For The Salt He Had Eaten

Talbot Mundy

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Prologue

To the northward of Hanadra, blue in the sweltering heat−haze, lay Siroeh, walled in with sun−baked mud and listless. Through a wooden gate at one end of the village filed a string of women with their water−pots. Oxen, tethered underneath the thatched eaves or by the thirsty−looking trees, lay chewing the cud, almost too lazy to flick the flies away. Even the village goats seemed overcome with lassitude. Here and there a pariah dog sneaked in and out among the shadows or lay and licked his sores beside an offal−heap; but there seemed to be no energy in anything. The bone−dry, hot−weather wind had shriveled up verdure and ambition together.

But in the mud−walled cottages, where men were wont to doze through the long, hot days, there were murmurings and restless movement. Men lay on thong−strung beds, and talked instead of dreaming, and the women listened and said nothing−−which is the reverse of custom. Hanadra was what it always had been, thatched, sun−baked lassitude; but underneath the thatch there thrummed a beehive atmosphere of tension.

In the center of the village, where the one main road that led from the main gate came to an abrupt end at a low mud wall, stood a house that was larger than the others and somewhat more neatly kept; there had been an effort made at sweeping the enclosure that surrounded it on all four sides, and there was even whitewash, peeling off in places but still comparatively white, smeared on the sun−cracked walls.

Here, besides murmurings and movement, there was evidence of real activity. Tethered against the wall on one side of the house stood a row of horses, saddled and bridled and bearing evidence of having traveled through the heat; through the open doorway the sunshine glinted on a sword−hilt and amid the sound of many voices rang the jingling of a spur as some one sat cornerwise on a wooden table and struck his toe restlessly against the leg.

Another string of women started for the water−hole, with their picturesque brass jars perched at varying angles on their heads; and as each one passed the doorway of this larger house she turned and scowled. A Rajput, lean and black−bearded and swaggering, came to the door and watched them, standing proudly with his arms folded across his breast. As the last woman showed her teeth at him, he laughed aloud.

"Nay!" said a voice inside. "Have done with that! Is noticing the Hindu women fit sport for a Rajput?"

The youngster turned and faced the old, black−bearded veteran who spoke.

"If I had my way," he answered, "I would ride roughshod through this village, and fire the thatch. They fail to realize the honor that we pay them by a visit!"

"Aye, hothead! And burn thy brother's barn with what is in it! The Hindus here are many, and we are few, and there will be burnings and saberings a−plenty before a week is past, if I read the signs aright! Once before have I heard such murmurings. Once before I have seen chupatties sent from house to house at sunset−−and that time blood ran red along the roadside for a month to follow! Keep thy sword sharp a while and wait the day!"

"But why," growled another deep−throated Rajput voice, "does the Sirkar wait? Why not smite first and swiftly?"

Mahommed Khan moved restlessly and ran his fingers through his beard.

"I know not!" he answered. "In the days when I was Risaldar in the Rajput Horse, and Bellairs sahib was colonel, things were different! But we conquered, and after conquest came security. The English have grown overconfident; they think that Mussulman will always war with Hindu, the one betraying the other; they will not understand that this lies deeper than jealousy−−they will not listen! Six months ago I rode to Jundhra and whispered to the general sahib what I thought; but he laughed back at me. He said 'Wolf! wolf!' to me and drew me inside his bungalow and bade me eat my fill."

"Well−−what matters it! This land has always been the playground of new conquerors!"

"There will be no new conquerors," growled the old Risaldar, "so long as I and mine have swords to wield for the Raj!"

"But what have the English done for thee or us?"

"This, forgetful one! They have treated us with honor, as surely no other conquerors had done! At thy age, I too measured my happiness in cattle and coin and women, but then came Bellairs sahib, and raised the Rajput Horse, and I enlisted. What came of that was better than all the wealth of Ind!"

He spread his long legs like a pair of scissors and caught a child between them and lifted him.

"Thou ruffian, thou!" he chuckled. "See how he fights! A true Rajput! Nay, beat me not. Some day thou too shalt bear a sword for England, great−grandson mine. Ai−ee! But I grow old."

"For England or the next one!"

"Nay! But for England!" said the Risaldar, setting the child down on his knee. "And thou too, hot−head. Before a week is past! Think you I called my sons and grandsons all together for the fun of it? Think you I rode here through the heat because I needed the exercise or to chatter like an ape or to stand in the doorway making faces at a Hindu woman or to watch thee do it? Here I am, and here I stay until yet more news comes!"

"Then are we to wait here? Are we to swelter in Siroeh, eating up our brother's hospitality, until thy messengers see fit to come and tell us that this scare of thine is past?"

"Nay!" said the Risaldar. "I said that I wait here! Return now to your own homes, each of you. But be in readiness. I am old, but I can ride still. I can round you up. Has any a better horse than mine? If he has, let him make exchange."

"There will be horses for the looting if this revolt of thine breaks out!"

"True! There will be horses for the looting! Well, I wait here then and, when the trouble comes, I can count on thirteen of my blood to carry swords behind me?"

"Aye, when the trouble comes!"

There was a chorus of assent, and the Risaldar arose to let his sons and grandsons file past him. He, who had beggared himself to give each one of them a start in life, felt a little chagrined that they should now refuse to exchange horses with him; but his eye glistened none the less at the sight of their stalwart frames and at the thought of what a fighting unit he could bring to serve the Raj.

"All, then, for England!" he exclaimed.

"Nay, all for thee!" said his eldest−born. "We fight on whichever side thou sayest!"

"Disloyal one!" growled the Risaldar with a scowl. But he grinned into his beard.

"Well, to your homes, then−−but be ready!"

I.

The midnight jackals howled their discontent while heat−cracked India writhed in stuffy torment that was only one degree less than unendurable. Through the stillness and the blackness of the night came every now and then the high−pitched undulating wails of women, that no one answered−for, under that Tophet−lid of blackness, punctured by the low−hung, steel−white stars, men neither knew nor cared whose child had died. Life and hell−hot torture and indifference−−all three were one.

There was no moon, nothing to make the inferno visible, except that here and there an oil lamp on some housetop glowed like a blood−spot against the blackness. It was a sensation, rather than sight or sound, that betrayed the neighborhood of thousands upon thousands of human beings, sprawling, writhing, twisting upon the roofs, in restless suffering.

There was no pity in the dry, black vault of heaven, nor in the bone−dry earth, nor in the hearts of men, during that hot weather of '57. Men waited for the threatened wrath to come and writhed and held their tongues. And while they waited in sullen Asiatic patience, through the restless silence and the smell−−the suffocating, spice−fed, filth−begotten smell of India−−there ran an undercurrent of even deeper mystery than India had ever known.

Priest−ridden Hanadra, that had seen the downfall of a hundred kings, watched through heat−wearied eyes for another whelming the blood−soaked, sudden flood that was to burst the dam of servitude and rid India of her latest horde of conquerors. But eight hundred yards from where her high brick walls lifted their age−scars in the stifling reek, gun−chains jingled in a courtyard, and, sharp−clicking on age−old flagstones, rose the ring of horses' feet.

Section Number One of a troop of Bengal Horse Artillery was waiting under arms. Sabered and grim and ready stood fifty of the finest men that England could produce, each man at his horse's head; and blacker even than the night loomed the long twelve−pounders, in tow behind their limbers. Sometimes a trace−chain jingled as a wheel−horse twitched his flank; and sometimes a man spoke in a low voice, or a horse stamped on the pavement; but they seemed like black graven images of war−gods, half−smothered in the reeking darkness. And above them, from a window that overlooked the courtyard, shone a solitary lamp that glistened here and there upon the sleek black guns and flickered on the saber−hilts, and deepened the already dead−black atmosphere of mystery.

From the room above, where the lamp shone behind gauze curtains came the sound of voices; and in the deepest, death−darkest shadow of the door below there stood a man on guard whose fingers clutched his sword−hilt and whose breath came heavily. He stood motionless, save for his heaving breast; between his fierce, black mustache and his up−brushed, two−pointed beard, his white teeth showed through parted lips. But he gave no other sign that he was not some Rajput princeling's image carved out of the night.

He was an old man, though, for all his straight back and military carriage. The night concealed his shabbiness; but it failed to hide the medals on his breast, one bronze, one silver, that told of campaigns already a generation gone. And his patience was another sign of age; a younger man of his blood and training would have been pacing to and fro instead of standing still.

He stood still even when footsteps resounded on the winding stair above and a saber−ferrule clanked from step to step. The gunners heard and stood squarely to their horses. There was a rustling and a sound of shifting feet, and, a "Whoa,−−you!" to an irritated horse; but the Rajput stayed motionless until the footsteps reached the door. Then he took one step forward, faced about and saluted.

"Salaam, Bellairs sahib!" boomed his deep−throated voice, and Lieutenant Bellairs stepped back with a start into the doorway again−−one hand on his sword−hilt. The Indian moved sidewise to where the lamplight from the room above could fall upon his face.

"Salaam, Bellairs sahib!" he boomed again.

Then the lieutenant recognized him.

"You, Mahommed Khan!" he exclaimed. "You old war−dog, what brought you here? Heavens, how you startled me! What good wind brought you?"

"Nay! It seems it was an ill wind, sahib!"

"What ill wind? I'm glad to see you!"

"The breath of rumor, sahib!"

"What rumor brought you?"

"Where a man's honor lies, there is he, in the hour of danger! Is all well with the Raj, sahib?"

"With the Raj? How d'you mean, Risaldar?"

Mahommed Khan pointed to the waiting guns and smiled.

"In my days, sahib," he answered, "men seldom exercised the guns at night!"

"I received orders more than three hours ago to bring my section in to Jundhra immediately−−immediately−−and not a word of explanation!"

"Orders, sahib? And you wait?"

"They seem to have forgotten that I'm married, and by the same token, so do you! What else could I do but wait? My wife can't ride with the section; she isn't strong enough, for one thing; and besides, there's no knowing what this order means; there might be trouble to face of some kind. I've sent into Hanadra to try to drum up an escort for her and I'm waiting here until it comes."

The Risaldar stroked at his beard reflectively.

"We of the service, sahib," he answered, "obey orders at the gallop when they come. When orders come to ride, we ride!'"

Bellairs winced at the thrust.

"That's all very fine, Risaldar. But how about my wife? What's going to happen to her, if I leave her here alone and unprotected?"

"Or to me, sahib? Is my sword−arm withered? Is my saber rusted home?"

"You, old friend! D'you mean to tell me−−"

The Risaldar saluted him again.

"Will you stay here and guard her?"

"Nay, sahib! Being not so young as thou art, I know better!"

"What in Tophet do you mean, Mahommed Khan?"

"I mean, sahib,"−−the Indian's voice was level and deep, but it vibrated strangely, and his eyes glowed as though war−lights were being born again behind them−−"that not for nothing am I come! I heard what thy orders were and−−"

"How did you hear what my orders were?"

"My half−brother came hurrying with the news, sahib. I hastened! My horse lies dead one kos from Hanadra here!"

The lieutenant laughed.

"At last, Mahommed? That poor old screw of yours? So he's dead at last, eh? So his time had come at last!"

"We be not all rich men who serve the Raj!" said the Risaldar with dignity. "Ay, sahib, his time was come! And when our time comes may thou and I, sahib, die as he did, with our harness on! What said thy orders, sahib? Haste? Then yonder lies the road, through the archway!"

"But, tell me, Risaldar, what brought you here in such a hurry?"

"A poor old screw, sahib, whose time was come−−even as thou hast said!"

"Mahommed Khan, I'm sorry−−very sorry, if I insulted you! I−−I'm worried−−I didn't stop to think. I−−old friend, I−−"

"It is forgotten, sahib!"

"Tell me−−what are these rumors you have heard?"

"But one rumor, sahib−war! Uprising−−revolution−−treachery−−all India waits the word to rise, sahib!"

"You mean−−?"

"Mutiny among the troops, and revolution north, south, east and west!"

"Here, too, in Hanadra?"

"Here, too, in Hanadra, sahib! Here they will be among the first to rise!"

"Oh, come! I can't believe that! How was it that my orders said nothing of it then?"

"That, sahib, I know not−−not having written out thy orders! I heard that thy orders came. I knew, as I have known this year past, what storm was brewing. I knew, too, that the heavenborn, thy wife, is here. I am thy servant, sahib, as I was thy father's servant−−we serve one Queen; thy honor is my honor. Entrust thy memsahib to my keeping!"

"You will guard her?"

"I will bring her in to Jundhra!"

"You alone?"

"Nay, sahib! I, and my sons, and my sons' sons−−thirteen men all told!"

"That is good of you, Mahommed Khan. Where are your sons?"

"Leagues from here, sahib. I must bring them. I need a horse."

"And while you are gone?"

"My half−brother, sahib−−he is here for no other purpose−−he will answer to me for her safety!"

"All right, Mahommed Khan, and thank you! Take my second charger, if you care to; he is a little saddle−sore, but your light weight−−"

"Sahib−−listen! Between here and Siroeh, where my eldest−born and his three sons live, lie seven leagues. And on from there to Lungra, where the others live, are three more leagues. I need a horse this night!"

"What need of thirteen men, Mahommed? You are sufficient by yourself, unless a rebellion breaks out. If it did, why, you and thirteen others would be swamped as surely as you alone!"

"Thy father and I, sahib, rode through the guns at Dera thirteen strong! Alone, I am an old man−−not without honor, but of little use; with twelve young blades behind me, though, these Hindu rabble−−"

"Do you really mean, Mahommed Khan, that you think Hanadra here will rise?"

"The moment you are gone, sahib!"

"Then, that settles it! The memsahib rides with me!"

"Nay, listen, sahib! Of a truth, thou art a hot−head as thy father was before thee! Thus will it be better. If the heavenborn, thy wife, stays behind, these rabble here will think that the section rides out to exercise, because of the great heat of the sun by day; they will watch for its return, and wait for the parking of the guns before they put torch to the mine that they have laid!"

"The mine? D'you mean they've−−"

"Who knows, sahib? But I speak in metaphor. When the guns are parked again and the horses stabled and the men asleep, the rabble, being many, might dare anything!"

"You mean, you think that they−−"

"I mean, sahib, that they will take no chances while they think the guns are likely to return!"

"But, if I take the memsahib with me?"

"They will know then, sahib, that the trap is open and the bird flown! Know you how fast news travels? Faster than the guns, Sahib! There will be an ambuscade, from which neither man, nor gun, nor horse, nor memsahib will escape!"

