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ENTHUSIASM."

CONVERSATION BETWEEN KANT AND A CANNIBAL (LEIPZIG, 1780)

Gianet S. Rogers

THE PLUNDERERS

A ROMANCE

BY

MORLEY ROBERTS

AUTHOR OF "THE COLOSSUS"

METHUEN & CO.
36 ESSEX STREET W.C.

LONDON

1900

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TO MY FRIEND
MAX MONTESOLE
WHO SUGGESTED THIS STORY

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THE PLUNDERERS

CHAPTER I

THE FUZE

“INTERNATIONAL morality is, of course, the lowest form of morality,” said Frazer of the Foreign Office.

“Naturally,” replied Sarle.

“And therefore things are done which, though quite right according to international morality, seem rather shocking to the ordinary morality expounded, let us say, in a leading article.”

“That is a rider to your original theorem,” said Dr. Sarle, puffing at a long Turkish pipe.

“The great difficulty we have in the Foreign Office at times,” mused Frazer, “is to get someone to do things for us without being asked.”

Sarle lifted an eyelid, but otherwise he seemed rather narcotised.

“Yes.”

“To explain to you,” went on Frazer; “to give you an example. There are some prominent firms of solicitors in London who are said never to lose an important verdict.”

"Jury buyers," murmured Sarle, "the Americanisation of our institutions."

"Do not say such things. What, buy juries! what would the good public say?"

"To Tophet with the good public."

"Well," resumed Frazer, "how is it done? The chief remarks to his chief clerk, 'We must not lose this case. I would rather lose a thousand pounds!' 'You don't say so?' says the clerk. 'I do say so,' repeats the solicitor. And then the clerk goes out and remarks to a hanger-on of the office that the boss says he would rather lose a thousand pounds than lose that case. 'Do you say so?' asks the hanger-on eagerly. '*He* says so,' replies the clerk. And the case isn't lost."

"Of course not," murmured Sarle.

"But has the solicitor bought a juryman?"

"He can swear he has not."

"Then that's all right," said Frazer, and he lighted a cigarette.

And there was silence in Sarle's room for at least five minutes.

"Touching this matter of"—

Frazer lifted a finger.

"Of this eastern city, say."

"Touching this matter of the eastern city, then? What is it that you want done?"

"Sarle, my dear Sarle," said Frazer, with a delicate and refined air of surprise, which went well with his face, "you are most extraordinarily blunt, and do not appear to have digested the lesson conveyed in the little story I have just related to you."

Sarle puffed at his pipe.

"Then what would you be pleased to see happen?"

"Far better," said Frazer, "very much better put. As a man in the Foreign Office, and one intimately acquainted with the delicate nature of our relations with certain formidable Powers, it would please me"—

"And others?"

"Me, me," insisted Frazer, "let us have no one else in; it would greatly please me to see the Russians checkmated in this matter."

"I see," said Sarle, "you just don't like 'em."

"Let us say so, though I find many of their diplomatists perfectly charming. They can say the thing that is not with an air of almost religious fervour."

"They can," said Sarle; "but explain the situation to me. I might, I say I might, get someone to suggest to someone else that if in certain circumstances certain measures were adopted, existing reasons for their proposed action would possibly be altered or even entirely removed."

Frazer smiled, and removed his cigarette from his mouth.

"I did you wrong just now, Sarle. No one could have expressed what I mean with more diplomatic grace. But to put the matter to you as, let us say, a mere theorem. We know that a treasure commonly said to be worth about four millions (we know it to be more) is a great temptation to a certain northern Power. Six millions (for it is all that) would be a considerable haul, to put it vulgarly and in the language of the burglar. So much for the motive. Let us imagine that we shall be this winter so deeply engaged in other ticklish operations in Egypt, South Africa, West Africa, and China, that we cannot afford

to go to war with this northern Power if it determined to make a rush for the eastern city to which we have referred. That may easily be ; and we may know that this is the plan of action agreed on by some of the Powers acting against us. And we may know further that the existence of this treasure is the balancing motive, determining action on the part of the northern Power. If that treasure were not there, we might feel sure the irruption would never take place. If it does take place it would mean war next spring, or, if not war, it would perhaps necessitate our compensating ourselves by taking over an immense territory bordering on the Gulf and our other possessions. This we should want to avoid ; we have not the necessary land forces at our disposal. It would put a considerable strain on us."

Sarle nodded.

"That is my hypothetical case," said Frazer.

"Your piece of fiction," cried Sarle. "But is it not possible that the dispersal of the treasure might precipitate the war?"

"No," replied Frazer, "and for these reasons. The treasure motive would be removed ; and while the whole kingdom would be alarmed and in a state of preparation, it is conceivable that our diplomatists might have means for suggesting that the raid was organised by the very Power we have mentioned."

"That certainly is possible," said the doctor. "But as you remarked at the outset, this would be rather shocking to the good public morality. And I presume it would be a crime internationally. Suppose your agents"—

"My dear sir!"

"I apologise," said Sarle, "and substitute the

raiders. Suppose the raiders were caught, would England back them up?"

"Back them up in a crime of that description! Impossible, and you know it."

"But if they succeeded and were known?"

"They would have levied war against a friendly Power," said Frazer. "It would be most lamentable conduct, and England would be bound to take severe notice of it."

"Ah, the Foreign Enlistment Act," cried Sarle. "By the way, I wish you would send me a copy; I have always wanted to read it up."

"With the greatest pleasure," said Frazer. "It will be most interesting to you, I have no doubt."

"And in the most improbable event of anyone being able to bring off a thing of this kind, what would England do with the treasure if she caught the criminals?"

Frazer lighted another cigarette.

"Considering that most of it was taken a long time ago from Delhi, it would be worth considering whether she could not establish a lien on it. It is most likely, however, that she would restore it—on terms."

"On terms! I see," said Sarle. "What a very interesting man you are, Frazer. You have a fine imagination. Do you ever by any chance mention these dreams of yours to certain superior creatures who are immaculate?"

"We talk at large over atlases at times," said Frazer modestly; "when there is an interval in ceaseless toil."

"And do they admire your imagination?"

"They are not displeased," said Frazer pointedly,

"at finding a man in the Office (or out of it) who has the true racial instincts developed. And that I sacrifice my leisure in considering even the remotest contingencies connected with England's welfare naturally does not annoy them. They have considerable confidence in my judgment."

"I am not surprised," said Sarle, "and I own your choice of me to mention these thoughts of yours to pleases me not a little. I find, by the way, that I catch the trick of your locutions. I have been sufficiently long out of the atmosphere of the Orient to lose the subtlety it engenders."

Frazer looked pleased, but retained his eminent self-possession.

"The West is rather brutal, is it not? But in our Office, and among diplomatists, we manage to combine the best elements of the Orient and the Occident. We suggest, we hint, we work up to a point, we rely rather on chemic activity than on mechanical mixture. Now I think that saying is rather good! Chemic activity rather than the crudity of mechanical mixture."

"It is very good," said Sarle. "Will you say it again, and then I shall remember it."

Frazer said it again.

"When you think of it, it contains an entire philosophy of life and action," said the doctor. "It means we should work with tools that fit us."

He rose from his chair.

"It is spring now, Frazer. I have been thinking of working out a long-cherished plan of mine during this spring and summer. It includes a great scheme of travel."

Frazer glanced at him out of one eye.

"It includes Persia."

"A most interesting country," said Frazer coolly; "at least so I am told. Nice man the Shah."

"He has accumulated a considerable treasure, I understand," said Sarle.

"So I have heard," nodded Frazer.

"But for this journey I require money."

He looked at Frazer, and Frazer looked out at the window.

"In that little illustrative story you told me at the beginning of our conversation there was money mentioned?"

"There was, I own," said Frazer, "but my illustration was not intended to"—

"To illustrate so far?"

"Exactly," said Frazer. "I own, though it would please me to see you take your journey, that I cannot hold out any hopes of being able to lend you any money."

"That's a great pity," said Sarle with a humorous twitch of the face; "now, I had thought of asking you to lend me, out of your savings, the sum of fifty thousand pounds."

"It's quite impossible," cooed Frazer; "I have not saved so much."

"Could you not ask your uncle?"

For a moment Frazer did not follow the game.

"My uncle!"

"I did not mean that uncle, Frazer. I referred to an imaginary uncle, who might be conceived as ready to back you."

"They, or he, wouldn't," said Frazer. "Do you not see that there would have to be explanations? You have money of your own, and I have no doubt that a

man of your ability will be able to make such a journey pay."

Sarle grunted.

"I could make it pay, but I must have money to begin it. For, as you understand, my dear chap, I shall have to take some friends with me. I could not go quite by myself."

"It would be lonely, of course," said Frazer pathetically; "you must at least be two or three."

"And a following."

"A tail of course," said Frazer. "So great a man! But in my hypothetical case I foresaw this difficulty, and provided against it. I had the absurd notion that in a rich country like this there must be at least one manly young millionaire with a desire to do something."

Sarle, for so cool a man, watched him rather eagerly.

"You had that idea? Why, so had I!"

"So far did I carry it that I almost imagined I knew the very man. Advertise for him, Sarle!"

"But you imagined you knew him?"

"And," snapped Frazer with a touch of irritation, "I also imagined that I did not choose to suggest the notion to him. But if you advertised I might imagine my calling his attention to the advertisement and saying I knew you for—what you are!"

"Thanks," said Sarle; "I'll do it. And it may chance that I shall get an answer."

"Who knows?" asked Frazer wisely. "And now I think I'll go. By the way, if you should go to Persia, you will revisit Teheran?"

"Of course I hope to," said Sarle. "I wonder whether I could get an introduction to the Shah. I

should like to see his treasure and jewels. They are worth four millions, I believe."

"At the least six," said Frazer. "But advertise, advertise!"

"I will," cried Sarle.

CHAPTER II

PAWN TO KING'S FOURTH

THE waiter in the smoking and chess room of the Hungarian café swept the table in front of Sarle with his napkin, and waited for an order.

“Yes, Joachim, I’ll have, I’ll have—yes, coffee!”

He lighted a cigar—a long, thin, torpedo-shaped one, inserted it into his back teeth, and puffed a sudden cloud to the mirrored ceiling, where men walked upon their heads. It was verily a glass house.

“And none should throw stones here,” thought Sarle; “for what are they? what are we?”

The wedge-shaped room was just then like the sudatorium of a Turkish bath, for all its open windows looking on Oxford Street one way and into Bloomsbury the other. And as in a bath the whole world meets, so here were representatives of all Europe and some of the East and West. A Turk played chess with a Brazilian; a Russian challenged a Swede; a noisier gang talked over “matador” and smacked the dominoes down on unclean marble.

“Now, Bertrand, Bertrand, vagabond that you are, where are you?” said Sarle.

“Have you seen the captain, Joachim?”

“No, sir,” said Joachim, “not to-day.”

And that very moment a strong hand was laid on Sarle's shoulder.

"So," said Sarle, "Joachim, more coffee."

And Bertrand dropped into the chair opposite. He extracted a home-made cigarette from a leather case, which looked like an old cartridge pouch, and smoked without a word.

"You Djin," said Sarle, "you demon out of Tophet, you look especially dangerous this afternoon."

"Thank you," replied Bertrand; "and how goes it with my brother Afreet?"

"It is settled," said Sarle, with eyes sparkling like the blue sea in the sea-breeze. There was answering fire in Bertrand's; and he clutched the table's edge.

"You mean it?"

"I've got the man," said Sarle; "and now to my other trades of doctor and wanderer, I'll add that of raider."

"You've absolutely got him?"

"He has risen to the fly, and I'm to see him this evening, this afternoon."

Bertrand relaxed his grip on the table and frowned.

"Villain, don't look cross," said Sarle; "for if I see him, it will be settled. Believe me."

"You believe in yourself," said Bertrand.

"To encourage myself," answered Sarle. "If I didn't blow my own trumpet I should sit down on my hams and do nothing."

"Then this is Frazer's man?"

Sarle nodded.

"His moneyed man."

He leant back, and saw himself in the ceiling.

"Which is upside down, Bertrand, here or there? Speak, noble Albanian!"

"Peace, son of a burnt father," said Bertrand. "Do we not walk upon our feet? And on our feet we go to and fro, and mostly arrive nowhere, until at last, God being merciful, we die and are no more than cigarette ash, unless we have done something."

"And I've done nothing," said Sarle, "but go everywhere. Appetite comes with eating. Shall we get Cook to conduct us?"

"Your millionaire will suffice. Oh, but I'm sick of your Western world! It's a demoniacal hurrying string of asses, of madmen, who hurry, seeking nothing, while their hearts burn with fire. Their fire in this year of our Lord"—

"Infidel!" cried Sarle; "for a Mohammedan you have your religions rather mixed."

"Am I not in Europe, and Western Europe?" said Bertrand, whose present name was the gift of chance. "Can a man touch pitch and not be defiled? I assure you I find myself hurrying sometimes when there is no need. But, come, where is the man with money, our own, own millionaire?"

"We'll go directly," said Sarle, glancing at the clock; "and to think I landed my millionaire through Frazer and the advertisement columns of the *Times*."

He put his finger and thumb into a waistcoat pocket, and extracting a newspaper cutting, spread it out on the table.

"Hear, oh hear, you vagrant millionaires—

"To millionaires and others. Wanted a young and active millionaire who has ideas above his station, and would like to do something in the big world beyond being made a fool of by women. For such a man, whose notions of space are not bounded by Park Lane on the west and Threadneedle Street on

the east, an opportunity now offers of spending £100,000 or more on an unremunerative scheme, which is hardly likely to occur again, as its projectors will very probably be killed on the expedition. To anyone, however, who desires some months full of excitement and an international reputation, nothing could be more attractive. Apply for further details to Sarle, E 501 *Times* Office."

"It is rather neat," said the Albanian.

"Frazer says his man was awfully excited when he drew his attention to it," said the composer of the advertisement; "and Frazer pretended to dissuade him."

"And he rose at once?"

"He wrote at once anyhow. And he's no fool, for he insisted on seeing my solicitor. I had to find one on purpose, and tell him all about my noble and disreputable self."

Bertrand laughed.

"With some reservations?"

"With none," said the doctor; "and I suppose my noble character must have been satisfactory. He got my erudite book on *Natural Selection among Disease Germs*, and, at anyrate, he's open to negotiate. If I've any gift of persuasion, he's hooked. But I wouldn't miss him for worlds. Let's be going."

On the threshold of the crowded international room Sarle paused and looked back.

"Olla podrida, all sorts pudding, cosmopolitan hash, isn't it, Bertrand? Shall we ever come back to play Pawn to King's Fourth?"

"We're not going yet."

Sarle laughed.

"Turk in a high hat, outcast Albanian, wild refugee

from Stamboul, and dear friend of mine (I also being a ruffian), we *are* going, and don't you omit to remember not to forget it. You shall see me hypnotise our millionaire in three minutes by Shrewsbury clock."

He went downstairs two steps at a time, and, pausing, waited for the quieter Albanian. He put his heavy hand on Bertrand's shoulder and laughed good-temperedly.

"You know chess palls after a while," he said as they walked; "a man wants men to handle, or a bigger man to handle him. Something to do is my cry. Or I get lost pretending."

"Or fooling with woman," said Bertrand.

"You mean Miss Cazenove, of course."

"I did."

"You're quite mistaken," said Sarle, evidently meaning it; "she's useful, beautiful, and has courage and brains, but I'm not *épris d'elle*. Just now I've no time anyhow. Why, man, this business is serious."

"But between times?"

"There's nothing between times."

"I wonder you trust her."

"I do, because I know she's to be trusted just as long as"—

"She loves you," said Bertrand drily.

"Perhaps," nodded Sarle. "But she's a real good sort, and understands men."

"One of them at anyrate, I fear."

And they came to Sarle's house in Great Ormonde Street. Sarle stayed on the step for a moment.

"So far we've only set the board, Bertrand, and now, if our only and especial millionaire turns up, we

can play 'Pawn to King's Fourth' in a very big game."

The doctor's sitting-room on the ground floor was sufficiently dark even for Bloomsbury, and the windows looked much in want of cleaning. Two big tables were covered with books and papers; on a side-table lay an open case of surgical instruments and a sextant; on the walls were a few savage weapons, an odd Japanese print or two, a big map of Asia, and another of Persia.

"You are still a savage, Sarle," said Bertrand as he sat down in a leather camp-chair.

"I don't want to be comfortable, Bertrand, for to be comfortable means to be softened imperceptibly. To eat always till one is satisfied is ruin to any man. As my religion, praise be to your working and fighting Prophet and the twelve holy Imams, is to do something actual once a year at least, I fast very often. Just now I'm down to skin, muscle, and bone, and my head's as clear as a mountain stream."

"Someone came up the steps, I think," said the Albanian, whose hearing was like a cat's.

"Then the millionaire is punctual. That's a good sign. Ha! he rings and makes the bell peal."

There came a tap at the room door.

"Come in," said Sarle in a big voice.

"Pawn to King's Fourth," said Bertrand to himself as the man with money entered.

"Good," thought Sarle, and not without reason.

For the millionaire upon whom they depended was a long thin man of some twenty-eight or thirty years, with a bronzed face and a contemplative eye, that just now showed something like actual shyness.

He looked first at Sarle.

"Dr. Sarle, I presume?"

His voice was musical.

"That's so," said the doctor; "and allow me to introduce to you Captain Bertrand. Bertrand, this is Mr. Carew Singleton, of whom you have heard me speak."

"Very much pleased to meet you," said Bertrand. "Will you smoke?"

And the three relapsed on cigarettes for the space of a minute while Singleton sized up his new acquaintances and was himself weighed in the balance.

Sarle spoke presently from his seat on the big table.

"I gather, Mr. Singleton, that, like ourselves (for I know I can speak for Bertrand here), you have some complaints to make of civilisation."

Singleton raised his half-lowered eyelids and showed a liquid brown eye.

"It would be all right if we had it, Dr. Sarle, but are we not in a state of transition when civilisation and barbarism have produced a mulatto, as usual, without the virtues of either?"

"That's so," said Sarle, "and as a consequence no one is comfortable. One's civilised side is outraged by our remaining barbarism; our barbaric instincts are choked by civilisation."

"So we are first one and then the other, or mostly neither," said Bertrand.

"And not at all content, Dr. Sarle."

Sarle nodded.

"That's so. We shall get on together. These are my own notions and Bertrand's. That's how I got on with him. You will find certain men in apparently unconnected races who suit each other better than

the bulk of their countrymen. And now, what's to be done?"

"I came to hear your suggestions," said Singleton. "Your advertisement tickled my fancy mightily. And it appears you know my friend Frazer?"

"A little," said Sarle, "a little, but not very well."

"He showed me your advertisement."

"Ah," said Sarle, "now, did he? And I suppose he jeered at it?"

"He jeered a little, but he said you were a character."

"Very nice of him. But all the same I'll swear he tried to dissuade you."

"He did."

"I'll have a row with him," said Sarle, laughing. "But then he's a solid bureaucratic person. And he and I would never get on together. I presume a good solid old-fashioned Nonconformist conscience would seem out of place in me, Mr. Singleton?"

Singleton looked him up and down.

"Rather."

And Bertrand chuckled.

"I see you can judge a man," said Sarle. "So, to give you a pointer or two about myself, I've been everything more or less, and everywhere. China, Japan, Borneo, Java, Siam, Central Asia, and Persia, North and South America have been hunting-grounds of mine, and in no one place did I run counter to the accepted morality. So"—

And he paused, looking at Singleton.

"So"—said Singleton.

"Finish it yourself," said Sarle.

Singleton hesitated.

"Do I gather you have no morality?"

"By no means," said the doctor virtuously.

"I see," said Singleton, "I see; you have the morality common to all races."

"Bertrand," cried Sarle, "get out the whisky and soda. Mr. Singleton will be one of us I see."

They drank.

"That's so," said Sarle, putting down an empty glass. "To act in one environment as one does in another is to act immorally. The missionary is frequently a fragment of glass, a foreign body producing constitutional disturbance in a previously healthy tribe of cannibals. They become disturbed, go for him as the leucocytes do for a foreign body, kill him and eat him. He says, previous to his decease, that that's immoral. Absurd missionary! He was immoral; the society's gun that shot him into the disturbed tribe was immoral. So, to make a big jump, not insulting your intelligence by putting in all the steps, we come to this, that morality depends on environment. And it may depend on mental environment, and if we three have, in Europe, in London, a different mental environment from our fellows, it behoves us to get out. We don't want their morality in its developed state, only the essentials. Hence (another jump) we have no absurd respect for human life, no abnormal respect, that is"—

He looked at Singleton.

"Proceed," said Singleton.

"Though we love our country, that is a curious, primitive, and almost ineradicable feeling, and we like to keep on doing it. Let us drink to England, and Great and yet Greater Britain! Bertrand, we will excuse you. He is an Albanian, Singleton."

"Bless me," said Singleton, "I'd never have thought it."

"Drink and count me in," said the Albanian; "I'm Anglicised; for having lost my own country I've found a better."

"To England!" said Sarle.

"To England!"

"And may she never get swelled head," said Sarle. "However, to resume our high philosophic talk, we have only primitive morality and are not in the high position which enables us to be primitive, not only without reproach, but as a duty. Do you follow, Singleton?"

"With some difficulty," said the modest millionaire.

"Now if you were—shall we say Rhodes?"—

"By all means; I know Africa," cried Singleton.

"You might do many fine primitive things and get applauded after success. Quite right too. And a statesman can be cunningly primitive and roll kings' heads on the green and play at bowls with everything. We, we are bound in swaddling clothes. And, frankly, we don't like it. We propose to go in for a little amateur statesmanship which may alter a good deal in the world, and give us excitement enough to last the rest of our lives. Incidentally in the expedition we may manage to get our money back. Pardon me saying *our*, won't you?"

He spoke with infinite charm, for rough as Sarle could be, when he liked he had the manner of a diplomatist and the carriage of a Prince of Empire.

"Of course," said Singleton; "but can you now go into details?"

"I shall be glad to; but, my dear sir, I have held

the platform too long. I want you to tell me a little about your life, if you will. For you can see, to some extent, what I am. And as for Bertrand here, he's rather like me, only much better and much worse."

Bertrand chuckled.

"Don't believe him, Mr. Singleton; I'm innocence compared with him."

"Where did you learn your innocence? In the Soudan, in the palace at Stamboul, among the Arabs in Mecca? Oh, sweet green innocence indeed! By the Black Stone of Mecca, he's an awful villain, Singleton, and should be heir to Abd-ul-Rahman, strong hand of Afghanistan."

Singleton beamed on Bertrand.

"And have you really been in those places? That's where I want to go. I don't know the East."

Bertrand and Sarle exchanged glances.

"We'll show it you," they cried together.

"But you know Africa?" asked Bertrand.

"Only the south and centre," said Singleton. "I've never risked my life there, except once with an elephant. Everywhere I went peace raged like the rinderpest."

He looked quite melancholy.

"You men have evidently been much luckier than I; so you don't know what it is to rush two thousand miles and find everybody coming back, and all the row over. Would you believe it, gentlemen, but I've never seen a man killed yet; not even by a tramcar."

Sarle and Bertrand shook their heads.

"Never mind, Singleton," said the doctor encouragingly, "we'll soon alter that. Things that are

long in coming come with a rush. You know the old weather proverb—

‘ Long foretold, long last :
Short notice, soon past.’

You mark me, you'll be up to your neck in it soon ; why, you're a first-class type of the best English fighting-man."

"Why were you not in the army?" asked Bertrand quickly.

Singleton blushed.

"I never found myself out till a while back," he murmured ; "and besides, till three years ago I was devilish poor ; I got a second cousin's money, an African chap, and the last three years I've been a kind of peacemaker to the world ; for as soon as I got anywhere all the fun was over."

"No big game?" asked Sarle.

"No, certainly not," cried Singleton. "I can't bear *pis allers*. I want the real thing."

"You've come to the right shop for that," said Sarle ; "for with your help we propose to start an Empire-Making and Empire-Breaking Establishment ; and when the Foreign Office won't stir, we propose to dig something into them to make them jump. For, as I said before, the good of our country is the final basis we work on, and except among ourselves we won't trouble to be more particular than international morality."

"Do you think something on that basis will suit you, Mr. Singleton?" asked Bertrand.

Singleton jumped up.

"I'm pretty sure it will," he cried ; "and now"—

"And now," said Sarle, "I think we'll go and have

dinner, and afterwards we'll give you an outline of our plan. If you don't like it, you will say so ; and if you don't like it we shall be surprised, but not hurt. And all we ask is, that if you decline to finance the scheme, you will never speak of it."

"That's me," said Singleton with unexpected slang. "Shake hands."

And he put out a hand that tested even Sarle's enormous strength.

Then they went to the Café Royal.

CHAPTER III

SINGLETON SAYS "YES"

CAREW SINGLETON lunched with Sarle next day, and after the meal was over the doctor, finding his guest's curiosity sufficiently excited, unfolded his scheme. Carew's eyes opened, he gasped, jumped up, sat down again.

"It's impossible!"

Sarle lifted his eyelids.

"So?"

"Utterly."

"Nothing's impossible to impossible people, and I propose to show you we're of that order."

Carew got up.

"It's piracy."

"It is."

"And open war."

"I admit it."

"It would upset Europe?"

"I hope so."

"And Asia?"

"Exactly."

"And yet you look quite sane, and Frazer said you were! On my soul, I'm disappointed," said Singleton.

"Cheer up," cried the doctor, "you'll get over that. What have I been telling you about the deadening effects of environment? You don't know your own power. You are a torpedo, loaded up with gold, which is far and away the most powerful explosive known."

"But—but"—

"Never mind about 'buts,'" cried the doctor, laughing; "look at facts. Just remember that a poor theatrical thing like Boulanger came near to upsetting the French Republic."

"But France was unstable, Sarle."

"So's Persia, so are a thousand countries. All civilisations are in a state of unstable equilibrium. If they were not you would not find the ruling classes so nervous. But as to Boulanger, do you remember his chief backer?"

"She was a duchess, eh?"

"A woman, a simple intriguing woman, foolish enough, but rich. She backed him to the tune of a hundred and eighty thousand pounds, and with that the show nearly went over. The instrument broke, but the power was there. You don't know your power. Do you take me for a flimsy man of imagination?"

"You don't look it," said Carew Singleton.

The doctor rose and stretched his arms out.

"We live hemmed in by illusion. What we think strong is mostly weak. But I know what I'm saying is right. Now Bertrand is"—

"An adventurer?"

"Exactly, and so am I, and you want to be. Did you use the word in a derogatory sense?"

Carew twisted a lip.

"Ah," said Sarle, "you fell back into an old mental environment. Think yourself out of it. Now Bertrand has had an extraordinary life. He knows the East like a book; Asia Minor was his washpot; over Persia he has cast his shoe. India he knows; he was in Arabia; he fought in the Soudan, and in Abyssinia. He has been accustomed to desperate chances, and he thinks this no more than dangerous. We can do it."

Carew lighted one cigarette after another. He was such a confirmed cigarette smoker that his left eyelid drooped a little through the smoke getting his left eye.

"But it's enormous!"

"Oh, go and fish for tarpon!" said Sarle.

"The idea is too much."

"No, for we have worked it out."

"But where are the others?"

Sarle opened a drawer of his desk and took out some photographs. He threw them over to Singleton one by one.

"Catch."

And Carew caught the picture of a man in naval uniform. He was quiet, gentlemanly, full bearded.

"He had to leave the navy because of his sight, which at one time threatened to go. He recovered, and is desperate for work. Do you like his face?"

"Does he know this scheme?"

Sarle nodded.

"I should say so. Catch."

And Sarle skidded another man through the air.

"Well caught."

"This is a bit of a devil," said Carew.

"A good devil," cried Sarle.

"He looks a black demon."

"He looks what he is. But he's as gentle as a girl too. He's a merchant-sailor, and his name is John Bent, who never was bent."

"And he knows?"

"Of course," said the doctor. "This is a complete scheme. We are all aboard—captain, engineers, officers, and men. All we want is the coal. You supply that."

Carew Singleton got up and walked the room.

"Am I dreaming?"

"'Do I sleep, do I dream, or is visions about?'" quoted Sarle, laughing.

"But it's a hanging matter?"

"Not a bit," cried Sarle. "Bless me, the Persians won't hang us. That's not their method."

"But if this country goes for us, what are we then?"

"Raiders, filibusters, and we shall be the idols of all England, except the editors of the *Daily Chronicle* and *Truth*, who will impart to the salad of praise the necessary garlic of invective."

"Still there will be prison?"

"If we come back alive or are caught or don't get off on a technicality. But if you prefer an arm-chair and peace"—

"Oh!"—began Singleton, but just then there was a bang on the street door. Sarle opened it himself, for he knew Bertrand's summons to surrender.

"I beat the chamade! Come in, high and mighty, Osman Arslan Skipar Bey," said Sarle. "I've got Singleton raising objections. Tell him something 'bluggy,' and get his mild eye to sparkle."

"Ah, how are you," said the new-comer, and Carew shook hands tenderly.

"I'm very angry," said Bertrand.

"Why, what's wrong?" asked Sarle and Singleton.

"A policeman was rude to me. I want to go out of this country. A miserable zaptieh! I yearned to get my hands on his throat. Have you settled things?"

"Not yet," said Sarle; "Singleton is *advocatus diaboli*, and objects."

"No, I'm only thunderstruck. Do you really think it practicable, Captain Bertrand?"

"The first part is easy. But that's my part."

"And the sea part?"

"That's Bent's lookout, and he says any fool could do it!"

"And the whole scheme?"

"Ask Sarle. He's overseer and lord of the plan."

Sarle smote one hand into the other.

"It's difficult as blazes, but if it wasn't, what good would it be? I want Singleton to know that. Would you like to see Bent and Mason?"

Carew shook his head.

"Time enough for that. No, Captain Bertrand, I'm not objecting, only I like to see all round a thing."

"When you do that you usually do no more," said Bertrand.

"Tell him about El Shômar," said Sarle.

Bertrand shook his head.

"Then I will," cried the doctor. "Look at him, Singleton, and consider his points. Now this young man, who is now only thirty-three, had, for reasons not necessary to detail, to quit Constantinople in a hurry. He got into Arabia, after a bit of travel, where, instead of roses, it was 'bowstrings, bow-

strings all the way,' and there he got three discontented Arab tribes to put their heads together, sink their individual quarrels, and raise the standard of revolt against the Turkish Empire."

Sarle paused.

"Is that so, Bertrand?"

"Humph," said Bertrand.

"It is so," said Sarle, "and he took three forts, fought one pitched battle, slaughtered three thousand Turks, and was well on the way to start a little empire of his own in Northern Arabia when success proved too much for his followers and our budding Sultan had to escape in the disguise of a black magician."

"Oh, is that true?" said Singleton eagerly, looking at Bertrand wonderingly.

"He's a romancer," said Bertrand; "but there is something in it."

"He's covered with wounds," said Sarle. "I've a few myself, but he's cut almost like a butcher's block."

"Oh, are you?" asked Carew, "are you really?"

"Shut up, Sarle; don't be so silly," said the Albanian.

"It's quite true," said Sarle. "But to return to business."

"Oh, there's no need," cried Carew. "I think it could be arranged. And you really believe it will be for the benefit of England?"

Sarle saw how the young man's moral mind worked, and grew enthusiastic.

"Our Foreign Office is hidebound. We propose to shake them out of sleep. If we go on as we are going the Russians will be in Teheran. Do we want them there?"

"Certainly not," cried Singleton indignantly.

"They shall not be. Or if they come they shall not find what they expect. We have never taken enough. Or if we have we have let it go. Now look at South America. What right have the United States to pretend they hold the reversion of that southern continent from Panama to Cape Horn? We took Buenos Ayres once, and three precious English generals left it after losing one fight; and, sailing away, took for it—what? Ye gods, the desolate wind-swept Falklands, outliers of the Horn, second cousin-land to Tierra del Fuego. No, by the Lord, we, *we* have rights inalienable in the South Americas, and, as we hold Canada, we may yet fatten our own herds on the grey plains of Patagonia and go northward to Brazil!"

"Hurrah!" cried Singleton. "Down with Monroe!"

"No," said Sarle. "He spoke not for the States but for the Anglo-Saxon race. Good Lord, think of three hundred million of us from Magellan's Straits to Baffin's Bay! Some day we will teach the Americans their own destiny."

"You are right," said Singleton with his eyes flashing. "We do not want to let a tradition stiffen till it strangles us."

"The first law-breakers are criminals; they may be martyrs," said Sarle.

"When can we start?" cried Singleton.

"Whenever you please," said Sarle and Bertrand in one breath.

"My hand on it," cried the millionaire.

"The Gold-Torpedo's launched," said the doctor; "look out ahead! Hallo, Hallo!"

CHAPTER IV

THE FOREIGN OFFICE IN BLOOMSBURY

TWO months later, Sarle was sitting at his desk in the ground-floor room when Singleton came in. By this time the young millionaire had got to know the doctor well.

"Heigho, how are you?" said Sarle. "Just one moment."

He finished a letter, dropped it into a basket with a pile of others, got up and shook himself like a big dog.

"I've been at it since seven!"

"Can you work at that hour?"

"At any hour when it's wanted. When I'm not on the broad of my back I'm a bit of a worker. But when I'm off work I'm the laziest hog in Christendom. For all that, I've never had mañana fever."

"What's that?" asked Singleton curiously; "I never heard of it."

"Wait till you go to a Spanish country, my boy. It's the 'to-morrow' fever, *morbus procrastinationis*, so to speak. For a Spaniard 'to-day' is the time for smoking cigarettes, or seeing bull-fights, or going to the theatre, or lying in the sun. But to-morrow he will do the work you want. 'Mañana, señor!'"

Singleton lighted a cigarette at a burning lamp and sat down.

"I'm afraid I'm a bit mañana-ish myself. But this business will shake the dream out of me."

"How about the cash?"

"I can overdraw to any amount," said Singleton; "and I've arranged for a biggish credit at the Ottoman Bank in Constantinople."

Sarle nodded.

"And you won't mind losing it? If you do."

"If I lose it, why I lose it," said Singleton. "All I expect is"—

"What we'll give you," interrupted Sarle. "Take my word, you shan't growl. So you had better arrange for Bertrand to have ten thousand at once, and liberty to draw for as much more. His is the most ticklish business, and, to tell the truth, it's risking his neck to get within grabbing distance of the Sultan."

"He's a Mohammedan, I suppose?"

Sarle shrugged his shoulders.

"He's one by education, like all the Albanian chieftains, though their subjects are Christian, but if he's orthodox he's a bit of a Sufi in his heart, a freethinker, you know."

"I didn't know, but thank you."

Sarle smiled.

"You are quite welcome. At anyrate Bertrand or Osman knows the East like a book, or like the proper order of his prayers and all the delicate distinctions of Moslem ablutions. But thank Heaven the business is now mostly arranged in this my Bloomsbury Foreign Office. Here I'm Secretary of State."

"You have a thundering lot of maps."

"And I'd like to alter some of them, and will," cried the doctor warmly. "On my soul, you're a privileged person, Carew Singleton!"

"How?"

"Why, think that this country is full of men who could do anything, full of miracle-workers who could set the globe aquiver, alter its axis, buy the moon, annex Venus, fight Jupiter, and steal his satellites, and yet they do nothing."

"They don't, they don't," said Carew.

"They do nothing or even less. By thunder, I could endure them if they sat motionless, inscrutable. For then one might imagine them thinking, but they give their mean little souls away in horse-racing, theatre-running, woman-buying, notoriety-hunting. They might be arbiters of a nation's destiny, and they appeal to fools, they compete like tame dogs. Ye gods, but I've landed a man among them, I do believe!"

"Thank you," said Singleton; "but how did you come to think of it?"

Sarle's eyes sparkled.

"By seeing I couldn't be an absolute unique. If I was what I am, there must be others like me and a deal better: others like Bertrand, others like my friend Ross, now in Teheran. Four or five millions of men must have four or five among them with a little real snap, go, and devilment. We English are pirates still. England was made by all the pirates of the North."

"What would Clapham say?"

"Abuse us on Sunday and push their trade through us on Monday. Think of our abnormal life; think how it must press on thousands. We must pass a

thousand unable captains of mankind as we walk from Charing Cross to Piccadilly. They want a general and a treasurer. Treasurer, I salute you!"

"Generalissimo, here's how!" cried Singleton. "But I say, has Bertrand a really good head?"

"You doubt it?"

Singleton scratched his chin thoughtfully and closed one pensive eye.

"You're wrong," said Sarle, "you're away off the target. He's a big politician as well as a big fighter and a man-handler; it's in his blood; and he's a bit ruthless too, almost as ruthless as Rosas the Argentine dictator was. And he has persuasion, that's a gift; heavens, what a gift it is! I believe he could persuade you to stop at home."

"Never," said Singleton, looking hurt.

"Well, hardly that," cried the doctor hastily, "but he would persuade me if I would argue. But I won't when I feel sure; for he'd persuade a statue off its pedestal, convince a woman, make a theologian temporarily tolerant, and a German modest about militarism. But I expect Bent and Mason."

He sat down at his desk.

"And here they are! They must work by chronometers."

The two sailors came in a moment later, and Sarle introduced them to Singleton.

"Glad to meet you," said the naval man cheerfully.

But the merchant-sailor eyed Singleton with a darkling glance which presently lighted up.

"Humph, humph," he said as he held out his hand.

And Sarle knew that Bent was pleased with his

new man. He passed cigarettes round, and all accepted one.

"Mr. Singleton here is coming on the land side of course," said Sarle.

"Sorry we can't have him," cried Mason; "however, we'll get your remains at the head of the Gulf, Mr. Singleton; so cheer up."

Singleton stared.

"That cheers me, of course."

"I mean the remains of the party."

"Ah, that's better, Singleton, isn't it?" said Sarle. "But how long will it be till the *Flag of Persia* is ready?"

Mason turned to Bent.

"Oh, Sarle, any time you like," said Bent; "she's pretty full, and the guns are aboard, in the manifest as duck guns, you know. And otherwise the cargo is very harmless, except for a lot of Birmingham tenth-rate rifles for Muscat, and there's nothing wrong if Her Majesty's cruiser *Diadem* comes nosing about."

Singleton listened with his ears open.

"Then you go out as a trader?"

"As a tramp, sir," said Bent, "as a howling, rackety tramp; looking like a nine-ton-a-day nine-knots-an-hour son of a gun, all grease and rust. Oh"—

He paused and looked at Sarle.

"But she's a banger, she is, and so I tell you, and cheap for the money. For by the look of her who'd go filibustering in a rusty kerosine tin?"

"But surely, who'd interfere? What right has a British man-of-war to search you?"

Bent chuckled.

"Lord save you, talking of rights—oh, cheese it. What, in the Gulf of Persia? Why, man alive, the

captain of a British gunboat swaggers in the Gulf as though he owned it. We're in the island business, and we want all the shores as well. The admiral rules it with a rod of iron, and says, 'Our Gulf,' and means it. It's difficult to sneeze betwixt Ormuz and Bushire without seeing the *Diadem* fire up and come smoking to know what the thunder you mean by it. Sacramento, I tell you the Gulf's British! Now I tell you!"

And he looked at Singleton with what appeared a glance of concentrated malignancy.

"Oh, very well," said Singleton, in a half-offended tone, which astounded Bent.

"Why—what's"—

"Oh, don't glare, Bent," cried Sarle. "Do you know, Singleton, that Jack Bent is the mildest-mannered man who ever cut a throat, and yet when he's in earnest he looks as unpleasing as a shark."

"So you do, Bent," said Mason. "Why, you frighten men off the *Persia* by looking at 'em."

Bent shook his head.

"And do I want a man who's afraid of me at first? Not me. Now what I want is to get a crowd scared of no one and then make 'em fear me. That's what I enjoy," said Bent in contemplation. "That's what I thoroughly enjoy."

And he sank deep in pleasing reminiscence of a tough crowd conquered, of battered hoodlums, and Liverpool wharf and packet rats cowed.

"What about the time-table?" said Mason.

Sarle sat down.

"Well, we are where we were, so far. Our Mr. Bertrand, as business firms say, will go to Kassik in Kurdistan and let us know about what time he

thinks we shall start. It will take you a month to get to the Gulf, say five weeks. You had better sail this week, and call in for orders at the Rock, and if you don't get them there you will at Port Said. And if we are delayed you can look in at Aden and spend any necessary time at pretending to repair something. M'Phail can do that, eh?"

"Devil doubt it," said Bent, who woke out of a pleasing reverie of flying belaying pins. "He's the boy."

"Oh, Bent, have you got your mates?" asked Sarle.

"Hum," said Bent, "one's my brother and the other's a fiend frae Glasgie."

"Trustworthy?"

"Bar whisky," said Bent.

"Then you're all right," cried Sarle, "and Mason will bring you some cash this evening or to-morrow."

"So," said Bent, "and I'll not see you again, likely. To tell the truth, I'm full up of London town, and I shall stay on board unless you want me. So long, Mr. Singleton, and you, doctor."

He shook hands, sighed, looked a bit vicious, nodded to Mason, and clapped his hat on.

"Oh, so long!"

"He's a queer stick," said Singleton when the door shut.

"Best chap on earth. He would go ten times round the world to get even with a man who did him. He's a dear chap," said Sarle with quiet enthusiasm. "As long as he looks very vicious it's all right, but when he smiles and gets pale, stand from under. He's a teetotaller, and doesn't smoke either. However, that's enough of Bent. You won't want much money, Mason?"

"Not more than a thousand!"

"A thousand!" cried Sarle; "and what for?"

"In case of bribery and corruption. But it is for the good of England."

"Very well," said Sarle; "come and dine with me at seven, Mason, and you shall have the money."

Mason nodded and went.

"Do you think it is well arranged, Carew Singleton?"

Singleton lighted another cigarette.

"I should say so. Why, the preliminaries must have cost you a lot!"

"More than I could afford," cried Sarle thoughtfully; "but we were going to do it on the private syndicate system. To advertise for you was like raising debentures. Of course if we come through you will have the first right to be recouped. I'll put that on paper if you like."

Singleton frowned.

"I don't like paper. Could I sue you on it?"

Sarle smiled.

"If one burglar could another. Perhaps it's as well to have nothing written; or as little as possible, for fear the Attorney-General in the case of *Regina v. Sarle, etc.*, should have documentary evidence of long-established intent. For we mean it to look like accident if it comes off. 'Sudden temptation, my lord,' and so on."

Singleton coughed.

"I've got catarrh of the throat, I believe," he sputtered.

"Catarrh of the cigarette case, I should say. How many cigarettes do you smoke?"

