

CARRY ON!

HERBERT STRANG



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A DASH FOR LIBERTY

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A STORY OF THE FIGHT FOR BAGDAD

BY

HERBERT STRANG

ILLUSTRATED BY H. K. ELCOCK
AND H. EVISON

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CHAPTER I

A TELL NEAR BABYLON

Mesopotamia, "the land between the rivers," has been brought by Time's revolution once more into the foreground of the history of the world. The plains where Abraham, Isaac and Jacob tended their flocks and herds; where the hosts of Sennacherib, Shalmaneser and Alexander contended for "world-power" in their day; where the Arabs, heirs of ancient civilisations, reared a civilisation of their own until it fell under the blight of Turkish dominion: have become once more the battle-ground of opposing armies, the representatives of conflicting spirits and ideals.

This fertile land, whose history dates back many thousands of years, has long lain desolate. Swamps and marshes and the floods of the Tigris and the Euphrates cover immense tracts that were once the granary of the middle East. The old canals and irrigation works constructed by Babylonians and Assyrians are now obliterated by sand. Where once large populations thrived and cultivated literature and the arts, now roam only a few tribes of Arabs, degenerate descendants of the race that at one time led the world in the things of the mind. Mesopotamia is the "abomination of desolation."

Here and there a mound—known to archæologists as a *tell*—marks the site of a buried city, and excavation has brought to light the remains of palaces and monumental tombs, and temples where "pale-eyed priests" chanted incantations to Assur and Ishtar and Merodach—the Baalim and Ashtoreth of the Bible. It was at one such *tell* that the story to be unfolded in the following pages had its beginning.

Early one morning in the autumn of 1916, any one who had chanced to be

standing on this *tell* would have noticed, far in the eastern sky, a moving speck. It might have been a gigantic bird, but that, as it approached, its flight was swifter, more direct, more noisy. As it came nearer, it swept round in an immense circle, then descended in a spiral course, skimmed the surface of the *tell*, and finally alighted on a clear and level stretch of ground on the western side.

Through all its ages of solitude the *tell* had never known so strange a visitant. The shades of ancient priests and soothsayers might be imagined to shrink away from this intruder upon their haunts. What had remotest antiquity to do with this symbol of modernity, the last word in scientific invention in a world of scientific marvels?

Some such thoughts as these seemed to grip one of the two young men who disengaged themselves from the aeroplane.

"So this is your *tell*!" cried the elder of the two, in the loud tones that bespeak a cheerful soul. He looked with an air of mockery at the rugged contours of the mound.

"Hush, Ellingford!" said the other, in a stage whisper. "We are trespassers—on a spot where Assyrians worshipped when Rome was still a village."

"Well, *they* can't hear us. What's more to the point, the Arabs can, if they're about; so hurry up."

"Hopelessly matter-of-fact; everlastingly practical! Here are we, in the very nursery and cradle of mankind; yet you can't spare half a thought for the past! You live altogether in the present——"

"Look here, Burnet," said the other, cutting him short; "if you don't stop gassing we shall neither of us live in the future. Before you can say Jack Robinson—or Beelzebub, if you prefer it—we may have a swarm of Arabs

round us with Mauser rifles and explosive bullets. I'm responsible for this machine. So buck up. You can commune with the spirits of the past when I am gone."

Captain Ellingford spoke good-humouredly, but with an undertone of seriousness. Roger Burnet laughed.

"Righto," he said. "I'll not keep you."

He glanced keenly around, as if looking for some landmark; then, having found what he sought, set off with quick step towards a group of ruins near the centre of the *tell*, about a hundred and fifty yards from where the aeroplane had landed. Captain Ellingford, first looking in all directions to assure himself that no one was near, followed his companion, ever and anon throwing a glance backward: he was loth to leave his machine.

The surface of the *tell* was irregular. At one part you would find a smooth expanse of sand; at another, drifted heaps, fragments of rubble, brick and stone; at a third, larger blocks of stone, broken columns, chips of cornice and frieze. Only at one spot was there any substantial relic of the ancient buildings. The lower portion of what had once been a magnificent gateway or porch, together with the remains of the adjacent walls, rose above the surrounding litter. Each side of the portal was formed of what appeared to be a massive solid block, carved to the image of some strange colossal animal, its mouth gaping in a hideous grimace, like the gargoyles on a medieval church. Through this gateway Burnet passed; then he turned to the right, stooped, and with a piece of broken sherd began to scrape away the sand from an area several feet square. Presently there was revealed a flat slab of stone, which, when he had cleared its edges of sand, he lifted, revealing a shallow flight of steps.

"Here we are," he said, turning to his companion. "We discovered it when we were digging here a few years ago, my poor old father and I, and covered it up, meaning to return. There was a German grubbing about in the

neighbourhood, and my father didn't want any poaching on what he considered his preserves. But he never had a chance to come back. Come down and have a look."

He led the way down into a small subterranean room or cellar, and flashing his electric torch, pointed out strange markings on the walls.

"Queer hobby," remarked Ellingford. "Well, I must get back to the bus. Don't like leaving it so long."

They returned to the aeroplane. Burnet took a bundle from it. Ellingford got into his seat, saying:

"A month from now, then. I'll be here unless I'm pipped. Take care of yourself. Good luck!"

He started the engine. Burnet helped him to shove off; the machine jolted over the rough ground, rose into the air, and in five minutes was out of sight.

CHAPTER II

THE GAPING JAWS

Burnet ascended to the highest point of the *tell*, and, unstrapping a pair of field glasses, made a careful survey of his surroundings. The country between himself and the river consisted mainly of swamp and marsh, dotted with islands of various sizes. There were no dwellings within view, but Burnet knew that the region was inhabited, though sparsely, and the flight of the aeroplane, its descent near the *tell*, its subsequent departure, must have been noticed by a

certain number of Arabs. Curiosity, if no other motive, would impel any who were near to hasten to the spot; but he saw no movement on all the wide expanse around except among the birds of the marsh; and reflecting that those Arabs who had witnessed the return flight of the aeroplane would not guess that it had left a passenger behind, he restored the glasses to their case, and prepared to complete the errand that had brought him to the spot.

Descending to the foot of the *tell*, he made his way to a wady that bordered it on one side. A sluggish current of muddy water flowed through the channel, whose banks were thickly overgrown with reeds. A number of these he cut with his pocket-knife, binding the stalks with tendrils of a trailing plant. With this faggot of reeds in one hand and the bundle he had taken from the aeroplane in the other, he returned to the ruins on the tell. There he stuck the former in the grinning mouth of one of the grotesque animals at the porch; then he passed inside, and once more descended into the underground room, this time, however, letting the stone slab drop into its place above.

A few seconds later the bundle of reeds hanging out of the monster's mouth disappeared. The animal, so far from being a solid block, as it appeared, was hollow, and Burnet had climbed into it by means of notches in the wall at one corner of the cellar. He withdrew the reeds: next moment they reappeared at a similar orifice on the other side of the figure, which, like Janus, was double-faced, and with this roughly extemporised broom he swept a quantity of sand over the slab, until it was hidden sufficiently to pass unnoticed except by a careful observer acquainted with its position. This done, he drew the broom back and took it down with him to the dark and airless chamber below.

If any watching Arab had seen the young British officer disappear into the earth, he would have been somewhat startled, some twenty minutes later, when the slab was lifted again and an Arab lad cautiously emerged. His head was swathed in a strip of parti-coloured cloth held in position by two thick rings of camel's hair; a dirty, shapeless, yellowish robe descended to his knees; his legs, remarkably brown, were bare; his feet were encased in leather-thonged

sandals. He carried a small bundle; across his shoulder was slung a British regulation water-bottle—the only article by which he could have been distinguished from the boatmen who might be seen any day on the Tigris. He lowered the slab, swept sand over it, obliterated the footprints around, and having thrust his reed-broom into the mouth of the stone animal, picked his way through the ruins to the north-west corner of the *tell*, where an uninterrupted view of the country could be obtained.

He was just turning the corner of a rugged wall when, beneath him at a distance of barely twenty yards, he saw a young Arab rushing up the slope, stumbling, recovering himself, his eyes directed always to his feet. Burnet edged backwards round the corner, and was out of sight when the Arab gained the top. But there was now only a few yards between them; in a second or two the Arab would himself turn the corner, and Burnet saw that if he made a dash for the nearest cover in his rear he must inevitably be observed by the stranger before he could reach it. Whipping out a pistol as a precaution—for he knew not whether the Arab was friend or foe—he stood back. The Arab darted round the corner at racing speed, saw the pistol pointed at him, and swerving slightly grabbed at Burnet's wrist. The sudden wrench jerked the pistol out of his hands and at the same time caused both men to lose their balance. Burnet, the first to recover himself, freed his arm with a dexterous twist, and the two men closed, stumbling and swaying over the broken surface of the *tell*.





THE STRUGGLE ON THE TELL

THE STRUGGLE ON THE TELL

As soon, however, as Burnet got a firm hold the issue was not long in doubt. The Arab wriggled like an eel, but he was no match for the Englishman

either in physical strength or in athletic skill. Moreover he was already winded by his impetuous rush over the heavy ground. Burnet freed himself without much difficulty from his opponent's grip: then, getting his hand behind the Arab's neck in the position known to the wrestler as the "half-nelson," he forced him downwards and finally threw him helpless into a pocket of sand. In a few seconds he had secured the man's weapons—a clumsy pistol and a crooked dagger called *shabriyeh*—and regained his own pistol. Then he stood above the Arab, who now lay on his back, staring up at the supposed fellow-Arab who had thrown him so easily and in a manner so unfamiliar.

The stranger was no older than Burnet himself. He was an Arab of the best type, with handsome features and intelligent and fearless eyes.

"Rise, I pray you, brother," said Burnet in Arabic. "We have somewhat to say one to the other."

The Arab got up quickly. Puzzled as he had been by the wrestling trick, he was still more puzzled by the friendly manner of the man who had vanquished him, and especially by the slight smile that accompanied his words. He fixed his keen eyes on Burnet's face, but said nothing.

"I am alone here, as you see," Burnet went on, "and in these times, when it is hard to know friends from foes, a man must needs take care. We are strangers, yet it may be that we are also friends."

The Arab assented merely with a word, but did not relax his attitude of watchfulness. This man who spoke to him used good Arabic, but was more direct and less given to expletives than the average Arab.

"You are my captive," Burnet continued. "Tell me who you are, whence you come, and why you ran hither in such headlong haste."

"My lips are dry; give me drink," said the Arab.

"By the grace of Allah I have fresh water—not like the foul water of the swamp," said Burnet, unscrewing the stopper of his water-bottle. "Drink, brother."

The young man took a deep draught, returned the bottle with a word of thanks, and said:

"My tongue will speak true things, and Allah judge between us."

Burnet threw a keen glance around the horizon, then sat down on a broken block of stone, inviting the Arab to sit opposite him. And then the young man began his story.

His name was Rejeb, and he was the chief of a clan of the Anazeh whose territory lay on the far side of the Euphrates. His father, now some years dead, had been a lifelong rebel against the Turkish rule, and in his last year had suffered a disastrous defeat through the defection and treachery of another chief who had been his ally. In this final battle he had lost his life; his people had escaped extermination only by fleeing into the desert. Since the outbreak of the Great War they had gradually reoccupied their old districts, the Turks having enough to do without taking measures to suppress so unimportant an enemy. It was otherwise, however, with the treacherous tribe which had been his father's ruin. For some time its chief, Halil, had made no sign: his fighting strength was greatly reduced through the fact that many of his men were with the Turks. But after the British failure to relieve Kut he had collected a considerable force, and taking advantage of Rejeb's absence at Kerbela he had first cut off the young man's tribe and then attacked it. The tribe, after a stout resistance, had made good its retreat across the Euphrates, to a fastness in the swamps. Rejeb, on his way back from Kerbela, had been met by a messenger with news of the reverse, and, changing his route in order to rejoin his people, had been chased by a party of Halil's horsemen. In eluding them he had lost touch with the messenger who had hitherto accompanied him; his horse had foundered, and the only course then open to him was to swim the Euphrates on a skin. This he

had done, and thought himself safe, when the reappearance of his pursuers revived his anxieties. Fortunately their horses were useless in the swamps, and on foot he had reasonable hope of escaping them. An hour or so, however, before his arrival at the *tell*, he had only just succeeded in giving their main party the slip. The direction of his flight had been seen by three or four of their number who had separated from the rest, and he did not doubt that these three or four, if not the whole body, had tracked him and before long would reach the *tell*.

Rejeb's story was told rapidly, and with an air of sincerity that would have disarmed suspicion even in one far more sceptical by nature than Roger Burnet. The news that men of a hostile tribe in Turkish pay were hastening to this spot was very disturbing. Burnet knew that he was in fully as much danger from his captive's pursuers as the captive himself. His disguise might pass muster; the story he had invented to account for the presence of a solitary boatman so far from the river, if he were challenged, was sufficiently plausible; but if he was found in the company of the young chief whom Halil's men were hounding down he would certainly be seized and carried to Halil for examination at least. He had very little time in which to secure himself.

The obvious course was to release Rejeb, who would no doubt continue in the direction he had been going, and as soon as he was out of sight, to take refuge in the subterranean room until the chase was past. But the young chief was jaded, worn out by his hurried flight and the subsequent struggle on the tell. It was almost certain that he would be run down. Burnet had taken an instinctive liking to him; he could not give him up to his enemies, who were at the same time enemies of the British. After a few moments' reflection he turned suddenly to the Arab and said:

"If I save you from the hands of Halil, will you swear by the beard of the Prophet not to play me false?"

Rejeb was apparently staggered by this strange offer from a man with

whom, a few minutes before, he had been locked in fierce struggle—a man, moreover, who had given no account of himself and about whom there was something mysterious. He flashed a keen questioning glance at Burnet, as if fearful of a trap.

"You are no boatman?" he said slowly.

"And if I am not? What is that to you if I am a friend?"

The Arab hesitated for a brief moment. Then perhaps it occurred to him that his situation could scarcely be worse than it was; perhaps he was mutually attracted to this young man of his own age. At any rate, after the slightest pause, he said, raising his hand:

"By the beard of the Prophet I swear it."

During this conversation the two men had remained behind the wall, Burnet every now and then peering through a gap in the masonry in the direction from which the Arab had come. He now suggested that Rejeb should go to the corner and keep watch for the pursuers. Having left his field glasses with the rest of his equipment in the underground room, he was less able than the keener-sighted Arab to view the distant country.

Rejeb went to the corner and flattened himself against the wall with the instinct for cover natural to a dweller in the wilds. In a few moments he beckoned to Burnet with one hand, the rest of his body remaining motionless. When Burnet joined him, he asked him to look at a large bed of rushes some distance to the north-west. Shading his eyes with his hand, and careful not to expose himself, Burnet gazed towards the spot indicated, and was soon able to make out five or six figures moving among the reeds and advancing straight towards the tell. Burnet led the Arab to the central ruins and through the porch to the entrance of the underground room. Raising the slab they descended; then Burnet mounted into the interior of the colossal animal in which he had left his

broom, and swept sand over the slab and the nearest footprints as before. He had hardly withdrawn the broom when he heard shuffling footsteps on the rough ground beyond the wall, and looked out through the wide mouth of the image. It was almost completely dark within, and in the unlikely event of any enquirer thinking to peer into the jaws of the colossus he could escape discovery by stooping.

In a few minutes a tall Arab appeared round the corner of the wall. He was followed at short intervals by four others. All were stalwart sinewy warriors of the desert, bristling with arms. They hunted through the ruins like a pack of dogs that have lost the scent. Here one would point to the impressions of sandals, and the rest followed him as he traced them along the wall and up to the portico. Burnet watched them without much anxiety, for he had taken care that no tell-tale footmarks remained around the slab; and knowing that the tracks that were visible led both towards and away from the ruins, he guessed that the Arabs would suppose that their quarry had come and returned. Their actions justified him. They traced the marks back to the wall, then back again to the portico, beneath which they stood to consult together. From the few words that Burnet caught it was clear that they had seen Rejeb mount the tell, and they supposed that he had crossed it and pursued his journey on the other side. Presently one of them climbed a pile of rubbish from which he could scan the surrounding country. The fugitive could not have gone any great distance, and he must become visible on one or other of the open spaces between the beds of rushes. The scout's four companions meanwhile threw themselves down in the shade of the portico to rest.

Secure in his hiding-place, Burnet felt some amusement at the situation. He went down to the chamber beneath, and, warning Rejeb against making any sound, took him up to his peep-hole and showed him the figure of his enemy looking for him. It was some time before the Arab gave up his vain task and returned to his companions. They came to the conclusion that the fugitive must be lying hidden among the rushes near the *tell*, and separating, started to scour

the vicinity thoroughly. They went methodically through clump after clump until Burnet grew tired of watching them. Not until it was getting late in the afternoon did their perseverance give out. Baffled, weary, and angry at their failure, they rested awhile on the *tell* and ate some of the food they had brought with them; then they set off to return the way they had come.

Burnet was glad enough to win release at last from his stuffy quarters. Emerging with Rejeb, he made all secure, and prepared to resume the mission which the day's events had interrupted. In the underground chamber he had already returned the young Arab's arms, and discussed with him his subsequent movements. Rejeb would continue his journey to his people, who were a march away to the south-east. He was full of gratitude to his rescuer, and begged to know how he might serve him.

"Surely it is right that I should serve the saviour of my life," he said; "and my people also: they shall know that in serving him they serve me."

"We will not talk of service now," replied Burnet. "Who can tell the future?"

"At least let me know the name of my preserver: how else can I speak of him rightly to my people, and bid them watch for opportunities of serving him?"

"Call me Yusuf the boatman," said Burnet, after a slight hesitation. "By that name I am known to some in Bagdad and elsewhere. It may be that some day we shall meet again."

As soon as darkness made it safe to leave the *tell* they parted. Rejeb took his way to the south-east; Burnet set off north-west through the swamps, in the direction followed by Rejeb's pursuers.

CHAPTER III

THE BARBER'S APPRENTICE

Firouz Ali, the barber of Bagdad, had just opened his shop near the south gate. There were many other barbers in the city, but none of them was so popular as Firouz Ali. Arabs, Turks, Greeks, Persians, Germans, and the hundred and one nondescripts of the population resorted to the well-known shop, not merely because Firouz Ali was dexterous in his craft, but because he was a chatty agreeable fellow and a fathomless well of information. Every customer of his who went to be shaved, or shampooed, or to have his nails trimmed or his ears cleaned (a very necessary toilet operation in a land of dust), came away feeling that he had spent a very pleasant quarter of an hour and gained knowledge at a trifling cost. He was not often aware that he had given more than he had received. The barber had just opened his shop, and, early as it was—the sun had risen no more than half an hour before—a customer had already presented himself in the person of a Turkish non-commissioned officer, come for a shampoo to brace him for the work of the day. Firouz Ali had spread his towels, and was shaking up his mixture.

"A most elegant preparation, by the Beard," he said, holding the bottle to his customer's nose. "You smell the oil of lavender? When you leave me your hair will diffuse a sweet savour, and perfume the street."

"Wallahi! I hope it will not attract the insects," said the Turk.

"Make your mind easy about that. There is here an essence that is bitter as death; insects shun it as you would the plague. You keep your hair well, O noble warrior; the wear and tear of war has not diminished your locks, Allah be praised! My own head, man of peace though I am, has a bald spot that is only prevented from spreading by the daily use of my own famous lotion. It is marvellous to me that you men of war, considering the strain upon your

intelligence and the hardships you undergo, can preserve such bountiful locks without the aid of my unguents."

"Hardships! You speak truth, barber," grunted the soldier. "You men of peace know nothing about it. Bad food, hard work, pay always in arrears _____"

"A dog's life, indeed," said the barber sympathetically. "And, if I am not deceived, the hard work is done by such as you, while the credit goes to the officers."

"You are not deceived, barber. If all goes well, how accomplished are the officers! If things go ill, where is the misbegotten dog of a non-commissioned officer who is to blame?"

"Wallahi! That is the very echo of my own thought. What labours are laid upon you! What responsibility is yours! Well for me that my years forbid my bearing arms, for without doubt the strain would wear me to a shadow and I should sink into my grave. Now bend your head, and let your nostrils inhale the delicate odour of this matchless preparation."

He was in the act of pouring lotion on the man's head when a young Arab in the dress of a boatman entered. Firouz Ali threw him a quick glance; an observer might have detected a mutual look of recognition between them; but the Turk's eyes were fixed on the basin.

"Enter, O kelakji, and wait your turn," said the barber. "A month ago, before my worthless dog of an apprentice left me, you might have been attended to by the boy while I myself was occupied with customers of importance; but now you must have patience until the demands of the officer of the Padishah are satisfied."

The newcomer sat himself down on a stool, and the barber went on:

"Said I not truly? Is not the aroma fragrant as the gardens of the Prophet? And the lather is white as the bloom of the tobacco plant. Wallahi! we were speaking of your toils and sorrows, noble warrior, when this young boatman entered. Truly your life is no bed of roses."

"Truth is on your tongue, O barber," said the Turk. "This week I have been able to snatch scarce an hour's sleep at a time. From morning till night, from night till morning, stores to be checked, a never-ending task. What with the railway and the river there is no rest. If it is not a barge-load of grain, it is a train-load of ammunition."

"And it falls upon you to count all these things? Surely it is like counting the ripples on a stream."

"A labour beyond any man. The ammunition comes in boxes—we number the boxes. I passed in 100,000 rounds yesterday, as many the day before; and to-day there are machine-guns."

"No wonder you come to be refreshed with a shampoo! You have charge of the guns too! A heavy charge—all those thousands."

"Ahi! I said not thousands—would there were! But in truth we have not so many machine-guns as could be wished. The Alemans have not sent us so many of late. But now they are beginning to come in again. There are twenty, so word came to me, now waiting to be unpacked."

"Verily it passes my understanding how you find room for all these engines of war, even in so great a city as Bagdad. Moreover, is there not great danger in the handling of them? I speak as a man of peace."

"We are in truth sometimes hard put to it for store room, and when the godowns are full, we have to keep our stores in the barges upon the river hard by. But they do not remain there long, so great is the demand for them from

our brothers down the river. And as to danger——"

At this point the Turk found himself under the necessity of keeping his mouth shut. He was in the middle stage of the shampoo. To take part in the conversation was impossible when the barber was pouring floods of water over his head, or even later, when his head was smothered in a towel, and the barber was kneading it with his hands. Firouz Ali himself said, little during the final perfuming of his customer's hair, and the sound of a bugle reminded the Turk that he must hasten back to his duties.

When he was gone, the barber turned to the young Arab.

"Your father's son must always be welcome," he said, "but what of prudence? Is it not a necessary virtue? The Turk is stupid, Allah knows: witness the ass-head I have just anointed; but a watch is set upon all the approaches to the city, and you may tempt fortune too far. The house of Ionides was but lately occupied by a picket——"

The young Arab started.

"How did you know?" he asked.

"Peace, peace!" replied the barber, with a significant gesture. "The walls have ears; the dust carries tidings. Is it not my business to know?"

It was barely two hours since Burnet, slipping through the garden of a deserted house on the bank of the Tigris south of the city, found refuge in the building itself and watched for an opportunity, when, as he thought, no observer was near, to make an unobtrusive entrance into the streets. He knew of old how perfect was the barber's knowledge of what went on in Bagdad, and indeed throughout Mesopotamia; but this new illustration, this proof that his temporary shelter in the deserted house of the Greek merchant Ionides was already known to Firouz Ali, came upon him with something of a shock.

Roger Burnet, as some may remember, was the son of a Cambridge scholar who had devoted the latter years of his life to archæological research in Mesopotamia. There Roger had spent the greater part of his boyhood, learning to speak Arabic almost as well as a native. Just before the outbreak of war he had been recalled from school in England by a peremptory telegram from his father, whom he found very ill. Mr. Burnet lingered for more than eighteen months in the hill village of an Arab chief, and it was not until June 1916 that Roger, after his father's death, was able to set off with the intention of joining the British army. Disguised as an Arab, he had travelled to Bagdad with a party of the chief's men, and taken counsel with Firouz Ali, an old friend of his father, a man of quick wit, and an important member of an organisation that was working for the release of the Arabs from the Turkish yoke.

At that time the British attempt to relieve General Townshend in Kut had disastrously failed, and the cause of freedom lay under a heavy cloud. Burnet learnt that the Turks were organising an expedition to punish the chief whose hospitality he had enjoyed, for his refusal to furnish levies to the Sultan's army. It subsequently came to light that the expedition had been instigated by the Germans, its real object being the capture of a stronghold that commanded an important road of communication. Burnet decided to throw in his lot with the chief, escaped from Bagdad by the aid of Firouz Ali and of a mysterious dervish who turned out to be a British secret service agent, after many adventures assisted in the defence of the stronghold against a large force of German-led Turks, and ultimately reached the British lines below Kut. He wished to return to England by way of Bombay for the purpose of training for a commission; but a man with his knowledge of the native dialects was too valuable to be spared. The commander-in-chief made direct application to the War Office on his behalf, and he had in fact been gazetted a second lieutenant on the General List a few weeks before he set off with Captain Ellingford on his present mission to Bagdad.

Firouz Ali was too polite to make any direct enquiries of Burnet as to the

object of his visit. The latter explained.

"You spoke of prudence, my friend," he said. "Well, I grant there are risks, but I have run risks before—for good cause. Of late we have had no news either from you or from the dervish Hezar."

"That is true, Aga," replied the barber, "and therefore is my heart heavy. But who can strive against Fate? Twice within the past month have I sent messengers. The first came back with a shattered arm: the Turkish dogs shot him as he tried to pass through their lines, and he was hard put to it to escape with his life. The second was drowned swimming the river to avoid them. And as for the dervish Hezar, did he not quit the city secretly some ten days ago, having reason to believe that some were looking upon him with suspicion?"

"I guessed there was a simple explanation: that there were difficulties. That is why I am here. We *must* know what the Turks are doing—whether they are receiving reinforcements and supplies, and where these are stored."

"By the Beard, you heard something from that addle-pate who has but now left us. But that is little. I can tell you more. There is at this time in the city a German, a very cunning fellow, who has gathered about him spies in number as the ants in an ant-hill. Ahi! but there is no buckle to his shoe; by which parable understand that he speaks not the tongue of those that he employs, and needs an interpreter. With him there is an Arab who has sold himself to the Turks, and moreover a German who speaks my tongue readily, though with a gurgling throat—a man who has lived many years in this land, digging for the treasures of old time. Is not his name Bukkad Bey?"

"Burckhardt! I know him. I met him with my father years ago." He smiled at some recollection. "So he's here, organising secret police! Well now, my friend _____"

Firouz Ali interrupted him by a gesture. The barber's eyes were fixed on a

water-seller who was passing the shop, going down the street. Burnet saw no glance exchanged, heard no word; but the man had no sooner gone by than Firouz Ali said in a hurried undertone—

"One of the German's spies approaches. It is not wise that you remain here. Leave me now: go up the street, and after the sun is gone down seek the caravanserai of our friend Yakoub: there will I meet you."

Burnet had barely risen from his stool when a carpet-mender passed, in the opposite direction to the water-seller.

"Wallahi!" muttered the barber, who had gazed at him with the same fixity. "Another spy approaches, from the other end. If you go now, verily you must meet one or the other. They would mark you as a stranger. Is it a time for questions? Haste now: that former day you became for a while my apprentice, and beguiled the Turkish dogs. So it shall be again."

He was already stripping off Burnet's travel-stained outer clothes and clumsy shoes. These he cast under his bench, and then with amazing quickness replaced them with a long white djellab and light sandals.

"Mark you, Aga," he said, "you are my nephew and new apprentice, in place of that misshapen Mahmoud who has left me. You have even now arrived from Bebejak." He named a village near the Persian frontier northward which was not likely to be well known to these agents of the secret service.

Burnet had just taken up a razor and was feeling its edge when a man in the dress of a city merchant passed the open shop, throwing a glance into the interior. Half a minute afterwards a second man appeared from the opposite direction. He stopped, mounted the two steps that led to the shop, and greeting the barber sat down on the chair.

"Comb my beard, barber," he said.

"In truth it needs the comb, effendi," said Firouz Ali. "A fine beard, of the fineness of silk, though its beauty is hidden by the thrice-accursed dust that defiles it. Yusuf, lay my whitest napkin about the effendi's throat."

"A new apprentice, barber?" said the customer, eyeing Burnet. "More agreeable to look at than that hunchback of yours."

