dry. He did that, but remained standing with his back toward the river, so I motioned him to a chair on the other side of the fire, between Grim and me.

"By Allah," he answered, opening a great gap of a grin in the midst of his black beard, "if my men should lose sight of me I might die with you, and I have business elsewhere! It is not so easy aiming in the

dark."

So I set the chair where his men could see him in the firelight; and the first thing he demanded when he sat down--awkwardly, unused to canvas chairs--was a rag and some oil for his wet rifle.

Narayan Singh, next on his left, offered to dry the rifle for him.

"I am a soldier. I can do it properly," he said.

"I will leave my life in a Sikh's hands when I have no more use for it!" Kangra Khan answered, and then waited, saying nothing, until Grim fetched him oil and rags. Thereafter he cleaned while he talked, squinting down the barrel at the firelight. I judged him a man of forethought and determination, to be trusted unconditionally in some ways, not at all in others, the latter perhaps predominating.

He was nearly as heavy as I am. And he was handsome, for his nose was not so hooked, nor his eye so cunning, as is usual along that frontier. The edge of a coil of black hair showed beneath his turban. His forehead was a thinker's, broad and level, with two heavy lines across it. First and last, there was nothing about him that suggested cowardice or even respect for heavy odds.

"They said you have a tale for me; and so, by Allah, I am here to listen," he said simply, all eyes for me. (They like big men where he came from, and I wore a beard at that time, which was another point in my favour.) However, King took up the argument--since argument there must be in the North, whatever else happens.

"The tale is this," he said, leaning forward to knock the ashes out of his pipe; and with his dark skin and Roman nose he looked in the firelight like one of Julius Caesar's men: "that you, Kangra Khan, are planning a raid while the Prince is in this part of India; and that I am

told off to prevent you." He sat back and filled his pipe again. He might have just remarked it was a fine night.

"Then by Allah's Prophet, thou and I are well met!" the hillman answered, showing his yellow teeth again. King struck a match, and it served to show his manly, unpretending smile.

"So now we understand each other," he said, puffing away at the pipe.

"Maybe. But it is Allah who prevents!" said Kangra Khan, with his eye on my servant, who was bringing out whisky from the tent. I poured him a straight tumblerful, and he tossed it off at a gulp. "The river was wet, and not warm," he remarked by way of thanks, offering no apology for drinking in defiance of the Koran; for which I liked him. Apology and explanation are due to one you may have injured; otherwise they are indecent. He said nothing about how he had managed to swim the hurrying Jumna, rifle in hand.

"Why should you choose this particular time?" King demanded, sailing as close to the eye of the wind as he could carry way.

"It is a good time," the hillman answered simply. Neither seemed inclined to ease his helm. They were coming at each other head on, so at a whisper from Grim I strode among the shadows and ordered the servants out of earshot.

"It is the worst time you could choose," King assured him.

"The eagle's opportunity--the hare's disadvantage--are one!" said Kangra Khan.

"You are not dealing with hares," King retorted. "You are blind if you think the eagles are not on our side."

"Aye, I have seen them. They have buzzed above us now for half a month."

"They lay eggs on the wing, those birds!" King suggested meaningly. "There is Cavalry and Infantry to right and left of us, and guns at the rear."

"Aye, but this is women's talk. I know the chances," Kangra Khan answered.

"Talk like a man, then!" growled Narayan Singh. It seemed to me that that was what the hillman had done, but the Sikh knew what he was doing.

"Meet me across the border, and I will show thee how a man fights!" the other retorted.

Narayan Singh was about to answer, but Grim interrupted him.

"None will talk if the time for fighting comes. Talk like a man first," he advised him.

"My men are restless. They lost too much in the fighting of a year ago. The crops have been poor. There will be a hard winter unless we rape a town or two. They look to me to lead them," answered Kangra Khan.

"Why not tell the whole truth?" King asked him. "You have received offers from the Punjab. Someone has promised that if you will lead a raid the Punjabis will rise simultaneously. Isn't that so?"

"By Allah, little sahib, you know too much," the hillman answered, laughing.

"I think I know the name of the man who made you that offer, but never mind," King continued. "What did he offer you?"

"He talked like a plainsman, deceiving none but himself. He offered me the Prince! He promised we may take him and hold him for ransom, after they have burned his camp and done the capturing. He said, with truth, although the fat pig lied nine other ways, that to keep the Prince hidden in the Punjab would be impossible, whereas, among our mountains--"

"Why talk nonsense?" King interrupted. "Isn't it clear he's just trying to use you as a catspaw?"

"Truly. But he who uses fire may just as well be burnt, and I like the Punjabi's money," said Kangra Khan.

"They never could take the Prince. He'll be too well guarded."

"Aye, probably... inshallah! The British are crazy, but not so mad as to leave the boy unprotected. However, the Prince is coming northward for a hundred days, and there will be a hundred days of trouble, unless I am well paid to keep still."

Well, that was frank enough. There was not so much cupidity as calm appreciation in the hillman's eye. He seemed willing enough to barter his advantage for a fair price. As he finished cleaning his rifle, and laid it across his knees with the sort of affectionate slap a man bestows on a dog or a horse, he looked at least as worthy to be dealt with as any of those diplomatists who play the international game with marked cards.

"How much do you want?" King asked him.

"A crore, and no less," he said instantly.

A crore of rupees is a third of a million dollars, more or less, and King laughed.

"That would pay for quite a nice campaign," he answered. "You hillmen are like children when money is mentioned."

"India is rich. Let her pay for peace!"

"You won't get a crore. You won't get as much as a lakh.\* You won't get anything, unless you give proof in advance of good intentions," King assured him. "You must call this raid off, and tell the Punjabis you won't give them any assistance. If you do that first, and give me your word of honour, then I'll promise to get you as much money from the Government as they can be induced to part with in return for your service in the matter. I don't know how much. You'll have to trust me to do my best. I'll keep faith with you." [\* 100,000 rupees]

"Aye, King sahib. None doubts your *izzat*,\* but what of mine? The fat Punjabi is a pig, but I will not betray him. By Allah, if he comes to talk with me the troops might pounce on him, and what then?" [\* honour]

"He shall have safe conduct."

"Aye, but after, you will know who he is, and--"

"I know already!"

"If thou art not a liar, name him!"

"He is no Punjabi. His name is Ali Babul," King answered promptly. "Isn't that so?"

Kangra Khan said nothing. In the ensuing silence Grim leaned sideways, better to study the hillman's face. It was Narayan Singh

who took up the argument, opening and shutting his right hand so that the knuckles cracked almost like a pistol-shot.

"I, too, know Ali Babul. As thou sayest, he is fat. Better caution him, hillman! For if I make a feud with a man he will die. By my Guru's\* honour, he shall not live; his fat shall feed crows... unless thy wisdom forewarns him! I have made the Prince's life my personal affair." [\* Religious teacher]

"I have heard words. They are principally wind, smelling of onions," said the hillman.

He was well aware that we would not sit there talking to him, offering him terms, if there had been any easier or less expensive course open to the Government just then; nothing but business acumen prevented him from attacking the Sikh that minute, and even that element of self-control was weakening, as the Sikh had foreseen. He prodded it further.

"The truth is, you are afraid to refuse Ali Babul," he asserted, with an air of absolute conviction.

"At least I am not afraid of thee, thou ---- "

"Shame that such a hairy man should fear a shaven, swag-bellied bunnia!"

"Allah!"

"See him then, and warn him, if you aren't afraid to," King suggested intervening. There could hardly have been bloodshed there before our fire, but the border laws of guest and host do not preclude commencement of hostilities the minute the threshold is left behind. Sikh and hillman love each other as dog and jackal do... not much.

"There have first to be promises."

The hillman looked in King's eyes reading there good faith, but not much else; for there was little King might promise without referring to headquarters.

"I will do my best about the money for you," King said.

"I, too, then, about Ali Babul. And how much is that? Bring the brute here. Give us both safe conduct. I will talk with him tomorrow night, at this hour, before this fire in the Huzoor's presence. But if the Government were not afraid for its skin it would have scoughed up Ali Babul long ago," the hillman added.

There were elements of truth in that suggestion, and the only plausible retort would have been a boast, which in turn might have cut short negotiations.

"Would Ali Babul come?" Grim asked.

"Aye! For I will bring him!" said Narayan Singh.

King nodded. Whatever Narayan Singh might undertake to do would be carried out unless he died in the attempt, and not even Kangra Khan questioned that outcome. But I was watching the hillman's face and questioning that, and I noticed Grim did the same thing. There was deep, unspoken thought there, and his eyes were too bright to mean anything but mischief.

"Hadn't we better define things more exactly?" I proposed in English.

So we tried, but the uselessness was fairly evident at once. It was like bargaining with a tricky lawyer; we could not possibly foresee all the quirks and sidesteps that would certainly occur to him, and our



apparent doubt of his good faith only served to increase his trickiness. It would have been better if I had held my tongue.

"Enough!" King said finally, with a gesture that wiped out the last five minutes at a stroke. "This is between thee and me, Kangra Khan. The undertaking stands thus: here, by this fire, tomorrow night, thou and Ali Babul are to meet and talk before us. Both to have safe conduct. Nothing that shall be said tomorrow night by this fire shall be held against thee or him, unless we all reach agreement."

"That is the promise," the hillman answered, and he rose with his right hand on the hilt of his knife to give the oath solemnity. When he had met the eyes of each of us in turn King shook hands with him, and he turned and strode out of the camp with more assurance in his gait than I was altogether glad to see. There is nothing finer than the sight of independence with its face against the world; but there are times, and seasons.

"Somehow, before tomorrow night, he means to put one over on us," I said, and Grim nodded assent. But King and Narayan Singh were both of opinion that the hillman would keep the peace strictly until after the next conference, at any rate. They had the right to know best.

There was peace next morning sure enough... kites wheeling lazily, the smoke of breakfast fires rising spirally from the camps to either hand, and a subaltern with two mounted troopers riding an errand, who laughed as he tossed us the news:

"No shootin' last night! First time for a month! We're wonderin' what Allah's cookin'! You fellows notice anythin' worth mentionin'?"

We reported all well, and no shots fired.

"Hell presently, I'll bet you!" he said, laughing, and rode on.

It was a reasonably safe bet that he offered. Quiet along that border usually presages coming bloodshed. But we had reason to believe there would be at least one more quiet night, and wished we had betted, just to dampen down his cockiness. Then, two hours after breakfast, there came a mounted messenger with a white envelope tucked in his turban. He halted as if it were mounted baseball and he sliding for the home plate. But that was merely swagger; he had trotted until he came within a hundred yards of us. King held his hand out, but the fellow jumped to the ground and stood examining us each in turn.

"Ram-mis-den sahib?" he asked, staring at me.

So I took the envelope and broke the seal, aware of mixed emotions, for I knew the handwriting... as strong and downright as a man's, but flowing, with large spaces between the words.

"Joan Angela!" I said, not understanding why I was not pleased; for I would rather see her than a sunrise. Intuition sums up the near future in a flash, giving you the total and no details; but so does Joan Angela's correspondence.

Hello there, Jeff! she had written. Don't pretend this isn't a surprise. I'm with the Farquharsons, but they're off on leave today, and I've a date for dinner with the Somethingorother Bengal Lancers. Might see you sooner. Having lots of fun. So long. J.A.L.

The "Somethingorother" Bengal Lancers were presumably the outfit camped over on our left hand. The Farquharsons, I think, belong to the Civil Service; but whoever they are, they ought to have been hanged for turning Joan Angela loose on that countryside. I passed the note in turn to King and Grim, and they waited for the explanation.

"One of my countrywomen. Youth, brains, ability, good looks, heaps of money, and a sense of humour," I said, and King looked at me steadily, reading on my face what I daresay was alarm. I did not try to diagnose it.

"She'll be safe enough with the Lancers, but I'm surprised they should ask her to dinner out here. I suppose there's nothing about that in the regulations, but there's such a thing as common sense," he answered after a long pause.

"She's pretty sure to get them to ask us to dinner too, tonight," I said.

"Well, we can't go. At least, you can, of course, but Grim and I must stay here."

That was true. Narayan Singh had ridden off on his quest of Ali Babul, and even if it had been likely that the Sikh would return before night, it would have been out of the question to leave him there alone to manage the conference.

"Where is she now?" I asked the messenger.

The man did not know. He said he was the son of a *thalukdar*,\* and had been asked as a favour to carry the message by Farquharson sahib, whom he had met on his way to the railway station. He had not even seen Joan Angela. Did not know who she was, or pretended not to, and dropped a rather strong hint that, as someone on that countryside, he set a good example by minding his own business. He said he had come simply to oblige Farquharson sahib, and would ride back home as soon as his horse was rested. [\* Land-holder]

So I offered to ride part of the way with him, and he agreed. He seemed rather glad to have company. Even in broad daylight that is no safe border for a solitary horseman, whose equipment is worth

powder and shot; belated prowlers lie up until the next night affords opportunity to sneak back with their plunder to the hills, and in their eyes it is sin and shame to overlook a chance that Allah sends.

My purpose was to turn Joan Angela back from the border, even at the risk of a quarrel. As King said, she would be quite safe with the Lancers; but neither he, nor I, nor they, nor she, nor anyone could guess how long she would remain with them. She acts on the spur of any moment, with assurance that would make an oil-stock salesman green with envy, and the fact that her astounding luck had never yet deserted her was no proof there would be no end to it.

I rode away presently in search of her, turning over in mind a hundred arguments I might use, well aware that she would flout them all and laugh at me. I would have to make a personal appeal to her; I knew that, and I hated it. For friendship she will often do what no argument of safety or convention will induce her to consider; but I dislike dealing on those terms. Friendship is nothing to bargain with, but a thing apart, like a man's religion or his nationality, to be held unaffected by circumstances. Nevertheless, I was willing to sacrifice that friendship, if by doing so I might steer her out of danger.

Nevertheless, whatever her luck might be, mine was out that morning. I drew the Farquharson's bungalow blank; nobody home, not even a caretaker; not as much as a hanger-on to answer questions. The European quarter there was a straggling line of beastly official bungalows, and I rode to every one of them, without result. Nobody had heard of Joan Angela. I gathered, without being told so, that the Farquharsons had made themselves disliked and had applied for leave in consequence.

But I stuck to it, and the *thalukdar* stayed by to help. Failing all trace of Joan Angela herself, we begged a change of horses and galloped all the way to Dera Ghazi Khan, where I saw the Commandant and

warned him. He was indignant, and swore he would twist the Lancers' tails for daring to ask a woman to dinner so close to the border. I overheard his instructions. Joan Angela Leich was to be found and taken to Peshawar, where the authorities might deal with her as they should see fit.

That suited me. It was after four o'clock then, and I calculated I had just about time to reach the Lancers' camp before dark. That was the last card up my sleeve, and a trump of sorts. I meant to tell them what the Commandant had said, after which it was fairly safe to wager they would keep Joan Angela at least well guarded until definite orders came.

So the *thalukdar's* son and I parted company, and I begged still another change of mounts, for my weight is no joke even for an Army remount used to carrying all the paraphernalia a soldier lugs around with him. That last horse was a good one, and I made him prove it, galloping hell-bent-for-supper-time until we reached the Jhelum, and then following the bank, with only a short pause to let him breathe, until I could see the lights of the Lancers' camp beginning to blink in the distance in descending dusk.

They were still several miles away, but it was not time yet for the border-thieves to take chances, so I reined in to a walk for the horse's sake, conscious for the first time that I had no weapon, but not especially nervous on that account. I was very likely safer at slow speed than if I hurried, since a lurking enemy would judge that if I did not seem afraid there was probably good reason for it. On the whole, I was well enough contented, deeming my effort in Joan Angela's behalf well made and her as good as shipped away to safety.

It was pitch dark before I grew aware of voices somewhere on ahead. One voice was a woman's... golden... not raised, and yet not

undisturbed. I could not hear what she said, for my horse put his forefoot in a hole and nearly fell as I spurred him forward. I heard a man order her in English to be silent, and then I caught the answer, as distinctly as if it had been given ten yards away instead of possibly a hundred.

"You'll have to ask in a different tone of voice if you expect me to oblige you?"

"Then you die!" someone snarled--in English again.

"All right. My funeral. Nobody else need worry!"

Then I recognized her voice beyond the shadow of a doubt, but did doubt what to do. All I could see were the camp-fires and lanterns blinking in the distance; between them and me were quite immeasurable miles of black night, with the Jhelum River swirling and sucking on my left hand. The horse sensed danger, shied toward the river, and reared as he found himself too close to the rotten bank. Someone fired from fifty yards ahead of me. The horse shuddered and collapsed; a ton or two of earth gave way, earth, horse and I went plump into the river all together.

I ought to have drowned along with the wounded horse, for the Jhelum sweeps in a hurry around a curve at that point, with shallows in mid-stream that send the force of water sluicing against the bank. But there was a boat tied by the nose to a tree-stump and pressed close against the bank by the weight of the river rushing by, and my hand caught that as I struck out blindly. In about a minute I was up on the bank again fumbling at the rope that held the boat. But it was tangled, and my wet fingers made hard work of it in the dark; so I found my clasp knife and, opening that with my teeth, cut the rope and let the boat go. It was better than nothing at all to cut off the enemy's retreat.

Then I heard Joan Angela's voice again:

"Let go! I'd rather be killed than handled by a brute like you!"

I heard a slap, as if she had struck someone with her open hand, followed by an oath that ripped the very bowels of the night apart. But she did not scream, and there was no answering blow, nor any sound of struggle. Footsteps began approaching, and I crouched behind a clump of high grass.

I had been in that position about twenty seconds when a new sound warned me I was being stalked. The enemy presumably had sent a scout to make sure that bullet had done its work thoroughly, and I heard the fellow crawl up to the other side of the clump, within two yards of me. I heard, too, the clink of some kind of weapon that he dragged along the ground. I needed a weapon more than anything else on earth that minute.

The fellow lay still, listening and trying to peer through the dark along the river bank. He held his breath, and let it out silently, but I could smell him, and knew he wore a sweaty sheepskin jacket. Then I heard what sounded like a knife-blade striking against stone, and judged he had two weapons, of which the knife in the dark was the more dangerous.

There was nothing after that to hesitate about. When you know the worst, and know there is no alternative, the thing to do is to have it over with. I jumped, and landed with both heels on the small of the fellow's back, and maybe it was that that killed him, but I used the butt-end of his rifle to make sure, not being minded to have an enemy at my back as well as several in front.

I could hear them coming fast now, and had no time to reach for the long knife. It was impossible to see, but I was trying to count the

footfalls. Joan Angela's were easily distinguishable, and there seemed to be five or six men hurrying her along. I crouched beside the clump of grass in readiness to do my utmost at close quarters. However, they stopped again. Maybe they had heard me land on the fellow's back, although he had not cried out.

"Suliman!" called someone, twenty yards away.

I fired, and hit him, but not fatally, for he shouted to the others. Two or three of them came charging toward me, and I stopped the first one with the butt-end. Another one fired, and missed.

"Joan Angela!" I shouted.

"Who's that? Jeff! Is that you?"

I started for her; but I'm too slow on my feet to pull off any of those tip-and-run stunts. I shouldn't have tried. Before I could reach her I was knocked on the head by a blow from behind, and after that there was darkness and a very bad dream for a long time.

## **II. "Those Fools Will Prod a Hornet's Nest."**

I came to with a splitting headache, and lay wondering in a kind of twilight, caused, as I discovered presently, by a guttering candle stuck in a knothole in a board on a stamped earth floor. Overhead there were beams made of all sorts of odds and ends, including two telegraph poles stamped with the British Government's broad arrow, and a length of standard railway metal.

My fingers informed me that I was lying on sheepskins or something of the sort; and in among the singing in my ears I could distinguish occasional sounds obviously made by someone rather close to me;



but I did not move my head for several minutes, because it hurt too much for one reason, and for another it seemed wise to get some information before betraying any.

It was night; that much was obvious. But I could not guess how many nights I might have lain unconscious, and it felt like aeons since that blow from behind had knocked me sprawling. There seemed to be two people in the room, or hut, or whatever it was, and one of them was crooning to herself in a language that if I ever understood I could not then remember. It was decidedly cold, and at last I shivered, whereat I felt agreeably soft fingers feeling the back of my hand.

"Shall I throw a sheepskin over you?" a voice asked. So I turned my head and saw Joan Angela in riding breeches on the ground beside me. She looked tired, but not otherwise distressed.

"How did you get here?" I asked her stupidly.

"Don't try to talk for a while yet. Listen," she answered. "I was afraid once or twice you were dead; and you're so heavy they had to handle you roughly, although I think they tried to be decent in their own fashion. There's a cut on the back of your head, but I don't think it's deep, and I've bandaged it, so don't move."

"I don't remember much. How long have I been here?" I asked.

"Several hours. But don't talk. I'll tell you all about it if you'll listen."

So I lay still, and presently Joan Angela began.

"I was on my way to the Lancers' camp. There were two men with me, and I'd sent a third in advance to say I was coming, and would be late, but was all right. My horse had gone lame, and I was letting him take it easy. But it was later than I thought, and I think we'd lost the

way; I'm sure we covered lots of unnecessary miles, and when it grew dark the men seemed to lose their bearings altogether. But I knew if we reached the river and turned along the bank we'd be all right, and it was no use turning back, even if I'd cared to; so we rode on. The men didn't like it much. They were Biluchis, who'd been lent to me by the Farquharsons when they left home... supposed to be awfully faithful and so on, but too stupid for words.

"Well, we reached the river at last, and they said to turn to the right, but I knew better. If we had turned to the right, maybe you and I wouldn't be here now, but I'd have missed the Lancers' camp, and then some other brigands would have bagged me, so what's the odds? I knew I'd taken the right direction.

"It got so dark at last you couldn't see a thing. Then some men jumped out of a hole by the river bank and knifed my Biluchis without a word. I had a pistol and tried to use it, but another rascal cut my horse's throat, and grabbed me as he fell, so the shot went wild. Then he knocked the pistol out of my hand and I was prisoner. But he didn't see where the pistol went to, and I've got it now. They treated me reasonably well, and while they talked I sat down--right on the pistol.

"I wasn't worried much. The Biluchis were dead, and of course that was horrible, but I despise a man who's so afraid he has to have a woman show him which way to turn; and they didn't put up any fight, they were just cowards. I was sorrier for the horse. And I knew the Lancers would be out looking for me in two ticks, because they expected me to dinner, and besides, that third Biluchi had ridden on ahead to tell them I was really on the way.

"What puzzled me was that the men who'd captured me--there were nine of them--started to lead me off in the wrong direction. We kept along the river bank. I was even crazy enough for a minute to think they were taking me to the Lancers' camp to hand me over. I could

see the camp lights in the distance. There was a man in charge of the party--a chieftain I suppose--whom they all called Kangra Khan; he was the only one who seemed to know a word of English, but when I asked him a question or two he ordered me to hold my tongue. He even threatened to kill me if I made a noise, but I didn't believe him. I kept raising my voice in the hope some of the Lancers' outposts would hear me; and at last I really did hear someone coming. It turned out to be you.

"Kangra Khan put his hand over my mouth then, and I bit it. I wish you'd heard him swear! But he's a gentlemanly sort of savage and didn't hit back. They shot your horse, and they were awfully sore because you killed one of their men, and that was why they knocked you on the head instead of roping you. You nearly killed Kangra Khan by the way. Your bullet seared his cheek, and would have hit me if I'd been about a foot more to the right.

"Well, you were knocked out; but someone struck a match and I recognized you. And you weren't dead, because I could feel your heart beating. Then we heard what might be Lancers coming. The party grew scared and got ready to scatter. They were about to tie my hands, and one man folded up a bit of sheepskin for a gag. I didn't fancy that.

"Of course, it was worse than a hundred to one chance of the Lancers coming on you in the dark; and if they didn't stumble on you you'd be dead before morning. So I promised them I'd come quietly provided they took you too. If not, no. And I started in to yell to prove it!

"Kangra Khan seems something of a sportsman in his own way, and took me at my word. He gave orders to the gang to pick you up and carry you gently. It seems you'd cut their boat loose, and we had to go

miles back along the bank until we found another one, and we crossed the river at last in the craziest box of a thing you ever saw. I thought we were sure to be drowned a dozen times. The boat was half-full of water, and you lay on the bottom with the water flopping over you, and me holding your head up so you could breathe.

"They had turned loose the two horses that belonged to my Biluchis, so that the Lancers would follow them and give Kangra Khan a chance to slip by unobserved. He didn't cross the river with the rest of us, but continued along the bank in the direction of the Lancers' camp, saying he'd see me later and that he held me to my promise to go quietly. I told him I'd come to his funeral when the British hanged him, and he grinned as if he thought that a good joke.

"Once we'd crossed the river the going was fairly easy for a long time, but they hurried me and lugged you until I felt nearly as all in as you looked. I had to remind them a good many times of the chief's orders to treat you gently; and as they didn't know any English, and I can't talk their language, it wasn't so easy. But I remembered I'd heard 'em call him Kangra Khan; so I kept saying 'Kangra Khan!' and pointing to you, and frowning, and presently they saw the point. I guess they're scared of him, and I don't blame 'em--he looks like a top-dog.

"Then we came to these hills, and the going began to be awful. They had to lug me up precipices by the hands. When daylight comes I daresay it'll all look simple enough, but in the dark it felt like climbing Everest or something. When we reached this but they shoved me in, and threw in some sheepskins, and you on top of them, and left us. But a little later on they opened the door and pushed in an old woman--at least she looks old--that's her you hear crooning. She's scared to death of us. Every once in a while she shows me a knife about a yard long. But she brought a candle with her, which is

something. I guess it'll be dawn soon. This hut's built of stones and mud and stolen timber, with bits of old sacking and stuff like that in the chinks. Are you cold? Are your clothes nearly dry? Let me feel them."

"Does the old woman know any English?" I asked.

"No. I've tried her. I think that song she's croaking is a prayer or an exorcism. It's intended to keep us from bewitching her; that's my guess. How does your head feel?"

Nothing obliges a man to recover so swiftly as something particular to think about, and Lord knew I had that in plenty. If I had my choice, for instance, between saving Joan Angela Leich or Rheims Cathedral, the building would go without a moment's hesitation. I managed to turn my head to look at her.

You can't change her much. Her hair was all untidy, and her jacket and shirt-affair were stained with dirt, but she was mighty good to look at, nevertheless. The guttering candle threw half of her face in shadow, but made her brave eyes shine, and the outline of her face was something that is never born outside America, whatever fools may say about the melting-pot. There was no nonsense there, no humbug, no claptrap, but a gallant good-humour, and a disregard for things of no account that seems to me better than religion.

I told her to take one of the sheepskins and throw it over her to keep off the draught that came whimpering through the cracks; apparently she hadn't thought of that before. She had to pull the thing out from under me. Then, because the gods who supervise such things were willing, I fell asleep, which in men like me, who am nearly all physique without much brains, is a pretty sure sign of recovery.

When I awoke it was broad daylight, as you could tell by the light

streaming in through cracks. Joan Angela was dozing, chin on knees, with her back against a wall, and the old hag was mixing up a mess of goat's milk and some sort of grain—our breakfast presumably. I got up and found I could stand without holding on to anything, but that was about all; so I copied Joan Angela's example and sat with my back to the wall.

Five minutes after that the door opened and in strode Kangra Khan. He stood leaning on his rifle looking at us while I blinked at the sunshine. There were men crowding to the door behind him, but he motioned them back angrily and slammed the door in their faces, which did not, however, prevent them from clapping their eyes to the cracks.

After about a minute's silence, during which the old hag stirred away steadily at the porridge, he gave me Allah's blessing. I assured him he needed it more than I did.

"A man," I said, "who commits such treachery as you have done will need pity rather badly by and by."

"Inshallah!" he answered. "I am sorry you were hurt, but you killed two of my men. What wrong had they done you?"

There was no need to answer with words. I glanced at Joan Angela, who was studying him quietly over the top of her knees.

"Is the sahiba hurt?" he asked.

"She seems to be a prisoner," I answered.

"And a good one!" he retorted. "What of it? What treachery have I done? Lo, I kept the promise. I was at the fire, and spoke with Ali Babul in the sahib's presence. Moreover, I told the fat pig Ali Babul I

will not help the Punjabis. Lo, I spat at him to prove it! Lo, I have no need to bargain with the dog!" He gestured magnificently in Joan Angela's direction. "They tell me the sahiba has a mint of money!"

"So we're held for a ransom?" I asked.

"Aye, a great one!"

I gestured upward with my thumb. There was the roar of two aeroplanes overhead.

"The Lancers will come presently," I assured him.