"Rather a lot," said Singleton.

"A hundred a day?"

"Oh no!"

"Not much less," said the doctor. "Let's look at your throat. Say 'Ah!'"

And Singleton said "Ah!"

"Keep on saying it," cried Sarle.

And the millionaire kept on saying it.

"I'd knock off smoking," said the doctor. "And as I am looking at you, let me listen to your heart."

"Why?" asked Singleton in obvious alarm.

"I want to know how courageous you are," said Sarle.

"What! can you tell?" asked Carew.

"Rather," said Sarle; and Carew bared his chest.

"Good," said Sarle; "but you'd be more heroic with less tobacco. As a man's heart is, so is his nerve, or as his nerve so his heart. In either case it works out that men with some hearts can't be brave, and with others can't be cowardly."

"And is mine good?" asked Carew anxiously.

"Right as a trivet!"

A knock came to the door.

"Come in," said Sarle carelessly, and a lady entered.

"Miss Cazenove, allow me to introduce Mr. Singleton, who is interested in our company."

"Delighted, I'm sure," murmured Miss Cazenove, who was on the right side of thirty, and very handsome. "You mean the Exploration Company?"

"Exactly," said Sarle; "in fact, he is the man I wrote you about."

"Indeed!" cried Miss Cazenove, obviously inspecting the young man with more interest. "And do you not think the scheme tremendously interesting, Mr. Singleton?"

"More than interesting; it is exciting, Miss Cazenove," cried Singleton.

"Miss Cazenove was once a governess in Persia, Singleton."

"To a prince of the royal family," added Miss Cazenove.

"And she much regrets the Russian influence, which appears to increase there."

"To fight against Russian influence in Persia appears to me a duty," said the lady. "England comes before everything."

"Ah, yes," said Sarle, with half a wink distributed over the quarter of the room where Carew stood; "but though you are a woman you can give many a diplomatist a quarter of a mile and a beating. Miss Cazenove has the entrée at the Foreign Office, Singleton."

"Indeed," said Singleton, who began to understand; "that must be interesting, Miss Cazenove."

"You see I know Persia," said the lady, "and they know I know it; I know the character of every man of importance in the immediate entourage of the Shah. And their favourite wives. And the Shah's favourite wives. So you see!"

"I see," said Singleton; "I'm delighted to meet you, Miss Cazenove. Shall we meet again—in Persia?"

"I fear not," said Miss Cazenove, laughing. "I had to leave owing to the unwelcome attentions of His Imperial Majesty; and till it is the will of Allah to remove him, I fear I must renounce the East."

Sarle had signalled Singleton to go; and the millionaire took his hat.

"Adieu," he said.

"Return in an hour if you can," said Sarle. "Then we'll lunch."

And Singleton nodded, bowed, and departed.

"So you've got the money, Henry," said the desired of the Shah.

Sarle nodded.

"Have you any news?"

"I hear there's a bit of a revolt on in north-east Persia, on the borders of Afghanistan. They told me that. And they thought it might be serious."

"Oh, they did?" said Sarle. "Well, encourage them in the notion."

"Do you think me a fool, Henry?" asked Miss Cazenove.

"Not by any means. But who started that north-east row?"

"I don't know."

"Osman did," said Sarle. "And it has cost me five hundred pounds, and will cost five thousand pounds before it's over. You can go and tell the F. O. Johnny that you know it will be serious. For it's going to be. We have half a mind to fetch the Ameer of Afghanistan down there in person. Just half a mind," said Sarle, pondering.

"I might tell Quinton Hazlitt that," said Miss Cazenove. "But I do wish you would tell me something definite to say."

Sarle shook his head.

"My dear girl, it would give us away. Just keep hammering on about the Russians."

"They smile," said Miss Cazenove, "and think I'm not Cassandra. I don't really see what good I can be to you here."

"It's only just a chance, Edith," said the doctor ;

"you might be. Still, if you want to go anywhere, don't trouble about it. We shall be all right."

She shook her head.

"I don't feel at all sure about that. I'm sorry I ever encouraged you."

"But when we come back?"

"That's different. I wish it was over. Oh, Henry, don't go!"

"My dear girl, how foolish you are. It's settled. I'd go now if I was sure of death, Edith."

"Ah, you're not kind," said Edith.

Sarle glanced at her.

"My dear, I fear I'm a big selfish brute. Better think so."

"You're not!"

"I am; and I've got this in my head. It has to be done."

But when Edith left him she was crying.

"I almost wish I wasn't going after all," said Sarle.

CHAPTER V

OSMAN GOES

“ I NEVER understand how you can trust a woman in an affair like this,” said Bertrand, who came in to lunch with Sarle and Singleton.

“ Osman, my son, I trust her because I trust her.”

“ Yes.”

“ Just because,” said Sarle.

“ Because! Oh, we understand!” cried Carew; “ I saw it.”

“ The deuce,” growled the doctor.

“ I mean no discourtesy, my friend. I wish you were married to her.”

“ Wait till I come back. Shut up, you chaps, that’s enough of it.”

“ How comes she to be mixed up with the Foreign Office?” asked Singleton.

“ Journalism, enterprise, and accident,” said the doctor. “ She has been very useful to them. The public knows nothing of the way the F. O. is run. As a matter of fact nine men out of ten in it know nothing accurate about their own Intelligence Branch. And Miss Cazenove is deadly patriotic, and she’s a splendid sort too. So let’s talk business.”

“ You never talk anything else,” said Osman;

"where are your bright old days of yarns and stories?"

"Idle yarns and reminiscence? Time enough when we've done making reminiscence. I've been a fat pig long enough, and fate ought to have stuck me and made me pork for it," said Sarle. "Two years' idleness is enough for any man. And I've had three."

"And I four, and lots of work waiting to be done," said the Albanian.

"And I one. And nothing done before," said Singleton.

"You shall have reminiscence enough to last you for a while, I promise you," cried the doctor encouragingly; "we'll be the Three Musketeers. You'll get your money's worth, don't doubt it. Here's a dollar to the pan and the bed-rock pitching! Hohé, business!"

"I'll go to-morrow," said Osman. "I got my passport viséd by the Russian ambassador this morning. I want the money. Singleton, does it seem like pouring thousands into the sea?"

"Don't you remember that ten thousand to me is like a hundred to the doctor?" asked Carew. "And if I chucked nine hundred and ninety thousand I should still have more than I deserve. For I've never earned anything. Take it."

Osman did; and as the bottled energy of money went into his pocket-book he fairly swelled and grew strong.

"Why don't you burst with power?" said Sarle to the millionaire. "Great Scott! have you ever thought that to have a million means the power to hire the labour of a thousand men for ever; fifty thousand men for a year; a million for a week; seven millions

for a day? And to think there are men with fifty millions. *Sac à papier!*"

"I never thought of it that way," said Singleton humbly.

"Does anyone ever think? I doubt it," said the doctor.

And they smoked.

"Well, hook it! sling it! go, my partner, my criminal partner, my fellow-robber. Pick good men and good horses. And we'll come to you by Constantinople."

"Cut the Sultan's throat," said Osman. "Lord! what a chance the man had. Now, if I were an Othman!"

"When we come back, who knows?" cried Sarle. "We'll make you Khalif, Commander of the Faithful, the Shadow of Allah on Earth!"

"Abdul Hamid has been the Shadow of Man on Heaven!" said Singleton.

"You mean the Armenians?"

"Yes."

Osman chuckled.

"Poor devils!—but there, I'm not as cruel as a Turk."

"Are they really so cruel?" asked Carew.

Bertrand smoked.

"I once"—he said presently—"I once cut the throats of eighteen Montenegrin prisoners myself"—

"Good God," said Singleton with aversion.

"Hold on," cried Sarle.

"And I overlooked one in the dark, and as I was going away he called to me to say he'd been forgotten. And I went back to him."

"He called to you!" whispered Carew incredulously.

Osman nodded.

"And thanked me. I really couldn't stand the way the Turks had been treating them. They were going to begin again in the morning."

"Oh!" said Singleton.

And he lighted a cigarette with shaking hands.

"I'd like to wipe them out," he said, and he stared hard at Osman. What must this man have seen and done in his life! And yet he could not be much over thirty.

"Yes," said Sarle, with curious intuition of Singleton's mood, "and the fat cretins of the suburbs, the goodly hand-fed geese of the churches, the mean politicians of the provinces, and the virtuous scum of a city's backwaters, judge men who know!"

"Yes," said the fascinated Singleton.

"They apply the morals of a Bethel to the business of the world, and tub-thump savagely because the flat arithmetic that can sum up the greasy three-pences of a Brixton Collection fails at the Three Dimensions of the Earth. Crawl, you miserable white ants in a log; crawl and creep, but stand from under when a Man comes along!"

He puffed at his pipe and then laughed and sang a stave.

"Stand back; clear the track, for I'm Josephus Orange Blossom, the greatest coloured gentleman in the land; oh, my!"

And he added—

"Persia will be like the nigger who said when he was struck by a meteorite, 'Who frowed dat brick?'"

"Let's hope so," said Osman. "But why trouble about your howling dervishes?"

"They make mischief."

"Do they alter the course of your country a hair's-breadth?"

"Yes," said Sarle, "and when we have to go and do what they prevented, the job is dirtier, and there's usually more blood than ever."

They smoked in silence for ten minutes.

"So you start for Odessa in the morning?"

"Per Oriental Express," said the Albanian. "Are you coming to see me off?"

"I shall be too busy," answered Sarle, "but Singleton will, I daresay. I must write to Ross at Teheran a long final letter."

Singleton looked up.

"You seem to have a good many in your confidence," he said rather uneasily.

Sarle shook his head.

"Not really more than half a dozen outside ourselves. There's Bent and Mason, and Miss Cazenove and Ross. Wait till you see Ross: he's a rip-snorter, a war correspondent in piping times of peace. Don't you think he owes me something if I start a general row and put him right on the spot for the Teheran affair? Why, Ross thinks I'm a little tin god on wheels, a bishop in the real Church militant, topside joss pidgin. And as to risks, why, what are they to some? As adventures are to the adventurous, so adventurers are to the adventurer!"

He jumped up.

"Oh, hang business! Now, boys, it's all ready, and we're ready, and, bar details and my Rossian epistle, there's nought to do. Are you men with heads? Let's drink a little to the goddess Luck!"

Singleton forgot Osman's ghastly yarn, and his fears of too many in the adventure, and laughed.

"I thought Osman was a good Moslem!"

"Oh, we'll drink for him, and he shall have a nargilé," cried Sarle. "Get it you, my Balkan bully! Oho, oho, I'm off for Odessa in the morning!"

"Sing us a song, vagabond," said the Balkan bully.

And Sarle winked as he brought out some champagne from a cupboard.

"I'll knock the head off!"

"Look out for shells," said Osman.

And the head of the bottle flew across the room.

"Here's to the looting of the palace," said Sarle; "here's to a new Shah, Osman or myself; and here's to luck in the Gulf and on the high seas!"

He and Singleton drank.

"Why did I waste time at home?" asked Sarle.

"Sing your song, 'Ohé, ohé,'" said Osman; "sing it, tramp."

"Let me alone," cried Sarle; "wait till the wine gets its work in. 'Tramp, tramp, the ground is damp, but we have gaiters on!'"

"Where's that rot from?" asked Singleton, grinning.

"Ask me another," said Sarle. "It's a reminiscence. Yes, my Balkan hero, I'll sing you."

And in a fine tenor he sang:

"We will never come back any more,
 Ohé, ohé, ohé!
 For we go where the breakers roar,
 Ohé!
 Simple Simons may stay at home,
 But you and I for ever must roam,
 Ohé, ohé!

Little indeed we hope to make!
 Ohé, ohé, ohé!
 But what care we for the ague shake,
 And what for starving for no one's sake!
 Ohé!

THE PLUNDERERS

It's ours to cease not, ours to go,
 Whether our mothers will let us or no,
 Ohé, ohé!

The Wallaby track or counting ties,
 Ohé, ohé, ohé!
 Under the brass of burning skies,
 Ohé!

And what is ease or what is pay,
 At the rate of enough for an hour of day,
 When our feet must travel and will not stay?
 Ohé, ohé, ohé!

My little plump folk, the road is rough,
 Ohé, ohé, ohé!
 By God, we're paid at the rate of enough,
 Ohé!
 When we sit in camp by the long lagoon,
 And watch our goddess, the wandering moon,
 Ohé, ohé!

The rate of enough for travelling men,
 Ohé, ohé, ohé!
 Is the rate of too much for nine in ten,
 Ohé!
 And he who returns has swallowed the nine,
 He's ten times one like a big combine!
 So stand from under, you lazy swine!
 Ohé, ohé, ohé!"

"Go on," yelled Singleton.

"Write more to it," said Sarle.

"Did you write it?"

"I write it! Heavens! do you take me for a miserable writer? writers are the men who don't!" said Sarle. "It was written by a poet with a broken leg, and expresses his desire to get down to the Café Royal to have an absinthe gommé."

"Rot," said Singleton.

"Absinthe is rot," said Sarle. "Tell us something very much stained, Osman. Let us hear you. Or

shall I relate something about tortures in the Andaman Islands? 'Orrible deetiles, extree speshul.'

Osman was squatting in a low divan smoking extra special *tumbak* with vine wood charcoal.

"I'd like to give some of the newspaper men something. Now, if they had the fear of the bastinado over them we should have a quieter life."

"Hear the man, Singleton. He yearns for a quiet life!"

"So I do," said the man from Albania. "My inner soul does, and as the years go on so the fighting devil gets less and less. My younger brothers would probably think me a debauched child of civilisation."

"The Albanians are very good fighting men, are they not?" asked Singleton.

"Moderately so," said Osman.

"Oh, just a little wee bit so," said Sarle satirically. "Why, Carew Singleton, it's this way. Correct me, Osman, if I'm wrong. The best fighter in the world is the Albanian, and after him the Moslem Circassian, and then the Montenegrin and the Turk."

"And where do we come in?"

"We don't," said Sarle.

"Do you mean that we can't fight?" asked Singleton indignantly, all his cherished Britannic notions being outraged.

"Well enough," said Sarle, "in our way, and when there are lots of us. Oh, by the way, I ought to have put the Ghoorkha, when he's got his favourite English officer, in with the Albanian and Circassian. But as to us, why, we fight in crowds, and with artillery and gold, while the best of the Balkan men are just born fighters. An average Albanian would lick three average Englishmen, and don't you forget it."

"I can't believe it."

"Think of the average."

"Yes," said Singleton.

"And remember we are of such low stamina and vitality that we have introduced the theory that human life is always sacred as an additional safeguard for our miserable city-destroyed lives. But as for the fighting races, why, 'they're ten times one in a big combine, ohé.' Drink, Singleton, drink, my child, and thank Heaven you're not an average Englishman."

"You are an awful iconoclast," said poor Singleton; and Sarle laughed.

"You see, Singleton, to be a fighter you must know how to fight. How many Englishmen are brought up on weapons? The fighting races begin early, and are professionals; the best of us are amateurs. The best even of our officers in a hand-to-hand combat with an ordinary Albanian would have no show. Is that so, Osman?"

The Albanian nodded.

"But we are we, and where are they?" asked Singleton.

"It's not our fighting qualities have made us what we are," said Sarle, "but our political nature, our perseverance, our colonising instincts. We don't love fighting for its own sake, and a fighting race does. That's the last word. Well now, drink and smoke, and chew the cud, and talk to that ruffian in the divan. My head is clear, and I'll write to Ross."

And in the morning Singleton saw Osman off to Odessa by way of Vienna.

"Spend your spare time on fencing," said Osman. "It may save your skull."

He leant out of the carriage as the train moved.

"You know it was Sarle who wrote that song."

"Well, I'm hanged," said Singleton.

For this poor innocent millionaire actually respected even good poets.

CHAPTER VI

THE TRAMP

SINGLETON found Sarle packing a lot of traps to go out in the *Flag of Persia*. The doctor winked cheerfully and went on singing.

"What's the song?" asked Singleton.

"Klonas kahta nika tumtum
Kopa Johnny.
Okook tenas man mamook pelton nika.
Aya!
Yaya,"

sang Sarle, as he sorted out a lot of tabloids.

"What's it mean?" asked Singleton.

"Kultus kopa nika
Spose mika maksh nika :
Hyu tenas man koolie kopa town ;
Alkie wekt nika iskum :
Wake kul kopa nika,"

said Sarle.

"And"—

"It means," said Sarle, "that the young woman owns she is soft on Johnny. But, nevertheless, if he deserts her, she proposes to replace him. It's Chinook, the Western American trading jargon. By the way, haven't you a young woman to fool you?"

Singleton sighed.

"Ever since I came into my money I've been scared of them. I've had seventeen proposals, ten from the mothers and seven from the dears themselves; and as I wasn't very popular before"—

"I see," cried Sarle, "but never mind, we'll set you up in business with a few selected Sultanas. It's just as well to be free when you are on a jaunt like ours. It's a sad thing to leave them weeping; especially as they get over it. By the way, how many languages do you know?"

"One," said Singleton, "and a very good one, English to wit."

"Why, what an Englishman you are," cried the doctor, opening a case of instruments. "Now, I know a smattering of fourteen, including Chinook, West Coast jargon and Pidgin English, and I flatter myself that few men can mangle French more outrageously. When I talk to a Frenchman, he must feel as if he were fox-hunting; every five minutes I present him with a linguistic bull-finch that makes his hair curl, and finally he falls on his knees, and in piercing accents and the name of his academy begs I won't do it any more. Will you come down to the *Flag* with me? There's very little to do now till Osman sends word."

"Of course I will," said Singleton, and when Sarle had finished packing a bag by the very simple expedient of treading down the contents till the hasp caught, they took a cab to the Temple Pier and went on board a steamboat.

London burnt that day in a haze of heat, and the river steamed and gleamed.

"Sapperment and potsankerundsegeltuch," said Sarle, "but she's a fine river! This is the way to

come into London, Singleton, my boy ; for you see her muck and her grandeur at once. She's lady of a house of corruption, and a goddess too. Thank Wren for St. Paul's. That dome crowns the city."

They came to London Bridge and changed boats.

"This is the Pool, the troubled Pool of the Angel of Commerce," said the doctor, as they ran below the bridge on a swirling ebb. "Oh, how I love the rattle and stink of it all."

"It's fine," said Singleton. "Would you believe it, I've never been on the river between Richmond and Tilbury!"

"And to think I might have taken you out to get your carotids cut without your having seen the great sight of the world!" cried Sarle. "'But the one who returns has swallowed the nine,'" he hummed.

"Osman said you wrote that!"

"He might have concealed my shame," said the doctor. "But if I did I'm sorry."

Singleton stared.

"Why, I'd give anything to write poetry."

"So would I," said the doctor drily, "especially if I could do it without being a poet, who are usually a drivelling lot of debauchees, and their gift a flower on a dungheap. To be a man is better than to be a poet. 'All I want is labourer's wages: I'm the man to carry the hod.' But you'll think I'm mad, Singleton. Now I'll talk sober sense. The river always intoxicates me."

They got out at Wapping and walked up old Gravel Lane.

"Old-fashioned seamen have a song about this lane," said Sarle, "but I forget it, so why I mentioned it I don't know. Here we are at the London Dock.

'And when we get to London Docks, the pretty young girls come down in flocks.'

"Hallo," said Jack Bent over the side of his vessel.

"How's 'The Kerosine Can'?" asked Sarle cheerfully. "I've brought Mr. Singleton to see you, for I found time after all. When are you going to take this slab-sided tin kettle to sea?"

"The morning tide to-morrow, sir," said Captain Bent, who treated Sarle and Singleton as his owners when on his own coal-tarred iron decks.

"She'll be a hot ship, Bent."

The skipper nodded.

"Where's Mr. Mason?"

"Up at the Admiralty."

"Ah, I see. Where's the chief engineer? That's M'Phail, Singleton; you must know him in case you never get a chance later."

"Grim beggar, how encouraging," said Singleton. "Fetch your character along."

They were in the cabin out of the sun, and that was the only comfort they got, for she looked inside as shabby as a discarded packing case.

"Steward, ask the chief engineer to step this way," said Bent; and he did the honours with whisky and soda.

"M'Phail says he's a Scotchman," said Sarle, "but that's because he thinks he ought to be. Though he has a Scotch name he was brought up in London and has hardly a trace of Scotch except that he doesn't drop his aspirates. But if you could hint that he talks rather broad Scotch, you'll please him."

"I'll do it," said Singleton.

A black-faced giant came in.

"Why, but it's the doctor," he said, and wiping his right hand with a ball of waste, he put out a fist two sizes larger than Sarle's own. "And glad I am to see you, sir."

Sarle introduced Singleton.

"Before I forget it, Mr. M'Phail, why is it that only Scotchmen run marine engines?" asked Singleton.

M'Phail looked at him.

"It's not quite a fact, sir. There are some interlopers and even Cockneys at it; though I think it shouldn't be allowed, and the Board of Trade should see to it. But the reason we Scotchmen take to engineering is just because machinery takes to us, and it's because we're a deductive nation, Mr. Singleton. Now, if you mind, Buckle remarks that, and he tells about Cullen and about John Hunter. And we're all the same, sir. We want our premisses, and then we come down from them, and the premisses we work from are the laws of steam and the strength of materials and the nature of machinery and the nature of lubricants, and so we come (ay, I'll take a drink, sir) down to the particular fact. And like all with the deductive nature, sir, we don't give a cuss for facts outside our own hypothesis. So, if it be Captain Bent's will, we'll make a collision of it any day. For your skipper is inductive, and I think I'm talking too much, so here's to you, gentlemen, and a prosperous trip in this boat when you board her at the port of 'We-know-where.'"

He tipped his little finger up.

"Hear it sizzle," said M'Phail. "Gosh, my bearings were hot."

"And are you satisfied down below?" asked Sarle.

"Satisfied!" said the chief engineer, "now I should

say so. How came she to have such a bellyful of the best? By the looks of her outside if her engines had been best scrap I'd have thought it too good for her. And can she do fifteen?"

"With you she can," said Sarle; "she's as deceitful as blazes, and the more she looks like a slouching tramp the better. Are you satisfied with the men you've got, too?"

M'Phail nodded.

"They're a tough, rough lot, but they know their work, and I've put the fear of God into three already. But they'll come all right, for they see I'm just and logical. I explained the nature of a syllogism to Thompson yesterday. Says I, 'Thompson, my man, the major premiss is—

A chief engineer that can lick you and will if it's needed;

and the second is—

A second engineer mustn't talk back unless it's to the third engineer, and so on;

and the third is—

Take that, you impudent deevil,' and with that, doctor, I slammed him into the bunker and broke his spirit for the day. He'll be a good man. Here's to you again, gentlemen."

And the big M'Phail strode out.

"Do you like him?" asked Sarle of Bent.

"Fine," said the skipper.

"I picked him up years ago, and kept my eye on him since," mused the doctor. "I could tell you stories about him."

"His son's the third engineer," said Bent, "a long, slab-sided hoosier."

"And a true Cockney," cried the doctor. "He

breaks his father's heart with his talk ; and the old man puzzles the boy till he's ready to die, with his jaw about Buckle and deduction and induction."

"All the youngster knows about Buckle is the buckle-end of a strap," cried Bent. "But, by the way, who was Buckle?"

Sarle chuckled.

"I'll tell you in the Gulf or outside the Strait of Ormuz, when we get there. Well, Singleton, do you like the *Flag*?"

Singleton's nose lifted like a topped boom.

"She's a bit rotten, here."

He looked round the cabin.

"You'll think you never saw anything so sweet in the way of a home next time you clap eyes on her, and that'll be after you've smelt the lee side of Tophet," said Sarle. "Bent, what does the crowd think?"

"They don't think," said Bent. "I'll take care of their thinking. Let me see one think, that's all. I'm here to do that. And in case I should blow a cylinder head out of any thinking apparatus, here's my brother."

And young Bent came in. He was a pleasing, mild, young fellow, who promised unpleasing capabilities, for he had an aquiline nose, and an eye the blue of new-tempered steel.

"Glad to see you, sir," he said modestly.

"Does he know what's what?" asked Sarle benignantly.

"Now, what do *you* think?" asked Bent. "And the second mate's an extra master passed in steam and graduated at Whisky Academy, but come down to us, and he yearns for wealth, and would

sail the pitch lakes below with a freight of brimstone."

"He must be a fine fellow," said Sarle, "and I'm sorry I can't wait to be introduced. Let's have a stirrup cup, and, by the way, Bent, you can get some ice on board for yourself."

"Thank you, sir," said Bent, "but ice is bad for the digestion, and I drink hot drinks in the Red Sea."

"That's physiology," cried the doctor. "Here's to you! prosit; salud; here's how, and may luck come on board with the pilot and stay as a passenger."

"Here's just so," said Bent.

"May your shadow never grow less," said Singleton. "Here's at you, dad, drat you,—here's to you and towards you; if I'd never ha' seen you, I'd never ha' knowed you."

They chinked glasses.

"And as a last toast, gentlemen, I give you the Shah!" said Sarle.

They drank the toast.

"No meaner thing after!" said Sarle, and he smashed his tumbler.

"So long!"

CHAPTER VII

MISS EDITH CAZENOVE

A WEEK later things stood thus:—
The *Flag of Persia* was in the Bay of Biscay, and Osman was at Kassik in Kurdistan, while Persian troops were moving slowly up to the Persian north-east frontiers, where there was a good deal of trouble threatening. In Baluchistan the English politicals slept the sleep of politicals, except that Major Waller, whose mother had been a Bilooch, kept suggesting to Simla that there might be more than unrest along the Khorassan frontier before long. And Simla sighed as one man, and said Waller was a bore. For, as he had once prophesied a row which he himself stopped by a vast amount of brag and bullying and fine political cunning, the whole army looked on him as a spoil-sport of the worst kind, and said he was no true Englishman.

And Sarle was at his last gasp of patience.

“A little more waiting and I shall take to drinking Devil’s Peg,” he said to Singleton.

“What’s that?” asked Carew.

“An invention of my own. Whisky and morphine,” said the doctor. “And, to-night, I’ve to take Miss Cazenove out. Do you know, that unless I am

protected in some way, she will marry me by main force? I wish to the deuce that she was ugly. I should feel stronger. But, to tell the truth, I'm a bit weak. If it weren't for that I should be an emperor of somewhere."

"How is it you are not married?"

"I have been married," said Sarle. "I married in Egypt, and divorced my wife with a gift of a thousand pounds, and now she's the favourite of Ahmed Bey. She writes to me in wonderful illiterate French once a year."

"Why did you divorce her?"

"Because I was going orchid-hunting," said Sarle pensively. "And I was afraid she was getting tired of me. I certainly was tired of her."

"And so went orchid-hunting?"

"Did I put the effect as the cause?" asked Sarle. "Well, let it be so."

It was four o'clock in the afternoon then, and hot dust and paper danced in the streets of sombre Bloomsbury.

"I shall be glad to get out of this," said Sarle presently, as he puffed at Osman's special nargilé, "for I've got travel fever to the extent of not being able to sit down, except in a camp-chair or on a cabin trunk. And any moment now we may get news from Osman. What a piece of luck it was to tumble across you, Singleton. To think that you have the money and the necessary insides, when most men are poor and with the guts of an eviscerated mouse!"

Singleton looked pleased.

"I'd been hunting for you for years," he said, "but if I had advertised I should have landed"—

"Ten thousand," cried Sarle, "at least ten thousand

with every quality but brains. The rare thing is to get courage, knowledge, and brains and action together. And, to say it humbly, I believe I've something of all four. But, as a general thing, thinking destroys action. A thinker may walk, but never runs; a philosopher may sit, but never walks; your advanced Yogi man may open his eyes, but never even sits in an active manner; and as we come round the circle we find philosophy ends where idiocy begins."

"You're too deep for me," said Singleton, "for I really haven't any brains. I was notorious for not having them as a boy."

"Which means not having the kind of brains a schoolmaster desires. Ha, what's that?"

The divided quadruple hammer of the telegraph boy thundered on the street door, and the next minute a telegram was brought in.

"Give me that little red book, Singleton," said Sarle, pointing to the mantelpiece against which Singleton was leaning.

"It's from Osman, and he says 'Caramba,'" cried Sarle, opening his code-book, "and that means—'Things progress; come at once.'"

"Hurrah!" said Singleton. "It is to-night, then?"

"Yes; no! I daren't; I must be civil to Miss Cazenove. We'll make it to-morrow. And now I'll dress. And after to-night we may not wear such social war-paint till we're back again."

"Here's to that," said Singleton, emptying his whisky and soda.

"Here's to our noble selves," cried Sarle. "And now you go and get ready. And be here to-morrow about nine."

They shook hands, and Singleton went off to his

chambers in Piccadilly, where he rang for his landlord, who was also his valet.

"I'm going to-morrow," said Singleton, obviously in great excitement.

"To Persia, sir?"

Singleton stared.

"Did I say Persia, Gray?"

"Yes, sir."

"I must have been dreaming. It's to Ecuador."

"And where is that, sir?" asked Gray.

"It's—oh, look it up in a map," said Singleton.

"And when will you be back, sir?"

"When I—return," said Singleton.

"And how far do you go to-morrow, sir?"

"To Constantinople," said Singleton.

"By express I should say, sir," suggested Gray, who had travelled. "Fast express?"

"Of course fast," said the millionaire, rather irritably, as he gathered up papers from his writing-desk.

"And breakfast, sir?"

"Oh, confound breakfast; I'm not hungry," said Singleton. "I'll have a hansom at half-past eight."

"My dear," said the landlord to his wife when he got downstairs, "it has come at last."

"What has come?" she asked.

"The married woman episode."

"Talk sense, you fool."

"I mean it. I saw it coming. Mr. Singleton is fairly crazy, and says he'll have a hansom for breakfast at half-past eight, and that he's going to Persia, to Constantinople, and to some other place on the equator. And if that doesn't mean someone else's wife and an orange grove in a quiet place on the Mediterranean, I don't know the ways of 'em at all."

His wife shook her head.

"It looks bad," she cried, "but he's got enough money and to spare for damages. And it's better for us than his marrying, isn't it? And can we let his rooms while he's away?"

"Of course not," said her husband; "but we will."

"Has that new friend of his, Dr. Sarle, come in with him?"

"No. Ah, he's a queer one. The most reckless talker, my dear. For a man of his age it's a fair scandal."

"Then you shouldn't listen," said his wife.

"But I like to," cried Gray.

And while they continued to discuss Sarle's and Singleton's morals, Sarle was getting ready to take Miss Cazenove to the theatre.

"Well, I'm going," he said an hour later as they sat down to dinner.

"When?"

"Now," said Sarle. "I really believe you'd like to come."

"If I were a man I would," she cried. "But I'm a woman, you see."

"I see it with half an eye," said the doctor, noting that she poured water into Corton.

But the smooth sweet creature saw his half-eye.

"You might just as well have ordered vin ordinaire."

"Certainly not. When shall I taste such Burgundy again?"

"I like it with water," said Miss Cazenove.

"But with the wine of life you make King's Peg."

"What's that?"

He told her.

"Brandy, champagne! But I don't think I like champagne. And now you are going"—

Sarle shook his head.

"You overrate me, Edith, and I wish you wouldn't."

"I don't overrate you. But you are a fool. Why did I ever help you over this murderous campaign of yours? And I want to know how it is you got Osman, who certainly should know the risks better than you, into such a business."

Sarle smiled.

"It has never occurred to you that Osman, who is as cool as the summit of Nanga Parbat, got me into it?"

"I thought he had sense," snapped Edith; "at any-rate till"—

"Till he fell under my influence?"

She nodded.

"Do you think I'm the loadstone mountain and a universal wrecker?"

Miss Cazenove caught sight of a woman at a near table looking at Sarle with some natural pleasure in a fine big blue-eyed man. She turned on the offender and stared her off the earth.

"Can you see through those glasses?" asked the doctor.

"No," said Edith. "I use them when I don't want to see. Oh, how very unkind you are to me, when I do everything you ask me. And if it was mine"—

"Oh!" said Sarle hastily, "you know I'm a beast, and a wandering beast, a cut-and-never-come-again savage. But we'll meet after it's over."

"Madness," said Edith, pretending not to wipe away a tear; again turning on the woman whom she

had swept into farthest planetary space. She gazed at her with a fine astronomical eye, which appeared to be fixed on the planet Neptune, and not being able to stand it the poor stranger succumbed and retired out of the cosmos.

"Ah," said Edith, when her critical eye came back from escorting the defeated woman into outer darkness.

"How unkind you are," said Sarle. "She didn't do me any harm."

"Oh," said Edith suddenly, "and pray what do you mean?"

Sarle drank quietly and looked at her over his glass till she blushed.

"You're a horrid wretch," said Edith, "and why I like you I can't tell. And are you really going in the morning?"

"Fact," cried the doctor; "my millionaire and I."

"He's rather soft."

"Not so very by any means. He makes me give him receipts."

"And your I O U?"

Sarle laughed.

"There's no besting you. Come, or we shall be late."

He put her into a cab after the theatre.

"Are you not going to see me home?" she cooed.

Sarle hesitated.

"I am a coward and fear to die," he said enigmatically. But he got into the hansom.

"It will never do," thought the doctor disconsolately. "I'm far too weak."

"Oh, how strong you are," said the fair diplomatist admiringly.

"No," said the doctor, "I'll not kiss her."

"Oh, when shall we meet again, Henry? Yes, kiss me once more and good-bye," she sobbed.

"Well, never mind," said Sarle, sighing as he drove away. "I'm as good as dead anyhow."

CHAPTER VIII

IN STAMBOUL

EDITH CAZENOVE, though a woman, had a gift which most women lack, and that was decision. It was not merely decision of character but decision in action, and though she cried herself to sleep, she got up early and made the best of her beauty. She had found out that what a pretty and clever woman cannot get is rarely worth having ; and having had the honour of refusing His Imperial Majesty the Shah of Persia, her natural confidence was by no means abated except in the presence of Henry Sarle, M.D.

"I'll do it," said Edith Cazenove.

So having eaten a good breakfast she walked in Hyde Park till half-past ten.

"Thank Heaven I'm as strong as a bull," said Edith.

At eleven she went to the Foreign Office and sent up her card to Mr. Quinton Hazlitt, who was a rising man and usually at work by then.

"I'm delighted to see you," said the light of the Foreign Office.

"Thank you so much," cried she who might have been the light of the Shah's harem for six weeks.

"Have you any news?" asked elegant Hazlitt.

"Yes, most important news," said Miss Cazenove.

"Indeed?"

"Yes, indeed. I am going to Persia."

"Great Heaven," said Quinton Hazlitt; "now you don't mean to say so. It will be a pity!"

"Why, Mr. Hazlitt?"

"His Imperial Majesty."

"Bother His Imperial Majesty," said Miss Cazenove, turning her nose up. "I hope never to see the wicked old horror again."

"Then why go back into the lion's den?"

"You call him a lion? I'm not afraid. I want you to get me a passport, and I want a letter to Sir Everett Home."

"I can give you one, of course. You would rather have a private and personal one?"

"Certainly," said Edith. "By the way, have you heard anything more about the north-east frontier?"

"We are keeping our eye on it," said Hazlitt.

"And what does our eye see?" asked Miss Cazenove, with a touch of sarcasm which Hazlitt omitted to note.

"Ructions, I fear," said the light. "And they are sending troops up."

"They will want them. I am certain Abd-ul-Rahman is in it. Mesrour Smith writes me that it is said so openly."

"Why will you call him Mesrour?"

"Because he's so utterly, sweetly English, the dear boy," said Edith. "And now, if you have any particular instructions from the chief for me, let me know by to-night."

"When do you start?"

"To-morrow morning."

"I wish I was going too."

"Ah, but you are needed here," said Edith; "on my word, and you won't mind my saying it, they want a smart man or two among them here, for they *are* a lot."

Quinton nodded.

"They are. But, on my soul, do you really think there are *two* clever men in this Office?"

"Oh, there must be another among so many," cried Edith.

"I'll look for him," said Quinton Hazlitt. "And now good-bye. Remember to write me every week. And do keep your eye on old Fack. They say his new attaché—he's a Lapunoff—is as vain as a girl and as leaky as the Danaids' jar. Now with a little flattery"—

"I see," said Edith. "It's a pleasure to talk to you, Mr. Hazlitt, for upon my word every man I know, but one, is a fool."

But that one, of course, was Sarle, who was also going to Persia with a view of getting into the largest possible pan of hot water.

"He's an idiot," said Edith.

But that one was Quinton Hazlitt.

Next day Edith went to Paris, stayed there a night and wrote a long letter to Mrs. Hawker, wife of the Shah's pet engineer. This was part of it:—

"The glamour of the East has come back to me, my dear, and I'm coming out to you. Oh, can't I see the surprise upon your dear face to think I can dare to come back into the lion's den. But I can't help myself. I've the smell of the East in my nostrils, and the cry of it in my ears, and the strange

kaleidoscope of its colour in my eyes. Here the pavements deafen me, and it's all so sombre (yes, even in hot Paris), and the smell has no romance in it; and the colour is vile. They are wearing the most violent heart-breaking contrasts here: scarlet and magenta and a shrieking green with Reckitt's blue, and a violet that scrapes one's eyes and gives one ophthalmia. And it's *chic* to the last degree to have a tailor-made plaid with squares like a chess-board of all these colours. And their hats! Well, I'm bringing you one, so you'll see.

"You will get this letter not much before I come, so get my room ready, dear, and clear any scorpions out.—Your loving friend,
EDITH CAZENOVE."

That night she started for Batoum. And as she went Sarle and Singleton were hurrying east in the Express for Constantinople, being but a day ahead of her.

They were in the best of spirits.

"Don't over-smoke yourself, Singleton," said the doctor; "you will want all your nerve."

"I'm very anxious to know whether I'm a coward," said Singleton.

"I'm glad to hear it, and should be better pleased if you find you are, for then there will be two of us," answered the doctor. "I've never done anything serious in my life without being very much frightened till it began. And after it was over I got frightened again."

"That's curious," said Singleton. "But you weren't scared while the thing was on?"

"Never, unless I had time to think. So never give yourself time. If you are scared, do something."

It's much more comfortable to be dead than to be frightened, I assure you ; and we westerners haven't the natural love of danger inherent in true fighting races, as I told you before. We are curious creatures, are we not ? ”

He considered the matter while the train went a mile.

“ Even our own Osman Arslan Skipar Bey told me that living in the West for four years half-wrecked his nerve. It's impossible not to be affected by one's environment, and he says that to have all the world insisting on the value of human life affected him. And when I think what that chap has done in his short life, I'm paralysed, fairly paralysed.”

“ How came he to go West at all ? ”

“ He was a Young Turk.”

Singleton stared.

“ Shameful ignorance,” said Sarle ; “ don't you remember Midhat Pacha, and the time he and his brother duffers started a kind of Turkish Parliament under Murad after Abd-ul-Aziz was despatched ? The party who tried to westernise the Orient were called Young Turks, and trying to get Old Turkey into line with modern civilisation they came to immortal grief. Osman was one of them, and had to skip out to escape sudden death. After years of piratical wanderings, when he carried his life not in his hand but tied by a hair, he drifted into Austria, and then to Paris and came over to us.”

“ And who started this Teheran matter ? ”

Sarle looked round the smoking car, which was full of mixed nationalities and some Jews.

“ 'Ware hawks,” said Sarle. “ However, he says I did. I say he did. But I've a notion he has an axe

to grind in Persia. For he's as secret as the grave, and when he's quiet he has two gloomy devils, one in each eye. By the way, let us say Ecuador when we mean Persia."

He relapsed into silence, and they hardly spoke of Persia again till they sat in their hotel in Pera. There he found a letter from Osman.

"Call on Suleiman Pacha," said this letter. "He will see you through to Nassa. You are English archæological travellers, remember, and when he says so gravely, you will bow gravely. He is a fine old scoundrel, and if Singleton could make him a present, say, of a couple of thousand francs, it will do no harm. At Nassa you will be found out by a man of mine who talks French. When he asks you if you are travelling East, you will say, 'We go through the East to the West.' All things are well, and the word goes round."

"We will drink coffee with this scoundrel to-night," said Sarle; and he sent to Suleiman's house in Scutari. They rowed across the Bosphorus in a caique, and found the Pacha waiting to receive them.

"Allah preserve your Highnesses," said fat old Suleiman; "my friend Osman Bey's friends are mine."

"And his are ours. On my head be it," said Sarle. "He has then informed you of our heart's desire?"

"He has, Effendi. It is strange how the hearts of all Franks should be set upon seeing ancient buildings."

"There are doubtless fine ones in Nassa!" said Sarle.

"God is great," replied the Pacha, "and it may be that He has had them built since I was there. For at that time there were none."

"There will be the foundations," said Sarle solemnly. "My friend Singleton is a man after your own heart. Having heard that you admired fine buildings and coins, and were learned in the lore respecting them, he has brought you a book and some coins in a purse."

"It is well," said Suleiman; "I thank him for his goodness. My house and all in it, and a ruin at the back, are his. I will have the pleasure of calling upon your High-mightinesses to-morrow."

And Sarle and Singleton withdrew.

"A most sweet ruffian," said Sarle; "now can't you imagine that Johnny having a good time in the back parts of Armenia, and coming home loaded down, beyond any reasonable Plimsoll's mark, with blood-stained loot? These Turks, these Turks!"

Just outside the hotel they were accosted by an obvious Greek.

"Well, son of Sappho, what is it?" asked Sarle in very fair Romaic.

"My lord speaks the true language," replied the ruffian; "and may I ask if I have the honour to speak to the Doctor Sarle?"

"You have that honour."

And the Greek extracted a letter from the inside of his shirt.

"From Kassik," he said, and made a gesture which Sarle understood.

"Give him a hundred francs, Singleton."

And going inside the hotel he read the note from Osman Bey.

"In case you have not received my letter at the hotel appointed, I send you this by the hands of a Greek. You will acquaint yourself with Suleiman

Pacha, and make him a present, and he will send you to Nassa, and provide everything necessary. Though there is no great haste, it is as well you came at once, for I have to bribe the Pacha here to keep his eyes and ears shut. I have also sent a letter to Singleton at the Ottoman Bank. May Allah protect you."

"Then we'll go to the Bank now," said Sarle.

The Greek stood waiting.

"Have you not been paid by someone else?" asked Sarle with an air of ferocity.

"Certainly, Effendi," cried the Greek, "but if you need a trustworthy man"—

"No," said Sarle, and the bowing Greek withdrew.

"Come," said Sarle; and they went to the Bank.

