

A VIZIER'S DAUGHTER

A TALE OF THE HAZARA WAR

BY LILLIAS HAMILTON, M.D.
COURT PHYSICIAN TO ABDUR RAHMAN,
AMIR OF AFGHANISTAN

LONDON
JOHN MURRAY, ALBEMARLE STREET
1900

Re-arranged by
Foundation Bibliotheca Afghanica
Bubendorf / Switzerland, 2002

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INTRODUCTION

FRIENDS (one's friends are ever indulgent) so constantly tell me how interesting they think my Afghan experiences, and ask me why I have never turned any of my piles of manuscript into a book, that I have tried to do so again and again, but always without success; I have found the task beyond me.

To explain everything would be to tell too much, to get down to the dregs and stir up a sediment that is perhaps better left to settle. To half explain would lead to misconstruction, and for this reason: so many of my greatest difficulties in Kabul, and therefore the most interesting incidents in my life there, arose from sources not Afghan in origin. An autobiography of my sojourn in the capital of Afghanistan would therefore necessarily entail many explanations that for very obvious reasons it is better not to enter into. They are best forgotten.

To get over this difficulty I have written *A Vizier's Daughter*, every character in which is drawn from a model, and should, therefore, as far as it goes, give an accurate description of one phase, at any rate, of Afghan life. I lay no claim to originality, either as to plot or setting except as regards the last two or three chapters, and even in them there is more truth than meets the eye. I write of what I saw and heard, and of person that I knew as intimately as one can ever know a people so far removed from us in thought and education. Gul begum told me much, the Hakim a good deal, but far more is what actually passed before my own eyes. I have, in fact, transposed some incidents, and have drawn pictures of events which took place years before I went to Kabul, from scenes that occurred while I was there.

As far as I have touched on Abdur Rahman himself, I have tried to sketch him truly; but during a man's lifetime it is almost impossible to do so fully enough to make an exact picture.

I have been less cautious in dealing with his Chief Secretary. Those who have known him since he left Kabul will doubtless think I have been unduly severe. I have certainly not flattered him. I have tried to draw him as he was *then*, not as he is now after a period of repose, surrounded with the luxury of the most refined and cultured intellects in the world. I have tried to picture him first as the self-satisfied Court favourite, flattered and sought after by every one; then as the overworked official, intrigued against, bunted and accused of every conceivable and inconceivable crime, by enemies too unscrupulous and too numerous not to be formidable. Let those who have never been in such a country and in such circumstances be lenient. He is not always lenient to himself.

On showing him the manuscript of this volume, which I would not have published without his permission, his only comment was: "I think it is very like what I was." I do not exaggerate when I say he did, after a

fashion, of course, the work of twenty men. He had not only the mere nominal superintendence of a dozen most diverse kinds of works, offices, etc., but was responsible for the working, and for the actual detail of each, and in Afghanistan there is no method. None has an understudy in case of illness, or to provide for a much needed holiday, so that if an official is laid up, the whole of his work accumulates, and he rises from a bed of sickness to meet a task beyond his strength even when he was well. There is no one whom he can rely for anything.

But besides *those* works, which were merely extras, the man whom I have called Ali Mohamed Khan had his Court duties to attend to; he was head of what we should call the Intelligence Department, and was Chief Secretary to the Ameer. There is no doubt that there is no such thing as smoke without fire, and it is equally true that there were men in Kabul who had serious causes of complaint in that their work was retarded for want of materials, etc. But these were not, as a rule, the men who had most to say against him. Besides, the real fault lay not in the man who failed to do the work of twenty, but in the system which invariably overtaxes the willing horse. There is a popular saying in Kabul that instead of receiving increase of pay or an additional holiday for special services rendered, an official is praised and congratulated in open Durbar, and receives as a reward for his labours an extra burden of work. That is really what happened in his case.

It may seem to some that Gul Begum herself is an impossibility – that such a country and such surroundings could not have produced a woman of that stamp; but this is not so. Here and there, very rarely, I admit, one meets in Afghanistan a character that stands out alone – a nature that would be far above the average in the most civilised country in the world.

Such an one was an old Pir (leader, teacher), who is almost universally revered as a saint by the highest, as well as by the lowliest, throughout the country. He reminded me of St Francis both in his life and teaching. I longed to be allowed to visit him, but, though he would send me messages, he would go no further. He saw no women except those of his own family.

There are, too, among the mountains, people of the most absorbing interest. Men who need but a touch to awaken them to civilisation, so naturally refined are their minds, so ready are they to admit that they are behind other nations, so anxious are they that something should be done to raise them as a nation. Those are to the people of Kabul what the Scottish farmer is to the East London loafer. Unfortunately, the loafer predominates to such an extent, that in one's daily life in Kabul one almost loses sight of the other. What I wish to convey is that a man such as Ghulam Hossain is by no means an anomaly in Afghanistan, but then neither is Ferad Shah nor yet Mohamed Jan. What ruins the country in the first place is its disjointedness and its consequent feuds; in the second place, the fact that the people have no outlet. If a man is clever and ambitious, instead of taking up some work that makes him

some one in his own district, he goes to Court and commences an elaborate system of intrigue, by which he endeavours to oust some other man from his position in order that he may occupy it. There is no such thing as private enterprise. The Government is a paternal one in the very strictest sense, and everything belongs to the lead of the state.

If my readers complain that there is no brightness, no happiness in my book, that it is a story without one ray of hope, I can but reply, "Then I have succeeded but too well in my task of drawing a fair picture of life as it is in Afghanistan." There is no such thing as joy there. There is no such thing as peace, or comfort, or rest, or ease. There is never a moment when any one is sure he is not the subject of some plot or intrigue. There is no amusement, no relaxation; the people don't know how to enjoy themselves. Once a year there are races and trials of skill in wrestling, shooting, etc., but few of the upper class people compete, and no one of any importance, except the little princes who are too young to have any state duties to perform, attend these games. Moreover, they are almost too serious to be called games. There is no enthusiasm or freedom anywhere. Life is serious from the start to the close, and the very children who act as messengers learn to gossip and intrigue from their infancy, by carrying verbal messages from one house or another.

Such as it is, however, I send Gul Begum's story to the press, and can only hope that though it lacks all the personal incident that makes an autobiography so pleasing to the author's own immediate friends and relations, it may prove of some interest to those who would fain know, something of the life of peoples in lands far removed from their own.

CHAPTER I

A HAZARA VILLAGE

SUCH a crowd of girls, and every one of them hideous. But they were quite unconscious of that, and probably there was not one among them

who considered herself anything below the average in the scale of beauty. Nor were they, according to the accepted standard of their tribe, for they were Hazaras. Broad, squat little persons, with faces like full-moons and heads like rugged bullets, all bumps and nodules, covered with straight, coarse, lank black hair, which only half-concealed the curious outline of the skull. Moreover, they had tiny, sunk-in eyes, high cheek bones, flat noses, sallow complexions, feet and hands like their persons, short, broad and powerful, and when they walked it was with a heavy, plodding gait.

They dress, too, seemed specially adapted to emphasise these peculiarities. It was made of print, wadded throughout, and consisted of a body and full skirt, made separately, but sewn together at the waist, where there was a thick piping, to give substance enough to support the heavy skirt. There was no attempt at shaping or fitting. The sleeves even were quite straight, narrowing gradually from the shoulder to the wrist; only the gathers of the thick wadded skirt made the waist look narrower than the hips, and gave to these curious little people a certain grotesque, picturesque appearance.

Their surroundings were picturesque, too. A perfectly pure blue sky – a sky we know nothing of in England, clearer, if possible, even than a Monte Carlo sky – and the whole atmosphere was dear too. Everywhere around stretched undulating hills and dales, all beautifully green with spring grass, dotted over with innumerable cows and sheep and goats and a few camels, while away far in the distance, against that wonderful clear blue sky, rose the white tops of the higher mountains, which were still covered with snow, for it was spring, and the snows had not melted yet. Close behind the girls, and forming their immediate background, rose a mud tower, which might have been called two-storeyed, but that the place where the lower room ought to have been was filled up by a solid mass of mud, baked hard by the sun of many summers, so as a matter of fact it contained just one room, capable of holding about a dozen persons closely packed together; this room and the flat roof above it being reached by a steep, winding staircase, no two steps of which were the same height. Some were so high that only a very active person could have climbed up them, others so low as hardly to be worth calling steps at all, so that a stranger unaccustomed to these irregularities was apt to get a shock when, having raised his foot almost up to the knee of the other leg preparatory to making a huge step upwards, he suddenly found it drop almost to the level of the one on the lower step. Of these slight inconveniences, however, the village inhabitants were blissfully unconscious.

This was *The Tower*, a place of the greatest importance in the village. At night it was occupied by some dozen men, all fully armed, who took it in turns to sleep on the roof, so as to be able, themselves protected by a rampart about ten inches high, to keep watch on the country round about, and, if necessary, sound the drum to summon all the male villagers to protect the flocks and herds and young spring crop from Turkoman tribes, who were continually making raids on them, laying

waste their land, carrying of their cattle and their sheep, and also sometimes their girls and young boys as slaves, for Hazaras are naturally hard-working and industrious, and being also strong and active, they make excellent servants and even beasts of burden, and in the towns, at any rate, are cheaper to feed than donkeys, go faster, carrying almost as much, and do not need a man to drive them.

Poor, heavy, dull Hazara! But he is patient and industrious, and not really devoid of intelligence, in spite of the subjection in which he is held, so his day may come yet, and then let his master beware, for he is fierce, revengeful, and cruel, if he ever does strike, he will strike hard.

To the left of the Tower, and joined on to it, was a long low building made also of mud. This was evidently a cattle-shed or stable, or something of that sort, for it was open in front, and at the time at which we are being introduced to it – about nine o'clock in the morning – was occupied chiefly by cocks and hens, and a few pigeons puffed out and prancing round in semi-circles, paying devoted court to apparently indifferent mates who stalked contemptuously on, picking up here a grain, there a scrap of bread, albeit casting a hurried occasional glance back, just to see that their admirers were keeping up unflagging attentions. In front lay a great sheep dog, rough, unkempt, apparently asleep, but watchful.

At right angles to this shed, and opposite the tower, stretched a long low building or row of buildings projecting nowhere more than twenty or thirty feet from the hill which protected them from the chill north winds. One-storeyed buildings for the most part, but one at last, that adjoining the shed had a sort of upper storey, closed on three sides by a dead wall, but open on the third except where it was partially screened in by a number of tall bulrushes. Beyond this and down the hill there were other similar buildings – many of them in fact – but the mud was less smoothly laid, and the ground in front of them less carefully swept, and they projected less beyond the protecting hill, so little, in fact, that it was easy enough to see that their outer wall was a mere frontage to the true dwelling, which was literally hollowed out of the hillside and extended often two, sometimes three, rooms deep into its very centre. Other dwellings had no wall in front at all, but were mere caves, more like the habitations of wild beasts than of men.

Such then, in brief, was a Hazara village, consisting of some two hundred houses or so, and the dwelling with the little scrap of what one may call second storey was the residence of the Chief or Mir of one of the most important sub-divisions of the Hazara tribe. Next to this structure, and separated from it indeed but by a few yards, was another, similar in all particulars except that it could boast of no upper chamber. This was the residence of the chief's cousin (his brother, he called him, though he was his uncle's, not his father's son), who acted as his assistant and adviser, his vizier, in fact, a man of rather unusual qualities in that country, for he had ideas, ambitions, plans. Moreover,

he had much more influence with his tribe than had the nominal chiefs, and was everywhere looked up to and respected.

They were chattering, of course, those girls. How could it be otherwise in any nation, when twenty young female things were sitting together in a group? But these girls had something special to talk about; evidently something more than usually interesting was going on, and every now and then one would pout and look dissatisfied, perhaps even a little sad, or another would laugh and look coy and happy, and knock over the companion squatting beside her who had evidently been chaffing her; nothing rude or rough in the push that had sent her neighbour sprawling, only play which was in no way resented; but there was a good deal of noise, and certainly no one was thinking of work, when another young woman stepped from the vizier's dwelling and joined them. Her dress was exactly similar to theirs, her hair black, her mould distinctly powerful, but there the resemblance ceased, for she was tall – full head and shoulders taller than any other girl present. Moreover, she had fair, smooth skin and a bright complexion, large intelligent eyes, a nose instead of a knob in the centre of her face, a well-shaped head placed on a well-shaped neck, long, well-shaped feet and hands, and a step as elastic as a deer's, carriage erect and dignified. This was Gul Begum, the pride and beauty of her tribe, her father's hope and joy, the object of many an ill-natured remark from the less well-favoured of her sex. Alas! That it should be so.

“What are you all doing here making such a noise?” she asked. “Ah, Dilbhar, you here?” she broke off, suddenly frowning, “go to your work, bad girl. Are the pots and pans all cleaned, the meat washed, the rice ready, that you sit idling here?” The girl thus addressed slunk quietly away. “But who have you here?” she went on, spying among the group the cause of all the laughter, all the chatter and excitement “Miriam? Now, Miriam, what did I tell you?”

A wizened, cunning-eyed old woman in the centre of the group looked up coaxingly. “You told me what no young girl, least of all you, my lovely child, could possibly mean,” she said.

“I never say what I do not mean,” the girl replied firmly. “I told you to go and not come back. We don't want you here, making our girls dissatisfied, putting foolish notions in their heads, making them neglect their work. We don't believe your promises, and we are not afraid of bad omens.”

“Oh, aren't we?” whispered one girl squatting at her feet to her neighbour. “It is all very well for Gul Begum, she was born under a lucky star, but it is different for us who have to work now as girls and will probably have to work harder still as wives.”

“Come, just this once, give me an old pair of long leather boots or a little salt and I'll tell you your fortune, and such a fortune too, my fair

princess – such a fortune,” and the old hand rubbed her hands and chuckled to herself.

“I have others to whom to give my old boots,” Gul Begum said, “others who work and who deserve them. You only roam through the country telling lies, deceiving young girls. Get up! Begone.”

A scowl gathered on the old fortune-teller's face; she bent her head down till it rested on her knee, then looked up sideways at the girl towering above her. “What lies have I told?” she asked. “Did Sara's uncle lose his cattle? Did Neckbacht's own father sell her into slavery for a gun? Did Nookra wed above her highest expectations? Did Dilbhar become a disgrace to her tribe, and is she not now glad to hide her face in a stranger's house, a servant, a menial, where she would formerly have been waited on as a guest? Answer me that.” Gul Begum had turned a little white. What the old woman said was true enough, and the girl, though cast in a different mould, was not altogether above the superstitions of her race. Ignoring the first part of the old woman's speech, which was perhaps unanswerable, she caught hold of the latter. “Dilbhar was a good girl till you put your curse on her.” She said; “she never went astray till then, besides service is no disgrace. It is better to be good and serve than to have so much time on one's hands that one's thoughts stray off to evil.”

“And what about *your* time?” the old hag asked, chuckling again. “Where do your thoughts soar, my beauty? To Bamian, perhaps, or to some yet higher sphere maybe?”

A hot angry flush mounted to the young girl's cheek. She stretched out her hand menacingly. “Begone, old witch,” she said, “begone! Half the misfortunes of the tribe come from your idle pratings. Begone, and don't dare show your face here again, for, if you do, I'll set the dogs on you.”

The old woman rose slowly, and with evident difficulty. She was stiff, and her back was bent with age and the weights she had perhaps had to carry in her youth. Suddenly she darted forward and seized Gul Begum's still outstretched arm, and casting her glance hurriedly at the hand that had thus come within her reach, she examined it eagerly then flung it from her with a mocking derisive laugh. “Begone, old witch, begone!” she echoed, jeering. “Yes, I'll begone. ‘Twill be, ‘Come, old Miriam, come,’ some day. ‘Come and tell me of something to live for, something of peace, and love, and rest, somewhere, anywhere.’ But Miriam will not come. The Vizier's daughter, the chiefs niece, has cast old Miriam out; is it likely that she will care to visit *the rejected – the prisoner – the slave?* Old Miriam has nothing good for you, fine, handsome, haughty maid. Your pride must have a fall. You will have dust to lick and tears to dry. Your day will soon be over and you will come to envy old Miriam, who wanders free among the Hazara hills.” Then picking up a bundle fastened in a red handkerchief, she planted

her stick firmly on the ground and slowly and steadily walked down the hill.

But Gul Begum stood still where she had left her. The flush had died out of her cheeks, and she had turned deadly pale. She made two or three steps forward, then suddenly stopped and put her hand up to her heart. She felt a chill all through her. Her fingers even were white. The group of chattering girls had melted away and she alone, cold and shivering, with a curse upon her.

CHAPTER II

FORECASTS

“WHAT was it the old woman said? Tell us once more, Shereen,”

A group of listeners and inquirers had again clustered together, this time in a more secluded spot, out of sight of most of the village houses, and there was no laughter, only eager whisperings, nodding of heads, raising of eyebrows.

What had it meant, this curse? Miriam's words often had hidden meanings; her prophecies were often difficult of interpretation, but this sounded clear enough, “Rejected – a prisoner – a slave.” There seemed

little room for conjecture here. And it was all true, of course, not one of all that eager group had any doubts as to that.

“What’s that story about the Governor of Bamian’s son, Dilbhar? You ought to know. You’re in their confidence.”

“No one is in Gul Begum’s confidence,” the girl thus addressed replied; “she never seems to take much notice of their plans; she’s a strange girl, as I always tell you. When men come to the house, it isn’t she who waits on them, or fetches the water. She will take her father *his* food and her uncle *his*, perhaps, but after that, away she goes, and neither her mother nor any one else can drag her back. The fact is, her father spoils her.”

“The fact is, she’s flying at other game,” put in one.

“The Governor of Bamian?” questioned another.

“Or perhaps a Kabul prince?” suggested a third.

“God knows,” whispered a girl who was evidently the centre of attraction, and who must have remained behind after the others had scattered in the morning, as she alone seemed to have heard what had passed between the Vizier’s daughter and old Miriam. “Whatever it is, remember the curse, ‘Rejected – a prisoner – a slave.’”

“Ah! That’s it, I see it now; she’s flying too high. What was it you said about her pride having a fall? Tell us again, Shereen?”

“Your pride must have a fall. You will have dust to lick, and tears to dry,” repeated the girl thus addressed, with more gusto than such direful words spoken of her cousin would seem to warrant.

“Have you heard anything about her horoscope, Shereen?” asked one older than the rest, who had not hitherto mingled in the general conversation.

“Her horoscope? No, that is one of the things I have against my uncle; he never will have horoscopes made out; he does not believe in them; and as my father was away when I was born, *I* have no true horoscope either. My uncle was left in charge of the family, of course, but as he takes no interest in these things, he had nothing done at the time, and no one specially marked down the moment of my birth.”

“I thought you had had your horoscope cast,” Dilbhar said thoughtfully, “and wasn’t there something strange and not altogether lucky about it?”

Shereen reddened, and seemed put out. “You’re thinking of some idle tales told long afterwards when the hour and even the exact day of my birth had been forgotten; that does not count. What is the good of bringing up old foundationless gossip that is best forgotten?”

“Ah, well, but you and Gul Begum were born on the same day, at almost the same hour and same spot,” another put in somewhat viciously; “whatever is her fate is yours, Shereen, that’s clear.”

“How so?” asked the chiefs daughter indignantly; “would you have my fate as hers? ‘Rejected – a prisoner – a slave?’ *she* may have held *her* nose too high, but what have I done that I should share the same fate? Why thrust her ill-luck on me? Besides, I was born after her by several hours, and a very little time makes all the differences in the world.”

“No one thrusts ill-luck on you, it’s the stars,” Dilbhar said sadly. “Who can fight against them? They are far beyond all reach, past all control. They make one’s Kismet.”

“Did they make your Kismet, black-faced one?” Shereen asked petulantly; “did they cause your disgrace?” She was angry at the allusion to the horoscope she had thought forgotten, but which, though she denied its accuracy, in her heart of hearts, she dreaded.

Dilbhar, insulted, rose angrily; this perpetual allusion to the past was unbreakable, and a quarrel seemed imminent when a shadow fell across the group. It was Gul Begum, with her earthen milking vessel in her hand; she was on her way to the plain to milk the sheep.

“Dilbhar, it’s milking time,” she said quietly. There was a strange authoritative way about her, which compelled obedience, and Dilbhar slunk off to the house for her vessels, and the group was soon dispersed, for Gul Begum had caught Shereen’s eye, and without uttering a word, had conveyed a reproach which, though it stung the chiefs daughter, incited her to do something more dignified than gossip, and repeat the idle tales her cousin’s soul abhorred.

And Gul Begum walked on, without once turning her head to note the effect she had produced. She was thinking – dreaming shapeless dreams, not of the Kabul prince, not of Bamian. She could hardly have put her own thoughts into words, for they were all unformed. They carried her far beyond the Hazara Hills, beyond Bamian, beyond the Court of the Iron Ameer, the man whose word was law, who swept whole villages, whole tribes, off the face of the earth, if they dared but disobey his orders, or even seem to question him.

Of him she thought often. She would like to see him just once, the man with the bushy black beard and the brow that was like the sky on a thundery day, now bright as sunshine smiles, now fierce and terrible as he showered volleys of curses on the terror stricken men who stood before him, dealing death with every flash from those relentless eyes. He must be wonderful! What power! Yes, she would like to see him, and see his wives; he had many she knew. How many? What were they like, and had they power too? How much authority lay in their hands? Was there a special favourite perhaps? One who dared face him on the stormiest days, one who could dispel the clouds and coax back the

sunshine – unwilling at first, perhaps, but yielding by slow degrees to her gentle laughter and soft, winning ways? Ah! What must she be like? Raven hair, of course, and eyes – laughing, mischievous eyes, and a skin – oh, so fair, with roses on her cheeks, and hands, little soft hands that knew nothing of work, all dimples and chubbiness. What nonsense! What a wife for such a man! No! she must be tall. I wonder if she is taller than I? And the Hazara beauty drew up her stately head and squared her broad shoulders. She must be a big woman, the Ameer's wife, tall and graceful, lithe and active, severe as he, proud as he, and as relentless, cruel too perhaps, for women are sometimes more cruel than men.

Strange stories reached the Hazara hills of the Kabul harems, those walled-in houses, where hundreds of women lived together, and not always in peace. Ah, that must be dreadful, no roaming about, free, over hills and dales, no paddling in cool streams on a sunny day, no sitting under the shade of bushes, which to Gul Begum's mind – because she knew no others – seemed like great forest trees. Yes, that would be intolerable there was no doubt about that.

Those other women had a better time, those washed-out women, who lived down south, in the hot, burning plains. Kafirs, of course, and therefore outcasts, outcasts in the next world, but not in this. Certainly those women had their paradise in this world. What was to be their portion in the next? She had heard of them from her father: - women who remained seated while their husbands stood, women who were waited on by men-servants as well as maids, women who drove and rode about with men.

Then there was that strange story about the great field, where men rode races on horses, and races on camels, and races in vehicles, some sort of cart on two wheels, but light – very light – and beautifully polished and bright. How did they get that polish? What could make wood shine like that, so that you could see your face reflected in it? What skilled workmen they must be, and all for what? Why, that the winners of these races might go up to a tent – a great white tent – from which fine cloths of red and white and blue were suspended and fluttered in the breeze, and there with uncovered heads receive their reward – from a chief, a general, think you? No, nothing of the kind; from a woman, a woman with hair like gold, polished, shining gold. That must be a wondrous sight – golden hair! But what made it gold? What a position! What a glory! Those men who had won, bareheaded before her, proud to be worthy so to stand. And Gul Begum sighed. Kafirs, of course, or such things would be impossible, for women are born to be in subjection to men, to wait upon them and serve them. Must they for ever be in subjection? Why? Because it was God's law and there was no disputing that.

But she had known one woman, years ago, when she was quite a little child, a woman even Hazara men looked up to, and loved, and waited on. It was her grandmother, her father's mother. "I am something like

her,” she would say to herself, and smile over her bowl in which the milk was frothing almost to the brim, “but she was fairer than I, though not so tall, and she was not a Hazara; who was she, I wonder, and where did she come from? I am glad I am tall; my father says I should have been a boy. Why was I not a boy? Ah, if I were only a man I would not stay here in these mountains, at least not altogether. I would travel. I would go and see those white-faced women; not that I would pay them homage or wait upon them, certainly not; that would be unseemly in a Hazara, but I would see them and the strange institutions of their tribe. Those great long vehicles, bigger than a row of twenty elephants, that move so fast that no horse is swift enough to follow them. How on earth do they move so fast? What runs faster than a horse? ‘Vapour, smoke’ her father had said, but there must be a mistake there, she could not have heard aright, that was, of course, ridiculous, but he had said something about a long tube from which smoke ascended. That must be a curious tribe, she would certainly like to visit them,” but instead, as her milking vessel was full, she rose, placed it on her head, and walked slowly home. Miriam and her curse were for the time being quite forgotten; she lived in a dream world of her own, and the trifling occurrences of her uneventful life had but little interest for her.

CHAPTER III

GATHERING CLOUDS

THE broad plain below the village tower had turned from a vivid green to a dull brown; not a camel was to be seen, and only here and there a few stray donkeys and some goats, which strolled lazily about cropping off the last green shoots, or nibbling at the sticks, which were all that was left of the bushes that in the spring had been covered over with greyish-white leaves and blossoms. The sheep and cattle had been driven to the higher regions, from which the snow had now completely melted, and where the grass was still plentiful, for spring had given place to summer, and the sun had been doing its very best for several weeks to reduce the lower plains into an arid wilderness of stones and scrub.

Only where the wheat stood ready for the sickle was there any sign of cultivation, and much of that even had been removed, and the ground prepared for the crop of Indian corn which a group of labourers was busy planting. It was a hot, cheerless day, misty, oppressive.

“Is your food not to your taste, father?” Gul Begum asked as she went outside and joined him as he sat in the shadow cast by the tower across the court.

“The food’s right enough,” he said, “but this is not a time for much eating; fetch me some water, or no, is there any tea? Make me some tea, Gul Begum!”

“Something is wrong,” the girl muttered, as she disappeared inside the dwelling; “there is something more than thunder in air; it isn’t that he is not hungry, he had forgotten to take his food though he was sitting there in front of it,” and as she came out with a tray in her hand she knew that she had guessed aright, for he was eating; whatever was the matter it was not sufficient to spoil his appetite.

“Will you take your food first, or shall I pour out your tea?” she asked.

The Vizier pushed the dish from which he had been eating from his with a sigh.

“That’s enough,” he said, “give me the tea, ah, good girl, I see you have remembered, that’s capital! To be worth anything tea must be piping hot.”

Gul Begum had removed the thick coloured quilt, which, in obedience to her father’s instructions, she had made and thrown over the tray and its contents.

“Two cups, I notice!” the father went on, smiling; “you are cultivating your father’s taste for tea, I see. Pity you were not a boy, Gul Begum; you ought to have been a boy, you have the size of a man, and the strength and endurance of a man, and, yes, I think I may say the wits of a man.”

“If I have the wits of a man, tell me what is the matter, and why you forgot to eat your dinner?” his daughter asked, sitting down beside him coaxingly; “what trouble is there in the air?”

“Ah, there you show something more than the wits of a man,” he said, laughing outright; “those are the wits of my dead mother appearing again in you; she was a strange woman, Gul Begum, and none of us knew rightly where she came from, she did not know herself, but she was a fine woman, the finest woman I have ever seen in these parts; there was nothing of the Hazara in her.”

“There is not much of the Hazara in you,” the girl said boldly.

“Now there you are wrong,” the Vizier replied hurriedly. “I’m a hazara to the backbone, but it’s my mother’s blood in me, perhaps, that gives me a love of adventure and travel, and makes me hate to see my countrymen mere beasts of burden, animals, with no thought beyond

the clothes they wear, the rock or the mud that gives them shelter, and the next morsel they can get to stuff down their throats.”

“It is their Kismet,” Gul Begum said, “what can they do?”

“What, indeed? Pay taxes to the Ameer of Kabul, forsooth, we who are free, as free as he. Let him pay taxes to us; we do far more for him than ever he does for us.”

“What is this about paying taxes, father? Who can demand taxes from us who are free and owe tribute to none?”

“That you may well ask. Who devastated the hillsides for miles? Who destroyed half the villages around Jellalabad? Who made a tower of Shinwaris heads? Who does these deeds of blood?”

“Ah, there you are unjust, father; the iron hand that swept these robbers off the face of the earth brought peace and safety to thousands of honest traders and herdsmen; there is nothing to regret in the destruction of the Shinwaris. We must be just. The wives and mothers and children of those robbers may have suffered, but for all others in was a gain. We must be just, I say.”

“True enough,” her father retorted pensively. “The world lost nothing in the Shinwaris. But the man who overthrew Jadu and Dadu can overthrow others too, and he will, too, if they oppose him.”

“Who is talking of opposing him?” the girl questioned eagerly, half guessing the truth.

“I am,” her father said. “I refuse to pay him the tribute he has sent to demand.”

“Why does he suddenly ask tribute of us, father; what have we done to gain his displeasure? How have we excited his wrath?”

“What have we done? Just what we’ve done for hundreds of years, no more, no less; we have lived free among our own hills untrammelled, now and again carrying off some Afghan girls and cattle in return for some they have carried off of ours. Just vengeance.”

“Just vengeance, indeed; who would do less?”

“No *man*, that’s just the point; but this Iron Ameer, he would fain be the *only* man in all the land, and bids all the other men be women. He had forbidden feuds, and vengeance. He is no Mohamedan, he had forgotten the ancient law, ‘an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,’ and he says there is to be peace. The men that make raids upon their neighbours are to be exterminated, root and branch, and because our neighbours here made a raid down into an Afghan village last week, and carried off three women, two children, seven cows and some sheep, he demands restitution, and promises (if we pay him taxes) to protect

us from his subjects in the future. If we won't pay he won't insist on his subjects discontinuing their raids, and yet he says he will burn our villages and destroy our crops if we make raids on them. What sort of justice is that?"

"Father, 'twould be a good thing if these laws of retaliation were done away with. If we kept our flocks, and herds, and women, and boys, and they kept theirs. I never could see the use of these perpetual thefts and pillagings; both sides must lose in the long run. There's no sense in them."

"That's just what your grandmother would have said, and it is all true enough. Let there be peace, I say too. Let us make a mutual compact. The chiefs of the Hazaras being free with the chiefs of the Afghans and their Ameer, they also being free. Let us agree each of us to force our subjects to keep the peace, and if either side had cause for complaint, let the injured side appeal to the chiefs of the country at fault for compensation and restitution of stolen property."

"Yes, that is simple enough; here comes my uncle, arrange it with him," and Gul Begum moved off, leaving the two men to discuss the affairs of the nation.

It would have been difficult to find two men more unlike than were these two cousins. Wali Mohamed, the chief, was a typical Hazara, short, bullet-headed and pig-headed, but with a certain shrewdness, and an eye to his own interests, which made him very difficult to deal with. Ghulam Hossain was made in an altogether different mould, Gul Begum had not been far wrong when she said he was no Hazara. Tall, erect, active, intelligent, there was nothing but his massive frame, powerful hands, and certain, but much modified flatness about the face, to remind one of a Hazara, and yet he was a patriot. A man with deep-rooted devotion to the people of his forefathers and the land that had given him birth.

The discussion was a long one, but seemed to terminate satisfactorily to both parties. Ghulam Hossain called to Gul Begum to give them some more tea, and while she poured it out, he told her that they had agreed to call a meeting of the chiefs of the whole of their nation, and suggest that an envoy, bearing presents of sheep and butter and cheese, and some of their finest hand-woven cloth, should be sent to Kabul to the Ameer to express the willingness of the chiefs of the Hazaras to order their subjects to cease from the petty warfares and raids now carried on between them and the Afghan Maliks, and to beg the Ameer to order a similar truce on the part of his subjects.

"That will be all right," the Vizier's daughter said, "he is a just man, though severe, he will listen to what is reasonable and right."

"He will *not* listen," her father said shortly, "there will be war, a cruel, devastating war."

“Yes, a cruel, devastating war,” the chief said, smiling, “a cruel, devastating war, but we shall win. Win as we’ve always won before. Let them try, and they will see us triumph over them, slaying thousands, as our forefathers slew.”

“We shall *not* triumph,” the Vizier said again, sadly, “we shall not slay, whichever way we act, our freedom is over, but we can at least die like men.”

“Why do you say that, father? Our country has remained unconquered for hundreds of years, why should it be conquered now?”

“Times are changed, customs, manners weapons, warfare is changed everywhere but with us. The Afghans have allied themselves with the Kafirs, the white governors of Hindustan; these Kafirs have given them weapons, given them cannon, given them money. One-third of our nation will be bought over, one third will be killed, and the remainder will be fugitives or slaves. I see it all! But I will face it – face it to the end. I will *not* pay tribute.”

“No, nor I,” the chief joined in, “but we will not be overthrown; we will not be defeated. The Afghans have allied themselves with the Kafirs; so be it. Let their alliance prove their curse. We will proclaim a Jihad, a holy war, against these allies of Kafirs. Half his own nation will turn against him. We will fight for the one true God and his prophet, and for Ali against these Kafirs and allies of Kafirs, and you will see who will flock to our standard. Overthrown? Of course we shall not be overthrown, we shall triumph and take tribute from them.” The chief’s white teeth gleamed and his deep-set eyes twinkled with cunning and anticipation of good things to come.

His cousin’s teeth were clenched, his jaws set, his mind was made up, but there was neither triumph nor hope in his face, nothing but fixed purpose and fixed resolution. Gul Begum, facing the two men, read the thoughts of each, and a sense of unrest took possession of her heart. Her uncle’s sense of security was no satisfaction to her, with her father’s set face before her, she knew which was the master mind.

CHAPTER IV

THE RULERS OF THE COUNCIL

ANOTHER group of eager debaters. Men this time. Fit mates for the squat little women to whom the reader has already been introduced. Short, broad, sturdy little people, in coarse, dust-coloured woollen garments, a strip of the same material would round and round their legs from the ankle to the knee, serving as gaiters, and their bare feet encased in coarse heavy boots. Such a chattering and gesticulating!

Three men sat apart and talked more quietly; one seldom spoke at all. He wore a discontented, tired sort of look and at last he rose. "I will tell you what it is," he said; "it's pretty clear that we all refuse to pay this tax. All this talking and wrangling has brought us *thus* far; and it is equally clear that our refusing to do so means war, but it does not seem that any one is asking himself the question, 'Are we prepared for war?'"

"Of course we are prepared for war," the taller of the men who remained sitting answered.

"How?" asked the other scornfully.

"As we have always been in past centuries."

"But I tell you things have changed. What *was* is passed, what we have to look to is what *is*."

"We *have* looked to it. There is what there has always been – knives, swords, guns, and men; what more do you want?"

Ghulam Hossain (for it was he who had risen and now stood talking) answered with two words:

"Discipline – money."

“Discipline? What of that? Were our fore-fathers drilled? And as to money – when men fight for their country and their religion, they want no pay.”

“Ah! There we are back again. No, our fore-fathers were not drilled, but we have to look to the sort of men we are going to pit ourselves against. The new Ameer is not like the former rulers of Kabul, who met our flint-lock guns with flint-lock guns, our hill-knives with hill-knives, our home-made swords with home-made swords. Those days are all changed. Do you know what a Henri-Martini rifle is?”

“Ah, those are the guns; good guns indeed, and good enough soldiers, those Goras (the name given to British infantry soldiers), on a plain, but no good for our crags. I have seen them – can't keep their heads under cover for a minute, and then are surprised when they get potted off.”

“But what's the good of talking of them; we're not going to fight with them.” The shorter of the three men remarked.

“Perhaps not, but the men we are going to fight are Helas, not Goras, not the sort that cannot keep their heads under cover, and are not used to crags. They are mountaineers like ourselves, and they have Henri-Martini rifles. Do you think the Ameer of Kabul has been idle these last ten years? He had made friends with the Feringhees, in Hindustan and they have given him money, guns, and men. When I was in Kabul, there were no less than seventeen of these Kafirs at work there, and they have made a village, no, a town, I tell you, where every kind of gun and implement of war is made. A trained Kafir for every department, and a Royal Sirdar over all – I have seen it, so I know.”

“You have seen it with your own eyes, or is this mere hearsay?” questioned the other speaker.

“I have seen it,” the Vizier said emphatically; and he walked away slowly with his head bent down.

“Is Ghulam Hossain turning traitor?” the other asked of the third member of the little group, whom we should recognise as the chief – Shereen's father.

“He is not a traitor, but he is full of forebodings; he believes that the days of the independence of the Hazaras are counted. What do *you* say?”

“I? – I say that our men have more determination in the gristle of their ears than the Afghans have in their whole body. I say, let the Afghans attack our natural forts that the God of our Prophet has given us, let them try their Henri-Martinis on our mountains. What of guns? Feringhee-made guns, forsooth! When we have God's own everlasting mountains at our back! Guns, indeed!” and the old man laughed. “I have a better weapon than guns to wield – you remember that I told

you? – and I have been active since then. I have stirred the people up – I have told them of this unholy alliance with the infidels – the enemies of God. The Ghazis are up in arms – and low be it spoken – many of the Afghans themselves are tired of this ‘one man rule’ and tyranny, and have promised to join, for I have proclaimed a Jihad against this ally of the Feringhee.”

“You have? Then all will be well. Who can stand against the Ghazi? Not even the Feringhee. I can see them as they lay dead in heaps; they fought hard, but what availed their rifles? Their bodies blocked the Jugdullick Valley, and the kites and vultures that collected there could be seen hovering over it for miles around for many a day; and their rifles, these boasted rifles, why, they lay there beside them, too, useless. I know a man who has one, and you know him too – gave his daughter for it, so they say; not a nice thing to do, but he had four, and little enough to get them husbands with. I daresay he did right – or right enough. He’s married off two since then, and the rifle is a good one. I would give something for one myself.”

“Your daughter?” asked the Sayad sarcastically. “Shereen? No, not Shereen. I have only one, and, thank God, I can afford to keep her, and give her a dowry, too, when I have seen the man worthy of her.” “Silence!” shouted Ghulam Hossain, who had at that moment rejoined the group, and stood among these dusky little figures as a Saul in Israel. “Silence, and listen to this letter which I have drafted to send to Kabul by such messengers as you may appoint.

“To your friend and neighbour, the great, the illustrious Ameer of Afghanistan,

“We have received your letter and understand from its contents that the recent raids committed by our villagers upon yours are displeasing to you, and that you demand restitution. This would be just had not this raid been undertaken to avenge similar losses inflicted on our people by yours. We therefore decline to make restitution. We also understand from your letter that you hate these unfriendly expeditions between two neighbouring countries, which ought to be friendly, and that you are willing to protect our villages from your subjects, provided we are willing to pay you a tax for the support and maintenance of the soldiers and officials whom you must employ to do this. In answer to this we beg to say that we too hate these unseemly robberies and murders, that we too wish for peace, and that we hereby offer to keep our tribesmen in subjection, or, in we fail, send any pillagers to you for punishment should they infringe such new laws as we shall make regarding raids, if you, on your part, will do the same by us. There will be no need for taxes; we shall confer a mutual benefit the one upon the other. We trust that this proposition will meet with your approval, and

appeal to that sense of injustice and right for which you have already so great a name among the followers of the one true God and of his Prophet. We are your sincere friends, well-wishers, and allies, etc., etc.'

“Has any one any objections to make to that?”

“Yes, we are neither his friends nor his well-wishers, nor his allies, cursed be his father, and his father's father,” said one little man, in no wise distinguished from the rest of the group, unless by an even greater ugliness, and more specially nodulated head.

“Let him first make us restitution for all that his people have taken from ours since he came to the throne,” cried another.

“Let him rather pay us taxes,” suggested a third. “Cursed be the father of his taxes, who talks of taxing a free people?”

The Sayad had been sitting still, playing with some little lumps of dry clay, which he had broken off and was still arranging in a sort of pattern, but he looked up and said authoritatively: “Let that letter stand. It is just and reasonable, and choose out three men who shall take it to Kabul, carrying with them sheep, and goats, and cloth, presents to the Ameer. I nominate Ghulam Hossain as one who shall go; who do you choose?”

“You, Sayad, you,” called out several voices all at once.

“No, I will not go; there is nothing to say to the Ameer that is not in the letter. – Yet, stay! Yes, I will go, I may find something to say, yes, I will go, it will suit me well.”

There was much discussion about the third member, but he was at last appointed, and the little group broke up. It was not often that a Hazara council ended in so satisfactory a manner. The business they had come to discuss had actually been got through – a course of action been decided upon, and each member was waddling about smiling and giggling, congratulating himself on the important part he had taken in the new plan of action. Only the two men who had guided them, or rather, over-ruled them, did not congratulate themselves, but retired into the Vizier's house, and there remained deep in conversation, far into the night.

“With money all could be managed,” the Vizier said; “we could bribe the men of this own household.”

“By firing them with religious zeal all *shall* be managed. I will prove that the ally of Christians is no Mohamedan, and that his own subjects, therefore, owe him no allegiance, his own bodyguard shall turn against him.”

“He knows the Koran, he will defeat you. I have myself heard him justify this alliance from ‘The Book,’ which says, ‘There are of those

who have received the Scriptures, upright people – they mediate on the signs of God in the night-season, and worship. They believe in God and the Last Day, and command that which is just, and forbid that which is unjust, and zealously strive to excel in good works; these are the righteous.’”

“The Prophet wrote that of the people of this day; that remnant is long since dead. He rooted out these hateful Feringhee, these Kafirs who have rejected the one true God and despised his Prophet. What have we to do with such as these? If you think otherwise you are out of Islam.”

The old man grew excited and his eyes seemed to flash fire, but the Vizier was quite unmoved.

“Your scheme is an excellent one,” he said quietly. “I am only considering whether there is any chance of its succeeding. The Ameer has strange answers to such styles of reasoning; he fears no man. I have sometimes doubted whether he fears the Higher Powers still.”

“I know him better; he does fear – he fear man more than God, and he will soon have cause to fear him,” the Sayad said, rising to prepare his bed for the night.

CHAPTER V

PREPARATIONS FOR A JOURNEY

“WHAT? Two clean shirts and two pairs of white trousers? Nonsense, Gul Begum, your father can't have said that; he must have meant that he wished the shirt he went away in to be a clean one, and another with him to change. No man could want two spare shirts. I would venture to say that your uncle would not take one. He'll not be more than a month away.”

“He said, ‘Get two shirts ready for me to take with me, new ones if possible; I can ride in an old one, and I want two pairs of white trousers. I shall ride in barak, but I want the others with me; it will be hot.’”

“And who's to make them, I shall like to know; and where is so much stuff to come from?” the elder woman went on fretfully.

“There's plenty in the store, enough for a dozen shirts,” her daughter said, “I'll cut them out now, and Dilbhar can set to work at once, and Shereen will help, and you, too, my flower,” she said, stooping down to fondle a child of about nine years old, and who, from her resemblance to the speaker, would have been recognised anywhere as her sister. “Then where is Fatina? She can sew well; and, mother, you can help. Why, it will be all done by to-morrow.”

“I will not have two shirts cut out until I've seen your father myself, it's quite unheard of; I'm sure you've made a mistake, Gul Begum.”

“I've made no mistake, and I don't see why it should be unheard of – the old one for the road and two to change about when he gets to Kabul. It seems to me just what he ought to have.”

“Oh yes, it would just suit you, only you would travel in a new one and have the store cupboard left full too, as well as the saddle-bags, and I suppose they would all be gold embroidered. We shall never get you married, girl. Why, the man does not live that could keep such a wife.”

“The men don't seem to agree with you, mother,” the girl retorted, smiling, a strange light in her eyes, a smile of pride and conscious power on her lips – a smile that seemed to say, “There are so many, it is for me to choose, not they, and yet I choose none, I put them all aside, I will have none of them. The hero of my dreams has not appeared, he has yet to come forward. Where is he?” and then the light and the smile slowly faded and gave way to a certain sadness that seemed to ask, “Will he come? Will he ever come? This ideal, this hero. Perhaps not, probably never, and then what?”

“See that my leggings have their ties well sewn on,” her father said as he came in. “I saw a nice kind when I was in Kabul. I wonder if you could make me a pair like them. Instead of being a strip of barak to wind round and round the leg like ours, these were cut to the shape of the leg and buttoned down the outer side.”

“What new-fangled notion is this?” asked his wife.

“A good notion, I think,” he said quietly. “Come, Gul Begum, see if you could manage a pair for me.”

The girl looked thoughtful. “I could in leather,” she said, “but not in barak, at least I think not I think they would crease and rumple; it seems to me it would have to be something stiffer.”

“Then make me one pair in leather and one in barak, that’s much the best. Then we are sure to be right.”

“And when is all this to be done, and who’s to do it?” asked his wife.

“I leave the day after to-morrow,” he said, “at dawn, and as to who’s to do it, that’s no affair of mine. I have a wife, three daughters, and a servant; that should be plenty, and Shereen will help too, I know.”

“I daresay, but what about these new shirts and trousers? Who’s to make them?”

“There, that again is no affair of mine. I want them, you have to provide them; you should keep these things ready, made in case of emergency; then when they were wanted there would be no hurry and bustle.”

“Yes, I daresay, for you to give to the first vagrant who chooses to call himself a Mullah or a Sayad. I’m not quite as foolish as that.”

“There – it is for you to choose. I don’t lay down strict rules, I have no laws in my own house; you do as you choose, of course, but if your plan gives you extra work, don’t blame me. Gul Begum can make the leggings. The new shirts and trousers ought to be ready in the store; if they are not, arrange as best you can, but see that they are ready at daybreak the day after to-morrow.”

There was nothing harsh in the way he spoke, simply an absence of all affection. He gave his orders. This woman was his life. He provided her with a good house, the most luxurious and plentifully supplied in the country side. She had borne him five children, two sons and three daughters, of whom Gul Begum, then fifteen, was the eldest, so he was fairly satisfied with her. He did his duty by her, in providing her with plenty of clothes and food, and he expected her to do her duty by him. Had she been sick he would have secured the services of the best herbalist in the neighbourhood for her, and given her the best that his

country afforded. If he required anything, he expected her to provide it. It was fair enough; what else should a wife expect?

As for his love for Gul Begum, that was a thing quite apart. He could have found many wives that would have suited him just as well as Halima, women who would have made just as good mothers for his children, and have kept his house just as well better perhaps. But with his daughter it was altogether different. There was only one Gul Begum. All Hazara could not have produce another. She was head and shoulders taller than the tallest woman in the country; she was twice as strong and active; twice as quick at her work; and as to intelligence, they were all fools when they tried to measure their wits against hers.

What was to be done with this girl? His beloved, his treasure. Of course he would have to give her to a husband some day; that was unavoidable. It was one of the customs of his nation, a custom that could not be broken under any circumstances. But must he part with her? He thought not sometimes, for he could find some fairly intelligent boy, the son of poor parents, to whom he would give her on condition that he gave up his own home and came and lived in hers. In that way he could keep his daughter with him without going against the traditions of his tribe.

But sometimes he formed more ambitious schemes, and this evening, on the eve of his departure for Kabul, it was these plans that were taking up his attention. The governor of Bamian had a son, a boy of sixteen; he was of the Afghan blood royal. Could he not, by allying her to this family, secure certain advantages? – not only for his family but for his whole nation? He could give her a dowry – a very handsome dowry, quite sufficient to tempt the governor, but would he by this means secure what he wanted? He must make sure of that; it would never do for him to give her up and then find that the sacrifice had been all to no purpose, for he had yet another scheme. The son of the Ameer of Kabul was just sixteen too, and he thought he would be more likely to secure his object by making an alliance there; the difficulty in that case was that what he could offer as a dowry would be no great inducement to the son of a man who could command the best and handsome of many nations, who could plan an alliance with Turkey or with Egypt.

That certainly was rather ambitious, but was is too ambitious? It might suit him well, and now was the time to suggest it. A diplomatic marriage had often been made when two nations were one the eve of war; why should not such a marriage stop war at the present crisis? And then a wild plan came into his mind; the Ameer wanted to unite the land of the Hazaras with Afghanistan; here was his chance; no Hazara unless, perhaps, Sayad Mir Hassan, had Ghulam Hossain's diplomatic skill, could he not by this alliance, unite those two countries? Who so queenly as Gul Begum? Why should not she be Queen – Queen of the whole Hazara tribe? Who had a better right? Few knew, except Ghulam Hossain himself, that he was the richest man in

all Gaur; that he was the most able, none would have thought of disputing. What easier, then, that to make himself chief? But he need not even do that, for he need not reveal his designs till the last moment. If, as he suspected, the Ameer meant to amalgamate the two countries, he would do it *coute que coute*; what were the lives of a few hundred soldiers to him? He would not hesitate to declare war, and, if war were made, there was but one result possible: the Hazaras would be massacred and carried off into slavery, and their country would be confiscated. The only conceivable plan for saving his people was this alliance, with the clear understanding, of course, that Gul Begum's son should succeed as Sultan of the Hazaras; this must be made quite clear; that was, in fact, essential, or the Hazaras would no longer be an independent people, and what could be easier or more suitable?

The only difficulty lay in the fact that he was not the chief and had no business to place his daughter on the throne. No, he had no right, but what of right? Had the Ameer any right to intrigue to take a free country? Certainly he had *none*, but Ghulam Hossain had *some* right. He was himself a Hazara, the grandson of a Hazara chief, and furthermore, his marrying his daughter to a Kabul prince on condition that her son should succeed to the sultanate would save many lives, perhaps the freedom of the whole country. It was all quite justifiable.

But suppose Gul Begum had no children; a distinct difficulty came in there. What, however, was the use of meeting troubles half way, and of taking such an unfortunate contingency into account? Of course she would have children. Gul Begum, young, healthy, active, supple, - why, of course she would; that possibility need not be taken into consideration at all. And so, having settled all this in his mind, he went off to arrange about his ponies for the journey. He would take a servant, too, and a pack pony. He would not go as a beggar but as a chief; a chief about to make a political alliance with another, and, he was bound to own, more powerful chief. And his wife! She had begrudged him a change of clothes, had thought his old ones good enough to go to Kabul in! a fine idea that when he was going to make such an arrangement as would make her the grandmother of the future Sultan; and he smiled to himself as he passed from one pony to another, and had their blankets removed, so that he might inspect their backs; and with such thoughts as these he started at daybreak the following day but one.

He was wearing the barak leggings Gul Begum had made him; the leather ones were among his clothes on the pack animal, where, also, there were the new garments he had required. For two nights no member of his family had gone to bed.

CHAPTER VI

CUCKOOS AND HEDGE SPARROWS

GHULAM HOSSAIN had left home with a light heart, full of ambitious designs, full of hope. He returned dejected, hopeless.

Gul Begum saw something of all this in the far distance. She guessed it by the way he sat his horse; she knew it when he greeted her two miles from their village, where she had gone to meet him.