"But if you follow later, it will mean the same thing! When they see you ride off on a spent horse, with twelve swords and the memsahib−− d'you mean that they won't ambuscade you?"

"They might, sahib−−and again, they might not! Thirteen men and a woman ride faster than a section of artillery, and ride where the guns would jam hub−high against a tree−trunk! And thy orders, sahib−− are thy orders nothing?"

"Orders! Yes, confound it! But they know I'm married. They know−−"

"Sahib, listen! When the news came to me I was at Siroeh, dangling a great−grandson on my knee. There were no orders, but it seemed the Raj had need of me. I rode! Thou, sahib, hast orders. I am here to guard thy wife−−my honor is thy honor−−take thou the guns. Yonder lies the road!"

The grim old warrior's voice thrilled with the throb of loyalty, as he stood erect and pointed to the shadowy archway through which the road wound to the plain beyond.

"Sahib, I taught thy father how to use his sword! I nursed thee when thou wert little. Would I give three false counsel now? Ride, sahib−−ride!"

Bellairs turned away and looked at his charger, a big, brown Khaubuli stallion, named for the devil and true in temper and courage to his name; two men were holding him, ten paces off.

"Such a horse I need this night, Sahib! Thy second charger can keep pace with the guns!"

Bellairs gave a sudden order, and the men led the brute back into his stable.

"Change the saddle to my second charger!" he ordered.

Then he turned to the Risaldar again, with hand outstretched.

"I'm ashamed of myself, Mahommed Khan!" he said, with a vain attempt to smile. "I should have gone an hour ago! Please take my horse Shaitan, and make such disposition for my wife's safety as you see fit. Follow as and when you can; I trust you, and I shall be grateful to you whatever happens!"

"Well spoken, Sahib! I knew thou wert a man! We who serve the Raj have neither sons, nor wives, nor sweethearts! Allah guard you, Sahib! The section waits−−and the Service can not wait!"

"One moment while I tell my wife!"

"Halt, Sahib! Thou hast said good−by a thousand times! A woman's tears−−are they heart−meat for a soldier when the bits are champing? Nay! See, sahib; they bring thy second charger! Mount! I will bring thy wife to Jundhra for thee! The Service waits!"

The lieutenant turned and mounted.

"Very well, Mahommed Khan!" he said. "I know you're right! Section! Prepare to mount!" he roared, and the stirrups rang in answer to him. "Mount! Good−by, Mahommed Khan! Good luck to you! Section, right! Trot, march!"

With a crash and the clattering of iron shoes on stone the guns jingled off into the darkness, were swallowed by the gaping archway and rattled out on the plain.

The Risaldar stood grimly where he was until the last hoof−beat and bump of gun−wheel had died away into the distance; then he turned and climbed the winding stairway to the room where the lamp still shone through gauzy curtains.

On a dozen roof−tops, where men lay still and muttered, brown eyes followed the movements of the section and teeth that were betel−stained grinned hideously.

From a nearby temple, tight−packed between a hundred crowded houses, came a wailing, high−pitched solo sung to Siva−−the Destroyer. And as it died down to a quavering finish it was followed by a ghoulish laugh that echoed and reechoed off the age−old city−wall.

Proud as a Royal Rajput−−and there is nothing else on God's green earth that is even half as proud−−true to his salt, and stout of heart even if he was trembling at the knees, Mahommed Khan, two−medal man and Risaldar, knocked twice on the door of Mrs. Lellairs' room, and entered.

And away in the distance rose the red reflection of a fire ten leagues away. The Mutiny of '57 had blazed out of sullen mystery already, the sepoys were burning their barracks half−way on the road to Jundhra!

And down below, to the shadow where the Risaldar had stood, crept a giant of a man who had no military bearing. He listened once, and sneaked into the deepest black within the doorway and crouched and waited.

II.

Hanadra reeks of history, blood−soaked and mysterious. Temples piled on the site of olden temples; palaces where half−forgotten kings usurped the thrones of conquerors who came from God knows where to conquer older kings; roads built on the bones of conquered armies; houses and palaces and subterranean passages that no man living knows the end of and few even the beginning. Dark corridors and colonnades and hollow walls; roofs that have ears and peep−holes; floors that are undermined by secret stairs; trees that have swayed with the weight of rotting human skulls and have shimmered with the silken bannerets of emperors. Such is Hanadra, half−ruined, and surrounded by a wall that was age−old in the dawn of written history.

Even its environs are mysterious; outside the walls, there are carven, gloomy palaces that once re−echoed to the tinkle of stringed instruments and the love−songs of some sultan's favorite−−now fallen into ruins, or rebuilt to stable horses or shelter guns and stores and men; but eloquent in all their new−smeared whitewash, or in crumbling decay, of long−since dead intrigue. No places, those, for strong men to live alone in, where night−breezes whisper through forgotten passages and dry teak planking recreaks to the memory of dead men's footsteps.

But strong men are not the only makings of an Empire, nor yet the only sufferers. Wherever the flag of England flies above a distant outpost or droops in the stagnant moisture of an Eastern swamp, there are the graves of England's women. The bones that quarreling jackals crunch among the tombstones−−the peace along the clean−kept borderline−− the pride of race and conquest and the cleaner pride of work well done, these are not man's only. Man does the work, but he is held to it and cheered on by the girl who loves him.

And so, above a stone−flagged courtyard, in a room that once had echoed to the laughter of a sultan's favorite, it happened that an English girl of twenty−one was pacing back and forth. Through the open curtained window she had seen her husband lead his command out through the echoing archway to the plain beyond; she had heard his boyish voice bark out the command and had listened to the rumble of the gun−wheels dying in the distance−−for the last time possibly. She knew, as many an English girl has known, that she was alone, one white woman amid a swarm of sullen Aryans, and that she must follow along the road the guns had taken, served and protected by nothing more than low−caste natives.

And yet she was dry−eyed, and her chin was high; for they are a strange breed, these Anglo−Saxon women who follow the men they love to the lonely danger−zone. Ruth Bellairs could have felt no joy in her position; she had heard her husband growling his complaint at being forced to leave her, and she guessed what her danger was. Fear must have shrunk her heartbeats and loneliness have tried her courage. But there was an ayah in the room with her, a low−caste woman of the conquered race; and pride of country came to her assistance. She was firm−lipped and, to outward seeming, brave as she was beautiful.

Even when the door resounded twice to the sharp blow of a saber−hilt, and the ayah's pock−marked ebony took on a shade of gray, she stood like a queen with an army at her back and neither blanched nor trembled.

"Who is that, ayah?" she demanded.

The ayah shrank into herself and showed the whites of her eyes and grinned, as a pariah dog might show its teeth−−afraid, but scenting carrion.

"Go and see!"

The ayah shuddered and collapsed, babbling incoherencies and calling on a horde of long−neglected gods to witness she was innocent. She clutched strangely at her breast and used only one hand to drag her shawl around her face. While she babbled she glanced wild−eyed around the long, low−ceilinged room. Ruth Bellairs looked down at her pityingly and went to the door herself and opened it.

"Salaam, memsahib!" boomed a deep voice from the darkness.

Ruth Bellairs started and the ayah screamed.

"Who are you? Enter−−let me see you!"

A black beard and a turban and the figure of a man−−and then white teeth and a saber−hilt and eyes that gleamed moved forward from the darkness.

"It is I, Mahommed Khan!" boomed the voice again, and the Risaldar stepped out into the lamplight and closed the door behind him. Then, with a courtly, long−discarded sweep of his right arm, he saluted.

"At the heavenborn's service!"

"Mahommed Khan! Thank God!"

The old man's shabbiness was very obvious as he faced her, with his back against the iron−studded door; but he stood erect as a man of thirty, and his medals and his sword−hilt and his silver scabbard−tip were bright.

"Tell me, Mahommed Khan, you have seen my husband?"

He bowed.

"You have spoken to him?"

The old man bowed again.

"He left you in my keeping, heavenborn. I am to bring you safe to Jundhra!"

She held her hand out and he took it like a cavalier, bending until he could touch her fingers with his lips.

"What is the meaning of this hurrying of the guns to Jundhra, Risaldar?"

"Who knows, memsahib! The orders of the Sirkar come, and we of the service must obey. I am thy servant and the Sirkar's!"

"You, old friend−−that were servant, as you choose to call it, to my husband's father! I am a proud woman to have such friends at call!" She pointed to the ayah, recovering sulkily and rearranging the shawl about her shoulders. "That I call service, Risaldar. She cowers when a knock comes at the door! I need you, and you answer a hardly spoken prayer; what is friendship, if yours is not?"

The Risaldar bowed low again.

"I would speak with that ayah, heavenborn!" he muttered, almost into his beard. She could hardly catch the words.

"I can't get her to speak to me at all tonight, Mahommed Khan. She's terrified almost out of her life at something. But perhaps you can do better. Try. Do you want to question her alone?"

"By the heavenborn's favor, yes."

Ruth walked down the room toward the window, drew the curtain back and leaned her head out where whatever breeze there was might fan her cheek. The Risaldar strode over to where the ayah cowered by an inner doorway.

"She−Hindu−dog!" he growled at her. "Mother of whelps! Louse−ridden scavenger of sweepings! What part hast thou in all this treachery? Speak!"

The ayah shrank away from him and tried to scream, but he gripped her by the throat and shook her.

"Speak!" he growled again.

But his ten iron fingers held her in a vise−like grip and she could not have answered him if she had tried to.

"O Risaldar!" called Ruth suddenly, with her head still out of the window. He released the ayah and let her tumble as she pleased into a heap.

"Heavenborn?"

"What is that red glow on the skyline over yonder?"

"A burning, heavenborn!"

"A burning? What burning? Funeral pyres? It's very big for funeral pyres!"

"Nay, heavenborn!"

"What, then?"

She was still unfrightened, unsuspicious of the untoward. The Risaldar's arrival on the scene had quite restored her confidence and she felt content to ride with him to Jundhra on the morrow.

"Barracks, heavenborn!"

"Barracks? What barracks?"

"There is but one barracks between here and Jundhra."

"Then−−then−−then−−what has happened, Mahommed Khan?"

"The worst has happened, heavenborn!"

He stood between her and the ayah, so that she could not see the woman huddled on the floor.

"The worst? You mean then−−my−−my−−husband−−you don't mean that my husband−−"

"I mean, heavenborn that there is insurrection! All India is ablaze from end to end. These dogs here in Hanadra wait to rise because they think the section will return here in an hour or two; then they propose to burn it, men, guns and horses, like snakes in the summer grass. It is well that the section will not return! We will ride out safely before morning!"

"And, my husband−−he knew−−all this−−before he left me here?"

"Nay! That he did not! Had I told him, he had disobeyed his orders and shamed his service; he is young yet, and a hothead! He will be far along the road to Jundhra before he knows what burns. And then he will remember that he trusts me and obey orders and press on!"

"And you knew and did not tell him!"

"Of a truth I knew!"

She stood in silence for a moment, gazing at the red glow on the skyline, and then turned to read, if she could, what was on the grim, grizzled face of Mahommed Khan.

"The ayah!" he growled. "I have yet to ask questions of the ayah. Have I permission to take her to the other room?"

She was leaning through the window again and did not answer him.

"Who's that moving in the shadow down below?" she asked him suddenly.

He leaned out beside her and gazed into the shadow. Then he called softly in a tongue she did not know and some one rose up from the shadow and answered him.

"Are we spied on, Risaldar?"

"Nay. Guarded, heavenborn! That man is my half−brother. May I take the ayah through that doorway?"

"Why not question her in here?"

The mystery and sense of danger were getting the better of her; she was thoroughly afraid now−−afraid to be left alone in the room for a minute even.

"There are things she would not answer in thy presence!"

"Very well. Only, please be quick!"

He bowed. Swinging the door open, he pushed the ayah through it to the room beyond. Ruth was left alone, to watch the red glow on the skyline and try to see the outline of the watcher in the gloom below. No sound came through the heavy teak door that the Risaldar had slammed behind him, and no sound came from him who watched; but from the silence of the night outside and from dark corners of the room that she was in and from the roof and walls and floor here came little eerie noises that made her flesh creep, as though she were being stared at by eyes she could not see. She felt that she must scream, or die, unless she moved; and she was too afraid to move, and by far too proud to scream! At last she tore herself away from the window and ran to a low divan and lay on it, smothering her face among the cushions. It seemed an hour before the Risaldar came out again, and then he took her by surprise.

"Heavenborn!" he said. She looked up with a start, to find him standing close beside her.

"Mahommed Khan! You're panting! What ails you?"

"The heat, heavenborn−−and I am old."

His left hand was on his saber−hilt, thrusting it toward her respectfully; she noticed that it trembled.

"Have I the heavenborn's leave to lock the ayah in that inner room?"

"Why, Risaldar?"

"The fiend had this in her possession!" He showed her a thin−bladed dagger with an ivory handle; his own hand shook as he held it out to her, and she saw that there were beads of perspiration on his wrist. "She would have killed thee!"

"Oh, nonsense! Why, she wouldn't dare!"

"She confessed before she−−she confessed! Have I the heavenborn's leave?"

"If you wish it."

"And to keep the key?"

"I suppose so, if you think it wise."

He strode to the inner door and locked it and hid the key in an inside pocket of his tunic.

"And now, heavenborn," he said, "I crave your leave to bring my half− brother to the presence!"

He scarcely waited for an answer, but walked to the window, leaned out of it and whistled. A minute later he was answered by the sound of fingernails scrabbling on the outer door. He turned the key and opened it.

"Enter!" he ordered.

Barefooted and ragged, but as clean as a soldier on parade and with huge knots of muscles bulging underneath his copper skin, a Rajput entered, bowing his six feet of splendid manhood almost to the floor.

"This, heavenborn, is my half−brother, son of a low−born border−woman, whom my father chose to honor thus far! The dog is loyal!"

"Salaam!" said Ruth, with little interest.

"Salaam, memsahib!" muttered the shabby Rajput. "Does any watch?" demanded the Risaldar in Hindustanee. "Aye, one."

"And he?"

"Is he of whom I spoke."

"Where watches he?"

"There is a hidden passage leading from the archway; he peeps out through a crack, having rolled back so far the stone that seals it." He held his horny fingers about an inch apart to show the distance.

"Couldst thou approach unseen?"