"Bring ten thousand in gold and ten thousand in orders on the Bank," said Osman's Bey's letter. And when the people at the Bank understood that this long, thin Englishman was the man who had a credit with them for a hundred thousand English pounds, they pestered him with attentions which he could not endure.

"My friend will do all the necessary business," he said, "unless you want my signature presently."

And he pulled the latest *Figaro* from his pocket, and retired to a chair in the corner.

"Sign, villain!" said Sarle; "and now let's go. What shall we offer to the other villain across the water? Pipes, coffee, sweetmeats, a nip of brandy if he does not compound for his sins by adhering to the spirit of Mahomet's injunctions."

"And must I give him more money?"

"You may suggest a little more will be sent to him when we reach Nassa safely."

"Shall we?"

"I hope so. It would be bad luck to fall at the first hurdle when there are so many."

They dined as quietly as possible with the street uproar of vivid Constantinople in their ears. The din was terrific; the air vibrant.

"I dream," said Singleton, "and you are a dreamer."

"I a dreamer?" cried Sarle. "No, I'm practical to my finger tips. That's why I'm not famous. I've not enough dream in me. I am like the parrot that talked too much. Now the man who does things really is like Loder of South Africa. He dreams, but dreams possibilities, and looks at people with a cold and almost fishy eye, so that the greatest plan of his seems a matter to be compassed easily. He sits in a rocking-chair under the verandah, and jerks a few rough words together with the utmost difficulty, for he's no vocal artist; and those few words represent the essence of reality. Then he's not excitable. For people distrust those who are excitable. And he never gives himself away by writing letters. And he keeps his weaknesses to himself, which is the great art of your real strong man. Probably he sits on his stoep wondering how the deuce it is people think him strong at all. You will notice as you go on learning that the man who forgets his weaknesses comes to grief. This is the danger of swelled head, my son. A man with that plays with his cards on the table, and probably gets pipped. But I'm diverging and showing my own character."

"But you've carried this scheme through!" said Singleton.

"We, not I!"

"You were the origin."

Sarle lighted a cigar.

"Perhaps yes, and perhaps no. Anyhow, Osman was necessary, and so were you. When I put that absurd advertisement in the papers I was almost throwing it up. For I'd been trying to raise my financier for years. You've hardly a notion how much work I've done over this idea—this mad idea."

"Oh, I have, though," said Singleton admiringly. "I think you a wonderful chap. And when I saw you I said"—

"What!"

"That I'd as soon take your word as any other man's bond. It was in your eyes."

Sarle reached out his hand.

"That's good of you. But don't you overrate me, my son. You don't know my weaknesses yet. I'm even now half broken down with worries. A little more making arrangements would have ended me. Thank the Lord that so much is done and the active work is commencing."

"Did you have to do so much?"

Sarle laughed.

"Oh, nothing to speak of. I had to plan out a scheme of the most complicated description. That was done before I knew you. It is all arranged with alternative courses at every point. I have constructed a dozen defences according to circumstances if we fall into the hands of our own people. If we fall into the claws of the Persians they will be forced to give us up unless we are killed right off. My instructions to Ross took me a month. I hope you will meet him. And it was I who got Osman to send his brother into the north-east of Persia. For he had been in the employ of the Ameer. Why, there's just

a chance that Osman Junior might really pull off a big thing. For the Shah hasn't a shred of character left up there by now. And all the time I've been trying not to fall in love."

"She's a very pretty woman," said Singleton contemptively as he recalled Edith Cazenove.

"Oh, she's all that, and has a real head too," replied the doctor; "but I don't want to marry yet."

"How did you know her first?"

"Didn't I tell you? I escorted her out of Teheran years ago, when His Imperial Majesty was only prevented from adding her to his harem by the British Ambassador."

"Is she plucky?"

"Dangerously plucky. She told me, and she certainly meant it, that if the Shah had roped her in, she would have killed him. When she's mad she looks like Judith."

"Who was Judith?"

"The woman who killed Holofernes."

"And who was Holofernes?"

"Oh, ask me another!" said Sarle, rather languidly.
"Let's get our man and go out a bit."

CHAPTER IX

OSMAN BEY

THE two archæologists, with the permission of the Sultan, gained neither knew how, started on their Asia Minor ride the day after Suleiman Pacha returned their visit and got half drunk on brandy.

"May you see many fine buildings," said Suleiman with a leer.

"May we never lack ruins," cried Sarle cheerfully. "We thank you for all you have done, and will acquaint Osman Bey with your kindness."

The Pacha sobered a little.

"You will tell him I did all he asked?" he said anxiously.

"We will," cried Sarle.

And as they rode he wondered how it was that Suleiman feared Osman. For fear him he did.

"This Osman is the devil," said the doctor. "I suppose he knew Suleiman in the old time, and has him in his power somehow or other. But there, how do we know that the Sultan himself has not been backing Osman?"

"Then you don't trust Osman's word?" asked Singleton in astonishment.

"I trust him, but he's truly an Oriental, though an Albanian, and may have other motives than I know. He's an astounding character—deep, simple, crafty, childlike, heroic, and yet very wise. That's the reason I believe there is something behind him that I don't know."

"Why?"

"Because this is the wildest thing ever put in train," said the doctor. "And unless he had some other reason than mere love of a row and an adventure he would not have been in it, wild as he was to get back again to his old life. I think some thousands of your money may actually be in Razzet Bey's hands."

"And who's he?"

"The foul scoundrel who is the Sultan's favourite," said Sarle.

The doctor lectured for five minutes on the life and moralities of the Sultan and his entourage of villainy.

"As I told you, anything is possible to money. Do you remember I called you the Gold-Torpedo? With sufficient cash you may blow even H.M.S. *England* out of the water. Give me the money, and I'll make Russia a Republic. Give me the money, and I'll create an Emperor for the United States. Money is bottled energy. When the Jews control it all look out for the New Jerusalem and a new Ghetto for Galilæans. God is great, and nowadays His name is Gold."

He paused, then rode a bit closer to his companion.

"And I'm glad to meet a man who is no slavish worshipper of it, Singleton."

Carew Singleton looked pleased.

"It has its temptations. Isn't this one of them?"

"Oh, this is a crime," said the doctor, "an international crime, and when (or if) we come armed into Teheran, the gold-worshippers will be most annoyed."

That night they camped out in the open.

They rode next day and the day after across fertile plains and across plains that had been fertile ere the Kurds came down upon Armenia. Then the country rolled and rose in hills and grew wilder.

"Buildings! In the name of Architecture, where are they? But as Suleiman said, God is great, and may have caused some to arise in the night at Nassa," cried Sarle.

"Our men look on us as madmen."

The doctor laughed.

"And probably disbelieve the architectural theory as Suleiman did. What creatures these Armenians are! *Armenie bokh* the Turks call them, Armenian dirt, bond-slaves. When will the next wiping out come?"

"Europe won't permit it."

"Won't permit it," bellowed Sarle; "can they stop it? But the Turk is a fool."

So the week passed, and Nassa came nigh.

"Are you toughened to the saddle?" asked Sarle.

"Remember what a ride is before you."

"Tough? I'm tanned," said Singleton.

That night they camped ten miles from Nassa. And when the moon rose at the third hour of the night a horseman came to their camp.

"Have you two Franks with you?" he asked the gorgeous dragoman.

"Two Franks who are Engliz."

"Whom God has affected with a desire to behold ruins?"

"It is even so," said the dragoman.

And the horseman came to the camp-fire by which Singleton and Sarle sat smoking.

"Est-ce que vous allez à l'Orient, messieurs?" he asked swiftly.

"Vers l'Ouest par l'Orient," said Sarle.

"It is well," said the horseman, and squatting on his heels, he lighted a cigarette on a hot coal. "Then I will go with you to Kassik. My lords are well?"

"We are well," said Sarle; "and is our friend well?"

"The Bey is a mountain of strength," said the Kurd, "but this Franji tongue breaks my teeth."

And Sarle spoke with him in Turkish, and then called the dragoman.

"Ahmed, I take this man into my service."

And the dragoman smiled.

They rode through Nassa, and on the third day afterwards camped by a ruined mosque among the hills. As the darkness fell upon the little valley, and their camp-fire crackled and blazed, the Kurd ran a few yards from the fire. He put his ear to the earth, and the men about the camp were quiet.

"My lord comes," he said when he returned; "for I have heard the thunder of his horses."

Listen as they would they heard nothing for five long minutes. And in the swift darkness, unlighted yet by the moon, they saw nothing.

And then they heard one horse's gallop plainly.

"My lord Osman Bey, Osman Arslan, Osman the Lion," said the Kurd.

And behind him a squadron.

"His chosen men, and of them am I," said Osman's messenger.

And the next moment Osman Bey came out of the night, and sprang from his horse.

"May Allah be with you."

"And with you also," said Sarle.

And Singleton rubbed his eyes to rub out the dream as he shook hands with him who had been for a while an Englishman and was now lord of thousands in the uttermost wilds of Kurdistan.

"Did any molest you on your way?"

"Your spirit was with us," said Sarle with a strange laugh. "Could a wandering robber hinder us, who are robbers indeed? How is it with you?"

They sat down by the fire, and the others withdrew. Only the Kurd Ali Bedredeem Khan stayed near, and Osman introduced him.

"Oh, it is well! I must have been born under a lucky star after all. For all I say goes like the words of a mollah among Ghazis; and even Mahomet Pacha has ceased to send word of my doings to Stamboul."

"And did he send?"

"He sent," said Osman. "But his letters came to me."

"And the messengers?" asked Singleton.

"It is to be hoped they are in Paradise," said Osman.

"Good Lord," cried Singleton.

And Sarle laughed lightly. For Singleton amused him.

"Peacemaker, can you make peace here?"

"He means they were killed?"

"Assuredly."

Singleton sat amazed, and stared curiously at Osman, who was now an Oriental.

“Do you remember England?” he asked.

“Where is it?” said Osman with a twinkling eye; “and what sort of people live there? But, doctor, was Suleiman all he should have been?”

“We are here,” said the doctor, “but what hold have you on him?”

“I hold him with a bowstring round his fat throat,” replied Osman shortly.

“And how do things go?”

“Like fire when grass is dry. Smoke and I will tell you.” He stared at the fire and then looked round.

“By Allah’s shrine but it is wonderful. I have these Kurds in the hollow of my hand, for they remembered me, and when I came it was a festival. And among those over the border they believe that the Shah has sold Persia to the Russians; and here, on this side, some are ready to go anywhere with me, for knowing I was exiled they believe I am back with the Khalif’s permission and am doing his work. They hear that Russia is moving into Armenia, and will swallow Kurdistan. And I have shown the chiefs that the only way is to raid Teheran and thus cause an awakening among the nations of Frangistan, who hate the Russians. And you being English, they believe the English are on their side. For this is to be the beginning of a war. The Khalif will wrench half Persia from the schismatic Shiites, and the orthodox will prevail! I have persuaded them that the English are becoming Moslems at last. And on the Afghan border the trouble increases; they have sent the flower of their troops there; even half the

Gholam-i-Shah, the slaves of the king, his body-guard, are on their way. From Luristan many thousands of their best have gone towards Khorassan. Teheran is but an unwalled garden; it is denuded of troops, and the money which was to rebuild the fortifications is needed elsewhere. And I have sent word to Teheran that the stir here portends a tribal outburst between chiefs, whom I have made friends after years of strife."

"Good," said Sarle, "you are a prophet warrior, Osman. But a little more and you might be Sultan, Bin-el-Sultan."

"But no Kajar," said Osman. "Though the Kajars, from which Nasr-ed-Din says he springs, be fighters, what are they to my fathers?"

His eyes burnt like coals. Then he turned to Carew Singleton.

"Are you glad to be here?"

"I begin to think I am very much frightened," said Carew.

"Good!" cried Osman; "you are not yet blooded. When you ride your first man down you will be a man."

"And when does the trouble begin?" asked Sarle.

"On the third day from this. To-morrow we shall be at Kassik, the next day on Azerb, and on the third we cross the border. But let us sleep."

And Singleton slept and dreamed a dream of smoky Tophet, where Afreets made mouths at him, and, cutting him up with yataghans, fried him on hot coals. Which being interpreted later in the night meant that he was sleeping where red ants were.

His morning dreams were heroic.

The envoys from England were received with the firing of guns, and a thousand horsemen escorted them into Kassik.

“Where are our ruins?” asked Singleton.

“We can make them in Teheran,” said Osman ;
“and with the Shah’s treasure we will build ourselves
palaces.”

CHAPTER X

THE RIDE TO TEHERAN

AS a mountain stream begins from the quiet lake on the great divide, and drips over a mossy rock, and then is a shallow brook that hardly murmurs, but soon gathers strength, so was it with Osman's Kurdish raiders. And as the brook swirls, and from every hollow draws volume for its downward course, so every valley sent more and more men, with eager faces set towards the fertile East, where Nasr-ed-Din reigned.

"To Teheran!"

"Shall so fair a land fall to the Nazarene! Oh, preach a jehad, a holy war!"

And as the brook is no longer to be leapt across, but grows wide and deep and loud, so the bands became an army that murmured as it went. A hundred horses were a thousand; that thousand became two, and now the river of men poured onward, a mass alive with power, full of ancient fighting instincts, only capable of fullest growth when numbers became innumerable. They asked no longer where they went, but rode with loose rein down the mountain-side. Stray parties of Kurds fled before them; then stayed, returned, were drawn in and held as a magnet holds steel filings.

"To fight the infidel!"

"The Shah has sold us," said the Persian Kurds.

"Their Shah has allied himself with Nazarenes; he himself is a Nazarene since he went to Franjistan," cried the Turkish Kurds.

And Osman Bey rode at their head, and with him were Sarle Pacha, of a *pachalik* unknown, and by him was Singleton Bey, clad, to his astonishment, like a Kurdish warrior. The two Englishmen rode big grey Turkoman horses, with large lean heads, and the lighter Osman crossed an Arab.

Each hour of the rapid day brought Osman news, for his agents spread from the border through the south of Azerbaijan into Teheran.

"The wire is down," said Osman, "and our beloved Nasr-ed-Din can hear nothing of us yet."

They thanked Allah for hardy horses that devoured the rocky way. And hour by hour the higher hills sank behind them and more level land came in view. Each camping-ground was settled beforehand. The wild locusts of Kurds ate up the land and yet spread sedition against the Shah. In excitement the great Lie prevails.

"Down with the Nazarenes!"

But had the Shah left Teheran or not? Had he gone, as they said, with the Gholam-i-Shah towards Afghanistan? They came to Hozar and found the telegraph wire still standing. A foolish Kurd was in the office, and the man of the telegraphs was lying on the floor dead. The Kurd was staring at the ticking instrument that called for a reply with furious impatience. Osman alighted from his horse.

"Come, Sarle," he cried; and Sarle ran in.

"You understand this," said Osman. "Answer!"

And Sarle answered.

"Here am I."

"His Majesty himself desires to know if all things are quiet on the border?" tapped the sounder.

"They are quiet," said Sarle, *"but a storm blows, and we fear for the wire."*

And then Osman cut the wires. They rode on.

"You have spoken with Nasr-ed-Din," said Osman.

"Do you then know Persian?" asked Singleton, open-eyed.

"Does he know it?" asked Osman, laughing; "has he not written verses in Irani? He is the son of Omar Khayam."

"The Lion and the Lizard shall keep the Court where the Shah glories," said Sarle.

And he sang:

"The rate of enough for travelling men,
Ohé, ohé, ohé!
Is the rate of too much for nine in ten,
Ohé!"

"So I told him all was quiet along the Potomac," he laughed as he rode with a loose rein. "Shall we ever see him?"

"Let us trust so," said Osman.

They came to a good road for Persia, when roads were not yet made by Germans and Russians, and the pace increased. Many fell by the way, for many horses tired. But Persia is a land of horses, and it is a poor Kurd who cannot smell out a spare horse, if there be one within reach. They caught a band of the Shah's own on their way from the great stud farm in Azerbaijan. They brought three for the leaders, and more for the chiefs who rode with them.

"He has good cattle," said Sarle. "May his

treasury increase till we come. When Nadir Shah looted Delhi he never thought of this."

"Nor of his throat being cut at Meshed," said Osman, "when the loot was lost till Agha Mohamed got it back."

"Good Mohamed," said Singleton. "Did the Koh-i-nur belong to that lot?"

"The Afghans in Nadir Shah's army got it. But the Darya-i-nur is at Teheran," replied Osman.

That night a party of miserable Persian Kazaks fell all-astounded into the hands of the invaders, and were cut to pieces ere Osman could stay the fight. Singleton and Sarle rode with him headlong.

"Good God," said Singleton, "it makes me sick."

"Tut," cried Sarle; but he was soon busy with their own wounded. They sent back ten men who could ride, and the wounded men cursed destiny.

"Can you help, Singleton?" asked Sarle.

And Singleton helped while blood spurted on him.

"Good man," said the doctor; "you are a brick."

"I can bear the sight of my own," said Singleton eagerly, "and after a little while"—

"Of course," cried Sarle, "but it will be to-morrow."

The fastest horsemen scouted on ahead for miles, covering the country with a net that brought in every horse, leaving none for the carrying of news to Teheran. And yet rumours came there.

But rumour had to compete with actual news of fighting on the frontier of Afghanistan. For the Kizilbashes, who, like most Persians, are Shiah, had fallen out at Herat with some orthodox Sunnis, and a Sunni Mollah had called the Kizilbashes in

open bazaar, "children of dirt, sons of burnt fathers," whereupon had been bloodshed, and of the Kizilbashs three had been slain. So red war flowered on the border, and Abd-ul-Rahman remonstrated with Nasred-Din; and the nomad king of the great Kajar line was sincerely troubled, and sent half his bodyguard even, with a contingent of fighting Bakhtiaris from Luristan, to calm matters down. And he wrote a peaceable message to the Ameer: "My royal brother knows what these fighting sons of Shaitan are. How can the fathers of such people have peace?"

And it was said in Teheran that His Sacred Majesty was much engaged with a new addition to the harem side of his house, which fell out awkwardly in the hour when earthquakes threatened as though the north-east were volcanic Afsher, and when an avalanche, unseen and unheard of, came from the west, like snow from lofty and imperial Demavend.

"If we are not met in the morning we shall sweep Teheran unopposed," said Osman. And very early in the dawn of that splendid autumn day the army of Kurdish locusts flew for the Garden City.

"Wonderful colour," said Sarle, "though the green of spring and early summer is dead. And see! see!"

Out of the gloom of dawn sprang a cone of pale fire as the unseen eastern sun shone upon the ancient volcanic cone of Demavend.

"A mountain of mountains," said Osman; "Sultan of the loftiest Persian range!"

The peak glowed like a pink star, and was then a pink cone; dawn ran down its sunny sides like golden cataracts into the vast sea of night that still beat about the cliffs beneath. And with a mighty rush

the sun uprose and day broke upon the day of battle.

Carew Singleton sighed with ineffable joy.

"Beyond is Teheran," said Sarle. "We shall see it at noon."

And the river of men behind the leaders murmured with delight.

"The old days return," said a white-bearded tribesman.

"We have been ruled too much," cried another. "What place has there been for men these long years?"

"We have eaten ourselves and have slain our own kin lest our swords should rust," said the old warrior. "But now we will slay an enemy."

Osman reined in his horse and drew aside upon a rocky spur, and with him stood the Frankish leaders.

"Men," cried Osman, "since last I led some of you the world has changed, and I charge you that you slay none but those who resist with arms. But the spoils of Teheran are yours lest they fall into the hands of the Muscovites, sold by a renegade of the tribe of Kajar."

"We hear you, Osman Bey," said the tribal chieftains; "and as you say, so shall it be. On our heads be it!"

And the river flowed on.

Once more Osman and his friends rode at the head of the column.

"Tell us the truth, brother," said Sarle to Osman; "but what has brought you here?"

"The treasury of the Shah," answered Osman.

"Not his treasury," said Sarle. "But"—

"The avenging of blood then," cried Osman savagely; "and I avow it. He slew my brother years ago, and years ago I swore, if Allah indeed were merciful, that I would meet him in his own city, and, Sultan though he be, show him how men of my race avenge themselves."

"Destiny brought us together, and, for one brother, has given you two," said Sarle. "But I knew this, Osman."

"Give me the dog's life and you can have all Nadir Shah's loot from Delhi. For his life I would give you the treasures of Mecca, what there is now and what was taken from it before," cried Osman, laughing. "Oh, Sultan, Bin-el-Sultan, Nasr-ed-Din, Kajar, I come, I come!"

He spurred his horse, and bounding ahead stayed alone for a minute. He reined up and let the others join him. With them then was Mansur, chief of the Kurds of Kassik.

"You remember my brother Achmed?" said Osman to Mansur.

"I knew him. He was a lion," cried Mansur. "Did he not die in Afghanistan?"

"He died in Teheran," said Osman harshly, "and he died at the hands of his enemy Mozuffer Mirza, who is dead. But Nasr-ed-Din gave him to Mozuffer as though he were a precious carpet, a present from Sultan to Kaimakam, and Mozuffer smote him in the face with his slipper and hewed off his head, and so I go to seek the Shah. He is a green pasture, my locusts!"

At noon or after, they saw Teheran glitter on the plain, and an hour later they chased, but did not catch, ten horsemen who rode fast to the city.

“He will have two hours to prepare,” said Osman, “and I reckoned on his having two days!”

They tightened their girths and rode towards that fair star of the East. The noise of them was like the sound of loosed waters.

CHAPTER XI

THE SHAH AND A WOMAN

EDITH CAZENOVE was but five days ahead of the incursion when she landed at Enzelli after crossing the Caspian from Baku. An English-woman travelling alone excited the curiosity of the Russians on the *General Baryatinsky*.

"She actually knows some Russian," said one of the officers.

"And talks Persian!" cried another. "What a woman! Oh, and so handsome!"

"She's a spy. These English have their spies everywhere. St. Petersburg swarms with them. I have met them even in Finland," said one young officer, who was a Finn. "They take photographs and laugh and say that the English must travel or die. But this one is too good-looking to be English."

"Oh, on the contrary"—

And they argued over the quiet woman who sat staring across the Enzelli lagoon, wondering if travelling in Persia was at all improved in five years.

"That Kasvin Road!" she sighed, "and the rest-houses and the fleas! Oh, why am I here? I am a fool!"

That she had a passport at all, and that it was

viséd, surprised the functionary who inspected it. He would have preferred to furnish her with one at a price, and spoke to her in execrable French. She answered in pure Irani, and the official was astounded.

"Madame, are you not Persian yourself?" he demanded.

"I am English. But all English people can speak Persian, if they choose," said Edith coolly. "When can I leave here?"

At Menzil only on the road to Teheran was she fairly comfortable, and she for once blessed the Russians and that prince of theirs for whose sake some small improvements had been made. And yet had the road been worse what befell her might not have happened, and it might have chanced she would never have seen the man she loved again.

For as she drove onward from Menzil down the dusty road, remembering how years ago she had travelled the same way to become the English governess of the children of Ali Mirza, the Zil-es-Sultan, she went onward to a strange meeting, and Sarle faded from her mind for a while as she recalled her parting from His Sacred Majesty the Shah.

They had met in Ali Mirza's house, and when the young Englishwoman was presented to him, he eyed her with much appreciation.

"She is very beautiful, Ali Mirza," said His Majesty.

"But she knows quite a little Persian, your Majesty," suggested Ali Mirza.

"So much the better. They say I love the Franks, but I do not love their languages. So you can speak Persian, mademoiselle?"

"A little, your Majesty. It is a beautiful language, and I desire to learn it."

"Do you have her taught, Ali Mirza?" asked the Shah.

"No, your Majesty," replied Edith's employer, who began to find his king's interest in his governess a little embarrassing.

"Then I will send Agha the Scribe daily to her in order that she may learn quickly."

And he dismissed Edith with a kindly Sultanic smile.

"Give her to me," said the Shah; "I will teach her myself."

"And what would the ambassador say?" asked Ali Mirza.

"He should be glad to have English influence in my harem," replied the Sultan. "She is beautiful; I must see her again."

And before six months had passed, Edith Cazenove had the honour of refusing to be the light of the Shah's harem.

He behaved like a child and threatened to take her by force. She referred him to the English Embassy, and when next the ambassador sought audience with him, the king demanded her hand as a favour from the English nation, and promised to grant the long-delayed firman concerning the concession of the Teheran waterworks.

"What does the lady say?" asked Sir Julius Redburn.

"She is afraid you might disapprove, I imagine," said the Shah. "You are in the position here of her father and her mother."

"Has she refused the honour your Majesty wishes to confer on her?"

The Shah frowned.

"She awaits your decision."

"Will your Majesty send for her?"

But the king preferred not.

"Ali Mirza will bring her to you. And if she consents, I will grant the water concession."

"Your Majesty is very good."

He spoke with the air of irony permitted to ambassadors.

"And I will open the Karun to navigation."

"Humph," said the ambassador, and to speak the truth he was half inclined to sacrifice Edith Cazenove on the spot. For the opening of the Karun was a great point. It would probably displease the Russians. And the English and Russians are the Codlin and Short of Persia.

"Well, my dear, and what is this I'm told?" asked the kindly old man when Edith was brought to him. "Am I to consider you lucky?"

"Certainly not, Sir Julius," she cried. "I won't go into a harem indeed. I hate him, and he's horrid, with his twinkling black eyes. And how many wives has he got already?"

"It's not in the Almanack de Gotha," said the ambassador; "and besides I'm bad at figures. But His Majesty certainly gave me to understand that you were rather in favour of the idea."

"The wretch!" said Edith. "But you won't let him? Can you stop him?"

Sir Julius smiled.

"My dear, I represent England here, and you are English. He will do nothing unless he wants war."

"War about me?" cried Edith. "Do you really mean there would be war about a governess?"

"Unless he grovelled," said the ambassador.

"Well, that's quite comforting," mused Edith; "I never knew before how nice it was to be English, and to have such ambassadors as you, Sir Julius."

From that hour dated her intense interest in international and Oriental politics.

"But in Persia he might do anything. Suppose I disappeared?"

"I will pull down the palace with these hands," said Sir Julius; "so don't be frightened."

"Then can I stay?"

"You can do just as you please, my dear."

And being a very nice old man she let him kiss her cheek. To have been wooed by a Shah and kissed by an ambassador all in one day might have turned many heads, but it only gave Edith Cazenove self-confidence. Two years later she was left five hundred a year and went home. But before she went His Imperial Majesty insisted on seeing her, and renewed his offer.

"Certainly not, your Majesty," said Edith.

"What is the use of being the Shah?" asked His Sacred Majesty, and he went hunting, and, for a merciful man, was very hard on everyone for days afterwards.

Now once again Edith Cazenove was flying towards the spider. And it fell out that Destiny had ordered the nomad king to go hunting or riding when she came within twenty miles of the flat roofs of Teheran. For whenever Nasr-ed-Din was much troubled he got upon horseback, being a true son of the great Kajar tribe. And with him went a party of the Gholam-i-Shah under command of Malik Mansur, one of the Afshar Shahsevends.

"I shall be obliged to go towards Afghanistan myself," thought His Majesty, grumbling in his mind. "And I wonder what in the name of Shaitan is going on in Kurdistan."

And they came out upon the Teheran Road as the evening fell and God's pyramid Demavend glowed red-hot.

"What is this?" asked His Majesty, looking west.

"Kebleh of the Universe, it is the post-cart smashed up, by the looks of it," said Malik Mansur.

And next minute Edith Cazenove, having extricated herself from the ruins, stood face to face with *El Sultan, Bin-el-Sultan, Nasr-ed-Din, Shah, Kajar*.

His eyes flashed fire, and Edith took the bull by the horns.

"Good-evening, your Most Sacred Majesty: these roads are not roads."

"Ha," said the king, "you have come back to my Persia; you could not stay away. Why have you returned, Editta?"

"Because I wanted to, Centre of the Universe," said Edith, losing some of her coolness.

"You could not live in the cold West. Did you miss the nightingales, my beloved?" asked the Centre of the Universe.

"Oh, your Majesty"—

The Shah's eyes flashed.

"These women! Malik, send your men, get a carriage. This lady is a friend of mine."

And Malik Mansur bowed low across his saddle to the Frankish woman, who looked him in the eyes like a strong man.

A carriage could not be found, but, as each man of the escort brought by force everything he could see,

in half an hour there was soon the motliest array of wretched wheeled vehicles ever got together. And by the time they came there was little occasion for them, for the post-cart was fixed up again. A Greek had been Edith's companion, and when he attempted to enter the mended carriage he was thrust aside by the order of the Shah.

"I shall complain to the Shah," cried the son of Athens, not in the choicest Persian. For he had not discovered who was before him.

"Dog, it is the Shah," said Malik. "It will lessen your fat to walk."

And with the king and his escort for her escort Edith Cazenove rode onward to the city.

"Are you happy, my nightingale?" asked His Majesty when they had gone five miles.

"I am fairly comfortable," replied Edith, who was really most desperately uncomfortable. She wondered what was going to happen. She had read determination in the monarch's eye.

"You shall be happy, my English bulbul," he cried. "Lo, have I not charged myself with the task?"

"Oh, please your Sacred Majesty"—began Edith. But he galloped on ahead. He waited to hear nothing. And now Teheran showed in the gloom.

"To the hotel," said Edith.

"Hôtel du Roi," cried Nasr-ed-Din, laughing; and with a cracking of whips and a terrific clatter they drove at last through the streets where the king's good subjects sat smoking and drinking tea. They came suddenly to a stop.

"It is your palace," cried Edith.

"And yours," said the king in triumph; "and yours."

"I refuse to enter," she answered, half fainting.

And the king disappeared as the carriage drove into the court. Edith was taken out of the carriage and half led, half carried by the Kisler Aghasi himself to a room that looked out upon the gardens.

She spoke to the chief of the eunuchs, who treated her like a sultana—but was unimpressed.

"The English ambassador will release me," she said. And the Kisler Aghasi smiled.

"And who shall declare to him that madame is here?" he asked.

"Go, and send me a woman," she said, recovering herself a little.

How soon, if ever, could she make certain that someone would know of her being in the palace? Mrs. Hawker by now had her letter, and would be expecting her. Yet, if she did not come, where and how would her friend learn her whereabouts? She would never know, thought Edith sombrely.

And, if not, what kind of man was the Shah when he had nothing to fear, when he could laugh at her powerlessness? England would know nothing of her lost daughter; could neither protect nor avenge her.

Yet an Englishman might! How long then would it be before Sarle came to Teheran upon his desperate and mad errand; how long before the Kurdish horsemen swarmed down upon the city and blew in the palace gates seeking treasure? It should be in less than a week if all had gone according to the raiders' calculations; if the trouble on the Afghan frontier had been worked properly; if the Kurds had joined together; if Bertrand or Osman Arslan Bey had been as cunning as he seemed, as powerful with the tribes, as brave, as audacious. But then, in the

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infinite complexity of the plan, with all its wheels within wheels, its thousand chances of failure, who could be surprised if nothing came of it ; if there was a flash in the pan, if the fuse declined to act, if the train of powder fizzled and died without producing the explosion which would rouse the world to action ?

But if the thing did not fail, why even now they must be over the border : Sarle was riding towards her, riding fast down south of Azerbaijan, by Hamadan, and with him the locust tribe of Kurds, filled with excited hatred of the Shah ! If the king learnt of it at once, if his Intelligence Department served him, he would gather troops and meet them. But if not—to-morrow and to-morrow and to-morrow and then Teheran would be ablaze ! God send her her deliverer, and make him her lover ! She knew that if he saved her his heart would be softened ; he would love her because he had saved her. She knew that her very strength and self-sufficiency half repelled him now.

They sent her a woman who spoke French, but Edith would not have her trunk unpacked.

“Bring me water.”

She washed and sat upon the divan with her hat beside her. She regretted having no weapon, and she clung to her hat-pin as a feeble substitute.

They brought her dinner. She ate a little rice from a pilaf and, refusing wine of Shiraz, drank only water.

“His Most Sacred Majesty will do madame the honour to see her,” said the Kisler Aghasi when she sent away the food.

“I will not see him,” said Edith ; “tell the king I wish to see the English ambassador.”

“His Most Sacred Majesty solicits the honour of being allowed to see madame, in order to inquire how madame is after her journey,” said the Kisler Aghasi when he again returned.

“Madame’s compliments to His Majesty and she requests the favour of being allowed to go to her hotel.”

“The palace and all that are in it are madame’s.”

And as madame desired nothing of what was in it, she suddenly burst into tears, turned her face to the wall and refused to answer. She was disturbed by no more kingly importunities; and she spent the night without undressing.

“The worse I look the better,” said Edith miserably. “I’ll kill him first.”

But as the night passed she reflected that if the raid failed she would be utterly helpless and quite dependent on the Shah’s mercy. It would be as well not to irritate him overmuch. If he would let her go she would undertake to make no complaints.

In the morning the Kisler Aghasi, in whose especial charge she was obviously placed, came to inquire on the part of Nasr-ed-Din, how she had slept. As a matter of fact she had slept pretty well in spite of everything.

“I have not slept at all. I wish to see the Shah,” said Edith.

And ten minutes later the great monarch entered her apartments. He dismissed the Kisler Aghasi.

“I wish to be allowed to go, your Majesty,” said Edith, whose hat was on rather sideways. For she kept the bonnet-pin handy.

“Editta, my nightingale, how can you say such things?” urged the monarch sadly. “If I am a

king I am also a man, and I have loved you for years."

Edith sat up very straight.

"But I have not loved you for years, your Majesty, though I have admired your sacred and just and noble character, and your enlightenment which is like a sun to the East. So I beg you will let me go."

"Did I not let you go once? But you have returned. Oh, why did you return?"

"I came because I love the land of Persia," said Edith, "and I relied on your noble character which has shamed many kings in Franjistan."

"But if you love the land of Persia, *I* am the land of Persia," said the Shah; "I am Persian of the Persians; I am the king."

"And is not the king just?"

"The king is just."

"Then let me go."

"But the king is a man," said the Shah.

"Is not the king a ruler of men, your Majesty?"

"He is."

"Then shall he rule the Bakhtiaris and the Shah-sevends who cannot rule himself?"

"You shall rule over the man, Editta," said the Shah, eluding the point.

"Oh, you have many to rule over him," cried Edith quickly, making a false move.

"They are mats for your feet, my beloved. I will send most of them away, and only keep sufficient to be your servants," said the Shah, smiling.

Edith knew that could not be.

"Can the king put away the Kadins of the Kajar tribe?"

And the Shah moved uneasily.

“What is there I cannot do?”

“You cannot go and tell Sir Everett Home that I am here against my will, your Majesty,” said Edith sharply.

And for the time being the Shah was routed.

“A woman with a sharp tongue is the devil,” said the Shah.

CHAPTER XII

THE DAY OF RUMOUR

"I SUPPOSE your friend will turn up to-day," said Hawker, the engineer, to his wife.

"I expect her, certainly. But why do you say *my* friend, William?"

"Well; isn't she your friend?"

"But yours too. Why, you knew her first."

"So I did, now I come to think of it," said Hawker, rubbing his shaven chin. "But she's too much of a hard nut for me."

He and Edith Cazenove had struck out sparks when they encountered in argument; and Mrs. Hawker was an Oriental cushion of softness, a fair little woman of the purely adhesive type. When her husband wandered like a letter astray, she stuck to him like a postage stamp.

"She's a dear," said Lily Hawker, "and is almost as brave as you. I wonder how she dare come back."

"Oh, that about the Shah! The wooing o't must have been funny," said her husband. "Perhaps she's come back to tell His Majesty she repents."

But Edith did not come that day. She was in the palace. And of course the next day passed without her.

"William, I'm anxious."

"Ducky," murmured William as he studied a profile of a railroad which was to begin in 1900, having been squashed for the present by the Russians.

"I'm anxious, William; do you hear me?" stamped Lily.

"Yes, I hear—Eh, what—anxious! What the devil about?"

"About Edith."

He relapsed on the profile.

"Oh, Edith? She can take care of herself. She's as hard as a three square file," said William.

"She's not," cried Lily, shaking him by the shoulder. "And she said yesterday, and it's to-day."

William Hawker rolled up the railroad, wondering whether he would be there to build it, and turned to his wife.

"Now I come to think of it, so it is."

"Stupid," said his wife; "where is she?"

"Must have missed the boat at Baku."

"Did you ever know her miss a boat? She's not like a man."

"Not like most, God be thanked," said Hawker, "or I should go under. Imagine having to compete with a race of Edith Cazenoves! The notion gives me ague"—

"Abuse the poor girl if you like. But where is she? I want you to go and telegraph to Enzelli to see if she came by the *General Baryatinsky* and left for here?"

Hawker lifted his wife off her feet and kissed her.

"You want me to? Well then, I must, I suppose. How shall I put it? shall I ask whether a steel and corundum woman came?"

"She's a woman, and isn't steel and conundrums," said his wife. "But go and do it. And remember to think it's business, and then you'll do it right."

Hawker went obediently, and in the city found rumours flying like kites on a Chinese holiday. For some said the Ameer had gone mad, and was the victim of fanatic Sunni Mollahs, who had induced him to declare war on Persia with a view of wiping out the Shiah schismatics once for all. And others swore that the Khalif himself, notoriously a cool friend at any time to the Shiah kingdom, was in league with Abd-ul-Rahman, and was coming in by way of Kurdistan, having previously put the Balkans in such a state of ferment that the Russians dared not do more than keep half an army corps observing the frontiers on either side of the Bahr Kazar. Another curious story was going the rounds in the bazaars, but that Hawker did not hear. It was to the effect that His Most Sacred Majesty Nasr-ed-Din had very little energy for anything outside the walls of the seraglio. For the story went on to assert with an infinity of differing details, each convincing till confronted with another, that he had imported a new wife from Franjistan, and that there was the devil to pay.

Hawker listened to some yarns told him in confidence by people who told things in confidence to anyone they met, and strode on his way to the telegraph office, and sent a wire to Enzelli-Resht, asking whether an Englishwoman who talked Persian had left the last day or so for Teheran.

"Now, if the idiot had wired to us!" said Hawker; "but there, I don't believe she's anywhere within miles of Persia."

And going into the office an hour later he found a reply. Yes; an English lady, who spoke good Persian, had gone on to Teheran two days ago.

"Great Scot!" said Hawker. "Now what's this mean? I must talk with Lily."

So he took the tram home, and in the tram an Armenian whom he knew told him the story of the Shah's new wife imported from Russia.

"Eh, what?" cried Hawker; "oh yes—how interesting!"

And he dropped off the tram and went home."

"She left Enzelli the day before yesterday"—

"And isn't here?"

Lily Hawker jumped to her feet.

"And there's a yarn going round the city that the Shah has got some new woman in the seraglio."

"Good Heavens!" said Lily. "Let us go to the ambassador at once."

She fell into a shake.

"My God! poor Edith!"

"Poor Edith! I pity the Shah," said Hawker; "she'll dress him down. Yes; let's go to the ambassador in time to save enough of him to bury."

"Oh, you brute!" said Lily Hawker.

"Yes, my love!" cried Hawker, laughing. "But, joking apart, I'll go with you."

They were received by the young attaché whom Edith Cazenove, in talking to Quinton Hazlitt, had called Mesrour Smith. He was a plump and fair Anglo-Saxon of the most pronounced type, and the name Mesrour fitted him as well as a necromancer's robe would fit a baby.

"Bless me, you don't say so!" said Mesrour. "Miss Cazenove—oh, good Lord! here's a pretty kettle of

fish. I'd better tell Sir Everett at once. And he's as busy—oh! as busy as I am. Good Lord! Miss Cazenove!”

He stared at Mrs. Hawker with big blue eyes.

“Why, what the deuce did she come back for?”

“To see me,” said poor Lily Hawker, almost weeping.

“Well, if it's so, we'll get her out. By Jove, I should say so. But she was pretty well able to take care of herself. Old Sir Julius used to say she was the finest man he knew.”

“He didn't know her. She's as feminine and sweet as anyone,” said Lily very fiercely. “And as gentle as I am.”

She looked as gentle as a trapped owl just then, and frightened Mesrou into fits.

“I'll go and see Sir Everett. And you don't know how busy he is. Hawker, have you heard any of the rumours going round?”

“Oh yes; I'll have to rebuild Teheran day after to-morrow,” said the engineer carelessly.

Mesrou began to say something, but shut his opened mouth, and fled to Sir Everett Home. He was a round fattish man, with thin tight lips and a bald head.

“What! the deuce!” roared Sir Everett, when he heard the news. “Oh yes; send them in.”

And the Hawkers entered his private room.

“Is this true?”

Hawker related with the brevity of a good *précis* writer all they knew, and what they suspected.

“The devil!” said Sir Everett. It was his one ejaculation, and the Persians said it was like an Englishman to worship the devil. At anyrate a

devil-worshipper was preferable to a Nazarene or a Sûni.

"This will never do," said Sir Everett. Then he turned savagely on Mesrour Smith, who was standing by.

"What did the woman mean by coming back to Persia?"

"Ask Mrs. Hawker, Sir Everett," said Mesrour.

"She came to see me."

"The devil!" cried Sir Everett. "Don't you tell me that, Mrs. Hawker. She has done it to get us into a mess. She regretted having left before; and has come back on purpose to do what she has done!"

"Oh, Sir Everett, you don't know her!"

"Oh, don't I?" roared Sir Everett. "But if I don't, Sir Julius Redburn did. She led the Shah on! I know the type!"

Mrs. Hawker lifted her hands.

"Oh, Sir Everett, how can you say such a thing! Led the Shah on! She never would; and she was as modest and as quiet"—

"Oh, I know them," said the raging ambassador, eating a quill tooth-pick with large bites; "here am I in a pretty position. I have to look after every silly Englishman and every idiot Englishwoman; and if she stays the Russians will say it's a put-up thing; and if I get her away the Shah will be as mad as the devil!"

He finished his tooth-pick, and took another.

"But you'll do it at once, Sir Everett?"

"Madame," said the ambassador, "I have to do everything at once. Mr. Smith, send down at once, and ask for an audience at once. Oh yes! I'll do it

at once; and if I get her I'll give her a piece of my mind; I'll scarify her; I'll skin her alive! An Englishwoman travelling alone, and calling on ambassadors as easily as if they were her big brothers! Yes, ma'am, I'll do it; but never again. Not if the Shah marries her to his whole bodyguard. Now then, what are you waiting for, Mr. Smith?"

And he drove the imperturbable Hawker, the perturbed Mrs. Hawker, and Mesrou into the outer room, and shut the door with a slam right on their backs.

"Seems a trifle put out this morning," said Hawker.

"The beast!" said his wife. "Oh, and poor, poor Edith!"