He seemed pleased to see her, and she knew that her little attention in meeting him had not been thrown away upon him, though he said not a word upon the subject, and took not the faintest pains to conceal his low spirits from her. There was, however, no trace of disappointment in his manner when he rode up to The Tower, where he dismounted. On the contrary, he greeted every one with effusion, and was particularly gracious when he unloaded the pack pony.

“Here is a Khilat (Coat of honour, official present) for you,” he said to his cousin, unfastening a parcel containing a coat of purple cloth edged with gold braid; “the Ameer gave it to *me*, but I told him to would hand it on to you as chief of this sub-division of our sultanate; you have a better right to it than I.”

“It’s a fine garment,” Wali Mohamed said, grinning. “I wonder how I shall look in it.”

“Put it on him, Gul Begum,” his cousin replied, “and let us see.”

“Ah, none of your tricks with me,” the little man said, almost blushing at the idea of putting on anything so smart, “such robes are not for me.”

But Gul Begum thought it a great joke, and insisted, and he, not altogether displeased, allowed himself to be dressed up, though, truth to tell, he looked, when he had got it on, more grotesque than ever, not unlike a monkey on a barrel-organ the most marvellous of human inventions, never even having heard of such a thing, so that simile did not strike her, but something else must have, for she burst into such screams of laughter that Shereen and her mother, and all the rest of the Vizier’s family, came rushing to see what was the cause of such merriment.

Now that it was once on, her uncle was in no wise disposed to lay his newly acquired property down, but strutted about in it, to the immense admiration of all but Gul Begum and her father, who had exchanged mischievous glances, and still continued laughing.

“You’ve got the credit of being a wise man,” Ghulam Hossain’s wife said, addressing her husband, when they had gone indoors, “but I think you must keep your wisdom for the chiefs councils.”

“How so?” he asked good-humouredly.

“What advantage do you expect to get from Wali Mohamed by giving him that coat? Many’s the thing I’ve seen go from this house to that,

but there's never even an old shoe that I've seen come from that house to this."

"Oh, that's it, is it?" he said. "I might have guessed as much. Would you really have liked to see me made a laughing stock of before the whole village?"

"Who's being made a laughing stock of?" his wife went on. "It's you that have made a laughing stock of yourself, giving your good clothes away and wearing your old ones."

"I only gave away what I would never have dreamt of wearing, myself," her husband replied quietly. "When would you wish me to appear in such a coat?"

"Why, at Durbar of course."

"At Durbar? In a coat given me by the enemy of our country? That would look strange, would it not?"

"I don't see that it would look strange at all; if you could accept it, you could surely wear it."

"To have refused it would have been to insult the giver, and so bring the present unsatisfactory state of affairs to a more speedy head. I could not have done that. But to wear it! That's another thing; to wear it would imply gratification, pleasure in the gift. No, I could not have worn it, even had it been a suitable thing to wear in our mountain home."

"Then you might have given it to one of your own household, who could have worn it and enjoyed it," she went on, a little petulantly. "There's Gul Begum there" (her father turned and looked at the girl half regretfully), "or me" (her husband looked at her and smiled, a little scornfully perhaps); "it would have done well for me in the winter. It is a good thick, warm coat. Did you notice it, Gul Begum? It is lined with Bokhara silk."

"Yes, I noticed," the girl said, "but it's not a woman's coat. It would have looked ridiculous on one of us. Now, if it were not that he looks so foolish in it, it is just the thing for my uncle, the chief."

Ghulam Hossain had left the room, and now returned with his hands full of parcels.

"Leave Wali Mohamed his coat," he said, "and you can make what you like of these; here is stuff for coats for you all and to spare," and while the women were gloating over their newly acquired treasures, the Vizier went out and joined a group of men who had already assembled in the courtyard to hear the result of the mission.

All that actually transpired was that the Ameer had granted the envoys several public interviews, when they had set at one end of a long room, while he had sat on his couch at the end of the other; that he had been gracious and courteous, but had also been firm. "The Hazaras," he said, "were excellent, useful, hard-working people, people whose value he appreciated, and whom he was most desirous of having as friends, but they were aliens, and therein, no doubt, lay the cause *casus belli*. They had been planted in Gaur, part of the territory proper of Afghanistan, by aliens who had retreated into the regions from which they had sprung, leaving these cuckoos behind. There they have lived and multiplied, in the land of the Afghans, without even owning allegiance to the prince whose territory they occupied. Other aliens, taking advantage of the disjointed condition in which the country had been for centuries, had done the same thing. The Hazaras were by no means the only offenders, nor were they serious offenders. The Ameer had laughed and joked and told them they had been wise and had done well, but the time had now come when all this was to be set right. This state of affairs had been proved disadvantageous to the cuckoos as well as to the hedge-sparrows, as the Afghan hedge-sparrow, unlike the feathered one, had resented the strangers and had shown fight. So he, the Ameer, the generous, the wise, having leisure now to devote to this important question, had reviewed the whole matter in his mind, and had decided that an alternation must be made, and that for the future there was to be but one ruling sovereign in the country of Afghanistan, one capital and seat of government, one military centre, and, in consequence, of course, one royal treasury. The cuckoos were, however, to be allowed to retain the nests in which they had established themselves so long ago (provided, of course, they proved themselves loyal subjects to the lawful owners and therefore worthy of the consideration shown them), but they would now be required to pay rent, in the form of taxes, for the land and houses which they occupied. Nothing could be fairer. These taxes, moreover, would be used for their own benefit for the making of roads through their own country, and for the support of an army and police for their own protection.

It had all sounded so plausible that the third member of the Hazara mission to Kabul could detect no flaw in the argument, and only shook his heavy head wisely, saying, "True, true."

Ghulam Hossain said nothing, but wrote on a piece of paper requesting a private interview with His Majesty, when neither Afghans nor the other two Hazara envoys should be present. He received for answer that his request should be considered.

Sayad Mir Hassan said nothing, so it was taken for granted that his feelings were friendly, and that he was disposed to follow the lead given by his companions, and having been about an hour in the presence chamber they were given leave to depart.

Never had any of those three mountaineers been surrounded with so much magnificence. The Sayad moved on in front, little affected by it.

The third member of the mission was lost in wonder – and perhaps admiration, who knows? – as he stood in front of a handsome pier-glass and contemplated his own squat little figure. That was all *he* saw of the magnificence of an eastern court, but it was quite sufficient, he was deeply impressed.

Ghulam Hossain gazed everywhere, saw everything, and dreamed an ambitious dream. As he stood thus for a moment lost in thought, a tall thin man, wearing the usual Afghan court dress, came up to him, and, unnoticed by any one, whispered something in his ear. Little harm, would have been done, however, had they noticed it, or had even caught what he said; it was only this, “Come to my house to-night, after evening prayers; my servant will be at the door of your house, and will conduct you.” Ghulam Hossain’s heart beat quicker and he held his head higher. Here was his chance, this man, whoever he was, must have received instructions to take him to the Ameer, and once there, what might not be arranged? This was just what he wanted. He went home with the others, but was very silent during the few hours that intervened between his return from Durbar and the hour for which the next appointment had been made. He was thinking, turning over in his mind, every conceivable course that would be open to him. As usual, however, when the time came, the offers made him were just such as had never entered his head.

CHAPTER VII

A DIPLOMATIST AT WORK

WHEN the hour of his appointment drew near, Ghulam Hossain went to the outer door and stood a moment in the street. A curious narrow street with high, irregular mud walls on either side, broken only by a very occasional window, which windows were in the upper storey, and for the most part projected out some six feet or so across the public thoroughfare, supported by stout roughly hewn pillars, placed at either of the two projecting corners, or by thinner logs placed at an angle of forty-five degrees between the wall, and the outer edges of the window.

A few children ran past at intervals, and innumerable ill-conditioned dogs. Once a woman's hand holding a vessel which was promptly emptied into the street below, appeared over the wall almost opposite to where he stood. His eyes followed the direction of the fluid as it fell from the bowl. A pool of blood which had not been there before had been formed on the ground.

A shiver ran down the Hazara's back as he stood in that strange city of which such strange tales were told, and contemplated that pool. He was not a really superstitious man, though he came of superstitious stock, and there was nothing mysterious to him in what had occurred. Some animal, a sheep, or a goat, had been killed to supply the household with food, and this was its blood, which had to be got rid of somehow, and the road was handy; there was nothing unusual in that.

Two dogs that had been strolling about in search of some such luxury as this met and snarled at each other across their loathsome meal, till a third and much larger one espied the dainty, and sent the two first comers flying.

A man in the ordinary flowing raiment of a respectable Kabuli tradesman or servant next appeared upon the scene. Under ordinary circumstances he would have attracted no attention even from a stranger, but when he came close to the place where Ghulam Hossain stood, he stooped and lifted a piece of dry mud which he flung at the hungry dog, and though there was no one else in sight or apparently within ear shot, he whispered as he did so, "Go along this street to the left, till you come in a straight line, and I will meet you." Then he passed on, pausing again some little way up the street, to fling another piece of mud at the dog, but taking care at the same time to use this opportunity for looking back and noticing if his directions had been obeyed by the man whom he had addressed.

Ghulam Hossain had recognised him. He was the servant to whom the man who had whispered to him at the gate of the palace had given his papers when he came out from Durbar early in the afternoon; and wondering wherein lay the necessity of so much secrecy and mystery, he proceeded to act on the instructions he had received. He had not gone very far after passing the baker's shop, when the same man caught him up and whispered again as he passed, "Follow me." Soon afterwards the guide stopped suddenly beside an arch, where he addressed a few words to some soldiers who were lounging about in various attitudes, then went through it and along a narrow lane, from the houses on either side of which wooden gutters kept pouring filth at intervals into the thoroughfare below. Once or twice Ghulam Hossain had suddenly to bend forward, or jump to the other side of the lane to avoid its falling on his head.

They soon stopped again, this time beside a huge roughly carved door, which they entered. They had come to their journey's end.

“Go upstairs and you will find Agha (master) alone,” the guide said, and then disappeared, to return shortly carrying a tray containing all the necessaries for tea drinking; over these was thrown a padded coverlet, such as Gul Begum had been commended for having made, but this one was of cloth of gold – the girl's had been of camel hair. Tea was partaken of almost in silence, and when this ceremony was over the servant again retired.

“What is your rank, sir, and to whom have I the honour of speaking?” Ghulam Hossain inquired as soon as the door was closed.

“My name is Ali Mohamed Khan, and I am the Ameer's confidential adviser and secretary,” the other replied. “I am commissioned to ask you why you solicited a private interview with the Ameer. Such private audiences are seldom granted to strangers, but if you and I come to such a settlement as would make such an interview desirable, His Majesty will doubtless grant you one, but he must know what your views and objects are, before such a thing can be even contemplated. The Afghan people are very suspicious, and if they thought that the Ameer was entering into private arrangements with the chiefs of alien tribes, they would suspect treachery, and he would have trouble with them.”

Ghulam Hossain understood and was satisfied, but found it far from easy, under these rather unexpected circumstances, to open out his plans, and explain his views. He did so, however, eventually, but afterwards he did not feel satisfied with himself and what he had said. He felt he had put his case badly, had not shown himself off to advantage before this tall, silent man. He could not have put his finger upon the weak spot in his argument, but he felt that there was a weak spot somewhere. Or was the whole thing weak? It had been very difficult to put it all satisfactorily, for he had met with but slight response and very little encouragement from the secretary; who kept on writing at intervals – making notes, the Hazara envoy thought, for he seldom put down more than two or three words at a time.

“Is that all?” he said, when Ghulam Hossain had finished.

“Yes, that is all I have to say,” the envoy replied, “unless you can suggest some other way out of the difficulty; my people are open to reason. What do you think the Ameer will say to my proposals?”

The secretary smiled. “It is not for me to say,” he said. “You have had no dealing with the Ameer or you would understand that it is impossible to *guess* even, how things may strike him.”

“But you must be able to form some opinion – you who are with him constantly, and carry on his correspondence. You must know so much of his dealings with foreign powers.” The envoy went on eagerly.

“With foreign *powers*, yes,” the secretary replied, placing particular emphasis on the word “powers.”

“What you mean is that I am not the representative of a foreign power, but only of a nation, which has established and maintained its independence when it ought never to have been free, but should have owned allegiance to the rulers of Kabul these hundreds of years back?” the Hazara envoy said, reddening.

“I did not say so.”

“No, but you implied it.”

“What do *you* think the Ameer implied in his interview with you to-day?”

Ghulam Hossain's heart stood still, he saw it all plainly enough now. It had not struck him in that way before, and he suddenly felt his cause was hopeless.

The secretary, who, though writing, never took his eyes for long off his visitor, saw and noted all that was going on in his mind; he had something to suggest, and was only waiting his opportunity.

“You asked me if I saw any way out of this difficulty a few minutes ago. There is, of course, a very easy way.”

Ghulam Hossain looked up, a ray of hope lightning his face. But the light soon faded. “Persuade your people that it is to their advantage to pay these taxes; you have no roads throughout your whole country, you have mere sheep tracks along which your altogether insignificant trade is carried on. You have no army, no guns, no money, to protect yourselves from foreign invaders. The Ameer wishes to see you strong, he wishes you to have an army, he will give you guns and possibly money, to make whatever is necessary for your protection.”

“Perhaps we have no roads,” the envoy said, “but if we required them we could make them, we have men enough and to spare. And what do you mean by our having no army? Why, in my country every man is a soldier. Of course, what you say about the arms is true, I feel that, and also that we have but little money wherewith to procure them, but why should any great power such as your master covet our barren hills?”

The secretary smiled. “The Ameer does not covet them,” he said, “he does not wish to interfere with you in any way, but he wishes to have his soldiers in your country to protect you from the two great Kafir nations that are advancing step by step, and closing in inch by inch around his country; he cannot afford to leave you unprotected, because once let either of those two nations in among your hills, and he will never be able to dislodge them – on the contrary, they would be able to dislodge him, so they must never get there. There are two empty natural forts that practically command the whole of Afghanistan – I say

empty, because when men know nothing of warfare, and have no army or ammunition, they are but little better than women, when it comes to war. Of these two your country is one, but there is another, with which, however, we have nothing to do just now. If these were likely to remain empty, well and good, you might each keep your hills, we do not want them. But this is not likely. These two Kafir powers I mentioned, note every weak spot, every point of vantage, in these parts; they have, without doubt, noted you for conquest, not because *they* want your hills, rocks, stones, and pasture land, but because yours is a country which commands other more fertile countries, and because a few regiments quartered there could do much to stop an army marching from the north or south, as the case might be. The Ameer has trade treaties with these Kafir nations; it would be difficult for them to make war with him, for reasons which I am not at liberty to disclose, and with which, of course, you have nothing to do; but *you* have no such treaty with either; as long as you call yourselves free, there is nothing to prevent them walking into your country, and incorporating it with their own. If, however, you were once incorporated with Afghanistan, the treaties that protect this country would also protect you, because you would be included in them.”

“Then what need of the taxes for the country and the roads,” inquired Ghulam Hossain, “if the fact that our country being allied with your means protection from outside enemies?”

“It means that for you to be recognised as Afghan subjects you must conform to Afghan laws, and be placed on the same footing as the other Afghan tribesmen, none of whom are exempt from taxation. Listen,” he said more softly, “I am disposed to be your friend; truth to tell, my sympathies are to a certain extent with you. There is no use your attempting to resist. If you agree to the Ameer’s terms now he will make easy ones. If you resist, it will be a case of fire and sword, extermination and slavery. You do not know the man you have to deal with. Go home now and come to me in two days, and let me know what course you have decided on. Believe me, there are but two alternatives. Peace with taxation, or war which will make the few survivors fugitives or slaves. You will find me here at this time the day after tomorrow, unless you hear from my servant to the contrary. Good-bye; I have other work to which I must now devote myself.” He placed his right hand on his heart and bowed, and his visitor had no choice but to retire.

Two other such visits did Ghulam Hossain pay, but each proved equally unproductive. The Ameer, it is true, had sent him private friendly messages, messages which the Hazara felt were meant to convey carefully veiled offers of bribes. Once the secretary had said, “Any of the people who are willing to submit will find a hospitable asylum in Kabul in the event of a war, and when that war is over, their land, or whatever property they may have been obliged to leave behind, will be restored to them. But if the Ameer can find a Hazara with sufficient

understanding and sufficient shrewdness to foretell the results of such a war as will assuredly be directed against this unfortunate nation should it prove refractory, and should that Hazara, from a fine spirit of patriotism, save the lives of the poor misled peasants and mountaineers by helping him to put his finger on the Mullahs and other leaders of the rebels, the men who are inciting the people to do they know not what, that man will be exalted to a rank and receive such rewards as his wildest aspirations had never led him to hope for. He might be made governor, which will be practically chief of his own country.”

Here was the very position he had coveted, that he had dreamt of, but the terms were not such as a man of his calibre could have accepted.

“You mean, should a Hazara be found mean enough and vile enough to save his own skin and property by betraying his countrymen, then his very lowness and poverty of pride and spirit would be his fortune – that is what you mean,” Ghulam Hossain said bitterly. “There are such men in the country of the Hazaras. Bribes will do much, I doubt not that you will find traitors without difficulty.”

“That is an unpleasant way of putting the case,” the secretary said, quite unmoved. “There are two sides to every question. One is at liberty to choose which side one prefers to look at. I choose the other. I should call the man who saved his country from a war that will be its undoing a patriot, not a traitor.”

“Then we never can agree,” the Hazara said hotly.

“Don’t say that,” the Afghan rejoined, “time often leads us to see things in a totally different light, *time* and change of circumstances. When you go home and note how very ignorant the people are, how over-ridden by priests as ignorant but more cunning than they; when you have realised that it is a mere question of submitting to a really trivial taxation imposed by a Mohamedan prince, or being ruled by Kafirs who will send your children to mission schools, insult your women, and teach your young men to drink spirits, then I think you may change your mind and consider than the man who helps to save his country from such calamities is a patriot as I said, and not a traitor. It seems to me that the man who plays into the hands of Kafirs is a traitor to his God.”

But Ghulam Hossain remained silent. He made no mention of these visits to the other envoys. He felt it to be unnecessary, especially as the Sayad made no mention of the way in which *he* had spent his time, but there was little doubt in his companion’s mind as to what he had been doing; he had been inciting all the Hazaras and as many of the Afghans as he found discontented (and there were many such) to rebel against their ruler.

After a month's visit, during which time everything was done to impress upon them the luxury, comfort, and prosperity enjoyed by their hosts and the good-will of the Ameer towards them, the Hazara envoys were given leave to depart, which they did, laden with gifts of various kinds: ponies, stuffs, shawls, and a coat of honour.

Now that they fully understood the Ameer's intentions, and his friendly feelings towards them and their nation, they were to consult with their chiefs, and bring him word again what course had been decided on. He gave them six months, the winter in fact, when there was little else to do, to discuss these matters, and at the end of that time, if he did not hear from them, they would *hear from him – that* was all.

CHAPTER VIII

THE CLOUDS DARKEN

SUMMER had given place to autumn, autumn to winter, and the winter snow had already melted in the valleys. Flocks and herds innumerable again covered the lower slopes of the hills, for the grass was green as green could be, the air was clear, the sky blue, as the year before, and the year before that, and nothing seemed changed or likely to be changed.

Time did but little work in those unfrequented valleys. Only some useless old body had here and there been laid to rest, and in some of the houses a new inmate had made his or her appearance, little welcomed or noticed by the other inmates of the household. These were the natural events of everyday life, and excited no more comment than

did the fall of snow, and less than the strength of the spring or autumn gales.

Nor were they half so important, or of such general interest even to the persons most nearly concerned. Children born in the year of unusually heavy snows or some specially devastating gale bore a date, the others had none except as they might be younger or older than the dated children, and that was indefinite enough. If so unusual an inquiry was made as to the age of any individual that answer could be arrived at after a good many arithmetical calculations, "Well, he was born a year or two before the great storm."

"And when was the great storm?" would be the most natural rejoinder.

"The great storm? That was six winters before it snowed blood."

"Good gracious, when was that?"

"That was the winter before the Ameer Sahib came from Russia."

So there you had your date as nearly as you were likely to get one, and it was seldom you got as near as that. But this is digression.

Two men in all the country round felt that to these unchanged scenes a change was coming. Both knew that war was imminent. The one was full of hope, he felt the change was to be for the better, more power, more riches, and consequently greater luxury; the other foresaw nothing but disaster, defeat, and ruin; the one busied himself in every township for miles around, and where he could not find time to go himself, there he sent emissaries stirring up the people, filling them with more religious zeal than any casual observer would have believed those wiry little creatures capable of; exciting their bitterest hatred against the man who had declared himself their lawful ruler, and who, moreover, belonged to a different section of the Mohamedan religion. The other sat in his house and brooded. He, at least, seemed to have changed already, changed from being even tempered, full of anecdote and gaiety, fond of sport and all exercise, to a man morose, silent, preoccupied, who seldom left his home.

"What are you doing here, blocking up the place when I am busy?" his wife said to him one morning.

"What am I doing here?" he had replied angrily; "that's a strange question to ask a man in his own house."

"Father, I wish you would do something for me," Gul Begum said, coming to the rescue, as she now seemed so often obliged to do.

"What! Do you want to get rid of me too?" he said sadly.

“No, father, certainly not,” she replied, trying to be gay, and seating herself half behind him, so that she could get her arms around him, and at the same time lay her head on his shoulder, “but the sheep must be looked after. My grandfather has, I hear, a fine flock of Kohistani sheep; we want some new blood in ours. I wish you would go down and see what exchanges you could make; I could let them have some fine cows; or if they won't exchange, we might buy a ram or two,” and she whispered something in his ear.

He smiled and pulled her cheek caressingly. “I was keeping it all for your wedding,” he said playfully.

“My wedding? Ah, I see it is you who want to get rid of me, so that is all you care about me, is it?” she said pouting. “Well, just to punish you, I'll make you spend it on sheep.”

“I don't mean to do that,” he said, becoming suddenly stern; “there will be enough to do with what little money we can collect, soon.”

“Yes, much to do,” she said, laughing still, and trying to ignore his sudden change of manner, “for I want a camel as well as the sheep; we really need it, father, you have not half looked after the animals lately.”

“Listen, Gul Begum,” he said. “I will exchange whatever you like, and if you have sheep to sell I will sell them for you, but I won't spend money, on that I'm quite determined.”

Her mother had by this time gone outside; she was busy washing the cooking utensils; but Gul Begum looked sharply round the room, as though making sure there were no listeners near.

“Father, what is it?” she asked eagerly. “I know there is something wrong; you have been full of anxieties and troubles for months, ever since you came back from Kabul. You went away so merrily. What has made you so despondent since your return?”

He hung his head; his plans, his hopes, his ambitions, his dreams, passed in review before his mental vision. Where were they now? He threw back his arm and drew the girl closer to him, then kissed her on the forehead, but said nothing, and so they sat, in the happy silence that can only exist where there is true sympathy, he revelling in the tender love which she poured out upon him from the fulness of her warm young heart, and she full of trust and confidence in his strength and wisdom, contented not to know if he did not wish her to, though she guessed pretty nearly the cause of his trouble. It was his wife's entrance that broken the spell; she said nothing, she did not even look; her very presence it was that chased away the repose.

“I’ll go to-day, Gul Begum,” he said, “and see about those sheep. It suits me pretty well; I have other business down there that I can see about at the same time.”

His daughter looked at him lovingly, they were all the world to each other. She had felt instinctively that change and active employment was the best thing for him, and though, manlike, he had not quite seen through her little artifice, he felt her sympathy, and was warmed and comforted by it.

He was gone six weeks, six long weeks it seemed to his daughter, and when he returned he had thrown off much of his silence and dejection; he seemed, in fact, full of activity. He brought home his mother-in-law, and she had some terrible tales to tell. Her home was in a village, close to the borders of the Ameer’s country, and one morning the chief of the village had received a message from a man calling himself Colonel Ferad Shah, saying that he would presently arrive there with a body of 50 Swars (cavalry), and that houses and provisions were to be procured for them without delay.

The chief of the village, fully realising the necessity of gaining time, first despatched private hurried messenger in all directions, summoning aid from the surrounding villages, and next sent a courteous reply by the colonel’s servant, to the effect that this was a difficult season to provide for so many at so short a notice, but he had sent his servants to see what could be collected, and he had no doubt that if the villagers were fairly well remunerated for the inconvenience to which they would be put, such food and accommodation as the village provided would be placed at the colonel’s disposal.

In reply to this inoffensive message, the village chief received the following, brought by three soldiers: “Give these three men every facility for finding out for themselves what provisions and accommodation your village contains, and be prompt in assisting them. Should they be delayed or put to any inconvenience, I will send such messengers in the afternoon as are sure to be listened to.”

The soldiers were rude, and dictatorially demanded tea and sugar at once, and a good solid meal later on. Fresh meat they must have, and rice and bread, and what else did the village contain? In the meantime they would inspect the houses.

The houses were not yet clean, they were told.

“All right, then we will see them dirty,” was the insolent reply.

“Pray be seated,” the Mir said courteously, “the tea will be here directly. It must not arrive during your absence, for if it stands too long it will be cold.”

“Then we can have fresh tea made,” one of the soldiers said surlily.

“Of course you could,” their unwilling host replied, “but that would delay you again, and we have orders from your most honoured colonel that you are not to be delayed.”

“You have too much to say, my friend,” another of the soldiers answered. “*You* are here to obey, *we* to command; now show us *your* house, and then we will go on and look at the others. Have the water for the tea kept boiling, and when we come back, we’ll soon have what we require.”

The wretched man walked dejectedly back to his house. He felt that in the meantime there was no use resisting, and he could only long and pray for the arrival of his friends from the neighbouring villages.

“Why, you’ve hardly rooms in the whole place sufficient to house us decently. You’ll have to clear all *these* houses here. *Those* pig-stys you can keep, they well do well enough for Hazaras, but they won’t suit us.”

“You can have my house, certainly,” the Mir said politely. “I’ll see about getting my women and children decently provided for directly. But *all* these houses you cannot possibly have; there would not be a respectable woman or child under shelter to-night, and the spring winds are not over yet. Those huts you have rejected are the herds’ dwellings; we could not sleep in those even were there accommodation for so many people in them.”

“‘Can’s possibly,’ that sounds pretty calm,” one of the Afghans returned; “it’s wonderful what’s *possible* at times. Do you see this?” drawing his sword, “it’s wonderful how quickly this little instrument clears houses.”

“Don’t be in too great a hurry,” one of the others whispered; “remember we are three to God knows how many;” then aloud, “Come, we’ll have our tea now, and by the time we have finished, we shall expect to find those houses cleaned and ready for us.”

But when they had had their tea, all of the houses were of course not cleaned; the Mir’s was, however, deserted. “I have sent my wife and children to my sister-in-law,” he said with well-assumed civility; “my dwelling is at your disposal.”

“And where is your sister-in-law’s house, pray?” one of the Afghans asked with almost unbearable impudence.

“It’s there, through that gateway and down that lane.”

“Why, cursed be your fathers, that is one of the houses we told you to make ready for us. What do you mean by turning them into one of the houses we have selected?”

“They must have shelter somewhere,” the Mir replied passively.

“I see no necessity for any such thing,” the other answered, and as he spoke he struck his host on the head and then kicked him. “Put your Hazaras where you like, that’s nothing to us, but clear out the houses we have pointed out every one of them, and be sharp about it too.”

The Hazara seemed in no wise to resent the abuse he had received, great man in his own village though he was, the fact being that he was biding his time. He was waiting the arrival of his neighbours.

“Where are all your men?” one of the soldiers said, noticing the scarcity in the streets; “where are they all gone to?”

“They are on the hills tending their flocks at this time. I might send some of the boys to fetch them, then they could help to clear those houses for you.” There was a sense of triumph in his heart. Yes, he would send the boys to hurry up the men, the men who were to help him to expel these unwelcome guests. Little did the Afghan soldiers know what he was thinking. In the meantime he ordered another and then another house to be cleared, and seemed himself most active in ordering the people out.

Not active enough, however, for the Afghan soldiers, who kept pouring volleys of abuse on him, his immediate relations, and his ancestors, extending those same attentions also to the relatives and ancestors of his wife and others. Still the Mir kept silent, till at last, exasperated by his coolness and deliberation, one of the soldiers struck him in the open street and knocked him over. This was more than his woman, at any rate, could stand, and one of them, from a window overlooking the street, threw out a hatchet. The blow was well-aimed, the instrument heavy. It cleft the wretched Afghan through the shoulders close to the neck. This was the signal for a general onslaught, which ended in the wounding of both the remaining soldiers, but more than one Hazara lay on the ground never to rise again. A few of the men from the other villages arrived.

Sore pressed, the two remaining Afghan soldiers made for the open, and as soon as they had found their horses, mounted and were off at full gallop in the direction from which they had come. Their companion remained where he had fallen, his life blood pouring from him.

“What brought you here?” a Hazara woman asked.

“The orders of my colonel,” the wounded man replied. “For the love of God and our Prophet give me some water.”

“Give you water?” said a heavy little man, no crueller nor fiercer than the rest, but with a stolid immovable Hazara face, “give you water! Look round and see the water you gave to us, look at our dead!”

“Yes, give him water,” a woman called out, “give him the water he deserves, “and she stuffed his mouth with the blood-stained mud in which he was lying. The poor fellow could not resent it, less still resist. He sank back; but the fury of the people had been roused, and they poured it forth on their suffering dying enemy.

“May you be tortured in hell, as you have tortured me to-day,” the wretched man called out; “tortured with fire.”

“Ah fire!” shouted another, “a good idea of that; come, let us burn him;” and so they did – burnt him as he lay there completely at their mercy. But they did not triumph long.

Suddenly shriek after shriek, the shrieks of children, rent the air – then the cries of women.

“The dogs! The dog-wolves are on us! Fly to the houses, children, fly.”

But the children were paralysed with fear, and knew not where they ran. The dogs were indeed on them – the huge Afghan dogs bred in Kabul – half-wolf, half-boardhound – creatures than which nothing could be more bloodthirsty or more cruel, as they sprang first on this child and then on that, tearing them, wounding, and killing, but stopping nowhere to do more. It was the work to which they were trained by their master, and they obeyed him well. The streets ran blood. Then there came another sound – the sound of horses’ hoofs, the voices of men, the clatter of arms, and Colonel Ferad Shah and his men entered the village.

One glance, and all was clear to him. He saw the charred remains of the wounded man, the corpses, the wounded, suffering, dying children, but these did not appease him. His blood was hot, and he was known all over the country among his friends, as well as among his foes, to be the most relentless, cruel monster, that ever assumed human shape.*

“Yes, cry, cry! – You shall have something to cry for. Pull down that straw,” he shouted. “Aye, bring the hay, that will burn as well. Set it alight, here, quick, bring straw and lights. We’ll roast these swine alive. We’ll give them a warm shelter. We’ll teach them how to treat us in the future, these low Shiah.”

But on what followed let us rather draw a veil. Enough than the village streets ran blood, that the light of the burning stacks and houses attracted the attention of the country side for miles around, that the shrieks of the victims startled the returning shepherds, and made them

pause to consider what was going on. That they were then met by some half-demented fugitives, flying anywhere – they cared not in which direction – from their blackened hearths, where all they had held most dear lay soaked in blood, or roasted on funeral piles, the size of which would have done honour to a dead sovereign.

* I once asked an Afghan, in no way connected with this story, what sort of a man Colonel Ferad Shah had been. For answer he threw up his hands above his head and exclaimed: “Oh, *that* creature was not a human being at all – he was a bear. No – worse – for when a bear kills, he does it to defend himself, or to provide himself with food; but that man killed that he might have the pleasure of witnessing human terror and suffering in all its most agonising forms. He and his dogs were fit companions for one another.”

CHAPTER IX

A FATHER'S DECISION

“WHAT'S in this letter, brother?” Wali Mohamed asked the Vizier one morning, soon after the latter had returned from his expedition. “It's a letter from Colonel Ferad Shah, the commander of the Afghan forces, but I can't rightly make it out, and I don't exactly understand what the messenger is trying to tell me either. He talks in a language I don't quite understand, half Pashtu, it seems to me. Something about a girl you read it and see what you can make of it.”

“A letter from Ferad Shah! That can mean no good to any of us,” Ghulam Hossain replied anxiously. “We shall have to sound the call and assemble the men in force. The Ameer meant what he said

evidently. The cuckoos are to be turned out of the nests they have occupied so long. They must find shelter elsewhere – among the kites and eagles perhaps.

He spoke bitterly, then took up the letter Wali Mohamed had brought, and commenced reading, at first aloud, but gradually his voice sank into a whisper. Then the words were uttered so rapidly as to be inaudible, then ceased, only the reader's eyes skimmed over the paper rapidly, and then he dropped it. "May God, this is too much," he cried.

"What's the matter, Ghulam Hossain? Speak! In the name of God what is it?" the big little man said hurriedly. "Why this agitation? Is there anything wrong? Has he sent for our submission to the Afghan rule? Speak, man, what has happened?"

"He has sent for Gul Begum, for my child – my beloved," the Vizier replied quietly. The blow had stunned him. "Are our very daughters to be torn from us and violated at their pleasure? My God, this is not war. What is it?"

"I hear you have a niece,' he says, 'a tall handsome girl, whose name is, I think, Gul Begum. I require her; send her to me by my messenger, and mind, no delay, or, mark my words – and I am not a man to trifle with – I will come and fetch her myself or will send such messengers as you are not likely to refuse anything to.'"

"My God, the dogs!" the chief said suddenly, looking out on to the plain as though he already half expected to see them come tearing up the slope. "I hear he keeps a whole pack of them – this slave-boy monster whom the Ameer has raised to the rank of colonel. What shall you answer, brother?"

"That he must send his wolf-hounds, or must come himself to fetch her. There can be no other answer to such a demand. Where is the messenger? Let us find out how far his master is from here – or stay, what is the use of asking? He would not tell us. Let us send some polite message to gain time. It will take some consideration to come to any conclusion as to what we had better do."

"Look here, brother," the little chief said firmly. "Listen to me, I have a proposal to make. This colonel is a great man, and powerful I'd give Gul Begum to him in marriage if I were you. Make legal marriage the condition, of course," he added, seeing that the man he was addressing had moved impatiently and was evidently preparing to put the idea aside as impossible. "She is a handsome girl, and clever, and has whining ways when she chooses. This marriage might save our whole village from much trouble and molestation. It's a good idea, and will at any rate gain time. I'd send a message to him expressing satisfaction at the proposal and –"

“Cease, brother, cease, your words cut through me like a knife. This man means no marriage; besides, he has forty wives and more, and if he had none and meant to make Gul Begum a queen, I would rather see her dead than given to such a fiend. Ferad Shah is not a man, nor would I dis-honour the creatures God has made by calling him ‘brute.’ He is a devil in the guise of man, there is nothing human in him. I would kill Gul Begum with my own hand rather than let him have her.”

“What shall we do, then?” the chief asked impatiently. “How are we to get rid of this difficulty? The whole village can’t be sacrificed to just one girl. What do you suggest?”

“Me? I suggest that as you are so anxious to provide this monster with another wife that you should send him Shereen. She is a nice girl and a good one. Tell him Gul Begum is married, but as you are proud to be connected with so great a man, you send your daughter to him instead.”

The little man was very wroth. It was not often his cousin spoke to him in such bitterness. “He does not mention Shereen, knows nothing of her,” he said. “Fortunately, my girl is a modest girl, and I have made no public boast of her good qualities, so when there is danger she is passed over unnoticed, while the proud and haughty ones find themselves in difficulties. I am a Mohamedan and know what a woman’s place is, and keep her in it.”

“This is no time to quarrel, Wali Mohamed,” the man he called his brother said more quietly. “You know the Ameer’s story of the cats. Don’t let this monkey run off with our prize while we are fighting. We must think how best we can frustrate this colonel – how best we can answer him. I look to you for help in this trouble.”

The little man was mollified; this was as it should be. His advice, of course, ought to be asked – was he not the chief?

“If you had given Gul Begum in marriage as I wanted you to do,” the girl’s mother said testily, “we should not be in this trouble now. She has had plenty of suitors and she is of an age to be married. We have our other children to consider. If you don’t like this colonel for a husband for her, give her to some one else, and send a message saying she is married; that would settle the question once and for all as far as we are concerned. She would have a husband whose business it would be to protect her.”

“I’ll tell you what I might do,” Ghulam Hossain said thoughtfully, ignoring his wife’s remark. “There is that Mohamed Jan down in the next village. His father asked Gul Begum’s hand in marriage for him some time ago; he is certainly not the man I would choose for her – not of our class at all. I have not seen him myself since he was a boy, but the father was a good old man, though ignorant and obstinate.”

“Yes, but he’s dead now,” Wali Mohamed broke in. “He died in the early part of the winter.

“True, but there is the son still living, and that is the chief thing at this moment. He must be well off now. The old man had camels and carried on some trade, they say. He had only this one son, so he must have got it all.”

“How are you going to manage that?” his wife asked crossly. “You surely are not going to ask him to take your daughter in marriage now, when a few months ago you refused to let him have her. That would be a strange thing to do.”

“Don’t you trouble yourself over much, mother,” she said quietly. “It is not easy to arrange all of a sudden. I grant, but I daresay we shall manage it. You go off to your cooking and your sewing. I’ll let you know what we decide in good time.” Then, turning to his companion, he said, “Look here, Wali Mohamed, I might send the old grandmother down to Mohamed Jan’s with a gun and some cloths, and a sheep or two, and tell him he shall have them if he will let Gul Begum be named on him, and will take her into his establishment till this war is over (for war there’s going to be, there can be no doubt about that), on the full understanding, however, that the whole plan is a mere ruse to take in this Colonel Ferad Shah. These are days when men will do much for a rifle, and to purchase one by merely offering a home and protection to a young and handsome girl for a few months would tempt most men.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” Wali Mohamed admitted. “You have some cunning ideas about you, brother, we must all admit that, but how are we to manage about this messenger? He is still in my house.”

“Oh, we’ll easily dispose of him, we’ll presuppose that Mohamed Jan will consent to take Gul Begum on my conditions, and we’ll tell him she is married, that’s all. It’s quite simple.”

“Bah! What’s the use of that? The colonel won’t believe a word of it, and will send another messenger here in less than two days, a messenger that will bring death and destruction.”

“That may be so, but I think not, and we must risk something. Most assuredly he will send some one to find out the truth of our statement, but by then my bird will have flown and will be beyond his reach. He won’t want a married woman for his harem. They are lawless, these Afghans, but not so lawless as that. Send that messenger to me; or stay, I will go with you to your house, he will be getting impatient.”

“Good day to you, soldier,” Ghulam Hossain said, smiling, as he entered. “Do you know anything of the errand on which you have come, and can I send a verbal message by you, or must I write your master a letter?”

“I know nothing of the message,” the man said gruffly, “only that I was to bring back a woman and see that she is provided with a good pony and is closely veiled. The colonel said nothing about a letter.”

“Well, I will tell you this much, and that is that you would have to ride nine miles from here to get the woman your master mentions, she is not here. She is married now, and lives there with her husband. I will write this to Colonel Ferad Shah, lest there should be any confusion in the message, and so that you may not be blamed for the delay. Had he sent some six weeks ago he would have been in time, and we might have made some terms respecting the girl, agreeable to both parties, but now she is gone, so that opportunity is lost.”

The soldier smiled. “It won’t be lost. In fancy, if he really wants the girl. The colonel is not the man to let husbands stand in his way. Six weeks is not very long, I dare say he’ll know how to settle that.”

“Ah, well, when the husband’s settled, you must come and let us know;” the Vizier said, laughing, and apparently quite indifferent.

“Then we’ll begin to think about terms,” Wali Mohamed said cunningly. He did not see that his cousin’s plan was likely to be of much use in this case, but it was worth trying, and at all events by sending Gul Begum away, the Afghan colonel’s attention would be directed from *his* village, and that was what he chiefly cared about; for his niece he cared but little.

“Stay, have some tea while I write the letter,” Ghulam Hossain said pleasantly to the messenger. “I can give you as good tea here as you could get in Kabul, for all we live in so out of the way a part of the world. I’ll treat you to my best.”

This was a pleasanter reception than the soldier was accustomed to, and while the tea was being prepared by Gul Begum herself, in the back part of the dwelling, and her father was writing the letter in the front part, a little old woman started out to make the agreement with Mohamed Jan. she was mounted on the best pony Ghulam Hossain’s stables could produce, and the man who accompanied her carried an English rifle in his hand.

CHAPTER X

A MOCK ENGAGEMENT

THE old lady returned from her mission with very mixed feelings. She had been successful, but she was not altogether pleased with her success.

“That is not a house to send Gul Begum to,” she said. “Those people are not of our class at all. They have made their money by trading, and don't know how to live.”

“Tut, mother,” her son-in-law answered. “From many an outsider's point of view they have a better house than we have. We are comfortable enough, and I would not change my home for any man's, but, after all, what is it? There are those who would say I was but a well-fitted cave. Now, Mohamed Jan has a house all properly built and arranged. He is no man's servant, and neither was his father before him.”

“You will, of course, do as you please,” the old lady replied mildly. It was not her place to raise objections.

“I would not give Gul Begum in *marriage* to Mohamed Jan,” Ghulam Hossain continued conciliatingly. “She is only going there to be out of danger during a time of difficulty, and the man is to be well rewarded for his trouble. What did he think of then gun? Did he seem satisfied?”

“He said it was a good one, and would serve him well to shoot his enemies with,” the old woman replied.

“Yes, that’s what it’s for. That gun was sent to serve a double purpose. It is to purchase a place of security for Gul Begum, and help her guardian to protect her. But it has a wider use than that, mother. It is to protect our country from our foes. Looked at in that light, don’t you think this arrangement good?”

“The plan is good enough,” the old lady answered, “I am not finding fault with that. It’s the man himself I don’t like.”

“Why, what’s the matter with him?” her son-in-law asked, rather irritated by her persistence. “I knew his father well. Had I not had other plans for Gul Begum, I might have even given her in marriage to this son. I have not seen him much of late, but the lad’s a good lad, you may depend on that.”

“He may be,” the old lady said quietly. “It is not for me to judge, but if God made him a good man, it’s a pity He did not give him a better face.”

Ghulam Hossain laughed aloud. He had nothing of the usual Hazara giggle about him. “Ah, there we have it, mother,” he said gaily. “The lad is ugly, and has not found favour in your woman’s eyes. Poor lad, he is indeed unfortunate. He had not looks enough to secure him a good wife, or indeed, apparently, to give him credit for a good character.” The old lady was not too well pleased; she felt she was being laughed at, so she said nothing more, but looked unconvinced. Moreover, it was not as though the girl were to be given in marriage – she was only going on a visit, but she did not like this plan of naming a girl on a man she was not intended to marry. It was against all custom, and gave the man and his family an authority over her niece that was quite beyond their social position. But her son-in-law was a strange man, with quite unusual notions, and there was no use opposing him, and no use talking. It was his business too, not hers, after all. The girl was his to do what he chose with.

But Ghulam Hossain’s difficulties were by no means all over when he had succeeded in silencing the old lady. Gul Begum had not been brought up as an ordinary Hazara girl. She had ideas of her own. When the scheme was unfolded to her she most evidently did not approve.

“Let me stay here, father, with you,” she pleaded piteously. “Don’t send me away. If you can’t protect me from this man, who can?”

“Nothing but marriage, or a supposed marriage such as this, can protect you from this monster,” her father said quietly. “Be reasonable, my flower. I do not send you from me willingly. You know that, don’t you, Jan-e-m (my life)? You know the story your grandmother told you about those dogs? They are this very man’s dogs. Had I sent him a

direct refusal, we should have had those brutes here as his next messengers – he said as much in his letter to your uncle – and half our children would have been torn to pieces and mangled by them. It is so all over the country. We are being exasperated into war by this tyrant.
It is unavoidable.”

“Father, that may be so; but what is the use of men if they are afraid of a few dogs or wolves, or even tigers, or any mere animal? You have rifles, you can shoot. It would be a benefit to the whole countryside if you could rid it of those brutes.”

“I wish we could shoot, or trap, or by any possible means destroy them,” her father said thoughtfully. “But how? You must remember these are not wild jungle beasts acting on their own instincts and the laws of nature, which we know. They are cross-bred brutes, unnatural in every way, and trained to work destruction in the plan and on the order of a man as unnatural as themselves. They come one knows not whence nor at what hour. No clatter of horses’ feet, no bullet whizzing through the air, announces their advent. They may come at cock-crow, or at noontide, or at milking time, and we can know nothing of them till they are on us. It has always been so wherever they have been sent. But our men are gathering on the hills. You will hear the all to arms and the shots from their rifles soon enough. We shall have to go and meet our foes. I shall not even be here to protect you. It is only as a married woman that you will be safe from outrage.”

“Father, that is not necessarily so,” she said, pleading her cause with all the arts that she knew would appeal to her father. “When these Afghans and Turks come harrying our country, they are not particular as to whether it is a wife or maid they carry off. What do they care, these savages? It is all one to them. They are but little better than Kafirs when it comes to pillaging.”

“There you are both wrong and right,” her father said quite patiently, stroking her gleaming black hair lovingly. “There are bad men among every people, Mohamedan as well as others, but the bulk of them have some conscience, and, besides, that is hardly the question. I am saving you from their colonel by this pretended marriage, not from the people generally. A thorough libertine is this Ferad Shah, and if he hears you have already become the property of some other man, and have, perhaps, learnt to bask in the sunshine of your husband’s smiles and favour, he will commence bullying elsewhere. It is not *you* he wants, dear child. He wants your uncle’s niece, my child, the pride of our nation. He would fain stir up all our hatred – our most undying passions, laying violent hands on all we hold most precious – by destroying our darling’s chances of lawful and happy marriage. He knows we should resent it if we are men at all. That is the meaning of this demand of his. He is not in want of wives, he has dozens. He only wants to insult us, and drive us into a war, which he is pleased to call rebellion, that he may treat us as rebels and make us slaves. Now, my sweet child, my comforter, be reasonable. I would keep you with me if

I could, but at this moment I am powerless. The call to arms, I may tell you secretly, has gone forth. In a week or two, none worthy of the name of patriot will be found among these hills. As the wife, or affianced wife, of Mohamed Jan, the obscure, the peasant, you will be unnoticed and unknown. As Gul Begum, my daughter, the Hazara beauty, in your own home, you are exposed to every danger. Try to understand my difficulty, and to help me to overcome. I do not ask you to wed this man. I have had other and very different plans for you, but try and fall in with my views. You need not associate with these people over much, and I will pay them well for housing and feeding you, so that you need not work for them. You have only to accept their service gracefully and graciously, remembering that you are my daughter, and can command whatever rewards it may be in my powers to give to those who serve you well.”

“Father, I will obey you,” the girl said, weeping quietly. “I will do the little I can to set your mind at ease. But oh! It is very hard to go among these strangers. Oh, why was I not a boy, or why can you not treat me as a boy and let me go out and fight with you and my uncle. In the old days, father, women did these things, why not to-day? I am as strong as many a man, and hardy too.”

“Yes, child,” he said quietly, “and stronger. Prove that you are strong enough to wait and watch. That is far harder to a brave, active woman like you than the rush and excitement of war and strife.”

“Are you coming to prepare your things to accompany your grandmother to-morrow morning, or does your father expect me to do it all for you?” Halima asked, interrupting the tender leave-taking between her husband and her daughter.

“It is late,” Ghulam Hossain said sadly. “Gul Begum can stay the night with me. She may not see me again for many months.”

“I have got my clothes ready to start anywhere at any time, mother,” the girl added hurriedly. “They are fastened in a cloth in the recess. I have nothing to do but send them.”

“Are you going to take all those clothes with you?” her mother asked peevishly. “Are you then going to remain permanently at this peasant’s, this Mohamed Jan’s? or do you wish to show his women that Ghulam Hossain has so much more money than he knows what to do with, that he gives his daughter more clothes than she knows how to wear? That’s just the way to do if you want your father to pay away everything he possesses to these people in return for the extraordinary favour he is asking them.”

“Let her take such clothes as she has,” Ghulam Hossain replied, answering instead of his daughter. “She may need them all, and they will be at least as safe there as here. I can spare a pony to carry the bundle and her bedding, besides her grandmother’s pony and her own.

My daughter must not arrive at these people's house a beggar. What are you thinking of, wife?"

"I am thinking there won't be much left when this accursed war is over," the poor woman said, half-sobbing. "Everything is always leaving the house. It's seldom I ever see anything come in."

"And yet we manage to live and have still something left," her husband said, trying to be gay, though he had seldom felt so broken down and sad. "Go to your bed, wife, and don't you trouble about clothes and stores. I will see that they are provided; you look after your cooking and your children. That's your department; never mind about the rest. Leave that to me."

"And am I not looking after my child when I come to see what Gul Begum needs for her journey? Is she not one of my children? You seem to think that she's only yours."

"I am his special one," the girl said, smiling and nestling in to her father's side. "I am your pet, am I not, father?"

His only answer was to press her closer to him. "You won't forget me, Jan-e-man, will you?" he said jealously. "These strangers won't turn your heart away from your old father?"

"These strangers?" the girl said proudly. "I shall not forget that they are peasants. How could they, or *any one*," she added more gently, "estrangle my thoughts from you? Far more likely you will forget *me*, father, and will not remember that you have a daughter who is watching and waiting every hour for you. Will you think of *that* when shots are flying and knives are flashing, and say to yourself, 'I have a daughter; she would break her heart if I were killed. I am all she has in the world to love and care for.' Will you say that, father?"

"Yes, Gul Begum, I will say, 'I have a daughter and she is young and fair, and has a long life to live, and she must live in freedom and in honour, and in peace and comfort, and mine is the arm that must strike for her.' That is what I shall say and think, my daughter. You would not have me a coward, would you?"

"No, father, no. It is because you are so brave and grand, and such a leader among our people, that I love and reverence you so; but, father, a man can be prudent as well as brave. Will you promise to be prudent?"

"It is my duty to be so where I can," he said. "Our country cannot afford to lose a soldier, still less a leader. You may depend on my prudence, child," and so they sat and talked far into the night, and dawn found them still sitting together, clasped in each other's arms – but they were asleep.

CHAPTER XI

THWARTED

IT was nothing of a journey on which Gul Begum set out that bright spring morning, and she needed no horse to take her the nineteen short miles that lay between her village and Mohamed Jan's, but custom demanded that she should ride. She was a bride on her way to her affianced husband's house, and the old lady, her grandmother, rode too. It was *de rigueur* that she should do so. Then there were two pack animals laden with bedding and clothes, besides rice, raisins, almonds, and other dried fruits, a herd who drove three fine fat sheep, and two servants to take care of all.

