

FICTION

Louis Tracy

The Great Mogul

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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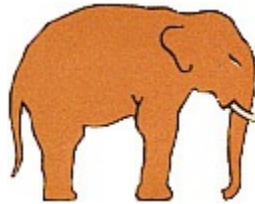
The Great Mogul

by

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"The Pillar of Light"

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As it entered the gate the bar crashed across its knees.

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The Great Mogul

CHAPTER I

"And is there care in Heaven?"

Spenser's Faerie Queene.

"Allah remembers us not. It is the divine decree. We can but die with His praises on our lips; perchance He may greet us at the gates of Paradise!"

Overwhelmed with misery, the man drooped his head. The stout staff he held fell to his feet. He lifted his hands to hide the anguish of eye and lip, and the grief that mastered him caused long pent-up tears to well forth.

His resigned words, uttered in the poetic tongue of Khorassan, might have been a polished verse of Sa'adi were they not the outpouring of a despairing heart. The woman raised her burning eyes from the infant clinging to her exhausted breast.

"Father of my loved ones," she said, "let you and the two boys travel on with the cow. If you reach succor, return for me and my daughter. If not, it is the will of God, and who can gainsay it?"

The man stooped to pick up his staff. But his great powers of endurance, suddenly enfeebled by the ordeal thrust upon him, yielded utterly, and he sank helpless by the side of his wife.

"Nay, Mihr-ul-nisa, sun among women, I shall not leave thee," he cried passionately. "We are fated to die; then be it so. I swear by the Prophet naught save death shall part us, and that not for many hours."

So, to the mother, uselessly nursing her latest born, was left the woful task of pronouncing the doom of those she held dear. For a little while there was silence. The pitiless sun, rising over distant hills of purple and amber, gave promise that this day of late July would witness no relief of tortured earth by the long-deferred monsoon. All nature was still. The air had the hush of the grave. The greenery of trees and shrubs was blighted. The bare plain, the rocks, the boulder-strewed bed of the parched river, each alike wore the dust-white shroud of death. Far-off mountains shimmered in glorious tints which promised fertile glades and sparkling rivulets. But the promise was a lie, the lie of the mirage, of unfulfilled hope.

These two, with their offspring, had journeyed from the glistening slopes on the northwest, now smiling with the colors of the rainbow under the first kiss of the sun. They knew that the arid ravines and bleak passes behind were even less hospitable than the lowlands in front. Knowledge of what was past had murdered hope for the future. They had almost ceased to struggle. True children of the East, they were yielding to Kismet. Already a watchful vulture, skilled ghoul of desert obsequies, was describing great circles in the molten sky.

The evils of the way were typical of their by-gone lives. Beginning in pleasant places, they were driven into the wilderness. The Persian and his wife, Usbeg Tartars of Teheran, nobly born and nurtured, were now poverty-stricken and persecuted because one of the warring divisions of Islam had risen to power in Ispahan. "It shall come to pass," said Mahomet, "that my people shall be divided into three-and-seventy sects, all of which, save only one, shall have their portion in the fire!" Clearly, these wanderers found solace in the beliefs held by some of the condemned seventy-two.

Striving to escape from a land of narrow-minded bigots to the realm of the Great Mogul, the King of Kings, the renowned Emperor of India--whom his contemporaries, fascinated by his gifts and dazzled by his magnificence, had styled Akbar "the Great"--the forlorn couple, young in years, endowed with remarkable physical charms and high intelligence, blessed with two fine boys and the shapely infant now hugged by the frantic mother, had been betrayed not alone by man but by nature herself.

At this season, the great plain between Herat and Kandahar should be all-sufficing to the needs of travelers. Watered by a noble river, the Helmund, and traversed by innumerable streams, it was reputed the Garden of Afghanistan. Pent in the bosom of earth, all manner of herbs and fruits and wholesome seeds were ready to burst forth with utmost prodigality when the rain-clouds gathered on the hills and discharged their gracious showers over a soil athirst. But Allah, in His exceeding wisdom, had seen fit to withhold the fertilizing monsoon, and the few resources of the exiles had yielded to the strain. First their small flock of goats, then their camel, had fallen or been slain. There was left the cow, whose daily store of milk dwindled under the lack of food.

The patient animal, lean as the kine of the seven years of famine in Joseph's dream, was yet fit to walk and carry the two boys, whose sturdy limbs had shrunk and weakened until they could no longer be trusted to toddle alone even on the level ground. She stood now, regarding her companions in suffering with her big violet eyes and almost contentedly chewing some wizened herbage gathered by the man overnight. Strange to say, it was on the capabilities of the cow

that rested the final issue of life and death for one if not all. The cow had carried and sustained the woman before and after the birth of the child. Last and most valued of their possessions, she had become the arbiter of their fate.

The Persian, Mirza Ali Beg was his name, was assured that if they could march a few more days they would reach the cultivated region dominated by the city of Kandahar. There, even in this period of want, the boundless charity of the East would save them from death by starvation. But the infant was exhausting her mother. She demanded the whole meager supply of the life-giving milk of the cow, and in Mirza Ali Beg's tortured soul the husband wrought with the father.

That four might have a chance of living one should die! Such was the dreadful edict he put forth tremblingly at last. And now, when the woman saw the strong man in a palsy at her feet, her love for him vanquished even the all-powerful instinct of maternity. She fiercely thrust the child into his arms and murmured:--

"I yield, my husband. Take her, in God's name, and do with her as seemeth best. Not for myself, but for thee and for our sons, do I consent."

Thinking himself stronger and sterner than he was, Mirza Ali Beg rose to his feet. But his heart was as lead and his hands shook as he fondled the warm and almost plump body of the infant. Here was a man indeed distraught. Between husband and wife, who shall say which had the more grievous burden?

With a frenzied prayer to the Almighty for help, he wrapped a linen cloth over the infant's face, placed the struggling little form among the roots of a tall tree, and left it there. Bidding the two boys, dark-eyed youngsters aged three and five, to cling tightly to the pillion on the cow's back, he took the halter and the staff in his right hand, passed his left arm around the emaciated frame of his wife, and, in this wise, the small cavalcade resumed its journey.

Ever and anon the plaint of the abandoned infant reached their ears. The two children, without special reason, began to cry. The mother, always turning her head, wept with increasing violence. Even the poor cow, wanting food and water, lowed her distress.

The man, striving to compress his tremulous lips, strode forward, staring into vacancy. He dared not look behind. He knew that the feeble cries of the baby girl would ring in his ears until they were closed to all mortal sounds. He took no note of the rough caravan track they followed, marked as it was by the ashes of camp fires and the whitened bones of pack animals. With all the force of a masterful nature he tried to stagger on, and on, until the tragedy was irrevocable.

But the woman, when they reached a point where the road curved round a huge rock, realized that the next onward step would shut out forever from her eyes the sight of that tiny bundle lying in the roots of the tree. So she choked back her sobs, swept away her tears, gave one last look at her infant, gasped a word of fond endearment, and fell fainting in the dust.

Amidst the many troubles and anxieties of that four months' pilgrimage she had never fainted before. Though she was a Persian lady of utmost refinement and great accomplishments, she came of a hardy race, and her final collapse imbued her husband with a stoicism hitherto lacking in his despair.

"This, then, is the end," said he. "Be it so. I can strive against destiny no further."

Tenderly he lifted his wife to a place where sand offered a softer couch than the rocks on which she lay.

"I must bring the infant," he muttered aloud. "The touch of its hands will revive her. Then I shall kill poor Deri (the cow), and we can feast on her in the hope that some may pass this way. Walk, with three to carry, we cannot."

This was indeed the counsel of desperation. The cow, living, provided their sole link with the outer world. Dead, she maintained them a little while. Soon the scanty meat she would yield would become uneatable and they were lost beyond saving. Nevertheless, once the resolve was taken a load was lifted from the man's breast. Bidding the elder boy hold Deri's halter, he strode back towards the infant with eager haste.

As he drew near he thought he saw something black and glistening amidst the soiled linen which enwrapped the little one. After another stride he stood still. A fresh tribulation awaited him. Many times girdling the child's limbs and body was a hideous snake, a monster whose powerful coils could break the tiny bones as if they were straws.

The flat and ugly head was raised to look at him. The beady black eyes seemed to emit sparks of venomous fire, and the forked tongue was darting in and out of the fanged mouth as though the reptile was anticipating the feast in store.

Mirza Ali Beg was no coward, but this new frenzy almost overcame him. There was a chance, a slight one, that the serpent had not yet crushed the life out of its prey. Using words which were no prayer, the father uplifted the tough staff which he still carried. He rushed forward. The snake elevated its head to take stock of this unexpected enemy, but

the stick dealt it a furious blow on the tail.

Instantly uncoiling itself, either to fight or escape, as seemed most expedient, it received another blow which hurled it, with dislocated vertebrae, far into the dust.

The man, with a great cry of joy, saw that the child was stretching her limbs, now that the tight clutch of its terrible assailant was withdrawn. He caught her up into his arms and, weak as he was, ran back to his wife.

"Here is one who will restore the blood to thy cheeks, Mihr-ul-nisa," he cried. And truly the mother stirred again with the first satisfied chuckle of the infant as it sought her breast.

The husband, heedless what befell for the hour, obtained from the cow such slight store of milk as she possessed. He gave some to the two boys, the greater portion to the baby, and was refuting his wife's remonstrance that he had taken none himself as he pressed the remainder on her, when the noise of a commotion at a distance caused them to look in wonderment along the road they had recently traversed in such sorrow.

There, gathered around some object, were a number of men, some mounted on Arab horses or riding camels, others on foot; behind this nearer group they could distinguish a long *kafila* of loaded beasts with armed attendants.

"God be praised!" cried Mihr-ul-nisa, "we are saved!"

This was the caravan of a rich merchant, faring from Persia or Bokhara to the court of the Great Mogul. The undulating plain, no less than their own anguish of mind, had prevented the Persian and his wife from noting the glittering spear points of the warrior merchant's retainers as they rode forward in the morning sun. Surely such a host would spare a little food and water for the starving family, and forage for Deri, the cow!

"But what are they looking at?" cried the woman, of whom hope had made a fresh being.

"They have found the snake."

"What snake?"

"It is matterless. As I returned for the child, when you fell in a swoon, I met a snake and killed it."

A startled look came into her eyes.

"*Khodah hai!*"^[A] she murmured; "it would have attacked my baby!"

Two men, mounted on Turkoman horses, were now spurring towards them. Mirza Ali Beg advanced a few paces to meet them.

One, an elderly man of grave appearance and richly attired, reined in his horse at a little distance and cried to his companion:--

"By the tomb of Mahomet, Sher Khan, 'tis he of my dream!"

The other, a handsome and soldierly youth, came nearer and questioned Ali Beg, mostly concerning the disabled and dying snake, found and beaten into pulp by the foremost men of the caravan.

The Mirza told his tale with dignified eloquence; he ended with a pathetic request for help for his exhausted wife and family.

This was forthcoming quickly, and, while he himself was refreshed with good milk, and dates, and cakes of pounded wheat, Malik Masud, the elder of the two horsemen and leader of the train, told how he dreamt the previous night that during a wayside halt under a big tree he was attacked by a poisonous snake, which was vanquishing him until a stranger came to his aid.

The snake lying in the path of the *kafila* was the exact counterpart of that seen in his disturbing vision, but his amazement was complete when he recognized in Ali Beg the stranger who had saved him.

So, in due course, Mihr-ul-nisa, with her baby girl, was mounted on a camel, and her husband and two sons on another, and Deri, the cow, before joining the train, was regaled with a copious draught of water and an ample measure of grain.

Thus it came to pass that Mirza Ali Beg and his family were convoyed through Kandahar and Kabul in comfort and safety. They rode through the gaunt jaws of the Khaibar Pass, and emerged, after many days, into the great plain of the Punjab, verdant with an abundant though deferred harvest.

And no one imagined, least of all the baby girl herself, that the infant crowing happily in the arms of Mihr-ul-nisa was

destined to become a beautiful, gracious and world-renowned princess, whose name and love-story should endure through many a century.

In that same month of July, 1588, on the nineteenth day of the month, to be exact, the blazoned sails of the Spanish Armada were sighted off the Lizard. Sixty-five great war galleons, eight fleet galleasses, fifty-six armed merchantmen and twenty pinnaces swept along the Channel in gallant show. Spread out in a gigantic crescent, the Spanish ships were likened by anxious watchers to a great bird of prey with outstretched wings. But Lord Howard of Effingham led out of Plymouth a band of adventurers who had hunted that bird many a time. Drake, Hawkins, Frobisher and the rest--they feared no Spaniard who sailed the seas.

Their little vessels, well handled, could sail two miles to the Spaniards' one, and fire twice as many shots gun for gun. "One by one," said they, "we plucked the Don's feathers." Ship after ship was sunk, captured, or driven on shore. A whole week the cannon roared from Plymouth Sound to Calais, and there the last great fight took place in which the Duke of Medina Sidonia yielded himself to agonized foreboding, and Drake rightly believed that the Spanish grandee "would ere long wish himself at St. Mary Port among his orange trees."

During one of the many fierce duels between the ponderous galleons and the hawk-like British ships, the *Resolution*, hastily manned at Deal by volunteers who rode from London, hung on to and finally captured the *San Jose*.

It was no easy victory, for the Spaniards could acquit themselves as men when seamanship and gunnery gave place to swords and pikes. Three times did the assailants swarm up the lofty poop of the *San Jose* before they made good their footing.

At last, the Spaniards gave way before the ardent onslaught led by a gallant gentleman from Wensleydale in the North, Sir Robert Mowbray, to wit, who, had he lived, was marked out for certain preferment at court.

Unhappily, in the moment of victory, a young, pale-faced monk, an ascetic and visionary, maddened by the success of his country's hereditary foe, sprang from the nook in which he lurked and struck Mowbray a heavy blow with the large brass crucifix he carried.

The Englishman had doffed his hat and was courteously saluting the Spanish captain, who was in the act of yielding up his sword. One outstretched arm of the image of mercy penetrated his skull, and he fell dead at the feet of his captive.

At once the conflict broke out anew. Nothing could restrain the crew of the *Resolution* when they noted the dastardly murder of their chivalrous leader. The galleon became a slaughter-house. The monk, frenzied as a beast in the shambles, sprang overboard and was carried past another ship, the *Vera Cruz*, which rescued him. This vessel was one of the few storm-wracked and fever-laden survivors of the Armada which reached Corunna.

The Englishmen learnt from wounded Spaniards that the fanatical ecclesiastic was a certain Fra Geronimo from the great Jesuit seminary at Toledo. They remembered the name so that they might curse it. They cried in their rage because Fra Geronimo had escaped them.

A black snake in the plain of Herat, a glittering crucifix on board the *San Jose* in the Channel off Gravelines--these were queer links, savoring of necromancy, whereby the lives of gallant men and fair women should be bound indissolubly. Yet it was so, as those who follow this strange and true history shall learn, for many a blow was struck and many a heart ached because Nur Mahal lived and Sir Robert Mowbray died in that wonderful month of July, 1588.

CHAPTER II

"Up then rose the 'prentices all,
Living in London, both proper and
tall."

Old

Song.

Sir Thomas Cave, of Stanford in Northamptonshire, a worthy Knight who held his wisdom of greater repute at court than did his royal Master, was led by the glamour of a fine summer's afternoon in the year 1608 to fulfil a long-deferred promise to his daughter.

At Spring Gardens, removed but a short space from the King's Palace of Whitehall, that eccentric monarch, James I., had established a menagerie. Here could be seen certain mangy specimens of the wonderful beasts which bulked large in the lore of the period, and Mistress Anna Cave, with her fair cousin, Mistress Eleanor Roe, had teased Sir Thomas until he consented to take them thither on the first occasion, of fair seeming as to the weather, when the King would be pleased to dispense with his attendance.

The girls, than whom there were not two prettier maidens in all England, soon tired of evil-smelling and snarling animals, which in no wise came up to the wonderful creatures of their imagination, eked out by weird wood-cuts in the books they read.

They found the charming garden, with its beds of flowers and strawberries, its hedges of red and black currants, roses and gooseberries, and its golden plum-trees lining the brick walls facing west and south, far more to their liking.

Nor was it wholly unsuited to their age and condition that their eyes wandered from the cages of furtive wolves and uneasy bears to the smooth walks tenanted by a coterie of court ladies with their attendant gallants. Anna Cave, eighteen, yet looking older by reason of her tall stature and graceful carriage, Eleanor Roe, a year younger, a sweet girl, at once timid in manner and joyous in disposition, found much to cavil at in the Spanish fashions then prevalent in high circles. Born and bred in decorous and God-fearing households, they were not a little shocked by the way in which the great dames of the period dressed and comported themselves. Yet, with all their youthful disapproval there mingled a spice of curiosity, and Nellie, the shy one, often nudged her more sedate companion to take note of a specially ornate farthingale or a Spanish mantilla of exquisite design.

Now, despite the reverence in which the stout Sir Thomas held the King, he did not approve of some of the King's associates. Especially was he unwilling that the bold eyes of any of the young adventurers and profligates who clustered under the banner of Rochester should survey the charms of his daughter and niece. Therefore, when the girls would have him walk with them in the wake of Lady Essex, then at the height of her notorious fame, he peremptorily vetoed their design.

"If you are weary of the kennels," he said, "we will stroll in our own garden. It is fair as this, and the scent of the flowers therein is not aped by the cosmetics of the women."

"Nay, but, uncle," pouted Eleanor, disappointed that the style of the much talked-of Countess should be no more than glimpsed in passing, "we have seen neither lion, nor tiger, nor humpbacked camel. Surely the King's collection is not so meager that one may find as many wild beasts at any May-day fair in Islington?"

"Lions, tigers, and the rest, Got wot! What doth a girl like thee want with such fearsome cattle?"

"'Tis only a few days since I heard one declaiming a passage in Master Shakespeare's play of 'Macbeth,' and he said:

What men dare, I dare:
Approach thou like the rugged Russian
bear,
The arm'd rhinoceros, or the Hyrcan
tiger;
Take any shape but that, and my firm
nerves
Shall never tremble.

Now, save a very harmless-looking bear, neither Ann nor I have seen these things, so we know not why they should be held so terrible."

During this recital the knight's red face became wider and wider with surprise.

"Marry, Heaven forfend!" he cried, "what goings on there be behind my back! Anna, can you, too, spout verse as glibly?"

"Indeed, father, Nellie and I know whole plays by heart. Yet we would not indulge in this innocent pastime if we thought it angered you."

Sir Thomas was as wax in his daughter's hands. Secretly, he feared her greater intellectual powers. He believed that girls' brains were better suited to housewifely cares than to the study of poetry, yet some twinge of doubt bade him keep the opinion pent in his own portly breast.

"Nay, then, if it pleases you and wiles away dull hours, I will not hinder you. But our sweet Nellie should not betray her gifts in public. Folk hereabouts have rabbits' ears and magpies' tongues. I fear me there are neither lions nor horned pigs to hand. They are costly toys, and 'tis whispered that his gracious Majesty obtaineth less credit abroad than among his liege subjects. Further, my bonny girls, I have asked a certain youth, George Beeston by name, to sup with us to-night, and it behooves you--What, Anna, has it come to that? You shrug at the mere mention of him! And he a proper youth--not one of these graceless rascals who yelp at Carr's heels!"

Again was Sir Thomas becoming choleric and red-faced, and the girls' excursion promised to end in speedy dudgeon had not a messenger, wearing the Palace livery, approached and doffed his cap, bowing low as he halted.

"Happily one said your worship was in the gardens," he said. "I am bidden to tell you that the King awaits your honor in his closet. The matter is of utmost urgency."

Now, this announcement had the precise effect on its recipient calculated by those who sent it. Sir Thomas, inflated with importance, was rendered almost incoherent. Never before had he received such a royal message. All considerations must bow to it. He hustled the girls into a litter in which they could be carried to his brother's house in the city without soiling their shoes or being exposed to the gaze of the throng in the Fleet or Ludgate. He himself hurried off to Whitehall, there to be kept in a fume of impatience for a good hour or more, while the King disputed with a Scottish divine as to the exact pronunciation of the Latin tongue. Admitted at last to the presence, he found that the urgency of his summons touched no greater matter than the cleansing of the Fleet ditch, a fruitful source of dispute between the monarch and the city in those days.

Sir Thomas had wit enough to promise that the King's wishes should be made known to the Common Council, and sense enough to wonder why he was called in such hot haste to attend a trivial thing.

It was a time when men sought hidden motives for aught that savored of the uncommon; the knight, borrowing a palfrey from a merchant of his acquaintance, rode homeward along the Strand revolving the puzzle in his mind. Long before he reached Temple Bar he was wiser if not happier.

Soon after Anna Cave and the sprightly Eleanor entered their litter to be carried swiftly through the Strand, two young men approached Temple Bar from the east. Their distinctive garments showed that while one was of gentle birth the other was a yeoman; that they were not master and man could be seen at a glance, as they conversed one with the other with easy familiarity, and repaid with ready good-humor the chaff which they received from the cheeky apprentices who solicited custom in the busy street.

Indeed, the appearance of the yeoman was well calculated to stir tongues less nimble than those of the pert salesmen of Fleet Street. Gigantic in height and width, his broad, ruddy face beaming with the delight afforded by the evidently novel sights of London, his immense size was accentuated by a coat of tough brown leather and high riding-boots of the same material which almost met the skirts of the coat. Tight-fitting trousers of gray homespun matched the color of his broad-brimmed felt hat, in which a gay plume of cock's feathers was clasped by a big brooch of dull gold. The precious metal served to enclose a peculiar ornament, in the shape of a headless fossil snake, curled in a circle as in life and polished until it shone like granite.

Though his coat was girt by a sword-belt he carried no weapons of steel, apparently depending for protection, if such a giant required its aid, on a long and heavy ashplant. In other hands it would be a cumbrous stake; to him it served as a mere wand.

His immense size, aided by a somewhat unusual garb in well-dressed London, absolutely eclipsed, in the public eye, the handsome and stalwart youth who, in richer but studiously simple attire, strode by his side.

The apprentices, fearless in their numbers and unfettered in impudence, plied him with saucy cries.

"What d'ye lack, Master Samson? Here be two suits for the price of one, for one man's clothes would never fit thee."

"Come hither, mountain! I'll sell thee a town clock that shall serve thee as watch."

"Hi, master! Let me show thee a trencher worthy of thy stomach."

The last speaker held forth a salver of such ample circumference that the two young men were fain to laugh.

"I' faith, friend," said the giant, with utmost good-humor, "we are more needing meat than dishes. Nevertheless, you have ta'en my measure rightly."

His North-country accent proclaimed him a Yorkshire dalesman, and the White Rose was popular just then in Fleet Street.

"If that be so," said the sturdy silversmith's assistant who had hailed him, "you must hie to Smithfield, where they shall roast you a bullock."

"Come wi' me, then. Mayhap they need a puppy for the spit."

The answer turned the laugh against the apprentice. He bravely endeavored to rally.

"I cry your honor's pardon," he said. "I looked not for brains where there was so much beef."

"Therein you further showed your observation. Ofttimes the cockloft is empty in those whom nature hath built many stories high."

Again the buoyant spirits of the Colossus won him the suffrages of the crowd. Clearly, he had an even temper in his great frame of bone and sinew, for the easy play of his limbs showed that, big as he was, he held no superfluous flesh, while the heat of the day left him unmoved, notwithstanding his heavy garments.

But his companion caught him by the arm.

"Come, Roger," he said quietly. "We must find our kinsman's house. There is still much to be done ere night falls."

The crowd made way for them. They passed westward through Temple Bar, which was not the frowning stone arch of later days, but a strong palisade, with posts and chains, capable of being closed during a tumult, or when darkness made it difficult to keep watch and ward in the city.

The Strand, which they entered, was an open road, with the mansions and gardens of great noblemen on the left, or south side. Each walled enclosure was separate from its neighbor, the alleys between leading to the water stairs, where passengers so minded took boat to Southwark or Lambeth.

On the north were other houses, some pretentious, but more closely packed together, and, on this hand, Drury Lane and St. Martin's Lane were already becoming thoroughfares of note.

One of these houses, not far removed from the Church of St. Mary-le-Strand, thrust the high wall of its garden so far into the road that it narrowed the passage between it and Somerset House. Here, a group of young gallants had gathered, and some soldiers, of swarthy visage and foreign attire, were loitering in the vicinity.

"This, if my memory serves, should be the house of Gondomar, the Spanish Ambassador," said Walter Mowbray, the elder and more authoritative of the pair.

"Gondomar! Another name for Old Nick! The devil should keep his proper name in all countries, as he keeps his nature in all places."

"Hush, Roger, or we shall have a brawl on our hands. I am no lover of Spaniards, you know full well, yet we must pass Gondomar's men without unseemly taunt. The King loves not to hear of naked blades."

Thus admonished, his wonted grin of good-humor returned to Roger Sainton's face, and, as the swaggering youngsters in the road were paying some heed to a covered litter rapidly approaching from the west, the friends essayed to pass them by taking the pavement close under the wall of the Ambassador's garden.

As luck would have it, a sort of signal seemed to be given for a row to start. Swords were whipped out, men ran forward, and there was a sudden clash of steel.

A laughing fop, for his sins, turned to seek some one with whom to pick a quarrel; he chanced to find himself face to face with Mowbray, Roger being a little in front and at one side.

"I'll have the wall of you, sirrah," cried the stranger, frowning offensively.

Walter stepped back, and his right hand crossed to his sword hilt, so evident was the design of the other to insult him.

But Sainton laughed. He caught the would-be bully by the belt.

"Yea, and take the house, too, if the landlord be willing, my pretty buck," he growled pleasantly, whereon he heaved the swaggerer bodily over the wall, and they heard the crash of his body into the window of a summer house.

Those who stood near were rendered aghast by this feat of strength; they had never seen its like. Young Lord Dereham was no light weight, and his lordship's wriggling carcass had described sufficient parabola to clear coping-stones set ten feet above the pavement.

The incident passed unheeded by the greater mob in the roadway. For no reason whatever a crowd of struggling men surged around the litter. Mowbray, clutching his undrawn sword, planted his back against the wall from which the discomfited aristocrat would have ousted him; he called to Sainton:--

"Stand by, Roger! There is some treason afoot!"

The words had scarce left his mouth when a Spanish halberdier felled the two nearest litter-bearers, and a shriek of dismay came from behind the drawn curtains as the conveyance dropped to the ground.

Another rush, also preconcerted, enabled some of the well-dressed rascals to possess themselves of the litter-poles. The gates of Gondomar's garden were suddenly opened, and a move was made to carry the litter thither.

At that instant Eleanor Roe, thrusting aside the curtains, showed her beautiful face, now distraught with fear, and cried aloud for help.

"Be not alarmed, fair one," said one of her new escort, scarcely veiling his bold stare of admiration by an assumption of good manners. "We have saved you from some roistering knaves, and shall give you a pleasant refuge until the trouble be quelled."

"Where are my father's serving-men?" demanded another voice, and Anna looked forth, though anger rather than fear marked her expression.

"Prone in the dust, miladi," answered the cavalier.

Both girls saw that they were being taken towards Gondomar's house.

"I pray you convey us to Temple Bar," cried Anna, an alarmed look now sending shadows across her dark eyes. "'Tis but a step, and there our names shall warrant us bearers in plenty."

"You are much too pretty to trust to such varlets," said the spokesman of the party, and, before another word of protest could be uttered, the litter was hustled within the gates, which were closed at once.

Now, both Mowbray and his huge companion were assured that the whole business was a trick. The only sufferers from the riot were the unfortunate litter-bearers and the nobleman who was pitched over the wall. All the rest was make-believe, save the unpleasing fact that two young and beautiful girls were left helpless in the hands of a number of unprincipled libertines such as followed the lead set by Carr, the Scottish page, and maintained, in later years, by "Steenie" and "Baby Charles" in a lewd and dissolute court.

But Mowbray was a comparative stranger in London, and Sainton had never before set eyes on the capital. Common prudence suggested that they should not raise a clamor at the gates of Gondomar, whose great influence with the erratic King was widely known and justly dreaded.

Yet, when did prudence ever withstand the pleading of a pretty face? Mowbray's blood was boiling, and it needed but little to rouse him to action. The impetus was soon forthcoming.

The noise of the disturbance brought people running from Temple Bar. Others hurried up from the direction of Charing Cross. Then, as now, Londoners dearly loved a street row.

Again, by well-planned strategy, the soldiers and some of the exquisites mingled with the crowd and gave lying assurances that the rogues who fought had run off towards the Convent Garden. Roger recognized the silversmith's apprentice among the gapers.

"Here, lad," he said, beckoning him, "ask yon fellow holding a kerchief to his broken head who were the ladies he carried in the litter."

The man, thus appealed to, gathered his wits sufficiently to answer, and the honored names of Cave and Roe acted as

sparks on tinder. Forthwith, a number of city youths gathered round Mowbray and Sainton to hear their version of the fray.

As soon as they knew that the girls had been taken into Gondomar's house, all the race hatred and religious bigotry of the time flamed forth in ungovernable fury.

"Prentices! Prentices! Clubs! Clubs!" rang out the yell, and the war-cry of the guilds quickly reached to the city barrier, whence a torrent of youths poured headlong into the Strand.

"We'll have 'em out, if all the ambassadors in St. James's barred the way," shouted the valiant silversmith, who contrived to keep very close to Roger in the press, and, when reinforcements arrived, a decided move was made towards the garden gate.

And now, indeed, a real fight was imminent. Seeing their ruse foiled, Gondomar's adherents banded together for the defense. The citizens were determined to rescue the daughters of two men respected of all honest burgesses, but, if more numerous, they were not properly armed to attack swordsmen and halberdiers. Hence, blood would be spilt in plenty before they won the gate, had not Roger pulled back Walter Mowbray, who headed the attack.

"Leave 'em to me," he said. "I'll side 'em!"

With that he leaped forward into the space cleared by the halberdiers, and made play with his staff. A steel helmet was cracked like a potsherd, three unarmored gallants dropped beneath one blow, and two halberds were broken across as if they had been pipe-stems abhorred by the King.

Before this raging giant, with the tremendous sweep of his long arms and six-foot staff, ordinary swords and ceremonial battle-axes were of no avail. He mowed down his adversaries as a scythe cuts grass, and a few lightning circles described by the ashplant, cleared the way to the gate.

The door was really a wide postern, sunk in the wall, built of stout oak and studded with iron rivets. Without a moment's pause, Sainton leaned against it. There was a sound of rending wood-work, and the structure was torn from its hinges.

Mowbray parried a vengeful thrust made at his friend by a fallen Spaniard, and jammed the hilt of his sword into the man's face. Roger, bending his head, entered the garden. Behind him came Walter, and the exulting mob poured in at their heels.

The garden was empty. Leading to the house was a flight of broad steps; at the open door of the mansion stood a tall, grim-looking, clean-shaven priest, a Spaniard, of the ascetic type, a man of dignified appearance, in whose face decision and strength of character set their seal.

At his elbow Mowbray saw the young nobleman who had addressed the girls. He ran forward, fearing lest Roger should open the argument with his cudgel.

"Hold!" cried the ecclesiastic, in good English. "What want ye here in this unbridled fashion?"

"We seek two ladies, daughters of Sir Thomas Cave and Master Robert Roe, who were brought hither forcibly but a few minutes back."

"They are not here."

"That is a black lie, black as your own gown," put in Roger Sainton.

The priest's sallow face flushed. He was of high rank, and not used to being spoken to so curtly. Mowbray, already cooler now swords had given place to words, restrained Roger by a look and a hand on his arm.

"My friend is blunt of speech," he explained. "He only means that you are mistaken. It will avoid riot and bloodshed if the ladies are given over forthwith to the safe conduct of those who are acquainted with their parents."

"Who are you who can venture to speak on behalf of an ignorant and unmannerly gathering which dares to violate the sanctuary of an Embassy?" was the vehement response.

"My name is Walter Mowbray," was the calm answer. "There is no violation of sanctuary intended. We are here to rescue two ladies inveigled into this house by unworthy device. Either they come out or we come in."

"Aye, shaven-pate, 'tis ill disputing with him who commands an army," cried Roger.

The cleric, on whom Mowbray's reply seemed to have an extraordinary effect, shot glances at both which would have

slain them if looks could kill. But the impatient mob was shouting for active measures: it would have asked no greater fun than the sack of Gondomar's residence; moreover, the majority of the Spaniards and their allies were routed in the street.

So the priest swallowed his wrath and muttered something in a low tone to the silken-clad person by his side. Then he faced Mowbray again.

"When I said there were no ladies here, I meant that none had been conveyed hither forcibly. Two young ladies were sheltered by his Excellency's retinue, it is true. If they choose they are at liberty to accompany you, and I shall now acquaint them therewith."

A hoarse laugh from the crowd showed that the sophistry did not pass unheeded. Nevertheless, Mowbray's counsel of moderation swayed the mob into quiescence, and, a minute later, Anna Cave and Eleanor Roe, pale and trembling, hardly knowing what was toward, were carried in their litter to the city by an excited but good-tempered escort.



CHAPTER III

"The attempt, and not the deed,
Confounds us."

Shakespeare,

"Macbeth."

Anna's father, jogging along comfortably on the borrowed cob, overtook the rearmost of the rabble near St. Dunstan's. Anger made him red, and alarm made him white, when he heard the disjointed tales of those who sought to enlighten him.

That the daughter and niece of one who held high place in his native county, and whose brother in the city was loaded with civic dignities, should be waylaid in the Strand by a number of young profligates aping Rochester's license, was not to be endured. Therefore, Sir Thomas flushed like a turkey, and his right hand, long unaccustomed to more serious weapon than a carving-knife, tightened on the reins in a way that surprised his placid steed.

But it was an equally serious thing that certain youthful hot-heads, led by "a pair of Yorkshire gallants, one of whom was like unto Gog himself," should have stormed the house of the Spanish Ambassador in order to rescue the two girls. The royal prerogative, already in grave dispute, was sadly abused by this disorder, and Gondomar was well fitted, by diplomatic skill and political acumen, to make the most of the incident. When Sir Thomas thought of the way in which James, with his dagger-proof doublet unfastened and his points tied awry, would stamp up and down his council-chamber in maundering rage, the color fled from his ruddy cheeks and left him pallid, with drawn under lip.

Nevertheless, when he reached the house of Alderman Cave, situate on the north side of Draper's Garden, his natural dread of the King's wrath soon yielded to indignation. He found there not only Anna and Eleanor, but Walter Mowbray and Roger Sainton, with a concourse of friends and neighbors drawn together by news of the outrage.

The old knight's vanity was not proof against the knowledge of the peril from which the girls were saved. He swore roundly that he had been separated from them by a trick, and admitted that the King did not want him at all. With tears in his eyes he thanked the two young men for their timely aid.

"You will be the son of Sir Walter Mowbray who fell in the great sea-fight against the Spanish Armada?" he cried, seizing Walter's hand effusively.

"Yes. I scarce remember my father. I was but five years old when he died. Yet my mother taught me to regard all Spaniards as false men, so I scrupled the less to take part against Gondomar."

"Mercy-a-gad, she might justly have given thee sterner counsel. Thy father was a brave and proper man. I knew him well. Were there more of the like to-day these graceless rogues would not treat as courtezans the daughters of honest folk. And thy friend, if he be not Goliath come to life, how is he known?"

"Let me present to your worship Master Roger Sainton, of Wensleydale, in Yorkshire."

"Ecod, he is well named. I warrant him sain (wholesome) and I trow he weigheth nearest a ton of any man breathing."

Roger, seldom at a loss for a repartee, waited until the laugh raised by Sir Thomas's jest had passed.

"'Tis an empty tun at this moment, your Honor," said he, glancing plainly at the row of shining tankards which graced a sideboard.

"Where are those lasses?" shouted the knight, glad of the diversion afforded by the claims of hospitality. "Zounds! Here be their defenders athirst and not a flagon on the table."

In truth, Anna and Eleanor, flurried out of their self-possession by the turmoil of the past hour, had escaped to their apartments, whence they sent the excuse that they were engaged in exchanging their out-of-door dresses and cloaks for raiment more suited to the house.

There were servants in plenty, however, to bring wine enough for a regiment, and certain city magnates, arriving about this time, were emphatic in their advice that Mowbray and Sainton should not attempt to traverse the Strand a second time that day in their search for the residence of the North-country nobleman whom Walter meant to visit.

"A bonny tale will have reached his Majesty ere this," ran their comment. "Were the pair of you to be haled before him after Gondomar had poisoned his mind you were like to lose your right hands within the hour for brawling in the streets."

"Neither Roger nor I broke the peace," protested Mowbray.

"They say that one of you nearly broke Lord Dereham's neck," put in a city sheriff, "and that will be held a grave crime when recited to his Majesty by his crony, Carr (Rochester). No, no, my lads, bide ye in the city until such time as inquiry shall be made with due circumspection. The King hath a good heart and a sound understanding, and I'll wager my chain of office he shall not be pleased to hear that his name was used to decoy my worthy gossip, Sir Thomas Cave, from the company of his daughter and niece."

This shrewd comment was greeted with solemn nods and winks. The timely arrival of Alderman Cave, with the intelligence that Gondomar, summoned from play at Beaujeu's, had ridden furiously to Whitehall, determined Mowbray to accept the safe custody offered to him.

Gradually the assemblage dispersed. A man was sent to the Swan Inn, by Holborn Bridge, where the travelers' nags and pack-horses were stabled. Hence, ere supper was served, Walter wore garments of livelier hue, and Roger was able to discard his heavy riding coat and long boots for a sober suit of homespun.

The girls were discreetly reserved as to their adventure. True, they said that no incivility was offered them. For all they could tell to the contrary the Marquis of Bath and Sir Harry Revel, who made their names known to them, had really saved them from an affray of rowdies.

"I would I had been there," vowed young George Beeston, who seemed to resent the part played in the affair by Mowbray and his gigantic friend.

"A yard measure is of little avail when swords are drawn," cried Anna, tartly. The hit was, perhaps, unworthy of her wonted good nature, for Beeston belonged to the Linen-drapers' Company.

He reddened, but made no reply, and Sir Thomas took up the cudgels in his behalf--

"When George weds thee, Ann, thou wilt find that a linen-draper of the city is better able to safeguard his wife than any mongrel popinjay who flaunts it at Whitehall."

"I am in no mind to wed anyone, father," said she, "nor do I seek other protection than yours."

"Nay, lass, I am getting old. Be not vexed with young Master Beeston because he guessed not of your peril."

"I would brave a hundred swords to serve you," stammered George. Better had he remained silent. No girl likes love-making in public. Anna seemingly paid no heed to his bashful words, but her eyes sparkled with some glint of annoyance.

Roger Sinton, ever more ready to laugh than to quarrel, smoothed over the family tiff by breaking out into a diatribe on the virtues of the knight's Brown Devon ale. Mowbray, too, seeing how the land lay, offered more attention to Mistress Eleanor Roe than to her stately cousin.

Herein he only followed his secret inclination. The girl's shy blue eyes and laughing lips formed a combination difficult to resist, if resistance were thought of. She was dressed in simple white. Her hair, plaited in the Dutch style, was tied with a bow of blue riband, nor was her gown too long to hide the neat shoes of saffron-colored leather which adorned her pretty feet.

She wore no ornaments, and her attire was altogether less expensive than that of Anna Cave. His own experiences had given Mowbray a clear knowledge of domestic values. Judging by appearances, he thought that the house of Roe was not so well endowed with wealth as the house of Cave. He did not find the drawback amiss. He was young enough, and sufficiently romantic in disposition, to discover ample endowment in Eleanor's piquant face and bright, if somewhat timid, wit.

Anna, who looked preoccupied, quickly upset an arrangement which threatened to leave her and Beeston to entertain each other.

It was not yet dark when the supper was ended. Anna, rising suddenly when a waiting-man produced a dust-covered flagon of Alicant, assumed an animated air.

"I see you sip your wine rather than drink it, Master Mowbray," she cried. "Will you not join Nellie and me in the garden, and leave to these graver gentlemen the worship of Bacchus?"

"Aye," growled George Beeston, spurred into a display of spirit, "though Venus may be coy the god of wine never refuses his smile."

"Take an old man's advice, George," said Sir Thomas confidentially, "and never seek to woo a girl with a glum face."

"Better still," said Roger, reaching for the flagon, "wait until she woos thee. Gad, a woman plagues a man sufficiently after he is wed that his heart should ache before the knot is tied."

"If your heart ached, Master Sainton, its size would render the ailment of much consequence," said Eleanor.

"Mayhap 'tis like an August mushroom, which, when overgrown, hath the consistency of hide," he answered, and his jolly laugh caused even young Beeston to smile.

"Roger and I were bred together," said Mowbray, as he walked with the two girls into the small public garden which faced the house. "I vow he never cared for woman other than his mother."

"Belike it is the fashion in Wensleydale," was Anna's comment.

"Nay, Mistress Cave, such fashion will not commend itself anywhere. Certes, I have observed that it does not prevail in London."

This with a glance at Eleanor, but the retort told Anna that although Mowbray came from the shires his wits were not dull.

As his hostess, however, she curbed the inclination to make some one suffer vicariously for poor George Beeston.

"May I make bold to ask if you seek advancement at court?" she inquired civilly.

"Yes, if it help one at court to wish to fight for his Majesty. That is my desire. After much entreaty, my mother allowed me to travel hither, in the hope that my distant kinsman, the Earl of Beverley, might procure me the captaincy of a troop of horse. As for Roger, his mother was my mother's foster-sister, so the worthy dame sent her son to take care of me."

"What will the good ladies say when they hear that you had not been in London an hour ere you stormed Gondomar's house to succor a couple of silly wenches?" put in Eleanor.

"My mother will remember that my father lamed two men who sought to stop their wedding, but Mistress Sainton will clap her hands and cry, 'Mercy o' me! what manner o' fules be those Spaniards that they didna run when they set eyes on my Roger? They mun be daft!'"

His ready reproduction of the Yorkshire dialect brought a laugh to their lips; it aided Eleanor in no small degree to hide the blush which mantled her fair cheeks when Walter so aptly turned the tables on her.

But Anna, if restrained in her own behalf, thought that this young spark's wooing of her friend should be curbed.

"There was purpose in your father's prowess," she said. "Sir Harry Revel told me he wished us no indignity, so, perchance, you erred in your boldness, though, indeed, I do not cavil at it."

"Sir Harry Revel lied. When I meet the fop I shall tell him so."

"Nay, nay. You take me too seriously. I pray you forget my banter. It would ill requite your service were careless words of mine to provoke another encounter."

"For my part, I plead with you on behalf of the Marquis of Bath. He is but a goose, though he carries the feathers of a peacock," added Nellie.

In their talk they passed along the north side of the garden. Here, a number of trees gave grateful shade in the daytime. A wall beyond, with foliage peeping over it, showed that another smaller enclosure, belonging to some civic dignitary, occupied one of the few open spaces remaining within the city defenses.

At this moment, though darkness had not yet fallen, the gloom cast by the trees rendered persons near at hand indistinct. Their voices must have given warning of their coming, for a tall cavalier, wrapped in a cloak, suddenly stepped from behind a broad-beamed elm.

"Anna!" he said, "and Nellie! But whom else have we here?"

The girls started, and Mowbray would have resented the newcomer's manner had not Eleanor cried:--

"My brother!"

Anna, too, quickly intervened.

"This is Master Walter Mowbray," she said, "and his breeding, no less than the help he rendered so freely to-day,

warrants more courteous greeting from Sir Thomas Roe."

The stranger, a young man of dignified appearance, made such amends for the abruptness of his challenge that Mowbray wondered how it happened that so elegant and polished a gentleman should have startled two ladies with a peremptory challenge.

Soon this bewilderment passed. They strolled on in company, and they had not been discoursing five minutes before he discovered that Sir Thomas Roe was favored of Anna if young Beeston was favored of her father.

A certain reluctance on their part to return to the more open part of the garden did not escape him, and, although there was no actual pairing off, he found little difficulty in addressing his conversation exclusively to the bewitching Eleanor.

In the half light of evening she was fairy-like, a living dream of beauty, a coy sprite, who laughed, and teased, and tantalized by her aloof propinquity. It was strange, too, that a youngster who could hold his own so fairly in an encounter of wits with Anna should be suddenly overtaken by one-syllable bashfulness when left alone with Eleanor. Yet, if Master Mowbray's confusion were inexplicable, what subtle craft can dissipate the mystery of Nellie Roe's change of manner? From being shy, she became pert. She seemed to pass with a bound from demure girlhood to delightful womanhood. When Walter strove to rally her with an apt retort she overwhelmed him with a dozen. Her eyes met his and looked him out of face. It might be that the presence of her brother gave her confidence, that the sweet gloaming of a summer's eve enchanted her, that the day's adventures flashed a new and wondrous picture into the undimmed mirror of her mind. Whatever the cause, Mowbray was vanquished utterly, and, being of soldierly stock, he recognized his defeat.

There came to him, in that magic garden, the first dazzling vision of love. Never before had he met a maid to whom his heart sang out the glad tidings that here was his mate. Somehow, the wondrous discovery, though it thrilled his very soul, sobered his thoughts. And then, with quick alternation of mood, he found his tongue again, and behold, Mistress Roe must fain listen, with many a sigh and sympathetic murmur, whilst he poured forth his day-dreams of founding anew the fortunes of his house.

Ah, those summer nights, when hearts are virginal: they are old as Paradise, young as yester eve!

Unhappily, true love does not always find a rose-strewn path. Absorbed though they were in their talk, and ever drawing nearer until a rounded arm touched by chance was now pressed with reassuring confidence, they could not help seeing, when they met Anna and Sir Thomas Roe in a little open space, that the lady had been crying.

Indeed, she herself made no secret of it, but bravely carried off the situation by vowing that old friends should never say "Good-by."

"Here is your brother, Nell, come to tell us that he sails forthwith for some far-off land he calls Guiana," she cried, striving to laugh in order to hide the nervous break in her voice. "Not content with that, he must need add that he hopes to discover the limits of that wild river of the Amazons, as if there were greater fortunes for men of intelligence in savage countries than in our own good city."

"Can it be true that you leave us so soon?" cried Eleanor, disengaging her arm from Mowbray's hand in quick alarm.

"It is, indeed, but a matter of hours," he said lightly. "I did but break in on your after-supper stroll to ask your fair gossip for some token which should cheer my drooping spirits by kind remembrance when England shall have sunk below the line."

"A most reasonable request," put in Walter. "Had I another such keepsake from a lady whom I honor most highly I would seek the further privilege of going with you on your travels."

"Lack-a-day! at this rate we shall lose every youth of our acquaintance," said Anna, who found in excited speech the safest outlet for her emotions. "Yet, lest it be said that I would restrain young gentlemen of spirit who would fain wander abroad, I have here a memento of myself which Sir Thomas Roe shall carry as a talisman against all barbarians."

She took from beneath a ruff of lace on her breast a small oval object which was fastened by a tiny gold chain around her neck. Even in the dim light they could see it was a miniature.

"It is the work of that excellent painter, Master Isaac Olliver," she added hastily, "and, from what I know of his skill, I vow his brush was worthy of a better subject."

"Anna, it is your own portrait!" cried Roe.

"Indeed, would any woman give you the picture of another?"

"Not unless she wished me well and gave me yours."

"Have you also sat to this Master Olliver?" whispered Mowbray to Eleanor.

"Tis clear you come from the country, sir. His repute is such that to procure one of his miniatures would cost me my dress for a year or more."

"Then he has not seen you, or, being an artist, he would beseech you to inspire his pencil."

Already they were alone again, for Roe and his lady might reasonably be expected to say something in privacy concerning that painting, and there is no telling what topic Walter would have pursued with Eleanor, his dumbness having passed away wholly, had not the noise of some one running hastily in their direction along the gravel path drawn the four together with the men in front.

It was now nearly dark, and they knew not, until he was upon them, that the individual in such urgency was George Beeston.

"Master Mowbray!" he called out, "Master Mowbray, an you be in the company, I pray you answer."

"Here I am. Is aught amiss?"

"But there is another, yet I left your good friend Sinton at the door?"

"We are accompanied by Sir Thomas Roe, with whom you are acquainted," intervened Anna, in the clear, cold accents which were but too familiar in Beeston's ears.

"Ah!"

The little word meant a good deal, but the young man was too single-minded to seek a quarrel with a rival at that moment. Gulping back the bitter exclamation which rose to his lips, he said quietly:--

"I am glad it is none other. Here be ill news to hand. The King has sent officers demanding the instant rendition of two strangers, one Mowbray by name and the other a maniac of monstrous growth, who committed grave default to-day without the confines of the city. The requisition is made in proper form, under his Majesty's sign manual. The sheriff cannot withstand it. He hath sent a privy warning, and he comes hither with some pomp quick on the heels of his messenger."

"Then the King's orders must be obeyed. What sayeth Sir Thomas Cave?" said Mowbray.

"His worship is greatly perturbed. He fears that Gondomar has poisoned the King's mind. You had best consult with him instantly."

"The sheriff did not give warning without motive," said Sir Thomas Roe. "He conveyed a hint that those he sought had better be absent. Unhappily, Sir Thomas Cave would not be pleased by my presence in his house, or I would accompany you. Nevertheless, I advise you to avoid arrest."

"Tell us, brother dear, how this can be accomplished."

There was a tremulous anxiety in Eleanor Roe's question that sent a thrill of joy through one listener at least. Unnoticed in the darkness, Walter sought and pressed her hand.

Again Roe's natural air of domination made itself felt. Even Beeston, who would gladly have run him through the body, found himself waiting for his sage counsel.