"I said he was rather busy," cried Mesrou. "Bless my soul, you have no idea how he goes on when he's *really* angry."

"Oh, haven't we?" asked Lily Hawker.

"Now, my dear, cut away home. And I'll let you know all there is to know," said Hawker.

And the only news he took back that evening was that His Sacred Majesty had refused Sir Everett an immediate audience on the plea of ill-health, but said that he would receive him on the morrow.

"Then I'll see the Sadr Azem," stormed Sir Everett. "Arrange it at once."

And when Sir Everett and Hoseyn Nouradeen met, the ambassador only wanted to meet steel to give out sparks.

"Your Excellency must be misinformed," said the Prime Minister smoothly.

"Your Excellency had better see whether it is so or not," retorted the fiery ambassador. "You must remember that this is a thing which, should it be

true, would be considered in the light of the most unfriendly act that could possibly be committed."

"These Franks are fools," said the Sadr Azem to himself; "and all this about a woman! Well, your Excellency," he added aloud, "I will communicate with His Sacred Majesty"—

"At once, I beg," said the bald-headed fire-eater, with a courteous contorted smile.

"Assuredly," said the Sadr Azem, "and believe me, your Excellency, that anything which disturbed even for a moment the delightful peace of our relations will overwhelm me with grief."

"The devil," said Sir Everett between his teeth; and they parted smiling.

But when the Sadr Azem was alone, he turned against his king, and felt inclined to blaspheme the Prophet Ali.

For when things were as they were in Persia, with the king's eldest son suspected of disloyalty, with the Afghan frontier in a bubbling ferment, and with Kurdistan on the boil, for Nasr-ed-Din to do anything to stir up the English in wrath seemed the very height of folly. He would be angering the Russians next, and then it would be necessary for a politician to reconsider his position and his loyalty.

"Your Most Sacred Majesty, the English ambassador is greatly disturbed in his mind," said the Sadr Azem, when he at last induced the Shah to see him.

Nasr-ed-Din pulled at his moustaches.

"He will have his audience to-morrow, Hoseyn Nouradeen," said he. "Is there any further news from the North-East?"

"None of importance, your Majesty," said the minister; "from all I can learn there is nothing in it.

But the wire is still down from the West. And concerning the matter which disturbs his Excellency the English ambassador! He speaks of an English-woman, your Majesty."

The Shah came as near jumping as was compatible with his position and Oriental character.

"Proceed, Hoseyn Nouradeen; what has the hot-head to say?"

The Sadr Azem told him what Sir Everett suspected.

"Your Most Sacred Majesty will see that under the circumstances it is very unadvisable to quarrel with these English. They have ridiculous notions concerning their women. It is, I suppose, because they are scarce, and the men have only one apiece. But that your Majesty will know better than I who have had no chance of studying them in their own country"—

"Humph!" said the Shah; "I will let you know concerning the matter in the morning."

And terminating this highly unsatisfactory audience, he went to Edith's apartments. If he could only induce her to declare she was in the palace of her own free will, he believed he could quite pacify Sir Everett.

But if he could not persuade her, what then?

"What is the use of being a king nowadays?" asked His Majesty, who was naturally of a peace-loving disposition for all his true descent from the turbulent Kajars. And though he sat on the throne of the mythical Zohak, he did not care for the implacable use of his authority, and was never cruel, rarely even severe. Yet at this time the Shah sometimes rebelled.

“With Russia on the north, England on the south, a ruffianly Ameer of Afghanistan on the east, and Turkey on the west, where am I?” asked Nasr-ed-Din. “And I absolutely dare not anger these insane trading English, or they will raise a row in the Gulf, and land troops to keep order, as they always do. Oh, Editta!”

He sent for a casket of jewels and with his own royal hands selected certain valuable and villainously inartistic ornaments in order to dazzle Editta.

“I thank your Most Sacred Majesty,” said Edith; “but as I am a prisoner”—

“No; my guest, my nightingale!”

“You keep nightingales in cages, and I am in a cage.”

“In my palace,” urged her royal lover; “in your palace too.”

“Certainly not,” said Edith; “I am in a prison. Oh, your Majesty, pray let me go!”

“You shall be my chiefest jewel,” cried His Majesty, “and your children”—

“Your Majesty,” remonstrated Edith.

“Shall be princes,” continued the Shah; “who knows but that they shall rule Persia?”

“May the king live for ever,” said Edith; “but I am no one, and it is not my destiny.”

His Majesty’s eyes sparkled with anger.

“You are in my power, girl.”

“You could also slay the English ambassador,” said Edith, rising; “but your Majesty will not slay him or harm me.”

“You may be deceived!” cried the Shah harshly.

“I know your Majesty better than you know yourself,” said Edith. She walked to the window,

which was set high and deep in the thick wall. The coloured glass cast gold upon her hair, and rose upon her face.

"Whither looks this window, oh, my king?" she asked.

"To the west, child. Why do you ask?"

He spoke more softly, for she had softened. He smiled.

"I hear the march of warriors and the thunder of horsemen," she cried.

"It is the voice of my happy city," said the king.

"The City of Envy; how long shall you withstand the Barbarian of the North?"

"The Muscovite and the English may eat each other. And what are they?"

In his dark eyes glowed the pride of ancient kings. Behind his dynasty was the long dynasty of the Pehlevi, behind them were dynasties that reached to Zohak, beyond him were Assur and the nomads of antiquity. On carved rocks before the dawn of history were kings with his own inscrutable face. Yet they were strong.

"Look you to your kingdom," said Edith, with curious exaltation; "who am I that you should be false to your kingship? King, I hear the thunder of destiny!"

This day she knew should be the Day of Terror; in her eyes was knowledge; she appeared prophetic.

"Take me upon your palace roof. Let me look towards the West."

And at the clapping of the king's hands, the Kisler Aghasi appeared. They went upon the roof as the red sun sank behind the distant hills. The

eunuchs stood apart. But Edith stared into the West.

“Look!” she cried.

“But I see nothing!”

“The thunder of horsemen and the battle and the shouting,” she said. “They come in thousands, in tens of thousands! So fly the locusts from Africa into Arabia on the south-west wind.”

“Who should come that I know not?” asked the king; “but who knows all things here but me?”

“Look again,” said Edith.

“What do you see?”

“I see a horseman riding!”

The sun’s upper limb yet burnt upon the bitten pass. She shaded her eyes against his last level beams.

“He rides like a Persian bringing news.”

“I see him,” said Nasr-ed-Din. “But my people are a people of horsemen.”

“And behind him are others,” cried Edith. “Count them, king of kings. There are two, and three, and four! There are nine!”

The Shah stared into the West and counted those who came.

“And yonder, farther still, is a cloud of dust,” cried Edith. “Has the sun set? what reddens it before its time? it is the ten thousand, Nasr-ed-Din Shah! Who are these that you know not of?”

And as the sun set and a fan of dust rose on the horizon, the king knew that the West had spoken before the East; and that the locusts came down upon the Garden City.

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The Shah caught Edith Cazenove by the wrist.

“Woman!”

“Your Majesty!”

“How knew you of this?”

“I did not know. I meant what would be if you kept me. Oh, is it true?” she cried. And again she stared into the darkening west.

The king called in a harsh voice to the Kislir Aghasi.

“Keep this woman safely!”

And the Shah was first down the steps, while the eunuchs followed him with wondering eyes. Even as he reached the room below, there was the sound of swift galloping, and Nasr-ed-Din heard the call of his own guards. The captain of the Gholam-i-Shah the next moment entered the room abruptly, and, saluting His Majesty, waited to be told to speak.

“What is it, Mahmoud Mulkdeen Khan?” asked the king.

“A horseman reports thousands of Kurds riding straight for the city, your Majesty.”

“I saw them from the roof. Bring the Kasvin Regiment here. Take charge of the telegraph office, and telegraph in every direction for troops. Let the word go if you are slain, Mahmoud.”

“*Be Cheshm*, your Majesty,” said Mahmoud, who was of the royal tribe.

And now as night fell, rumour ran through the city and shook everyone from sloth and their content. The chattering tea shops where the Persians sat drinking and smoking were deserted suddenly.

“The Kurds are upon us,” they cried, believing and disbelieving. And others said—

"These are the Muscovite Kazaks."

And again others—

"They are the English afreets."

The people ran to their houses and barred themselves in with trembling hands; for peace had been theirs so long, and this thunderbolt fell without any warning of any storm-cloud. And the very troops were startled; their startled officers found them hard to handle: so much had the utterly unexpected driven them from their disciplined calm. And when Mahmoud came to the telegraph office he found half the officials gone already. Nothing but astonishment had kept the rest. Mahmoud drove two in with his sword, and bade them send messages for help. Their hands trembled; the noise of the guard outside was like the noise of imminent death. And Mahmoud pricked each onward with his sword.

The Shah himself saw the horsemen who brought the news. They bowed and fell upon their knees.

"Your Most Sacred Majesty, they are not to be numbered: they are as countless as the sand upon the seashore; they ride like the wind; they are like locusts, and manifestly they are the Kurds. One of our band fell into their hands. We are but an hour ahead of them."

It was now dark night in the dark streets where none but soldiers moved. They looked as they marched towards the streets whence the bee swarm should issue, towards the part of the city where the new walls were not yet built.

"We shall be ridden down," said the men. Fear of death was upon them.

And afar off as they listened they heard very distant thunder, the thunder of innumerable squadrons

beating the hollow earth. It was as if long silent Demavend was muttering at last.

The rumour in its course now came to the eastern suburb where William Hawker lived. People galloped past his house. They were cowards fleeing. And others galloped towards the town. They were brave men going to their king's aid.

"What is it?" asked the engineer of one who stayed to tighten a girth.

"The waters of Kurdistan are loosed, they say," cried the man out of the darkness. "The Kurds are upon us."

He rode towards the town.

"What did he say?" asked Lily in alarm. She knew but little Irani.

"Madness and impossibility," cried Hawker; "he said the Kurds were riding on the city."

"The Kurds!"

"We should have known," said the engineer. "But there have been strange rumours. I must ride and see."

He called to his man.

"Get my horse."

"No, William," said his wife; and she clung to him.

"By God, yes!" he cried, "I must know."

"And if it is true, and harm befalls you?"

"None will befall, my dear; I will take arms, and will be back in an hour."

He looked out at the door and saw his horse ready.

"William, take me?"

"I cannot."

"I will not stay."

"Then come," said Hawker; and he swung her

from the ground like nothing. For he was strong. She sat behind him.

“Put your arms about me.”

And as he rode he too heard the roar as of wind or of beating seas. But it was the beating of iron hoofs on the hardened anvil of the earth.

“Great God, it must be true,” said Hawker, and he saw what was to be done.

“Hold fast,” he cried, and the Turkoman grey he rode galloped. The woman’s hair loosened and flew behind her. Her mind was dazed.

“To the Embassy,” he said. And yet why should the Kurds respect that? If they respected not the city of the Shah, why should they leave untouched the house and home of the intruding infidel? Yet he was an Englishman, and it was good to be with others of his kind. He pulled up outside the place. Now he heard strange cries come clearer upon the wind: the war-cry of the Kurd. He hammered on the door.

“It’s I, William Hawker!”

But the house was awake. Inside the great hall he found Mesrour Smith and Sir Everett armed. Behind them stood Sir Everett’s servant, an Englishman, and by him were the Persians of the household.

“Have you heard anything?” roared Sir Everett.

“Nothing; but I’ve brought my wife,” said Hawker. The English servant ran forward and held the horse. Hawker carried Lily in.

“Oh, Sir Everett!” she cried, and the lighted room danced.

“Lily,” said her husband sternly. And his voice recalled her and made her strong.

"Can you take my horse, John?" asked Hawker.

"Certainly, sir," said the man.

"I'll go with you."

And together they stabled the Turkoman, who turned his big lean head towards them in wonder. A neigh from the next stall soothed him; he made acquaintance, and rubbed noses with Sir Everett's Arab pony.

"The devil!" roared Sir Everett when Hawker got back; "what is all this about?"

Hawker shook his head.

"You should be better informed than I."

"Was the Shah better informed?" shrieked the angry ambassador. "We should have troops to protect us."

A hammering on the door let in the entire *entourage* of the Russian Embassy. Their ambassador was away, but the attaché was at the head of his mob.

"Your house is more defensible, and has a good well inside," said Sergius Lapunoff. "You have no objection?"

"None, only too pleased," said Sir Everett. "Now I want someone to go to the Shah."

"No use, Sir Everett," said Sergius. "He has refused me any help, and says we may come to his palace."

"It will be the first place attacked. Perhaps the only one; and with these alterations even the citadel isn't defensible!" cried the ambassador. "We must do the best we can. I've got in all the Europeans I could reach."

"There will be trouble about this," said the Russian. "I consider it scandalous."

Even as he spoke there was the sound of the world galloping. Hell had broken loose in Teheran. They heard afar the great roar of an explosion. And Sarle, the raider, heard it too, and knew that Ross had done his work.

CHAPTER XIII

SACK

A SINGLE horseman stood two miles outside the city gate, where two roads joined in the great Western road. His hands shook a little with excitement as he lighted a cigarette to keep himself calm. He let it out after three puffs.

"Jehoshaphat, they'll ride me down and pulp me," said Ross. "If I escape, my dear friends, it will be a miracle. 'Do I sleep, do I dream, or is visions about?'"

He was a short, thick-set, ugly little man, who had been in a thousand tight corners as adventurer, as mercenary, as war correspondent. Now he was clothed like a Kurd, and sat with a drawn sword.

"If the first one who comes doesn't chop me, and if the rest don't get me flat, I'll be all right," he cried.

Now he caught sight of the van. They rode furiously. The noise of their hoof-beats was appalling. To be the leader of a squadron over rough ground was not in it with awaiting this charge. Ross edged up to the side of the road and got partially into the cover of a tree. He struck a match and put it to something which he had placed in a hollow knot.

"Burn, you beggar, or I'm done!" said Ross. And the thing caught fire, a red light burned as the thousands came on.

"Osman Bey," yelled Ross, "Osman, Osman!"

And even as he shouted he heard a stentorian voice call a halt. He recognised the voice, but did not recognise the man who rode out of the halted army.

"Ross!"

"It's I. Oh, Sarle, my man!"

And this Kurdish chieftain wrung his hand.

"Are you well mounted?"

"The best horse outside the Shah's stables."

"Forward," said Sarle.

"Ross," he roared, "this is Osman Bey; and this Singleton."

They waved their hands to him as they galloped.

"When did the news come?"

"An hour ago."

"What troops have they?"

"No more than I said. A battalion of the Kasvin Regiment and half the Shah's bodyguard, and"—

"And guns?"

"A few, but none mounted where we enter. And the city's upside down."

He spoke in shouts, so deafening was the sound of the galloping. Trees whirled past them; the few lights of the city showed close.

"We heard the explosion. At least I thought so."

"It is right. I blew out the whole east gate and the wall of the palace citadel," said Ross. "It must be so. How many men?"

"Six thousand at least."

They galloped on.

"It's great!" screamed Ross. "Oh, Sarle, my man, I owe you one"—

"Owe it to Singleton; he's the detonator; he's the Gold-Torpedo. Gods, but he's bought excitement!"

Yet Sarle was cool, and coughed only a little eagerly.

"Poor folks of Teheran!"

They came to where the Kasvin gate and its fortifications had been, but were not rebuilt. The old bastions and walls had been levelled; none had grown up yet to replace them. In a fool's paradise the city had lived, trusting to the rivalries of alien Powers. The Kurds were met there by no organised force; they poured in like waters through a breached dam; for the city was open.

"Ay," screamed Ross, "and the citadel is now no citadel! My dynamite and gun-cotton did their work."

And then the palace citadel rose before them. They heard a shot fired, a scatter of shots, and a gun spoke from the palace gate. A shrapnel shell with an unlighted fuze roared over their heads; another struck the ground, exploding harmlessly; a third blew a horse inside out and killed its rider and wounded three more. A man shrieked and was ridden over.

"The guns," said Osman fiercely; and they rode under the walls, and caught one gunner who had not fled. Then the citadel spoke, and from it poured a scattering fire; the fire of men out of hand who would not volley even if they could.

At Sarle's word Ali Bedredeen Khan, the Kurd who had met them near Kassik, and spoke French,

went with Singleton and a big party to the telegraph office. They got in, and found Mahmoud Mulkdeen there with forty of the Gholam-i-Shah. When they finished with them ninety Kurds were dead, and Singleton had a thin stream of blood running down his left arm from the shoulder. But Ali was untouched. They clambered over the dead and dying, and found but one collapsed operator alive; the other lay dead down upon his instrument. Ali pricked the live one with his dagger.

"Pig of a Shiah, wake up if you want your head upon your shoulders."

The man screamed, for he belonged to no fighting race. When he turned Ali spat.

"'Tis an Armenian."

And while Singleton bound a handkerchief over a flesh-wound, Ali made the man telegraph.

"To what places have you sent for help?"

The ghastly Armenian stammered what he had done.

"Now wire that it is a false alarm."

And when that was done he took out a series of orders made up by Osman and Sarle.

"Send these."

Every movement of troops there indicated cleared the road back to Kurdistan and the roads towards the Gulf.

The Armenian sent the telegrams.

"My lord will spare my life."

The Kurd had his dagger shortened, but Singleton intervened.

"Ali," he cried, "tell him to say that communication will cease for a day by order of the electrical engineer."

And when he had done so Singleton smashed each instrument with a stool.

"Leave the dog alone!" he cried. For even Singleton despised the Armenians by now.

"Back to the palace!"

He strode over the body of Mahmoud in a strange cold frenzy of excitement. For in that intense hour he had found himself and knew that he was a man.

In the road was a dark mass of dead and dying. Some had crawled to their held horses. They who were able to mount gained for a moment fresh strength when they reached the saddle. They rode to the palace headlong, and as they rode some of the saddles were emptied again. The streets were void of men: at the palace only was there fighting. Loose horses galloped; some neighed; some shrieked with wounds.

The part of the citadel which Ross had blown down was the point of assault and desperate defence. There Singleton found Sarle at the moment when the first attack had been repulsed.

"Where is Osman?"

"On the right," said Sarle, who was grimed with powder smoke and splashed with blood not his own.

"Why are we waiting? The work is done at the telegraph."

"Good man," cried Sarle. "Ross is blowing down the great gate. You are wounded!"

"A bleeding only," said Singleton joyously; "and my left arm, thanks be!"

As they spoke there was a deafening roar round the corner on their right, and the Kurds shouted "Allah! Allah!" as Osman led them into the gap left by the explosion of dynamite. Sarle and Single-

ton and Ali Bedredeem with three Kurdish chiefs led a new assault upon the mass of masonry and timbers they had been repelled from before. They trod on dead men and live. But this time success was with them; the Kasvin Regiment bolted, and now the raiders actually entered the very palace and were in the lower open rooms, and those above were helpless to aid those beneath. But each slammed door into the next halls was another hindrance. With bleeding hands Sarle's men tore out jagged timbers from the fallen débris, and, using them as battering-rams, forced door after door through which the Persians fired.

"These dogs of Shiahs, sons of burnt fathers!" roared the Kurds. "Kill! kill!"

Sarle and Ali were the first through the first door, and Sarle slid on blood and pitched headlong in time to save his life. For a storm of bullets swept though the farther door ere it was shut. Singleton had his ear chipped. One of the chiefs shouted "Allah!" and fell dead. Ali was wounded in the shoulder.

"They run! they run!"

But again they burst open the door and got into a corridor. From the far end it was commanded by a company of the Kasvins under an officer who kept his head. Against such a fire as they kept up it was impossible to advance, though time and again the Kurds, who were mad with battle, tried it desperately. Sarle found a side passage and led a party there, while the only remaining chief with him gathered his men and took them aside, and with curses tried to get them to fire in volleys down the main passage.

Sarle and Singleton were together.

"Keep with me," said Sarle; "Osman must be behind these men."

They heard a frightful uproar in the very next room. They rushed to curtains and found a window behind them.

"To the outside?"

"No," said Sarle. And with a stool he smashed the window, which led into the great hall of audience. He sprang through the smashed glass, and Singleton and his men followed. They took the remains of the devoted Gholam-i-Shah from behind. For they saw Osman beyond them.

What happened then Singleton never knew. But at the last he found himself sitting upon a dead man and his sword was bloody. With difficulty he got his breath back. Sarle and Osman spoke together.

"Ali and his men?" asked Osman.

And then Ali entered. The company of Kasvins had given way and fled when they heard the audience hall in a roar.

"Ali, do what you have to do," said Osman. "To the treasury you. Singleton with him. Where is Mahommed Bey?"

Ali and Mahommed were his own confidants. They marked the treasure with Ross.

"Now for the Shah!" said Osman fiercely. He lifted a servant of the king from the ground.

"Show me where the Shah should be!"

He and Sarle went together.

"It has cost blood," said Sarle grimly.

"It may cost more if I see the king," cried Osman with a laugh. "Men, this way!"

But the fighting was not yet over, and those of the

Shah's bodyguard who had escaped the first great slaughter had run to his protection. They were the flower of the fighting tribes; they were his honourable slaves; they were chiefs of the Kajars, of the Shahsevids, of the Bakhtiaris, the ancients of Persia, and they knew their duty even though this came upon them like a thunderbolt.

Osman knew them. As they grew thicker he knew whom they fought for, and he grew desperate to think his vengeance might escape him. Every moment lost was an hour of anguish. But if they were fighters he was a fighter of the greatest warrior tribe in the world. Sarle, as he went with him, owed his life to Osman thrice in an hour. But Osman himself was not yet touched, though his face was black with burnt powder loosed at him within a yard.

"Allah!" he cried; and as he fought he laughed so grimly that the bravest quailed, until at last they came to one half-broken-down door at which the remnant gathered.

"The harem of the Shah," said Osman as he drove at those who were ready to die but not to yield. For when Sarle cried to them to yield they jeered at him.

"Come and kill us."

They fought now in darkness, for it was darkest night outside, and only sparse and grated windows showed the night.

Then suddenly one of the king's guard spoke. His voice was sullen.

"His Sacred Majesty offers you the treasury to spare those who are within these rooms."

Out of the blackness Osman spoke.

"Does the Shah offer us what is ours? By now

his gold and jewels are on their way to Kurdistan. Give me the Shah, and we will leave you."

Sarle pressed up to Osman.

"Man, isn't it vengeance enough! You have insulted the king in his palace, and we have taken his treasure."

But Osman turned.

"No, it is not enough. My men!"

His own men gathered about him. Some were Kurds but others Daghestanis from Circassia, and others of his own hard race.

"It is enough," said Sarle, and he leant upon the point of his sword.

"Then interfere not in this!" cried Osman. "For this I came."

He shouted and rushed upon the door with some twenty men. Others hung back by Sarle, who grunted angrily like a disturbed lion. The passage behind them was empty, for the main body of Kurds were in the treasury or looting at large in the unprotected city.

At the broken door five of Osman's men went down, and as the price of their lives they killed but three, and Osman's left arm hung helpless at his side. Thereafter there was no firing, and darkness was lighted by the flash of grinding swords. Over all the noise was heard the shout of laughing Osman, who at last sprang through the door first of all. And then Sarle turned and found himself alone.

"The others will have all the gold," had said his Kurds. So he followed into the inner room, lighted by one dim swinging jewelled lamp. Behind the next door they heard moans and the cry of women.

It was a fight of seven against ten. And with Osman were the seven.

Sarle sprang to his side and crossed swords with a brave mountaineer of the Shahsevents. He found all his strength and skill needed. He thanked old hours of sword-play when this fight was not begun. For soon neither he nor the mountaineer knew of any other there. They fought a duel, and were strangely alone in the intensity of that great hour. Yet one by one the others fell. And Osman struck down two; one by skill and the other by a desperate chance when a footstep threw him in blood. The last who stood there were Osman and a Circassian, and Sarle and his man opposite.

Then Sarle awoke and knew how the big fight had gone. Osman leant upon his sword and watched.

"Let the Englishman fight it out," he said to the Daghestani. For even then he loved to see the battle.

But as Sarle grew stronger from knowing that the balance was on his side, so by desperation of escape and loss of blood the Shahsevend weakened. He saw Death, and then went down with Sarle's sword through his heart.

"A brave fighter," said Osman.

And he beat upon the unopened door, a mere frail lattice. With his sword-hilt he broke it in and it swung back. Sarle and the Circassian rushed in with him. The room was empty.

And so was the next. Osman foamed at the mouth and gnawed his long moustaches.

"Has he escaped?"

He threw himself bodily at the next door, which resisted his efforts. Sarle ran to him, pulled him

away, and being much the heavier man, burst it open with a crash.

The room into which they came was even worse lighted than the one which they had just left, for but one swinging lamp hung by gold chains from the painted ceiling. A long low window looked towards the East; outside, a house in flames threw a ghastly flickering light upon the lattices and on a woman who faced the intruders alone.

CHAPTER XIV

EDITH AND SARLE

NO sooner was horrible disaster about to burst upon Teheran and upon the king of kings, the ruler of fair Persia, than Edith, who had fought against this strange passion of his for a woman of the West, gave way to pity for his estate. In a moment the innumerable calamities likely to fall upon her in this sack and siege were banished, put aside and half forgotten. At anyrate, say what she would against the Oriental despot, he had remembered her for five long years, and knew her face again, finding her still fair.

“Poor king,” she murmured, when she was half thrust, half driven back into her own room. “And yet”—

And yet he might be victorious, and then what of her lover? who was not her lover but only her beloved!

She had come to Teheran on the chance, the bare chance, of being useful to him, and now it might be that her presence in the city should save him. She saw herself pleading with Nasr-ed-Din for his life.

“And what shall my reward be?” asked the king in her dream.

She shivered as she looked across the room and saw her guardian, a eunuch of the harem, whom the Kisler Aghasi had stationed there. Was it her lot to be immured within these walls for ever? And would Sarle be grateful to her? Oh, if he loved her, no! She sat upon a divan with her elbows on her knees, her hands over her ears. When would the thunder of the horsemen break in storm? Even now she heard the tramp of armed men, and the cries of command in the street beneath her. Then she knew that guns were being unlimbered in the court, and she saw vividly, what she had not realised before, that this was war and carnage and panic! What of her friends in the city?

And even as she thought of Lily Hawker, then in the rooms of the British Embassy, she heard the breaking of the storm. And as her thoughts were gathered upon the rising gale, for the squadrons galloping were like a great wind afar off upon a mountain forest, there was suddenly a most awful roar. The palace rocked and swayed as though there were an earthquake, as though the world were ending, and after the roar there came the sound of rending timbers, of falling masonry; and from the next rooms of the seraglio the screams of women. The floor of her own room heaved and shook; she heard the walls crack; bits of plaster fell, the dim lamp swung to and fro. Again the wail of women rose; she heard the high-pitched voice of the Kisler Aghasi, and then there was silence for a space. Was there to be another explosion? She could not remember; she wondered if she ever knew. Her brain was dizzy; cool as she kept, her nerves thrilled and her heart failed her. This was the work of Ross, the

man she had never seen; the man Sarle had praised as the most desperate adventurer of Europe, a young man yet, but one born for war and the forlorn hopes of war.

She looked up and found herself alone. Her guardian had fled.

And now the wind of the cyclone of war was at hand. She caught the yell of the Kurds as they rode; the sound of their horses' feet was the sound of a great multitude made one. Now they were in the city!

"My God, and when those devils break in!" said Edith.

They were in the city; they came in thousands; she heard them like the multitudinous sea. The backwash of it would be blood!

"Allah! Allah!"

These men cried on God, who was the God of battles; His name was flung abroad upon the night like a thousand banners inscribed with death to the infidel, with death to the schismatic Shiah!

And then rifles rang out from the very roof above her!

"God send Henry safe!"

And yet Henry was the heart—head of it all.

Then the guns spoke beneath her! Their deafening roar was overwhelmed by the sea of men.

"Kill! kill!"

For the next half-hour it seemed as though she had been forgotten. More than once she rose, meaning to escape if it were possible. But the uproar below was terrifying, even in the corridor outside her room powder smoke floated in wreaths, and the rattle of rifles was incessant. And now some savage Kurdish

work was seen in a flaming mansion across the broad clear space in front of the palace.

"They must be in!" cried Edith. She heard savage yells almost beneath her, words of command were lost ere they were given. The sound of hand-to-hand fighting was terrible. She ran again to her door, and fancied she caught the sound of Osman Bey's voice, which was the very voice of combat.

And where was Henry?

As she thought of him the door into the other part of the seraglio was opened.

"Editta," called the Shah.

She turned and saw him in the dim light.

"Your Majesty, your Majesty!"

"You prophesied well, woman," cried the king, whose face was white, though his eyes blazed. Edith trembled at his wrath and agitation.

"Who are they?" asked Nasr-ed-Din.

"Russians," she said suddenly. "I heard a Russian shout just now."

"And you are English? What did you know of this?"

She hardened her face and heart and held her trembling lips straight as she lied.

"I knew nothing."

"Then what did you mean?"

"I meant that if you kept me my own nation would come from the West like locusts and consume Persia."

"What woman speaks truth?" cried the Shah.

"Shall I leave you to these Kurds?"

She cried out involuntarily.

"You brought me here, my king!"

Even as she spoke the roar of the combat in the

hall of audience rose in a very volcano of awful sound.

"Come," said the Shah; and he took her hand. "My place is not with the women yet."

He led her into the inner rooms of the painted seraglio, where the other women were. Even in the torture of suspense and the fear of death they looked strangely and curiously at this white Western woman with their lord and master.

"A Frankish woman!"

The Kislér Aghasi, whose dark face was drawn with fear, bowed before the Shah.

"She was alone!"

"The dog who left the lady shall be beaten to death, your Majesty," said the Kislér Aghasi, trembling.

"You will be safe here. Or—I shall be dead," said the king to Edith.

She clung to him fearfully. For now she hated to let him meet the wrath of Osman.

"Tell me one thing, your Majesty!"

"What is it?"

"Years ago did you give up to Mozuffer Mirza a young Albanian, Achmet Suleiman Bey?"

The Shah turned towards her in surprise.

"What know you of him?"

"I knew his brother, who is with the—Russians."

"Mozuffer killed the boy, and I knew nothing of it."

"And how did Mozuffer die?"

The king smiled terribly.

"He died to escape a king's vengeance, woman."

Edith caught the king's arm.

"If it should be that Osman Bey, that boy's brother,

is with these men from Kurdistan, let him know that."

"Shall the king plead with robbers?" asked the Shah disdainfully.

The next moment he was gone, and the women crouching on the divan moaned and wailed like a sorrowful boding wind; and in all the ways of the palace the battle roared; the noise of it came nearer and nearer still. Edith sat quietly holding her hand upon a revolver in her pocket.

"They will hardly harm me if I call upon Osman," she thought; "but these poor creatures and the king!"

She looked round and found the room nearly empty. The Kisler Aghasi and his fellows thrust the women into an inner chamber.

"Come, madame!" said the chief of the eunuchs.

"Which way will they enter if they break in?" asked Edith, without moving.

The Kisler Aghasi pointed to the door she had entered by.

"And is the room, where the women are, strong?"

"It is stronger, and I and my men must die before they enter. Come!"

Edith stood up.

"I will not come!"

The man who was no man stared at her.

"Madame!" he cried astounded.

"I will not come!"

"It is His Majesty's will!"

Even as he spoke the sound of the fighting was in the next room but two. They heard savage cries. Then silence fell. Then came the clash of swords. That moment her lover fought a prince of the

Shahsevids while Osman panted and watched the duel.

“I will not go.”

The Kisler Aghasi entreated her, and would have used force.

“Stand back!” she cried; and she showed him that her determination carried means with it.

“If harm befalls you, I am a dead man!”

And then the Shah entered himself by the second door. He was breathing heavily; a thin streak of blood ran down from his black hair into his moustaches.

“The king is wounded!” she cried lamentably.

“The lady will not come,” said the Kisler Aghasi.

“Go,” said Edith to him.

The Shah ran to her.

“Come, woman!”

“No,” said Edith; “leave me here, leave me; I will save you all.”

“By the Prophet Ali,” cried the king, “shall I leave you to the wolves?”

“They will not harm me; I swear it.”

Lightning was not fiercer than the king’s eyes that moment.

“Woman, do you know them?”

“I know Osman. I hear his voice. Go, go! They shall not enter the seraglio, I swear to you, Shah.”

“I cannot leave you!”

His voice softened again.

“For Persia’s sake, go!” she cried. “In one moment it will be too late.”

And then she was alone; terror got hold upon her. She shrieked faintly as the far door cracked. When it cracked next time it burst open, and a man came in headlong, sword in hand.

It was not Osman!

And not her lover surely! Could this big man in the savage dress of the Kurds, who was powder-grimed, blood-stained, and bleeding, be he?

Her heart failed her, she cried aloud—

“Osman! Osman!”

And Osman came running upon her in the dim light.

“By the Prophet’s beard!” he yelled in strange astonishment.

“God’s truth, a confounded woman only,” said Sarle; and Osman shrieked with laughter.

“Take her! I want the Shah!”

Sarle threw her aside upon a divan; for darkness and sweat were in his eyes.

“What are you laughing at?” he cried.

“It’s your woman!” said the Albanian.

“Mine!”

And then he saw Edith.

“Edith!”

“Henry!”

“How came you here?”

But she could not speak. She waved her hand towards the door that Osman and his Daghestani comrade beat at.

“Osman! Osman! the Shah!”

“Ah!” cried Osman.

“He got away an hour ago in the dress of a dead Kurd!”

Osman disbelieved her.

“No; he’s in here!”

“There are only women in there!” she cried. “I helped the Shah to go; I swear he is gone!”

“You swear it?”

"And now he is on his way towards the camp," she cried. "Have you got the treasure?"

"Ay," said Sarle; "but how"—

"There is no time to lose," said Edith. "Good God, you will be caught like rats in a trap! Osman, it is not true that Nasr-ed-Din gave your brother to Mozuffer Mirza!"

But Osman doubted her.

"How did you come here?"

"Take me away, and I will tell you! I swear on my honour there are only women in there."

Even as she spoke the Daghestani who had watched at the third door leading into the passage, cried out in warning—

"Persians, Osman!"

There was a rush of men along the corridor.

"Back!" cried Sarle. "Osman, it's enough!"

And Edith, with the three men, ran into the room from which Sarle had come as a savage remnant of the Gholam-i-Shah entered the big room.

"Down with the lamp," said Osman; and the Daghestani pulled it down upon the floor, where it lay smoking.

"Hold the door and check them," said Osman; "and then back!"

He ground his teeth.

"And have I lost His Majesty! Oh, woman, did you speak the truth? But if I die, look out, Mozuffer!"

The savage remnant of the Gholam-i-Shah pressed on them. The Albanian could not despise these picked men of the Persians, who had fought like lions, like Albanians themselves.

"It's help or we are done!" said Sarle.

And of a truth only the darkness and the door saved them, for the bodyguard men knew not their numbers.

"Go, and we will spare your lives," cried Sarle, laughing; and he called for the Kurds, who heard not.

"Dog," said a captain of the Gholam, "it is your last hour."

He crossed swords with Sarle.

"Make it my last," said the Englishman. "Did we not spare your Shah?"

Edith stood behind him and the Daghestani.

"Into the next room, Edith," cried Sarle. Then he made a savage attack through the open door.

"Back!" he cried; and then they rushed back to the next room. Osman cried aloud from the broken window.

"Here, my men, here!"

And there was a roar from below.

The Gholam came on, for there were eight of them against the three. At that door Sarle made it seven, for the Persian captain got the sword-point in his mouth.

"Come," said Sarle savagely. "Kill us quick, you dogs; I hear my men running."

But he only heard the roar outside, the crackling of dry timber in the flame. The darkness of the inner rooms saved them; the Persians dared not rush the door with three swordsmen holding it. And they had no firearms with them.

"Show them we have," said Sarle to Edith, who stood behind him, white but strong.

She fired across his shoulder, and heard a cry that made her shudder.

And as the Persians drew back, their withdrawal

became a flight. For Osman had brought a score of his men.

Sarle was bleeding from a cut over his right eye.

"Come, Edith," he said. "Good God, where are we?"

She knew no more than he did, but as they hurried Osman and his men returned.

"Oh, are there no more? And I have lost the king."

"Did you ever hope to call the king a dog of a Shiah to his face?" asked Sarle. "How goes it all? Has Ross done his work?"

"Ay," said Osman; "he got the jewels out before our Kurds got in. They are outside the city waiting for us. The men are loaded with gold, and the Garden City is trampled down."

Once out in the open air the night was lighted by burning buildings. Kurds rode to and fro aimlessly. Some had their horses loaded down with plunder of the most miscellaneous kind. Many had two horses; some three. There were fierce quarrels going on over the animals. Many a man who had escaped from the fighting died at a fellow-tribesman's hand.

Osman gave a whistle, and was answered.

"Ali Bedredeen, give the signal!"

And a man with Ali blew upon a bugle.

"It goes well," said Sarle. "Come, Edith!"

"With you, Henry?"

"No, my girl. It has only begun for us. To the English Embassy!"

CHAPTER XV

AT THE EMBASSY

“THE devil!” said Sir Everett, stamping down the big room with a look of imminent apoplexy about him; “we are well served, we are well served!”

He glared at his attaché with sudden malevolence.

“Mr. Smith, we are well served!”

Mesrour quailed.

“But, Sir Everett, even the Shah”—

“Confound His Infernal Majesty!” cried the ambassador; “what kind of an Intelligence Department has he got?”

He turned sharply on the Russian attaché.

“And are you taken by surprise?”

Sergius was smoking two cigarettes at once, a curious habit of his, and, blowing through his Pan’s pipes of tobacco, he stared at Sir Everett.

“It looks like it, Sir Everett.”

“Ay, it *looks* like it,” growled the devil-worshipper
“Shall we live through this night?”

“What can it be?” said Mesrour.

Hawker joined in.

“Nothing but the Kurds, that’s certain.”

"And who has worked it?" roared Sir Everett; "don't talk to me of the Kurds organising and keeping secret a thing of this dimensions. It's a conspiracy, a gigantic conspiracy; and there's someone at the back of it."

"The Sultan," suggested Mrs. Hawker.

"Pshaw," said the ambassador rudely; "as if he hadn't his hands full."

"The German Emperor! He's a young man in a hurry, and may want to embroil England and Russia," said Sergius calmly. "For, of course, we are to fight about Persia some day."

"Nothing of the sort," said Sir Everett; "we are here to prevent fighting, and I propose to do it."

"But have you done it, my dear?" asked Lady Home.

"Don't talk nonsense, my love," said Sir Apoplexy. "As I said, this is a conspiracy, and we shall have our throats cut from ear to ear, and if the Kurds, or the"—(he looked at Sergius)—"the others come in, I shall have to kill you, my dear. And what was that explosion?"

He stared at them all round.

"Hawker, what was it?"

"Don't know, Sir Everett."

"Then you ought to know. Someone ought to know. I've an audience with the Shah to-morrow, and if he's alive I'll make it hot for him, hot as curry, so I will."

Outside the sound of the fighting increased. They heard the thunder of the guns, and the women screamed.

"Stop that!" said the ambassador furiously; "I'll have no shrieking here."

Then Lily Hawker began to cry, and the ambassador appealed to Hawker.

"Make her stop."

"I can't, I'm afraid," said Hawker.

"Order her to stop!"

"Good Heavens!" said Hawker; "now, does a woman stop crying when ordered? What's the matter, Lil?"

"It's Edith," sobbed Lily; "I've only just thought of her. It's selfish of me. For here we are safe"—

"Are we?" asked Hawker.

"And she's in the palace, and oh, she'll be killed!"

"God grant it's no worse than that," said the ambassador suddenly, a little more gentle. "What with the Shah and the Kurds (if they are Kurds) she'll be well off."

"Can't someone save her? William, can't you?"

"My dear," said Hawker, "I'm not a regiment."

"Oh, Edith, Edith!"

Lady Home put her arm about Lily.

"There, my dear, we are all in a bad fix, and I daresay she will be all right. Why did she come here?"

"To see me," sobbed Lily. "We were always great friends when she lived with Ali Mirza. And she's so sweet and brave!"

"She'll need to be," said Hawker sombrely. "Good Lord, what a tumult! Do you think we shall be attacked?"

"How the deuce should I know?" snarled Sir Everett. "Ask someone who knows what it's all about."

He drew Hawker a little aside.

"I believe this is a Russian business, Hawker. In

confidence I'll tell you that I have a certain reason for believing it a Russian scheme."

"Impossible!" cried Hawker.

"Hold your tongue, sir," cried the irate ambassador in a whispering roar; "look at that Lapunoff. He's as cool as—as the top of Demavend!"

"He's always a pretty cool hand."

"Then he's icy now," squealed Sir Everett; "he's enough to freeze the Persian Gulf solid!"

"What advantage for the Russians?"

"The treasure! Don't they hanker for it? And so close to 'em. And we're so busy everywhere. If I had my way we should just turn our attention to them, and let other things slide. But no, our Government must have a million irons in the fire."

He walked to and fro in agitation.

"Can't we get some information of what's going on outside?"

As the roar of musketry was incessant, and the sound of the fighting even more prodigious, there was a plentiful lack of volunteers.

"I'll go on the roof," said Hawker. "Mr. Smith, will you come with me?"

"You shan't go," cried Lily; "what shall I do if you are killed?"

"My dear, I shan't be killed. There's no real danger there."

But Lily screamed as he went, and fainted when he was gone.

The buildings near the palace were well alight when Hawker and Mesrou came out on the roof.

"Don't show yourself," said Hawker. "If any of these larkers see us, they'll loose off at us, for sure."

And there are quite enough chance bullets flying as it is."

From the edge of the roof they could see the roof of the palace reddened by the opposing blaze, but none of the open palace space was visible. Below them in the street some looting Kurds galloped.

"Allah, indeed!" cried Hawker, "they had better call on Shaitan!"

"They are Kurds," said Mesrour, putting his head over the low parapet.

"And may be Cossacks!"

Phit came a bullet and knocked away a bit of plaster below Mesrour's nose.

"Was that meant for me?" he asked indignantly. "I've got some plaster in my eye."

"Lucky it's no worse," said Hawker. "You'll have a claim for compensation. And to think we supposed this city as safe as Paris!"

Mesrour Smith had some very obvious theories, one of which was that the bigger cities got the more dangerous they were. He began to develop this theory, all the time with a smarting eyeball. But Hawker paid no attention to his talk; the lighted city fascinated him. What was going on now within the palace? And what of Edith Cazenove?

"They've made a poor defence," said he at last.

"There were no troops to speak of in the city," said Smith; "the only hope is that some will come."