But the girl's heart was heavy, and her grandmother was not encouraging. "I don't approve of this way of doing things," the old lady kept saying. "I never heard of such an arrangement. A young girl of your position being named on a common man like Mohamed Jan, with no ulterior intentions as to matrimony either. It's against all custom and all precedent, and it seems to me against all decency. I don't believe that any good can come of it. No one ever gains anything by breaking through the rules made by their forefathers. It is not likely that we can judge as wisely as they did, still less likely are we to improve on what they laid down as fitting and proper. I don't understand your father."

"I think my father quite as capable of judging of what is right and wise as any man who ever lived," his daughter replied testily; "but it seems to me awful that such a scheme should have had to be devised. Who is this tyrant that he should dare to send for other men's daughters and command wives where he should ask for them?"

"Oh, I agree with your father in not sending you to Ferad Shah. God only knows what that man's heart is made of." Then, sinking her voice, "Sometimes I think he is no man at all, but a devil in human guise. Your father did well not to send you there. Nothing short of a curse could have resulted from that. However, what must be, must be, and since it has been decided that you are to go to Mohamed Jan's, well, go you must, but you mark what your old grandmother has to tell you.

Never for one moment let them imagine that you put yourself on a level with his women. Show them from the first moment who you are and who you mean to remain. That you are, in fact, Ghulam Hossain's daughter, not Mohamed Jan's affianced wife. If you were to begin by putting yourself on an equality with people like that, there is no knowing what advantage they might not take of you. Make them wait on you from the very first, or, my goodness, before you know what has happened you may find yourself waiting upon them."

"Never fear," the girl answered proudly, "I shall never let them fancy themselves my equals. My father has sent them handsome presents for this favour that they are showing him, and is willing to give them more, if he is satisfied with their treatment of me. He has told me that himself. They will be well paid."

"Assuredly, most assuredly," the old lady went on. "Ghulam Hossain may have faults in that he thinks he knows more than any man that ever lived, but he is not mean. No one could accuse him of ever doing anything shabby – on the contrary, if half your mother tells me is true, he goes too far the other way and is over generous with his goods, and is extravagant in his habits; too fond of fine clothes and plenty of them."

"My father has the very simplest taste," the girl said coldly, "but he knows what is due to himself in his position, and he insists on having it."

The old lady was much struck with the girl's whole attitude any way of expressing herself, and was somewhat mollified; she felt sure she had been the means of advising her granddaughter how to behave during her coming visit, and she was not without hopes that all might yet go well.

"You have taken your embroidery, I hope? You must show them how girls of your positions are accustomed to employ themselves," the old lady went on after a pause. "It is a beautiful kind of work that those poor Kandahar women do. It is well that you have learnt it." But Gul Begum did not answer, she was watching some fat partridges in the road that almost seemed to tempt their natural enemy, man, to destroy them, they kept so close to the little advancing party, only flying on a few paces ahead, soon to be caught up again. "If I were a partridge," she kept thinking, "I would spread my wings and fly far, far away, beyond all harm, off to the wild hills where there is no one to entrap and to destroy. I would not linger round these frequented paths."

Quite a large party of Mohamed Jan's friends and relations met the travellers about a mile outside their village, all waiting and ready to escort the girl to what they believed was to be her new home; two donkeys laden with sweets being perhaps the most noticeable feature in the group.

“They should have sent some cooked food instead of paltry sweets, that was the proper thing to do,” the old lady whispered to her granddaughter. “But what do they know, these poor village people? It is just as well, perhaps, that they are so simple, they will give the less trouble later on.”

Gul Begum made no reply; she heeded neither cooked food nor sweets; the whole thing was a mere farce to her, and she paid but little attention to her hosts, what little she did notice was not at all pleasing to her.

“How dare Mohamed Jan send a bridal party to meet me as though I were really going to be his wife?” she thought to herself. “He has taken a great liberty already. My subsequent refusal to marry him will be the talk of the whole village, perhaps of the country side. This is not at all what my father intended, I am sure.”

With these ungracious thoughts in her heart in was little wonder that she failed to attract her new guardians, and produced an impression not altogether favourable in their minds; but Gul Begum would have cared but little about that even had she discovered it.

The arrangements at the house suited her quite as little as did the reception party. The whole thing had been got up hurriedly, of course, but there was a certain amount of display, and nowhere any taste. The girl felt out of tune, and wished she were going home. “Tell them quite openly that I am only here on a month’s visit until the disturbance with Afghanistan has quieted down,” she whispered to her grandmother, and the old lady readily acquiesced; but she did not dare to add that this naming of the girl on Mohamed Jan was a mere ruse, though she knew that there was a private understanding to that effect between the girl’s father and her supposed suitor. She had received strict injunctions from Ghulam Hossain to do nothing of the kind, and she would never have dared to have disobeyed him.

Three days the old lady stayed with her granddaughter, and then her visit was over, and courtesy demanded that she should return home. Gul Begum did not love the old lady very dearly, but she dreaded her departure. One good she certainly felt she had done, and that was that she had established a rule that the girl should eat alone unless she herself specially asked the others to join her, which, according to custom, she almost always did; but she kept herself apart and seldom spoke to any one.

One day she asked for a clean cloth on which to have her food spread. “It takes away my appetite,” she explained, “to see dirty cloths about my food.” The woman giggled and got one. Mohamed Jan looked on and said nothing. He did not seem over well pleased himself, though the possession of the rifle reconciled him to anything during the first few days.

The parting between the grandmother and granddaughter was more affectionate than any they had ever had before. Gul Begum actually wept when she saw the last of the old lady disappearing down the pathway.

“Never mind, it won't be for long,” she said, addressing Mohamed Jan's mother, “and then I shall go home.”

“Don't make too sure of that,” the elder woman replied; “we have not seen the last of the Afghans yet, but if you apply yourself to work industriously the time will soon pass. We all grow old quite soon enough.”

“I have brought my needlework,” Gul Begum replied coldly. “I will get it and sit in the shade and work hard, and then, as you say, the time will soon pass.”

But days passed on, and then weeks, and still there was no sign of the war abating. She heard that the men were all up in arms, and sometimes she ventured to ask Mohamed Jan why he had not gone off to the war; but he was a man lazy by nature, and it took a good deal of stirring to rouse him, unless he saw a chance of making money, then, indeed, it was astonishing the energy he displayed.

“You have been here three whole months,” he said to Gul Begum one day. “Does your father think that a rifle and three sheep are to pay me for that?”

The girl looked up surprised. “I should think they more than paid for the little food of yours that I have eaten,” she said indignantly.

“Oh, that's it, is it?” Mohamed Jan replied. “I am to get nothing for the trouble of protecting you, and for being kept away from my fellow-countrymen, who are up in arms all over the mountains defending their country, while I am kept here to look after an idle woman who cannot even answer civilly when she is civilly spoken to.”

Gul Begum gave some angry retort, and a hot discussion ended by Mohamed Jan assuring his guest that it was high time she learnt what her true position was, and that he would take an early opportunity of teaching it to her. The girl winced. The long absence from home was beginning to be torture to her, but now that her jailors, as she called them in her heart, were going to treat her with harshness instead of indifference, she determined to write to her father and let him know the sorry plight she was in. Ah, how as a child she had resented those writing lessons! How hard she thought it that she should be obliged to sit still and make all those little strokes and dots while other girls were running about the hills or sitting playing in the sun! now she felt most truly thankful for the persistency with which her father had taught her; but she had some days to wait before she could get hold of either pen or ink.

“To my noble father, to Ghulam Hossain,” she wrote.

“After expressing my respect, and assuring you that I never cease to pray to God for your well-being, I write to let you know that I can no longer remain under the roof which you provided to shelter me. I feel as if I must leave or die. No one here has a kind word for me, my father, but I have borne that. Three days ago, however, Mohamed Jan insulted me, and I judge from his conduct since then that there are worse things to follow. More than once I have been told that if is high time this long engagement were brought to a close in the usual way, and that if my family make no preparation for the marriage ceremony, that Mohamed Jan sees no reason why it should not be dispensed with, especially as no dowry has been offered. You may, in your wisdom, oh, my father, think that these are mere threats intended to keep me humble and to show me how great an obligation I am under to Mohamed Jan, but this is not so. There are many little things that I can hardly write about that show me that if you do not come and fetch your beloved child, she will be made to suffer misery that would be to her worse than death itself. Come, therefore, and see with our own eyes, and if, after seeing, you still think that my sorrow at being parted from all I love makes me exaggerate things, then I will abide by whatever you may decide; but come only once and see how things are. This house is not far. If I were married I can understand that you would not think it right to come and see me under the year, but I am not married to Mohamed Jan and am never going to be, so there is no law or custom to keep you away from me.

*“After expressing my devotion to you, my beloved father, and promising to be submissive to whatever you shall decide after seeing me, I sign myself, your sorrowing daughter,
“GUL BEGUM.”*

Having accomplished the task of writing so long a letter, a task very great even for a girl who had been as carefully taught as she had been, Gul Begum watched her opportunity to get it sent to her father.

She had long since decided on her messenger. It was to be the little herd who pastured the flocks up on the hills within easy distance of the village. She had spoken to him about it, and had arranged that she was to watch his master's sheep and goats while he ran off to her father's house with the precious missive. So, having penned it, she started in the direction of the hills, some three miles away. Soon, however, she heard footsteps behind her, and turning round she saw Mohamed Jan coming rapidly towards her. The girl literally trembled with excitement, then calmed herself with the assurance that he knew nothing of her letter, and that if she could not evade pursuit that day she most certainly would the next, and that a day more or less could make but little difference.

“Where are you going?” asked her would-be protector angrily. “What makes you start away from the house without giving warning to any one?”

The girl said nothing, but pointed to her embroidery which she carried
in her hand.

“And what rubbish is that?” he asked surlily. “What do you mean by stitching at garments fit for a chief when you are the destined wife of a poor man who does not care to see his wife decked in such finery?”

“I am no man’s destined wife,” she said haughtily. “I am the daughter of Ghulam Hossain, and as such am entitled to wear whatever embroideries I choose. It is not for you, his hired servant, to interfere.”

“Ghulam Hossain’s hired servant!” roared the Hazara, now really roused. “You dare to call me Ghulam Hossain’s hired servant, do you? My God, but you shall pay for this. That is an insult I take from no one,” and before she was aware of his intention he had thrown her on the ground, and then trampled on her.

“Ah, proud, vain girl,” he muttered again and again, as he treated her with the greatest brutality. “I’ll humble you. I’ll teach you whether it is for you to wear clothes fit for princesses, or for slaves; from to-day a new regime begins.” Then seizing her embroidery he snatched it from her now feeble grasp, and almost immediately discovered the letter she had concealed within its folds. “Ah hah! Ah hah!” he cried exultingly. “What have we here? What have we here? Is it to Colonel Ferad Shah, perhaps, and would you fain be an Afghan general’s wife after all, in spite of your father’s wishes to the contrary? My God, we know how to punish such want of patriotism.”

The girl’s heart beat fast. “The letter is to my father,” she said as quietly as she could. “You can read it, I wrote it myself. There is no one in all your ignorant household who could have written it for me; that is my proof that I wrote it myself.”

“Liar,” he muttered between his teeth. “You cannot write, this is all make believe, but I will have it read to me, and then I shall know how to act. Come, follow me, and at a respectful distance, mind. The days of your pride are over. You have now to learn submission.”

The tears started into the girl’s eyes, she saw that her chance was gone, and that she had now the worst to expect.

CHAPTER XII

THE RETURN HOME

NO ONE could have been more surprised than was Gul Begum at what appeared to her the sudden change in Mohamed Jan's attitude towards her. During all the first part of her stay in his house he had noticed her but little, and when he had done so it had always been with respect.

For some weeks, however, she had become aware of a certain subtle change in the women of the establishment, which she had attributed to the fact that they were tired of having a stranger constantly in their midst; tired of treating as a guest one who belonged to a class above themselves; tired of restraining themselves before her.

She knew nothing of the war, nothing of the turn that events had taken, nothing of the fact that her father was now practically a fugitive among the mountains, with a price on his head, without power, except among a few devoted followers, without money, for he had spent it all, nor yet that the Ameer had made a proclamation promising protection to all Hazaras who would lay down their arms, a home to all who would seek refuge to Kabul, rewards to all who would help him to suppress this unrighteous rebellion. But even had she known, she would never have dreamt that any of her country people would have accepted such terms – she had been brought up by such a patriot that she imagined all men must be patriotic. This sudden change in her position came upon her, therefore, with a great shock. That she should be treated with indifference was one thing, but to be struck, absolutely kicked, and generally ill-used by the man who had been rewarded by her father for his promise to protect her, that was something quite unexpected. And then her letter – the letter she had written to her father – what had become of that? How she wished it had never been penned! Mohamed Jan was the last person she would have wished to have had it ready by.

On reaching the house she had gone to her room, had removed her soiled and crumpled garments, and had sat there alone till nightfall, her limbs still aching from the blows she had received, waiting for the next turn in the wheel of her fortune, but no turn came. Night came, and she sat there still waiting, waiting.

Sounds of loud laughter and giggling reached her from time to time, and her anxious, excited brain fancied that she herself and none else must be the butt of every joke, that her humiliation must be the topic of all conversation and the cause of all the merriment among these people who had so evidently never cared for her, and whom she had certainly never tried to conciliate. Proud as she was, she was obliged to admit to herself that her grandmother's advice, which she had perhaps carried

out with unnecessary zeal, had not been of the wisest; and, sitting alone through the long hours of that moonless night, she reproached herself for not having shown herself more amenable, not to say amiable, to the women among whom she had been thrown, and who had so much in their power in the way of making her happy and comfortable.

She realised, at last, for the first time, that not only was she now probably among people who were indifferent to her, but among people who were quite capable of showing her open enmity and even maltreating her.

Wearied at length, she fell asleep, and when she woke up it was with a start and a consciousness that there was something wrong.

“I’ll just stay where I am to-day,” she thought, “or at any rate, till some of them come and look for me and inquire what is the matter.” But the sun rose up to its zenith, then sank slowly behind the hills, and still they did not come. Every one seemed to have forgotten her very existence, which perhaps wounded her pride more than the most violent abuse.

At last, driven by hunger, she descended the stairs and entered the room which the women generally occupied. Her entrance was the signal for giggling and nudgings and ill-suppressed jokes.

“I should like my food,” the girl said reddening, “I am hungry.”

“Well, there is no food for you now,” Mohamed Jan’s mother answered shortly. “If you wanted food why did you not come down while we were having ours? There’s none left now. We have given the remainder to the men-servants, and it’s not much they’ll leave, but you can go and see what there is outside.”

The girl turned to look. Her doing so was a signal for a loud outburst of laughter. There was nothing, of course, left but some broken pieces of bread. Quickly she stooped and picked these from among the remnants of the meal, and hid them among the folds of her shawl, unperceived as she both hoped and thought, but turning round she came face to face with Mohamed Jan.

“Glad to eat to dogs’ food, I see, after your day of sulks. That is as it should be. You’ll soon learn how to behave under my tuition.”

That evening she was not left unmolested as she had been on the previous one. At short intervals the women kept opening her door, and peeping in and laughing – she knew not at what, and probably no more did they. The girl felt stung to the quick.

“I am but nineteen miles from home,” she said to herself, “and what is that? Why should I stay here to bear all these insults? I shall escape; my father will not blame me when he knows,” and so she munched her

crusts in silence, but with a deep resolve growing up in her heart. She would escape, and that soon.

Next day when she smelt the fresh cooked food being brought in from the kitchen, she went downstairs, and was surprised to find how weak she felt after her two day's starvation. She took her customary place.

"That's no longer the place for you," Mohamed Jan's mother said. "We do not give people the place of honour who cannot afford to pay us even for what they eat. *There* is the place for you," pointing to the extreme end of the dirty cloth that was laid upon the floor. So Gul Begum sat down with a sigh, and waited till some food should be passed to her and to the women who sat by her, and who were practically servants in the house. She, however, said nothing, and minded it less than she would have expected. She had made up her mind. She was going home – to danger perhaps, but at any rate not to insults; and with this idea in her mind she ate well when her turn came, the others giggling and staring at her as she did so.

That night, when all was still, she made her way safely down the stairs, and by dawn was nearing her beloved home. She could stand no more of the insults and maltreatment to which she had lately fallen a victim.

She grew weary with her long march through the dead of night after all she had gone through, but the knowledge that she was nearing home sustained her, and her heart beat fast at the thought of meeting her beloved father, and throwing herself in her arms, and telling him all her woes, but as she got within sight of the village, she became conscious of some change – some want of life about the place which she could not have defined.

"Are the men indeed so late in beginning their day's work?" she said to herself. "I am glad to have found them out. It must be looked to. It is time the farmers were seeing to their crops. How strangely late everything seems."

Arrived at her home, the girl half fell, half threw herself into her mother's arms as she opened the door to admit her, almost knocking down poor Halima, who was unused to such demonstrations, and therefore unprepared for them.

"Good gracious, girl," the elder woman said anxiously, and with the old peevish whine her daughter knew so well, "what is the matter now? What further ill news do you bring us, that you come upon us in this way?"

"*Further* ill news, mother?" the girl replied breathlessly. "What ill news is there? I have heard nothing of any of you for months."

"Not heard of the war? Not heard of devastating land? Not heard of the prisoners that have been taken, nor of the slaves that have been made?"

Good gracious, are you all asleep in your village that you know nothing of the war?"

"And what of my father?" the girl asked eagerly. "Say he is well, mother, say he is well," and she almost shook the elder woman as she spoke.

"I know nothing of him at all, nothing at all," poor Halima replied, almost weeping, "only that he left here with almost every man in the village that could hold a gun, and that he has not returned."

"And my uncle?" gasped Gul Begum.

"And your uncle with him," the wretched woman murmured; "we are all left, all deserted. If the Afghans find their way here we shall meet with the fate of many another flourishing village. Our homes will be left desolate, our goods will be at their mercy, and we ourselves shall be carried off as slaves. This is no way of defending the country. I say, leaving only a few old hoary-headed dotards and herds to look after the homes, while all the men march off, God knows where, to meet the enemy."

"Oh, mother," the girl said piteously, "what a home-coming!"

"Yes, what a home-coming indeed," her mother answered sadly. "But that reminds me, what brings you home? What has become of Mohamed Jan? Is he, too, at the war? And even if so, why does he send you here?"

"Mother," the girl said, hanging her head, "Mohamed Jan has not gone to the war, and he has not sent me home. Dear mother, forgive me," the girl went on almost weeping, "I have run away – protect me," and she tried in a few words to tell her mother all that had occurred.

Their talking brought the old grandmother to the door, anxious to know what news there was, but little expecting to see her granddaughter, whom, truth to tell, she looked upon as practically married and done for.

"Well, I never," the old lady said, when she heard all that Gul Begum had to say. "Well, I never! To think that Mohamed Jan should have turned round on you like that, just because he had heard of our misfortunes, and knew that there was but a poor chance of his ever getting a dowry. As a matter of fact, as I always said, if you were to go to that man at all, you ought to have gone to him as his wife, taking your dowry with you at the time of your marriage I never did hold with that arrangement of your father's, and no more I ever shall. I always said no good would come of it."

"Well, let me in and let me rest," the girl said wearily. "I have had hardly any food for the last three days, and I feel weak and faint for want of something to eat," and so she entered her home and rested, and

soon little Marwari, delighted to see her favourite sister, rushed up to her – and when she had had a good meal of bread and curd, she fell asleep with her head in her little sister's lap.

On waking, the news that greeted her on all sides was no more cheering. Everywhere, so it seemed to her, was death, devastation, defeat, and slavery, and no news of her father.

“Give me a change of clothes, mother,” the girl said later in the day. “I feel I need one badly. I forgot all about such things in my anxiety last night.”

“A change of clothes?” Halima exclaimed, “a change of clothes? Where am I to get clothes from, for you? What did I tell you when you went away, taking the great bundle with you? I said, ‘Leave some at home,’ but ‘No,’ said your father, ‘let her take then all. My daughter must not go among these people as a beggar,’ and now, what is the consequence? That here you are home again with nothing to put on your back.”

The girl hung her head. “You did say so, mother, but who was to know what was in store for us? Who was to tell that the war would be carried on to this extent, and that we should be left in such a plight?”

“Well, another time it will teach you, and, perhaps, your father too, that though I may be of very little account in any one's eyes, that I sometimes know better than the wisest of you. What do you say, mother?”

Thus addressed, the old lady shook her head despondingly. “I say, of course, that as the head of this house, now Ghulam Hossain is no longer here, that your word should, of course, be respected, but no one could have foretold the miseries of this war. I always thought our army would everywhere prove victorious. That's what the Mullah said.”

“That's not what my father said,” Gul Begum said sadly. “I remember his words so well. I can hear him say them even now: ‘We shall not be victorious.’”

“Then it's your father that has brought this ill-luck on us,” Halima exclaimed angrily. “What on earth did he mean by prophesying misfortune to his own nation? I call such speeches as that but little better than treason.”

Gul Begum smiled. It was no good arguing with her mother, there never was any reason in her tirades.

“I may see what there is in the store, and get something to make myself a new dress of, may I not, mother?” the girl asked.

“Oh yes, go to the cupboard and take out whatever there is and use it for any purpose you like,” her mother replied testily. “When it's all

finished there will be nothing more to go to the cupboard for, and at the rate things are going on at present, that time is not far distant.”

There was a little gnawing pain at Gul Begum's heart as she listened to her mother, she seemed so little glad to see her back, or if she were glad she had a strange way of showing it. How different it would all have been had her father been at home. What a warm embrace would have been in store for her! What gladness, and what a rest! The girl sighed.

“Where is he? What has become of him? Is he still alive? God grant he may not be a prisoner; better dead than that.”

Towards afternoon the neighbours all came crowding in. “Gul Begum back? What is the meaning of this?” they all exclaimed. “Why, we thought she was married by now and settled for life. It's time she was settled too, Halima,” one of the elder women said seriously. “This Mohamed Jan may not be much of a match for Ghulam Hossain's daughter, but he is at any rate better than no one. Strange that with so handsome a face no one should come forward to seek the girl in marriage.”

“Plenty have come forward,” Halima replied indignantly. “My girl is not short of suitors, but her father is difficult to please, and is he not right?”

She could abuse her husband well herself at times, but like many another more civilised woman, she was not going to stand there and hear other people question his wisdom.

“These are not the times to keep unmarried girls at home,” the other went on pertinaciously. “She's named on Mohamed Jan, let her go to him in marriage I say.”

Gul Begum sat still and listened. What these women said cut like very knives into her heart, and for once she almost questioned her father's wisdom in providing for her temporary safety in the way he had done.

CHAPTER XIII

A TRAITOR

WEEK succeeded week, and time brought no further change to the Hazara village among the hills. Gul Begum resumed her old natural

place in the household. Independent of every one, she yet managed all the most important part of her father's property' viz., his flocks, and by her energy restored some of the comfort which for several months past had been sadly lacking in her old home, for Halima was no manager.

The summer, then the autumn ended, and winter was well nigh upon them when one evening towards dusk Ghulam Hossain suddenly made his appearance in the midst of his family, just as though he were returning from some of his ordinary business expeditions connected with the sale of sheep or wool. He expressed no surprise at seeing Gul Begum, and she was far too much taken up with him and the joy of his return to think of what she herself had had to suffer. A Hazara soon forgets the actual discomfort or even pain to which she has been subjected. All she remembers is that she owes the inflictor a debt, and that that has to be paid. So with Gul Begum. In time Mohamed Jan must be punished for the insults to which he had subjected her, but for the moment she had her father with her and she was satisfied.

In the course of many conversations she had with him, it appeared that the snow having fallen on all the highest passes, the Ameer had recalled his troops for the winter, with further promises of peace and favour to the Hazaras in the future, if they would lay down their arms and would consent to have their country incorporated with Afghanistan.

“Father, he is irresistible, this Iron Ameer. What is the use of persisting in opposing him? You yourself said long ago, ‘We shall *not* be victorious.’ Where is the use of striving further? Has there not been trouble and suffering enough throughout the country?”

He looked her at fondly. “There has been more than enough,” he said, noting the many signs of anxiety and care which had made their appearance on her bright young face since last he saw her, “but, Gul Begum, I cannot sell my country to secure my own ease. The Mullah still is confident of final victory. He is spending the winter down in the country round Kabul. There are many Hazaras there. If only they would rise as one man we should have some chance. There is hardly a household about there that has not got its Hazara slave; and there are the labourers, the donkey drivers, the water carriers, men by the thousand, who, if they would only rise in the city, would oblige the Ameer to call back his soldiers from the hills to protect his home. Then we might make a rush down and assist our fellow-countrymen in the town, and it is just possible that if all went in our favour we might be the victors, and might even take Kabul. It is a great scheme, and whichever way the chances of war go, there will be carnage and most terrible slaughter; but if they go against *us*, it will mean the complete destruction of our race.”

“Father, the risk is too great,” Gul Begum urged; “give in, make terms now with this man of steel. Consent to pay these taxes and whatever else he demands, provided they are used for the benefit of our own

country. Why continue all this strife and bloodshed? We have been at war all one summer, and look at the result. Where are our crops? Another year and there will be a famine such as has never been known in all time. Give in, father," she pleaded, "give in."

He drew her closer to him and kissed her brow fondly. "You must be patient, my child, and trust to the leaders of our nation. This is not a case where one man can act alone. Much lies in the Sayad's hands and much in the hands of the other Mullahs. I confess I have but little hope myself. I would have *none* were it not that these men, from their priestly office, can travel everywhere and anywhere practically unnoticed, and can stir up people that we chiefs have not the means of reaching. We shall all have to practise the greatest self-denial and patience. Will you help me to instil this both by example and precept, my flower?" And the girl promised.

That she kept her promise was proved many times during that long winter. Many of the men had been killed or were disabled, and there was much distress throughout the village, especially among the labourers and their families, and in spite of Halima's grumbling her daughter cooked, and Dilbhar carried many a dish of nourishing food and many a piece of well-baked bread to the homes of the sufferers. It was a hard, but in many ways a satisfactory, time to Gul Begum, and did much to prepare her for the far harder time that was before her.

Early in the spring news was again received as to the activity of the Afghan soldiers on the Hazara frontiers, and Ghulam Hossain among many others prepared himself for what all felt was to be the final struggle.

Again a messenger from Ferad Shah came to demand Gul Begum, and again he was sent back assurances that the girl was married and no longer lived in the village.

"You must prepare yourself to return to Mohamed Jan," her father said when the message was communicated to him. "I cannot protect you here. It was perhaps not the wisest plan to have adopted originally; but it was the best I could devise at the moment, and now there is no choice. You cannot be protected by any one else. This time I will take you to his house myself, and will promise him such rewards for your safe keeping as cannot fail to tempt him."

Gul Begum resisted all she could. She wept, she entreated, but all to no purpose. Ghulam Hossain was inexorable, she must return to the house of the man on whom she had been named.

"You must be diplomatic," her father told her, trying to cheer her, "you must show no airs of superiority with these people. Help the women with their household work, and Mohamed Jan with his animals, as you do me. In that way they will grow fond of my precious child, and will

treat you well because they will love you and because you will have shown them cause why they should value you.”

Gul Begum had nothing to say. She felt that such advice a year ago might have stood her in good stead, but that now it was useless. It was too late. A fierce enmity against the man who had insulted her rose up in her heart, and she felt she could neither conciliate him nor the women who had mocked her in her trouble, but she said little. She felt that if her father could not realise the depths of degradation to which she had been subjected from her description of that terrible interview with Mohamed Jan, when he had snatched the letter from her, then explanations and remonstrances were indeed useless.

The fact was Ghulam Hossain did not *quite* believe all his daughter had told him. He understood her proud spirit well, and knew how bitterly she would resent the slightest insult. Moreover, he was very busy and did not give the matter his full attention; besides Gul Begum was naturally reticent on so delicate a subject. Eastern women of any position always are. So the poor girl was borne ignominiously back to the house from which she had fled in such terror and mortification.

Mohamed Jan professed to be much offended at the way in which Gul Begum had treated him, admitted that he had raised his hand against her one day when she had exasperated him beyond words, apologised and promised that there should be no cause for such complaints in the future.

“With what part of our army did you serve last year?” Ghulam Hossain asked, when the subject of Gul Begum’s complaints and also of the rewards that were to be bestowed on Mohamed Jan had been thoroughly discussed.

Thus interrogated, the man shuffled about, made two or three attempts to speak, but said nothing. Ghulam Hossain repeated his question.

“How could I both serve with the army and obey your orders as to protecting your daughter?” Mohamed Jan replied evasively.

“That means, I suppose, that you served nowhere,” the Vizier remarked severely. “That seems to me a poor account for a patriot to give of himself in such times as these. Speak up, man.”

Absolutely run into a corner, the villager thought he had better make a stand and put himself in the right if he could. “The fact is,” he said, “I am not at all in sympathy with this war. Our people are labourers and poor, with no knowledge of warfare. How can they ever hope to stand up against the trained soldiers of the Ameer of Kabul?”

“Ah, I see,” Ghulam Hossain said bitterly. “You have had one of the Ameer’s emissaries here, and you have learnt to quote his words most accurately. Deeply do I regret that I ever placed my daughter in the

charge of such an one as you, but it was Kismet. I judged you as I would naturally judge your father's son."

"You do me a great wrong," the other replied moodily. "I have had no emissaries here. I use my common sense and judgement, and I know what the result of this war must be. Our arms cannot possibly be victorious. Unless we surrender or the fairly easy terms the Ameer now offers, we are a doomed nation, and after all, what does he require of us, this Ameer? That we pay him taxes so that he may make roads for our caravans and traders, and may provide us with soldiers to protect them. It seems to me that it is an arrangement that would suit many of us well."

"The *traders*, perhaps," Ghulam Hossain replied scornfully, "but we are not a race of traders. We are a race of farmers, of free mountaineers, and we owe allegiance to no man."

He paused, waiting for a reply, but Mohamed Jan vouchsafed none.

"Are you willing to join our band four days hence and go and meet the enemy under Ferad Shah on the frontier? We are not going to attack, only to wait the news of events that we hope are even now taking place elsewhere, but we wish to be prepared to attack his rear should any move in other quarters compel him to draw off his men."

"Ah, you have men with both brain and forethought at work," Mohamed Jan said, showing more interest than he had hitherto done. "If that is so, we may yet prove victorious. What is your plan of action? If it seems feasible and I see any chance of success I may join you. What I disapprove of is useless slaughter in a forlorn cause."

Ghulam Hossain scanned him narrowly. He was not a suspicious, but he was a cautious man.

"I am sorry I cannot reveal our plan of action to you. Its success depends on the secrecy with which it is carried out. Should any one betray it to the enemy some of the most valuable lives in our country would be sacrificed – the lives of men who hold freedom to be the first essential of a noble race."

"You do not encourage me," Mohamed Jan replied. "I would willingly risk all in a cause which held the smallest chances of success. What I object to is exposing ourselves, our wives, our children and our property to the certainty of death or confiscation. We may be badly off as subjects of Afghanistan, our freedom gone, but we shall be infinitely worse off as slaves."

"Your arguments do more credit to your common sense than to your patriotism," Ghulam Hossain replied, more harshly than he was wont to speak. "I can see my daughter will be safe with you. The Ameer promises safety to those who do not oppose his arms, but I do not care

for such safety myself, and neither, I am sure, does she. For the moment I leave her with you, on condition that she receives respect and good treatment from you, in return for which I will, should I be satisfied, pay you the moneys and other articles that I have agreed to hand over to you.”

“Am I then to have no hope of eventually possessing her as my wife?” Mohamed Jan asked, with well-feigned regret.

“None, emphatically none,” the Vizier replied warmly. “Put that idea out of your head for ever. When my daughter marries she shall marry a patriot.”

“Do you not think it is rather hard that I should have had a girl named on me for so long, and then be told finally that I am to have no chance of ever possessing her?”

Ghulam Hossain looked at him surprised. “There has never been any mention of your finally obtaining her in marriage. It was an understood thing that you were to receive her into your establishment on condition that you received certain articles in return. You have not used the gun, so perhaps you do not know how good a one it is.”

Both men remained silent for some time, then Ghulam Hossain rose.

“It is quite clear, then, that my daughter remains here as yours and your mothers guest,” he said, “until such time as I can fetch her, and that in return for this service you shall, when the time expires, receive rewards according to the way in which you have treated her, and the length of time she has been with you.”

Mohamed Jan did not seem over well satisfied. “Kismet,” he murmured, “but I think the money at least should be paid in advance.”

“My bargain is made,” Ghulam Hossain replied firmly, “and may God deal with you as you shall deal with my daughter. Now send her to me here.”

He spoke always as one accustomed to be obeyed, and the man he addressed at once left the room to summon his guest. In the meantime the Vizier did not resume his seat, but continued pacing up and down.

“I am, indeed, in sore difficulty,” he said. “I have myself no means of protecting this girl, and her presence is a distinct danger to our village, but I mistrust this man. I should have got to know him better before I placed this great trust in his hands. I judged him too entirely by his father. The son has nothing in common with that good soul. He is not worthy of the confidence I reposed in him. I fear he is but little short of a traitor.” And then his daughter entered, and he went to meet her.

“God bless and keep you, my flower,” he said, embracing her. “Be strong and courageous as you always are, and try, my child, to be patient. As soon as ever I am able I shall come and fetch you. Have no fear.”

The girl spoke not a single word. An oppression as if of impending death was on her, and her father, unwilling to prolong the agony of the parting, mounted his horse and rode off.

CHAPTER XIV

BONDAGE

AFTER her father's departure, Gul Begum, half paralysed with misery, sat down quietly among the other women, her mind too dulled even to formulate good intentions. No one spoke to her, no one noticed her, which perhaps, after all, was the very kindest thing they could have done, though they did not know it.

“In four days,” Ghulam Hossain had said, “I shall be at the front,” so for four days Gul Begum was left in peace, but when those four days, and with them all chance of his return to see after to well-being of his daughter, were passed, matters changed very much indeed for the worse.

Mohamed Jan was so convinced that all the Hazara efforts would end in failure, and so certain, therefore, that the rewards promised by Ghulam Hossain would never be forthcoming, that he no longer took any pains to conceal his intentions and character. It pleased him to bully a woman who had been brought up in a refined and comfortable home, and who had occupied a singularly responsible position in her own village. It was his nature to wish to do so, just as it is some children's nature to love pulling off the legs and wings of flies and beetles. He meant little by it. It just amused him. But in Gul Begum's case he had a special grievance. *His* father had asked *her* father for the girl's hand in marriage for his son some time before, partly, of course, because she was an undoubtedly fine girl, and the daughter of one of the chief men in the country, but also and more especially, no doubt, because Ghulam Hossain was known to be a rich man, and he made no secret of his devotion to his eldest daughter. Without doubt a large dowry would be hers.

This proposed marriage had been rather scornfully declined. Yet the previous year, when danger and difficulty threatened, the Vizier had been only too ready to make use of the house that he had not considered good enough for her permanent home, as a temporary refuge for this girl; and, moreover, to justify the fact of her paying so long a visit, and also the better to secure her safety from the man who was molesting her, he had gone so far as to have her named on him.

There was nothing noble, nothing gracious or chivalrous in all Mohamed Jan's composition. He did not feel in the least honoured by the trust reposed in him. He cared nothing whatever for the girl herself, excepting that he had been told she was an excellent cook, but he would have liked to have had that dowry, and he also felt that he would like to have been able to tell other men that he had secured the Hazara beauty.

All this satisfaction was denied him, however, so he felt sore and aggrieved. That to his mind meant that he owed Gul Begum a grudge, and he meant to pay it. The previous year he had been somewhat restrained, owing to the uncertainty as to the final issue of the war. This year he felt free to do as he chose, so convinced was he that ere long the girl would be fatherless and homeless. She would then, of course, be his to do what he liked with, but that was a poor consolation after all, for with Ghulam Hossain's downfall, his house would, of course, be searched, his goods confiscated, and he, Mohamed Jan, would find himself with a very fine wife, no doubt, but with one who had absolutely no dowry, and all this might so easily have been

avoided, so it seemed to him, by a little foresight on the part of her father. Without doubt he owed them a grudge.

During her first visit to his house, Gul Begum had, or at least her grandmother had, stipulated for her that she should in no wise feel herself obliged always to eat with the family, and by not presenting herself at the ordinary meal times, she had forced her hostess sometimes to serve her meal apart from the others. Now she was *forced* to eat alone, and to be thankful for the scraps that were thrown across at her.

“Go, fetch me some drinking water,” Mohamed Jan had called out to her one day. “And see that you are sharp about it.”

“I am not your servant,” the girl had replied firmly, remaining seated.

“Ah, is that so?” the man had replied brutally. “Then as you are not my servant, and you are certainly not my relative, you have no right to my food. You can go without.”

So all that day she never broke her fast. Hunger compelled her to a certain amount of submission, and she was not really unwilling to help the other women with their household work. It was Mohamed Jan's orders that she so resented.

One morning she was engaged in braiding her hair, the luxuriant raven tresses of which her father had been so justly proud, in the usual elaborate fashion of her countrywomen, when Mohamed Jan called her.

“I am engaged,” she replied quietly. “I cannot come just now.”

“Don't dare to tell me you cannot come! You will do as you are bid,” he shouted. “Come to me here, at once.”

But the girl sat still, finishing the braiding of her hair. She thought she was safe from molestation, so long as she was in her own apartment, at any rate. But she was mistaken. Her tormentor had no scruples.

“Listen to me,” he said, appearing suddenly in the doorway. “I am tired of all this pride and nonsense. What you must do is to cease all this braiding of hair and vanity. Such things are not for women in your position. You must learn to obey, and I am the man who is both willing and able to teach you. You refuse to become my wife, and your father refuses to give you to me in marriage. So be it. I am not particular as to ceremonies. Your father's wishes I am by no means obliged to consider. He has left you here for me to feed and protect, without so much as paying a single pice for your keep; and as to *your* wishes, you are a woman, and should have none. Either you consent here, now, at once, to become my wife, or I will treat you in such a way as to make you beg me to make you my wife, but, mind you, if you let matters

come to such a pass as that, my God! You will make your entreaties in vain. Do you see this rope?" he went on, flourishing a piece he held in his hand. "Rope is a useful article. It can bind, and it can lash, and it has other uses," and as he spoke he brought it down with a sharp flick across the girl's shoulders and arms, making her jump, and causing the tears to start in her eyes against her will. Still she said nothing.

"Now listen to me," he went on. "You elected to stay in this room when I called to you to come down to me. It is well. You shall remain here. I should be sorry not to oblige you, but lest you should feel inclined to leave it, you shall be bound hand and foot to prevent your doing so that you may have the full benefit of your own choice. When you have come to your senses, and are willing to submit, you can call for me if you like, and if I am in the house and unoccupied, I will, *perhaps*, come and see what you want," and as he spoke he knelt on her, and tried to force the rope round her. But Gul Begum was strong, and lithe, and active, and in spite of the smarting pain across her shoulders, she struggled and resisted to the uttermost.

"Here, you women," Mohamed Jan called out. "Ho there! Come upstairs and help me with this vixen," and they came, glad to see the girl, whose airs of superiority had so often galled them, in such sore straits and trouble.

And so, among them, they bound her, and bound her tight too, then left her almost fainting with pain, fatigue, and humiliation. Left her without a scrap of food or a drop of water, nor could she have partaken of either if she had had them, so tightly were her arms bound down to her sides, and the hours dragged on slowly, slowly.

By the evening it seemed to the poor suffering girl that she must have lain there a whole year. Every event of her life passed before her as in a pageant, and she wondered why God had placed so heavy a curse on her; wondered if it was indeed just punishment for her pride – a pride of which she had so often been accused, but of which, truth to tell, she felt so very little. "Why do they call me proud?" she asked herself. "How do I show myself to be so much more vain than other women? Who works harder than I when I am at home? Who is more submissive to her parents?" and then the tears trickled down her cheeks and fell one by one on the mud floor on which she was lying. She had been obedient even when obedience had brought her to this, the deepest of degradation.

"Ah, father," she sobbed, "I knew how it would be. I knew, I knew; I saw it coming last year when I ran away, and though you love me, yes, I know you do, you would not listen to me. Your thought I did not know, but I knew, alas! too well. Father, father, where are you now? Far, far away from here, protecting your country from its enemies, your poor country which nothing can save, while your wretched, suffering child, your own flesh and blood, lies here encompassed by a far more

deadly foe, a far more relentless enemy. Father, father,” she murmured, but only the voice of the wind replied, the wind that was blowing from off the mountains of her beloved home, and which, lifting her hair, the hair she had not even finished braiding, fanned her aching temples and her burning, throbbing head.

The sun set and the moon rose. Such a beautiful, bright, Eastern moon. She could hear the regular Hazara giggle going downstairs, and every sound tortured her. She remembered old Miriam's words, “Rejected – a prisoner – a slave.”

Ah, here was the fulfilment of that dire prophesy already. Was ever prisoner so bound? Was ever slave so punished? A weird shadow passed slowly between her and the moon. It was a great dun-coloured owl, she knew by the peculiar swishing of its wings, and she knew, too, that according to the superstitions of her race, such a visitor boded no good, and oh, how cold she was getting. Her limbs were quite numb. The very blood in her veins seemed to be stopped by the encircling cord. Her head grew dizzy, and then Providence was kind to her at last, for she lost consciousness, and all her tortures, both mental and physical, were for the moment as though they were not.

The next thing she was conscious of was something licking her, now her hands, and now her neck, and then her face. She started, there was something so uncanny in the sensation. It was broad daylight, and a great sheep-dog that she had often petted and fed had come to show its sympathy with her in her trouble. A dog is everywhere considered by Mohamedans an unclean beast, and deservedly so, for in the East he is one of the most common and at the same time of the most useful of the many scavengers, in providing which Nature has been so bountiful.

For a moment, only a moment, the girl was filled with disgust and horror. Then a new feeling, born of her loneliness and misery, came to her, and she bent towards this humble friend, an outcast like herself, rubbing her head on its shaggy, dusty brown coat, because she could not undo a hand wherewith to stroke it.

The sun rose higher and higher, but still no sound came from below. The house seemed to be deserted. A kind of terror seized her and shook her from head to foot. Had they all gone away and left her, bound and helpless, to starve? The outer door must evidently have been left wide open, or the dog could never have got in. fearful as she was of the consequences of what would seem to Mohamed Jan to savour of submission, her terror at being forsaken was too great to admit of any other feeling. She must call – and call she did, but how husky her voice! It seemed to have no strength, to have lost all its carrying power. She called and called again, but still no one replied. Only the dog snuffed round about her and then lay down, placing its head affectionately on her breast. Again, she called, but still no reply came.

At last, nerved even to desperate deeds, she rolled and wriggled towards the door, to the top of the stairs, and then down them. The fresh morning air fanned her brow and gave her hope such as a few moments before had seemed impossible, but the hope soon died within her, for there, grinning all over his face at her contortions and struggles, stood Mohamed Jan, and behind him the little herd who was to have carried her letter to her father.

“You must be hungry,” he said. “Come, I will give you some food,” and he went inside and fetched her some bread and water, which he placed within easy reach had her arms been unbound, but he did not offer to unfasten the rope.

“Why don't you eat?” he asked, mocking her. “Is it not food you want?”

But the girl, relieved from her first great terror, made no reply.

Weeks and months passed on – but over the tortures, the insults, the degradation to which the Vizier's daughter was exposed during that time, it is best to draw a veil. Only one point she made and kept, she refused to be Mohamed Jan's legal wife. She could not but believe that some day she would escape, some day she would find a means of returning to her father's house, and when that day came, she wished to be free, she would have no legal tie to bind her and force her back to a misery that was worse than death.

News of the war reached her from time to time. Mohamed Jan made no attempt to keep it from her. It was part of his amusement to tell her of the privations to which her fellow-countrymen were exposed. At first she had found a reply to much that he had had to say, and had more than once asked him when he was going to join the combatants, but after a time she ceased to make any remark.

Once he was away for three whole weeks, and then the girl felt as though the millennium had come. The jeers and laughter of the women were as nothing compared to what she had had to put up with from him. She was given the coarsest of food, and was not even allowed to wash her clothes.

“What do you want clean clothes for?” Mohamed Jan's mother asked her one day.

“Why, she is going to be married, I should think, and wants all her things got ready,” another one joined in. “Isn't that it, Gul Begum?”

The girl said nothing.

“It’s nothing but vanity,” the older woman went on severely, “nothing but the vanity that is inborn in her, and which she inherits from her father. That’s what’s the undoing of her. Ah, soft, silly fool, can’t you even now see where your own best interests lie? Your father is dead by now, you may be sure, and your mother and all your people slaves, and your home deserted and desolate. Can’t you see what a mistake you’ve made in not submitting from the first? Why, you might have had a good home here, and Mohamed Jan would have made you a good husband if you had treated him properly in the beginning.”

The girl shivered.

“Yes, shiver away,” the old woman went on, incensed. “A long time ago I told my son what he ought to do. You want to have your nose cut off, that’s what you want. That would take the vanity out of her a bit. I should think,” she said, turning to address the other women, who giggled and nudged one another. Gul Begum said nothing. She knew these women dared not do anything to her while the master of the house was away.

When Mohamed Jan returned, he was in high good humour. He brought some presents for his women, and soon afterwards bought a number of goats and sheep cheap, from a neighbour who was satisfied that any day the Afghans might come down on them as they had already done on so many others, and would seize his animals without offering any payment at all. Mohamed Jan also brought fresh news of the war, and seemed rather to despise than to sympathise with his fellow-countrymen in the struggle they were making for liberty.

“The Mullahs,” he said, “tried to stir up the Hazaras in Kabul, and they did succeed to a certain extent, without doubt, for the Mullahs have great power, but some of the Hazaras had experienced great kindness at their maters’ hands, and knew when they were well off, so they betrayed the plot. My word! yon should have seen the carnage that followed. The Mullahs were taken and tortured till they told the names of all who were concerned in this scheme. Which was to have caused a universal rising of every Hazara in the Kabul valley. The rebels were hanged, the Mullahs cut to pieces, and every Hazara has had a spy put on him, so they are having a lively time for their trouble.”

Gul Begum’s blood simply boiled, but she said nothing.

“Your father is dead,” he said, “and so is your uncle,” but still the girl said nothing. Fortunately she did not believe him, though her anxiety was increased to an almost unbearable extent.

Nor was she disappointed. Weeks passed and the summer was nearly over when one day Ghulam Hossain rode up to Mohamed Jan’s house and demanded his daughter. Her piteous condition, her dishewelled hair, spoke volumes. He did not need to ask any question, or even look

in her drawn and suffering face; besides, he had heard something of the treatment she had received from the little herd to whom the girl had shown many kindnesses, and who had been truly shocked to see her bound and ill-treated as she had been the morning she had wriggled down the stairs in terror at being deserted and left to starve.

“I owe you no payment except one that you shall not fail to receive in him,” the injured father had said. “I would shoot you now, here, in cold blood, traitor that you are, but that is the reward due to a soldier, and a man – and not to such as you. But mark my words, it may be long in coming, but your fate is sealed. You shall not die in your bed.”

The girl was weak and weary. Not so weary, however, but that, by putting her foot on her father's, she could mount his horse and ride home behind him.

CHAPTER XV

A WARNING DREAM

IT was a wild rainy night. Black clouds were tearing across the sky running races with one another, so it seemed, to see which would first reach and cover over the moon, which, on her part, kept making the most valiant efforts to remain unhidden, and light up the sad world on which she was trying to shed her soothing rays. Generally, she was

over-mastered, but every now and then her smiling face revealed itself, making her brightness the more apparent after her temporary seclusion.

The village among the Hazara hills was wrapt in sleep. Not a sound was to be heard, save the rushing of the mighty wind as it sought out every nook and corner, and blew its piercing blast through every crevice.

Suddenly Ghulam Hossain was startled from his slumbers. A shadow differing from those cast by the clouds had fallen across his pillow, and even in his sleep this keen mountaineer knew the difference. He sat up hastily, at the same time feeling for his gun, which lay beside him, then realised that it was Gul Begum who stood beside him.

“Get up, get up quickly, father,” she said impetuously; “take the boy at once and fly.”

Ghulam Hossain jumped up and felt for his pistols and his knife. They were all in place, just as his gun had been.

“What is it? Who is there?” he asked eagerly.

“I don't know. I have not seen nor heard, but hasten – hasten – fly to the mountains while there is time. There is no good trying to fight. You have not time to call even such men as are left in the village to arms. I have had a dream.”

Ghulam Hossain sat down again, replaced his gun and sighed, but Gul Begum hurried on, half pulling him up again on to his feet as she spoke.

“Oh, it is no joke. Don't be too proud to heed, father. Take the warning that has been sent. I dreamt there was a storm – Hark! do you hear it raging? Just such a storm as this that shut out all other sounds. Then suddenly I heard a sound of crackling through the storm, and knew that the place was on fire, and then I felt the flames first on my face and then all over me, such a scorching fire that I cried out for very pain, and started up and roused you and told you to fly, but you were sound asleep, and when you woke, you heard only the storm and not the crackling of the fire, and would not heed me at first, but sat smiling there, just as you are smiling now. Then suddenly you heard the roar of the fire, far above that of the storm, and you rose hastily and took the boy. Hark! what is that?”

Ghulam Hossain was on his feet in an instant; he too had heard something, and seizing his gun, stood listening, then wakened the boy that lay beside him. “Horses' hoofs at midnight,” he murmured, and was going towards the door.

“No, by the roof, father, by the roof across the shed, that is your only chance. That's how I saw it in my dream. Fly! fly! they are

dismounting, they will soon be in the yard, and you will be lost. You would be but one man against perhaps hundreds.”

She rushed to the door and fastened it, then dragged a heavy chest that at other times she could hardly have moved, and placed it across to obstruct the entrance of any one from without, and so gain time. Her father had taken the warning and was gone, carrying the boy with him.

“Here, open the door!” a rough voice called out, a few minutes later.
“Ho! there, are you all asleep?”

“Who’s there at this time of night, making so much noise?” the girl said sleepily. “You can’t come in unless” – correcting herself hurriedly – “there is anything wrong and you want something.”

“Aye, we do want something, and that something we will have; and, if you don’t open to us quickly, we’ll pull down your house over your heads and bury you in its ruins. Do you understand me?” and he commenced hammering at the door with the butt end of his gun.

“You must wait a moment,” the girl called out entreatingly, “and don’t make all that noise, you’ll wake the children, they are asleep inside. If you will be patient till I have fastened on my clothes I’ll call my mother and we’ll move a great box that we pull across the door to protect us at night. There is no need to force your way in, I’ll open as soon as I can. Here, mother, help, there is some one at the door who seeks admittance; help me with this chest.”