The Rajput nodded.

"And there are no others there?"

"No others."

"Has thy strength left thee, or thy cunning?"

"Nay!"

"Then bring him!"

Without a word in answer the giant turned and went, and the Risaldar made fast the door behind him. Ruth sat with her face between her hands, trying not to cry or shudder, but obsessed and overpowered by a sense of terror. The mystery that surrounded her was bad enough; but this mysterious ordering and coming to and fro among her friends was worse than horrible. She knew, though, that it would be useless to question Mahommed Khan before he chose to speak. They waited there in the dimly lighted room for what seemed tike an age again; she, pale and tortured by weird imaginings; he, grim and bolt−upright like a statue of a warrior. Then sounds came from the stairs again and the Risaldar hurried to the door and opened it.

In burst the Risaldar's half−brother, breathing heavily and bearing a load nearly as big as he was.

"The pig caught my wrist within the opening!" he growled, tossing his gagged and pinioned burden on the floor. "See where he all but broke it!"

"What is thy wrist to the service of the Raj? Is he the right one?"

"Aye!" He stooped and tore a twisted loin−cloth from his victim's face, and the Risaldar walked to the lamp and brought it, to hold it above the prostrate form. Ruth left the divan and stood between the men, terrified by she knew not what fear, but drawn into the lamplight by insuperable curiosity.

"This, heavenborn," said the Risaldar, prodding at the man with his scabbard−point, "is none other than the High Priest of Kharvani's temple here, the arch−ringleader in all the treachery afoot−−now hostage for thy safety!"

He turned to his half−brother. "Unbind the thing he lies with!" he commanded, and the giant unwrapped a twisted piece of linen from the High Priest's mouth.

"So the big fox peeped through the trapdoor, because he feared to trust the other foxes; and the big fox fell into the trap!" grinned the Risaldar. "Bring me that table over yonder, thou!"

The half−brother did as he was told.

"Lay it here, legs upward, on the floor.

"Now, bind him to it−−an arm to a leg and a leg to a leg.

"Remove his shoes.

"Put charcoal in yon brazier. Light it. Bring it hither!"

He seized a brass tongs, chose a glowing coal and held it six inches from the High Priest's naked foot.

Ruth screamed.

"Courage, heavenborn! Have courage! This is naught to what he would have done to thee! .... Now, speak, thou priest of infidels! What plans are laid and who will rise and when?"

III.

"Sergeant!"

"Sir!"

The close−cropped, pipe−clayed non−commissioned officer spurred his horse into a canter until his scabbard clattered at young Bellairs' boot. Nothing but the rattling and the jolting of the guns and ammunition−wagon was audible, except just on ahead of them the click− clack, click−click−clack of the advance−guard. To the right and left of them the shadowy forms of giant banian−trees loomed and slid past them as they had done for the past four hours, and for ten paces ahead they could see the faintly outlined shape of the trunk road that they followed. The rest was silence and a pall of blackness obscuring everything. They had ridden along a valley, but they had emerged on rising ground and there was one spot of color in the pall now, or else a hole in it.

"What d'you suppose that is burning over there?"

"I couldn't say, sir."

"How far away is it?"

"Very hard to tell on a night like this, sir. It might be ten miles away and might be twenty. By my reckoning it's on our road, though, and somewhere between here and Jundhra."

"So it seems to me; our road swings round to the right presently, doesn't it? That'll lead us right to it. That would make it Doonha more or less. D'you suppose it's at Doonha?"

"I was thinking it might be, sir. If it's Doonha, it means that the sepoy barracks and all the stores are burning−−there's nothing else there that would make all that flame!"

"There are two companies of the Thirty−third there, too."

"Yes, sir, but they're under canvas; tents would blaze up, but they'd die down again in a minute. That fire's steady and growing bigger!"

"It's the sepoy barracks, then!"

"Seems so to me, sir!"

"Halt!" roared Bellairs. The advance−guard kicked up a little shower of sparks, trace−chains slacked with a jingle and the jolting ceased. Bellairs rode up to the advance−guard.

"Now, Sergeant," he ordered, "it looks as though that were the Doonha barracks burning over yonder. There's no knowing, though, what it is. Send four men on, two hundred yards ahead of you, and you and the rest keep a good two hundred yards ahead of the guns. See that the men keep on the alert, and mind that they spare their horses as much as possible. If there's going to be trouble, we may just as well be ready for it!"

"Very good, sir!"

"Go ahead, then!"

At a word from the sergeant, four men clattered off and were swallowed in the darkness. A minute later the advance−guard followed them and then, after another minute's pause, young Bellairs' voice was raised into a ringing shout again.

"Section, advance! Trot, march!"

The trace−chains tightened, and the clattering, bumping, jingling procession began again, its rear brought up by the six−horse ammunition− wagon. They rode speechless for the best part of an hour, each man's eyes on the distant conflagration that had begun now to light up the whole of the sky ahead of them. They still rode in darkness, but they seemed to be approaching the red rim of the Pit. Huge, billowing clouds of smoke, red−lit on the under side, belched upward to the blackness overhead, and a something that was scarcely sound−− for it was yet too distant−−warned them that it was no illusion they were riding into. The conflagration grew. It seemed to be nearly white−hot down below.

Bellairs wet his finger and held it extended upward.

"There's no wind that I can feel!" he muttered. "And yet, if that were a grass−fire, there'd be game and rats and birds and things−− some of 'em would bolt this way. That's the Doonha barracks burning or I'm a black man, which the Lord forbid!"

A minute later, every man in the section pricked up his ears. There was no order given; but a sensation ran the whole length of it and a movement from easy riding to tense rigidity that could be felt by some sixth sense. Every man was listening, feeling, groping with his senses for something he could neither hear as yet nor see, but that he knew was there. And then, far−distant yet−−not above, but under the jolting of the gun−wheels and the rattle of the scabbards−− they could hear the clickety−clickety−clickety−click of a horse hard− ridden.

They had scarcely caught that sound, they had barely tightened up their bridle−reins, when another sound, one just as unmistakable, burst out in front of them. A ragged, ill−timed volley ripped out from somewhere near the conflagration and was answered instantly by one that was close−ripped like the fire of heavy ordnance. And then one of the advance−guard wheeled his horse and drove his spurs home rowel−deep. He came thundering back along the road with his scabbard out in the wind behind him and reined up suddenly when his horse's forefeet were abreast of the lieutenant.

"There's some one coming, sir, hard as he can gallop! He's one of our men by the sound of him. His horse is shod−−and I thought I saw steel when the fire−light fell on him a minute ago!"

"Are you sure there's only one?"

"Sure, sir! You can hear him now!"

"All right! Fall in behind me!"

Bellairs felt his sword−hilt and cocked a pistol stealthily, but he gave no orders to the section. This might be a native soldier run amuck, and it might be a messenger; but in either case, friend or foe, if there was only one man he could deal with him alone.

"Halt!" roared the advance−guard suddenly. But the horse's hoof−beats never checked for a single instant.

"Halt, you! Who comes there?"

"Friend!" came the answer, in an accent that was unmistakable.

"What friend? Where are you going?"

One of the advance−guard reined his horse across the road. The others followed suit and blocked the way effectually. "Halt!" they roared in unison.

The main body of the advance came up with them.

"Who is he?" shouted the sergeant.

"We'll soon see! Here he comes!"

"Out of my way!" yelled a voice, as a foamed−flecked horse burst out of the darkness like an apparition and bore straight down on them−−his head bored a little to one side, the red rims of his nostrils wide distended and his whole sense and energy, and strength concentrated on pleasing the speed−hungry Irishman who rode him. He flashed into them head−on, like a devil from the outer darkness. His head touched a man's knee−−and he rose and tried to jump him! "His breast crashed full into the obstruction and horse and gunner crashed down to the road.

A dozen arms reached out−−twelve horses surged in a clattering melee−− two hands gripped the reins and four arms seized the rider, and in a second the panting charger was brought up all−standing. The sergeant thrust his grim face closer and peered at their capture.

"Good−−, if it ain't an officer!" he exclaimed. "I beg your pardon, sir!"

And at that instant the section rattled, up behind them, with Bellairs in the lead.

"Halt!" roared Bellairs. "What's this?"

"Bloody murder, arson, high treason, mutiny and death! Blood and onions, man! Don't your men know an officer when they see one? Who are you? Are you Bellairs? Then why in God's name didn't you say so sooner? What have you waited for?

How many hours is it since you got the message through from Jundhra? Couldn't you see the barracks burning? Who am I−−I'm Captain O'Rourke, of the Thirty−third, sent to see what you're doing on the road, that's who I am! A full−fledged; able−bodied captain wasted in a crisis, just because you didn't choose to hurry! Poison take your confounded gunners, sir! Have they nothing better to engage them than holding up officers on the Queen's trunk road?

"Supposing you tell me what's the matter?" suggested young Bellairs, prompt as are most of his breed to appear casual the moment there was cause to feel excited.

"Your gunners have taken all my breath, sir. I can't speak!"

"You shouldn't take chances with a section of artillery! They're not like infantry−−they don't sleep all the time−−you can't ride through them as a rule!"

"Don't sleep, don't they! Then what have you been doing on the road? And what are you standing here for? Ride, man, ride! You're wanted!"

"Get out of the way, then!" suggested Bellairs, and Captain O'Rourke legged his panting charger over to the roadside.

"Advance−guard, forward, trot!" commanded the lieutenant.

"Have you brought your wife with you?" demanded O'Rourke, peering into the jingling blackness.

"No. Of course not. Why?"

"`Of course not! Why?' says the man! Hell and hot porridge! Why, the whole of India's ablaze from end to end−−the sepoys have mutinied to a man, and the rest have joined them! There's bloody murder doing−− they've shot their officers−−Hammond's dead and Carstairs and Welfleet and heaven knows who else. They've burned their barracks and the stores and they're trying to seize the magazine. If they get that, God help every one. They're short of ammunition as it is, but two companies of the Thirty−third can't hold out for long against that horde. You'll be in the nick of time! Hurry, man! For the love of anything you like to name, get a move on!"

IV.

"Trot, march!

"Canter!"

Bellairs was thinking of his wife, alone in Hanadra, unprotected except by a sixty−year−old Risaldar and a half−brother who was a civilian and an unknown quantity. There were cold chills running down his spine and a sickening sensation in his stomach. He rode ahead of the guns, with O'Rourke keeping pace beside him. He felt that he hated O'Rourke, hated everything, hated the Service, and the country−− and the guns, that could put him into such a fiendish predicament.

O'Rourke broke silence first.

"Who is with your wife?" he demanded suddenly.

"Heaven knows! I left her under the protection of Risaldar Mahommed Khan, but he was to ride off for an escort for her."

"Not your father's old Risaldar?" asked O'Rourke.

"The same."

"Then thank God! I'd sooner trust him than I would a regiment. He'll bring her in alive or slit the throats of half Asia−−maybe 'he'll do both! Come, that's off our minds! She's safer with him than she would be here. Have you lots of ammunition?"

"I brought all I had with me at Hanadra."

"Good! What you'll need tonight is grape!"

"I've lots of it. It's nearly all grape."

"Hurrah! Then we'll treat those dirty mutineers to a dose or two of pills they won't fancy! Come on, man−−set the pace a little faster!"

"Why didn't my orders say anything about a mutiny or bringing in my wife?"

"Dunno! I didn't write 'em. I can guess, though. There'd be something like nine reasons. For one thing, they'd credit you with sense enough to bring her in without being told. For another, the messenger who took the note might have got captured on the way−−they wouldn't want to tell the sepoys more than they could help. Then there'd be something like a hurry. They're attacked there too−−can't even send us assistance. Told us to waylay you and make use of you. Maybe they forgot your wife−−maybe they didn't. It's a devil of a business anyhow!"

It was difficult to talk at the speed that they were making, with their own horses breathing heavily, O'Rourke's especially; the guns thundering along behind them and the advance−guard clattering in front, and their attention distracted every other minute by the noise of volleys on ahead and the occasional staccato rattle of independent firing. The whole sky was now alight with the reflection of the burning barracks and they could see the ragged outlines of the cracking walls silhouetted against the blazing red within. One mile or less from the burning buildings they could see, too, the occasional flash of rifles where the two companies of the Thirty−third, Honorable East India Company's Light Infantry, held out against the mutineers.

"Why did they mutiny?" asked Bellairs.

"God knows! Nobody knows! Nobody knows anything! I'm thinking−−"

"Thinking what?"

"Forrester−Carter is commanding. We'll settle this business pretty quickly, now you've come. Then−−Steady, boy! Steady! Hold up! This poor horse of mine is just about foundered, by the feel of him. He'll reach Doonha, though. Then we'll ask Carter to make a dash on Hanadra and bring Mrs. Bellairs−−maybe we'll meet her and the Risaldar half−way−−who knows? The sepoys wouldn't expect that, either. The move'd puzzle 'em−−it'd be a good move, to my way of thinking."

"Let's hope Carter will consent!" prayed Bellairs fervently. "Now, what's the lay of things?"

"Couldn't tell you! When I left, our men were surrounded. I had to burst through the enemy to get away. Ours are all around the magazine and the sepoys are on every side of them. You'll have to use diagonal fire unless you want to hurt some of our chaps−−sweep 'em cornerwise. There's high ground over to the right there, within four hundred yards of the position. Maybe they're holding it, though−− there's no knowing!"

They could hear the roar of the flames now, and could see the figures of sepoys running here and there. The rattle of musketry was incessant. They could hear howls and yells and bugle−calls blown at random by the sepoys, and once, in answer as it seemed to a more than usually savage chorus from the enemy−−a chorus that was punctuated by a raging din of intermittent rifle−fire−−a ringing cheer.

"They must be in a tight hole!" muttered Bellairs. "Answer that, men! All together, now! Let 'em know we're coming."

The men rose in their stirrups all together, and sent roaring through the blackness the deep−throated "Hip−hip−hur−r−a−a−a−a−a!" that has gladdened more than one beleaguered British force in the course of history. It is quite different from the "Hur−o−a−o−a−u−r−rh" of a forlorn hope, or the high−pitched note of pleasure that signals the end of a review. It means "Hold on, till we get there, boys!" and it carries its meaning, clear and crisp and unmistakable, in its note.

The two beleaguered companies heard it and answered promptly with another cheer.

"By gad, they must be in a hole!" remarked Bellairs.