"Return, all of you, to the dwelling," said Roe. "Let Master Mowbray bring his friend hither, and I shall conduct them both to a place of safety. None need know of my presence here. If Master Beeston desires an explanation thereof I shall accord it fittingly hereafter."

"For my part I shall be equally ready to receive it, when these Yorkshire gentlemen are provided for," said Beeston.

"Then these polite rejoinders are needless," cried Anna softly, "for Sir Thomas Roe sails forthwith for the Spanish main. Come! No more idle words. Our feet are more needed than our tongues."

They raced away together, Walter thinking no harm in helping Nellie by catching hold of her slender wrist.

They found Sir Thomas Cave's house in some disorder of frightened domestics. The knight himself was raging at the garden door.

"A nice thing," he roared at the girls, "gadding about among the bushes and gilliflowers when men's lives are at stake. Here be arquebusiers by the score come from Whitehall--"

"Where is Sainton?" demanded Mowbray, wishful to cut short any discussion that threatened to waste time.

"Gone to don his suit of leather. He says he has no mind to see his mother's good homespun cut by steel bodkins. Gad! he is a proper man. But this is a bad business, Master Mowbray. I pray you demand fair trial, yet anger not the King by repartee. He is fair enough when the harpies about him leave him to his pleasure. I have some little favor at court. It shall be exerted to the utmost, and backed by my last penny if need be. Never shall it be said that I left my daughter's protectors to languish in gaol, maimed for life, without striving with all my power--"

"Never fash yourself about us, most excellent host," roared Sainton, appearing behind the distressed old gentleman. "Friend Mowbray and I can win our way out of London as we won our way into it. Methinks 'tis a place that has little liking for honest men, saving those who, like your worship, are forced to bide in it."

Seizing the cue thus unconsciously given by Roger, Walter said hurriedly:--

"We bid you Godspeed, my worthy friend, and hope some day to see you again. Farewell, Mistress Anna. Come, Roger. I think I hear the clank of steel in the distance."

"My soul, whither will you hie yourselves at this hour?" gasped Sir Thomas.

"We can strive to avoid arrest, and that is a point gained. Forgive me! Lights are dangerous."

He seized a lantern held by a serving-man and blew out the flame. Instantly he clasped Eleanor Roe around the waist and kissed her on the lips. She was so taken by surprise that she resisted not at all, even lifting her pretty face, in sheer wonderment, it might be.

"Good-by, sweetheart," he whispered. "I shall see you again, if all the King's men made a cordon about you."

Then Roger and he vanished among the trees, while a loud knocking disturbed the quietude of the night in the street which adjoined the gardens.

CHAPTER IV

"The Philistines be upon thee, Samson."
Judges xvi. 9.

For the first time in his life Mowbray felt the tremor of a woman's kiss. Naturally, in an age when kissing was regarded, save by husbands and jealous lovers, as a mere expression of esteem, his lips had met those of many a pretty girl during a village revel or when the chestnuts exploded on the hearth of an All Hallow's Eve. Yet there was an irresistible impulse, a silent avowal, in the manner of his leave-taking of Eleanor Roe that caused the blood to tingle in his veins with the rapture of a new delight. For a few paces he trod on air.

Big Roger, recking little of these lover-like raptures, brought him back to earth with a question:--

"Had we not better seek the open streets than scramble through these uncertain trees, friend Walter?"

"Forgive me. I should have told you that one awaits us here."

"Marry! Is the refuge planned already?"

"I know not. Hist, now, a moment, and we shall soon be wiser."

They stood in silence for a few seconds. They heard the clash of accouterments and the champing of bits from the cavalcade halted outside Alderman Cave's door.

"I' faith," growled Roger, "his most gracious Majesty hath sent an army to apprehend us. Yet, if you be not misled, he bids fair to be no better off than Waltham's calf, which ran nine miles to suck a bull and came home athirst."

"I pray you cease. Sir Thomas! Sir Thomas Roe!"

At the call a figure advanced from amidst the trees.

"Grant me your pardon, Master Mowbray," came the polite response. "I was not prepared to encounter a son of Anak in your company. I had grave design to climb the wall speedily when I saw your giant comrade dimly outlined. It will be a matter of no small difficulty to pilot him unobserved through the city."

"Show me the North Road and I'll make my own gait," said Roger.

"Nay, that is not my intent. I was, in foolish parlance, thinking aloud. Difficulties exist only that resolute men may surmount them. I do not decry your length of limb, good sir. Rather would I avail myself of it. Behind these bushes there is a wall of such proportions that your height alone will enable us to scale it without noise. Now, Master Mowbray, up on your friend's shoulders. I will follow suit. Between the two of us we shall hoist him after."

Roe's cool demeanor inspired them with confidence. Though it was now so dark, owing to storm-clouds having banked up from the west, that they had to grope their path through the undergrowth, they obeyed his directions. All three were seated astride a ten-foot wall without much delay.

That they had not acted an instant too soon was evident from the fact that already armed men carrying torches were spreading fan-wise across Draper's Garden from the Caves's house, and they heard a loud voice bellowing from the private doorway:--

"I call on all liege men and true to secure the arrest of two malefactors who have but now escaped from this dwelling."

Mowbray found himself wondering why the hue and cry had been raised so promptly. Some one must have indicated the exact place where he and Roger had disappeared. But Roe dropped from the wall on the other side and whispered up to them:--

"Follow! It is soft earth."

"Hold by the wall," he murmured when they stood by his side. "It leads to a wicket."

Walking in Indian file they quickly passed into a narrow court. Thence, threading many a dark alley and tortuous by-street, stopping always at main thoroughfares until their guide signaled that the way was clear, they crossed the city towards the river. Roe knew London better than the watch. Seemingly, he could find the track blindfold, and Walter guessed that the cavalier often used this device in order to encounter Anna Cave unseen by others. It was passing strange that Nellie should be an inmate of a house where her brother was so unwelcome. However, this was no hour to push inquiries. He was now utterly lost as to locality, and he awaited, with some curiosity, the outcome of this

nocturnal wandering through the most ancient part of London.

At last, the close air of the alleys gave place to a fresher draft, and his quick ear caught the splash of water.

"Guard your steps here," said Roe. "The stairs are not of the best, but they will bear your weight if you proceed with caution."

He appeared to vanish through a trap-door in a small jetty. Down in the impenetrable darkness they heard him say:--

"I have flint and steel, yet, if you give me your hand, I can dispense with a light."

Thus, with exact directions, he seated them safely in a boat, and, controlling the craft by retaining touch with the beams of the wharf, after gliding through the gloom for a few yards he was able to ply a pair of oars in the stream. Neither of the others had been on the Thames at night--Roger had not even seen the river before--and so, when the oarsman vigorously impelled the wherry straight into what looked like a row of tall houses, with lights in some of the upper windows, the North-country youths thought for sure they would collide violently with the foundations. They were minded to cry a warning, but seeing that Roe glanced frequently over his shoulder they refrained.

Thus, they shot under one of the many arches of London Bridge, covered then throughout its length by tall buildings, and, once they were speeding in mid-stream of the open river, they saw a forest of masts rising dimly in front.

Ere long, Sir Thomas Roe, who exercised sailor-like skill in the management of his oars, picked out one of the innumerable company of ships and lay to under the vessel's quarter.

"*Defiance* ahoy!" he cried softly.

"Aye, aye," replied a voice, and a rope ladder fell into the boat. Whilst Roe held it his companions clambered aloft, gaining the deck of a fair-sized merchantman where watch was kept by a number of sailors.

It chanced that Sainton mounted first, and a lantern flashed into his eyes. As he became visible, by feet at a time, for he stood nearly seven feet high, the man holding the light fell back in amazed fear.

"Avaunt thee!" he roared. "Up pikes to repel boarders! Here be the devil himself come to murder us!"

"Peace, fellow," said Roger, "when Old Nick visits thee he shall not need to come in the guise of an honest man. Yet, I warrant thee, Sir Thomas Roe shall play the devil when he comes aboard if thou makest such a row without better cause."

Mowbray's appearance, with Roe close on his heels, quelled the excitement of the watch. A few sharp words recalled them to their duties. The ladder was hoisted in and the boat secured with a painter, whilst Roe led the newcomers to the after cabin, where, over a flagon of wine, he sought their better acquaintance.

Mowbray gave him a detailed account of all that had taken place, and Roe's finely-chiseled face flushed deeply when he heard the true extent of the outrage planned by the band of young gallants.

"I have no wish to defend Gondomar," he said slowly, seeming to compel reason to master rage. "He has brought the Inquisition to England. He carries our worthy King in his pocket. Yet I would fain believe that he is too wary and prudent to countenance such doings at the very gates of the city, which he fears alone in all England."

"To be just, I believe he was not present. Nevertheless, word came to Sir Thomas Cave that when tidings of the affair reached him, he rose instantly from play at Beaujeu's and hastened to Whitehall to demand our arrest."

"Ah, it is a bad business. I am much bounden to you. You know that one of these girls is my youngest sister. The other I prize dearer than life itself. Yet, unless you and Master Sainton agree to sail with me on this ship to the Amazons I fear that naught can save you from the King's wrath. I am powerless, being in ill repute at court. The city is strong, but unwilling, as yet, to openly defy the thieves and adulterers who pander to James's vanities and stop his ears to the representations of God-fearing men. This cannot endure. Our people are long-suffering but mighty in their wrath. If Elizabeth ruled with a strong hand she ever strove to advance the honor of England and to safeguard the liberties of her subjects. Now our flag is trailed in the mud. We are treated with contumely abroad and our protests at home are stifled by the Star Chamber. It must end. It shall end. Monarchy itself shall rot ere England perishes!"

These were dangerous words. They lost none of their tremendous import when uttered by a man of such statesman-like qualities that Anthony a Wood wrote of him long afterwards: "Those who knew him well have said that there was nothing wanting in him towards the accomplishment of a scholar, gentleman, or courtier."

It was inevitable that the opinion of such an one should weigh deeply with young Mowbray, and impress even the less

critical brains of Roger Sainton. Roe's appearance, no less than his impassioned outburst, would have won the credence of any well-bred youths in the Kingdom. In face, in figure, and indeed in many of his attributes, he resembled that gallant and high-minded adventurer of an earlier generation, Sir Walter Raleigh, who was now a close prisoner in the Tower. He had the bright, penetrating eyes, the long, aquiline nose, firm mouth, and well-molded chin which bespeak good birth and high intelligence. A mass of brown hair waved over a lofty forehead and fell in ringlets on his neck. He wore the mustaches and Vandyke tuft of beard affected by gentlemen of the period, and the natural gravity of his expression could be wholly dispelled, when occasion warranted, by a smile of rare humor.

But he was in no smiling mood just then. He leaned his head on his hand and sighed wearily. Mowbray, notwithstanding his own desperate though wholly unmerited plight, now presented to his eyes in all its sinister significance, could not help marveling how it came about that the leader of an expedition to the Spanish Main, which could scarce be undertaken without royal sanction, should avow himself so helpless in that very circle, while it was still more strange that Roe's position and attainments did not render him a favored suitor in the Cave household.

Moreover, the King had knighted him, and Nellie Roe had said, during their walk in the garden, that her brother was a great friend of Prince Henry, and declared laughingly that Anna should think herself highly flattered, for the gossip ran that Princess Elizabeth was much attached to "Honest Tom," as she called him.

Roe's disturbed reflections and Mowbray's bewilderment alike were put an end to by Roger.

"Ecod!" he cried, thumping the stout table screwed to the floor of the cabin and making the tankards dance under the blow, "Walter and I can ask no better fate than to voyage with you to the Indies. We are in quest of fortune, and folk say that the Spaniards have gold for the taking. Here's to you, Sir Thomas Roe, and here's to all of us! May we never want nowt, none of us!"

He drained his own tankard and caused a gleam of amusement to flicker on Roe's face.

"Had you lost your right hand for brawling, Master Sainton," he said, "you would now lose the left if the King heard your sentiments. Harry a Spaniard, i' faith! That is rankest heresy nowadays. Yet there is no telling what may befall when we set our course west by south of the Canaries. And now, let me see to your comfort for the night."

He called a young negro from the depths of the ship; the sudden appearance of the boy's shining black face in the cabin caused Roger Sainton to start so violently that Roe and Mowbray laughed, while the negro himself displayed all his teeth in a huge grin. Mowbray, during an earlier visit to London, had seen many a dark-skinned man; it was becoming the fashion to have one or more of these ebony-hued servitors in each household with any pretensions to grandeur. But Roger had never before set eyes on the like, and the apparition was unexpected.

"Gad," said he, reaching for the flagon again, "no wonder the sailor-man thought he saw the devil! 'Tis clear he fancied that this worthy had fallen overboard."

He stood up, to follow Roe, whereupon the negro's astonishment was even greater than Roger's, for the cock's feathers in the Yorkshireman's hat swept the ceiling of the cabin, and his belt was nearly on a level with the other's chin.

"Where him one dam big fighting-man lie, sir?" said the black to Roe. "Dere am no bunk in the ship will hold him half."

Indeed, this was a minor difficulty which had not been foreseen. In his own cabin, which Roe intended to place temporarily at their service, there were two bunks, but each was a full twelve inches too short for Sainton. They were stoutly built, too, of solid oak and abutting on strong lockers. The only way in which one of them could be made to serve his needs was to cut away the partition, and it was now a very late hour to seek the services of the ship's carpenter.

"If that is the only drawback, it is solved most readily," said Roger, and, with his clenched fist, guarded only by a leather glove, he smashed a strong oaken panel out of its dovetailed joints.

The negro's eyes nearly fell out with amazement, and, indeed, Sir Thomas Roe was not prepared for this simple yet very unusual feat of sheer strength.

"That blow would have felled an ox," he cried, and Mowbray told him how Roger once, in the market square of Richmond, had, for a wager, brought down an old bull with a straight punch between the eyes.

Now, the negro not only saw and heard, but he talked of these things to the watch, and they, in their turn, related them to others of the ship's company in the early morning. It chanced that a half-caste Spanish cook, hired because he knew the speech of the natives of Guiana, was among the auditory, and he stole to the cabin wherein the two Englishmen lay sleeping soundly. Mere idle curiosity impelled him to gaze at the man who could perform such prodigies, and, having gaped sufficiently, he went ashore for a farewell carouse with certain cronies in Alsatia.

Not the great men of the world, but their petty myrmidons, are oft the mainspring of the events which shape the destinies not alone of individuals but of nations. Even Pedro, the half-caste, might have dispensed with the day's drinking bout had his cup been fashioned of the magic crystal which enables credulous people to see future events in its shadowy mirror! Assuredly, some of the sights therein would have sated his desire for stimulant.

Mowbray and Sinton were aroused by an unusual movement. At first they hardly knew where they were, and it was passing strange that the floor should heave and the walls creak.

Mowbray sprang from his bunk quickly and looked through the open door to see if it were possible that the ship had cast off from her moorings during the night. The frowning battlements of the Tower, dimly visible through a pelting rain, showed that his first surmise was incorrect. The *Defiance* was anchored securely enough, but a high wind had lashed the river into turbulence, and the storm which threatened over night had burst with fury over London.

Roger, too, awoke.

"Gad," he cried, "I dreamt I was being hanged as a cutpurse, and I felt the branch of an oak-tree swaying as I swung in the wind."

"You will have many such visions if you mix Brown Devon and Alicant with the wines of Burgundy in your midnight revels," said Walter, cheerfully. To his ordered senses had come the memory of the garden and Nellie Roe's kiss. He hailed the bad weather with glee. Men would be loth to stir abroad, and, if Sir Thomas Roe's arrangements permitted, he could foresee another meeting with Eleanor that evening.

"At times you talk but scurvy sense," grumbled Sinton, pulling on his huge boots. "'Tis the lack of a pasty, washed down by any one of the good liquors you name, that hath disordered my stomach and sent its fasting vapors to my brain. By the cross of Osmotherly, I could eat the haunch of a horse."

"Without there!" shouted Mowbray. "Where is the black summoned by Sir Thomas Roe to wait on us?"

The negro came at the call. He told them that his master had gone ashore at daybreak, with intent to return before noon, but that breakfast awaited their lordships' pleasure in the cabin.

The hours passed all too slowly until Roe put in an appearance. He was ferried to the ship in some state, in a boat with six rowers. He had learnt that the city was scoured for them all night, and the rumor ran that they had escaped towards Barnet, this canard having been put about by some friendly disposed person.

"I cannot understand the rancor displayed in this matter," he said. "King James must have been stirred most powerfully against you, yet it is idle to think that you have earned the hatred of some court favorite already. Perhaps Lord Dereham is seeking revenge for being thrown into the glass-house, though, if rumor be true, his Lordship dwells in one, being a perfect knave. In any event, you must not be seen, and I shall warn my men to forget your very existence. We sail with to-morrow morning's tide, and, if this wind holds, shall be clear of the Downs by night."

Thinking this speech augured badly for his hopes, Mowbray said nothing of his plan to visit Cave's house after dusk.

The sailors, under Roe's directions, began to warp the ship alongside a wharf, where many bales of merchandise and barrels of flour, salt beef, dried fish, preserved fruit for scurvy, wine, beer, and the mixed collection of stores needed for a long voyage, were piled in readiness to be placed in her hold.

Walter, and Roger especially, were warned to remain hidden in the after cabin, where none save the ship's officers had business, and Roe felt that he could trust his subordinates, if for no better reason than self-interest, for two such recruits were valuable additions to the ship's company.

Though the confinement was irksome it was so obviously necessary to their safety that they made the best of it.

Walter found in a cupboard a ship-master's journal of a voyage to Virginia, and entertained Roger with extracts therefrom, whilst the latter, at times, stretched his huge limbs and hummed a verse or two of that old song of Percy and Douglas, which, as Sir Philip Sydney used to say, had the power to stir the heart as a trumpet.

The rain ceased with the decline of day. The monotonous clank of the windlass and the cries of stevedores and sailors gave place to the swish of water as the watch washed the deck. For convenience' sake, a supply of fresh water being the last thing to be taken aboard next morning, the vessel was tied up to the wharf. When the tide fell she was left high and dry on the mud.

Roe was much occupied ashore with those city merchants who helped him in his venture, but he undertook privily to warn Anna Cave as to the whereabouts of the two young men to whom she was so greatly indebted, and they might

leave to her contriving the transfer of their baggage to the ship at a late hour.

"You shall not see her again, then?" asked Walter, with a faint hope that her lover would strain every nerve in that direction, when he might accompany him.

"No," was the determined answer. "Such a course would be fraught with risk to you. I might be seen and followed. Her father's serving-men, coming hither by night, will pass unnoticed."

"Do not consider me in that respect, I pray you."

Roe shook his head and sighed.

"I am resolved," he said. "We may not meet until I return, if God wills it. I told her as much last night. We said 'farewell'; let it rest at that."

So Walter's heart sank into his boots, for the case between him and Nellie rested on as doubtful a basis as that between Roe and Anna.

He sat down to indite a letter to his mother, which Sir Thomas would entrust to one of his friends having affairs in the north. Roger could not write, but he sent a loving message to Mistress Sainton, with many quaint instructions as to the management of the garth and homestead.

"Tell her," quoth he, "that I be going across seas to reive the Dons, and that I shall bring back to her a gold drinking-cup worthy of her oldest brew."

"A man may catch larks if the heavens fall," commented Walter in Rabelais's phrase.

"Or if he lime a twig he may e'en obtain a sparrow. My auld mother will be pleased enough to see me if the cup be pewter. Write, man, and cheer her. I'll warrant you have vexed Mistress Mowbray with a screed about yon wench you were sparking in the garden last night."

Indeed, it was true. Walter bent to the table to hide a blush. His letter dealt, in suspicious detail, with the charms and graces of Nellie Roe.

At last the missive was addressed and sealed. It was nearly ten o'clock, and London was quieting down for the night, when the two quitted their cabin and walked to the larger saloon where Sir Thomas Roe, with Captain Davis, the commander of the *Defiance*, was busy with many documents.

They talked there a little while. Suddenly they heard the watch hailed by a boat alongside.

"What ship is that?"

"Who hails?"

"The King's officer."

Roe sprang to his feet and rushed out, for the cabin was in the poop, and the door was level with the main deck. The others followed. In the river, separated from the vessel by a few feet of mud, was an eight-oared barge filled with soldiers.

"Fore God!" he whispered to Mowbray, "they have found your retreat."

They turned towards the wharf. A company of halberdiers and arquebusiers had surrounded it and already an officer was advancing towards the gangway.

"Bid Sainton offer no resistance," said Roe, instantly. "At best, you can demand fair hearing, and I will try what a bold front can do. Remember, you are sworn volunteers for my mission to Guiana."

As well strive to stem the water then rushing up from the Nore towards London Bridge as endeavor to withstand the King's warrant. The officer was civil, but inflexible. Sorely against the grain, both Mowbray and Sainton were manacled and led ashore.

"Tell me, at least, whither you take them," demanded Roe. "The King hath been misled in this matter and my friends will seek prompt justice at his Majesty's hands."

"My orders are to deliver them to the Tower," was the reply.

"Were you bidden come straight to this ship?"

There was no answer. The officer signified by a blunt gesture that he obeyed orders, but could give no information.

Surrounded by armed men and torch-bearers the unlucky youths were about to be marched off through the crowd of quay-side loiterers which had gathered owing to the presence of the soldiers--Roe was bidding them be of good cheer and all should yet go well with them--when an unexpected diversion took place.

Standing somewhat aloof from the mob were several men carrying bags and boxes. With them were two closely cloaked females, and this little party, arriving late on the scene, were apparently anxious not to attract attention. But the glare of the flambeaux fell on Roger's tall form and revealed Mowbray by his side.

"Oh, Ann," wailed a despairing voice, "they have taken him."

Walter heard the cry, and so did Roe. They knew who it was that spoke. Roe, with a parting pressure of Mowbray's shoulder, strode off to comfort his sister, whilst Mowbray himself, though unable to use his hands, hustled a halberdier out of the way and cried:--

"Farewell, Mistress Roe. Though the cordon of King's men be here, yet have I seen you, and, God willing, I shall not part from you so speedily when next we meet."

He knew that the girls, greatly daring, had slipped out with the men who carried his goods and those of Sainton. Though his heart beat with apprehension of an ignominious fate, yet it swelled with pride, too, at the thought that Eleanor had come to see him.

The guard, seeming to dread an attempted rescue, gathered nearer to their prisoners. A slight altercation took place between Roe and the officer anent the disposition of the prisoners' effects. Finally, Sir Thomas had his way, and their goods were handed over to the soldiers to be taken with them.

Then, a sharp command was given, the front rank lowered their halberds, the crowd gave way, and the party marched off towards the Tower.

Roger, by means of his great height, could see clear over the heads of the escort.

"That lass must be mightily smitten with thee, Walter," he said gruffly. "She would have fallen like a stone had not Mistress Cave caught her in her arms."



CHAPTER V

"This is the time--heaven's maiden sentinel
Hath quitted her high watch--the lesser
spangles
Are paling one by one."

To understand aright the mixed feelings of anger and dread which filled the minds of the prisoners as they marched through the narrow streets on their way to the Tower, it is necessary to remember how the gross corruption of the court of the first Stuart had inspired Englishmen with a scandalized disbelief in the wisdom of their sovereign. The Tudors reigned over a people who regarded even their mad temper with a half idolatrous reverence. The great poet of the splendid epoch closed by the reign of Elizabeth fittingly expressed the popular sentiment when he spoke of "the divinity that doth hedge a King." But James, a slobbering monstrosity, at once shallow and bombastic, claiming by day monarchical privileges of the most despotic nature, and presiding by night over drunken revels of the most outrageous license, had torn beyond repair the imperial mantle with which a chivalrous nation had been proud to clothe its ruler.

In the Puritan north especially was he regarded with fear and loathing. Hence, Mowbray and Sainton, though prepared to face with a jest any odds in defense of their honor or their country, could now only look forward to an ignominious punishment, fraught with disablement if not with death itself, because they had dared to cross the path of one of the King's favorites. It was a dismal prospect for two high-spirited youths.

"We have brought our eggs to a bad market, I trow," muttered Sainton, as the gates of the Tower clanged behind them and they halted in front of the guardroom, whilst the leader of their escort was formally handing them over to the captain of the guard.

"I fear me you were ill advised to throw in your lot with mine, Roger," was all that Walter could find to say.

"Nay, nay, lad, I meant no reproach. Sink or swim, we are tied by the same band. Nevertheless, 'tis a pity I am parted from my staff and you from your sword."

"Here, they would but speed our end."

"Like enough, yet some should go with us."

He looked about him with such an air that the halberdiers nearest to him shrank away. Though fettered, he inspired terror. From a safer distance they surveyed him with the admiration which soldiers know how to yield to a redoubtable adversary.

The troops from Whitehall quickly gave place to a number of warders, and the two were marched off, expecting no other lot for the hour than a cold cell and a plank bed. They saw, to their surprise, that some of the men carried their belongings. This trivial fact argued a certain degree of consideration in their treatment, and their hopes rose high when they were halted a second time near the Water Gate. Soon, the sentinel stationed on the projecting bastion shouted a challenge, the chief warder hurried to his side, and, after some parley, the gate was thrown open to admit the identical boat which they had seen lying alongside the *Defiance*. Moreover, in the light of the torches carried by those on board, they now perceived that the soldiers and rowers were not King's men but Spaniards.

The galley was brought close to the flight of steps leading down to the dark water beneath the arch, and the prisoners were bidden go aboard.

Walter hung back. The slight hope which had cheered him was dispelled by the sight of the Spanish uniforms.

"I demand fair trial by men of my own race," he cried. "Why should we be handed over to our enemies?"

He was vouchsafed no answer. Sullenly, but without delay, the warders hustled him and Roger towards the boat. They could offer no resistance. Their wrists were manacled, and, as a further precaution, a heavy chain bound their arms to their waists. It was more dignified to submit; they and their packages were stowed in the center of the galley; the heavy gates were swung open once more, and the boat shot out into the river. For nearly three hours they were pulled down stream. They could make nothing of the jargon of talk that went on around them. Evidently there was some joke toward anent Roger's size, and one Spaniard prodded his ribs lightly with the butt of his halberd, saying in broken English:--

"Roas' bif; good, eh?"

By reason of his bulk, Sainton seemed to be clumsy, though he was endowed with the agility of a deer. Suddenly lifting a foot, he planted it so violently in the pit of the Spaniard's stomach that the humorist turned a somersault over a seat.

His comrades laughed, but the man himself was enraged. He regained his feet, lifted his halberd, and would have brained Roger then and there had not another interposed his pike.

An officer interfered, and there was much furious gesticulation before the discomfited joker lowered his weapon. He shot a vengeful glance at Roger, however, and cried something which caused further merriment.

What he said was:--

"Would that I might be there when the fire is lit. You will frizzle like a whole ox."

Fortunately, the Englishmen knew not what he meant. Yet they were not long kept in ignorance of some part, at least, of the fate in store for them. The galley at last drew up under the counter of a large ship of foreign rig, lying in the tideway off Tilbury Hope. With considerable difficulty, in their bound state, Mowbray and Roger were hoisted aboard, and taken to a tiny cabin beneath the after deck.

Then there was a good deal of discussion, evidently induced by Roger's proportions. Ultimately, a ship's carpenter drove a couple of heavy iron staples into the deck. The big man eyed the preparations, and had it in his mind to pass some comment to Walter. Luckily, his native shrewdness stopped his tongue, else his spoken contempt for the holdfasts might have led to the adoption of other means of securing him.

Two chains, each equipped with leg manacles, were fastened to the staples, and the bolts were hammered again until the chains were immovably riveted in the center. The prisoners were locked into the leg-piece, and their remaining fetters were removed. These operations occupied some time in accomplishments. They had been on board fully half an hour before the halberdiers left them, and they did not know that a tall man, heavily cloaked, who stood behind the screen of soldiers, was furtively watching them throughout.

A sentry, with drawn sword, was stationed at the door when the others departed. The shrouded stranger imperiously motioned him aside and entered. He threw open his cloak. A tiny lantern swinging from the ceiling lit up his sallow, thin face. The piercing black eyes, hawk-like nose, and lips that met in a determined line, would have revealed his identity had not his garments placed the matter beyond doubt. It was the Jesuit whom they had encountered in the doorway of Gondomar's house.

He regarded them in silence for a moment. Then he smiled, and the menace of his humor was more terrible than many a man's rage.

"You are not so bold, now that a howling crowd is not at your backs," he said, speaking English so correctly that it was clear he had dwelt many years in the country.

"It may well be that your holiness is bolder seeing we are chained to the floor," said Roger.

"Peace, fellow. I do not bandy words with your like. When you reach Spain you shall have questions enough to answer. You," he continued, fixing his sinister gaze on Walter, "you said your name was Mowbray, if I heard aright?"

"Yes. What quarrel have I or any of my kin with Gondomar that my comrade and I should be entrapped in this fashion?"

"Your name is familiar in my ears. Are you of the same house as one Robert Mowbray, who fell on board the *San Jose* on the day when St. Michael and his heavenly cohorts turned their faces from Spain?"

"If you speak of the Armada," answered Walter coldly, "I am the son of Sir Robert Mowbray, who was foully murdered on board that vessel by one of your order. Nevertheless," he added, reflecting that such a reply was not politic, "that is no reason why I should be subjected to outrage or that you should lend your countenance to it. My friend and I, who have done no wrong, nor harmed none, save in defense of two ladies beset by roisterers, have been arrested on the King's warrant and apparently handed over to the Spanish authorities because, forsooth, we pursued certain rascals into the Ambassador's garden."

He paused, not that his grievance was exhausted but rather that the extraordinary expression of mingled joy and hatred which convulsed the Jesuit's face told him his protests were unheeded.

"*Domine! exaudisti supplicationem meam!*" murmured the ecclesiastic, "I have waited twenty years, and in my heart I have questioned Thy wisdom. Yet, fool that I was, I forgot that a thousand years in Thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past."

The concluding words were in Spanish, but Walter had enough Latin to understand his exclamation in that tongue. It bewildered him, yet he strove to clear the mystery that enfolded his capture.

"I pray you," he said urgently, "listen to my recital of events as they took place yesterday. When the truth is known it shall be seen that neither Master Sainton nor I have broken the King's ordinance, or done wrong to Count Gondomar."

"Tis not the King of England, so-called, nor the minister of His Most Catholic Majesty, to whom you shall render explanation. Words are useless with those of your spawn, yet shall your neck bend and your back creak ere many days have passed. Would that my sacred duty did not retain me in this accursed land! Would that I might sail in this ship to my own country! Yet I do commend you, Senor Mowbray, and that gross Philistine who lies by your side, to my brethren of the Seminary of San Jose at Toledo. They shall tend you in the manner that beseemeth the son of him who sent the miraculous statue of our patron to lie deep beneath the waves which protect this benighted England. *Gloria in excelsis!* Spain is still able, by the Holy office, to revenge insults paid to her saints. *Malefico! Malefico!*"

Turning to the sentry, the Jesuit uttered some order which plainly had for its purport the jealous safeguarding of his prisoners. Then, with a parting glance of utmost rancor, and some Latin words which rang like a curse, he left them.

"I' faith," laughed Roger, quietly, "his holiness regards us with slight favor, I fancy. The sound of your name, Walter, was unto him as a red rag to an infuriated bull."

"I never set eyes on the madman before yester eve," said his astonished companion.

"Gad! he swore at us in Latin, Spanish and English, and 'tis sure some of the mud will stick. An auld wife of my acquaintance, who was nurse to the Scroopes, and thus brought in touch with the Roman Church, so to speak, did not exactly know whether priest or parson were best, so she used to con her prayers in Latin and English. 'The Lord only kens which is right,' she used to say. I have always noticed myself that the saints in heaven cry 'Halleluiah,' which is Hebrew, but, as I'm a sinful man, I cannot guess how it may be with maledictions."

The Spanish soldier growled some order, which Walter understood to mean that they must not talk. He murmured the instruction to Roger.

"They mun gag me first," cried Sainton. "Say but the word, Walter, and I'll draw these staples as the apothecary pulls out an offending tooth."

Here the sentry presented the point of his sword. His intent to use the weapon was so unmistakable that Roger thought better of his resolve, and curled up sulkily to seek such rest as was possible.

Hidden away in the ship's interior they knew nothing of what was passing without. Some food was brought to them, and a sailor carried to the cabin their own blankets and clothes on which they were able to stretch their limbs with a certain degree of comfort.

They noticed that their guard was doubled soon after the Jesuit quitted them. One of the men was changed each hour, and this additional measure of precaution showed the determination of their captors to prevent the least chance of their escape, if escape could be dreamed of, from a vessel moored in the midst of a wide river, by men whose limbs were loaded with heavy fetters.

With the sangfroid of their race they yielded to slumber. They knew not how the hours sped, but they were very much surprised when an officer of some rank, a man whom they had not seen previously, appeared in their little cabin and gave an order which resulted in their iron anklets being unlocked. He motioned to them to follow him. They obeyed, mounted a steep ladder, and found themselves on deck.

The first breath of fresh air made them gasp. They had not realized how foul was the atmosphere of their prison, poisoned as it was by the fumes of the lamp, but the relief of the change was turned into momentary stupefaction when they saw that the banks of the Thames had vanished, while two distant blue strips on the horizon, north and south, marked the far-off shores of Essex and Kent.

With all sails spread to catch a stiff breeze the ship was well on her way to sea. The prisoners had scarce reached the deck before a change of course to the southward showed that the vessel was already able to weather the isle of Thanet and the treacherous Goodwin Sands. Roger's amazement found vent in an imprecation, but Walter, whose lips were tremulous with a weakness which few can blame, turned furiously to the officer who had released them from their cell.

"Can it be true?" he cried, "that we have been deported from our country without trial? What would you think, Senor, if your King permitted two Spanish gentlemen to be torn from their friends and sent to a foreign land to be punished for some fancied insult offered to the English envoy?"

The outburst was useless. The Spaniard knew not what he said, but Mowbray's passionate gestures told their own story, and the courtly Don shrugged his shoulders sympathetically. He summoned a sailor, whom he despatched for some one. A monk appeared, a middle-aged man of kindly appearance. He was heavily bearded, and his slight frame

was clothed in the brown habit, with cords and sandals, of the Franciscan order.

The officer, who was really the ship's captain, made some statement to the monk, whom he addressed as Fra Pietro, and the latter, in very tolerable English, explained that the most excellent Senor, Don Caravellada, was only obeying orders in carrying them to the Spanish port of Cadiz. Arrived there, he would hand them over to certain authorities, as instructed, but meanwhile, if they gave him no trouble and comported themselves like English gentlemen, which he assumed them to be, he would treat them in like fashion.

"To what authorities are we to be entrusted?" demanded Mowbray, who had mastered the first choking throb of emotion, and was now resolved not to indulge in useless protests.

A look of pain shot for an instant across Fra Pietro's eyes. But he answered quietly:--

"Don Caravellada has not told me."

"Belike, then, friend, he only needs the asking," put in Roger.

The monk shook his head, and was obviously so distressed that Roger went on:--

"Nay, if it be a secret, let it remain so, in heaven's name. Mayhap I may request your barefooted reverence's good offices in another shape. At what hour is breakfast served on board this hospitable vessel?"

Fra Pietro answered readily enough:--

"It awaits your pleasure. The Senor Capitan bids me offer you, in his name, the best resources of the ship."

"Egad, let us eat first, after which all he has to do to get rid of us is to place Master Mowbray and me in a small boat with oars. 'Twill save us much bother and the ship much provender, for I am sharp set as a keen saw."

Without reply, the monk led them to a cabin where plenty of cold meats, bread, wine, and beer graced the table.

He sat down with them, crossed himself, and ate sparingly of some dry crust, whilst Walter and Sainton tackled a prime joint.

Roger, pausing to take a drink, eyed askance the meager provender which sufficed for Fra Pietro; he made bold to ask him why he fared so poorly.

"It is fast day, and, unfortunately, I forgot to tell the cook to boil me some salted fish."

"Are there many such days in your calendar?" quoth Roger.

"Yes, at certain periods of the year."

"Gad, if that be so, you ought to follow the practice of a jolly old priest I have heard of, who, having pork but no fish on a Friday, baptized it in a water-butt saying, 'Down pig; up pike!' Then he feasted right royally and without injury to his conscience."

The monk smiled. He was wise enough to see that the hearty giant intended no offense.

"I do not need such sustenance as your bulk demands," he said. "I heard the men speaking of your proportions, but, until I saw you with my own eyes I could scarce credit that such a man lived."

"I take it you are not in league with our captors?" put in Walter, anxious to gain some notion as to the extraordinary circumstances which led up to his present position.

"I am but a poor Franciscan, availing myself of a passage to Lisbon."

"Do you know the Jesuit who visited us last night?"

"I did not see him."

"Perchance you may have heard of him. He appeared to hold a high place in the household of Gondomar, the Spanish Ambassador."

Fra Pietro dropped his eyes and murmured:--

"I think he is Dom Geronimo, Grand Inquisitor of the Holy Office."

Mowbray pushed away his plate.

"Dom Geronimo!" he cried. "Your priestly titles are unfamiliar. Is he, by any chance, one who was known in former years as Fra Geronimo, a Jesuit from Toledo?"

"The same, I should believe. He is now a dignitary of much consequence."

"He is a foul murderer! He slew my father by a coward's blow, during the great sea-fight off Dover. Oh, to think of it! Not yet two days since he stood in front of my sword."

"I was minded to tap the bald spot on his skull with my staff and you restrained me," growled Roger.

Mowbray's bitter exclamation seemed to horrify Fra Pietro. He placed his hands over his ears.

"Madre de Dios!" he murmured, "speak not thus of the head of the Holy Office. Did anyone else hear you your fate were sealed, and the Lord knoweth your case is bad enough without adding further condemnation."

Sensible that the Franciscan could hardly be expected to agree with the denunciation of his religious superior, Mowbray restrained the tumultuous thoughts that coursed wildly through his brain. He bowed his head between his hands and abandoned himself to sorrowful reflection. A good deal that was hidden before now became clear.

It was not to be wondered at that Sir Thomas Roe should be puzzled by the animosity displayed by an unknown clique in Whitehall against two strange youths who happened to participate, as upholders of the law, in a not very serious brawl. The expression of the Jesuit's face when he heard Mowbray's name, the determined measures adopted by Gondomar to capture those who had defeated the cleverly planned abduction of the two girls, the remorseless hatred of Dom Geronimo's words when he visited the captives overnight, all pointed to one conclusion. The Jesuit was, indeed, the fanatic who killed Sir Robert Mowbray on board the *San Jose*, and he was ready, after twenty years, to pursue the son with a spleen as malevolent as that which inspired the assassin's blow that struck down the father.

How crafty and subtle had been the means adopted to crush Roger and himself! Were fair inquiry held, no charge could have lain against them. So an unworthy monarch, already a dupe in the game of king-craft played by Spain, had weakly consented to allow the royal warrant to become an active instrument in the hands of an implacable bigot. Swift and sure was Dom Geronimo's vengeance. They had the misfortune to cross his path without the knowledge even of his identity, and now they were being ferried to Spain for some dread purpose the mere suspicion of which chilled the blood in Mowbray's veins.

And Nellie Roe! She, with her beautiful and imperious cousin, was left in the city which harbored a hostile influence so venomous, so pitiless, and yet so powerful. The suspicion that she, too, if only because a Mowbray was her rescuer, might fall under the ban of the Jesuit, wrung a cry of anguish from his lips. Hardly knowing what he did, and not trusting himself to speak, he rushed on deck with the mad notion of throwing himself overboard in a vain attempt to swim ashore. As he emerged from the companionway a whiff of spray struck him in the face. The slight shock restored his senses. A heavy sea was running, and the coast was six miles distant. To spring over the bulwarks meant suicide. Moreover, could he desert Roger? It was not to be thought of. Though death might be a relief, he must stick to his loyal friend, no matter what the ills in store.

Meanwhile, Roger, in his homely way, was telling Fra Pietro the story of their adventures. The monk, who seemed to be of a very kind and benignant disposition, said little. But he listened attentively. Later, when Mowbray had steeled his heart to endurance, Fra Pietro spoke gently to him, and, when the pair were stricken with sea-sickness, he tended them like a skilled nurse.

And so the days passed until, with a favoring gale, they neared the Portuguese coast, and the *Sparta*, for thus was the ship named, bore up for Cape Finisterre and thence ran steadily, under the lee of the land, down to the harbor of Lisbon. Fra Pietro, with whom they had contracted a very real friendship, although his beliefs and opinions ran counter to theirs on almost every topic they discussed, was greatly concerned when the captain's edict went forth that during the vessel's stay in port the two prisoners must be chained in their cabin.

Yet he sought and obtained permission to visit them, and twice he brought them a goodly supply of fresh fruit and a flagon of the famed wine of Oporto. The *Sparta* was not tied to a wharf. She dropped anchor well out in the harbor, and communication with the shore could only be made by means of a boat.

Fra Pietro came to see his English friends for the last time. There were always two sentries on duty at the cabin door now, so it was evident that Senor Caravellada meant to discharge his trust with scrupulous fidelity.

It is natural that the worthy monk, knowing full well the dreadful fate that awaited the two youths at the end of the voyage, should be much downcast during this farewell interview.

Yet there was a hesitancy in his manner that did not escape Walter's eyes. He produced his basket of grapes and

peaches and rich pomegranates, while, this time, he carried three wicker-covered flasks of wine.

Then he began to laugh nervously.

"In one of these flagons, that with the broken seal," he said, "the wine is extraordinarily potent. It has the quality of sending a man into a sound sleep if he imbibe even a small measure, yet it tastes like other wine."

"Ah," exclaimed Roger, who had caught a hint from the close attention paid by Mowbray to the monk's words, "that should be a fine liquor if a man wanted to sleep but could not."

Fra Pietro held out a luscious bunch of grapes.

"Within a bowshot from this ship," he said, affecting a gaiety that should hide the serious nature of his words, "there is a Portuguese vessel, the *Sancta Trinidad*. She sails for the East Indies before dawn. The captain, an honorable man, would give safe asylum to those who were distressed, could they but reach his ship, and in this cluster of grapes is a file. My friends, may God prosper you! Though you are not of my faith I cannot but wish you well. I have striven hard ashore to help you. I have pleaded with those in power, but my words have fallen on deaf ears. Now you know the extent of my poor resources. *Dominus vobiscum! In manus tuas, Domine, commendo juventes.*"

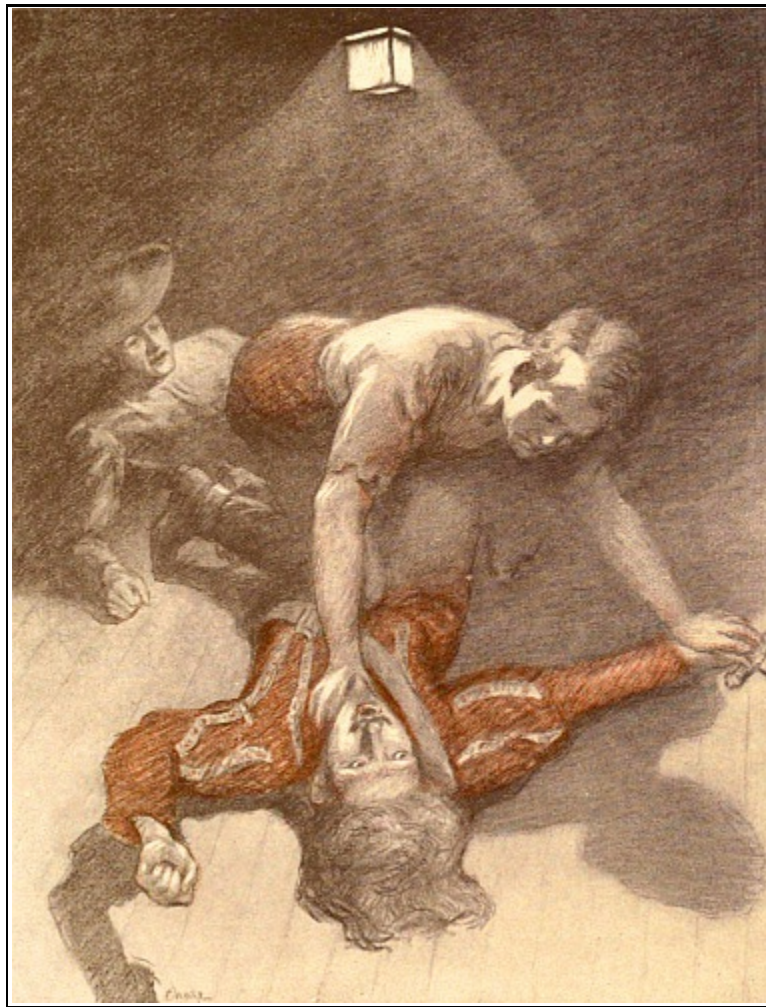
Tears sprang into his eyes, he lifted his hands to heaven as he called down a blessing on them, and the two bowed their heads before this good and true man, in whom the spirit of Christian charity triumphed over narrow conceptions of dogma.

His prayers seemed to abide with them. When night fell the men whose duty it was to maintain the watch indulged in a carouse, as those who had been ashore not only returned full of liquor but carried with them a liberal supply of wine for their less fortunate comrades.

Hence, though Roger drugged two of the guard into torpor, no suspicion was aroused when the relief came, but the sergeant, growling at the drunkards, determined to take a turn himself on duty. Now this circumstance, at first forbidding, turned out to be providential. Walter had plied the file industriously on his shackles, but it was quite certain that several hours of severe labor would be needed before he could cut through his own and Roger's anklets. Sainton, with his great strength, might have pulled the staples from the floor, but this would be of little avail if they were compelled to swim to the ship described by Fra Pietro. Moreover, their freedom of movement would be so hampered that they might hardly hope to quit the vessel unperceived, even if a boat were moored to the stern.

As a last resource they determined to adopt this expedient, but the presence of the sergeant, in whose pouch rested the key of their leg irons, gave a new direction to their thoughts.

In the most friendly way, Roger plied him with the doctored wine. Feeling himself becoming drowsy the man would have staggered out. At this, the very crisis of a desperate situation, Sainton gave a mighty tug at his chain. The restraining staple came away, tearing with it half a plank.



In a minute or less they were free.

Startled almost into full consciousness the sergeant sprang towards him, with sword half drawn. So there was no help for it but to assist the action of the wine. Roger grabbed him by the neck and held him, wriggling, until, to say the least, he was willing to lie very still.

In a minute, or less, they were free. They knew that the hour was long past midnight. The dawn would soon be upon them and there was no time to be lost.

Walter seized the sergeant's sword and Roger took the sentry's halberd. They would fight for their lives now, even if they were compelled to face the whole ship's company. But fortune still favored them. The watch on deck were mustered forward, and the clinking of a can, together with the manner of such speech as they overheard, told them that conviviality was well established there. So they crept to the after part, Roger going almost on all fours to hide his stature. Sure enough, a boat was moored there. They climbed down into her, cast off, and a strong tide quickly carried them away from the *Sparta*.

They looked about for the *Sancta Trinidad*, and guessed aright that a fine brig, moored about a cable's length distant from the *Sparta*, must be the vessel spoken of by Fra Pietro.

Rowing quietly towards her they hailed her by name and were answered. They were hoisted aboard, and a stoutly built, black-bearded man, who came at the cry of the watch, met them cordially:--

"Ah!" he cried, "Eenglish! One dam big fella! I haf wait you dis hour an' fear you no come."

Instantly, though it meant the loss of a good anchor and length of rope, the cable was slipped, a sail or two shaken out, and yards were squared. The ship got some way on her and began to move. In the ghostly light the *Sparta* looked like a great bird asleep on the dim waste of waters. Soon her outlines faded and were lost in the gloom. As the sails filled and more canvas was spread the *Sancta Trinidad* showed her mettle and spurned the lively waves from her well tapered bows. The hills merged into the low-lying clouds, the lights ashore became smaller and smaller until they

vanished altogether, the ship was well out to sea, and the two youths were saved, they hoped, from the devildoms of Spain.

They went to seek the captain, who greeted them again in the most friendly manner.

"No tank me," he said, smiling until his teeth gleamed. "You tank Fra Pietro. Him good man. Him come my house an' nurse my son when him sick wid plague. *Por Dios!* I do anytink for Fra Pietro!"



CHAPTER VI

"For her own person,
It beggared all description."
Shakespeare, "Antony and
Cleopatra."

The road from Delhi, as it neared Agra, wound through a suburb of walled gardens. Between occasional gaps in the crumbling masonry, or when the lofty gates happened to be left open, the passer-by caught glimpses of green lawns bordered with flowers and shaded by leafy mango-trees. Diving into a ravine scarred with dry water-courses, the road passed a Hindu shrine and a Mahomedan tomb. On the opposing crest it cut a cluster of hovels in twain; thence it ran by the side of a long, low caravansary, and finally vanished, like a stream suddenly embeveled in the earth, within the dark portals of the Delhi Gate of the chief Mogul city.

Two Europeans, mounted on sturdy cobs of the famed Waziri breed, drew rein at the entrance to the caravansary. One of them held up an authoritative hand to the sumpter train which followed.

"Here we reach the end of a long journey, Roger," said he. "Agra lies within the gate, the Palace stands beyond the bazaar, and this is the rest-house spoken of by Rasul, our native friend at Delhi. The hour is yet early to seek an audience of the Emperor. Let us refresh ourselves here, make some needed change in our garments, and then hire a guide to lead us to the house of Itimad-ud-Daula, for they say that he alone possesseth Akbar's ear."