"Aye! Those fools will prod a hornets' nest! They are across the river now. I sent my man an hour since to warn them to turn back again. They will make him prisoner. When they question him he will ask whether four hundred can wisely attack us. I have twenty thousand men."

I accepted that statement with reserve. Accuracy as to numbers is unknown in all that North-West country. Two thousand--twenty thousand--even two hundred thousand--might mean pretty much the same thing. Still, his point was obvious.

"Defeat them, and you deal with the guns behind them. Beat the guns, and comes an army," I answered.

"Comes the army, and who shall guard the Prince? Is the Punjab so contented? Do the British want war?" he asked me. "Nay! I tell you they will rather pay my bill! A crore of rupees, and sahiba goes free--thou with her. Otherwise, the Melikani will send battleships and land an army, and fight the British from the rear!"

They have peculiar notions about the United States in some parts of

the world, and it was no use telling him how slight the prospect was of Congress voting for a war in India. Since the A.E.F. went to France they all believe that anything might happen.

His case looked stronger than I cared to admit to him. It would probably take weeks, and months perhaps, before the British could bring a force to bear sufficient for invasion of that territory. For defence they were fairly well provided, but it is another matter to advance across savage and supply-less hills. Besides, as he said, there was the Prince; undoubtedly they did not want a war while he was visiting India. About our only chance was if the British should strike suddenly and surround the place where we were now hidden, which could not be far from the border. But as if he had read my thoughts, Kangra Khan deprived me of that faint hope that minute.

"They hunt on a false scent," he said, grinning. "Today we lie here. Tonight we move on. By tomorrow they may hunt a year and never find you. In a week you will be further from them than the mountain was from Mahommed, on whom Allah's blessing! Shall they come to you then?"

He could only have one object in telling me his plans. The much more usual method is to keep a prisoner in the dark as to his destiny. He was talking to me, but at Joan Angela, hoping she would offer to pay the demanded ransom. But ignorance is a great fortifier of courage; and inborn love of adventure is no weak straw to blow away with argument.

"I won't pay!" Joan Angela said simply, looking up and straight into his eyes. I think she was rather enjoying herself.

For a moment a look of cruelty crossed his face. The hills--the spirit of the hills--the barren, cruel heart of Allah's Slag-heap, as they call it, that compels and curses and deprives the weakest, hardening the



hardest, reminded him he might compel too. There are ways and means; and there are women who are more expert than men in inventing agony for prisoners--all at his beck and call. But something manly in him seemed to fight that suggestion down. He laughed, showing yellow, irregular teeth.

"I have seen men's hearts fail. Is a woman's resolution greater?" he asked ironically. Then, with bitter meaning: "Eat while you have the chance!"

He motioned to the hag, who brought the bowl of porridge and set it down between Joan Angela and me, together with two old rusty spoons. The stuff was smoky and nearly cold, nor any too clean, and we preferred our fingers to the spoons. There was grit, too, in the stuff. But I think Joan Angela enjoyed it, partly because almost any food was good after a long fast and a wetting; mainly because of the adventure and the novelty.

Kangra Khan stood watching us, smiling rather grimly. We might have been two strange animals being fed in a cage. On the whole, he seemed rather pleased with us, but I thought I detected a trace of anxiety underlying his cavalierly air, as if perhaps all were not so well with him as he pretended. There were the eyes to the cracks, for instance, and the voices of his men outside, suggesting neither discipline nor over-confidence in their leader. Their eagerness to get a glimpse of Joan Angela, and some of the comments I overheard, brought another thought, and it was just as well Joan Angela did not understand the language.

"You know this woman's honor is in your keeping?" I said, looking straight at him. He did not answer; so I added to the hint: "You will be held answerable. If harm should befall her the British would never rest until they hanged you in a pigskin. They would burn your carcass afterwards."

He showed his teeth again. No Moslem enjoys that threat.

"Let her beware of herself!" he answered surlily. "By Allah, who am I that you should say such words to me?"

"Let's hope you're a man of discretion," I answered; and at that he turned his back on us and went outside to snarl and argue with his men. Whereat Joan Angela nudged me and touched her jacket pocket in which the little automatic pistol lay; which was all very well as a last resource, but none too comforting at that.

Meanwhile my head ached damnably, and if we were to be moved on somewhere that night it behoved me to get in fit condition for the march, or otherwise I would be unfit to snatch opportunity. It may have been fever--a man's brain after a severe blow is seldom in shape to judge sensibly--but the only line of action that appealed at all to me just then was to escape by some means as we threaded the hills by night, and work our way back to the Jhelum River. I began to talk it over with Joan Angela.

I have often wondered since why I did not advise her there and then to agree to pay the ransom. Then they could have sent a messenger to make the necessary stipulations with the military; bankers, or the Government, would doubtless have advanced the money on Joan Angela's note, and even a third of a million dollars would hardly have inconvenienced her much. But the truth is, it hardly occurred to me.

Courage is more contagious than disease. If she had dallied with the notion I might have urged it. But the indomitable spirit was so strong in her that there was lots to spare, and some of it conveyed itself to me. It was likely enough she would have despised me if I had ventured to propose surrender--not that I would have let that prevent, if I had thought it best to yield. But you can't consider yielding--not in

Joan Angela's company. As an abstract proposition, failure is incomprehensible to her; and as a concrete fact it never seems to have been part of her experience. Men have called me an idiot for not insisting on her handing over the ransom money; but neither King, nor Grim, nor Narayan Singh found fault with me in that respect; and I know that as I sat there in the hut beside her (admiring her, I admit) the only line of thought I followed was how to escape by subtlety or violence. And I am not a subtle person.

"Let's take turns sleeping," I proposed. "Whichever of us is awake should pocket any kind of food obtainable and any weapon that comes within reach. I might hide a long knife, for instance, inside my breeches. Above all, don't give them any idea that we're thinking of escape. Now you go to sleep first."

She has grit, that girl. She did not argue, but went and lay down on the sheepskins that had been my bed, and I kept watch while she dropped off to sleep like a two-year-old. The old woman started her crooning again, as if sleep were something dangerous, productive of evil spirits to be exorcised. But after a while it occurred to me she was trying to work magic to cast a spell over us; so I pretended to doze off too, sitting up, and surprised her in the act of searching Joan Angela's jacket pocket.

That put me in possession of a knife. She flashed the weapon the instant she saw I was awake, and I took it from her, twisting her wrist until she gasped; but she did not scream, and she was at such pains to make no noise that I could not help noticing the circumstance. She seemed much more anxious than I was to avoid being heard by the watchers on guard outside.

What is it that makes a man act when his own judgment has nothing definite on which to base itself. Intuition? Stored-up experience? I don't know. I only do know that scores of times I have acted swiftly in

the face of facts that have seemed to suggest the opposite course, and in the outcome have scored heavily.

I shoved that long knife down my breeches-leg, took the old woman by the scruff of her wrinkled neck, opened the door, which was only fastened with a leather thong, and kicked her out into the midst of an astonished circle of Pathans, who were sitting around a six-stick fire discussing prospects. She landed almost in the fire. Two of them pointed their rifles at me and the rest kicked her further on her way, she screaming and cursing, they laughing, throwing stones after her as she slid out of sight down a shoulder of rock.

Then I stood in the doorway, not particularly nervous on account of rifles, since I argued they would hardly shoot a prisoner worth money if they could avoid it; but curious. Four of the men were playing a game with a wooden board and pebbles--a sort of prehistoric form of checkers. I sat down between two of them and looked on, remembering to bless them in the name of the Prophet of God, and they returned the blessing civilly enough, although one great hairy ruffian standing on the look-out near by slapped his rifle meaningly. I nodded to him and he seemed to accept that as a satisfactory promise of good conduct. His principal business seemed to be to watch the British aeroplanes and give warning if they should turn in our direction.

One of the players asked me if I had any money to gamble with, but I was not fool enough to say yes. I always carry money. There were four five-hundred-rupee notes tucked away in a pocket inside my waistband, and I suspected Joan Angela of having more than that in some fairly safe hiding-place; but the sight of money would have acted like blood on wolves. However, the question gave me an idea, and there are better ways than bribery to win the friendship of a savage. Admire a horseman's horse, a musician's music, a

politician's politics, and he is your man.

I singled out the strongest-looking of them and admired his muscle. He began to brag immediately and to show off, picking up a piece of wood about the thickness of an axe-handle. He broke it with a jerk. I entered into competition with him, breaking one of the pieces, which was more than twice as difficult. It made my head ache, but aroused the excited interest of all of them. The fellow came back at me with an offer to try hand-grips, elbows to the ground; so we lay down face to face, each with his right elbow on the rock, and gripped fingers; he chose a tricky grip that gave him an advantage, but I let him have it, and rapped his knuckles on the rock so sharply that he shouted, and they all laughed. He refused to try that a second time, so to put him in good temper I let him beat me at pulling against each other, foot to foot, and after that we were all on excellent terms. He told me his name was Akbar bin Mahommed.

I asked him why they had been so glad to see the old hag kicked out from the hut, but instead of answering the question they all became suddenly interested in their rifles, and pretended to hear sounds among the rocks below that called for investigation; so when they had quit that foolishness I began to tell them stories, remembering how Grim was used to managing wild Arabs in that way. They became like children almost instantly, and one man turned his back so that I might rest my head against his while I talked. I told about magic I had witnessed in Benares, and about imaginary old women who could turn a man into a crow, the crow into an alligator, the alligator into a fish, and the fish into an insect, after which the insect could be trodden on and squashed by the first hoof that happened along-- evolution vice versa, as it were. They voted that a splendid story, and began to brag about their own witches. The hag whom I had kicked so cavalierly turned out to be one of them.

Her principal virtue, or demerit, according as a man employed her or became her victim, was that she could see in the dark what a man would do by daylight; and by mixing incantations with his food could prevent his doing this or that thing and oblige him to do something else. That, they said, was why Kangra Khan had sent her into the but with us; and they added that now no doubt I would have to do as Kangra Khan wished. But they all claimed to have suffered under the old harridan in some way or another. She had made this man's cow abortive, that man's wife barren, and the other's child had died of smallpox. One fellow vowed he had spent nine months in Peshawar gaol, all because, for spite, she had given him the wrong magic when he set forth to rob soldiers at the guard-post.

"But she will bewitch your foot for having kicked her!" Akbar bin Mahommed added by way of afterthought. "And that is a pity, for the foot is a good strong man's. Better kill her next time, lest a worse evil befall. By Allah, I myself would kill her if I dared; but my son is only two years old and at that age men die easily."

"Is she devoted to Kangra Khan?" I asked him.

"Devoted to none but the devils! She supports him. None dares refuse to obey him for fear of her."

It seemed likely Kangra Khan would resent my having kicked the hag, if that was the state of local politics. I suggested something of the sort, but they all laughed.

"Nay! He, too, is afraid of her. The next time she refuses him a request he will bring her back to thee to be kicked and choked! None of us dares wring her neck, but who cares whether she bewitches thee?"

I asked where the British Lancers were, and with considerable glee

they pointed out a sort of amphitheatre in the foot-hills about twenty miles away. After a while I made out an extended string of dots, like insects, and they told me those were the Lancers vainly searching in the wrong direction for Joan Angela and me.

"And, by Allah, there will be some on this side who get boots and new weapons!" they added. "Kangra Khan has set an ambush."

I asked about Kangra Khan, and they all agreed he was a good strategist but a domineering fellow who could not brook rivalry or even argument.

"He thinks that when he speaks his word is Allah's, and the mullah must stand aside, praying backwards under his breath! In time of fighting Kangra Khan is best; in peace, the mullah; so we play the one against the other; but by the Prophet, on whom blessings, a man can hardly call his life his own in any event."

Presently a party of Lancers began scouting in our direction, and we could see the machine-gun ready to search out nooks and crannies so I was ordered back into the hut, whose roof I noticed then was hidden from above on three sides by an over-leaning crag and camouflaged by the rock's shadow. It would probably be impossible for a flyer to see the hut at all until late afternoon. I stood in the doorway and watched the guard take cover as skillfully as if they had had a course in Flanders; then went in and took my turn on the sheepskins, while Joan Angela stood watch.

They brought us meat and stolen rice at noon, with curry in it--pretty evil stuff. I cached a little of the rice in a handkerchief and went to sleep again, we taking turn and turn about until evening, when they brought us more food, this time bread of a sort made in the form of flat cakes like chupatties. I cached quite a lot of that.

Then Kangra Khan came looking tired and none too well satisfied. He omitted the customary blessing as he filled the doorway and stood glaring in at us with his rifle slung behind his back.

"You have a last chance now to pay the ransom," he said angrily. "The mullah has paper and pen. Will you sign a letter for us to send?"

Joan Angela laughed at him, which is not a wise course to take toward a chieftain in those savage hills.

"No," she said, "I've promised to attend your funeral."

### **III. "Thou and I are Birds Who Love the Storm, Sahiba."**

The sun went down in an angry glare behind the hills at Kangra Khan's back as he stood in the doorway muttering oaths into his beard. He did not choose to be laughed at by a woman. Nevertheless, he postponed reprisals, and the reason appeared presently.

"See that!" he snarled, tossing an envelope to me. So, as it was dark inside the hut, I went to the door and walked out past him holding the letter toward the last red rays of sunshine. It was written in Persian.

To Kangra Khan of the Orakzai (it ran), from Athelstan King.

Take notice. This affair is between you and me. You have prisoners a woman and one of my friends. Their honor and their lives are in your keeping. If ill-treatment should be offered either of them then you and I will have a bone to pick and the jackals shall tell the answer to the night. Settle your own quarrel with the Raj, but look to me to hold you answerable for the proper treatment of my friends.



I began to read the message aloud to Joan Angela, but Kangra Khan snatched it from my hand.

"Mashallah! Does he think I am a wild beast?" he demanded. "Curse his impudence! Those Lancers have slain a dozen of my men this afternoon, and the fliers have finished off another score. Shall I not play tit-for-tat on you two?"

I could have smashed him where he stood, for a well-aimed blow would have cracked his head against the doorpost, but there were too many men in the dark behind him to make that chance worth taking. Besides, it was decidedly unlikely he would kill such valuable prisoners as he calculated us to be.

"He invites you to act like a gentleman," I suggested.

"Not he! He threatens me!"

"He says it's between you and him," I retorted. "We're only prisoners. You can't drag us into it."

He seemed to see the force of that. A savage always is at a disadvantage when his sense of fairness is appealed to. It is only the civilised folk who hold ethics subject to convenience. I think what angered him was that King should have doubted his proper intentions.

"Ye shall eat as I eat, sleep as I sleep, march as I march, suffer as I suffer," he growled. "By Allah, ye shall pay the price I name or be forever prisoners!" He strode into the hut as if to seize Joan Angela, but was satisfied when she came backing out in front of him. "By Allah, who is Lord of all, now hear me! Ye have a hundred days. Pay me the money before the hundred days are up or I take this woman for a wife and shoot thee, Ramm-is-den. That will be my answer to

Attleystan King!"

He tore the letter into little bits in front of us and threw them to the winds, then turned and strode away, tossing an order back over his shoulder to the men who were clustered in a group between us and the edge of the rock on which the hut stood. They signed to us to follow him and closed in before and behind, so that we trod on the heels of the men in front and those behind crowded us. Escape would have been impossible, and after an hour's hard traveling the chance grew even less, for we followed a track that wound in and out among crags and ravines with seldom more than room for two to go abreast, and often only room for single file. It was impossible to see into the ravines, for the cliffs above us cast a deep-black shadow, and only the snarling of Jhelum's tributary streams among the boulders hinted now and then at what might be in store for anyone who stumbled.

But Joan Angela was a long way yet from being ill-pleased with her lot. She was getting what she had come away from home for--excitement. Money had taught her that you can't buy anything worth having except responsibility, and she was tired of expensive civilization--bored to rebellion against it. This was fun in her eyes; real risk; genuine adventure; thrilling. She began to sing until a man turned in his tracks and ordered her curtly to be silent.

Joan Angela was going much the stronger of the two. A blow on the back of the head leaves effects that are not thrown off too easily. At the end of the second hour I began to feel dizzy and had to sit down for a rest at intervals, to the awful disgust of our escort and the alarm of Joan Angela.

"The big bullock weakens soonest!" they quoted, sneering.

"We'd better offer to pay up if you're going to be sick," Joan Angela

argued. "I won't have your life on my conscience."

It only made it worse, of course, to have to argue with her. What was worse still, Kangra Khan looking down from above overheard us and joined in.

"Ye have but a hundred days to pay in any case!" he reminded us, and though I could not see him I could almost feel him grin. "One month for a letter to go to America. One month for the letter to return. A month for negotiations, and ten days to make the payment in! Be but one day late and the woman shall know what wifing means in a village of the Orakzai! Attleystan King may come then and make a feud for her; mayhap he will bury such bones of thine as the jackals haven't cracked up, Ramm-is-den!"

"Better pay," said my friend Akbar bin Mahommed, with a hand on my shoulder. "Mashallah! It would be shame to see such a corpse as thine blistering in a nullah. Write thou the letter and go free when the money comes. Make a feud with him thereafter and I will join thee!"

I thought that a mighty handsome offer and it put new heart in me. That was no time or place to write letters in; time enough to do that in the morning, if Joan Angela should then elect to yield. A man who offers friendship to a fellow in a tight place ranks ace high in my esteem, whatever his friendship may be actually worth. I struggled on again; and after a while we came to a circular cup in the hills where a group of stone huts surrounded a corral in which were three lean horses.

There was argument. There always is in that land when anything whatever is to be done or left undone; but at the end of half an hour's explosive blasphemy, in which the name of Allah mingled with pollution and the angels were summoned to witness the mess, two of the horses were finally "borrowed under duress" for Joan Angela and

me, and the poor old skate that fell to my lot started on the worst, and last, adventure of his life.

I overheard Kangra Khan saying he really took the horses, not on my account, but because the men we took them from would want them back, and therefore would be wary about giving information about our route to any British troops who might chance on our line of retreat. That sounded plausible, but it may have been only his method of keeping up a reputation with his men for iron-hearted craftiness. It served at any rate to inform me on two points. I bullied my sorry beast until I was knee to knee with Joan Angela.

"Our host is afraid of pursuit, and not too popular hereabouts," I told her. "Pathans are poor hands at sticking together. If there's a dispute among themselves our chance to escape improves."

She nodded. "I won't pay as long as your head holds out," she answered. "But you and I are friends, Jeff, and you know me well enough to say so the minute you feel like it. If it weren't for your injury I'd call it good fun."

Well, opinions differ as to what is fun. Now, looking back at it, I can see her point of view; but just then there was nothing except dislike for squealing (to apply no stronger term) that kept me from counseling surrender. I made up my mind to let things take their course until the next day, after which I would urge her to pay the ransom unless some obvious means of escape should present itself. You see, Joan Angela is not the type of young woman you can treat in any way except as an equal mentally and physically. She can endure as much as any man alive in the way of roughing it, and about the only kind of man who doesn't find her splendid company is the kind who can't or won't forget the sex problem. To her mind it is no problem, anyhow, and if I had played the part of a heavy male protecting her against a world too dangerous for her sex she would have held it

against me all my days. I would have lost a friend I value.

Yet men who have seen her since, in evening dress at Simla and such places, have thought me a scoundrel for not compelling her, by force if necessary, to pay the ransom and have done with it. There is one man in particular whose talkative head I intend to punch as soon as I am well enough to leave this hospital.

We rode interminably up and down a winding track that would have suited goats, I walking as often as not because my horse was too weak to negotiate the stiffer places with my weight on him. Once or twice, as if to prove the dissension among the Pathans that I suspected, there were shots fired near at hand; but whether at us or in pursuance of some regulation feud it was impossible to guess. We were making a prodigious noise, stumbling over the rocks and kicking loose stones that went echoing down into the gorges. Sound travels in those hills as if through speaking galleries, and a wakeful enemy might have heard us coming for miles away.

The strange part was that although we saw the flash of a rifle frequently, and our men usually fired at the spot where the flash was seen, not a bullet sang near us. It was like a sham fight staged for the motion-pictures, and Kangra Khan led on and on, as if there were no fight at all.

Then the moon rose, wan and silvery, veiled like a bride in a wreath of mist; and we came to a cliff shaped like Gibraltar. At the angle facing us the track divided, turning to right and left. Kangra Khan took the left hand, and we filed after him. Close behind me walked Akbar bin Mahommed, and there were two more men guarding our rear about fifty or a hundred yards behind--both busy at the moment with an enemy who yelled insults and fired wildly from between rocks practically out of range.

The wan moonlight shone on that Gibraltar-shaped cliff, and it was impossible to pass it unseen. There was a distance of possibly two hundred yards along which the track that Kangra Khan had chosen wound like a glistening snake before it dipped into gloom again. It looked like sheer, stark suicide to follow that course under fire: the track was narrow; there were no caves, no boulders, no shelter; a man's shape would be silhouetted against grey cliff. An owl swooped by, and bird and shadow were as clear as if they had been etched. The only element of safety was the deep, dark ravine on the left hand, which was so wide that an enemy under cover on the far side would have to sight carefully; but, even so, the range was not more than three hundred yards.

However, Kangra Khan hurried forward, perhaps in haste to get the danger done with, and his men hurried at his heels at two or three yard intervals. Akbar bin Mahommed, close behind me, made no comment, and the firing in the rear ceased. Silence fell as if the air had suddenly refused to carry any sound except the snarling of a waterfall a mile away.

"Wait a minute!" I said, and Joan Angela drew rein. We watched Kangra Khan and his men step forward into the pale light.

"Allah! What now?" asked Akbar bin Mahommed.

Suddenly a hurricane of rifle-firing spilt the silence, and for about a minute the ledge on the far side of the ravine was lit with spurting flame. There must have been fifty men pot-shotting out of ambush, and at one spot flashed powder enough to suggest a machine-gun. Bullets splashed against the glistening cliff, and whole sections of shale shuddered and slid downward. Yet Kangra Khan continued on his way, and not even his men seemed in any special hurry.

"You see for yourself," I said, turning to Akbar.

"Ho!" he answered. "That is nothing! Those are the Jebel Waziris. They came to loot across the border, but they quarreled with us. Now they think to leave a feud or two behind them on their way home. But, by Allah, none can shoot straight against that cliff in this light--as the British learned a year ago. By day a boy could hold the path against a hundred men. By night--ride on and see!"

"By Allah, no!" I answered, and I seized Joan Angela's rein to make sure no spirit of daring should take hold of her and send her galloping across the line of fire.

"I'm not afraid of anything those savages dare face," she said, laughing at me, and Akbar bin Mahommed was in the act of seizing my rein to drag the horse forward, when it suddenly occurred to me that our chance had come. There were only two men to our rear. If we could make those plugs of ours gallop we had a reasonably good chance to escape.

I thought of the knife, but there was not time to pull that out from its hiding-place. Besides, even in that crisis I doubt whether I would have used the blade of it on Akbar--he and I had grown too friendly (though I don't doubt he would have shot me). I swung my fist back for a blow that should have stunned him--and the horse shied.

Something--brown-black-heavy--slid in an avalanche of loose shale and fell from the ledge above us plump on to Akbar's shoulders. His rifle went spinning into the ravine. A hand that must have had a grip of steel went to his mouth, and he lay helpless, heaving in spasms underneath a dark-robed thing that might have been a vampire-bat. In the shadow at our feet the outspread sleeves of the garment looked like wings. But the bat's head turned, and Grim's pale face glanced up at me!

"Take the right-hand track!" he snapped. "Hurry!"

But I could hear the rearguard coming. I jumped off the horse and waited for them, trying to draw the knife while I crouched in the shadow of a projecting spur of the rock-wall. But they came too fast, and I failed to get my belt undone in time. So I punched the first man in the nose, and he went over backward, rifle and all, into the ravine, crying out to Allah as he fell. The other fellow fired at me point-blank and singed the bandage on my head. I wrenched the rifle away, and swung the butt-end upward, catching him below the jaw, and he followed his friend, making no outcry whatever. I heard the two of them fall--thump-thump--on the rocks below.

Now the rear was open for retreat, and I didn't doubt for a second Grim would change his plans. I hurried back to him, and found Joan Angela helping him to lash Akbar bin Mahommed's hands with the reins belonging to my sorry screw. Neither of them knew Grim, and to me he seemed like an apparition in a dream. Not a word was said until Akbar's hands were safely lashed behind him. Then Grim said "Mount!" and we obeyed him.

It never entered my head that he would still insist on the right-hand track in front of us. I reached for my brute's nose to pull him round and start back along the way we had come; but Grim slapped his rump and kicked him forward, and in a second we were trotting straight for the great Gibraltar rock, Joan Angela leading.

There was one great pool of light to cross before we could plunge into darkness on the right-hand side. Just before we reached it Grim vaulted up behind me, and the miserable horse nearly collapsed under our joint weight. Joan Angela jockeyed her plug into a gallop, shot through the zone of brightness, and was swallowed in the gloom. We followed at an amble, which was our poor beast's last broken-hearted effort. Midway through the zone of light a bullet from I don't



know what direction struck him behind the girth and he pitched to the ground, throwing Grim and me into a heap in front of him. Grim pulled a pistol out and finished that business. Then we ran, each with a hand on Akbar, and found Joan Angela dismounted waiting for us in the darkness just round the bend.

My head was swimming, but I supposed we must hurry on. However, Grim said "No."

"Sit down and take a cinch on things," he suggested, fingering my bandage. "Is your head bad?"

"Who are you?" Joan Angela asked him. "Jim Grim? Who is that? Thanks awfully for coming, anyhow!"

"Where's King?" I asked as soon as I could pull myself a bit together.

"Lord knows! He and I took the trail the minute the Lancers said Miss Leich was missing. They had opinions of their own, of course, but King suspected Kangra Khan instantly. It was probable you'd have to lie up all day, and that gave us time to overtake you if we used our wits; and King knew of a bunch of Jebel Waziris whom he once befriended in some border row. So he and Narayan Singh took one side of the ravine to get their help if possible, and I came this way picking up your trail. I'm supposed to be Ali Ibraim, a very holy person from Arabia. They tell things to a holy man, you know, and don't molest him--much. I carry a tooth of the Prophet with me--found it in a dead man's skull this side of the Jhelum. Those were the Jebel Waziris on the far side of the ravine. It was touch and go. I was afraid they'd shoot us all, but Allah was on our side that time."

"How on earth did you manage it?" Joan Angela asked him.

"It looked impossible. But Narayan Singh sent a woman to me to

have herself blessed for childbirth. I gave her a written amulet, which wouldn't be any good until she'd found him again and had him write the name of Mahommed and several angels on the back of it. After that she'd have twins. So I guess he got my message. But, by Gorry, if I don't sleep and eat soon I'll be no good!"

I gave him the rice and chupatties I had cached in my handkerchief--a most disgusting mess it was.

"Have you two eaten recently?" he asked, and then, when we told him yes, devoured the lot as if he liked it.

"This is the best fun ever!" said Joan Angela--truthfully--fervently. She wouldn't have changed places with any woman in the world just then! Grim met her eyes, and glanced at me.

"We're not through yet," he assured her curtly.

As he spoke there came the stuttering din of rifle-firing from around the cliff behind us... angry, spasmodic stuff... and yells of imprecation.

"That'll be Kangra Khan trying to fight his way back," said Grim. "He hasn't a chance. But the trouble is our Waziri friends have made themselves unpopular. They're being hounded in their turn. Two outfits of Pathans are on their heels to scupper them before they can reach home; so all we've got is a hundred men in a hurry to reach the skyline with every man's hand against 'em. Retreat to the border is cut off absolutely. Kangra Khan has bragged about Miss Leich and her millions; he was using that yesterday as a talking-point to rally armed men to his standard. All he accomplished was to arouse cupidity, and now they're all on the watch for her between here and the border. They figure she's a prize worth bagging!"

"Won't the British troops come for us?" Joan Angela asked.

"Let's hope not!" he answered. "The tribes would stop quarreling among themselves and make common cause. Even our friends the Waziris would be forgiven *pro tem*. The best thing the British can do is to withdraw across the border and pretend they don't care a hoot. Time's the main thing. Every day that passes without cash in sight will tend to decrease Miss Leich's market price. Meanwhile, the more they quarrel among themselves for her possession, the better our chance. Gee-whizz! They're hitting her up!"

It began to be clear now why Kangra Khan had led his handful of men so boldly along that moonlit track. He had reinforcements waiting for him somewhere along there, and now he was leading them back to find his prisoners, suspecting probably that the Waziris had seized us. He seemed to have enough men with him to force the issue, judging by the din; but the light was against him, and the yells from the far side of the ravine were triumphant, not discouraged.