"He has a straight back, Allah be praised," said the barber, "but what is that? A fair form may go with a foolish mind. Ahi! The ingratitude of man! Behold, Mahmoud left me without a moment's warning, enticed away by some flattering tongue. And here am I in a pitiful plight, for all likely youths are snapped up for the army, and I have had to summon my nephew from his mean village in the north, a mere country lout——"

"A lout, say you? Methinks his frame deserves a fairer word."

"A lout, I say again: clumsy as an untamed colt. Did he not break my best basin into a thousand and one fragments?"

"And why is he too not in the army?"

"In the army! By the tomb of my father, what should he do in the army? Where are his wits? Bid him go to the right, straightway he goes to the left. Ahi! it broke my poor brother's heart to find a witless mind in a body that, as you truly say, has some elements of graciousness. Will he repay me for all my pains in training him to my honourable craft? Who can tell? He has but just arrived; and I have yet to learn——"

Here the barber was interrupted by the hurried entrance of a young man in military uniform.

"Salaam, barber," he cried. "The barber of Bukkad Bey has fallen sick, and the Bey requires a cunning hand to smooth his cheeks. Whose hand is more

cunning than Firouz Ali's? Haste, then, for time presses."

Firouz Ali briefly acknowledged the command, and apologised to his customer for spending less time on his silky beard than its beauty deserved. The secret service man, apparently satisfied with the barber's explanations about his new apprentice, left the shop.

"Woe is me!" exclaimed the barber. "What is to become of you, Aga? I dare not leave you here, and I fear some harm will befall you if you go alone through the streets."

"Take me with you, of course! I can carry your things."

"Mashallah! But Bukkad Bey may know you again."

"Not he! I was hardly more than a child when he saw me, just that once; and he was too busy with my father to notice me."

"Truly you are bold with an exceeding great boldness. But so it shall be. Gather up the basin, and soap, and the brush, and two razors, and the strop. I will bid my neighbour have an eye to the shop, and we will go together."

CHAPTER IV

THE SHAVING OF BURCKHARDT

Major Cornelius Burckhardt was quartered in an old house not far from Firouz Ali's shop. He occupied two rooms on the ground floor, the bedroom opening from the sitting-room. It was into the latter that the barber and Yusuf

his apprentice, having been admitted to the outer courtyard by the doorkeeper, were ushered by the major's servant, who bade them wait there, and disappeared into the room beyond.

Burnet looked around with curiosity and amusement. The appointments of the room bespoke a blend of archæologist and military officer. In the centre stood a roll-top desk, open, and strewn with maps and papers: Major Burckhardt, although unshaved, had already been at work. Military accoutrements, hanging from pegs on the wall, dangled above a table strewn with potsherds, fragments of tiles, tablets, and other objects unearthed from Babylonian ruins. Images, large and small, all very much damaged, were ranged on the floor around the walls. Across one corner was a stone screen nearly six feet high, strangely carved, and chipped at the edges.

The servant having left the bedroom door half open, his announcement of the barber's arrival was clearly heard in the outer room. A husky voice, speaking Arabic with a strong guttural accent, bade him show the man in. Firouz Ali, closely followed by Burnet carrying his utensils, entered, bowing low, and giving the customary salutation, "Salaam aleikam!" to which the German suitably responded.

"My barber is sick," he went on. "I sent for you, knowing you to be skilful with the razor."

"May your excellency——" began Firouz Ali.

"Yes, yes; but no man lives for ever," said the German, cutting short the formula. "I was about to say that I cannot shave myself. I have worn a beard for twenty years, but naturally I had to discard it on resuming my career in our German army. I explain this, because it is foreign to my nature to be dependent. I prefer to do everything myself. Also my beard grows strong: therefore is it necessary that your razor should be particularly keen. And now proceed."

Burnet had some difficulty in repressing a smile. Major Burckhardt was a tubby little man, with an immense dome-like head, rather bald, and spectacled. His brown moustache was brushed up at the ends. He wore a long camel's-hair dressing-gown that accentuated his rotundity. Burnet vividly remembered his last sight of the little man, then heavily bearded. He was being rushed down the slope of a *tell* by Burnet's father, who had seized him by the scruff of the neck, the German frantically calling upon his Arab followers to assist him against the English interloper. Prudently, the Arabs had stood by, gravely watching the scene.

"Yusuf, spread the napkin," said the barber. "Your excellency will have no cause to regret the misfortune that has befallen your barber. In all Bagdad, nay, in all the realm of the Padishah there is no razor equal to this, whether for keenness or for the velvet softness of its touch. Your excellency will be soothed and——"

"Yes, yes," the major interrupted; "get to work. I want my breakfast, and I am already later than my usual hour."

Firouz Ali, like all loquacious people—even though his loquacity was designed—disliked the spoiling of his sentences. He pressed his lips together, and vigorously stropped his razor, signing to Burnet to lather the officer.

While Burnet was preparing the lather, Major Burckhardt, his thick neck swathed with a snowy napkin, looked up at the ceiling, and discoursed of many things.

"There are great days coming for this city of yours, barber. When our Kaiser establishes a protectorate over the country, Bagdad will regain something of its old renown—nay, it will become even more illustrious than it was in its palmiest days. And we have not long to wait." Here Burnet began to lather; but the major, having started on the pleasant pastime of hearing himself

speak, continued, in spite of the brush that was travelling over his cheeks and chin. "The English are beating their heads vainly against the impregnable fortresses down the river, erected by German genius. Soon they will be swept away into the sea they claim as their own; that race of boastful braggarts, robbers, hypocrites, scoundrels, scum——"

How far the major's vocabulary of abuse would have extended will not be known, for at this moment Burnet dabbed the shaving-brush, thick with the whitest and creamiest of lathers, into the German's half-open mouth. The little man jumped up, spluttering with froth and fury. Firouz Ali instantly feigned an explosion of rage. Seizing the brush, he flung Burnet aside and shouted:

"Away with you, you clumsy fool, last of a generation of apes! Woe is me that I should call you kin! Would you shame me before the very face of his excellency? Would you take away my good name, and cause it to be spread abroad throughout the world that Firouz Ali is the uncle of an ass? I pray your excellency to pardon me, the least of his servants, and not to turn away the light of his countenance from me because of the iniquities of this poor fool, who is but lately come from a mean village that I may sharpen his wits and better his manners. Stand here, poor witless lout, and hold me the basin: 'tis all you are fit for."





A MOUTHFUL OF SOAP

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A MOUTHFUL OF SOAP

The German allowed himself to be appeased; he wanted his breakfast. Firouz Ali, alternately abusing his apprentice and flattering the officer, finished his task, and coaxed out an admission that, barring the awkwardness of the

young man, it had been a very comfortable shave. The major then dismissed him, telling him to wait in the next room and the servant would bring his fee.

The barber bowed himself out, and harshly bade Burnet follow him, and close the door. They heard the major ring for his servant, who gained the bedroom by another entrance. There was some delay, and Burnet catching sight of a marked map spread out on the desk, and remembering his mission, moved across the room to examine it. Before he had taken more than a cursory glance, however, there was a sound of persons approaching the outer door. Instinctively he slipped behind the stone screen at his elbow, next moment feeling annoyed with himself, for there might have been time to rejoin Firouz Ali. The door opened, and there entered a tall man in the uniform of a German general, with a Turkish aide-de-camp at his heels, Major Burckhardt's servant following. The latter crossed at once to the door of the bedroom, half opened it, and announced that General Eisenstein had called on important business. Major Burckhardt, still in his dressing-gown, came out hurriedly, with proper apologies for his appearance. He signed to Firouz Ali to go, and the barber was followed out by the servant, who handed him his fee, receiving a portion of it as commission, in accordance with oriental custom.

"Where is your apprentice?" he asked.

"Where is that ass-head, that worker of iniquity!" cried the barber. "By the Beard, it were fitting he should drown himself. Did you not see him pass out, rubbing his pumpkin pate?"

"He did not pass me."

"Then peradventure he slunk out at the back while you were admitting your master's high-born visitor. Truly he would shrink from showing his foolish face even to you, friend."

He spoke in a very loud tone of voice, in order to be heard both by the

doorkeeper across the courtyard, and by Burnet within the house. When the servant had closed the door, Firouz Ali stood for a moment or two debating with himself what he had better do. He was seriously perturbed. For years past he had lived on the edge of circumstance, a secret revolutionary, owing his safety solely to his quickness, resource, and address. He had never felt so helpless as in the present predicament, due to Burnet's impulsive action. Deciding that to loiter in the neighbourhood could do no good, and might do harm, he returned to his shop, convinced that he would see his benefactor's son no more.

Meanwhile Burnet, crouching back in the corner behind the screen, and feeling that he deserved all the abuse lately showered upon him by his friend, had perforce listened to the conversation between the German officers. The opening sentences, spoken in German, he did not understand. General Eisenstein had in fact begun by apologising for disturbing Major Burckhardt at what was clearly an unseasonable hour.

"As you know," he remarked, "I am myself up and about before dawn."

Burckhardt caught the implied reproach, and answered in something of a fluster.

"I have already been at work, Herr General," he said, "but my barber fell sick, and——"

"Quite so, but speak in Arabic, if you please. Major Rustum Bey does not understand German. I have come to you for information about a part of the country with which I understand you are familiar. Major Rustum Bey has had some difficulty in getting exact particulars."

Burnet pricked up his ears. From this point on the conversation was conducted in Arabic.

"The chief Halil," General Eisenstein went on, "who has hitherto shown himself friendly and proved to be of some use (although one can trust these Arabs no farther than one can see them), has come in to ask for assistance. It appears that a certain tribe with which he has been long at war (they call it war!) has crossed the Euphrates and established itself in a fastness among the swamps. The tribe is known to be disaffected towards his Ottoman Majesty: if it is not rooted out it will become a nucleus of hostile activity, attracting other rebel Arabs, and may seriously threaten our communications on the river. The situation of the fastness is described as a long march south of the *tell* of—what is the name, major?"

"The *tell* of Tukulti-Ninip, Excellenz," said the Turkish officer.

"Now, Major Burckhardt, in the first place do you know this *tell* of—ach! _____"

"Tukulti-Ninip," said Burckhardt. "Certainly: I know it well. Only a few years ago it was the scene of a brisk little action between myself and a brutal Englishman who was poaching on my ground. The Englishman had cause to repent his insolence."

"Good, Major Burckhardt. You will soon have further opportunities, no doubt, of action of a still more stirring character. Now, as to this fastness—you have a map? Yes, I see you have. Point out to me the locality of this *tell* of _____"

"Tukulti-Ninip. Here it is, Herr General." He laid a fat forefinger on the spot. "It is covered with the ruins of a temple erected by Samsi-Addu to the god Anu, and was——"

"We are discussing military matters, not antiquities, my dear major. Let us proceed. The fastness in question is described as an island in the marshes, and has ruins of some kind, giving good cover. It is approached by a causeway

nearly a thousand metres long. Do you know such a place?"

"That, too, Herr General, I know as well as I know my own native village of Obervogelgesang: better, indeed, for I once spent six months digging in the ruins you mention, and the museums of Dresden and Munich count my finds among their choicest treasures. I had the good fortune to discover a tablet commemorating the expedition of Tukulti-Ninip to the Sebbeneh-Su——"

"My good major, confine yourself to our present business, if you please. You know the place well. Then we shall not be dependent on the Arabs for our information. Where would you locate it on the map?"

Burckhardt took a pencil, and after some consideration marked the spot, saying:

"It is here, as nearly as possible. The wady, once a canal (dating from the time of Assur-Uballit) that irrigated the whole surrounding country, is now the cause of the marshes. It carries the flood water of the Euphrates over a hundred square kilometres, and is now a scourge where it was once a source of prosperity. I discovered in my researches that Pudi-ilu——"

"Enough!" cried the general, his patience giving out. He turned to the Turk. "A company of infantry with a machine-gun, assisted by Halil's horde, will no doubt suffice?"

Though in form a question, there was so little real enquiry in the remark that Major Rustum Bey hastily agreed.

"Certainly, Excellenz. It will be quite sufficient."

"Then I will arrange that you undertake the little expedition, associated with Major Burckhardt, whose peculiar local knowledge should be of much value. Shall we say a month from to-day? Halil will have to return to his tribe and make his arrangements, and procrastination is such a vice with the Arabs that

we must give him plenty of time. Tell him to be ready in a fortnight, and we may be reasonably certain that he will be ready in a month. That is all, then, Major Burckhardt. Ah! it occurs to me to remind you that this is a military expedition, not a hunt for old stones."

The visitors took their leave, Burckhardt accompanying them to the door.

CHAPTER V

SECRET SERVICE

Behind the screen, Burnet had listened to the three officers' conversation with mixed feelings. On the one hand he had gained a piece of information which might be of importance and well worth his risky visit to Bagdad. On the other, he had placed himself in a position which made it very doubtful whether he would be able to use the information, or even to escape with his life. There was short shrift for any spy.

What could he do? Burckhardt, on the departure of his visitors, rang for his servant, ordered him to prepare breakfast, and retired into his bedroom to finish his interrupted toilet. The servant set the table. In a few minutes the German would be engaged with his meal, after which he would no doubt resume work at his desk. Burnet felt that if he did not escape at once he would probably have no opportunity later. The only possible chance seemed to be to follow the servant as quietly as possible when he should leave the room to fetch his master's food. What course would then be open to him he could not guess. He was ignorant of the plan of the house. All that he knew of it was that small portion which he had passed through with Firouz Ali. The front door opened

into a small courtyard about which the house was built, with a verandah along the front of the house. Near the outer door, on a small square of carpet within the shade of the verandah, sat the doorkeeper, cross-legged. To gain freedom Burnet would have to reach the front undetected, cross or skirt the courtyard, and pass the doorkeeper. It was so far fortunate that Burckhardt had followed the oriental custom in employing a native porter, instead of being guarded by a sentry as might have been expected. There was, it was clear, a back door, giving access no doubt to one of the narrow evil-smelling lanes which Bagdad, like every oriental city, has in plenty; but to go exploring in search of that was out of the question.

The doorkeeper was the difficulty. Burnet wished that Firouz Ali had not been so ready with his explanation of his being unaccompanied by the apprentice. The man would almost certainly be suspicious if the apprentice who, he supposed, had already left the house should come out of the front door so long after his master. Even if not suspicious, he might detain Burnet for a chat on things in general, or to enquire the reason of the barber's anger, and during their talk the servant might come into the courtyard and see him. Burnet was taxing his wits for some means of eluding the doorkeeper when the servant, having set the table, went off to fetch the meal. For the moment there was but one thing to be done: to escape from the room before either the man or the master re-entered it.

No sooner had the servant gone out, leaving the door open, than Burnet slipped from his hiding-place and followed him on tiptoe into the passage. The servant had turned to the right, no doubt towards the kitchen. Burnet, waiting at the doorway until he had disappeared, hurried to the left towards the front door, paused until he had made sure that the doorkeeper on the far side of the courtyard had not seen him, then slipped under the shade of the verandah behind a tall plant growing in a pot. He had noticed, under the verandah on the opposite side, not far from the doorkeeper, a pile of packing-cases, in which he guessed that Burckhardt's antiquities had been transported. This pile would

form a securer shelter than the plant, which was in full view of any one who might enter the courtyard from the street. Stealing round the verandah close to the wall, he got behind the cases; and breathing a little more freely, waited to consider his next move.

He looked across the courtyard, and through the window of Burckhardt's room saw that officer, now in his military uniform, come from his bedroom and seat himself at the table. The servant brought in a tray, poured out his master's coffee, then disappeared. Burckhardt propped a book against the water-jug, and divided his attention between that and his breakfast. There was little to be feared from him.

The doorkeeper remained on his mat. He was not even drowsy. Burnet tried to think of something that would account for his presence, but found nothing that would not involve such lengthy explanations as he was anxious to avoid. If only something would take the doorkeeper away for a minute or so!—the wish had no sooner formed itself than an idea occurred to him. The cases and crates among which he was sheltering were very insecurely stacked. A slight push would displace one of the topmost. Its fall would probably bring the doorkeeper to the spot, not to replace it—that would not be his job, and an oriental servant is the last man in the world to do more than he must—but to satisfy his curiosity and find a subject for conversation. Burnet might then dodge behind the other cases towards the doorway, and with luck slip out.

The plan was no sooner formed than acted on. A heavy crate, which a European would have put at the base of the pile instead of at the summit, toppled over on to the paving-stones with a crash and flying splinters. But the stolid doorkeeper only turned his head for an instant. A crate had fallen: what was that to him? The noise, however, had an effect which Burnet had not reckoned on. Burckhardt, with his napkin round his neck and the coffee-pot in his hand, came to the window. His servant appeared at the door.

"What is that?" the latter called.

"Have you no eyes, foolish one?" answered the doorkeeper without rising. "The crate lies where it fell."

Here Burckhardt threw open the window and roared, with his mouth half full:

"Get up, you son of idleness, and set the crate back in its place, and take care that it is secure. Shall I speak twice?"

Burnet, keeping out of view, saw the doorkeeper rise slowly and move towards the crate. The servant returned into the house, no doubt fearing that he might be called upon to lend a hand. But Burckhardt remained at the window to see that his command was carried out. Burnet was in despair. He could dodge the doorkeeper, but it was impossible to reach the door unnoticed while Burckhardt stood looking on. But the German, seeing that the man was stirring, went back, presumably to fill his cup, or to replace the coffee-pot on the table. Burnet seized the lucky moment. He slipped along behind the pile, threw a hasty glance towards the house, and knowing that the doorkeeper's back was now turned to him, darted through the open doorway into the street.

Firouz Ali uttered a fervent "Mashallah!" when Burnet, a few minutes later, walked into his shop, then empty.

"Verily a leaden weight is lifted from my heart, Aga," he said. "It was bowed down with the fear that you were in the hands of the enemy. Tell me by what device you escaped out of the net."

Burnet explained.

"It was well done," said the barber, "and surely good fortune attends you. But give heed to the words of one who has learnt wisdom. Let two thoughts go before one action. What need to hide in the very chamber of the foe? Am I a child? Could you not trust me to bring us both safely away? Such foolishness

leads you into dangers that might be avoided: moreover, it might have brought my own head into peril, for has not a sword hung over it by a hair these many years? Nay, more: my life must end some day: such is the fate of all; but I would not that it should end before my eyes have seen the glory for which I have striven since I was a beardless youth."

"What you say is quite right, my old friend," said Burnet. "I was rash, and I am sorry for it. But after all, if I had not hidden I should not have learned what I did."

"What was that?" asked the barber eagerly.

"The Germans are joining hands with that rogue Halil to attack Rejeb son of Hussein. I have not told you yet—I have not had time—that I met Rejeb on my way here, and was able to do him a trifling service. Halil's men were even then hunting him."

"Mashallah! What you did for him was well done, for Rejeb is as a pillar in the temple of our freedom. If any harm befalls him, not only will a heavy blow be dealt against the faithful who would throw off the Turkish yoke, but the safety of your own countrymen between the rivers yonder will be put in jeopardy. There are tribes in the desert, now friendly to you, or at least wavering, which would turn to the enemy from very fear if Rejeb fell; and then your people would be harassed by constant raids, and their task, heavy enough, would be doubly hard. And I may tell you now that the dervish Hezar, when he left the city of late, set forth to learn how stand the minds of the tribes bordering the Euphrates towards you. Of him I have heard nothing: he is in the hands of Allah!"

The conversation was here interrupted by the entrance of a customer; indeed, it was not resumed until the time of the midday siesta checked the stream of customers who came to Firouz Ali for his professional attentions and almost as much for the flow of chat which he poured out. Burnet admired the

unfailing tact with which the barber suited his talk to the tastes and interests of his various patrons. He remarked, too, how cleverly his friend, knowing that his stay in Bagdad must be brief, prepared his customers for another change of assistants.

"Wallahi! Mahmoud was a hunchback," he said to one, "but he was learning his craft: whereas this poor thing, my nephew, fresh from his benighted village, will never make a barber, even though he live to the age of the patriarchs. His tongue is slow, an ill thing in barbers; moreover, he is clumsy as a camel: did he not this very morning fill the mouth of a German effendi with soap, to my everlasting shame? No, he must find other work for his unruly hands."

Burnet listened to all this with secret amusement, and laughed heartily when, in a leisure moment, Firouz Ali apologised for his uncomplimentary remarks.

"My friend, I enjoyed them," he said. "Besides, you are quite right. I am conscious that I never should make a satisfactory barber."

It was not until the end of the day that they were thoroughly at leisure to discuss the course of action which Burnet ought to follow as the result of what he had learnt. Firouz Ali decided to send a messenger to warn Rejeb of his impending danger: the same man would also try to penetrate to the British lines with a message from Burnet giving the same information. Meanwhile Burnet himself, in pursuance of the object that had brought him to Bagdad, would remain at any rate for a few days to pick up any information he could regarding the enemy's movements and plans. With this purpose it would be necessary to find opportunities of visiting different parts of the city. The barber pointed out that it was no longer easy, as in the past, to perambulate the city without exciting suspicion. The old laxity had disappeared when the Germans assumed control. Discipline was now rigorous in the army, and the civil administration had been militarised. Burnet was not likely to learn more about the Turkish arrangements than Firouz Ali could tell him. His reply to this was that he wanted not only to know the numbers and constitution of the military forces,

the extent of their supplies and so on; in addition, for the purpose he had in view, he must learn by personal observation exactly where the storehouses were situated.

During the next few days the two men spent a good many hours in going about the city and its neighbourhood. For these excursions they chose the middle part of the day, when people in authority were resting, and the shop could be left most safely. They were always prepared with a story.

While talking matters over with Firouz Ali, and combating the objections he raised on the score of prudence, Burnet had a happy thought. Why should not the barber make capital of his summons to Burckhardt? Let him announce through his agents that during the middle part of the day, when people of consideration were resting, and few or no customers came to the shop, the barber who had had the honour of attending upon Bukkad Bey would visit at their own lodgings any who were at leisure to be refreshed with a shampoo, to have their nails trimmed, or their hair improved by the application of his famous lotion.

"But what will it profit?" asked Firouz Ali, not seeing the drift of the suggestion. "If I am thus employed, how can I accompany you in your goings to and fro, and accompany you I must, for your own safety?"

"My friend, we may thus account for our presence in any part of the city at unusual hours, armed with our brushes and bottles. And as for those who would avail themselves of your services, what easier than to explain to a man in one quarter that when he wanted you, you were busy in another?"

The plan, as further explained, was one after Firouz Ali's own heart, and next morning it was put in operation. It succeeded admirably. For a day or two the barber, always accompanied by his apprentice, spent the early afternoon in practising his craft here and there in the city; then, having taken care that his new activities should be talked about, he dropped them, and led Burnet to the

quarters he was anxious to see. He was sometimes stopped and questioned, but his explanation was always ready, with his apparatus for credentials.

After each excursion Burnet, on his return to the barber's house, took from its place of concealment between the soles of one of his shoes a plan of Bagdad, placed over it a sheet of semi-transparent paper such as is commonly used in the country, and marked upon it a small dot over the spot at which some military establishment was situated. In the course of a few days this paper, which would have appeared to the uninitiated merely a blank sheet with a number of scattered and apparently meaningless dots, was in reality a compendium of important discoveries.

One day, when they were out on their usual errand, Burnet's wish to discover the exact position of certain ammunition barges that lay in the river led them to venture farther than was prudent. They were stopped and questioned by a sentry more than usually alert. Firouz Ali's glib explanations for once did not satisfy the man, perhaps eager for promotion, and they were marched to the guard-room. At the moment none but private soldiers were there, one or two of whom knew the barber, and were quick to inform their comrade that he had made a mistake. While they were discussing the point, there entered the non-commissioned officer whom Firouz Ali had been shampooing at the time of Burnet's arrival at the shop some days before.

"Ahi! What is this?" he cried, in surprise.

"Mashallah! Here is one who knows the truth of things," exclaimed the barber, before the sentry could begin. "This excellent servant of the Padishah did but his duty, beyond doubt, but you, being a man in authority, will be able to content him. Who can bear witness better than you that I am Firouz Ali, the barber of Bagdad, the maker of sweet scents and famous lotions? Is it not known far and wide that the illustrious Bukkad Bey has entrusted to me his noble chin? And was I not honoured in bedewing your own matchless locks with my sweet-savoured essences? And lo, chancing to pass this way, and remembering your witty sayings and all that you told me, I did but think to pay

my respects, and perchance to behold with my own eyes your manifold labours in the service of our father the Padishah. And now, wallahi! we are taken, myself and my poor nephew—we are taken, I say, as common malefactors. Woe is me! Shall it be said that Firouz Ali, a man of no little renown——"

"Stay," interrupted the sergeant, clearly flattered at being coupled with Bukkad Bey; "this is very true. That you are Firouz Ali the barber I know, and that you have shaved Bukkad Bey and shampooed me; but who is this? Surely it is the kelakji who came into your shop that morning. Wherefore then is he in your company, his raiment changed?"

"Wallahi! Do not I ask myself that question twenty times a day? This youth, effendi, that came to me that unlucky day—woe is me that I should call him nephew! Behold him, the poor witless loon who ran away from his village and sought fortune vainly in many crafts, and having failed in them all for want of wit, he came to me for help, and I could not believe he was my own brother's son, so much had he grown. Ah! As his stature increases, so does his mind decrease; he will never be a barber, for all my instruction; and he is fit for nothing better than to carry my pots and perchance to stir a lather. Wallahi! My poor brother!"

"By the Beard, it is a sore affliction for your family," said the sergeant, looking pityingly at Burnet, who stood with half-open mouth and as silly an expression as he could assume. Quite unsuspecting, he rated the sentry for his stupidity in arresting a citizen so well-reputed as Firouz Ali, and ordered the prisoners to be released, at the same time warning the barber against indiscretions in the future.

"Verily it is a lesson," said Firouz Ali, after profusely thanking the man. "I will offend no more. And here, effendi, is a bottle of my famous lotion—a small token of my gratitude, but in truth what can a man give better than his best?"

When they had been escorted beyond the military quarters Firouz Ali uttered a heart-felt invocation of the Prophet.

"It is time for you to go, Aga," he added earnestly. "That sentry has more wits than the ass-head who commands him. Did you not perceive his sulkiness, and the sparkle of some thought in his eye? Of a truth he was not satisfied, and he may even yet bring harm upon you."

"I am inclined to agree with you, my friend," said Burnet, "and the more readily because I doubt whether it is worth while my staying any longer. And I must keep my appointment with my countryman at the *tell*; there may be delays; I had better start at once."

"We will talk of it this night when the shop is closed. You must not go as you came: ahi! it needs that I work my wits once more for your behoof. What would I not do for the son of my protector and friend!"

CHAPTER VI

THE DERVISH HEZAR

Before Burnet laid himself down that night on his humble couch in Firouz Ali's house the plan for his departure had been thoroughly discussed. Among the barber's friends and agents was one Ibrahim, once a prosperous owner of camels, which he hired out to merchants or pilgrims. Since the war, however, all his camels but two had been commandeered by the Turks; his business was ruined; and he now employed himself in picking up camels from the remoter tribes in the Arabian desert, and selling them to the army authorities at a

miserable profit. He had adopted this occupation to cover his real business, which was to keep in touch with the revolted chiefs at Mecca and Medina and to act as a travelling link between them and Firouz Ali, the centre of the secret revolutionary movement in Bagdad.

Firouz Ali arranged that Burnet should become Ibrahim's temporary assistant. Having lost no opportunity of belittling the intelligence of his new apprentice, the barber would find it easy to explain to any one who was curious enough to enquire, that the lad had shown himself hopelessly inefficient, and gone to try his luck as a camel-driver. Burnet would accompany Ibrahim to Kerbela and Meshed Ali, and thence make the best of his way to the *tell* of Tukulti-Ninip, in good time, he hoped, for his appointment with Captain Ellingford.

Next day he did not leave the barber's house, but employed himself in writing a letter. Curiously enough, it was addressed to himself, and in Arabic; and though of no great length, its composition occupied several hours. The paper on which it was written was that thin sheet which he had several times laid over his map of Bagdad and the neighbourhood and marked with small dots, which formed a haphazard pattern like the stars in the firmament. Written Arabic, as every one knows, is a series of strokes and curves and dots, like a compacter sort of shorthand; and the reason why this simple letter was a work of long labour was that the dots already marked on the paper had to be incorporated, in the most natural way possible, with the invented message. When the letter was finished, only a very observant eye would have noticed that some of the dots were slightly heavier than the rest. No one would have suspected that only these dots were of the least importance: the letter existed for them.

It read somewhat as follows:

"To my dear son Yusuf, greeting. My heart is sore, yearning for you, my

sweet son, for a sight of your face, round as the moon, and your eyes, like raisins in a cake. I hope that you have not shed your bright blood by careless handling of your uncle's razors, and I pray that you may become rich enough to give your sister a good dower, and that you will attain as high a renown as my famous brother himself. Blessing and peace be with you. Written by the hand of the mullah for your father and mother."