"That is another way of saying that he shall first possess himself of a moiety of our goods. Well, be it so. 'Tis a strange land at the best. Let us cram his maw, and mayhap he will tell us a more homely manner of addressing him. It passeth my understanding how thou dost mouth this lingo, Walter. Ecod, I can carry it off bravely with a Mahomed or a Ram Charan, but when it comes to Iti--what d'ye call him?--my jaws clag and my tongue falters in the path like a blind man's staff."

So saying, Roger Sinton swung himself off his steed, and straightway the gapers gathered, for his height was not so apparent on horseback as when he stood square on his feet.

But the servants tending the pack-animals were accustomed to this exhibition of popular interest. They warned off the rabble with the insolence every jack-in-office displays towards his inferiors.

"Away, illegitimate ones! Have ye not work?" cried one.

"Bapre! If ye stand not aside ye shall eat the end of my stick," shouted another.

"Bring fire and singe their beards," growled a Mahomedan driver.

"Kick, brother, kick!" suggested a humorist, tickling a mule, whereupon the long-eared one ducked his head and lifted his heels in approved style, readily clearing a space, amidst the laughter and jeers of the onlookers.

By this time, Mowbray and Sinton had entered the caravansary. It was a substantial looking building externally, but its four walls merely supported an interior veranda, split into sections, where merchants could sleep if they chose, or cook their food and rest during the midday hours. In the open square, which occupied nearly all the inner space, was herded a motley collection of elephants, camels, bullocks, horses, and asses,--while every conceivable sort of package of merchandise was guarded by attendants of many Indian races. At first, it seemed that there was no more room for man or beast, but the requisite amount of shouting, and a lavish use of opprobrious epithets, couched in various languages, secured a corner of the square for the friends' cavalcade and a clear space of the veranda for their own convenience.

Three years of life in the East, not to mention the new experience of a march of over a thousand miles up country, had accustomed them to such surroundings.

Whilst they were washing and dressing their servants prepared an excellent meal of kid and rice, which they tackled with a gusto that showed appetites in no wise impaired by residence in Hindustan.

They had ridden ten miles that morning, and it is hard to conceive a more exhilarating or healthful exercise than a march across the great central plain of India during the early hours of a fine day in the cold weather. The date was the first day of November, 1611, and, if the two Yorkshire adventurers had changed somewhat since they sailed away from Lisbon on board the *Sancta Trinidad*, the change was for the better. Walter Mowbray had become more manly, more authoritative, less prone to flash his sword at the first sign of a quarrel, whilst Roger, if he had increased neither in height nor girth, had gained a certain air of distinction that was not due wholly to his gigantic proportions.

Their intervening history may be told briefly. The *Sancta Trinidad*, touching at the Canaries, might have passed them on to an English ship, bound for Plymouth, which lay there waiting for the wind to change. But worthy Captain Garcia had taken a great fancy to the pair of them. He vowed that such fortunes were to be won speedily in the land of the Great Mogul that they agreed to sail thither with him. They called at Table Bay, were nearly lost in doubling the dreaded Cape of Good Hope, were assailed by pirates off Madagascar, when Roger proved that a capstan-bar, properly wielded, is worth a dozen swords, and finally brought to in the harbor of Swally Road, at some little distance from Surat on the Tapti River. Here, the worthy Garcia realized what his friendship had forgotten. Englishmen were in small favor with his grasping fellow-countrymen, and the two encountered many reverses, until they fell in with an English factor, named Edwards, from Ahmedabad, who asked them to join him in business.

Though they were wanting in experience of the ways of Indian merchants, Edwards undertook to teach them, for he was greatly in need of those whom he could trust implicitly. They learnt the Urdu language, Walter thoroughly, and Roger with less success; they made the acquaintance of Prince Jahangir, acting as Viceroy for his father, Akbar, in the west country, and, ultimately, they and their partner put all their store to the hazard in an ambitious expedition to the far-off capital.

It was their intent to meet the renowned Akbar at Delhi on his way south from a summer spent in Kashmir. News of a rising in the Dekkan, however, had hurried the monarch's movements. They missed him at the ancient capital of India, so, having learnt, among other things, the eastern habit of patience, they marched by easy stages to Agra.

And now, refreshed and properly clothed in garments befitting their position, they mounted fresh horses which had been led during the march. Preceded by a *chuprassi*, or attendant, they advanced towards the gate.

"Make way there!" shouted the man, "stand aside, you basket-carriers! Hi, you with the camel, pass on the left! Oh, you pig of a bullock-driver, do you not see the sahibs?"

Thus, their advent heralded by much unnecessary bawling, they rode through the center one of the three pointed arches of the gate.

Beyond lay the principal street of the narrow bazaar in which the Agra merchants conducted their brisk trade. And what a brilliant spectacle it offered in the glorious sunshine! Lofty houses, gay in tawdry colors and picturesque in their dishevelment, looked down on a crowd as varied as any on earth. Caste and color of every sort jostled in the roadway. Women, erect and elegant, carrying earthen jars on their heads, returning from riverside or well, moved with graceful carriage. Merchants, coolies, sweetmeat sellers, and milk-venders rubbed shoulders with swaggering Rajputs and stately Mahomedans. A Hindu pilgrim, laden with sacred water from the distant Ganges, paused for a moment to buy a handful of millet. A white-turbaned Sikh, attracted by the striped and golden fruit of a melon-seller, tendered a small coin for a rosy slice and stalked on, eating gravely and with dignity. Crawling snake-like in the dust, a devotee wound his way to far-off Ajodhia, where Holy Ganga, if ever he reached its banks, should lave his sins. Near him stood a snow-white leper, thrusting fingerless stumps into the faces of the passers-by, and gaining, by his raucous cries and revolting appearance, a few cowries, or coin shells, from the few who did not remain utterly indifferent to his appeals. An olive-skinned Brahmin, slender and upright, bearing on his forehead the marks of his proud descent, and carrying a brass vessel wherewith to draw the water for his morning ablution, pulled his red cotton wrapper more closely around him as he passed the leper. A young Pathan, fair-complexioned, eagle-nosed, hawk-eyed, stalwart and stately as is the birthright of his mountain race, pushed through the crowd with careless hauteur. The Sikh, the Brahmin, the Pathan, were the born aristocrats of the mob.

To add to the seemingly inextricable confusion, pariah dogs prowled in the gutter, bullock-carts crept along complainingly, stealthy footed camels lurched through the crowd, palanquins, borne on the shoulders of chanting carriers, passed swiftly amidst the vortex, and the two travelers encountered at least one native carriage, painted green and gold, and drawn by two white Dekkani bullocks, conveying a party of Hindu women to the temple of Mahadeo, God of Love.

The occupants were young and pretty, too, clad in silks and laden with jewels, as could be readily seen by a peep through the folds of the *chudda*, left carelessly open, and they laughed musically as they caught sight of the Englishmen's eyes turned towards them.

"'Tis clear enough that Akbar is a strong ruler and a just one," said Walter, his white teeth showing in a smile at the merry party of girls.

"Such is his repute," answered Roger.

"Repute may belie a man. Here is ample proof. In a Mahomedan city I find Hindus in excess. Amidst a strangely assorted crowd, pretty women drive abroad in brave display of gold and gems. I reason that every man knows he is

protected by the law and a woman need fear no insult. 'Tis not so in another great city we wot of."

"Ecod, I was just thinking of London. Not that I know much of the place, but the babel of the bazaar brought to mind the Fleet. Ah, Walter Mowbray, 'twas a queer gate we opened when you drew on my Lord Dereham and I heaved him over the wall."

"We were heedless youths then. Now we are grave merchants and must comport ourselves as such. I fancy it would better become our peaceful character had we left our swords at the caravansary."

"I' faith, I differ from you. Some chuck might have a notion to measure our bales by our blades, and I like ever to give a man an ell for a yard by that reckoning."

So saying, Roger significantly tapped the handle of the tremendous weapon fashioned for him by an armorer at Ahmedabad. Slung from his right shoulder by a baldric, the sword was nearly four feet in length, perfectly straight, double-edged, and strong in the forte. Probably there was not its like in all India, as the expert native swordsman finds delight in manipulating a curved scimitar, with razor edge and tiny grip. The Indian uses the sword to cut, the lance and the dagger to stab.

Mowbray shook his head.

"There is so much at stake on this venture," said he, "that I hope we may keep clear of quarrels. Remember, I wrote to Nellie Roe telling her, if fortune smiles on us, we should return to England by the first ship that sails from Surat after we have adjusted accounts with Edwards. Let us sell our silks and spices as best we may and haste back to the coast with lighter and speedier convoy."

Roger laughed, so loudly and cheerily that many an eye was turned towards him.

"By the cross of Osmotherly!" he cried, "that letter hath made thee a parson. Yet I heard naught of this when Suraj Mul barred the way at Ajmere, and you and I rode down his sowars as if they were painted men and not bewhiskered knaves of flesh and blood, though of the black sort."

"Mayhap the near end of our journey hath made me serious minded."

"Now, I think with you, but I arrive at the same end by a different road. Our swords have done us good service. Let them keep in use and they may earn us hilts of gold. But how now? Do we leave the city?"

Their guide had led them to the bank of the Jumna, where a bridge of boats spanned the stream. In reply to a question by Walter, the man told them that the house of the Diwan, or Prime Minister, lay on the other side of the river.

They followed him, crossed the shaking bridge which made their horses nervous, and climbed the steep bank opposite. Away to the right, on the city side of the Jumna, they could see the high piled red sandstone battlements of the palace, with some of its white marble buildings glistening in the sunlight over the top of the frowning ramparts. A winding road led towards the castle along the left bank of the river, and, in the far distance, they could distinguish a gay cavalcade of horsemen, whose burnished ornaments and arms shone in the sun with dazzling gleams.

"What pageant may that be?" asked Walter of the guide.

"The King of Kings may ride forth in state, sahib, or Prince Jahangir may go to the chase. I know not. At this season such spectacles are common in Agra."

"'Tis a brave show," muttered Roger. "This Agra must be a grand place to loot."

They lost sight of the cortege and halted in front of a strong but exceedingly beautiful gateway, fashioned in a Saracenesque arch of white marble, and bedecked with scrollwork wrought in precious stones, with a text in Persi-Arabic over the porch.

Whilst the guide spoke to a guard, Walter deciphered the script:--

"http:May Allah prosper all who enter and all who leave this dwelling! A most noble wish," he said, "and one which I reciprocate to the full."

"These Mahmouds have a way of uttering a prayer when they cut your throat," growled Roger. "They never kill a duck but they chant a verse of their scripture to mark the beheading. Now, I'll warrant me this is a canting rogue at the best."

The gate was thrown open. Between its portals was revealed a vista of a most delightful garden, where roses hung in festoons and all manner of beautiful shrubs gave shade to pleasant lawns or were reflected in the placid depths of clear lakes. Half hidden among lofty trees they saw the low towers of a mansion built wholly of white marble, and decorated,

like the gate, with flower-like devices wrought in topaz, and camelians, and blue, red, and green gems that sparkled with the fire of sapphires, rubies, and emeralds.

"The inmate may have the heart of a rogue, but he has the eye of an angel," said Walter. "Is this the house of Itimad-ud-Daula?" he went on, in Urdu.

"It is, sahib," answered the guide.

"And how is it called?"

"Bagh-i-dilkusha, sahib."

"The Garden of Heart's Delight!" He turned to Roger. "And well named, too. If ever a place deserved such title methinks we are looking at it now."

"I vow he has been dreaming of Nellie Roe all night," growled Roger to himself as they dismounted. "I never knew him in such mood. Gad! he is either sickening for a fever or he will write a set of verses ere sunset."

They were asked to wait in the *baramada*, or porch, until a messenger took particulars of their errand to the Diwan. But fortune smiled on them that day and carried them far. The man had scarce set out towards the house when the clatter of a horse, hard ridden, announced the approach of some cavalier in hot haste.

The animal was reined in with remarkable celerity without, and the rider entered the garden hurriedly. He checked his speed, however, when he saw strangers, and not even the well-bred hauteur affected by the Persian nobles of Akbar's court enabled him wholly to conceal the surprise with which he beheld Sainton.

Walter stepped forward and bowed.

"We are English merchants," he said, "and we seek an audience of the illustrious Itimad-ud-Daula. These servitors are dull-witted and may not explain our errand. Perchance, if you have affairs with his Excellency, you will be good enough to convey to him our request."

The newcomer, a handsome, noble-looking man of thirty-five or thereabouts, laughed with a certain frankness that bespoke an open character.

"Traders!" cried he. "Had you said soldiers I might have better understood you. In what commodity do you deal? Is it aught to eat or drink? If so, on my soul, your friend gives good warrant of its virtues."

"Unhappily our land is too far distant to permit us to produce other than a sample of what our meat and wine can achieve. But we have ample stock of rare silks and rich spices of Araby and Gondar. If the ladies of this charming city are as fair to behold and as richly adorned as all else we have seen then our journey from Surat to the court of Akbar shall not have been made in vain."

Mowbray's easy diction and the distinction of his manner astounded the hearer quite as much as did Roger's proportions. The Persian, a born gentleman, well knew he was talking to his equal of another clime.

"You and your wares could not have arrived at better season," he said gravely; "but I never yet met merchant so unlike a merchant as you and your gigantic companion."

Walter's quick intuition told him that here was one who might be a good friend. It was important to stand well with him and leave room for no dubiety. So, in a few well-chosen sentences, he told how it came about that he and Roger brought a pack-train to Agra. The mere mention of Edwards's name cleared up the mystery so far as his hearer was concerned.

"Edwards!" he cried, "a fat man, who struts as he walks and coughs loudly to command respect?"

Mowbray admitted that the description fitted his partner sufficiently well.

"You know he has been here himself in years past?" went on the Persian.

"Yes. The knowledge he gained then led to the proper selection of our merchandise."

"Did he not tell you what befell him?"

"Little of any consequence."

"He carried himself so ill that he bred a low repute of your nation. He suffered blows from porters, and was thrust out of many places head and shoulders by base peons without seeking satisfaction. Yet he showed some judgment in

choosing you two as his agents. Name him to none. Strive to forget him until you rate him for sending you hither without warning."

No more unpleasing revelation could have been made. Walter was fully aware of the difficulties which faced Europeans in India at that date. The vain and proud Orientals lost no opportunity of humiliating strangers. A cool and resolute bearing was the only sure fence against the insults and petty annoyances offered by minor officials. It was, therefore, vexing to the uttermost degree that Edwards had endured contumely and not even prepared them for a hostile reception. For the moment, Mowbray felt so disturbed that he was minded to retire to the caravansary to consider his next step, when Sainton, who understood the latter part of the conversation well enough, strode forward.

"Where be the peons you spoke of, friend?" said he. "'Tis fine weather, and the exercise you spoke of, if practised on me, will give them a zest for the midday meal."

This time the stranger laughed as heartily as etiquette permitted.

"No, no," he cried, "such minions demand their proper subject. Now, do you two come with me and I shall put your business in a fair way towards speedy completion."

Talking the while, and telling them his name was Sher Afghan, he led them through the garden towards the house. The deep obeisances of the doorkeepers showed that he was held of great consequence, and none questioned his right to introduce the two Englishmen to the sacred interior. They passed through several apartments of exceeding beauty and entered another garden, in which, to the bewilderment of the visitors, who knew what the close seclusion of the zenana implied, they saw several ladies, veiled indeed, but so thinly that anyone close at hand might discern their features.

Courteously asking them to wait near the exit from the house, their Persian acquaintance quitted them and sought a distant group.

He salaamed deeply before a richly attired female and pointed towards Mowbray and Sainton. Then he explained something to a dignified looking old man, robed in flowing garments of white muslin, whose sharp eyes had noted the advent of the strangers the moment they appeared.

With this older couple was a slim girl. When the others moved slowly across the grass towards the place where Mowbray and Sainton stood, Sher Afghan hung back somewhat and spoke to the girl, who kept studiously away from him, and coyly adjusted her veil so that he might not look into her eyes. He seemed to plead with her, but his words fell on heedless ears.

Indeed, ere yet the aged Diwan had conducted Queen Mariam Zamani, sultana of Akbar and mother of Jahangir, heir to the throne, sufficiently apart from her attendants to permit the strangers to be brought before her--the rank of the august lady enabling her to dispense with the Mahomedan seclusion of her sex--Sher Afghan's gazelle-like companion ran forward and gazed fearlessly at Mowbray, wondering at Sainton.

"Their skins are not white but red!" she cried joyously. "Nevertheless one of them must come from the land of Tokay, which is famed for its white elephants."

Hastily conquering his air of dejection the younger nobleman signed to the Englishmen to approach. They obeyed, without haste or awkwardness. Grasping their sword hilts in their left hands and doffing their hats with the elaborate courtesy of the age, they stood bareheaded before the elder pair, and certainly the kingdom of James I. had no cause to be ashamed of its latest representatives in the Mogul capital.

Roger Sainton had not his equal in height, in thickness of bone or strength of sinew, in all the wide empire governed by the most powerful of Indian monarchs, while Walter Mowbray's splendid physique was in no wise dwarfed by the nearness of his gigantic comrade. They were good to look upon, and so the girl found them notwithstanding her jest.

She herself was beautiful to a degree not often seen even in a land of classic features and exquisitely molded figures. Her deep, violet eyes were guarded by long lashes which swept rounded cheeks of ivory tint, brightened by little spots of color which reminded the beholder of the gold and red on the sunny side of a ripe pomegranate. Her lips were parted, and her teeth, dazzlingly white, were so regular and large that they appeared to constitute the chief attraction of a singularly mobile and expressive mouth. Again she laughed, with a musical cadence that was quaint and fascinating:--

"May it please your Majesty," she said, addressing the Sultana, "these are not merchants but courtiers."

"May it please your Majesty," said Walter, instantly, "we would fain be both."

His apt retort in high-flown Persian was unexpected. His eyes encountered those of the girl, and they exchanged a glance of quick intelligence. She was pleased with him, and he offered her the silent homage which every young man of

proper spirit pays to a beautiful and sprightly woman.

Her brilliant orbs said: "I will befriend you."

In the same language he answered: "You are peerless among your sex."

And such was the manner of the meeting between Walter Mowbray, son of him who fell on board the *San Jose*, and Nur Mahal, the baby girl who was saved from death in the Khaibar Pass twenty years earlier.

It was a meeting not devoid of present interest, and of great future import, yet it is probable that if Nellie Roe had witnessed it she might have been greatly displeased.



CHAPTER VII

"She's beautiful, and therefore to be
woo'd;
She's a woman, therefore to be won."
Shakespeare, "King Henry VI," Part
I.

Nur Mahal was a Persian, not a native of India. In her wondrous face the Occident blended with the Orient. Its contour, its creamy smoothness, the high forehead and delicately firm chin were of the West, and the East gave her those neatly coiled tresses of raven hue, those deeply pencilled eyebrows, beneath whose curved arches flashed, like twin stars, her marvelous eyes.

Her supple body was robed in a *sari* of soft, deep yellow silk, bordered with a device of fine needlework studded with gems. It draped her closely, in flowing lines, from waist to feet, and a fold was carried over her right shoulder to be held gracefully scarfwise in one hand. An exquisite plum colored silk vest, encrusted with gold embroidery, covered her finely molded bust, revealing yet modestly shielding each line and flexure of a form which might have served Pygmalion as the model of Galatea.

On her forehead sparkled a splendid jewel, an emerald surrounded by diamonds set *en etoile*. Around her swanlike throat was clasped a necklace of uncut emeralds, strung, at intervals, between rows of seed pearls. She wore no other ornament. Her tiny feet were encased in white silk slippers, and, an unusual sight in the East, their open bands revealed woven stockings of the same material.

But the daughter of the Persian refugee who had risen to such high place in Akbar's court was bound neither by convention nor fashion. She fearlessly unveiled when she thought fit, and she taught the ladies of Agra to wear not only the bodice and the inner skirt but also a species of corset, whilst to her genius was due the wonderful perfume known as attar of roses.

Again, although more than twenty years of age at that time, she was unmarried, an amazing thing in itself when the social customs of Hindustan were taken into account.

Suddenly brought face to face with such a divinity, it was no small credit to Walter Mowbray that he kept his wits sufficiently to turn her laughing comment to advantage.

The Sultana was graciously pleased to smile.

"If your wares comport with your manners," she said, "you will be welcome at the palace. We hold a bazaar there to-morrow, and novelties in merchandise are always acceptable on such occasions. Sher Afghan," she continued, "see that the strangers are properly admitted to the Hall of Private Audience at the first hour appointed for those who bring articles for sale."

The young nobleman bowed, as did Mowbray and Sainton, though the latter knew but little of the high-flown Persian in which the Sultana spoke.

Nur Mahal, who appeared to be on terms of great familiarity with her august visitor, whispered something to Queen Mariam which made the good lady laugh. Obviously, the comment had reference to Roger, and that worthy blushed, for a woman's eyes could pierce his tough hide readily, there being no weapon to equal them known to mankind.

"She's a bonny lass, yon," he murmured to Walter, "and she has uncommonly high spirits. I never kent afore why a man should make a fool of himself for a woman, but now that I have seen one who is half an angel I am beginning to have a dim notion of the madness which seizes some folk."

"There are others, but why only half an angel?" asked Mowbray with a smile, for the Queen had turned to address the Diwan.

"Because that is all we have seen. The hidden half is the devil in her. Mark me, Walter, there will be heads cracked in plenty before that fancy wench stops plaguing mankind."

Courtesy was urging Sher Afghan to give some directions to the wanderers he had so greatly befriended, but inclination, always a willing steed, dragged him to the side of Nur Mahal.

"I came to ask what you needed most for the bazaar," he said anxiously.

"Naught that you can bestow," was the curt reply.

"Sweet one, your words chill my heart. 'Tis but a week since your father--"

She stamped a foot imperiously and clenched her hands.

"I am not one of those to be dealt with as others choose," she cried, though modulating her voice lest it should reach the Queen's ears. "Why do you pester me? Your tall sheepskin cap affrights me. Take it and your ungainly presence to far-off Burdwan. I mean to abide in Agra."

He bent low before her.

"A blow from the hand of my beloved is sweet as a grape from the hand of another," he said, conscious, perhaps, of the manifest injustice of the attack on his personal appearance. Physically, he was a worthy mate even for such a goddess, and he had already won great renown in India by his prowess in the field and his skill in all manly exercises.

"Gladly would I bestow on you a whole bunch of such grapes," she said, turning to follow the Sultana and her father. But a laughing shout from the interior of the house caused all eyes to seek its explanation.

"Well met, mother! Have you come, like me, to wring another lakh out of the Diwan?"

A young man, tall and well built and of pleasing aspect, notable for his broad chest and long arms, and attired in sumptuous garments, entered the garden. His words would have revealed his identity to Walter and Sainton had they not met him, two years earlier, at Surat. This was Prince Jahangir, the heir apparent.

His complexion was a ruddy nut brown, his eyes, if somewhat closely set, were strangely keen and piercing, and it was a peculiar and noticeable fact that he wore small gold earrings, in token of bondage to the great saint Sheikh Salem, to whose intercession, it was said, he owed his birth.

Jahangir did not trouble to conceal his emotions. His joyous glance, evoked more by the sight of Nur Mahal, it is to be feared, than by the unexpected presence of the Sultana, changed instantly to a scowl when he saw Sher Afghan. Moreover, he discovered the presence of the Englishmen, and he affected a tone of surprised displeasure.

"How now, Diwan!" he demanded. "Do you admit strangers to the privacy of your zenana?"

"These are merchants from Ahmedabad. The Queen has commanded them to show their wares at the palace," was the courteous reply of the aged Prime Minister.

Jahangir smiled contemptuously. The foreigners in no wise disturbed him. He knew quite well that his insult had reached the one man for whom it was intended. Sher Afghan's pale face grew dark with anger.

"Oh, it is matterless," said the Prince, flippantly, and he addressed Nur Mahal with a ready smile that utterly banished the anger from his expressive features.

"Fair lady," he said, "I have brought you a present. I know your fondness for all that is rare and beautiful. See if my gift will earn your approval."

He clapped his hands, and a servant came, carrying a small gilded perch to which clung two snow-white pigeons, each fastened to the crossbar by a short silver chain.

Nur Mahal uttered a cry of pleasure. She ran to meet the man with arms outstretched.

"They are quite tame," said the gratified Prince. "After a little while they will come at your call and perch on your wrist."

She took the birds and caressed them softly. Suddenly, yielding to impulse, she unfastened a chain, and the pigeon, finding itself at liberty, darted up into the air and flew around in rapid circles, crying loudly to its mate the while.

"How did that happen?" demanded Jahangir.

"Thus," she answered, freeing the second bird.

"But they are unused to the garden as yet. You have lost them."

"Sooner than take away their freedom. My heart weeps for all who are destined to captivity."

"Then you weep for me, as I am truly your captive."

"Ah, my bondage would be pleasant, and, like the birds, you could fly away when you chose."

At that instant one of the pigeons dropped with angelic flutterings, and poised itself on the perch which the girl still held.

The other, timidly daring, followed its mate's example, but settled on the same side.

"See!" cried Jahangir excitedly. "The choice is made. They come back to their fetters!"

"Your Highness will observe that there are two to dispute the vacant place," interposed Sher Afghan.

The icy distinctness of his words showed that the significance of the little comedy played by Nur Mahal had not escaped him. The girl pouted. Jahangir wheeled about fiercely. A quarrel was imminent, but Queen Mariam stopped it.

"Sher Afghan," she said, "you, who are a soldier, should not take much interest in this idle playing with doves. As I return soon to the palace, go with the strangers and let them exhibit their wares there after the midday meal. That will better suit my convenience than the customary hour to-morrow."

Bowing silently, the Persian motioned to Mowbray and Sainton to follow him. He spoke no word, but a tumult raged within, and, at the gate, when a servant was slow in opening it, he felled the man with a blow. Instantly regretting the deed he gave the fellow a gold mohur, but his face was tense and his eyes blazed as he mounted his horse and rode silently with the two Englishmen through the midst of the gay retinue which had escorted Prince Jahangir from the palace. Guessing with fair accuracy the hidden meaning of the scene just enacted, Mowbray did not intrude on the sorrowful thoughts of his Persian friend.

"We are in luck's way, Roger," he said quietly. "We have escaped the Diwan and won the door of the Queen's apartments. If the good lady be as ready to pay as she is to buy, this bazaar to-morrow should ease us of all our goods."

"In which event we shall turn our faces westward?" asked Sainton.

"Assuredly. We must settle with Edwards, else I would take the river to Calcutta."

"Ecod! From the manner in which you gazed at that hoity-toity lass in yellow silk I thought you were minded to dally in Agra."

For some subtle reason the remark nettled Mowbray.

"We have already met two who are willing to come to blows about her," said he, tartly, "but I fail to see why you should hold me capable of the folly of making a third."

"Nay, nay," said Sainton, with irritating composure. "I credit thee with wisdom beyond thy years, but if Solomon, who had three thousand wives, could go daft about yet an extra woman, there is small cause why thou, who hast no wife at all, shouldst not be bitten by the craze. I warrant you Prince Jahangir hath a bevy of beauties in his private abode, and this chuck who hangs his head so dolefully may have half a score or more waiting his beck and nod at home, yet they both are keen to fall to with sword and dagger to dispute the possession of the quean we have just quitted. 'Garden of Heart's Delight,' i' faith! The flower they all seek there is of a kind that stings in the plucking."

Mowbray, conscious that the dethronement of Nellie Roe in his mind was but momentary, regained his normal good humor.

"You are in a mood for preaching this morning," he cried. "Now, had your tongue run so smoothly when the Sultana was present, you might have won her favor, as all the women have an eye for you, Roger."

"A murrain on the barbarous words that trip my speech! I could talk to her Majesty in honest Yorkshire, and I can make some headway in the language of the common folk hereabout, but when it comes to your pretty poesy of Shiraz I am perforce dumb as a Whitby mussel."

Here, Sher Afghan, rousing himself from a mournful reverie, began to hum a verse of a well-known Persian love song:--

"O love! for you I could die;
'Tis death from your presence to fly;
O love! will the pain never end?
Will our hearts ne'er in unison
blend?"

They were crossing the bridge of boats at the moment, and the singer, more occupied with his thoughts than with external events, did not notice that a laden camel, advancing down the center of the swaying roadway, gave the party

little enough room to pass on one side.

Walter drew his attention to the fact. The Persian, disdainful of the lower orders as were all of his class, spurred his mettlesome Arab forward, caught the lounging *unt* by the halter and imperiously swung the beast to one side.

A shriek rang out wildly from behind the camel, whose load of firewood had struck a native woman walking on the side of the bridge. She staggered and fell. The infant she carried was jerked out of her arms into the river.

Walter, who saw what had happened, sprang from his horse, jumped into the water, which was deep enough at that point to drown a man, and caught the little naked child as it rose, struggling and gasping for breath. With a vigorous stroke or two he reached the side of the nearest pontoon. Roger leaned over, seized the collar of his friend's jacket, and lifted him and the baby back to the firmer footing of the bridge.

The distraught mother flung herself at Mowbray's feet and wound her arms around his ankles, thereby embarrassing him greatly, as he was soaked from head to foot, and the dense crowd which gathered with extraordinary speed threatened to block the bridge for an hour.

Sher Afghan, who was divided between wonder that a man should take so much trouble to rescue a wretched infant and amazement at Roger's feat of strength, for Sain-ton had lifted Walter clean over the rails of the bridge with one hand, now awoke to actualities.

He beat a path through the gaping mob, extricated Mowbray from the extravagant gratitude of the Hindu woman, and quickly led the two Englishmen to the open road beyond the river.

"Did you not know that the Jumna swarms with crocodiles?" he asked, when they were all mounted again, and riding onward at a sharp pace.

"Yes," said Walter.

"Then, by the tomb of the Prophet, you did that which I would not have done for the sake of any brat in Agra."

"I gave no thought to it, or perchance I should have hesitated," was the modest reply.

The incident served one good purpose. It effectually banished Sher Afghan's love vapors, and he exerted himself so well in behalf of his new acquaintances that they and their packs (Walter having donned dry clothing) were admitted to the palace at the appointed hour, and marshaled past countless officials who would otherwise have barred their path.

The great fortress, in the center of which lay the royal apartments, was a city in itself. Its frowning walls of dark red sandstone, sixty feet in height and defended by many a tower and machicolated battlement, surrounded a low hill. This was crowned by the famous Moti Musjid, or Pearl Mosque, an edifice as celebrated to-day for its perfect architectural proportions and refined taste in embellishment as it was when the Great Mogul, during his daily orisons, occupied the small floor slab nearest to the northwest, and, behind him, six hundred and forty-nine nobles bent in devout homage towards Mecca.

The Hall of Public Audience, a splendid structure, was separated from the mosque by a large garden. Near this rallying ground for all having business with the court stood the smaller but even more impressive Hall of Private Audience, to which there was direct access from the Emperor's personal apartments. The Zenana, marked by its exquisite Jasmine Tower, containing the Sultana's boudoir and giving a far-spread view across the Jumna, lay beyond.

These buildings, and many another, constructed almost exclusively of white marble and decorated with scrollwork festoons of flowers wrought wholly in precious stones, shone in the rays of the afternoon sun as the Englishmen passed through the somber depths of the great City Gate and entered the open space surrounding the palace.

That they were the cynosure of many eyes goes without saying. But here, curiosity was restrained. The grave courtesy of an Eastern court was blended with the iron discipline enforced by a powerful ruler like Akbar.

"The King's order!" said Sher Afghan, and before the King's order every head bent.

Thus, avoiding the crowd which thronged the path leading to the spacious Hall of Public Audience, where the Emperor in person was then dispensing justice with that even-handed promptitude which won him the respect of all his subjects irrespective of class or creed, Sher Afghan led them to a secluded stairway.

Certain formalities needed fulfilment before the strangers or their goods were allowed to ascend. Guards with drawn swords stood there, and even Sher Afghan himself was compelled to satisfy the high-pitched questions of a gorgeously robed eunuch ere sanction was given to advance.

Mowbray and Sainton, eager to witness the successful end of their twelve hundred miles' journey, were more concerned, doubtless, to display their silks and spices, their rich store of Arabian and Persian goods, than to note the marvels in sculptured stone with which they were encircled. A mosaic pavement worth a monarch's ransom was to them only a fine space for opening out bales of cloth cunningly bedizened with gold thread, whilst a balcony of carved marble served excellently as a counter.

At last, when all was ready, a messenger was despatched to the Sultana. Queen Mariam came promptly, and with her were many ladies of the court. They were all veiled, as was the strict rule when the Emperor was near at hand, but among them Sher Afghan, and perhaps Mowbray, looked in vain for the sylph-like form of Nur Mahal.

The scrutiny commenced at once. "Shopping" was as dear to the heart of those Eastern dames as to their sisters of other climes and modern days. The babble of tongues waxed eloquent, and the two traders, comparatively new as they were to the occupation, saw with gratification that the Sultana was as loud in her appreciation of the novelties spread before her eyes as was the youngest lady in her train.

All was going well; Queen Mariam had asked the value of the whole consignment, and Mowbray, with some trepidation, had added half a lakh to the lakh of rupees with which he would be well content--expecting, indeed, to obtain no more than the latter sum at the close of the bargaining--when a sudden hush, a drawing together of the women, a protest suspended in its utterance by the Sultana herself, announced that the elderly man dressed solely in white muslin, who entered the hall from a raised veranda at the further end, could be none other than the Emperor.

His appearance was at once engaging and dignified. Not so tall as his eldest son, he was even broader in build. Possessed of prodigious muscular strength, due to the great breadth of his chest and his long, sinewy arms and hands, Akbar looked a ruler of men both in physical and intellectual properties. His eyes were full and penetrating, with eyebrows that met in a straight line over his well shaped nose. His face, a ruddy brown in color, was firm yet kindly in expression. His forehead was high and open, and in the front folds of his white turban lay a single large ruby in which the sun kindled a fiery glare.

He surveyed the scene in silence for a moment. Then, as his glance dwelt on Sainton, a somewhat prepossessed smile gave place to a look of genuine surprise. He turned and uttered some comment to one behind, and, as he strode forward, they saw that he was accompanied by the Prime Minister, Itimad-ud-Daula.

Every man present, save the armed guards and the two Englishmen, dropped to his knees and bent his forehead to the ground, but Mowbray and Roger, not accustomed to genuflection, contented themselves with bowing deeply.

The Emperor was in no wise offended. He smiled again, showing his teeth plainly.

"They told me you were a big man," he said to Sainton, "but are you a strong one? Big men are oft like long-backed horses--they bend when the strain comes."

Luckily, Roger understood him, and, though his Hindustani was rude, be sure it never lacked point.

"I do not think," he said, "that my back is too long for my height, your Majesty. Be that as it may, they tell me there is no better judge of strength, whether of man or horse, than your Majesty in all India."

"By the shade of Nizam-ud-din, this giant is no fool!" cried Akbar, whose voice, though loud, was very pleasant. "Were I younger I would test thee, Elephant, but that day is past. Tell me, couldst thou shear two tigers' heads with a single stroke?"

"Yes, if your Majesty first tied both heads together."

"Allah, here is a spark after my own heart! What is thy name?"

"Roger Sainton, may it please your Majesty."

"Raja Sainton! If you be of noble rank why do you come hither in the guise of a trader?"

Sainton was puzzled, as Akbar's elegant diction rendered the mistake difficult to understand, so Mowbray, in a few well-chosen words, set things right.

The Emperor gave a quick glance at Walter, and seemed instantly to appreciate the relation between the two. But he addressed himself again to Roger:--

"You have traveled far, and are welcome. To-day I am busy, or I would discourse with you further. Be here to-morrow, two hours before sunset, and we shall give each other entertainment. Meanwhile, what can I do for you and your friend?"

Sainton, filled with the sense of *camaraderie* which makes men of kindred sympathies quickly known to each other, realized that Akbar would not resent a little familiarity.

"Sir," he said, "if you buy our goods and give us good cheer we shall do that which those in your court ought to do every day, but fail therein most scandalously, I fear."

"And what is that?"

"We shall pray to God for your health and happiness."

Akbar grasped him by the shoulder.

"List, all of you," he shouted. "Here is our Elephant showing his wisdom. By the Prophet's beard, I regret, for once, that there is peace in our dominions, else you and I, Elephant, should go to the war ere ever you sailed away to your distant land. But we shall find sport, or my wit fails. You, sir," he went on, speaking to Mowbray, "shall tell us something of the ways of your country when the Elephant and I have wearied ourselves. Meanwhile, the Sultana will buy your wares at your own rates. I judge as much by the cackle of women's voices I heard as I came hither."

By way of a joke he gave Sainton's shoulder a farewell squeeze that would have dislocated many a man's bones. Roger, pretending he had not felt it, stooped and picked up a small brass jar which he grasped around its narrow neck.

"Let me give your Majesty a reminder of to-morrow's meeting," he said.

The Emperor, seeing more in the words than their mere purport, took the jar. Roger had bent the brass cylinder into a double fold.

"Thanks, friend," he said, quietly. "'Tis well it was not my neck which received that grip, else there would be a new ruler in India. And, by the Koran!" he added under his breath, "I am minded now of another matter."

He looked around until he caught sight of Sher Afghan, standing somewhat apart from the listening crowd.

"My young friend," cried he, "I have been discussing you with my trusted Diwan. He agrees with me that you should provide his beautiful daughter with a careful husband. Marry her forthwith! To-night, if you be so minded! And lest anyone should dispute the prize with you take a troop of horse to escort you to Burdwan."

Bombs were hardly known in India at that period, but the explosion of a live shell in the midst of the company would have created a sensation little more profound than Akbar's words. Nur Mahal, that fiery beauty, to be wed forthwith to Sher Afghan! What would Prince Jahangir say?



CHAPTER VIII

"The trenchant blade, Toledo trusty,
For want of fighting had grown
rusty."

*Butler's "Hudibras," Part I, Canto
I.*

Yet all knew it mattered not a jot what Jahangir said. The Diwan had given his consent, the Emperor his approval, and it was common knowledge that both were acting for the welfare of the state in putting an effectual stop to the infatuation of the heir apparent for a girl with whom a recognized alliance was impolitic if not impossible.

But Queen Mariam, all of a tremble by reason of her fear lest Jahangir's madness should lead him to excess, ventured to utter a word of protest.

"My Lord," she said, "this decision hath been taken suddenly."

"Do you think so?" asked Akbar, pleasantly. His composure disconcerted her. Nevertheless, love for her eldest born and favorite son gave her strength.

"Yes," she cried. "I would force no maid to wed where her heart is not set. It oft leads to evil."

"Ah!" he answered, "you are becoming an old woman. Were I one also I might think like you."

The kindly tone of his words deprived them of their sting. When he clenched an argument in such wise Akbar had a habit of stroking a large wart on the left side of his nose, a slight disfigurement which astrologers assured him was a most propitious sign. Gently rubbing the wart now he turned again towards Sher Afghan.

"Has delight rendered thee dumb?" he growled good humoredly.

"Not so, O King of Kings," cried the young Persian. "Fearing that my ears betrayed me I was silent. When your Majesty speaks all tongues are stilled. I have but two possessions which I cherish, my sword and my honor. The one has always been and will ever be at your Majesty's disposal; the other I fly to place at the feet of Nur Mahal."

By this fearless utterance, Sher Afghan accepted the Emperor's command and flung defiance to all others. Salaaming deeply, he withdrew. In the hush which had fallen on the assembly they heard him rush down the outer stairs, and, an instant later, the clatter of his Arab's hoofs as he rode towards the gate showed that the wedding ceremony would not be delayed by any dilatoriness on the part of the bridegroom.

Akbar vanished. The Diwan, who had not taken any overt part in the scene, followed him, and the Sultana, without casting another glance at the brave array of merchandise, withdrew with her retinue.

Mowbray and Sinton were left gazing blankly at each other, but an official, knowing better than they the domestic trouble which was brewing in the royal household, advised them to repack their goods, as, in his opinion, the bazaar projected for the morrow would certainly be abandoned.

"I thought for sure yon sloe-eyed wench would bring us no luck," muttered Roger when he heard Mowbray bidding their servants load up their mules again. "My mother always advised me to wed a homely wife if I wanted to be happy. Not that she was ill-looking herself, but I have heard her say that my father never had spirit enough to quarrel with anybody."

"On my word, Roger," laughed Walter, smothering his own annoyance at the turn taken by events, "you look as glum as Lot's wife when she lost the use of her feet."

"Who wouldn't!" demanded Sinton. "We had the silver as good as in our breeches pockets, when some imp of mischief set the King to scratch his nose and talk about marriage."

"All is not lost yet. I trust to your wit to make his Majesty realize to-morrow in what fashion he spoiled our market. At the worst, we retain our goods, and still can trade in the bazaar."

Two journeys through the tortuous streets of the city, joined to the labor of unpacking and packing their bales at the palace, had occupied so much of the short November afternoon that the sun was setting with the rapidity peculiar to the tropics ere they reached the caravansary.

The smoke of many fires clung to the ground, spreading over the streets and open spaces a hazy pall some ten feet in

height. Beneath, all was murky and dim; above, the tops of trees and the upper stories of houses were sharply silhouetted against the deep crimson-blue of the sky, whilst the stars were already twinkling in myriads overhead. This coverlet of smoke creeps nightly over every Indian town in the cold weather. It is disagreeable to the eyes and nose if not to the artistic senses, and the haze is oftentimes so dense during the hours before midnight that, in the crowded bazaar, the range of vision becomes lessened and even familiar objects cannot be recognized until they are close at hand.

The phenomenon was familiar enough to the two travelers not to excite their notice on this occasion save in one respect. It was essential that heed should be given to the fondness of native servants for appropriating articles which did not belong to them. Naught could be easier than for a pack animal to be slyly driven into a by-path, whence it would never return, whilst search for it and its valuable burden would be time wasted. So now, as on every other night when they chanced to be belated, Mowbray and Sainton kept a sharp eye on their train, and stood at the gate of the caravansary until each mule and bullock had filed within its portals.

They were engaged in this task when the chant of palki-bearers and the glare of torches lighting up the roadway apprised them that some person of importance was being carried toward Agra from the direction of Delhi and the north. The carriers were singing cheerfully, announcing in rhyme the close of a long march, and setting forth the joys of rice and *ghi* at the end of the day's toil.

But the verse stopped suddenly, and the rapid shuffle of naked feet through the dust gave place to the objurgations of the torch-bearers addressed to the muleteers and bullock tenders of the Englishmen's cortege. Native servants curse each other fluently on the slightest provocation, so a lively exchange of compliments affecting the paternity and ancestry of both parties instantly broke out. In reality, nothing could be done. The mules and bullocks, eager as their drivers to have finished with the day's work, were crowding into the caravansary, and the *palki*, or litter, could not pass for a minute or so unless the bearers quitted the beaten track and made a detour behind the mud hovels which faced the rest-house. Glad of a moment's respite the coolies preferred to halt, and wag their tongues scandalously.

Walter, somewhat amused by the scene, did not interfere. There was only one *palki*, but the number of retainers and loaded ponies behind showed that the traveler was some one of consequence.

The occupant of the litter, evidently wondering what caused the commotion, drew apart the curtains on the side opposite to that on which Mowbray was standing, Sainton, urging on the rearmost of their train, being at some little distance.

A Pathan torch-bearer approached the *palki*, and, as luck would have it, Roger came to Mowbray at that moment to tell him that his count tallied with their reckoning.

Something said by the Pathan caused his employer to withdraw the second set of curtains. Hence, the light of the torch illumined the interior of the litter and revealed most clearly the identity of its tenant.

Walter would scarce have believed his eyes had not Roger muttered:--

"Fore God, 'tis Dom Geronimo!"

"He and no other," whispered Walter. "I knew there were Jesuits in Agra, but they are well spoken of, and I never dreamed that this wretch was numbered among them."

"He knows us, too," growled Sainton. "Why should we not requite him for the ill he would have done us. 'Return good for evil,' saith the maxim, and 'twill be a good deed to let some of the bad blood out of him."

"No, no. It would ruin our cause with Akbar. Though he is our enemy, he is less able to work us harm in this heathen land than in our own country. Let him pass. I vow he takes us for malign spirits, come back to earth to vex him."

Certainly the aspect of Dom Geronimo's face as the *palki* moved on and his carriers resumed their song was that of a man who gazed at a threatening vision. Incredulity blended with fear at first, to be succeeded by a glance of utmost malevolence as his shocked senses resumed their sway. That he recognized the two friends was not to be doubted. Sainton's gigantic stature alone marked him out from other men, and, at that season of the year, their garb did not differ materially from the clothes they wore when the Jesuit left them to their fate on board the Spanish vessel in the Thames.

He closed the curtains of his *palki* with an angry gesture, as though the sight of them was displeasing to him. Yet Dom Geronimo would have been a lucky man in that hour had he blotted them from his memory as well.

Nevertheless, his contemptuous action served to hide from him the fact that Roger reached out a long arm and detained a fellow who was hastening in the rear of the Jesuit's retainers.

"Whence comes thy master?" he said gruffly.

"From Lahore, sahib," was the stuttering reply, for the man was frightened by the size of his questioner.

"And whither is he bound?"

"To the court of the mighty Akbar, O protector of the poor."

"Hath he been long in these parts?"

"I know not, huzoor. I am a poor man--"

"Treat him easily, Roger," put in Walter. "See now, brother, here is a rupee for thee. How is thy master known?"

"He is called the Fire-Father," answered the native, reassured by the sight of the money and the relaxation of Roger's grip. "They say he earned the name from the Emperor himself, because once, when a *moullah* disputed with him, the black-robed one challenged the *moullah* to enter with him into a raging fire. The one would carry the Koran and the other a Book by which he sets great store. Then, he said, it would readily be seen whether Mahomet or He whom he calls Christ were the more powerful. But the *moullah* hung back, and the Emperor laughed, I have been told."

"Aye," said Roger in English, "he has faith enough and to spare, I warrant ye. Anyone who believes that Spain can win her way in England will believe owt. And as for fire, God wot, he hath the stomach of a salamander for it. Now, had I been the *moullah*, I would have bid him go first into the flames, when, an he survived the ordeal, Mahmoud should be scouted as a rank impostor."

They could obtain little further information from the servant so they bade him hasten after his master, and, to still his tongue, Walter gave him another silver coin.

Though the presence of Dom Geronimo in Agra was an omen of bad fortune, they agreed, in converse over a meal of which they were much in need, that his animosity would be exerted in vain if they maintained the good relations already established with the Emperor. Akbar was renowned for his religious tolerance. The tale told by the native was one of many which revealed this generous trait in a ruler deservedly entitled "the Great." The Jesuits, coming to India in the wake of the Portuguese, were already well established in Agra, where they were then building a splendid church. They and the Capuchins, composed, for the most part, of learned and truly pious men, not only commanded respect by their discretion and Christian meekness, but won the admiration of the educated classes by their scientific knowledge. It was probable that the religious zeal of a fanatic like Dom Geronimo would be restrained by his wiser brethren. His intemperate language had earned him a typical *soubriquet*, which stood out in curious contrast to the charity of the doctrines preached by eminent missionaries like Father Joseph d'Acosta, a Portuguese, and Father Henri Busee, a Fleming.

"I have heard," said Mowbray, expounding some such theory to Roger, "that the Emperor once became impatient at the reproaches of the *moullahs*, who were ever denying him the use of certain meats and wines. 'If these things are forbidden by the Koran,' said he, 'according to what religion can a man eat and drink as he likes?' 'That is the teaching of the Christians alone,' said they. 'Then let us all turn Christians,' said Akbar. 'Let tailors convert our loose garments into closer fitting coats, and fashion our turbans into hats.' He frightened them, and they all declared that, however it might be for common men, the Koran did not affect the sovereign."

"Be that as it may," said Sainton, "and the tale is not unlike some in vogue about our own Jamie, I am a believer in portents. Here we are in Agra, and not a whole day before we run up against a girl and a black robe. In London--"

"You will anger me, Roger," cried Walter in sudden heat, "if you speak thus of Nellie Roe and Nur Mahal in the same breath."

"Ecod, you flare up in the twinkling of a quart pot, the sheer name of which gives me a thirst. What the devil! has it not a queer semblance to magic, to say the least?"

Mowbray grudgingly admitted so much, but their discussion was interrupted by the arrival of a messenger who, on behalf of Sher Afghan, apologized very handsomely for his master's apparent rudeness in leaving them so hastily at the palace, and invited them to the wedding ceremony that night at the residence of the Diwan.

"Here is a spark in a hurry to light a bonfire," cried Roger when he disentangled the request from a maze of compliments.

"'Twas the Emperor's command," said Mowbray, dubiously. "I suppose we must go. He befriended us greatly, though I hold it the wiser thing to send a civil excuse."

He rose to bid their servants prepare their best attire, and Roger eyed him with a smile.

"Aye, aye," he murmured to himself. "Everything goes the same old gait, as the man said when he tried a second wife. Here we are, off to the feasting. Thank the Lord! if there be fighting to follow I shall not be snared this time like an owl in daylight."

Indeed, the first visible indications of any unusual event in progress, when they crossed the bridge of boats before gaining the pavilion in the Garden of Heart's Delight, savored far more of a campaign than of a wedding. There were guards there, mounted and on foot, who challenged all comers. The Englishmen had taken the precaution to detain Sher Afghan's messenger, and he was useful now in preserving them from questioning and delay. Clearly, the Persian warrior obeyed his master's behests to the letter. He not only knew the importance of speedy fulfilment of an order, but he did not disdain to use all requisite means to carry it out.