"Go down and tell them what you have seen," cried Hawker. "I'll be down in a minute."

When he was alone he went to the end of the roof, where he got a fresh view. The roar at the palace began to die away, but he heard more cries of triumph,

with now and then a shriek of pain as some wounded wretch tried to avoid a mad Kurd galloping down the street.

"It must be over in there," he thought sickly; "and what of the women?"

For now those Kurds who had missed what they thought sufficient plunder in the palace, began looting in the town. He heard the crash of gates, some fresh firing, and the screams of those who died. Hard as it was to tear himself away, he ran down below. It was then long past midnight, though it seemed but an hour since he had ridden in from his house.

"It's all over!" he cried.

Lily shrieked.

"Oh, are we to die, William?"

"It's over at the palace," said Hawker; "and now it may be the city."

"Is she dead?" cried Lily.

"How can the man know that?" roared Sir Everett. "And here we are like rats in a trap. If I see the Shah to-morrow I shall say"—

The thunder of a wild squadron down the street drowned his words.

"Are they going past?" cried Lady Home, whose nerves were failing rapidly. "Thank God they are gone."

The next band of raiders emptied their rifles against the windows as a *feu de joie*, and at the crash the ambassador's wife nearly died. Sir Everett ran to her and swore most tenderly.

"Oh, your Sacred Majesty, it will be as well if you are dead before I see you!" he cried savagely.

Then they heard a few men gallop by. But the

great fight was evidently over ; the sounds of massed conflict were past.

"Send us daylight, good Lord," yawned Sergius. "I am very sleepy."

Behind him, on a rug, John, the English servant, snored most unmusically as he lay embracing a rifle. Seated by him on the floor were the Persian and Armenian servants. But they were not asleep.

"Edith," moaned Lily, "oh, poor Edith, where is she?"

And they heard a single horseman in the street. He stopped outside the Embassy.

"Ha," said Hawker, springing to his feet. "What is that?"

Someone kicked against the outer door.

"Shall I open?" asked Hawker.

At Sir Everett's orders all the men stood ready in the hall.

"Speak to him," said the ambassador.

"Who is it?" he cried in English.

The answer was unintelligible.

"Try Russian," said Sir Everett, with a hard glance at Sergius, who was smoking his seventieth cigarette.

But Hawker spoke in Persian.

"A friend!" was the answer. "Let me in!"

And Hawker opened the door narrowly.

"Wider, I am carrying a woman," said the man outside.

And looking out cautiously to see that this was so, Hawker opened the door and let in Sarle. But those who saw him saw only a blackened, bleeding Kurd.

"Stand back," said Sir Everett.

"I bring you an Englishwoman," said the Kurd in fluent Persian. "She is from the palace."

And Hawker cried out joyfully as he caught Edith, who was dazed and more than half unconscious.

"Lily, Lily, it is Edith!"

Lily came, running. But first she saw the stranger and shrieked at his ghastly aspect. Then she caught Edith to her bosom, and Edith fainted. Mesrour Smith and Sergius carried her into the inner room and then returned.

"Who are you?" asked Sir Everett of the Kurd. "And how did you find the lady?"

"Your Excellency, I found her at the palace."

He spoke with a simple air. But Hawker and Sir Everett talked together swiftly.

"He is one of the raiders, surely," said Hawker.

"Are you a Persian?"

"I speak it."

He still stood by the door, so that it could neither be opened nor shut.

"You fought for the Shah, man?"

"I helped to save his life."

"Then he is alive?"

"He was but a while ago, your Excellency; and unless he has got himself killed since I left, why he is alive now."

"The man's a fool," said Mesrour in English.

"I doubt it very much," said Hawker critically.

"At anyrate he has brought Miss Cazenove to us."

Sir Everett turned.

"And a fine suspicious thing too. How came you to bring the lady here?"

"She asked me," said the simple and heroic defender of kings and ladies in distress. "So I did it."

"I told you he was a fool!" cried Mesrour triumphantly.

"Very far from it," said Hawker again. And he played a trick on Sarle which almost succeeded. He spoke very rapidly in English.

"But you knew her?"

The Kurd half opened his mouth and then stared at Hawker steadily.

"What does he ask?" he said, turning to Sir Everett.

But Sir Everett had his questions.

"Were there any Russians among these people?"

"Yes, Excellency," said the Kurd. "I heard Russians giving orders."

Sergius spat out a cigarette.

"It's impossible."

"Eh?" asked the stupid Kurd.

"And do you know where they came from?"

"From Kurdistan, from my own country," said the Kurd.

"Now, how could Russians come from there?" asked Sergius in French. "I don't believe a word this lying thief says. We ought to arrest him."

He made half a step forward, but the Kurd's eyes caught his.

"He understands you," said Sir Everett pointedly. "Or he caught your eye. I think he'd be a tough customer."

Outside there was the sound of a trumpet. The Kurd made a haughty salutation, and, throwing the door open, retreated into the street. He leapt upon his horse.

"Adieu, messieurs," he cried suddenly; and then in Russian he added: "I'll see some of you in St. Petersburg!"

He set his heels into his horse and vanished into the night, leaving the whole party thunderstruck.

"What did he say?" roared Sir Everett. "Oh, this will be a pretty tale for your people to listen to."

But Sergius stared like a mooning idiot.

"Why, he knew me," he muttered. "Meet me at St. Petersburg!"

"He said so," cried Hawker. "But, cheer up, perhaps he only means to capture your city. I told you, Smith, that he was no fool."

And Sir Everett turned a wicked eye on the Russian attaché.

He had lighted three cigarettes, and now sat by himself in a dream which took no account of what the others did.

"He knew me, he knew me!" he kept on repeating. "Meet me in Moskowa; no! at St. Petersburg!"

And then Edith came out of a long faint. Only the English were about her.

As the deadly pallor passed away from her cheeks, her lips moved.

"What does she say?"

Lily, who held her in her arms, shook her head impatiently.

Then Edith spoke.

"Henry!" she said, "Henry!"

"Who the devil is Henry?" whispered Sir Everett to Hawker. "Confound it, who's Henry?"

"It's I, dear, your friend Lily."

Edith opened her eyes.

"Oh, where am I? Lily, is it over? Where's Henry?"

"Who is Henry?"

"He brought me here. On a horse," said Edith.

"Sir Everett glanced at Sergius, who was still engaged with his problem.

"He brought you here?"

"Yes, oh yes," said Edith; "and he was bleeding so."

There was blood upon her dress, which at first Lily had feared came from some wound of her own.

"Good Lord!" said Sir Everett, who, in obvious agitation, with difficulty kept under some explosive reference to the devil. "Don't let that infernal Russian hear. Ask her whether the man who brought her here was an Englishman."

And Lily asked her. But now Edith was recovering.

"Oh, am I at the Embassy?"

"Yes, yes, and I'm the ambassador, my dear," cried Sir Everett. "Was the man who brought you here an Englishman?"

Edith dropped her eyes.

"Oh, Lily, Lily, take me away, I'm so ill, so ill."

"Ask her, ask her!" said the ambassador. "Now was he?"

Edith hesitated.

"He was a—Russian—I—think," she said.

"It's a lie! it's a lie!" cried the ambassador beneath his breath. "But there, we'll say it's true. For if it's an Englishman there will be the devil to pay."

And he prayed for morning and some light on things.

CHAPTER XVI

TO THE GULF

IT was all very well for Osman Bey and Ali Bedredeen Khan to have the trumpet blown to collect their crew, but to get them to come was quite another thing.

"It will be daylight directly," cursed Osman as he fumed on his horse.

"Blow, you fiends," said Singleton, who was still in a wild state of excitement. "And where's Sarle?"

Osman threw up his head.

"He'll be back soon. Oh, here he comes!"

And now some of the Kurds poured into the big square. But half their chiefs were dead; they were many of them unmanageable; they quarrelled; they fought furiously. For when a man without a horse found another with three, the argument was often short and sharp, and a bullet the settlement thereof Osman, whose authority was now tenuous, raged at the men with biting sarcasm. He had to cut one down.

"How many have we lost?" asked Sarle.

"A thousand, I should say," cried Osman; "and if we stay longer there will be more. Ride round

and come in on the other side, and cry out that the Persian army is upon us."

And Sarle rode away. The trumpet blew again, and then from the other side of the square they heard Sarle's bellow.

"The Persian army! the Persian army!"

The cry was taken up, and the Kurds started; the rumour of the main body's going ran like fire through the city; stragglers came galloping; and some cried out, asking not to be left.

"And now," said Sarle to Osman, "it's good-bye for you and me. Heaven send we get through to the Gulf. If you get back, remember to be at Suez or Port Said."

For it had been arranged that Osman was to go back with the main body, while Sarle, Singleton, and Ross with a chosen party set out for the Gulf. By that means the whole attention of the Persians would be set in the north-west; and if the way was not quite clear to the south, Sarle's knowledge of Persia and the Persians might put them through. And they were not unprepared to cheat attack, or to cheat questions if defence seemed vain.

"Farewell," said Osman. "May Allah protect you!"

He shook hands with Sarle and Singleton. Ali Bedredeen went with them, for he knew the south of Persia.

They set spurs to their horses and galloped south-west out of the city just as the first fire of the morning lit her lamp upon the cone of Demavend.

"The first part is done," said Sarle, "and I am stiff and sore."

"You look as if you were cut to pieces," cried Singleton. "Now I could sleep."

"Are you wounded, Carew?"

"A scratch between my left elbow and shoulder."

Ali Bedredeem spoke.

"Sarle Pacha, how far is Ross Bey gone?"

"Ten miles; it may be more."

"It was a great fight, Sarle Pacha; I have never seen such a fight."

His eyes sparkled.

"You were not touched, Ali?"

"Allah was gracious to me," said Ali. "May His name be blessed, and may the Prophet (upon whom be peace) send me many more such days."

As they rode Sarle translated Ali's words to Carew.

"He hasn't had enough, eh?" asked Carew.

"Well, I don't mind owning I have. Sarle, will the Persians cut up the wounded?"

Sarle shook his head.

"If it were anywhere else but the city they would, but there it wouldn't pay, I think. And really old Nasr-ed-Din is not a bad sort."

"So Osman never got him?"

"No, and I doubt if he wants to now. We heard that it was not true the Shah gave his brother to Mozuffer."

"I should be sorry for Mozuffer if Osman could fetch him back to life."

"Hurry," said Sarle; "up comes the dawn."

Demavend was lighted to its base; its neighbour peaks were rosy; the sun's upper limb climbed the eastern hills; the flood of dawn poured west.

"Is that Ross and his party?"

"And if not?"

"Ride on and I will speak to them."

But it was Ross, who sat grinning on his horse.

"Salud!" said Ross; "God's truth, but I thought you were done up; chopped, made mince. Another minute or two and I would have stuffed a handful of the best jewels in my pockets and have turned Persian."

"You have it all?" asked Sarle. "And how many men?"

"Thirty," said Ross; "five mine, and the rest Osman's. Good stuff too. Are you hurt?"

"Sliced a bit," said Sarle.

He slipped off his horse and washed his face in the stream by which Ross had camped since midnight.

"We can spare five minutes. We must. Singleton, take your coat off."

And Sarle roughly bandaged a heavy bleeding bruise on Singleton's left triceps.

"Do the same for me."

But Sarle had two bad cuts and a furrow over the shoulder made by a bullet. His clothes had stuck in two places. Carew was as gentle as he could be, but Sarle shook his head.

"Oh, you clumsy devil."

They used a cocaine dressing.

"For we've got to go," said Sarle. "Ross, give me my other clothes."

He put them on.

"I'm a Persian gentleman; an emissary of the Shah. Ross, are you hurt?"

"Not a flake off the flint."

He looked as hard as flint.

"But that diamond, the sea of light, nearly did for

me. A Kurd who got in with us made a grab for it, and I had to go in for a rough-and-tumble to get it. And I couldn't grab his right wrist, and he sliced my clothes off me."

He showed them his rags.

"The Darya-i-nur," said Sarle.

"Take it," cried Ross; "you look the safest to hold it."

"Can I see it?" asked Singleton.

"When we camp next."

They rode on, Sarle and Singleton and Ross ahead. Ali Bedredeen rode with them. Each man led a pack-horse. Some led two, lightly loaded, to change as saddle-horses.

"We are twelve miles out of the city now!"

Suddenly Ross held up his hand and pulled his horse up.

"A gun!"

"No."

"Yes," said Ross, "and the sound of volley-firing."

They turned towards the north-west.

"Yes," said Ali, bending down; "I hear it."

He sprang from his horse, and, crying for silence, laid his ear to the dust.

"Heavy firing!"

And then they all heard it.

"Osman may be caught!"

"Trust him," said Sarle. "He's a man. On—on!"

And for an hour they rode without a word. They passed peasants and rode through villages. The inhabitants fled to their houses and barricaded themselves, for at first they believed these were the Kurds. The sound of the fight and the news of it had come to them. But Sarle's men wore Persian caps.

"How went the fight?" asked one bolder villager at the second village.

"The king of kings is victorious," said Sarle, bowing. "Blessed be the Prophet and the Prophet Ali."

"Dirty Shiahs," said the Kurds to themselves. For they could not forget, when they heard the Prophet Ali mentioned, that they themselves were the orthodox, the true children of the Faith.

The party camped at noon in a lonely grove, and that afternoon Sarle impressed a number of fresh horses in the name of the Shah, for the Shah's service.

"The Russians are in the North," he told the village headman, and he showed him his passport with the big red seal. "We are going to the South to call in the English. One dog shall eat the other."

They spent part of the night camped, but started long, long before the dawn. Singleton slept like a dead man, but Sarle hardly slept at all. His wounds were what they should be; they ached and smarted. And on him lay the responsibility. And how was Edith? His heart was certainly softened to her.

"She must have come for me."

He remembered how she had clung to him as he rode through the city.

"And what will she say? Well, I don't know yet, if we come through!"

The notion of quiet and peace even in an English home was not so unpleasant when he rode now, after great excitement, on the razor-edged bridge of danger.

It was still early dawn, when the air of the great

Persian plateau was a little cold, that Ali rode up to him and the others as they went in silence.

"Sarle Pacha!"

"Ay, Ali."

"Pacha, we are pursued!"

Without turning about, Sarle looked at him.

"Are you sure?"

"I think so. As we came upon the top of the last rise I saw a little cloud of dust."

"Far away?"

"Very far; but I saw it."

"Drop back behind, Ali," said Sarle, "and I will join you. Did anyone else see it?"

"No, Sarle Pacha."

And when Ali was in the rear, Sarle dropped out of the thin cavalcade and smiled cheerily as each man passed him. They saluted him with a gratified air. All of these whom Osman had chosen were brave and faithful, known to him of old. And they had seen this Englishman fight.

"We will look back at the next rise, Ali," said Sarle. And at the next low height he got off to tighten his girth.

"I see the dust."

"Is it nearer, Ali?"

"It is nearer, my lord."

And Sarle mounted.

"I see it, Ali."

"My lord has the eyes of an eagle."

"Don't praise yourself, Ali Khan," said Sarle cheerfully.

And he rode on.

"Unless they are picked men, we could eat a hundred," said Sarle.

Ali's eyes sparkled.

"Not one among *us* but is a man," he cried. "But what of Ross Bey's men?"

"He chose them," said Sarle significantly. "When will you be able to judge how many come?"

But Ali did not answer that.

"How far behind?"

"They are where we camped."

"Then they must have seen us by now," said Sarle. He rode on and joined the main body.

"Singleton, my man, are you very stiff?"

Carew stood up in his stirrups and yawned.

"What a long man is that Englishman," said the Kurds.

"I'm not as stiff as a biscuit; but still I'm stiff."

"Not too stiff to fight?"

"Oh no," said Carew; "but I'd much rather not. I want peace."

"You will have to fight for it then. For, Carew, we are being pursued. Don't look round. Ross!"

"Ay, what's up?" asked Ross, waking. For, like the Kurds, he could sleep on horseback, and found the gift invaluable.

"We are being pursued."

"Naturally," said Ross. "What else did you expect?"

"Nothing else!"

"Then let me sleep."

"But they are close behind us."

"How close?"

"Five or six miles."

Ross growled.

"Then why did you wake me now?"

And he went to sleep again with much resolution.

"He's an extraordinary devil," said Singleton.

"He writes very well too," said Sarle with utter irrelevance. He turned and nodded to Ali.

"Are we near any place good for defence?" he asked. For Ali knew the country well.

"If we ride fast."

And Ross, much to his disgust, had to wake up. Not knowing his horse, he could not sleep at a gallop.

"Confound the dust," said Sarle crossly. "But there, the more we make the more they will think our numbers."

And after half an hour's hard gallop they came to the entrance of a narrow defile.

"Ross, what do you say? Shall we take the horses through and then make an ambush behind the rocks, or go on?"

"Give them beans here," said Ross. "We are thirty-four, and we shall have a good rest while waiting."

By now the word ran through the party that the Persians were on their track. The men unslung their rifles and looked to their bandoliers. Most of them were armed with Martinis, a favourite weapon all through Kurdistan and Persia, where they were known as "Marteens"; and some had Remingtons.

Four of the party, and these four Ross's men, were put in charge of the horses a little way the other side of the crest of the defile; the others lay down behind rocks on the right hand of the northern declivity which commanded the entrance.

"I'm sorry for the Persians," said Ross "Call me when it begins."

And he went to sleep again.

"Look at him," said Carew in astonishment. "I never saw such a man."

"He's a dear chap," replied Sarle, "and I'll swear you never saw one like him. He writes most excellent English, but he's got a beastly habit of quoting Shakespeare in his articles."

"Why's that a beastly habit?"

"Because Shakespeare is rot," said Sarle.

Singleton stared at him.

"Why, he's the greatest writer"—

"Good Heavens," cried Sarle, "don't get off on platitudes here! I'm just sick of Shakespeare. Do you ever read him?"

"No-o; or not much," said Singleton; "but everyone"—

"Who's everyone?"

"They all"—

"O Lord," said Sarle, "I wish they would eat every copy of him printed and let us have something fresh. Fricasseed folio for fools!"

Singleton looked quite angry.

"Well, you might be civil, I think."

Sarle clapped him on the shoulder.

"My dear chap, if you can tell me anything striking that the man ever said, or a good play he ever wrote, I'll give you my whack out of this business."

Singleton gasped.

"Why, *Hamlet, Hamlet!*"

Sarle snorted.

"Look here, wait till this is over and I'll just tell you what I think of the worst play ever written!"

"Oh, all right," said Singleton in a mighty huff; "it's a pity you can't write something like it."

"Wouldn't if I could," growled Sarle.

And then there was that curious sound from the men in waiting which betokens an enemy in sight. It was like the sound of wind in barley.

"We'll argue it out afterwards."

"Certainly not," said Carew; "I'm only an ass."

"Don't mention it," cried Sarle. "Give me your hand, old son."

And Carew gave him his hand quite reluctantly.

"Hush!" said Sarle.

And the pursuing force rode into the mouth of the defile.

Every man's finger was now on the trigger of his rifle, and to Singleton it seemed that the pulsation in his finger would send the bullet to its destiny. What fighting he had done in the palace had been fevered, furious; but this seemed like murder, almost like shooting at a sitting hare or a running pheasant. And yet—

"I could bowl him over so nicely," said Singleton, to his own surprise.

He meant the man who rode at the head of the troop.

"How many?" whispered Ross, now wide awake.

"Ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty," counted Sarle. "And that's all."

Would so few pursue desperate men? he asked, or was this only the advance guard?

Even as he spoke the remaining darkness of the night was rent and the dawn was day.

"Stop!" cried Sarle, springing to his feet. "Stop! Don't fire, men! Good God, it's Osman!"

CHAPTER XVII

MOZUFFER MIRZA'S LEGACY

WHEN Sarle's big voice re-echoed from the rocks of the defile, the band of Kurds under Osman, for indeed it was Osman, stopped dead and made motions as though to unsling their rifles.

But Osman spoke.

"These are our friends."

The rocks gave up their defenders; the silent pass was alive.

"How comes this?" asked Sarle, running down to Osman.

"There's no time to lose," replied the Bey; "I'll tell you as we go on."

He looked back at the defile.

"A pretty ambush you planned for us! Don't think I would have ridden into this trap if I hadn't known you were just ahead."

He shook hands with Singleton and greeted Ali Bedredeen Khan, and then resumed command of the entire body.

"Right, my general," said Sarle. "But I think we want a few more Persian caps. For am I not an emissary of the king's?"

When they rode on Sarle and Singleton and

Ross waited for the story. And yet before they heard it they knew much of it. Osman's men talked fiercely with their fellows: they spoke of a great fight. And many of them were wounded with fresh wounds.

"How did it happen?" asked Sarle at length.

"It was my fault," said Osman gravely. "And now I am not where I should be. My place was with those who go back to Kurdistan."

He was greatly troubled, and yet a certain grim satisfaction sat upon his hard and handsome face.

He suddenly turned to Sarle.

"I have paid my debt to the Shah!"

"Ay," said Sarle.

"And I have paid my debt to Mozuffer Mirza."

"He was dead, Osman!"

"And so are his sons now! By the Prophet (upon whom be peace), I have wiped out his name from the earth, which shall know it no more."

He smote his hand upon his thigh, and for some moments did not speak.

"Mozuffer Mirza left much wealth. For years he had been Sadr Azem, and was not clean-handed. He bought justice and sold it. He was Governor of Azerbaijan, and returned to Teheran richer than he went. He died, and was called a holy man. He prayed much. It may be that he prayed for help to Allah against me. That a dog of a Persian Shiah should have killed my brother Achmet, a chief of the Skipars of Albania! He left his wealth to two sons, and by the especial favour of Allah I found them both together. And with them were their sons! Allah heaped bounty upon bounty on me, his unworthy son."

"Where did you find them?"

Osman laughed.

"I never thought to find them. For I was told they were both in Khorassan. But as we rode out of the city we came to a rich house in a walled garden, and though we rode fast, something, I know not what, put it into my heart to discover who dwelt there. That I should be so favoured astonishes me; it is a wonder!"

Then he laughed.

"It happened that Allah sent a seller of water-cresses that way, and the poor fool came riding on a little ass, singing with the voice of an ass about the wine of Shiraz, which assuredly he had never tasted, and a man with me (who is now in Paradise) was about to ride over him when I stayed him. 'Who lives here?' I asked. And the trembling singer said, 'Your High Excellency, it is my lord Mozuffer Mustapha Mirza's house.' My heart stopped with joy. 'And is Mustapha Mirza there?' 'He is, with his brother.' Thus I say that Allah heaped bounty on bounty upon me. When I had finished interrogating the cress-seller, Mahomed, who was with me, asked whether the dog should be permitted to live. How could I kill the very messenger of the Prophet? I took his basket and in it put gold, and I asked him if he dared take jewels? He cried out in wonder, for assuredly he hardly believed his head was upon his shoulders. And I gave him a handful, telling him that if he was discovered with them he might say he had taken them from the dead body of a Kurd. 'If any of mine stay you, say you are the friend of Osman.' He went away rejoicing, and I trust he is safe. And then I turned to the house of Mozuffer."

He paused, and Singleton offered him a cigarette. Osman waved it away, and Sarle frowned significantly at Carew, as much as to say, "Leave him alone."

"We broke in the door and were received with bullets. Seven of my men fell upon the threshold, but me not a bullet touched. I called for Mustapha, the dog, and the son of a dog, to come out. I heaped all insults upon him and his father and on his brother Faridûn. And again we broke down a door and came to an inner court. Many died ere we came out of it into the harem. And behind a door we held a parley with the two brothers. I told them that I was Osman Arslan Skipar Bey, and bade them remember that my brother had fallen into the hands of the old man who was now in Gehenna. And as I spoke I heard them whimper like whipped dogs. For they smelt death upon the air of the morning, and knew they would behold no other day. They asked for mercy! I knew they were white; I felt them tremble; they remembered the name of my people; they knew their renown, and my name was a sword. We broke in that door, and I entered the harem first. I say that Allah and the Prophet (upon whom be peace for evermore) had elected me for their service. My life was charmed; their bullets were not for me; their swords fell flatling; and as for them, they were afraid. And so they died. Their sons were even then dead: their house is no more. For it was burning as we left it. Their bodies tasted flame, and were defiled. Allah be praised that I came into Persia!"

He turned then and spoke in Osmanli to Ali Bedredeen, telling him the story briefly.

"Good," said Ali, "if I could but have been there!"

"And after?" cried Sarle eagerly, "and after?"

"The hour lost at that house was used by the Persians well," said Osman. "I think some of their messages must have gone through, for when we galloped on to rejoin those who were on their way back, we ran into a regiment of cavalry coming by a cross-road, and though it was yet not wholly light they charged us. We cut down many, but they were too strong. Far ahead we heard the sound of rear-guard fighting, and those of us who escaped rode hard away to the left. Again we saw Persians. Our main body was beyond them, at the entrance of the valley: there was plainly nothing for it but to turn south while we could and join you. So, my friends, we are here. And now what Allah sends, let it come."

"The others will escape?" asked Sarle.

"Without doubt," said Osman. "If it had not been for the fight at the house, we should have been ten miles ahead of real pursuit. And what think you now of this?"

"What I always did," replied Sarle. "Do I look like a Persian Kaimakam?"

"Ali is your own particular prophet, you Shiah," said Osman with a grave smile.

"I'm glad to see you can laugh. It's a deal more than I should have done," said Carew; and he dropped back alongside Ross.

"Queer devil, isn't he?" said Ross. "It's a curious thing, but the Mohammedan religion only really suits fighting races. It's the religion of the future!"

"Eh?" said Carew; "do you think it will wipe out Christianity?"

"Sure of it," cried Ross; "for it's the only thing of

the kind that doesn't soften a race's fibre. And the real fighting of the world has hardly begun yet."

"Oh, that's surely nonsense."

"Is the world full?" asked the journalistic mercenary.

"No."

"When it is, the nations will commence. All wars up to now have been preliminary canthers for the big race. Our notions of a world of peace have been fostered by the discovery of America and so on. You wait till they're full."

He smacked his lips with humorous anticipatory gusto of a bigger row than had ever been.

"Emigration is blood-letting. We shall fight for trade, which is the racial equivalent for starving people fighting for grub. Heigho! what a pity that I shall be dead! It's a long millennium till then. But I think I could sleep."

And he nodded promptly.

Before noon one of Osman's men dropped off his horse and died. Sarle examined him, and found that the man, who had said nothing, had been wounded to the death, bleeding internally. They buried him under rocks.

And at noon Sarle, whose own wounds were healing, had a surgical field-day.

"Those who can't come must die," said Osman fatalistically. But now they rode slower. At each village, Sarle, the Persian, bought food, and bullied the villagers in the name of the Shah. He exchanged horses for his escort, and paid them in gold from Nasr-ed-Din's treasury. Day by day the little troop, in all but eighty men, looked more and more like Persian irregulars. They laughed among themselves,

and sometimes answered orders with the Irani "Cheshm!" or "Chira!" Most of them were Kurds from the border, so they could talk with the few in Osman's band who were Persian Kurds. For few be the Kurds who talk their own tongue, and they inhabit the unexplored part of Central Kurdistan.

"Will the *Flag of Persia* be in the Gulf now?" asked Carew on the fifth day.

"Let us hope so," replied Sarle. "And the Lord send she finds us!"

"What must they be thinking?"

"What is Europe thinking?" asked Sarle. "I expect there is a devil of an exchange of diplomatic notes going on. The Russians for once are sold."

Osman's third in command, the next after Bedredeen Ali Khan, was the young Daghestani who had been with him in the palace. He belonged to the great fighting family of the Ak Karassys, to which Schamyl, the Lion of Circassia, had belonged. The name of Russia was foul incense in his nostrils.

"The children of the devil," said the Ak Karassy. He spoke Turkish well and Persian badly.

"His tribe love the Muscovites!" said Osman. "And they have good reason."

"Europe will have good reason to hate them," said Sarle, "for the big bear of the North will roll in their honey-pots yet. And who shall face them but the Anglo-Saxons?"

It was a favourite matter for wrangling between Osman and the doctor.

"There may be a revival among the sons of Islam."

But Sarle would not argue.

"Well then, the world is for the sons of Islam, the

Anglo-Saxons, and the Russians. Only in any case the Mohammedans will not be homogeneous."

"They may last till they can fight among themselves. Islam advances among the Chinese, and among the tens of millions of Africa. Who shall say that the Western world shall not in the end succumb to an invasion of the Mohammedan negro coming through Egypt to Palestine?"

"Why, Ross said that, or something like it!" cried Carew.

"He's a wise man and sleeps upon horseback," said Osman.

They rode through a fertile valley of South-Western Persia, where all the cultivation is in valleys, and came out again upon more barren hills.

"We get on to a very miracle," said Sarle; "our luck is wonderful."

"Irani Kaimakam, Vizier of Luristan, it is your swift Persian speech," cried Osman; "you talk it like a fluent mollah. You might be Jemal-ed-Din himself who preaches in this Shiah kingdom the reunion of Islam."

"I have not yet used the pass given me by Nasr-ed-Din himself," said the doctor.

He brought out a Persian document sealed with the seal of the Shah, made of a mould taken from a true seal.

"El Sultan, Bin-el-Sultan, Bin-el-Sultan, Bin-el-Sultan, El Sultan, Nasr-ed-Din Shah Kajar greets his faithful subjects and commends Abdul Azim Khan to their care."

"I am Abdul Azim Khan," said Sarle, "and my special mission on his behalf is to bring Russia into suspicion. As I said just now, Europe must be all

alive and the Russians must be sick to death, to think of their scheme to swallow Teheran and its plunder, when they are getting the discredit of it without the loot. It will be awfully hard on poor Ross to have such a journalistic scoop in his very hand and yet not be able to use it."

Ross was awake and heard his name.

"Give me leave, Khan, and I'll shake thunder out of everything, and put the world fair out of plumb. It does make me sad. There isn't a paper in London or in New York that wouldn't pay in thousands for the truth. Give me leave, good and noble Abdul Azim Khan."

"Dry up, son of a paper father," said Sarle, grinning. "I'm thinking of Sergius Lapunoff at the Embassy when I spoke in such excellent Russian."

They shouted with laughter, and the men behind them wondered.

"Osman Bey is a great man," they said; "and as for the Feringhis, they are also men. Can the big one be a Nazarene?"

"Impossible, he is a farmaçion."

"A freemason and a robber too."

"They laugh!"

"And why not? He who laughs must die, and he who weeps must die," said an old grey-beard. "As for me who am very old, I thank the Prophet (upon whom be peace) that I have been in Teheran with a sword in my hand. If it had pleased Allah for us to stay longer I should have been more pleased. For I have heard it is fair to look upon, and even in the dark it is certain there were many houses."

"It is a poor city," said one who had been in

Stamboul, "and there is no water by it. A great city has a river."

"Always?"

"Always, Achmet. Is it not so at Stamboul, which is the greatest city in the whole world? Would I lie to you? I have even seen the Sultan."

"You always tell us so," said the old man.

And so they talked and wrangled as the day died down upon the lonely hills.

Though they rode fast, as if upon the great king's business, yet their progress across Persian south-west valleys seemed immeasurably slow. The day passed, and oftentimes it appeared as though the distance accomplished was as nothing. Men's nerves were strained, and custom, the easer of strain, came to their help.

"A man gets used to anything," said Sarle. "And I've often noticed that in times of danger, if the time is long, men not only talk but think of irrelevant trifles."

On considering the matter they agreed with him.

"As we rode in from Kassik," said Carew, "I had one main idea in my mind"—

He paused.

"Yes?"

"It was a kind of wonder if I should ever get a decent feed again; and I am perpetually recalling a dinner I had at the Café Anglais in Paris."

Ross chipped in.

"And while I was waiting for you the last night in Teheran I did nothing but lament that I must leave two dozen white shirts behind me."

"Did you think of any quotation out of Shakespeare?" asked Sarle, with a glance at Singleton.

"'If 'twere done, then 'twere well,'" quoted Ross; "but I couldn't think of a line about white shirts."

"Osman, what did you think of?"

"I was wondering whether my few years in the West hadn't taken the natural edge off me."

"Be reassured," said Sarle. "And I don't mind confessing that, bar funk and a general idea that we had overestimated chances of success, I was mostly concerned about a stirrup corn on the sole of my right foot which always gets me after a week's hard riding."

When he and Osman were together and alone again, Sarle spoke of Edith Cazenove.

"I suppose she came to Teheran on my account."

"How came she in the palace?"

Sarle shrugged his shoulders.

"We didn't have much chance of an explanation, but as far as I could gather, Old Nebuchadnezzar, to miscall him, raked her in by chance."

"Are you going to marry her when you get back?"

"Who would insure my life now?" said the doctor. "My head's loose; I feel the solution of continuity in my carotids very imminent."

"Talk English."

"She's a brave woman, though," said Sarle thoughtfully, "and has more pluck than most men."

"Had the Shah escaped?"

Sarle looked at him.

"Do you still want his life?"

"Not now."

"Well then, the Shah was in the next room."

Osman nodded.

"I thought so; but"—

"How naturally she swore he wasn't!"

"And why should she want to save him?"

"He is a king and she a woman. And it is tolerably obvious he was down on his luck. It's quite natural. I wonder where she is now."

"Back again in the palace, I daresay."

"No!" said Sarle angrily, and spurring his horse he rode ahead.

For after all it was possible. And he did not like the notion in the least.

But that day was the last which gave them any chance of idle talk.

Abdul Azim Khan had to play his part every hour, and now they drove south like a whirlwind, like a dust-devil across burning plains. They changed horses by fear, force, or fraud.

"You cannot give us horses? By the Prophet Ali, the Shah will sweep you from the earth."

He cowed them down, and the village with no horses procured many.

"How far yet from the Gulf?" asked the men.

Three days.

"And now?"

But two!

"To-morrow, to-morrow!" cried Sarle, a little haggard for all his courage.

"And shall we find our men?"

The gods they prayed to were Bent and Mason, and the *Flag of Persia*.

"Any time now we may meet troops sent from Bushire to intercept us," said Sarle. "Oh, Jack Bent, we hang on you, lest we hang upon a tree!"

The heat was now terrific, and the haze danced on the horizon. Twirling dervishes of dust-devils swept down upon them, hissed and passed by. Their horses

flagged ; they had no grass, and with difficulty they procured barley. Long stretches of waterless country almost slew them. Thirsty men saw visions, and in mirage beheld the pleasant pastures of the calenture, as the dying mariner sees them in the salt fields of the sea.

“The Gulf, where is it?”

And at one inclination of the westering sun they saw a glittering line south-east of them.

“Is it the Gulf?”

They lost it as they rode, and camped twice ere they saw it again. Sarle perpetually studied his map with a corrugated brow. But he steered straight for the meeting-place.

“Beyond this rise, if I am right,” he said in a whisper to Osman and Carew, “beyond this far rise, we shall see the Gulf, and—if our luck is in—the *Flag of Persia!*”

An hour afterwards the Kurds, not one of whom had seen any great water but the Bahr Kazar or Caspian, cried out as Xenophon's men had done—

“The sea! the sea!”

The red shore glared in the high noon's sun, and the water lay without a ripple on the sand. But their luck was out!

CHAPTER XVIII

SOME RESULTS AND THE WOMAN

SARLE was of course right when he prophesied a prodigious exchange of telegrams and notes among the European Powers chiefly interested in Persia.

Old Sir Everett sent off a long telegram in cypher before he went to bed. In it he told the English Foreign Office a deal that was news to part of it. But it is highly probable that some of the staff knew what was coming before it came. If they had not been high-minded Civil servants they might have sold Russian Stock the day before. For it was not long ere the virtuous Government published the news about Russians being in it.

"And if they didn't mention the extra fact that the Russian, who came to us with the heroine of the story, was an Englishman, it will look nasty for the Russians," said Sir Everett to Mesrour Smith, who, now that things had cleared up, was delighted at the way events had gone.

"For I don't believe it was the Russians really, Sir Everett!"

"Very far from it," said the ambassador; "but we must give them the credit for it. I shall have to take

Hawker into my confidence. I know he suspects this 'Henry.' Now, who the deuce is Henry?"

"Ask Miss Cazenove."

"She's too ill to be worried, so she says."

And certainly Edith was more than a little shaken.

"She knows more than she will tell. She shall stay here till the danger is over, and I must impress on her that it is much against English interests for anyone to suspect an Englishman in the business," said the ambassador. "But all the same we are all in the dark."

But so was Russia and so was the world. The St. Petersburg papers were all taken aback, and showed it. The report about the dare-devil Russian who had gone to the English Embassy was put down as an English lie. The *Novosti* yelled, and the *Novoe Vremya* hedged, but the *Hamburger Nachrichten* let itself go against Russia, and even the Paris *Temps* said this was carrying things too far.

The newspaper men in Teheran hugged themselves with delight, and wrote and telegraphed columns about the attack on the palace, which they had not seen. But all their accounts were knocked out by the *Times* special correspondent, whose big letters of four columns gave more details than were yet known. It was a curious thing that he sent no more: he disappeared, and was supposed to be killed. For Ross, who could not bear to lose a journalistic "scoop," had written his account of the raid, the explosions, and the attack long before they occurred, and had posted his letter as he rode out of the city with the plunder.

The wounded Kurds who were interrogated knew very little. It is true, there were not many of them,

for the Persian troops, part of whom intercepted Osman, had bayoneted most of them. And many of those who were saved believed the big Feringhi with Osman to have been a Russian. Osman they knew to be an Albanian, but that advanced knowledge in no great measure. For an Albanian out of his own country is usually a soldier of fortune.

And the only person who could have explained matters lay in bed at the Embassy, and was given bromide of potassium, which she carefully poured away.

Sir Everett, when he dared be himself with her, stormed about the sitting-room in which she lay, and demanded the truth.

"Who was Henry, madame?"

"Did I say Henry?"

"You know you did. Now, don't equivocate!"

"But, Sir Everett, I was in such a state of confusion and so frightened, I just said Henry because a very dear friend of mine is called Henry."

"And what's his other name?"

Edith looked at him and closed her lips.

"I don't see why I should say."

"Was he the Kurd?"

"My friend a Kurd? Why, no; he's an Englishman!"

"Then who brought you here?"

"You said he was a Kurd, Sir Everett."

"I said he was the devil, madame!" roared Sir Everett.

"I never heard you say that," said Edith; "and if he was, it was very kind of him."

"Then you won't tell the truth? I shall find means to make you speak, Miss Cazenove."

"Oh, Sir Everett, how can you talk to me like that?"

"And then the artful cat began to cry," said Sir Everett to Mesrour. "And a crying woman is the deuce."

When the ambassador had a private audience with Nasr-ed-Din, which was on the second day after the raid, he found His Majesty in anything but a sweet temper. The Sadr Azem, old Hoseyn Nouradeen Khan, looked as if he had been seriously injured.

"Has your Excellency yet discovered who is responsible for this?" asked the Shah. "Are the great Powers of Europe pirates?"

"I think your Majesty must see that some of them are!"

"I fear that Englishmen may have been concerned in this."

Sir Everett simulated the profoundest but most respectful indignation.

"Your Most Sacred Majesty condescends to jest!"

"Is the loss of my treasure a jest?"

"Then it is lost?"

"Some of it, some of it," interjected the Sadr Azem meekly.

"All of it!" roared Nasr-ed-Din; "all that was most precious to myself, and to my dynasty."

"If your Majesty speaks with firmness and relies on the nation which has the greatest interest in the stability of your kingdom," said the ambassador, "what reason is there that it should not be recovered?"

"So says the Muscovite attaché," sneered the king.

And when the audience was over, Sir Everett told the Sadr Azem how a Kurd had spoken in Russian to Sergius Lapunoff.

“Was he a Kurd?”

“He might also have been an angel from Paradise,” said Sir Everett ironically. And as Hoseyn Nouradeen was Anglophile to his curved old backbone, they put their heads together and made many plans.

“If some of the treasure, and especially the Darya-inur, could be recovered through your Excellency’s influence, it would redound greatly to England’s credit,” said Hoseyn.

He whispered.

“And your Excellency, supposing for a moment that an Englishman has been at the bottom of this, there is still no reason why the jewels should not be returned, if they can be discovered.”

“Why, Hoseyn Nouradeen Khan?”

The old man rubbed a finger over the wrinkled back of his left hand and spoke without looking up.

“It might be reported secretly, in order that all the world should know, that your noble Government had squeezed it out of the greedy Muscovites. And His Sacred Majesty, even if he knew it was not so, would welcome any means of repelling their advances, which at times become troublesome.”

“I should think so, I should indeed think so,” said the representative of the virtuous and dovelike English. “And touching the matter of the navigation of the Karun?”

“It shall be arranged. On my eyes be it,” said the Sadr Azem.

And the ambassador went off to concoct a despatch, pointing out how this disastrous affair might be the

best thing for England which had ever happened. When Frazer of the Foreign Office read it he took it with an innocent air to a superior, who also looked innocent, and they were both quite pleased.

But Sir Everett had to settle with Hawker, and being, for an ambassador, rather a casual person, he dropped in on the engineer that afternoon.

"Now tell me the truth, Hawker; do you believe they did it?"

He pointed to the north.

Hawker looked doubtful.

"I wouldn't like to swear. And, after all, what about that Russian"—

"Whom your wife's friend called Henry!"

"That's so," said Hawker.

"And what does Mrs. Hawker think?"

"I don't believe she ever does anything of the kind, Sir Everett. And she's very fond of Edith Cazenove, and if Edith is in it, my wife wouldn't give her away, not even to me."

"Very well," said the ambassador, "then I won't trouble you any more, only of course you understand that it is highly desirable to encourage the notion that Russians were at the head of this, even if they weren't?"

Hawker lighted a cigarette, and a careful observer, like Sir Everett, might have noticed him wink.

"Exactly, Sir Everett; it's an infernal scandal; most preposterous. To think of such things occurring in a city with waterworks in it!"

"And trams!"

"And trams!"

Sir Everett button-holed the engineer for a moment.

"And yet"—

"Yes?"

"And yet the Russians had this very idea!"

Hawker lifted his eyebrows.

"But someone got in ahead?"

"It looks like it, doesn't it?"

"Then all enterprise isn't lost yet," said Hawker; "and with your help I'll build that railroad to Bushire."

He went home to his wife.

"Lily, my dear, I want to know who Edith's friend was?"

Lily looked curiously abstracted.

"Eh, William?"

"Yes, my child."

"What did you say, dear?"

"I said what you heard me say."

"But did you ask who her friend was? Which friend?"

"The Kurd!"

"To be sure he wasn't her friend, William. How could a Kurd be Edith's friend? What nonsense you talk."

She got up and casually moved to the door. As casually Hawker got there first.

