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With Roberts to Candahar, a tale of the third Afghan war

F. S. Brereton

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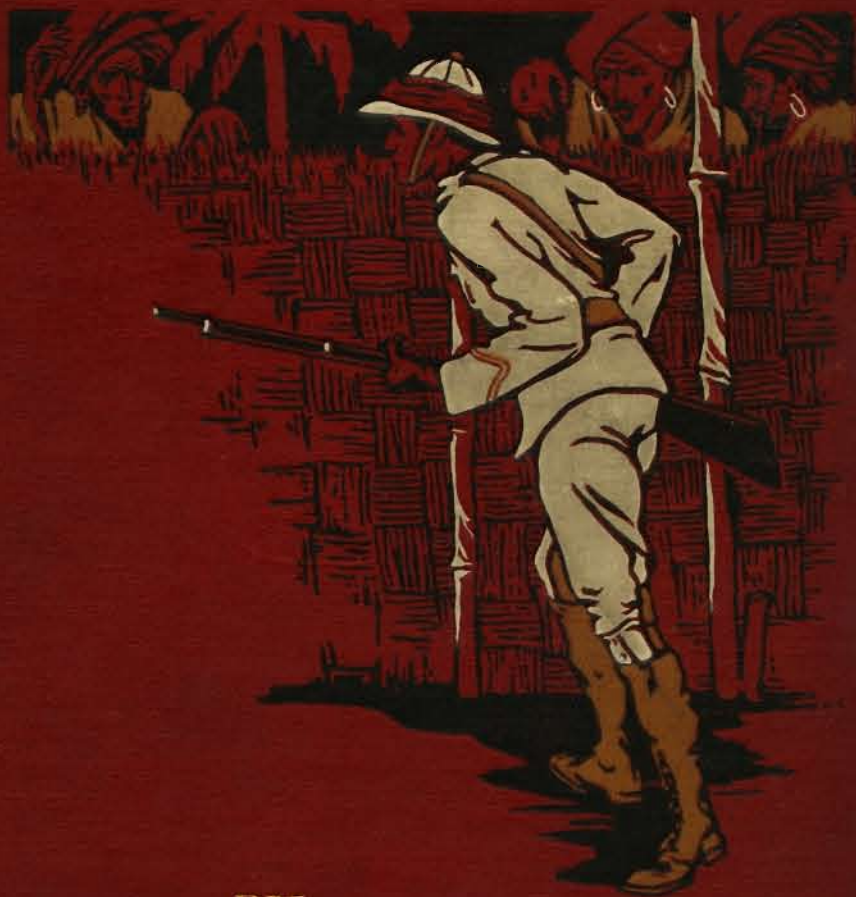
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WITH ROBERTS
TO CANDAHAR



BY

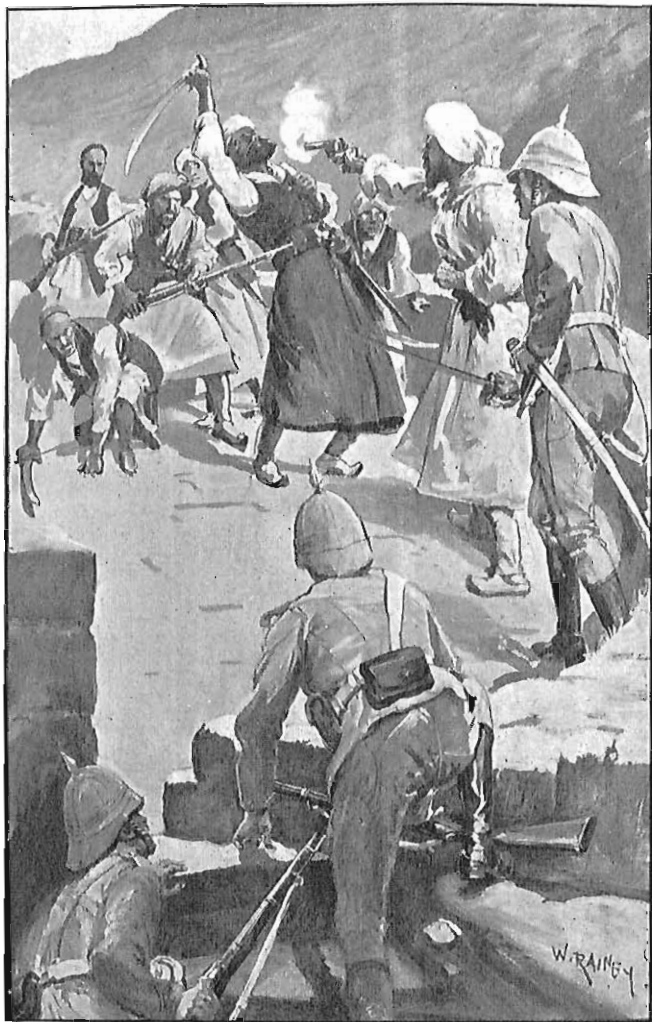
CAPTAIN F. S. BRERETON

WITH
ROBERTS
TO
CANDAHAHAR
BIRERETOW



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WITH ROBERTS TO CANDAHAR



B 665

“ HE AIMED CAREFULLY, AND, JUST AS THE AFGHAN LEAPT
TOWARDS HIM, PULLED THE TRIGGER ”

WITH ROBERTS TO CANDAHAR

A TALE OF THE THIRD AFGHAN WAR

BY
CAPTAIN F. S. BRERETON

Author of

"Roger the Bold," "A Gallant Grenadier," "The Dragon of
Pekin," "Foes of the Red Cockade," "A Soldier of Japan," etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY WILLIAM RAINEY, R. I.

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WITH ROBERTS TO CANDAHAR

CHAPTER I

The City of Conspiracies

AWAKE yet, major? The ponies are ready, and I see the other fellows coming from their rooms."

A quick rat-a-tat-tat rattled upon the door of one of many rooms on the first floor of the Balla Hissar in Cabul, causing the long gallery to echo with the sounds. Rat-a-tat-tat. The knock was repeated, and the one who stood outside the door lifted the latch and opened it slightly.

"Halloo!" he called out in a cheery voice. "Not up yet! Shame, major! I thought that you were always one of the early birds. Come along! It's a grand morning for a ride."

No answer greeted the officer who had knocked, and again he repeated the summons, till the movement of a foot was heard inside the room, and someone hurried to the door.

"Up? Of course I am, and dressed long ago; but, I say, Sir Louis——"

The note of the voice changed swiftly from that with

which one is apt to greet a friend, and suddenly became serious.

"I've been on the balcony outside, looking into the barrack square, and—look here, you don't fear trouble, do you?"

"Good heavens! No! I cannot say that we English are loved. Feringhees * are always hateful to these Afghans, don't you know. But they have accepted us as a necessary evil, and it seems to me that they look upon us as harmless madmen. It is not often that I see a single individual looking really dangerous."

"Hum! You know them better than I do, perhaps," was the doubtful answer. "But it is always a safe thing to suspect an Afghan, Sir Louis, for they are treacherous as a nation. Come in and look out from the gallery. There's a row on in the barrack square."

By now the door had been thrown wide open, and the two who had been conversing were face to face with one another. They linked arms and crossed the room, a huge airy apartment, delightfully cool in summer, but somewhat frigid during the winter months. Then they emerged onto the balcony, looking strangely dissimilar; for he who had spoken first, and had been addressed as Sir Louis, was tall and robust, with a fine beard, and a look of determination and of great power in his face. He was dressed in a white drill riding suit, and wore spurs at his heels, while a switch dangled by means of a thong of leather from his wrist. This Sir Louis Cavagnari was the commander of a British mission sent to the Court of the Ameer of Afghanistan in

* A foreigner.

July, 1879, to confer with that ruler, and to remain in the country to watch over British interests.

His companion in the gallery was a short man, slim and wiry, with grizzled hair, and a small black mustache which made him appear to be younger than he really was. Indeed, his general alertness, his activity of mind and body, and his genial ways helped to mislead strangers, so that he was often thought to be a junior major, whereas this gallant and dapper little gentleman was already past the age of fifty, and had retired from the service. More than that, he had, in spite of his modesty, seen far more of the nation of Afghans than had Sir Louis, for he had traveled in the country, spoke the language like a native, and for many years had been stationed on the frontier as a "political." Major Dennisson was, in fact, an officer of much repute, who since his retirement had elected to travel, having found it impossible to settle down. And his travels had brought him once more to Cabul, on a visit of some importance to his friend Sir Louis. He had arrived but two days before, and had as yet hardly settled down.

"Come and look at the Ameer's regulars," he said again, significantly. "They seem to be quarrelsome this morning, though that should concern you in no way at all. Besides, if I really thought that you and your men were in danger, should I have obtained a post under you for Alec? Look now! They are a discontented lot, and about as disciplined as a collection of beggars. What's the trouble?"

"Wages, I suppose, major. That's always the cry with

these beggars. The Ameer is a little tight-fisted. Holds on to his money a little too firmly, and attempts the impossible task of having a force of trained men without submitting to the expense. A set of ruffians they are, too, these regulars."

By now they had emerged from the major's bedroom, and had issued onto a balcony outside, which ran the length of that portion of the Balla Hissar. The latter was the name given to a large block of buildings, in which were many of the palaces belonging to the nobles of Cabul, and, in addition, the Ameer of Afghanistan had his quarters there, while there were barracks close at hand, affording accommodation to the soldiers, as well as an arsenal, where ammunition and guns were stored. From the balcony it was possible to look down into the barrack square, where the troops were then paraded, without their rifles, however.

"It looks suspiciously like a mutiny," said Sir Louis, after he had watched the parade for a few minutes. "The men are unsteady, and there is too much noise altogether. The officers, too, don't seem to me to be checking the men as they should. I don't like the look of affairs."

"Better to warn your men to keep out of the way," suggested the major. "If these fellows are angry, they might vent their ill-feeling upon you. There are many who would take the opportunity if it presented itself."

The advice was good without doubt, and the leader of the British mission was the first to recognize the fact.

"Many thanks, major. I had not thought of that. Will

you get below and ask Hamilton to see about it? And, by the way, our ponies are outside the gate. Better get them in, don't you think?"

The little major gave a vigorous nod of his head. "I've seen these fiery Eastern people break into mutiny before," he said. "An Englishman is like a red rag to them at such a time. I'll tell Hamilton, and come up to you again."

He turned abruptly and went from the balcony with light and active steps, strapping his revolver to his side as he passed through the room.

"I've not lived on the frontier all these years for nothing," he murmured. "To be armed is to be prepared to the fullest extent. And, besides, I think there's danger. The attitude of those men is ugly."

He would have been more convinced that there was trouble brewing, indeed, that a revolution was even then on the point of occurring, had he been able to hear what was passing among the men paraded in the square. Sir Louis was an onlooker, and could soon detect where the noise came from, and the cause of the same. For within a minute of the major's departure one of the soldiers stepped from the ranks and confronted his officers, his comrades giving vent to marks of approval which approached as nearly to a genuine cheer as people of the East ever allow themselves to go to. Then he drew his tulwar,* and began to harangue the parade.

"You say that we are not to be paid in full," he cried, his eyes flashing; "that we are to receive what is due for two months only, and that the remainder will be owed to

* A native curved saber.

us till it is more convenient. Are we, then, to starve that others may live? Are we and our wives and children to stint ourselves while the money which our Amcer should pay to us goes elsewhere? Tell us, where does the money go? Who is it who is the receiver?"

He turned to his comrades as if asking for their support, and they gave it without stint. There was a roar of voices, and then, as silence fell again, one of the men answered—

"Why ask a question which all are able to answer?" he shouted. "We all know that the gold goes to the feringhees. Else how could they live here? And, moreover, our moulla * has told us so. It is they who take the money which should be ours."

"While we look on and starve! While they live in plenty, shaming us with their presence, we shiver and starve! Give us this money! Give us what is our due, and drive these feringhees from the country."

"Or we will do that for you," shouted the man who had spoken from the ranks. "Why ask to have them sent away? Have we not done so before? and is this the first occasion on which we have clamored for our wages? Death to the feringhees! Let us drive them out ourselves! Let us slay them till none are left!"

There was no doubt that this man had gauged the temper of his fellows, for if there had been much noise before, a howl of execration now burst from the soldiers. One snatched a pistol from his belt, and, pushing his fellow aside, stepped out in front to join his comrade.

* A native priest of Afghanistan.

"Brothers," he said quietly, turning to the men, "we have talked before. This time we will act. Who will come with me to the palace in which this mission is housed? Who will aid me in attacking?"

The words caused the soldiers to break from their ranks instantly, and gather about the man. But it was only for a few minutes. Mutinies in the East run with the rapidity of flames, and deeds of violence are undertaken as soon as conceived. The thought of slaying the feringhees matched well with the sulky humor of the men, and now that they had a leader, they followed willingly.

"Your guns and bayonets, and then attack. Come!" shouted the man.

In a moment the aspect of the barrack square was changed, for the group of soldiers melted away, the men running to their quarters. They were gone only for a minute when they appeared again, and, running to the gate, burst their way into the street. And here they met with another element, scarcely likely to check their determination. The news that there was trouble in the barracks had already brought a crowd of ruffianly Afghans about the gate, for Cabul holds many a scoundrel. Though but a few minutes had passed since their morning devotions were finished, they swarmed to the gate, eager for some deed of violence. They heard the cry of the leader, and joined in the rush with fiendish delight.

"To the Balla Hissar! Slay the feringhees!" echoed down the street, bringing yet more ruffians from gutter and alley. Then, as if fortune were directly against Sir

Louis and his little band, a moulla appeared, a holy man, accustomed to hold the ear of the public.

“Spare them not, these wicked feringhees!” he cried. “Halt not till all are slain, for then will you have done a service to Allah. Rush on them, and fear not their bullets, for they shall be harmless, and shall rebound from your bodies.”

He gathered up his trailing cotton cloak and ran after the mutineers, shrieking to them and exhorting them to violence. What wonder, then, that the soldiers never paused, that, lacking the opposition of their officers, who should have kept them in check, and meeting with so much encouragement, they should keep to their purpose! They had weapons in their hands, and they smarted under an injury, an injury done them without doubt by the feringhees. The latter should suffer, while they would make the most of the loot to be obtained.

That thought was uppermost in the minds of all; and since the British had the reputation of being fabulously wealthy, there would be enough and to spare for all.

“To the gate! Tear it down, and then slay them with the sword!” shouted the ruffian at their head. “Look, there is one of the hated heretics!”

The mob had by now arrived opposite the gate of the palace in which the British mission was quartered, and at once a figure appeared on the battlements above, while some four or five ponies were seen hastily retiring within the gates. Sir Louis had left the gallery, and, mounting to the roof, had taken up this position so as to be able

the better to watch the ruffians. Indeed, he had some thought of addressing them, for he spoke like a native, and might have pacified their anger. But there were too many hot-bloods in the mob, too many scoundrels who had never failed to scowl darkly and spit upon the ground when a feringhee happened to pass. Their hatred and the words of their moulla caused them to shake their fists or their weapons at the figures above, and to halt while they gave vent to one long howl of derision. Then one picked up a stone and flung it, a thousand following suit.

"See what a bullet will do!" cried out the leader. "That to commence the action."

He leveled his pistol, took a hurried aim, and fired, the bullet whizzing past Sir Louis. Then he led the mad rush again, aiming straight for the gate. Meanwhile, the latter had been hastily barred, the bolts being pushed firmly home by the guard stationed there, while officers and men gathered together within, and looked out at the mob through the loopholes left in the gate.

"Perhaps a beam or two would help," said Major Denison, who had arrived some minutes before and given his warning. "There are a number of ruffians rushing against us, and their weight might burst in the bolts. Ah! that was rather unwise."

He and the young officer whom he had addressed lifted their heads and listened as a dropping volley burst from the Balla Hissar from a quarter close by.

"That would have been better left undone," went on the major; "for we are safe from harm for a time, and

it may yet be possible to subdue these men by other means. Those bullets have told heavily."

"They were fired without orders. I agree that it would have been better to have waited. But look out, major; they are close upon us now."

The mob, led by the big Afghan who had fired at Sir Louis, was by now within striking distance, and undeterred by the volley poured into them, they rushed right up to the gate, and hurled themselves against it till the beams bent and the bolts shuddered in their cleats. Indeed, had it not been that a beam had been placed in position, the gate might have been thrown open. Then came the thunder of a hundred rifle-butts on the woodwork, accompanied by fanatical shouts and shrieks.

"Better drive them off," said the young officer. "That door looks as if it might give way. Line the loopholes, men, and open."

He gave the order to a number of native soldiers of India belonging to the corps of Guides, of whom there was an escort of seventy with the mission, and at once the men ran to their positions, their rifles quickly snapping as they fired into the enemy. Then the major, joined by the officer who had given the order, and by another, took the places of three of the men, and emptied their revolvers into the faces of the enemy. Not till they had repeated the process on four occasions did the Afghans show signs of wavering. But they were suffering heavily from a flanking fire, and at length retired sullenly, leaving numbers of their comrades on the ground.

“A chance to breathe and to see to the gate again,” said the major, calmly, his voice breaking the silence which had followed the retirement, and which up till then had been undisturbed, save for the whining of one of the unhappy wretches outside, who had been struck down by a bullet. “Better get ready, Hamilton. There will be more trouble to meet, if I am not mistaken, for these fellows are hot-headed, and their moulla will never allow them to rest. Yes. Look at them! They are coming on again.”

A glance through a loophole showed that this was the case, and those within the gateway again prepared to resist them. Some, at the orders of Lieutenant Hamilton, hastily secured another beam in place, while others sought for posts which would give them the greatest advantage. And meanwhile the sound of musketry came from the roof and from the battlements above, showing that their comrades were busy.

“Take command for a moment, please,” said the lieutenant, addressing the major. “I am going to see that the gun is made ready. We may want it.”

“And perhaps it would be as well to make early use of it. If crammed to the muzzle and fired into the middle of a rush, it might stop the enemy.”

“While we could take advantage of the confusion. I see, major. It would be fine to get to work with the bayonet, and teach those fellows to leave us alone. However, this time we shall not be ready.”

The officer went off to do as he had said, two men helping him load the gun with canister. Then he returned,

to find that the enemy were almost at the gate. And on this occasion there was more method in their fanaticism, for while a number threw themselves against the wood-work with fury, beating upon it with their fists and with their weapons as before, others acted with some thought and combination. Taking cover at the foot of the walls, those who could, aimed at the defenders on the battlements, picking them off as they leaned over to fire, while others raised their weapons to the loopholes in the gate, and pulled the trigger, sending bullets into the men massed behind it. In fact, the battle raged at close quarters, a gate, none too strong, separating the combatants. But the defenders never faltered. Major Dennisson was a power in himself, and, fortunately, his reputation was known to the Guides. They fought, therefore, with dogged courage, taking but little notice of their losses. Half an hour later they were successful in beating off the enemy.

"They will come again," said the major, "and so we will make the most of the breathing space. What's the news, Sir Louis?"

He started, and changed color, for as he turned from the gate to speak with the lieutenant, he caught sight of the leader of the British mission. He was deadly pale, and a large crimson stain on his white clothing showed that he was wounded.

"The roof is no longer tenable," he said feebly. "The mutineers have gained possession of the roof of the arsenal, and from that position they are able to fire down on us. We have lost heavily in defending the place. But we

should not have returned had they not set the building on fire."

"Fire!" the major gasped.

"Yes. Listen to it. The floor above is in one big blaze from end to end."

The news was terrible, and for a little while the four officers faced one another in silence, while the crackle of burning woodwork and the roar of the flames came to their ears, drowning the hoarse tumult of the mob.

"I left Kelly at the end of the gallery," continued Sir Louis. "He will join us soon, for the flames will make it impossible for the Afghans to get at us from the roof."

"Then we shall have to fight it out here; and as the place is on fire, we shall soon have to move into the open," said the major; "in which case Hamilton——"

"We will have a go at them. Let's get the gun in position."

"We're in a tight place, I fear, Sir Louis," went on the major, "and I advise that we meet the scoundrels halfway. If we are to be killed ourselves, at least let us punish these ruffians."

"And meanwhile we will send again to the Amcer. I have already asked once for his help, and that the mutiny might be stopped; but I have had no answer. Dennisson, give me your arm, like a good fellow."

The unfortunate leader of the British posted in Cabul sat down upon a stone step somewhat suddenly, his pallor becoming more marked. Then he almost fainted away, some brandy being necessary to revive him.

"Take no notice of me," he whispered gallantly. "I shall be better soon. I was hit soon after the fighting began, and the loss of blood makes me weak. Thanks, major. You are good to help me."

They did what they could for him, and then went to the gate again, for Dr. Ambrose Kelly had put in an appearance. He was the surgeon to the mission, and had just come from the gallery giving access to the roof. A smoking rifle was in his hands, while his helmet showed a gash, the result of a bullet. But he did not forget the reason for his presence there, and in the midst of the next attack he devoted himself to Sir Louis and to the other wounded. And what a scene of confusion it was; what noise surrounded the Balla Hissar! For the rattle of musketry had long ere this brought the seum of the turbulent city from the lowest hovels, and these, filled with the desire for loot, and only too ready to wreak their hate upon feringhees, eagerly joined with the mutinied soldiers of the Ameer. A few, the more cowardly ones, slunk away, no doubt, but the majority took up the work of slaughter with a ferocious zest which was appalling, and only to be approached by the frantic hate and disregard of danger shown by the ghazees, the white-robed fanatics of the nation, who could always be relied upon to head an attack if the enemy happened to be heretics. These enemies swarmed in all directions, and already, as has been mentioned, they had made the roof of the Balla Hissar impossible, so pitiless was the hail of bullets which they poured upon it from the higher elevation of the arsenal.

Within the gateway, which gave entrance to a narrow courtyard roofed with stone, the scene was even more pitiful, for by this time a number of the defenders had fallen, and lay in the narrow space in all sorts of ugly postures. Others were wounded only, but so severely as to render them helpless; and these poor fellows, brave though they endeavored to be, could not help the pleading look which came into their eyes as they watched their hale comrades. Some fumbled at their rifles, feebly replacing the cartridge which was expended, with the sure knowledge that the time would come when that bullet would be needed. And overhead the flames roared, while the crash of the roof falling in at various points could be plainly heard. A volcano, in fact, raged round the survivors of the mission, while outside a danger lurked which was even more to be feared.

Within a stone's throw sat the Ameer of Afghanistan, he who had given his solemn pledge to protect the mission, to keep our representatives safe and sound. But he made no movement. To the messages sent him he returned but empty promises, which were never to be fulfilled.

"They are going to make another rush," said Lieutenant Hamilton, when the garrison had had half an hour's breathing space. "You can see them mustering outside. Now, major, we'll make use of the gun. I'll post men at the doors, ready to throw them open, and, as soon as the gun has fired, we will give them the bayonet."

"And drive them clear of the gates," was the answer, Major Deunisson removing the cheroot which he was

smoking, and answering with a calmness which was remarkable. "Then I'll help to lead the men. We will stand behind you, so as to give you every opportunity, and then we'll make a rush."

He placed the cheroot back in his mouth, and went on smoking; for he was of a philosophic turn of mind, and this was not the first occasion on which he had found himself in danger of losing his life. And besides, like many another, he found that a cheroot soothed him, and steadied his nerves. Presently he tossed it aside, and sprang to his feet, for the moment had arrived.

"They have started," said the lieutenant. "Pull the bolts, my men, and when I shout, throw the gates wide open. We will run the gun forward and fire."

There was no time for further preparation, for if the Afghans had come on bravely before, on this occasion their valor was of the desperate order. They had suffered heavily, and had found this handful of feringhees and their escort by no means easy to quell. But this time they would make an end of the matter. And for that purpose their moulla led them, his cotton robe gathered up free of his feet, and his lank hair streaming out behind him. And this time they came on in silence, their desperation robbing them of the power to shout. All their fierce energies were required to get them to the gate and burst it open.

"Now!" shouted the lieutenant. At the command the gate swung wide, and those who had been told off to the gun ran it forward. There was a minute's pause—a pause purposely prolonged by this gallant gunner officer,

for he deemed that the enemy was as yet hardly close enough.

“Wait till the whites of their eyes show,” he murmured. “It’s a good thing to remember.”

The time had come. He stooped, squinted along the sights once more, and touched the vent. There was a roar, and hardly had the gun leaped back at the recoil when the major dashed forward, the Guides, the doctor, and a third officer sharing in the sally. They burst into the ranks of the enemy as the latter were recovering from the shock of the canister which had torn through their midst, and swords and bayonets quickly completed the work. The Afghans broke and fled, having lost heavily. Thereafter there were more sallies, more desperate conflicts, till the garrison was miserably reduced. Death stared each one in the face, and they knew well that the next assault would be successful. But they never flinched, and made no offer to lay down their arms; instead, they crept as far from the flames as the surroundings would allow, and waited—waited calmly now, for the last scene of all. And very soon it came. Another gang of ghazees and scoundrels from the city rushed at the gateway, their entrance now unopposed by any obstacle, for the gates had been beaten from their hinges. Nor could the gun offer further help to the defenders, for it lay useless, with broken wheels, its ammunition expended. What other end could there be to such an act of treachery? The Afghans, secure now in their numbers, poured over the gun and into the gateway. Then, for the last time, bayonet was crossed with tulwar,

while native pistol answered the snap of the revolver. Weight told, and ere ten minutes had passed the Balla Hissar had fallen, and the British mission was extinct.

As for the dapper and gallant little major, he fell beneath the body of one of the Guides, with the useless gun mounting guard, as it were, over him. And across the muzzle of the weapon dangled the brave Lieutenant Hamilton, keeping his friend, the major, company to the very last.

CHAPTER II

An Afghan Rising

IT was late in the afternoon of September 3, 1879, when the last of Sir Louis Cavagnari's mission were gathered in the gateway of the Balla Hissar, awaiting their end, that a rifle shot suddenly awakened the echoes in a rocky gorge on the road from the Kuram Valley to Cabul. The sound instantly brought a small caravan traveling through the defile to a halt, and set the leaders talking.

"A shot!" exclaimed one, a lanky youth, spare of frame, and of slim figure. "You heard it, count?"

"A shot? I think so, Monsieur Alec. One of these pestilent peasants shooting a goat, perhaps."

The speaker, a narrow-shouldered Frenchman, short of stature, and wearing a comical little beard, lifted his topee from his head, and, dropping his reins, paused to mop his forehead; for the midday sun had heated the air in the gorge, and traveling was arduous work when the road was so rocky and difficult.

"Nothing! Mon cher Alec, a shot here is nothing! Pooh! You Englishmen think that everyone wishes to shoot at you."

"But I don't," was the answer. "Anywhere else I should have passed the matter by, but—well, count, you

know what these Afghans are. My father has always suspected them, for they have shown treachery before. Ah, another shot!"

Alec Dennisson, whose features resembled his father's, the gallant major who had been with Sir Louis Cavagnari, but who, unlike his parent, was very tall, leaped from his saddle, and, snatching a pair of glasses, eagerly scanned the sides of the rocky gorge. And while he did so another and yet another shot rang out. The reports echoed through the gorge till it seemed almost as if a regiment were firing. And as he dismounted, his companion, the Count de Bomparo, halted behind him, shrugging his shoulders and smiling incredulously, as if to show his disbelief in all thought of danger; while twelve native Guides stood about him, the thought of possible attack causing them to fumble at their ammunition pouches.

Bang! bang! bang! This time there could be no doubt that more than one piece had been discharged; and at the noise even the count showed some concern.

"*Peste!*" he murmured, with the same old shrug. "This lad is right, perhaps. These English are always quarreling with their neighbors. Who can be coming?"

He leaped from his saddle almost as rapidly as Alec Dennisson had done, and, shading his eyes with his topee—a topee, by the way, which was ridiculously large for him—stared along the gorge in the direction of Cabul.

"A fugitive, Monsieur Alec!" he cried; "and see the men who fire at him! There are five—no, ten. Ah, there are even more than that."

"And the man they aim at is one of the Guides, I think. Count, I fear that we are in for trouble."

"Then we can meet it. I have a revolver here, Monsieur Alec."

The Frenchman opened the pouch at his hip, and extracted the weapon, turning to his young companion as he did so.

"Perhaps you will retire?" he asked, with a questioning lift of his eyebrows. "These are your men, and I am but a guest with the party."

"I shall wait till he reaches us, and if he is unable to do that, I shall push on and rescue him," was the decisive answer. "I tell you that he is one of the Guides, and he may have news for us. The mission may be in danger, even; perhaps already attacked. My father often said that a stay at the Balla Hissar was highly dangerous. Ah! the poor fellow is down. We shall go forward!"

By now the fugitive, who had been seen struggling along the floor of the narrow gorge, had approached within three hundred yards of Alec Dennisson's party, and as the latter watched his course, they saw him suddenly stumble and fall, while the echo of a shot came thundering along the rocky walls. Then the figures of some dozen wild Afghan hillmen were seen pushing along on either side high up on the sky line. Others were seen to enter at the far end of the gorge.

"Fix bayonets! Double!" shouted Alec over his shoulder as he raced toward the fugitive. "Count, we will return in a few minutes."

"There will be no need, monsieur. I shall come with you. My weapon may be useful."

The gallant little Frenchman gripped the butt of his revolver, and, cramming his topce about his ears, followed Alec and his party swiftly. As for the young leader of the caravan, all his thoughts were centered upon the unfortunate fugitive lying face downwards in the gorge, and upon his rescue.

"He will have news of father," he said to himself as he raced forward. "What can it be? I know that he warned Sir Louis of some impending danger."

This was, in fact, precisely the case, for Major Dennisson, besides being a soldier of some merit, was also an energetic traveler, who had visited Afghanistan among other countries, and had taken Alec there with him. Born in India, a son of an old servant of the East India Company—John Company, as it was generally known—he spoke a number of the native dialects fluently, and no doubt for that reason had been selected to act as political officer on the frontier of India, abutting upon Afghanistan. A hard-working and zealous officer, he had devoted himself to the service of his country, and whenever able to obtain leave, had spent his holiday in Cabul, or even in northern Herat. A widower, with one boy, he sold his commission when Alec was fifteen years of age, and returned to England to watch over the latter's education, and to manage a large property to which he had succeeded.

"In two years, or a little more, we will sail for India again," he had said to Alec, when the latter was home for

one of the Christmas holidays, the first which he had spent with his father for some time. "Meanwhile, work hard, for upon your success will depend the position you will hold in India. If you do well, I have no doubt of obtaining a commission for you in the cavalry, and that will be a stepping-stone to a post under the political office."

As a matter of fact, Alec, though he did his best, did not shine brilliantly at school. But a boyhood spent in India and the knowledge which he had of the life of an officer stimulated him so much that, contrary to his own expectations, he proved successful, and when seventeen years of age, sailed to India with his father, having been granted a commission in the cavalry. A year later, owing to his own hard work, and to his knowledge of native dialects, a knowledge obtained when he was a boy, he was so fortunate as to be appointed to Sir Louis Cavagnari's mission at Cabul.

"I shall be there when you arrive," the major said. "It is some little while since I traveled in Afghanistan, and I am anxious to see my old friend Cavagnari. You will be following in a few days, and it will be a fine experience to come up alone. Of course, you will have an escort, for I do not deny the fact that to the *feringhee* Afghanistan is dangerous, at least in the neighborhood of Cabul, for the *ghazees* have not forgotten the punishment we inflicted in the last campaign, and, moreover, the present Ameer is weak and untrustworthy. Then, too, we have interfered with the affairs of Afghanistan too often, and there is no doubt that the nation owes us a grudge."

"Then, will there be fighting?" Alec had demanded with some show of excitement, for his eagerness to see active service was pronounced.

"Perhaps, my lad; perhaps not. Who can say when Afghans will rise? They are like water which simmers over a slow fire, for they may go on for months and years peacefully simmering; then, one day, a moulla, as their holy men are called, stirs the fire, and the water boils. The ghazees see blood, as the Red Indians say, and nothing else will satisfy them. However, we will hope that trouble is not before us, and for you, you must put your back into the work at Cabul. Remember that a young officer is watched, and his actions reported. Show that you have plenty of energy, therefore, and, above all, make friends of your comrades. As to your journey, you will have a dozen Guides as escort, and my old friend, the count, will travel with you. Once you are installed at Cabul, he and I propose to journey to Herat, and then on into Russia, if we are successful in obtaining passports."

Already the reader will have learned what happened, for when the gallant major fell, fighting in the gateway of the Balla Hissar, the end of Sir Louis Cavagnari's mission had come. In all, some seventy Guides had perished, while Mr. William Jenkins, the secretary, Dr. Ambrose Kelly, and Lieutenant Hamilton, V. C., had fallen with their leader and Major Dennisson in a vain attempt to uphold the British ensign. One poor fellow had managed to escape, and now lay dying at Alec's feet.

"Sahib, I die," gasped the unfortunate fellow, as he

looked into the young Englishman's face. "They have hunted me through the gorge, and I could not escape, for I was weak and wounded."

"How? Do you come from the Balla Hissar?" demanded Alec, anxiously. "Quick! What is the news?"

But the unfortunate Guide was all but spent, and, in spite of his desire to give the news, was too weak even to force his lips to frame the words. Instead, he stared into Alec's eyes as if the latter could read the horrible tidings in his face.

"Leave him to me. Let me see to this good fellow, Monsieur Alec, while you command the men," exclaimed the count. "This news must be important, and we should therefore do all that is possible to obtain it."

Thrusting his revolver back into the pouch, he unhooked the flask which dangled from his belt, and at once knelt by the native soldier's side. And as he did so, Alec rapidly placed his men so as to command the gorge.

"Get behind the rocks here," he commanded, "and shoot whenever you are certain of hitting a man. Ah! look at the ruffians! They are creeping along one side of the gorge."

"Take shelter, sahib," called out the native officer with the escort. "See, they are shooting close."

"Then we must put the count and your comrade under cover at once," answered Alec, his whole frame thrilling with excitement, which he endeavored to subdue. Indeed, he might have been excused if he had shown more than a little trepidation, for the Afghan hillmen who had pursued

the Guide were already within easy range, and, undismayed by the sudden arrival of the caravan, poured in a heavy volley, sending their bullets crashing against the rocks, while the report went rolling and roaring along the gorge.

"I thank you," said the count, as the bullets hissed about him, helping Alec to lift the wounded man. "See, monsieur, I have given him some brandy, and he is better already. In a few minutes he will speak, perhaps."

"Then we will hold these fellows back till he can give us the news. Afterwards we must consider how to act."

Alec returned to his men, and for ten minutes or so carefully directed their fire; and meanwhile his eye sought for some more sheltered spot which could offer better prospects for defense.

"There is a hollow a few paces away from us," he said to the jemadar,* "and we will retire into it if they try to roll rocks upon us. Some of the hillmen have already climbed to a point almost above our heads, and we must be prepared to rush under cover. Give orders to our best shots to watch them, and warn all to be in readiness to retreat to the hollow."

It was well for the party that he did so, for, in spite of numerous attempts to prevent them, some dozen of the enemy had now contrived to clamber up the side of the gorge to a point which overlooked the party below, and there they could be seen loosening the bowlders with the object of rolling them into the gorge. The bullets sent by the Guides splashed upon the rocks about them, but they kept carefully under cover, experience having taught them

* A native lieutenant.

that to expose themselves for more than a few moments was fatal. Indeed, three of their number had already paid for their rashness, and lay crushed and mangled at the bottom of the gorge, where they had fallen.

"Run!" shouted Alec, seeing a bowlder begin to roll. "Into the hollow!"

He stood where he was, watching the scene above, till the whole party had retired, carrying their wounded comrade with them. Then he took to his heels, and leaped under cover as the bowlder crashed into the gorge. And there, collected closely together, the Guides firing an occasional shot, the whole party remained, while rocks and huge bowlders came hurtling to the floor of the ravine.

"The noise is great, and at first gives one the alarm," said the count with a smile, as a mass of stone, larger than any which had preceded it, came from above, and falling upon a bowlder was shattered into a thousand splinters. "But the danger is not so great, unless it be from splinters. Monsieur, our unhappy friend recovers. I think that he will speak. Take the flask and sit beside him while I look out at these ruffians who attack us."

He handed the flask of spirit to Alec, and then, showing a wonderful amount of *sang-froid* under the circumstances, he crept to the center of the Guides, and, raising his head above an enormous howlder which shielded the entrance to the hollow, looked out at the Afghans.

"*Peste!*" he cried angrily, suddenly withdrawing. "The fellows are creeping so close, and I declare that one of their bullets struck this rock only one hand's breadth

below my face. We shall have to stop them. Ah! I will allow Monsieur Alec to hear the news, and then I will tell him what I have seen."

Conscious that to raise his head again would be highly dangerous, he sought for a crevice between the rocks and applied his eye to it, having beforehand, by dint of signs and much pointing, disclosed to the jemadar the position of the enemy. Meanwhile, Alec had been rapidly extracting the news brought by the fugitive.

"Tell me the worst, shortly and swiftly," he whispered, bending over the dying man. "What of the mission? What of Major Dennisson, sahib?"

"All are dead. The Residency was in flames, sahib, from end to end. The major, sahib, lived when I crept away from the Balla Hissar, but he is dead now of a certainty. I alone have contrived to escape, and I am thankful that I have come among friends in time to give the warning ere I die."

The poor fellow told his tale in tones which were scarcely raised above a whisper, and Alec had once or twice to give him stimulant before he could proceed, for the Guide was mortally wounded, and past all help. Indeed, he had hardly told the news of the massacre and of his own escape from the Balla Hissar when he died, smiling serenely, with his hand in our hero's. And all the while the echoes of the firing went rolling along the gorge, while bowlders poured from above, the Afghan hillmen making frantic efforts to reach their enemy.

"For the time we can laugh at these madmen above,"

said the count, as Alec crept to his side. "But the danger comes from the front. There I see more than twenty Afghans, who are creeping slowly towards us. Doubtless they will make a charge."

"Then we must dash out and drive them back," exclaimed Alec. "It will be safe to do so, for the men above will not toss stones upon their comrades. But, listen to the news! The British mission has met with treachery. The Residency is burned, and all save the poor Guide there are slaughtered. My father is one of the number."

Poor lad! though he did his utmost to speak quietly and betray no sign, his lips twitched while he gulped down a sob. But the sound seemed to restore his composure, for his features hardened, while he unconsciously lifted his head erect. As for the count, he had suspected long ago that something serious had happened to the British mission at Cabul.

"The news may be false," he said. "The poor man may have exaggerated. His terror may have led him to believe matters to be worse than they really are. Let us hope that our good friend, the major, lives yet."

It was a vain endeavor to comfort his young companion, and both knew it. At another time perhaps Alec would have indignantly responded that he was sure that there was no mistake, could be no exaggeration; but now, when bullets hummed overhead, when rocks crashed from above, and hitting upon the bowlders at the foot of the gorge splintered into pieces, bursting asunder with terrific noise, there was no time for argument and none for discussion.

Indeed, a moment later his thoughts were entirely distracted, for of a sudden the crash of rocks ceased, and instantly, it seemed, a dusky figure leaped upon a bowlder at the edge of the hollow, and jumped down upon the defenders.

Thud! A bayonet met the ghazee halfway in his flight and impaled him. But still he struggled, furiously slashing with his tulwar, till a second bayonet quieted him.

“Prepare to hold the hollow!” shouted Alec. “They are rushing us!”

He had no time for more, for hardly had the first of the Afghans fallen to the ground and been shaken from the bayonet of the Guide who had met his mad rush, than twenty were upon the little band of defenders. In threes and fours, or singly, they flew at the Guides, hacking furiously at them. It was a moment of wild excitement—of tremendous peril. Grouped together, Alec, the count, and the escort of Guides used their revolvers and swords or their bayonets desperately. Men fell gripping a ghazee enemy, struggling to hold the arm which wielded a dagger, while those about, when they had a moment to spare, waited to aid their comrade with a bayonet. As for Alec, a few seconds had sufficed to empty his revolver, and then, sword in hand, he had endeavored to defend himself from the enemy. But an Englishman was a mark for these Afghan ghazees, and at once half a dozen were upon him.

“Death to the feringhee dog!” they shouted. “Death to all who enter here!”

A rapid thrust relieved him of one of his attackers,



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THE COUNT COMES TO ALEC'S ASSISTANCE

while one of the Guides shot a second dead at his feet. After that, Alec found himself slashing at four of the Afghans, who, with tulwar in one hand and dagger in the other, waited their opportunity to dash in below his sword and end the combat. But now they had another to deal with, for the little count came pushing towards them.

"A brave fight, monsieur!" he called out. "But the odds are too great. I come to aid you with this weapon."

In a moment he was beside Alec, holding a rifle in his hands, with bayonet fixed.

"Forward!" he shouted. "Let us not give back to these ruffians."

There was something alarming in this little, narrow-shouldered Frenchman, for as he came to the front the Afghans gave back for a moment; then, as he and Alec together dashed at them, they turned and fled over the bowlders.

"Now for the others! Beat them off!" shouted Alec. "Come! Together! One last rush!"

There was no need to encourage his men, for these Guides were among the staunchest of our native troops. Those who still lived and fought at the fringe of the hollow sprang at their enemies, and in a trice the latter were flying.

"Load!" shouted Alec, cramming cartridges into his revolver. "Now shoot them down as they run! Teach them the danger of attacking!"

Flinging himself upon a bowlder, he leveled his revolver and sent five shots into the thick of the enemy, and

as he did so his men rapidly joined him, their fire causing five of the ghazees to fall to the ground. A minute later all had disappeared, some fifteen dark figures alone bearing witness to the fact that an attack had been made. Silence once more reigned in the gorge, a silence unbroken even by the sound of firing.

"And now we will discuss the situation, perhaps," said the count, coolly, as he mopped his forehead and saw to the reloading of his revolver. "For the moment we have the victory, Monsieur Alec; but we are in a strange land, and enemies are about us, wishing to take our lives."

That there was no doubt of the correctness of his remarks was self-evident, for the bodies of four of the Guides lay at his feet, while as he spoke a distant shout set the echoes rolling, the crash of a falling boulder just outside the hollow proving that the hillmen were still at hand.

"It needs little discussion. We are here, hemmed in the gorge, and unless we retreat at once we shall be killed."

"And supposing we make this retreat, monsieur? These rocks which fall will kill us more surely than will the bullets and knives of the enemy. Is there any retreat? Would it not be better to remain here and sell our lives as dearly as we may?"

For a little while the two looked at one another, wondering what course to take, and as they did so the Guides crept back to their old positions, first having taken possession of the cartridges left in the pouches of their dead comrades.

"To retreat through the gorge means death to all," said Alec at length, craning his head out of the hollow, and pointing significantly to the heights above. "You can see for yourself that there are a hundred and more of the hillmen there, waiting to throw bowlders upon us. Even the darkness, which is already coming, would not help our escape, for the place is narrow, and those who managed to rush through unharmed would find a barrier of tulwars beyond. No, there is no retreat in that direction, count."

"And to remain here means to await a final rush in the night, monsieur. In the darkness, who will know whether he thrusts at friend or foe? Death stares us in the face on every side. Fortune is against us, as it has been against that little band of which my friend, the major, formed a part. Ah, well, we must not condole too heartily with ourselves, for others have met disaster before. Remember that we are from Europe, and that Frenchmen and Englishmen have died side by side before."

The narrow-shouldered count stood erect, despite the bullets which had now again commenced to whirl overhead, and smiled at his comrade; for this Frenchman, despite his size, had the heart of a lion, and an abundance of courage. More than once had his *sang-froid*, of which he had already given such excellent proof, caused the major to marvel; and, indeed, it was that—the manly qualities of the count, his charming personality, and his light-heartedness—which had won the esteem of Major Denisson.

“But we need not talk of dying yet, count. Let us speak of liberty. Why should we not, after all, manage to get away from the gorge? Why sacrifice our lives uselessly by remaining here to be slaughtered in the dark?”

“But, *mon cher*, we are not birds. In the night we could not climb the cliffs, and we cannot fly above them. Outside the rocks fall rapidly, while behind us, cutting us from our friends, are these hillmen, these scoundrels who long to butcher us. Then, how can there be escape? Better make our adieux and die.”

“If need be we can do that, count,” said Alec, his eyes directed along the gorge. “But let us make some effort. To retire is impossible; but why not advance? See how these ghazees are creeping along the ridges on either side! Wait, now! If you look up there, in the deep shadow, you will see the flash of their matchlocks. They are all drifting behind us, evidently thinking that we shall retreat.”

“And if we advance, monsieur, these ruffians will see, and will change their course. Besides, will they not, in any case, block both ends of the gorge?”

“They may; and if they do, we must be ready to push our way through. But the majority of the enemy will choose to be where the fighting will be fiercest, where the slaughter is taking place. If we advance, we act exactly in the opposite manner to what will be expected of us, and we meet fewer enemies. We will make them think that we are retreating. Once the night has fallen, we will send a few men down the gorge with orders to fire at the

rocks above. They will rejoin us rapidly, and then all will advance to the Cabul end of the gorge."

"And afterwards?"

"We shall be in the open, and there will be no fear of rocks. We shall push on over the hills and make for the frontier."

Once more silence fell between the two—between this tall, alert young Englishman and his comrade, the frail-looking Frenchman. And as they pondered, each scanned the cliffs above, now almost hidden in the fast-gathering gloom, watching the flashes of the matchlocks, or peered along the gorge, first to their front in the direction of Cabul, and then to the rear, towards the frontier of India. It was the jemadar who at length broke in upon their meditations.

"Sahib," he said, standing stiffly at attention, "we see none to fire at now towards our front. All seem to have crept away, and my men say that they have clambered by way of the cliffs to our rear. Will the sahib order that we remain in the hollow, in which case it were well to prepare for attack; or is it his wish that we march from the gorge?"

"Tell me, what hope have we of safety if we march?" demanded Alec. "Is there escape for any one of us?"

"Sahib, who can say? It may happen that all will reach the frontier. But if we retire, fierce fighting is in store for us."

"Then advance, monsieur," cried the count, with some show of excitement. "Forward, let the order be."

Ten minutes later darkness, a deep, impenetrable darkness, had settled down upon the gorge, hiding Afghans and British from one another, and bringing with it a silence which was ominous. Hardly a sound could be heard, but an occasional fall of rock told of moving feet above, while now and then a distant shout awoke the echoes.

"Time to move," said Alec, quietly. "Come along, count."

Taking a rifle apiece, the two stole from the hollow, and, their plan of action fully arranged, moved down the gorge in the direction taken by the Afghans. Soon they had traversed some hundred yards, Alec leading the way, listening intently, while the count clung to the tail of his coat so as to keep close to him in the darkness.

"S-s-sh! I hear sounds above," whispered Alec, at length. "We are in position, and had better prepare. Let us search for cover."

Sprawling upon hands and knees, he crept over the rocky bed of the gorge, and presently came upon a spot which gave promise of shelter.

"Right, count!" he called. "Creep in here and get ready. Now, I am going on a few yards farther, and will throw a few stones to attract their attention. Don't fire till I am back with you."

He was gone in an instant, and as the count crept into the cover provided by two huge bowlders tossed closely together, only the faint clink of a pebble told him that the young Englishman was there. There it was again, some yards farther on; and there——

"The enemy!" whispered the count, breathing hard. "They have heard already, and they are preparing to roll rocks down upon us. Ah, that must be our young officer."

There was a loud crash, which set an echo rolling along the cliffs, and then a chorus of shouts. A second later a volley, a straggling, spluttering volley, burst from the sides of the gorge, while flashes came from the farther end, from the lower level. Bang! A huge mass of rock slid into the dark streak between the cliffs, and smashed into fragments against the stony bed.

"Now fire a couple of shots," said Alec, as he crept in beside the count. "That will do for a time. Presently we will give them a couple more. Listen to the noise they are making!"

"And let us be thankful that we are out of the way of the bowlders," added the count. "They have been falling very close to us. Monsieur Alec, I begin to think that, after all, you may find safety for us."

"We can never be sure. These Afghans are wily fellows, and may suspect. But things look promising. Come, count, another shot, and then let us retire. The sooner we are clear of the gorge the better, for then we shall have longer to get to the frontier. All depends on the darkness."

A quarter of an hour later the little band crept from the Cabul end of the gorge, not a single Afghan having remained there to intercept them, for they had been entirely taken in by Alec's ruse. At once the latter led them

towards the mountainous ground which lay to the left, and, urging them to use their best endeavors, pushed on into the night. But Afghanistan is an inhospitable country, inhabited by fierce tribes of implacable hillmen, and broken up by innumerable hills and mountainous places. To march away from the roads is to meet certain difficulty, while to make such an attempt during the night is to encounter almost assured disaster. Poor Alec and the count struggled on valiantly, now stumbling to the bottom of some deep ravine, and then clambering laboriously to the shoulder of some mountain. Drenched with the dew, and numbed with the cold, they pushed on almost aimlessly, for all had now lost their bearings; and when morning came at length, it was almost with cries of despair that they realized that they had made little way, and that, though they were nearer the frontier and friends, some miles still separated them from safety.

"Courage!" said the count, smiling upon them. "All is for the best, and soon we shall be with friends. Let us eat first, monsieur, and then forward."

That evening, when they were on the very edge of the frontier, the relentless hillmen came up with them, having searched all day for their tracks, and then commenced a running fight, the horror of which clung to Alec for many a day. Matchlocks flashed from all directions—now from their front, and then from either flank, and gradually their numbers lessened till only the count and Alec remained.

"Our fate is sealed, monsieur," said the count, placid

and polite even at this stage. "Let us make a stand here and face them."

"But it is getting dark, and we may escape," cried Alec, whose stubbornness and determination had been remarkable. "Come, stick to it, count! Never say die! We are already over the frontier."

They struggled forward again in the gathering darkness, only dimly aware of their position, and of the fact that they were at length descending a rocky chain which bordered the Kuram Valley. At any moment they might meet with British troops; but would that moment be too long delayed? Now and again a matchlock flashed and a bullet flew past them. But not a single Afghan dared to come to close quarters, for the two white men had proved hardy fighters. Instead, the hillmen, relentless in their pursuit, fired at them, harassing their flight, and waiting only for the darkness to come to fall upon them. And presently it came, dense blackness swallowing up both Alec and the count.

"Let us change our course," said the former, "otherwise they will rush in at us. Come this way."

He took the Frenchman by the sleeve and led him, for the latter was now thoroughly exhausted, and, in spite of his pluck, could barely make another effort. Then, having moved some yards to one side, the two lay down and waited. And presently they heard sly, stealthy feet passing them.

"Now forward!" said Alec, a quarter of an hour later.

Rising wearily, they scrambled on down the hill till a

sudden cry startled our hero. Then he addressed the count, only to be answered by silence. Silence? No; far down below his feet he heard the clatter of falling stones, the rush of a sliding body. Then, groping in the darkness, he learned that he too was on the very edge of a steep declivity, a precipice which he could not hope to clamber down. Three hours later, thoroughly worn out and miserable, he fell in with a party of General Massey's Lancers who were patrolling the country.

CHAPTER III

To Arms!

YOUR news is too important to trust it all to the telegraph," said General Massey, when Alee was brought before him some two hours after he had fallen in with the Lancers. "I shall, of course, send on information of your arrival at once, but you must go to Simla. When can you start? Now? The matter is urgent, and though you have had such a trying time, a young fellow such as you are, the son of a tried English soldier, will not allow fatigue to stand in his way."

"I will go now. Give me permits and transport, sir, and I will get to Simla as soon as possible," answered Alee, if the truth be told, in a somewhat dreamy voice, for he was feeling little better than exhausted, and the rest he had had while being carried in by the Lancers had not improved his condition very much.

"Send for the boy!" said the general, curtly, eying the young Englishman curiously. "Sit down, Dennisson. Now, boy, bring brandy, and tell my man to get a bath ready, and a good meal."