“Who is it?” asked the woman coming in, “and what’s the box doing there? and where’s your –“

Gul Begum had seized her mother’s arm, and placed her finger on her lips to command silence. Again, the same man outside began knocking with his gun, and another made a great rush at the door, thinking, with his whole weight, to push it in. But the door was of teak wood, and Ghulam Hossain had seen to the fixing of it himself.

“Wait, wait,” she said, “we are moving the chest, but it is very heavy; when I have pushed it aside a little I will open the door so that you can slip your hand through and help us from outside. But who are you who come forcing your way in at night instead of seeking admittance in the daylight?”

“We’ll tell you our business when we get in,” the same voice went on. “Make haste and move that chest. What do you mean by putting lumber before the door in this way?”

“My father saw it put there before he went away,” the girl said quietly. “He has it put there for our protection in case any one should try to molest us in his absence.”

“Is your father not here then?” the man asked angrily.

“Oh no, he’s not here, or he would have come out and spoken to you; he is away – at the war.”

“The bird has flown, my men,” the same voice called out. “We have lost him again. I thought we had tracked him this time. That devil of a Mohamed Jan must have misled us. I’ll make him sing for this, taking our pay just to misled us.”

“Mohamed Jan!” Gul Begum put her hand to her forehead as though she had been shot. “We have traitors in our very midst,” she murmured.

The men outside seemed to be holding a council. They had ceased knocking, but they were talking too low for the girl to catch what they said.

“I hope I did not do wrong to tell them he is not here. He will be safe now. They cannot follow him on horseback where he can gone, and only a Hazara and one who knows the way could take them to the caves. But what about Mohamed Jan? which Mohamed Jan? There are many of that name,” she said to herself, “many Afghans as well as Hazaras. It need not necessarily be *that* fiend.”

But somehow the more she thought of it the more convinced was she that the man who had laid this trap for her father was none other than the wretch whom had had trusted with the greatest treasure he possessed – his daughter. He had been faithless and worse in the one case – what was to prevent his being a traitor to his country?

Suddenly, above the murmur of the many voices just outside the door, above even the roar of the elements – the raging of the storm – another sound made itself heard, and struck terror into the hearts of the two women who stood listening inside. Shriek after shriek rent the air – the yells of a man in the agony of torture, then a dull thud.

A shriek – a thud. “Ah, they are using the fauna. Poor wretch! Who can it be, and what is it for?” Gul Begum cried. “Quick, mother, let us undo the door.”

“My God! My God! I have led you right,” the wretched victim called out. “I hate the man myself, and for my own sake would willingly deliver him to you. I tell you he is inside. Those women are deceiving you; he is there; search the house, he is there,”

Again there was a rush of many feet towards the door, which now stood open, so that any one could enter.

“Where is Ghulam Hossain?” a gruff voice asked peremptorily.

“Ghulam Hossain has joined the soldiers. He is not here. Do you want him?” Gul Begum asked composedly, stepping outside and moving towards the spot from whence the shrieks had proceeded. The black clouds were still chasing one another across the sky, and the wind was so high as almost to blow her off her feet, but the moon shone clear and the shrieks directed her to the spot where a little crowd had collected on the far side of the shed near the tower.

“I tell you I tracked the man here the day before yesterday, and after sending you the messenger have never ceased watching his every movement. He could not have left the house without my seeing him. I have sat in this shed all night watching the door until I heard the sound of your horses' feet coming up the hills, when I joined you. He is there, you have but to make a thorough search and you will find him, no matter how well he may be hid. Ah, let me go, let me go, it is useless all this torture. There is no sense in it at all. I would tell you all I could without any torture. If you break my feet, of what use can I be to you? If you will only release me I will serve you right faithfully. Undo my feet, they are breaking.”

“The dog speaks the truth,” one of the soldiers said authoritatively. “Undo the man. Those women have got that devil in here hiding somewhere. I'll make them produce him.”

Gul Begum had pressed forward, her shawl well pulled over her head, and was just in time to see Mohamed Jan released. He was sitting on the ground, his legs stretched out before him, his feet, from which the blood seemed oozing in every direction, securely fastened between the divided sides of a bamboo that had been split and driven into the ground. Beside him stood a soldier with a great club in his hand, and much as she loathed the sight of the man who sat before her in an agony too great to notice her, she shivered when she thought of the torture each stroke of that mallet on the end of the bamboo must inflict on the poor wretch who sat there, the sharp edges of the wood driven ever deeper and deeper into the almost bursting flesh of those poor, wretched feet, squeezing the bones almost to crushing point as the bamboo was driven further and further into the ground.

Another cry of pain – it was when the bamboo was removed – and then the blood flowed freely.

“Give me some water,” the suffering traitor pleaded. Gul Begum instinctively turned to get him some, but a feeling of revulsion came over her; she went into the house, and sat down beside her little sister in a heap on the floor. She could not return to face that loathsome sight, nor could she urge herself to take him the water he was craving for. He was her own most bitter enemy, who had insulted her and abused the confidence placed in him by her father. But he was worse than that, he was not only false to his country, but a spy to lead the enemy to the haunts of the Hazara chiefs. What worse could he be?

“Let those whom he serves attend to his wants, I cannot,” she said to herself, then took her little sobbing sister in her arms.

“You can search wherever you like,” Halima was saying in her terror. “He is not here, we have not a corner where we could hide a mouse in. Such an inconvenient house. No place to put anything. My husband was here yesterday. He was here last night. He must have had a sudden call and gone off late; he cannot be far away, not further than the next village at most; he often goes there; or he may have joined some company among the hills. He never tells me where he goes. If any one could tell you it would be Gul Begum there; ask her, she knows if any one does.”

“Where is the girl?” one of the soldiers asked roughly.

“I am here,” she said quietly, from her corner. “What do you want with me?”

“Where is your father?”

“How can I tell?” Gul Begum asked truthfully enough. “He was here last night sleeping in this very room with the eldest boy. When you knocked and made such a clatter, I came in here to see what you wanted, and found that the room was empty, neither my father nor brother were here. Doubtless they heard of your coming and escaped,” and then a spirit of evil took possession of the girl. “Mohamed Jan,” she said, “says he has been in the shed all night watching our house. My father is a spirit that he can vanish into air. Ask him which direction he took. He must have seen him go. My father may have made it worth his while to keep silent. Mohamed Jan is a man who will take any master’s pay – ours as well as yours.”

“That’s true, the traitor! Where is he? My God, he shall smart for his. Here, lads, tie him up again, tie him to the post of yon shed, and see what a hundred lashes will get out of him.”

CHAPTER XVI

A PRISONER!

GUL BEGUM had made the suggestion regarding Mohamed Jan and the bribe he had possibly received from her father, knowing perfectly well that, though undoubtedly a traitor to his country and capable of any conceivable crime, he was innocent on this particular occasion. She had said it without ever considering the consequences, in a moment of excitement and fury against the man who had not only wrecked her life,

but had been discovered in the very act of betraying her father, and who would, she was sure, be ready at any time to lead his country's enemies into the most secret fastnesses of their mountain homes, not merely to save his own neck (by going and taking refuge in Kabul he could have done that), but to earn the paltry sums of money with which any Hazara mean enough to accept them was being bribed by the Afghan commanders. And this man, had thought to be her husband! She shivered as she recalled the scenes she had gone through, and then shivered again as she heard the cries of the tortured wretch outside. "He is receiving his just reward," she murmured. But still she felt sick and faint and longed to run away and hide herself, longed to take back her angry words, even though her doing so were to release her enemy.

Suddenly an Afghan soldier entered the room where she sat crouching, and trying to shut out those awful cries from the ears of her little sister, who, hearing the noise, and general commotion had sought refuge in her arms.

"Is your name Gul Begum, woman?" he asked authoritatively.

"Yes, it is," she said without rising. "What do you want with me?"

"Stand up when I speak to you, and answer my questions truthfully, or it will be the worse for you. Do you hear?" the man went on.

The girl rose, wrapped her little sister in a quilt, and made her comfortable, then went and learnt against the door, looking out into the night.

"Are you a married woman or single?" the soldier interrogated.

"I am not married," the girl said, almost inaudibly.

"That man there, that Mohamed Jan," pointing in the direction of the shed, "says you are his wife, and begs as a reward for his services to us that you be restored to him."

"He lies," she said again, in the same low tones. "He wished to make me his wife when I went on a visit to his house some time ago, because he wanted the dowry my father would have given with me, but I am not his wife and never will be. I would rather die."

"Is there any one here who can prove that you are not his wife?" the man asked again, not so roughly this time. Perhaps though he was too hard to be touched by her evident distress, he was not altogether insensible to her beauty.

"Let him bring the witnesses of the marriage," she said quietly, feeling that she had gained a point somewhere, without knowing exactly where.

“That is not possible at this time,” he replied more harshly. “Do not dare to trifle with me. Where is your mother or some relation whom I can ask?”

“My mother is here, but she is beside herself with grief, and would say anything, hardly knowing what she said,” the girl replied anxiously. She did not know what trouble her mother might not get her into.

“Then call your mother – or stay, I will call her myself,” and he kicked the door of the inner apartment, where the other woman and children sat crouching in abject terror, repeatedly with the toe of his heavy boot.

“The mother of Gul Begum is to come here with me, I wish to speak to her,” he said. The poor woman came forward trembling, but speechless.

“Is this your daughter, woman?” he asked. “Yes, sir, it is,” she said faintly. “Is she married or single?”

“I tell you I am not married,” the girl put in, trying to give her mother the cue; but the poor woman was far too terrified to take it.

“She is married.” Then seeing that the soldier turned round on Gul Begum and advanced towards her menacingly, she added-hurriedly, “At least she is named on a man, a neighbour, and has stayed in his house as his affianced bride.”

“What does this mean?” the man asked angrily. “You pack of lying hounds! You want tying up to the post, and beating too, I think.” Then turning to Gul Begum, “Listen to me,” he went on. “If you are that man’s wife, go to him. You are free. You are his in payment of a debt we owe him. If you are single, go, get yourselves ready and come with me. You are all war prisoners, slaves of the Ameer, and must come with me to Kabul.”

Gul Begum shivered.

Her mother flung herself at her captor’s feet. “Oh, mercy, mercy, show us some mercy,” she pleaded. “I have little children and an old mother, do not punish us all for this girl’s sake. How can we go to Kabul in this weather? How can we get there in this storm? Let us at least spend the rest of the night here. Good sir, hear my prayer, and let us wait till morning.”

But she might as well have addressed the raging elements.

“Get ready to start as I tell you, and don’t loiter. I have orders to take you to the camp at once. Don’t keep me waiting here, “ was all the reply she got.

“Who is to saddle the ponies?” the woman whined piteously. “None of the men seem to be about the place. I suppose, like their master, they have run away instead of staying here to protect us.”

“The ponies? Oh, don’t you trouble about those, my good woman. We will take good care of them;” the soldier said laughingly. “You did not think you were going to ride to Kabul, did you? But make haste, or I shall have to help you with a stick. There goes the call. Come, march!”

“We must get on our things; you would not have us run barefooted on these hills.”

“Look here, my good woman, out at that door. No trifling here with me,” and, as he spoke, he pushed her outside. “You go out there and stay there. I’ll send the others after you.”

Meanwhile, Gul Begum had not been idle. She had seen at a glance that resistance was useless, impossible – and, picking up first one child, and then another, had clothed it as best she could in the hurry of the moment. Then turning to the recess where the stores were all kept, had seized every warm wrap she could lay her hands upon, urging her old grandmother at the same time to make what speed she could. But the confusion was terrible: the children, wakened from their sleep, cried, and would not be persuaded to help themselves to any extent, and Gul Begum, who had been concerning herself chiefly about their clothes, had no time to seize any food before the soldiers returned, this time with a stick in his hand, which he flourished menacingly, then brought down – but not heavily – across the girl’s shoulders.

“Look here, you women, out you go,” and, heedless of cries and tears, he drove them all out before him.

The scene outside was one never to be forgotten. Gul Begum had thought that they alone in their house were to be the victims, and had been reproaching herself, thinking she was the cause of all this trouble, but in that she found she was mistaken. With the dawn which was now breaking, the storm had lulled somewhat, and before her, as far as she could see, were figures moving in the dim morning light – figures, chiefly of women and children, driven and hustled by the soldiers, first here, then there.

Shereen and her mother were standing huddled together against a wall; neither had put on their boots, and both were but very lightly clad. They had been torn half asleep from their warm beds, and many others were in a still more pitiable condition. In all that great seething crowd it was almost impossible to find any one, and Gul Begum looked round in vain trying to discover her mother.

Oh, such a wailing and crying, such sobs and such despair! Here what fortitude and courage, there what dull obstinacy and indifference; but it

was the weeping of the children, the crowds of half-clad sleepy girls exposed to the night wind, that went most to Gul Begum's heart. Her little brother, the youngest of the family, she had folded in a great shawl, and soon hushed to sleep upon her breast, even among the noise and confusion that everywhere prevailed. Her youngest sister, a little child of barely nine, Gul Begum herself in miniature, clung to her sister's skirt in terror, but she had ceased crying and kept looking about, wondering what was the matter. Fatma, the elder girl, wailed loudly, hardly knowing why she cried. Then suddenly the order was given to march, and the whole crowd was driven down the hill and on the way to Kabul. Road there was none – only the pathway that had been made by the trampling of many feet for many years – but there they were, these hundreds of human beings, driven like so many sheep along a sheep-track, the lambs following as best they could.

“My feet, my feet, they are getting all cut, I can't walk on these stones barefooted,” a woman kept crying bitterly. “And where are my children? Will no one find my children and my mother?”

She was some distance on in front at first, but as she got further and further behind, owing to the tenderness of her feet, Gul Begum recognised her mother's voice.

“Here, mother, we are here,” she cried, “and Shereen and my aunt. I have given aunt your boots, for her feet were getting cut too, but you can have mine. I am used to going barefooted and prefer it,” and so saying, almost without stopping in her walks, the girl pulled off her long boots and handed them to her mother.

“And I am cold,” the wretched woman sobbed, almost breaking down now she had got back among her children.

“Here, take the boy and wrap the shawl around you both,” the girl said again soothingly. “It's all right now, mother. Whatever happens, we are all together, so that nothing can be so bad as if we were all separated.”

“Ho! there, no loitering,” one of the soldiers called out. “Who's that blocking the way?” for it took just a few seconds to effect these changes, and this time Shereen, the furthest behind of the party, got a poke in the back with the end of a stick.

Relieved of her burden, Gul Begum was the brightest of the company and did much to cheer the others on their way, now giving this little child a lift, now that, and as the light grew brighter the very soldiers noted her handsome form and face, and spoke more kindly to her than to the rest.

But what a dreary weary trail of human beings! A few men-servants and field labourers who had been left behind when the rest of the men had been called off to take part in the war were to be seen here and

there, but the great bulk of all that crowd consisted of women and children who, now that they had got well on the road, marched for the most part in silence, except where a child's wail or the fretful cry of an infant made itself heard.

On, on they marched. The night wind softened down to a pleasant morning breeze, and that in its turn disappeared and the sun broke out in all its strength, but still the molted crowd marched on. They had only halted twice, chiefly, it seemed to Gul Begum, to let the soldiers have some food, but they had been kind to her, and had let her have a piece of bread now and again, which she had at once given to her little sisters, and more than once they had pointed out to her a spring of fresh clear mountain water at which she had slaked her thirst.

The sun, as it rose higher and higher, streamed down on the white stones and sand, and baked them as though they had just come out of an oven, scorching the fugitives' feet. It streamed on their heads, and made them draw their shawls more closely round them. Gul Begum was accustomed to roam the mountains barefoot, but that had been at her leisure and at the hour she herself had chosen. This constrained march, barefoot on those burning stones, became very wearisome, and when the mid-day halt was called under the shade of some mulberry trees by a running stream, she was thankful to dangle her poor aching swollen limbs in the cool water.

The children ate the fallen mulberries ravenously, then stretched their weary limbs and slept in the refreshing shade.

"Shake down some more," Gul Begum had said to one of the soldiers. "Do, for the love of Heaven. See how hungry the little children are," and he had not only shaken the tree, but had climbed up, and, after eating as may as he could contain himself, had brought her down a handful. She ate them hungrily, and wished that at any cost she had seized some of the bread she had baked overnight, and which lay in piles on a shelf in the house she had been so suddenly forced to quit. How easily it might have been brought – and now they were so short of food.

So many mulberries to children unaccustomed to them could not be anything but harmful, but still they must eat something. Presently she feel asleep, and when she woke the shadows had lengthened by many feet and the evening breeze was beginning to rise again.

"Where are we to sleep to-night?" she asked.

"You will see," was all the answer she received. "How soon shall we be in Kabul?" she asked again.

"Khuda me danad" (God knows), the soldier answered, "to-morrow, or the next day, or a week or two hence. How can I tell?"

The girl sighed. “But the children? They will never stand this march,” she said, “and just look at my feet. They are better now, but by tomorrow night I shan't be able to put them to the ground.”

“Can't help that,” the soldier said again. “Why did you give away your boots? You had some on when you started.”

“Oh, it was to my mother I gave them,” the girl answered simply. “I could not walk in boots and see her feet bare.”

“As you please,” the man answered carelessly. “It's not much of a matter that to my way of thinking.”

They halted at night in a village, and were packed as tightly as they could be squeezed into the rooms, or rather sheds, allotted to them. It was a terrible night. Many of the children had a touch of sun fever, and in addition to this the mulberries had disagreed with several, and made them sick and restless.

“Give me some water – water,” Gul Begum's little sister kept crying, “I am so hot and thirsty.”

“Ah, God, my darling is ill,” the elder girl moaned. “God make you well, my sweet one,” but still the little thing wailed and cried, “Give me some water, sister mine (Khwar-e-m), I am so thirsty. Water, water.”

All night the girl sat by her and tried to soothe her, and when day dawned she slept. Then Gul Begum put down her head and slept too. She could do no more; she was worn out.

The child seemed better in the morning, but languid. Towards noon, when the sun again broke out in all its fury, she got worse. The fever returned with redoubled strength, and the child could not drag her poor weary limbs along.

“Oh God,” Gul Begum cried, “have pity but there seemed no God to hear, only the soldiers, and they hurried on the laggards behind and plied their sticks – not mercilessly, however – on those who seemed too weary to drag themselves forward. Gul Begum tried to carry her little sister, but her own feet were sore, she lagged behind in her turn and had a stick laid across her back just as though she had been a sheep straying from the flock. She borrowed her boots back from her mother, but found she could not get them on, her feet were so swollen. At last they halted again for the mid-day rest, but Gul Begum got no repose, the suffering child kept crying and could not sleep or eat. But why dwell on events so painful, so harrowing? The next night but one Gul Begum's darling died, died in a raging fever, and two nights later the boy died too. Oh, the wailing and the weeping throughout the camp! Dozens of little children perished on that long burning road, and so

exhausted were their mothers and relations at length that in most cases they became almost thankful to be rid of their burdens.

Not so Gul Begum; she nearly broke her heart. She mourned her little sister, her flower, her favourite, more deeply than did the mother who had given her birth; but still they journeyed on.

CHAPTER XVII

SELECTED

ON the afternoon of the fifth day, weary, worn, and travel-stained, the exiles saw a great camp in the distance – white tents extending in all directions over a well-watered plain where the corn stood high and green above the rich earth which, year after year, yields such abundant crops.

A motley crowd indeed had set out from the village among the Hazara hills, but it was an emaciated, haggard, exhausted crowd that came into camp that evening. Some of the older women, on the excuse of

remaining with the children who could drag their weary limbs no further, had begged to stay behind and watch their little ones die, promising to rejoin the party as soon as the last struggle should be over; and the soldiers had let them stay, partly under the firm conviction that, like the little ones whose death was inevitable, these feeble old bodies would never reach their destination, and partly also because they knew that as slaves their market value would be absolutely nil. But if the oldest of the party had dropped out from among the ranks and were sitting by the roadside in the last state of exhaustion, others seemed somehow to have taken their places in the most extraordinary way.

The middle-aged women, many of whom had been stout and well built, if not comely, when they had set out, were now mere shadows, their tanned and wrinkled skins hanging in folds across their but too apparent bones. Even the young women looked twice their age, and many were worn with grief as well as suffering. Among these was Gul Begum. Her father was her idol, her ideal, and he, thank God, was so far safe; but little Marwari had been her darling, her comforter and adorer. She missed her every hour. In all her sufferings in the days that were past it had been of the little sister she had thought, and the warm soft hand slipped tenderly in hers had been her solace during many a sad and anxious hour, and now she was gone, gone where the sun could never scorch her more, where no stones would cut her little aching feet, and where there were rivers and fountains in plenty to slake that burning unquenchable thirst.

As she had trudged on the tears had chased each other down her sunburnt, wind-tanned cheeks, and had fallen one after the other on her travel-stained skirt and shawl, but no sob had escaped her – only the tears welled up and fell, then welled up and fell again – she was too tired for more; nature could make no further effort. Properly clad, and at her own leisure, she could have accomplished the distance in half the time and without so much as turning a hair; but this weary, steady march, barefoot, all through the scorching noontide, with the helpless little ones depending on her when their own strength flagged, had taxed even her strength to the very uttermost.

The night she arrived in camp, however, she slept – and slept soundly – and next morning, except that her feet were both swollen and cut about by the stones, she felt fresher and brighter than she had done for some days. Shereen, too, and many of the other girls, had recovered their spirits and had begun wondering what the next move was to be. They had had an abundant supper over night, so for the first time for several days they were not hungry. Besides, they were not under nearly such strict rule as they had been, and some even talked of flight, but it was mere talk. Not one had either strength or courage to attempt it, and, moreover, for all the apparent carelessness, they felt that they were closely watched. Towards noon there seemed more stir about the camp.

Food was distributed, and the soldiers seemed altogether more active and busy about their arms and accoutrements.

“The Commedan has awakened and will be round to see the prisoners almost directly,” somebody whispered, and soon the fact was loudly discussed on all sides, and all sorts of speculations raised.

After a while a soldier came round and picked out about twenty girls or so, among whom were both Shereen and Gul Begum, and told them to smooth their hair and make themselves look as tidy as they could. The Commedan was coming, and was going to choose some half-dozen of them for himself. Some of the girls took the news placidly enough, and even began giggling and nudging one another in the usual Hazara style, when anything in the shape of marriage is in the air; but Gul Begum was most indignant.

“If I am a slave at all,” she protested loudly, “I am the Ameer’s slave, and must be assigned my place by him, not by any stray Commedan or Captain who may chance to crop up.” But the soldiers took no notice of her.

“Most probably he will not choose you at all,” one of the girls remarked, nudging her neighbour meaningly. “There are twenty of us here, and he only wants six. Why should he choose you? I would be quite willing to be one of the six, I’m sure, if only it meant an end to all this marching and driving across deserts.”

When the time came, however, the willing victim was not selected, and neither was Shereen. Gul Begum was.

As the Commedan marched off, having made his choice known to his subordinate, a sudden inspiration seemed to come to Gul Begum.

“Sahib,” she said – he turned – “Sahib, I understand that I am one of the girls you have selected for your own household.” He was going to pass on, but something in her carriage and bearing struck him, and he paused.

“Well, what of that?” he asked.

“I thought I had better let you know at once, and before matters proceed further, that your taking me may get you into trouble which you would rather avoid. I am Gul Begum, the Vizier’s daughter, the chosen of Colonel Ferad Shah.”

“Ferad Shah?” the Commedan said, almost below his breath. “Is that true? Do you soldiers know anything of this?”

“Heard nothing of it before.” One of those standing next him answered wonderingly. “We heard she was the wife of that spy of ours, Mohamed

Jan. Ferad Shah's name has never been mentioned in connection with her."

"It is well," Gul Begum said quietly, noting something of the awe which the very mention of this man's name had inspired. "It is you who run the risk of his displeasure, not I. These," pointing to the other women, "are my witnesses that I have protested. It is for you now to do what you please."

"What proof have you of this? Have you any one here who is aware that you have been selected by Ferad Shah?"

"There is my cousin Shereen," she said. "ask her, and somewhere you will find my mother, and these girls they, too, all know that Colonel Ferad Shah has twice sent special messengers for me to go and join him. That he is a man who does not care to be crossed I also know, and probably you know as much of him, or more, that I do."

The man looked her up and down. It seemed to him not unlikely that Ferad Shah had chosen this girl. He was a judge of these things, and knew a fine woman when he saw one.

"All right;" he said to his men, "put her aside to send to Ferad Shah. Let us hope she will like it when she gets there," he added below his breath. "My God, women have strange tastes!"

So the Vizier's daughter was returned for the moment to her tent and to her companions, and the other five, with another girl who was chosen in Gul Begum's place, were all marched off to the Commedan's quarters. But during the day many were the calls paid round the prisoners' camp, and many of the girls that were marched off in this direction and that, henceforth to be the slaves of those who had selected them. There was nothing unkind in the way they were treated. They were quietly told what they were to do and they did it; only when mothers and daughters were parted there was wailing and sobbing, and sometimes an effort on the mother's part to go with the daughter – an effort not altogether unavailing in some cases if the mother were young and the child too small to do easily without her. Fatma was selected during the first hour or two, and sent to the household of the chief man in one of the neighbouring villages. Halima cried loudly and begged to be taken too, but was sent back. She was not wanted. Gul Begum began to wonder what was to be done with her, and what her fate was to be. Like many another in Afghanistan she had saved herself from the difficulty of the moment, by placing herself in a far worse plight, had substituted what might prove a terrible ordeal in the establishment of a monster for the comparatively ordinary every-day trouble that had threatened her; but Hazaras and Afghans, too, never think beyond the passing moment. When the next difficulty arose she would find some means of meeting it, she thought, and in the meantime she had a few hours' respite.

Early next morning she was awakened by a soldier calling outside her tent. "Gul Begum, Gul Begum," he said, "you are wanted."

The girl was on her feet in a moment. "What is it?" she asked.

"Get up and make yourself ready to start at once. I have orders to take you to Colonel Ferad Shah's garden house, it is not very far from here, but the Commedan has ordered a pony for you to ride, and he is sending two other girls with you.

Who would you like to take? You may choose any that you may prefer from among those that are left."

Gul Begum smiled. "This is what it is to be the chosen of Colonel Ferad Shah," she said to herself, and in spite of all her many troubles and anxieties as to her future, a certain glow of satisfaction passed over her. After all, this was but how she ought to be treated; was she not Ghulam Hossain's daughter?

Shereen and her mother, besides Halima and several other women, occupied the same tent. "Take me," her cousin pleaded, "don't leave me behind, Gul Begum."

"And me," entreated Halima. "You would not leave me here all alone, or I shall indeed be forsaken. My baby is dead, and Marwari" -the wretched woman commenced weeping- "Fatma has been torn from me, and now you are going to forsake me too. Oh, wretched creature that I am, would that I too had died."

"Hush, mother, hush," the girl said smoothly. "If I may, of course I will take you."

"And me too?" asked Shereen's mother. "Don't let me be parted from you all."

"I wish I could," Gul Begum said anxiously. "I will ask the soldier," and she stepped outside.

"Look here," she said, "I am poor to-day and a prisoner, but I am not born poor, and I shall not always be a prisoner. I am going to the house of a rich man, where I know I shall soon have a good position, and in the days of my prosperity I will remember you if you will help me now in the time of my trouble." Afghan promises that all meant very little, because no one knows what his or her future is to be, for Afghanistan is the country above all others where the unexpected always happens. But the soldier, like the rest of his countrymen, lived in hopes. A better day might come, that was all he had to look forward to, though, after the manner peculiar to his race, he took not the faintest means to secure those better days.

“What do you want?” he asked. “Whatever it is, be sharp, there is no time to waste.”

“I want you to let me take my mother besides two others that the Commedan has ordered to accompany me.”

“Oh, you can take her and one other,” the soldier said, smilingly, “the Commedan put no limit as to age.”

“Ah,” the girl said sadly, “I see you are not going to help me. Our family has all been divided up, and some have died. There are just we four left, and we do not want to be parted. Will you not grant me this little favour? If you will, I will speak for you to Colonel Ferad Shah, and he will make you a Hawaldar (Sergeant), and something more, perhaps, some day, if you succeed in pleasing him, and do his bidding, and mine.”

“Do you know what Colonel Ferad Shah’s bidding is likely to be, my good woman, that you talk so lightly? Have you ever seen him?”

“I know something of him,” Gul Begum said, and a shiver passed through her as she recalled what she had heard; but, womanlike, she believed in her own power. “I know that he was a slave once, but that he is a colonel to-day, and placed in a position of great trust and responsibility, and I know that he may be a commander-in-chief some day, and have it in his power to make captains and even colonels of those who know how to serve him.”

The man stood thoughtful for a moment. “Look here,” he said, “you hurry up, and you can take your old mother with you. The chances are she will be sent back, but you can take her with you and see what happens. If she gets a beating for going where she is not wanted, don’t blame me.”

“You mistake,” the girl said brightly, “my mother is not an old woman, she is only wearied after a long journey; she is an active, able-bodied woman who can work hard, and has been accustomed to do so. She won’t get sent back,” and Gul Begum disappeared into the tent, well content with the result of her promises.

They had but little preparation that they could possibly make, these poor wanderers, possessed of what they stood upright in, and nothing more, so in less than five minutes they were on their way, Gul Begum riding, the others walked behind – one soldier leading the pony, two soldiers with loaded rifles walking behind to prevent any possibility of escape.

“How far have we to go?” Gul Begum asked. “Not far,” the man said doggedly. He did not want to be reported as having indulged in over much conversation with the prisoners, for in Afghanistan every man and woman looks upon every other, even his comrades, as possible

spies. There is no *esprit de corps* in Afghanistan. It is a country where every man is for himself, and “the devil take the hindmost,” which generally means the man who brings in fewest reports to his superiors.

When they were out of sight of the camp, Gul Begum called her mother up beside her. “Forgive me, mother, that I ride while you walk,” she said. “I only did so till we got out of the camp,” and so saying, she flung herself from the saddle.

“Here, what is this?” the soldier called out indignantly. “What are you doing? Get back on to the horse at once.”

Gul Begum turned to the tow men behind. “Persuade this man to let me walk a little way,” she pleaded. “I am longing to stretch my limbs. Let these two get on to the pony together,” pointing to her mother and aunt. “We shall get over the ground quicker so. Shereen and I can walk as quickly as any of you, and we may as well get as far as we can before the sun gets hot. It will be best for you as well as for us.” And so they let it be – the two older women riding the one behind the other on the pony, the two girls walking along briskly. Their previous five days’ march had put them in excellent training, and their thirty-six hours’ rest had completely restored them.

“I wonder what sort of life we are going to?” Gul Begum whispered in her cousin’s ear. “I shan’t stay if I am to be made unhappy, shall you?”

“I don’t see how we can help ourselves if we are to be shut up and guarded by soldiers,” Shereen answered hopelessly. “It does not seem to me we shall have much chance.”

“Here, not so much talking,” one of the soldiers called out. He was sharp enough to notice that there was something earnest in the nature of their conversation, and as that might mean trouble for their escort, he felt it wise to suppress it.

CHAPTER XVIII

AN AFGHAN “GARDEN HOUSE”

THE soldier had said it was not far to Colonel Ferad Shah’s garden house, but though the travellers had started shortly, after dawn, the sun was already low on the horizon when the little party halted in front of a heavy door – the only apparent entrance to several acres of land, enclosed by a high thick mud wall. Gul Begum’s heart stood still. Once inside those walls, what chance would the bravest have of escape?

Three times the soldier thundered with the butt end of his rifle, before his summons met with any response, and each time he cursed, not the man who should have admitted him, and did not, but his father, and his grandfather, and his wife's, and other relations' forefathers, in the usual Afghan style. At last an old man appeared in the doorway, in a state of fury, equal to that of the soldier, and in his turn commenced the same style of greeting.

"What sense have you that you thunder at my master's door in that manner?" he asked. "Are we all your servants that you expect admission the moment you choose to rap at our door, son a low-born barber that you are?"

"Cursed be your fathers, then, why did you keep us waiting?" asked the soldier angrily. "Are we dogs that we should be left standing outside the gate in this way awaiting your good pleasure? See, I bring you a new mistress, the last who had found favour in your master's eyes, and she is travel-stained and weary. A nice story she will have to tell your master of the way in which you received her."

"I was at my prayers, blasphemer," the old man said more quietly, noticing the woman on horseback. "Could you not have guessed the cause of the delay and have waited a little more patiently?"

The soldier, sending that he, or rather the rider, had made some impression on the irate old man, was about to add a good deal more, but Gul Begum herself interposed.

"Enough," she said, "now that we know you were at your prayers, there is nothing more to say. It was not so very long that we had to wait after all."

"Who are you?" the door-keeper asked quite civilly, noticing the air of authority with which she spoke, "and why do you come here?"

"I am the daughter of the Vizier, Ghulam Hossain," she said quietly, "and have been chosen by your master, and sent here by order of the Commedan of the camp over yonder," indicating the direction from which she had come. "We have ridden all day to get here, and are tired and hungry."

"It is passing strange," the old man said, eyeing her. "You are a likely girl enough, but I have no orders about you whatsoever, and hardly know what to say."

"You are not likely to," the soldier again interrupted, "if you don't go to the right source for your information. If you choose to address yourself to me instead of to the woman, I might be able to give you the information of which you do not seem to be possessed. I have a letter here for your master from my Commedan which will explain everything

there is to know about these women, and why they are sent here. It appears that your master saw this girl in her Hazara home and wished to have her. She was, however, taken prisoner by mistake along with a whole tribe from among the mountains, and brought in to our camp. So when the Commedan found out who she was and what the Colonel's intentions were regarding her, he sent her straight on here with these three women who are to wait on her and be her servants. Do you see, old owl?"

"Then come inside and leave off those evil cursing ways of yours." The door-keeper replied indignantly. "Don't show at every breath how low your origin happens to be; it is not necessary, any fool can see that at a glance before you ever open your lips." So saying, he unbolted the other half of the heavy teak wood door, and admitted them to a scene the memory of which never passed from Gul Begum's mind as long as she lived. It was only a garden planted both with fruit-trees and flowers, but the girl had never seen a garden before, and, unlike her more unimpressionable companions, it affected her deeply. For hours, for days indeed, she had been walking along a burning stony plain, with here and there at considerable intervals a stream, the borders of which had been planted with occasional groups of mulberry trees which had afforded her pleasant shade and a sense of peace. But this was quite different. It was a fairyland. The sun was just setting and spreading a flood of golden glory over everything, showing up in strong relief the graceful forms of the young almond trees on which the fruit was already beginning to show, while beyond them, and forming a magnificent background, stood great spreading sycamores, so old that no one knew who had planted them. In the front, at her feet, were sweet-scented English annuals, and all round her the atmosphere was laden with the perfume of the delicate pink rose from which the famous attar is extracted.

She drew a long breath and turned to address the door-keeper, but stopped again, full of wonder at the overhanging vines, the gnarled apple trees forming strange and grotesque shapes, and stretching out weird and ghostly arms in the rapidly increasing shade.

"You had better come to the house," the old man said. "The ladies will arrange something for you for to-night. To-morrow, doubtless, we shall hear from the Colonel what his wishes are regarding you; if there is no room in the house I can put a tent up for you to-morrow, but for to-night you will have to manage as best you can; you were not expected."

"Give me some receipt," the soldier said, "that I may show the Commedan that I have discharged my duties, and have landed the women here safely."

"You get nothing from me, you cursing fool," the old man said testily. "Go, make what explanations you best can. What care I what your Commedan has to say to you?"

“Have you a slip of paper?” Gul Begum asked, “and pen and ink. I can give you a few lines to let your officer know that I have reached my destination safely. That is all you want, is it not?”

The man could neither read nor write himself but he carried in his pocket the ordinary Afghan pen box, containing also a tiny bottle of ink, and now produced both it and a scrap of paper. One of his duties was to wait upon his superior officer and he often had to provide him with writing materials on an emergency. Dipping the pen in the bottle, it was found to be quite dry, but that in no wise nonplussed the soldier – he walked a few steps to the water channel, and dipping his hand in, poured a few drops on to the dried-up particles in the bottom of the bottle, then shook it. Again Gul Begum dipped in her pen, and now was able to write. That is the way with Afghan ink; it is like a sort of paint that only needs water to be added to it to make it fluid, and ready for use.

Three lines were all she wrote, then read them to the man:

“Greetings to the Commedan of the camp, which I left at daybreak this morning. May God give you happiness. I have reached Colonel Ferad Shah’s garden in safety, and am thoroughly satisfied with the conduct of the three men who acted as my guides and protectors during the journey.

GUL BEGUM.”

The door-keeper took the paper from the girl’s hand – looked at the writing, and then at her dress, but failed to reconcile the two – then handed the paper to the soldier. “It is a deal more than you deserve,” he said. “You have done your duty. You had better go back to your master.”

“No, that I will not,” the soldier said. “Is this Afghan hospitality, when we have walked from dawn? You must give us some supper and a bed; we will be off at daybreak to-morrow, we cannot start to-night.”

The old man thought a moment, and in the pause Gul Begum advanced a step towards him.

“Give them some food,” she said gently. “Two of the men, at any rate, have not offended you, so do not punish all for the sake of one.”

He looked at her as many another had looked, recognised the something that they too had recognised, and gave way.

“Sit down there, then,” he said, “and I will go and see what can be done in the harem for these new arrivals. Come along with me,” he went on, as he preceded the women in the direction of the house, which was protected by a second enclosing wall.

“Tell the Bibi that four women selected by Agha have been sent here from the camp,” he said to a slave girl, who met the party on the threshold.

“Nam-e-Khuda, what are we to do with them?” the girl ejaculated; “we are already so crowded we have to sleep like sheep in a yard.” Then, turning to look at them, “Hazaras!” she said. “Oh, they can sleep anywhere; put them in the stable.”

“Peace, girl,” the old man said angrily, “and be more careful with that tongue of yours or you may find yourself without it some day. You don't know what you are talking about. Take my message to the Bibi and tell her that one favoured by Ferad Shah, with free attendants, has arrived, and that a room must be cleared for them in the house. It can be quite small, they are only four, and, coming late at night, must be satisfied with what they can get.”

The girl disappeared, to return presently.

“Bibi says she has had no orders about the arrival of any women, and that if you wish them housed, you must house them yourself.”

The old man was very wroth. “Tell your mistress that I say the women are to be received and properly treated, fed, and clothed, or it will be the worse for her when Agha returns,” then he stooped and whispered something in her ear.

The girl glanced at Gul Begum, who, almost unconscious of what was going on around her, was still gazing at the beauties of a semi-tropical garden in full bloom, the gigantic scarlet briar roses and the brilliant yellow and orange ones a little further on, and, above all, the beautiful spreading trees in which the turtle doves were cooing one another to sleep. She had never seen the like, never dreamt of such a glory of colour.

Almost in equal wonder the slave girl gazed for a moment at the travel-stained new arrival. It was not her beauty that impressed her, nor yet her size – there were plenty of girls as tall in the harem – she could not have said what it was. Perhaps it was the fearlessness that comes of freedom, the possession of a soul that could forget the physical discomforts of its shell in the contemplation of the simple beauties of nature. Perhaps it was her quiet dignity.

Gul Begum was quite unconscious of having produced any impression, but the girl went quickly into the house, to return with a more civil

message. "The women must wait in the enclosure, and some food would be sent to them while a room was being cleared for their reception. It was late, the Bibi would see them on the morrow."

"That's well," the door-keeper said, addressing them; then in an undertone which obviously was meant to create a lasting impression, "I've done my best for you, but for me you would have had to sleep out in the dew to-night. You will not forget to recall my services when Agha returns, he will be back in about a week, I expect, but really we never know, especially since the war began."

Then he retired, and the women were left alone, or at least temporarily alone, for presently one woman came up, and then another, just to have a look at them and then pass on.

"I wish they would bring in some food," Halima began.

"I feel as if my thirst could never be assuaged," Shereen went on, and she stooped and drank some of the water from the stream that ran through the enclosure. "That's better," she said with a sigh. "This Ferad Shah must be a rich man! My goodness, look at his garden, look at his house, and look at his servants! What money he must have to clothe and feed them all."

"God grant it that we may have peace here," her mother said reverently.

And then the food was brought. One large dish of mutton and rice with cranberries mixed up in it, and two small ones containing two different kinds of green vegetables. "That is all that is ready just now," the girl said. "It is not much, but you were not expected." A very dirty cloth was laid upon the ground, and the women sat round it hungrily. None of them had had such a meal in all their lives, so well-cooked, so delicate in flavour, and yet the girl who brought it had made a sort of apology for it, as though it had been insufficient.

"I'd stay here for ever and work my fingers to the bone to get such good food," Halima remarked, when first she paused in her endeavour to satisfy her hunger.

"What rice!" her sister-in-law went on. "They must have some different way of growing it here. I have never seen the like."

The two girls had less to say, but both ate greedily. They had had nothing but a piece of bread to eat since about that hour the night before. After the meal was over, it was long before any one came near them. The night was growing chilly and the moon stood high in the heavens when the slave girl they had first seen on their arrival came towards them.

“What! still sitting here?” she said. “How is this, Nam-e-Khuda? You must have been forgotten. There are too many mistresses in this house and too few servants. God knows what it’ll all leading us to. Fine trouble there will be when Agha comes home. Here, come with me. I told a lot of girls to clear out a little room at the side for you, but I don’t exact they’ve done it.”

The wanderers rose with some difficulty. They had walked far and had fallen half asleep, in the damp night air, but they managed to follow their guide through the doorway and up a few steps, then into a little room, but the guide stumbled as she entered, and an angry, sleepy voice called out :-

“Here, what are you doing? Look where you’re going. Am I a dog that you walk over me?”

For answer the speaker got a smart rap on the side of the head. “What are *you* doing here, tripping me up?” the new arrival said. “What business have you here at all? Didn’t I tell you, you were to find quarters elsewhere and leave this room for the strangers?”

“There’s nowhere else to go. There’s not an inch to sleep on anywhere. I’ve been to see.”

“Then go and lose yourself,” the woman replied, “but clear out of here at once. Is there any one else here?”

“Yes, two or three. Are we all to turn out for these accursed strangers?”

“Do what you’re told,” the woman who was evidently in authority replied sharply, “and take’ these other women with you. Now, be sharp, or I’ll get the stick to you.”

Slowly and sulkily they rose, taking their mats on which they had been lying and their pillows with them.

“Cursed be their fathers!” the slave girl went on as they retired. “Not one of them is worth the food she eats. Stay here and I’ll fetch you some bedding that will do for to-night. I shan’t be a moment,” and she disappeared, to return with a huge bundle which she threw down on the ground, leaving the new arrivals to make the best they could of it. It was more than they had seen for many a long day, and in almost less time than could be credited they were all four sound asleep.

CHAPTER XIX

AN INMATE OF AN AFGHAN HAREM

THE sun was visible above the wall of the enclosure which bound their horizon when the party from the Hazara hills awoke on the following morning.

“Nam-e-Khuda! What must these people be thinking of us!” Halima exclaimed, as she pulled her shawl from over her head to admit the full light of day to her still sleepy eyes.

“They can only think that we have travelled far, which indeed we have, and were very much fatigued, which indeed we were,” her sister-in-law

replied anxiously. She did not remember in all her life having overslept herself to such an extent.

“There is nothing more or less for them to think,” Gul Begum said, laughing. “Aunt, lend me your comb, you are the only one that has such a thing; my hair is just like a camel’s beard.”

She moved towards the window and looked out. “Every one must have gone out to work,” she said, “there isn’t a soul about the courtyard. I can’t see over to the other side of the wall. Come, mother, look.”

“It was kind of them to let us go on sleeping undisturbed,” Shereen said quietly. “It looks as if we were going to be properly treated here, and not made regular slaves of.”

“Oh, how I should like to go out!” Gul Begum exclaimed suddenly. “I should love to be down among those trees and flowers. Come, Shereen, as every one is out, there is no reason why we should not go out too.”

Soon they were in the quadrangle that divided this inner shrub-planted enclosure from the beautiful orchard and garden beyond.

“Did you ever see anything like these flowers?” Gul Begum remarked to her cousin. “What colours!”

“They’re well enough,” Shereen said placidly, hardly noticing them, “but what I like is this. Look here, just think what grapes we shall have later on, and raisins too. I daresay there are almond trees over the other side of the wall. Let us go through and see what there is.”

So they made their way towards the door, but it was locked.

“Oh, how tiresome, they’ve gone and left us locked in,” Shereen went on.

“I suppose they thought we should run away,” Gul Begum said thoughtfully.

“Not likely, with that old door-keeper standing as watch-dog over the entrance outside.”

“Be careful,” Gul Begum said. “Some one is watching us. Every one has gone out. Don’t let us even look as though we were trying to run away. Come, let us go and speak to her,” and as they crossed the garden, a long-tailed Afghan magpie flew over their heads.

“Khuda! What bad luck,” Shereen exclaimed anxiously. “Our coming here is to bring us no good. What can it mean, Gul Begum?”

“It means that the poor bird has lost its mate, and has gone to look for it, I should think,” her cousin said, with some appearance of

indifference; but, as a matter of fact, she wished the bird had not taken it into its head to fly over them just then. “Look at that lovely creature, Shereen. What a colour! Did you ever see anything so beautiful?”

It was a yellow oriole, a “dochter-e-sofie,” as the Afghans call it.

“Ah, that must mean brightness after trouble, surely,” Shereen went on. “I don’t mind a little trouble first, if things will only end up well. I’m tired of being a war prisoner already, aren’t you, Gul Begum? And I’m so hungry, I should like some bread and sour curd, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes, I shouldn’t refuse it,” Gul Begum answered, smiling. “It will take us some time to ‘eat ourselves satisfied,’ after all the starving we have been having. Let us ask that woman. She doesn’t look bad and she’s got something in her lap, she looks as if she were preparing food of some sort.”

The woman to whom they alluded ceased looking at the girls when she found she had been observed, and kept her eyes fixed on her work. “We arrived here last night,” Gul Begum said, addressing her. “And though we did have some supper before we went to bed, we are very hungry now.”

The woman said nothing, but handed them some young vegetables she was paring and cleaning. They were sweet juicy, and the girls were glad to have anything to eat, they were so hungry.

“Has every one gone out to work?” Shereen asked after a pause. The woman only shook her head, and went quietly on with her work.

“I wonder if she is a stranger, and does not understand us,” Shereen remarked again.

Gul Begum was very silent; she had a sense as of something uncanny in presence of this strange, silent woman, and instinctively she looked first at the walls then at the door they had tried and had found locked.

“What time do you expect the others back?” Shereen asked again. “Will they be away all day?” The woman shook her head and shrugged her shoulders at the same time, much as a Frenchwoman might do who wished to say that she neither knew nor cared.

“Why don’t you speak? Are you not allowed to, or don’t you understand?” the girl went on. “We don’t want to do you any harm, but we are strangers, and we want to know something of the household we have come to.”

For answer the woman looked round furtively towards the house, and then round the garden; then, seeing no one else about, she touched Shereen’s hand, beckoning to her to look into her mouth which she

opened wide, throwing back her head as she did so. The girl recoiled in horror. The woman had no tongue. It had evidently been cut out, and the wound was not quite healed yet.

Gul Begum shivered. "My God!" she murmured, and instantly the woman bent down her head again and went on with her work, then motioned to the girls to leave her. As they turned, the slave who had brought them their meal the night before came down the steps and towards them.

"I thought you must all be out," Gul Begum said, addressing her. "We are sorry, but we slept very late. We were fatigued after our journey. It was so hot."

"Ah, you went to bed early, and so you woke early, I suppose," the girl thus addressed returned quite pleasantly. "What are you eating there? Ram's horns? Did you get them from Nookra?"

"We got them from that old woman there. What a dreadful creature she is," Shereen broke in. "She has just shown us her mouth. The poor wretch has got no tongue."

The slave girl looked Shereen up and down. Gul Begum she knew about, but who was this talkative piece of goods who spoke aloud in the daytime of matters that should not even be whispered at midnight?

"You had better look to your ways, and try to keep your own tongue a little more in control," she said, "or you, too, may find yourself in like condition some day. You are too forward. Ferad Shah knows how to deal with women who have too much to say. He'll have no busybodies here."

Shereen reddened, then turned pale, and moved nearer her cousin as though seeking protection.

"Oh, you need not be afraid," the girl said, noting the gesture. "I am only warning you. Keep your eyes down, and your ears closed, and your mouth shut in this house, and it will be so much the better for you. Come, you said you were hungry. Would you like some bread and curd? There is some fresh just come in, and Bibi won't be ready to wake yet this long time."

"Is she ill?" asked Shereen.

The girl looked at her again, a contemptuous curl on her lip.

"Oh, I can prophesy your fate at a glance, and what's more, you won't have long to wait for it to come to you. You want to know too much in too short a time, and you can't take a hint when it's given you. You'll

be sitting on a stool by Nookra holding your mouth before a month is over.

Again Shereen reddened up to the eyes, and this time the tears started into them. What had she done that this girl should speak to her so? She had asked nothing wrong, only a simple question. Instinctively, as Gul Begum had done, her eyes wandered to the high walls, and then to the bolted door. Her tormentor was not slow to notice this gesture either, and seeing how easily she could terrify this girl, she went on provokingly: -

“Ah, you need not look at either walls or door. They are strong and high – no one has ever been known to overcome either, but we have stronger things inside if you show a disposition to get away. We shall have to keep our eyes on you. I see.”

Shereen was by this time fairly cowed, and only hung her head, pouting.

Gul Begum, more to try the girl than anything, smiled knowingly at her. She replied with something not very unlike a wink, which was distinctly reassuring, and presently all three sat on the steps and commenced their breakfast of delicious newly baked bread, and sour curd. Seldom had the Hazaras tasted anything more entirely to their liking; and as there was no further mention made of the possible consequences of indiscreet talking, Shereen gradually became pacified.

Towards noon the girls noticed considerable stir about the house. Several slaves or servants passed by and glanced at them, and then the old doorkeeper came through the heavy garden door and disappeared into one of the rooms at the side of the chief entrance, leaving his shoes on the steps. He had the Commedan's letter to Colonel Ferad Shah in his hand. Gul Begum noticed it at once. When he came out he went up to where the girls were sitting and address them.

“Bibi is having her tea now, but when she has finished she will send for you. Salaam her respectfully and wait always for her to address you first. It is wise not to say too much,” he said in a low tone; “she is a great lady, and it is not well to dispute her wishes. When Agha comes home you will be given your position in the household; till then you must put up with whatever happens to turn up.”

Gul Begum bowed her acknowledgements. “It is of your kindness that you tell us this,” she said.

The old man seemed quite pleased and was moving away, when the girls addressed him again hurriedly: -

“Will you let me walk in the big garden under the trees this evening?” she asked.

“Among the men?” the old man said surprised; “how could I do that?”

“In my country the women can walk about everywhere,” she said. “Is it not so here?”