"That'll do, if I'm collared," thought Burnet, as he tucked the letter into his girdle.

He then tore up the map which gave the key to this letter: there were plenty more at headquarters.

In the evening, when the shop was shut, Ibrahim the camel-driver came to the house and was introduced by Firouz Ali to his new assistant. Ibrahim had brought with him a few essential articles of clothing, and it was settled that Burnet should join him next morning at dawn.

Soon after daylight the two camel-drivers, each mounted on a rather poor specimen of the kind, rode southwards out of the city. Ibrahim had a pass, which franked them through the sentries, to whom, indeed, he was pretty well known through previous journeys in and out. Like all travellers in those desert lands he carried a rifle: Burnet, apparently unarmed, had his revolver securely tucked away.

Burnet had lived long enough in Mesopotamia to have more than a passing acquaintance with the camel, its moods and vagaries; but during the next few days he learnt more about that useful "ship of the desert" than he had known in all his previous experience. His steed tramped on hour after hour at the same steady pace, with a jolting movement that he found unpleasant and tedious. He longed for the lithe, springy, varied gait of a horse, and once ventured to express his preference to his companion. Ibrahim was up in arms at once, and

lectured him so roundly that he wished he had held his tongue.

"You speak out of your little knowledge, effendi," said this champion of the camel. "The horse, indeed, starts with his heels in the air, and will curvet and gallop and perform as many tricks as a tumbler. But how is it at the end of the day? The beast shambles and stumbles, and, ill-tempered from hunger, he will bite and fight, scatter his corn like a prodigal, and even paw it with his hoofs into the mire. But the camel—behold how patiently he marches, as well at sunset as at dawn; how gently he kneels down at his journey's end, and thankfully receives his beans, and chews the cud peacefully until the morning. He has more wits than a horse, and if he roars, it is but to say that his saddle galls him, and to plead that it may be restuffed. Better one camel than twenty horses."

There was something to be said on the other side, but Burnet had tact, an excellent thing in a travelling companion.

The sixty-mile journey to Kerbela was almost uneventful. As Burnet knew, the place was seething with disaffection towards the Turks, and he was not surprised when, a few miles from the town, a small party of rebels suddenly sprang out from behind a palm grove and commanded the travellers to dismount. The sequel caused him to realise that the movement controlled by Firouz Ali was very widespread. At a few words from Ibrahim, and the display of a small token that he carried in the folds of his turban, the hostile attitude of the rebels changed as by magic to the frankest friendliness. They readily answered Ibrahim's questions as to affairs in the town, and took a cordial farewell.

The travellers stayed in Kerbela only long enough to rest their camels, then pushed on towards their destination, Meshed Ali, fifty miles to the south. Leaving the palm gardens behind them at early morning, they were soon in the barren desert. Towards sunset, when they had almost reached Birs Nimrud,

half-way to their goal, they came upon a camping party of five men, squatting on mats and eating dates, in the shade of a small pile of ruins. Four horses were tethered close by, and Burnet saw that one of the men, a wild, dirty, long-bearded figure clad in the deerskin of a dervish, had his hands tied together with a piece of rope.

"What did I say, Aga?" remarked Ibrahim, as they came abreast of the party. "The horses are far spent; they can go no further; otherwise those men would not have paused here to rest when the town lies but a few miles beyond."

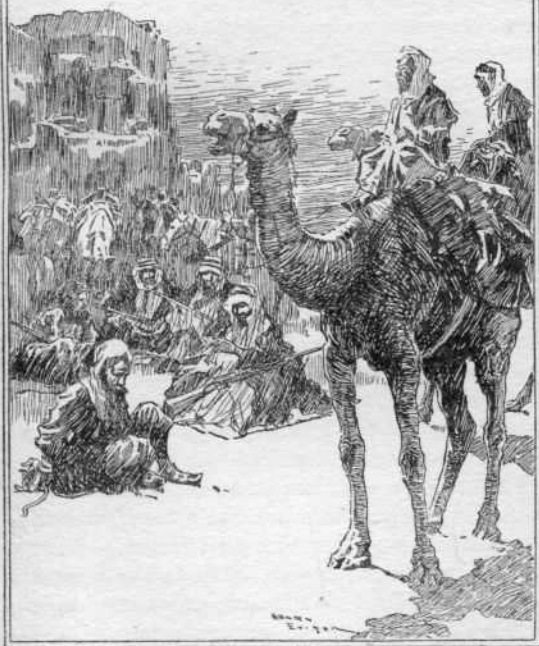
The men, each of whom had a rifle laid across his knees, looked up somewhat suspiciously at the two travellers. Ibrahim pulled up and gave them a greeting.

"I perceive you have a prisoner," he added. "Verily he has the look of a vile creature and a worker of iniquity. What is his offence, I pray you?"

"Wallahi! He is indeed an evil-doer," answered the leader; "a runaway thief, and we have ridden hard to catch him."

"He shall be beaten with stripes, and repent with mourning," said Ibrahim. "Upon you be blessing and peace."





THE PRISONER

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THE PRISONER

The camels jogged on again. As they passed, the prisoner looked up and

flashed one quick glance at Burnet, instantly lowering his eyes. Burnet involuntarily started, but recollected himself in a moment, and refrained from turning his head. Those keen grey eyes, however, were unmistakeable. The prisoner was the man who passed among the natives as the Dervish Hezar, but was known to the British headquarters staff as Alfred Sanderson, the most daring and skilful of secret service agents.

When they were out of earshot, Burnet said to his companion: "The prisoner, no thief, is a friend of Firouz Ali's. We must rescue him."

"Say you so? Firouz Ali's friends are mine, and if that man be the Dervish Hezar——"

"He is."

"Ahi! But what can we do? They are four, well armed: we are but two."

"Yet it must be done, and though they are more than we, peradventure with two there will be more wisdom and cunning than with four."

This implied compliment to his intelligence pleased Ibrahim, and as soon as they had ridden out of sight he turned aside from the beaten track, rounded a slight eminence, and causing the camels to kneel down, asked Burnet to dismount with him and talk over the problem.

"Those poor beasts," he remarked, "are jaded; they will not be fit to travel for some hours to come; therefore the men will remain where they are until the morning. Perchance in the darkness we could steal up to their camp and bring the dervish away."

"We had better return to it while there is still light in the sky," said Burnet. "It will be dark in half an hour, and we might then find it difficult to discover them. The ruins will cover us from them if we approach from the east."

"It is well said, Aga. I will give the camels a handful of beans which they will chew peacefully, and so refrain from disturbing the night with their roaring; then we will make a circuit and come to the ruins even as the sun sets."

Less than half an hour later the two men, having made their way back to the ruins, crept stealthily to the southern corner, where they could see the spot on which the five men had camped. It was growing dark, but in the slight glow from the western sky they perceived at once that the men were no longer there. There was no sign of them in what was visible of the open desert to the west; it was indeed scarcely likely that they had decided to pursue their journey on horses so patently fatigued. Ibrahim suggested in a whisper that they had withdrawn farther into the ruins to avoid observation by passengers along the direct route from Kerbela to Meshed Ali.

This was disappointing. The ruins were extensive; to explore them in the dark would be as hazardous as difficult. Their footsteps would be inaudible in the sand; but they might stumble against one of the innumerable fragments of masonry that lay scattered all about, and the Arab's ears are so quick that the slightest sound might utterly defeat their purpose. The night would be moonless; even if it had been otherwise, moonlight would have been little less dangerous than darkness, for though they could have seen their way, a flickering shadow might have betrayed them.

In whispers they discussed their safest course. Burnet agreed to remain on the outskirts of the ruins while Ibrahim searched. When the Arab started on his quest darkness had descended, and there was only a slight glimmer from the stars. It seemed hours before he returned. He explained that he had almost despaired of finding the men, and concluded that they had after all ridden away to the north, when he suddenly heard voices, and creeping towards the sound had almost stumbled upon the party, encamped in the midst of a group of broken columns hidden by a slight fold in the ground. Their horses were

tethered some little distance away, and from the appearance of things it seemed clear that the men had no intention of leaving the spot until daybreak.

During Ibrahim's absence Burnet had turned over in his mind, not merely the problem of getting the dervish away, but the further problem of successfully eluding pursuit. Tired as the horses were, they had probably had rest enough to make them more than equal to the camels in pace. Should he stampede them? It would be easy enough, but the attempt might lead to disaster, for they would almost certainly scent a stranger long before he reached them, and a startled whinny would bring the Arabs in haste upon the scene. The safer plan would be to depend on releasing the prisoner while his captors were asleep, and then on following a roundabout course through the desert.

The two men consulted in whispers and soon came to a determination. Burnet, as the more active of the two, and also as being well known to the prisoner, undertook the task of releasing him. Ibrahim meanwhile would ensconce himself at a convenient spot near at hand, and remain on the watch, ready to defend the others with his rifle if need arose.

The Arab has an almost unerring sense of locality and direction, and in spite of the darkness Ibrahim was able to lead Burnet without fault through the maze of ruins to the slight hollow where the men were encamped. Looking down upon it from his higher point a few yards away, Burnet was just able to discern, by the glimmer of the stars, five figures on the ground. Four of them were squatting; every now and then a word was spoken; the fifth lay at full stretch, a little apart from the others.

Burnet watched and listened impatiently. Surely the men would not remain thus the whole night through. What if they slept in turn, leaving one always on guard? After a while the conversation became still more spasmodic and drowsy: presently it ceased altogether, and all four men sank into a recumbent posture. Secure in their retreat far within the ruins, they had seen no need of

keeping guard.

All was now silent. Not even a snore broke the stillness. Only a slight clink came occasionally from the spot where the horses were tethered. Burnet still waited, though he knew that the Arab, like all creatures of the wild, falls asleep instantly. But he knew also that the sleep was light. The least unusual sound inaudible to a European ear, would cause these men to spring up, as wide awake and alert as a house-dog.

At last he moved, stealing along a few feet away from the rim of the hollow until he came opposite the spot where the fifth man lay. Then, after a momentary pause, he wriggled down the slope as noiselessly as a slug, breathing fast, drawing nearer only inch by inch to his friend. He touched him lightly; the prisoner started, but relapsed immediately into immobility. Feeling along the inert body, Burnet discovered that now both hands and feet were bound. With silent cuts of his knife he severed the cords, lay for a moment listening, then crawled backwards up the slope. Why was not the prisoner following him? He had gained the top before the dervish gave any sign of movement. Then, however, he began slowly to follow, and Burnet guessed that his limbs were stiff from his bonds. Watching with eager impatience, he saw the greyish figure, scarcely distinguishable from the earth, draw nearer to the top. The Arabs slept on undisturbed. And at last the dervish rose to his feet, clasped Burnet's hand, and followed him silently to the spot where Ibrahim was awaiting them. Without a word spoken they hastened with all speed to the camels. The dervish mounted behind Burnet, and within twenty minutes of his rescue all three were heading southwards. At the moment of starting they had a slight alarm. Ibrahim's camel, annoyed, no doubt, at the early disturbance of his rest, uttered a hoarse grunt. His master instantly pressed a couple of dates into his mouth, and the beast was appeased.

Safety lay in their making the best speed they could. Should any of the Arabs wake, he would almost certainly discover the absence of the prisoner,

but it would be impossible to track him in the dark. With the dawn, however, the tracks would be easily picked up, and then their horses, refreshed, would regain the start if the pursuit was carried far enough. The dervish suggested that pursuit was unlikely. His captors belonged to a tribe that was in Turkish pay, and the neighbourhood of Meshed Ali, where the revolutionaries were strong, was by no means safe for supporters of the Padishah. But Ibrahim, unwilling to run risks, struck off from the highway into a stony district with which he had become familiar in the course of his business journeys. Here, even if they were pursued, it would be difficult to track them.

"I owe you my life," said the dervish to Burnet as they rode on, "and I thank you."

"I am only too glad. You helped me out of a hobble not so long ago; I never imagined I should have a chance of doing anything in return. But surely your life was not in danger?"

"There can't be much doubt of it. I heard that that old ruffian the chief Halil had gone to Bagdad, and knowing that there was some difference of opinion among his tribesmen as to his wisdom in siding with the Turks, I took advantage of his absence to visit them, in order to learn the strength of the opposition party and to do what I could to increase it—to foment treason, in fact. Some of Halil's people suspected me: they were quite right: and they only waited the return of their chief to denounce me. He came back unexpectedly. I had warning only just in time, and decamped. I had begun to think myself safe when those four fellows rode me down. No doubt there are scores more of the tribesmen hunting me in all directions. Halil has an old grudge against me: I crossed him once before."

"Then I am doubly lucky. Halil's business in Bagdad was to arrange an attack on Rejeb's people. He is back sooner than I thought possible, and I am glad to know it, as I should not have done but for meeting you. It is one more

item in my budget of news for headquarters."

The conversation was conducted in Arabic. The identity of the dervish was known only to the headquarters staff and to Firouz Ali, and he always took particular care not to let fall the slightest hint that he was other than an Arab, even to fellow-workers in the same cause.

Ibrahim allowed his animals to finish their interrupted rest during the small hours, and the travellers started again at dawn. When they were still a mile or two distant from Meshed Ali, within sight of the glittering dome of its mosque towering high above the walls, the dervish dismounted.

"It will be better for us all if I enter the city alone," he said. "I shall not be long after you. But if we meet within the walls, let it be as strangers."

"You are a wise man, O dervish," said Ibrahim, "and I perceive that the spirit of Firouz Ali is in you. Allah will bring us all together openly in his good time."

Burnet and Ibrahim reached the city about an hour before noon, and passing through the one gate in its high brick walls, and along the crowded bazar, came to the khan or inn where Ibrahim had decided that they should part. After the Arab had attended to his beasts, he returned to the chief room, where traders, camel-drivers and others were squatting around the walls, ordered a meal, and then carried out the instructions of Firouz Ali.

"By the Beard, you are a lazy good-for-nothing," he cried in a loud tone, addressing Burnet. "What evil destiny brought you before my eyes? Why in the softness of my heart did I have pity on you, poor fool, and hire you to be my helper? Truly my heart got the better of my head, for you know no more of camels than a week-old babe. I take you all to witness," he went on, looking round the room, "that I pay this worthless loon the hire agreed on, and I bid

him go back to his paltry village and feed goats, for he is fit for nothing better. Begone, I say, and let me see your face no more."

Burnet took the few coins offered him, and assumed the shamefaced air of a servant dismissed in disgrace. The little scene had been arranged between him and Firouz Ali in order to protect Ibrahim in case he should ever have to defend himself against the charge of consorting with a spy. The public dismissal would provide the camel-driver with witnesses.

As Burnet slunk out of the room, he saw the dervish leaning against the post: he had entered while the scene was in progress. There was a twinkle in the Englishman's eyes as Burnet passed him; but neither gave the other any sign of recognition, and Burnet went his way to the gate, as a discarded servant about to return to his hill village on the Persian frontier.

He spent his money in the purchase of a waterskin and a quantity of dates sufficient for a few days' supply. Captain Ellingford was due at the *tell* in three days. Barring accidents, Burnet should have plenty of time to keep his appointment.

CHAPTER VII

A MAD RACE

Burnet was too well experienced in eastern travel to commence his journey in the heat of the day. He found a fairly quiet khan where he rested until the late afternoon, not forgetting to complain bitterly of his summary dismissal by a camel-driver whom it was impossible to please.

When at last he started, he struck across a line of low hills to the north-east, towards a wide bend in the Euphrates just below the latitude of Kut el Amara. Between the hills and the river the country was marshy and desolate, and he felt pretty secure against encounters with inquisitive wanderers. His idea was to swim the Euphrates at the northern extremity of the bend, from which the *tell* of Tukulti-Ninip was about a march distant.

Night overtook him before he reached the river, and since he did not know this part of the country well enough to proceed in darkness, he found himself obliged to seek a resting-place, and passed the night hours somewhat uneasily in a sandy hollow. At dawn he was up again, and had arrived at the edge of the marshy district when the midday heat again compelled a halt. Hitherto he had met no one; in the distance he had seen one or two bird catchers moving upon the marsh. He slept through the afternoon, and had just started again when a squadron of Turkish irregular cavalry emerged from behind a mound sparsely covered with ruins, where the troopers had probably off-saddled during the heat of the day.

Of all men these were such as he least desired to meet. The Turks were so eager to snap up recruits that no explanations or excuses, no feigning of half-wittedness, were likely to avail him if he were caught. Unluckily the country was devoid of cover until he could gain the marsh reeds nearly half a mile away; the cavalry were, when he caught sight of them, a little farther distant in the opposite direction. If he could once plunge among the reeds he had a reasonable chance of escaping, for the horses would be at a disadvantage on the boggy ground. But at a second glance he abandoned hope; the men must have seen him; they would reach the reeds first, and it was so small a patch that they could encircle it and soon beat him out. Flight was evidently useless; he must put the best face on it and trust to mother wit.

Even as he made up his mind to this, three men detached themselves from

the squadron, which appeared to be about a hundred strong, and galloped towards him. Their comrades pursued their course upstream at a walk. When the men rode up to him, one of them ordered him to follow them: he must come before their officer. He assumed as silly a look as he could, and without replying, walked on at the same sauntering gait that he had adopted as soon as he saw the soldiers.

"Now, ass-head, bestir yourself," cried the man who had addressed him. "The captain is a hasty man."

"Ahi! Ass-head I am, but my legs—are not they the legs of a man? How should they keep pace with the legs of these mules?"

"Mules! What a foolish fellow is this! Take hold of my stirrup, and run."

Burnet clutched at the horse's tail, then shrank back.

"Woe is me! Shall I have more dealings with a shaving-brush?"

"By the Beard, he has not the wits of a calf," said another of the men. "Take him up behind you, Hassan."

The trooper, a brawny Kurd, stooped, took Burnet by the middle, and hoisted him with apparent ease to the horse's crupper.

"Put your arms round me," he said, and galloped off.

On their catching up with the squadron the captain gave the order to halt, the trooper let Burnet down, and led him to his officer, explaining that he seemed to be an idiot, not knowing a horse from a mule nor a tail from a stirrup iron.

"Your name?" demanded the captain.

"Yusuf, may you live for ever," replied Burnet.

"What are you? Why are you wandering here alone?"

"Ahi! I am an ass-head; that giant there says so, and so did my master, Firouz Ali."

"The barber of Bagdad!"

"Truly he is a barber, and of Bagdad; and he has brushes and sharp knives and soap, and he pours water on the soap——"

"This must be that witless apprentice of the barber's," the captain interrupted, "of whom they tell that he filled the mouth of Bukkad Bey with soap."

"Mashallah! was it not well done?" cried Burnet, with a foolish smile. "It was like cream in a cup of raspberries."

"The boy is a fool," said the captain. "You left Firouz Ali: what are you doing here?"

"Truly I am gazing at the sun, noble effendi," said Burnet innocently, fixing his eyes on the officer's round fat face. "My father says my face is the moon, and he wants to see it." He took out the Arabic note, unfolded it, and offered it to the captain, who however pushed it away impatiently.

"Answer my question: what have you done since you left the barber?"

"Eaten and drunk and slept, and suffered many stripes at the hands of one Ibrahim, a driver of camels. It is true I am an ass-head, for he too called me so, and having brought me to the town yonder, he sent me away; and I am even now going to my home in the Beni Lam country to feed the goats. It is all I am

fit for."

The captain looked him up and down.

"He is a fool, but his limbs are sound," he said. "He is good enough for the infantry. Take him up behind you again, Hassan. We will see what they make of him in Bagdad."

The squadron moved off at an easy trot. Burnet was alarmed at the turn things had taken. He had little doubt that Firouz Ali would find some means of preventing his enlistment in the army; but the delay would prevent his meeting with Captain Ellingford at the *tell* and render it impossible for him to convey his information to headquarters, at any rate for some time to come. Meanwhile the young chief Rejeb's tribe was in danger of annihilation. However, there was no help for it. Bagdad was a long way off, and before they got there he might find a means of escaping.

As they rode along, Burnet listened to the troopers' conversation. They appeared to be a mixed lot, and spoke in a variety of dialects which he found very puzzling. But from words he made out here and there he gathered that the squadron had been on a reconnaissance down the right bank of the Euphrates. The mention of Halil's name now and again seemed to indicate that the expedition had been in some way connected with the impending attack on Rejeb. Whether it had been made in anticipation of that attack, to collect information, or whether the squadron was a part of the force detailed for the actual operations, Burnet was unable to determine. If the raid on Rejeb's people had actually occurred, his chances of finding an open route, should he succeed in crossing the Euphrates, were small indeed. The enemy would almost certainly hold the country through which he must travel, and probably in some strength. But from what he knew of the Turk it seemed unlikely that the expedition had even started yet. General Eisenstein had mentioned a month; there were still some days to spare, and not even the driving force of the

German would have the effect of keeping either Turks or Arabs up to time. The month would probably extend to five or six weeks before the organisation of the expedition was sufficiently complete to satisfy Eisenstein, who, like all the German high command, would not move until he felt assured that every possible contingency had been foreseen and provided for.

Burnet cast many a longing glance at the fine Arab ridden by the captain. It trod the sand with the high step and graceful movement of the thoroughbred, and a gallop on its back would have been a sheer joy.

The squadron continued their march for some time after sunset, intending to bivouac at a spot which they had used for the purpose on the way down. It was a mound rising slightly above the marsh which had extended along their right flank the whole of the day. When they halted, the captain gave orders that Burnet should be tied up during the night. He was allowed first to eat a meal of his own dates, washed down with tepid, musty water from the skin he carried. It was an unpleasant night. His feet were hobbled, and his hands being bound, he suffered a good deal from the depredations of mosquitoes which he was unable to brush away. The birds and animals of the marsh kept up a strident chorus. Occasionally a wild boar with his family could be heard crashing through the reeds. It was impossible to sleep except in fitful snatches, and Burnet beguiled the wearisome hours by trying to form some plan of escape. He made several attempts to release his hands, but the trooper who had tied the cords had done his work thoroughly. Until his hands were free the most ingenious scheme for eluding his captors was a mere beating of the air; and he had to confess to himself that even then the chances of getting away from so many well-mounted men were not worth reckoning.

Overcome by weariness, Burnet was at last in a deep sleep when, at the first sign of dawn, the camp was astir. He was wakened, his bonds were loosed, and he was permitted to make a frugal meal again while the troopers saddled up in preparation for starting. Burnet noticed that the squadron had

diminished in numbers, and learnt by and by that two or three parties of half a dozen men each had ridden off very early to scout in various directions.

Looking around him, he observed a wide glittering expanse some three miles or more to the east—no doubt the Euphrates shining in the morning sunlight. Rush-grown pools in the middle distance suggested that the intervening country was marshy.

Burnet's limbs were a good deal cramped by the uneasy postures he had had to adopt during the night, and he thought it well to assume a greater degree of stiffness than he actually felt. Uttering many doleful lamentations on his unhappy lot, he sat down and rocked himself to and fro until one of the troopers told him (with a scornful gibe on his lack of wit) to walk about if he wished to ease his aching. The majority of the men were squatting or lying on the ground beside their horses. The captain, in the centre of the mound some twenty yards away from Burnet, was examining the surrounding country through his field glasses. His horse was being walked up and down by his orderly, who eyed the benumbed prisoner with a certain amusement as he passed him. Burnet ignored the man and looked only at the horse, admiring the graceful high-mettled creature.

Suddenly a wild idea set his blood leaping. He rose, as if in response to the trooper's suggestion, and began to walk up and down, slowly and stiffly. Every moment he drew nearer to the short stretch on which the orderly was giving his master's horse gentle exercise. He allowed the man to pass him once, but as he returned from the end of his beat, Burnet gathered himself together, threw himself upon the Turk, and with a straight right-hander, shot out with all his strength, sent him staggering back. Half dazed as he was, the man still clutched the bridle. There was no time to loosen his grip. The plunging of the horse had already attracted the officer's attention, and Burnet was partly hidden from him by the animal's body. While the orderly was still staggering, Burnet vaulted into the saddle, and the scared animal wrenched himself from the man's relaxed grip

and dashed across the mound towards the open country.

The officer had rushed forward, and with a furious imprecation sent three bullets in quick succession after the runaway. Burnet instinctively ducked; he discovered afterwards that one of the shots had perforated his water skin. The camp was in uproar. The troopers had sprung up, and in obedience to their captain's frenzied commands leapt into their saddles. Then began the maddest gallop that the plains of Babylonia had ever seen. Burnet felt that at every stride his mount must come to grief. At the start he had clung to the horse's mane, at the same time pressing his knees into its flanks with a muscular energy of which he felt the resulting strain for several days. The reins hung loose, the stirrups danced, and it was only by sheer horsemanship that Burnet was able to retain his seat until he recovered the former, which he had feared might trip the horse up. To slip his feet into the stirrups was impossible while the mad pace was maintained.

It was some moments before he realised that his steed was carrying him towards the south-west, away from his goal. With a firm grip now on the reins he managed to edge the horse gradually to the left, and, still at the same furious gallop, made straight towards the river. Lying low on the horse's neck, he glanced round, and saw, as he had expected, that the troopers were strung out in an irregular line behind him. Some, divining his intentions, were already heading to cut him off. And now his familiarity with the Arab horse served him well. By degrees he brought the frightened animal under control, and checked its pace, realising that its panic would soon exhaust its strength. He had little fear that the trooper's heavier horses would overtake him; but there was a risk of meeting one of the scouting parties which had ridden off an hour or two before, and he might need all his mount's reserve of speed to avoid being cut off.

Having mastered the horse, he was able to give his mind to a rapid calculation of his course of action. It was of the first importance that he should

keep off the marsh, for if the animal were mired, within a few minutes he would find himself the target for fifty odd rifles. Even a convenient bed of reeds would hardly save him, for as one against fifty he would stand no chance. Before he attempted to cross the river his object must be to ride the pursuers out of sight, a difficult matter on the flat plain, which was almost devoid of cover. It was a case of trusting to the horse's stamina. Keeping therefore within touch of the edge of the marsh, he settled to a fast steady trot, every now and then looking over his shoulder for a sight of his pursuers.

For some time Burnet's resolution to spare his horse prevented him from increasing his lead appreciably. Indeed, the pursuers began to gain upon him. But he was so confident in his mount's superiority that this fact did not disturb him. Barring accidents, he could outstrip the more heavily mounted troopers at his pleasure.

Now that this plan of action was clearly outlined, he began to feel the exhilaration of the race. The horse had lost his fright, and already seemed to have entered into that mutual understanding which is established between a thoroughbred animal and a skilled rider. The air of early morning was crisp and still; there was no wind to sweep dust into his eyes, and the sand that flew up under the horse's hoofs hung in a cloud behind him.

His only anxiety was concerned with the scouting parties, and he looked more frequently ahead, and to his right, than towards the pursuers behind. There was little or no danger to be feared from the marsh on his left, but at any moment one of the detachments might appear on the plain to the south or west.

This apprehension proved to be well-founded. He presently caught sight of what appeared to be a low cloud far away to the south-west, and a few minutes later he was able to distinguish a number of specks in the midst of it. These grew rapidly larger as they approached, and he at length counted seven horsemen riding close together, and almost certainly troopers of the squadron.

He had just time, perhaps, to avoid them; but whether he struck off to the right or left he would arouse their suspicion, especially as they must already have seen the string of pursuers in his rear. They could hardly fail also to recognise their captain's horse, and would probably guess that a horse-stealer had been at work and ride to cut him off, or, what would be worse, dismount and fire. It seemed best to take the bold course: to ride straight towards them, leaving them in doubt as to the meaning of the chase until he was close upon them.

Bending low upon the horse's neck to avoid recognition as long as possible, he groped for his revolver and held on his way. As he approached the party, their actions showed that they were puzzled. They halted, gesticulated, gathered in a group to debate the matter. No doubt they thought that a fugitive would hardly ride straight into their midst. But before Burnet had ridden another hundred yards he saw that the critical moment was at hand. The men suddenly broke apart; it appeared that they had at last recognised him, for they unslung their rifles. And now for the first time Burnet made the supreme call upon his horse. The gallant beast shot forward instantly, closing in upon the group with amazing speed. With the instinct of leaderless men, the Turks, evidently disconcerted, bunched themselves together again, and lost a few precious moments in fumbling with their rifles. Before they had aligned themselves and got their weapons ready Burnet was upon them. When some twenty yards distant, a touch on the rein caused his horse to swerve slightly to the left, and the nearest Turk, dropping his rifle, drew his tulwar and aimed a sweeping cut at Burnet as he flashed by. Burnet felt the air of the stroke as it missed him by inches. Turning on his saddle, he fired his revolver, rather with the object of inspiring caution and respect than with the expectation of hitting any of the enemy. At such a headlong speed to take aim was impossible. His shot, in truth, missed. He heard four scattered cracks: the rifle bullets whistled past; but he was already many yards beyond the stationary group, and when the thunder of pursuit reached his ears, he was confident that, with a clear course now before him, he could shake off the new pursuers if his horse could

stand the pace.