He turned to Alee with a smile, nodding to a chair which stood close beside the table at which he sat. They were in a large Indian tent, one of those double-roofed tents which

keep out the hottest sun, and which are provided with large overhanging flaps to each of the doorways. Of the latter there were four, so that, though the sun was now well up, the general's quarters were delightfully cool.

"Drink it off at once. Don't hesitate," he said, adding water to the spirit which the native "boy" had just brought. "That's right. You need a little stimulant, and now a bath and some food will do you a vast amount of good. Listen for a moment. I had the news of the massacre at Cabul only a few hours ago, and have had orders to hold this valley and the Shutargurdan pass. My men heard firing, and as I knew that your party had only crossed the frontier on the previous day, I sent out some of the Lancers. I'm thankful that they found you, and I congratulate you on your escape. And so the gallant little count was slain?"

"He fell over the precipice in the darkness," answered Alec, feeling better already, and speaking with far more briskness. "He suddenly disappeared, and when I felt at my feet I found that I, too, was at the edge. I tried to look for him, but without success. I fear that he is dead."

"I fear so," agreed the general. "But I have already sent out men to search the country, and they shall have orders to follow your tracks, and see if any trace of him is left. Now the bath, and then a meal. All shall be ready for you within an hour."

The general was as good as his word, for Alec had only just emerged from his bath and scrambled into his clothes

when horses were led up to the tent. But the general would allow no undue haste.

"Tackle the food, youngster," he said kindly. "Remember that you have a long journey before you, and will have need of all your strength. I am sending an escort of Lancers with you, with Escombe in command. He will look after your comfort, and his orders are to push on so long as you and the horses are able to do so. Rawal Pindi is your first station, and there you will inquire for messages, for I may have some to send. Bear in mind that your evidence may be of the utmost importance to the Government."

He sat beside the table watching Alec eat, and occasionally glancing at telegrams and papers. And soon, a telegram having just arrived, he again addressed our hero.

"No doubt I shall see you within a month," he said quietly, as he stretched the paper out on the table. "This is from the Government at Simla. They have already decided to send a force into Afghanistan, to Cabul, and that means fighting. You will be one of us, I have little doubt."

Half an hour later, feeling wonderfully refreshed by his meal and bath, but still dazed after the stirring events of the previous day, Alec shook hands with the general, saluted, and leaped upon a horse provided for him. A young officer sat another, while in rear were half a dozen Lancers, looking smart, as all British cavalry do.

"Good-bye!" called out the general. "A quick journey, and a safe return."

"Walk, march! Trot!" commanded the subaltern, and in a moment the little party was under way, their faces turned toward Rawal Pindi, where they arrived on the following evening. Immediately they went to the office of the commandant.

"You are to ride for Sialkot," said the latter, as they entered. "Sir Frederick Roberts has been appointed commander-in-chief of the force which will punish the Afghans, and he has telegraphed here that he is already on his way from Simla. I know him very well, and so will you shortly. He is in a hurry, and when General Sir Frederick is in a hurry nothing can stop him. Get to Sialkot as soon as you can, and rest there. You will have none once he arrives, for he is bound for the frontier, and his energy will carry him right through, traveling day and night. You will see that he will make a move into the enemy's country more rapidly than would be thought to be possible."

The commandant spoke enthusiastically, and he had good cause to do so, for Sir Frederick Roberts, the Earl of the present day, was even in those times known throughout India as "Bobs," "Little Bobs," the fighting general, who had won his V. C. in the Mutiny, and had since seen service in many places. Indeed, it may be stated now that his selection was most popular, and that the force under his disposal entered upon their duties with enthusiasm, knowing that where "Bobs" commanded there would be order and movement; that there would be fighting, of the fiercest nature, no doubt, but well-ordered fighting, in which men on the British side could rely upon being excellently led.

"We'll put up for the night with a friend of mine, Skinner of the Lancers," said Escombe, the young subaltern who commanded the escort with which Alec had been sent down country. "Then we will make a very early start, and perhaps reach Sialkot twenty-four hours later. Fortunately, we have excellent horses, and an order on the commandants to supply us with fresh ones if we have need of them. Ah, here we are. This is his bungalow. Our men will go to the barracks."

Late on the following afternoon, when the escort with Escombe and Alec were jogging along in the direction of Sialkot, a distant cloud of dust attracted their attention, and presently they became aware of the fact that a number of horsemen were approaching.

"Perhaps it is the general himself, Sir Frederick," said Escombe. "We have heard how he pushes along, and travels hard. We had better make ready to meet him."

They drew up at the side of the road at once and dismounted, both of the young officers staring down the road as they did so. And very soon their suspicions proved to be well founded, for Sir Frederick Roberts himself rode at the head of the cavalcade, while just in rear of him, and occasionally drawing up beside him, was a second officer, Colonel Charles Macgregor, C. B., a brilliant soldier, who had been chosen to act as chief of the staff. A third officer, with the badges of a general on his shoulder, rode beside the colonel, and hastily exchanged words with Sir Frederick as they drew near. They were coming along the road at a smart trot, while in rear rode a general's escort, their

horses kicking up clouds of dust, in which the rear members of the escort were smothered.

"Halt!" The general who had conversed with Sir Frederick threw his stick into the air, and at the signal all pulled in their horses and brought them to a standstill just in front of Alec and Escombe, who promptly saluted. As for Sir Frederick, he remained in the background, preferring that his subordinate should conduct the interview.

"Good-evening, gentlemen," said the general. "Which of you happens to be Mr. Dennisson?"

"I am," answered Alec promptly, standing forward and saluting again, while the officer eyed him for one moment, but with a flashing glance which took in everything—his height, his slimness, the pinched look which his features bore after some days of great exertion and anxiety, and the resolute air he wore.

"Son of an old comrade, and a hard fighter, too," remarked the general. "The telegraph tells me that you and your escort accounted for thirty-six of the enemy. General Massey's men made a dash over the border into the hills, and spies informed them of what had happened."

"And the count, sir?" demanded Alec, anxiety for an old friend prompting him to speak, "was any sign found of him? He also was an old friend of my father's."

"And of mine, too. He was quite an old Indian, and as fond of traveling and of shooting as your father. But he is gone, and your father also, I grieve to say. We have information that all with the mission were killed."

For a few moments the general remained seated upon his horse, looking thoughtfully at Alec. Not a movement, nothing seemed to escape the eye of this dapper soldier. He noted Alec's trembling lip as reference was made to his father's fate, and almost at the same moment remarked on the condition of the horses which had brought the little party so rapidly from the frontier.

"Movement will be good for the lad," he was saying to himself. "I knew Dennisson well. He had only this son, and no one else to care for. The blow is a severe one, and the boy must have his thoughts distracted."

"You speak the language of the Afghans?" he demanded, suddenly swinging round. "You could make your way among the people supposing there was no war."

"I can speak their tongue well, sir," answered Alec. "I was in Afghanistan once with my father. I also know some of the dialects used along the frontier."

"And you have a tale to tell us. I want to hear all about the rising, and the news which that poor guide brought you, and later on I will hand the facts on to Sir Frederick. Ride with me, Mr. Dennisson. Mr. Escombe, you have done well. Your horses have been worked very hard, but they are capable of a good deal more, and not one seems to be overdone. Fall in rear, please, and when we reach the camp, arrange to rest there for two days. You will rejoin leisurely, for we want our cattle in the best of condition. Now, we will ride on."

Shaking his rein, he set his horse in motion again, while

Sir Frederick and his chief of staff rode some paces in advance.

"Now your tale," said the general. "Give me the exact hour when you heard the first shot, and a description of the place in which you were traveling."

Thus bidden, Alec told his tale, a little nervously at first, and then with more assurance, for the general's manner was genial and kindly.

"Then you fought these ghazees from late in the afternoon till darkness fell, and afterwards, having retired from the gorge, you were engaged with them for the whole day, being pursued to the frontier. There you lost your comrade, the count, and finally fell in with the Lancers, who carried you to General Massey. That was, indeed, hard fighting, and you must have been exhausted. When did you start down to meet us?"

"Within two hours of reaching General Massey's quarters, sir. The news was urgently required, and, therefore, I had a bath and some food, and started off at once."

"Then you have shown great endurance and pluck, let me tell you, Mr. Dennisson. I admire the manner in which you have ridden, for you must have been many hours on the road. Are you too fatigued to ride with us through to the frontier? I have ordered dhoolies for to-night's traveling, and after that we shall push on on horseback. What do you say?"

"That I am quite fresh and rested, sir, and that I should like to ride with Sir Frederick's escort. I am anxious to be

one of the invading army, for I was attached to the Cabul mission, and feel that I have a personal interest in learning their fate."

"And I will see that you have opportunities of ascertaining what happened. But do not let false hopes encourage you to think that any still live. Afghans do not give quarter to fallen enemies, and never to seringhees. Make up your mind that your father fell like a man, and that the count is gone also. Now, fall in with the escort, for we must push along."

No amount of fatigue seemed to damp the energy of General Roberts and his companions, for, in spite of the heat, and of the fact that he had been now traveling for three days and nights, partly by rail, partly by dhoolie,* and mostly on horseback, he still pushed on eagerly, halting as the evening came for an hour only, when a meal was served, having been ordered by telegraph. As night fell, he and his staff officers, with Alec accompanying them, were being driven in the direction of the frontier in two-wheeled carts, one being supplied for each, while the escort camped for the night, to return to their stations slowly on the following day. For the first time Alec discovered that there are worse and more uncomfortable conveyances than these Indian carts, for, curled up on the floor of his, with a thick quilted rug beneath him and one over his body to keep him warm, the nights being chilly, he fell into a delightful sleep, which lasted till morning. Also, he discovered that it is a different thing to march with a general and an escort, and to accompany a commander and

* A light litter of canvas.

his staff officers alone; for now that the four found themselves together, Sir Frederick and his two companions chatted with our hero pleasantly, and more as if they were old comrades.

"Come, breakfast, and then forward," said the general who had questioned Alee, with a smile, as he emerged from his dhoolie, rubbing the sleep from his eyes, but looking as full of energy as ever. "Everything has been well arranged for the journey, and by the time we have eaten, the escort will be here. Sit down, Dennisson."

Alee had stood beside the table in the bungalow at which they had stopped, hardly knowing how to act, for he was so very junior; but at the general's words he sat down, and was soon engaged with his breakfast. Then the horses were brought up, and within an hour they were off again, Alee falling in with the escort. Two days later they arrived at the frontier, joining hands with General Massey. And here all the arrangements for an invasion of Afghanistan were pressed forward, Sir Frederick being determined to deliver a blow rapidly, before the enemy could mass to oppose him. However, there are certain difficulties which even an abundant stock of energy among generals and men cannot overcome, and for some time lack of transport delayed the movement.

"We are almost ready to move forward," said General Macgregor to Alee one day, having sent for the latter. "To-morrow will see the last of our arrangements completed, and I think the general will then join the advance party at Kushi, in the Logur plain. You will ride with

us, Dennisson. The general has selected you as an extra aide-de-camp, for your knowledge of the language will be very valuable. Now, let me tell you something about the campaign."

He opened a leather satchel, and commenced to search for a map, while Alec stood before him in the entrance of the tent, his face aflame at the news which had been just imparted to him. Could anyone have expected such good fortune? Who could have prophesied a week ago that he, Alec Dennisson, would be appointed an aide to the general? What prospects it opened up for him! He was still lost in thought, exulting over his good fortune, when the chief of the staff smoothed out the map and laid his finger on the Kuram valley.

"Here we are encamped, at Ali Khel," he said. "Cabul is, roughly, fifty miles from here, and therefore this route has been decided on. We might have taken the old route, through the Khyber Pass, but that would mean marching one hundred and forty miles, and possibly fighting every foot of the way. As it is, we are in a position now to make a dash, and you will see that we shall do it. Our column will consist of the cavalry brigade under General Massey, and of two infantry brigades, commanded respectively by Generals Macpherson and Baker. We shall have in addition three batteries, two Gatlings, and a company of sappers. That is the force which will make the first dash upon Cabul. Afterwards others will follow, for we shall be surrounded, and once we cut ourselves adrift from our communications, which will be the instant that we

move from Kushi, we shall have to rely absolutely upon our own bayonets. Behind us, entrenched at the pass, we have Colonel Money and four guns, while four thousand men will garrison our base here, holding the line of communication and this Kuram valley till the snow comes and closes the pass. By that time there will be a strong reserve of troops stationed between this and Rawal Pindi, under General Ross, who will be prepared to move in any direction; and, in addition, General Bright should be in position on our right, and Sir Donald Stewart threatening the Afghans from the direction of Candahar."

Tracing the positions on the map, the colonel showed that the dispositions for reducing the nation of Afghans had been thoroughly thought out, and that time alone was required to punish the nation.

"We are bound to have some desperate fighting," he said, "for they will resent our coming bitterly. This will be no ordinary war, as we have in Europe at times, but a jihad, a holy war, something like the Indian Mutiny. Their mollahs will preach and harangue, and every ruffian will come out, longing to destroy the feringhees. To those will be added the regular troops and the thousands of hill-men, of whom, as you know, there are numerous tribes, all of which can fight, and will fight desperately. No doubt we shall meet with severe opposition from the first; but though we have been forced to delay, yet our march follows very quickly upon the massacre of the mission, and we shall find the nation of Afghans unprepared. Perhaps we shall reach Cabul and entrench ourselves there. Then will

come the anxious time, for the Afghans will rise to a man when they find the *feringhee* in force at the capital. We shall be surrounded, and shall have to look to ourselves while the other columns are being formed. Then two at least will march, one from the south and one on a parallel line, through the Khyber *viâ* Jellalabad, and we shall march out to join hands with them. There, you have the plan of the campaign."

The colonel shut up his map, nodded to Alec, and strode out of the tent, leaving the *aide-de-camp* to think out the position. And, as a matter of fact, though he had had ample time to find out all these particulars before, our hero had not done so. Too many other questions occupied his mind to the exclusion of these others concerning their movements. Now, however, he began to realize that he and his comrades, who were to march under Sir Frederick, were to act as a flying column, and were to make a dash into the country.

"Then we shall, of course, be absolutely surrounded. That will be fine. We will show these beggars what it is to fight with armed men."

"Show what beggars? Whom are you speaking about, young fellow? Take a friend's advice, and don't chatter to yourself in such a loud voice."

It was Escombe who spoke, Escombe of the Lancers, the regiment to which Alec had been gazetted, and from which he had been seconded for service with the mission. In fact, he had only served four weeks with the regiment, and was almost a stranger to them all.

"Come, young fellow, what's the chatter about?" repeated Escombe, severely.

Tall and slim, like Alec, Jack Escombe was somewhat similar to him in other ways, for his hair and eyes were of the same color, while there was a small resemblance in their features. But there the similarity ended, for whereas Alec held himself modestly erect, Jack carried himself with a fine cavalry swagger, to which his younger companion had not yet attained; and, moreover, a desperate attempt at whiskers and mustache blossomed upon his cheeks and lip. From the first he had assumed an amusing air of superiority, and had developed the habit of addressing his more youthful comrades as "young fellow."

"It's the campaign," admitted Alec. "The chief has been lecturing me. We're to push out into the country alone, with Bobs at our head; and alone we shall be till we whip the enemy, or till the other columns march in to join hands."

"And you think there will be fighting?"

"Rather! Sure of it!"

"Then I mean to see my share. I'm galloper to Massey, and you can bet that, with the cavalry to command, he will be somewhere near the enemy. We'll see a lot of one another, Alec. But—I'm forgetting. Here's Macgregor of the 72d—at school with me, you know, and just come out to join. He's suffering severely from cold just now, as he's so lately taken to a kilt and bagpipes. Oh, and here's Ramsey of the Ghoorkas! He's seen lots of service."

There was a roar of laughter as Jack Escombe mentioned

the kilt and bagpipes, a roar in which Macgregor joined. Then the latter came forward to shake Alec's hand. Well grown for his years—he was barely eighteen—Harry Macgregor looked a likely lad in his Highlander costume, and was already a favorite. Indeed, he and Alec soon became excellent friends. As for Ramsey of the Ghoorkas, though little older than Escombe, he had already three years' service to his credit, and could boast of more than one hill skirmish. Short and stout, and looking particularly sturdy in his Ghoorka uniform, his features showed that he was one of the pleasantest fellows possible, as all were to find before the termination of the campaign.

“Look here,” he said, as he lit up a cheroot, “the general's galloper should know everything, and as he's just had a lecture, we'll ask him to hand it on. What are the movements, Dennisson? Come, here's the map, and we've all plenty of time to spare.”

“Open it, and spot out the news, young fellow!” cried Jack, handing him the map. “Now, we are the flying column. Where are the others?”

That evening orders were issued from headquarters for a forward move, and on the following morning the first portion of the little army marched forward to the village of Kushi, in the Logur plain, the general and his staff, with the other portion of the army, remaining in their old position. Alec now found every moment occupied, for messages had to be carried here and there, while he was sent more than once toward the transport camp to report on the movements.

"Ride after the advance brigade, and let me know how the animals are getting along," said the chief of staff on the following morning. "And take a few men with you. Escombe is your friend. I'll ask General Massey to send him with some of his Lancers."

Half an hour later the two young fellows were riding from the camp, twenty troopers following them closely.

"There's no difficulty about finding the road," said Jack Escombe. "It stares us in the face. By the way, Massey says we must be careful. There have been skirmishes. Supposing we get along, for we had better be back before darkness comes."

"And it would be as well to send a few of the men in front, to avoid surprise," added Alec. "These Afghans are wily beggars."

"Ah, I'd forgotten that you'd met with them before, young fellow. Sergeant Gillows, ride on with six of the men as an advance guard. Send two points well in advance of your guard, with orders to keep their eyes open."

Dipping their lances, the sergeant and his party trotted to the front, their faces showing their delight at the prospect before them. Indeed, all who rode from the camp were filled with satisfaction, for for three weeks past they had done little else but ride through the Kuram valley, searching for draught animals, and buying them for the transport, together with suitable carts, for animals and conveyances were sorely needed. Now, however, there was a change. This was war, on a small scale, perhaps; but there was a real spice of danger about it, and all rejoiced.

Trotting forward, they had covered seven miles, and were about that distance from Kushi, where the advance brigade were camped, before anything occurred to attract their attention.

"Firing somewhere in front," reported the Lancer sent back by the sergeant, bringing his lance to the salute. "Shall we advance further?"

"Halt the advance points till we come up," commanded Jack Escombe, promptly, who, to do him full justice, knew his work, and what was expected of him. "Come along, Alec. Canter."

Away in front went the Lancer, galloping back with the message, while the two young officers came cantering behind, the main body of the escort riding some yards in rear. And soon they had come up with the sergeant and his advance guard.

"We halted here below the ridge, sir," reported the former. "There is heavy firing over there, and I can see a heliograph at work on a knoll in front. I fancy they are trying to call up our camp, or the one at Kushi."

"Dismount! Wait here till you receive an order, and take command."

Again Jack Escombe's orders were given with precision, while at the same moment he lifted his right leg over his horse's neck and dropped to the ground. Alec did the same, and at once, seizing their glasses, they ran forward.

"Mind the ridge," said the latter. "Perhaps the enemy are near. Perhaps we shall want to surprise them. Keep under the sky line."

The words came just in time, for Jack had had no great experience, and in his anxiety to see all that was occurring, would have walked to the summit of the ridge. Now, however, he cut off to the left, and, dropping on hands and knees, scrambled forward.

"Heavy firing and men shouting," he said suddenly, lifting a hand. "They are in the valley beyond."

"And the shouts come from the Afghans. I have heard them before, and well I know them. Push on, Jack."

A few minutes later the two reached a collection of rocks, which gave them excellent cover, and from which they were able to look down into the valley. And there they at once saw the cause of the commotion.

"A couple of wagons broken down," said Jack, his eye to his glass. "One has lost a wheel, and I fancy that the other could not advance, as the road is blocked. Most of the animals have been shot down."

"And the men are taking cover in the wagons and behind them," added Alec. "That heliograph is calling up our camp, probably to ask what has happened to the last two wagons. I suppose they were delayed in the darkness, and then lost sight of. There are eighteen men and on the road are three dark figures—the drivers, I suppose."

"Look at the enemy!" ejaculated Jack. "They are as thick as peas, and they've tried a rush."

He pointed to a number of fallen horses, and to the bodies of numerous Afghans, which lay in a circle round the stranded carts, and then away to right and left.

"They're potting at our fellows," he said. "Sniping * them at close range, and getting ready to charge again. It's a fix. There are a hundred Afghans, at least."

"Then you'll attack?" suggested Alec, his eyes dancing with anticipation. "We've twenty troopers, and we're all longing for a skirmish."

"Attack! Rather! Old Harry is down there below. Look at him popping up behind the first of the carts."

A minute later the two young officers were retiring slowly toward the horses, engaged in animated conversation.

* Murderous picking off of isolated soldiers in camp by concealed sharpshooters.

CHAPTER IV

The First Encounter

TWENTY against a hundred! Of course, it's enough and to spare," said Jack, hopefully; "but—er—how to spread 'em out, that's the question. What do you think, young 'un?"

"Can't say at present. We want to decide whether to charge down to the carts, or to skirmish in that direction dismounted."

"Not for me, thank you! We're Lancers, and we're going to make use of our horses. But there's only a lot of rocks to be charged."

"At present," Alec ventured to remind him. "But those Afghan fellows have been down in the open. You can see where Harry and his men have bowled them over. They'll make a second attempt, and then——"

"We'll walk into them like smoke. But, I say, supposing they come from either side——"

"They will come from left and right only, and will gallop to one spot," said Alec with emphasis. "I saw that a few had been killed on the left, but the ground there is too rough for horses. Perhaps only men on foot made the attempt. Those fellows are cavalry of some sort—regulars, I should say, from their uniforms—and, like you, they

will want to make use of their mounts. They will ride to the open ground to our right, and will wheel and gallop at the carts."

"Then we'll gallop to the right, on to the open ground, and get them in flank. That's where twenty troopers will have full effect. We'll split our way into their very center. How do you like the idea?"

He turned to Alec for support, for, with all his promptness and power of decision, Jack had a wholesome idea of his comrade's shrewdness. And, besides, our hero had already had a brush with the enemy, and the numbers which he had accounted for and his own miraculous escape had been common knowledge in the camp. Besides, he had shown his grit when he staggered over the frontier, utterly exhausted, and within two hours set out to meet the commander-in-chief.

"How do you like the plan of attack?" demanded Jack, again. "Any alterations or suggestions?"

"None! You've twenty men, and it would never do to divide them. Besides, even if you wished to put one-half over the other side, so as to make a combined rush, they would be seen while trying to get into position. No, rush them from here, and the sooner the better!"

"Then we'll move along up to the rocks," said Jack Escombe. "And look here, Alec, I'm senior, I know, but you're the man we're escorting. Besides, these fellows are in our regiment. So it's kind of half-command for us both. If we're successful, we'll share the honor."

"Let's beat the enemy first," answered Alec. "No need to count our chickens before they're hatched."

Calling the men about him, Jack Escombe now proceeded to tell them of what was happening, and to instruct them as to what he required.

"We'll creep up there to one side of the road," he said, "and then we'll mount. When I give the word, follow at a trot on to the road. Then canter, keeping your horses well in hand. You'll get the charge when the moment comes."

At once they moved forward, the men leading their horses and chatting in low voices.

"Bet yer I goes through 'em clean!" remarked one lanky Lancer to his friend. "None of yer tent-pegging this time, me lad. Real fighting, yer know, and you and me, and the other chaps, has got to go right through 'em. Pick 'em up like pegs, and carry 'em on."

He shook his lance excitedly, and leered at his friend, while the latter smiled back at him grimly.

"A 'underd of the blokes!" he said disdainfully. "Think of the Light Brigade! There was thousands to one in them days!"

Soon the whole party was gathered behind the mass of rocks, which gave excellent cover, and which was sufficiently near the road to allow the Lancers to reach the latter without loss of time. And here all mounted, and as the moment for action might arrive at any time, feet were thrust far into stirrups, and lances made ready, while Alec and his friend loosened their sabers.

"I shall give them the point, and put the horses at them," he whispered to Jack. "A flank charge won't give much time for slashing."

"Right through them, then rally, and back again. That's our work," answered Jack. "You're right. The horses will do the work for us."

"Look out! They're moving. Harry is creeping along to speak to his men."

Alec had fixed his glasses upon the stranded carts, and had noticed some unusual movement there. Then, sweeping along on either side, he became aware of the fact that the sniping, which up till then had gone on incessantly, had suddenly ceased.

"There's a fellow mounted over there. See, he's behind the hillock! And there are others!"

It was Jack's turn to cry out excitedly, for his eyes had caught sight of a party of Afghans mounted. Indeed, very soon it became certain that the enemy were massing for another charge. Down below at the carts the flash of bayonets came frequently, while the bare legs and the kilts of individual men could be seen as they crawled into more advantageous positions. Harry Macgregor, gallant fellow, stood up behind the overturned cart, calmly surveying the enemy.

"Cool for his first skirmish," exclaimed Jack. "He used to look like that when playing back at footer, waiting coolly for the time to come when his work would begin. I wish we could warn him. But when he sees us he'll know. Time to move, Alec, my lad!"

He shut up his glasses with a snap, and, followed by his comrade, ran back to the horses.

"Ready?" he demanded, as he swung himself into his saddle. "Feet right in stirrups, lauces up till the moment of meeting the beggars, and right through 'em, my boys. Trot!"

There was no hesitation about this British officer. A horseman from his earliest days, he rode as if he were part of the animal. Flash! His sword came naked to his shoulder, while Alec fell in beside him. Bang! A rifle shot rang out in the valley.

"Harry talking to them," said Jack. "Time we cantered."

He waved his arm above his head, and put the spur to his horse's flank. And soon they were on the road, clattering along it loudly. The ridge seemed to glide swiftly beneath their feet, and in a few seconds they were in the valley, within four hundred yards of the stranded carts.

At once cries of satisfaction escaped the men, for a large party of mounted Afghans had just debouched from behind the hills, and were trotting toward the open ground to the right of the British.

"Harry must be short of ammunition," said Alec. "Those fellows are within easy range, and, so far, he has only fired one shot. He's waiting till they get to close quarters."

"And his boys are closing up together. Alec, we may get down in time to catch the enemy as they are opening

out, for they won't attack in close order. Have they seen us yet?"

The question was not easy to reply to, but soon it became evident that so far the party of lancers had escaped attention. Indeed, the Afghans were so engaged with the carts and their escort that they failed to glance up and down the road. Breaking into a trot, they came toward the open ground in a close body, their commander at their head. And there was little doubt that these horsemen were well drilled and armed, for they handled their horses admirably, keeping them well together.

"Take it easy! Steady all!" called out Jack. "We shall be too soon for them if we are not careful. Ah, they are cantering now."

Galloping along at a fast pace, it was not long before the enemy were at the open ground, where they swung to the right, wheeling in admirable order. Then Alce saw their leader lift his tulwar, and at once the lines opened out, shrill shouts burst from the men, while the horses sprang madly forward—all save some forty, which, guided by their riders, swept onward, and came in the direction of the advancing Lancers.

"Gallop!"

Jack Escombe stood in his stirrups till six inches of daylight showed between him and the saddle, and turned to his men.

"Gallop!" he shouted. "Right into them, my lads!"

The command to charge was scarcely needed, for his twenty men rode close in rear, their faces tense with ex-

citement, their lips close shut, and their nostrils quivering. Ah, and now the lance had dropped into position, and was tucked firmly beneath the arm, with the leather slipped over the hand. Backs were arched, for however erect your British lancer may ride at other times, he crouches close to his saddle when about to charge. Even the horses seemed to have caught some portion of the excitement, for they hardly needed the spur. Keeping in regular order, the line, led by its two young officers, galloped madly at the forty Afghans. Would they stand? Was it to be a stern fight between the two bodies of mounted men, a crash and *mêlée*?

"They're giving way!" shouted Alec, at the top of his voice. "Some of the flank men are bolting!"

"Into them! Charge!"

Jack Escombe and his friend might have led many a charge before, for as they came within fifty yards of the enemy they stood in their stirrups and turned to their men, brandishing their sabers. Then they settled into their saddles again, gripped firmly with their knees, and singled out an opponent. Directing their animals to the very center of the Afghan line, they ignored the men who had broken away from the flanks, and with a shout met those who were bolder.

"Hurrah! Down with them all!"

This forlorn hope seemed to appeal to the Lancers, for they went into the fray with a shout, and magnificently did they support their officers. Their horses simply spurned the lighter-bred animals ridden by the Afghans,

while their lances did terrible execution. But Jack Escombe was less fortunate, for thrusting fiercely at one of the enemy, the force of the impact and the rate at which he was traveling almost jerked his saber from his hand, and when he withdrew it from the body of the horseman the blade was twisted and bent. Crash! Another man rode at him, and by great good luck the twisted saber warded off the fierce cut delivered by his tulwar. But the horse struck Jack's sideways, and in a moment the young subaltern was in the dust, pinned beneath his mount.

Alec hardly knew how he went through that charge, though the Lancers told the tale when they reached camp in the evening. But out of the corner of his eye he saw, as he slashed at the enemy, his friend, Jack Escombe, crash to the ground. Should he halt the men and rally them to their officer? For a moment the idea occurred to him.

"No," he said to himself. "There are more of the enemy to be dealt with. We must see to them first."

With a wave of his sword he led the men on.

"We're through the first lot," he shouted. "Now for the others! Straight for the carts!"

There was a cheer from the men, and an answering cheer from Harry Macgregor's party. Then shouts, and the rapid discharge of musketry drowned his voice. Spurring on, the little party of Lancers struck the mass of Afghan horsemen broadside on, and hurled them to one side. Indeed, their arrival came as a matter of surprise, for the leader of the Afghans had expected that the men

he had detached for the duty would have been sufficient to protect him. But the dash of these British horsemen had carried them through, and now that the task was easier, they made light of it. For five minutes there was an exciting *mêlée*, Lancers dashing hither and thither, killing a score or more of the enemy with their weapons; while Harry Macgregor, seeing the turn of events, came from behind his barricade and charged at the head of his men's bayonets.

"Halt!" shouted Alec. Then, tearing a whistle from his belt, he blew a shrill call upon it. "Rally!" he called out. "Now, Lancers, back to your officer!"

Within a couple of minutes the brave fellows had gathered together, panting with their exertions, some minus their lances, while not a few had lost their head-covering.

"Harry, you'll see to these beggars," called out Alec. "We'll go back over the ground. Ready, men? Then gallop!"

Meanwhile the enemy had retired from the neighborhood of the carts as rapidly as possible, for the dash of the Lancers and their losses had filled them with alarm. A few, however, hovered around, making frantic dashes at their enemy. Then, too, those who were left of the party which had first met Jack Escombe's charge had been rallied at the far end of the open ground, and as Alec led the men back they were riding forward, waving to their comrades beyond.

"They'll bolt if we go for them," said Alec to himself.

"Now, men, ride through them, and then rally again."

It turned out as he had thought, for the sight of the horsemen coming pell-mell toward them was too much for the courage of the Afghans. They drew rein, hesitated, and then, breaking from their ranks, galloped round the edge of the clear ground to join the main party of the enemy.

Alec at once pulled in his horse and leaped to the ground.

"Keep a good lookout," he said, as he handed the reins to one of his men. "Get your carbines out of the buckets and pepper those fellows. Now for Jack."

He ran across to his friend, and eagerly stretched out a hand to help him rise, for the horse which had fallen across his leg had scrambled away.

"Hurt?" he demanded anxiously. "Or only knocked out of time? Just got the breath shaken out of your body?"

"Look at that! That's a saber!"

The words were spoken in the utmost tones of disgust, while Jack Escombe held up his twisted blade for inspection.

"Fancy trusting your life to that tailor-made affair," he said. "I can put up with the fall, but that saber is too much for me. But lend a hand, young fellow. My leg feels rather funny."

He was cheerful even under such circumstances, and manfully tried to hide the pain he felt.

"Precious near broken," he said, as he rubbed the limb ruefully. "I doubt if I can ride as yet. You whopped those fellows finely. Hallo!"

"Help from the camp!" exclaimed Alec, his attention suddenly attracted to a large force of horsemen in the dress of the Lancers coming over the ridge. "Jack, we're in luck. Those Afghan beggars weren't quite finished. Look at them rallying. In a few minutes they would have been at us, and then we'd have been in a fix."

He called one of the men to him, and set him to work to rub his friend's leg, for there was little doubt that it was badly bruised, his horse having fallen upon it. Then, seeing that Harry's men and his own escort were sufficient to hold the enemy till the arrival of the reinforcement, he left Jack's side and ran for his horse, intending to ride back to meet the troop of Lancers.

"Help me, Englishman! Have pity on one who is helpless to move either hand or foot."

Alec stared about him, his eye passing from one fallen Afghan to another. Then he saw a figure lift a hand, and at once ran across to him.

"You can earn the lasting gratitude of Sheer Afzul if you will but give me aid," said the horseman, a man of some distinction by his uniform. "Drag this beast from off my thigh, and Allah will reward you."

The Afghan lay face down on the soil, his dead horse having tumbled half across him, pinning him down. Alec at once clasped the hoof of the animal, and throwing all of his weight into the work, tugged at it with all his might.

"One moment," he said, using their language. "The beast is heavy. I will call a man."

"And he shall not touch me? My life will not be taken?"

"Englishmen do not slay in cold blood," said Alec sternly. "You are safe if you offer no resistance."

Again he had recourse to the whistle, and presently, with the help of one of the Lancers, he released the Afghan.

"I can do no more now," he said. "Stay where you are, or someone will ride you down."

"I will obey. The blessings of Allah upon you. Sheer Afzul will remember till his dying day. What name has the Englishman?"

"Dennisson. Alec Dennisson, son of the officer murdered in Cabul," answered Alec curtly. "Now I must go. Remember my warning."

He ran across to his horse, and had hardly swung himself into the saddle when the reinforcement came up with him.

"Halt!" The officer, a captain by his badges, gave the signal, and turned to our hero. "A hot engagement," he said. "Many hurt? How many of the enemy? And what's all the noise about?"

"Two of the advance army's carts stranded, sir. About a hundred of the enemy attacking. Mr. Escombe and I came up in the middle, and found the Highlanders hotly engaged. We charged and went through them. No one badly hurt I believe."

"Right through 'em! The deuce you did! That's the style for Lancers. They're retiring now, worse luck, or

we might have had a tussle. But we'll give them a parting shot. Collect your men, Dennisson, and look after Escombe and those Highlanders. Be ready to march in ten minutes."

The commander of the troop of Lancers touched his horse with the spur and went on at a fast gallop. Very soon his men began to spread out, while the Afghan horsemen could be seen retiring hurriedly. The men slipped from their saddles, and a volley flashed. Again it belched from the carbines, the shot doing considerable execution. Then, as the enemy rode out of range, the troop mounted and turned about. Meanwhile Alec and Harry Macgregor had joined forces, while Jack Escombe had improved so far as to be able to limp.

"No bones broken, my boy, but a nasty smash," said the captain. "You'll have to ride in the cart. You've done right well, you fellows, and I shall report it when we get back. But it was a lucky thing for all that that our signalers saw the helio. It called us up, and told us that there was trouble. Sir Frederick sent us off at the gallop, and with a little luck we should have arrived in time. Now, men, let's see to the carts."

They threw themselves upon the work, for there was no saying when the enemy might reappear, and, besides, the day was advancing and seven miles separated them from the camp. But there was ample labor at command, and very soon one of the carts was on its wheels and fully horsed.

"The other is useless, and we'll burn it," said the cap-

tain. "You see to it, Mr. Macgregor, please. Pile all the things on the one we've righted."

Three hours later the whole force marched back into camp, not a man being missing, and only a few having suffered wounds. Then they separated, the officers to go to their quarters, from which they were soon called to attend at the commander-in-chief's, who gave all four the highest commendation.

"The first action of the war, after Mr. Dennisson's, gentlemen," he said, "and the Lancers have worthily upheld their reputation. It seems to have been a very dashy affair, and I shall bear it in mind."

They emerged from his tent feeling as though they would do anything for this little man, and then betook them to their suppers. And as they ate, the remainder of the camp discussed their action, while one of the men, who had ridden as Alec's escort that day, held forth to the latter's servant, by name Tom Bird.

"'E's a smart 'un, that ere young officer of yours," he was saying as he sat in his shirt-sleeves, meditatively sucking at a short clay pipe. "A lively lad, who knows what's doing every time, and don't make no mistake. None of yer 'igh and mighty with 'im; not a bit of it. You're jist like 'im—a 'uman, with feelings same as 'is, and he don't forget it. And don't he ride straight!"

The trooper turned his eyes skyward to add expression to the words, and thrust the pipe back between his lips.

"And 'e's a sportsman, that's what this ere officer is," he went on deliberately. "Wouldn't put a blade through

'is greatest enemy if 'e wasn't ready and warned. Ast Bill Siggins about it. Bill was for pinkin' one of them Afghan chaps as we charged, when your orfficer jist puts the lance aside. 'Then he pulled his horse over, and when Bill looked, there was the Afghan feller rolling in the dust. ' 'E wasn't armed nor nuthin', says your young orfficer to Bill, when the scrummage was over. 'You don't mind if I give 'im a chanst?'"

A loud call at that moment put an end to the discussion, for the garrulous trooper had to put in an appearance at stables. But he had told something of the truth to Tom Bird, our hero's servant. Indeed, it was the talk of the camp for many a day, that Lieutenant Dennisson, the officer whose father had been massacred in Cabul, had scorned to thrust his sword through an Afghan whose tulwar had dropped from his grip, and, instead, had turned aside a lance and ridden over a man sooner than kill him.

"Yes, 'es a sportsman," agreed Tom Bird, when stables were ended, and he and his friend had come together again. "You jist take my word for it; my young orfficer 'll do big things afore this campaign's ended."

CHAPTER V

On to Cabul

HEARD the news yet?" demanded Alec on the following morning, when he crept into the little tent dabri belonging to Jack Escombe. "We've had a new arrival in the camp."

"Who? You speak as though there was a mystery, young fellow. Look out for my leg!"

He drew the limb up slowly and painfully, for it had been severely bruised, and, indeed, it was a couple of days before he was able to ride again.

"Who is this visitor?" he demanded.

"The Ameer of Afghanistan, Yakoub Khan. He rode into Baker's camp late last night with an escort of twenty-five men. He's anxious that 'Bobs' shall not attempt to reach Cabul."

"Then all the fun's over. There'll be no invasion!" exclaimed Jack, with a groan of disappointment. "But no, our little general will want more than that to keep him out of the country. But the Viceroy may order him to hold his hand."

"The Viceroy has ordered the advance to proceed. We move forward to Kushi within three days," said Alec triumphantly. "The news is over the camp by now, and

there's no harm in letting it be known. This Ameer found himself helpless at Cabul, the people sided with the mutinous soldiers, and the sirdars,* or lords, preached a jihad, or holy war. I suppose the Khan has come in with a view to making terms and saving his own neck."

This apparently was the reason which had brought the Ameer in, for he could hardly expect friendship on the part of the British. Indeed, he became at once virtually a prisoner, a guard of Gordon Highlanders being mounted over his tents. Two days later, when General Sir Frederick reached Kushi, and joined hands with Baker, he had an interview with the Ameer, in which the latter again begged that the advance might be delayed. He was given the same firm answer, preparations for a forward move being proceeded with, while arrangements were made to send the Afghan ruler into India.

And now excitement ran through the little army over the destinies of which Sir Frederick presided. A feeling of elation filled the men to overflowing, while not one but had unbounded confidence in the general and in his comrades. Massed at Kushi were eight thousand men in all, a ridiculously small force when the nature of the work was taken into account; for these eight thousand of all arms were to be opposed to a nation, a nation mustering a regular army of greater proportions, and having at its beck and call numerous warlike and untrained tribes, such as Ghilzies, Mangals, Mohmunds and Khyberees, Afreedies, Shinwarries, and many more—tribes filled with fanatical courage, and roused to the last extremity of frenzy by

* A native chief in India.

their moulas. The majority of these tribes were armed with old matchlocks and smooth-bore guns, while all carried knives and tulwars. But it must not be supposed that the Afghan regulars were ill armed. They had an abundance of cannon, while their rifles and ammunition were as good as our own. And, as the campaign proved, they had leaders on their side who had studied tactics, and had learned to handle troops.

"Here's a list of our grand army," said Alee on the evening after General Roberts had moved forward from the Kuram valley and had joined hands with General Baker. "Two batteries, horse and field artillery, one mountain-train battery; the old 67th (the Hampshires), the 72nd (Albany Highlanders), the 92nd (Gordon Highlanders), 5th Ghoorkas, 23rd Pioneers, 5th and 28th Punjaub Infantry, 3rd Sikhs, and one company of sappers and miners. That for the infantry and departmental fellows. For cavalry we have the 9th Lancers, 12th and 14th Bengal Cavalry, and a wing of the 5th Punjaub Horse. Total, about eight thousand, under command of Sir Frederick Roberts, general."

"And Alee Dennisson, sub-lieutenant," sang out Jack Esembe.

"Lieutenant Dennison. I beg your pardon."

At the sound of this unexpected voice, Alee and Jack, who had been seated just within the latter's little tent, scrambled out and straightened themselves. Indeed, when they recognized the chief of staff, they stood erect, stiffly at attention, while their hands went up to the salute.

"Not sub-lieutenant any longer," said the colonel, a smile playing about the corners of his mouth. "You are speaking of our troops, and of the commander, I think," he went on, appealing to Jack, who colored beneath his tan; "and with our general you associated the name of Mr. Dennisson, formerly sub-lieutenant. Permit me to hand you a copy of to-day's orders. I offer you both sincere congratulations."

He was gone in a moment, leaving Alec in possession of a copy of the orders at which neither dared to look, for they were taken up with the figure of the colonel.

"Let's see," said Jack, at length, assuming indifference. "I suppose you're promoted, young fellow. Congratulations."

"But he offered his to us both. What do the orders say?"

Tearing them open, the two placed their heads together and glanced down the list.

"'Lights out at eight-thirty.' No, that isn't it," said Alec, as he read. "'Reveill e at four. Sub-Lieutenant Macgregor to attend a board of inquiry on the loss of stores and carts.' No; where can the entry be?"

In his excitement his eye ran down the long page without meeting with the names he looked for. But Jack Escombe was luckier.

"Hold hard!" he said hoarsely. "By George! Shake hands, Alec!"

He gripped our hero's fingers till they ached, and clung to them despite the latter's desperate attempts to free them

and look at the orders. Then he ran his finger down the headings till they rested at one line.

"Read," said Jack, exultingly. "That's what little Bobs does to encourage his officers and men. I'd fight my way to Cabul alone if he gave the order!"

There was little doubt that he meant every word he had said, for his face was flushed red with delight, while Alec's also showed a deeper color; for, snatching at the orders, he read:

"The general congratulates both men and officers on their gallantry in the affair of yesterday, an engagement which was boldly conceived, and carried out with dash and discretion. He thanks them for having at the very commencement of this campaign accomplished a victory, and taught the enemy a severe lesson."

Underneath, shortly put, was the following:

"To be Lieutenants—Sub-Lieutenant John Hartley
Escombe,
Sub-Lieutenant Alec Dennisson,
both of the 9th Lancers.

"Sub-Lieutenant Macgregor's name is noted for future promotion.

"Sergeant Gillows to be detailed for duty with the commander-in-chief's escort."

For once Jack Escombe's assurance disappeared, his swagger left him, and the corners of his mouth twitched for all the world as if he wanted to weep.

"What a bit of luck!" he presently exclaimed, squaring his shoulders, and slashing his riding-boot with a switch.

"Alec, but for you I should still be sub-lieutenant; and, just fancy, you'd be my superior!"

The idea of such a thing staggered him, and for a moment he thought of the consequences of such a change in their relations. Then his old happy laugh returned.

"You're still young fellow, mind that, my lad, and I'm your senior. But, honestly, I don't believe I should have been here if it hadn't been for your work yesterday. Oh, I don't mean that you came back to my aid! And no doubt you yourself do not recollect the affair. But I saw what happened, and I thanked you heartily when I saw your sword run clean through one of the Afghans. I was on the ground, and he had marked me. If you hadn't interfered, he'd have finished my campaign."

Alec dimly recollected the affair and modestly admitted it. Then he turned the conversation. A little later they separated, for the following day promised to be a hard one, and fighting was expected. Shaking hands again, they went to their tents, and very soon Alec had crawled into his and had wrapped himself in his blanket.

October 2 dawned fine and bright, and the camp was early astir. Creeping from his tent, our hero was ready for work within a minute, for each officer and man slept in his clothing, ready to rise on the instant. Emerging into the open, he ran to the headquarter's mess; and having breakfasted and taken possession of the tin of spiced beef, and the ration of biscuit allowed, he went off to watch the forward move of the army. And a gallant sight it was on this bright morning; not so brave, perhaps, as it might

have been, for the troops detailed to march into the Afghans' country had discarded red and blue and gold, and for the most part were clad in khaki, with puttees on their legs. Indeed, there was little color about the brown mass of active men, save that lent by the tartans of the Highlanders, and by the throngs of mules, camels, and horses. Even the pennons of the Lancers had been left behind lest they should attract the enemy. Many years later it was brought home even to the Highlanders that their fine tartans were a source of danger to them, and in the late Boer war the kilted regiments wore an apron of khaki to hide the color.

"We will submit to that," said one of their officers, a gallant fellow who fell in the Free State. "The apron covers the tartan in front, my boy, and that's all we require. Anyone can see the tartan behind, and they're welcome to do so, for no Highlander ever shows his back to the enemy!"

By now the forward movement had begun, and Alec noted with feelings of envy that part of the 9th Lancers were already scouting the road in advance, while a small force held the flanks, advancing over the broken ground to right and left. Then came the infantry, European and native, plainsmen from Britain and from India, Highlanders and Ghoorka hillmen. Pleasant, indeed, was it to look at the fine fellows, to watch the swing of the Highland kilt, and the characteristic, sturdy marching of the Ghoorkas. Then came the rumble of the guns, the horse and field artillery, with the mountain-train close at hand,

sturdy mules having been selected to carry the weapons. Further in rear, and grouped as closely together as was possible, came the transport, the food, and ammunition, loaded on the backs of numerous mules and camels, while a few light carts were dragged by horses and mules. In rear marched a strong guard of horse and infantry, prepared to beat off an attack from that quarter.

And thus, prepared for any eventuality, the little army of eight thousand men marched into Afghanistan, till they had reached a point some twelve English miles from Cabul, and known as Charasiyah, or "The Four Water Mills." They had been four days on the road, days which had brought many eventful excursions to Alec Dennisson, for time and again he was sent off to either flank, into the numerous defiles which branched from the roads, all of which were thoroughly and systematically patrolled by the cavalry. Then, too, he was sometimes sent to General Baker, who led the advance, and, who, indeed, was at this time a day's march in advance. Very early on the morning of October 6 our hero was aroused by his servant.

"Wanted at headquarters, sir," he said. "I've packed some food into your haversack, and the syce has brought your horse."

"Capital! I'll be back shortly. I expect it means another ride."

Alec darted out of his tent and ran across to the tent erected for the use of the staff. Entering it, he stood at attention.

"We have information that the enemy were sighted

yesterday," said the colonel, "and the general desires that you ride forward at once and report yourself to General Baker. It may be that some villagers will come into the camp, or a prisoner be taken. Then you will be able to interpret. Get your breakfast and ride. You have little time to lose."

Alec swung round as he saluted, and ran from the tent to the one in which he messed. Snatching up the leg of a fowl and a few biscuits, he ran on to where Tom Bird was standing, chatting to the syce. Ten minutes later his figure could be seen riding out of the camp in the direction of Cabul.

"Does not spare himself," was the comment of the colonel, as he and the commander-in-chief stood awaiting their horses. "He will reach the scene of operations as soon as anyone. The lad seems to love the work."

"Like father like son," was the rejoinder. "Dennisson was all energy and pluck. I knew him well down at the ridge when we were holding Delhi. But we should be moving. Here are the horses."

An hour later Alec rode up to General Baker and reported. "The chief of staff ordered me to come and report, sir," he said, as he saluted. "I was to await your instructions, and hold myself in readiness to interpret."

"Then you are likely to be useful on our right. Ride over to Major White. He will be in touch very shortly."

Alec turned about, and, having ascertained the direction he ought to take, galloped to the north, toward the Sung-I-Nawishta pass, which led to Cabul. Suddenly he pulled

in his mount and came to a stop, for a sight calculated to disturb the course of any man had suddenly presented itself. Thousands of the enemy came into view on the heights on either side of the pass, while a forest of banners waved overhead. Instantly Alec's glasses flew to his eye and he surveyed them, dismounting so as to obtain a steady look.

"Thousands of the regulars," he said to himself. "I can see their brown uniforms and the red facings; and I suppose that those others, in all sorts of colors and with various banners, are the citizens of Cabul, the murderers of our mission. Ah! I have seen those beggars before. They were among the men who attacked our party in the pass."

His eyes had been attracted to numerous figures dressed in spotless white, men whom he recognized at once as belonging to the ghazees, the religious fanatics. Then, of a sudden, heavy firing to right and left caused him to gaze in that direction. A minute later the glasses went back with a snap and he leaped into his saddle.

"Better report to Major White," he said to himself, as he set his horse in motion. "I rather fancy it will bring me under fire."

His surmise proved to be correct, for owing to the broken nature of the ground, and to his own rash advance, he had lost touch with his own party, and now found to his horror that he was far from friends. Rolling volleys behind told him that General Baker was engaged, and, moreover, that he was moving, while in front only the

sound of musketry told him of the direction of the right flank of the army. There was no help for it, however, and so he clapped spurs to his horse, and sent him along over the ground, choosing open country whenever possible. Meanwhile the nature of the engagement had become clear to those with the general staff.

At dawn cavalry patrols had left the camp, one taking the southern road, leading through the pass, while a second had taken the northern track. The leaders of these two patrols had soon come into action, and had reported, the first that he had occupied a village and was hard pressed, and the second, the officer in command of the patrol to the north, that he had been fired on, and had one horse killed. Major Mitford had at once been sent with twenty Lancers to the south, while some native infantry doubled forward in support of the second party. A little later information was brought to the commander-in-chief that a host of Afghans could be seen on either side of the pass. The news was serious, and might well have daunted the leader of this small British force. But General Sir Frederick Roberts had not won his sobriquet for nothing. It was no fancy name given him by our soldiers. Let him who doubts look through the history of the Indian Mutiny. He was not the leader to sit down and await developments, nor was he the one to choose a defensive policy.

"We are here to punish," he had said to himself. "What use will my men be if I hold them in check?"

Very soon the action developed into one of respectable size, for, as Alec galloped across the valley for Major

White's position, more of the British army were advancing. The plan of battle indeed soon became clearly unfolded, the cavalry engagements being simply the prelude to an action all along the line. From our right flank, where was the Sung-I-Nawishta defile, the Afghan hills stretched before us in a semicircle, covered with the banners of the enemy. Indeed, subsequent information showed that there were no fewer than thirteen regular regiments, while thousands of irregulars swelled the throng. And these latter swarmed on the heights on either side, threatening the camp and the column of ammunition and impedimenta which lay a day's march in rear.

Nek Mahomed Khan, the Afghan leader, had made his dispositions with much skill, for, besides holding our front in force, these tribesmen on either flank made it imperative that our camp should be strongly garrisoned, thus leaving fewer men for the advance. Four of his best guns, made by Armstrongs, were posted in the mouth of the defile, while on the flanking height twelve mountain-guns had taken up position. Then his left flank was very heavily reinforced, the troops being posted so that their fire swept the valley across which our men would have to advance.