"Yes, my dear?"

"William, you're horrid," said Lily.

"Who was the Kurd?"

"As if I knew who a horrid wretch like that was."

He caught her chin.

"Look me in the eyes."

"Nothing of the sort," said Lily. "Why should I?"

"Because I feel like knowing who the Englishman was that headed a raid on Teheran."

"Ask Edith. But she says he was a Russian."

"Does she say so to you?"

Lily pouted.

"Oh, William, it's just horrid of you. And why should I tell what she tells me?"

"To relieve your mind, and because it is to everyone's advantage the truth should be known."

"How's that, William?" she asked anxiously.

"Because if Sir Everett knows and the other side doesn't, he can lick them out of their boots."

The "other side" meant the Russians.

"But would it do him any harm, dear?"

"The Kurd?"

Lily nodded.

"Not a bit, I'll swear."

"But if I tell you, will you tell Sir Everett his name?"

"Why not?"

"He might have him arrested."

"He's got to catch him; and besides, you dear silly, can't you see as things stand the English Government would never do anything to let the world know an Englishman did it? If he were to walk into the Embassy now, the old boy would just have to be civil to him."

"You're sure of it, William? Because if you aren't sure"—

"I am sure."

"Then the Kurd was an Englishman, dear."

Hawker slapped his thigh.

"I knew it."

"And he's an old friend of Edith's."

"She's fond of him, I suppose?"

Mrs. Hawker nodded seriously.

"Very fond. And he's a doctor"—

"A doctor, eh? And his name"—

Lily shook her head.

"No, I won't tell you that till Edith says I may, and I never, never ought to have told you this."

"I just think you ought," said Hawker. "So that's the way it is, eh? Upon my soul—and what's his name?"

"No, William, I won't."

"My dear, do."

"No, I won't. Oh, please, don't ask me!"

And having got all but that, Hawker said he wouldn't just yet. He rode back to the city and called on Sir Everett.

"I've found out who the Kurd was."

"A Russian?"

"Not very much," said Hawker; "an Englishman, and a doctor."

"His name?"

"I can't get it, but if you will give me your word that nothing will happen to him in consequence, I might find out," said Hawker.

"And how in the name of all that's unholy do you expect me to do that?" asked Sir Everett. "For if we find him we may have to squeeze him uncommonly hard to get back these jewels. I'd like to knock that woman's head against a post!"

"Which woman?" asked Hawker, with something more than curiosity.

"Why, Edith Cazenove's, of course!" cried the ambassador a trifle hastily. "You can't imagine"—

"I did for a moment," said Hawker with some heat; "but, of course, I see you must have meant Miss Cazenove."

"And since you went away I've had the Sadr Azem here"—

"Poor old Hoseyn Nouradeen!"

"And he says that His Sacred Majesty, having learnt she is with me, insists on an interview. It seems, from a hint the old man let fall, that the Shah believes she knows much more about it than she lets out. I suppose I shall have to agree."

"Perhaps she won't," said Hawker.

"I'm rather inclined to hope she'll decline. For if she makes a clean breast of it to him"—

"Why, where are we?"

The ambassador nodded irritably.

"And if I tell her to hold her tongue I am implicating myself in the intrigue, and she may become unendurable. Now, if someone else"—

He paused and contemplated the pattern of a beautiful old rug.

"By the way," said Hawker with a fine detached air, "my wife said she thought of calling on Lady Home to-morrow."

"Delighted," cried Sir Everett, "and"—

"And on Miss Cazenove."

"It might do her good. Mrs. Hawker is a very sensible woman," said the ambassador.

"She can do what she is told, at anyrate. By the way, are you thinking of pushing that matter of the aqueduct?"

"I wasn't."

"Of course, I'm not quite sure Mrs. Hawker will come."

The ambassador frowned and tapped upon his desk.

"Oh, the aqueduct—well, perhaps I was thinking of it."

"I'm glad to hear that, Sir Everett!" cried the engineer heartily as he rose. "By the way, I'll do all I can to get my wife to—call."

"Yes, to call," said the ambassador. "Lady Home will be delighted, delighted, I'm sure."

So Lily came in the morning, and presently found herself alone with Edith.

"You dear, you do look pale."

"Oh, Lily, I'm so fearfully anxious. Any moment I might hear of his being killed."

And strong though she was, Edith dissolved in tears.

"Don't you think he must have escaped by now?"

Edith counted the days on her fingers.

"No; for if everything went well he did not expect to be in the Gulf till to-morrow or the next day. Why, Lily, he may be dead now!"

Lily hugged her.

"Dear, he didn't look like a man of that sort in the least. I can't imagine his allowing himself to be killed."

"And now the Shah wants to see me again, Lily, and I was such a fool in all that horrible excitement. I told him I knew Osman."

"I would like to see that Osman," said Lily; "but after all, what can the Shah do?"

Edith clutched her.

"Don't you see that if I anger him and Henry is caught he will make Henry pay for it?"

"But if you do see His Majesty, my dear," said Lily, "you mustn't say anything about Henry. And stick to it that it was the Russians."

"Osman isn't a Russian, and the Shah knows it. For I told him who he was."

She related the story of Osman's brother.

"That accounts for it," said Lily; "everyone wondered why Mozuffer's house was the only one deliberately attacked but the palace. They killed every soul in it, and then burnt it."

"Oh, then Osman did it!"

"He must be a *horror!*" shrieked Lily.

"He's nothing of the sort," said Edith; "he's one of the finest men I ever met. And if anyone killed Henry I would burn them first and kill them afterwards. You don't understand men."

The married woman thought this especially unjust.

"Oh, as if being married made any difference," said Edith; "you either know them or you don't. It's like being musical or not being it. You can't learn them. Dear, you might marry five hundred and you would still be a duffer. Now Mr. Hawker is naturally a perfectly bloodthirsty man."

"Oh, how *can* you say so?" shrieked Lily indignantly.

"He would revel in it."

"He wouldn't."

"I can see it in his eye. And so are most men. Even missionaries."

"And chaplains?"

"Oh, especially chaplains," said Edith carelessly. "But what am I to tell the Shah? What a fool I was to say I knew Osman."

"Say you knew him in St. Petersburg."

Edith got up.

"Why, of course. That will just do. Lily, you are sweetly clever."

She kissed her.

"And do you really think William is quite a blood-

thirsty kind of fighting-man by nature?" asked Lily wistfully.

"No, no, I didn't mean it."

"You're a nasty, unkind thing," said Lily. "But there, I know you did mean it."

"Of course I did," said Edith.

CHAPTER XIX

THE WOMAN AND THE SHAH

SIR EVERETT took Edith to the palace himself. "You understand that I don't understand what His Majesty wants to see you about," said the ambassador.

"I understand," said Edith.

"But be discreet."

"I will be most discreet. You have been very kind to me, Sir Everett, and so has Lady Home."

"She is kind to everyone—even to me," said the ambassador drily.

"I suppose we shall know some day how this raid was managed by the—Russians," said Sir Everett, after a pause.

"It is sure to come out—in the end."

"In the end, but not yet. So far, by curious good luck, it has been of more advantage to us than to the other side," mused the ambassador.

"How is it taken at St. Petersburg?" asked Edith.

"They are what I might call flabbergasted, if you will permit me the expression. And there is quite a chill between them and the Sultan of Turkey, who must think they have been playing round in Kurdistan.

It is curious that counter-irritation should be such a splendid thing in international politics."

Edith nodded.

"Then personally, and speaking for England, you have no great reason to be displeased with these—Russians?"

The ambassador pondered.

"On the whole—no! But here we are at the palace."

They were received without that full state which the proud position of ambassador, who is a deputy-king, entitles him to demand. For ostensibly this was but a visit, and a semi-private one, to the Sadr Azem.

So while Sir Everett and old Hoseyn Nouradeen Khan conversed on one side, Edith was conducted beyond a curtain, and soon afterwards found that the Shah had come out of darkness from the far corner.

"Your Most Sacred and Gracious Majesty is well?" she murmured.

"No, Editta, my flower, my nightingale, unkindest of women, how can I be well?" said the king. "Have I not been flouted in the face of the world? And those whom I love have been, I fear, but traitors to me."

She did not speak.

"Will my nightingale return to me?"

"Oh, your Majesty, I am sorry, sorry."

There were indeed tears in her voice.

"It is in vain, then, that I am a king," said the Shah with melancholy. "But since dogs have run wild in the very precincts of my harem, what can a king ask of destiny?"

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"A king has his people," said Edith; "and this fair land is yours."

"Though my land grows the pomegranate and the citron, though it be fruitful in wine and oil, yet is my heart unsatisfied."

"The king of kings is yet a man," said Edith; "and this is the lot of all men under the sun."

"Those I love have leagued themselves with my enemies."

She bowed her fair head.

"Are not the king's friends stronger than his foes? And does not the king's throne stand more sure even now? What do the wise men of Persia say?"

"So I live on sufferance and support!" said the Shah.

"It is a king's part to use his enemies. Who fears no fall but the slave?"

"Who looks to rise but the slave?"

"And the Muscovite," said Edith.

The Shah approached her.

"You knew this Osman, woman?"

"I cannot deceive the king. I knew him."

"Where?"

So strong and noble in that moment seemed the Shah that her heart almost failed her.

"In the land of the Muscovite."

"And you knew of his hatred to the dead Mozuffer Mirza?"

"I knew it, your Majesty."

"And did he threaten my kingdom?"

"He believed in those days that the king had delivered up his brother to his enemy, and he said that if Fate were kind he would one day speak with you in Teheran."

The king's eyes flashed.

"Of a surety he came nigh to his desire. And you saw him that day?"

"And told him what your Sacred Majesty told me."

"He believed it?"

"Assuredly. He is, though then the king's enemy, a great fighter and noble, and of courage as great as can be equalled on the earth. Had he served your Majesty that day he would have died in your defence!"

The Shah took her by the wrist.

"Editta, you love this mad Albanian?"

"No, your Majesty."

"Editta!"

"I swear it!"

"But your heart is given away?"

She bowed her head and did not speak. The Shah dropped her hand, and paced the room for a long, long minute. She heard his steps go to and fro upon the heavy carpet; from beyond the curtain came the low sound of those who talked; the great city hummed outside like a nest of bees.

"So be it," said the Shah; "and may your lot in life be blessed."

"My king!"

When she lifted her head again the Shah was gone.

And the next morning there came news of fighting from the shores of the great Gulf.

CHAPTER XX

THE TAX COLLECTORS

“GREAT SCOT!” said Ross, as he looked out upon the glittering Gulf which spread blue and intense before them.

For Ross was the first who spoke.

“Are you sure this is the place?” asked Osman.

For once Sarle showed irritation. He cursed everyone in a heap.

“The Pit yawns,” said Ross coolly; “give it lip, old son.”

He dropped off his horse and squatted on his heels in the shade of the animal.

“Am I sure?” asked Sarle. “No, I’m not sure. Why don’t you chaps ask a policeman?”

He unslung his field-glass, and swept the long curve of the shore and the expanse of burning sea, while Carew and Osman lighted cigarettes. The men behind them showed little excitement; after the row in the city and their four hundred miles’ ride they were ready to accept a check. And the big Feringhi was a devil of resource, while they believed Osman specially favoured by the Prophet.

“I see smoke to the east,” said Sarle presently; “but that’s nothing. It may be Bent, it may be a

cargo boat, it may be a cruiser. There's only one thing for it, and that is to wait."

He called Osman on one side.

"We must occupy the village as arranged."

"Which way?"

"A mile south, perhaps two, over that ridge."

He pointed to a rocky spur which formed the south horn of the bay's curve.

"If it's anything like what I was told, we should be able to defend it for a while if need be. But why should there be need?"

"Noble Khan," said Osman with a smile, "we trust in you altogether. I'm out of it now till fighting commences."

"You had better speak to the men," said Sarle, after a moment's consideration, "and suggest to them that they behave themselves."

"There's no particular need. Ali Bedredeen has them very well in hand now. Besides, are we not sent by the king? These poor devils will bow down to us."

"I'm not so sure," said Sarle. "However, let's get on."

They rode slowly for half an hour over barren sand, and then across the rocky spur, which was flat-topped.

"Do you see the village?" asked Carew anxiously.

Sarle snapped a little.

"Why ask silly questions? You know I can't see it."

"Cheer up, old son," said Ross; "what's the odds as long as we're happy?"

"Tupper," cried Singleton.

And then Sarle reined up.

"Look!" he said. And they saw a half-ruined tower on a rock. They rode another hundred yards, and the huts of the village showed themselves. A narrow stream-bed which was now dry was marked out by some green reeds. A few palms grew beyond it.

"What dialect do they speak here?" asked Osman.

"Something utterly unintelligible," replied Sarle; "but there is sure to be someone who can understand good Persian."

"As spoken by Abdul Azim Khan, Grand Commissioner for the Persian Gulf, invested with plenary powers by Nasr-ed-Din," said Singleton.

The Circassian Ak Karassy rode on ahead. Sarle followed him serenely at a few yards distance.

"Remember to treat me most respectfully," said Abdul Azim Khan.

And then they were seen by the villagers.

"The rock scorpions are out," said Osman. But the cavalcade advanced slowly, and dropped down the slope upon the level by the stream-bed.

"They never get raided here," said Osman to Singleton, "so they will show no great alarm."

The men behind chattered in low voices.

"It's a very great water, is it not, Abdullah?"

Abdullah's small eyes were extended to their utmost and his mouth was open.

"It is a strange colour. By the beard of the Prophet it is as blue as a lake in the mountains! Now the Bahr Kazar"—

The Kurd who had been to Stamboul interposed.

"It is no bluer than the Boghaz at Stamboul. It is not so blue. It was there I saw the Sultan."

"Peace, Aziz," said the old man; "you have the Sultan for ever between your teeth, as the long, thin Frank has his cigarette."

"But I saw the Sultan!"

"Did he see you, Aziz?"

"Who knows, my father?" asked Aziz; "is it not possible? But there were very many by the landing-steps. And so I say the water here is no bluer than the Boghaz, which I saw with my own eyes when I beheld the Khalif. He is a little man, no bigger than the little Frank."

"It is a pity he did not make you vizier, for assuredly you could have deafened his enemies with a great deal of talk," said the grey-beard. "But what is this village to which we come?"

"They meet us in peace."

"Good," said the old man. "For to speak what is in my throat I require water rather than blood, and I would far sooner eat than fight, if it pleases Allah to arrange it so."

The Tcherkess Ak Karassy was met now by a deputation of three villagers, who were old men and unarmed. They saluted him gravely, and he replied in his own tongue, which appeared to astonish them greatly. As they stared at him, Sarle rode up attended by Singleton and Osman. Ross was behind with Ali Bedredeem.

"Salutations, my children!" said Sarle mildly in Persian.

"Salutations, father," said the deputation. "What is my lord's wish?"

"We journey this way towards Abushere," said the solemn Khan; "but it is my desire to stay here for the night and to hear and understand, on the part of

El Sultan Nasr-ed-Din Shah, any troubles you may have relating to the subject of taxes."

They listened intently, but evidently good Persian was difficult to one of them and practically an unknown tongue to the other two.

"We are the Shah's slaves and the servants of the noble Khan," said the man who understood best; "but being poor and ignorant men, and for the most part fishers, we do not understand all the words which the Khan condescends to utter. What is it that our lord says concerning taxes?"

"It is my desire to know if they press heavily upon you," said Abdul Azim Khan. "And to-morrow will I make an inquiry upon the subject."

"May the Khan's coming be a blessing to this poor village!" said the spokesman; "for assuredly the taxes are very heavy. But who are we to entertain so many? Noble Khan, as I said before, we are very poor."

"By my coming shall you be richer," said Sarle; "for all that we consume the Shah shall pay. For he is determined henceforth that justice shall be done in the land, and flour shall be as cheap as millet seeds."

Ross made a queer strangled kind of whistle.

"The seven-hooped pot shall have ten hoops, and I will make it felony to drink small beer!" Singleton, our one and only Sarle is a devilish clever chap. Now I tell you that there are villages in England where a man could play this game. One touch of taxes makes the whole world kin."

They moved down towards the village, while one of the deputation hastened back and harangued the collected inhabitants, saying that the noble Khan,

whom they could see upon the big horse, was the very Kaimakam of the Shah who had come to take off their taxes and make the land flow with milk and honey.

"But there is no house fit for my lord to stay in," said the disconsolate headman. "How can we suitably entertain him?"

"The Shah himself," replied Sarle gravely, "in endeavouring to make his people happy spares no labour and no discomfort. I, his representative, am by nature one of those who hate roofs even as the king does. We will camp by the tower."

He set the villagers to clean out the ruins, and Osman took a look at the defensive capabilities of the place.

It stood alone with the village below it, and was only easily reached by a neck of land some twenty yards across. But there was no well there.

"It could be held against five hundred," said Osman to Sarle, who was seated on a carpet smoking in a very noble and Khan-like manner. "But the difficulty is water. Tell these villagers to bring up a lot in their jars; if it won't make them suspicious."

"Very well," said Sarle; and he explained to the Ked Khoda or headman that water obtained near the sea was very unwholesome for people who came from inland, unless it was kept standing in jars for a long time, and had a certain drug put into it. When the headman had had this repeated three times he nodded.

"God is great! Perhaps the salt of the sea does it."

And presently half the village was engaged in bringing water in jars, which were stored in the lower

compartment of the tower. Into each jar Sarle dropped a pinch of something which he carried in a gold snuff-box, part of the loot from the palace.

"What are you putting in?" asked Singleton.

"Some earth I scratched up just now," said Sarle, with a steady wink of his eye.

And so they camped for the night.

By the very earliest dawn, and long before anything was visible either over sea or land, Sarle had climbed to the crumbling platform of the old tower and swept the horizon with his glasses.

"And if he doesn't come, what?" he asked himself as he looked down upon the quiet encampment. Save for the sound of an awakening neigh of a horse and the movements of two sentries posted on the neck of land leading to the little village, there was no sign of life. But though the westering stars still shone, the golden glow in the east grew like a magical sun-flower and opened as an anemone opens in the warm flood-tide. Of a sudden the sun's upper limb glowed and was but a fiery star, then it hove itself into the height. Even yet the fine faint chill of night lingered like an evanescent and sharply-bracing odour, but as the myriad voices of the grasshopper and fly awoke the day was warm. Palm and clear-cut rock showed against the sky; the long curves of silent beach ran out of sight in a grand measureless hyperbola.

But on the sea was nothing.

It was the hour of prayer, and the camp woke.

"There is nothing to see because there is nothing in sight?" said Ross inquiringly to Sarle, when that noble and melancholy Khan descended.

"Nothing," replied Sarle.

"I shall devote the day to the interests of journalism," said Ross. "I am going to pretend that I am a Russian, and shall send my little story to the *Times*."

"Send all our obituaries," suggested Singleton. "For if the *Flag of Persia* doesn't turn up"—

"She'll turn up all right," said Ross, and he sat under a rock and scratched away in his notebook.

Osman joined them.

"What if she doesn't come?" said Sarle to him.

"We must try for Arabia."

"Is it possible?"

"Just possible, but I would rather not try it. Come now, you have to play your part."

And for some hours Sarle, as the noble Abdul Azim Khan and the blessed representative of the Shah, listened to strange tales of woe concerning the subject of taxes. Ross, as one of the three who knew Persian, was torn from his *Times* article and compelled to act as scribe, while Osman occasionally intervened in the conversations.

As was Sarle's nature, it was not long before he became very much interested in taxes, and he showed a peculiar and most astounding knowledge of the subject. Everything he had heard when he lived in Persia now returned to him.

"Verily, most noble Khan, your learning on the subject of imposts is terrible," said Ross solemnly in English.

"What tongue is it that the Khan's learned scribe speaks to your excellent lordship?" asked the Ked Khoda curiously.

"It is Court Persian," said Sarle.

"Does the Shah then speak it, noble Khan?"

"Assuredly," said the Khan; "but touching this matter of the collection of dues? Speak freely, for I listen, and all you say is for the Shah alone."

The headman showed much reluctance to let himself go on this branch of the subject.

"Ah, of the collector of taxes?" he murmured.

"Yes."

"Most noble Khan, how can poor villagers speak concerning such? What man, knowing a nest of hornets is in a hollow rock, thrusts his hand therein?"

"Your words are wise, father," said the Khan; "but the justice of the Shah is the child of knowledge, and he who talks with a dumb man goes round the house instead of through the door."

The headman bowed.

"I am old, Most Excellent, but I have children; and though I be dumb soon, yet will they speak, and how will they answer the tax collector when he says, 'Your father spoke ill of me, and his children shall pay twice over'?"

"I will deal with such," said Sarle; "and his name shall be wiped out. So says the Shah."

"It is a very, very long way to Teheran," said the headman, "and Hissar is very near. For the collector has the ear of the farmer of taxes, and the farmer speaks with the governor, and the governor is the man of the king. But, nevertheless, if the Khan desires it, then will I speak."

And, as the Khan desired it, the headman spoke.

"It is well," said the Khan, dismissing them; "be assured that the king shall know these things. Tomorrow I will speak with you again."

"Poor devils," he said, when they had withdrawn. "I guess they must have a very tough time."

"And here you've been cockering them up with notions of justice and of your telling the Shah," grumbled Ross.

"By the tail of the sacred Bull," said Sarle, "the Shah shall know. I will write him a paper myself on the collection of taxes. You see if I don't. Give me your notes."

"I'll write the paper for you," said Ross; "it will be something to do."

But before he had written half of it there was very much to do.

It was late in the afternoon when young Ak Karassy, posted on the tower top, called quietly to Osman.

"Osman!"

The Bey had been lying half asleep on a rug in the shade of the ruin.

"Yes."

"I see two horsemen riding from the direction of Hissar. They have just come over the hill."

"I will bring up the glasses," said Osman; and having spoken to Ali Bedredeen he went up to the Tcherkess.

"They are facing our way but do not advance. Ah!"

And as Ak Karassy spoke, the troop to which the two horsemen belonged showed over the low hill crest.

"How many?"

And as the Tcherkess counted so the numbers grew.

"Three hundred! Stay here!" said Osman.

He dropped down the broken steps and called Sarle.

"So," said Sarle. "Have they had the news from Bushire?"

He climbed high enough to see some of the strangers, who were not apparently all in sight.

"Three or four hundred, and who knows how many behind?"

"Ah, where is Bent now?" said Osman. "We must hold this place till he comes, or till we can hold it no more. Do they see us?"

He spoke to the Tcherkess.

"I think so. They are riding along the crest of the hill."

Osman consulted with Sarle and Ross, who thrust his notebook into his pocket and came flying.

"Shall we try to bounce them? Can you fool them?"

"If they know nothing, but if they do"—

And Sarle shrugged his shoulders.

"It's a quick thing," said he. "Get your men ready. Fetch the headman quick, Ali."

The old man came running.

"Who are those upon the hill?" asked Sarle.

The headman did not know.

"Do they come from Hissar, or are they robbers?"

And the question was answered well enough for those who asked it, for they saw a puff of smoke, and presently heard the faint report.

"The food," said Sarle; and then all Osman's men swooped down upon the village and swept it clear of any food it contained, and of all its goats. The poor old headman stared and cried out.

"You shall be paid," said Sarle grimly. "These are probably tax collectors, but we shall pay you with the Shah's money."

When the supplies were brought in and the water jars filled again, the stones which had been put ready were rapidly built into a winged breastwork on the neck of land. The astounded villagers wrought miracles under the fierce direction of Osman, Ali, and Ak Karassy, who persuaded them with the point of the sword when they lagged.

"Well, Carew," said Sarle presently, "if Bent doesn't turn up, things are very liable to go crooked."

"It looks so, I own."

"But you'll have had your money's worth, eh?"

"I believe it. Are we likely to get a hammering?"

"In the end, of course. But we have the jewels, and it might be possible, if the worst comes to the worst, to bluff them into terms. And so long as they have no guns we can hold this place till we die of thirst and hunger."

Carew lighted a cigarette and let it out ten times.

"A cheering prospect," he murmured as he looked out upon the vacant blue sea. "Oh, John Bent, John Bent!"

When the villagers had been forced to do all that could be done to make the place defensible, Sarle called up the headman.

"When these people ask you who we are, you will say what pleases you," he said gravely, "and in the meantime I pay you for the food and the work. Ross, give him the money."

"Most noble Khan, I do not understand!" cried the old man feebly; "who are they who fire upon the representative of the king?"

"They are most probably collectors of taxes," said Sarle, "collectors of taxes who have heard of my coming. But here is the money."

And the dazed headman with his bag of money was conducted out of the camp.

"I tell you, Carew," said Sarle, "that this poor old Johnny will believe in us, and not in them, let them say what they like. And it might be useful if he does."

Any doubt that there might yet have been in the raiders' minds as to what knowledge these newcomers had of them was soon dissipated. For their leader sent a horseman with a flag of truce, who rode boldly into the village and up the slope to the breastwork.

"Lie down, men," said Osman; and then he called to the stranger.

"Come no farther. Who are you, and what do you require?"

The flag-bearer was a fine fellow, by his type, one of the Bakhtiari, the truest and most ancient Persians.

"We come by the orders of the Governor of Abushere, and require you to surrender."

"Wherefore?"

The Bakhtiari laughed.

"By Allah, do you ask wherefore? Be it known to you that we have learnt you are Muscovites, and that, aided by Shaitan, you have come even from Teheran."

Sarle joined Osman, and they consulted together.

"Who is your leader, brave Bakhtiari?"

"Fateh Ali Bey from Hissar."

"Then tell Fateh Ali Bey from Hissar that we will surrender if he will bring the Muscovite and English consuls from Abushere."

"And if he will not?"

"He must come and take us!"

"The Feringhis are surely mad," said the Bakhtiari; "for one that you see upon the hill, ten will come, and for ten that come a hundred will follow."

"And many that come will remain," said Osman; "we will make this the greatest burying-ground between the East and West."

"What is written, is written," cried the Bakhtiari. "But it is not written that you should escape."

"Learned mollah that you are," said Osman, "will you write commentaries on the will of Allah?"

"Nay," replied the Bakhtiari, "but it may be that I shall be a pen in the hands of Azrael."

"I said you were a mollah," cried Osman. "Go, friend! When you are my prisoner I will discuss these matters with you!"

And the Bakhtiari galloped away. Even as he reached those who came to meet him, yet another band came over the hill.

"Singleton, do you see anything?"

He was on the tower and saw nothing.

But he was looking seaward.

CHAPTER XXI

BELEAGUERED

EVEN as the Bakhtiari joined his fellows and with them rode to report what these infidels had said, the sun went down a blazing ball of fire, and swift darkness veiled the land. For the shadows strode from hill to hill and swept along the shore like an invading army; they swallowed Persia, and left the little band of outlaws on a promontory like an island.

"These Persians won't attack us at night," said Osman; "at least not till they know how few we are. It's lucky we've our backs against the sea."

"Are the Persians brave?" asked Singleton.

"You found them so at Teheran."

"But they were picked men."

"They are good enough anywhere," said Osman, "but here we have them at a disadvantage. As light cavalry they have few equals."

They cursed Bent and the *Flag of Persia* at intervals when they met at the tower. But their time was occupied making patrols, to see that a watch was kept at every assailable point. Out of the eighty they started with from the defile where Osman had joined them they still had seventy-nine.

For only the one wounded man had died. Yet many were half disabled; even Sarle's wounds, which had healed almost miraculously, still gave him trouble.

"Only we've no time to be ill," he said.

"Great opportunities for rest when we're dead," cried Ross.

At the tower they kept their inlying picket of thirty men. For another thirty lay embracing their "Marteens" at the breastwork, and the remainder watched at goat-paths leading from the village and the southerly flats. During the night they worked at improving the defences of the tower; they strengthened the upper and middle platforms, and loopholed it there and in the basement. Round it lay the fragments of an old *Serai*: they built up the walls breast high. Again inside of that they built *sangars* or winged breastworks sheltering the two entrances to the old square tower.

"I'm getting nervous," said Singleton to himself. "Damn!"

But he worked like a mule, and was not too nervous to sleep when his turn came. He and Sarle kept watch together. Ross and Osman relieved them. Ali Bedredeen Khan fell asleep now and again with those who were at the big outer breastwork.

And the night passed away quietly, save for the bleating of the goats, and a shot now and again from a sentry whose eyes saw things that were not, and created a crawling Persian out of a deeper shadow of the ground.

But with the growth of dawn a dropping fire commenced from every hilltop. Osman and Ali impressed upon their men that they were to lie close and never reply at random; for they had no reserves

of ammunition. Sarle took a rifle and his glasses into the upper tower, and watched the vacant glaring sea and their growing enemies. For more came from Hissar and some from inland, until their numbers grew to six or seven hundred. And those who came last were three companies of infantry.

"How long till they get guns?" asked Sarle. Osman was with him on the tower.

"I doubt if they have any of their camel artillery nearer than Ispahan," said the Albanian. "But if they have and it comes"—

He was eloquently silent.

"Bent must have broken down!" cried Sarle. "He'd surprise them with a quick-firer mounted. Oh, he'd make 'em skip!"

"They'll try and starve us out," said Osman; "either that or they have artillery coming. They think we are helpless, so why should they throw away lives? See!"

He pointed to a little rise to the east, until now not occupied.

"It commands the village and the well," said Osman. "They have communicated with the villagers during the night, I expect."

But the village showed no sign of life.

"I don't think there's a creature in it," said Sarle. "They must have cleared out under cover of the darkness. The poor old headman, what's he think of Abdul Azim Khan now?"

"Let's go down and eat," said Osman. They called to Ross, who came up.

"Keep your eagle eye on them," said Sarle, slapping him on the shoulder; "and mind you don't show yourself."

"Teach your grandmother," replied Ross. And when they were below he carefully placed two or three conical Persian caps on the parapet. The enemy wasted much ammunition on them before they guessed the cheat.

After breakfast Singleton drew Sarle aside.

"Look here, Sarle, I want to tell you something."

He looked with a haggard eye at the doctor.

"Well, old man?"

Singleton dropped his voice.

"I say, do you know I'm—I'm getting afraid?"

"Yes."

"I'm an infernal coward."

"And only just getting afraid?" said Sarle. "Well, if you want to know, I've been afraid for a long time."

"But you don't show it. And I don't believe it."

"I am," said Sarle; "and if this kind of thing lasts three days we shall all be afraid, even the most thick-headed Kurd here. That's war, my son. You're full of story-book notions of getting used to it. Take my word, they're mostly rot. A man goes on getting more afraid the more danger he runs. And it ends in his not being able to stand it any more."

Singleton shook his head.

"That doesn't sound like what I've heard."

"Read, you mean."

"Well, read then."

"Look here, let me call Osman."

"He'll laugh at me," said Carew uneasily.

"Not if I know him," answered Sarle; and he called to Osman—

"I say, Osman, our friend here says his nerve is going."

Osman smiled.

"A good many men's would have gone a long time ago."

"Do you think so?" asked Singleton.

"And," continued Sarle, "he's full of notions about veterans who are entirely callous, and would rather be shot at than have breakfast."

"A veteran of that sort is an ass whom it has pleased Allah to spare for some inscrutable reason," said Osman; "and there are not many of them. No troops can face constant danger for long without tumbling to pieces, except in a course of perpetual successes. I've seen old and seasoned troops after three bad days shaking as if they had the ague, and they let off their rifles in the air if a man clapped his hands."

"D'y'e hear that?" asked Sarle. "Cheer up, old son! All men, even the bravest, are cowards."

"It's a funny doctrine," said the disconsolate Singleton. "And I want the *Flag of Persia* badly."

"And so do we!" cried his friends.

"But all the same, Osman," said Sarle, when they were alone, "it's my opinion that trouble will begin when Bent comes into the bay—if he does come. For they'll not assault this little death-trap unless they see us escaping."

"It's possible," nodded Osman. "Nevertheless, I shall be surprised if we get through this night without a scare."

But the night passed away in quietness, except for perpetual "sniping" from the surrounding hills, which effectually prevented any of the leaders but Ross from getting a good sleep. Singleton got more and more nervous, and had the satisfaction, if indeed he found it such, of seeing that Sarle and Osman dis-

liked the "phit, phit" of the bullets almost as much as he did.

"Plunk, plunk, plunk, oh, confound you!" said Sarle savagely when he got his cap taken off after two other narrow escapes. "It's just a fair pity we haven't a few Ghoorkhas to send out on a stalking expedition this fine starry night. If I were behind that gentleman with a *kukri* I'd slice him like a cucumber."

About two o'clock in the morning, when the air was at its chilliest and the beleaguering force fairly quiet, they watered the horses and let the goats out to water too, and brought most of them back, as they had evidently been accustomed to camp about the old tower. But their bleating roused the snipers again, and one of the Kurds got badly chipped, right across the ear and cheek. He came swiftly to Sarle, and was bandaged with an old handkerchief and a turban. The hospital was established in the base of the tower, and an hour after dawn three more were in it. For the Persians shot in volleys at every man they saw run from tower to breastwork, and brought two down. The third was mortally hurt by a ricochet right inside the tower.

And still the sea was vacant,—not even a fishing-boat or dhow disturbed its glittering surface.

"Bent should have been here five days ago," said Sarle angrily; "and if he doesn't come in three more"—

"Yes"—

"We shall have to make terms."

"With Persians? I wouldn't if I were you," said Osman. "Oh, they're a cruel lot."

He told him a few encouraging stories, until he saw Singleton blanch.

"I couldn't stand torture," said Carew hastily.

"To tell the truth, I don't think they'd take so much trouble," said Osman; "for unless they have orders from Teheran to make us prisoners, we shall be bird's-meat in five minutes after we surrender. What, trust Persians, the liars of the world!"

At noon Ross saw smoke on the far horizon as he watched from the tower.

"Smoke!" he cried, and Sarle ran up. He crawled out on the roof, which was high enough not to be commanded from the position of the enemy.

"How long have you seen it?"

"Five minutes," said Ross, "and for five before I fancied I did."

"It doesn't grow fast," thought Sarle. He wetted his finger, and held it up to find out which way the light air was blowing.

"What there is is westerly," he said. But if there was so little on the tower, there might be more at sea; it could hardly help him to judge the course this vessel took.

"She may be coming towards us, or she's carrying her smoke with her," he said.

Down below, Singleton stood first on one foot and then on another, while Osman showed a certain amount of agitation of mind by lighting a cigarette and letting it go out. Among the men the news spread that the Frankish steamer was at last in sight, and the Kurd who had seen the Sultan and the Bosphorus quarrelled with those who had seen the Bahr Kazar, about the nature of steamboats and their size.

"It lives by eating black stones! I affirm it," said the beholder of the Commander of the Faithful.

“Nay,” cried the man who had walked by the waters of the Caspian, “I know better. Was I not at Baku, where Shaitan himself dwells, and did I not meet with a Muscovite who was upon a vapour boat, and did he not show me the very inside of the demon within it?”

“You say these things,” returned the beholder of Sultans, “but we are by no means compelled by the faith to credit you; and as for me, I have handled these same stones, and they are as black as the very stomach of darkness, and they catch on fire.”

The hearers murmured, and the son of the Caspian rejoiced.

“You insult our beards, Ali! What are these lies you compound in a deceitful heart? Listen to him, my friends; he speaks of stones blazing.”

“I affirm it, and with these eyes I have seen it!” cried Ali; “I swear it by the beard of the Prophet, and, as to telling lies, we who know, know it is the part of the liar to say others lie. But sooner than waste words upon you, what say you about the food the vapour boats consume?”

“They consume oil,” said the man of the Caspian; “and it is by far more credible that a smoke vessel should consume what burns than that which does not burn. Is it not so?”

It appealed to the others, who agreed with him, and the old man reproved Ali for endeavouring to obtain credit for knowledge he obviously did not possess.

“For though if Allah willed it he could doubtless make stones burn, why should he take the trouble to perform miracles for the sake of the infidel and his accursed inventions?” he demanded.

"It is not Allah but Shaitan who performs this miracle," returned Ali sullenly.

"Yes, that is a different matter," said the old man ; "but, nevertheless, we imagine you must have been deceived. So let us talk of something else, about which there can be no disputations. For should Osman Bey's vapour boat come it will be an easy matter to discover the truth, and he who was too sure might look like a fool. And, to speak for myself, I do not care whether it be stones or oil. When I get back into Kurdistan I shall doubtless have learnt many things."

But neither he nor his friends nor his leaders were destined to learn aught that day from steamboats, for the smoke which Ross had seen disappeared at last in the south-west quarter like a faint wreath of mist. And some of them learnt many things in Paradise, even before the sun went down.

It was Osman who saw the camels first. For that day his watch upon the tower lasted from morn till four o'clock. He turned from the sea at about three o'clock, and with Sarle's field-glasses swept the hills across which lay Hissar.

"By the Black Stone," said Osman, "let us hope they are baggage camels."

He watched them for half an hour ; and at the end of that time came to the conclusion that the baggage they bore was of a kind which would bring the besieged little comfort.

"Sarle !"

"Ay, Osman !"

"Bring your eyes up here."

And presently Sarle brought his big body alongside Osman, who lay stretched and flat, peering through a small loophole.

"Take the glasses, and tell me what you see towards Hissar."

And in a minute Sarle spoke.

"By the Lord! camel guns!"

"They were waiting for them, I suppose," said Osman; "and now, how long will it last?"

"Till to-morrow night, unless we cut our way out."

"We have too few horses for everyone now!"

For though they herded the horses closely in a sea hollow of their headland, they had little food for them, and some of them had been shot.

"It would be best to leave the treasure too."

Sarle struck his hand against a stone and made it bleed.

"What's happened to Bent?"

"He'll never come now."

"He must, he must, Osman!"

"It will be foolish to stay, Sarle."

"Give him till to-morrow."

"And will not to-morrow be too late?"

"What's the chance of escape in a rush?"

"A ten to one chance."

Sarle nodded.

"I prefer to take the chance that Bent is close to us and is coming. Osman, you don't know him. Something must have happened to his engines. He may be just out of sight working like a fiend. Oh, I can see him, see him! And old M'Phail too!"

"We'll hold a council of war. You stay up here now, and I'll go down," said Osman.

He called Singleton and Ross and Ali Bedredeen.

"What, guns?" said Ross; "that's very mean of

these Persians. What a sickener! they'll knock us out of this in thirty-six hours."

Osman asked what they thought of making a rush west and getting into Arabia.

"What do we know of it?" said Singleton. "What do you think of it yourself? *A priori* I prefer to stay here and chance Bent's turning up."

"And you, Ross?"

"Oh, settle it among yourselves," said Ross; "I don't mind which way it is. Personally, if I have a choice I'd rather let the Persians come and take us."

Ali gesticulated with his hands.

"Noble Bey, let it be as you will," he said. "If there is any chance of the vapour boat coming for us, it is well. But outside I fear there are many more than we are. It is in the hands of Allah."

"How will your men like the guns, Ali?"

"What horseman likes them, Osman Bey? But nevertheless they are men, and they are assured that the boat will come."

"So be it," said Osman, "and for light guns our defences are not so bad."

An hour before sundown the Persian artillery opened fire, and after two shots, which went screaming overhead into the sea, they got the range. As the tower was their obvious mark, Sarle removed the wounded into a kind of cellar, and had it boarded over. The boards and timber were covered with stones. When the night fell they strengthened all the breastworks, and themselves threw down much of the upper storey of the tower, which was obviously rotten and insecure. With the débris they strengthened the basement, where most of the water jars were kept. The treasure was there also.

In the hospital there were now three men with shell wounds, and Ross, who would not lie up, was injured by a stone which one of the shells had sent flying.

"A rib cracked," said Sarle; and he bandaged him too with a turban. "Take it easy, old man."

"I'd finish my article if we could have a light," said Ross.

But he kept his watch upon the tower just the same, while all night through the snipers never ceased. Osman and Ali Bedredeen took no sleep, but went their rounds perpetually, and twice before dawn they brought back a wounded man for Sarle. Then the dawn broke.

"Singleton," said Ross from his eyry.

"Hallo!"

"What about my being relieved?"

"I'm coming," said Carew, who had been helping Sarle and Osman to carry in a wounded man.

"Then I'll come down first," said Ross, standing over the manhole.

The snipers had apparently ceased, but just then a solitary shot was fired.

"Damn you," said Ross angrily. "Oh, my rib!"

He clambered down, and when he reached the ground he clutched at Sarle.

"What's wrong?" asked the doctor, who only saw him dimly; and Ross nearly threw him off his balance.

"Ah!" said Osman, "are you hit?"

Ross stared at him intently, and as he opened his mouth to speak blood welled up it.

"Um," said Ross, spitting; and he fell headlong into Sarle's arms.

“Right through the lungs,” said Sarle a minute later. “Poor old Ross is done for!”

Then the dawn opened like a lily, and the artillery fire began again. But Singleton, who liked Ross greatly, could hardly see across the burning land and glittering water for tears.

CHAPTER XXII

"THE FLAG OF PERSIA"

AFTER hunting for some time to find the hole by which the bullet had come that had hurt Ross, Osman discovered it.

"Hardly big enough for a man's forefinger," he said.

"But big enough for death!" cried Carew, as he moved a stone so as to block the aperture. "Poor old Ross!"

And within an hour Sarle called Osman and Carew down.

"He's going."

The dying man was blanched by loss of blood, but even yet a twinkle of humour was in him that was half bitter.

"Just as the fun was going to begin!" he said feebly. "Oh, hang it!" And by fainting then he prolonged his life for a moment or two. He signed to Sarle when he revived.

"Don't forget my papers—the *Times*," he murmured.

"I'll send them, when I can."

"Don't cut a word," said Ross, "and give my love to Jack Bent."

But he said no more, and in five minutes Sarle rose up and spoke his funeral oration.

“I met him years ago in China, and since then I never lost sight of him. For he was quite child-like, without fear, without any prejudices, with the strongest sense of loyalty to any employer. He had no vices of temper, no desire for money, and perfect health. And to the heathen in conventicles such as Ross would be anathema. Let the God of Battles and of things as they are judge him. I dare swear that he never did a mean thing in his life, and if he ever hurt anybody it was because they had to be hurt.”

And Sarle turned away with the tears rolling down his face.

“Now,” he said a moment later, “I know Bent will come. Oh, he’ll come now! As sure as death where death is busy.”

And death was busy with them that hot day. Though they found time to bury Ross, his dead body was replaced ere he had been out of sight five minutes, and though the men lay close during that hot and awful day, some bullets found their mark, and more than one Persian shell burst where it could do harm.

“How long will they keep this up?” asked Sarle of Osman and of destiny.

“They will rush us to-night, I daresay,” replied Osman; “and to tell the truth the men are getting shaky; they can’t stand shell fire with so little hope at their backs.”