“No, it is not, but I will try and give you a chance of getting into the garden. If you were ordinary Hazaras I would ask Bibi to let you work there; we are short of men and there is a good deal to do at this season; but the master might not like it.”

“Oh, I would like to work in the garden,” Gul Begum interrupted him eagerly. “Will you ask if I may?”

“I’ll see,” the old man said again. “I must not been seen talking too long with you now; but I’ll do my best for you, and then, when Agha comes home I shall expect you to remember my services.”

“I shall never forget your kindness,” Gul Begum said quite sincerely. She was still thinking of the garden of which she had caught glimpse in the light of the setting sun, and she was inclined to think well of any one who would get her an entrée into it; but soon her ideas of garden and flowers and scents were thrown to the winds.

“You are to bring your attendants and come and speak to Bibi,” one of the slave girls told her, and Gul Begum went upstairs to summon her mother and aunt.

CHAPTER XX

SCENES IN A HAREM

IT was with a feeling something akin to that of appearing before a tribunal that Gul Begum entered the long, narrow room where the mistress of the house sat at one end surrounded by several other women of evidently less importance.

“You are welcome,” the lady said, as the strangers approached. It was only the usual form of Kabul greeting, but it sounded sweet to the girl’s ears after the weary days she had gone through lately.

“God keep you in peace,” she returned fervently, and by a sudden impulse, she darted forward, and taking the stranger’s hand in hers, she pressed it first on one eye and then on the other. “God keep you in

prosperity,” she said. The lady was evidently pleased. Gul Begum’s action denoted a certain amount of submission, which, from the description she had received of her from the girls who had seen her, was not what she had been prepared for. She had expected a haughty beauty who was to take *her* place perhaps in the household, but she found instead an undeniably good-looking girl with quite submissive ways and proper manners.

“Sit down,” she said.

Gul Begum turned and glanced at her mother. “I cannot sit while my mother stands,” she said.

“Is that your mother?” the lady asked, surprised.

“Yes, she *is* my mother,” the girl said simply, repeating her interlocutor’s words according to the manners of polite society in Afghanistan.

The lady turned to the woman who sat next her and whispered quite audibly, with a snigger: “Can you imagine that woman being mother-in-law to Ferad Shah?”

Gul Begum heard and flushed. “We are tired and travel-stained,” she said, “and may not appear to be worthy of any position in your household, but my aunt there is the wife of the chief of my country, and my mother is the wife of his brother the Vizier.”

“It is well,” the lady said haughtily, as though there had been nothing to call forth such a remark on Gul Begum’s part. “It is well; are you not satisfied with the treatment you have received since your arrival?”

“We are well, *very* well satisfied,” both Halima and her sister-in-law said hurriedly. “We have received the greatest kindness since we came here, and are most grateful to you for all you have ordered for our comfort.”

“Why should you talk as though you had something to complain of?” Halima went on, addressing her daughter rather angrily. *She* was indeed well-satisfied with the good food and immunity from work she had enjoyed since her arrival, and feared any change would be for the worse, not for the better.

“I had no intention of making any sort of complaint as to the treatment we have received,” the girl said quietly, then remained silent, but the flush did not soon die out of her cheeks, and she could not forget the lady’s words: “Can you imagine that woman being the mother-in-law of Ferad Shah?” It could have but one meaning. Ferad Shah must intend to make her, Gul Begum, his wife, and that the girl felt could never be,

and as the thought recurred to her again and again, the colour deepened on her cheek.

“God! what am I to do?” she murmured to herself, and the tears started unbidden to her eyes. “What am I to do? was ever girl more wretched?”

The lady saw the distressed look in the girl's face, but failed to divine the cause. “I am not angry with you,” she said, not unkindly. “You have not offended me. You need not feel distressed.”

Just then a slave girl entered with some tea on a tray, but, tripping on a stool that had got out of place by the door, she fell, upsetting several cups and the sugar as she did so. Instantly the mistress was on her feet, and darting towards the girl before she had had time to recover herself, dealt her blow after blow in the most savage manner on her head, her back, her chest, wherever she could see an unprotected place. Tired at last with her exertion, she was returning to her seat when the sight of a broken cup animated her afresh.

“The whip! bring my horse whip here,” she cried. “Fetch it at once.”

“Oh, not the whip, not the whip!” the poor girl pleaded, sobbing, “with your hands and feet as much as you please, Bibi, but not with the whip. Spare me, spare me!”

“Ah, bad one,” her mistress screamed, kicking her. “Do you cry now? I'll make you dance directly,” and she seized the whip that one of the other girls had brought her.

Gul Begum felt sick, she would have protected the girl had she dared, but there were a dozen women at least helping their mistress, and she felt that any effort on her part might be worse than useless, so she waited, silent but horrified. Such treatment for such a little offence! “Curse you!” shouted the girl in pain, “and curse your father and your mother. Curse all your father's children.”

“Ah, wretch,” yelled the lady, “you dare, do you?” and giving her a cut straight across the face she bade the other women remove her.

“You will hear more of this, my girl,” she said. “We shall see who is to be the accursed one. You all heard her, all heard what she said?” she went on, appealing to those who stood round. “She cursed both Ferad Shah's father and mother-in-law. You all heard that?”

“We did indeed, yes, that we did,” replied first one and then another all round. Not one would have dared to have opposed her in that temper, even had they wished to do so, and yet each girl knew that her turn would come some day, and that exactly the same thing might happen to her, and that no one would raise a finger to help her.

Soon, however, the storm was over, the lady recovered her temper and returned to her seat, but no fresh tea was ordered. Gul Begum felt sorry, she would have liked some. Instead, they were ordered to sit on a carpet at the far end of the room and do absolutely nothing – the occupation, indeed, that all the other women shared.

“Has no one any work to do?” Shereen whispered to her cousin.

“What does she say?” asked the Bibi, but neither of the girls answered. “Do you hear me?” she asked again angrily. “What did that girl say?”

“I said it was kind of you not to set us to work,” Shereen prevaricated skilfully.

“If that was all why did you not answer at once?” Ferad Shah’s wife went on sharply. “No one is going to hurt you for speaking.”

“Of your kindness, excuse her,” whispered Shereen’s mother nervously.

The lady turned to the lady next her, whispered something, and both burst into a fit of forced laughter. The Hazaras sat still, feeling uncomfortable; they knew they were being laughed at.

All the rest of that day they spent with the ladies and women of the household, and at two o’clock in the morning they were sitting in the reception room, still, silent, and unoccupied. Even Shereen did not venture on a remark.

Next day they were not sent for, nor the next. They had their meals alone, and were little noticed by any one, but the third night Gul Begum was startled from her first sound sleep.

“God, what was that?” she said. Halima, too, had heard something. “Hark! said Shereen, after a pause, “what’s *that*?”

It was as though several people were struggling in a padded room through which nothing could be heard distinctly. Then all was perfectly silent. The women sat up still, listening, they knew not for that.

After a time, the door leading into the beautiful garden in which Gul Begum so longed to wander opened, and some one rapped noisily at the door of the house.

“Open here, some of you,” the door-keeper’s voice called out. “What’s going on in there? What was that noise?”

A voice gave some answer that the listeners upstairs could not catch, but which seemed to pacify the old man, for he took his departure without proceeding further, murmuring as he went, “Cursed be the fathers of these women! Why can’t they keep quiet and peaceable?”

There's always some row or other going on. Never mind, they'll have the master home soon, and then they'll have something to do to keep him quiet, and that'll do them all good. Women are never so troublesome as when they have nothing to do."

The Hazaras sat listening to his retreating footsteps, and then turned and looked at one another. They heard a footstep on the stairs leading to their room. Gul Begum signed to the others to lie down, and feign to be asleep; they did so, and presently the door opened softly, and some one peeped cautiously in, stood for several seconds without moving or speaking, then quietly closed the door again and retired. It was the Bibi, but still the Hazaras lay still. No one dared move or speak, though they knew not what they feared, and at last they fell asleep.

With the morning brighter thoughts came to them. The great event of the proceeding night seemed like a dream. "I daresay it was nothing," Halima said.

"Do you think it was in any way connected with that slave girl?" Shereen asked anxiously. "I shall never forget that scene, shall you, Gul Begum?"

"Hush," her cousin answered, with some irritation, "do, for God's sake, keep that tongue of yours still. What's the use of talking about things that don't concern you?"

"But they do concern me," Shereen went on. "I can't forget that girl, and I can't forget poor Nookra. They are both slaves, and they call us slaves too, you know, Gul Begum, and what happened to them may some day happen to one of us. We've always heard the most awful tales of Ferad Shah, but it would seem that cruelty and injustice are by no means confined to the master of this house."

"Look here," Gul Begum said crossly, "if you want to say these things, please go and say them to some one else. In a house of this sort the very walls can hear, and what you are saying now may be repeated to the Bibi when she wakes. You will get not only yourself but every one of us into trouble by your chattering. I will not have you talk of what you see and hear in this house to me."

"You seem very nervous and anxious, more so even than I am, who never pretend to be brave," Shereen went on, almost crying, "what do you think can happen to us?"

"I know no more than you do," Gul Begum answered again severely. "I only know that if you want to bring misfortune and trouble on us all you will go on gossiping as you have been doing, and if you wish to avoid both you will keep absolutely silent. Do you remember what that slave girl said to you the other day? It is not only I who tell you of this

bad habit of yours, it is absolute strangers meeting you for the first time.”

“Oh, how cruel you are to remind me of that again,” Shereen went on. “I feel as if I could never get it out of my head. Why did you ever bring us here? All this misfortune has come upon us through you.”

“Yes, indeed,” Halima went on most ungenerously. “What made you say to that man that you were the chosen of Ferad Shah? It was very forward of you and hardly true.”

“It was quite true,” Gul Begum said, “and you know it; besides, I did not ask you to come with me. It was you who asked me to bring you, and only two days ago you told the Bibi you were more than satisfied with the treatment you had received. Why have you changed?”

“Why do you ask? Two days ago we did not know anything of the ways of this household,” the girl’s mother said, ignoring the absolutely incontestable statement that she was where she was by her own doing. Then lowering her voice, “Two days ago we had not heard that cry.”

“Was it a cry?” asked her sister-in-law. “Something woke up, but I could not say what it was. Perhaps it was not a human cry after all. Might it not have been a jackal?”

Gul Begum, who was more especially addressed, said nothing. Whatever her own ideas on the subject were she evidently wished to keep them to herself. One little observation she had made when first she woke that morning, but she revealed it to no one, and took an early opportunity of obliterating what she had seen. It was a mark evidently of a woman’s shoe on the wooden door sill, and the nature of the stain left behind was unmistakable. It was blood.

Something of the old hunted look that Gul Begum had had in the old terrible days with Mohamed Jan stole back into her eyes, and there was something, too, denoting fixed resolve. Shereen did not feel particularly friendly towards her cousin on account of the lecture she had received as to the too free use of her unruly member, so she did not join her cousin as usual, and Gul Begum was left to herself and her thoughts, which did not seem to be of a particularly pleasant nature. She started when Halima suddenly laid her hand on her shoulder.

“Look here, Gul Begum,” the older woman said in a whisper, “you brought us here. You must devise some plan for getting us away. We are here locked up like prisoners and surrounded by people who seem capable of anything. This is far worse than Mohamed Jan’s house. You have a way with people that makes them give in to you. Get us out of this. I shall be driven mad with terror.”

The girl looked at her mother, a sad pity for herself as well as for her swelling up in her heart.

“Listen, mother,” she said, “I have already resolved to do all I can, but I cannot yet make up my mind what to do. It appears that Ferad Shah contemplates marrying me. Can you devise any plan which would get me away from here before his return? I have been thinking and thinking, but can come to no decision likely to prove successful.”

Halima, really alarmed for her own safety, became more amiable and more sensible than usual, and mother and daughter conferred for some time together. When the discussion was over, Gul Begum seemed less dejected. There was something to be done besides sitting and awaiting what she felt to be her doom, and the girl's spirits rose at the very thought of release from this establishment of horrors.

CHAPTER XXI

A LADY'S TOILET

FORTUNE seemed to favour Gul Begum next morning. Before very long the slave girl, to whom she had spoken on the day of her arrival, and who had given her the bread and sour curd the following morning, came upstairs and called her: “Bibi is just finishing her toilet after her hum hum (Turkish bath), and has sent for you. She wants to speak to you alone,” she said. Then in a lower tone she added, “Now is your time to get some clothes from her. You need them badly.”

So the girl followed her guide with an almost trembling eagerness. It was not clothes she wanted, it was release, but how to get it?

They crossed the quadrangle, went up a few steps, and Gul Begum had to stoop to get into the apartment into which she was ushered, so low was the doorway. The floor was concreted, and felt very hot to her feet, and the air was laden with moisture.

There was a rough, wooden door opposite that by which she had entered, and she could see beyond a smaller room too, from which a considerable amount of steam and heat was evidently coming.

Gul Begum had never seen a Turkish bath before. She was puzzled, and not a little alarmed. The cry, or whatever she had heard in the night, recurred to her, and she turned instinctively and looked at the door through which the slave girl was on the point of making her exit.

“Kush amedi” (Welcome), the lady of the house said graciously.

Gul Begum had hardly noticed her, she was so taken up with her other surroundings; but, on being thus recalled to a sense of what was due to her hostess or mistress, whichever she might prove to be, “You are well?” she returned, with an inclination of her head, remembering suddenly how much depended on this interview.

“Remain in peace,” continued the lady. “You have not seen a hum hum before, I day say. Would you like to go and look round, before you come and speak to me?”

“I would,” the girl said quietly, somewhat reassured. “This seems to me a strange place. It must be pleasant in cold weather.” So saying, she advanced towards the inner chamber. There was not much to see when she got there, only a very hot room, almost dark, and full of steam. There was a deep, dark hole in the wall. Gul Begum put her arm through, and came to the tank containing the hot water which the attendant bath women throw on their mistresses, as they lie flat on the ground on a deer or tiger skin put down for the purpose, going through the process of scrubbing, first with a thick sort of mud, then with a kind of soap, next with a rough glove which seems to take the very skin off, and finally with a cool white powder, called sufedi (whitening), very comforting after all the kneading and scouring that has gone on before, but not becoming, it makes one so ghastly white.

When her eyes got accustomed to the light, she saw two brass taps below the opening in the wall. Wondering what they were for, for she had never seen such a thing, she stooped and turned the cock, and immediately the water began to run.

“What convenience!” the girl said to herself. “This is indeed a luxurious people. One turns one little handle and hot water comes, and another, and one has cold water. It is all very wonderful,” and rejoicing in the discovery of what had interested her, her cheeks hot from the

atmosphere she had been standing in, she returned to the outer room and rejoined the lady, who still sat on the floor amid the mysteries of an Afghan toilet.

Her mistress, for such in fact she might for the time being at anyrate consider herself, looked up and noted the girl's appearance. "She is very handsome," she thought, and a hard expression came into her face. Many and confused thoughts chased one another through her brain. What position was this new arrival to occupy? Hitherto, since her marriage she had been mistress in this house, ruling the other wives and slaves with none too gentle a hand. What place was this new girl to occupy? Her beauty was undeniable, and there was something more than ordinary beauty in that erect head, elastic step, and graceful carriage. The Bibi saw it all, and trembled for her own position. "She has undoubted beauty," she said to herself again, then smiled. "But with a man, beauty is not everything. It may conquer for a time, but it takes more than mere beauty to hold him fast. She is a simple village maiden, this girl. What does she know? I have arts of which she knows nothing. I shall soon overthrow her when her first flush of possession is over. She can be no rival to me."

Gul Begum stood still watching the lady as she proceeded with her toilet. To her it all seemed wonderful, and she had not the slightest idea of the jealousy she was rousing in the breast of the woman who sat before her, apparently so innocently engaged with her pots of ointment and powder, her rogue, and her antimony.

"You do not use antimony for your eyes?" she said, addressing the girl. "Do none of your people use it?"

"I think not," Gul Begum said. "I have never seen it before."

"Nor henna* for your hands? Dear me, what a lot we shall have to teach you. We shall have to do your hands and feet up in henna tonight, then you will be ready for your hum hum tomorrow. It is very pleasant; I have some very good women who will bathe and massage you well."

Gul Begum blushed. "Oh, I can do everything for myself." She said hurriedly. "I shall not require any one to wait on me. I am not accustomed to it."

The elder woman laughed. "That may have been well enough for your old days in your home among the mountains, but it won't do here. You are to be one of Ferad Shah's wives, and must learn the customs of this country, and must conform to them."

Gul Begum pulled herself together. Ah, now the supreme moment had come, the moment when she must make a wild effort for freedom, and win or lose it for ever.

“Bibi,” she said, “I cannot be Ferad Shah’s wife. There are reasons why I can be no man’s wife, but I fear to tell you, you may be angry.”

“Ah, you are going to tell me you are married,” the lady said hurriedly, “or that you have already been named on some one. All that will make no difference to Ferad Shah. He is not particular about little details of that sort; besides, you are a slave girl, a war prisoner. No former tie *need* be recognised now, even by the most religious, and no one would call Ferad Shah *that*.”

The girl bent forward, and whispered something in the lady’s ear. “I was married once, but I was returned to my father’s house,” she added, not quite truthfully.

Her mistress laughed. “Oh, that’s it; is it? Then why were you sent here? Whose doing was it?”

“I was sent by the soldiers,” she said, “and I have been waiting for a chance of explaining things to you. Oh, Bibi; when my husband sent me home, he beat me and ill-treated me, and you have no idea what I suffered. My beauty is a great misfortune to me, it only gets me into trouble.” Then kneeling down before her, she went on hurriedly as though she feared there would not be time for all she had to say. “I have thought of a plan, and I think it would suit you well. I know something of Ferad Shah, and of his practices.”

“Ah, then you know *something*,” the lady interposed in an almost inaudible whisper. “You cannot know *all*, he is bad beyond all description, beyond all imagination. He is a monster. What you say will make no difference to him. He will want you all the same for your beauty.”

A jealous pang gnawed at the elder woman’s heart.

“Listen, Bibi,” Gul Begum went on, “in this house you are all powerful; till he returns you can do anything you please. Swear over your women to tell every one that I am hideous and untidy, and cannot work, and am generally worthless, and send us all away. Sell us to some one.”

The lady smiled a gratified smile. “I cannot do that,” she said, “I am not so powerful as you think, but I can do something, and I will do my best to help you. You do not wish to remain here, you would rather go somewhere else?”

“I would rather go where I am wanted as a servant, and not as a wife. I know what it means. I have gone through much already. Spare me, Bibi, if you can, and send us all away.”

“I can do nothing till Ferad Shah comes home,” she said, “but he is probably coming here this evening.” Gul Begum’s heart gave a great throb of pain and anxiety, almost of hopelessness. “He has heard of your arrival, and I have had instructions from him this morning that you are to be properly clothed, and got ready generally to receive him to-morrow. So you see it would be quite impossible for me to get rid of you; besides the old door-keeper would not let you through.”

The girl smiled, a little danced in her eyes. “Bibi, let me manage that door-keeper,” she said. “I think I could persuade him.”

The older woman looked at her, saw the triumph, the light in her eyes, and seemed about to change her mind. She felt the power of this woman.

“I do not believe what you have told me,” she said. “It is all made up, a lie-“

Gul Begum interrupted her. “Bibi, what I have told you is to *my* disadvantage, not yours. I am young, I am handsome, why should I not marry happily and be head of my husband’s house? I am your junior by many years.”

The elder woman turned round and addressed her anxiously: “But instead of that, you ask for obscurity and probable ill-treatment among the servants?”

“That is so,” the girl said, and sighed. “I ask to go to some household where I can work, and where I shall attract no notice. Does that look as though I had lied?”

The lady looked at her again. “Well, you are a strange girl, but it would suit me well enough, I daresay, for you to go and do as you seem to wish, but first you must wait for Ferad Shah’s orders. I cannot act in this matter without them. It is out of the question.”

“Then, Bibi, do this,” Gul Begum replied. “Send all of us like common labourers to weed in the big garden and remove the stones. Tell Ferad Shah you find we have tried to deceive both him and you as to our former position; that we are mere nobodies, and that awaiting his return you have sent us to our proper place – to the garden to work among the ordinary labourers. I can make myself look so different to what I do now that *you* even would not know me. Then when you have told him that we are low born, and useless, and all the rest that I have told you, he will soon send us off. He will not want for extra useless mouths to feed.”

“Do you realise what you are asking for?” the lady went on, surprised. “I don’t think you can have considered what your fate will be. If Ferad Shah sends you away (and you will probably all get the stick before

you go), you will be sent to a Kabul prison. Have you any idea what a Kabul prison is?"

Gul Begum shivered. She had an idea, only she felt nothing could be worse than what she had seen and heard in this beautiful garden, and Hazara-like, again she wished to throw off her present burden and let the future concern itself with the next one when it came. For the moment she was satisfied to get out of the difficulty in which she then found herself.

"Bibi," she said, "I know what must be my fate, because I know what my fate has been. I know I am beautiful, and I know if once Ferad Shah sees me I shall be in difficulties. Do not be offended at my suggesting such a thing, the idea is indeed abhorrent to me: he may for a time place me even above you. Let me go before such a thing can happen. Send us to the big garden to work there as I have suggested."

"But how about the other women? Your women as well as mine?"

"My women wish to leave with me," the girl went on, "and as to yours, tell them that in a long conversation with me you have discovered the truth about us, and that as a punishment you are going to get rid of us."

The lady smiled. "There are many among them who would think that a strange punishment," she said.

Gul Begum bent forward and took her hand. "Whatever happens," she said, "whether I succeed or fail, I wish to thank you now, before the immediate future is known to either of us, for the gracious way in which you have listened to my request. Whatever you may be to others you have been kind to me, and I am for ever grateful to you. I would serve you if I could."

For a moment the horrors of the house, the scene with the slave girl, all was forgotten. She only felt grateful for the helping hand that was being stretched out to her in her trouble. It blotted out for the time being all other details. She was not wise enough to analyse motives, she did not go for character study. Had she done so she would soon have found that Ferad Shah's chief wife was a most typical Afghan. Idle, luxurious, treacherous, capricious, capable of the most unheard of cruelties, but with certain generous impulses, and possessed of a gracious courtly manner when it suited her to assume it; a willingness to help another so long as it cost her nothing, a willingness, prompted to no inconsiderable extent, by her desire to show her position and influence. Somehow, too, this girl had a power of flattering her. What she said and did came straight from her heart, any one could see that. There was nothing in the least artificial about it. Ferad Shah's wife felt this, and it pleased her.

“Remain in peace,” she said, “and do not misunderstand any change in my manner towards you. I shall have to dissemble, and so will you.”

While she was still speaking the slave girl entered. “Take this woman from out of my sight!” she exclaimed excitedly, “take her away,” she almost yelled, and rising from the floor, where she had been sitting, she endeavoured to thrust both her and the attendant outside the door.

Gul Begum gazed at her in absolute wonder, so rapid had been the transformation. Again she saw before her the woman who had kicked and lashed the slave girl for what had been a mere accident, and the whole of the former horror and terror at finding herself in such surroundings returned. She rose hurriedly to her feet.

“You hear what I say,” her mistress yelled, still addressing her attendant. “Put them outside the garden gate, these labourers who come to us disguised as princesses as tell us they are Chiefs’ and Viziers’ daughters. Send them to their proper sphere, and put them to the work for which they were born, and send me the Derwan here.”

The slave girl advanced towards her mistress. “Sahib,” she whispered in her ear, “consider well, Ferad Shah returns to-day. You know him. He will see this woman, you cannot prevent him unless, perhaps, for a day or two at most, and when he has seen her, who knows what her position may be? If you maltreat her now she may have a chance of causing you to remember it later. Be advised. She has looks.”

“Look, has she?” roared the mistress. “Cursed be the father of her looks. Do as I tell you, take her away from me. How dare you leave her here when I have ordered you to remove her, and send me the Derwan here. I have a good deal to say to him. It is possible he too may have been deceived, but I will undeceive him.”

** Henna is the herb with which almost all sects of Eastern women dye their hands, and especially their nails, a sort of terra-cotta colour. The leaves are ground into a powder, and by the addition of water, a sort of thick paste is made. In this the fingers are closely encased. The hand is then closed, and a second coating is placed all over the fist. The hands are kept doubled up like this all night, and next morning they are dyed a deep terra-cotta, the creases in the palm of the hand showing up white where the dye has not reached. This is considered a beauty, and is, moreover, thought to soften the skin.*

CHAPTER XXII

“A SLAVE”

SO rapid had been the change in the Bibi's attitude towards her, that Gul Begum, for a moment, felt that her petition had been an insane one, and could have wished it unproffered. Soon, however, she realised that greater discomfort at the moment might lead to something better in the future, if only her mother and other relations would stand by her.

“What on earth have you said or done so to offend the Bibi?” the slave girl asked. “You have been very unwise, and I must not seem to notice

you, or I shall get into trouble myself, but if I do what I can for you now, and get you taken into favour by the master when he returns, you must not forget me later on. I have more influence than you perhaps think.”

“I shall never forget your kindness to me, but send my companions to me now, I entreat,” was all Gul Begum could find words to say.

“Yes, when I can, but first I must send the Derwan to the Bibi,” the girl replied. “Crouch down there in the corner as though you felt yourself to be humiliated, and later on I will come to you if I can.”

Gul Begum did as she was bid, and apparently her disgrace soon became the gossip of the harem, for now and again one girl, and sometimes two, would come to look at her, then laugh derisively and pass on, then come back and laugh again.

Presently the Derwan came through the garden door and passed into the large room where the Hazaras had first been received, and shortly afterwards the Bibi, with several of her women, entered the same room. What transpired she never knew, but in the meantime the other Hazaras had joined her, and she was completely engrossed in explaining her plan of action to them.

“What we have to do is to get out of this place at any cost,” she said, “and if you will only follow my advice, boldly, we shall succeed, but do not ask me for details now, the very walls here have ears.”

What she really felt was that she dared not tell them that the Bibi, for her own selfish interests, was willing to befriend her. She could not trust one of them with such a secret as that, at a time when she had no idea what the next few hours would have in store for them all. Presently the Derwan came out of the house, and towards them, as they sat crouching by an outhouse at the far end of the quadrangle.

“What tomfoolery have you been up to?” he said, addressing Gul Begum. “You may have deceived the Bibi, but you can't deceive me. However, come and do as she bids, and as you have yourself chosen, come and work with the labourers in the garden. I'll give you a patch to yourself where no one will molest you, but I shall expect to be remembered for this service.”

And so Gul Begum's wish was realised, and she went to work among the beautiful, many-coloured flowers under the shade of the spreading trees, but her heart was beating with the wildest hopes and fears, and, a presentiment of evil that no beauty could allay, though after a time she felt soothed. The soft blamy air played through her hair and fanned her burning temples, and the gentle cooing of the turtle doves lulled her excited brain to something like rest.

“Are you going to get us away from here, Gul Begum?” Shereen asked after a time.

“Don’t ask me any questions,” her cousin answered shortly, “only let us get near the water channel and we will put some of this grey mud upon our faces, so that if Ferad Shah should see us, he may think us old and ugly and send us away, let us hope to some lowlier and less cruel household,” and then to terrify her cousin into submission, she added rather pointedly: “This is no place for people who cannot hold their own tongues, for it would appear that there are those here who are willing and ready to hold them for them.”

Gul Begum saw she had produced the desired effect, not only on Shereen, but also on her aunt, who expressed great anxiety as to what would become of her daughter if she could not learn to control her insatiable desire to know more than her eyes could tell her.

“Go with Gul Begum,” she said, “and do as she bids you, and, for God’s sake, keep your mouth shut and don’t get us all into trouble. Thank God we are outside on set of walls. Let us see if we can’t get outside the next set.”

When the two girls returned from the water channel they were hardly recognisable, so skilfully had Gul Begum applied the greasy grey mud, a piece of which she had almost unconsciously carried off with her from the Bibi’s hum hum.

“Khuda-a-a!” said her mother, prolonging the final a in the way common to all Afghans when they wish to express astonishment. “How poor a thing is beauty when a scrap of mud the size of a marble can efface it all.”

Quite late in the evening there was a sound of horses’ hoofs, a barking of dogs, and a sort of short sharp yap peculiar to Ferad Shah’s much dreaded wolf dogs. Gul Begum shuddered. The awful trial was drawing very near, how would it end? The turtle doves fluttered in their nests above her, quarrelling, she supposed, by the feathers that came scattering down all round her. There seemed no peace, no rest anywhere, not even in this garden of Eden with its flowers-scented atmosphere. Tents were soon pitched in every direction, and a regular camp established under the trees; only the master and several women, easily recognisable as Hazara prisoners, went inside the second enclosure.

When all was quiet again the Derwan came and spoke to Gul Begum: “There is no good in my speaking of you to Ferad Shah to-night. He will be taken up with Bibi and the other ladies, and showing them what he has brought from the war, and telling them of the great deeds he has done; besides, he is tired and will go to rest early. But what have you been doing to yourselves?” the old man went on, noticing the change in

the girls' appearance. "Is that how you hope to win your way into Ferad Shah's favour?"

"I wish to win my way to Kabul, to the Ameer," Gul Begum said, as if by some sudden inspiration, "and if you will help me I will not forget you."

The man looked at her, surprised. "You have great ambitions," he said. "What will you do when you get to the Ameer?"

"God knows," she said sighing, "but I might chance to find favour in his eyes."

"I don't see how that is to be brought about," he said. "I can see no way of helping you to that."

"I don't ask you to help me," the girl pleaded, "only do not hinder me, and tell Ferad Shah, if he mentions me, that you think me ugly. See how old and worn I look."

"I see you have been disfiguring yourself," he said; "but if I tell Ferad Shah that you are ugly, there are plenty of others who will deny what I have said. You don't want to get me into trouble, do you?" And after providing the women with a rough shelter for the night, the old man left them, but not for long.

The sun was just showing above the horizon when Gul Begum was summoned inside the inner enclosure, and she found herself in the outer chamber of the hum hum where the Bibi had received her the day before, and presently the Bibi herself entered hastily but noiselessly.

"Ferad Shah is asleep," she said. "He came home in the best of humours last night. He had travelled straight from Kabul, where he was received with marked favour by the Ameer, and was presented with a metal and a Khelat (coat of honour). He asked about you, and I told him what we had arranged he should be told. He seemed more amused than angry, and then I begged of him to send you away to Kabul to the prison, as a punishment for your having insulted me by presuming on my credulity. He told me to do as I liked, as for the moment he has more girls than he well knows what to do with. So now to horse and to Kabul with you. I have done all I can for you. I have arranged that one of the labourers shall take you, and you can have the horse you brought, for Ferad Shah will never miss it, and you have far to go. May God protect you, and do not forget that I have helped you in your need." So Gul Begum, to her astonishment, found herself in less than an hour on her way to Kabul, guarded only by one soldier and the labourer, who lead the horse, and who received strict injunctions from the Derwan to return it to the master, as he might hear of it and ask for it.

Long afterwards, from one of the Hazara slaves Ferad Shah brought with him that night, Gul Begum heard of the fate from which she and her companions had been spared by the timely intervention of the Bibi. Ferad Shah awoke to find he had much to do, and therefore but little time for rest and enjoyment. The Hazaras who were said to have so imposed on the credulity of the household did not at first cross his mind, but when they did he ordered them to be sent for.

“I’ll teach them to deceive me,” he said. “Ho! where are the dogs? We’ll have some sport and see how they can run, these women.”

“You ordered them to jail,” his wife explained. “They have been sent off long ago. It was not for me to keep them here when once you had passed judgement on them.”

“Sent off long ago?” Ferad Shah exclaimed. “Why do you tell such lies? I have not yet been forty-eight hours in the house. How can you call that ‘long ago’?”

“I should have said immediately you gave the order,” his wife put in gently. Before her lord she was a very different person from the wild cat who had so impressed Gul Begum.

“What right had you to act without my orders?” he asked again angrily, disappointed at losing what he looked upon as sport.

“I understood I had your orders,” his wife replied with well-feigned regret, and there the matter ended, for Gul Begum was by then in Kabul.

Another weary march had been accomplished, another act in her life had been played, and she was in a crowded Kabul prison, but “no man’s slave yet, thank God,” she said to herself again and again. That degradation, however, was not spared her long.

A city merchant had an order for a slave, and his choice fell on Gul Begum. The girl made what resistance she could, but of what avail was struggling on her part? A heavy stick, the weight of which Gul Begum did not forget for many a day, was laid across her shoulders, and she was led forth, a panting, slatternly, ill-looking girl. She had a great scheme in view. She would make herself so objectionable to every one who chose her as their slave that at length she would be treated as an imbecile and so regain her liberty, but she told her plan to no one.

That same day her aunt, Shereen’s mother, was chosen by some one else, but Halima and Shereen remained on still in the prison.

The new home in which Gul Begum found herself was in every way very different from and, as regards wealth and luxury, very inferior to Ferad Shah’s. The bread brought ready baked in the bazaar was not

very palatable, the flour being well adulterated by the bakers; the rice was poor, the milk smoked; the girl felt sick at the very sight of it. There was not much to do, and the mistress was kindly enough, but grossly ignorant.

“A curious girl for Agha to have fancied,” she said to herself, “my goodness! I don’t think all the water in Kabul would wash the dirt off her. You must go to the hum hum, girl,” she said. “I will give you the pice (pence). You can’t appear before Agha like that,” but Gul Begum only glared and looked stupid. She had managed Ferad Shah’s wife by fear and jealousy, but she felt that these would be no weapons to use against the patient dutiful creature who was now her mistress.

“Agha,” the latter said, “that slave you have sent is no good for any purpose whatsoever. She seems to me to be little more than half-witted.”

“Oh, nonsense, try the effect of the stick on her,” the merchant said indifferently. “These wild Hazara women are not much above the level of the brutes when first they come in. You’ll break her in in time,” but even as he spoke, Gul Begum tripped intentionally on a great earthen vessel standing just outside the window. It fell against the wall, smashing into fragments, but the girl made no apology or comment whatsoever. Merely picking up the bottom piece which still contained a little water that had been left there to settle, she applied it to her mouth.

“Ah, dirty wretch!” the woman exclaimed, “polluting the last drop of water that is left. Get you gone and don’t let me see sight of you again. She is only fit to carry your goods from the store to the shop, Agha, she may be of some use as a coolie (porter), but a house servant she is no good at all.”

The merchant kept her a month, but at the end of that time saw a far more likely girl, who would do well for his household as well as for the store. So Gul Begum received a sound thrashing and was sent back to the prison.

Her mother and Shereen were still there; Hazara slaves were so plentiful in Kabul at that time that there were not masters to be found for them all. Shereen, only too glad to have nothing to do, although it entailed poor and scanty prison fare, used the little piece of mud Gul Begum had left with her with great effect, and no one who came to the prison seemed to fancy her. Gul Begum was in high spirits when she returned. She felt she would yet find a way of escape to her beloved Hazara hills, and to her father. She had only to endure and to keep up her present *role*.

Shortly after her return, however, she was again chosen, in spite of her squalid appearance. An old General fancied her strong, active limbs

and lithe, graceful form that no mud could hide. He had no wife and had had none for some years, so there was a good deal of chafing among his friends when he announced his intentions regarding his new Hazara slave girl, but of this Gul Begum was quite unconscious. She only resolved to find out the old General's weakness, and disgust him as she had succeeded in disgusting her late mistress. Her master had spent many years in India, and had taken to the Indian habit of beetle-nut chewing, and kept spitting all over the house, much to Gul Begum's disgust, so she took to beetle-nut chewing too, and out-Heroded Herod by the way in which she behaved. Moreover, she refused to conform to ordinary Kabul habits of cleanliness, found no means of obtaining the conveniences she was accustomed to in her own country, and before long the general was glad to restore her to her prison home.

"The day will come when you will be turned out of that too," her master said, as he saw her hustled off with none too gentle hands by one of his own servants. "We don't want animals in Kabul. We send *them* to consort with their fellows in the hills. You'll make an excellent dinner for some hungry wolf next winter."

Gul Begum only glared at him as though she did not understand what he was talking about, but she understood well. She was on the right track for liberty. She was ready and willing to share the winter with the wolves. She had far greater fear of man than of the beasts.

CHAPTER XXIII

GUL BEGUM'S MASTER

THE episode at the General's house had ended satisfactorily to Gul Begum, but another trial – the final one – was soon to follow.

The Ameer's Chief Secretary walked round the prison to choose four slaves, "Girls that will make good servants," was what he asked for. "I want two to give away, and two for myself."

Gul Begum and her cousin were among those chosen, and with the usual loud cries and wailings, they were walked off to their

destinations; but Gul Begum had recovered something of her queenly gait and carriage. She felt that she was master of her fate. Ten days would restore her to her prison life and her mother, and so, guided by former experiences, she commenced her old game of stupidity and slatternly untidiness.

The elder of the four was soon sent to Jellalabad, to be a servant in the house of the Chief Secretary's spiritual leader (he had asked for an elderly woman), and one of the remaining three was superfluous in her present abode.

"I can make nothing of that Gul Begum," the Chief Secretary's wife said plaintively. "She's a great useless hulk. She does nothing but eat and sleep. And is so dirty and untidy, I do not fancy anything she has once laid her hands upon."

The Chief Secretary's house was a well ordered one; each person in it had his or her share of work. Idleness in one member threw extra work on the others. He had but one wife, and was faithful to her.

"All right, Jan (my wife)," he said quietly. "We will send her to the Mir Sahib. I promised him a wife, and though a bad servant, she may make a good wife. Is it not often so? You can send her at once, if you wish. I will make arrangements for her as soon as you have settled with her."

But Gul Begum was not so easily settled with; she would not go to Logman to be any man's wife, she wished to stay where she was.

The lady was in despair; she would speak to her husband about it when he came in, she said. "In the meantime Gul Begum was to return to her work.

When the subject was broached to him, the Chief Secretary was rather annoyed; annoyed with his wife because she could not manage a slave, annoyed with the slave for daring to oppose her mistress; it was most unusual. He sent for her himself, he who never addressed a word to the female slaves, and she came in, prostrating herself at his feet.

He had a thick stick in his hand, it was his walking stick, and he was toying with it. She had not heard of his using it on any one since she had entered his establishment, but he might, why not? Hers was an exceptional case – she was a refractory slave.

"What is the meaning of this, Gul Begum?" he asked sternly. "You will not work, and yet you refuse to leave my establishment when I offer you to be a holy man in honourable marriage." He rose from the cushion on which he was sitting, and came towards her. The girl shrank back, but he passed her and fetched a piece of paper from a ledge in the

wall, and, re-seated himself, commenced folding the paper in the usual Persian way, a margin down each side, preparatory to writing.

The girl understood; he was going to make out an order or a pass or something – the fatal paper that was to carry her thence to the unknown but already hated husband. Again she flung herself at his feet.

“Agha (master), hear me once,” she pleaded softly. He paused. “Well, what have you to say?”

“Just this,” she said, still kneeling before him, “Just this, Agha, that I have indeed behaved badly, and have indeed deserved to be sent away. I have made myself dirty, and stupid, and awkward, but see how big I am, how strong, how capable of work; and ask Shereen there, she is my cousin, I am the cleverest girl in all the Hazara country; I can cook and bake, and sew and wash, and do all the work that other women do, and twice as well as they.”

“Then why have you been so idle and useless here?”

“Agha, I will tell you. I am dirty, and untidy, and slatternly now, as you see me, I do not deny it, but, Agha Sahib, I am the daughter of the Vizier, who is the brother of the chief of the Hazaras, and I was considered the handsomest and smartest girl in all the land. That has, no doubt, made me proud and made it very difficult for me to be a slave; many men have chosen me before you came to the prison, Sahib, but I made some excuse of another, just as I saw I could deceive them, and one after another they all sent me back, some with a beating, some without, I cared but little; what I most dreaded was that some one would make me his slave wife, that is what has been my hourly terror.”

“I keep no slave wives,” the Chief Secretary interrupted shortly.

“No, Agha, I know you do not, and you take no notice of your slave girls, and never even speak to them.” The girl hung her head. “And that is why I don't wish to leave you. Oh, Agha, do not send me away, give me one more trial, one little trial more,” and again prostrating herself till her forehead touched the ground, “one week, one day,” she petitioned.

The Chief Secretary put the paper down, he seemed half amused, half touched. “Send your mistress here,” he said, “and if she consents to try you, I have no objection to her doing so, but you her slave, not mine, your remaining rests wholly on her good-will and favour. You have done nothing so far to ingratiate yourself with her, but I will speak for you to her. Go.”

“She's a curious girl, that Gul Begum, and she says she is well-born,” the Chief Secretary said, looking up from the paper he was writing. His wife had entered the room timidly some minutes before he addressed

her, and without speaking had sat down on a small thick rug in a corner of the room, waiting till she should be noticed by the husband who was so evidently also the master.

She would not have dreamt of interrupting him, but now he had opened the conversation she did not seem over-pleased. "Yes, they say so," she replied, "and that the other, the flat-faced one, is her cousin, and daughter of the chief."

"Supposing we give her another trial, and send none of them away for a week or ten days, or it might be wise to keep them for a month or six weeks, till you see which of them is most inclined for work; there will be plenty for them to do presently when you are laid up."

His wife looked down; an Eastern woman is very modest in some ways, though in others she is more outspoken than we are.

"I should not like any of those women near me," she said.

"No, perhaps not, but if they do all the housework, it will leave Sardaro and all your usual attendants free to wait on you."

"As you wish," she said, resignedly.

"Nay, as *you* wish," he said, "I care neither one way nor the other; I am only thinking of your convenience."

"We have the Mir Sahib to consider," she still objected, "he has seen this girl, and, I think, fancies her."

"Good gracious! What taste," the Chief Secretary laughed. He understood that his wife half disliked the girl, and did not want her, but Eastern husbands are not accustomed to have their slightest wishes thwarted; he had never opposed his wife in anything, but then it takes two to make a controversy, and she had ever considered that his slightest wish was law.

"I will settle with the Mir," he said, "send him here to me or stay, it is hot, you shall not have the trouble of drawing down your windows. I will go and speak to him in the saracha" (the outside room, occupied by the men), and he went out.

"Mir," he said, laughing, as he entered the meagrely furnished apartment where several men were sitting cross-legged on the floor talking or writing, but evidently chiefly engaged in waiting, "my slave girl, Gul Begum, objects to become your wife. I cannot force her, what am I to do?"

"Objects?" said the Mir, "how can she object? She is a slave."

“Then will you take her by force?” the Chief Secretary said, still laughing. “A fine thing that for a man of your age. How old are you, Mir?”

“That is not the question,” the old man replied testily; “you have promised me a girl. I have seen her. I fancy her. I shall keep you to your promise.”

The Chief Secretary loved a piece of fun, none better. “She is a handsome girl,” he said, “a beauty according to Hazara taste, but she is very big and strong, and you are rather old, good friend. I would not push the matter too far were I in your place, it might be dangerous.”

This constant allusion to his age nettled the old man, who, though some sixty summers – rather more, perhaps – had come and gone since he first saw day, was hale and hearty still, and as he rose and angrily threw his dark blue lungi (a cotton shawl, heavy and strong) across his left shoulder, he seemed to the casual observer to be hardly past his prime. His complexion was fresh, his eyes clear, his carriage excellent, his beard was long and flowing, and dyed a glorious rich black.

“You have seen the girl yourself, and doubtless fancy her,” he said, “I do not blame you there; she is a girl any man might fancy; but I blame you that your word should prove as smoke, useless vapour, that every wind of passion blows in a different direction.”

“Nay, sit down,” the young man said, “now I will be serious. Believe me, I fancy the girl not at all; she is dirty, idle, and generally incapable, but she has thrown herself on my protection, and I have promised her a trial.”

“You promised her a trial? How could you such a thing? You had promised her to me.”

“But I have lots of other girls, and you shall have your choice. I care for one no more than I do for another. You shall choose one for yourself.”

“So I will, and I have chosen Gul Begum.” Again the Mir flung his lungi impatiently over his shoulder, but this time without rising. The Chief Secretary seemed a little irritable also. There were not six men in all the kingdom from whom such opposition was to have been expected, and *this* man, who was he? A holy man, no doubt, but a mere village peasant, a dependent partly on his bounty.

He sat tapping the floor with his stick for a few minutes, then impatiently called a servant up to speak to him. “Do you see this carpet?” he said, and he gave it a more vigorous tap. “It’s a disgrace to you, and a disgrace to me. It is full of dust. Have it taken out and beaten, and the floor underneath well cleaned, or, hark you, the beating that you should have given to the carpet shall fall on your shoulders.

You understand me, son of a low-born swine?" The servant salaamed and retired; this was not the language to which he was accustomed from his gentle, polished master. When he had retired, silence again resigned supreme, for the chief secretary had even ceased to raise the dust from the carpet with his stick, and had commenced business with the various men who were waiting his orders.

From a corner where he had been sitting unobserved, a little man with a flowing white beard rose and left the room. He was the Hakim, and perhaps had work elsewhere. No one noticed his departure, and if they had, they would, doubtless, have thought he was going to visit some patient.

CHAPTER XXIV

RIVALS

"WHAT about the girl?" the Mir asked presently, when the room was a little clearer.

"The girl?" her present owner said, rather wearily, as though she had formed no subject of the recent hot discussion, "you can use your own persuasions. If she will go with you, you can take her, but no woman

shall be dragged or force in any way, from my house. You understand me?"

"You did not force her from the prison, did you?" the old man asked, with a sneer.

"I chose her and she came. I do not say she did not weep. They all wept loudly, and bewailed their fate, but there was no sort of force used. And now I come to think of it, I remember that Gul Begum came less unwillingly than the rest, and that though there was something defiant in her carriage she walked straight and briskly, and required no hurrying at all."

"She fancied you dark skin, perhaps," the holy man said, sneeringly.

The Chief Secretary was not annoyed at the allusion to his dark skin; he was a Rajput, and proud of his ancient race and lineage. His skin was his birthright, had been the birthright of a hundred generations of his ancestors. He had no cause for shame.

"Some girls like dark men, some fair," he said, indifferently. "We shall see which Gul Begum will choose," and as he spoke he rose. The Mir rose too.

"Nay," said the other, "but I will fetch her."

"That you shall not," the elder man replied. "We will have fair play. The girl shall be brought here, and here she shall decide whether she will stay with you, to be your slave, your surati – with you, who are not of her colour, not of her race."

"Are you then of her race – a Hazara?" the Chief Secretary asked, amused. He had quite recovered his temper.

The rival candidate paid no heed to the interruption, and continued. "Or whether she will prefer to be taken in honourable marriage by me, who have no other wife, and no child living in the house with me, and who am, moreover, a man chosen by God as His special servant and an expounder of His religion, and who devote myself to the service of my Creator, instead of to the service of a mere earthly king."

"I quite agree to that," the Chief Secretary replied; "you shall have quite fair play and every chance. Ali Hakimgee, do me a favour," he continued, addressing the little man who had left the room at the commencement of the discussion and who now returned and was preparing to re-seat himself in the corner.

"Bally (yes), Sahib; in what way can I be of service to you?" he said, straightening his knees and standing to the full of the small height that Providence had given him.

“We have had a great discussion, the Mir Sahib and I, ever since you left us,” the Chief Secretary explained, “and it is a very difficult case to settle. The Mir has been promised one of my slave girls, a girl called Gul Begum, and now she objects to go to him. The Mir says that that should form no insurmountable difficulty, as all girls are coy, and even when most willing to be wooed like to appear to be hard to win. Now I say that if Gul Begum is only coy, or even more that coy, unwilling to accept our young (?) friend here, I still will send her to him so long as tears and cries are the only weapons that she uses, but if she utterly refuses to go and will not leave without brute force and beatings, I will not have her carried away, I will not have the scandal of such a marriage from my house.”

“You seem to anticipate much difficulty,” the Mir remarked. “Since when has all this opposition arisen?”

“Since the subject was first broached, oh most excellent and desirable bridegroom. My wife could do nothing with her, and sent her on to me, to see what I could do, but I could do no more than she had done. The girl insisted that she would not go. Now we are going to have a Tamasha (entertainment), and the Mir Sahib himself is going to take an active part in it; we are all going to have a lesson in the gentle art of love, or if not of love, at least of persuasion. (Come along, Hakimgee, will you be the intercessor, will you go fetch the unwilling bride?”

“This business is not much in my line? the old man said; but as he spoke he smiled, and the Chief Secretary thought he detected something, just a little knowing, in the wrinkles in the corner of his eye. Then their eyes met. They understood one another, there was no love lost between the Hakim and the Mir; not that the Mir had any serious cause of complaint, except just this, that the Hakim was somewhat overbearing, somewhat exacting of deference and respect, which the Mir seemed to think it beneath his dignity to bestow. On the Hakim's side the dislike was due to a totally different cause. The Chief Secretary was a very generous man, almost prodigal in his gifts. It took but the slightest persuasion, hardly more than a hint, to get a piece of fur, a new coat, a posteen (fur cloak) from him, unless indeed it had once been seen inside the harem, *then* it was comparatively safe, for it was there under his wife's protection, and she saw that it did not slip through her fingers easily.

But many were the presents that fell to the Chief Secretary's share. He was a great man at court, and furs and camel cloth, embroideries, and even carpets and fine silks, not infrequently accompanied the letters that came from a distance, begging this favour or that, craving relief from this injustice or that extortion, and if the Hakim happened to be present at the time, and reminded his patron that he was poor, or cold, or that his wife was sick or his daughter had no posteen, and that he had been promised one last winter, but that it had been forgotten in the

hurry of the Chief Secretary's important and manifold duties, whatever was placed before him was given away, heedless of its value, or of promises made to others not present at the moment, or of what might have been acceptable in the harem serai (enclosure for women). This was the one complaint his wife ever had against him – this reckless carelessness, this generosity which in reality amounted to squandering, for she always heard about the things in time.

“Why did you not tell me you liked stone-marten better than any one fur? I had such a handsome double sheet of skins sent me only last week, and a piece of embroidered camel-cloth that would just have made a suitable covering for a cloak. Now I have given it away; the Hakim has, I think, taken it to his wife or daughter, I forget which, she has had rheumatism,” he said, “and wanted one.”

“Good gracious, sheep-skin would have done well enough for them; and I have had to send to the bazaar for camel-cloth just lately, you last year's coat was so shabby I have had a new one made for the Durbar. Why did you not let me see these things before you gave them to these common greedy people?”

“There are plenty in the bazaar,” he would say, and turn away and laugh. But though there were doubtless plenty of good things in the bazaar, 'twas little that the careful housewife allowed herself to buy, nothing, indeed, that was not necessary to her lord; so she it was who suffered, and not he, by this recklessness of his. Others, too, besides the Hakim, carried off the spoil; and sometimes a well-dressed lady would call in her covered palanquin and take a cup of tea, add sit an hour or so by the Chief Secretary's sandali. (a sandali is the charcoal fire round which the Afghans sit to keep themselves warm in the winter)

“That's a fine silk you have on, a good colour, too, for wear, as well as strong,” the hostess might remark.