We have seen the preliminary movements of Roberts' force, and a few words will serve to show how this astute leader met the dispositions of the Afghan general. Major White, afterwards General Sir George, the hero of Ladysmith, received orders to push to the right in support of the cavalry patrol already hotly engaged, and to take with him three guns of the Royal Artillery, a wing

of the Gordon Highlanders, one hundred of the 23rd Pioneers, and two squadrons of the 5th Punjaub Cavalry. His orders were to preserve a threatening attitude, and to act in conjunction with the advance on the left. In the latter quarter General Baker moved forward promptly, with some two thousand men, against the Afghan right, with orders to gain the heights, and then to wheel, sweeping the hills of the enemy till he came to the defile and joined hands with Major White. Naturally such a movement could not be carried out in a moment, but carried out it was, with wonderful dash and courage. Led by the 72nd Highlanders, and supported by the 5th Ghoorkas and the Punjaub infantry, the attack rushed up the heights. They were met with a decimating fire, for here were placed the majority of the Afghan regulars, and every minute brought reinforcements. But General Baker handled his men with skill. Cover was taken, and the enemy treated to a course of shell and shrapnel. Then, by means of a succession of little rushes, the troops won their way up the hills. It was stubborn work, and called for much courage. But the British were not to be gain-said, and finally, with one last rush, they gained the summit and drove the enemy before them. Then, wheeling, they swept along, capturing or putting to flight the remainder of the enemy.

Meanwhile Major White had been actively employed, while Alec, riding across the valley which intervened between him and his friends, met with an adventure.

He had gained an open stretch of country in front of

the pass when his eyes fell upon the four Armstrong guns, and upon a strong escort of cavalry. His appearance was the signal for one of the guns to fire, and then four men detached themselves from the escort.

"An officer and three troopers," thought Alec, cramming his helmet on to his head and touching his horse with his spurs. "And they are separating. Ah, the three troopers are making direct for me, while the officer is cutting over the hill. I fancy he will be a trouble. The others may be able to come up with me, but I rather doubt it. Anyway, here goes for a gallop."

That was the maddest ride which he had ever undertaken, and many a time he expected his horse to come clattering to the ground, for in parts the country was exceptionally rough, and unfitted for saddle work. But this was a case of life and death. Sword in hand, and revolver eased in his wallet, he lay forward on his horse's neck and sent him ahead. Presently a swift glance behind told him that of the three troopers one alone was to be feared, the others having fallen far in rear. But this one came along grandly, his horse being fast. As for their officer, he was now out of sight.

"I'll wait for this fellow," thought Alec, "and when he's near enough I'll let drive with my revolver. Hallo! That was a near one!"

A pistol had snapped in the rear, and a bullet which flew past his head hummed merrily.

"A miss as good as a mile!" thought Alec. "A revolver should have the range of the fellow."

Taking his from the wallet, he still lay flat on his saddle, while he turned his head round, lifting his arm as he did so. A glance showed him the trooper far nearer than he had thought, also crouched on his saddle, carrying a second pistol in his hand, while his tulwar was firmly grasped between his teeth. Bang! He meant business undoubtedly, for the bullet this time chipped a neat little piece out of Alec's ear, and flying on punched a beautiful round hole in the brim of his helmet.

"Shooting!" exclaimed Alec, somewhat startled. "That chap wants stopping."

Taking a very careful aim, he pulled the trigger and saw the pieces fly from the trooper's holster. But the man himself was unhurt, and, moreover, was coming up swiftly. Bang! A second shot caused him to sit up for a moment, but whether hit or not our hero could not determine. Next second the man snatched at his tulwar and swung it to his shoulder.

"He's too small a shot," thought Alec. "I'll try the horse."

This time he had more success, for, as his weapon snapped, the animal which the Afghan trooper rode stiffened all four legs, and came sliding along, churning up the ground; in fact, he almost threw his rider. But the latter managed to retain his seat, and, digging his spurs into the poor beast, caused him to plunge forward. But it was his last effort, for, steadying his arm as much as possible, Alec managed to plant a ball in the horse's head. There was a dull crash, the shriek of a startled

man, and when Alec looked, there was the animal tumbled into a heap, while three yards in front lay the trooper, silent and motionless.

"Broke his neck, perhaps," thought Alec. "He was a plucky beggar. I wonder how I shall get on with the officer?"

He had galloped on some three or four hundred yards, and was emerging into a plain at the far side of which were Major White and his party, when a shot rang out, and a puff of smoke belched from behind a rock some fifty yards away, just at the edge of the hill for which the Afghan officer had made. An instant later Alec was flying headforemost through the air, while, from the position where the gun had been fired, a figure mounted a horse rapidly, and, drawing his tulwar, rode out to dispatch the fallen enemy.

CHAPTER VI

Yohinda Khan, the Sirdar

WHILE Alee lies prone upon the ground we will canter ahead some little way and fall in beside Major White and his miniature force. This gallant officer had received orders to make his presence felt, and to act in conjunction with Baker's force away on the left flank.

"I mean to drive the enemy off the hills on our right with my own men," said the major. "Let the guns advance and talk to those fellows on the crest."

He pointed to the enemy, now well in sight, and watched as the gun teams dragged their loads into position. There was no doubt that the officer in command meant business on this cool morning, for he took his pieces within fifteen hundred yards of the crest and smartly unlimbered; then, for a quarter of an hour, shell after shell was sent at the enemy, bursting finely on the crest. Not that the Afghans thought much of our guns at first, for they crowded the ridge, and, as the weapons boomed, danced frantically, shouting at the top of their voices and waving banners and tulwars above their heads.

"Blest if they ain't like a lot of bloomin' lunatics!" said Sergeant Gillows of the commander-in-chief's escort, as he fidgeted in his saddle. "They looks for all the

world like apes a-dancin' the fantango. But jist you wait a bit, you'll see the major'll give 'em snuff."

"Jemima! Plump in the middle of them! Sergeant, them gunner boys pumped one of their shells right into the middle of a crowd and—look, there's another!"

The trooper, who had raised his voice in the excitement of the moment and had risen as high as possible in his stirrups, suddenly subsided and attempted to efface himself, for the chief of staff, hearing their voices, had turned round.

"Keep quiet, yer noodle! Do yer want to get me into trouble?" growled the sergeant. "James, that was a good 'un! And look at them Highlanders!"

Well might he draw attention to the wing of the 92nd, for their advance was a magnificent piece of work. Pushing forward at the run, and in slightly extended order, they mounted the hills by means of short and rapid rushes, taking advantage of every scrap of cover. Plainly discernible from the position taken up by the general and his staff, the figure of Major White could be seen in advance. His control of the men was wonderful. A movement of his sword was instantly detected by his officers, and also by his men. He sprang to his feet and went racing up the hill, the lusty Gordons following. Showers of bullets greeted them, being fired from behind excellent cover given by the ridge, and yet, in spite of the fact that the side of the hill was almost devoid of cover, few of the missiles found a mark. Here and there, as the onlookers watched, a kilt was seen to drop, roll a few feet downhill, and then

come to a stop. But the majority held on till their leader suddenly made a signal, and then, as one man, the wing of the gallant Gordons plunged face forwards on to the ground.

“A fine sight! Splendid! How I wish I was there!”

A staff officer, dressed in trowsers and khaki jacket, who sat his horse just behind the general, with his eyes glued to his glasses, brought one hand down upon his thigh with a resounding smack, and then colored to the roots of his hair.

“A gallant leader, and the right sort of men!” smiled the general. “I would that I was there also.”

“Hammer and tongs! They’re at it again!” growled Sergeant Gillows. “Oh, look at them bloomin’ shells!”

“What’s the matter with them, sergeant? Yer can see with half an eye that they’re flyin’ clear overhead into the field behind. That ain’t the way with our gunners. Why, look for yourself?”

This time their attention was attracted to the fire of the Armstrong guns posted in the mouth of the defile, which had turned their attention from the three British guns to Major White and his wing of Highlanders. Had they obtained the range, and been able to handle their pieces as precisely as did our men, no doubt the Gordons would have had some harassing moments to contend with. But, as the trooper had remarked to Sergeant Gillows, with a fine flow of language induced by the excitement of the moment, shells had, without exception, flown harmlessly overhead.

“On again! The boys are pushing forward!” whispered the staff officer; “and see how close they are to the enemy!”

By means of his glasses he had detected a large force of Afghans posted on the ridge, and outnumbering the Gordons by at least eighteen to one. And no doubt Major White had also observed them. Leading his men upward, he took them from cover to cover, and from ridge to ridge, till they were almost within hand grips of the enemy. And there he was forced to let them rest, for all were breathless, all save the major, whom no amount of climbing seemed to tire. For a moment he too lay beneath the scanty cover; then, seeing that there was little hope of the British guns disturbing the Afghans, and that his own men needed some powerful stimulus, he leaped to his feet, seized a rifle, and ran on up the hill. Then he halted, singled out the leader of the Afghans, and fired, bringing the man crashing on to the rocks.

A moment before he had stood unsupported, while his officers and men looked on open-eyed with astonishment. Now there was a roar, the clatter of stones set loose by a hundred pairs of boots, and then a line of gleaming bayonets swept on up the hill.

“Hurrah! hurrah! hurrah!” The cheers of these gallant Gordons came like music to the ears of the head-quarter staff, posted in the plain. They saw the flash of bayonets and the swing of the dark tartan kilt. Then the thunder of the guns playing on the right ceased, and cheers and Highlanders went over the ridge together, the skirl of

the bagpipes following closely in their rear. Nothing could stop them. Led by their gallant major, who won the Victoria Cross for his daring action of a few minutes before, the wing of the Gordons joined hands with the Cavalry and the Pioneers and dashed down upon the defile.

On their left General Baker had meanwhile been ascending the heights manned by the Afghan regulars, and presently he was marching toward the defile, sweeping the enemy before him. As darkness fell his column joined with that of Major White, and the troops who had fought so magnificently prepared to bivouac upon the ground which they had captured.

This action cost our forces very little, for but three officers were wounded, while of the rank and file about eighty were killed and wounded. The enemy were completely routed and fled toward Cabul, leaving two standards, twenty pieces of cannon and various mountain guns in our hands. Four hundred were killed, while a vast number of wounded regulars and hillmen lay about on the hills or were dragged away by their comrades.

Alec Dennisson lay like a log, stunned by the toss which he had taken, while his horse was stretched out some feet behind him, killed by the Afghan's bullet.

"The first blood to me," thought the Afghan. "I will sever his neck with my tulwar, and carry the head to Cabul. Yes, and I will perform the act as I gallop."

Just to practice his aim, he leaned forward in the saddle and made a sweeping cut at a big tuft of grass, lopping the heads off daintily. Then he returned the tulwar to his

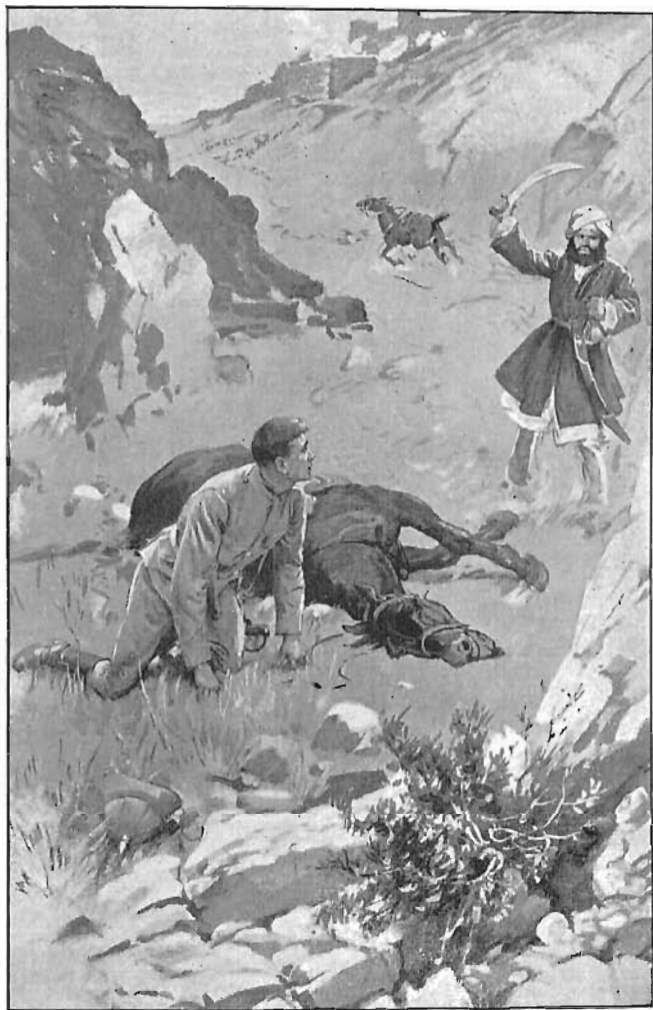
shoulder, and, gathering the reins well between the fingers of his left hand, spurred his horse at the senseless figure of the Englishman. A moment and he was close to it, when, steering the horse into position, he swung the tulwar round, and at the precise moment brought the keen blade hissing down at Alec's neck. It happened, however, that his animal was not as reliable as he, for having galloped right up to the recumbent figure, which was almost hidden in the grass, the fine gray Arab suddenly caught sight of Alec, and, with a shiver, started to one side, almost unhorsing his rider. The movement just saved our hero's life, for, as it was, the tip of the tulwar cut a fine clean line through the back of his coat.

"Pig!" shouted the Afghan officer, wrenching at the reins. "Back, so that I may complete the work."

He tugged at the animal's mouth, but in vain, for this high-spirited beast was not accustomed to such rough handling. It galloped on some fifty yards, and then, feeling the bit, rose erect with such suddenness that the Afghan dropped his tulwar and clung to the saddle with one hand. Down went the beast again, only to receive another jerk. This time he rose still higher, and still feeling the bit, staggered and fell backwards, throwing his rider, who narrowly escaped being rolled on.

"Brute!" he exclaimed, as, somewhat frightened, he rolled to one side. "I will teach you to behave in such a manner."

Fuming at his bad fortune, he rose to his feet and ran toward the horse, snatching at the bridle when within a



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"GRASPING HIS KEEN WEAPON, HE RAN TOWARDS ALEC"

pace or two. But the animal was thoroughly frightened, and swerved away from him. Another attempt set it trotting away, and the next second it was galloping, throwing up its heels as if the very sound of its own hoofs had started it out of its senses. With a growl of anger the Afghan swung round and ran toward his fallen tulwar.

"Sidi shall have a lesson in manners," he was saying. "I will practice him at this exercise of riding up to fallen Englishmen. Doubtless he will soon learn, and perhaps it will be useful later on. Ah, the horseman!"

As he stopped to pick up his tulwar and turned his head in Alec's direction, measuring the distance he would have to traverse ere he came up with the enemy, he saw that the latter had risen on hands and knees.

"He recovers from the fall. Then I will run to him. He is in the correct position now, and with a bold stroke I could sever the head. Ah, I will not disappoint him or keep him waiting."

Grasping his keen weapon he ran toward Alec, while the latter remained on hands and knees, his head whirling, while a deadly sickness gripped him. Mechanically, as the Afghan ran over some rocky ground and scattered the stones, Alec lifted his head, staring at his enemy casually and with faint interest. It did not seem to dawn upon him that he was in danger. Indeed, nothing dawned upon his dulled perception but a feeling of intense sickness and giddiness.

"He is helpless! I have him! His head shall be displayed in the bazaar."

This Afghan had no fine feelings about the slaying of an enemy, and set up a shout of joy, which was his undoing; for Alec could watch his advance listlessly, wondering vaguely what it meant, while the sight of the tulwar caused no apprehension. But the shout had a note of menace in it which roused his muddled brain. He lifted his head higher, threw off the feeling of sickness with a huge effort, and staggered to his feet. Then, feebly, he drew his sword, and raised it just in time to parry a terrific slash which the Afghan delivered. Then indeed did Alec rouse himself.

"Murderer!" he shouted. "Now I remember you cut at me when I lay half stunned by the fall. And you were returning here to finish the job. Then you will be disappointed. How's that?"

"Surrender and I will spare your life," cried the Afghan. "Drop your sword and accept imprisonment in place of death."

"Surrender yourself!" shouted Alec, now thoroughly roused and indignant at the attempt which the officer had made to slay him while quite helpless. "Up with your hands, or I will do for you as you attempted to do for me!"

"Die! That for your threat!"

The Afghan sprang in with a bound, taking advantage of the fact that the point of his adversary's sword was lowered, and made a sweeping cut. Alec instinctively stooped, though the movement brought on the old giddiness. Then, quick as lightning, he raised his sword, and,

finding the Afghan too close for the point, struck him a heavy blow on the forehead with the pummel.

"Dropped him like a dog! Well done, young 'un. We thought you were done for, and were standing on our toes with anxiety. Hurrah! You've made a capture."

Alec looked up, startled to see a group of Lancers just topping the rise in front of him, where they had halted their horses and stared at the combatants, not daring to move lest they should attract his attention and be the means of his downfall. Now, however, Jack Escombe came galloping up, and swung himself from the saddle.

"They helioed to the general that you had lost your way, and had been seen riding toward the pass. Also, that you were being pursued. Massey sent me along; and here we are, by George! and a narrow shave you've had of it. That beggar meant to kill you. Hi, corporal, give a hand here!"

The garrulous officer had stretched out his hand to shake his friend's, for with all his merriment he was sincerely relieved to have come in time. To his amazement, Alec looked at the hand aimlessly, stretched out his own with sword dangling from the wrist, and turning a ghastly color, stumbled against his friend.

"He's shook up, sir," remarked the corporal, as he gently placed Alec on his back and rested his head on his knee. "I saw a bit of what happened. This cove here fired at his horse, and didn't Mr. Dennisson come a cropper! Then the blackguard rode at him and give him

a cut with his tulwar. Look at that for a slice! It's cut through jacket and shirt, and just drawn blood. Then he got thrown hisself, and come back to wind up the matter. Mr. Dennisson's done well without us."

"Fetch the flask from my holster, one of you lads," sang out Jack. "And look here! There's a stream a few yards behind us. One of you get a helmetful of water."

The Lancers were bustling to carry out the order within a moment, four of the sturdy fellows falling up from their saddles and handing the reins to a comrade. Then one unstrapped the holster on Jack's saddle, while the remainder rushed off to the stream.

"Getting better, young 'un. You're knocked out of time by the fall, but you managed splendidly. Your Afghan is still insensible. How do you feel now?"

"A bit dizzy. My head is swimming, and I feel very sick. Oh, I say, steady on with that water!"

He spluttered, and sat up gasping, for the corporal in his anxiety had thrown a liberal supply of water into his face. Then he laughed good-naturedly and scrambled to his feet, the kindly corporal still supporting him.

"Put that down. Drink it to the last drop!"

Jack Escombe lifted the tumbler of his flask to Alec's lips, and grasping the latter's head, tipped the liquid into his mouth. It set him gasping again, for Jack had but a faint idea of proportions, and had poured the dose of spirit out in unusual haste. But it had the desired effect, Alec declaring himself to be much better.

"No, no more water, thank you, corporal," he laughed, as he wiped his face with his handkerchief; "you've given me a regular bath."

"I fancy we'd better be moving," said Jack. "Our fellows are mounting the hill, and we are likely to find ourselves between their fire and that of the Afghans. Bring along that horse, corporal, and let one of our boys sling this Afghan across his saddle. And, by the way, send four of them to take Mr. Dennisson's bridle and saddle. Alec, we captured the horse, while you made a prisoner of the man. Exchange is no robbery, don't you know! You hand over the unfortunate beggar to us, while we present you with a mount to replace the one shot under you. Now, up you go."

He helped his friend into the saddle, and then, seeing that he was still giddy and badly shaken, he motioned to a couple of the Lancers to close up on either side.

"No need to make the pace," he said reassuringly. "We'll walk it if the Afghans give us the chance."

He led the way, Alec with a trooper on either side following, while the escort fell in the rear, one of the men having lifted the unconscious figure of the Afghan officer across his saddle, where he carried him as gently as the circumstances would allow. And presently, as they emerged from the low hills and came into the plain, bullets swept past them, humming loudly in the air, for a Snider * makes a huge noise compared with the missiles now in use—that is, if the latter are flying true. A conical bullet fired by a modern weapon, should it strike a rock or the

* The rifle formerly used by the English army.

ground and be deflected, wobbles, and sometimes turns over in its flight, setting up a high-pitched sound which is somewhat awe-inspiring. Despite the flying bullets, none of the party were hit. Very soon they were riding through a part placed exactly between the two flanks of the British army, and, of course, in rear, and by turning their heads to either side could see Baker's army of two thousand, or Major White's slender force. The guns attracted their attention more than all, for at this stage of the battle they were at it as hard as they could work, answering the Afghan guns in a manner which did one good to see. Half an hour later they rode up to the general staff, for Alec was still too shaken to follow out his original orders.

"What is this?" demanded the chief of staff, riding up to them. "We saw you ride out; and the general tells me that General Baker helioed that an officer was out of his bearings. Who was it?"

"Mr. Dennisson, sir. He rode toward the pass, hoping to reach Major White. He was chased by the Afghans, and managed to get away from them. He was thrown badly, and this prisoner was in the act of killing him as he lay stunned on the ground. But he came to at that second, and just had strength to knock the fellow—the prisoner, I beg pardon—down. The Afghan is an officer, sir."

"Bless my life! Mr. Dennisson seems always to be meeting with trouble and hard knocks. Let him lie down for a time. And, Mr. Escombe——"

"Yes, sir."

"Take the prisoner and our friend round to the advance dressing-station, and ask the doctors to see to them."

"And let a careful watch be kept over this Afghan," suddenly interposed the commander of the British forces, having walked a few paces toward the group as they talked. "When Mr. Dennisson is better we will interrogate him."

Alec would have liked there and then to declare his ability to cross-question the Afghan, but the chief of staff seemed to have instantly divined his intention.

"No, no, not now," he said. "We are too busy. The action is at its height. Carry out the orders, Mr. Escombe, and accept my thanks for your prompt action. Our young interpreter is too valuable an officer to be lost without an effort."

"My word! There's a feather in your cap!" grinned the subaltern of the escort, as, having saluted, he rode away with his men. "Put that little sentence in your pipe, young 'un, and smoke it."

It was, in fact, handsome commendation, and Alec appreciated it to the full. Indeed, it went far to restore him to his old self again. Resting while others were moving and fighting irritated him, for he was filled with energy. But there were the orders, and Escombe and one of the doctors between them saw that he obeyed.

"No talking," said the latter, peremptorily, hiding a smile. "You will lie there in the shade of the tent till I am satisfied with your condition. Let me tell you that you have had a narrow escape, and that anyone else would

have broken his head or his neck. You have been badly stunned, and from the appearances of this jacket have been precious near to being beheaded. Let that satisfy you for a time."

He walked away to attend to a few cases of minor wounds which began to dribble in, leaving Jack Escombe beside his friend.

"Jolly glad you're alive and well," said the latter, as he pressed his hand preparatory to leaving. "You have indeed had a narrow shave, and it must be that you're born only to be hanged. Not a word! Off to sleep!"

Alec laughed and shook his fist. Then, obedient to the order, he turned on his side and closed his eyes. Guns thundered in the distance, while rolling volleys came to his ears. But presently he heard them but distantly, and soon fell asleep. When he awoke it was getting dark, and the action was over. Less than half of General Sir Frederick's troops had been engaged, and had routed the Afghan army.

"The provost marshal has sent across to say that when you are fit for the work he will be glad of your services as interpreter," said the doctor as he made his rounds. "That Afghan beggar is sitting up, looking about him as though he thought we would slaughter him. And, by all accounts, he deserves to be harshly treated."

"I'm quite ready, sir. I'll go now."

He was out of the tent in a moment, standing erect.

"Thank goodness, that headache has gone," he said. "May I go across now?"

The doctor nodded, and went to his work, wondering at the keenness of our hero.

"The right stuff," he said to a brother-medico. "Gets a crack over the head which would lay many a man up for the best part of a week, and lies down for three hours or so. The general has his eyes on Dennisson, they say."

"Then he'll need to use them well," was the rejoinder, "for the lad is everywhere, the most restless youngster, and when there is no work to be done, he and that chap Escombe, with a few more besides, are forever ragging and skylarking. Come along here, Ellis. I want you to help me with one of the Highland boys."

A minute or two later Alec presented himself at the provost marshal's tent, directed there by the faint light which streamed through the canvas.

"Come in!" the colonel shouted, and at the summons he entered promptly.

The provost marshal and his subordinate were seated at a traveling office table, in the center of which a regulation candle spluttered, being affixed to the boards by the simple process of heating the base. Behind them stood a sergeant, with papers in his hand, while the murmur of sentries could be heard outside.

"Ah! Better, I hope. Had a nasty experience, eh?"

The colonel smiled his pleasant smile at Alec, and with one swift glance seemed to take in every inch of him.

"The tulwar must have had a razor edge," he said, motioning to the gash in our hero's jacket, a gash which

he had endeavored to conceal; for the weight allowed an officer for kit was small, and spare tunics did not form a part of it. Tom Bird would have to see what he could do with needles and cotton.

"Now tell me," he went on. "I understand that you were thrown and stunned, and that the prisoner attempted to slay you while lying senseless. Is that the case?"

"Yes, sir."

"He missed his stroke and your neck, and was thrown himself. Then you managed to rise and protect yourself. In fact, you stunned the ruffian in return?"

"I hit him with the hilt as hard as I could, sir. He was too close for the point, and I felt so giddy that I did not dare risk missing him."

"A fact which he discovered to his cost. We will question him, Mr. Dennisson, and it would be as well to let him know at once that by all the rules of warfare his life is forfeited. March him in, please."

There was silence for a moment or two, and then the voice of the commander of the escort.

"Shoulder harms!" shouted the sergeant, as if his men were half a mile away. "Right wheel! Quick march! 'Alt! Right dress."

He prided himself upon his smartness and that of his men, and at the voice the latter flew. Closing about their prisoner, they hustled him into the tent, and when he halted a pace in front of them, dragged him back with marked lack of ceremony.

"Right dress!" commanded the sergeant, in tones

which had some trace of disappointment, as if he thought the prisoner ought to understand and act more promptly on the order. "Back on the extreme left. Eyes front!"

"Ask his name," said the colonel.

Alec at once turned to his late opponent and repeated the question.

"Yohinda Khan," was the answer. "A sirdar of Afghanistan."

"And a ruffian to boot," growled the colonel. "Now, tell him that an enemy who attacks a wounded or helpless man of ours forfeits his life."

Alec did as he was asked, noticing that the prisoner's eyes turned up as he heard the words, while his complexion changed. His lips trembled, the ends of his mustaches shaking visibly.

"He doesn't like the thought," said the colonel. "Now, say that he is to be shot to-morrow morning."

Alec repeated the words, while the provost marshal watched the prisoner. As for the latter, the news set the perspiration pouring from beneath his turban, though the night was decidedly chilly, while the sentry on either side had to support him.

"Add, unless he is prepared to do as we desire."

Alec had no need to repeat the sentence more than once, for Yohinda Khan gripped at the reprieve as he would have done at a straw were he a drowning man.

"I will tell all," he said, looking at the men assembled about him as if, as was indeed actually the case, he were in terror of his life. "Let the noble lord ask, and it shall

be answered. There is nothing that I will withhold from him."

"And nothing to withhold," said the colonel, turning to his subordinate. "Our intelligence officers have learned all the news, and we have not frightened this wretched fellow with a view to extracting information. We desire to make use of him, and this will be his work. Tell him this, Dennisson. He will be given papers to-night, and will be escorted through the pass. From thence he will make his way to Cabul and scatter our proclamation. It is to warn all women and children and the non-combatants to clear away, for we may have to fire on the capital. He will report himself to me when the army is in possession of Cabul."

The Afghan's face lighted up as he heard the news, and he even smiled his thanks and relief.

"The noble lord can rely upon my doing the work," he said. "I will report to him when he arrives at the capital, this I vow on my honor."

"His honor!" exclaimed the colonel with a sniff, when Alec interpreted. "You can say that we of England do not value honor which allows a man to strike at a fallen enemy."

A scowl flitted across the handsome features of the Afghan sirdar when he heard what had been said. But in an instant he was smiling again, and smiling, he was marched from the provost marshal's presence.

"A bad hat, I should say," was the remark of the latter's subordinate as he emerged with Alec. "And he didn't

seem favorably impressed with you. Depend upon it, Dennisson, here in a land of enemies you have made one of them most certainly yours. Look out for the fellow. They say these Afghans are faithless, and given to assassination."

Alec had heard the same, but he gave little heed to the captain's warning. However, he was yet to see more of Yohinda Khan, and to understand better than formerly the depths to which an Afghan's hate can take him.

CHAPTER VII

Looking Backward

ALEC DENNISSON awoke refreshed upon the following morning, the morning of October 7. His headache had entirely gone, and the sole effects remaining from his fall of the previous day was a stiffness about the muscles of the neck and a tenderness of the head; that and the long slit in his tunic and a battered helmet.

“It saved yer life, sir,” said Tom Bird, producing the headgear alluded to, at an early hour, as Alec crawled from his tent. “I’ve pushed it into shape with my fist and thrown some water over it. The sun will dry it hard, and no one will be the wiser. There’s the tunic, sir. My mother taught me to do a bit of stitching.”

“And capitally you have done it, Tom. What about the orders? When do we move!”

The handy fellow shook his head, for as yet none had been published. Instead, he helped his master into the tunic, drawing attention to his work again.

Like all soldiers worth their salt, Tom could turn his hand to many things, and for that reason was an excellent servant.

“I can mend and wash yer clothes, and cook yer rations

at a pinch," he had confided to Alee, when the latter was interviewing him with a view to appointing him his servant. "I can ride, else I wouldn't be a Lancer, and I can lead a horse with any man."

And the honest fellow had been as good as his word, for he was invaluable. A little later he had seen his master satisfactorily dressed, and proceeded to lower the tent and pack away the kit, while Alee went across to the mess. And here again was an example of handiness of soldiers. Though continually on the move, the staff appointed to cater for the headquarters of this mobile field force were never found wanting. A native cook was employed, while a sergeant and four men saw to everything else. Their duty it was to erect the tent and unpack, while they waited upon the officers at all times. But few had time to spend on their meals. The latter were always hurried, and so but a few minutes had passed ere Alee was in the open again, waiting to take any message. There was a bustle about the camp on this morning, for Cabul was near at hand, and there was much to be done. Overnight the dead, twenty in number, had been buried, while by now the wounded were all comfortably settled. But arrangements had to be made as to the captured guns, and a thorough investigation of the ground between the troops and the city of Cabul. It was not long, therefore, before the general and his staff rode forward to the pass and cantered through it. On the far side they found pickets of Baker's force, while in rear the main portion was strongly entrenched. And very close at hand was the city of Cabul,

the scene of the massacre of Cavagnari's mission, backed by a high rocky ridge. Afghans could be seen moving hither and thither, while standards crowned the hills. But as yet there was no sign of a massed army, or of serious resistance, and so, that the British force should not march into an ambush, patrols of horse were sent forward to reconnoiter.

"That is the Sherpur cantonment," said an officer to Alec, as they stood looking at the city through their glasses. "The British forces were encamped there in 1839 and until their disastrous retreat in 1841. Ever been here before?"

"No, sir. But I have traveled a good deal in the country with my father. Many of the sirdars were friendly with him, and he could cross the frontier with little danger. I learned the language on those trips. But we never ventured into Cabul."

"Then you are young Dennisson. Ah, I have not met you before. Even in a small force like this one may march beside fellows for weeks and never get to know them, though it is somewhat unusual, I admit. What an escape you had yesterday! How's the head?"

"Quite right, sir, thank you. I am a little stiff about the neck."

"A good thing in an Englishman," laughed the major. "Seriously though, this little band will want all its fortitude, for though we may take the city we shall have hard times before us. We are not likely to intimidate the whole of Afghanistan. Their anger will smolder, and one of these days their moullas will get the upper hand,

and the fanatics will launch themselves at us. Did you ever hear of those poor fellows who were here in '41?"

"My father told me something, but I don't recollect, sir. They were slaughtered to a man."

"Wrong," said the major. "One officer escaped from their clutches, and later on a few officers' wives were handed over to us with their husbands. It was a sorry affair, and we did not shine brilliantly. And it's too long a story to tell you here, while our fellows are patrolling out in front. And, besides, the history of Afghanistan is so full of intrigue that a scholar would scarcely do justice to it. You've heard of Dost Mohamed, of course?"

Alec admitted that he had, for Dost was the ruler of the country from 1826 till 1863, save for a period of three years when the British were in occupation.

"And you have doubtless heard of Shah Soojah? No? Well, he was ruler in Cabul from 1803 till 1809, when he was deposed. He has always been described as ne'er-do-well, a wanderer and a bandit, and a wanderer he became again when he was deposed. He it was, too, who had possession of the famous diamond, the Koh-I-noor, which was taken from him by Runjeet Singh, the ruler of the Punjaub. Penniless and a wanderer still, this fallen ruler found his way to Loodianah, where he became a pensioner of the East India Company.

"Persia and Russia are mixed up in these Afghan troubles of ours," went on the major, "and I can only tell you here that the Shah of the former nation was ambitious, and had cast covetous eyes on Herat and the Afghan

province about that city. Indeed, in 1837 he marched on Herat and besieged the place, being defeated and obliged to raise the siege after nine months and a half. It was well known by our Government that Russia was aiding and abetting the Persian Shah, and as any advance of Russia toward our western frontier of India was a menace, we were forced to interfere. For that reason a military force and a fleet of warships were dispatched from Bombay to the Island of Karrack in the Persian Gulf. Such an exhibition of our intention to interfere, combined with his non-success at Herat, caused the Shah to raise the siege.

“And now for Dost. He was a fine fellow, not of the nobility, but the son of Poyndah Khan, a statesman and a fine soldier. The times were troublous ones when he was a young man, and had it not been for the cruel murder of one of his brothers, no doubt he would never have come to the throne. But he set himself to avenge his brother's death, and, gathering adherents, in the course of time finally seized upon the throne. And a wise ruler he made, only the British Government could not see it. Indeed, surreptitiously they aided and abetted the man who sought for his downfall, for they caused four months' pension to be advanced to Shah Soojah to enable him to regain his own throne. But the attempt was doomed to disappointment, for when Shah Soojah appeared before Candahar and besieged it, the gallant Dost marched against him and hopelessly defeated him. On his return to Cabul he found that Runjeet Singh had crossed the Attack with his forces

and occupied the province of Peshawur, now in British hands. Naturally, Dost turned from the British to the Persians. The latter were then besieging Herat, Russian envoys were at the court of Cabul full of promises, while the Government of India wrote scolding dictatorial letters, promising nothing, not even their protection. And all the while they looked on and saw Dost robbed of a province, and his country invaded by a force raised by means of the rupees which they had advanced.

“Our reply to this decision of the Dost was to send our force to Karrack and end the siege of Herat. Then we turned to Shah Soojah, and set to work to prepare an army which should carry him to Cabul and place him on the throne. Altogether, it was a piece of amazing policy, an example of highhandedness which was inexcusable, and, as the result proved, a disastrous decision for our Government. Your father was a ‘political,’ was he not, Dennisson?”

Alec nodded assent. “He was on the frontier for many years,” he said.

“Then he would have known all about the affair. I am with the Intelligence, and know that these facts are correct, and also that the action of the Government was afterwards severely criticised. And so were the military arrangements for the campaign, for instead of an invasion along this, the shortest line, our men were marched hundreds of miles, their route being along the Sutlej to its junction with the Indus, then along the latter river to the crossing point at Roree, and from thence across the north-

ern Belooch provinces by the Bolan and Kojuk passes to Candahar. From that city they marched to Cabul by way of Khelat-I-Ghilzai and Ghuzni, meeting with fierce opposition at the latter place. Afterwards none was met with, and on August 6 the invading army marched into the town we see before us. The gallant Dost had fled from the place, and Shah Soojah entered Cabul in triumph, with British bayonets about him, a swarm of political and military officers at his elbow, and the thunder of salutes deafening the air. None but the most servile of Afghan sirdars attended his durbars. The whole population stood aloof, scowling at this usurper, thrust on the throne by a nation they despised as feringhee dogs. Thus were we rewarded, after a long march lasting from December of the previous year, and costing numerous valuable lives, a huge loss in transport animals, and as a consequence, in baggage and military effects, and in addition a very large expenditure of treasure. It was to cost us still more. Have you heard of the retreat of that hapless, half-starved army?"

Alec had been told some of the facts by his father, but listened respectfully.

"It is a pitiful story," said the major, "and can be told in few words. But, first of all, let me say that the invading army, finding the nation of Afghans peaceful for the time, sent home for wives and children, and soon settled as an army of occupation. There were dances, dinners, and concerts, and a hundred other little amusements by which life in cantonments was made more agreeable; and, meanwhile, all troops had been withdrawn from Cabul, and

from the Balla Hissar, the key of the city. They were now stationed outside at the Sherpur cantonment, with the Afghan positions close at hand and dominating them. Then, too, Dost had made his appearance again. At first he had come with armed men, and had given trouble in Kohistan. Then, weary of wandering, he had delivered himself to our commanding officer, and in due course was dispatched to British India. But he left his son behind to watch over his interests, Akbar Khan by name, and he quickly made his presence felt. All seemed quiescent, and the nation of Afghans had apparently accepted British occupation with a good grace, when a trifling affair upset all calculations. The subsidies paid to Afghan sirdars for their good-will were suddenly reduced, and at once they went over to Akbar Khan, with whom, no doubt, they had all through been in communication. Then fighting began, outstations being at first attacked, and with wonderful success; indeed, though it was unpleasant to have to admit it, the support offered these outstations by the officer commanding the central garrison here at Cabul was almost *nil*. Encumbered often with women and children, and surrounded by masses of the enemy, they were driven from their posts, and in some cases few indeed survived the journey to Cabul. All this time our troops lay in the Sherpur cantonment, a wall of earth erected about them, and a mere scratch in the ground forming the pretense of a ditch. Disheartened by the news of misfortunes elsewhere, and with their spirits depressed for the simple reason that they lay motionless when danger surrounded them,

they looked over their three-foot walls at the Afghan forts commanding them on every side, and wondered what would happen. Would you believe it, their food supplies were stored in a fort commanded by one held by the Afghans, and lying some distance outside the cantonment?"

The major paused to draw Alce's attention to some of the patrols now riding near the city, and to massed Afghans on the heights beyond. Then he gave expression to a grunt of disgust and resumed the tale.

"There were enemies all round our troops," he said, "while the Ameer whom we had thrust on the throne sat in his palace, impotent to aid either himself or those who had come so far to befriend him. And very soon the crisis came. Our treasury, situated in Cabul, was attacked and looted by the mob, three British officers being massacred. And then came the turn of the other. The frantic Afghan irregulars got completely out of hand, and attacked fiercely. Soon they had taken our supplies from us, and we were hustled in the cantonment, unable to move, and expecting assault in force at any moment. Of course, we ought to have met their treachery with force, and made use of the men we had. But indecision was the order of the day, and matters steadily became more desperate. Indeed, they came to such a pass that we were forced to accept the harshest terms, and to agree to march out of the country. The tale of that journey down the Khyber is too sad to tell you, and no doubt you have heard it often before; but of some five thousand fighting men and a huge number of camp followers, one only lived to escape

through the pass and reach friends. A few were saved as hostages, or by some friendly Afghans, while all the remainder were massacred.

“Of course, we had to send up a punitive expedition after that; and well the work was done! Finally, this new force retired, bringing with it British garrisons from other parts of the country, and inflicting on its way punishment on the Afghans. From that date till a short while ago we left this country severely alone. Now we are here again, and let us hope we shall be more successful.”

“And what of Shah Soojah?” demanded Alec, “and of Dost?”

“Ah, I had forgotten. The former remained in Cabul when our hapless force evacuated the cantonment, and within a few short days was murdered. Dost returned from India, and for many years ruled the country wisely and well.”

“And then, major?”

“The same danger; the fear of Russian influence here haunted our Government. And no doubt they had good cause to feel nervous, for if this Afghan nation were subjected by the Muscovites, the Czar and his masses of troops could make their way into Northern India; that is to say, they would not have to fight their way through the Khyber and other routes, for, as you can easily see, this country is extremely difficult for the passage of troops, and if Russia were to force her way through now, she would have to keep open her lines of communication, in case the need for retreat should present itself. That would mean a huge

force; and if Russia were defeated by our troops, you may be sure that these Afghan irregulars would hang on the flanks of the retreating armies and massacre every straggler. So that, with the Ameer friendly to us, and still holding independent rule over his own country, we are more or less secure from Russian invasion; but were the Muscovites to conclude a treaty giving them free passage through, or were they to conquer the Afghans, then, indeed, the danger to India would be great.

“That is why our Government has striven to keep a friendly Ameer on the throne; and for that reason also we sent a mission to Cabul, with the object of maintaining friendly relations; and perhaps more than that, of keeping a watchful eye on the Ameer and his doings.”

“A mission which the Afghans massacred in cold blood,” said Alec, bitterly, thinking of his father.

“An act of treachery for which we shall make them pay, or I am much mistaken in the intentions of the Government and of our gallant leader. But we shall have to fight, Dennisson. So far we have been opposed to regulars and to some thousands of irregulars. That is nothing to what we may expect. This Ameer has made the mistake of attempting to organize a regular army when his people are fitted for irregular fighting. They are divided into tribes, all of which are noted fighters in their own fierce way. And they can be kept in hand and guided so long as, when the time for action comes, they may rush at the enemy in their own manner, and not in serried lines. We have disposed of the brown-uniformed men, trained to act

as regiments. Let us see what success we shall have with the wild hillmen, who, before long, will be surging about us."

"Look at them on the hills over there," burst in Alec, his glasses to his eyes. "I think that a force is being sent against them."

This, in fact, was what was happening. General Massey and his troopers had been actively engaged since early morning in patrolling the ground lying between the pass and the city of Cabul, and now his energies were being occupied by the massed irregulars and regulars who had been defeated on the previous day. They, with their banners of many hues, could be seen manning the heights at the back of the city, and against them were sent the cavalry brigade and General Baker's command.

Later on it was learned that the rabble on the Asmai heights, which overhang the suburb of Deh Afghan, were under the command of Mahomed Jan, and consisted of the remnants of the regular regiments of the previous day, three fresh regiments from Kohistan, and the firebrands of the city.

It was with no little interest that Alec watched the maneuvers, his glasses following the horsemen as they galloped hither and thither. Presently, as the hours passed and the afternoon arrived, a violent explosion was heard, while the figures of wild Afghan horsemen could be seen galloping toward the hills.

"Looks like an explosion in the Sherpur cantonment," said one of the general's staff. "Dennisson, ride along

and ascertain the real cause. You will find General Massey over in that direction."

Delighted to have something to do again, Alec was in his saddle in an instant, and went across the plain at a fast canter, his Afghan horse carrying him magnificently. Well up to his weight, this fine gray had more breeding than the average horse from India, and had already attracted the attention of numbers of the officers, all of whom envied him the capture; and our hero, too, began to learn that he had indeed obtained a treasure in exchange for the poor beast shot on the previous day.

"I fancy I could overhaul most of our mounted men," he said to himself as he galloped along. "The pace is fast, and yet this animal has a good lot left. I'll try him for a few furlongs."

There was ample room out there on the plain, and so he touched the beast with his spurs, loosened the rein, and sat closer in his saddle. Obedient to the wishes of his rider, the horse burst into a swinging gallop, which took him and his rider through the air at a pace which brought the tears to Alec's eyes. Then, as the reins were gently tightened, he slowed down, and presently broke into a fast trot. A few minutes later Alec was riding in the Sherpur cantonment, the scene of much British humiliation forty years before. There was Jack Escombe, strutting about, apparently engaged in counting some guns parked in the cantonment, while a Lancer held his horse.

"That you, young 'un?" he sang out. "Just in time to report a capture. General sent you?"

"Yes, to report to General Massey and ascertain the cause and whereabouts of the explosion."

"Then General Massey's aide will have pleasure in giving the information. In fact, I am left here for that purpose, with orders to count these guns which we have captured, and send the news to the commander-in-chief."

Full of importance, this dashing young Lancer officer passed among the guns, his saber clanking and his riding switch tucked beneath one arm. In his hand he carried a note-book, and with Alec's aid slowly counted the Afghan artillery.

"Seventy-five pieces of ordnance," said Jack, solemnly. "A fair capture, don't you think? And look at them!"

The two young officers passed through the lines of parked artillery, inspecting each of the guns in turn with interest. Some were from the firm of Armstrong, and a few bore the British Government stamp, having obviously been presents to the Ameer; but the majority were of home manufacture, the Ameer having set his own artificers to work to cast and bore weapons. Indeed, a few days in the neighborhood of Cabul proved to the British forces that the Afghans were not by any means behindhand when it came to a question of arms, for their tulwars were keen-edged and of the best steel, contrasting more than favorably with swords and sabers carried by our men, while their rifles and guns, the majority of home manufacture, were very creditable imitations of our own, the rifling of many of the weapons being particularly good. However, Alec

had a message to convey back to headquarters, and turned to Jack Escombe:

“Seventy-five pieces of ordnance captured by General Massey’s brigade? What of the explosion? And is there anything else to report?”

“Nothing. The blowup was a powder magazine in this cantonment. The enemy retired at once, and we rode in. Now we’re off to turn the beggars out of the hills. So long, young ’un!”

He swung himself on to his horse and rode off with a couple of troopers, leaving a dozen to look after the captured guns. Alce, too, clambered into his saddle, and returned at an easy gait to the headquarters position. And as he rode he had opportunity to admire the businesslike methods of the British troops, for he formed a central figure about which all moved. Before him the rear guard and main body of the invading force rested on their arms, the regiments lolling on the grass, awaiting orders. In their midst stood the commander-in-chief and his staff, following with their fieldglasses the movements of the enemy and of the two brigades operating against them. A little behind them were their horses, the syces squatting at their heads, while in rear of these the tent could be seen, with men bustling about it, preparing the day’s meal; and emerging through the pass came the head of the baggage column—camels groaning beneath their loads, mules, horses, and even a few asses, all with a strong advance guard before them, and, without doubt, a still stronger flanking rear guard.

A flash on the right caught the eye of the general's aide-de-camp, and, halting, he turned his glasses on the spot, and then at once swung round and stared at the distant heights. A similar flash was seen there, and, satisfied with that, he snapped his glasses to and rode on; for he had but seen the heliograph at work, the most useful daylight-signaling apparatus extant. Indeed, he afterwards learned that it was General Massey's signalers, who were calling up the headquarters and reporting the movements of the enemy.

"We shall camp here, I bet," said one of the infantry subalterns, when Alec had made his report and been dismissed. "The orders have just been given to prepare meals, though we are all to stand to arms. To-morrow we shall be masters of Cabul."

"Not till we have cleared those fellows from off the hills," answered Alec. "I hear that they are retiring through a gap, and that our fellows are after them. There are barely three thousand of the enemy."

"Bet you a new helmet, then, that we are in to-morrow, Dennisson. Come, accept the wager, for you are in want of a helmet."

But Alec was not to be beguiled, and, indeed, would have lost to a certainty; for on the morrow, the heliograph having reported that General Baker, with the help of the cavalry brigade, was dispersing the enemy, Alec was sent after the latter to report his movements, and arrived only in time to meet the latter returning.

"We've had a rough time of it," explained Jack

Escombe; "out pretty well all night, and always wondering when the enemy were going to attack. Now they're scuttled, and we are on the way home. Massey means to show the beggars that they are licked, and that he knows it. He's marching us through the city, for we are all tired, and it's a long way round."

And this was actually the case. Conscious of a victory achieved, the general commanding the cavalry brigade led his jaded men and horses through the heart of Cabul, past hundreds of the inhabitants, none of whom offered violence or even insult. That night the divisional camp was moved to the Siah-Sung heights, while a cavalry regiment bivouacked in the Sherpur cantonment, the Ghoorkas being near at hand on the ridge commanding the Balla Hissar; in fact, the city of Cabul was virtually in the hands of the British, though at present it was left severely alone. Within three days, however, officers and men were strolling through the streets, while the flag of Britain flew from the shattered battlements of the Balla Hissar.

It was with melancholy interest that Alec, accompanied by Jack and Harry Macgregor, ventured into the town, and turned toward the scene of the massacre.

"You go ahead, young 'un," said the former, as they arrived near the scene of the last fight of the mission. "Harry and I are going to have a look outside first of all, and will join you later on."

They realized that their comrade would like to be alone, and turned away at once. Alec, trembling in spite of himself, slowly walked toward the gate of the Balla

Hissar and ventured beneath the archway. There was the gun which had held the Afghan fanatics back, one wheel broken, and the sponging-rod splintered, as if it, too, had been used as a weapon. Charred beams and blackened pieces of fallen masonry lay everywhere, while amid the *débris* lay the bones of those who had so gallantly defended the place, their clothing still telling their nationality. It was a painful duty, but he carried it through. Hunting high and low, he encountered Guides and British officers, their bones, too, often buried beneath the fallen masonry. Who could say who had or who had not fallen here beneath the gateway, or who had crawled into the blazing building and there succumbed? It was enough to know that all had died, and in dying had left a tale of gallantry behind. Sad at heart, he returned to his friends, and wandered through the town. Then his services were in demand, and he forgot his sad experience; indeed, for many days he had little time to think, for a *darbar* * was held, and efforts were made to bring to book all who had had a hand in the massacres. The Afghan quarter was entered, and all against whom there was evidence were promptly hanged. But it was known that many sirdars still escaped discovery, and against these special efforts were made. Thus were the first two weeks of British occupation spent; nor is there any movement of importance to record, save that General Hugh Gough retraced his steps with a small force to the Shutargurdan heights, and escorted Colonel Money's troops to Cabul. These latter had beaten off many attacks, and on one occasion had successfully resisted an assault

* An official reception or levee in India.

delivered by no fewer than seventeen thousand fierce Ghilzies. Almost immediately General Gough's helio had come into touch with Colonel Money's signalers, and the latter boldly took the offensive, scattering the enemy. After that the combined force returned to Cabul to learn that all was quiet, and that our troops had suffered severely from a series of explosions in the Balla Hissar, where there was an enormous store of ammunition. On that account they found the ridge deserted, and the troops encamped in the Sherpur cantonment. Two days later, as Alec and his two friends wandered through the Afghan quarter, a startling adventure befell them.

CHAPTER VIII

Afzul the Skinner's House

RUMMY people," observed Jack Escombe, as he swaggered through the Arghan quarter with Alec and Harry Macgregor. "The men look fine fellows; and don't they long to fight us!"

"If looks would kill, then we should all be dead long ago," answered Harry. "They scowl on us, and there is never a salaam as one would have in India."

"Do you notice that there are no women to be seen? Once or twice I have fancied that I caught sight of a veiled face at the windows, but it has gone at once," said Alec, suddenly. "There are never any to be seen in the street. But—look there!—what are those fellows doing?"

They had come to the jewelers' portion of the Afghan city, and at once their interest was aroused; for at every open door sat a skilled workman, some article fitted into the wax end of his stick, working at it diligently. A tray of stones lay close at hand, and the majority of these men were engaged in setting them into gold and silver brooches, many of which were displayed for sale. So interested were the three young Englishmen that they did not notice a group of Afghans approaching. One, whose dress was of the superior class, and who had a soldierly bearing, hastily

turned his face away as he saw Alec, and dragged a fold of his turban down till his forehead was completely hidden. The second was a shorter man, though still fairly tall, who wore a fierce scowl of resentment on his face, particularly as his eyes turned to the invader, a scowl which a comrade a pace or so from him also displayed. These two last were less gaudily dressed, and looked as though they might be the servants of the first Afghan. All three were armed to the teeth with pistols and with tulwar and knife, while one of the men, the most ruffianly looking of them all, carried a whip in one hand.