British soldiers do not cheer like that, all together, unless there is very good reason to feel cheerless. They fight, each man according to his temperament, swearing or laughing, sobbing or singing comic songs, until the case looks grim. Then, though, the same thrill runs through the whole of them, the same fire blazes in their eyes, and the last ditch that they line has been known to be a grave for the enemy.

"Trumpeter! Sound close−order!"

The trumpet rang. The advance−guard drew rein for the section to catch up. The guns drew abreast of one another and the mounted gunners formed in a line, two deep, in front of them. The ammunition−wagon trailed like a tail behind.

"That high ground over there, I think!" suggested O'Rourke.

"Thank you, sir. Section, right! Trot, march! Canter!"

Crash went the guns and the following wagon across the roadside ditch. The tired horses came up to the collar as service−horses always will, generous to the last ounce of strength they have in them.

"Gallop!"

The limbers bumped and jolted and the short−handled whips cracked like the sound of pistol−practise. Blind, unreconnoitered, grim−− like a black thunderbolt loosed into the blackness−−the two guns shot along a hollow, thundered up a ridge and burst into the fire−light up above the mutineers, in the last place where any one expected them. A howl came from the road that they had left, a hundred sepoys had rushed down to block their passage the moment that their cheer had rung above the noise of battle.

"Action−−front!" roared young Bellairs, and the muzzles swung round at the gallop, jerked into position by the wheeling teams.

"With case, at four hundred!"

The orders were given and obeyed almost before the guns had lost their motion. The charges had been rammed into the greedy muzzles before the horses were away, almost−−and that takes but a second−−the horses vanish like blown smoke when the game begins. A howl from the mutineers told that they were seen; a volley from the British infantry announced that they were yet in time; and "boom−boom!" went both guns together.

The grapeshot whined and shrieked, and the ranks of the sepoys wilted, mown down as though a scythe had swept them. Once, and once only, they gathered for a charge on the two guns; but they were met half−way up the rise by a shrieking blast of grape that ripped through them and took the heart out of them; and the grape was followed by well− aimed volleys from behind. Then they drew off to sulk and make fresh plans at a distance, and Bellairs took his section unmolested into the Thirty−third−lined rampart round the magazine.

"What kept you, sir?" demanded Colonel Forrester−Carter, nodding to him in answer to his salute and holding out his right arm while a sergeant bandaged it.

"My wife, sir−−I−−"

"Where is she? Didn't you bring her?"

"No, sir−−I−−"

"Where is she?"

"Still at Hanadra, sir−−I−−"

"Let the men fall in! Call the roll at once!"

"There was nothing in my orders, sir, about−−" But Colonel Carter cut him short with a motion and turned his back on him.

"Much obliged, Sergeant," he said, slipping his wounded arm into an improvised sling. "How many wagons have we here?"

"Four, sir."

"And horses?"

"All shot dead except your charger, sir."

"Oh! Ask Captain Trevor to come here."

The sergeant disappeared into the shadows, and a moment later Captain Trevor came running up and saluted.

"There are seven wounded, sir, and nineteen dead," he reported.

"Better than I had hoped, Trevor! Will you set a train to that magazine, please, and blow it up the moment we are at a safe distance?"

Trevor seemed surprised, but he saluted and said nothing.

"O'Rourke! Please see about burying the dead at once. Mr. Bellairs, let me have two horses, please, and their drivers, from each gun. Sergeant! See about putting the wounded into the lightest of the wagons and harness in four gun−horses the best way you can manage."

"Very good, sir."

"Which is your best horseman, Mr. Bellairs? Is his horse comparatively fresh? I'll need him to gallop with a message. I'll dictate it to Captain O'Rourke as soon as he is ready. Let the gunner stay here close to me."

Bellairs sought out his best man and the freshest−seeming horse in wondering silence. He felt sick with anxiety, for what could one lone veteran Risaldar do to protect Mrs. Bellairs against such a horde as was in Hanadra? He looked at the barracks, which were still blazing heavenward and illuminating the whole country−side, and shuddered as he wondered whether his quarters at Hanadra were in flames yet.

"It's a good job old Carter happened to be here!" he heard one of his men mumble to another. "He's a man, that is−−I'd sooner fight under him than any I know of!"

"What d'you suppose the next move is?" asked the other man.

"I'd bet on it! I'll bet you what you like that−−"

But Bellairs did not hear the rest.

A bugle rang out into the night. The gunners stood by their horses. Even the sentries, posted outside the rampart to guard against alarm, stood to attention, and Colonel Carter, wincing from the pain in his right arm, walked out in front of where the men were lined up.

Captain O'Rourke walked up and saluted him.

"I've arranged to bury them in that trench we dug this evening, sir, when the trouble started. It's not very deep, but it holds them all. I've laid them in it."

"Are you sure they're all dead?"

"I've burnt their fingers with matches, sir. I don't know of any better way to make sure."

"Very well. Can you remember any of the burial service?"

"'Fraid not, sir."

"Um! That's a pity. And I'm afraid I can't spare the time. Take a firing−party, Captain O'Rourke, and give them the last honors, at all events."

A party marched away toward the trench, and several minutes later O'Rourke's voice was heard calling through the darkness, "All ready, sir!"

"Present arms!" ordered the colonel, and the gunners sat their horses with their hilts raised to their hips and the two long lines of infantry stood rigid at the general salute, while five volleys−−bulleted−−barked upward above the grave. They were, answered by sniping from the mutineers, who imagined that reprisals had commenced.

"Now, men!" said Colonel Carter, raising his voice until every officer and man along the line could hear him, "as you must have realized, things are very serious indeed. We are cut off from support, but now that the guns are here to help us, we could either hold out here until relieved or else fight our way into Jundhra, where I have no doubt we are very badly needed. But"−−he spoke more slowly and distinctly now, with a distinct pause between each word−−"there is an officer's lady alone, and practically unprotected at Hanadra. Our duty is clear. You are tired−−I know it. You have had no supper, and will get none. It means forced marching for the rest of this night and a good part of tomorrow and more fighting, possibly on an empty stomach; it means the dust and the heat and the discomfort of the trunk road for all of us and danger of the worst kind instead of safety−−for we shall have farther to go to reach Jundhra. But I would do the same, and you men all know it, for any soldier's wife in my command, or any English woman in India. We will march now on Hanadra. No! No demonstrations, please!"

His uplifted left hand was just in time to check a roar of answering approval.

"Didn't I tell you so?" exclaimed a gunner to the man beside him in an undertone. "Him leave a white woman to face this sort o' music? He'd fight all India first!"

Ten minutes later two companies of men marched out behind the guns, followed by a cart that bore their wounded. As they reached the trunk road they were saluted by a reverberating blast when the magazine that they had fought to hold blew skyward. They turned to cheer the explosion and then settled down to march in deadly earnest and, if need be, to fight a rear−guard action all the way.

And in the opposite direction one solitary gunner rode, hell−bent− for−leather, with a note addressed to "O. C.−−Jundhra." It was short and to the point. It ran:

Have blown up magazine; Mrs. Bellairs at Hanadra;
have gone to rescue her.
(Signed) A. FORRESTER−CARTER (Col.)
per J. O'Rourke

V.

The red glow of barracks burning−−an ayah from whom a dagger has been taken locked in another room−−the knowledge that there are fifty thousand Aryan brothers, itching to rebel, within a stone's throw−−and two lone protectors of an alien race intent on torturing a High Priest, each and every one of these is a disturbing feature. No woman, and least of all a young woman such as Ruth Bellairs, can be blamed for being nervous under the stress of such conditions or for displaying a certain amount of feminine unreasonableness.

She stood shivering for a minute and watched spellbound while Mahommed Khan held the hot coal closer and even closer to the High Priest's naked foot. The priest writhed in anticipation of the agony and turned his eyes away, and as he turned them they met Ruth's. High priests of a religion that includes sooth−saying and prophecy and bribery of gods among its rites are students of human nature, and especially of female human nature. Knowledge of it and of how it may be gulled, and when, is the first essential of their calling. Her pale face, her blue eyes strained in terror, the parted lips and the attitude of tension, these gave him an idea. Before the charcoal touched him, he screamed−−screamed like a wounded horse.

"Mahommed Khan, stop! Stop this instant! I won't have it! I won't have my life, even, on those terms! D'you hear me, sir!"

"Have courage, heavenborn! There is but one way to force a Hindu priest, unless it be by cutting off his revenues−−he must be hurt! This dog is unhurt as yet−−see! The fire has not yet touched his foot!"

"Don't let it, Mahommed Khan! Set that iron down! This is my room. I will not have crime committed here!"

"And how long does the heavenborn think it would be her room were this evil−living pig of a priest at large, or how long before a worse crime were committed? Heavenborn, the hour is late and the charcoal dies out rapidly when it has left the fire! See. I must choose another piece!"

He rummaged in the brazier, and she screamed again.

"I will not have it, Risaldar! You must find another way."

"Memsahib! Thy husband left thee in my care. Surely it is my right to choose the way?"

"Leave me, then! I relieve you of your trust. I will not have him tortured in my room, or anywhere!"

Mahommed Khan bowed low.

"Under favor, heavenborn," he answered, "my trust is to your husband. I can be released by him, or by death, not otherwise."

"Once, and for all, Mahommed Khan, I will not have you torture him in here!"

"Memsahib, I have yet to ride for succor! At daybreak, when these Hindus learn that the guns will not come back, they will rise to a man. Even now we must find a hiding−place or−−it is not good even to think what I might find on my return!"

He leaned over the priest again, but without the charcoal this time.

"Speak, thou!" he ordered, growling in Hindustanee through his savage black mustache. "I have yet to hear what price a Hindu sets on immunity from torture!"

But the priest, it seemed, had formed a new idea. He had been looking through puckered eyes at Ruth, keen, cool calculation in his glance, and in spite of the discomfort of his strained position he contrived to nod.

"Kharvani!" he muttered, half aloud.

"Aye! Call on Kharvani!" sneered the Risaldar. "Perhaps the Bride of Sivi will appear! Call louder!"

He stirred again among the charcoal with his tongs, and Ruth and the High Priest both shuddered.

"Look!" said the High Priest in Hindustanee, nodding in Ruth's direction. It was the first word that he had addressed to them. It took them by surprise, and the Risaldar and his half−brother turned and looked. Their breath left them.

Framed in the yellow lamplight, her thin, hot−weather garments draped about her like a morning mist, Ruth stood and stared straight back at them through frightened eyes. Her blue−black hair, which had become loosened in her excitement, hung in a long plait over one shoulder and gleamed in the lamp's reflection. Her skin took on a faintly golden color from the feeble light, and her face seemed stamped with fear, anxiety, pity and suffering, all at once, that strangely enhanced her beauty, silhouetted as she was against the blackness of the wall behind, she seemed to be standing in an aura, shimmering with radiated light.

"Kharvani!" said the High Priest to himself again, and the two Rajputs stood still like men dumfounded, and stared and stared and stared. They knew Kharvani's temple. Who was there in Hanadra, Christian or Mohammedan or Hindu, who did not? The show−building of the city, the ancient, gloomy, wonderful erection where bats lived in the dome and flitted round Kharvani's image, the place where every one must go who needed favors of the priests, the central hub of treason and intrigue, where every plot was hatched and every rumor had its origin−− the ultimate, mazy, greedy, undisgorging goal of every bribe and every blackmail−wrung rupee!

They knew, too, as every one must know who has ever been inside the place, the amazing, awe−inspiring picture of Kharvani painted on the inner wall; of Kharvani as she was idealized in the days when priests believed in her and artists thought the labor of a lifetime well employed in painting but one picture of her−−Kharvani the sorrowful, grieving for the wickedness of earth; Kharvani, Bride of Siva, ready to intercede with Siva, the Destroyer, for the helpless, foolish, purblind sons of man.

And here, before them, stood Kharvani−−to the life!

"What of Kharvani?" growled Mahommed Khan.

"`A purblind fool, a sot and a Mohammedan,'" quoted the priest maliciously, "`how many be they, three or one?'"

The Risaldar's hand went to his scabbard. His sword licked out free and trembled like a tuning−fork. He flicked with his thumbnail at the blade and muttered: "Sharp! Sharp as death itself!"

The Hindu grinned, but the blade came down slowly until the point of it rested on the bridge of his nose. His eyes squinted inward, watching it.

"Now, make thy gentle joke again!" growled the Risaldar. Ruth Bellairs checked a scream.

"No blood!" she exclaimed. "Don't hurt him, Risaldar! I'll not have you kill a man in here−−or anywhere, in cold blood, for that matter! Return your sword, sir!"

The Risaldar swore into his beard. The High Priest grinned again. "I am not afraid to die!" he sneered. "Thrust with that toy of thine! Thrust home and make an end!"

"Memsahib!" said the Risaldar, "all this is foolishness and waste of time! The hour is past midnight and I must be going. Leave the room−−leave me and my half−brother with this priest for five short minutes and we will coax from him the secret of some hiding−place where you may lie hid until I come!"

"But you'll hurt him!"

"Not if he speaks, and speaks the truth!"

"Promise me!"

"On those conditions−−yes!"

"Where shall I go?"

The Risaldar's eyes glanced toward the door of the inner room, but he hesitated. "Nay! There is the ayah!" he muttered. "Is there no other room?"

"No, Risaldar, no other room except through that door. Besides, I would rather stay here! I am afraid of what you may do to that priest if I leave you alone with him!"

"Now a murrain on all women, black and white!" swore Mahommed Khan beneath his breath. Then he turned on the priest again, and placed one foot on his stomach.

"Speak!" he ordered. "What of Kharvani?"

"Listen, Mahommed Khan!" Ruth Bellairs laid one hand on his sleeve, and tried to draw him back. "Your ways are not my ways! You are a soldier and a gentleman, but please remember that you are of a different race! I can not let my life be saved by the torture of a human being−− no, not even of a Hindu priest! Maybe it's all right and honorable according to your ideas; but, if you did it, I would never be able to look my husband in the face again! No, Risaldar! Let this priest go, or leave him here−−I don't care which, but don't harm him! I am quite ready to ride with you, now, if you like. I suppose you have horses? But I would rather die than think that a man was put to the torture to save me! Life isn't worth that price!"

She spoke rapidly, urging him with every argument she knew; but the grim old Mohammedan shook his head.