Outside the gates stood a troop of horse, the stalwart *sowars* being either Rajputs or Punjabi Mahomedans, as both of these warrior races found favor at the court of Akbar. The transient gleams of flitting lanterns fell on their accouterments, and revealed the presence of several litters, destined, the young men thought, for the comfortable conveyance of Nur Mahal and her attendant women to the bridegroom's far-off domain at Burdwan.

Within the peaceful garden a different spectacle presented itself. The Diwan's vast household had used every effort to make a brave display notwithstanding the short notice given. A myriad little lamps festooned the trees or bordered the ornamental waters and flower-beds, whilst the main avenue from the gate to the house was brightened by Chinese lanterns and carpeted with rose leaves.

The guests were conducted, by a new way, to yet another portion of the magnificent garden, and here they were suddenly introduced to a spectacle which held them spellbound for a little while.

In the midst of a green plot was an artificial lake, square, and protected by a small and beautifully carved white marble balustrade. From each side ran a causeway to a circular island in the center, its surface almost wholly occupied by an exquisite marble *baraduri*, or summer-house. The delicate fantasy of the structure might have been designed by some Florentine artist. Inlaid with jasper, carnelian and agate, it rose with superb grace from the setting of the dreamy lake, whilst the causeways of dark red sandstone enhanced its pearl-like sheen in the rays of the innumerable rows of tiny oil lamps which ran along every cornice and bedecked each tier of the plinth.

Fountains played in the lake itself, and the shimmering waters reflected now the starry gleams of the lights, and again the solemn shadows of a row of tall cypress trees, standing in stately order in the background and silhouetted against the unimaginable blue of an Eastern sky by night.

In the *baraduri* a band of native musicians were squatted on a rich carpet. They made a deafening row with *sitar* and *daf-thakri*, *murchang* and *mirdang*, instruments with sounds as barbarous as their names, but capable, perhaps, of soul-stirring music to ears tuned to their torture. Near them, covered with heavy cloaks, sat a bevy of nautch-girls, who, when the married pair had set forth on their first march, would be summoned to the warmer rooms inside the mansion, to dance there and sing their love songs until dawn.

Between the lake and the house stood a mighty elephant, eleven feet high at least. His enormous proportions were magnified by a great silver *howdah* with roof and curtains, and by the long trappings of scarlet cloth, embroidered with gold thread, which swept down his massive flanks nearly to the ground.

That this fine brute was to provide the triumphal car for Sher Afghan and his wife was evident, when, in a covered court beyond, Mowbray and Sinton saw the Diwan and Sher Afghan entertaining a number of native gentlemen. Active servants, clad solely in white, threw garlands of jasmine round the neck of each guest or offered golden salvers of *pan supari*, the savory betel leaf so dear to Eastern taste. There was expectancy in the air. The bride would soon come forth and pass forever from the enchanted garden.

Itimad-ud-Daula received them with grave courtesy, and Sher Afghan, who seemed in no wise disturbed by the known fact that Nur Mahal hated the sight of him, made his English friends welcome.

"I have met few of your nation," he said to Mowbray, "but my heart has never gone out to a stranger as to you and your brother. You shall not suffer because I leave Agra. I have spoken to the Diwan concerning your affairs. Rest content for a little while. When matters are settled over there--" and he nodded scornfully towards the palace--"he will bring you forward again. You may be obliged to wait a month or two for your money. The Diwan will advise you of this, and you may trust him. If it be so, come to me at Burdwan, and I shall show you how to kill a tiger."

"How little can a man see into the future," confided Walter to Sinton when the Persian was called away. "You will perceive, Roger, that we should have missed a good deal had we not come hither to-night."

"He talks of the killing of tigers, but I vow he will first have the taming of one," said Roger. "Here comes the bride. Saw you ever such a spitfire? Soul of my body, I'd liefer charge a row of spears than climb into yon silver turret by her side. Yet Sher Afghan is a proper man, a finer fellow by half than the spleenish Jahangir!"

"Perchance she cares little for either, but would sell her happiness for a diadem."

"She looks a quean of that sort. I ken nowt of love, such as folk make songs about, but my mother always tellt me never to wed a lass for a dowry. She said it bred a heap of mischief and few fine bairns."

Walter laughed, discreetly enough, but, at that instant, Nur Mahal, who had imperiously flung aside her veil and was preparing to mount into the howdah on the kneeling elephant, looked straight at him.

Her face was deathly pale, and her lustrous eyes shone with a strange light. Pain struggled with anger in her glance. She was defiant yet humiliated, and she shrank from the proffered hand of her husband as though his touch would defile her. When her gaze fell on Mowbray she singled him out for a specially scornful arching of her eyebrows and contemptuous drooping of her beautiful lips. Considering that he had seen her that day for the first time, and had scarce exchanged a dozen words with her, he was taken aback by her evident disdain.

Somehow, though no word was spoken, those wonderful eyes said to him:--

"You, too, have come to witness my degradation--you, in whom I thought I had found a new lover."

For some reason, unknown even to himself, he bowed sorrowfully. When he lifted his head again, Sher Afghan was seated beside his unwilling spouse, a gorgeously-clad *mahout* was prodding the elephant's head with a steel ankus, and the stately animal was marching off into the shadow of the cypresses, his path being marked by two winding rows of lanterns.

Feeling themselves slightly out of place among the *nawabs*, *omrahs*, and other grandees who formed the Diwan's guests, the Englishmen soon took their leave. Their servants, thinking the sahibs would sit long at the feast, had gone off to revel with the rest of their kind, and there was a wearisome delay whilst one guard after another was despatched to search for them, the truth being that each *chuprassi* seized the opportunity himself to indulge in libation and eat the sweetmeats provided with lavish hand for the household, before he fulfilled his quest.

The wedding cortege had gone, the night was dark and cold, and the patience of the belated pair was fast ebbing, when a hubbub of shouting and firing, mixed with the screams of women and the neighing of horses at some distance, rudely disturbed the brooding silence.

"Gad!" roared Sainton, "I thought there would be a fight."

"The Prince has attacked the escort. He means to slay Sher Afghan and carry off the girl. What can we do?" cried Walter.

"Bide where we are. Here comes news if I be not mistaken."

Indeed, the loud trumpeting of an elephant, and the shaking of the earth under his mighty rush, showed that not only had the Persian's force been overcome but he was in full retreat. The excited servants of the Diwan--those who were left at the entrance--barred the gate and left the Englishmen standing outside. But there was a lamp there, and the row of little lights on top of the wall lit up the roadway sufficiently to reveal the approach of the elephant. He came with the speed of a galloping horse, his trappings flying in wild disorder and his trunk uplifted in terror. Behind him raced a mob of armed men, but, on his left side, managing a fine Arab with consummate skill, and cutting and thrusting madly at Sher Afghan, rode Prince Jahangir. The Persian, leaning well out of the *howdah*, was endeavoring with equal fury to kill or maim his royal rival, but the swaying strides of the elephant, and the difference in height between the huge brute and the horse, made it difficult if not impossible for either combatant to injure the other.

Yet Sher Afghan's face was bleeding, and Jahangir's clothes were torn. Evidently there had been a sharp tussle ere the *mahout* turned his obedient monster towards the Diwan's residence.

Behind Sher Afghan, Mowbray saw the white, distraught face of Nur Mahal. He fancied, though the whole incident was fleeting as a dream, that she held a dagger in her right hand, but his attention was distracted by Roger shouting:--



**And that was the manner in which Nur Mahal on her wedding night
came back to the Garden of Heart's Delight.**

"I can see nowt for it but to cleave Jahangir in two as he passes."

And cloven the Prince assuredly would have been, for Sainton had drawn his long, straight sword, had not the *mahout* suddenly wheeled the elephant against the gate, upsetting the snorting Arab by the maneuver. Jahangir was thrown, almost at Mowbray's feet. The elephant charged the massive doors head downwards, and they were torn from their hinges as if they were paper screens. The arch collapsed, there was a crash of falling masonry and rent wood-work, and the great brute himself, stunned by the shock, fell to his knees.

And that was the manner in which Nur Mahal, on her wedding night, came back to the Garden of Heart's Delight.

CHAPTER IX

"Why didst thou not smite him to the ground and I would have given thee ten shekels of silver?"

2 Samuel xviii. 11.

Jahangir was on his feet instantly. Sher Afghan should not escape him now unless the gods fought against him.

"To me!" he yelled. "Spare not! Every man shall have a golden *tauq*!"^[B]

The elephant struggled to rise, but failed. He was dazed by his terrific impact against the solid gateway. Sher Afghan leaped from the *howdah* and rushed joyously to meet his frenzied antagonist. Perhaps the fate of India would have been settled then and there for many a year had not the mob of horsemen, unable to stay their disorderly pursuit, swept between the rivals. Many of the *sowars* were thrown by crashing into the immovable bulk of the squealing beast in the roadway: most of the others either reined in, expecting to encounter a fresh foe, or were carried past the gate.

Walter, in whom the fire of battle had extinguished the dictates of prudence, whipped out his sword, faced the enraged Prince, and engaged him in rapid play. The curved scimitar of the East had no chance against the straight English blade, wielded as it was by one versed in the art of European swordsmanship. Jahangir was disarmed, his wrist nearly broken when he would have drawn a dagger, and Mowbray, closing fearlessly, pinned him against the base of the wall. His infuriated adversary was no puny youth, but Walter was now at his best. He tripped Jahangir, got him down, and gripped him by the throat, saying:--

"Yield, fool, and lie quiet. If Sher Afghan finds thee he will slay thee without mercy."

In the road a remarkable change had taken place. The elephant's assault had dislodged a long and heavy iron bar which served to prop the door from within. Sainton, alert as a fox in an emergency, saw it lying amidst the ruins. Any ordinary man would find it a difficult thing to lift, but Roger, sheathing his sword, picked it up and used it with both hands as a quarter staff. He leaped back into the melee and made onslaught with this fearsome weapon on men and horses alike. In the press, the Prince's retainers could not use their arrows, and their cumbrous matchlocks, once discharged, could not be reloaded readily. As for their swords and short lances, of what avail were such bodkins against this raging giant, mowing down all comers with a ten-foot bar of iron? Who could withstand him? Those who escaped him fled, and the clash of steel beyond the circle of light told that Sher Afghan's followers, though dispersed by the first unexpected charge, had rallied and were coming to the assistance of their chief.

Sainton, who thoroughly enjoyed the fight, ceased his exertions when he saw Sher Afghan helping Nur Mahal to alight from the *howdah*. A crowd of guests and armed vassals, attracted by the noise of the conflict, had run from the house, and the obedience rendered to the Persian's orders by a fresh batch of horsemen advancing out of the darkness showed that the assailants had been completely routed.

But some remained. Six horses and more than twenty men were prone in the dust, and few of them moved, for that terrible bar had touched naught that it did not break. The fallen elephant blocked the gate and the big Yorkshireman held the road. None could come out from the garden save by a wicket, and neither friend nor foe dared to approach within striking distance of Roger.

Sher Afghan, who had not earned his name, "Slayer of Lions," by bragging, glanced at the tumbled heap which surrounded Sainton and cried:--

"May Allah bear witness this night that thou hast saved my life, friend from beyond the seas. I did well to help thee, and nobly hast thou repaid my service. But where is thy brother? I trust he has come to no harm."

"When last I saw him he was instructing Prince Jahangir in the art of fence," said Roger, stooping to recover his hat which had fallen.

"Ha, sayest thou? Would that I had given the lesson in his stead! Search for him, I pray you, whilst I conduct this lady to her father."

Nur Mahal, who stood near, seemed to be in a somewhat subdued mood. There was a new note in her voice as she murmured:--

"Heed me not, my Lord, but look for the stranger. My heart misgives me as to his fate."

Sher Afghan gave her a quick glance, clearing his eyes in wonderment. Before he could reply the girl darted forward.

"See, here he comes, and with him a prisoner. For my sake, if for none other, let there be no further bloodshed!"

The appeal was timely. Walter, holding Jahangir, whom he had purposely kept in the background until the turmoil had subsided, now advanced. But the spirit of the combat had not wholly left him. When Sher Afghan sprang forward, eager to renew a duel interrupted by the downfall of the elephant, his sword barred the way.

"Not so," he cried determinedly. "The Prince is unarmed and my hostage. Moreover, I cannot see why two such gallant gentlemen should fight over a worthless woman. Whilst you were defending her and yourself, Sher Afghan, her dagger was raised to strike you dead."

The Persian stood as though he had been stabbed indeed. He bent a piteous glance on his wife.

"Is it true," he asked brokenly, "that you would have done this thing?"

She shrank from him.

"You forced me to wed you," she protested. "I did not love you."

Plucking a dagger from his belt he offered it to her.

"I dreamed to conquer the fickle heart of a woman," he said. "If you were minded to end your woes by my death, here is my unprotected breast. Kill me! It is my desire. Better that than an assassin's blow at the hands of the woman I love."

She burst into a passion of tears and fell to her knees.

"Forgive me, my Lord," she sobbed; and her grief was music in Sher Afghan's ears. If, indeed, his wife regretted her attitude he could afford to be magnanimous. Throwing sword and dagger to the ground he bowed to Jahangir.

"Your Highness has been misled by idle tongues," he said. "Tidings of this brawl will reach the Emperor as fast as men can ride. Let you and me hasten to his presence and together seek his clemency."

It was a proposal which could only emanate from a chivalrous soul, but Jahangir was too enraged by his defeat, too embittered by Nur Mahal's apparent submission, to avail himself of it.

"I neither plead nor make excuse," he said. "Go you in peace with your bride. I call Allah to witness that I have been misled by none save Nur Mahal herself. My followers have fled, though I am glad to see some of the hare-livered dogs cumber the ground. Give me a horse and I shall ride alone, if your foreign ally grants my liberty."

The lowering anger in his closely set eyes, the quivering lips which scarce could form the words, showed that Jahangir was not only keenly resentful of his plight but that he scorned Nur Mahal for her meekness. The appearance of the Diwan, agitated and faltering in his steps, put an end to a scene which at any moment might have assumed a new phase of violence. The aged statesman, when his first alarm was sped, thought more of the morrow than of the present excitement. He bade Sher Afghan undertake the interrupted journey in a litter as soon as his wounds were bound, and he despatched Jahangir to the fort with a strong guard of his own servants.

By this time the dazed elephant had yielded to the curses and endearments of the *mahout*. He rose ponderously, and marched across the ruins of the gate to his stable.

For some reason the Diwan would not allow Mowbray and Sainton to return to the caravansary. He may have feared for their safety, or perhaps he found comfort in the thought that Roger, mighty man of war, slept under his roof.

Before setting out a second time Sher Afghan came to the chamber allotted to them. He threw around Roger's neck a magnificent gold chain studded with turquoises.

"Let me gild the bond of steel which rivets our friendship," he said.

To Walter he handed a dagger, with a handle so encrusted with diamonds that it blazed in the light of a lamp like a single huge stone.

"It is worthy of the hand of my friend and the heart of my enemy," he cried, nor would he harken to their protests, but hurried away to the waiting litter and Nur Mahal.

"How read you the riddle of this night's doings?" asked Roger, when they were alone once more.

"There is no riddle. 'Tis nothing new in history for a woman to plot for a throne."

"But the wench blew hot and cold. One minute she was for striking her husband dead and the next she was tame as a pet lamb."

"There you have me. I am only sorry that a brave man like Sher Afghan should be enamored of such a siren."

"By the cross of Osmotherly, Walter, I came to think I ken more than you of the ways of women. Now, mark me, she is a hoyden of some spirit. When the Prince would have reaved her she was willing enough, and tempted to aid him withal. But when the fight started, she hung back, like a doe watching two contending stags. Her husband was the better man and the greater gentleman, and he did more to win her by a five minutes' contention than by a month's wooing."

"You are right, Roger, but you had most to say in that respect. Now, let us rest. Jahangir was no mean antagonist. He struggled like a bull when I had him on the ground. I am weary."

They slept late, and, when they had dressed and eaten, were at a loss whether to go or stay, as the Diwan had hastened to the palace soon after daybreak. But their doubts were quickly resolved. A mounted messenger from the Diwan bade them bring their packs with all speed to the fort. The Emperor had laughed when told that his heir was lying abed with sore bones, and gave imperative orders that the bazaar should take place as arranged.

The man told them that the fair was the *Khus-roz*, or "Day of Pleasure," and the scene in the garden of the zenana, when Mowbray and Sainton had hurried their train thither, showed that the festival was not misnamed. Not only the ladies of the court, but the wives and daughters of the chief nobles, occupied the stalls, and, while Walter was busily superintending the unpacking of his bales, he heard the Emperor himself chaffering like an old wife about the value of a penny.

He was bargaining shrewdly with a beautiful Kashmiri, and receiving as good as he gave.

"What do you know of merchandise?" she cried. "You may be a good king, but certainly you are a poor trader."

"And you are selling inferior silk by your pretty face, just as a fine rind may cover a bad apple," he retorted.

"If your Majesty can only admire my face," said she, "I fear you must go where you will be better served."

"Ohe, here is a prude! Come, accept my price and let me take my compliments elsewhere."

"And what shall I say when I render short account to the Sultana?"

"Tell her that the King thought you ill-looking, so he showed you no favor."

"Your Majesty is reputed a better judge of women's nature. Then, indeed, the Sultana would regard me curiously."

"Oh, go to! You are vain as a peacock. Here, not a pice more!"

He threw down some copper coins, and affected to drop a number of gold pieces by accident. The lady promptly covered them with a fold of her *sari*, and Akbar strolled away to another stall. Among the money she found a rare pearl, and the gift of a jewel was a signal sign of royal favor.

"They tell me an elephant broke loose outside the Diwan's house last night," said Akbar, stopping in front of Walter and eying him keenly.

"For a little while I fancied it was a whole menagerie, your Majesty," was the quick answer.

"So. And this other elephant, the Hathi-sahib, made a pen for the beasts?"

"Assuredly they found him occupation for a time."

"Tis well. I am sorry I did not see him at work. Meanwhile, you shall not lose trade because young blood grows hot. What is the value of your wares?"

"A lakh and a half, your Majesty."

"Bones of my father! They must have told you that 'Akbar' meant 'a mint' in your language."

"The meaning of your Majesty's name is known far beyond the confines of your kingdom."

"Ha! Thy tongue is glib! And what is my repute with your King?"

"I have been told that he regards your Majesty with great respect, which is saying much, as he is held by many to be a very Solomon."

"Aye, the wisest fool in Christendom," broke in Sainton, in English.

Mowbray smiled and Akbar cried eagerly:--

"What sayeth the Hathi?"

The translation, which Walter rendered accurately, made him laugh heartily.

"I doubt not thou hast an apt phrase to describe me when my back is turned," he said to Roger.

"If your Majesty leaves behind you the lakh and a half demanded by my partner I shall at least say that which is true."

"And what will it be?"

"That none but a royal bird could cast such feathers."

"Bismillah! Aught but that! The four winds would blow hither every knave in India, for they will read it that none but a royal goose could lay such eggs."

Of course the imperial quip was much applauded by those who stood near, and Akbar was so pleased with his own wit that he called for pen and paper and commanded an attendant to write an order on the Treasury for the amount named, for, strange to say, this far-seeing and intelligent monarch was quite illiterate. He could scarcely read, and his signature was a mere scrawl. Nevertheless, his hieroglyphics covered, in this instance, a considerable sum, its English equivalent being PS15,000. Seeing that the cost and transport of their goods amounted to only one-third of the sale price, both Mowbray and Sinton had the best of reasons to rejoice at this rapid change in their fortunes.

But Akbar knew the value of money as well as the poorest of his subjects. Turning to a corpulent nawab who had laughed loudest at his joke, he said:--

"Now, Agah Khan, thou shalt see that I am as ready a seller as a buyer. Look at this roll of Persian silk. Think of the joy it will cause in thy household. Is it not cheap at two hundred gold mohurs, or shall we say two-fifty, as thou wouldst not care to rob a man who scarce knew the value of his commodities."

Agah Khan, not at all elated by this twist of the royal humor, hastened to say that two hundred and fifty was the true price, at which figure he would certainly purchase it. He knew Akbar. Had he hesitated the figure would have risen by hundreds a minute.

"Nay, be not so shy, Nur-ud-din," called out the Emperor after one who affected an interest in another stall. "Here be spices of Gondar that shall make thee eat until the mirror reveals one twice thy size. What shall it be?"

"Fifty, O King of Kings," was the quick response.

"Fifty! When each grain doth season a meal! A hundred at the least!"

"Be it so, shadow of Allah on earth!" said Nur-uddin; yet he looked so dismal, for he was a reputed skinflint, that Akbar smiled grimly, and there was discreet mirth even among those who dreaded their own dealing with this masterful salesman.

"Gad!" whispered Sinton to Walter, "I begin to catch the drift of the King's bargain. He hath a nice wit."

In half an hour Akbar had sold three fourths of their stock and retained the best quarter for nothing. They, all aglow with pleasure at this successful close of their venture, watched the proceedings in patience until the Emperor approached them again.

"It grieves me that affairs in the Dekkan will detain me to-day," he said, looking fixedly at Walter. "Visit the Treasury to-morrow, come hither at the hour fixed for this evening, and then journey with all speed and good fortune back to Surat."

Now, Walter read a hint into the words. He bowed deeply, assuring the Emperor that he would obey his commands to the letter. Then, Akbar having gone, he and Roger went on their way with light hearts.

In a land where intrigue was rife, the signal favor shown by the Emperor to the two strangers was in every man's mouth. This was clear from the respect paid to them as they rode forth from the palace. Each menial salaamed, and officials who had surveyed them with hauteur during their first visit now rendered obsequious attention.

They were yet some little distance from the bazaar when two richly clad nobles, mounted on fine Turkoman Arabs, overtook them, drew rein and entered into conversation.

At first, Walter answered their courteous inquiries unguardedly, but a question anent the previous night's escapade revealed a hidden motive. He described the affair jestingly, robbing it of serious import.

"Nay, friend," said one, the elder of the pair, "we heard Akbar's words. Prince Jahangir, a profligate and a drunkard, hath

grieved him by his excesses. Had the edge of thy sword fallen on Jahangir's neck, instead of the flat blade on his wrist, there would have been little harm done."

"A bold speech from one whom I know not."

"Would that a bold action by one whom we know not had rid the land of a pest!"

Amazed and somewhat disturbed by this outspoken declaration, Mowbray wheeled his horse squarely towards the speaker.

"I would have you realize that my companion and I are traders. We have no concern with the court beyond the sale of our goods," he said sternly.

"Traders should not have enemies in high places."

"We have none."

"Why, then, is one of the foreign preachers closeted with Jahangir since the ninth hour? Why hath this same preacher spread the rumor in the bazaar that you are spies, emissaries of a king beyond the black water who is sending armed ships to prey on our territories in the west?"

Here was unpleasant news, indeed. Mowbray must have looked his annoyance, because the other continued eagerly:--

"This black gown hath established too great an influence over Jahangir. Were he dead, and his brother Khusrow recognized as heir, all would be well, and the store thou hast made to-day would be quadrupled."

"To whom do I speak?"

"I fear not to give my name. I am Raja Man Singh, and this other is the chief of Bikanir."

"Why do you tell me these things?" said Walter, sorely troubled, for the men were grandees of high position.

"Because, in God's name, if Jahangir comes in front of thy sword again, plunge it into him."

Roger, who gathered the drift if not the exact significance of the talk, broke in in English:--

"If they're athirst for Jahangir's blood, Walter, bid them slit his weazand themselves."

They evidently read his ejaculation as hostile to the Prince, for he from Bikanir murmured:--

"Good! The Hathi hath trumpeted."

Now, Roger did not like the nickname given him by Akbar. He stretched out a huge fist toward the Rajput and roared:--

"I kill only in fair fight. Beware lest the slaying be done now, when, perchance, we may win not only the Emperor's approval, but that of his eldest son."

His attitude surprised them, but they showed no fear. Raja Man Singh said coldly:--

"I have spoken. Many hours may not pass before you feel that my words were not uttered without cause."

He spurred his horse, and the other followed him in a sharp canter. They soon vanished in the distance.

The incident, perplexing though it was, would not have troubled them greatly save for the reference to Dom Geronimo. Here was one whose rancor was implacable, his spleen being probably augmented by their presence in the Mogul capital and the notable success they had attained. When they recalled the Emperor's advice as to their departure they saw that there were dangerous undercurrents in existence which might swamp the argosy of their fortunes if they did not conduct their affairs with exceeding discretion.

Hence, they hailed with joy the invitation from the Diwan to make his house their own during further residence in Agra. In the caravansary they were surrounded by strangers who might be in anyone's pay. In the Garden of Heart's Delight they were, at least, under the protection of an influential minister, whose abode even Prince Jahangir was compelled to respect, else he would not have resorted to the ambushade of the previous night.

But the blind god, having tossed them towards the smooth haven of prosperity, blew them back into a storm with malignant caprice. That night, the Diwan died suddenly, poisoned said some, while others held that his end was hastened by the turmoil attending Nur Mahal's marriage.

Application to the Treasury for payment of their order was futile. They were assured, civilly enough, that no money

could be disbursed until a new Diwan was appointed, and, when they kept the appointment fixed by Akbar, they were told that the Emperor, overwhelmed with grief at the death of his favorite minister, added to the news of the illness of one of his sons, Danial, at Burhampur, was secluded in his private apartments.

Day after day they waited, devising many schemes to secure their money and leave a city they would gladly see the last of. They lived in the Diwan's house. None interfered with them, and the place itself was an earthly Paradise wherein they would be well content if other matters had progressed to their liking. The warning given by Raja Man Singh had no justification in fact. Jahangir had apparently forgotten their existence, while Dom Geronimo gave no sign that he concerned himself in any way about them.

Walter not only visited the palace daily, but wrote letters, none of which received an answer. At last the truth could no longer be hidden. Akbar, who had reigned over India fifty-one years, was stricken down with paralysis. In the words of the chronicler, "His Majesty, finding that his last moments had come, summoned all his Omerahs to his bedside. Wistfully regarding them, he asked forgiveness of any offense he might have been guilty towards any of them. Then he gave them a sign to invest his son, Jahangir, with his turban and robes, and to gird him with his favorite simitar. He entreated Jahangir to be kind to the ladies of the family, to discharge all his (Akbar's) obligations, and never to neglect or forsake old friends and dependents. The grandees prostrated themselves before their dying lord and did him homage. The King repeated the confession of faith, closed his eyes, and died in all the forms of a pious Musalman."

The worthy scribe no doubt intended his concluding sentence to dispel, once and for all, the rumor which found credence with many that Akbar had a decided leaning towards Christianity. However that may be, the tidings of his death sounded the knell of the adventurers' hopes. Not only had they lost the fortune within their grasp, but they and their Surat partner were ruined.

Walter's dream of gaining a competence and sailing speedily to England and Nellie Roe was shattered. In his despair he debated with Roger the advisability of quitting Agra secretly, and journeying towards Calcutta by river.

But Roger swore, with quaint oaths, that he would beard Jahangir in his palace and shame him before all his nobles if he did not fulfil Akbar's behest. Matters were in this desperate plight when a royal messenger was announced.

Wondering greatly what new development fickle fate had in store they admitted the man. He salaamed with much ceremony and said:--

"My master, the Emperor Jahangir, second Sahib-i-Qiran,^[C] bids the illustrious strangers wait on him to-morrow after he appears at the jharoka (window) to receive the blessings of his subjects."

Here was the unexpected happening in very truth. Had Kingship made Jahangir a King? Would he rise superior to petty considerations and treat them with justice? Who could tell? As Roger said:--

"We mun eat a good breakfast, buckle on our swords, and trust in Providence."

CHAPTER X

"Out of this nettle, danger, we pluck this flower,
safety."

Shakespeare, "King Henry

IV."

Jahangir received them in the Hall of Public Audience. If he wished to inspire respect by a display of magnificence, his appearance and surroundings were well calculated to achieve this purpose.

The fine building itself supplied a fitting shrine for regal splendor. The Arabesque roof was borne on Byzantine arches, which gave free access on three sides from a delightful parterre. It was closed on the north, as here it rested against the higher ground which contained the private apartments. A raised marble canopy stood out from the center of the built-in side, the floor being some eight feet above the mosaic pavement of the hall. This retreat held the Emperor's throne, to which a small door communicated from the back.

The throne was elevated on a dais of silver steps. Four massive silver lions bore an inner canopy of gold, curiously wrought and emblazoned with jewels. Tavernier, the French traveler, himself a goldsmith, estimated the value of this wonderful structure at so many millions sterling that later historians have held the sum named to be incredible. Nevertheless, it made a brave show in the clear light of an Indian interior in the cold weather. Not less striking was the figure of Jahangir himself. Robed in white muslin, his belt, simitar, dagger-hilt, and scarf literally blazed with diamonds. On his turban reposed a Persian diadem with twelve points, each terminating in a large diamond of purest water and most brilliant luster. Within a mass of sparkling stones in the center was set a shimmering pearl of extraordinary size and value, while a necklace of smaller but exquisite pearls served to enhance the lustrous ornament in his crown. Tavernier, probably with reasonable accuracy, valued the diadem alone at two millions sterling.

Grouped near him on the steps of the dais, or on the platform, were several court dignitaries, amidst whose gorgeous robes the Englishmen's eyes quickly discerned the cassock of Dom Geronimo. A host of officials and nobles of lesser importance thronged the floor of the great hall, and the scene was one of glittering animation at the moment the two friends arrived, the only somber and sinister note being the unrelieved black robe of the Jesuit.

That they were expected was demonstrated by the sudden stilling of tongues and craning of necks as they approached. All men made way for them, as men will, though the path be to the steps of a throne, when they think a fellow creature is doomed to instant death or torture. It was common knowledge that these two had not only thwarted Jahangir's amours and laid violent hands on him in the process, but that he was their creditor, in his father's behalf, for a considerable sum of money. What better reasons could there be for hanging the pair of them forthwith?

Yet, some prudent souls, noting the fearless glances cast around by Sainton and his less colossal but powerfully built companion--thinking, perhaps, that the Emperor might call on his faithful subjects to seize these two--edged away from the vicinity. It would be much easier to yell than to act when Jahangir cried "Maro!"^[D]

"Desperate need calls for desperate deed," growled Roger as they strode forward, side by side. "If it comes to a fight, Walter, let me sweep a clear space with a stroke or two. Then I shall catch thee by the belt and heave thee up at Jahangir. It will take him by surprise. Bring him out, as a keen dog would draw a badger. Once we have him on the floor, perchance we can make terms."

Walter laughed gaily. The suggestion that they should terrorize the whole Mogul court by sheer force was ludicrous, and its humor was not lessened by the knowledge that they were both in a position of imminent danger. The presence of the Jesuit in close attendance on the Emperor was, in itself, an ominous sign, and the mere sight of him brought a glint into Mowbray's blue eyes which boded ill for Jahangir if Roger's last daring expedient became necessary.

They advanced near to the marble canopy, and, doffing their hats, bowed respectfully. Roger, with an eye over his shoulder, thought that the eager mob of courtiers was inclined to tread too closely on his heels. With his left hand he pressed the hilt of his long sword, and the scabbard, sticking straight out behind him, seemed to indicate that he did not intend to be incommoded.

Anyhow, those in the rear read his wishes that way, and anxiously whispered to others not to thrust them forward, while the wiser men, who had kept aloof, noting the strange expression on Jahangir's face, thanked Allah for the wit which stationed them in a safe place.

Walter, who, of course, acted in the assumption that Jahangir had sent for him in the most friendly spirit, began the conversation by addressing a neatly worded compliment to the monarch on his accession.

"It is the happy law of nature," he said, "that the setting of the sun shall be followed by the rising thereof. May your Majesty's reign continue for as many years as that of your illustrious father, and may the brightness of your glory illumine the earth!"

Having some trick of versification, he gave the words a turn towards a Persian couplet. There was a rustle of gratified surprise among the audience, few of whom were aware of Walter's proficiency in the courtly language of Hindustan.

Jahangir, smiling acidly, bent forward:--

"I sent for a merchant," he said, "but you have brought me a poet."

"A happy chance enables me to combine the two, your Majesty."

The Emperor, without any hesitation, answered:--

"You are modest, withal. The last time we met I discovered in you other qualities, whilst your words savored more of the battlefield than of the court."

"I have not seen your Majesty before," said Walter boldly, for he could in no wise guess what line Jahangir intended to take with him, and he was not prepared for this open allusion to the struggle at the gate of the Diwan's garden.

The King's face exhibited some amazement, as well it might. He significantly touched his right forearm, which was closely wrapped in black silk.

"My eyes and ears may have deceived me," he cried, "but I have that here which bears witness against thee."

"Your Majesty is good enough to allude to a slight dispute which involved Prince Jahangir and another. It did not concern me, and I was foolish to take part in it, but I maintain that had I encountered the Emperor on that occasion I would have behaved very differently."

Dom Geronimo, who lost no word of the interview, seemed to be displeased by Mowbray's adroit distinction between the occupant of the throne and a prince of the royal blood. He leaned over and whispered something, but Jahangir paid little heed to him.

"Then, you think a monarch should have no memory?" he asked, looking fixedly at Walter.

"Not so. He should remember his friends and forget his enemies."

"And how shall I class thee and thy comrade?"

"We trust that your Majesty will continue to show us the favor manifested by your royal father."

Jahangir laughed.

"It is strange," he said slowly, "but you have read my intention. I am told that the renowned Akbar had it in mind to give you an exhibition of certain sports which he loved. Faithful to his wishes in every respect as I am, I have brought you hither to-day for that same purpose. I have ordered a steward to wait on you. After the midday meal he will conduct you to the *tamasha-gah*,^[E] where I will meet you. Farewell. God is great!"

"May His brightness shine forth!" chanted the Mahomedans present, and, ere Mowbray and Sainton well understood the King's desire, Jahangir had vanished and they were confronted by a bowing chamberlain, who besought them to accompany him to a guest-room.

Here, an excellent meal was served. On the table were several flagons of various wines. Though they knew not what was in store for them, and the Emperor's manner was as inscrutable as his words, they fully believed that he did not mean them to be poisoned on that occasion, so they ate heartily, notwithstanding Roger's earlier precaution in the matter of breakfast. But the wine, though its novelty was tempting, they spared. They knew its effects in that climate, and until they were far removed from Agra it behooved them to keep eye undimmed and blood free from fever.

The less they drank the more the steward pressed the wine upon them, until Roger, whom the sight of the flagons tried sorely, bade the man, if he were minded to be truly hospitable, send the liquor to their abode, where they would endeavor to do it justice.

"If your Honor will say that you have already partaken of it I shall obey your behest," said the other with alacrity.

"That will be only the bare truth," was the astonished reply, for they had each tasted a small quantity and found it excellent, there being Canary, Alicante, Malaga, and the famed product of Oporto on the board.

"Ware hawk, Roger," interposed Walter. "Unless I mistake me greatly we are being screwed up to undergo some ordeal. Jahangir said naught of paying us. I dislike his civility."

"Gad! if this honest fellow keeps his word and conveys the bottles to the old Diwan's house, I shall change my mind anent the chuck ere midnight. What flea hath bitten thee now, Walter? The King hath dealt with us right royally, and you and he seemed to oil each other with smooth words."

"I cannot forego my suspicions. They are useless, I admit. We have thrust our heads into the jaws of the lion, and can scarce complain if he snaps them off."

"Let us rather resolve to give him the toothache if he tries any tricks," growled Sainton. "Make for him, lad, if there be aught amiss. Trust to me to clear a path. For each one in the crowd who draws for the King there will be another ready to draw against him should they see a chance of success."

They spoke in English. Their native attendant, seeing that they had finished their meal, begged to be allowed to depart for a little while. When all was ready he would come and bring them to the *tamasha-gah*. They were seated in a beautiful apartment, with frescoed walls, mosaic floor, and arched Moorish roof composed of colored tiles. On one side it opened into a garden. The palace, unlike most kingly residences, was not one vast building, but was made up of a series of exquisitely proportioned halls or small private abodes, sometimes connected by covered ways, but often standing quite apart, and always surrounded by a wealth of flowers and foliage peculiarly grateful to eyes wearied by the glare of the sun reflected from white marble.

Industriously watering the plants was a sturdy *bhisti*, or water-carrier. His goatskin bag seemed to be inexhaustible. He had been traversing the garden paths throughout the whole time they were eating. No sooner were they alone in the room than he ran close to the plinth and began to deluge the rose-bushes in good earnest.

"Protector of the poor!" he murmured to Walter, "stay not here. Go away quickly, in God's name!"

Considerably startled by the man's words, which chimed so strangely with his own forebodings, Mowbray bent towards him.

"Who bade thee give me this message?" he asked, knowing full well that such a menial would never dare to speak on his own authority.

"One who wishes thee well, sahib--my wife, to wit," answered the *bhisti*.

"Thy wife!"

"Yes, honored one. You plucked our child from death in the river, and my wife heard from others that there is intent to make sport with thee and the Hathi-sahib ere both are put to death."

Swish, swish went the water among the rose-leaves. Never was there a more energetic *bhisti*, for a gardener had appeared, and further talk was impossible.

"As well die here as a mile away," was Roger's quiet comment. "We have breakfasted, we have dined, and a fight is toward. What more can a man want? Out with your hanger, Walter, when Jahangir so much as opes his mouth to speak crossly. We shall give him a feast of steel, with first, second, and third course all alike. There shall be much carving, yet none will tarry to eat. Gad! this talking makes me thirsty, and, if I am fated to fall to-day, their blades may as well let out some good liquor. Fall to, lad! We may not have another chance."

He seized a bottle of Alicant and poured out two generous measures. Mowbray lifted a tankard and cried:--

"Here's to Old England and Nellie Roe, if I never see either again!"

"And here's to the day when I set foot on the heather once more!" was Roger's sturdy rejoinder. It was in such spirit that they followed the chamberlain when he reappeared.

They had no opportunity of conversing again with the *bhisti*. Whatever good cause inspired his mysterious message they were now on the verge of enlightenment, so Walter called the poor fellow towards him and openly presented him with some rupees, saying:--

"He that refreshes the thirsty earth and causes the flowers to grow is among the most deserving of mortals."

The man shifted his water-bag uneasily.

"Salaam, sahib," he said. "May your years be numbered as the pice in these coins!"

Now, there are sixty-four pice in a rupee, so the *bhisti's* wish had not an uncheerful ring in their ears as they followed their guide across the garden and thence to a new part of the palace grounds. They were conducted to an extensive stone platform, built level with the fortifications at a point where the outer walls were laved by the river Jumna.

Exactly in front of and below the platform, however, a square enclosed court, or arena, was reclaimed from the bed of the stream. The preparations in progress there, no less than the presence of several elephants in battle gear, hunting leopards in leash, antelopes trained for fighting, buffaloes whose tremendous horns were tipped with lance points, and many other animals, including even the ungainly rhinoceros, showed what manner of sport was forthcoming. Notwithstanding the precarious condition of their own fortunes, both Mowbray and Sainton regarded the scene with curious eyes. They had, of course, during their three years' sojourn, witnessed the fierce spring of the *chitah*^[F] onto the back of a flying deer; they had chased wild boar and even *nilgau*, the fierce blue cow of India, on horseback; they had seen a trained eagle pounce onto an antelope and buffet the frightened creature's head with its wings until the claws got to work. But a combat of elephants was a King's amusement, as few save a monarch could afford the cost or compel men to risk and lose their lives in such fashion.

The broad terrace on which they stood was flanked by the graceful buildings of the zenana. A double line of spear-men guarded it on three sides, while another batch of warriors surrounded a ponderous block of black marble, resting on four low supports, which bore the Emperor's chair. This was placed close to the edge of the battlements, so that his Majesty could watch each detail of the sanguinary encounters in the arena some twenty feet beneath. The chair was securely bound to the marble block lest it should topple over in a moment of royal excitement, and there was standing room on the huge stone to accommodate a dozen privileged spectators. For the rest, the platform extended so far on either hand that all could look easily into the enclosure, whilst many a window and balcony of the palace permitted the ladies of the household to take part in the proceedings if they were so minded. When the Englishmen arrived there were already many rajahs, omrahs, and other notabilities standing in groups on the terrace. None of these addressed the strangers, but muttered words and covert looks showed that some event was toward of which those present were cognizant.

Roger eyed the strength of the guard and smiled. He laughed outright when he nudged Walter to note the manner in which even the royal chair was protected.

"Jahangir either plans mischief or is afraid of it," he said. "He hath marshaled a small army to protect him in his own house."

Walter straightway took the bull by the horns in addressing a question to one who stood near and with whom he had a slight acquaintance.

"Is such display of force usual within the palace?" he asked.

The other shrugged his shoulders.

"They talk of a fierce tiger being let loose," he murmured. "One never knows what may happen."

He vouchsafed no further information. Indeed, at that moment, Jahangir put in an appearance. His swarthy face was flushed and there was an evil glint in his close set eyes. Evidently he had been imbibing liquor forbidden by the Prophet. Accompanied by a few young noblemen whose appearance betokened the force of kingly example, he strode towards his chair without paying the slightest attention to the respectful salaams of the crowd.

"Bring the sheep first," he grunted. "We shall deal with the pigs later."

This obscure joke was greeted with shouts of laughter.

"Karamat! Karamat!"^[G] was the exclamation, for every Mahomedan there had laid to heart the Persian proverb:--

"Should the King say that it is night at
noon,
Be sure to cry: 'Behold, I see the moon!'"

Yet Mowbray, alert to discern the slightest straw-twist on the swirl of the current, thought that some of the older men glanced askance at each other, which puzzled him, as he knew quite well that the death of a Feringhi was of little account to an Asiatic.

The "sheep" alluded to by Jahangir were veritable carcasses of those animals, slung from poles by the feet tied in a bunch. They were carried by servants onto the terrace itself, and forthwith a few athletic youths created some excitement by endeavoring, in the first place, to cut through the four feet at one blow, and, secondly, to divide the body

in the same way. They used their razor-edged simitars with much skill, science rather than great strength being demanded by the task.

When half a dozen carcasses had been dissected with more or less success, Jahangir shouted a question to Sainton, of whose presence he seemed to be unaware hitherto.

"Tell me, Hathi," he cried. "Canst perform either trick with thy long sword? Thy arm is strong, but is thy wrist supple?"

All eyes were instantly bent on Roger, to whom Mowbray whispered the King's meaning lest he had not properly caught the words. The giant grinned genially.

"A slung sheep offers but slight resistance to a blow," he said. "Were he fresh from the spit I'd sooner eat him."

Discreet mirth rewarded his humor, but Jahangir wheeled round in his chair towards the ditch and clapped his hands as a signal to the attendants. At once began a series of sanguinary events in which buffaloes contended with *nilgau*, hunting dogs tore down bears let loose from invisible caverns, and panthers made magnificent leaps after flying deer. Few were real combats. In most cases a helpless creature was ruthlessly slaughtered by some vicious and snarling enemy, and the more ghastly the dying struggles of the doomed antelope or bellowing cow the more excited and vociferous became the spectators.

A fight between elephants was a really thrilling affair. Two magnificent brutes, specially imported from Ceylon, were led up on opposite sides of a low mud wall built on wood and carried into the arena by a host of men. Gorgeously caparisoned, and trumpeting strange squeals of defiance, each elephant was urged towards this barrier by his two riders. Separated at first by the wall, they fought furiously with heads, tusks, and trunks, while the leading *mahout* encouraged his mount by shrill cries, forcing him to the attack with a steel *ankus*, or striving to ward off the blows of the opposing beast's trunk with the same instrument. It was quickly apparent why there were two men astride an elephant. Each cunning brute knew that it was an advantage to get rid of his adversary's *mahout*, and, indeed, one rider was killed before the fight was long in progress. But the death of the man so enraged his elephant that he sprang onto the wall ere the second attendant could climb to his head, and gored his opponent in the flank with such ferocity that the other turned and fled.

The two rushed towards the end of the enclosure, and the leading animal charged a stout barricade so blindly that it yielded before his great bulk. He fell, and the pursuer attacked him furiously. At once a terrific fanfare of hautboys and cymbals burst forth, and a number of men ran with lighted fireworks, mostly Catherine wheels, attached to long sticks, which they thrust under the legs and before the eyes of the victor. This device caused him to abandon the assault, and he allowed his remaining *mahout* to drive him away, but not until two unfortunate *bhois*, or attendants, had been trodden to death.

Jahangir nodded his satisfaction, and the riders of the elephants were permitted to alight, each man being given a sackful of pice, while the ears of the conquering animal were decorated with tails of the white Tibetan ox, or yak. As for the inanimate corpses of the hapless *mahout* and his assistants, they were huddled onto biers and borne away, followed by some shrieking women, whose plaints were drowned by the din of trumpets six or seven feet in length and a foot wide at the mouth.

It must not be imagined that the spectacle disgusted the English onlookers. In an age when men lived by the sword, when personal bravery and physical hardihood were the best equipment a youth could possess, there were no fastidious notions as to the sacredness of human life or the deliberate cruelty involved in such encounters.

They were wondering what would provide the next act in this drama of blood and death when a stir towards the rear of the platform on which they stood caused them to look in that direction.

Sainton, by reason of his height, could see over the heads of the crowd.

"By the cross of Osmotherly!" he cried, "the mystery is cleared. Here comes Sher Afghan, closely tended, if not a prisoner."

It was, indeed, the Persian noble himself who now advanced towards Jahangir, the Emperor having swung his chair, which was on a pivot, to face the palace. Sher Afghan's mien was collected, his dress in good order. He was unarmed, and the mace-bearers who marched behind him might be merely doing him honor.

With eyes for none save Jahangir he strode on with firm step. At the proper distance he stopped and bowed deeply.

"To hear the King's order is to obey," he said quietly. "Your Majesty's messenger rode far, for I hastened to Burdwan, but when he reached me I turned my horse's head that moment."

"Say rather, you gave orders to your litter carriers. When last we parted you had pleasant company in the *palki*," replied Jahangir.

"Neither my wife nor I love indolence, O King of Kings. We have ridden hither at the rate of sixty miles a day."

"I am glad of it. Being newly come to the throne I did not wish the most beautiful and the bravest of my subjects to be banished from the capital to far Burdwan."

"Your Majesty's words are more propitious than a favorable sign in the heavens."

"They carry no better augury than the hour of your arrival, for, in very truth, I feared you might be tardy. I owe these strangers from beyond the black waters some slight debt in my illustrious father's behalf. Certain monies shall be paid them, but first I have discharged a promise of the great Akbar's to entertain them."

He waved a jeweled hand towards Mowbray and Sainton, and the Persian saw them for the first time. But Jahangir went on slowly, his white teeth showing as if he wished to bite each word:--

"Thy coming, friend, hath provided for all a truly marvelous close to a day of pleasure. Art thou not named Sher Afghan, Slayer of Tigers? Behold, then, a foe worthy even of thy reputation."

Again he clapped his hands. A door was opened in the cellars beneath, and a great Bengal tiger, maddened by hours of torture, sprang into the center of the arena, the broken barrier having been hastily repaired with strong hurdles. The lissome beast, whose striped skin shone like cloth of gold and brown velvet in the rays of the declining sun, stood for a little while lashing his sides in fury with his tail until he caught the scent of blood. Then he crouched, and began to stalk, he cared not what. The air was fetid with killing, and this past master in the hunter's art knew the tokens of his craft.

But the arena was otherwise empty, and his lambent eyes, searching eagerly for the cause of so much reek, were raised at last to the intent row of faces looking down at him.

"What sayest thou, Sher Afghan," cried the Emperor. "Art thou minded to vindicate thy title with one who seems to dispute it, or has a happy marriage robbed thy arm of its prowess?"

The Persian hesitated. He, like his English friends, had thought it better to brave Jahangir's animosity in Agra itself than fall beneath the attack of hirelings in some distant fray. In the capital, there was always a chance of a political upheaval as the outcome of a quarrel, whereas, in a remote part, the minions of a vengeful monarch might strike unheeded. Jahangir's tenure of the throne was far from stable. Yet, though he might not dare openly to put to death a noble of high rank, this challenge meant little else, even if it held the plausible pretext that Sher Afghan chose his doom voluntarily.

A thrill of anticipation shook all hearers as they awaited the Persian's answer. He gazed around on them disdainfully, for he was well aware that many there would utter a protest did they not fear for their own skins. Then he spoke.

"Give me arms and a ladder," he said, "and I shall try to kill the beast."

A murmur arose, like the hum of wind-tossed leaves presaging a storm. Some men might have been warned by it, but the Emperor, already half-intoxicated, was now goaded to utter madness by his rival's cool daring.

"Arms thou shalt have," he screamed, "but what need is there of a ladder? Why not jump? There is sand beneath!"

Now this, indeed, was spurring Sher Afghan to his death, for the tiger would be on him with inconceivable speed ere he could recover his feet.

Among those who thronged breathlessly forward to hear all that passed, Roger Sainton listened and understood. The big Yorkshireman's eyes glowed like live coals, and the veins on his neck bulged with sudden passion. It was in his mind to end the quarrel then and there by sweeping the Emperor and a row of his guards into the fosse, but a quaint idea suddenly gripped him, and, without any hesitation, he put it in force.

Thrusting the gapers left and right he reached the royal dais.

"If not a ladder, friend," he said to Sher Afghan, "why not a step?"

With that, he stooped and caught hold of the huge block of black marble. Before anyone so much as grasped his intent he lifted it from its supports, toppling Jahangir and several of his favorites in a confused heap on the terrace. Then he pitched the mass of stone into the arena and it chanced to fall flat onto the crouching tiger.