"If King's with the Waziris, you can bet on them safely," Grim said, listening intently. "Lord! Let's hope the noise don't bring marauders our way! We haven't a friend to windward. The Waziris are our one reliance--and a shifty lot at that!"

Joan Angela showed him her pistol, but he shook his head.

"Keep that for the last contingency," he advised. "Are you fit? Can you march? Is your nerve all right? Then never show your pistol to a soul until you have to use it on yourself. Getting killed don't hurt. The most the best of us can ask for is to die clean. Hide that thing away."

But he drew his own pistol, and stood leaning against the horse, with an outcrop of the cliff on his right hand, so that he could watch the track either way and have the best of any sudden turn of affairs. I noticed he had two more pistols in a belt under his dark cloak, and

when I suggested he should lend me one of them he passed it butt-first. About a second after we came within an ace of accident.

To our right, in a momentary lull between the bursts of rifle-fire, we heard the sound of hurrying feet and clinking weapons. I stood up and leaned over the horse beside Grim, and we raised our pistols to fire point-blank along the track. It was impossible to see anything; the bulge of the cliff cut off the zone of moonlight; one and the same thought urged both of us to stagger the attacking force by a sudden burst of unexpected pistol-shots and then make a bolt for it. Joan Angela guessed our intention and stood by to jump on the horse.

But the hurrying ceased, and the thirty or forty pairs of feet we had heard reduced themselves to three or four, who advanced at a walk more cautiously. So much the better for our plan! I calculated the probable level of a man's heart and managed to pull that long knife out as well for a furious set-to before we beat retreat. We heard a gruff voice giving orders in Pushtu.

"Careful now! We're near them. Dark and the mother of death are one! Halt! I go forward alone!"

Something blacker than the blackness loomed around the serrated outcrop. I fired. Grim knocked my pistol up in the very nick of time.

"God save you, sahib, that is the only turban I have!" said a voice I recognized, and Narayan Singh stepped up to us, showing his teeth in a great white grin in the midst of his black beard. He pulled the turban off and rubbed his head where the bullet had grazed the scalp.

"I have thirty men behind me," he went on, beginning to rebind the turban as casually as if he were in camp. "But it is difficult, for these Waziris are not in love with Sikhs, who have slain too many of their comrades in the border fights. King sahib bade me bring these

ruffians to hold this track, lest Kangra Khan should fight his way round the corner yonder in spite of everything. They are picked men, but who shall pick diamonds from a dunghill?" he asked, giving the turban a final twist, and adjusting the whole at last as a woman gives the final touches to her hat. "Is the sahiba well?"

We introduced him to Joan Angela, who shook hands. She had met him before in Egypt, and was as pleased as he was to renew the acquaintance.

"Thou and I are birds who love the storm, sahiba!" he said gallantly. "Better to die well than to live ill. This would look like opportunity; yet the gods know best. These sahibs know I speak the truth when I say I am your servant."

I did not catch her answer. Someone shouted for Narayan Singh, and we all went hurrying back along the track to the corner, where we piled up such loose rocks as we could find and, in the limelight, as it were, held that point of disadvantage against Kangra Khan's men while King worked his Waziris down into the ravine below. Every man of ours had a rifle stolen from the British, and they squandered ammunition as men always do waste stolen goods; but even so, we failed in our object. Kangra Khan detected King's purpose to join us; the Waziris made too much noise negotiating the watercourse; to judge by their yelling some of them reached our side, but when it came to climbing the steep slope they were met by a sweeping fire from several hundred rifles. Kangra Khan told off a couple of dozen men to keep us busy and poured the rest of his nicked lead into the ravine. Once I heard a long, shrill whistle--King's in all likelihood--and after that there was more or less silence below while the Waziris beat retreat under a galling fire up the slope they had so easily descended. Only one man reached us--a fellow with a bullet through his arm, immensely angry.

By dint of threatening to tie her hand and foot I had persuaded Joan Angela to keep out of sight behind the corner. The newcomer crawled behind our barricade of stones until he reached her hiding place, and then got to his feet. I followed him to make sure of his intentions, but he only looked at her; he did not seem to regard her as anything more than a curiosity. And before he spoke to me he tore a strip of calico from his filthy shirt and, with one end of the strip in his teeth, proceeded to bind his arm. Joan Angela instantly offered to do it for him, but he grinned savagely, and turned his face to me.

"Allah's wonders! We are all dead men below there!" he said, jerking his right thumb across his shoulder. "Why not sell this woman to the Pathans if they desire her so much? My people wish to go home."

"How many did you lose down there in the ravine?" I asked him.

"A thousand," he answered. He presumably meant ten. "Where is Jimgrim? I was to speak with Jimgrim. Who art thou?"

I told him I was Jimgrim, doubting whether it was safe to strip off Grim's disguise as a holy man from Arabia.

"Well met!" he answered. "But thou art a liar none the less! I am King sahib's friend, and he told me Jimgrim is the Hajji Ali Ibraim, whom men call Jimgrim because he is beautiful and loved of many women."

It is no insult to be called a liar in those raw hills--rather a compliment. They envy those who have enough imagination to invent an untruth on the spur of an occasion.

"What is the message?" I asked him. "I am Jimgrim's friend."

"King sahib says: 'She should die, and if a youth should step into her shoes, and he a holy man, it might be well.' But he said: 'Jimgrim is

the man who will attend to it.' None the less, if Jimgrim fights among the rocks there, thou and I might throw her over the cliff and save him trouble. Have you the holy youth to take her place?"

"Let Jimgrim do his own work," I answered, stepping between Joan Angela and him. "What is the rest of the message?"

"Where is that Sikh? Is he here?"

We peered round the corner, and I pointed out Narayan Singh crouching behind a boulder, firing into black night. "By Allah's teeth, I have a bone to pick with that Sikh! The dog called me a son of--"

"Pick it with me, then," I answered. "Give me the rest of the message first."

I laid a hand on him, for he was minded to go after Narayan Singh that minute. He tried to break away, but I jerked him round again to face me.

"Kill him!" said a voice beside me. "It was he who set fire to the cloth-stalls in Peshawar half a year since!" And Akbar bin Mahommed, with his hands still lashed behind him, thrust his face between us. "Yussuf, thou dog, I would kill thee myself if I were not tied!"

"Trussed like a pig!" answered Yussuf, and spat into Akbar's face.

For answer Akbar ducked his head and butted the Waziri like a ram, hitting him in the belly and sending him reeling backward into the line of fire where a bullet drilled him through the head from ear to ear and he lay grinning in the moonlight, twitching his fingers, with his brains oozing out on the rock.

So we never received the latter part of King's message, and had no

means of guessing what his plan might be. I dragged a fellow out of the line of fire and sent him to try to cross the ravine and bring an answer back; but he never returned, and whether he was shot or simply ran away I don't know.

When I had sent that messenger I shouted for Grim, but though he heard me it was several minutes before he came crawling behind the improvised barricade. Heavy firing had returned from the far side of the ravine, but there was still a chance that Kangra Khan's men might try to rush the corner, and Grim saw fit to give that danger his first attention. He was moving from man to man, encouraging each in turn. I saw him pull out the "Prophet's tooth" and show it to several of them. Then their war-cry went up--"Allaho Akbar!"--and there ceased to be much risk of flinching.

Meanwhile, Akbar bin Mahommed thrust his face up close to mine and stared into my eyes as if he could see through them to the thought behind.

"Let my hands go, Ramm-is-den," he urged. "I swear friendship. By Allah and the Prophet and the honor of my father; by my father's beard and mine, and by the Holy Tomb, I swear I am thy friend! Untie my hands. By Allah's breath I will be thy brother until I die!"

He turned to Joan Angela, and looked into her eyes as he had into mine.

"Sahiba, thou art this man's wife. Bid him loose me. I will be thy man and his until Azrael summons all of us."

She did not understand a word of Pushtu, but his appeal was obvious enough. He shook the hands behind him that were lashed with the leather thong so tightly that the wrists were swelling, and turned half toward her so that she might loose the knots if I refused.



"Do you know these hills hereabouts?" I asked him.

"Aye. There is not a cranny I do not know."

"How far to the nearest village?"

"There are four villages that I could reach before the moon sets."

"Have you friends among them?"

"Nay! Who loves me hereabouts?"

He doubtless read the disappointment on my face, for his eyes were close to mine again.

"But there are those who fear me," he added. "There is a woman who must do my bidding lest I laugh in her husband's face, and she die of his knife. Listen, Ramm-is-den! Inshallah, I may help thee, for I heard what that dog of a Waziri said. If she is to die"--he glanced at Joan Angela--"and a youth shall take her place... by Allah am I wrong, or does it mean that she shall not die, and that only the clothes are needed, so that she may pass for a hairless boy? Then I am the man to manage it! Loose my hands and give me a weapon. Give me that knife. I know a young Afridi hereabouts who has been to Bokhara and picked up foreign manners there, along with a way of wearing clothes that would shame a Hindu. He teaches some new kind of politics to the younglings, because the elders will not listen to him, and goes unharmed because they say he is mad. I will strip him naked, and she may wear his foppery. Loose me! Let me make haste!"

"Can you bring him here alive?" I asked.

He hesitated, looking straight into my eyes.

"Let that be the test of thy good faith," I said. "Wherever we go, follow, and bring that youth alive to us."

"Good. I will do it. Ye will not go far among these hills," he answered with a note of irony.

Then Grim came, and I gave him King's message.

"Shall I let this fellow go?" I asked, explaining why.

Grim nodded, and I cut the thong, then gave Akbar the knife. He held it out for Grim and me to touch the hilt, hesitated in front of Joan Angela, and after a moment held it out for her to touch too—a prodigious concession, for it is not thought manly to show a woman too much courtesy in that land. Then he was gone, running like the wind up the track away from us.

The rifle-firing was as furious as ever. Now and again there would come half a dozen fairly steady volleys from the far side of the ravine, as if King was trying to instil some system into the Waziris. Then there would be a riot of independent shots, followed by silence, and volleys again at intervals. Kangra Khan's men were wasting ammunition as if it were the easiest stuff to come by in the world, instead of having to be stolen from the British or bought for its weight in coined silver. "We're beaten," said Grim, "and I don't know what to do." It was the first time in all my knowledge of him that he had ever admitted that. "King can't get to us, nor we to him. The tribes will have heard this shindy, and when morning comes they'll surround us all. Then goodbye!"

But Joan Angela, who should have been the most discouraged, laughed.

"Why will the tribesmen wait until the morning?" she asked, with a

woman's flair for questions.

"They dread the dark. Unless they're caught out, they stay in and stir late," Grim answered.

"Then we've hours ahead of us. Anything might happen. Let's try our luck. Mine's always good."

Grim was racking his brains, and it was no use my proposing anything. I knew the language well enough, but did not know the hills; nor did he know them nearly as well as King, who was out of reach. Whatever we might elect to do, there would be no means of getting word of it across that ravine in time to give King a chance to follow up.

"If we wait until dawn we can signal," Grim said, scratching his chin. "King and I both know the Morse code."

"How many men are hurt?" I asked him.

"Several... eight or nine. I know of four dead. We can't leave the wounded here."

"I'll bet you King does something clever!" said Joan Angela. "He has the most men. He'll realize it's up to him."

"If he don't we're all done for," Grim answered gloomily.

But it did not sound as if King were being clever. His Waziris, yelling imprecations, started suddenly to squander ammunition more furiously than ever. The edge of the ravine along the far side became a line of spurting flame. He seemed to have persuaded his men to space themselves along a wider front, and perhaps a scout or a false alarm had put them in fear of a rush by Kangra Khan's contingent.

Shot answered shot across the impenetrable darkness, and I wondered how long the cartridges would last, when suddenly Narayan Singh leapt up and shouted: "Ahah! See them! Ahah! King sahib, thou art a king, a great one! Ho! A head is worth a hundred thousand rifles! Jimgrim sahib! Rammy sahib! Come and see!"

#### **IV. "What the Hell Do You Know About Women?"**

The moon had shifted to the westward far enough to uncover Kangra Khan's position, and because of the shape of the Gibraltar rock our corner now was more obscure. We were still exposed in a hazy light, but the table was turning rapidly. All the advantage of light was coming our way... and King's. Outline by outline, Kangra Khan's predicament disclosed itself; and suddenly the moonbeams touched with silver a long ledge, higher than the Pathans' position, and we all knew what Narayan Singh was exulting about.

I could see King... knew it must be he. No man on earth stands exactly as he does when he is himself, not playing parts. His unself-consciousness seems absolute then, so utterly absorbed in what he sees and hears that neither danger nor convenience exist for him. He stood like a statue beyond the ravine, on a crag that overhung that moonlit ledge, directing his Waziris, half of whom had crawled to the new position and were pouring a galling fire down into the *sangar*\* Kangra Khan was holding. [\* A fortress of stones]

There was still the ravine between them, but at that point it curved in Kangra Khan's direction and grew considerably narrower, so that the utmost range was not more than two hundred yards. Kangra Khan's men were forced to crouch close to their stone wall, which put them almost out of action, although there was possibly room for twenty of

them in a square stone tower at one corner, from which they were answering the Waziris fire. The others, under the wall, had to content themselves with yelling, and by the noise they made I judged there were several hundred of them; but numbers don't mean much (except to increase the problem) when the tide of fortune turns.

The moonlight track that led from us to the *sangar* was still covered by about a third of King's men, who had practically ceased fire, sending only an occasional warning shot to serve notice that the way was barred, and notifying us that it was a "one way street." A one-eyed charwoman could have recognized that opportunity.

Grim pulled out his Prophet's tooth and acted like a regimental chaplain showing Irish troops a crucifix. We had about twenty men still fit for action, and they began their chant "Allaho Akbar... Allaho Akbar," gaining and gaining in speed and noise until it sounded like the tumult of a hundred, and the echo went grinding and clamoring away into the hills, cannoning back and forth from crag to crag. We may have sounded like a thousand to the Pathans up there in the *sangar*, already desperate under the slanting hail of Waziri bullets.

I shouted to Joan Angela to stay where she was, and rushed forward to get in the front rank with Grim and Narayan Singh. (There was no room for more than three or four abreast at any point along that track.) In a second I was passed by half a dozen of our Waziris, so I practically led the rearguard, stumbling over lumps of shale that had been shot down from the cliff wall on our right hand.

I believe we might have made the *sangar* wall unnoticed by Kangra Khan's men, in spite of the yelling and the noise of the loose shale underfoot; for they, too, were yelling, and the echoes were so confusing that our particular din might have been coming from anywhere. But King's Waziris saw us, and opened a supporting fire

too soon, so that we rushed with a screaming stream of bullets overhead, and the pat-pat-patter of their hail on the *sangar* wall preceded us.

One huge Pathan leapt up on the wall waving a tulwar and crumpled up backwards under a hail of bullets. Another took his place, and was run through the belly by Narayan Singh's long sabre. Half a dozen more leapt over the wall, engaging Grim, Narayan Singh and several of our men long before I could come on the scene, for it was a straggling rush we made, not timed to meet the exigencies of the slowest. Then we of the rearguard came up breathless, and a man beside me lent me the use of his knee to leap the wall.

I was first over, yelling, I don't doubt, like two or three men. Only Grim was silent. Narayan Singh roared for a dozen. He and Grim were over close behind me. I stumbled over a dead Pathan and seized his tulwar. In a second we were backed against the stone wall in the shadow fighting for dear life, with fifty of Kangra Khan's contingent at our throats, and our own men scrambling over one by one to drop down and hack and thrust before their feet touched ground.

That was a fight! One of our men was drilled clean through the head by a Waziri bullet from over the ravine as he crossed the wall, for King's men did not cease fire soon enough. But I think nineteen got over unscathed, and the odds against them, and the utter hopelessness of quarter, made them fight like devils on the slag. To our left front King never ceased his hail of fire against the tower and the wall on that side, so we would have been mowed down if we had left our cover; and many of Kangra Khan's Pathans who tried to get at us by taking a short cut across the midst of the enclosure fell before they came half-way.

It was knife-work--butt and blade and pistol. The Pathan falls back on his natural weapon and tactics in a tight place, and none of us had

time to load, or even to aim, for they came at us in the shadow of the wall in a series of spurts and rushes, and when a man was down that was not by any means the end of him. A Pathan with hardly life left in him would crawl in close and try to thrust his knife home before Allah beckoned him.

We lost nine of our nineteen, all dead, for there was no chance for a wounded man except to fight on... no quarter... no appeal for it. I broke the tulwar on a rifle-barrel thrust up by a Pathan to guard his head, and the broken half of the blade went half-way through his skull between the eyes. Then I emptied the pistol, and after that I ducked to avoid a blow, and grabbed a dead man's rifle, using butt and thrust like an old-time quarterstaff.

Once, and then again, I was saved by a pistol-shot that flashed up from under my arm when three Pathans attacked at once. I had the outside berth, on the edge of the line of moonlight, where the hail of King's Waziri bullets swept within a yard of me, and there were men who went down under my clubbed butt who were nearly shot to pieces as they lay; so I was easier for the Pathans to see than any other of our party, and well for me that singlestick and gloves have always been my favorite pastime! Fifty times in half as many minutes I was dead but for the training of hand and eye those sports had given me.

And more than a dozen times, from under my legs or arms, or over my shoulder, something--someone--that I had no time to turn and see, created a diversion. It was swift, wild, savage work, brute instinct up, with Karma signifying who were to be slain and who the survivors. Luck, some fellows call it. Law, say I. Neither my time, nor Grim's, nor Narayan Singh's had come. No flinching yet on either side. Nothing but a shambles in the dark. And King's move next.

The firing over our heads ceased and a yell as from the emptying graves on judgment Day came up from the ravine, announcing that King's Waziris were making a second attempt to cross. And this time they came like the wind, for half of King's men kept up such a withering hail of fire from the new position on the ledge that none could man the walls to make the ravine impassable... and besides there were we who had to be dealt with before any man dared turn his back on us. Once, from the stone tower, Kangra Khan in desperation turned his fire in our direction; but his riflemen, already wild and wavering, could not see us in the shadow. They mowed down half a dozen of their own side, and then had to turn again to rake the flanks of the ravine.

Then the show was over, with the sudden swiftness of a hailstorm. How the word spread among the ranks of the defenders I don't know. There was a last savage rush in our direction... a last melee breast to breast, with long knives thrusting upward from behind between the legs of those in front and the curses hot in your face as a man's life winged to its account--then almost silence! They melted. They flitted away like ghosts. They vanished over the rear wall of the *sangar* like a string of shadows cast by magic-lantern rays, leaving nothing but a lot of dead men and some broken, empty cartridge-boxes. One wounded man sat up in the midst of the open space, laughed like a ghoul, fired at me point-blank, missed by an inch, and fell backward stone dead. That was the last shot fired that night.

I turned to see who stood behind me, and looked straight into Joan Angela's grey eyes! She held an empty pistol in one hand, and in the other a long tulwar that had blood on the end of the blade.

"You fight like a man, Jeff!" she said with a little nervous laugh. "I'm sorry I'm only a woman, but I was useful once or twice."

Her overcoat was torn, and stained with blood where she had knelt to



guard my legs. Her lips were parted, and her eyes wild with excitement. She did not seem afraid, but the hand that held the tulwar was shaking.

"Are you hurt at all?" I asked her.

"No," she answered. "How's your head?"

I had forgotten my head. It was bleeding. The cut had opened, and the bandage was a sticky mess. I think it was that, and the exertion, that saved me from a protracted spell of illness, for my brain was clear again and there was no more numbness. Joan Angela took a dead man's turban and began to look for a clean piece to make a new bandage. I was pulling off the old one, turning at the same time to see where Grim and Narayan Singh might be, when the next thing happened.

Our men were all leaning over the wall to watch King's Waziris come climbing out of the ravine, yelling jokes at them and boasting. I had dropped my clubbed rifle to attend to the bandage. Suddenly two of Kangra Khan's Pathans rushed out from a shadow, and one of them aimed a blow at me with a tulwar that made my skin tingle as I ducked. The other seized Joan Angela around the waist.

I yelled for help, and closed with my man, crushing the breath out of him before he could recover and swing the tulwar a second time. I got his wrist and twisted it until he let the weapon fall, and that took only seconds, but it gave the other fellow time enough. He carried Joan Angela away into the shadow, seizing her from behind with great hairy arms like an orang-outang's. She could not scream, but she kicked and nearly tripped him. He had his hands full.

I shouted, and some of our men and Narayan Singh came running. I hurled my prisoner into the midst of them backwards and don't know

what happened to him. When I saw him again he was dead. I heard Joan Angela gasp in the darkness somewhere. There was a struggle, for the man gasped too, and swore. We rushed for the sound, and cornered the two of them between two inside buttresses, and the Pathan realised the game was up, for he spoke. You could not see anything... not even his eyes.

"By the blood of my father, I will choke her if you move another step!" he snarled. So he had no weapon. That was something. (Pathans don't strangle people if they have a knife available.) Joan Angela did not speak; he had his hand over her mouth; but I could hear her heels cracking against his shins. Then she gurgled, and I knew he was choking her. Narayan Singh and I rushed in simultaneously. The Pathan took to his heels, and we missed him in the dark, cannoning into each other. We had to stop and listen. Then we heard him dragging her body along the stones, and he had reached the corner of the wall before we overhauled him. Then he had to step into the moonlight, and we saw he had her by the coat-collar. She seemed either dead or unconscious, and he had the nerve to try to vault the wall and hoist her over before we reached him. Narayan Singh jumped for him and I grabbed the girl; but he kicked Narayan Singh in the jaw and slipped down out of sight over the wall, taking the overcoat with him, minus one sleeve.

The girl's tongue was out between her teeth, and it took several minutes' hard rubbing before the muscles of her throat and neck began to function properly and she opened her eyes. By that time there was no more hope of catching the Pathan, nor for that matter much object to be gained by it. King's Waziris were swarming over the wall, and I helped Joan Angela along toward the tower, meaning to carry her up the outside steps to the upper part of it, out of harm's way; for those Waziris were allies rather by accident than design, and there was no guessing yet what their attitude might be toward a

valuable prisoner. We were at their mercy absolutely, and they might see fit to compensate themselves for their heavy losses in the night's engagement. They were savages to a man, with a savage sense of justice... honor of a kind, and elemental decency no doubt; but elements are unconventional. If they in their predicament should assert their own right now to hold Joan Angela to ransom, no other argument than force was likely to have much weight.

So I carried her up the irregular steps that formed an outside support to the tower on two sides, and into the draughty square chamber, pierced for rifle-fire. There was no roof--only burned beams where a roof had once been, and most of the stones that had formed the roof were still littered about the floor, which in one place had broken under the weight. In the midst was a square hole above the deep well that gave the tower its excuse for being and made it tenable against attack. There was no windlass or rope and bucket, but a ladder made of sticks lashed clumsily with hide, up and down which whoever wanted water had to climb. I tested the ladder with my own weight, and told Joan Angela to get down into the dark hole and hide there if I should give the alarm.

Then I climbed to the crazy wooden platform at the stairhead outside and waited, hoping nobody had missed me and that none had seen me carrying the girl across the moonlit enclosure. It was a wild hope, I admit, but a man throws reason overboard when it argues only pessimism in a tight place; and besides, our small party of Waziris were celebrating victory with their friends who swarmed over the wall, chanting a battle-song, greeting friends, exchanging boasts, and some searching the bodies of the dead for loot. I could see Grim and Narayan Singh trying to persuade some of them to mount guard on the defenses. King had not appeared over the wall yet, and it was impossible to guess what he was doing in the dark, but I could hear voices somewhere midway down our flank of the ravine.

My perch on the platform gave me a view of all of the enclosure that was not in shadow, and of acres of darkness and moonlight to the northward beyond the wall. Crag like glistening teeth arose in irregular rows and curves out of silvery mist that seemed to float on a coal-black sea. If Kangra Khan were half a leader, and his men not more than half beaten, our position was likely to become as untenable as his had been--and that before we should have much time to make our dispositions. Daylight would see us helpless. The well in all likelihood was all that had persuaded natural warriors to fortify such an unpromising place. It was true it overlooked the track up which we had come, but in turn it was overlooked from three directions, and unless the surrounding heights were held in force it would be worse than useless as a point of vantage. But there were circumstances connected with the well that I did not know yet, and there is always more than meets the eye when a savage's reason for taking laborious pains is not immediately obvious.

The Waziri women came up the ravine at last, loaded like pack-animals with cooking-pots, fuel, the scant supplies and the scantier remaining ammunition. The Waziris had gone to the border on plunder bent, expecting to replenish their stocks at the expense of Punjab villages and British outposts. Now they were parlous short of everything except ambition, and the women, heaving their packs over the wall, began at once to strip whatever the men had not yet taken from the dead. Such Pathans as yet had life in them received short shrift, and there were mutilations not to be described. Then one by one they threw the corpses down into the ravine and after that the widows of Waziri dead began their wailing, keening to the night like hopeless ghouls.

Then sudden silence. Something was about to happen... none knew what... save Kangra Khan, who had the call on opportunity ... and King, perhaps. There were King, and possibly fifty Waziris, still to be

accounted for. Our folk within the *sangar* began, as if instinctively, to seek the shelter of the wall, like jackals, surprised by the dawn, slinking off to their lairs. Here and there a woman stayed crying by her dead mate, but except for those within sixty seconds the enclosure seemed utterly deserted, the silence broken only by click-click-click as men opened their magazines to make sure, and snapped them into place again.

Then the storm broke, Himalaya fashion, and the wind came with it, as if even the elements had taken sides against us. All the wreaths of white mist that had floated like foam among the crags were whipped and whirled into one hurrying cloud, and out of that came spurts of flame as Kangra Khan's men started to woo vengeance in the name of Allah. Their yells out-dinned the rifle-fire. The range was short. They had crept under cover of the mist to a position on the nearest overlooking crag, not much more than a hundred yards away. Naturally, they supposed we had manned the tower. A hundred bullets rattled against the masonry, and I ducked in through the door, shoving Joan Angela in front of me, as another fusillade splintered the dry wood of the platform at the stairhead.

Our men did not answer yet. They seemed cowed by the suddenness of the attack. The wind shrieked, as it only can in those infernal hills, bearing the din of the firing and imprecation down toward us, making answering yells useless; and that is a worse handicap in savage warfare than odds of two to one. It is not enough to know that Allah is on your side; you must be able to assert the fact and to make the other fellow listen, whether he will or no. Curses must reach his ears to have effect. Taunts must prove to him your own contempt for danger, or the danger grows as real as he intends it shall be. Yells are as deadly as bullets, estimated by result.

I peered through the slits in the wall, but could see nothing except

spurts of flame and hurrying white mist. But suddenly there came an answering din, whose source I could not see. Somewhere on the far side of Kangra Khan's men King was turning a flanking fire on their position. The stutter of Kangra Khan's riflemen ceased and began again as some of them turned their attention to the unexpected enemy. It was obvious that if we hurried we could save the night. But you have to preach, and teach, and stir before you can change dumb disgruntlement into an assault against wind and mist and high-perched riflemen.

"Will you stay here?" I asked Joan Angela.

"Why?" she demanded; and I cursed all women under my breath.

"Will you hide down that well at the first sign of danger?"

"No!" she said candidly.

I did not argue. I swept her up into my arms and carried her, protesting violently, down the rickety ladder into the well-shaft, and stood her on a platform near the bottom. It was pitch-dark down here. You could only see a faint square patch of dimness up above, pricked out with a pattern of abnormally bright stars. You could hardly hear the din of fighting down there, although it began to sound as if our men were coming into action.

"How dare you, Jeff! I'll not forgive you for this!" she said angrily.

"We'll discuss forgiveness afterwards," I answered. "Will you stay down here, or must I tie you to the ladder?"

Hot temper and haste are bad medicine in the dark where there isn't room to move without contact, nor any chance to see, nor time to explain. She misunderstood; or it may be her nerves were over-

strained. At any rate, she struck me in the face with her open hand.

"Get up that ladder and leave me here, Jeff Ramsden!" she said more bitterly than I had ever heard her speak. And I grew dumb with the anger that any fellow feels when a good woman elects to accuse him of the dirtiest kind of villainy.

We have all been cads and cowards in our day, but there are lots of us who have proved and earned the right to be trusted to any length with any woman anywhere. Such men need no telling what that slap in the face with an open hand meant to me in that predicament. I did not answer. I went up the ladder hand-over-hand, simmering indignation like a bear driven out of his den. She called to me out of the well, but I did not listen.