"Better die here," he answered her, "than on the road! No, memsahib. With thirteen blades behind me, I could reach Jundhra, or at least make a bold attempt; but single−handed, and with you to guard, the feat is impossible. This dog of a Hindu here knows of some hiding−place. Let him speak!"

His hand went to his sword again, arid his eyes flashed.

"Listen, heavenborn! I am no torturer of priests by trade! It is not my life that I would save!"

"I know that, Mahommed Khan! I respect your motive. It's the method that I can't tolerate."

The Risaldar drew his arm away from her and began to pace the room. The High Priest instantly began to speak to Ruth, whispering to her hurriedly in Hindustanee, but she was too little acquainted with the language to understand him.

"And I," said the Risaldar's half−brother suddenly, "am I of no further use?"

"I had forgotten thee!" exclaimed the Risaldar.

They spoke together quickly in their own language, drawing aside and muttering to each other. It was plain that the half−brother was making some suggestion and that the Risaldar was questioning him and cross− examining him about his plan, but neither Ruth nor the High Priest could understand a word that either of them said. At the end of two minutes or more, the Risaldar gave an order of some kind and the half− brother grunted and left the room without another word, closing the door noiselessly behind him. The Risaldar locked it again from the inside and drew the bolt.

"We have made another plan, heavenborn!" he announced mysteriously.

"Then−−then−−you won't hurt this priest?"

"Not yet," said the Risaldar. "He may be useful!"

"Won't you unbind him, then? Look! His wrists and ankles are all swollen."

"Let the dog swell!" he grunted.

But Ruth stuck to her point and made him loosen the bonds a little.

"A man lives and learns!" swore the Risaldar. "Such as he were cast into dungeons in my day, to feed on their own bellies until they had had enough of life!"

"The times have changed!" said Ruth.

The Risaldar looked out through the window toward the red glow on the sky−line.

"Ha! Changed, have they!" he muttered. "I saw one such burning, once before!"

VI.

The most wonderful thing in history, pointing with the surest finger to the trail of destiny, has been the fact that in every tremendous crisis there have been leaders on the spot to meet it. It is not so wonderful that there should be such men, for the world keeps growing better, and it is more than likely that the men who have left their footprints in the sands of time would compare to their own disadvantage with their compeers of today. The wonderful thing is that the right men have been in the right place at the right time. Scipio met Hannibal; Philip of Spain was forced to meet Howard of Effingham and Drake; Napoleon Bonaparte, the "Man of Destiny," found Wellington and Nelson of the Nile to deal with him; and, in America, men like George Washington and Grant and Lincoln seem, in the light of history, like timed, calculated, controlling devices in an intricate machine. It was so when the Indian

Mutiny broke out. The struggle was unexpected. A handful of Europeans, commissioned and enlisted in the ordinary way, with a view to trade, not statesmanship, found themselves face to face at a minute's notice with armed and vengeful millions. Succor was a question of months, not days or weeks. India was ablaze from end to end with rebel fires that had been planned in secret through silent watchful years. The British force was scattered here and there in unconnected details, and each detail was suddenly cut off from every other one by men who had been trained to fight by the British themselves and who were not afraid to die.

The suddenness with which the outbreak came was one of the chief assets of the rebels, for they were able to seize guns and military stores and ammunition at the very start of things, before the British force could concentrate. Their hour could scarcely have been better chosen. The Crimean War was barely over. Practically the whole of England's standing army was abroad and decimated by battle and disease. At home, politics had England by the throat; the income−tax was on a Napoleonic scale and men were more bent on worsting one another than on equipping armies. They had had enough of war.

India was isolated, at the rebels' mercy, so it seemed. There were no railway trains to make swift movements of troops possible. Distances were reckoned by the hundred miles−−of sun−baked, thirsty dust in the hot weather, and of mud in the rainy season. There were no telegraph−wires, and the British had to cope with the mysterious, and even yet unsolved, native means of sending news−−the so−called "underground route," by which news and instructions travel faster than a pigeon flies. There was never a greater certainty or a more one−sided struggle, at the start. The only question seemed to be how many days, or possibly weeks, would pass before jackals crunched the bones of every Englishman in India.

But at the British helm was Nicholson, and under him were a hundred other men whose courage and resource had been an unknown quantity until the outbreak came. Nicholson's was the guiding spirit, but it needed only his generalship to fire all the others with that grim enthusiasm that has pulled Great Britain out of so many other scrapes. Instead of wasting time in marching and countermarching to relieve the scattered posts, a swift, sudden swoop was made on Delhi, where the eggs of the rebellion had hatched.

As many of the outposts as could be reached were told to fight their own way in, and those that could not be reached were left to defend themselves until the big blow had been struck at the heart of things. If Delhi could be taken, the rebels would be paralyzed and the rescue of beleaguered details would be easier; so, although odds of one hundred or more to one are usually considered overlarge in wartime−− when the hundred hold the fort and the one must storm the gate−−there was no time lost in hesitation. Delhi was the goal; and from north and south and east and west the men who could march marched, and those who could not entrenched themselves, and made ready to die in the last ditch.

Some of the natives were loyal still. There were men like Risaldar Mahommed Khan, who would have died ten deaths ten times over rather than be false in one particular to the British Government. It was these men who helped to make intercommunication possible, for they could carry messages and sometimes get through unsuspected where a British soldier would have been shot before he had ridden half a mile. Their loyalty was put to the utmost test in that hour, for they can not have believed that the British force could win. They knew the extent of what was out against them and knew, too, what their fate would be in the event of capture or defeat. There would be direr, slower vengeance wreaked on them than on the alien British. But they had eaten British salt and pledged their word, and nothing short of death could free them from it. There was not a shred of self interest to actuate them; there could not have been. Their given word was law and there it ended.

There were isolated commands, like that at Jundhra, that were too far away to strike at Delhi and too large and too efficient to be shut in by the mutineers. They were centers on their own account of isolated small detachments, and each commander was given leave to act as he saw best, provided that he acted and did it quickly. He could either march to the relief of his detachments or call them in, but under no condition was he to sit still and do nothing.

So, Colonel Carter's note addressed to O. C.−−Jundhra only got two−thirds of the way from Doonha. The gunner who rode with it was brought to a sudden standstill by an advance−guard of British cavalry, and two minutes later he found himself saluting and giving up his note to the General Commanding. The rebels at Jundhra had been worsted and scattered after an eight−hour fight, and General Turner had made up his mind instantly to sweep down on Hanadra with all his force and relieve the British garrison at Doonha on his way.

Jundhra was a small town and unhealthy. Hanadra was a large city, the center of a province; and, from all accounts, Hanadra had not risen yet. By seizing Hanadra before the mutineers had time to barricade themselves inside it, he could paralyze the countryside, for in Hanadra were the money and provisions and, above all, the Hindu priests who, in that part of India at least, were the brains of the rebellion. So he burned Jundhra, to make it useless to the rebels, and started for Hanadra with every man and horse and gun and wagon and round of ammunition that he had.

Now news in India travels like the wind, first one way and then another. But, unlike the wind, it never whistles. Things happen and men know it and the information spreads−−invisible, intangible, inaudible, but positive and, in nine cases out of ten, correct in detail. A government can no more censor it, or divert it, or stop it on the way, than it can stay the birthrate or tamper with the Great Monsoon.

First the priests knew it, then it filtered through the main bazaars and from them on through the smaller streets. By the time that General Turner had been two hours on the road with his command every man and woman and child in Hanadra knew that the rebels had been beaten back and that Hanadra was his objective. They knew, too, that the section had reached Doonha, had relieved it and started back again. And yet not a single rebel who had fought in either engagement was within twenty miles of Hanadra yet!

In the old, low−ceilinged room above the archway Mahommed Khan paced up and down and chewed at his black mustache, kicking his scabbard away from him each time he turned and glowering at the priest.

"That dog can solve this riddle!" he kept muttering. Then he would glare at Ruth impatiently and execrate the squeamishness of women. Ruth sat on the divan with her face between her hands, trying to force herself to realize the full extent of her predicament and beat back the feeling of hysteria that almost had her in its grip. The priest lay quiet. He was in a torture of discomfort on the upturned table, but he preferred not to give the Risaldar the satisfaction of knowing it. He eased his position quietly from time to time as much as his bandages would let him, but he made no complaint.

Suddenly, Ruth looked up. It had occurred to her that she was wasting time and that if she were to fight off the depression that had seized her she would be better occupied.

"Mahommed Khan," she said, "if I am to leave here on horseback, with you or with an escort, I had better collect some things that I would like to take with me. Let me in that room, please!"

"The horse will have all that it can carry, heavenborn, without a load of woman's trappings."

"My jewels? I can take them, I suppose?"

He bowed. "They are in there? I will bring them, heavenborn!"

"Nonsense! You don't know where to find them."

"The ayah−−will−−will show me!"

He fitted the key into the lock and turned it, but Ruth was at his side before he could pass in through the door.

"Nonsense, Risaldar! The ayah can't hurt me. You have taken her knife away, and that is my room. I will go in there alone!"

She pushed past him before he could prevent her, thrust the door back and peered in.

"Stay, heavenborn−−I will explain!"

"Explain what?"

The dim light from the lamp was filtering in past them, and her eyes were slowly growing accustomed to the gloom. There was something lying on the floor, in the middle of the room, that was bulky and shapeless and unfamiliar.

"Ayah!" said Ruth. "Ayah!"

But there was no answer.

"Where is she, Risaldar?"

"She is there, heavenborn!"

"Is she asleep?"

"Aye! She sleeps deeply!"

There was, something in the Rajput's voice that was strange, that hinted at a darker meaning.

"Ayah!" she called again, afraid, though she knew not why, to enter.

"She guards the jewels, heavenborn! Wait, while I bring the lamp!"

He crossed the room, brought it and stepped with it past Ruth, straight into the room.

"See!" he said, holding the lamp up above his head. "There in her bosom are the jewels! It was there, too, that she had the knife to slay thee with! My sword is clean, yet, heavenborn! I slew her with my fingers, thus!"

He kicked the prostrate ayah, and, as the black face with the wide−open bloodshot eyes and the protruding tongue rolled sidewise and the body moved, a little heap of jewels fell upon the floor. Mahommed Khan stooped down to gather them, bending, a little painfully, on one old knee−−but stopped half−way and turned. There was a thud behind him in the doorway. Ruth Bellairs had fainted, and lay as the ayah had lain when Risaldar had not yet locked her in the room.

He raised the lamp and studied her in silence for a minute, looking from her to the bound priest and back to her again.

"Now praised be Allah!" he remarked aloud, with a world of genuine relief in his voice. "Should she stay fainted for a little while, that priest−−"

He stalked into the middle of the outer room. He set the lamp down on a table and looked the priest over as a butcher might survey a sheep he is about to kill.

"Now−−robber of orphans−−bleeder of widows' blood−−dog of an idol−briber! This stands between thee and Kharvani!" He drew his sword and flicked the edges of it. "And this!" He took up the tongs again. "There is none now to plead or to forbid! Think! Show me the way out of this devil's nest, or−−" He raised the tongs again.

At that minute came a quiet knock. He set the tongs down again and crossed the room and opened the door.

VII.

Mahommed Khan closed the door again behind his half−brother and turned the key, but the half−brother shot the bolt home as well before he spoke, then listened intently for a minute with his ear to the keyhole.

"Where is the priest's son?" growled the Risaldar, in the Rajput tongue.

"I have him. I have the priestling in a sack. I have him trussed and bound and gagged, so that he can neither speak nor wriggle!"

"Where?"

"Hidden safely."

"I said to bring him here!"

"I could not. Listen! That ayah−−where is she?"

"Dead! What has the ayah to do with it?"

"This−−she was to give a sign. She was not to slay. She had leave only to take the jewels. Her orders were either to wait until she knew by questioning that the section would not return or else, when it had returned, to wait until the memsahib and Bellairs sahib slept, and then to make a sign. They grow tired of waiting now, for there is news! At Jundhra the rebels are defeated, and at Doonha likewise."

"How know you this?"

"By listening to the priests' talk while I lay in wait to snare the priestling. Nothing is known as yet as to what the guns or garrison at Doonha do, but it is known that they of Jundhra will march on Hanadra here. They search now for their High Priest, being minded to march out of here and set an ambush on the road."

"They have time. From Jundhra to here is a long march! Until tomorrow evening or the day following they have time!"

"Aye! And they have fear also! They seek their priest−−listen."

There were voices plainly audible in the courtyard down below, and two more men stood at the foot of the winding stairway whispering. By listening intently they could hear almost what they said, for the stone stairway acted like a whispering−gallery, the voices echoing up it from wall to wall.

"Why do they seek him here?"

"They have sought elsewhere and not found him; and there is talk−− He claimed the memsahib as his share of the plunder. They think−−"

Mahommed Khan glared at the trussed−up priest and swore a savage oath beneath his breath.

"Have they touched the stables yet?" he demanded.

"No, not yet. The loot is to be divided evenly among certain of the priests, and no man may yet lay a hand on it."

"Is there a guard there?"

"No. No one would steal what the priests claim, and the priests will not trust one another. So the horses stand in their stalls unwatched."

The voices down the stairs grew louder, and the sound of footsteps began ascending, slowly and with hesitation.

"Quick!" said the Risaldar. "Light me that brazier again!"

Charcoal lights quickly, and before the steps had reached the landing Mahommed Khan had a hot coal glowing in his tongs:

"Now speak to them!" he growled at the shuddering priest. "Order them to go back to their temple and tell them that you follow!"

The priest shut his lips tight and shook his head. With rescue so near as that, he could see no reason to obey. But the hot coal touched him, and a Hindu who may be not at all afraid to die can not stand torture.

"I speak!" he answered, writhing.

"Speak, then!" said the Risaldar, choosing a larger coal. Then, in the priest's language, which none−−and least of all a Risaldar−− can understand except the priests themselves, he began to shout directions, pitching his voice into a high, wailing, minor key. He was answered by another sing−song voice outside the door and he listened with a glowing coal held six inches from his eyes.

"An eye for a false move!" hissed Mahommed Khan. "Two eyes are the forfeit unless they go down the stairs again! Then my half−brother here will follow to the temple and if any watch, or stay behind, thy ears will sizzle!"

The High Priest raised his voice into a wail again, and the feet shuffled along the landing and descended.

"Put down that coal!" he pleaded. "I have done thy bidding!"

"Watch through the window!" said the Risaldar. "Then follow!"