When next he glanced back, one man was hard on his heels, but the rest were strung out at various intervals behind him, and the original pursuers were rapidly losing ground. There was nothing to fear except from the one man who was evidently better mounted than his comrades. He carried his rifle still unslung, and though an Arab of the desert might have found it a useful weapon even at the breakneck speed at which they were riding, it was not likely that a Turkish trooper would possess the dexterity of his wilder brother. But it was clearly necessary to dispose of this man. Burnet slightly checked his horse, and trusting it with its own course he looked back continually over his shoulder and watched the Turk foot by foot reducing the gap between them. From forty yards it became thirty—twenty—and then Burnet turned suddenly in the saddle and took a snap shot at the pursuer. It went wide. The Turk gave a shout of triumph, flourished his tulwar, and came galloping on. At fifteen yards Burnet tried another shot, and before he could see the effect of it, had to turn hastily to control the horse, whom the repeated shots had apparently disturbed. But he was conscious that the sounds of pursuit had died away, and glancing round a few moments later he saw that the Turk had reined up and was dismounting. That he was not seriously hurt was soon proved. Burnet had only just faced forward again when a bullet sang past his ear. "A good shot," he thought, and bent low to avoid a second. But no other came, and glancing back, he saw that the man's comrades had galloped past him, and were now between him and the quarry. There was no fear of further rifle practice.





THE LAST SHOT

Burnet was surprised that the troopers had not by this time relinquished the chase, for they were hopelessly outpaced, and must be losing a yard in every twenty. Probably they had unpleasant anticipations of their captain's wrath if they returned unsuccessful, and were hoping against hope that accident would give the fugitive into their hands. It was only after they had continued the pursuit for another mile or so that they at last recognised its futility. Dismounting, they tried to snipe Burnet's fast-lessening figure. In another five minutes he was beyond effective range, and with a sigh of contentment drew rein.

"Well done, old fellow," he said, patting the steaming neck of the quivering horse. "You have earned a rest."

CHAPTER VIII

ACROSS THE EUPHRATES

The chase had extended over several miles, and it appeared to Burnet that he was not far from the spot where he had been captured on the previous day, when he was considering how best to cross the Euphrates. He had lost a day; it was now doubtful whether he could reach the *tell* by the appointed time, even with the aid of the horse. Captain Ellingford could not be expected to wait long for him at such a remote and desolate place, and since it would be a long and hazardous undertaking to cross the Turkish lines except in an aeroplane the prospect was not at all cheering.

The first necessity was to give his horse rest after the long gallop. He reined up at a shallow pool, and while the animal drank he carefully scanned the

surrounding country. It was a flat and almost bare plain, a few straggling bushes here and there making a struggle for existence. The river was not in sight, and he knew that between it and him stretched miles of swamp, through which it would be difficult for one unfamiliar with the locality to find a way. It seemed that his best course would be to ride on, as soon as the horse was sufficiently rested, until he came to one of the mounds that rose slightly above the general level: this would give him a wider outlook. As he waited he reflected on the almost entire absence of signs of war. In Meshed Ali he had heard scarcely any mention of the great conflict in which more than half the world was engaged; yet on the other side of the Euphrates, comparatively few miles away, a great Turkish army under German taskmasters was holding far-flung entrenchments which not all the valour of seasoned British troops and their gallant Indian comrades had availed to pierce after months of effort. The chances that Bagdad would fall to British arms appeared small indeed.

After half an hour's rest he put his horse to a smart trot, riding southward with a slight eastward trend in order to make gradual approach to the swampy region. In some twenty minutes he espied, some distance away to the left, a mound that would give him the look-out he desired. Riding towards it, and beyond, he dismounted, retraced his steps, and leading the horse, left it at the foot of the mound, screened from the north, and cautiously made his way on foot to the summit, where he found good cover behind a pile of ruins. And then he had a shock. To the north, probably two miles away, a small party of horsemen in extended order was riding towards him. They were too far away for him to distinguish their costume, but he had no doubt that they were some of the men who had pursued him from the bivouac. He had hoped and believed that the Turks, finding that he had the heels of them, had abandoned the idea of chasing him farther; but he was now forced to conclude that a few of the better-mounted men had been sent to follow him up, trusting perhaps to accident to deliver him into their hands. The order in which they rode seemed to show that they were following his trail on the sandy soil, with precautions

against its possible disappearance in stony patches.

Burnet had no fear of their catching him if it came to another race over the plain, but he had already come so far out of his true direction that the prospect of further loss of time was annoying. He threw a hasty glance eastwards. Far off he descried the irregular line of reeds that marked the course of the Euphrates. The middle distance was almost unbroken swamp, except in one quarter, the north-east, towards that bend to which he had been proceeding when he was captured. A rapid calculation determined him to make a dash in that direction. It would mean doubling on his tracks, and if the enemy caught sight of him as he rode off at an acute angle with their own course they would certainly strike off to their left and try to intercept him before he reached the river. But he could not afford further delay. He had no fodder for the horse; for himself he had only a few dates left, and no water, for his waterskin was leaky and useless; and the farther south he went, the worse would be his chances of making a safe passage of the river.

Some distance to the south-east of the mound was an extensive area of marsh grass. Remounting, and keeping the mound between himself and the pursuers, he started in this direction, gained the shelter of the grass, which rose nearly to the horse's shoulders, and rode through it as rapidly as he could on the soft ground due eastward. He guessed that the pursuers would use the mound as he had done, as a post of observation, and when he judged that they must be approaching it, he plunged into the tallest patch of grass he could find, and dismounted. Through the grass he could still see the top of the mound, but he felt confident that neither himself nor the horse would be visible to the enemy when they arrived there. His hope was that, failing to discover him, they would continue their ride southward, leaving him to make off in the opposite direction without further danger.

Time passed. There was no sign of the Turks, and Burnet was beginning to surmise that they had either given up the chase or passed the mound when he

saw figures appear above the summit. Four horsemen halted there. Where were the others? Surely he had counted six before? The absence of two made him uneasy. Had he been seen in spite of all his caution?

The four men remained motionless on the mound for several minutes. Then there was a faint shout in the distance. Instantly the four Turks dashed down the side of the mound, and galloped towards the patch of grass in which Burnet was concealed. It was only too clear that the missing men, whose movements he had been unable to see, had sought and found his trail at the base of the mound: the hunt was up.

It was no time for further finessing. He vaulted into the saddle, and rode off at full speed, as nearly as he could judge towards the narrow stretch of dry land through the swamp which he had previously marked. He was no longer in danger of being cut off, for he was between his pursuers and the river. Would they be able to ride him down?

Disappointment awaited him. The irregular space of open ground that had seemed to him, on his distant view from the mound, dry and firm, turned out to have many soft patches which it was impossible to avoid. There was no time to pick his way: he could only plunge into the swampy places as they occurred, chancing his luck. He soon found, however, that his horse had extraordinary judgment, bred, no doubt, of former experience in the marshes. It seemed to distinguish by instinct the firm ground from the soft, and being given its head, sprang from one hard patch to another unerringly.

As Burnet drew nearer to the river, the grasses and reed-like plants of the marsh grew taller and thicker. Immense white lilies and other flowering plants showed their blossoms here and there; water-birds of all kinds, disturbed by the passage of the horse, flew out in all directions, among them a stately pelican or two, indignant at being molested in their solitary retreats. Encompassed by these dense masses of vegetation, Burnet was effectually hidden from his

pursuers, who could only follow his trail; and he felt a joyous confidence that their horses were not likely to be so clever as his own.

At last, the river came suddenly into view—or rather, the remains of an ancient embankment a few feet above the surface of the marsh, covered thick with creeping plants. A touch on the horse's flank sent the animal bounding up the embankment, and then Burnet reined up and looked back over the waving sea of grass and reeds. He was just able to descry the heads of the pursuers, at least a mile away.

Burnet looked to right and left, seeking a convenient place for crossing the river, here about two hundred yards wide. There was the risk that if he descended the embankment too hastily, he might find himself embogged in the thick mud that bordered the stream. Riding along southward, he came at length to a deep wady or channel running into the marsh, where the descent seemed fairly easy. He gave the horse a minute or two to recover breath, then rode into the river at the spot where the wady left it. The animal took the water readily enough, but showed a disinclination to go beyond its depth, until Burnet slipped from the saddle and swam along with his hand on the bridle.

He struck out obliquely, hoping to gain the spot on the opposite bank which he had marked as offering an easy landing. Progress was slow, but he was three-fourths of the way across when shouts behind apprised him that the pursuers had reached the embankment. By this time the current had carried him fully two hundred yards below the place where he had entered the water, and some little distance below his chosen landing-place. The pursuers rode along the embankment in the same direction, with the idea, no doubt, of gaining on him by shortening their swim. But the wady brought them to an unexpected check. His horse's tracks showed that it was there he had entered the river; they must either enter it at the same spot, or lose time by crossing the wady first. Two of them chose the former course, and dashed down the bank into the water. The rest dismounted and opened fire on their quarry, now within a few

yards of the further bank. The range was five or six hundred yards; the Turks were weary, Turkish irregular cavalry are at no time very good shots, and only the heads of man and horse were above water. Burnet heard the bullets singing past him on either side. The landing-place he had chosen was far to his left. There was no time to seek another convenient spot. With encouraging words to his gallant horse, he led it straight towards the bank, which looked like an impenetrable green wall. The horse found his feet, but at first refused to drive his head at the apparently solid vegetation. Burnet, still holding the bridle, scrambled first into the midst of the plants, and drew the animal slowly up after him. In another half minute both he and the horse had disappeared from the sight of the Turks on the opposite bank.

Burnet hitched the bridle to a bamboo-like stalk, and returned to the edge of the bank, where he could watch the pursuers through the dense mass of reeds. The two swimmers had already turned their horses' heads; the men on the bank were evidently debating the question of their next move. They were presently rejoined by their comrades; the discussion was continued for a little; then they all turned their backs upon the river and disappeared behind the embankment.

CHAPTER IX

FRIENDS OR FOES?

Feeling that he was now reasonably safe, Burnet led the horse through the stretch of marsh land that bordered the river until he reached a dry spot, screened by tall grasses, where he could rest and think out his course.

To begin with, he had lost a whole day. With the utmost expedition, and no accidents, he could hardly reach the *tell* at the time appointed with Captain Ellingford. Moreover, the horse, to which he owed his escape, was now an encumbrance and an embarrassment. The remainder of his journey lay over a parched and barren plain, that provided sustenance for neither man nor beast. The small stock of dates which he had purchased in Meshed Ali would suffice for himself, but not for the horse as well. True, the Arab horse was accustomed to go long distances with little or no food, but it would be two days at the best before he reached the *tell*, and two days' fast was beyond even the Arab's endurance. Further if by good luck he should meet Captain Ellingford—and that was now doubtful—what could he do with the horse then? He could not return to the British lines except by aeroplane: yet it went much against the grain to abandon the noble animal that had served him so well. If turned adrift and left to forage for himself, the horse would probably pick up a subsistence until he found a new master. A new master! In these regions that could hardly be any one than an enemy. Turkish troops were constantly on the move in the plains between the Euphrates and the Tigris. Burnet was loth to let his prize fall again into Turkish hands. The problem how to save the horse and yet not fail in his appointment with Captain Ellingford was a very hard nut to crack.

When Burnet had pondered the question for some time, a light suddenly dawned upon him. The stronghold of the young chief Rejeb, which he had heard described in the course of the interview between General Eisenstein and Major Burckhardt, was about one march distant from the *tell*, in a south-easterly direction. As nearly as he could judge, the spot where he had crossed the river was almost due south of the *tell*. In all probability, then, the stronghold was not less than fifteen nor more than twenty-five miles to the east. Could he discover the stronghold, leave the horse in Rejeb's care, and yet keep his appointment with Captain Ellingford?

There were several circumstances to take into consideration. In the first place, it was clear from what the Germans had said that the stronghold was not

easy to discover. Its locality was not well known to the authorities in Bagdad; they had had recourse to Major Burckhardt; it was certain that Rejeb had chosen a place far from the tracks of the desert travellers, and by its very nature hard of access. Then, too, the expedition organised against it might already be on foot; the stronghold might, indeed, have already fallen. To approach it might be to jump into the lion's jaws. On the other hand, General Eisenstein had anticipated delay. The month he had allowed for the organisation of the expedition was barely up, and there might be time to gain the stronghold before operations began, and, indeed, to give Rejeb warning of what was to come.

On the whole Burnet decided that it was worth attempting. If he failed to find the stronghold, he could make up for lost time by riding instead of walking to the *tell*, and the horse must then, after all, be turned adrift.

Having made up his mind, he shared a few dates with the horse, ventured to drink a little water from a pool, then mounted and set off eastward. He had expected that in proportion as he increased his distance from the river the country would grow less swampy; on the contrary, the farther he went, the worse it became. Again he found it necessary to trust largely to his horse. The necessity of making detours was annoying, because they involved loss of time. But as the animal picked its way unerringly through the marshy patches, Burnet began to realise the defensive possibilities of this water-logged region. If this was the country chosen by Rejeb's tribe as their refuge, the stronghold should give its assailants a vast amount of trouble. Unhealthy it might be; it was certainly secure.

As the day wore on, Burnet wondered whether he had decided rightly. Progress was terribly slow. The zigzag course necessitated by the nature of the ground, made it difficult even to maintain his general direction. Without a compass, without definite knowledge of the position of the stronghold, it seemed that he might wander for days in this desolate region without gaining a

single clue. At nightfall he was almost in despair. Fatigue, the reaction from the strain of the escape and the pursuit, told heavily upon his spirits, and when he sought a secluded spot where he might rest during the night, he was a prey to that heart-sickness and despondency which assails at times even the bravest.

He found a clear and fairly dry space, with a background of shrubs, which seemed to promise security for the night. Tethering his horse to a stout bush, he fastened his revolver to his wrist, and lay down, with his back to the wall of vegetation, his face to the open. Weary though he was, he intended to keep awake, but he dozed more than once, shook himself, got up and walked about, lay down again when he thought himself fully roused, only to fall at once into a profound sleep.

In the dead of night he was suddenly startled into consciousness by a shrill whinny from his horse. He was in the act of springing to his feet when a number of forms closed in upon him silently out of the darkness. Before he could use his revolver he was seized, thrown violently back upon the ground, and in spite of his struggles securely held. It was so dark that he could not count his captors; but while he lay in their grasp there was the sound of others approaching; he heard no voices; the men who held him had said nothing, and one had pressed a hand upon his mouth. Presently a light was struck: Burnet remembered as an incongruous detail in such a spot that it was a safety match; and a small lantern was lit. By its feeble light he saw himself surrounded by a score of well-armed Arabs. He tried to speak, but the pressure upon his mouth did not relax. Two of the men swiftly tied his hands; another gagged him with a strip of dirty cloth cut from his garment; then he was lifted up, his horse was released, and the whole party, preceded by the man carrying the lantern, quitted the open space and started to march through the tall grasses below.





A CAPTIVE IN BONDS

A CAPTIVE IN BONDS

The silence of his captors, their rapid yet stealthy movements, suggested the caution of men travelling in an enemy's country, or at any rate in the neighbourhood of a hostile force. They followed their leader, who held the lantern, in single file, each keeping closely in touch with the man before him. Burnet had been placed about half-way down the line, and immediately behind him came the man leading his horse.

Glancing at the sky, he knew by the position of the stars that the general direction of their march was eastward, and he wondered with a certain hopefulness whether their destination was the stronghold which he had set out to find. Their muteness had prevented him from picking up clues from conversation, and they might, for all he could tell, be a part of the force of Rejeb's enemy the chief Halil. But it seemed much more probable that they were Rejeb's men, and Burnet was vexed that their over-caution in gagging him prevented him from explaining that he was a friend of their chief.

The march continued without pause through the rest of the night. The leader made so many turns in seeking practicable paths through the swamp that the distance covered must have been three times the distance as the crow flies. Burnet, tired when he started, was ready to drop with fatigue; but he was resolved to "stick it out," and to show no sign of his condition. It was not until the darkness began to break that the embargo of silence was lifted. The leader appeared to consult with some of the men at the head of the line. Their tones were so low that Burnet could not hear what was said, and after a few minutes they again fell silent. When, however, it was quite light they halted. Two or three of the men went ahead in different directions, evidently to scout, and when they returned after a brief interval, the leader gave a grunt of satisfaction,

and the whole party, at his signal, opened their wallets and prepared to take a meal. At another signal the man who had marched behind Burnet removed the gag, and placed him before the leader.

This man, a swarthy hook-nosed Arab of about thirty-five years, looked keenly at his prisoner.

"That is a fine horse," were his first words. "Where did you steal it?"

Burnet could not help smiling. The man had shrewdly hit the mark. What should he reply? He thought it best for the present to temporise.

"Truly he that borrows meaning not to pay back is a thief," he said: "yet it is not theft if it is done openly."

"Wallah!" grunted the man. "What is your name, whence do you come, and on what errand?"

These questions came after a slight pause, during which Burnet had thought rapidly. His captors must have recognised the military trappings of the horse; they must know that it had belonged to some one in the Turkish service, and their suspicion that he had stolen it, together with the absence of any note of indignation in the leader's question, seemed to argue that they were at any rate no great friends of the Turk, and to confirm his surmise that they were Rejeb's men. He resolved on a bold stroke.

"Is it for servants to know their master's business?" he said. "My errand shall be told to your chief. Send word to Rejeb your master that Yusuf the boatman would have speech with him."

He had spoken in loud tones so that all might hear, and the start of surprise which he noticed in a rapid glance around the company at the name Rejeb convinced him that he was right.

"We have heard of Yusuf the boatman," said the leader, with a marked change of tone. "Are you indeed the man who saved Rejeb out of the hand of Halil's creatures?—the man whom our chief bade us hold in honour?"

"I am he. And that there be no delay, send a man upon this horse to your chief, telling him that Yusuf the boatman is here."

The leader ordered one of his men to ride off with the message, and the rest to resume their march.

"May not my hands now be unbound?" Burnet asked, as he set off with the rest.

"Nay, that is for our chief to order," replied the man. "What if you are some paltry horse-thief that has taken the name of Yusuf the boatman with some evil design? Your dress is rather that of a camel-driver than of a boatman."

"Truly your chief has faithful servants. So be it, then, until his eyes fall upon me."

Something less than an hour later, a small party of horsemen was seen in the distance, approaching at speed. One of them had a led horse. In a few minutes Rejeb rode up at the head of his men.

"Peace be with you!" he cried, springing from his horse, and coming towards Burnet with an eager light in his eyes. "This is a day of rejoicing. But what is this? Your hands are bound!"

"Your servant here kept me faithfully bound until assured that I am what I said I was."

"Mashallah! Loose him at once," he cried to the man. "Know that this is the

brother of whom I told you, saying that he had saved my life, and that I and my people are bounden to him for ever. And now, my brother, mount this horse that I have brought for you: that horse the messenger rode was weary and famished and is being well cared for."

He put no questions to Burnet, treating him as a guest who had been expected. The horsemen rode off, Rejeb commanding the unmounted party to follow as rapidly as they could. During the ride there was little conversation between Rejeb and Burnet, though the latter guessed from the young chief's manner that he either had important news to give, or expected to hear something of importance.

After about half an hour's easy trot they came in sight of extensive ruins on a mound surrounded by swamp, and as they drew nearer to them, Burnet wondered how the stronghold, if this it was, could be approached, for it appeared to be completely encircled by wide expanses of water, broken here and there by areas of mud or reeds. Presently, however, they came to a broad wady that must in ancient times have been one of the major irrigation works of the district. Here the party fell into single file, and Rejeb, apologising for riding in front of his guest, led the way along the narrow embankment of the channel. At intervals the embankment was intersected by smaller wadys: these the horsemen waded through.

When they at length arrived opposite the mound, Rejeb turned abruptly to the right and pushed through a clump of reeds on to a narrow stone causeway, fringed on both sides with tall rushes which completely hid it from view. It led directly to the mound, almost half a mile ahead in a straight line. Burnet learnt, later on, that the causeway was believed to date from the Babylonian age; it was supposed to have been built, not for the passage of the swamp—for in those days the surrounding country was probably dry land, carefully irrigated from the wadys—but as a means of access to the temple which then crowned the mound, in times of flood due to abnormal rainfall. Centuries of neglect had

turned the land once well drained into permanent swamp, but the solid masonry of the causeway had withstood the ravages of time, though when Rejeb's people first discovered it it had been much overgrown with rampant vegetation. They had at once perceived the advantages of the mound as a natural fortress and of the causeway as the only means of access. They cleared away the overgrowth except at the edges, where the vegetation that was allowed to remain made the causeway a sort of secret lane.

On riding up the mound, Burnet saw that the ruins were even more extensive than they had appeared at a distance. They covered a space nearly half a mile long and a third of a mile wide. He conjectured that the place had been the site of a temple and the dwellings of a community of priests. The lower part of what had once been a large tower was in a fair state of preservation, and dominated the rest of the ruins. It was here that Rejeb and his family were lodged; for, young as he was, he had already a wife and children. No other buildings had been habitable when the mound was chosen as a harbour of refuge; but the young men of the tribe had made for themselves fairly serviceable shelters out of the fragments of masonry with which the site abounded.

These details were explained by Rejeb as he led the way to his tower. He explained also that only part of his tribe had found refuge here. The rest were dispersed. Many of them, especially the old men, women, and children, had been received by friendly tribes in the southern desert. With the exception of Rejeb's own family, the occupants of the *tell* were nearly all fighting men. They had with them all their most valuable horses, and were armed with rifles of various patterns. Their great difficulty was the supply of food and fodder. They had brought with them a considerable stock of dates, meal, and dried goat's flesh, which they kept in underground cellars excavated for the purpose; and this they supplemented by periodical forays upon the plantations and flocks of the weaker tribes of the marshes. But it was becoming increasingly difficult to keep up the supply, especially of fodder for the horses. A great part of the

surplus produce of the neighbouring tribes was sold to the Turkish army, and the sympathies of these people was naturally on the side of their customers. They would just as readily sell food to the British, but the British were still barred by the entrenchments at Kut el Amara. The smaller communities of Arabs, moreover, were dominated by the large and powerful tribe of Halil; and Rejeb's people, obliged to retreat into their fastness, were not in a position to exchange and barter commodities. Their only means of supplying themselves was to swoop suddenly, most often by night, upon the settlements of their less warlike neighbours, and of late they had only too often returned from these forays unsuccessful.

It was not until Rejeb had conducted Burnet to his tower that the important matters each had at heart were entered upon. In a bare stone room, as comfortless as a hermit's cell, the two young men, seated on blocks of stone, exchanged confidences.

"You know me as Yusuf the boatman," Burnet began. "I owe it to you to tell you that I am really an Englishman—the son of Burnet Aga of whom you may have heard."

The Arab gave no sign of surprise.

"Did not my heart tell me you were not as you seemed?" he said.

"I would tell you all my adventures but that I have little time to spare," Burnet went on. "I promised to join a British officer to-day at the *tell* where you and I met. Let it suffice that I have been to Bagdad on a secret errand, that I fell into the hands of Turks as I came to seek you, and escaped on the horse of their officer. The rest of my story must be told at leisure on some future day. Now, my friend, Firouz Ali, the barber of Bagdad, sent a messenger to inform you that the Turks have joined hands with Halil to root out you and your tribe. Did the man reach you?"

"He came but a few days ago, and departed immediately to carry his tidings to your general below Kut, for it is a matter that concerns your army weightily. The talk of the country is that Kut is a locked door which your countrymen will never open. Yet there must be some among the Turks who fear that the lock will one day be burst: if it were not so, why should they help Halil to destroy a small tribe like mine? Is it not because they know that my people hate the Turks, and will lend assistance to all who are the Turk's enemies? When the barriers at Kut are burst, and your army pours through the open doorway to attack Bagdad, my people will help to protect them on the side of the Euphrates. This the Turks well know, and therefore it is that they go about to destroy me, as it were to pluck a thorn from a foot. I bade the messenger tell these things to your general, but I cannot hope that he will send me help, for he is a great way off, and moreover he will not move a part of his army so far from his main body. There is no help for me until Kut has fallen. Wallahi! I must

guard my own skin. In my father's days his tribe withstood more than once the power of the pashas of Bagdad; they will do so again, though in truth the odds are heavy against them now, when the Germans have furnished the Turks with new and terrible engines of war such as my father never knew. But we will make a stout defence in this our stronghold, and Allah is merciful to those who fight in a good cause."

Burnet admired the young chief's courage, though he doubted whether, even in a position so strong by nature, all the valour of the Arabs would prevail against the superior arms of the enemy. Rejeb informed him that the parties of scouts whom he sent out daily had as yet learnt nothing of the expedition, and his great hope was that the British would have broken through at Kut before the menace became pressing.

It was necessary that Burnet should depart betimes if he was to reach his rendezvous with Captain Ellingford while daylight lasted. After consultation with Rejeb it was arranged that he should ride out under the escort of a few picked mounted men, who would conduct him by the shortest route to the *tell*. They would not actually approach the *tell*, lest the sight of Arabs near the spot should deter Captain Ellingford from alighting. Having brought Burnet within two or three miles of it, they would return, taking his horse with them, and leaving him to perform the remainder of the journey on foot. They would furnish him with food and water enough for two or three days. If by ill luck the captain should not keep the appointment, Burnet would return on foot to Rejeb's stronghold, and endeavour to reach the British lines by a long detour.

Rejeb summoned six of his men, explained that they were to serve Burnet as they would serve himself, and gave them the orders that had been agreed upon. A little more than an hour after his arrival at the stronghold Burnet quitted it, riding the Turk's horse, and accompanied by the six Arabs, on mounts little inferior to his own.

CHAPTER X

THE TRYST

It was nearly noon when Burnet and his escort reached the spot, between two and three miles from the *tell*, where they were to part company. Autumn was merging into winter, and the midday heat was not so great as to necessitate a long halt. Burnet took leave of the Arabs, confided his horse to their care, and went alone on foot across the plain. The route chosen for him by his guides was not direct, and the journey took him twice as long as it would have done had he followed his own judgment; but it was safe; he met no one; and he arrived at the *tell* a little after two o'clock.

There was no sign of Captain Ellingford. Burnet went down to the underground chamber, exchanged his Arab dress for his own uniform, then returned to his former look-out post on the mound, field-glasses in hand. It was a case for the cultivation of oriental patience. Two or three hours passed. He had frequently scanned the horizon, without catching a glimpse either of the expected aeroplane or of figures on the plain. At last, however, almost at the same moment, he noticed, away to the north-west, a dust cloud moving on the ground, which speedily resolved itself into a strong body of horsemen, and some distance to the east of them a speck in the sky which grew larger moment by moment and was undoubtedly an aeroplane, flying at a height of about two thousand feet. Burnet had just focussed it through his field-glasses when it dropped swiftly earthwards, and vanished from his sight. He had not had time to distinguish its make; but it was unlikely that an enemy machine was flying in this direction on the very day when Captain Ellingford had promised to return

to the *tell*. On the other hand, if the machine was piloted by the captain, why had he alighted so far from his destination? Was he the victim suddenly of the airman's chief foe, engine trouble?

Burnet turned his glasses towards the body of horsemen. They had changed their course, and were now galloping eastward, in the direction in which the aeroplane had come down. Smitten with misgiving, Burnet slipped the glasses back into their case, hurried down the slope, and set off at his best pace towards the spot where he feared his friend was in peril. It was hard going. When he had left the sandy neighbourhood of the *tell*, he had to skirt swamps, cross wadys, and sometimes to force his way through thick masses of reeds. To make matters worse, his view was circumscribed by the rushes and tall grass, so that he could only gauge his general direction by the sun.

After half an hour's exhausting progress he began to wonder whether he had not overshot the mark. He had seen no sign of the horsemen, nor of the aeroplane, which must stand higher than they. In this trackless and desolate region he might wander as in a maze. But just when the difficulties of the situation were weighing his spirits down to the point of despair, he was suddenly startled by the rattle of a machine-gun not far ahead, the crackle of musketry, and loud cries.