“Bent will come,” said Sarle stubbornly. “It is written.”

He was more superstitious than Osman.

"But too late," said the Albanian.

"This firing may bring a stray English cruiser along."

"Allah send her quick then," said Osman.

"No," said Sarle, with fierce eyes. "I don't want her. God send us the *Flag of Persia*. I feel like a dog being whipped on its chain."

"Oh, keep your head, Sarle. We need it. Singleton's nerves are gone. And if yours go!"

"Oh, mine?" said Sarle, "mine, they're all right. Did you think they were off? Do your men want cheering up?"

And clapping his Persian cap on he walked out of the tower and round the breastwork into the open, leaving Osman shrugging his shoulders.

The sun was a ball of fire overhead then, and the ground was hot. The dust upon the headland skipped with odd bullets even before the big Englishman showed himself, but when he came out ten shots were fired for one.

"Behold it is the Hakim," said the Kurds; and he came across to them where they sheltered under the rocks and the breastwork. "Is he mad?"

But nothing touched him, and calling to them cheerfully he sat down by Ali Bedredeen.

"How do the men stand it?" he asked in Persian.

The Khan shook his head.

"This is not the kind of work they are used to, Excellency; but, nevertheless, so long as they say it is the will of Allah, I think they are steady. But they begin to say that the steamboat is overlong in coming."

"Do you think it long, Khan?"

Ali looked at him steadily.

“Blessed be the Prophet, I do not think much of the things that belong not to my province. But assuredly, if the boat came I should be glad.”

“She’ll come,” said Sarle. “But I want you to know that when she comes these hill dogs will rush us, seeing that we escape.”

“Then there will be a fight after all?”

“It is a sure thing, my friend.”

“I will tell the men,” said Ali; “for many of them are sick thinking that we may be starved out.”

As he spoke in their dialect a hoarse murmur ran along the breastwork.

“Allah is merciful!” they cried; “the vapour boat will come, for does not the noble Khan, who is a prince of Frangistan and a prince of Hakims, say it? And we shall cut the throats of more Shiah dogs yet.”

But outside upon the hills the girdle of fire and steel grew stronger as the fierce hours went on, and the governor of Hissar and the leaders of the irregulars whom he had summoned laughed to know the enemy of the Shah was trapped.

“He who shakes the tree may be struck by unripe fruit,” said the governor, “but for him who waits ripe apples fall. Allah has delivered them into our hand that they may be taken alive and stand before the king.”

And still upon the blue gulf were faint trails of smoke that rose and died away, while Singleton lying on the floor looked out through loopholes hour after hour, and saw with strained eyes many things that never sailed the sea.

Yet as the sun went down again he saw heavier

smoke upon the southern horizon. He told Sarle of it.

"It's Bent at last," said Sarle eagerly.

"Oh, is it?"

"Let's think so," said Osman lightly. "I begin to think we need it; the water's nearly done."

"We can refill at the well this night."

But Osman knew they could not. One of Ali's men had been down in the village soon after the last midnight, and found that a daring party of Persians, or probably the driven villagers themselves, had filled the well up with rocks.

"Then we need Bent all the more," said Sarle. "Can we last another day?"

They sat in silence while the darkness deepened and the hope that was theirs departed.

"Do you really hope for Bent?" asked Osman.

Sarle twisted his lips and looked with rather haggard eyes into the night.

"I hope," he said, "but my mind's a bit fagged; and I must go to my hospital."

It was only in that half-underground hollow that he dared keep a light to cheer the seven wounded men he had now under his care. He went down, and was greeted with the wan eyes of two dying men. He gave them water and dressed their wounds.

"And in a little while our lips are dumb," he quoted to himself. "I feel as if I had killed these poor devils."

When his immediate work was over he sat on a rock within reach of the Kurd who was nearest death, and from time to time wetted the man's parched lips.

"Thanks be that these men mostly die easy," he

thought. “To have one of them screaming when I have so little opium would wreck me.”

He fell half asleep, and woke to find the Kurd speaking to him.

Sarle called for Osman, for he did not understand their barbarous Turkish.

“He can’t live out the night,” Sarle told Osman. “There’s the water; I’ll go up for a bit.”

“He wants to die in the open air,” said Osman. “Can we carry him up without hurting him?”

“Ay, in the rug.”

And they brought the Kurd out under the stars which gleamed in a calm and wonderful heaven.

“Allah be praised that I see the skies again, Osman Bey,” whispered the dying man. “And if it be written in the books of destiny that you return again to Kassik, you will see that my wife and son get my money?”

“If Ali Bedredeen or I return it is theirs assuredly,” said Osman.

“In my time I have killed many infidels,” said the Kurd feebly; “Armenians and a few Muscovites, and once even a Parsee.”

“It is well, my brother,” said Osman.

“And at Teheran I slew three Persian Shiahs, and at the house of the Mozuffers three more.”

“Even I beheld this,” said Osman; “and I said when I beheld it, ‘This is a man!’”

“Did you indeed say so?”

“By the Koran I swear it!” said Osman. “May I die the death of a dog and be burnt if I did not say so!”

“Then I die in peace,” murmured the Kurd. “But, Excellency, I hear a noise!”

"What noise?"

"It is a strange noise, and like the beating of the wings of a great bird."

Osman told Sarle what the man said.

"His heart is failing," said the doctor; "and the sound is in his ears."

"Nay, but I hear it," whispered the Kurd. "Think you it is the sound of the wings of Azrael?"

"A son of the Faith fears not Azrael. His is the key of Paradise."

"Allah Akbar," said the Kurd, "and have I not been as a sword in the hands of Allah? Nevertheless I hear the sound."

And Sarle rose up and walked to the edge of the headland that overlooked the sea.

"Is it the blood in *my* ears?" asked Sarle in a strange shake. "Or"—

Then Singleton came running and caught Sarle by the arm.

"I heard"—

"What?" asked the doctor quickly.

"A strange dull beating!"

"And can you see anything?"

"A shadow in the water!"

"Ah," said Sarle. "Quick, go to the tower and light one of Ross's red lights upon the top."

And Singleton ran, while Sarle stared with strained eyes upon the sea that showed him nothing.

"In shelter, Osman," said Carew as he passed him. And next moment there was a sputter upon the highest stone of the ruined tower. It spat and grew and flashed red, and grew again and opened till the headland was ruddy and the tower a tower of blood. And the men spoke to those

who slept, and on their faces glowed the intense colour.

“Allah, what means it?”

It lighted even the murmuring edge of the sea, and the lip of foam showed like the red lips of a vast and monstrous polyp. It shone upon the dead village and flamed like a distant volcanic glare upon the waking Persian hills where savage foemen wondered as the infidels performed hideous rites of incantation to their devil. They shouted and fired upon the red light, and as their fire increased and spread from one hilltop to another, they heard the worshipped sea-devil of these infidels answer out of the great black deep.

It answered—

“*Hoot, hoot, hoot*”—and then wailed like a jackal scenting a corpse, and screamed with curious and awful exultation.

“It’s Bent, it’s Bent!” said Sarle.

And as the fire upon the tower died, the camp was wakened, and even those who were to be saved by the Frank’s vapour boat felt as if it must indeed be a creature of unhallowed origin.

The *Flag of Persia*, if it indeed were she, carried neither side-lights nor a head-light, but crawled upon the water like a shadow, just turning her engines ahead. Sarle now saw her black bulk plainly, and again she spoke in triumph.

“*Hoo, hoo, I’ve found a dead Hindoo*,” said the jackal whistle.

Then they showed three vertical white lights, the *Flag’s* sign-manual arranged for long ago; and Sarle ran back to the tower. In a moment’s lull of the firing he heard a sound that rejoiced

him—the rattle of her cable running out as she anchored.

“Singleton, get down the path to the water’s edge. I’ll stay here.”

And Carew ran with three men who had more or less attached themselves to him. Coming to the verge of the sea, there quite sheltered from any bullets, he lighted a lamp, which was visible seaward, and waited.

Sarle spoke with Osman in a still fury of excitement.

“Do the men understand that it all depends on the Persians not making a rush, or on their being stopped if they do?”

“They understand. There is no mistake?”

Sarle laughed a rather high-pitched laugh and clapped Osman on the shoulder.

“If luck’s ours I’ll play you a game of chess tomorrow under the *Flag’s* awning.”

They brought Sarle two damaged Kurds to patch up just then.

“Hang being doctor,” said he. But this time there was more splash than mischief, for one smashed bullet had made two scalp wounds, leaving two thick skulls unharmed. He scissored a little hair, diachyloned the cuts, sponged their heads and faces, and asked them what the devil was the matter that they came worrying him.

“Oh, Excellency, it is nothing,” they said, and, grinning, went back to the breastwork. “Verily he works miracles. Did I not believe I was killed? And am I killed? By the Prophet I have not even a headache!”

Sarle went into his hospital and found one man

dead and the others sitting up in excitement. His joyful air calmed them.

“ It is the boat, then, Excellency ? ” asked one in Persian.

“ It is, my son.”

“ And are we to go upon the boat ? ”

“ Assuredly, if you will stay alive, Yussuf.”

He went up again to the man who had first heard the engines of the *Flag*, but he was dead and would hear no more.

“ The poor chap’s out of it,” said Sarle. “ What’s that ? ”

He heard laughter ; there was a rush of feet across the level from the seacliff. The next moment Singleton had him by the very neck.

“ It’s Bent ! ”

Bent himself came round the corner of the *sangar*.

“ Well,” he drawled, “ and how do you find yourself ? ”

His coolness brought calm.

“ Why were you so long ? ”

“ You can kill M’Phail if you like when you get on board,” said Bent, sitting on a stone and taking out a tobacco-pouch and a pipe. “ The slab-sided old son of a gun had something go wrong with the works.”

He filled his pipe.

“ No ; don’t strike a match here,” said Singleton.

“ Are the outside beggars very troublesome ? ” asked Bent, when he came from inside with his pipe lighted.

The Persians answered for themselves.

“ Noisy beggars,” said Bent. “ Well (puff), it’s

midnight now (puff), so shall we be getting you on board?"

"How far are you lying off shore?"

"About half a mile."

"Have you the quick-firer mounted?" asked Sarle. Bent nodded.

"You may need it. And now we'll begin with the wounded."

"What about the treasure?"

"The wounded first," said Sarle. And one by one they carried those who could not walk. They were five.

"And I could take some of the stuff too," said Bent. "If you are all killed when I come back I shall have only five wounded Kurds to show for it, and Mason will be mad."

They dumped a considerable amount of valuable matter into the boat, and Bent grunted with pleasure.

"That's the sort," he said. "That's encouraging. It makes me feel good."

"Bring three boats!" cried Sarle as they shoved off.

"They'll be over the side by now," said Bent. "Now, then, put your backs into it."

Even as he shoved into the darkness there was a roar of firing from the breastwork. Sarle and Singleton ran back to the inlying picket at the tower.

"The Persians have waked up," said Sarle. "We're not out of it yet."

The whistle of the steamer made the enemy fear their prey would escape, and now instead of remaining on the hills they pressed down in the darkness. Behind every rock within fifty yards lay a Persian;

they came in a swarm, crawling like ants at night. In the intervals of volleys the besieged heard words of command. Sarle heard Osman too; over all the space about the tower his words rang like a trumpet.

“They’re closing in,” said Singleton. “Isn’t it rot staying here, doing nothing?”

Sarle pressed him down upon a rock.

“Keep cool; we may be wanted anywhere. That’s what we’re out of it for, my son.”

“Of course, of course,” said Singleton; but he could not sit. He danced like a bear on a hot plate. And then the camel guns began again when the Persians were gathered in the hollows below them.

“They shout wildly,” said Sarle. “How long till the boats return?”

A moment later a new white man ran in to them.

“Mason!”

They gripped hands.

“There are three boats below with Bent and his brother and the second mate. Have you any more wounded, and any more stuff?”

“Can you spare any men, Mason?”

“If they’ll come.”

“Bring five or so.”

And Sarle detached a working party of ten to aid Mason’s five, two of whom were white men, one a nigger, and two Malays.

“It’s all in,” said Mason at last.

“I must see Osman now!” cried Sarle. And as the Persians’ fire did not then command the little plateau but only its edges, he walked across to the breastwork where Osman was.

“If we leave this for an instant it will be rushed,”

said Osman, "and there will be a hand-to-hand business with ten to one against us."

"We can hold the tower and the works there. If it were but just the edge of dawn the steamer could help us."

A deafening volley half stunned him.

"How long to dawn?" echoed Osman. "An hour?"

"And more."

"Get your men back there to build the breastwork wider at the tower," said Osman. "It will give them something to do. And is the gun-cotton ready? Did Bent bring it?"

"You bet," said Sarle. He worked with his men at the new wings of the northern *sangar*.

"There must be still sixty to put on board," he thought. "Ah, how many of us will get there?"

Now the time of waiting for Bent seemed long ago; dear old Ross's death was ancient history; the raid was something done in old immortal times when the brave world was young. Each hour held the concentrated life of man: a minute had its complex chronicles. As they had waited for the steamer through strange incalculable æons of time, so now they waited for her to speak and help them. And even then the voice of the quick-firer was heard, as she split the air over the sea.

Her third shell played havoc with the guns upon the hill, and from that moment they spoke no more. The gunners ran, but five of them crawled.

"Good Bent," said Sarle. And hearing Osman call he answered—

"Ay!"

And out of his twenty men he sent ten to the boats.

Some of them refused to leave their comrades. The doctor drove them before him like a whirlwind. Singleton took them down the path to the sea.

“Back again, quick!” said Bent to his brother, who rowed them to the steamer. “Hurry up, you swine, or I’ll murder you when I get on board.”

A cold line of grey night grew olive in the east, and Osman saw it. He ordered a volley that made every Persian in front take cover and cower behind it. They too saw the light growing, and darkness no longer covered them. For all the words of their leaders they began to think a little distance between them and the besieged would be more healthy. And this view of matters was encouraged by half a dozen of Osman’s best marksmen in the tower.

“Get ready,” said Osman; and then at another word most of his men ran back to the tower breastwork. Those who were left pulled down as much of their cover as they could, and working on their knees got it at last too low to protect any of the enemy from those in the tower if they made a rush for it.

“Good,” said Osman, who stood behind a rock. And the next moment he and the remainder of his party were at the tower. The Persians on the hills raised a shout again, and again their skirmishers advanced. But still the *Flag of Persia* planted her shells where she would, and if a group gathered in the sky-line she dissipated them as the sun dissipates a wreath of mist. Now they concentrated their fire upon the tower, and soon two men were brought down wounded and taken to the boats.

“It’s time now,” said Osman; “we shall drive them no farther.”

Even then the Persians, grown desperate to see the

enemy escape, were gathering under the very shelter of the plateau's edge. They came down a zigzag hollow which served as a series of trenches.

"Back then to the boats," said Sarle. And one by one his men ran towards the sea, and lying on their breasts lined the edge of the plateau.

"They are coming," said Osman. "Light it, Sarle."

Sarle stooped and lighted a fuse.

"Go, Singleton!"

Carew ran.

"And you, Ali?"

"Yes, Ali," said Osman.

"After you, Osman," said Sarle.

"No," said Osman.

"I'm last," said Sarle; and seeing Osman's set face, he took him suddenly by the shoulders.

"Don't be an ass, you—Albanian."

He gave him a strong shove, and, after biting his lips, Osman laughed and ran.

Sarle bent over and saw his fuse fizzing merrily.

"Look out, those who do not yearn for Paradise," he said.

And then he too ran across the open as the Persians made a rush and lined the old breastwork on its far side.

The *Flag of Persia* could not fire now to do good without doing harm, for Osman's men as they lined the seacliff were in the line of fire for the far breastwork.

"In the boats all but fifteen!" said Sarle.

And with his fifteen, and Osman and Singleton and Ali Bedredeen, he kept up a smart fire on the enemy.

“How much longer?” asked Osman anxiously.

Sarle looked at his watch.

“Three minutes.”

And now some of the bolder Persians who had climbed up from the village got into the very tower.

“Can they destroy the fuse?”

“They’ll never see it,” said Sarle.

The men in the boats now lay off twenty or thirty yards from the shore. They sat with their rifles ready to stop any rush while the last detachment entered Bent’s own boat.

“Send them now,” said Sarle.

He and Osman alone remained.

“You go first,” said Osman.

So Sarle shrugged his shoulders and dropped down the goat-path. As he got to the bottom he was sent flying into the water, and the men in the boats yelled. Osman had fallen upon him.

“Is he killed?” asked Bent.

Sarle reached out his paw and hauled Osman from the rock upon which he lay into the water. The Albanian sputtered.

“Not a bit of it,” said Sarle; and when they were hauled into the overloaded boat Osman sat up and stared about him. But blood from a scalp wound ran into his eyes.

“Pull, pull, curse you!” said Sarle; and then the *Flag of Persia* opened fire again. The shells swept twenty feet over their heads, and the Kurds ducked. Sarle kept his eyes upon his watch.

“Now, now, now!” he said. And there was a sharp and terrible roar from the tower, which leapt into the air in a very volcanic outburst. Then the quick-firer ceased its hammering upon the anvil of

war, and not even the Persians on the hills sent a parting bullet after them.

The *Flag of Persia* was under way when they got up alongside of her, out of the reach of any bullet. In ten minutes more the boats were hoisted in, and with a parting salute she steamed out to sea.

CHAPTER XXIII

TOWARDS ORMUZ

BENT, who was on the bridge, suddenly called out to Sarle—

“Godfrey Daniel! where’s Ross? Didn’t he come with you?”

Sarle climbed up alongside him and pointed to the land they were leaving on their port quarter.

“He’s there.”

“What?” said Bent, “what?”

“He’s dead.”

Bent turned away and walked the length of the bridge.

“Killed?”

Sarle nodded, and Bent spoke no more for ten long minutes.

“Oh, I’m sorry for that,” he said at last. “I could have spared some of you better. Tell me about it.”

“Ah,” said the skipper when the story was told, “so he went through it, and our not being in time did for him. By crimony, I feel as if I could go down and shoot old M’Phail. Oh, get off the bridge, Sarle, and let me be! I liked Ross well! I liked him well!”

And Bent spoke to no one for hours, but kept his

place on the bridge as the *Flag of Persia* ran south-east for the strait of Ormuz.

"Bent's awfully cut up about Ross," said Sarle to Singleton, who was lying under the awning on a pile of rugs.

"So am I!" cried Carew, "and I'm all of a shake now."

"It was a bit trying," said Sarle as he walked away with his head down. "A bit trying."

He went to the engine-room and saw M'Phail crawling up from below. The old boy wiped his hands with a bit of waste and clutched hold of Sarle.

"So it's you, my bonny man, is it?"

"It's I, you breakdown blackguard! How did you manage it?"

"A crack in the shaft," said M'Phail dolorously. "Come into my berth. Can you do with a whisky?"

"I could do with a bottle and get very drunk," said Sarle, "for your not coming up to time killed a friend of mine and of Bent's. The skipper feels as if he could slaughter you."

"By Jerusalem," growled M'Phail, "and could he feel like me that time? Oh, to sit over a cracked shaft and have to brace its weakness without just the right thing to fix it, Sarle, and then to stand by it and never dare shove her for what she's worth, and to know you would be waiting, and to dodder along at eight knots when we should be doing fourteen!"

"And can't you run her now at her best?"

M'Phail screwed his pale and dirty face into odd shapes.

"I can try, man; but who's to say she'll hold? Maybe she will and maybe she won't, and if she does she will, and if she don't she won't, and that's all

that's in it. So go day and come day and God send Sunday, and if you're the praying sort, which I much misdoubt, you can get on your knees and beg the Almighty not to try a broken reed. Where's your Turk?"

"He's asleep," said Sarle.

"What d'ye call him?"

"Bertrand or Osman, whatever you like, M'Phail."

"Now, is the man what he looks? He's got a wicked, keen eye. I'd rather drink with him than fight with him any day. And so you got the stuff? And did you see the Shah?"

"Shucks, no!" said Sarle crossly. "I think I shall turn in."

But before he did so he told Mason the bare outlines of their story.

"I ought to have been with you," said Mason; "for I've been no use here—none to speak of. I've been eating my heart out, and when the shaft cracked I thought we'd have all gone crazy. And if we'd been in time your friend would have come through."

"Kismet!" cried Sarle; "and who knows that we shall get through yet? Are there any cruisers about?"

"The *Diadem* was due at Muscat, so I heard at Aden," said Mason, "and I was told the whole bally squadron was coming up from Bombay. Will they know about it now?"

Sarle nodded.

"Of course, unless the Persians minimise matters for any reason of their own. And you know that I told you that it would be England's lay to make a demonstration in the Gulf when they heard of it. For who did it?"

"The bold, bad Russians," said Mason.

“And if we are seen will they overhaul us, do you think?”

“What do we look like?”

“A stinking old tramp,” said Sarle; “why, you’ve made her look a worse old howler than she did before.”

Mason smiled.

“I think she’s most artistic. We scraped off any decent bit of paint she had on her, and now she’s rust and tar and dirt, and looks as if she’d been on a begging trip. If any cruiser just catches us where there’s no get out, we’ll go off to her and borrow a drum or two of oil, or ask for a bag of bread.”

“Great Scot! she makes my eyes sore,” said Sarle. “Why don’t you get more pace on her?”

Mason shook his head.

“Not with the shaft the way it is, until we have to. And besides, after all, to go along at more than seven and a half or so would look suspicious.”

“That’s so,” said Sarle. “Well, call me if you want me, for I’m going to take my doss. I feel as if I hadn’t slept for three months. And don’t forget if any vessel comes in sight to get that Kurdish crowd off the decks.”

And in the meantime the Kurds were full of awe and wonder, and squatted in every bit of shade there was to discuss matters.

“Now, Yussuf,” said the old man, “touching that argument about burning stones.”

“I said that in a vapour boat stones were burnt,” repeated Yussuf.

“He said those words!” cried Abdullah; “whereas I who have seen the Bahr Kazar know that the thing inside drinks burning oil.”

“Are we not upon a vapour boat?” asked the old man.

“We are,” said the gathering crowd.

“And if we are on a vapour boat, there are many infidels down below who must of necessity understand the nature of the beast?”

“My father speaks words of wisdom,” said Yussuf, “and he goes to the root of the matter. Why should we waste words upon an argument which is wind, when there are those who can tell us?”

“Nevertheless,” said the old man, “be assured, Yussuf, that if upon inquiry we find your words touching the stones are true, we are not likewise compelled to believe that you have seen the Commander of the Faithful.”

“I saw him with these eyes,” said Yussuf; “upon the landing-steps I saw him. And he was a little man.”

“With what dirt do you defile our beards?” asked the old man. “The Khalif, on the contrary, is a big man. To be Khalif he must be a destroyer of infidels, and how can a very little man fight?”

“I said not a very little man,” replied Yussuf; “and when I said little I meant no shorter a man than Osman Bey. And who says that Osman Bey is not a very madman in the battle? Have I not seen him eat the Persians like so many radishes?”

“Then why say the thing that is not, and defile the Commander of the Faithful by endeavouring to make true believers consider him a dwarf? But here comes Ali Bedredeen Khan and likewise Osman Bey.”

“Will you ask them to decide this matter?” inquired Yussuf.

“What, am I a *cadi* ?” said Osman, smiling. “My children, Yussuf is right.”

“Hear what the noble and excellent Osman Bey says !” cried Yussuf in triumph.

“And Abdullah is also right.”

Yussuf’s jaw fell.

“For upon the Bahr Kazar the vapour boat drinks hot oil in flames.”

“*Wallah, Billah !*” said the crowd ; “this is wonderful.”

“If you ask one of the blackened infidels from below,” said Osman, “he will show you some of the stones ; and as for the oil, it is the same oil we burn in lamps. Speak ye to the big negro. He is a son of the Faith and knows some Osmanli.”

“We will inquire of him, Excellency,” said the old man, “and deign to receive our thanks for this information, which is very wonderful. These Franks are a strange folk. And why it has been permitted to them to acquire such arts passes our understanding. And if it is permitted to us to inquire further, we desire to know how this vessel finds out her way upon the sea ?”

Osman pointed to Bent upon the bridge.

“The Captain Effendi knows the sea as you know the hills of Kurdistan and the country about Lake Van,” he said, “and presently he will talk to the sun with strange instruments. Wait and you will see.”

And when Bent and his brother took an observation at noon the entire crowd of Kurds who could stand came out to watch him.

“He cannot be a Nazarene,” they declared. “He is a sun-worshipper.”

They entertained the wounded in the deck-house

with strange and garbled accounts of all they saw, and when Sarle came into the deck-house hospital at two o'clock he had to turn an arguing crowd out on deck.

And through the rest of the burning day the *Flag of Persia* crawled down the coast and got into the track of trading vessels from Bushire.

"So far, so good," said Mason; "no cruisers can come along now and ask awkward questions as to what we are doing so far from any usual port."

The night fell at last, and in the darkness old M'Phail gave his cylinders a little more steam, and the "Kerosine Can," as Sarle had named her, slipped through the oily sea at nine knots. When hospital work was done and the men fed, the gang of leaders gathered in the cabin and had as good a meal as the Chinese cook could fix up.

"How do you find yourself, Carew?" asked Sarle more cheerfully; "and are you not glad to see this rotten old saloon and its twinkling, stinking oil lights?"

"But I'll have a nightmare to-night," replied Carew. "I'm feeling very much shaken up, and every now and again I think I'm dreaming."

"And no wonder, Mr. Singleton," put in Bent from the head of the table; "on my soul, sometimes we never expected to see you; did we, Mason?"

"That's so," said Mason; "and old M'Phail all the voyage has been talking logic and deduction about the necessity of a disaster to you. And it came to us first."

"And us second," said Sarle. "Gentlemen, we'll drink in silence, if you will, to the memory of our dear friend Ross. Some of you didn't know him well, but

you'll take the word of those who did, that he was a real good man, of a kind that's none too common."

They stood up and drank to the dead man in silence, and no one spoke for five minutes afterwards. Osman and Ali and young Ak Karassy drank water only. For they were all, even including the partially westernised Osman, true sons of the Faith, and would not drink forbidden liquor before one another.

"And now tell us all about it connectedly," said Mason.

"Ask M'Phail to come in then," said Sarle; and old Mac was presently drawn away from his engines and the cracked shaft over which he watched like a mother watching a sick child.

He sat at the forward end of the cabin table with a big glass of whisky, and between sips wiped his face with waste. But presently he and the others almost forgot their drinks as Sarle gave them a bare outline of what had been done.

"And to think there wasn't a Scotchman in it," growled old M'Phail.

"Why, who was Ross?" asked Bent.

"Ay, man, maybe he was Scotch by descent, but he was born in London, and had no accent but a London one, and a Scotchman with a Cockney twang is a dreadful sight," growled M'Phail in very good Cockney of his own.

"It's a pity they didn't talk the broad Doric like you, M'Phail," said the doctor, with a wink at the others.

M'Phail looked at him uneasily.

"I'm no' that broad, doctor, and living in London and with Cockneys has spoilt the fine Glasgie

speech I had. I own it, and now I never talk as I should unless I'm more than a wee bit soppo. But that boy of mine's a fair rotter of a Cockney. Only yesterday I heard him say 'blimy,' and I fetched him one on the ear for it. And I'll do it again. But all the same 'tis a fine grand yarn you've been telling, and you're a fair murderous lot, and by and by some o' ye will get your necks stretched. And now here's to ye, and I'll go down to my shaft."

"And what happened to you?" asked Sarle of Bent when the old giant was gone.

"Just nothing," said Bent; "bar the cracking of the shaft we might have been carrying coals between London and Newcastle. And if we get through the Strait all right we shall go back in the same doddering fashion. I've not even had a row with the crowd."

He looked a little chapfallen.

"Poor chap!" said Osman.

"It's all very well to chaff," grunted Bent with heavy brows, "but to have nothing to do but to think of you chaps made it a sweet and anxious time. And I wouldn't go through the days again while M'Phail was fixing her up, not for a hundred times the money. And I'm thinking of Ross."

"He died as he would have wished," said Sarle. "He was never easy while he was alive, and if he had come out with us he would have been planning some other devilry. I wonder he ever lived so long. Heaven rest him! Let's talk of something else. Great Scot, but if it isn't a pleasant sound to hear those engines going I don't know what is! And when you blew your whistle, Bent, why, that was just Paradise!"

It was past twelve o'clock when all turned in but Bent, who wouldn't leave the bridge.

"Sleep! I don't want sleep," said the little skipper. "I wouldn't give the skin of a banana for a sailorman who can't stay awake a week."

So he leant on the bridge rail by his brother and stared into the night. Mason joined him for a few minutes.

"Give me a call, Billy, if you see anything."

The mate nodded.

"Oh, go to sleep, Mr. Anxious," said the captain. "We're all right."

"If a cruiser"—

"Cruisers be hanged!" cried Bent; "look at us, look at us!"

"Well, that's so," said Mason. "Of all the holy shows"—

"She's the holiest."

And Sarle as he got into pyjamas after a bath was wondering where Edith was and what she was doing, and whether she was going home, and if so what would happen. He turned in and thought more still. Suppose she was home when he got there! And what then? He ended by saying he didn't know, and fell asleep and dreamed he and she and the Shah were having supper at the Savoy. And then darkness followed which was dreamless. His deep sleep lasted till dawn, and he woke suddenly to find the *Flag of Persia's* heart-beats stopped. With a jump he landed on the floor.

"What! the shaft again?"

But when he ran on deck he found the poor old packet was curtseying to a very lord of the sea.

"Protector of the Poor," said the *Flag*, "I am the

dust beneath your exalted lordship's feet. Your honourable notice lifts me up to the skies; your anger bows my head into the very dust. I am a very, very poor thing of a steamer, your lordship's high excellency."

"Do you laugh at our beard, son of a burnt father," replied the cruiser, "that you smother us with words? Speak when you are addressed, wandering jackal that you are. But, nevertheless, I will interrogate you concerning certain matters."

And H.M.S. *Diadem* put a boat over the side.

"Keep the Kurds below," said Bent coolly; and his brother Billy took care none could come up from their quarters in the 'tween decks. "Sarle, is the hospital door locked?"

"Ay," said Sarle.

"Then keep out of the way, and call Mason."

When Mason appeared on deck it was in a foul rig which suited an officer of such a low-down tramp as the *Flag of Persia* looked. And neither he nor Bent had shaved since entering the Gulf.

"The second mate?" asked Mason.

"He won't be wanted. He got a skinful last night," said Bent. "You are mate and Billy second."

The watch on deck put a ladder over the side, and did it as clumsily as might be, and the bowman of the cruiser's boat hooked on to the *Flag*.

"Well, what's wrong?" grunted Bent to the young officer who came on board.

"Where are you from?" asked Mr. Cock-a-hoop disdainfully.

"Bushire; and I say, could you spare us a drum of oil?" said Bent.

"My good man," replied the disdainful one, "do you take us for a marine store? Have you seen any fast-looking steamer coming south?"

"None but ourselves," said Bent, "and we're none too fast, but for the coal we burn we do very well. We can knock seven and a half out of her for eight tons a day."

"Indeed," said the naval officer, "and she's as sweet as any pigsty."

"You wasn't asked to come aboard of 'er, any'ow," said Mason.

"You dry up," cried Bent, giving him a shove; "d'ye think you're captain here? Could you do with a drink so early, mister?"

The naval man looked him up and down.

"No, thanks."

"And about that oil now? I'll pay for it straight. The swine of a Persian at Bushire gave us the worst you ever see."

"And good enough too," said the young lieutenant. "Good-day."

"And go to blazes!" said Bent when the stranger was in the boat. "I'll write to the Admiralty about you, young man, and I'll have damages for being stopped on the high seas, that's what I'll have. And I said 'Go to blue blazes,' did you hear?"

The smooth youngster answered with a sudden torrent of blasphemy, which was quite surprising to everyone within ear-shot but Mason.

"Oh, we can always swear," said the ex-naval lieutenant; "but, Lord, what a pig-boat he must have thought us. Look, here's the rest of the squadron!"

And out of the south came six ships of war in

single line ahead, every one of them carrying a bone in its teeth.

"See them chuck the seas abroad," said Mason longingly. "Oh that I had to quit the service! Shove her in close, Bent. Let's have a look at them. Little they think we brought them here."

"Godfrey Daniel, but they're fine!" cried Bent as he rang the telegraph ahead. "We're beneath contempt, ain't we?"

And the *Flag of Persia* moved south as the cruiser that had stopped them went north with her full engine power.

In half an hour the squadron came past them, and Bent dipped his ensign.

"Oh, we can be polite," he laughed. "But they're beauties. Oh, you bet they're beauties! So long, my sons."

And going down on deck he roared with laughter till he was tired. Sarle came out in his pyjamas, and together they rolled on the main hatch.

"What a beast I was to the young chap," sputtered Bent; "and as for our gentlemanly Mason, he spilt his h's like M'Phail's son, and looked the hardest case that ever sailed the seas."

"I heard," said Sarle; "it was a good bluff. And now I guess we're safe. When we get to Medina we'll drop all the Kurds who want to be Hajjis now they have the opportunity, and the rest of them as we go along."

He breathed freely for the first time since he had left Kassik with Teheran in front of him.

"By the three thousand minor prophets, by the seven great prophets, by the Great Prophet himself (upon whom be blessings evermore), and by the

twelve Imâms," said Osman, "our destiny has been laid in pleasant places, and we can defer going to Paradise or to prison till a more convenient season."

And it being the hour of the true believers' third prayer, they let the Kurds come on deck.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE RETURN OF THE DOCTOR

FRAZER of the Foreign Office having finished his lunch, rang the bell and admitted a journalist by whom semi-official articles in the *Thunderer* were not infrequently written.

"Touching this matter of Teheran," said Frazer, "we think that the behaviour of the Russians has been scandalous."

"Yes, the behaviour of the—Russians," repeated the journalist thoughtfully.

"The behaviour of the Russians," said Frazer, joining his finger-tips, "has destroyed international confidence; it has led to the opening of questions which might well have been delayed for years."

"You have no further news of the raiders?" asked the journalist.

"They appear to have got back into Kurdistan and into Russian territory. There is some talk of a body of them having gone south, but that is impossible. What should they be doing south?"

"That is so," said the painstaking writer of articles "and I see our fleet in those waters has gone into the Gulf."

"We make a demonstration," cried Frazer, "and

not before it is wanted. By the way, if you should happen to be writing any of your notices on this business, it occurred to me that some satirical reflections on the European notion that only the English are given to political intrigue, and conduct of this outrageous description, might not be amiss."

"A righteous attitude?" asked the journalist, with uplifted pencil.

"By no means," said Frazer, "rather a brutal acknowledgment of fact. I put some phrases down for you if you cared to use them."

"Shall be very glad of 'em," said the newswriter. "And is it true that our ambassador at Teheran is coming home?"

"Yes," said Frazer, with something not unremotely resembling a wink. "We are very much displeased that he did not learn that this Russian raid was in progress, and to show our sense of it we shall—shall"—

"Promote him," suggested the journalist.

Frazer nodded.

"You may paragraph it that Sir Everett Home is returning with evidence which will carry conviction to Europe that Russia is at the bottom of this. Say, 'It is suggested that'—and so on."

"And so on," nodded the journalist. "Is there anything else?"

"Not to-day, I imagine," said Frazer; "but I am always glad to see you when you have time to look in."

When the newspaper man was gone he took up a telegram and read it.

"All well, Sarle."

It was dated from Aden.

"He will leave the boat at Brindisi or Naples," said Frazer, "and should be here in—how long?"

He made some calculations on his blotting-pad.

"He's at Naples now. In three days then."

And that night Sir Everett Home, with his wife and Edith Cazenove, arrived in London. Lady Home liked Edith from the very beginning, and liked her better now since she might become a social sensation.

"You will come and stay with us for a little while, my dear," she said to her eagerly.

"Oh, how kind you are to me!" cried Edith.

And then Lady Home's conscience pricked her, for though she did like this astonishing young woman, her husband looked on her with terrible suspicion.

"We must keep our eye on her till this matter is settled," said Sir Everett; "for if the newspapers get hold of her the fact of an Englishman having been in the raid will do the greatest harm. So ask her to stay with us till we see how things go."

Though Edith was pretty well aware of the peppery ambassador's feelings about her since she had refused to make a clean breast of all she knew, the idea of staying with them in Grosvenor Square was not more unpleasant to her than it would have been to any other woman till then without experience of Society.

"I really have no house of my own, so, dear Lady Home, I shall be delighted to stay as long as you like me."

"Ha!" said the ambassador's wife, "I fear that won't be long anyway, my dear. I fancy 'Henry' will come and take you off my hands, as he put you on them. Now, do tell me who he is? I'm sure you told Mrs. Hawker."

"I did," said Edith, "but she is not an ambassador's wife, and if I told you all about it you would be very uncomfortable till you could tell Sir Everett. And I promise to tell you as soon as I can."

"You are an astonishing personality, my dear," said Lady Home, "and how you can keep it all in astounds me. But I won't press you. If you can tell it me later I think you would find yourself the most popular person in town next season. Just imagine your adventures in the citadel! My dear, we *must* arrange for it to be known. You have no notion how you would be run after."

And she pictured the whole of Society running to Grosvenor Square to see the beautiful Miss Cazenove, who twice refused the Shah of Persia, and only escaped from the assault in the citadel and palace through the kindness of a Kurd, who was really a Russian officer.

"For we had better say nothing of his being an Englishman, Edith, if Sir Everett allows me to make this known."

"Oh, certainly not," said Edith.

Next day Edith went by herself to the Foreign Office, and did not inquire for Quinton Hazlitt, but for Frazer. He sent down to ask what her business was.

"Oblige me with an envelope," said Edith to the messenger, and on the back of another card she wrote—

"Dr. Sarle of Teheran."

"Show her up," said Frazer; and he received her almost at the door.

"What Dr. Sarle is this, madam?" he inquired almost nervously.

"I thought you knew a Dr. Sarle, Mr. Frazer."

Frazer tapped his forehead.

"To be sure, to be sure, I had almost forgotten."

"Oh, Mr. Frazer," said Edith, shaking her head and smiling, "I know you know him very well. I know him too, and I know another friend of yours, a Mr. Carew Singleton."

Frazer sat back in his chair.

"Why, confound the cat, she's in it," he said to himself.

"I am just back from Teheran," she said, "and I want to know if you have any news of the doctor and of Mr. Singleton."

"What do you know?" asked Frazer, with sudden breathlessness.

"Nothing and—everything," said Edith; "but is the doctor safe?"

She was now obviously agitated, and Frazer saw it.

"I mustn't rag her; she knows too much. Yes, Miss Cazenove, he is safe."

She bowed her head suddenly, and did not speak.

"You have heard from him?"

"From Aden."

"And when will he be back?"

"It is possible that he will be here the day after to-morrow," said Frazer. "He should be coming overland through Italy now."

She breathed more freely, and put up her veil.

"I thought so," said Frazer, who admired beauty as much as he did a tortuous intrigue. "And now, is there anything you could tell me?"

"Nothing that Dr. Sarle cannot," said Edith; "but as he will be here so soon I think I must leave it to him. I was anxious, or would not have called. Might I ask you to do me a favour?"

"Shall be only too delighted."

"Then will you send me word to this address when you hear Dr. Sarle is back?"

Frazer looked at her card, and stared at her.

"Why, that is Sir Everett Home's address!"

"They are great friends of mine," said Edith, rising; "and I am staying there. Such charming people, are they not?"

"Oh, delightful," murmured Frazer; "but how the—oh, I say—how do you come to be there?"

"They brought me back with them from Teheran," said Edith. "Dear Sir Everett was very sweet to me. A dear old man."

"The deuce," said Frazer to himself. And then he spoke aloud—

"But what does he know?"

"He only suspects," said Edith; "for it is obvious you never told him."

Frazer stood staring at her. For once he was utterly nonplussed.

"No, I never did," he muttered, as he scratched his cheek and stared.

He accompanied her to the head of the stairs and tried to say something. Edith understood him.

"Of course, Mr. Frazer, when he understands who did it, there is no need for him to understand who suggested it or knew of it here."

She accented "here" lightly, and looked round smiling.

"It is obviously best that the fewer who know the exact truth the better. Even if much of the truth came out, all of it never shall."

"Thanks," said Frazer; "for England's sake it would be best. Our newspapers, unless they get

their news from us, are apt to be so troublesome. And our party system!"

"Exactly; and—good-day," said Edith. "You won't forget to send me word?"

"And my compliments to Sir Everett and Lady Home!" cried Frazer. "I shall be so happy to call when you are all settled."

"Any time now, I think," said Edith; "so pleased, I'm sure."

"Well, I'm hanged!" gasped Frazer, when he was back in his room. "I tell you, my boy, some of this is a little risky. And I'll give it Sarle for letting a woman into it. But confound it, I seem to have heard her name somewhere. It's most uncommon, most uncommon."

He stared into space, and rolled his eyes as he endeavoured to recall her.

"Perhaps that ass Hazlitt knows."

He rang the bell, and asked the messenger to get Mr. Quinton Hazlitt to step that way.

"Miss Cazenove, why, of course I know her," said that light of the Intelligence Branch; "she was the woman who was governess to some Mirza or the other in Teheran, and the Shah fell in love with her, and Sir Julius Redburn got her away. She's in Persia now."

"No, she's not," said Frazer. "She's in London."

"She's in Persia," said Hazlitt firmly. "I had a letter from her only two weeks ago. She sends us information sometimes, and, as she knew most of the Court and is intelligent, we have found her useful. I wonder what she will have to say about this raid. And why do you think she is in London?"

"Oh, well, I thought she was," growled Frazer,

"from something someone said. But, since you had a letter from her"—

"Why, your informant must be wrong!" cried Hazlitt. "She would come to me first, of course."

"Of course, you idiot," said Frazer, when Hazlitt was gone. "But now I begin to see why Sarle used her. Nevertheless he might have asked me about it."

Two days later the card was brought to him that he was waiting for.

"Ask Dr. Sarle up," said Frazer rather eagerly. "Confound him, I wonder whether he'll be difficult to manage."

The messenger opened the door, and announced the doctor.

"Dr. Sarle, sir."

Frazer looked up with a far-off air; but when the door was shut, he jumped to his feet.

"So you're back; and you look well."

"I feel well, which is better," said Sarle; "but my clothes don't fit me. I'm thin. I've been a very long journey. To Persia—most interesting country, by the way."

"Oh, stuff!" said Frazer; "and what about the jewels?"

Sarle stared at him.

"What jewels?"

"Have you brought them?"