His giant half−brother peered from behind the curtain and listened. He could hear laughter, ribald, mocking laughter, but low, and plainly not intended for the High Priest's ears.

"They go!" he growled.

"Then follow."

Once again the Risaldar was left alone with the priest and the unconscious Ruth. She was suffering from the effects of long days and nights of nerve−destroying heat, with the shock of unexpected horror super− added, and she showed no disposition to recover consciousness. The priest, though, was very far from having lost his power to think.

"You are a fool!" he sneered at the Risaldar, but the sword leaped from its scabbard at the word and he changed that line of argument. "You hold cards and know not how to play them!"

"I know along which road my honor lies! I lay no plans to murder people in their sleep."

"Honor! And what is honor? What is the interest on honor−−how much percent?"

The Risaldar turned his back on him, but the High Priest laughed.

"`The days of the Raj are numbered!" said the priest. "The English will be slain to the last man and then where will you be? Where will be the profit on your honor?"

The Risaldar listened, for he could not help it, but he made no answer.

"Me you hold here, a prisoner. You can slay or torture. But what good will that do? The woman that you guard will fall sooner or later into Hindu hands. You can not fight against a legion. Listen! I hold the strings of wealth. With a jerk I can unloose a fortune in your lap. I need that woman there!"

"For what?" snarled the Risaldar, whirling round on him, his eyes ablaze.

"'For power! Kharvani's temple here has images and paintings and a voice that speaks−−but no Kharvani!"

The Rajput turned away again and affected unconcern.

"Could Kharvani but appear, could her worshipers but see Kharvani manifest, what would a lakh, two lakhs, a crore of rupees mean to me, the High Priest of her temple? I could give thee anything! The power over all India would be in my hands! Kharvani would but appear and say thus and thus, and thus would it be done!"

The Risaldar's hand had risen to his mustache. His back was still turned on the priest, but he showed interest. His eyes wandered to where Ruth lay in a heap by the inner door and then away again.

"Who would believe it?" he growled in an undertone.

"They would all believe it! One and all! Even Mohammedans would become Hindus to worship at her shrine and beg her favors. Thou and I alone would share the secret. Listen! Loose me these bonds−− my limbs ache."

Mahommed Khan turned. He stooped and cut them with his sword.

"Now I can talk," said the priest, sitting up and rubbing his ankles. "Listen. Take thou two horses and gallop off, so that the rest may think that the white woman has escaped. Then return here secretly and name thy price−−and hold thy tongue!"

"And leave her in thy hands?" asked the Risaldar.

"In my keeping."

"Bah! Who would trust a Hindu priest!"

The Rajput was plainly wavering and the priest stood up, to argue with him the better.

"What need to trust me? You, sahib, will know the secret, and none other but myself will know it. Would I, think you, be fool enough to tell the rest, or, by withholding just payment from you, incite you to spread it broadcast? You and I will know it and we alone. To me the power that it will bring−−to you all the wealth you ever dreamed of, and more besides!"

"No other priest would know?"

"Not one! They will think the woman escaped!"

"And she−−where would you keep her?"

"In a secret place I know of, below the temple."

"Does any other know it?"

"No. Not one!"

"Listen!" said the Risaldar, stroking at his beard. "This woman never did me any wrong−−but she is a woman, not a man. I owe her no fealty, and yet−−I would not like to see her injured. Were I to agree to thy plan, there would needs be a third man in the secret."

"Who? Name him," said the priest, grinning his satisfaction.

"My half−brother Suliman."

"Agreed!"

"He must go with us to the hiding−place and stay there as her servant."

"Is he a silent man?"

"Silent as the dead, unless I bid him speak!"

"Then, that is agreed; he and thou and I know of this secret, and none other is to know it! Why wait? Let us remove her to the hiding− place!"

"Wait yet for Suliman. How long will I be gone, think you, on my pretended flight?"

"Nay, what think you, sahib?"

"I think many hours. There may be those that watch, or some that ride after me. I think I shall not return until long after daylight, and then there will be no suspicions. Give me a token that will admit me safely back into Hanadra−−some sign that the priests will know, and a pass to show to any one that bids me halt."

The priest held out his hand. "Take off that ring of mine!" he answered. "That is the sacred ring of Kharvani−−and all men know it. None will touch thee or refuse thee anything, do they have but the merest sight of it!"

The Risaldar drew off a clumsy silver ring, set with three stones−− a sapphire and a ruby and an emerald, each one of which was worth a fortune by itself. He slipped it on his own finger and turned it round slowly, examining it.

"See how I trust thee," said the priest.

"More than I do thee!" muttered the Risaldar.

"I hear my brother!" growled the Risaldar after another minute. "Be ready to show the way!"

He walked across the room to Ruth, tore a covering from a divan and wrapped her in it; then he opened the outer door for his half−brother.

"Is it well?" he asked in the Rajput tongue.

"All well!" boomed the half−brother, eying the unbound priest with unconcealed surprise.

"Do any watch?"

"Not one! The priests are in the temple; all who are not priests man the walls or rush here and there making ready."

"And the priestling?"

"Is where I left him."

"Where?−−I said."

"In the niche underneath the arch, where I trapped the High Priest!"

"Are the horses fed and watered?"

"Ha, sahib!"

"Good! How is the niche opened where the priestling lies?"

"There is the trunk of an elephant, carved where the largest stone of all begins to curve outward, on the side of the stone as you go outward from the courtyard."

"On which side of the archway, then?"

"On the left side, sahib. Press on the trunk downward and then pull; the stone swings outward. There are steps then−−ten steps downward to the stone floor where the priestling lies."

"Good! I can find him. Now pick up the heavenborn yonder in those great arms of thine, and bear her gently! Gently, I said! So! Have a care, now, that she is not injured against the corners. My honor, aye, my honor and yours and all our duty to the Raj you bear and−− and have a care of the corners?"

"Aye," answered the half−brother, stolidly, holding Ruth as though she had been a little bag of rice.

Again the Risaldar turned to the High Priest, and eyed him through eyes that glittered.

"We are ready!" he growled. "Lead on to thy hiding−place!"

VIII.

The guns rode first from Doonha, for the guns take precedence. The section ground−scouts were acting scouts for the division, two hundred yards ahead of every one. Behind the guns rode Colonel Forrester−Carter, followed by the wagon with the wounded; and last of all the two companies of the Thirty−third trudged through the stifling heat.

But, though the guns were ahead of every one, they had to suit their pace to that of the men who marched. For one thing, there might be an attack at any minute, and guns that are caught at close quarters at a distance from their escort are apt to be astonishingly helpless. They can act in unison with infantry; but alone, on bad ground, in the darkness, and with their horses nearly too tired to drag them, a leash of ten puppies in a crowd would be an easier thing to hurry with.

Young Bellairs had his men dismounted and walking by their mounts. Even the drivers led their horses, for two had been taken from each gun to drag the wounded, and the guns are calculated as a load for six, not four.

As he trudged through the blood−hot dust in clumsy riding−boots and led his charger on the left flank of the guns, Harry Bellairs fumed and fretted in a way to make no man envy him. The gloomy, ghost−like trees, that had flitted past him on the road to Doonha, crawled past him now−−slowly and more slowly as his tired feet blistered in his boots. He could not mount and ride, though, for very shame, while his men were marching, and he dared not let them ride, for fear the horses might give in. He could just trudge and trudge, and hate himself and every one, and wonder.

What had the Risaldar contrived to do? Why hadn't he packed up his wife's effects the moment that his orders came and ridden off with her and the section at once, instead of waiting three hours or more for an escort for her? Why hadn't he realized at once that orders that came in a hurry that way, in the night−time, were not only urgent but ominous as well? What chance had the Risaldar−−an old man, however willing he might be−−to ride through a swarming countryside for thirty miles or more and bring back an escort? Why, even supposing Mohammed Khan had ridden off at once, he could scarcely be back again before the section! And what would have happened in the meantime?

Supposing the Risaldar's sons and grandsons refused to obey him? Stranger things than that had been known to happen! Suppose they were disloyal? And then−−blacker though than any yet!−−suppose−− suppose−− Why had Mahommed Khan, the hard−bitten, wise old war−dog, advised him to leave his wife behind? Did that seem like honest advice, on second thought? Mohammedans had joined in this outbreak as well as Hindus. The sepoys at Doonha were Mohammedans! Why had Mahommed Khan seemed so anxious to send him on his way? As though an extra five minutes would have mattered! Why had he objected to a last good−by to Mrs. Bellairs? . . . And then−−he had shown a certain knowledge of the uprising; where had he obtained it? If he were loyal, who then had told him of it? Natives who are disloyal don't brag of their plans beforehand to men who are on the other side! And if he had known of it, and was still loyal, how was it that he had not divulged his information before the outbreak came? Would a loyal man hold his tongue until the last minute? Scarcely!

He halted, pulled his horse to the middle of the road and waited for Colonel Carter to overtake him.

"Well? What is it?" asked the colonel sharply.

"Can I ride on ahead, sir? My horse is good for it and I'm in agonies of apprehension about my wife!"

"No! Certainly not! You are needed to command your section!"

"I beg your pardon, sir, but I've a sergeant who can take command. He's a first−class man and perfectly dependable."

"You could do no good, even if you did ride on," said the colonel, not unkindly.

"I'm thinking, sir, that Mahommed Khan−−"

"Risaldar Mahommed Khan?"

"Yes, sir."

"Of the Rajput Horse?"

"Yes, sir. My father's Risaldar."

"You left your wife in his charge, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir, but I'm thinking that−−that perhaps the Risaldar−−I mean−− there seem to be Mohammedans at the bottom of this business, as well as Hindus. Perhaps−−"

"Bellairs! Now hear me once and for all. You thank your God that the Risaldar turned up to guard her! Thank God that your father was man enough for Mahommed Khan to love and that you are your father's son! And listen! Don't let me hear you, ever, under any circumstances, breathe a word of doubt as to that man's loyalty! D'you understand me, sir? You, a mere subaltern, a puppy just out of his 'teens, an insignificant jackanapes with two twelve−pounders in your charge, daring to impute disloyalty to Mahommed Khan!−−your impudence! Remember this! That old Risaldar is the man who rode with your father through the guns at Dera! He's a pauper without a pension, for all his loyalty, but he went down the length of India to meet you, at his own expense, when you landed raw−green from England! And what d'you know of war, I'd like to know, that you didn't learn from him? Thank your God, sir, that there's some one there who'll kill your wife before she falls into the Hindus' hands!"

"But he was going to ride away, sir, to bring an escort!"

"Not before he'd made absolutely certain of her safety!" swore the colonel with conviction. "Join your section, sir!"

So Harry Bellairs joined his section and trudged along sore−footed at its side−−sore−hearted, too. He wondered whether any one would ever say as much for him as Colonel Carter had chosen to say for Mahommed Khan, or whether any one would have the right to say it! He was ashamed of having left his wife behind and tortured with anxiety−− and smarting from the snub−−a medley of sensations that were more likely to make a man of him, if he had known it, than the whole experience of a year's campaign! But in the dust and darkness, with the blisters on his heels, and fifty men, who had overheard the colonel, looking sidewise at him, his plight was pitiable.

They trudged until the dawn began to rise, bright yellow below the drooping banian trees; only Colonel Carter and the advance−guard riding. Then, when they stopped at a stream to water horses and let them graze a bit and give the men a sorely needed rest, one of the ring of outposts loosed off his rifle and shouted an alarm. They had formed square in an instant, with the guns on one side and the men on three, and the colonel and the wounded in the middle. A thousand or more of the mutineers leaned on their rifles on the shoulder of a hill and looked them over, a thousand yards away.

"Send them an invitation!" commanded Colonel Carter, and the left−hand gun barked out an overture, killing one sepoy. The rest made off in the direction of Hanadra.

"We're likely to have a hot reception when we reach there!" said Colonel Carter cheerily. "Well, we'll rest here for thirty minutes and give them a chance to get ready for us. I'm sorry there's no breakfast, men, but the sepoys will have dinner ready by the time we get there−− we'll eat theirs!"

The chorus of ready laughter had scarcely died away when a horse's hoof−beats clattered in the distance from the direction of Doonha and a native cavalryman galloped into view, low−bent above his horse's neck. The foam from his horse was spattered over him and his lance swung pointing upward from the sling. On his left side the polished scabbard rose and fell in time to his horse's movement. He was urging his weary horse to put out every ounce he had in him. He drew rein, though, when he reached a turning in the road and saw the resting division in front of him, and walked his horse forward, patting his sweat−wet neck and easing him. But as he leaned to finger with the girths an ambushed sepoy fired at him, and he rammed in his spurs again and rode like a man possessed.

"This'll be another untrustworthy Mohammedan!" said Colonel Carter in a pointed undertone, and Bellairs blushed crimson underneath the tan. "He's ridden through from Jundhra, with torture waiting for him if he happened to get caught, and no possible reward beyond his pay. Look out he doesn't spike your guns!"

The trooper rode straight up to Colonel Carter and saluted. He removed a tiny package from his cheek, where he had carried it so that he might swallow it at once in case of accident, tore the oil−silk cover from it and handed it to him without a word, saluting again and leading his horse away. Colonel Carter unfolded the half−sheet of foreign notepaper and read:

> Dear Colonel Carter:
> Your letter just received in which you say that you have blown up the magazine at Doonha and are marching to Hanadra with a view to the rescue of Mrs. Bellairs. This is in no sense intended as a criticism of your action or of your plan, but circumstances have made it seem advisable for me to transfer my own headquarters to Hanadra and I am just starting. I must ask you, please, to wait for me−−at a spot as near to where this overtakes you as can be managed. If Mrs. Bellairs, or anybody else of ours, is in Hanadra, she−−or they−−are either dead by now or else prisoners. And if they are to be rescued by force, the larger the force employed the better. If you were to attack with your two companies before I reached you, you probably would be repulsed, and would, I think, endanger the lives of any prisoners that the enemy may hold. I am coming with my whole command as fast as possible.
>
> Your Obedient Servant,
> A. E. Turner
> Genl. Officer Commanding

"Men!" said Colonel Carter, in a ringing voice that gave not the slightest indication of his feelings, "we're to wait here for a while until the whole division overtakes us. The general has vacated Jundhra. Lie down and get all the rest you can!"

The murmur from the ranks was as difficult to read as Colonel Carter's voice had been. It might have meant pleasure at the thought of rest, or anger, or contempt, or almost anything. It was undefined and indefinable.