His sword flashed out as several spear-men, having recovered their wits, made lunges at him.

"Hold back, good fellows!" he cried cheerily, for Roger's anger never continued when steel was bared. "Mayhap the Emperor thinks the revel is ended!"



CHAPTER XI

"I do not set my life at a pin's fee."

Hamlet, Act I.

Mortal fear has caused many a man to run who thought himself unable to walk. It now gave a tonic to an inebriate king. Jahangir, struggling to his feet, obtained a fleeting glimpse of Roger Sainton's amazing achievement. He heard more definitely the crashing fall of the great stone into the arena, and his first emotion was one of profound thankfulness that he and several of his boon companions had not gone with it.

But instantly there came the knowledge that he had been treated with contumely before all his court. So his face, already pallid with terror, became even more white with anger, and words trembled on his lips which, if uttered, would have been the irrevocable signal for a wild tumult. Yet, hidden away in the brain of this headstrong debauchee there was a latent sense of king-craft which taught him caution, and deep down in his soul was a certain nobility of character which age and the cares of a ruler developed in later years. His quick eyes discovered what Roger had truly divined. There was many a powerful noble there ready to espouse the cause of Sher Afghan, whilst, such was the awe inspired by Sainton's almost supernatural feat, it was more than likely the giant's onslaught would create a mad stampede. Moreover, Jahangir himself was as conscious as any present that he had witnessed a deed whose memory would endure through the ages, and the warring influences in his breast sobered him for the moment.

With a self-control that was wholly creditable, he held up an authoritative hand.

"Who dares to strike ere the Emperor commands?" he cried, and his strong voice stilled the rising waves of agitation as oil beats down the crests of troubled waters.

Heedless, or perhaps unknowing, that his turban was awry, he walked to the edge of the parapet and looked over. There lay the fine marble slab, broken in two as it remains to this day, though it was quickly restored to its old-time site. Bound to it were the silken cords which fastened the imperial chair, the seat itself having been crushed into a thousand splinters underneath.

He turned towards Roger; though a cruel despot, Jahangir was a sportsman:--

"Did it fall on the tiger?" he asked.

The big man pretended to scan the arena.

"As the beast is nowhere else to be seen I doubt not he is on the right side of the stone, your Majesty," he answered.

"Why did you not warn me of your intent? I would have given a lakh of rupees to have seen this thing."

Roger was far too quick-witted not to accept the cue thus thrown to him.

"There was scant time for words, your Majesty," he said. "In another instant your devoted servant, Sher Afghan, would have been in the pit with the snarling brute. For sure you meant but to try him. Nevertheless, I made bold to interfere, as there is many a tiger, but only one such man among your vassals."

The big man's humor was mordant, but the excited throng chose to ignore the implied disparagement, and a murmur of applause told the Emperor that in curbing his wrath he had acted with exceeding wisdom.

"You are right," he said slowly. "I am much beholden to you, and that is more than some kings would say who had been flung headlong to the ground. But see," he added, making a brave show of nonchalance as he faced the crowd and waved a haughty hand toward the west, "the hour of evening prayer approaches. Let us to the mosque!"

"Now look you," murmured Sainton to Walter, who stood watchful, with sword-arm ready, during these thrilling moments, "there goes a man with murder in his heart, yet will he turn his jowl to Mecca and chant verses from the Koran with the best of them."

"I fear he only bides his time. But what good fairy prompted you to act in such a way? I knew not what to do. I felt that any moment we might be fighting for our lives, yet I saw no loophole of escape."

"Ecod, I remembered my mother telling me that a white sheet makes nine parts of a ghost on a dark night. I reckoned to scare 'em with a bogie, and succeeded."

In company with Sher Afghan, they quitted the palace fortress without let or hindrance. The gallant Persian, after thanking Roger for his aid, explained his motive in returning to Agra. He had reached the Garden of Heart's Delight only

an hour after they quitted it that morning. Hence, Jahangir was evidently quite well informed as to his movements, and had planned the escapade with the tiger as a means of requiting one, at least, of his avowed enemies. Indeed, they learned later that, in the event of Sher Afghan's death, the spear-men were ordered to close round Sainton and Mowbray and bear them down by sheer force of numbers if they strove to assist their friend. Roger had defeated the scheme only by taking advantage of a prior moment of intense excitement.

When Sher Afghan told them that Nur Mahal and he, with their retinue, had taken up their residence in the Diwan's house, the Englishmen wished to return forthwith to the caravansary. But this the Persian would in no wise permit. He sat late with them that evening, and, from words which fell now and then in the talk, they gathered that while he was even more enamored than ever of his wife the haughty beauty herself was far from being content with her lot.

"She intended to be a queen," he sighed once, "and, alas, my kingdom is too small and rude to suit her tastes."

"Why, then, did you not send her to Burdwan, and come here alone in deference to the king's command?" asked Walter.

"Because there she would pine in solitude. Here, I have good hopes that Jahangir's profligacy will disgust her. Already I have heard grave rumors of court dissensions. Saw you not to-day how ready were many to oppose him?"

"Thank Heaven it was so, else naught could have saved us. But what of the morrow? You will incur constant danger. As for us, we have well nigh abandoned all hope of gaining the reward of our venture. Were it not for my stout-hearted friend we had endeavored long ere this to leave our fortunes a sunken ship in Agra."

"Say not so. The shame of foregoing Akbar's obligations would travel far, and the King cannot afford to lose his good name with traders. Bide on in content. His mood changes each hour, and surely the day will come when he shall treat you royally. I have good cause to hate Jahangir, yet I would never say of him that he is wholly ignoble."

Their conversation was interrupted by a servant, who announced that a store of wine had been sent from the palace for the Feringhis.

"Gad!" cried Roger, "that cat-footed servitor hath not forgotten my request. And it is good liquor, too."

Sher Afghan was very suspicious of the gift until they apprised him of all that had happened. Though he would not drink he smelt and tasted samples of the wine, which, apparently, had not been tampered with in any way. His brow cleared when he convinced himself that no trick was intended.

"I told you," he said, "that Jahangir's nature owed something to his lineage. May Allah grant him wit enough to win me and others to his side by reason of his forbearance!"

With this magnanimous wish on his lips he quitted them. They were fated soon to recall his words in bitterness and despair. Jahangir, sunk in renewed orgy, and twitted by his evil associates with the failure of the afternoon's device, was even then devoting himself, with an almost diabolical ingenuity, to a fresh plot for their undoing.

He limned the project fully, but declared with scorn that it needed a man of courage to carry it out, and there was not one such in his court.

Whereupon, Kutub-ud-din, his foster-brother, who was noted chiefly for the girth of his paunch, but who, nevertheless, had some reputation for personal bravery, sprang up from the cushions on which he reposed and cried:--

"Give me the vice-royalty of Bengal and I swear, by the beard of the Prophet, to bring you news of Sher Afghan's death ere day dawns."

The Emperor paused. It was a high price, but the memory of Nur Mahal's beauty rushed on him like a flood, and he said:--

"Keep thy vow and I shall keep my bond."

The conspirators knew nothing of Roger's pact with the chamberlain, else their task were made more easy. But there is in India a poisonous herb called *dhatūra*, the presence of which cannot be detected in food or drink. Taken in any considerable quantity, it conveys sure death, quick and painless as the venom of a cobra; in less degree it induces lethargy, followed by heavy sleep.

Now, Sher Afghan's doubts of the Emperor's wine were justified to this extent, that it had been slightly tintured with *dhatūra*, in the belief that Mowbray and Sainton would drink heavily during the midday meal, and thus be rendered slow of thought and sluggish in action when put to the test by the Persian's encounter with the tiger. Such drugs, thwarted by the unforeseen, oft have exactly the opposite effects to those intended. Their state of rude health, and the

exciting scenes which took place before the Emperor played his ultimate card and failed, caused the poison to stimulate rather than retard their faculties.

With night came reaction and weariness. Nevertheless, they did not retire to rest until nearly an hour after Sher Afghan left them. They drank a little more of the wine, discussed their doubtful position for the hundredth time, and thus unconsciously spun another strand in the spider's web of fate, for Jahangir, whom fortune so aided, might have spent his life in vain conjecture ere he guessed the circumstance which in part defeated his malice.

While the two talked the glorious moon of India, late risen, sailed slowly across the blue arc of the heavens, and garbed all things in silver and black. The air was chill, but these hardy Britons were warmly clad, and they preferred the cold majesty of nature's own lamp to the evil-smelling oil and smoky wicks which, at that period, were the only means of lighting Indian houses.

When, at last, they stretched themselves on the charpoys which, for greater safety, they placed side by side in a spacious chamber of the suite they occupied, they did not undress, but threw off their heavy riding-boots, unfastened their coats, and arranged their swords so as to be ready to hand at a moment's notice. They knew that Sher Afghan's trusty retainers guarded the gate and slept in each veranda. There was little fear of being taken by surprise in the unlikely event of an armed attack being made during the night, yet they neglected no precautions.

"Sleep well, Roger, and may the Lord keep thee!" was Walter's parting word; and Sinton answered drowsily, for something more potent than the day's emotions had wearied him:--

"An He fail either of us, lad, naught else shall avail."

The bright moon circled in the sky. Her beams, low now on the horizon, penetrated to the recesses of the room and fell on the low trestle-beds on which they reposed in deep slumber. It was a small matter, this nightly course of the luminary, yet, perchance, in those still hours, the direction of a stray shaft of light made history in India.

About two o'clock, when the tall cypress trees of the Garden of Heart's Delight threw black shadows toward the house, a small, naked man, smeared with oil lest anyone should seize him, and covered again with dust to render him almost invisible, crawled along the dark pathway of the shadow and crossed the veranda outside the Englishmen's room. He moved with the deathly silence of a snake, passing between two sleeping Rajputs, so quickly and noiselessly that one who saw him would most likely have rubbed his eyes and deemed the flitting vision a mere figment of the imagination.

Once inside the house he crouched in the shade of a pillar, and waited until another ghoul joined him in the same manner. These two were Thugs, murderers by caste, who worshiped the pickaxes with which they buried their victims. Had Milton or Dante ever heard of such the abode of harpy-footed furies and the lowest circle of Infemo would alike have been rendered more horrific by a new demoniac imagery. No man was safe from them, none could withstand their devilish art. Sinton, whom not a score of Thugs could have pulled down in the open, was a mere babe in their clutch when he knew not of their presence.

For these fiends never failed. They were professional stranglers, with sufficient knowledge of anatomy to dislocate the neck of him whom they had marked down as their prey. Never a cry, scarce a movement, would betray a strong man's death. Of them it might indeed be truly said:--

Their fatal hands
No second stroke intend.

Creeping stealthily, they reached the two charpoys, and each squatted at the back of his intended victim. Sinton slept nearer the veranda, and his wide-brimmed hat was lying on the floor. Throughout his wanderings he ever sported a plume of cock's feathers and he still retained the curious ornament which served as a brooch. It was lit up now by a moonbeam, and the Thug, whose watchful eyes regarded all things, saw what he took to be a headless snake, coiled in glistening folds and surrounded by a ring of gold. The wretch, in whose dull brain glimmered some dim conception of a deity, drew back appalled. Here was one guarded by his tutelary god, the snake, a snake, too, of uncanny semblance, reposing in a precious shrine. He had never before encountered the like. Weird legends, whispered at night in trackless forests, where he and his associates had their lair, trooped in on him. He quaked, and shrank yet further away, a fierce savage tamed by a mere fossil.

The sibilant chirp of a grasshopper brought his fellow Thug to his side. Glaring eyes and chin thrown forward sufficed to indicate the cause of this danger signal. No words were needed. With one accord they retreated. Squirring across the veranda and along the path of the lengthening shadows they regained the shelter of the cypresses.

"Brother," whispered one, "they have a jadu!"^[H]

"Who shall dare to strike where the jungle-god reposes!" was the rejoinder.

"A snake without a head, ringed and shining! Saw one ever the like?"

"Let us escape, else we shall be slain."

The trees swallowed them, and, although sought vengefully, they were never seen again by those whose behests they had not fulfilled.... Minutes passed, until the stout Kutub-ud-din, hiding near the gate with a horde of hirelings, grew impatient that his vice-regal throne in Bengal was not assured. So he growled an order and strode openly to the gate, where, in the Emperor's name, he demanded of a wakeful sentry audience of Sher Afghan.

"My master sleeps," was the answer. "The matter must wait."

"It cannot wait. It concerns thy master's safety. Here is Pir Muhammed Khan, Kotwal^[1] of Agra, who says that two Thugs are within. We have come in all haste to warn Sher Afghan to search for the evil-doers."

Now, the mere name of the dreaded clan was enough to alarm his hearer, who well knew that none could guard against a Thug's deadly intent. Warning his comrades he unbound the door, but showed discretion in sending messengers to arouse Sher Afghan. Kutub-ud-din, thinking the Persian and the Englishmen had been killed half an hour earlier, deceived the guard still further by his earnestness. Giving directions that some should watch the walls without, while others searched every inch of the gardens, he, followed by a strong posse, went rapidly towards the house. Almost the first person he encountered was Sher Afghan himself. The young nobleman, awakened from sound sleep by strange tidings, no sooner recognized his visitor than his brow seamed with anger.

"What folly is this?" he cried. "Why hast thou dared to come hither with a rabble at such an hour, Kutub-ud-din?"

Surprise, disappointment, envious rage, combined to choke the would-be viceroy, but he answered, boldly enough:--

"You should not requite with hasty words one who thought to do thee a service."

"I am better without any service thou canst render. Be off, dog, and tell thy tales to some old woman who fears them."

Beside himself with anger and humiliation, Kutub-ud-din raised his sword threateningly. It was enough. Sher Afghan, seeing naught but some new palace treachery in this untimely visit, drew a dagger and sprang at his unwieldy opponent with the tiger-like ferocity for which he was famous. Kutub-ud-din endeavored to strike, but, ere his blow fell, he was ripped so terribly that his bowels gushed forth. Here was no vice-royalty for him, only the barren kingdom of the grave.

"Avenge me!" he yelled, as he fell in agony, for your would-be slayer is ever resentful of his own weapons being turned against him.

Pir Muhammed Khan, an astute Kashmiri, seeing his own advancement made all the more certain by reason of the failure of the Emperor's foster-brother--thinking, too, that Sher Afghan might be taken at a disadvantage whilst he looked down on his prostrate foe--leaped forward and dealt the Persian a heavy stroke on the head with a scimitar. Sher Afghan turned and killed him on the spot.

It chanced, unhappily, that among those in the immediate vicinity of this sudden quarrel the Kotwal's retainers far outnumbered the followers of Sher Afghan, many of whose men were yet asleep, while others were scouring the gardens. The native of India may always be trusted to avenge his master's death, so a certain dog-like fidelity impelled a score or more to attack the Persian simultaneously. Realizing his danger he possessed himself of the fallen Kotwal's sword and fought furiously, crying loudly for help. Oh, for a few lightning sweeps of the good straight blades reposing peacefully in their scabbards by the beds of his English allies! How they would have equalized the odds in that supreme moment! How Roger would have shorn the heads and Walter slit the yelling throats of the jackals who yelped around the undaunted but over-powered Persian!

For the blood from the Kotwal's blow poured into his eyes, and he struck blindly if fiercely. Closer pressed the gang, and, at last, he fell to his knees, struck down by a matchlock bullet. He must have felt that his last hour had come. Struggling round in order to face towards Mecca, he used his waning strength to pick up some dust from the garden path. He poured it over his head by way of ablution, strove to rise and renew the unequal fight, and sank back feebly. A spear thrust brought the end, and the man who had dared to rival a prince's love died in the garden to which the presence of Nur Mahal had lent romance and passion.

Roger, whom the clash of steel might have roused from the tomb, stirred uneasily in his sleep when the first sounds of the fight smote his unconscious ears. The shot waked him, though not to thorough comprehension, so utterly possessed was he with drowsiness.

Then a light flashed in the room, and he saw a beautiful woman standing in an inner doorway, a woman whose exquisite face was white and tense as she held aloft a lamp and cried:--

"Why do ye tarry here when my husband is fighting for his life and for yours?"

Now he was wide awake. It was Nur Mahal, unveiled and robed all in white, who stood there and spoke so vehemently.

Up he sprang, and roused Mowbray with his mighty grip. The new conflict raging over Sher Afghan's body was music in his ears, for several Rajputs had come, too late, to their master's assistance.

"God in heaven, lad!" he roared, "here's a fray in full blast and we snoring. Have at them, Walter! The pack is on us!"

His words, no less than a vigorous shaking, awoke his companion.

"Oh, come speedily!" wailed Nur Mahal again. "I know not what is happening, but I heard my husband's voice calling for aid."

They needed no further bidding, though their eyes were strangely heavy and their bodies relaxed. Once they were out in the night air and running toward the din of voices the stupor passed. Yet, when they reached the main alley, where Sher Afghan lay dead, they knew not whom to strike nor whom to spare, so intermixed were the combatants and so confused the riot of ringing simitars, of hoarse shouts, of agonized appeals for mercy.

But Nur Mahal, quicker than they to distinguish between native and native, cried as she ran with them:--

"My husband's men wear white turbans. All the others are strangers."

They needed no further instruction. When they saw a bare poll, a skull cap, or a dark turban, they hit it, and the battle, equal before, soon became one sided. The presence of Roger alone determined the fight instantly. Kutub-ud-din and the Kotwal had assured their supporters that the Feringhis were dead, and hinted, in vague terms, that the looting of the Diwan's house would not be too strictly inquired into if the "search" for the Thugs were resisted.

But here was the terrific mass of the giant looming through the night, and here was his sword sweeping a six-foot swath in front of him. No man who saw him waited for closer proof of his existence. Soon the Garden of Heart's Delight was emptied of the gang save those who were dead or too badly injured to crawl. Then lights were brought.

Nur Mahal was the first to find her husband's body. She threw herself by his side in a gust of tears.

"Alas!" she sobbed, "they have slain him! It is my fault, O prince of men! What evil fate made thee wed me, Sher Afghan? I vow to Allah, though I could not love thee living, I shall mourn thee dead. Jahangir, if thou hast done this thing, bitterly shalt thou rue it! Oh, my husband, my husband, thou art fallen because of an unworthy woman!"

It was with difficulty that Walter could persuade her to leave the corpse of the dead hero. Tears choked her voice, and her self-reproach was heartrending, inasmuch as it was quite undeserved. The distraught girl could not be blamed because a marriage planned for state reasons had not prospered, and even Mowbray, who was prejudiced against her, knew quite well that she was no party to this night attack against her father's house.

Finally, he led her to the trembling serving-women who cowered within, and then addressed himself to an inquiry into all that had taken place.

Piece by piece, the tangle resolved itself. At first, the references of the watchman at the gate, supported by certain wounded prisoners who gave testimony to the presence of Thugs in the garden, were puzzling. But a Rajput, who knew the ways of these human gnomes, found a smear of oil and dust against the wall of the sahibs' bedroom, and even traced their tracks, to some extent, by similar marks on the floor. None could guess the reason of the Thugs' failure, which was unprecedented, but the remainder of the sordid story was legible enough.

Two hours before dawn, Walter sent word to Nur Mahal that he wished to consult her. She came instantly, and he noted, to his surprise, that she was garbed as for a journey.

He began to tell her what he had discovered, but soon she interrupted him.

"I know all that, and more," she said. "I can even tell you what will be done to-morrow. Jahangir will repudiate the deed, and execute those concerned in it whom he can lay hands on. But you and I are doomed. With Sher Afghan dead, who shall uphold us? We have but one course open. We must fly, if we would save our lives. Let us go now, ere daybreak, and ride to Burdwan. Once there, I can frame plans for vengeance, whilst you shall go to Calcutta, not unrewarded."

The firmness of her tone astounded Mowbray as greatly as the nature of her proposal. When he came to seek Roger's advice he found that his friend had swung round to the view that it was hopeless now to seek redress from the

Emperor. The number and valor of Sher Afghan's retainers gave some promise of security, and, once away from the capital, there was a chance of escape.

So Nur Mahal was told that they would adopt her counsel, and it was wonderful to see how a woman, in that hour of distress and danger, imposed her will on every man she encountered.

It was Nur Mahal who instructed certain servants of her father's to see to the embalming of her husband's body and its safe conveyance to Burdwan. It was she who sent couriers to start the caravan of the Feringhis on a false trail back to Delhi. It was she who arranged the details of the first march, forgetting nothing, but correcting even the most experienced of Sher Afghan's lieutenants when he declared impossible that which she said was possible.

And finally, it was Nur Mahal who, after a last look at the face of him whom she revered more in death than in life, rode out again into the darkness, from the Garden of Heart's Delight. But, this time, Walter Mowbray and Roger Sainton rode with her, and those three, as it happened, held the future of India in the hollows of their hands.



CHAPTER XII

"Who ever loved that loved not at first sight?"

Marlowe, "Hero and Leander."

Of all the perils encountered by Walter Mowbray since he left his home in Wensleydale, there was none so impalpable, and therefore none so mortal, as the daily companionship of Nur Mahal. She used no wiles, practised no arts--her subtle mesmerism was the unseen power of the lodestone. At first, there never was woman more retiring. Mowbray and Sinton were seldom absent from her side; nevertheless, she spoke only when the exigencies of the journey demanded a few simple words. The horror of Sher Afghan's death seemed to weigh on her heart, and her natural vivacity was almost wholly eclipsed. Yet her face would kindle with a rare smile when acknowledging some trivial act, and the fragrance of her presence might be likened to the scent of roses in a garden by night. It was there, ravishing the very air, whilst its source remained invisible. Though she rode fast during many a weary hour, and bore without a murmur hardships under which her more robust waiting women sank, one by one, until five out of eight were perforce left to recuperate in various small towns passed on the way, she never lost that wondrous sense of delightful femininity which constituted her chief attraction and her most dangerous allurements.

In guiding, counselling, controlling, her intellect was crystal ice, but let any man render her a service, let him help her to dismount or bring her a cup of water, and, with the touch of her hand, the flash of her deep violet eyes, she thrilled him to the core. It was natural that Walter should be her attendant cavalier on many such occasions, a fact greatly to be regretted in the interests of Nellie Roe, whose saucy blue eyes and golden locks were too far away to deaden completely the effect of Nur Mahal's bewitching personality. And, truth to tell, England had a somewhat shadowy aspect in those days. After three years of sojourn in the East, here were Mowbray and his faithful companion no better off than when they rode along the North Road into London one fair summer's afternoon to seek their fortunes. Then they had their swords, some equipment, and a few crowns in their pockets. Their case was even worse in this semi-barbarous land, for their worldly goods were not enhanced, while they themselves were fugitives from the spleen of a vengeful tyrant!

Not even Roger was proof against the magic of Nur Mahal's smile. At the close of the third march, when their leg-weary horses were unable to reach the hamlet of Mainpura, the intended goal of the night, they camped under a tope of trees, lit fires, and proceeded to make themselves as comfortable as circumstances permitted until the dawn. Nur Mahal, having taken leave of them with her accustomed grace, rested in a small tent which was carried by a pack animal. Mowbray and Sinton sat on saddles piled near a fire, and Roger showed the trend of his thoughts by asking:--

"Is it in your mind, Walter, to tarry long in Burdwan after we have brought my lady thither?"

"How can I answer? We are but a degree removed from beggars. If she gives us the wherewithal to journey speedily to Calcutta, why should we remain at Burdwan?"

"You parry one question with another. I may be much mistaken, yet I doubt if my lady sought our escort for the sake of the journey."

Mowbray, who was striving to burnish a rusted bit, looked sharply at his big comrade, whose broad red face, propped on his hands, was clearly revealed by the dancing flames.

"Out with it, Roger," he cried. "Thou hast not been so chary of thy words for many a year."

"Well, to be plain," said the other, "I think yon bonny head is well dowered wi' brains. Here is a land where wit, wedded to a good sword, can win its way. Were you and she married--nay, jump not in that fashion, like a trout on a hook, else I may deem the fly well thrown--were you and she married, I say, she is just a likely sort of quean to carve out a kingdom for herself. Here you have Mahmouds, Rajputs, Hindustanis, Bengalis, and the Lord knows what hotch-potch of warring folk, each at variance with the other, and all united against a galling yoke such as may fairly be expected from Jahangir! Why, man, were you lord of Burdwan and husband of Nur Mahal, you might run through India like a red hot cinder through a tub of butter."

Mowbray breathed hard on the steel in his hands.

"Roger," he said, "had you not eaten half a kid an hour gone I would have dosed you for a fever."

"Aye, aye, make a jibe of it, but there's many a true word spoken in jest. If King Cophetua could woo a beggar-maid, the devil seize me if it be not more likely that the beauty tucked up under yonder canvas should make pace with a fine swaggering blade like thyself."

"Thou art too modest, Roger. If she wants a hammer wherewith to beat out an empire, where could she find a mallet to equal thee? And is it not reasonable to suppose, if such were her intent, she would have furthered the aims of our poor friend, Sher Afghan? He was of her own people, and would soon find a backing."

"It seems that any man will suit her needs save the one she fancies," said Roger drily, and, to Mowbray's exceeding relief, he pursued the matter no further.

Yet the notion throve on certain doubts which it must have found imbedded in Walter's own mind, and, next day, with memories of Nellie Roe very tender in his heart, now that all chance of wedding her was lost in gloom, he avoided Nur Mahal as thoroughly as politeness would admit. She gave no sign of discontent, but suffered him to go his new gait in silence. Once, indeed, when he made to help her onto her Arab horse, she sprang to the saddle ere he could approach, and, at night, when she parted from him and Roger with a few pleasant words, a fold of her veil screened her face.

It were idle to pretend that Mowbray was in his usual happy vein during this part of the journey, and when, at the next evening's halt, Nur Mahal signified that after Sainton and he had eaten she would be glad of some conversation with them, he was, if not elated, certainly much more cheerful.

She received them with smiling gravity, and bade them be seated on stools which her servants had procured in the village where their little camp was pitched. She herself reclined on a number of furs which served as a couch when she slept. They noticed that her dress, which, by some marvel, was white and fresh, was devoid of ornament. Indian widows wear purple, but the exigencies of the hour might well excuse this neglect of custom, and, for that matter, Nur Mahal was not one to pay any heed to such ordinances.

"I have fancied," she said, addressing Roger, "that you are not wholly satisfied with this present journey, Sainton-sahib."

Now, Roger was so taken aback by this side stroke that he blurted out:--

"In the name of your excellent prophet, Princess, why do you charge this to me?"

She flashed her star-like eyes on Mowbray.

"Perhaps I am mistaken. Is it you, Mowbray-sahib, who would gladly be quit of my poor company?"

The attack on Roger had prepared him, as, indeed, Nur Mahal may have meant that it should.

"Your Highness," he said, "has some good motive in stating a belief which would otherwise be incredible. What is it?"

She sighed, and answered not for a moment. Maybe she wished Walter had been more confused and, by consequence, more lover-like. But, when she spoke, her sweet voice was well controlled. The affair was of slight import from all the index that her manner gave.

"A woman's mind is oft like a smooth lake," she said. "It mirrors that which it sees, but a little puff of wind will distort the image into some quaint conceit. Let that pass. My object in seeking your presence has naught to do with idle thoughts. To-morrow, an hour after sunrise, we reach that point on the road whence one track leads to the Ganges, and to Calcutta, and the other to Burdwan. It will, I do not doubt, be better for you to make your way to the river, and leave me and my wretched fortunes to the hazard which the future has in store. I am greatly beholden to you for all that you have done in the past, and it grieves me sorely that this journey, taken so unexpectedly, leaves me so short of money that I can only offer you a sum which is barely sufficient for the expenses of the voyage down the Ganges. But I have in my possession a goodly store of jewels, and in Calcutta, or in your own country, there are merchants who will buy them at a fair price. Take them, and be not angered with me, for I would not have you go away thinking that my acquaintance had brought you naught but ill luck."

From beneath a fold of her *sari* she produced a small cedar wood box which she offered to Walter. He sprang to his feet, with face aflame.

"I may be only a poor merchant, Princess," he cried, "but I have yet to learn from your own lips what word or deed of mine leads you to believe that I would rob a woman of her diamonds."

"Ohe," she wailed, with a very pleasing pout, "how have I offended your lordship, and who talks of robbery where a free gift is intended? Tell me, you whom they call Hathi-sahib, see you aught amiss in taking the only valuable articles I can presently bestow?"

"Please God!" said Roger, "we shall set you and your gems safe within the walls of Burdwan ere we turn our faces towards Calcutta, and that is all my friend Walter meant by his outburst."

Her eyes fell until the long lashes swept the peach bloom of her cheeks, for the physical difficulties of the journey, instead of exhausting her, had added to her beauty by tinting with rose the lily white of her complexion.

"Is that so?" she murmured, and Walter, who knew that she questioned him, said instantly:--

"No other thought entered our minds."

"It is well. I shall retain my trinkets a little while longer, it seems."

She laughed quietly, with a note of girlish happiness in her mirth that he had not caught since the day of their first meeting in the Garden of Heart's Delight.

"Now that you have repaired my imagined loss," she said, "will you not be seated again, and tell me something of your country. I have heard that women there differ greatly from us in India. Are they very pretty? Do they grow tall, like Sainton-sahib?"

Here was a topic from which their talk might branch in any direction. Soon Walter was telling her of his mother, of life in London and the North, while a chance reference to his father led up to the story of Dom Geronimo's crime, and the implacable hatred he bore towards even the son of his victim.

Nur Mahal followed the references to the Jesuit with close interest. When Mowbray would have passed to some other subject she interrupted him, and clapped her hands as a signal to one of her women, whom she bade summon Jai Singh, the Rajput chief of her guard.

"What was the story you heard on the road as we returned to Agra?" she asked when the rissalder stood before her. "It dealt with certain Christian priests who dwell in that city, and with others at Hughli, if I mistake not."

"A dervish, who sought some grain, maharani, told us that Jahangir was privately minded to seize all the black robes because they encouraged the Portuguese traders to greater boldness. He ever counseled the great Akbar to that effect, but the Emperor, his father, was too tolerant towards the Feringhis to listen to him. Now, said the dervish, Jahangir would make all the men good Mahomedans and send their young women to the zenana."

"You hear," she said, as Jai Singh saluted and disappeared. "Jahangir is opposed to strangers, and it is quite probable he harbors some such project, which he has discoursed with the *moullahs*, being anxious to win their favor."

"But the crow was standing by his side when we went to the palace," put in Roger.

"That may well be. If this man spoke evil against you, Jahangir would listen, though his own purpose remained unchanged. I had this in my mind when you spoke of going to Calcutta."

"When you spoke of sending us thither to-morrow, you mean," cried Walter.

"I should have warned you," she replied, but her hearers saw another purpose behind her words, because anything in the shape of a disturbance on the Hughli rendered it very necessary that they should tarry at Burdwan and avoid the river route until the trouble was ended.

Again, a sense of distrust welled up in Mowbray's breast, but Nur Mahal's soft voice allayed it.

"It must not be forgotten," she said, "that affairs at Agra may cause the King to forego the folly he contemplates. Khusrow, his brother, has many adherents, and if Jahangir, as I am told is true, devotes his waking hours to wine and dissolute companions, he shall not long retain the throne his father built so solidly."

Both men recalled Sher Afghan's words. How strange it was that his wife, who had not quitted the walls of Dilkusha during the few hours of her recent tenancy, should be so well informed as to events in the palace.

Walter laughed.

"If I could not see your face and hear your voice," he cried, "twere easy to believe it was the Diwan, and not his incomparable daughter, who spoke with such wisdom."

"Incomparable! It is an idle word. Who is incomparable? Not I. Assuredly there is a maid beyond the sea whose attractions far outweigh mine in your estimation, Mowbray-sahib. Nay, seek not for some adroit phrase to flatter and mislead. Men tell me I am beautiful, but there never yet was rose in a garden which the next south wind did not help to destroy while fanning its budding rival into greater charm."

She spoke with a vehemence that caused Roger, who followed her poetic Persian simile with difficulty, to believe that Walter had said something to vex her.

"What ails thy tongue to-night, lad?" he cried in English. "It is not wont to rasp so harshly on such fair substance."

"You disturb my comrade," said Mowbray, glancing covertly into the girl's eyes. "He thinks I have offended you."

She flung a quick glance at Sainton, and laughed. Some pleasant quip was on her lips, but, in that instant, the hoof-beats of horses, hard ridden, came to their ears. In the present state of the fugitives, the sound was ominous. At once the men were on their feet. Mowbray bade Nur Mahal retire to her tent, an order which she was slow to obey, and then betook himself to the disposal of his small force, lest, perchance, the distant galloping signaled the approach of pursuers. The night was dark but clear, the only light being that of the stars, and it was strange indeed that any party of horse should ride with such speed over a broken road.

It was essential that the nature of the cavalcade should be ascertained before it was permitted to come too close. Flight was not to be thought of, owing to the condition of the horses. If the newcomers were the Emperor's minions the only way to avoid capture was to show a bold front and strike first.

Rissalder Jai Singh was ordered to mount and ride forward with two sowars to bring the party to a halt. If they were strangers, of peaceable intent, he would courteously request them to pass, after explaining the necessity of the precautions taken. Were they the King's men, he was to demand a parley with their leader, failing which, he and his companions must turn and ride at top speed towards the village, giving the defending force, stationed under a clump of trees on both sides of the road, an opportunity to ambush the enemy on both flanks.

It was a hasty scheme, evolved so hurriedly that Jai Singh cantered off while as yet the invisible horsemen were quarter of a mile away. Mowbray and Sainton, adjusting their sword-belts, stood on the road between their men and listened for the first sounds which should indicate the reception given to the rissalder.

Suddenly Roger said: "Lest harm should befall Nur Mahal, is it not better that you should take a couple of horses and lead her to some point removed from the track? Then, if this force overwhelms us, you have a chance of escape, whereas the presence of one sword more or less will make slight difference to the odds."

"Did I think you meant what you have said, you and I should quarrel," retorted Walter.

"Sooner would my right hand quarrel with the left. Yet my counsel is good. Whilst one of us lives she is not wholly bereft, and you are the lad of her choosing. I' faith, if she showed me such preference, I'd take a similar offer from thee."

"You are not wont to anticipate disaster, Roger, nor yet to frame such clumsy excuse."

"I have never before been so mixed up with a woman. Argue not, Walter, but away with her. I'll strike more freely if I ken you are safe. It is good generalship, too. She is the treasure they seek, and she should not be left to the hazard of a rough-and-tumble in the dark."

"Then let her ride alone if she be so minded. We have fought side by side too often, Roger, that we should be separated now."

Sainton's huge hand reached out in the gloom and gripped his comrade's shoulder.

"Gad, Walter," he growled, "thou art tough oak. Least said is soonest mended, but the notion jumbles in my thick head that Nur Mahal will surely be a quean, and that thou art fated to help in her crowning. Hark! What now?"

They heard Jai Singh's loud challenge, followed by the confused halting of a large body of horse. The clang of arms and the champing of bits came to them plainly. The distance was too great to distinguish voices at an ordinary pitch, but it was reasonable to suppose that Jai Singh was conversing with some one in authority.

They were not kept long in suspense. A few horsemen advanced slowly, Jai Singh at their head.

"Sahiba!" he called, when close at hand, "there is one here who would converse with your Lordships in privacy."

Although the fealty of a Rajput to his salt can never be doubted, there was a chance that Jai Singh might have been deluded into an exhibition of false confidence. Walter, therefore, ordered his little force to march close behind Roger and himself, but when he saw that Jai Singh and the two sowars were accompanied by only one man he knew that his suspicions were not well founded.

The stranger was the Chief Eunuch of Jahangir's court, and the mere presence of such a functionary betrayed the object of the pursuit.

He dismounted and salaamed deeply.

"Praised be the name of Allah that this undertaking nears its close!" he cried, his queer, cracked voice rising and falling

in irregular falsetto. "Seldom have men and never has a woman ridden so fast and far during so many days. Had not those whom you left on the way assured me that you were truly before me, I had returned to Agra long since, though my head might have paid the forfeit of a fruitless errand."

The Chief Eunuch, important official though he was, commanded little respect from other men. Even the manner of Jai Singh's announcement of his presence betrayed the contempt with which creatures of his type were held. So Walter said, sternly enough:--

"The length of the journey might well serve to condense thy speech. Hast thou brought some message from the Emperor? If so, out with it."

"Honored one, I am charged to escort the Princess Nur Mahal back to Agra, where, sayeth my Lord, the King, she can dwell in peace and content in her father's house."

"What sayeth the capon?" demanded Roger, who caught the peremptory tone of the man's words and was minded to clout him, for such a menial is apt to become unconsciously insolent when he carries his master's commands.

Mowbray's restraining hand warned Roger not to interfere.

"Is that all?" he said with ominous calm.

"No, protector of the poor. The Emperor Jahangir sends his compliments to you and to the Hathi-sahib. He says that if you return with the Princess you shall be received with all honor, paid in full, and forwarded, at his proper charge, to Ajmere on the road to Bombay."

"And if we refuse the King's offer?"

"Why should you refuse, sahib? My Lord, the King, is wroth that any should dare act as did that foolish man, Kutub-ud-din. All those who took part in the attack on Sher Afghan have been impaled alive on the road leading from Dilkusha to the bridge of boats. I and my companions rode between their writhing bodies as we quitted Agra."

"It were foolish to distrust so just a monarch, yet what say you if we choose rather to proceed to Burdwan?"

The Chief Eunuch suddenly became very humble.

"I am only an envoy," he said. "Behind, there are two hundred soldiers, mounted on the best horses in the King's stables and commanded by a valiant officer. Behind them, there is the might of the Empire. I pray you believe that my Lord, Jahangir, means to do well by you."

There is an Indian story of a crocodile inviting a lamb to inspect his beautiful teeth as he lay with his mouth open, but the messenger's fair words placed Walter in a quandary. Obviously, he must consult Nur Mahal ere he returned the answer which was ready enough on his lips, for he thought that the two hundred, however valiant their officer, would never dare to attack half the number of stalwart Rajputs trained by Sher Afghan, especially when they knew that they must also encounter the terrible Man-Elephant. As for the King's armies, Burdwan was a far cry.



"If we go to Burdwan are you content to abide there?"

"Bide you here, Roger," he muttered shortly. "Keep things as they are until I return. I go to seek Nur Mahal."

A cloaked woman, who had passed silently between the line of soldiers on the road, and who heard each word of the dialogue, evidently guessed what Walter said, though he used English to Sainton. She darted forward now and clasped his arm. Even before she spoke he knew who it was, for the mere touch of her fingers thrilled him.

"I am here!" she whispered. "Let us draw apart. I have that to say which is best said now. One of us two must answer that man, and we gain naught by delay."

By the roadside grew a field of millet, the sparse crop of some poor ryot in the village who cared little for kings or courts. He would grin with amaze if told that his small holding formed the council-chamber in which was settled the affairs of a nation. Yet it was so in very truth, for Nur Mahal led Mowbray into the midst of the standing crop until they were out of earshot of the others.

Then she turned towards him, and there was a rapture in her face which was bewildering, though the way in which she still clung to his arm caused the warm blood to tingle in his veins.

"Tell me," she murmured softly; "if we go to Burdwan, are you content to abide there?"

CHAPTER XIII

"A man that hath friends must show himself friendly; and there is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother."

Prov. xviii. 24.

That man would be a fool who pretended to misunderstand her. She would have said more, but words failed. Her labored breath betrayed her, and the light that kindles only in a woman's eyes leaped out at him. He seemed to be wandering in a maze with a siren as guide. What magic spell surrounded him? Why had the arrival of Jahangir's messenger forced this tacit avowal from the lips of the proudest woman in India?

If she defied the Emperor and continued the journey to Burdwan, it must be as the promised wife of Walter Mowbray, an alien in race, and one who professed a hostile faith. Never was stranger compact dreamed of. They knew little of each other, beyond the acquaintance arising from an enforced companionship of five days. They scarce had a thought in common. They were bred and reared under social conditions as wide asunder as the poles. Nature, indeed, careless of arbitrary restrictions, had fashioned them in superb comparison, for never were man and woman better mated physically than these two. But the law which parts the East from the West divided them, and, although Nur Mahal would have scorned the unseen barrier, Mowbray drew back. Assuredly, there is no knowing what his answer would have been had not another face risen before his entranced vision, and a despairing voice cried bitterly in his ears: "Oh, Ann, they have taken him!"

Yes, though far from Spanish halberds and London Tower, here was lifelong bondage chaining him with a glamour more enduring than fetters of iron. It says much for the charms of Eleanor Roe that the memory of her anguish when last their eyes met on the Thames-side quay rescued her lover now from the imminent embrace of a most potent rival.

It was no time for measured phrase. His heart rose in pity as he took Nur Mahal in his arms for an instant.

"Sweet lady," he said, "were I not pledged to one whom I hold dear as my very soul I would abide with you in Burdwan, and my sword should defend you while my hand could use it. But no man can gainsay his fate. He can only keep his conscience clean and leave the rest to God. I came to India hoping to earn a fortune wherewith I could return to my own land and claim my love. I have failed, yet my purpose will endure until I succeed or die."

He felt the shrinking form he held shake with a sob, and he would have striven to comfort her with some faltering prediction of future happiness had she not raised her beautiful face in wild appeal.

"I have not humbled myself in vain," she fiercely cried. "You must not deem me unworthy because I have departed from the path ordained for my sex. I am no timid maid who nurses her woes in secret. It may be that I am incapable of feeling that which other women call love. Never was man more deserving of true and faithful wife than Sher Afghan. Yet I hated him. You are one whom I could trust and honor. Had the fates willed it we should have gone far together. Now I yield to my destiny. Go! It is ended. If I never see your face again, at least think well of me, and strive to forget that, in a moment of folly, I sacrificed my self-respect for your sake."

And now she struggled to free herself, but, because of his true regard for her, he would not suffer her to leave him in such self-condemning mood.

"Nay, fair lady," he murmured, "we do not part thus. I have misjudged you in the past; be it mine now to make amends. You were wedded against your will, yet who shall hold you guilty of your husband's death? Be assured that none in all this land shall shield your high repute as I and my honest comrade, Sainton. Lead us to your State, and if Sher Afghan's followers prove faithful to his widow's cause, Jahangir may wreck his throne in seeking to injure you."

Again she lifted her wondrous face to his, and tears were glistening in her eyes. Yet, in the dim light of the open field he fancied he saw a piteous smile dimple her cheeks.

"Spare me your vows," she said. "Keep them for her whose love is so strong that it binds you beyond the seas. And now, let us return."

She looked up at him so wistfully that he yielded to impulse and kissed her. Perchance her heart fluttered with the thought that she had won, after all. But Mowbray was adamant in his faith, and his was the kiss of pity, not of passion.

"I shall never know peace again," he cried, "until you are well content that I am pledged to another, and even wish her well of a poor bargain."

"Then you are doomed to a life of misery, for that shall never be," she retorted.

"Say not so, Princess. Your name alone was chosen with wondrous wisdom. It marks out one who has but to seek a throne to obtain it."

"Ah, is that your secret thought? Strange, indeed that it should pair with mine!"

She wrenched herself free from his embrace, and ran a little way back through the millet. Then she stopped, and there was the wonted imperious ring in her voice as she cried:--

"A moment ago you undertook to defend me from my enemies. Swear, then, that you will obey my wishes!"

"In all things which concern your welfare--"

"Fear not, Mowbray-sahib. I offer myself twice to no man."

Her quick transition from melting femininity to stern dominance surprised him as greatly as aught that had gone before. It relieved him, too. Who could deny the truth of Nur Mahal's estimate of herself, that she was not like unto other women?

"I swear!" he said, wondering what new madness possessed her.

"'Tis well," she answered. "I shall soon put your fealty to the test."

Without another word, she passed to the road, where Sainton's giant figure towered among the group of men and horses. Her quick eyes discovered Jahangir's messenger, and she addressed him as if he were a servant of lowest rank.

"Ibrahim!" she cried, "did thy master, the Emperor, give thee thy charge in writing?"

The Chief Eunuch bowed obsequiously.

"Knowing your repute for exceeding discernment," he said, "I even asked the Emperor of the World^[J] to honor me with his written command. I carry it with me."

"Follow me to the village. There we can procure a light."

Whatever purpose she had in mind she gave no sign of her intent until she had perused the script which Ibrahim handed to her. Mowbray, watching her mobile features as she broke the seal of the Emperor's parchment, whilst one of her women held a lantern, saw only an expression of fixed resolve, her set lips and thoughtful eyes revealing a determination to carry out in the best way the course upon which she had already decided.

She read Jahangir's letter twice before she spoke, and, even then, there was an odd restraint in her manner when she addressed Mowbray and Sainton, who, with the Chief Eunuch, had accompanied her in silence.

"Jahangir told his envoy the chief part of that which he has written. Ibrahim's message is exact in so far as it touches your affairs. I will fulfil the Emperor's behests in all save one slight matter. You must not return to Agra. The Ganges lies a short march ahead, and, now that I have Jahangir's written promise to pay you, there is no reason why I should not discharge his obligations."

"I have brought no great store of money," put in Ibrahim nervously.

"Said I aught to thee?" she blazed out at him. "It will be thy turn to speak when the Emperor demands a witness."

"Do you revert to a proposal which we have once refused?" asked Walter, with Saxon doggedness frowning in his face.

"I revert to your promise given me quarter of an hour ago."

"I swore to obey you, but--"

"Obey then, without question. Since you force me to it, I command you to accept my jewels in payment of the Emperor's debt. A lakh and a half, is it not? If you are not cheated, they are worth as much. Further, I advise you to retain a score of my men until you reach Calcutta. They will follow you, I doubt not, but, to make certain of their allegiance, I shall promise them a good reward if they return bearing me a letter from you. They cannot deceive me, as I shall have your signature on the receipt for the money."

"In truth, Princess, 'tis easy to see that you are the daughter of the High Treasurer," broke in Roger suddenly. Nur Mahal's tense expression relaxed for an instant; nevertheless, Walter, vexed that he should be forced into a settlement exceedingly repulsive to his feelings, asked gloomily:--

"What other of the Emperor's requests do you carry out?"

"I go back to the Garden of Heart's Delight. You spoke just now of fortunate names. Is it not happily entitled?"

The quiet scorn of the question revealed to him an utter hopelessness which was so greatly at variance with her confident mien during their flight that not even the scene which took place in the field of millet served to explain it wholly to his puzzled brain. In the presence of the rabbit-eared Chief Eunuch it was not advisable to say too much, but he could not forbear a comment.

"I have heard you describe a woman's mind as a lake," he said. "Will you forgive me if I liken it to a whirlpool, in which thoughts flowing in one direction at one moment, fly in the opposite way the next."

She laughed lightly, though the joy had gone from her mirth.

"You still would have me go to Burdwan?" she cried.

"Yes; and I care not who hears."

"Nor do I, for the Emperor bids me return, and I am dutiful. Who could deny the wish of so benignant a prince?"

"Burdwan without a husband is not to your liking, perchance. It would be dry meat, anyhow, as the fellow said after coursing a hare and losing it," said Roger, who, for a cause best known to himself, attempted to deprive the undercurrent of their speech of its vinegar.

"Spare us such ill-timed jokes," growled Mowbray angrily in English, but Roger only answered:--

"Gad! if the quip run not with thy humor, leg it after the hare again."

Walter realized that his level-headed comrade appreciated the situation sanely, and was, indeed, advising him how to act. Yet he was torn by a thousand conflicting emotions. That field of millet had been to him a bed of nettles. He was still smarting from the sting of recollection. If Nur Mahal offered herself twice to no man, assuredly she was a woman whom few men would refuse at the first asking. And to what purpose had he thrust her away? For all he knew to the contrary, Nellie Roe might be married these two years. He had conversed with that sprightly maid during half a day. He had kissed her once. He had seen her fall fainting into the arms of Anna Cave, as any girl might have done who witnessed the arrest of a young cavalier for whom she felt a passing regard and whose ill fortunes were incurred in her behalf. Frail bonds, these, to hold in leash a warm-blooded youth!

His adventurous soul spurred him on to follow the career which Nur Mahal offered him. In those days, when the world was young, a stout heart and a ready sword were a man's chief credentials. In no land did they lead to the Paradise of happy chance more readily than in India, where the golden fruit of the pagoda tree was ever ripe for him who dared to shake a laden branch. And yet, and yet--a lover's kiss in an English garden withheld him from the glamour of it all.

It was fortunate, perhaps, in that hour of fiercest temptation, that Nur Mahal was too proud to stoop again to conquer. There were not wanting signs to her quick intelligence that Mowbray was fighting with beasts at Ephesus. Yet she disdained, by word or look, to join the contest, and it may be that her Eastern brain conceived a more subtle way of achieving her object. She brought forth the little box of cedar wood and handed it to Walter.

"Take heed, Ibrahim," she said, "that I have given the sahiba diamonds to the value of a lakh and a half. You shall prepare a full quittance for the Emperor, and Mowbray-sahib shall sign it. Be speedy!"

She gave Walter a quick look from those wonderful eyes of hers.

"Whilst Ibrahim inscribes the receipt," she continued, "you should choose your attendants."

"At this hour?"

"Why not? When an Emperor is urgent the night becomes day. I begin the march back to Agra forthwith."

Even the wearied Chief Eunuch would have protested, but she did not deign to heed his stammering words. It took Ibrahim some time to write all Jahangir's titles on the parchment which set forth Nur Mahal's settlement of Akbar's debt. When the last flourish was drawn, and Mowbray had appended his name to the script, with Roger's cross as agreeing to the same, the masterful lady herself was equipped for the road.