"Jeff!" I heard, booming up hollow behind me; but I paid no attention. I stepped out on the platform, in a mood to welcome bullets as a concrete insult that a man could fight back at. I was mad, that minute. Nothing mattered... neither night nor morning, nor the mist, nor odds, nor the outcome... least of all Joan Angela's opinion of me. I had had enough of that. I turned my back on it, and her, and went down the steps in running jumps, six steps at a time, sprawled headlong at the bottom over loose stones fallen from the roof, got to my feet in a greater rage than ever, grabbed a rifle from a man who lurked in the lee of the wall and struck him half unconscious when he protested... then vaulted to the wall and shook the rifle in full moonlight, with my feet in blown mist and my body bathed in silver light above it.

"Allaho Akbar!" I roared; and I can bellow like a bull when the mood is on me.

I daresay, seen through the mist-film from below, I looked encouraging to those crouching Waziris; but I don't know why I was not shot to pieces by the storm of bullets that greeted me from

Kangra Khan's position. I stood there unscathed. Rage may be an armour after all. I saw Grim, and then Narayan Singh, scrambling to the wall to follow my example... heard the yelling and din of King's riflemen, and next the roar of our men beginning at last to work themselves into a frenzy with the battle-cry.

"Allaho Akbar! Allaho Akbar!"

Over the wall I went, brandishing the rifle; and over they came in my wake... not pausing... not firing... swept forward by the impulse that had surged in me and carried me on like a crazy unreasoning bull in an arena. If I had a thought at all it was to hack my way as far as possible from where Joan Angela and her opinions were. I wished never to see her again, and least of all to suffer explanation and apology. Death did not cross my mind. I was not wooing martyrdom. Anger was the all-embracing force that moved me, and it lent my feet wings, heavy and slow as they are as a rule.

No Waziri--not even Grim or Narayan Singh, who are fleet of foot--passed me on that crazy charge from our *sangar* wall to the ledge where Kangra Khan had deployed his men. We plunged into darkness, and had no breath to yell with, so the roar to Allah ceased. Maybe Kangra Khan misunderstood the silence beyond our breastwork. Perhaps he and his men believed our first yells, if they as much as heard them upwind, were an effort of despair, that died away. They kept a steady fire pouring on the wall, and, we not pausing to reply from the darkness beneath the hurrying mist, they had no means of divining what we were up to.

So we were up there and among them before they guessed we were coming, and that night's second shambles was staged on a ledge, with a sheer fall of fifty feet for whoever set a foot wrong or was forced over backwards in hand-to-hand fight.



I don't remember using the rifle as it should be used, although when it was all over I found the magazine was empty. Perhaps the fellow I snatched it from had emptied it and not reloaded. Maybe I fired instinctively and forgot it as a man forgets the breath he drew. I do know I clubbed the thing and fought Berserker fashion all along the ledge, driving Kangra Khan's Pathans along in front of me, myself untouched, not even in danger as I remember it. They quailed in front of the flailing rifle-butt, and I wake up now at night sometimes in a hot sweat, from dreaming of their bearded faces as they fell in front of me and toppled off the cliff. Some fell before I struck them, stepping backward to avoid the blow.

I don't know what Grim and Narayan Singh or our Waziris did. That was a one-man fight as far as I was conscious of it... a delirium of anger. I'm not proud of it, although they tell me the Waziris have composed a song about that fury of mine. I may say I was hardly in it. It was passion--all the brute, hereditary instincts using my strength. I don't remember how I got there, but I found myself at last sitting heaving for breath on a rock at the end of the ledge, with the blood-beastly rifle over my knees, wondering stupidly why the magazine was empty.

Grim came and told me that our Waziris were scattered in all directions in pursuit of Kangra Khan's men, and that he hoped they would find their way back before daylight. Then King came, and stood looking at me, with his back to the moon. I think he understood, for he said nothing--nothing personal that is. He turned and talked to Grim.

"All right so far," he said. "Kangra Khan has likely had enough. But the tribes will gather now to hound the Waziris harder than ever. They'll argue they're tired and running out of ammunition. Tomorrow, or the next day at latest, will see us surrounded again. Where's Miss

Leich?"

Grim did not know. He asked me. I knew, or thought I knew, but that slap in the face was as fresh in my memory as if it had happened that instant. He had to ask me twice before I answered.

"The last I saw of her, she was in that tower," I said, jerking my thumb in the direction of the *sangar*. Doubtless they thought my surliness was due to the reaction after fighting. They walked away along the ledge, and presently found Narayan Singh, and sent him to keep an eye on me, while they started off for the *sangar*, keeping an eye on each other for fear of Pathan knives lurking in the mist. Narayan Singh came and sat down on the rock beside me, and he and I are such old friends that there was no need to speak unless either of us felt disposed. We were silent for perhaps five minutes, he pulling a rag through a rifle he had picked up somewhere. Presently he took the rifle off my knees, pitched it over the cliff, and replaced it with the one he had cleaned.

"That is better," he said quietly.

I did not answer. I was hardly more than conscious of his presence. Such process as was going on in my mind was hardly to be dignified with the name of thought, but I was dimly aware of contentment that he should be there; and because he was not of my race I preferred him just then to either King or Grim. I felt he might be less inclined, and less able than they, to interpret my state of mind and draw conclusions. But I was entirely wrong.

"Sahib," he said presently, running the fingers of his right hand upward through his beard, "all women are the devil. Of two, the more beautiful is the worse; and of three, the youngest."

"What the hell do you know about women?" I asked.

"This: that a man's own error is reflected in their faces; his goodness or his badness, his strength or his weakness in their hearts. A man sees himself in a woman, and the more he loves her the worse the vision shocks him. So he goes off and acts like the madman that he naturally is... even as an ape making faces at himself in a stolen looking-glass."

"You're polite!" said I.

"I am the sahib's friend. I am a man who has seen much... including my own heart in a woman's... at which I look no longer... having no delight in it."

I was about to answer (hotly, it may be) when we both heard someone scrambling breathlessly up the track. In a minute Grim came stumbling over stones along the ledge.

"Miss Leich!" he said. "Where is she?"

"In the tower," I answered, aware of an uncomfortable premonition.

"No," Grim said, "she isn't there."

"She's down on the platform at the bottom of the shaft," said I.

"No, she's not," he answered. "We've looked everywhere. She's gone! No trace!"

## **V. "A Most Wise, Excellent Sahiba!"**

There were rifle-shots, stray for the most part, but now and then in ragged volleys, among the crags around us as our Waziris pursued and snipped the retreating Pathans. There was not even a guard over

the supplies within the *sangar* wall, and even the women had taken the trail in the mist to pounce on wounded and strip the dead. The *sangar* was empty of all except King, as Grim, Narayan Singh, and I arrived breathless. King was sitting on the bottom step outside the *sangar* tower.

"She's gone!" he said, not getting up. "Have you shouted?" I asked.

"Shout all you want to in this wind!" he answered. "Unless she's lost her head and run away down-wind toward the border you couldn't make her hear ten yards away. And if she's run off in a panic she'll be either miles away, or dead, or a prisoner. Shout, though, if it suits you!"

"She never was in a panic in her life," I said. And I would have said more, but Narayan Singh interrupted--a thing he rarely, almost never, did. His usual method is to wait until everybody else has had his say, and then after a pause to say extremely little.

"We might at least try down-wind, sahibs," he broke in. "So, we would be on our way home. If we find her, we can make tracks for the border, lying up by day."

"You fellows go," King answered. "I've a pledge to keep. I promised these Waziris, if they'd help me tonight, I'd stand by them until they reach their own villages."

"Damn!" muttered Grim. "I'll stay with you, of course," he added.

Narayan Singh waited for orders, and I said nothing. Mixed emotion makes me speechless as a rule, and the notion of describing exactly what had happened in the well had left me--as I think Narayan Singh intended. We were all in the deep of discouragement. Narayan Singh was plucking at his beard irresolutely.

"Sahibs!" he exclaimed suddenly, stepping up to windward of us to spare noise, "is it not best that Jeff sahib and I should undertake this task?"

King eyed me and nodded. Grim was silent. I knew he hated to be left out of any difficult or dangerous employment, but his loyalty to King was paramount, and it was obvious that two would be better than one on either venture. None, except possibly Narayan Singh, had any confidence in the outcome.

"Let's go," I said. "So long, you fellows."

I remember we did not shake hands.

So Narayan Singh and I set forth with the wind at our backs and climbed the *sangar* wall, dropping down on to the track along the side of the ravine that we had rushed with such enthusiasm but a short while back. The lower end was now no longer in the moonlight, and out of the solid-looking blackness down there the only sound that came was the cry of jackals, long since attracted to the feast of slain. I don't know to which of us it occurred first that three jackals had come slinking the wrong way... toward us... out of darkness into moonlight... uphill... without apparent reason. Nothing in Nature happens undesignedly. We both came to a standstill. The Sikh's ears are sharper than mine, and he heard something that caused his fingers to clench tight on the barrel of his rifle. (He had left his sword with King, as likely to get in the way, and probably more useful to King now in any case, if only as a symbol of authority.)

There was nowhere to hide in the moonlight, and it was not easy to go forward silently among that loose shale, but that was the only course open, so we picked our way carefully, pausing to listen at intervals. In spite of our care, the noise we made scared away a pack

of jackals that were nosing something just within the dark zone; they scampered away whimpering. Then we heard low voices, and another sound. Narayan Singh sprang forward and I after him. But when we reached the corner where the tracks forked on either hand of the Gibraltar rock there was nobody there.

Nobody--and nothing, I thought, except a jackal lurking near us, and an owl that swooped and swooped again, afraid of us, but bent on an investigation. Suddenly the jackal threw caution to the winds and scurried by within a yard of me, seized something in the darkness under the cliff, and scampered away with it. I swung a blow at him as he went by, missed, but could see that he had something in his mouth.

So I stooped in the shadow and groped. Narayan Singh did the same. Each of us found something. I picked up a leather legging-mate to the one the jackal had pounced on. The Sikh produced Joan Angela's cloth riding-hat. Beyond question both articles were hers. There was even a strand of her brown hair caught in the hat-band; it glistened like gold when I stepped back into the moonlight to examine it. But there was no blood on the hat nor on the legging, and I could feel none on the stone where the things had lain. We did not dare strike matches.

"She is not dead," said Narayan Singh.

"They've stripped her and chucked the body over the cliff," said I. "We'd better climb down there and drive the jackals off."

"Nay," he said. "If they had stripped her they would have carried off the garments. And since some were left, then why not all? She is alive and not far away. She herself has removed these for reasons. Notice, sahib, they were not thrown away at haphazard, but lay side by side, as a soldier, or a lady, would have left them. And they lay on

a prominent stone where whoever passed would see them in daylight. Yet she was unseen when she laid them there, or whoever saw would have taken them surely. She is alive, and did this purposely."

It was possible she had removed the leggings to make running easier. I had noticed how the things caught on the backs of her boots when she walked, and the lower edge of the one we had found was worn shiny with the friction. But why the hat?

"She and I had a misunderstanding," I said, hating to refer to it but forced, in order to make my meaning clear. "She may have felt so piqued that she has decided to make her own way back to the border."

"Nay, sahib, for she left the hat and leggings on a stone beside the way where we might see them. That is proof that she wished to be followed."

The Sikh's argument seemed fair enough, and yet I found it unconvincing. I recalled a woman who had once deliberately wandered off for the sake of causing trouble, knowing well that I, whom she detested, would feel compelled to search for her and bring her back. Such memories do crop up when they can do the most harm. I saw a mental vision of Joan Angela in hiding near by, chuckling at the thought of my disgruntlement. But that unpleasant idea vanished when I remembered that we had heard more than one voice as we came downhill. I began to hunt about for tracks, but might as well have looked for a subway entrance, there in the dark, on those dry rocks.

"There be two ways," said the Sikh, "for we know she is not in the *sangar* up behind us. If she left the hat and leggings for us to see, I think she will have left another sign to show which way she took. Let

us try the likeliest first."

So we strode side by side in the dark, along the righthand fork that curved around the Gibraltar rock, and came presently to the outcrop, where I suddenly remembered we had left a horse standing. I had forgotten all about the beast, and believe Narayan Singh, too, had forgotten, until that instant. The beast's droppings were there in a heap, and warm, for he had stood still patiently. I struck a match at last, sheltering it between my hands. There was the mark of a man's sandaled foot imprinted plainly in the dung and pointing along the track, away from the corner behind us.

That proved not much yet. There was nothing likelier than that a lurking hill-thief had come and stolen the horse. I could see no sign of Joan Angela's footprints. But Narayan Singh scouted forward, and at the end of about a minute stood and waited for me. When I reached him he showed me a hairpin stuck into a rolled-up piece of soiled white cotton cloth--the sort of stuff the Hindus use for making turbans. The hill-women don't use hairpins--not of that sort, at any rate--nor do they pin a piece of cloth so neatly, nor would they have dropped such a long piece and left it, as a bandage, or a tape to tie bundles with; it would have been too valuable.

"That is her sign, sahib. We go forward," said Narayan Singh.

So forward we went in a hurry, with our choice between making a noise and being waylaid, or going too slowly to have any hope of catching up, and making some noise in the bargain; for it was impossible to move silently in the dark on that rough track. We broke into a run at intervals, and at the end of about a mile of up and down hill scrambling we had to pause for breath.

"I am thinking of that prisoner you let go, sahib. What was his name? I mean the man whose hands were tied with the reins from off the



second horse," said Narayan Singh when he had breath enough to speak.

"Akbar bin Mahommed," I answered louder than was necessary, because the thought spurred emphasis.

"Aye! Akbar bin Mahommed!" said a voice from a ledge up above us, and we both jumped nearly out of our skins.

I took aim at the sound, seeing nothing, not meaning to shoot, but by way of instinctive precaution. But Narayan Singh pushed my rifle up.

"Not so, sahib," he said quietly. "We are two, against we know not how many. Oh... Akbar bin Mahommed!" he called out, pitching his voice to an almost falsetto note, to make it carry.

There was no answer; only the echo and re-echo, wailing away and away into the distance. He called again, but only more echoes, and then silence, punctured by the distant crack of a skirmisher's rifle.

We climbed up on the ledge, and it took us ten minutes of strenuous scrambling, hauling each other up in turns, since we could not find even a goat-track. There was nothing on the ledge, and nobody, although we found a way down that led to a spot fifty yards beyond where the track we had been following before forked. So we followed the new direction, throwing caution to the winds. It was no use trying to go silently. Whoever lay in wait for us had an easy task in any event. We did better to save time and husband strength by striding at ease, if the phrase can be made to fit, stumbling through stone-strewn shadow.

Long ago we were out of all reach of our friends, and whatever King's and Grim's predicament might be, we were pretty surely now cut off from hope of reaching them. The dawn was beginning to announce

its coming, cold-grey in the east. The wind changed and blew more chill. I felt hungry and wondered what Joan Angela might have to eat, supposing she were really still alive; tired, and wondered whether she were not exhausted, even though she had the horse; hopeless, because of the absurdity of going further with all those ragged hillsides swarming with ambushed men, and daylight due.

"That man Akbar called to us for some good reason, sahib," said Narayan Singh. But I did not answer. There was no use in saying what I thought. We were enough discouraged. I remembered tales of how those hillmen will decoy a man until he stands exactly where it suits them best to murder him. We were easy marks, at the end of our tether, leg-weary, beginning to grow thirsty, and without supplies. I sat down, and the Sikh chose a rock beside me.

"Akbar bin Mahommed!" a voice croaked from a ledge again above us.

I turned swiftly, and this time, because the dawn was brightening, I caught sight of a man's head in a notch between two boulders. It was there for a second and then gone again. Narayan Singh got to his feet.

"Sit down again," I said. "If he's an enemy we're easy prey. If he's a friend he'll watch and see we're not coming, and call to us again."

So we sat still, nervously alert for sounds. But we sat for at least ten minutes, and the sun rose in a sea of color, tipping the hills with gold, before anything happened. Then the same voice called again from the same place, and I saw Akbar bin Mahommed's face between the rocks, with a thin wisp of smoke blowing along the wind behind it.

"In the name of Allah, the All-merciful, the Lord of all this way! I am thy friend, Ramm-is-den!" he cried out. "May my offspring eat me if I lie!"

"Are you alone?" I called back.

"Nay, since He who sees all is everywhere! But when ye come we shall be three men."

"And a woman?"

"Nay!"

Hope, that had sprung in an instant, was dashed again. However, the smoke suggested breakfast. We began to climb, Akbar directing us at intervals from overhead, counseling caution and warning us to keep our heads low.

"For, though I am a friend, there be those who are not!" he explained, as if he were announcing something new.

At last he reached over the ledge and seized me by the hands, helping me to swarm the ten-foot scarp. And then the two of us hauled up Narayan Singh.

There was a cave at the back, and thence the smoke came. The opening was two-thirds blocked by a boulder, but it was a draughty hole, shaped roughly like a curved gourd, full of the acrid smoke from a small fire of dung and sticks and litter, on which, of all unexpected things, tea was stewing in a battered enameled iron kettle.

"Where is the sahiba?" I demanded.

"God knows," he answered naively.

"You know!" I said, seizing his arm and giving him a jerk to make him face me.

"Who knows the way of a woman?" he retorted. "The animals--the rocks--the wind--men's hearts--a man may understand. But not women. Allah forgot to make them comprehensible."

"He made me easy to understand!" I assured him, backing him against the wall. "I'm going to learn from you where the sahiba is, or kill you."

"Then thou art a wizard, Ramm-is-den! Read my heart! Tell me what is written there that I myself know not!"

"Tell me first what you do know," I demanded.

"Be seated then, sahibs. Who am I that I should not tell truth? And see, I have tea that I stole from the fattest bunnia in Dera Ghazi Khan--very good stuff indeed, and stewed thoroughly. Moreover, eggs, behold them! Nine chupatties... lo, three apiece! A woman will be beaten presently because her man lacks food. I gave her the tea not long ago, and she was beaten for not saying whence she had it. Such is life, inshallah! Women are whores and men cuckolds. Bellies ache for food. None but Allah knoweth whence a meal comes. Sahibs, it is pleasanter beyond the fire where less smoke is. So, with your honour's good permission, eggs! Three eggs apiece--a hen's best effort, in the name of the All-wise! We must drink tea from the kettle, having no cups. It is hot. Beware of it! I tried to steal cups, but there were none."

He paused with his mouth full of eggs and chupattie.

"Where is the sahiba?" I repeated.

"Ah! She? God knows! I was telling what I know with your honour's favour, when your honor interrupted. Sahib, I am thy man. We are friends for ever. None shall thrust a feud between us. I went forth with

swollen wrists to find a set of garments, is it not so?"

"And to bring a holy youth to me, alive," I reminded him.

"Ah! That one! Such a simpleton he is! Take another egg, sahib--none save Allah knoweth whence a meal comes. Let the hen not have labored in vain! Lo, I went forth with swollen wrists. Is the smoke offensive? Let us tread the fire out. It is cold, but the sun is rising. Sons of evil mothers might observe the smoke. In the name of Allah, no more bloodshed than is necessary. If they come here we must kill them, and the hills are full of dead already. So. Lo, I have a sheepskin. It was warm when I took it, for a woman slept in it. I will lend it to your honor until the sun gets high. Thereafter it will serve for pillow for the three of us, inshallah."

He tossed the sheepskin over my shoulders and sat down again. I sat closer to Narayan Singh to let him share it, for the whistling wind was keen. Akbar bin Mahommed resumed his tale.

"So I went forth with swollen wrists to do your honour's bidding, we being friends whom none shall separate. Who am I that I should not tell truth? God witnesseth. There is a village on the shoulder of the hill that men call Iskanderan, none knoweth why. Thither I went bearing in mind your honour's wishes, much exercised with wonder how this cunning purpose might be accomplished, yet hopeful, since Allah knoweth all--aye, even the unlawful ways of women! So I came in great haste to the village on the humped-up shoulder of Iskanderan, my wrists still hurting. And I lay, praying Allah for cunning and courage, in the shadow of the stone wall that surrounds the evil-smelling place. God witnesseth. He heard me.

"Lo! The house of the man whose wife I am witness has more than once deceived him, stands thus, at the corner of the wall, with a flat roof, and thereon a breastwork--easy to defend and hard to enter.

Had the man been there we three were not in this place now. But Allah, who is All-wise, put a hope of loot into the fool's head, and he was one of those who prowled the hills last night to strip the slain--a very jackal. May his eyes drop out! May he learn in good time what his wife is, and eat mockery! The dog!

"All earth is full of wonders. It happened his wife had obeyed him, and lay within, behind a locked door, snoring, for I heard her. There was none else in the house. To right and left the wall is lower, and I chose the darker side, leaping the wall and descending silent-footed in the piled coudung. None heard me. Allah is my friend. I went to the shed where they keep the hens, and wrung a hen's neck lest she make an alarm. Beneath her were ten eggs. The hen is yonder, sahibs, in the corner. I cut her throat before the life left. Those I hid where I could find them presently, and then crept to the woman's door. But I dared not beat on it, and she slept like a bear in winter.

"None the less, it was dark, for the peak above the shoulder of the hill shut off the moon--an unwise situation for a man's house, whose wife and Um Kulsum are one! And a beam projected. Moreover, there are crannies in the stone into which a man's toes may be thrust. Allah is my friend, I reached the roof, whereon was a trap-door opening outward--by the favour of God, unlocked. I opened and descended.

"Whereafter, after a while the woman gave me tea and this kettle, and chupatties that were waiting against her man's return. Those I hid beside the eggs and hen, returning to have further word with her, she having unlocked the door that admits to the yard, in fear of me who might so easily betray her, and in greater fear of neighbours to the right and left. An evil conscience, sahibs, is by Allah's favour a good man's opportunity. Lo, I practiced on her fears.

"The crazy youth who preaches new politics, wearing fine clothes and the white turban of an uleema since he went to school in Samarkand,

slept--so she told me--in a house on the far side, and alone that night, since all who had the courage were on foot in the hills in search of loot. He has no wife. I bade her go bring him on any pretext. She is very fair to look at. She refused. But her husband had left his second knife--lo, this one!--hanging by its girdle from a rafter. I showed her the edge of it.

"By and by she brought the youth, he much enamored--yet presently much more afraid of me, and of the point of the knife at his belly. A simpleton, though full of politics! Clean-shaven like a fool, though old enough for a beard a foot long. Brave with long words, but as fearful of cold steel as a camel is of ghosts. And in love with the woman.

"So I promised to betray them both to the woman's husband unless obedience were the very breath he breathed. And I stripped him naked, rolling his clothes in a bundle, white turban and all. Thereafter I bade him go and hide his nakedness in garments fit for a man, and to return, and to come with me on a certain errand; for I bore in mind your honour's wish that I should bring him living and unhurt.

"But he was over-fearful and more evil-minded than the witch who gave him birth! When he had clothed himself, by Allah, it occurred to his treacherous mind that I was alone in the house with the woman, and if he aroused the village she and I could be taken red-handed, he acquiring honour, and we caught like rats in a cess-pit!

"So he wakened two or three, and they others. And before I knew it, as the Most High is my witness, there were nine men, mostly old ones, but a youth or two, and one in his prime--whom I will slay for his insolence if Allah wills--all beating on the door and demanding entrance.

"So I whispered to the woman, bidding her say that shaven fool had sought to seduce her and had started this false alarm for vengeance

on her because she refused him. Then I left by the roof very silently, closing the trap-door after me and dropping down into the dung, the knife and the kettle clanging together as I fell. But I leapt the wall before they saw me, and they searched in vain, some swearing the clang of the kettle was this thing, and some that, while I lay crouched in a shadow. Allah is my friend.

"I heard them questioning the woman. And I heard her lie, like the Um Kulsum that she is, first none believing her, then one or two, and then all believing her, because there was no trace of me, and the shaveling lacked an explanation for his change of garments. So they beat him for having wakened them, and drove him home with a threat in his ears that he should make his reckoning with the woman's husband. And I returned over the wall for the eggs and chupatties and the hen, finding them where I hid them, though an egg was broken where a fool in search of me had set his heel on it, leaving nine.

"I did up the food in the bundle of clothes, hung the kettle to my belt, and, with the knife held ready, set forth to find your honours, praising Allah, who is Lord of virtue, and my friend. Lo, sahibs, here I am, by Allah's favour! Yet not without a happening on the way. Not by any means.

"I set forth. To myself I laughed because the man whose wife had served my purpose is a cuckold, who shall learn it at the proper time and eat shame, and be shot when he picks a quarrel with me. None the less, I was filled with regret because the shaveling I had promised I would bring lay dreading the dawn and the woman's husband. Allah put a thought into my heart. Lo, consider how He works to preserve His friends! A miracle! It crossed my mind that the shaveling would gladly come away with me, for great fear of the woman's husband. I turned back, minded to regain the village on the upward side where his house is. So I chose another trail, and as I turned along it, by the



grace of the Most High, I heard footsteps!

"There was a clank of knives and rifles, and the heavy tread of men returning with a night's loot. I lay behind a rock, and soon I saw moonlight shining on the faces of three men--that woman's husband one of them. Had I not turned back when Allah put the thought into my heart, it had been I on whom the moon shone! Your honours would not have breakfasted! They had three rifles each, and clothing and some bandoliers, and what not else. I let them pass, though it burned my heart not to possess at least one rifle.

"When their backs were toward me I set forth again, abandoning hope of the shaveling, but praising Allah, who had brought the fool to mind. And I reached unseen the corner where your honor had befriended me. But the fight was over and I heard stray rifle-shots beyond the *sangar*; and after considering a while I guessed that your honours' great valour and cunning had put Kangra Khan to fight. So I approached the *sangar* and found only dead men lying there.

"The women had been busy. Women are women, sahibs. The dead were in many pieces, and as for loot, the thieves--may Allah curse them!--had left not so much as a button or a finger-ring. But they had left their own stores unguarded, so I helped myself. Thereafter I went to the watch-tower, where the sacred well is, minded to drink a little of the water that protects a man against red-sickness and the bullets of a foe, inshallah.

"Sahibs, may the Lord of all forget me if I lie! I was half-way down the ladder when I jumped at one leap to the top! This heart of mine, that is a man's and beats in one place sturdily, remained there! When I reached the summit it overtook me, and returned into my bosom with a thump, causing every hair of my body to wriggle like a worm! Mashallah! Did a voice from the well not speak to me? And am I the

wind or the water, that I should hear such a marvel and not feel terrified? Nay, by Allah, I was flesh, and very nearly decomposed!

"Nay, I heard not what the voice said. I was afraid, sahibs. He who is afraid hears fear and nothing else. Said I to myself, there is a devil in the well, fouling holy water! Should it truly be a devil, thinks I, in the name of Allah I will show that is no place for him; and if it is a man in hiding, well and good; his spirit shall go where no living man can ever see it! I got me a good-sized stone, about as heavy as a man can lift with two hands. I hove it, thus, above my head, standing back a little from the well-mouth, lest the devil come forth, or a man shoot up at me. And I stood on tip-toe, thus. I raised a shout to Allah to direct the aim and smite His enemy. The voice spoke again from the well, and I answered it! 'Ho! In the name of Allah, and of His servant Mahommed, I, Akbar bin Mahommed answer thee!' I shouted. And I flung the stone--a great stone, sahibs!

"Mashallah! He is great, and wise, and wonderful! He knoweth all. He foresees and predestinates. I told you how I stood a little back lest the devil come forth, or a man shoot up at me. The stone, too, slipped a little in my hands as I strained my strength to it. And lo, it hit the well wall. Lo, it bounded off and smashed a ladder rung. Then lo, it splashed into the water. And mashallah! when the echo of the splash was finished a beautiful voice like a houri's came forth, saying, 'Akbar bin Mahommed, why do you try to kill me?' Aye, English, sahibs. The voice spoke English."

He paused, the silence eloquently illustrating an emotion much too deep for words. It was a full minute before he took up the tale again.

"Now the houris speak the language of the Koran, sahibs. English is an unknown speech to them. So I reasoned this must be a woman. I am not afraid of women. Nay! A woman has her reasons to fear me, or to admire me! Until I lie stricken in the dark by some man's bullet,

and the hags come forth with knives, I will fear no woman! So I stepped to the mouth of the well with a second stone--a smaller one--intending this time to make better aim.

"Come forth,' I called to her, hoping thus to hear her as she set foot on the broken ladder-rung, and to direct the flight of the stone, with Allah's aid, accordingly.

"Mashallah! As my head appeared between the well-mouth and the stars, she fired a pistol at me! But, as Allah is All-merciful, the bullet missed!

"Thereafter the voice like a houri's came forth again speaking angrily. And He who governs all things opened my ears and understanding so that I knew her for Joan Angela sahiba. And I said again, 'Come forth.' And when her face appeared above the well-mouth, looking white and angry, with such little English as I have bade her praise the name of Allah, the All-merciful, who had sent to her assistance such an one as me, and not a dog of a Waziri, who might have offered her insult and worse things. Whereat she laughed, and we were friends. A most wise, excellent sahiba!"