But there was no doubt at all as to how young Bellairs felt. He was sitting on a trunnion, sobbing, with his head bent low between his hands.

IX.

"Come, then!" said the High Priest.

Mahommed Khan threw open the outer door and bowed sardonically. "Precedence for priests!" he sneered, tapping at his sword−hilt. "Thou goest first! Next come I, and last Suliman with the memsahib! Thus can I reach thee with my sword, O priest, and also protect her if need be!"

"Thou art trusting as a little child!" exclaimed the priest, passing out ahead of him.

"A priest and a liar and a thief−−all three are one!" hummed the Risaldar. "Bear her gently, Suliman! Have a care, now, as you turn on the winding stairs!"

"Ha, sahib!" said the half−brother, carrying Ruth as easily as though she had been a little child.

At the foot of the stairway, in the blackness that seemed alive with phantom shadows, the High Priest paused and listened, stretching out his left hand against the wall to keep the other two behind him. From somewhere beyond the courtyard came the din of hurrying sandaled feet, scudding over cobblestones in one direction. The noise was incessant and not unlike the murmur of a rapid stream. Occasionally a voice was raised in some command or other, but the stream of sound continued, hurrying, hurrying, shuffling along to the southward.

"This way and watch a while," whispered the priest.

"I have heard rats run that way!" growled the Risaldar.

They climbed up a narrow stairway leading to a sort of battlement and peered over the top, Suliman laying Ruth Bellairs down in the darkest shadow he could find. She was beginning to recover consciousness, and apparently Mahommed Khan judged it best to take no notice of her.

Down below them they could see the city gate, wide open, with a blazing torch on either side of it, and through the gate, swarming like ants before the rains, there poured an endless stream of humans that marched−− and marched−−and marched; four, ten, fifteen abreast; all heights and sizes, jumbled in and out among one another, anyhow, without formation, but armed, every one of them, and all intent on marching to the southward, where Jundhra and Doonha lay. Some muttered to one another and some laughed, but the greater number marched in silence.

"That for thy English!" grinned the priest. "Can the English troops overcome that horde?"

"Hey−ee! For a troop or two of Rajputs!" sighed the Risaldar. "Or English Lancers! They would ride through that as an ax does through the brush−wood!"

"Bah!" said the priest. "All soldiers boast! There will be a houghing shortly after dawn. The days of thy English are now numbered."

"By those−−there?"

"Ay, by those, there! Come!"

They climbed down the steps again, the Rajput humming to himself and smiling grimly into his mustache.

"Ay! There will be a houghing shortly after dawn!" he muttered. "Would only that I were there to see! . . . Where are the sepoys?" he demanded.

"I know not. How should I know, who have been thy guest these hours past? This march is none of my ordering."

The priest pressed hard on a stone knob that seemed to be part of the carving on a wall, then he leaned his weight against the wall and a huge stone swung inward, while a fetid breath of air wafted outward in their faces.

"None know this road but I!" exclaimed the priest.

"None need to!" said the Risaldar. "Pass on, snake, into thy hole. We follow."

"Steps!" said the priest, and began descending.

"Curses!" said the Risaldar, stumbling and falling down on top of him. "Have a care, Suliman! The stone is wet and slippery."

Down, down they climbed, one behind the other, Suliman grunting beneath his burden and the Risaldar keeping up a running fire of oaths. Each time that he slipped, and that was often, he cursed the priest and cautioned Suliman. But the priest only laughed, and apparently Suliman was sure−footed, for he never stumbled once. They seemed to be diving down into the bowels of the earth. They were in pitch−black darkness, for the stone had swung to behind them of its own accord. The wall on either side of them was wet with slime and the stink of decaying ages rose and almost stifled them. But the priest kept on descending, so fast that the other two had trouble to keep up with him, and he hummed to himself as though he knew the road and liked it.

"The bottom!" he called back suddenly. "From now the going is easy, until we rise again. We pass now under the city−wall."

But they could see nothing and hear nothing except their own footfalls swishing in the ooze beneath them. Even the priest's words seemed to be lost at once, as though he spoke into a blanket, for the air they breathed was thicker than a mist and just as damp. They walked on, along a level, wet, stone passage for at least five minutes, feeling their way with one band on the wall.

"Steps, now!" said the priest. "Have a care, now, for the lower ones are slippery."

Ruth was regaining consciousness. She began to move and tried once or twice to speak.

"Here, thou!" growled the Risaldar. "Thou art a younger man than I−− come back here. Help with the memsahib."

The priest came back a step or two, but Suliman declined his aid, snarling vile insults at him.

"I can manage!" he growled. "Get thou behind me, Mahommed Khan, in case I slip!"

So Mahommed Khan came last, and they slipped and grunted upward, round and round a spiral staircase that was hewn out of solid rock. No light came through from anywhere to help them, but the priest climbed on, as though he were accustomed to the stair and knew the way from constant use. After five minutes of steady climbing the stone grew gradually dry. The steps became smaller, too, and deeper, and not so hard to climb. Suddenly the priest reached out his arm and pulled at something or other that hung down in the darkness. A stone in the wall rolled open. A flood of light burst in and nearly blinded them.

"We are below Kharvani's temple!" announced the priest. He led them through the opening into a four−square room hewn from the rock below the foundations of the temple some time in the dawn of history. The light that had blinded them when they first emerged proved to be nothing but the flicker of two small oil lamps that hung suspended by brass chains from the painted ceiling. The only furniture was mats spread on the cut−stone floor.

"By which way did we come?" asked the Risaldar, staring in amazement round the walls. There was not a door nor crack, nor any sign of one, except that a wooden ladder in one corner led to a trapdoor overhead, and they had certainly not entered by the ladder.

"Nay! That is a secret!" grinned the priest. "He who can may find the opening! Here can the woman and her servant stay until we need them."

"Here in this place?"

"Where else? No man but I knows of this crypt! The ladder there leads to another room, where there is yet another ladder, and that one leads out through a secret door I know of, straight into the temple. Art ready? There is need for haste!"

"Wait!" said the Risaldar.

"These soldiers!" sneered the priest. "It is wait−−wait−−wait with them, always!"

"Hast thou a son."

"Ay! But what of it?"

"I said `hast,' not `hadst'!"

"Ay. I have a son.

"Where?"

"In one of the temple−chambers overhead."

"Nay, priest! Thy son lies gagged and bound and trussed in a place I know of, and which thou dost not know!"

"Since when?"

"Since by my orders he was laid there."

"Thou art the devil! Thou liest, Rajput!"

"So? Go seek thy son!"

The priest's face had blanched beneath the olive of his skin, and he stared at Mahommed Khan through distended eyes.

"My son!" he muttered.

"Aye! Thy priestling! He stays where he is, as hostage, until my return! Also the heavenborn stays here! If, on my return, I find the heavenborn safe and sound, I will exchange her for thy son−−and if not, I will tear thy son into little pieces before thy eyes, priest! Dost thou understand?"

"Thou liest! My son is overhead in the temple here!"

"Go seek him, then!"

The priest turned and scampered up the ladder with an agility that was astonishing in a man of his build and paunch.

"Hanuman should have been thy master!" jeered the Risaldar. "So run the bandar−log, the monkey−folk!"

But the priest had no time to answer him. He was half frantic with the sickening fear of a father for his only son. He returned ten minutes later, panting, and more scared than ever.

"Go, take thy white woman," he exclaimed, "and give me my son back!"

"Nay, priest! Shall I ride with her alone through that horde that are marching through the gate? I go now for an escort; in eight−− ten−−twelve−−I know not how many hours, I will return for her, and then−−thy son will be exchanged for her, or he dies thus in many pieces!"

He turned to Suliman. "Is she awake yet?" he demanded.

"Barely, but she recovers."

"Then tell her, when consciousness returns, that I have gone and will return for her. And stay here, thou, and guard her until I come."

"Ha, sahib!"

"Now, show the way!"

"But−−" said the priest, "our bargain? The price that we agreed on−− one lakh, was it not?"

"One lakh of devils take thee and tear thee into little pieces! Wouldst bribe a Rajput, a Risaldar? For that insult I will repay thee one day with interest, O priest! Now, show the way!"

"But how shall I be sure about my son?"

"Be sure that the priestling will starve to death or die of thirst or choke, unless I hurry! He is none too easy where he lies!"

"Go! Hurry, then!" swore the priest. "May all the gods there are, and thy Allah with them, afflict thee with all their curses−−thee and thine! Up with you! Up that ladder! Run! But, if the gods will, I will meet thee again when the storm is over!"

"Inshallah!" growled Mahommed Khan.

Ten minutes later a crash and a clatter and a shower of sparks broke out in the sweltering courtyard where the guns had stood and waited. It was Shaitan, young Bellairs' Khaubuli charger, with his haunches under him, plunging across the flagstones, through the black−dark archway, out on the plain beyond−−in answer to the long, sharp−roweled spurs of the Risaldar Mahommed Khan.

X.

Dawn broke and the roofs of old Hanadra became resplendent with the varied colors of turbans and pugrees and shawls. As though the rising sun had loosed the spell, a myriad tongues, of women chiefly, rose in a babel of clamor, and the few men who had been left in. Hanadra by the night's armed exodus came all together and growled prophetically in undertones. Now was the day of days, when that part of India, at least, should cast off the English yoke.

To the temple! The cry went up before the sun was fifteen minutes high. There are a hundred temples in Hanadra, age−old all of them and carved on the outside with strange images of heathen gods in high relief, like molds turned inside out. But there is but one temple that that cry could mean−−Kharvani's; and there could be but one meaning for the cry. Man, woman and child would pray Kharvani, Bride of Siva the Destroyer, to intercede with Siva and cause him to rise and smite the English. On the skyline, glinting like flashed signals in the early sun, bright English bayonets had appeared; and between them and Hanadra was a dense black mass, the whole of old Hanadra's able−bodied manhood, lined up to defend the city. Now was the time to pray. Fifty to one are by no means despicable odds, but the aid of the gods as well is better!

So the huge dome of Kharvani's temple began to echo to the sound of slippered feet and awe−struck whisperings, and the big, dim auditorium soon filled to overflowing. No light came in from the outer world. There was nothing to illuminate the mysteries except the chain−hung grease−lamps swinging here and there from beams, and they served only to make the darkness visible. Bats flicked in and out between them and disappeared in the echoing gloom above. Censers belched out sweet−smelling, pungent clouds of sandalwood to drown the stench of hot humanity; and the huge graven image of Kharvani−−serene and smiling and indifferent−−stared round−eyed from the darkness.

Then a priest's voice boomed out in a solemn incantation and the whispering hushed. He chanted age−old verses, whose very meaning was forgotten in the womb of time−−forgotten as the artist who had painted the picture of idealized Kharvani on the wall. Ten priests, five on either side of the tremendous idol, emerged chanting from the gloom behind, and then a gong rang, sweetly, clearly, suddenly, and the chanting ceased. Out stepped the High Priest from a niche below the image, and his voice rose in a wailing, sing−song cadence that reechoed from the dome and sent a thrill through every one who heard.

His chant had scarcely ceased when the temple door burst open and a man rushed in.

"They have begun!" he shouted. "The battle has begun!"

As though in ready confirmation of his words, the distant reverberating boom of cannon filtered through the doorway from the world of grim realities outside.

"They have twenty cannon with them! They have more guns than we have!" wailed he who brought the news. Again began the chanting that sought the aid of Siva the Destroyer. Only, there were fewer who listened to this second chant. Those who were near the doorway slipped outside and joined the watching hundreds on the roofs.

For an hour the prayers continued in the stifling gloom, priest relieving priest and chant following on chant, until the temple was half emptied of its audience. One by one, and then by twos and threes, the worshipers succumbed to human curiosity and crept stealthily outside to watch.

Another messenger ran in and shouted: "They have charged! Their cavalry have charged! They are beaten back! Their dead lie twisted on the plain!"

At the words there was a stampede from the doorway, and half of those who had remained rushed out. There were hundreds still there, though, for that great gloomy pile of Kharvani's could hold an almost countless crowd.

Within another hour the same man rushed to the door again and shouted:

"Help comes! Horsemen are coming from the north! Rajputs, riding like leaves before the wind! Even the Mussulmans are for us!"

But the chanting never ceased. No one stopped to doubt the friendship of arrivals from the north, for to that side there were no English, and England's friends would surely follow byroads to her aid. The city gates were wide open to admit wounded or messengers or friends−− with a view, even, to a possible retreat−−and whoever cared could ride through them unchallenged and unchecked.

Even when the crash of horses' hoofs rattled on the stone paving outside the temple there was no suspicion. No move was made to find out who it was who rode. But when the temple door reechoed to the thunder of a sword−hilt and a voice roared "Open!" there was something like a panic. The chanting stopped and the priests and the High Priest listened to the stamping on the stone pavement at the temple front.

"Open!" roared a voice again, and the thundering on the panels recommenced. Then some one drew the bolt and a horse's head−−a huge Khaubuli stallion's−−appeared, snorting and panting and wild−eyed.

"Farward!" roared the Risaldar Mahommed Khan, kneeling on young Bellairs' winded charger.

"Farm twos! Farward!"

Straight into the temple, two by two, behind the Risaldar, rode two fierce lines of Rajputs, overturning men and women−−their drawn swords pointing this way and that−−their dark eyes gleaming. Without a word to any one they rode up to the image, where the priests stood in an astonished herd.

"Fron−tt farm! Rear rank−−'bout−face!" barked the Risaldar, and there was another clattering and stamping on the stone floor as the panting chargers pranced into the fresh formation, back to back.

"The memsahib!" growled Mahommed Khan. "Where is she?"

"My son!" said the High Priest. "Bring me my son!"

"A life for a life! Thy heavenborn first!"

"Nay! Show me my son first!"

The Risaldar leaped from his horse and tossed his reins to the man behind him. In a second his sword was at the High Priest's throat.

"Where is that secret stair?" he growled. "Lead on!"

The swordpoint pricked him. Two priests tried to interfere, but wilted and collapsed with fright as four fierce, black−bearded Rajputs spurred their horses forward. The swordpoint pricked still deeper.

"My son!" said the High Priest.

"A life for a life! Lead on!"

The High Priest surrendered, with a dark and cunning look, though, that hinted at something or other in reserve. He pulled at a piece of carving on the wail behind and pointed to a stair that showed behind the outswung door. Then he plucked another priest by the sleeve and whispered.