But these three might, perhaps, have been met with elsewhere, for in this bazaar, a portion of the city which the British had leveled as a punishment for the massacre of our army of occupation in earlier years, not a single Afghan passed an officer of our invading force without an ugly scowl, without spitting upon the ground, and muttering threats and curses, and calling upon Allah and the prophet. It was the exception, also, to meet one who was not armed. These three had something more about them, something which seemed to say that they desired to pass unseen by the British, as if they feared scrutiny. Perhaps it was the fact that a woman accompanied them, a woman somewhat above the average height of the race, heavily veiled, and clad in clothes which belonged to the better class. Alec happened to turn round as this quartet passed, and nudged his comrades.

"There you are," he said beneath his breath. "There is one of the women of the race, the first that I have seen.

And don't the men scowl as we pass! I don't half like it, you fellows. The fact that men alone are about seems to point to something brewing."

"Nonsense! You're getting jumpy!" exclaimed Jack. "Bother their scowls! Of course, they don't like us much, and I should scowl at you if I were one of them. Halloo!"

"Who called? I thought the woman turned, and attempted to make her voice heard," said Harry, suddenly.

"And I swear that I heard 'Help' in English, and in muffled tones," cried Alec.

"Help! In English! Why, you're dreaming, young 'un. She has never seen one of us before, and that's why she turned. She was astonished at our handsome appearance."

"Don't!" exclaimed Alec, angrily. "This is no time for humbug. I heard a call for help, and I'm going. Stay here if you like."

He walked after the retreating figures at once, followed by his comrades.

"Did you see how those two ruffians threw themselves upon the woman as she turned?" he suddenly asked. "And look, now, how they are all hurrying off. By George! I think I know the scoundrel on the right. He's that beggar who nearly beheaded me. Come along!"

Exactly why his interest had been aroused it would be hard to say, for, as Jack Escombe remarked, the sight of a British officer was quite enough in those days to bring an exclamation from any Afghan, and more so from the women, who practically live their lives behind the walls of

their houses, and seldom meet strangers. But Alec had got the idea into his head that this person was in need of help, that she knew his own language, and that her veil, or some other object, prevented her calling aloud. And now she was being hurried away, obviously because her escort did not wish for the interference of the British officers.

"By James! she's struggling like a tiger!" exclaimed Jack suddenly as they hurried along the street, hesitating how to act. "Come, I say, that's a little too much of a good thing. Hi! just stop that!"

The three gave vent to a shout of rage, while Alec started to run at once, feeling as he did so for his revolver, without which no one ventured into the city; for as they were following the party of Afghans which had attracted their attention, they had all seen the woman again turn hastily, making frantic efforts to break from her escort and run back. Then the two ruffians had thrown themselves upon her, one bringing his whip about her shoulders with all his strength, and with such force that the noise came distinctly to their ears. Then they hustled her away up the street, breaking into a run.

"After the blackguards!" shouted Jack Escombe. "And look out for their pistols and knives!"

"They've gone to the right between two of the houses. Hurry up!" called out Alec, who was a few paces in front of the other two. "Halloo! one of the two has turned to face us."

Hurrying along, it was not long before they were within

an easy pistol-shot of the narrow street down which the four figures had disappeared. And even the one who had for a time remained, seemed now to have gone. Consequently, Alee was hastening toward it in his eagerness, when a shot rang out loudly, and a bullet caught him in the shoulder, plowing its way through the muscles and passing out without touching the bone. Almost instantly there was a second shot, the bullet flying wide and striking the wall of the house behind with a thud.

"Look out!" shouted Jack, who had now come up. "The fellow is hiding in the doorway just round the corner. There he is. That may reach him."

He held his revolver in his hand as he spoke, and, suddenly catching a glimpse of the ruffian, pulled the trigger.

"Hit!" exclaimed Harry Macgregor, seeing the man start forward. "I say, you fellows, I don't like the looks of things. Others are coming up, and that bullet came from behind us."

He turned and looked anxiously down the street up which they had come, the hasty glance telling him at once that danger threatened from that quarter. In fact, the first pistol-shot had startled the Afghans in that part of the bazaar, and at the sight of the English officers they came hurrying out of their little shops, snatching at their weapons as they ran.

"The feringhee dogs!" called out one, a tall, handsome man, who wore an enormous beard. "They fire at our brothers. Let us cut them off and slay them. Who shall be the wiser?"

He led a dozen of his countrymen up the street at a run, opening fire as he did so with his pistol. Meanwhile, Alec had recovered from the shock of his wound, a slight one, as it turned out to be in the end, and had managed to shoot down the ruffian whom Jack had struck with his bullet.

"You hit him, Jack," he said calmly, "but he was about to fire again, and so I shot him. You can see the others hurrying off. Shall we follow?"

"Follow! We shall be killed if we are not away at once. Come along! We'd better run."

Alec was so carried away by excitement that he would have rashly dashed up the narrow street in pursuit of the Afghans who had carried the woman off. But the shouts of the denizens of this low quarter of the bazaar, who were rushing after them, caused him to look in their direction, and at once he followed Jack and Harry without demur.

"Strike for the Balla Hissar," he panted as they ran. "We may meet some of the men."

"And may prevent these beggars from cutting us off."

"Too late," said Jack a minute later, as four Afghans ran from a side street a few yards ahead, and ranged themselves across the street. "They have doubled round, and got between us and friends."

"But they have only come because of the shouts. They do not know the cause yet," panted Alec. "Their friends are calling to them to tell them. Let us rush through them before they have a chance to draw."

By now they were within a few paces of the Afghans, the new arrivals being burly individuals, who looked as though they had spent their lives in idleness, and thereby grown fat. And, as Alec had said, as yet they were ignorant of the cause of the commotion. Still, three Englishmen were dashing toward them, and behind came numbers of their own countrymen. That was enough, and at once they prepared to hold the street. However, Alec and his two friends went at them without hesitation.

"Out of the way!" shouted the former, lunging forward with his fists as he came within reach of the central man, and striking him a blow on the chest which sent him reeling. "Through them, and then straight on for the Balla Hissar."

He turned for an instant to see how the others fared, and shouted with joy as he saw Harry Macgregor follow his example, and send his fist into the face of one of the Afghans. But Jack was less successful, for his foot slipped on the cobbles which lined the road, and in a moment he was sprawling on his face. There was a shrill cry of triumph, and instantly one of the enemy threw himself upon the prostrate officer, and, kneeling on his back, pulled at the hilt of his dagger. It was a critical moment, and, perhaps, had the weapon come from its sheath freely, Jack Escombe would not have lived to see the end of that day. But the blade stuck for a second or so, and that interval proved his salvation; for Harry Macgregor had used a revolver before, and was not likely to be frightened at the thought of hitting friend instead of foe. Moreover,

the Afghan sat up well, presenting a fair target. One instant sufficed to sight the weapon. There was a sharp report, and the man fell backwards, his whole weight being upon Jack. But the latter made nothing of it. Rising to his knees, he shook the body off. Then he sprang to his feet and joined his comrades.

"On at once!" cried Alec. "The crowd is gathering, and soon we shall have a mob after us. How far is it to the Balla Hissar?"

"Half a mile, perhaps, but I cannot say," panted Harry. "What are we to do supposing more of them come up in front?"

"Run down a side street, and if there isn't one, dash into a house. Anything to get cover. What do you say, Jack?"

"Anything to get out of a horrible mess. If we're headed, there can be but one thing for it. We must seize a house. Then we'll hold it till our chaps come. Ah!"

"Headed!" said Alec, quietly, coming to a halt. "Ten Afghans ahead, a hundred behind, and friends a long way off. Which house shall it be?"

They looked about them desperately, while the shouts and the hubbub of the mob came nearer. Then, by common consent, they entered a tiny tenement, which seemed to have been squeezed in between two gigantic houses.

"What is it to be?" queried Jack. "This door would not keep a dog out."

"And the stairs are almost too rickety for use," added Harry Macgregor.

"Then up you go, and the last man pulls them up or smashes them."

The daylight which had penetrated through the open door had shown a small room, from one corner of which a narrow, rickety ladder led to a hole in the ceiling above. It was the merest apology for a ladder, for it consisted of two light struts, crossed by rough pieces of wood, tied into place by knotted pieces of rope. Obviously the thing to do was to see what was above, and at once Harry swarmed up, Jack following closely, till the ladder swayed, and threatened to break beneath them. Then Alec made the attempt, for the cries of the Afghan pursuers were close behind, and in a moment they would be entering the house.

"Now drag it up," he said, when he reached the top, kicking the side baulks free with his foot. "One! Two! Three!"

"And up she comes. What next?"

"I'll stay here. You go on and see what kind of place it is. Look for doors communicating with the next houses."

Alec motioned to them to leave him, and then stood at the opening, well back from the view of anyone who happened to look up, but in such a position that he could see the Afghans as they entered. Panting with his exertions, he stood there eagerly awaiting the enemy, his hands gripping the rungs of the ladder, while the side timbers which held together still rested on the floor. Suddenly an idea occurred to him, and, searching for his knife, he fell to work on the ropes.

"I saw another ladder behind, so that we shall not want this," he thought. "I'll cut the thing adrift, and send the beams down onto the heads of the fellows who dare to enter."

He slashed at the rope bindings, and ere long had the ladder in pieces. Then he poised one of the rough beams on his shoulder, and waited.

Crash! An Afghan foot sent the door clattering from its frail hinges, and a cloud of dust filled the room. When it cleared away, the floor below was crowded with the enemy, all gesticulating and shouting.

"Silence!" suddenly exclaimed the big man wearing a beard, who had come from the bazaar at the first shot. "The dogs entered here, of that we are all sure. Then let us learn whose house it is."

"Afzul the skinner owns it. He is at this moment at work in the bazaar."

"And who can tell us aught of the size and shape of the lodging? Silence, I say, lest these men escape us. This house belongs to our brother Afzul, skinner by trade, and who among us can tell us what is asked?"

"I can do that. He is my brother by marriage, and I am often here," said a man, pushing his way into the house, and speaking breathlessly. "Afzul is poor and unmarried. He lives alone, and each night clambers to the room above. In the hot times he goes to the roof, and sleeps there in the cool."

"And from there he could pass to other roofs? Is that not the case, brother?"

"He could if he desired, though those who live beside him would have something to say. In the summer they and their women live on the roofs."

"Then these feringhees will not ask permission. They will run along by means of the roofs, and will escape us. Who will watch them from the street while I follow above?"

A shrill chorus of voices greeted the question, a number of men at once running to the door.

"We will leave it to you," said the self-made leader. "Now, for the floor above, and a ladder with which to reach it."

For a little while the absence of the rickety ladder troubled them, and they discussed the best means to take, some advising that an entry should be made next door; and others that the Englishmen should be picked off with rifles aimed from the street. Then one shouted that he had found a solution.

"There is a stall outside," he said. "Let us take the trestles, and place one on top of the other. Then we shall be able to clamber up."

The idea was seized up with a shout of joy, and very soon the trestles were in position.

"Follow swiftly," said the burly Afghan leader. "Now stand aside while I fire this pistol to clear the path."

Going to the spot beneath the aperture, he pointed his weapon directly upward and fired, Alec taking good care to stand aside as he did so. Then, as the fellow began to clamber on to the trestles, our hero lifted his beam, and,

taking a careful aim, launched it downward. It was a fine shot, delivered with all his force, and for a little while nonplussed the pursuers; for the end of the beam struck full upon the uppermost trestle, splintering it to matchwood. Then, continuing in its flight, it broke one leg of the second trestle, toppling it over on the ground with the Afghans sprawling over it.

"That will stop them for a time," he thought. "Now I'll see how the others are doing."

He sprang away from the opening just in time to escape a shower of missiles—some thrown by the hands of the enraged mob cramming the room below, and others fired from pistols. Then he groped his way in the darkness till he came to a ladder of similar proportions to the one which he had just destroyed. It was clear that Afzul was miserably poor, and that whatever his other accomplishments might be, he was not given to cleanliness and order, for now that Alec had an opportunity of inspecting the room in which he found himself, he saw that it was indescribably dirty and mean, and boasted not a single article of furniture. Only a few dusty skins in one corner seemed to point to the spot where the skinner took his rest at night—that and an elaborate hubble-bubble * which stood in one corner, together with a brazier and a pan in which he cooked his food, no doubt. Above, there was another opening, dark and forbidding.

"The house seems to consist of room over room," thought Alec. "They are just piled the one on the other,

* A tobacco pipe in which the smoke passes through water.

squeezed in between the two neighbors, and connected floor to floor by miserable ladders. Well, I fancy I have checked those fellows down below, and will join Jack and Harry. Halloo!"

"That you, Alec?" came down from the opening above. "Stand in the patch of light. Ah, it is you! I was not certain, and had you covered with my revolver. What a relief to see you! Come up out of that dark hole and let us have your news."

"They are crammed into the room down below, Jack. I bowled their leader over with a portion of the ladder and broke their trestles. Now they're searching for some other means, while a number of the ruffians are in the street waiting to take pot shots at us."

"They've done that already. Harry had his helmet knocked from his head. How's the wound, young 'un?"

Even in such a predicament Jack Escombe's good nature came to the fore, and he remembered his friend's bad fortune in receiving a wound.

"Haven't felt it yet," was the answer. "Haven't had time. But what are we going to do? These blackguards seem to be all round us."

"Come up here and see for yourself. It's a ticklish position, and I don't know how to move. I only wish some of the troopers would turn up."

"No chance of that," said Alec, promptly. "None are allowed in the city save officers, and we were fools to come. At least, I think that we were. But hold on. I'm coming up. We must contrive to get out of this and run for our

lives. There are working parties near the Balla Hissar, and we must hope to meet with one of them, or that the noise will bring them to us. Those fellows below are shouting, so that they must have been heard at the Sherpur cantonment."

He gave one more glance below him, only to find the room still filled with howling Afghans, among whom the big leader raged, his ire increased by his tumble. Then he went to the ladder and swarmed up it, being greeted by Jack Escombe with enthusiasm.

"I was getting fidgety about you," he explained. "Those beggars made such a noise that I could not hear your voice, and no doubt you could not hear mine, though I shouted. Come along. Harry is on the roof keeping a watch."

He was leading the way to a short flight of steps, of better construction than the ladders, when Alec stopped him.

"One moment. The ladder," he said. "Lend a hand, Jack, and we'll hoist it."

Together they grasped the top rung and pulled, with the result that the ladder was soon resting at their feet. Then they emerged on to the flat roof to discover Harry Macgregor seated behind the parapet.

"Warm work here," he said with a nervous grin. "They saw me as soon as I looked over, and ever since they have been firing. I've given them a mark to draw their fire. Ha! Good shot, sir! Hit the crown fairly, I think."

As he spoke his helmet, which he had planted on the edge of the parapet, flew into the air and came tumbling at their feet, while a howl of triumph rose from the street.

"That's the third time that they have managed it," Harry explained. "The first was when my head rested beneath it, and the second some minutes ago, after I thought of putting it on the parapet. But, I say, this cannot last much longer. There must be hundreds below."

He spoke in the coolest tones, and behaved indeed just as he had done on that day, but a little time ago, when Jack and Alec had come to his rescue with their escort of Lancers. Moreover, the excitement of the moment had not caused him to exaggerate, for there were, indeed, hundreds in the street below—nay, thousands, gathered from every corner of the city, while fresh additions came to the outskirts of the crowd every moment that passed. Compare the gathering with that which assembles on the occasion of a fire in England. They spring as if from the very ground—young men and old, women and children. And here, in the city of Cabul, the city of conspiracies, of murders and plots to murder, the turbulent Afghans came tumbling from bazaar and workshop, from hovel and palace, and crushed in the throng.

"Some of the feringhee dogs have fired upon a peaceful brother," the word was passed. "But they are cornered. Mahomed Jan leads the crowd, and he has sworn to slay one of the dogs with his own hand. It is said that they are on the roof of Afzul the skinner's house."

"Feringhee dogs! Kill them! Hack them to pieces! No one will be the wiser!"

Shouts, hoots, and shrill calls sounded through the crowd, and came distinctly to the bewildered ears of the fugitives. Look as they might to right or to left, the street which they had just vacated was filled to overflowing, while the very sight of a cap brought a fusillade, rifle bullets and missiles sent by antiquated flint pistols hurtling above their heads.

And on either side a steep wall presented itself, for Afzul the skinner had modest wants, and a huge house was not to his liking; and for that reason, and, perhaps, because the times were not promising, he had taken a tenement which was dwarfed by its neighbors. Their walls continued up above his own till they looked down upon his just as the walls of the arsenal looked down upon the roof of the Balla Hissar. The outlook was bad indeed. Escape seemed out of the question, while, as if to accentuate the fact, the roar of the mob seemed to surround them. Alec looked about him eagerly, but nothing met his eye which could possibly bring encouragement. He stood on a flat roof slabbed with stone and surrounded by a low parapet. At his feet was the narrow opening at the summit of the stairs, while nothing else disturbed the flatness of the roof save a bundle of skins in the far corner where, no doubt, the worthy skinner slept during the hot weather—that and a few others, which were flung over the parapet, no doubt to cure in the sun. The situation was hopeless. Unless help came, escape would be impossible; and

of what use was it to hope for the arrival of friends? For some minutes the three young officers stared at one another and then turned their eyes to Harry's helmet, still perched upon the parapet. Then a roar of voices came up through the narrow opening, and they knew that the mob had gained the first floor.

"The trestles again," Alee heard the burly leader exclaim. "Now prepare your weapons, and when I am ready, fire. And recollect, I, Mahomed Jan, have sworn to slay one of the infidels unaided. Let no one come between me and my oath."

CHAPTER IX

A Question of Seniority

HOIST with a will, and Allah will surely bless you. Now place your shoulder beneath me, and I shall be there. Ah, I give you thanks, brother."

"Give me a head. Throw me the head of one of the feringhee dogs; that will be ample reward."

"And do not forget us in your triumph, Mahomed," shouted the mob around.

The burly leader of the attacking Afghans smiled upon his comrades indulgently, while he panted heavily; for the climb was more severe than he had anticipated, and two trestles placed one above the other are not the easiest nor the safest method of ascending to a higher story. But Mahomed Jan had taken an oath, and, though the exertion told upon his ponderous body, he was not to be balked.

"Now, follow," he said huskily, when at length he had been hoisted to the story above; "and then let some of you fling up the trestles. I will wait till you have joined me, for I am breathless, and three of the dogs might be too much for my strength."

He sat on the floor, looking somewhat anxiously about him, and noting with relief that the ladder leading higher

had gone. Then he pulled out his pistol and carefully rammed in a fresh charge.

"These men who met the enemy as they marched here boast of their deeds," he said to himself. "We shall see whether Mahomed Jan, of the jewelers' guild, located in the bazaar, can make a story for himself. The English are cornered. I give them five minutes in which to live."

By now a second Afghan had clambered up by means of the trestles, and, turning to help his comrades, soon had a dozen crowding in the room.

"Enough!" cried Mahomed. "Now for the roof. Hand up the trestles, and let us mount. Who among you will favor me with their help?"

At once all pressed forward, for the big man was a power in the bazaar, and they sought his favor.

"I thank you. Two are better than one, and I choose those who stand beside me. Clamber to the floor above, and then aid me in the ascent. The task is too much for a man of my years and weight."

Eagerly obeying him, they hauled on the trestles as their comrades below handed them up, and soon had them beneath the opening which gave access to the last short flight, and thence to the roof. Then the two men who had been chosen sprang forward, and, placing their daggers between their teeth, swarmed up with the agility of cats.

"We wait, Mahomed," they called out in low tones. "Come, for we hear the dogs above us."

They leaned over the opening in their eagerness, and

stretched their arms down to help the burly Afghan; but the latter was too slow to make use of their aid. He had clambered on to the trestles, and was just raising himself to his full height, when the sharp crack of a revolver rang out, followed instantly by a second. Then, as if he had been dropped from the sky, one of the Afghans crashed through the opening, and, missing his leader and the trestles by an inch, fell with a thud to the boards below. The second dropped dead, as if he were an ox struck with a poleax, and remained above, his arms and head dangling over the edge of the opening.

"That should stop them for a little while, and give us a minute to breathe in," said Jack Escombe. "Now, Alec, what is this dodge you hinted at? Escape this way is out of the question, and, as far as I can see, it is equally impossible in any other direction. Unless——" he stopped abruptly, and led the way back on to the roof—"unless you thought of using the ladder to climb to one of the other houses," he said.

"I thought of it, certainly, but gave the idea up. They'd see us from below, and we should have the whole mob after us. It would not even prolong the defense. It's plain that, if we remain here, sooner or later we shall be taken. They've tried the stairs, or, rather, they've attempted to climb up to us. Perhaps they'll give that up now, and——"

"We shall be able to hold out longer."

"If they don't climb through the next house and gain the roof. You see, we are overlooked on either side, and

men posted up there could fire down upon us. Our lives wouldn't be worth a moment's purchase."

"Then you think——"

"That we ought to clear off at once. Look here."

The imminence of the danger had stimulated Alec's wits, and suddenly he had hit upon a plan of escape which seemed likely. He led the way across the roof to where Harry Macgregor was crouching, and drew Jack's attention to a bale of skins which had been propped against the parapet, so as just to show above the top. It was capped by Harry's helmet, now pierced by many bullets.

"They're tough," he said rapidly. "Sun-dried, you know, and will stand a lot of stretching. They'd make a rope which would bear our weight and take us to the ground."

"But——" Jack looked at his friend as if he thought that his senses had left him. "The Afghans swarm below," he said huskily. "We should be cut to pieces before we had placed a foot upon the ground."

"In front here we should, but not behind. Come and look."

Alec dragged his friend across the roof, and, taking care to shelter below the parapet, drew his attention to a hole in the masonry.

"There's a yard on this side," he said, "and no one about, so far as I can gather. I thought of the idea before, but could not make up my mind how to get down. The skins would help us. What do you say?"

"We'll try it. Better make some attempt than to be cut to pieces here. Listen to the brutes! Ugh! how they shout and clamor to reach us."

"Then let us get to work. Harry, come over here and lend a hand."

Their conversation had been carried on breathlessly and in violent haste, and now they threw themselves on to the skins with the furious activity born of terror. Death stared them in the face. A mob howled for their blood, and nothing but energy could save them. No wonder, then, that they slashed at the skins, tearing them in long shreds till the harsh material cut their hands and set them bleeding. And as they cut, Harry seized the strips and joined them together, knotting them as securely as possible till he had a rope of respectable length.

"That should do," said Alec. "Now let us try it. Fasten it to the ladder, and jam the latter into the opening here."

In feverish haste they secured the rope, and then, putting all their weight upon it, pulled till the ladder bent and groaned.

"Now, to let them see us. I'll stay while you two fellows go. Don't waste time, or they will be on us before we are away."

Alec looked to his revolver and crept to the parapet. Down below the mob still clamored and filled the streets with shouts, while the dummy figure still drew the fire of those who had rifles. Alec stood up in full view, shifting the dummy before he did so. Then he hastily selected a

part where the enemy were more crowded than elsewhere, and rapidly emptied his revolver in that direction. His appearance was the signal for a perfect storm of shouts and rifle fire. Bullets sang through the air, or chipped large pieces of the masonry away; but from the interior of the house itself not a sound came, for Mahomed Jan had found it convenient to retire, and for the moment had forgotten the oath which he had taken.

Meanwhile Jack Escombe and Harry had secured their skin rope by passing the piece of timber through the opening in the roof. Then they took the coil and threw it over the parapet at the back of the building. And now a difficulty presented itself, a deadlock occurred, which threatened to delay their departure dangerously.

"Supposing they clamber up by means of their trestles!" said Jack, suddenly, looking round at Alec. "They'd kill him to a certainty, and we should be unable to help. I'm not going to leave him to himself."

They had crossed the roof by now, and were crouching by the side of Alec, watching the latter as he crammed fresh cartridges into his revolver.

"Look here!" exclaimed Jack, impulsively. "You go first. I'll stay; I'm the senior."

"By a few hours only," retorted Alec, calmly; "and this is not the time nor place in which to press your claim. Someone must go first, and someone remain till the last. I was the cause of all this trouble, and I thought out this chance of escape. I claim the right to remain."

He looked Jack Escombe unflinchingly in the eye and

toyed with his revolver. And as they crouched there and debated, the shrill cries of the Afghans and the murmur of the angry mob came to their ears.

"For Heaven's sake settle the question," said Harry, angrily. "What does it matter who remains, or who is senior, so long as we all escape. Toss for it and end the matter."

"Then, heads I win, and take the post of danger. Call to me, Alec."

Jack stood up in his eagerness, dragged a coin from his pocket, and spun it into the air.

"Tails! Tails! Then I stay, and you two get off as quickly as you can. I'll give you a minute each to reach the bottom."

Alec turned to his companions and addressed them in a manner which was peremptory, to say the least of it; indeed at another time it would have called forth an outburst of indignation from his comrades, and particularly from Jack. But, as Alec had already said, it was neither the time nor the place for argument. Any inclination which General Massey's aide might have had for remonstrance was, however, cut short abruptly by the interference of the hostile mob below. For a time Harry's helmet had persuaded them that they were firing at one of the hated feringhees, and they had screamed with delight whenever a shot happened to hit the mark; indeed, their angry cries were for the moment transformed into roars of uproarious delight. They danced with pleasure, and grave Afghan merchants rubbed shoulders with the scum

of Cabul, with the sweepings and dregs of the turbulent population, as keen on sending a successful shot as a party of schoolboys would be with a bottle put up on some rail for a mark.

But the pastime began to tire them, and it dawned upon these Afghans that the helmet was headless, and that the mark displayed so temptingly was a clever ruse of the feringhees to hold their attention and give time for a rescue party to arrive. At the thought their rage and impatience were increased, and they called to Mahomed Jan to fulfill his promise. Then, as Alec leaned over the parapet and emptied his revolver into the mob, they saw that the feringhees were, indeed, untouched, and at once a hundred pistols of every shape and age sent bullets in his direction—bullets which failed to meet a mark, for the simple reason that the Englishman had disappeared so rapidly. But another might be seen. This feringhee was crouching behind cover while he loaded his weapon. He would be there again if they had but patience to wait, and then——

A roar which would have frightened the bravest greeted Jack's appearance, and a storm of bullets chased one another to the roof of the tenement as the coin spun into the air. Ghazees and men of the bazaar shook their fists at the Englishman, and called down curses upon his head, while those who boasted of the possession of rifles redoubled their efforts; and, no doubt, had further opportunity been given, the Lancer officer would have been slain. However, Alec dragged him to the cover of the parapet,

and a moment later Jack and Harry were creeping toward the rope.

"At least, I shall go last of us two," said Jack. "Slip over while I watch the opening."

He went to the square skylight from which exit from the house could be obtained, and lay down beside it, holding the piece of wood to which the skin rope was attached; and soon, as the latter tautened, and the beam bent with the weight, his ear caught a sound below, the shuffle of some person approaching.

"Perhaps they are hoping to surprise us," he thought; "or it may be that Mahomed Jan is determined to slay us. I heard them call his name."

Still the suspicious sounds could be heard, and Jack carefully looked over the edge of the opening into the dark room below. It was untenanted so far as he could see, and the corners were hidden in gloom, though where the ladder was wont to project and give admission from below a lighter patch was visible, and through this opening the boards of the ground floor could be seen, bare and deserted. Yes, he was sure of that, for he looked long and carefully, and could only detect the broken trestles which had supported Mahomed Jan. He was about to retire, thinking that Harry must now be close to the bottom, when that suspicious sound caught his ear again. He sank back, drew the revolver, which he had thrust into its pouch while helping to manufacture the rope, and brought the barrel to the edge of the opening. Suddenly he started, became rigid, and slowly raised the weapon, sighting it along the

beam to which the rope was secured. Then his arm ceased to move, and the muzzle halted opposite four dusky fingers which were sliding toward the rope. A second later the owner of this mysterious hand took a firm grasp of the beam, and, supporting the weight of his body by one arm, leaned forward from the corner in which he had been skulking. His eyes were fixed upon the tautened rope, toward which the keen edge of his dagger was approaching.

Once more had a crisis arrived. If this man cut the rope, Alec and Jack were doomed, while, even if he failed, their means of escape would become known to the mob below, and swift death follow. Jack saw it all in a second, and his finger slowly stiffened and contracted. He had the Englishman's compunction to slaying an enemy, as it were, in cold blood; but this was clearly a case of self-defense. His decision was taken. He lowered the revolver as the Afghan's body came into sight, and just as the man was about to sever the rope, he sent a bullet through his head, the report being followed by the thud of the body on the floor below.

"Better see whether he had any companions," he said, and at once slipped past the beam and the rope and down the smaller flight of stairs. The man he had just shot lay huddled beneath the latter, while the body of the Afghan who had clambered up some time before still dangled through the opening in the floor, looking as if it would overbalance at any moment. Each corner was empty, and though he stood there and listened, there was no sound below.

"Time to be moving," he said.

He darted up the stairs and across the roof. Already the rope hung slack, while Harry stood at the foot, anxiously awaiting his friends. Jack tucked the revolver into his pouch, clambered over the parapet and slid to the ground. A minute later Alec followed, his exit from the roof having been preceded by another storm of bullets.

"They haven't a leader," he gasped, "else they would have been into those other houses long ago. They think we are still above, and I gave them cause to do so, for I fired again just before I left."

"Then fill your revolver now," said Jack. "We shall want every bullet, perhaps."

"Unless we have the luck to slip through unseen. We seem to be in a courtyard, and there is a door over there."

Harry pointed to the farther side of the narrow yard into which they had descended, and at once all three crept toward it. A few windows looked down in their direction, but no one appeared at them, for all the inhabitants of this rough quarter were staring into the street, egging on the mob to slay the feringhees. What, then, was beyond the door?

"A narrow lane between the yards of the houses," said Alec, opening it cautiously and stepping out. "Empty too. Which way?"

"From the bazaar," answered Jack, promptly. "Let us go in the opposite direction, for the Balla Hissar lies that way."

"And if we are seen and pursued?"

"We must do as before, and make a run for it. If we are headed, we will select another house. After all, it helps to give us time, and may mean safety. The noise must have been heard in the cantonment by this, and the general will suspect. We were not the only officers who came to the city, and it will be guessed that someone is in difficulties. Come along!"

Led by Alec, the three issued from the doorway and started along the lane, nervously apprehensive that an Afghan would enter it before long and shout an alarm. But fortune seemed to be acting in their favor, for the alley still remained empty, while on their right the row of city houses only served to dull the noise of the mob. They could still hear it, still catch the snap of pistol and rifle, and the hum of angry voices. Suddenly a dog came into the lane, and at the sight of the foreigners it set up a noise which caused the fugitives to shiver with apprehension. They did not fear the beast itself, though it hung at their heels, snarling and barking; but the commotion might attract attention. Alec lifted his revolver with the intention of shooting the dog, and then lowered it again.

"The shot would be noticed where the barking passes unheeded," he said. "I have another method."

He slipped his belt from his waist, lifted the sword from the frog, and then, waiting till the dog made a rush at him, struck it smartly with the belt, sending it howling along the gutter. A minute later his belt and sword were back in the proper place and the trio were running down

the lane. They soon came to a spot where another alley cut the one in which they were at right angles, and here they halted and cautiously looked round the corner. Could they get across unseen? The main street, some yards to the right, was packed even here, and men were pressing closely together, all their energies being engaged in the endeavor to get nearer to Afzul the skinner's house.

"We must chance it," said Alec, quietly, "and we had better run across together. Wait till I drop my arm, and then go."

Peering round, he waited more than a minute, till Jack and Harry fidgeted. Then a sudden outburst of firing attracted the attention of every man engaged in hunting the feringhees, and Alec dropped his arm. All three at once took to their heels and ran across the open, diving into the lane beyond. Had they been seen? Had one of the Afghans caught sight of the Englishmen escaping? The question was uppermost in each one of their minds, but they could not stop to decide it. Nor had they need to do so, for hardly had they covered a dozen yards when an Afghan boy, a ragged urchin, came running from one of the yard doors into the lane, evidently with the intention of squeezing his way into the crowd farther on. So great was his hurry that he did not at first notice the fugitives; then, when within a pace of Alec, he realized that the Englishmen were before him. Slipping like an eel past them, he went on at full speed, and doubled round the corner, calling the alarm at the top of his shrill boyish voice.

"The feringhees! The feringhees! Escaping down the lane behind! Chase! Chase!"

"Run! For our lives," cried Alec. Keeping together, they sped along the narrow lane, slipping on the greasy cobbles or on the garbage which moldered in the street, or splashing into shallow kennels,* the only system of drainage of which the city boasted. Sometimes the lane twisted, for that part of Cabul had been built as seemed most convenient to the prospective owners of the houses, the streets and thoroughfares being entirely a matter for afterthought. Then it would go on again, parallel to the one which had been filled by the crowd.

At length it came to another cross road, and a glance showed that the street did not continue beyond.

"To the left," called Alec, "and keep close together. If anyone attempts to arrest us, go for him!"

By now, thanks to the unfriendly action of the brat who had discovered the flight, Mahomed Jan and his comrades of the bazaar were in full chase. The news that they were about to be balked of their prey had spread with the rapidity of a fire, and the struggle to get clear of the street and enter the lane had been a fierce one. And the discovery had an added disadvantage for Alec and his friends, for those who now came close on their heels were the men who had perforce been content to stand afar off, staring at the distant tenement of the skinner, unable to reach it or take a share in the volleys for the simple reason that a solid barrier of flesh and blood was interposed between them and the spot. Now the tale was altered, and

* A gutter.

they took up the pursuit with all the Afghan's fierceness and longing for the death of a foreigner. Fresh for the reason that they had merely stood still, lookers-on at the scene, they followed at a pace which taxed the powers of the Englishmen. Also, they knew the windings of these lanes, and soon a number had broken away, and had dived down an alley to the left, hoping to cut off the fugitives. Alec and his comrades never knew how many times they turned to right or left, nor how many Afghans accosted them and endeavored to detain them; for they were still in the poorer streets, the narrow tracks running between the hovels tenanted by the laborers in the bazaar; and those they came across were for the most part of the lower orders, the men who were always ready for a brawl, and always eager to engage in a task of similar nature. Some displayed weapons as the officers approached, but drew back when they saw that the latter were armed. Others endeavored to clutch them as they passed; but for these, Alec and his friends had a ready answer, for their fists shot out, and more than one went reeling back.

"The Balla Hissar!" shouted Harry, suddenly, as the huge straggling building came into sight. "There is the British flag."

"And there are some Highlanders. Give them a shout," panted Alec.

In the distance he had seen a fatigue party of the Highlanders, returning from the ammunition store in the Balla Hissar, their rifles slung across their shoulders; for in those days no man ventured outside the cantonment

without his rifle or a revolver. They heard the shout and turned. Then the hunted officers saw the sergeant in command give some order, for he waved an arm and slipped his rifle from his shoulder. His men, some fifteen in all, left the hand-cart on which they had stored the ammunition, and also freed their weapons. Then they formed into twos, and with a shout came rushing toward the fugitives.

CHAPTER X

Alec receives a Message

HALT! Fix bay'nets!"

The little party of Highlanders came to an abrupt stop at the orders of their non-commissioned officer, and, lining across the street, felt for their bayonets and fixed them with precision, and in a manner which showed that discipline had not been taught them in vain. There was no wild hurry, no firing before an order was received; they toed an imaginary line, and listened for the succeeding order.

"Make way for the officers. Now, sir, what's the trouble, please?"

The fine fellow naturally appealed to Harry Macgregor, he being one of the regiment, and stood there before him respectfully at attention.

"Chased by Afghan blackguards, sir," he went on, seeing that none of the three was able to speak, for they were utterly exhausted, and the long run had taken all their breath. "Front rank remain fast till I whistle. Rear rank, about turn! Quick march!"

Motioning to the officers to proceed with the rank then retiring toward the Balla Hissar, he took his stand beside those who remained, and watched the horde advancing down the street. They were coming as fast as their legs

could take them, and for the most part had not yet seen the reinforcements obstructing their path. But ere a minute had elapsed they sighted them, and came to a halt themselves, while they discussed the situation.

"They mean fight, and so we had better make ready to receive them," suddenly exclaimed Jack, taking upon himself the command now that he had regained his breath, and had recovered in a measure from the exhaustion resulting from his flight. "I'm going back to the sergeant."

"And may bring the Afghans buzzing round us again," said Alec, hastily. "Don't you see that when you return to the party with the sergeant, the ruffians who have been chasing us will catch a glimpse of their prey, and will be tempted to press on with the matter. Leave the Highlanders to their non-com., and come along. We shall halt soon, and be ready to reinforce if he is in trouble."

The advice seemed good, and Jack took it without a murmur. A moment's reflection showed him that the very sight of one of the escaped feringhees would be dangerous, and like exposing a red flag to maddened bulls. As it was, a small party of men opposed the rush of the Afghans, men against whom they had no grudge in particular, and no quarrel save the one caused by the fact that they were feringhees, unbelievers to this nation of Islam, and invaders. More than that, the sturdy Highlanders obstructing the path of the pursuers were armed, and the rabble of the city had already had more than one taste of British steel, and remembered the rush of these strangely kilted men.

"We'll halt now," said Jack, after a while, when they had pushed on a hundred yards. "We are near enough still to help. It looks like trouble."

"And as if the sergeant would pull through very nicely," echoed Harry, keenly supporting his own men. "Macalister is one of our best N.-C. Os., and can be trusted. The Afghans are beginning to throw stones."

"And there is a pistol! It will be time to return the firing soon."

Alec leaned against the corner of a wall which formed the back of some yard, and gazed down the street. He was still breathing hard, and felt as if he had taxed his strength to the utmost. A few minutes' rest was required, and he took it while he had the opportunity. Meanwhile Sergeant Macalister stood beside his little party, their bayonets fixed and ready for use. Stones were falling about the Highlanders, and one had narrowly escaped a bullet. But the sergeant kept his head. He was a steady man, who had seen troubles of this nature before, no doubt, and had some idea of the best methods to employ when dealing with angry mobs. A volley from his men would have brought the rabble storming down the street. A passive attitude was better than flight. He showed that he was ready for any attack, but would stand aloof if the enemy drew off. And no doubt a well-ordered set of men would have seen this and retired. The mob, however, was composed of the scum of the bazaar, and with it mingled not a few Ghazees and fanatics. These latter indulged in stone-throwing, while others crept closer, wishing that

they had pistols. The question of further fighting hung in the balance, and that balance was speedily upset.

"We are afraid! We would retire before a handful of the feringhees! Then I will set the example. Death to the dogs!"

It was one of the white-robed fanatics who shouted the words, having exhausted all his store of argument vainly in the endeavor to cause the mob to advance.

"Follow if you dare!" he shouted, as he snatched at a pistol which one of the Afghans held in his hand. "If not, see one of your comrades strive with them alone!"

He darted to the front and came at a run, while the mob stood defiant and menacing, waiting to see what success he had.

"Hold your fire. Use the bayonet!" cried the sergeant, calmly. "If more follow, fire over their heads and reload instantly."

The sergeant stood his ground coolly, and waited for the fanatic's attack, and very soon the man was upon them. Presenting his pistol as he ran, he pulled the trigger, and then flung the weapon at the Highlanders. Then his hand leaped to his dagger, and he bounded at the central man.

"Smartly done, my lad!" exclaimed Sergeant Macalister, and Englishman for all the fact that he belonged to a Scotch regiment. Indeed, many of the Highlanders are English or Irish. "Nicely done, lad. Remember, hold your fire!"

He gave the command again, for it is hard work for soldiers who possess rifles to keep their fingers from the

trigger when an enemy is so close, and more particularly when one of them is rushing frantically against them. But these Highlanders were old soldiers, steady, and gifted with excellent nerves, and they stood their ground, unmoved save for the fact that the central one whom the fanatic had selected for particular attack lunged to his full length, and struck low, impaling the Afghan. Then he flung the man from his weapon, recovered his position, and faced the mob, a flicker of his eyelids and a flush upon his cheek alone showing that he had heard his sergeant's words of commendation.

“Present!”

Sergeant Macalister lifted his own rifle and aimed at the roofs.

“Over their heads,” he said quietly, “and wait for the word.”

The death of the fanatic had for a moment struck awe into the hearts of the mob, and a few began to slink away, for the city was filled with tales of the prowess of the men in kilts. But there were turbulent spirits there, men who counted not their lives if they could slay an unbeliever, and presently a few of these pushed to the front. Shouts and hoots gave place to an angry roar, and a movement was made to advance, a shower of stones being flung from behind the leaders.

Still the sergeant stood immovable, his rifle at his shoulder.

“Charge! Death on the slayers of our brother! Follow! Follow!”

This time it was a gray-beard who led the attack, and he knew that he would not be alone. A hundred leaped to accompany him, and at his shout the mob broke into a run.

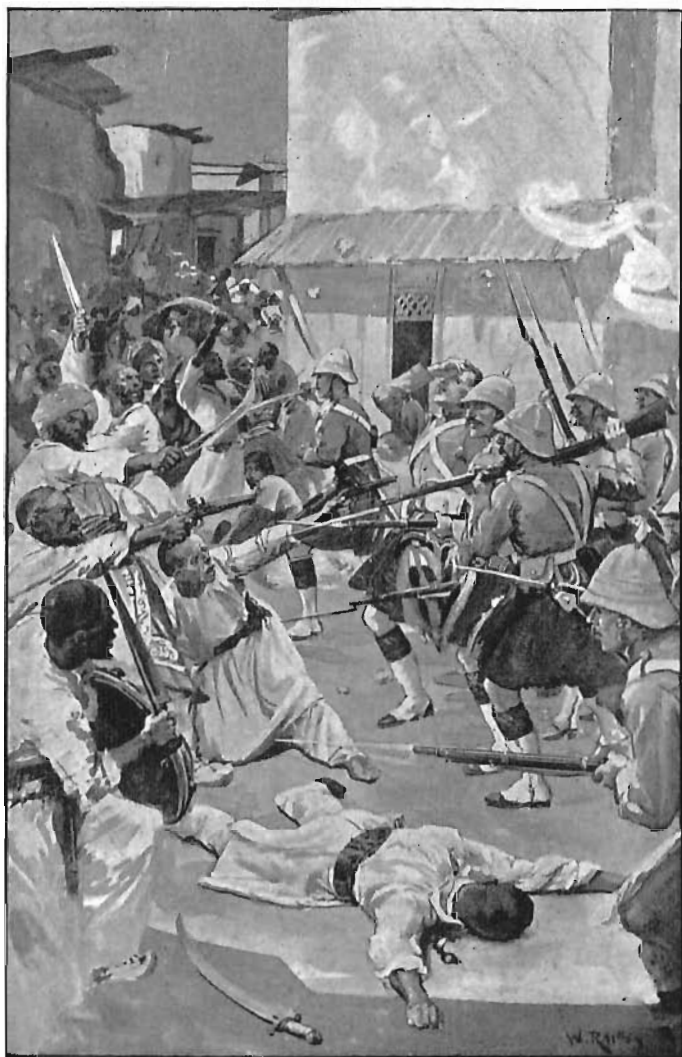
“Fire!” A ringing volley set the street echoing, and filled the place with smoke, behind which the Highlanders rapidly crammed in fresh cartridges. And very soon they had good cause to make use of them, for the bullets which had swished above the heads of the angry mob, and had pattered against the walls of the houses, had served only to alarm the most timid of the attackers. To the bolder spirits, the fanatics who filled the streets, the fact that the feringshees had fired over their heads was a sign of wavering—a sign that they feared the day was lost, and would break and run. The gray-beard who led them paused for one moment to point ironically at the Highlanders and shout encouragement to his comrades; and then he came on at a mad run, his eyes blazing and his tulwar flashing in his hand. A hundred pressed closely on his heels, stumbling against one another, and so closely wedged together that they were almost helpless. Still, they meant business, and the sergeant recognized their mood thoroughly.

“Steady, my lads!” he called out. “Aim low down, about the top of their legs, and fire when I give the word. After that you can use the bayonet. Ready? Fire!”

Again a volley awoke the echoes, a cloud of smoke once more hiding attackers and attacked from one another. When it cleared away a dozen of the Afghans lay on the

ground, struggling and shrieking, or still, struck dead by the British bullets. Those who remained unharmed, however, came on without a pause, and threw themselves with terrific fury upon the bayonets. Armed to the teeth for the most part, they flung themselves against the Highlanders with tulwars and daggers in their hands, and made fierce play with them. But the old type of bayonet, whatever its disadvantages, had one excellent point, for its length gave a decided help to those who wielded it. And these Highlanders had had more than a little practice. Encouraged by the words of their sergeant, they lunged and parried, keeping their faces to the foe. Then, at his command, they fell back very slowly, till a shout told that the second party were close at hand; indeed, Jack Escombe had brought them back at the double, and the lusty fellows came up with their comrades with a shout which told of their arrival.

“Open out a little!” shouted their sergeant, and, obedient to the order, the men who had faced the Afghan rush separated a pace or two, while their comrades slipped in between them. Then Jack Escombe took the command of the combined force. Meanwhile the steady front displayed by the British troops and the active work of their bayonets had for the moment discouraged the mob, and they drew off a few feet and stood facing the feringshees, their faces scowling and their eyes flashing their hatred. Some leaned against the walls on either side, nursing their wounds, while a few skulked behind, firing over the heads of their friends whenever they had an opportunity.



11 565

“THEN OUT OF THE SMOKE CAME THE LINE OF STALWART
KILTED MEN”

"Now is the time to send them about their business," shouted Jack. "We'll deliver a charge. Give them a volley, and then make a rush."

He faced about and waited for the men to load their rifles. Then he leaped aside and dropped the point of his sword. Instantly a seathing volley burst from the rifles, and a line of flame belched from the muzzles, followed by a dense cloud of smoke. Now was the moment for an effective charge, and the officer took it. His sword went up above his head, and with a shout he darted forward. After him, closely following on his heels, came the whole party, the Highlanders coming with a rush and a bellow which must have struck terror into the hearts of the mob. Already many of the latter had fallen, for, densely crowded as they were, each bullet could not fail but find a mark. Then out of the smoke came the line of stalwart, killed men—men who were so strangely dressed, and whose fighting qualities had already made a wholesome impression upon the roughs of the city of Cabul. Their eager faces, the hoarse shouts with which they filled the air, and, more than all, the row of bayonets which they carried, struck fear into the hearts of the enemy. Those in front turned almost to a man and burst their way through their comrades, who also gave way. A few hesitated; then, bracing their courage, rushed forward to win death on those terrible bayonets. But the majority had had their fill of fighting, and, spurred on by fear, disappeared from the street with wonderful rapidity. Those who sought death found it with equal rapidity at the hands of the

Highlanders, for the latter were now a little out of hand, and fought with their blood thoroughly up.

“Halt! Load, and prepare to retire.”

Jack gave the order calmly, emphasizing it with another movement of his sword. Then, of a sudden, he sat down in the street, while the weapon clattered from his hand.

“Just a bit done up, you know, young ’un,” he said faintly, as Alec rushed to his side. “One of those beggars hit me with his pistol as we were about to charge, and the loss of blood makes me feel dizzy. A piece of rag, a handkerchief, will put the matter right.”

But it required more than that before this gallant young officer was strong enough to walk, for Harry Macgregor soon found the cause of the trouble. The roughly-cast bullet, discharged from an enormous blunderbuss, one of the numerous antique weapons to be found among the mob in Cabul, had struck Jack Escombe in the leg, and had severed a vessel of some importance; indeed, the leg of his riding-boot was filled with blood, which still poured from the wound.

“This way, sir,” said the sergeant. “I’ve done this sort of thing many a time, and one of the doctors gave me a few lessons. That is the way. We fold the handkerchief and place it over the wound. Now, one of you lads lend me his puggaree.”

Half a dozen were forthcoming at once, and very soon Jack Escombe’s wound was safely bandaged, though he himself lay full length in the street, his face ghastly pale, and his eyes firmly closed. A few drops of water from one

of the Highlanders' water-bottles had helped to bring him round, though he was still too faint to rise.

"Don't bother about me," he murmured. "Get away at once, or those brutes will be coming again. Alec, march the men away."

But our hero was hardly in better condition. The excitement of the day, the urgent need for flight, had kept him going till then, and had caused him to forget his wound. But now that the Highlanders had appeared upon the scene, and the danger was less, the pain in his shoulder became agonizing, while for the first time he became aware of the fact that his arm was almost useless. Then, too, his coat sleeve was wet, while an ugly red stain soiled his tunic. As Jack spoke he was leaning against the wall, feeling dizzy and as if he would fall. But he was not the one to give in without a struggle. At the words of his superior he staggered forward to carry out the order. Then Harry and the sergeant clutched at his clothing, and a moment later he, too, was on the ground.

"There it is, sir," said the ready sergeant, stripping the coat from the shoulder with the deft use of his knife. "Now, another handkerchief and a puggaree will put him right. I think we had better leave after that. Our men can carry the officers and make light of the weight."

A few minutes, in fact, saw the party ready to retire, Harry Macgregor in command.

"Sling rifles, four of you men," he said. "Now, pick up the officers, please, and let the others surround them. Take the rear guard, sergeant. Quick march!"

They stepped off briskly, Jack and Alee being carried in the center, while the Highlanders fell in in front and in rear; and in that order they marched up the street till they came to the hand-cart which they had deserted for the sake of their officers. And here Jack and Alee were gently deposited on the ammunition in the cart, while those who had carried them went to the shafts. Again the order to march was given, and very soon the party were retiring to the Sherpur cantonment, an occasional shot and the noise of a frightened mob following them. Presently they were met by the Highland regiment, which came up at the double.

"What is this?" demanded the colonel of Harry, severely. "We heard firing and a great deal of shouting. Then a man, one of the camp followers, came running in with the news that there was a riot, and that he had seen some officers in trouble. We received orders to double into the town and help, if possible. Why, there is Escombe, and Dennisson, too! What has happened?"

Harry told him in as few words as possible, while the regiment halted and stared at their comrades who stood about the hand-cart.

"And you have left no one behind? No one was wounded and taken by the Afghans?" asked the colonel, anxiously. "If one of my lads is in their hands, I will go right in and hunt for him, even if there are a thousand of these rascals."

"We are here in full strength, sir," answered Harry. "Only two officers were hit, and those we have brought

with us. The sergeant came up with his party in the nick of time and handled them splendidly."

"What I should expect of Sergeant Macalister," said the colonel, favoring the non-commissioned officer with a glance of approval, which brought a flush beneath the latter's tan. "You've done well, my lads. An Afghan mob, when infuriated, is a troublesome thing to deal with. But we had better be returning. You punished the rascals well, I hope, Mr. Macgregor."

"Killed thirty or more, sir, I think. They chased Escombe, Dennisson, and myself into a house, and peppered us on the roof. But Dennisson found a way for us to get out, and we ran for it. Then they followed, and we were in danger of being caught when the sergeant came to the rescue. He fired over them at first, but later on we gave them bullets and the bayonets. They bolted when we charged."

"What I should always expect when Highlanders hold the bayonets. Well done, my lads! These rascals will know us before the campaign is ended. But we have delayed too long. We will retire."

He gave the order promptly, and soon the regiment was back in the cantonment, where Alec and Jack were at once taken to the hospital to have their wounds dressed. On the following morning they were visited by a staff officer, who duly extracted from them the details of their adventure.

"You were lucky to get away with your lives," he said as he rose to leave. "Our fellows who have garrisoned

Cabul before have left tales of similar risings. Some of our men were slain treacherously. They entered the bazaar and never returned. You will have to be more cautious in future, and, in fact, there is an order now that no one shall venture into the town unless accompanied by a party, so that those who want to see the place will have to collect a lot of other officers, or get a company of their own regiment to go with them. But I must not wait here too long, or the doctors will be quarreling with me. Good-by, and get well. And before I leave let me remember to tell you that the general thinks you were very venturesome to go into the bazaar, and wanting in caution; but that he is pleased to hear the manner in which you met the ruffians who attacked. He says that the new lesson will do them good, and that no doubt many of those who fell deserved their deaths, for they were nearly certainly part of the mob which massacred the British mission."