## **VI. "Of Such Stuff are Women Made!"**

Nevertheless, I took her pistol, sahibs. Excellence in women is a thing of dangerous uncertainty, like the temper of bazaar-bought knives. Nay, she did not fight me for it. Nay, she did not see me take it. She had thrust it in her pocket. Lo, see what a pretty toy it is. One of these nights I will use it on the husband of the woman at Iskanderan, inshallah! Has the sahib ammunition that will fit? Such stuff is hard to come by in the hills.

"Allah! But the sahibs are impatient. I was coming to that part when

your honours interrupted. Lo, she remembered me perfectly. It might have been that she had rescued me and not I her! She began giving orders at once, and to ask more questions than a man with a book in his hand could have answered in a night, so that I, knowing little English, was at my wits' end how to answer. Nevertheless, when a man is at his wits' end, Allah still provides. There came a thought to me.

"I recalled how I had left my bundle in a dark place near the corner where the track forks, lest the women who follow those Waziris, whom may Allah curse, should find it while I might be busy with some other matter. Those hags would steal a hair from a jackal's tail! Moreover, it was well I did so, for I had enough to carry, that I had lifted from the Waziri's packs in the *sangar*. And now I had the sahiba to manage also.

"I remembered your honour's purpose in freeing my wrists at the time when we swore friendship. Had I not risked more than life--aye, honour!--to bring the clothing of a shaveling for the sahiba's use? Who am I that I should risk so much in vain? Lo, I would clothe her that she might be safe! I would bind the uleema's turban on her head that none might lift hand against her! Hah! I remembered then that she is your honour's wife, and I praised Allah for the opportunity to prove true fealty! I bade her come with me.

"And lo, she would not come! Of such stuff are women made--may Allah rot them all, saving ever your honour's privileges! By the Forty Martyrs and the Prophet himself, I was enraged! There was shooting in all directions. An accident might happen any moment. The Waziri hags might come... your honor might be dead... in Allah's name, a hundred things! Yet I bit the anger as it surged, and swallowed it again, like a man who has overeaten. And I lied to her--I, who have lied to no man--I, who love truth as an eagle loves the air. But a

woman is a woman. I said your honor was down the track a little way, and had sent myself to bring her thither.

"Whereat, when I had told the lie a second and a third time, and she understood, she came with me. The wind blew mist across the *sangar*, veiling the moonlight, and she helped me carry the trifles I had lifted from Waziri packs. Together we fled across the *sangar*, and over the wall, and down along the track between the cliff and the ravine, both breathing hard, for we were loaded, and what with one thing and another making more noise than was wise. It was in my mind to hide away the trifles I had taken, and to clothe her in the shaveling's garments from the other bundle; then to return and to find your honour, thus accomplishing all purposes in one. I strode ahead, she following as close behind me as the nature of her burden permitted. It was heavy.

"So. As Allah is my witness, I heard voices; and I knew some ill-begotten sons of evil mothers were in hiding at the corner where the road forks. And because of the nature of that place I knew they could hardly lurk there very long without discovering the bundle I had left under a heap of stones. If they had already found it, then my night's labour was in vain, unless I were stronger than they and more cunning. Allah is my friend.

"I bade the sahiba sit down where she was and be still in the shadow of an overhanging crag. I laid my load beside her. I drew this knife. And I went forward praying to the Lord of All, and not forgetting the sahiba's pistol that I had borrowed when she came out of the well.

"Sahibs, there were six men at the corner; and a seventh, who kept watch between me and them--a misbegotten son of Belial, whom Allah blinded and made deaf and dumb, lest he hear me, or see me, and give the alarm. His Majesty be praised! I slew the fool, severing

the wind-pipe at a blow, and he went over the cliff, making no more noise than a stone that the wind and rain have loosened.

"I heard the six exclaim--a lousy gang they were, with tongues that took the Name of Names in vain. They called to the dead fool who had stood watch with his eyes shut, and I answered them, changing my voice to sound as if I were chewing something. I said a stone had slipped down under my weight; whereat they called me a noisy fool, and continued talking to one another. They were lurking there for fugitives from the fighting, intending to rob, like the sons of Um Kulsum they are.

"So I took thought, and Allah is my friend. I struck the knife into my girdle--lo, the blood, sahibs, in proof I lie not! I gathered two stones in either hand, and those I hurled into their midst. Then I fired the pistol four times, jumping this and that way that it might seem I was many men. And I shouted as if to men behind me, rushing forward, kicking stones before me as I ran. Whereat they all took to flight, except one man who stood his ground and fired at me. Him I slew with the knife, and he fell over backwards into the ravine. In the devil's name he took the rifle with him, and I hope his soul may scorch for ever in hell-flame!

"I found my bundle, sahibs. The besotted fools had not seen it. I returned to the sahiba. I unwrapped the bundle. Then I bound it up again, for I remembered that a wise man takes all precautions. Lo, it was darker down near the corner, and easier to hear if anyone should speak around from the other fork of the track--moreover, easier to hide the plunder there in case of accident. Together we bore my belongings down to the place where I had conquered seven men; and there in the dark she tucked her hair up and set the red cap on her head, and I bound thereon the white uleema's turban very carefully.

"I bade her remove her outer garments, but she refused. It was well

enough, for she is slender and well-shaped, whereas that shaveling grows fat from easy living and his clothes would have hung loosely on her. All she would take off were the leggings; and her stockings and the laced shoes were like the effeminate things a Hindu wears when he has had an education. All passed muster, save that she is better-looking than the shaveling, and without his swaggering conceit. In the dark she would pass for a man; and surely none would shame himself by slaying one who wore the white uleema's turban. I was satisfied. I praised Allah, and bethought me of your honour's goodwill presently to be bestowed.

"Allah be my witness that I lie not! I set to work to hide those heavy burdens, this kettle and the food first, then what I had lifted from the Waziri packs, intending nothing but to go then in search of your honor and to deliver the sahiba into your honour's keeping. Who shall read Allah's mind?

"The kettle and the food were safely stowed. I was searching for a place to put the other things—a large enough place, sahibs, for I had helped myself!—when a voice spoke in the dark beside me! The sahiba checked a scream. She is brave. She felt for her pistol, but I had that, as I have told you. And it was just as well, for the voice was a voice I knew.

"O, Akbar bin Mahommed," he said softly, "I am Ali, thy brother, and I need thy aid."

"Nay, sahibs, he is not my mother's son, but a man who follows Kangra Khan. He and I once swore blood-fellowship. But now I have a grudge against him, and he shall pay in full! Mistaking the sahiba for a man, because of the darkness doubtless, for she has not yet learned how to carry herself, he whispered to me, minded not to let another hear.

"Up yonder in the *sangar* I slew the sahiba,' he told me. So I answered that he lied, he protesting. 'Aye,' said he, 'I slew her, and here is proof of it,' and he showed me the sleeve of her long coat, torn off at the shoulder. Whereat I thought it best to humour him, so I asked him what then.

"And he told me Kangra Khan had sent him lurking near the *sangar* wall to seize the girl and carry her off; but that he had come near death, and had slain her with his fingers at her throat rather than fail entirely. He escaped, so he said, by a miracle, and so, returning to Kangra Khan at a place appointed, had told his tale, expecting praise. Yet Kangra Khan grew furiously angry, cursing him for having thrown away a crore of rupees, miscalling him outrageous names, and threatening to have him flayed alive by women before a fire. Yet Ali is a man whom Kangra Khan has loved exceedingly, and when Ali begged an opportunity to make such amends as might be, the favour was granted. Yet not an easy task! Nay, nay!

"'Go,' ordered Kangra Khan, 'and bring me that man Ramm-is-den, living and unhurt, in the girl's place. Thus we may yet win a ransom!' So Ali set forth. He did not tell me that he took ten men with him. May Allah roast him in eternal flames for that!--for he and I were brothers.

"And lo, while Ali and I talked, the ten came sneaking around the corner, curse them! One knocked me down by a blow on the head from behind, believing doubtless he had killed me (but Allah is my friend). They seized the sahiba, and all that plunder I had not yet hidden, and they ran--I following, as soon as the blow ceased from echoing in my head, and my eyes could see, and I stand upright. Ali had run too, but he shall not run very far! His next long march shall be on the road to hell! Aye, it may be they gagged the girl, for she did not scream. But the next time I caught sight of her she was riding on the horse between four men, and not gagged nor in any way molested.



"Great... great... great is the Lord of All, and praise be to His Prophet! Lo, I laid my head between my knees in a frenzy--in a supplication! I was like a woman in labour of child. As a man was I who is torn between four camels! Allah! Go I forward to rescue the sahiba--eleven they be to one! And who am I to fight eleven men? Shall I search among the crags for my friend Ramm-is-den (whom Allah bless! ) and tell him I have lost his wife? Mashallah! What a storm of wrath I must endure then! What a lightning! What a thundering! For thou, O Ramm-is-den, art a man of muscle and great anger--a hearty man and head-strong, whom I love, and whom, inshallah, I would rather serve than kill! Nay, I dared not seek thee, Ramm-is-den! What then? Shall I follow? Shall I lurk and call to the sahiba to escape to my protection in the dark? Nay, nay! She is a woman unused to darkness or the hills--one woman against eleven men. If she attempts it they will slay her. If she come to me then clumsily she comes, and they detect us both, and slay us both, and gone is mine honour! What else? Shall I stay there, then, and wait for Ramm-is-den to come to me in search of the sahiba? Nay, by the Forty Martyrs! Ramm-is-den will pick a feud with me, not waiting for a true account. In haste and anger he will smite for his honour's sake because his wife is lost! And who am I that I should lie in wait and slay my friend? So there was no course open to me. I smote my brow and my breast in vain. Shall I run away? Shall I run home? Shall I hide and forget? Then may Allah hide and forget me!

"Allah is my friend. He who knoweth all things put a thought into my heart. Lo, I go forward. Lo, I follow and observe. As a jackal tracks the leopard, lo, I keep down-wind of them. Said I, if she were my wife, and I Ramm-is-den, would I not very swiftly clap my foot and frenzy on the trail? As a she-bear whose young one has been netted Ramm-is-den will pursue; and are the leggings and the hat not where the sahiba laid them? He will pick up the scent and come swiftly! He will see the horse-dung, and maybe a footprint--mine, for I laid it there!

"Mashallah! Who in all these hills can stalk as I can? They went swiftly. Yet not so very swiftly, for the horse was a sorry beast, and ill fed, and must keep the track, helped even so by ten men at the broken places. I could hear the blows they struck him, and his floundering--she protesting. The sahiba's voice was as a golden bell, and they bade her be silent; but neither knew the other's language, so it may be they gagged her again. As Allah is my witness I cannot speak as to the truth of that.

"I kept the higher ground. I know the short cuts. Not a leveret--no quail--no kite--no jackal knows these hills as thoroughly as I do, God preserve me! So I followed, keeping one ear and an eye for Rammis-den. And by and by I heard thee, O Father-of-an-elephant. And by and by I called to thee, lest devils steal the light of Allah from thee and decoy thee on the wrong trail. Allah is thy friend, and mine.

"But by the holy hair of the Prophet's beard, there came to pass a worse befalling than any yet! For Allah willed that they eleven should be met by Kangra Khan's men--thirty and upward, as I lie not!--and there was a fight with knives. No shooting, nay, and so the sahiba was unhurt. I crept close. I heard all, seeing little because of darkness. One slew the horse, and I went closer yet, hoping to seize the sahiba and carry her off while they fought among themselves.

"Lo, but their bellies were full of fighting for a while to come! They fought and they argued between whiles, none shooting, lest Kangra Khan might hear and make pursuit. Then thirty sought to persuade the eleven to run away home; and they knew who the prisoner was, for one had seized her when the horse was slain, and the outer garment tore, showing the woman's riding raiment underneath. There were groans and oaths in the dark, for some were wounded; and one man, seeking a place where he might sit to bind his leg, sat on me, who lurked between two stones. I slew him. He made no sound. But

he was not my brother Ali. So I crept in search of Ali, hoping to slay him, and seize the sahiba, and carry her off while they argued. But lo! As birds cease chattering and take wings, they agreed and were gone! Between two breaths they were gone with the sahiba in their midst! And I, seeking the rifle of the fellow I had slain, found none. He was a dog--a yellow dog--a snooter-among-dung-heaps--armed with nothing but a butcher's knife stolen from the stalls in Dera Ismail! Lo, behold it! The bull whose throat was cut with such a thing died, by the Blood of the Prophet, of shame before the dishonourable skewer touched the skin!

"Allah! They were gone like wind! Like jackals afraid of the dawn! And by that I knew they would not go far; for he who fears the dawn, and fears the leader he deserts, loves caves. And there be great caves hereabouts. Great caves and little ones, among which Kangra Khan might hunt a year in vain; for there are runways in between them; hunter and hunted may play at hide-and-seek for ever!

"I was confounded. I had failed. Yet not so! Allah is my friend. I thought of Ramm-is-den, whose belly, thinks I, by this time is as hollow as a drum, and whose great bulk is an easy target in the dark. By Allah, had I not carried the kettle all this distance, and the eggs, not breaking one! Shall he who is my friend be hungry, and I have food? May He who seeth all forget me, if I as much as think of it!

"So, by Allah, I hied me to this place; and I gathered little sticks, but not enough of them, for where are trees in all these hills? Yet Allah brought a thought to mind, and I remembered where the Kumara-Afridis hid the bulls they lifted from across the British border a year ago. So I brought dung--and lo, a good fire. Then water. Sahibs, I was hard put to it for water! Allah bear me witness how I prayed!

"Lo, water! Had we not tea? Was the stuff not excellent? There are no wells hereabouts--none nearer than the great cave, whither it may be

they have taken the sahiba; though there is a good one there in a ravine between the great cave and the next one. But observe, sahibs, in the direction of my finger, northward, that way, lies a village so evil--so black with shame--that Allah cursed it and the wells ran dry three months ago. And I bethought me how the women rise before dawn, and walk many miles for the water, with a man or two guarding them. Allah guided me. I found their path. And an old hag had a sore foot. Lo, she sat in a hollow place with the water-crock still balanced on her head because it was full, and too heavy to raise in case she set it down. So I gave her a new pain to offset the other, and filled the kettle from her crock, she weeping anew because now after she reached home she must make a second journey; for they swill water in that village like pigs on the plains of Hind. Women are women, sahibs. None may understand them. The hag was not at all pleased to have slaked the dry throats of honourable men. So I smote her and ran, for I heard others coming, and the men who guarded them with rifles were of a certainty not far away. So, tea, praise be to Allah!

"Then ye sahibs came. And here we sit in Allah's sight, Who seeth all. We have eaten and drank, and have a hen to cook--scant fare, indeed, for three men, yet better than emptiness. Inshallah, there is good luck awaiting us. I am thy friend, Ramm-is-den. May God forget me if I lie! And as for this man--he is a Sikh, yet I will befriend him for thy sake, Ramm-is-den. I love thee. Great is Allah!"

Akbar bin Mahommed sat still, eyeing me with that burning gaze of the Northerner, that by intensity and concentration can detect the very thought behind guarded speech. And he smiled; for he saw I was in no mood to find fault with him. He believed Joan Angela was my wife, and he had failed to protect her; moreover, he had failed to keep his promise to bring the "shaveling" alive to me. Maybe he had acted unwisely in a dozen ways; and he was certainly a rogue--a murderer--a conscienceless thief. Yet I wish I might be half as faithful in my

obligations to a friend. The only claim I had on him was that I had loosed his hands. His promise to me had been made under duress. He would certainly be killed, and doubtless cruelly, if Kangra Khan should ever learn the truth and happen to lay hands on him.

"We must take the trail at once," said I. But Narayan Singh said nothing, and Akbar bin Mahommed took snuff from a box made of two brass cartridge-cases, offering me first helping.

"Nay, nay!" he said presently. "In the name of Allah, sleep! These hills be full of hunted men. I know the hills! Pathan and Waziri are at one another's throats. The sides men took mean nothing now. Each one for himself, and the shortest road home! Loot... that is all that matters! By day, the men whom we are seeking hide, and none save Allah knoweth where; yet we would be a mark against a skyline. When the night comes they will fare forth; and we likewise. In the dark all men are equal, and numbers nothing against cunning. Sleep, sahib. Wait for the night."

I met Narayan Singh's eyes. He and I had the same thought.

"Turn about!" he said gruffly.

"Then ye two take the first spell," said the hillman, snatching the sheepskin from off our shoulders and rolling it up for a pillow. "Sleep there together, while I watch."

"I will keep the first watch," said Narayan Singh.

"Nay, it is better that I do," the other answered with growing impatience.

"I will sit in the cave-mouth and watch what may happen on the countryside. So when night falls I shall know better what to advise."

"Thou and I together, then," said Narayan Singh.

The Sikh's hereditary, ingrained distrust of the hillman, reinforced no doubt by long experience, was not to be offset by a tale of a night's adventure. Whether he believed or disbelieved Akbar bin Mahommed's story, he did not propose to trust him.

But it seemed to me we had small choice. If we should offend him, he might turn against us as swiftly and as savagely as he had hitherto tried to serve. Should we two prove too many for him, he could easily slip away and bring friends to his aid by promising them a share of the loot. Without him we were helpless. We must keep his friendship at all costs--take all chances. I drew out my pistol and passed it to him, butt first.

"That's in proof I trust you," I said. "Keep it for me while I sleep. Narayan Singh, give him your rifle!"

The Sikh obeyed. He did not like it, but he is the bravest fellow in the world when it comes to obeying orders against his inclination. Akbar bin Mahommed grinned, understanding the mental conflict perfectly.

"May I eat dirt," he said to me, "if I break faith, as Allah is my witness, Ramm-is-den! And as for thee" (he smiled a trifle thinly at Narayan Singh)--"I am thy friend for his sake!"

"Of which the proof will be the outcome!" Narayan Singh answered none too tactfully; and then came and lay beside me. So we slept with our heads on one rolled sheepskin, and our lives were for a number of hours in the hands of Akbar bin Mahommed, thief by religion and murderer by habit!

## **VII. "I Know a Thousand Gods Superior to**

## Allah."

I don't dream much as a general rule. Not having dabbled in things psychic, nor professing to understand as much as the general terms of that weird science, I offer now no explanations. What I set down here is fact. I know I was in sound health, but the blow I received on the head the night of my capture by Kangra Khan's men may have had something to do with my dreaming. And there may be something in environment. Sleeping on the hard floor of a draughty cave, side by side with a Sikh, with your head on a sheepskin and a professional murderer keeping guard, after a night of prodigious fighting and a meal of hard-boiled eggs and cold chupatties, is conceivably disturbing to the normal mental processes.

I dreamt that Joan Angela walked straight into the cave, and sat down beside Narayan Singh and me to talk with us. She was dressed as usual in riding kit, and without the turban and accessories belonging to the "shaveling." She seemed her normal self in most respects. She was apparently uninjured, and not exactly unhappy; but her delight in adventure for its own sake seemed to have entirely disappeared, and she was pale-calm-serious.

"This fighting has got to be stopped, Jeff!" she said as soon as she had sat down. "I refuse to be responsible for any more of it."

I forget what my dream-answer was; perhaps I made none. But Narayan Singh, who in the dream was squatting cross-legged beside me, leaned forward tracing figures with his finger in the dust of the cave floor, and after a pause spoke sententiously, as his way not seldom is.

"The truth," said he, "is true. It is one; and there is no alternative."

Explain that how you like. I can't make head or tail of it, but in the dream it seemed apt and enlightening. Joan Angela nodded.

"Attempts to rescue me," she said, "can only lead to more fighting, of which there has already been too much. Yet if I agree to pay the ransom, that will only lead to more kidnaping; and I do not choose to be responsible for that either."

All this while, in the dream, someone--Akbar bin Mahommed, I suppose--was sitting in the cave-mouth keeping watch but making no comment, as if the whole proceedings were entirely in order. Narayan Singh appeared particularly undisturbed, but even more than usually thoughtful.

"Yet if you were to be killed," he said, "that would be the cause of more fighting than ever, since the British would feel themselves obliged to punish the tribesmen, and they, disliking to be punished, resist."

"Very true," said Joan Angela. "So I must live, although life among these people is unpleasant to contemplate. They eat so disgustingly; and I don't know their language. However, I can learn it; and when I get hungry enough I shall eat without distress. But you must not try to rescue me. I will go with them; and you must go the other way, and tell people I am very likely dead, so that the British won't send an expedition."

"That is wisest," said Narayan Singh.

I heard those three words "that is wisest" as distinctly as I can now hear the clock ticking on the wall of this lime-washed hospital. Then I awoke, full of indignation, and stretched out my hand to prevent Joan Angela from going; for in the dream she had started in great haste to leave the cave. My hand struck against Narayan Singh, as fast



asleep beside me as a hibernating bear. The blow awoke him and he sat up. Blinking, we both stared at Grim in the cave-mouth, sitting on guard with two rifles and a pistol in his lap! Akbar bin Mahommed was not there!

Narayan Singh looked into my eyes and nudged me. I nudged him. We were both awake.

"Is it you, Jim, or your ghost?" I asked.

"It's me," said Grim, and went on watching something down below the cave.

"Where's King?" I asked.

"God knows. Licking the Waziris into shape, I hope," he answered.

"Any news of Joan Angela?"

"No more than you have. I've been listening to Mahommed bin Akbar."

"Where is he?"

"Gone to look for her. Just went. We talked over various plans, including one that he should scout for news of her whereabouts, and I concluded that was wisest."

"What time is it?"

"High noon, or a little after."

"Have you slept?"

"No."

"Eaten?"

"Yes."

"Better sleep now, hadn't you?"

"Yes, I think so, if you're through."

He looked so deathly tired that I had not the heart to question him further until sleep should have restored him to his normal taciturnity. Then he would be sure to tell us all that was essential, if no more. So when he had given the Sikh his rifle, and handed the pistol to me, he went and lay down where we had lain, and fell asleep that instant. Narayan Singh and I sat in the cave-mouth, saying nothing for a long while, watching as much of the landscape as we could see in either direction, with especial attention to the kites, whose movements as a rule betray the whereabouts of any considerable parties of men.

"Did you dream a while back?" I asked him at last.

"Aye, sahib."

"Tell me of it."

"The sahiba came. She spoke. She said to you and me--in the dream, sahib, we were squatting down beside her--'I go,' said she, 'to the village belonging to these people; and there I think you will find me alive, if you should travel fast enough.' And I said in my dream, 'We come at once, sahiba.' And she said, 'When?' I answered, 'Tonight.' And she said to me, 'That is wisest.' Then the sahib woke me with a blow across the jaw that tingles yet; and lo, Jimgrim was sitting there!"

So much for dreams! I have a great sigh of relief. Not both dreams

could be right. My old nurse used to say dreams go by contraries, but, even so, both dreams reversed would still remain opposites. We were to go, and we were not to go. We were to rescue her, and we were not to rescue her.

"Stewed tea and hard-boiled eggs!" said I.

"Chupatties! They were like leather, sahib--indigestible--cooked by a hillwoman--phaugh!"

Yet neither of us quite dismissed our dream from mind. We sat there on the qui vive, listening to Grim's snores, and peering in turns around the rock that blocked two-thirds of the cave-mouth; and when we conversed at rare intervals it was more of the dreams than of how Grim came to be there. Narayan Singh you might say is a specialist in such matters, accepting as obvious facts what to the West would seem crazy theories.

"The dreams mean this, sahib," he said after a while. "We shall rescue her. Nevertheless, whatever plan we make will be a bad one, leading only to more bloodshed; whereas the true plan will be unfolded by the gods. Being blind, we are unable to do right. Yet, going forward, we cannot set one foot wrong. We are but agents in these matters."

I would like to believe him. It would take the worry out of nine-tenths of existence. But I notice that he, too, worries on occasion, in spite of his convictions; and I wonder just how much of his philosophy he honestly believes and how much is habit.

He worried more than I did as the sun wore down towards the west, and there began to be signs of movement here and there among the ugly crags. The wind began blowing half a hurricane, whistling into our cave and drowning out most other noises; but once in a while we

heard sniping, and twice a yell reached us that told someone had hit the living mark, or missed.

Grim slept on. He can worry, too, but seldom when he has faced a situation and made up his mind on a course; so I judged by the calmness of his sleep that he had fully decided what to do and was characteristically storing up strength for the effort.

After a while Narayan Singh crept out and climbed a crag, from which to get a better view of the locality. To make the most of that he had to stand upright on the top, and was clearly silhouetted against the sky. Someone three hundred yards away began shooting at him. The first shot missed altogether, but announced the sniper's general whereabouts. The second chipped a piece of rock from close beside the Sikh's feet. The third chipped the rock again, a little to the left. The fourth shot was mine. I used Grim's rifle, and it proved to be a very good one.

Narayan Singh returned and squatted once more in the cave-mouth.

"There is smoke a mile away," he announced, "but the wind blows and spreads it. It is hard to tell exactly whence it comes. It is the smoke of many men."

I took a turn at scouting, selecting another crag, while Narayan Singh covered me. But there were no more gentry sniping thereabouts; or if there were they took to heart the first one's fate. I stood up unmolested, and a fluke in the wind gave me a clear view down a gorge to the side of a ravine that the gorge entered at a right-angle. The smoke was issuing from the mouth of a cavern, and there was lots of it. I judged they had a fire in there that would have roasted an ox; and that meant the presence of women, for the men-folk prefer discomfort to the *infra dig* business of gathering and bringing fuel. Before the wind fluked again and the smoke blotted out the view, I

saw about twenty men sitting on a ledge outside the cavern; and that looked as if they were not in the least afraid of being seen. But I could not tell whether they were Waziris or Pathans. When I returned to the cave Grim was awake. He had raked the fragments of our scattered fire together, spitted Mahommed bin Akbar's hen on a stick, and was toasting it. We ate the bird, and it was beastly, but sufficed.

"What next?" I asked him; and he was about to answer when Akbar bin Mahommed came in, munching dry corn that he had stolen somewhere.

"May Allah bless you!" he said handsomely. "May Allah make that hen enough for you! I found a fool with a bag full of this good food, who thought to knife me from behind a rock. But, by Allah, as he followed me I followed him, and took him by the heel (it was a little rock). I pulled him back towards me, thus; and as he turned on his back to fight me, I drove my knife into his belly, thus; and he has no more hunger, whereas I would have been starving presently! Moreover, I did Allah a great service, ridding the earth of a pig who cumbered it! He was a--"

"News! What news have you brought?" demanded Grim.

"Oh, as for that, I did not discover much. I watched the mouth of that cavern from this side of the ravine. There is Kangra Khan with nearly a hundred men. I did not see the sahiba, but I know they have her with them, because those outside the cavern keep peering within curiously. The wives of some of Kangra Khan's men are there; they brought fuel, and much food; from time to time they carry water, and there is a great cooking going on. I think they have determined on a long march. I think they will go home."

"How many days' march?" Grim demanded.

Eleven days, if there is no fighting on the way. But it is slower by night; and if there is fighting, who knows?"

"Are you from Kangra Khan's village?"

"Praise be to Allah, no! I come from a decent place, a half-day's march from his dung-hill. Lo, my home is in the shadow of the graves of holy ones, whom Allah bless! Mine is a town of fair women--a city of delights--a paradise! His stinks! I would not live there. I came southward looking for a profit after all the big talk Kangra Khan made, but that dung-hill of his is the mother of buzzing flies and naught else--words without a doing at the end of them!"

"What's the name of the place?"

"They call it Kangra Khan's. It deserves no better name."

"And the name of yours?"

He would not tell. The more he was questioned the more he fell back on evasion. Whether it was superstition or mere caution it was difficult to guess, but he was resolute; he would not name the place he came from.

"Allah knows its name!" he answered. "It is a city of trees and splendid buildings. There is a mosque a dozen times more lovely than the Taj Mahal!"

"Have you seen the Taj Mahal?" Grim asked him.

"Nay. Why take the trouble? Have I not seen the mosque in my city? There is nothing fairer."

"Well," said Grim, "to get to your home, must we go by Kangra Khan's?"

"Aye, if Allah wills. Between here and there it might be there would happen fighting!"

"And the Waziris? Where do they live?"

"Over beyond. Forever to the northward. They are not true Waziris, but a cross-bred spawn of hell who fell heirs to three villages because the Afridi, who used to live thereabouts, were too weak to withstand them. They will never get home. There are too many tribes on the watch, and no friends anywhere! And if they did reach home they would find the Afridis waiting. Show me that Tooth of the Prophet, sahib. Bless me with it! I have in mind to loot a few Waziris before too many Pathans get the first pick!"