“Yes, it is very good,” her guest would reply. “I have had it in wear now these two winters, and yet it is so good I cannot make up my mind to part with it, though I am almost ashamed wear the same dress so long. You husband gave the piece to my father; he intended covering a posteen (full coat) with it, but you see I begged it from him, and I have made better use of it than he, men are so careless with their clothes. It is a pity to let them have good things, don't you think so?”

“Perhaps,” the gentle lady would reply, with genuine satisfaction, untinged by the faintest taint of jealousy, “I am glad you got it.”

An Afghan woman under such circumstances as these never dreams of resenting the fact that she is dressed in calico, while her friend, by her husband's bounty, is dressed in silk. That is not her form of weakness. The Chief Secretary's wife upon such occasions would hold her head a

little higher and say to herself: “Her husband calls himself Sirdar, but it is my house that supplies his wife with fine clothes,” and she would feel elated and quite gratified.

The Chief Secretary liked to keep his one wife all to himself; he did not much wish to attend the Durbar, or entertainments in the Royal Harem Serai, and she was not allowed to visit anywhere; what did she want with silk brocades? She was more comfortable in cotton, she would have said, and, thank God, she had plenty of that, and plenty of slaves to embroider it too. What more could she wish for? But the Hakim was a sore subject, he came so often and took so much, he, a mere nobody who could do no credit to her husband's lordly gifts, and so she resented his coming and his cunning, sneaky ways. But just inasmuch as she disliked him for his graspingness, so much did he dislike the Mir for his, for in the summer, when the Mir visited Kabul, he, the Hakim, he a rival, and a powerful one too, for the Mir, by his very profession of sacred personage, was also a licensed beggar. He lived chiefly on what he received, not in open charity, but by interceding with the Almighty for things temporal, and by reading dreams, and interpreting visions, he was thus a dangerous hanger-on. In the summer when he came up to Kabul, the Hakim's gifts decreased in number and in value to the advantage of the Mir, and the Hakim resented this, and looked upon the Mir as an interloper, almost as a thief.

The Chief Secretary was by no means blind to all this, he clearly saw the little game that went on continually around him, and gathered such amusement as he could from the little by-play. As a rule he was on the Mir Sahib's side. A six months' sycophant palls less than does an all-the-year-round one for one thing, and, besides, the Chief Secretary was without doubt a little superstitious – a believer in dreams and visions, and in times of trouble the Mir was a great comfort to him. But to-day the tables were reversed. The sun was shining brightly on the courtier, he was in high favour, and quite independent of his spiritual assistant, and, moreover, the Mir had been rather forward, rather pertinacious. He had spoken in a most authoritative, almost insolent manner, and the official felt that he had gone rather far. So when he observed the little twinkle in the old herbalist's eye, he said nothing, but waited the development of events.

The Hakim took only one cup of tea that day, usually he took two with sugar and one without (the latter to clean the mouth, as they say in Kabul), but to-day he had another game in view. If any one had questioned him he would have said that he had his patron's bidding to do, and could take his tea at any time, but any one who had followed him down the stairs to the old doorkeeper's tiny abode, would have known that he was anxious to gain time, and they would have understood why he had so silently left his companions in the earlier part of the afternoon.

“Ask in the harem serai if that girl has obeyed my orders,” he said to the old man, and, presently a short flat-faced girl, easily recognisable as Shereen, stood before him.

“She is obeying your orders, Hakim Sahib,” Shereen said softly. “she will be here directly, but you have not given her much time, it is but a few minutes since you returned to the saracha, and she has much to do to get ready.”

“Go then and help her, we must not let the Mir know that I have advised her, otherwise our little plan will all be spoilt, and she will have to go to Logman.”

CHAPTER XXV

WOO'D, NOT WON

A FEW minutes later and they entered the saracha together. What a reformation was here! No dirty, untidy slattern stood before the tribunal – for such Gul Begum felt it to be – but a tidy, handsome, tall, well-built girl of seventeen, with plenty of dignity in her carriage, and more self-possession than one would have expected in a despised Hazara, a prisoner, a slave. The Chief Secretary as host, as present possessor, as official of the Ameer's court, prepared himself to address

the girl, but the Mir interrupted him. “You said I should have fair play and the best possible chance, so I, as the claimant of her hand, demand the right of speaking to the girl first.”

The Chief Secretary smiled and was silent. “Your name is Gul Begum, I think,” the Mir said, addressing her quietly and kindly.

“Yes,” she said haughtily, “my name is Gul Begum. What do you want with me?”

“Just this,” he said, “that your present master obtained an order from the Ameer to take four girls out of prison, and that I, being his friend, and having no wife or child or any one to look after me, and care for me, he has given me my choice among three of you, that I may take the one I fancy most away to my solitary home to be my wife and comforter.”

“Well,” said the girl, “and what of that?”

“Why this,” he went on in the same quiet tones, “that you have found favour in my eyes. I had not thought to find any one so altogether to my taste, but I am very well pleased with you, and I will take you away from the narrow confines of this city, away from this slavery which must be almost intolerable to a young, free-born creature like yourself, away to a country home among the hills. I wish to take you in lawful and honourable marriage, as my one and only wife.”

The old Hakim fidgetted a little. This was better than anything he had expected from the Mir, such a position would have been an inducement to girls in a more fortunate position than that in which Gul Begum found herself at that time. The Chief Secretary only smiled as he went on with his writing, and appeared to be taking no notice of what was going on.

They were, however, not long left in doubt as to Gul Begum's view of the case. With one derisive peal of laughter, she tossed her head. “You must be mad, old man,” she said, “surely raving mad. Does the dove mate with the eagle, the tiger-cat with the deer, the young, the strong, the living with the old, the decrepit, the dead? Good sir, I have seen seventeen summers barely. You have seen not less than seventy. Your face is old and worn and wrinkled, and you must have grandchildren who would make more suitable mates for you. Look at me, I am a child, an infant in comparison with you.”

Such laughter rippled from her lips, such scorn sat on her mouth, such derision was visible in every movement. The Hakim tried hard to suppress any outward sign of satisfaction with the result of his scheme. The Chief Secretary looked up from his writing, surprised more than amused. The Mir was very wroth. “'Tis you who must be mad,” he said, indignantly. “You who are raving, for you rejecting what half the girls

who came with you from Hazara would give ten years of their life to obtain. Freedom, and an honourable marriage with one; who is a servant of the living God, a saint, who devotes himself to prayer and fasting. Do you understand me, girl, a saint?"

"I understand you, saint," she began again in the same mocking tones, "I understand you quite well. you being seventy, and fit mate for my old grandmother, or better still, her mother, who has been dead these fifteen years, desire to take me, who can barely number seventeen summers, as your lawful wife, as though there were some merit in that. Go to, fine saint, I see no piety or virtue in you. I see before me nothing but a bad old man, a shameless, vile old sinner, with wrinkled face, and loosened teeth, and hair dyed black." She flung herself back in an almost hysterical paroxysm of laughter. "I see no saintliness, no virtue there. it is a sin common to many old men when they are worn out and old, that they would fain take a young girl to wife, a young girl full of life, and gaiety, and strength, and live their life, in fancy, at least, a second time in her. Away with you, old man, away, your offer pleases me in no wise. I have no desire to become any man's wife, lawful or otherwise. I have no desire to be free unless in my own mountain home. I have no desire to be the prop of any man's old age, unless it be that of my father. Go, find some other girl, one of those many who would give ten years of their lives to have the offer you make me, for I will none of you."

The Mir arose and would have seized her by the arm, but the Chief Secretary interposed. "You may use all persuasion," he whispered, "offer any inducements, but no force must be offered; remember that is part of the bargain."

The old man sat down again. Somehow he looked older now, but the girl remained standing, erect, firm, and fearless. "Listen," the Mir began again, this time severely. "Hitherto, I have spoken to you kindly, and treated you as though you had some right to choose. Now, I will tell you that all your objections are absolutely useless. It may be that I am many years your senior. It may be that a younger husband would have suited your fancy better, but, my good girl, do you now realise that you are no longer free as you were in the home from which you have been taken? You are no longer the spoilt child of what seems to have been a most indulgent and not over wise parent. You have no longer power over your own person, to do with it what may seem good to you; you are a war prisoner, the daughter of a rebellious subject, given over into lawful slavery by your king."

The girl sighed, and tears started unbidden to her eyes. These words recalled to her what she had lost – reminded her of her present position. Still she did not lose her presence of mind. "What you say is right," she said more quietly, "I am a war prisoner, a slave, but I am not *your* slave. *My* master is there," pointing to the Chief Secretary, who sat a passive though interested spectator of the scene. "He went to

the prison with an order from the Ameer, and by that order I was forced to leave my mother and to follow him. I am a free gift from the Ameer to him, to be his slave, to do his bidding, to work for him, and, if necessary, to die in his service; but with you, old man, I have nothing to do. Go your way quietly to your grave, and let me go mine to my slavery. Why should we quarrel? We have nothing in common, you and I, and absolutely nothing to do with one another." She turned as if to go.

"Stay here, girl," the Mir called out peremptorily, "stay here. What do you say? That we have nothing in common and nothing to do with one another? Do you still misunderstand your position so entirely? Do you still realise so little. What it is to be a slave, that you do not know that your master has 'full power over you to keep you, or to give you, or to kill you, or to sell you? Do you understand that, madwoman? That you are as much his as is this table or this carpet, and will be as much mine as is this stick," and as he spoke, he threw the heavy, gnarled rod with which he supported himself during his long wanderings across the mountains over at her, half in scorn and half as a menace.

The girl stooped and picked it up. The old Hakim's eyes glistened. She was playing up well after all. He had feared she would give in.

"Now listen to me, old man," she said. "I am a slave, a prisoner, my master's chattel, but with this difference, and in this I resemble neither the table nor this stick, to which you have compared me. I am a living, breathing chattel, a chattel who cannot be forced or stolen without a struggle. A chattel who has brains and strength and who knows how to use them, and who will use them as long as I have a breath in my body. I will appeal to the law, to the high priest, as to whether my real and rightful captor the Ameer Sahib, having given me to be my present master's slave, he has either the right or the power to give me in marriage to a man who has not five years of natural life to live, and to whom I object as a husband. He has full rights over me for himself, that I *must* perforce and *do* acknowledge, but I deny that he can force me to be another man's wife. It is against the law and again our holy religion. My father has told me this many times, and he knows. So hark you, holy man, I protest against your desires, your passions, and your shamelessness."

"Again you forget that you are a slave," the Mir replied satirically, and with a gleam of triumph. "Your father seems to have taught you carefully, if injudiciously, as to the things which concern *free* women, but he has omitted to teach you the law relating to slaves; he does not seem to have contemplated the possibility of your ever occupying that position. For the slave there is no law, no choice, no will except her master's. Do you understand now, girl?" he almost hissed; "you are beyond the protection of the law. We can do with you whatsoever seems good to us. You are the daughter of a rebellious subject, taken in arms against his sovereign."

“My God,” she cried with one bitter cry. Then throwing herself at her master’s feet, “Master, is that so?” she pleaded.

Her whole attitude, her wild despair, would have moved a stone, but the Chief Secretary, though touched, could feel the Mir’s eye upon him, seeking the smallest sign of withdrawal from his promise, so he merely answered quietly, “What the Mir Sahib says is quite true.”

Then she turned in her despair towards the Hakim. The Mir was looking out of the window triumphant, and did not catch the slight, almost imperceptible clenching of the little man’s fist as he nodded encouragingly in the direction of the old man. But it was enough for Gul Begum. It just gave her back the courage that was flagging, and recalled to her mind what the Hakim had gone down to tell her. “Only be firm. Don’t touch him till he offers to touch you, but when he does, fight with all your might. Scream, strike, scratch, and struggle. If you do that, your Agha will not allow you to be carried away by force, he will either return you to the prison or will keep you himself.”

Again she drew herself up, this time for a last effort, “Alas, what my master says must be true,” she said, with a sigh. “I have no choice left between death and you, but I prefer death, and I will die fighting to the last. The moment either you or one of your men attempt to come near me I will brain you with this cudgel, your own, which you made strong and straight to support your tottering footsteps. You take me from this house, and before you have turned the first corner of the street I will have you pounded into such a mush as your wizen flesh will never recover from! Your skin is old and shrunken now, when I have finished with it, it will not be so. When I have done with you, your flesh will not be dried up on your bones. You will be fat and young, you think, perhaps?” She laughed again wildly, almost terribly, the fury and undying hate of her race showing in every word and gesture. “Nay, you will be a jellied mass, a many-coloured swollen corpse, without the smallest semblance of manhood left.”

He moved as if to speak, and pointed at the stick which she still held, and periodically flourished aloft defiantly.

“Ah, you think that with the help of your men-servants, and maybe with that of your own miserable old friends, you will wrest this weapon from me and thus leave me defenceless. That does not frighten me at all.

I fear you not a bit, nor them. You try to clasp me once in your horrible embrace and you will see what I will do with them. I will pluck out every hair from that deceitful, dyed, old beard of yours. Yes, by handfuls, and you may beat and punch, but I will not let you go. You shall know something of my embraces too. You shall know what it is to mate with a wild cat, what it is to expose your frail, dying old

corpse to the fury of my young and active limbs. Come, are you willing? Come now and try.” She laughed and almost yelled exultingly. “See, I throw the stick aside,” and as she spoke she flung it on the floor in front of him. “I would not frighten you over much. Now clasp me to your wizened, vile old bosom. Why not? You see I am unarmed. But beware, beware, I say. I have given you full warning. Let the old man come and try. See, I stand waiting to receive him.”

But the old man, thus adjured, did not rise. He turned round to the Chief Secretary, and smiling quietly as though he had made some great discovery. “I see that the girl is mad,” he whispered, sufficiently audibly for every one in the room to hear. “She is not accountable for these strange threats and actions. That is the secret of her having remained so long unchosen in spite of her fine appearance; she is possessed. What shall you do with her? Send her back to the prison? I advise you to, it is hardly safe to keep a raving lunatic here among other women and children. She might frighten your wife too, and who can tell what the result of that might not be, especially at the present time. Take my advice, send her away at once. It is the only thing to be done. She is not safe.”

But the Chief Secretary only smiled and asked the Mir Sahib if he were satisfied now to let her alone and let her go.

“Let her alone? Do you think I want a tigress in my house, a mad woman for my wife? Of course I’ll let her go. I would not have her at any price, not even as a free gift to be my lowliest slave. There, go, girl,” he said, turning round and addressing her. “You are not a woman, but a beast, a savage. Do you hear me, go!”

“Am I to go?” she said, addressing the only master she seemed inclined to acknowledge, in a voice they had not heard before, the soft gentle tones in which she had been wont to soothe her father, and as though no storm had just been surging and swelling within her, arousing her fiercest and most unruly passions.

“Yes, go,” he said sternly, “and set yourself to work, and see that I hear no further complaints. Remember you have hitherto disgraced yourself. You are here only on trial.” But he was only human after all, and though far too much impressed with his own dignity to allow himself to show any gratification, a careful observer would have detected something a little artificial in his well-assumed indifference. That fierce, strong, magnificent creature could be gentle as a dove, and *he* was the man who could tame her.

CHAPTER XXVI

A PATIENT WIFE

AND so Gul Begum's fate was settled, for ere forty days had passed a little stranger had made his appearance in the Chief Secretary's house. A little stranger who cost his mother her life, and his father a devoted attendant and sympathiser, if not companion in *our* acceptance of the word.

Nor did he live to repay what he had cost. A few hours after she had breathed her last, they laid him by his dead mother's side.

During her illness, the services which, when she had been well, it had been her special privileges as well as duty, according to Eastern notions, to perform, seemed somehow to fall naturally upon Gul Begum. Who else, indeed, was there to perform them? The children's nurse (there were two other tiny children besides the little stranger) was more than taken up with her mistress and her little charges. The lady's usual attendant was also in hourly requisition, either to take the new baby or to massage and soothe her suffering mistress. Little delicacies and nourishing dishes were constantly required to tempt the failing appetite, to strengthen the poor, failing patient, so even the cook's hands were more than full, according to a Kabul servant's way of thinking. Thus all the ordinary household work fell on the slaves, who did everything in an uncomplaining, listless, unmethodical way, as untrained servants without a mistress are sure to do, and the master, for whom they were not as a rule allowed to do anything, never entered their minds.

The cook cooked his food – of course she had always done so – but she had now no time to bake the bread, her services were not constantly required for other things, so the bread has to be fetched from the bazaar. The bazaar bread was heavy, and, moreover, the flour was not pure. The Chief Secretary did not complain, but he did not eat it. So Gul Begum baked the bread. She did it well, but her master made no comment. The bread the day before had been uneatable, to-day it was good – excellent. When he had finished his meat and vegetables, he sent for some sour curd. He only did this when the bread was fresh and light, and the slave who had made it, and who waited on him as he ate, knew this and felt rewarded. At home her father would have prayed her, or if much preoccupied, would at least have patted her on the head. *Here* the master never even asked who had made it: some *slave*, that was all she was *now* to the master of the house. What had *she* to do with recognition? If things were bad or put of order the slaves were to blame. When things were good, they were as they ought to be. The slaves had done their duty, that was all. She was one of many, and had no separate identity from the others.

The Chief Secretary was a most religious man according to the ordinarily accepted standard, but with his religion there was combined a good deal of superstition, which deprived him of much sleep and much time that other men spent in leisure. He never omitted to say his prayers five times a day – that much was the duty of every true believer. To do less than that was to deprive the Almighty of His rights, to prove the creature a defaulter in the service of the Creator. But the Chief Secretary did more than that. Besides his compulsory prayers, he generally, and always in times of trouble, rose at twelve o'clock at night to say an optional prayer – a prayer that was not a positive duty, but the repetition of which, so he believed, brought certain special blessings and favours. It often brought about the fulfilment of an earthly desire, or if that were denied, it at least

produced a special resignation to the will of Providence, whatever that will might be.

So now that his wife was ill, his household all upset, this midnight prayer was, as it were, almost a necessity to him. Leaven's gates must be besieged if necessary, that the Ameer's Chief Secretary might be spared the inconvenience of a disorderly household, the disaster of the death of the chief conductor to his creature comforts.

"I wish you would get strong," he had said plaintively to his wife one morning. "It is very hard on *me*, this prolonged illness of yours, especially hard in this, that there is no one I can trust to wake me for my midnight prayers. Last night I never woke till four. I did not return from Durbar till after ten o'clock, and so I was tired, I suppose, and overslept myself. This has depressed me very much. You know I always feel happier and more satisfied when I have said them."

It did not strike upon this gentle lady's ear that selfish sentence, "It is very hard on *me*," so it could not ring there to produce tears and misery. She knew it was selfish in *sound* chiefly.

An Englishman would have said, "Do try, love, and get better. I cannot bear to see you like this. I miss you so." The Eastern put it more baldly; he did not think it necessary to conceal where the trouble lay, nor did she expect or wish it. She was missed, her services were wanted: The sick woman flushed. It was a flush of pleasure.

"I shall have ease soon," she said. And so she had, but not here, on this earth.

That night she had a curious dream. She told her husband of its next morning. "I dreamt that I lay dead," she said, "and that you sat by disconsolate, and knew not what to do, nor even where to bury me. You had never even dreamt that I was going to leave you. And as you sat thus and wept, one came and whispered in your ear, 'Bring her beside me, just behind my tomb. A little to the left there is just one space left. Take her and bury her there, and there shall her body rest till the great day, the final day, when God shall judge the earth.' And looking up, you saw the figure of the saint who is buried on the hill, just below Sultan Mohamed's monument, but he turned and went away before you had time to address him, and I awoke."

"Did you see the face of the Hazarati Sahib?" the Chief Secretary asked uneasily.

"Yes, that I did quite plainly. And, husband, just as I saw, so I believe it will come to pass, and that you will bury me there on the hillside, by the road along which you must pass every time you go to meet a friend from India, every time that you go home to see your place. And I shall like that, my dear one, for thus will my memory be kept green, and

though you may take other wives, and though they may serve you well, perhaps, yet I shall not be forgotten.”

The Chief Secretary's head was bowed. He had not anticipated this. He had said his midnight prayers that very night, and had besought the God in whom he trusted that He would not only preserve his wife, but would restore her speedily to health and strength, and her usual place in his establishment, and he had believed that these prayers had been accepted, and, in anticipation, he already enjoyed the usual comforts of his home. And now she told him that there was no hope of any such thing, she had seen the dead man's face. She would not get well. The very saint on whose name he had constantly repeated portions of the Koran, and to whom he looked to make special intercessions at the Throne of Grace, that very saint had visited her in her dreams, and had, so to speak, beckoned her to his side, and had shown her where she would be buried.

“Nay, wife,” he said. “It was but a dream. I myself will go to this very saint's grave to-day, and will see what inspirations come to me there.* I cannot believe that God will reject my prayers. One of the slaves woke me last night at twelve, and I stood before him a whole hour in wrapt contemplation and adoration.”

But the sick wife turned on her side, and as she turned, she smiled. She knew her work was done, and that she was going thence on the last long journey that man is called upon to make. Next day her spirit had fled, and on the day following that she was laid, as she had said, behind the saint's grave, a little to the left – in the last empty spot within the enclosure.

The Chief Secretary was, in his own way, a domesticated being. He was overwhelmed with grief. He had not loved his wife passionately, had indeed at times taken but very little notice of her, but anything outside the ordinary routine of daily life disturbed him, and he almost preferred a bad thing he was accustomed to, to a new article he was not in the habit of using. His home was *his* home, no other pleased him so well, no other was so well arranged to suit his convenience. His walking stick was *his* stick, no other fitted so comfortably into his head. So his wife had been *his* wife. Others might be more attractive, more capable, more highly educated, but no other woman knew his ways so well, so no other could suit him so well.

This loss made him inconsolable; he was a very busy man, and had had but little time to devote to domestic affairs and enjoyments; but now that she was dead, had gone away and left him, he knew what he had lost, he realised, alas! too late, how all his little wishes had been anticipated, his little comforts looked after and considered, and he would have given all he possessed, even his hardly won and much coveted position, to have been able to recall the unrecalable, to bring back the past. The quick, unassuming creature whose life had been

spent in unobserved, apparently unappreciated, obscurity, became now a person of paramount importance. The world seemed to have died to the Chief Secretary in her death, and he had no wish to live.

He entirely neglected his business, and never left his house for thirty days, except to pay a daily visit to his dead wife's grave. Oh, if her lifeless clay could but have been sensible of all this, what joy would not have been hers, what compensation for the loss of life – mere life, indeed! But all unconsciously to himself, and quite unnoticed, there was an unobserved hand that was smoothing over the sad event for him. His ordinary creature comforts had indeed been attended to from the very first, clumsily perhaps, according to his fancy, or, at least, not in the accustomed way, but still attended to.

“Ho there! is there no one who will give me water?” he had cried one night as he tossed on his bed in restlessness and fever.

There was a gentle movement outside, as of one who sought for shoes upon the flags, and presently a woman's voice said, “Agha, here is water, are you ill?”

“I cannot sleep,” he said. “I am so hot, and all my bones are aching, and I am, oh, so weary,” and after a pause, something like a sob, “How I wish that I were dead.”

The girl said nothing, but knelt down beside him, gently pressed his back and shoulders in the soothing way that Easterns understand so well; then his arms and feet, and then his head. Gradually he tossed less, and became more comfortable. The clock struck two. He was asleep, and at sunrise he was still asleep, but she did not wake him for his prayers. He must have rest, she thought.

But with the ingratitude of man, he never noticed her; never for one moment dreamt that his earthly selfish petition had been heard, and granted, though not in the exact form that he had expected. For, behold, a lamb was caught in the thicket, ready to be sacrificed, and willing, too. Gul Begum had found her master, and was willing – glad to be his slave.

* Afghans and many others among the less educated and therefore more superstitious Mohamedans believe that if they go to the grave of some man who during his life was noted for his piety and charity, and there relent certain portions of the Koran “*on his name,*” that they will obtain some immediate temporal blessing. The idea is, that to repeat these passages of the Koran is an act of piety, and that if this is done “in the name of” a dead man, that the act is counted to *him* for righteousness, and so shortens his

time in purgatory. The dead man out of gratitude, therefore, intercedes with the Almighty on behalf of the man who is releasing him from his time of purification, and if this intercessor has been a man whose life on earth has been well spent, and who is, therefore, in favour with the Deity, it is highly probable that his petition will be listened to and granted.

CHAPTER XXVII

A MOURNER

THREE months passed. The Chief Secretary never missed a day at Durbar, after the first customary days of mourning, but he was no longer the life and centre of the court. His business done, he went home.

“What is the matter with you?” the Ameer asked him kindly one day.
“You look to me thin and bloodless, are you ill?”

“I am not very well,” he said. “I think I would like to go to India and pay a visit to my mother.”

“Oh, nonsense,” the Ameer replied, sufficiently hastily to show that the suggestion did not please him. “We shall see what we can do for you here. You are not a child that you must go home to your mother; you are sick. What you need is a tonic. Where is the Hakim? Send for him, some one. I shall prescribe for you myself, and a most costly medicine, too; but what is cost when a valuable official's health has to be preserved?”

The Chief Secretary brightened up. His master's solicitude cheered and comforted him. He placed his right hand over his heart, and bowed profoundly. “May God preserve your Majesty,” he murmured.

“Bring some of that tonic paste I ordered you to make a little while ago,” the Ameer said later on to the Hakim, when he came in answer to the summons; “that with frankincense, and rubies and pearls in it.” Then turning to his secretary he went on: “The rubies are to lighten and strengthen your brain and heart, the frankincense will clear your blood, and the pearls will produce a general sense of well-being. But besides these there are other ingredients, which all tend to produce the same results. A wonderful pick-me-up you will find it. You must take some night and morning, and you will soon feel a different creature.”

“This apathy has nothing to do with health,” a handsome, mischievous boy remarked gaily. “The silly fellow is heart sick, your Majesty.”

“Heart sick? What has he to make him heart sick; he is not in love, is he?”

“He is though, your Majesty, and in love in the most hopeless way. He is in love with a dead woman.”

The Ameer looked up quickly. “What does that mean?” he asked.

The Chief Secretary stood leaning on his stick wearily, but said nothing.

“He is spending all his spare time in tombs, you Majesty. You should prohibit it,” said another, laughing.

“Wah, wah!” the Ameer murmured. “How is this? Speak up, man.”

An older courtier, and kinder, the royal cupbearer, who was standing near, whispered in his master's ear, “He lost his wife three months ago, your Majesty, and has never been the same since.”

“Ah!” said the Ameer, “so he did, I had forgotten.”

“That is no reason why he should be weeping still,” another of the pages remarked. “What would your Majesty do if every man who lost a wife were to mourn her three months? A fine thing that would be for the man who had a hundred wives. Why, he would never be out of mourning.”

“Your Majesty would soon restrict the number of our wives. We should become a Christian people, ruled by one wife while she was alive, and her slave still after she was dead,” called out another, who was a sort of court jester, and glad to have a chance of ridiculing the man whose more refined wit was often appreciated above his own coarse jokes.

“Silence,” thundered the Ameer in the voice that all Afghanistan obeys. “Silence, every one of you. By what a pack of rogues am I not surrounded. Now you have proclaimed yourselves for what you really are.” Insensibly they slunk back, and left the solitary figure leaning on his stick, standing alone in the middle of the room. “You men, what do *you* know of faith and love and honour? Today you swear fealty to one master, to-morrow you sell yourselves, your oaths, your honour, to another. To-day you marry one wife, and tell her God knows what of love, but to-morrow a feast is prepared and the house made ready for another. No wonder my country is a prey to robbers, and murderers, and thieves; loyalty and fidelity are qualities that are not in you. The wild beasts would understand me, but not you, you are too low, sunk far beneath their level. Come here, my son” (addressing his secretary), “come to me and be comforted; we are men, you and I, the others are hardly fit to be called wolves.”

The Chief Secretary crossed the room and knelt by his master's side, love and gratitude beaming from his great hazel eyes.

“You must not fret and make yourself ill,” the Ameer went on. “You must remember that we have need not only of your work, which never flags, but of your company. We have missed you in the evenings of late, the company has seemed dull and spiritless without you. For our sake you must console yourself, and come to Durbar and help us with our entertainments. You will make this effort to please us, will you not?”

He was gentle and sympathetic as a woman amidst the fury of a nature stronger and fiercer than most men's. And therein lies the charm that binds men to him. In a storm of passion that seems unrestrainable, boundless, he will lay his hand soothingly on a wound or aching head, or turn and comfort a little frightened child, the furrows on his thundery brow all smoothed out, the fire in his eyes subdued, his set jaw relaxed, a smile upon his lips. There comes a perfect burst of sunshine through what had seemed but a moment before an impenetrable cloud, and the spot on which the rays fall full is for the moment bathed in light and gladness.

A pin, had it fallen, would not have done so unheard, so intense was the silence in that room, and each jeerer trembled lest his words should be remembered and brought home to him. Thus does this man rule his kingdom – partly by fear, but also by a love which attracts and fascinates, almost awes.

After this the Chief Secretary adopted a new method of procedure. He never omitted his weekly visit to his wife's grave, but he was seldom at home, and often stayed in court till twelve or two in the morning.

His little girl, not much more than three years old, whom he had begun to teach in his spare hours just after his wife's death, missed him sadly, and cried for her Agha. Another – a woman – missed him, but said nothing. She was only a slave – what right had she to miss anyone?

But this state of affairs was not to last long. Exhausted nature had her way, and before long, the Chief Secretary was at death's door, and because his skin was hot, his lips parched, and his head ached till it almost seemed as if it would burst, the Hakims bled and starved him. Then he became unconscious, and spoke wildly, so he was bled again. The ordinary Hakim has only two potent remedies, and of these bleeding is one. More often than not, the patients do not recover, but the Chief Secretary was devotedly nursed. He did recover. One faithful soul hardly left him day or night. A sigh and she was by him, offering iced milk, some refreshing sherbet, a cooling syrup; a moan of pain, and she would take his poor aching head in her great tender hands, and press and soothe it till he slept.

As he became conscious she kept more and more in the background. "You are the head of the house," she said to Sardaro, the children's nurse, a woman of the royal tribe sent specially by the Ameer for this purpose, one day when her master was beginning to recover his wonted health, "You must take Agha his food. It is not right that I should do so, now he is better, that is your privilege."

It was one of which the older woman showed herself in no wise anxious to avail herself. Afghan women are not at all keen on availing themselves of privileges when these entail service. It was hot, and she was not actively inclined, but Gul Begum was firm. She feared she might be censured for being officious – she could not have borne that.

"You have put no ice in my water," the sick man growled a few days after the change had been made. "You have forgotten the salt," he sighed another.

On each occasion the woman retired and supplied the missing articles without comment, but next day there would be the same omission again, or else the food would be cold, or the cloth on which it was laid, soiled.

“Is there not a woman in all my establishment who can serve a meal properly?” he asked peevishly. “Every day there is something wrong. My house is like a river-bed after a storm.”

“Gul Begum is more accustomed to serve meals than I,” the old woman said, “and she is younger and more able. Shall I send her?”

“Send any one who knows their work,” he said, “I don’t care who it is.” So Gul Begum was reinstated in the high office of serving her master’s meals.

At last, worn and feeble, the invalid rose from his couch.

“Go help Agha to dress,” Gul Begum said, addressing Sardaro again, “that really is your business. I expect some of his clothes, too, need buttons and repairs of some sort. If you will look them through, I’ll do the sewing.”

Dressing her master was an even more difficult task than taking him his meals. “Your hands are like calves’ feet, Sardaro,” he said, “send Gul Begum here,” and so Gul Begum went.

As he grew better he began to ask for his papers. He was able to do some work, though he was not able to go to Durbar.

“Nam-e-Khuda, Gul Begum, go and see about Agha’s papers,” Sardaro begged. “I can neither read nor write. What good am I among papers?” so *that* task, too, fell on Gul Begum, but she never presumed, never took the procedure that by rights went with the offices she performed.

One service which she had taken upon herself from the first, the girl offered to no one. It was she who spread the master’s prayer-carpet and brought the water for his Voozoo (religious ablutions), and it was she who roused him for his prayers. Only Sardaro kept the purse and ordered the provisions in from the bazaar.

Shereen was quite happy. She had no position, but then she had no special work. That was just what she liked. She was not much worse off than she had been at home. She was fed, clothed, and housed, and but little noticed, except when she told stories. She was an excellent raconteuse, and she had plenty to tell to these other women, who had, poor souls, all been born within some harem walls, and had never known the joy of freedom. Besides, there were all the incidents connected with the war to relate, and the awful sights and scenes she had there witnessed formed endless themes, to which the Afghan women are never tired of listening.

Old Miriam, too, and her prophecies, and their subsequent fulfilment, were of boundless interest. Shereen sat with her hands before her and told stories, while the others sewed or hushed the children to sleep.

She could not both sew and talk, she said, and there was no one but her most ready listener, Sardaro, who had the right to make her do so. The Mir had long since carried off the third of the Hazara slaves to his home among the hills, quite certain in his own mind that all the trouble that had fallen on the Chief Secretary was due to his want of respect for so holy a man as himself, and his evident desire to retract his promise.

CHAPTER XXVIII

OVERTAXED

MONTHS rolled on unnoticed. The Chief Secretary had but one thought – his master; that sympathy in the time of his great trouble and welded him to the royal service in a way that nothing else could have done. Outside his work he had no interest – only a craving – a heart emptiness he could not have described.

“We must find you another wife,” the Ameer had said more than once, but the Chief Secretary showed no disposition to fall in with this suggestion.

“I have my children to interest, and the slaves you have bestowed upon me, to serve me,” he had replied. “I have all I require. A wife would only take up my time, and I have none to spare from Government service.”

This argument, of course, appealed to his master, who was nevertheless frequently conscious of a certain restlessness in his favourite.

“Send for your brother and have him to spend the summer with you,” he suggested. “That might do you good.” And so the brother came, glad to escape from the burning sun that was scorching up the Southern plains. Still the official seemed nervous and irritable, and did not appear to derive the comfort that was expected from the presence of so near a relative.

“You have far too much to do,” his brother said. “It’s all as plain to me as yonder road to India. Thirty guests, from how many different tribes? With all their petitions to attend to – the Ameer’s private as well as public correspondence, all the foreigners in the Government employ to look after, the many requisitions from the royal gun factory, the distillery, the tannery, and what not. You have the work of twenty men; is it not so, Gul Begum?” he said, addressing the girl who stood offering him some sherbet he had sent for, but which he did not seem to have time to drink. “Your master never rests, does he?”

The girl only shook her head sadly, she did not think it was her place to comment on her master’s work even to his brother.

The Chief Secretary smiled hopelessly. “I think I *have* too much to do,” he said, “but in this country who has the Ameer to trust but me? As for me, I have no one that I can get to help me in anything.”

“The Ameer will soon have no one at all either,” the brother replied indignantly. “You’re working yourself into your grave – any one can see that. What’s more, you’ll get into trouble some day for neglecting some of these many works that you have undertaken, and will find a halter round your neck as a reward for your many services, instead of a pension for your old age, such as we get in India?”

“What do you advise?” the Chief Secretary asked despondently. “I do not undertake these works myself. They are thrust upon me. Now look, for instance, at this paper. It is my annual report on the general condition of the country, and my opinion concerning it. Here are my suggestions as to possible improvements in the education of the children in the larger towns. Nothing could be simpler and more easily carried out, and nothing is more necessary. But it won’t be done. I

shall be told that it is excellent, well-devised, and carefully worked out, but that the time has not yet come to do these things, that there are other matters to be attended to first. It is all useless, and yet this report is one of my chief duties, and what can be more important to any country than education? Year after year I prepare these things, and year after year there is nothing done. It is enough to take the heart out of any one. Then here again is a matter to which I have devoted much time and thought – the best and most economical way of treating the prisoners. Thousands of them in this country, who have committed no special crime, but have been reported as having done so, are sent to prison to await their trial and are then forgotten. They have no money, poor wretches, wherewith to bribe their jailers to bring them forward, when the heads of the police go round, so there they sit year after year, eating up Government food and learning to become lazier even than they naturally are. But I might as well have left it all unwritten. These poor fellows will go on sitting there degenerating and degenerating, and the roads and reservoirs will continue unmade. What can I do?"

"Why, take a holiday, of course. Come home with me this winter, and if you wish, return to Kabul in the spring. But I don't like this country. Why should you stay slaving here? It is a country of horrors and of terrors. You have lands of your own, lands which, if properly managed, instead of being allowed to go to rack and ruin, would yield you more than a sufficient income to live in ease and comfort, or if you must work, work for the British Government. The pay is small, but it is secure, and the position is indisputable. You must get leave to come home with me. You need fix nothing definitely about the future now," he went on, seeing the official shake his head despondently. "Get a month's leave and let the events that occur while you are at home decide what your next step is to be."

"I know the Ameer, he would not understand my wanting to leave him. He would think my interest in his cause was flagging. My enemies would put all sorts of false reasons before him, and I should probably find myself in prison," the Chief Secretary said sadly.

"Nonsense, they would only be too glad to see your place empty. Nothing would please them better than to get rid of you and have a chance of holding your appointment. I wonder how they'd like it when they got it, eh?" and the guest, though grieved, could not help smiling as he thought of the work that went hand in hand with the honour of the office of Chief Secretary.

"You don't know these people," the official said again. "One has to live among them to understand them. They are not satisfied to hold the office and draw the salary of a rival, they want his downfall, his utter ruin, his death. That is the Kabuli nature."

"Then *I'll* speak to the Ameer about it myself," his brother said boldly. "I'll tell him there are urgent private family affairs that can only be

settled by you in person, for it is so many years now since you were at home, you are not able to grasp the situation from my description.” And so it was arranged. But he soon understood the uselessness of his petition.

The Ameer withdrew his favour at once from the hitherto honoured guest, and he was sent home with considerable haste and not too great courtesy.

Moreover, the Chief Secretary found to his cost that he had indeed enemies. In a court full of intrigue and jealousy, who has not? Like vultures they stood round watching for the slightest flaw, the faintest weakness in the man whose post they coveted. Here was their chance; they discovered they could at any time provoke the Ameer against his favourite by hinting at his desire to leave the country and seek repose elsewhere.

At first the suggestions met with indifference and even an occasional angry retort, but after a time the shafts sank in and made the Ameer determine to chain this man, on whose services he was so dependent, more closely to his capital; and thinking he was unsettled owing to domestic discomfort, he began again looking around for a suitable wife for him – one who was young, good-looking, and had a sufficient dowry.

The Ameer's intentions soon became an open secret, not only in the city itself but in all the countryside, then spread to distant provinces.

The Chief Secretary was quite the best *parti* available outside the royal circle. He was the court favourite, had been allotted the house that had been always occupied by the Vizier, when Afghanistan could boast of such an official, drew what was considered in Kabul a very high salary, and, moreover, had many allowances and consequently but few expenses. Besides, there were the gifts that fell to him in virtue of his office, both from the Ameer and princes, but more especially from other sources, and these were quite worthy of any one's consideration.

Last, but not least, perhaps, in importance, was the fact that not only had he no other wife at the time, but was known to have always been satisfied with one, and that circumstance, even in a country where polygamy is not only tolerated but in many cases encouraged and sometimes almost forced, is considered of the very first importance in the selection of either a son or brother-in-law. What we should consider the natural order of events was therefore absolutely reversed in this case. Instead of young and handsome suitors, vying with one another in the richness or their attire, their youth, and comeliness, waiting outside her window for some sign from the fair lady to whom they would fain pay their devoted court, elaborately comparisoned horses carrying undoubtedly rich and prosperous riders sought interviews with the Chief Secretary for the purpose of laying before

him an account of the various virtues, accomplishments, charms and possessions of their various female relatives – sisters, daughters, cousins, and the more the list of the names of the applicants for his favours swelled in numbers, the higher grew the dowries that were offered; but the Chief Secretary would have none of them.

His friends began to tell him of the dangers to which he was exposing himself by his want of compliance with the Ameer's wishes. The worry upset his health and distracted his attention from his work. His correspondence – everything – got into arrears, and finding himself quite unable to cope with the accumulation, he engaged a Mirza (clerk), whom he swore over the secrecy on the Koran, to help him.

Therein lay the great mistake. Things were made easier for the moment to become more complicated later on. Certain state secrets eked out, formed a topic of gossip and wonder in the town, and in the course of time came round to the Ameer. No suspicion rested on the Chief Secretary at first. He had proved himself too trustworthy for that, and was, moreover, too constant and too evidently honest in his endeavours to find out whence the reports proceeded. He felt that he had an enemy and a very active one, who was constantly endeavouring to get him into trouble. He became more nervous and irritable than ever. He could no longer look ahead and clear his path as he had hitherto been able to do. He saw only the present accumulated arrears of work that he was for ever fruitless striving to cope with, and he felt that his enemies were gaining ground – he could not quite see where or how.

He no longer felt the same confidence in himself, and to a great extent he lost his power of amusing and attracting his master. He became more often the butt for a joke or the subject of some biting sarcasm than he had ever been, and the ready answer for which he had been so noted and so feared was now seldom forthcoming.

“That man has never recovered from his wife's death; he is still pining to go home,” the Ameer said one day, when, beaten in an argument, the Chief Secretary had left the room crestfallen and not in the best of tempers.

“If he only wants to go home for a visit, why won't he marry an Afghan wife, and leave her here to take care of the children till his return?” suggested an old vulture, who had been dismissed from office some time before, and was sadly in want of the salary of which he had been deprived.

“If he once gets away from here, he has no intention of returning. I can tell you,” whispered another, quite loud enough for the Ameer to hear. “His brother is in the employ of the English. Doubtless, when he was up here, he offered him bribes and a good appointment among those Kafirs, to induce him to reveal state secrets to them when he gets down there.”

“It is certainly strange how since that same brother’s departure matters have been talked about that had better have been kept secret,” croaked a third.

“And, stranger still, is how the discovery of these private matters seems to upset him,” continued another. “If he were not to blame, why should he care, he looks as if he were guilty of something, the consequences of which he fears. I never saw a man so changed. It all dates from his brother’s visit here in the summer, too. There is something distinctly odd about it.”

“Ah, you jackals, you never dare to approach an enemy till you smell death about him,” the Ameer retorted, angrily. “Get out of my sight, rogues! Your little-tattling disgusts me. How dare you venture to carry it on in my very presence?”

So they retired in silence, but they knew that the poison that they had infused would filter in time, and they were prepared to wait for the direful results they knew it would produce.

CHAPTER XXIX

“A KABUL TOWN OF SUN AND DUST”

IT was a strange, new life to Gul Begum, this slavery in a city harem, after the freedom of her mountain home. Sometimes she thought that without that awful nightmare of a time she had gone through at Mohamed Jan’s, which made everything else seem easy, she would never have been able to have stood it. At first she felt stifled, and longed for a draught of mountain air, or what she called mountain air, for it is hard, on the plain of Kabul, to realise that one is nearly 7000

feet above the sea level. What she wanted was a good climb across rocks – a keen blast from the snow mountains – a wild coursing of the blood in her wind-stirred veins, such as she had enjoyed in the wild days of her girlhood.

She had never been cold then, or only for a few minutes. It was so easy for those young and active limbs to get warm with healthy exercise, but in her present confined lie it was different.

The snow lying in the quadrangle was soon melted by the radiation of heat from the warm rooms around, and the bright sun above, and became a slush that was very unpleasant to walk in. After every fall of snow, this state of affairs was increased twofold, for not only was there the snow that fell from the sky to deal with, there were the heaps of snow shovelled off the roof by the Hazara labourers, who from time immemorial had earned their living winter after winter in this way; preventing the sun-baked mud, of which the Kabul roofs are for the most part formed, from becoming a perfect slush, and then falling in.

She often looked at these men – her fellow country-men – at their work, and wondered how they could bear it. They were not slaves, for these were not prisoners of war. They and their fathers before them had lived in the city for years, but they were far worse treated than any slaves she ever saw. They were in fact the slaves of slaves, ordered about, struck, and if more obstinate than usual, beaten as though they had been dogs. And yet these men were free to go where they chose, but bore all this abuse uncomplainingly, only turning to scowl at their maltreaters when they were well out of their reach. What could it mean? The Hazaras she had known at home were much the same in character – lazy enough, or at least disinclined for regular work, but they had some spirit and would till their own little plot of land, and cultivate it at certain seasons with the greatest assiduity, making it yield abundantly. And so the girl's mind began working away at one of the great problems of life – the labour question – as it exists in Afghanistan, and saw the difference between the work of the man who has a bit of land of his own that he is cultivating for himself and for his children after him, and the work of the man who merely seeks to provide himself with food, from hour to hour and day to day. The one “possesses the earth,” and with it the joys of reaping the direct fruits of his labour, the other, though he earns his daily wage as best, or rather as worst, he can, is practically a slave, and has no interest beyond seeing how little he can do for the money paid him, and if possible leaving enough work undone to-day to oblige his employers to send for him again on the morrow. A kick or a blow for his idleness he probably would and did get, but what was that? A Hazara's skin is tough. There was no competition in Kabul, no higher wages for the better workmen. A certain class of work was paid for by a certain daily wage. Why try to do it better than your neighbour? Proficiency brought no better pay. If during the busy season a man had dared to ask more because the demand for workmen was greater, he would have had so

many blows with a stout stick from his would-be employer, as the reward of his impudence, and no one would have pitied him. Then even out of the trifling sum these wretched labourers earned, there was a certain proportion that went by right of custom to the man who called them from the street corner where they stood waiting to be hired. There was no fighting against that, of course, though it reduced the already trifling amount received to a mere pittance.

Gul Begum saw much of this, and wished she had had her father by her to talk it over with. Ah, how she missed her father, and how she longed to get news of him! What had become of him that night after he had slipped out of the house and away into the darkness and the storm? Had he indeed escaped? and where was he now? Ah, how she longed to know; and how did he fare? Who baked his bread for him? Who made his tea? her special task; or did he get none at all?

When the storm blew bitter blasts straight from the Hindoo Kush, she shivered in her bed, not so much with cold as with fear and grief. She wondered what shelter he had found, her beloved father, how his clothes were wearing, whether he had his sheepskins with him, and his gaiters that she had made, and every trifling detail that in so many cases occupies the whole of a woman's thought.

In summer, to this free-born girl, matters were even worse. The sun streamed down on the white mud, the mud that formed the roof, the mud that formed the walls of the house, the mud in the quadrangle, and scorched it through and through. Soon every green leaf dried up, and was covered with a thick coating of dust, and everything in the city became of one dead grey colour. The water in the canal that ran through the quadrangle got low, and there was very considerable difficulty in getting water for even the most necessary purposes. The Chief Secretary hired a special man who was supposed to go down to the river twice a day and fill the mussacks (skin water vessels), but there was no one to see that he either went or returned punctually. The master himself was at Durbar all day with his head servant, who waited on him and did his most important messages, so there was no one at all to see that the men at home did their work. As far as possible, therefore, it was left undone, and the women confined within the four walls of the harem were the people who suffered.

A dozen times a day Gul Begum would go down to the old door-keeper with her complaints.

“For God's sake tell that man to hurry up with the water. We have not a drop to wash the cooking vessels in even, and if it is not here soon, it won't have had time to settle before Agha wants his drinking water.”

“Give him some sherbet then,” the old man would answer, with a smile. “He won't be able to tell whether that's thick or clear, when the cyrup is in it, and he'll like it all the better.”

“Don't talk nonsense, Kopje (a Kabuli word for Derwan, doorkeeper), Agha is not a child that I can tell him whether he is to take water or sherbet when he comes in. don't be so unreasonable, but hurry up that man.”

“What is the name of wonder does it matter to you whether the vessels are washed up, and whether Agha gets his drinking water clear or not? If the water-carrier does not bring it in time, it's he that will get the stick, not you. Why should you care?”

This was a Kabul form of reasoning that Gul Begum could hardly understand. She had been too short a time a slave to realise that most slaves only work to avoid blows. Although his wife had nominally managed her father's house, it had been his daughter who had to a great extent regulated the larger and more important matters connected with his property, and more especially with regard to the animals, the milk, butter, ghee, and wool, the spinning and the sending of the yarn down to the weaver's who turned it into cloth, both fine and coarse.

Gul Begum's had been a wild but a full life, and by no means devoid of keen interest. It seemed impossible to her to live without some responsibility. The more immediate interests of her own family having been wrested from her, she sought occupation for her active mind in her new surroundings, and made them her business, but it was almost impossible to meet the difficulties that cropped up at every corner. It was easy enough to report the Kopje to her master for want of activity in the pursuit of the water-carrier, but it was a dangerous thing to make an enemy of the only communication these imprisoned women had with the outer world, so often Gul Begum would have to retire discomfited and wait; but once when the water had been standing outside waiting for some time, the door-keeper too lazy to bring it in, her indignation overcame her prudence.

“Look here, old wretch,” she said, “I hear from Selima that her husband says the water has been standing outside for an hour or more. What do you mean by such laziness? I shall report you to Agha now without fail. You understand me?” and she did.

The old man was very wroth, and determined she should suffer in a thousand petty ways for her zeal, but Gul Begum was not easily cowed. Now she had once put her foot down she did not mean to lift it up again without a struggle, and if the Hazara slave had occasionally to suffer for her enthusiasm in her master's cause, she found it paid her in the long run. It was not much the master said, but a rupee cut off his wages for his carelessness, and a threat that he would be dismissed from his exceedingly easy post, brought him to his senses, and made him dread the girl who, in his opinion, took so much, too much, upon herself.

The worst time of all in the harem was when the water in the channel ceased to run altogether. Then, indeed, things became unbearable. The frogs, whose everlasting croaking had irritated her more or less all day and all night long, did disappear certainly. Many of them were dead, and their bodies doubtless added to the hideous stench that now rose from the open pool of stagnant, putrid water. The girls could hardly stir across the yard without feeling sick. The children got fever and other significant complaints, and throughout the town the mortality rose higher and higher.

The Chief Secretary had the water cleared out and the channel scraped, but still the smell continued, though it was perhaps a little less bearable.

“It’s the smell through the channel right into the houses on either side,” the man who had cleared it out explained. “I can do nothing more unless I clear out the two next houses as well as yours, and then how am I to get out the dead rats and frogs in the part that runs under the house and street?”

“God knows,” the official would say hopelessly, and so the matter was left. In Kabul there is no Public Nuisance Act, and it would have been against all etiquette for him even to suggest to his neighbours that their drains were in an insanitary condition, and must therefore be cleaned out.