She sought no private leave-taking of the man whom, an hour earlier, she was willing to espouse. Before them all, she curtsied most gracefully to the two Englishmen.

"Farewell, sahiba," she said. "May Allah prosper you!"

And with that she was gone. Ere they were fully resolved that this was, indeed, the end, they heard the hoof-beats of

her retreating cavalcade. Soon they knew, from the distant commotion, that the Emperor's troopers were withdrawing to their last camping-place.

Mowbray, a prey to thoughts which he could ill control, stood with Sinton a little apart from the cluster of mud huts adjoining their bivouac. Roger, sympathizing with the stress of his comrade's reflections, gazed at the stars and softly whistled a few bars of an air popular in the North:

"O, do ye ken Elsie Marley, honey--
The wife that sells the barley,
honey?
For Elsie Marley's grown so fine,
She wean't get up to feed the
swine."

But Jai Singh, who had elected to go with them to Calcutta, did not scruple to break in on his new master's reverie. To him, no matter what the comedy played by his mistress, one woman more or less in the world was of little import.

"Do we, too, march to-night, sahib?" he asked, when he discovered Mowbray on the outskirts of the hamlet.

"No," was the curt reply.

"Then, sahib, if Khuda permits it, let us sleep. Three times in one month have we passed restless nights in this accursed village."

"Ha! Why are these poor dwellings more hateful than any others passed on the road?"

"I know not, sahib, unless it be a meeting-place of evil spirits. When the Maharani came this way to Burdwan she wept all night and refused to be comforted. When she returned she wept again, for it was here we rested after regaining the great road. To-night, when I saw her smiling whilst she conversed with your Lordships, I thought the spell was broken. Yet, by the beard of Manu, now she is gone--and for what?--to indulge the fancy of a king who murdered that good man, Sher Afghan."

"It may be that the local fiends are unfriendly to her and not to thee, Jai Singh. Sleep in peace. We march betimes in the morning."

He knew full well that ambition was the sprite which plagued Nur Mahal. It had tortured many before her, nor would it cease to vex mankind long after her restless soul was stilled eternally.

"In truth," said Roger, as they walked slowly after Jai Singh, "I am resolved now that your lucky star shines over these hovels, lad. Had you tried to shoe yon filly she would have requited you by kicking you into the smithy fire."

"My soul, that would be the proper lot of an indifferent smith," said Mowbray, with a queer bitterness in his voice, for weak human nature is so made up of contradictions that he missed Nur Mahal sorely now that he had seen the last of her.

"Ecod, if that is your way of thinking, why didn't you give her a hearty hug when she led you forth into the field of chick-peas? Women will oft yield to a squeeze when they cry 'Pshaw' to a sigh. My mother told me--"

"I pray to the saints, if ever we see England again, thy mother may tell thee when to hold thy tongue," cried Walter wrathfully, whereat Roger whistled another bar of "Elsie Marley," and winked portentously at a gnarled and wizened village head-man, who cowered in his blanket close to their fire. The old fellow wondered dully what all these comings and goings of great folk betokened, but the giant's humor pleased him greatly. It was propitious to be thus noticed by a lord of the earth.

Thenceforth, their days and nights provided an uneventful record of quiet travel. They reached Allahabad next day, and the local *Kotwal* was minded to give them some trouble. He was cowed instantly when Walter exhibited Akbar's order to the Treasurer, which he had forgotten to hand to Ibrahim with the receipt. Nevertheless, being now well versed in the ways of Indian officials, he marveled at the man's hectoring manners, since this city, situated at the confluence of the Ganges and the Jumna, was one of the chief resting-places for merchants passing between the Mogul capital and the Hughli delta. Even at that date the Bay of Bengal was becoming noted as the site of important trading stations. It was passing strange that the civil head of Allahabad should be so impolitic.

No restrictions were placed on his movements, however, and the incident scarce demanded further thought. Indeed, the *Kotwal* deigned to help him by ordering his men to belabor the curious crowds which hampered progress through the bazaar, for the fame of Sinton's stature spread like wild-fire, and numbers of mild-eyed Hindus came to gaze at him.

Here, they were able to test the value of Nur Mahal's gift. Deeming it wise to replenish their small stock of ready money, eked out as it was by a sum which she had entrusted to Jai Singh for the expenses of the escort, they sold four small diamonds in the bazaar. The gems brought a thousand rupees, after some bargaining, so it was evident, even to non-experts, that the two hundred stones in the little cedar cabinet, some being very large and pure, must be worth even more than the price estimated.

With the money thus obtained they purchased three roomy, flat-bottomed boats, spacious enough to house the whole party, man and horse. Assured that there would be no difficulty in securing food and fodder on the long river voyage they did not burthen their craft with a bulk of stores. Nevertheless, their preparations, though simple, consumed several days, for, to the native of India, *Kal* (to-morrow) is as precious a word as *Manana* to the Spaniard.

At last, after a weary delay, towards which Mowbray strongly suspected the *Kotwal* contributed indirectly, the huge, osier-woven sails of their buggalows were hoisted, and the unwieldy caravels lumbered slowly down stream. Owing to the ever-changing channel, the numerous sand-banks, the occasional barriers of half sunken trees and other debris, they could only move during the hours of daylight. At night they tied up near some village, where young goats, eggs, poultry, milk, and grain were obtainable. At times, the people were so poor that even these primary commodities ran short, but, on the whole, they fared well. A week's quiet voyaging did wonders for their horses. The hardy country-breds became sleek and fat. When taken ashore for exercise they would plunge and caper for sheer liveliness. One evening, after they had passed Benares, some such ebullition on the part of the powerful stallion which carried Sainton during the march from Agra caused his master to growl:--

"It seems a daft thing to me, Walter, to ferry these ill-mannered brutes so far. They are in good condition now. Why not sell them at the next big town, and let Jai Singh purchase others for his return up country?"

"I have been thinking of that same plan," agreed his friend. "Let us consult Jai Singh, and hear what he says."

But the shrewd old Rajput opposed the suggestion. He pleaded that no such cattle could be bought in Lower Bengal, and that they themselves would be glad of good mounts when they quitted the river to ride into Calcutta. The argument prevailed, though his real intent was to sell the animals as soon as their backs were turned and procure wretched tats for himself and his comrades, thereby netting a very handsome profit.

In life, it is ever the trivial things that count. A straw would have swayed them to barter the horses at Dinapore. Had they done so this history would have changed its course.

It was their custom to pass through populous places without stopping. Seen from the banks, they attracted little attention, which suited their purpose better than to leave behind them a trail of surmise and gossip. The dull villagers they encountered had no ideas beyond the state of the crops and the prospect of an early monsoon. Hence, they slipped quietly, if slowly, over a very long stretch of their journey to the sea without any important event breaking the monotony of peaceful nights and restful days.

The pranks which fortune had played them in the past might have warned them that this idyllic existence could not continue. But the fickle jade gave them no portent. Little did they realize that stern times were come again when one evening, whilst strolling ashore on a high bank and idly watching the Rajputs watering the horses, a man, black as a negro, but dressed in semi-European costume, suddenly appeared from a clump of trees crowning the promontory carved from the land by a bend of the stream at that point.

Half running, half staggering, he made towards them. As he came nearer, they perceived that he was in desperate plight. His garments were blood-stained; his gait and aspect told of abject fear; his eyes glistened like those of a hunted fawn; and, sinister token, his hands were weighted with heavy gyves of a fashion usually intended for the legs of prisoners.

"Gad!" cried Roger, staring at the apparition, "this chuck minds me of that image of Satan who greeted us on board Sir Thomas Roe's ship. Yet, an he be the devil himself, some one hath bound him!"

The poor wretch reached them, fell panting at their feet, and gasped in Portuguese:--

"Save me! Save me, for the love of God, if ye are Christians!"

Their long voyage with Captain Garcia had taught them sufficient of the *lingua franca* of the high seas at that period to understand his frantic appeal. Walter stooped and patted his shoulder encouragingly. He found it hard to arrange a sentence in the man's language, but he managed to say:--

"Have no fear. We are English."

Then it occurred to him that one who wandered in such fashion through the wilds of India must surely know

Hindustani, so he continued:--

"There are none here to harm you. Why are you chained? Of whom are you so afraid?"

The man, a Portuguese half-caste, who, like many of his class, more resembled an African than an Indian, save in respect to his smooth, blue-black hair, seemed to be too dazed to do other than pour out trembling demands for succor. Roger, thinking deeds served better than words, to reassure him, lifted the heavy links which connected the fetters on his wrists.

"Mayhap," he said, "if thy hands are freed thy tongue may loosen itself."

With that, he tore apart the rivets binding the chain to the bracelets. Two mighty tugs, and the chain lay on the ground. But this exhibition of strength merely stupefied the captive. Surprise made him dumb. It was not until they led him to the boats and gave him some food, which he ate ravenously, that they were able to extract an intelligible story from him.

With many a vow to the Mother of Mercy and all the chief saints in the calendar, the fugitive, a youth of twenty, who said his name was Antonio da Silva, told them how Abdul Aziz, a fanatical Musalman of high position in Bengal, had treacherously attacked the Portuguese colony at Hughli. There was a fight, in which many were killed, but the multitude of assailants, no less than the wholly unexpected nature of the assault, sufficed to carry the town by storm. After looting the stores, Abdul Aziz paraded the survivors, offered degrading terms to those of both sexes who would become Mahomedans, and, when only three men and one woman yielded, out of some two hundred prisoners, despatched the whole company, strongly guarded, to the northern capital.

Hearing this story, which so curiously bore out the accuracy of Nur Mahal's information, the two Englishmen looked at each other.

"Now we know why she bade us take the river," said Roger. "Had we gone by road we had encountered these unfortunates."

"We are much beholden to her," said Mowbray. "But how and when did you contrive to escape?" he went on, filling Antonio's empty plate again.

"Yesterday, at the close of a weary march--"

"Yesterday! Is the convoy so close, then?"

Da Silva pointed to the west.

"The party is not more than five miles distant over there," he said. "It chanced last night that there was some confusion owing to the advance guard having gone beyond the agreed camping-ground. We prisoners were hurried back in the dark. Passing through a wood, and scarce able to walk owing to fatigue and the weight of my fetters, I stumbled over a rock and fell into a hollow. I lay there, expecting to be roused with a lance-thrust, but careless what fate awaited me. Mater Misericordia! the black dogs heeded me not. When I discovered that I had not been missed, hope gave me new strength. I rose, and went rapidly along the road in front, thinking that search would not be made far in that direction, whereas any attempt to reach the south road would lead to my capture. At dawn, utterly spent though I was, I turned into the cultivated land, knowing that in time I should gain the river's bank. I kept on until the presence of villagers caused me to hide in the top of trees whence I first saw you. I dared not reveal myself to the natives, because they would conduct me back to the column, being fearful lest the soldiers should pillage them for concealing me. So I lay close all day, without so much as a drink of water, until the good God sent your lordships towards my hiding-place. Then I felt that I was safe."

There was a spice of humor in the tragedy of his story. He called Indian Mahomedans "black," and alluded to the inhabitants of Upper Bengal as "natives" with all the assurance of the whitest white who ever entered the country. But the Englishmen were more concerned in the character of his news than in his way of imparting it. While such a gang as the washbucklers of Abdul Aziz infested the neighborhood, it behooved them to keep watch and ward until the marauders were far removed. Moreover, the magnitude of the affair was alarming. If the Hughli district were overrun, the other stations at Calcutta and lower down the river would be difficult of access. Da Silva, in reply to further questions, said that the sacking of the Portuguese colony took place nearly a month since, so Jahangir must have despatched his murderous order soon after he came to the throne. Were his couriers carrying a similar mandate to the west coast? Would the Christian posts at Surat, Ahmedabad and Bombay also be given to the flames?

Certainly, here was a dilemma. Yet their only course, precarious though it might be, was to guard against sudden attack, keep to the river, and endeavor at all hazards to reach the sea.

Ere night fell, Jai Singh and a sowar made an extensive reconnaissance on horseback beyond the perimeter of the

village. They returned, to report that many fires were lit in the locality described by the half-caste.

By this time, da Silva's confidence was somewhat restored, and he bethought himself of the miserable lot of his fellow captives.

"Ah!" he sighed, "what would I not give to help them. Think of that gracious lady, the Countess di Cabota, being subjected to such indignities! Though she looks young enough, she is very stout, and she suffers greatly from the vagaries of the mule on which she is strapped. And then, the good priests! I can see them now, patiently enduring contumely and insult, and answering each blow with a prayer."

"A Countess!" said Mowbray. "How came a lady of rank to be in an Indian station?"

"They say she was jealous of her husband, who was a very handsome man, and when he was named Governor of the Portuguese possessions in the East Indies she insisted on coming with him. But he died of a fever, and she was about to go home when the attack took place."

"Are there many women among the prisoners?"

"About forty, your lordship, but some are converts. Perhaps twenty, all told, are Europeans like myself."

Walter repressed the temptation to laugh.

"It is a grave matter," he said, "and Portugal should avenge it heavily. While the names are fresh in your mind tell me all you can remember. I shall set them down for the information of the first Portuguese official I encounter."

The roll progressed until da Silva reached the ecclesiastics.

"First, let me think of the Franciscans. Who, that knew him, would not weep for good Fra Pietro!"

"Fra Pietro!"

There was many a "Brother Peter" in the Franciscan order, yet the words smote Mowbray's ears with a sudden menace of disaster.

"Tell me of this Fra Pietro," he said. "What manner of man is he?"

Da Silva, glib of tongue now, told of a monk who was sent to India nearly three years ago. It was rumored that he had been guilty of a breach of discipline, or had, in some manner, displeased the authorities at Lisbon, though what his error none knew, since there never was saint who walked the earth more humble and devout than Fra Pietro. Yes, Antonio was sure the excellent father spoke English, because he conversed, in their own language, with the sailors on board an English ship which once came up the Hughli river. Surely his lordship must have met Fra Pietro, seeing that he described the friar so accurately. He was, indeed, very thin and pallid, with large brown eyes that seemed to be ever contemplating the happiness of heaven!

Then Walter set aside his tablets and hastened to find Sainton, who was eating an extra heavy supper on the set principle that a good deal might happen ere breakfast.

"Roger," he said, quietly, unconscious in his perplexity of the pain in his voice, "here is ill news."

"Why, what ails thee, lad?" demanded the giant, suspending his assault on the haunch of a deer, though, to be sure, he had his mouth full.

"You remember Fra Pietro, who saved us from the Inquisition?"

"Remember him!" cried Roger. "I shall forget my own name first."

Mowbray pointed to the dying light on the western horizon. Against the golden purple of the sky was silhouetted the indigo line of the great central plain of India.

"He is among those unhappy people," he said. "Unless I err greatly he is there because he helped us to escape. Perchance he was banished because they feared to put him to death. Roger, what say you?"

"Say! What is there to say! Sit thee down, lad, and eat while we think. We mun have him out, whole and hearty, though every cut-throat between here and hell barred the way."

CHAPTER XIV

"As if a wheel had been in the midst of a wheel."

Ezekiel x. 10.

Roger's cheery optimism was an excellent thing in itself. Nevertheless, the best of good-will cannot withstand the logic of hard fact, and prolonged discussion of the means whereby Fra Pietro might be rescued revealed an undertaking bristling with difficulties. After extracting from da Silva all the material information he possessed, they considered a hundred varying expedients, rejecting one proposal after another until they almost despaired of hitting upon any scheme which offered even a remote chance of success.

They took Jai Singh into their confidence. Unless he and his Rajputs yielded willing help it was hard indeed to see what could be done. Two and twenty men, well mounted, might, if fortunate, achieve something: two men alone, with hundreds against them, were utterly powerless.

It was whilst Jai Singh was strenuously opposing Sainton's suggestion of a direct attack that Walter, inspired by idle chance, hit upon a plan the very daring of which commended itself to them. To be sure, Roger long remained stubborn ere he would agree to it. At last he yielded. Admittedly, the project was a forlorn hope, yet none other they could propound gave such promise of speedy realization, and nothing could shake their resolve that Fra Pietro must be saved.

The horses were quietly disembarked; by present payment, and promise of greater reward, a guide was obtained from the village; and the whole party, less da Silva and three trustworthy men, set off under the starlight to march across country by field paths. The three Rajputs who remained behind were charged to safeguard the boats and prevent any enterprising villager from carrying news to the distant column. Da Silva was left not only because he was paralyzed with fright at the bare thought of falling again into the hands of his captors, but also on account of the suspicion his presence in their company would arouse.

Before daybreak they reached the main road, a dust-laden track with slight pretense to the characteristics of a highway other than the occasional felling of trees and the cutting of an approach wherever the steep banks of a nullah offered a barrier to the passage of a caravan. If it had none of the virtues it held full measure of the vices inseparable from traffic. Though animals alone, camels for the most part, carried Indian merchandise over long distances, the ryots were wont to use heavy two-wheeled carts, drawn by oxen, and the numerous ruts left by these caused the so-called road to bear more semblance to a ploughed field than the land which was actually tilled, as the Indian plough merely scratches the ground and leaves no furrow.

The whole party halted at some distance from the road itself. It was essential that the presence of a body of horse should not be discovered, so, at this point, Mowbray and Sainton bade each other farewell. Never before, during their many wanderings, had they separated in the course of any enterprise which threatened disaster or death.

Walter handed to his disconsolate friend the box of jewels.

"If things go awry," he said, with a smile, "you will be the last to fall, Roger."

"Aye, lad," was the rueful response. "I am doubting now lest we ought not to hunt together."

"Your heart says so, but your head warns you that we have chosen the better way. Good-by!"

"Good-by, Walter, and may the Lord be with you!"

Accompanied by a single Rajput trooper, a brave youth specially recommended by Jai Singh, Walter turned his horse's head towards the road. The others, led by their guide, rode off into the jungle, where they were speedily lost to sight.

Soon the sun, dissipating the dawn-mist, disclosed a cloud of dust rising slowly from the track some two miles southwards. Walter advanced at a walking pace. He was dressed with unusual care. His long sword was slung from a handsome baldrick; Sher Afghan's dagger shone in his belt; a cloak of quilted silk, trimmed with rich fur, hung from his shoulders. These accessories, together with his plumed hat, heavy riding boots, and attire of dark brown cloth, gave a distinguished appearance to one whose face and figure proclaimed him a cavalier of high lineage. His attendant, too, had donned the state livery of his former master. The two were superbly mounted, and well calculated, by their style and bearing, to take by surprise the leader of a rabble host marching through a country where all was new to his eyes.

For Mowbray, as shall be seen, had prepared his measures judiciously. When he sighted the mounted vanguard of the

convoy he clapped spurs to his horse, and, followed by his orderly, galloped towards them at a rapid pace. Pulling up within a few yards of the astonished soldiers, who were already consulting as to the identity and errand of this unlooked-for embassy, he shouted sternly:--

"Halt, in the Emperor's name! Bring Abdul Aziz hither at once!"

He calculated that this assumption of authority would not be questioned, nor was he mistaken.

"It is not known to your honorable presence that Abdul Aziz remains at Hughli," said one who was the captain of the guard.

Mowbray exhibited well-feigned surprise.

"If not Abdul Aziz--for which he may thank the Prophet--who commands you?"

"Nawab Fateh Mohammed, his nephew, your Excellence."

"Pass the word to halt, then, and ride at speed to bring him hither."

Fair Europeans, particularly Englishmen, were rarer than white blackbirds in India at that period. The Portuguese invaders were, for the most part, so swarthy as to rival the brown skin of the natives. Never had the Musalman officer encountered a man of such mien and semblance, who, moreover, spoke the aristocratic language of the court in all its sonorous purity. Nevertheless, it was passing strange that the Emperor should choose such a messenger.

"Forgive me, your Honor," he stammered, "but I must have some authority before I--"

"Does Jahangir need to speak twice by my mouth? Am I to exhibit the seal of the Conqueror of the World to the first who questions me?"

The officer simply could not withstand Mowbray's grand air. He civilly asked the other to await his return, gave some orders to the guard, and vanished in the dust-cloud which enshrouded the remainder of the column. Walter saw that the troopers surrounded him as if by accident. He paid not the slightest attention to the maneuver, but took off his hat and fanned his face nonchalantly. Behind him, the Rajput sowar sat his horse like a carved statue. Scarce comprehending what enterprise was forward, knowing little save that he would surely swing from the nearest tree if he kept not a still tongue and obeyed orders, the native soldier took his cue from his master in the matter of disregarding the ring of steel which girt them both.

But Nawab Fateh Mohammed must have hurried, judging from the speed of his approach on a long-striding camel, which loomed out of the dust so suddenly that there was barely time to stop the lumbering beast and avoid a collision. The nawab was a stout man, though young, and it was his ambition to make his way in life quickly. This laudable aim arose, however, from a base intent. The more wealth he amassed in a little time the more speedily could he gratify his ignoble passions. Such a person is usually hectoring towards his inferiors and servile to those above him. At present he was all of a twitter owing to the unexpected presence of a messenger from the Emperor, whilst his informant had not failed to apprise him of Mowbray's imperative mien and the half-veiled menace of his words.

Luckily, Walter took the man's measure at a glance. Here was one designed by nature to play the cowardly tyrant, and such a personality was far better suited to his purpose than a straightforward soldier, who would have obeyed his own chief's instructions and cared not for consequences.

So the *soi-disant* courier of Jahangir saluted the nawab with dignity and said:--

"Be pleased to dismount and walk apart with me. His Majesty's words are not for all ears."

Fateh Mohammed, although nervous, felt slightly flattered. It was new to him to be addressed in that way. He glanced at the single Rajput trooper who held Mowbray's horse, and saw forty of his own men within instant call, so he had no fear in his mind other than that instilled by the vague threats conveyed to him by the leader of the guard, who now stood near and watched the nawab for a signal.

He followed Walter willingly enough until they could not be overheard if they spoke in low tones.

"Information has reached the Emperor," began Walter, "that Abdul Aziz, whilst carrying out the royal mandate to prevent the encroachments of Portuguese traders in Bengal, attacked and burnt the settlement at Hughli, killed many of the inhabitants, and despatched the survivors, numbering some hundreds, to the Imperial court at Agra."

"The Shadow of Allah did indeed--"

"Better hear me first," interposed Mowbray, with a serious smile. "It is most fortunate that Abdul Aziz himself does not

march with the convoy; otherwise, my mission would be of a different nature. Of course, you have not heard of recent occurrences in the Emperor's household?"

"No, but my uncle--"

"Even he could not be aware that the beautiful Nur Mahal, whose fascination for Jahangir is known to all India, would become a widow, and hence regain her ascendancy at court. It is true. Her husband, Sher Afghan, is dead. She herself is Sultana by this time, and her first act has been to free all the European prisoners in Agra, Delhi, and other cities, whose bondage was the result of Jahangir's earlier policy. Judge for yourself what she will say when she hears of the excesses committed by Abdul Aziz. The Emperor, knowing your uncle, dreaded the account of his actions, but he dreads much more the frown of Nur Mahal. Hence, I have been despatched with a double mission. Had Abdul Aziz been present in person I had no choice but to deal with him harshly. In his absence it is my more pleasant duty to bid you explain to the captives in your charge that a terrible mistake has been made. They must be treated with all courtesy and attention, and, indeed, brought to see, before they reach Agra, that it is the special design of the Emperor to recompense them in every way."

"Then they are not to be set at liberty?" gasped Fateh Mohammed, who had been so carried away by Mowbray's announcement that he quite forgot to ask for any verification of it.

"In a sense, yes. They are to be clothed, fed, and provided with means of conveyance in such manner as to show that they are the Emperor's guests. But they must go to Agra. It could not be otherwise. They must be maintained fittingly until order is restored in Bengal, their ruined houses rebuilt, and means taken to insure their future safety. Thus only can Jahangir undo the evil deeds of Abdul Aziz."

"This intelligence--"

"Finds you unprepared. What is more natural? But the downfall of one man oft opens the door of opportunity to another. The Emperor is free-handed. He rewards as fully as he punishes. Leave to me the pleasing task of informing him how quickly you fulfilled his behests to the last letter."

"It shall be so, in very truth. Yet your lordship sees the difficulties that confront me."

"I am bidden help you dispel them. I have money and fair words at command. Be sure that neither a mule nor a woman can resist such pleading. But let all clemency come through you in the Emperor's name."

Fateh Mohammed flushed deeply under his bronze skin. He pursed his lips and set his feet apart. A dazzling vista opened before his mind's eye. He pictured Abdul Aziz, whose severe tenets he loathed in so far as they restrained his own gross desires, swinging from a *nim* tree, while a mourning nephew journeyed back in state to take up an assured position. Mowbray watched him narrowly. He saw the man's vanity puffing him up like the frog in the fable, and he could scarce restrain a smile at the thought that, in all probability, this fantastic scheme would actually result in the way he had described. But it was necessary to strike while the iron glowed, so he continued impressively:--

"Above all things, keep your own counsel. You and I can be discreet. If others know your mind they have you at a disadvantage, for they can shape their conduct to further their own ends while skilfully defeating yours."

"The Emperor's wishes shall be locked within my heart," said the other in a tone of absolute confidence.

"Tis well! I will accompany you to the prisoners--Jahangir's guests--after despatching my attendant to summon my escort."

"Your escort?"

"Surely you cannot imagine that the Emperor's courier rode with only one sowar! You see he wears the livery of Sher Afghan, whose retinue is placed at my disposal by Jahangir's own act."

Fateh Mohammed little guessed how literally true this statement was. He knew naught of affairs at Agra, nor was he skilled in the new heraldic fashions then penetrating the East. But the assumption that he was an adept therein added the last drop to the cruse of oil which had been so judiciously administered to him.

Having ascertained when the escort might be expected, he gave orders that it was to be received with proper honor. As soon as the sowar had ridden away north, *ventre a terre*, the two grandees mounted and proceeded slowly through the ranks of the halted cavalcade.

Walter, chatting affably about the splendors of the court, counted two hundred fairly serviceable horsemen, and half as many armed guards of the baggage train. He estimated that a similar number would bring up the rear, so the futility of a

surprise attack by night, which Roger had suggested, was now quite demonstrated. Even if a panic were created and the host broke up in disorder, what could be done next day, and every other day for weeks, by twenty men burthened with a host of helpless captives, for da Silva's account made it certain that nearly all the Portuguese soldiers had fallen in the first fierce fight at Hughli. The whole country would be roused. Every Mahomedan would deem it a religious duty to slay the Giaours, and they would all perish miserably. Yes, his amazingly daring plan, now that the first barrier was passed, promised ultimate success, and his heart throbbed at the thought that two Englishmen, alone and almost unfriended in a powerful foreign land, should have adopted such a mad device and carried it triumphantly to the very gate of achievement.

For this was his scheme. He counted that, long ere this, Nur Mahal was firmly established as the despot of a despot. He was sure that a woman of cultured and artistic tastes would sway the shallow-minded King back from his retrograde policy with regard to other nations. Therefore, the instant Jai Singh heard that Fateh Mohammed had taken the pill so neatly prepared for him, the Rajput and a couple of men would ride at utmost speed to Agra and warn Nur Mahal as to the way in which Jahangir's authority had been usurped. If she did not gainsay it, but promised to make smooth their path, all would be well. If aught untoward happened, Jai Singh was to collect as many of Sher Afghan's retainers as were available, and ambuscade the caravan at some preconcerted place. They would endeavor to secure the escape of those able-bodied prisoners who could ride, the Europeans thereafter plunging recklessly into Central India with the hope of reaching Bombay. If not all, some could be saved.

These alternatives each depended on Walter's primary success. If, however, Fateh Mohammed were suspicious or actively hostile--it was thought he would not dare do more than detain Mowbray until his pretended mission were justified or otherwise--then the only course which remained open was a surprise attack at midnight, of which Mowbray would privily warn all whom he could trust in order to create a diversion. Here, obviously, lay the chief risk of failure. But Mowbray steadily believed in his theory that Nur Mahal would so mold Jahangir's mind that Fateh Mohammed would be acclaimed as a most judicious person when he reached Agra, and, by consequence, that he himself and Sainton would have no difficulty in proceeding to the west coast by the direct overland route. At any rate, granted the less favorable outcome, they made sure of saving Fra Pietro, who, after all, most enlisted their sympathies.

And now the sowar was speeding to the agreed rendezvous to apprise Roger and Jai Singh that all had gone well thus far. No wonder Mowbray felt elated, and that his confident air left room in Fateh Mohammed's brain for no shadow of suspicion. But his gaiety, subdued and decorous as became a person who ranked high in the trust of a king, was rudely dispelled by the first sight of the wo-begone prisoners. He first encountered a batch of men each chained securely after the manner in which da Silva was manacled, but now bound together by strips of cowhide, since, apparently, a few had escaped like the half-caste. They were haggard, foot-sore and in rags. Poor souls, they had taken advantage of the unexpected halt to lie down again in the dust. Such was their misery that they had lost all human interest. They looked at Walter and his companion with lack-luster eyes, like those on the point of death who retain some glimmer of consciousness yet have already quitted the living world.

Fateh Mohammed, giving a sidelong glance at Jahangir's envoy, saw the stern frown in his face and began to explain.

"Abdul Aziz is a hard man," he murmured. "He gave his orders and I could only obey."

Mowbray stifled his rage. He must play his part to the end.

"Of course," he said, "there were difficulties. This is no time to tell these unfortunates of the Emperor's regret. Order them to be freed and given good food. Then let them rest all this day until horses and camels are procured for tomorrow's march."

The stout commander obeyed instantly, with such denunciations of his myrmidons and such appeals to the Prophet that his own men deemed him temporarily insane, while some among the unhappy prisoners lifted their heads to ascertain if they had heard aright.

The plight of the women was not so bad. None save the young and good looking had been brought from Hughli. They were supplied with mules and ponies, and were destined for the zenanas of such court favorites as might take a fancy to them. All the older women had been massacred in cold blood. There were girls who had lost their mothers, wives who had seen their husbands cut to pieces before their eyes. Over them, too, brooded a settled despair. Tears had long been dried. There remained only a haunting terror of the future.

Prominent among them, if only on account of the richness of her soiled garments, was the Countess di Cabota. Although she was, in Eastern eyes, bewitching by reason of her fair skin, large brown eyes, and exceedingly plump figure, she was undoubtedly over thirty years of age. Hence, she owed her life to that which many another woman risks her life to avoid, namely, a somewhat too pronounced development of a figure naturally inclined to solidity.

The unhappy lady--perhaps by subtle operation of the principle *noblesse oblige*--retained some degree of vivacity. Her glance no sooner fell on Mowbray than she cried in Portuguese:--

"Mother of mercy! An Englishman of rank!"

Walter doffed his hat with ceremonious politeness.

"A friend, too, I trust, Countess," he said. "You may believe that, from this moment, your sufferings have ended."

"Misericordia! how can that be?"

"His excellency the Nawab Fateh Mohammed will explain better than it is possible for me to do."

Thus impelled, his "Excellency" did, indeed, give the Countess and her companions a cheering message, which the half-caste women joyfully interpreted for those who did not follow the native words with complete understanding. Then, after many days, some broken hearts found relief again in tears.

At last, not venturing to search too eagerly, yet missing none he passed in this Via Dolorosa, Mowbray found the Franciscan. Utterly spent, unable to move one foot before the other, Fra Pietro would have been dead a week gone had not some bullock-driver, whose crushed fingers he had dressed, lifted him into a grain cart and kept him there in defiance of repeated advice to throw the Giaour into the jungle and let him glut the jackals.

Nevertheless, the good monk, broken in body and exhausted for want of food suited to his condition, had not benefited greatly by the jolting repose thus given him. He was still exceedingly ill, and when Mowbray, who knew him instantly, could not refrain from leaping to the ground and bending over him, the parched blue-white lips were moving in fitful prayer:--

"De profundis clamavi ad te, Domine!... Dona me requiem aeternam ... Ostende me, Domine, misericordiam tuam!"

"The Lord has heard thee, good friend, though happily thy days of eternal rest may be long deferred for the good of mankind," murmured Walter to himself, for he dared not be too openly recognized by the Franciscan, lest Fateh Mohammed should be moved to ponder upon all that had taken place.

Yet something must be done, and quickly, too, if that flickering soul were to stay in its earthly tabernacle.

He turned to the nawab.

"Here is one who, I have good reason to believe, will be highly esteemed by the Sultana. He should be carried to a tent, given a little wine and milk, and receive the most careful attendance. If, indeed, his name be Fra Pietro, his life is of the utmost value to all concerned."

At each moment Fateh Mohammed saw how essential it was to adopt prompt measures if he were to earn the good will of this masterful envoy. He bestirred himself now to such effect that when Roger and the remaining Rajputs, including the three left in the village (whence da Silva was advised to go down the river in one of the boats), marched into the camp, there was an air of liveliness among the Europeans long absent from their tortured existence, whilst Fra Pietro was sleeping peacefully on a couch of soft furs.

Sainton's arrival created the customary stir. By none was he gazed on with greater interest than by the Countess di Cabota. She vowed, by all the saints, she had never seen such a man, and likened him to the terrible Archangel who defied the fiends when they would have assaulted heaven.

To Fateh Mohammed the sight of this unexampled specimen of humanity, joined to the appointments and smart appearance of Sher Afghan's horsemen, gave the last proof, if further proof were needed, that Jahangir's delegate was indeed a person to be treated with deference. He became dog-like in his servility, and transformed his train from a band of ruffianly jailers into a troupe of servitors, each and all being anxious to win the friendship of those whom formerly they goaded to madness or insensibility.

Mowbray's word was law, his least wish was executed. Within three days, after fraternizing judiciously with others, he and Sainton were able to visit Fra Pietro. The meeting between them was joyful indeed. The Franciscan, when he regained faculties bewildered by recognition of them, was moved to tears. To him, because he spoke English, they could talk without reserve, and his breath came fast with alarm when he learned what they had done for him.

"Nay, nay!" protested Roger, "fear not that we shall come to an ill end because we took a risk on your account. They tell me you are here owing to the timely aid you gave us, and, by that same token, our arch enemy, Dom Geronimo, is now laid by the heels at Agra. I know not who cast the net which gathered us all in this God-forgotten land, but, by the cross of Osmotherly, he hath hauled together some queer fish."

"Have you met Dom Geronimo? Does he know of your presence in India?"

"Trust him for that. He hath the sight of a vulture where friend Mowbray is concerned."

"I attribute to him some part of the bad fortune which has pursued us," said Walter, and, the topic thus broached, he gave the Franciscan a full account of all occurrences since Roger and he first crossed the portals of Dilkusha.

The monk listened intently, only interposing a question at times when the changeful moods of Nur Mahal seemed to puzzle him. He was surprised to learn that the Jesuit had succeeded, even temporarily, in gaining the ear of Jahangir, for, as he said in his mild way:--

"Dom Geronimo is too zealous. It was his intemperate acts which unfitted him for the Holy Office in Europe, and he was despatched to India, a country which offered a more suitable field for one whose fiery ardor knew no bounds. Therefore, it is hard to see how such a man could win his way with the Emperor."

When, after conversing until a late hour, Fra Pietro thoroughly understood the nature of their present undertaking, he again urged them to consider the danger they incurred.

"You have already done more than I thought possible for mortal man to achieve," he said. "Why not, on some good pretext, ride on in front of the column and leave the success or failure of your scheme in the hands of Providence? If all goes well we shall be treated with the same consideration. Should there be aught amiss you will be far away on the road to the sea."

"Where your life is at issue, we bide with you and you with us until the die is cast," said Walter, firmly. Then they left him, carrying with them his blessing, and regained the spacious tent allotted to their use by the obsequious Fateh Mohammed. They slept soundly at night, and were not troubled by anxious forebodings. Jai Singh and his followers could not reach them on the return from Agra for at least ten more days at the best rate of traveling. Not until they had his budget could they decide definitely as to their future.

But these things are oft settled for men by a Power to whom the comings and goings of a Jai Singh are of little account. And it was so now, for, when Mowbray and Sainton awoke in the morning, they found their swords removed, their daggers withdrawn from the sheaths, and they saw twenty muskets leveled at them through the open door of the tent.

Behind the file of musketeers stood Fateh Mohammed, livid with rage, yet with a certain gratified malice sparkling in his eyes.

"Ohe," he yelled, when Roger, missing his sword, gazed steadily at the phalanx without, "ohe, Elephant, thy tricks have led thee into the *kheddah*.^[K] Stir hand or foot, resist those who will bind thee by so much as a refusal to submit thy limbs to the fetters, and thou shalt be pierced by a dozen balls."

Walter, roused by the bellowing, raised himself on one arm. Instantly he realized that Fateh Mohammed had found out the ruse of which he was the dupe.

"Roger," said he, quietly, "we have been betrayed!"

"Aye, lad, and by a woman, I fear. What sayest thou? Shall we die here or in Agra?"

"I care little. Have it which way you will."

CHAPTER XV

"Bring me to the test,
And I the matter will re-word, which madness
Would gamble from."

Hamlet, Act III, Sc. 4.

Perchance they had dared the certain death which faced them had not Fateh Mohammed spoken again. Vain as he was, and furious at the thought that a Feringhi should have lorded it over him for days, he was held in leash by the written orders of the Emperor, which, this time, he had really received and read with bulging eyes.

"I am bidden," he said, "bring you to Agra, alive if possible. Hence, though clemency ill accords with my present mood, I offer you terms. Suffer my men to bind you securely--for none would be such a fool as to trust that Man-Elephant at large--and I will have you carried in litters. Refusal means instant death to both."

"Hast thou suddenly gone mad, Fateh Mohammed?" demanded Mowbray, thinking, by a display of boldness, to save the situation even at the twelfth hour.

"Aye, mad, indeed, to accept the word of the King of Kings from the mouth of an unbeliever! Oh, thou Feringhi dog, open thy lips again in defiance and I will make thee a sieve for bullets!"

Walter knew that the bubble of his pretense was pricked. Some bolt had fallen from a blue sky, else this subservient rogue would never venture to bluster in such wise if he feared reprisals. Nevertheless, the contempt inspired by the groundling served the Englishman in good stead at a critical moment.

"Thou shalt be most bitterly enlightened ere many days have passed," he said. "Sainton-sahib and I can do naught at present but yield to your demands, yet I warn thee, Fateh Mohammed, that for each second of ill-treatment meted out to us or to the unhappy people brought from Hughli thou shalt be requited by an hour of torture on thy unwieldy carcass."

Here was defiance, truly, from one whose capture, living or dead, Jahangir's couriers, riding hot-foot in pursuit, had demanded an hour earlier when they came at dawn to Fateh Mohammed's tent. These men carried no tidings save the Emperor's warrant for their action. They knew, they said, that Sher Afghan was slain--it was even rumored that the companion of the Hathi-sahib was concerned in the deed--and that his widow had gone towards Burdwan with the two Feringhis. As for the statement that Jahangir had charged these latter with a mission, it was manifestly absurd in view of his eagerness to secure their arrest, while it was impossible that anyone so far south could be aware of Nur Mahal's fortunes at Agra, seeing that they, the messengers, had passed her returning escort privily by night, being urged thereto by the Chief Eunuch, who accompanied her. Indeed, the Eunuch, Ibrahim, was responsible for the Emperor's action, having sent a private report to Jahangir, by carrier pigeon it was thought.

It was on their advice that Fateh Mohammed had adopted irresistible safeguards ere he summoned the Englishmen to surrender. The bazaar gossip of Agra had invested Roger Sainton with a legendary halo which would daunt the bravest heart. No half measures could be taken with the Hathi-sahib, said the King's *chuprassis*: he must either be killed or bound as one would tie a wild bull.

Now, it was distasteful, above all things, for men who had been treated with the utmost deference during many days to permit themselves to be led forth in fetters. The bare thought of such ignominy sent the blood bounding through Mowbray's veins and caused an ominous frown to deepen in Sainton's face. The big Yorkshireman stood close to the tent-pole; had Walter deferred further speech for another tick of a clock, the tent had been torn from its supports and Roger had either fallen or knocked down a dozen of the waiting musketeers. But he heard his friend say quietly:--

"Hearken to me, Fateh Mohammed. If one of us, speaking in haste, has used injurious words, let them be forgotten. You have your orders--assuredly they must be obeyed. Sainton-sahib and I are already disarmed. You probably disarmed our escort ere you came to us. We, on our part, pledge ourselves to go with you to the fort at Agra. Under no circumstances shall we seek to escape, and we will counsel all others who may be guided by our admonitions to give the same gage. If you are the wise and far-seeing man I take you to be you will content yourself with this promise, and treat us and the remainder of the Europeans with due courtesy. What say you? Shall the Emperor upbraid you for faithfully carrying out your charge, or do you care to risk the unknown dangers of flaunting the wishes of one who, for anything you or I know to the contrary, may now be Sultana?"

Fateh Mohammed, though naturally distrustful of the honeyed poison of Mowbray's counsel, felt in his heart of hearts that the Giaour was not only giving him good advice but making a fair offer. Yet, like a cur which cowers and snarls

when a determined hand would stroke it, he said sullenly:--

"How am I to place trust in you? You told me--"

"I told you what I truly believed, and still believe, to be the Emperor's intent," interrupted Walter, who saw that the fat man was weakened by the bare hint of palace intrigue. "Look back through my words and you will find no single phrase in which I actually represented myself as charged with a mission by Jahangir himself. Nay, be not so amazed. It is true. You may have been misled, I admit, but it was a most fortunate mistake for you. Did I not meet you almost alone? Have we not marched with you daily and slept nightly on the same camping-ground? If Sainton-sahib and I wished to betray you, have we not passed a hundred opportunities?"

Fateh Mohammed was manifestly uneasy. The affair was not so simple as he deemed it. Moreover, by placing a degree of faith in Mowbray, he applied salve to his own wounded vanity. In simple parlance, if he managed things aright now, he would not look such a dupe in the eyes of others as he was in his own estimation.

"Never was man more perplexed," he murmured. "You may be honest! How can I tell? Certainly, the King of Kings does not say you are to be treated with contumely, yet, what security have I that you will act according to your promises?"

Mowbray resolved to risk all on a final hazard. He turned to Roger.

"Give me the cedar box," he said.

The big man reached for his hat. Cunningly tied inside the lofty crown was the gift of Nur Mahal.

"I am a heavy sleeper," he grinned in explanation, "and I thought none would search there though they might scour my clothes. When waking, I reckoned to hold the gew-gaws whilst my brains were undisturbed, so I kept them under the same thatch."

"Here!" cried Mowbray, opening the box and handing it to Fateh Mohammed, "these diamonds are worth a lakh and a half of rupees. They shall be my bond."

To a native of India, such a guarantee was worth a thousand oaths. Fateh Mohammed might be trusted to take this view and none other. The production of a hidden hoard showed that this most enigmatical Englishman was really in earnest. It needed only a glance to assure him that the gems were worth the sum named, and more. His voice was thick as he answered:--

"Soul of the Prophet! you give me a worthy bail!"

"You think so! See to it that the box and its contents are well cared for. If not I, Nur Mahal knows each stone. And now, if we are to march ere the hot hours, let us eat."

Promising to observe his part of the compact, Fateh Mohammed withdrew his imposing array of soldiers. Soon, a servant brought them some food, curried chickens and rice, with new milk, eggs, and bread. Not a word did they exchange until they had eaten, for Mowbray was dismayed by the collapse of his scheme, and he dared not seek from his loyal comrade the forgiveness which would be only too readily extended to him. Their fortune as good as lost, their lives in imminent jeopardy, their honor pledged to render themselves up to the spite of an implacable tyrant, and all because he trusted more to the machinations of a beautiful siren than to the good swords of which they were deprived. Truly, the outlook, hazardous enough before, was now desperate beyond description. No wonder Walter ate silently, fearing to trust his gloomy thoughts to language.

Suddenly Roger cried:--

"Gad, these Paradise birds are rare eating!"

"Birds of Paradise, man! They are but common fowls."

"Never, on your life, Walter! This mun be Heaven, for sure. I heard the gates click when the musketeers cocked their flints."

After all, that was the best way to take their misfortunes. As Roger said to Fra Pietro, when, later, they told him the news which camp rumor had twisted into grotesque form:--

"It is your turn now, most worthy friar. 'Fight first and pray afterwards' has ever been my honored motto, but from fighting I am debarred both by loss of my sword and by perjury of my good name. Pray, then, brother, in every tongue thou knowest, and mayhap the Lord will list unto thee."

Mowbray sought an opportunity to question Jahangir's emissaries. Their statements showed that Jai Singh must have

passed them in Allahabad. The *Kotwal* of that city urged them to keep to the road, and inquire at each large town if boats carrying men and horses had passed down stream. In that way they could make sure of intercepting the fugitives.

"How came you to slip so quietly away from the camp of Nur Mahal?" he asked, but to this they replied vaguely, so Mowbray concluded that the Chief Eunuch had bribed them to silence, in which event it were best not to tell them of Fateh Mohammed's admission.

They said, frankly enough, that had any chance led them to miss the Hughli contingent, the first intimation of the Emperor's wishes would only have been forthcoming at Allahabad, where the *Kotwal* must have recognized the sahibs. Walter reflected ruefully that, had he bribed this man to silence, he might have despatched the messengers on a hopeless chase by river. It was now too late. Although so much depended on Jai Singh's journey to Nur Mahal, he was bound irrevocably to go on to Agra, and must veto the rescue which the gallant Rajput would undoubtedly attempt should matters at court be not to his liking.

It was an inglorious end to an undertaking which opened so auspiciously. The sole consolation Mowbray could derive from soul-wearying thought as to the future arose from the certain relief he had given to the unhappy captives. From the depths of misery the Portuguese were raised to a level of comparative comfort, whilst Fra Pietro had assuredly been snatched from the very jaws of death.

So, at last, Walter resolved to abandon useless gropings against the veil which shrouded the days to come. He made himself as agreeable as might be to Fateh Mohammed, and so played upon the latter's ambitious dreams that not even the hostile *Kotwal* of Allahabad was able to disturb the arrangement into which they had mutually entered.

The column crawled up country at a slow rate, for such a mixed company travels perforce at the pace of its most dawdling units. Fifteen miles was a good day's march, and, where a river barred the road, many hours were wasted in safely transferring men and animals from bank to bank.

And now, for the first time in his life, Roger Sainton fell under petticoat dominance. *Buen principio, la mitad es hecha*--"Well begun is half done"--says the Spanish proverb, and certainly the Hathi-sahib made a good start.

The Countess di Cabota professed that she never felt safe from the perils of the way unless the big Yorkshireman held her mule's bridle. He beguiled the hours by improving her English, of which language she already had a fair knowledge; she repaid him by many a bright smile, and displayed a most touching assiduity in mastering the broad vowels and quaint phrases of his speech, for Roger's slow diction was the pure Anglo-Saxon which yet passes current in his native dale.

They were thrown together the more that Walter sought distraction from troubled reverie in learned discourse with Fra Pietro, and for this sort of talk Roger had no stomach. Once Mowbray rallied the giant on the score of the attention he paid to the buxom Countess, but Roger countered aptly.

"I' faith," he said, "she is a merry soul, and not given to love vaporings like most of her sex. She tells me her heart troubled her somewhat before she married, but the fit passed quickly, and now she will be well content if the Lord sends her home to wholesome fare and a down pillow. After that, commend me to a fat woman for horse sense. Your scraggy ones, with saucer eyes, would rather a love philter than a pint of wine, but set down a stoup of both before her Ladyship and I'll wager our lost box of diamonds that she'll spill the potion on the ground and the good liquor down her throat."

"At last, then, you have found a woman who marches with your humor?"

"I'm not one to judge such a matter quickly," murmured Roger with a dubious frown. "They're full of guile at the best, yet I vow it pleases me to hear Matilda say 'Caramba!' to her mule. It minds me of my mother rating a lie-abed maid of a Monday morning. 'Drat you for a huzzy,' she would cry, 'here is six by the clock already! To-morrow's Tuesday an' next day's Wednesday--half t' week gone an' nowt done!'"

"So the lady's name is Matilda?"

"Aye! She has a lot more, but I fancied the sound of that yen."

"Surely you do not address her so familiarly?"

"And why not? Gad! she calls me Roger, pat as a magpie with a split tongue."

"This is news indeed. Yet you tell me she is not inclined to tender passages?"

"Tender fiddle-de-dee! She laughs like a mime if I tickle her ribs with my thumb when the mule stumbles. My soul, Walter, you are grown so used to every woman making sheep's eyes at you that you think they'll treat a hulk like me after the same daft fashion."

"In truth," said Mowbray, sadly, "my courtships have been all too brief, and threaten to end in aught save laughter."

"Nay, nay, lad. Let not thy spirits fail. I cannot but think that you and I shall scent the moors again together. We have driven our pigs to queer markets; mayhap we shall sty them yet, despite this cross-eyed Emperor and that fly-by-night, Nur Mahal."

"I have dreamed of home in my sleep of late. Methought I saw my mother weeping."

"'Tis well. They say dreams go by contrary. Were it otherwise, has she not good cause to greet? By the Lord Harry, when we show our noses in Wensleydale, my auld dam will clout my lugs. 'Roger, you good-for-nowt,' she will say, 'I tellt ye te keep Master Mowbray frae harm, and here hev' ye led him tiv a pleace wheer t' grass grows downwards and t' foxes fly i' t' air. I'm fair shammed on ye!' Eh, man, but I'll be glad to hear her tongue clack i' that gait."