Grim thought a minute, then produced the "Prophet's tooth." It looked as if it had been in a rain-washed skull for centuries. He had it folded in a piece of paper, on which was some writing in Persian characters, and he held it carefully, giving Akbar bin Mahommed no more than a glimpse of it.

"It can curse as well as bless!" he said meaningly. "I bade thee bless me with it!"

"Aye, but I will curse thee with it unless thou art amenable!"

"To what?"

"To me!"

"Mashallah! Thou art an Arab. Shall I obey an Arab? Thou truly art an Arab--is it not so?"

"Aye," said Grim, "a Hajji. Thrice I have made the pilgrimage to

Mecca."

"Thrice blessed one!" said Akbar bin Mahommed. "Nay, I will not be cursed! What then?"

Grim seemed to hesitate, but I knew that he was acting; he had made his mind up. He clutched the tooth in its paper wrapping close to his breast, as if he loved it. His eyes glowed as he stared at Akbar bin Mahommed, and he seemed to recognise in the hillman's face something splendid--something that thrilled him. Yet he clutched the tooth again, and seemed to wage a war within himself, forcing himself at last to speak.

"Thou art a man--a very man--a man indeed--a good man, art thou not?" he asked.

"None better!" said the hillman modestly.

"And a good chief thou wouldst be?"

"Aye, had I but a following. But the fools follow others."

"They would follow the tooth of Mahommed, the Prophet of God!"

"Aye!"

"And thee if it were thine!"

"By Allah, would they not! Nevertheless, thou art a holy Hajji, and I will not slay thee, even to possess the tooth!"

Grim looked astonished. His jaw dropped. Astonishment gave place to wonder--wonder to admiration--admiration to excitement--excitement at last to a measure of caution. It was marvelous good acting.



"Near the place where the Prophet of Allah used to pray in the holy city of Mecca, a very holy and white-bearded sheikh, who used to pray there seven times daily, waiting for the hour when he should die, gave me the blessed Prophet's Tooth," said Grim.

"Peace be to him! In the name of the Most High, peace to him!" said Akbar bin Mahommed.

"Thrice seven years had he waited there, praying seven times daily in that spot, keeping all the fasts. And when he saw me he knew me instantly, having oftentimes beheld me in a vision in a dream," said Grim.

"Allaho akbar!"

"He pressed the blessed tooth into my hands, thus, wrapped in this paper that bears the Prophet's blessing written with his own hand."

"Allaho akbar!"

"And he laid a charge on me."

"Thrice blessed one!"

"'Go thou,' said he to me, 'to the mountains northwest of Peshawar, where thou shalt find a man--a warrior--a very Rustum--whose name shall be an attribute to God, and whose other name shall be the Prophet's.' That might be thou," Grim suggested.

"I and no other!"

"'With him have word,' said he. And he described the man to me, signifying such an one as thou art--even with a white scar like a star, five-pointed, on the face between the eye and nose."

"Allah! Surely he meant me then!"

"But I charge thee in the name of the All-wise," said he, 'to have great care lest the holy tooth should fall into evil incapable hands. For the tooth is for that one whom thou shalt meet; and when he shall possess the tooth he shall straightway become a great chieftain.'"

"It is I, and no other! Give me then the tooth," exclaimed Akbar bin Mahommed.

"And he spoke to me after this wise: 'There is a good man, who shall have the holy tooth, and a bad one, who will greatly desire it. Each of them will say these words to thee: "Thou art a holy Hajji, and I will not slay thee, even to possess the tooth." 'Nevertheless,' said he again, 'thou shalt know the good one from the evil one after this manner. Lo, he who is evil will refuse to obey thee. But he who is good will obey thee in all things for a hundred days, or until such time as thou releases him. To him, when he has obeyed thee, give the tooth, with my blessing in the Name of Names. He shall be a great chief.'"

Akbar bin Mahommed's eyes burned. His fingers clutched his knife-blade. He could have killed Grim for the tooth that instant, but for his own vow not to, and for a certain dim sense of the proprieties.

"Lo, I obey thee! Have I not obeyed?" he asked, with bated breath. Excitement had him by the throat. He could hardly speak.

"Not yet for an hundred days," Grim answered. "Nor have I yet met the second man--the evil one. When I meet him--"

"Ill for him in that hour!" the hillman interrupted. "I will slay the dog in Allah's name! I will hack him into pieces and burn the foul bits on a dung-heap! It is I who am the good one, I assure thee!"

"Maybe," Grim answered. "We have yet to prove that. Lo, there is a great trust laid on me, and I must put thee to the utmost test."

Akbar bin Mahommed thumped his breast and laid his forehead on the cave-floor. Then, looking straight into Grim's eyes:

"Inshallah, I will not fail!" he said simply. "I obey thee. And moreover, this being the will of Allah, and the charge of the holy sheikh, it must follow that I pass unscathed through all things! Can I die and yet possess this tooth? Nay. Then since I must possess the tooth--for that is written--surely I cannot die! Lo, then, I am a lion! Lo, not Ali was a safer one than I! I may dare all things! Obey? I will obey thee if the order is to walk through fire... ."

"By the Forty Martyrs, I am not a madman!" answered Grim, judging his customer shrewdly. "What good would it do me to see a fool singe himself? It is my orders not thy boastfulness thou must obey!"

"Say the word, and I march to Mecca, Hajji!"

"Nay, for then I could not keep an eye on thee."

"Bid me slay an hundred men!"

"Not thou, but I, must choose the orders."

"Choose then, Hajji! Be swift! My bosom burns! By Allah, I obey thee if the order is to--" (he glanced at me and grinned)--"to fight this Ramm-is-den!"

"Nay, Ramm-is-den is my friend," answered Grim.

"I will slay you the Sikh, then!"

"He likewise. It is I who choose the deeds that must be done."

"In Allah's name then, choose thou, Hajji! Be swift with the beginning!"

Little the hillman guessed what a taskmaster he was dealing with. Grim's eyes, whose color is all mixed of grey, and blue, and brown, so that those who know him hardly ever agree as to what their color really is, hardened--lost their romantic gleam--grew cold, with a different fervor. Narayan Singh, who knew that sign of old, caught his breath sharply and leaned forward.

"Does Kangra Khan know you have taken the part of the sahiba, and of this sahib, and of this Sikh?" Grim asked.

"Nay. How should he?"

"Does he know you were made prisoner?"

"Surely. Why not? I was either a prisoner or a dead man. Allah! What else should he think?"

"But those men with whom you fought in the dark? Your brother Ali? Will they not tell Kangra Khan you are alive and a traitor?"

"Nay, I know them! They will say I was stealing the sahiba on my own account, having made my own escape. They will show the loot I took from the Waziri packs. They will say she watched it for me. Kangra Khan will laugh, saying I am, lo, a greater thief than ever!"

"Presently," said Grim, "before the sun sets, thou shalt go with me to the cavern where Kangra Khan is. Thy first task is to introduce me to him, winning his great favour in consequence, boasting thou hast persuaded me to show him favour."

Akbar bin Mahommed looked first incredulous, then crafty. Then his

face lit with guile and greed as all the possibilities of this new turn of events dawned on his imagination.

"Allah be praised, who designeth all things!" he exclaimed. "I understand thee! I will slay this Kangra Khan, who is a cockerel from a very smelly dung-heap. Then thou shalt give me the Prophet's Tooth, and proclaim me chief. Thus shall the prophecy be fulfilled! Thou art a wise and cunning fellow, Hajji--a strong one and a bold! Hah! Inshallah, I shall be a great chief; and there shall be a war such as these borders have never before seen!"

"There shall be a cursing such as thou hast never heard!" Grim hastened to assure him. And with that, he passed his hand over his mouth, removing the plate that holds in place the false teeth of his upper jaw on either side. His cheeks sunk instantly. It changed the whole expression of his face, making him almost unrecognizable. Then he scowled, squinted inward, thrust his tongue between his teeth, and made a noise in his throat that resembled something boiling up from within him. He waved the tooth in its paper packet to and fro.

"Nay, Hajji! Nay! What have I done? Nay! Keep thy curses for an enemy. I am thy friend--indeed thy friend! By Allah, I will obey thee! Say the word, and I will nestle Kangra Khan to my bosom. I will slay his enemies! I will--"

Grim's aspect changed, although he did not let a hint of a smile escape him.

"I begin to believe thou art truly the one," he said, nodding.

"Aye. By Allah, I am he! No doubt of it!"

Grim passed the tooth to me. With utmost outward reverence I

stowed it out of sight.

"These two," said Grim, pointing to Narayan Singh and me, "are made custodians of the holy tooth until such time as I, and no other, bid them convey it to thee. Thou and I are thus freed, I of danger, and thou of temptation."

"I would not slay thee, little Hajji!"

"Nay, I know it. And it would be yet more difficult to slay these two men. Moreover, should accident befall me--for none knoweth when his hour comes--these two will keep the tooth, because they may not part with it without my order."

"Little Hajji, how I will preserve thee! None less than Allah shall do thee a harm! I will nurse thee like a fledgling! But who shall preserve them?"

"Allah, who is Lord of all," said Grim.

"Yet the one is a Sikh, who is damned, and the other an Amelikani, whose god is a dollar, as all the world knows! A pious Moslem would deem he did Allah a favour by driving a bullet through both of them!"

"That is why I have appointed them custodians of the tooth," said Grim. "It will preserve them both."

Akbar bin Mahommed saw the force of that, but he was far from satisfied. However, it was no use arguing with Grim; a very *kaffir*\* could have seen that the Hajji was full to the brim of retorts and evasiveness, and besides, the longer he talked the longer it would be before he won the tooth and with it a key to chieftainship. By the look in his eyes he already saw himself unquestioned ruler of a thousand villages. [\* Unbeliever]

"I am ready. Allah is my witness," he said proudly--simply. No crusader starting for the Holy Land ever felt, or looked, more consecrated.

Grim turned to me and spoke in Arabic, which might as well have been ancient Greek as far as Akbar bin Mahommed was concerned although he could mouth a few Koran texts from memory.

"I don't care to meet Kangra Khan before dark," he said. "That night when he first called on us the fire was between him and me, but even so he might recognise me, even with my teeth out. I have no particular plan except to go close and get word with Miss Leich. After that, if possible, I mean to discover what Kangra Khan intends. They may march tonight. So as soon as it's dark you two would better go as close as you dare. I'll try to send our friend here back to get in touch with you, so keep a look out. But if I fail to do that, and Kangra Khan marches, follow on our heels."

"What about King and the Waziris?" I suggested.

"He's already to the northward, trying to work between Kangra Khan and his probable objective. He'll try to persuade the Waziris to put up another fight, but they're short of ammunition and may prefer to scatter and run. In that case King will try to raise some other clans to hound Kangra Khan. There's nothing certain. The next half-hour may see us all dead. On the other hand, we may rescue Miss Leich tonight. You fellows must be alert and use discretion."

Narayan Singh grunted. He loves commands of that kind. Once in Palestine they gave him a letter to carry across the Jordan and down into Arabia, with leave to use discretion; and he was so discreet that he came back uninjured, with an answer and two camel-loads of loot. Besides, he knows those gruesome hills more or less, having

campaigned among them rather frequently when he was in the Indian Army. He was all I had to rely on, for I don't know those hills at all; and though I understand the *lingua franca*, I speak it with an obviously foreign accent.

It does not amuse me to be sniped by dark or daylight. I believe Narayan Singh enjoys it. I enjoy a stand-up fight, although I'm ashamed to admit it; but cold steel in the dark gives me the shudders when I think of it. Narayan Singh prefers cold steel to rifle-fire. Grim revels in work, no matter what it is. He stood in the cave-mouth, back to the light.

"Allah keep you, my brothers. Allah give you strength and courage. Allah bless you!" he said--and was gone.

"I know a thousand gods superior to Allah!" said Narayan Singh.

## **VIII. "We've One Chance in a Million. Are We All Set?"**

It was blowing a gale of dry, cold wind when Narayan Singh and I left the cave. To the westward there was the last light of a yellow sunset on the bellies of aloof clouds--liars like the hillmen, threatening a rain they had no notion of delivering. It was darker than a coal-hole underfoot, for the moon had not risen, and the rocks cast shadow everywhere. No stars yet visible, because of high-hung clouds. No sense of direction; no guide but the feel of the wind on your cheek and, now and then, when we topped a rise, the crimson glow of flame in the throat of a cavern a mile away. A mile, that is, as crows are said to fly; about five miles by the route we had to take. The wind seemed to blow clean through you.

We scrambled and stumbled for about two hours, more or less in an



arc of a circle, helping each other over steep places, and grateful for the shelter from the wind when the road (for that was what Narayan Singh called it, and he swore it was a good one for that neighbourhood) dipped into deep hollows. How he found the way I don't know, for once we went more than half an hour without catching sight of the crimson glow; but we halted at last and lay down in the eye of the wind on a ledge half-way up the side of the deep ravine opposite the cavern in which Kangra Khan and Joan Angela were supposed to be.

It was nearly, but not quite, impossible to keep watch there, for the bitter wind made our eyes run; and it was so cold that when I borrowed Narayan Singh's rifle and took a sight along it, just on general principles, I could not hold the foresight on the mark for trembling. However, we could see the glow of the fire; and at moments, when we wiped our eyes, we could see men, or perhaps women, going and coming.

"They carry the loads out," said Narayan Singh. "They march tonight."

No sign of Grim. No sign of Joan Angela. Nothing to show that either she or he was over there. Both, for aught we could prove, were lying dead in the ravine, and about all that we could do was to hope and hang on. Now and then the wind swept down the ravine with such force that it nearly blew us off the ledge, and at last I grew rebellious.

"This isn't as close as we can get," I said--down-wind into the Sikh's ear. "I'm going closer."

I did not wait for him to object, but started there and then to clamber down into the ravine, not caring how much noise I made, nor seeking cover, for we were in shadow on our side, and sound was carried along so swiftly by the wind that no one who heard could judge our whereabouts.

None did hear--not even the man I stepped on, who was no more aware of me than I of him, until he felt my weight between his shoulders and tried to squirm out from under. Narayan Singh dropped down beside me on another man, nearly breaking his back, and in a second we were fighting blind-man's-bluff in total darkness, with long knives whickering to right and left, and nothing to be seen at all. Narayan Singh clubbed his rifle; I heard the butt descend on something and a cry as a bone broke. Then I thought I saw something at last--fired at it point-blank with the pistol--and hit a horse. No doubt of that whatever. It was a shod horse; it kicked and struck sparks as it fell. Someone fired back at me, and then a voice said:

"By any chance, is that you, Jeff?"

It was King's voice! I would know it in a thousand, and Narayan Singh exploded one great guttural monosyllabic laugh. I heard King calling off his men, and he had his work cut out, for we had injured three of them and tempers run quick and high in those infernal hills. But he managed it somehow, and came in the dark to stand between us, smoking a cigarette, which he held very carefully in the hollow of his cupped hand.

"Let's hope Kangra Khan's men didn't hear your pistol-shot," he said. "Where's Grim?"

I told him where I hoped Grim was, and he nodded. "How many men have you?" I asked him.

"Fifty," he said, "less three you've hurt. The rest have cleared off home, and stand no chance of getting there." "Grim thinks you're to the northward," I told him.

"Couldn't make my fifty march," he answered. "Our only chance is to

nab Kangra Khan as he comes out. Tonight or never! Another morning'll see all the hills out after our Waziris. I've promised these men, if they'll see this through, to try to lead them back across the border where we'll let 'em take refuge until the situation clears a bit."

"Any sign of Joan Angela?" I asked him.

"None. But there's somebody or something important in there that they're keeping out of sight. By Gad, I'm worried about Grim. I should have seen him. The firelight betrays anyone who passes the cavern-mouth. Tell you what," he said after a pause, "one of us should go close and find out."

Narayan Singh volunteered for that duty almost before the words had left King's lips, but King suggested I should go too, because his men were none too pleased with us for having put three of them out of action, and it would be easier to calm them in our absence.

"Cover each other," he said. "If you can, let Grim know where we are. When Kangra Khan starts to lead his men out, duck, for we'll ambush 'em, and there'll be wild work! Then see if you and Grim between you can't bag the girl and get away with her. If she's shot, that's kismet. Our best is the best we can do for her. So long."

So Narayan Singh and I set out to cross the floor of that ravine, moving a lot more cautiously than when we dropped down to the ledge. The next we were likely to meet would be foes, not friends, and it was probable that Kangra Khan had his pickets posted within hail. Once Narayan Singh nudged me and we lay down listening; but all I heard was my own heartbeats, and the wind whistling overhead. When we started again I could see about twenty men in front of the fire-glow, and it occurred to me they were taking long chances to stand silhouetted in that way, with enemies all about them in the hills. They seemed deliberately to be trying to attract attention. The same

thought occurred to Narayan Singh.

"Let us hope King sahib sees them," he said, coming close to whisper in my ear. "Those Pathans expect a reinforcement. They have heard their friends are coming, and unless our friend King sahib is alert he may be caught between two fires."

"You go back and warn him," I ordered. "I'll wait here."

He turned and went without a word. The wind and darkness swallowed him, and I lay there on a flat rock hugging my pistol, with the owls swooping close to take a look at me--swerving down-wind and circling up again for another look. A jackal sniffed my feet and yelped. The men in the cavern-mouth drank something hot out of a kerosene can, passing it from one to the other and laughing (although the wind carried all sound away long before it reached me). They were plainly feeling confident.

It was easier to watch from where I lay than it had been on the ledge, for the wind did not worry my eyes. I kept my gaze fixed on the fire-glow, hoping not to miss Joan Angela, or Grim, if either of them should pass in front of the fire. All I saw was the cavern-mouth and its occupants, and as for hearing, you could probably have fired a rifle within ten yards of me without my knowing it; my left ear ached from the pressure of the cold wind. I was taken absolutely by surprise when a cold hand was laid on my neck from behind and a voice said in Pushtu:

"The tooth, Ramm-is-den! Give me the tooth or I slay thee!"

Lord knows, men fight for idiotic reasons! I fought for that tooth from a savage's rain-washed skull as instantly and with no more argument than if it had been a regimental colors, or my personal fortune--using a ju-jitsu trick, turning suddenly on my back and kicking upwards with

both feet. Akbar bin Mahomed turned a somersault in mid-air, and when he fell I was on top of him, with my knee on his belly and his knife-wrist in my left-hand. He had not let go his knife, and I accepted that as proof you could make a sportsman of him if you had the time, and took the necessary pains.

"Thou elephant!" I joked. He gasped when he could get some breath.

"How did you find me?" I demanded, working at his wrist to make him drop the knife.

"Peace, thou! Let me go! Nay, Allah's mercy! Break not my knife-wrist, Ramm-is-den, or I am no more use!" I eased on the wrist a little, and repeated the question.

"I heard a jackal cry. There was likely a dead man hereabouts. Not all the dead have been stripped yet."

I eased the pressure on his belly, meaning to keep him there on his back until I had the whole of his story, but he squirmed off the rock and out from under me, and though he did not offer to use his knife I covered him with the pistol. But he squatted down with his back towards the fire-glow in a gap between two boulders, and began chafing his wrist as if nothing at all out of the ordinary had happened; so I sat down too, where I could keep an eye on the cavern-mouth beyond him, close enough to him to have touched him with the pistol-muzzle.

"Mashallah! Thou art strong!" he grumbled. "Lo, I am no weakling, but thou--"

"Where is the Hajji?" I demanded.

"Up yonder."

"And the sahibs?"

"Up yonder."

He jerked his thumb over his back. We were shouting at each other as if thirty yards apart, because the wind snatched words and took them scattering down the ravine.

"What then? Why are you here?" I demanded.

"Allah! To find thee! Why else? Where is the *kaffir*?"

He meant Narayan Singh, but that was no way to refer to him, so I ignored the question. I demanded news, and he told it in gasps and snatches, showing his teeth as he spat the words out, trying to make me hear without taking all down-wind into confidence.

"Sahibs in corner behind fire--back of cavern--guarded by women. Hajji--Kangra Khan growing friendly. Suspicious at first, but Hajji gave him piece of stone from near Ka'aba at Mecca. Kangra Khan thinks stone will bring luck, but Hajji whispered to me it will curse him. Orakzai Pathans--some say two hundred--some say twenty--sent word--coming tonight--from south, on way home. Kangra Khan waiting for them."

We heard nothing, but Narayan Singh loomed suddenly out of the night and squatted down beside me.

"King sahib *dekta hai!*"\* he shouted in my ear. [\* Is on the watch]

Akbar bin Mahommed heard the word "King," and brought his fist down on his thigh in excitement.

"Thou--Sikh--thou has seen him? Seen King? Is he not to the

northward? Where are the Waziris?"

"What then?" Narayan Singh retorted. "Tell thy tale, Pathan!"

"Allah! If only the Waziris were at hand! The Hajji said to me: 'Those Pathans whom Kangra Khan expects may well be late, or may not come at all. If the Waziris could come in the dark they might appear to be Pathans. Then Kangra Khan would sally forth to march with them, and there might be a fight and a rescuing!' Much may happen in the dark!" he added.

I turned to Narayan Singh but could hardly see his outline in the darkness. However, he laid a hand on my arm to attract attention.

"Shall I summon King sahib?" he suggested.

I agreed, and he disappeared a second time, swallowed by wind and darkness like a ghost before he had gone two paces.

"The danger," I said, "is that Kangra Khan may send reliable men to see who the new arrivals really are."

"Slay them one by one as they come scouting!" he retorted, brandishing his knife.

"No," I said. "You must go back to the cavern and tell Kangra Khan that his friends are here and waiting for him to come out."

"He will not believe me. The Hajji yes, me no!"

"Trust the Hajji to persuade him."

"Aye. That is better. The Hajji might come forth, and return, and report favorably. A great fellow is that Hajji. He convinces men!"

I was much too cold and afraid to take any satisfaction in the thought of a pitched battle in the darkness amid those boulders and in that bewildering wind. But I could see no other hope, and it fitted in with King's suggestion.

If we could solve the problem of persuading Kangra Khan to lead his men out, there was the risk of shooting Joan Angela and Grim. The only time when they could possibly be distinguished from the others would be at the moment when they passed through the firelight. The chance of persuading excited Waziris to spare the lives of those two, while at death-grips with the rest, was remote to say the least of it.

However, there is always something you must leave "on Allah's knees," as the Moslems have it. The question is, how much? And how much is your own responsibility? If we knew that, I daresay there would be a lot less shotted argument and sudden death.

Who should tell friend from foe in that ravine at night? There would be no moon for a long time, and then only at intervals between the racing clouds. No word of command could carry against or across the wind, and to that would be added the din of rifle-firing and the yells of excited hillmen. Yet, if we should postpone an attempt at rescue until dawn, it would be impossible to pretend our Waziris were Pathans, and we would be so out-numbered as to make fighting hopeless. Moreover, if King was right (and he usually is) by daylight the tribes would be swarming to hound the Waziris to death.

"Allah be praised! It would seem to me Kangra Khan's hour comes tonight!" said Akbar bin Mahommed in my ear, exultingly. He seemed to see no danger in the prospect. "As for thee, Ramm-is-den, that tooth is thy preserver. Allaho Akbar!"

I answered him "Allaho Akbar" for courtesy's sake; for I liked him better than scores I know, who use their tongues to murder with



because they are afraid of knives. I wished him luck in his aim on Kangra Khan--another savage not by any means to be despised. And I wished them both at the devil, if that might do the rest of us the least good.

"Thou art a Kaffir, Ramm-is-den!" he yelled into my ear. "It is great shame to doubt Allah! These be His ways to try the hearts of men. What is a fight, or the darkness, to the Lord of all? Whom He loveth He preserveth! Lo, he loveth me, and thou--thou hast the tooth!"

He leaned across to slap me on the shoulder, and I have endured less tolerable pleasantries from gentler men. Then King came. He and Narayan Singh dropped down beside us, and we held a four-square conference in the hollow between tip-tilted rocks, King sitting where he could watch the cavern-mouth. His men were inaudible--invisible; but he said they were hiding all about us in the dark, and once I caught sight of a shadowy thing that might have been a rifle pointing upward.

"You understand," said King, speaking Pushtu so that Mahommed bin Akbar might feel flattered, "I must stay with the Waziris. They'd run if I left them; and besides, I've promised. We'll engage as soon as the last of Kangra Khan's men are out of the cavern. But if we just make a skirmish of it without a definite objective it'll end in our just being scattered, and morning will see our finish. I'm going to try to gain the cavern and hold it."

"They'll only blockade you in the cavern," I objected; but he swept the objection aside impatiently.

"We'll attend to the day, when day comes!" he answered. "You men have got to grab Miss Leich. Be good enough not to report to me without her, dead or alive. My objective is the cavern. That's our rendezvous. Who goes to the cavern now, to tell them their friends

have arrived and are waiting for them?"

"!" said Mahommed bin Akbar.

"Good. But don't seem too positive," King advised him. "Say you detected us in the dark, and that you think we're the Orakzai contingent. Then suggest to them that Hajji is the man to find out for sure, because he has been to Mecca and was made immune from bullets. If they let him come on that errand you stay up there. The Hajji should arrange some sort of signal with them, to be made from here as soon as he discovers whether we're friend or foe. We'll make the agreed-on signal, of course, and when Kangra Khan's men come out, get as close to the sahiba as you can. Keep her out of the way of bullets if possible. Look out for Ramm-is-den and Narayan Singh. Help them to rescue her. You understand all that?"

"Aye," he answered. "But I should first slay Kangra Khan! His hour has come!"

King did not answer. He sat still, as he always does when he feels himself up against insuperable difficulty; much too wise to argue, or to do anything except to wait for a fresh development. But it was I who held the whip-hand in that crisis, though I little guessed what a rod I was laying up in pickle for myself.

"Slay Kangra Khan tonight, and you shall never have the Prophet's Tooth!" said I. "For I will break it between rocks and throw the dust down-wind!"

"Nay, Ramm-is-den, that were a sin!" he objected.

"Unlike you, I am a sinful man!" I answered him. "I will do as I say. Tonight you must attend to the sahiba's rescue, ignoring all other issues. Otherwise, no tooth!"

"Allah!"

"Allah witness it!" said I.

After that there was no further argument. Akbar bin Mahommed, with the hillman's fatalistic recognition of an impasse, rose and went. King disappeared to talk with his Waziris, and Narayan Singh and I sat in silence watching the cavern-mouth. It was half an hour before we saw Akbar bin Mahommed's back against the fire-glow, where the men on the ledge appeared to be suspicious, for they gathered around him and gesticulated.

It was several minutes before we saw one man enter the cavern, and minutes again before he returned with someone who towered and bulked above them all and by his bearing might be Kangra Khan. There followed argument--gestures--much pacing to and fro--he who might be Kangra Khan breaking away from the others at intervals and striding to the end of the ledge, as if to try and peer into the ravine.

At last Grim came out, easily distinguishable from the others by his Arab dress. He and Kangra Khan stood full in the firelight, Grim stock-still, Kangra Khan gesticulating. Finally Grim disappeared from view. Kangra Khan returned into the cavern, and the others spread themselves along the ledge. At the end of another fifteen minutes Grim sat down in the dark between Narayan Singh and me.

"Where's King?" he demanded.

King came presently, with two smelly Waziris at his back, who lay down on the rocks and watched us as if their eyes could burn up darkness and read our inner thoughts. They said nothing; gave us no greeting.

"The plan is," said Grim, "that if you're Waziris I'm to trick you into

staying here until morning, when in Allah's daylight Kangra Khan's men and the neighbours hereabouts will deal with you. But if you're the Orakzai contingent on your way home, I'm to build a fire where they can see it and show myself in front of it three times."

"Fire, at once!" King ordered; and the two Waziris who had followed him went off in search of anything whatever they might build it with.

Ten more minutes passed, and a pale moon began to glimmer through racing clouds over the summit of a ragged hill, before flames leaped up in a cleft among rocks on our right and Grim went to stand in front of it. He showed himself thrice as required, standing with his arms outstretched as if crucified. After the third time a man in the cavern-mouth took a fire-brand and waved it.

"Now, you fellows!" said King, and disappeared at once to manage his Waziris.

Then Grim, Narayan Singh and I laid our heads together for a last swift conference.

"They'll come down by a sort of ramp--rough going--that slants downward into the ravine from the righthand end of the ledge as we face it," said Grim. "Most of their loads are at the foot of the ramp already, with a few on guard. But there's a path one man can climb at a time, that joins the ramp half-way up. It's so difficult they haven't posted anyone to watch it. Joan Angela is watched by the women. I couldn't manage to get word with her, but I know she recognized me. As soon as they come out of the cavern the women will have to pick up loads. Kangra Khan is pretty sure to keep Joan Angela close by him, with a bodyguard of his best fighters. Our only chance is to lurk and surprise 'em. It's on Allah's knees. We've one chance in a million. Are we all set? Good. Let's go!"