The priest passed on the whisper. A third priest turned and ran.

"That way!" said the High Priest, pointing.

"I? Nay! I go not down!" He raised his voice into an ululating howl. "O Suliman!" he bellowed. "Suliman! O!−−Suliman! Bring up the heaven−born!"

A growl like the distant rumble from a bear−pit answered him. Then Ruth Bellairs' voice was heard calling up the stairway.

"Is that you, Mahommed Khan?"

"Ay, memsahib!"

"Good! I'm coming!"

She had recovered far enough to climb the ladder and the steep stone stair above it, and Suliman climbed up behind her, grumbling dreadful prophecies of what would happen to the priests now that Mohammed Khan had come.

"Is all well, Risaldar?" she asked him.

"Nay, heavenborn! All is not well yet! The general sahib from Jundhra and your husband's guns and others, making one division, are engaged with rebels eight or nine miles from here. We saw part of the battle as we rode!"

"Who wins?"

"It is doubtful, heavenborn! How could we tell from this distance?"

"Have you a horse for me?"

"Ay, heavenborn! Here! Bring up that horse, thou, and Suliman's! Ride him cross−saddle, heavenborn−−there were no side−saddles in Siroeh! Nay, he is just a little frightened. He will stand−−he will not throw thee! I did better than I thought, heavenborn. I come with four−and−twenty, making twenty−six with me and Suliman. An escort for a queen! So−−sit him quietly. Leave the reins free. Suliman will lead him! Ho! Fronnnt! Rank−−'bout−face!"

"My son!" wailed the High Priest. "Where is my son?"

"Tell him, Suliman!"

"Where I caught thee, thou idol−briber!" snarled the Risaldar's half− brother.

"Where? In that den of stinks. Gagged and bound all this while?"

"Ha! Gagged and bound and out of mischief where all priests and priests' sons ought to be!" laughed Mahommed Khan. "Farward! Farm twos Ter−r−r−ott!"

In went the spur, and the snorting, rattling, clanking cavalcade sidled and pranced out of the temple into the sunshine, with Ruth and Suliman in the midst of them.

"Gallop!" roared the Risaldar, the moment that the last horse was clear of the temple−doors. And in that instant he saw what the High Priest's whispering had meant.

Coming up the street toward them was a horde of silent, hurrying Hindus, armed with swords and spears, wearing all of them the caste− marks of the Brahman−−well−fed, indignant relations of the priests, intent on avenging the defilement of Kharvani's temple.

"Canter! Fronnnt−−farm−−Gallop! Charge!"

Ruth found herself in the midst of a whirlwind of flashing sabers, astride of a lean−flanked Katiawari gelding that could streak like an antelope, knee to knee with a pair of bearded Rajputs, one of whom gripped her bridle−rein−−thundering down a city street straight for a hundred swords that blocked her path. She set her eyes on the middle of Mahommed Khan's straight back, gripped the saddle with both hands, set her teeth and waited for the shock. Mahommed Khan's right arm rose and his sword flashed in the sunlight as he stood up in his stirrups. She shut her eyes. But there was no shock! There was the swish of whirling steel, the thunder of hoofs, the sound of bodies falling. There was a scream or two as well and a coarse−mouthed Rajput oath. But when she dared to open her eyes once more they were thundering still, headlong down the city street and Mahommed Khan was whirling his sword in mid−air to shake the blood from it.

Ahead lay the city gate and she could see another swarm of Hindus rushing from either side to close it. But "Charge!" yelled Mahommed Khan again, and they swept through the crowd, through the half−shut gate, out on the plain beyond, as a wind sweeps through the forest, leaving fallen tree−trunks in its wake.

"Halt!" roared the Risaldar, when they were safely out of range. "Are any hurt? No? Good for us that their rifles are all in the firing−line yonder!"

He sat for a minute peering underneath his hand at the distant, dark, serried mass of men and the steel−tipped lines beyond it, watching the belching cannon and the spurting flames of the close−range rifle−fire.

"See, heavenborn!" he said, pointing. "Those will be your husband's guns! See, over on the left, there. See! They fire! Those two! We can reach them if we make a circuit on the flank here!"

"But can we get through, Risaldar? Won't they see us and cut us off?"

"Heavenborn!" he answered, "men who dare ride into a city temple and snatch thee from the arms of priests dare and can do anything! Take this, heavenborn−−take it as a keepsake, in case aught happens!"

He drew off the priest's ring, gave it to her and then, before she could reply:

"Canter!" he roared. The horses sprang forward in answer to the spurs and there was nothing for Ruth to do but watch the distant battle and listen to the deep breathing of the Rajputs on either hand.

XI.

There could be no retreat that day and no thought of it. Jundhra and Doonha were in ruins. The bridges were down behind them and Hanadra lay ahead. The British had to win their way into it or perish. Tired out, breakfastless, suffering from the baking heat, the long, thin British line had got−−not to hold at bay but to smash and pierce−−

an over−whelming force of Hindus that was stiffened up and down its length by small detachments of native soldiers who had mutinied.

Numbers were against them, and even superiority of weapons was not so overwhelmingly in their favor, for those were the days of short− range rifle−fire and smoothbore artillery, and one gun was considerably like another. The mutinous sepoys had their rifles with them; there were guns from the ramparts of Hanadra that were capable of quite efficient service at close range; and practically every man in the dense−packed rebel line had a firearm of some kind. It was only in cavalry and discipline and pluck that the British force had the advantage, and the cavalry had already charged once and had been repulsed.

General Turner rode up and down the sweltering firing−line, encouraging the men when it seemed to him they needed it and giving directions to his officers. He was hidden from view oftener than not by the rolling clouds of smoke and he popped up here and there suddenly and unexpectedly. Wherever he appeared there was an immediate stiffening among the ranks, as though he carried a supply of spare enthusiasm with him and could hand it out.

Colonel Carter, commanding the right wing, turned his head for a second at the sound of a horse's feet and found the general beside him.

"Had I better have my wounded laid in a wagon, sir?" he suggested, "in case you find it necessary to fall back?"

"There will be no retreat!" said General Turner. "Leave your wounded where they are. I never saw a cannon bleed before. How's that?"

He spurred his horse over to where one of Bellairs' guns was being run forward into place again and Colonel Carter followed him. There was blood dripping from the muzzle of it.

"We're short of water, sir!" said Colonel Carter.

And as he spoke a gunner dipped his sponge into a pool of blood and rammed it home.

Bellairs was standing between his two guns, looking like the shadow of himself, worn out with lack of sleep, disheveled, wounded. There was blood dripping from his forehead and he wore his left arm in a sling made from his shirt.

"Fire!" he ordered, and the two guns barked in unison and jumped back two yards or more.

"If you'll look," said General Turner, plucking at the colonel's sleeve, "you'll see a handful of native cavalry over yonder behind the enemy−− rather to the enemy's left−−there between those two clouds of smoke. D'you see them?"

"They look like Sikhs or Rajputs," said the colonel.

"Yes. Don't they? I'd like you to keep an eye on them. They've come up from the rear. I caught sight of them quite a while ago and I can't quite make them out. It's strange, but I can't believe that they belong to the enemy. D'you see?−−there−−they've changed direction. They're riding as though they intended to come round the enemy's left flank!"

"By gad, they are! Look! The enemy are moving to cut them off!"

"I must get back to the other wing!" said General Turner. "But that looks like the making of an opportunity! Keep both eyes lifting, Carter, and advance the moment you see any confusion in the enemy's ranks."

He rode off, and Colonel Carter stared long and steadily at the approaching horsemen. He saw a dense mass of the enemy, about a thousand strong, detach itself from the left wing and move to intercept them, and he noticed that the movement made a tremendous difference to the ranks opposed to him. He stepped up to young Bellairs and touched his sleeve. Bellairs started like a man roused from a dream.

"That's your wife over there!" said Colonel Carter. "There can't be any other white woman here−abouts riding with a Rajput escort!"

Bellairs gripped the colonel's outstretched arm.

"Where?" he almost screamed. "Where? I don't see her!"

"There, man! There, where that mass of men is moving! Look! By the Lord Harry! He's charging right through the mob! That's Mahommed Khan, I'll bet a fortune! Now's our chance Bugler!"

The bugler ran to him, and he began to puff into his instrument.

"Blow the `attention' first!"

Out rang the clear, strident notes, and the non−commissioned officers and men took notice that a movement of some kind would shortly be required of them, but the din of firing never ceased for a single instant. Then, suddenly, an answering bugle sang out from the other flank.

"Advance in echelon!" commanded Colonel Carter, and the bugler did his best to split his cheeks in a battle−rending blast.

"You remain where you are, sir!" he ordered young Bellairs. "Keep your guns served to the utmost!"

Six−and−twenty horsemen, riding full−tilt at a thousand men, may look like a trifle, but they are disconcerting. What they hit, they kill; and if they succeed in striking home, they play old Harry with formations. And Risaldar Mahommed Khan did strike home. He changed direction suddenly and, instead of using up his horses' strength in outflanking the enemy, who had marched to intercept him, and making a running target of his small command, he did the unexpected−−which is the one best thing to do in war. He led his six−and−twenty at a headlong gallop straight for the middle of the crowd−−it could not be called by any military name. They fired one ragged volley at him and then had no time to load before he was in the middle of them, clashing right and left and pressing forward. They gave way, right and left, before him, and a good number of them ran. Half a hundred of them were cut down as they fled toward their firing−line. At that second, just as the Risaldar and his handful burst through the mob and the mob began rushing wildly out of his way, the British bugles blared out the command to advance in echelon.

The Indians were caught between a fire and a charge that they had good reason to fear in front of them, and a disturbance on their left flank that might mean anything. As one−half of them turned wildly to face what might be coming from this unexpected quarter, the British troops came on with a roar, and at the same moment Mahommed Khan reached the rear of their firing−line and crashed headlong into it.

In a second the whole Indian line was in confusion and in another minute it was in full retreat not knowing nor even guessing what had routed it. Retreat grew into panic and panic to stampede and, five minutes after the Risaldar's appearance on the scene, half of the Indian line was rushing wildly for Hanadra and the other half was retiring sullenly in comparatively dense and decent order.

Bellairs could not see all that happened. The smoke from his own guns obscured the view, and the necessity for giving orders to his men prevented him from watching as he would have wished. But he saw the Rajputs burst out through the Indian ranks and he saw his own charger−−Shaitan the unmistakable−−careering across the plain toward him riderless.

"For the love of God!" he groaned, raising both fists to heaven, "has she got this far, and then been killed! Oh, what in Hades did I entrust her to an Indian for? The pig−headed, brave old fool! Why couldn't he ride round them, instead of charging through?"

As he groaned aloud, too wretched even to think of what his duty was, a galloper rode up to him.

"Bring up your guns, sir, please!" he ordered. "You're asked to hurry! Take up position on that rising ground and warm up the enemy's retreat!"

"Limber up!" shouted Bellairs, coming to himself again. Fifteen seconds later his two guns were thundering up the rise.

As he brought them to "action front" and tried to collect his thoughts to figure out the range, a finger touched his shoulder and he turned to see another artillery officer standing by him.

"I've been lent from another section," he explained: "You're wanted."

"Where?"

"Over there, where you see Colonel Carter standing. It's your wife wants you, I think!"

Bellairs did not wait for explanations. He sent for his horse and mounted and rode across the intervening space at a breakneck gallop that he could barely stop in time to save himself from knocking the colonel over. A second later he was in Ruth's arms.

"I thought you were dead when I saw Shaitan!" he said. He was nearly sobbing.

"No, Mahommed Khan rode him," she answered, and she made no pretense about not sobbing. She was crying like a child.

"Salaam, Bellairs sahib!" said a weak voice close to him. He noticed Colonel Carter bending over a prostrate figure, lifting the head up on his knee. There were three Rajputs standing between, though, and he could not see whose the figure was.

"Come over here!" said Colonel Carter, and young Bellairs obeyed him, leaving Ruth sitting on the ground where she was.

"Wouldn't you care to thank Mohammed Khan?" It was a little cruel of the colonel to put quite so much venom in his voice, for, when all is said and done: a man has almost a right to be forgetful when he has just had his young wife brought him out of the jaws of death. At least he has a good excuse for it. The sting of the reproof left him bereft of words and he stood looking down at the old Risaldar, saying nothing and feeling very much ashamed.

"Salaam, Bellairs sahib!" The voice was growing feebler. "I would have done more for thy father's son! Thou art welcome. Aie! But thy charger is a good one! Good−by! Time is short, and I would talk with the colonel sahib!"

He waved Bellairs away with a motion of his hand and the lieutenant went back to his wife again.

"He sent me away just like that, too!" she told him. "He said he had no time left to talk to women!"

Colonel Carter bent down again above the Risaldar, and listened to as much as he had time to tell of what had happened.

"But couldn't you have ridden round them, Risaldar?" he asked them.

"Nay, sahib! It was touch and go! I gave the touch! I saw as I rode how close the issue was and I saw my chance and took it! Had the memsahib been slain, she had at least died in full view of the English−−and there was a battle to be won. What would you? I am a soldier−−I."

"Indeed you are!" swore Colonel Carter.

"Sahib! Call my sons!"

His sons were standing near him, but the colonel called up his grandsons, who had been told to stand at a little distance off. They clustered round the Risaldar in silence, and he looked them over and counted them.

"All here?" he asked.

"All here!"

"Whose sons and grandsons are ye?"

"Thine!" came the chorus.

"This sahib says that having done my bidding and delivered her ye rode to rescue, ye are no more bound to the Raj. Ye may return to your homes if ye wish."

There was no answer.

"Ye may fight for the rebels, if ye wish! There will be a safe−permit written."

Again there was no answer.

"For whom, then, fight ye?"

"For the Raj!" The deep−throated answer rang out promptly from every one of them, and they stood with their sword−hilts thrust out toward the colonel. He rose and touched each hilt in turn.

"They are now thy servants!" said the Risaldar, laying his head back. "It is good! I go now. Give my salaams to General Turner sahib!"

"Good−by, old war−dog!" growled the colonel, in an Anglo−Saxon effort to disguise emotion. He gripped at the right hand that was stretched out on the ground beside him, but it was lifeless.

Risaldar Mahommed Khan, two−medal man and pensionless gentleman−at−large, had gone to turn in his account of how he had remembered the salt which he had eaten.