He nodded, and was gone, leaving Alee and his companion to their own reflections. Indeed, they had plenty of time for the latter, for, much to their disgust, it was a week before they were discharged from hospital and allowed to return to duty. Meanwhile, Sir Frederick Roberts had not been idle. He had held durbars, at which he had laid down the British policy, and asked for the names of all who had had a hand in the attack upon Major Sir Louis Cavagnari's mission. Then, failing to get the latter, he had set his men to work to hunt the miscreants out, for numbers were hidden in Cabul,

while others had been harbored in the surrounding country. Against the latter a small force was sent, while cavalry patrols visited every village. And in this manner, and by dint of carefully sifting the evidence to be obtained, quite a number of the culprits were unearthed, all of whom were promptly hanged.

It may be wondered what efforts were being made during this time to reinforce the small army which had marched to Cabul, and which had to all appearances cowed that portion of Afghanistan; for the reader will understand that the policy of pushing this small force into a bitterly hostile country was hazardous in the extreme; indeed, it would not have been ventured upon had it not been necessary to deliver a blow speedily, and bring swift punishment to the miscreants who had murdered a friendly mission. That punishment had already been dealt out in some measure, and steps were being daily taken to bring individuals to book. Meanwhile, though the nation seemed to be peacefully disposed, none but the most dull-witted could imagine that it would remain in that condition. The history of southern Afghanistan, which is peopled by a swaggering race addicted to arms, was an object-lesson to our Government and to the leader of the small invading force. Both knew what to expect, and both made preparations accordingly. The Government did all that was possible to push on the equipment of the second expeditionary force, that which was to advance by the Khyber-Jellalabad road. But the equipping of Roberts' force had for the time paralyzed the resources

of the Government. Stores were not to be had on the frontier in sufficient amount, and weeks would be required to bring them up, for there was no frontier railway in those days. Then, the greatest want of all could not be supplied. Camels, mules, and other transport were not to be had, even for big payments. The country was almost destitute of baggage animals, and, of course, the advance of the relieving force was delayed.

For a time, therefore, there was a lull in affairs in Afghanistan. Roberts and his insignificant force lay in the Sherpur cantonment dominating the surrounding Afghans, and for the time keeping the turbulent spirits in the city under control. But outside there was hostility, if not active opposition. The Afghans made no pretense of friendship there. They were waiting for a leader to give them the signal, when thousands were ready and eager to rise. From their hills they could look down upon Cabul and watch the British, and when the time for action came, they promised themselves that they could drive the enemy out as they had done on a former occasion.

And come it certainly would, for as the days passed it became increasingly evident to our general that influential men were at work among the villagers and the tribesmen. His attempts to gather a winter store of grain told him that very plainly, for skirmishes and treacherous attacks upon the troops became of daily occurrence; indeed, it may be said that as the days passed the circle closed more tightly round the British force. Their communications were entirely cut, close at hand they had a city teeming

with cutthroats who were only too willing and ready to try conclusions with the feringhees, while outside the Sherpur cantonment the only ground which the troops dominated was that covered by the range of their rifles. Beyond that all were truculent and hostile.

It was at this stage of affairs, when he and Jack Escombe were quite recovered from their wounds, that Alec once more had cause to recollect the affair of the bazaar, when he and his comrades so nearly lost their lives. For days he had wondered what was the meaning of the mystery. The strange, heavily-veiled form of the Afghan woman had been continuously before his eyes, while the inarticulate cry to which she had given vent haunted his ears.

“Could she have really cried for help? And even if she had not done so, why had she made such frantic efforts to reach the three Englishmen?” Those were the questions which Alec asked himself, and which he discussed with his two comrades.

“Bosh!” was all that Jack could be got to say in the way of elucidating the mystery. “It’s all stuff and nonsense. Help! You must have imagined the word. The lady was attracted by our appearance—naturally, I think—and turned to satisfy her curiosity. The fellow with her objected, and thereat there was a row. I own that they were rough with her; but then, are these rascals ever gentle?” He plucked at a budding mustache as he spoke, and looked at his riding-boots with the greatest self-satisfaction.

"And I am as sure—well, as sure as possible that she called for help," repeated Alec. "Ask Harry what he thinks."

"I thought the same. But she seemed to be gagged, or so muffled in her veil that the word was smothered. We must have been mistaken. The girl got into trouble for looking at unbelievers; and we nearly had our throats cut for the reason that we followed and showed sympathy. It's a lesson. I never interfere again."

"While I am determined to get to the bottom of the affair. I believe that the mystery has something to do with the murdered mission."

Both Jack and Harry turned abruptly to stare at Alec, as if they thought that he had gone out of his mind.

"Then, take a regiment with you," said the former, bantering. "Get the general to lend you one, but don't tell him for what reason. I believe he'd put you under arrest if he thought that you would be ass enough to follow up such an affair. Bosh, Alec! You'll never get out of such a scrape again, take my word for it."

"And I shall be careful not to get into such another," was the stubborn answer. "But I'm sure of this, that woman has something to do with the murdered mission. Call me an ass if you like, but I still stick to that theory."

There was silence between them, Alec falling into a brown study which saw him analyzing the whole mystery again. Could this woman be one of the Guides, after all? or was it his father? That caused him to start to

his feet, and trudge up and down in front of his tent, while Harry and Jack stared at him with elevated eyebrows. No; it certainly was not his father. The veiled figure was that of a woman—he would stake his life upon that. Then, who could she be, and how came it that she could speak English?

The question was too baffling, and the mystery too deep for anyone, and, think as he might, Alec could not arrive at a solution. Indeed, after a few days he began to forget it a little, though his determination to follow the affair up at some suitable time never wavered. Then, of a sudden, all his interest was reawakened, for one day, as he sat outside his tent, basking in the sun, a note was brought him by an orderly.

“From the main-guard, sir,” said the latter, saluting. “A fellow gave it in, and then bolted. He was one of the Afghan bazaar men.”

“And he left nothing more? No name? Nothing?”

“Nothing, sir. He was in a hurry to get away. Just put the note down in front of the sentry, and was off at once. Any answer, sir?”

Alec sent him away with a nod, and then looked at the note. It was a small piece of smooth parchment, which looked as though it had been torn from a book. Age had colored it yellow, while much thumbing had left many a dirty mark upon it. Folded into a square, it presented some characters on one side, which on closer inspection proved to have been scratched in native ink, and probably with a roughly-cut quill. And it was clear that the writer

was not an expert with the pen, or, rather, was not accustomed to writing English characters, for the "Lieutenant Dennisson" scrawled upon the note was only just decipherable. What was the use of staring at the outside and wondering who could possibly have sent the note, and what were the contents? Alec carefully opened it, and spread the parchment out to read.

"Written with the same pen and by the same person," he observed aloud. "And written, too, by someone only slightly acquainted with English. What does it say?"

He read the words through almost breathlessly, and then stared thoughtfully at the note, for this was the message:

"To the Lieutenant, greeting—I intreat your help, and can promise very much of news by return. The Afghans hold me because some are put to death, and they fear me as a witness. But they wish to sell their prisoner. Follow a man whom you shall see beneath the Beni Moulla minaret, which is in the street before the Balla Hissar. He will know himself to you by his cap. It is of red cloth, bound about with a blue sash. Follow, and fear not."

There was no signature. The note came to an abrupt end, without further explanation, leaving Alec as mystified as ever before.

"I felt sure that this woman had something to do with the murdered mission," he said. "But what? That is where I am troubled. And who is this prisoner? When I read the note again I think that she may mean herself.

She is obviously a prisoner. But why should I be called upon to ransom her, and what evidence could she possibly give against the Afghans?"

Alec pondered over the note for long, and remained none the wiser. In fact, nothing seemed to be clear save the invitation to follow a certain man who would be dressed in a cap of startling color, and even there the date and hour were omitted. Nor did the writer of the note say why it was that he, Alec Dennisson, had been chosen for this mission, nor what interest the affair could possibly have for him.

"I'll go," said Alec, after much deliberation. "At any other time I should feel a fool for doing so, and, indeed, I can see that the errand will expose me to no end of danger. But there is something of vast importance behind the message—something which, I am convinced, concerns me greatly. Yes, I shall go, and I shall say nothing to Jack and Harry."

He read the note again carefully, folded it up and tucked it into his pocket. Then he searched for his revolver, and cleaned it, for he felt sure that he would have need of its protection.

CHAPTER XI

In a Trap

TOM.”

“Yes, Mr. Dennisson, sir?”

“Can you be trusted with a secret?”

The worthy Tom Bird grinned, scratched his forehead, and went on industriously polishing the riding-boot which he held in his hand when Alec called him.

“I’m partic’lar good at that, sir. I never give no one away.”

“It isn’t a question of giving anyone away,” said Alec, “but can you keep a secret? Can you be relied upon to keep that long tongue of yours between your teeth?”

“Keep me mouth shut, sir? Yes, sir; many’s the little thing I’ve known and kept to myself. There was that little bit of fun back in the Kuram valley, sir, when Mr. Escombe played a prank on the senior captain of ours. Lor! If I’d said just a word——”

“Yes, I remember,” interrupted Alec. “But this is a different matter. I’m going into Cabul again. I’ve heard news, and it may be important.”

“Cabul again!” gasped the tall Lancer servant. “Where you and Mr. Escombe and the Highlander officer got as nigh wiped out as ever men could! Why——”

Tom stared at his master, speechless with astonishment, for the narrow escape which the three had experienced, had filled the cantonment. Indeed, none ventured further than the Balla Hissar unless well armed and accompanied by several comrades. Besides, the orders were precise on the subject.

Not that there seemed to be need of any extra precautions or unusual reason to expect treachery and violence, for the population of the city seemed unusually quiet. The trouble now was with the tribes living outside—tribes who refused to treat the British as their rulers, declined to yield tribute in grain, or to sell stores to the invaders, and who, when Sir Frederick sent native governors to them, with a fitting escort of British bayonets, turned upon their unwilling governors when the bayonets had gone and slew them without mercy. No; Cabul was to all intents and purposes quiet. Troops seldom passed through it, for it was deemed a wise policy to keep them out of the sight of the fanatical Afghans. But now and again they entered the lowest quarters in search of some miscreant hiding there, against whom there was evidence of having taken a part in the massacre of the mission. And the same were promptly hanged.

“Why not?” demanded Alec. “I shall go at dusk, when people will not so easily see me, and I shall carry arms. Look here. That should suffice.”

He opened the greatcoat which he was wearing, for the bleak winter winds blew through the Sherpur cantonment, and at times it was bitterly cold beneath canvas.

Attached to his belt were two revolver pouches, while a smaller pouch carried ammunition.

"And supposing a gang fell upon you?" demanded Tom, anxiously. "Supposing they slit yer throat before yer was expecting. I'd like to come, sir. I'm tall, strong, and can handle a six-shooter. If you don't think so, sir, come over to the outside wall, sir, and I'll show how I can hit a bottle. 'Sides, two's better than one."

"At times, Tom; but not on this occasion. But, listen. I believe I have a letter here from someone, a woman, perhaps, who escaped the massacre of the mission."

"Thought there wasn't no women in the Bally Hisser," exclaimed Tom, whose pronunciation of the Afghan words was not always very correct. "Didn't know as they had their wives with 'em, sir."

"Nor did I, Tom. But they may have done. There may have been a few, and one would seem to have been captured. If one person was spared, another may have been. My father was there. There is no trace of him, and though I have questioned a host of Afghans, both sirdars and of the lower class, and have made inquiries among the soldiers of the late Ameer, I have been able to gather no news of his death. Remember, he was a guest, and did not belong to the mission; also, he had been in Cabul before, and had a few friends among the natives. Why should this message not concern him?"

"Message, sir? What message?" demanded Tom.

"This note, brought me yesterday morning," said Alee, producing it from an inner pocket. "I would have shown

it to Mr. Escombe and Mr. Macgregor, but they don't believe that there is anything in the mystery. I do, and I am going to investigate."

"And you want me to come, too, sir. Ready and willin', sir."

The fine fellow threw the boot to the ground, and would have gone off then and there to prepare had not Alec stopped him.

"Not that, Tom," he said quietly. "I shall go alone; but I will read you the note, and give it to you. If I am not back in three hours from the time of setting out, you can go to Mr. Escombe and tell him what has happened. Now, listen."

He took the note and read it carefully, Tom Bird following with mouth wide open. Indeed, this mystery seemed to throw him into a condition bordering on consternation, and, in spite of the respect he had for his master, his misgivings caused him to gently remonstrate.

"Go into Cabul, among all them cutthroats, because a jade sends in a note!" he said in high tones of disgust. "It's a plant. They'll be there to meet yer, and will do some mischief."

"Why should they?" demanded Alec. "I've thought it out all ways, Tom, and as I shall not carry money or valuables, why should they hurt me? I have done no one an injury, therefore why should they particularly fix upon me? Surely there must be some reason?"

"Reason! Yes, sir, there's a reason, plain enough.

They jest want to get yer in and then they'll kill yer. Bless my life! Didn't I hear the sergeant-major a-sayin' only a night or two ago that these villains jest live to kill an Englishman. Then they can die happy. That's what they do, and I don't like this here concern."

For a moment the desperate resolve of reporting the affair at headquarters occurred to him, and he clenched his fist as he realized the enormity of such an act, and his master's anger. Then, as Alec talked to him, the gallant fellow began to see with his master's eyes, and to realize that, after all, there might be something in this mystery.

"I'll do it, sir, if you orders so," he said reluctantly, "though I don't half like it. Shall I take the note now, sir?"

"In half an hour. I am having something to eat now and shall canter over to the Balla Hissar. If you are there I will hand over the note and the pony."

There being nothing more that he could say to put a stop to what in his heart of hearts he considered a mad expedition, Tom betook himself to his boot-polishing again, scrubbing hard with the leather as he pondered over the expedition which Alec was about to make.

"Don't half like it," he muttered, as he wagged his head, "but orders is orders, and so I'd better make ready and be movin'."

With that he gave a final polish to the boots, set them upright alongside one another in the diminutive tent occupied by his master; and, tucking his cane beneath his

arm and his rifle over his shoulder, strolled across to the Balla Hissar, the enormous building in one portion of which the British mission had been quartered, and in which were the palace of the nobility and of the Ameer, the arsenal, and many other residences.

Alec had few preparations to make. He saw once more to his revolvers, discarded his helmet, and adopted a forage cap. Then he slipped his sword from the frog and laid it on the blankets which covered him at night.

"Might get in the way or make a noise at the wrong moment," he said to himself. "Two revolvers should be enough. Now for the pony, and I will be off."

He crept from his tent and walked across to the horse lines, which were a little way in rear of the tents. His pony was already saddled, the syce leading it toward him as he came forward. Alec took the reins, acknowledged his salaam, and leaped into the saddle. A touch of his heel sent the animal cantering, and very soon he was well on his way to the Balla Hissar. And there Tom Bird awaited him, a curious look, half shamefaced, half defiant, on his face.

"Looks like snow, sir," he said lamely. "Do yer think it'd be better to put it off. Try to-morrow, sir."

"Like snow! Nonsense, Tom. What's amiss?"

"Nothing, sir, only I don't half like this here little business. Too many of the cutthroat Afghan fellers about it. Couldn't I come, too, sir?"

"And chance the cutthroats, Tom. No; that will not do. I must go alone. Come, now, you've said enough,

and I know you're a good fellow. Here's the pony. Will you wait here? It will be dusk by the time I am in the town, and I may be back long before I said."

He threw the reins to his servant and then strode on without another word, leaving the Lancer, unhappy and ill at ease, wondering when next he would see his master. Alec went on without a pause, skirting the walls of the Balla Hissar and passing the very gate at which the mission had made their last stand. If only he could have conjured up the scene, he would have known how well his father had fought, how he had faced the enemy to the end, and had fallen close to the gun, the broken wheels of which were there at the side of the road, while the gun itself lay upon two blocks of masonry, where it had been placed by the sappers when making their inventory of the Balla Hissar.

Turning to his right, once he had passed the huge mass of building, Alec plunged into the streets of Cabul, passing through them practically unnoticed, for though the dusk had not quite fallen, the sun was gone, and a winter sky hung overhead. As Tom Bird had said, it looked like snow, and the heavy clouds, coupled with the narrowness of the streets, made things gloomy in the extreme. And there were very few people about on this evening. They seemed to have left the city, though Alec imagined that they must be within doors. Presently he came in sight of a larger building, and of a minaret towering above it. But it was not the one known as the Beni Moulla, that he was sure of, for he had obtained a plan of the

city that very morning, having borrowed it from the staff office, and had carefully studied it.

“Straight on for two hundred yards or so, as near as I could guess from the scale,” he said. “Then turn sharp to the right, take the first to the left, and there it is.”

He trudged on boldly, quickening his pace and looking behind him on occasion, for the gloom of these native streets, their deserted appearance, and the fact that no lights could be seen, made him feel uncomfortable. Not that anything had occurred to upset his tranquillity, only something which he could not entirely understand struck him as ominous. Afterwards he realized that it must have been the silence of the streets, and the fact that barely one native had crossed his path; and those who had done so had slunk away into some alley or doorway, scowling, and as if anxious to keep away from the feringhee and from awkward questions.

“Perhaps they are having some meeting elsewhere,” he thought, “or they are at prayer. What can those fellows want to slink away for? A week ago they would have marched past, scowling as they did just now, and looking as defiant as ever people could look. They are nasty customers, with their arms protruding from their belts and their tulwars clanking beside them. Ah, here’s the turning, and soon I shall be at the Beni Moulla minaret.”

He walked along more slowly, his eyes in all directions, while he listened closely. But all was silent. Not a step

could be heard, and only a creaking door some way up the street told him that anyone was near.

“‘He will know himself to you by his cap,’” repeated Alec, as he thought of the note. “It is of red cloth, bound about by a blue sash. Well, I will have a good look at the gentleman first of all.”

With this object in view he walked still slower, peering into each alley that he happened to pass, and into the windows and the doorways of the houses. By now the dusk was more pronounced, though the light had not entirely faded. Still, it was sufficiently dark to make it difficult in these narrow streets for a casual passer-by to say whether Alec were British or Afghan. Stumbling along, it was not very long before he came to the turning which led down to the Beni Moulla minaret, and at once his caution was redoubled. He did not venture into the street till he had cautiously peered round the corner, and had remained staring into it for some minutes.

“There might be some rascal hiding in a doorway, prepared to put his dagger into me as I passed,” he thought. “So I’ll keep a careful eye on the place and look out for some movement.”

However, in spite of his inspection, he could detect nothing. There was not even a light, though some little way on beyond, where the minaret towered in the center of a square, the fast-flitting gleams of daylight showed up more prominently, and objects were clear there in comparison with the spot in which he lurked.

“Was that a figure?”

Alec drew back suddenly and crouched in an opening, for of a sudden he thought that he had seen something move in the square.

“Pooh!” he said, with a shrug of his shoulders and an impatient toss of his head. “What am I here for? I am here to meet a man who is to wear a curious cap, and probably that will prove to be he. I’ll go forward.”

But, in spite of his words, he crept on with redoubled care, for still that uneasy feeling assailed him. Indeed, now that the moment and the place for the appointed meeting were at hand, he recognized what he had more than half admitted before—that this expedition was risky in the extreme. Madness, many would call it. And yet think of the stake—of what it might mean to him! Put any other young officer in his place, and would he not have accepted the task and endeavored to follow it out? It was not one which concerned the safety of a woman, but one clouded in mystery, a mystery which might mean a huge amount to Alec. Supposing this woman could speak of a prisoner in the toils of the Afghans—a prisoner taken from the Balla Hissar! Might that man not prove to be Major Dennisson? Preposterous as the thought seemed, Alec clung to it stubbornly. Supposing this woman were something to do with the slaughtered mission, and merely called upon Alec for help and freedom!

“Then I shall be proud to bring it to her,” he said. “It may turn out that she alone is concerned; but I believe that there is more.”

The thought seemed to stir him, for he emerged from the doorway in which he had crouched and stopped forward, his feet making no sound as he walked, and presently he was on the verge of the square, peering through the darkness. Yes, there was a man, pacing restlessly to and from before the minaret. Alec almost gave vent to a cry of delight; but he suppressed it, and crouched again, watching the stranger. At first he could not be certain; but when the man turned and came toward him, the light that remained was just sufficient to tell that he wore a curious turban, and that the colors corresponded with those mentioned in the note.

"Then he is the man," thought Alec, as he stared at the stranger. "Fairly tall, I should say, and strong. I cannot make out his features, but they look quite right, and not too malignant. He seems to be impatient, as if he had been here a long time and had given up all hope of my coming."

This, in fact, seemed to be the case, for the Afghan stranger trudged to and fro restlessly, staring up and down the street, and halting each time he came in front of the one in which Alec crouched to peer into its depths. Then he would give an impatient stamp with his foot and turn round again.

At length, after an unusually long halt, when Alec was on the point of declaring himself, the Afghan with the curious turban swung round with an exclamation, and began to walk from the square.

"He comes not," Alec heard him say. "The English-

man fears. Perhaps to-morrow will see him. To-morrow! No. If not this day, then never!"

"What could that mean? What would prevent his coming on the morrow?" Alec crouched there bewildered, and wondered what could be the meaning of the words. Then the solution came to him. "He thinks that if I have not obeyed the summons at once, I shall never come," he said. "That seems likely, too, for one would either follow such a clew swiftly or not at all. Well, I will watch the fellow and follow him."

He crept after the Afghan and very soon was in the square. A few paces took him beyond the minaret and into the street on the farther side. Here it was hardly possible to follow the retreating figure of the stranger, but Alec crept still closer, and by dint of peering into the gloom and listening every now and again, gained an accurate idea of his whereabouts. The Afghan, in fact, walked on without a pause and without turning round, till he came to a second square. And here he directed his steps to a dwelling on the farther side, a dwelling distinctive from the others because of the fact that a light glimmered from one of the upstairs windows. Now was the time for action, and Alec at once hastened forward into the square.

"Then you came, after all," said the man, turning round with a start and clutching at his belt. "You gave me a fright, Englishman sahib, and spoiled my greeting. Accept salaams. Now, follow within, and you shall hear news of importance."

He spoke in the native tongue and seemed to be sure that Alec would understand. Then he turned again, and without a word or a look pushed the door of the dwelling open and entered, his figure being swallowed by the gloom within.

"I don't half like it," said Alec, unconsciously repeating Tom Bird's words of warning to himself. "But here goes."

He walked boldly to the doorway and pushed the door open, for it had swung to. Then he entered the passage within, still holding the door.

"One moment," he thought, as he stood there suspicious. "This door will close and the darkness will be dense. I'll push a stone in the way."

His foot happened to strike at that moment against the side of a rickety stool which lay in the passage, and at once he placed it in position to keep the door open. Then he groped his way forward, finding that the passage turned to the left abruptly, for all Afghan houses are built on a plan to permit of the door being left wide open during the day, and yet so that the privacy of the family within may not be destroyed. A second later it swept to the right again, and Alec thought, as he rounded the bend, that he caught sight of some stairs. But he could not be certain, and so as to prevent a collision with the walls, stretched his hands in front of him. Suddenly his fingers came in contact with a garment, and a thrill of fear ran through his frame.

He almost gave vent to a shout, and would have done

so, perhaps, had not someone suddenly thrown himself against him. Then there was the sound of some swift movement, and an arm, brought down with furious force, struck him on the left shoulder, sending him staggering back. The hand at the end of that arm clutched a dagger, the blade of which was meant for Alec's heart.

"Die, feringhee," he heard his assailant hiss beneath his breath. "Die swiftly."

Alec closed with the man instantly, and, having no weapon in his hand, clutched at his neck and shook the Afghan, shook him till the man swayed from side to side, till his dagger clattered from his fingers and his hands fell nerveless beside him. Then he flung him against the wall furiously, staggering against it himself, for the suddenness of the attack had taken his breath away.

"Better leave at once," his common sense told him. "I'm here, and mean to get to the bottom of the matter," his stubborn spirit prompted him to say. "There was a light upstairs, and I want to see who sits beside it. Perhaps I shall surprise them, for this fellow evidently meant to kill me before I could mount to the other floor. I'll have a look at him first, for he might prove troublesome."

But he had no reason to fear, for the Afghan lay still and silent. Not even a sound came from his lips, though Alec listened carefully, for the grip which had encircled the Afghan's throat had proved even more fatal than a dagger thrust, and he had died within a minute.

"Then I can go on," thought our hero. "I know that

trouble is awaiting a Britisher here, and so I will go prepared."

He sought for a revolver and made ready to use it. Then he struck a match and looked about him, his eye falling first of all upon the figure of the dead Afghan at his feet, the man who had treacherously attempted to assassinate him, and then at the stairs, a rickety affair, which led to a door above. Alec stared at it thoughtfully till the match burned low and scorched his fingers. Then he struck another with equal want of satisfaction, for the door above told no tale and gave no information. Not a sound issued from the room beyond, and not even the feeblest ray of light; not a glimmer issued from beneath the door or through any crevices that there might be. Then, a little reflection helped him.

"Of course, there would not be a light there," he thought, "for the window which looks down into the street is in a room above my head. Then the door leads to some passage, and I could not expect to see a light nor to hear sounds. Hark! Did someone move above?"

His heart beat rapidly, and with such violence that he felt breathless and stifled. Yes, his ears had not deceived him, for he heard the shuffle of a sandal, the sound of someone moving across a carpetless floor. And the owner of those sandals was an active man, whether old or young he could not tell; but active, for the shuffle passed quickly, as if with a spring. It was followed by the gurgle of a hubble-bubble. Alec recognized the sound at once, for

he had lived in India for long, and had spent his time in bazaar and native quarters. Suddenly the gurgle of the pipe was smothered by the shuffling sound again, and he heard the sandals moving overhead, and then toward the door.

"Going along the passage," thought Alec. "Perhaps he will come to the door and listen. Supposing he looks! He'll see the man I've just killed."

The very thought was sufficient to set him to work, and at once he fell upon the body, and, clutching it by the shoulders, dragged it round the corner till out of sight of the door. Then he lay down on the ground, removed his cap, and peered round at the door. It opened, slowly at first, and then more rapidly, disclosing an ever-widening strip of light. Then the strip was filled by a human form, bearing a native lamp which smoked and dripped fat on the floor, and which, thanks to its crude manufacture, lit up only the immediate surroundings, while the passage below was thrown into half-lit shadow, which was little better than the darkness which had filled it before.

"There is no one below. You were mistaken," called out the man who bore the light, as if he were addressing someone in the room from which he had just come.

"You are sure? No one? Nothing?" came in the rasping, high-pitched tones of a man of advanced years.

"As sure as I am that the British fool will not come. The trick seemed cunning. We knew him to be bold, and set a trap likely to catch him. But these feringhee dogs

smell danger. They are quick to meet it, and quicker still to avoid it."

"But I heard a sound, a scuffle, and a fall," said the high-pitched voice. "I swear it by the Prophet."

"As you have sworn this hour past on three separate occasions. No; there is no one. Your old ears deceive you, while your anxiety and impatience cause you to imagine things. If the man had come with the officer he would have given the signal, three blows upon the stairs. If by himself, then two only. There have been no knocks, and there is no one below, least of all our comrade with the colored turban, and the feringhee dog whom we sought to catch."

Did Alec recognize the voice? He started, and slowly edged backwards, for the man above held the lamp before him and peered down the stairs. And if he could see nothing, certainly the Englishman crouching below was unable to perceive much more, for the smoke from the crazy lamp cloaked the features of the Afghan, while fear of discovery caused him to retreat so far round the bend that he might have been altogether out of sight of the door. But the voice——

"They all speak much alike," he said to himself, "but this fellow——"

Alec could not be sure where he had heard the man before, if he had ever done so. But of this he was sure, this was the house where he was expected, the dwelling where the mystery might be cleared up, or where the clue might be found. Moreover, if he could possibly have had

a lingering doubt after the murderous attempt made upon him the words of the rascal who had just appeared convinced him that foul play was premeditated. It had been arranged that he was to be brought here and killed in the passage. Then the man with the cap was to ascend and give two taps on the stairs. That would show success in his enterprise, or that he came alone, having failed to meet the Englishman. In any case, those above could be prepared to carry out the deed if three taps were given.

“And now it is so late that they hardly expect me, dead or alive,” he thought. “Then I must surprise them. I will give them an hour to settle down, and then I shall go up to them and see what they have to say. And, perhaps, it would be as well to deceive them at first.”

He lay perfectly still, listening to the movements of the man above, and not daring to look at him. And very shortly the door closed, the passage was again plunged in dense darkness, while the shuffle, shuffle of sandals over a carpetless floor were heard again—that and the dreary gurgle of the hubble-bubble, which had ceased only while the two men conversed. Alce lay and pondered till he almost fell asleep. Yes, in spite of the imminence of his danger, though he lay in a dark and foul passage, within a foot of a man who had died by his hand, a feeling of drowsiness came over him, and had he not struggled against it he would have slept. Perhaps the stuffiness of the passage helped toward the feeling, for when he crawled to the door and looked out into the street, the cold wind blowing upon his face brightened his wits and awakened

him thoroughly. More than that, the open street, the starry sky, and the absence of foot passengers were a new temptation to be gone, to shake the dust of this treacherous city from his shoes, and flee to the Sherpur cantonment, to his friends, to the headquarters' tent, where the lamps would be burning now, and good fare displayed on the table. The inclination to shirk the danger was great, and for a while he hesitated. Then his mind conjured up the gate of the Balla Hissar, those fractured wheels and the dismounted gun, and his courage and determination returned.

"Now or never!" he murmured. "My duty is clear. This is no wild, boyish escapade, but an honest endeavor to clear up a mystery which my heart and my suspicions tell me concerns me closely. My duty is to fathom it to the bottom, and I will."

He turned abruptly, as if afraid that continued sight of the starry sky would destroy his resolution. Then he groped his way into the passage, and sat down beside the body of the man who had attempted to kill him.

"His cap and cloak will be useful for a time," said Alec. "Exchange is no robbery, and perhaps may be useful."

He tore off his coat and cap, and then struck a match. With the aid of the light thus given he freed the cloak which the Afghan wore and rapidly slipped it on. The belt followed, and into it the daggers and pistols were thrust, while his own revolvers found a place beneath the cloak. Then, using all his strength, he dragged his great-

coat on to the limp body, laid the Afghan at the foot of the stairs, and let the cap rest half on the floor and half on the man's head. Another match served to light the passage while the limbs were arranged, when, satisfied that all was ready, Alec stamped heavily and struck the wall with his fists. Then, boldly advancing, he tapped twice upon the stairs. Instantly the gurgle of the hubble-bubble ceased, while the shuffle of sandals was heard. There was a cry, as if of joy, while within a minute the door above was flung open.

“Honor to our brave comrade,” said the man who had appeared before. “Ascend, and tell us the news.”

CHAPTER XII

The Storm

ADAPPER young Lancer officer trotted slowly along the Luttabund road on the afternoon on which Alec Dennisson had taken his fate in his hands and had entered the streets of Cabul. Tall and fair, with open, merry features, and a boyish look, to which even the sprouting mustache could not give an appearance of age, this British officer was, for all that, a little power to contend with. He had seen fighting, and the three dozen men trotting behind him, heavily cloaked—for the snowflakes whirled about them—could rely upon his judgment. Jack Escombe, as he was familiarly known to them, was an officer after their own heart, just as was his friend, Alec Dennisson, interpreter and aide-de-camp, and the troopers reckoned on seeing service when out under his command. They were a patrol sent along the lines of communication to see how the fortified posts on the road were faring.

“The next is the last, I think, sergeant,” said Jack, calling the non-commissioned officer to him. “That will be ten miles from Cabul, and we might manage to get into cantonment to-night.”

“Might, sir, but it doesn't look promising. Going to

snow hard, and that will make traveling difficult. Perhaps we shall have to wait at the post till the morning."

"I hope not," responded Jack. "Life here at the posts must be deadly dull, and I have no wish to stay even for a night; but, of course, I shall if there is need. Sergeant!"

"Sir."

"Do you see anything suspicious on the hills away on our left? We were warned by the officer in command of the last post that the enemy had been seen, and Sir Frederick has news of a rising."

"There's banners over there, sir," said the sergeant, emphatically, drawing up beside Jack and staring at the hills. "The snow makes it a little difficult to see things, but—there; five banners, I am sure."

His hand went out at once, and he pointed to the crest of the broken ground to which Jack had drawn his attention. And as they looked, the banners increased in number, and presently a large number of Afghans could be seen streaming over the crest and down toward the road.

"Going to attack us," said Jack. "We shall have to make for the post, and—sergeant!"

"Yes, sir."

"I think we had better send a warning through to the general, and to the post we have recently quitted. Choose two of our best men, who are very well mounted."

"Rolls and Jennings, sir," was the prompt reply; for this non-commissioned officer knew his men and horses

as well as he knew the fingers on his hands. "Good men, sir, and well horsed."

"Then call them here."

It took only a matter of a minute to give the troopers their orders, and at once they were off, one turning his face toward Cabul, and the second retiring at a gentle trot back to the post which had recently been visited.

"He should get through without difficulty," said Jack, as he watched the first. "The horse is fresh, for we have ridden slowly; and, besides, the enemy seem to be on foot. Now we will get to the fort. Those beggars may draw off then."

"They look determined to see something of us, sir," remarked the sergeant; "and they are in greater numbers than we have seen for many a day. Seems to be a rising."

This, in fact, was what it was. The period of calm which had followed after the capture of Cabul was about to be broken, for at length the Afghan tribes, who are forever quarreling among themselves, had agreed to lay aside their differences and fight the invaders. Their patience had at length been exhausted, and a variety of reasons had caused them to awake from their lethargy and rush to arms. Already the reader will have learned how the sphere of influence of the British force included Cabul and the Sherpur cantonment, and as much ground outside as could be included in the fire zone of the several detachments. Elsewhere there was open antagonism—not so much in the form of armed attack or resistance as in scowling assent to reform and a general policy of with-

drawal from the neighborhood where our troops happened to be. The nation of Afghans had seen a British punitive force before, and remembered that when a requisite number of their comrades had been hanged, and punishment meted out to those actively engaged in the work of slaughter, the troops had marched back into India, leaving the bazaar in ruins. They set their mark on the city, and went. Well, a bazaar could be built again, and men could be spared for the hanging if only there were promise of an early withdrawal—if only the feringhees would depart. But this little general was too exacting for them. He had already declared an amnesty to all found without arms, excluding severely those who had aided in the slaughter of Sir Louis Cavagnari's mission. But now he proclaimed himself ruler of Afghanistan, virtually the Ameer, who would hold the government for his sovereign and maintain it by means of his bayonets. Then he had attempted to thrust native governors upon the provinces; and, last of all, had settled himself in the Sherpur cantonment, which he was steadily fortifying as if for a prolonged stay, while from that position his officers governed the turbulent city, and quietly dismantled the Balla Ilissar, the mass of buildings which had seen so much British misfortune.

Mushk-i-Alum, the chief moulla of Guzni, an aged man, filled with energy, hatred, and determination, made much of these facts, and for weeks had been busily at work among the tribes. He settled their private differences, persuaded them to lay them aside for the common

cause, and preached a jihad, a holy war, from east to west, and from north to south. Now the fruits of his labor were about to become apparent. Sir Frederick, by means of his spies, had knowledge of the storm about to burst, and made good use of the time given him. But he could not do the impossible. Delay is inevitable where the British Government is concerned, and more so if it be concerned with the War Office departments. The relieving force under General Bright had only just completed its preparations and marched for Cabul, and not until November 6 had a junction been formed between the invading force and that destined to keep its lines open. That meeting took place at Kutti Sung, between General Macpherson's brigade and the troops under General Bright. They fell back upon their respective stations, Macpherson on Cabul, leaving posts along the road at intervals, while General Bright retired to Gundamuk, for lack of transport and supplies still hampered his movements. Between the two forces lay a tract of the roughest country, swarming with villagers to whom the word had been given, and held here and there by these small collections of bayonets, which seemed almost useless, and certainly practically helpless in case of attack in force.

Mahomed Jan, an Afghan leader of tried merit, accustomed to the handling of troops, was in chief command of the forces against the British, while the wiles of the aged moulla brought to his standard not alone villagers and fanatical tribesmen, but the population of the city of Cabul, the horde of rascals living beneath the shadow

of the Balla Hissar. His plan of campaign was to send his southern contingents to capture the Cabul ridge extending from Charasiah northward to the cleft through which the Cabul River flows. Those from the north were to occupy the Asmai heights, while the levies from other parts were, under his own leadership, to come in from the westward across the Chardeh valley, capture Cabul, and, with the aid of the population of the city, to raid every quarter. These steps accomplished, the investment of the Sherpur cantonment was to follow, and ultimately the defeat and utter slaughter of the invaders. Surely a comprehensive programme, and one which might well tax the efforts of our little general and of the 6000 odd troops at his command.

Naturally the object of the invaders was to prevent the concentration and union of these three forces, and we shall see how the work was carried out. From the first the tribesmen under the immediate command of Mahomed Jan were the most to be feared, and an effort was made to crush his troops between two forces. For this purpose General Roberts dispatched two columns, one under General Macpherson, with guns and cavalry under Massey, with orders to march to Aushar, and from thence along the Guzni road to Urgunde, where Mahomed Jan and his men lay. He was to drive them down in a southerly direction. General Baker was to march on the following day southward into the Logur valley, and, continuing his march, was to turn west and south, and close upon the flying masses of Mahomed Jan's forces. Undoubtedly the

plan was worthy of a general of such brilliant attainments, but, unfortunately, circumstances occurred to upset the arrangements. Macpherson reached his rendezvous and halted for a day. Then he discovered, by means of his cavalry patrols, that a huge force of the enemy lay to his north and west, which it became necessary to disperse. Therefore his march into the Chardah valley, toward Urgundeh, had to be abandoned temporarily, and he marched against this newly-discovered force, his troops quickly routing them and causing considerable loss. On the following day he turned west and south again, and headed for Urgundeh, with the object of carrying out the original plan.

Unfortunately, the country crossed by Macpherson had not been suitable for cavalry and guns, and therefore General Massey had been left at Aushar while the major portion of the force dispersed the enemy to the north. He had orders to march at a certain hour on the following morning, and to time his progress so as to come into communication with Macpherson on the Guzni road. The smallest circumstance threw out his calculations, for he took a cross-country route, and thereby got into position too early, to suddenly find himself confronted by the whole mass of Mahomed Jan's force, a force which had shown its determination by moving from Urgundeh and electing to place itself between the two columns sent out to crush it. And it had advanced into dangerous proximity with Cabul. Could Massey have held it where it was, there would have been time for Macpherson and Baker to come

up and fall upon the enemy from north and south. But the force of cavalry and guns was too weak. They fell back slowly, and then as rapidly as possible. But the Afghans would not be stopped. They pressed forward so rapidly that guns fell into their hands. Then they swept on toward Deh Mazung, a village in the opening of the gorge through which the Cabul River flows. Nothing could stop them, though the Lancers charged home more than once. At length the little force reached the village, to receive reinforcements there of one wing of the 72nd.

It was touch and go, for had the Afghans won the pass they would have swarmed through and thrown themselves upon the Sherpur cantonment, now almost depleted of soldiers; but the carbines of the cavalry and the rifles of the Highlanders kept them back, a fierce musketry duel being carried on. At length the Afghans swung to the right and occupied the hills there. They had contrived, by dint of much daring and by able leadership, to reach a point dangerously near the cantonment, while close at hand were the other forces, prepared to join hands with them and fall upon Sherpur. Our troops fell back upon the latter place for the night, a small force holding the gorge.

On the morrow more work was to face the British soldiers, for when they awoke and looked from their defenses, the heights about Cabul were in possession of the enemy, Mahomed Jan's men swarming on the spur to the south of the Cabul River, while to the north, on the continuation of the ridge, numerous banners flaunted in the breeze,

thousands of white-robed figures moving among them. For the moment we will leave them in position, looking down upon the feringhee invaders, while we take the road to Luttabund, where Jack Escombe and his troopers were riding.

They trotted at a good pace along the road toward the post, watching their messenger as he galloped to Cabul, and in due course saw him pass the villagers, who were making down from the hills.

"Then we can look to ourselves," said Jack, "and we will canter. Come along."

He set spurs to his horse and eased the rein, and at once the troop galloped along. Ten minutes later they were in touch with their friends, and before the hostile Afghans had reached the road were safely behind the defenses. The latter were composed of a mud wall, which had once been a village fort, but had long ago been deserted, and of a number of sangers * of rocks and bowlders, which lined the ground in front of the wall. The fort itself had been built halfway up a hill, the approach being over rough ground, entirely devoid of vegetation and littered with fallen bowlders. Here and there was a nullah, † now filled with drifting snow, while behind the face of the hill was steeply scarped, and presented no foothold. A space of some three hundred yards intervened, so that an enemy perched above could not annihilate the holders of the fort by tumbling bowlders upon their heads, a practice of which the Afghans are very fond. The garrison consisted of twenty native infantry under a young subaltern.

* A breastwork.

† The dry bed of a small stream.

"You'll take command, of course," said Jack, as he entered and saw the horses led to some old buildings which still stood within the fort. "I have come here merely for safety, and shall lend you whatever help you may want. I can give you the information that some four or five hundred of the enemy are coming toward you. Have you a gun?"

"A Maxim, which is as good or better," was the reply. "And you really mean that I am to remain in command? Remember that you are the senior."

"While you have been placed here, and are in charge of the station. For the time I act under your orders."

It was just like Jack Escombe to give the younger officer a chance, and good-naturedly he discussed the matter with his comrade, the two rapidly deciding on their course of action.

"Then I place one of the subahdars * with six men in rear," said the young officer, whose name was Giles, "and the remainder hold the front face. Of those, one-half will creep into the sangars until they are forced to retire. Where will you go, Escombe?"

"In the sangars," was the quick answer. "Then, if we are driven in, I can help in the defense of the fort, and be ready at any time to cut out through the gate with my men and lead a charge. Ah! There goes the first shot. Bullets will be humming shortly."

By now the enemy had gathered at the foot of the slope, their banners fluttering above them in the snow-laden air. Some five hundred they numbered, and appeared to be all

* Chief native officers of Sepoy troops.

filled with courage and determination. Without a pause they hurried up the slope, and as Jack had spoken they began to open fire with their matchlocks. A few possessed breech-loaders of the smooth-bore variety, and these soon showed the defenders that they could shoot well and truly. It was time, in fact, that Jack and his men went to the sangars, and at once he led the way, fifteen of the native infantry filing out with him. Gulleys had been cut in the soil, or made by means of rolling bowlders into position, and by creeping along these he and his men were soon in position. Then the crackle of their fire was heard, and puffs of smoke issued from the face of the sangars. Meanwhile, the lieutenant had placed his Maxim in position, one of the Lancers manning it, while two stood by ready with fresh rolls of ammunition.

Crash! A bullet of unusual size hit the face of the sangar behind which Jack crouched, and, finding its way through a crevice between the bowlders, only missed the young Lancer officer by an inch.

"A near shave," he said, "and the bullet must have been fired by that fellow in advance. He ran ahead and took cover. I'll see what I can do."

He had noticed one of the tribesmen pushing in advance, and had taken stock of his weapon, a huge unwieldy thing which made a big noise, and which kicked in a manner which one could almost see at that distance. Jack leveled his rifle on the bowlder and waited. But he had a wily tribesman to deal with; for though he waited patiently, watching the right of the bowlder, no head ap-

peared. A second later a burst of smoke issued from the opposite side, and a cloud of stone splinters and dust was thrown in his eyes. This time the Afghan had sent his bullet a little low. It had struck the base of the sangar.

"A clever beggar, who wants watching," thought Jack. "I suppose he will chose the right side this time. Ah! I thought I saw him move. He's creeping along."

He crouched behind the wall of rocks and watched eagerly through a crevice. But the glimpse he had caught of the tribesman was not repeated. He seemed to have gone to the left, and his new position remained uncertain till of a sudden the big weapon bellowed again, and a sepoy in the next sangar fell forward against the rocks, shot in the head. The next instant Jack's rifle went to his shoulder and slowly covered an arm which protruded from the cover. The turbaned head followed, and then the shoulders. Jack pulled the trigger, and the man drew back swiftly, the bullet having missed him by a hair's breadth, for the sight of the rifle had struck against a boulder when Jack was getting into position, and though only slightly bent out of shape had made a true aim impossible. However, there was still time, and on the next occasion when the Afghan made his appearance the deflection was allowed for. There was a shout, following swiftly upon the crack of the rifle, and the tribesman rose to his full height, his weapon held at arm's length; he waved the other arm at the enemy, made an effort to run forward, and then fell heavily against a boulder, the clatter of his weapon being heard distinctly.

"Now for the others," thought Jack. "They are getting very near, and are closing in. We shall have a surprise for them soon, for the Maxim will come into action. Ah, that was a nasty one!"

Again a bullet had penetrated between the bowlders, and had struck the earth behind with a bang which startled him. But it was not surprising, for by now two hundred of the tribesmen were within easy range, and these fired rapidly at the fort and at the sangars, while their comrades slowly stole up toward them. For an hour the duel continued, the native infantry steadily picking off the enemy. But, in spite of their persistence, the Afghans drew nearer, showing a marvelous facility for this class of warfare. Already they had learned the importance of taking cover, and they advanced on this occasion singly, creeping from cover to cover, or crossing the more exposed parts with a rush, which frequently carried them to safety. Then a number made use of a nullah, and by its means crept to the left till level with the face of the fort, from which position they were able to enfilade the sangars.

"Time to retire," said Jack, whistling to his men. "Now, sudahdar, tell off three of the best shots to occupy the attention of those fellows while the others run into the fort; and be quick. They may attempt a rush."

They retired slowly and steadily, the discipline of the natives being excellent, and soon all but two were in the fort, the latter having fallen to the bullets of the Afghans. Their withdrawal was the scene for a fierce attack by the Afghans. Headed by a moulla dressed in spotless white,

they came bounding over the rocks and rough ground, their weapons waved above their heads and loud shouts proceeding from their lips.

"Ya-Allah! Ya-Allah!" they shouted. "Slay! Slay!"

"Cover them with the Maxim, and wait," said the commander of the fort, running to the weapon. "Hold till I give the word, then give it them as hot as you can. Escombe, what about the horses?"

"Ready, if your men can hold the fort," said Jack, promptly. "They are here saddled and bridled, and if there is a chance I will make use of them. Give me the word and I'll go. But I shall have to make for the road, or close to it, for the ground outside is too broken."

Together they stood beside the Maxim, now manned by one of the native infantry, who had replaced the Lancer; and as they stood watching the oncoming enemy, Lancers and natives lined the wall of the fort and poured in a steady fire, which seemed to have no effect. Men were seen to fall, but the bulk came on without a pause.

"Ready?" asked the lieutenant.

The native nodded and turned the whites of his eyes toward the officer for the space of a second.

"Fire!"

The rattle of the gun drowned every other noise instantly, while smoke enveloped the weapon and those who manned it; but outside all was clear, and the eyes of the gunner never left the figures struggling there. At first, the muzzle had been turned at the very center of the struggling mass till that had sunk out of sight; then it

had stopped for a brief instant, only to swing round and rain bullets to the right, where a dangerous rush was developing.

"That has stopped them in that quarter," cried the lieutenant. "Well done! Ready with that ammunition, and hold on for an instant."

The gunner heard the words, which were shouted close to his ear, and showed that he understood, for his eyes came round again.

"They are gathering in front again," said the lieutenant, in Hindustani. "Prepare, and keep a careful watch on those men who crept up the nullah. They would be here very quickly."

"They are coming now," said Jack. "There is one fellow calling to them, and—— Look out, you men! Pour in your volleys!"

He left the lieutenant for the moment to join his men, while the former stood coolly beside the Maxim. Like a flash the latter swung round. Then the gunner's eye went down to the sights and his grip tightened. Once again the smoke belched from the muzzle, while the rush, which had carried the five tribesmen to within sixty yards, ended suddenly. Some twenty prostrate figures marked the track which it had followed.

"Stop!" said the lieutenant. "They are retiring. Escombe, I don't know, but I fancy that it would be rash to attempt a charge. Quite half the enemy have remained below, out of our range, and their rifles would pour volleys into you."

There was little doubt that the decision was wise, and Jack bowed to it. Then he and the lieutenant took their posts on the walls and discussed matters while they watched the enemy.

"They look as though they had had enough, but I wouldn't trust them," said Jack. "They are wily beggars, and if they don't come now, will attack during the night."

"We will rest the men so as to be prepared for that. They were just about to take their evening meal. I'll send them to it while your fellows man the walls. Afterwards they can have a meal and a rest, and to-night we will mount treble guards, and sleep under arms."

"Can't be too careful," agreed Jack. "I'll give my men their orders."

An hour later darkness had fallen, hiding the combatants from one another. But the flash of weapons still studded the side of the hill, while loud shouts, the drumming of a tom-tom, and defiant cries filled the air. Snowflakes fell silently, now in thick clouds and then almost disappearing. The sky was invisible, while the darkness was intense.

"The very night for a surprise attack," said the lieutenant. "How can we prepare for it?"

It was a question not to be rapidly decided on, and it was long before the two young officers came to any conclusion. Light was what they wanted. If they could have that they might guard against surprise and concentrate their men. Without it they might as well evacuate the fort and retire to the steep part of the hill. In the end

they decided upon fires, and presently a dozen were blazing at points round the fort, and so close to the walls that the flames could be replenished from the latter. Men were set to work with axes, and these made an attack upon the rotting woodwork which had once formed doors and windows. Others dragged the logs away and piled them close to the wall, where they could be easily reached and tossed on the fires. Then one-half of the garrison lay down to sleep, while the remainder watched eagerly. Four hours passed before the crack of a rifle disturbed the silence.

"I saw something," said the Lancer who had fired, "and I heard a sound as if someone had hammered a peg. It was over there, between the fires."

An instant later another rifle went off, and on hastening to the man, the lieutenant received precisely the same report.

"I am sure it was one of the Afghans," said the sentry, emphatically, "and I believe I hit him. There was a cry, and the sound of hammering ceased."

"Then they have some design against us. What do you think, Escombe?"

"It's hard to say, but if the sentry thinks he hit the man, someone had better investigate. Give the men a warning to hold their fire while I creep out. Now, sentry, where exactly was the spot?"

"Just on the fringe of the light, sir. Sometimes it is quite dark there, and sometimes the flames start up and you can see. That's when I fired. There, close to that boulder."

He pointed eagerly, and Jack made a mental note of the position.

"Then you don't object?" he asked. "Right! I'll slip out at the darkest spot and be back as soon as I can. If you hear hammering, don't fire. Warn all the men along the front."

He was gone before the lieutenant could answer, and very soon had slipped from the end of the fort. Three minutes later they saw him slinking along the fringe of light, creeping close to the ground so that the enemy might not see him.

"Hammerin' again, sir," reported the sentry, "and farther on this time. Shall I fire?"

"Certainly not. It may be our officer. Yes. I saw him for a second. What can he be doing?"

They watched anxiously for half an hour, and then, of a sudden, Jack appeared among them.

"It was as I suspected," he said quietly. "The Afghans are trying an old trick. They sent a couple of fellows forward, each armed with a peg, to which a line was tied. The men drove the peg in and then crept away with the line. One I fancy was badly hit, but though I followed the line I did not come up to him. I then went to his peg and moved it over to within twenty yards of the other, where I drove it into the ground."

"And—and you think?" demanded the lieutenant.

"That we are in for an assault. That the enemy will creep along their lines, and wait till they are massed near enough to the fort. Then they will come along like tigers,

only, instead of making the attack in two separate places, they will come together."

"But will they not discover the alteration?"

"Probably, but not certainly. The fellow who placed the peg I moved may be dead by now. I think they will come on, in any case."