## IX. "Sure, Lend a Hand!"

Narayan Singh praised a number of gods for what befell, and himself not at all. Grim and I thanked the wind, that tore down the ravine in gusts and solid waves of irresistible fury that a man could hardly stand against, making Kangra Khan believe that Allah had sent the blast to favour his own retreat northward under cover of darkness. Even the fierce tribesmen of that region were hardly likely to stir on such a night, and he reasoned, as we learned afterwards, that the Waziris would take advantage of the fury of the elements to scoot for home. Consequently none but his temporary allies, the putative Orakzai Pathans, could have signaled to him from below.

He added all that argument to his conviction of the Hajji's holiness and orthodoxy. But argument and conviction are alike dangerous on dark nights, or at any other time.

His men ignored the possibility of danger. Believing themselves well guarded against surprise by their allies in the ravine, they began to troop out of the cavern and down the ramp, carrying the few odds and ends of loads that had not already been stacked at the foot of the ramp in readiness. And those who were first at the bottom crouched down behind the loads to shelter themselves from the wind; coming out of a warm cavern, they doubtless felt it even more than we did.

Some of them carried lighted torches made of the resinous wood no longer needed for the fire-proof enough that they meant to march far and furiously, as otherwise they would have heaped the unburned fuel on the women. One group of six torchmen stood at the end of the ledge where the ramp began, perhaps to keep tally of the men who passed; and as we reached the foot of the nearly sheer side of the ravine we could see Joan Angela standing beside Kangra Khan in the torchlight.

She was still wearing the uleema's turban and a sheepskin jacket, but her hands appeared to be tied behind her, and somebody had robbed her of the long smock, so that she looked like a rather wretched boy in knickerbockers. There were no women near her; they were at work; but as the torchlight wavered in the wind we could see the shadowy forms of about a dozen riflemen--undoubtedly Kangra Khan's picked bodyguard.

The chief himself seemed in desperate haste, and to be trying to instil the same ambition into his men. Once he seized a torch and beat the men who passed him, driving them with it in a hurry down the ramp. Then he returned and appeared to be speaking to Joan Angela, pretty roughly to judge by his attitude; but she stood up to him, as if afraid we might not recognize her from that distance, although the torchlight shone full in her face.

Then, with an imperious gesture to the handful of men who were watching, Kangra Khan went off with long strides down the ramp, presumably to try to get some kind of order out of the chaos among the loads. It was then that we began to climb, Grim leading, and I last. As the biggest and strongest, it was my job to be a stepping-block when the track proved otherwise impracticable. When they had used my shoulders to reach a higher perch they lowered Grim's girdle for me, so we went up fairly fast.

Near the top was a narrow ledge shaped roughly like an oyster-shell, jutting out about five feet below the great ledge in front of the cavern. There was just room on it for the three of us, and there we crouched, partly protected by the wall that leaned outward above us, but unseen only because Kangra Khan's men were overconfident. It was a dizzy perch, and there was a sensation as if the whole hillside were swaying in the wind. When I saw that the torchlight actually shone on Narayan Singh's rifle, I neither dared tell him of it for fear of being

overheard, nor to try to move the thing lest one or other of us should lose his grip and go sliding off the smooth rock on to the fangs below.

Luckily for us the wind was playing ducks and drakes with acoustics, for otherwise the least noise we made would have betrayed us; and who could cling to that crazy ledge, let alone reach it, without making any amount of noise! We were breathing hard from the climb, for one thing; for another, the rock's unevenness was painful to hands and knees, and we had to keep shifting our weight. If we had been detected, one shove with a stick would have ended the careers of all three of us. I think if anyone had shouted at us suddenly from above we would have jumped out of our shivering skins and slid to death! There were certainly never three men who felt less heroic.

However, we received warning before a shout came, and had time to cling to one another and the rock, digging our fingers into crannies. Someone yelled against the wind in Pushtu that there was an approach unguarded. He came and stood above us with his back to the ravine, gesticulating and shouting at the torchmen. We could only catch about one word in ten that he said, but from the general drift of it he seemed anxious about the track we had climbed by. Apparently the others took no notice of him. He moved a pace or two along the ledge, and by screwing my neck around I could see the top of his head as he peered over; but he drew back instantly and went to yelling again at Joan Angela's bodyguard. I could not hear what he said.

He came back to his original position directly over us, still yelling, and, lying prone on his belly, leaned over. Then his face was just five feet above us, and I could see the dark outline of his turbaned head distinctly against the sky. I took aim with the pistol, but had to move to do it, resting my elbow in the Sikh's back; and as luck would have it, I slipped and almost fell off the ledge, so I did not fire, not caring to

waste a bullet even in that crisis.

But I could not recover balance without getting to my knees. Then the others moved, and forced me to stand upright, so I reached up, meaning to seize the Pathan's neck and pull him over. He drew back, and by that time the other two were standing upright beside me. I bent my knee for Grim to mount by, and he had his hand on my shoulder, when the Pathan's face grinned within a foot of mine, and he almost screamed at me:

"The tooth, Ramm-is-den! Have you the tooth?"

That saved his life. This time it was Narayan Singh's sword that licked upward, and checked only in the nick of time.

"Ho!" the Sikh laughed in my ear, "the gods are good to us!" And his weight followed Grim's on my knee. They scrambled on to the ledge and dragged me after them. And as if the whole thing had been timed by G.H.Q., as we got to our feet a very hurricane of firing burst out from the ravine below us.

I would like to tell exactly what happened then, but it happened so fast that a man's brain could hardly record it. We had the full advantage of surprise, and all the corresponding disadvantage that goes with it, not least of which is that every man acts then on impulse and reason hardly enters into the ensuing chaos. The torchmen began beating out their torches--all except one, who waved his flaming stick frantically as if hoping to summon friends from heaven knew where. By that light I saw one of the bodyguard seize Joan Angela to kill her with his tulwar, and my pistol bullet tore through the breadth of him under the arms as the tulwar was in mid-air. I saw her stoop and pick the tulwar up. Then darkness. The fool who was waving the torch had flung it down into the ravine.



We four rushed the bodyguard, and the howling wind seemed to change key as nine or ten tulwars whirled thrumming to stand us off. Those Pathans could see no more than we could. They depended on speed of swordsmanship to bar the way as it were with a wall of live steel. But one man fired his rifle at random in our general direction, and I went like a rock out of a catapult, straight for the flash.

I use my fist in times like that--instinct, I suppose. My left took the rifleman full in the mouth, and he went down like a poleaxed steer. The others followed through behind me, and that broke line, nerve, resolution--everything. The remainder was panic, or riot, or hell, or whatever you care to call it--hand-to-hand shoot, and slash, and butt-work in the dark, with the Sikh's sword striking fire on tulwar blades, and the gasping and grunting of desperate men in a shambles.

I heard Joan Angela cry aloud, and as I tore in to her aid she thrust out blindly with the tulwar and ran the point through the skin over my left ribs. I don't know how a man sees at a time like that. Forgotten, latent senses function. Two Pathans seized Joan Angela to carry her off. One clapped his hand over her mouth from behind, and the other seized her legs to stop her kicking. I used the pistol and missed both of them. The second man let go her legs and closed with me, groping for my eye to stick a thumb in it. I took him around the waist, up-ended him, and flung him over the ravine. I don't know where the pistol went, or how. I never gave it a thought until some time later.

I ran back for Joan Angela, and she was gone. Yelling for the others, with no hope of being heard against the wind, I rushed down the ramp, overtaking three men. Two went backwards over the ravine like ninepins as they turned and met my fist. The third fired at me, but too close. I knocked the rifle up, and he staggered backwards from a blow I landed on him somewhere, leaving the rifle in my grasp. Then he ran, and I swung for him with the butt-end, finishing that business.

That gave me a weapon, but the magazine was empty. I remember jerking out the empty shell as I ran, and sticking my thumb down into the magazine with a desperate notion of finding a cartridge jammed in there. I imagined Joan Angela's throat being cut in the darkness; for Pathans in a panic will do anything.

And panic there was. For down at the foot of the ramp where they had piled the loads the darkness was alive with spurting rifle-fire and the yells of the Waziris--both sides utterly desperate--none dreaming of quarter--and no control--no chance of it. Once I thought I heard King's voice barking commands in a momentary lull, but that may have been delusion.

Then someone rushed by from behind me, and I thought he was Narayan Singh. I ran my best to overtake him, and the two of us charged neck and neck behind a line of Pathans who were kneeling along the edge of the ramp and pouring a useless fire into the ravine, each one yelling to the others he had killed a man for every shot he fired. Bullets from below, as wild as theirs, were spattering on the cliff above our heads. I tripped over a man's legs and fell, rolling like a dead man down a steep, smooth place until a sharp rock knocked the wind out of me, and I lay there shamming dead for I daresay two minutes, until I could recover breath.

Then Narayan Singh, charging and sliding down the ramp, stumbled over me in turn, and I knew the first man had been either Akbar bin Mahommed or an enemy in flight. I pounced on Narayan Singh to let him know who I was before he plunged his sword into me.

"The sahiba!" he yelled. He was frantic--worse than I--neither man nor beast in that hour, but more like the embodiment of some ungoverned element.

"Krishna!" he screamed, and broke loose. The night swallowed him.

Then someone lit a torch down there among the loads—I suppose to give the Pathans a point to rally on. The Waziris yelled, and the man (or the woman, maybe) who held the torch went down under a hail of bullets. But before the light died I had seen Kangra Khan and three men on a rock at the foot of the ramp. No sign of Joan Angela. I clubbed the rifle, scrambled to my feet, and went for Kangra Khan, possessed of no thought, but an impulse.

I don't remember how I reached him. At that point there is a gap I can't bridge, of hideous, screaming night, all streaked with rifle-fire. Even in dreams there's a gap there, although most of the incidents of that night recur in sleep in intricate detail. The next I recall I was crouched beside Narayan Singh in pitch darkness under the bulge of the rock on which Kangra Khan stood, with the rifle like a club in one hand, and the other hand on the Sikh's shoulder, to take the time from him.

We sprang together, like fiends out of a hellhole. He ran a man clean through from behind with his sabre, and I clubbed another. A third swung for me with a tulwar, but missed his footing and fell off the rock. Kangra Khan fired a pistol and jumped for his life, but the Sikh caught his foot, and I closed with him.

Over we went, all three together, Kangra Khan under us, down into the hole the Sikh and I had sprung from. And now, as I write, I can hear myself yelling, "Don't kill him! For the love o' God don't kill him!" I wanted news.

But it was easier to hold an eel than him, and he was stronger than any Pathan I have ever seen. Again and again he nearly broke away from us, but at last I got him in a stranglehold, and the Sikh seized his foot. We had him pinned then.

"The sahiba!" I gasped. "Tell me where she is, or I'll break your neck!" And I let him feel the pressure by way of evidence of good faith.

But I had to ease off to let him speak, although Narayan Singh twisted his foot to remind him of urgency. And it took him about a minute to gain enough breath. Then he coughed out a bark of a laugh, and answered me.

"By Allah, I don't know!" he said, and laughed again. Then the Sikh took a hand in earnest.

"Have you got him, sahib?" he asked. Then he let go the leg, and thrust the point of his bloody sabre in between Kangra Khan's teeth, standing over the two of us, with his weight poised to drive the sabre home.

"Speak, thou! Where is she?" he demanded.

Kangra Khan moved his head a fraction clear, and spat before he answered.

"By Allah, I don't know, I tell you!"

The sabre went downward an inch.

"Then you die like a dog!" said the Sikh.

"By Allah, I do not know!"

He asked no mercy--made no appeal--betrayed no sign of weakness. Under my knee I could feel his heart thumping sturdily, and, though I could not see his eyes, I did not doubt they stared up as bravely as they had ever done. If he was lying he was much too big a fool to be a chieftain in those hills, for almost any tale would have

sufficed to make us spare his life for at least a little while. And I do like a man who can face death in a dark hole without flinching. I would not have killed him in that way, without more proof than I had that he had slain Joan Angela. Perhaps he guessed that.

I bade Narayan Singh put up his sabre, and he obeyed me, for a wonder, for he was pretty well beside himself. He stood waiting with the sabre raised, to see what I would order next. And I surprised him.

"Rope!" I said.

It was a mad enough order to give a man on that night, in such surroundings. But Narayan Singh was in a mood to cut the heart out of the impossible. The wind lulled, and I heard his sabre thwack home twice. Then voices began calling for Kangra Khan, and one man nearly found us, lying on his belly on the rock that Kangra Khan had stood on to direct the fighting and peering down in all directions. I laid my hand on Kangra Khan's mouth; not heavily; he understood the implication well enough. I surely would have killed him then, if he had cried out. But he made no sound, and the man went away.

In the lull of the wind I could hear a great change in the fighting. Lord knows how, but somehow, King had got control of most of his Waziris; and though there was nothing like volleys, there did seem to be a weight of firing all directed at one place. He had persuaded them to let the piled-up loads alone, and to attack the ramp. The Pathans, if not stampeding yet, were in a mind for flight, for I could hear some bawling to the women to bring the loads back to the cavern, and others crying out that they should take to the hills. Between them there was a prodigious rushing to and fro.

Then Narayan Singh came, and with him the moon, looking down on the scene between wild clouds. The Sikh had a long piece of rawhide. I turned Kangra Khan over and held him while Narayan

Singh lashed his wrists.

"I'll kill you if you make one unnecessary sound," I said in his ear, and then let him get to his feet while I peered around the rock.

There was a battle raging on the ramp above us that would have done the Titans good to watch. The moon showed most of it, but threw enough in shadow to give imagination rein. King's Waziris were storming the ramp in flank, and about a dozen of Kangra Khan's men were holding it with a nerve and courage that did them credit. The moonlight was against them. Those of King's men who were covering the assault fired from shadow. Kangra Khan's men were in full view, and using stones to hurl back the storming parties. There appeared to be two points of assault. Unless the Waziris had ladders, which was out of all question, they must be swarming on one another's shoulders to reach the ramp; and the Pathans yelled and danced with excitement every time they aimed a stone by hazard true enough to hit the leader and hurl a whole storming party down. Those twelve or so Pathans were having much the best of it, but I saw four of them shot dead during the minute or two while I watched. Then it seemed by their excitement they had detected a new, more determined attempt. Four of them hurried for stones, and the rest began shooting fast at a target they could certainly not see, yelling to one another to correct the aim, and themselves trying to take cover against a steady hail of bullets that swept up out of the ravine. There could not possibly be more than twenty men making the assault, and perhaps ten firing from the dark to cover it, because there were some of King's Waziris still shooting into the scrimmage where the loads were being shouldered, and King had said he only had about fifty men all told. But it doesn't need great numbers to make a fierce affair.

One man hurled a stone from the ramp that apparently hit the mark,

for the Pathans broke cover and danced and yelled in chorus. But I heard King's shrill whistle below, and another attack began immediately, covered by a hotter fire than ever. But in spite of the moonlight the odds were all with the Pathans. Four men could have held that flank of the ramp against a hundred unless there were some diversion.

So I had to be Diversion--Jack-in-the-box--Kismet on the flank of the Pathans! There was no alternative, unless I wished to see King's Waziris hopelessly beaten off.

"Guard the prisoner!" I shouted to Narayan Singh; and, clubbing the rifle again, I scrambled out of the hole before fear, posing as discretion, should lay a restraining hand on me. It was then or never. In another minute any help would be too late.

So I charged into the moonlight, at the risk of being hit by the Waziri bullets, and the first the Pathans knew of my coming was when the butt of the rifle smacked like a poleaxe on the nearest man's head and he toppled overside, leaving room for my swing at the next, and the next.

And of that, I remember not much. It was battleaxe work, and my strength was what counted. Four or five of them charged me, and I stepped back where an overhanging buttress of the cliff made shadow, dodging as they slashed at me, and bringing down the butt with all the force I knew.

They told me afterwards Mahommed's Tooth preserved me. Maybe! Something did. I was untouched!

Someone found the path that Grim, Narayan Singh and I had climbed by. King's second storming party reached the ramp by that route and came charging down on us. Then King and no other, with a shield

made of wood in his hand to turn the defenders' stones aside, and his feet on a Waziri's shoulder, gained the top, and his party came scrambling after him. The Pathans took to flight, to add themselves to the chaos where the loads were. Lying, standing, kneeling, the Waziris fired savagely into that mess, sweeping the ramp and the rocks, and completing the stampede, if yells meant anything.

King and I both tried to stop them; he, because ammunition now was desperately short; I, because Narayan Singh was down there in the dark, with a prisoner who might mean more to us than a hundred men when it should come to daylight and a show-down. But it was slow work stopping them. The priceless, irrecoverable bullets were squandered for many minutes.

"Where's the girl?" King demanded, when he got a chance to pay attention to me.

I told him I didn't know. He said nothing--pointedly. He displayed no interest when I told him we had Kangra Khan with his hands tied. He went on mastering his men, getting them posted to repel a possible return assault, singling out the wounded, sending them up to the cavern. There were nearly a score of wounded, several with scant chance of recovery.

There was no sense in arguing with King about Joan Angela. Besides, I was alone to blame. It was I who had had the opportunity to snatch her away from her guards--I who missed it. It was up to me to find her, and I turned and went, straight down the ramp again.

Two-thirds of the way down I met Narayan Singh leading Kangra Khan, who was coming quietly enough, aware that the Sikh's long sabre would stop midway the first shout he might attempt. I stopped them, and pushed them both back into the dark behind a boulder out of reach of stray shots.



"Now," I said to Kangra Khan, "tell me where the sahiba is, and as soon as I've found her I'll let you go free."

He shook his head. "Huzoor, I do not know!" he answered.

"Is she down there among your men?"

"As Allah is my witness, she did not pass me. I have not seen her since I left her well guarded near the cavern. She is slain, no doubt."

He looked nearly as despondent as I felt, for from his point of view Joan Angela's death meant the loss of an enormous ransom. But Narayan Singh was unconvinced.

"I say kill him, sahib!" he broke in. "If she is dead, he slew her! Kill him, and then you and I together will search for her body below there."

But I felt fairly well convinced that Kangra Khan was telling truth; and never yet having murdered a prisoner I felt no disposition to begin.

"Take him to the cavern," I said. "I'm going down alone."

Narayan Singh objected strenuously. He begged me to come with him to the cavern, arguing that Kangra Khan might otherwise escape—a manifest absurdity. He said if I would consent to that, he would return with me and protect me while I searched for the sahiba's body.

"For thou and I have campaigned together often. Thy honor and mine are one!" he argued.

At last I consented to stay where I was while he led Kangra Khan to the cavern and returned to join me in the search. It did not amuse me to meet King again without Joan Angela dead or alive. My mental processes are no man's business but my own, and King's opinion of

me, though I value it, was not the issue. I am the man who must live with myself.

I waited an interminable time, listening to the scattered shots of some of King's Waziris, who were peppering the enemy's retreat and making it as difficult as possible to get away with the remaining baggage. Every minute seemed priceless, yet the Sikh did not come. I decided to go down alone, and had started, when I heard him come hurrying behind me. I put on speed then. To wait would only lose more time. He started to run, crying "Sahib! sahib!" So I ran, knowing he could overtake me; but I had nearly reached the bottom, and was by the rock where Kangra Khan had stood, when he laid a hand on my shoulder from behind.

"Come, sahib!" he said, and turned, and started running on his way back up the ramp.

Seeing I did not follow at once, he turned.

"Come, sahib! Quickly! King sahib's request!" he shouted.

"What has happened?" I demanded; but the wind blew the words back in my face, and if he heard me he did not answer. He stood there beckoning in the moonlight within easy range of the Pathans, and I suspected by his gestures he was grinning. It looked very much like a trick of his to prevent me from taking a long chance among the rocks. There are always plenty of friends to dissuade a fellow from the proper course. I turned my back on him, and started forward.

In a second he was in pursuit of me again, jumping and sliding down the ramp in a little avalanche of loose stones.

"Come!" he insisted. "King sahib sends for you!" And before I could ask for an explanation he was gone again, scrambling up the slide on

hands and knees. Far up above me I could see King standing in the moonlight on the ledge before the cavern, talking to about a dozen men, of whom one looked like Kangra Khan, our prisoner. There seemed nothing in the way of excitement going on up there. But Narayan Singh beckoned and shouted: "Come swiftly! King sahib waits!"

I stepped out into the moonlight from the shadow of the rock, and climbed up on another rock to get a view of the surroundings. I was not up there a second before King caught sight of me--blew his whistle--and began beckoning violently.

I jumped down into shadow, still intending to go forward, but saw King himself and half a dozen men come hurrying down the ramp, and that decided me to wait and hear what they might have to say. I crawled back to the bottom of the slide and stood there in total darkness--perfectly invisible; but I could see all the ramp and the men who came down it.

Half-way down the ramp King stopped and blew his whistle. Narayan Singh stood up and waved his arms again, yelling, "Sahib! sahib!" I could not pretend after that, nor could King pretend, that I had turned back of my own free will. I was satisfied to go and discover what King had to say before continuing the search, at all events.

But the moment I stepped into moonlight, and he saw me coming, King started back, beckoning to me once and taking it for granted that I would follow him. He never once looked back to see whether I was coming. Neither did Narayan Singh wait, but scrambled to overtake King. So I climbed up the ramp all alone, in no hurry, disgusted at the turn of events, and sore with King, whom I suspected of having cold feet after as good as ordering me out on a forlorn hope.

But it was all very matter-of-fact up there. Nobody seemed disturbed, or to expect an attack before morning. They were loafing about cleaning rifles, and I saw smoke issuing from the cavern-mouth, and two Waziris climbed over the edge of the ramp with water slopping out of half-filled kerosene cans. If they dared use the well in the ravine it meant that the Pathans had drawn off further than I thought. That was not reassuring. It might mean that King had definite news that Joan Angela was already miles away.

I came up with him at last, feeling pretty well exhausted, for a good deal of the heavy work that night had fallen to my share, and my head had not properly recovered from that blow I received the first night.

"What's the news?" I demanded.

"We're all safe for tonight," he said simply, reaching out his hand for my blood-stained rifle. He examined it casually and tossed it over the cliff. "Why not go in and rest?" he asked, nodding his head in the direction of the cavern. Not answering, I stuck my hands into my pockets and accepted his advice.

There was a good fire in there. They had gathered what fuel the Pathans had left scattered about, and a brilliant flame was lighting up a great hole in the cliff that would have held a thousand men. Some wounded Waziris were sitting and sprawling around the fire, and towards the rear there were two people bandaging the rest, who were sitting with their backs against the wall, waiting their turn. One of the two was Grim. He turned his head as I passed the fire, and nodded a curt greeting.

"I saw Joan Angela," I said, "but they carried her off almost under my eyes. It was my fault. Can I help here?"

"Sure! Lend a hand," said a voice that made me nearly jump out of

my skin; and Joan Angela looked up from tearing turbans into bandages to laugh at me. "It was Jim here who carried me off. Come over here and get busy."

## **X. "Thou Wilt Have the Blessed Prophet's Tooth, So Who Can Harm Thee!"**

Men differ, as the pigs that perish, and all of us are brutes to some extent. We have a lower nature that obstructs the higher and persists in spite of all our boasted civilization.

Joan Angela, whose nature compared to mine is as a diamond to a hunk of coal, was her normal, natural, brave self again, no longer enjoying adventure, but making her absolute best of it; and I think she had utterly forgotten that incident down in the well. She looked at me, and spoke to me as to an old friend; and if she had never been more than an acquaintance, that might have passed muster.

But the devil of it was that she and I had been old friends. I value friendship more than anything on earth. It rankled in me—it had made of me that night a Berserker—that she should have dared think I would take advantage of her in any sort of circumstances. I did not answer her when she spoke. Her mere proximity filled me with a burning rage. For a minute or two I held a Waziri while Grim pushed his finger into a wound to feel for splintered bone; and when that job was done I turned my back on both Grim and her, and walked out. There was not the least excuse for it. I did it.

Outside, I met King come from posting his watchmen. "Where's Akbar bin Mahommed?" I asked, chiefly for something to say.

"Gone over to the enemy!" he answered. "By the way, he has your pistol... snatched it, I suppose, while the fighting was on."

I remembered then that Akbar bin Mahommed had passed me during the first rush down the ramp. But I found it hard to reconcile desertion with his earlier faithfulness, and said so.

"You're right," King answered, "he's no deserter. He's after that tooth, and Grim sent him to earn it. He's a spy for us. He'll let us know before morning what the enemy intend."

He was looking at me curiously where the firelight streamed on both our faces.

"Why don't you go and lie down?" he said presently. "You need a rest."

He said nothing of rest for himself, and I laughed at him. I told him it was his turn. I said I would stay there on the ledge and keep watch, while he turned in by the fire; and I think it was more to humour me than for any other reason that he went in and left me standing there. I bore a grudge against him too, because of his curtness when he came on me alive without Joan Angela. The mere fact that he had been justified meant as much to me as that Joan Angela had been unjustified. I would have quarreled with my own mother just then.

Narayan Singh came and sat down in the shadow of the cliff beside me. I resented it. He had had no right to play that trick on me, calling me back up the ramp without explanation, thus causing me to burst in like a fool on Joan Angela. I said nothing, savagely, for several minutes, but he undoubtedly divined my mood.

"Where's your prisoner?" I asked at last, compressing into one short sentence all the discourtesy I could command.

"At the back of the cavern, sahib. He is well guarded," he answered.

Then, after a pause, during which I tried to think of some suitable rebuke: "Our Guru saith: 'To fight for the oppressed is excellent; but let not wrath consume the spirit that has led thee!'"

I told him to go to the devil with his preaching, and he got up and walked away, too wise to argue.

There I sat, hour after hour, watching the moon change the shadows down in the ravine, listening to jackals and the lowering voice of the wind, that whined as if all the Pathan wounded were crying for help. But there were no discoverable wounded down there. Our Waziri women had pounced on quite a number of them before King could prevent, and their own women had found and carried off the rest.

Narayan Singh strode past me once or twice on a sentry-go of his own election. The third time he stopped as if to speak, but thought better of it and passed along. Five minutes later he saluted, military style.

"Sahib," he said, "sleep. For I need sleep. And sleep I will not until you have slept first."

That was the thin end of the wedge that entered my abominable mood and forced me back to a reasonable frame of mind. I began to argue with him, but made no headway, he assuring me that a Sikh can go without sleep for twice as long as a white man with less than half the ill effect. He was adamant--as gentle and firm and respectful as a well-trained nurse; and wise in the bargain.

"You are stronger than I. We may all need your strength before morning. You should sleep first, for that if no other reason," he insisted.

So I yielded, and lay down where I was. I suppose it was he who

threw a sheepskin over me, but I was fast asleep before that happened... so deep in slumber that I never heard a sound of Akbar bin Mahommed's coming. It was Grim, about an hour before dawn, who shook me awake.

"Conference!" he said. "You're wanted. Give me Mahommed's Tooth."

So I gave him the old tooth in its crumpled scrap of paper, and followed him into the cavern where Joan Angela, King, Narayan Singh, and Akbar bin Mahommed were already seated around the dying embers of the fire. Akbar looked mighty well pleased with himself, as if he had brought good news. I sat down between him and Narayan Singh, sideways to Joan Angela, so as not to have to look directly at her; and Grim took his seat facing me. King wasted no time on preliminaries. He called for Kangra Khan, who came from a dark corner of the cavern followed by four Waziris, and, at King's invitation, sat down beside him, watched intently by the guards. Then King spoke up, dealing only with essentials, as his way is.

"Akbar bin Mahommed got in touch with Kangra Khan's men, who have bivouacked an hour's march away at the north end of the ravine. They expect the Orakzai Pathans, for whom we were luckily mistaken, to join them soon after dawn. After that, they expect to return and attack us. They believe we must be short of ammunition. They count on cutting us off from water. They are sure we have very little food. They say our only way of escape is down into the ravine, where they can cut us up at leisure. On the whole, they're about right.

"However, Akbar bin Mahommed is a diplomatist. It seems that our Hajji Jimgrim promised him Mahommed's Tooth, and he sees the way, when he possesses that, to make himself a man of great influence. He has told the Pathans about the tooth; so their purpose now is to capture the Hajji and Miss Leich alive if possible, and to kill



all the rest of us. But they are anxious about Kangra Khan too. They're afraid we might kill him. They feel their honor is entailed in saving his life if possible. But most of all they want the tooth. They believe its possession will make them prosperous and powerful, besides protecting them from other tribes on their way home.