And with this cheerful dictum Sainton strode away to bewilder and amuse the Countess di Cabota with his amazing lingo. Although they were now enjoying the glorious cold weather of India, the absence of wind and the brilliant sun of the Doab served to render the midday hours somewhat sultry. Her Ladyship, being plump, complained of weariness.

"You have a most excellent color," said Roger, eyeing her critically.

She sighed.

"It may be," said she, "that as we are near Agra my heart droops. What manner of man is Jahangir? Is he of a generous and princely disposition?"

"If he takes after his father he should be open-handed with other folks' money. I know him to be a fine judge of a woman, which is a right royal attribute; but he drinks freely, a better quality in a sponge than in a king."

"Sancta Maria! A spendthrift, a libertine, and a sot! What hope have we of such a one?"

Roger laid a huge paw on her shoulder, and his merry eyes looked down into hers although she was riding a fair sized mule.

"Be not cast down, Matilda!" he cried. "If the sky were cloudy you would not vow the sun would ne'er shine again. I observed it was hotter in coming to the Line than under the Line itself. Here, Got wot, it is hottest of all, yet fear and fancy may be worse bogies than fact."

For some reason, his hopeful philosophy did not console the lady that morning. She leaned a little against his arm, and glistening tears suddenly dimmed her vision.

"Alas!" she sobbed, "we are all going to our death, and you, good Roger, have risked your life to no purpose."

"Then shall I die in good company, a thing much to be commended. He that went to the grave with Elisha recovered his breath owing to his lodging."

She straightened herself in the saddle.

"I like not this talk of dying," she snapped.

"Gad, it is not greatly to my mind on a fine morning after a hearty meal. When I can strike no longer may I fall handsomely, say I. Yet I thought you were bent on chewing the unsavory morsel, though, to be sure, you mainly use your teeth to vastly better purpose."

She glanced up at him, clearing her eyes defiantly.

"You make no allowance for a woman's feelings," she said. "Did I not know the contrary, I should believe you held women of no account."

"I' faith, that would be doing me an injustice. When a woman says 'Lack-a-day,' my tongue wags in sympathy. If she weeps, my heart grows as soft as a fuzz-ball."

"Fuzz-ball! That is a word you have not yet taught me," she said.

"It much resembles a round mushroom, and when dry, it bursts if you squeeze it."

"Oh, go to! I never before met your like."

She laughed, though there was a spice of irritation in her mirth, but Roger gripped her round the waist, for the mule, more perceptive than the man, stumbled at the right moment. To comfort her, he gave her a reassuring hug.

"There is naught of the fuzz-ball about thee, Matilda," he vowed, and the Countess laughed again. But she blushed, too, and murmured in her own language:--

"After all, the truest romance is more than half a comedy."

One night, when the cavalcade was halted in the very village whence Nur Mahal had turned northwards with such quick vagary, an owl hooted from the depths of a *nim* tree. The weird note thrice boomed unheeded through the air, for all in the camp were weary, but, when the mournful cry rang out for the fourth time, one of Sher Afghan's Rajputs raised himself quietly from his bed of leaves and listened.

At the fifth hoot he glanced around and saw that none other was disturbed. He rose and sauntered quietly towards the tree, in whose deep shade he was lost for a little while. He returned, and with him now walked another Rajput. The two reached the camp fire around which lay their clansmen, and conversed in whispers with others whom they awakened. Then the newcomer, following directions, strolled towards the tent occupied by the Englishmen. Entering in the dark he was seized by Walter, who was lying sleepless, thinking of the possible outcome had he given Nur Mahal a different answer when they last stood together in the millet-field so near at hand.

Jai Singh had said that the place was bewitched, and lo, here was Jai Singh himself wriggling in his clutch! As for Roger, the sound of the scuffle roused him, and both Mowbray and he were vastly surprised when the old Rajput gasped:--

"Slay me not, sahib! My throat is sore enough with screeching to deaf ears. Soul of Govind, let go!"

Bad news can be told with scant breath. It did not take Jai Singh long to acquaint them with the dire intelligence that Nur Mahal, although received in great state by Jahangir, had openly defied him. She charged him with the murder of her gallant husband, and, woman-like, even unfairly taunted him with his cowardice in destroying by a trick one whom he dared not encounter in fair fight.

Lashed to rage by her scorn, Jahangir gave instant orders that she should be sewn in a sack and thrown to the crocodiles. But even in that servile court there lingered memories of Akbar's justice, and the infuriated tyrant was compelled to rescind his cruel mandate before it could be executed.

Some subtle instinct of statecraft told him the better way. He boldly declared that Nur Mahal's late husband had conspired with others to slay Kutub-ud-din, whilst Sher Afghan had himself fallen a victim to an intrigue between his wife and the Englishman, Mowbray. Ibrahim, Chief Eunuch, proved that his royal master was absolutely in ignorance of the facts until he (Ibrahim) told him certain things he had discovered. Here was actually a receipt showing that Nur Mahal had given the Feringhi jewels worth a lakh and a half of rupees. It was evident that her motive in returning to Agra was to stir up disaffection on the one hand and to purge herself of crime in the eyes of the public on the other. What better excuse could Oriental monarch devise to clear his own reputation and to confiscate the estates of Sher Afghan and the late Diwan? A royal *hukm*^[L] was drawn up forthwith, and one of the richest heiresses in India became a pauper, while pensions were conferred on the relatives of those who had been unjustly slain for participating in the attack on Sher Afghan.

But remorse is an invisible snake whose fangs cannot be drawn, and its venom tortured Jahangir during the few hours each day that his brain was clear of wine fumes. The prize he had so dearly bought was now within his power, yet he affected to take no notice of her. Nur Mahal was allotted a mean apartment in the seraglio. She was appointed an attendant on the king's mother at a salary of one rupee a day, and the Dowager Queen Mariam was forbidden to show her any favor whatever. Though this ordinance was not strictly fulfilled, Jai Singh, when he, after much difficulty and with grave peril, obtained an interview with Nur Mahal, found her doing needlework and painting silk, in which arts she excelled, to support herself and the few devoted women who refused to leave her.

Jai Singh delivered this budget in an unconcerned way that did not escape Mowbray's ear, for, in the gloom, he could not see the Rajput's face.

"Nur Mahal knows that we are marching to Agra with the Portuguese captives?" he asked, when Jai Singh seemed to invite questions rather than continue his recital.

"Assuredly, sahib. How else could I explain my presence there?"

"Did it need explanation? Was there no knowledge of Jahangir's intent to capture me?"

The other hesitated, and Mowbray cried bitterly:--

"Tell all thy tale, Jai Singh, or else leave me in peace."

"Hush, sahib! Not so loud. I swear by Khuda I am party to no device against your Excellency. If I look through glass I can see what is beyond, but if I look into a woman's mind I peer at the reflection of my own conceits. I can only tell you of things as they are. When I seek to fathom Nur Mahal's thoughts I am gazing into a mirror."

"Forgive my haste, Jai Singh, and speak on."

"My story is nearly ended, sahib. At dawn you march to the next camping-ground, which will surely be on the south side of a big nullah fourteen miles ahead. While perched in the tree I noted the lie of the camp, and, doubtless, it is the same each night. At the eleventh hour I and threescore followers will cross the nullah. Be ready! Strike fearlessly when you hear an owl hoot three times. If the commotion starts in the center they will think the devil has broken loose when the real attack comes from the flank. There will be led horses in plenty once we ford the nullah, provided you tell me now how many will escape with you."

"And then?"

"Then we ride to the east and back to the south."

"Whither bound?"

"To Burdwan. Nowhere else can we obtain shelter until we make our next move."

"The plan is Nur Mahal's?"

"You forget, sahib, it is your own."

"But she approves. What of her? Does she bide in Agra?"

"She bides there, sahib, if that be your wish."

"Ah! Was that her word to you?"

"Nothing could be clearer, sahib. If you choose to help her she will escape from the palace and join you at an agreed place. If your only desire is to make for the sea I am pledged to her on Ganges water to aid you with money and life."

"But she is poor, you said, obliged to adorn others not worthy to adjust her gown if beauty were alone to wait on the most beautiful?"

"There is money in plenty for the removal of Jahangir," was the laconic answer.

"Hearest thou, Roger?" said Mowbray, reaching out to touch his comrade's arm in the dark.

"Aye, lad, I hear," came the giant's low growl. "'Tis a pity affairs are ordered differently, else we should see some pretty fighting."

Jai Singh, too, leaned forward. He thought they were agreeing that he had planned most excellently. Already he could sniff the sacking of Agra fort, in which the accumulated treasure was so great, when Akbar had an inventory made, that four hundred pairs of scales were kept at work five months weighing silver, gold, and precious stones. His breath came thick and fast. His voice gurgled just as it did under the pressure of Mowbray's hands on his windpipe. A revolt now, properly handled, would mean the loot of a century.

"'Twill soon be sunrise, sahiba," he said. "I must be going. Remember, the eleventh hour--three hoots--"

"Stay, Jai Singh," said Walter, quietly. "There must be no attempt at a rescue. If any attack be made on the column, Sinton-sahib and I will strike hard for Fateh Mohammed. We have given our bond to accompany him to the very presence of Jahangir. God helping us we will maintain our honor in this matter as in all others. Go you, and tell Nur Mahal what I have said. There is no other way. We are pledged to meet the Emperor face to face as his prisoners, and he must do with us what he wills, or, rather, what God wills."

"Sahib, you know not what you are refusing."

"Go, nevertheless, Jai Singh, and tell Nur Mahal that I have refused. Perchance, now, she may hasten alone to Burdwan."

"Hear me, sahib, I beseech you. She rode to Agra meaning to marry Jahangir, but her gorge rose at the sight of him. Do not hold her guilty of deceiving you. It was your memory which forced bitter words from her lips when the Emperor expected her kisses."

"It may be so. But when you gave your oath by the sacred Ganges you meant to keep it?"

"Until death, sahib."

"Know then, Jai Singh, that Sainton-sahib and I have given our word to Fateh Mohammed. An Englishman's word is strong as any vow by holy river. You have discharged your trust most faithfully--would that I could reward you! But I am penniless. Even certain diamonds, concerning which Jahangir was rightly informed, are part of my bond. Leave us, good friend, and warn Nur Mahal that we are, perhaps, less able to help her than she to help us."



CHAPTER XVI

"And when a lady's in the case,
You know all other things give
place."

Gay, "The Hare and Many
Friends."

Fateh Mohammed, whose name, literally translated, meant "The Victorious and Praised," intended to halt his cohort a short day's ride from Agra, in order to patch its way-worn aspect into some semblance of dignity ere he entered the presence of the King of Kings. Had he ever heard of Falstaff he might well have cried with Sir John: "No eye hath seen such scarecrows. I'll not march through Coventry with them, that's flat." The wear and tear of seven hundred miles had pressed so heavily on the resources of guards and prisoners alike that their clothes and accouterments did, indeed, require some furbishing. In this ragged regiment the Englishmen and their Rajputs alone presented a reputable appearance.

But, stout though he was, and otherwise much resembling plump Jack in his rascally tastes, Fateh Mohammed possessed a fair share of Eastern wiliness, so he took good care to apprise Jahangir beforehand of the curious conditions under which he was bringing to the capital the two men whose presence there was so greatly desired by his imperial master. The recital naturally showed that the fat man was a model of zeal and discretion. If the Conqueror of the World regarded the Giaours as malefactors, here they were, ready to be bound and dealt with according to the King's command, but, should it happen to please the Planet-born to treat them as friends, naught had been done to give ground for other supposition, save in such slight and easily arranged matters as disarming them and holding certain valuable securities for their observance of the pact agreed upon.

Hence, Fateh Mohammed felt neither "victorious" nor "praised" when a high official, accompanied by a glittering retinue, rode out from Agra and greeted Mowbray and Sainton with much deference, inviting them to return with him forthwith and accept the Emperor's hospitality! They had gone through so many vicissitudes of late that this bewildering attitude on the part of the Mogul monarch left them outwardly unmoved though inwardly amazed. No one could be more surprised than Mowbray, the too successful prophet of the royal intent. Yet he bowed his polite acceptance of the proffered honors, and his manner was discretion itself when Fateh Mohammed, jelly-like in agitation, expressing his regrets with the spluttering haste of water poured from a narrow-necked bottle, hastened to restore not only the cedar box with its contents intact, but also the swords and daggers stolen from the Englishmen while they slept.

Mowbray did not know then that the court official had curtly told Fateh Mohammed he was in grave peril of being hanged on the nearest tree if Jahangir had reason to complain of his treatment of the strangers. It was in vain that the fat man pleaded the Emperor's written instructions, which were ambiguous certainly, but which must be interpreted by his Majesty's anxiety to secure the presence of the two Feringhis at Agra.

"If you interpret a King's wishes you run the risk of making a false translation," was the chilling response, so Fateh Mohammed was left alternately thanking the Prophet that he had not obeyed his inclinations and slain the Giaours when he learnt how they had hoodwinked him, and shivering with fear lest, after all, Jahangir might find cause to be displeased with him.

Therefore, he groveled before Mowbray, and, like Prince Henry's sack-loving companion, wished "it were bedtime and all well."

The mystery of the Emperor's attitude deepened when Walter learned that Nur Mahal was, indeed, a palace menial. Even the weather-cock courtier, skilled in the art of polite evasion, did not scruple to show his contempt for feminine influences at the best.

"I have seen many such butterflies dancing in the sun," he said scoffingly. "They are very brilliant until the rain falls, or some hungry bird eats them."

His orders were to conduct the Englishmen and their followers to Dilkusha, where they would be in the midst of familiar surroundings, and it was Jahangir's wish to receive them that afternoon. When Mowbray insisted that Fra Pietro should come with them the envoy was dubious at first, but Walter would not yield the point, which was ultimately conceded. As for the others, they were to bide in their present camp until arrangements were made for their disposal.

"Gad!" cried Roger, paying some heed to this statement, "that will not be to Matilda's liking!"

"Have affairs come to the pass that you may not be parted?" asked Walter, roguishly, his perplexities vanishing for the moment as he pictured the Countess's agitation when told she was to be separated from her cavalier.

"Tis to me a matter of no great cavil," was the reply, "but the poor body will surely miss me when the mule crosses a bad bit of road."

"Why not bring her with us?"

"Aye. That is to be thought of. There are always more ways of killing a dog than choking him wi' butter."

"But you must marry the lady first, Roger. At a pinch, Fra Pietro--"

"The devil fly off with thee and thy pinching! Who spoke of marrying? Thy humor, at times, Walter, is dry as the Swale after a drought."

"From what I have seen of the Countess I fear that marriage will be the only cure for her affliction."

"By the cross of Osmotherly!" cried Sainton, hotly, "if that be her malady she will ail a long time ere I give her physic. Marry, forsooth! If ever I seek a wife, which I greatly doubt, I'll hitch up wi' a lass from my own dales. Not that Matilda is ill-looking, or, for that matter, as skittish as some I have seen, but may the Lord help any woman I bring to Wensley afore my mother runs an eye over her!"

"I fear, then, her Ladyship must remain here willy-nilly."

Sainton, more annoyed than he cared to show, drew his long neglected sword and began to burnish it affectionately.

"Thou hast a toad's tongue at times, lad," he growled, breathing on the steel before rubbing it to a fine sheen. "The thing had not troubled me a whit hadst thou not spoken of it, but, now I come to think over bygones, I am constrained to admit that mayhap her Ladyship may have construed my actions amiss. Women are oft prone to look through a chink when the door is open all the time. On my soul I fear to face her. My hang-dog looks will betray me and she'll upbraid me. Go thou, Walter, and tell her--tell her--"

"That thou hast no mind to wed. Nay, Roger, that would be ungallant, to say the least."

"Tell her any glib lie that will get me safely away. Samson was half conquered when it was known wherein his strength lay, and my only sure refuge is flight if a woman attacks. Poor Matilda! I would I had the heart to appease her. Yet I am not for matrimony, and no barber can make a wig of a hide that is bald of wool. But I vow you have vexed me by your niceties. Drat the thing! I trust the bit of Latinity our worthy friar gave me yester e'en is sound sense, else I'll mope for a week."

"And what was that, Roger?" asked Mowbray, turning to hide a smile from his wrathful friend.

"He spoke to me of certain passages twixt you and Nur Mahal, as he built somewhat on her power despite Jai Singh's story. Yet he sighed and said: 'Quid vento? Mulier. Quid muliere? Nihil!' It tickled my fancy to put the quip into rhyme:--

'More fickle than wind
Is woman's mind;
More fickle than woman
Naught you'll find.'

Beshrew me! It fitted Nur Mahal all right, but the cap seems to sit awry when worn by my jolly and pleasant-spoken Countess. What! Would you grin at me, you dog, like a clown gaping through a horse-collar? I'll wager, were the business yours, you'd carry a longer jowl."

"On my word, Roger, if you trumpet so loudly I must even believe that my Elephant is sore wounded. Why say aught to-day to the Countess? Once we are sped on some new path I promise to write her on your behalf, and in such a strain that any silly notions she may be harboring shall vanish after a day's fasting."

"Ecod, you know not Matilda. She would not miss her dinner for twenty men. And that is what draws me to her. A plague on all weddings, I say. They mar a woman and vex a man. What the devil! A nice thing Noah did for the world when he took nowt but pairs into the Ark."

Nevertheless, though angered by his tardy discovery, Sainton was far too good-natured to steal away covertly from the genial presence of the Countess di Cabota. He cudgeled his brains to invent some reasonable excuse for bidding her farewell. Finally he hit upon an expedient that pleased him greatly, and chased the unwonted frown from his cheerful face.

In view of the expected state visit to Jahangir he had donned his best garments, which, though soiled, were yet free from rents, and never a finer man trod the iron earth of India than Roger that day when, with his four-foot sword clanking against his thigh, he approached the Countess's camping-place. Already, of course, rumor had been busy. The perturbation of Fateh Mohammed and the haughty curling of Rajput mustaches which followed the advent of Jahangir's envoy told some portion of the tale to the stealthy-eyed natives. Gossip did the rest. Roger found the Countess all agog with joyous hope.

"*Por gracia di Dios!*" she cried, clapping her hands, "now that I see you wearing your sword I know that what I have been told is true."

"I' faith, Matilda, you are a rare hand at guessing sheep when you smell roast mutton," was his hearty greeting. "'Tis indeed true that some favoring star hath moved the king to deal with us kindly. Perchance 'tis the moon, which is said to rule certain humans. But my news is stale. I come to take leave of you."

The Countess's ruddy cheeks paled beneath the tan of long exposure to the open air, and a spasm of fear dilated her pretty eyes.

"To take leave of me! *Mater misericordiae!* What say you?"

"Nay, my bonny Countess, you read my words wrongly. Master Mowbray and I are bidden ride ahead to meet the Emperor. That is all."

"You will return ere night?"

Roger stroked his chin with dubious calculation. The action enabled him to avoid her startled glance.

"I have my doubts," he said, and, not so sure now of the simplicity of his errand, wisely added not another word.

"Do you mean that you go on to Agra and leave me here with--with Fateh Mohammed?"

There was a directness, yet a veiled inference, in the question that did not escape him.

"Be reasonable, Matilda," he pleaded. "We go but to prepare the way. You forget that Jahangir, for some reason not known to any of us, is changing his plans. From fire and murder he hath turned to clemency. It may be that he thinks some quiet talk with Master Mowbray may clear the thorns from his new path."

"Then let Master Mowbray go to him, and you bide here."

"That cannot be. It would argue distrust."

"I think I understand," said the Countess, quietly, with all a woman's irritating assumption of the truth when a man would soothe her with a plausible tale.

Roger, whose wit was keen enough when he encountered opposition, was helpless before this passive attitude. Yet he blundered on, trusting to luck to extricate him. He fumbled with a small package he took from his breast, and swayed from one foot to the other, losing some of his gallant air in an attitude which reflected his mental stress.

"There's nowt to make sike a pother about," he growled. "We haste to Agra, you follow more slowly, and that is all there is to it. But you are in sad plight, Matilda, after these weary days of travel, without a stitch to your old clothes, so to speak, or means to buy new ones. Now, a lady of your condition should be garbed more reputably. Though I doubt not Jahangir will treat you generously in his altered mood, I would not have you wholly dependent on his tardy grace. I have no money, but here is money's worth, and it can never be put to better use than in purchasing the wherewithal to adorn you."

So saying, and thankful that the concluding sentence, which he had concocted with some care, had not escaped his memory, he dropped Sher Afghan's magnificent gold chain into her lap, for the Countess was sitting on a saddle outside the tent.

She bent forward, as if to examine the present, passing each of the fine turquoises with which it was set mechanically through her fingers. She managed so well that her voice seemed to be under control.

"You are very kind and thoughtful," she said in a low tone. "I am, indeed, much in need of repair."

"Gad! I would smite sorely the man who said so. I spoke of the husk, not of the kernel."

"And I shall value the gift highly," she continued.

"Stick out for the last rupee. These Agra goldsmiths are thieves. If not the whole, you might sell a portion."

Her head drooped a little more.

"They are beautiful links, well knit, and of the best workmanship," she said, "and I have never before seen such stones. 'Twould be a pity to sunder them. They will be pleasant to look upon long after the flimsy silks they would buy are faded and threadbare."

Resignation, not to say hopelessness, was a new phase to Sainton in woman's varying humors. Had the Countess di Cabota stormed, or protested, or even broken down utterly, Roger, though profoundly uncomfortable, might have survived the ordeal. But the merry-eyed lady was crushed. She who was wont to toss her curls so saucily when he tried that excellent specific of a thumb in the ribs now sat before him with hidden face. And Roger was terrible only in war. Let him have his way he was easily swayed as a child; but to-day he was a child perplexed by a new problem.

"If you are not minded to use the gaud in that way," he growled hesitatingly, "I must devise some other manner of meeting your wants."

"I am greatly beholden to you," she murmured. "Mayhap I may not see you again, so, should you succeed in sending me some money, let your messenger bring a parchment, and I will write an order on a certain house in London for your repayment."

This was unbearable. Roger stooped, placed a great hand under her chin, and raised her unresisting face. His unlooked-for action caused pent-up tears to tremble on her eyelashes, while there was a suspicious quivering in the corners of her red lips.

"Are you bent on plaguing me, Matilda, or is it that you truly believe I am seeking some pretense to go away under a false flag?" he demanded fiercely.

"I cannot tell you, Roger. You know best yourself. Why should I complain? I owe my life, and many days of happiness, to you and to your good friend. Whether you go or stay may the Lord watch over you, and bring you safely to that pleasant home in the North of which you have so often spoken to me! I think I have seen it in my dreams, and the notion pleases me."

She caught his hand and would have pressed it to her face, but he was too quick for her. Before she well knew what was happening she was lifted to her feet, and Roger had kissed her heartily on the lips.

"That is a quittance for the chain," he cried. "When I want another for the money I shall bring thee, be not surprised if I discharge the debt in like fashion."

Woman-like she glanced hastily around, all aglow with sudden embarrassment, to learn if others had observed his action. Certainly the eyes of some of the Portuguese captives were turned curiously towards them. Making a tremendous effort, she laughed gaily.

"Your English leave-taking is very nice, but somewhat unusual to our ideas," she cried. "Nevertheless, I am glad to have your promise to return."

"I swear it, by the cross of Osmotherly!" vowed Roger, and with this mighty oath the Countess was satisfied, though, as a good Catholic, she might have been surprised if she knew that the giant's favorite expletive only referred to a crossroad on the summit of a Yorkshire hill, where King Oswald is supposed to lie buried by the side of his mother, whence the name Osmotherly: "Oswald-by-his-mother-lay."

There was some dubiety among the remaining Europeans when they saw the Englishmen ride off with Fra Pietro and the Rajputs. So might sheep feel in a wolf-infested land, if the shepherds and dogs were withdrawn.

"What is to become of us," they asked, "and why have our protectors taken the friar alone?"

But the Countess bade them be of good cheer.

"They will come back," she said, calmly. "They have promised; and those men never say what they do not mean."

Yet one of the pair reflected ruefully, as he jogged towards Agra, that he had said a good deal more than he meant to say. Mowbray, noting his comrade's introspective mood, forbore to question him as to his farewell interview with the Countess, and Roger quaked at the thought of putting into words his recollections of the scene. So Walter chatted with Fra Pietro, seeking that grave counselor's views as to the possible motives which inspired Jahangir's remarkable *volte-face*.

To reach the Garden of Heart's Delight the cavalcade crossed a ford of the Jumna and followed a road along the left bank of the river. Thus, they passed close to the royal palace, being separated from it only by the width of the stream. Its lofty red sandstone walls, high piled towers and threatening battlements, topped by the exquisite spires and minarets of the white marble buildings within, made a resplendent and awe-inspiring picture in the vivid sunlight. Dominating the cluster of regal apartments on the river face was the superb Diwan-i-Khas, or Hall of Private Audience, which stands to this day "a miracle of beauty." Mowbray knew it well. Behind its inlaid walls lay the garden in which Akbar chattered with the ladies at the fair, and on the south side was the broad terrace whence Roger heaved the great stone onto the tiger.

Standing boldly out in the angle formed by the Diwan-i-Khas and the terrace was the Golden Pavilion, so called because of its roof of gilded copper, and nestling close to this glittering apex of the zenana was the fairy-like Jasmine Tower. No strange eyes might dare to rest on that imperial sanctuary save from a distance. Yet Mowbray, from description oft repeated, could tell the Franciscan some of its glories; how the marble pavement of its inner court represented a pachisi-board, on which the Sultana and her ladies played a clever game with shells; how the lovely lattice-work of the window screens was cut out of solid slabs of marble; how trailing devices of flowers and fruit were fashioned in pietra dura with camelians, agates, turquoises, and all manner of bright colored or sparkling gems; how fountains made music where marble baths were sunk in the floor, while the dripping naiads who emerged from the cool depths might survey their charms in the Shish Mahal, or Room of a Thousand Mirrors, wherein a cascade of rippling water fell over a tiny terrace artificially lighted with colored lamps. These and other marvels did he pour into Fra Pietro's ears, until the friar piously crossed himself and said with a smile:--

"Yet a little while and these glories shall be forgotten. 'Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was; and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.'"

"But you will grant, good brother, that a man only lives once on earth, and it would be scarce credible, did we not know it, that with all our Western wit we have naught in London or Paris to match the skill of these barbarians," cried Walter.

"I have seen in old Rome the crumbling fragments of palaces for which the proudest hall in Agra might serve as an ante-chamber. Brethren, more traveled than I, and learned men withal, have told me of the still more wondrous works of ancient Greece and forgotten Babylon. Of what avail are the vain efforts of man! 'Lord, a day in Thy courts is better than a thousand. Heaven and earth shall pass away, but Thy word shall not pass away.'"

Though the friar spoke Latin when he quoted the Bible, Walter followed his thought closely. Here was a man wholly unmoved by the pomp and vanity of the world. Fra Pietro paid more heed to a budding shrub as a manifest sign of the Creator than to all the transient splendor of the Mogul capital. Yet he was one who seldom mixed religion with his conversation, and it is reasonable to suppose that his utterances would have taken a less abstract form had he known that the bright eyes of Nur Mahal were even then fixed intently on the cavalcade from the recess of a small apartment over the Water Gate of the palace. Perchance the subtle mesmerism of her glance was more potent with his gentle spirit than with the hardier soul of the young Englishman, for his sedate mule had not gone many paces by the side of Walter's mettlesome Arab ere he spoke again:--

"Forgive me, friend," he said, "if I broke in on your discourse with solemn reflections. One must be boorish, indeed, to deny a just meed of praise to the designers and builders of yonder superb pile. Tell me, as you seem to know its ways so well, in what quarter does Nur Mahal probably dwell?"

"There!" and Mowbray pointed straight towards the Water Gate.

"Ah! That is the very heart of the fortress. It will be difficult to reach her."

"Difficult indeed, dangerous for a native and wholly impossible for a European. But why do you ask?"

The Franciscan's remark took his hearers by surprise, and Roger, who listened silently to their talk, smiled for the first time during five hours.

"Hola, my chuck," he muttered to himself, "now it is thy turn to be roasted while a woman turns the spit."

"I think she is the *fons et origo* of all that has occurred," said the friar. "Whether exalted or lowly, such a woman will ever be the yeast in the leaven of a man like Jahangir. He may neither believe nor admit that this is so, yet I incline to the opinion that the character of your reception is due to the promptings of a higher intelligence than that with which the Emperor is endowed."

"I would rest assured if Nur Mahal supplied his inspiration," answered Mowbray, conscious that Roger's eye was cocked at him. "But remember there is a chance that my arch-enemy, Dom Geronimo, may have survived the Emperor's edict against the Christians. In the East one perforce looks for guile, and I fear that the smooth seeming of Jahangir's

actions may prove a snare for our undoing. I account in that way for the desire to separate us from the others. It is idle to say that this great city could not house us without preparation. And now you have my secret mind as to your presence here. If Jahangir means evil, Roger and I, knowing his methods, may defeat him. Assuredly you are safer with us than with the poor souls who remain in Fateh Mohammed's custody."

Then Roger swore so violently that Fra Pietro turned and looked at the fort again.

"By all the fiends!" he roared, "why didst thou not tell me thy secret mind, as thou callest it, earlier? Here have I left Matilda with yon spawn of Old Nick, and kept her content only by a pledge to return with proper haste."

"Roger, Roger! never before hast thou addressed me with such unreasoning heat. Who asked thee, this morning, to bring the lady with us? Who asked me to make thy excuses to her? What of my dry humor, my toad's tongue? Who was it that grinned like a clown through a horse-collar because he would not lie glibly enough to suit thy purpose?"

Sainton gulped down his wrath, but Mowbray was disturbed by the expression of ox-like stubbornness which suddenly clouded his face. Roger, wearing such aspect, was hard to control.

"I mun go back," he said. "Look for me ere midnight, Walter."

Without another word of explanation he bared his sword and wheeled his powerful horse.

"Make way, there!" he bellowed. "Out of my path, swine! Quickly, ye sons of pigs, I am not to be stayed!"

Thinking the Hathi-sahib had gone mad the troopers who rode with Jahangir's emissary scattered right and left. Mowbray, though vexed by the untoward incident, promptly endeavored to rob it of grave significance by ordering half a dozen of his own Rajputs to follow Sainton-sahib and help him if necessary.

Before the nawab who headed their escort quite realized what was happening, Roger had vanished. The last glimpse Mowbray obtained of his gigantic countryman was when Sainton, sitting bolt upright on his charger and holding his sword aloft like a steel torch, disappeared in the cloud of dust created by the passage of himself and his small troop.



"Out of my path, swine."

Now, the high-placed official was vastly offended by Roger's rude and peremptory words, and some little time elapsed before Mowbray's apologies, couched in the most polite Persian, were accepted. There was nothing for it but to credit the Colossus with a touch of the sun, and add thereto a hint of his passionate attachment for the buxom Countess.

Even then Walter's difficulties were not exhausted. Fra Pietro, speaking very firmly, said that his place was with his people, and he would be glad if some arrangement were made whereby he could return to them.

"It is not to be thought of," was Mowbray's instant answer. "Not only will Roger create difficulty enough when he encounters Fateh Mohammed, should the latter oppose the departure of the Countess, but I look to you to champion the cause of the other captives at our meeting with Jahangir. A woman may account for my comrade's absence. Such excuse will not avail you."

The friar bowed meekly.

"I would not burthen you with fresh cares," he said, "but I cannot save my own life and leave my flock to perish. Nevertheless, if it be best in your judgment, I will go with you into the Emperor's presence."

Mowbray's resolute features must have shown the irritation which mastered him, for the Franciscan added:--

"Be not angered with your friend. He hath a heart of a size to match his body, and 'tis a man's privilege to protect the weaker sex. 'From the beginning of creation God made them male and female.'"

"Believe me, brother, I am mostly concerned about my own lack of foresight in this matter. Thank Heaven there is no woman here for whose sake I should be compelled to act, it may be, even more hastily than Roger!"

"Did you not tell me that Nur Mahal inhabits that portion of the zenana situate over the Water Gate?"

"Yes; what if she does?"

"While Master Sainton was venting his ire I chanced to turn my eyes that way. A white scarf fluttered for an instant high above the gate. Ah! there it is again! Take heed lest some of the others follow your glance! You are not prone to rash vows, friend, yet I am much mistaken if there be not a woman in Agra who shall perplex you sorely ere many hours have passed."

And, indeed, Walter did see a whirl of muslin tremble in the air like a tiny cloud from one of the many small windows which pierced the frowning battlements.



CHAPTER XVII

"Under which King, Bezonian? Speak, or die!"
King Henry IV, Part II, Act 5, Sc. 3.

When a woman's head governs her heart she is to be feared; and that is why Providence, meaning her to be loved, ordained that, for the most part, her heart should govern her head. In the rarer descriptions of the human clay a woman unites in herself romance and the critical faculty, as though the Master delighted in blending Aphrodite with Athene.

Nur Mahal, true daughter of the gods, was such a one. Gifted with the intelligence and cold intellect of an empire-ruler she seldom yielded to the divine femininity which was her birthright. It was an impulse of sheer emotion which led her to betray her joy by a signal when she distinguished Mowbray in the midst of the troop of horse. Not unnaturally, she interpreted the sudden halt caused by Roger's anxiety anent the Countess as arising from Mowbray's wish to let her know that he had seen the fluttering scarf and rightly guessed its owner. If so, his action was an indiscretion. Who could tell how many pairs of eyes were watching him from hidden chamber or open battlements?

The departure of Sainton in such furious haste puzzled her exceedingly, but she was reassured when Mowbray turned his horse's head again towards Dilkusha. She knew now that the brown-robed stranger who rode so near to him was not only the friend, spoken of by Jai Singh, for whom the Englishman had dared so greatly, but that he, too, had observed her token. So she ventured to thrust forth the gossamer muslin a second time, and she was sure that Mowbray looked towards her and bowed gracefully, even raising his hat to show that he was aware of her presence.

In Agra, during the Mogul dynasty, such was the perfection reached by the weaver's art, muslin was fashioned of a texture so delicate that a turban or girdle, if spread out, would sink gently, with surprising slowness, to the ground. Nur Mahal, though impoverished, still retained her wardrobe, and this scarf was one of the lightest and most beautiful in her possession. Nevertheless, a flaming torch thrust into an oil-soaked beacon could not have kindled a tocsin fire of more furious significance than those floating folds. Aware of her environment she, having hastily adjudged Mowbray guilty of imprudence, should have been prudent herself. But prudence is a negative quality seldom allied with the magnetic powers which sway men, and Nur Mahal was bold in either love or hate. Moreover, she despised her enemies.

So it came to pass that the Emperor pleaded fatigue when Mowbray and Fra Pietro rode to the palace that afternoon, and they returned to the Garden of Heart's Delight more perplexed than ever by Jahangir's inscrutable attitude. Of Jai Singh they could glean no tidings. All the servants in the late Diwan's residence were newcomers and Mahomedans, to whom the old Rajput was unknown. His fellow-clansmen of the escort had no later intelligence of his movements than Walter himself, who, though restored to familiar surroundings, was nevertheless in the position of a traveler returned to a place whence the well-known landmarks have been effaced.

Fra Pietro, in his placid way, admired the beauty of the garden, the elegance of the building, the wealth of roses and flowering plants which adorned each lovely vista, and then settled down to read his breviary by the waning light.

"It is a salutary practise," said he quietly, "to turn one's thoughts heavenward when the world grows dark," and indeed, Walter, confused by a hundred conflicting issues, found himself regretting the lack of spirituality in his soul which rendered such solace unattainable in the present stress of events.

For never was man more mystified. Clemency, even from a Mogul ruler, was not altogether a vain thing to expect. But why had Jahangir's grace taken such form? If the Europeans were to be well received, why had the Emperor denied them admission to the fort under a trumpery excuse, after having expressed a wish to see them at once? Where was Jai Singh? Evidently Nur Mahal, assuming it was she who signalled from the tower, had definite news of their coming, and it was most unlikely that she could be so accurately informed save through the medium of her devoted adherent. What mad adventure was Roger engaged in that he was not come ere sunset, for he would reach Fateh Mohammed's camp about noon, and he would surely hasten the Countess's departure, if unopposed, to permit arrival at Dilkusha before night fell? Yet the shadows cast by the cypress trees were fast merging with the somber pall spreading over the land, and not a sound of jingling mule bells or clanking steel came to the anxious listener's ears.

Darkness fell with the phenomenal rapidity of the vast Indian plain. The sky was overcast. The winter rains were long due, and heavy clouds were massed aloft ready to break when the first cold wind swept down from the Himalayas. But the wind, as Fra Pietro would have it, was only surpassed in fickleness by woman, and it chose now to linger in the icy solitudes of the awful hills rather than seek the pasture lands awaiting its caress. Hence, the atmosphere was oppressive, stirred only by languorous zephyrs from the southwest, and the silence of the garden was such that the uneasy perching of a bird or the rustle of a mongoose in the undergrowth were sounds of import, demanding watchful eyes and strained hearing.

Mowbray and the friar were lodged in that part of the building which overlooked the *baraduri*, or summer-house. As frail man, whether warrior or saint, must eat, the pair partook of a well served meal. Other things being equal the repast would have provided a grateful change from the hard fare of the journey up-country. But anxiety is a poor sauce, and they ate rather because they must than because they chose. And now, even the Franciscan put aside for the hour his indifference to matters mundane.

"Our good Roger is belated, I fear," he said. "Unless he cometh soon I shall offer a prayer in his behalf to St. James, the special patron of all who travel by night."

"If the result be guaranteed, brother, pray earnestly, I beg you, and, should your list of heavenly advocates include one noted for his wise counsel, ask him to guide our steps aright when next we leave this bewitched abode. In my childhood I was told that the little people who dwell under the green knolls on the hillsides always lead those mortals who fall into their power to scenes of fairy beauty. Certes, this garden is planned for like sorcery. I first entered it a simple trader, but ever since that day my brains have been clouded and my feet meshed in hidden snares."

Walter spoke bitterly, else he would not have even hinted at his disbelief in the efficacy of the apostolic protection. There never was man of humbler spirit than Fra Pietro, yet he took up the cudgels in earnest when his companion seemed to discredit the son of Zebedee and Salome.

"Blame not the Garden of Eden because it held a snake," said he. "Whether in garden or desert the Lord will listen to my petition, and grant it the more readily, should it be for the good of my soul, if it be carried to the foot of the throne by a holy sponsor like St. James. His mother, some commentators hold, was sister to the Blessed Virgin; he taught the gospel to each of the twelve tribes; and he was the first Christian bishop to undergo martyrdom. He is ever portrayed with the gourd, shell, staff, and cap of a traveler, and it is only reasonable to suppose that such a pillar of the Church should be in special favor in that eternal garden where he is receiving the reward of his earthly sufferings."

The friar's outburst, delivered with much fervor, aroused Mowbray to some sense of his involuntary error.

"I beseech your pardon, good Brother Peter," he cried. "Not for a moment would I dare to disparage St. James. Forget my heedless words. My faith, was it not one named after him who packed me neck and crop into such wanderings as have not been endured by many of my generation, unless it be those few countrymen of mine who crossed the Spanish Main with Hawkins and Grenville? Assuredly, it would ill become me to question the potency of a James, whether Saint or King, where travelers were concerned."

Perhaps he had phrased his apology better were he less preoccupied. The Franciscan, watching him, sighed and murmured:--

"Gratiam tuam quaesumus, Domine, mentibus nostris infunde!"

The hours passed and naught happened, until Mowbray, harassed by evil forebodings, resolved that further inaction was not to be endured. He marshaled his Rajputs, of whom there were fourteen, and asked for three volunteers who would ride to Fateh Mohammed's camp and bring news. He would see to it that they were allowed to depart from Dilkusha, and thenceforth they were not to draw rein until they reached the camp, which they were to enter by such means as seemed best to them. If Sain-ton-sahib were there they must return with utmost speed, one or all, as soon as they had gleaned some explanation of the sahib's detention.

Each man was willing, so he selected three, and one other, whom he commissioned to search the bazaar and inquire in likely quarters for tidings of Jai Singh.

There was some difficulty at the gate, but Mowbray's determined air, no less than the truculent attitude of his men, whose belief in him was unbounded, soon quelled the scruples of the doorkeeper, and the four clattered out into the night. It was now ten o'clock, and, in Walter's opinion, nothing short of force had kept Roger from joining him within the preceding five hours. He deemed it wise to guard the gate on his own account, so he selected the oldest Rajput, one Devi Pershad, to act as lieutenant, while he split up the remainder of his small force into three watches.

He gave strict orders that thenceforth, until daybreak, none should enter or leave the compound without his knowledge and sanction, and he fancied that the Musalman durwan, thus deposed from his duties, smiled maliciously when he heard the lordly stranger imposing his will on those who maintained the dwelling for Jahangir.

Instantly the man was put to the test. Ere he could banish the smile from his face, Mowbray grasped him by the neck, and Devi Pershad held a lantern close to his eyes while his master bared Sher Afghan's dagger.

"How now, dog!" Walter cried. "Wouldst thou dare to question my commands?"

The doorkeeper's knees yielded. Here was one who read his thoughts.

"Not so, protector of the poor," he gasped, "but many have come within the hour, and there may be others."

"Many, sayest thou? There are not twenty servants in the house all told," and he shook the fellow till his teeth rattled.

"I am a poor man, sahib--and I do as I am bid. Those who come with a sign--I admit," was the stuttering answer.

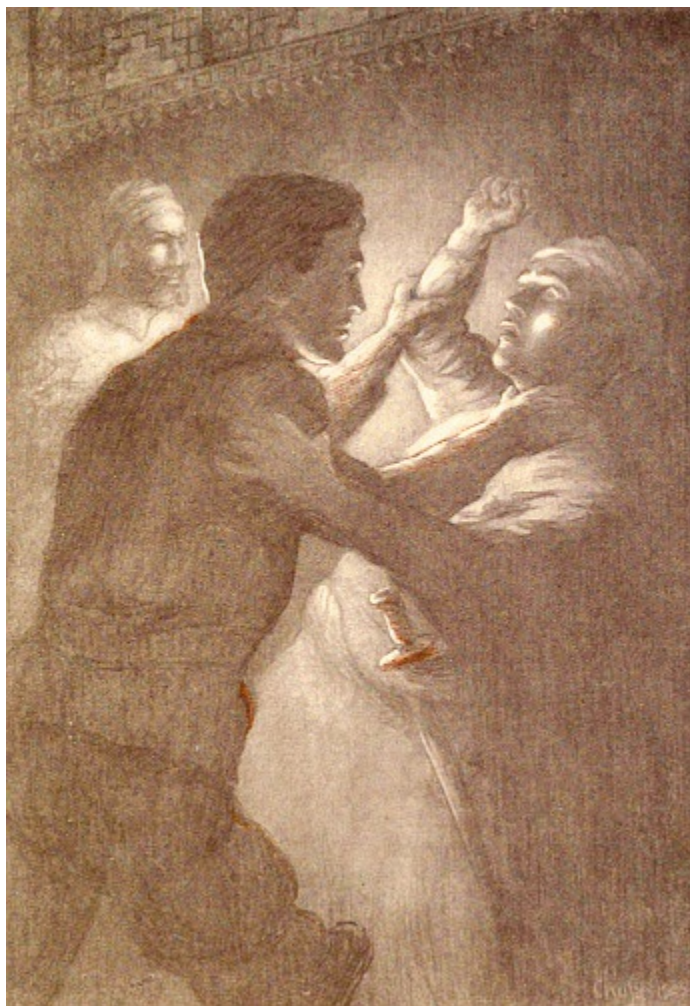
"What manner of sign?"

"Some tap once and cry *sufed-kira* (death watch); others tap thrice and say *Jai* (victory), and it was my *hukm* to admit both without question."

If the trembling wretch's confession needed evidence it was fittingly supplied. From without came three slight knocks and a voice:--

"Within there, brother. The word is *Jai*!"

Mowbray released the durwan, sheathed his dagger and drew his sword. He motioned to the door.



Instantly the man was put to the test.

"Open, and act as thou wouldst have done were I not here," he muttered. He and Devi Pershad, with the Rajputs of the first guard, hastened into the dark interior of the lodge while the man unbound the gate. There entered a very harmless couple, a *bhisti*, carrying his empty water-bag of goatskin, and a veiled woman whose simple garb showed that she was of the same caste, in all probability his wife.

But why had such a pair used a password, and why were two different passwords in vogue at all that night? Here was a minor riddle of which a sword-point might find the key. Walter sprang forth and seized the water-carrier. The woman uttered a slight cry of alarm, but seemed to regain instant control of herself. The poor *bhisti* was so taken aback by the sight of the gleaming blade with which the Englishman enforced his stern demand for information that he uttered not a word. His jaw fell and he gazed up at Walter in dumb fear.

Somehow, when the rays of the lantern revealed his features, Mowbray thought he knew the man. Suddenly, recollection came. This was the palace servant who warned him and Roger against Jahangir's malice on the day of the wild beast combats.

But, whatever form Mowbray's questions might have taken, all such speculations were driven from his brain, and he released the *bhisti* in blank amazement, when a well-remembered voice murmured sweetly:--

"Harm him not, Walter. He is a humble well-wisher who escorted me hither."

It was Nur Mahal who spoke. Never before had she addressed him by his Christian name, the sound of which she must have learned owing to Roger's frequent use of it. Clearly, she had acquired its facile pronunciation by much private endeavor, for his own mother could not have uttered the word more accurately.

And what was he to say, or do? Though it was always a likely thing that Nur Mahal, knowing he was in Agra, would endeavor to reach him, now that she was actually here how should he shape his course to avoid the complications sure to result if her visit came to Jahangir's ears? It is not to be wondered at if his brain whirled with jostling thoughts, nor that her presence should obscure for the nonce the vital importance of ascertaining the significance of the passwords, whose mere choice showed that they represented the rival factions of Mahomedans and Hindus.

"I see that you are not to be taken by surprise, let those plan who will," she whispered, and she laughed musically, with a certain frolicsome lightness long absent from her manner. Was the winsome maid of the Garden of Heart's Delight re-born amidst the sorrows which encompassed her? Was her rapid descent from high estate the means of her regeneration, seeing that content oft arrives by the door through which ambition departs? Who could tell? Certainly not Mowbray, to whose already grievous load of cares her presence added no inconsiderable charge.

But, if the man were flurried, the woman was not. She threw back her veil, being ever disdainful of the ordinance that women of rank and beauty should hide their faces from the common ken.

"Thank you, good fellow," she said to the *bhisti*. "Get you back to the fort speedily, and remember that those who serve me without words shall be paid ten times more than those who talk. Ah!" she continued, turning to the wondering Rajputs who, of course, recognized her as soon as the light illumined her animated features, "Jai Singh told me you were faithful to your salt. It could not be otherwise with men from Rajputana, yet such fidelity is worthy of reward. It shall not be long delayed."

The coarse linen *sari* of the water-carrier's wife had fallen from her head and shoulders, and even the flickering glimmer of the oil lamp revealed the fact that Nur Mahal was attired with uncommon splendor. She not only looked but spoke like a queen, and her way of addressing the poor retainers at the gate was as gracious and dignified as if they were court nobles.

"Have you brought no other retinue?" asked Walter, at a loss for more pertinent question before so many inquisitive ears.

She laughed again, and the silvery note of her mirth was pleasant if disconcerting.

"All in good time," she said. "Let us go to the house, but first inquire, if you do not know, who have preceded me. Then I shall tell you who will come after."

Amidst the chaos of his ideas Mowbray was conscious that Nur Mahal was rendering him one invaluable service. She brought with her certainty where all was void. Her words, her air, betokened a fixed purpose. For all he knew he might be a pawn or a king in the game she was playing, but, until he was further enlightened, it was advisable to move as she directed. Then, being a free agent, he might become erratic.

The doorkeeper, brought to the domain of dry figures, whittled down his earlier statement as to the number of strange visitors he had admitted. There were two Mahomedans, using the significant countersign "Death Watch," while no less than eight Hindus, excluding Nur Mahal (herself a Mahomedan), were of the "Victory" party. He knew none. His orders were from the Grand Vizier.

"Whither have they gone? Are they secreted in the house?" demanded Mowbray.

"Enough said," was Nur Mahal's laconic interruption. "Come with me. I will explain."

She led him into the avenue of cypresses. When he would have spoken she caught his arm.

"Not here!" she whispered. "I am told you are lodged in the Peacock Room. Let us converse there in privacy."

"You know so much," he murmured, "that perchance you can tell me what has befallen Roger Sainton?"

She stopped.

"Why did he leave you?" she asked.

"He went to rescue one whom he promised not to abandon. My fear of intrigue led him to bring the lady here ere it was too late."

"To bring a woman--here!"

"Why not? If one woman, why not another?"

"Come!" she urged. "We are at cross purposes, but I have no information as to Sainton-sahib. I had hoped he was with you, for he is worth a thousand. Silence now!"

His feet crunched the gravel of the path, yet he disdained to walk stealthily. Nur Mahal's tiny slippers made no noise. She moved by his side with swift grace, and when he would have made a detour, led him to the main entrance, paying no heed to those of the house servants stationed at the door, though they stared as if she were a ghost. It may be that some among them were aware of her identity, but in any case the apparition of such a woman, unveiled, in the company of a foreigner, was sufficiently remarkable in India to create unbounded astonishment.

She swept on through the building, casting aside the cumbersome *sari* as if its purpose of concealment were at an end. The few lamps which lit the inner rooms were scattered and dim, but Mowbray could see that his first impression as to the magnificence of her garments was not a mistaken one. She had yielded so far to convention, being a widow, as to wear a purple dress, but the bodice of white silk was fringed with silver, an exquisite shawl draped her shoulders in diaphanous folds, diamonds gleamed in her hair, and her rapid movements showed that her silk stockings were shot with silver. A strange garb, truly, for one who, according to Jai Singh, lived on a pittance of one rupee a day, and even more noteworthy when the manner and hour of her visit to Dilkusha were taken into account.