"And we——"

"You will have the shooter ready, while I and my men shy timber on the fire, and dress them with our rifles."

There was little time to be lost, and at once they made their preparations. Each man was warned of the expected attack, and guards were left in rear and at either end of the fort. The main portion of the force was concentrated at the spot selected for attack, and weapons were carefully loaded. Then the spare store of oil for the signaling lamp was placed on the wall, and a man directed to throw the can on to the flame.

"Silence! The sentry hears something."

The lieutenant crept to his side, while Jack took post by his men.

"Make ready the Maxim, and get hold of the timber and the oil. Silence! I hear something."

It was a moment of intense suspense, and each soul within the walls of the fort held his breath and listened. The crash of a loosened stone came to their ears; then silence—silence? No; a noise, a shuffling sound, the clink of metal upon stone, and then silence once more.

"In their places, and waiting for the stragglers to come up," said Jack in the lieutenant's ear.

“And time for us to move. Pass the word for the oil to be thrown, and make ready.”

Again there was a moment of silence. Then a tall figure stood outlined on the wall, and the crash of the falling can was heard. It had been torn open at the neck so as to allow the contents to spill at once, and within a second flames were roaring into the air, casting their light over a considerable radius. And there, just within its limits, could be seen the head of the Afghan attacking party, already risen to their feet for the assault. The British were only just in time. Another minute might have been too late. As it was, the Maxim opened before the enemy could give vent to their surprise, and, thanks to Jack's efforts, its effect was so disastrous that within a minute those of the enemy who lived were racing for their lives. Nor was anything more heard of the tribesmen. When Jack marched out on the following morning there was no trace of them, and only the fallen weapons and the bodies of the slain proved that the whole affair had not been a nightmare. Two hours later he reached the Sherpur cantonment to hear that the enemy were on every side, and that Alec Dennisson had completely disappeared from sight within the city.

CHAPTER XIII

An Exciting Interview

HONOR to our brave comrade! Ascend and tell us the story."

The rascal who had appeared at the top of the stairs, on hearing the two blows which Alec had given, stretched out the hand which bore the smoky native lamp so as to light the crazy steps. Then he watched as his supposed comrade ascended. And, thanks to the fact that the light was uncertain, and also because the man who ascended wore the turban of distinctive color, and the cloak of the Afghan who was expected, no suspicion crossed his mind; nor did he wonder because his greeting was not returned, for it happened that the ruffian who lay dead in the passage below was of a silent disposition.

"Come," said the man above. "We wait eagerly for your news of the feringhee and the manner of his death. Did he fall in the passage below, or was the blow struck outside in the street? If the latter, so much the better, for then none may tell who did the deed, unless it happened before this very door. Mahomed, our aged comrade, swears by the Prophet that the knife fell down below in the passage; and if that is so, it will be necessary to take the body away at once. We cannot afford to delay, for at

this hour all are within doors, attending the meetings held by Mahomed Jan and the moulla. In a little while they will be streaming out again, and he who bore the body would be seen."

"And there are spies and tale-bearers in Cabul," ventured Alec, in the Afghan tongue, a scheme to be rid of one of the conspirators having occurred to him.

"There are tale-bearers in plenty in this city—is it not so, my brother?"

As he spoke he held his head down, as if picking his way up the stairs, while he endeavored to give his listener the idea that he was breathless and almost exhausted. He paused suddenly and leaned against the wall, as if to rest himself, while he waited for the man's answer.

"Tale-bearers in Cabul!" said the rascal, indignantly. "Ask his honor, Yohinda Khan, and he will tell you. Why, is it not because of tale-bearers that this feringhee was lured here? But soon Cabul will be rid of them all. Yes, all will perish when the British are gone."

The words staggered Alec. How could he have to do with tale-bearers? What connection could there possibly be between this plot to murder him and the existence of spies—native spies—in the city of Cabul? He almost ventured to inquire the meaning of the answer which had just been given, but the man saved him the trouble.

"Spies, indeed!" he exclaimed with an oath and a sneer. "There are tale-bearers here in truth, else would there have been these hangings? Not that a few lives matter much; there are dogs in the city who can well be

spared. But when money is to be earned, when this feringhee general—may the Prophet overthrow him and his men!—offers reward for news of so-called traitors who joined in the good work of slaying those of the mission in the Balla Hisar, is it a wonder that some are ready to lay evidence before him and enrich themselves? That is what Yohinda fears, for he led the attack at the first, as you must know, for you were beside him; and were the common people, or even other sirdars, to know what we know, comrade, why, his honor's head would be high above the walls of the city, and his feet would dangle in space below. Yes, and not his feet alone. Others would dance to the same tune, comrade, yours and mine, and maybe a few others. Ugh! I like not the thought. Better, far better, is the hope that when these troubles are over we may become rich. And wherefore should we not? His honor has made his bargain with us, and could not retire from it, seeing that we know so much, and that you are so clever with your dagger. He will pay us our share, and we shall buy a house and live in the best style possible. Yes, that shall be our reward, and it is more within our grasp now that the feringhee is dead. He it was whom we feared most of all."

"Because, comrade?"

"Because he was young and venturesome, as Yohinda learned to his cost. Because he was bold and courageous; and, more than all, because that chance meeting raised suspicions in his mind, suspicions which, if permitted to continue, might lead to our ruin, to the loss of that re-

ward which Yohinda and all expect, and perhaps even to the loss of our lives."

"Then we cannot delay," said Alec, in low tones. "To arouse the curiosity of one of these native dogs just now would end in ruin. Our money and our lives would surely pay the forfeit, as you yourself declare. This body must be removed, and as far as possible. Yohinda gave us that order, and we dare not disobey. Go, comrade, and drag this feringhee to the other end of the city. Not a man walks abroad at this time, and all is quiet; but if we delay, who can say what may happen? I would myself have undertaken the task, but I am worn; the dog fought like a fury."

"I would have cared to hear your tale before leaving," was the grumbling answer, as the man set down the lamp on the floor within the passage above. "But we must take no risk. I will go. Where does the dog lie?"

"Just round the bend," answered Alec. "No, do not take the lamp," he added swiftly, seeing the Afghan stretch out his hand for it again. "Down here it is dark, and you will find the body with ease. Then, as the street is lighted by the stars, you will be able to make sure that no one is about to pass. A lamp would call attention, and perhaps show what you were doing."

"A wise thought, and one which makes still more for security. And, besides, there is but one lamp here, and that will be required in the room where Mahomed smokes and thinks. Go to him, comrade. Rest and be content, for you have done nobly."

Alec crushed himself against the wall as the rascal descended the shaky stairs, and then clambered to the top himself, his revolver held ready all the while, for sudden discovery was possible. Then he stood in front of the lamp, thus making the stairs and passage below even darker, and called to the Afghan.

"Be cautious as you go, comrade," he said, "and remember, drag the dog to the farthest corner of the city. It is not native spies whom we wish to hide the feringhee from, but his brothers, who will be swift to search for him."

"Then their task shall be a difficult one," came the answer. "I will hide him where none shall find the body, not even you or I should we wish to show the feringhee to his honor."

There was the sound of shuffling sandals on the cemented floor below, and then silence—silence broken by the deep breathing of a man who exerted his whole strength to lift some heavy weight. Then the shuffling, less springy and elastic than of yore, commenced again as the Afghan bore the body of his comrade down the passage to the door. There he paused while he peered out into the street.

"All is clear," he called over his shoulder, "and I will therefore go now. In two hours, perhaps, I shall be back, and it may be sooner, for this feringhee dog is lighter than I had expected. I shall be able to walk swiftly, and shall not need to rest so often by the way."

Alec heard him step out into the street, and for a little while could trace the shuffle of his sandals.

Should he go down again to the door and watch so as to make sure that the rascal had gone? The thought occurred to him, and he made a step downward; but his progress was arrested the next instant, for the same high-pitched voice, the voice of the old man whom he now knew as Mahomed, fell upon his ear.

"Come," he said, "there has been talking enough, and I wish to hear something of your struggle with the feringhee; and besides, with the door open, the wind comes through this room till I shiver. Close it and enter."

Alce did not hesitate, for he knew that he had now only one enemy to deal with, and he was an old man. Better meet him at once, while the other rascal was gone, and drag from him the secret of this mystery, the reason for this treacherous plot which had brought him into Cabul.

To decide was to act. He picked up the lamp, closed the door, and advanced along the passage, dragging the turban well down over his eyes as he did so. Presently he came to the entrance to the room which looked out into the street, and perceived a figure huddled upon a square of ragged and dirty carpet placed in the very center. In front of the figure was a hubble-bubble, which still emitted its mournful gurgle, while the stem of the long tube was grasped in the hand of the man squatting on the carpet. The fitful rays of the smoky lamp showed him to be some seventy years of age, tall and thin, and gifted with piercing eyes, from which the light was reflected redly. A thin, gray beard straggled from his chin, while the hand which

grasped the stem of the pipe was, like the features, thin and emaciated, and wrinkled deeply. Alee set the lamp down close to him and strode over to the window, where he squatted down in native fashion, and in such position that he could watch the man and the door at the same time.

For a minute there was silence, the old Afghan sitting still, while clouds of smoke came from his lips. Indeed, partly owing to his thinness, and to his wrinkled, evil-looking face, and to his piercing eyes, and, perhaps, owing to the uncertain light afforded by the smoky lamp, the man at whom Alee gazed looked more imposing, more fearful, than did the Russian who had just departed from the house. This old man was cool and collected, slow of speech, and given to command. Would he be easily dominated? Would it be possible to persuade him, and to make sure of his silence?

"A revolver shall teach him manners," thought our hero. "I will have no trifling, even though he is too old to fight. He is in this conspiracy, and he has helped in the plot which aimed at my assassination, therefore I shall treat him as he deserves. If he tries to raise the alarm, I will shoot him dead and then rush out. First to the left, then to the right, and there I am. Yes, I remember the way; there shall be no mistake."

"Your news, comrade?" suddenly demanded the old man. "Tidings of this feringhee dog whom we feared, and of the manner of his death."

He stopped for a moment, while the gurgle of the pipe

was heard. Then he spoke again, the sound of the hub-bubble cutting in between his words while smoke issued from his mouth.

"You met him at the Beni Moulla minaret. Yes, that was the place selected. You did not slay him there, but here, below, and some little while ago. Is that not the case?"

"Perhaps half an hour ago," said Alec, quietly, without an effort to disguise his voice.

"And it was then that our comrade went to the stairs and called. Why did you not answer? Ah, you were wearied with the struggle, perhaps, or dazed with a blow struck by the British dog in self-defense. You are wounded, it may be."

Slowly the old man allowed his piercing eyes to leave the smoky lamp, or the clouds of tobacco smoke which seemed up to now to have riveted his attention, and turned them on Alec. He peered at the cloak and followed it upward till the face was reached, when he suddenly dropped the stem of his pipe. Then he swung round and stared into the features of this stranger, for Alec had removed his turban.

"You are pale. You—you—my eyes deceive me, but——"

"But I am not the one you expected," said Alec, quietly. "This assassin, hired by you and Yohinda Khan, should be seated here, while the feringhee dog should be on the shoulders of the rascal who was with you a few minutes ago. It is unfortunate for you that it is otherwise. The

feringhee is here, prepared to punish this attempt upon his life with death—prepared to shoot instantly.”

Never once did he raise his voice as he addressed the old man, nor did he allow his eyes to leave the face of this ruffianly Afghan. Slowly his revolver came from beneath the cloak, and when the man turned full in his direction, and stared at him in open-mouthed astonishment, his eyes looked into the muzzle of a revolver, and behind that muzzle were a pair of dark, steady orbs which set him quaking.

“You! you! The feringhee!”

“Prepared to shoot instantly,” repeated Alec, quietly. “Turn round. Now place the lamp nearer to your feet. That is well. You will answer my questions quickly and truthfully. If you fail——”

He squinted down the sights of the revolver and saw the Afghan squirm. His hands swayed to and fro, while the fingers grasped at the air. Indeed, he looked as though he would totter and fall to the floor. As Alec lowered his weapon, however, the man’s courage returned to some small degree, though the fingers twitched, the eyes shifted uneasily, flitting from the face of the feringhee to the lamp, then to the window, and back again, furtively, to the stranger who sat before him, dominating him with his revolver.

“I will tell all that I know. Hear me, and spare my life,” said the man, in quaking tones. “Ask, and I will answer as I can.”

“Then, this note, which was sent to the Sherpur cantonment—who wrote it?”

"Alas, sahib, I did that."

"Then you write English?"

"Better than I can speak it, sahib. Many years ago I was employed by the British garrison in Cabul. There I learned what I know. I also acted for those who lately lived in the Balla Hissar, interpreting for them on occasion."

"Till they were murdered by your comrades. But why did you write this note to me; and why did Yohinda Khan desire to have me killed?"

Alec looked closely into the old Afghan's face as he asked the questions, and wondered what the answers would be.

"Sahib, I cannot give the whole tale, for there is much that I do not know or understand," said the man, returning Alec's gaze without flinching. "I swear it. It is the truth."

The piercing eyes did not shift. There was a look of sincerity on the old man's face, and Alec felt that he was indeed making a true statement.

"You know something. You can tell me why I was feared, and why spies were feared. You can explain the contents of the note, for you admit that you wrote it. These were the words. What do they mean?"

He repeated the note slowly from beginning to end, and then demanded an answer.

"Who is the prisoner mentioned in the note?" he asked breathlessly, "and who is this woman?"

"The last was a wife to one of the sepoy soldiers. The

man was slain in the attack upon the Balla Hissar, and the woman fell into the hands of Yohinda Khan. The man——”

“Yes, the prisoner; who is he?”

“Sahib, I cannot say, for I have never seen him; but he is a feringhee. My employer holds him prisoner also, and hopes to receive ransom for him. He dare not give him over to your general now, for to do so would be to prove that Yohinda had a part in the slaying of the mission; and, also, there would be no ransom. He waited, therefore, hoping that your countrymen would retire, when he, perhaps, would extract a promise of payment from the prisoner. You were enticed here because spies in your camp told us that your meeting with this woman had aroused your suspicions. You were likely to probe the matter deeper, and therefore it would be well to be rid of you. There was no other reason to my knowledge.”

“But why was I selected?” demanded Alec, sternly. “There were others with me when we met the woman and heard her cry for help.”

“Others who did not believe in that cry, sahib; others who had not a special interest in the matter. But you have. Yohinda tells us that your father was with the mission.”

“And he is this prisoner who is held to ransom!”

“I cannot say, sahib. The prisoner is a feringhee. The other, the woman, is a native. She can speak a little English, and she called to you. She was being taken from

this house to another, for the English soldiers were searching this part for men who had helped in the attack upon the Balla Hissar."

Alec stared hard at the aged Afghan, and, though suspicious, was bound to confess that the man was telling the truth. His tale seemed probable. One of the Guides happened to have his wife with him—perhaps many of the poor fellows had—and the woman had survived the massacre. Yohinda Khan had taken possession of her. He had also an Englishman in his hands. Was it one of the officers—Major Dennisson, or who? Obviously this Mahomed did not know, and he had never seen the feringhee. More than that, was it not probable, with a crafty fellow as Yohinda Khan undoubtedly was, that he had not entrusted his employes with all his secrets; for spies abounded, and money was to be earned by those who had information to give.

"Tell me why the note was sent yesterday?" he suddenly asked. "Why such need of haste?"

"Because the sahib was known to be suspicious, because he might not wait; but, more than all, because there was to be fighting, for the whole of Cabul is to join in an attack upon the enemy. That is why the streets are empty. All are attending a huge meeting, or are at the larger houses, arranging plans and listening to their leaders. To-morrow the guns will fire, and the sahib, had he not received the summons, would have been away in the valley. Yohinda Khan desired otherwise. He had a debt to pay; for did not the sahib take him prisoner and worst

him when the victory should have been on the other side?"

In an instant Alec realized that this sirdar of whom the aged Afghan spoke, and whose name had been mentioned by the other ruffian, must be the very one whom he had captured, the officer who had attempted to behead him while he knelt half stunned after his fall. Yohinda Khan, then, had had an active part in the massacre of the mission, and had made a captive. He was in need of money, as were all these Afghan sirdars, and he sought to ransom one of his prisoners. Meanwhile, chance had thrown Alec in the way. The very Englishman who had effected Yohinda Khan's capture had heard the cry of the native woman, and because of his father's presence with the mission had taken special notice of it. If he looked further into the matter there might follow discovery, and that meant loss of ransom and death for Yohinda. Better to entice this young feringhee into the city and slay him, thereby removing a danger and gratifying a little private rancor.

Alec could see the matter in its proper light now, and sternly determined to punish this treacherous Afghan. More than that, he then and there made up his mind that he would never rest till he had found the native prisoner and the feringhee of whom the old man had spoken. The woman had been removed to some other portion of the city when the search in this particular part had become too close. Where had she been placed?

"I begin to understand this mystery," said Alec, slowly,

eying the Afghan with increased sternness and toying with his weapon till the old man trembled. "The woman has been removed, and doubtless the man also, though you did not say so. Where are they? See that your answer is correct, for I shall want your guidance to the spot, and—you will understand that I will brook no trifling."

"I have promised, and I will tell all that I know, sahib, Listen," said the man. "This is where you will find the native woman, though I cannot say whether the feringhee is there, for that has been withheld from me. Has the sahib knowledge of the quarter wherein is the bazaar?"

He paused and glanced at our hero, who nodded.

"Then you must make for the corner which faces the direction of the Balla Hissar. Then enter the bazaar——"

Once more the aged Afghan came to a stop, his attention arrested by some sound outside. It was a man walking, a man who wore sandals loosely tied to his feet, and who stepped along briskly over the cobbles. Alec heard the steps, too, and fingered his revolver, while his eyes never for one instant left those of the man seated before him. Did those eyes change? Did their color alter, and a look of relief sweep over the face? It might have been fancy, but such changes do the relaxation of a single muscle make upon the features, that it was more than probable that he had seen a change, that this Afghan heard a friend approaching, heard steps with which he was acquainted. However, Alec gave him little room for doubt as to what would happen if he attempted to raise the alarm.

"That is our friend who went off with the body of the feringhee on his shoulder," he said quietly, though his heart throbbed and pulsed so that he hardly thought that he could speak. "He suspects something, perhaps. He is not quite happy about the affair. Or he has been forced to return by the appearance of the people. You will get rid of him while I pretend to have fallen asleep. But my eyes will be on you both. My revolver will cover you and—the smallest sign will be sufficient to cause me to press the trigger."

"But, sahib——" the old man commenced.

"Silence! You are old, and I do not like shooting even younger men in cold blood. But, then, you are all murderers, and I shall not hesitate. A sign even, and recollect."

His hand went out in front of him, the muzzle looked squarely into the Afghan's eyes, while the trigger went back slowly. There was no need for more, and but little time, for the shuffling steps had now passed under the window and entered the passage below. Alec at once seized his borrowed turban, drew the cloak about him, and settled himself in a heap.

"I have told you the whole tale of the assassination," he said in low tones. "You can repeat anything that may seem interesting, but you will send this man away. I shall watch. My revolver is beneath the cloak, but it will shoot every bit as well from that position. Now, be prepared. Take up the pipe again."

By now the steps were at the door of the staircase, for

the creaking of the latter had been heard, and as Alec finished speaking, the door was thrown open. Then the man who had so recently left the dwelling with the object of hiding the crime strode into the room.

Alec watched him as he came, and, thanks to the light which the lamp gave, made sure that he was ill at ease. Something had occurred to disturb the ruffian, for his hand shook, and his features showed traces of anxiety.

"Hush!" said the old man. "Our brother sleeps. He is worn out with his struggling. What brings you back so soon? Surely you have not hidden the feringhee safely? Think what discovery will mean."

"Think! I know! But this is why I have come. Listen, for the thing puzzles me and troubles my mind. This feringhee was tall, I thought?"

"They say so," was the answer. "I am old, and scarcely leave the house. I have never seen him."

"And he should be heavy, too, for I reckoned his height and weight when we took the woman across the town and ran against the three Englishmen."

"And what of that? Surely you have not come back to tell me all this!" exclaimed the other, feigning anger. "Have you hidden the body?"

"Listen, and you shall hear. What has brought me back? Why, I thought when I started out that this feringhee was small and light for my reckoning; but he is dark-skinned also, or the night and my eyes trifle with me. I say that his skin is as dark as ours. He is no feringhee; he is one of ourselves, and there is some mis-

take or treachery in the matter. Wake our comrade so that we may speak together."

"And all because the darkness of the night and your own fears have upset your courage," said the old man, still in tones of annoyance. "One of ourselves, indeed! Do not these English live under canvas, and gallop about beneath the sun all day, exposed to the wind and heat? Then why should all be fair-complexioned? This youth is burned brown, and the darkness of the night completes the change."

"But his feet," burst in the man, as yet far from convinced. "He wears a military cloak, as is usual with the feringhees; but there are native shoes on his feet, and he wears our dress also, I believe."

"You will believe soon that he is alive," scoffed the old man. "Come, back to the body and hide it at the far end of the city! And as you go, think a little for yourself. This officer came in answer to our summons. He spoke our tongue like a native. It might be convenient to pass as one at any moment; and for that reason he wore one of the native dresses, merely covering it with a military cloak. He was in disguise, and could change from feringhee to Afghan on the instant. One of ourselves, indeed! Come, move quickly, or Yohinda Khan may have something to say."

The old man went on pulling at the hubble-bubble, while he eyed the newcomer askance, his eyes shifting from his face to the turban which covered Alce's head and shadowed his features—to that and to the outline of the revolver,

which could just be seen behind the cloak. Puff! a cloud of smoke came from his lips, and he stared now at the lamp and then back at Alec. But the latter never moved. To a casual onlooker he was fast asleep; but a peep beneath the turban would have shown that his half-closed eyes were riveted upon the aged Afghan, and that only once or twice had he allowed them to wander to the face of the stranger.

"What! Are you not gone yet?" said the old man, after a pause, as he turned to his comrade. "Does anything trouble your mind, or have you also fallen asleep?"

"I was thinking," was the answer. "The silence outside has disturbed my courage. My fear of discovery just now is very great, for were the feringhees to find out that this act had been done by us, the punishment would be terrible. The darkness has caused me to make a mistake. I will go at once and complete the task."

He was gone in a minute, Alec and his comrade in this strange room listening to his shuffling sandals.

"Had the old man given this friend of his a hint? Had he managed to convey some impression of danger to him, some suspicion which would cause him to return with Yohinda Khan or with other help?"

Alec asked himself the questions, while he straightened himself and looked thoughtfully at the lamp. No, he decided. Fear of the revolver had assured the old man's honesty, and the ruffian who had just departed would not return yet awhile. Then he ought to learn where the native woman was to be found, and would go to the place

at once. Ten minutes, in fact, sufficed to give him the street and the house in the bazaar where he would find those whom he sought.

"Then I will leave you also," he said as he rose. "You will remain here, and if you desire to save your own life you will take care not to follow or to let your comrades know the trick that I have played upon them. Should you do so, I will hunt you down till you are captured. You know better than I do what that means."

There was no need to engage in further conversation. This aged Afghan was a party to a disgraceful conspiracy to murder him, and though he had given valuable information, yet that could not excuse his previous acts. Alec, therefore, spoke to him curtly, and repeating his warning and the directions just given him for finding the particular house in the bazaar, he strode down the passage and opened the door. A moment later the aged Afghan heard the stairs creak and the door swing to. There was the sound of a step in the passage, and then silence. The Englishman who had dared to enter into the heart of the trap set for him by Yohinda Khan had gone, and the place where he had squatted was vacant. Only the feeling of a huge danger narrowly escaped remained: that and the certainty that treachery to the feringhee would bring a stern and speedy punishment.



B565

"IF YOU DESIRE TO SAVE YOUR OWN LIFE, YOU WILL TAKE
CARE NOT TO FOLLOW"

CHAPTER XIV

Back to the Cantonment

ALEC descended the stairs swiftly, the door above banging to and shutting him off from the passage and the room in which the old Afghan sat and smoked. Then he felt his way along the narrow hall which twisted till it came to the street. He passed the very spot where the man with the strange-colored turban, the turban which he himself now wore, had attempted to stab him, and in his heart he silently thanked God that the blow had fallen as it did in the darkness. Had it been light he would have been killed to a certainty; but, as it happened, he had had a very narrow escape, and had killed the murderer. Then he had, by the use of his wits and no small amount of stubborn courage, contrived to rid himself of one of the ruffians, and extract an important secret from the second. He felt glad now that he had not run for his life when he realized that treachery was intended, for he had benefited to a great extent, and this mystery was all the clearer. He could see now what was happening, and what Yohinda Khan feared.

"He shall come to the gallows yet," said Alec, as he threaded the passage. "And if I fail to find the woman and this feringhee—can it be my father?—I will hunt for

him and force him to give me the secret. Yes, that is what I will do. But the old man above seems to have told me all that he knows, and perhaps it will be sufficient. Here is the door and—ah!”

His foot struck the rickety stool with which he had propped the door open, and sent it rolling on the cemented floor, making such a noise that Alec drew back panting, fearful that it would attract the attention of a chance passer-by. But he had no need to alarm himself, for a minute later, when he ventured to peer round the door-post and look into the street, it was deserted—at least, as far as he could see, for the night was dark, and only the stars lit the scene.

“That accounts for the other man’s uncertainty,” he thought. “Had there been a moon he would have recognized his comrade in an instant, and no amount of persuasion would have convinced him that he was carrying my body. I hardly dared to breathe when he returned. My finger was on the trigger, ready to shoot.”

A careful inspection having shown him that the street was empty, and no sound occurring to disturb him, he emerged from the passage and struck direct for the Beni Moulla minaret, the rendezvous appointed for his meeting that evening. Skirting this, he plunged into another narrow street, and pushed on as fast as possible for the corner of the bazaar which pointed toward the Balla Hissar. Half an hour later he had reached it, and at once entered the crowded quarters of this portion of the city of Cabul, a quarter where the roof extends from house to house

across the street, and where the main artery of the bazaar is covered from end to end. Now, indeed, it was dark, and he was compelled to stand still for a few minutes to accustom his eyes to the change.

“Straight down the center of the bazaar,” he repeated to himself, “and halt when I reach a tall thin house which rises on the right. The old boy said that it had no gallery under the roof, as the others have, and that I should know it by its narrowness, and because there is an arched opening passing beneath it. I go through that till I come to another street, turn to the left, and stop at a stall which is at the very end of the street. That is the house; and a knock, and the pass words, ‘Yohinda Khan,’ will gain me admission.”

Alec brought his hand down against his thigh in vexation, for suddenly he remembered that in his anxiety to learn where this native woman was imprisoned, and where also the feringhee, he had forgotten to demand who looked after them. There might be half a dozen cutthroats, or merely one.

“I was a fool not to find out who is there,” he said, “and my omission to do so may end the whole matter. But I have gone so far with it that I shall not turn back. I will find the house and enter. Those who oppose shall do so at their cost.”

A dogged look came over his face. His lips came together firmly, while a frown wrinkled his brow. In fact, Alec, had the light been sufficient, would have been seen to wear an ugly look, one which would have warned

anyone with designs against him to leave him severely alone.

"Forward!" he said to himself quietly. "This is the main street of the bazaar, and there is danger in delay."

Encouraging himself in this manner, he felt for the hundredth time to assure himself that his weapons were in position. Then he straightened his turban and plunged into the dark, roofed street. On either hand were empty stalls, closed for the time being, and destined to remain untenanted for a few days to come. And, like the streets elsewhere, there was not a light visible, and not a sound disturbed the silence, not even the bark of some stray cur. The place felt oppressive, and, strive as he would, Alee could not resist a feeling of depression which assailed him. It was almost worse to be in this dark place alone than to be rubbing shoulders with the Afghan inhabitants. But a moment sufficed to throw off the feeling, and having now accustomed his eyes to the darkness, as one does in a coal pit after a few minutes there, he walked on briskly, searching for the tall, thin house with the arched opening beneath it. There it was, rising ghost-like to the roof, where its outline was shrouded in gloom. But by standing close to its walls and looking up, he made sure that the house had no balcony above, while all the others had.

"That seems certain," he said, "and as it has an opening here, it must be the one. I suppose the people who live in this quarter spend a great deal of their time in the balconies, from which they can look down into the bazaar."

He stood there for a little while, looking up and down

the main street; and then, satisfied that no one was approaching, in fact, that the place was utterly deserted, he strode on, feeling for the sides of the gallery with his hands. It went on for some thirty feet till it emerged from under the house and gave entry to another street, lighter than the last for the reason that there was no roof over it. Alec could distinguish the change even before he left the gallery, for the arched exit stood out plainly. Then his eye fell on something else and he halted abruptly.

"Lights," he said to himself, "and people moving in the rooms. There is a meeting, I fancy, and there must be a huge number there."

He craned his head into the street and watched the row of lighted windows opposite, his eyes following the dark figures which moved within. Voices reached his ear, and occasionally a tom-tom was beaten. Could this be one of the gatherings to which the old Afghan had alluded? Alec felt sure that it was, and was thankful that he was still in time.

"Better get to the house and see the matter to the end before they are done talking," he said. "This must be the place, and there can be no mistake. Then I will go straight on."

He stepped from the archway, looked up and down again, just as he had done when leaving the house where he had had the interview with the aged Afghan, and then walked swiftly toward the blind end of the street where the native woman was imprisoned. A feeble light burned

in one of the windows, as if it were placed there to guide him. But he knew that this could not be the case, and also felt sure that the old man had not had time to lay another trap for him. There was no need therefore to hesitate, and crouch in some corner gazing at the light, as many might have done. Alec took his fate in his hands, and strode straight up to the empty stall, behind which was the door. A second later he started back violently, for a figure had sprung from the doorway.

"Greeting," said the man, halting within a yard. "Will my brother enter that we may talk? There is light within, and wine and refreshment."

Alec recognized him in an instant; there could be no doubt that this was the very ruffian who had carried off the body of a comrade, thinking it to be the Englishman. Did he suspect? Had he discovered his mistake, and found out that he was being hoodwinked? Alec almost groaned, so great was his disappointment. It seemed so hard that this man should again appear just at the critical moment, and when all seemed working so smoothly. But did he suspect?

"He probably does, and nearly certainly knows what has happened. But it is too dark here for him to recognize me, and he does not want to make another mistake. That is why he has invited me into the house. I will go."

It was a bold decision to come to, and yet under the circumstances not an unnatural one; for trouble was certainly in store for him. There would be discovery and

a struggle. There would be a noise. Probably his revolver would be called into use, and then the whole street would be alive. The people would pour from the meeting and surround him. In a flash he saw what would happen, and once more he took his fate in his hands. Better enter and see the trouble through than come to blows in the street.

"Enter, and I will follow," said Alec, shortly, moving toward the door as he did so.

Without a word the man turned toward the stall and, passing through it, threw open the door. He did not wait to knock, nor did he venture to give the pass words, "Yohiuda Khan," which the old Afghan had told Alec would be necessary. Indeed, it seemed more than probable that he had only just emerged from the dwelling, for the door was unlatched. Pushing it open, he strode into the passage and disappeared in the darkness. But only for an instant. Alec heard him fumbling and the movement of some object. Then there was a gleam of light, and he saw a lamp extracted swiftly from beneath a wooden box, where it had been hidden. With a quick movement the Afghan grasped the light and, turning, thrust it into Alec's face. Next instant he had snatched at the latter's turban, and with a cry of delight had dragged it from his head.

"The feringhee!" he shouted. "The dog who slew our comrade, and thought to make a fool of me!"

Dropping the turban, he snatched at a tulwar which was thrust beneath his belt, and drew it out. He was in

the act of throwing himself upon the Englishman when Alec sprang in beneath the weapon, and, striking the Afghan in the face with all his strength, sent him sprawling in the passage, and the lamp and tulwar clattering to the ground. The former rolled into a corner, and gave a parting glimmer before it went out. Then all was dense blackness again. But our hero did not wait for further developments. Already he knew that the man's shout must have been heard, and fearful that it would bring the inhabitants about him, he took advantage of that glimmer of light to seize his turban and make for the door. Banging it to behind him, he ran through the stall and into the street, his eyes searching for the opening which led into the main thoroughfare of the bazaar. But he was not to reach it as easily as he hoped, for hardly had he cleared the front of the stall than the door was again burst open, and shouts and cries of rage issued from it. Then figures appeared farther down, and men came running from the house in which the meeting was being held. A minute later they were across the street and had barred the entrance to the archway.

Alec saw that his escape in that direction was cut off, and perceiving an alley close beside him, plunged into it without hesitation, his exit through this channel being unnoticed in the darkness. And here we will leave him for a while to return to Sir Frederick and the troops.

The reader will remember the dispositions made by our general for preventing the junction of the various forces into which the Afghans had divided themselves, and that

owing to a mischance, and to the boldness of the levies under the command of Mahomed Jan, and to the fact that General Massey with the guns and cavalry had come into position in advance of the allotted time, those dispositions had very nearly ended in disaster. In fact, the wing of the 72nd Highlanders had practically saved the day, for on receipt of an urgent summons they had doubled out from the Sherpur cantonment to the village of Deh Mazung, situated in the mouth of the gorge through which the Cabul River flows, and by which the main road runs to the city of Cabul. There they had combined their fire with that delivered by the carbines of the cavalry, and the stubbornness and gallantry of the whole party had resulted in a check to the enemy. The latter swerved to the right and occupied the mountain spur there, while, later on, our troops, taking advantage of the darkness, managed to withdraw the abandoned guns from the rough ground on which they had been stranded.

On the following morning, when Sir Frederick Roberts and his staff emerged from the Sherpur cantonment and surveyed the country with their glasses, they found that Mahomed Jan's levies had taken up a very strong and menacing position. Their deviation from the village of Deh Mazung had carried them on to a lofty and rugged range which runs due south from the gorge through which the Cabul River flows. About midway along this range is a prominent peak, the Takht-i-Shah, and projecting eastward from the range at right angles are two lateral spurs, that nearest to Cabul being the shorter, and running

down to the Balla Hissar. The spur to the south of this one strikes out from the main ridge slightly south of the prominent peak alluded to above, and runs into the plain as far as the village of Beni Hissar. The faces of the ridge and spurs are everywhere extremely rugged and steep, while huge bowlders cover the surface in all directions.

The glasses of the general staff were hardly needed on that December morning, for the Afghan levies were bold and defiant, and their vari-colored banners could be seen south of the peak, on the main ridge, and on the southern spur projecting from it. Their reserves were massed behind the peak, while huge numbers of their skirmishers crouched among the bowlders on the face of the ridge, or busied themselves with the crection of sangars and strong stone curtains, destined to form excellent cover for the riflemen. On the summit of this range there was a great natural cavity which the enemy had rendered bomb-proof, and which formed a most secure cover against artillery practice.

This formidable position, which overlooked the city of Cabul and the Sherpur cantonment, was another illustration of the acuteness of Mahomed Jan. On the previous day he had seized upon the key of the position, thereby materially helping the disturbance of General Roberts' plan; and now he had placed his men in a position at once masterful and menacing. Had he had guns and ammunition, the city and the cantonment would have been at his mercy; and, as it was, he lay so close to the Afghan

quarter of Cabul that a junction between his levies and the populace of the city seemed certain.

But Sir Frederick, with his usual courage and optimism, which have gained for him so many victories, and have always sent his men to the attack with that elation and determination to succeed which are characteristic of our soldiers, thought otherwise, and did not allow even the steepness of that rocky range to deter him. First of all, he set the helio to work and called in General Baker, who, till then, was unaware of the turn which events had taken. Then he gave the task of capturing the heights to a mixed force of native and European soldiers belonging to Macpherson's brigade. This force consisted in all of five hundred and sixty men with two mountain guns, and they had, together with the remainder of the brigade, taken up position that same morning on the northern extremity of this range, known as the Sher Darwaza heights, overlooking the Cabul River.

For several hours the two mountain guns searched the peak and the face of the range. Then the little force was launched against the position, and, resolutely pushing forward, swept an advance party of Afghans back and rushed forward to the assault. But the task was too difficult, for the steepness of the climb made it hard for the men to use their rifles. Both hands and feet were required, and at such times movement was very slow, cover practically entirely absent, and the soldiers an easy mark for the Afghans lying behind their sangars. Eventually this little force retired to the ground which it had won,

and held it while preparations were made to form a diversion by attacking the enemy elsewhere. But it was too late to continue the action that evening, and therefore the attack was deferred till the following day.

The force which General Baker led out from the Sherpur cantonment early next day was particularly strong, for it was made up of the 92nd Highlanders, the Guides Infantry, a wing of the 3rd Sikhs, a cavalry regiment, and eight guns; and the direction it took was that of the lateral spur extending from the prominent peak to the plain village of Beni Hissar. Nor were the troops long in coming into action, for General Baker was quick to seize upon a fine opportunity which presented itself. Large numbers of Mahomed Jan's levies had elected to spend the night in the village down in the plain, and the advance of Baker's force was the signal for all to leave their homes and make across the plain toward the heights. Their delay was fatal to them, for our men were rushed into positions midway along the ridge, thus interposing a barrier of bayonets between two forces of the enemy. In fact, the situation was somewhat similar to that of the 11th, when Mahomed Jan had advanced into the plain, and had defeated the small command under General Massey before reinforcements could be brought out to his aid. Now, however, it was our turn, and we made the most of it.

The guns galloped forward into action, and heavily shelled the peak, while the Sikhs, the Highlanders, and the Guides doubled forward. To the former was given the

task of extending across the plain and holding our right flank, while the Highlanders and Guides dashed at the center of the ridge and raced for the summit. Very soon Lieutenant Forbes reached the highest point with his color-sergeant; but a band of Ghazees fell upon them and slew them before support arrived. The incident caused a momentary check, but Lieutenant Dick Cunnyngnam sprang to lead them, and the top was gained. For this act this gallant officer received the Victoria Cross; for the moment was a critical one, and failure to seize the heights would possibly have resulted in a union of Mahomed Jan's irregulars. Meanwhile the cavalry had gone straight for the hordes of Afghans crossing the plain, and cut through and through them.

The day was almost decided, and in a little while a British victory was assured. No sooner was the center of the ridge won than Highlanders and Guides swept to the right in the direction of the peak, leaving a strong detachment to hold in check some two thousand of the enemy now isolated on the ridge at its eastern extremity. Advancing swiftly, their volleys drove the Afghans back, and the sight of the bayonets caused a panic to set in. Then, too, the gallant little band, which had attempted to capture the peak on the previous day, were again launched at the position. It was a race between them and the Highlanders and Guides, and they won, as they deserved to do; in fact, the helio with the attacking forces proclaimed the news that the position was taken just as the midday gun boomed from the Sherpur cantonment.

But fighting had not ended for the day, and the Afghans soon showed that the work of their chief moulla had not been undertaken in vain. Thousands issued from the city, and joined hands with those in the plains, and together they attacked General Baker's flanks. Then they made for a range of hills which swept along south of the Cabul River, and a little to the east of the city, known as the Siah Sung heights. There the guns from the cantonment of Sherpur shelled them, while General Massey rode out with the cavalry. They found that these irregulars were wonderfully resolute and unusually disciplined, for they stood in regular formation, holding their fire till the horses were upon them. However, the blood of our troops was thoroughly up, and the cavalry in particular smarted at the memory of their defeat on the 11th. They charged with reckless fury, charged home again and again, cutting their way through and through the enemy and scattering them all over the plain. A detachment of Guides cavalry aided them, and, falling in with a body of Kohistanees marching to join hands with Mahomed Jan, they attacked them without hesitation, and without thought of the enormous odds, and, splitting them into fragments, pursued them far into the plain. The day ended with a loss to us of sixteen killed and forty-five wounded, at which price we had captured a formidable position, and dispersed large masses of the enemy.

But the lesson, severe as it was, did not deter the enemy, nor did the removal of Macpherson's brigade from Deh Mazung and the Cabul gorge to the spur overlooking the

Balla Hissar contribute to the chances of a cessation of hostilities; for this withdrawal, necessary as it must have been, left open the road to Cabul, and allowed Mahomed Jan's levies to fraternize with their comrades of the city. In fact, the following morning showed the result of the combination, for the Afghan general had transferred his position from the range running due south of the Cabul gorge to that extending from the northern side of the gorge in a northwesterly direction. These are known as the Asmai heights, and they practically overhang the city of Cabul, and dominate the Sherpur cantonment.

Once more the task of dislodging them was entrusted to General Baker, who led his bayonets against a conical hill extending from the Asmai heights to within a mile of the cantonment. It was captured with remarkable promptness, and preparations were at once made to assault the Asmai heights, the guns shelling the position heavily. Brownlow's Highlanders formed the center of the storming party, the Guides being on their right flank, with Macpherson's guns on the spur; besides, the Balla Hissar helped in shelling the position. Two companies of the 67th were also detached from his brigade, and, crossing the Cabul gorge, fell upon the left rear of the enemy. The position was carried with tremendous dash, and the heights captured after a fierce hand-to-hand conflict. The enemy left behind large numbers of their dead, slain by our shrapnel fire. But at this point the fortunes of the day were suddenly reversed, for vast hordes of Afghans were discerned in the Chardeh valley south of the river, marching to

combine with their defeated comrades, while others rushed to attack the conical hill now held by a small British force, and lying between our main body and the Sherpur cantonment. The whole mass of the Afghans came together, and, displaying desperate valor, carried the conical hill and swept onward till they captured the heights. Retirement to the Sherpur cantonment became necessary, and that evening saw the concentration of Sir Frederick's whole force behind the defenses. The retirement had been very skillfully carried out, and our losses, though heavy, were not excessively so. When night fell all outlying detachments had come in, and a new phase of the war had commenced. Our troops, hitherto the attackers, were now surrounded, and at bay. None were outside the cantonment save a few of the killed, whose bodies had not been recovered, and Alec Dennisson, aide-de-camp and interpreter, whose strange disappearance and the cause of the same had been duly reported at headquarters by his servant.

CHAPTER XV

For Dear Life

A FERINGHEE! Bar the street, or he will escape!" The Afghan, whom Alec had struck with his fist and sent sprawling to the ground, was at first so shaken by the blow that he was hardly sensible. But a minute had sufficed to recover his scattered wits, and at once he scrambled to his feet, groped his way to the door, and, rushing into the street, set the walls ringing with his shouts.

"A feringhee dog, I tell you! He slew my comrade an hour ago, and ever since I have been endeavoring to find him. He was here in the street but a minute ago, and cannot have passed you. A light, a light to search for the dog!"

"A feringhee! A Christian dog! One of the hated invaders!"

The words acted like magic upon the mob of Afghan men, who still continued to pour from the wide door in which the meeting had been held. They burst into the street and formed a line across it, shouting as they did so. Others, for the most part the more youthful and hot-headed members of the crowd, drew their daggers, the weapon which no citizen of Cabul dared to be without in

those turbulent days. Some shouted eagerly for lights, taking up the words of their comrade who had sounded the alarm; while others stretched from the open windows, called directions to their friends, or asked questions as to the cause of the commotion. And very soon a number of native lamps were produced, with the help of which the street was thoroughly investigated; but nowhere could a trace be found of the Englishman.

"Are you sure that you saw him, my brother?" demanded an aged Afghan of the man who had given the alarm. "These are strange times for Cabul, and excitement runs high. Then there have been meetings in every part, where fiery and patriotic speeches have been made, and where sweetmeats and wines have passed. May it not be that—well, my brothers, we are all filled with the same enthusiasm, and some of us also have no doubt imagined the presence of one, or even a host of our enemies."

He turned to the mob which surrounded the Afghan, and appealed to them with a smile and a knowing wag of his head.

"In our dreams we often conjure up before us that which is most desired," he added. "And is there one of us here who does not long to meet with feringhees, aye, with a host of them, and fall upon them single-handed?"

"A dream! I imagine this Englishman! This dog of a Christian!"

The man stood to his full height, and glared at the old man, his eyes flashing, while, for the moment, his indignation and anger robbed him of the power to speak. He

gasped, raised his two clenched fists above the head of the old man who had dared to make this flippant suggestion, and then burst into a torrent of invective.

"Imagine an Englishman! Idiot!" he shouted. "A man may dream that he sees even more than a host of enemies, and in his excitement may rise to attack them, but unless he strikes himself against the bed, or against the wall, owing to the darkness, can he imagine a blow received? Can he imagine this? Look! Is this the result of a dream?"

He caught at the shoulder of a man who stood behind him, bearing a lamp, and dragged him forward till the light shone full upon his face, plainly showing the result of Alec's blow; for his fist had struck the man in the cheek just below the eye, and the latter was already invisible owing to the swelling, while blood flowed from the nostril. His appearance at once drew shouts of anger and indignation from the people, and they pressed more closely about him, those who had first emerged from the meeting declaring loudly that they had seen the fugitive.

"We heard your shout as the ruffian struck you," belated one, at length making himself heard. "The meeting had just ended, and Afzul and I were speaking at the door below. We ran into the street at once, and I swear to you all that I saw this fellow hastening toward us. He seemed to stop at one of the houses on the right; but we searched there, and did not find him."

In a moment the old man and his suggestions were forgotten, and even the indignation which filled the injured

Afghan disappeared, as if by magic, for a new subject occupied the minds of all.

"You hear the declaration? Our brother actually saw the dog!" said the man who had raised the alarm, appealing to all about him. "He watched him run to one of the houses, and made search in that direction. But did he enter? Did he push open the door and search the rooms within?"

This time his question was directed to the Afghan who had given the information; but before the latter could answer, one of the bystanders interrupted the conversation.

"And who of us does not remember that but a week ago three of these feringhees insulted some of our brothers, and when pursued, took refuge in a house! This dog is close at hand, no doubt. While we waste time in talking, he is seeking for an exit, and unless we make haste, he will escape us altogether. Take the lamps and search."

The meeting broke up instantly, those who had heard the words shouldering their way through the crowds to the row of houses toward which Alec had made. As they went they took the lamps from the hands of those who had brought them from the meeting-house, and, dividing into threes and fours, burst open the doors of the various dwellings, without ceremony, and rushed in. Others followed, while a few, disbelieving the idea that the feringhee had taken refuge in a house, ran through the arched passage, and gained the main artery of the bazaar, the street lined on either side by stalls, and rendered so dark by reason of the roof which spread over it from end to

end. But it was dark and silent. Not a sound proceeded from it, though in the distance the shouts of the searchers could be heard, while on occasion a man would run on to one of the balconies above and look down into the street. In fact, one youth who did so, happening to peer at the street below, caught sight of one of his comrades, and at once the night was rendered all the more hideous by the shrieks of excitement to which he gave tongue.

"Here! He is here!" he shouted. "Pursue!"

That brought a score of the Afghans round, through the passage, into the main street, and these, finding the mistake made, gave free vent to their tongues. Then they returned to search other houses, till another commotion attracted their attention. This time there was news to tell, for one of the Afghans had hit upon some trace of the fugitive. With loud shouts of exultation, he issued into the main street of the bazaar, and called his comrades about him.

"Look at this," he called, holding his discovery up above his head, and beckoning a man with a lamp to come closer. "This turban is strangely gaudy, and I believe must have belonged to this feringhee. Where is he who was struck and bade us pursue?"

The prize which he had found was the turban, the color of which had been so much emphasized in the note sent to allure Alec into the city; and the find had been made at the exit of the narrow passage into which our hero had plunged; in fact, it was found just outside, lying in the main street, and was at once sufficient evidence that he

had passed through into it, and had then made his escape in that direction.

"See!" shouted the finder. "The turban struck against the roof of the passage, and in his haste he left it. Now to follow. But, first, is it the one worn by the feringhee? We have already been told that he was dressed as an Afghan."

"And that is the cap he wore," called the man who had fallen to Alec's blow. "An hour ago a comrade of mine wore it; but this dog slew him in the darkness of a passage, and then took his clothes. Bring the lamps, and let us seek for his tracks."

He forbore to mention the fact that not only had the Englishman killed his comrade and taken his clothes, but that he had also been so clever as to hoodwink those who were waiting for news of his own assassination, and had so deluded them that one had actually borne the body away, thinking it was the feringhee's. However, even had he cared to tell the tale, there were few who had the patience to listen; for at this time the blood of the Afghans was aroused, and especially in the case of the city population. Always of a turbulent disposition, it was a wonder that they had remained tranquil so long; but the coming of their chief moulla and of Mahomed Jan had roused them to fury. All their hatred was revived, and they counted the hours, longing for the time to come when it would be their turn to throw themselves upon the invaders. Here was an opportunity, and they seized upon it with enthusiasm. They rushed into the main street and hurriedly

consulted together. Then they separated as before, and scatter through the bazaar, vainly searching for the fugitive. Meanwhile Alee had made the most of the start afforded him, and of his knowledge of Cabul. Darting into the passage, he had found, to his joy, that it gave access to a yard, and that from this a second passage, a continuation of the first, went on beneath the houses to the main street of the bazaar. There was no time for delay; he could not risk a halt there to peer into the street to make sure that all was clear, and promptly he emerged, losing his turban in doing so. For a moment he hesitated whether to return and search for it; but the delay might have cost him his life, and he raced on without giving it further thought.

It took but a few minutes to reach the confines of the bazaar, when he swept to his left and headed straight for the Balla Hissar, knowing that once he could reach that spot he would be in comparative safety, for at that time the conflict with Mahomed Jan had not commenced, and a small force of British soldiers was stationed close to the Ameer's palace.

A hundred yards farther on he came to a square, and while crossing this suddenly found himself face to face with some half-dozen Afghans.

"Why so much haste, brother?" demanded one, endeavoring to stop him. "Come with us, and we will pass the night in feasting. To-morrow there will be little opportunity for food. Come, there can be no need for haste at this hour."

To halt would have been fatal, and Alec recognized the risk. Better to shake the fellow off and take to his heels again. In a moment he had made up his mind, and was in the act of hurling himself against the man who had accosted him, when the others closed round. Here was a dilemma, and Alec was forced to change his plans.

"Feast! Would that I could," he answered breathlessly; "but Yohinda Khan sends me with a message. Can any say where I may find the general, Mahomed Jan? If not he, then our moulla. Either will do for my purpose. Your answer, for my message is of importance.

"And it refers to what, comrade?" demanded the man who had first spoken, continuing to bar the path. "This message is of importance, and concerns the nation and the city. Come, tell us and go."

Once more Alec found himself in a difficulty. The voice of the man and the demeanor of those who thronged about him showed clearly that they did not suspect the messenger as yet, that they had no idea that he was a feringhee. Indeed, to give Alec the full credit due to him, he had, as has been already related, a natural aptitude for languages, and his command of the Afghan tongue was excellent. What message could he manufacture? Would it be better to pretend that it was so important that he dare not tell? No. These men had already been feasting, and to thwart them now might lead to serious consequences.

"I'll pretend to take them into my confidence," he said

to himself. "That will allay any faint suspicions which they may have."

For a little while he stood in their midst, breathing deeply, and making much of the fact. Then he beckoned them closer with his finger, forgetting that in the darkness they could hardly see.

"The message," he said in low tones. "I was charged to give it to none, but seeing that you are of the city, and that it concerns you and your lives, I will tell it to you. Hush! Come closer, for there may be listeners about. Now, hear what I have to say."

The mystery attracted them, and at once the Afghans crowded closer till they formed a ring about him.

"Tell it and go," said one of the men. "Your haste is evident, and therefore the message an urgent one."

"It is this," whispered Alec. "Yohinda sent me at full speed to give news of an attack. A spy has been found in the bazaar. As I left it the people were still searching for another feringhee; and this one who was found was here in the city for a purpose. Yohinda learned that the invaders are about to make an attack upon Cabul, having heard of our meetings. When morning dawns they will hold the city unless we can prevent them, and then where will our plans be? I am to warn Mahomed Jan, and tomorrow he will make such a demonstration close to Sherpur that the British will retire. There! Tell it to no one; but, if you will, hasten to the bazaar. It may be that you will arrive in time to discover this other feringhee."