Then the wind would rise and blow a fine powder over everything. The dust lay thick on every shelf and every nich. It filtered through the cupboard doors and settled on all the clothes packed away for the winter. It filtered through the covers on the bedding, and got in among the teased cotton of which it was made, and had they not been regularly shaken and dusted every fibre and every seam would have looked as though it had been powdered; and then at last the storm would break, and the blessed rain would fall. Ah, that was the one treat Gul Begum had – watching the storm as it advanced up the broad valley. She would creep quietly up on to the roof and watch. How refreshing to her burning feet and hands was that icy air that always precedes the final burst! How thrilling the momentary hush when even the kites and the crows are still, and when the wild dogs seek out some temporary shelter in the rocks or among the faggots by the roadside cut ready to bring in to the town for fuel. And then the great finale – the burst itself – the roar of the cannonade among the mountains echoing and re-echoing from one peak to another. The rending of the rocks above, the swishing of the rain that fell in torrents, obscuring everything but the livid flashes of lightning that seemed to penetrate through everything. Then it was that her spirits rose, and she almost felt free again, as though her soul found something kindred to it in the free soul of the storm and the wind.

“Come out of that, mad woman,” old Sardaro would call. “Come down from there at once. Did ever any one hear of such insanity? Actually provoking the God above to strike you dead with His lightning, sitting in the storm there when even the very beasts have had sense to seek shelter. And who is going to nurse you when you are ill, think you?” she would go on peevishly, not understanding in the least wherein the attraction lay.

And then Gul Begum would come down softly, and change her wringing garments for dry ones, and sit by the nursery window, and watch what she could see of the storm that attracted her so from there.

And she found a little sympathiser. Her little mistress, a perfect baby, hardly able to toddle in the heavy shoes that she was made to wear, would come and land herself on the slave girl's knee all of a heap, and sit by the window and watch too.

“That was a big one,” she would say, and hide her face for a moment from the dazzling glare, on her companion's breast. “Tell me about the lightning, Gul Begum. What makes it come? and where does it come from?” the child would ask. ‘Hark!’ as the thunder rolled close over where they sat, almost, it seemed, above their very heads.

“It comes from the clouds,” Gul Begum replied, not knowing what to answer. “And what are the clouds, Jan? Ah, listen to me,” the baby lips would say, seeing that the girl was only half attending to what she was saying, and was gazing far away into space. “Tell me, Gul Begum, what are the clouds, and how can they make all that noise? You must know, because you are always watching them.”

“We must ask Agha, I think, darling, I do not know,” was all the girl could say. “It always seems to me as though they must be charged with powder like the guns, and that when they touch the mountain tops, they burst just as a gun might do, and send forth the flash and the roar just like a gun, but I do not really know, that is only what I fancy.”

There was another moment of keen joy to Gul Begum in her slavery. It was just before the sun rose on the horizon, when there was the first weird glimpse of day – when the cold, pale bluish green streak first made its appearance far away in the Eastern sky, and, gradually warming and warming, spread further and further up into the heavens, telling that a new day was receiving its birth. Gul Begum knew nothing about colour, nothing of artistic effects – at last, nothing that could be defined. She had never seen or heard of a picture, but that was the hour she preferred to all others in the day or night. It was the time when she thought of her father and longed to be with him; the time when pure thoughts and a sense of duties to be accomplished ungrudgingly, came over her, and something more than that, too – a new feeling to which she could have given no expression. Something that was an instinct born of the curious circumstances under which she was placed, but

which she did not yet understand. It was the dim consciousness that a place that had been empty was being filled, and that by her, unobserved by every one, even those most concerned perhaps, but that was no matter.

She had found a new care – a new duty that was to fill the place that her father and little sister had always occupied. But it was the first dawn of something more than that; of the passion than which no stronger or holier can animate a woman's breast, the first dawn of an unselfish, self-sacrificing love, ready to give all, and to ask for nothing in return.

But Gul Begum knew nothing of that; she would only sit and watch the sky as she has watched the shadows on the Hazara hills, and dream and dream, or rather let unformed dreams just filter through her brain, for they left nothing behind, and an hour later had any one said, "What were you thinking of as you watched the sky?" she could truthfully have answered, "Nothing," for she was conscious of nothing but a feeling of rest, and hope, and trust, in something that was above and beyond her.

And that hour at dawn was a time she was quite sure to get all to herself. That was *the* hour in the twenty-four when All Kabul slept. The Court often did not close till one, or even two or three, or even later, but by dawn the last straggler had almost always found his way home; and when the Court slept the whole town slept, and when the Court rose the whole town rose.

Clocks there were and plenty, and there was the bell that rang to warn the workmen that it was time to assemble in the various factories. But that was the foreigners' signal, and that of the prisoners and workmen who served the Government under them. It had nothing whatever to do with the good townfolk. It was only for ignorant villagers and tillers of the soil to get up at daybreak, not for respectable, well-to-do tradesmen and private gentlemen, and as for the officials, it was their only time of repose, this time while the Ameer slept, so that throughout the city every sound was stilled until the cocks and the wild dogs awoke to the consciousness that day had dawned, and that it was time for them to try and wake to world, even if the world choose not to be awakened by them.

CHAPTER XXX

VISITORS

AS weeks and months succeeded one another, visitors occasionally broke the monotony of the dull routine of daily life in the Chief Secretary's house.

Gul Begum's mother was attached to a household close by, and being an elderly woman, was often sent out on certain messages, more readily executed by her than by a man. So she dropped in every now and then to see her daughter and niece, generally staying for a meal more

luxurious than that to which she had now had to accustom herself, and not infrequently carrying off with her material for a new Peran (upper portion of a woman's dress) or a shawl, or perhaps a cap or shoes.

Once on a never-to-be-forgotten occasion Ghulam Hossain had made his way disguised as a water-carrier to the house where he had formerly been received as a guest.

Things had quieted down somewhat, and, driven by love for his child, he had ventured, nearer and nearer to Kabul, hoping to hear something that would give him some clue as to her whereabouts.

Long had he waited before so insignificant an applicant was admitted into the presence of the busy official, but, in spite of the disguise, the Chief Secretary knew him at once, and when he had got rid of his other visitors, the two men conversed far into the night.

"Would your country have lost or gained had you followed my advice?" the official had asked.

"We should have gained," the Hazara replied, "gained in position and wealth, and gained in dishonour. Fearful as the devastation of the whole country is, terrible as are the losses I have myself sustained, I would rather it were so, than that we had been proved cowardly and slaves."

"Many of you are slaves – men as well as women and children," the Chief Secretary replied.

"Their bodies may be slaves – slaves to a force more powerful than they could withstand," Ghulam Hossain had answered proudly; "but their hearts are not enslaved. My mother had many strange sayings, 'Those who submit by force are only half conquered' was one of them. We may be free again some day. You are a generous man. What do you advise? How does the Ameer regard us now?"

"For the moment you are forgotten," the official said quietly. "Remain forgotten yet awhile. To force yourselves on the Ameer's notice would only be to forge fresh chains. In time, other troubles will put this rebellion of yours into the background, and, if you respond when he calls to you for help, your folly may be wiped out."

"Our folly!" the Vizier murmured. "Is that how my countrymen's gallant fight for freedom is to be viewed? – as a folly! Can you offer us no hope?"

"Hope – what hope?"

“The only hope I have, the hope of a grant of freedom for my tribe, or at least for my family. I have lost everything.” The exile bowed his head, and only with great effort restrained himself from tears.

The Chief Secretary was deeply moved. He, too, had lost, he could sympathise. “Come, I can comfort you a little, at any rate,” he said. “It is night now, you can come inside. The women are all in their rooms. I will send some one to you who may make life seem more bearable.”

They went downstairs through a long dark passage, and then through the porter's lodge, or cupboard as it might more appropriately have been called, and thence through the square, round which the harem was built.

Not a sound broke on the stillness of the summer night, save the footfall of the two men as they passed along the flags that were laid along the edge near the house to form a path in wet weather.

As they went up the four or five steps that led to one of the entrances, the rustle of a woman's clothes was distinctly audible, and the master of the house paused to satisfy himself as to what it was. Apparently it was all right, for they entered the long, narrow room, the floor of which was covered with quilted felt of the most brilliant crimson, and at the far end was a couch with pillows, and a quilt all laid out for the night.

“This is where I am sleeping just now,” he said, addressing his guest. “Stay here and I will send some one to prepare a bed for you. I may return later.”

“Ho, there!” he called below his breath when he had closed the door, leaving his guest inside, and Gul Begum, ever watchful, ever ready, stood before him.

“A traveller, a Hazara, has come, and I have offered him hospitality for the night. He is in my room. I wish you to go and see that he has everything that he can require. If he is hungry, take him food. If he is thirsty, you know where to find cyrups and sherbets. You may have seen the man before. He may be a friend; if so, let no exclamation escape you. He has come here in disguise and in the greatest secrecy, and if discovered he might be captured. No mention of his visit is to be made to the slaves, not even to your cousin, certainly not to your mother; you understand?”

She put her hand on her heart as if to still its throbbing, her pulse beats faster, her breathing quickened. Even in the dim light of the stars her master could see her heightened colour.

“Agha,” she asked, “is it my father?” and without waiting for a reply she knelt and touched his feet with her forehead, then rose and went to meet the man whom she believed she loved best on earth.

What passed between them none knew; but next morning the exile wore a more tranquil expression. His beloved child was in safe hands. He was much comforted. But he was warned not to attempt to see her again – not for some months at any rate. But he went away satisfied, thankful, relieved. He felt that he could live without seeing her for a long time now.

One cold raw day when Gul Begum was helping her master to find some private document that was missing, the old porter poked his nose into the room where the search was being made.

“Agha,” he said, “there is a troop of gipsies with a dancing bear and some monkeys outside, and they ask if they may have the honour of performing before you.”

“Here it is,” cried Gul Begum at that moment, “see, I have found it. Surely this is the one.”

“Yes, so it is, that’s well. I am very much relieved. I feared I might have dropped it between the Court and the house. It would have been most serious.”

The old man repeated his question, “Will you please see the gipsies, Agha?”

“Gipsies? What do I want with gipsies? Send them away at once.”

“Oh, Agha, do let us see the dancing bears and monkeys,” Gul Begum pleaded. “Bibi Ayesha so delights in them.”

Her master looked at her. She was little more than a child herself, this girl who pleaded with him for his own beloved child. She had found his paper too, and he was pleased. “The men can’t enter the enclosure, of course, but if there is a woman among them who can be trusted to bring the animals she may come in with them.”

The door-keeper returned to the entrance gate jubilant.

“Here! Can that old hag take in the animals?” he asked. “If she can she will be admitted, but remember half of the backshish comes to me. I had hard work persuading Agha, and had to use all my resources, to my share is well earned.”

“If only the woman is to go in there won’t be much backshish given,” said the man. “You must satisfy yourself with a third. One third for the

old woman, one for the keep of the animals, and one for you. Come, that's fair."

"Quite fair," the door-keeper said, grinning, "but it won't suit me. You can go on your way. I'm not particular," and he shut the door in their faces. But presently there was a knock, as indeed he knew there would be. The terms were soon agreed upon, and the woman marched in, leading the monkeys by a rope. The bear could not be trusted without a man to look after it. In a moment Gul Begum had recognised old Miriam, and she shuddered as she met her eyes.

"Ha! Ha! My fine beauty," the old fortune-teller cried out, "I did not forget you, as you thought I would, I daresay. I've come to see how you are getting on, and whether you have not long since regretted your cruelty to old Miriam. Don't vex yourself, child. You cross my hand with silver, and you'll see I'll have something better to tell you this time. Oh, I owe you no grudge, poor dear. Why should I? You tried to turn me out and you have been punished. I am more than satisfied, nay, I would undo it if I could. Let me now prophesy for your, favour in your master's eyes, a happy marriage, and a son."

Gul Begum blushed and withdrew. Nothing could have been more disasterful to her. Hers was rather a peculiar position in the household, one generally given to some old servant or member of the master's own family. So far no remarks had been passed on it by the other women, and here had this wretched old hag come putting all sorts of upsetting false notions into their heads.

"This is the old fortune-teller I told you about," Shereen whispered to the others. "She never makes a mistake. Offer her something and she'll tell you what your future is to be."

The small possessions of all the party were ransacked, and as the old woman seemed satisfied with what was put before her, she began looking at their hands, first one and then the other.

"Now, Miriam, tell me something good," Shereen said when it came to her turn. "I want money and the best husband in the world. One who won't want to make me work. I care nothing as to his nationality; I only want quiet and peace."

Long did Miriam gaze at the extended palm. "You are young," she said, "you can afford to wait, and you *must* wait. Fortune does not come to you easily, only after many years. There is exile, and there are prisons and slavery, and a life of obscurity in your hand. Then there comes a change. Your whole nation recovers, or rather the branch to which you belong, and you return to your old home and to your old position for a time, but then you wed, and wed happily, and – let me see – one, two, three children, and two of them sons. There now, Gul Begum, what better could you wish than that? Come, let me see that hand of yours

again,” but Gul Begum ran away up the stairs and on to the roof. Her companions were too excited to let her off, however. All of them had been promised something worth having, but so far Shereen was the luckiest.

“You must come down, Gul Begum,” she said. “Good gracious!” the girl retorted crossly, “what do you want with me? I want none of Miriam’s fortunes, I want no husband.”

But they surrounded her and seized her, some half dozen of them, and in no gentle fashion either. The girl called out, “You’re hurting me. Let me go. I won’t see Miriam. I hate the wretch.”

“Hush!” Sardaro called up, “be quiet. Are you mad, Gul Begum? Agha is in the house and will hear you. What will he think of you?”

“Then tell these girls to let me be,” she shouted again.

Sardaro rushed up. “Take that and that and that, you bold, bad girl,” she hissed below her breath, hitting her first on one side of the head and then on the other, and finally kicking her all over as she lay prostrate on the ground, held down by her companions.

Shereen had slipped downstairs and was bringing up old Miriam. She was very inquisitive as to her cousin’s future and most anxious to hear what the old woman had to say.

“Be off, old hag,” Gul Begum shouted when she saw her head appear in the doorway, “be off, miserable liar, or I’ll throw you off this roof down to the courtyard below. Don’t dare to come near me.”

“That’s right,” grinned the old woman, “hold her down, girls, hold her down.” She was furious, and determined to get the better of her old enemy.

“Now utter one sound,” Sardaro said, “and I’ll choke you,” and as she spoke she put her two hands round the girl’s neck. It had struck her all of a sudden that what old Miriam had suggested might indeed come to pass. That the Vizier’s daughter, though a slave at the moment, might find favour in the eyes of the master on whom she waited so faithfully, and that she, with the others, might suddenly find themselves Gul Begum’s servants. The idea was very displeasing to the elder woman, and prompted her to be more violent than was her wont with those under her.

In the meantime the other girls were arranging themselves so as best to keep their companion pinned down to the roof, where she was practically beyond earshot of their master so long as he remained in his room at the other side of the house. A good deal of force and an occasional downward pressure of Sardaro’s thumbs on the girl’s throat

at length obliged her to open her hand, and Miriam gloated over it, chuckling to herself as she read.

“You’re married, I see,” she said; “no change for you with your master, then, as the gossips seemed to think. And you’ll hear more of this husband of yours, too, my dear. Sweet, tender messages are coming to you. Ha! ha! he’s tender husband. I told you before you’d be a prisoner, a slave, now I tell you there are worse things than that in store for you. A shot, a knife, a –“

“Good gracious! You have killed her,” Shereen interrupted suddenly. “My God, she is dead.” Overpowered, beaten, kicked, half-suffocated, the girl had fainted.

CHAPTER XXXI

EVIL TIDINGS

IT was early spring again, the sky a spotless blue, the grass a tender green, the mountains in the background still covered with snow. But of these neither Shereen nor Gul Begum saw anything. Their horizon was

limited by the four sides of their master's house. The only green that refreshed their eyes was the jasmine bushes in the centre of the quadrangle, and a wonderful pear-tree that grew in the wall of one of the rooms, displacing the mud of which it was built, and making all that side of the house damp.

The girls had now been slaves for four long years, and they were much changed, but their altered circumstances had affected them differently.

How could it be otherwise? they had accepted their lot so differently.

Shereen was a mere useless addition to the household to which she belonged, showing no aptitude for sewing, and but little for tending the children or nursing any one who happened to be ill. She lived wholly in anticipation of the day that she felt sure was coming to her, the day that Miriam had promised. Prosperity was to return to her. She was to go back to her own people, she was to marry well and live comfortably and happily ever afterwards. Why interest herself in a sphere which was not her own, a mere transitory position which was to lead to nothing, which would before long be wholly laid aside for ever? But how long? that was the one question Shereen asked herself continually, indeed, that was her one great interest in life. How soon was her luck to turn? When was she to get her freedom and make this suitable marriage?

With Gul Begum all was very different. She was no longer a Hazara in thought or hope or aspiration. Had she, indeed, an aspiration at all? If she had it was never formulated beyond the daily desire to see her master partake of the food she placed before him with such care, beyond the hope of his approval of some work she had undertaken, beyond the longing to see the now almost settled melancholy of his expression relieved for a few moments by a smile.

Her spirit, her pride, were still unbroken, but the old dreams had vanished. She filled her thoughts and time with active work. She was a slave only in name. The service she rendered was the service of the free, willing, bountiful, at times even joyous. Her expression, too, had changed. Her voice was softer, it was sweeter and more refined. She lived very much apart from the other members of the household, who generally, when not otherwise engaged, sat together in groups in the children's room, chatting, and either sewing or preparing fruit for preserves, and sherbets or vegetables for pickles. More often still, they squatted on their heels, in the shade in the summer, by the fire in the winter, with their hands before them, doing absolutely nothing. Gul Begum was generally with her master when he was in the house, helping him to arrange his papers or to find some document that had been mislaid by some of his careless messengers, waiting on him while he ate, preparing his room for writing or for repose, spreading his prayer-carpet or fetching the water for his ablutions. Then when he was out there were his clothes to look to, and mend, and make, and air, and

iron, for she had learned the latter accomplishment, and was proud of it. Her mother, of course, was pleased to see the important position occupied by her daughter in so high an official's establishment and in spite of Miriam's prophecies, which had, of course, been repeated to her, had hope of great things. No mother in Kabul, indeed, aspired to a better position for her child than did the Hazara exile. One day, however, she was the bearer of evil tidings.

"Who do you think I met in the bazaar to-day, Gul Begum?" she asked, when she got the girl alone.

"Who?" asked the daughter indifferently.

"Mohamed Jan."

The girl flushed for a moment, then turned deadly white. "My God, what is he doing here?" she asked.

"He has come to get news of you. Had he dared he would have struck me in the open street because I told him I knew nothing about you, and no more I did. None of us do, at least, nothing of your thoughts and intentions. You know Mohamed Jan is quite a rich man now, and has some sort of official position. I don't know what it is, but it is something that seems to give him a right to domineer over his betters, at any rate, if nothing more."

"What does he want with me? He must know I am a slave and that he cannot claim me," the girl said nervously. "It is not hard to guess how he got his appointment, nor yet even what it is. It is easy enough for a man who is not ashamed to be a traitor to his country to make a fortune in time of war. It does not take a clever man to do that, only a rogue, and there are plenty of those about."

"But he is all the more dangerous to us for that," the elder woman went on, below her breath. "He knows that we know, not only of his treachery, but of his humiliation that awful night, and it is quite possible he knows who secured him his flogging too. Oh, you have made a bitter enemy there, my daughter. I often wonder if you will not live to repent it. Moreover, he has heard that the soldiers offered to return you to him, and that you refused and preferred imprisonment and slavery to becoming his wife, and he is furious. I tell you, as I have always told you, that you should have gone back to him patiently, or, better still, have put up with him from the first. Men are all alike, some a little better, some a little worse, but not worth the choosing between. Had you gone back to him you would have been a free woman to-day, instead of a slave; and in a good position, too. I tell you Mohamed Jan is a rich man, while your poor foolish father roams the hills a beggar, with all his family in slavery. Oh, your father may be a very fine *man*, but he is nothing either as a husband or a father!"

“Mother, never mention the subject to me again,” Gul Begum said, decidedly. “I wish to hear no one’s opinion on this subject, not even yours. I am proud of my father, I prefer slavery to a dishonourable marriage, and I have a right to choose.”

“Oh, I don’t say you are not well off here, but listen, Gul Begum,” and the older woman stretched her head forward till it nearly touched her daughter’s. “I am not only concerned about Mohamed Jan, but am getting very much alarmed as to your future here. There are rumours that the Ameer is looking out for a wife for your Agha, because it is whispered on all sides that he is trying to leave the country.”

“And what is that to me?” the girl answered proudly, and even to the anxious mother watching for the slightest sign of emotion, no tremor, no change of colour, was apparent.

“How can you be so indifferent? How can you pretend that a wife placed over you would not affect your position, would not affect your chances of marriage with your master. What is the use of pretending? I am not blind, *I* can see which way the stream is running, but *you* don’t seem to know how to make use of it to water your own ground.”

“Mother, you do not understand,” was all the girl said quietly. “Let us join the others.”

“No, I will not join the others. I want to know, and I have a right to know, if there is any chance of your being set on one side, supplanted, degraded.”

“What should degrade me, mother? My master taking a wife? How can that affect me? What have I to do with that?”

“Ah, silly fool, are you indeed so ignorant that you do not know what your position would be with a wife here? To-day you may call yourself by whatever name you choose, but you are practically mistress of this house. To-morrow, if your master takes a wife, you will be the servant, the slave, your chances for the future all gone.”

Again Gul Begum sighed. “I see, mother, we shall not agree; you do not understand. I only care to keep my present place in my mater’s regard. No wife can affect that. He will regard me none the less that he will regard her the more. Men are not like women, who, seeing but one side of a question, imagine there can be no other. Men have the whole world to deal with. Their thoughts, their lives, are not shut up in the narrow square round which their house is built. A man’s heart is like a river, dear mother. What difference can it make to the current if here a dog quenches its thirst on its banks and there a camel? Does it flow less swiftly to its appointed end?”

“Ah, silly girl, who says it makes any difference to the river? There’s where you are all wrong. Say, rather, is not a man’s heart more like the sea; the great black water into which the bounteous rivers flow so ungrudgingly, the sea which receives them all but gives nothing in return, nay, hardly designs to notice them?”

“Aye, so it is, mother,” the girl said sadly, “so it is. That is Kismet, that is God’s law. We have but to obey, as do the rivers, and flow on and on for ever.”

The elder woman turned away impatiently. “You are beyond all sense and reason,” she said. “You have the whole chances of the game in your hand, and sheer carelessness and folly rather than ignorance make you throw your luck on to another’s lap. It was a wretched day for me when you were born.”

Gul Begum made no answer, she seemed to be watching the flight of some pigeons overhead, directed and governed by a hand – she could not see, felt, but invisible, that guided them first here, then there, now far up into the deep blue sky, then down, down out of sight below the line that bordered her horizon, the roof of the other side of the harem serai.

CHAPTER XXXII

WITH THE TIDE

AFTER that, for a time, Halima’s visit became much more frequent than they had been. She sought more opportunities for speaking with

her daughter alone, and always left her agitated or else depressed and low spirited. Mohamed Jan was evidently watching all that concerned the girl he claimed as his wife most actively, and his only object could be revenge. He could want nothing else from her now. She could bring him no dowry, and her father could help him to nothing in the way of position in these days of his adversity. Sometimes after her mother had gone, however, a sort of reaction would set in, and the girl would be unusually gay. It occurred to her at times that the old lady took extraordinary pains to harrow her feelings, and the idea would come to her that perhaps she did it to try and incite her to make more effort to secure her own safety by obtaining the protection that would necessarily be enjoyed by the legally married wife of so high an official as was the Chief Secretary, and this idea tended to calm and comfort her, by shutting out from her mind the reports and messages that were brought. But on the occasion of her mother's next visit, she would again feel upset and miserable.

“She does not understand, poor mother,” the girl say to herself. “She does not realise what my Agha is, how far above an ordinary girl like me.” By which it will be seen that Gul Begum had learnt true love's first most invariable and most remarkable lesson. She had learnt humility.

“She thinks he is just like any other everyday man, given to pleasures and luxuries and money earning. She knows nothing of his plans for the education and general amelioration of the condition of the people – nothing of his schemes for this poor, wretched country. She does not even know, as my Agha does, that it *is* a wretched country. She does not know that he never thinks of himself, is always arranging and thinking for others, planning to get this man out of some difficulty, or that one some better post or pay; that he is, indeed, a living saint who has eschewed all earthly desires, and lives only for his God and to benefit the human race.”

Thus mused this wild mountain girl, idealising the object of her dreams, of her deep, undying self sacrificing love, as many another, and far shallower nature, idealises every day, not appreciating in the least, in the case of her beloved, the very mixed motives by which even the best of us are influenced. Nor could she in the least have understood the ambition, the actual craving for popularity and fame, that formed so prominent a feature of the Chief Secretary's character. What did she know of the wide world, and the reputation that it is possible for the very few to gain it, or of the intoxicating joy of being the idol of the hour? Neither did she understand the exact cause of his constant restlessness and uneasiness – though sometimes when he came home irritable and dissatisfied, instead of bright and gay as he had done when she first knew him, he would tell her he was in trouble, and that he had many enemies.

“My father says that those who are great and good must always have enemies during their lifetime,” she would answer. “It is only after they are dead, and there is no longer any cause for jealousy, that men remember their good deeds, and would recall them if they could. You must not notice these harpies.” And her innocent flattery would soothe and comfort him.

More often, though, she would just keep silent, merely answering with a sigh or gesture that meant quite as much as words – more perhaps. Then, kneeling down beside him, she would massage his shoulders and head in the regular oriental fashion, as he sat waiting for a meal or for the answer to some message he had sent. At other times she would simply remain sitting in the room where he was writing, waiting to do his bidding, a silent figure anticipating his wants almost before he felt them himself. Yet he hardly seemed to notice her – this girl on whom so much of the comfort of his daily life depended.

“She is my slave,” he would have said, had any one spoken to him about it, “that is her duty.” So he received all, and gave nothing in return.

One day Halima came in with a special budget of news. She had met Mohamed Jan in the melon market, and he had asked her just to step into his house, which was quite close. “I tell you, my dear child, his house is nearly as good as Agha’s; not so well furnished, of course – where would he get the carpets from? and shawls, and curtains, and suck like? But he has fine rooms, and what any reasonable person would call plenty of everything. He has his old mother there too, and his sister and her husband – quite a family party – and then there are servants and slaves in plenty.”

“Hazara slaves?” the girl asked, interrupting suddenly.

“Of course, Hazara slaves, the town still teems with them, slaves of all sorts and ranks. Why, you can buy a slave now for next to nothing, but they say the *Ameer* gave Mohamed Jan *his* slaves, and has offered his an Afghan wife – a member of his own tribe.”

“Indeed?” the girl answered sarcastically. “A Hazara, with Hazara slaves! What I said the other day, then, proves to be perfectly true. It is very easy for a traitor to prosper.”

“Well, traitor or no traitor, he has known how to prosper where others have been ruined, and I don’t suppose the Hazara nation is one bit the worse off to-day for his treachery than it would have been without it. Had he, like your father, given up everything for what he is pleased to call patriotism, not one of us would have been one bit the better off, and he would be all the worse. So where is he to blame?”

“Quite true, mother,” the girl said quietly. “I don’t suppose any one would deny that; but what did he want you for? Why did he ask you to his house?”

“Oh, I think he wanted to show me how he lived – his fine rooms, his bedding, his Russian tea-service, as he calls it, and his servants and household generally. He seemed very much pleased with himself, and anxious, I think, that you should know about it. Perhaps he thinks it may make you anxious to return to him.” The girl shivered. “He said so, in fact, or as good as said so. ‘Look here, mother,’ he said, ‘I have a home here for Gul Begum. If she will but return, I am still waiting to receive her, in spite of the cruelty with which she has treated me, but she must get her freedom from her master, *now, at once*. Mind, I am not going to wait long. If she does not come to me soon, I will find means of making her, and those means, I can tell you, won’t be particularly agreeable to her, I should imagine. I know how I can get her, no matter how high the position of the official who owns her. This is a country where a man, who is willing to help a neighbour to rid himself of an enemy, can easily make powerful friends, and I know Gul Begum’s master’s enemies. They are good pay masters, too, and not over scrupulous. They have many agents throughout the country, and spies in nearly every household – women as well as men. Let the Chief Secretary beware. If Gul Begum is only to be had by accomplishing her master’s downfall, then he must fall. That is no concern of mine. What I want is the wife that I have chosen, and I mean to have her. Let her come to me of her own accord, and I will receive her and give her a place of honour. Let her give me the trouble and danger of forcing her, and when I have got her in my power’ – his face turned ashy pale when he said this, Gul Begum – ‘let her give me the trouble and danger of forcing her, and I will tear her to pieces, limb from limb, when I have got her. And the getting of her will not be so hard. I am not talking of what has not been done before, and of what I have not planned. If you have any influence with your daughter, warn her; before long it will be too late and beyond my power to stop.’”

“But, mother, what can that jackal do to hurt my master? Agha stands far above him and out of his reach, like a very elephant in the forest.”

“True, my daughter, true, but your elephant is sick and wounded, and he has lost much of his power. It then becomes your jackal’s business to lead his master, the tiger, to find a supper, and what avail size, and a strength that has vanished, when the tiger’s claws are deep in his stricken foe? That is the true position, girl. This jackal can do little enough himself, but he has powerful masters who know how to strike, and where. It seems to me quite clear that to secure your own position, you must make some sort of effort somewhere.”

“Mother, that man has been deceiving you,” the girl said quietly. “He would like to get me in his power that he may crush me, that he may tear me limb from limb as he has said. It he can get me easily by my

going to him of my own accord, so much the better for him, it would save him both time and trouble, but I would in no wise alter his treatment of me. I know that man. You must remember I have lived with him. Take care that he does not make use of you to get information out of you: that seems to me to be the meaning of this invitation of his house. This is a country where a son is employed to spy on his father, a mother against her daughter. Take care what you say when you meet him. I don't like your having any dealings with that man at all. Sometimes I think that it has been through you that he ever found out when I lived. What did you tell him the first time you ever saw him? Will you try and remember, mother?"

"I told him absolutely nothing except that you were with a man who was well able to take care of you. He had not the slightest idea who it was," Halima said, much offended.

"Walk here with me? Why, he has harshly designed to speak with me when he has met me till I saw him in the melon market. You have no idea what he thinks of himself now. He does not care to be seen speaking to a slave. I can tell you he is far too grand a man. There are plenty of people who could tell him where my daughter lives. I have made no secret of that – why should I? – nor of your position here."

The girl turned very pale. It had been easy enough indeed for Mohamed Jan to trace her when once he had met her mother. Any gossip with whom she dealt in the bazaar could have told him that the old woman's daughter was the Chief Secretary's slave. Of what else besides might she not have boasted?

CHAPTER XXXIII

"REJECTED"

“WHAT’S the matter with you to-day, Gul Begum? First you hand me my hat without my skull cap, and now you are putting the right boot on to the left foot, and I am in a hurry and nearly distracted with business.”

It was the Chief Secretary who was speaking, but an old friend would hardly have recognised the querulous peevish tones, so unlike were they to the confident calm of the old happy days.

“Fool! now you’re running the tag into my very flesh,” an he bent down and gave the girl a smart rap on the side of the head.

“Forgive me, Agha,” she said, “I am very sorry, but I am indeed not myself to-day. I have had bad news and feel sick and anxious.” She placed her hand over her heart and drew a long breath as though she almost doubted her powers to produce it.

“Bad news? What do you mean by bad news? Speak, girl, what is wrong?”

“For some time past I have been hearing rumours, Agha, rumours of your being out of favour, of another’s being given your post, of possible imprisonment, perhaps worse than that even, God knows.”

“Who brings this gossip inside these walls? What miscreant have you been talking to? What right have you to listen to such tales?” he asked angrily.

“Agha, I have proofs; be warned in time. It is my mother who has brought the news, she does it for your good, do not close your ears and refuse to listen. Agha, you are in danger.”

The Chief Secretary looked down at the kneeling girl, whose imploring eyes were fast filling with tears. “Listen, Agha, and I too am in danger, but what of that?”

“How’s that?” he asked.

“Mohamed Jan can never cease hating me. That is impossible. He has had too good cause, and now he is only waiting an opportunity to take his revenge on me. He knows I am your slave, and that as long as I am with you I am safe, but he has found out what you have yourself often told me, that the head of the police is one of your worst enemies. He has therefore been to him, has accepted a bribe from him, and has sworn never to rest till he has convinced the Ameer of your disloyalty to the Government. Helas! Agha, he has heard of my poor father’s visit here, and has found some means of making capital out of that too. His intention is first to accomplish your destruction, and then to demand me from the Ameer in return for the service of discovering to him your supposed treachery, that he may punish me for hating him by tearing

and hacking me limb from limb. I know him, and he will do it. He knows he cannot get at me except through you, and so he has sworn to compass your ruin first.”

The Chief Secretary said nothing, but gazed through the window into space, reviewing matters in his own mind.

“Agha, what am I to do?” the girl went on after a pause. “Would it not be better for me to leave you? Had you not better give me my freedom and let me go? Or – pardon me if I offend you – will you not trust yourself to me? You are out of favour with the Ameer you are not well – you want to return to your father’s house, and yet you cannot get leave. Why not escape, Agha? Why not fly the country now you are free, and can easily do it. Why wait until it is too late – till the prison walls with a guarding sentry block your exit? To-day you are free! God only knows how long you will remain so. This is the country of death and destruction, of intrigue and treachery, and secret assassination. Why not fly?”

She had grown more and more eager, and before she uttered the last few words had risen and shut the window lest the almost inaudible whisper, in which alone she had dared trust herself to speak, should be carried by the treacherous winds to the ear of the man of whom she stood in so much dread.

“This is terrible news, indeed,” her master said at last. “The very fact that I have kept your father’s visit here so secret, now it has come out will tell against me. The real reason will never be believed. I shall be accused of intriguing with the Hazaras, and any little contretemps that has occurred will be attributed to me. I am indeed lost, and all through you, black-faced one. I have had nothing but ill luck ever since you came to me,” and the wretched man bowed his head upon his hand and wept.

Cut to the quick, wondered and rose, it was now the girl’s turn to be strong. “Agha, Agha,” she persisted, “you have still a chance. You know the road in every direction for fifty miles round Kabul, and you would pass respected everywhere at present. Escape to the frontier while there is yet time. Thence I can take you to the Hazara country, where I know every stone on the hillsides, and where my father and I can hide you among the caves and boulders until we can escape from there too, and make our way to India.”

The Chief Secretary looked up. “Give me my stick,” he said, “I must be off on the track of these wolves. I will remember what you have said, and will think of how best I can act, but I cannot take you with me. I must go alone. The fact of my having a woman with me would betray me at once.”

The girl's face fell. "Agha, would you leave me to the torn in pieces by Mohamed Jan? my wretched body thrown to the dogs and jackals to be their food? Oh, Agha, I had not thought –"

"Ah, you make my safety the excuse because you want to fly yourself," he said, cruelly wounding the woman who would have given her life for him in his bitterness and disappointment. "I might have known as much. Here, give me my stick."

"Agha, I am not afraid, only fly and leave me to my fate. The good God above can protect me if He will. He has protected me theretofore; but make the arrangements to-day, Agha. Who will you find for a guide? Who can you trust?" Ah! there she had touched the real question at stake, who could he trust? He turned and looked at her.

"In man's clothes no one could tell I was a woman I am taller than most Hazara men; I am as tall as you, Agha. I can load and fire a rifle as well as any," and she shivered. "If I were put to it, I could use a knife. I know nothing of fear. I dread only two things on earth – your disgrace, and my capture by Mohamed Jan; but I swear that I would face the latter if I were but sure that you were far out of reach of your enemies, in a country where there is justice and right, instead of intrigues, false witnesses, and bribes." She shivered again. "Ah, surely God has put His curse on this country for ever and ever. You may strive for it as you will, but it can never be great again. It must fall among the nations of the world, because it reeks with wrongs and cruelties, and the blood of those who have been murdered must cry aloud for vengeance."

"Hush, girl," her master said, "think what you will be silent and seem gay. Don't let your face look sad, or your eyes tear-stained before your companions. God knows what spies there may be in my own household. Sardaro is of the royal tribe, though of a poor and lowly branch, and I have thought I have caught Gulsum trying to listen at the doors at times. Hark! What is that?"

"It is but the cat lapping up the milk that I upset when I brought in your tea this morning," the girl said, smiling and without the slightest contempt for the man who offered her no assistance in her trouble, while showing such evident concern about himself. But she did not despise him whatever others might have done. She thought of him only as he had been years ago, before all these troubles had come on him; when he had been full of thought and care for others as well as for himself. What could she see in him that was not as it should have been? She loved him, she knew *that* now, her eyes had been opened within the last few days, these days of anxiety and distress, during which she had had those constant visits from her mother, visits which had brought her nothing but ill tidings, and which day by day had plunged her deeper and deeper into such an abyss of despair that at length her lips had become unlocked, and she had been forced to appeal to her master.

She looked up; he had gone out quietly and had slipped noiselessly from the house without another word. Then she threw herself down on the ground where the prayer carpet she had spread still lay. "My God, my God," she murmured, "save him, save him. What am I, and who am I, that he should take me with him? Place a guide within his reach, straighten his path, smooth his way and do with me according to Thy good pleasure. I am but dross. Spare him," and after a time, exhausted, she fell asleep, she had hardly closed her eyes all night.

CHAPTER XXXIV

A SPY

A GENTLE kick, rather a stirring with a foot, awoke her.

“What are you sleeping here for, Gul Begum, and what’s the matter? You’ve been crying.” It was Gulsum who spoke.

“Crying? Why should I cry?” the half-unconscious girl answered thoughtlessly, not knowing that denial was worse than useless, for no looking-glass had revealed the piteous condition of her whole face, and she was still sleepy to be conscious of the discomfort caused by the swelling.

“Don’t tell me you’ve not been crying. I have eyes,” Gulsum retorted viciously. “You must have been crying for hours, and then have fallen asleep. It’s past mid-day, and you’ve had no food.”

“Nam-e-Khuda! What have I been thinking of?” Gul Begum said, springing to her feet.

“Your troubles, I should think,” Gulsum retorted, as she turned away with a sneer.

Gul Begum was now wide awake, and suddenly realised that she must be on her guard if she would disarm the suspicion with which she at once felt herself surrounded. She called her companion back.

“Gulsum, say nothing about my tears and troubles,” she pleaded, “I ask, I pray you. I am but a slave who should have no feelings, of course, but sometimes I am a fool and forget. Perhaps, like the rest, you envy me and think me favoured because I wait on Agha, and because I seem more trusted than you others are. Ah! You do not know – I could tell you many things, but I try to keep silent, it is my duty. I have never asked you for sympathy, you do not even know I need it. Even now I only speak because you have seen my sorrow. Do not make a laughing-stock of me before the others. Keep my secret; do not let them know I have been weeping.”

“What do you mean, Gul Begum? Explain yourself,” the little spy said sympathetically, “tell me what are your troubles. Any one can see that you are distressed, and yet you seem to us to have all that life can give. Sometimes, I admit, I have envied you.” Her tones were kind and earnest, as though she sought confidence that she might give comfort, but she had some one more wily than herself to deal with.

“I cannot speak even to you, Gulsum, who are my companion in slavery,” Gul Begum said sadly; “you are only a girl, how can you understand?”

Besides, my secrets are not altogether my own, they are my master’s, and he bears a good name. I must not cast a slur on it.”

“I may be only a girl, and to you I may seem unworthy of confidence, but I understand more than you think, and though I have not said so, I have long noticed that you are troubled, and have griefs and anxieties of which you do not speak. Tell me about them; can I do nothing to relieve you.”

“You could, you could,” Gul Begum said eagerly, “but there, you won’t, so what’s the good of my asking? none of you will. It all falls on me – everything. Even Sardaro has given up every one of her duties. I have the whole weight to bear alone. This constant service is too much for me. I cannot remember everything. I cannot *do* everything, and then I get curses and abuse, and this morning it even went so far as blows.” The girl put her hand on her heart as she spoke, and a look of agony passed across her face.

“That was an insult indeed, and how incredible!” Gulsum murmured. “We thought things were so different, that you were so highly favoured, perhaps even loved.”

A look of triumph succeeded the look of pain. It had been like the thrust of a knife to speak so of her master, her beloved, but her object was achieved, Gulsum had been drawn off the track. It had been worth it. Her master could not escape unaided. Who, was to help him, if not she? and to help him effectually none must know or suspect her love for him; that would be fatal indeed. Rather let it be thought that she feared him, and cherished a secret hatred for him which she dared not show.

Gulsum was mollified. In the first place, she had got some news for an employer who paid her well for the little she could tell him, and in the second place she had now something to gossip about in the house. They had all been deceived then. There was no attachment between her master and the Hazara beauty. It could not be for her sake that he was refusing the handsomest and richest girls in Kabul. There must be some other reason. What could it be? One thing was all right, she felt sure, Gul Begum did not suspect her; on the contrary, she had her confidence, she could work that, by being very sympathetic and helpful. The head slave would never accept her offers of help, she was thankful for that knowledge, but she could at least proffer them; and as to her master! What was he to her? What had he ever done for her? Called her a lazy good-for-nothing, told her not to dare to appear before him, as it made him sick to look at such a slatternly object. She certainly owed him no duty beyond the work that was thrust on her. She had herself and her own interests to look after, and Mohamed Jan had promised her jewels, pearl ear ornaments. She would risk a good deal to get those. Her tompons (full Turkish trousers) were soiled, she had not washed them for a month. Her peran was torn, she was the most untidy girl in her master’s establishment – but she longed for pearl ear pendants. She would never have dared to wear them before her companions, lest inquiries should be made as to where she got them;

and she had no reasonable hope of ever getting her freedom, and so being able to wear them elsewhere; but common sense and power of reasoning formed no part of Gulsum's character, or of that of most Afghan slaves; she only felt she would like to have pearl earrings.

The consequences to others of her efforts to get them, the trouble she would herself get into if it were ever discovered that she had bribed the porter to let her slip out just for a minute to see a friend in the next house, and had instead spoken with a man for ten minutes, in the lane round the corner, had never crossed her mind. Hers was a limited horizon, nor had she reckoned that her companion, during her four years of slavery, had learnt something of harem intrigue too, and was prepared to meet her on her own ground.

"Have you heard that Agha's sais (groom), has been put in prison by the Ameer's orders?" Gulsum asked one day, after considering how much of her information in would be prudent for her to divulge in order to gain more.

"Khuda - a - a!" exclaimed Gul Begum, in well-affected surprise, having heard all about it from her master, "and what is that for?"

"I tell you Agha is in serious trouble. His enemies are pressing round him. So, to get some information as to their movements, he sent Abdul Raof to see how the land lay, and gather what information he could from the servants at the police office. They, however, were too smart for him, and reported his being there, spying into their affairs, to the Ameer. The Ameer sent for Abdul Raof, who swore he had not been at the office five minutes, and had asked no questions. Of course, fifty witnesses were produced, who all swore to his having been there for hours, and of all he said and did there. Have you heard nothing about it? I should have thought Agha would have told you all about it."

"There is where you make such mistakes, Gulsum," the elder girl had remarked quietly. "I tell you I only *seem* to you to hold a position of confidence. I know nothing, how should I? Where do you get your information? I should like to know those things too. They may effect my chances of a change as well as yours."

Sardaro and her companions were surprised at the sudden intimacy that had sprung up between the proud Hazara girl, who hardly held the position of slave in the household, and the untidy little drudge whose chief work consisted in cleaning the kitchen utensils, and looking after the hens, and at the amount of gossip she now brought into the harem.

"Gul Begum is teaching me to write," she had said to Sardaro when she had been questioned on the subject. "Agha says every woman ought to be able to write, and I am going to marry some day – a Mirza (writer), perhaps, so I want to be able to write."

“Learn to comb your hair and to keep your nails tidy,” Sardaro had answered peevishly. She could not write herself and saw no sense in women in learning men’s accomplishments.

Some one else *outside* the harem was surprised too. Mohamed Jan learnt for the first time that Gul Begum had no chance of ever becoming anything more to her master than she then was. That she was, indeed, unhappy in her present position, and was merely waiting for the Ameer to commence his promised concessions to the Hazaras to place an appeal before him. She had had enough of slavery and was ready to return to her duties and her husband. It certainly struck Mohamed Jan as odd, knowing the Vizier’s daughter as he did, but Gulsum was no friend of Gul Begum’s, and had found these things out by pretending to sympathise with her. She had thought quite differently until the day she had caught her weeping, and had succeeded in surprising her into betraying her secret. No doubt the beauty’s pride had got broken at last; nothing like slavery for humiliating and subduing a high-spirited, haughty woman! And no fear of her forgetting her lesson when he got hold of her again, as he most assuredly would do, now she was determined on appealing to the Ameer. He would show her her place and keep her there. He would marry another and a younger wife, and Gul Begum should be her servant and do her bidding, and if she would not, he would know how to punish her. That was a final idea! How the Vizier’s daughter would resent it. Mohamed Jan rubbed his hands together and grinned, as only a Hazara can.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE PLOT

SHE was sitting by the window looking at the blank wall opposite. Gul Begum was idle, at least her hands were lying listlessly in her lap, only

her brain was active. She was reviewing her past, and wondering wherein lay the failure of her life. In herself, or in her fate?

Was there not, perhaps, after all, something in the stars that shed a blessing or a curse on those born under them? Her father had taught her that man makes his own destiny. Had her father, her splendid, her heroic father, made *his* destiny? – he, now a fugitive, a wanderer, deprived of home, and wife, and child, or had some cruel star put an irremediable curse on him in the hour of his birth, and was he merely working out the destiny imposed upon him – a destiny over which he had no power?

She knew nothing of the offers that had been made him – offers that would probably have given him the position of governor in his own beloved country, that would have put within his reach such a home as had not been seen in Hazara for centuries, at any rate. She knew nothing of the hour of his temptation – nothing of what might have been – and if she had, she would still have wondered.

She knew all about Paradise, and what it offered. Her father had often spoken of that land of bliss, but to be quite truthful it attracted her but little, she looked forward to it with no eager longing. She was young, and strong, and bold, and daring, and the women of her father's Paradise had but little in common with her. It seemed a placid but a poor end to a life such as hers had been, though she had never ventured to even whisper such thoughts as these to any one.

No one had ever suggested to her, and her intuition had not taught her, that her life *had* been worth living, and that she was being disciplined in a hard school, taught by an unrelenting master, just because she was strong and brave, and could bear it; and that beyond, somewhere, somehow – God only knows – she would reap the results of her pain.

Quite unbidden, the tears stared into her eyes, flooded them, and then fell upon the hands that lay in her lap. Miriam's words came back to her as she sat there, "Rejected – a prisoner – a slave." It had all turned out true, though she had despised the cursing old gipsy, and had not believed a word she had said, but it had been true, every word of it. And what had she said that day in the harem when the old hag had come round with the monkeys and the bears – she could hardly remember, for she had fainted, but surely there had been something about a shot – a knife. Again she shivered as she had done years before, when she had heard the first curse, and again she placed her hand upon her heart, as though to still its beating. Why had she been called into existence if this was to be her all – this crippled life, where even her very offers of services were rejected? No one wanted her, no one but her father, and he, poor darling, could not have her.

And then her thoughts turned towards her home again, her old peaceful, happy home among the hills, and the days when she had spent her time

tending the great gentle cows and oxen, the sheep and the camels – discontented, refractory creatures that they were. She thought of the little sister that She had parted from with such a pang, and thanked God from her heart that He had taken her. What would have become of her had she lived to reach her destination? Where would she have been now? It was impossible to tell. She preferred to think of her in the grave on the hillside in the country that *might* now be incorporated with Afghanistan, but which still seemed different to the poor exile, because it was the home of her birth and of her ancestors.

Of Fatma she had often heard, she was quite happy. She was a girl who had never asked much of life, and who had not fretted over her loss of liberty. She was a slave still, but a favourite, and had a son, which gave her a certain position in her master's household, quite enough to satisfy her. But still Gul Begum was glad the little sister she had loved so dearly had not shared that fate. A slave's life in Kabul was not necessarily an unhappy one – the girl knew that. On the contrary, in a small house, if the wife were old she often had a much better time than her mistress – more freedom, better treatment, and less responsibility. In a large establishment where there were many wives, it depended very much on the girl herself what her position would be. She might be a wretched, slatternly drudge like Gulsum, hustled hither and thither at every one's beck and call, or she might be the attendant of the chief wife, and as such, if the lady were lazy and apathetic, as most great Afghan ladies are, would hold almost the same position that Gul Begum herself occupied. These things depended very much on luck, but a good deal on the girl herself.

She wondered how it had fared with her brother, the one she had helped to save the night she had been inspired in that strange dream about the fire. Did he ever think of her or remember her? How could he? He had been such a child at the time, and it was now four long years since they had been parted. "Only my father can miss me much," she thought, "and if I were with him I might even be a burden to him now he has no home!"

The wasps and hornets droned in dozens in the room where the girl sat thinking, and swooped round her head in circles. She cast her eye up towards the ceiling. There were one, two, three nests hanging from it, and another just begun. "I am getting very careless about my work," she said to herself. "But how can one work when one is in such misery and anxiety. Oh, Agha, Agha," she groaned, "how is this all to end? What is to become of you, and what is to become of me? What shall we do? What is the use of our closing our eyes and deceiving ourselves? It cannot be long now before the plans are hatched, the net woven that is to ensnare you, and what will that mean to me?" She shivered as she always did when she thought of Mohamed Jan.

A light hurried footstep on the pavement by the porter's lodge roused her. The sound came quickly in her direction, and she stood up prepared to receive her master.

"Gul Begum, I am in danger," he whispered the moment that he had entered the room. "The police have got hold of a paper that was given to me in the strictest confidence by the Ameer. A paper from – ah, well, never mind what is in it, but they declare it has been secreted from the British Agency by one of their spies, and that I must have sold it to the English – betrayed my master – turned traitor! But I have the paper here, the one he gave me. I saw it only yesterday, I am certain of it – I had it in my hand."

The Chief Secretary was ashy pale, his hands trembled, and somehow he looked old, and positively as though he had shrunk – as though his clothes had been made for another and a stouter man. He went towards the curious, square, four-legged trunk – the yachdan in which his important papers were kept under lock and seal – and tried to open it, but somehow neither fastening seemed to obey his eager fingers. "Give me a knife," he said, "that I may cut the string. Quick, girl, are you asleep? Cut the seal off, and help me to unfasten that box."

Gul Begum advanced, pale, but firm and quiet. She had fetched a second key from the shelf under the Koran, and without a word had turned it in the lock and raised the lid.