When she entered the Peacock Room she found Fra Pietro kneeling, with his face sunk in his hands, near to the *charpoy*, or roughly contrived bedstead, which, like all Europeans, he preferred to the cushions of the East. Walter had quitted the room by another door, so the worthy Franciscan's spellbound look, when he raised his eyes to learn who it was who came from the interior of the house and saw the radiant figure of Nur Mahal, would surely, under other circumstances, have brought a laugh to Walter's lips.

The friar, wishing to read some portion of the daily "office," had obtained four lamps and trimmed them with some care. Comparatively speaking, there was a flood of light at his end of the spacious chamber, and the obscurity reigning in the further part only added to the bewildering effect of the sylph-like being who, after advancing a little way, stood and gazed at him irresolutely.

But Mowbray's firm tread broke the spell against which Fra Pietro was already fortifying himself by fervent ejaculations. A prophet surprised by the fulfilment of his own prophecy, he rose to his feet, and bowed with the ready politeness of his race.

"Princess," he said, speaking Urdu, with slow precision, "I greet you! None but you can resolve our perplexities. You are, indeed, well come!"

The aspect of the friar, with the shaven crown, untrimmed beard, coarse brown robe and hood, white cords and rough sandals of St. Francis d'Assisi, was no less astounding to Nur Mahal than was her regal semblance to him. In her eyes he was on a parity with the fakirs, the mullahs, the religious mendicants of her adopted country. The few Europeans she had seen were soldiers, merchants, or dignified ecclesiastics of the Jesuit order, but here was one whose poverty-stricken appearance might well have prejudiced her against him. Like the Apostle whose name he bore, Fra Pietro had said: "Lo, we have left all, and followed Thee." Of such renunciatory gospel Nur Mahal had no cognizance.

Nevertheless, such was the depth of this girl-widow's sagacity, that she caught instantly from the Franciscan's benign features some glimpse of his exalted character. She half turned to Walter with her enchanting smile:--

"I had forgotten the presence of your friend. This, doubtless, is the priest of whom I have heard, and for whose sake you dared do more than for mine."

"I owed him my life, and more, for he saved me from unimagined horrors. Nor is the debt yet paid in full," was the reply.

"Can I speak openly before him?"

"You may trust Fra Pietro, Princess, as you would trust none other."

"Yet I have trusted many to-night. Now list to me carefully, for time presses. Jahangir dies ere daybreak, and there is

much to be done by a man who shall risk all."

"The Emperor dies! Do you mean that he is to be murdered?"

"Call it what you will, his death is ordained. Nay, frown not so ominously. 'Tis not of my planning. Those who wish his downfall are not seeking to avenge my wrongs. If they succeed, and I see no reason why they should fail, they aim at placing Khusrow on the throne. And who is Khusrow? A boy of ten! I, a woman, am a mere puppet in their hands. That is why I am here. You see one who is in the counsels of both parties yet bound to neither."

She threw back her head, and the circlet of brilliants across her smooth white brow did not send forth brighter gleams than her eyes. Speaking so freely of treason and dynastic plots, she smiled as though the whole affair were some hoax of which she alone knew the petty secret.

"You have met Raja Man Singh and his ally, the Maharaja of Bikanir?" she continued, coolly, before Walter could decide what shape the tumultuous questions trembling on his lips should take.

"Yes," he answered, "and they are well aware with what loathing I regard their schemes."

"It is always possible to change one's mind," she said slowly. "I cannot, in a few minutes, give you the history of months; the record of the past few hours must suffice. Since it was known that you and the Hathi-sahib were returning to Agra there has been naught but plot and counter-plot. First, those who conspire against the Emperor look to you to help them, and are even now awaiting you in the *baraduri* at the bottom of the garden. Secondly, Jahangir, well aware of their intent, has resolved to ensnare them and you in one cast of the net. Hence, the followers of Raja Man Singh and those others who will strike for Khusrow are gathering silently, some within a stone's throw of the outer walls of the palace, ready to follow their leader in the attack on the fort, where the guard of the Delhi Gate will admit them, the remainder among the trees without. But the forces of the Emperor, ten times more numerous, will fall on them at midnight, whereas the revolt is timed for the first hour. Already the traitors inside the fort have been secured. A few live to delude their friends--most are dead. All this, you may say, concerns you not. You are wrong, Mowbray-sahib. You are a greater man than you think. The conspirators count surely on your assistance and that of Sainton-sahib, whose repute with the common people is worth a whole army. Therefore, lest aught miscarried, they came to me and urged me to induce you to head the outbreak. Though I am a weak woman, I might not have consented had not the Emperor joined his supplications to theirs."

"The Emperor!" cried Walter, with involuntary loudness.

"Hush! The *baraduri* is not far distant. Yes, Jahangir still favors me with his jealousy. He does not know that--that--you are longing for the sight of some other woman beyond the black seas. Do not misunderstand me. Jahangir hates me and fears you. Kept well informed by his spies of all that was going on, he connived at the scheme which brought you and me to the forefront of the rebellion. Thus, when he stamps it out in blood, we shall be the chief victims. But that is not all. Raja Man Singh and his friends are in no mind to kill Jahangir and clear the way for a foreign intruder. They, too, see how we may serve their ends. Once the Emperor is dead it will be a fitting excuse to get rid of us on the ground that we conspired against him."

"'Tis a pretty plot," said Mowbray, grimly. "Hath it any further twists?"

"Yes, one. Raja Man Singh, Khusrow, and the rest are doomed. Few of them shall see the sun again. The man who contrived their fate is far more skilled in intrigue than they. Behind Jahangir and his feud with me stands the black robe."

"Dom Geronimo! I thought him dead."

"He may be, but he lived to-day," was Nur Mahal's careless answer. "Living or dead, his hour has passed. Others, too, can think and plan. Not plotters now, but swords are needed. I would that Sainton-sahib were here. Why did you let him go?"

"He is hard to restrain when set on anything. But you would not have him and me, with twenty troopers, fight for our own hand 'gainst all India!"

She came nearer to the listening men. In her eagerness she grasped each by an arm and whispered:--

"Jai Singh is within call with two hundred. A few determined men to-night are worth thousands to-morrow. Three hoots of an owl from the wall behind the *baraduri* will bring him and them. You have the leaders of the revolt gathered in the summer-house, whence they will soon send a messenger to summon you to council. They know I am here and await my pleasure. Above them--" and now her voice dropped so low that the words only just reached their ears--"you have Jahangir himself and his principal minion, Ibrahim, the Chief Eunuch!"

Her eyes blazed with the intensity of her emotion. Great though her power of self-control, she quivered slightly, and the action, trivial in itself, told that this woman was the nerve-center of an empire. She waited no comment. The moment long looked for had come at last. India, with all its potentialities, was within her grasp.

"Doubt not, but act!" she murmured, passionately, seeing the incredulity in the men's faces. "In the roof of the *baraduri* there is a secret chamber, contrived there, for their own purposes, by Akbar and my father. From it, in fancied security, Jahangir and Ibrahim can see and hear all that passes beneath. I took care they should know of it. 'Twas too good a bait to pass, and they swallowed it. What joy can equal the Emperor's when he hears his enemies plotting with you and me to place us on his throne, knowing full well that ere many minutes have passed we shall be slain or, far better, captured, so that he may glut his vengeance on us? Come with me! Let a Rajput give the signal to Jai Singh. Without any fear of failure, almost without a blow, you will have both Jahangir and Khusrow's adherents in your power to do with as you will."

They could not choose but believe her. Here was a counter-stroke, worthy indeed of the daughter of one who entered India a pauper and died Prime Minister. Walter's head swam, and Fra Pietro shook as if with a palsy.

"There is no other course open," she murmured, vehemently. "It is your death and mine, or Jahangir's. Decide quickly! Do you flinch from the ordeal?"

"No," said Mowbray, recovering himself. "If such be the alternatives, may God prosper those who are in the right!"

Nur Mahal released them. Walter would have sent for Devi Pershad, and in a few fateful seconds the irrevocable step must be taken which should plunge India into an era of turmoil and bloodshed. But a tumult of alarm among the household servants, and the clatter of hurried footsteps in the interior of the house, betokened some new and unforeseen commotion. Then the door by which Nur Mahal and Mowbray had entered the room was flung open and Roger appeared, carrying in his left arm the apparently lifeless body of the Countess di Cabota. His long sword was dripping blood, and his clothes were rent by cuts and lance thrusts, but his genial face, never downcast when a fight was toward, broke into a broad grin when he saw Walter.

"By the cross of Osmotherly!" he roared, "I have had the devil's own job to reach thee, lad. I have fought every inch of a good mile, and been ambushed times out of count. Poor Matilda fainted at the last onset. I had to hug her with one arm and slay with the other. Gad! it was warm work. She is no light weight!"

He deposited his inanimate burthen on a *charpoy* and cleared his vision of blood and perspiration, for he had been wounded slightly on the forehead. Then he set eyes on Nur Mahal.

"Oh, ho, my lady, art thou here?" he said. "Small wonder there were such goings on without! By gad, thou art the herald of storm on land as the petrel is at sea. Walter, my lad, give us a grip of thy hand! I'm main glad to meet thee again. But Matilda needs tending. Bid this glittering fairy see to her. Whether Portugee or Hindee, I suppose women are much alike in such matters!"

CHAPTER XVIII

"Gregory, remember thy swashing blow."
Romeo and Juliet, Act I, Sc. 1.

But there were matters of graver import afoot than the Countess's fainting fit. Already the conspirators in the summer-house, alarmed by the commotion, must be devising means to protect themselves, and the Emperor, ensconced in a hiding-place after the fashion invented by Dionysius of Syracuse, was probably doubting the wisdom of his Haroun-al-Raschid escapade. For Roger, bursting through the hostile cordons like an infuriated blue-bottle fly caught in the outer strands of a spider's web, had applied a premature spark to a gunpowder train. The silence of the night was jarred into fierce uproar. The imperial troops, thinking the revolt had broken out before its appointed hour, were hurriedly closing in around the rebels. The latter, strenuously opposing Sainton's passage up the hill leading to the Garden of Heart's Delight, communicated a panic for action, which is the next worst thing to a flight, to those of their comrades who knew not what was happening. In a word, the left bank of the Jumna was ablaze, and sharp encounters occurred wherever the Emperor's men met those who fought for his would-be supplanter, Khusrow. At the gate Devi Pershad and the Rajputs, manfully aided by the house servants, were even then resisting the efforts of the rebels previously hidden in the wood to break open the door and go to the aid of their leaders within. Indeed, Roger had barely ceased speaking, before a sowar, one of his own small escort, ran in and breathlessly announced the desperate nature of the attack on the gateway.

Sainton, of course, knew nothing of the real cause of all this riot. Nor was there time to tell him. Mowbray grasped the excited soldier.

"Canst hoot like an owl?" he cried.

"Aye, sahib, that can I," was the reply, for the man guessed the portent of the question.

"Come, then, Roger! Thou knowest the summer-house? Smite any man who leaves it! Nur Mahal, bide you here till I return! Fra Pietro, bolt the doors and open only to me or Roger!"

"One word, brother, ere thou goest," cried the friar in English. "A chosen ruler, be he Christian or heathen, is the Lord's anointed. 'Curse not the King, no, not in thy thought.'"

Walter, hurrying forth, darted a single glance at the speaker. Somehow, the Franciscan's words gave ordered sequence to a project which flitted vaguely through his mind as he listened to Nur Mahal's thrilling recital. It seemed to him that this beautiful woman, "who offered herself twice to no man," harbored a certain spite against Jahangir because of the treatment he had meted out to her. Once she had vaguely hinted at by-gones as between Mowbray and herself; otherwise her utterances were those of unsated and insatiable ambition, and the style of her raiment alone showed that she had quitted the palace that night prepared to fill the stage in whatsoever part fortune allotted her.

Now the two Englishmen were in the garden, running towards the summer-house, which, it will be remembered, stood on an island in the midst of a small lake, and was approached by four narrow causeways, each at right angles with its neighbors. There never was a darker night. It was barely possible to distinguish the tops of the trees against the sky; beneath, they passed through a blackness so dense that they could not see each other.

Under such conditions rapid progress was impossible. Mowbray called a halt, and bade the Rajput use his skill in imitating owls. Thrice the long-drawn ululu vibrated in the scent-laden atmosphere; at the third screech came an answering hoot, lanterns twinkled of a sudden at the farther end of the lawn, and Jai Singh, with his rabble of swashbucklers, perched expectantly on the wall, tumbled pell-mell into the garden.

"We come, sahib!" they heard his exultant cry. "Every man carries a light and wears a black turban. Spare none other!"

"Ecod!" said Roger, "that is good talking. Jai Singh is thin in the ribs, but he hath the liver of a bull. Yet there seemeth no urgency for killing. What is toward, Walter? 'Smite,' say you. 'Spare not,' yelps Jai Singh. Nur Mahal shoots lightning from her eyes. Even the good friar points a moral with a text on cursing the king. Who hath cursed him? Whose throat is to be cut? My soul, there's battle in the very air!"

Sainton was appealing to unheeding ears. The *baraduri*, being a roofed entablature supported on slight columns, became vaguely silhouetted against the dim glow of the advancing lantern-bearers. Walter saw several armed men rushing towards the house along the nearest *chaussee*. It went against the grain to strike any man who came to him trustingly, no matter what the ultimate intent, and among the foremost he thought he recognized Raja Man Singh.

"Back, there!" he shouted. "We are for Jahangir! Back to your covert and lay down your arms!"

There could be no mistaking his meaning. The conspirators, dumbfounded by the discovery that he whom they reckoned an ally was a declared foe, stopped, hesitated, and then broke, left and right.

"They must not escape!" said Mowbray to his companion. "After them, Jai Singh!" he vociferated to the Rajput, and forthwith there was a scurry in which several fell. Nevertheless, two, at least, got away through the trees and scaled the wall. Raja Man Singh remained, gasping his life out, but he of Bikanir and one other reached the reinforcements outside.

Hastily despatching Jai Singh and his followers to defend the main gate, Mowbray retained only two men of his own little troop. Equipping them with lanterns, he led Roger to the summer-house and cried in a loud voice:--

"Come forth, Jahangir!"

There was no answer. The hollow roof, exquisitely painted with frescoes representing forest life, echoed the command, and the slight scrutiny rendered possible by the weak light of the lamps gave force to Roger's query:--

"Dost think to find him, like Mahmoud's coffin, slung 'twixt heaven and earth, Walter?"

But Nur Mahal was to be trusted beyond the credence of eyes alone. Unless the Emperor had flown, or changed his mind at the latest moment, he was surely there, for the doorkeeper said two strangers had passed by the watchword "Safed-Kira." And the vital need of hurry made stern measures necessary.

"Jahangir!" cried Mowbray again, "I know that thou art here, thou and thy pimp, Ibrahim. Nur Mahal hath sent us to save thy life, and thy throne if need be. Descend, therefore, else Sainton-sahib shall pull thee down together with thy lurking-place."

A moment's pause brought only the racket of desultory firing in the roadway, the thuds of a battering ram against the iron-studded door, and the yells of assailants and defenders as the high boundary wall was sought to be carried by escalade, for the Maharaja of Bikanir, now that his desperate scheme was unmasked, urged his adherents ere they marched to sack the palace to extirpate the brood of vipers in the Garden of Heart's Delight.

"Roger," said Walter, calmly, resolved to be sure of his quarry, "try thy strength on a pillar!"

The summer-house, an elegant hexagon, had a carved pillar at each angle. Sainton placed his foot against one, gave a mighty push, and the stones yielded. Some fell with a clatter onto the mosaic pavement, others splashed in the water of the lake.

"Hold!" came a muffled cry, "I come!"

A fine creeper had entwined its stout tendrils round three of the pillars. In one of these, cunningly hidden by the vine, were small holdfasts, by which an active man might climb to the roof. Once there, a section of the blue enameled tiles slid back and gave access to a small apartment with a grille floor, the interstices being invisible from beneath owing to the painted foliage.

Jahangir, followed by Ibrahim, made an undignified descent. Obviously, he feared a sword thrust as he neared the ground. Yet he was no coward. Disdaining to jump he came down slowly, and faced Mowbray without laying hand on the pistol or jeweled tulwar he carried. If treachery were intended he could not guard against it, and he was too proud to exhibit his secret thought by useless action.

"Have I heard aright?" he asked, with well-feigned coolness. "Did you say that Nur Mahal had sent you?"

"Yes. How else should I, a stranger, know of your retreat?"

"And neither you nor she are in league with my enemies?"

"Some of them lie in the garden. You hear the others without. Are you man or king enough to help us in repelling them?"

Jahangir bowed his head.

"God is great," he said, as though in self-communion. "Never was mortal more deceived than I have been."

Ibrahim, Chief Eunuch, somewhat restored from the rare fright of the trembling roof, thought it high time to trim his sails to the new wind.

"I always told your Majesty," he began; but Jahangir, for answer, smote him in the face with his clenched fist so heavily that he fell into the lake and lay there insensible. He would have been drowned had not a Rajput pulled him out and

held him by the heels until a good deal of water came from his mouth and a good many gold pieces from a tuck in his cummerbund.

Mowbray, whose judgment was cooler and truer in the frenzy of a fight than when a woman's eyes assailed him, did not forget that where Jai Singh had introduced his hirelings others might follow. Nevertheless, with the inadequate force available, it was impossible to conduct an effective defense of a square enclosure containing many acres. It was above all else essential to resist the main assault. The Eastern fighting man is moved to the madness of heroism by success, and driven to despair by failure. The gateway must not be carried.

He detailed sentries, therefore, to report any hostile move from the flanks or rear, in which case he would fall back on the house, which occupied the exact center of the garden. Then he and the others hastened to the gate.

They were not a moment too soon. A huge balk of timber, carried up from the bridge and swung by fifty men against the sturdy door, smashed the panels and dislodged the hinges. Through the gap poured a torrent of assailants, all well armed, and the struggle must have resulted in instant victory for the rebels had not Roger faced them.

There was light in plenty. Many carried torches, whilst masses of tow soaked in oil had been placed on the ground to enable the archers and matchlockmen to shoot. Luckily the onward rush prevented anything like a volley being fired in that narrow space, or the Emperor and his English supporters must certainly have been hit. As it was, the giant had a fair field, steel against steel, and one man against a hundred.

When Roger was busy there was no standing-room for friends by his side or foes in front. His tremendous strength was no less astounding than his tigerish agility. His long sword whirled in lightning circles, he sprang back, forth, and sideways with incredible ease, and such was the area he covered, combined with a quick eye to discern and a supple wrist to disconcert every adventurous cut or thrust aimed at him, that, whilst those outside were yelling to the van to press forward, the unlucky wights of the front rank were making a new rampart of their bodies.

Walter found a corner where Sainton's sickle did not reach, and Jahangir, fired to emulation, joined him. The three practically held the gate, because Jai Singh, with his horde of freebooters, did not quickly regain his self-possession after the stupefying discovery that the Emperor, whom he was actively fighting against, was laying on with a will in behalf of the Englishman.

Others, too, learned the bewildering fact that here was Jahangir himself in the very hatching ground of the conspiracy. The Maharaja of Bikanir saw him, and having missed him twice with a pistol, adopted a new tactic which might easily have involved the monarch and the Englishmen in common ruin. Awaiting the rebel leader, to carry him to the fort, was a war elephant, a huge brute, well protected by iron plates, thick knobs of brass, and chain armor, penetrable by no missile short of a cannon-ball. The animal was trained to charge any one or anything at the bidding of its *mahout*, and the Maharaja, mounting the *howdah* with some of his officers, bade the driver launch the elephant at full speed through the gate.

Among the many physical advantages Roger held over other men not the least was his height. While dealing with the present danger he could see that which threatened farther afield, and now, above the heads of the combatants, he caught sight of the great moving mass of shining panoply. Such a thunderbolt would rend its way through all opposition. Swords and lances were powerless against it, but there lay on the ground, wrenched from its sockets by the battering-ram, the heavy iron bar which the big Yorkshireman had used so effectively on the night that Sher Afghan carried off his unwilling bride.

None of the others knew of the approaching peril. Roger turned to Jai Singh.

"Come on, Don Whiskerando!" he shouted. "I thought thou hadst better stomach for a fray!"

Though he spoke English, his look was enough. The old Rajput awoke from his trance and rushed forward manfully. His levies followed, the rebels yielded a few feet, and Roger secured breathing space. He sheathed his reeking sword, picked up the iron bar, and stood on the left of the gateway, balancing the implement over his right shoulder and bracing his feet, set wide apart, firmly against the ground.

A fiercer yell, a stampede of both parties, announced the oncoming of the new danger. Mowbray and Jahangir thought that this was the end until they saw Roger, not smiling now but frowning, whirl the bar lightly as a preliminary to the greatest feat he ever performed. For the story lives yet amidst the glorious ruins of the Mogul Empire how the Man-Elephant killed the elephant. Trumpeting loudly, rushing through the swaying mass of human beings as a whale cleaves water, the immense brute seemed to enjoy the sensation it created. As it entered the gate, with trunk uplifted, the bar crashed across its knees. The elephant stumbled and fell. Again the iron flail whistled in the air, this time striking the brass-studded boss on the beast's wide forehead. The thick metal disks shivered into fragments, and the monster, with

fractured skull, lurched over heavily on its side, throwing the Maharaja of Bikanir and his lieutenants to the ground, where they died quickly at the hands of those nearest to them.

A great shout went up, a shout of terror and wonder. Men ran, throwing away their arms and shrieking incoherent appeals, whether to Allah or Khuda, for protection. It was recorded that some went mad, some died from fright, and many dropped from exhaustion miles away from Dilkusha and its magic. For never before had one man met a full-grown fighting elephant face to face in single combat and killed it. Such deeds were told of lions and tigers, of many-antlered deer and massive bulls, but never of the elephant, which, in the plenitude of its majestic strength, can drag four score men in triumph, let them tug their best at a rope.

"*Shabash, hathi!*" cried Jahangir. "By the soul of my father, Akbar, if I am spared to-night those two strokes shall be writ in history and recorded in stone!"

"'Twill please me better if they remain in your Majesty's memory," was Sainton's gruff answer. Truth to tell, his mighty effort had shaken him. In that last almost superhuman blow he had surpassed himself. His muscles still twitched from the tension, and he experienced a curious sympathy for the magnificent creature whose dying convulsions alone betokened the abundant life with which it was endowed.

He leaned wearily on the long bar. The slaying of the elephant was the culmination of a day's toil such as no other man in India could have endured, for many a stout warrior had fallen under his sword ere he carried the Countess di Cabota into the Garden of Heart's Delight.

But the Emperor, not to be rebuffed thus curtly, seized him by the arm.

"Harken, friend," said he, "one lie will poison a river of truth. They told me 'twas thy intent to tumble my palace about my ears. Tomb of the Prophet, what will not a man believe when he lends his wits to women and wine? Never was king more beholden to stranger than I to thee and thy friend; canst thou not credit my faith when I say that no recompense you ask shall be too great for me to give?"

Sainton turned and clapped the Emperor on the shoulder.

"I have oft wondered," he cried, "how so good a soldier could be a bad king. Now I see 'twas a passing fit, which, mayhap, like certain distempers, leaves thee wholesomer."

And that was how Jahangir and Roger began a comradeship which was never marred nor forgotten while either lived.

Mowbray, though delighted that Sainton's rough diplomacy had won the Emperor so thoroughly, nevertheless kept a sharp lookout for any recrudescence of the fight. But the back of the revolt was broken. He who escaped with the Maharaja of Bikanir, riding post-haste for fresh troops, was captured by the imperial forces, and a strong contingent of mounted men arriving at Dilkusha relieved the little garrison of further concern. Jahangir despatched several officers with instructions, the exact significance of which Walter failed to grasp. He knew it was hopeless to expect clemency for those who fomented the disorders. In the East, and indeed elsewhere, rulers had a habit, not wholly lost to-day, of repressing such outbreaks with merciless severity.

The Emperor quickly completed his arrangements. Then he drew Walter aside.

"You spoke of Nur Mahal. She is here, I know. What was her errand?" he asked.

"To warn me of the plot of which I was the unconscious figurehead," was the ready answer.

"Her action is the chief surprise of a night of marvels," said Jahangir, thoughtfully. "No matter how greatly I was misled by others, I vow she was candid. Never did woman belittle a man as Nur Mahal belittled me. She said much that was true, and a good deal that was false. But her spleen was manifest. Had my head rolled at her feet she would have kicked it. Why, then, should she risk her life to save me?"

"You must ask her that yourself, your Majesty."

There was no other way. It was out of the question that Walter should dispel Jahangir's doubts by hinting a very different motive for Nur Mahal's visit to Dilkusha. Come what might he had dissipated in her mind the mirage of a dynastic struggle in which he would participate as her husband. The mere fact that he had so completely thrown in his lot with the Emperor would prove to her, if proof were needed, that the dream of those memorable days which followed their flight from Agra might never be renewed. What would she do? What manner of greeting would she give Jahangir? Who could tell? Once before, when expected to marry the Emperor, she reviled him. Not half an hour ago she said Jahangir must die before dawn. He was not dead, but very much alive, and more firmly seated on his throne than at any time since his accession. What would she say? Mowbray was on thorns as he walked with the Emperor and Roger to

the house.

Fra Pietro unbolted the door at which they knocked. Roger, seeing the Countess moving forward, and evidently quite recovered from her faintness, was seized with a spasm of shyness.

"All is well, Matilda," he said, hanging back. "You had a boisterous journey, but you are in quiet waters now. I go to remove some marks of the jaunt."

He made to sheer off, but she ran after him, brushing the Emperor aside in her eagerness.

"Nay, my good Roger!" she cried. "Fra Pietro hath told me all. I closed my eyes, and my heart stopped beating when I witnessed that last array of dreadful men. And thou didst carry me in thy arms as if I were a child, bearing me hither in safety through a hostile army. Oh, Roger, how can I wait to thank thee!"

"Calm thyself, sweet Matilda," they heard him growl. "I'll have no kissing of hands, and I cannot kiss thy lips in my present condition. Gad! I have more brains on my clothes than in my head. Well, if naught else will content thee, there!"

In the center of the room stood Nur Mahal, her normally lily-white face with its peachlike bloom wholly devoid of color, and her wondrous eyes gazing fixedly at the tall figure of the Emperor, who hesitated an instant when Mowbray motioned him to enter first. Walter's pulse galloped somewhat during that pause. He did not know then that while men were dying in hundreds around the gate and elsewhere, the Franciscan had won a wordy victory behind the locked doors. No sooner were the Countess's senses restored than Fra Pietro engaged the Persian Princess in a discourse which quickly revealed that here were well-matched dialecticians. Pride, keen intellect, consciousness of physical charm and mental power, were confronted by gentle insistence on the eternal verities which govern mankind, irrespective of race or climate.

Neither palliating nor excusing Jahangir's excesses, the friar did not hesitate to hold a mirror to the girl's own faults. If she had loved the prince why did she profess to hate the king? If the death of her husband so rankled in her memory that the Emperor, who was indirectly responsible for it, was not to be forgiven, why had she gone back to Agra, instead of pursuing her peaceful voyage to Burdwan? Ah, yes, he appreciated her belief that other eventualities might happen, but life was constituted of shattered hopes, and the one eternal, wholly satisfying ideal was to so order one's actions that when called to final account one could truly say: "This I did and thus I spoke because it seemed to me best for the happiness and well-being of my fellow-creatures."

To and fro flew the shuttlecock of their argument, until Nur Mahal, astonished and not a little humiliated by the singular knowledge of her inmost feelings displayed by this mild-eyed man of low estate, paced the long room like a caged gazelle, and the Countess di Cabota, half distracted by the distant sounds of murderous conflict, nevertheless found time to wonder what Fra Pietro was saying which made the beautiful Persian so angry.

The sound of Mowbray's voice, the sight of Jahangir in his company unattended, drove the passion from her face. Her red lips were slightly opened in mute inquiry, her fingers were entwined irresolutely, her whole attitude, so heedless was she of the restraint that cloaks the secret thought, indicated a passive desire to let chance carry her which way it willed.

But the glory of her loveliness was never more manifest than in this feminine mood, and Jahangir, a man of impulse, was drawn to her as steel to a magnet.

"You and I," said he, slowly, "have much to forget, but you alone have a great deal to forgive. Nevertheless, on a night when I have won my kingdom I may well be pardoned if I hope to win my queen."

With that, he unfastened the samite over-cloak he wore, and took from his neck a string of priceless pearls. Nur Mahal bent her proud head, and the Emperor, with a laugh of almost boyish glee, adjusted the shimmering ornament around her throat.

She said something in a low tone, and it was a long time before she looked up again. When her eyes first encountered Mowbray's they were bright with repressed tears.

Notwithstanding these tender passages, and some amusingly one-sided episodes in the garden between Roger and the Countess, for the lady made him kneel down whilst she washed his face, there was little time for love-making. Jahangir, having joyously informed the nearest members of his entourage that Nur Mahal was to be treated as the Empress which she would be created next day in durbar, began to question Mowbray as to the events of the night. Walter's task was rendered more simple by the projected marriage of one whom he suspected to be the real instigator of the whole affair. He must perforce twist the narrative to show the prospective Sultana in the best light, and herein, as it happened, a casual reference to Dom Geronimo was helpful.

"I mistrusted that man from the first," said Jahangir. "Why should he, a European, conspire against his fellows? No beast of prey, unless it be indeed hard pressed, eats its own kind. Howbeit, he will trouble the world no longer."

"What means your Majesty? I was told he was active in his machinations this very day."

"Yes," was the cool reply. "I made use of him until my patience vanished. When you and Sainton-sahib proved him a liar, I sent orders that a cow was to be slain instantly and the black robe sewn in the skin."

"Sewn in the skin!" repeated Walter, incredulously.

"Yes. He will be dead by the fourth watch. Hussain Beg, a traitorous villain from Lahore, whom I caused to be sealed in an ass's skin, took a day and a night to die, but the hide of a cow dries more speedily."

Horrified by the fate which had overtaken the arch enemy of his race, Mowbray told Fra Pietro what the Emperor had said. The Franciscan at once appealed for mercy in the Jesuit's behalf.

"Forgive him," he pleaded, "as Christ forgave his enemies. You can save him. Your request will be granted. God, who knoweth all hearts, can look into his and turn its stone into the water of repentance."

It was not yet one o'clock when Walter and Roger, the latter glad of the errand which freed him from Matilda's embarrassing attentions, rode with a numerous guard to the fort, bearing Jahangir's reprieve for Dom Geronimo.

There had been no delay in the execution of the sentence. They found the unhappy priest already imprisoned in his terrible environment, and almost insane with the knowledge that the stiffening hide was slowly but surely squeezing him to death.

With Sher Afghan's dagger Mowbray cut the stitches of sheep-sinews, and, after drinking some wine and water, the Jesuit fanatic became aware of the identity of the man to whom he owed his life.

"Tis surely time," said Walter, sternly, "that you and I discharged our reckoning. I could have pardoned my father's death, foul murder though it was, on the score of your youth and zeal. But it is unbearable that you, who preach the gospel of Christianity, should pursue with rancor the son of the man you killed with a coward's blow. Now, after the lapse of twenty-four years, I have requited both his untimely loss and your continued malice by saving your wretched life. What sayest thou, Geronimo? Does the feud end?"

"On my soul, Walter!" cried Sainton, "I think he is minded to spring at thee now."

But the glazed eyes of the unfortunate bigot were lifted to his rescuer with the non-comprehending glare of stupor rather than unconquerable hatred. He murmured some reference to the miraculous statue of San Jose, to which, lying at the bottom of the bay of Biscay amidst the rotting timbers of a ship bearing the saint's name, he evidently attributed his escape. So they left him, with instructions as to his tendance, and rode back to the Garden of Heart's Delight.

All fighting had ceased. Some few Samaritans were tending the wounded; ghouls were robbing the dead; a mild rain, come after weeks of drought, was refreshing the thirsty earth and washing away the signs of conflict.

"What kept thee so long on the road?" asked Walter, when Roger confessed that the shower was the next most grateful thing to a flagon of wine he did not fail to call for and empty at the palace.

"Gad! I was forced to wring Fateh Mohammed's stiff neck," was the unexpected answer. "Having received Jahangir's orders, he held by them as if they were verses of the Koran. The fat knave was backed by too many arquebusiers to assault him by daylight, so I played fox, and rode off in seeming temper. I and the six troopers hid in a nullah until night fell. Then we spurred straight to Matilda's tent, but Fateh Mohammed, to his own undoing, was grossly annoying her, in that very hour, by professing his great admiration for her manifold attractions. He was not worth a sword thrust, so what more was there to do than to treat him as my mother treats a fowl which she wants for the spit?"

"What, indeed?" said Walter.

CHAPTER XIX

"To shew our simple skill,
That is the true beginning of our end."
Midsummer Night's Dream, Act V, Sc. 1.

When they reached Dilkusha they yet had much to talk about. During their absence Jahangir had departed with Nur Mahal, entering the palace by the Water Gate, so the Englishmen did not encounter the royal cortege. Worn out by fatigue, the Countess di Cabota was sound asleep, but Fra Pietro awaited them, being anxious to learn the fate of his co-religionist. He was devoutly thankful that Dom Geronimo was not dead, and his next inquiry dealt with the adventures of Roger throughout the day. Then the lively record of the fight at the gate must be imparted, and nothing would suit the friar, late though the hour was, but he must go and see the fallen elephant, which, guarded by a crowd of awe-stricken natives, still cumbered the entrance to the cypress avenue.

He gazed long at the mighty brute, whose bulk, as it lay, topped a man's height. Then said he to Sainton:--

"At what hour, friend, didst thou attack the camp of Fateh Mohammed?"

"It might be half-past eight of the clock."

"Ah! You forced your way in and out; you rode through hundreds of King's men and rebels, who each in turn sought to bar your path; you fought here so well that not even this monster could prevail against you; nevertheless, our worthy Master Mowbray would scoff at the special protection of St. James which I invoked for you in the very hour of your first onset."

"Gad! Such a serious speech hath a deep meaning. Walter, what's to do between you and our good friar? Hast thou been reviling an apostle?"

"Never, on my life," laughed Mowbray. "When my ears have lost the sounds of strife, Fra Pietro, you shall lecture me most thoroughly on my seeming lack of faith in that matter."

"By the cross of Osmotherly!" vowed Roger, "if St. James be so potent I'll down on my marrow-bones the next time I'm bliged to carry Matilda a mile. My soul! my left shoulder will ache for a week with the strain of her exceeding shapeliness."

The Franciscan sighed. They were in no mood for a sermon. The load of care lifted from their hearts by the witchery of the night left room for aught save sober reflection. He must point the moral another day.

When fortune buffets a man for years she is apt, if caught in the right vein, to shower her favors on him with prodigality. Jahangir, wholly taken up in affairs of state and his wedding festivities, did not see his English friends until nearly ten days later. Then he astounded Walter with the information that King James of England had sent an Embassy to India, that he, Jahangir, meant to march to Ajmere to meet the Ambassador, and that he would esteem it a favor if Mowbray and Sainton would come with him, the journey being a fair measure of the road to Surat.

But this first surprise was sent spinning by the discovery that the leader of the Embassy was Sir Thomas Roe.

"Does your Majesty know if the Ambassador hath brought his sister?" asked Sainton, for Mowbray scarce knew how to account for the rush of color which bronzed more deeply his well-tanned face.

"There is no mention of the lady in my despatches. What of her?" inquired the Emperor.

"That is a tale for Mowbray-sahib to tell," said Roger with a wink, and, indeed, the levity of his manner towards the monarch then, and on many other occasions, greatly scandalized the punctilious court flunkeys.

Jahangir seemed to be greatly pleased by the fact that Walter regarded Nellie Roe as his future wife. Being a devoted husband himself, he naturally told Nur Mahal, and was astonished that she received the news with indifference. Of course, Mistress Roe did not accompany her brother, but she sent a very nicely worded acknowledgment of Walter's letters, together with a small package, which, when opened, disclosed a very beautiful miniature of herself by that same notable artist, Isaac Olliver, who had painted Anna Cave.

One day, when Jahangir and the Embassy were met in durbar at Ajmere, the conversation turned on this very art of painting on ivory, in which the Delhi artists were highly skilled, and Sir Thomas Roe's "Journal" contains an effective sketch of the assembly to which the pictures of the two fair Englishwomen (Anna being then secretly married to Roe) were brought for comparison with native products.

"When I came in I found him sitting cross legged on a little throne, all cladd in diamonds, Pearles, and rubyes; before him a table of gould, on yt about 50 Peeces of gould plate sett all with stones, some very great and extreably rich, some of lesse valew, but all of them almost couered with small stones; his Nobilitye about him in their best equipage, whom hee Commanded to drinck froliquely, seuerall wynes standing by in great flagons."

There was some good-humored dispute as to the ability of the Delhi craftsmen to copy Master Olliver's work, and a bet was made, which both Roe and Mowbray discreetly lost when the originals were returned with the reproductions. Yet, the native artists had achieved a better result than the Englishmen expected, whilst Jahangir was puzzled by his wife's eagerness to see Nellie Roe's presentment, although she evinced no curiosity concerning her when first he mentioned the projected marriage.

But the Emperor, still a wine-bibber it is clear, soon ceased to question the why and the wherefore of Nur Mahal's actions. Each day of his life he fell more and more under her influence. Soon he practically made over the government of the state into her hands. At that time, especially during Mowbray's continuance with the court, she exhibited a restless activity which found no sedative save constant movement. Devoted to sport, and showing much skill in using a gun which Sir Thomas Roe gave her, she shot many tigers with her own hand, and tigers, even at that distant date, were to be found only in secluded jungles.

A letter preserved in the Addlestone MS, from Sir Thomas Roe to Sir Thomas Smythe, refers to the Empress's passion for roaming in remote districts. "I am yet followeing this wandering King," he writes, "ouer Mountaynes and through woodes, so strange and unused wayes that his owne People, who almost know no other God, blasphemee his name and Hers that, it is sayd, Conducts all his actions."

This same disturbing transition from place to place led to the departure, much against her will, of the Countess di Cabota to Bombay. Her ladyship found out, what was oft rumored in India, that the Dowager-Empress, Mariam, mother of Jahangir, was really a Christian woman of Portuguese birth. The Countess met her, and spoke to her in her own language, and the incident incensed the Emperor, who feared that his claim to be another Mahomet might be questioned by the imaums. Roe, a politic negotiator, took advantage of the hardships and difficulties of baggage-carrying involved by the daily breaking up of the camp, to despatch the Countess to the nearest Portuguese port.

She took leave of Roger with copious tears, and wrote him long letters he could not read, so that Walter was obliged to order his face as he made known her loving messages, and heard Roger swearing under his breath the while. Soon she sailed for Lisbon, and the big man, thinking he would never see her again, did not know whether to be glad or sorry.

Mowbray naturally rendered the greatest service to the English mission. The whole country was thrown open to British trade, special sites were granted for factories, and, indeed, Roe's embassy undoubtedly planted in India the seeds which have borne such million-fold yield. But Walter, to his great relief, found that Nur Mahal avoided him. He seldom exchanged a word with her, and then only by way of formal politeness. She moved like a star, bright and remote. The sole instances of personal favor which she showed him consisted, in the first place, of the redemption of the box of diamonds for money, and, secondly, in urging him and Roger to invest two thirds of their capital in indigo, which, shipped to London, was worth five times what they paid for it in India.

During an uneventful voyage home, Roger often spoke of his Matilda, and wondered how she fared. He was sorry a gale blew them past Lisbon, though it hurried them to the Downs, but his regret merged with other sentiments when he learned, by advices awaiting Walter from his mother, that the Countess di Cabota was arrived in Wensleydale, where she had won much popularity, and was a special favorite of old Mistress Sainton's.

"Ecod!" roared Roger, when the full effect of this amazing intelligence penetrated his big head, "that ends it. I am undone! Between them they'll lead me to the kirk wi' a halter, for my owd mother ever had an eye for t' brass, and Matilda will have filled her lug wi' sike a tale that I'll be tethered for life."

His prediction was verified. The Countess married him a week after he reached Yorkshire. But the only halter she used was the chain of turquoises and gold which he himself gave her. Never did man have more loving wife. Her chief joy was to find some wondering listener while she poured forth the thrilling recital of her husband's prowess, and her only anxiety was lest his fighting instincts should prove too powerful to keep him at home during the troubled years of the next reign.

But her wealth, joined to his own very considerable store, made him a rich man and a landed proprietor. Several little Saintons, too, promised to be nearly as big as their father, or as pretty as their mother, so Roger stopped at Leyburn to look after them, siding with neither King nor Parliament, but making it widely known that he was yet able to break heads if anyone interfered with him or his.

Of the wooing of Nellie Roe by her constant lover much might be written of vastly greater interest than many things herein recorded. Yet, such a history is neither new nor old, being of the order which shall endure as long as man seeks his mate. So they were wed, in the Church of St. Giles, at Cripplegate, and, by one of those pleasant actions which redeem his memory, King James was graciously pleased to forget the contumacy of his long-lost subjects. On Roe's showing that Mowbray had done such good work for England that he well deserved the royal favor, the King bade the newly-married couple invite him to the wedding, to which he came in great state. He asked for the Ambassador's sword, averted his eyes, nearly clipped Walter's ear with the blade in delivering the accolade, and duly dubbed him a knight. Here, also, the English Solomon met Sainton. Though his majesty was far too sagacious, in his own estimation, to credit half he was told of the giant's performances at home and in the domains of the Great Mogul, he nevertheless asked Roger what he considered to be his most remarkable achievement.

"Gad!" was the grinning answer, "though I have lopped heads by the score, and fought wi' strange beasts of monstrous size and fury, I think the most wonderful thing I ever did was to get off scot free when your Majesty was ill disposed towards me."

James rubbed his nose dubiously. He took thought, and found that the retort pleased him. So Roger, too, was ordered to kneel, and arose, very red and confused, "Sir Roger Sainton, of Cabota Hall, in the County of York."

A great deal of water had flowed under London Bridge, and under the bridge that spanned the Jumna at Agra as well, when Sir Roger rode up the Vale of Ure one day to dine and sup with his friend Sir Walter. With him, in a carriage, came Matilda, Lady Sainton, and the special purport of the visit was to hear news lately received from India.

Fra Pietro had written, as was his yearly custom, giving them the annals of life in far-off Agra. The Franciscan would not abandon his people, and he remained with those who elected to settle in the capital rather than return to Hughli. There, owing to the patronage of Jahangir and Nur Mahal, he established a thriving colony. In course of time, by teaching his flock to eschew politics and stick to trade, he made the Franciscans a greater power than the Jesuits.

Divested of the quaint phraseology and varied spelling then in vogue, some portion of his epistle is worthy of record.

"Each year it becomes more established," he said, "that the Empress rules in Jahangir's name. Truly she is a good and wise woman. She hath effected a beneficial change in his cruel disposition, and put a stop to his savage outbursts of temper. Not only does he drink less wine in the daytime, but he is ashamed to be seen by her if his evening potations are too indulgent. She still retains her habit of going unveiled among all classes, and, indeed, it would be a wise reform were other women of the country to do likewise, for the Creator never intended one half the human race to remain invisible to the other half. Herein, however, she has failed, though it is said, as a quip, that were her own features less noteworthy she would not be so free in their exhibition.

"Nevertheless, she is the most accomplished woman of her age and clime. She rules this land with moderation and firmness, encourages education and good living, and gives freedom to all men to worship God as seemeth best to them. I am reminded, by these last words, that one who sought unfairly to impose his will upon others, Dom Geronimo to wit, died recently in the Convent here. He had been partly demented for years, but you will be glad to learn that his final hours were peaceful. His soul was restored to consciousness when the weak body failed, and he departed this life sincerely regretting the excesses to which he was led by unmeasured zeal. Perhaps I err in judging him thus harshly. 'Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.' I Cor. x. 12.

"The Emperor kept his word touching the record of my good Roger's mighty deed in slaying the elephant. Within the Ummer Singh Gate of the Palace he hath erected another gateway called the Hathiya Darwaza, or 'Door of the Elephants.' It stands on the summit of a steep slope, and bears on its two flanking towers life-size models of two elephants, one of which has a man's head. Fra Angelico, of the Blessed Order of St. Francis, newly come here from Barcelona, has a gift in painting, and, at my wish, he has made two oil drawings, which I send herewith, one of which shows the noble design of the structure.

"The other will be equally foreign to your eyes. You will scarce credit that the splendid marble edifice drawn by my worthy brother in Christ is the tomb of Itimad-ud-Daula, father of the Empress, and erected by her on the site of the house in the Garden of Heart's Delight. Jahangir wished the place kept as an evening retreat for the days of spring flowers, but Nur Mahal would hear of no other end than the monument. So there stands the mausoleum, a noble building truly, yet a grave. Who knows what unfulfilled desires lie buried with the unheeding bones of the old Diwan! I sometimes think the Empress, who, with all her wisdom, remains a wayward woman, was not wholly swayed by filial piety

when she moved the remains of her excellent father to that lovely garden. Once, by chance, I met her there. She spoke to me, and I gave her such meager intelligence of my English friends as I possessed. She was pleased to hear that Roger and you were honored by the King. She sends her greetings. Jai Singh leader of the body-guard, also places his turban at your feet.

"And, in this connection, I am reminded of that verse in the XXVth Chapter of Proverbs: 'As cold waters to a thirsty soul, so is good news from a far country.' Write to me, therefore, my good Walter. May it please the Lord that these presents shall find you and yours in good health and abounding in happiness! They tell me I am growing gray, and thinner than ever, so assure me, I pray you, that Sir Roger is adding width to his inches and thus adjusting that proper balance between the extremes by which nature at times leaves the common level.

"It will be of interest to his lady, best known to me as the Countess di Cabota, to learn that recently, while on a journey to the Nasirabad mission, I turned aside and visited the deserted city of Fatehpur-Sikri, built, as you know, by Akbar. In Queen Mariam's house I found wall-paintings representing the Annunciation, and other scenes in the history of Our Lord and His Blessed Mother, thus proving that the unhappy woman, long since dead, was an apostate. May she have found grace and repentance even at the foot of the throne. It would be a great delight to me if I could win Nur Mahal to the faith. She and Jahangir are ready enough to reason the matter, but they remain obdurate. I trust yet to prevail."

The Franciscan then branched off into such trading information as he thought might be useful to them or their friends in the city of London, and concluded by expressing the hope that, if ever he returned to Europe, they might all meet; though, said he, "I expect little more than that my own bones shall rest in the small graveyard we have established at no great distance from Dilkusha."

Nellie, who had heard the letter when it reached her husband, listened to it again while he read it to Roger and Lady Sinton.

"What an influence Nur Mahal seems to exert on all who meet her!" she said, thoughtfully, when Walter laid down the last closely written sheet.

"Aye, a witch, and a bonny one at that!" muttered Roger.

"Was she really so beautiful?" asked Nellie, and Walter felt that her eyes were on him though her question was addressed generally.

"She was so beautiful," he said, caressing her fair head with a loving hand, "that once, when I wished to be complimentary, I told here there was only one prettier woman in the world, to my thinking, and her name was Nellie Roe."

"Gad! Was that what you said to her in the field of chick-peas?" cried Roger.

"Some words to that effect."

"But no woman would take that as a compliment," said Nellie, dubiously.

"I could fashion no better at the time," he answered, and he picked up Fra Angelico's sketch of the Garden of Heart's Delight. The cypresses were there, and the smooth lawns, with the white marble pavilion shining from the green depths, whilst the artist-friar had cunningly depicted a gold mohur tree, in all the glory of its summer foliage, to cover one corner of a tower where the sheer lines were too harsh.

Roger rose ponderously, having lost that ease of movement which was wont to be so deceptive when an enemy deemed him slow because of his size. He looked over Walter's shoulder.

"'Tis a gaudy picture," he growled, "but 'tis not the place I dream of at times when a pasty is too rich or the beer a trifle heavy."

"I oft wish I had seen the garden as you knew it, Walter," said his wife.

"May the Lord be thanked your wish was not granted!" he said, drawing her nearer and kissing her with a heartiness that was unaffected. "'Twas no fit habitation for you, Nellie, or for any Christian woman. Ask my Lady Sinton. She knew it, only too well. The Empress is right. It was best fitted to hold a tomb."

And, indeed, while the men went forth into an English rose-garden, to indulge in the new fashionable habit of smoking

tobacco-leaf, Matilda assured her young friend, for the hundredth time, that, notwithstanding the undoubted charms and barbaric elegance of the Persian princess, Walter Mowbray treated her very cavalierly. So, for the hundredth time, Nellie drove the wrinkles of thought from her brow, smiled delightedly when Matilda vowed that the man's face on the stone elephant was not a quarter as handsome as Roger himself, and thus effectually banished the dim but lovely and ever fascinating wraith of Nur Mahal.

FOOTNOTES:

"There is indeed a God!"

Collar or circlet.

Literally, "Born under favoring planets," a title conferred by historians on Taimur, and assumed by Jahangir.

"Kill them!"

Arena, or sport-ground.

Leopard

"Wonderful! Wonderful!"

An amulet.

A functionary akin to a chief of police.

A literal translation of the name "Jahangir."

The enclosure in which wild elephants are captured.

Order.