At this moment he was on the edge of a reedy swamp, like those which he had skirted more than once since he left the *tell*. He felt that it was no time for caution, and plunged into the yielding surface, sinking in first up to his ankles, and soon finding himself in deep water where it was necessary to swim. Wading toilsomely through the slime beyond, he scrambled ashore, coated with mud and green scum, and dashed through the reeds, guided always by the continuous sounds of conflict. A quarter-mile of stumbling, wading, dragging his mud-caked boots brought him to the edge of a belt of rushes that separated the morass from a broad clear space beyond, and as he plunged through the tall flags he dreaded what he might see on the other side.

By this time the firing had ceased. When he parted the screen of rushes and peered through he saw the aeroplane not far from the centre of the open space. Near it Captain Ellingford lay on the ground, guarded by two Turkish troopers. Forty or fifty other Turks were intently examining the machine. A little beyond it were several prone forms, and farther away the horses of the troop were bunched together in the charge of half a dozen men.

The Turks were too much occupied and interested to observe the face peering at them through the rushes. After a rapid glance that took in all the details of the scene Burnet stepped silently back under cover. There came to his ears the sounds of an animated conversation between the officer in command and his subordinates. He could not understand what they said, but guessed that they were discussing in perplexity the question what to do with their prize. Presently the officer gave a series of sharp orders, and parting the rushes to make for himself a peep-hole, Burnet saw the greater number of the men cross the space and mount their horses. A few of them then rode off in different directions, no doubt to act as vedettes and give warning if an enemy approached. The remainder lined up and awaited further orders.

Meanwhile the officer resumed his conversation with the men he had retained. It was clear from their puzzled looks that they could come to no conclusion about the disposal of the aeroplane. Burnet guessed that they were unwilling to destroy a machine which would be useful to their own army; but the problem how to convey it to their lines, probably a good many miles away, over country that was one long succession of swamps, was evidently beyond them.

After a time, however, it appeared that light had dawned. Burnet heard the word *wady* several times repeated, and though his ignorance of Turkish prevented him from understanding in what connection it was used, it gave him a clue to their next step. The officer sent one of the men to convey an order to

the mounted group. A dozen of the troopers rode away westward, in the direction of the Euphrates. The rest dismounted again. While some of them brought picketing ropes and attached them to the aeroplane, others began to beat down the rushes that edged the northern boundary of the open space. Then two of the horses were yoked to the ropes, and dragged the machine slowly towards the track which the troopers were hastily making. Burnet came to the conclusion that they intended to draw the aeroplane to a wady somewhere to the north, float it there, perhaps on an extemporised raft, and so convey it to the river.

As soon as the aeroplane began to move, the officer gave an order to the two men standing sentry over Captain Ellingford, and then Burnet saw for the first time that his friend was wounded. The Turks helped him to his feet, with a care that showed a certain chivalrousness, and supported between them he limped after his machine.

Burnet felt utterly helpless. Alone against forty or fifty men, he could do nothing, either to rescue his friend or to save the aeroplane. True, night was approaching: the Turks could not complete their preparations for floating the machine that day; he might follow them up on the chance of finding an opportunity in the darkness of getting the captain away, if not of destroying the engine. But on second thoughts he recognised the almost certain futility of such a course. Ellingford was wounded, probably unable either to endure the fatigue of walking or to sit a horse. It was scarcely likely that circumstances would again favour such audacious but hazardous schemes as had already twice won success. Burnet felt that an attempt to make off with a couple of horses would be to strain good fortune too heavily. Yet it went utterly against the grain to allow a British officer to remain a prisoner with the Turks, or a British aeroplane to take place in a Turkish flight.

One resource remained, but Burnet's heart sank as he thought of it. Rejeb might help him, but Rejeb was twenty odd miles away. Was it possible, tired as

he was, to tramp all those weary miles back to the stronghold, with only an hour's daylight left, and after that no guide but the stars? How he wished that he had retained his mounted escort until he had actually met Captain Ellingford! But regrets were vain. The attempt must be made, and without loss of time, for he had to reckon with the chances of going astray, consequent delay, arriving at the stronghold too late for Rejeb to render any effective assistance, the possibility that troopers had already been despatched northward to acquaint the Turkish authorities with the capture of the aeroplane, and that by the morning the small body of cavalry would have been augmented.

"Carry on!" Burnet said to himself. "There's nothing else for it. Carry on!"

He scraped some of the mire from his clothes, wrung out the water, and set off while daylight lasted to find a way around the swamp: to swim again through that foul expanse was more than he could face. Keeping a wary look-out for the troopers who had been sent scouting, he worked his way back to the drier ground and regained the *tell* as the sun was sinking below the horizon. There he stayed just long enough to swallow a little food; then he started on his lonely march.

The next five hours, when he tried to remember them later, were almost a blank to him. It seemed to him that he had trodden as in a dream the plain over which he had ridden earlier in the day. He must have kept his course by the stars, though he had no recollection of calculating from their positions. Settling into a steady pace, he tramped on and on, over sand and swamp, scarcely conscious of his movements, but feeling vaguely that he was racing against time. If he had paused to think, he might well have yielded to despair, for he had travelled the route but once, and the odds were all against his keeping a straight course in the starlight, and discovering the causeway by which alone he could reach Rejeb's stronghold. A cold wind swept over the plain, but he gave no thought to its possible effect, striking through his damp clothes. He was deaf to the sounds of animals and birds in the marshes, heedless of possible pitfalls in

the way; and thought only of Captain Ellingford a prisoner behind him, and of Rejeb somewhere ahead, on whom all his hopes rested.

It is doubtful whether he would have reached his goal had not Fortune bestowed her favour upon the brave. He was several miles westward of the stronghold, on a course that would have brought him to the Euphrates, when, in crossing a stretch of open country, he saw a line of horsemen pass a little ahead of him, riding slowly from right to left. The sight roused him. Rejeb's men were accustomed to go forth on their forays by night: was this a foraging party from the stronghold, or a hostile band? Apparently the men had not seen him, for they neither interrupted their march nor broke their line. They were proceeding at a walking pace, as if heavily laden: he could follow them, and join them if he could assure himself that they were friends.

Changing his course, he struck off to the left, keeping the horsemen in sight, and gradually drawing closer to them. He could now see that every horse had a large bundle on each side of its rider, and he had no longer any doubt that, in this neighbourhood and at this hour, the men were of Rejeb's tribe, returning home from a successful foray. Just as he had come to this conclusion, the horsemen quickened their pace, and fearful of losing them, he almost unconsciously uttered a cry. Instantly the men sprang from their saddles, formed up their horses in a crescent-shaped line, and took post behind them, resting their rifles on the animal's backs. Burnet called to them again, staggered towards them, and fell upon his face.

Five minutes later he was perched on the saddle behind the leading man, clasping him tightly, though half asleep. And he awoke to full consciousness only when he was lifted down and carried into Rejeb's tower.

"What harm has befallen you?" cried the young chief.

"None has befallen me, but the British officer who was to meet me is in the

hands of the Turks. His aeroplane fell; Turkish cavalry surrounded him; he fought and was wounded. The Turks are conveying him and the aeroplane to the Euphrates. I come to seek your help."

"It is yours, even to the last of my people. And you have come alone, on foot, and in the night! Surely Allah must have directed your steps."

"Time is precious," said Burnet. "What can you do?"

"Tell me where this mischance befell your friend."

"A little beyond the *tell* The Turks spoke of a wady running into the river
_____"

"Well I know it. How many are these Turks?"

"Forty or fifty."

"Mashallah! They are delivered into our hands. I will take fifty of my best men, and we will fall upon these Turks before they come to the river. Doubt not that we will save your friend and also his machine, though that we cannot carry away: we can but destroy it."

"Will you not take a larger force?"

"What need? Shall it be told that an Arab of Rejeb's tribe is not equal to a dog of a Turk? I will go now and choose my best warriors and most skilful riders. You are very weary. When you have eaten, a couch shall be laid for you, and before you awake from sleep we shall have accomplished our work and returned."

"But I must go with you."

"Ahi! were it not better to take repose and refresh yourself for what the

morrow may bring forth?"

"Believe me, I could not rest. I must join your party."

"So be it. But there is yet time for rest. It is scarcely the middle of the night. The journey that has taken you since sunset on foot will take us but half the time. If we start in the third watch we shall still come upon the Turks some while before daylight. Sleep, then; I will awake you at the seasonable hour, and your horse, who has been well tended, will carry you nobly."

Burnet needed no further persuasion. He was, in fact, dead beat, and fell asleep before the food which Rejeb ordered to be prepared for him was brought. Rejeb had him carried to his own couch, laid rugs over him with his own hands, and placed the food by his side, in readiness for his awakening.

CHAPTER XI

THE TRAP

A little more than two hours later, when Burnet, refreshed by his brief sleep, but acknowledging inwardly that he was still very weary, issued from Rejeb's tower to the clear space outside, the light of a single shaded torch fell on a brave array. If Rejeb was like Saladin of old in his chivalrous determination to meet his foe on equal terms, he also had not a little of that famous warrior's practical good sense. The young chief was content to lead forth no more than fifty men, but he had taken care that those fifty were his best. All in the vigour of early manhood, lean, straight, stalwart, they had been selected by Rejeb himself, not without pangs of jealousy and disappointment among the rest of the

tribesmen. Ranged in line, they sat immovable on magnificent horses, holding their rifles slantwise across their saddles.

There was a glow of conscious pride on Rejeb's handsome face as he led Burnet towards the spot, a few feet in advance of the line, where their horses awaited them. They mounted.

"I would have your counsel, brother," said Rejeb courteously, but in a tone that implied a sense of perfect equality. "The wady of which the Turks spoke bends north-westward to the river. At half a march's distance from the river the wady runs through ruins, neither so widespread nor so well preserved as those here around us." (At this Burnet felt slightly amused, for with the exception of the stump of tower the stronghold could not boast of four upright walls.) "These ruins the Turks must pass on their way; shall we not then ride directly thither, and there lie in wait?"

"You flatter me by asking my counsel—you who know the country, whereas I am a stranger," said Burnet, adopting the chief's manner of formal courtesy. "What is good in your eyes is good also in mine."

"What you say is the truth: I know the country. I know that the Turks have an outpost on the river northward of the place where the wady joins it; southward they have none, their forces being encamped here and there on the banks of the Tigris. If then we leave the *tell* on our right, and ride straight as a bird flies to the ruins I spoke of, not only shall we avoid any meeting with the enemy, but we shall gain our post of ambush long before they arrive there, since it will be a work of no light labour to drag the aeroplane along the uneven embankment of the wady."

"Might they not construct a raft on which to convey it on the stream itself?"

"Where in the swamps would they find wood? There is no timber nearer than the outpost of which I spoke, where kelaks laden with palms sometimes

lie in the river. It is true, they may have sent men to bring one of these kelaks to the wady, but the kelakjis are too fearful of shoals to come down the river by night, and we shall arrive at our ambush long before the dawn."

"It shall be done as seems good to you," said Burnet. "Who am I that I should offer counsel?"

He saw, in fact, that Rejeb had consulted him out of politeness merely, and felt great confidence in this plan that had evidently been well thought out.

Thereupon Rejeb gave an order; the Arabs tightened their reins; and Rejeb rode towards the head of the causeway, with Burnet immediately behind, the rest following in single file.

Keeping well to westward of the *tell* the party rode at a steady trot over the plain. Long experiences in night forays enabled them to avoid the difficulties and dangers of the swamps, even though they had no light but the star-shine; and the man whom Rejeb sent to the front as guide when they had left the immediate neighbourhood of the stronghold could not have led them more confidently in broad daylight. Burnet thought privately that a British commander would have detailed an advance guard and flanking parties to give warning of possible enemies; but these precautions seemed unnecessary to Rejeb until three-fourths of the journey was accomplished. Even then he contented himself with sending two men ahead and two more to the right; from the left he anticipated no danger. The party, indeed, arrived at the ruins, of which Rejeb had spoken, without incident. Burnet's wrist watch had stopped, no doubt through immersion in the swamp; but Rejeb without hesitation, after a glance at the sky, declared that there were still two hours till dawn, and ordered his men to off saddle, to hobble the horses among the rampant vegetation bordering the ruins, and to post themselves as best they could on the broken ground until daybreak.

Burnet, however, was not content to wait thus in complete ignorance of the enemy's position and movements. During the ten hours which had passed since he had last seen them, anything might have happened. Some of the troopers who had ridden away from the spot where the aeroplane lay might have been despatched to the Turkish outpost twenty or thirty miles up the Euphrates, and an enterprising officer there might have taken instant measures to retrieve so valuable a capture as an aeroplane. He put this point to Rejeb, who had so low an opinion of the Turk's initiative and intelligence that he scouted the suggestion. It was only when Burnet hinted that there might possibly be a German at the outpost that the chief wavered, and ultimately agreed that Burnet with two men should ride round the swamp southward of the wady to the spot where the aeroplane had come down, in order to follow its track at the first glimmer of dawn, and ascertain beyond doubt what progress the enemy had made, what their present position was, and what were their probable intentions.

The two Arabs, having had the locality described to them, were able to lead Burnet by a much easier route than that which he had followed with so much toil and discomfort on the previous day. Approaching the open space with great caution in the dawning light they found it vacant: only the wheel tracks of the aeroplane and footprints in the soft earth remained as evidence of yesterday's events. It was easy to follow the course of the aeroplane, and the three men rode cautiously forward, Burnet in the centre, an Arab at a little distance on either side.

They had ridden for nearly an hour at a slow walking pace before they had any sign of the enemy. Then one of the Arabs halted, snuffed the air for a moment, and riding up to Burnet, said:

"There is fire, Aga."

Dismounting, they left their horses concealed among the tall grass, and stole

forward on foot a few yards south of the wheel tracks, taking advantage of the cover provided by the rank vegetation. Burnet soon detected the acrid smell of smoke, and in about ten minutes caught sight of the heads of horses just projecting above the swaying top of a belt of reeds. He heard also the dull murmur of voices.

"It is well that I go alone and spy out the land, Aga," said the man who had first smelt the smoke. "I will go and come to you here again."

He disappeared through the reeds in a southerly direction. It was nearly half an hour before he returned, with the news that the enemy had bivouacked on dry ground near the bank of a small stream—not the wady, but probably a tributary of it. They had just finished their morning meal: he had seen them stamp out the embers of their camp fire, yoke two horses to the aeroplane, drag it across the shallow channel, and set off northwards. They were riding in loose formation, having evidently no apprehension of meeting an enemy in this region, remote from the military operations on the Tigris some fifty miles to the east, and destitute of settled inhabitants. There was no doubt that their intention was to convey the aeroplane to the wady, which had an embankment wide enough to allow the passage of the machine.

Burnet could only conclude that in default of any means of transport they would follow the course of the wady until they reached the river. Their progress must necessarily be slow, and there was plenty of time to ride back to Rejeb by a circuitous route and lay plans for a successful ambushade.

The chief's eyes gleamed when Burnet, rejoining him an hour or two later, told him the result of the reconnaissance. It seemed that the enemy must fall an easy prey. The position was admirably suited to an ambush. The ruins extended some hundreds of yards on each bank of the wady. They were fringed on the south by a dense encircling belt of reeds. In this belt, at its south-western corner, Rejeb posted the greater part of his force, mounted, the reeds

being tall enough to conceal them. The remainder he ordered to dismount and place themselves under cover at the northern extremity of the ruins, at intervals of a few yards, so that they could command the southern bank of the wady with their fire. His plan was to throw the enemy into disorder by rifle fire from the north, then to hurl himself upon them with the mounted men from the south and complete their rout.

These dispositions had only just been made when a new element entered into the problem. Rejeb, sitting his horse beside Burnet in the belt of reeds, suddenly turned his head sharply to the left.

"What is that sound, brother?" he said. Burnet listened intently, but it was the space of a minute before his ears caught a faint throbbing murmur in the direction towards which Rejeb had turned. He recognised it instantly as the purring of a petrol-driven engine, and scanned the sky, half expecting to see a British aeroplane: perhaps a pilot had come to look for Ellingford, whose return had been expected in the lines below Kut on the previous evening. But the sky was one speckless blue, and though the sound of the engine grew louder moment by moment, there was nothing to be seen.

Presently Rejeb exclaimed:

"I hear horses!"

A few moments later Burnet also detected another sound mingling with the drone—the unmistakable thud of hoofs. The explanation flashed upon him. The troopers who had ridden from the scene of the previous day's incident had been despatched to the Turkish outpost of which Rejeb had told him, and were now returning, accompanied by a motor launch on the wady, no doubt sent to transport the aeroplane by water.

He imparted his conclusion to Rejeb.

"Wallahi!" exclaimed the chief. "An evil spirit is striving against us."

One thought had flashed upon the young men at the same moment. They might rout the Turks, but lose the aeroplane. The enemy would no doubt place on the deck of the launch not only the machine, but their prisoner, and the Arabs could not fire on the crew without the risk of hitting the Englishman. It was possible, of course, to hold up the launch and prevent it from passing up the wady, but the sound of rifle shots could not fail to be heard by the Turks conveying the aeroplane, and the alarm would ruin the chances of a successful ambushade.

While Rejeb and Burnet were discussing the matter in low tones, they peered out through the reeds in the direction of the rapidly approaching sounds. Soon they caught sight of six horsemen riding in couples along the bank of the wady, and as they drew abreast, the launch became visible beneath their horses' bellies. One of the horsemen was an officer, whom no doubt the news brought him at the outpost had induced to ride back with the messengers and see for himself the captured aeroplane.

Launch and horsemen passed out of sight. During the few moments' pause in the conversation while the enemy went by, an idea had occurred to Burnet. It was probable that the aeroplane had barely arrived at the bank of the wady, and, judging by the direction of its captors' march, at a point at least five or six miles from the ruins. The launch was keeping pace with the horsemen on the bank; it might reach the aeroplane in something under an hour. Further time would be occupied in explanation; no doubt the officer from the outpost would be curious enough to examine the machine; then its safe bestowal on the deck of the launch would be a long job. Probably two or three hours would elapse before the return journey commenced, and Burnet had conceived a plan for utilising those hours.

He mentioned it to Rejeb, who received it with a torrent of joyous

ejaculations. There was no time to be lost. The chief told off a man to go on foot half a mile along the bank of the wady, to give warning of the enemy's approach. The course of the channel was almost perfectly straight, and horsemen riding along the embankment could be seen from a great distance. Then he selected twenty men, and placed them at Burnet's orders. Burnet took them down to the brink of the wady, chose a spot favourable to his design about half-way through the ruins, and instructed the men to build a dam with the material that lay close to their hands. The channel was shallow, and only about forty feet wide. The men formed two queues, and masses of brick and stone were passed from hand to hand and dumped in the middle.

Working with interest and hearty good-will, within an hour the Arabs had raised that obstacle almost to the surface, and in the muddy water it was scarcely visible, even from the bank. Much less was it likely to be seen from the deck of the moving launch, the crew of which would not suspect that the channel they had already navigated safely could hold any danger for them.

Having completed the dam, the men returned to their former posts. No change in the general plan was necessitated: indeed, the sudden stoppage of the launch would tend to further it, for it would add one more element to the confusion.

It was now only a question of waiting. The Arabs sat their horses in stolid patience, scarcely moving or speaking. Burnet was more restless. He would have liked to steal along the bank of the wady, and watch the stages in the enemy's progress; but he contained himself, and tried to emulate the stillness of his friend the chief.

Three hours passed: it was almost midday when the Arab scout came running back with the news that the enemy were in sight. Soon afterwards the sound of the propeller was heard, and then, peeping through the reeds, the watchers saw the horsemen riding two by two at a walking pace along the

embankment, and the aeroplane, its wings extending over the banks on either side, as it were floating on the stream.

There was now some order in the troopers' march. Three couples rode ahead as an advance guard: after an interval came the two officers riding abreast, and behind them the remainder of the party. Burnet suggested that the advance guard should be allowed to pass, fire being reserved until the main body was half-way through the ruins and unable to escape without fighting. It was impossible now to send a messenger with orders to the men on the north bank, but this gave Rejeb no concern:

"My warriors will know what to do," he said, with a firm air of confidence.

The advance guard was some distance ahead of the launch, which had to go slowly because of the unwieldiness of its burden, and the risk of striking the overlapping wings of the aeroplane against some irregularity in the surface of the bank. There was thus no reason to fear that the conflict would start prematurely through the obstruction of the launch before the horsemen had arrived. The men were riding easily; the two officers were engaged in animated conversation; in this wide no man's land between the rivers they had no cause for apprehension.

Burnet, holding his revolver, tingled as the enemy drew slowly nearer. It was not his first action, but a youth of twenty cannot know the coolness and indifference of the veteran. His one anxiety was for the safety of Captain Ellingford. Knowing that he was on board, the Arabs would not fire at the launch; but in the confusion and hurly-burly of the coming fight he might be struck by a chance shot; perhaps, indeed, he might be deliberately murdered by the Turks in charge of him. "Thank Heaven they are not Germans," Burnet thought.

The advance guard came to the edge of the ruins, riding along the

embankment, which was only a foot or two above the general level, with a gentle slope on the southern side. The troopers glanced to right and left without particular care; and indeed it would have needed keener eyes than theirs to discover the men ambushed in snug positions a few hundred yards on the north side of the stream, or the horsemen securely hidden in the tall rushes at a rather greater distance to the south.

They passed by without suspicion. About a hundred yards behind them the two officers came within the circle of the ruins, still chatting together. Their orderlies were a few paces in the rear; and the head of the short column of troopers, in line with the launch, rode at an equal interval behind them.

To Burnet, at least, their progress seemed painfully slow. The advance guard had reached the western extremity of the ruins before the officers came level with the dam. Burnet was just wondering whether the dam would escape their notice when there was a sudden crackle of musketry from the northern side. The officer nearest the wady fell from his horse; several saddles in the column behind were emptied; and there ensued a scene of wild confusion. The horses curvetted, and drove against one another; the men shouted and gazed about them irresolutely, seeking the unseen enemy and trying to control their steeds. Another volley struck down several more horses and men; then, just as the launch, coming stern foremost, crashed into the obstacle, Rejeb and Burnet, at the head of a compact body of horsemen with swords held aloft, dashed from the shelter of the reeds and rode at a hot gallop straight for the centre of the column.

By this time some of the Turks had flung themselves from their saddles, and, bridle in hand, were running down the slope of the embankment to gain shelter from the rifle fire. The sight of the horsemen bearing down upon them like a desert whirlwind from the opposite quarter caused them to mount again in haste. Some rallied about their officer, and prepared to meet the shock, others spurred their horses forward with the idea of avoiding it, only to find

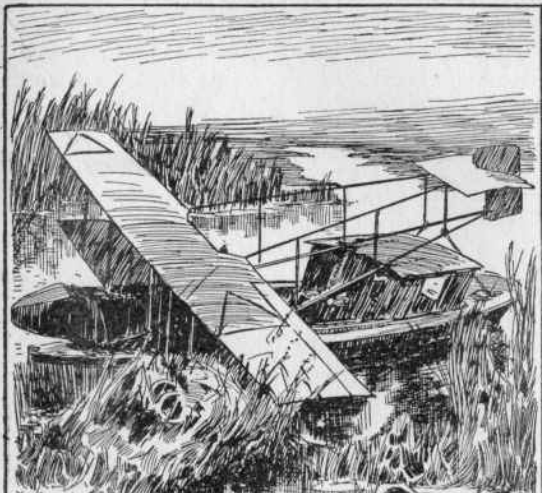
themselves checked by their more steadfast comrades. Others again swung their horses round, and galloped madly in the direction from which they had come.

The officer's desperate efforts to dress his ranks at the foot of the slope were rendered abortive by the confusion into which his more resolute men had been thrown by their comrades' attempt to escape. Rifle fire had ceased, and with a gallantry that won Burnet's admiration the Turk, supported by less than a dozen troopers, rode straight at the charging mass. Burnet, whose matchless horse had carried him slightly in advance of Rejeb, made a sudden swerve to avoid a sweeping stroke of the officer's sword, and as he passed, fired his revolver point blank at his opponent. The trooper behind made a cut at his head, and he discovered later that the peak of his helmet had been sliced off.

Having no more of the enemy in front of him, he wheeled round and rode back into the fray. Several men and horses had fallen, and the survivors, hopelessly outnumbered, almost surrounded by the Arabs, were crying for quarter.

Meanwhile the advance guard, brought to a halt by the sudden outburst of fire behind them, had stayed only long enough to see that their comrades had no chance against such odds, and had then galloped off in headlong flight towards the Euphrates. It was a matter of the most urgent importance that none of them should escape to carry news of the ambush to their outpost on the river, and Rejeb himself, with ten of his Arabs, rode along the embankment at breakneck pace to overtake them. It was equally important that the fugitives who had ridden in the other direction should not be allowed to work their way round to the north, and Rejeb's lieutenant, with the rest of the mounted men, set off to ride them down. Some of the Arabs swam the wady on their horses in order to cut off their escape northward; the lieutenant himself with another body galloped straight along the embankment; a third section struck off into the swampy ground to the south.

The moment the fight was over, Burnet turned to see what had happened to the launch. When its course was checked by the dam, it appeared that the crew had endeavoured to escape by driving it back along the wady, for Burnet saw that it was now a hundred yards or so to the east. But in their haste they had neglected the precautions necessitated by the breadth of the aeroplane. Attempting to run at too high a speed in the narrow channel, they had failed to keep a course exactly in the middle, with the result that one of the wings had jammed in a tangle of vegetation, and the launch was unable to move. Meanwhile the Arabs posted in the ruins had left their stations and run down to the bank, where they stood sentry over the vessel, rifle in hand.





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CHAPTER XII

A REARGUARD ACTION

Captain Ellington, lying on the deck of the launch, called a breezy salutation to Burnet. The two Turkish troopers who formed his guard were smoking cigarettes; the crew of four were gathered aft, taking the disaster that had befallen them with stolid unconcern. The launch was held fast in position, a few yards from the bank, by the wing of the aeroplane which had become

entangled, and Burnet, eager to learn the nature of his friend's wound, and the causes of his plight, scrambled along the wing and dropped to the deck.

"Congratulations, old man," said Ellingford, grasping his hand. "It was quite a brilliant little action. Where did your Arab friends spring from?"

"It's rather a long story; I'll tell you all as we go along. I was waiting for you on the *tell* when I saw you come down, and finding you in the enemy's hands, I managed to get a friendly tribe to come to the rescue. Are you badly hurt?"

"Not a bit; I got one through the shoulder and another through an unsuspected roll of fat just above my thigh. The Turks patched me up with their own field dressings; they seem quite decent chaps; and I'll do very well till we get back to our own M.O. I can manage to fly right enough."

"The machine's all right?"

"I think so—or will be with a little attention. The engine wasn't behaving very well; still, I hoped to get to the *tell* and overhaul it there; but it began to misfire badly, and I thought it safer to come down at once, though I'd seen this mounted patrol. Unluckily they rushed me before I had well got to work. I held them off in front, but they attacked in the rear and pipped me."

"Jolly lucky it's no worse. I'll get the men to clear the wing; then we'll haul ashore, and start for home. You might have a look at the engine at once: it'll save time."

He returned to the bank and set some of the Arabs to cut away the vegetation. Meanwhile Ellingford opened up his engine. "I say," he called in a minute or two, "this is bad luck. The petrol tank is riddled. I can't repair it here."

"You can't fly, then?"

"Absolutely impossible."

"That's a blow. We shall have to haul it, then, as the Turks did."

"But where to? We can't possibly get through the Turkish lines."

"How long would it take you to patch up sufficiently to get us back?"

"I doubt whether I can do it at all. It's a job for our mechanics, and a rather long one at best."

"Well, there's no hope for it, then. There's a place something over twenty miles from here—the settlement of these Arabs—where we can find refuge. I shall have to leave you there and get round to our lines on foot somehow."

"But twenty miles! It'll take us a whole day or more to haul the bus there. And there isn't time. These Turks are a reconnoitring patrol of a larger force _____"

"What?"

"I saw them when I was about 3000 feet up—a cavalry force marching along the left bank of the Euphrates a good many miles to the north. There were a number of boats keeping pace with them on the river. Some of these beggars are sure to have escaped. They'll make their way back, and we shall have cavalry on our heels before we've covered half your twenty miles."

"There's no time to be lost, then. We must save the machine if we can: if we can't, you have a choice of mounts among the Turks' horses, and you'll have to ride as well as you can. The chief of the tribe has gone off in pursuit of fugitives; I'll leave word for him, and he'll follow us up."

When he explained the situation to the Arabs, one of them suggested that

they should convey the aeroplane by launch for some distance up the wady, which would not only save a few miles, but bring them to much harder ground, where it would be easier to drag the machine. Burnet adopted the suggestion at once. He left the Arabs to clear up the scene of the fight and to await the return of Rejeb, who would no doubt then ride straight back to his stronghold with his prisoners and the captured horses. Two of the Arabs he selected to accompany the launch with led horses, these for hauling the aeroplane and to serve as mounts for himself and Ellingford in case the machine had to be abandoned.