"Give me the bundle on the top," her master said excitedly, "yes, that one, the one in the red handkerchief." The colour was coming back into his face a little. "Untie it," he said, and then he smiled. Yes, there was the paper safe enough, just where he had left it the night before. But whence, then, came that other paper that he had seen in his master's hand? There had been but one original letter, that sent by a Border Chief to the Ameer making certain proposals. Who had made that copy? It was a most skilful forgery, cleverly designed to overthrow him and to bring him to the gallows. His enemies were indeed active and had laid their plans well, but he had the original quite safely. He would go straight to the Ameer with it; he would scatter his enemies.

His whole appearance changed, as surely only that of Easterns can do in so short of time. His carriage became erect again as usual, his colour returned, his very clothes sat differently on him.

"Just give me a brush down," he said to the girl who stood beside him, more composedly, she thought, than she had heard him speak for weeks. "Now we will see who is for the gallows. We shall see whether God protects His own servant who waits on Him continually, or whether these carrion crows, these pariahs, are to triumph over me and overthrow me. Hark! there is the Muezzin. It is prayer time, Gul Begum. Bring me some water and spread my prayer carpet. In God's strength I shall overcome all my difficulties."

Something, perhaps the soothing effect of his prayers, perhaps faith in his master, in whose desire to be just he had absolute confidence, perhaps the possession of the paper he had been afraid must have been stolen from him, killed in him for a moment the melancholy and depression, the nervous irritability that had so taken possession of him of late years, as to change his whole mien and bearing. He was a courtier again, a chief, a leader of men.

CHAPTER XXXVI

FACING HIS ACCUSERS

THERE was defiance in the Chief Secretary's very carriage as he entered the Court. He spoke to no one, took no notice of the head of the police as he passed him by the door, and marched straight to the entrance of the presence chamber. In the morning a casual observer, knowing nothing of him, would have pronounced him a criminal; as he stood now in the anteroom, erect and fearless, his very attitude denoted innocence.

The door opened to let some one out, and the Chief Secretary stood before his master as of old. The Ameer looked up surprised. So astute an observer and reader of character could not fail to observe the change.

"You have returned," he said. "You have prepared your defence. I will summon your accusers."

The official drew himself up and his eyes flashed fire.

"Your Majesty," he said, "I have no defence to make. I will answer no accusers. From my boyhood I have served you faithfully. From my first entrance into your Court I have loved you. Now I appeal to you. Point out the man who has served you as I have served you. Twice – it is a long time ago – but twice I have saved you from danger, perhaps from death. Ill-health and over-work have combined to alter me so that I hardly know myself. I am listless and dull, unnerved. Your Majesty has not understood my depression. I have shunned my friends. I have behaved like one with a burden on his mind, like a criminal if you will; perhaps I have almost looked like one, but God is my witness that never have I toiled more arduously in your service, never since I have been in this country have I more right to appeal to you for protection against my enemies."

The Ameer held up his hand to command silence and opportunity to speak. "What you say is all true," he said. "You have served me long and well. You have been unsparing of your time and energy, but you are only mortal. You have yourself told me that you wish to return to your own country, your country which is ruled by a nation which, while calling itself my friend, keeps the mouths of its cannon pointed at my capital. For months I have heard that you have been seeking an appointment among these strange friends of mine, that you have been in correspondence with your relations on the subject. That one of them has visited you and even endeavoured to allure you from my service. I myself *know*. He himself spoke to me on the subject. A paper of little importance, but one given to you by me in strictest confidence, has been found in the office of my friend's (?) agent ready to be despatched to India. I have faithful servants, you see, besides yourself, men to whom I owe much of the peace that has so long reigned in my country. One of these saw the paper, recognised its importance, and brought it to me. What excuse have you to make? How did it get into the British Agency?"

The Ameer's eye never moved. It was fixed on the man before him. The room had gradually filled with courtiers and servants of all ranks. Except in the immediate vicinity of the Ameer's couch, there was hardly standing room, and not one man in all that crowd would have changed places with the official who stood facing his judge, his back turned to his accusers.

With something like a laugh, or rather, perhaps, one might say a shout of derision, the Chief Secretary turned and faced them all, then turned again and addressed his master.

"My accusers?" he said scornfully. "Are these pariahs my accusers? If so, I refuse to answer them or to speak to such dogs at all. They know I am an alien, they know I have private sorrows and troubles, and they know I have the pay of your Majesty's Chief Secretary. That is all they know. They know nothing of loyalty, nothing of duty, nothing of patriotism, they want but one thing – my pay. Your Majesty does not for one moment believe they *could*, even if they *would*, do my *work*. But because they want my pay, my house, my position, they make plots and deep-laid plans to overthrow me. They intrigue, they forge, they perjure themselves, all that they may obtain so paltry a sum that I am half ashamed to call it my salary, and your Majesty asks me to answer them; but I dare to stand before you, one man, an alien, and refuse to speak to them at all. I am sick of my life, I do not wish to live, I would rather die. I have spent my health and strength in your Majesty's service, I have worked for you and your cause day and night, and I believe in you and love you still, because I can see how impossible it is for you among these rogues and false witnesses to judge me fairly. I fear either gallows nor gun – nay, rather, I seek them, and am ready to face them; but before I do so, and in presence of this vast flight of carrion crows all watching for my poor corpse, I hand you your letter, the letter you placed in my hands, and which has never left my possession since. I have other confidential papers of your Majesty's, some of them papers I have had for years. They are in my house, they are all ready. Any one of these vultures can go and fetch them for me."

The Ameer held the paper in his hand. He was looking it carefully over and examining it.

"This is the original," he said, in his low impressive tones. "Some one has made a copy. My God! what villains I have got for subjects. They will try to prove to me soon that I myself am traitor. Ah, you hungry hawks, you are on the sharp look-out for prey, but take care you do not strike too soon. It is better for such as you to wait until the quarry is quite dead. Though sick and sad, he has claws that can scratch and jaws that can bite, and he may strike you so that you never rise again. Two minutes ago this room was full to overflowing, now where have these accusers gone? My son, I forgive your vehemence, which was hardly becoming in the presence of your sovereign. There are times when the

most moderate of us cannot restrain ourselves. Go home and rest, or rather, no, stay, I am sending for my food. You must be refreshed before you go. I shall inquire into this case. Your enemies shall not go unpunished.”

The Chief Secretary bowed low. Something of his usual melancholy had settled on him again.

“First, let me give thanks to my God, who alone can deliver me,” he said reverently, and passing from the presence chamber where he had been the object of so much interest and excitement, he entered a small apartment often used as a writing-room by the Princes and certain officials of importance. It was a bright little room at the corner of the house, one window facing the entrance gate, the other looking into the prettiest part of the flower garden, where there were seats and benches for the comfort and convenience of the pages and courtiers.

“Ho! Nabi Khan, bring me some shawl or carpet to pray on, and some water for my woozoo,” he called to one of his servants sitting in the sun just by the entrance, waiting for his master to reappear.

The summons was instantly obeyed, and long did the Chief Secretary remain rapt in his devotions, sitting on his heel on the carpet spread for the purpose, his hands held out before him in earnest supplication. The sound of voices came through the window, voices that came and passed on. He heeded them not, but prayed on. He asked his God for no special temporal blessing, only for light, and guidance, and strength for whatever lay before him.

Suddenly, however, his attention was arrested. Two boys (he knew exactly who they were) had evidently occupied the seat immediately below the window, and were discussing the event of the afternoon.

“That was a fine appeal,” one was saying; “I must say I thought the Chief Secretary spoke well, and what he said was true.”

“Yes, and he looked well too, and that has something to do with his getting off so easily. You know how influenced the Ameer is by looks, but what he said was no defence. He has averted the evil day for the moment, but it is a mere delay. They have made a ring from which he cannot escape in the long run. He’s bound to fall, and then what is there for him? The gallows or a prison, which, to my mind, is worse.”

“There are some others that will ornament the gallows before he does, though, I fancy,” the other replied warmly. “This case is going to be sifted to the bottom. I heard the Ameer say so, and you know what that means.”

“Oh, I daresay we shall see the executioner busy, but others being hung first won’t save him. He’s bound to fall sooner or later. I tell

you again they have arranged a ring to do it, and they will stick to their purpose like flies to a honey-dish until they have destroyed him.”

“Yes, and then betray one another afterwards, when he is dead, that is their way. They have been at it for years.”

“Oh, nothing is surer than that, but I should not like to know who made that second copy, who got the chance of copying it. He must have kept it carelessly, to say the least of it. Or – he may have copied it himself, and sold the copy the English. He is a sly devil that. I daresay he got a good round sum for it.”

“I don't believe he ever did any such thing. He isn't the man to do it,” the more sympathetic of the two said warmly. “But these police agents are clever enough to invent anything.”

“Oh, clever enough, of course they are, and if it doesn't strike them, I'll put them up to it. I like to see the fun. It's the only life we have,” the other speaker said gaily.

“Well, I don't wish to see him hanged; he's done many of us a good turn, and if I were he I would escape. I would not stay here to be caught like a rat in a hole.”

CHAPTER XXXVII

A RAT IN A HOLE

THE Chief Secretary had heard enough. His danger was quite clear. He saw the whole trial, as it would be, just though it had been.

Even man and boy about the Court thronging to hear the evidence against him. Each interested in the highest degree not in his, the Chief Secretary's, downfall particularly; no, they were not vicious, but interested to hear how would extricate himself, or whether he could extricate himself at all – interested in the game of skill where one man alone, the ablest and most crafty in the country, would plead his cause and fight for his life alone against a dozen, perhaps fifty accusers, each of whom would feel that to fail in his evidence would mean danger to himself – perhaps death.

How they would push for the best places – quietly, of course, that the Ameer might not notice – but none the less forcibly. How they would think out each point, suggest further possibilities or impossibilities, every now and then bringing forward some new and deep-laid scheme, undreamt of by him, the accused – schemes that could only occur to an Afghan; schemes he might not be able to find an answer for on the spur of the moment, but which, nevertheless, might appeal to the Ameer as reasonable, such as the one the page-boy had suggested but a few moments before in his own hearing.

Hi might escape once, or even twice, as he had done to-day, but the net was surely cast, he was bound to get caught in its meshes. Besides, it was strange about that second paper. Ransack his brains as he would he could not account for it, or suggest any means by which it could have been made before the original had been placed in his care by the Ameer.

The case, when it had first been put before him, had seemed an urgent one. The messenger had brought it to the official's house sealed, and had requested a personal interview with the Ameer. He had even kept the man as his own guest, fearing he might talk too much, until the appointed hour had come. the packet had then been delivered, still sealed, into the Ameer's own hands. That was all quite clear in his mind as though it had happened but yesterday. Who, then, had made the copy? and how had the forger got hold of the original?

Only one man, besides himself had ever had access to his yachdan – his Mirza (writer, secretary). He had trusted that man implicitly – had looked upon him as a creature wholly his own by right, for he had saved his life. It was an old story now, but the man still constantly referred to it, and reminded the master, to whose interests he professed to be devoted, of the day when he, like so many others, had been hounded by his enemies, and almost brought to earth there in that very room where his master had that day stood before his accusers. And that master had saved him, hail shown the Ameer clearly and convincingly why the accusations were being brought against the poor trembling wretch – had pointed out the man who was really at the bottom of the

plot, and his object in making it. Gratitude alone, he had thought, the instinct man shares with the baser animals, should have bound the miserable creature to him – but no. that man alone could be the culprit, there was no one else. The official had, of course, never shown him or told him anything about these private papers, but the box had not infrequently been in the room, and sometimes open, while they had been at work together, and sometimes he had been called away suddenly to attend to some visitor, or some other matter of business, and then the man must have found his opportunity. The Chief Secretary saw it all now – saw his own folly. The miserable hound whose life he had saved, and whom he had fed and clothed, had sold him to his enemies, and for what? – a few rupees at the most, perhaps a winter coat. It had often been done before. He had seen such things happen over and over again during his years of residence in Afghanistan. There was nothing unusual in the occurrence. He should have expected nothing different from a Kabuli.

He still sat upon his prayer carpet, his hands still outstretched to Heaven. He had prayed for light, and light had been sent. He had sought guidance, a guide would surely be found. He was calm and collected, and quite satisfied that this conversation that had taken place so near was no mere chance. It was Heaven sent. He had but to follow. He must escape, and that at once. But how? That was the next question. He began thinking of where he could turn for a guide, and which would be the shortest way out of the country. There was one route by which in twenty-four hours he could have found himself on British soil. That was by far the easiest, but it was also the most dangerous way. It was a road along which there were Afghan guards at every turn – each having to be satisfied as to his reason for being there, and the further he got from Kabul the more difficult it would be to find an excuse. It was the way many a courtier had tried to find freedom, only to meet with his death. No, that was no use. Then there was the road by the ruby-mines – that was a pretty safe one, if only he had had some excuse for going there just now – but there was none, and so long a journey undertaken on but trifling grounds at such a time could not fail to excite the very suspicions he was most anxious to avoid. “I know the best way to do it, and one of the most direct routes too,” he said to himself. “But I need a guide for that, and where is a guide to be found?”

Who, indeed, could he trust? There were many among the hill tribesmen who owed himself such debts of gratitude as no man surely could forget. Men who owed him all they possessed – life, and limb, and property – and if he had had time he would have sent for some of them, but which? That was another difficult point to decide; and then he remember cases where men had trusted themselves to these very hillmen, and had been sold by them to their enemies, after having received large sums of money, and promises of more for taking them safely out of the country. Whole histories of families and tribes that has sunk from the greatest importance down to absolute insignificance,

and visions of the ultimate fate of their chiefs, passed in review before him as he sat rapt in thought.

Somebody opened the door and peeped in. It was only a slave boy – but the reverie had been interrupted, the spell broken.

He rose quietly, composedly, sadly, and called to his servant to remove his prayer carpet, and bring him his horse. He had finished his business, he sad, was tired, and was going home. If the Ameer asked for him some one must be good enough to make his excuses. He would be at Court after the usual Friday prayers next day. That was all he said aloud, but another and a very difference sentence kept surging up in his brain, and ringing in his ears. "I must escape – I must escape at once, or I shall be caught like a rat in a hole." On that point he was determined absolutely. On ways and means he had yet to decide. But with that fixed purpose in his mind he looked round him with many and mingled feelings swelling up in his heart and brain. He had been longing to get away for months and even years, but now that the final wrench had come he could hardly bear to tear himself away from this, the country of his adoption.

Many links bound him to it. There was the grave on the hillside, where the wife who had loved him and during whose lifetime he had been so happy, and in such favour, now slept – the little girl who called him Agha and did the honours of his house so sweetly. Afghans were treacherous, of course, but still he had some friends, men who at least wished him well, even though they might not have the courage to stand by him. The very buildings were familiar and therefore dear to him. He had watched the house where he now sat being built from the foundation when he was a mere boy, and the Ameer had only just begun to build the palatial villas, of which there were now so many. How grand he had thought it in those days. How he had marvelled at his master's genius displayed at every turn, at his patience with the workmen when he was teaching them, for they were all fresh to this new style of work then, and every step had had to be explained. What games he and the young Princes had had in the garden, before it had all been laid out and cut into beds by the Scotch gardener who had come up and revolutionised their old system of growing flowers. They had all been mere boys then – he a little their senior, and therefore their leader. Care had sat but lightly on their shoulders in those days. How different it was to-day!

A sob almost escaped him when he thought of his master sitting now but a few yards from him. His master who had practically brought him up, aroused in him an enthusiasm for a country in whose welfare he had ever since been so deeply interested, where his ambitions had been satisfied, his love of power gratified. Never would he see that master or that country more. Then there were the schools he himself had suggested and designed. There were the factories he had established, the workmen he had trained, all doing fairly well – not so well, of

course, as they ought to do, because he was but one man in a place that twenty should have filled if the work were really to be brought to perfection.

There was a sound of clanking chains on the path outside. He looked out. A prisoner led by two soldiers was being taken before the Ameer for trial. Ah, poor wretch, what was to be his fate? The very thought of such a thing stirred the Chief Secretary to activity. This was but another warning sent by the God whose aid he had invoked to show him what his fate would be, if he did not at once act on the message that had been sent him. He straightened his coat as he had done in the old days when he had thought a good deal of his appearance, smoothed his hair under his fur cap, and without saying a word to any one, was on his horse and off in the direction of his house.

He had salaamed no one, not even the Ameer.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

WANTED AT LAST

GUL BEGUM sat by the window again – but this time she was not listless. Her whole attitude denoted alertness, she was listening for her master's footsteps. Would he return at all? and if so, what next? She had seen and heard enough to know the danger he was in. she felt certain that if it were not already too late, something must be done at once, if that life that was so dear to her was to be saved.

It was three hours since the Chief Secretary had left his house, and during those three hours her brain had been hard at work continually, contriving, plotting. Already she had laid her plans, and had commenced her preparations. She had had a long conversation with Sardaro, had worked upon her feelings, and had persuaded her to coax their master to let her go and see her mother. She had had a bad dream, and could not rest, she said. She felt that some misfortune was coming to their family, and that she must see her mother.

“We will send for your mother to come here, nothing is simpler,” the old woman had said sympathetically. She had the greatest faith in dreams and presentiments, and, moreover, she liked Gul Begum in a way, and would have been glad to have done a good turn for one who was in such favour with their master.

“Ah, that's just what I don't want even to suggested to Agha,” the girl had pleaded anxiously. “I *must* go to her. I want to find out by my own observation to whom she is talking, and of whom she is making a confidant. I can only do that by going to the house myself. I believe she is talking too much, and imprudently. Sardaro, do help me. I will do anything you like if you will help me in this. *You* can coax Agha.”

“I really don't see how it is to be managed,” the elder woman had replied nervously, but rather flattered; she did not know she was thought to have so much influence. “Agha will never listen, and will only think me a fool for my pains, and *you* something worse, perhaps, for wishing to go out. You had much better let me send for your mother to come here. You can question her closely, and without her suspecting your object.”

“Then you will not help me,” the girl said, genuine trouble visible in every feature. “I am indeed friendless! Ah, if I were only rich, I would offer you anything to do this for me, this one little thing. As it is, I have nothing worthy of your acceptance. I can only suggest a little gift, a present so small that it is hardly worthy of your consideration. You know that gold embroidered shirt front I was making for Agha? Well, he says he prefers Feringhee (foreign) made shirts, and does not want it. I was going to have made it into a peran for myself, but if you will accept it, I shall be proud to see you wear it. I would much rather you had it, Sardaro, indeed I would.” So intend was the girl in getting what she wanted, so sure was she that events were about to occur which would prevent her from ever wanting her gold embroidery more, that

the old woman was quite carried away, and promised to speak to their master when he came in. besides, after all, Agha had called her a fool many a time. It would not hurt her much for him to do so again, and that peran was worth having. Gul Begum had been working at it for the last six months. She (Sardaro) was of the royal tribe, and ought to have good things – they became her and her position, but her master was very forgetful, and, as long as they were clean, seldom troubled himself as to the clothes his servants wore.

“I shall go and get ready so that I can start at once, if I get permission,” the girl went on eagerly. “Will you give me my bokra* out of your store cupboard, Sardaro?”

The old woman rose and unfastened the door. Gul Begum got up from her seat by the window; took it, and gave a sigh of relief when she got back to the little anteroom, where she usually sat when she had nothing special to do. She had got that much – her bokra – without exciting suspicion, had gained one point. Now she must find an old suit of her master's clothes frown among those laid aside to give away, and she must let them out somehow, so as to make them fit herself.

It took her some time and entailed some curious looking patches, but that mattered little in a place like Kabul. Moreover, a long loose coat caught in round the waist by the usual Kabuli belt was more easily found, and hid many defects. The slave girl laughed to herself as she surveyed herself in her master's little mirror, dressed in his clothes, and looking well in them. “I would have made a fine man,” she thought; but fear of discovery made her hasten to complete her toilet, and cover the man's suit with the bokra she had obtained from Sardaro. Some cold meat and some bread had been rolled up into a bundle, and the few jewels she possessed were inside the breast of the coat. “Agha must provide the money, and must give me one of his caps to wind a turban round, and a pistol. Now I am ready. We must fly to-night across this great plain, and then over into the Hazara hills, and there I will hide him. He will need me there. He will not be able to do without me at last,” and as these thoughts came to her, her eyes glowed and her cheek flushed with rapturous joy at the prospect; then she sat down again and waited, thinking and planning still. She knew her master well, and that unless something most unusual had happened he would come home full of despair, incapable of thinking out anything; he who could influence and command thousands – could organise a state – could do nothing for himself.

She had not long to wait. But the footstep, when it fell upon her ear, was not hurried, almost tottering, as it had been last time he had entered the serai. It was the old stride and swing – Gul Begum recognised it without raising her eyes, and wondered! She had not believed it possible. Things had prospered with him at the Court, then. He would believe again as he had so often believed before, that his old luck was returning, and that all would yet be well. He would put off

and off this day of escape that she had been planning; put it off until one day she would sit and watch and listen for him, as she was listen for him, as she was listening and watching then: but he would never return to her more, never, never again.

“What are you doing dressed in that bokra?” he asked, the moment his eyes lighted on her; “where do you think you are going?”

“Agha,” she said, as if by some sudden inspiration, “I am ready to take you out of the country. I have planned it all. Here comes Sardaro. She will ask you go let me go and visit my mother. I have no time to explain anything, only trust me and grant her request. Oh, Agha, grant it, it is your life, not mine, for which I plead!”

It was she who commanded now – she, his slave. It was for him to obey; and as the old woman entered the apartment the younger one slipped out, her hand upon her heart as if to still its tumultuous beating. “Will he understand, and will he do as I have said?” she asked herself. “Sardaro was too sharp, she did not give me a chance of explaining things to him. Oh, he will never do it. He will want to know a thousand reasons why. He will never let me go.”

But she had miscalculated this time. Good fortune made Sardaro choose the most happy form of introducing her request.

“Gul Begum has had a bad dream,” she said, “and is much upset. She thinks her mother has been gossiping and listening to gossip which is likely to produce great trouble, and she has begged me to ask you, Sahib, if you will let her go in her bokra, quietly and unobserved, to see her mother. She is a good girl and steady, I feel sure that you can trust her; and she is prudent, she will not let tongue wag over much.”

The Chief Secretary raised his eyebrows calmly. “If Gul Begum seeks a favour, why does she not come to me direct and ask me herself? Am I so harsh with my slaves that they do not dare to approach me? Send her to me. I must know what all this means. If there is any reason for her request it shall not be denied.”

“Agha has found favour in the Ameer’s eyes to-day,” the old woman said to herself as she left the room. “He has not been so reasonable and easy to deal with for many months. He seemed disturbed when he went out this morning, as though a storm were brewing. He must have scattered his enemies and sent them flying, God bless him, for he has returned in a very different mood. Perhaps his salary has been increased, and if so, perhaps we shall get backshish.” The old woman was in high good humour – all sorts of possibilities occurred to her with her master’s return to favour.

“Gul Begum,” she called out, “Agha wants you. He is ready to grant your request, Jan” (literally my life, my dear), she added in a whisper,

“and then you will remember your promise and will let me have the peran, won't you? By-the-bye, is it quite finished?”

“Quite finished, Sardaro,” the girl said, smiling. “You can take it now, it is on the shelf with my work.” What cared she for gold embroidered tunics now? She had other work before her, she was going to ride for her life and for freedom, she was going to save her maser.

“What is all this about, Gul Begum, where are you going to, and why? I do not know I can spare you just at this moment. I have much on my mind and I may need your help.”

The girl's eyes glowed. “Agha, you do need my help, and I am prepared to give it. You must fly this cold, murderous country, and to-day, and I am prepared to guide you. I am ready.” She raised her bokra and showed the man's clothes she wore underneath. “I will go out saying that I am going to see my mother, but I will go to the Zearat (grave) on the hill where your wife is buried. I remember the spot well, thought it is years since I passed by it. There I will pray to God and seek His guidance till you come. You must bring one servant with you on a horse and make him hold both yours and his outside while you go in to pray. After a few minutes, you must go back and tell him that you have heard news of great importance from an official whom you have met in the Zearat; that you and he are going to ride to another Zearat further on to invoke aid from the dead saint buried there; but that he (the servant) must hasten back into Kabul on foot, as the official will need his horse. Order him then to take the best horse left in the stables and ride to Paghman, and ask the Governor if he can give you any information on some point which you, Agha, can devise better than I can, not knowing all your business. This will take the only man who knows the direction in which you have gone, miles out of Kabul, and it will leave a horse for me to ride.

Presently when he has gone, I can slip out of the Zearat, take off my bokra, and hide it among the boulders on the hillside, and return as your servant, to accompany you to the Zearat, fifteen miles from here. Tell whichever servant you take that to-morrow, being Friday, you will stay at the Zearat all to-night, and that he is to join you there to-morrow for mid-day prayers, bringing the Governor's reply with him. We will then ride in a totally different direction to another Zearat that I know of close to my country, for then, should we be stopped, and suspicion aroused by the conflicting account given by the servant, you can easily say that the man is stupid, and mistook the name of the Zearat and the appointed meeting-place. If we are lucky – as my heart tells me we shall be – it will be fully thirty-six hours before any inquiry will be made about you. The Ameer will just be told that you have been spending the night in prayer at a Zearat – and he knows that of late years that has been so constant a habit with you, that, though he may feel vexed, he will say nothing about it, and will not send to inquire after you.”

The Chief Secretary had listened to every word the girl had had to say without interrupting her. Perhaps, he did not formulate his thoughts. If he had done so he would probably have said to himself: “In answer to my prayer, a boy was sent to tell me of my danger, and warn me that I must fly the country; a man was sent to show me what fate would be mine if I remained any longer here; and now a girl has been taught by the same overruling Power how my safety is to be secured and my enemies thus overthrown. He has Himself provided me with a guide when I could not think of one myself. Truly, God is great – who am I that I should set aside the warnings and the warnings and the chances He has thrown in my way?”

Indeed, some such current must have passed through his mind, for he asked no further questions, merely gave his slave the necessary permission to go out. “Tell Sardaro as you pass that I have given you leave to stay the night with your mother if you are invited,” he said.

“Do not forget money and pistols and knives,” she said, “we may have to fight for our lives. We must be prepared.”

* A bokra is a dress which completely covers the figure from the crown of the head to the sole of the feet, and which Eastern women wear when they go out into the public thoroughfares.

CHAPTER XXXIX

A PILGRIMAGE

TWILIGHT in Afghanistan lasts but the very shortest time, and the darkness of the night during the moonless half of the month seems, perhaps, the deeper, because during full moon the night is so particularly, so startlingly light. In fact, so white do the flat roofs of the mud-houses seem, that on a sharp, cold wintry night it is difficult to tell whether there has a fall of snow or not.

It was on a bright moonlight night such as this that a man in the dress of a court official accompanied by a single servant, rode up to a small encampment of soldiers some thirty miles out of Kabul, among the wild hills that form the natural boundary between Afghanistan and the adjoining countries.

"A salam, Aeikum Mir Munshi Sahib," the chief of the group said, advancing to receive him, and in that bright moonlight recognizing him at once, "What, in the name of God, brings you here attended by only one servant, at this time of day? It is not safe. This place is simply infested by robbers. We ourselves never stir from camp, less than four or five together, after the sun has set."

"You are very right", the official said calmly, sitting down by the campfire, and stretching out his hands to the warm embers, "but for me it is quite different. Here, imbecile," addressing his servant, "come and get warm too. You were complaining of cold upon the road." Then, turning to the soldiers: "That is the best servant I have," he said. "He is mute, so can carry no tales, and does not annoy me with conversation on the road. Moreover, I am never tempted to send a verbal message by him, because I know he can't deliver it. Whatever he has to convey, must be written, so he has got me into less trouble than any one of my messengers, and he is very faithful, as all these poor deficient creatures are."

"Tongue been cut out?" the man to whom the official addressed the conversation chiefly asked in a whisper. Even among those wild mountains, far removed from any human habitation save the caves in the hillside, such a question could only be asked with bated breath. "Oh no, born so," the master replied indifferently. "He was in a pitiable state of neglect when I first got him, but he is getting on well now." "Still he is by no means sufficient guard for a man in your position, Sahib, especially at his hour. It is not safe".

"Ah, that is just where you are mistaken, my friend", the other returned, unconcernedly. "You are most wise and prudent, and are, in fact, obeying the Ameer, our master, in never leaving the camp alone, but for me it is quite different. You are placed here by the Ameer to keep these mountain passes safe for travelers and pilgrims, and to prevent the hilly tribesmen from carrying on their old trade of robbery and murder. They are your enemies now, and their sons will be your enemies after you, for generations. It is in the very nature of things in this country, that this should be so, but with me it is quite different. I am a man of peace,

my business is reconciliation, not war. God has caused me to find favor in the sight of the Ameer, and sometimes I have been able to help these very men you speak of, and to lessen their punishments, or even get them off altogether on certain occasions, when they have been brought before him for trial, and so they are my friends, and their sons will be my sons' friends after me?

"Ah, God be praised, that is true," the sergeant and leader of the little party said fervently. "There are few families in this part of Afghanistan who do not owe you gratitude for favors done to them, or to some of their relations. You ought to be able to travel alone with a sack of rubies on your back, from one end of the country to the other. But the people about here are Shinwaris, Sahib, and you know the old saying, "Trust a scorpion, but not a Shinwari." Be wise, wherever you may be going tomorrow, stay here tonight with us; we have but little to offer you, but you can have food, protection and my charpoi (bed) for the night. That's right! Here comes the tea, we have not much to offer, but there are hard-boiled eggs, and bread, and curds poor fare, but it's about the best we can do in the way of food when we want it in a hurry out here. You must not expect to find Kabul luxuries among the hills, Sahib."

"And what better fare can a hungry man want?" the official replied graciously; "strangers may say that Afghans have many faults, but they cannot touch them in one thing – in the matter of hospitality. When a man gives the best he has, if it be but a crust, he spreads a feast."

The soldier put his hand upon his heart and bowed. There was not a man in Afghanistan who would not have been glad to have been so spoken to by the Ameer's Chief Secretary.

"You will stay the night with us, Sahib?" he asked. "I will give orders for you to be attended to at once."

"No, my friend, that I cannot," the official replied firmly. "I merely looked in on you to cheer you on your lonely watch among these hills. I am due at the Zearat near here to-night. How far off is it, by the way? I don't know these parts as well as I thought I did."

"Why, it's a full hour's ride from here. You must let me send some of my men with you, if you really cannot stay," the soldier insisted.

"They can remain the night too, and bring you safely back to-morrow morning. My life would answer for it if you were killed, and the Ameer heard you had left my camp alone by moonlight. It is as much as my life is worth."

This was not easy to refuse, but the Chief Secretary was a man of many resources.

"Look here," he said, "I will tell you something in secret that you may understand. I have been in disfavour of late, not real disfavour, but my

enemies have found opportunities to belittle me in the eyes of our master.”

“Ah,” gasped the soldier anxiously, “that is bad, we had heard something of it here, but we could not credit it. You who have always been so high in his esteem! How could such a thing be?”

“This has been but a trifle, and hardly worth mentioning,” the official replied quietly, as he sipped his tea, his servant peeling one hard boiled egg after another, and placing them before him on the bread which also formed his plate. “But I have not been so well in health of late” (“May God cure you,” murmured the soldier fervently), “and these troubles, instead of stirring me up to meet my enemies boldly, have only made me feel more anxious to keep in my house, so that these rogues have been left free to brew such plots as they chose to make undisturbed. The consequence is, that this very day I have had to answer a most serious charge before the Ameer. Of course I was innocent, and the Ameer in his heart never dreamt that I was otherwise, but he felt he ought to try me as he would try and other man, to prove to his people that he is just, and listens to complaints against the highest as attentively as he does to those against the lowest.”

“Cursed be the fathers of these, your accusers,” the soldier murmured again, but grasping his rifle a little more tightly. The Chief Secretary was a great man, of course, and had been a good friend to the soldiers, but if the Ameer were displeased with him, and he was trying to escape justice, it was his business as a soldier to see that his plans were frustrated. He was but a poor man, earning about eight shillings a month, but his life was still worth something to him, and he did not feel inclined to risk it in any one's cause.

“Well,” continued the official, noting the slight movement in his companion and understanding it perfectly, “I had recourse, as I always do in all my troubles, to my God, and I made a vow that if He would deliver me from my enemies, and would show the Ameer where the guilt lay, that I would make a pilgrimage to this saint's tomb, and that to show my confidence in His power to protect me, I would come alone and unarmed. You know I have never carried fire-arms, knowing that my fate lies in God's hands, and that He alone has the power of his life and death.”

The soldier bent his head in acquiescence, but said nothing. Personally, he had great faith in his good English-made rifle.

“So, feeling sure that nothing could happen without God's direct guidance, I went to Court and stood before the Ameer. Ah, Din Mohamed, you should have seen those pariahs,” and the Chief Secretary's eyes glistened in the moonlight, as he recalled the scene, “you should have seen them melt away like snow before the spring sun.

They had not a word to say, and gradually slunk off to escape notice and the punishment that is in store for them.”

“God is great; He will not allow His servants to suffer,” murmured the soldier again.

“The Ameer is going to sift this matter to the bottom, and I am as high in his esteem again as ever I was. He asked me to stay and dine at Court; but you know me, it was impossible, I had my vow to fulfil, so to-morrow, being Friday, when there is no work done in Court, I came straight on here, and have only this poor youth with me to wait on me and bring me my woozoo water and such like, that I may be no burden to the good Fakir at the Zearat.”

The soldier's grasp on his rifle relaxed. The Chief Secretary's vows, and pilgrimages, and abstinences were well known throughout the country – there was nothing wrong after all, and the official must, of course, have his own way. The other soldiers were his witnesses that an escort had been offered and refused.

“Here, you take some food too, boy,” the would-be pilgrim said not unkindly, addressing his servant. “We have still an hour's journey before us. You must not starve, but fit yourself for your duties. We have another long ride before us to-morrow.”

Yes, another long ride – neither knew how long. They were close on the borders of the country every inch of which Gul Begum knew, and neither was thinking of danger – it all seemed such plain sailing now. The meeting with the soldiers had been an accidental one. The Chief Secretary did not know that a new camp had been established there or he might have avoided it, but as it happened all had turned out well, and it had been a good move in case of discovery. That story about the pilgrimage too – he had noted the effect on the soldiers, and had seen that it had all been taken in.

It was midnight when the travellers reached the Zearat, and the old Fakir had long since retired for the night.

“We will just stay here three hours, Gul Begum,” her master whispered. “We must both take what rest we can to-night. To-morrow we shall be followed.”

“Let them follow,” the girl said bravely, “none but a Hazara could find us when once I am among my native hills. We are close to the borders now – there are passes there no Afghan knows, and caves inside caves that none would dare enter. We have but a little way to ride and then we are safe, but we can sleep till three or even four and rest the horses; they need it more than we do; the soldiers fed them well, I saw to that.”

“And paid them well, girl? Did you see that? Nothing is more important now we are flying for our lives.”

“Agha, I did not give them all you gave me. I gave them their due. More would have excited suspicion. As long as this is looked upon as an ordinary pilgrimage we are safe, even were we followed.”

Her master looked at her, surprised and pleased, but said nothing.

“Can you give us shelter for the night?” he asked the old guardian of the tomb, when, after much shouting and rousing, the old man at length opened the door.

“What! Mir Munshi Sahib, and at *this* time? What brings you here, and almost unattended?”

“A pilgrimage, good Fakir,” was the reply, “but I am weary. Let me in. I must sleep a few hours. I will commence my devotions at three, for by four I must be in the saddle again. This is a long way from Kabul, and Court business cannot be neglected.”

“That’s true, that’s true,” the old man said, “but I am feeble now and cannot well rouse you at three. This boy of yours must do it for you.”

“Of course he can. Why, that’s what I’ve brought him for. He has no other use,” the official said wearily. “Show us where we can rest and put our horses, and then back to your bed, good friend. I am sorry to disturb you so late.”

It was three o’clock. Even in her sleep Gul Begum was conscious of the passing hours, but the Chief Secretary slept on. He had had a trying day, then a long ride in the cool evening among mountain passes, all of them several thousand feet above the level of the sea, so he slept the sleep of exhausted nature, and, moreover, the reposeful sleep of confidence. He never doubted that he would be wakened in time.

Gul Begum had had a trying day too. Are not the hours of watching and waiting in dread uncertainty harder to bear than the active dangerous ones? Thus had she sat and waited, listening to each sound – dreading yet longing for each footstep on the road to stop at her master’s door. She had worked hard too, and had ridden far – after four long years of captivity – but love is stronger than fear, stronger than fatigue, stronger than aught save death.

After three hours’ sound sleep she woke, and woke refreshed – ready for the flight that was before her. There were a good many things to do. Her master’s prayers to prepare for, the horses to look after and feed, and their own food to get ready. Softly, softly, she went out into the clear bright night; not so softly, however, but that the old Fakir heard

the movement, and turning round in his bed, had said to himself: “A pious man that Secretary, he is up at his devotions already.”

As four, all was prepared – the horses saddled, the breakfast ready – so Gul Begum called her master.

“Have you not slept?” he asked, a little anxiously, seeing her ready to start.

The girl flushed with pleasure. “Yes, Agha, I have slept, and well, but I woke early. So there is nothing for us to do now but to start when you have had some food.”

He smiled as he looked at her. “You are a good boy,” he said gaily, “and know your business I have slept more soundly than I could have believed possible.” And soon they were in the saddle.

CHAPTER XL

FREE, FREE, AT LAST!

“AGHA, we are free! Do you see that rock? That is the boundary line between the Ameer's territory and ours. We are no longer in Afghanistan,” Gul Begum said suddenly. “We are free! Oh, Agha, we are free.”

“You forget,” her companion replied, “it is all Afghanistan now – all ruled by the same king, and by the same laws. All is changed since last you passed that rock. All Hazara is now Afghanistan.”

The girl sighed, but sadness could find no long resting-place in those glad eyes.

“That may be – I suppose it is so,” she said, “but there is a difference somewhere, somehow. It may be in the air – it may be only in my heart – but I feel different. Ever since I saw that rock in the distance, the word keeps ringing in my ears: Free – free – free.”

The Chief Secretary turned suddenly and looked at her.

“Oh, that is it, is it?” he said, a touch of something like sadness in his voice. “You are free here, you are at home – you are no longer my slave at all. You are your own mistress. Is that what you mean?”

“I mean nothing of the sort,” the girl replied, looking down. “I was hardly thinking of myself – certainly not of my own position as regards you. I was only thinking that here in this country there is no king who keeps his servants working day and night for him, and who, when they are overworked and cannot accomplish the tasks that are set them, blames and reproaches and imprisons them. Here you, Agha, are free because you have no master. I have often thought, in Kabul, that though you called yourself free, that yours, not ours, was the slavery – a far worse bondage than that of the lowliest menial in your own household. Always working, always striving, never accomplishing, never satisfying.”

“How do you know all this?” her master asked. “What makes you guess these things, girl?”

“Agha, I know, because I feel,” and as she spoke she placed her hand upon her heart. “I was once free, and I know what the joys of freedom are; then I became a slave – your slave,” she said, lowering her voice, and dwelling with a certain tender lingering on the last two words; “and then I found that there is a joy in service as well as in freedom. But to be happy one's service must be recognised, must be appreciated, or *I*, at least, could no longer serve.”

“Then you think I appreciated your services, Gul Begum?” her master asked, looking at her more scrutinisingly than was his wont, and noting how the wind had caught her cheeks and heightened her colour.

“Yes,” she said, boldly. “You might scold me or you might even curse me, but I knew, what I don’t think perhaps you know, and that is that you would have missed me had I not been ready to receive you. You could not have done without me. You would not be here to-day, now, free, without me.” And the girl tossed her head and drew in a long draught of the fresh pure morning breeze that was blowing from her own native hills and stirring in her old pride and independence.

“Ah, and so you think the Ameer did not appreciate my services; is that your idea, Gul Begum?” the official asked, nettled.

“No, it is not, Agha Sahib,” the girl said, more quietly. “He did – he always will appreciate your work, even more perhaps now you have left than when you were actually with him. But he had not that perfect confidence in you which alone can bring joy. He has seen too little of truth and faith among his own people to trust you as you deserve to be trusted. That is what must have been so galling to you: working and toiling as you did, to have to stand in that Court and see him listen to those wolves and vultures when they yelped and screamed against you, who were as a son to him.”

“He does not trust his own son, Gul Begum,” the official said quietly. “How can he? All his life long he has been surrounded with intrigue, every man fighting for himself against every other man, brother against brother, father against son, and son against father, even wife against husband. Think of that, Gul Begum; how can he trust any man? You must never blame the Ameer to me. I know what you can never know. I know what difficulties he has to contend with – the people he has to deal with.”

The girl sighed, then threw up her head joyously again and drank in the morning breeze. “Let us forget it all, Agha, forget it and for ever. Forget that we either of us ever saw Kabul, ever toiled and worked and were slaves.”

“Have you, then, no pleasant memories of Kabul? nothing you would care to remember now you have left?” He scrutinised her closely as he asked her, and saw the hot colour mount up into her cheeks, and noted too her silence. What had she to say?

“Do you wish you had never seen Kabul? Would you like to blot these four years out of your life, Gul Begum? Would you rather have stayed with Mohamed Jan, and have given him all the services you have given me?” he asked.

Somehow out here among the Hazara hills their relative positions seemed somewhat altered. Here in this wild country she was a woman of position, he a mere fugitive whom she was rescuing. He felt it without formulating any thoughts.

“Agha, that is hardly a fair question,” she said. “You say I have *given* you services. Do you accept them as a gift, or was I merely slave *bound* to render them?”

“You were never as my other slaves, Gul Begum,” he said quietly. “Surely you must admit that.”

“No, I worked harder, was more often scolded,” she said pensively.

“And were often praised,” he added. “Would you have changed places with any of my other slaves – with your cousin – with Shereen, for instance? I never scolded her.”

The girl looked down. “No, Agha, I would not, you know I would not. I was never unhappy, except in seeing you cast down and overstrained and anxious. I had no trouble of my own.”

“Not when you heard Mohamed Jan was going to reclaim you and tear you limb from limb? How quickly you have forgotten, girl.”

“Mohamed Jan! Ah, that is the one name on earth that makes me tremble, Agha – Mohamed Jan. do you believe in dreams? I know you do, and in palmistry and all such things, although you will not own it?” She gave him no time to answer, but continued: “Agha, that man is in my fate, I cannot shake him off or get rid of him – he haunts me. Old Miriam said so, and since then I dreamt, oh, such a horrid dream! I thought that a great thick blackness was drawn between me and the light, and when I tried to peer through it I saw only as it were through a mist – a thick white mist like a veil. I strained my eyes and strained and strained again, then saw a face; it was Mohamed Jan; and then the darkness deepened again, and I awoke, cold and trembling, and with the feeling that I had seen a vision rather than dreamt an ordinary dream.”

“Forget all about that now, child,” the official said kindly, but rather sadly. He, too, was superstitious. “*Those* thoughts, *those* dreams, *that* fate belonged to Kabul. We have both broken our Kismet, we have burst our bonds, and as you yourself said but a few minutes ago, we are free. We must both dream, but now we must dream for the future. Dreams of peace, and,” after a pause, “of power. I feel a different man. When shall I reach India? and when are we to get food, and where? this mountain air gives me quite an appetite.”

“Do you see that cleft in the hills there, Agha, far in the distance? If we make for that we shall be taking the shortest way to India, shall I take you there, or will you not stay a day or two and rest? In this country we are safe.”

“Rest? Why should I rest?” her companion asked gaily. “What has there been to fatigue me? I went for an afternoon and evening ride

yesterday. I slept well last night, and am fresh, and even ready for a fight this morning. It really does seem laughable how easily I have got rid of all my troubles. There has been no fatigue, no difficulty, no danger. Was ever escape so planned? and now I come to think of it, I owe it to you, Gul Begum. You planned and arranged this scheme. I am not ungrateful, I shall remember you always. By-the-bye, what shall you do while I am in India?"

The girl started. "What shall I do, Agha? What should I do? What I have always done. Do you no longer need me?"

"Are you coming with me, then?" he asked, looking at her. "There are, you know, no slaves in India; the moment you get there you will be free. Don't you know that? Those Kafirs have no slaves, they think it a sin."

"Am I not free now?" she asked simply. "Here and there it seems to me that I am free. Do you not give me my freedom?"

"Oh yes, I do, but how can I take a young girl of your position home with me to wait on me? It is out of all custom in India, even more so than in this half savage country."

"I do not know," she said, "you must know best. You have a mother; can I not live with her, and wait on you?"

"You have a father," he said quietly.

The girl put her hand on her heart. "Yes, I have a father," she said softly. "How could I forget? He needs me, I will go to him."

"I shall miss you, Gul Begum," her companion continued earnestly. "I am not sure that I shall be able to manage without you, but I must try. My mother would not understand your position at first, if I took you with me. If I explain everything to her, and she agrees, you could come and join me later, when I have prepared the way for you."

The girl drew a long breath, almost as though something were stifling her. "Whatever you choose, that I will do, Agha. It is for you to decide." But a new and unexpected trouble seemed to have arisen. The light died out of her eyes. What was the use of freedom?

He noticed her too evident pain, and would have soothed her.

"It will only be for a time, Gul Begum. You will not be parted from me long," he said gently.

For ever, for ever, for ever, kept ringing in her ears, but she did not answer, only turned round in her saddle as though to review the past that was all gone – to look at the road along which Fate had led her. She knew nothing of the future, nor where it was to take her, but in the

distance behind her lay the fertile plain, along which she had ridden – a plain now lit with sunshine, though it had been dark enough as she had ridden along it. Then, beyond that, rose the hills that now divided her from Kabul – from the past on which she was already beginning to look so tenderly. About midway between her and them, there were some specks distinctly visible upon the plain; they might have been anything, camels or ponies grazing, perhaps, but were far too distant to make out. She had not noticed them as she had passed along, she hardly noticed them now; she was thinking of something else, of the great blank that was coming upon her, of the great trouble she had brought upon herself – for she knew him well – without her her master would not have moved a step, he would have been in Kabul still, and there would have been no talk of separation.

She half wished she could recall what she had done. Those had been happy days – why had she herself, with her own hands, cut the cords that bound her to them? The sun was getting hot, she felt thirsty.

“Agha, let us stop and rest at the first stream,” she said. “We are still three miles from the next village, let us rest for half an hour.”

“Tired?” he asked. “Why, we have gone no distance yet.”

“No, Agha, no distance; but now that the great effort is over, and we are safe, I feel I would like to rest only a minute, and bathe my head and feet. I am not accustomed to these boots, so they seem heavy.”

He looked at her, she was certainly paler than she had been in the early morning, before the sun had risen so high.

“Yes, why not?” he said, “we’ll look out for the first spring.”

And when they found one she was like a child in her delight, and sat on the bank dangling her feet in the clear mountain stream.

“Gul Begum,” the official said, suddenly, catching hold of her arm, “look, what is that upon the plain? Surely not cattle?”

The girl sprang to her feet in an instant. “To horses, Agha, to horses! they are horsemen – they are Swars. We are followed, we must get to the hills, to the caves – we must fly for our lives.”

In three minutes they were in their saddles, and in full flight.

“I wonder if they have seen us? If not we have nothing to fear. When we get to that corner there, pointing to a turn in the valley up which they were riding, we will double like a hare when it is chased; that will put them off the scent. None but a Hazara would think of that dodge, because none else would know that down there to the right lies one of those caves villages I told you of. An Afghan could only suppose we would fly straight on to India.”

They turned the corner, and by so doing lost sight of those whom they believed to be their pursuers; but five minutes later a shot rang through the air, and then a cry – a woman's cry of pain. A horseman darted out from among the boulders, and stood confronting them on the road. It was Mohamed Jan! both recognised him at once, though neither spoke, and both instinctively put their hands into the breasts of their coats and drew out their pistols, then fired simultaneously. A bullet buzzed past the Chief Secretary's head, just grazing his ear. Mohamed Jan had discharged his second barrel, had then thrown up his arms wildly above his head, and in so doing, his rifle lead flown from his head, far off among the boulders; then he had reeled in his saddle, and had fallen heavily on to the ground. It had all happened in a moment. There had been no time for words, hardly for thought.

"Agha, leave me," the girl said faintly, "I cannot ride with you. I feel sick," and she dismounted hurriedly. "Fly, fly, to India, take the direction I pointed out to you. I will rest here a little, then make my way to the village. It is not far from here. Now Mohamed Jan is dead, I have nothing further to fear. The soldiers will never discover my whereabouts, they would never have discovered us now but for him, he must have guessed I would take this turn when I found we were pursued, and have made a cut over here, leaving the soldiers to go straight on. You have only to ride, but ride as for your life. Your horse is good and fresh, he will carry you safely home, and I too will go home," she sighed. "I am not far from my grandmother's old home now, I can easily get there, where I am well known. I have a woman's tunic under my coat, I can take off these men's clothes and leave them here among the stones. Even were I to meet the Afghan soldiers, I should excite no suspicion in their minds, they would pass me by. I would merely be to them a Hazara woman attracted to this spot by the shots, and if they were even to ask me if I had seen you, I would say yes, and that you have ridden to the village to get food."

Then, seeing her master hesitate, and looked dissatisfied, "They will never come this way though," she added, "it is off the direct route; but hasten, hasten, Agha, or you will be too late. Fly! Fly! I am not much hurt. I am hardly in any pain, only faint. I felt at first as if I had been hit here in the chest, with the end of a rifle or something heavy; but now I think it can only have been the start and fright. I feel nothing of it, only faint. I am at home. It is you who are in danger."

She seized his hand and covered it with kisses. "Master, dear master, my beloved, fly," she whispered.

But he remained where he was, kneeling beside her, realising, but too well what had happened. So eager was she in her entreaties, so absorbed was he in his distress at parting with her thus, that neither had paid the slightest heed to the man who had lain so still and lifeless on the ground. Noiselessly, almost imperceptibly, he had crawled

forward on his stomach. Suddenly the official caught a sound, heard a movement; it was the drawing of steel along a scabbard. Instantly he fired again, but not before the wounded man had flung his heavy knife, and flung it true. It found its resting place deep in the throat of the girl, as she lay propped up against a stone.

“Gul Begum, Gul Begum.” An exceeding bitter cry rent the air. “He has killed you,” and the Chief Secretary forgot his pride, and knelt and wept over the girl he had too late learnt to appreciate. One wave of her great tender hand, that had so often soothed him in his pain, one loving glance that told him what he had known or could have known for years, and she was gone, free, free at last! – free, even from the new pain that had come to her in her last hour, and which would have turned her freedom to nothing but wormwood and gall.

He turned to see if this time her murderer were really dead. There was no mistaking it now. Ah, why had he not made sure before? The last bullet had gone straight through the back of his neck. Then the Chief Secretary rose, mounted his horse, and was off at full gallop on the road to India.