"My *dear* Frazer! How indiscreet you've grown," said the doctor.

Frazer's nerves were by no means what they had been. Three or four months' anxiety had told on him, and now he flared up.

"Confound my discretion! Oh, well!—but there, I'm glad to see you back safe."

"That's much better than asking about the loot first," said Sarle, with a rather doubtful smile. "But before we talk of my journey, let me hear how things go on this side. Of course I've seen some of the papers, but they're nothing. Has it worked as you expected?"

"The Russians are quite thunderstruck," said Frazer, standing in front of the fire. "And I understand that, when their ambassador was shown absolutely irrefragible evidence that some of his countrymen had planned such a raid, he nearly fainted. There is not the slightest doubt that we shall be able to use this as a lever for some time to come. The Persian minister was conspicuous by his absence at the last show given by the old boy."

Sarle nodded.

"Then you have been well paid for your trouble. Go ahead and get concessions. I shall retire from the business of adventure on my share."

Frazer looked at him anxiously.

"But when will you bring me the jewels?"

"Bring you the jewels! My dear Frazer, what jewels?"

"The Crown jewels, and especially the Darya-i-nur! You don't mean to say you didn't get that?"

Sarle crossed one leg over the other, and produced a cigar case.

"Not a jewel case!" said the doctor. "May I smoke?"

"Of course."

"And as to these jewels, I'm not at all inclined to admit I ever saw them."

Frazer bit his lips and paled with anger.

"Do you mean to say that you will stick to them?"

"That is what someone might infer if I had ever owned to having them."

"You have them, I'll swear," said Frazer angrily. "I can see it in your very expression."

"My expression is sometimes deceitful, Frazer," replied the doctor quietly; "and if you ever gathered from my expression that I was going to risk my life and the lives of thousands to enrich you, you were confoundedly mistaken."

Frazer dropped into a chair.

"To enrich *me*?" he gasped.

Sarle smiled curiously.

"Now tell me, would you have given them all up if I had turned them over to you? Of course you wouldn't."

"I would."

"You wouldn't."

"I would"—

"No, Frazer!"

"I—well, confound you, what are you going to do with them, anyhow?"

"I've not thought it out yet," said Sarle significantly; "but if I give them up at all they will go into the hands of two or three people at once. You may be one of them, but I've not settled who the others are to be. Do you really think I will give these up without having a certificate of indemnity for Singleton and myself? It is very easy to throw a man over."

Frazer scowled furiously.

"You don't trust me, and I could hang you!"

"Nonsense," said the doctor lightly. "Let us be friends. I want peace. You shall work your plans out yet, but not if you get angry. You know you

daren't give me away, for how do you know it? And so long as I hold what I hold you won't alarm me. Cheer up, Frazer; the good opinion of your superiors will console you. And, by the way, what has Sir Everett Home said on the subject of that row in Teheran, which I have read of in the papers?"

Frazer walked up and down the room two or three times before he grew quiet enough to reply.

"You're a pretty cool sort of person, aren't you?"

Sarle looked up at him.

"At times I am rather icy. But I have been known to lose my temper."

"And what happens then?"

Frazer spoke in a bantering tone.

Sarle looked at him very straight for quite half a minute.

"I beg your pardon," said Frazer hastily. "Yes. Sir Everett Home is in England; and this morning a friend of yours—apparently, at least, a friend of yours—called on me. She"—

"She?" cried Sarle.

"Is staying at Home's house. A Miss Cazenove!"

"Good Heavens!" said Sarle. "And has she got back? And what did she want?"

"News of you. But she knew too much. How did you ever come to let her into this?"

"Oh, she came in, she came in!" said Sarle. "I couldn't keep her out."

"She looked that sort. But she's staying with the Homes! How do you account for that?"

"Nice woman Lady Home," said Sarle.

"Do you know her?"

"I saw her once, when I introduced Miss Cazenove

to her in a rather informal way," said the doctor; "but I doubt if she would recall me now. Peppery old boy Sir Everett. Did you ever see him with a gun in his hands? But whatever he suspects she will not say anything unless I tell her to."

"I gathered as much from her agitation when I said you were well. And I'm under an engagement to send her word of your arrival."

Sarle looked at Frazer.

"For a man who could hang me you were very indiscreet to own you knew me, were you not? But I'll absolve you from your promise. I'll go and call there this afternoon."

Frazer was obviously frightfully worried, and yet he hardly dared tackle the doctor again.

"But about those—jewels!" he murmured. "Look here, Sarle, joking apart, unless we can get him back his chief jewels most of our plans will go through. There's a lot in this you don't understand. Why, I've even got a Russian here ready to swear he was in the raid, and he has already signed a statement that he gives his part of the jewels up to the English Government in order to avoid being sent to Persia. And he says the rest are in Moscow. And so on and so on, Sarle. And then when our new ambassador goes he will take the jewels back, and give them up to the Shah, quietly informing him that they were squeezed out of the Russians."

"Good-bye now, and I'll see about it," said Sarle; "but before I go I'll say I think you are a queer sort of stick never to ask a man a word about how he got on, or how your own friend Carew Singleton is. You are just wrapped up in yourself, Frazer, that's a fact."

It was a fact, but Frazer, being a selfish man, never suspected it.

"You give a man no time," said he shortly, "and my first business is the business of the country"—

"'Ego et meus Rex' and 'Ego' alone!" said Sarle. "However, as I never quarrel or say nasty things unless I'm obliged, I'll tell Singleton you asked after him."

"Your hat doesn't fit," said Frazer; "it's left a great red mark on your forehead."

Sarle laughed.

"I had an accident in Teheran, and ran against a man who was so inexcusably careless with a sword he carried that I got cut."

"By Jove, is that it?" asked Frazer.

"And I was so rash with one I was carrying that I fear he will never cut anyone else."

"You don't say so? Was Carew hurt?"

"Three times, and he's so proud of his wounds that with difficulty I prevent him taking his clothes off in public."

"But he won't talk too much?" asked Fraser, in obvious alarm.

"He can't just now. He's far too hoarse with telling us all about it as we came home. He's being treated for clergyman's sore throat."

"Nonsense!" said Frazer. "He's not religious. And what about the Albanian?"

"He's not back yet. Being so near Mecca, he went on a pilgrimage, and has by now become a Hajji."

"What's that?"

"It's Arabic for having swelled head," said Sarle. "But now I'm going. Don't be alarmed. You will see me again. Indeed, if you like you can keep me

under surveillance. Come and have lunch with me."

"I can't. I'm lunching with the Permanent Under-Secretary."

"Then give him my love," said the doctor. "Could you get him to sign my certificate of indemnity? By the way, when you have been fishing did you ever get a hook in your hand?"

"I don't follow you," growled Frazer.

"It's no use being violent or cross with a hook," said Sarle; "treat it as Isaac Walton did his worm."

CHAPTER XXV

AT LADY HOME'S

SARLE found Singleton waiting for him at the Oriental Club, and apologised for being late.

"I've been to see Frazer. By the way, do you really like Frazer?"

Singleton replied with some deliberation that he had never thought of the matter, and didn't know.

"I don't like him; anyhow he's a kind of official automaton," said Sarle; "and I would not trust him any further than I could swing a bull by the tail. He would like to get a hand into the spoil, and why should he?"

He told Carew of his conversation with Frazer.

"We should be made scapegoats if I gave up the Darya-i-nur without an indemnity!" he cried; "and do you know, I feel strongly inclined not to give it up. There's a perilous attraction in a big diamond, and it always seems the property of the strong hand. As we have taken it, why give it up?"

"Would you ever feel safe?" asked Carew.

"No; but who wants to feel safe? I'm not old yet," said the doctor. "However, I shall give it up in the end, I suppose; it certainly might be a great pull for our ambassador to restore it solemnly."

"What a scoundrelly thing diplomacy is!" cried Carew. "And a diplomatist would denounce us!"

"Who are just robbers of the best kind. We risked our lives, but if there's anything in current theology, the diplomatist risks his soul every time he opens his mouth."

"But he sometimes tells the truth!"

"In order that no one shall believe it," said Sarle.

After lunch and the consumption of half a dozen cigarettes, five of which Singleton smoked, the doctor rose.

"I'm going to call on Miss Cazenove. She's back in England, and is staying with the Homes at their house in Grosvenor Square."

"And you are going there?" gasped Singleton; "by Jove, you have a cheek."

"Not in the least," said Sarle; "no one will recognise me, and I'll swear she hasn't given me away. It would be great fun to be introduced to Lady Home, and the old devil-worshipper, as the Persians call him. Can I drop you anywhere as I go along?"

But Singleton declined to be dropped anywhere.

"I'm leaving the chambers I had in Piccadilly. When I got back I found my trustworthy man, old Gray, had let them to an American, and I dropped right in upon him."

He told Sarle the yarn.

"I walked slap in and threw myself on the sofa, and I hadn't been there a minute before a long, thin man followed me. We stared at each other. 'Air you comfortable?' he asked coolly. 'I am,' said I; 'but who are you?' 'My name's Rensslaer, and I come from New York. Equal opportunities for trade;

what's yours?' 'Mine's Singleton,' said I, 'and I've no present use for anyone from New York, thank you, as I'm not dealing in arbitrations or anything of that sort.' He sat down and put his hands on his knees and whistled. 'B'gosh, are you an ice merchant?' he drawled. 'For of all the cool, cold, icy expanses of British gall commend me to the specimen I have on my sofa.' 'Your sofa?' 'Yes, my duck; but perhaps if you are feeling fatigued you'd like to go to bed. If so, don't trouble to take your boots off.' I began to see what it was, and reaching out I touched the bell. And you bet I kept my fingers on it till Gray came in running. The room was dark, and he didn't recognise me for a minute. 'Remove this kindly stranger,' said Mr. Renssler from New York. And then Gray saw me. His legs gave way, he sat plump on the nearest chair, and after some useful explanations we both left, and I and the American dined together. I'll introduce him to you by and by. He says he's a rip-snorter from Way Back."

"Right," said Sarle, "let him rip-snort. I'm off!"

"My compliments to Miss Cazenove. By the way, how long till the wedding?"

But Sarle grunted and went out. In twenty minutes a fast hansom deposited him at Sir Everett's house, and in five minutes more the drawing-room door opened, and Edith stood before him. She pressed her hand to her bosom, and did not speak.

"You are pale, Edith," said Sarle gently.

"Oh, Henry!" she cried, and then she sat down.

"My dear child," said the doctor, "do not agitate yourself."

"But are you really—really back?" cried Edith.

"Pinch me," said the doctor, "or at anyrate shake hands."

"And the others?"

"All but poor old Ross," said Sarle. "He was killed."

"Oh, poor fellow!" she cried; "but you are back, you are back, Henry!"

The colour returned to her face, and Sarle hurried to speak.

"Tell me how you come to be staying here."

"Sir Everett asked me, because he's afraid to let me go out of his sight, and Lady Home, who's a dear old woman, wants to give At Homes and exhibit me," said Edith. "And till I knew you were all right I didn't care where I was, and if anything happened I was sure to hear of it in this house."

"Singleton sends his kind regards."

"Oh, Singleton!" said Edith vacantly.

"And Osman did the Mecca pilgrimage. But he'll be back here in a few days."

"Tell me what you went through after that dreadful day," said Edith. "Be quick. Lady Home might be in any minute."

He swept through a five minutes' narrative, and the pictures grew up in her mind.

"Oh, Henry!"

She was white and then red.

"Oh, Henry!"

Her heart was in her eyes, in her voice, but Sarle talked fast and would not look.

"The *Flag of Persia* will be here in a week, unless Bent turns pirate and runs off with the swag."

"Did you get the great diamond?"

"Yes," said Sarle. "Would you like to see it?"

"Yes, yes!"

He extracted a gold snuff-box from his waistcoat pocket.

"You carry it about with you?"

"Whatever I do with it, I'm uncomfortable," said Sarle, as he opened the box. "Look, Edith."

And she saw the great jewel gleaming with a thousand colours as Sarle held it in the rays of the winter sun. It lay on a piece of black silk over cotton wool; the pulsation of his hand made it tremble till it showed like an ice-gemmed tree shaken by the wind. It was deep, and yet shallow and very wonderful, and, by suggestion, wicked. Any diamond is peculiarly soulless, it is the Undine of jewels; but the Darya-i-nur appeared like a cold and brilliant intellect with a million years of evil memories.

"Oh, it is wickedly beautiful!" said Edith.

"You've hit it!" cried Sarle. "It's just that. I'm afraid of it."

"Let me hold it in my hand," she implored. "Oh, just let me!"

"It will hypnotise you," said Sarle; "and you will be different ever after."

She drew back with a superstitious shudder.

"I'll not touch it, Henry; I'll not touch it. I want to be what I am."

"Is that really wise?" asked Sarle, with just a little quiver in his voice.

And Edith burst into tears.

"Has it made you different ever after?" she sobbed.

"My dear child, what's the matter?"

But he knew, and she knew that he knew. He shut up the diamond, and put it in his pocket again.

"What are you going to do with it?" she asked as she struggled for self-possession.

"If it had been got without bloodshed I'd have kept it," said Sarle gloomily; "but as it is I'm going to let the country have it to give back to the Kebleh of the Universe. He can't be such a bad sort, Edith."

"He's a very good sort!" cried Edith; "and I'm almost sorry I didn't stay there."

"He shall have his big diamond then, poor Kebleh! But as for a lot of the other stuff, he must squeeze the Kurds. Persian tomauns should be cheap to-day in Kurdistan."

"How many lives did it cost?" asked Edith.

But Sarle shook his head irritably.

"What does that matter? Those who died are at peace, if not in Paradise. Those who live have the memory of the wildest and maddest week that ever entered the hearts of a nomad race. I'd do it again."

"Oh no, you wouldn't! Don't you want peace now?"

"Can you imagine me settled down, Edith?"

Alas, she had imagined it too often!

"Yes, Henry."

"But only after a serious railway accident and the loss of a leg or two."

"What a foolish man you are!" she cried. "But if you were good and wise I should detest you."

"Then I am good and wise, Edith, a very preacher of a militant theocracy. Should I be justified in taking a house, let us say, and settling down? How long should I stay settled?"

She looked him in the eyes.

"As long as it suited you."

"And the house?"

"Would pull down its blinds and wait for its master's return."

"My house would weep its eyes out, window-frames and all. Or would it not put up 'To Let'?"

"And forget? Never."

"Why, I may be in prison to-morrow, Edith. The State may provide me with a stone wife without any chance of divorce. If I were married I might beat you."

Her colour rose.

"I think I should not mind. At least not very much. Oh yes, I would kill you."

"That's the right spirit. And if I imported a Javanese wife or two? They are sweet and docile and play pretty instruments."

"Why Javanese?"

"I've been in Java."

"I forgive you, Henry."

"I'm so afraid of being fickle, child. I wobble like an agitated compass needle."

"It comes back to the north."

"It points equally just in the other direction, Edith; and I might want my own way sometimes."

"You should have it sometimes."

"Do you think you could take the risks?"

"You know. Could I marry a grocer?"

"You would at least be sure of sugar."

"Or any good young man with views?"

"Religions and stays combined are a woman's safeguard. If you have only the stays you might marry the rest, Edith."

He put his hands on her shoulders.

"I'll marry you, Henry, and if you won't I'll marry no one."

"I've seen this coming a long time," said Henry, with a queer sparkle in his blue eye. "All the ship has to do is to sail the seas often enough. Very well, Edith, as I have not been killed you can have your vagabond. Oh, my dear, I'm really very fond of you!"

"Really, Henry?"

"Ever since I knew you. Of course I may get over it, but we'll get married first, Edith. Shall we go to Mexico for a wedding trip?"

He took her in his arms and kissed her.

"To the moon if you like, dear."

"And we'll get married just as soon as I'm sure I've not to go to prison."

"Henry!" said Edith; and then she heard a swift rustle which she knew.

Lady Home had entered the room, and now she stood staring at Sarle.

"Henry! You said 'Henry,' my dear!"

"Lady Home, this is my friend Dr. Henry Sarle."

"You said 'Henry,'" repeated the ambassador's wife. "Oh, tell me, tell me, Edith, is it really he? I beg your pardon, Dr. Sarle, but are you really he?"

"Oh!" said Edith, gasping.

"I mean the Russian. Tell me, are you the Russian?"

"Lady Home, I am English," said the doctor; "but I know Russian. A difficult language, by the way."

"Are you the Kurd? Oh, tell me, are you the Kurd?"

Edith caught hold of her and whispered in her ear. Lady Home nodded.

"I give you my word of honour."

"Then he is the—Kurd," said Edith.

"Most astonishing," said Lady Home; "but the moment I heard you say 'Henry' I knew the truth. You cannot deceive me. You are just about the same height."

"I am, undoubtedly," said the doctor.

"And the same build."

"Naturally."

"Oh, how fascinating!" cried the ambassador's wife; "and how very disappointing to know it and not to be able to speak of it! But it was really very shocking of you, Dr. Sarle; you frightened us awfully. If it hadn't been that my husband had previously acquainted me with his fear that the Russians were really going in for something of the same sort, I should have died of fright."

"I am glad things turned out fairly well in the end," said the doctor. "I understand Sir Everett is to have Constantinople."

"We thought of it, I own!" she cried.

"I think I may assure you it is so," said the doctor coolly. "I am often in a position to hear things of this description."

"It will be delightful, if trying," said Lady Home. "But difficulties show my husband at his best. When there is a riot or a massacre going on he is perfectly splendid."

"Then Constantinople is the very place for him," said the doctor. "I hope my information is accurate. It usually is. And all you have to do to please a Turk is to abuse the Persians."

"Yes," said Lady Home, in sudden abstraction. Coming out of her brown study she turned to Edith.

"Edith, my dear, I have determined not to allow you to rob Society of a legitimate sensation. I shall have a few of the nicest people I can get together next week, and I shall introduce you as the heroine who was in the Shah's palace when the raid took place."

"Henry!" said Edith.

"Yes, my dear."

"What!" cried the wife of the ambassador, "are you two going to be married?"

"Undoubtedly," said Sarle, "that idea is in our minds."

"It shall take place from here," said Lady Home, "and we'll have that little gathering too."

"I shan't have a rag of reputation left!" cried Edith. "People will say I ran after the Shah."

"Absurd," said Lady Home, "and I have it! Can I not announce at the same time that Dr. Sarle, who was hurrying to meet you in Persia, got among the Russian raiders, and to save his life pretended to be a Russian, and was thus the means of rescuing you?"

The doctor shook his head.

"It would raise an inconceivable number of questions, which I should have some difficulty in answering!" he cried. "And for the next six months at least I should like to speak the truth. I began just now with Miss Cazenove."

Edith looked at him gratefully.

"And I really prefer obscurity, dear Lady Home," she said, "to the fierce light which beats on one who has escaped from the royal *anderûn*."

"It's *most* disappointing," said Lady Home; "for now the raid has quite dropped out of sight, a little sensation like your story would just revive it."

"Odd as it may seem," said Sarle, laughing, "I would rather it was not revived while things are as they are. You see, my dear Lady Home, you are talking to a man who has outraged the laws of his country while endeavouring to forward her interests."

"Why, yes!" groaned Lady Home; "you would be tried and put in prison. Oh, it's too, too vexing!"

She almost cried.

"Dear Lady Home, don't be so miserable about it," said Edith. "Could we have just a little party of our own, when Mr. and Mrs. Hawker come next week? And Dr. Sarle could bring Mr. Singleton."

"Who's he?"

Edith told her.

"And you could get Osman too, Henry?"

"If he's back."

"Who is Osman?"

"He was the real leader," said Henry, "Osman Arslan Skipar Bey, a very handsome Albanian."

Lady Home wrung her hands.

"I am really one of the most unfortunate women in London," she declared. "All the town would be intriguing to get invitations to my house, and I am positively muzzled. A handsome Albanian; a millionaire who knows how to spend his money; a doctor who is English and Russian and a Kurd and a Persian, and has been so brave in the interests of his country! It is worse than a misfortune! My dear, this is a disaster! But if you all came, Dr. Sarle, I could not tell my husband who you were."

"And if it were found out who we were afterwards,

how could it be accounted for that we were in your house?"

"I see," said Lady Home, clasping her hands upon her lap, "it cannot be thought of. My husband's enemies would destroy his career. I am almost sorry he is not old enough to be obliged to retire."

She had real tears in her eyes, and Edith felt very sorry for her.

"But, dear Lady Home, everyone who is anyone comes to your house."

"Ah, you don't understand," said the ambassador's wife. "It's not half so much the people who would come, as those who would want to, and whom I wouldn't have."

Edith consoled her, but she was inconsolable.

"Would you like to see the great big diamond?" asked Edith at last.

"Which one, which one?" said her hostess eagerly.

"The Darya-i-nur. Henry has got it."

"Oh yes, yes; show it me!" cried Lady Home.

She took it in her hand and tried to speak, but could not.

"And this too," she said at last, "it's—it's too cruel, too cruel!"

And she burst into tears.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE RECEIPT

“DON'T look so shamefaced about it,” said Singleton.

“I'm not looking shamefaced.”

“You are,” said Singleton; “but after all men usually do marry.”

“They usually die too.”

But Sarle cheered up.

“You see, I want to marry her, but I'm afraid that she will repent. I shall always be travelling, and women are like cats; they like a long range, it is true, but the fireside must be under their lee. And I'm in a perpetual fret and stew about these jewels. I can't go home for fear of Frazer. He sits on my doorstep. He lurks round corners. He chases me in hansoms. He runs me to earth in 'busses.”

“And what about the certificate of indemnity? That includes me, and don't you forget it.”

“Do I ever forget? And now I've got this plunder I don't like parting. Oh, if you'd only seen Lady Home's face when she saw the Darya-i-nur! She straightway wept.”

“Poor dear!” said Singleton.

“By the way, does Frazer know your address now?”

"Didn't I tell you he's been here three times asking for you?"

They were in Singleton's new rooms in the Albany.

"Then he's here now," said Sarle. And in another minute Singleton's man announced him.

"Oh, you are here!" said Frazer to Sarle.

"Light the lamps," said Singleton; and till the valet withdrew not a word was uttered.

"Yes, I'm on deck," said Sarle, putting his heels on the table just to annoy Frazer, whose manners were scrupulously accurate.

"Well?"

"Have you brought it?"

"You don't trust me," snarled Frazer.

"I think I said as much," replied Sarle. "I will trust no one man with the Crown jewels of a kingdom. To annex them would be so great a thing that it would cease to be criminal. I can imagine an archbishop pocketing them on the ground that he was benefiting the Church."

"To whom will you give them up?"

"I'm not inclined to do it at all," said Sarle coolly; "but take me to the Permanent Under-Secretary of State, and I'll consider it."

"You know that's impossible. He knows nothing of it," cried Frazer. "Singleton, don't you think he ought to give them to me?"

Singleton closed one eye slowly.

"I leave it to my leader."

Frazer fell back in his chair.

"Considering that I suggested this to you and found you Singleton, I think you are treating me vilely."

"Sorry," said Sarle, "but as I said before, if you

imagine I'm going to give them up till I'm sure no further trouble will come out of it, you're wrong. Have I ever said anything which suggests that I am quite a fool? Pass the cigarettes, Carew. Help yourself, Frazer."

Frazer growled a curse.

"Come, now, supposing the Permanent Under-Secretary is impossible, whom else will you trust?"

"The Archbishop of Canterbury."

"Pshaw!" said Frazer.

"The Foreign Secretary himself."

"If you persist in joking I shall be reluctantly compelled to let matters take their course," said Frazer, falling into semi-official phraseology.

"Call Carew Singleton!" said Sarle nonchalantly. "And now, Mr. Singleton, what do you know of this matter? A pretty cross-examinee our only Carew would make. If you say such things again, Frazer, I shall give the jewels to the lady I'm about to marry, and tell you to do your little best and worst."

"Good Heavens," said Frazer, in great excitement, "but you are so irritating. Will you give them to me if I write you out a receipt in my own name?"

Sarle shook his head.

"You are not of sufficient importance, my dear man."

Frazer chewed his lip and moustache.

"I must have someone who is high enough to implicate the Government in the eyes of Europe if things went wrong and you wanted me as a whipping-boy. Get me a cabinet minister or an ambassador."

Singleton, who had been imitating Sarle in the

matter of elevating his feet above his head, now brought them down to the floor.

"I have it. Why not give them to old Sir Everett?"

Sarle opened his left eye wide and then closed both.

"It would be rather fun. What do you say, Frazer?"

"I don't think it possible," said the Foreign Office man; "for just consider. From what you say he thinks some Englishmen were in it, but he doesn't suspect anyone suggested it."

"Any of You, with a big Y, you mean?"

"That's so," said Frazer.

"Then I think you had better go and tell him, Frazer. I'll give them up to him and you, on your signing a joint receipt, which acknowledges that Singleton and I were only instruments of State."

"I couldn't get him to do it."

"You must," said Sarle; "and if you want them you must do it quick. Take a cab and go down and see him. You'll find him at dinner. I know they dine at half-past seven."

But Frazer at first would not budge.

"And what will he think of me, and of us?"

"What do I care, anyhow?" asked Sarle. "Perhaps he'll be sore at having been kept in the dark. And if he gives you beans, you will have the consciousness of civic and patriotic virtue to support you. Go now. I mean it, Frazer. If I don't get rid of these things to-night I'll keep them."

His face was flushed, and he spoke harshly.

"You mean it?"

"Ring the bell, Carew," said Sarle.

"A hansom for Mr. Frazer," said the doctor. He caught Frazer by the arm.

"Now, my suggester of raids, take my suggestion. And when you come back, come to my place in Bloomsbury. Charles, another hansom."

He fairly pushed Frazer out of the room.

"Now I know I don't like Frazer," cried Singleton. "I should like to take him on a real old roaring randan such as we've been in. His nerves would go, Sarle."

"The poor creature is not a fighting type," said Sarle, as they drove towards Bloomsbury. "It's a curious thing that all over the East you find separate and distinct sets of fighting and utterly non-combatant races working more or less together. We have the same thing here, but we're oddly mixed, and actually associate with each other. We've our Bengalis here. Their *swadharm* or especial virtue is mere cunning."

They went into Sarle's rooms.

"I'll put on a dinner jacket," said the doctor, "so just squat and smoke, and drink if you will."

"Am I to come with you?"

"To be sure," said Sarle; "why not? But not if you prefer to lie low."

"Certainly I'll come," said Singleton. "Hurry, my son."

The doctor ran upstairs as Singleton lighted the gas and a lamp and sat down to smoke. He had not consumed two cigarettes before there was a knock at the street door. Presently there came tapping.

"A gentleman to see Dr. Sarle," said the servant.

"Show him in," said Singleton; "the doctor will be down in a minute."

The next moment Osman entered, and Singleton sprang to his feet.

"*Wallah, Billah*, is it you?"

Osman shook hands and reached for a cigarette. He lighted it and sat down.

"It's I, noble Carew, vendor of jewels. And how are things?"

"They go," said Singleton. "Oh, but I'm glad to see you!"

"And Sarle?"

Singleton jerked a thumb towards the ceiling.

"He'll be down in a minute. Oh, what a black devil you look!"

Assuredly the Albanian was burnt by the sun.

"It was hot going to Mecca."

"How's Ali Bedredeen?"

"Flourishing like a myrtle in spring."

"How did they go back?"

"I spread them in Asia Minor ports. Trust a Kurd for getting home."

"By Jove," said Singleton, shaking hands again and again. "But it does me good to see you. And have you heard how the others got on? Did they get back?"

"Wait till Abdul Azim Khan comes down and I'll tell you."

And the next minute that noble Persian entered.

"I thought I heard talking," said Sarle quietly, "and I fancied it was you. Glad to see you, old man."

"May your life be a long one, my ornament of the oäsis," replied Osman. "And am I justified in my rashness of returning?"

Sarle nodded.

"Yes, my son. We are not advertised heroes, but I reckon we are not going to be advertised. Give me humble seclusion. Now tell me all about it."

"First, my men are all right," said Osman. "And as for the others, I got a letter, through old Suleiman Pacha, from Mansur."

"No; he must have thought you dead?"

"Listen to what he says!" cried Osman. "Here's his letter, in execrable cursive. His scribe must have been an unlettered Persian outlaw."

"Read it."

"Most noble and excellent Osman Arslan Skipar Bey," read Osman, "this is to inform you that we know you are not dead, even though it was the will of Allah you should not lead us back into our own country. For we returned for you, fearing that you were surrounded, and a Persian dog, whose throat we cut immediately, informed us that you had escaped towards the south; and such was our confidence in you that we obeyed your orders, and made all haste in the direction of the setting sun. The way was long and we lost many men, but any Shiah heretics we met melted into mist before us; and though there be wailing in our tents for those who are now enjoying the direct encomiums of the Prophet himself (upon whom be peace) yet the quantity of Persian tomauns we brought back will doubtless console even the oldest widows among our tribes. For surely we had never imagined there was so much money in the universe, unless it were in the treasury of the Commander of the Faithful. Now, most noble and excellent Osman Arslan Bey, we, your faithful friends, bid you fare-

well, until it shall please Allah to send you among us again, on which occasion we pray that it may be the will of Allah, and Mahomed, his Prophet (upon whom be blessings), to raise up in your heart a plan whereby we may spoil and reduce to poverty Achmet Pacha of Arz Roum, who is now exceedingly greedy in the matter of taxes. This letter is intrusted to my own son, who will take it to Kassik whence it will go to Suleiman Pacha, with a suitable present of five purses and a praying carpet. May Allah smite all heretics, and especially the accursed schismatic Shiahs, and preserve you evermore!

“MANSUR.”

“Fine old boy Mansur,” said Sarle. “I hope the knees of Suleiman Pacha may not suffer by over-use of that praying carpet. And as for you, you are now a Hajji! Most blessed among the sons of the Prophet, tell us about Mecca.”

But before Osman could even begin the tale of his pilgrimage a hansom stopped outside, and there was a loud rat-a-tat-tat on the door.

“Frazer to wit,” said Sarle.

The F. O. man came in rather sulkily, and glared when he saw a stranger.

“Osman Bey, Mr. Frazer of the Foreign Office,” said Sarle.

“Oh,” said Frazer, remembering the name; “glad to meet you.”

“Will he do it?” asked Sarle.

“Yes,” grunted Frazer. “Will you come now? A nice job I had.”

“Did the devil-worshipper dance?” asked the doctor amiably.

But Frazer only growled.

"Hanged if I like to do it," said the doctor, hesitating.

"Oh, you gave me your word!"

Sarle unlocked a safe in the corner of the room.

"Remember, I'm only returning the especially historic jewels," he said; "as to the others the less said the better; they are scattered over the world now."

"Yes," said Singleton, looking at a fine diamond in an antique ring which he had on his finger. "All over the world."

Sarle took out a couple of wash leather bags, and from one he drew a list of what both contained.

"Tally them."

"That's all right, except the Darya-i-nur."

"It's in my pocket."

"Let's look at it," said Frazer.

The doctor put it on the table under the shaded lamp, where it glittered like a star.

"A very jewel of the Pit," said Sarle; "and perhaps its history of bloodshed has hardly begun."

"Let's go," said Frazer; "the ambassador is dancing like a cat on hot bricks."

The unaccustomed lowness of the simile betokened his agitation. But, like the great Samuel Johnson, he recast the sentence in a more cumbersome form. "I left him in an extremely irritated and highly nervous condition. He could hardly preserve his composure."

"And said, 'the devil!' forty times, if all's true I've heard of him!" cried Sarle. "Come, Singleton. Osman, you come too if you like."

"Why the three?" objected Frazer.

That settled it.

"Of course the three!" cried Sarle. "Now, if you've any more objections I'll not go at all."

He was obviously very cross.

"You go with Frazer," he said to Singleton. "Osman and I will come after you."

And though Frazer dreaded to let Sarle out of his sight he dared say nothing against anything that Sarle now proposed.

When they got to Grosvenor Square and entered the house, the ambassador was peeping from his library door, and just then Lady Home and Edith came across the hall.

"What, Dr. Sarle!" said Lady Home.

"The devil!" cried the ambassador. "She knows him! She knows him!"

"Henry," said Edith in surprise.

Sir Everett rushed into the hall.

"What's the meaning of this? Do you all know him? Is this 'Henry'?"

"Yes, Sir Everett," replied Edith.

"I'm—I'm—yes, that's what I am," said the ambassador. "But come in, gentlemen; come in! Oh, who am I to know anything? Come in, come in."

They preceded him into his library.

"This is Dr. Sarle, Sir Everett," said Frazer.

The ambassador growled.

"I suppose I ought to be polite, sir," he grunted, "and say I'm glad to see you and so on, and perjure myself. But, though this is my own house, I have to say that I'm highly indignant, and astounded, and, confound it, I'm put in an awkward position, sir."

"Sir Everett! Sir Everett!" implored Frazer, who was in fear lest Sarle should turn round and go out even now.

"Silence!" said the ambassador; "mind your own business, Mr. Frazer. If you had done that all along, things wouldn't have come to the pass that I should be a receiver, a receiver, sir! Well, sir, let us get this business over. And who are these other gentlemen?"

"This is my friend Mr. Carew Singleton."

The ambassador pricked up his ears.

"Not the Mr. Carew Singleton the millionaire?"

"Yes," said Sarle.

"I thought rich men were the very buttresses of Society," gasped Sir Everett; "but it appears I've been mistaken."

"And this is Osman Bey, Sir Everett, an Albanian friend of mine."

"And you were all in it?"

The three bowed; and Sir Everett shook his head again and again.

"Why, why— Oh, well, I can't say anything; not a word left. You appear to have been the leader, Dr. Sarle?"

"I think the leadership was really in commission," said Sarle; "we took it by turns according to where we were. But if you have the paper ready, Frazer, we will turn you over the articles in question."

"To put my name on this paper may ruin me!" cried the ambassador. "It's an awkward position. I consider I am usurping the very highest authority of State."

"You represent it," said Sarle.

"But not here, sir."

He smacked the desk with his open hand.

"Here I'm nobody, no more than Mr. Frazer, whom till this day I never met."

"I beg your pardon, Sir Everett," said the unfor-

tunate Frazer. "I reminded you before that I met you at Lord Hillersea's."

"And I told you before I didn't remember it," snapped the ambassador. "How do I know you're even in the Foreign Office?"

"Lady Home knows me," said Frazer, who now felt as if the heavens and earth were passing away. Was ever a Foreign Office clerk so treated?

"Very well," roared Sir Everett, "then let's have the jewels."

Sarle cleared a space in front of him, and emptied the two bags on the table.

"And that's the diamond. This is the receipt."

It read:—

"Received of Henry Sarle, Carew Singleton, and Osman Arslan Skipar Bey, the jewels as per list, the property of Nasr-ed-Din, Shah of Persia, including the diamond known as the Darya-i-nur. The undersigned undertake on behalf of the State that the above-named persons shall in no way be called on to account for having such jewels in their possession, while Henry Sarle, Carew Singleton, and Osman Arslan Skipar Bey agree on their part on their honour to make no use whatever of this paper in any case but that of their being prosecuted for any share they may have had in the raid in Teheran."

"I don't like it," said Sir Everett; "but I'll do it."

He signed, and was followed by Frazer.

"Of course," said Sarle, "we are perfectly aware you cannot quite guarantee us from further trouble, Sir Everett. Only were the authorities so ill-advised as to institute proceedings, it renders it very doubtful if any jury in England would convict."

"Humph!" said the ambassador; "and now I should like to know how you came to know my wife, sir?"

"I had the pleasure of seeing Lady Home the other day when I called on Miss Cazenove."

"Then you were the bloodstained brute who brought her to the Embassy?"

"I was that brute, Sir Everett."

"Well, I'm—I'm—yes, that's what I am!" cried the ambassador. "For of all the infernally cheeky things— Do you know you were levying war, sir?"

"I fear it was so," said Sarle.

"It was," said the ambassador; "and it was quite impossible, and yet you did it."

Sarle bowed.

"It was a devilish plucky thing, and it may have its advantages after all. I thought I understood the nature of Englishmen, but, sir, this is Irish."

"I am a bit Irish," said the doctor; "but my friend Singleton is English to the backbone. And as for the Albanians, you must know they love a row like any man from Tipperary."

There came a tap at the door.

"Come in," growled Sir Everett.

"Lady Home wishes to speak to you for a moment, Sir Everett," said the footman.

"One moment, then, gentlemen," cried the ambassador, going outside. He found his wife in the hall.

"Oh, Everett, bring them up to the drawing-room."

"Helena, you astound me!" cried the ambassador, in a roaring whisper distinctly audible in the kitchen and the very garrets. "You know this filibustering gentlemanly scoundrel!"

"My dear, he's engaged to Edith."

"You prevaricate, Helena!"

"Nonsense, Everett. I *must* see them all. I must."

"They've come on business, and now they're going."

"Not till they've come upstairs, Everett," said his wife; "I would not miss knowing them all for worlds, not for worlds."

The ambassador recognised that rare state of mind in which the usually docile wife was determined to have her own way. He wilted under her gaze.

"They shall come up, Everett."

"My dear, if I receive these people on a matter of business that is nothing; but if it came out I entertained them as friends I might be ruined."

"Don't talk nonsense, Everett!" cried Helena; "and if you were you could retire."

"Good God!" said Sir Everett; "and if it came out it might ruin England!"

"I don't care!" cried his wife; "and oh, Everett, I'll have them upstairs! Is there a woman living who wouldn't?"

"Very well, then, I'll ask them," growled Sir Everett.

"And do it as if you really meant it," said his wife; "for I mean to listen outside."

But when she heard the filibusters accept Sir Everett's forced invitation, she ran upstairs like a young girl.

"My dear," she said to Edith, "they're coming, they're coming! If there were only two hundred others here, and I could say what they and you were, I should be perfectly, perfectly happy."

The subdued ambassador introduced Osman and Singleton, and Lady Home endeavoured to talk with both at once, while Frazer, trying to forget the snubbing he had received, conversed with Sir Everett. Edith and Sarle stood by the entrance to the conservatory."

"This will come out all right, Sir Everett," said Frazer.

"It's to be hoped so," cried Sir Everett; "but I'd like to get to the bottom of it."

"You are at it yourself, Sir Everett. If you had never sent home your suspicions about the Russians attempting the very same thing, which no one believed out there, and no one here but myself and another in the Office, it would never have happened."

"Who was the other?" asked the ambassador.

"I'm afraid I could not mention his name without his permission," said Frazer. "He's a cleverish man, however, and saw the force of my arguments. I introduced Singleton to the doctor, and he supplied the money."

"It must have cost him a pretty penny."

"There must have been pickings," said Frazer. "Won't you have a talk with Osman Bey? He knows the East as no man living knows it."

"Look, Edith," said Sarle, "there's your old devil-worshipper of a host having a close confab with Osman. And Singleton is probably being asked to Lady Home's next dinner-party."

"If it would all come out, the dear old thing would go off her head with joy, Henry."

"Let it come, dear. But we'll be married first, and then no jury will have the heart to separate us."

“ And if they did, Henry ? ”

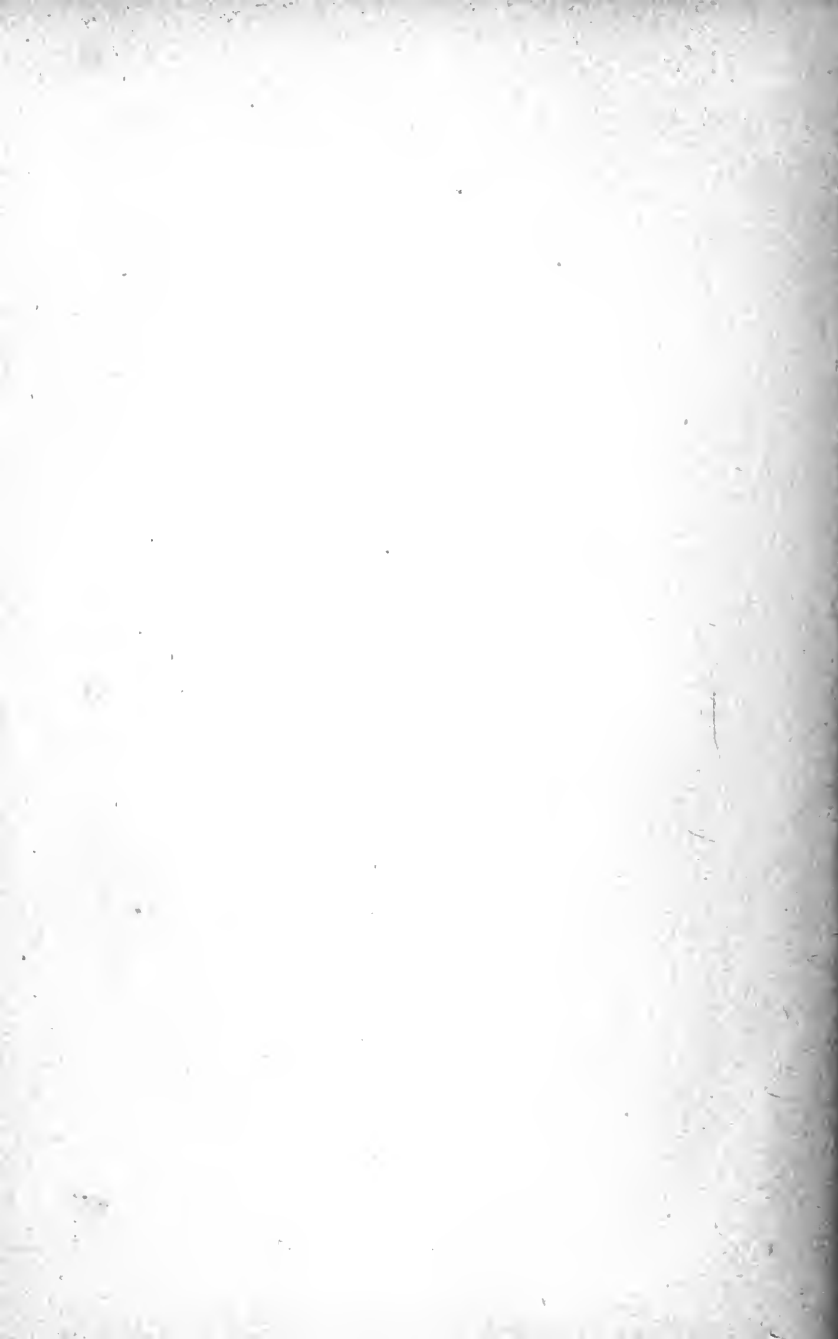
“ Neither they nor anything else shall, dear. Shall it be this day week ? ”

“ If you like, Henry. ”

And he said he did like.

THE END





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