It was a bold attempt to hoodwink an enemy and to escape from a situation which was more than embarrassing, to describe it but mildly; and, like many another bold attempt, it proved successful—the tale of a feringhee acting like a red rag to these hot-headed Afghans. They hardly waited to acknowledge the receipt of the message, or the favor shown them by the messenger; but, breaking away, went toward the bazaar at a pace which almost eclipsed that of Alec's as he ran in the opposite direction. Nor was it long before they came in touch with one of the search parties and heard their story. Only then did they guess that a trick had been played upon them, the discovery of that fact giving another clew to the course taken by the fugitive, and bringing a score or more of the Afghans racing after him. Alec heard them in the distance, and ran at his fastest pace. No doubt he would have outdistanced the pursuers had not other citizens put in an appearance, causing him to diverge from his course; indeed, before very long he was stumbling blindly through narrow lanes and alleys, vaguely making for the Balla Hissar. Sometimes he seemed to have outdistanced the Afghans altogether, and then, as he turned into another street, their shouts would come plainly to his ear, so plainly that after a little while he was forced to believe that he had entirely lost his bearings, and that he had been traveling in a circle. His position was desperate, and the appearance of a group of the men of the bazaar at the farther end of the street caused him to fear that all hope of escape was gone. But he was a gallant and a

stubborn lad, and reminded himself that he had been in more than one tight position before. He would make one last effort, and then turn and fight. A flight of steps was close at hand, and so far the Afghans had not caught sight of him. Alec at once descended till he reached a landing of stone, and, hurrying across this, was searching for an outlet, when the platform seemed to recede from under his feet, and he fell, reaching a stone floor some feet below with a crash, and with a shock which twisted one foot beneath him, and sent him sprawling upon his back. The place was densely dark, even more so than had been the main street of the bazaar, and absolutely nothing could be seen. Then, too, the silence seemed strangely pronounced in this spot, though as he lay there the distant shouts of his pursuers could be heard.

“Where was he? Where had he fallen to, and—hark?”

His hair bristled, while he struggled to rise to his feet and walk, only to sink to the stone floor again with a groan, for his right ankle refused to support him.

“Voices!” he said hoarsely, sitting up and staring into the blackness. “Hush! The men who were following me!”

He could hear their feet now as they came along the street, and their voices came clearly to his ear; for they were not hurrying. They were conducting a systematic search in this quarter while comrades hunted elsewhere; and these wily men did not allow a single likely spot to escape them. They inquired at every house and peeped into every passage. The flight of steps attracted their atten-

tion, and Alec heard the shout of one of them calling his friends to accompany him.

"A charming spot for a feringhee," he called. "The lamp, brother, and we will soon see if he is here."

Alec saw the light flash, and instantly understood what had happened to him. He had descended the steps into some sort of warehouse, and had then fallen through a trap into a room below. There above his head was a wide square opening, while dangling through it was a rope which came from a pulley above. That much he saw in the flash of a second, and recollected that his hand had closed upon the rope as he fell, and that the cord had cut the flesh. Then something else attracted his attention. It was a huge pile of loose corn stored at one end of the large chamber in which he lay.

"One chance left," thought Alec. "They are still at the top of the stairs, and I may have time."

Unable to walk, he crawled as fast as his arms and one leg would propel his body, and threw himself into the corn. Burrowing his way into it, he tossed handfuls over his limbs, and then over his face and chest.

"Was he covered? Did a portion of his clothing show?"

The doubt was sickening, and his heart beat and throbbed till he could hardly endure the strain. Would the next minute bring discovery and capture, or would the Afghans see nothing to excite their suspicions?

It was a question which would have driven many a man to desperation, for in that darkness who could say whether

he had concealed himself with thoroughness? And the time for concealment was so short that to even attempt it seemed madness.

"A storehouse," said a voice above; "but to whom it belongs I have no knowledge, though the dwelling above is big enough for a sirdar."

"And this place itself sufficiently large to hide a dozen of the feringhees. Hold the light so, and let us look."

"Sacks on every side," chimed in a third voice; "sacks of corn for the noble sirdar's bread, and a trap in the very center."

"A trap through which you will fall if you are not cautious," laughed the first. "And if this feringhee did by chance come here, that is what will most likely have befallen him. Place the light over the hole, and let us see what is below."

They brought the lamp to the opening, and while one knelt and stretched his hand through bearing the lamp, the others shaded their eyes from the rays, and endeavored to pierce the darkness and gloom below. But it is easier to see the ceiling of a room when the lamp is held closer to it than to the floor, particularly if those who look are above the light. And on this occasion only the faint gray of the stone floor below and a thousand dark shadows could be distinguished.

"Wait," said one of the men. "Here is the very thing. Tie the lamp to this and lower it."

"Hark! Stand still, all of you. I heard a sound."

"Then it was a rat disturbed by our arrival," was the

answer. "Listen now. There, you can hear the vermin crawling across the corn. There is a granary below, and it will be full of the beasts."

A dexterous twist of the rope round the handle of the lamp secured the latter in position, and very soon it was swaying over the opening. Alee, as he lay on his back, could see the light descending, and almost groaned. But corn covered his face and his mouth, and made breathing difficult, though it could not keep out the rays of light. Indeed, thanks to a few odd crevices, he could see the outline of the trap, blurred perhaps, but obviously there, and also the faces of three men. But the lamp attracted most of his attention, and he kept his eyes glued upon it.

"Three men," he thought, "and one lamp with which to find me. If they suspect that I am here, and attempt to follow I will dash at the light and kick it out and then——"

Suddenly the agonizing pain in his ankle reminded him that for the time being his days of activity were over; that he was more like a helpless log who must accept discovery and capture philosophically if it came or be hacked to pieces where he lay.

"A granary," he heard the same voice declare again. "Where my lord keeps his winter store. See it there, comrades? Enough to feed us all and our families."

"And a fine soft hiding-place for this cursed feringhee. Swing the light farther over toward the heap. Perhaps he is there. We heard a noise, remember that, and it has ceased now."

"For the reason that the rats are gone. We have scared them finely," laughed the other. "Yes, a grand place to hide in; but tell us how this feringhee reached the spot? The drop is more that I would care to risk even though death faced me."

"But this rope," the man who had spoken before exclaimed, with all the triumph of one who has made a brilliant discovery. "No need to fear the drop with a rope as stout as this."

"But there would be occasion for a friend," his comrade demurred. "Try the feat yourself. You are here above, and the rope is in your hand. Lower yourself, and send the tackle up to this position again. That puzzles you, and would have puzzled this dog for whom we search, particularly when you think that he had no lamp. Comrades, we waste time and patience. Let us be going."

The lamp was drawn up slowly and detached, and the shuffle of sandals was heard. Alec could count their steps as they went to the stone stairs and ascended, and could hear them, getting fainter as they retreated down the street. He shook the corn from his face, rose on his elbow, and listened. Then he fell back in a dead faint, overcome for the moment by the pain of his ankle and by the narrowness of his escape. When he came to and looked about him it was some little while before he could recall his scattered senses. Then he recollected his fall, and the corn in which he had hidden himself. He looked for it now, strangely oblivious of the fact that the chamber in which he lay was lit by a lamp. There was no corn,

much to his bewilderment, but a native bed of canvas, stretched between wooden uprights, supported him. Above his head was a whitewashed ceiling, far lower than that of the granary, and no aperture or trap appeared in its center. His eyes roamed on either side, and next lit upon the foot of the bed, upon his injured limb. Wonder of wonders! The boot and sock were one, and a cold linen cloth surrounded the ankle. Then a chair caught his eye. A native cup was upon it, and, raising his head, he saw that it contained some white fluid, which must be milk. He vaguely marveled who could have brought it, and then lost interest. His eyes closed in utter weariness, and he would have slept had not a sound startled him. Fear of the Afghans caused him to raise his head again and search the room till a second movement brought his eyes to the opposite side of the bed. A figure stood there, tall and silent, and dressed in the familiar garments worn by the enemy.

CHAPTER XVI

A Friend in Need

FOR more than a minute Alec Dennisson stared at the silent figure standing over his bed, remarking upon the height of the man, his calmness, his folded arms, and the richness of his dress. The face he could not see, for the turban was wrapped low down on the forehead, and the lamp was in such a position that the rays hardly fell upon the stranger. But whoever he was, he was of the nation of Afghans, that was certain, for his color and his beard proclaimed the fact.

“Then I am a prisoner, after all,” thought Alec, as he sank wearily back upon the bed, for the effort of rising upon his elbow had tired him. “But who can have captured me? and why is it that I am given a bed and am kindly treated, for my ankle has been dressed, and there is milk beside me? Tell me,” he went on, rolling on his side so as to see the Afghan better and without effort, “who are you, and why is it that I have been taken prisoner? Our men who have fallen wounded into the hands of your comrades have been hacked to pieces.”

“A fate which the lieutenant would have suffered had a friend not appeared to help him,” was the answer in calm, even tones, and in the voice of one who was of the

upper classes. "Because even in this country where hatred runs high, and where fierce vengeance is the order of the day, there are some who see the ultimate good of their country in British invasion, and who, while patriotic to a degree, can yet stretch forth a hand to aid the one who was lenient. Does the sahib not remember?"

Alce started as he heard the voice, and rose again on his elbow, the movement allowing a few rays from the lamp to strike upon the figure of the stranger. The voice seemed familiar; at least, he thought that he had heard it before. But where? And when had he been lenient to this Afghan? He puzzled his brain for a few seconds without result.

"You have the advantage of me," he said wearily, but with awakened interest. "Since we marched into this country I have joined in the fighting, and can think of few with whom I have been friendly among your nation. I knew some of the sirdars who were to be appointed governors of the provinces, but——"

"The sahib did not know me. We met at an earlier date. Let the lieutenant carry his mind back to the early days of the invasion, when I had the honor to hold the Ameer's commission in the Cabul Horse, while the sahib rode with an officer and some twenty mounted men who bore lances, to which small brown pennons were attached. There was a fight. The advance force of the British general's army had left wagons behind, and the men who wear a kilt were defending them. We thought to make a capture, and to boast of a first victory. But you and your

men charged down upon us, and we were beaten, while I was upset in the rush and lay beneath my horse."

"Ah! Now I recollect. You called, and I dismounted and set you free. You gave me your name, but I have forgotten it; and in any case, the act was a small one."

"To me it was of vast importance," said the Afghan, in tones which showed that he was more than grateful. "I am the sirdar, Sheer Afzul, and capture at that time would have ended in my death, for, listen——"

The Afghan noble drew a stool from the corner of the room and sat down close beside Alec, offering him the cup of milk as he did so.

"Perhaps you are tired and would prefer to sleep," he said, noticing Alec's weariness. "Later on I can return and give you my story, and meanwhile you can rest in peace, for there is little fear of discovery. You are safe in the basement of my house."

"I am wide awake now, and would far rather hear all that you have to say," answered our hero. "A minute ago I should have fallen asleep, for I own that I am tired. But my eagerness to know what has happened would keep me awake now. How did you find me and take me to your house?"

"That I will tell you; but first let me proceed with what I was relating. Capture would have led to my death, for I am known to have liberal thoughts, and a fixed policy with regard to the English and the Russians. Also I was deeply opposed to the massacre of the British mission,

for they had partaken of our salt, and were as sacred as hostages. Thus I gained many enemies, and had I fallen into your general's hands, evidence would have been produced by my fellow nobles to prove that I had had a part in the massacre. To such lengths do their dislikes carry them. One in particular is my enemy, but I will speak of him later. I have merely told you this to show that your act was a generous one, and meant life itself to me. I owed you a favor, and no true Afghan forgets his gratitude."

"And that led you to save me from those men of the bazaar?"

"By great good fortune I was able to come to your aid when you lay insensible, for, strange as it may be, in your dash for liberty you chose to enter my granary, and to fall through the trap which leads to the storehouse in which my house supplies are laid. I heard the crash, and I went to look, only to see a lamp swaying through the trap and men peering down. Then I withdrew, for I am not well loved at this time. But when they had gone I entered the granary, and bore you here in my arms. You are within a stone's throw of the place in which I found you, and for the sake of safety you are lying in the basement rooms of my house. The few servants I had have been dismissed days ago, for there is mutiny in the air, and thus there is little fear of discovery. The sahib may sleep now, with the feeling of security which is dear to all who are maimed."

Sheer Afzul passed his hand over Alec's brow, noticing

how hot it was, and then stole gently away. Presently he returned with a piece of linen which had been soaked in ice water, and laid it across his forehead.

"My cellars contain a store of ice, for we need it in the hot weather," he explained. "The cold will soothe your head, and you will sleep. Drink the milk, and lie down. To-morrow we will talk again."

He helped his patient to roll upon his side, and carefully placed a chair at the bottom of the bed where the injured limb projected, so that it might not be touched by anyone who might happen to pass. Then he took the lamp, and bidding Alec adieu, left the chamber. When he stole in again some ten minutes later the fugitive feringhee was fast asleep, breathing almost stertorously, while his face was flushed and heated, as if the events of the last few hours had thrown him into a fever. And, indeed, that was precisely the case. The excitement of his interview with the aged Afghan, the determination necessary to induce him to enter Cabul at such a time, and the subsequent events had thoroughly disturbed him. For no man may pass through an attempted assassination unmoved, and if to that be added a struggle in the dark, the haunting fear that enemies were about to seize him—enemies who were noted for their fanaticism and hatred—and that capture meant something too terrible to think of, it is little wonder that our hero was indisposed. Then his fall had been a severe one. He might have been killed, and as it was, had severely sprained his ankle. There was another cause for his fever, and Sheer Afzul, who attended

to his needs, did not despair when, on returning the following morning he found his patient light-headed and wandering.

"Young blood is hot," he said to himself, "and our friend has shown that he is impulsive and bold. In a little while the fever will subside, and he will be well again. Meanwhile, if he calls, there is myself to answer him, and none else but the walls."

In those two days he showed how grateful he was to the Englishman, for not only did he keep the secret of his hiding-place, though a search was made throughout the town, but he sat behind him and watched, lifting the cup of feed milk to his lips at frequent intervals. And at the end of that second day and night, as the daylight began to creep across the land, and show the sleeping camp at Sherpur and the sentries patrolling before it, this fine Afghan noble had cause to congratulate himself. For Alec turned over with a grunt, rubbed his eyes, and began to speak as if he were continuing the conversation which had been commenced two days before.

"You are in favor of the British, then?" he said; "and your friends are less friendly than before?"

"Some are of my way of thinking, but secretly," was the answer. "I have been less cautious, or rather, too bold. My views are known, and in these days, when our chief moulla stirs the people to war, and Mahomed Jan leads them, I have need to keep out of sight. Also I have an enemy, whom I mentioned to you. He and I are of the same age, and seeing that we are both ambitious,

we became rivals, though I was prepared to be courteous and friendly. This sirdar aimed at a court appointment, and failed, for the reason that it was given to me. From that day he was my bitter enemy. The sahib knows him, for I have the tale of the adventure which occurred three nights ago. Yohinda Khan is the sirdar, and his character is too well known."

Once again it was Alec's turn to show surprise. He sat up on the bed and stared at his friend. Then he caught him by the sleeve, and spoke earnestly.

"Can you tell where this noble has sent his prisoners? And who are the prisoners? Can one be my father?"

He waited for the answer as if his life depended upon it; for this determination to discover the prisoners had grown upon him. A few weeks ago, when he escaped over the frontier, and rode to tell General Roberts of the fate of the mission, his father's death seemed as certain as did that of the French count's. But someone had been saved from the garrison of the Balla Hissar. A native woman had been spared, and there was another. True, many a time a voice had seemed to warn him of false hopes. This prisoner might be anyone—a native, a white man, or one of the many attendants who looked after the mission. But then the old Afghan had admitted that the prisoner alluded to in the note, the one for whom Yohinda Khan desired a ransom, was a feringhee, and might that not be the major? Alec had thought the matter out till the possibility became a certainty, till the meeting with his

father and his rescue became the object of his thoughts by day and of his dreams by night. Now, perhaps, Sheer Afzul would be able to tell him the real truth.

"Would that I could answer, sahib; but this Yohinda tells his plans to few, and to me last of all. I know nothing of him, save that he took a prominent part in the massacre, and would long ago have been handed over to your countrymen had it not been for his many friends, and for the money which he has paid. Also he has been out of Cabul. That I know, for I have one trusty man who serves me, and has been with my house for many years. He learns much that is kept from me, and he has told me what I have repeated. I have never heard of these prisoners, and have no knowledge of their whereabouts; but I will do what I can to hear of them, and will let you know. Now listen to the news I have to give you."

He sat down beside Alee, and told him of the fighting which had been taking place, of the defeat of General Roberts' dispositions on the first occasion, and of his subsequent success.

"There is a big action to-day," he said, "and hosts of Afghans are swarming to the attack. Your countrymen may drive them from the hills, but in the end they will have to retire to the Sherpur cantonment. Then this city will be given up to anarchy, and all those who have been friendly to the British and to their aims will have to disappear, or they will be slain. You cannot remain, and as soon as you can hobble, you must return. I shall

ride from the city to my country place, where I shall be secure. When the troubles are over I will return, and communicate with you."

"And you think that matters will settle down?" asked Alec.

"There will be fierce fighting, even more fierce than that which has already taken place, and I know that the Afghans will throw themselves upon the cantonment. But they will be beaten. In the open they stand a better chance than they will rushing against steady troops, posted behind the walls of the cantonments. They will suffer defeat, and in a little while this part of the country will be pacified. The British will give us a new Amcer, selecting one who is liked by us, and who will guarantee to hold aloof from the Russians. Then this nation will see a return of prosperity. I and my friends have seen this all through, and though we are patriotic, we consider that we do better for our country in advising peace and subjection than in stimulating the people to fight. We are the guilty parties. We have treacherously slain a mission, and we should make reparation, and become the friends of those with whom our interests are bound. But let us speak of something else. How does the ankle feel now? The swelling has subsided considerably, and there is little heat about the part."

Alec had almost forgotten the injury, but now that his attention was attracted to it he was bound to confess that the pain had practically disappeared, and that the ankle felt almost well. Not that it would support him yet, for

an attempt to place even a small amount of weight upon it caused him agony.

"A stick to lean on, and a little more rest will do a great deal," said Sheer Afzul, "though it will be some weeks before you have the use of it as you had before. In three days, perhaps, it will be possible to limp along, and then it will be necessary for you to make for the cantonments. I will arrange everything for you, and meanwhile I will tell you of what is passing."

He was as good as his word, for, thanks to the old and trusted servitor who lived away from the house, Sheer Afzul was able to bring a report of the decisive engagement in which General Baker's force had split the levies of Mahomed Jan in two parts, and had beaten both, causing heavy loss. Then came the tale of the cavalry charges, and of the concentration of the various bodies of rebellious Afghans on the Asmai heights. The news of the final retirement of the British struck dismay into Alec's heart, though the sirdar reassured him.

"Can six thousand battle with thirty thousand who are in the open?" he demanded, with a smile. "Hitherto my countrymen have had chosen positions, and as soon as they have been driven from one they have occupied another, while more of the misguided peasantry have joined the ranks. Their numbers have become so great that your general has retired to the cantonment as a measure of precaution. His men will rest while ours harry this town, and commit all manner of excesses. When those are done with they will attack the cantonment, and, as I have said,

they will find the task a difficult one. You need have no fear for your countrymen, but for yourself there is much. I hear that already the bazaar has been sacked. To-night, or to-morrow, the ruffians who hang on to our armies will pillage right and left. You must go, and fortunately you are able to get along with a stick, though slowly, I fear."

"But the cantonment is two miles from this," said Alec. "How can I crawl that distance?"

"You will be carried," was the answer. "My servant will pick you up on his shoulders and bear you to the nearest point. There he will set you down, and your sentries will discover you. Perhaps even he will be able to carry you to the cantonments."

"And supposing we are seen?" Alec ventured to ask.

"You must be seen. The streets of the city swarm with truculent fellows, with hillmen and peasants of the plain. A dog could not pass without attracting notice. But you will be a lame beggar, who is carried about the streets searching for alms. There are many such—many rogues, I expect, who manage so successfully that they have the money to hire some lusty fellow to attend upon them and transport them from place to place. If you care you can be deaf, or dumb, or blind, for the matter of that, though you will have little fear of discovery. The sahib speaks our language like a native."

That afternoon Alec spent a considerable time in practicing his paces round the room. A stout stick had been

provided for him, and with this he was able to hobble about with some success, though the effort caused him no little pain. Still, he was satisfied that if the necessity arose he could crawl slowly, but certainly, as far as the cantonment.

"It would take me the best part of the night," he said, with a laugh, when Sheer Afzul appeared; "but I should get there. Now for the make-up."

The friendly sirdar had all in readiness, and soon produced a collection of rags, at the sight of which Alee shuddered.

"They are dirty and torn, I admit," said Sheer Afzul; "but, then, they may save a life, and it is worth while to suffer a small inconvenience for that which is dearest to the majority of men. Now dress, and I will arrange other matters."

He watched his patient as he dragged the filthy rags on to his limbs, and then proceeded to wind a turban round his head.

"It is cold outside," he said, "and the people of this city suffer much from rheumatism and toothache. It is your fate to have a decaying tooth, and so as to allay the pain you have a rag wound about the face. There it is. It hides more than one-half of your features, and this dark earth will do the rest. It will stain the skin in streaks, and that will be as it should be. Were you to issue out with a clean face people would remark upon it, for our beggars are the lowest of the low. Now, sahib, take the stick and practice the part."

He stood on one side, and watched our hero as he hobbled across the floor.

"Anyone, even a child, would be suspicious," he said severely. "You are a soldier in disguise; you hold your head high and look me straight in the face. That will never do. Crouch, Englishman; let your eyes be ever on the ground, looking furtively from side to side. Bend your head. It is by abject humbleness and whining that our beggars thrive."

Sheer Afzul took the stick and posed for the part himself. Hobbling to and fro with bent shoulders and sunken head, he stopped at the door, opposite the bed, or in front of Alee, and whined for alms, while he tottered as if he would fall through utter exhaustion. Indeed, he played the part so well that Alee was at first amazed, and then, struck by the strangeness of the scene, laughed till his sides ached.

"Now do as I have done," said Sheer Afzul; "do not allow a feeling of bashfulness to hamper you. I am the only one who looks at the moment, but when night comes there may be hundreds. And, moreover, your life depends upon the excellence of the sahib's acting."

He spoke severely and with marked earnestness, and reproved Alee more than once, when the latter, having taken the stick again, did not conduct himself to his approval. However, at length he deigned to express his satisfaction, and permitted his patient to rest.

"What does it matter if you have to hobble all the way?" he said. "Though I would rather have sent you

back to your friends thoroughly cured, circumstances make that impossible. And, as you must go now, better reach the cantonment safely, where you can rest and convalesce, than remain and risk discovery. Listen! You can hear the hubbub in the streets. The road to Cabul has been left open by the retirement of your general, and our streets swarm with ruffians, with disbanded soldiers of our late Ameer, and with villagers. To-night they will pillage and drink wine; to-morrow their excess will be greater, and then, at any time, they will attack. Tell your people that from Sheer Afzul. I am no traitor when I give you the information, for, as I have said, the sooner we are conquered, the sooner will the nation settle down, and our miseries cease. Remember, an assault is contemplated, though exactly when it will be made is more than I can say. Now we will have a meal before you go. Once you have left the place, I shall burn your clothing and depart myself."

That evening, after darkness had fallen over the city, Alec made ready to go to the Sherpur cantonment. The servitor, to whom Sheer Afzul had alluded, entered the room, and took our hero on his back. Then his Afghan master gave him precise instructions, just as he had done in the case of Alec.

"If a crowd is met with, put the feringhee down," he said, "and let him beg for alms till all are weary. Then take him up again. Beware of spies and followers, and, at first, do not take the direct path to the cantonment. When near the British quarters be guided by circumstances

and by what the sahib directs. Now go. A search may take place at any time, and that would end in disaster for us all."

He took Alec by the hand and bowed deeply, while our hero gripped his fingers warmly.

"You have saved my life," he said, with deep feeling. "I was worn out and done for when I fell into the granary, and anyone else would have given me up to the men of the bazaar."

"To help an Englishman is honor to Sheer Afzul," answered the sirdar, simply; "and when it happens that one to whom I am deeply indebted falls at my feet, I should be base indeed to desert him. Sahib, I have discharged my debt to some extent, but I shall contrive to help further. When matters settle here again I shall set my agents to work to search this mystery of Yohinda Khan to the bottom. And be sure of this—if there is a feringhee, and your people are successful in defeating Mahomed Jan, then that feringhee's life is safe. Yohinda Khan will never dare to slay him, for defeat will mean more friends on the British side, more evidence against the sirdars, and almost certain discovery of a barbarous act. Now go, sahib. You will hear again from Sheer Afzul."

The fine fellow stood at the door of the little chamber, stroking his black beard reflectively as the servitor picked Alec up and moved out. Alec caught a last glimpse of him, smiling and bowing. Then the door stood between them, and he lost sight of the kind friend who had sheltered him. A minute later his bearer was marching across

a wide hall, and having ascended a long staircase of stone came to a narrow door.

"We will look out first of all, sahib," he said. "The more haste, the more risk. Caution is always necessary."

He opened the door carefully and peeped out. Then he strode through it, and having satisfied himself that all was clear, returned and took his burden up again. They plunged boldly into the street, closing the door after them, and then commenced their long walk to the Sherpur cantonment. But the servitor had many opportunities of rest, for once out of the side street Alec saw that the main thoroughfares of Cabul were crowded with men. All were armed to the teeth, while a hundred and more banners rested against the walls. Shouts proceeded from all quarters, and at one spot some men were staggering away with bright-colored clothing and silks which their comrades were tossing from the windows of one of the larger houses.

"This is what shall be done for all the friends of these cursed invaders," laughed one of the Afghans. "We will empty their houses, and afterwards, when we are the powerful ones, we will slit their throats. That is all the dogs deserve."

For a little while Alec and his bearer looked on, as if vastly interested, Alec getting to the ground and hobbling about in search of alms, which the ruffians freely gave. Then they pushed on again, till a similar scene and a crowd of men caused them to halt again. None seemed to

suspect that the beggar and his friend were anything else but what they were supposed to be, and no one seemed to be following. It was therefore not more than two hours later when the lights of the Sherpur cantonment came into view.

"They burn but few lamps nowadays," whispered the bearer, "for my countrymen creep near and fire the guns, thinking that where there are lamps there will be soldiers. Does the sahib know what part to go to?"

Fortunately Alee did, and directed the steps of the Afghan. Some three hundred yards from the outer walls he halted the man, and bade him put him down.

"We will part here," he said. "Our men are on the alert, and already I fancy that they have fired at us. There is no reason for you to take the risk of a shot, and I can hobble the remainder of the distance with ease."

He searched for a piece of money which he had screwed into a corner of his cloak. Then he handed it to the man, and said farewell, thanking him for his services. A minute later he was hobbling painfully forward toward the lights. What memories they brought to his mind! what recollections of comrades and of congenial work, which a few days ago seemed lost to him for good! And now they were so near—if only he could reach them!

Ping! A single shot rang^d out, the bullet humming angrily overhead. Ping! Alee looked round, and found that he had unwittingly got between the sentries and a light in the town of Cabul. Instantly hobbling to one side, he again crawled forward, this time without being

fired at. Ten minutes later he hailed the sentries, his voice being followed by silence.

"Ahoy!" he shouted. "Don't fire. I'm Lieutenant Dennisson."

Then he heard the sentry cry out for the sergeant of the guard, and the movement of the men's feet. There was another call, and very distinctly on that cold night came the voice of an officer.

"Someone hailing us in English? Who does he say he is? Hold your fire, lads, but be prepared for a rush. These Afghans are treacherous beggars."

"Lieutenant Dennisson, sir. That's what the fellow said."

"Good heavens! Dennisson has been absent for a week, and has been notified as missing. Call him in. No! Wait; I'll go to him.

It was Harry Macgregor, the gallant Highland officer, and, satisfied that it was indeed his friend, he came out in front of the sentries at a run, and nearly wrenched Alec's fingers off.

"What a sight!" he said, as a lamp was brought forward. "By George! What rags! But you're done for. You've had a rough time. I can see that clearly, and all on account of that confounded note. Tom Bird gave it to the general when he reported your absence, and a fine wiggling he had, too, for not trying to prevent your going. But I'm talking too much. Sergeant, pick the officer up on your back and take him over to headquarters' tent. Lor! What an escape!"

The lamp was removed hastily, as already shots had begun to patter about the group, the Afghan snipers being forever watchful. Alce was picked up by the killed sergeant as if he had been a child, while the men of the guard set up a cheer, so glad were they to see him return in safety. Indeed, this last escapade had again gone the round of the small camp, and had brought him much popularity. Not that he was in a fit condition to enjoy it, for now that the strain of the last week was over he collapsed thoroughly, and spent the next twenty-four hours in the hospital. But before receiving attention he insisted upon giving his news to one of the headquarters' staff, and intimated that he had information that an assault was to be made.

Then he resigned himself to the care of the doctors and to the congratulations of his friends—congratulations which were not unmixed with scoldings at what was called his rashness. And while he rested the six thousand troops in the cantonment looked to their weapons and to their defenses, knowing that at any moment some thirty thousand of the enemy would rush to the assault.

CHAPTER XVII

The Grand Assault

THE Sherpur cantonment in which Alec Dennisson found himself after his fortunate escape from the city of Cabul, and from the toils of Yohinda Khan, was the same cantonment in which the British garrison had stood a siege some forty years before, and from which they had ultimately retired, dispirited and starving, with the object of reaching India. The reader will remember how the promises of the Afghans proved false, and how practically every man was massacred by the fierce Ghazees and hillmen.

Alec had many opportunities of watching the preparations now made, and of contrasting the demeanor of Sir Frederick's troops with that of those unhappy men who had once occupied the place, for the hospital did not claim him for very long. He was given a crutch and a long strip of bandage, which passed from his shoulders to his injured foot and supported the limb, and by this means was able to get about.

"Of course, the place is too big for six thousand of us to hold," said Jack Escombe, with a superior air, as if he had given special study to the matter. "Our men are precious thin at parts, and those forts near us are a

great danger. But I dare say we shall do well if the beggars attack. Hardly think it likely, though—do you?"

Alec emphatically declared that the Afghans would assault. "Sheer Afzul said so," he answered, "and he should know. Besides, listen to the beggars! Every hour they seem to get more excited; and once they have done with the city, and have tired of pillaging, they will turn their attentions to us."

The two stood at the western face of the cantonment, at its junction with the southern wall—in fact, in the corner looking toward Cabul, and nearest to the Deh Afghan quarter, that portion which was inhabited by all the ruffians and all the firebrands of the place. And, standing there, a confused babel reached their ears, while the thud, thud, thud of numerous tom-toms could be heard. There was a glare over one portion of the city, probably from a fire, for among the fanatical gang brought together by the Mushk-i-Alum, chief moulla of the nation, and by Mahomed Jan, were many incendiaries, who had been busily at work. Others, no doubt, thought more of the loot to be obtained, and, taking advantage of their numbers, of the confusion and lawlessness of the times, they spent their hours hunting through the best houses of the city, just as Sheer Afzul had prophesied they would, murdering all those who dared to oppose them.

"It must be a frightful time for the peaceful inhabitants," said Alec, recollecting the little which he had seen during his escape. "Mahomed's levies will find plenty of

loot in the city; and you will see that, when they have finished preying upon their helpless countrymen, they will begin to think of the invaders again. And you tell me that the Sherpur cantonment is too large for us to hold?"

The question gave Jack Escombe another opportunity of dilating upon the matter, and of showing his superiority.

"My dear young 'un," he said, striking a jaunty attitude, and beating his boot with his cane, "you only need half an eye to see that our numbers are too few; and if these Afghans really attack in force, and on every side, we shall have our work cut out."

There was no doubt that he had spoken the truth, though he had omitted to say that certain portions of the cantonment were practically impregnable. This, in fact, was the case along the southern and the western faces, where there was a massive and unbroken enceinte. Against artillery these faces would no doubt have presented less of a formidable obstacles; but, then, the general and his little force had contrived, by the boldness and rapidity of their dash upon the treacherous city, to capture almost every gun.

Elsewhere the cantonment was by no means so well protected, for on the eastern side the wall was only seven feet high, and there was a wide gap at either end of the northern face, which latter was constituted by the Behmaroo heights. Of these gaps, the one between the northern end of the western wall and the heights was the

site of an entrenchment and of a laager* composed of a large number of useless Afghan gun-carriages; in front were wire entanglements, and a village a little farther out was strongly occupied. The other gap was protected in a somewhat similar manner, the village of Behmaroo being also occupied, and prepared for defense by loop-holing the walls; in addition, a tower and garden in front of the eastern wall were held by our troops, and the wall itself heightened by piling logs upon it. The last position to be strengthened was the ridge of the Behmaroo heights, where there was a long entrenchment, with block-houses at intervals, and guns here and there.

The British force under Sir Frederick Roberts was undoubtedly all too small to hold such a long line of defenses; but the men carried themselves jauntily, for if their leader had had a reputation among them before, it was now enhanced to a huge degree. There is no exaggeration in saying that the soldiers swore by their little general, while the Highlanders, who had seen so much of the fighting, were ready to a man to follow anywhere at the simple beckoning of his finger; for your British soldier quickly learns to know when he has a good leader, and realizes almost instantly the fact that that leader has supreme confidence, not alone in himself, but in his men. General Roberts had indeed handled this diminutive force of his in a masterly manner. It was obvious to all that their numbers were ridiculously small, and that this dash into the country was hazardous in the extreme. An over-cautious leader might have retired to the defenses of Sher-

* A defensive inclosure formed by wagons.

pur, once he had gained Cabul, there to await developments, and thereby he would undoubtedly have partially lost the confidence of his men. Sir Frederick had, on the other hand, pursued the boldest tactics. He had never hesitated to throw his men against what appeared to be hopeless odds, and almost inaccessible heights were never considered impossible. Then, once in Cabul, he had never rested; he had dominated the city and the surrounding country, and had virtually taken the post of Ameer of Afghanistan. His very audacity lulled for a time the storm which had now risen, and which would most certainly have broken out long before had he pursued a milder policy. He was feared and hated by the Afghans, while, because of the opportunities which he had given to them, and of his faith in their gallantry, his small force were ready for any and every emergency. Very soon, too, their qualities of endurance were to be tested, for that very evening important news was brought to the cantonment by the man who had carried Alec there.

"The Sahib Dennisson!" he said, when he crept up to one of the sentries under cover of the night.

A few minutes later a sergeant appeared with the Afghan and an escort of two men, and halted just outside Alec's tent. As the latter appeared, and surveyed the messenger by means of a lamp, the Afghan salaamed.

"News from his honor Sheer Afzul," he said. "I have a letter here; and when the sahib has read, there is much that I can tell him."

He felt for the Afghan knife which was thrust into his

waistband, and, holding the sheath, pulled the blade out. There was a piece of parchment folded round it, which he handed to Alee, and which the latter eagerly scanned.

"To my friend the brave Englishman," ran the note—"greeting! The writer sends his messenger to the sahib with news, and bids him carry the same to the proper quarter. The desires of my friend are fresh in my mind, and I will never cease from making inquiries. Farewell! May Allah protect you!"

There were the simple initials of Sheer Afzul below, and nothing more. Alee turned to the messenger and questioned him.

"Then your lord did not leave Cabul, and he has sent me news?"

"His honor contrived to escape the search; he has friends who influenced others in his behalf. He remained at home while I went abroad to gather news. Our moulla, the Mushk-i-Alum, exhorts the men of the hill and of the plain, and he is gradually winning them back to the cause. They grow tired of thieving and of murdering the helpless. They have sacked the Hindoo and the Kuzzilbash quarters, and many of the houses of the rich, and now there is no more to steal. They recollect the Jehad and their enmity to your people, and at the signal of our moulla they will attack. To-morrow is the last day of the Feast of Mohurram. Beware of attack during that night or toward the dawn. Look well to the western end of your fort, for that portion looking toward the city will be attacked. But this is only to draw your attention. Thou-

sands will hurl themselves against the village of Behmaroo. For a sign of attack, look to the Asmai heights."

It was obvious that the Afghan had learned the message by heart, for though Alec closely questioned him, he could obtain no further information.

"The words are those with which I was charged," said the man. "I know nothing more of the matter, and have but one other message from my lord. It concerns the sirdar, Yohiuda Khan. He is gone from Cabul, and as yet there is no trace of him."

The Afghan took his knife and pushed it back into the sheath. Then he looked questioningly at Alec.

"If the sahib permits, I will leave at once. None saw me come, save the sentry; and it were well that none saw me go."

"A few minutes will make no difference," answered Alec. "We will go to the general. Sergeant, lead the way."

Half an hour later, when the Afghan slipped stealthily from the cantonment, the general had been made fully acquainted with the intentions of the enemy. In fact, he had long been expecting attack, for the Afghans had occupied the Meer Akhor forts, near the eastern face of the cantonment; and being driven from that, had sniped continuously, and finally occupied another fort. Then, again, Mahomed Jan had attempted to induce Sir Frederick to march from the cantonment to the frontier, promising a safe conduct if he would only consent. But a similar arrangement some forty years before had led to treachery

and a massacre, and the conditions were emphatically declined. Now, to show that he was in earnest, the Afghan leader caused his men to swarm from the city, while the moulla, taking advantage of the Feast of Mohurram, and of the fact that fanaticism was then at its height, went among the tribes, stimulating them to attack.

As darkness fell over the Sherpur cantonment on the following day, the men of the British force stood to arms, and fell in at the places assigned. Then, in silence, they waited for the attack. In the distance the hubbub of the Afghan levies could be clearly heard, their shouts and chants carrying far on that cold, dark night. The air pulsated with the thud of a thousand tom-toms, while the hollow sound emitted by those native instruments, the shouts and the groaning chants, were punctuated by the frequent roar of a matchlock, or of the more modern Snider, with which some of the Afghans were armed. Every eye in the cantonment was turned toward the west, to the Asmai heights, where the sign of the moulla would appear.

"Bet you a new helmet that the old boy will fire a gun," said Jack Escombe, in a hoarse whisper, as he stood beside Alec.

"Taken!" was the prompt reply. "My own idea is that he will light a torch; and I've no doubt that thousands of the enemy are now creeping toward us, and looking toward the heights. It's rather an uncanny feeling, and I can't say that I am very comfortable. I suppose you'll be with General Massey?"

"Rather," was Jack's reply. "We are to stand to our horses, and to be ready to dash out and cut into the enemy. You'll have to remain quiet this time, young 'un, and look on."

Alec smiled quietly under cover of the darkness, while he tested the power of his injured ankle.

"I shall hobble up to the Behmaroo village," he said to himself, "and get one of the officers to serve me out a rifle. I can lie down under cover and help to pepper the enemy."

He did as he had decided, passing the brigade under General Baker as he crossed the cantonment, for the latter were to hold themselves in reserve on this occasion, and were to be prepared to double forward and support any part of the defenses which might be severely pressed. Then he fell in with the troops who manned the eastern defenses, and, recognizing Harry Macgregor's regiment, searched for that officer. It was no easy matter to get the young Highlander to serve out a rifle.

"If I did rightly, I should put you under arrest, and send you back to your tent," he said severely, though there was a gleam in his eye which showed that he liked Alec all the better for the fact that he did not shrink from the danger, but, in spite of his injury, desired to take a part in the fighting. "That's where you ought to be—wrapped up safely in your tent, instead of here, where you will only be in the way."

"Thank you!" said Alec, ironically. "Thank you for nothing, Harry. Much chance there would be of resting

if I were in my tent, with guns going off and the enemy howling all round me. Besides, you know," he added, with a smile, "I shall feel much safer here with you and your men to protect me."

He had his way, and within a few minutes was posted among the Highlanders, a rifle with fixed bayonet in his hands, while an abundant supply of ammunition was attached to his belt.

"That 'ere aide-de-camp of Bob's," grinned one of the Highlanders, nudging one of his comrades. "Blest if he don't live for fightin'. Jest keep yer eye on 'im, mate, 'cos if there's a rush, it might go 'ard with the officer."

The gallant fellows passed the caution from one to another, for our hero had become quite a celebrity with the soldiers, and all ranks had seen much of him. Then, too, his capture of Yohinda Khan had fired their enthusiasm, while the courage which had caused him to enter the turbulent city alone in search of his father was an act which appealed to these simple-hearted men. So they arranged to take good care of him; and having done that, prepared for the coming of the enemy.

The hours dragged along wearily for the defenders, while utter silence reigned in the cantonment. Every eye was turned toward the Asmai heights, till the gray of dawn appeared. It seemed as though the information would prove incorrect, so long was the signal delayed. But suddenly a murmured exclamation passed down the ranks, and men gripped their rifles, for a tongue of flame leaped into the darkness from the Asmai heights, and then sank

out of existence. At the signal a storm of bullets swept over the cantonment from the south, the flashes showing that the enemy had crept within two hundred yards. Then from beyond the village of Behmaroo came the roar of the enemy, as if thousands were there. But not a man could be seen, though the din told that they could not be far away.

“Hold your fire till the enemy is in sight, and until the order is given,” was the command issued by the officer posted at that portion of the defenses where Alec happened to be.

The gallant Highlanders obeyed the order implicitly, showing yet again the staunch material of which they were made. Shoulder to shoulder they stood, waiting with beating hearts, till suddenly thousands of the enemy came into sight through the mist. Even then they made no movement, but waited resolutely for the command. At length, when the enemy were within eighty yards, the word was given, and a searching volley crashed into the Ghazees, who led the attack. They fell on every side, but those who survived never halted. Their moulâ and their own fanaticism had worked them into a condition of fierceness which knows no danger. Armed with daggers and tulwars, and with every weapon of defense likely to be useful, they came forward at their fastest of pace, the one object of each individual among them being to reach the British line, and there to bury his weapon in the breast of one of the invaders. It mattered not then what happened, nor how soon they themselves were killed, for in

slaying one of the detested feringhees they would have accomplished an action as pleasing to Allah as to their nation. "Allah-il-Allah!" their battle-cry, sounded along the line, and time and again the frantic men made the attempt to reach the British. But discipline told marvelously, and fire discipline in particular. All along our defenses the men were kept well in hand, and held their fire till the enemy were clear targets. Then, indeed, the volleys rolled along the face of the defenses, thick columns of smoke rising above the heads of the defenders.

Alec had taken his share in the action from the first. Seating himself upon a bowlder, he freed his leg from the sling, and awaited the signal. Then, when the word to fire was given, he joined his shots to those of the Highlanders. Once a fierce rush of the Ghazees brought them to within a few yards—to the abattis and entanglements erected just in front, and he could see even the gleaming eyes of the attackers. But he never wavered, and never even moved from his seat. His rifle spoke, while his shots told heavily.

"That fellow Dennisson has a lot of grit!" exclaimed one of the officers, approaching Harry Macgregor during a temporary lull. "He seems to have chosen a spot where there is little cover, and though I have watched him I have never seen him flinch. Look at him now!"

Alec was chatting with the Highlander who stood beside him; the very one who had taken him under his protecting wing, and hardly looked down as a slug of unusual size struck the rock upon which he sat. When he did, he

merely smiled, and pointed the place out to the Highlander.

"A miss as good as a mile," he said, laughing; "and that bullet gave the rock a precious hard tap. No, thank you, my lad; I'm comfortable here, and can use my rifle. There's quite sufficient cover."

"Grit!" was Harry's answer. "Why, the fellow's positively reckless. He's got some crazy idea about his father being still alive, and, I tell you, he will never rest till he has searched this mystery, as he calls it, to the bottom. And there's no side,* either, with all his pluck. He's a decent fellow."

Exactly what it was that the Highland officer meant by decent it would be difficult to define, but Alec was certainly as modest as he was bold, and was as high-spirited and jolly as anyone of his age could be. But it does not fall to the lot of every lad of his age to lose a father under such circumstances, and it is not to be wondered at that since his own escape from the Afghans, when attacked in the gorge, he had looked on life a little more seriously. He took this attack seriously, for instance, as if he thought that every bullet he aimed would help him to find his father, or to get certain knowledge of his death. Then, again, the experience which he now had of fighting had given him a coolness and a steadiness in danger which were commendable, and which had already attracted the favorable notice of his seniors.

"Look out! they're coming again," called out the officer in command of that section of the defenses. "Hold

* Pretentiousness.

your fire as before, my lads, and if they get in, just give it them with the bayonet."

A cheer answered him; and the look of determination, which had for a little time disappeared from the faces of the Highlanders, again settled upon their features. They gripped their rifles and felt at the triggers. Young and inexperienced soldiers would have opened fire despite the orders, for that is the failing of recruits. But these sturdy fellows kept their heads and their ammunition, and did not let off a rifle till the command was given. Then there was a repetition of the former attack. The Ghazees recoiled, came on again, and were finally driven off, though there were many exciting episodes, for some seemed to possess the nine lives of a cat. They fell at a volley, and sprang to their feet again, only to dash forward. Some reached the abattis, and hacked at it with their knives; while others, careless of the wire and of the pointed stakes, and other impediments, leaped at the obstacle in the hope of clearing it, and then thrust their way through it.

"Take them quietly, lads," sang out the officer. "Pick them off as soon as they reach the abattis, and do not fire till you are certain of hitting. Ah! look out for that fellow over there."

He pointed to one of the Afghans, a crafty man, who had fallen within some sixty yards of the defenses and seemed to be dead. But in reality he was unhurt, and taking advantage of the confusion and of every scrap of cover—for there are none cleverer at that than the Af-

ghans—he had reached the abattis and was crawling through it. At that moment, too, half a dozen of the reckless Ghazees reached the same spot, and at once the man was on his feet, his teeth clenched, and his eyes blazing with fury. However, he was not to reach the line, for Alec sat up a little higher, took a swift aim, and dropped him within three yards of the rock upon which he sat.

After that there was another lull, which lasted for some time, though the Afghans still kept up a hot fire at the face of the cantonment, their sharpshooters lying in tiny hollows in the ground, or taking advantage of scraps of cover which a European would have hesitated to use. An hour later there was another rush, which was easily defeated, and then the enemy again retired to snipe the garrison, their attitude being threatening, though not immediately dangerous. Suddenly there was an interruption, for four British guns were taken through a gorge in the Behmaroo heights, and, sweeping round, shelled the right flank of the enemy. At once the Afghans broke up, and the cavalry, taking advantage of their discomfiture, emerged from the cantonment, and fell upon them in the open. The movement was the signal for flight in all directions—a flight in which large numbers of the enemy were cut down, or transixed by our lances. When evening fell the surrounding country was clear of the enemy, and Sir Frederick and his little force were able to congratulate themselves upon a victory. Indeed, the defeat of Mahomed Jan that day broke up the resistance of the Afghans in that quarter, and practically put an

end to hostilities for miles around Cabul. That city once again was governed by our officers and policed by our men, while but few precautions were necessary when entering it alone. Elsewhere there was trouble, as we shall see—trouble which again called for the energetic action of Sir Frederick Roberts, and the quelling of which won for him even greater credit than he had already earned.

CHAPTER XVIII

News of the Feringhee

THREE whole months passed before Alec Dennisson could gather further news of Yohinda Khan and of his prisoners, the native woman and the feringhee, for his duties engaged his whole attention, and for at least a month after the defeat of the Afghans outside the Sherpur cantonment he was laid up with his ankle, the injury having proved to be more severe than was at first thought to be the case. Troops were sent out in all directions, and every occasion taken advantage of to see that the villagers had returned to their homes. But what spare time he had was spent in investigating Cabul.

“I mean to search every quarter,” he said to Sheer Afzul, when that sirdar came to visit him; “and if you will be good enough to carry out the work, I shall be grateful if you will visit the bazaar and the house where I gained news from the old Afghan.”

“I have done so, sahib,” was the answer. “No sooner were the levies of Mahomed Jan scattered than I caused search to be made. The old man is there still, but he knows no more than he told you, save that Yohinda Khan is gone from Cabul. The house in the bazaar is empty, and of the ruffians who served Yohinda none are to be

found. But I may succeed. Give me time, and it may be that my agents will gather information."

With that promise Alec had to be contented, though every afternoon that he was free found him in the streets of the city, now well ordered and excellently policed. He wandered through the narrow alleys and peered into the houses. Then, finding that the presence of a feringhee was sufficient to close the lips of all the natives, he took to disguising himself, and, with Sheer Afzul's help, wandered about in the dress of an Afghan merchant.

"You must be careful to keep the disguise undiscovered," said the sirdar, in warning tones. "Though we are now at peace in and around Cabul, there is sedition and fighting elsewhere, and my countrymen cannot forget that you are an enemy. Besides, you know their excitement. Were they to discover who you are, they would fall upon you instantly, and your fate would be sealed."

Alec took the caution to heart, and thereafter made a point of slipping into Sheer Afzul's house when darkness had fallen. Half an hour later a bearded Afghan would appear, dressed in snowy raiment, and apparently unarmed, though an experienced man of the bazaar would have instantly detected the long native knife half hidden behind his waistband. Then, too, thanks to the Afghan whose help he had, he had manufactured a story. He knew his position to a nicety, and could answer every question.

"You are a merchant—Abdoolla by name," said the sirdar, "and you have come from Guzni, where your house is. You are the son of Abdoolla Kil, also a mer-

chant, and you come to find orders for steel and iron blades. Keep that in your mind, and boast of your ancestry; that will gain the confidence of these natives sooner than anything else."

Alec found, indeed, that the advice was excellent; for, having practiced the part till he had it to perfection, he emerged into the streets, stroking his beard reflectively, and never hesitated to enter some booth or stall and talk with the owners. Once or twice, as he wandered through Cabul, he met officers whom he knew, and even ran against Jack Escombe and Harry Macgregor.

"That's a fine-looking beggar," exclaimed the former, as Alec passed. "And, by George, isn't he proud of his beard! He looks quiet enough, too, though I've little doubt but what he can be fierce enough."

"And probably—say certainly—took part in the recent attack," chimed in Harry. "But, I say, Jack, doesn't something about the fellow strike you as familiar? Is it the face or the figure?"

They stared after the Afghan merchant, and then followed, while Alec hurried away.

"Bet you a day's pay that it's Alec," exclaimed Harry, beneath his breath. "You know what a dogged chap he is. He hasn't said a word of late about his mystery, and about his father; but he's been at work, I know that, for Tom Bird told me how he comes into Cabul whenever he has a spare half-hour. It's a risky game to play, if that is actually our brother officer in disguise."

"Pooh! You are a fellow for discoveries!" answered

Jack, loftily. "You are better at finding mysteries than Alec himself. That chap there is an Afghan born and bred; that I'll stake my oath on. I'll take your bet. Alec, indeed! Why, the idea is preposterous! Look at the fellow scowling!"

They came to an abrupt stop, for Alec had become alarmed at their attentions, and turned an angry face upon them. He even placed his hand on the hilt of his weapon, an action which at once caused the two officers to turn back.

"We've had one turn in Cabul, and that's enough for a lifetime," said Jack. "Come along; you'll be getting us into another mess."

They walked off rapidly, while Alec slipped into a street near by and soon became lost among the people. But the meeting gave him food for thought, and set him wondering whether his disguise had been discovered. However, an hour later his attention was distracted, for, happening to walk into one of the numerous stalls in the bazaar, he found there a couple of natives, one of whom was undoubtedly the very man who had sat with the old Afghan, and had awaited the news of Alec's assassination—he who had carried off the body of his friend, thinking it to be that of the feringhee. To retire would have been to give rise to suspicion, and therefore our hero marched boldly in, salaamed, and offered greeting in the flowery language of the East. Then he took a seat, with his back to the light, and gently stroked his beard.