A few minutes later the launch started, and Burnet had leisure to give Ellingford an outline of all that had happened since their parting at the *tell* a month before.

"I'm very much afraid that cavalry force you spoke of is the advance guard of the expedition against my friend Rejeb," he said in conclusion. "The Turks and Arabs have for once succeeded in working to a date, which implies a good deal of cheyving on the part of the Germans. They evidently want to carry things through quickly."

"I don't wonder. They're getting funky. The loss of Bagdad will be a tremendous blow to them. Apart from its being a complete smash-up of their railway schemes, it will immensely heighten our prestige all through this country; in fact, through the whole Mohammedan world: it will be the handwriting on the wall for them."

"We'll do it, then?"

"Of course we'll do it—this time. You know what had been done when we came away a month ago. Well, during the past month the progress of our organisation has been amazing. We've no end of new boats; the light railway through Amara has almost reached our advanced base; so that our transport is

as nearly perfect as it can be; and what with new guns, aeroplanes, pontoons, Red Cross units and the rest, we're in a position to give the Turk a very nasty jar. In fact, I wouldn't mind giving long odds that we're through Kut by the end of the year, and in Bagdad before Easter. What sort of reception shall we get there?"

"Oh, the people will lick our boots—just as they'd lick the boots of the Germans if they entered in triumph. With them, nothing succeeds like success. They don't love the Turk, but they don't love any one but themselves. The decent Arabs, especially Firouz Ali and his little band of patriots—who've got a stronger following outside Bagdad than within—will welcome us as deliverers; but it's a very mixed population, and the most of them don't draw fine distinctions between Europeans: they're all sheep to be fleeced. Of course they don't realise what a bad time they'd have if the city became Germanised—morally, I mean, for there's no doubt that German administration would effect great material improvements. At present they're slaves to a corrupt tyranny; German tyranny is rather brutal than corrupt. They'll find that we are neither corrupt nor brutal—and take advantage of us. I'm talking as if we were already there. In the meantime you and I will be lucky if we save our skins."

During the voyage Burnet inspected the launch, and found that it contained a cargo of provisions and cases of rifles and ammunition. He concluded that it had been one of the fleet which Ellingford had seen up the river, and it could hardly be doubted that the stores were intended for the expedition against Rejeb.

When the launch had run some ten miles along the wady eastward, one of the mounted Arabs on the bank announced that they had reached the spot where it was necessary to land. At a short distance from the wady the ground was firmer than it had been farther west, and more suitable for the haulage of the aeroplane. The launch was run close into the southern bank and set on fire; the aeroplane was lugged ashore; then Burnet set the crew to unload the

stores, while the Arabs yoked the two led horses to the machine. When this was done, he mounted one, Ellingford the other. Burnet marshalled the prisoners three on each side, and ordered one of the Arabs to ride back rapidly to Rejeb, and ask him to send or bring up enough horses to convey the stores to his stronghold. Then, under the guidance of the second Arab, the southward march began.

Progress was very slow, though more rapid than it had been when the aeroplane was hauled over the swampy ground by the Turks. After they had marched for about two hours, Rejeb with a small party of his men came galloping up behind. He related that five of the six Turks whom he had chased had been killed or captured, the sixth had escaped. The prisoners, among whom was the officer whom Burnet had shot, were now being conveyed by the direct route to the stronghold. At the bank of the wady he had left some of his men loading the stores on to the horses captured from the Turks, and Rejeb intended to ride back to them, and himself head the convoy to his stronghold.

By nightfall Burnet's party had accomplished about half the distance to the causeway. It was impossible to proceed in the dark with the aeroplane, and they bivouacked in a convenient hollow. Soon afterwards Rejeb arrived, in advance of his men. He explained that the convoy of stores would march through the night; the rifles and ammunition were a valuable prize which he wished to place securely in the stronghold as soon as possible. Further, he was anxious that, in case of pursuit and attack, his fighting men should not be hampered by having to guard their booty. But he had left a number of his men a few miles to the rear, to give warning of an enemy's approach. Then he galloped away to the south-east to meet the track along which the other Arabs were escorting their prisoners.

Before dawn Burnet made preparations for starting, and the party moved off as soon as it was light enough to see. In about three hours they converged upon the main route which Rejeb had followed overnight, and had gone but

little farther when they were met by Rejeb himself with some two score men. The young chief showed few signs of fatigue, though he had been up all night. He reported that the convoys of stores and prisoners had safely reached the stronghold, and pointed with glee to the new rifles with which he had armed his men. Turning his horse, he rode on beside Burnet, his men coming at a short interval behind the aeroplane.

They were within two or three miles of the causeway when the scouts he had left in the rear galloped up with the news that a large body of cavalry was following up the trail of the parties which had passed along the main route, and must overtake them before they reached the causeway. Rejeb held a rapid consultation with the two officers. It was evident that he wished the aeroplane to be abandoned, but when Captain Ellingford, through Burnet, said that he would burn the machine rather than let it fall into the enemy's hands, he instantly declared that he would leave nothing undone to save it.

"My friend looks upon his aeroplane as you look upon your horse," Burnet had explained, and the comparison appealed to the Arab.

It was clear that the machine could be saved only by making a stand where they were. The enemy must be prevented from coming within range of the causeway until it was safely across; otherwise they might hopelessly cripple it, and also shoot down the men and horses who were hauling it. Rejeb ordered these men to push on with all haste; the rest to dismount, send most of their horses forward to the cover of the vegetation that concealed the causeway, and take up their positions on a wide front covering the retreat. He dispatched also a swift rider to the stronghold, to send out fifty men to take over charge of the aeroplane and the six prisoners. Burnet had pressed Ellingford to accompany the aeroplane, but this he flatly refused to do.

"If you think I'm going to leave you with a scrap on hand you've mistaken your man," he said. "I can still use my revolver."

The country around was flat and fairly dry, but broken up here and there with patches of scrub and of marshland fringed with reeds and rushes.

"I almost wish I had burnt the machine after all," said Captain Ellingford, when Rejeb was placing his men. "Your chief is very keen, and a good chap; but he can't hold up a force of Turkish cavalry with his few men, and I shall be sorry if things turn out badly."

"Don't worry, old man," said Burnet. "He knows what he's about. It's ideal country for a small force fighting on the defensive, and we're not likely to have artillery against us. There's plenty of cover all the way from here to the stronghold; we can fall back from one clump to another if we are hard pressed. On the other hand, it's bad country for cavalry, especially if they don't know the ground. They may find themselves bogged; and anyway they'll offer a good target; we can see them above the rushes. Besides, Rejeb has more men in the stronghold, and he'll send for them if necessary, though it'll be a point of pride with him to lick the enemy with inferior forces if he can."

Rejeb had by this time posted his little force on a long arc extending for some distance on both sides of the track. The men were all perfectly concealed by bushes, clumps of reeds, or tall grass, and had been given definite instructions about the new positions to which they were to fall back under the enemy's pressure.

The wings of the aeroplane could still be seen projecting above the scrub about a mile away when the advance guard of the enemy emerged into view on the north. They evidently caught sight of the aeroplane, for one of the troopers galloped back, the rest halting. In a few minutes the head of the main column appeared. The officer in command looked ahead through his field-glasses, then swept the country on each side of the track, and apparently satisfied that the course was clear, gave an order. Riding in couples, the cavalry galloped forward, the intention no doubt being to capture the aeroplane and its escort at

a rush.

Then, from the Arabs concealed a few hundred yards in their front, there broke a sudden volley which emptied many saddles and took the Turks aback. The officer shouted an order, the men wheeled round, suffering losses from a second volley, and dashed back to the shelter of the belt of vegetation from which they had emerged, causing some confusion in the rear part of the column. Burnet estimated that the number of those who had come in sight was about two hundred; how many more there were it was impossible to guess. But Rejeb perceived that his little force was not strong enough to hold the position long when the Turks should have taken its measure, and he instantly sent a rider to the stronghold to bring back another hundred men on foot, and to order a hundred and fifty horsemen to post themselves near the outer end of the causeway.

Before the reinforcements arrived the enemy started a dropping fire from their sheltered position, with the intention, no doubt, of drawing the Arabs' fire and causing them to disclose their strength. This proving ineffectual, they made another attempt to carry the position with a rush, losing even more heavily than before. Again they fell back, and for a while there was no further move. Rejeb sent a scout out on each flank to worm his way towards the enemy and discover what he was about. They returned with the not unexpected news that the Turks, now dismounted, were deploying; it could only be with the object of outflanking the defenders. They reported also that behind the Turks there was a large force of mounted Arabs. Burnet's suspicion that this was the expedition organised by the Turks and Halil's tribe jointly was confirmed; he wondered where Major Burckhardt was.

By this time the reinforcements had come up stealthily from the rear. Rejeb threw them out on the wings, so that the defending force, its main strength in the centre, covered a rough semi-circle nearly half a mile in extent.

Within a very few minutes the enemy's intentions were disclosed. Advancing on a wide front, taking cover wherever it was possible, they came on in short rushes. It was seen now that the majority of them were Arabs, and the total force could hardly have been less than a thousand men. Rejeb ordered his men to fall back slowly, holding on as long as they could without the risk of being cut off, and inflicting as much loss as possible on the enemy whenever they crossed stretches of open ground.

It was clear to the chief, as to Burnet and Ellingford, that Major Burckhardt's profession of knowledge of the stronghold's position had not been vain. Clearly they had to look forward to a siege. They were not strong enough to defeat the enemy in the open, and as soon as the safety of the aeroplane was assured, they must retreat along the causeway and make the best use of their natural advantages.

For nearly two hours Rejeb's Arabs fell back steadily. More than once the enemy sought a decision by attempting to rush the defenders, now in the centre, now at one or other of the wings. At one moment it seemed that the left wing was in danger of being crushed, but Rejeb, who throughout the day showed many of the best qualities of generalship, sent a runner to the rear to bring up a portion of his mounted reserve, now less than half a mile away. In a few minutes a hundred superbly mounted warriors galloped to the threatened point, swept like a whirlwind upon the dismounted enemy, rode through them again and again, heedless of losses, and not only defeated the flanking movement, but caused a check in the whole line.

Then came word that the aeroplane had been conveyed across the causeway to the centre of the stronghold. From this moment the retreat became more rapid, though still as methodical as before. Late in the afternoon the Turks, who formed the right and right centre of the attacking force, and had fought more steadily and doggedly than their Arab allies, gained a position from which, though at extreme range, they began to command the end of the

causeway. Rejeb drew nearly all his men together, posted them under cover, and concentrated his fire on the assailants on his left, in the hope of holding them off until darkness rendered it possible to slip away. At sunset, before the enemy knew what was happening, the chief withdrew his little force swiftly across the causeway. The day's work had cost him barely a score of casualties, while the enemy's losses were probably five or six times as great.

"That was a top-hole rearguard action," said Ellingford to Burnet as they went together to Rejeb's tower. "I'd no idea that Arabs could ever behave so steadily."

"It's due to their chief," replied Burnet. "He's got stuff in him, and he's going to be very useful. By George! I'm dead tired."

CHAPTER XIII

IN THE BRITISH LINES

It was a week later. In one of the tents of the Headquarters staff behind the British lines Burnet, once more in Arab dress, was conversing with Captain Mitchell, an officer high in the Intelligence branch. He had just come to the end of a rather long narrative—the story of his adventures from the day when he had said good-bye to Captain Mitchell more than a month before, down to the time of the attack on Rejeb's stronghold.

"And how did you get out?" asked the captain.

"I slipped away to the south through the marshes, swimming the deep places

on a waterskin, and wading the rest. When I was clear I steered south-east till I struck the Tigris and got aboard a country boat that was bringing up fodder."

"It sounds simple, though I daresay it wasn't all what the rags at home call a joy-ride."

Burnet smiled: it was not necessary to tell all that had happened during that week.

"I will place the situation before the Chief," the captain went on. "You will hear from him."

"He will understand that Rejeb is waiting to hear whether he may expect help? He is greatly outnumbered."

"Quite so. The Chief will realise what is at stake, and I think you may depend on prompt instructions."

The interview was at an end. Burnet went off to visit his particular friends, including Scuddy Smith, captain in the Bengal Lancers.

"What ho!" cried Smith. "Back again, then. We were getting anxious about you. Where's Ellingford?"

"In an Arab camp, Scud."

"A prisoner?"

"No, an honoured guest. Also an invalid: he was unlucky enough to get hit—not seriously. I say, I haven't had a decent meal for I don't know how long. Come and see me feed, and I'll tell you between the mouthfuls as much as is good for you."

Smith and other friends heard Burnet's story rather enviously. They would

willingly have shared his dangers for the sake of the variety and movement, so different from their own stagnant existence. But their spirits were rising in proportion as the time drew nearer for the opening of the great offensive. They had much to tell Burnet of the progress made during his absence. Every one was confident that when the moment came the Turkish fortifications at Kut would be pierced and the misfortune of General Townshend repaired. And then for Bagdad!

Next day Burnet was summoned to another interview with Captain Mitchell.

"The Chief is greatly pleased with your work," said the captain. "Your particulars of the state of Bagdad and your map showing the military establishments are especially valuable. For certain reasons he thinks it best not to see you himself just yet, but he will thank you in person at the proper time. He made a note of your application to be employed as observer on an aeroplane when we attack Bagdad from the air. Meanwhile he thoroughly agrees that it is of the first importance that your chief's stronghold should be held. It will protect our left flank and render unnecessary the employment of a large cavalry force to cover our advance on that side. As a matter of fact, preparations are being made for a movement in that region. It won't be started until we are ready for the main attack, and the forces employed will be smaller than were contemplated, provided the stronghold can be held. Can your Arab friend stick it for a week or two without help?"

"It's largely a matter of food. The stuff we captured in the Turks' launch will help, but Rejeb's usual forays are of course out of the question now, and I'm afraid he hasn't much food in reserve. His horses are the great difficulty. I know he has next to no fodder, and if the place is to be held, the horses must be evacuated. To the Arabs that'll be worse than drawing their teeth. Their horses are their chief wealth, and they won't easily part with them."

"What about non-combatants?"

"There are very few: the chief's family and a score of others."

"They must leave, of course, and you'll have to exercise your persuasive powers with regard to the horses. No doubt they can be got away by the route you followed?"

"I think so; the Turks aren't numerous enough to surround the place."

"Well then, we'll arrange to receive them in our lines, and give a bond for their delivery to the Arabs in due course. Now, what about ammunition?"

"So far as rifle ammunition is concerned I think they are all right: they had a good deal of their own and collared a lot more on the launch. But when I left the Turks had a couple of machine-guns in action. They had formed a sort of bridgehead at their end of the causeway, and the Arabs had cut the causeway in the middle to prevent their getting across. Ellingford's machine-gun is available, but we've only two or three hundred rounds for that, and when I left we had decided to keep that for emergencies. If we had more ammunition, and perhaps another machine-gun or two, I think we could carry on—unless the Turks bring up field guns, which isn't likely, perhaps, in such swampy country."

"Well, we can send you ammunition and perhaps a couple of machine-guns and gunners if you think they can be got to the place. That would save dismantling Ellingford's gun."

"It's worth trying. And while we're about it we might take a little petrol. Ellingford's tank can be patched up, and he might get away."

"That's important. We need every aeroplane we can muster. Is Ellingford well enough to fly?"

"He was doing well, and by this time I daresay he could manage a short

flight. But he won't want to leave us."

"He'll obey orders, of course. Well, there's no time to be lost. I'll see about things at once. Be ready to start back early to-morrow."

At dawn next day Burnet with a party of eight embarked on a boat bound downstream. There were two men of the machine-gun corps with their weapons and ammunition, three native boatmen, and three men of the Indian transport service in charge of three mules. They disembarked near the place where Burnet had boarded the country boat three days before; the mules were loaded with the machine-guns, ammunition, petrol and other stores, and the march across country was begun.

By noon on the following day they came to the edge of an extensive marsh. Here the mules were unloaded, and sent back. Among the stores there were materials for putting together a small kelak—a raft supported by inflated skins. This was quickly rigged up by the native boatmen, and launched on a winding channel through the marsh. The trimming of the kelak took some time, and only two hours of daylight were left when the party started on their journey to the stronghold. The two machine-gunners found matter for jokes, as British soldiers will, always and everywhere.

"Look out for submarines, Bill," said one of them, to his comrade on the other side of the craft.

"Mermaids is more my line," replied the man. "I say, Tom, what if these balloons underneath us was to go pop!"

"And no parachutes neither! Not even bathing drawers. D'you know what this here thing reminds me of?"

"What?"

"The bathing raft at Brighton. Wish you was at Brighton, Bill?"

"Don't talk about it."

"Tea and shrimps, and Mary Angelina in the tea-shop, and the little gal with the curls as played the fiddle so sweet. Bill, you ought to change your name."

"What for?"

"Cos 'twas Big Bill as sent us to this here Messypotamia. If it hadn't 'a been for him we might have been in Brighton now."

"No we shouldn't. We'd 'a been in the mines blasting coal. Never would have heard of Brighton. But I tell you what: when old Bill's done in——"

"He won't be done in."

"What I mean is, when old Haig catches him as he's bolting out of Berlin. What I say, send him to Messypotamia, and without a sun helmet: lumme, he wants a place in the sun."

The boatmen paddled the kelak slowly through the marsh until sunset compelled a halt. They slept on board, and started again at dawn. Soon they came into shallow water where it was necessary to jump overboard and wade, pushing the kelak. Sometimes they swam; more than once they had to make a portage over comparatively dry land, dismantling the kelak and carrying the stores. It was afternoon before they came to the neighbourhood of the island stronghold. Burnet left his party securely hidden in the reeds, and made his way alone, wading and swimming until he reached the rising ground south of the mound.

"Is it good news, my brother?" said Rejeb, meeting him.

"There are guns and stores in the marsh yonder," replied Burnet. "Will you send out men to bring them in?"

While a party of Arabs went on this mission, Burnet enquired what had happened during his absence. He learnt that the situation was much more serious than it had been on his departure. Under cover of machine-gun fire the Turks had advanced along the causeway and erected a breastwork of stones at the northern edge of the gap which the Arabs had cut. Then they had set to work to fill up the gap, and had already made great progress. They had several times attempted to gain access to the island from other directions, but the waterlogged condition of the country had rendered their efforts fruitless against the fire of the vigilant defenders. When the causeway should be restored, Rejeb despaired of holding his ground against a force so largely outnumbering his own. To make matters worse, a slight wound which he had received had grown serious through lack of attention, and he felt incapable of the energy necessary to the conduct of a strenuous defensive campaign.

His depression of spirit was somewhat lifted by Burnet's report that measures would be undertaken for his relief. He called a council of some of his principal men to consider the propositions which Burnet conveyed to him from headquarters. There was no opposition to the sending away of the non-combatants. The Arabs, accustomed to a nomad existence, saw little hardship in the people having to wander for safety to other regions. But the suggestion to part with their horses was at first strongly opposed. An Arab without a horse is like a shipwrecked mariner. Burnet found all his persuasiveness unavailing until a diversion was caused by the appearance of the two gunners bringing up their machine-guns, followed by the boatmen and the Arabs loaded with stores. The explanation that these were only an advance party of a force that was by and by coming to their assistance, and that this force would in all probability bring back their horses, turned the tide. Encouraged by the assurance of help, the men agreed to the temporary sacrifice demanded of them; and the council broke up with a yell of defiance which caused the enemy, expecting an attack,

to open fire.

CHAPTER XIV

THE ENEMY'S GUNS

Before he sought his couch Burnet had a talk with Ellingford.

"I'm jolly glad you are back," said the latter. "Not one of these Arabs knows a word of English, and to be over a week without any means of communication but dumb show has been a horrid nuisance. I managed to make them understand that they had better rig up some sort of a fortification at this end of the causeway as a defence against machine-gun fire, and I was thinking of placing my gun there, for things are getting warmer every day. There's no need for that now, perhaps: the two guns you've brought are enough on such a narrow front: but we've all our work cut out to hold the enemy off until relief comes."

"By the way, I've orders for you to return if you're fit," said Burnet. "The Tommies I've brought will patch up your tank."

"That's rough luck. I wanted to stay here and see it through. I'm fit enough, for a short flight at any rate, but I don't like running away."

"You can do a little useful scouting for us before you return to the lines. We'll talk about that later. To-morrow you had better get your tank repaired. The men are handy fellows, and they'll do what's required under your instruction. We're evacuating the non-combatants and the horses, and I hope our food will last out until we're relieved. That's the only risk—unless the enemy bring up artillery and shell us. Even then we may still have a chance, because there are underground chambers here and there under the ruins—places excavated long ago for shelter from the heat; and they ought to prove effective dug-outs. The greatest danger is that the Turks will repair or bridge

the causeway and overwhelm us with numbers. I shall have a look round to-morrow and see what can be done to prevent them."

Next day Burnet resumed his own uniform and went round the position with Rejeb. It appeared that when the non-combatants were gone, under escort of a sufficient number of armed men, the effective strength of the garrison would slightly exceed four hundred. The enemy, at a rough estimate, outnumbered them by three to one, and were on the whole better armed; the rifles and ammunition captured on the launch were sufficient to arm about a third of Rejeb's force. The food supplies might with care last for a week or two. Plenty of drinking water was to be got from an old well which the Arabs had cleared out at their first occupation of the island.

The weakness of the defence was that a wide front—for it was not merely a question of holding the end of the causeway—had to be held by relatively small numbers. The channel between the island and the Turkish position was too deep to wade; but it was obvious that an enterprising enemy with a large preponderance of numbers would not find it an insuperable obstacle, and with half the causeway in their possession they could harass the defenders until an attack in overwhelming force was possible.

Burnet saw that his first concern must be to prevent the enemy from pushing farther along the causeway. That should be practicable. It was more doubtful whether he would be able to dislodge them from the position they had already gained.

The sudden outburst of fire from the Turks on the previous evening had soon died down when they found that the Arabs made no attack, and so far the morning had been quiet. Taking advantage of their inactivity, Burnet went cautiously to the end of the causeway, examined the breastwork which the Arabs had constructed with material from the ruins, and cast about for an emplacement for one of his machine-guns. His first idea was to instal it in a sort

of blockhouse in the middle of the breastwork, from which it could sweep the causeway from end to end. But there was always a chance that the Turks would ultimately bring up field artillery; the blockhouse would then be their first objective, and the gun would very likely be put out of action. The second gun, which he intended to keep in reserve, might suffer the same fate. What then could be done?

The breastwork hastily erected by the Arabs across the end of the causeway was neither long enough nor strong enough. But along the shore of the island ran a low artificial embankment against floods. Just behind it was an old, much dilapidated wall. About a hundred and fifty yards on the right of the causeway the embankment had broken away. It was only necessary to break an opening in the wall just behind this gap, to form a sort of embrasure for the gun. The position was well screened from the enemy, for the surface of the island rose slightly in the rear, and the horizon, from the Turks' point of view, was cut by the chief's tower with the dwarf trees that flanked it. Placed in this embrasure, the machine-gun would command the whole of the causeway except the fifty yards nearest the island.

It was a question whether the necessary pioneer work could be done during the hours of daylight, for much of it must be carried out in full view of the enemy. But at present none of the Turks was to be seen. They were not at work on the causeway, and a careful scanning of their farther position through field-glasses failed to detect any sign of movement or of preparations. Taking advantage of this rather surprising inactivity, which suggested that they were either awaiting reinforcements or planning some dangerous stroke, Burnet set a large number of the Arabs to the task of carrying out his scheme. While some cut the embrasure for the machine-gun, others dug a communication trench from the blockhouse to a group of ruins about two hundred yards in the rear. Others again strengthened these ruins by piling up blocks of masonry collected from the whole area, so as to form a shelter, effectual against all but gun fire, for the larger part of the garrison. The underground chambers beneath the ruins

were partially cleared of accumulations of rubbish, and should serve as safe quarters when the men were not in action.

While Burnet was setting all these operations in train, Rejeb had superintended the departure of the non-combatants. They were transported in relays across the southern marshes on the *kelak*. The horses, too, under the charge of a score of well-armed men, left the island by wading or swimming, Rejeb keeping half a dozen in a safe place at the south of the island, in case he might find them useful for scouting. Among them were his own horse, and the one that Burnet had captured.

It was the third day after his arrival before the defensive works were completed. Except for occasional sniping the enemy had not attempted to molest them. To Burnet this quiescence seemed ominous, for it suggested that the Turkish commander—no doubt that Major Djaved Bey who had visited Burckhardt with General Eisenstein—thought the Arabs' operations of no importance, and that must mean that he was confident of the success of whatever coup he might be planning. Burnet felt the necessity of learning what preparations the enemy was making, what stroke he had to guard against, and the approaching departure of Ellingford gave him an opportunity.

The two gunners, Bill Jackson and Tom Sturge, had repaired the petrol tank. Ellingford himself had regained the use of his limbs, and, though not perfectly recovered, was clearly strong enough to pilot his machine the thirty or forty miles between the island and the British lines.

"I don't want you to run any unnecessary risks," said Burnet, "but if you could do a little scouting——"

"My dear fellow, with all the pleasure in life. A few extra miles are neither here nor there. And there are no Archies to worry me."

"Then will you fly a few miles northward, say as far as the *tell*, and see what

the beggars are up to? Don't waste time by coming down again, but drop me a message. If I don't get anything from you, I shall know that there's nothing to worry about."

"Right. And the sooner I go, the better. It's a perfect day. Everything's as clear and sharp as you could wish, and I shall hardly even need to use my glasses."

"But don't fly too low. A bullet might drill another hole in your tank."

"Never fear. I shall be safe enough at two or three thousand feet. Any messages for headquarters?"

"You might tell them what we're doing, and say that with luck we can hold out ten days or a fortnight. There's nothing else, I think."

The aeroplane had been placed at the extreme south of the island, where the dipping of the ground kept it below the Turks' line of sight. A space was rapidly cleared in order to give room for rising, and after a careful preliminary test of the engine the captain ran off and rose smoothly into the air. At first he headed south-east; then, when he had gained an altitude of something over two thousand feet, he wheeled round, recrossed the island, and, still rising, for some minutes circled over the Turkish position, amid a fusillade of rifle fire. At one moment Burnet was alarmed, fearing from a sudden downward swerve that the machine had been injured; but it was evidently an intentional movement on Ellingford's part, for he at once skimmed away to the north-west, and the shooting ceased.

An hour later Burnet heard the hum of the returning engine.

"He's flying perilously low," he thought, as the machine came into view on the west. Pursued again by rifle fire, it flew straight across the island from west to east. Burnet had informed the gunners and Rejeb what to expect, and the

eyes of all the garrison looked up for the sight of an object falling from the aeroplane. It was so small and fell so swiftly that no one saw it until a fraction of a second before it reached the ground. One of the Arabs picked it up and ran with it eagerly to Burnet. It was a stone wrapped in a sheet of paper. Burnet read the message:

"Nothing doing opposite you: 2 f.g. bogged 10 m N. of *tell*."

The aeroplane had circled round: Ellingford evidently wanted to know whether the message had been received. Burnet signalled in Morse with his arms; the machine turned again, and heading south-east in a few minutes was out of sight.

The inactivity of the enemy was explained, and the explanation was of serious import for the garrison. They were awaiting the arrival of field-guns before resuming the attack. The transport of the guns over the marshes had naturally been difficult, and the fact that they were actually now stuck in the swamp was welcome news. But the respite would only be temporary, and Burnet realised that he would soon have to deal with the only situation that gave him real anxiety. Would the Arabs' resolution stand the test of gun fire? At the best, the period of possible resistance was shortened, for the Arabs, unaccustomed to shelling, would probably be so much demoralised by it as to be incapable of standing up against a sustained attack.

On reading the message Burnet had not allowed any sign of his anxiety to escape him. He could not conceal its purport from Rejeb: it would not be fair to keep him in the dark; but he laid more stress on the bogging than on the guns. Later on, however, he went away by himself to a quiet spot on the south of the island, to think things over. So, one of Britain's heroes, Robert Clive, had gone apart to decide in solitude the momentous question to which the battle of Plassey was the answer.

"Why wait for the guns?"

That was the question that filled Burnet's thoughts. The enemy no doubt thought they had the garrison well boxed up: they had only to bring up their guns to compel surrender. The escort of the guns must have seen the aeroplane, and guessed that its occupant would have carried news of them to his own lines. But the British were far away, much too far to send a force to capture two field-guns. Nor would they think it worth while to send airmen to bomb guns so remote from their own position, and of no danger to themselves. The Turks, then, would not dream that they had any difficulties to contend with except those due to the swampy nature of the country. Such a feeling of security gave the best possible promise that an attack would be successful.