"Akbar bin Mahommed now makes this offer: If we will give him the tooth, he will be responsible for leading the Pathans away and letting us and the Waziris escape unattacked to the border. We are here to discuss the proposal."

"The shameless dog would be a chief in my place!" Kangra Khan growled, glaring at Akbar bin Mahommed, who met the gaze without flinching. "Promises are wind that any rogue may belch forth! Give me the tooth, and I will take the promise on myself. Aye, I will fulfil it!"

King's eyes met Grim's and mine and Narayan Singh's in turn. We all shook our heads. It was Grim who made the next proposal, speaking Arabic, which neither Kangra Khan, Akbar bin Mahommed nor Joan Angela understood.

"Suppose I take the tooth and go with Akbar bin Mahommed. Then if he keeps his word, and you reach the border safely, I'll give him the tooth, and you can exchange Kangra Khan against me."

But we voted that down instantly. Hajjis are respected in the hills, but murder is sport and art, and a murderer would argue that possession of the Prophet's Tooth would cleanse all sin from his soul. They would kill Grim and then, with the tooth by way of absolution, would attack, and wipe us out. It looked like an impasse. There seemed no solution either way. We might have trusted Kangra Khan, perhaps; but Grim had promised the tooth to Akbar bin Mahommed, and we were not a treaty-making government to cancel promises at our own convenience.

Akbar bin Mahommed, suspicious of the Arabic, began to doubt our good faith.

"What manner of men are ye, to make a bargain with me and then break it?" he demanded in Pushtu; and at that comprehension dawned on Kangra Khan.

"Oho!" he exclaimed. "By Allah! That way blows the wind! Ye have bargained to give the Prophet's Tooth to this worrier of dung-heaps? Give it to him, if he is fit for it, but let him prove his fitness first! Let him fight me--here--now--for the chieftainship! Clear a space and give us weapons!"

At that, Akbar bin Mahommed drew my pistol. I knocked it from his hand, but only in the nick of time. The blow nearly broke his wrist.

"Allah reward thee, Ramm-is-den!" said Kangra Khan graciously. But Akbar bin Mahommed hugged his wrist, and eyed me from another aspect.

"That man is a liar and a traitor!" Kangra Khan said, pointing his finger at Akbar bin Mahommed. "I am a man of my word, and ye know it! Lo, give him the tooth, and send him forth with me. Ye and the Waziris shall go safe to the border, Allah is my witness."

That was a handsome enough offer. Of all the long chances we might choose from, the prospect that Kangra Khan might literally keep his word contained the least improbability. But Akbar bin Mahommed had risked his life on our behalf more than once, and we would have been curs if we had accepted the proposal as it stood.

Joan Angela piped up, sitting with her arms round her knees, and staring with great tired eyes across the embers at Kangra Khan.

"I think Kangra Khan is a man," she said. "I believe he would keep a promise."

Kangra Khan bowed his head ever so slightly in acknowledgment. He was not too pleased to be championed by a woman; yet his situation was nearly as desperate as ours, and he welcomed any hint of an approaching solution. He eyed Joan Angela intently as she continued.

"Why not ask him to promise to do his best to find a way out of this difficulty, and then let him go. He'd be an ingrate if he failed us, and I don't think he has that in him."

There was silence. It was a daring suggestion, but it rang true. If we let him go, and he deceived us, gone was our only hostage. He and his men could get possession of the tooth by cutting us off from food and water and attacking in their own good time. Yet, if he were a man of his word...

"By Allah!" he broke in, "the woman has the right of it! Keep ye your promise, and lo, I keep mine! Give ye the tooth to Akbar bin Mahommed. Let me go. I promise ye shall reach the border unmolested... ye and the Waziri!"

There was a fly in that amber somewhere. Akbar bin Mahommed detected it instantly.

"That is for them. As for me?" he asked pointedly.

"Dog! Thou wilt have the blessed Prophet's Tooth, so who can harm thee?"

From a hillman's viewpoint that was unanswerable. It placed us in the horrible dilemma of having to stand up for the tooth's authenticity or

else, by admitting it would not protect Akbar bin Mahommed, to throw away our lone chance. We simply did not dare to drop a hint that the tooth's power was not miraculous, and Kangra Khan, continuing, rubbed that fact home.

"Hah! It has saved the sahiba! Hah! Were it not for the tooth, would a handful of dogs of Waziris have beaten off me and my men? By the Prophet, whom may Allah bless, who art thou, thou dog, to have no faith in it?"

Time was precious. Dawn would bring about the meeting of Pathans and a view of the ramp and the cavern—our predicament and our small numbers. We had to agree on something swiftly.

"We will take you at your word," said King, and stood up, holding out his hand to Kangra Khan. They shook hands across the dying embers of the fire, but Kangra Khan waited, and there was awkward silence for a moment, until King detected what the matter was. He went and picked up my pistol (which was really Grim's) that I had knocked out of Akbar bin Mahommed's hand, and offered it to Kangra Khan butt-first. The Pathan accepted it, but waited yet.

King looked about him. He could hardly take a knife from a Waziri, and Kangra Khan's own had vanished in the dark when we had captured him. But one of our fellows had died of his wounds at the back of the cavern; Grim went and looked for his tulwar, found it, and brought it back to King, who offered it to the Pathan hilt-first. It was a brute of a weapon, weighing twenty pounds at a guess, with a rather curved blade, and beautifully worked with silver wire to keep the hand from slipping. Kangra Khan seized the hilt, and King laid his hand on the blade.

"By the Name of Names, I swear!" said Kangra Khan. Then he stuck the tulwar into his waist-cloth, bowed to us all as stately as the devil,

turned on his heel, and swaggered out.

"He's our only chance," said King, not too enthusiastically.

"Huh! Ye should have trusted me," said Akbar bin Mahommed, kicking at the embers.

Joan Angela crossed to my side of the fire. I backed away, but she followed. None heard us.

"I'm sorry, Jeff!" she said simply.

"So am I!" I answered.

"I was down in the well in the dark, and... "

"So was I," I said. "I went down because it never entered my head you'd doubt me. I won't repeat the mistake."

She said no more, but stared at me for several seconds with those great grey eyes of hers, then went and joined the others. I walked out on the ledge and watched the dawn come.

## **XI. "So Let Us Fight."**

We breakfasted off goat, singed by Grim over resinous and smoky firebrands, washed down with water tasting of frog-spawn or something similar that had a natural right to be in it. Then the fire went out, and the wind rose, and it was cold. We felt like ship-wrecked mariners, and watched an aeroplane away over near the horizon, circling and circling without a chance of seeing us, nor any prospect of our being helped in time, even if we were seen. For the Pathans were on their way toward us from the other direction, taking their time about it, keeping cover, well aware, too, of that fowl-that-laid-eggs-

on-the-wing.

Their scouts were in a screen below us very soon after dawn, but the sun was well up over the hills before the main body arrived. They had been reinforced by the Orakzai contingent, and for lack of anything better to do I counted upwards of three hundred of them. They took cover just out of practical rifle-shot, with their left flank on the well--our only source of water, of which we had stored two kerosene cans and eight or nine earthenware crocks full--about enough to last until next day, unless we should have to wash wounded.

Our Waziris were in the depths of despair. About half of them wanted to bolt, and the other half were in favour of opening fire with their remaining ammunition and then charging down to die.

"For let us die like men and please the Prophet... not as cattle in the byres in famine time!"

We did not dare to encourage them with lies about the tooth. That course would have made them fanatical. They would then have charged ten times the number with hardly a moment's hesitation. King kept them quiet by telling them he had a ruse in store, appealing to their sense of cunning, never far below the surface.

It was after nine o'clock when someone waved a white cloth from a rock in the ravine, and we answered it. They waited for us for half an hour to go down to them, but we were not such fools as that; so at last Kangra Khan, with eight bearded giants at his back, came climbing up the ramp and halted in front of us, where we sat in line in the midst of the cavern-mouth. Our Waziris, some in the cavern, and some outside, hung around on the alert, as nervous as a pack of wolves. Akbar bin Mahommed stood behind us, showing his teeth in a grin mixed of apprehension and bravado.

"By Allah, I have come!" said Kangra Khan.

"Why not? Did you not promise?" answered King.

"Aye. I keep my promises. Ye go free. But ye must leave the rifles. I have promised those to my men. And as for the Prophet's Tooth, that man"--(he pointed to Akbar bin Mahommed)--"must fight me for it!"

"That was not in the bargain," said King.

"Nay, there was nothing in the bargain said about it. Neither yes, nor no. Therefore he must fight me for the tooth, since I say so."

"I have not yet given him the tooth," said Grim.

"What odds?" said Kangra Khan. "Give it to him now. He shall come down there"--(he made a sweeping gesture in the general direction of the ravine)--"and fight me--he who would be chief in my place! Then, if he wins, let him make himself chief! He shall have fair play. When the fight is over, ye shall all go free."

It was all obviously prearranged. The eight stalwarts who stood back of him were grinning in the way men do who know they have you in a trap.

"You can't allow that!" said Joan Angela nervously. "Jeff! You can't allow Akbar to be killed on our account."

She spoke to me because she knew me best; but in my mean mood she seemed to be singling me out as the one who most needed instruction in ethics. It added fuel to the anger that still smouldered in me. Akbar bin Mahommed blew on it.

"How can I fight?" he demanded. "Ramm-is-den injured my wrist."

"I have promised my people there shall be a fight," said Kangra Khan. "So fight there must be!"

He did not frame the inference in words, but his gesture as he jerked his head towards the men below, and the truculent manner of the chieftains he had brought with him, left little to the imagination. There would be a fight or a wholesale slaughter, and we might suit ourselves. So I stood up. I did not consult the others, and I was careful to turn my back on Joan Angela.

"It's true I hurt Akbar bin Mahommed," I said. "Fight me instead!"

"Nay, fight me!" said Narayan Singh, and leapt to his feet beside me.

"Don't, Jeff! Do sit down!" implored Joan Angela; and she could not have said anything to make me more determined.

"Leave this to me, sahib!" urged Narayan Singh; but I gripped him by the arm and swung him back behind me.

"Is it for the tooth?" asked Kangra Khan.

"Yes," I said, "since I'm fighting for Akbar bin Mahommed. Let the terms be stated, though. You name them."

The men at his back were delighted. They grinned like a row of devils, and it was clear enough my challenge would have to be accepted or Kangra Khan would lose *izzat*. And his *izzat* means to a Pathan of breeding more than his religion. King and Grim sat saying nothing. There was nothing they could say that would have been of the slightest use.

"These be the terms," said Kangra Khan: "If I slay thee, I take the tooth. Slay me, and keep it." Then he added in English, so that his



own men might not understand: "It is a lie about the tooth, but it will serve, and I can use it. That man"--(he nodded at Grim)--"may be a Hajji, but--"

He did not finish the sentence. It was Grim who jumped into that breach. He spoke English too.

"Keep faith!" he warned. "Win the tooth, and when we reach the border safely I will procure a writing to prove that the tooth is authentic. But if you lose it, and do not keep faith, I will admit I am a fraud and you a fool. Your men will kill me then; but not until then, because I am a Hajji. They will laugh you to scorn."

Kangra Khan nodded. It was perfectly easy to read what was passing in his mind. He wanted the title of Ghazi--slayer of an infidel--which would make him the unchallengeable leader of perhaps a dozen villages; and the tooth, if he could keep up the fable about it, would make him a match for the mullahs, who are thorns in the sides of chieftains.

"I have sworn in the Name of Names to keep faith," he said simply. "Moreover, I have a bone to pick with Ramm-is-den, who took me by surprise and thinks he is as strong as I am! So let us fight."

King and Grim had altogether too much faith in my prowess. They regarded it as a foregone conclusion that I could beat the Pathan, for they had both seen me in action. On more than one occasion it had been my physical strength and skill with old-fashioned weapons that had pulled Grim out of a tight place, and in all our adventures it had always been understood that each should contribute his utmost at any moment. The account was much better than square. Grim's brains had saved me scores of times; and King had saved us all by making friends of the Waziris. But Joan Angela took another point of view.

"Jeff, I won't have you take this risk on my account!" she said.

She looked miserable and indignant. I did not even answer her.

"Where shall the fight be? And what weapons?" I asked.

"Below there, in front of all my men," he answered with a jerk of the head towards the ravine. "I fight with this tulwar." And he drew from his sash the weapon King had given him when we set him free.

"My sahib fights with this!" said Narayan Singh, seizing his long sabre midway down the scabbard and holding it on a level with his eyes. Whereat all nine Pathans grinned hugely; as a weapon they considered it contemptible.

Kangra Khan saluted me with an air of mock respect, and turned on his heel to swagger away with his chieftains.

"I will wait for you below. No hurry. By Allah, Rammis-den, death waits for one of us, and I feel foreknowledge of long life in me!"

King became busy at once with our Waziris, for they crowded him, asking for explanations, and he had to instruct them very carefully. An ill-considered move on their part, or a mistake at the peak of excitement, was likely to upset everything and bring on massacre; for Kangra Khan's authority was none too absolute. Grim reinforced him, and the two had their hands full, the Waziris bitterly resenting the proposed surrender of their rifles. They swore they would rather die where they were, fighting. There was mutiny, until King promised them a brand-new rifle apiece when they should come to British territory.

Meanwhile, Joan Angela clung to my arm; and, boor though I had been to her, I was not brute enough to throw her off. She begged and

implored me not to fight.

There were no tears in her eyes, and she did not sob or act hysterically, but she said she would much rather go down below there and be killed than to have me killed on her account, while she looked on.

"Don't look, then," I advised her.

"Jeff," she said, "you're still nursing that grudge against me! I've admitted I was wrong. I've begged your pardon. I know you're a man who would never take advantage of a woman in a situation like that. I was alone in the dark, in a well, and my nerves were on end... can't you... won't you understand that?"

I did understand it perfectly. But I did not answer.

"Don't you love me, Jeff?" she asked.

That question from Joan Angela was more surprising than if all those mountains had suddenly been swept away. I turned at last and met her eyes—the same, good, friendly grey eyes they had always been, as true and honest as the year is long.

"We all love you," I answered.

"Jeff, I want you to marry me. You're not to go down there and be killed. You're to live and marry me. There's some other way out of this. There must be!"

"That's kind, Joan," I answered. "You make me very sorry I was so damned rude. But the sacrifice is much too great, and I'm not worth it. I'd be still less worth it if I accepted it. Besides, I have passed my word to fight the man."

"Jeff, I mean it! You asked me once and I refused. Now I ask you."

"To keep me from fighting!" I said, trying hard to grin at her. It takes more manhood than I have to appear unaffected by Joan's arm on my shoulder and her lips and eyes as near as need be.

"I mean it, Jeff!"

"Dear girl," I said, "I'm grateful for the honour, but I don't believe you."

"Jeff, I'm telling you the truth!"

"Joan," I said, "you tell that to the Horse Marines; or tell it again to me when this fight's over."

"All right," she said, suddenly releasing me and stepping back. "Get into the fight then, and win! Have you forgiven me?"

Words would have been a lame reply to that. I deliberately strode two paces up to her and kissed her twice--the first time I had ever done that and, I don't mind betting, the last. Some day I expect to meet the man who has the right to kiss her; and I'll envy him.

I had forgotten Narayan Singh. Those were all-absorbing moments. He stepped forward grinning, with the sabre in both hands, hilt towards me.

"Now the sahib will fight like the warriors of old!" he said. "Observe, this sabre is a good one. But beware how you take the full weight of that tulwar on the guard. In distance you have the advantage. At close quarters weight and cutting-edge are in his favour. Bear that in mind, sahib!"

He knew my shortcomings. He and I have practiced sword-play by

the hour together, and though I can beat him to his knees by sheer strength when I get close enough, he usually ends an afternoon by pinking me neatly pretty nearly where he will.

"Now it is no matter of laughter over a dozen bruises," he warned me. "Tulwars cut deep. He will count on the edge. Use thou the point."

Well, it was no use waiting. I looked to my shoes, which were worn by the rough work on the rocks. Narayan Singh cut frayed leather away, and retied the laces firmly, cutting off the ends, for more fights than a few have been lost by clumsy footwork. I took the sabre, leaving the scabbard with Narayan Singh, and led the way down the ramp. The others followed, except King, who stayed with the Waziris to prevent them from approaching too close to the Pathans. By the time we reached the foot of the ramp most of our wounded were perched in a row like vultures on the ledge, and King and the rest of the Waziris had descended by the short cut, to squat like fans in the bleachers along a ledge low down.

The battleground was chosen already. Kangra Khan stood waiting there, swinging his heavy tulwar, with the black breast-hair showing through a gap in his cotton shirt. He grinned at sight of me, and the Pathans in groups on every near-by rock set up their battle-cry--"Allaho Akbar!" until the hills echoed it. King kept our Waziris silent somehow, and receiving no defiant answer the Pathans grew still.

They had picked out the only nearly level spot available--a sheet of smooth rock, crossed by a couple of layers like steps a few inches high. The rock was rather slippery, and sloped upward towards his end. Moreover, he had the sun behind him. But you can't expect a Pathan to understand the niceties of fair play.

Joan Angela, pale as a ghost, took her seat on a rock between Grim and Narayan Singh, with her arms around her knees. She had used

the white uleema's turban to make bandages for the wounded, and her hair was all down over her shoulders, making her look younger, but forlorn--you might say shipwrecked.

I threw off my sheepskin jacket and gave it to her to hold, but she put it on over her shoulders, for the wind was blowing hard and laden with bitterness from far-off ledges where snow never thawed. She did not speak. Grim laughed for his own encouragement and mine.

"Rammy, old top," he said, "be quick for the Lord's sake. We want to go home!"

I made some sort of lame joke in reply, and noticed Akbar bin Mahommed picking his way leisurely towards us over the rocks; he waved his hand, not exactly reassuringly. Then I strode out to meet Kangra Khan.

He began at once to show his swordsmanship, no doubt to scare me. He could whirl that heavy tulwar so fast that it was invisible and sang like a dynamo. He could change hands while he did it, never checking speed, bending his body the while in all sorts of supple curves. His men set the ravine echoing again with their approval, and there were cat-calls directed at me, along with prayers to Allah to assist their chief.

But I have always thought that sort of display is rather unwise, for it gives your opponent a line on your strength and your weakness; and applause leads to excitement, which saps swordsmanship. A swordsman should be an enigma. I could see he was puzzled because I did not complain about the sun in my eyes, or make any fuss, but stood on guard in silence, waiting for him. The only sound from my side was the voice of Narayan Singh:

"Keep the hand low, sahib! Let the blows glance! Point!"

Then Kangra Khan came on like a whirling dervish, swinging at me as if my head were meat on a butcher's block. I side-stepped him, and he had to check his swing midway to guard my lunge, that even so laid one of his rib-bones open. The speed of his rush took him past me, and now the advantage of the sun was mine.

"Bohut atcha!" cried Narayan Singh. "The hand lower, sahib! Wait for him!"

I did not have to wait long. The Pathan was stung, and furious. He had to show his men the hurt was nothing and his spirit none the worse for it. He came on with a sort of hop, like a shot-putter's, one leg advanced, whirling the tulwar slowly; and his shift as he came within reach of my point was like lightning.

"Watch low!" cried Narayan Singh, and a swipe at my legs glanced off the sabre that would have shorn them both through had they been there. His recovery was marvelous, and my point missed his shoulder by a foot. Then I went for him, driving him backward along the rock with blow after blow that brought sparks from his tulwar, while Narayan Singh cried, "Steady, sahib! Steady!" It was foolish. I was playing the Pathan's own game. He ducked and swerved suddenly, gave me the sun in my eyes again, and I felt blood flowing from my neck. "The point, sahib! The point!" yelled Narayan Singh. It was easier said than done, for we were breath to breath, and the tulwar blows were aimed like hail. But I knocked the tulwar up at last, and gave him the hilt in his teeth, which sent him reeling on his heels and brought my point in play. However, he still had the sun in his favour.

"You're not hurt!" yelled Grim. "That cut's nothing." But I could tell by the tribesmen's yelling that they thought otherwise; and Kangra Khan's grin was not wholly due to the blow I had landed on his mouth. He spat out a tooth and came on again.

But now I took warning and stuck to the point, he swiping and dodging in efforts to reach me, yet giving ground foot after foot as I lunged, with Narayan Singh's voice in my ear

"Hand low, sahib! Slower recover!"

Then I used an old trick and he fell for it. After a lunge that forced him to give ground I left my right leg well advanced, and he swung for it with all his might, while his men sent up a yell that pierced the sky. But the leg was not there when he struck, and the force of his blow made swift recovery impossible. I used the edge then, laying his shoulder open handsomely. He barely saved his life by clever footwork and a back-handed upward blow with the tulwar that was as clever as anything I have ever seen. I had the sun of him again, and took full advantage of it, raining blow after blow on him that kept him on his heels. Then he set one foot wrong on the ledge that crossed the rock, and threw himself flat on his back rather than be run through. In silence, in which you could have heard a pin drop, I set my point at his throat and stood over him. He did not cry for quarter, but lay glaring up at me with eyes that I pitied. I have seen a hunted animal look that way.

"Good, Jeff! Very good!" I heard Joan Angela.

But it was not so good. There were the tribesmen to

consider, and none but Kangra Khan to hold them to their word. That look in his eyes was a savage's. He was ashamed to be beaten so easily. Hate, and his notions of honour, our helplessness, and the obvious fact that a cry from him would bring the tribesmen down on us to end the whole affair in the shortest, simplest way, were among the odds I had to reckon.



I stepped back raising my point, and signed to him to rise, returning to my own end. I even gave him his own ground with his back to the sun, saluting him as he retired to have his wound attended. He answered the salute, and it had an excellent effect on the tribesmen; they did not applaud, but they murmured, and I could actually feel the change of attitude towards myself, as if it were a concrete thing that stirred the atmosphere. It began to look as if another round or two might win their friendship.

However Grim who came to my corner with Narayan Singh to staunch the blood flowing from my neck, brought bad news--worst imaginable.

"The tooth's gone!" he said. "While I watched you, Akbar bin Mahommed stole it from the pocket in my sleeve! He has sneaked away with it.

"Find another!" I suggested.

"Where? How? A green tooth won't do." Grim was all at sea. His nerve seemed to have failed him. "Without that tooth we're done for. Akbar bin Mahommed can show it to them, and--"

"Break a false one out of your plate!" I answered. I had never known Grim's fertile imagination to fail in a crisis before, but there comes a time when the best of us succumb to nerves, and the mark of a good man then is the speed with which he regains self-command.

Narayan Singh mopped up the blood on my neck and poured into my ear the abstract of a long experience.

"You should have slain him, sahib! Never mind. Slay him the next time, unless he is so badly hurt as to be helpless. That cut you gave him is nothing much, and now he will be like a wolf at bay. Beware of him! He is cunning; and he will seek to regain the admiration of his

men! Stick to the point, sahib! Put the sun in his eyes, and keep him at a distance! The gods are good, and seek to discredit Allah, but they are wise and dislike foolishness! Use only the point, sahib! When you lunge, be swifter, and recover much more slowly, keeping your eye on his eye. Never mind that thing he wields; you have the better weapon. Watch his eyes! Now!"

A roar went up from the Pathans as Kangra Khan stepped out on the rock again. His shirt was a mass of blood, but there was lots of liveliness about him, and he swung the tulwar once or twice, by way of challenge, with all the old skill, making the blade thrum. I walked out to meet him, stood on guard and waited. He crouched low, and waited too, inviting me to attack, but I did not accept the invitation.

Suddenly he rushed in, mowing like a scythe-man at my legs. He forced me to stoop to guard myself. As I crouched lower and lower, playing the waiting game, he watched his chance and, letting my point pass through his shirt (it grazed his ribs), sprang for my neck, and with a jerk of his left hand nearly threw me forward on my face. Before I could quite recover and turn he was down on me with the tulwar. I caught the blow on the guard and it snapped the sabre-blade clean off. I heard Joan Angela scream. The Pathans began yelling and dancing like devils in hell-fire; and I felt the sting as the tulwar blade hit home, gashing me from hip to thigh. But I did not fall, and I did crash the hilt like a cestus into his teeth. He reeled backward, and I closed with him. We went to the rock together, he under me, and I rained blows on him with the hilt, while he struggled to get his right arm free and cut my throat with the tulwar.

"Smash him, Jeff! Oh, smash him!" Grim yelled. "Crush his guts!"

"Get the tulwar, sahib!" roared Narayan Singh. "Throw that hilt away and get the tulwar!"

I let the hilt go, for that gave me two hands, and I felt my strength oozing through the wound. The sole chance left me was speed and sheer strength. I dazed him with blows to the head and then, failing to seize the tulwar, got a hold on his jaw and tried to break his neck. I got my thumb on his windpipe. Over and over we went. He broke the head-lock--nearly broke my grip on his right forearm, chopping me badly in a dozen places--then yelled in agony as I got both hands on his wrist and he had to let the tulwar go.

Then to get the tulwar! Slimy with each other's blood, we rolled and strained and fought to reach it, while the Pathans danced in circles around us, yelling themselves hoarse. We were both growing weak, I bleeding worse than he, which gave me a strange advantage; his hand slipped wherever he gripped me. To offset that he set his fingers into a cut in my arm, and the agony of that spurred me to a last prodigious effort. I knew it was my last. He had me beaten if I failed. I gripped him round the waist, pinning one arm, whirled him, staggering to my feet, and hurled him into the midst of his yelling men. Then the world seemed to slide out from under my feet; I sat down backwards, still more or less conscious, but weak, and without even will to recover.

What followed was like the vivid details of a nightmare, in which I seemed to have no part except as the arena in which opposing arguments struggled for the mastery. I felt Narayan Singh's arms, and Joan Angela's, but nothing seemed to matter, even when King came, and I recognized his voice quite close to me. He was talking with Grim to windward--in low tones, probably--but the wind carried both voices, and my hearing-sense was all at sixes and sevens. Joan Angela's voice in my ear seemed a mile away, and her words were a jumble; King's and Grim's were perfectly distinct.

"He stole the tooth."

"Who did?"

"The Waziri who killed Akbar bin Mahommed. Then three more Waziris fought him for it, and between them they lost it. It's gone. Are your fingers strong? Quick! Pull out one of my teeth!" That was King.

Then Grim: "A green tooth won't do! Wait--I've got it! Stand in front of me!"

Then I heard, as distinctly as I now can hear the ticking of the clock on the wall above me, the crack as Grim broke up two hundred dollars' worth of U.S. dentistry.

"The biggest one!" said King. "Quick! They're coming! Give me the rest--I'll hide them."

Then a war of words, in which *izzat* and *shirm* predominated, along with excited argument about Waziri rifles. I know now what happened, but then it seemed no possible concern of mine.

Kangra Khan was too beaten and weak to control the Pathans, until King's experienced fingers bandaged him and chafed him back to full consciousness. There were men there who considered themselves his formidable rivals for the chieftainship who would have preferred to see him dead. But King helped him to the middle of the battle-rock, and Grim presented him with the tooth, wrapped in a page of Persian notes extracted from his memorandum book. After that it was only a question of whether Kangra Khan would keep his word; no Pathan dared disobey him, now that he had the Prophet's Tooth to curse or bless with.

Our Waziris refused point blank to keep their part of the agreement, and therein lay the difficulty. They refused to surrender their rifles, offering rather to do battle, man for man, with the Pathans. The idea

of single combat had taken hold, and challenge followed challenge. It was King and Grim, pouring wise words into Kangra Khan's ears, who managed the business finally. Our Waziris were allowed to take their rifles with them over the British border (where they were confiscated promptly by the authorities, for various and sundry reasons, including the good one that every single rifle was originally stolen).

And to their honor be it written that, though we had two-score Waziris who could stand and march and bear a load, they were eight Pathans who carried me to the border on a stretcher made of poles and sheepskin. And they have sent a deputation since, to tell me I am free of all their country; although I don't intend to test that generous *laissez passer*.

Joan Angela came and nursed me in the hospital, and when my great heap of thews and bones turned atavistic and recalled the caveman trick of recovery from what commonsense would say was certain death, she renewed her offer, very gently and sincerely.

But my head, as well as my heart, was functioning by that time.

"God knows," I said, "I'll wear your offer in my hat until I die, and will try to live up to it. But I'm a middle-aged man, of middle-class means. You're a young girl, with millions, and all your life in front of you. There's the right man somewhere. I won't wrong him--or you."

She said she was in earnest, and she was undoubtedly. But so was I, and I'm the man I have to live with. So we parted good friends. And if any of you ever chance to meet Joan Angela and win her friendship, you may take it from me, you are fortunate; her friendship is stronger and longer, and has more grain in it than most have nowadays.

THE END