"I am from Guzni," he said, when the owner of the

stall and his companion had offered their good wishes and inquired, as was seemly, after his health. "I am the son of Abdoolla Kil, and I come hither to see the sights of the magnificent city of Cabul, and to learn the desires of my brothers."

"And mayhap to see something of the feringhees? There is much curiosity concerning them," said the owner of the stall.

"Feringhees! May Allah bring them to destruction!" Alec feigned indignation, and, turning his head, spat upon the ground, as was the custom among men of the bazaar.

"And swiftly, too! These heretics keep us in a ferment. There is no trade to be done while they are here, and their greed is so great that there is fear of a famine. It will be well for us when they are gone. But this matter of business, brother from Guzni? We will discuss it after we have sipped our coffee. Let the stranger rest and be content."

In truly Eastern manner they sat cross-legged upon a flat portion of the stall, talking in monosyllables, and on any and every subject but that of the mission which had brought the trader from Guzni. For in the country of the Afghan, as well as in many another Eastern part, dilatoriness is the order of the day, and it is discourteous to approach a matter of importance directly. Let the stranger first see the hospitality of the men of Cabul, sip *their* coffee, and rest a while. Later on, perhaps on the following day, it would be time to discuss other matters.

Alee knew the custom well, and though he fretted at the delay, and looked furtively at the ruffian whose acquaintance he had already made, he could but do as requested. He sipped his coffee complacently, displaying a flashing ring upon his finger. Occasionally he deigned to make some remark, but for the most part he listened, or looked listlessly at the passers-by. Presently, however, a few words from the ruffian roused him, though he still preserved the appearance of weariness which he had worn before.

"Our brother is from Guzni," he said. "May it happen that he has heard of Yohinda Khan, the sirdar?"

Was the man endeavoring to find out his identity? Did he suspect? Why had he asked such a question?

Alee sought for an answer, while he watched the Afghan closely, lying back in the shadow as he did so. It was a minute before he deigned to reply.

"Perhaps my brother of Cabul will tell me why he asks this information?" he drawled, stifling a yawn. "Is he a friend of this Yohinda Khan, or is he his servant?"

There was a half-veiled note of disdain in his voice, and the Afghan was quick to perceive it. He realized that this man of Guzni was of some account, and must be carefully approached.

"Not a friend, and not a servant. A follower," he answered. "I am my lord's right-hand man."

"And you ask news of the sirdar. He was in Guzni when I left, his business keeping him there. The sirdar, Yohinda Khan, is well known to me, and he it was from

whom I learned tales of these feringhees. The sirdar fell captive, and escaped. He would have come to take a share in the recent fighting had not Guzni called for his attention."

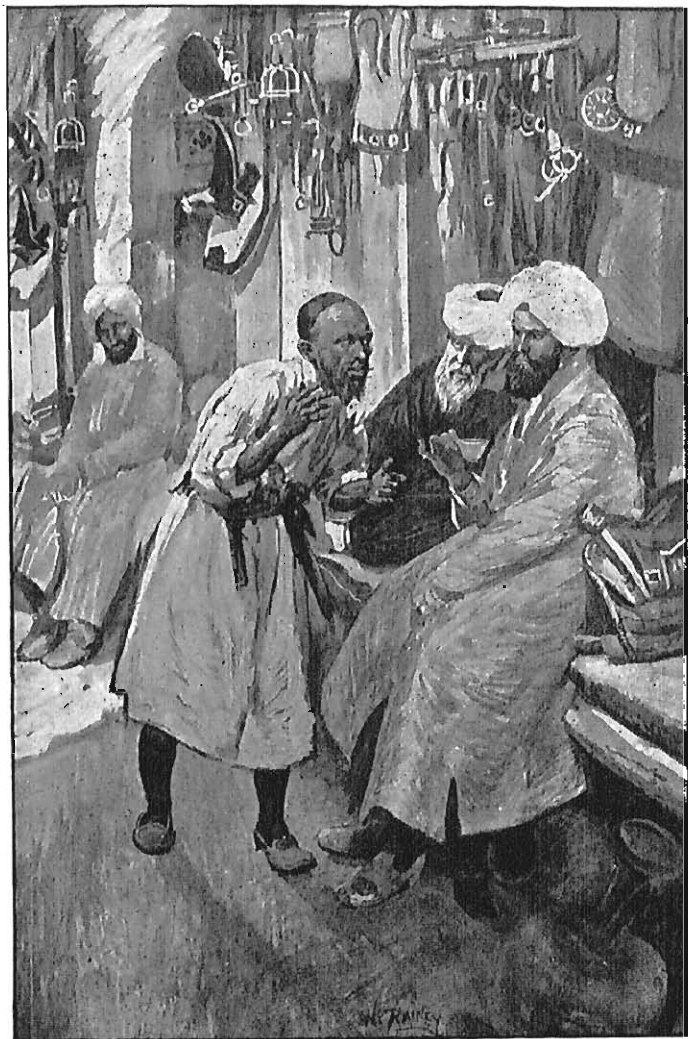
There was silence in the booth, the Afghan ruffian sitting up to listen to Alec's words; while the latter, together with the owner of the stall, leaned back at their ease. Not that our hero felt at all comfortable. He had again made a shot in the dark, and had leaped to the idea that Yohinda must actually be at Guzni, some eighty miles southwest of Cabul. If that were the case, the very fact that his hiding-place had been mentioned was sure proof that the two Afghans seated in the booth had no suspicion that the man who represented himself to be a native of Guzni was in reality a feringhee. It was a bold card to play, and Alec promptly followed it up with another.

"My brother asks me if I have knowledge of the sirdar. Mayhap he desires to send his dutiful greetings to his lord?"

"Greetings and a message, friend. I have looked long into your face, and when you spoke of the hated feringhees, I knew that I could trust you. Perchance my lord could do you some favor were you to convey my words to him. He is generous and rich."

Then this rogue desired to send some message to Yohinda, and the latter was undoubtedly at Guzni. Should he agree to accept the task, and what of the reward at which the man hinted?

"To do it for nothing would be unlike the people,"



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ALEC BARGAINS TO CARRY A MESSAGE

thought Alec. "I will be casual, for I see that the fellow is anxious. Then I will make my bargain."—"There are times when riches do not recompense," he said slowly. "Were this message a dangerous one, it would perchance bring me into the toils of these detested feringhees, and then death might rob me of my reward. For this sahib who is in command has a name among us. They tell me that our brave brothers who did Allah's will upon the men in the Balla Hissar, slaying them to a man, were hanged without the walls."

"And they speak the truth," exclaimed the owner of the stall. "Let our brother of Guzni take heed lest he incur their enmity. These men from India are terrible."

"But there is no danger of discovery. Can a feringhee see what is in the heart? Can he read a message which is not written upon parchment? Let Allah witness the fact that there will be no hazard. If our brother will, he can carry my words, and win large reward."

The man started to his feet, and thrust his face close to Alec's, showing his anxiety; and perhaps, also, because in his own crafty way he wished to ascertain whether this Afghan stranger would be difficult to deal with—whether his avarice would make the terms too heavy. As for our hero, he never flinched or moved from his position. But his hand went down to the tiny cup of coffee, and he lifted it languidly to his lips, displaying the ring upon his finger.

"What is wealth to men of our nation?" he asked quietly. "So long as we have food and warmth, and a

roof above our heads, what more do we desire? My tastes are simple, my wants few. But I have learned that we who live together should do all that is possible for our brothers. What is this message, friend, and what the reward?"

The latter part took an hour to arrange, for Alec demanded a figure which was out of all reason; while the Afghan suggested a paltry sum, knowing that he would have to increase it. Such is the method of doing business in the East—a method which hampers commerce, and would distract a European. Indeed, in many parts of the East this slow method of conducting sales and exchanges has existed for centuries, and will still exist into the future, unless some drastic change is made in the lives and education of the people. However, at length the vital question was settled, Alec slowly receding from his figure, though anxious to end the matter. He groaned over every penny reduced, waxing indignant in true native style, for he knew the manners of the Afghans to a nicety. Then came the message itself, and he hardly dared breathe lest he should lose a single word of it.

"These are the words of Abdul Habib," said the Afghan, leaning forward again, and speaking in low and cautious tones. "From Abdul Habib to my lord, Yohinda Khan, who lives in the stone house beside the grand minaret at Guzni—greeting. There is news that the feringhees leave us, and soon they will be gone. Shall my lord's servant cause it to be known that a feringhee awaits ransom? There is little time to waste, and mayhap if the matter

is delayed the opportunity will be gone. Let my lord send his answer swiftly."

Alec repeated the message aloud, taking care to make no mistake, for few items of news are written in Afghanistan; and the people are, as a whole, well trained in the carrying of verbal messages.

"And this feringhee?" he asked quietly, as he stifled another yawn. "Does my brother ask that he shall be sent with the messenger, to be ready for the ransom? Shall he be sent to this city of Cabul?"

It was a leading question, and artfully put. But Alec had to deal with a man to whom caution and craftiness had been taught since he was a lad. He suspected everyone, and trusted only when it was absolutely necessary to do so—and then only to a limited extent.

"This Abdoolla of Guzni is, without doubt, a man of stealth," he muttered beneath his breath, his brows contracting. "Were I to tell him all that I know, it might happen that he would seize upon this feringhee, and claim the gold himself."—"My lord, the sirdar, Yohinda Khan, will decide," he said aloud. "His word is law to me, and his messenger will tell me whether the feringhee dog shall come to this place, or whether he shall remain where he is now hidden. Brother, my trust is with you. I pray that your journey to Guzni may be swift and unbroken."

He rose from his squatting position, salaamed, and went from the stall, leaving Alec to finish his business with the owner. That, too, was at length arranged, our hero coolly

accepting an order at an impossibly low price for a number of steel blades.

"For delivery within one month," said the dealer. "Mark that, brother. One month from this date, and no later, else I shall lose all profit. This Abdul Habib bids us know that the feringhees will march from Cabul within a little while. They will seek to carry something with them, to remind them of the city. These blades which you will send will be mounted into handles, and my workers will manufacture leather sheaths. I shall then sell many, and the harvest should be great. But we will drink more coffee before you go. Our friendship has been most agreeable."

For the fourth time, at least, the tiny cups were filled, and the two languidly sipped the contents, while they watched the passers. But Alec's thoughts were wandering, and he hardly took note of his surroundings. The news which he had just gathered filled his mind, and he was puzzling his brains how to act. The first question of all was to settle whether this feringhee was in Cabul or elsewhere, and if the latter, where he was imprisoned. Alec recalled the evasive words of Abdul Habib, and pondered over them.

"He is a scoundrel of the first order," he said to himself, "but I fancy his cleverness gives him away. Supposing this feringhee was here. I know for certain that Yohinda Khan is at Guzni, for I am charged with a message for him. Is it likely that he would be eighty miles away from his captive? What would prevent this

rogue stealing a march upon him, and seeking to gain the ransom for himself? Nothing at all. It is perfectly clear that his share of the gold expected depends upon his master, and that the latter holds the secret of the feringhee's whereabouts. I must be going. I must say good-bye to this fellow. His slowness worries me, and I cannot afford to delay."

For the very first time he allowed his natural impatience to get the better of him, and rose without ceremony. Still, he was not the one to ruin a chance for the sake of a little thought, and he rapidly searched for and found an excuse.

"If my brother will spare me," he said apologetically. "In his friendship, and while partaking of such hospitality, I had forgotten others to whom I am charged to make my salaams. There is time yet, and I will go. To-morrow I shall turn my steps to Guzni."

There was the usual exchange of salutations, the dignified owner of the stall showing his visitor much attention, for he had hopes of making a fine thing out of this seller of blades. Then Alec turned into the roofed street, and presently was wending his way to Sheer Afzul's house. But here, again, his anxiety was not so great that it was permitted to spoil his plans. In Cabul, with its seething population, there are always the curious, the robbers who follow those who seem to have the appearance of wealth, who track the steps of those simpler folk from the country outside, and taking advantage of their simplicity, fall upon them and rob them of all they possess. Also there are some who spy into their fellows' doings, hoping that

some chance will put them in possession of a secret which may prove valuable. Alee halted at the corner of the street, therefore, and did not on this occasion venture to enter by the main gate of the house. Seeing no one about, he ran down the stone steps which led to the granary. Then he grasped the rope which dangled over the trap, and lowered himself to the room below. Five minutes later he was relating his adventure to Sheer Afzul.

"The news is so important that I shall go to the general," he said, with decision. "He has heard about my quest, and though he may not believe in it, he is not the one to throw difficulties in the way should there be reasonable hope of coming upon this feringhee. This I know now—the prisoner exists. There is no doubt of that, and I mean to recover him, whoever he happens to be. Meanwhile, Afzul, I have a task for you."

"Name it, sahib."

"This Abdul Habib must be taken, and held from communication with his friends. Then, should Yohinda happen to return to Cabul before he is expected, he will be unable to talk with this servant of his, and thereby learn of Abdoolla Kil of Guzni. Were he to do so, he would at once detect a plot, and we should be farther than ever from the feringhee. For myself, I shall endeavor to get leave of absence, and shall make for Guzni."

"Alone, sahib? Surely that would be rash indeed."

"It would be safer, perhaps, than if I took a friend," answered Alee. "I know where to find Yohinda, and I

shall hunt for him in this disguise; only on this occasion I shall be Abdoolla Kil of Cabul, instead of that merchant from Guzni. Once I meet this Yohinda, I warrant I will bring him to reason, and cause him to hand over his captives. What do you think of the plan?"

"It is risky, but offers hopes of success, sahib. Do as you will, while I will carry out this commission. To-morrow this Abdul Habib shall be a prisoner in this house, and I will hold him till I have your word to set him free."

The matter having been thus arranged, our hero changed his attire, and slipping into the streets, soon made his way to the Sherpur cantonment. Here he found the troops in a state of expectation, for a cavalry patrol had just ridden in with stirring news.

"There's to be a move," cried Jack Escombe, pluming himself upon his superior knowledge, and riding up to Alec. "I met our boys coming in, and I tell you there will be more fun for the division, or for a part of it. We've had certain information of the approach of troops from Candahar. They've been fighting all the way."

"And will a force be sent down to meet them?" asked Alec, anxiously.

"They say that the details of the division who will move have already been arranged. It will be a rapid march, and the move will take place to-morrow. There you are, young 'un. You see, even the general's aide doesn't know all that's happening."

He went off with a laugh, while Alec at once ran to one of the officers of the staff, from whom he knew that

he could obtain information. Then he went to his own tent, and hunted out a map. That evening all within the cantonments knew that the advance from Candahar, which Sir Donald Stewart was to undertake as soon as he could obtain the necessary supplies, was an accomplished fact. A force under General Primrose had been left in Candahar, with its communications kept open by General Phayre's brigade. Then the bulk of the troops had taken the road for Cabul. Their difficulties had commenced shortly afterwards, and now a native runner had brought to our patrol the information that these new troops were heavily opposed at Mushaki, some thirty miles south of Guzni. Now was Alec's opportunity, and he seized upon it. His friend of the staff soon was able to assure him that his name was down in the list to march with General Ross from Cabul, with the intention of joining hands with Sir Donald Stewart.

"Guzni is the place you mentioned, I think, Dennisson? You'll get as far as that, I've little doubt; and I'll see General Ross myself. If he has the opportunity, he will let you make a search in Guzni. Now, be careful. It isn't everyone who would put up with these escapades of yours. You'll go, of course, as official interpreter."

The news was almost too good to be true, and Alec could scarcely rest. But with Tom Bird's help he packed his scanty kit that night, including his disguise, and sent a note across to Cabul to his friend Sheer Afzul.

"Hold your prisoner when you get him," he wrote. "I am to ride with the expedition, and shall endeavor

to come upon Yohinda Khan before he has time to escape."

On the following morning there was a bustle in the camp, to which it had been a stranger for many a week. Men strode about more briskly, for the inertia of life in cantonments, with little to do, is always distasteful to British soldiers. The cavalry could be seen watering their horses as the sun came up, while in the transport camp the drivers were packing their animals with their loads. And opposite the tents of the brigade under orders to march hundreds of men could be seen eating their breakfasts, the European troops seated upon boxes or upon the ground enjoying their ration of coffee; while apart from them, jealously preserving their several castes, squatted the Indian troops, cavalry and infantry, their meal consisting for the most part of curry and rice.

On the road outside, the guns to accompany the force were already in position, their teams harnessed in for an early move.

Alec had no special place in this force. He was, of course, at the orders of its leader, for he was to act as interpreter. He rode, therefore, with Jack Escombe, who was detached from his staff duties, and was to act as junior to the leader of the European cavalry. It was therefore with a friend that he rode from the cantonment when the order to march was given, and with the same brother-officer that, three days later, he came within sight of Guzni, the town in which Yohinda Khan was supposed to be in hiding.

CHAPTER XIX

In Full Cry

NOW, young 'un, there's the place. What's the next movement?"

Jack Escombe stood up in his stirrups so as to obtain a better view of the town of Guzni nestling on the road below. It was a straggling place, smaller than Cabul, and looked cold and desolate. But to Alec it was the finest sight that his eyes had beheld for many a day. Now, at last, he was within striking distance, and his blood warmed as he saw the town, his pulses beat more forcibly, and he tingled with excitement.

"The next move?" he responded slowly. "I'll tell you what I think it should be. The general has given us permission to make a reconnoissance, and ascertain whether the people about are inclined to be friendly. They seem to me to be so, for there are men tilling the fields, doing their ordinary work. Therefore it is probable that the men in the town are quiet also. Then why should I not enter? If we go together, our presence in advance of the brigade might lead to a disturbance."

"And about the troop? Are we to sit still and wait?" asked Jack, in tones which showed that he was none too pleased.

"I want you to take the men to the far gate, and hold it till I come, or send to let you know of my success or otherwise. Don't you see? This fellow may have taken alarm at the coming of the troops, for, depend upon it, he will have heard the news. By riding round you will be able to cut him off."

The arrangement seemed the best that could be made under the circumstances, and the two young officers prepared to carry it out promptly. Alec leaped from his saddle and stripped his uniform off.

"Now, Tom," he said. "If you please, I will have that bundle of clothing. Now the mirror and the beard."

It was a strange performance to look on at, and it is not to be wondered at that the troopers, who stood dismounted beside their horses, smiled quietly, and winked at one another. Not that they were inclined to make fun of their officer, for long ere this the tale of Alec's loss, his persistence, and the fact that he now had definite news that there was a captive feringhee had won their warm approval of his efforts. But it was strange indeed to see one of their officers wearing such a costume, and transforming his appearance by donning turban and beard.

"Blue Beard," laughed one of the men, nudging a comrade. "'O'd 'ave thought as that 'ere bloke was our officer, Mr. Dennisson? They say as 'ow 'e speaks the lingo like a blessed native, and 'as been a-walking through them bazaars a-takin' orders for goods what 'e's supposed to sell. Bust me! But 'e's a cool 'un; and look at the trouble 'c takes over 'is dress!"

"Jest like a gal," was the answer. "But I reckon it ain't all a question of makin' 'isself 'andsome. It's life with our officer. If 'e was nabbed, do yer think they'd spare 'im? Rather not!"

"They'd jest think out some special sort of torture, I reckon. Ugh! They're a set of wild beasts, is these 'ere Afghans. Shan't be sorry when we're done for 'em and got clear of the country. It ain't 'alf a place to soldier in. Nothin' to eat but 'ard-tack, and not always plenty of that."

"But there's fightin', sonny. Heaps of it."

"Ay, that there is. But, blow me! Did yer ever!"

It was a source of vast amazement to these simple fellows to see Alec's preparations, for in the bustle of the march they had hardly noticed the complete arrangement which he had made for his entry into Guzni. Now, however, they understood why it was that a mule with native saddle had accompanied them, and why a pile of skins was strapped across its back.

"A merchant; didn't I tell yer?" said the trooper. "'E's goin' to do a bit o' business; only I reckon it won't be with them 'ere skins."

"It's what 'e's got under 'is belt. Did yer see 'im slip the shooters in?"

They commented freely, but in low tones, on the movements of their officer, smiling at the serious expression which Alec bore all the while. Then, as he shook hands with Jack, and scrambled on to the back of the mule, they realized that he was going.

"Good luck to yer, sir!" sang out one of the men. "Beggin' yer pardon, but we 'opes as you'll catch the chap. We'll be a-waitin' for 'im right enough if it happens that he slips past yer."

Alec thanked them quietly, and then kicked the mule, sending it ambling down the road; while Jack Escombe withdrew with his horsemen, for it would never do to be seen riding with the Afghan. Alec kept straight on for the town, and made direct for the main gate, his eye fixed now on the minaret which towered up from among the houses. There was a figure on the balcony which ran round it near the top, and he wondered who it was.

"Probably a moulla, waiting to see the British enter," he said to himself. "It is an excellent spot from which to watch; and should that be Yohinda Khan, he will see the men when they are within two miles of the town. But that will not matter. Jack took care to halt before he reached the top of the hill, and though we could see Guzni, I doubt that anyone here could catch sight of us. That fellow has disappeared. I had better push on."

By now he was within a few hundred yards of the gate of Guzni, and feeling secure in his disguise, he trotted boldly up to it. Afghan men and women were passing in and out, some on foot and some seated on donkeys and mules. Once he passed a fine camel which bore a palanquin, behind the silk curtains of which he caught a glimpse of a finely dressed lady with veiled face. Then he came upon the guard stationed at the gate, who

looked at him critically, salaamed to him as a stranger, and passed him through without demur.

"Now for the house which stands beside the minaret," thought Alec. "Once I am out of sight of the gates, I'll send this mule ahead at his best pace. Ah! I've turned the corner. Here goes!"

His heel went to the flank of the animal, and it broke into a canter, which soon increased to a gallop, the mule's hoofs clattering over the cobbles and striking sparks from them, for Alec had taken care to have it well shod. They swung out of the street which led to the gate, and guided by the minaret, the summit of which could be seen, made directly for it. Suddenly Alec caught sight of the figure on the balcony again, and saw that the man waved a piece of cloth. Was it a signal to the men at the gates, or to whom? He looked again, and the figure had disappeared once more, and so rapidly that the Afghan might have leaped from the minaret. The movement puzzled Alec, and had he been able to spare the time, he would have halted to investigate matters more closely, and to think what could be the meaning of the signal. But minutes were of the utmost value, and instead of stopping, he kicked the mule again, till it flew over the cobbles, slipping and sliding at times, till it was wonderful that the rider kept his seat. For it must be remembered that an Afghan does not sit a laden mule as he would a horse rightly saddled. Alec sat sideways, getting very little grip, and feeling that a sudden and more unexpected swerve might throw him to the ground.

"I'll chance it," he said between his teeth. "I've met very few, and they must think that the beast is bolting. I'll get across the saddle."

He changed his position in a moment, and then, feeling more secure, sent the mule round the corner and into the square, in the center of which the minaret stood.

"The stone house beside the minaret," he repeated. "There it is."

There was no mistaking the dwelling, for a huge white house was built right up against the minaret, and stood in the center of a courtyard which surrounded it on three sides. The fourth side was attached to the other building. Alec scrutinized it as he pulled in the mule, and noticed that there were very few windows, and what there were, were narrow and shuttered. There was a gate to the square, however, and he rode up to it. In a moment he was down on the ground, and at once pushed at the woodwork. Someone was within, for he heard the sound of a key in a lock and the shuffling of sandals. The man, whoever he was, was trying to keep the stranger out, and made no response when Alec called to him. Instead he managed to get the door to, and shot the bolt.

"Open!" shouted Alec, in the Afghan tone. "A reward if you let me in at once."

But there was no reply, while the shuffling sandals were receding.

"Then I must go over."

Our hero was not the one to be kept out by a mere gate, and at once he sprang at the top of the woodwork, caught

it, and drawing himself up, leaped into a courtyard within. Instantly he caught sight of the man who had locked the door. He was running across the square, evidently with the intention of escaping.

"Halt!" cried Alec, lifting his revolver. "Halt! or I will fire at you."

He might have saved his breath, for the Afghan knew the ins and outs of the place perfectly well. He leaped through the doorway and disappeared, and when his pursuer reached the spot, his heels were alone visible as he raced around the angle of the square and out into the street. Then there was the clatter of hoofs, and Alec knew that the ruffian had leaped on to the mule and ridden off.

"Then there was something in the signal. This fellow had been left behind to send a warning of the approach of a rescue party. The prisoners must have gone."

Our hero's heart sank into his shoes at the thought, for he had hoped—so careful had he been with his preparations—to capture Yohinda Khan before he could get wind of his coming. But he had not reckoned on the fact that the artful sirdar had a vast interest in deceiving this British officer. This Afghan noble knew well that to be captured now would mean loss of life as well as loss of the ransom for which he longed. He had but to keep out of the toils of the British, and sooner or later they would march from the country. Then, once their backs were really turned, and the orders had come for them to retire, the mere question of a ransom would not

bring them back. The exchange of prisoners could be easily arranged, and he would be sure of his reward. It was worth his while, therefore, to take the utmost precautions; and if Alec had been careful in preparing a trap, this Yohinda Khan had been doubly cautious. His spies had been stationed along the road in such a manner that they attracted no attention. They worked in the fields, and the lifting of a hoe had signaled the arrival of the enemy to a second worker nearer to the town, who in turn had signaled to the man at the top of the minaret.

"I'll search the house, and see for myself," said Alec. "Now, where's the door?"

He found it after a moment's search, and burst it in without ceremony, for it was locked. Then he ran through the rooms, throwing the shutters wide open so as to see into the darkest corners. People had been living there lately, that he was sure of, for charcoal still smoldered in a brazier in one of the rooms. But the whole house was deserted. Not a soul was to be seen, though it was certain that the inhabitants had retired but recently.

"And in a violent hurry, too," said Alec, as he hunted round. "There is food down below, and someone has been smoking."

There was the unmistakable aroma of a cheroot, the certain indication that one of the inmates had been a feringhee, for Afghans are not given to the smoking of cheroots.

"Horrible bad luck!" exclaimed Alec, almost in tears with vexation and disappointment. "I had better leave,

and run to meet Jack and the troopers. These people who are held by Yohinda Khan cannot be far, and perhaps Jack has made a capture. I'll go. There's nothing here to give a clue as to their whereabouts."

Once more, so that there should be no mistake, he searched the rooms, finding nothing. Then he was in the act of leaving the place when something in the room where the brazier was attracted his attention. He ran back hurriedly, and threw the shutters still wider, allowing a stream of light to pour in upon the walls. Then he gave vent to an exclamation of astonishment, for penciled upon the wall opposite the window were some words, while the stick of charcoal with which they had been written lay on the boards below.

"Save us from Yohinda Khan," they ran. "We three prisoners are helpless."

"Three prisoners! And one a feringhee, an Englishman!"

Alec ran close up to the wall and peered at the writing. Whose was it? Was it Major Dennisson's, or were the words penciled by some other officer who had been with the mission? The uncertainty was exasperating, maddening. He almost beat his fists against the walls in his despair, for who could say whose writing this was? The letters were rough and straggled. No doubt they had been written in haste and in the confusion of the enforced departure from Guzni, for below the words there was a deep scratch, as though the writer had been about to add his initials, and had been disturbed.

"No use looking any longer," said Alec. "Better get after them. Now, are they likely to be in the town still?"

He stood looking out of the window down the street, and quickly made up his mind that Yohinda Khan would never dare to remain in the town. Then he must be on the road, and the patrol must pursue him. Alec pushed his revolver back into its place and ran down the stairs. Then he clambered over the gate, and, much to the astonishment of the few passers-by, took to his heels and ran down the street. He was breathless when he arrived at the main gate of the city wall, and shaking with excitement.

"Where passes the stranger?" asked one of the three armed men who stood there, striding in his way. "Stop, and report the need of this haste."

"No doubt bribed by Yohinda," thought Alec. "Out of the way!" he cried. "My haste does not afford time for explanation."

He went on without a pause, and finding that the man did not move, pushed him aside roughly. There was a shout from the others as their comrade staggered against the gate, and when Alec looked a pistol was leveled at his head.

"There is no haste which allows of such roughness," said the man. "Stop instantly and report, else I will pull the trigger. Now, whither does our brother go at such reckless pace? Stand and tell us."

Alec halted, seeing the muzzle staring into his face. Then he retraced his steps slowly, his willingness to obey

causing the man to lower his weapon. He turned to his comrades with a smirk and a look of triumph, and then faced the stranger again. When he did so it was his turn to look into the muzzle of a firearm, for a revolver almost touched his forehead.

"There are times," said Alec, breathlessly, "when it is unwise to ask questions of a stranger, or to attempt to delay him when he is running in haste. And there are some who do not care to tell their business to loafers about the gates. I am one of those, and more than that, I dislike to have you watching my course. You know this weapon? It has the lives of six men in the barrel. I advise you and your comrades to retire into the guard-house."

He meant every word he uttered, and these Afghans realized the fact at once. Had they been of the order of the Ghazees, the fanatics who stop at nothing, and who would fling themselves to certain death in the slaying of a heretic, they would without doubt have declined to follow the advice, and would have thrown themselves upon this bold stranger. But they had had their pay from Yohinda. They had done their best to arrest any who tried to follow; and above all, a tall, bearded, and stern man, armed with a strange weapon, scowled darkly at them. They turned sullenly and withdrew.

"One moment," said Alec, suddenly. "A man rode through this gate on a mule some few minutes ago. Is that not so? Answer with the truth, and swiftly."

This time there was a menace in his voice, and the

last of the Afghans trembled at the sound. He was the one who had up to this spoken not a word, and at that instant was about to enter the guardhouse. But he swung round, salaamed humbly, and answered:

"A man on a mule?" he said. "No, not through this gate. Not a single Afghan has passed within the last hour."

Alec was nonplussed. He had felt sure that the ruffian who had galloped away on his mule must have gone by this gate, for he would be following Yohinda Khan and his three prisoners. Then why had he gone in the opposite direction? for the plans of Guzni showed two gates only, and no other exits from the town. Could the prisoners have been taken through the other gate, or was it possible that they were still in Guzni?

Suddenly Alec thought of the people he had passed as he entered, and the camel with its palanquin returned to his memory. There had been a second camel, following closely, and he had noticed that the villagers who marched close beside them were sturdy-looking ruffians, who bore arms.

"I believe I have got a clew," he almost shouted. "If they have not come this way, then Jack will not have caught them, and he will have seen no one. I must reach him and his men as soon as possible, and then——"

He strode across to the guard-house, and called to the Afghan who had spoken.

"Come outside," he said sternly. "Now," he continued, when the fellow appeared, looking scared and

frightened, "this man who rode a mule did not leave by this gate, you said. Did a man without a mule? Answer."

"No one has passed for more than an hour. Your honor hears the truth."

"Did the sirdar, Yohinda Khan, leave by this way to-day or earlier?"

Alec could see that the man was hesitating. He would lie if he thought that the consequences would not be severe. He needed forcible and unpleasant persuasion. It was a case for the revolver again.

"Reply at once, and truthfully," he said quietly, raising his weapon. "I have too big a stake in this matter to permit a lie from you to cause me to fail. The truth, or——"

"Your excellency shall know. Yohinda passed out by the same gate as that by which you entered. May the Prophet deal unkindly with me if I speak not the truth. He left with two camels, and he paid us money to arrest any who followed if not dressed as a feringhee. He expected an Afghan of your appearance, and he desired that we should lead you to believe that he had passed this way. Sahib, your pardon. We are not altogether to blame."

The man sniveled and whined, while his knees shook against one another. For the tales of British prowess had reached Guzni, and he had taken good heed of them.

Our hero hardly waited to hear the last of his words, for now he was sure that he was on the right road to recover the prisoners, whoever they might happen to be.

He picked up the tail of the cloak which hung over his shoulders, threw the heavy native knives from his belt, and thus lightened took to his heels, running at his fastest pace toward the open country. Once or twice he passed villagers going in the same direction, or townsmen returning to Guzni. But none interfered with him. They watched his figure for a little while in vast amazement, for your Afghan cannot understand the reason for haste, unless it be in warfare. Then they exclaimed loudly, calling upon Allah, and with that went on their way, imagining that the man who had passed them must be mad. Half a mile from the gates Alec saw horsemen, and came toward them shouting and waving his arms. Presently they saw him, and in a minute or more Jack and the troopers rode up. Alec at once swung himself into his saddle, for Tom Bird had led the horse.

"They have gone by the other gate. There are three prisoners," he gasped. "I can't tell you all. I've been running. Gallop!"

He clapped spurs to his horse and sent it down the road toward the town. Arrived at the gates he led the way through the streets of Guzni, scattering the people and striking sparks from the cobbles. Shutters were thrown open and townsmen peered from the windows. Others, seeing the mad cavalcade, squeezed into the doorways, scowling or shouting curses as the feringhees clattered past them. But none of the troopers took any notice of the Afghans. They followed the figure riding in advance, the bearded Afghan whom they knew to be an officer; and

soon they were out through the opposite gate, and were hammering over the open road.

"Two camels with palanquins," shouted Alec, having recovered his breath a little. "They have the better part of an hour's start. A sovereign to every man if we catch them up, and two if one of the prisoners is my father."

A cheer answered him, and the men settled down into their saddles and pulled their horses in a little, for if the runaways had an hour's start their own animals would be foundered before they came up with them.

"Steady!" cried Jack, endeavoring to curb his friend's impetuosity. "We shall be stranded ourselves unless we take it easier. And, besides, are we on the right road?"

That question caused the two leaders to pull in altogether and consult.

"You see, young 'un, we are on the road leading to Cabul," said Jack. "Do you think that they would come this way, where they would meet our troops?"

"They will have branched off, certainly. I never thought of that. We must ask some of the natives. There is a man working in the fields over there; I'll speak to him."

Alec trotted toward the Afghan, and drew up within a pace of him, the man looking very much as if he would have like to bolt; for, had the truth been known, he was no lover of the invaders, and was a friend to Yohinda Khan, for the reason that the latter had bribed him to watch for the coming of the British.

"I know nothing," he answered, with a scowl and a curse as Alec interrogated him. "I have been at work

since early morning, and have seen no camels leave the town. People have come and gone, but am I to take note of everyone? I am busy, and do not wish to be disturbed."

"And I am anxious to find these people," answered Alec, stubbornly. "To the one who gives me the necessary information—the correct information, mind you—there will be a handsome reward. A hundred rupees for the truth. Where has this party with the camels gone?"

The man's eyes sparkled, and he was on the point of speaking. Alec could see that he hesitated, and that if he wished he could tell all he desired to know. But it happened that this Afghan had seen but little of the invaders, and what little he had seen of them, added to the tales which he had heard, had roused in his mind a furious hatred of the foreigners. Why, then, should he help them in a matter of this sort, even for gold? True, by doing so he would be taking money from both sides, a clever arrangement to which he was quite partial; but even then, why should he give help? A sudden thought struck him.

"I will give this fool of a feringhee who dresses as one of ourselves false news of Yohinda Khan, the sirdar, and thereby obtain the reward. Thus shall I be doing well for myself, while preserving the secret which I have been paid to keep."

Alec could see that the man was considering the question, and, knowing the natives of the country as he did, at once guessed what his thoughts must be.

"To the man who tells where they have gone there will be a reward," he said quietly. "That I faithfully promise, and one of the troopers shall remain with him to see to the payment. But if the news prove false—well, you know what your own nobles would do, and how they would reward the man who misled them."

There was a menace in his voice, though he spoke quite quietly; and the suggestion that a trooper should remain helped to alter the Afghan's determination. He looked at Alec from beneath his brows, shuffled uncasily, and then quickly changed his tune.

"The feringhees have proved too strong for us," he said. "I will speak the truth on condition that the sirdar, Yohinda Khan, be not told of my complicity. Let the horsemen turn to the left sharply as the hill rises. There is a country track which leads along the foot of the hills. That is the direction taken, and there these fugitives will be found."

Alec turned his horse without a word, and galloped off to the troop. A minute later they were trotting briskly along the road, one disconsolate Lancer breaking from the party and riding across to the Afghan.

"You've got ter be watched, my precious beauty," he said somewhat caustically, oblivious of the fact that the man could not understand a word of his language. "To be took care of, don't yer know, till the young officers come back. If you get tryin' any hankey-pankey I've got ter hold yer, and if that ain't possible, to run yer down. Them's the orders, and you've had yer warnin'.

Now be careful, 'cos this here lance has been at the game before, and knows jost how to pick up a darkie."

He slipped from his saddle, and took the rein over his arm. Then he thrust the butt of the lance into the ground against his toe, and squatting on a boulder drew out a black pipe and a cake of tobacco.

"None o' yer blessed tricks, Johnny, me boy," he said. "'Ave a quiet smoke, if yer like, and make yerself 'appy. But no monkey tricks. Savvy?"

The Afghan evidently did "savvy," for he looked askance at the Lancer and at his strange implement of warfare. This very pleasant and easy-going feringhee puzzled and awed him, and he did as directed, stood looking after Alec's party, congratulating himself over and over again on the happy fact that he had actually given correct information, and therefore might expect reward instead of punishment.

CHAPTER XX

To Candahar

TO the left, Jack, and now along beside the hills. We're going to catch these fellows."

"And I'm beginning to think that there must be something in this mystery of yours. But don't have too much faith in the idea that one of the prisoners will be your father. Halloo! What's that?"

"A native fort of sorts. Mud walls, loopholed, a house, and a bit of a tower. The kind of thing that one sees all over this part of Afghanistan. Built, I suppose, to afford a refuge in case of tribal warfare."

"And as a splendid resting-place for this fellow Yohinda. You can see the track for five miles ahead, and there isn't a camel. Alec, we shall find them there."

"And we will rush them. We can't wait. They might kill their prisoners."

"Then we'll surround the place. Put men all round, and keep a little force for the attack. Then there'll be no riding away for this sirdar fellow. But hadn't we better trot along the track as if we were going to pass the fort? That will allow us to come closer without warning them of our intentions."

"And we shall be close enough to gallop straight for

the place. You're in command, Jack. Give the men an idea and tell them off."

The two young officers had been riding neck and neck, and during the few minutes which had passed had been talking rapidly, Alec telling his friend of the message penciled upon the wall, and of the news which the Afghan working in the fields had given him. They had taken the field-track to the left as the hill rose, over which ran the main road; and now, as they trotted along at the foot of the range of hills, they could see the track for miles ahead. A plain spread out before them, and no hiding-place was afforded save by the mud fort. They watched it closely, but the enemy gave no sign. No turbaned head could be seen on the summit of the fort, while the windows—what few there were—were closely shut. The troop of Lancers followed on the heels of their officers, each man keenly alive to the situation, and burning to make a capture. By now they had the details of the strange affair by heart, and knew how eager was the officer whom they had watched that morning as he donned the strange garments worn by the Afghans. They had entered into the fun of that mad gallop through the town of Guzni, glorying in the fact that they, a tiny force of hostile horsemen, should be the only ones among so many of the enemy. And now, as Jack shouted his news over his shoulder, the hearty fellows gripped their lances and straightened themselves.

"Leading three files will break away when I give the command," he said. "They will surround the fort and

watch for Afghans or others attempting to break away. Remainder will turn and gallop for the gate. They will dismount under cover of those trees a hundred yards from it, and two men will hold the horses. The others will follow with their carbines. We want to rush that fort, my lads."

At another time they would have answered him with a cheer; but there was need for silence. It would not do to let the enemy know their intentions, if it happened, as seemed most likely, that they were actually hiding in the fort. The place must be surprised—taken with a rush, as Jack Escombe had said. How eagerly did Alec fix his eyes on the fort, watching for some sign of Yohinda! And presently he was rewarded; for as the patrol of Lancers swept along the track and arrived nearly opposite the fort, riding as if they would pass it without a halt, something white showed for an instant above the tower. A moment later his advance brought two large loopholes on opposite sides of the tower into line, and against the light showing through them he saw a man dressed in Afghan costume.

"They are there!" he cried triumphantly. "I saw a man."

"Break away!" shouted Jack. "Remember, gallop for the trees."

They went at a mad gallop across the sun-baked soil, kicking up a cloud of dust which trailed in the air behind them. Soon they were at the trees, where they at once slipped from their saddles. There was a half-minute's

pause, while reins were handed to those told off to hold the horses—unfortunate individuals who looked little pleased at the lot which had fallen to them. Carbines were dragged from the long leather buckets, and the men fell in behind their officer.

“A pistol, I think,” said Jack, as the crack of a weapon came to their ears. “And there goes another. Surely they are not firing at this range?”

“It must be the prisoners,” shouted Alec. “There is another. They are holding their captors away. Let us rush for it.”

There was no need to give another word of command, and the Lancers needed no further encouragement. They took to their heels and rushed toward the fort, aiming for the gateway. And now a rifle flashed from the tower, a bullet shrieking above their heads. A second and a third shot had equal want of success, for it is no easy matter to hit running figures, particularly when posted at a higher elevation.

“The gate is barred. Push it in,” cried Jack.

They flung themselves against it till the woodwork bent; but the bolts held firmly.

“Follow me over the top. Someone give me a leg up.”

Alec leaped at the top rail, allowing his revolver to dangle from his wrist. A lanky Lancer caught his leg, and with a mighty heave threw him to the top. Over he floundered, a shot striking the ledge beside his hand as he did so, and throwing splinters of wood in the face of the

man who was following. But none of the attackers noticed such a trifling thing. They vied with one another in their eagerness to clamber over the gate, and they followed Alec so quickly that he had hardly reached the ground before others were beside him.

"The door, sir," called out one of the men. "It's here, round the corner, and——"

His words were cut suddenly short, for an Afghan peered round the corner, and took a hasty aim. At that point-blank range he could hardly miss, and as it was his bullet struck the Lancer's hand, perforated it, and then hit the gate with a thud which nearly carried the lead to the farther side.

"That's yer game, is it!" shouted the Lancer. "Then here's for you."

He sprang in front of Alec and dashed round the corner, our hero following closely. He was just in time to see the fine fellow close with the Afghan. With a swing of his carbine he knocked the fellow's rifle from his hands, smashing the stock of his own weapon. He threw it to the ground, and with a spring was on the enemy. The struggle had hardly commenced before it was over, for the Lancer was maddened with the pain of his wound, and fury had added to his natural strength. He took the Afghan by the neck with both hands and lifted him bodily. Then he threw him against the wall of the fort with terrific force, killing him instantly, for the hapless man's head struck the building heavily.

Meanwhile Alec had darted past the Lancer, and seeing

a door standing ajar, rushed at it. It was shut in his face, and he could hear the bolts being pushed home.

"Jest a moment, sir," said one of the Lancers, running up. "This'll stop their game."

He put the muzzle of his carbine within an inch of the door and pulled the trigger.

"Now push," he shouted. "One, two, three!"

It refused to give, even when two more men added their weight to Alec's. But Jack Escomb had a remedy, and quickly made the fact known.

"We can't afford to wait," he cried. "Try what a boulder will do. Johnson, you are the biggest."

The man he had alluded to—the very one who had taken the Afghan by the neck a few moments before—grasped his meaning instantly.

"Stand aside," he said curtly. "Here goes."

He stooped over a huge boulder, many of which lay about in the compound within the walls of the fort, and with a hoist lifted it above his shoulder. Then he took a short run, and when within two yards of the door threw his missile against it. It was a happy suggestion, for the weight splintered the wood and fractured the bolts. The door flew wide open with a bang, disclosing a wide entrance, against the wall of which lay a man, coughing feebly.

Alec was the first to enter. He dashed through the doorway, and, seeing a curling staircase, ran up it. Near the top a pistol snapped, and he felt the bullet pass through his turban. But he did not stop. With a bound

he reached the landing from which the shot had been fired, and caught sight of a retreating figure racing up another flight.

"Follow!" he shouted. "Up the stairs."

Jack Escomb was now beside him, and together they rushed for this second flight, the Lancers following closely. Shots were fired at them, and as they neared the top a number of Afghans appeared against the light, standing with drawn knives and tulwars. Alec recognized two of them—Yohinda Khan and the man who had charge of the native woman when crossing the bazaar in Cabul. He lifted his revolver and fired at Yohinda; but the aim was faulty, and the bullet struck the man beside him. It had the effect, however, of causing the others to withdraw.

"Don't give them a moment!" shouted Jack. "Rush on them at once."

Carrying the point of his sword well before him, and accompanied by his friend, he ran up the remaining steps and emerged upon the roof. There were the enemy, ten in number, grouped in one corner, and undoubtedly prepared for resistance.

"Drop your weapons instantly, or we will fire," called out Alec, in the Afghan tongue. "Surrender!"

"On them! Fling yourselves against the feringhees!"

Yohinda Khan sprang to the front of his followers, his eyes blazing with fury, for he was cornered. This Englishman had never ceased to dog his movements, and had at length cast the net about him. Surrender meant death, while a continuance of the conflict held out some hope of

escape. He was desperate, and desperation lent him courage. His arm went up above his shoulder, while the hand grasped an empty pistol. He threw it suddenly, aiming for the one who had called upon his men to surrender. But Alec easily dodged the missile, and before the sirdar could step forward had covered him with his revolver. This time there was to be no mistake. He aimed carefully, and, just as the Afghan leaped toward him, pulled the trigger, bringing Yohinda Khan crashing upon the roof.

"Lay down your arms," he repeated sternly. "You see what has happened to your leader. You will be treated in the same way if you do not surrender instantly."

The fate of the sirdar thoroughly scared his followers, and now that they had not his example to follow they surrendered.

"Place a guard over them," said Jack, calling to his sergeant. "Now, Alec, where are the prisoners?"

"They are in the room below," surlily replied one of the Afghans, when our hero questioned him; "they have barred the door."

A minute later the two young officers, who had led the attack on the fort, were thundering at the door of the big apartment which filled that portion of the fort.

"Who is there?" they heard someone ask. "If Yohinda Khan, he will be shot."

Alec gave vent to a shout of triumph. "Open, open!" he called out, while his foot thundered at the door. "Yohinda is dead. Open!"

It was the greatest moment in his life. He trembled with uncertainty, and, in spite of his eager demands, could hardly enter when the door was at length unbarred.

"Go in, old chap," said Jack, kindly. "There are three prisoners inside, and two, at least, are feringhees."

What need to describe the scene which followed? When Alec at length ventured to enter a shout of welcome greeted him, while his eyes fell upon three strange figures, all dressed in native costume. One was a woman, and she held a loaded pistol in her hand, while the others were white men, both short and spare, and each wearing a ragged and grizzled beard. But there was no mistaking them. The erect figure of one, together with his jaunty air, proved beyond doubt that he was the major, while the voice of the second told its tale with equal clearness. Alec rushed up to them and wrung their hands, while the tears streamed from his eyes.

"At last, father!" he said. "I felt sure that it was you. I've hunted high and low, and tracked you to Guzni; and who would have thought——"

"That you would see the count again," said the other grizzled prisoner, bowing over Alec's hand. "Monsieur, I assure you that I have now as much esteem for the son of my very dear old friend as I have for that friend himself. I give you my congratulations and my hearty thanks, for we are free at length, after having endured a terrible time. That villain——"

"He saved my life, so that I can forgive him," interrupted the major. "I tumbled beneath the gun at the

Balla Hissar, and poor Hamilton was slain and fell across the muzzle, thus hiding my body. The brutes hacked all the rest cruelly, but they failed to find me. This Yohinda happened to notice me after darkness had fallen, and he carried me away. Not that he did that for the sake of showing kindness to an enemy. Money, a ransom in the future, was what he desired. And now, thanks to my son—thanks to his persistence and bravery—Yohinda is dead, and he has had no ransom. Shake hands again, Alec.”

It was a long tale to tell, and, in fact, our hero did not gather the details for many hours, for it was necessary to return to Guzni, to the camp. Then he learned that Yohinda Khan had artfully concealed his prisoners in Cabul, dressing them as Afghans and keeping them hidden indoors. At first he had been in possession of the native woman and of Major Dennisson alone. But the tale of a second feringhee, who had been found at the bottom of a steep declivity some thirty miles away, reached his ear, and by dint of bribery he secured the count.

“And how was it that you managed to bar them out of your room when we came up to the fort?” asked Alec.

“We owe that to the native prisoner,” said the major. “She is a devoted soul, and has proved that bravery exists among the women of the races of India as well as among the men. We seldom saw her while in Cabul; but here, while traveling to Guzni, she rode on a camel. She passed you yesterday as you entered the town; and had you stooped to look, you would have discovered the count and

myself bound and gagged in the other palanquin. Yes, Yohinda was an artful scamp, and was almost successful, but he was beaten by the native woman. In the rush to reach the fort and hide there she managed to steal a pistol, for she was not bound. We were pushed into this room, and ordered to lie still. But a slit in the windows showed us that your party was pursuing, and we determined to hold the place; for if there was the smallest chance of your success, we felt sure that the ruffians who held us would cut our throats. The woman cut our bonds, and with marvelous pluck fired when one of Yohinda's men ventured to enter. I took the pistol then, and held them at bay, while the count banged the door and put up the bolts. Thank heavens, you fellows came on with a rush and won the day. But you've heard our tale, and we've nothing more to tell. During these months the count and I have been together, and that has been our one consolation. We have been given food in plenty, and water to drink, and really all that we could complain of is the fact that we were kept indoors as prisoners. Now let us hear all about this campaign. Sir Frederick has done wonderfully."

Alec sat down before them, and told of the manner in which he had unraveled the mystery, and of the adventures through which he had passed in doing so.

"Monsieur Alec has shown what you call, I think, grit," said the count, thrusting his fingers through his grizzled hair. "We owe our lives and our liberty to him, major. I give him a thousand thanks."

That Major Dennisson was equally grateful can well be imagined; indeed, he was a proud man, for all in Sir Frederick Roberts's division recognized that the aide-de-camp had shown unusual courage and perseverance; even the lordly Jack Escombe admitted that, Harry Macgregor agreeing with him enthusiastically. As for Tom Bird, he felt almost a hero himself, and made much of his opportunities.

"Didn't I tell yer?" he said that evening to the assembled Lancers, as they squatted round the camp fire. "I always said as there was something in this here mystery, and I was right. The young officer's saved his governor and the froggie, and I'm blest if he don't deserve a Victoria Cross."

Alec Dennisson had many more opportunities of showing his courage before the campaign in Afghanistan was finished, for after General Ross's brigade had come into touch with Sir Donald Stewart, and had learned from the latter that he and his men had defeated the enemy very severely some thirty miles south of Guzni, the brigade returned to Cabul with Sir Donald. Then came news that General Primrose had met with a disastrous reverse. Maiwand had been fought, and the Afghan fanatics and regulars had broken into the British ranks, causing very severe losses. They were jubilant at their success, and daily harassed the troops at Candahar. It was a situation which required instant action, and the gallant and determined Sir Frederick took steps to humble the pride of the enemy. He marched with his men to Candahar, ac-

completing the journey in record time. There he defeated the Afghans decisively, thereby gaining fresh laurels. Indeed, wherever he had marched in Afghanistan success had followed his troops—not alone because of good fortune, or because the troops were gallant fellows, staunch to the very backbone, but also because this Sir Frederick was a born leader, who set no impossible tasks to his men, and who believed implicitly in them. To Candahar! was the cry when the news of Maiwand came to Cabul, and to Candahar the gallant general led his men, in spite of enormous difficulties. Alec accompanied the expedition, and to this day has tales to tell of that forced march, and of the fighting which took place when he accompanied "Bobs," the hero of a hundred battles. He has seen much service since, and has risen rapidly, but none of his campaigns can compare with that of the Afghan War. Now that he is past the prime of life, and has retired to a peaceful spot in Surrey, Colonel Dennisson, as Alec is known, spends a great part of his time in fishing and shooting, and in playing the ancient game of golf. He is considered excellent company, and when friends are there, and he is in the mood, will tell tales of days gone by. None, however, affords him so much pleasure in the telling as the narrative of his campaign in Afghanistan, of the strange mystery which he was enabled to unravel, and of the days when, filled with youth and enthusiasm, he marched with Roberts to Candahar.

Roger the Bold

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