But how could an attack be made? Not in force, nor openly. The escort of the guns, though probably not a large body, would be strong enough to withstand any assault by a small number of Arabs, and Burnet would not feel justified in reducing the garrison of the stronghold by more than a few men. And between him and them was the Turkish main body; his retreat would be cut off. He felt that he could not ask the Arabs to undertake so hazardous an expedition until he had himself reconnoitred the ground, and discovered for himself what were the chances of a surprise.

He returned to Rejeb's tower, and told the chief what he had in mind.

"It must not be," said Rejeb. "I am weak, and my faintness increases. Who is to lead my people if the Turkish dogs attack?"

"But it is for these guns they are waiting. Until they come there will be no serious attack, and when they come your position here will be much worse. Is it not wise to seize any chance of keeping them at a distance?"

"Who knows whether there will be such a chance?"

"True; that is what I want to find out. And if I discover that we can do nothing, I will return at once. My absence will be but for a night and a day."

"You will not go alone?"

"No: I want you to lend me five of your most trusty and stout-hearted men. This is work for a few."

"It shall be done, and may Allah preserve you!"

While Rejeb was selecting the men, Burnet informed the machine-gunners of his intentions, and ordered them, in case the Turks attacked, to use the gun which had already been placed.

Late in the afternoon, he slipped away from the south of the island with the five Arabs, leading their horses through the swamp. Then they swept round to the west, outside the probable range of the enemy's scouts, and rode rapidly in the direction of the *tell*. When they came in sight of the ruins, lit up by the glow from the setting sun, Burnet confided the horses to the care of two of his men, and with the other three went forward on foot, taking advantage of what cover the barren country afforded. He hoped, before darkness closed upon the scene, to be able to discover, from the summit of the mound, whether the guns had been extricated from the bog; if there was no sign of them, it would be necessary to go farther north.

CHAPTER XV

A RAID

Burnet had only just reached his former observation post on the *tell* when, looking to the north, he saw two mounted men in khaki about two miles away riding slowly in his direction. A few minutes later there came into view the horses of the gun teams and the muzzles of the guns. Through the haze of dust cast up by the heavy vehicles it was impossible to see the escort, which was no doubt following.

It was clear that he had arrived only just in time. Half an hour later he would certainly have found the *tell* occupied. The day was already so far advanced that the Turks would probably camp on the *tell* for the night. He instantly decided on his course of action. The underground chamber was unknown to Burckhardt, the only man among the enemy who had previously visited the *tell*. Burnet resolved to take refuge there with his three Arabs, trusting to the chapter of accidents to give him later the opportunity he was seeking.

The Arabs were surprised when he lifted the slab and disclosed the cellar below, and their excitement was almost boyish as he climbed up into the colossal figure with his brush of reeds. Watching him smooth the sand over the slab they yielded to a burst of amusement: Burnet had never seen the customary gravity of the Arab so much impaired.

From his spy hole at the mouth of the animal Burnet kept watch for the coming of the enemy. Within ten minutes the two troopers came into sight. Immediately behind them now were two officers, in one of whom he recognised Major Burckhardt. And he could now see, not far in the rear of the two guns, a half squadron of cavalry, together with a number of men on foot, driving mules laden with boxes and large bundles, which contained no doubt ammunition and the impedimenta of a camp.

Burnet watched the approach of this force with some anxiety. Would they halt at the *tell*, or, late as the hour was, continue their march to Rejeb's stronghold? He had only a limited range of vision from inside the colossus, and

as the head of the column passed out of sight he feared that there was no intention of bivouacking, and his only chance of interfering with the guns would be lost.

Presently, however, he heard voices very near, and round the angle of the wall came Major Burckhardt, toddling along on foot, accompanied by a Turkish officer whom Burnet surmised to be the commander of the gunners. They came to a stand on the open space in front of the colossus, and Burckhardt, lifting his hand with the gesture of a showman, said:

"It was here that I had the adventure with the Englishman that I described to you as we came along. An ignorant fellow from Cambridge, whose books are the laughing-stock of every good German scholar. When I arrived I found him _____"

"But you said, I think, that you were here first."

"First in the neighbourhood. The Englishman was constantly dogging me. As I told you, I had made the world-shaking discovery that here Tukulti-Ninip _____"

"Yes, major, I remember; but it is getting late, and we have much to do before dark. I will have our tents pitched here. The guns had better remain at the foot of the *tell*, and the men must shift for themselves in the ruins."

"At a reasonable distance from our tents."

"Certainly."

"And the wind is south. We must not be disturbed by smoke from camp-fires."

"Nothing shall disturb you, major. General Eisenstein gave me particular

orders to pay you every consideration."

The Turkish colonel went away to give orders, and Burckhardt, exchanging the spectacles he wore for another pair, entered between the two figures and began to stroll about the ruins.

From below the mound came words of command, the rattle of accoutrements, the clanging of chains, and other sounds indicating the bustle of pitching camp. Presently one of the mules climbed the slope and was led through the porch. From its back a group of Turkish soldiers lifted the light shelter tents intended for their colonel and Major Burckhardt, and proceeded to pitch them. Watching these operations from the rear mouth of the colossus, Burnet had a momentary alarm when it seemed that Burckhardt's tent was to be placed exactly over the slab that covered the underground chamber; but the major himself came up as the men were spreading out the canvas, and ordered them to carry it a little higher up the *tell*, where the air was fresher and he could get a good view of the rising sun.

The tent pitching was completed. Orderlies came up with the officers' baggage. As the sky darkened, the glow of camp-fires rose from the lower ground on the northern side of the *tell*. The colonel returned; he was shortly followed by men carrying his evening meal, and he invited Burckhardt to share it with him in his tent. Burnet could see them in the interior, illuminated by a couple of candles, sitting on camp-stools at a small folding table, eating and drinking with the heartiness of men who have had a long day in the open. They lit cigars, smoked them through in drowsy silence; then Burckhardt yawned, stretched himself, and declaring that he was very sleepy, entered his own tent a few yards away, and let down the flap. Through the canvas Burnet saw the kindling of a candle and the German's bulky figure undressing. Then the candle was extinguished: the colonel's tent was already dark. A sentry began to pace up and down between the two tents.

It had been a tedious period of waiting, especially for the Arabs in the stuffy underground chamber. Nothing could be attempted until the camp had settled down. Sounds still came from below the *tell*. Even when all should be silent, there was much risk to be run. The surface of the *tell* was very dark; but the moon would rise in two or three hours. What was to be done must be done before then. The sentry was only about thirty yards from the slab; it must be removed in absolute silence. Other sentries, no doubt, were patrolling the camp. Would it be possible to elude them?

At last all was quiet, except for the slight sounds made by the horses. Burnet had arranged his plan. He would take one of the Arabs with him, leaving the other two in hiding. If he failed to return and release them, they were to wait until the camp was broken up and then to make the best of their way back to the island.

It was a nerve-trying moment when the slab was gently raised from below, and Burnet, with his head just above the hole, looked towards the officers' tents. He could barely see the figure of the sentry pacing slowly to and fro. With the silence of moles Burnet and his Arab companion crept out of the hole, and, crawling on all fours, stole along a few yards to the shelter of the ruined wall. Burnet had his revolver, the Arab only a knife.

They peered over the wall. Three campfires burned dully below the mound, some distance apart. Their light was insufficient to reveal the disposition of the bivouac. Moving stealthily round the corner of the wall, and sinking to the ground again, they crawled a few yards down the slope. A little to the right, at the foot of the mound, was a pile of objects which had certainly not been there before. Burnet guessed that it consisted of the stores which had been removed from the mules' backs. The two men threaded their way between boxes and bales, and continuing in the same direction, towards one of the camp-fires, discovered the guns close under the mound on the north-east side. Just above them, shadowing them from the little light that flickered from the stars, was

another stack of boxes.

Burnet had expected to find a special guard set over the guns. The camp, however, was so small—the total number of men seemed to be about a hundred and fifty—that the two sentries whose figures could be dimly descried moving up and down along the outer border of the bivouac had been deemed sufficient. There was a tent, however, near one of the camp-fires about a hundred yards away: it was clear that this was being used as a guard-house, for while Burnet, lying flat, was peering into the darkness four men came from the tent and marched northward. The sentries were being relieved. In a few minutes four men returned, and marched up the slope within twenty yards of the two figures lying there like logs. The officers' sentry was relieved; the sergeant came back with the three men released from duty, and re-entered the tent.

Near another camp-fire, farther away, was a larger tent, presumably devoted to the subaltern officers. The men lay here and there on the open ground. From the sounds that reached his ears Burnet guessed that the horses and mules were hobbled near a patch of swamp still farther to his right.

Burnet congratulated himself on his luck in having no special guard over the guns to deal with. He had the average Briton's dislike of attacking a man in the dark and at a disadvantage, and the possible necessity of disposing of an unsuspecting sentry had been disagreeable to contemplate. In the absence of such a guard, everything depended on whether he could move about without attracting the attention of the men in the guard-tent, of the distant sentries, or of any of the soldiers who might chance to be wakeful.

Bidding the Arab remain where he was, Burnet crawled to the foot of the slope, and in the deep shadow there stole along to the guns. He discovered just beyond them, and also beneath the limbers, various packages which from their shape evidently did not contain ammunition. This was disappointing. But going

on a little farther, he found the ammunition boxes stacked close under the tell, about thirty yards from the guns.

His aim was to destroy the guns, or at least render them useless. How was he to achieve it? The shells were not of much use for the purpose by themselves: he needed combustibles. No doubt there was plenty of combustible material among the stores; but it would not be easy to find it in the darkness, while the removal of it, necessitating movement to and fro, would increase the danger of detection. The only course possible was to make a rapid tour of all the stacks of stores, and finally to choose such material as seemed most suitable and most easily carried to the spot where it was needed.

He crept first to the stores placed above the guns: these latter would screen him from observation from the camp. A few moments' investigation showed that there was nothing to hope for here: the boxes evidently held nothing but food-stuffs. From this point he skirted the slope, passing his Arab companion on the way, until he reached a widely spread pile which had escaped his notice before, owing to the fact that it rose only a foot or two from the ground and was covered with a tarpaulin. Lying flat, and raising a corner of the cover, he was instantly aware of a smell of petrol, and his groping hand touched a can. For what purpose did the Turks require petrol? He groped still farther, and felt a long curved sheet of metal, in which there were holes at equal intervals apart. Further search discovered more metal sheets, a number of bolts, planks of wood, other objects whose nature he could not determine, and finally a small engine. The explanation flashed upon him: the Turks had brought up the sections of a motor-boat, no doubt intended for patrol work on the marshes about the island.

This discovery gave him a thrill of delight. No better combustibles could be required: here he had all he needed—if the enemy gave him time to use it. Taking two of the cans of petrol, he crept back to his companion under the shadow of the *tell*. A whispered instruction sent the Arab to the pile to bring

two more cans. They conveyed these with the same stealth to the guns. While the Arab returned for more petrol, Burnet went on to the piles of ammunition, and brought back a shell in its case. By the time he had completed three such journeys the Arab, who moved more quickly, had increased the number of petrol cans placed beneath the guns to ten.

Returning to the tarpaulin-covered pile for wood, they were alarmed by sounds of talking somewhere in the camp. They flung themselves flat and lay breathless, fearing that any further movement would be detected. The talking continued for some time, and Burnet grew more and more anxious. He could not tell how long the task had occupied him hitherto; if it were not finished before the rising of the moon all was over. After a trying period of suspense, however, the voices ceased. He stole on again with the Arab, removed some of the wooden sections of the motor-boat, and carried them back to the guns without further disturbance.

While the Arab laid the wood over and around the three shells under the guns and in the space between them, Burnet set about opening one of the petrol cans. It was stopped with a waxed cork, and the necessity of working quietly required that he should cut the cork out bit by bit with his knife. This being done at last, he emptied the contents of the can upon the heap, and laid the other cans on the top. At this spot all was now ready. Determined to do as much damage as possible, he resolved to wreck the motor-boat also beyond repair, and sent the Arab to open another can beneath the tarpaulin, giving him a few matches out of the single box he had with him. The Arab was to kindle a fire as soon as he saw the glow of Burnet's match. Then they would both hurry along the base of the mound and conceal themselves among the ruins until the officers had left their tents, as they would no doubt do when the explosion was heard. During their absence there would be time to release the two Arabs from the underground chamber and escape to the south. There was a risk of being seen in the light of the conflagration before they gained the shelter of the ruins, but Burnet trusted that in the excitement and confusion they would not be

noticed.

Tense with anticipation, Burnet waited for the Arab's signal that he was ready. It came at last: so perfect an imitation of a horse's whinny that the Turks, if they heard it, would think it came from one of their own beasts. Burnet struck a match, flung it into the petrol-soaked heap, and dashed away as he had arranged. Seeing no answering fire at the spot where the Arab was, he was about to risk everything and swerve in that direction when a flame sprang up, and he saw the Arab running half bent towards him. He learnt afterwards that the man's first match had gone out. Together they sprinted up the slope towards the shelter of the ruined wall.

The camp was already roused. Wild cries were heard: in the brilliant glare men were seen streaming from all parts towards the two fires. If any of them noticed the two figures rising up the mound they were too much startled, bemused with sleep as they were, to draw any inferences.

Burnet and the Arab had just reached the wall when the air shook and the earth trembled with a tremendous explosion. A few moments later the Turkish officer, bare-headed and without his tunic, came rushing from his tent, and ran down the slope, closely followed by the sentry. They passed the two lurking figures within a few feet. Burckhardt had not yet appeared, and a sudden idea flashed into Burnet's mind. There was no need of further hiding. He went quickly forward, passed between the two colossal figures, and in the lurid glare saw the burly major hurrying down from his tent beyond. He was without his spectacles, and Burnet's figure, dark against the glowing sky, might well have been mistaken for that of a Turkish officer.





MAJOR BURCKHARDT IS DISTURBED

MAJOR BURCKHARDT IS DISTURBED

"What—what is happening?" panted the major, in Arabic.

Burnet felt that the enemy was delivered into his hands.

"You are my prisoner, Major Burckhardt," said Burnet in English.

Utterly bewildered, the German dropped his hands to his sides, and stood speechless, staring with his short-sighted eyes at the young officer before him. He was incapable of resistance; started a little when Burnet addressed his companion in Arabic, but accompanied the Arab meekly when the man bade him march. Burnet lifted the slab, called the two Arabs from below, and with them in a few minutes overtook the prisoner and his escort. Hurrying Burckhardt along, they crossed the *tell*, descended the slope on the south-west side, and almost ran into a picket of Turks who were dashing towards the conflagration. The whole countryside was now lit up, and the non-commissioned officer in the rear of the group, catching sight of Burnet's uniform, shouted to his men. They paid no heed to his cry, and seeing himself deserted, the sergeant redoubled his pace and followed them up.

Burnet had no doubt that, as soon as the man made himself understood in the confusion, a party of the enemy would be dispatched in pursuit, but he trusted that the Turks would be for a time too busily occupied to heed the incredible report. Still, there was need for haste. The rim of the moon was just thrusting itself above the horizon. If the horses were not reached before the pursuit began there was great danger of being run down.

Burckhardt had now recovered the use of his tongue, and was complaining bitterly at being compelled to trot across damp ground in his slippers and pyjamas.

"It is contrary to the usages of war," he declared. "There shall be an indemnity."

"All in good time, major," said Burnet consolingly. "You shall be fitted out in Arab dress before long; that will be no novelty to you."

"What? You know me, and my work, and you treat me with such indignity!"

"Well, you know, you once bundled my father, according to your own account, ignominiously from the *tell* of Tukulti-Ninip. This is only a mild reprisal."

"Who then are you?"

"I am the son of Mr. Burnet."

The German was silent. The pace caused him to breathe heavily; but it was his secret thoughts that provoked the sigh which presently escaped him.

It was only about a quarter of an hour after they had left the *tell* that they heard the thudding of galloping horses behind them. Burnet plunged into the nearest clump of reeds, and held his pistol to Burckhardt's head until the pursuers had ridden past. Then, winding their way under the guidance of one of the Arabs through the swamp, they continued their march until they arrived at the spot where they had left the horses. Mounting Burckhardt behind him, Burnet ordered his Arab guide to lead straight for home. They rode on in the growing moonlight, following the route by which they had come; and as dawn was breaking, regained the island, tired out, but well satisfied with their night's work.

CHAPTER XVI

CLOSING IN

The story of that night's achievement, told with the usual oriental exaggeration by the Arabs who had accompanied Burnet, evoked an extraordinary burst of enthusiasm among Rejeb's people. The capture of one of the terrible Germans filled them with a childish pleasure and satisfaction. Major Burckhardt, it is true, did not look very terrible. Without his uniform he was just a fat little man; without his spectacles he looked out dreamily upon a disappointing world. Clothed in Arab dress, his appearance drew many a smile from Jackson and Sturge, the machine-gunners, who, however, with the Tommy's accustomed kindness, did what they could for his comfort. They gave him half the small supply of tobacco they had with them, and one of their pipes, smoking the other in turn.

For three or four days the Turks left the garrison in peace, except for occasional sniping. The non-appearance of guns seemed pretty conclusive proof that Burnet's work had been effectual. He wondered whether they would send for others before resuming their attack. That would give probably more than a week's respite. Would the British relief force arrive during that time? If not, he foresaw a very critical situation. The defences could not long withstand a bombardment; moreover, the food question was always an anxiety. Still, he must hope for the best, and employ the quiet period in doing what he could to strengthen the defences.

In this task the machine-gunners did yeoman service. Acting for the time as foremen of the works, so to speak, they assisted him in directing the building of small redoubts along the edge of the embankment from which he could command the stretch of water between the island and the firm land beyond. That an attack by water, or at any rate supported from the water, had been

contemplated was clear from the inclusion of a motor-boat among the enemy's impedimenta. The destruction of the boat had rendered that for the moment impossible, and it was unlikely, perhaps, that the Turks would have another boat to spare.

In addition to the redoubts, he erected a long, slightly curved breastwork behind the embankment, at such a distance from the latter that it was concealed from the view of the enemy. Without experience in this sort of work himself, he relied on Sturge and Jackson, who were learned in all that pertained to parados, traverses, and so on, and took a great pride in the fortification which the Arabs constructed to their plans, and still more in the fact that, though they had picked up only a word or two of Arabic, they were able to dispense with Burnet's assistance as interpreter after the first day.

The Turks, meanwhile, though they refrained from attacking, were not idle. They strengthened their bridgehead half-way along the causeway, fencing the latter on both sides with a mud wall just high enough to cover their movements up and down. The wall was no doubt easily penetrable by rifle or machine-gun bullets, but, as the Turks must have guessed, the garrison's supply of ammunition was not sufficient to allow them to pepper the wall at random on the chance of hitting the men behind it. Burnet hindered their work as much as possible by employing some of the best marksmen among the Arabs as snipers; the vegetation, however, that fringed the causeway formed in itself a very effective screen to the enemy, and he feared that a good proportion of the snipers' bullets were wasted.

Remembering the old adage that it is lawful to learn from the enemy, Burnet was inclined to raise similar walls on his own side of the central gap. But he saw on reflection that if the Turks succeeded in bridging the gap—and that was always to be reckoned with—such walls would give them invaluable cover right up to the shore of the island. He therefore abandoned the idea.

It was Sturge who suggested the employment of listening patrols by night, to discover any new movement on the part of the enemy. His crude idea was merely to send a few picked men along the causeway as far as the gap. Burnet improved on this. With Rejeb's consent he sent, nightly, a swimmer on an inflated skin from the kelak to worm his way under cover of the reeds as near to the enemy's walls as possible. For three nights the scout's report was of no great value, but on the fourth, just before dawn, he came back with the news that there was considerable movement at the bridgehead and along the causeway, and a good deal of bustle on shore.

Not a little surprised that the enemy, after waiting so long for guns, had apparently decided to attack without them, Burnet at once reinforced the small body of picked men on duty at the outwork at his end of the gap, and sent word to the garrisons of the redoubts to be on the alert. The two English gunners were eager to take a part at once, but Burnet, with wise forethought, declined to let them use their guns or even enter the firing-line. The enemy's intentions were not yet disclosed.

It turned out that the warning had reached him only just in time. When he joined the Arabs at the outwork he saw, in the grey light of dawn, several dim shapes on the water on both sides of the causeway, slowly approaching the island. In a minute or two he made them out to be small kelaks crowded with men. Some of them were converging on the gap, the others were keeping a straight course for the island.

Before he had time even to conjecture what the enemy's aims might be, a hot fusillade, no doubt intended to cover the approach of the kelaks, broke out from behind the breastwork on the further side of the gap. One or two of the Arabs were hit before they had obeyed his order to lie low and hold their fire until he gave the word. At the same moment he sent a man back to the shore with instructions to their comrades there not to fire until they could be sure of hitting.

As soon as the individual forms of the men on the kelaks could be distinguished Burnet gave the order to open fire. The range where he stood was almost point blank, and the first volley all but cleared two or three of the kelaks of their crews, the vessels drifting idly for a few moments and getting in the way of the rest. But the others crowded on, and in spite of their losses under the continuous fire of the Arabs they pushed into the gap, where they were partly protected by the broken edge of the causeway.

Now Burnet seized their intention. The kelaks jostling each other in the gap formed a sort of pontoon, not so much below the surface of the causeway but that the enemy could easily reach it. The enemy's fire suddenly ceased; then a stream of men passed from the outwork at their side of the gap, leapt from kelak to kelak, and tried to spring over the parapet on the nearer side. Many of them fell before they reached it, but their places were instantly filled, and the fight became a hand-to-hand grapple.

Dawn had increased to almost full daylight with the rapidity characteristic of this latitude. Meanwhile the Arabs on shore had already been directing a hot fire upon the crews of the kelaks approaching them. And now, from behind the enemy's outwork, through embrasures suddenly opened in the mud walls, two machine-guns, one on each side, began to play upon the shore. The Arabs' position there being considerably higher than the level of the water, the Turks were able to shoot without danger of hitting their own men. The fire from the machine-guns and a hurricane fusillade from the opposite shore of the channel kept down the Arabs' fire, and the kelaks drew slowly nearer to their goal.

When the fighting at the gap became close, Burnet seized the rifle of a fallen Arab and did strenuous work in holding the enemy at bay. Such of them as succeeded in clambering upon the parapet were hurled back upon their comrades in the kelaks beneath. But the assailants were all sturdy Turks and stern fighters. Fresh men were continually pouring across the gap, and the Arabs, fight as gallantly as they might, would sooner or later yield to the enemy

from sheer weariness. The breastwork could not be held much longer. Indeed, the inevitable moment came earlier than Burnet expected, for two kelaks, propelled by stout polemen, pushed beyond the gap, and ran close in on the side of the causeway, the Turks upon them opening fire upon the defenders from the flank and rear.

Burnet's little band was thrown into momentary confusion by this unexpected attack, and several Turks gained a footing on the breastwork. A final effort was necessary before the position could be safely abandoned. Telling off a number of the men to return the fire from the kelaks, Burnet called on the rest to support him. With a shrill cry they rallied, and threw themselves upon the enemy with an impetuosity that nothing could withstand. The Turks were forced back, some falling upon the kelaks in the gap, others into the water. Once more the breastwork was clear.

Then Burnet gave the order for retirement. The flank attack had been beaten off; the causeway was open. One by one at intervals of a few yards the Arabs dashed back towards the shore. Burnet kept a few men with him to act as rearguard, and waited until the wounded had almost reached the end of the causeway before he followed them up. It seemed that the enemy was hardly aware of what was happening, for the retirement was not harassed until the last few men had almost reached the bridgehead. Then, however, the fusillade broke out again, answered by the Arabs on shore, and one or two men, including Burnet himself, were hit before they had gained shelter. Burnet had already seen that the kelaks which had headed for the shore had been driven back, in spite of the support of the machine-guns. The Arabs at the bridgehead and in the redoubts had suffered very little loss, and he felt that the honours of this first encounter were with the defence. The Turks, seeing that their opponents had made good their retreat, ceased fire. They had captured the gap, but it was clear that they had to master a further line of defences before they gained access to the island. What would be their next move? Their success at the gap might give them sufficient encouragement to push on after a

breathing space and finish the job while their blood was up and the tide seemed to have turned in their favour. It might prove a somewhat desperate undertaking unless they had more artillery at their disposal than the two machine-guns which had already been in action; but they in their turn would not suspect that they had to face machine-guns, and they would probably conclude that the Arabs' retirement after a short action was an earnest of further retreat as soon as they were hard pressed.

It seemed to Burnet that a serious attack in force along the causeway was to be expected and provided against. Like many another subaltern in the heroic annals of British warfare, he found himself alone, at the head of an alien force, badly provided, and, what was worse, totally inexperienced. But it is in such circumstances as these that British valour has shone forth most brightly, and British ingenuity most thoroughly proved itself, and Burnet was to show forth those sterling qualities which hundreds before him had evinced.

If the defence was to have the least chance of success, the rough and hastily contrived fort at the bridgehead must be held to the last moment. In spite of the limited quantity of ammunition, the time had clearly come to bring the machine-guns into action. Burnet sent for the two gunners, who had been itching to take their part, and told them frankly what he expected, and how he proposed to meet the attack.

"We'll give 'em what for, sir," exclaimed Sturge, rubbing his hands. "With Bill on one side and me on the other we'll keep that Margate pier clear of Turks for a hundred years."

"Well, you know how many rounds you have," said Burnet. "But I don't want both guns in action at first. Both might be knocked out. We'll keep one in reserve, in case anything happens. The one we have in the fort is certainly pretty well protected against anything less than a 9-pounder, but we must provide against accidents. You can help each other in working it. Open fire

only if the enemy make a rush along the causeway."

Something more than two hours passed. The enemy were seen to be framing a practicable floating bridge from the kelaks, and Burnet ordered some of his best marksmen to snipe them. But they were to some extent covered by the captured outwork, and completed their task with very little loss.

A few minutes afterwards, the kelaks which had not been required for the bridge emerged from both sides of the gap and approached the island, keeping close to the walls of the causeway. At the same time a column of Turks streamed across the bridge, sprang over the abandoned outwork, and rushed without making any attempt at regular formation straight for the bridgehead. From the shelter of their walls on the causeway itself, as well as from their main position at the further end, the enemy opened a heavy covering fire, to which the Arabs replied thinly, and chiefly for form's sake, Burnet desiring to mislead the Turks while husbanding his ammunition.

The head of the enemy column had advanced a hundred yards along the causeway before any attempt was made to check them. Then, however, while they were in full career, the machine-gun suddenly rapped out its deadly message. The effect was like that of a huge scythe sweeping along the causeway. Within less than a minute there was scarcely a man left erect between the bridgehead and the gap. The few who had escaped the hail of bullets flung themselves frantically into the water, and swam for safety, some of them falling victims to rifle fire from the flanks of the Arabs strung out behind their breastwork near the shore.

As soon as the causeway was clear, the machine-gun ceased fire. It was evident that the enemy was disconcerted by the check. Their plan of operations had taken no account of the possession of a machine-gun by the defenders. Some time elapsed before they made any further movement. Then with their own machine-guns they directed a rain of bullets upon the Arabs, raking their

position from end to end. At the first sound of the guns Burnet ordered his men to throw themselves down, and all the effect produced by the enemy was the carving of innumerable dents in the stonework, and the infliction of slight wounds on a few men.

Trusting probably rather in the moral than in the material effect of this miniature bombardment, the Turks launched a second attack. Their machine-guns were now silent, for they could not fire on the Arabs defending the bridgehead without hitting their own men. Again a column of brave and gallant men surged along the causeway, springing over the bodies of their fallen comrades, and encouraging one another with strident shouts. But in face of the terrible machine of man's invention the highest human valour availed nothing. Confined to the narrow causeway, the Turks had no means of escape. Once more they were mown down, and the frenzied survivors took to the water. Burnet contrived to signal to the enemy that they might remove the wounded without molestation, and for a time men were engaged in the grim work of clearing away the traces of their defeat.

While a fight is in progress, a man has no time to think of anything but the deadly work in hand. It is afterwards, in quiet moments, that he cannot but reflect on the causes of warfare, the root ideas that develop into so terrible a harvest of pain and misery. Burnet, with less than a year's soldiering behind him, had not become hardened. He was not content with knowing that killing was his duty: he felt bound to go a step farther back, and ask himself, was his duty right? Amid much that was puzzling his thoughts all converged to the same conclusion: force could only be overcome by force. The Germans had elected for military force as the efficient agent of civilisation. All that they had done since the war began showed that German civilisation was rotten to the core. It was a system in which lying, low cunning, treachery and brutality were, not tolerated, but applauded. The nations that cherished different ideals, or, to put it on the lowest ground, desired to live their own lives unmolested, had either to submit to material loss, moral degradation, the cowed and hopeless existence

of slaves, or to stand up defiantly against this monstrous tyranny and fight it with its own weapons. Only thus could they save their souls.

CHAPTER XVII

RAISING THE SIEGE

Burnet felt that the checks they had suffered were not likely to cause such tenacious fighters as the Turks to abandon their object. The fact that the attacks had been made by Turks and not by Halil's Arabs was clear proof that the enemy's high command attached importance to the capture of the island. With ample resources in their rear it could not be doubted that artillery would be brought up, and then the inevitable end was a matter of a day or two, perhaps only of hours, unless help came. Such help had been promised, but Burnet knew well enough that the strategic plans of the coming campaign could not be disarranged for his benefit, and though the possession of the island was of some importance to the security of the British left flank, it might well be that other considerations would prevent the dispatch of a relief force. In any case relief might not arrive in time.

Whether Rejeb would allow his men to prolong their resistance when the odds against them became overwhelming was a question that gave Burnet some concern. He thought it fair to put the situation frankly before the young chief, who was mending but slowly, and was in no condition to take an active part in the defence. Rejeb replied with equal frankness.

"The burden is truly heavy upon us, my brother," he said, "but we will not cast it from our backs until there is no more hope. What if we should steal

away by night? Without our horses we should fall a prey to Hali's mounted legion. Moreover, even if I escaped alive, my name would be evermore a reproach. Surely it is better to fight and die than to run and live dishonoured."

"That is well said. With your consent, then, we will resist the enemy to the death."

He thought of sending a messenger into the British lines with a note relating what had happened and explaining that he could scarcely hope to carry on more than a few days longer. But reflecting that it would take the man several days to reach his destination, even with the best of luck, and that unless the relieving force had already started by then it could hardly arrive in time, he gave up the idea. If he had been able to overhear the counsels of the Turkish officers he would have found his worst fears realised. The destruction of the guns and the capture of Major Burckhardt had infuriated General Eisenstein, who had dispatched a German officer from his staff to conduct the operations, with more field-guns.

For some days the enemy's activity was limited to sniping, and to pushing forward the walls along the island section of the causeway. The Arabs could do little to impede them. The work was done at night, with the assistance of kelaks, and always under cover of as many troops as could be concentrated on the causeway and the kelaks on either side. An attempt to attack the wall-builders must inevitably be outflanked. Nor could another gap, nearer the island, be made in the causeway. The enemy was always on the alert, and working parties of Arabs would only have been destroyed.

Day by day Burnet saw the walls approaching the bridgehead. Provisions, in spite of the most careful rationing, were running low; and another action like the last would exhaust his stock of ammunition.

The walls had been pushed to within fifty yards of the bridgehead when,

early one morning, the garrison was startled by the sound of an exploding shell. It had burst on the embankment a few yards below the emplacement from which the machine-gun had repelled the last attack: the enemy was clearly ranging on that spot. The Arabs showed signs of nervousness, but were reassured by the broad smiles upon the faces of the two machine-gunners. Burnet's first precaution after the late action had been to change the position of the gun. Two new emplacements, well masked, had been prepared within a short distance of each other and connected by a shallow trench. Before a second shell fell, Sturge and Jackson, assisted by a party of Arabs, had removed the gun from the threatened position to another about twenty yards away. But Burnet realised that bombardment was the beginning of the end.

To avoid useless loss of men, he withdrew the garrison from the bridgehead. The defences, consisting only of piles of loose stones and rubble, while effective against bullets, must soon be knocked to pieces by shells, even from field-guns, and would prove only a death-trap to men congregated behind them. He had reason to be thankful for the precautions he had taken when the enemy, after sending shell after shell into the vacant emplacement until it was thoroughly demolished, got to work on the bridgehead. Some twenty rounds reduced this, the first line of defence, to a mere rubbish heap.

Fortunately the enemy did not suspect the existence of the main trench which had been dug in the rear, and was masked by the embankment on the shore of the island. Having destroyed the bridgehead, the Turkish gunners began to search the embankment methodically, dropping shells at every few yards along the front. The embankment, consisting of deep and closely packed mud, could not be broken down by the light shells from field-guns; but the bombardment would have played havoc with the defenders if, as the Turks no doubt supposed, they were extended behind it.

As soon as their intentions became clear, Burnet withdrew the machine-gun from the second emplacement to the third, which was well retired from the

shore and beyond the enemy's immediate objective. This precaution turned out to be unnecessary, or at least premature, for the bombardment was limited to about two hundred yards on each side of the bridgehead. Seeing that the second emplacement was outside the enemy's present zone of fire, Burnet had the machine-gun quickly restored to its former position.

Hitherto the Arabs had not fired a single shot in answer to the bombardment. Not a man of the enemy was in sight, and the guns were far away on the mainland, completely hidden. The Arabs, at first alarmed by the deafening explosions and the devastating effects of the shells, had begun to recover tone when they saw that the damage was mainly material. A few of them had been hit by flying splinters of stone, but their injuries were light, and none had been killed.

At last the bombardment of the embankment ceased. A few moments later shells began to fall on the ruined buildings in the centre of the island. Anticipating this, Burnet had told the small body of Arabs whom he was holding there in reserve what to do, and they, with Rejeb, had already taken refuge in the deep underground chambers.

Immediately after the enemy's fire was lifted, a strong force of Turks rushed along the causeway, being protected by the walls until they came to the open stretch of some fifty yards. A few succeeded in reaching the demolished bridgehead; the rest were caught by the fire of the machine-gun from its new emplacement. The attack was too costly to be maintained; the survivors were recalled; and during the confusion and disorganisation due to this unexpected check a party of Arabs crept down to the ruins of the bridgehead, and after a short, sharp fight killed or captured the handful of Turks who had penetrated so far. Two Arabs escorted the prisoners to the rear; the others, at Burnet's orders, took cover behind the remains of the defences, to hold them if possible against infantry attack, but to retreat if they were again shelled.

As Burnet expected, the Turkish gunners again changed their objective, directing their fire upon the neighbourhood of the second machine-gun emplacement. The British soldiers, however, had already withdrawn the gun to its third position. Burnet saw clearly enough that in this game of hide-and-seek the opponent must ultimately win; but meantime it seemed to him the most effectual means of holding up or disconcerting the attack and playing for time. Sturge assured him that the enemy had no more than two field-guns in action, as he had judged by timing their shots; and the area of the island was large enough to give them plenty of work before they could be assured that they had searched every likely place for the elusive machine-gun.

This cheerful forecast was rudely belied only a few minutes afterwards. In altering their range, the Turkish gunners dropped several shells on the open ground between the central ruins and the embankment. One of these burst within a few yards of the machine-gun, which was blown off its stand and irreparably damaged. Sturge himself was hit by flying splinters and thrown to the ground. It was seen that he was unable to rise, and since he could not be carried to the rear without being exposed to the view of the enemy, all that could be done was to place him in the trench until darkness gave an opportunity of removing him.

Rejoicing that he had kept the second machine-gun in reserve, Burnet sent Jackson to fetch it from its shelter behind a pile of stones at the extreme left of the position. The shell that had ruined the first had found it by accident; another had exploded in the trench and killed or wounded several of the Arabs; but the Turks had now shortened their range and were dropping their shells many yards nearer the shore. The incident, however, was very disquieting. Luck might favour the enemy again, or the position of the second machine-gun might be more quickly discovered when it came into action, and it was the last reserve. Moreover, the casualties suffered in the trench, more serious than any that the Arabs had hitherto experienced, had had a manifestly depressing effect on the rest of the garrison. Burnet felt a racking anxiety as to their steadiness

when the next attack should come.

He was standing beside Jackson, who had just set up the machine-gun, when the man suddenly swung round, exclaiming:

"Hear that hum, sir?"

The bursting of a shell drowned all other sounds, but when the rumbling echoes had ceased, Burnet caught a faint drone far away. He scanned the sky all around; for about a minute nothing was to be seen; but between the shots the humming was clearly audible, growing louder continually. An aeroplane was approaching: was it friend or foe?

At last a speck appeared in the eastern sky, growing rapidly larger. It had evidently been seen by the Turks, for the bombardment suddenly ceased: they too, no doubt, were asking themselves the same question. As it drew nearer to the island, the aeroplane rose higher, and presently the prolonged crackle of rifle fire from the Turkish position proclaimed that they had recognised it as a British machine.

Hope surged in Burnet's breast. The eyes of all the garrison were fixed on the aeroplane. It flew high over the island, wheeled round, passed directly over the trench, the disdainful target of innumerable Turkish bullets, then soared away northward. A few moments later two deafening explosions in quick succession shook the air, and two columns of smoke rose in the neighbourhood of the northern end of the causeway. The machine again turned, swept away to the east, and was soon out of sight. Before it disappeared, an Arab ran up to Burnet, and handed him an object which he declared had fallen from the sky as the aeroplane passed over, and struck the ground near him. Tearing off the canvas cover of the missile, Burnet found a small shell case, within which was a slip of paper. With leaping heart he read the message. "A flying column of horse is advancing up the Euphrates, and should make contact

with you to-morrow morning. We are opening the ball. Carry on."

Burnet tingled from head to foot. Without a word he handed the paper to Jackson, who, less restrained, let out a wild cheer. Burnet told the Arab to convey the good news to his comrades, and the air was soon filled with a chorus of discordant shouts. Gloominess of spirit vanished; help was at hand; every man glowed with new courage.

It was now past midday. Burnet was under no illusion. News of the British advance must have reached the Turks opposing him; it probably explained their eagerness to rush the island before the walls on the causeway had been completed. It could hardly be doubted that they would now make a supreme effort to storm the position: the garrison's sternest ordeal was yet to come.

To Burnet's surprise, though the bombardment was kept up intermittently by the field-guns during the rest of the day, there was no infantry assault. He jumped to the conclusion that they intended to attack during the night; perhaps to make a feint along the causeway, and try to gain the shore of the island in their kelaks. At nightfall one part, at any rate, of their plan was disclosed. From the causeway came the sounds of many men hard at work: it was clear that the enemy were toiling with fierce energy to finish the walls that would cover the last fifty yards of their approach. The task could easily be completed before the dawn, for it could not be effectually hindered; the machine-gun was now so placed that it could not fire directly along the causeway, but only at an angle across it, and the builders, being protected by the walls already raised, were not likely to suffer much loss in pushing the additions forward.

The enemy's full purpose was patent. Covered by the walls, they would rush the ruins of the bridgehead, debouch behind the embankment, and trust to their superior numbers to carry the inner defences by one overwhelming assault. Hampered by the darkness, the garrison would be at a great disadvantage. Neither rifles nor machine-guns could command the whole front

of attack. If the enemy were contained in the centre, they had sufficient men to sweep round on both flanks and take the defenders in the rear.

Burnet saw that there was only one means of saving the situation—of gaining time until, with the morning, relief came. The enemy must be forestalled. It was important to choose the right moment for the counter-move. If made too early, and defeated, it might precipitate disaster. If too long deferred, it might be just too late. Leaving judgment or chance to decide the point, he quickly made preparations. He sent for the small reserve which had hitherto occupied the underground chambers in the centre of the island, posted them just behind the advanced breastwork, and dividing the rest of the garrison, some three hundred in all, into two parties, he ordered them to steal quietly down to the embankment, and be ready to scale it at the word of command.

In the early hours of the morning the lessening of sounds from the causeway seemed to indicate that the work on the walls was nearly completed. It was pitch dark; not even a reflection of starlight could be seen in the water. Burnet gave the word; the men slipped noiselessly across the embankment, half of them on each side of the causeway; then, no longer preserving silence, dashed into the shallows, which extended some fifteen or twenty paces from the shore, and began to wade towards the working party. The Turks had only a few moments' warning; but they made fierce resistance with clubbed rifles and pioneer tools to the Arabs who swarmed up on each side of the causeway. There were some minutes of bitter hand-to-hand fighting; but the enemy were for the nonce outnumbered; they received no support from the rear; and presently they fled helter-skelter, suffering heavy losses in their flight from the rifle fire of their assailants.

Burnet carried the pursuit along the causeway until progress was blocked by a traverse. The enemy were apparently not in sufficient strength to attempt a counter-attack until reinforced. Taking advantage of their inaction, which he knew could not last long, he ordered some of his men to demolish the newly

constructed mud walls, while the remainder kept up a dropping fire. When the walls lining the last thirty yards of the causeway had been destroyed, he led the men back to their entrenchments, leaving a small detachment at the ruins of the bridgehead.

The night work of the enemy had been frustrated, but Burnet did not flatter himself that the danger was over. Without doubt they were determined to capture the island before the arrival of the relieving force, of whose approach they must by this time be well aware. How would the Arabs, wearied by exertions unfamiliar to them, suffering from scarcity of food, endure the shock and strain of the crisis?

With the first lifting of the sky at dawn the field-guns began a systematic shelling of the embankment and of the area immediately behind it, where it was now clear to them from previous events that the garrison were entrenched. The Arabs, lying close under their breastwork, suffered few serious casualties, though many of them were bruised and grazed by fragments of stone and shell, and some were overcome by the nauseating fumes. Presently the guns were turned on the ruins of the bridgehead, and Burnet at once withdrew the detachment from its precarious shelter there.

He had scarcely done so when the storm broke. A dense column of Turks came rushing along the causeway. Kelaks, one of large size, carrying a machine-gun protected with sand-bags, swept out from the gap. From loopholes in the walls on the causeway the enemy poured a hot fire upon the flanks of the defenders' position. Numbers of Halil's Arabs swam in the wake of the kelaks, which were approaching the island on the side of the causeway remote from Jackson's machine-gun. Jackson directed his fire across the causeway, and took a heavy toll of the horde of Turks, but failed to check the determined rush. Finding that the machine-gun had not been disposed of, the Turkish gunners again searched the right flank of Burnet's position, and though they did not succeed in hitting the exact spot where Jackson, unperturbed, was

emptying his belts of ammunition one after another, he was struck more than once by chips and slivers of metal and stone.

As soon as the field-guns changed the direction of their fire, Burnet called on some of the Arabs to follow him to the embankment, from which they poured a hail of bullets upon the enemy. In spite of losses, the Turks and their Arab allies pressed on and penetrated to the bridgehead. Meanwhile some of the kelaks had reached the shore opposite Burnet's left, and parties of the enemy swarmed up to the further side of the embankment and established themselves there.

The enemy found it impossible to maintain their position at the bridgehead in the centre beneath the withering fire of the Arabs under Burnet's immediate command. Baffled but not beaten, they too sought shelter under the embankment on either side, and some of them, at the extreme horn of the arc, so placed themselves that they could enfilade the defenders. Burnet was compelled to withdraw his men hastily behind their breastwork. If that was carried the whole island was at the enemy's mercy.

There was a brief lull. Some hundreds of Turks and Arabs had now gained a footing on the island, and were no doubt collecting their energies for a final overwhelming rush. Burnet employed the interval in doing what was possible for his wounded, and in going from end to end of the defences, speaking words of encouragement to the men.

It was nearly two hours before the rush came. Across the gap at the end of the causeway, or wading through the shallows, or on the kelaks, which had returned for reinforcements, the enemy swarmed to the assault with exultant cries. They were now protected by the embankment except where the machine-gun still enfiladed them, but Jackson's ammunition was running short, and fired less rapidly than before. They had landed their own machine-gun on the extreme left, and were seen hastily cutting an embrasure in the

embankment. If they were unmolested, the defences would soon be swept from end to end, and all would be over.

Burnet hurriedly collected fifty men, and led them straight for the gun. A few fell to rifle fire; Burnet himself had his rifle struck from his hand; but they flung themselves upon the machine-gun team with the swiftness of a tornado. A crowded minute of fierce hand-to-hand fighting gave them possession of the gun, and they dashed back with it, the retreat involving more losses but not one-tenth of those that the gun would have inflicted in a few seconds Burnet's only regret was that he could not employ the gun against the enemy.





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THE DASH FOR THE MACHINE-GUN

By this time they had scrambled over the embankment and were swarming towards breastwork. Burnet rushed to the centre, and succeeded in maintaining a certain fire discipline among the Arabs within sound of his voice. Again and again the enemy recoiled before the defenders' fire, at point-blank range. But reinforcements were continually streaming up; one of the field-guns was now concentrating its fire on the centre of the position; and the sight of comrades falling around them severely strained the resolution of the Arabs. Their valour, proof against infantry attack, could scarcely be expected to endure shelling to which no reply could be made. If the risk of hitting their own men had not constrained the Turkish gunners to plant their shells well beyond them, Burnet felt that his force might soon have become utterly demoralised.

Hurrying from point to point, now to give a heartening word to the survivors

of a shell-burst, now to direct the rifle fire where especial danger threatened, he lost count of time and all sense of personal risk. His sole thought was to hold on as long as possible. Now and again he found himself asking, "Why don't they come?" and listening for the shots that would announce the proximity of the relieving force.

It was nearly midday. Burnet, on the left, was suddenly conscious that the machine-gun had ceased firing, and saw Jackson hurrying towards him with a rifle.

"Played out, sir," said the man. "Fired my last round."

He had scarcely finished speaking when a bomb exploded near the angle of the breastwork. Immediately afterwards a strong party of Turks swept round, dashed through the smoke, and began to bomb their way along the trench. The Arabs crowded back in panic. Some swarmed out of the trench and rushed frantically towards the centre of the island. Burnet and Jackson, together with a few of the more stout-hearted Arabs, fired into the advancing mass of Turks; but there was no adequate defence against bombs, no possibility of stemming the rout.

Step by step they fell back, towards the men who, as yet unaware of the new weapon in use against their left, were still holding the defences with grim valour. The Turkish bombers advanced slowly, respecting the rifles which so steadily sped their bullets through the increasing volume of smoke. And now Burnet saw that another party of the enemy, passing the end of the breastwork, was striking up across the island. At this moment a shell burst a few yards away; he was struck below the knee, and sank to the ground. Jackson, smothered with earth, rushed to his side.

"Carry on!" gasped Burnet. "We won't give in till the last gasp."

Jackson turned about, and fired again into the advancing bombers. The

field-guns ceased to play; only rifle fire and bomb explosions could be heard. Then, after a minute or two, came reports of guns again, but no shells fell. The blare of bugles was heard, and a few seconds afterwards Jackson, still facing the enemy, shouted:

"By Jupiter, they're bolting, sir."

It was true. The men who had penetrated the island were running back. At the breastwork the Turks had suddenly dropped away, and were now streaming along the causeway, scrambling on board the kelaks, plunging into the water, in desperate anxiety to save themselves from the new danger that threatened them. The ever-increasing boom of guns away to the west told them clearly enough what that danger was; and Jackson, running a little way up the rising ground behind the scene of the long struggle, soon declared that he saw the glint of sunlight on lances above the patches of vegetation.

Rejeb's Arabs, weary though they were, sprang over the breastwork and the embankment and dashed along the causeway in pursuit of their retreating foe. Many of them suffered from their own temerity, for the Turk in defeat is still a dangerous man, and some of the fugitives halted and turned upon their pursuers with grim ferocity.

Some hours later, Burnet, lying on a couch in Rejeb's tower, was embarrassed by the congratulations of the colonel commanding the relieving force.

"Thanks to you," said that officer, "we've made a bag of some five or six hundred Turks who are now on their way to enjoy the luxuries of imprisonment, for by all accounts they'll fare better with us than they've been doing with their own people lately."

"Did they put up a fight, sir?" asked Burnet.

"They made a little noise until our main body came up. Unluckily that old rascal Halil's men got away on their horses, most of them: after our long march our horses were too fagged to round them up. But Halil won't give any more trouble in these parts."

"And what of our big push, sir?"

"We've started, and one may say that Bagdad will be our next stop. You'll be out of it, I'm afraid, young man; you'll be under treatment for synovitis or something of the sort when we march in."

"I hope to goodness not, sir," said Burnet, pulling a long face.

The colonel smiled.

"That's the right spirit," he said. "Well, I'll take care that the Chief knows all about your doings here. If the enemy had got this position they might have worried us a good deal on our left flank. But I'm not sure that your friend the chief here doesn't owe you more than we do, for it seems to me that he stood an uncommonly good chance of being wiped out."

And later, when Rejeb and Burnet were alone together, the Arab thanked the Englishman with all the fervour of a generous nature.

"I kiss your eyes, my brother," he said in conclusion, and Burnet knew that no Eastern phrase more expressive of gratitude could have been used.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE TIMELY BOMB

This is not the place, even if it were now possible, to describe in detail the brilliant campaign in which General Maude retrieved previous errors and disasters, and struck a blow at German aggression in the east from which, it is

to be hoped, it will never recover. A bare outline will suffice to bridge the gap between Burnet's last day on the island, and the day, three months later, when, fully recovered from his wound, he made another solitary entry into Bagdad.

On the night of December 13 the great advance, the climax of months of the most careful preparation, began. General Maude, by a surprise attack, seized a point on the Hai stream some seven miles south of Kut, and threw his mixed force of cavalry and infantry northward towards the enemy's formidable entrenched position round that town. About a week later, his airmen, who had done invaluable work in scouting and in raiding the enemy's camps, heavily bombed his ammunition dumps higher up the river. While one of his corps, under General Cobbe, was making deceptive demonstrations against the fortifications at Sanna-i-Yat, on the north bank of the Tigris, another, under General Marshall, steadily pressed the Turks back towards the south bank; and parties of cavalry harassed their communications between the Tigris and the Euphrates.

For three weeks more the enemy maintained an obstinate resistance to General Marshall's pressure; then they were compelled to abandon all their positions south of the river, and fell back beyond Kut. It was not until February 22 that General Cobbe's force captured the first two lines of trenches at Sanna-i-Yat. On that night also British and Indian troops, after heroic efforts, forced the passage of the river at Shumran, some ten miles upstream, and next day the fortifications which had defied all the attacks of the troops who attempted to relieve General Townshend were in British hands. The immediate result was the fall of the town which had been the scene of almost the greatest surrender in British history.

There was no relaxation in the forward movement. While cavalry and airmen chased the fleeing enemy on and over the land, gunboats harried them from the river. Here and there they made attempts to stand, but lost so heavily, especially in guns and prisoners, that their flight degenerated into a stampede.

Within less than a week they had been hunted half-way to Bagdad. Then the rapidity of the pursuit necessitated a halt, in order that supplies might be brought up and the extended lines of communication secured. This inevitable halt prevented General Maude from destroying the Turks as a military force, and enabled them to restore some semblance of order.

The advance was resumed on March 5, after only a week's delay. The Turks had had time to throw up entrenchments in more than one well-selected position, and here they contested the ground with the stubbornness for which they are famed. At the Diala river, twenty miles below Bagdad, they were massed in great strength, and fought with courage and tenacity to prevent the British troops from crossing. The story of the forcing of the passage, after repeated failures and terrible losses, by the Lancashire and Wiltshire regiments, is one of the most heroic in our annals.

When the river was crossed, the enemy lost heart, and withdrew towards Bagdad. On March 11 General Cobbe occupied the railway station on the right bank of the Tigris, and General Marshall flung his advanced troops into the outskirts on the left bank. Without parade or the insolence of victors the British troops marched into the city, between crowds of inhabitants, a mixed population with elements from almost every race known in the East, shouting, dancing and clapping their hands. For the first time in history the city of Haroun al Raschid welcomed a Western conqueror.

A few hours before this historic event, Firouz Ali, the barber of Bagdad, came within an ace of losing his life.

When it became clear that the city must soon fall to the victorious British forces, the Turkish soldiery, with a licence which their German masters could hardly have exceeded, had begun to plunder the inhabitants, among whom they

were always foreigners and the agents of a corrupt despotism. They stripped the houses of everything valuable that they could carry away, and with threats, blows and actual murder extorted huge sums of money from the wealthier citizens. Having thus provided themselves, they crowded into the last outward-bound trains, and left the city to its fate.

Their departure was the signal for all the ruffians of the place to sally out of their haunts and loot the defenceless citizens. Checked by no authority, restrained by no scruples, they pillaged from midnight till dawn, gutting houses and shops, sparing none who resisted them, and even wrenching away the beds of the wounded in the Turkish hospital from under them.

Among those who suffered in this orgy of plundering was Firouz Ali. He had barricaded his house and shop, but in the early morning an excited mob forced an entrance, and in a few minutes stripped the place of everything, sweeping even such trifles as shaving brushes along with every portable article of value that the old man possessed. Vigorously protesting, he followed the looters into the street, crowded with the dregs of the population mingled with a few Turkish soldiers who had not succeeded in escaping, or had perhaps remained to increase their spoils.

Almost at once the cry of "Spy!" was raised. One of the soldiers—the sentry who had arrested Firouz Ali and his supposed apprentice—had recognised the barber. Resenting the reprimand he had suffered on account of the two men, he found himself in a position to wreak vengeance. His cry was sufficient, in their present temper, to bring up every soldier within hearing, and there were not a few among the civilian rabble willing enough to spare a minute from looting to enjoy the sport of baiting and torturing a personal victim. Firouz Ali was seized by the sentry, and dragged from the platform of his shop to the road. A dozen swords and knives, straight and curved, of many different patterns, were whipped out, and the old man, forced to his knees, a silent dignified figure among that wild throng, awaited a cruel fate.





THE BARBER IS MOBBED

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THE BARBER IS MOBBED

Suddenly there was an explosion close by, that flung innumerable fragments of masonry like falling leaves into the street, and made the very earth tremble. The startled mob broke apart, the group surrounding the barber loosed their hold on him; the soldiers, who knew what the noise meant, gazed up into the sky. Then, with shouts and curses, they rushed blindly this way and that, seeking doorways, alleys, dens where they could find shelter from the dreaded bombs.

Firouz All, left alone, got up slowly and went back into his dismantled shop.

Late that evening, after the entry of the British troops, and when order had been restored in the town, Roger Burnet came to the house.

"Peace be with you!" said the old man, greeting him warmly. "Surely this is a day of deliverance, and a blessed answer to my prayers."

"You have been plundered, I see," said Burnet after returning his greeting. "I hoped you had escaped."

"Barely I escaped with my life. The sword was at my throat when a bomb fell on that very arsenal which you and I noted when we walked the city together. The villains were afraid, and left me, or I should not be alive now to welcome the son of my benefactor and my friend."

Burnet felt a strange thrill.

"Those walks of ours, that plan I made over the map, were useful to us both, my old friend," he said. "It was I who dropped the bomb on that arsenal, which I saw a rabble of Kurds looting. I can never be too thankful that I was able to do a service unawares to one to whom I owe so much."

"Mashallah! Surely it was the hand of God. And I rejoice that I have lived to see the day for which I have yearned for many years, and to know that the son of Burnet Aga has had a part in the triumph of the cause his father had at heart. And now let us sit down, even among these ruins, which are but a small price to pay for my soul's contentment, and you shall tell me all that has happened since last I bid you go in peace."

THE END

A FEW STIRRING ROMANCES

BY HERBERT STRANG

The Air Patrol

A Story of the North-West Frontier.

Illustrated in colour by CYRUS CUNEO.

In this book Mr. Strang looks ahead—and other books have already proved him a prophet of surprising skill—to a time when there is a great Mongolian Empire whose army sweeps down on the North-West Frontier of India. His two heroes luckily have an aeroplane, and with the help of a few Pathan miners they hold a pass in the Hindu Kush against a swarm of Mongols, long enough to prevent the cutting of the communications of the Indian army operating in Afghanistan. The qualities which marked Mr. Strang's story, "The Air Scout," and won extraordinarily high commendation from Lord Roberts, Lord Curzon, and others, as well as from the *Spectator* and other great journals, are again strikingly displayed; and the combination of thrilling adventure with an Imperial problem and excellent writing, adds one more to this author's long list of successes.

"An exceptionally good book, written moreover in excellent style."—*Times*.

"The Air Patrol' is really a masterpiece."—*Morning Post*.

The Air Scout

A Story of National Defence.

Illustrated in Colour by W. R. S. STOTT.

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"Written so well that there is not a dull page in the book."—*The World*.

Rob the Ranger: A Story of the Fight for Canada.

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Rob Somers, son of an English settler in New York State, sets out with Lone Pete, a trapper, in pursuit of an Indian raiding party which has destroyed his home and carried off his younger brother. He is captured and taken to Quebec, where he finds his brother in strange circumstances, and escapes with him in the dead of the winter, in company with a little band of stout-hearted New Englanders.

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